



# A Manifesto

for 2.8 Million Minds

OK

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and all those who wish not to be named.

Delivered by the vacuum cleaner, Bernie Grant Arts Centre  
and Chisenhale Gallery

# 1. Introduction

**By the vacuum cleaner (aka James Leadbitter)**

"Kids as much as artists make sense of the world through creative interaction."

Adrian Searle, Guardian Art Critic

"Kids as much as artists make sense of the world through creative action."

the vacuum cleaner

**If you were to count the minds of every young person in London, it would take 32 days, 9 hours, 46 mins and 40 seconds. Can we stay present for every single second of them?**

**Let's begin...**

one, two, three,  
four, five...

Because this is A manifesto for 2.8 Million Minds. 2.8 million lumps of growing grey matter, that matter.

Six. Seven. Eight...

There is beauty, you see. There is beauty in the possibility of hearing them all.

And there is beauty in the here and now, and what that could be. All 32 days 9 hours 46 mins and 40 seconds. All 2.8 million seconds. All 2.8 Million Minds.

Before that possibility/ that here and now fades/ and the day to day and the oh buts/ and the what abouts/ and the yes buts/ and the adults... get in the way.

Let's hold our breath, hold on to each beat. 2.8 million times. It may be one of the few things we have (to hold on to). These 32 days, 9 hours, 46 mins and 40 seconds.

Nine. Ten. Eleven...

Let's cherish what is being imagined in these pages. Let's be really aware of who is speaking (and what gives these voices the value they have).

Let's dream a little and be nourished by the wisdom and what is shared. 2.8 million times let's let down our guard, and hear the potential. Just say yes, kids. This is a manifesto for the minds of 2.8 million londoners. Many of them are struggling with their health.

## Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen...

In the winter of 2021, a group of young people, artists, activists, cultural workers, health workers, and researchers, with support from the Cultural team of the Greater London Authority, came together to try to ignite a cultural shift in how we use art to soothe, balm and support those minds that aren't doing so great. Which is a thing of necessity and potential and beauty.

## Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen...

These pages outline that desire.  
What we have been doing.  
What we have heard.  
What we have reflected on.  
And what next.

Between December 2021 and April 2022, 121 people responded to a specific question set by 'the vacuum cleaner':

"How can young people use art and culture to create change in their mental health and change how mental health care is imagined, delivered and funded?"

This document represents this, a moment in time, the thoughts and feelings of the many people involved - in response to this impossible to answer question. It isn't a complete document. There are mistakes and holes, things we got wrong, things that were right at the time but maybe aren't so right now. It isn't a PhD or a policy document. It's more like a love letter to healing, a song in the night that allows the pain of it all, a list of things that complement and contradict each other, a thought and an impulse, that have all been swept into a basket and ordered on the cloud.

## Twenty-one. Twenty-two.

We approached the question through different processes and within different contexts,

- With different framing and from different perspectives. Young people aged 10 to 25 who worked with 4 artists that were commissioned to work with them.
- 1 research event called 'How Can We Do This Better?' - a space to bring together 50 people involved in art, mental health and young people to look at the structural challenges.

- 2 network meetings - for arts organisations to consider what appetite they have to work with young people around mental health and what support they would need to do this work.

## Twenty-Three. Twenty-Four.

We approached this work with core values such as

Supporting and centring young people to share what their needs, wants, experiences, desires and frustrations are.

- As a group of adults, we were led by people with lived experience of mental health and the mental health system.
- An intersectional approach, specifically linking racism and mental health.
- A disability justice framework<sup>1</sup>.
- Attempting to work in ways that prevent burnout, or furthering psychological pain or recreating existing harmful ways of working.
- Paying people above a living wage and providing other care strategies.

## Twenty five

What follows is what we found out and what those involved in writing this document feel should happen now.



Hello!



My name is Aniq, and I am one of the young artists who worked on 2.8 Million Minds.

Growing up, I had experiences with many different services. I found that there was help available, but only in certain circumstances – usually when it's an emergency or crisis. That is a reckless situation.

Adults can act like they listen, but often they pick apart what you say, select what works for them and put you in a box. That makes it feel like they're digging to find something wrong with you to put a label on you. 2.8 Million Minds is not a mental health service, and it is not trying to be. But through the process and the art, we were approaching mental health issues - our own, each other's and in

society - in new ways.

Many involved in running the project have their own mental health struggles. There is an unspoken feeling of connection, so we don't need to worry that others won't understand us.

There were also no labels. We've been taken on as individuals and as a group. The process was open; we were going on a journey with no specific destination, and we control the direction of the discussion and the content of the work rather than the other way around. This allows everyone to explore and figure out who they are without imposition.

The sessions mixed fun and pleasure with seriousness and striving to want something better. For example, we

would play a series of games that Becky devised, and then have an open debate, with no judgement, drawing on our experiences about how we would like the mental health system to change. We were able to be very honest and concentrate on many sticky issues because we had been laughing together just a moment before. No one had to share anything we were uncomfortable with, but it says a lot that people felt comfortable enough to share what would normally be very difficult.

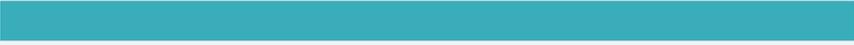
This balance was so important. The joy created a *light and airy feeling*; the light and airy feeling created a sense of *freedom*, and if you are in a free state of mind, it allows all the seriousness to happen naturally. And even if it was painful, we could find the light in the situation. I believe joy allowed us to address the serious stuff authentically.

I think we have all opened up each other's minds a little. It can be liberating to see the world through someone else's eyes, however hard it might also be. We've tried to capture this feeling in our art. 2.8 Million Minds is about helping young people to create an image of thriving on their own terms. This is an invitation to recognise the seriousness of the situation, but also the joy of coming together and taking action.









# Tyreis Holder

I have been working with a group of 7 children (aged 10-14) connected through CAMHS Tower Hamlets. In this project, I wanted to explore the practice of journaling with the group, whilst sharing my love of making-for-making's sake.

It was crucial to make the workshop space feel like a space of warmth and safety. Before the group arrived, we would fill the studio with colourful cushions, plants, incense, and ambient music and lighting.

At the start of each session, we invited the group to spontaneously express any thoughts and feelings by writing or drawing onto a large piece of fabric - this is our *feelings fabric*. The feelings fabric charts that immediate emotional response at the threshold where the day-so-far meets the art-making to come. And bit by bit, this beautiful, organic pattern emerged. We then designed an outfit using the fabric for me to wear.

Journaling is important for me: it is a way of caring for myself and nurturing my creative impulse. At the start of the project, everyone was given a plain hoodie. This was our blank journal. Each workshop then functioned as a new page or entry. In a typical session we learnt a new

textile technique (such as weaving, or latch-hook rug making), and used it to respond to a prompt (for example, 'a letter to your future self' or 'one thing you wish you could change'). The young artists would then take materials home with them, coming back the following week with a new element to add to their jumpers - we call them the *joy jumpers*. I hope that when the children wear them, they can feel safe and in touch with themselves.

Finally, *Elegance With No Name* is a poetic dialogue between the young people and me. It is an attempt to speak on behalf of the young people, to communicate how they want to be cared for and have their voices heard. When I perform *Elegance With No Name*, I will be wearing the garment we designed together. In this way, I will also be wearing or bearing the burdens and the spirit the young people brought to our sessions.

The jumpers demonstrate the groups' capacity to use their minds to create something that contains and protects them. The poem, collaborative outfit and performance reflect what the group want adults to understand, with me as their creative interlocutor.

This is our manifesto.





## Elegance With No Name

I wonder who cares for you?  
If adults are truly there for you?  
Or are they just there to share unfair views,  
to know it all,  
to tell you what not to and to do?  
Curfew the days of not listening,  
to blossoming buds of future flowers.  
Empowering the leaves that have fallen in Autumn,  
to spring sprouts with those lessons we've taught them.

So, what are your needs?

Well, I want it to be known  
that you put things in place to make me feel safe  
but those same safeties lock me into a jamming spree.  
Telling me you'll provide protection  
but leaving me with metal reflections,  
asking why you hid the key?  
Do you even know how it feels?

Once my age but so far from that experience  
you fold feelings down to 'not a big deal'.  
When Global warming and environmental damage  
is actually very scary, sincerely  
the people who will actually see it: Gen Z.

I notice I'm treated as a villain in a book  
I did not write because I look and think differently.  
I feel fat and I hate that.  
I can dot my spots on my face and back,  
school only teaches me why I hate it.  
My eyes sweating salt water  
followed by sniggered laughter  
I can't just erase that.  
I'm sensitive.

I'm sensitive.

And I know that you know that I am,  
but do you know that I know that you know that I am? ...

Exhausted by executive emotions and you daisy dancing,  
showering me in kindness when I am no highness,  
just a human who weeps low sometimes  
but wants to be watered  
just like all the other plants in the garden.  
Forget me not.  
I still require attention  
which you'll know how to give if you just

L I S T E N

That the walls of the world break my brains boundaries.  
That I don't feel proud of me.  
That the world I live in tells me to sit on nails  
when I was sitting comfortably.  
The thoughts and thinking that live deep inside of me  
confiscates my letters and physicality,  
but connecting with art  
brings out a new language in me.

I want to let you know that I hear you completely,  
I hear you completely.

I hear you.

There is not much difference between me and you,  
I do what I do to be the person I once needed.  
As the world let go of me swiftly,  
art and poetry were the only things to catch me.  
To bring out the power in me  
when silence was my unwanted saviour.  
It helped remind me of joy.

My power comes out when I get a choice,  
when I get to be me,  
when I relax,  
when I understand  
when the microphone is in my hand  
and the stage is my oyster,  
when music hums in my ears.



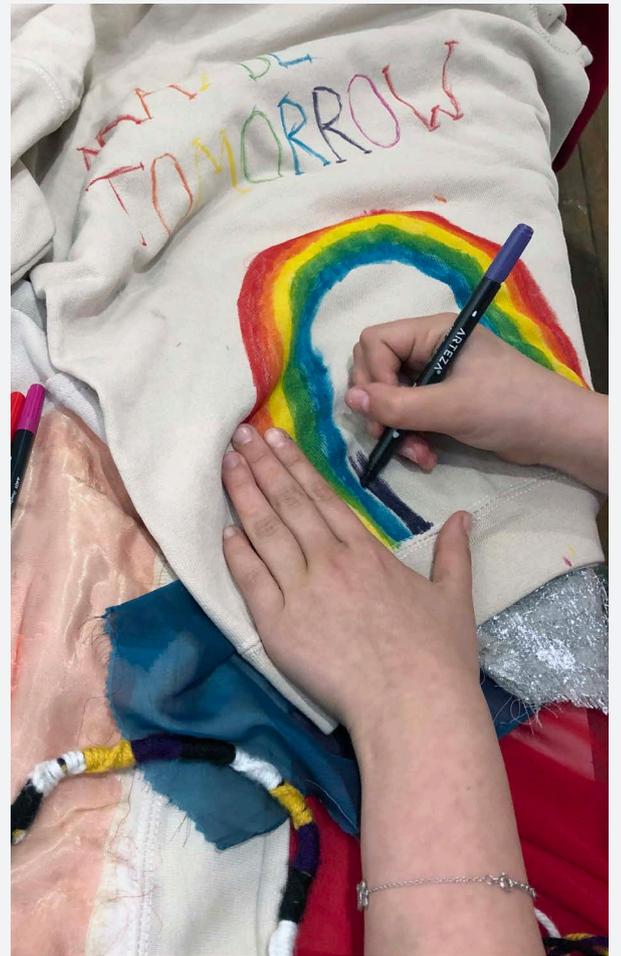
When I have the opportunity to explore myself  
through processes that are new to me.

I feel powerful.

Being in a space that lets me create endlessly,  
a phenomenon sense  
that lets me sift self systems.

Tame off beat rhythms of government shame,  
an elegance with no name...

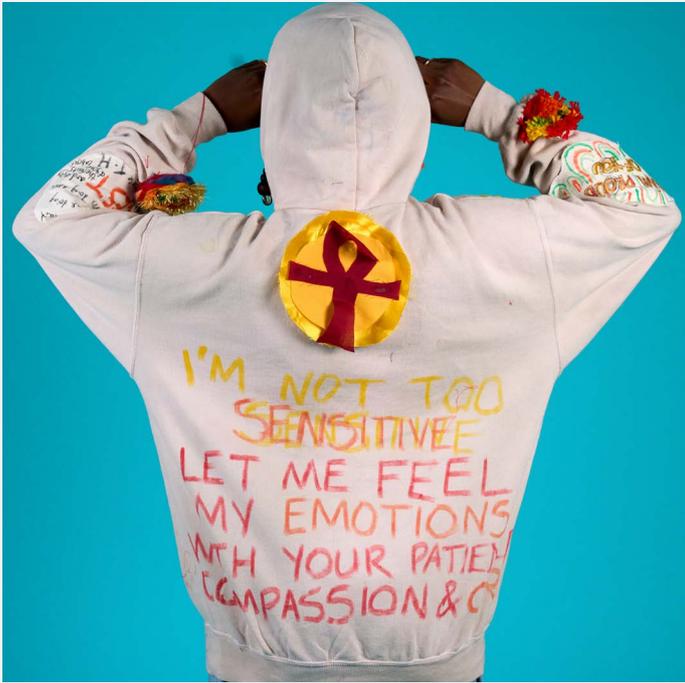
I wonder            who cares for you?





I know on yourself that you enough, a

OK









Yomi Şode and Simon Tomlinson



## “I hurt every day”

“The work that was produced is an expression of truth.”

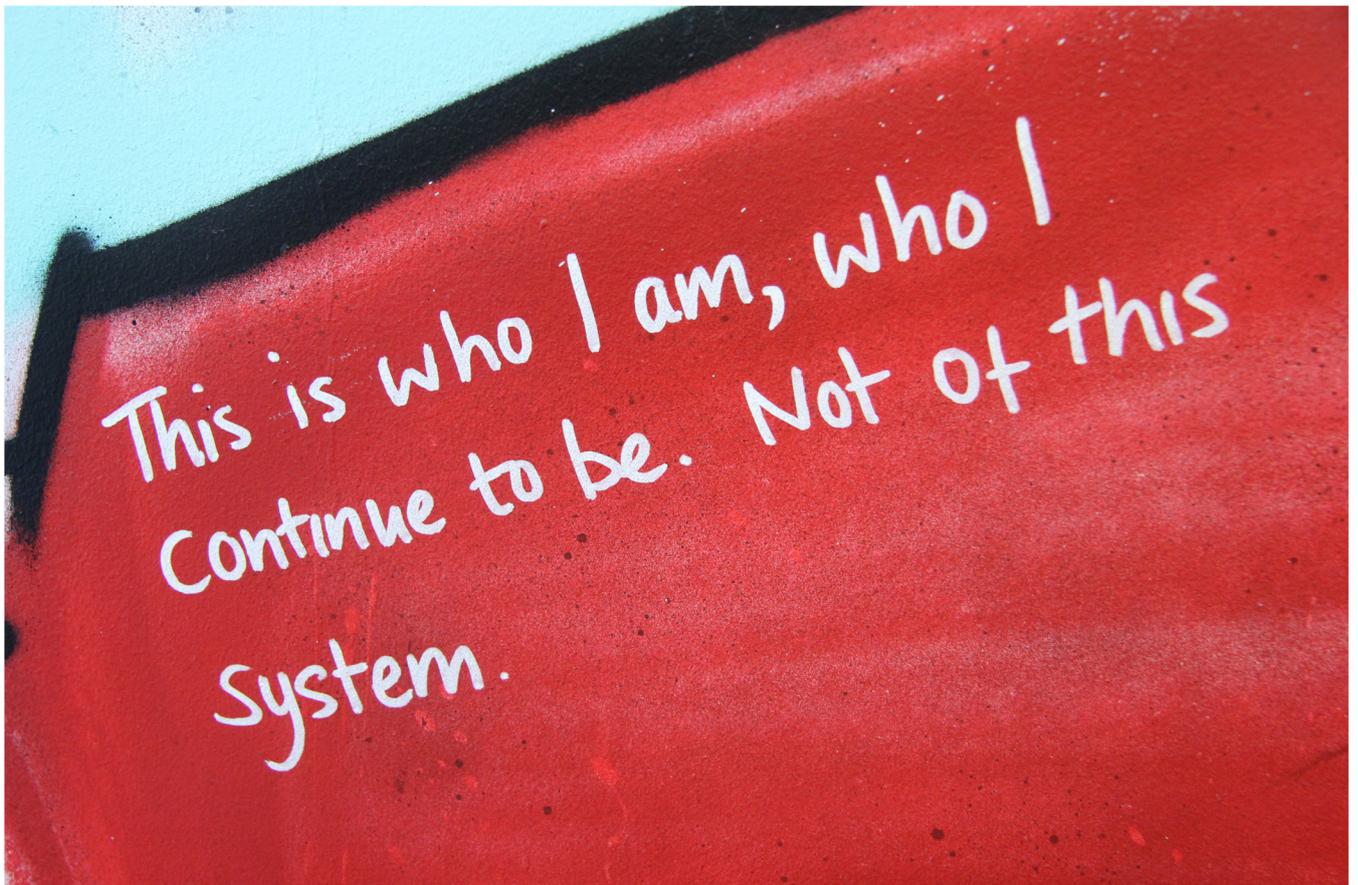
**Simon Tomlinson, artist**

“There’s a picture [in the exhibition] of a footprint. This footprint signifies “put yourself in my shoes for a day, put yourself in my shoes for an hour, put yourself in my shoes for a whole week”. How would you feel?”

**Yomi Sode, poet, writer, artist**

## “Not of this System”

Every so often an artistic project comes along that transforms those who come into its orbit. Artists and organisations get stuck, we need these moments of alchemy to bring us back to life. The moment we started working on 2.8 Million Minds the team at Bernie Grant Arts Centre felt our chemistry start to change. We believe the methodologies established in this project have the power to embed radical love and healing into the way arts organisations work with young people. As one of the young people wrote in their artwork, this project is “Not of this System.”



# The Alchemist

The project was led by Bevali McKenzie, BGAC's Community Arts Producer. Bevali has over 20 years of experience working in Tottenham with children and young people. Outside of the BGAC, Bevali is an artist, mentor, holistic practitioner and founder of Communities Out to Demand Empowerment (CODE1) community group. No one knows Tottenham's young people like Bevali.





## The Artists

### **Yomi Şode, poet and author**

Have you seen Nigerian-British poet Yomi Şode perform? He's incredible. Yomi has shared stages with everyone from Saul Williams to The Last Poets. He's performed at the New York's Public Theatre, Latitude Festival, Sadler's Wells, Southbank Centre, The Barbican, Brighton Festival, Lovebox and many more. Yomi's incredible new collection of poetry, *Manorism*, explores family survival, generational trauma and the complexities of belonging. *Manorism* is an examination of the lives of Black British men and boys. Yomi has worked with young people for over a decade, in schools, prisons and beyond, empowering them to find their voice through the power of the pen. Yomi is unapologetic in his vulnerabilities, so we knew he would respect the young people and treat them as equals.

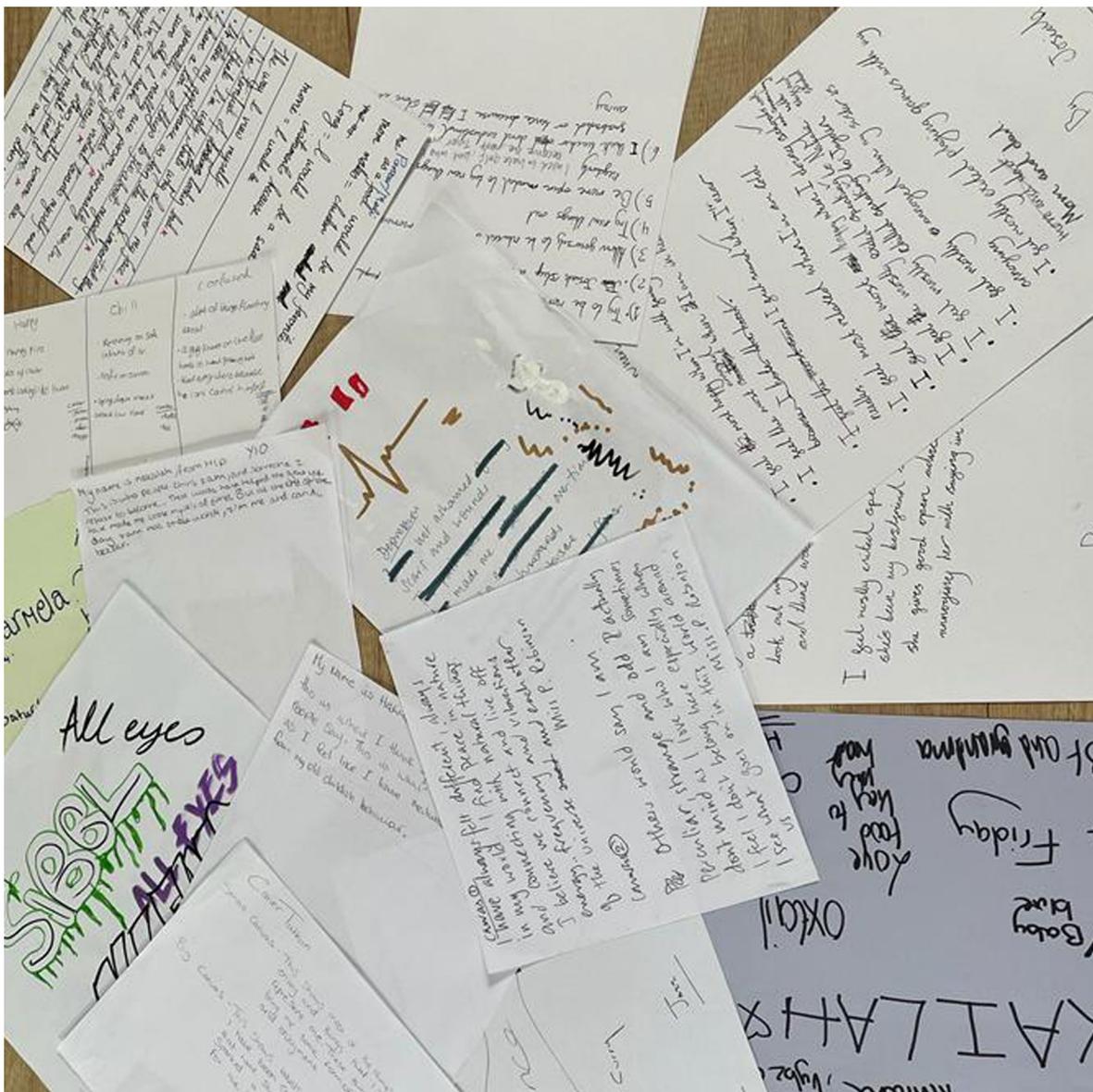
### **Simon Tomlinson, Blingwear Arts**

Graffiti artist Simon unleashes spray cans, pens and an intoxicating energy. His practice is socially engaged and participatory. Using deeply collaborative methods, Simon turns words into community art. With his unique graffiti workshops in schools, youth groups and community centres, Simon has been working on giving a voice to London's young people for over two decades.

# The Partner

## Haringey Learning Partnership (HLP)

At BGAC a key part of our purpose is to create safer spaces for Black voices to be heard. For this project we were proud to partner with Haringey Learning Partnership, who provide respite, nurture and reintegration for pupils removed from mainstream education, including the provision of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). HLP offers multi-disciplinary (social, emotional and medical) support for students who require highly specialist support in managing their needs, with a care-based approach that tries to foster a sense of belonging and encourage each young person to be proud of who they are.

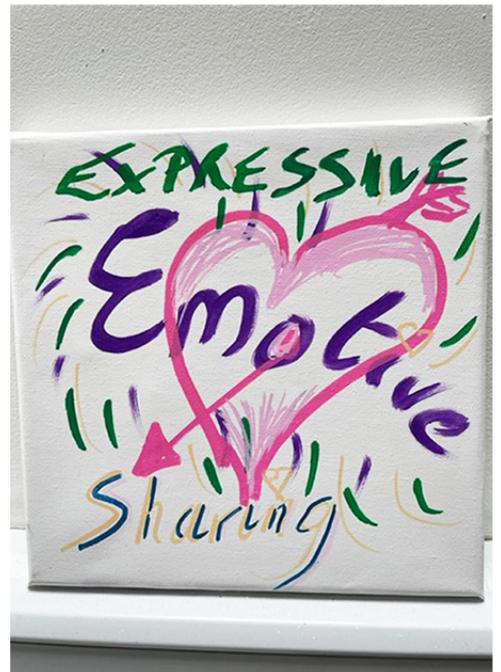


# The Project

Over the course of five exhilarating, and sometimes hard, weeks, Bevali and Yomi worked with the young people in the PRU, exploring storytelling, generating ideas and crafting ways to find their artistic voices. The practice was light touch, the emphasis was very much on it not feeling like a formal 'school' session, but rather a gathering of narratives, a chance to be heard and listened to, rather than talked at.

We wrote poems, we shared them. We wrote some more. The main provocation was not to feel constrained about what was expected, or what others would think. Feel free to express yourself. No limits.

The young people were incredible. Together we wrote, we laughed, we cried, we vented. The young people supported each other, reading out each other's work when that felt like the safest way to share.





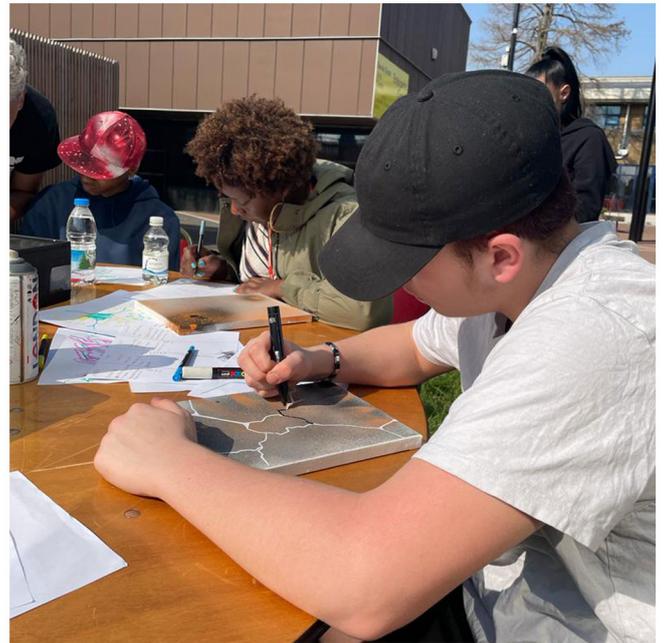
their thoughts can be illustrated on the wall in the studio. In one session, the young people, with the guidance of Simon, drew their canvas illustrations onto the wall. They also wrote a lot of their own work on the wall.

## The Space

### **Bernie Grant Arts Centre Studio**

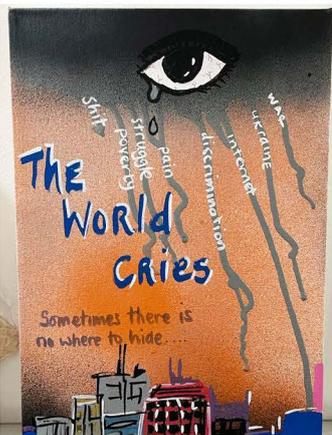
In the midst of the project, Community Arts Producer Bevali (aka The Alchemist) somehow turned one of BGAC's empty office studios into a sanctuary for the young people on this project. The idea of a space at the centre was gradually introduced to the young people a month before their first visit, via video footage, as a way to open them up to the prospect of visiting an arts centre, and to show them an empty shell they could take ownership of. How would you like to breathe life into your new space? What would you like people to feel when they walk into this space?

This also started the process of generating ideas for the wall. Here's a completely blank canvas to fill with your art. Again, no limits. This is where Simon and his graffiti workshops came into the process. The graffiti workshop opened the world of possibilities for how the young people's words could be captured. Simon (guest artist/facilitator) ran an amazing session on how to use spray paint on canvas and how to think about the ways in which





## The Exhibition



The finished room is a lot. “Fuck it”, “Failure”, “Slut”, “Sometimes there is nowhere to hide”, shout the walls. But there’s also humour, tenderness, pride and deep vulnerability. To stand and read requires time, energy and above all else, humility.

The exhibition launched in April 2022 to an audience of artists, practitioners, community members, young people and parents/carers. When you walk into the room, you go on the journey of a young person. You see the world through their eyes and, crucially, experience how the world sees them.

Every arts organisation needs a room like this. A place where young people can really be seen. And heard. We encourage you to pause, take a breath and read every word. Because it’s real. And true. This is how our young people are feeling. The wall is our chance to listen. And this is why art and mental health matters.

A large yellow banner is displayed on a silver metal stand in a room. The banner features the text "how's the weather in your head?" in a blue serif font. Below the banner, the text "Becky Warnock + OOST Collective" is written in a smaller, white serif font. The room has a white ceiling with a ceiling fan and a long light fixture. A large window on the right side of the room shows a brick building outside. A mirror is visible on the left wall.

how's the weather  
in your head?

Becky Warnock + OOST Collective

I don't always like words. Words can feel messy, confusing, and ill-fitting. The language of mental health is one I find particularly difficult. The words we use to describe feelings never seem to quite stretch to the full range of emotions and experiences that might be there. The words we use to try and console or support people never seem to quite get to the real intention, no matter how much we do, in fact, care. The word 'health' comes from the Latin word 'whole'. In this project, the idea of 'wholeness' felt not just important but necessary and timely.

We are whole people. The culmination of our diverse experiences, our loved ones, our pain, our joy, our pasts and our presents.

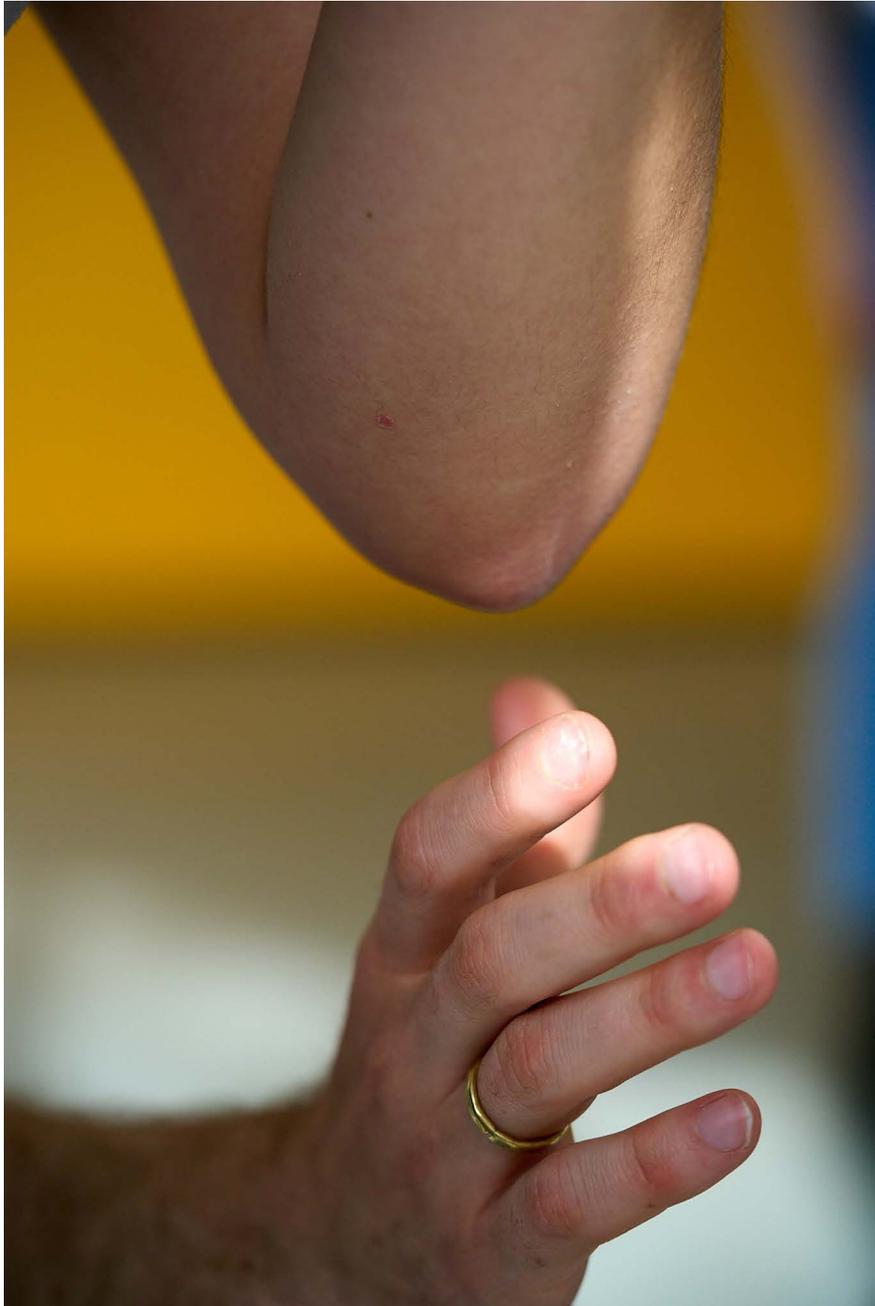
We are whole beings. Sometimes when we talk about mental health, our bodies are forgotten. We want our bodies to be part of the care we receive for our minds. We want it to be as normal to care for our minds as it is to care for our bodies.

We are whole communities. Struggling with your mental health doesn't discriminate, but the world we live in does. Our experiences aren't the same and the support we need and want isn't either.

We are whole creatives. Creativity isn't just a 'nice' thing to supplement ideas. It's crucial. Creativity gives us a space to think differently, to express ourselves when words don't fit: to dream.

Becky Warnock





This project brought together a group of people who were interested in working creatively to think about mental health. We had all struggled with our own at some point, but this wasn't a project where we had to tell everyone all of our difficulties. We knew that each of us had been there at some point, might be going through something now, and maybe would again. That was our connection.

We thought about power in society, who holds it, what they do with it, and what we would change if we could. We spoke about how difficult it is to communicate our feelings sometimes. We played with how images could represent how we feel, keeping photo journals each day and seeing what we noticed. We talked a lot about the weather. Then we tried to think about listening to our bodies and what they tell us about how we are feeling. We tried to visualise that.

This is just a tiny part of the work we made together; it's the work that we hope gives you an insight into our time together. The other work we are also proud of, but you'll have to wait to see that.





# We all have mental health

We are OOST collective, with lived experience of adverse mental health. This is our manifesto:

We see that it is difficult to understand the sometimes unimaginable intensity of mental ill-health, and so working with those who have gone through it themselves is important

We believe in the power of sharing in a safe environment and that there should be more spaces in which to do so

We believe that mental health is a fertile topic for art and that creativity is a good way to explore our own mental health

We believe in non-judgemental spaces

We believe that there is a spectrum of mental health, that changes from day-to-day. The spaces we enter need to be able to accommodate these patterns

We believe we should be supported to recognise the early signs of mental health issues in our own bodies and minds and in each other

We want conversations around mental health to be going on in the classroom from a young age, and should form a core part of the curriculum

We want more mental health programmes that aren't talking to doctors or therapists

We want more opportunities to look after ourselves and one another, we believe we are strongest when we work together as a community

We want a society with more space for reflection - this is something that art-making can provide

We want people to notice those around them and to really see and listen closely

We don't need to look to the past, or to the future.  
We need to look to the now!

# Invitations for a care curriculum

Pick someone that is important in your life: family, a friend, a colleague, pet... then write them a letter, a song, a poem or a diary entry, whatever comes to mind. Tell them about your day, a thought, a feeling, whatever you would like to write. Tell them what they mean to you. You don't have to share this, but you could. It could be a way of sharing something that you don't want to talk about, or just a way to express yourself.

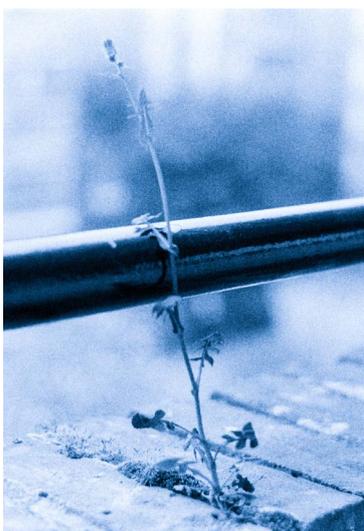
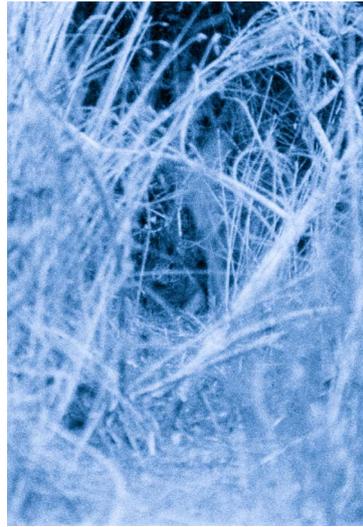
Invite someone to cook or cook for yourself.

Create a playlist for every emotion. A song for feeling sadness, for combatting anxiety, nostalgia, songs that remind you of people, for anger, for the ugly cry.

Gather some mementos that remind you of happier times, and carry them with you as a constant reminder that you have been happy before and you can be happy again.

Take a nap.





collaborator / the one whose words have power  
 collaborator / the one who brings calm  
 collaborator / the one with the powerful honesty  
 collaborator / the one that captured the vision  
 collaborator / the one that listened carefully  
 collaborator / the one who brings the energy  
 collaborator / the one who enables the vision  
 collaborator / the one who speaks quiet wisdom  
 collaborator / the one who sees into your soul  
 collaborator / the considerate + reflective one  
 collaborator / the one that makes us listen to our bodies  
 collaborator / the one who committed with her whole self  
 collaborator / the one with limitless ideas  
 collaborator / the caring + observant one  
 collaborator / the one that held us all together so well

Alfie  
 Amina  
 Aniq  
 Anna  
 Becky  
 Bobby  
 D  
 Emma  
 Jummy  
 Maiya  
 Masumi  
 Naomi  
 Nurul  
 Sanjay  
 Seth





# Ambitions for 2.8 Million Minds

## What if every young person in London who is struggling with their mental health had access to

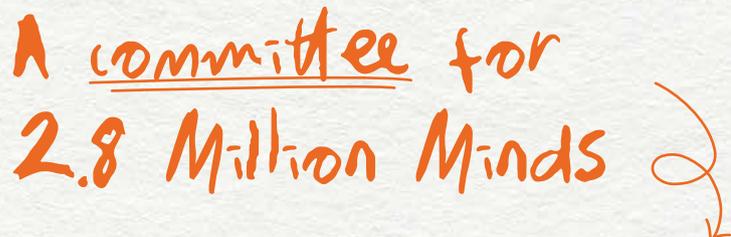
- Artists with lived experience of their own mental health struggles.
- Artists with similar intersectional experiences to them.
- Artists who make critically acclaimed work.
- Art spaces that create specific programmes around young people's mental health.
- Other young people who are struggling with their mental health.
- Other young people who are interested in making or developing their creativity.
- The ability to work collectively to decide how the above happens and also influence and impact how organisations like the Greater London Authority (GLA), NHS, schools, arts, and social care support young people's mental health.

## What if every young person in London who is struggling with their mental health had the potential to

- Build lasting relationships with artists and art organisations that want to nourish young people, their creative practice and their communities. To be in brave, creative and safe spaces so they can share what has or is happening to them.
- Be able to use art to criticise the systems that are failing them.
- Be able to use art to imagine something other.
- Be able to use art to help what they imagine become real.
- Build relationships, conversations and for the care to be real, not performative, or some weird trauma fetishisation.
- Focus on a process of making, but also have access to ways of sharing their process that is nourishing.
- Be part of something bigger than themselves, but also be seen as individuals.

To achieve this, the Bernie Grant Arts Centre, Chisenhale Gallery and 'the vacuum cleaner' would like to continue supporting young people and begin to scale our process in the following ways....

## A committee for 2.8 Million Minds



**A monthly creative space for young people from across London to:**

- Gain training in how to direct their own creative process.
- Work towards their own goals.
- Respond to wider young people's mental health and other concerns/challenges/desires/ambitions.
- Advise the Mayor of London/NHS and other organisations on policy and action.
- Implement training and policy for other organisations (if they want).
- Meet once a month online and once a month in person.

## 2.8 Million artist studios



**Creating a model of an art studio where:**

- Young people can make art themselves.
- Young people can make art with world-class disabled artists on long term commissions.
- World-class arts organisations can deliver both studio and artist-led processes safely, healthily and over long periods of time.

## A sharing of 2.8 Millions Minds

**A biennial sharing/festival. Bringing voices together to make some noise, to drive some change, to speak some uncomfortable truths, to have a laugh, to be quiet together, to soothe our minds...**

- A way for young people from across London to share work together.
- Possibly curated by the 'committee' with support from others in the project...

## How to heal 2.8 Millions Minds

**Policy, advocacy and training - devised and delivered by The Committee of 2.8 Million Minds.**

- Training for artists, arts and health professionals and organisations on how to do this work.
- Accreditation as brave/safe spaces for young people.
- Embedded policy in borough cultural strategy and borough of culture curation.
- Advising and imagining simpler pathways for young people to access mental health services, art spaces and more.

### What Next?

Between now and November 2022 we will be working to attempt to get these 4 points started, and working toward establishing them all by the end of 2024.



## 4. Methodologies



# what did we do?

There are 2.8 million young people in Greater London

## Background

The Mayor of London commissioned 2.8 Million Minds, a pilot project about art, young people and mental health, in response to an emergency in young people's mental health across the city, priorities set out in the Mayor of London's Culture Strategy, and the Government Arts and Health White Paper, both of which highlight the positive impact creative and arts practice have on people's mental health. The project is a collaboration between Bernie Grant Arts Centre (Haringey), Chisenhale Gallery (Tower Hamlets) and artist and mental health activist the vacuum cleaner (aka James Leadbitter). 2.8 Million Minds sets out to demonstrate models of good practice for non-specialist arts organisations who wish to work with young people with mental health struggles, showcase the artwork created through this programme, and outline a plan for cultural activity to benefit all of London's 2.8 million young minds.

## Social and political context

The scale of the crisis is overwhelming and enduring. At a national level, one in six children aged five to 16 were identified as having probable mental health struggles in July 2021, a dramatic increase from one in

nine in 2017<sup>2</sup>; 83% of young people with mental health needs agreed that the coronavirus pandemic had made their mental health worse<sup>3</sup>, and nearly half of 17-19 year-olds with a diagnosable mental health condition has harmed themselves or attempted suicide at some point, rising to 52.7% for young women. In London, the situation is bleak; more so, in our respective boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Haringey, which have disproportionately young populations and some of the country's highest rates of child poverty (37.2% Haringey, 56.7% in Tower Hamlets<sup>4 5</sup>).

This desperate situation has played out against more than a decade of government policy that has systematically gutted infrastructures of support for young people. Between 2010 to 2020, £1.8bn was cut to early intervention programmes such as children's centres and family support services, with more than 1,000 children's centres and 750 youth centres forced to close across the country<sup>6</sup>. Again, the issue is particularly acute in London, where local councils have had their funding cut by 63% since 2010 (compared to a national average of 50%<sup>7</sup>). These kinds of interventions and spaces are proven to help tackle and prevent emerging problems before they reach crisis point. This privation of access to support is a betrayal that is difficult to comprehend due to its shortsightedness and the

## what did we do?

scale of the suffering it compounds.

### **Action Plan**

The arts cannot be a panacea to such a crisis and the complex structural forces that underlie it. But we have a duty to try to be aware of, engage with and respond to young people's experiences and concerns.

We understand that many others share the same desire. However, we recognise a gap between the impulse that arts organisations like ours have to work in this territory and the availability of knowledge and tools to do so effectively. This manifesto is an attempt to address that gap, in order to support young people with mental health struggles to have life-enhancing experiences through art and advocate for and participate in change to wider systems.

So - what did we do?

### **Methodology**

At the centre of 2.8 Million Minds has been the question:

*"how can young people use art and culture to create change in their mental health and how mental health services are funded and delivered?"*

We have tried to centre young people's experiences, ideas, wisdom

and wishes for better mental health and care throughout the research and development of 2.8 Million Minds, approaching this question in a number of ways.

### **Artist commissions**

We have collaborated with four artists on three projects: Tyries Holder, Yomi Şode and Simon Tomlinson, and Becky Warnock.

Each artist connected with a different group of young people of different ages, across our two boroughs. Tyreis Holder was paired with a group of six children aged 10-14 via CAMHS Tower Hamlets. Yomi Şode and Simon Tomlinson worked with a group of students aged 14-18 through Haringey Learning Partnership, a pupil referral unit in Tottenham. And Becky Warnock led a dynamic group of seven young adults aged 18-25 from across East London with diverse mental health experiences, who responded to a widely shared call-out.

The projects were developed over 8-10 sessions, between 1.5-2 hours in length, predominantly taking place in our respective institutions. Over the course of these workshops, each collaboration yielded a sensory manifesto, responding freely to the above question as a stimulus for debate and art-making.

## what did we do?

They have each uniquely expressed what they have learnt from their experiences, what they need from art and culture, and what they believe a better system to support them and others could look like. These are the artworks you will encounter in this booklet.

### **How Can We Do This Better?**

On March 14, 2022, we ran an event at Somerset House called “How Can We Do This Better?” devised by James Leadbitter. The event brought together over 50 people from across the arts, mental health and youth sectors, alongside a number of participants from the project, to explore what this question meant to them, how we can work more closely, share knowledge, access resources more easily, and collectively imagine how art can serve young people and their mental health. You can read the learnings from this experimental roundtable discussion on pages 64-70.

### **Network Group**

Finally, a separate ‘Network Group’ met twice online, bringing together arts professionals and young people to think in-depth around a series of related questions and share their experiences in navigating this field. Reflections on these meetings can be found on pages 71-74.

### **Critical Friends**

The team worked with critical friends Tara Brown and Nicola Sim, who helped to embed reflective practice throughout the project, establish the ambitions and values, draw out learning, and support the creation of the action plan. They led reflective discussions with young people, artists, partners and staff and supported the network meetings and “How Can We Do This Better?” event with critical perspectives.

### **Approach to commissions**

Key to the framing of our project is the disability slogan “nothing about us, without us, is for us.” All the artists involved in the project, including lead artist James, have lived experiences of mental health struggles. We believe these projects work because there is shared experience between the lead artist and participants.

Our methodology is to centre the well-being of the participants as a deliberate artistic and aesthetic choice. We tried to design a positive and encouraging process where young people are empowered to make art about their lives, supported to think critically about the social and institutional contexts in which they live and lead in establishing a deeper understanding of their own agency for change-making. This undertaking also requires careful consideration

## what did we do?

in maintaining the well-being of the four participating artists via oversight therapy, regular check-ins, access riders, and paid rest days. It has required additional support for ways of working, flexibility, travel and special needs and disabilities.

Examples of this support include:

- Training from James Leadbitter
- Regular sessions with an oversight therapist
- Post-session debriefs, emotional support and check-ins
- Paid well-being days

### People and organisations

The project is a collaboration between artist the vacuum cleaner (aka James Leadbitter) and his company Madlove, Chisenhale Gallery, a contemporary visual art gallery in Tower Hamlets, and Bernie Grant Arts Centre, a multi-purpose arts venue and community hub in Haringey.

- **the vacuum cleaner** (James Leadbitter) is a central figure in UK disability and mental health arts. As Lead Artist of Madlove, he draws on his own experience of mental health disability, working with different groups to challenge how mental health is understood, treated and experienced.

- **Chisenhale Gallery** has an award-winning, 39-year history as one of London's most innovative places to see art.
- Located in the heart of Tottenham, the **Bernie Grant Arts Centre** is a cultural hub and a catalyst for the regeneration of the area. The Centre champions innovative work by Black artists and seeks to remove the barriers that contribute to the under-representation of 'participation diversity' in the arts

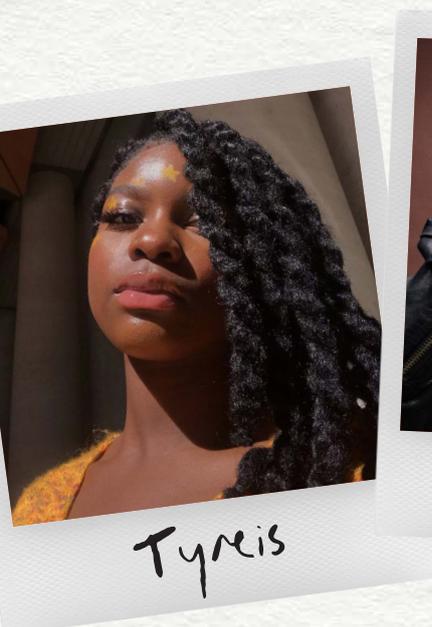
# what did we do?

## Critical Friends

**Tara Brown** and **Nicola Sim** are collaborative critical friends/evaluators. They bring together professional, academic and lived experience as a critical lens to explore creative projects.

## Artists

- **Tyreis Holder** is a multi-disciplinary Artist, Poet and Visual Storyteller from South London, with heritage reigning from Jamaican/St Vincent. Their practice centres around explorations of self and identity, the relationship with the mind, particularly with regard to navigating colonial spaces.
- **Yomi Şode** is an award-winning Nigerian British writer. He is a recipient of the 2019 Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellowship and was shortlisted for The Brunel International African Poetry Prize 2021.
- **Simon Tomlinson** is a graffiti artist, mentor and director of Blingwear Arts.
- **Becky Warnock** is an artist and organiser whose work engages with the politics of representation and questions of identity. Interested in authorship, her practice is rooted in participation and community engagement.



# Ambitions, ethics and values



**These points below represent the project's core belief system and the set of principles and intentions by which we tried to work:**

## **Taking a disability justice-informed approach**

- Modelling the principle of 'leadership of the most impacted' - i.e. working with young people and practitioners with lived experience of mental health challenges and systems.
- Ensuring participants don't feel commodified or defined by their mental health but are valued as whole, complex people.
- Prioritising intersectionality in relation to the Black mental health experience and compounding discriminations, and reflecting that in the recruitment of artists and participants.
- Working with institutions with awareness of/commitment to intersectionality in their programming.
- Enshrining activist principles across the project - e.g. resisting the capitalist urge to be productive above all else.

## **Considering wellbeing, access and mental health at every level of the project**

- Setting a culture of honesty and flexibility.
- Putting practical resources and funds in place to support the emotional labour of practitioners.
- Respecting communication preferences and access needs in project administration.
- Acknowledging (and working to mitigate) the risks of doing/reproducing harm in these projects.
- Sensitively checking in on everyone's mental health throughout the project.
- Creating mutual respect and understanding through participants' and artists' lived experiences (whilst recognising that not everyone will want to share their lived experiences).
- Respecting the different ways people claim identities and language around their lived experience (including language related to mental health and disability).

## Ambitions, ethics and values

- Creating a support system that enables an environment of vulnerability and solidarity during this intense work.
- Collectively unlearning internalised ableism and habitual behaviours of overwork and neglecting rest.
- Creating an environment of care and safer spaces (as opposed to safe spaces).
- Respecting individuals' right to privacy, seeking informed consent and being transparent about how personal data, stories and work will be used.
- Planning good goodbyes at the end of the project whilst also seeking out ways for young people to continue forms of engagement if they want to.
- Acknowledging mental health practitioners as creative beings themselves with their own expertise and potential.
- Utilising cultural institutions' buildings, programming, artistic networks, pedagogies, access to funding etc.
- Working with different types of mental health support providers/ programmes.
- Using creative and imaginative ways of communicating ideas and proposals.
- Taking inspiration from the histories of past work in this area.
- Utilising and sharing best practice knowledge and tools.
- Signposting existing research that evidences how this type of work affects mental health.

### **Showcasing the radical creative potential of bringing together art and mental health provision**

- Working with brilliant contemporary artists to explore new art forms, take creative risks and produce challenging, provocative art.

# Ambitions, ethics and values

## **Facilitating cross-sector conversation and action**

- Making these conversations as equitable as possible.
- Differentiating between the intentions of the individuals and the limitations of the organisations/ systems within which they work.
- Acknowledging (and maybe more than that) the tension between needing to work with NHS and social care institutions and individuals whilst being able to critique honestly.
- Being able to talk frankly about recurrent problems and blockers (including those created by the art world).
- Informing ourselves about existing or possible pathways to better integrate the arts and mental health fields.
- Understanding (and questioning) the frameworks/evidence needed from the mental health sector to embed the value of this work across the broader system.

## **Supporting young people's development as artists**

- Supporting young people to actually develop an art practice, and a skillset and mindset to continue a practice.
- Giving space for young people to engage in their artistry in a critical way.
- Encouraging young people to feel pride and confidence in their work.
- Thinking about how developing this creative identity impacts on a person's sense of self, which ultimately has consequences for their mental health.

## **Centring young people's views and ensuring these are heard at policy level**

- Having transparent conversations with the GLA about expectations, boundaries and possibilities.
- Considering how to do disability justice-led organising in the context of working with governmental authorities.
- Co-developing creative and collaborative methodologies and manifestos by and with young

## Ambitions, ethics and values

people that could be implemented across London .

- Ensuring a diversity of young people's voices are represented (i.e. diversity of identities and experiences).
- Being mindful of the structural inequalities that disproportionately affect young people and, where possible disrupting power dynamics to amplify under-represented voices.
- Ensuring voices are heard in places of the highest authority amongst people who can make an actual difference.
- Thinking about how having a say and being heard impacts on a young person's mental health.
- Translating the creative and critical work into an accessible, actionable plan with a focus on practical change and sustainability.



## 5. Reflections



# Did we do this better?

## Learning from 2.8 Million Minds

By Critical friends/evaluators Tara Brown and Nicola Sim

These learnings are drawn from reflective conversations with eight young people, four artists, two mental health workers and two producers who were part of 2.8 Million Minds. These findings only represent a snapshot of opinions of young people across the project. It is important to recognise the limitations of one-off conversations with strangers, that there will be perspectives missing and that circumstances/relationships make being completely honest hard.

### What did we hear?

#### Young people want their voices and work to be taken seriously and engaged with critically

- Being part of change and being heard by people in power was a big motivator for many of the participants in 2.8 Million Minds. Young people want actual action from adults, and fast. Young people are highly aware of the scale of mental health crises in London and failings of support. They want a voice but don't want adults to shirk responsibility.
- Participants we spoke to said they felt listened to and could "talk freely" in 2.8 Million Minds. They were glad when adults gave honest feedback about their creative work and ideas and didn't patronise or give compliments unthinkingly.

"I do think I am good at art. But I want to hear other people's opinions. maybe they should tell me actually how they think about it, and how they see things. I think people mostly just tell me things that they don't actually think about. So if they think my work is bad, they will tell me it's good. And I don't want that type of opinion."

(Young person)

- Managing group dynamics, especially quieter and louder voices, was a challenge in the project. It took time and support for some young people to develop a comfort level where they could express their opinions.
- There seemed to be less focus on critiquing 'the system' or reimagining provision in the group of younger participants, and more focus on amplifying their (often "trivialised") feelings and experiences.

## Did we do this better?

### Lived experience really matters

- Framing lived experience of mental health challenges as a strength in the project was “empowering” for artists, staff and young people.

*“you want to talk about it with someone who's lived it as well. It's sensitive, you know? Living with lived experience is good. It's nothing to be ashamed of.”*

(Young person)

- Artists spoke voluntarily and “in multiple ways” about their own experiences of mental health in sessions and saw a shift in the relationship with young people as a result, including more openness to write/talk from their personal experience.

*“How dare I ask something vulnerable from anybody, if I'm not willing to share my own vulnerabilities?”*

(Artist)

- Meeting and making with a group of peers with shared lived experiences was powerful for some participants. Some young people found themselves talking to other people and making friends when previously they were isolated.

### Understanding people as whole and complex is critical

- There was rarely a clear cut divide between an arts worker and mental health worker in this project. Workers had multi-layered professional identities and experiences. Artists were also mentors in social services; therapists were also designers, producers were also community activists.

- Importantly, all practitioners involved in this work had some literacy and confidence in both art practice and working with young people.

*“I'm interested in how culture is part and parcel of identity and who you are and how you live.”*

(Mental health service practitioner)

- Some of the young people involved also worked in mental health/ social care. Their motivations were personal and professional.
- Artists understood the need to treat young people as individuals. It was not always easy to make the projects fit everyone's needs. Being in groups was tough for some participants with anxiety around social spaces. Sometimes staff had to dedicate their focus on individual

## Did we do this better?

participants who required more one on one time.

### Working with great artists and holding space for uncertainty matters

- Finding the right artists, who were creatively ambitious, relatable, risk-taking, able to hold attention and bring energy and “vibes” into a space was really critical.
- Finding the right partner, the person/team who gets it, also seemed to be crucial. Some young people’s previous experience of art in mental health settings is that compliance is valued over work that is critically or emotionally engaged.
- Mental health practitioners in the project recognised the value of working with a brilliant artist.

“There is this tendency with youth work where people are employed who don't really have experience in their field, because everyone wants to save money. Whereas actually with work like this, you want to make sure that young people are working with an artist who's at the top of their game, so they can get that experience and then that inspiration can rub off on them.”

(Mental health education practitioner)

- Young people liked that there were “no rules”, that the project felt “open-ended”, and there were opportunities to “do your own thing”. Working in this way made some participants reflect on the “tick-box”, rigid nature of their diagnostic and therapeutic experiences.

### Care and self-care need to be learnt and reinforced

- Access to oversight counselling and paid rest days was a key framework in 2.8 Million Minds, and the artists felt supported having these options, even if they didn’t all utilise these resources. Those who did use the therapy found it useful. One artist said it made them recognise how much they “take on the stress of projects”. Another was able to better validate their chronic conditions and the importance of rest.

“Having the counselling and understanding and just a bit of compassion, a bit of softness, really helped.”

(Artist)

- One artist didn’t have time to use the free therapy, even though they were hearing “heavy” issues in their sessions and clearly managing a very busy workload.

## Did we do this better?

- Even though they were paid, taking ‘rest’ days was hard sometimes. ‘Rest’ also didn’t mean doing nothing - it meant reading, writing, doing yoga or having a “posh coffee”. Making art is also a “safe haven” for artists and paid rest meant they could focus on other work and still reduce their stress.
- Self-care isn’t individualistic and relies on holistic support in the structure of the project and partnerships with the producers. The artists have repeatedly stressed how support from their producers was crucial - from enacting backup plans, being challenging and supportive, doing active listening, easing self-doubt and validating their plans. This is part of the culture of care the project wanted to cultivate.
- The intense timeframes for this project and the need to produce an outcome meant a conflict with the ethos of 2.8 Million Minds. Planning breaks in was helpful but some artists still dealt with anxiety due to aspects of the project.
- With a focus on reducing stress for the artists, it’s important to note that the burdens and pressures don’t

disappear and can be placed on other members of the team. Artists were also conscious and concerned about this.

### Partners need to see and feel the value

- Partners had to make some personal sacrifices to be part of the projects. Time was tight; caseloads were high. But all partners felt it was worth it, for the participants and for them. “Letting go” and having space for creativity is nourishing for mental health practitioners:

“In spite of the fact that we don’t have enough time to do it, you kind of just create the time. This is what helps us avoid burnout.”

(Mental health education practitioner)

- There were very few demands from partner organisations regarding formal objectives, targets and ‘evidence’. Partners trusted and believed in the process and knew that their young people were getting a different and valuable type of experience.

“With the young people, if it’s just myself, who knows them, or another member of staff that knows them, there’s a kind of a desensitization that happens.”

## Did we do this better?

When it's outside creatives that come in, it's like, "oh, there's actually other people that are interested in us." And so having access to resources like this, as a constant, is definitely beneficial for the young people."

(Mental health education practitioner)

- Thinking about the sustainability and longevity of these relationships (beyond individuals being generous and making sacrifices) will be the big test for future partnership work.

"The enthusiasm for building these connections is widespread, and it's real in CAMHS. It's just that it's so busy."

(Mental Health Education Practitioner)

### Centring mental health requires patience, creativity and listening

- Articulating feelings and opinions around mental health is hard; for adults and young people, and children in particular.
- Creative work was a "gateway" to talking about mental health without that always being the explicit subject of discussion.

"Sometimes you don't know what to say, sometimes it's just in your head, and you don't know

how to verbalise it. So with doing a project like this, where it's about art, I think it makes it easier. And because it's not in the professional clinical side, I think it's more open to people and less terrifying." (Young person)

- Artists tried to ensure that participants were in control of what they were/weren't sharing. This also meant "not prioritising traumatic tellings" so participants wouldn't feel compelled to treat their vulnerabilities as currency. This was "key in forming a group dynamic".
- Occasionally, participants would bring their mental health experience into the space very directly - e.g. "I was sectioned on the weekend". Sometimes this would feel like a "test", where the artist's reaction would determine the engagement. Not reacting with shock and responding with a follow-up question: "tell me more about that", worked well for trust-building.

"There is a panic button for adults when they've faced with something that is quite shocking. Immediately they want to fix it. And fixing it often means that they're not listening to the young person." (Artist)

## Did we do this better?

- Despite the context and values of the project, some adults and young people still seemed to internalise some level of stigma around mental health. This was also connected to negative associations with provision.

*"When I hear "mental health" sometimes that actually makes me close up a bit more, because I'm thinking, "it's going to be the same, self-care, do this, do that", just glossing over. So I was quite wary of where I said "mental health." (Artist)*

### Enablers of safety

- James and producers on the project setting the tone for flexibility, silliness and making it feel safe to be human, be unwell and take time off.
- Partner staff being actively present who have a familiar and lasting relationship with the young people.
- Staff and artists bringing "quality of attention and care" was important for partners to feel the gallery was a safe space for their young people to be. Producers, directors and assistants at the art organisations also provided a vital support network for the artists.
- Staff were needed to ensure young people attended, and got home

(cabs had to be budgeted for).

- Pre-project meetings with partners and young people to build familiarity and learn about what creates anxiety for individuals.
- De-formalising and curating the environment (e.g. music in the background, cushions, air diffusers, lighting, incense, breaks).
- Clothes are signifiers - an artist wearing a tracksuit created comfort.
- Having a therapist present in sessions was useful for the artists and producers, although it is uncertain if this support was used directly by young people. (One person wondered if this was to do with young people's sometimes-negative associations with representatives of clinical therapy).
- For artists - trust that young people will have continued support after the project ends.

### Suggestions for doing this type of work in the future

- Mental health practitioners said these opportunities should be accessible for more young people - this doesn't always mean looking at specialist mental health settings

## Did we do this better?

(where young people are at least already accessing support). “A lot of young people get lost in mainstream school” and are not attached to services.

- Input from and participation with mental health services was not strategic in the project (e.g. the relationship with CAMHS relied on the enthusiasm of an individual rather than a connection with the broader service). One practitioner suggested working with the participation team at CAMHS in the future would be worthwhile. (It was also acknowledged that more grassroots, person-to-person relationships were valuable in the project).
- Artists would have liked more time to talk and share as a group and for there to be more “cross-pollination” across the projects.
- The flexibility and openness (i.e. a moveable project structure) was both liberating and stressful for at least one artist.
- A couple of artists had challenging moments in sessions where they didn’t feel completely equipped to know how to deal with a situation. More people in the room/training for artists was recommended.

- One mental health practitioner felt having a trained creative therapist in the room to support when things are opened up would be helpful (this was available in at least one of the projects).
- Young people felt there should be more time for participants to get to know each other, and longer engagement - with exposure to different art forms and more choice to explore different creative approaches that suit them.

### Final thoughts

These points scratch the surface of learning from these projects, but what came through strongly from our perspective as critical friends/ evaluators was the importance of a process that held really clear (and regularly voiced) values and ethics of practice. This didn’t mean that everything was perfect – far from it. But the intentions of 2.8 Million Minds, the disability justice framing and the absolute belief in art as a permissive space to develop a critical voice, set the tone for everything that happened and didn’t happen. One of the key elements in upholding these values was the fact that the project was steered by the vacuum cleaner (James), in collaboration with producers at

## Did we do this better?

Chisenhale Gallery and Bernie Grant Arts Centre. Having an artist, and an artist with lived experience, and with a reputation for speaking truth to power made many of us feel safe to be real and pushed us to be more radical, to have more fun, to not get lost in bureaucracy and to keep the work grounded towards art. James also had the ability to draw a crowd and attention from the art and mental health worlds in a way that may have been impossible if this was simply a top-down institutional project. What's the learning? Artists need to lead more of this stuff.

# How Can We Do This Better?

By Tara Brown, Critical friend/evaluator



**How Can We Do This Better?** was a day for people from the mental health and art sectors to really speak on the issues of young people, art and mental health and inform the future directions of 2.8 Million Minds. Bringing forth our inherent creativity and knowledge within a collaborative space, it was an opportunity to build connections between ourselves, counteract the isolation engineered by funding streams, overworking and most recently the ongoing Covid pandemic. This was not a conference; it was a collaborative endeavour to talk about our fears, frustrations and ideas for a brighter future.

# How Can We Do This Better?



## “What’s Wrong? What Are You Scared Of? What Is The Problem?”

There were key repeating factors:

### **Practitioners and organisations are lacking in time, resources and capacity!**

- Funding has been consistently squeezed for the last 12 years
- Resources simply do not match the demand

### **The mental health system is broken and overwhelmed!**

- Long waiting lists, short term treatments, lack of early intervention
- Mental health is chronically undervalued and under-resourced

## **Burnout is everywhere!**

- What is the consideration for the mental health of arts and mental health workers?
- Tremendous pressure on staff to be more productive despite lack of resources. Staff feel isolated, and that art and mental health sectors lack a shared language
- Fears of art sector workers taking on clinical responsibility and blurring boundaries which can lead to unsafe spaces for everyone
- Lack of access to holistic support and self-care

## How Can We Do This Better?

### **Young people's voices are not centred or heard!**

- Young people are not given agency or opportunities to make decisions or provide meaningful input
- Many programmes in the arts can be tokenistic

### **For young people, access to mental health help can be unclear, intimidating, and often elitist!**

- Strong mental health stigma and lack of education on mental health make it hard for young people to express themselves and access help

### **Art organisations are not seen as meaningful/accessible to many mental health professionals and young people!**

- Arts organisations/programmes and artists are often not visible or present in young people's lives
- The therapeutic framing of art is dominant in mental health, and partnerships more focused on outcomes over process

### **What Are The Consequences?**

Everyone in the room shared fears of young people falling through the cracks, and being too overwhelmed

to provide meaningful, long term projects. Many people in both the art and mental health sectors simply have to drop out altogether, losing crucial knowledge and experience. Ultimately the main consequence is preventable deaths. Speaking personally, I have lost three friends in the last year alone due to failings from the mental health system. These friends were not just dear to me but also community leaders and activists; that beauty and wealth is gone forever. During the event this consequence wasn't expressed, but it is important to share those consequences. Raising these issues is a first step to connecting to each other to do the real (scary) work with vulnerable young people.

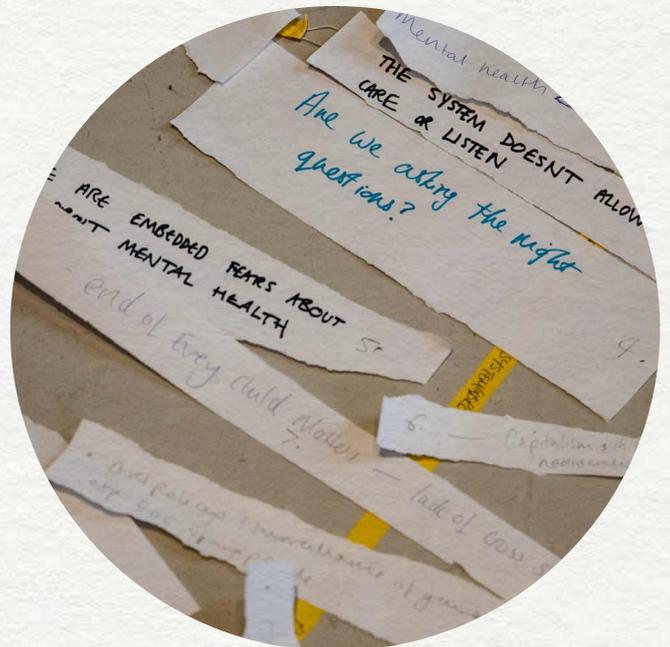


# How Can We Do This Better?

## How Did This Happen?

For this next big question, some of us wrote group poems and reflections. The lack of resources was again a strong theme throughout. This was linked to the nature of capitalism devaluing mental health, the arts, creativity and the intersectionality of people. Because - where capitalism is dominant, it values “profitable” industry and productivity. This will never fit with the needs of young people struggling with their mental health and the process for meaningful interaction, creativity and healing.

The pressures for productivity mean that communities can become fragmented and shared spaces are lost. This is not a short term issue but really about the structure and perceived values in the society we live in, and how this society was built. Institutional racism, elitism and ableism are woven from the interpersonal to the highest offices in the land.



# How Can We Do This Better?

## How Can This Not Happen Again?

Wanting to take our fears and transform them in groups we talked about ways we can get out of this place.



- Intersectionality also means committing to anti-racism and battling societal biases (elitism, transphobia, ableism etc.)
- Making people feel heard also means creating actions and buy-ins to value their contribution and make young people part of the process
- We need to go to where the young people are - using empty high street shops was an idea, as well as social media where young people are already doing marvellous work
- Give young people the agency/ power in decision making and delivery. We need to be prepared to give up power in order to empower those who need it most

## Intersectionality and a person-centred approach

- Seeing young people as complex individuals with their own marginalisations, histories, families, mates, schools etc. This can make it harder from a funding perspective but quintessentially it is the truth! We must follow that truth in order to do the best job possible



PERSON WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE /  
YOUNG PERSON / ART MAKER /  
ART FACILITATOR / ADULT TO A YOUNG  
PERSON / MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONAL /  
YOUTH WORKER ETC

## How Can We Do This Better?

### Push Back on Productivity / Slow It Down / Put Precedence on Process

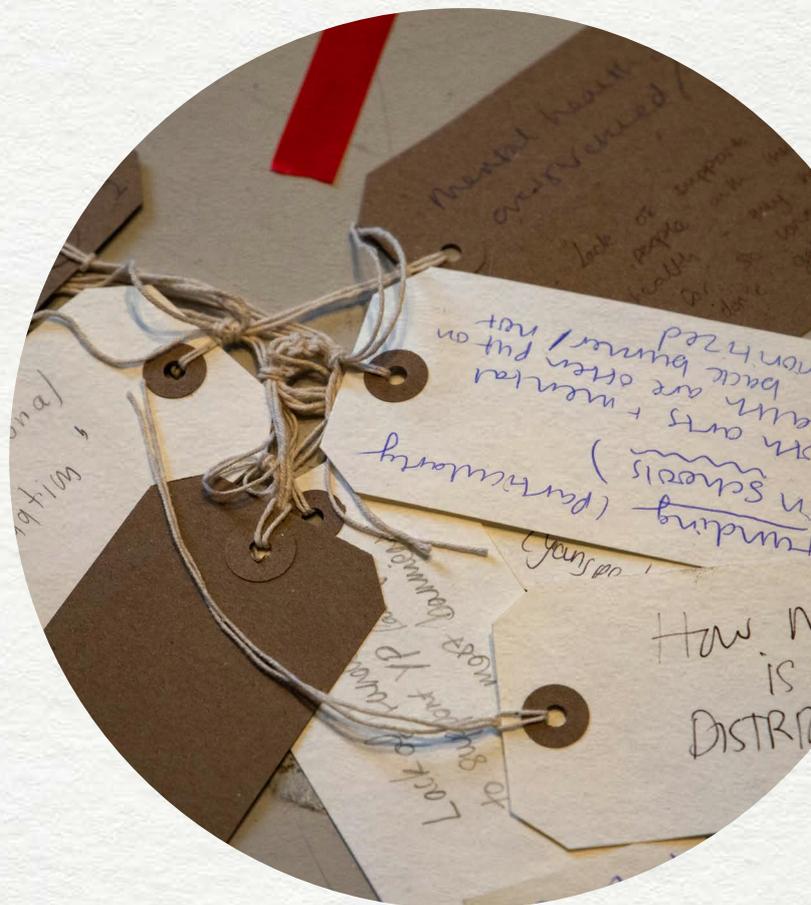
- Having the space and resources for more open-ended projects and programmes, ensuring these are sustainable for the long term
- Having workshops and projects that aren't under the pressure for a showy outcome
- To do meaningful work takes time - it needs to be responsive to young people's needs

### Resources, Training and Collaboration

- Employing artists in mental health services and mental health professionals in art projects
- Creating a shared language between the art and mental health sectors for smoother collaboration
- Mental health services to provide more open-ended support, and be more accessible. The NHS needs to be more flexible and quicker to change
- Reverse the decline of youth spaces and services
- Generally more funding and time for everyone, the lack of funding is still a massive issue

### Rethinking Our Values

- Cherishing play and creativity; creating a culture based on enjoyment, community, love and rest
- Embedding the arts in school from an early age and throughout the curriculum
- Making cultural activities available to everyone
- Mental health awareness and support more interwoven into the education system, early intervention as opposed to reactive work



## How Can We Do This Better?

### Final Reflections

Institutional racism, ableism, colonialism, neoliberalism, capitalism, poverty, scarcity, the abominable actions of neoliberal governments, the state of the NHS... how utterly daunting. How completely impossible it all feels.

Understanding and sharing the problems and consequences we have experienced is important to understand what needs to change and create connections and empathy towards each other. Vulnerability is powerful and the best way to fight against feelings of isolation. Everyone in the room has some level of power, whether in the office, across London boroughs or the whole region. Some of the issues brought up are systemic but there is also change people can enact on smaller scales. It is also key to recognise who has the power to start making changes, and who is disempowered and needs to be brought into the conversation.

It's also a reflection that there was much more talk about mental health rather than art for its own sake. There were scant actual mental health practitioners in the room. So many people had done projects where mental health becomes part of the conversation, or tackled vaguely under terms like "loneliness" and

"community". 2.8 Million Minds is a point of difference in that we are centring young people's mental health along with leaders and artists of lived experience.

One thing that does give ground / love / validation to 2.8 Million Minds is recognising how many of the values and ideas of how to improve things fit right in with the disability justice model. Disability justice talks about viewing people as complex intersectional beings, radical community change and pushing back against capitalist ideals and pressures. It's important to recognise that within these sectors, people's time is a valuable resource, and that they can rework their resources for radical change. It is precious, to rethink the work / life balance is actually a radical act, especially when carried out among your peers. As well as allowing more time for process within projects we need to see ourselves as valuable - to take time and rest when you need it, and allowing your colleagues to do the same. It was heartening to see that the arts and mental health sector already inhabited the values of disability justice whether they had heard of it or not.

# 2.8 Million Minds Network

**As part of 2.8 Million Minds, two network meetings were held online, bringing together young people, and representatives of art organisations and health/faith organisations with some involvement in art. These conversations encouraged knowledge sharing and debate, using a set of questions about working around young people, art and mental health.**

**This is a short summary of findings from these meetings.**

## **Network members told us:**

- Conversations around mental health and wellbeing are “ever-present” in projects and programmes but rarely is mental health explicitly centered as the main driver or subject.
- Many of the young people engaged with organisations face intersectional issues that affect their mental health.
- Colleagues talk about supporting the mental health of one another and their collaborators, “though putting into the place the necessary support and processes often proves to be much harder.”
- There is a shared understanding that art is a meeting point to share stories, feelings and ideas, to be yourself, develop creatively and make connections.
- Ways of working seen as meaningful to mental health include the promotion of relaxed venues, safer/horizontal spaces, accessibility, open discussion about fears, feelings and experiences, acceptance/no judgement, having agency, and having creative work taken seriously.
- There is excitement around working cross sector and collaboratively on systems change, but there are also worries about the scale of the issues around young people’s mental health, and the art sector’s limited capacity to work long term and in-depth.

## 2.8 Million Minds Network

### **Network members shared their learning from working in this space:**

- Respect and recognise difference but don't impose labels. Commit to equity and inclusion but accept and be honest that you can't cater for absolutely every individual access need.
- Thinking about access means considering language, space, and the facilitators reflecting those taking part.
- Flexibility is key, especially when working with disabled artists. Make it possible for it to be okay to change plans/push back a deadline/not attend a meeting.
- Recognise that artists are also working in an arts industry that exacerbates ill health. Working to address injustice is also exhausting and artists have little room to nourish/replenish themselves. Be present and responsive with your support.
- Allow time to build trust, don't rush and don't try to do too much, too fast, with not enough time, budget or care.
- Be transparent and open, don't make assumptions and invite people to express themselves in different ways.
- Give people space to be creatively ambitious and don't predetermine the outcome. Make people feel wanted, seen and respected as artists.
- Create pathways to critical conversations – making it easy for people to speak up and give feedback without this feeling like negative judgements.

## 2.8 Million Minds Network

**We discussed ways to be led by young people with lived experience.**

**Network members recommended:**

- Crediting and remunerating young people for their ideas and time in ways that are meaningful to them, so there is a clear exchange/value (this might not mean monetary payment).
- Not applying pressure to share lived experiences, being attentive to the power dynamics in a room and ensuring others are present with common experience to create a safer space.
- Understanding the emotional labour involved in sharing experiences and ensuring that this sharing has meaning, and will make a difference.
- Never exploiting personal trauma.
- Offering different and flexible levels of engagement – accounting for young people’s capacity and fluctuating mental health.
- Stepping away from only relying on verbal exchange, especially when discussing issues that make people feel vulnerable.
- Working in partnership where pastoral care is really clearly held by organisations with existing relationships with the young people involved (although this can raise challenges around tokenism).
- Moving between settings, meeting young people in their spaces too.
- Creating more informal and social environments for conversation.

**We asked the network to dream up what they would do around young people, art and mental health, with access to all the resources, training and people needed. Responses included:**

- Create long-term projects that look at the whole person, their influences, networks and mental health complexities.

## 2.8 Million Minds Network

- Incorporate travel/holiday/retreats/rest into programmes for young people/artists/staff (space for joy, rest and expression).
- Have more space for conversations around mental health/relationships and art - building new vocabularies, removing stigmas and exchanging knowledge between all people involved.
- Have consistent spaces for young people to come and create (free studio/youth club approach, where young people can just turn up when their mental health allows).
- Young people should have space to develop their creative practice with mentoring from artists with lived experience.
- Artists/studios should also have a presence in mental health units/hospitals, where going out may not be an option.
- Build stronger partnerships with mental health services.
- Create workshops that cater to specific mental health needs (instead of all young people in need of mental health support being grouped together). When young people have radically different needs, it creates different energy in a space, although a diversity of needs can also be positive.
- Connect up with other departments in art organisations to hear and respond to young people - structurally and programmatically.
- Network members felt that having this kind of provocation to “imagine or prophesise” beyond established structures was rare and essential.

“For me, a lot of my work is about imagining the things that don't exist. And I think that's what's really possible in an art space.”

# Why criticality matters for young people making work around mental health and art

**By Dr Zoé Whitley** Director Chisenhale Gallery  
**and Seth Pimlott** Curator of Social Practice, Chisenhale Gallery

Well made, thought-provoking art and mental well-being are hard-won and therefore precious; both take time, care and effort to sustain. At Chisenhale Gallery, we have been working with young people who have faced particularly tough circumstances, and we acknowledge that many young people face inordinate daily obstacles.

One response to hardship is understandable rigidity. We have found that artists frequently respond to difficult circumstances with resilience and imagination. What these young artists have created for themselves and for one other are safe, supportive, and imaginative spaces in which trusting relationships are nurtured. These are spaces in which we can experiment together with different possibilities, new forms and ways of relating. Together, we practice flexible and resilient ways of being and doing. Facing the world as an artist, through the process of making art and the power of knowing you have capacity to create something new, can make some everyday hardships slightly less daunting.

Each project has been animated by meaningful discussion around the development of the artworks. We ask crucial questions about the conditions in which these young artists can thrive, and seek solutions to what can and must be improved. In the past few months, we have leaned on each other and practiced creative problem-solving. We make space to be playful, yet don't shy away from being serious, vulnerable and honest. These are also the conditions of friendship.

It is said that the three pillars of psychological resilience are autonomy, relatedness, and competency. Making good art also requires the careful, considered practice and balance of these three forces: some self-reliance, some collaboration and some skill. It may be that in striving for one, we are helping to create the conditions for the other, and vice versa. None of these attributes are effortless, so we can only be proud of the determination and drive shown by these young artists who are fighting to be seen and heard.

# Why intersectionality in art and mental health matters

By **Hannah-Azieb Pool**, Artistic Director/CEO Bernie Grant Arts Centre

*What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence!*

## **The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action, *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde**

The ambition is for this work to be radically wholistic, and for this it must have a fully intersectional approach. The bringing of the whole self is essential, for participants, practitioners and artists. No young person should have to separate their identities to engage with any artistic mental health intervention.

For the work to be transformative requires the acknowledgement of the mind-altering effects of systemic oppression; the embodied trauma of racism as it intertwines with sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, and other systems of oppression. These are the reasons that any work around young people, mental health and art must keep intersectionality at its core, ensuring that artists and practitioners working with young people have lived experiences of navigating these traumas and depth of understanding of what a fully intersectional approach to mental health support really means.

# From malaise to radiance through art

By **Bevali Mckenzie**, Community Arts Producer, Bernie Grant Arts Centre

Developing a project that was centered around mental health was very daunting to begin with. I was unsure about the scope of the project and the expectations from me. I was not part of the funding application and initial conversations and needed to familiarise myself with what the manifesto could look like. I did however meet the other producers and felt very relaxed with them immediately. There was, however, a sense of speediness for the project to start and to get dates locked in, which did bring on a sense of panic.

I had to really question myself when I was asked to look for individuals who have had lived experience of mental health issues. I found myself reflecting on a time when I was suffering with depression, when my mother died at an early age, and I had just left a youth training scheme (YTS). I remember feeling isolated and lacking motivation for life. I would drink alcohol and smoke and do anything to try and feel something. It was then that I was advised by someone to do a college course to keep myself occupied. I decided to do photography, and would spend many days alone in a dark room producing images on white sheets of paper. It proved to be an amazing experience for me as I started to feel

alive and valued, especially when being supported in a group setting. The college course was a platform for me to discover creative outlets and become someone that had a voice. This led me to work with young people and to later form my own community group Code1, which supports Black families by working with experienced artists and filmmakers to give them space to create. This is why I love this project, because facilitators and participants can find some understanding. After lockdown it is more apparent that mental health is something that a lot of us try to hide. Even though it is well advertised that mental health issues are on the increase it is still seen as “something wrong”. I had an opportunity and an intervention when I was ‘losing it’ and that is what the culture and arts brings to the lives of young people; a voice and sometimes an intervention.

Having lived experience has proven to be a valuable part of this process as the young people are often surprised and intrigued that the adult in front of them is not “perfect”. They can relate. We decided, early on in the project, not to put a call out for artists as we felt this could complicate things and prove overwhelming. We were already familiar with Artist Yomi

## From malaise to radiance through art

Şode as he had recently performed at our Tottenham Literature Festival in November 2021. He is a great established artist and has lived experience of mental health issues and the arts. Being a grassroots community person, it was easy to identify the young people that this project was reaching out to. Bernie Grant Art Centre (BGAC) wanted to support young people from our Black and other global majority communities to find their voices in the arts, especially Black people. BGAC recently started a free summer theatre school with Code1, and this has proven to be a great way of offering young people a safe space within our building during the summer months. The CEO encourages the creation of projects that bring schools and young people to the centre and this project fitted in well.

When the project was introduced to us at BGAC, we felt it was important to make sure that the young people felt that they were invited to the centre for more than the period of the workshop session. We did not want them to feel that they were doing something for funders and getting nothing back. I asked the CEO to let us use one of the empty units for the project and decorate this so that the young people can make a safe hub within our centre for them to express themselves. This provided a safe and comfortable

environment for the young people to share each week. We aim to keep this space after this initial project is over.

Simon Tomlinson, a local street artist, was introduced to the project, after all the three artists were commissioned, to curate a visual art image on the hub wall that represented what the young people had been expressing to Yomi during their sessions. They seemed to love the idea of owning a newly white wall, especially as they were able to draw on the walls and own the space. We made sure that there was refreshments and art equipment for them to use and that they were comfortable in the space by talking about rules and confidentiality. This unit has worked well.

The work that was produced on the wall of the hub is to a high standard and I think it expresses mostly what the young people were talking about in the sessions. I feel that there was a little bit of holding back when it came to honestly expressing their emotions with 'swearing' words or words that might be seen as wrong. Maybe there was a lack of total freedom, but this freedom of expression was growing.

I feel that with more time there would be more confidence built. To ask young people to be free is like asking them to 'break the rules', what child is allowed to splash a wall?

## From malaise to radiance through art

We expanded the project with me and Simon visiting a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) for 2 days. We asked the children questions about mental health and the arts. The children at the PRU were different at this venue and displayed more challenging behaviour. They were majority Black and other global majorities. Many had anger issues and some found it difficult to focus. The work that was done with them was very innocent and authentic. The young people had two quick-fired sessions and were asked to reflect on their emotions straight away. The use of spray painting made the sessions more enjoyable for the young people and they talked about their feelings with a lot more ease.

In all the project felt supportive, from the weekly zoom team chats, to the updates and meet ups. The support of Tara and Nicola was so welcomed. The interactions I had with the GLA were very encouraging as I felt able to talk freely (sometimes funders scare me!).

When it came to managing my own wellbeing I found that there were some challenges along the way. I was glad that I could express these to my colleagues and project team. I, now, have been receiving massages and therapy, which I wish I had taken from the midway point of this project as this has made a great difference to how I

balance my day to day. I have been able to talk to someone else outside of the project that allows me to be free. This project has given BGAC a new young people's hub space and a new drive to continue to work with the PRUs and has personally inspired me greatly.

**There is no more joy in life than seeing a young person progress and laugh and show character in a safe space to express themselves and create.**

# Seth's Top Tips

**By Seth Pimlott**, Curator of Social Practice, Chisenhale Gallery

**Being part of 2.8 Million Minds and helping bring these projects to life has been a privilege. Becky, Tyreis, Yomi and Simon have travelled so far with their respective groups. Their journeys have been riveting and very beautiful.**

**Below are some practical reflections on how we have tried to make things happen and create a space where these artists can excel.**

## **Initial stages of the project/ recruitment**

- Artists who have lived experience of mental health struggles do not necessarily address this fact in their practice. We decided to work with artists who do so explicitly, but this doesn't have to be the case - a sensitively worded open call to find artists with lived experience would have been another approach.
- Recruiting young people for these projects was a considerable amount of work. Making it happen relied on the goodwill and curiosity of a few mental health professionals, a robust social prescribing network in Tower Hamlets, and personal contacts. Moving forward, there may be a way of streamlining this by identifying gatekeepers within the borough and NHS Trusts, encouraging creatively-minded mental health professionals to partner on such projects, and creating networks in which callouts can be widely shared.

## **Inside the workshops**

- Fundamental to the success of these projects has been to treat young people as individuals as well as a collective. For us, this has meant one-on-one time in the sessions themselves, but also regular check-ins to work out how things are going, what works and what doesn't, and what they need to develop their own creative practice independently from the group. In the future, this might mean doing full inductions with the wider gallery team, a mentorship scheme, and an open-door policy at specific times in the week.
- For younger children and teenagers who cannot always travel alone, arranging transport to the workshops was essential (in this case, from CAMHS Tower Hamlets and occasionally from school or home). This was budgeted for.

## Seth's Top Tips

- It helps, especially for younger children, to have consistency in the environment and workshop space. We found that on the few occasions when we had to move our workshop space, it negatively impacted the children's ability to feel comfortable and participate in the sessions.
- Working with children or young people who have additional needs requires extra support. We came to understand that for children or young people on the autistic spectrum it is a good idea to prepare with the child and their family ahead, perhaps inviting them to the space before the programme begins, asking whether you can help shape the environment to their needs, understanding things that might be triggering, and if they would like to bring anything that might help them self-regulate and navigate the activities.

### Personnel

- This work is personnel heavy. For most of the sessions, we had at least two people from Chisenhale (one with mental health first aid training) and one mental health professional who also "gets it" (i.e. someone who is up for getting involved creatively). Ideally, if a situation develops that requires special attention or support, this can happen independently and allow the lead artist to continue to hold the space. In practice, this can't always be the case, and disruptions will occur - this is why it is so important to have the right people in the room.
- We were lucky that our Director Zoé and Deputy Emma joined us for some of the sessions. Bringing senior staff into these projects was an important part of making the young people feel that they were being taken seriously. It also embeds the project in an institution, so that the whole team feels invested in it, with a tacit understanding of the participants, relationships and nature of the work being undertaken. This could also be done via inductions with the wider institutional team - the more you can embed these projects within the institution, the better!
- Support-staff participation in the workshops was a good way of creating parity between young people, the project team and mental health professionals in the room. This is not school - this is an adventure, and we are all on the journey together (it's also way more fun than standing at the back of the room).

## Seth's Top Tips

### These young people are artists

- Engaging the participants as artists is central to the work. This happens through words and actions. Take every opportunity to remind the group that they are artists on this project: in email correspondence, in the sessions, as you walk around exhibitions or look at references together. Calling yourself an artist can sometimes feel hard, but if someone else does it often enough it cuts through, and we have found that it has been embraced as an identity. This also means treating the groups like any other artists you might work with, in all kinds of ways, including remunerating people for their work (this includes artist fees for the older participants at London Living Wage).
- A number of participants in the older group are interested in pursuing careers in arts and mental health, informed by their experience of the project. We believe that being appreciated as an artist and paid for your work is a route to growing confidence and positive self-perception.

### Artist support

- The well-being of the lead artists is a priority. We addressed this in a number of ways (see 'Methodologies' and 'Did We Do This Better?' for details).
- We recommend asking the artists if they have a preference or requirement for the profile, expertise or orientation of the therapist/counsellor for their oversight therapy.
- We found the debrief questions outlined by Nicky and Tara (see 'Toolbox' section) useful in terms of efficiently finding out what the evolving needs and requirements of the lead artists were. We used them in structured session debriefs after each workshop, which guided our approach and allowed us to quickly address any issues that arose.
- In the event of the lead artist's absence, it is a good idea to have established a simple backup workshop that can be deployed by the other staff with the consent of the artist. This is both a good way to maintain consistency for the group but also reinforces to the artist that it's ok to need to take time out, as the group will get along fine until they feel better.

## Seth's Top Tips

- Even though the project was undertaken intensively over the course of a few months, we tried to create short, regular breaks in the workshop schedules.
- My role has been to enthusiastically open doors and possibilities for the lead artist and help hold some of the uncertainty that comes with open-ended projects like these, shaping an exciting exploratory space, rather than an anxiety-filled one. This is not a university course and there are no learning outcomes. We are not creating content, we are making art - and that requires stepping into unknown territory. This is also how we have framed it for the groups - we don't know exactly where we are heading, but let's follow our nose and see where we land. Having reached a destination that was not preconceived is one of the most exciting outcomes for everyone involved.



### **Creative problem-solving**

Moving forward: how might we increase participation even further?

In her introduction, Aniqa talks about the balance of joy and seriousness in the project. I believe that creative problem-solving is key to striking this balance: when Tyreis spends quality time teaching a child how to master latch-hook rug-making; when the group work with Becky to imagine, debate and then refine their manifesto; or even, in the lead-up to one of the photoshoots, trying together to find a solution to the feeling of overstimulation that might occur in response to livelier moments of the day (the answer was to have breaks followed by short focusing games as a group).

These moments of mentalising work and playful solidarity are the foundations of strong attachment and relationships, and also happen to describe the productive relationship between curator and artist. In future, I'd like to see participants taking on even more responsibilities for the co-regulation of the space, behind the scenes, in terms of planning, and creating conditions for the next group of artists. Perhaps in a few years' time, they will be the ones running the workshops - I want this to feel like a tangible possibility.

# 13 things we got wrong

- 1.** We didn't push back hard enough against the timeline set for us and ask for a year to do this work. (working to a more realistic timeline)
- 2.** We (James mostly) would panic and send too many emails. (Use Small, Slow Solutions)
- 3.** Could we (should we) have worked more closely with health care workers, but there was a fear (from James mostly) about how to protect open and blue sky creative thinking without getting drawn into target driven health care approaches. (where is the boundary between art and health in arts and health?)
- 4.** We didn't address the question of how you work with health services when some of those systems have done real harm to the people you are trying to support. It is really complex. (Is it our responsibility at this stage to still point out that real damage is being done?)
- 5.** We should have made more time to talk and figure out how we were going to work together, specifically addressing what would happen if something went wrong or we made mistakes. (lay good foundations for process)
- 6.** We tried to do too much with the resources we had. (overproduction mentality)
- 7.** We could have used the resources outside of our core team better - tapping into others' wisdom, networks, ways of organising, aesthetics, and so on. (expectation of self-reliance)
- 8.** We should have had more young people involved in guiding how the project was delivered, not just in the 'imagining' part of the process. (true, but that would require more time and resources)
- 9.** We didn't have an honest conversation about whether we had the capacity to take the work on in the first place or during the process (Because we wanted to deliver, as mental health is really important and the crisis is real.. and we needed the funding)
- 10.** We had problems with emails going in each other's spam folders.
- 11.** We could have been more aware of our language and privilege with each other, particularly around disability, racism, mental health, class and gender - though not exclusively those things. (we need more time to consider how we worked, not to just do the work)

- 12.** We should have had contact details of supportive friends, carers and family members for the young people we worked with who were over 18 but still in precarious situations. (what is the model of support for adults who are vulnerable but don't have formal support structures?)
- 13.** We, our freelancers and the GLA had to take time to deal with Covid and other experiences. and we should have worked more closely to flex timelines and expectations to better support them. (Should we have built in soft deadlines like we build contingencies into budgets).
- 14.** We coulda coulda coulda, shoulda shoulda shoulda, woulda woulda woulda. Do woppa do.



## 6. Conclusion



# Conclusion

As indicated in our learning and mistakes, 2.8 Million Minds reproduced some of the unhealthy characteristics of art projects that it has tried to call out and push against. It is not enough to instil principles of care or have radical champions in a process. Internalised/institutional ableism, delivery mentality and behaviours of productivity are so conditioned that it takes considerable support, resources and actively vulnerable leadership to undo them. It is hopefully clear that future work centring mental health needs to have mental health-oriented practices built into its design at every single level (from funders/commissioners onwards) and engagement needs to be lengthy, flexible, open and in-depth. A disability justice framework goes some way towards making this happen, but processes and people also need to be in place to hold projects to account on whether they are enacting their progressive values.

Listening to young people in 2.8 Million Minds translated into a grassroots approach that didn't involve strategic mental health representatives. This was not always deliberate, but it was obvious that some people in the project with lived experience of mental health services felt burnt by a broken system and needed space to dream, test and critique without a heavy

clinical presence. The de-centring of mental health services in the process goes against accepted ideas of best practice in partnership working and it is a risk to take this approach when delivering for governmental authorities and funders, where the momentum is directed towards integrating systems. Reconciling this relationship or making the case for creative resistance may well be part of the next steps.

The project hasn't got to the stage where it is possible to know who exactly needs to be involved to make the next steps in the action plan happen. It is clear that art organisations have time, freedoms and access to certain funding that mental health services don't have. And there are also many potential collaborators, advocates and enablers within the mental health sector who haven't yet been engaged with the process and who could play an important role in activating and embedding. There is particular excitement around finding the radical individuals within the sector who are willing to go on a journey of experimentation and who are committed to a different way of working with young people. But the biggest message from the process is that young artists with lived experience need to be actively and centrally involved in leading what happens next.

## Conclusion

2.8 Million Minds also pushed forward the idea that just because young people might be in a fragile place, we should not be afraid to unpack, question and think critically about what they're doing. There will be arguments and ideas in this document that need pulling apart and challenging, and the team and young people involved look forward to this manifesto sparking debate and bringing together other unheard voices to make change a reality.

Get in touch if you'd like to talk:  
**[mind@thevacuumcleaner.co.uk](mailto:mind@thevacuumcleaner.co.uk)**



## 7. Toolbox: How can you do this better?



# How can you do this better?

## Things we have found that work when working with young people with mental health experiences. (not a complete list)

### **Always share what will happen**

Write on the wall a list of tasks you will do that day - don't use times. Builds active consent - helps manage anxiety - useful for neurodiverse minds/ASC young people.

### **Check-in**

It can be boring to start with - but also a way for you to talk about your mental health: "I'm feeling anxious or tired today etc." Share things about your life. Show vulnerability, help young people know you don't have all the answers. Model ways of talking about how you feel, learn little bits about each other and share that they exist for you outside of the room, "I was thinking about you a few days ago because..."

### **Boundaries making**

Allow the young people to define the boundaries together - so make those in the first session. Ask questions like

- How you want to work together?
- How you should treat each other and the work you may share?
- How we create supportive environments?
- Can also be useful to come back to if things kick-off

Write the tasks on large bits of paper. In case of confusion, people dropping in and out, make these questions simple and meaningful.

### **Silly games**

Can be a nice way to start the session. Familiar but also ways to bring subjects into the space.

### **Praise and critically engage**

Praise them for trying, making something, speaking about something etc. or identifying something. Go on to say something like "Ok - I want you to make this better/ this bit here needs some work.. and why". So critically engage with their work. And then praise them again.

### **Ask them about sharing and how**

Do you want to share it? How do they want to share it? Can they read, can they speak loudly? What references can you give them to help them think about sharing - performers you like, artist's style you may want to build on.

## How can you do this better?

### **Importance of final context**

Your work matters - it will be shown here, it will be taken seriously - and I want to support you to make the best thing you can. Show you are listening but also make sure they feel safe to fail too. Your role is to support them in feeling safe to try something - which comes back to critical engagement and praise.

### **Always over plan**

In case things run short.

### **Ask to make sure you are understood**

And take the time to explain in different ways.

### **Safeguarding.**

Don't lead the conversation, but listen and validate, believe the young person. Thank them for sharing, and let them know you take it really seriously. Let them know you will have to talk to another adult, and check that they are not in danger today/tonight. Write it down and email it to your safeguarding lead.

# How do we evaluate better?

**By Tara Brown and Nicola Sim,** Critical friends/evaluators

**How cheerful are you feeling on a scale from 1 to 5?**

**How much energy do you have to spare on a scale from 1 to 5?**

**How loved do you feel on a scale from 1 to 5?**

**What do you think about your complex emotional feelings and mental health being reduced to a number? Many people within the mental health system find this system of evaluating a dehumanising experience, flattening our expression and creating new harm and trauma upon what we are already living with.**

Completing well-being scales before and after a mental health ‘intervention’ makes us feel small. A number in the system, a stat on a sheet. And it’s a process that happens so often it’s very easy to just shut down at the point where you should be able to talk about what you need.

There is an argument that art projects should incorporate measurements that health providers use. The fear is that art is too wishy washy to provide concrete evidence-based data. Surely the art sector needs to utilise these traditional measurements from the mental health sector to be legitimate in this space? Maybe. Or maybe we could be more radical. Maybe our projects could challenge the target-driven indicator model that forefronts the needs of the system rather than the person. Maybe young people, art and artists can help to creatively reimagine the ways that young people participate

in mental health evaluation.

**Is accountability, quality and reflection on our mental health experience important? YES!**

**Does it have to make us feel worse about ourselves? NO!**

**Does this require more time and resources? You bet. But not always.**

We want to advocate for an approach to evaluating future work that adheres to the principles of disability justice and centres art, young people and their mental health needs. We argue that this approach is more meaningful, will produce richer information and has less opportunity to reproduce harm by creating negative feelings and disrupting relationships.

A disability justice method focuses on a person centred approach and

## How do we evaluate better?

honouring their complexities. It means being curious and not intrusive. It means being flexible to people's needs and not using their experience as a funding resource. Embedding reflective practice in this context also means artists supporting their groups to build a critical voice and vocabulary around their work and the work of peers. This is where truly radical art and culture can flourish.

For this project we were not working as external evaluators but as critical friends and co-writers of the action plan. Our common values and philosophies chime with 2.8 Million Minds, which is why we were involved in the first place. It also means for this project our role as evaluators was limited as we were not independent.

**Here are some recommendations, based on our experience as critical friends/evaluators of 2.8 Million Minds.**

**Talk about evaluation from the beginning, and think critically about what is being evaluated, why and for who?**

Did the partners in this process need to know participants' mental health experience and demographics in

excruciating vulnerable detail?

No. So we didn't gather it.

Did participants still voluntarily talk about their mix of circumstances and emotions? Yes.

**Think about the ways evaluation methods could make people feel**

What are you trying to discover through your evaluation?

Is the language used giving opportunities for meaningful reflections, as opposed to flat statistics for your funders or for the purpose of diagnosis? Be wary of the colonial overtones of 'capturing' data and being inflexible in your approach.

Have you talked to participants or support workers about what kind of communications work for them? Is there potential to co-produce research and evaluation methods with young people and artists? How are you going to make participants feel comfortable and reasonably safe during your evaluation?

Our evaluation was light-touch and focused on one off conversations due to limited time and resources. Ideally we would have liked much more time to get to know participants and be part of sessions. We found having snacks and

## How do we evaluate better?

fidget toys available and sitting outside with more than one person helped to enable conversation.

### **Embed reflective practice within projects**

Have you thought about and planned your reflective practice from the outset before you have started your project?

In the 2.8 Million Minds projects, artists designed different ways to check-in on how individuals were feeling. It was part of the ritual of a session to invite participants to reflect. Sometimes it meant asking:

- How's the weather in your head?
- What do these colours represent for you?
- Can you draw your feelings on fabric?
- Let's try these journaling exercises
- Choose an image that means something to you and tell me why

These methods were integrated into the creative process, but they didn't work for everyone, and it was important that staff and artists were able to notice and respond in this scenario.

*"Some children need a bit of support or scaffolding to think about what their feelings are right now."*

(Mental health service practitioner)

### **Work with external evaluators with lived experience**

This affects the power imbalance between evaluators and participants, reducing the probability of reproducing harm. The ability to be more vulnerable with participants can also engender empathy and understanding between both groups. We tried to find ways in our reflective conversations to indicate that we also had lived experiences of mental health services for example.

### **Make it meaningful**

If participants see how their participation in evaluation benefits them (and not someone else trying to meet a target) they are much more likely to derive meaning and value from that experience. If they see their contributions making a difference - for their peers, services and communities, this also makes for a much more equitable exchange.

Our big hope is that the findings from the evaluation of 2.8 Million Minds are taken on board in the realisation of the action plan, so participants can see the impact of sharing their perspectives and experiences.

## How do we evaluate better?

### Further reading:

There is a growing body of research looking at alternative ways to evaluate, using more creative and youth-centred/led methods. A few projects currently inspiring us are:

Heart n Soul: Believe in Us and Heart n Soul at the Hub  
[www.heartnsoul.co.uk/discovery](http://www.heartnsoul.co.uk/discovery)

Loneliness Connects Us  
[www.lonelinessconnectsus.org](http://www.lonelinessconnectsus.org)

New Town Culture  
[www.newtownculture.org](http://www.newtownculture.org)

Rethinking impact, evaluation and accountability in youth work  
[www.rethinkingimpact.com/](http://www.rethinkingimpact.com/)

# Sample Artist Brief & Contract

## 2.8 million minds

a young people's project funded by the GLA, formed by BERNIE GRANT ARTS CENTRE, CHISENHALE GALLERY, THE VACUUM CLEANER

*How can young people use art and culture to create change in their mental health and change how mental health care is delivered and funded?*

Artist and mental health activist 'the vacuum cleaner' is working in collaboration with non-profit organisations Bernie Grant Arts Centre (BGAC) and Chisenhale Gallery (CG) to devise the Greater London Authority's (GLA) c. Young people resident in Haringey, where BGAC is located, and those resident in Tower Hamlets, where CG is located, will work with us to imagine and create this action plan.

We are commissioning three artists by invitation to work with young people on project research and development. Each artist will support one of three different age ranges. The age groups are 7-13; 14-18; and 19-25. We want young people to be at the heart of imagining how art and culture could help them with their mental health.

As a commissioned artist, we ask you to bring your own unique experience of mental health and artistic process to support one specific age group in **creating a manifesto** that can be shared with other young Londoners as well as staff from the GLA/stakeholder organisations. Eventually, this work is designed to reach the wider arts, mental health and social activism communities.

We see your role as a hybrid of artist, researcher, facilitator and activist. We define a manifesto in a broad sense. It doesn't have to be a written document but it will be a declaration of feelings, motives, frustrations, views, hopes and intentions of the participants.

We are open to how you would like to do this: in form, time and structure. Whether it is making film, music, movement, text, 2D or 3D, or a combination of media. And it could happen over one intense week, series of weekends, or slowly build over 8 shorter sessions spread over 8 weeks.

The three commissioned artists and young people would then be brought together to share in an evening that collectively imagines what art and culture could be like for London's young people. We want both the process and outcome to be of high quality and based on critically considered practice that centres the

voices, experiences and imaginations of young people. The aim is to create something that the young people can own, be proud of, and also find practically useful as a tool to chart their future of better mental health through art.

We would like you to work with a group of young people in the context of Bernie Grant Arts Centre aged 14-18.

To understand the intentions and expectation of the GLA's action plan for young people's mental health through art and culture programme, we have included their original tender document and our response to this document. We suggest you read them in full. Please come back to us with any questions and we can talk through the documents with you.

## **Practicals**

### **Time**

8 workshops or similar to create a manifesto for young people's mental health care for London. The estimated times below are based on an 8 hour working day, exclusive of necessary lunch and break times.

- 6 half days (24 hours) for planning workshops
- 3 days (24 hours) of admin, care organising and debriefing - including, ideally, in-person work, Covid safety allowing
- 6 oversight therapy sessions - 1 hour each, online (6 hours)
- 6 mutual and individual check-ins - 1 hour each, online or in-person (6 hours)
- 3 half days paid for rest (12 hours)
- One day of debrief and research collection, in-person (8 hours)
- 8-10 days for workshop prep and delivery

**=20 days at £250/day**

### **Financials**

Artist Fee - £4000

Materials - £2000\*

Access costs - Personal access costs should be covered by Access to Work.

Oversight therapy - up to 5 sessions (see further details next page)

\*Note on materials:

BGAC, Chisenhale and the vacuum cleaner each have a variety of resources which will be made available and you are welcome to use.

### **Provisional timeline**

December 15th - agree commission

Dreamtime, devise, image - until early Jan

7 January - check in with James, Zoe and Hannah - plan feedback and refining.

12 January - first workshop plans locked.

Workshops can begin 17 January-14 March

Sharing of three groups - end March (tbc and we wish to negotiate this for more time)

### **Care, wellbeing and emotional labour**

As a team, we are working towards commissioning in a way that supports disabled/mad/neurodiverse artists to make radical work. To support and enable artists to be able to do this, we acknowledge the huge emotional labour involved and will work closely with the commissioned artists individually and collectively to provide formal and informal care and access requirements. This is a new approach and we aren't going to get it perfectly right, however we are deeply committed to pioneering better models of care and emotional wellbeing for those we work with and for ourselves. We hope to be able to work with you around your needs and to balance those with our own.

We think it is important to acknowledge that this project is working on a tight timeline -- not ideal for care and we have already raised this with the GLA and are working with them to extend deadlines. We also want to acknowledge that this work is not for everyone; it will require a certain amount of emotional resilience and existing strategies to not be overwhelmed.

The practical care strategy, which can be adapted and added to includes:

- Oversight therapy from a professional therapist. Either we can provide this or you can use your own trusted provider if you have an existing relationship - we have budget for £70 per session, 6 sessions total
- Informal debriefs - we would meet fortnightly with each commissioned artist individually during a workshop session. Collectively, we get together with all the commissioned artists fortnightly to debrief, reflect, and gather critical feedback.

- Telephone support - within office hours 10am-6pm, a member of the team can provide a check-in over the phone in response to any intense moments that arise. In crisis moments, out-of-hours calls can be requested - please be aware many in the team are parents, provide care for others and manage their own mental health within demanding schedules.
- Paid rest and recovery time - each artist receives 3 paid half days for 'duvet days, rest and wellbeing time' - which can be used at your discretion outside of scheduled time with the young people.
- Travel and subsistence - each artist will have a budget of £250 to pay for travel - a taxi if you are tired, healthy or unhealthy takeaway food if you don't have the energy to cook etc.
- Agree working methods - each artist will meet with the commissioner to agree 'how they are going to work together' - which could include communication requirements - times of work - expectations of each other - safety process such as being able to 'send up a i'm not ok message' - privacy and safeguarding guidance.
- Other strategies we may not have thought of.

It is important you communicate with us your access requirements. This could be around disability, emotional wellbeing - but could also be around other things, experiences of inequality and violence, supporting dependents, being a carer. We ask this to be undertaken in an open and honest way, whilst always respectful of privacy and confidentiality of all.

### **Participation in evaluation and research steps.**

To make the process of understanding young people needs and desires of art for mental health we are working closely with an evaluation team and you are required to join us for a day of critical reflection of what has happened and how best to present this to the GLA and other stakeholders.

### **IP**

As an artist you will keep the copyright of your work, and the right to share it in the future.

You will also grant commissioners the right to share your work in not for profit contexts, talks, presentations - you will always be credited.

You also grant the GLA permission to share your work in not for profit contexts.

You grant researchers attached to the project access to your work and documentation of it. You can remove yourself from research you fundamentally disagree with.

You should be clear with participants around consent, and seek consent from them or their adults. We would recommend having detailed discussions about using the images of the young people with us and the young people, particularly those who may be vulnerable.

## **DBS**

Anyone working with those under 18 will be required by law to complete an enhanced DBS check. As a commissioner we will not make judgements of any previous convictions, unless they have placed young people at or in danger.

# Sample Easy-Read consent form

## 2. 8 Million Minds - Consent Form

Thank you so much for taking part in [2.8 Million Minds!](#)

We would really like to use the artwork you have created in public presentations. We would also like to take photos and make short videos in the art-making sessions with Tyreis and share these as a record of the project online. We will also use these images in research about the project that looks at art and mental health.

We will **never** share your personal information (like your name) or capture anything that could identify you (like a photo of your face) with anyone.

To do this, we need your permission (or consent).

If you are under 16, the adults responsible for you will need to give consent with your agreement. If you are over 16, you can give consent for yourself. If you are happy for your / your young person's work to be included in the project's documentation, please sign the consent form below.

### **CONSENT FORM**

We may display artwork and images captured during the project in the following ways:

- In public presentations of '2.8 Million Minds'.
- In publications about the project and reports.
- On social media channels.
- On dedicated web pages for the project.
- On the websites of the artists, galleries and the projects' funders.
- In external media (newspapers, magazines and online)

For us to use your work, please tick yes or no next to the sentences below:

YES/NO I consent to myself / my young person as outlined in this consent form

Please complete the details below using capital letters. This information is confidential and will not be shared. OR if you have received this form by email, you consent digitally using this link.

Your name / your young person's name:.....

Date of birth:.....

Name of parent/ guardian (if child under 16):.....

Email:.....

Phone number: .....

Signature:.....

Date: .....

If you wish to revoke consent at any time, please email [seth.pimlott@chisenhale.org.uk](mailto:seth.pimlott@chisenhale.org.uk) or [mail@chisenhale.org.uk](mailto:mail@chisenhale.org.uk)

If you do not want your / your young person's work to be included, let us know. You are still welcome to take part in the project, but we will not include your ideas and work in the documentation if they can only be attributed to you.

**How you can contact us:**

If you would like to contact us to ask questions about this project, please email Seth Pimlott at [seth.pimlott@chisenhale.org.uk](mailto:seth.pimlott@chisenhale.org.uk)

## Debrief/reflection template for 2.8 Million Minds

For artists, partners and staff leading sessions with young people, below is a list of prompts as a guide for reflecting after sessions. This reflection might happen straight away or the next day, or whenever you prefer. You might want to write your thoughts down, draw a map, record yourself speaking or chat through your reflections together. You don't need to answer everything; these are just a few starting prompts to encourage a ritual of reflection after each session. Where possible and appropriate it would be great if you could share your reflections with the project team so we can all learn from your experiences.

**If you have other ideas for question prompts, please let us know!**

Tara and Nicky

### **How are you?**

- How are you feeling after the last session?
- Is there anything you or others could do to support your needs or well-being post-session?

### **What did you observe and learn?**

- E.g. How were the participants feeling? (Any observations/feedback about group dynamics, confidence, engagement)
- Were there any highlights/challenges?
- How do you and the participants feel about the work and ideas being produced?
- Do you think participants felt safe and heard?
- How was the staff engagement and support?
- Taking the project ambitions into account, have you learnt anything in the last session that would be useful to share with the project team?

### **What could be different?**

- Could anything be improved for next time?



# Credits

## **Manifesto Team**

Co-edited by Tara Brown, James Leadbitter, Seth Pimlott and Nicola Sim

Supported by The Mayor of London

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Design by Sanjay Sur

Project Management by Seth Pimlott

## **Image Credits**

**Pages 1, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20** - Tyreis Holder & co, *Joy Jumpers* (2022). Photos: Shakyra Lodge & Filip Skiba.

**Pages 6, 21** - 'A Manifesto for 2.8 Million Minds' launch at the Houses of Parliament (2022). Photos: Sam Nightingale.

**Pages 7, 8** - Aniq, *untitled* (2022). Photos: Aniq.

**Page 16** - Tyreis Holder workshop at Chisenhale Gallery (2022). Photos: Seth Pimlott and Sai Stephenson.

**Pages 23-30** - Yomi Şode, Simon Tomlinson & co, *I hurt every day* (2022). Photos: Bevali Mckenzie, Yomi Şode, Simon Tomlinson and Seth Pimlott.

**Pages 31-38, 39-40, 83, 109** - Becky Warnock and OOST collective, *How's the weather in your head?* (2022). Photos: Anna Howell.

**Pages 64-69** - 'How Can We Do This

Better?' at Somerset House (2022). Photos: Alessia Leo.

## **2.8 Million Minds Team**

Hannah Azieb Pool, Bevali McKenzie & Frank Sweeney for the Bernie Grant Arts Centre

Zoé Whitley, Seth Pimlott, Sai Stephenson & Amina Jama for Chisenhale Gallery

James Leadbitter, Beki Bateson, Katie Brewer & Angie Robinson for the vacuum cleaner

Tara Brown & Nicola Sim as Critical Friends

Clare Lovett & Georgina Bednar for the Mayor of London

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## **Network Group**

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Lascelles, Layla Mahmood, Richard Martin, Liz Moreton, Alina Puleston, Linda Rocco, Naomi Wilson-White

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2.8 Million Minds was a collaboration  
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