



Youth Creative Health

A Preventative, Place-Based Lever for Youth Participation and Economic Growth

Strategic Relevance

Youth mental health is both a public service pressure and an economic growth issue:

- Poor mental health costs the economy an estimated [£300bn annually](#).
- Young people with mental health conditions are nearly [five times more likely](#) to be economically inactive.
- [One in six](#) 16–24-year-olds who are NEET (not in education, employment or training) report having a mental health condition.

Without early intervention, poor mental health contributes to long-term economic inactivity, pressure on NHS services, and widening regional inequalities. Youth creative health offers a preventative, place-based intervention that addresses these risks upstream while building employability and participation.

Economic Case

Using the HM Treasury-approved Green Book methodology of *quality-adjusted life years* (QALYs), cultural engagement for 18–30-year-olds shows an average [wellbeing benefit of £854 per person](#). This approach combines: measurable wellbeing improvement, reduced escalation risk, improved education and employment participation, and high social return. This shows that for relatively modest investment, creative health can contribute to both health and growth agendas.

Why Creative Health Works

Creative health programmes are cultural and creative activities designed to improve health and wellbeing. For young people, they deliver three system-level advantages:

1. Prevention That Reduces Escalation

Evidence shows that creative engagement:

- Improves emotional regulation, self-esteem and resilience (for example, see: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#))
- Reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression (for example, see: [5](#), [6](#))
- Supports young people on CAMHS waiting lists (for example, see: [7](#), [8](#), [9](#))

By strengthening protective factors early, these programmes reduce risk of crisis escalation and long-term disengagement. These directly inform prevention-focused reform and support the reduction of avoidable demand on specialist services.

For example:

- [BeeWell](#) - [Longitudinal data from 18,244 adolescents](#) in Manchester shows that nearly one in five adolescents report minimal engagement in arts, culture and leisure activities, and this group experienced the lowest subsequent wellbeing outcomes. Young people with frequent and/or wide-ranging engagement across artforms demonstrated significantly higher wellbeing one year later than those with minimal

participation (i.e. lower frequency or variety of engagement), even after adjusting for prior wellbeing and socio-demographic factors.

- **ICE Heritage** - Working with a range of partners across Hampshire, the ICE Project engaged with [hundreds of young people directly referred by CAMHS](#), youth projects and schools, with a positive impact on wellbeing for over 90% of participants.
- **Horsfall**, a creative space and gallery that forms part of 42nd Street (a mental health charity for young people aged 13-25), has identified the [‘active ingredients’](#) that make up their non-prescriptive creative space, and which support positive outcomes for youth attendees. These include *freedom, validation, agency, belonging, safe space, accessibility, processing, social connection and action.*

2. Employability and Economic Capability

Creative participation builds transferable skills that employers value:

- Confidence and communication (for example, see: [10](#), [11](#), [12](#))
- Teamwork and collaboration (for example, see: [13](#), [14](#))
- Creative thinking and problem-solving (for example, see: [15](#), [16](#), [17](#))
- Self-worth and aspiration (for example, see: [18](#), [19](#))

Programmes targeting young people at risk of becoming NEET demonstrate strong progression outcomes. For example:

- **The Music Works** - [73% of NEET participants](#) in their programme entered employment, education or training, and 84% of young people grew in confidence.
- **HQ CAN** supports young people who have been [unemployed for over a year](#), including those struggling with mental illness and ex-offenders. Leader Yasin El Ashrafi was previously recognised by a Prime Minister’s Points of Light Award (2018) for his contribution to youth employment via creative engagement.
- **Derby Theatre’s Plus One** Programme provides members with free access to creative and cultural opportunities, including creative mentoring and structured pathways into volunteering, leadership and creative sector employment.

3. Place-Based Infrastructure

Youth creative health programmes operate through partnerships across:

- NHS (ICB and Trusts)
- Local Authorities
- Schools and Academies
- Arts and Cultural venues
- Libraries, Museums and Heritage sites
- Community Organisations and Centres

Examples include:

- **Noise Solution**, delivering long-term 1:1 music mentoring in partnership with NHS and local government, demonstrating statistically significant wellbeing improvements and £12.54 social return per £1 invested.
- **Sound Young Minds** is a programme that works with young people across a partnership of psychiatric hospital schools to help them shift focus away from illness and build confidence, creative engagement and self-expression through collaborative sound and improvisation workshops alongside professional musicians.
- **Wavelength**, working in partnership with Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust (BSMHFT) and Forward Thinking Birmingham, provides music making opportunities for young people aged 14-25 referred across mental health services in Birmingham and Solihull and surrounding areas.
- **Lancashire Reading Well Community Champions**, which focussed on three communities in areas of deprivation. Partnership work targeted young people at risk of loneliness, isolation and/or NEET. Libraries became trusted, emotionally safe

spaces for teenagers to explore mental health, lead peer conversations, and shape community wellbeing.

Embedding creative health within local systems strengthens civic infrastructure and supports levelling up through community assets.

*“My Mum was told I would likely be in inpatient mental health care for life... Since Noise Solution, I got back into education, [achieved a] Distinction, and I am now in my third year of university... You helped me find a voice and a purpose.” – **Noise Solution Participant***