

EVENT REPORT

GATHERING AND CELEBRATION

SUMMARY

THE BOARDWALK | 28–29 AUGUST 2026

New Music Scotland's 2026 Gathering and Celebration brought together NMS Members – composers, performers, promoters, educators and organisations – from across Scotland for a two-day event focused around the environment, sustainability and new music.

The event was framed around the question:

What does the best case for new music look like ten years from now, and what steps can we take now to get there?

Several points came up repeatedly across the two days:

- The climate emergency is already here, and the climate we have known is changing. The question for those working in New Music (as it is across society) is how we respond.
- Individual musicians and small organisations are not responsible for the largest share of emissions. The opportunity to make a difference comes from influence – through making and sharing work, telling stories and asking questions.
- Guilt and isolation can make action harder. Finding other people, sharing ideas and making small changes can make it easier to keep going.
- Sustainability and accessibility need to be considered together. Changes that reduce environmental impact can often create additional barriers for disabled people and others with access needs.
- Community and place-based work should not be seen as separate from ambitious artistic practice. It can produce work that is artistically ambitious and relevant to the wider new music sector.

If you need this report in another format, contact info@newmusicscotland.co.uk.

PROGRAMME & KEYNOTES

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PROGRAMME

FRIDAY

- Welcome from Lewis Coenen Rowe, Chair of New Music Scotland
 - Keynote panel with Ben Twist, Lisa Robertson, Karen Ridgewell and Sam Redway
 - Facilitated group discussions and questions to the panel
 - A provocation on creative access from Sorcha Pringle, on behalf of Drake Music Scotland
 - Three breakout sessions: Making Music; Environmental Impacts: Practical Steps; and Institutional Context
 - An evening celebration with music-making sessions led by Raymond MacDonald, Simon Hellewell and Emily Doolittle
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SATURDAY

- Open sessions shaped by attendees' suggestions, looking at what people had taken from Friday and what could happen next
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KEYNOTE PANEL

Each speaker approached the question of climate and new music from a different perspective:

Ben Twist, Founder and Director of [Culture for Climate Scotland](#), argued that music has always responded to the major issues of its time, and that climate is one of the defining issues of ours. He challenged new music to declare its own climate emergency and develop a plan for responding to it. He went further, arguing that all new music should now engage with climate change. Given the urgency of the crisis, there is not the time to work on anything else.

He also put the sector's own emissions into context. For most musicians, travel is the main area where individual changes can make a significant difference. Beyond that, he argued, the bigger opportunity is influence. He suggested researching the subject, making a commitment, using a green rider, choosing slower forms of travel where possible, explaining those choices, and making the process enjoyable. He also highlighted that Creative Scotland's requirement for grant recipients to demonstrate action on environmental issues is creating new opportunities for climate-engaged work.

KEYNOTE PANEL

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KEYNOTE PANEL (continued)

[Lisa Robertson, composer](#), based in the West Highlands, spoke about making work in response to environmental issues. She described how working with scientists, activists and community organisations has brought new perspectives in to her work. These collaborations can also bring in new audiences and give people a practical way to respond to their feelings about the climate crisis.

Lisa also spoke about local and rural audiences, who can be curious and receptive to this work. Working locally can reduce travel while making it easier for people to take part. She stressed the importance of music education, making room for individual voices, and recognising the value of community-engaged work.

[Karen Ridgewell, Climate Emergency and Sustainability Lead at Creative Scotland](#), set out the scientific context. The 1.5°C threshold was exceeded in 2024, and actions taken over the next ten years will have a significant bearing on the level of warming we experience. She described the climate we have now as the most stable climate we are likely to know.

Drawing on a framing from Dark Matter Labs, Karen talked about “dream matter”, the work artists make and its ability to move people, alongside “dark matter”, the less visible work involved in getting organisations and practices in order. She encouraged people to learn more about climate change, work out what they can control, where they can influence others and what sits outside their immediate control, and connect with others working on climate across the sector.

[Sam Redway, dramaturg, librettist and director](#), put the emissions of the new music sector into a wider context. He pointed to the relatively small carbon footprint of several UK new music festivals compared with the emissions associated with the investments of the world’s wealthiest individuals.

Sam argued that people can end up carrying a disproportionate sense of guilt for a problem they did not create. At the same time, he encouraged people to continue making practical changes, including flying less, driving less and eating less meat.

His six suggestions were i) to let go of internalised blame, while still changing our own behaviour; ii) allow ourselves to be affected by what is happening; iii) find other people who feel the same; iv) make music that can bond, anger, comfort and provoke; v) reject the idea that music should only be about music; and vi) make more angry music.

DISCUSSION & ACCESS

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GROUP DISCUSSIONS

A set of facilitated discussions followed, which brought a wide range of questions back to the panel:

People asked whether their time was better spent reducing their own environmental footprint or changing the content and purpose of their work. There were questions about how to keep going when individual action feels insignificant, how to sustain anger without burning out, and how to balance activism with artistic freedom.

Other discussions covered the dependence of independent artists on digital platforms, the difficulty of reducing that dependence while making a living, and how local work can be valued alongside international activity.

The panel returned to several practical points. They highlighted the importance of knowing where your biggest impacts are, while recognising that influence may be more significant than an individual's footprint.

They encouraged people to start with changes they can see and build from there, and to find others to work with rather than trying to do it alone. They also cautioned that climate doom can raise awareness but does not necessarily help people act. As one panellist put it, action follows motivation.

CREATIVE ACCESS

Sorcha Pringle, musician, composer and disabled activist, spoke on behalf of Drake Music Scotland.

Her starting point was that everyone has needs in order to work at their best, so access should not be treated as an additional consideration. She encouraged thinking about access in two ways – what can be built in as standard, such as flexible working or publishing information in more than one format, and what needs to be available when an individual has a specific requirement, such as a BSL interpreter.

Sorcha described how working with a creative assistant underpins her own practice in schools and argued that roles like this should be seen as a normal part of how a team works. She encouraged individuals and organisations to use access riders.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

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BREAKOUT SESSIONS

MAKING MUSIC

Hosted by Lewis Coenen Rowe with input from composers Alex South, Lisa Robertson and Emily Doolittle, this session looked at why people make environmental work and what that work can do.

Discussion covered people's relationships with place and land, listening to other species, from whale song to individual blackbirds, and the fact that the climate crisis is also a biodiversity crisis.

People also discussed whether music needs to communicate a particular message. Music can provide a space for reflection and care as well as being a way of communicating an argument.

The session also shared practical advice on less obvious routes to funding this sort of work. Suggestions included the public engagement budgets built into large science grants, the small funds held by Scotland's regional climate action hubs, and partnerships with heritage organisations, alongside Creative Scotland's own support for this kind of work.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS: PRACTICAL STEPS

Hosted by Fiona Robertson, with input from Sorcha Pringle, Atzi Muramatsu, Director of Sonic Bothy and Terry Roberts, Environmental Sustainability Manager at Edinburgh International Festival, this session focused on the practical changes the sector can make to reduce its environmental impact and adapt to a changing climate, and the challenges around accessibility for artists with a disability.

Discussion turned to climate adaptation, and in particular the need to build additional travel days into plans. This can go hand in hand with making the most of a visiting artist's time, for example through short residencies and multiple activities, an approach Edinburgh International Festival is already exploring. Work planned in this way may also need contingencies, such as the possibility of cancellation if travel is disrupted.

BREAKOUT SESSIONS

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BREAKOUT SESSIONS (continued)

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Hosted by Joseph Peach, with input from Chris Hutchings – Choirs for Climate, Karen Ridgewell and Clare Hewitt, this session looked at how funders are responding to the climate emergency and what that means for the people and projects they fund.

Karen and Clare explained how Creative Scotland's environmental criteria work in practice. These criteria are a requirement as a result of Scottish Government's climate legislation, with different requirements applying across their grant making according to the scale of application.

They highlighted the distinction between environment-related assessment criteria and the subject matter of funded activity. Creative Scotland's criteria concern how a project is delivered – applicants are asked to show they have considered its environmental impact and how they will reduce it. They stressed that the criteria are not about the subject matter of work funded by Creative Scotland, which remains the applicant's decision.

Karen also made the case for annual environmental reporting, which creates vital evidence to argue for new support for the sector. Chris encouraged applicants to keep applying and to look beyond the usual arts funders.

Wider topics covered included how projects can fall between arts and health, with funders in each space seeing the work as the other's responsibility, and what replaces fossil fuel sponsorship as organisations move away from it, at a time when public funding is already stretched. The session closed on the point that decisions about culture funding are political ones, and that everyone in the sector has a role to play in making the case for investment.

KEY THEMES

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KEY THEMES

INFLUENCE AND FOOTPRINT

The discussion returned a number of times to the distinction between the environmental impact of the New Music sector and the influencing power of the work it makes. Practical changes still matter, particularly around travel, but people also talked about the wider effect that artists can have through their work and public voice.

TURNING GUILT INTO ACTION

A number of those present described personal feelings of guilt or powerlessness about climate change. The response was not to ignore those feelings, but to focus on what is possible, to take small, manageable actions and build from there.

COMMUNITY AND CONNECTION

The value of working with other people came up throughout the day. Climate-related work can be difficult to sustain alone, and finding others with similar concerns can make it more manageable.

ACCESS AND CLIMATE JUSTICE

Sustainable choices are not always accessible choices. Public transport is not always available or accessible, lower-carbon options can cost more, and making work accessible can involve additional costs and climate impacts. Climate action needs to take these realities into account.

PLACE AND LOCAL WORK

There was considerable interest in place-based work, local audiences and rural communities. These approaches can open up different creative possibilities while reducing some of the travel associated with cultural activity.

DIFFERENT EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Anger, grief, hope and uncertainty all featured in the discussions. People talked about the value of making space for those different responses rather than expecting climate-related work to have one particular tone.

TAKEAWAYS & ACTIONS

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

The final sessions focused on next steps, some of the points raised included:

- There is no going back to the climate we have known, and that loss needs space to be acknowledged.
- Sustainability can create problems for people with access needs. Transport can be limited, sustainable options can cost more, and access itself can cost more.
- The importance of focusing on what can be controlled, such as considering a venue's energy use when booking.
- It is possible to make work about the climate crisis without expecting it to change the world.
- Considering how to use music to bring people together and support vulnerable communities in a future world affected by the climate crisis.
- Individual voices can feel small in an institutional context, but actions are still noticed by others.
- The new music sector is not a large source of emissions, but that does not remove the need to make changes.
- There may be value in finding better ways to demonstrate and quantify the benefits of new music.

ACTIONS

In the final session, two groups picked up on some of the questions raised during the weekend and discussed possible actions.

One group focused on everyday choices and the wider effects of how musicians work. Discussion included small changes such as cycling to work, thinking carefully about the use of AI as its impact becomes clearer, and making connections through existing work in unexpected ways. For international work, the group suggested fewer, longer residencies instead of repeated short flights. They also discussed programming, and the need for a balance between work that responds directly to the climate crisis and work that gives audiences space to engage with other ideas and emotions.

The other group focused on creative work and community engagement. They argued that there should be room for all kinds of work in programming, including music that brings people together and gives them space to take in ideas and feelings in their own time. They stressed the importance of meeting people where they are, including in their own communities and at different stages of life. Audiences do not need a background in new music to engage with the work. A lack of support for composers and musicians working in this way was identified as a barrier. This led to a proposal for a toolkit to help artists approach community engagement and development work around climate, more below.

WHAT NEXT

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WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

TOOLKIT

New Music Scotland is exploring the idea of developing a toolkit on navigating the climate crisis through new music. It could include practical examples, case studies, approaches to wellbeing, slowness and mindful travel, and ways for people in the sector to support each other.

NEXT MEMBERS MEET

Attendees suggested a future Members Meet on the pressures of building a career in music alongside full-time work, caring responsibilities or disability.

KEEPING THE CONVERSATION GOING

We will continue to share resources and opportunities around climate and new music with members.

If you have ideas, projects or questions that you would like New Music Scotland to pick up, please **get in touch**.

THANKS

Thank you to everyone who came and contributed: Ben Twist, Lisa Robertson, Karen Ridgewell, Sam Redway, Sorchia Pringle, Alex South, Emily Doolittle, Chris Hutchings, Clare Hewitt, Raymond MacDonald, Simon Hellewell, Atzi Muramatsu, Terry Roberts. Thank you to The Boardwalk for hosting us.

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