Transformative Spaces

Final Report from the Project *Transformative Servicescapes and Consumer Vulnerability*

Holly Porteous

Kathy Hamilton

Juliette Wilson

Sarah Edwards

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Introduction

Transformative Servicescapes and Consumer Vulnerability (2020-2022) was a two-year project funded by The Leverhulme Trust and based at the University of Strathclyde.

Our case study organisation, Glasgow Women's Library (GWL) is a library, museum, archive, arts and community space. The project explored the role of physical space in contributing towards positive transformative experiences for those who make use of its resources. The project expanded on this theme to gain an in-depth understanding of many other aspects of the organisation, from organisational culture to partnership working. The project looked particularly at how service spaces have the capacity to transform the lives of those experiencing vulnerability.

Who might find this report useful?

The project includes valuable findings on how organisations can help to effect positive change with local communities and beyond, based on a multi-layered and in-depth understanding of our case study's impact on individuals and the wider community. We anticipate that our findings will be of interest to a range of stakeholders and service providers: for example, women's organisations, local authorities, community development professionals, commercial organisations, or those working in the arts, museums, libraries, and public engagement.

What do we mean by 'transformative'?

We use the word 'transformative' to refer to moments and/or processes of positive change that people feel they have experienced as a result of their interaction with a service and/or service space. The project was guided by Transformative Service Research (TSR), a field of research that aims to facilitate well-being by addressing inequities and exclusions in service provision. This report looks at both transformative practices (i.e. *by* the organisation) and transformative outcomes (i.e. as a result of interacting *with* the organisation).

What do we mean by 'vulnerability'?

The project uses a definition which broadly incorporates individuals or groups suffering the effects of social, cultural and/or economic barriers. It recognises 'vulnerability' as fluid and socially constructed, rather than fixed and objective. This definition supports our aim of reflecting the complex, intersectional nature of inequalities.

5 Action Points for Transformative Spaces

The project findings resulted in five key action points for organisations seeking to increase the potential of their own spaces to transform lives:

1. Transformation through Kindness as an Organisational Value

The value of kindness emerged as a key factor in the transformative experiences of our participants. This may be shown in a multitude of ways - how people are treated, how they are listened to, and the freedom they have to explore and just "be" in a space. We found that small things can make a big difference. Participants talked about a sense of being cared for: being welcomed into a space; being offered a cup of tea; and being made to feel part of a community.

2. Transformation through Inclusivity

Our research highlighted the importance of thinking of inclusivity in as broad a way as possible. GWL has a range of volunteers and service users of different ages, with diverse ethnic backgrounds, gender and sexual identities, and experiences of health conditions and disabilities. Many of them spoke of the power of feeling included as individuals in their own right, but importantly, not being singled out in terms of particular needs. This was done by designing spaces for everyone rather than just one group and thinking continually about ways of including all kinds of people in events and everyday activities.

3. Transformation through Design, Architecture and the Physical Space

We interviewed people who had experience of running events in a variety of service and community spaces. What became clear was the critical role of the physical space in making their projects a success. Having a space that is cared for in turn makes users feel that they are cared for and worthy of attention. Space shouldn't be taken-for-granted as a mere backdrop for activity but seen as a resource that can empower people and make them feel safe. This is particularly important for services that are directed at those experiencing vulnerability. Our findings suggest that you do not need a large budget, but that participants appreciate spaces that are designed to be comfortable.

4. Transformation through Embedding Creativity Throughout the Organisation

Embedding creativity within the culture of an organisation can help generate ideas and encourage different ways of thinking and working. In recognizing that a creative mindset is open to all, enabling people to work together can benefit well-being. Opportunities for expression through art can help break down barriers, lead to meaningful conversations, and build relationships. Many examples of innovation also stemmed from creative partnerships: for example, including creatives on the board of directors or short-term collaborations with professional designers.

5. Transformation through a Non-Hierarchical Organisational Structure

Breaking down traditional hierarchies and embracing a culture of trust was also key to transformative experiences. Designing open, shared and multi-use service spaces promotes team-working and softens boundaries between service providers and service users. Giving people an equal voice in meetings ensures that everyone feels able to contribute, from the newest volunteer to the most experienced staff member. This benefits the individual and the organisation, ensures that staff members and volunteers feel valued, and enhances an individual's potential.

Methods

The project used a variety of methods for data collection to help us capture the experience of being in GWL with as much richness as possible:

- Interviews with 64 users, volunteers, staff, and people from associated networks and organisations;
- Material from two risograph workshops on the theme of GWL and transformations, including risograph prints by 11 participants and short interviews with 10;[1]
- Historical analysis of GWL's archives;
- Analysis of GWL website and social media analysis of Twitter, Facebook and other content to help us understand the range and type of events and projects hosted in GWL;
- Participant observations in the GWL space and of (due to Covid-19, largely online) events.

Table 1: Interviewee Cohorts

Please note that research participants very often held more than one role, so the right-hand column does not add up to the total of 64 interviews.

Cohort	Number of interviewees
Staff (current/former) and/or board members (current/former)	14
Volunteers (current/former)	25
Student placements	7
People from networks/former collaborators	17
Service users (who had not been volunteers)	9

The interview cohort involved members of the following groups:

- Older people (60+)
- Younger people (18-29, some of whom had been GWL users under the age of 18)
- People from different ethnic backgrounds
- People from different religious backgrounds
- Migrants
- People who have experienced mental health issues
- Survivors of abuse
- People who identify as LGBTQIA+
- People with disabilities, chronic health conditions, or mobility issues
- Neurodivergent people
- People from a range of socio-economic backgrounds.

Interviews were carried out by Holly, the research associate for the project, and took place largely via Zoom during the Covid-19 pandemic. The importance of community and service spaces was arguably brought to the fore during the pandemic when lockdown restrictions reduced opportunities for people to frequent the places that are meaningful to them. Holding the interviews online during Covid-19 meant that participants had time to think about what they valued in the space, which added another dimension to the fieldwork. Pseudonyms are used throughout this report.

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[1] These 10 are included in the total of 64 participants above.

Visual Material

This report includes prints, illustrations and graphics from three sources. Firstly, we commissioned a series of illustrations from illustrator Jules Scheele that were inspired solely by extracts from the interviews.

Secondly, in the final stages of the project we saw emergent themes from the research combined with expertise from GWL volunteer coordinator Gabrielle Macbeth and local artist and long-term GWL collaborator Helen de Main in the form of arts-based workshops. In these sessions, entitled *Transformations*, people with longstanding or significant links to GWL were invited to take part in Zoom-based risograph sessions. They created visually striking prints to represent the impact the organisation had on them over the years.

Post-workshop, short interviews with willing participants were then arranged to allow for discussions of the artworks, and for further stories about the significance of GWL for participants to emerge.

Finally, for one of our online dissemination events in March 2022 we commissioned visual minutes/graphic recording from a specialist artist, Jenny Capon, who worked on these as the event was taking place, incorporating comments from the audience as we gave presentations and paused for questions. Jenny then presented the visual minutes (see below and the front cover of this report) at the end of the event, helping to consolidate what we had presented and bring our findings to life.

1. Transformation through Kindness as a Core Organisational Value

Risoprint created by a participant in arts-based workshops carried out as part of this project.

Kindness shone throughout this research as a key value experienced in our case study space. Feeling kindness, and sharing kindness with others, was threaded through many of the transformative experiences participants shared with us.

Kindness was demonstrated in many different ways as we studied the space and the people who use it. It was seen in people's descriptions of feeling cared for, and caring for others. Small things, such as being welcomed into a space or being offered a cup of tea, could have a big impact and foster a sense of community.

What was integral to the power of kindness was that it made people feel supported, secure, nurtured, and 'seen' as individuals. This sense of kindness allowed them room to grow as a person, at their own pace. The fact that most of this research project took place during periods of Covid-19 lockdown sometimes emphasised this for participants.

> **I suddenly realised in it, during this [online] event, how much I actually was missing the kindness of GWL and how it has stopped me being kind - because we're sort of so isolated now, you don't get the sorts of opportunities I suppose to be kind to people. Because [my partner] and I, we just keep ourselves completely to ourselves. I don't... I mean, I haven't seen anybody else really except for people at the shops and so on. I suppose it suddenly... I got quite sort of, you know, teary. Not, you know… I kept it to myself! But just realising that this is one of the things, for me, that GWL once again exemplifies: this sense of being kind and caring, to each other and to yourself, and I think I hadn't realised how much I've been... how much I actually was missing that, until yesterday.**
>
> **(Monica)**

An atmosphere of kindness allows people experiencing vulnerability to come along 'as themselves'; not to be defined by their disability, migrant status or experience of trauma, for example, but to feel welcome to take part and share experiences as and when they felt ready. When difficult emotions inevitably arose, participants spoke about the kind, calm and professional – never minimising or dismissive – reactions embodied by staff and volunteers.

> **I've noticed this lovely acceptance of people wherever they are, whatever they're doing, whatever they're afraid of, whatever they're so happy about. […] It doesn't just leave you in peace; it leaves you in peace but then it keeps an eye, I think.**
>
> **(Patricia)**

This atmosphere of kindness extended from staff, to volunteers, to people using the Library in whatever context. "Keeping an eye" represented the sense of care around people who have become part of the Library, even in a small way; as one participant put it, "it's got that structure of care embedded in it":

> **People come along and they're maybe enjoying it for a couple of weeks, but then they miss a week and then you maybe don't see them ever again. And I think the Women's Library takes that care and attention to check in with those people and to, like, give you that little nudge to join back in. It's so easy to talk yourself out of joining in things, but I think that knowing that there's somebody looking out for you in that volunteer role […] really keeps people engaged.**
>
> **(Madeline)**

A personalised service was a key part of how kindness worked in the space, particularly for those who may have been experiencing vulnerability. Staff and volunteers showed sensitivity and tact and never put any pressure on people to join in with something they didn't feel comfortable with.

The opportunities for informal conversation offered through food and drink were also a key part of how kindness was shown within the space. The offer of a cup of tea, the act of sharing cakes and biscuits with others, the visual and tactile pleasures of proper china cups; all of these elements contributed to people's ability to relax and then to feel comfortable sharing parts of themselves in mutually supportive ways:

> **You're able to come in, get yourself settled, have a cup of tea - "I'm going to make you a cup of tea" […] the chance to offer that hospitality was so important. (Eve)**
>
> **It's not a one-way support network and quite often, as you know yourself, when you get a tea break and you all go into the kitchen and you're all blethering to each other, is when the real magic happens, you know?**
>
> **(Iris)**

LEARNING

- Kindness can be shown in very simple ways - a smile, a warm welcome – but these small gestures have been shown to make a big difference.
- Rituals and material objects emerged as important in conveying kindness, such as the practice of making someone a cup of tea.
- Kindness was threaded through the organisation's aims, goals and activities, and is a strong example of strategy as practice. It was also one of the key organisational strategies taken up by those in the case study's networks.

2. Transformation through Inclusivity

Illustration by Jules Scheele

This research highlighted the importance of thinking of inclusivity in as broad a way as possible. Designing spaces for everyone, rather than just one group/targeted groups, was a particularly powerful action point.

Glasgow Women's Library has a range of volunteers and service users of different ages, with diverse ethnic backgrounds, gender and sexual identities, and experiences of health conditions and disabilities. Many of them spoke to us about the power of feeling included as individuals in their own right, but importantly, not feeling singled out in terms of particular needs. The space itself was designed to be welcoming to all kinds of people with all kinds of different needs and

abilities. This was largely a result of policies which ensured that inclusivity was actively foregrounded into every piece of work being done under the aegis of the organisation, rather than being a passive tick box exercise.

Staff prioritised finding gaps in their knowledge and policies and, although there was a sense of pride around the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) work carried out in the organisation, there wasn't a sense of resting on one's laurels:

> **For instance, we had a review of our Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan a couple of weeks ago and we were talking a lot about what's our strategy for working with the people from the deaf community or people with hearing loss, or hearing impairment. And I was thinking – "well actually, do we have much in the collection written about or by people from those communities? I'm not sure how much we have." So I've taken a note and I'm thinking: "right, I feel like we might need to get more books on that topic". So yeah, I think just making sure that the collections are going to have something that people feel that they are reflected back in those is really, really important.**
>
> **(Rebecca, member of staff)**

A wide range of (both regular and one-off) events helped build connections with users, and contributed towards transformative experiences, without the events themselves being necessarily labelled as 'for older women', 'for women with disabilities', etc. Though these events do have their place, and have been very much valued (e.g. autism-friendly screenings), the focus on content *with the inherent assumption of* a diverse audience contributed to the inclusiveness of the space.

As an example, volunteers who had suffered with their mental health were particularly positive about their experiences in the space. The atmosphere of kindness and acceptance meant there was no pressure to hide mental health issues, and they felt that allowances were made where necessary to allow them to build up their confidence and achieve more than might have been possible volunteering and working in other organisations:

> **I felt like I could go at my pace because I was given so much freedom. […] by having the support that I had, I just felt secure and I felt like I could try new things. […] If you ever just needed time away […] they were like, "just take a look around, read a book, we totally understand if things might get a bit too much, so feel free to just take that time to yourself." Luckily I never needed to because it was such a pleasant experience, but it was nice to have that option. In times where I couldn't make it in, [for example when] I had like a really bad month […] they were very supportive about it and they knew that I was putting in the work at home, even if I wasn't making it in.**
>
> **(Erin)**

People with neurodiversity, disabilities, or health conditions also felt seen and heard within the organisation – whether they were volunteers or regular library users. The space had clearly been designed with people of all abilities in mind.

> **I can't think of a better way to say it than it's a comfortable space. You don't feel ostracised in any way by disability. I'm quite deaf, but I have two very flashy in-ear hearing aids which sync into my phone and my laptop and so on and so forth, so that isn't a problem. But I could go in there without my hearing aids and get on with my day quite happily. Just tell people "I'm not wearing my hearing aids". [And they would say] "if anything happens we'll come and tell you or we'll come and get you." We have a few people who sign for deaf as well, because we do have deaf people coming in. Everything seems to be, I think, accommodated.**
>
> **(Sylvia)**

Making sure a diversity of voices was heard in planning and organising activities was vital. Accessibility was also a priority in online spaces, e.g. through the use of features such as live captions wherever possible on Zoom events and social media.

The research clearly showed the planning and awareness that GWL put into ensuring the space and organisation were welcoming to women from many different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The spread of events, and the women invited or choosing to speak at the Library, clearly emphasise a commitment to exploring different stories, both locally and globally. Participants who had moved to Glasgow from abroad spoke about how they found a sense of home in a new country.

> **This library, including the building and the staff and the atmosphere: everything. Everything is like you're a family member, so I love it. […] Because when you're a newcomer in a new place, you feel homesickness and nostalgia. So I felt [that] in the start too much. After that I felt that the Women's Library was the best place for me to be[come] familiar [with], because my husband was at work and he had no time to make me familiar with everything. So I went and joined the Library, it was the best for me. It proved for me a learning point for everything: not only the Library's atmosphere, but also the outside. So now I am fully confident to go everywhere.**
>
> **(Fatima)**

Blurred staff/volunteer/user/learner boundaries also had a large impact on transformative experiences. To give an example from adult literacy and numeracy work, the organisation's value that "we are all learners" meant that adult learners were not siloed into specific classes at specific times but were part of the ebb and flow of learning, sharing and mutual reward continually taking place in the space.

> **I think that is what the ethos is around the literacy learner thing is that we are all learners. So we're learning as much as they're learning, and we... a lot of the lessons are turned around like, "oh, what can you teach me and then I can teach you this?"**
>
> **(Courtney)**

Those who identified as LGBTQ+ cited community workshops and the continual use of material from the organisation's extensive archives as something which contributed to a sense of belonging, as well as providing education and a sense of community to diverse groups of service users.

> **It's a real connection with your own history, so it's a meaningful learning experience rather than something far away that doesn't belong to you. […] [At one event] there was a really incredible box of photographs from a black lesbian organisation in London that just had so many photographs of protests and things like that. And the young people [attending] were all LGBT so they were really like, "wow, [it's] as if we've got history!" And it felt like a really important session because so many of the young people, I guess, don't have a space to talk about their experiences and see that other LGBT people have lived before them and have done amazing things.**
>
> **(Jess)**

Women often started to visit our case study space when they were feeling vulnerable or at a crossroads in life, and for a significant part of our cohort this was the case when they entered a new phase as older women; e.g. after losing a partner or entering retirement. Experiencing a sense of long-term community was particularly transformative for this group, amongst others. Participants of all ages mentioned the transformative impact of intergenerational socialising, which was not always easy to find in other spaces.

LEARNING

- Designing spaces for everyone, rather than just one group, is an important step towards inclusivity.
- A wide range of events, both targeted and general, encourages the mixing of different groups (e.g. intergenerational) and contributes to a sense of community.
- Thinking of inclusivity in all ways of working means that people don't feel singled out in terms of their particular needs or abilities, and that organisations are proactively working in as inclusive a way as possible rather than reactively dealing with particular issues.
- Archive and history content that highlights the experiences of particular groups in the past and makes links to service users today can provoke particularly meaningful experiences.

3. Transformation through Design, Architecture and the Physical Space

Risoprint created by a participant in arts-based workshops as a part of this project.

This research showed that space should not be taken for granted as just a backdrop for activity; it is a resource that can empower people and make them feel safe. Having a space that is cared for creates a sense of welcome and intrinsic value for those who use it, in turn helping them to feel cared for and worthy of attention.

Community development workers and staff felt that a well-cared-for space actively contributed towards the success of their work with people experiencing vulnerability.

> **Having that space was absolutely critical to making the [project participants] feel safe and able to start relaxing enough; and that is something that is consistently undervalued in terms of community work. There's never an understanding that you actually need a place to feel like it's attractive, and I'm not going to get anywhere with a group if we're meeting in a freezing cold, disgusting... […] And it just feels like it's been treated with care, whereas the council libraries a lot of them just feel really... just uninspired.**
>
> **(Eve)**

Eve's contrast of the GWL space with municipal spaces she had worked in highlights the potential for local councils to allow their employees freedom and creativity to create an informal, welcoming civic space.

Our findings also suggest that you do not need a large budget, but that service users appreciate spaces that are designed to put them at ease and make them feel at home.

> **They had cups of tea everywhere and they had blankets on every chair. It was like a mismatch of blankets, you know, like actually hand-knitted that people got from home. And people had hot water bottles and all sorts. It was more like going to a friend's house than a library, you know? […] Everybody sat there in a kind of artist's garret listening to all these readings.**
>
> **(Lindsay)**

A welcoming physical space was clearly spoken about as central to the positive emotions experienced whilst in the building.

The flexibility of shared spaces also arose as a key part of a transformative space. For example, a large table in Glasgow Women's Library was used for many different activities and provided a sense of sharing and community. It was a focus of volunteer activity, but also a place to sit and have lunch and swap ideas informally. The flexibility of this space was key to its impact: whereas in other community spaces, you might have clearly delineated areas for reading, for using computers, and for community meetings, in GWL any of these things might be possible in any area.

Crucially, the space also offered more discrete and private areas, which provided a retreat from the activity of the wider space without cutting people off completely. The sense of balance offered by having different areas available was also important in community work:

> **For me it's always about - how do I arrange the space so that it's removing some barriers? So a round table is ideal, but then it gets too big, so actually those tables - because they're long and thin - you're able to see each other. You can have all the stuff right in front of you. […] It's small enough to feel quite cosy and secure, which is a really, really important part of group building.**
>
> **(Eve)**

Having different kinds of spaces available to use helped staff and volunteers to facilitate positive group interactions.

Illustration by Jules Scheele.

MAINTAINING IMPACT IN DIFFERENT SPACES/DURING COVID-19

This research also showed that the atmosphere and values of organisations like GWL do not necessarily have to be limited to one location; they can be successfully transmitted across many different outreach spaces – digital as well as physical.

Our project began just in time for the first Covid-19 lockdown. Although this curtailed the amount of in-person research we were able to do, it became clear from interviews and observation of online events that GWL's values were not diminished, but rather helped the organisation and its community to adapt to a new world of Zoom-based support.

This was due firstly to a strong record of community development outside GWL's main space. Speaking to participants about outreach work carried out by GWL prior to Covid-19 demonstrated the success of work carried out outside the main building, in spaces like women's prisons and organised trips to cultural landmarks and events.

Secondly, during the global pandemic online activities gave many participants a sense of connection during periods of lockdown and beyond. This was particularly the case for migrants who were new to the city, and for those who were more clinically vulnerable or preferred not to visit public places to minimise their risk of infection.

> **They gave me the space to be able to be productive in a time where it felt like I was just stuck at home and I couldn't do anything, and that was so, so valuable to me and so important to me. I feel almost emotional thinking about it because I don't know what I would have done without them - like genuinely […] And that was so important because I think, with this past year [of the pandemic] … It's so easy to feel very depressed and worthless in a way, because you're so stuck inside and you're isolated from everyone and, you know, being so far away from my family as well. […] So having that space was so important and valuable to me and I couldn't be more grateful for it.**
>
> **(Courtney)**

The inclusive nature of online events prompted reflection on holding more of these in future. Certain groups of people who might otherwise struggle to attend in-person events – whether due to disabilities, mental health problems, or caring responsibilities - spoke about feeling more included by online events.

> **I think probably going forward […] we'll probably be thinking about how we can offer digital events and things as well. Because there's some women who've sort of expressed the fact that, whether it be through health or mobility, or distance from the Library, they wouldn't have been able to attend, and they've really loved being able to do that. […] For instance, one of the things which was on yesterday was that we had this creative writing for women experiencing chronic pain. […] That's the kind of workshop that lends itself really well for women to not have to struggle either on public transport or driving or however they're getting to the Library, but to be able to do that from the comfort of their own home actually makes a lot of sense.**
>
> **(Rebecca, member of staff)**

However, online events didn't necessarily offer the same benefits as face-to-face events. The informal social interactions that take place in a community space, face-to-face with others, was one of the most valued aspects of GWL's service, and many participants we interviewed during periods of lockdown spoke about looking forward to getting back to using the space again. In-person events were found to be particularly important for people who were more vulnerable to social isolation for various reasons (e.g. migrants, the recently bereaved; people experiencing digital exclusion).

> **I felt it is different between [the in person] colleagues' atmosphere and without colleagues, because it is our nature to see people, to tell face-to-face. It's okay, we are becoming step-by-step used to this new normal, but it is difficult and not so much friendly.**
>
> **(Fatima)**

Having a strong social media presence helped to maintain community bonds throughout Covid-19. Even as people were unable to access the physical space of GWL, they were able to take part in interactive activities posted on Twitter, Facebook, etc (e.g. guided walks alone or in their own social bubbles; poetry slams via sharing videos).

LEARNING

- The research highlights the transformational impact of space on well-being, mental health, and empowerment.
- We emphasise the importance of making spaces seem well cared for, as this makes users feel cared for and respected.
- You do not need a large budget to create spaces where people feel comfortable and able to connect with others – often small, homemade touches can make all the difference.
- Our findings highlighted the possibilities inherent in flexible, adaptable spaces.
- Material objects can be used to signpost spaces and the meaning-making in them.
- If an organisation has strong values, these can be successfully transmitted through different spaces and in digital spaces. Although the benefits may not be exactly the same, online or hybrid events can sometimes be more inclusive and accessible than in-person events.

4. Transformation through Embedding Creativity Throughout the Organisation

Illustration by Jules Scheele

Embedding creativity within the culture of an organisation can help generate ideas and encourage different ways of thinking and working. In recognizing that a creative mindset is open to all, enabling people to work together can benefit well-being. Opportunities for expression through art can help break down barriers, lead to meaningful conversations, and build relationships.

> **At first I just kind of went [to the workshops], and then as time went on you made friendships and you kind of connected to it a lot more, and it was really, really good. And it kind of grew into this thing that became important to other people as well, and you could see how other women progressed through their trauma or abuse through their artwork, and how people grew in confidence, and then people were making choices to do different things with their lives as well.**
>
> **(Rhiannon)**

Participants described how having their experiences validated - first through others simply listening, then through being included in output such as collections of writing or exhibitions - had a transformative impact in their lives.

> **It was quite cathartic for a lot of women, and also just the legitimising force that that had - because it wasn't just a kind of workshop where "tell us about your childhood, tell us a story about [this topic]"... It actually went into a book, it went into a podcast, and I think that was quite empowering for women to have: that your life story mattered as it was. That you didn't have to… you know, quite often the ones that get attention in the wider press and things like that are… you have to have the biggest X-Factor sob story ever, you have to have, you know… It was like: no, your story has value as it is.**
>
> **(Lindsay)**

Continually foregrounding different kinds of creativity in the organisation's identity – from including creative people on the board of directors, to everyday activity and events – built a strong foundation of knowledge and practice, which then helped users of the space to feel empowered and flourish in their own artistic expression:

> **I sort of knew that I liked writing, but it seems a very strange thing for a dyslexic to be into creative writing. But one of my earliest memories is sitting writing stories. Even though... I think I was "writing" stories even before - finger quotes - before I went to primary school […] I have been very involved with [another support organisation] for years and years, so I've been writing for their blog and their members' magazine and stuff. So I had realised that my writing could get ideas across and wasn't totally impossible for other people to read. But being at the Library has shown me my creativity in that.**
>
> **(Lesley)**

Finally, using creative and arts-based activities helped to maintain connections during Covid-19. GWL staff and volunteers displayed creativity in maintaining connections with their community, such as posting materials out to service users and even in-person drop-offs to continue to facilitate learning. It combined the physical, material experience of making art (with materials sent to participants through the post) with the online communality.

LEARNING

- Embedding creativity within the culture of an organisation can help generate ideas and encourage different ways of thinking and working.
- Emphasising that a creative mindset is open to all enables different groups of people to work together and benefits well-being.
- Opportunities for expression through art can help break down barriers, lead to meaningful conversations, and build relationships.
- Creative partnerships can lead to innovation.

5. Transformation through a Non-Hierarchical Organisational Structure
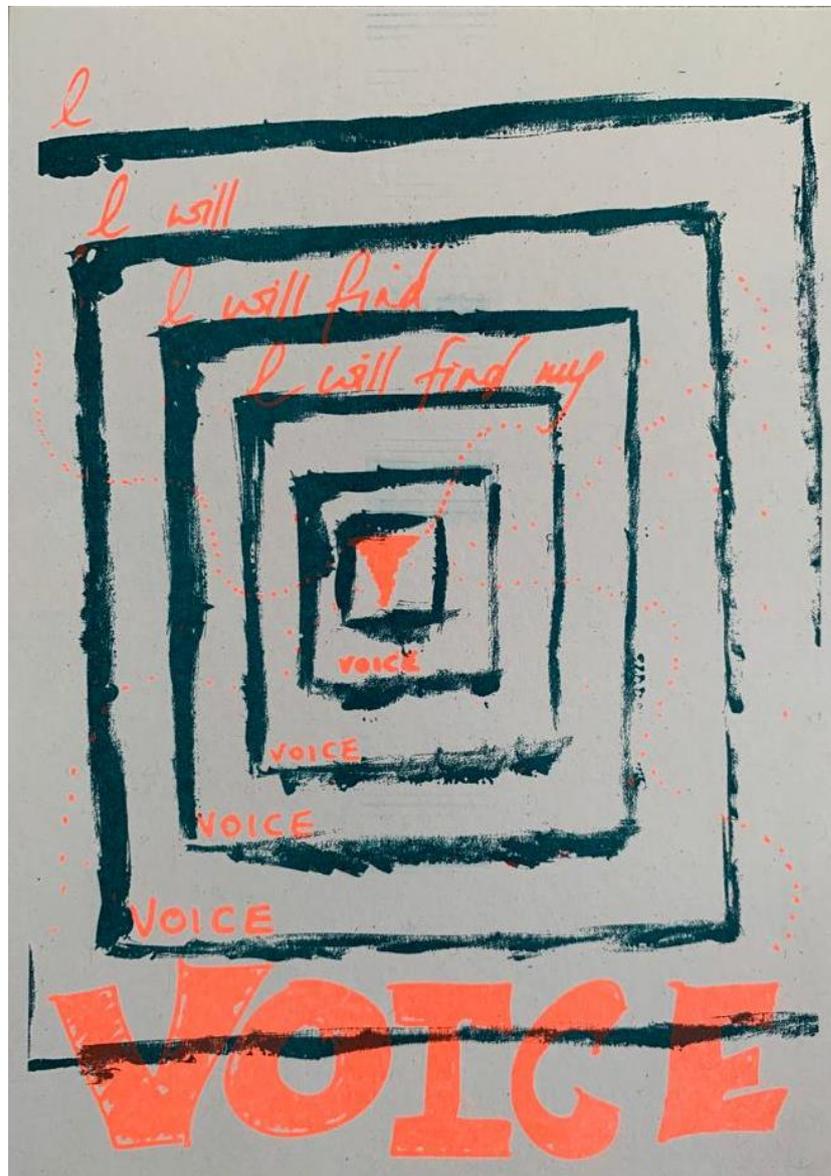
Risoprint created by a participant in arts-based workshops.

Our final action point explores how breaking down traditional hierarchies and embracing a culture of trust was key to creating a transformative space. In this case study, this was achieved via a structured, yet flexible, volunteering programme which treated people as individuals whilst also making them feel part of a community – something bigger.

As soon as people entered the building the welcoming policy of the organisation aimed to make them feel seen. As they become regular users or volunteers, they continued to feel that their voices were heard and valued.

> **I think one of the best things is how [the volunteer coordinator] approaches the interview with a volunteer. Everything is sort of matched to your interests and stuff.**
>
> **(Lesley)**

People attending groups regularly were encouraged to volunteer, even informally. Some, particularly those experiencing vulnerability, seemed to have been quietly 'drawn in' to becoming part of GWL and its work in a way that felt comfortable for them.

They were allowed to maintain whatever boundaries they needed, and to let down these boundaries and to 'join in' at a time that this felt appropriate. Some volunteers spoke about having struggled to stay in stable employment, and found that GWL's flexibility around volunteering roles made them more likely to continue to engage with the organisation and continue to benefit from this:

> **It is quite unique I think. It's totally different from other places, you know. Other places are just more official, sort of thing. […] I think there's probably less rules. [Laughs] […] It's a lot more flexible. Like if you do other volunteer work, you've got to be in by a certain time, but this way sometimes you come in, it's not necessarily at the same time or if you're maybe a wee bit late it doesn't matter.**
>
> **(Gwen)**

Many of our GWL volunteer participants spoke about the importance of the malleable boundaries between different types of role (user/volunteer/collaborator/staff/board member) as key to the organisation's unique and transformative nature, mainly because it was seen to discourage hierarchies.

> **There seems to be more of a horizontal way of making decisions; not just it has to go up to management. It's like they all talk things out and it's a group decision, which helps make it feel like a community and supportive and everything.**
>
> **(Aubrey)**

A flatter hierarchy was important to volunteers, not only in enjoying their workplace, but in feeling heard and developing confidence.

> **Unless you are given the opportunity, then you can't sort of... First of all, you can't show what you know, what you can do; then to contribute, to upskill your own skills and offer something, and just to show what you are about.**
>
> **(Yasmin)**

Often transformative experiences happen through forming new relationships or gaining new skills. Whichever way transformation happened for specific individuals, the most important thing was that they spoke about feeling accepted, valued and encouraged through engaging with the organisation. Staff saw a volunteer's potential rather than their limitations, which could be transformative for those who may have felt categorised as lacking by other people or organisations in the past (whether that be schools, employers, Job Centre Plus, or their own family).

LEARNING

- The successful incorporation of volunteers and volunteering into organisations is enhanced by an individually-focused, flexible approach.
- Focusing on an individual's potential, rather than what they can't do, is very empowering.
- There is strength in being able to identify as belonging to a collective voice.
- Giving people an equal voice in meetings ensures that everyone feels able to contribute, from the newest volunteer to the most experienced staff member. This benefits the individual and the organisation, ensures that staff members and volunteers feel valued, and enhances an individual's potential.

Further Information

This project has highlighted the transformative potential of service spaces for users. Transformation can be seen in terms of individual growth and encouraging users to think differently about themselves and the world around them. These transformations may be small, but they can also be life-changing. We encourage organisations to think about the various ways they can use space to support the well-being of all who interact with them.

If you are part of any organisation who would benefit from further information or collaboration on transformative services more generally, we would love to hear from you.

Email: holly.porteous@strath.ac.uk

Twitter: @ProfK_Hamilton and @HollPort

We are happy to present our findings formally or informally in any context, and/or provide reports tailored to your own focus (e.g. gender, age, community spaces, etc).

Our short video on Transformative Spaces is available to view online: https://vimeo.com/699009879

University of Strathclyde Project Team

Professor Kathy Hamilton, Dr Juliette Wilson, Dr Holly Porteous and Dr Sarah Edwards. Our team is interdisciplinary, combining specialisms in the social sciences, business studies, history, literature, and gender studies.

LEVERHULME TRUST

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