



A BLUEPRINT FOR **CREATING** **CHANGE**





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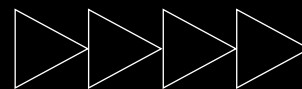
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INTRODUCTION

This book was co-authored by the team at Art Against Knives in order to capture what young people have taught us about how to create lasting social change.

What we do works. It works because we've spent over a decade in one place; listening and learning from local young people and investing in their ideas, building long term relationships, stitching ourselves into their communities and amplifying their voices to affect local and national systems change.

We've carefully packaged up their collective knowledge so that it can be heard outside of the walls of our creative spaces. Our hope is that it will inspire and influence others who share our vision; for every young person to be able to imagine and create their own positive futures, free from violence.



HERE'S OUR BLUEPRINT FOR CREATING CHANGE



WHAT WE DO

We embed creative spaces in London's most isolated communities, co-designed with young people, that build on their strengths and create opportunity. In these spaces our team of creative, highly skilled professionals provide creative skills training, mentoring and specialist support to keep them safe and make it possible for them to thrive.

We've established ourselves as one of London's pioneering youth justice organisation's. Renowned for our ability to consistently support London's most marginalised young people through co-produced, creative programmes.

REACHING OVER

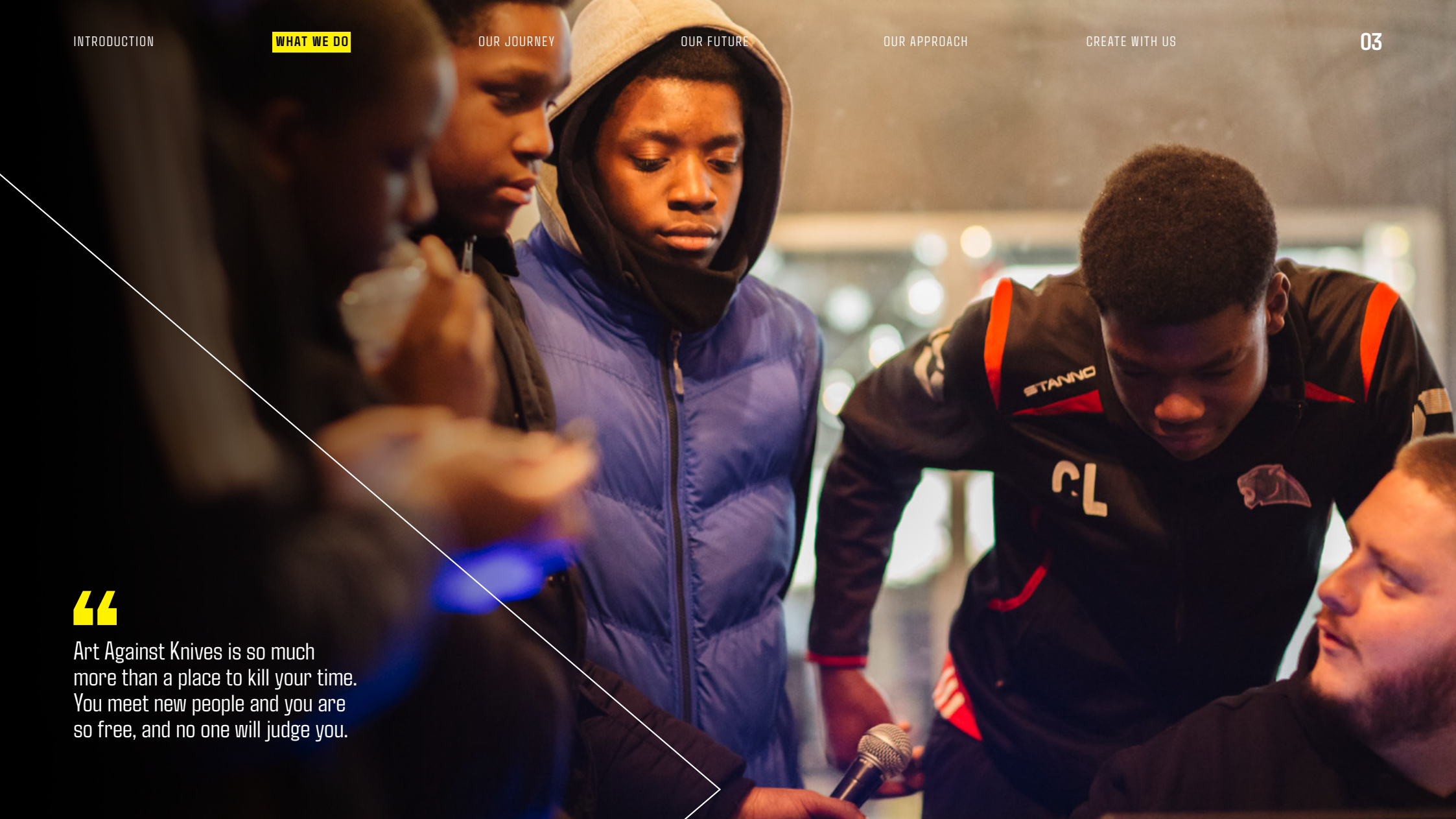
+2,000

YOUNG PEOPLE SINCE
OUR LAUNCH IN 2011



“

Art Against Knives is so much more than a place to kill your time. You meet new people and you are so free, and no one will judge you.



OUR JOURNEY

2009

Oliver's friend Katy Dawe organised an exhibition to raise money for his full time care. The event galvanised some of the biggest names in the art and fashion world and inspired action.



2008

Art Against Knives was created in response to the stabbing of Oliver Hemsley, a 21-year-old student from Central Saint Martin's College of Art & Design which left him in a wheelchair.

2010



We wanted to channel this support into action, so spent a year listening to young people and their communities in east London to understand if and how we could best support their ideas for social change. They designed and delivered their first project 'OurSpace'.

2011

We continued to co-design creative programmes in collaboration with young people, their communities and the creative industry. The young people we met taught us what effective interventions should look like, and how to genuinely co-produce.

CHECK OUT ONE OF OUR
FLAGSHIP PROJECTS



REGISTERED AS
A CHARITY IN
2011

2012

We were invited onto Dollis Valley estate in High Barnet where we met an incredible group of local young women. We started painting their nails as a means of building relationships, and they came up with the idea to set up their own nail bar; our flagship community nail bar Dollis Dolls Nails was launched.



2013



We moved our focus to Barnet, North London – where there was very little localised support for young people, a true opportunity to intervene early and address the root causes of youth violence. We launched our music project On_Track.



2014

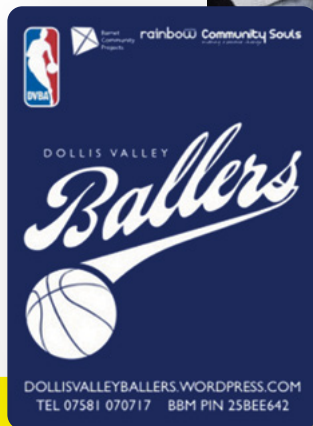
Vales Nails, our second community nail bar was founded by local young women on Strawberry Vale Estate, Barnet.



2016

Launched our project Design+Make in partnership with London College of Fashion.

WATCH THE DESIGN+MAKE FILM



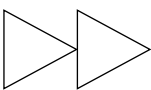
2020

We launched the 'Digital Hustle' virtual summer programme during Covid in partnership with Apple & curated by GUAP.



2022

Ran a crowdfunding campaign and launched our new space in East Finchley.



2015

The Lab our music studio was launched in North Finchley, Barnet.



2017

Dollis Valley Ballers, our annual summer community event designed and delivered by young people.

WATCH THE FILM HERE



2018

NW9 Nails, our third community nail bar launched on Grahame Park Estate, Barnet.



2021

Our podcast One Mic Real Talk launched.



UNLEASH

SOCIAL

Young people tell us how essential it is that we continue to generate creative, hopeful and safe places and futures for them. To achieve this, we need to continue to unleash the social imagination and creativity of young people and work with them and their communities to co-design personal, community and social change.

IMAGINATION

OUR STRATEGY

Over the next three years we will:



2024

2027

Step 01

Strengthen, secure and innovate to increase the impact of our creative spaces and programmes embedded in Barnet in partnership with young people and their communities.

Step 02

Imagine and work to create safer communities by addressing the root causes of violence and transforming the culture of care for young people.

Step 03

Nurture and retain a diverse, multi-disciplinary team including youth leaders, who are skilled at building trusted relationships and bring an agile, psychologically-informed, creative support to marginalised young people.

Step 04

Build a robust and sustainable charity, with the structure, governance and resources to deliver our objectives and embody our values.

RE-DEFINE YOUNG PEOPLE

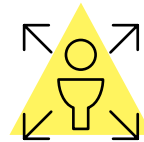
We position young people as they wish to be seen, allowing them to walk through the door with labels removed and to be their authentic selves.

Too often, young people are viewed as the problem. We put them in the lead of their own narratives and allow them to explore, define and communicate themselves to the outside world. Our creative platforms such as our podcast and digital magazine are a conduit to ensure they are seen and heard in spaces where they feel misunderstood e.g. local authorities, the education sector, local communities and creative industries.

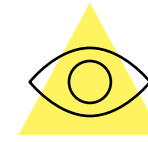
This is how young people choose to be positioned when they walk into our creative spaces.



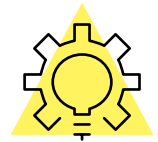
CREATIVES



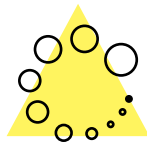
CHANGE MAKERS



VISIONARIES



EXPERTS



TRENDSETTERS



ARTISTS



NEXT GEN



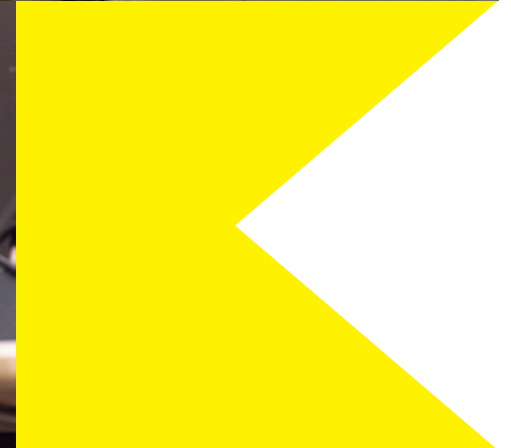
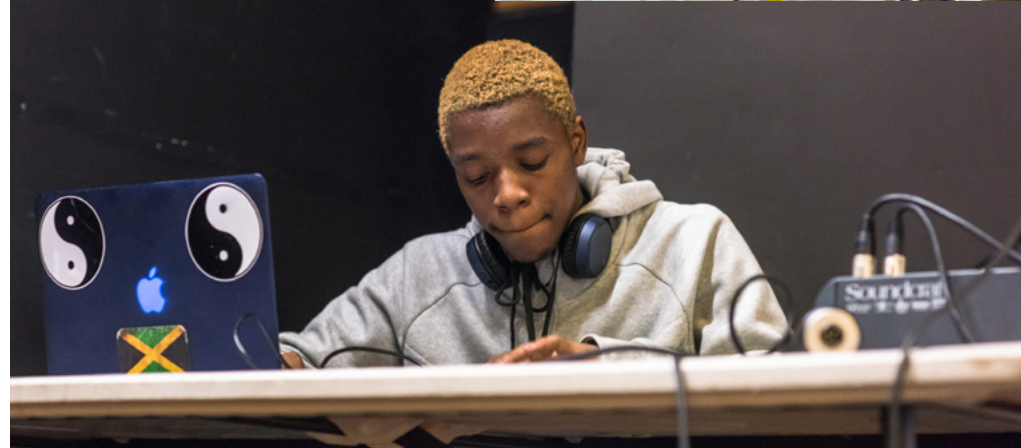
DESIGNERS

CASE STUDY

In 2020 we launched the One Mic Real Talk, a podcast co-produced by young people. It was born during the pandemic, and was the result of a 6 week project delivered in partnership with Apple and GUAP magazine. Young people said they wanted to run a podcast to capture their ideas for change, and to challenge stereotypes.

Young presenters and special guests take you on a journey through the issues they face in society and their lives along with some inspiring stories. Topics range from discussing mental health, the education system and music and culture, to challenging racist systems and painting a picture of what really happens in their communities.

It's an opportunity for them to speak truth to power, in a safe and creative environment. We then work with them to make sure they're being heard by people in positions of power who are able to intact the change they call for.



CREATE SPACE

Physical space in which young people feel safe is essential. Our spaces create a secure base and become part of their everyday lives.

“

I love the atmosphere, the vibe. The support and the trust and bond I have with the staff is unmatched.

Phoebe,
Vales Nails

Our spaces are co-designed to be fully functioning creative environments rooted in their communities, such as nail and hair bars, music or design studios. They're open all year round and accessible to young people wherever they're at. They can pop by to say hello and hangout or access resources, accredited skills training, support in a crisis, or take on leadership roles. It's all on their terms.

We also pop-up across community and school settings, creating inspiring spaces wherever we are with whatever we have. Whether that's a pop-up nail bar in the middle of an estate or a podcast studio in the local library.





EMBEDDING CREATIVE SPACE

CASE STUDY

THE LAB was co-designed with local young people in 2014. Every Wednesday we transform a shop unit into a pop-up music studio, providing young people with the space to write, record and produce their own music and socialise in a safe, creative and professional environment.

Our talented staff team teaches young people how to use music equipment to a professional standard; allowing them to work with their peers to produce their own music. Mixtapes are regularly co-produced and released, providing them with the opportunity to showcase their work

“

The LAB n me, Gon make bare P, OMG, This beat so Greez, Av a lil faith in the process please, When I blow, Den we all blow, I put bare LAB's on LDN streetz.

Dali,
Young Artist

on industry platforms. Staff are not just creative professionals, they're specialists in youth violence and mental health, making it possible for them to provide on-the-spot mentoring and crisis support.

[LISTEN HERE](#)



We deliberately bring together people with diverse experiences and expertise. They're music producers, nail artists and hair stylists, as well as violence advisors and award winning youth practitioners and clinical psychologists.

Their professional experience ranges from creative production through to play and social work. Many we've met along the way, as participants in our projects who we've then supported to become full time members of our team. They're united by their shared values and passion for transforming young people's lives.

Our team holds an in-depth understanding of the issues which affect marginalised young people and their communities, and we all share a commitment to dismantling unjust systems in order to do this work.

Our team is our biggest asset, most valuable resource and our critical tool.

FIND THE RIGHT PEOPLE

They're generous collaborators who work with and through others at all times. And they have all got past an interview panel of young people to land their roles, which says it all really.

YOU CAN MEET THEM HERE



“

Art Against Knives is a positive space that explores all sorts of creativity not just nails and hair but painting, drawing, dancing and even games! Everyone there is super kind and you're never alone. And the staff? Best people you could ask for!

Chloe, 16

UNITING & TRANSFORMING LIVES

CASE STUDY

We are lucky to have a team of youth workers who we have met through our creative spaces who are now supporting the next generation of young people in their community.

We met Elise and Rania on Dollis Valley estate back in 2012. They were both instrumental in co-designing the project, and attended regularly for years. Elise has since gone on to get a degree in Youth Work and is a full time youth worker with us, specialising in co-producing creative content with young people and supporting them into education, employment and training. Rania has recently joined us as a full time youth worker, supporting young people across our In Our Hands programme as she continues to pursue her dream of supporting young people with experience of the criminal justice system.

David was one of the first young people we met in our music studio, The LAB. He's recently graduated from Loughborough university and is joining us as a full time youth worker, supporting young people in accessing our creative spaces and producing their own music.



Working for AAK means a lot to me. Being a young person who used the support and is now working for AAK is definitely a special feeling. I love how I am able to pass on the support and guidance I received to other young people.

Rania,
Youth Worker





We are fueled by care. We work on a long-term basis, so that all young people can engage with us at a pace that works for them, for as long as they'd like.

INVEST IN THE LONG TERM

We give young people the time they need to get to know us, feel safe in our spaces, build relationships and ask for support. This can take weeks, and for some it can be years. You'll never hear us say 'times up'.

To make this possible, our spaces are open every week, all year round. Young people can come and go as they like,

when they like, and even if they're gone for a while they often return in moments of crisis or celebration.

Working in this way is challenging, as it means we're reliant on consistent funding and need to sustain long-term staff teams. But it is critical to creating long-term change.

CASE STUDY**CREATING COMMUNITY NAIL BARS**

Dollis Dolls Nail Bar was co-created with a group of young women from Dollis Valley estate in Barnet, North London in 2012 who felt let down by support services that just “came and went.” They suggested running a nail bar that would ‘put Dollis Valley estate on the map for something positive, not just negative things like stabbings’ and they’ve done just that. The weekly nail bar has been open weekly for over 10 years, supporting over 500 local young women.

Open once a week, it provides a free nail service, skills training and a wide range of creative activities, delivered by our specialist nail technicians who are also trained violence advisors. The tactile act of painting young women’s nails allows us to build trusted relationships, and through regular conversation we raise aspirations

and explore issues like healthy relationships and personal safety, as well as responding to high-risk disclosures in the moment.

It’s inspired other communities too. We now have three community nail bars across the borough that have also been co-designed by local young women and bring specialist support to them.

**NAIL BAR HAS BEEN OPEN
WEEKLY FOR OVER**

10 years

SUPPORTING OVER

500

LOCAL WOMAN



Art Against Knives has been built by the collective imagination of young people we've met. We could never have predicted where we are today; young people have led the way.

SHIFT POWER

Our entire model is built on centring youth-voice, and putting young people in the lead so that we can shift power to them. We do this through an on-going process of co-production and operate a consistent 'feedback loop'. Young people's needs and ideas are consistently captured and fed into our strategic planning ie. the programmes we deliver, the funding we apply for and the people we employ.

It's easy to ask young people what they want, but it's harder to put them in the lead from start to finish and to be truly comfortable with not knowing where you will end up. It's an on-going investment that requires commitment from the whole organisation in order to do this genuinely.



CASE STUDY**EMPLOYING CREATIVE DIRECTORS**

We are co-led by a team of Creative Directors – young people who have come through our programmes who are offered paid positions to consult on our strategy. We support their learning and development, teaching them project management skills so that they are in a position to realise their ideas and know how to put them into action.

We first met JD in 2018. He had been excluded from school and was trying to navigate loads of complex challenges in his life. During this time, the one consistent in his life was coming to our weekly music studio, The LAB. He came through every Wednesday, built great relationships with the team through these, was able to access consistent mentoring support over the course of two years whilst he was not in education.

Last year, he expressed an interest in working with us, so we worked together to create a role for him that would give him insight into the working world and

draw on his interests and strengths. Since then, he's sustained his employment with us amidst loads of disruption in his life, including his peer group moving in and out of the criminal justice system. He's gone on to consult and advise national commissioners on how to best provide mental health support to marginalised young people, and he's about to start his level 2 youth work training and pursue a career in supporting young people.



Before the opportunity I was influenced badly by my deprived area, but this has kept me off the streets and has given me hope for the future. I am now starting a youth work course in 2023 thanks to Art Against Knives and the NHS project.

JD



FOSTER COLLABORATION

We've never felt the need to do this work on our own. It's always been about building on the collective strengths of others who share our vision, never duplicating or competing.

We're a conduit for collaboration, building strategic partnerships with the voluntary, statutory and creative sectors that strengthen, shift and elevate support for marginalised young people.

Key to this is our commitment to centering young people in the design of these partnerships, ensuring that they respond directly to their needs, and create meaningful opportunities for them to progress and create change.

We are a key influencer, active in a broad range of forums across the community and local authority and work closely with senior leaders in the Local Council to shape strategy.



CASE STUDY TRANSFORMING SERVICES

Through our current partnership with the NHS we are delivering a co-produced young Black men's mental health project to address the mental health inequalities of Black men in Barnet. A team of 5 young Black men who have been long-standing participants have been trained as Peer Leaders and employed to explore the needs of their peers, map and understand the services currently available to them and make recommendations for how these systems can better reach and meet their needs.

They've been incredible, and their commitment to ensuring the younger population of Black boys are better supported is inspiring.

“

Making it possible for young people to lead is important because young people understand what's best for them, so. We are the next gen. We have the most current and challenging perspective.

ROS

NURTURING YOUNG MINDS THROUGH ARTISTIC EXPRESSION



WORK THROUGH

It takes time to build trusted relationships with young people. We invest in this by creating the space and moving at a pace that works for them.

The creative process is a powerful tool for building relationships. Whether we're stepping into the booth to record a track or painting someone's nails, the ability to create together unites us and allows young people to feel heard.

It's through these relationships that we are able to bring personalised support to young people, rather than expecting them to come to us. They're a powerful tool for listening, making it possible for us to understand their individual and local needs, and to co-design long-term provision.

The majority of the Young Creatives (80%) we support are self or peer referred, meaning they attend out of choice and encourage their friends to come too, demonstrating our reputation locally, and the safe space and trusted relationships we've established.



TRUSTED RELATIONSHIPS



CASE STUDY NATIONAL IMPACT

From 2018-2022 we were one of 11 projects across the country funded by the Home Office to understand the impact of working with and through trusted relationships. We worked in partnership with the charity MAC-UK and Barnet Council Children's services to reduce young people's risk of exploitation by scaling up our youth-led, creative safe spaces to ensure young people could easily be referred across and/or experience joined up and coordinated care between different agencies and professionals.

Over 4 years, 633 young people accessed universal support from our safe spaces which included building protective factors such as trusted relationships with adults and peers, increasing confidence, creativity, leadership skills. 175 received targeted 1:1 support relating to issues such as healthy relationships, staying safe, addressing risky behaviours, housing, finances, benefits, mental health and wellbeing.

OVER 4 YEARS

633

YOUNG PEOPLE ACCESSED UNIVERSAL SUPPORT FROM OUR SAFE SPACES

An independent evaluation by the Behavioural Insight Team released in 2020 reported significant positive outcomes for young people and improved coordination between statutory and community and voluntary sector, as well as improved levels of co production with young people in Barnet Children's services. Young people directly feed into the Home Office strategy and programme development, through presentations and face-to-face interactions.

[READ FULL EVALUATION REPORT HERE](#)

“

AAK have combined the provision of safe spaces... with creative positive activities and psychologically informed approaches... which has shaped multi-organisational thinking about how children and young people can be supported to participate and have a valued contribution to the services they receive.

Director,
Children's Social Care Barnet



We teach creative skills, working alongside creative professionals to provide industry standard, accredited training and create pathways into employment. We use creativity as a tool for building relationships with young people, helping them to express themselves and in amplifying their voices.

We also use it as a tool for developing social imagination, allowing young people to see the world from different perspectives so that they can better identify and question various aspects of society, and imagine new positive futures. Their on-going insight fundamentally shapes the way we work, feeding into programme development and our longer-term strategy, and addressing contextual change.

Creativity runs through everything we do.

CREATE SOCIAL IMAGINATION

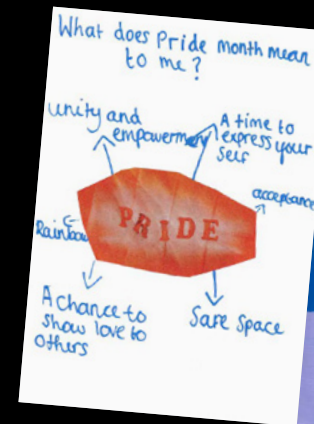
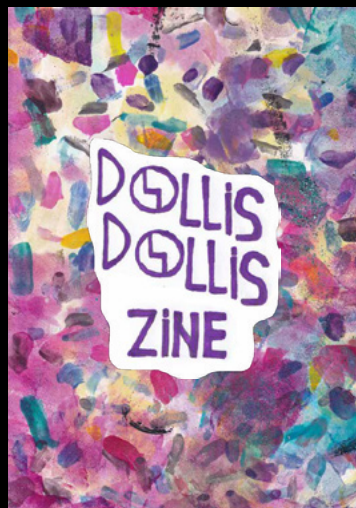


CASE STUDY DOLLIS DOLLS ZINE

Young women from one of our community nail bars, Dollis Dolls Nails, spent 12 months co-creating their own Zine to document their experiences & ideas for change amidst the redevelopment of their community.

They explored social issues that covered everything from empowerment, representation & safety, & collaborated with a range of creative professionals to bring it to life. The magazine is available to buy, with all money going back into their project, allowing them to continue to design and run social action projects in their community.

[BUY YOUR COPY OF THE ZINE HERE](#)



EMBED SPECIALIST SUPPORT

Behind our professional looking creative spaces, the perfectly painted nails and the expertly produced tracks – there's a lot more that goes on.

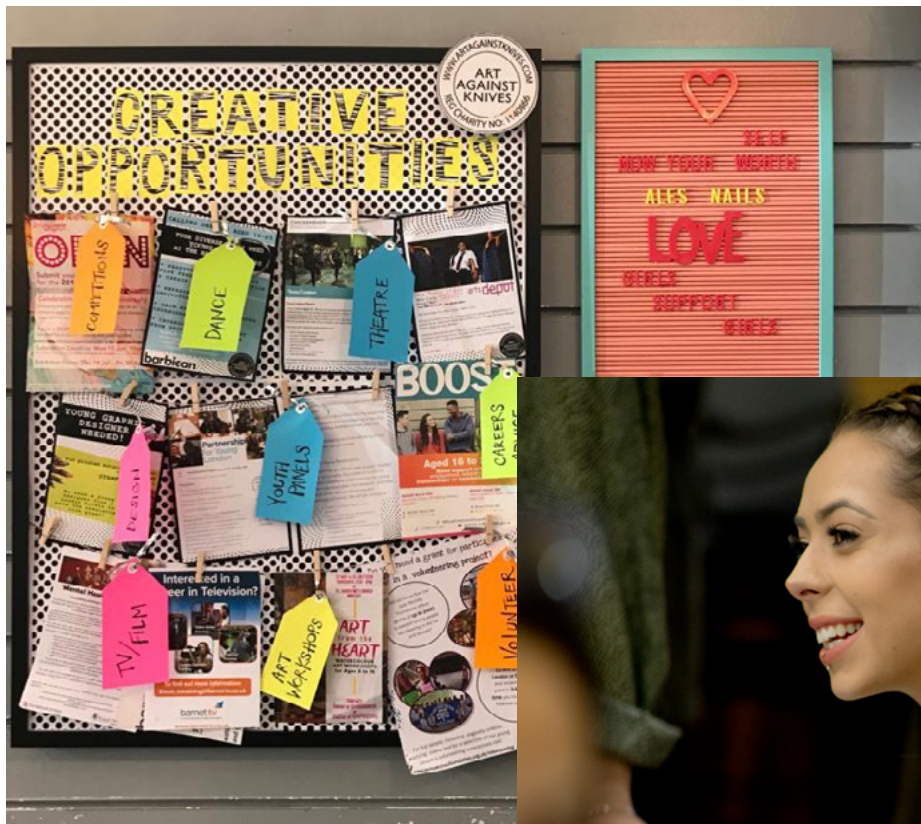
Every young person who comes through our doors can access specialist support from one of our highly experienced team who works with them to identify risk and long-term solutions. If and when required we will connect them to external support, putting them in lead of their plans and in navigating the networks of professionals around them.

We've spent 10 years refining our safeguarding practice and embedding this into our work. This is informed by models of best practice from contextual safeguarding through to trauma science, psychological and poverty-informed

approaches. We are trained in Adaptive Mentalisation-Based Integrative Treatment (AMBIT) giving us the tools for putting mentalisation to use with young people and the complex systems around them.

As a result of our support, young people with complex experiences develop and grow in their achievements, and are better able to navigate their lives, and feel empowered to pursue alternative pathways free from violence, risk and exploitation.





CASE STUDY CREATING SAFE SPACES.

Across our spaces, we were seeing a recurring trend in young women who had experienced sexual abuse and were struggling to manage the long-term impact of this trauma on their lives, in accessing mental health services and in being heard by the professionals around them.

We worked with a core group of young women to co-produce a support space to meet their needs and offered both peer and professional support. They designed everything from the space itself, the creative activities i.e. pottery and theatre trips through to the outcomes they wanted to achieve i.e. confidence, communication, reduction of anxiety and depression.

One of the key insights they uncovered was the need for a safe space specifically for young black women like themselves. They valued being guided by staff they could relate to, and identified that the lack of culturally competent staff in their engagement with mental health services and education was a key barrier to their access. We created multiple opportunities for them to share their insights and provide training to professionals in our network which has had a transformative impact on the healthcare systems around them.



Our work is rooted in justice and equity – we're driven to create fairness in society, so that young people are able to flourish. It's not on them to change.

We shift the focus from the individual to the environment and work to address the root causes of violence; poverty, inequality, alienation and exclusion.

To do this we use our position to challenge and address systemic barriers, biases, and power imbalances that perpetuate inequality and discrimination. We create opportunities for young people to thrive outside of our spaces; from ensuring their voices and ideas for change are heard and responded to,

through to co-designing accessible policies and practices with them and their communities.

But, we don't just call on others to adopt anti-oppressive practices, we're accountable for our own. We seek to risk-take, innovate and re-design our policies, programmes, and practices to actively promote equitable opportunities and outcomes for all, and to ensure we don't uphold the status quo.



CENTRE JUSTICE AND EQUITY

TACKLING ROOTS OF VIOLENCE, FORGING EQUITABLE CHANGE

CASE STUDY

Holding Our Own: A guide to non-policing solutions to serious youth violence

In 2023 we were part of a groundbreaking report that called for a new approach to tackling serious youth violence, with the powers of the police rolled back and more funding and support given for young people to thrive.

Alongside a coalition of grassroots groups and campaigning organisations, the report explains how the government is harming communities by failing to invest in young people, and that the policing of young people, particularly young people of colour, is damaging their futures.

“

Whatever our postcode or the colour of our skin, we all deserve to live in communities where we are cared for and given the tools we need to flourish in life.

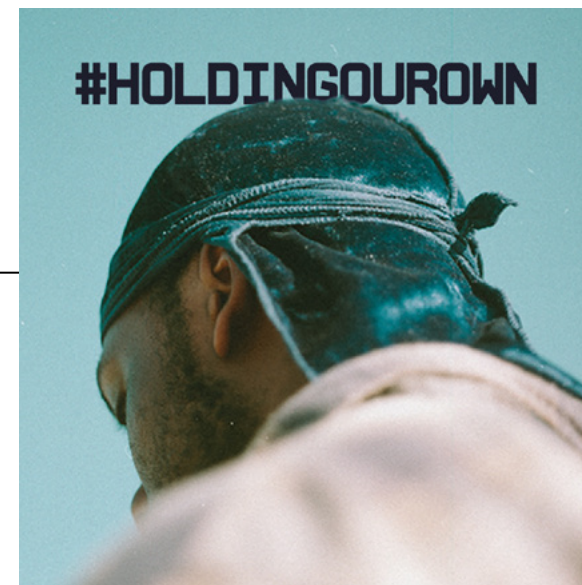
As a collaborator, we advocated for major investment in trauma-informed and racially literate support for young people to prevent harm, build trusted relationships and support them with issues they face.

Young people from our creative spaces co-authored a chapter on how policing is a tool used by the state to reinforce

their place in society, and they boldly redefined the racist depiction of themselves perpetuated by the government and mainstream media.

[READ THE HOLDING](#)

[OUR OWN REPORT HERE](#)



CREATE WITH US

This blueprint captures what young people need so that they can create their own positive futures, free from violence.

We're committed to releasing their vision for change. This requires us to remain consistent in their lives, and rooted in their communities.

But we can't do this alone. If you've been inspired by what you've heard, and would like to be part of creating this change too, then please get in touch. We'd love to work with you.

hello@artagainstknives.com

[DONATE HERE](#)

“

A lot of places shut down after a while but AAK is still here, however long I don't come for, I come back and it's still love.

TM,
Young Person







**WE WOULD LIKE TO THANK EMPEROR, L&S PRINTING
AND DENMAUR PAPER MEDIA FOR CONTRIBUTING
THEIR TIME AND RESOURCES TO DESIGN AND
PRINT THIS BROCHURE.**

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