



Photo by Emily Appleton Photography

Issues, Opportunities and Developments: Exploring progression routes

Our Space: Phase two Evaluation Report, Spring 2025

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Our Space Evaluation

Our Space is a creative theatre programme that works with adults with multiple and complex needs, including people with lived experience of homelessness, mental health issues, substance misuse, reoffending, or those who feel socially isolated. The programme provides a safe space for participants to come together to explore drama processes, techniques, and skills. The weekly sessions provide a supporting environment and transformational experiences that lead to improved mental health and well-being, developed friendships, relationships, and community connections, along with new opportunities, increased resilience, and positivity towards the future.

Our Space has had considerable success over the past 15 years, having been formed in 2009 and receiving an unprecedented three rounds of funding from the National Lottery due to the uniqueness of the programme and its proven success. Our Space is loved by participants, who speak highly of the programme and ways it has changed and enhanced their lives. However, the success of the programme has led to a long waiting list of people unable to join, meaning that the current model is not sustainable. A key question being addressed by the programme is how to do justice to those waiting on the list whilst not moving participants on too soon.

An independent evaluation has been commissioned by Our Space and funded by the National lottery to evaluate and provide evidence of the programme's benefits, strengths, outcomes, and areas for development. The purpose being to celebrate the successes of the programme and explore sustainable funding opportunities and partners to continue the good work of the past 15 years. The evaluation is taking place in phases:

Phase One: Understanding Our Space: Participants and Outcomes.

Phase Two: Issues, Opportunities and Developments: Exploring progression routes.

This phase two report outlines new directions being taken, including the forming of a new Progression group to provide a stepping stone between the existing Morning group and Production group. The report presents case studies that draw upon the voices and experiences of Our Space members of the three groups along with hopes and concerns regarding the future of the programme. A total of eight members and one parent took part. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The findings contribute towards Our Space planning going forwards to support members' aims, hopes and goals.

Special thanks go to the participants for sharing their stories, thoughts, and experiences of the Our Space programme.

Participants were given a choice to include their names or remain anonymous. Seven participants choose to include their names. Two participants choose to remain anonymous. Pseudonyms have been used to represent these participants.

Amy Farley, Alan, Caroline Thomas, Clint Granville, David Sparkes, Elisha, Jenny, De-Ville-Warne, Tracey and Zoe Luscombe.



Photo by Emily Appleton Photography

Report Overview

Morning group *"100%, it's changed people's lives" (Tracey)*

Alan and Jenny share their experiences of the Morning group and the positive impact it is having on their lives. Alan's mum, Tracey, also discusses the life changing impact that Our Space has had on her son's life. Members talk about how Our Space helps them to build confidence through playing drama games, team building, sharing ideas and experiences. The inclusive environment ripples out to new members who feel included and go on to help others feel included. Members shared how they are building new friendships that reach beyond the workshops to meeting up after the sessions too. This highlights the importance of inclusive environments, supportive groups and positive relationships for enhancing confidence and wellbeing. The fact that members talk about how much progress they make in just a short time, and the life changing nature of the programme, shows that the potential of participants has always been there and highlights the importance of finding an inclusive environment where individuals can grow and flourish.

Progression group *"They should put it on a poster "Building connections!" (Clint)*

Amy, Zoe and Clint discuss moving from the Morning group to the Progression group and share their enjoyment of learning in the new group. They discuss how the group is raising their aspirations and helping them to prepare for future jobs, along with providing stability and a safety net that helps with managing life's ups and downs and provides continuity and stability. Members appreciate the structure and timing of the new group, which runs alongside the Morning group, meaning they can still see their friends from the morning group during the coffee breaks and meet up for lunch after the sessions. They describe Our Space as a growing family, who have a lot of fun together, socialising, learning new skills and building connections.

Production group *"I've got a huge amount of confidence; I had none before" (Caroline)*

Caroline, Elisha and David share their thoughts and experiences about the Production group, including engaging more deeply in theatre production, creative writing and devising shows. Alongside the development of plays, Our Space is helping with healing, building friendships, and developing confidence to try new things in the theatre and beyond. The weekly workshops are also helping with developing skills for life, by providing tools and techniques for expression, confidence, communication, sharing stories with others, developing the courage to fool around and have fun in front of strangers and be experimental in public. Members speak highly of the Our Space programme and the life changing opportunities and being happy where they are in the group, yet concerns were expressed about what happens if the group stops or has a break, such as over the summer. The group provides a lifeline and a constant in members' lives that they hope will continue.

The Morning Group

Introduction

The Our Space Morning group runs one morning per week during term times. Participants have the security of knowing that they can stay with the programme without feeling a need to move on. Previously, a production group provided a development route for members who felt ready to progress into theatre production. Following consultation with members of Our Space, a new Progression group was formed to provide a stepping stone between the Morning Group and the Production group. This offers a new direction for those who are either not ready or not wanting to be involved with theatre production but are ready to try new theatre skills and opportunities. The aim being to provide new opportunities for members and address the long waiting list for the Morning group, which at the time consisted of 51 participants. New places were opened up in the morning group as members chose to move to either the new Progression group or Production group. Our Space offered taster sessions for people on the waiting list. Twelve people attended and were offered a place on the Morning group for the term starting after Easter 2025.

Alan and Tracey's story

Alan started the Morning group with the new members after Easter. Alan's mum Tracey plays an active role in supporting her son to attend the programme. She attended the first couple of sessions with her son and now waits in the building whilst Alan attends the group. Alan and Tracey both shared how much had changed for Alan in a short time. Alan, spoke about how after being at the group for around six weeks, he was feeling braver, had more confidence and had developed friendships within the group.

It's been brilliant for me. It's been brilliant for my confidence. I've been talking to people a lot more and it's yeah, it's been good for me. I think it makes you come out your shell like it make it gives you that freedom. If that's a good word, that freedom to express yourself (Alan)

Improved confidence and well-being

Tracey stated that joining Our Space has led to a major transformation in her son's life, from being introverted and isolated to enjoying attending the weekly group sessions, making friends, communicating with group members, and developing confidence, self-belief and hope for the future.

Alan has always been very introverted and would never walk into anywhere on his own or speak to anyone that he didn't know. Even people he knew, he wouldn't speak to them. Now he goes in there on his own and he knows I'm upstairs and he's progressed now that he doesn't need me at the break time either. He's with his group, which I love. Whereas before he couldn't do that, so that is just amazing (Tracey)

Alan talked confidently about his experiences of being a member of the Morning group and how it has helped him with developing confidence and how he was enjoying socialising with other members.

I just love the camaraderie, I like camaraderie with other people and I'm really enjoying my time and just coming out of my shell, and it's made me feel like I can do a lot of stuff that I've never been confident in doing before (Alan)

Tracey shared that since coming to Our Space, she was seeing positive changes for Alan that she had never expected to see.

I'm telling you, up until very, very recently, I was the one speaking when we went anywhere with him, he never spoke to anyone. And to see him sat there conversing with you and his group and putting over his side of things, I never thought I would see it (Tracey)

Interpersonal skills, relationships and social life

Alan explained that the support and camaraderie of the group had boosted his confidence and given him a sense of freedom that he had never felt before. He expressed a sense of freedom, coming out of his shell and being able to follow his dreams.

I've always been an introverted person, and this has helped me come out myself and come out of my shell and push me out of my comfort zone a bit, but I had to be pushed from my comfort zone to be where I am now, it's been a big help for me (Alan)

Alan's newfound confidence had led to new friendships and a feeling that he had found like-minded people who understood each other, and that this was something that had previously been missing in his life.

I've got close to a couple of them [Our Space members] and yeah, it's been it's been nice to have that friendship and someone to like talk to and we can understand each other and stuff like that, and I think that's what I needed in my life (Alan)

Tracey spoke highly of the Our Space programme and the positive transformation that she was seeing in her son's life.

I could not be more grateful that Alan was referred for this programme. Because the difference in my son, he is 33 years old, I have never seen this. Him coming out, enjoying people, enjoying being part of a group. Before Alan wouldn't speak to anyone, but he loves now being part of this group and they've all called. They've said to him he's found his people, which is just amazing, and he absolutely loves it, and it makes me really emotional because I've never seen this side of him (Tracey)

Resilience and purpose

Renewed confidence and supportive friendships contributed to developing a stronger sense of resilience and purpose, with an improved ability to tackle difficult situations. Alan mentioned that he liked the theatre, and he had attended shows together with his mum in the past. Tracey spoke about how Alan recently attended a theatre show for the first time with his Our Space friends, and although he found it difficult at first, with the support of the group, he found the resilience to overcome this and stay to enjoy the show.

He did a massive, big first last week, where he went with his friends with his group to the theatre. I dropped in, I told him I'm not going to be around, I'm going home but I'll come back and pick you up. And he was absolutely fine. He told me he had a bit of a wobble, but his friends all rallied and brought him back. So, yeah, so that was brilliant (Tracey)

Alan agreed that being a member of the group, having supportive friends in the group was helping him to develop resilience.

Yeah, it definitely does help a lot with that, and especially when like not in a good space. It does help having those people [group members] around to try and get me out of here and stuff like that. Yeah, it does help... it's something I've needed for years (Alan)

Learning techniques during the weekly sessions, was also said to help, including working together to come up with ideas for a scene and developing and changing ideas, which helped with considering new ways to approach an issue or work through a problem.

I think to progress with a scene you have to change your ideas up and I think you have to have a lot of ideas in your head anyway so you can change up and stuff like that (Alan)

Reduced isolation and new opportunities

Tracey explained that Our space creates an atmosphere of socialisation beyond the weekly Morning group workshops. For example, some members meet up for lunch each week after the workshop sessions. Members make sure everyone is invited each week, even if they do not feel ready yet, they know they are welcome to join in the future.

So, it's like socialisation outside of here as well, it creates an atmosphere that you can be social with your group outside of this building. This whole group the way they the way they get together, I've never seen anything like it in my life. The way they all are together is phenomenal, inclusive right from the get-go (Tracey)

Tracey shared that on his first day, Alan was anxious about joining the group and meeting and speaking to new people. The welcome he received from the group and from staff members helped to make him feel safe and supported. Tracey explained that whilst Alan found a safe space within the group, he also helped others to feel safe within the group.

On that first day there was a young girl who is part of Alan's group, when we were sat outside waiting for it to start, she looked at Alan and she wanted to come over and sit by Alan, so she did, and then they all went in there together. From that day they have become both of them who wouldn't speak to anyone who wouldn't take part in anything to being really social. They are absolute firm friends. They got each other's phone number, and she looks to him and he's become like her safe place. Now for Alan to think of himself as someone else's safe place, when he was looking for a safe space, he loved that, and I said to him that she looks up to you. You are her safe place and he's like ohh wow, I can be that for someone (Tracey)

Alan's new-found confidence and self-belief has led to him believing that he can now realise his dream of being able to do acting.

I've never felt confident enough that I could be good at acting or stuff like that and this has showed me that I can be (Alan)

Jenny's story

Jenny has been attending the Morning group for two terms. She spoke about how coming to the group had helped with overcoming anxiety and overwhelm and how the group created a safe space that allowed members to talk and share and learn ways to express themselves.

Improved confidence and well-being

Jenny shared her experience of anxiety and how it led to feeling overwhelmed, which impacted on her going into social spaces. By learning techniques, tips and ways to express herself, Jenny is developing ways to overcome anxiety, manage overwhelm and become more confident.

When I first came, I was very anxious going through a lot of difficult things. Being overwhelmed like in big spaces and being too close together or just being overwhelmed like a heightened state that I couldn't cope with things. Someone recommended Our Space to express yourself in a happy way rather than the negative, and it's helped me so much and just in the first term, at the end of the term I was out of the anxiety (Jenny)

Jenny spoke about having a difficult childhood and going on a healing journey with the support of the Our Space group and help from staff members. As her confidence grew, she has been able to use her experiences to contribute to the group in creative ways.

Our Space is helping me on a journey. I've had a toxic childhood, and I want to address those issues to become a better person. Last time I was struggling with finding out that I had rejection sensitivity dysphoria. Things would trigger me, and I would really find it hard to deal with, that I didn't want to cause a scene or whatever. But I had to have a break sometimes to overcome that. But I was given a helpful tip, I can do this or get in there and not let it win... I got there in the end, and it was so beneficial and felt like everyone was in awe of a poetry emotion machine that I created (Jenny)

Interpersonal skills, relationships and social life

As confidence and well-being improves, members talked about wanting to help others within the group, leading to supportive relationships being formed. Having experienced the support of the group often leads to members wanting to share that support with others and become mentors and supporters for new people joining the group. This highlights the ripple effect, where the supportive ethos of Our Space programme is passed on and has become a core value within the group. Jenny explained that members of the group help to support those who are struggling or feeling down because they all understand how it feels to go through difficulties.

We help one another, if someone's down and struggling kind of thing, because we all know what's going on and you are there for them no matter what... give other people confidence to enjoy it as well and we see lots of people coming out of their shells already. It's good helping their process as well... It's like a family of understanding what everyone's going through (Jenny)

Resilience and purpose

Jenny spoke about techniques that were used to develop interpersonal skills, confidence and connections within the group. This included drama games, team building exercises and creative ways to share ideas and experiences. Workshop activities were also said to help with developing problem-solving skills, which in turn helped members to become more resilient and better able to find solutions to problems.

We play games, it's like a team building kind of thing; to feel confident being able to share more things with other people... and we bounce off one another's ideas. It's like a family of understanding what everyone's going through and sharing stories. We learn to problem solve and when you're down as well. Sometimes it's like having an idea and then trying to do it differently, change it in a different direction of what we anticipated kind of thing (Jenny)

Reduced isolation and new opportunities

Jenny talked about new opportunities that she was engaging with since joining Our Space, including enrolling on a drama course at City College to start in the autumn and going to the theatre. She shared how the theatre is helping her with well-being and overcoming anxiety and how each term for her is getting better and helping her to grow and improve her life and develop skills and interests in writing stories.

I absolutely love going to the theatre. When I'm feeling down it just up lifts you at the end. And when you're struggling with anxiety, sometimes still just touch, when you come out, you feel 100% better and it shows you how much you've grown (Jenny)

Each term it's different, it just gets better and better and better. You just grow and grow and grow (Jenny)

Jenny spoke confidently about developing her passion for writing and wanting to write a book that helps people who are going through difficult experiences. She shared how being a member of Our Space was helping her to develop her writing, including developing creative ideas, writing plots and developing the specific quirks of characters.

I'm just growing each time, becoming more alert, and coming up with different ideas and very creative ideas, and writing different plots and everything and helping other people as well. I have written short stories, and I want to write a book to help other people going through the same thing as well... [Our Space] help you like go into character like finding the quirks of being in the character and the ideas of mannerisms and like completely coming together as a character (Jenny)

Thoughts on progression

Alan and Jenny spoke highly of the Morning group and the many ways it has changed and enriched their lives. Both feel the morning group is working well for them and wish to continue in this group for now. They are both interested in trying the Progression group in the future, knowing that they can return to the Morning group, which they find reassuring.

The Progression Group

Introduction

The Progression group started in the new term after Easter 2025. It was important that as the programme changes took place that Our Space members felt safe, held and a sense of continuity. The new Progression group was therefore designed to run parallel with the Morning group and in the same venue at TR2. This provided continuity in terms of time and space and meant that members could share taxis with their friends in the two groups and get together during the coffee breaks. The first term ran as a ten-week block, consisting of carousel classes for the first six weeks, followed by the final four weeks working on a project. This included masterclasses, such as creative writing, singing and introduction to theatre production.

Democratic process and choice

Members were included in the process of developing the group. An evaluation was held to explore what members would like to see in the new group. Those who felt ready, and who had been attending for a year or more, were given a choice of group. Members had different aims, some were keen to get into theatre production, whilst others wanted to develop transferable skills such as social skills, interview skills to work towards college or employment. Ten members chose the Progression group and five chose Production group. Our Space ran a ceremony and awarded certificates for those moving to the new groups.

Feeling ready to move up

Members shared their initial thoughts and experiences of the Progression group, stating that they felt it was time to move up and they felt ready. They were also aware of the long waiting list and wanted to give others a chance to join the Morning group by freeing up space, whilst still being able to stay with Our Space.

I felt like it was time (Clint)

Yeah, same. I felt like I had done enough there and there were people trying to get in that couldn't get in because we were still there, and I felt like it was time to give them a chance (Amy)

I think it was definitely needed so that we could still be a part of it [Our Space] and you know obviously new people have to come in (Zoe)

New enjoyment for learning

Members spoke excitedly about the enjoyment of learning new things in the Progression group, saying that it felt like being back at school but learning in a more positive and exciting way. They were also learning new skills and knowledge for future jobs and were being introduced to new ideas, possibilities and roles within the theatre.

I feel like it's like sometimes I feel like I'm back at school again learning new things but in a more exciting way. And I kind of enjoy, like learning about rather than being on stage, learn more about what's behind stage and the kind of jobs you can get from that (Amy)

Yeah, we are getting more of a variety of like everything that goes into it (Zoe)

Members talked about difficult school experiences and that the Progression group was leading to a new enjoyment of learning and new interest and curiosity about what things mean and how the theatre works behind the scenes.

I would say in my early years school wasn't brilliant, but here I'm writing things notes down and taking note of things and learning each thing like this means that and that means that and why they mean these things (Amy)

I've really enjoyed stage management because I'm not very good at writing, I get memory block, but the stage management and learning about what they do here, it's actually pretty good (Amy)

I did enjoy the writing, I think you go to each session, and you just get bits out of everything (Zoe)

I feel like I have absorbed more of this than I did with anything at school. It just sinks in way faster, because I'm actually interested in the subject (Clint)

And I want to be here (Zoe)

Variety and new opportunities

Members spoke about enjoying the variety of opportunities that are being provided in the Progression group and the range of guest facilitators, introducing members to different areas of theatre production. This was said to be a positive step forwards in their journeys, offering more learning and training, following their progression from the Morning group.

I think we're taking a lot more away from our sessions. We're getting like more training and things like that, which is nice (Zoe)

It feels more official. It's a kind of a promotion. Like me and Amy did four terms of Our Space, and we learnt pretty much everything we could from that. So now this is like a whole new learning situation for us. I actually like this group a bit more because it feels like a little bit more grown up (Clint)

Especially in Progression group because the morning group was like more acting and playing games (Amy)

I think it's nice because there's always something different. It's nice to have like the different practitioners that come in, because you get a bit more variety. We had a two-week writing course with a lady who came in and then today, we've been learning about all the stuff backstage. It's nice to have different things (Zoe)

One member mentioned that they missed the movement from the Morning group, such as the games that they used to play and the acting and showing a play at the end of the term. Although being early days in the first few weeks of the new group, they wondered if they might get more of this as the weeks progressed and were due to have an acting session coming up soon as one of the facilitated sessions.

Safety net and continuity

Members spoke about how Our Space provides a constant in their lives that acts as a safety net, always being there for them. Members were aware of the importance of freeing up space for others to benefit from the Morning group and the Progression group allowed them a way to stay with the programme. Members spoke about how Our Space provides a space to let go of outside concerns and to be themselves.

I feel like with all my health conditions when everything else feels so chaotic, I just feel like this group is a solid thing in my life. That I know that I'm not going to get suddenly get told it's time to leave or you can't come anymore. And I think that the middle group was like a really good idea (Zoe)

Almost like a safety net (Amy)

You can let your guard down. Sometimes it was like when you're at work with someone, you've gotta put on this professional face, and here you can just come and just let all that go (Clint)

I think just having that safe space that you know you've always got, it's like the place that like despite everything else that's going on, it's like the thing that won't change (Zoe)

Just knowing that when everything else is a bit uncertain you've got this each week and you know, you're like, come out feeling a little bit more positive about things. When you come into the group, you can sort of just let it go for a couple of hours (Zoe)

An inclusive space

Our Space was described as being inclusive in that members felt the atmosphere was positive, there were no judgements, they felt equal and could develop at their own pace.

I think there's no expectations you, you can just do it at your own pace (Zoe)

No one expects anything of anyone. If someone gets something wrong, that's alright, we'll help you (Amy)

There is no negativity (Clint)

It is so unjudgmental (Zoe)

Yeah, everyone's equal where we are (Amy)

Structure and friendship groups

Members stated that they liked how the new Progression group was structured to run alongside the Morning group. This means they can still see their friends from the morning group. This was said to be important in terms of continuity and being able to maintain meeting up for lunch after the workshop sessions.

That is the best thing because then we still get to see the people who didn't move up with us. It's like because otherwise it like feels so distant without them (Amy)

Yeah, we haven't got that divide (Zoe)

We miss a lot of them from there [Morning group members] but having the break together can be quite nice (Amy)

That's nice [the coffee break]. Yeah. So, we're all back together (Zoe)

And then you meet all the new people as well that come into the Morning group, so you get to say hello and everything (Amy)

Interpersonal skills, relationships and social life

Members discussed how being part of Our Space has helped with improved socialising and the development of friendships. They spoke about being a family, forming a social media group chat and starting a lunch group. Members shared that they feel accepted and have a lot of fun together.

I think we are just like a family now aren't we (Zoe)

This feels like a second family, all these people here, and there's more constantly adding every time a new term comes in (Clint)

Yeah, we made our own group chat. We all meet after Our Space and then some of us, whoever can make it, have lunch together. Everyone at our space come and join us (Amy)

I'm still shy as hell, but I feel like with these lot they know that I can't make eye contact and stuff like that so it's more accepted here because a lot of people are like it here (Clint)

I feel it's more fun, because when we get here, all we do is we have a laugh with each other and we're all talking nicely. It's like no matter who we are, whether we've met each other before we greet each other and we're all laughing (Amy)

As friendships deepen, members are engaging in activities beyond the Our Space workshops. This includes, going to the theatre together, activities around the city, football training together and meeting up with each other's wider partners and families.

Me and Zoe do football training together, and so does another member from morning group... We are trying to get people from Our Space groups into a football group (Amy)

Sometimes people post what else is going on around the city so that if people want to go (Zoe)

*They should put it on a poster "**Building connections!**" (Clint)*

Stepping stones and raised aspirations

The Progression group was said to act as a stepping stone for members to build up their confidence, learn new skills, be open to new possibilities and to prepare them for roles that they would like to get into in the future.

I certainly I'd like to be on stage. I've always wanted to be an actress, but I felt like going straight to stage, like the Production group, I needed more time to boost my confidence and learn more about the stage before I jump straight into it, but I definitely want to get there somehow but slowly (Amy)

I don't think I'm advanced enough for the Production group yet. I need like a little halfway point to get me through (Clint)

Our Space was found to be raising aspirations and providing new possibilities that members may not have been aware of before. Clint shared that Our Space had helped him to secure a job setting up stages and opened a potential pathway to working in theatre in the future.

Eventually I would like a job here. I've already got a stage job thanks to this, setting up stages. I did Olly Murs in the pavilions, next week I've got to do something in TR2. So hopefully that'll get me a job in here. Our Space has made me more interested in it because I would have never chosen this as a career path before... I would like to carry this on forever if I could, but I know someday it's going to eventually end and because work will get in the way eventually and then I will have to stop coming, but I'll enjoy it for now (Clint)

I think I'd like to carry on as I am in this group and then who knows? I'd always keep it open as a possibility of moving to the production group, but I know with my own sort of body and limitations at the moment, that sometimes just feeling settled is okay. I'm just settled in this group, I'm happy where I am (Zoe)

The Production Group

Introduction

The afternoon Production group provides a progression route for members who feel ready to engage more with theatre production and participation in show performances. Some Morning Group members who had taken part in the Pierless show or the Key show felt inspired and were keen to join the Production group to get more into the theatre, such as doing acting, creative writing and devising. As part of the new developments, the Production group extended from a two-hour session per week to three-hour sessions that ran twice per week, to conclude with a show performance at the Theatre Royal, in July, called Domestication.

Moving to the Production group

Elisha and Caroline shared their reasons for choosing the Production group, including feeling ready to move on to develop skills such as acting, creative writing and speaking in front of an audience. David moved to the Production group before the new structure was created. This process had happened gradually overtime by engaging in opportunities to participate in plays and contribute to the devising of plays whilst still in the Morning group.

It's just time for me to move on, I felt ready in myself to move on and see what else is out there. I want to get it back into performance and I need to learn to be able to speak in front of an audience, that's my main reason (Elisha)

For me it was being part of Pierless and being on the stage and just catching the bug, absolutely loved it! In my private life I was going to a lot of writing groups, and the writing and producing and devising is my favourite thing so that's why I wanted to go to the Production group. Not necessarily because I was ready, because actually they tried to talk me out of it and said I wasn't ready. But the writing and the devising and the producing of shows is what I am really interested in (Caroline)

This time last year we were doing the key. So, the Our Space group [morning group] had come up with an ocean movement, and that was incorporated into the Key performance. And then we were then in the final build up to Pierless. So, we were then doing the devising. So, it's a lot, much more protracted process (David)

New skills and opportunities

Members shared their enjoyment of the Production group. For some members, the intensity of the Production group was appealing, with longer sessions and an additional session each week, which provided more time to immerse in learning and developing skills. Others enjoyed learning how shows are put together and seeing a production come together from start to finish.

I love creative writing. I really enjoyed that and every week we've got two sessions, Tuesday and Thursday, instead of just one. I was really interesting just doing a lot more intense and a lot more, and every session that we do, we have a creative writer, so I have really enjoyed that part. I just really wanted to do a lot more writing (Caroline)

I get to do a lot more writing because I quite like writing as well and the thing of putting it all together, knowing where your piece is going to be and learning it all. Seeing how it develops from the start to the end (Elisha)

It's the excitement of it all. You know, you don't actually feel any pressure until the last minute, but then it's just like the pressure is there and then it just poof is gone. Once you get on the stage and like and, you know, you know, like you're just being you know in your own world (Elisha)

Enthusiasm for learning

The enthusiasm for learning was evident, with members showing interest in session topics in both the Progression group and Production group. Although, the range of workshop sessions in the Progression group potentially led to Production group members questioning if they were missing out. However, knowing that moving to the Progression group in the future could be an option, was reassuring.

There is also there is the carrot, it's that once production is over you can drop back into Progression group. It's a shame because there's been quite a few progression group sessions that would be really useful to the people in production group (David)

Yeah, if we had been doing both it would have been really good cause there was stage management, there has been writing. I didn't want to keep doing two different things every week. I wanted to just concentrate on one, so Progression group wasn't ideal, but it's like doing workshops. So actually, it would be really useful for the production (Caroline)

Theatre for healing

Members spoke about the healing aspects of Our Space and how the processes of theatre production played a part in healing. Members shared some difficulties and traumas that they have faced in life and how being a member of Our Space provided an outlet for relief and a positive interest that helps to reduce stress when facing difficult life challenges including loss and bereavement.

I am happier all to do with mental health healing, I feel healed. Really healed. I feel like I'm back to almost back to how I was before I had trauma in my life. So I'm really like, I'm scared to say I'm happy and something bad is gonna happen. But yeah, everything's good. Everything's really good, huge improvement. I feel like I've got myself back (Caroline)

It saves staying at home and just like letting everything get on top of you. Do you know what I mean? So, it's like when Pierless was going on, my mother actually died around that time and then six weeks before that in September, my auntie passed away as well. I used Pierless as a focus to set my mind on that so that I wouldn't be thinking about all these things that was going on basically. It has grounded me, you know, to focus on something rather than worry and let it stress me all out (Elisha)

Along with providing a positive outlet, the theatre workshop techniques were said to help with exploring past difficult life challenges and processing and expressing feelings.

All of our writing has been about ourselves and our childhood and our deep feelings and it really brings our personal stories out and everything that we're saying in the play we've written ourselves and it's about us and our lives (Caroline)

By just the nature of the process, you put yourself into it. You inject your experience into it, but you're not literally writing out your experiences. It's not as crass as that. It's just more that by writing in various voices and forms you just can't help being yourself. You're not being asked to write about your experiences, it is more they are coming through as part of the process (David)

My bits of writing are completely like I am standing in a queue; I feel like an Alien. They are exactly like that. That's what came out... it was just very interesting and the way it came out was good (Caroline)

Friendships and reduced social isolation

Members spoke about the importance of friendships and the role that Our Space played in this. Building friendships and relationships was said to counteract social isolation and provide valuable connections beyond the weekly workshops.

I also think you shouldn't undervalue that just having a group of friends. You know, when you're isolated because we've both been socially isolated (David)

Very socially isolated for a very long time (Caroline)

And so just having a group of friends, even if you don't necessarily want to hang around with them all the time, you know, occasionally it's just having people you bump into in town, you know, those little things. So that being in a community is a really valuable thing (David)

Like-minded people as well, shared experiences (Caroline)

That's what I got out of it as well because I spend a lot of time on my own, even though my boys are at home most of the time, but I'm always in my bedroom on the PlayStation. So you know it gets me out of the house. Me and Jenny, quite often we go out for the day, catch your bus or train down to Exeter. We've been down to Looe. We just have really nice days out where we can chill out and relax and we ain't gotta worry about stress. So that's a really good thing. Having them bonds and new friends (Elisha)

Some participants shared that they missed their friends who either stayed in the Morning group or who joined the Progression group. The camaraderie from the Morning group was highlighted as being particularly good and the group was said to be a lot of fun. Whilst members expressed missing their friends and the large numbers of members in the Morning group, this also shows progress from the social anxiety when originally joining the group to enjoying being part of a large group.

[The Morning group] It was so great fun (Elisha)

Yeah, hugely, friends and like, we don't ever see them. There's a real it was a really good camaraderie with that particular group. Yeah, it's just such a big group. There's, like in production it's like ten at any given time (Caroline)

Personal development and leadership

Members spoke about many positive changes that were happening in their lives since joining Our Space. This included improved confidence, new friendships, reduced isolation and stronger sense of resilience to overcome life difficulties. Members were participating in many new opportunities, including multiple shows, new job roles and moving from personal development to organising and becoming leaders of groups and activities in the community. Whilst some developments happened outside of Our Space, members recognised that Our Space had been a catalyst for many new opportunities in their lives.

I'm fairly confident on the stage now, but still nervous obviously. But that's partly because I've actually done quite a lot in the last year. After the Key, I did a thing with at the Barbican, and then I done a couple of other things as well, but included in that is Arts Homeless International, which was like a leadership mentoring programme and the only reason I was on that was because of Our Space. Because Bernie encouraged me to apply for it and they were quite supportive during the process, and I was working with Lee on that as well to the extent that I actually delivered a one person show in London, just 12 to 15 minutes, you know, wasn't massive, but it was part of a short showcase event (David)

The ripple effect of Our Space was evident, as achievements by one member often had an impact on others, either through inspiring others to want to try new things to members supporting and helping each other with new ventures. David shared how the showcase that he was working on influenced Caroline, who helped out with it too and travelled to London to watch the show.

New vision and inspiration

Members spoke about ways that participating in theatre production was changing the way they see theatre and performance and leading to new visions and inspiration. For example, David discussed drawing inspiration from a show that helped him to develop a character for a performance with the Production group. Both David and Caroline spoke about seeing theatre in a completely new way from a technical and creators' perspective.

Even if it's a show you don't like, so there's some of the big productions, I'm not really interested in, but you're looking at it with the technical eye going how have they done that? And so, you're just appreciating it on a completely different level (David)

I don't watch theatre the same way anymore. I'm just watching it from a making theatre type, like the dancing ones that I didn't really like the music or things, but I loved the lighting and really appreciated the way they made us all look over there for that or I just don't watch it the same way anymore and now we go to the theatre so often really, really had a lot of tickets this year. Very grateful for that (Caroline)

I would say that Our Space is definitely a big part of it. Obviously, there are other things going on. I was doing improv, and I was also doing performance poetry. But then would I have gone on stage to do my poetry if I hadn't had the confidence from Our Space, maybe not. It's little exercises like when we all sat on a in a row and you just literally walked to the front and just say to everyone I am here and make eye contact with them and all these little exercises just to give you confidence about being honest, all those little things. So, I think it's definitely a contributing factor (David)

Resilience and purpose

Members discussed ways in which they were growing more resilient and developing a stronger sense of purpose. This included being able to keep going when things go wrong and feeling safe to be yourself.

I think that's what it's giving me back, that resilience. Sometimes things don't go well like we've had some pretty tragic happenings this week. Normally that would have floored me, and I would have been in my bed for like a week and I'd be miserable and stuff and like things don't make me as miserable as they used to, because I've got a lot of positives here, things to look forward to and purpose, I've got purpose. Like coming here is a priority and a purpose. So, I don't get miserable like I used to (Caroline)

Having more resilience led to being able to experiment with character roles and take risks, including having fun in front of friends and then taking this further to perform in front of an audience of strangers, which was becoming an exciting challenge rather than be scary. The weekly workshops helped with developing resilience due to offering a channel for expression.

Sometimes I don't know whether I'm coming or going. So having something that you know, I can look forward to every week when we come and writing it down and it all comes out in different ways (Elisha)

It's huge to have somewhere where you feel safe. I didn't have other places in my life before that felt safe, like where you can be yourself and actually it's interesting because now we have like the performances coming up. I was thinking the last couple of days like in front of my friends, I've been saying these funny things and like all these scripts that we've been writing is actually like, wait a minute, I'm bringing strangers into that in a minute and that's different. So that's like a whole other learning coming up. But it's an interesting challenge rather than oh no, no deepening anxiety. It's not like that anymore. Like it's more of a challenge now, it's fun. Something good might come out of it. It's exciting rather than scary (Caroline)

Some activities were said to be challenging yet were done within a supportive group environment and helped with developing resilience and confidence.

I would say also the sharing, I mean that's preparing you to do you know, it's like what Caroline was saying that in that kind of fooling around in front of your friends is one thing, doing it in front of strangers is completely different, and so even just the sharings are sort of building up that kind of resilience too. Being experimental in public (David)

Being part of the production process gave some members a feeling of being needed, due to being part of a team who each had particular roles in the show.

People need me here. If I wasn't here, the show wouldn't be the same or like they need my cue for their bit. It's really nice. I'm really grateful for the opportunity (Caroline)

Consistency, routine and uncertainty about what's next

Members from all three Our Space groups spoke about the importance of consistency and routine and how Our Space provides a constant in their lives. One member also spoke about the importance of routine and adapting to the routine of a new group, which can take time.

Because I've been there for so long [Morning group] I do kind of miss the routine of it because, like it was my routine. I was always there, like first thing in the morning. So then now I'm in the afternoon. It's like we are still getting used to that. That's a huge change, and my sleep pattern has gone whooo! (Elisha)

Whilst the consistency and routine of Our Space provided safety and security, the fear of losing this was a concern for some members. Some members of the Production group expressed uncertainty about the future. This included fear of not knowing what was coming next and concerns about experiencing a gap once the current production was completed.

I'm frightened of all the changes at the moment. There are new groups, don't know what's gonna happen after July. At the moment, it's a little bit like everything's been so good, I'm really worried about what happens in July and how my mental health is gonna feel not having this (Caroline)

I kind of echo that as but as have a slightly different perspective as well because obviously when Pierless ended it was a big hole and particularly since I didn't have Our Space to go back to. So I was kind of left in the lurch for several months with no knowledge of what's going on. And I'm worried that there's nothing gonna be over the summer. And I don't know what the status is and whether I'm gonna be allowed into progression group or not. What's coming up next. That kind of void is a bit of a worry (David)

However, members also pondered on the future beyond Our Space and wanting to do their own projects. It was recognised that the Progression group offered ideas and skills and steered participants towards future job opportunities.

I also do need to be doing my own projects as well because in that kind of leadership sense, because that's what I've been being pushed towards. I guess you can sort of see it with some of the progression groups things it's that people sort of starting to look at getting off like job opportunities potentially within the theatre. I guess that's kind of, like I've been saying, how do I push myself towards coming through the programme and actually then starting to contribute back (David)

Enjoying the now

Members spoke highly of Our Space and their experiences of the Production group. Throughout the interviews, members shared the enormous impact that Our Space has had on their lives in a multitude of ways, including positive changes in confidence levels, reducing social isolation, developing positive friendships, stronger resilience and opening up aspirations and opportunities. Although members had expressed anxiety about fear of missing Our Space, during the summer break, they nerveless looked forward to the future and shared their appreciation for the positive impact that Our Space has had in their lives.

My whole life has changed, everything. I run groups, spend all of my time writing. I've got a huge amount of confidence. I had none before (Caroline)

I almost certainly would not be doing the stuff I'm doing without Our Space and that's partly because it opens up opportunities. And I think just for us I think the biggest thing is we go to the theatre, I mean I never went to the Theatre before now and we go to theatre every few weeks now (David)

I'm just looking forward to the new possibilities because like I say, nobody knows what's gonna happen yet. You know, just take it as it comes, basically. I'm not set on one particular goal because there's different opportunities that I would like to try, like maybe helping with making props because I'm quite crafty, you know, making things and stuff. And I would love to learn a bit more about making costumes. There are other things that I wanna try out (Elisha)

I'm just enjoying what I'm doing, I'm happy where I am. I don't want any more change. I'm just enjoying this because I haven't had any of this and this is great. So, I don't want to do anything different. I don't have any idea for the future. I haven't thought that through, I am happy where I am (Caroline)


Conclusion

Our Space is loved by members who speak highly of the programme and ways it has transformed their lives. In all three groups, the Morning group, Production group, and new Progression group, members spoke about improved confidence and communication skills, developed life skills, a sense of purpose, improved resilience, new hope for the future, and raised aspirations. The progress that Our Space members make in multiple areas of their lives is outstanding.

The evaluation explored the insights and experiences of Our Space members following new programme developments. This included a Progression group, which offered a stepping stone between the existing Morning group and Production group. This provided new opportunities for group members and opened up spaces for new members from the waiting list to join the Morning Group. The new structure has been received positively by members, offering a choice between the Progression group and Production group for those ready to move up from the Morning group. Members who joined the new Progression group felt supported through the changes. They appreciated that moving to a new group means they can stay with Our Space whilst also learning new skills and knowledge about wider opportunities within the theatre, including gaining insights to roles that support the production of shows. Members were offered the chance to move back to a group if needed, which they found reassuring.

Four broad strength areas that contribute to the success of Our Space stood out. These being, an inclusive space, power of friendships, place for enjoyment and importance of consistency.

An inclusive space: Our Space provides a welcoming environment where members feel safe, valued and supported as a community, which they describe as a family. Members were included in discussions about developing the new Progression group, including what kinds of topics and sessions they would like in the new group. Our Space staff build positive relationships with group members and encourage participation in activities that are playful, challenging and rewarding. Members feel safe and supported in this process. The feeling of safety and support ripples outwards, leading to members wanting to become a source of safety and support for others, including welcoming new and existing members. As such, inclusion becomes a process that staff and group members participate in together.



The power of friendships: Members spoke about the importance of the friendships that they make within Our Space and the positive impact this has on their lives. Along with becoming a support network to help and encourage one another, friendships were found to provide a source of confidence, support to help develop resilience and a network for getting involved in new activities. Friendships also led to members feeling more connected within the wider community, which helped with a sense of belonging within the group and beyond.

A place for enjoyment: The fun and playfulness of the weekly drama sessions provided respite from the challenges that some members faced in their lives and helped members to feel uplifted. This included enjoying connections with new friends, chatting and laughing together, coming out of their shell, and learning to be playful in front of one another, which led to improved wellbeing. The playfulness of the sessions helped members to engage in activities that were sometimes challenging, yet were useful for developing life skills.

Importance of consistency: The regular weekly sessions were seen as paramount, providing a constant in members' lives. The Our Space programme was found to provide an important source of stability when experiencing life challenges. The importance of Our Space being a constant in their lives was evident both in members' narratives about the programme and expressed concerns about group endings. The latter was particularly evident in the Production group. Due to the project-based nature of the group, some members expressed anxiety regarding what happens when a production finishes. Following the completion of the most recent production, members were offered places within the Progression group. The expressed fear about the programme ending highlights the important role that Our Space plays in their lives.

Going forwards: Our Space provides a supporting environment, offering transformational experiences through support and consistency along with developing life skills, fostering inclusion, raising aspirations and creating new opportunities within the theatre and beyond.

Our Space continues to focus on providing consistency and longevity by finding ways that members can stay with the programme. The new structure and progression route offers positive steps forwards for addressing the long waiting list, whilst meeting the needs, hopes and goals of current members. The continued need for the important work of the Our Space programme is evident.

