

Readout of the Rewire events – February 2024

Context

Rewire: routing new ways of feeling together was a two-day event at Stanley Arts Centre between 24-26 February 2024. The Greater London Authority's (GLA) key event partners delivering this event were [Boundless Theatre](#) and [Stanley Arts](#), as part of London Borough of Culture Croydon.

Funded by [The Baring Foundation](#) and the GLA (CCI24 & Health policy teams), Rewire was co-designed and co-produced by young Londoners. These events marked the culmination of the [2.8 Million Minds project](#) as part of the [Thriving through Culture programme](#).

Over the last 18 months, the CCI24 Unit has worked with a range of young creative voice projects including [A Big Conversation](#), 2.8 Million Minds and Sounds Like Chaos, plus the 2.8 Million Minds network. Rewire was a unique and timely opportunity to pull all this work together. Linking up voices and findings from across London to support better understanding of the current mental health challenges for young Londoners.

Rewire was divided into two parts, young people only event (Saturday 24th Feb) and a summit of over 80 policy makers and young people (Monday 26th Feb). Across the two days we met with representatives from Rezon8, National Youth Theatre, researchers from Queen Mary's University of London, The Albany, London Arts and Health, Boundless Theatre Youth Advisory Group Members, Sounds Like Chaos, local councillors. For a closer look at how the two days unfolded, please read the Annex to this readout.

Key findings

A range of themes emerged from young Londoners for policy makers and those supporting young people to digest including:

Safe spaces – creating them, the look & feel

- A safe, open, non-judgemental space for young people to have deeper, meaningful conversations about their mental health and wellbeing.
- Joy comes from: expression through arts, the role of community, engaging with others, spending time with friends/other young people.
- We can speak about mental health more productively with: open conversations, prevention, places to talk, more safe and artistic spaces.
- Need a space that allows people to let their inner child out, have fun, have a laugh. No external pressure or judgement.
- It is important to welcome young people into a new space, e.g be there to welcome at the door.

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- Making a trusted space is vital for children who might not have a safe space elsewhere.

Created for and driven by young people

- A unique space and time for young people to talk to each other about their mental health while doing a mix of creative activities from drama to poems.
- Providing a day full of fun activities in the local area is a great way to build a feeling of community and for young people to make new connections.
- Need an environment and activities that appeal to all age groups.

Observations of the event(s)

- Many of the young people came intended to stay for a short time and ended up staying much longer – some for the duration of the event (5 hours). Here's a [blog](#) with reflections from the day by a participant.

Where we find support

- Young people tend to look beyond their local area for an event or activity, leading to a lack of community and a lack of local engagement.
- Challenges with local authorities ability to support activity for young people that goes beyond the standard offer.
- Church youth groups are underutilised. How can there be better signposting into community spaces and activities?
- A role for digital spaces/online resources in reinforcing key messages. Setting up and maintaining communities on social networks can allow for longer term connection and trust after an event finishes.

Power of the arts

- Arts as a prompt to get people talking about mental health, and/or to express themselves in different ways.
- Creative arts enable ways to express yourself, especially when people struggle to find the words.
- There can be lots of judgement around the arts, sometimes from different cultures.
- Remember that art can also be a job. Artists should be speaking more to children and young people.
- Art is a creative tool, alongside more traditional ways to express yourself.

Individual v collective – building community

- The power of arts in helping focus on the individual and their needs around mental health, as opposed to emphasis on the collective.
- Arts and culture activities can work well to support mental health as they allow space and agency for an individual. If done well, they give space for pure expression, and remove the expectation to be perfect or even 'talented'. This is a way for individuals to engage with their experiences. It's not about a 'one size fits all' fix to poor mental health. It's individual to each person.

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Pressures for young people

- Trust, honesty and understanding are vital in friendships when talking about feelings
- Young people face expectations and pressure, and lack access to facilities and resources;
- Young people feel proud of academic validation and need to be given more reasons to be proud.
- perceptions of needing to be perfect

Role of school

- Challenge of hosting events in a school setting due to children's varying experiences of school. On one hand, a safe space, on the other can associate with stress, pressure, bullying, academic pressures, etc.

Communicating & creating the offer more effectively

- Outreach activities in community
- Parent Governors as trusted networks
- Difficulty of timing with school holidays
- Challenge of busy school schedules and staff with no time
- Trust and connection must be maintained to achieve long term change in communities. We should think about how we are curating long term trust/connection long after an event, project or activity. Ideas include social networking (even WhatsApp groups) to continue conversations, and maintain peer support. This is often the most valuable part of any project.

Next Steps

- Thriving through Culture has completed its programme of work and is now in a period of evaluation, led by Thrive LDN. The evaluation will be available in Summer 2024.
- Links to the Rewire summit videos to follow
- This work will form a central part of building [London as a Creative Health City](#)
- Scale of the Creative Health Sector in London due to be launched during Creativity and Wellbeing Week (wk commencing 20th May 2024).
- Rewire advisory group extended until Summer 2024 and connecting with project in North Yorkshire for a week long residency exploring rural/urban youth mental health challenges, differences and similarities. How the 'quiet life' is not always the answer to stress free living. Led by Boundless Theatre.

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Annex – Rewire events: a closer look

Rewire: Day 1 (Saturday 24th February)

A day was created exclusively for young Londoners (aged 14-25) to share their thoughts and feelings on mental health and creativity. Key observations included:

- A unique space and time for young people to talk to each other about their mental health while doing a mix of creative activities from drama to poems.
- A safe environment for young people to have deeper, meaningful conversations about their mental health and wellbeing.
- Young people tend to look beyond their local area for an event or activity, leading to a lack of community and a lack of local engagement.
- Providing a day full of fun activities in the local area is a great way to build a feeling of community and for young people to make new connections.
- Many of the young people came intending to stay for a short time and ended up staying much longer – some for the duration of the event (5 hours). Here's a [blog](#) with reflections from the day by on participant.

Rewire: Day 2 (Monday 26th February)

80 policy makers and practitioners from culture and health sectors convened to discuss the transformative power of arts and creative practice for young people's mental health. The audience included a mix of national and local system leaders from culture and health (in particular public health and mental health), local councillors, researchers and young Advisory Group representatives.

The event was chaired by Croydon's first Poet Laureate, [Shaniqua Benjamin](#) with opening speeches by Assistant Director for Culture and Creative Industries Shonagh Manson; Stanley Arts Chief Executive Dan Winder and three representatives of Boundless Theatre's Youth Advisory Board. A series of videos were played to the audience encapsulating key points made by young people during Day 1. Key messages from the videos included:

- The power of arts in helping focus on the individual and their needs around mental health, as opposed to emphasis on the collective;
- Arts as a prompt to get people talking about mental health, and/or to express themselves in different ways;
- Joy comes from: expression through arts, the role of community, engaging with others, spending time with friends/other young people;
- Trust, honesty and understanding are vital in friendships when talking about feelings;
- Young people face expectations and pressure, and lack access to facilities and resources;
- Young people feel proud of academic validation and need to be given more reasons to be proud.
- We can speak about mental health more productively with: open conversations, prevention, places to talk, more safe and artistic spaces.

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Students from National Youth Theatre and Queen Mary's University London (QMUL) performed a short, powerful performance based on reflections from Saturday.

All attendees joined rotating 20 minute themed discussions facilitated by Rezon8 (Advocacy), National Youth Theatre (Peer to Peer Support), The Albany (Participation) and London Arts and Health (Lived Experience). Alongside this attendees took part in creative activities with Paint & Express, building zines with Queer Youth Arts Collective and a spoken word workshop with Rezon8.

Key insights from the structured conversations included:

- Need an environment and activities that appeal to all age groups;
- Need a space that allows people to let their inner child out, have fun, have a laugh. No external pressure or judgement;
- Challenge of hosting events in a school setting due to children's varying experiences of school. On one hand, a safe space, on the other can associate with stress, pressure, bullying etc;
- It is important to welcome young people into a new space, e.g be there to welcome at the door;
- Challenges with local authorities ability to support activity for young people that goes beyond the standard offer
- Church youth groups are underutilised. How can there be better signposting into community spaces and activities?
- Big question of how to get the word out about events/activities? Ideas and key issues include:
 - Outreach activities in community
 - Parent Governors as trusted networks
 - Difficulty of timing with school holidays
 - Challenge of busy school schedules and staff with no time
- A role for digital spaces/online resources in reinforcing key messages. Setting up and maintaining communities on social networks can allow for longer term connection and trust after an event finishes;
- Making a safe space is vital for children who might not have a safe space elsewhere.

Other topics discussed included early intervention, the dynamics of lived experience, demand for mental health services for children and young people in South London and scaling up creative health provision across London.

A panel discussion on the role of facilitators and creative practitioners was led by MC Shaniqua Benjamin with Advisory Group members, Maia and Drashti, Jay Morally (Seduced by Art), and Esme Green (dance movement psychotherapist). Key points included:

- Creative arts enable ways to express yourself, especially when people struggle to find the words
- Challenges include lack of funding, and perceptions of needing to be perfect
- Help raise self awareness and explore options for support/help
- There can be lots of judgement around the arts, sometimes from different cultures

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- Remember that art can also be a job. Artists should be speaking more to children and young people
- Art is a creative tool, alongside more traditional ways to express

[Key findings were shared from People, Places & Poetry](#) (please see pages 22-26), a youth-led peer-research project conducted by researchers and creatives Aleksa Asme and Kaylah Jackson, on behalf of Sounds Like Chaos and the Albany.

Rounding off the day, Dr Maria Turri (Queen Mary University London) pointed to the large policy evidence supporting benefits of arts and culture to mental health and wellbeing. Dr Turri also pulled out key recommendations from the national [Creative Health Review](#) published in December 2023.