

National Open Youth Orchestra Feasibility Study Executive Summary – October 2017

Background to the Feasibility Study

Founded in 2007, OpenUp Music is a charitable company with a clear mission – to ensure that orchestras are accessible to young disabled people.

In 2015 [OpenUp Music](#) launched the award winning South West Open Youth Orchestra (SWOYO), the UK's only disabled-led, regional youth orchestra. In 2018, OpenUp Music aims to rebrand and relaunch itself as the [National Open Youth Orchestra](#) (NOYO) and in so doing, create the world's first disabled-led national youth orchestra.

In January 2017 [Sound Connections](#) was commissioned to research and write the NOYO Feasibility Study. The brief was to identify opportunities and threats; suggest the required organisational structure and resources; and help establish the long-term viability, sustainability and resilience of NOYO. The resulting Feasibility Study is primarily for NOYO and its future partners, but will likely also be of interest to all those who contributed to the process, and to the wider music and disability sectors.

How has the Feasibility Study been compiled?

Sound Connections completed six months of desk research, project visits, observations and stakeholder consultations (interviews, surveys and focus groups with young people, parents, carers, and people working in the fields of music and/or disability). Approximately 130 people, representing all nine regions of England, contributed opinions and ideas via the consultation.

What did the research find?

An overwhelming amount of consultees agree that a national disabled-led and inclusive orchestra is needed, and that it would complement or enhance existing provision. Nobody disagrees that an ensemble of this sort is needed. All young people consulted said they would like to be part of a national ensemble.

People believe the ensemble is needed for the following reasons:

- **Equity and human rights** – that it is an “historical oversight that this orchestra doesn't exist already; all musicians should have the same equality of opportunity and access”
- The lack of accessible **progression routes**
- **Creating new and innovative art** – challenging expectations of what talent, musicianship and artistic excellence are
- **Advocacy** – that NOYO can play a part in changing perceptions, expectations, and by prompting change.

Key messages for NOYO are:

- **Collaboration and co-production** with disabled musicians at all levels of planning and delivery is essential. **Youth voice** must be built into practice and strategy

- **Artistic identity and high quality music-making must be the driver** - the ensemble must not be defined by disability
- **Target participants** – clear definition is needed around who the ensemble is open to
- **Changing hearts and minds** – sitting behind and beyond NOYO are much broader cultural and societal issues that will take a long time to shift. Whilst the orchestra can't change these alone, it does have the potential to change and challenge perceptions and expectations
- **Existing inclusive/disabled-led ensembles** – existing regional ensembles are an important part of the progression route infrastructure, and it is recommended that all existing ensembles are invited into NOYO discussion and planning
- The **role of parents and carers** – what is required of parents and carers in order to make NOYO happen must not be underestimated, and they must continue to be engaged and consulted
- The **social and collaborative** aspects of playing in an ensemble are very important to young people
- **Creative approaches and repertoire** will complement and enhance the use of composed works
- Young people are keen for an open-minded approach to the instruments included in the ensemble
- **Selection and audition** – the audition process must be one that is flexible, adaptable and centred around each individual. Selection through 'distance travelled' should be more important than pure skill and attainment
- **Logistics** – significant consideration must be given to the logistics required to enable a healthy, safe and functional rehearsal environment
- **Safeguarding, pastoral and medical care** – protecting the welfare, wellbeing and health of NOYO participants is paramount and requires deep and careful consideration. A specialist organisation or individual responsible solely for safeguarding, pastoral and medical requirements should be engaged or consulted in order to ensure that the best expertise is in place
- **Workforce** – there is an opportunity to better connect practitioners working in the field of SEN/D and NOYO can be a broker and driver in facilitating this community of practice
- **Growth** – the ensemble should be developed iteratively using a phased approach across a number of years. Flexibility, open-mindedness and adaptability are key during NOYO's infancy
- **Non-disabled participants** – whilst the idea of 'reverse inclusion' is welcomed, it is important to recognise that for non-disabled participants to be involved most positively and effectively, training and development will aid their understanding of the ensemble and their role within it

Key messages for the wider music education sector

- **The workforce** – there is a collective will to do more and be better in SEN/D music-making, but a current lack of coverage in terms of skills and experience, and a lack of confidence amongst many to work in new ways. Strategic and joined up approaches to workforce development are needed nationally
- **1-to-1 tuition** – 1-to-1 tuition will be an essential aspect of enabling NOYO participants' progression. Currently, consistent 1-to-1 tuition is not an established norm and much more needs to be done at local and regional level for this to change
- **Partnership** – NOYO is a national initiative that will require a considerable number of partnerships with music, cultural and disability organisations across the country
- **A truly national ensemble**
 - In order for NOYO to be truly national, first access and grassroots provision must be comprehensive, and Hubs and other cultural organisations must work collaboratively to ensure a strategic approach to SEN/D provision across the country
 - Beyond first access, borough/county ensembles are an important next step for young people progressing as musicians. Whilst there are examples of excellent practice in regional ensembles, this provision is patchy and many boroughs and counties don't have an inclusive/disabled-led ensemble
- **NOYO** can and should only ever be one part of the puzzle. It is for the whole sector to play a part in transforming SEN/D music education and opportunities

The recommended NOYO model

The NOYO model involves two tiers of activity:

1. More regular and local provision, provided by regional Training Centres
2. National activity that brings together musicians from the Training Centres as NOYO

Regional Training Centres will ensure that additional support needs are identified and met. Very targeted support for each individual will be provided, drawing upon the widest possible range of approaches, instruments, genres and methods of creating music. Training Centres should level the playing field and ensure that all barriers to progression are removed. They will:

- Work with their regional Music Education Hubs, schools, charities and arts organisations to identify young, disabled musicians
- Host a series of fully accessible, flexible format auditions
- Signpost young people and their families to other relevant opportunities, projects and organisations and support them to access other provision where possible
- Host "Instrumental Workshops" where NOYO will identify accessible instrument options (including music technology solutions) for individual musicians
- Provide 1-to-1 tuition to NOYO members
- Facilitate a range of regional rehearsals aligned to the NOYO programme
- Work to develop professional orchestral pathways for NOYO members in their individual areas

NOYO will commit £5,000 to each Training Centre annually towards delivery costs, as well as music leader training and support for activity from the NOYO Musical Director.

National activity

The National Open Youth Orchestra will provide for and build upon this regional activity, with overall responsibility for the artistic, strategic and operational management. NOYO will:

- Hold and adjudicate NOYO auditions
- Deliver NOYO residential rehearsals
- Identify, provide and promote NOYO performance opportunities
- Provide means-tested travel bursaries to enable NOYO members to remove financial barriers
- Develop and provide access to new, accessible musical instruments that musicians can take home
- Commission contemporary composers to devise new repertoire for NOYO
- Work with professional orchestras to provide musical mentors to NOYO members and open up professional pathways

The reasons and justifications for having a selective national ensemble are:

- It acts as a progression route to, and training for, Higher Education and professional music careers
- National ensembles have prestige and profile and as such challenge audience perceptions and expectations

Who is the ensemble for?

Throughout the stakeholder consultation process the need for clear entry criteria, and a statement about who this ensemble is for, has been a recurring recommendation. Whilst this needs to be treated with some flexibility, and adjusted as the ensemble establishes itself and learning is reflected upon, the suggested starting point is that the ensemble is for:

- People who could feasibly have a career in music if there were to be no barriers in the way
- People with passion, perseverance and potential
- Aged between 11-25
- Instrumentalists

NOYO's place within inclusion – philosophy, ethos and values

There is widespread agreement that the music sector needs to work towards a more inclusive and equitable state, and that inclusion isn't just about SEN/D, it's about all types of needs, interests and backgrounds. This doesn't necessarily mean that all ensembles and pathways will be for all people. One way of perceiving inclusion is the point at which opportunities and provision in their totality ensure everyone can find a pathway that is right for them, and that all types of progression are valued equally.

Creating such an equitable state is for the whole music and arts sector to tackle collectively, and one requiring systemic change. On the way to achieving true inclusion a variety of targeted, 'stepping stone' approaches are used to create change. There are many brilliant projects and initiatives working towards

inclusion in different ways and it needs recognising that NOYO is just one piece of this puzzle with the ambition of tackling some but not all of the issues. Nonetheless, there are ways in which NOYO can maximise its position.

If NOYO is established as a selective orchestra there must be a range of other options sitting alongside it that provide alternative but equally valid, exciting and recognised pathways that represent and cater for a variety of interests, backgrounds and ways of working.

NOYO can play a part in ensuring this happens by:

- Connecting and partnering with a range of partners, ensembles and initiatives
- Considering, once NOYO is established and settled, forming other ensembles to create a portfolio of NOYO ensembles
- Sharing NOYO skills, methods and models with the wider sector
- Situating NOYO within the centre of an ecology rather than at the top of a pyramid

Should a national disabled-led ensemble ever cease to exist?

This question, asked during the consultation process, is best summed up by two responses:

"Philosophically speaking you could argue 'should the orchestra exist in the first place' i.e. shouldn't we simply have orchestras which are inclusive at the point of use. However, I don't think wider society is even close to being there yet – we need to strike out in this area for now, to raise aspirations and awareness."

"Should this venture eventually lead to traditional orchestras becoming fully inclusive then perhaps yes. However, given the potential for this to be a new art form, the answer may be no."