



*I sat down to take the **art class** and that's the day my **life changed**. That's the day something inside me offered **hope** in a way I'd not felt within the services I'd had before”*

*Debs Teale, Creative Health Advocate, Mental Health and Wellbeing Roundtable*

### 3.1 Creative Health and Mental Health and Wellbeing

#### Key Points

Poor mental health already affects the quality of life of millions of people in the UK and the prevalence of mental health conditions is increasing. In addition to the human costs, this increase places pressure on a strained NHS and has a severe impact on productivity and public finances. It is therefore vital that resources are directed to the prevention of mental health conditions, and that people are better supported with management, treatment and recovery.

Creative health offers an alternative, non-medical approach to mental health, which has been shown to improve outcomes for individuals and systems, and reduce inequalities. Creative engagement can improve wellbeing and can prevent the onset of common mental health conditions. Embedded as a care pathway, it can

be an acceptable, effective and cost-effective intervention, which offers people a person-centred and holistic way to manage and recover from poor mental health.

Creative and cultural opportunities should be considered vital elements of a mentally healthy society as well as an important part of the toolkit available to manage and treat mental health conditions.

Creative health can be applied in communities, schools, workplaces and healthcare settings to tackle the current crisis in mental health. Embedding it as part of a whole system approach, facilitated by a cross-departmental government strategy will maximise the benefits for individuals, communities and systems.

### The challenge of mental ill health

Poor mental health affects the quality of life of millions of adults and children. It is the second largest cause of morbidity in England<sup>96</sup>, with one in six over-16s in England experiencing symptoms of a common mental disorder such as anxiety or depression – a rate that is rising<sup>97</sup>. Around 500,000 people are currently diagnosed with severe mental illness such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia<sup>98</sup>. There were over 6000 suicides in 2021, making suicide the leading cause of death in men under 50<sup>99</sup>. The prevalence of mental health disorders in children and young people has increased significantly in recent years. Around 18% of children aged 7-16 have a probable mental health disorder (rising from 12% in 2017)<sup>100</sup>. Those with special educational needs or disability (SEND) are much more likely to have a mental disorder<sup>101</sup>. We know that poor mental health in childhood can lead to a range of adverse outcomes in adulthood, and that the majority of mental health conditions are established before the age of 14<sup>102</sup>. Early intervention is therefore vital to prevent this crisis from deepening in future years.

Social factors such as employment, poverty and stigma or discrimination influence mental health and wellbeing and there are inequalities in prevalence, access to services and outcomes geographically, and between different ethnic populations. In 2020 to 2021, people living in the most deprived areas of England were twice as likely to be in contact with mental health services than those living in the least deprived areas<sup>103</sup>.

The impact of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis is expected to impact mental health still further. Although the percentage of people experiencing symptoms of depression peaked during the pandemic, at 16% it still remains higher than pre-pandemic levels, and there are links between depression rates and cost of living indicators<sup>104</sup>. In 2023, one in five people report feeling anxious all the time. Eighty-six percent of young people (18-24) reported feeling anxious in the previous two weeks. Financial pressures were a commonly cited cause<sup>105</sup>.

These trends place already stretched mental health services under greater pressure. In 2022/23, 5.8% of



*We need other approaches that address the whole picture of mental health, including looking at causes, triggers, and the broader psychological and behavioural symptoms and consequences. And we also need approaches that help to address stigma and shame, demographic and cultural barriers to help-seeking and approaches that give patients choice, autonomy and holistic care. Creative health is interwoven into every single one of these factors”*

*Professor Daisy Fancourt, Head of the Social Biobehavioural Research Group at UCL, Mental Health and Wellbeing Roundtable*

the population were in contact with mental health, learning disability and autism services (1m under 18 years old)<sup>106</sup>. The planned NHS spend on mental health in 2023-24 is £15.5bn<sup>107</sup>. Waiting times for support can be long, particularly in more deprived areas, and many people do not access the services they need. It is estimated that 60% of children and young people who have diagnosable mental health conditions do not currently receive NHS care<sup>108</sup> and that overall the number of people with mental health needs not in contact with NHS mental health services is 8 million<sup>109</sup>. Due to capacity limitations, thresholds to receive NHS care are high, which leads to a risk that untreated mild symptoms may progress to a more serious condition.

In addition to impact on quality of life, and the costs to the healthcare system, poor mental health has an economic impact. It is the most prevalent health condition cited by people unable to work due to long term sickness. In 2022, over 1.35m of those absent from work due to long term sickness reported depression, anxiety or nerves, a rise of 40% since 2019. This is commonly linked to complex comorbidities<sup>110</sup>. Overall, in the UK, the annual costs incurred by mental ill health in children and young people is in the region of £2.35bn<sup>111</sup>, and the overall loss to the economy to mental ill health is conservatively estimated to be £118bn annually<sup>112</sup>.



It is clear that a new approach to mental health is required. This should be one which emphasises prevention and investment in upstream interventions to help to keep people well, combined with better support for people with mental health conditions. Creative health has much to contribute in both respects.

### **The role for creative health**

Creative health can support the prevention, management, treatment and recovery of mental health conditions. It is a holistic and person-centred approach, providing a sense of meaning, purpose and control, and supporting people to achieve outcomes that are important to their own lives, rather than solely addressing their illness. Its benefits can be felt across all stages of the life course. Whilst for centuries people have tacitly understood the benefits of creativity for mental health and wellbeing and applied these independently, we are now developing a greater understanding of the mechanisms through which creative activity can influence health, and how systems can best embrace creative health to improve outcomes.

Systematic reviews have summarised the diverse ways in which participatory arts can promote mental health and wellbeing. These include improved quality of life, reduced mental distress (including a decrease in symptoms related to depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), improvement in social relationships, and empowerment, enabling people to gain a sense of control over their mental health and, often, subsequently other areas of their lives<sup>113</sup>. Creative health can provide a means of emotional regulation. This could be through distraction or disengagement from worries, or as a vehicle for venting, processing and coming to terms with emotions and developing problem-solving techniques<sup>114</sup>. Creative health is also linked to self-identity, self-esteem and agency<sup>115</sup>.

The benefits of specific creative activities have been investigated. For example,

- Visual arts have been found to improve wellbeing, reduce depression and anxiety and increase confidence and self-esteem in people with depression<sup>116</sup>.

- Group singing has a plethora of mental health and wellbeing benefits, including improved quality of life, social connection and reductions in loneliness, depression and anxiety<sup>117,118</sup>.
- Music - Listening to music can reduce anxiety and improve wellbeing, whilst playing music promotes the maintenance or improvement of wellbeing and health, particularly as part of a group-based activity<sup>119</sup>.
- Dance has been shown to improve quality of life and life satisfaction across cultures and age groups<sup>120</sup>.
- Gardening can improve both physical and mental health<sup>121,122</sup>.

There is also a strengthening evidence base linked to the benefits of engagement with heritage on mental health and wellbeing<sup>123</sup>. Young people's engagement with heritage has been shown to positively influence personal development outcomes such as knowledge, skills and confidence and to build identity and belonging<sup>124</sup>. AMPHORA (Authentic and Meaningful Participation in Heritage or Related Activities) guidelines have been developed to ensure that people are safe and looked after when they take part in heritage activities to support their mental health<sup>125</sup>.

Creative health can be effective across the life course and in different target audiences. For example, Breathe Melodies for Mums is a weekly group singing service for new mothers with symptoms or a diagnosis of postnatal depression, developed by Breathe Arts Health Research. The programme is based on a randomised controlled trial (RCT) with 134 mums which found that participation in group singing led to recovery from postnatal depression in 73% of mothers who took part<sup>128</sup>, and that symptoms decreased faster than in control groups. A clinical trial of an online version, adapted for the pandemic, also demonstrated a significant reduction in symptoms over a 6-week programme and further benefits for wellbeing and life-satisfaction<sup>129</sup>. Breathe Melodies for Mums is one of three arts health interventions in a £2m research programme with Kings College London and University College London (SHAPER), funded by Wellcome, to assess the effectiveness and implementation of arts and health interventions

at scale, and how they can be embedded into mainstream healthcare pathways.

Early intervention is vital to prevent mental illness in young people, which will have a lasting effect into adulthood. Arts activities have been identified as ‘active ingredients’ that help young people with anxiety and depression, particularly those with experiences of trauma, with evidence of significant decreases in symptoms in experimental studies<sup>130</sup>. Music and lyrical composition were strongly represented in a review by the Centre for Cultural Value which found that engaging with arts and culture supported young people’s mental health<sup>131</sup>.

Studies have investigated whether there are specific benefits of creative health as we age, and found that creative health benefits older adults by improving individual mental health and wellbeing, increasing social connection, and reducing isolation and loneliness<sup>132</sup>. Public and intergenerational creative activities can help to transform attitudes to older people, and reduce age-related stigma<sup>133</sup>. Longitudinal studies have shown that long term and frequent engagement with arts activities by older adults is associated with higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, self-realisation, and autonomy in older adults<sup>134</sup> and reduced odds of loneliness<sup>135</sup>.

Creative interventions can be used to reduce depression in older adults<sup>136</sup>. The benefits of singing for both mental and physical health outcome has been well-researched. Studies suggest that singing can improve wellbeing and reduce depression and loneliness in older adults<sup>137</sup>. A pragmatic RCT with over-60s found that participants in a 14-week weekly singing group saw significant improvements in mental health-related quality of life compared to a control group. The study also showed that the programme was cost-effective<sup>138</sup>.

### How does it work?

A bio-psycho-social approach can help to explain the complex and multifaceted ways in which creativity can influence mental health. Creative engagement can have physical effects on the body, such as influencing the release of neurotransmitters or stress hormones. For example, group drumming can reduce inflammatory cytokines, a mechanism which can

decrease depression and improve anxiety. This has been shown to have positive effects for people with mental health conditions which were maintained for at least 3 months post-intervention<sup>139</sup>.

Psychological effects include the opportunity for self-expression or increased confidence. Studies have shown benefits of creative activities through building self-esteem, self-acceptance, confidence and self-worth<sup>140</sup>. A recent analysis commissioned by Arts Council England to investigate the impacts of creativity and culture on the brain found extensive evidence that arts engagement enhances wellbeing, in terms of pleasure, life satisfaction, and finding meaning and purpose in life<sup>141</sup>. When creative activities take place in a group setting there can be benefits in the form of social connectedness and reductions in isolation

### Human Henge - Heritage and creative health

**Human Henge** ran between 2016 and 2018, led by the Restoration Trust in partnership with Richmond Fellowship, English Heritage, the National Trust, and Bournemouth University, and supported by Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust. It brought together archaeology and creativity through immersive experiences of historic landscapes to enhance mental health and wellbeing<sup>126</sup>. Based at Stonehenge and Avebury, the programmes engaged people living in Wiltshire with mental health conditions in a creative exploration of the ancient landscapes. Over 10 sessions, participants engaged in music, song, poetry, illustration, and working with clay whilst interacting with aspects of the historic landscape. Monitoring progress before, during and after the programmes, 65% of participants reported feeling an improved sense of health and wellbeing upon completion<sup>127</sup>. **Scaling Up Human Henge**, part of the Mobilising Community Assets to Tackle Health Inequalities research programme, ran between 2022 and 2023. Its aim is to run and evaluate a Culture Heritage Therapy Programme based in the historic Stonehenge landscape and to produce a toolbox guide that will help professional and voluntary bodies develop and run similar programmes in other historic landscapes around Britain.



and loneliness. Participatory arts can increase social capital, and improve wellbeing through encouraging connection, fostering feelings of belonging providing coping tools, supporting personal development and promoting greater civic and community awareness<sup>142</sup>.

A creative health intervention may act across all these levels. For example, group singing may have biological effects such as decreased levels of cortisol<sup>143</sup>, whilst also facilitating emotional regulation and improving social connectedness, reducing loneliness and improving mental health<sup>144</sup>. Where creative activities are linked to cultural heritage, they may also lead to improved levels of empowerment and self-worth<sup>145</sup>.

### **Creative health in mental health care pathways**

When used as part of a mental health care pathway, creative health has been found to be an acceptable and often enjoyable alternative or complement to medical treatments, without the associated side effects. Creative health programmes demonstrate good patient outcomes, and can be used to relieve pressure on an oversubscribed system.

Social prescribing is one route through which patients can be directed to creative health activities, and can reduce pressure on services, particularly in primary care, when patients can be effectively supported through activities in their communities. Mild to moderate mental health conditions are the most common reasons for referrals<sup>146</sup>. Arts on prescription programmes have been shown to result in improvements in anxiety, depression and wellbeing, including in patients with multi-morbidities<sup>147</sup>, and to be cost-effective<sup>148</sup>. An evidence review by the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP) finds that arts on prescription models are beneficial for psychological health, and models are particularly successful where strong partnerships exist with community infrastructure<sup>149</sup>.

Outside of social prescribing, creative health can be an important element of mental health pathways. For example, Arts for the Blues is an evidence-based psychological therapy for depression<sup>150</sup>. Originally based in primary mental health care settings in Manchester, as part of the

Mobilising Community Assets to Tackle Health Inequalities research programme, pilot projects with a diverse range of creative, community, NHS and academic partners have been developed to explore models to spread and scale the approach<sup>151</sup>.

In Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, where suicide rates are high and a key priority for the Integrated Care System, the Suicide Prevention Innovation Fund, supported by Public Health Cornwall Council and NHS Kernow, invited voluntary and community groups to suggest innovative community-based projects to reduce the numbers of people self-harming or taking their own lives<sup>152</sup>. The funded projects are putting suicide and self-harm prevention initiatives at the heart of communities and were chosen for their ability to support specific higher-risk groups in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, particularly demographics that are least likely to access traditional mental health services, such as men from the rural farming and fishing communities. The funded projects included creative initiatives such as digital photography and music.

The WHO scoping review *‘What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing?’* summarises the ways in which the arts have been shown to support people with severe mental illness<sup>153</sup>. Creative arts therapies are used to complement pharmacological treatment for severe mental illness (SMI). National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines recommend that arts therapies are considered for the alleviation of negative symptoms in psychosis or schizophrenia, with the aim of promoting creative expression, allowing people to experience themselves and relate to others differently, and to help people to process the feelings that arise<sup>154</sup>. A review into the use of participatory arts with people with SMI found that group arts engagement could improve social connectedness, provide an identity beyond a mental illness diagnosis, increase self-belief and generate compassion both for the self and others. Creative activities were found to allow people flexibility to express themselves, and to identify the outcomes that were important to them. Increased confidence, self-worth and wellbeing were common themes<sup>155</sup>.



## The Horsfall Creative Space and Gallery



**The Horsfall** is a creative space and gallery, which forms part of **42nd Street**, a mental health charity for young people aged 13-25 in the Greater Manchester area. The 42nd Street team recognises that many young people feel disempowered, that some services are difficult for them to identify with and access and that their mental health and personal difficulties can be made worse by the health, social, cultural and economic inequalities that they might experience. The mission of the Horsfall is to provide an engaging and accessible space for young people to express themselves through arts-based practices.

Through drop-in sessions, work with professional artists and the production of performances and exhibitions, young people are provided with space to explore their creativity and connect with others. The creative process provides the opportunity to reflect on, process and externalise feelings, and to engage different parts of the brain and develop new thought processes. Their artworks can provide a way to communicate their stories and experiences with their peers and to influence decision-makers.

The Horsfall prioritises allowing young people to tell their stories the way they want to tell them, and facilitates a flexible and supportive environment, which can be in contrast to the regulated and clinical spaces young people may otherwise experience in the mental health system.

*“The adult world quite often asks children to step into that adult world...One-to-one counselling can put a lot on a young person – that they can express themselves, verbally, in a room, to an adult...it relies on people being able to process as they talk. And I think art offers them that space to reflect and return to work.”* – Rod Kippen, Clinical Lead, Creativity and Social Action, 42nd Street

*“We normally get a referral from the main service, and calling it a referral is probably the most clinical thing that we do. From that point it is always about building up a relationship with the*

*young person...we don't even call the drop-in a mental health intervention, but even just coming along and being a part of a group is good for your mental health. And being in a creative space for some people is disrupting the monotonous places that young people have to be in, or the clinical places that young people find themselves in, where you have to behave or act a certain way.”* – Georgina Fox, Creative Drop-in Lead, 42nd Street

In our roundtable on Mental Health and Wellbeing, young artists from the Horsfall described the space as ‘humanising’ and explained how the environment offered them a sense of freedom, control and agency, as well as supporting them to develop skills and connections to develop their creative passions further.

*“I got to work with a professional artist and we collaborated together to create art, and then I took over fully and made my own piece, and it got showed around the gallery and on billboards and on Instagram and it was such a big confidence boost for someone to say ‘look, we value you, and what you think, and your art so much we’ve put it on a billboard”.* – Creative Collective Member, Horsfall Creative Space

*“To have that time (for creativity), to be allowed to sit and relax and express myself, I was able to do that in this building, and it became very much a safe space to socialise, and process, and relax...I got to really express myself through the pieces that I created. The pieces that I produced involved both the painting and breaking of plates. In any other circumstances, they would be like, ‘no, that’s unsafe, don’t do that’. But for me it really helped to process a lot of trauma that I had, through the painting on the plate, but it gave me a lot of agency to then break the plates. The sense of agency it gave me, gave me the confidence to pursue my own bigger projects.”* – Young Artist, Horsfall Creative Space



Creative activities can be introduced in inpatient settings to support mental health outcomes. For example, Quench Arts' Plugin project provides access to music opportunities for young people who are mental health inpatients. The programme uses creative music making to improve emotional literacy, social connectedness and self-esteem<sup>156</sup>. Incorporating the arts into the design of mental health units, and co-producing this work with patients has been found to improve patient experiences and outcomes<sup>157,158</sup>. Hospital Rooms put this into practice in mental health hospitals across the country<sup>159</sup>.

### **Children and young people's mental health**

With the rise in children and young people requiring mental health support, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) under pressure to meet waiting time targets, creative health can be an important resource. For example, the ICE Heritage programme is a partnership between Hampshire Cultural Trust and Hampshire CAMHS, which offers arts, heritage and cultural activities to children known to CAMHS services to improve mental health and wellbeing. The programme has observed improvements in wellbeing through confidence and self-esteem, self-expression, social inclusion and peer relationships, focus and concentration and fun and relaxation<sup>160</sup>. The research study 'Wellbeing While Waiting' will investigate the impact of social prescribing pathways for children on waiting lists for mental health treatment, with a view to increasing availability<sup>161</sup>.

### **Creative recovery**

Creative health can be used to support people in their recovery from mental ill health. Recovery colleges offer skills courses and educational opportunities with a focus on wellbeing, and creative activities are often central to the approach. For example, during the pandemic, the Phoenix Project offered a series of remote visual arts workshops to support mental wellbeing and resilience in partnership with Lancashire and South Cumbria NHS Foundation Trust as part of a recovery college online initiative. Twenty-three artists delivered a three-month programme across the summer of 2020. Programme evaluation by Lancaster University found increases in

participant wellbeing and a 90% approval rating for the programme<sup>162</sup>.

### **Addressing inequalities in mental health**

Creative health has a role to play in challenging injustices, prejudice and stigma and representing the voice of lived experience in relation to mental health. Arts and drama are used effectively to improve mental health literacy and reduce stigma in schools and through arts festivals and community initiatives<sup>163</sup>.

People from minoritised communities are at a higher risk of mental ill health, including severe mental illness<sup>164</sup>. For example, black people are 4.7 times more likely to be diagnosed with schizophrenia than white counterparts<sup>165</sup>. They are also, less likely to access mental health services, but more likely to enter crisis care, or experience compulsory detention<sup>166</sup>. Creative approaches have been used to address mental health-related stigma within communities, and to address institutional racism and improve relationships between communities facing inequalities and healthcare services, with co-production and the voice of lived experience central to the process<sup>167</sup>.

### **Creative Recovery**

**Creative Recovery** is a grassroot charity based in Barnsley that uses creativity to support mental health and recovery, boost wellbeing, build communities and bring about social change. The organisation works with families and communities with experience of mental health issues. People may self-refer or be referred by a healthcare professional. The organisation emerged from a call from a community of people with lived experience who wanted to create more alternatives for people, and now offers a full weekly therapeutic/creative programme. This includes art studio groups, creative events in green spaces, a choir, evening arts café, reading group and musical jam sessions.

Creative Recovery also lends expertise, co-producing therapeutic provision in other settings, for example working alongside CAMHS within a Young Offenders Institution and with Occupational Therapists on acute Psychiatric Wards.

### Creating a mentally healthy society

Given the increasing prevalence of mental health conditions, and associated burdens on the mental health system, a focus on prevention and upstream interventions which address the causes of mental ill health is vital. The role for creative health in improving the environments and conditions in which people live, interacting with the social determinants of health, will be addressed in more detail in the next section on health inequalities.

The evidence indicates that we should also consider the opportunity to engage in creative and cultural activity to be a determinant of good mental health. Cohort studies using population data from both the UK and US find that, after adjusting for factors such as age, sex and socio-economic status, both active participation in the arts and attendance at cultural events have a positive impact on mental health, improving wellbeing and reducing common mental health disorders<sup>169</sup>. The work of the MARCH Network showed that participation in culture and heritage activities improves wellbeing for everyone, but can have an even greater impact on the wellbeing of people living in more deprived areas<sup>170</sup>, emphasising the importance of ensuring creative health is available and accessible to all.

Existing community, cultural and creative assets are increasingly recognising the value of their collections and activities for mental health and wellbeing, and making them available to wider audiences. A survey carried out by the Art Fund found that 63% of respondents had visited a museum or gallery to de-stress, although the majority do not visit on a regular basis, making them a relatively ‘untapped resource’<sup>171</sup>. There are many examples where museums, galleries and gardens have formed relationships with NHS mental health trusts and charities to engage people with a mental health condition, often through participatory arts or heritage activities<sup>172</sup>. Social prescribing can also link people to these community resources. As part of the Mobilising Community Assets to Tackle Health Inequalities research programme, the University of the Highlands and Islands Division of Rural Health and Wellbeing investigated how heritage and cultural assets can be used to support health and wellbeing in rural areas, where social isolation, deprivation

and mental health issues can be hidden. New partnerships were developed between the NHS and heritage and museums-based sector and referral pathways were established through which people could be directed to local museums and archive centres<sup>173</sup>.

Schools are a vital part of this ecosystem, particularly as we face rising rates of poor mental

### The Journey to Racial Equality in Leeds Mental Health Services

Synergi-Leeds is a partnership between the NHS, Public Health, and the local community and voluntary sectors to tackle the long-standing overrepresentation of people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities admitted to crisis mental health services or detained under the Mental Health Act. Initially supported through a national partnership ecosystem led by the **Synergi Collaborative Centre** and latterly by **Words of Colour**, the partnership uses the Synergi model of co-produced ‘Creative Spaces’ events to champion the voices of people with lived experience, challenging institutional racism and galvanising people into meaningful action. There is also an all-age grants programme which financially supports grassroots projects. In the first year of the grants’ programme, 800 people directly benefited and over 5,000 people were engaged with projects in various ways, of which, 3,600 were from minority ethnic backgrounds. The programme, including signing up to the Synergi Collaborative Centre’s National Pledge to Reduce Ethnic Inequalities in Mental Health Systems, has influenced senior leadership within the NHS and Public Health to make changes within their own organisations, and commit to actions to reduce ethnic inequalities in mental health<sup>168</sup>. As a result, a new citywide initiative between Synergi-Leeds and Words of Colour, covering over 40 years of mental health inequalities and community responses in Leeds, part of a hybrid co-produced programme funded by Leeds and Yorkshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, will be announced for 2024.





## Hip Hop HEALS – Reducing inequalities through trauma-informed practice

**Hip Hop HEALS** (Health, Education, Arts & Life Skills) is the UK’s first Hip Hop Therapy organisation. They offer therapeutic Hip Hop and Hip Hop Therapy programmes, trauma-informed Hip Hop training and creative mentoring.

Hip Hop HEALS aims to reduce inequalities for marginalised groups, to offer an arts-based alternative to medication for human distress and to bridge the gap between Hip Hop, therapy and therapeutic creative writing. It recognises that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), trauma and grief are difficult to treat, let alone manage, that suicide and self-harm are the biggest killers of young people and men in the UK, and that throughout the pandemic marginalised groups were disproportionately affected by depression, anxiety and worries about unemployment and financial stress.

In response, Hip Hop HEALS aims to explore emotions through creative therapeutic writing with marginalised groups, to empower people and to amplify lived experience stories.

Hip Hop HEALS’ trauma-informed Hip Hop training is constructed with lived experience experts. Their person-centred therapeutic approach is based on Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes practice, which includes narrative, poetry and music therapy as well as bibliotherapy. Their unique model of Hip Hop Therapy includes UK bass music so that it is culturally-competent and relevant to those they serve.

The programme has been run with offenders in recovery at Warwickshire and West Mercia Community Rehabilitation Company, one of the 21 Community and Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) across England and Wales.

Whilst evaluating the programme, participants said:

*“I was very active mentally during the workshops, learning how to declutter my mind through writing. I found it a good way of grounding myself and relaxing. It wasn’t demanding.”*

*“It opened me up to having more confidence and listening to others.”*

health in children and young people. The role of schools will be considered in more detail in Section 3.3.

### Maximising the potential of creative health

Tackling the current mental health crisis requires a whole system approach. The evidence shows us that creativity and culture have an important role to play in establishing a mentally healthy society, and that creative engagement in communities helps to maintain good mental health and wellbeing. Within healthcare systems, creative health can aid management, treatment and recovery in mental health conditions.

A creative mental health workforce already exists. The Baring Foundation’s *Creatively Minded* directory lists 320 organisations working in arts and mental health in the UK<sup>174</sup>. The field is diverse and includes arts in hospitals programmes and wellbeing initiatives based in museums and galleries. Many will be small, community-based

organisations or solo freelance practitioners. These practitioners very often bring their own lived experience and in-depth knowledge of the communities they work in. However, funding and commissioning models can make their practice precarious. The Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance has proposed a model for sustainable practice in creativity and mental health and wellbeing, which moves beyond short term project-based funding towards investment in long term, sustainable partnerships between creative health practitioners and healthcare systems<sup>175</sup>. This includes resourcing for the development of a creative health infrastructure and cross-disciplinary networks, recognising the multi-sectoral approach required to address mental health.

A coherent, cross-sectoral approach, modelled at government level will facilitate the development of flourishing creative health ecosystems at place, working towards shared outcomes that will benefit individuals, communities and systems.

## Gardening, Green Spaces and Creative Health

Gardens, parks and green spaces are important resources for population health, and incorporating gardening and creative use of green space into a whole system approach to health and wellbeing can improve outcomes and reduce demand on health and social care services. The health and wellbeing benefits of green spaces and engaging with nature are well recognised<sup>176,177</sup>. Engaging creatively with nature can amplify these benefits.

The field of planetary health tells us that human health is intrinsically linked to the health of the planet<sup>178</sup>. The effects of climate change will impact our health and wellbeing, and these impacts will affect some populations disproportionately. Anxiety and concerns about climate change can also impact mental health<sup>179</sup>. Creative practices can help to bring an awareness and understanding of climate issues and environmental sustainability, whilst creative activities in nature have been shown to improve our connectedness with nature.

### Gardening, health and wellbeing

Gardening offers a multitude of physical and mental health benefits. Studies have shown that gardening can have a positive impact on depression, anxiety, life satisfaction and quality of life<sup>180,181</sup>, while randomised controlled trials (RCTs) indicate that community gardening may also modify risk factors for major conditions such as cancer, cardiovascular disease and musculoskeletal conditions through increases in



*Gardening is a form of creativity. It brings together human creativity and nature's creativity. For some people, it is a more accessible way of being creative. They don't have to summon something from deep inside themselves, but they can look at what they have grown and feel proud of it, and excited, and share it"*

*Dr Sue Stuart-Smith, Psychiatrist and author of The Well Gardened Mind, Mental Health and Wellbeing Roundtable*

physical activity and fruit and vegetable intake, and reductions in stress<sup>182,183</sup>. It can be an effective approach to maintaining health and improving quality of life as people age<sup>184</sup>. The biological processes through which engaging with nature leads to relaxation and a reduction in stress can be experienced through gardening, combined with psychological benefits including a sense of satisfaction and empowerment, an acceptance of cycles of regeneration and renewal, and a sense of hope for the future.

Whilst many people are able to actively engage in their own private spaces, for some, allotments and community gardens offer a route into the benefits of gardening. Gardening in these communal outdoor spaces can lead to further additional benefits such as social connectedness and reductions in loneliness and isolation, and the building of social capital and community cohesion<sup>185</sup>. It has been estimated that every £1 invested in community gardens could return savings of £5 through health benefits<sup>186</sup>.

A Kings Fund report summarised the evidence for gardening, finding that there is more that health and social care systems can do to take advantage of the benefits gardening offers both in terms of improved outcomes and reduced demand on services. The report recommends that gardening to support health should be considered as part of place-based population health systems. One route to this is through social prescribing or referral to community gardening schemes<sup>187</sup>.

Gardens can also offer safe spaces and sanctuary. Therapeutic gardens have been used effectively to support people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and people living with dementia<sup>191</sup>, and in hospital, care home and hospice settings to support the mental health and wellbeing of residents<sup>192,193,194</sup>. Public gardens are offering specific wellbeing activities and linking to social prescribing opportunities<sup>195</sup>, and museums and galleries are combining their indoor and outdoor spaces to offer wellbeing activities which combine horticulture and interaction with the indoor collections<sup>196</sup>.



### Gardening, nature and children and young people

School gardening initiatives have been used to improve knowledge and understanding of food, diet and nutrition, and have been found to increase fruit and vegetable intake, with the potential to reduce obesity<sup>197,198</sup>. For example, The Soil Association’s Food for Life programme provides resources for teachers on school gardening as part of a wider whole school approach to food culture (also including cooking skills)<sup>199</sup>.

Other nature-based activities with children have combined the benefits of creativity and the outdoors<sup>200</sup>. Fostering a sense of connection to nature in the early years not only improves the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people, but can help us to develop ecologically sustainable practices as part of a future thinking health system that will need to address the implications of climate change.



*Working with the cycle of life in the garden puts us in a direct relationship with how life is generated and sustained, so that deep existential meanings can emerge through gardening. The experience of transience alongside a sense of continuity is particularly important for people suffering from grief or the aftermath of a trauma. Whilst there is no denying that things die in the garden, the practice of gardening is orientated towards the future in a positive way. Fundamentally, gardening is a hopeful act”*

*Dr Sue Stuart-Smith*

### Green Social Prescribing

Recognising the benefits of nature for mental health, the Government and NHS have invested £5.77m in a pilot Green Social Prescribing (GSP) scheme in seven Integrated Care Systems. The programme aims to improve mental health outcomes, reduce health inequalities, reduce demand on the health and social care system and develop best practice for green social activities. GSP supports people’s health and wellbeing through a combination of interaction with the natural environment, social interaction and meaningful activity, which is often creativity focussed, for example, gardening, craft or engaging with heritage<sup>188</sup>.

GSP is being taken forward as part of HM Treasury’s £200m Shared Outcomes Fund, intended to pilot innovative ways of working that will improve collaboration on priority policy areas that sit across, and are delivered by, multiple public sector organisations to improve outcomes and deliver better value for citizens. It received cross-departmental

support from the Department for Environment and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC).

GSP has shown a positive impact on mental wellbeing and strong engagement in communities experiencing high levels of social inequalities in the interim evaluation<sup>189</sup>. Systems-level changes that could further support successful ongoing delivery have also been identified. These include a move away from short term and competitive funding to a model which supports continuity of provision, investment in system-level work to ensure progress is extended beyond the initial pilot duration, improved knowledge of the approach and its benefits within systems, and a collaborative data collection and monitoring<sup>190</sup>. We propose that a similar cross-departmental approach can be applied to creative health, with the suggested system changes taken into account.

## Branching Out: Tackling mental health inequalities in schools with Community Artscapers



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*Working with skilled artists and enablers, we focus on how the world just outside our doors can be opened up as a space for curiosity and imagination for everyone, allowing children's ideas to be explored and valued, and giving them a voice. In turn, this gives all young people the confidence to think of themselves as citizens, enabling them to care better for their communities, and the planet”*

*Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination*

‘Artscaping’ is an arts-in-nature practice developed by [Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination \(CCI\)](#). It is an evidence-based approach, combining the benefits of both the arts and nature for mental health and wellbeing through outdoor activities co-created by artists and children. Since 2015, over 7700 people have engaged with Artscaping in schools and communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough<sup>201</sup>. Children who participate in Artscaping have shown improvements in self-confidence and self-esteem, agency and calmness, alongside a greater appreciation of what CCI calls slowness. After engaging in the outdoor activities, children feel happier and more optimistic<sup>202</sup>. In addition to these benefits to mental health and wellbeing, Artscaping connects children to nature and helps them to value the natural environment around them, which can help to address eco-anxiety, and environmental sustainability<sup>203,204</sup>. Many of these benefits extend to the adults working alongside too with wider positive impacts reported at a school and community level.

*“Providing time and space early on for children to reconnect (or connect for the first time) with nature and art is the actual ‘medicine’ that’s required. Giving children a fresh start, with the adults seeing*

*them a-new with talents that were previously under the surface, is huge. Think of what could be achieved if more children worked with CCI! And think of the money that would potentially be saved in staff time, paediatrician referrals, expensive therapy...”* – Paula Ayliffe, Co-Headteacher, Mayfield Primary School

The research project ‘**Branching Out**’, funded by the Mobilising Community Assets to Tackle Health Inequalities research programme, investigated how more children can have Artscaping opportunities. Teams of local community arts capers were trained and supported to run art-in-nature/arts caping groups in six primary schools in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, particularly those in the most deprived areas. The research project developed training resources and models to support schools, all now free to access on the CCI website. Multi-agency level working was necessary and, as a result of the project, new partnerships were developed between schools, local authorities, NHS trusts, the VCSE and researchers. In addition to the benefits to pupils, schools recognised Artscaping as a useful whole school early intervention to support mental health and wellbeing, and the staff and volunteers involved also experienced improvements in their own wellbeing.

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*All primary age children should participate in one session of arts in nature activities per week to support their mental health and wellbeing, connect them with nature and positively impact on their broader engagement with learning in school”*

*Professor Nicola Walshe, Pro-Director of Education, Institute of Education, UCL. Principal Investigator, Branching Out, Creativity for Health and Wellbeing in the Education System Roundtable*