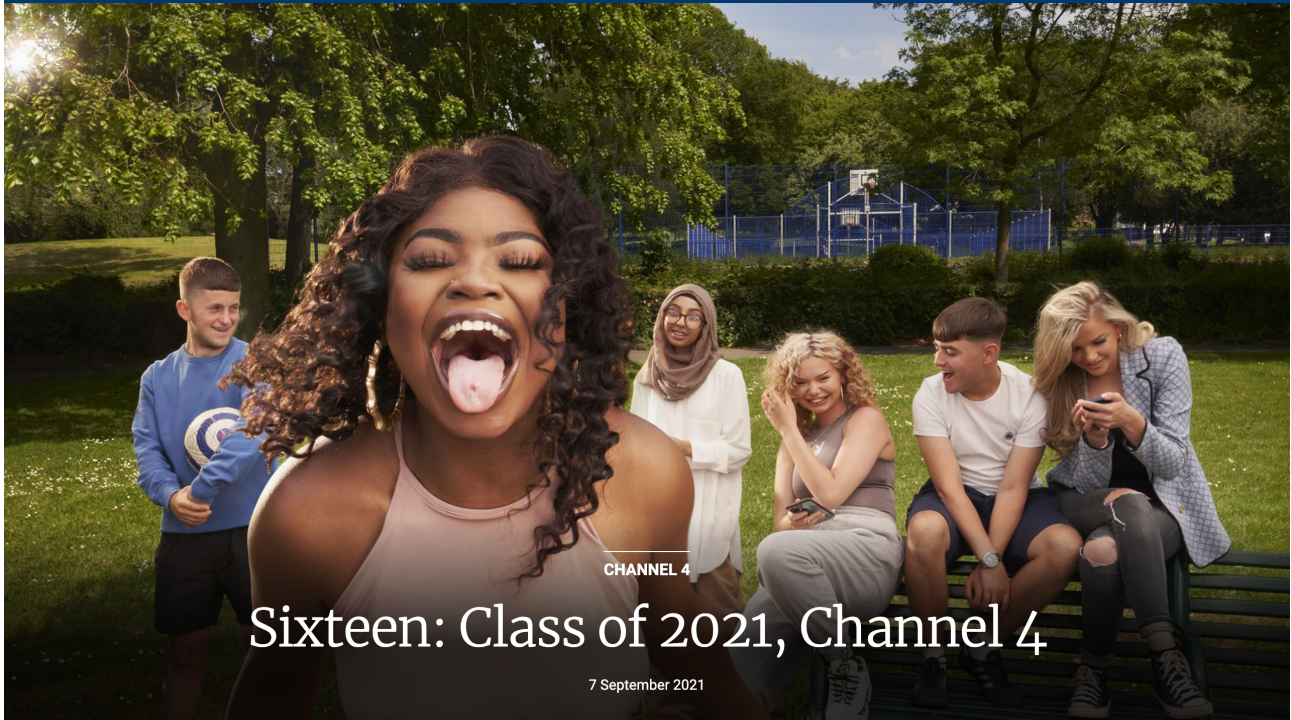


BROADCAST



The second wave of Covid completely changed the nature of our doc series says producer Farah Qayum

Production company: Label1 Television

Commissioner: Danny Horan, Channel 4

Length: 4 x 50 minutes

TX : Tuesdays 11pm on C4

Executive producers: Simon Dickson, Lorraine Charker-Phillips

Directors: Izzy Fonseca and Tom Power

Producers: Farah Qayum, Merle Currie, Bex Wallace, Debbie Vile

In early 2020, when Label1 proposed to Channel 4 an ambitious five-year project following secondary school students during their formative years – little did they (and we) know the challenges that lay ahead.

It is no surprise, however, that the series contributors at the heart of the programme – 16-year-olds with impending exams and teenage angst to contend with – are providing a raw and authentic look into the lives of the young people labelled ‘The Lost Generation’ due to the impact of the global pandemic on their education.

In the summer of that year, we were commissioned to film at The Link Academy in Dudley. The West Midlands town was less well-known than its illustrious neighbours Birmingham and Wolverhampton. But what it perhaps lacked in notoriety it made up with distinct charm, character and stories that would resonate in other towns up and down the country.



The idea of cameras, television crews and being in the spotlight was farfetched for many of the young people of Dudley. These things just didn’t happen to them, many remarked as we met them. Convincing them otherwise was one of our early challenges and one that persisted throughout the series.

But they had bags of opinions on life, love, politics, money and their futures and the future of our country. And from the very beginning, we were determined to give them the opportunity, the platform, and the tools to use their voice and tell their stories.

However, no sooner than filming had begun, than the second wave of Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns struck. Suddenly, instead of making a series about growing up in Dudley, we found ourselves as pretty much the only crew in the country filming an entire - and unprecedented - academic year in a school, during a challenging and turbulent time. It also meant making quick decisions about the future of the series in a shifting and uncertain environment.



That turbulence was acutely felt by us, a small filming team, on the ground. Our editorial evolved at a remarkable rate in those early weeks and months of filming which had an impact on everything from who and how we were casting, what we were filming and how to do it safely. That early rocking ship was skilfully steadied by our directors Izzy Fonseca and Tom Power and producer Bex Wallace – often filming in the eye of the storm.

Backed up by our production manager Stef Taylor who was constantly looking for safe and creative ways to keep the series afloat on choppy pandemic waters. As the prime minister announced in January 2021 that schools would again be closed for

months, there was a sharp intake of breath – had we finally succumbed to the ultimate tide?

Once we were able to fully grapple with and accept what was before us, it felt remarkably obvious what the series should be about. We had unique access to young people during a unique year in their life at a unique point in history. The stars were surely aligned for insightful and unexpected television.

With support from C4, we decided to pivot away from the original concept towards a series that was much more focused on the travails of the Year 11 cohort; those embarking on their GCSE year against the backdrop of lockdowns, remote learning and repeated school closures.

My tricks of the trade – Farah Qayum

- Be passionate about your vision for the series. it's infectious and draws in everyone from your team to your contributors
- A good, solid period of casting is the foundation of a strong series
- Really invest in your relationships with your contributors and take care of them. We are in such a privileged position to have people open their lives to us, we have a massive duty of care to them
- Where covid and young people are concerned, have plans A, B and C up your sleeve
- A well-fed crew is a happy crew!

The challenge didn't end there. Having got the kids on board and the newly focused premise signed off, there was the issue of how we film a series about young people in school and at home authentically and with all the added covid protocols (which at their height included one filming team in one house every 48-hours).

Having previously worked on Educating Yorkshire, I was aware the rig was great for hoovering up footage but often lacked intimacy. We wanted Sixteen to feel rooted in the young people's voices and told from their perspective.

We decided our Year 11 cast were to be given broadcast quality cameras and lighting setups that they could power up whenever they felt like documenting their feelings, providing truly unique access to their wider domestic lives, as well as their time at school.

It is these video diaries, filmed by our small group of friends, that have become the beating heart of *Sixteen: Class of 2021*. They reveal their hopes and ambitions, their worries and anxieties but most importantly their humour and resourcefulness during the most challenging year of their short lives.

I feel proud that we've had a part to play in helping these young people tell their stories to the nation.

FILMING CHALLENGES

Eleanor Steedman

Sixteen: Class of 2021 is different to programmes that have come before it. Along with filming in the pandemic, we were focusing on students in Year 11, their final year in secondary school. This was going to be tough, and we needed to make sure our filming didn't add more pressure for the student contributors when deciding how to capture their stories.

Initially we had two teams. Lead PD, Izzy, filmed on an FS7 and series editor, Simon, filmed on his C300. It was a challenge to cover everything without a rig and only two filming teams. So, we hired a third filming team, led by Tom, shooting on an FS7.

The young people taking part in the documentary series were having a tough final year and we wanted to capture what they were going through as authentically as possible. We introduced additional kit; Go Pros and a ring light interview set up, providing each with a smart phone with the Filmic Pro app downloaded and ready to use.

We had a rigorous process and protocols through which the equipment was signed in and out. The equipment was returned every 48 hours to be reviewed and wrangled by our runners.



However, this was not as foolproof as we had had hoped. The contributors weren't experienced camera users and they sometimes struggled with the Filmic Pro app. We often received footage with no sound or with recording issues. We had to think again.

As the stories ramped up and we began focusing in on our key contributors, so did the severity of the pandemic. We were hit hard with more restrictions. The team could not enter more than one home for every 48-hour period. As the edit began, we also went back down to two filming teams. How were we going to get these moments with the current processes in place?

Feedback from contributors indicated that they preferred filming themselves on their own phones and in their own time. I worked with Stef, the production manager on researching the best app to use for what we needed to achieve and we eventually chose SeenIt.

The contributors downloaded the app and were provided with a unique ID. They could now upload their footage as and when they wanted to. Our UGC team, Nick and Orlando reviewed and managed the footage. This was a huge success and worked well for the rest of the filming period.