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**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**



arts connect

# Young People's Cultural Journeys

Executive Summary

Arts Connect June 2018



# Young People's Cultural Journeys

Commissioned by **Arts Connect**, this report shares rich and robust **insight** into the lives of **digitally native young people**, their **journeys** and **attitudes to arts and culture** – as they define it – and its place in their lives.

**Arts Connect's** aim is that **all children and young people in the West Midlands can access and enjoy** a rich and meaningful **arts and cultural** life. Arts Connect believe that meaningful engagement with the arts and culture contributes to a thriving childhood and impacts on **learning, achievement, attainment, wellbeing, health, creativity, career options**, progression into **higher education** and wider benefits to participating in society.

At Arts Connect we feel it is important for us to understand what motivates today's young people to take part in culture. Since the development of digital technologies, the how and why young people, with access to these technologies, engage in culture is constantly evolving. Online communities provide young people with a cultural environment of which many of our leading arts and cultural organisations are not fully aware or accessing.

The aim of this research is to provide the cultural sector with actionable data and intelligence with which to increase the level of engagement and the quality of cultural experience for young people in the West Midlands.

Front cover image: St Mary's and St Margaret's School, Arts Award © Jack Spicer Adams

## What happens next?

We will work alongside our partners to interpret the findings in this report, to explore what they mean for our work as Arts Connect in providing a strong foundation for the cultural and education sectors to authentically engage young people on their terms.

We see this as an on-going process which will involve us all in paying more attention to the globally connected, technology enabled lives young people are living today so we can understand their own world-views, needs, motivations, expectations and desired outcomes.

We will do this by providing seminars and workshops for Arts Council National Portfolio Organisations, arts organisations, individual artists, schools and cultural organisations to examine the findings, to share their knowledge and experience and to undertake further action research to explore new ways of working.

**Susan Goodwin**  
**Associate Director,**  
**Cultural Sector Partnerships**

## The research

The research was undertaken by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, the largest cultural strategy agency in the UK, and one of the UK's most creative participatory art organisations, We are Frilly. The data was gathered through creative peer-led qualitative research with 207 young people and a demographically representative survey of 1,607 young people aged 11 to 18.

The research aims to provoke arts and cultural organisations into challenging their existing programming and engagement strategies, to provide young people with the most meaningful and highest quality arts and cultural engagement.

## The research provides:

Deep and wide-ranging knowledge of young people and their lives, illustrating the extent and range of their current engagement in culture.

- Understanding of the decision influencers and decision-making processes and key trigger points for engagement in culture, including the influence of families, schools, arts and cultural organisations and any significant others.
- The perceptions of, attitudes towards and motivations for engaging in culture and the barriers to engagement and how these might be overcome.
- The impact of rapidly evolving digital technologies in how and why young people engage in culture.
- Implications for the cultural and education sectors.

## Multi-method research gathering robust data and deep insight

Multi-method research was undertaken, encompassing:

- Socio-demographic, geo-demographic and cultural context mapping.
- A review of previous research into young people's cultural engagement.
- Formative qualitative research with 59 young people through creative participatory methods, undertaken by 22 peer researchers aged 11-19.
- Qualitative research using arts-based methods with 207 young people.
- A demographically, representative survey of 1,607 young people aged 11-18.

The research was guided by a comprehensive ethics framework and a steering group of ten representatives of the cultural sector in the West Midlands, to ensure the study could harness the expertise of the sector.

# Key findings

## Fluid identities and interconnected lives

### Self-definition through positive personal attributes

Young people tend to define themselves through their personality traits and positive personal attributes rather than through 'group' identities. When asked to complete the phrase "I am..." nearly half the answers (45%) were positive or neutral personal qualities. 16% of the answers were creative interests, suggesting that these interests form an integral part of how many young people see themselves, as well as what 16% of them do. Identity based on nationality and language is more important to those in multi-cultural areas.

### 'Tribes' have been replaced by a range of interests and identities

There was lack of self-identification to any one 'tribe' throughout the research. Rather, young people's social circles exist both locally and online, through the opening up of online networks which connect them to other young people and influencers globally, connected to their interests.

## Passions are varied, but arts / culture / creative / digital engagement and sport dominate

When asked to describe their 'passions' in the qualitative research, consuming and creating culture accounted for 43% of all answers across 10 different categories, followed only by sport at 22% of all answers.

## Digital technology is interwoven in their lives

### Technology can't be considered in isolation

Digital connectivity and its impact was woven throughout the data. Young people experience innate, instant and constant connectivity. The impact of rapidly evolving technology should be a filter through which all of the data is viewed.

### Social circles and digital access are intertwined

Understanding young people's social circles in isolation from technology is now impossible, with

boundaries between home, school and other realms blurred through constant online access.

Unless explicitly asked, young people didn't often mention their social media platforms, considering them as an enabler of everything else they do, rather than a discrete activity. Snapchat (61% engaging at least twice a week) and Instagram (59%) dominate, followed by YouTube (41%), Facebook (22%) and WhatsApp (22%). YouTube is however core for content sharing.

### Use of social media platforms is not universal

Young people from different socio-demographic backgrounds engage differently with digital media. There is higher use of WhatsApp amongst those from less affluent NS-SEC 5-8 but lower use of the two main broadcast platforms Snapchat and Instagram. Gender differences also exist – with girls more likely to use Snapchat and Instagram and boys more likely to use YouTube. Younger age groups are also significantly more likely to use YouTube.

## Immediate influencers remain vital

### Family remain influential

Despite the fact that family now only form part of a huge range of voices that young people have access to, they remain influential throughout young people's lives. Young people are four times more likely to consume culture with family members than through school and 50% cited family as the main inspiration to engage in cultural activities and remains important for 16+ at 43%.

### No longer a trend for universal influencers

The wide range of celebrities who young people can see, particularly online, is reflected in the varied range of wider influencers referenced. The accessibility of media and the volume of choice in content through online and streaming services mean that there is no longer a trend for universal influencers. In the qualitative research, a total of 283 different celebrity influencers were cited by 207 respondents, reflecting the diversity of reference points that digital connectivity enables.

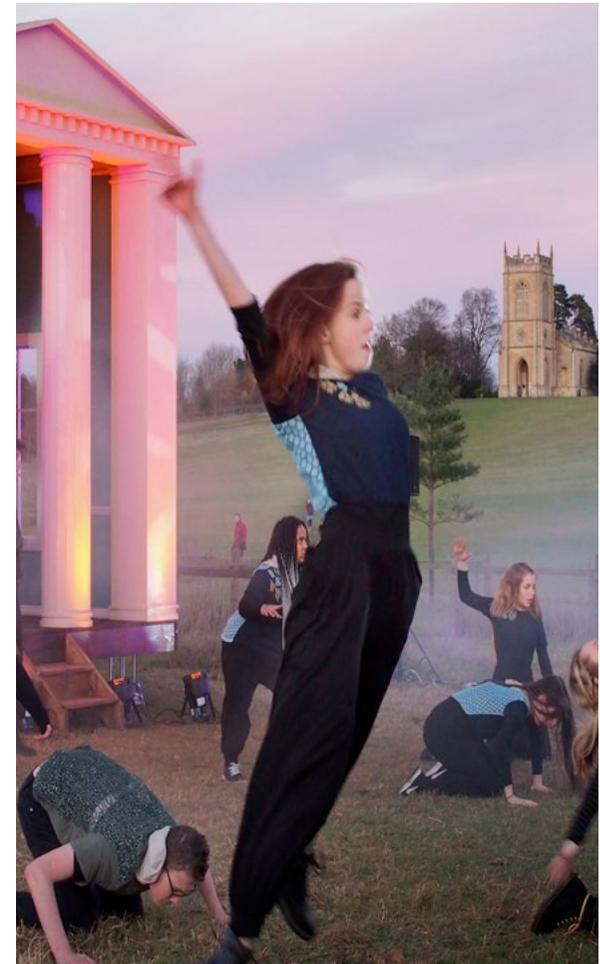
## Hyper-local and busy lives

Most activities that young people are involved in are home-based or could be carried out flexibly or portably.

Unsurprisingly, school work dominates their free time. Where young people are engaging in free-time activities that require travel, they tend to be private classes or sports. While this is universal, the area in which they live and the schools they attend impact on the way in which they spend the little free time they have.

When considering young people's free time outside of school, consuming and participating in what young people define as arts and culture is hugely important. In the qualitative research, a third of cited answers when young people were asked to map out their week fell into this category. This most frequently took the form of watching TV, watching YouTube, playing computer games, reading and watching Netflix.

**Gymnast, journalist,  
private detective, artist,  
fashion designer'** Year 6 girl



Adam Speaks Tree House Dance, Nov 2017 – Nov 2018, Croome, National Trust © Peter Young

## Simultaneously aspirational and realistic

Many young people are looking for their lives to be fulfilling in a range of ways, and reluctant to limit their options at this stage.

## Flexible approach to self-defining has fed into a generation of 'slashies'

As jobs for life become an increasingly abstract concept, an approach to careers based on flexible skills development, rather than fixed routes, was apparent in the data. The range of subcultures, styles and interests with which the young people identified feeds into the ongoing 'slashies' trend: an approach to careers based on multiple roles, so that they work simultaneously (e.g. as "Manga creator / engineer") requiring flexible skills development, as identified in wider societal trends.

## Careers are still important

Despite this flexible skills approach, jobs and careers are still the main focus when it comes to young people's future visions. Of the huge range of (731) different answers young people gave to



Motionhouse Youth Company Rehearsal for U Dance West Midlands 2017 © Leanne Vincent

a question about their future dreams, a quarter were career ideas.

When asked specifically what they want to be when they grow up, 27% identified creative careers (arts, drama, photography, dance, music, design); 13% health/caring careers (dentist, doctor, nurse, carer, optician, midwife) and 10% STEM related.

## Sector definitions of culture don't resonate

There is a disconnect between funded sector definitions of arts and culture and those of young people. Even defining them may prove problematic for an age range where there is a huge variety of available activities that may not be perceived to need categorisation.

**'Graffiti is culture, and art, skateboarding'**

Peer researcher

## **'Arts' was associated strongly with creating visual arts**

Arts is predominantly associated with visual arts but arts also includes graffiti, fashion, animation, and tattooing/piercing - all of which were more widely defined as art than novels, poetry and opera.

## **Culture is broader and includes identity**

Definitions of culture include sector recognised forms such as festivals, historic sites, carnivals and museums but also wider forms such as fashion and TV and is also related to identity, including learning a language and food.

**'Multiculture - lots of different people from different backgrounds. Food, buildings, religion, art, music, movies/drama and theatre, colour, textiles'** Golden Valley North in Herefordshire, Y11

## **Definitions of arts and culture aren't universal**

Definitions of arts and culture are influenced by age, socio-demographics and levels of

participation in arts/culture activities. Younger ages from less affluent areas (higher NS-SEC 5-8) reference a narrower range of arts and culture, while those from schools with a strong cultural offer, reference a broader range of forms.

## **Young people are engaging with arts and culture flexibly**

Arts and culture dominates young people's free time, accounting for a third of all activities undertaken in their free time, followed by sport. Much of this reflects young people's own definition of culture as it includes listening to music, watching TV, watching YouTube, playing computer games, reading and watching Netflix.

## **YouTube and other platforms are changing cultural and arts consumption**

Digital technologies are re-shaping cultural consumption and blurring the boundaries. YouTube was the most referenced platform in the qualitative areas for cultural consumption. The boundaries have been blurred between traditionally distinct categories, particularly of watching TV and films, listening to music and

interacting with both peers and celebrities, with many of these things done on the same platforms with little perceived difference between them.

## **Flexible/portable cultural consumption is the norm**

Mobile technology means that content is accessed instantly and constantly. Four of the five most common forms of cultural consumption carried out in free time were flexible/potentially portable activities (listening to music 98%, watching TV 96%, playing computer games 88% and reading a book 75%).

## **For participation/creation, non-digital activities were more prevalent**

Painting and drawing topped the list of participatory/creative activities that young people engage in, with 84% saying that they had done this. With the second activity being creating art on a computer (68% cited), we can say that visual arts are the most common creative activity that young people do. However, limited time means engagement drops with age with performance based and digital creative activities. Participation in performance based activities amongst those

aged 16 to 19 dropped by around 55% compared to those aged 10 to 11.

### **Exposure to culture through school broadens perceptions and increases engagement**

Engagement through schools is key due to there being little time for independent pursuits outside of school hours. There is evidence that exposure through school broadens perceptions of arts and culture and increases engagement, both through and out of school.

Art exhibitions was one of only three forms of culture or art that was consumed more through school than in young people's spare time (28% vs 24%). The other two were attendance at poetry and spoken word events (17% vs 11%) and science festivals (13% vs 10%).

### **Strong school cultural offer overcomes constraints from deprivation**

Young people attending schools with a high cultural offer in areas of higher deprivation (NS-SEC 5-8) are significantly more likely to consume a range of arts / cultural / creative activities both through school and in their free time, compared to

young people attending school with a low cultural offer in areas of higher deprivation. On average, young people attending a school with a high cultural provision in an area of higher deprivation consumed 11 out of the 27 activities, whereas those at a school with a low cultural offer in an area of higher deprivation consumed 8 of the tested activities.

### **Some gender differences in cultural engagement**

There are few gender disparities in the amount of culture engaged in but differences in young people of culture. Girls are more likely to be involved in (consuming and participating in) dance, drama, music, literature, and fashion. They are also creating more visual arts and crafts. Boys are much more likely to be involved in computers, computer games and film making. For music they are involved but in a more 'behind the scenes' capacity: preferring to write, edit and record over perform.

### **Over a third post creative or cultural content online**

Shareability is important to young people. 35% of young people are posting about arts and culture

or being creative in their general online posting, primarily through Instagram (46%), Snapchat (45%), WhatsApp (29%) and YouTube (24%). The qualitative research suggests that this may include not only sharing of creative content but also posting about arts / culture / creative activities and being creative in other posts, not necessarily related to arts and culture. Propensity to share creative/cultural content online increases with age, with Snapchat and Instagram more used as creative outlets for older young people (16+) and YouTube, WhatsApp and Musical.ly favoured by those younger.

### **Online sharing is influenced by socio-demographics**

Snapchat and Instagram - the most used broadcast platforms - are less to share arts/culture/creative content, by those in more deprived (NS-SEC5-8) areas. Girls are significantly more likely to share information about events that they have been to (46% vs 31% of boys). Girls are also more likely to share creative content online (41% vs 30%).

## **Social outcomes are important but spiritual, intellectual and emotional outcome are also desired**

### **Social and spiritual outcomes are desired from cultural consumption**

For cultural consumption 50% of young people identify their main desired outcomes to be social, which includes fun, enjoyment, time with friends and meeting other people. More spiritual outcomes (defined in a broad non-religious way), including relaxation, escapism and inspiration account for another 32% of desired outcomes and these desired spiritual outcomes increase significantly for those aged 16+, possibly reflecting reported increases in life pressures.

Environment matters. The qualitative research demonstrated how music, food, social spaces and wifi are key to engaging young people in having enjoyable experiences with their family and friends.

### **Intellectual and emotional outcomes are more desired from participation and creation**

Intellectual outcomes such as learning new skills, feeling challenged, help to get a job become more desired for cultural participation/creation (22% of desired outcomes) as do emotional outcomes such as feeling good about something, contributing to a sense of identity and increased confidence (23%).

**‘It is relaxing and allows me to escape reality. I enjoy reading as it widens my imagination.’**

*Shireland Collegiate Academy, girl: on reading*

### **Gender differences in desired outcomes**

Desiring relaxation, inspiration and increased confidence were higher for girls than boys. Boys were more likely to cite development of skills as a desired outcome than girls. However, while skills

development is important, there is little emphasis on how this might impact on future jobs.

**‘I play everyday. I play tactical games so keeps me thinking and adapting all the time.’** *Stoke on Trent Sixth Form, Year 12 boy*

## **An appetite for event attendance and creative skills development**

Despite the lack of attendance at more formal arts and culture events outside the home, there is the desire to get out and about and consume arts and culture ‘live’, or through attendance, rather than through technology. When asked about what they weren’t currently doing but would like to, the desire is mainly for events and performances such as music festivals (18%), comedy performances (13%), concerts (10%), circus 8% and fashion shows/events 8%.

In terms of participation and creation, there is a clear interest in both creative practice and skills development. Key among these activities are designing/programming computer games (13%), Vlogging (10%), designing/making fashion items

(8%) and uploading films to YouTube (8%). Vlogging was particularly desired by the younger 10-11 age group.

**‘I really enjoy making my own clothes but I haven’t had the opportunity to do this especially because A Level Textiles wasn’t available.’** Aylestone Hill, Y13

## Barriers to culture are complicated

The main barrier to engagement with arts and culture cited by young people is lack of opportunity or a perceived lack of provision. “I’ve not had the chance” was cited as the main barrier for both consumption (25%) and participation/creation (17%).

Functional barriers were most cited for **consumption** of arts and culture, including lack of awareness (18%), too expensive (14%) and lack of time (12%).

For **participation/creation**, lack of time was also a barrier (15%). Emotional barriers were

significantly more prevalent for participation/creation, particularly not feeling they would be good enough (11%) or being too shy (11%). Qualitative feedback confirmed this with descriptions of times participants felt they had been laughed at or made to feel embarrassed about their ability or performance.

## Low school cultural provision deters cultural engagement

Young people attending schools with a low cultural offer are significantly more likely than average to cite barriers deterring them from both consuming and participating in / creating culture. This is true for areas of higher deprivation where 40% say there is no cultural provision near them, but also for areas of lower deprivation (35%), compared to an average of 29%.

## Girls identify more and different barriers than boys

Girls identify a greater number of barriers to both consumption and participation/creation than boys. This is partly due to gender differences in desired activities, with girls more likely to want to engage with fashion and performing – which require out-of-home engagement – while boys desire

more online and therefore more easily accessed activities such as computer game designing and programming. Boys are more likely to cite lack of opportunity or awareness, inability to get to activities and expense.

**‘Because I feel like I can sing but I don’t have the confidence to do so.’**

Bridgnorth East and Astley Abbots, Y13

## Cultural influencers lie close to home

Mirroring young people’s influencers in other parts of their lives, arts and cultural influence tends to come from those closest to home. Family influence is crucial (50% main influencer) but friends (17%) and school (14%) also play important roles as main influencers.

## Three key influencers of family, school and friends are interrelated

Around half of those who chose family as an influence also chose friends and/or school, demonstrating the importance of these realms working together to inspire and deliver young people's cultural experiences.

Family maintains the dominant influence across all ages (50%+), although decreasing to 43% for 16-19 year olds. The influence of friends (20% main influencer) and celebrities (12%) increases for 16-19 year olds.

School influence, while 16% overall, is highest for the older (19% for 16-19) and younger (17% for 10-11 years), dropping to 15% for 11-14 and 14% for 14-16 year olds.

Influencers provide encouragement and support rather than inspiration. When asked how they were inspired, young people mainly discussed words of encouragement and being supported in their endeavours. They also talked about being told that they were capable of taking part.

**'They inspire me by telling to follow my heart and they support me with my decisions.'**

*Soho and Victoria in Sandwell, Y9 female*

## Boys aged 14-16 may particularly lack arts and culture inspiration

When asked how they were inspired, boys of this age group were more likely to say 'I don't know' or say that they were their own inspiration.

## Very few cultural trips happen without external organising

Very few formal encounters with arts and culture (those that take place at a specified location or on a trip) happen spontaneously, with interventions from school and family being central to creating these opportunities for involvement from young people.

## Schools tend to facilitate more cultural encounters

Despite the importance of family in inspiring engagement with culture and arts, it is schools that play the dominant role in facilitating these encounters. 40% of young people said their school had organised their most memorable trip relating to culture or arts.

## Access in early years influences participation later in life

Passion development starts early – all age groups peak before the age of 7 years when asked about the starting age for their favourite activity, although 14-16 year olds identify a further spike in starting age at 12-15.

## Arts and cultural organisations are not significant influencers on their own

This study finds that in terms of cultural influence, the cultural sector does get overlooked by young people. 8% mentioned arts / cultural organisations as an influencer at all and just 1% as a main influencer.

# Impact for cultural organisations

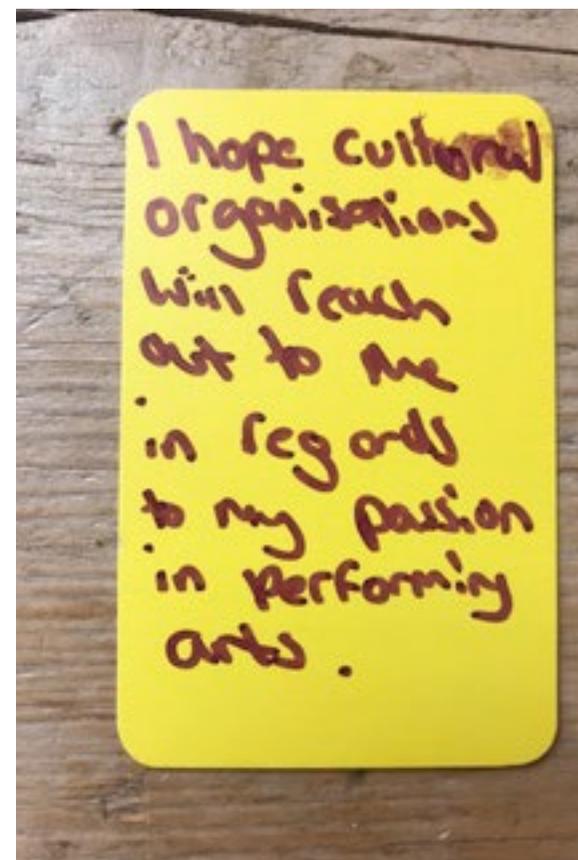
## 16 recommendations for the cultural and education sectors

Recommendations for the cultural and education sectors to increase and broaden young people's engagement with arts, culture and creative activities include:

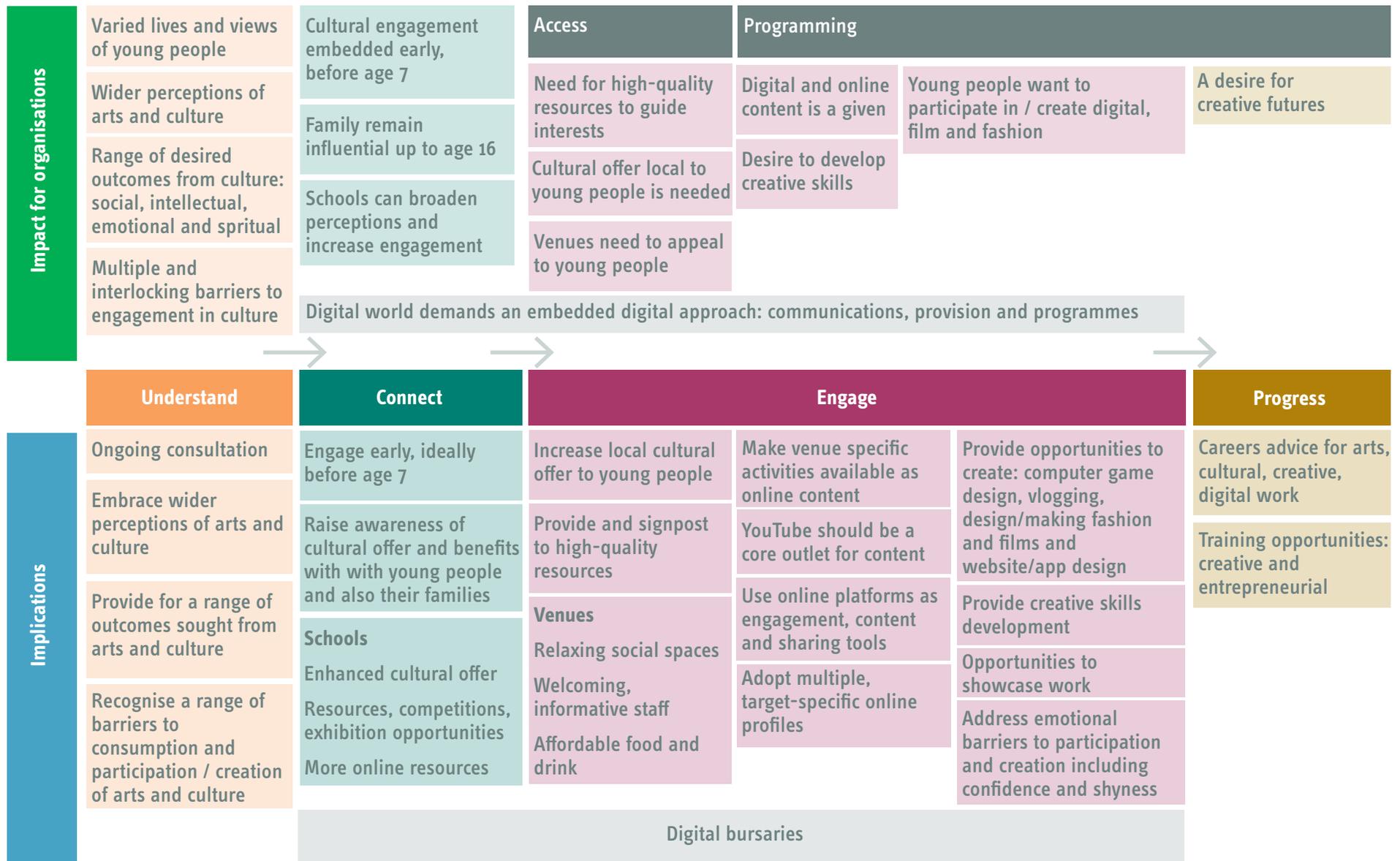
- Engage young people in the context of their own world-views, needs, motivations, expectations and desired outcomes
- Embrace young people's wider perceptions of arts and culture
- Engage with young people as young as possible and appropriate for the activities
- Engage family who remain influential throughout young people's lives
- Engage through schools to broaden perceptions of arts and culture and increase engagement
- Provide and signpost young people to high-quality resources which reflect their interests
- Provide for the range of social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual outcomes desired at different ages and from both programming and the wider wrap-around experience.
- Ensure that venues are welcoming to young

people in their ambience, social spaces, provision of affordable food and drink and free wifi

- Create an embedded digital approach recognising that (most) young people are constantly connected but acknowledge pockets of lower digital engagement
- Utilise YouTube as a core content provider for high quality cultural content
- Provide comprehensive digital content
- Address multiple and interlocking barriers around price, awareness and perception of provision which constrain greater consumption of arts and culture
- Increase cultural offer local to young people
- Provide young people with opportunities to pursue their desired development of creative practice and skills in digital and fashion, including computer game design, vlogging, design / making fashion and films and website / app design
- Provide creative skills development opportunities and opportunities to showcase work
- Offer advice and provide training for creative futures and careers



## The route to cultural engagement: impact for organisations



**‘It makes me escape into another world, a creative one.’**

St Michael’s, aged 11-14

**‘The word arts makes me think of performing, creativity and expression of feelings, talents and emotions’**

Hanley Park and Shelton in Stoke-on-Trent, Y13

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