

APPG: A New Ambition for Music Education in England

I often meet colleagues from across the music education sector who tell me how wonderful music education used to be in the old days. There is a view that there was a golden time for music education. Depending on who you speak to it was the 70s or 80s, 90s etc... I grew up in the 70s (in primary school) and 80s (in secondary school). I went to good schools and had access to instrumental music lessons, which I hated and curriculum music, which I hated. It was not a golden time for me, and it was not a golden time for many of my friends who managed to carve out professional careers as musicians, despite, not because of the music education they had access to. It is rather frustrating that I learnt nothing about music at school because, I loved music and it would eventually become my career.

For every person I meet who tells me how lucky young people were back in the day, I meet 3 people who tell me that they weren't musical and didn't have any talent for it. For many young people, the German composers they were asked to take an interest in, were too alien from their own interests. And, if you happened to be disabled, the best you could hope for was to have someone shake a tambourine in your face. Surely all this suggests there were plenty of issues with the golden days of music education. So, whilst I recognise there were good things about music education in the past, I don't think it is helpful to hark back to the good old days, because they weren't good for everyone.

I have no doubt that my own experiences of music education are why I have spent much of my career advocating for inclusion in music education.

The current National Plan for Music Education which I, along with 119 other hubs have been implementing since it was launched in 2012, promised much and delivered, well, a mixed report.

Let's remind ourselves of the vision, which was to enable children from all backgrounds and every part of England to have the opportunity to learn a musical instrument; to make music with others; to learn to sing; and to have the opportunity to progress to the next level of excellence.

So why is it a mixed report? Well, you could argue, the world in which the plan was intended changed quite soon after it was launched. Local authorities went light, school education narrowed its focus, and the world went digital. You could also argue that in order for any plan to succeed, those involved in its delivery need to be held properly accountable and that the accountability wasn't really thought through as there were no rules or laws demanding its compliance.

You could argue that when the NPME referred to “all children”, many in the music education sector understood this to mean “all children that are easy to reach and can afford to take part”.

Finally, you could argue that there wasn’t enough money behind the NPME and as a result the investment ended up being spread too thinly with just a few pounds spent on every child.

Now, I accept all of these reasons had an impact on the effectiveness of the NPME, but this didn’t stop high quality innovative music education being provided by many music education hubs and schools through partnerships with orchestras and conservatoires and concert halls and community music organisations.

At the heart of the plan was the idea of partnership. It was **Aristotle**, who said "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts". Where this philosophy was carried out effectively, we see the greatest impact. We see the most expansive opportunities for children and young people, we see the strongest and most sustainable programmes. We see musical inclusion.

I believe ‘collective impact’ sits at the heart of an effective strategy for the delivery of music education in England. If we can harness and channel the totality of the current investment in music education, galvanising resources from MEHs, National Youth Music Organisations, CATs, National Foundation for Youth Music funded organisations, NPO funded organisations, schools, music charities, music industry, trusts and foundations, etc... etc... we might truly create a golden age for music education.

So, **my first hope** for the revised National Plan for Music Education is that the role of partnerships is restated and amplified.

After all, a sector that was built on the idea of being in concert and ensemble should know how to play together.

My second hope for the revised National Plan for Music Education is largely dependent on effective partnerships. Many children, particularly those, where there is a perception that they are hard to reach or expensive to provide for, have traditionally missed out on music. We must not let this happen again which is why inclusion must be hard-wired into the revised plan from the very beginning and not a foot note that is open to interpretation. No child living in difficult circumstances should forgo a music lesson because all the many organisations providing musical opportunities can’t agree who’s going to pay.

Hubs and schools need deeper more mutually reinforcing relationships, building on each other's strengths and budgets. But they can't do everything which is why partnerships with other kinds of organisations are critical to ensuring all children, means all children. Organisations that have particular expertise or are culturally better placed to reach different communities will make the difference.

Finally, perhaps an unintended consequence of the first National Plan for Music Education was the dismantling of the visiting music teacher career path and a loss of teacher pay and conditions for many experienced peripatetic music teachers. This happened because approximately 40% of the investment in traditional music services was lost in the switch from service to hub and large numbers of the workforce were made to go freelance or to accept zero hours (gig economy) style employment conditions. Whilst fixing this is beyond the scope of a refreshed National Plan for Music Education it is important that the whole sector takes this moment to get behind efforts to establish a best practice charter that recognises and promotes a better, more supportive set of working conditions for the many exceptional instrumental and singing music teachers, without whom, there would be no music lessons at all. In my capacity as chair of the Music Education Council I have spoken to many colleagues, and everyone seems in agreement that the sector needs to unite behind efforts to improve matters for visiting music teachers and that now is the time to do this.

In conclusion, ensuring an excellent relationship between music education hubs and schools is of vital importance to the success of the revised plan. We must acknowledge the many schools across England, with strong and confident music departments and the important role these schools can make to the 'whole' and in addition to this, we must acknowledge the many other important organisations that complete the music education ecosystem.

I never understood the NPME as being the entirety of what hubs must do, I interpreted the NPME as being a foundation on which to build the whole, local music ecosystem. Ultimately, I hope that whatever makes the cut in the refreshed plan, everyone working in music education will take this opportunity to unite together to build an ambitious, partnership driven, inclusive programme for all young people.

Thank you for listening.