

PLAYING WITH FIRE



Our Creative Vision for
The Men's Room.

The Men's Room

The Men's Room is an arts and social care charity working with people who have multiple and complex needs, specifically supporting male and trans sex workers.

Creativity is at the heart of all we do and we believe it has the power to transform people's lives.

Through playfulness, challenge and creative adventures, we offer people a safe and welcoming space in which to try new things and become inspired:

- Weekly creative sessions
- Art therapy
- Theatre and gallery trips
- Opportunities to work with exceptional artists
- A space where you can be yourself and meet others.

Each creative session gives me a boost. It stays with me.



It's the one thing I look forward to.



Our artistic work is underpinned by practical support and advocacy, working with people on interconnected issues such as:

- Housing
- Drug and alcohol use
- LGBTQI+ rights and safety
- Sexual and mental health
- Education and training
- Volunteering
- Money management.

We work with many other organisations to ensure our participants get the help and support they need and deserve.

Our hope is that through engaging with us, everyone feels happier, healthier and more creative.

Playing with Fire

'Playing With Fire' is our long-term creative vision, co-produced by our participants and developed from a research project called 'Spark.'

Fire has many attributes and Playing with Fire many connotations. It can be...

WELCOMING HYPNOTIC
 TRANSFORMATIONAL RISKY
 BEAUTIFUL CHALLENGING

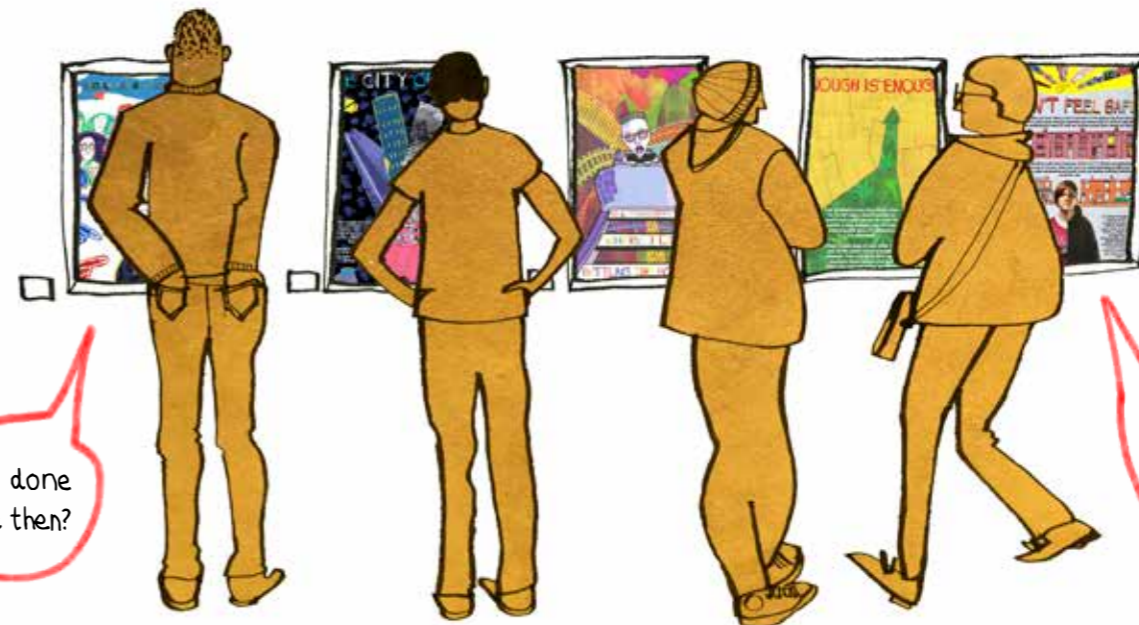
Playing with Fire is a creative vision that encompasses and reflects all of these fiery elements – from planned residencies in the great outdoors to street theatre and pyrotechnic spectacles; from edgy comedy to immersive performance incorporating dance, spoken word and music; from visual arts and design to photographic explorations and exhibitions.

Playing With Fire offers participants opportunities to collaborate with exceptional artists to create works of artistic brilliance which will be shared publicly.

Our aspirational vision challenges and enlivens participants and artists, pushing us all into new, exciting experiences.

Playing With Fire takes us beyond the confines of our own space and connects us with prestigious artistic institutions and cultural events. This encourages a sense of pride and self-belief.

It enables our participants to enjoy and feel a part of the artistic riches of our city, seeing themselves as artists, with their work appreciated by others.



Who's done these then?

It's that lot from the arts and social care charity, The Men's Room.

You can't start a Fire without a Spark

Spark was born out of the pandemic. During 2020-21 we were proud of our ability to react to changing circumstances, re-planning and adapting our creative practice by developing new artistic collaborations online and in socially-distanced spaces.

But we missed our 'homeground' – our own creative space – and we felt the absence of a clearly-articulated, inspiring vision for our future work. Spark was our five-month research and development project funded by Arts Council England. It gave us time and space to get back together, work with our staff team, our participants and many fabulous artists to decide what we wanted our future to look like.

Spark in numbers:

21

Men's Room Participants

9

Artists

Our artists were:

Tom Hogan, Len Grant, Kate McCoy, Kevin Turner, David Judge, Joey Hateley, Carrie English, Harriet Hall & Maura McKee.

Plus:

9 Men's Room staff members
4 Men's Room social work students
6 Men's Room volunteers.

6

Artistic and cultural partners:

TiPP, Contact, Oscars, Walk The Plank, Mustard Tree, interference-arts

16

Creative sessions

48

Hours of communal 'Spark' artistic activity

Plus another 388 hours dedicated to development, planning, revising, meetings and vision making.

All between August and December 2021.

56

Cheese toasties consumed

(approximate and cannot be independently verified)



What we did

- Brought together a diverse group of excellent and innovative artists who developed one-off sessions with The Men's Room participants exploring the theme of Playing with Fire
- Held 16 creative research sessions involving dance, pyrotechnics, forum theatre, spoken word, drama, photography, visual arts and street performance
- Reflected with participants and artists on the artistic content that had been created and where it might lead
- Artists submitted ideas and proposals for future work connected to Playing with Fire
- Participants developed a steering group to input project ideas – with additions such as candle making, iron forges and wild camping. Exploration, escape and adventure were all key themes
- Gathered up the collective ideas to create a simple matchbox-sized vision document
- We've developed a working practice with artists, and have planned some of the projects we'll do.

Icarus flying to the sun.
That's a great idea.



What we Learned

- It's good to be exploratory, and messy when developing a vision
- Doing creative activities to inform research and development makes sense – we need to try things out as part of 'seeing' if it might work
- Co-production happens best when we do it little and often, and build it into our creative structures
- Doing creative things together – staff, participants, artists, volunteers – is a collaborative and levelling process and feeds into how we 'do' co-production
- The generosity of cultural / organisational partners was confirmed during this 'mid' pandemic phase – kindly offering us space and hosting us and our group
- Working with artists from the beginning helps – artists understand our group and culture and they are free to suggest their ideas
- Artists set their own parameters and we aim to find funding together to realise individual projects
- The importance of trying different and challenging art forms – not being afraid to try new things, whether we fail or succeed
- Leave space between projects so we can be flexible in how we work
- We continually underestimate how long everything takes and how much things cost – double our time, double the costs for future!
- Finally, as Dorothy says, 'there's no place like home.' Being back in our own creative space after such a long time is a delight. We noticed, for some participants who experience anxiety, being 'home' made it easier to join us.

What fuels our Fire?

|| 'Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.'

United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 27

Whilst few people would argue that those with multiple and complex needs have a right to social care support, their need for the arts and creativity is often overlooked. At The Men's Room we believe that participation in the arts and in Manchester's extensive cultural scene is a right of everyone we work with.

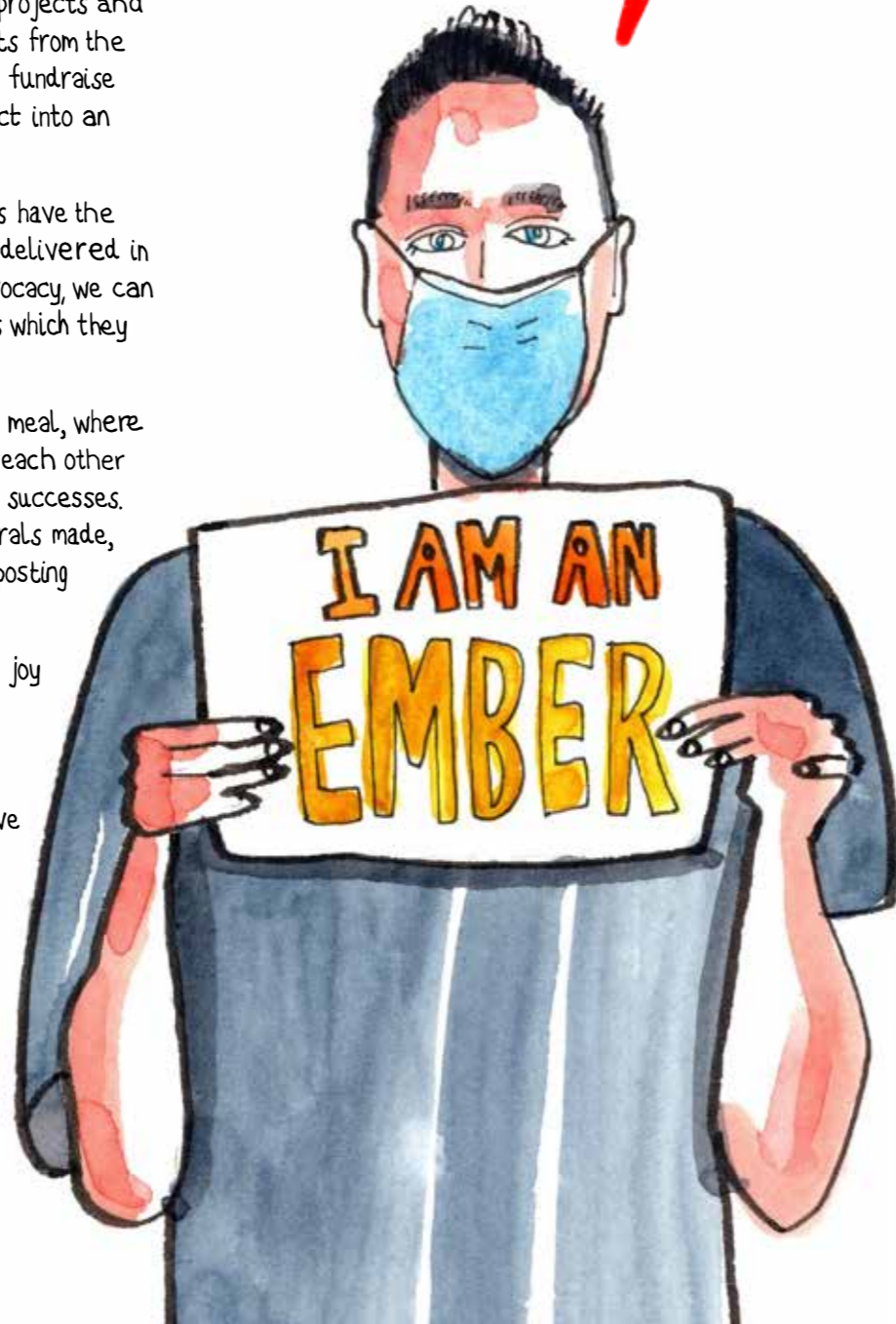
Playing With Fire gives participants real opportunities to co-produce, design and envision our future projects and creative direction. They work with the artists from the outset to agree on the proposal, and then we fundraise accordingly, rather than trying to fit a project into an existing budget.

We are motivated by the belief that the arts have the power to transform people's lives, and when delivered in conjunction with social care support and advocacy, we can empower and enable people to lead the lives which they deserve.

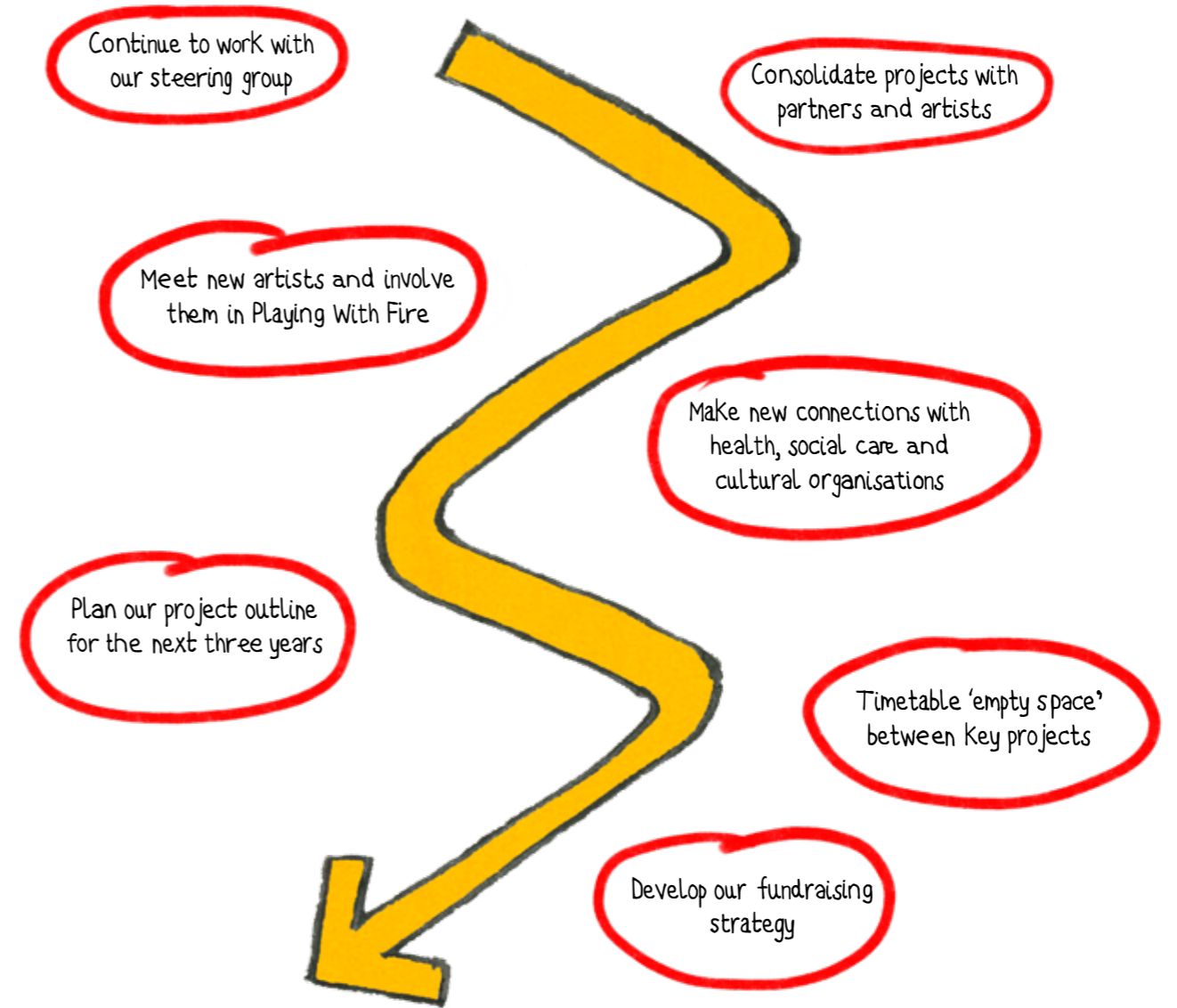
Creative sessions often start with a shared meal, where participants chat informally with staff and each other about their current trials, tribulations and successes. Support needs can then be identified, referrals made, targeted interventions put in place and signposting offered.

Fundamental to how we work is the need for joy and laughter, and even when creating work of high artistic merit, we champion the fun factor. We offer a safe place in which people can be themselves, have a laugh, make positive connections and re-imagine their lives.

Burnt out but with potential.



What's next?



Fan our flames!

Let's be frank – our ambitious vision will only be fully ignited with lots of support. There are many ways that you can help us and be an active part of Playing With Fire...

- Artists – get in touch if you have an idea, or would like to work with us
- Health and social care organisations – do you have an issue you want to explore creatively? Do you have people you could refer to us?
- Cultural partners – can you help us with performance / rehearsal / exhibition / studio spaces?
- Supporters – please connect us to funders or other people you think will be excited by Playing With Fire
- Rich philanthropists – let's talk and see if we can help you spend your money.



Thanks to:

The Men's Room participants, staff, volunteers and students; all artists, cultural partners, health and social care organisations and supporters for being the sparks behind our fire.

We're really excited about Playing with Fire.

Get in touch if you'd like to get involved.



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