



# Lighting the blue touch paper: Kickstarting the Arts Education Revolution

## Executive Summary & Recommendations

Dr Ally Daubney, Gregory Daubney (CPsychol) & Megan Clarke  
May 2026

Exploring the 'how' and 'why' of supporting professional development and work opportunities for creative practitioners through the West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub

# Executive Summary

West of England Music and Arts' (WEMA) Cultural Education Hub is uniquely positioned. Established in 2024, it is funded by the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority and Arts Council England through the Culture West programme. The research illuminates the central role of the WEMA's Cultural Education Hub in bringing about meaningful, impactful change for and with young people, schools, creative practitioners, cultural organisations and communities in inclusive and cost-effective ways, and the importance of strategically targeting limited resources and funding for maximum impact.

Focussed research undertaken from the perspectives of creative practitioners working in and with primary, secondary and special schools, coupled with insightful findings from seven case studies of creative residencies, demonstrate the power of a Cultural Education Hub to establish new models of working. These bring together and capitalise on multidisciplinary perspectives and experiences of people and organisations, with practices that nurture and develop local, regional and national cultural education ecosystems.

These programmes and creative practitioners provided opportunities for schools to consider identifiable and often invisible inequalities within their own communities alongside the uniqueness and strengths of each community and to give deep consideration to lived experiences. The notion of 'place' within programmes is central, and yet the temptation to see 'place' as simply a 'deficit' has been

avoided. The authentic work of these creative practitioners demonstrates the uniqueness of embracing places, communities and cultures past and present through *placemaking*, which is celebrated, activated and strengthened (aligning with key priorities identified by Arts Council England).

13 freelance creative practitioners at various stages of their career in receipt of grants under the umbrella of WEMA's 'Creatives in Schools' programme contributed to this research. They underwent a process of self-reflection of their key skills and personal attributes prior to and after running creative arts programmes in schools and undertaking professional learning of their choice from a wide offer, to uncover attributes they consider central to their own effectiveness as creative practitioners working in primary, secondary and special schools. Their insights demonstrate several common key attributes practitioners identified as being essential to their success in the role along with their commitment to developing as practitioners, alongside identifying multiple barriers that exist in their work and professional development that are likely to be relevant across contexts.

The importance of creative practitioners being mentored and being supported to feel that they belong both in schools and within wider professional networks alongside accessing bespoke needs-led professional learning opportunities comes through clearly. This research demonstrates the valuable strategic and practical role of a Cultural Education Hub in connecting,

supporting and nurturing the development of creative artists and teachers across all stages of their career and the power of professionals working and learning together in dedicated and authentic ways to bring about fundamental changes that positively impact young people, schools and communities now and in the future.

Arts education and creativity in schools in England urgently need a resurgence. For the ambitions of the recent Education White Paper “Every Child Achieving and Thriving” (UK Government, 2026) to be realised, the power of arts and cultural education needs to not just be recognised but actively developed and integrated within and beyond the taught curriculum. The expertise and authenticity creative practitioners bring is at the heart of developing teachers’ understanding, knowledge and practice, which is central to curriculum development.

Yet, the importance of creative practitioners’ role in brokering and leading learning and engagement in formal and non-formal education settings is often overlooked and under-funded, as is their professional development. To illuminate facilitating factors, issues and tensions in this area, WEMA commissioned a Rapid Research Review exploring ‘Creative and cultural practitioners working with young people and teachers in formal education’ (Clark et al., 2025). This provided a theoretical framework for the current research and for the bespoke professional development

programme developed by WEMA.

The success of this model of working is rooted in a Cultural Education Hub, led by an established and well-connected educational organisation with a breadth and depth of experience across the Arts and wider learning and engagement, leveraging local expertise and regional connectivity through galvanising sector participation around identified local and regional priorities and ambitions. This is central to supporting the development of confidence and expertise to collaboratively tackle priorities and overcome challenges in schools and communities in creative and innovative ways.

This model of working deserves recognition and further interrogation of the possibilities created by widening the network of Cultural Education Hubs to maximise potential for change. These recommendations offer insightful suggestions for policy makers, schools and educational institutions, cultural organisations, creative practitioners and all those that seek to champion creative and cultural education in harnessing the collaborative potential of artistic learning and practices. This model broadens and deepens access to creative and cultural learning and engagement which proliferates inclusive, inspiring and ambitious opportunities for all to achieve and thrive, regardless of their background, circumstances and where they live, work and go to school.

UK Government (2026) Every child achieving and thriving  
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving/every-child-achieving-and-thriving-html-version>

Clark, T., Andrews, J., Maisuria, A., & Fernandes, V. (2025). Rapid research review: Creative and cultural practitioners working with young people and teachers in formal education. <https://wema.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/rapid-research-paper-creative-and-cultural-practitioners-working-with-young-people-and-teachers-in-formal-education.pdf>

## Recommendations

1. A regional network of Cultural Education Hubs should be central to supporting and developing local and regional infrastructure and ecosystems, proliferating opportunities for schools, young people, creative practitioners and cultural organisations to collaborate, learn and grow through fruitful partnership working.
2. The significant benefits of creative practitioners working in formal education settings should be acknowledged and promoted.
3. The role of creative practitioners in opening up authentic and creative opportunities across formal and non-formal education should be given serious consideration, particularly in relation to their potential to support multiple aspirations outlined in the UK Government's Curriculum and Assessment Review (2025) and Education White Paper (2026).
4. Needs-led professional learning should be central to all creative and cultural arts programmes to support and develop creative practitioners at all stages of their career so that ambition and professional growth is nurtured. Providing access to appropriate inspiring and engaging professional mentoring for creative practitioners at all stages of their career should be developed as a central role of Cultural Education Hubs.
5. Cultural Education Hubs should maintain and grow their professional networks and provide access to support creative practitioners to become established within wider networks.
6. Creative and cultural learning should, wherever possible, facilitate authentic ways of working and support creative practitioners in illuminating potential pathways to further study, engagement and workplace opportunities.
7. Organisations leading Cultural Education Hubs should be well-placed to offer strategic and practical support across multiple domains and to target priority and need in the allocation and distribution of funding and resources.
8. Creative and cultural education should be recognised and embraced for its potential to catalyse development and change that capitalises and grows expertise and willingness to collaboratively identify and tackle local, regional and national challenges, ambitions and priorities.
9. Programmes should support the ambitions of creative artists and cultural organisations in co-developing their ideas and tools with and for young people and schools, drawing upon their own experiences and expertise.
10. West of England Music and Arts should disseminate the findings from their creative artists in schools programme research and share their expertise widely with policymakers, funding bodies, schools, cultural organisations and creative practitioners.

## Who are we?

West of England Music and Arts (WEMA) is an education charity that aims to make music, arts and culture accessible, affordable and enjoyable for all. The Cultural Education Hub was established as a new strand of work for WEMA in 2024, funded by the West of England Mayoral Combined Authority and Arts Council England through the Culture West programme.

The West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub aims to give every child in the region the chance to engage with inspiring, high-quality cultural activities, supporting them to achieve their aspirations and experience a rich, creative curriculum. It does this by:

- Building partnerships between schools and the creative sector.
- Supporting professional development for teachers and creative practitioners.
- Creating opportunities for children and young people to engage with high-quality arts experiences.

## Research team

Dr Ally Daubney is a researcher, teacher and educator who has worked across all ages and stages of education from preschool to postgraduate. Alongside her extensive work on international curriculum development and assessment, Ally is renowned for her work on creative and cultural learning and engagement across education and communities. She has conducted and widely published research and evaluation funded by local, regional, national and international organisations which has fed into policy and

practice in the UK and abroad. Ally led the research strand for the West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub 2024-2026. Ally is co-editor of the British Journal of Music Education and an Honorary Senior Lecturer at the University of Sussex.

Greg Daubney (CPsychol) is a freelance Chartered Psychologist registered with the British Psychological Society. Greg has provided psychological support across numerous performance domains, including sport and the performing arts, to improve performers' wellbeing, resilience and performance for over 18 years. He has worked with the British Association for Performing Arts Medicine (BAPAM) since 2021, providing psychological support to performing artists struggling with their mental health in these changing and challenging times as part of their 'Music Minds Matter' programme. Greg enjoys working holistically with individuals and groups to provide strong evidence informed practical guidance for performers at all stages of their career.

Megan Clarke was the programme lead for West of England Music and Arts' Cultural Education Hub during the period of this research. She is an arts and cultural engagement professional with over 10 years of experience working with children and young people, communities and artists to deliver inspiring engagement projects in the cultural sector. She has a passion for supporting people from all backgrounds to engage with arts and culture and the positive impact this has on people's lives.