

**SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS  
& THE ALBANY**

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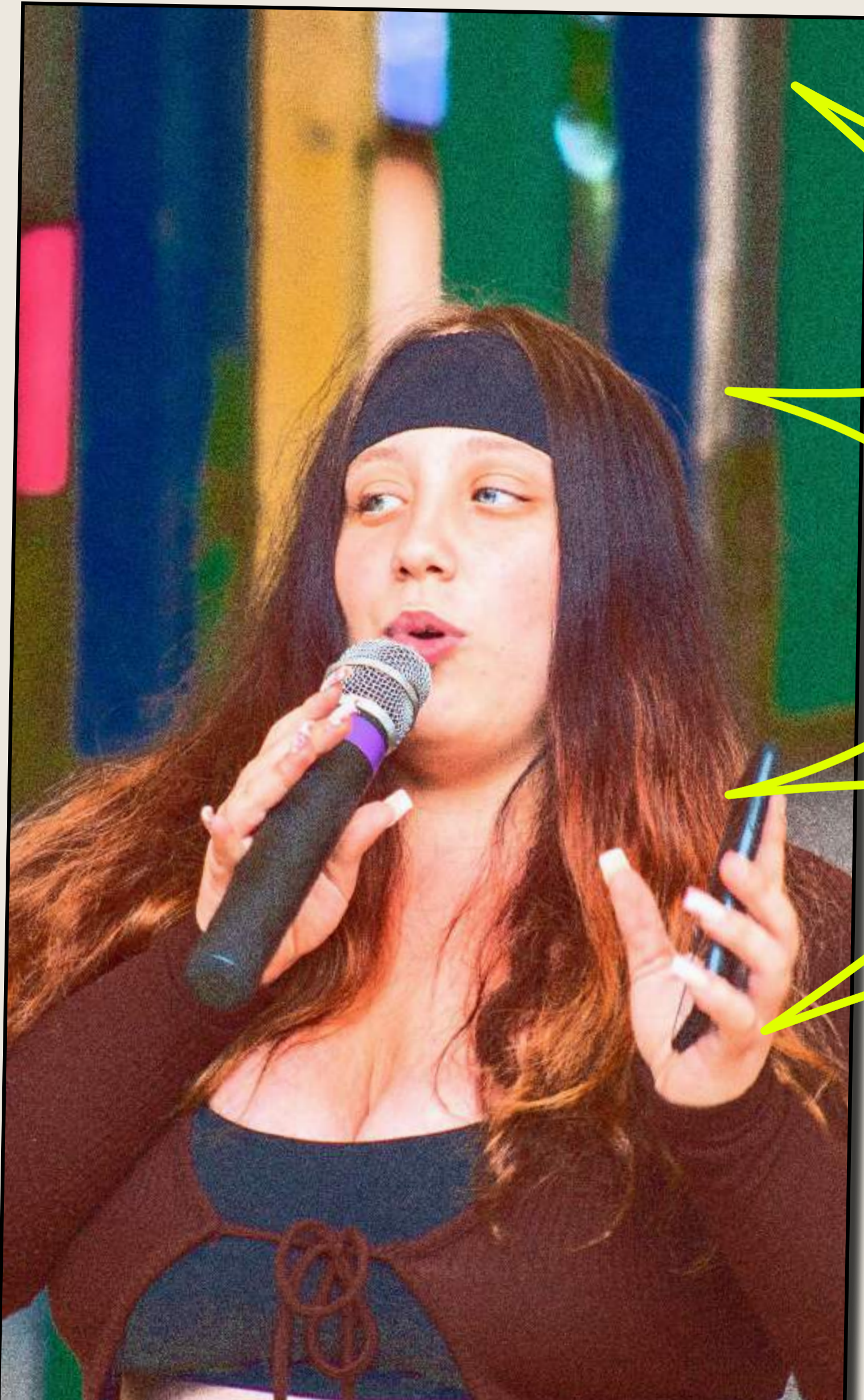
NOT

OK

BUT

Empowering Youth Mental Health  
The Transformative Role of Creativity





**“Writing and performing spoken word has become my trauma response. It enables me to take control over situations when I feel powerless, and I realised you have to talk about something to heal from it. Through various creative projects I have been involved in, I have learned to govern and express my emotions, regain my sense of self, and find peace.”**

Rofeda Bougaga, Peer Researcher





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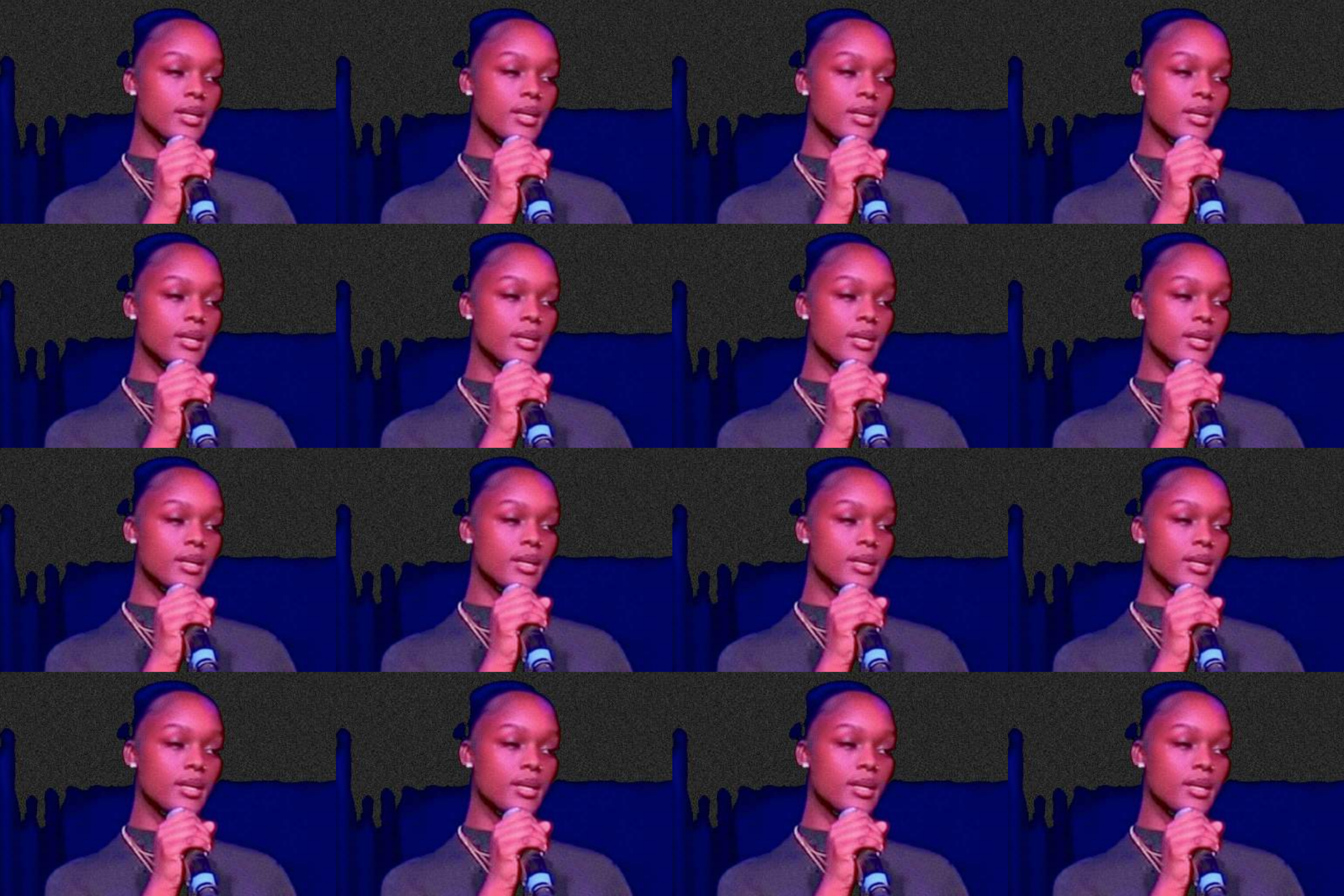
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## A BIG CONVERSATION

**A Big Conversation** is a youth-led research project that brought together **Lewisham partners, SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS, Lewisham Music, Heart N Soul, Lewisham Youth Theatre and the Albany**, in Lewisham's London Borough of Culture year to understand the role arts and creativity play in the mental health of young people. Young people were trained, supported and paid to take the lead and develop a large-scale conversation about mental health and creativity.

**I'm not okay but... was born out of the growing crisis in youth mental health. There has been a shocking 60% increase in children and young people experiencing mental health problems since 2017, 38 weeks waiting times to access mental health support for the most vulnerable young people and a real terms cut in youth services across London of 74% since 2011.**

**I'm not okay but...** is a youth-led peer-research project about the intersection of creativity and mental health, conducted by peer researchers and creatives Marlo Savin (23), Phoebe Fairchild (22) and Rofeda Bougaga (18) on behalf of **SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS** and **The Albany**.

Marlo, Phoebe, and Rofeda have been active participants and artists with **SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS** and the Albany's programmes for between five and ten years. Their contributions and interests span a diverse range of areas, including poetry, facilitation, performance, podcasting, producing and research.

The findings detailed in this report represent the experiences, suggestions and views expressed by members of **SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS**, as well as the Albany's street dance project, **Love2Dance**, and the youth-led record label, **REZON8**.

**The Albany** is a Deptford-based arts centre that inspires, develops and supports creativity for the community. **SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS** is a youth arts collective creating urgent and accessible creative interventions.

1. The Health Foundation, 2022
2. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021 - wave follow up to the 2017 survey, September 2021
3. YMCA – A Decade of Cuts to Youth Services, February 2022



“My feeling is that young people have the best ideas. If you ask them, in my experience, they always include supporting their peers and working together with their communities. I think [the impact of creativity on young people's mental health]... is multiple and indescribably large. We all have difficult feelings, and when we see something of each other's, that allows us to shake off some of our individual shame. The process of writing, or making, helps you understand the feeling you have, and to get under the skin of why you feel the way you do.”

Kirsty Collander-Brown, Head of Engagement at the Albany

“There's been so much learning amongst young people about mental health. The Big Conversation has allowed our young people to delve into peer-led research, creative approaches, and how they can be shared. It doesn't always need to be a survey. It can be a video, podcasting or even a song, and it's essential to understand how art forms integrate with research. The whole process has allowed a certain amount of openness because it's important not to keep mental health hidden in the dark. We're talking about lived experience, and our lived experiences are a massive part of our culture and who we are and the stories that we choose to tell. And I think something special happens when a 15-year-old is open about their mental health. It's social acupuncture. The Big Conversation, sitting within the London Borough of Culture programme in Lewisham, just makes so much sense. It could be a really great vehicle for understanding and gathering more knowledge about young people and their particular struggles, guided by them.”

Gemma Rowan, Co-Director at SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS

**“We found from this research that a wide range of people believe, from their own experiences, that being involved in creative projects has positively impacted their mental health. One participant described a tough situation at home and said that stepping on the dance floor gave them an avenue to release and express their emotions. Dance and the organisation facilitating the programme became a healing space for them. There is a recurring theme in the responses we have received about how participating in creative activities enables people to enter a different mindset, to feel in control and empowered, as it provides an avenue for expression.”**

Rofeda Bougaga, Peer Researcher



**“It's so beneficial to me, for my mental health, because I have that form of expression and I can say how I feel, instead of bottling up my emotions, it's like screaming, but in a creative way”**

Love2Dance attendee at the Albany, 17



Image Credit: Ines Yearwood-Sanchez

**“It's expression and understanding - this is what's important to my creativity and mental health, it's easier to express yourself and make other people understand through creativity, humans are storytellers. We're attracted to the expressions and stories people tell. One way of doing this is through creativity, this is one of the most powerful tools we have to help other people understand where you're coming from.”**

SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS member and Albany attendee, 23







**RESEARCH QUESTION**

**What impact has engaging in creative activities such as drama, dance and music had on mental health and wellbeing for young Londoners aged 11-25?**

**RESEARCH METHODS**

Peer research is a form of Participatory Action Research (PAR) that involves the communities that are affected by the research in the design and delivery of it. We used long-form recorded conversation and carried out an online survey.

**WHO WE SPOKE TO**

**32** young people aged **11-25** who take part in **SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS** and the Albany's programmes, including **Love2Dance** and **REZON8**, took part in an online survey. **7** participants from across **SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS** and **the Albany** aged **17-25 years** took part in recorded long-form conversations on the specially-created podcast 'I'm not okay but...' between November and December 2022. The peer researchers responded to the research findings through poetry.



**“Coming to the space allowed me to switch off and momentarily ignore what was going on in the rest of my life. While I was there, it was as though my problems had faded away.”**

SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS member and Albany attendee, 18



Image Credit: Nathan DeTelemaque



Image Credit: Nathan DeTelemaque

**“It’s not about therapy, it’s more about sharing an experience that doesn’t get heard.”**

SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS member and Albany attendee, 17



Image Credit: Ines Yearwood-Sanchez



**"Making art can be comforting and being involved in a process but also the satisfaction of making something. Sometimes creativity is used in different ways, something physical but also an idea and getting an idea out in words or a visual form."**

Love2Dance attendee at the Albany, 17

**"I get the chance to be surrounded by people who are interested in the same things without having to worry about the expense of that and I get to participate in classes and learn new things. It's a place I can go where I don't have to travel too far, it's really local and I can walk there. A free space where you can have the chance to explore in your own way. there's structured sessions but also chances to explore and do something you want to do and take control over your own ideas."**

SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS member and Albany attendee, 17







## WHAT WE FOUND OUT

**63%** of young people surveyed said that they had suffered with mental health problems.

**100%** agreed that being creative supports their mental health. **94%** strongly agreed.

**Young people surveyed said being creative supported their wellbeing because...**

It allows for self expression.

**63%**

Over half said it was enjoyable and a way of being present in the moment and leaving your worries behind.

**55%**

**90%**

of young people surveyed felt that if there were more opportunities for them to be creative, that mental health in young people would improve.



# Unique benefits young people said they gained from creative participation at the Albany and SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS

Support, love and acceptance.

90%

A safe place to express themselves and process things.

100%

A community and a family.

50%

80%

Unique opportunities they haven't received elsewhere including leadership, employment and performance opportunities and the chance to improve.

90%

of young people surveyed said that they think more creative programmes would improve mental health amongst young artists and help prevent mental health problems and conditions occurring or worsening.

# Respondents said youth mental health would be improved in this case as young people would have...

Permission for authentic self-expression

A positive space and useful resources

A sense of purpose and fulfillment

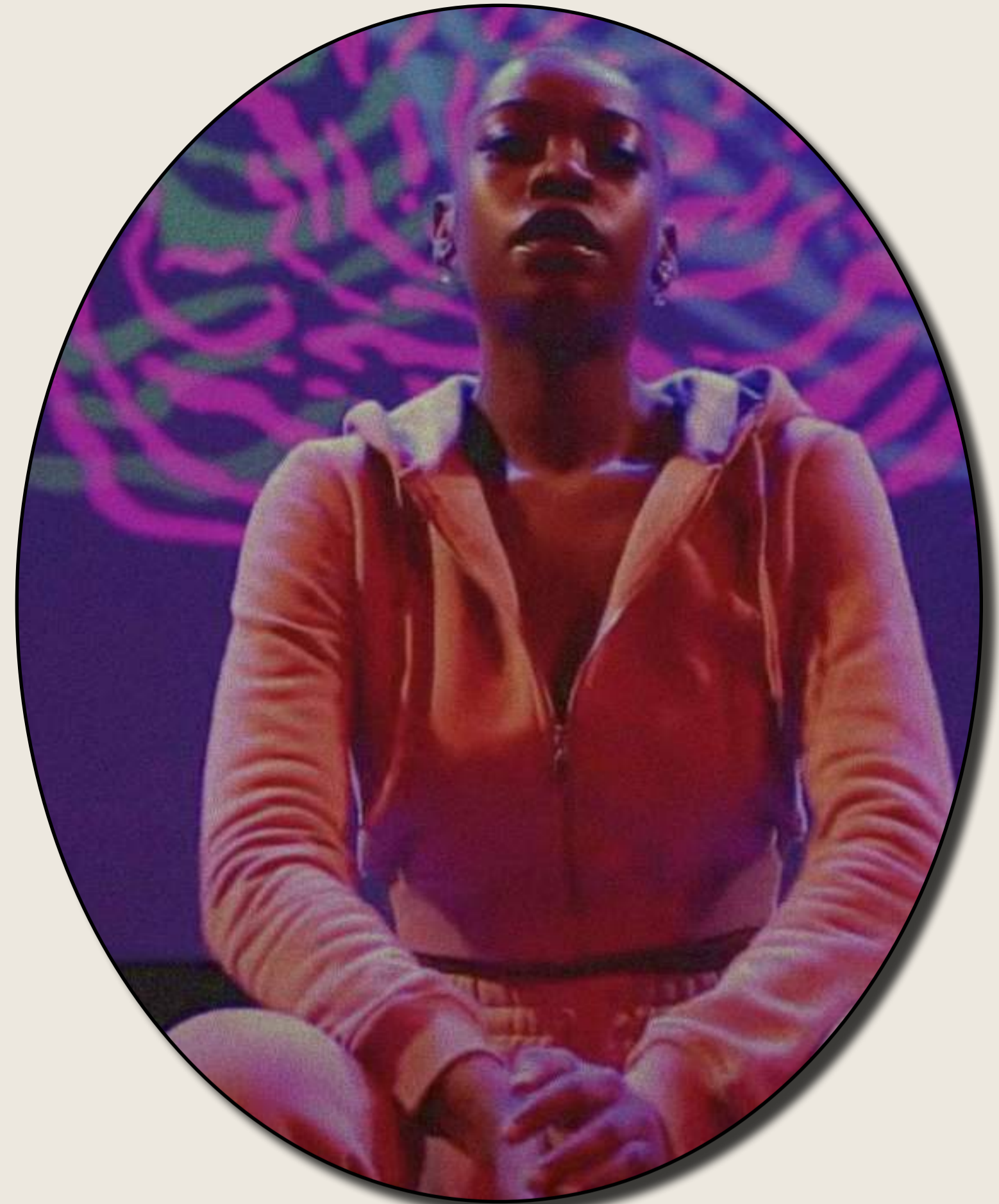
## Consistency and reliable support

were a big deal for over half of the young people surveyed- knowing that week by week there was a space for them to go and be creative with facilitators they trusted and were able to build a relationship with.



**“I don't think I have ever verbally expressed my mental health to SLC but without them knowing it they have helped me, having them there has helped my life as a whole. When there was the lockdown, having those weekly sessions was the highlight of my day, it was like a family. Overall, it's more the indirect help. I'm not always able to speak about my mental health.”**

SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS member and Albany attendee, 19



**“I feel that I can be myself and be free. Creative work allows me to enjoy myself doing something that I think I will be able to do in the future.”**

SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS member and Albany attendee, 23



## POEMS

Peer researchers and creatives Phoebe and Rofeda responded to the research findings through poetry and creative writing.

Inhale  
Hold for four  
Exhale  
Hold for four

Breathe.  
Take a nice warm bath.  
Do you have coping strategies?  
Sorry you're not severe enough to get help.

The systems are messed up.  
You cry for help, and you need a bit of love.  
But all you get is older generations, saying they used to be tough.  
Back in my day we just got on with things  
Is that why you can't talk about your feelings?

If I could write a letter to my younger self.  
I'd tell her it's okay to get help.  
It's okay to talk, it's okay to feel  
It doesn't matter if your school doesn't see that appeal.

I'd tell her to breathe. Enjoy life while she can.  
Because when I gained the trauma, I lost the grip of her hand.  
It's hard to have conversations, believe me I know.  
But it's easier to talk, than hit your lowest low.

The government is cutting funding to all the services we need.  
Maybe if we had someone to talk to, it'd water that little seed.  
The seed that grows and flourishes and dreams of growing tall.  
Not the one that's shoved in the dark, and shrivels up so small.  
The government doesn't care so we need you to step up.  
They're ones who need your tough kind of love.

You're always in young people's business, saying they need to party less.  
But when it comes to kids committing suicide because they can't handle stress.  
You can hear a pin drop because of the silence.  
Believe me in this case, silence is the most violent.

Phoebe Fairchild



## Empty Rhymes

I often fantasise of a life without a mind  
Impulsive thoughts envisioning the past I left behind  
Defined by complex issues, desperate to be refined  
Why should I be left behind?  
The education system is designed to keep us confined  
A place where they constantly distort the lines  
To undermine their crimes, time and time again  
Aligned, assigned and combined into one line  
Trying to find which one of us is one of a kind  
Whilst, we're working overtime  
Mental health issues I can't describe  
Trying to hide but I'm a stereotype  
The neglected girl obsessed with her body type

I'm beginning to think that I seek comfort in my pain  
I guess that's why I feel it's such a struggle to change  
My brain's in chains, my spirit slain, my mind insane and my body stained  
Again, a constant battle of darkness draining any light that keeps me humane

Depression is like mould  
And you'd wish someone would understand, but they don't  
Otherwise they'd be able to see that you can barely cope and it's 2am in the cold  
with no way home and then you realise  
Who would notice if I was alone?

What's a bigger feeling than love?

Loss.

The memory of yourself that died  
Whilst you sat there and cried  
Trying to hide the emptiness with pride  
Side by side, you and your past self tied  
Jekyll and Hyde, filling yourself with lies  
Preoccupied with the pain you have inside

I'm in pain everyday living this life,  
Maybe I would do better if I had a role model or guide,  
But I'll survive, my emotions will be swept away with the tide,  
the tide of life that is,  
I hope it will carry me to a safe place where I will no longer have to hide

Rofeda Bougaga





## CHANGES WE WANT TO SEE

We want to see mental health improving in young people and based on this research, access to creative activities and supported spaces for young people is a strong place to start.

**Ensure young people continue to have consistent and free access to creative outlets and that their voices and perspectives are heard and valued.**

**Provide the space and support for young people to advocate for their own creative interests and wellbeing.**

Advocate for the value of youth arts and creative opportunities, and fight against cutting provision for youth arts projects and spaces where young people can express their creativity.

Ensure that young people are represented in places of power and decision making.

Encourage collaboration between mental health professionals and youth arts organisations. By partnering with mental health professionals, youth arts organisations can enhance their programs and provide additional support for young people.

**Support youth arts organisations to better understand the impact they have on young people's wellbeing. Make the case for creative activity benefiting youth mental health and provide staff with training, resources and support.**

Promote the benefits of youth arts programs on mental health, increase public support for these initiatives and encourage more young people to get involved.

**Continue to foster inclusivity and diversity within youth arts programs. Youth arts programs should be accessible to all young people regardless of their race, gender, disability, sexuality or socio-economic status.**







## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

“We’ve learnt that a lot of us at SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS and the Albany use our work as escapism and quite a lot of us suffer with mental health problems that sit under the surface, but we use creativity to talk about them and help others. Creativity does help mental health, however everyone finds it frustrating that there isn’t enough funding for creative projects and arts for young people that specifically helps mental health and it’s just brushed to the side. From talking to people on the podcast, we’ve learnt that all of us have had our mental health supported and improved by these programmes, but we see there isn’t as much funding.”

Phoebe Fairchild, Peer Researcher

**‘You can make a change in an individual’s life. The pressures of school and of being 17 in modern society, that’s a lot. But if you have two hours to dance and you don’t need to think about what is happening outside, then that’s incredibly powerful. There is only so much we can do as a sector, but if we do something in the space we’re in that leads to help and change for an individual, there’s something powerful there. You affect positive change in someone’s life. There are people in your life, places you can go and you know that your presence can be felt, that you have an outlet to express yourself, you can process those emotions and share them in a safer way. Those are the ways that the arts and the arts sector can help. By having more of those spaces, maybe we will see a reduction in the need for medical interventions.’**

Marlo Savin, Peer Researcher





**“A big win in the area of young people’s mental health would be larger scale discussions around mental health and creativity. Expansion, adding creativity into treatment/services, prescribing creative projects and not only therapy or medication. Providing opportunities and space to be free, to be creative. This shouldn’t replace therapy but supplement it. Not to palm off the mental health crisis on artists, but this could be an alternative way of looking at and dealing with mental health problems. Reducing the stigma of more serious mental illness, we need greater understanding of this and more recognition, it’s not just about speaking up when you feel sad.”**

Marlo Savin, Peer Researcher

**“I feel productive then but my creativity often comes from things that make me feel sad, I often write about that. I think being creative makes me feel that I can help other people, it’s cathartic I can make other people feel they are not alone.”**

SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS member and Albany attendee, 22

**“A space to be yourself, to grow, to learn. A space that is welcoming and caring, accepting, a space where there are no limits. There's always a way to help you make your dream or ambitions happen even when they can't do it all they can help with the steps and tools. There is support like no other. there's a lot of community and unity.”**

SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS member and Albany attendee, 24





## THE PODCAST

Join Marlo and Phoebe, two young artists working with the Albany and Lewisham-based youth arts collective SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS, in conversation with their friends and fellow artists. Marlo and Phoebe will be asking how the Albany and SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS have helped develop creativity and supported mental health at critical times.

## CONTACTS

### Thanks to:

Marie Horner, Amaarah Roze, Kieron Morris, Joy Titilawo, Chiquita Dedlisser and all of the young people at SOUNDS LIKE CHAOS and the Albany who took part in the research.

### Contact us:

[gemma@soundslikechaos.com](mailto:gemma@soundslikechaos.com)  
[kirsty.cb@thealbany.org.uk](mailto:kirsty.cb@thealbany.org.uk)

[Soundslikechaos.com](https://soundslikechaos.com)  
[@soundslikechaos](https://twitter.com/soundslikechaos)

[thealbany.com](https://thealbany.com)  
[@thealbanyse8](https://twitter.com/thealbanyse8)

Prepared by Marlo Savin, Phoebe Fairchild, Rofeda Bougaga, Gemma Rowan and Rebecca Carter

Edited by Natasha Bloor  
Design by Adele Jeffs





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