

AGENDA 11, Enc xi) SOUND FUTURES FESTIVAL – REVIEW REPORT

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For inclusion in, or as an appendix to, the report of YMCA Northumberland to the Youth Forum and, in turn, to the Council's FGS Committee

1. Purpose of this report

This report has been prepared to support YMCA Northumberland in reporting on the inaugural Sound Futures Festival, held on Saturday 22nd August 2026 at People's Park, Ashington. It draws together feedback as a Council team: from Sharon, as previous organiser of Fair Day; from Sarah Eden, with an overview across both Sound Futures Festival and the former Fair Day; and from the wider Council team who have worked on both events. It also reflects feedback from Councillors who attended on the day, fellow stallholders, and attendees. It is intended to inform YMCA Northumberland's own report to the Youth Forum and may be reflected within that report as well as appended to it separately. Reports are being received by the Youth Forum ahead of consideration by the Council's FGS Committee of YMCA Northumberland's future leadership of the event.

The purpose of the report is to record what worked well, so that it is not lost, and to note constructively the one area of feedback received, relating to publicity, so that it can be built upon.

2. Overall feedback

Feedback received by the Council, including directly from Councillors who attended, has been overwhelmingly positive. The consistent message from those who attended is that Sound Futures Festival was a genuine success, and an exciting foundation for an annual event.

3. Young people's involvement and development

The objective from the outset and the most positive takeaway was the visible involvement of young people in delivering the day. The event was brought together by YMCA Northumberland, specifically Rob and Ricky, with young people's future leadership of the festival in mind, and young people were involved throughout and volunteered on the day itself. Seeing young people taking on real responsibility and gaining genuine, transferable experience, from performing to supporting the running of the site was invaluable.

This has a value that goes well beyond the day itself. It gives young people in Ashington real, hands-on experience of what it takes to deliver an event of this scale, and a foundation of experience and confidence to build on as they take on a greater leadership role in future editions.

4. Future opportunities for young people

Linked to the above, we must highlight the doors this event opens for young people going forward, whether that is progression in events management, technical production, performance, or the wider creative industries. The festival gave a number of young people their first experience of a live public event of this scale, and that experience will stand them in good stead for future opportunities, education and employment.

5. Professionalism of delivery

The professionalism of the event, both in the build-up and on the day itself, was clear to the Council team throughout. From the outset, the team could see how enthusiastic YMCA Northumberland were as a team and had every confidence that they would deliver something very different from the former Fair Day — which they did. Details that the Council team would not necessarily have thought of themselves, including the provision of a green room for performers and the calibre and helpfulness of the event's runners on the day, the acts that appeared, stage set-up and production, 'sound', all reflected this professionalism throughout. These are the kinds of details that make performers and visiting acts feel properly looked after and reflect very well on YMCA Northumberland and everyone involved in delivery.

6. Paid performers

The decision to pay young performers for their appearances was one of the most significant achievements of the event, and this is something commended to the Council to celebrate. Beyond

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the practical value of the payment itself, it sends a powerful message to young performers that their time, talent and effort are valued. For young people considering a future in the arts, that sense of being taken seriously and paid properly for their work is, in a real sense, invaluable to their confidence and their future career choices. That was a very conscious decision by YMCA.

7. Event branding and atmosphere

The event t-shirts were brilliant and very well received and helped give the festival a strong, professional identity from the outset. Attendees also commented on the enthusiasm of the performers, all of whom were under the age of 25. Performers provided a supportive atmosphere between acts, they could be seen encouraging and championing one another throughout the day rather than simply performing their own sets — a particularly positive feature of the day.

8. Traders, food vendors and sponsors

Market traders at the event reported being happy with the day, and food vendors sold out, both good indicators of footfall and of an event that worked well for those taking part commercially as well as those attending. The support of local sponsors was also valued and is an important foundation to build on for future years.

9. Range of ages in attendance

We observed a genuinely wide range of ages among those attending, suggesting the event succeeded in appealing across the community rather than to young people alone.

10. Feedback on publicity

The one area of feedback that was not positive related to publicity and specifically was raised via comments on Facebook. This is somewhat difficult to reconcile, given that the event was very heavily promoted on Facebook and other social media in the run-up; however, this feedback should be taken on board constructively rather than dismissed and should inform planning for future events.

In considering this feedback, it is important to bear in mind the context in which the event was delivered: a limited budget and a short lead-in time. Within those constraints, the level of promotion achieved was considerable, and the awareness gap identified should be seen as an opportunity for future growth rather than a reflection on this year's efforts.

11. Suggestions for strengthening publicity in future years

The following options may help address the publicity feedback for future editions of the festival, budget permitting:

- Paid social media advertising: the Council is unable to fund paid Facebook advertising directly, but YMCA Northumberland or other partners may be able to do so. This would be worth exploring, including whether paid promotion is able to overcome the effect of social media algorithms limiting organic reach.
- Dignitary and VIP sharing: a number of dignitaries and high-profile guests were invited to attend, but it is understood that many did not share details of the event across their own networks in the run-up. A specific, direct request that invited guests share event details ahead of time, rather than a general invitation alone, may help secure this in future.
- A headline act: a larger budget allowing for a headline act with their own established following could bring a significant boost to awareness and audience reach.
- Printed publicity: a bigger publicity budget could fund door-to-door flyer distribution and paid advertising in local titles such as the Gazette and the Chronicle.
- On-site signage: a large advertising billboard in People's Park in the weeks ahead of the event would provide sustained, highly visible local promotion.

12. Conclusion

This was the inaugural Sound Futures Festival, and by any reasonable measure it was a considerable success, delivered by YMCA Northumberland with young people involved throughout, for the benefit of young people and the wider Ashington community, on a limited budget and within

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a short timeframe. Events of this kind build their own momentum over time: awareness, sponsorship, and reputation all grow year on year where the foundations are strong. On the evidence of this first event those foundations are very strong indeed.

13. Recommendation

It is recommended that the Council supports YMCA Northumberland to deliver the Sound Futures Festival again, and that the budget for the event is looked at in the round to see whether it could be increased.