



Creating a Healthier Croydon

2024

CROYDON'S DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH
ANNUAL REPORT ON CREATIVE HEALTH

ANDREA FALLON

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Front cover: Folk Dance Remixed, Dance Festival
Croydon 2023. Photo by Vipul Sangoi.

Foreword

Executive Mayor, Jason Perry

I'm delighted to introduce this year's Director of Public Health's annual report for Croydon, which focuses on creative health.

Croydon has a proud history in creative arts, culture and heritage. This was demonstrated during our successful year as London Borough of Culture in 2023-24, where the benefits of arts participation on a large scale were very clearly seen. We want to build on that success and create the conditions in Croydon for creative health to become an integral part of our health and care offer to residents.

Creative health has a significant role to play in helping us deliver the future Croydon we want to see. It can help us align our work within communities and with our amazing voluntary, community and faith sector, whilst also supporting residents to learn new skills and access the kind of opportunities that can help them thrive.

The newly established creative health team in the Council are already working to make this a reality, providing valuable capacity to bring together arts, health and community partners delivering creative health initiatives, whilst also offering support and networking opportunities.

But we all must work together if we are to get the best results - this is not something that can be left to the creative health team alone. That's why I welcome this report's call to action and the recommended steps, so that everyone across the Council and our partner organisations can work towards common objectives and embrace the role they need to play to take this work forward. Together, we can take Croydon's already vibrant creative health sector and make it even better.



Jason Perry,
**Executive Mayor
of Croydon**

Acknowledgements

Andrea Fallon, Interim Director of Public Health

I have had the great pleasure this year to work alongside a number of outstanding colleagues from within the public health team and wider Council.

As a strong believer in the evidence for how creativity plays a significant role in our wellbeing and indeed how it shapes the society we live in, I suggested to the public health team that we focus this year's annual report on how Croydon's year as London Borough of Culture has impacted our residents' health and wellbeing.

The team jumped at the chance. I was then lucky enough to discover that Dr Jack Bedeman, Acting Deputy Director of Public Health is a keen artist himself, always encouraging the team to think about how we can use the creative sector more in shaping strategies that support residents to look after themselves and each other.

With that in mind, I asked Jack if he would lead this year's Director of Public Health Annual Report for Croydon, working closely with our creative health team, a challenge he readily accepted.

I would therefore like to extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone involved in the production of this report, and to all the residents and groups who shared their stories and experiences.



Andrea Fallon,
**Interim Director
of Public Health**

Foreword

Dr Jack Bedeman, Acting Deputy Director of Public Health

Why focus on arts and health? You might be wondering – why talk about the arts when there are urgent issues demanding our attention?

The NHS is under immense pressure, Council finances are stretched to the limit, and communities are struggling. Surely now isn't the time to be talking about the arts?

But what if now is exactly the right time?

Across the NHS and local government, we're being asked to think differently. We're being asked to focus on prevention, to build services around people and their communities, and to find new ways of tackling deep-rooted challenges. In short, we need to be more creative. And what better place to look for inspiration than the arts?

A truly sustainable health and care system must be built around human experience. And humans have always turned to the arts to navigate life's challenges—from the earliest cave paintings to today's community choirs, dance groups, and creative writing groups.

The evidence is growing, but the truth is, we've always known it: engaging with the arts improves health, strengthens communities, and helps us find meaning and connection.

In this year's report, we'll take you on a journey through some of the ways Croydon residents are already using creative arts to improve health and wellbeing. We'll connect these experiences to the growing body of evidence that proves their impact.

And we'll set a challenge: how can we bring this creativity into the heart of our organisations and the way we work?

The arts aren't just an 'extra' – they offer people opportunities to learn, connect, move, reflect, and express themselves. They build community. They drive employment, from individual artists to entire industries like film, music, and design. They even play a role in tackling issues like social cohesion, crime, and the built environment - yes, even housing.

So maybe, just maybe, the arts aren't a distraction from the real issues. Maybe the arts are the answer.

I believe there isn't a single challenge we can't tackle more effectively with creativity. And if we think otherwise – whether that's our teams in the Council, or our partners in health and other statutory services – then perhaps we're just not being creative enough.



Dr Jack Bedeman,
**Acting Deputy Director
of Public Health**

Section 1

Introduction

What is creative health?

Creative health can be defined as “the use of creative, artistic, cultural, or heritage assets to positively improve the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities”.⁽¹⁾ Creative health activities typically include visual and performing arts, crafts, film, literature, cooking and creative activities based in nature, such as gardening.⁽²⁾

There is an ever-growing body of evidence showing that creative health activities can play a significant role in preventing ill-health, supporting the management of long-term conditions, and enhancing treatment and recovery from ill-health, across the entire life course.⁽²⁾ Creative health activities also connect and activate citizens, aiding greater civic engagement and social change among communities.⁽³⁾



How creative health enables good health and wellbeing

The creative sector has been contributing to the delivery of positive health and wellbeing outcomes across diverse and often marginalised communities for many years. Whilst these benefits have been well understood by participants and practitioners, the localised and fragmented nature of creative health provision, and the limited connections between cultural, community and health sectors have limited the opportunity for creative health to develop. A growing body of research is developing which demonstrates the potential impact of large scale, strategic investment in creative health, which is detailed in Section 2 of this report.

Creative health interventions are generally significantly cheaper than traditional forms of treatment, with similar, if not more holistic health and wellbeing outcomes achieved. Emerging evidence suggests creative interventions might be more suitable than traditional health and care interventions particularly for marginalised groups such as young people with social and emotional difficulties, asylum seekers, and those with chronic addiction issues. Creative health interventions offer support to people in ways they may not yet have tried via previous health and social care contact, but that connect that each individual both to fundamental aspects of their sense of self (i.e. whole-person focused care), and potentially to enriching, community-building activities.

However, more collaboration is needed between commissioners, service providers and communities to design and develop the tools and methods to evidence impact at scale. Strategic partnerships can also help to address the challenges of short-term and insecure funding, and the stretched capacity and pressures faced by the health, culture and community sectors more generally.

There are many “active ingredients” that contribute to the relationship between arts and cultural engagement, and improved health outcomes⁽⁴⁾; for example, the content and type of creative health activity, where the activity takes place, and how participants engage in the activities and with each other, all impact on the effects these activities have on a person’s health and wellbeing.⁽⁴⁾

Each active ingredient within creative arts activities can produce psychological, physiological, social and/or behavioural responses in individuals, which are causally linked with health outcomes.

The evidence around this includes that participation in certain arts increases physical activity levels, associated with reduced chronic pain, improved cardiovascular health, and reduced depression and dementia; and that arts activities which encourage discussions about

health can increase health improvement behaviours such as healthy eating, reduced smoking and alcohol consumption, and increased take-up of primary care check-ups and screening appointments, reducing the risk of development of cardiovascular diseases (CVD) and cancer.⁽⁵⁾



Uptake of creative activities in the UK

Several national surveys attempt to assess levels of participation and engagement in creative activities, including the Active Lives Survey and Taking Part Survey. The latest data for the former has shown that levels have dropped over time and have not reached pre-pandemic levels after the COVID-19 lockdowns between March 2020 and March 2021.⁽⁶⁾

Table 1: Adults in England reporting they attended an arts event or visited a museum or gallery or spent time doing an artistic or creative activity in the past 12 months (%), 2015/16; 2019/20; 2021/22.

	2015/16	2019/20	2021/22
Attended an event, performance or festival involving creative, artistic, dance, theatrical or music activity	51.9%	45.6%	40.8 %
Attended an arts event, museum or gallery or spent time doing an arts activity	69.6%	65.1%	60.2%

Research in the UK has indicated that although many people engage in creative activities from time to time, only 10.3% of adults regularly participate in structured arts activities including singing, playing an instrument, taking part in a drama group, painting, drawing, or writing stories or poems.⁽⁷⁾

The Active Lives Survey (2021/22) found that those engaging more frequently in arts-based activities included women, those identifying as White, those reporting not having a disability, those of higher socio-economic status and those living in rural areas.⁽⁸⁾

These findings show that participation varies across populations, and that arts could be made more accessible to other groups in society, including those who have been historically marginalised, as well as emphasising the need for us to avoid exacerbating such systemic issues when developing creative health approaches in Croydon.

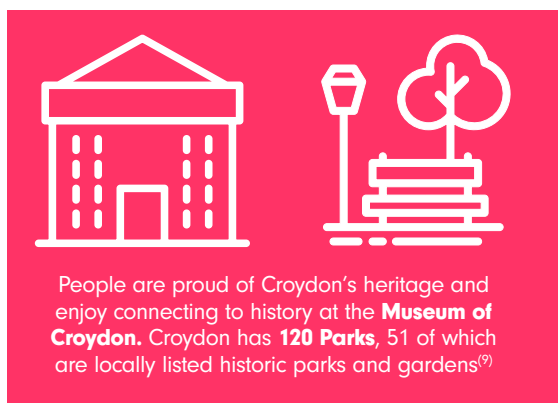


Photo by Dance to Health.

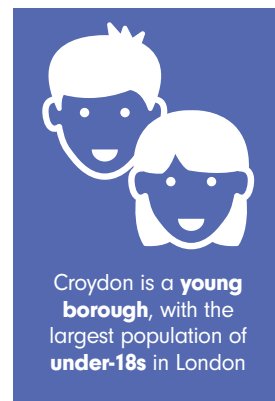
What assets do we have in Croydon to support development of creative health?

Croydon is a borough with a vast array of community assets that provide the roots for the growth of a vibrant creative health sector:

Places and spaces for culture including...



Large, welcoming, diverse population...



A strong voluntary, community, culture and faith sector which enables residents to access support and information and culturally relevant events and programmes.



A significant investment programme around Croydon town centre to make it a safer, more welcoming space which supports healthier living and builds on our local culture and heritage....



A moment of change, catalysed by the successful London Borough of Culture programme.



Johnny Moped play the Braithwaite Hall as part of the Rewind season. Photo by Peter Ball.

London Borough of Culture 2023

In February 2020, Croydon was awarded the London Borough of Culture for 2023. In the programme's impact report, the Mayor of London Sadiq Khan commended Croydon on how the borough had "demonstrated the power of culture to act as a vehicle for positive change and unity" through close collaboration between the creative sector and local residents.

This successful collaboration had to overcome a few hurdles to begin with. A combination of the Covid-19 pandemic and a series of Section 114 notices for the Council required a different approach to delivery. Thanks to a strong effort between the Council, culture and community sector, the year-long programme was a celebration of Croydon's rich culture and heritage, spotlighting our hidden histories and generating pride in the borough.

With an average of 5 things to do per day across the entire year, the programme reached an in-person audience of 360,000. The year was jam-packed full of a wide variety of events and activities, telling the story of Croydon's musical, cultural and architectural heritage while also showcasing its creativity, diversity and inclusivity. Altogether, over 2,750 artists and creatives and 114 partner organisations were involved; 83% of those based in the borough. In particular, the programme sought to engage Croydon's young people, with 16,275 opportunities taken up to develop their creative skills and cultural leadership. Overall, 128 (92%) of the borough's schools took part, with 42 going on to become Croydon Arts and Culture Schools, a demonstration of commitment to the arts and an undertaking to develop their cultural and creative provision.

The programme also had tangible health benefits across the many thousands who took part. Evaluation found 95% of audience members agreed that events had helped them feel connected to people in the community, while 88% of participants agreed that participating in their project positively impacted their mental wellbeing. A new grants programme for creative health, Croydon Loves You was launched and this work evolved into a partnership between the Council's culture and public health teams, establishing a dedicated creative health team to further develop strategic approaches to creative health in Croydon.

Economically, the programme gave the borough a helpful boost at a much-needed time. Investment of £3.6m was secured from partners including the Mayor of London, Arts Council England and National Lottery Heritage Fund. A significant proportion was used to fund Croydon's creative sector in grants and commissions, enabling partners to develop their practice and leverage further additional funding. Critically for the future of the local sector, among partner organisations involved, 87% developed new partnerships and 69% developed new skills in their teams.

Croydon's year as London Borough of Culture has been a catalyst for rebuilding the borough's cultural offer. Throughout 2024 and early 2025, cultural programming continued with programmes such as Family Pride, The Queen's Garden Party, Croydon Harvest featuring The Walnut Fair, and A Very Croydon Christmas. The programme steering group has evolved into a new community interest company, Croydon Makers and Creators, enabling ongoing collaboration, joint funding bids and advocacy for local freelancers and artists. The Access Arts toolkit and resource library continue to be used to ensure local programmes are inclusive to all.

Millions of pounds of investment also continue to go into projects focused on town centre development, showcasing local stories, supporting the creative and night-time economy, business development and creative health initiatives to address health inequalities in the borough and create the case for arts investment for a healthier, happier Croydon. For all of us who care about this borough, the year provided an opportunity to showcase a side of Croydon we can all be proud of.



Photo by Glenn Foster.

What health and wellbeing needs should we address in Croydon?

Croydon has the highest population in London and is the 12th most ethnically diverse borough. Crucially, the borough continues to grow in both areas.


Not everyone in Croydon has the same opportunities to lead a healthy life and there are many factors which influence different life outcomes for our communities that are known as health inequalities, which are unfair and avoidable differences in health between different groups of people.

There are key challenges to address to ensure improved and equitable health and wellbeing for all residents now and in the future.


Whilst much good work is already being undertaken by our health, community and Council services, more is needed and the complexity of health inequalities require innovative and creative solutions to overcome them and bring about positive changes in residents' lives.

There is compelling evidence that creative health can play an important role in this area, as outlined in Section 2 of the report.


1. Profile of the population



Croydon's **older population** is growing, and this impacts on the demand for a range of services as **people live longer** with more complex needs.



1 in 4 (23.1%) of Croydon's population is aged 0-17 years based on ONS Census 2021 data. This will add to pressures for **education provision and other services** for children and younger adults.⁽¹¹⁾



Since publication of the **Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2015**, Croydon has become relatively **more deprived** in relation to barriers to **housing services** and **Crime**.

2. Life expectancy



Life expectancy differs starkly between residents in the most and least deprived areas of Croydon. **Men from deprived areas are expected to live 9.2 years less** and **women 6.5 years less**, compared to people in the most affluent areas.⁽¹²⁾




Healthy life expectancy, the number of years spent in **good or very good health**, stands at **63.2 years for males** and **62.4 years for females**, meaning people spend nearly 20% of their life in poor health.⁽¹²⁾




National Gallery Art Road trip. Photo by Glenn Foster.


3. Children and young people




Take-up of funded hours in **Early Years settings** is much lower than regional and national averages.



Rate of **child protection** referrals to **children's social care services** per **10,000 children in Croydon** has consistently been higher than in London and England.



Croydon's 'Attainment 8' (a measure of a student's average grade across their best eight GCSE-level qualifications), GCSE and A level results are **consistently below** the London, Outer London (Attainment 8, GCSE), regional and national (A level) averages.



Percentage of **care leavers** aged **19-21 years** (formerly looked after when they were 16 years old) known to be in **education, employment or training** continues to be lower than the regional and national percentages.⁽¹³⁾

What health and wellbeing needs do we need to address in Croydon?

4. Health



Childhood immunisation rates continue to be lower than across London and England.



Croydon has a rising number of adults in treatment for **substance misuse**.



Over the last 5 years, the estimated dementia diagnosis rate for **65+ years** has been increasing and has been higher than the rate in London and England for the **past 2 years**.



The combined impacts of the **COVID-19 pandemic** and the ongoing **cost-of-living crisis** pose a challenge to the health and wellbeing of Croydon's residents.⁽¹²⁾

5. Crime



Knife crime is still a concern **with 1 in 4 incidents** in Croydon resulting in injury or death.



Croydon has one of the highest rates of domestic abuse incidents and offences **per 1,000 population** compared to the other London local authorities.⁽¹³⁾

6. Housing



Croydon continues to have over **2,000 households** that are in temporary accommodation.



In 2021/2022, **around two thirds (2/3) of homeless households** in Croydon were made up mainly of residents from non-White communities.⁽¹³⁾

7. Work



The proportion of out-of-work claimants in Croydon is stabilising at **around 6%** but is still higher than the regional and national averages.⁽¹³⁾



Open House - Almshouses. Photo by Glenn Foster.



Nyx Nightwriter, Shaniqua Benjamin, Out Of Silence. Photo by Glenn Foster.

How does creative health fit into strategic approaches to improving health and wellbeing?

There is momentum in the development of national, regional and local strategies focused on increased investment in, and capacity building of, creative health activities.

In **Let's Create**, Arts Council England's **2020–30** strategy sets out a vision for a country transformed by culture and creativity, in which people live happier, healthier lives. Delivering a plan for creative health and wellbeing is a critical step in realising that ambition⁽¹⁴⁾

The All Party Parliamentary Group Creative Health Review, published December **2023**, invites metropolitan mayors to "...support creative health and work in partnership with Integrated Care System leaders to deliver sustainable creative health infrastructure at scale, making best use of local assets"⁽²⁾

Creative health is recognised in the NHS Long Term Plan **(2019)**⁽¹⁸⁾

A variety of key tools have been created by leading organisations to support local areas to build creative health strategies (2023-25), including:

A new national **Creative Health Quality Framework**⁽¹⁵⁾

An online **Creative Health Toolkit**⁽¹⁶⁾

A newly launched **Creative Health Impact Framework**⁽¹⁷⁾

IN LONDON

Creative health is part of the **Mayor of London's Health Inequalities Strategy** and Health in All Policies approach⁽¹⁹⁾

Throughout **2023**, City Hall initiated work to develop London as a **Creative Health City**

IN CROYDON

The 2023 London Borough of Culture (LBOC) programme, This Is Croydon

Creative health initiatives support the delivery of outcomes 1, 3 and 5 of the **Executive Mayor's Business Plan 2022-26**⁽²⁰⁾

In **2024**, Croydon's Health and Wellbeing Board launched a refreshed **Joint Health & Wellbeing Strategy** that encourages prevention approaches and a reduction in health inequalities⁽¹²⁾

In **March 2024** the Executive Mayor for Croydon published the **Council's Future Croydon Transformation Plan (2024 – 2029)**⁽²¹⁾, and **Target Operating Model** for the Council, which sets out plans to focus on prevention, and change how the Council works with the voluntary, community and faith sector⁽²²⁾

Creation of a dedicated **creative health team** in September **2024**

The new **Creative Health Network** was launched in January **2025**

A year-round grant programme in **2025** is providing **£185,000 of seed-funding** to develop work specifically reaching communities at risk of health inequalities

Section 2

Why creative health matters – a review of the evidence

In this section, we provide a summary of key findings from the evidence showing how creative health can be leveraged to benefit health and wellbeing across four overarching outcomes, each critical to creating a healthier Croydon.

Outcome 01

Creative health approaches can support prevention of ill health and promotion of healthy behaviours across all ages.

Outcome 02

Creative health approaches can support treatment or management of specific conditions and health needs across the whole life course.

Outcome 03

Creative health approaches can reduce systemic health inequalities.

Outcome 04

Creative health can improve outcomes or experiences of the wider determinants of health (e.g. education, housing).

Across each of the outcomes, the **economic case** for using creative health to deliver cost-effective care with additional social and community benefits is clearly outlined, while short **case studies** demonstrate the positive impacts creative health is already having among local communities in Croydon. There are further details of existing initiatives and how the health and statutory sectors can best support the sustainability and expansion of this work in the accompanying booklet *'Croydon Snapshot: The Local Creative Health Landscape'*.

Outcome 01:

Creative health approaches can support prevention of ill health and promotion of healthy behaviours across all ages.

From early years to end of life, evidence shows that creative health initiatives funded at scale can contribute to improved population health and wellbeing. By ensuring a healthy start in life, encouraging healthy behaviours, and preventing or slowing unhealthy conditions, creative health has a role to play to support improved health for all residents.

A life course approach

Young children's circumstances and experiences impact on their health and wellbeing throughout their lives, including educational achievement, economic status, prevalence of heart disease, mental health and healthy weight.⁽²³⁾ Giving everyone the best chance of success by implementing support right at the start, is therefore essential.

Evidence shows that reading aloud and dancing can improve school readiness, whilst making music has been shown to improve listening and language skills, alongside improved motor control.⁽²⁴⁾

Recent research indicates that 40% of **dementia** cases could be prevented or delayed through changes to our lifestyles, saving billions of pounds from NHS and social care budgets each year.⁽²⁸⁾ Prolonged music and dance activities with older adults have particularly been associated with the delay of onset of dementia.⁽²⁵⁾

Dance activities have also been shown to improve **physical fitness, mobility and flexibility** which can contribute to a reduced **risk of falls** in older adults.⁽³⁾

The World Health Organisation recognises **social isolation and loneliness** across all ages as a world public health priority, due to the resulting serious impacts on mental and physical health.⁽²⁹⁾ Creative activities can provide critical support through the development and enrichment of social networks and reduce loneliness, especially amongst older people.⁽²⁴⁾

Rhyme Time

CASE STUDY

As part of Croydon Libraries' Universal Offer, every branch in Croydon offers at least one Rhyme Time session each week for children aged 0-5 and their parents.

A national initiative, Rhyme Time sessions involve library staff leading families in fun singing, rhymes, stories and movement activities.

Rhyme Time sessions have been shown to support the development of children's speech and language skills through introducing new words and speech rhythms in age-appropriate ways. Children are also able to socialise with their parents, other children and group leaders, developing skills such as listening, taking turns and communicating. Gentle activities also develop children's motor skills and coordination such as learning when to clap and matching movements to words and sounds.

Importantly, Croydon attendees report enjoying the social nature of Rhyme Time sessions, allowing them to meet other local parents and socialise, and contributing to feelings of belonging and reducing isolation.

Between April and December 2024, more than 12,000 attendances at Rhyme Time sessions across Croydon demonstrate Rhyme Time's important position in the local early years community.



Photos by Croydon Libraries. Rhyme Time.

Why creative health matters – a review of the evidence

For young people with disabilities or non-typical development, music therapy and musical activities can be effective at improving behaviours that contribute to success at school and at home. A Cochrane Review of literature found that for **autistic children**, music therapy can improve social interaction, verbal communication, and social-emotional reciprocity⁽²⁵⁾; music therapy has been shown to reduce aggression among **visually impaired adolescents**; and musical activities can improve auditory perception, auditory attention and reading ability among **children with dyslexia**. Among children with **physical or developmental disabilities**, theatre interventions have been shown to improve communication and social and behavioural functions.⁽⁵⁾

Continued participation in creative activities can also promote traits and behaviours linked with better outcomes in later life. Studies have shown that adolescents who were more engaged in a book club, drama club, band, cheerleading/dance, chorus/choir, orchestra or newspaper group had **fewer behavioural problems**, such as antisocial or criminal behaviours, and more **prosocial** classroom and playground behaviours, including reduced competition and bullying, compared to peers.^(4,5)

£157m

estimated to be saved each year nationally, owing to the delayed onset of Type 2 diabetes among those engaged in movement and dance⁽²⁷⁾.

Promoting healthy behaviours

Creative health initiatives can also be effective in promoting healthy behaviours.

Arts and drama delivery within schools can be used to improve **mental health literacy** and **reduce stigma** of mental health among young people, addressing both cultural stigma around mental health and inequalities in access to mental health services among different population groups.⁽²⁾



Reclaiming Narratives. Photo by Culture Croydon.

One study showed that co-production of the design of an invitation for **annual health checks** for people with **severe mental illness** increased uptake of the service from around 10% to 60%, while having a positive impact on participants from the creative process.⁽²⁾

Preventing ill health

Creative health initiatives also combat the causes and effects of chronic conditions, such as sedentary lifestyles, social isolation and cognitive decline.

It is estimated that up to 40% of health service demand could be avoided by preventing the onset of chronic health conditions. There are increasing numbers of studies that show that creative health activities for working-age adults (including those accessed via social prescribing) are cost-effective and add social value⁽²⁾ (see also recent work by Frontier Economics for a summary of estimated annual financial benefits across creative health models).⁽²⁶⁾

For example, evidence suggests that low social and cultural participation is associated with an increased risk of **coronary heart disease**.⁽²⁷⁾ Conversely, people who engage with dance have been shown to have a 46% lower risk of cardiovascular death than those who don't, and it has been estimated that £157 million is saved each year nationally, owing to the delayed onset of **Type 2 diabetes** among those engaged in movement and dance.⁽²⁷⁾ Creative health's contribution to physical activity is therefore an important opportunity to reduce the risk of ill health.

Creative Micro adventures

CASE STUDY

Delving into local nature, Croydon photographer Ameena Rojee ran three Creative “Microadventures” for adults in Farthing Downs and Happy Valley as part of Croydon Council’s Croydon Loves You grants programme in summer 2024.

Focusing on photography, nature-based exercises, poetry and ecology education (delivered by local rangers), walks in rural areas aimed to allow participants to engage with nature in deeper, more mindful ways while supporting people to be gently active.

37 participants attended across all events, with some being introduced to the areas for the first time. Participants reported events allowed them to meet others, socialise, and gain new knowledge and appreciation of Croydon’s beautiful landscape.

Walks were inclusive and guided, ensuring they were accessible to residents who may face barriers to accessing green spaces or physical activity.

100% of participants reported feeling positive about their experience, using words such as “restored”, “calming”, “rested” and “more engaged” to describe their experience, highlighting the project’s success at supporting relaxation and stress reduction for attendees.



Photos by Ameena Rojee.

Outcome 02:

Creative health approaches can support treatment or management of specific conditions and health needs across the whole life course.

Several recent evidence reviews have thoroughly explored the relationship between creative health activities and improved physical and mental health outcomes, including management of long-term health conditions. See, for example, The National Centre for Creative Health's Creative Health Review (2023)⁽²⁾ and Fancourt et al's The Impact of Arts and Cultural Engagement on Population Health (2023)⁽⁴⁾

Mental health

Creative health, when provided via social prescribing, has been shown to reduce demand for community mental health services, easing pressure on stretched waiting lists.⁽²⁷⁾ This has been shown to be a cost-effective way to support people with mild to moderate mental health conditions, particularly where strong partnerships between the health system and community organisations and groups exist.⁽²⁾

One systematic review has shown that activities such as painting, drawing, art appreciation, making and exhibiting art, ceramics, sculpture and crafts activities reduced depression, anxiety, symptoms of burn-out and exhaustion (in women), the impact of PTSD, and improved self-esteem and confidence in adults.⁽²⁴⁾

Creative interventions with children, including those with experience of adverse childhood events, show positive impacts on conditions such as anxiety or depression, while improving positive affects contributing to long-term mental health and wellbeing.

- A review of six studies, with a total of 422 children and adolescents, demonstrated a significant decrease in anxiety symptoms through art therapy interventions.⁽³⁰⁾
- Music therapy has been recommended for children who have been maltreated and live in poverty, shown to reduce depression, anxiety, withdrawal and improve attention problems in these children.⁽²⁷⁾
- Children who have participated in arts activities following trauma have shown reduced symptoms of grief, depression and PTSD, and report greater feelings of hope.⁽⁵⁾

For families, group singing during the postnatal period has been shown to reduce the time of recovery from postnatal depression, compared to the effectiveness of psychotherapy, medication or creative play. Further, arts and crafts for mothers of babies and young children has been associated with reduced anxiety, stress and depression among those mothers, and improved attachment with their infant(s).^(5,24)



Breathe Melodies

CASE STUDY

Breathe Melodies for Mums, an evidence-based programme for mums at risk of post-natal depression delivered by south east London based Breathe Arts Health Research, came to Croydon to deliver an Autumn Programme of ten weekly sessions between October and December 2024.

Reaching 20 mums and 21 babies across two sites in South Croydon and South Norwood, participants were supported by specially trained musicians to take part in singing sessions in community family hubs.

The programme compared scores on three depression and anxiety scales at the start and end of the programme. 79% of participants' Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale scores reduced. 93% of participants' Generalised Anxiety Disorder-7 scores reduced, of which 53% scored none or minimal symptoms (score of 0-4) in final assessments. 73% of participants' Patient Health Questionnaire-9 scores (assessing symptoms of depression)

reduced, of which 67% scored none or minimal symptoms by the end of the programme.

Questionnaires also revealed overwhelmingly positive feedback, with 93% of mums stating they would be very likely to recommend it to others, and 87% reporting they had learned new techniques to calm their baby. 93% of mums reported feeling happier, with feedback highlighting a recurring theme of the sense of community fostered through singing together, singing in rounds and learning songs from different cultures.

Breathe Melodies is currently delivering the programme in Croydon until March 2026.

Why creative health matters – a review of the evidence

Management of long-term conditions

Creative health improves people's ability to manage, cope with and, in some cases, slow the progression of chronic conditions.

Studies have shown dance participation leads to an increase in exercise capacity and reduced heart rate, blood pressure and hypertension for people with **cardiovascular disease** (CVD), whilst music can support relaxation and thus reduce stress and support better coping among people with the condition.⁽⁵⁾ Art therapy and music have also been shown to reduce depression and anxiety in people with CVD⁽⁵⁾, while music can reduce depression and improve wellbeing in elderly people with long-term conditions such as **cancer, Parkinson's disease and respiratory disease**.⁽⁵⁾

Among those who have had a **stroke**, drama and/or singing have been found to support the development of new neural pathways, which can contribute to improved physical and speech and language outcomes, as well as improve mental health and wellbeing, aiding recovery.⁽⁵⁾

For people living with **dementia**, music, and in particular singing, has been shown to support cognition, particularly for autobiographical memory and cognitive skills including attention and executive function.⁽⁵⁾ Music and dance can also reduce anxiety and depression for this population, particularly when conducted over three months or more, as well as decrease behavioural problems such as aggressive behaviours and restlessness.⁽⁵⁾

For people with dementia in hospital, music has been linked to reduced average length of stay, reduction in falls, decreased need for antipsychotic drugs and



Croydon Remix. Photo by Vipul Sangoi.

increased discharge rates.⁽⁵⁾ Hearst presents evidence that £149 million is already being saved annually in dementia care from movement and dance interventions, whilst highlighting that for every £1 invested into visual arts interventions for dementia, there is up to £6.62 social return-on-investment.⁽²⁷⁾

End-of-life care/ bereavement support

Creative health activities including art-making and art viewing can be beneficial in supporting individuals to accept terminal illness diagnosis and death, and increasing a sense of control during the end-of-life period.⁽²⁴⁾ In end-of-life care settings, opportunities to

engage in participatory arts and therapies can help people find meaning in their life stories, relieve pain, fatigue and anxiety associated with terminal illness, and provide spiritual, physical, psychological and social support for individuals.⁽⁵⁾

Arts can also support bereaved individuals to express their emotions, with evidence that bereaved young people who participated in structured group music-making sessions exhibited positive changes in their behaviour and feelings of grief following the sessions⁽³⁴⁾, and that families supported by music and arts activities following bereavement reported feeling helped with their loss and supported with meaning-making and maintenance of stable mental health.⁽⁵⁾

Art and Joy – Museum of Croydon

CASE STUDY

Art and Joy was a series of fortnightly creative activities at the Museum of Croydon aimed at those living with dementia and their carers as part of the 'Dementia, Art and Joy' project funded by Croydon Council.

Delivered in partnership with social enterprise Good Wolf People, sessions are run by experienced facilitators and create a fun, celebratory environment to engage participants in art-making activities.

Participants use different techniques to respond to artworks in the Croydon Art Collection – which features more than 2,000 paintings, prints and sketches from as early as the 17th century – offering people living with dementia and their carers opportunities to gain unique shared experiences and spend positive time together.

Workshops culminated with the launch of a new exhibition at Croydon Clocktower during Dementia Action Week in May 2025 featuring participants' favourite artworks from the collection alongside some of their new creations. The exhibition aims to evoke joy for viewers and lead to greater understanding of the importance of arts and activities to practice for those living with dementia and their carers.



Photos by Art and Joy, Museum of Croydon.

Outcome 03:

Creative health approaches can reduce systemic health inequalities.

There are indications that participation in arts, by having positive outcomes on health conditions exacerbated by inequalities, can support a reduction in educational, health and wider social inequalities by supporting groups who are shown to experience worse health and wellbeing outcomes⁽²⁵⁾.

Given the current impact of health inequalities is estimated to cost £32bn/year nationally, significant value can be gained by ensuring access to participatory arts is equitable across the social gradient, as it can support a reduction in inequalities in wellbeing between population groups.⁽²⁵⁾

However, we know participation in arts, culture and creative activities is not equal.

- People with excellent or good self-reported health are more likely to attend arts events than those reporting their health as fair or poor (66% and 65% compared to 45%).⁽³¹⁾
- Women are more likely to participate in arts activities than **men**, and younger people are more likely to engage with creative arts than **older people**.⁽⁴⁾
- People with **childcare responsibilities**, and people who are married, are also less likely to participate.
- People in the least deprived areas are most likely to engage in the arts, whilst areas with low levels of skills attainment, lower employment levels, higher **socio-economic deprivation**, greater risks of health conditions and of victimisation had lower levels of participation in arts and culture.

- People with **poorer physical health** have reported to perceive themselves as less able to participate in creative arts activities, as were people who felt lonely.
- People from the **global majority** are less likely to engage in arts and cultural activities than White individuals.⁽⁴⁾

It is therefore imperative that attention to potential barriers for target groups, and commissioning of bespoke interventions to mitigate these barriers, are considered. It is also important to ensure creative interventions have a clear strategy as to how they can counter inequality and respond to the overlap between people who have low arts engagement and higher prevalence of health issues. The right kind of creative health activity, delivered in the right way, by the right people in a sustained way is what is likely to have the greatest impact.

Men's Sheds

CASE STUDY

"Men like making & growing things, we are not good at talking about our feelings."

Good Food Matters volunteer/Shedder

Croydon Men's Shed was set up by Good Food Matters in New Addington & Fieldway, which has a high concentration of isolated older people.

Men's Sheds is a community-based initiative that tackles issues related to men's health, engaging those who are less inclined to access health services.

While all are welcome, men aged 45 years and over are the priority group, and the Shed offers a communal space to come together and engage in meaningful social and recreational activities.

From cooking, gardening and building to informal learning, participants access social support, information and advice, as well as share their skills, experience and knowledge, and relay concerns in a relaxed environment.

A number of men accessing the service report low-level mental health conditions, feel isolated and lonely, have expressed risk factors for suicide, or need respite from caring responsibilities. Through the initiative, they regularly engage in conversations about health topics such as diet and create relationships with peers and volunteers.



Photos by Croydon's Men's Shed and Croydon Council's communications team.

Our Croydon

CASE STUDY

Creating a treasure trove of memories for future generations, the Our Croydon project invited residents of African and Caribbean heritage to create their own archival records.

Encouraging everyone to see themselves as a “unique collection of memories, personal stories, hopes and dreams for the future”, the project, led by Talawa theatre company, weaved together stories of locals from past and present.

During November and December 2023, histories were exhibited through photography, text, film, performance and audio. Events included a talk and theatre workshop and a screening of Our Croydon’s Legacy film.

Throughout the project, community members and commissioned artists celebrated the diversity, resilience

and creativity of the borough, while defining what shared heritage and personal legacy meant to them. Though not a political project, the complex politics of race, space, gentrification and class came up many times.

Overall, 196 people participated, including 126 young people, with the audience totalling 3,793 over the project’s duration.

Feedback was very positive with 100% saying they felt welcome and included and 90% saying they felt connected to people in the community because of taking part.



Photos by Our Croydon, Talawa Theatre Company.

Why creative health matters – a review of the evidence

Outcome 04:

Creative health can improve outcomes or experiences of the wider determinants of health (e.g. education, housing).

"In communities, creative health can interact with the social determinants of health to improve the environments in which people live. Creative activities build social capital and connection, and provide individuals with a sense of agency, meaning and purpose. Through creative health people and communities can be empowered to make positive changes and improve quality of life".⁽²⁾

The wider determinants of health are the 'social, economic and environmental conditions in which people are born, live, age and work. These factors interact with an individual's genetics and behaviours to strongly influence health outcomes'.⁽¹⁶⁾

We saw evidence in Outcome 1 of the impact creative health initiatives can have on school readiness and pro-social behaviours, and Outcome 3 about how interventions can help reduce health inequalities by targeted work.

Further examples of creative health's role in the wider determinants of health include:

- Music sessions introduced among children identified as "at risk" (living in deprivation, in poor housing conditions, who are socially isolated, who have experienced violence) reduced anxiety, depression, school absence, aggression, low self-esteem, and poor nutrition habits.
- Participatory arts programmes introduced into inner-city social housing have been shown to improve the built environment, improve social cohesion, and reduce violent crime.⁽⁴⁾

Participatory arts activities have also been successful in:

- Building trust between children in care or in contact with social care, leading to more positive care outcomes and improvements to the children's self-esteem
- Reducing social isolation among homeless populations through use of hip-hop, music, poetry, and street and circus arts
- Empowering LGBTQ+ communities around health and wider issues through bespoke arts programmes
- Building confidence and motivation to engage in life changes among sex workers through group drumming sessions;
- Engaging individuals in prisons in health-related activities.⁽⁴⁾

Crisis Croydon

CASE STUDY

Crisis Croydon is the Croydon branch of national charity, Crisis, which supports local people with experience of homelessness. In November 2024, six service users took part in the Vessel Ceramics Project.

This one-week workshop, led by ceramicist Agata Novak and supported by Crisis Croydon staff, used ceramic materials and techniques to explore the theme of forced migration.

Participants began by producing images and shapes that captured memories and emotions relating to their experiences, transferring these to tiles and then working towards decorating a 'vessel'.

Participants spoke about the process of making the pieces of art and the 'healing' impact, including how the group helped let go of some of the stressors of outside.

A core theme from the project were the 'bonds' built between participants connecting them like a 'family', 'brothers and sisters'. This extended outside of the group and outside Crisis, supporting some of the participants to feel less lonely.

They described the sense of feeling like a weight had been lifted when they entered the space and described a movement of emotions from 'inside to outside' the body, leaving them feeling happy and calmer.



Section 3

Supporting the creative health sector in Croydon

A strong creative health landscape requires collaboration between the different entities that impact people's health and wellbeing, including local authorities, the health system, social care partners, community and arts organisations and participation from individuals themselves.

There are many individuals and organisations from the arts, health and voluntary, community, culture and faith (VCFS) sectors delivering creative health initiatives in the borough. In March 2025, 10 creative health providers currently delivering creative health activities in Croydon (see attendee list in Appendix 1) came together to discuss what is needed to enable the sector to reach more people in the most effective and sustainable way.

Funding

Funding for creative health work currently comes from a variety of sources, with the most common being trust and foundation grants and health sector commissions. The short-term nature, and small scale, of most of these funding arrangements leave the sector vulnerable and unable to plan strategically for long-term delivery.

Capacity is often focused on fundraising, limiting delivery capabilities for programmes which do have funding. Competition for ever-reducing funding pots creates pressure within the sector, hampering joined-up, strategic partnership working.

Barriers to accessing funding include funder expectations of robust evidence bases such as Randomised Controlled Trials (which often aren't appropriate or feasible for projects in the sector); uncertainty about how to relay the impact of programmes in 'health speak'; and potential inability to provide a track record of delivery among new providers (newly constituted organisations can be ineligible even where they have experience in other ways).

Commissioning practices can also be confusing or feel distant from what providers see on the ground; streamlining processes and ensuring commissioning prioritises local providers with existing knowledge of communities would be helpful.

The sector is adaptable, and open to considering alternative business or funding arrangements. Some organisations operate as Community Interest Companies (CICs), use commercial work to subsidise creative health work or have received Corporate Social Responsibility sponsorship.

Organisations are open to creating consortia to deliver greater impact, if this would enable larger pots of funding to come to local areas or health priorities. The sector is keen to engage with local statutory organisations - eg schools/ universities, blue light services, local businesses, and departments in the Council such as community safety and housing partners, to understand opportunities for joint working.



Creative Health Network. Photo by Glenn Foster.

Supporting the creative health Sector in Croydon

Support from health partners

The sector would benefit from health partners having better knowledge and understanding of the potential of creative health, and engaging collaboratively to design services and pathways to maximise this potential.

Recognition of the financial benefit of preventative creative health programmes and commitment to engaging with the sector to fully assume this role, would support creative health practitioners to create appropriate offers to meet demand. Health partners should share datasets and current health priorities, as well as information on support needs of high-priority conditions, to help those delivering creative health to become more effective at responding to current challenges. Equally, listening to the sector about emerging or increasing needs they are seeing in local communities would help create joined-up planning for emerging problems.

Clear referral routes from health to creative health opportunities would ensure more people in need are receiving support. Existing structures for referral to community providers, such as social prescribing, need assessment to ensure they are equipped to meet current demand for services, particularly around housing and cost-of-living needs.

Realistic caseloads for social prescribers and other community providers would enable better engagement with the sector, allowing for increased understanding of existing local offers and who they are suitable for, as well co-creation of services to fill current gaps.

Sector development

Coordination of the sector would improve efficiencies and joined-up working. Consistent creative health Network meetings and communication channels would enable the sector to work together more effectively and expand reach.

Support for freelancers, volunteers and micro-organisations, who make up a large part of the creative health workforce, would ensure all work is delivered by practitioners with adequate support and training. This could include support for practical matters such as safeguarding or health & safety, as well as pastoral care for providers.

A commitment to quality, continued training and the co-design of a shared vision for success, would ensure the sector is more robust. The sector should also explore how a local creative health skills mark would help make clear what types of activities different providers offer, what communities or conditions they have expertise in, and what level of need they can support. In this way, commissioners, referrers, providers and service users can more easily ensure residents with varying needs are accessing safe, appropriate care at all times.

The sector should continue to develop its practice, particularly around digital opportunities for creative health. This includes dedicated digital activities catering to people for whom live activity will never be appropriate or desired and who prefer to engage online.

Croydon Council's Creative Health team (initiated in September 2024) and creative health Network (launched January 2025) can provide centralised infrastructure and support towards these aims, while acting as link between the sector and health and statutory partners. NB Long-term funding is needed to continue this work on an ongoing basis.

Evidence

The sector can find it challenging to evidence impact to funders from different disciplines, who may have little familiarity with the realities of creative health work.

Sufficient funding is required to gather good evidence, which can be challenging to earmark within small delivery budgets. Narrative-based or self-reported user feedback is often easier to evidence than statistics, especially in complex settings where participant numbers or ability to respond to evaluation measures may be low.

Development of a fit-for-purpose, peer-reviewed and nationally recognised evaluation framework would help make a more persuasive case to funders, and be more meaningful to all sectors. In some cases evidence can best be relayed through discussion, case studies or funders experiencing the creative health work themselves, so in-person commissioning opportunities could also be beneficial.



Creative Health Network. Photo by Glenn Foster.

Section 4

Call to Action

We call upon every sector in Croydon – health, local government, education, voluntary, community, culture and faith groups, residents and other local statutory organisations e.g. education bodies and blue light services, and local businesses and partners - to unite behind creative health.

1. Prioritise prevention through creative health

Preventative interventions reduce long-term pressure on health and social care services. Investment now saves significant future expenditure.

- Ensure all partners understand the impacts, and commit to achieving the potential, of creative health.
- Target high-impact creative interventions towards priority populations, such as older adults (falls prevention, dementia), young families (early years development), those experiencing poor mental health (social isolation), individuals in need of weight management support and groups experiencing health inequalities (including those living in the most deprived wards in Croydon, the long-term unemployed, and people with substance misuse issues).

2. Embed creativity in existing pathways

With changing models of care, shifts towards prevention and community-based support are an opportunity to maintain or improve service delivery and quality of care.

- Examine existing social prescribing frameworks and re-design these to fit current demand, including remedying gaps by commissioning new creative responses.
- Make it easy for all partners to find out about, and confidently connect residents to, existing creative health and arts initiatives.
- Use existing service infrastructure (e.g. health hubs, community centres) and train staff and volunteers to deliver creative, preventative, cost-efficient activities.
- Embed creative health interventions and community arts initiatives in broader prevention initiatives across the borough.



Bollywood Weddings, Apsara Arts.



3. Leverage community assets to do more

Croydon's strong voluntary, community, culture and faith sector offers infrastructure, expertise, and community trust, working effectively with statutory partners on a number of health and wellbeing initiatives.

- Prioritise local organisations with existing knowledge of communities, offering grants and resources that enable them to attract the additional investment needed to expand and extend their work.
- Drive coordinated development of a creative health strategy by listening to local providers and underserved populations to identify needs, barriers and solutions.
- Co-locate services and engage VCFS partners to deliver creative health work in existing spaces, including community and family hubs, libraries and parks.

4. Simplify evaluation and demonstrate clear value

Clear, simple evidence of effective creative health interventions is essential for continued funding and support, especially in financially constrained environments.

- Adopt a simple, standardised impact measurement framework that captures clear health and community outcomes without burdening overstretched staff and volunteers.
- Publicly share accessible, concise examples of success, demonstrating direct cost savings and improved outcomes from creative health activities.



Next Steps

We propose the following immediate actions to move forward with these priorities:

Croydon Council and NHS bodies

1. Designate creative health as a high-impact priority in all prevention strategies.
2. Review existing social prescribing structures, re-design to fit current demand, and identify investment to plug gaps in provision where offers don't already exist.
3. Review commissioning practices to ensure they reduce health inequalities among Croydon's populations, are accessible to and prioritise local providers, and encourage sustainable creative health solutions.
4. Provide data and expertise to assess economic savings from creative health interventions, to drive future decision-making.
5. To build stronger partnerships with the sector, engage with VCFS providers to co-create the infrastructure required to build a creative health ecology in Croydon (see VCFS Next Steps opposite).
6. Agree long-term funding for the creative health team to support important programme workstreams, e.g.
 - a. Facilitation of the Creative Health Network, sharing project and funding opportunities, best practice guidance and providing training
 - b. Working with health and care partners to develop creative interventions for health improvement
 - c. Working with partners to develop a shared evaluation framework for creative health.

VCFS

1. Actively engage with the Creative Health Network to build knowledge, networks and shared intelligence, supporting joint advocacy and fundraising opportunities.
2. Work with statutory partners to co-design a quality framework and an evaluation framework comprising feasible methods acceptable to all partners.
3. Contribute to centralised databases of creative health work, enabling streamlined referral and engagement with referrers.
4. Share local knowledge with statutory partners to help create joined-up approaches for emerging priorities or challenges.



National Gallery Art Road Trip. Photo by Glenn Foster.

Other local statutory organisations e.g. education bodies and blue light services, and local businesses and partners

1. Identify service needs that could be fulfilled by creative health interventions.
2. Make use of existing resources, staff and funding to support delivery of creative health activities within services, including at community and family hubs, leisure centres, schools and libraries.

Conclusion: Necessity Drives Innovation

Croydon's current challenges demand pragmatic innovation, and smarter, integrated ways of working.

Creative health uses existing community infrastructures, knowledge and expertise to offer practical, affordable, achievable answers to immediate pressures, long-term prevention, and better community reach.

This is not simply an opportunity – it's an essential step in securing Croydon's healthier future. Let's be bold, practical, and creative in our response to today's realities, transforming constraints into lasting, positive change.

Subrang Arts' Mela Queen.
Photo by Glenn Foster.



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Appendix 1

Creative health delivery partners who participated in the focus group on supporting the creative health sector in Croydon - March 2025

Name	Organisation
Graeme Smith	PhD candidate, formerly Croydon Music & Arts
Helen Thompson	Mind in Croydon
Jane Markey	Young Roots
Janet Grant	Creative Croydon
Jill Finch	A Collective
Johnny Handscombe	Good Wolf People
Malti Patel	Apsara Arts
Maureen Lishomwa	Community Creative Writing Group (New Addington)
Make Catterall	Legacy Youth Zone
Zlatinka Hristova	Studio Upstairs

Creating a Healthier Croydon

2024

CROYDON'S DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC HEALTH
ANNUAL REPORT ON CREATIVE HEALTH

ANDREA FALLON

Give us your feedback

Do let me know your comments on the report, either
by emailing: jack.bedeman@croydon.gov.uk

or by post to:

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