



SPOTLIGHT:YOUTH MUSIC

ENPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION OF CREATIVES

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Introduction

The journey of the Spotlight programme has been one of collaboration, discovery, and relentless pursuit of opportunities for young people aspiring to enter the music industry. It all began in 2023, when a group of young individuals, already involved in various programmes with Our 1 Community, expressed a strong desire for more performance opportunities. This need for visibility and professional experience ignited the creation of Spotlight—a programme designed to provide young musicians with the tools, opportunities, and platforms they need to forge their careers in music.

From its inception, Spotlight has partnered with a wide array of organisations, including Kingswood, Network Rail, Catch22, and EuroMet, to provide unique and enriching experiences for young performers. These partnerships have allowed us to expand the reach of Spotlight and offer performances in diverse settings, ranging from youth residential centres to busy train stations, and even across international borders. Through our collaboration with Kingswood, young people have had the chance to perform at multiple youth residential sites across the country, performing in front of hundreds of their peers, from the Isle of Wight to Hexham, and from Norfolk to North Wales.

Our partnership with Network Rail enabled young performers to showcase their talents in unconventional yet exciting environments, such as busking on trains and performing in museums, bringing music directly to the public in unexpected ways. A standout moment came when we supported Catch22 by sending our Spotlight Youth Board to Belgium, where they performed at EuroMet, sharing the stage with young artists from ten different countries. These experiences have been invaluable in helping our participants build the confidence and skills necessary to pursue careers in the music industry.

As Spotlight has evolved, we have continued to seek new and innovative ways to support young people in their musical journeys, engaging with more young talent and building connections with industry professionals, education providers, and mentors. This report aims to explore the lessons we have learned, the boundaries young people face when trying to break into the music industry, and the strategies we have implemented to help them overcome these challenges. Through the ongoing development of the Spotlight programme, we hope to continue empowering the next generation of musicians and ensuring they have the support they need to thrive.

The Partnership and Collaborative Efforts

The development of Spotlight has been greatly enhanced through our partnership with The Enterprise Academy. Together, we have focused on expanding career and aspiration opportunities for young people in the music industry, particularly within the context of education. One key challenge we identified early on was the lack of specific creative career expos and activities tailored exclusively to the music industry. While broader career events were available, finding free, music-focused events for students was a significant gap in the education sector. This realisation led us to seek a more specialised solution.

In response, we reached out to ATG to explore the possibility of hosting a career expo dedicated entirely to the music industry. This collaboration proved to be a resounding success, with over 100 young people from schools and colleges across the Tees Valley attending the event. The expo offered invaluable first-hand industry insights from prominent names in the music world, including BBC Radio (SHAKK), Tees Valley Music Service, Index, Spotlight (us), NE Volume, and Mind, who facilitated a session specifically focused on mental health in the music industry. These sessions provided a unique opportunity for young people to learn directly from industry professionals, giving them a deeper understanding of the diverse roles and opportunities available within the creative sector.

We also engaged with 700 other young people across the borough in a school setting who were unable to make the expo and wanted a more diverse carer expo to support more of their students.

Building on the momentum of the career expo, we created the Spotlight Northern Music Alliance, a collective of 19 businesses from across the North East, all committed to supporting young people entering the music industry. These businesses see the value in collaboration, recognising that by working together, they can provide more meaningful opportunities and support for aspiring musicians. The alliance has proven to be a powerful platform for sharing resources, expertise, and connections, offering young people access to a network of industry professionals and mentors who are committed to their success.

Through these partnerships with ATG and The Enterprise Academy, we have established a strong foundation to deliver creative services for young people. The support from our enrichment partners, all of whom are part of the Northern Music Alliance, strengthens our ability to provide a comprehensive and well-rounded approach to career development in the music industry. Together, we are creating a sustainable, collaborative network that empowers young people to pursue their dreams in music, while also helping them navigate the challenges they may face along the way.

What did young people say?

The survey responses from young musicians across the Spotlight programme provide valuable insight into the lived experiences of young people trying to navigate the music industry. These findings were further echoed through direct conversations with young people during the careers expo at the Stockton Globe and through engagement sessions held in schools and colleges across the North East.

At the Stockton Globe, young people expressed how much they valued the opportunity to connect directly with professionals in the music industry. Many said they wished they had access to this kind of experience earlier in their school journey—particularly before making their GCSE choices. They spoke enthusiastically about being introduced to major regional venues and were particularly inspired by gaining a “behind-the-scenes” perspective of how the industry really works. However, despite their passion for music, very few young people were aware of the broader music supply chain or the range of careers that exist beyond performing. Most struggled to name music-related businesses or identify potential roles they might pursue. This gap in knowledge highlights a pressing need to embed music industry awareness much earlier in educational and career pathways.

These real-life conversations strongly mirrored what was shared in the surveys. Many young musicians still see music as a side job rather than a viable full-time career, citing financial insecurity and a lack of clarity around career routes. One young person described music as an “unstable career option as it is difficult to make a living off it consistently.” While most respondents rated their understanding of the industry as average, they often lacked a sense of direction or knew very little about roles beyond performance. There is clearly a need to introduce clearer career maps, exposure to role models, and practical insights into how the industry works behind the scenes. Events like the Stockton Globe expo are a good start but need to be more regular and more widely accessible.

Barriers to progression continue to be significant for many. Common challenges include the high cost of rehearsal space, travel, and access to suitable venues. Some mentioned a lack of confidence, while others highlighted how hard it is to find information about where and when events are happening. As one participant shared, “Rehearsal rooms can be expensive, especially in places like Newcastle,” while another noted simply, “just funding really, for equipment or recording.” There is an urgent need for better-resourced and subsidised spaces, particularly in areas of low provision, as well as improved access to information and funding routes.

Young people also expressed mixed experiences around collaboration and community support. While some benefit from studying music or being in youth networks, many others said that without being “in the scene” or active on social media, it was hard to make connections. This can create a sense of isolation or exclusivity. One respondent said, “Hard if you're not actively looking on social media, or already in a music scene.” Regular, inclusive

networking events, jam sessions, or collaborative platforms could bridge this gap and help foster peer support and shared creative development.

Marketing and communication also came up frequently. While many rely on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook to find out about opportunities, others pointed to the value of posters, flyers, or word-of-mouth at school. One participant remarked, “I’m old school – I like seeing creative posters around town.” This suggests that mixed-method marketing is crucial to reach different groups of young people. Schools and colleges also play a vital role in keeping students informed and should be part of any joined-up strategy.

When asked about the timing of events, most young people preferred weekday evenings and weekends, particularly early evenings that didn’t interfere with school or work. There was also a clear call for more events in accessible venues, outdoor spaces, or places that feel youth-friendly and welcoming. As one young person noted, “One weeknight at 6pm would break up the week nicely.”

Their ideal music scene is inclusive, diverse, and empowering. Young people want venues and promoters who give equal opportunity to emerging talent, who take young performers seriously, and who build audiences that are open-minded and engaged. One participant described this vision as “Open to people of all ages and abilities for all genres of music,” while another called for “More positive attitudes towards young performers.”

In summary, whether captured through surveys or face-to-face conversations at expos and schools, the message from young people is clear. They need earlier exposure to music careers, more inclusive spaces to develop their skills, accessible and affordable opportunities, and a more visible, better-connected support system. With the right investment in people, spaces, and partnerships, young people in the North East have the passion and potential to lead the future of the music industry—not just perform within it.

What did educators say?

When speaking with educators about the barriers they face in providing industry experience to students, a number of important themes emerged that highlight the complexity of delivering meaningful career pathways, particularly within creative sectors like music. One of the main challenges centres on balancing the demands of the curriculum with the need to offer enriching, real-world experiences. Teachers are under pressure to meet academic targets and evidence outcomes, which can leave little room for more flexible, hands-on learning or extracurricular projects that align with industry practice.

Educators also raised concerns about the difficulty of engaging industry professionals in a consistent and structured way. While one-off talks or visits can be inspiring, schools often lack the time, contacts, or funding to develop sustained partnerships with music industry figures or organisations. There’s also the issue of alignment—finding professionals who not

only work in the sector but can also communicate effectively with young people and offer insights that reflect the full range of opportunities available, from technical roles to business management and everything in between.

Another key issue is the ability to support the diverse needs and aspirations of students. Young people have vastly different learning styles, interests, and life experiences, and educators often feel limited in their ability to personalise guidance. For example, students with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities), those from disadvantaged backgrounds, or those with non-traditional ambitions may not find clear or accessible routes into industries like music, where freelance and gig-based work is common. Schools often lack the capacity or resources to fully support these young people to build the confidence, networks, and experience they need to succeed in such environments.

Further, careers education is often generalised and lacks the sector-specific depth that creative students require. Many educators highlighted the limited availability of information, guidance, or employer engagement tailored to the music industry or wider creative economy. As a result, young people may leave school unaware of the full breadth of pathways available to them or without a realistic understanding of what those careers entail.

Finally, many educators themselves do not feel confident or informed enough about the modern music industry to guide their students effectively. With an ever-changing landscape that includes digital streaming, social media, content creation, and independent publishing, the industry has evolved rapidly, often leaving formal education settings struggling to keep pace.

To truly support students into creative careers, including music, schools need stronger links with industry, more inclusive career education frameworks, flexible models of delivery that allow for real-world experiences, and training for staff to better understand and advocate for a broader range of career pathways. Partnerships like the Spotlight Northern Music Alliance are well-placed to bridge this gap—bringing together grassroots organisations, educators, and industry professionals to co-design experiences that are both meaningful and accessible for all young people.

Spotlight Northern Music Alliance

The Spotlight Northern Music Alliance brings together a growing number of grassroots organisations across the North East who are committed to supporting young people within the music industry. An analysis of the registration data shows that these organisations offer a wide variety of creative and developmental opportunities. These include Flying Start workshops for individuals aged 16 and above, studio and recording support, grassroots music venue access, live performance opportunities, rehearsal spaces, and informal mentoring. Each of these services contributes towards the personal and professional growth of young people, providing them with meaningful exposure to real-world music industry experiences that are often missing from formal education settings.

Based on the data provided, the organisations collectively support over 400 young people each year, with some engaging upwards of 50 to 300 individuals annually. While the figures vary across respondents, the average number of young people reached per organisation is approximately 80 per year. This highlights the significant, often under-recognised, role that grassroots organisations play in nurturing the next generation of creative talent.

In terms of risk management and organisational readiness, most of the participating organisations reported having some key policies in place. These include safeguarding policies, inclusion and diversity statements, and health and safety measures. However, when asked about their interest in receiving free training and support to strengthen these systems, 11 organisations indicated that they would welcome further guidance, while 8 did not respond to the question. No organisations explicitly stated a lack of risk management, which may either reflect genuine preparedness or an uncertainty around what is required.

Critically evaluating the training needs across this network, it is clear that many of the businesses involved are either self-employed individuals or small microbusinesses. While their passion and commitment to supporting young people is evident, there may be gaps in knowledge, capacity, or resource to fully meet all safeguarding and regulatory obligations. There is a need to build greater confidence and consistency in how these organisations manage safety, deliver age-appropriate programming, and engage with volunteers or freelance staff. Training in these areas—particularly around safeguarding, inclusion, and volunteer management—would strengthen the alliance's collective impact and ensure that all young people can access these opportunities in safe and supportive environments.

To address these gaps, the Spotlight Northern Music Alliance could introduce structured support that includes free or subsidised training, shared policy templates, and peer mentoring. By strengthening the infrastructure around each participating organisation, the alliance can help sustain and grow these creative spaces while ensuring young people are supported with professionalism, care, and clarity.

Conclusion – Structured Action

Our ambition for the future of Spotlight and the wider Northern Music Alliance is shaped by everything we've learned through deep engagement with young people, educators, grassroots organisations, and industry professionals. With the right support and funding, we are ready to deliver a bold, flexible, and youth-led programme that breaks down barriers and builds the infrastructure needed for young people to thrive in the music industry.

At the heart of this ambition is our commitment to embedding meaningful music career education into schools and colleges. Through tailored lessons and enrichment-led workshops, we aim to showcase the breadth of creative careers available—from production and performance to marketing, events, and business roles. These lessons will be paired with large-scale, annual expos held in major venues like the Stockton Globe and Sunderland Empire, giving young people direct access to professionals, performers, and real-life career journeys.

Alongside learning, young people must have access to real-world, hands-on experience. We will work closely with ATG theatres and grassroots music venues across the North East to create opportunities for young people to gig, tour, and build confidence in professional environments. These performances won't just build skills—they'll help reinvigorate local music scenes with fresh energy and new audiences.

A recurring issue we've heard is the difficulty young people face in building showreel content that reflects their talent and potential. To address this, we are developing the Buskers Box—a mobile, self-contained gig setup that allows young people to perform in new settings while also recording high-quality video and audio. This will be supported by a dedicated videographer programme, capturing footage from performances throughout the year to support young people in building portfolios that improve their employability and help them secure further work.

Youth voice is central to everything we do. We are expanding the Spotlight Youth Board and creating a youth-led music magazine column (NE Volume), offering young people the opportunity to write, review gigs, and document their experiences across the sector. This platform will ensure services are designed with, not just for, young people—bringing fresh perspectives and genuine insight into what works and what needs to change.

To support progression into work, we will host annual showcase events across the region, inviting agents, promoters, and employers to discover new talent. These events will help bridge the gap between development and professional opportunity.

Our digital ambitions are also growing. In partnership with Sunderland Software City and Newcastle University, we are developing an interactive Spotlight app to help young people safely explore and navigate the music industry. The app will offer access to paid gig

opportunities, online learning modules, band-building tools, and a calendar of enrichment opportunities through our Northern Music Alliance partners. A points-based reward system will incentivise learning, volunteering, and performance milestones—offering rewards such as gig tickets, merchandise, and training bursaries.

As part of building a more youth-friendly industry, we are also committed to launching a free training package for music organisations and their supply chains. This will help industry partners become more inclusive, safe, and accessible for young people by covering key topics such as safeguarding, inclusive language, youth communication, and supporting neurodiverse or disabled musicians. This will raise standards across the region and support more meaningful engagement with young talent.

Perhaps our most transformative idea—the Game Changer—is our proposal to attach funding directly to young people. This personal development funding would allow young people to take control of their own creative journeys by choosing from a pool of approved enrichment partners across the region. They could use the funding to access workshops, try new products or services, explore areas of curiosity, or deepen their skills in specialist areas. This model shifts the power back to the young person—enabling individualised development that fits their stage of growth, interest, and availability.

Importantly, this funding model also supports education providers, offering schools and colleges a wider pool of diverse enrichment without requiring them to coordinate everything internally. It also ensures that even the smallest grassroots music organisations can benefit by becoming approved partners—allowing them to offer services in a way that is accessible, funded, and connected to wider regional outcomes. The Spotlight app will be the platform through which this can be tracked and managed, ensuring transparency, safeguarding, and impact measurement.

We knew this approach was needed after conversations with other organisations in the industry who expressed how difficult it can be to engage young people at scale—especially when age, experience, and confidence levels vary so widely. The Game Changer flips that challenge on its head by putting young people in the driving seat of their own development, while building sustainability and reach for even more creative organisations across the North East.

With the right investment, this comprehensive and forward-thinking model can reshape the way young people engage with the music industry. It will prepare them not just to participate—but to lead, to innovate, and to define what the future of the industry looks like on their terms.

Economic Impact

The economic impact of the Spotlight programme, even at its current scale, is already significant and highlights exciting potential for further growth with the right infrastructure, investment, and coordination.

Currently, 124 young people are signed up to the Spotlight programme. As we continue to strengthen our Northern Music Alliance network, improve our booking systems, and expand our partnerships with venues and promoters, we believe that every one of these young people will be able to secure at least one paid gig per week within the next 12 months. Based on our proposed three-tier payment model—which reflects a performer's experience and duration of set—this activity alone would generate over **£417,000** annually in gig income for the young people involved.

In addition to paid performances, we are proposing a new funding model that places development capital directly in the hands of young people. By allocating **£300 per participant** to be spent on enrichment activity with approved partners, we would inject a further **£37,200** into the grassroots music economy, directly supporting studios, mentors, facilitators, rehearsal spaces, and other creative services. This approach ensures that young people can access support that is relevant to their personal journey, while enabling small and micro organisations across the North East to grow and diversify their offer. Combined, the gig income and enrichment spend would result in a total economic contribution of over **£454,000** per year from the current cohort alone.

Beyond live gigs and enrichment, Spotlight will also provide further income-generating opportunities through youth-led creative output. For example, young people will be supported to write articles, reviews, and interviews as part of the Spotlight magazine—an online and printed publication created by and for young people in music. These pieces will not only offer a paid creative outlet but will also help elevate the voices of emerging talent across the region. Additionally, contributors will be able to build published portfolios of work, strengthening their employment prospects in journalism, media, and wider creative industries.

As Spotlight evolves, these interconnected income streams—gigs, enrichment participation, media creation, and digital innovation—will create a robust, youth-powered creative economy. By recognising and rewarding young people as contributors, professionals, and creators from the outset, we are building a system that values their work and invests in their future. With continued support, this model will generate meaningful personal income, strengthen grassroots organisations, and bring new energy into the local cultural sector.