

OPEN MIC CLUB

"Four years ago, if you'd asked me, Jack, or Destiny to perform at the Junction, we would've said no. We were shy and not confident with each other. Now we see bigger steps every year. We've done videos, performances, and interviews. We're building friendships and a community, not just doing music."

OMC Participant

"The performance opened my eyes. I woke up on January 1st thinking this year was going to be different. Performing made me realize my music career was ready for the next step. That helped my mental health too. Knowing I have goals and I'm getting closer to them makes things better. It gave us a big push."

OMC participant



SUMMARY

Open Mic Club is a co-designed project addressing the barriers young people in Cambridge face in accessing creative opportunities. Cambridge Junction in partnership with Lyrix Organix, Romsey Mill, and YMCA Cambridge, provides a free, inclusive space for young people interested in the music industry to develop their skills, build a sense of community, and gain industry insights. Monthly sessions feature masterclasses led by industry professionals, open mic performances, and ongoing support to ensure participant engagement. By offering industry-standard equipment, travel bursaries, and hot meals, Open Mic Club fosters accessibility and inclusivity. The project aims to empower young people, build creative networks, and reshape Cambridge's cultural landscape to be more representative and welcoming for all.

With thanks to Preventative Health funding, Romsey Mill funding, Red Hill Trust funding and in-kind support from all project partners.

BACKGROUND

Cambridge is a deeply fragmented city, with one of the most acute wealth divides in the UK. Cambridge's dominant academic presence is deeply ingrained in the city's landscape and culture, and for many young residents this presence is alienating. Therefore, they perceive Cambridge not as a nurturing environment for growth and success, but rather as a place where their aspirations are limited. The cultural scene in the city centre often creates barriers that exclude the very demographic it represents. Examples of this can be seen in these quotes from young people who previously participated in Beats, Trials & Tribulations:

'I feel like to outsiders, if they don't live in Cambridge, they almost disregard what you are saying if it's negative. They are like "oh you're from Cambridge, how can you be going through that? You have universities on your doorstep, it's a lovely place". That's not the reality, not all of it, there is a lot of poverty and a lot of troubled places.'

'Once we step in town we don't feel part of the community, we just feel a bit left out, and in town you have the police and stuff and don't feel as safe.'

'I'm not even going to lie to you, I don't really like Cambridge. There's not much to do here, unless you're studying or working, but if your just out and don't go to a college or work there is nothing.'

The quotes address experiences of marginalisation, loneliness, disconnection, lack of safety and opportunities for vulnerable young people living in Cambridge. These negative experiences perpetuate significant mental health challenges for young people in the city.

In December 2023, young people we previously worked with through Beats, Trials & Tribulations, who are accessing Romsey Mill's youth support services and those who reside at YMCA Cambridge, participated in a consultation with Youth Music, Cambridge Junction and Lyrix Organix. The consultation sought to gain valuable insights and experiences from young creatives who are facing barriers accessing the music industries. In response to the issues addressed by young creatives, Lyrix Organix and Cambridge Junction held a masterclass with the group to address these barriers by sharing industry expertise and listening to the needs of the group who co-designed a new participatory programme; Open Mic Club.

Open Mic Club was born in response to these co-design sessions where young creatives identified a need for a regular, supportive, creative space to build their creative community and to develop and showcase creative skills with industry standard equipment alongside industry professionals. Open Mic Club is free to attend, with travel bursaries and hot food available at every session.

Open Mic Club is delivered in partnership with Romsey Mill, YMCA, Lyrix Organix, and local food vendors, Pizza 1889. Every session consists of two parts: workshop or masterclass and open mic. The industry masterclass is facilitated by Dan Tsu and Natty Sobhee from Lyrix Organix, as well as guest industry professionals. The open mic section is facilitated by local artist and previous participant, LambChop47 with DJ support from the founder of the Cambridge Hip Hop Show, Rehmid. Guest artists are identified by participants and host industry masterclasses in response to participants interests.

Between every session, Cambridge Junction check-in with the participants by attending regular youth club sessions at Meadows Community Centre and meeting with YMCA to continue building relationships and to ensure the interests of the participants are responded to at the following session.



PARTNERSHIPS

The majority of young people who accessed Open Mic Club provision came through our referrals from our partner organisations, with the rest self-electing to join the programme through our partnerships with schools and open access programmes.

Romsey Mill is a Cambridgeshire and Peterborough based charity committed to overcoming disadvantage, challenging injustice and promoting social inclusion with children and young people.

The YMCA is the largest provider of safe, supported accommodations for young people in England, specialising in supporting young people leaving care, separated migrants, those at risk of exploitation, those with mental health challenges, those misusing drugs and alcohol and those with offending behaviours.

Lyrix Organix is an acclaimed independent curator of rap, spoken word and live music. Their stages have seen legendary performances by Akala, Kojey Radical, Kae Tempest, Lowkey, Mike Skinner and

Ed Sheeran. Hosts of a major stage at Glastonbury Festival – the iconic Rumshack – they also specialise in boundary-pushing youth education programmes from Roundhouse to British Council and working with hip hop artists around the world from Mexico to Ethiopia.

PROJECT AIMS & DOMAINS FOR CHANGE

- To build a community of young creatives.
- To create a monthly creative development and performance opportunity for young people with significant barriers in Cambridge.
- To support young people to develop music-based skills to an industry standard.
- To support young people to understand the complexities of the music industry and start building pathways.

Participants:

- Develop a sense of belonging and community.
- Increase confidence and sense of possibility.
- Build a network and access further creative opportunities.
- Developing new creative skills.
- Change in perspective on what it means to be a successful industry professional.
- Change in understanding and develop skills and strategies of how to access the music industry.

Cambridge Junction:

- Establish itself as a safe and welcoming space for new participants.
- Changing the access in Cambridge for music development opportunities.
- Build an audience for local artists.
- Increase visibility and participation on creative learning activity.
- Challenge perceptions of young people, young artists and raise expectation.

TIMELINE

Click the link to view timeline: <https://bit.ly/OpenMicTimeline>

PARTICIPATION FIGURES

- 9 sessions with 172 engagements
- 6 rehearsals with 39 engagements
- 1 event with 17 young artist performing & 2 young sound/lighting engineers, 100 audience members.
-
- 19 consistent young people accessing Open Mic Club

TOTAL ENGAGEMENT (excluding audience): 211



THEMES & IMPACT

We collected feedback through formal interviews with participants, artists and youth workers, including using 'Most Significant Change' model to understand the impact of Open Mic Club without asking leading questions. We also collected unprompted and informal feedback: this was gathered via text or through informal conversations with young people, artists and youth workers.

The timeline of activities demonstrates a significant journey of artistic development, personal growth, collective power and community building, with the following key themes and impact:

***'What is Coldest in Cambridge? It's a Family...'* Open Mic Club built a community of young creatives, developing their sense of belonging and confidence. Young people's confidence and aspirations were raised through participating in Open Mic Club. Raised aspirations and a sense of community have a direct link with positive mental health in young people.**

The young people who took part in Open Mic Club told us that they felt part of a community and demonstrated that their community is authentic, effective and meaningful. We know that social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing are important factors in good mental health and opportunities to experience acceptance, community and connection act as preventative measures. Many young people describe the positive effects of the community they have created, the new connections they have made and the relationships they have built in response to engaging with Open Mic Club.

"It felt like we all rose up, and now we're like a family. Even if the project stops, we'll still come to the Junction, check in with each other, and stay connected."

OMC participant

"We're building friendships and a community, not just doing music."

OMC participant

Our evaluation demonstrate the impact of Open Mic Club, highlighting themes of community, confidence and creative growth. The young people directly describe the positive impact Open Mic Club has had on their confidence, sense of belonging, relationships and sense of purpose. Open Mic Club has fostered genuine friendships and artistic connections, building a network of encouragement and genuine collective success. They showcase a shift from uncertainty to self-belief and ambition.

We know that some of the young people attending Open Mic Club are navigating issues such as isolation, anxiety and low self-esteem: all of which are factors in poor mental health. Open Mic Club has offered them a place where they feel heard, valued and supported which significantly boosts their confidence and sense of belonging. It is a preventative and empowering space which supports young people's mental wellbeing through creativity, community and self-expression.

"Four years ago, if you'd asked me, Jack, or Destiny to perform at the Junction, we would've said no. We were shy and not confident with each other. Now we see bigger steps every year. We've done videos, performances, and interviews. We're building friendships and a community, not just doing music."

OMC participant

"Last year, if you'd asked me if I wanted to be a rapper, I'd have said I didn't know. But now? We've got cameramen, producers, beatmakers, rappers. We're building something real."

OMC participant

By offering consistent opportunities for creative engagement, meaningful connections, and self-expression, Open Mic Club actively promotes preventative mental health support. The sense of belonging it fosters has a profound and lasting impact on young people's overall wellbeing.

"I'm very excited for this guys, I hope you all are as well and I just wanna say you're all putting the work in which I really respect. I've been part of things before and people just haven't taken it seriously but I'm really happy that I'm involved with people that actually want to do it and are putting the work in so big love to all of you. Let's make some magic!"

OMC participant

"We've all started from the same place. We're in the same boat, and we either lift each other up or crumble."

OMC participant

"It's given them more confidence, we can tell them till their blue in the face but they won't go out and meet new people. Now there are chatting to others and have been collaborating with Louise."

Youth Worker at Romsey Mill

'When you're around experienced people and upcoming rappers like us, you start believing in yourself more ...' Monthly development and performance opportunities enabled young people to develop music-based skills; begin to build career pathways; develop a sense of possibility, network and connections and gain insight into how the music industry works. Learning a new skill has a direct impact on young people's psychological wellbeing, thus improving their mental health and preventing it from deteriorating.

The impact of having regular development and performance opportunities is evident in the reported growth, confidence and progression of the participants, detailed below. The young people have gained music industry skills, career direction and valuable networking opportunities. Participants detail their ignited creative ambition, increased confidence and self-esteem and describe the importance of collaboration and inclusivity, all of which have a positive impact on young people's mental health. Many participants are collaborating with each other and new connections, writing and performing more and releasing more music.

"The guys were working with people they wouldn't normally interact with, improved connections, confidence and self-esteem."

Youth Worker at Romsey Mill

"You brought experience to us—people like Dan and Jaya. When you're around experienced people and upcoming rappers like us, you start believing in yourself more. Last night, seeing that artist perform made me think, "Maybe I could be the next one on that stage."

OMC participant

Open Mic Club has empowered young people to develop as artists and take ownership over their creative journeys, whilst building resilience. The program has opened doors to new collaborations and career pathways, inspiring young artists to share their work, organise their own events, and actively pursue creative opportunities. Exposure to diverse genres and industry role models has broadened perspectives, reinforcing that success is achievable without leaving Cambridge. This initiative is not just fostering talent but is also strengthening the city's creative ecosystem, ensuring young artists feel seen, supported, and capable of thriving locally. As well as planned opportunities, it is evident that the young people's experience with Open Mic Club has given them the skills and confidence to self-direct and organise. This development is in line with the positive effects Open Mic Club has had on the young people's mental health but particularly highlights the improved psychological wellbeing of the young people – making self-directed connections and learning new skills is vitally important to good psychological wellbeing.

"The girls have got more of an outlook of where they want to go, they are starting writing, there's a massive progression in their confidence. It's given them that hunger to get more into music and writing."

Youth Worker at Romsey Mill

"Now, I'm giving beats out to other artists. It used to be hard because I wanted my beats to be appreciated on their own. But I've learned to share, to let others create with them. The feedback has been incredible—it gives you direction. Mateo sent me a song with one of my beats today, and it was amazing."

OMC participant

"We've built connections we wouldn't have had otherwise. If I hadn't come to the Junction, I wouldn't have met people like Rosca, Dan, or Natty. It opened up new opportunities".

OMC participant

Our learning from Open Mic Club has also highlighted the importance of provision local to Cambridge. Many young people fed back to us about the how valuable the space is in Cambridge. This enhances the young people's ability to feel part of their community, to value it and to learn from other local, successful artists, as well as establishing Cambridge as a place of cultural importance to them.

"Coming here and seeing different genres and artists has humbled me. Jaya did this talk with us—she's living the life I want. She's performing internationally, chasing her dreams. That hit me hard. It inspired me. This space makes you grow, watching other artists and learning from them."

OMC participant

"This provision is incredibly important for young people in Cambridge. When I was younger, we didn't have many opportunities like this. Many talented individuals feel the need to move out of Cambridge to pursue their creative careers, but initiatives like this can help build a strong creative community right here. There's so much talent and potential among the youth in Cambridge and providing them with these opportunities can make a huge difference, especially in a city often overshadowed by the university."

Jayahadadream, Masterclass Artist

'When I walk in here, my problems start to fade...' Young people felt safe, welcomed and able to access new creative opportunities through Open Mic Club. They gained a platform in Cambridge in which they felt valued and were able to experience success.

Participants have told us that they see Open Mic Club as a place where they can express themselves, build relationships and find support, with many describing both the collective and Cambridge Junction as a 'family' that connects and uplifts them. Their view of Cambridge is beginning to shift to a place of opportunity, where they have a platform for growth and young musicians can thrive.

"Our relationship with you and Junction, It's the best relationship anyone could have. You should be proud. You and Katie connect everyone. Even yesterday's performance showed that."

OMC participant

"There's nowhere else in Cambridge doing this for young people. Romsey Mill is great, but it's different. Junction hosts events for us—for free—and helps us grow as artists and people. Without them, who would do that? They're building a future for Cambridge by opening doors for people."

OMC participant

Young people feel that Cambridge is not just for university students but also a place for them. This fosters a sense of belonging, reducing isolation and increasing self-worth. The mention of feeling safe and problems fading when entering the studio suggests that these spaces provide emotional relief and a refuge from daily struggles, reducing stress and anxiety. Knowing that organisations like Junction help young people grow as artists and individuals builds a sense of hope and direction, which protects against mental health challenges like depression or low motivation.

"It's about more than music now. We're trying to make Cambridge look good and show that it's not just a place for university students. You can come here to make music, play football, and do creative things."

OMC participant

The ability to share opinions, even when difficult, promotes emotional intelligence, resilience, and healthy communication, which are crucial for mental well-being.

"Different people play different roles, and it's healthy. We can express opinions, even when it's tough."

OMC participant

By fostering an environment where young people feel safe and valued, Open Mic Club plays a crucial role in supporting their mental health. It encourages self-expression as a tool for personal and emotional development, reinforcing their ability to navigate challenges with confidence.

"You give us opportunities to meet new people, which is a big thing. Even being able to come and record a podcast—just having those chances means a lot. For me, Junction feels like family. If someone asked me in the future how I got successful, I'd tell them, "Go to Junction." They're the ones who believed in me, helped me grow."

OMC participant



SUSTAINABILITY

"It's that chance to see myself in any environment, in a different context, and to have that time to build relationships with people. I believe they're seeing me as I actually am. I've shown up, and I've felt comfortable because of the trust that's built over time. I felt comfortable to take my time, to gradually be myself, to feel at ease. And then the way people react to me—I know they're reacting to the real me, not an act I'm putting on for one night at a folk club or after an exhausting taxi ride into London. I'm showing them the real me, and they're saying, come back. And that actually means something. Whereas, if I feel like I've just been acting, I think, well, you like the act, but you don't even know me. It's great that you like the act, but what about when I'm too tired to pretend? What about when I'm feeling really depressed and sad and I can't pretend? Whereas coming here, having that time, it's like—okay, this is me. Sometimes I'm with my wheelchair, sometimes I'm standing up to perform."

OMC participant

The young people who have taken part in Open Mic Club have described its transformative impact, highlighting the importance of long-term, consistent provision and the time and space to build relationships with practitioners. However, despite its success, the initiative cannot continue effectively without multi-year funding.

Open Mic Club was initiated by young people with whom we had already established trust over a 2–3-year relationship, enabling them to co-create a programme that truly supports their development. Meaningful, youth-led work requires time, stability, and resources. Year-long funding cycles fail to provide this stability, forcing programmes to reapply for funding, disrupting continuity, and making it difficult to deliver the high-quality support young people need. Without sustained investment, these life-changing opportunities risk disappearing, leaving young people without safe spaces and creative outlets.

We hope that Open Mic Club will become part of our core creative learning programme at Cambridge Junction and we are conscious of ethical issues when applying for short term funding. However, programmes like this require substantial funding, and we are not in a position to use core funding to expand them. Short-term funding allows us to pilot initiatives, but securing long-term

investment remains essential. While we appreciate that the Preventative Health team understands these challenges, short-term funding alone cannot sustain the depth of support young people need.

Young people with complex needs require long-term, consistent support to build relationships, create structure, and focus on development at their own pace. If a project ends due to funding restrictions, we work with youth service providers to ensure participants can continue accessing support. However, when a programme ceases, so does the community it builds. For young people who have experienced trauma, this loss can significantly impact their well-being and discourage them from seeking support elsewhere.

Short-term funding also pressures programmes to deliver quick, measurable outcomes, shifting focus from participant needs to proving immediate success. Effective work with young people—especially those with complex needs—cannot be rushed. We have seen participants take years to feel comfortable engaging, with the following years being transformative. Without adequate time and investment, these relationships and the trust required for real growth cannot develop.

To mitigate the challenges of short-term funding, we have secured support from multiple sources. The Red Hill Trust funded musical equipment, removing a key barrier identified by the participants, and this equipment will continue to be available even as Open Mic Club's funding ends. The Preventative Health funding provided a crucial launch pad for a longer-term project, funding dependant. With additional in-kind and financial support from partners, we extended Open Mic Club, giving participants a platform to showcase their talents. The Health and Discovery Fund did not cover the full cost of co-producing an event, but partners such as Romsey Mill and Lyrix Organix stepped in to provide financial and in-kind support, ensuring young people could share their work and experience self-directed success.

Running Open Mic Club has strengthened our ability to co-design future programmes. We successfully secured a two-year grant from Youth Music to support young artists' development, mental well-being, and aspirations. While this does not replace Open Mic Club, it provides ongoing opportunities for the participants to remain engaged.

Despite these successes, Open Mic Club is not sustainable on short-term funding alone. We will continue seeking long-term funding to ensure young people have access to consistent, high-quality creative support. While piloting new approaches is valuable, the responsibility of fundraising from other sources remains challenging. The risk of losing essential programmes is not just about lost opportunities—it impacts young people's well-being, confidence, and ability to engage with other support networks.

We are grateful to Preventative Health for supporting the creation of a space that fosters the emotional, social, and spiritual well-being of vulnerable young people in Cambridge. To truly realise this potential, we must advocate for long-term, sustainable funding to ensure this vital work continues to make a meaningful difference.



CAMBRIDGE JUNCTION