

WHAT STOPS US FROM BEING WELL?

Evaluation Report (December 2020)



Please hold, your call is important to us!

Why is it so difficult to get the help that I need?

About

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What stops us from being well? (Sept 2019 - Dec 2020)

What stops us from being well? is an Arts Council England funded project that used different artistic mediums - including storytelling, visual arts and theatre - to better understand and creatively explore wellbeing.

The project was led by The Men's Room - an arts & health charity supporting men and trans people who sex work, are homeless or both. Working with a team of creative collaborators, The Men's Room and people who access their services used their artistic outputs to try to influence change in the ways that services in Greater Manchester support people's health and wellbeing.

This short evaluation report synthesises reflections on the project from key team members and participants, exploring each phase of the project in turn and offering some summative thoughts on what was achieved during the project.



Phase 1

Community Reporting

In this phase, People's Voice Media delivered Community Reporting sessions in which participants shared their own experiences of wellbeing and curated these into a set of key findings. These were represented as a short teaser trailer for social media and a soundscape.

What worked particularly well during this phase was that the people involved really set the agenda of what stops them from being well. Also people "loved the way [the stories] were incremental" and as they were gathered ideas began to build on one another. People also learned a lot of new skills during this phase such as media recording practices and storytelling techniques. These can be used in the future by participants. A key strength was that "people had the confidence to share their stories and encourage others to share theirs". Also, the "soundscape was powerful".

Challenges that emerged in this stage included the stories taking too long to upload to the Community Reporter site due to their length and WiFi barriers. This reduced the ability to share them wider than the project and on other platforms. In addition, problems with gaining consent to use the stories emerged because of the group of people the project worked with - some people were 'under the influence' when giving their stories and this could not be taken as informed consent.



Phase 2

Visual Arts

Working with artists Len Grant and Ian McKay, this phase of the project saw participants take the core ideas and themes from their stories and use them to create collages. These artworks were used in an exhibition in HOME, Manchester.

The way in which the artists delivered the sessions in this phase was really well received - "Len and Ian were very down to earth/gentle and brought a lovely energy to the space". Reflecting back on the sessions, one participant stated that "Loved this phase. Very happy memories of a very busy, creative space". This enthusiasm was evident in the participation numbers - this phase involved the largest number of people. Participants were also really pleased with the artworks produced, including the exhibition guide and sketches.

A disappointment in this phase was the impact that COVID-19 had on the exhibition. There was not a 'grand opening' as planned due to the initial national lockdown and instead there was an online event for participants, but not everyone could access the online event. Furthermore, because of subsequent lockdowns/restrictions when the exhibition was installed, footfall was greatly reduced. Additionally, the booklet that was printed for the exhibition could no longer be given out and could only be accessed digitally. The pandemic greatly impacted on audience numbers during this phase.



Phase 3

Legislative Theatre

In this phase, Cardboard Citizens delivered training on legislative theatre. The group then worked with practitioners Katy Rubin and Pat Clinton to devise their own theatre piece that explored the wellbeing issues identified in earlier stages. This was performed via Zoom to a panel of policymakers and at the event participants and the audience co-produced policy proposals that have been revisited and worked on further at subsequent events.

Despite the restrictions that the COVID-19 pandemic brought on the project, the engagement and participation with the Zoom performance were seen as key strengths of the project. People felt it provided an opportunity to "explore topics that would not normally have been considered". It also created a space for "good discussion" about the issues and allowed a diversity of voices to contribute to this. Also, the acting sessions that led to the performance were a great creative release for group members who had found the pandemic hard. As one person said, "I've been struggling these last couple of months... The acting is good... you get to be someone you are not".

The technology was mostly good during the performance, but the sound quality and overall acoustics was an area people felt could be improved. More so, the internet dropped out a couple of times during the livestream, but the technical crew in-place were prepared and kept the event on-track despite these issues.



Overall Reflections

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Key strengths of the project and opportunities for the future

The flexibility and commitment of everyone involved was seen as a key strength of the project. Due to this, each phase has happened and tangible outputs and artistic creations from them have been produced. A connection with the issues being explored and the socially-engaged artistic practice of the collaborators has helped to motivate the whole team to overcome problems when they arose.

Participants had a strong sense of ownership of the project. Enthusiasm and approaches that sought to involve people in equitable ways also helped to cultivate this. More so, the project used creative means as a way of talking about health in different ways. This opened up the conversation to people who would not otherwise have engaged. Partnerships have been formed that are already leading to new work and creative projects, and some group members have become involved in other, similar creative activities as a result of this project. In the future, people would like to arrange a screening of the behind-the-scenes film that was created during the project and use the learning from the project to train other staff members at The Men's Room.

Key weaknesses of the project and threats to future plans

On the whole, The Men's Room team feel that it took more of their time than was anticipated to run a project of this scale. In this sense, the project was underfunded and additional resourcing would have enabled further engagement/action and more support for different elements of the project. This is a key learning for future work - do not underestimate the preparations and behind-the-scenes work that need to be undertaken in an arts and social change project.

COVID-19 had an impact on the project in terms of the exhibition in phase 2 and moving to 'Zoom' for the performance work in phase 3. Needing to adapt, also took more resourcing that was available and budgeted for. However, with imagination and adaptability all phases were still realised. The group would like to continue this work, and the relationships they have established with the creatives involved, but they are also concerned that COVID-19 will reduce funding available for wellbeing, arts and social change projects such as this.



Illustrations by Len Grant.



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