

What we've learned about young people working in the music industries so far

YOUTH MUSIC NEXTGEN LONG READ

Youth Music's recent report, *A Blueprint for the Future*, highlighted how difficult it is for young people facing barriers to break into the music and creative industries. Even those armed with tenacity and entrepreneurial spirit, find routes from education to employment are lacking. Work experience is crucial, but not all young people can afford to work for free.

In 2019, Youth Music launched Next Gen, a scheme offering 18-25-year olds paid freelance work for Youth Music to help them take those first steps in their career. More than 60 young creatives have benefitted from paid work opportunities to date, and more than 700 are signed up to hear about opportunities from us and our partners.

Survey

In autumn 2020, we sent a survey to Youth Music's Next Gen mailing list, to find out how much impact we were having and what more we could do to facilitate the development of young creatives' careers.

The survey found that young creatives aware of Youth Music perceive the Next Gen opportunities on offer to be inclusive: 87% of overall survey respondents felt that to a good/great extent, Youth Music are inclusive in their approach to creating opportunities for young people.

Youth Music pays opportunities at the Living Wage, but for many young people responding to the survey, this wasn't the case elsewhere, with 41% of young people accessing career progression opportunities in their related fields indicating they had not been paid for their work at other organisations. These themes are explored in more detail further into this article.

Interviews

Respondents to the survey about Next Gen opportunities indicated whether they would be happy to be contacted further to speak in more depth about their experiences. We spoke to six young people at varying stages in their careers, with different levels of experience with Youth Music and Next Gen opportunities. In both the survey and the interviews, we asked respondents to tell us a little about the opportunities they had accessed to date (both through Youth Music and elsewhere) and how they had impacted on their career progression. When examining the different stages that young creatives were at in their careers, we identified three overall profiles. Participants in both the survey and interview phases of the research generally fell into one of the following three categories:

1. Young creatives recently starting out in their career

Nineteen percent of respondents told us they had not yet taken part in an opportunity with Youth Music at the time the survey was open. A number of qualitative comments reflected this, with respondents telling us that they had “not yet found an opportunity on Youth Music that suits the career path [they] want to take” but that they “keep [an] eye on the opportunities coming through” (survey respondent).

Amongst those who had not yet taken part, respondents could generally see the potential benefits and looked forward to taking part in the future:

“I feel the opportunities always present a step forward and something that if successful in attaining, will lead to further opportunities elsewhere.” - survey respondent

Forty seven percent of respondents told us that they had not yet taken part in career progression opportunities outside of Youth Music, suggesting that even though opportunities within Youth Music are catering to their needs, opportunities elsewhere are either not available or are difficult to access.

Many of these respondents were relatively new to Youth Music so had yet to experience the wider career progression benefits of taking part, but many remained open to the possibility of finding more opportunities elsewhere as a result of their contact with Youth Music to date:

“Although I have not yet further progressed to opportunities in the music industries, I feel that my role within Youth Music has given me great experience, skills and stepping stones to further work in music - it has been a really positive and informative experience so far.” - survey respondent

In our interviews, we spoke to India, who had just recently left school and was working full time in e-commerce whilst keeping her eyes open for more music-related opportunities. At the time of the interview, India had not yet taken part in any Next Gen opportunities, but had taken part in some unpaid work experience for a record label.

“I’ve done work experience but I’ve never had a proper job in the music industry I just feel lucky to have a job to be honest, but I am looking for something in music. In the next year I’d like to be an intern at a record label, paid, hopefully.” – India

2. Young creatives beginning to gain experience and build up their career

Sixty one percent of survey respondents told us that they had either taken part in a Youth Music opportunity previously, or were currently taking part in one. Many of these young creatives were beginning to see how participation in Youth Music opportunities could lead to future opportunities elsewhere:

“Youth Music always alerts me to new opportunities, even if I don’t necessarily apply for the ones advertised directly. I have been able to learn about more opportunities which have sometimes indirectly led to me gaining opportunities to further my career.” – survey respondent

“It’s still early days, so hard to judge, but I’ve already managed to meet new people and mentor figures through Youth Music who have introduced me to others working in audio and sound design.” – survey respondent

In our interviews, we spoke to three more Next Gen members who had taken part in Youth Music opportunities recently and were beginning to think about the ways in which their careers could progress as a result. For Carli, a backing vocalist and singer-songwriter, a spot on the panel of 18-25 year-old Grants Advisors for Youth Music’s Incubator Fund was a great way to earn some paid experience during a challenging time when much of her regular work had been paused due to the pandemic. However, as a keen advocate for youth voice, Carli’s experience on this role enabled her to broaden her horizons when it came to prospective career paths:

“It’s definitely opened up a couple of different avenues, of course that has also happened because my main one has been blocked, but I still think it’s important and it’s always been of value to me, even when I was working normally. So yeah it’s just a bit more concrete now and I have a little bit of experience that I can back up when I go into different opportunities.” – Carli

For Gemma* who was in her final year of sixth form at the time of the interview, the opportunity to run social media for the Youth Music Awards in 2019 gave her the transferable skills and experience to apply for multiple other opportunities elsewhere. Whilst she hadn't yet decided on her final career plans, her motivation to find out about opportunities and gain experience in a variety of areas was clear from the number of mailing lists and organisations similar to Next Gen that she was signed up to.

And for Lydia, a recent journalism graduate, the opportunity to work on Youth Music's 'Higher Frequency' Podcast series was a good way to gain some paid work experience alongside many of the voluntary roles she's taken on to progress her career in broadcast journalism.

3. Young creatives taking part in multiple opportunities and branching out elsewhere

Of those that have taken part in an opportunity directly with Youth Music, 45% told us that, to a good/great extent, their involvement with Youth Music has led them to further progression opportunities in the music industries. Furthermore, 61% felt that to a good/great extent, the opportunities that Youth Music offers would impact on their career progression, telling us in their qualitative answers that networking, gaining skills, knowledge and experience, and having opportunities to add to their portfolios were all important outcomes of taking part in Next Gen opportunities.

Similar outcomes were highlighted in our Blueprint for the Future report as particularly valuable for young people to access, and many young people we surveyed told us they could envision these benefits of participating in Next Gen opportunities being useful for their career progression in the future:

"Gives me vital industry experience and helps me create more things for my portfolio, and allows me to learn whilst on the job." – survey respondent

The final two interviewees in this research were Next Gen members who had taken part in multiple opportunities from Youth Music and were beginning to apply their experience elsewhere too. **Charlotte**, who aspires to work in Music PR & Communications, first made contact with Youth Music as a Freelance Grants Advisor, before staying in touch and going on to create some content for the Youth Music website.

Meanwhile, **Kate**, who works at a streaming platform and has a multitude of different creative interests, including presenting, DJing and production, first started with Next Gen as a vox-pop interviewer at the Youth Music Awards in 2019. She has since gone on

to host a live Q&A with Hot Chip streamed on Youth Music's channels, as well as a YouTube series entitled 'Live in Lockdown' which interviewed various musicians.

Below, we explore some of the themes that came out of the survey and interviews highlighted above, exploring some of the realities of being a young professional starting out in the music and creative industries.

Opening doors: routes into Next Gen and individual journeys

"Youth Music was really a thing that opened doors to a lot of other opportunities." – Gemma*

As a provider of inclusive opportunities, Youth Music are working to advertise for opportunities in a wide range of places. We know from survey responses and from the six in-depth discussions that there is more to do in terms of raising the awareness of these opportunities amongst young creatives:

"I'd just love to hear about the projects (with more detail). I only found out about the Music Ally programme by pure chance, it doesn't seem to be heavily advertised. I'm sure there's lots more people that could benefit from getting involved with Youth Music." – survey respondent

The young people we interviewed discovered Youth Music through an array of different means – for example, advertisements posted in social media groups for young creatives, visits from Youth Music staff at their university or college, and other mailing lists run by partner organisations such as Sound Connections' Wired4Music network.

In the majority of interviews, the young creatives we spoke to first became involved with Youth Music as a result of seeing and applying for a particular opportunity. For Charlotte, the first role with Next Gen that she came across was the Freelance Grants Advisor role, which, whilst was not completely aligned with her goals to work in marketing and PR for the music industries, she nevertheless recognised as a good opportunity to become involved with Youth Music. Her involvement in that particular role has since led to other opportunities with Youth Music that are more closely related to her longer-term goals:

"I saw on the NextGen page that they were looking for young people to make some content, so I thought it'd be nice to tie in. And whilst the funding advisor role was really great, it isn't exactly what I want to do as a

career – it was a great experience, but it doesn't quite link back into my career, whereas this is a great opportunity that actually links back to the degree I'm doing and the career I want." - Charlotte

In a similar story, Kate – who has multiple career goals relating to music presenting, hosting and DJing – first came into contact with Youth Music as a backstage interviewer for the Youth Music Awards 2019. She has since been involved in multiple opportunities directly related to her career ambitions:

"The first one was the Youth Music Awards in 2019, so I was a voxpop interviewer, so I'd stand backstage and when award winners and nominees and judges and whatnot came out, I'd be like 'ah I need to interview you!' And then from that [...] there've been quite a few varied things which has been exciting." - Kate

Whether the initial entry point into Next Gen was entirely related to their chosen goals or not, the general feeling amongst the six young creatives we interviewed was that, once initial contact with Youth Music had been made, the NextGen newsletter was a good way to keep them in the loop with all the latest career opportunities on offer:

"I get really happy when I see the opportunities in my inbox: I'm always looking for something to do. All I can ask for is more of the same thing, just as much as possible, mailing [as many] opportunities as possible!" - Gemma*

As illustrated by Gemma*, the young professionals we spoke to about their experiences of Next Gen to date are hardworking and determined individuals, many of whom are willing to take up a broad range of opportunities in order to gain experience and to get their foot in the door. Many of the young creatives we interviewed told us about the variety of opportunities outside of Youth Music that they've been involved in – many of them unpaid – in order to help them build valuable experience needed to apply for music industry roles:

"I'm doing some work experience at the moment as well with [high street department store], so that's – obviously it's not music based so it's not exactly what you want, and it is also unpaid, but you just take what you can at the minute, just to build up some little bits of skills and start building up a CV." - Charlotte

"[I've done] work experience at [record label] for a week last year and I've done a music business summer school. I've volunteered at music events and

stuff, I've been a photographer, and I've done some radio stuff as well. But other than the work experience, everything was just volunteering basically.”
- India

This open-minded attitude was evident amongst several of the young people we spoke to, and it was clear from speaking to them that the skills gained through work experience – even if it wasn't entirely related to their chosen careers – were valuable all the same, and the young creatives recognised the potential for building more of these transferable skills through taking part in Next Gen opportunities too.

“I knew that I'd have to fork out a bunch of money for work experience ... I basically had to pay to work there!”

However, many of the young professionals we spoke to told us of their experience of organisations paying poorly for such opportunities, or simply not paying them at all. In some circumstances, like the quote above which refers to a national radio station, we were told that the cost they had to fork out to access the work was more than the pay:

“You're having to pay loads of money to work for them” (Charlotte). There are pre-existing and compounding barriers to access that many individuals already face. Not paying or paying poorly for work further excludes them from accessing opportunities. Adding the barrier of work putting the worker out of pocket is exploitative.

“So being able to have a paid role in music and be able to do it from where I'm from, is such a big thing because there aren't paid music opportunities anywhere around where I live” - Charlotte

In our survey to Next Gen creatives, 41% of respondents told us that generally, the opportunities they've accessed so far in their careers were not paid. Twenty nine percent told us that some of them were paid but less than a third (31%) told us that all opportunities they've accessed were paid. Paying fairly for work done is essential. At Youth Music, all work carried out by young creatives is paid at the real Living Wage rate.

In spite of the paid opportunities at Youth Music, generally the opportunities the young professionals we spoke to had accessed elsewhere were not. Youth Music also encourage applicants to our funding streams to pay the real Living Wage to all employees, and if successful, we encourage them to become an accredited Living Wage employer. It shouldn't be underestimated the impact that fair pay for work

has on the personal development of young professionals: “a financial incentive not only boosts productivity but makes you feel professional” (survey respondent).

“Obviously Youth Music give a living wage for every opportunity, every little bit just makes your work feel valued and you’re able to call yourself, “oh, I’m a freelancer, because I’m getting paid for the work that I do”. So yeah, it gives value to your work, really.” – Kate

“I think just having a reputable name like Youth Music is just such a huge factor [...] Being able to say you’ve done work experience with Youth Music, which a lot of organisations have heard of, is such a big thing and such a big factor that you can bring into conversation in interviews, and I feel like it’s more memorable for an interviewer as well to know that you’ve worked for a charity, and that you’ve worked because you want to help people.” – Charlotte

An opportunity of work should never leave individuals struggling to cover the cost to undertake it, especially during the current economic climate. Due to the ongoing restrictions in place as a result of COVID-19, many freelancers do not have a sustained income at the moment. Some of the young creatives we spoke to were taking on full-time roles in fields unrelated to their career ambitions to be able to financially support themselves. Some had opportunities in their chosen fields lined up that were cancelled owing to restrictions. An opportunity for work which is enjoyable, relevant to career aspirations, and fairly paid, brings a multitude of benefits for the individuals, organisations and the industries.

“Clear commissions, with an easy and obvious pay scale from the outset.” – survey respondent, discussing the positive aspects to Next Gen opportunities

“I think it could definitely lead to more kind of work, hopefully in music journalism. I hope that it’s given me a bit of a platform where I can go to future employers and go ‘hey I’ve done this!’ This is how I interview people, this is how I script something and I did this for a big charity.” – Lydia

“Everyone had different levels of experience and everyone had gone through completely different routes, education wise and career wise, so it was great because I was meeting people at like different levels of education and their life.”

Young people can quickly sniff-out tokenism and identify where there is a genuine and ongoing dedication to inclusion. A working inclusive offer is and will always be

essential. An equitable approach to recruitment will ensure that a workforce, no matter what level of seniority or contract-type, is representative and inclusive of the array of different background and identities that make up our society. We asked the young creatives what inclusion meant to them:

“Doesn’t matter what experience you have, there’s an opportunity for everyone” – survey respondent.

“Just including everyone from whatever walk of life you come from, whatever background you have, everyone has the same opportunities to join in with something.” – Lydia

“Being open to diversity rather than just trying to fill a quota.” – India

“I’ve been in other sort of work situations [where] I haven’t felt sort of represented, I haven’t seen people like me, not even people that look like me or are from similar places, I mean people of similar interests and stuff like that.” – Gemma*

“A job like this requires you to have different perspectives, because not every young person is the same or has the same needs.” – Carli

Opportunity-providers owe it to our communities to ensure opportunities are offered to individuals equitably and inclusively. Opportunities cannot exclusively target or cater to “one type of person” (Lydia). These experiences should also support the growth of diverse networks of young people.

One young creative reflects on their experience connecting them to individuals they would not normally meet: “it [YM Awards] exposed me to a whole bunch of people I didn’t really know existed before then” (Gemma). Connectedness is necessary for professional development, building experience and tapping into communities that can enable individuals to “learn about all aspects” (India). It is, of course, beneficial to personal and mental wellbeing as well, particularly as many aspects of our lives have adapted to be online.

“I feel like as soon as we had that first meeting in September, looking at all the people on zoom, just being involved and I was like wow! We’ve got such a wide like diverse group of people, so that was my first impression and that just filled me with warm fuzzy feelings, I felt like we’re all kind of in this together, and it’s not just one type of person that is gonna be working on this (podcast).” – Lydia

The young creatives we spoke to also explored how important accessibility is to them when applying for and undertaking opportunities. Ultimately, it is the organisation's responsibility to ensure that the application process caters to different access needs.

This includes offering a variety of formats that an individual can submit their application in. For example, some individuals are able to express their personality most effectively using a video application. Communication styles and experience levels vary greatly, and organisations should offer a considered choice of application formats to best capture the suitability of an individual: "they [Youth Music] gave options on how to apply, which was letting it be accessible to those who maybe don't want to write out something" (Carli).

"You know, you're allowing the application process to be accessible to anyone who may have different ways of expressing themselves, whether that be written, verbally, you know, different other ways." – Carli

"There are some people that aren't gonna enjoy [writing] a CV and there are people that aren't gonna have experience as well, so a CV isn't gonna really show you how much they could offer." – India

"Some people may not have access to the internet or access to a fully functional computer or whatever, so kind of putting things in place for that not to be a barrier to access this opportunity." – Carli

There is a lot of strength and space to learn within a diverse team of individuals. Ensuring every voice gets heard is an important aspect of inclusive practice, as highlighted by the young creative we spoke to who conformed "everyone got to have their own say" (Charlotte).

Further to an organisation building a robust team, it is crucial that space is made to hear all individuals around the table who can bring their lived experiences to the forefront. Carli, who was a Freelance Advisor for the first round of the Incubator Fund, reflects how important it is to be present and continue "to shape these different programmes that are here for young people, because I think it's important that our voices are the ones that help shape these (Carli).

"I think all of us felt that we were really part of the team, it wasn't 'us and the Youth Music team', it was everyone was part of one group. We were constantly asked for our input, we weren't just sort of in the background or silenced which was really, really nice" – Charlotte

“The team that I’ve worked with at Youth Music has been so productive and enthusiastic and it’s really refreshing to have people who have that same enthusiasm as you do.” – Lydia

“In terms of being a female, they obviously need more females, especially music producers and things like that in the industry, so they’ve been very keen to hear what I’ve got to say because I’m a girl and they need more girls in the industry.” – Kate

“It’s nice to be able to stay updated on what they’re doing. You never know in the future when things might cross over again, or they might be doing something that you can help out on.”

Many Next Gen members spoke to us about the benefits of networks with other creatives. They are a starting point for collaboration, sharing experience and accessing different perspectives. Moving forwards, networking is taking a different shape. Online platforms are being used more than ever before: “I have met with other young people who enjoy similar things to what I do and got the chance to work with professionals over Zoom” (survey respondent).

As gatherings and meetings are adapting to take place online, the enthusiasm remains to connect with like-minded people and this environment can take shape in many forms: directories, hubs, networking sessions over Zoom, social media pages, etc.

Whatever it looks like, it’s an environment to “freely just talk to people about their interests and other things” (Grace), and to kick-start those relationships in which contact can be made “if I have any future projects in mind” (survey respondent). Youth Music’s recent report, *A Blueprint for the Future*, further explores the potential and impact of horizontal networking: “And all the evidence suggests these informal collectives and forms of ‘horizontal networking’ only grow in importance as young women and people from under-represented backgrounds mature in their careers, providing mutual support and career scaffolding outside of formal industry structures.”

Fostering an environment that supports the growth of communication channels and skills is essential. “I think it’s given me quite a lot more contacts in the music industry generally, I’ve reached out to people who I probably wouldn’t have reached out to before” (Lydia). Particularly for young professionals who possess less experience in the industries, networking and mentorship can make all the difference to their career outlook.

Mentors, particularly who have travelled down a less traditional route in their career, have a wealth of knowledge and advice that could benefit many young people who can relate to their beginnings. An approach to mentorship that is “more personal and less formal, so it’s not as intimidating” (India) can contribute to a mentor-mentee space that is long-lasting and rewarding for all. This is especially necessary in industries where there is a disparity felt between those at the top of their craft and those who are starting out.

“Just to hear about different people’s paths, it seems like everyone’s been to university! And yeah, I know that there must be some people that haven’t and I want to hear about how they did it.” – India

“The opportunities to be led by those with great experience in the field of music, to collaborate with other like-minded individuals and engage in direct conversation with artists has been invaluable at the beginning stages of career development.” – survey respondent

The Next Gen participants we spoke to also expressed the importance of being able to share learning amongst their peers, to be able to support those at similar positions in their careers, and to pass on the guidance that they’d had within their own journeys:

“the aim of helping other young people like ourselves. In the back of my head I’ve got ‘how can what I’m saying help other people in a similar position?’” (Charlotte).

“And so I’m definitely looking now, when I’m looking at different things, is there a way that I can train up to work with young people, and help them discover a different path, like someone did for me?” – Carli

“I do think that the whole thing of working from home has really made it more inclusive because you don’t have to all be from London.”

The young creatives and professionals we spoke to have a lot of initiative and are adapting to the changing external circumstances. Why shouldn’t the opportunities within the industries follow suit? Young professionals, especially if they have recently graduated from formal education or have been out of work for a long period of time, spoke to us about how grateful they were to find work: “it’s just been a lot of fun, it’s keeping me busy and so I’m not bored at home, I’ve actually got a purpose” (Lydia).

These opportunities are particularly important for those who have been training or studying towards a specific career path for a long time, and still working towards a career in the music industries which have been hit and their vulnerabilities exacerbated due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"I think I was definitely influenced by the fact that I had not been doing anything for 6 months, so this kind of gave me a purpose!" – Carli

"Doing something I'm passionate about has just really helped me to stay focussed and just keep my brain ticking over." – Lydia

"And obviously with everything that's happened in the last month or two about the retraining, trying to encourage people in the arts to retrain in different sectors and re-skill*, it's quite demotivating when you've just spent 3 years essentially training to work in music and then being told that you need to pick something else." – Charlotte

In a recent survey to young professionals signed up to our Next Gen newsletter, around a third of them found out about Next Gen opportunities through social media (35%), the newsletter (31%) and the website (31%). Organisations should strategically utilise online platforms to recruit young people to work remotely.

Following on from last year, many companies and individuals have proven that they are equipped with the tools, resource and determination to carry out work from home. This applies to individuals at the earlier stages of their career too, who are looking to build experience and find purpose.

Online-based opportunities also remove the barrier of young people paying a lot to travel to or missing out on an opportunity because of where they live: "I feel like I have missed out on quite a few things just because I haven't been able to get to them" (India).

"I wish it wasn't such a barrier but I do feel like people who are in London have that privilege of just being able to walk out their door and go to an interview or you don't have to worry about relocating because everything's on their doorstep. I try not to think of it as too much of a barrier but if I'm being true to myself, it is!" – Lydia

"I've seen a lot of volunteer work but I really can't, and they're all in London and I really can't afford to live in London for no money!" – India

*The UK Government ran a partnered campaign named CyberFirst with the slogan: "Rethink. Reskill. Reboot." which was widely criticised for promoting individuals working within the arts sector to retrain for a career in cyber.

"It's given me so many incredible opportunities and has led to more. Really excited to take part in more projects and have had such a buzz from all the opportunities I've taken part in so far!"

Nurturing a long-term, reliable, and exciting array of opportunities has never been more necessary. It is important for young people that organisations provide longevity in their programming and communication. Ninety six percent of respondents we spoke to in our recent survey indicated that they would be interested in taking part in future direct opportunities with Youth Music.

We have a collective duty to support an environment that is sustainable for the long-term, for everyone. Inclusive practice, tailoring opportunities and actively seeking to target inequality in access are necessary for any organisation moving forwards, especially when tapping into the resilience and skill of the next generation.

"It's hard to justify taking paid time off a paid job, to do something that's unpaid. So being able to work for Youth Music, work in the sector, work within music and build the CV while supporting myself is such a huge thing at the moment." – Charlotte

"Keep doing what you lot are doing, can't wait for things to get better and I would (highly) like to be a part of the movement" – survey respondent