

AHRC Creative Communities

Community Innovation Practitioner Pilot
Policy Paper

England Health & Wellbeing

October 2024



Commissioned by:



Policy Context

Liverpool is the third most deprived local authority, with 63% of residents living in the most deprived areas in England. The city has significantly higher rate of adults with mental disorders than the national average, partly due to [high poverty rates and health inequalities](#). Without changes, Liverpool's residents could see [double the number of adults experiencing depression by 2040](#).

[Integrated care systems](#) and community-based models of health such as Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust [Life Rooms](#) address this crisis by supporting local communities through learning, social prescribing and inclusion. However, the sustainability and development of these initiatives face [challenges](#) due to an imbalance between sectors, a lack of methodology in service evaluation and research, and insufficient funding.

Co-production and creativity are essential to address those challenges and ensure a holistic, sustainable response to the mental health crisis, tailored to the unique needs of Liverpool's population.



Recommendations

As a Community Innovation Practitioner funded by the AHRC, my research underscores how co-production through music enhances community wellbeing. Building on a 15-year partnership between Liverpool Philharmonic and Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, my research *Fostering Wellbeing Through Music Collaboration and Co-creation in the Community*, offers recommendations based on five key principles.

Connection

Enhance and sustain co-ordination between stakeholders

Devolved regions like [Liverpool City Region Mayoral Combined Authority](#) must actively lead in co-ordinating creative health stakeholders by including community members, practitioners, clinical staff, link workers, facilitators, and management teams from both NHS Trusts and cultural institutions. Stakeholders must be supported in staying connected through updates and revisions, ensuring that services are delivered effectively and inclusively, particularly in areas of deprivation.

Listen to the experts by experience and tune into real life moments

The voices and choices of those with mental health challenges should drive

decision-making at all levels. Projects like collaborative music-making can help practitioners deeply connect with service users, allowing them to listen to their stories, and understand their everyday needs. This first-hand experience should play a key role in shaping policies and services of Mayoral Combined Authorities (MCAs), as well as informing devolved funding decisions.

Improve communication strategies

Clear communication and defined roles are essential for effective planning and evaluation. It is vital to improve communication strategies among organisations and stakeholders, recognising different priorities and styles. Management teams should focus on active listening, ensuring regular feedback amongst diverse teams. This will strengthen connection, sharing findings more effectively. Stronger connection will promote openness, enhance collaboration, and create a cohesive and transparent environment.

Collaboration

Shape collaborative research and evaluation

Universities must work with practitioners to build a system that recognises practitioner roles as navigators between communities and academia, and as active policy

contributors. This demands creating equitable partnerships, enabling academics, practitioners and participants to reflect, reshape, and remap research together. Universities, MCAs and local councils must collaborate to support practitioners as well as service users in participating in research, rather than being subjects of research.

‘Co-produce’ commissioning

Health organisations, cultural institutions and policy makers must closely work together to co-produce a model of health that integrates the voices of people with lived experience and practitioners. By sharing respect and ownership, this approach will make mental health care services more relevant, effective, and sustainable, leading to better outcomes for individuals and communities. Mapping cultural organisations and practitioners together at local level will help create effective models that integrate creative activities into health care services, making them more accessible to people facing deprivation and mental health challenges.

Creativity

Co-create tools and methods to expand the workforce of healthcare musicians

Recent studies highlight the value and complexity of increasing the professionalism of healthcare musicians. However, there is currently no validated training for healthcare musicians. Universities, MCAs and cultural organisations must support musicians to

co-create a much-needed innovative toolkit with academic rigour to inform a framework and ensure that data is gathered with consistency.

Mayoral Combined Authorities must co-design research methods with community members, practitioners and creative partners

Research methods must be adapted to the needs of local communities in a creative and personalised way. Practitioners and creative partners must be trained to provide community members with the skills to manage health and wellbeing for themselves through creative methods. The newly devolved skills budgets of MCAs offer a new opportunity to pilot these interventions close to communities.

Commitment

Value the role of creative practitioners in academia

Universities must recognise the vital role of creative practitioners in academic settings. Balancing rigorous academic research with freelance work can be challenging, so it is crucial to find ways to connect practical experience with academic theory. This integration is key to better training for practitioners enriching research. Both perspectives should be valued and combined for mutual benefit. Universities must commit to support non-traditional paths into post-graduate training, embracing expertise-by-experience, and breaking down barriers between practice and theory, and between professional and academic expertise.

Improve access to creative health in the community

Raising community awareness and acceptance of creative mental health is essential. We need to identify and address barriers like financial challenges, cultural stigmas, and logistical factors that prevent people from engaging with collaborative and creative methods. Mayoral Combined Authorities and local government must invest more in targeted strategies with social inclusion teams to expand the reach and effectiveness of creative mental health services and help reduce health inequalities.

Empower local community mental health care through devolved mayoral powers

Investing in and empowering local communities will improve knowledge about creative health and support innovative mental health programs that meet the specific needs of the Liverpool City Region Mayoral Combined Authority. The national government should speed up devolution and transfer further decision-making powers and budgets to Mayoral Combined Authorities to ensure decisions about community mental health care are made closer to those affected. This approach will lead to better health outcomes and stronger, more resilient communities.

Care

Use devolution to enable holistic and integrated care

We need to embrace a holistic approach to health care that focuses on the whole person, not just their illness. This means understanding and respecting each person's unique needs, preferences and values. By working together across sectors and disciplines, we can create a healthcare system that treats everyone with dignity, empathy, and compassion in local communities. MCAs must use their newly devolved powers to help bring together service users, health partners, and creative practitioners to make this more personalised, inclusive care a priority and a reality. This shift will lead to better health outcomes and a stronger, more connected community.

Focus on prevention, not just reaction

Increased investment in community care is essential to prevent crises. Through connection, collaboration and creativity, creative practitioners play a key role by helping individuals regain their skills and confidence. This will in turn delay deterioration, reduce waiting lists, shortens hospital stays, and lower overall healthcare costs. MCAs must support practitioners and stakeholders in building and sharing knowledge about the value of creative communities as a model for early intervention.

Devolved Context

These recommendations clearly demand **greater devolution of health, culture and skills** and **stronger cross-sector collaboration led by Mayoral Combined Authorities in England**.

The 2024 [Liverpool Health of State Report](#) underscores the urgent need for radical change through devolved health powers. In parallel, the Liverpool City Region Mayor's [Corporate Plan](#) calls out for [deeper devolution](#) in areas like Economy, People, Place, Transport and Digital Infrastructure. The plan recognises that improving health and reducing health inequalities is key to enhancing productivity. However, it falls short in addressing the current mental health crisis and the pressing need for health devolution.

Liverpool City Region Mayoral Combined Authority's cultural initiatives, backed by devolved powers, recently launched a [five-year plan](#) focused on creative communities, individuals and spaces. Integrating these efforts with local healthcare is crucial, building on Liverpool's strong tradition of harnessing arts for wellbeing. The [partnership between Liverpool Philharmonic and Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust](#) exemplifies how such collaborations can transform lives, tackling challenges that medication alone cannot resolve.

Local control, ownership, togetherness and community cohesion are vital for a creative mental healthcare system that meet the needs of Liverpool's population, ensuring person-centred, effective, accessible, and inclusive care. The future of English devolution and the role of Mayoral Combined Authorities will be vital in delivering this much-needed change in approach and delivery to tackle the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Further Information:

For more information on AHRC Creative Communities visit <https://creativecommunities.uk>

Contact the CIP

Georgina Aasgaard, University of Liverpool
georgina.aasgaard@liverpool.ac.uk

Creative Communities is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK (Grant Agreement No AH/X001555/1) and hosted at Northumbria University, Newcastle.

Commissioned by:

