

Our Space



Voices and Reflections



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Our Space is proud to be funded by the National Lottery Community Fund



Voices and Reflections of Our Space

The Our Space project began in 2009 after inviting people sleeping rough outside the theatre and using drugs in the toilets to come in and have a chat with us over a hot drink. Now in its tenth year, the project continues to evolve and respond to the needs of the community.

This document aims to give a voice to some of the many different experiences of Our Space captured throughout the first year of new funding from the National Lottery Community Fund. Through interviews with the people involved in delivering and participating in the project, the piece embraces the complexity of human life, celebrates the progress and achievements of participants and offers insight into the diversity of individual cases.

The Our Space project is often referred to as a 'journey' or a 'safe-space'. This document looks to unpick this by exploring what it means and why drama and performance has such a profound impact and transformation on people's lives. We hope this may, in the words of the people who do it, explain how and why the project changes lives and is so vital to our ever changing, diverse city.

Sara Baldwin

Engagement Manager
Theatre Royal Plymouth





INTRODUCTION

Who is it for?

The Our Space project is a literal 'life line' for adults in the community who are identified as having multiple and complex needs. Mental health, addictions, homelessness, abuse, offending behaviour are just some of the many issues in life that participants may be dealing with, but there is no such thing as a typical case.

What does the project offer?

Community Hubs across the city: The project starts beyond the theatre, in 'hubs' across selected venues and services in the city that are working with adults with multiple and complex needs. Taking the Our Space offer out into these venues provides potential participants the opportunity to try it out in the space that's familiar to them. This is usually, but not always a person's first encounter with the project.

Regular, weekly drama workshops: Participants are invited to engage in the weekly morning workshop; simply referred to as 'Our Space'. For some who haven't attended a community hub, the weekly morning workshop is their first experience of the programme. 'Graduates' of the morning group move up to 'Project X' which takes place in the afternoon at the Theatre. The two groups are very similar in method and principle, 'Project X' just offers participants a next step on for those who are ready and a slightly different challenge, if they want it.

There is a taxi service provision open to all participants, which collects and returns people who require transport from the city centre to the Theatre's Production and Learning Centre, TR2 where the morning group workshops take place.

Performances: When and where appropriate, each group create a bespoke 'show and share' style performance. This could be a low-key event in a studio at the end of a term, out in the community or a more sophisticated production with the full resources available from the Theatre Royal Plymouth. The outcome is led by the group. Usually the

performances are devised; which means they are created and developed by the performer in the group and often draw on life experiences and personal untold stories. These ideas are then shaped by the professional facilitators and directors who work with the groups; they give these stories dramatic shape and take care that everyone is happy and feeling confident.

Membership: Once a participant has attended an Our Space session three times, they become a member. As a member of the project, each person is provided with a pack that includes an Our Space t-shirt, membership card and project policy. The membership card entitles the individual to discounted hot drinks at both theatre venues, along with signing members up to receiving standby ticket offers to see shows such as the pantomime, the opera and musicals that tour to the Theatre Royal Plymouth.

Social: As well as the offers attached to being a member, the project regularly offers free theatre tickets in the Drum Theatre, so that participants can not only see lots of different shows, but also have an opportunity to socialise with others from the project outside of the weekly drama sessions. Opportunities for one-off workshops with touring companies, team building trips to National Parks, coffee meet-ups during holidays and volunteering on other community events are all offered to members throughout the year.

Why be involved?

At every level of the project, people often refer to their experiences as a 'journey' so here is a selection of different people telling their story about the project from their perspectives. Our journey starts at the Community Hub, as this is often where people experience their first intervention the Our Space project. The stories then move through the different strands and show how the project progresses through the hearts and minds of the people involved.

Tiffany

Community Hub Facilitator

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Tiffany is part of the facilitation team, working out in the community in venues across the city to deliver a block of five weekly sessions lasting a couple of hours.

*"We have a real laugh. And laughing is contagious; it bonds experience and inspires trust."*

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### **What happens at an Our Space Community Hub workshop?**

In almost all cases, everybody is terrified because drama is a new thing. There is usually an intense mixture of fear, doubt, scepticism, but just enough hope to be able to make a circle. Then we'll slowly introduce ways that ignite the imagination and free up our senses, so that we can remember how we feel, express ourselves, and find the courage to do new things.

### **Do you always start in a circle?**

Yes, always. The circle is an ancient way of holding space; where people can openly see, listen, feel, share and give democratically and on their own terms. That's what we're promoting from the start. That's fundamental to all of our work.

### **How does drama differ from other group work?**

I think what makes drama special is that fooling about is encouraged, in a very playful way. Adults (from any walk of life and whatever their circumstances) lose their ability to play and so by being playful we regain and nurture a part of ourselves that has been neglected. Very simple drama exercises and games offer ways to access and reconnect to that inner child which is in all of us. Just to play — it's simple.





Dom Moore Photography

**You mention 'games'... Surely that's really difficult for people who may have anxiety, depression and low self-esteem?**

Not as much as you'd imagine. It's fun. We have a real laugh. And laughing is contagious; it bonds experience and inspires trust. Games are often fun, safe ways of releasing tension; be that physical trauma, emotional fatigue or simply from thinking too much about something for too long! Without getting too deep or serious, a game takes us out of our comfort zone, which is sometimes a place that's become stagnant. And from week to week I can see how participants settle into it; they understand the expectation and so it becomes less scary.

**Yes, but how do you prevent people from feeling stupid?**

I don't prevent it or try to control it, as that's their experience. Taking personal ownership of feelings, whatever they may be, is very empowering. Ironically, feeling stupid is like the gateway; it's a threshold to go through; a rite of passage! Feeling stupid allows people to express their feelings, it sets them free; and that's liberating, it builds confidence. There's a very real transformation happening right in front of me. And we're all in it together so nobody feels like they're the only one being stupid. That way, all the benefits are shared too.

**So what sort of 'games' do you play?**

Ok, so most importantly, it's not about winning, or being the best or even doing it right! The games are inclusive; easy and low risk. The rule of a 'game' creates an interaction, which could be just swapping chairs with someone and changing where you sit. It's as simple as that. Ideally, we'd then build to make eye-contact, explore exchanging words and take it from there. Even the most reluctant, resistant people can't resist the games because laughter and fun is raw; we feel it in our bones, in our gut, and it feels good; everyone deserves some of that, no matter who you are!

# Steph

## Our Space Participant

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Steph was referred through Plymouth Mind Recovery College to participate in the Community Hub in September 2018. By the end of the course, she signed up to the Our Space sessions at TR2 and has been coming ever since.

*"I thought, that's weird but I can see they're having fun, so I allowed myself to try."*

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### **What made you decide to sign up to the Our Space hub at Plymouth Mind?**

I'd become quite isolated, I'd got stuck inside myself more and more and this project was an amazing opportunity to bring me out of myself.

### **What were your hopes from the hub?**

I just wanted, needed to have interaction with other people, which was really important.

### **How did the first session go?**

When I first came in, I was a bit late and I walked into the room and people were asking me to do games and put myself out there. I just thought, no, no, no, no, no!

### **So what changed?**

Well everyone else in the room was also coming from a weird place as well; they all had mental health problems too, but what I started to notice was that they all looked like they were enjoying themselves, they all looked really happy. All of the scales from their eyes, so to speak, had fallen away and they were actually clearly enjoying themselves. I thought, that's weird but I can see they're having fun, so I allowed myself to try.

### **So when you joined in, what did you notice?**

We were working in pairs, so I was working with somebody less confident than me, if that was possible! I wanted to help them somehow.

And that was a major thing that I got from the workshop, above everything else.

### **How did working with a partner help you?**

Because I isolate myself a lot, I enjoyed being with this other person doing the simplest of things and I enjoyed having something to offer. I really made an effort for her sake. I really tried to share some of the excitement I felt with my partner; it made me feel somehow alive again making a connection with somebody.

### **And in that moment, did that make you feel proud of yourself?**

In a way. It reminded me of a part of myself I'd not seen for a long time. I'm qualified to teach and professionally I've done all sorts of facilitation and hosting of meetings, that's a natural part of me that's just died. Mental health makes you forget about all of those things. So a lot of this, at Our Space has been reminding me of my own skills. I've got a lot of stuff going for me that I'd completely forgotten about because I've been so depressed and fed up with myself.

### **How did it feel visiting that old part of yourself again?**

It's helped me because my default position is to not do this, and not do that and I get a lot of social anxiety. I was reminded that I used to facilitate and do a lot of things and although most of the time I'm running scared in my own head, I am a capable person given an opportunity. And a silly game was all that it took to remind me!



# Billie-Jo

## Our Space Participant

Billie-Jo recently joined Our Space in October 2018 having completed the community hub delivered at Plymouth Mind in September 2018.

### How's the project working out for you?

I'm still getting used to lots of people in one group but at the beginning I couldn't even get to the Theatre Royal for the taxi, and now I just get on the bus and get down there on my own! It's given me a focus to do stuff. Like my mum, she came to the end 'show and share' at the Plymouth Mind hub and she couldn't believe the things I was doing, she saw a real difference. She saw me talking to people and before, for a long time, I couldn't even leave the house.

### What impact has the project had on your life?

I feel different. I'm still struggling, I'm still signed off work, I'm still in treatment, but I feel like I actually look forward to having something to do. Whereas before I was doing it because I knew I had to do something. It was to keep me going as I'm not used to not working, and now I've got people to meet, friends to say hello to. I can just message them anytime if I'm struggling outside the group. Just knowing I've got somewhere to go and be part of something.

### Have you been to see any of the shows?

I wanted to for ages but I didn't work up the courage, I can't go out of my house in the dark, so a friend from Our Space came to meet me and I went on the bus with her. I went to see a show in the Drum called 'Rocky Shock' I didn't know if I'd cope being shut in the theatre, but I did that, and then I got on the bus, in the dark and I did that. Then, another time I went to see the Project X group perform, that one in The Clipper, which was really good.

### Can you imagine yourself in Project X?

I don't know! I'd like to, but I don't know yet. I think just bringing me out of my shell here, for me, it's more about being around people and getting my anxieties lower than actually being an actress or whatever. But I know that all of the acting, drama stuff they teach in Our Space helps me be a bit more confident.

### How does the Our Space work make you feel more confident?

I don't know, like I can't talk on the phone to people, or fill out forms or any of that, I can't do, I need help with. But I go in there, and we do this thing in a circle, and it's like whoah, I don't even know you but I feel ok doing it because we're all here.

### What do the drama facilitators do to make you feel comfortable?

Well it's like in the Mind hub as well, we're not forced to do anything, it's not like being in school and your drama teacher says 'get up there and do that!' If I keep my head down and I don't want to make eye contact, I know that's absolutely fine, that's ok. Maybe next time, I will. That's the way it goes. I can build up to it if I want to.

*"For me, it's more about being around people and getting my anxieties lower than actually being an actress or whatever. But I know that all of the acting, drama stuff they teach in Our Space helps me be a bit more confident."*

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# Jade

## Our Space Lead Practitioner

Jade is the lead practitioner for the regular Our Space morning group. The group meets for 2 hours on a Thursday at TR2.



Dom Moore Photography

*"It's a very, very simple thing but the consequences of that are massively powerful for that individual."*

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### **What is a drama workshop?**

So you'd walk into the session and I'd greet you and everybody, and we do a really basic check-in; your name and maybe one word to describe how you're feeling, whatever feels right, and then we'll do a couple of warm up games and they tend to be linked to the 'meat' or the bigger issues of the session. Specifically, we might play a simple game like 'circle dash' where you can make (or avoid) eye contact and swap places with others.

### **What's the purpose of a game like that?**

So, it's a really light, low risk introduction into connecting with people or not, so if you're feeling anxious or worried and you have a whole host of things going on in your life, you have the power to make eye contact or not. It's a very, very simple thing but the consequences of that are massively powerful for that individual.

### **How do you keep 'a safe space'?**

I appreciate that 'safe space' is thrown around a lot, but I try and keep the space very neutral to avoid it becoming a therapy session. I am not a therapist but the work that I do is therapeutic. We really keep it focussed on skills and being creative in the space. Rather than try to delve into any problems or issues that people have. I feel that being involved in any creative project, whether that be learning and developing drama or theatre skills over two hours, or being involved in a bigger production is inherently therapeutic in its own right.

### **How do you introduce drama to people who've never done it before?**

If I work with adult professional actors, I can gauge that they're confident and know what they're doing, they know the vocabulary. If I'm working with Our Space I'm aware that they've maybe never done drama before. So, I don't use jargon, I keep it simple, I'm conscious not to alienate people in the words I use. I give people the opportunity to approach it and come with where they're at; I work with what's in the room.

There's lots of different reasons why people access the group, but most of them are at a point where they want to make a change, or they're in need of support and they're acknowledging that they need that support. I think they're at a point in their life where things haven't been great for them, where everything has been stripped away from them, and they throw themselves into it, like nothing I see in any other work capacity or group that I do, because they have nothing to lose.

### **In this first year of the new project funding, what has success looked like within the Our Space project?**

Everyone has a different journey. It could be that somebody has loads of confidence, but they can't work in a group; they can't listen or collaborate. It could be that they were really anxious or nervous about it, but by the end they are advocates for the group, joining in and bringing their friends. Or it could be something like not wanting to go out and leave the house, so coming to the theatre to see a matinee is the first step to positive change.

# Kate

## Our Space Participant

Kate joined Our Space in October 2018 having completed the community hub delivered at Plymouth Mind.

### How did you get involved?

My GP referred me to Mind; when they said that 'Our Space' was coming I didn't want to go!

### So what happened at the hub at Plymouth Mind?

I remember turning up, I felt really sick, I didn't want to speak to anyone, and I just thought "why am I here?" I just thought "how is this going to help me?" I felt like an idiot! ... After I'd been twice, I couldn't not come back!

### So you noticed a change?

When you do stuff out of your comfort zone it builds confidence, even though you don't realise it. And it builds trust 'cos you're having to work with people and rely on people, and I'm rubbish at that because I've had to grow up fast and be very independent. So, trusting and relying on people is hard, but in that space it's safe. And if you don't want to join in, nobody judges you or gets angry or upset, they're just encouraging.

### What is it about the Our Space project, do you think, that creates this 'safe space'?

I think nobody walks in with a judgement of you, and nobody's trying to change you, everyone just wants the best for everybody. You go to a lot of therapies and you're told how and what your life will be, and you come out feeling failed because you think 'I haven't done that or I haven't hit that mark' whereas here it's ok.

### So there is a difference then between this and other things that you've tried as therapy?

*"We can just be us for a few hours when we come, without having to pretend anything to anyone."*

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When you suffer from mental health, you hear a lot of "come on pick yourself up, pull yourself together", but we can just come to Our Space and be ourselves. We can just be us for a few hours when we come, without having to pretend anything to anyone.

### Do you feel like you do have to pretend at Our Space?

You know that when you come, everybody's there with their issues and that somewhere, somehow there's a brokenness. I've got to make really good friends who I can just talk to, somebody who understands. I mean we all walk our own journey don't we, but to have that empathy and know there are other people who struggle doesn't mean you're weird or can't go on.

### How does this compare or compliment other therapies and group work?

When there has been brokenness in your life, either as a child or as an adult, the scars are always there, and then other things come along and the scars re-open. So something like this is invaluable because it's constant. You can come even when you're feeling better, and they don't say 'you can't come anymore. That's it, it's over for you. You're fixed. You're done.' It's more than just come in and build your confidence, it's like you're really welcome. It feels to me like I come home.

### How do you know it's working for you? Are there any clear indicators?

I just heard that I've got a job interview, I've not had a job or an interview for years. I've not had the confidence to go for anything and I know that if I hadn't come here I wouldn't have had that. I don't know if I'll get the job or not, but just going to the interview is huge; I'd normally cancel. I'm going to go into that interview and sit in front of people and actually talk to them.





# Mark Bignell

Chief Executive, Hamoaze House

*"People that have lived in the shadows of life, they are suddenly stepping out into the light, literally doing that."*

## **How does the Theatre Royal's Our Space project benefit and impact the people accessing Hamoaze House?**

People that have lived in the shadows of life, they are suddenly stepping out into the light, literally doing that. I think that is a problem for a lot of people, they carry a lot of shame, a lot of guilt, a lot of inadequacies, they feel very judged by society and they're very good at masking and hiding that; stuff that they don't tell us about. And that will influence the decisions that they make. So they have to find the courage and the strength to step into the light.

## **What positive influence do you see Our Space as having?**

People who come to Hamoaze, have very little inside to make them feel good about themselves, or about anything at all, so they are continually looking for things outside of themselves to make them feel better and ultimately it's things like drink and drugs and inappropriate relationships. So to establish some things that they love and enjoy doing, and to get a sense of self-esteem, self-worth and a purpose and some positivity starts to help them build some things to feel good about. Therefore they become less dependent on external things to make them feel good.

# Kevin Doel

Counsellor, Broadreach

*"They grow as an individual, they start to look and find themselves; find out who they are, the mask gets taken away."*

## **How does the Theatre Royal's Our Space project benefit and impact residents at Closereach?**

Our guys are lonely and sad because they hide themselves due to their addiction. But to actually go outside and start taking responsibility and maturing and growing up -that's what I see within them through doing 'Our Space'; they grow as an individual, they start to look and find themselves; find out who they are, the mask gets taken away. Everybody actively involved in addiction wears a lot of masks because they don't want to see or feel that vulnerability or show it in case people manipulate that. But there, in that environment they encourage them to feel the emotions and deal with their vulnerability.

## **What positive influence do you see Our Space as having?**

They're doing great work outside in the theatre, but they are 'finding themselves' on the inside, that's what I hear and see, and so the two together are really complementary. That's when it all comes together.

# Olivia Craig

CEO, Plymouth Mind

*"Creative activities are a fantastic way to support people to self-manage their mental health challenges, and the response to the Our Space project was incredibly positive."*

## **How has the 'Our Space' project complimented activities run at Plymouth Mind?**

We were able to offer the Our Space workshops as part of our overall Recovery College offering. It was a perfect fit as we had been asked about drama workshops in the past, but we didn't have the capacity or expertise to deliver these. Creative activities are a fantastic way to support people to self-manage their mental health challenges, and the response to the Our Space project was incredibly positive.

## **Have you noticed a significant difference in any of the participants? If so, what?**

Yes, hugely! Some of those who attended the Our Space project were initially incredibly hesitant, self-conscious and nervous about taking part. Some of the participants have since attended other Our Space activity, because of their very positive experience with the sessions at Plymouth Mind. Two of the people in particular who attended, have started to volunteer on some of our other projects and we do believe the Our Space project boosted their self-confidence and self-esteem enormously. It has lead us to think about how we can introduce drama as a longer term group within Plymouth Mind because we have seen the positive role it has to play in recovery.

## **Why do you think it's beneficial for the project to be working in the community and get beyond the theatre?**

For many people who are already struggling with their mental health, and those in particular who are experiencing social anxiety, the 'theatre' can seem like a daunting place to go to initially. If you have never gone to the theatre, you are unlikely to make it your first step on your journey to improving your mental health. By linking with those already well established community support hubs, like Plymouth Mind, it is a great way to introduce people to drama and the theatre in an environment where they already feel comfortable. As we have seen with the Our Space project at Plymouth Mind, once the participants got more involved, the Theatre then became somewhere they were confident in attending. We know that 2 of the participants went to the Panto at the Theatre Royal in December 2018 – the first trip to the theatre for both of them and certainly the Our Space project contributed hugely to breaking down those barriers.

# Julie Howes

Director, Longreach

*"The welcome we receive in whatever capacity, either to see a play or on arrival at an Our Space session; it makes us feel like royalty. They are so accommodating and friendly and give the women a real sense of value. Coming from rape, abuse, trauma, crack-houses and prostitution; they walk into the Theatre Royal Plymouth and they feel valued. They feel it."*

# Lee and Darren

## Project X Participants

Lee and Darren both identify as being artists and they started treatment at Closereach in September 2018. Through Closereach they were introduced to the Our Space morning group. In January 2019 they both began to transition into Project X.

*"This is the reason I'm staying in Plymouth now."*

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### **What was your fist impression of Our Space?**

**Darren** Like wow, exciting, there's a magic in this.

**Lee** Before I got here, I worked in theatre and got involved in everything that goes with it; lots of substance misuse, I got caught up in that. Crashed 'n burned. Got five years recovery. Relapsed again. Mental health issues, PTSD, long term imprisonment and used substances again to manage my mental health. As soon as I found out about this I wanted to get involved, it's great as it's in my life blood, but I'm clean now so it's a journey of rediscovery, my past, my voice and my creativity.

### **What are you getting from being involved?**

**Lee** When you're broken and smashed from addiction, you lose your integrity, your dignity, your ability to communicate, to be social. You're totally cut off from your feelings, your minds just a melting pot. So what it's given me is permission to grow, change, communicate and use that emotional language of drama and take that back into rehab.

**Darren** Yeah, to have emotional authenticity and honesty; that I didn't have before. It's been a rebirth. It's

allowed me to find myself, to perform in a way that I always wanted to and create a persona about myself that I wouldn't have been able to find. To live an alternative version of myself and then become it. I wouldn't have been able to find that without Our Space.

### **As artists, do you think it's true you have to suffer for your art? Is there some kind of balance between your genius and pain?**

**Lee** It isn't set up for therapy but change grows, it happens in the mix, I guess I've been the tortured artist in the past; I just thought that was the way of the world. I guess for me now, being an artist is about trust and being trusted and with that, being trusting with others. We're all vulnerable but there is a catharsis in Our Space for me, I don't hold onto that pain anymore. There's a freedom and liberation there where I've come back to my current space and not stuck in the boring fear of the future.

**Darren** We're both natural performers and we slipped into something that has opened an opportunity for us. This is the reason I'm staying in Plymouth now.

**Lee** Same.



# Sue

## Peer Mentor for Our Space and Project X Participant

Sue is a member of Project X and a long-standing participant of the whole programme. Sue is now a mentor to new participants; offering support, guidance and signposting them to information, if they want it.

### **First of all, what is a peer mentor?**

I'm there for the new-comers and the original people that have been coming for a while. It's to encourage them to continue coming, to answer any questions and also to bring them along when there are tickets for the theatre. Often they need somebody there to show them how to get the tickets, show them where to go, and also explain sometimes what the play is about. It can be quite daunting the first few times until you get used to it all.

### **The mentors offer something really unique. Why is it important for the participants to have mentors? What can they offer that a staff member can't?**

Because I've been there, I've started from where they've started.

### **What experiences of life do you share with the participants?**

I came along to Our Space not having a clue what I was doing, what it would be about, having never done drama before. I suffered a lot of mental health issues, I was isolated, no confidence whatsoever. I've also come through addictions, so I've got that in common with the guys who do rehab.

### **How do your experiences benefit participants?**

Well I can relate to them and I really know where they're coming from.

### **What made you want to become a mentor? Doesn't it encourage you to re-live those challenges?**

I've been on a journey that Our Space has taken me on, I'm in a place now where I have confidence, I have friends, I can give back. I've got so much from Our Space.

### **What makes a good mentor?**

Well I did a whole course about it and that helped. It was all about what's expected of you, and how to keep boundaries, and you've got to be non-judgemental and you're not even actually supposed to give advice. You're just somebody who can signpost people in the direction, if they want information. Just like somebody who is a listening ear really. But you're not a social worker, a psychiatrist or a psychologist, just a befriender really. Somebody who can listen and be supportive of where they're at. Not trying to change them but just accepting them. I like to describe it as an 'island of positivity'. Nobody can tell you how to be a good mentor as everyone's got something different to give.

# Clive

## Steering Committee Member

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Clive is a member of Project X and has been on the Our Space Steering Committee for twelve months. Clive's relationship with the Theatre Royal Plymouth is intimately bound up in his work as a 'Big Issue' vendor, as his pitch is right outside the theatre.

### **How did you get involved with the Theatre Royal?**

I got a free ticket to a show on a Friday night that they'd given to the Big Issue Office for homeless people, as a gesture. I didn't know how I was going to react to it, I thought I'd have to sit by the door and run out, but I watched it and I enjoyed that. I was invited afterwards to talk to the cast, but no way! Then I saw in the newspaper the next day that the show I saw was done by people who were just like me, you know, with problems, addictions, mental health. And I thought "O right, this is my cup of tea now. I want some of this." From there on, I plotted, and within a few weeks I got myself a pitch outside the theatre just to get closer to what was happening.

### **So what was going on for you at the time then?**

I'm bi-polar and I was psychotic at the time, I was in a real bad state, it doesn't show to people on the surface when I'm selling the Big Issue because I'm very professional. It's a bit like a swan; on the surface I look really calm but underneath I'm flapping about and dying on the inside.

### **How long have you been involved with the project?**

2 years and this is my second Christmas on the theatre pitch, it's a big deal, as it's a big pitch. But I've got the confidence now from doing Our Space. I know I can stand and talk well.

### **Have you always been able to do that? Have you always had that confidence?**

I was barely speaking at all when I first joined, you'd be lucky to hear me say "I'm Clive and I'm feeling shit" and that's all the Our Space team could get out of me for a good couple of months.

### **It sounds like you're in a really good place right now. Of course, I'm aware that with mental health problems, it's swings and roundabouts, and it comes and goes, so how does the project continue to support you now?**

It's a bit like my life-boat in life. Any time I'm not feeling very well, I just think pitch up at the theatre, think theatre, and the nasty thoughts drift away. It's safe there. I got a base of friends there, I am welcome outside the door, I can go there any hour I like, theatre is my life now. I'm going in that one direction and I'm sticking with it. I just want to do my best so that I can be the best at what I'm doing now and that's 'cos of the theatre.

### **You were invited to become a member of the steering committee? What does that involve?**

It's a chance for Our Space members to have a say in the future of the next four years of funding and basically how the project goes forward.

### **Has being on the steering committee changed your view of the project?**

Well it's changing me! In a good way! I'm always coming up with ideas; ideas that are on the right track.

*"It's safe there. I got a base of friends there, I am welcome outside the door, I can go there any hour I like, theatre is my life now. I'm going in that one direction and I'm sticking with it."*

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# Lee

## Project X Lead Practitioner

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Lee is the Project X Lead
Practitioner and Director



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At what point do Our Space participants graduate to Project X?

From what I pick up, they're turning up regularly, they have a 'hunger' for it, they start to swell with a bit more passion for making, they kind of get hooked into a creative thing and show signs that they are ready for more. Something that perhaps the morning group can't offer.

How does Project X differ do you think?

Maybe the afternoon group offers something more focussed, lengthier, but with familiarity. A continuation from the morning group.

Is it more performance focussed?

Yes, it's a project by project approach, for the next four years we'll be building year on year in our size so that in the final year there is something with a bigger production budget.

So you have a whole year to build and create a show?

That means we can take our time. Sometimes you'll come to our session and you wouldn't think that we were rehearsing for a show, it's quite exploratory and based on building skills. But then we will hone in on something more specific.

When you're working with non-professional actors, how do you draw out these incredible stories and invite them to take such phenomenal risks?

A project gathers its own momentum and the space opens up something that in a way draws us to speak, divulge and

share. Something is built week after week, moment after moment, so I think sometimes people end up doing things almost despite themselves.

They are very interesting people. Their stories of transformation, growth and rebirth are very powerful. And their courage! Turning up time after time with whatever challenge they've got and they'll never acknowledge that, they're quite humble about it.

For those people who haven't seen the work of Project X and didn't see the show 'Words Like Kites', in a nutshell, what was the event like?

The concept was a 'Story Café' and it took place in an old pub that's been redesigned for a new community purpose. It sells tea, coffee and cake now but it was a notorious drinking establishment on Union Street, just down the road from the Theatre. In the show, the audience would come in, were shown to their seat by the performers, who were all waiting staff. There was a menu on the table and you could order tea, coffee, cake but most importantly they could order a story. And the story would be delivered to the table, so across the whole café you'd have little micro performances happening simultaneously.

Do you think the restrictions of not being skilled actors offer more creative opportunities to make and devise engaging work?

I much prefer working with non-actors. I mean a trained actor may be able to better interpret a script, but in terms of generating our own work, non-actors are much more exciting. A trained actor would never come up with this stuff!

Jason

Long term member of Project X

Jason has been through Our Space and Project X, performing a number of times in Project X productions.

Before we focus on this year's achievements, how would you say that the project has generally, on reflection, helped you? Let's start with Our Space.

At first Our Space helped me build confidence, find myself as a person, not be frightened of myself, teach me communication skills because I was a broken man. Our Space opened up doors to the social network, going to the theatre, which I never in my life thought I'd enjoy, but actually finding out that I did quite enjoy that.

How about Project X?

I'm still not keen on acting, but I will do it. It's opened up my mind to all sorts of things like creative writing. Our Space is an amazing project, because it brings people together from all walks of life and different backgrounds. There is a diverse community of students, homeless people, people suffering from dependencies, mental health, abuse; we're all together in a safe environment where we can create something amazing and show it to members of the public.

What other things have you got involved with at the Theatre Royal?

Well they inspired me to take part and gave me the opportunity to do a project with the Young Company for five weeks. Watching and working with young people; helping them, signposting them, them asking me questions! It was an incredible experience. I realised that most people are just a product of the environment.

What are you doing now? How has all this influenced you over the last year?

I done a foundation art course for a year. I had to learn to read and write again so I did English and Maths. I got 60 UCAS points, and a distinction and realised that I was, in fact, quite clever. I got two unconditional offers to go to university. Lots of wonderful things happening that I never thought would happen.

And now your creative writing work has been picked up by the Talent Development programme at the Theatre and you're involved with that?

Well it didn't start out as a play or anything, I just write epic poetry at the bus stop, but we are turning a piece of my writing into a short play which will be part of a festival of work at the Theatre. My stuff is spoken with words people are too scared to say. I've realised true poetry is about being honest and drawing people in. If you can't be honest and true in your poetry then it'll be a load of shit.

Hopes for the next year ahead?

I hope to carry on creative writing. Maybe do a bigger play. I'm full of ideas. It's exploding in me.

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Don Moore Photography

Sara Baldwin

Engagement Manager at Theatre Royal Plymouth

"We're really passionate about making sure our work is based on people's real needs and wants and that we take a person-centred approach."

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What do you think accounts for the success of Our Space?

If you have somewhere that makes you feel welcome, provides some regularity and routine, with people you recognise and know, showing you genuine and on-going support, then you start feeling valued, start to regain and rebuild some self-worth, recognise who you are and what you can contribute.

Our Space is complimentary to other services a person might access, or as a stand-alone offer it can provide someone with simple things like a connection to others, something to look forward to and a place to escape from the outside world for a few hours each week.

Our Space provides stability for people through the infrastructure of the Theatre Royal Plymouth, it's so much more than just a weekly drama workshop. We've really worked on maintaining and developing that over the years and it is always highlighted when people who have come to the city for rehabilitation and attended the project, choose to relocate to Plymouth after their treatment, so that they can continue to access it and become part of the wider theatre community.

Our Space as a project has been running since 2009 and this is the second round of National Lottery Funding. How has the project improved?

28 We've really listened and consulted with users of the project, incorporated their suggestions and what they've wanted. We've done that through steering groups, regular

evaluation session and just chatting to people regularly to see how it's going for them. We have a really clear structure for the staff working on the project which helps to keep the programme robust and moving forward.

We couldn't run the programme without building and maintaining strong working partnerships with local organisations and services. Having regular check-ins and meetings with service managers, support/key workers and focus groups with those accessing the services, we are able to continually reassess what the barriers are that would potentially prevent someone new from taking part in the project. We're really passionate about making sure our work is based on the needs of the community, the project wouldn't be what it is today if we weren't invested in working from the ground-up, and taking a person centred approach.

Participants seem to really get involved and it becomes a really meaningful anchor in their week, doesn't it? How does the project achieve that?

The peer support at Our Space is really something quite special. The welcoming, non-judgemental environment created by the people in the room is often the thing that new participants find most surprising and the most rewarding. I think that's because of the real mix of people that the project engages with, there is strength in that diversity. People from all walks of life, coming together, getting to know one another, discovering things they maybe didn't know about themselves and having some fun.

Why is it important that each round of funding lasts four years?

Building relationships takes time. You need to gain trust, and take the time to allow change to happen, it's a different for each person. Because the project has been running for a substantial amount of time we are now in a position where we have many long term examples of the project's impact and how it has played a part in the transformation of people's lives. It's pretty incredible really.

How do you build on and develop the infrastructure for Our Space?

We have become experts in working with multiple and complex needs and socially-engaged practice is at the heart of what we do in the Engagement and Learning department at TRP, so for me, over the next four years it's about sharing our learning and developing a blue print of the project that can then potentially be taken as a framework and used by others.

The project speaks for itself through the voices of the participants. They have not only become part of our theatre community, but they are also our colleagues, artists on our stages, and our practitioners connecting local communities through the arts.

It's powerful stuff.







