

THE RISE OF CREATIVITY IN THE HOMELESSNESS SECTOR:

IN DISCUSSION WITH MATT PEACOCK
AND DAVID TOVEY OF ARTS &
HOMELESSNESS INTERNATIONAL

The field of arts and homelessness has grown significantly over the last 20 years. From agencies running art projects in homeless services to stand-alone creative NGO's and charities, there is now a broad and varied landscape of arts programmes for people experiencing homelessness. Matt Peacock and David Tovey of *Arts & Homelessness International* discuss the reason for this rise, the value of the arts in this context and the importance of co-production in their own work.



By **Matt Peacock** and **David Tovey**, Arts & Homelessness International

Matt:

The field of arts and homelessness has grown significantly over the last 20 years, since David and I began working in this sector. I remember in the '90s I only knew of a handful of projects such as **Cardboard Citizens** (UK) and the **Accueil Bonneau Choir** (Montreal) – now we have almost 500 projects in the global network.

Throughout Europe there are homeless agencies running arts projects integrated into services such as **Emmaüs Solidarité** – and stand-alone NGOs and charities from **Basket Beats** in Barcelona to **Shedia** in Athens, the Salzburg's **Apropos Choir** and **Som da Rua** in Porto. In the UK, there are well over 100 projects in the field from **Museum of Homelessness**, **Choir with No Name**, to homeless centres with arts programmes such as **Booth Centre** and **Crisis** and cultural spaces working regularly with homeless people from **Citizens Theatre in Glasgow** to **Manchester Museum** (who have an Artist in Residence with lived experience) and **Tate Modern**. There are projects exploring all artforms from film to poetry, opera to mosaics.

The reason for this rise in creative projects is partly due to a development and sophistication of homelessness support over the years from crisis management to strategies to empower people to move out of their situation. There has been a shift from the Maslovian idea of food and shelter first and education and culture later to a

more holistic approach of multiple needs requiring multiple solutions (typified by our **Jigsaw of Homeless Support**¹ which is now being embedded into local government homelessness strategies in UK and is an example of best practice at the UN).

Meanwhile, projects are also getting better at demonstrating how arts can provide tangible positive impacts. When I started as a support worker in a London night shelter, creativity was seen as a distraction, something to pass the time. Now through research from a number of NGOs, we can see evidence that creativity improves well-being, resilience, agency, knowledge and skills (Shaw, 2019²). Better evidence has increased funding from arts sources (certainly in the UK) which, in turn, has increased the number of projects.

Unexpectedly, the increase in creativity recently has had a lot to do with COVID. You might think that a global pandemic which has resulted in the closure of cultural spaces will have halted creativity in homelessness. But across history, when there is a crisis, activists roll up their sleeves and the world is full of arts activists. Also, it quickly became clear that people staying in hotels, emergency accommodation and on the streets were facing more isolation and poor mental health – so homeless services and local authorities have been turning to arts projects in this sector for help. The value of arts in community life has, I would argue, never been higher and it has resulted in a potential Golden Age of arts and social change.

1 [The Jigsaw of Homeless Support](#), co-created with homeless people in Manchester, 2019

2 [A Literature Review of Arts and Homelessness](#), Shaw 2020

“Art doesn’t necessarily provide homes, but it does help produce a route to one.”

David:

The value of the arts generally has never been stronger. Because of the COVID pandemic – overnight it became as important as medication, helping with isolation, resilience, and mental health in lockdown. TV programmes have exploded onto our screens, making the arts accessible to as many as possible. But there are always parts of society that fall through those cracks. Homeless communities being one.

Some creative projects in homelessness started moving their work online and others began devising new postal projects to reach people in isolation who didn’t have internet access. This has grown to include face-to-face projects in parks and with residents in hotels. Here are a few examples in the UK:

- Accumulate sent 3,500 art packs out to hotels in London and beyond;
- A group in Coventry led by Underground Lights sent out [creative packs](#) and postcards for members of those groups plus people in temporary accommodation and Housing First (this has become a [global project](#));

- An embroidery project, [Here Comes the Sun](#) by art collective Arthur and Martha involved the Booth Centre in Manchester;
- An online opera was created by Streetwise Opera;
- AHI researched the role of creativity in homelessness during the pandemic, bringing together homeless people, support workers, artists, commissioners and academics who produced this [film](#), [report](#) and [online learning resource](#).

Even though COVID shut down most parts of the world, we found that it brought our international community closer together. Having to change our ways of working to an online format, gave us the opportunity to facilitate a new online space for the international arts and homelessness sector. We set up a Zoom space where we can all come together to talk about our projects, our work, our concerns, have some fun, do and see some creativity, and so much more. Within these Forums, the international community has forged many connections around the world, from Johannesburg, South Africa to Nashville, Tennessee. Every last Wednesday of the month at 10am and 5pm (GMT) [you too can come and join](#) the conversations and see and hear from some of the most inspiring projects and artists around the globe.

Matt:

These monthly international Zoom 'Forums' that David runs are really beautiful events which show the importance of togetherness, sharing ideas and solidarity. The arts and homelessness sector is quite young compared with other sectors which use the arts for social change such as arts and health and arts and disability.

In any young sector, individuals and projects work hard to keep afloat and tend to do that in isolation. It was exciting when we started getting people together – there was so much common ground, overlapping successes and challenges which led to the transference of ideas and knowledge. People talked about their projects being like sticks which could be easily broken, but together, as a bundle of sticks, we were stronger.

During Rio 2016, we brought projects together from North and South America, Europe and Asia. One significant impact was that delegates from Manchester, UK were so inspired by the Brazilian movement of the streets (Movimento População da Rua) which is network of groups of homeless people throughout the country who lobby local government about homelessness legislation – that they brought it back to the UK. This became the Manchester Homelessness Charter, a mechanism of co-creation of homelessness services in Manchester with homeless people being involved from design to delivery. And this has now given rise to AHI's Civic Plan work in local authorities around UK embedding co-creation and arts into council homelessness strategies.

What we have seen countless times is that when you get brilliant people together (either face-to-face or digitally), brilliant things happen. And it has also shown us the incredible power of working in co-production with people who are or have been homeless. This runs counter to the historic ways of working where the people who held the power were mostly non-homeless people helping those who are homeless.

David:

Co-production is at the heart of everything we do, with 50% of our staff and board people who are or have been homeless. This is very important to us because how can we know what homeless people need if we have not been in their situation? Co-production may feel like you're giving something up, e.g. a job position, but I disagree, you gain so much as an organisation when employing someone because of their lived experience. That, in the long run, has such a massive impact on your company. In a way it's like having a spy on the inside. Don't get me wrong, there are hurdles, and it can take a lot longer to get stuff done, but co-production creates a fairer and more equitable environment to work in. I would recommend trying it, what have you got to lose? Arts got me through my situation when I was homeless and a few years later, I am on government panels with ministers, advising them on policy. Surely everyone deserves that opportunity.

Those who find themselves homeless also deserve to have an opportunity within the cultural sector, we know arts and culture is a human right (Article 27 of the UN Charter), but so many times



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homeless people are denied access to the arts. Obviously, this is something I'm extremely passionate about changing. Back in 2015 I first came across the work of AHI at City Hall in London. They had bought an arts and homelessness delegation from Brazil to London. After listening to one of the homeless delegates talk about how he had created a small music festival in São Paulo, I was so surprised that nothing existed in London. I then went about setting up a [homeless arts festival](#) to create more opportunities for artists who had found themselves homeless. This was done with no funding but just a desire to make change. It's been a massive success, with

shows and concerts in 3 cities across the UK and hundreds of artists worldwide showcasing their work. This is one of the impacts of AHI bringing people together from different countries and walks of life. Art doesn't necessarily provide homes, but it does help produce a route to one.

Matt:

We are driven by a desire to help the arts and homelessness community connect and strengthen. Please join us – we run programmes for homeless artists, arts/homelessness projects, cultural spaces, homeless centres, and local authorities. This year we will start the first leadership programme for homeless people in the cultural sector. Let's come together to use creativity to help each other thrive, not just survive.

Click [here](#) to join the network; visit www.artshomelessint.com to find out about our work. You can email us at matt@with-one-voice.com and david@with-one-voice.com and follow us on social media [@artshomelessint](#).