



# Understanding Our Space: Participants and Outcomes

Phase one: Evaluation Report 2024

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## 15-year anniversary event and 'Pierless' production

### AUDIENCE FEEDBACK



# Our Space

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*“It changes how you feel about yourself. You could walk in, in a right mood and leave and you're just elated, absolutely elated because of the session and what its brought for you, how many people care about you and you know, just start community, come back to the community because I never thought I'd be part of the community”*

## Purpose

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 proved success. Our Space recently celebrated its 15<sup>th</sup> year anniversary with a production at the Theatre Royal called Pierless, which received positive feedback and a standing ovation from the audience. 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 therefore has arisen; how to do justice to those waiting on the list whilst not moving participants on too soon. To continue to provide and expand its services, new funding streams and partnerships are needed to ensure the future survival of the programme. Furthermore, consideration needs to be given to how to develop the current model in ways that continue to meet the needs of current participants whilst also addressing the needs of those on the waiting list.

# Evaluation

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 will take place in phases, with the first two phases as follows:

**Phase One:** Understanding Our Space: Participants and Outcomes.

**Phase Two:** Issues and Opportunities: Exploring progression routes.

## Phase one introduction

This phase explores benefits and outcomes of the programme from the perspectives of participants. In February and March 2024, an independent evaluator took part in a range of Our Space drama sessions at TR2 and the Theatre Royal as a participant observer to learn about the weekly programme sessions and meet the facilitators and participants. In April 2024 interviews were held with seven participants either individually, in pairs or in threes according to participants' preference. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was carried out using the qualitative software package Nvivo14. The analysis included exploring themes running through participant interviews and comparing these with the four key themes of the Our Space programme outcomes, which are outlined on the next page.

The report findings are structured according to the four programme outcomes. Participant voices are prioritised and highlighted by presenting thoughts and experiences in colourful speech bubbles. The speech bubbles have been colour-coded to reflect the individual voices of each participant. The report is designed to represent participant experiences in a visually appealing format. All names and some recognisable details were omitted from quotes to preserve participants' anonymity.

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

# Programme Outcomes

## **Outcome 1: Confidence, self-esteem, and well-being**

Improved confidence, self-esteem, and well-being of adults with lived experience of homelessness, mental health issues, substance misuse and reoffending.

## **Outcome 2: Interpersonal skills and relationships**

Development of interpersonal skills leading to a positive social life and better relationships with peers, friends, family, and wider community.

## **Outcome 3: Resilience and purpose**

Adults with lived experience have a stronger sense of resilience and purpose, with an improved ability to tackle life stage transitions.

## **Outcome 4: Reduced isolation and new opportunities**

Reduced isolation and improved integration lead to adults with lived experience engaging with other activities within the theatre and beyond.



# 1: Confidence, self-esteem, and well-being

The themes of improved confidence and wellbeing were prominent across all interviews. Participants spoke about how Our Space has helped them to find themselves and feel more comfortable in themselves. The workshops provide space for sharing and self-expression. Sharing and listening to others led to feelings of acceptance and connection. During workshop activities participants were able to forget about outside problems and enjoy the moment. All these factors were said to contribute to improved confidence, wellbeing and helped towards developing self-esteem and a renewed sense of self.

*It's allowed me to express myself in a way I've never expressed myself to be confident in my skin, to be confident within the group as well. I found that very difficult to start off with. I still find it difficult, even though it doesn't show, anxiety is still there. However, I just love it, I just love it, I just love it!*

*I've learned that sharing where I'm at is extremely important, and Our Space has taught me how to share how to Just be myself. I don't have to hide who I am because I like myself, yeah, I do a little bit now.*

*Yeah, you know, because when you're doing something in the group, everyone they do the same, you don't feel you are alone, and that give you confidence and you coming out of your shell, and you just enjoy the moment really. It's just like that.*

*When you're going to the session, it's so much different to when you are out, you don't even think about outside problems, I'm just sitting there in that moment.*

Participants shared how Our Space provides a safe space where people living with complex physical and mental health issues can build friendships and engage in activities, having important time for themselves.

*It was it's been brilliant because I don't really go out very much. Because of my epilepsy I stay indoors, and I don't go out on my own. I don't really engage with other people. And then when my friend got me into Our Space, it's like, my confidence started to grow, and I met so many other people. I've got so many more friends now than I ever did have. It's been really good for me.*

*It's definitely brought out my confidence a lot more. Usually, I wouldn't engage in big groups. I mean walking into town sometimes would really put me into an anxiety attack. So before, I would not even think about going into a group of people I don't know. And now that I've actually started doing it, it's actually made me talking to people more and engaging, and it feels like a lot better, to be honest.*

*When I'm in Our Space I can be myself. Let my hair down. Haven't got to worry about my too autistic kids all the time. I suffer from severe mental health and depression, and I locked myself away for like two and a half to three years. When I got the opportunity to take part it really helped me to like start finding myself and be what I want to be rather than what somebody else was trying to tell me to be. So, it brought out a lot of things that helps me deal with my emotions.*

*Just being calm and kind is really important. Just being happy. I'm a happy go lucky person normally. So, it depends on what I'm going through, but if I'm dying, I'm really dying. If I'm dying, I come to our space. It's alleviated that feeling of despair, and hopelessness has gone when I come to our space.*

Participants spoke about how they experienced personal change in ways that had surprised them. They were moving past previous low confidence and anxiety barriers and trying out new things and new ways of being.

*Yeah, confidence and well-being because it was so encouraging there's such, you know nice, friendly, encouraging people... I had to be in so many different uncomfortable situations to get to where I wanted to be. Like taxis, buses, outside, huge theatres full of people, lights, music, all of these different things and I've like realised that I survived them, you know, like I know it sounds really silly, but it's all things that I wouldn't put myself out there before.*

*I don't know how to explain it. It seems like it's only been a couple of weeks. How could it possibly change me that much. But it has. Cause this is how I want, this is me. I've just never got the confidence to do it before.*

*I have zero confidence and they said if you go to Our Space, it will help you get a job and you will improve your confidence and it really has after 10 weeks. When we set this circle, when we met every person that talks about themselves, I would have never dreamed of doing that at the beginning of the last term. And this time I just did it and it didn't even affect me at all.*

*I'll first come in. I dread it cause I'm like, oh, I haven't got the confidence to do this, but now as soon as I'm in the room, it's like putting on a pair of slippers or something. It's just you just slide straight into it.*

## 2: Interpersonal skills and relationships

Care and relationships featured highly in participants discussions about the Our Space programme. This related to the supportive relationships with staff and friendships that are formed amongst participants in the group. Participants felt a sense of acceptance and feeling part of a community, which changed how they felt about themselves and fuelled confidence to communicate more with others.

*It generally changes how you feel about yourself. You know, you could walk in, in a right, mood and leave and you're just elated, absolutely elated because of the session and what it brought for you, how many people care about you, and you know, just start community, come back to the community because I never thought I'd be part of the community. So cool. So cool.*

*Building friendships, building relationships, and having fun, that's what I've had, I've had fun, and we forget about them little bits of life when we do need to have fun. Yeah, because it's really hard to get through life without that. And I've not had so much fun.*

*It's like a different experience. Usually when you go to groups like everyone divides into their own little groups, like I've had a conversation with every single person here at some point. I've actually gone up to people and started conversations with them whereas before I always wait for them to come to me. Yeah, because I felt like they didn't want to talk to me unless they come to me. But now I'll just walk over and start a conversation and then it will just flow like that.*

Some participants spoke about how seeing others having fun and enjoying the sessions gave them a feeling of satisfaction too. This was also linked with wanting to take on the roles of welcoming and supporting participants in the Our Space group and in other community groups.

*I like just watching people come in [new participants]. I like seeing them and they come in. And I was like, timid and shy and then by the end of it, they're like, like you know, come out of their shell and they are beaming in themselves. Being around other people, helping them, watching them grow helps me to grow. So, you know it, it's beneficial all round.*

*I'm taking more of a role in them [groups]. I'm more helping other people in them rather than being a participant. I'm like helping out a lot more than I did before and I'm just more confident in myself.*

*For me, it's like when you're in the group. I think everyone knows that they got that child inside them. But when you're in the group, you're bringing that child out and you do whatever you want and no one blaming you and that help me like for example, grow up with that child, even sometimes outside with my friends on doing that, that confidence gave me yeah. Like in our space, when you get that friend, you get friends with everyone. That's kind of healthy.*

*You see your team, your friends. Whoever's in there in the group, you see them having a laugh, having a good time, that gives me a buzz for next week, I mean, all the week that give me a buzz.*

### 3: Resilience and purpose

With renewed self-confidence, stronger self-belief and feeling more socially connected, participants resilience grew. Our Space weekly workshops gave participants a sense of purpose and something to look forward to each week. This also related to a sense of belonging and feeling part of something that was consistent and going to be there for them. Our Space provided opportunities for participants to find themselves by exploring and trying out new things.

*I've got something to look forward to as well. Something I can commit to, that's going to be there.*

*I think it just gives me that if it's been like a crazy week health wise it just gives me that like something to look forward to. I've got that that consistent thing. That's yeah. When everything else can feel a bit messy. And I know that I've got that to sort of look forward to.*

*This year has been crazy. I've done so much in such little time. It's been beautiful... I've had my trials and tribulations. I've been dying, but I've still stood back up again and got through it.*

*I've never experienced this part of my life before. I've never had the opportunity to be part of any theatre skills or anything. Traumatized I'd say I was. I was taught to survive, not to live. So, I never experienced all this good stuff that comes along with life. So, I'm doing it now. I'm throwing myself into anything because I don't know what I do and don't like. Trying to identify myself as a human as well, my hobbies, my interests because I have no idea.*

Participants also spoke about how techniques and topics explored in the drama workshops were helpful for everyday life. Warm up activities such as walking around and saying hello, introducing oneself and making eye contact were felt to be important, along with techniques for drama performances such as voice projection, posture and breathing techniques which are also useful for daily life. Working together within drama activities, team building and developing ideas for performances led to feelings of connectedness, purpose, and wanting to do more.

*Some of the techniques that we were taught within the group, I use them on a daily basis just to keep calm and just try and think of a different way of coping. Yeah, I've been practising different coping mechanisms...Just to ground oneself. The basics, that's what's really important that I think we forget about the breathing techniques. And yeah, just concentrating on like breath. It's not spoken about enough, but yeah, that's what's got me through.*

*The theme of destiny is so poignant because we're all going through that journey and we all want to reach that final destination. So as soon as I hear that word, I'm triggered back to good stuff. Not bad stuff. Which is replacing the bad stuff. So replacing the bad flashbacks with good flashbacks, which I never knew that was going to happen. But yeah, it's the best bit of therapy I've ever had.*

*The performing that we did at the end of last term. I actually wanted to do that again after, be on stage after. I've never wanted that in my life, like I could do this for a living, I enjoy this. It's like you are there in front of everyone but you are still anonymous. It's weird because. There's loads of people on stage and you're not the focus. It's like everyone is part of it... your part leads to someone else's part. Like they're waiting on your lines. So, it's like a team, you're just passing the baton to someone else.*

## 4: Reduced isolation & new opportunities

Along with weekly workshops, the Our Space programme introduces participants to additional opportunities. This includes highlighting activities in the community that they can participate in, offering free theatre tickets for members of the group, sharing voluntary and paid work opportunities, and offering support for applying for these roles. This contributes to inclusion by helping to overcome financial barriers, increasing participants sense of feeling worthy and a belief that everyone can enjoy and participate in social and community activities, events, and opportunities.

*Sometimes they give us free tickets [to see theatre shows]. Not many of us had got that opportunity going to see shows. I've never been in the theatre. None of my family was in theatre. But when they made ticket for first time, I feel like I'm special.*

*Now I feel that theatre is for everyone, but before, I thought maybe just for a certain class of people. When I joined Our space. I came to believe that theatre is for everybody and that was really important, and I didn't feel like people that see me and think 'who is this coming here', I was one of them. It's good feeling, really. It's really good feeling.*

*Sometimes you just need a night out. And if you ain't got no money and you can get a free ticket, you know, it it's worth its weight in gold it. It's a godsend because you can go out and have time away from stress.*

*And you tend to go together.*

*Yeah, gives you time to spend with your friends as well.*

Taking part in activities and opportunities at Our Space, within the theatre and beyond, helped to reduce isolation and lead to improved social connections and desire to want to participate new activities and opportunities within the wider community.

*I started volunteering, volunteering training and had I not come to our space, I don't think I'd have had the confidence to sign up for it and do something else.*

*I have done a mentoring course and I'm going to hopefully be the mentor next. I was speaking to them earlier. So, I'm gonna hopefully be a mentor when we come back after half term. I'm looking forward to doing that.*

*I applied for a job in here. I met B in here and she helped me write a cover letter. I didn't get the job, but it was worth trying.*

*Before I was like, I only took jobs where I worked alone. People just left me alone, but now, like with everybody in the group I'll just blend them. I never even met these people before and I just drive straight to a group with them, and it's like, we're all friends.*

*Yeah, it's so many different opportunities. Positive things are coming. When you're in the group of our space. Like flash mob for example, or let's go next for whatever next few months, bringing the show up even that ten minute showback, that's really important that's make a lot of difference for anyone.*

Participants spoke about how taking up new opportunities such as volunteering, getting involved in other community groups, clubs, and activities was changing their lives in positive ways and opening up thinking about the future.

*Everything in my life changed, like crazy different. I am putting myself in situations where I would never have put myself in before. I'm running a craft club, I went to a fancy dress party like normally I just wouldn't bother. So many things. I'm going to interviews, talking about my running my own business, getting the job, just everything going different... I volunteer and I've been going to art groups. Just putting myself forward for things I've been to the Climate Cafe the other day I went there on my own. That was really cool, it was huge for me.*

*It's definitely brought me out a little bit, I mean, they asked me to try the Flash Mob. And I got involved and I would not ever do anything else. Usually though, especially dance. And once I tried the flash mob and it was only a couple of days. And so I'm begging B to start to try and look for dance classes for me as well, because it's just made me want to do more as well. Like I haven't done before.*

*When I first joined, there was an opportunity to be part of a flash mob and I took the opportunity, and the confidence was amazing. I loved every minute of that, because I've never been part because it was part of a dance routine and we had to learn certain moves. And I'm very surprised within myself that I remembered the moves and stuff. It was lovely It really was very exciting.*

*I thought my future would be progress into the afternoon course and then hopefully get into theatre that way. I'd love to tour the country and see the world, cause I've never left England.*

## Positivity and hope: the ripple effect

Alongside the programme outcomes, additional themes included renewed positivity and hope and the ripple effect that this had. Some participants spoke about being inspired by other's successes, which was giving them hope for their own futures. Others shared how the positivity gained from Our Space was having an impact on their families too. For example, family members seeing the changes and wanting to get involved and participants renewed sense of positivity being carried forward into their own homes and families.

*I think like watching how some of the people have participated and then they've gone further. I think that gives me like it inspires me because I think or maybe I might like to do something in terms of like leading a group or being like a mentor or just helping in some way.*

*I never thought I'd be able to do anything beyond just groups because of my epilepsy and it has given me hope that I can do more.*

*Like I'm just. I accept everything like, there's like a thing here, but there's no negativity brought into this space. And if I'm at home, and someone says something negative. I'm like no we don't do that here. Makes the whole environment way more. It just adds a nice positive eye to my life really.*

*My mum can see that I'm so different. It's like ohh I wish I could do something like that and I'm like, well, why don't you then? She's like. Oh, no, I couldn't. I couldn't... But she has seen that I'm happy and different...So I've managed to convince her to come, she's actually signed up now, so that's epic.*

## Next steps

The interviews with Our Spaces participants provide overwhelming evidence of the positive impact of the programme and ways in which it transforms and enhances 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 therefore has arisen; how to do justice to those waiting on the list whilst not moving participants on too soon. Participants highlighted how important the programme is in their lives providing a stable and constant weekly event to look forward to, on which they could feel safe, supported and enjoy the moment away from outside life issues. However, some participants shared awareness of the issues facing the programme in terms of a broad need for the type of support being provided by Our Space and the long waiting list. To address this, the next phase of the evaluation will take a deeper look at sustainability of the programme in light of these factors.

*Everybody's awesome. It's amazing. I wish that. I wish there was more of it for more people, yeah. More of it for more people and not just once a week. Cause I love it.*

*I wanna stay here as long as possible, but I don't wanna take up someone else's space.*

*They definitely need more community groups because like I said, there's a lot of people out there that can't get their help they need. And, you know, this is a start. It's a foot in the starting position. Then, you know, they need to do more of them.*

*I'm grateful for all the years I've had and experiences I've had, and I just hope that we can keep it running as long as possible because there's people out there that need it, and they've got a long, long, long queue of people waiting to come.*