

Act Now: Learning and Evaluation Report

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Figure 1: Celebrating the final theatre performance featuring the Act Now ensemble along with project staff and some audience members

1. Act Now

1.1 The Organisations and Project Aims

In 2021, Geese Theatre Company (GTC) and SIFA Fireside (SIFA) successfully gained funding from the National Lottery Community Fund for Act Now, a collaborative project that aimed to demonstrate the impact of the arts as a powerful tool for change in people experiencing multiple and complex issues who are vulnerably housed, homeless or rough sleeping.

Since 1987, GTC has been at the forefront of arts in criminal and social justice settings. The company is renowned for its ability to engage with some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in both custodial and community settings. They create innovative projects and performances, working with diverse participants with multiple and complex needs, improving wellbeing, rehabilitation and recovery.

SIFA is the homeless support service and charity for any adult that is at risk of, or facing homelessness in Birmingham. SIFA support clients in their recovery from the effects of homelessness. From essential services such as Homelessness Intervention, Housing Transition and the essential needs met through their Support Centre, SIFA's range of homeless services exist to stand by people while they rebuild their lives in safety and with dignity.

Both organisations are based in Birmingham, UK.

¹ Shaw, P. (2019). *A Literature Review of Arts and Homelessness*, London: Arts & Homelessness International.

The original aim was to develop a series of personal development projects and a series of creative projects. Evaluation was built into the project from the start.

By providing people with opportunities to participate in creative, arts-based projects, the overall intended project outcomes were to:

- Increase social inclusion for people with experience of homelessness
- Improve mental health and wellbeing through engagement with arts and creative projects
- Develop skills for work, including empathy, communication and teamwork
- Challenge prejudices around people who are homeless and/or have complex support needs

A description of the original project plan and the evolution of Act Now are detailed in Section 3.1 of this report.

1.2 The Evidence Base

An extensive, international literature review exploring the intersection of arts and homelessness¹, drew on 61 pieces of literature published between 2000 and 2019. The review was designed to support practitioners working in arts and homelessness, and included qualitative studies, guidance documents, and feature articles. The majority of the literature originated from the United States (26), Canada (18), and the United Kingdom (10), with contributions from six other countries. The review defined homelessness broadly,

encompassing individuals without stable or suitable housing, including those in temporary or inappropriate accommodation. It also adopted an inclusive definition of the arts, covering both active participation (such as creating visual art, music, or theatre) and passive engagement (such as attending performances or exhibitions).

The review identified a wide range of artforms used in arts and homelessness initiatives. Theatre and drama featured prominently. The participant groups in these studies were diverse, including adults (35), young people (17), women only (8), men only (4), children (2), and mixed or unspecified groups. This diversity reflects the broad reach of arts-based interventions across different demographics affected by homelessness.

Five key outcome themes emerge from the literature. First, wellbeing is a central benefit, with arts activities shown to improve mental and physical health, support trauma recovery, and foster positive identity and emotional expression. Second, agency is enhanced through arts engagement, as participants gain a sense of control over their lives, develop creative identities, and are seen as more than their homelessness. Co-production and visibility in community arts projects are particularly empowering. Third, resilience is strengthened through the arts, which help build a sense of belonging, emotional support, and the strength to endure adversity. Many projects emphasise community-building and mutual support among participants. Fourth, arts engagement contributes to knowledge and skills development, offering participants opportunities to acquire transferable skills, engage in learning environments, and sometimes pursue further education or employment. These outcomes are achieved through both formal and informal learning experiences.

ⁱⁱ Holdsworth, N. and Verson, J. (2022), *Arts and Homelessness in Coventry: What does HOME mean to you?*, University of Warwick.

Finally, a small number of studies report additional outcomes, such as shifting public perceptions of homelessness and generating economic benefits through the sale of artwork. These broader impacts highlight the potential of arts initiatives to influence societal attitudes and provide tangible benefits to participants.

The review highlights the use of performance, storytelling, and role-play to support wellbeing, build confidence, and foster community. Theatre is noted for its ability to: help participants express personal narratives; create public engagement and challenge stereotypes; and offer collaborative and empowering experiences, especially when co-produced. While the review highlights individual outcomes, there is limited exploration of how arts engagement affects policy, service provision, or systemic change.

Closer to home is an evaluation of two major initiatives that took place during Coventry's tenure as UK City of Culture 2021ⁱⁱ. These initiatives were led by Arts & Homelessness International and aimed to explore how creative practices could support people experiencing homelessness and influence public policy. The first initiative, HOME Festival, was a city-wide celebration of arts and homelessness. It was co-produced by people with lived experience of homelessness, ensuring that their voices and perspectives shaped the festival's design and delivery. The second initiative, the Legislative Theatre Project, used participatory theatre methods to engage citizens and policymakers in revising Coventry's homelessness policy and rough sleeper strategy.

One of the key findings of the evaluation was the transformative power of co-production. Involving people with lived experience in the

design and delivery of arts-based projects led to outcomes that were more inclusive, empathetic, and effective. Participants felt a greater sense of ownership and agency, which contributed to the success of both initiatives. The report also highlights creative expression as a form of empowerment. Many participants reported increased confidence, visibility, and emotional wellbeing as a result of engaging in artistic activities and public performances.

2. Evaluation Methods

2.1 Approach

A qualitative research approach was adopted for the evaluation of Act Now. Qualitative inquiry explores social phenomena through eliciting rich description of, and reflection upon, people's perspectives and experiences. The methodology was designed to examine the delivery of, and to capture any impacts arising from, Act Now from the perspectives of project participants, GTC and SIFA, as well as other stakeholders (such as audiences, local arts and cultural organisations, and those involved in designing and/or delivering homelessness services).

The aim was to produce a robust evaluation of the project and to support discussions and debate, strengthening the case for arts-based approaches to recovery, particularly in the specific context of Birmingham, thus forming an important part of the project's wider strategic aims. The research and evaluation objectives were:

- To explore whether, and if so to what extent, participating in Act Now can **improve mental health and wellbeing** amongst those experiencing homelessness
- To examine whether, and if so to what extent, participating in Act Now can **increase social inclusion** for people with experience of homelessness
- To consider whether, and if so to what extent, participation in Act Now can facilitate the **development of skills** for individuals (such as empathy, communication, and teamwork)
- To learn about the potential for Act Now to challenge prejudices around homelessness and to influence service delivery and public policy

- To understand more about the opportunities and challenges of delivering a programme like Act Now, including the persistence of any barriers and how they were overcome

During the three-year period, the evaluation methodology was co-designed in close collaboration with GTC practitioners, SIFA staff supporting the project and, as the project developed, creative and participatory means were deployed to engage the project participants in helping to shape the evaluation process. This enabled the research team to stay attuned to how the project was evolving and to adapt to key learning as it was implemented, ensuring that the evaluation remained coherent, relevant, and robust.

2.2 Data Collection

The learning and evaluation deployed the following qualitative research methods:

Participant Observation: This involved (a) engaging in a sample of the sessions as an active group participant. This enabled the research team to observe what project delivery actually looked like (e.g. the physical space, activities, and interactions), and provided the opportunity to get to know participants and GTC and SIFA staff delivering the project, to build trust and rapport, and to speak with them informally. Additionally, it allowed for observation of the impact of participation on various outcomes such as building individual confidence, social inclusion, and social capital. Participant observation was also conducted at (b) a sample of film screenings and live performances. This allowed for the capture of both audience feedback and informal discussion with the wider project stakeholders in attendance (such as local arts and cultural organisations, policymakers and the project funders).

Creative Workshops: Following completion of each programme, project participants were invited to participate in a one-hour creative evaluation workshop. Here, individuals collectively reflected on their experiences of participating in Act Now through group discussions, drawing, and other creative expressive activities. They typically involved between 5 and 10 individuals per workshop. The workshops were required to be flexible either by being embedding within existing delivery or being hosted in a dedicated session. In particular, one piece of learning was that many participants experienced a ‘lull’ after completing the programme and tended to value the opportunity to participate in an additional follow-up session in order to reflect on the project together with their peers.

Case Studies: The research team conducted deep one-to-one conversations with a sample of project participants, including some who had been involved across numerous programme iterations. This enabled them to understand in much greater detail the individual-level impacts of Act Now with respect to those individuals’ personal circumstances and their specific journeys in/out of homelessness. Those one-to-one conversations, some of which were ongoing with individuals across the three-year period, focused on the participant’s journey of involvement in the project, their ongoing experiences and reflections, and their hopes and ambitions for the project and their own lives as the programme neared completion.

Semi-Structured Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of staff at GTC and SIFA that explored the experiences and reflections of those tasked with delivering and/or supporting Act Now through their role as practitioners or caseworkers. The lead practitioner at GTC additionally submitted weekly reflective voice diaries which enabled the evaluation to track session delivery in real time.

2.3 Project Participants

The research team spoke to a total of 15 participants who had been involved in at least one or more programmes in Act Now (see Table 1) through case studies and/or creative workshops. Those individuals were all clients regularly attending SIFA who were either homeless, vulnerably housed adults, or who had a background of homelessness. Those 15 project participants broadly represented the wider SIFA client base being mostly white men aged 25-70, although some older people, minority ethnic (Black, South Asian) individuals and women also participated in both Act Now and the evaluation.

Although the project eligibility criteria was initially restricted to those people engaging with SIFA’s services who are no longer ‘in crisis’, rather than those deemed by SIFA to be still ‘in recovery’, as the project evolved this distinction gradually broke down with individuals transitioning between the two categories (see Section 3.1). Both these client groups were involved in the evaluation activities. Finally, although in early 2025 GTC delivered some activities with a new project partner, the Birmingham-based drug and alcohol service *Change, Live, Grow* (CGL), only half of the scheduled sessions were delivered and these activities did not therefore form part of the evaluation process.

2.4 Project Timeline

Table 1: Act Now Projects and Activities

Project	Dates	Activities
1	May 2022 – July 2022	Creative Sessions
2	December 2022 – December 2022	Performance: <i>Jon's Journey</i>
3	January 2023 – March 2023	Creative Sessions
4	April 2023 – June 2023	Creative Sessions
5	September 2023 – November 2023	Film: <i>Archie's Choice</i>
6	January 2024 – March 2024	Creative Sessions
7	August 2024 – October 2024	Film: <i>The Way Forward</i>
8	January 2025 – March 2025	Film: <i>Through the Looking Mask</i>
9	January 2025 – February 2025	Sessions at CGL
10	July 2025 – July 2025	Final Performance

Table 1 details the ten individual projects that were delivered for Act Now. The development of the projects is described in Section 3.1.

2.5 Data Analysis

The data was subject to qualitative thematic analysis. To ensure rigour, data was triangulated by cross-checking against two or more alternative data sources (e.g. observational notes, case study and interview narratives, and material collected in the creative workshops). The evaluation team reflected regularly with GTC practitioners on emerging learning and the ongoing evolution of the project, and delivered briefing notes and an interim report that

allowed for iterative feeding back of learning throughout the project, submitted to GTC, SIFA, and the National Lottery.

As the evaluation represented an ongoing conversation with some participants for a period of up to three years, it was able to invite individuals to reflect on emerging findings as they developed through informal discussions and creative workshops. Finally, the evaluation team shared the research findings that are outlined in this report with stakeholders and the general public during an end-of-project learning and reflection event, held online in September 2025 to mark the culmination of Act Now, that exposed the findings and recommendations to additional scrutiny and insight.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

The evaluation was undertaken by two highly trained researchers with considerable experience in conducting research with individuals who experience multiple and complex issues. The research team were granted enhanced ethical approval by the Faculty of Arts, Business and Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Wolverhampton. It worked closely with caseworkers at SIFA to guarantee adherence to all safeguarding procedures. Furthermore, no data was collected prior to all participants' providing fully informed consent. To ensure confidentiality, participants' responses are anonymised within this report.

2.7 Limitations

Some limitations must be considered. First, despite co-designing the evaluation activities with SIFA caseworkers, bearing the specific needs of service users in mind – such as keeping one-to-one conversations short, informal, and sensitive to the traumas

experienced by individuals with multiple and complex needs – some project participants were unable or unwilling to participate in the case studies and/or creative workshops, and regrettably their voices are omitted from this analysis. Second, reluctance on behalf of participants to discuss and/or disclose sensitive topics and experiences must be borne in mind, potentially limiting our understanding of some of the individual-level impacts. Third, reporting deadlines prevent the collection of longitudinal data that may demonstrate longer-term impact. Fourth, while the initial intention was to deploy quantitative measurement tools in order to understand individual change over time, the project's gradual evolution towards working with a much smaller number of participants than originally anticipated (see Section 3.1) ultimately negated this approach in favour of deep qualitative inquiry.

3. Findings

The qualitative evaluation elicited a wealth of information concerning the delivery of Act Now that is presented within the following sections: how the project was actually delivered evolving along the way (3.1); what worked well, what did not, and the persistence of challenges and barriers (3.2); the emerging impacts upon individuals (3.3).

3.1 A Story of Continuous Learning: Documenting the Evolution of Act Now Delivery

Act Now has represented a process of continuous learning and evolution that has creatively flexed to the myriad opportunities and challenges that have emerged over the three-year period. As a result, the actual implementation of the project has diverged considerably from that which was originally proposed. Initially, Act Now envisaged working with up to 100 service users across two discrete programme strands:

Personal Development Projects

This strand was to encompass eight cohorts of 10-session programmes (involving 64 people) that would use drama and theatre methods to explore behaviour, choice, change and moving forward. The personal development projects would be themed around the particular needs of the group, current issues and shared experiences. They expected to cover topics such as offending behaviour, substance misuse, and family relationships.

Creative Projects

The creative projects were to involve three cohorts of 10-session programmes (involving 36 people) that would be more intensive, varying in length and structure, with different models being piloted; for example, 10 sessions over two weeks or 5 full days. The participants would work together to create a performance or other outcome to be shared on the final day to an audience of friends, family, peers, staff, volunteers and other professionals. They could also include the opportunity to create film or use other artforms, developing creative skills. Participants on these projects may have been through a personal development programme, but this was not to be a requirement.



Figure 2: Participants undertake a 'warm-up' exercise during a creative session

The participants for Act Now were to be referred predominantly through SIFA services, with eligibility restricted to those who were deemed by SIFA to be no longer 'in crisis'. However, this vision quickly

broke down. Staffing changes at SIFA and shifts in service priorities disrupted those referral pathways. Moreover, the binary distinction between individuals who are ‘in crisis’ or ‘in recovery’ proved inadequate, as some participants fluctuated between the two states throughout their participation in the project, as one staff member at SIFA noted:

“The reality is that we don’t have a strong difference between clients who are in crisis and in recovery. The kind of people that we see are [...] one week they’re in crisis then the next week they’re possibly in recovery, they’re, you know, extremely vulnerable. Life is very precarious [for them]”

Further learning was that the referral system required SIFA caseworkers to actively advocate for and to recruit for Act Now, and the success of this strategy depended upon their ability to promote the project to service users. This was not particularly effective. Some other proposed recruitment strategies – such as the distribution of promotional materials within SIFA – also did not prove to be effective.

The early stages of the project highlighted some of the barriers faced by clients in participating in the project. For some service users this perhaps reflected a lack of interest in participating in drama activities and/or negative perceptions about what joining a drama group might entail, yet even for those highly motivated to attend, consistent engagement was still impeded by factors such as episodic crises, scheduling conflicts with job, housing, and welfare appointments, ill health, poor weather, and so on.

While it was envisioned that GTC would work with eight participants per personal development project, attendance was sporadic with sometimes only three or four individuals in attendance each session. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, service users were at varying

stages of their recovery journey influencing their capacity and motivations to fully engage in the sessions. There was also a dilemma regarding the integration of new participants partway through a personal development project; although this was not anticipated, low attendance had discouraged GTC from excluding new arrivals. However, allowing participation on this ad-hoc basis prevented the project moving from ‘warm-up’ exercises towards the more focused personal development work.

These dynamics made it difficult for GTC to provide a cohesive programme of activity and served to undermine the continuity of the project. There were also frustrations concerning the difficulty in securing an appropriate and large enough work space within SIFA. Instead, the group were required to work within the main hall, partitioned only by a dividing curtain. The space was at times cold and loud, which was not conducive to creating the necessary safe space to foster the inclusion and creativity required for GTC’s personal development work.

In response, recruitment for Act Now became more informal, relying on word-of-mouth and the informal presence of GTC staff in SIFA client drop-in areas. Those staff helped to raise awareness of the project and allowed clients to ask questions, to discuss their likes, and what they are most interested in gaining from the project. While this activity was prefigured within the original project plan, and was semi-effective, it nonetheless placed a considerable imposition upon GTC staff time and recruitment continued to prove challenging throughout Projects 1 – 3.

Act Now finally began to pick up momentum in early 2023 with Project 4, following the emergence of a critical mass of participants that were predominantly collected across the previous three cohorts. Informed by ongoing challenges with recruitment, GTC revised its approach by

allowing those who had participated on previous projects to re-enrol, departing from the original plan that stated that each project would enlist eight new participants. From Project 4 onwards, this core group of initially five, before later growing to ten highly engaged individuals, formed the ensemble that would regularly form the basis for a new project, working alongside any new recruits. This change responded to the reality that although there was little new demand for enrolment, there was still considerable repeat demand:

“I knew there was another one coming up in a month or so. If that was the end of it, I don’t know how I’d feel. I think I’d feel a lot more down, to know that was it. At least I knew there was another one coming up. I think you look forward to the next one because you know what it entails and you know what you’ll do and the people you’ll meet, so you want to get involved with the next one as well.” (Participant)

Consequently, some of the project’s wider ambitions, such as the hope to offer targeted projects towards specific service user groups – for instance, a women-only support group, and a group of Central & Eastern European clients with language support – were not fulfilled. Instead, the project focused its delivery towards a cohort of 15 – 20 individuals who participated in multiple sessions or projects, with a further 10 attending intermittently. The evaluation focuses on the former group.

In May 2024, the National Lottery approved a six-month extension to accommodate underspend and to adjust delivery in light of these factors, as recognised by GTC:

“Over the last 12 months there have been changes to the focus of work and client groups that SIFA Fireside are primarily supporting. Their focus is on clients who are currently rough

sleeping, bringing them into the centre and supporting them out of the service. These clients are not suitable for [GTC] projects, and were never the intended target, primarily due to their chaotic situation. The programmes are designed for people further along their recovery journey away from street homelessness – those requiring less support. SIFA still work with some clients like this and are developing a Recovery Pathway to include modules on ‘life skills’ such as arts projects, alongside financial and practical skills. This cohort is much smaller than previously, and as a result the number of people suitable for referral onto [GTC] programmes has been reduced” (GTC Submission to the National Lottery)

As the project evolved, the distinction between the personal development and creative projects broke down, with most sessions incorporating elements of both. Act Now did experiment with different delivery models such as weekly sessions held over ten weeks alongside more intensive creative formats spanning, for instance, ten sessions over two weeks. These models did work to address different service user needs, as reflected in their feedback:

“I think the hook to get people in is definitely the once-a-week thing. If people are maybe not sure about it, they won’t say ‘I’ll commit to a week’. That’s too much. It’s more like ‘I’ll rock up this week and if it’s alright I might rock up again next week’. I think that’s a better way of getting people in” (Participant)

“In a weird way it was easier to commit even though it was more intensive because it was two weeks and it was blocked off. Whereas, when it’s just once a week, you don’t know what you’re going to be doing, you don’t know what your routine is going to look like. I think more people drop in and out” (Participant)

The outputs of the combined projects include three short films and two live performances that were showcased in local arts venues such as the Mockingbird Cinema, the Crescent Theatre, and the Blue Orange Theatre. These events attracted diverse audiences of up to 30 people per event that included friends and peers, GTC and SIFA staff, professionals and volunteers working in the local arts and cultural and social care sectors, and funders.



Figure 3: Through the Looking Mask Film

3.2 What Worked, What Did Not, Challenges and Barriers

A key factor contributing to the success of Act Now concerned the **formation and sustained engagement of the core group** comprising five to ten highly engaged individuals that participated across multiple

projects. The value of this group was threefold. First, members of the core group emerged as adept recruiters because they were able to endorse the project by encouraging their peers to come along to the sessions and try it out for themselves. In so doing, they were able to help mitigate scepticism and negative preconceptions surrounding drama-based activities. As one participant recounted:

“[My friend] thought I was mad when I came to the first one. He thought I was mad! I was like ‘come along, it’s alright’. He was just sat there at first thinking ‘what on earth is this?’. At the end of it he was like ‘it’s alright, this!’. He loves it now”
(Participant)

Second, the core group cultivated a palpable sense of energy and momentum that extended beyond the formal sessions. Their interactions, such as communal dining in the lunch hall and spontaneous public reenactments of performance scenes – much to the bewilderment of passers-by – fostered a sense of collective identity and belonging. SIFA staff observed the emergence of social bonds among individuals “who wouldn’t normally interact with one another” including the formation of enduring friendships.

Third, the core group functioned as a vital source of peer support. Members encouraged attendance, fostered inclusivity, monitored one another’s wellbeing, and engaged in skill-sharing. While it is acknowledged that certain internal group dynamics – such as personality conflicts or demographic homogeneity (e.g., predominantly white, male, English-speaking) – may have inadvertently discouraged other service users from joining, this issue was not comprehensively examined within the scope of the evaluation. Nevertheless, both GTC and SIFA staff reported that the group was generally welcoming, with no incidents of hostility. One participant reflected:

“When I joined, I thought ‘these have done it for a year or two and they’ve built their confidence up’. I was nervous at first because when I saw you all I bet you thought ‘oh, he’s quiet’. I was scared stiff, petrified! But now I’ve come out of my shell, I feel more forward” (Participant)

Participants consistently praised the **professionalism and interpersonal skills of GTC practitioners**, highlighting their patience, fairness, and sensitivity to individual needs, including the provision of session breaks and tolerance of non-attendance. The rapport between GTC staff and participants contributed to a safe, inclusive, and creatively stimulating environment. Practitioners were also commended by participants for their persistence in encouraging participation, particularly amongst individuals experiencing mental health challenges. One individual said: “once they get hold, they don’t let go!”, a comment which underscores the practitioners’ nuanced understanding of the barriers faced by individuals with multiple and complex needs and their capacity to foster empowerment and inclusion. The experiential nature of the sessions further enhanced accessibility by removing reliance on literacy, numeracy, or verbal fluency. Additionally, SIFA facilitated linguistic inclusion by providing a Polish-speaking staff member when necessary. While the sessions were active, the programme did not exclude those with disabilities or limited physical health.

A defining strength of Act Now was **GTC’s commitment to horizontal collaboration and participatory decision-making**. GTC demonstrated flexibility by tailoring each session to the needs of those individuals present, rather than adhering to a predetermined session plan. This adaptive approach enabled practitioners to respond dynamically to fluctuating attendance. The temporary shift from live performance to short film production meanwhile allowed for

episodic development aligned with the availability of participants. Here, the success of the project entailed recognising what does and does not work, and responding openly and positively to participant feedback.

In terms of **co-creation**, the participants were empowered to co-write content often drawing upon their lived experience, knowledges, and skills. One notable instance involved a film inspired by a participant’s poetry reflecting on their encounters with mental health services. This narrative was collaboratively developed and enacted, with participants contributing to both the artistic and technical aspects of production, including camera operation and filming techniques.

Act Now provided valuable insights into the **limitations of social prescribing models at SIFA**. While SIFA supports engagement with arts and cultural activities as part of individuals’ recovery, one caseworker expressed reservations about the feasibility of such approaches:

“You engage with clients, you develop a relationship with them, find out what their kind of interests are: are they interested in learning a musical instrument? Would they, you know, do they have any health issues? Would they benefit from going swimming once a week and this kind of thing? I’m personally quite wary of how this works”

The caseworker furthered that “the barriers are too high to be able to do that particularly well for a large number of people”, noting the relatively high levels of support required to enable the participation of just one individual with multiple and complex needs. While a service user may be prescribed music or swimming classes, for instance, regular attendance is difficult for those who may not have a mobile phone, stable housing, or any fixed routine. In contrast, Act Now’s on-

site delivery at SIFA aligned with participants' existing routines, thereby fostering meaningful engagement and interpersonal connection. As the caseworker concluded "to really engage with people [with an experience of homelessness] you have to have a community space and personal relationships to make stuff work". Act Now succeeded in creating such a space, thereby addressing gaps in traditional social prescribing mechanisms.

The project's efficacy was further enhanced by the **consistent involvement of a dedicated SIFA caseworker**. Initially, SIFA was unable to allocate a regular staff member to the sessions, contrary to the original project plan. However, as Act Now progressed, one caseworker assumed a sustained role, attending and supporting each session. This individual contributed in three significant ways: one, generating enthusiasm and enjoyment within sessions; two, maintaining regular contact with participants that encouraged attendance; three, symbolising organisational commitment, thereby transitioning the project from an external intervention that simply happened at SIFA to an integrated component of SIFA's service provision.

The creative outputs of Act Now, including films and live performances, have been **exhibited in prominent local arts venues** such as the Mockingbird Cinema, the Crescent Theatre, and the Blue Orange Theatre. Unsurprisingly, few participants reported having the opportunity to regularly engage with formal arts and culture, let alone produce it. This opportunity was therefore seen to provide real value and authenticity, enhancing participants' confidence and willingness to share their narratives with broader audiences. This public engagement holds potential for challenging societal prejudices surrounding homelessness and catalysing social change.

Turning to the **persistence of barriers**, despite the implementation of various strategic adjustments, poor attendance of participants could not be fully ameliorated. However, SIFA staff posited that some instances of non-attendance may in fact reflect clients' lack of need to use SIFA services, which itself could be interpreted as a positive indicator of individual progress and autonomy. Another unresolved challenge concerned the spatial limitations, as all on-site activities were restricted to the main hall for the entirety of the programme. Nevertheless, on both counts, it is fair to conclude that Act Now was able to function effectively despite the constraints, once having taken steps to flex accordingly. As one participant remarked, the designated corner represented "a safe space in a crazy place" illustrating the efforts of GTC and SIFA staff to cultivate a secure and supportive environment despite the logistical limitations.

It could be argued that one consequence of the decision to allow participants to re-enrol is that the project risked becoming repetitive for returning attendees. Over time, some individuals expressed a desire to move beyond the recurring focus on behaviour change and personal choice, and the core themes of homelessness, offending behaviour, and substance misuse. These topics, which formed the foundation of the personal development strand of the project, were increasingly perceived as reductive and clichéd by some long-term participants. This sentiment culminated in aspiration amongst some participants to transcend the portrayal of such roles. Concurrently, divergent expectations emerged amongst newer participants. While some were content with only limited engagement, others voiced disappointment that one particular project did not culminate in the production of a live performance.

These differing perspectives reflect the heterogeneous motivations and developmental trajectories of participants, who were each situated at distinct stages of their recovery and creative journeys.

Such internal variation was not fully anticipated at the outset of the project, highlighting the need for ongoing responsiveness to participant needs and aspirations.

3.3 Individual Level Impacts

The evaluation highlights the multifaceted benefits that participation in the arts can yield for those individuals experiencing homelessness and/or who are on their path to recovery. As illustrated in Table 2, participants articulated diverse motivations for joining Act Now, indicating the different expectations regarding what service users expected to derive from involvement in the project.

Table 2: Participants' Stated Motivations for Getting Involved During Creative Workshop

Why Did You Get Involved?
It was something to pass the time
It provided somewhere to keep out of the rain
I thought it would cheer me up
To get my mind off things
It gave me a sense of purpose
It was an opportunity to make friends
Drama reminded me of happy memories of school and church plays

In terms of personal skills development, individuals reported that participation in Act Now provided them with the opportunity to be

creative which has helped to build their self-esteem and self-confidence, and improve interpersonal communication.

“We’re all so happy. We feel confident now; that’s what we all wanted. When people look at you and it can give you more confidence back and you think “oh yeah, we could do it again”. That’s what it is; we feel confidence in ourselves”
(Participant)

Act Now has developed people’s emotional literacy, empathy, and understanding. This has had the effect of enabling individuals to find new ways to express themselves. It was reflected that being creative required participants to “make [themselves] sort of vulnerable”(participant) when exploring their own stories of alcohol and substance misuse, gambling, and offending behaviour, as well as the stigma that is associated with homelessness. A distinctive feature of the sessions was the use of masks as a central metaphor in GTC’s practice. These masks enabled participants to examine their emotional experiences and social identities from a reflective distance. The masks play a key role in exploring emotional literacy, as one participant remarked while reflecting on his past: “I realised I was playing a role. I had to go and perform every day”. Through character-based storytelling, participants were able to explore a range of recovery trajectories, facilitating collective reflection on behavioural choices and their consequences.

Although at times emotionally demanding, Act Now encouraged participants to confront and explore emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression. This process enhanced their capacity to articulate feelings and engage meaningfully with others. Notably, the films and performances produced through the project demonstrated a sophisticated and sensitive portrayal of emotions including fear, sadness, humour, and anger, which resonated with audiences.

A further key indicator of the positive impacts of the project was people's willingness to extend "out of [their] comfort zone" (participant) and to approach new challenges. Many individuals overcame initial apprehension to engage in public performance, and subsequently expressed pride in their achievements:

"Everyone said: I can see how much you've come out your shell. You're not scared. You've moved forward. In my family, my mum and dad [...] my dad grabbed hold of me and said: "I'm chuffed what you've done" (Participant)

The participants exhibited agency, leadership, and responsibility throughout the creative process, such as by contributing to the co-writing of scripts and the execution of live performances. These activities required mastery of key theatrical elements such as choreography and memorisation, as well as adaptability in assuming roles when others were absent. Meanwhile, the collaborative nature of drama demanded effective communication, teamwork, and resilience.

Members of the group enjoyed responding to the technical and artistic demands that drama and theatre presents, even relishing the challenges associated with understanding the importance of body language, eye contact, and communication skills:

"The acting was very challenging; actually being able to stand in the right position and be where you need to be was the most complicated for me. I found that a bit challenging [...] I've picked up quite a lot about the way you need stand, how you need to look – head, eyes, facial expressions: happy, sad, energetic, whatever. I found it a bit challenging" (Participant)

These competencies – ranging from non-verbal communication to emotional expression – are recognised as core transferable skills that are integral to supporting recovery and employability. Furthermore, the sessions involved exploring goals and goal setting activities, prompting participants to consider aspirations such as securing long-term accommodation or attending college, and encouraged participants to identify actionable steps towards achieving these objectives.

The presence of a dedicated SIFA caseworker within the sessions further enhanced the programme's effectiveness. The value was that the individual was able to develop a deeper understanding of participants' needs and then provide tailored support through referrals and signposting, thus contributing practically to more robust recovery pathways.

There is some emerging evidence that the project's impact extended beyond the sessions themselves. Participants were encouraged to reflect between meetings and return with new ideas, characters, and narratives to contribute to an evolving storyline. This continuity reinforced key skills – such as empathy, agency, and leadership – and facilitated their integration into participants' daily lives and routines.

Many individuals reported experiencing an improved sense of mental health and wellbeing as a result of their enrolment in Act Now. For some, participation represented a sense of psychological respite – escapism where "I can get forget myself for five minutes" (participant) and "escape from reality" (participant) – as well as routine and anticipation, serving as a positive fixture within otherwise unpredictable and difficult personal circumstances. This does not mean that participants uniformly embraced every session, as the realities of everyday life dictated the tone and atmosphere of the

sessions. This includes factors such as individuals being disgruntled by the cold weather, disturbed sleep, or financial hardship:

“We all have different days, don’t we? Some days you do feel feisty, and you think “yeah, I’m going to get in there”, other days you think “I’m not sure I’m up to it today” (Participant)



Figure 4: Participants embrace the production of a short film

However, as mentioned previously, the core group played a therapeutic role in supporting individuals’ participation and mental health and wellbeing:

“There have been days that it was very challenging for me and I knew for a fact that, despite how I was feeling, once I arrived to see the group I knew that I’d feel better. That was a guarantee [...] I knew it would be a place I wanted to be even in my darkest moment” (Participant)

“When you walk into a room and you’re having a bad day, you walk into a confidence boosting situation [...] then everybody’s acting, bouncing off each other and it gives you a boost” (Participant)

The conclusion of the project also elicited strong emotional responses, underscoring the depth of its impact. Participants reported experiencing a sense of loss and disorientation following the end of a project cycle:

“I had a downer the week after we finished the theatre project. Tommy said the same. It was like: we’ve got nothing to do today. We got into that routine. It was a bit of a downer not having it to do” (Participant)

“I was really hurt, really depressed. Sheila had to get on the phone to calm me down” (Participant)

With respect to social inclusion, Act Now created a sense of community and belonging among the core group. The evaluation identified a shared commitment to the values of patience, tolerance, trust, respect, and mutual understanding, which contributed to a welcoming and inclusive environment that served to encourage the participation and retainment of others. The evaluation did not encounter any significant moments of hostility or conflict:

“There’s one thing about it: no one takes the mickey out of each other. We’re like: if you’ve got one arm, one leg or whatever, just

join in. That's what it's about, join in with us. We're all one family"
(Participant)

"Some of the members of the group are very articulate and some of them are very kind of emotionally aware, they're quite emotionally intelligent" (SIFA Caseworker)

"Scott does a lot of caretaking with Michael, he really does look out for him. If he's got a hospital appointment, Scott knows about it!" (SIFA Caseworker)

It was reflected that aspects of the group's heterogeneity had contributed to developing a productive group dynamic. Concurring with the quote above, another participant noted that "we are a family now" with certain individuals described as having assumed different group roles akin to maternal and paternal figures. Meanwhile, the core group exemplified cohesion across diverse identities of age, gender, and ethnicity.

Participants were emboldened by the ethos that was instilled by GTC which emphasised that theatre does not necessarily operate within rigid binaries of right and wrong. Instead, every participant was encouraged to recognise and contribute their unique perspectives and experiences which enabled the formation of a safe and affirming space that allowed the multiple lived experiences of the group to be explored:

"I think it's the safe space of it, that it's sectioned off, that everybody gets a chance to talk. Everybody's listened to, you know, it's kind of like there's something about drama and the arts where nobody's wrong. Everybody's got experience [...] It makes people feel like they've been listened to. It makes them feel valued. It makes them feel part of the team" (SIFA Caseworker)

In revisiting participants' initial expectations regarding their involvement in the project (see Table 2), one individual remarked:

"You probably think that the people coming here [...] the last thing they need is a drama course, they probably need housing and stuff like that, [but] even if you can't get housing or whatever, this is still a good foundation"

This statement reveals a sense of unexpected benefit and appreciation, a sentiment echoed by numerous participants. Act Now was perceived to have surpassed initial expectations, delivering a breadth of outcomes that were not originally anticipated by service users. The perceived value was such that participants expressed a strong desire to continue their engagement with the creative arts. Many voiced disappointment at the project's conclusion and speculated about future opportunities to sustain their artistic development, particularly in light of the personal progress they had achieved.

Case Study 1: Kieron

Kieron (not his real name) is a male in his 30s who was referred to SIFA by his therapist, who encouraged him to socialise more. Kieron grew up with a single mother who had been through the care system, and he has six younger siblings who he has helped to take care of. Kieron's referral to SIFA followed what he describes as being a particularly dark period in his life. He explained that he had few friends, and despite being an energetic and charismatic individual, described himself as being insecure and lacking confidence in engaging with others.

At SIFA, he first joined the music group before hearing about the existence of a drama group called Act Now. Kieron found this appealing because he has always been interested in arts and creativity, including writing and performing songs.

He attended one of the first project iterations in December 2022 before becoming an every-present member of the core group as one of Act Now's most highly engaged participants. Kieron particularly enjoyed the camaraderie that was forged within the core group – going as far to describe it as a “family” – and relished the opportunities for collaboration and teamwork. He was keen to support and motivate others, and quickly gained the confidence to adopt the main character role in an early film production. Kieron reports feeling much happier and more settled as a result of his participation in Act Now, which also helped him to navigate several ongoing personal challenges within his life. Being involved in the project has helped him to challenge some of his insecurities, particularly those that relate to pressures associated with masculinity. Kieron continues to produce his own music and, following the culmination of Act Now, is keen to continue his arts and creative progression through pursuing new opportunities.



Figure 5: End of project celebrations

Case Study 2: Sean

Sean (not his real name) is a man in his 40s who has been attending SIFA for the past year. He joined the army at 19-years-old and, having subsequently left, found himself experiencing homelessness. Some years ago he was living between hostels while during his participation in Act Now he was living in a tent in the woods. He told us of his history of offending behaviour, being on bail for some part of the period in question, and of several mental health crises that he had suffered. Upon presenting at SIFA he explained that he was at “rock bottom” and that when the opportunity to join Act Now presented itself, he thought “why not?”.

That said, his preconception was that no one at SIFA would be taking a drama group seriously. However, having joined once Act Now enjoyed the presence of an established core group, Sean was surprised to observe the level of commitment and earnestness that characterised the ensemble. He also found the group to be friendly and welcoming, and he relished the opportunity to spend time and work with like-minded people, even to the extent that he soon successfully encouraged a close friend at SIFA to participate, who themselves were initially reluctant to join.

Sean was involved in a number of projects during the final year of Act Now, embracing the space to be creative and to express himself. Notably, Sean writes poetry and, one day, he was inspired to share his work with the GTC lead practitioner, who encouraged him to submit more. This is significant because Sean had not previously had the confidence to share his work before because it was highly personal.

The lead practitioner then identified one poem which reflected on Sean’s negative encounters with the mental health system; with Sean’s consent, the poem was shared with the group eventually becoming the focus of a film which documents the failures of mental health services.

The poem sparked collective discussions about mental health and provided individuals with the opportunity to bring their lived experience to the fore. Sean reflected that the process had boosted his confidence, and improved his mental health by providing something positive to focus upon. Additionally, he enjoyed the opportunity to challenge perceptions and stigma around homelessness through the making of the film.

Like Kieron, Sean is now eager to continue his arts and creative journey. The lead practitioner at GTC was able to signpost Sean to further creative opportunities and to inspire him to share his poetry further by encouraging him to submit it to a competition.

Aligned with the broader project aim to challenge societal prejudices around homelessness and to influence service delivery and public policy, the project has stimulated dialogue amongst participants regarding potential avenues for advocacy and systemic change. There is a shared aspiration to disseminate the creative outputs more widely, particularly towards politicians and policymakers. The inaugural film, *Archie’s Choice*, portrays the complex decisions faced by individuals experiencing homelessness, contextualised within issues such as unemployment, substance misuse, gambling, and peer pressure. The film follows Archie who is persuaded to sell drugs which ultimately leads to his arrest. In an alternative reality, Archie resists these pressures instead opting to attend college and enrol on a

cooking course. The following exchange considers potential pathways for impact:

“If we develop the story [...] to show the negative impact of him ending up in jail and losing his wife and kids and all that. I think that would have more of an impact. If we take it into school and you go ‘look, he’s gone to college and now suddenly he’s got a good job and he’s working for top restaurants’” (Participant 1)

“But would the education system allow you to show something like that? The system doesn’t allow for everybody to be educated. If you’re rich and you’ve got rich parents or are entitled or your parents are politicians or [from] inherited wealth, it’s completely different from our reality because they’ve got the places like Eton and they all talk like you’re going to be a leader” (Participant 2)

This exchange encapsulates two distinct yet interrelated perspectives. On the one hand, there is an endorsement of narratives centred on personal agency and behavioural transformation. On the other, there is critical recognition of the structural inequalities that shape individual circumstances and opportunity. While seemingly opposed, both perspectives emphasise participants’ desire to assert autonomy in shaping public narratives about homelessness and adding nuance and complexity to public understandings of the homelessness experience. Meanwhile, the latter perspective acknowledges the structural barriers faced by service users that contribute to social exclusion, a viewpoint which itself may serve as a catalyst for individual and collective empowerment.

Drawing upon the evidence presented, Act Now demonstrates that engagement in the arts can facilitate recovery for individuals

experiencing homelessness in three distinct ways. First, it supports the development of the core transferable skills that enhance personal autonomy and agency, enabling participants to articulate their identities and exercise control over their life trajectories, including pathways into education, volunteering, and employment. Second, it provides safe and supportive environments in which individuals can share their lived experiences with peers. This collective reflection fosters new approaches to addressing personal challenges and contributes positively to mental health and emotional wellbeing. Third, the programme has cultivated a sense of community and belonging among some of society’s most marginalised individuals, thereby contributing to broader social cohesion. In this regard, Act Now can be argued to have made a distinctive contribution to individuals’ recovery journeys.

There are two caveats that must be acknowledged. The first pertains to an absence of longitudinal data which would have allowed for an assessment of the extent to which these reported outcomes might persist over time, and therefore form part of a sustainable recovery journey. Or, in contrast, whether these impacts are more ephemeral in nature. The second caveat concerns the scale of delivery. While the original plan was to engage up to 100 service users, the project ultimately focused on a significantly smaller cohort. Consequently, Act Now represents higher levels of financial investment per person than was anticipated, with participants enjoying a higher degree of support intensity and resource investment. This raises an important question regarding the necessary level of engagement to replicate the observed outcomes here, although that question is sadly beyond the remit of this evaluation.

4. Summary and Recommendations

Act Now, delivered by GTC in partnership with SIFA, evolved significantly over its three-year span, adapting to shifting service user needs, staffing changes, and logistical challenges. Initially designed as two distinct strands (Personal Development and Creative Projects), the programme merged these approaches to better accommodate fluctuating attendance and participant engagement. Recruitment strategies shifted from formal referrals to informal, relationship-based outreach, and a core group of five to ten highly engaged individuals emerged as central to the project's success. These participants not only sustained momentum but also fostered peer support, social bonds, and a sense of community. Despite barriers such as inconsistent attendance, inadequate space, and unmet ambitions for targeted groups, Act Now demonstrated resilience and flexibility, culminating in public performances and films that showcased participants' creativity and growth.

The evaluation highlights the individual-level impacts of Act Now, including increased self-confidence, emotional literacy, and interpersonal skills among participants. The project offered a safe, inclusive space for creative expression, enabling individuals to explore personal narratives and confront complex emotions. Participants reported improved mental health, a sense of purpose, and strengthened social inclusion, with many describing the group as a 'family'. The presence of a dedicated SIFA caseworker enhanced continuity and support, while co-creation and participatory decision-making empowered individuals to take ownership of their recovery journeys. Although the conclusion of each project cycle elicited feelings of loss, the overall experience was transformative, offering participants a platform to challenge stigma and envision new possibilities for their futures.

It is important to acknowledge that the delivery team worked through a number of challenges, some that reflect the nature of working with people with complex life circumstances, some challenges that shaped the evolving design of the project, and some challenges that lead directly to the recommendations below. Recruitment proved challenging, as initial referral pathways through SIFA broke down due to staffing changes and shifting priorities, leading to inconsistent attendance and engagement. Even motivated participants faced barriers such as episodic crises, scheduling conflicts, and poor health. The lack of a dedicated, suitable workspace further hindered the creation of a safe and conducive environment for personal development. While the emergence of a core group of participants sustained momentum, their demographic homogeneity may have inadvertently discouraged broader inclusion. Additionally, the decision to allow re-enrolment, though pragmatic, led to concerns about repetitive content and diverging expectations between long-term and newer participants. While Act Now's embedded, relationship-based approach succeeded in creating a community space, its reliance on intensive support is important to consider. These challenges underscore the importance of flexibility, sustained support, and responsiveness in arts-based interventions for vulnerable populations.

Recommendations for Practitioners

By practitioners, we mean arts and support staff working directly with individuals experiencing homelessness.

1. Practitioners must adopt a flexible, participant-centred approach to recruitment and engagement. Informal, staff-led methods are often more effective than rigid referral systems, particularly when participants face chaotic or unpredictable life circumstances. Delivery should be responsive and adaptive, guided by an ethos that prioritises the needs and capacities of participants over pre-defined structures.
2. Engagement is most impactful when participants are at a suitable stage in their recovery journey. Practitioners should be attuned to signs of readiness and stability, while remaining sensitive to the non-linear nature of recovery. Building trust and rapport is essential, and support staff who actively participate in creative sessions can play a pivotal role in motivating and supporting individuals.
3. Creative expression should be encouraged in diverse forms, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences, challenge stigma, and explore new identities. Practitioners should also support participants in shaping the content and format of creative outputs, ensuring that their voices are central to the process. Evaluation should be participatory and reflective, using tools such as one-to-one interviews and visual storytelling to capture individual outcomes and long-term impacts.
4. To support sustainability, where funding allows, practitioners should invest time in training participants to take on facilitation roles, enabling peer-led delivery and leadership. This not only builds confidence and skills but also strengthens the long-term viability of the model. Where appropriate, practitioners should explore transitioning established groups from homelessness services into theatre or arts venues, supporting progression and integration into wider creative communities.

Recommendations for Organisations

1. Organisations hosting or partnering in arts-based recovery projects must provide safe, warm, and consistent environments that support both creative practice and participant wellbeing. Infrastructure matters: adequate space, privacy, and scheduling are essential to maintaining the quality and continuity of sessions. A dedicated staff member should be assigned to support participant engagement, liaise with partners, and ensure logistical coherence.
2. Organisations should embed co-production throughout the project lifecycle, recognising participants as collaborators rather than service users. This includes involving them in decision-making around content creation, evaluation, and dissemination. Organisations must also acknowledge and support the multiple identities and aspirations of participants, moving beyond a deficit-based view of homelessness.
3. Strategic alignment with recovery pathways and support plans is crucial. Organisations should tailor project delivery to complement existing services, ensuring relevance and impact. They should also prioritise sustainability by exploring long-term models, partnerships, and funding streams that embed creative practice within broader recovery services. Dissemination efforts should be proactive and inclusive, using public events, exhibitions, and screenings to share learning and influence discourse.

4. To support replication, organisations should document the processes, partnerships, and training approaches developed through projects like Act Now. Time must be allocated to build relationships, train participants, and create resources that enable other organisations to adopt and adapt the model. Exploring transitions from homelessness services into arts venues can also support progression and visibility, helping participants move into broader creative networks.

Recommendations for Funders

1. Funders play a critical role in enabling and sustaining arts-based approaches to homelessness recovery. Flexibility in funding structures is essential to support adaptive, participant-led delivery models. Funders should recognise the value of informal recruitment and engagement strategies, and the time and effort required to build trust and achieve meaningful outcomes.
2. Investment should prioritise projects that work with recovery-ready individuals, while also acknowledging the need for tailored support and long-term engagement. Funders must support infrastructure improvements, including dedicated staffing and suitable venues, to ensure consistency and quality in delivery.
3. Evaluation should be supported as a core component of project design, with resources allocated for creative and participatory methods that capture individual stories and long-term impacts. Funders should also champion dissemination and influence, encouraging grantees to share learning and creative outputs with policymakers, arts organisations, and the public. Importantly, funders must advocate for the role of the arts in recovery, helping to shift narratives away from individual responsibility and towards systemic understanding and structural change.
4. To ensure sustainability and replication, funders should provide dedicated resources for training participants to become facilitators and co-deliver sessions. Funding should also support partnership-building, documentation, and knowledge-sharing to enable other organisations to replicate the model. This investment helps embed arts-based recovery approaches more widely and ensures that the learning from projects like Act Now has lasting impact.

