

What does the New National Plan for Music Education and the House of Lords have in common?

We looked at the recent debate on music education in the second chamber and what this might mean for music education.

You might have heard about the new National Plan for Music Education – “The Power of Music to Change Lives” (DfE, 2022). It’s been over 10 years since its predecessor first appeared (“The Importance of Music” DfE, 2011), so the new national plan looks set to be an important document in music education for some time to come. Since its publication in June 2022, the renewed National Plan has been keenly debated and discussed in a wide variety of spaces including at music conferences, in social media threads and within staffrooms up and down the country. But did you know that it has also been debated in the House of Lords?

The debate, tabled by Baroness Fleet, who chaired the Expert Panel that advised the government on the plan, took place on Wednesday 9th November and was an important day for music education, as the significance that music can make was discussed in the second parliamentary chamber. The debate, which covered a wide range of perspectives, was characterised by full-throated support for the young people who make music together and a view that whilst there is excellent music education work going on, this is not universal. Many of the Lords drawn from the cultural sector themselves, have registered interests as trustees or advisors to major cultural institutions, or have personal (and parental) experience of engaging with a range of music making activities. The refreshed plan has sparked much debate in the sector but, until this session of the Lords, had not received detailed examination and discussion in Parliament, so is therefore a significant moment for all of us who work in music education in some capacity.

The debate charted the vision, aims and ambitions, and funding of the plan in an opening statement from Baroness Fleet, before going on to contributions, responses and questions from others in the parliamentary house. It was repeatedly noted that music enriches lives, can be transformative in its nature and is of value for all children., whilst cautions were sounded about musical access and barriers to music provision, alongside research and commentary that reveal worrying declines in GCSE and A-level music take-up and teacher workforce. It is clearly a good thing that the refreshed National Plan for Music Education, is being discussed in Parliament in such detail, both in terms of its ambitions and the practicalities of realising these aims. It is also obviously a subject about which many members of the Lords care; during the debate there was a bringing together of personal experiences, charitable trustee work, and a belief in the entitlement of all children to a meaningful, exciting, and fulfilling musical education. Within these contributions, however, there were clear anxieties about the extent to which the plan becomes a living and ‘real’ strategy, with tangible musical outcomes and impact.

Recent research from the Birmingham Music Education Research Group at Birmingham City University has explored three areas which align closely with themes of the debate and need further unpicking to realise their full musical potential in musical contexts:

1. Composing
2. Access to opportunity and qualifications
3. Workforce development

We wanted to share some key findings and questions which, we hope, can help music teachers, senior school leaders, and those working with music education hubs to think through the realisation of these three central areas.

Composing

Composing is an important part of musical experience for young people. It can be harder to include than playing, though without composing there wouldn’t be much to play in the first place. Even improvising is a bit like composing on the fly. Teaching composing and allowing

it into the curriculum can be even more of a challenge, especially as its nature is hard to get hold of. At Birmingham City University, the Birmingham Music Education Research Group has been thinking about composing and how it is experienced by young people for some time. Our research report for the Sound and Music's 'Go Compose' project (Fautley *et al.*, 2021) with which we worked with the organisation 'Sound and Music' looked at some of these issues.

We found that investing in training for teaching composing was needed and that experience of musicianship alone was not enough for music leaders to facilitate young people in their composing. This is an important area where music hubs can make a unique and valuable contribution. We also think that as composing is already a part of the National Curriculum for Music and forms a significant proportion of music courses which young people take later (such as GCSE, for instance), composing needs more emphasis in music provision. The national plan provides a real opportunity to address this and to think about composing in a joined-up way. Whilst progression routes for young performers are clearly mapped out on a local, regional and national basis, the same is not true for young composers. This would benefit from more joined-up thinking and provision.

A question to think about...

- *What specific provisions are in place where you are to support the development of young people's composing?*

Access to opportunities and qualifications

We know that a major challenge for many young musicians is the fact that they can't access appropriate musical qualifications in schools or colleges close to where they live. The overall decline in A-level music uptake in recent years has been widely noted. What is most concerning about this decline is that the subject is in a relatively precarious position in many schools, with the overwhelming majority of centres reporting fewer than 5 entries. Given the more precarious position of Key Stage 5 (KS5) music in many disadvantaged schools and colleges, there are significant knock-on implications on the wider landscape of musical activity in these school contexts.

Compounding these issues are geographic discrepancies across England, where there are nearly twice as many A-level music students in the East of England compared with the West Midlands, for instance. Digging deeper into these regional disparities, there are inequalities of access in some localities. In 2020, for example, Coventry, had just 8 A-level music students, and a local disadvantage attainment gap of 3.3 grades. In Staffordshire there were just 21 A-level music entries in 2020, where the A-level disadvantage attainment gap is 3.5. A-level music opportunities are concentrated in high advantage areas, meaning that disadvantaged students may encounter additional barriers to access this musical progression route, compounding inequality of opportunity (Whittaker & Fautley, 2021).

A question to think about...

- The National Plan for Music Education notes 'space for rehearsals and individual practice' (p. 19) as a key feature of high-quality school music provision. Can you use this to help you petition for these facilities, if they are not already in place?
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Workforce Development

The National Plan for Music Education is predicated on the idea that partnerships can broaden the offer available to children and young people. Our work has shown that partnerships can have a limited effect and impact, concluding that the notions of joining up practice in the original National Plan were susceptible to flawed models underpinned by 'victory narratives' (A sort of 'Before we had this project, everything was awful, but now we've had it, everything is good' type mentality). Before entering a partnership and joining up practices, partners need to have in-depth understandings of each other's starting points, positionalities, and goals. It is only from that point onwards that beneficial partnerships can be co-developed (Kinsella *et al.*, 2022).

Workforce preparation and the place of Continuing Professional Development is also very important and our work in this area was mentioned very specifically in the House of Lords Debate, where Lord Black stated, “the next generation of music educators need to have access to high quality training and development opportunities.” Recent work at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire has shown the value in engaging recent conservatoire graduates as pedagogical role models for current students. Involving graduates in sharing their early-career experiences with current students and staff connects teachers and practitioners with a ‘wider music education ecology’ can help to ensure that they are ‘best equipped to support children and young people’, both of which are aspirations of the refreshed National Plan (Shaw, 2021).

A question to think about...

- What could Continuing Professional Development in music education look like and how do we ensure there is something on offer for everyone, no matter what your job role?

The National Plan for Music Education “The power of music to change lives” offers huge potential. That it has been part of national discussion and debate in parliament at this early stage is hugely encouraging. The place of research in working out some of the key themes it identifies is, in our view, a critical one. We hope that the three key themes we’ve identified here will provide food for thought and most of all, that all of those involved in music education will continue to feel empowered to make a difference to the lives of young people.

House of Lords Debate

Music Education Volume 825: debated on Wednesday 9 November 2022, Columns 650-690
Available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2022-11-09/debates/B902CB55-9827-4C3F-B500-66EED4F53B66/MusicEducation>

Birmingham Music Education Research Group

For more information about Birmingham Music Education Research Group:
<https://www.bcu.ac.uk/education-and-social-work/research/birmingham-music-education-bmerg/research-projects>

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