



GMCA GREATER
MANCHESTER
COMBINED
AUTHORITY



Street Support
Network

Greater Manchester Legislative Theatre:

Co-Producing the GMCA Homelessness Prevention Strategy

Evaluation summary by
Stanislav Benes

Project led by
Katy Rubin

This evaluation was commissioned by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the Greater Manchester Homelessness Action Network. The opinions expressed in this evaluation are those of the evaluator and do not represent the views of the GMCA or GMHAN, or of the organizations or institutions with which the evaluator may be connected.

Background and Method

This project evaluation serves as a reference document detailing the achievements, challenges, and overall lessons learnt of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority led Legislative Theatre (LT) project. The hope is that it can serve as part of the platform upon which future Legislative Theatre initiatives can build, in Greater Manchester and beyond.

This LT process had two main goals. The first was to create a series of collaborative LT performances built on experiences of the group of actors involved, on topics decided upon by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority homelessness team. These performances and the forum following them would generate policy suggestions which would feed into the Greater Manchester Homelessness Prevention Strategy, as well as into other relevant decision-making discussions in Greater Manchester. The second goal was to train a group of facilitators who would be able to lead other groups and communities through the Legislative Theatre process in the future.

This evaluation draws upon the author's involvement throughout the LT process of rehearsals and performances, input from other participants, as well as two retrospective group sessions reflecting more broadly on the LT process. The first of the group sessions was with people who had taken part in the process as actors, and the second was with people who had been present as policy and decision-makers ('spect-actors') in the audience. The quotes present in this evaluation are taken from the two evaluation sessions.

The Combined Authority funded LT project ran from April 2020 to February 2021. The first phase consisted of training a team of five facilitators with lived experience of the issues surrounding homelessness, in the run-up to the rehearsals for the first of two main LT performances. The second phase consisted of two performances, each with rehearsals taking place once a week over a span of several weeks. These performances explored the topics of Multiple Disadvantage and Funding & Commissioning, respectively. The initial plan was to have a third performance exploring Housing & Infrastructure, but the decision was made by the CA Homelessness Team to hold a series of one day workshops focusing on ethnic minority communities who have experience with the intersection of structural racism and homelessness. This shift was suggested in order to address gaps in the Prevention Strategy.

Due to the coronavirus related lockdowns, some of the rehearsals and both of the two large performances were held over Zoom. The performances consisted of only the performers and a small technical and support team meeting in person on the day, with the audience attending in real time online. This presented both challenges and opportunities. The challenges included the need for extra technical capacity and resource, as well as the need to translate much of the in-person community and consensus building into a semi-improvised and not built for purpose virtual space. The opportunities included the engagement of a larger and broader audience than would have been able to attend an in-person performance, and the ability to have the entirety of the performance process recorded for future use, reference, and distribution.

Context

Legislative Theatre is a development of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal was a Brazilian theatre director who developed LT as a method for co-creating legislation through community involvement when he became a councillor in Rio de Janeiro in the 1990's. Briefly, the structure of the LT process involves three main stages. Firstly, a group of people with lived experience of the topic at hand develop a play based on and informed by their experiences over several rehearsals, facilitated by one or more trained facilitators. Second, this group performs the play in front of an audience of 'spect-actors', who are invited to suggest solutions for the problems and barriers presented in the play, and asked onto the stage to trial these solutions by running through the relevant scene again with their modification. This is repeated several times, after which the actors and audience explore and discuss the merits and possible issues of the solutions presented during the performance. During this section, called the 'forum', the solutions are developed into more concrete policy suggestions, which are then voted on by the audience to determine popular preference. The third stage comes after the performance, where meetings and workshops are held with actors, facilitators, and key decision-makers to make the policy suggestions as clear, focused, and actionable as possible. The hope is that this stage turns into sustained and sustainable engagements and relationships between the participants and the wider decision-making ecosystem, ensuring active participation is not confined to a one-off or peripheral event.

This and other Legislative Theatre projects in the Greater Manchester area sit within the context of the drive to embed co-production into the policy and decision-making ecosystems of the Combined Authority. Integral to the embedding of co-production is a drive towards integrating lived experience into the decision-making process, making sure that such experience is being valued as a legitimate and useful type of expertise. Co-production has emerged as a way of addressing a number of interrelated circumstances. Firstly, the impacts of austerity and a decrease in publicly available funding have led to a need to pool resources when addressing deficiencies in the social safety net. Secondly, co-production addresses longstanding feelings of disconnection and disillusionment of citizens and communities from opaque bureaucratic and technocratic methods of governance. Co-production seeks to include and value voices and perspectives of people whom the respective policies and decisions being discussed and proposed do and will affect. LT embodies the co-production ideal in concrete and practicable ways, allowing a wide range of people to share the policy-making space.

Key Findings

- Pre-existing personal and institutional networks are necessary in bringing together people from a wide range of communities who can lend their personal experience and expertise to the process. The LT process works well in nurturing and deepening these connections but is not best placed to gather voices from unconnected communities, especially in a short timeframe.
- Feedback from people involved with the performances indicates that LT had a generally positive effect on both actors and audience participants.
- LT humanises data-driven and abstracted conversations in otherwise bureaucratic and technocratic settings. It brings the person fully back into the conversation.
- A diverse range of voices and perspectives is necessary to minimise blind spots and biases with regards to what stories are told, and how they are told.

- A consistent and reliable time and resource commitment on the part of professional and organisational stakeholders is necessary to make sure policy suggestions stemming from the LT process are as relevant and actionable as possible.
- The LT process would benefit from a greater awareness of what sort of policy suggestions and solutions are actionable at what level and scale (Local Authority, Combined Authority, national...), and where the responsibility for these actions lies.
- Policy suggestions from the LT performances were integrated into the CA Homelessness Prevention strategy, meeting one of the key goals of the process.
- The ultimate aim of LT is broader systemic change, though it is also necessary to be able to focus on things that are actionable fairly quickly. This helps to maintain momentum for the LT process post performance, and works to provide examples of impact that can be used to advocate for further uses of the process.

Diversity, inclusion, and participation

One of the key conditions and considerations for the success of the LT process, as it is with any participatory project, is the quality and reach of pre-existing relationships and networks. The ability to create and utilise interest and involvement in the process has a direct and causative relation to the kinds of conversations that are had, the kinds of stories that are told, and ultimately the quality of policy suggestions that are produced. Furthermore, a network of relationships reinforces mutual accountability in following through with acting on the policy suggestions. This LT project relied on relationships built between and through the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Street Support, Greater Manchester Homelessness Action Network, Mustard Tree, Elephants Trail, and others.

The kinds of stories told and shared depend on the kinds of people that are present as participants, which includes actors and spectators as well as facilitators. LT draws upon the freedom people have when working in a space where they feel safe, and where they feel

their points of view will not only be valued, but also understood. Having facilitators who share a personal understanding of the actors' experiences can allow for more unguarded sharing. This aspect will be more important with some groups and topics than others, so an awareness of the context is necessary when planning group make-up and facilitation.

Two of the LT performances in this project focused on general experiences of a thematic area (Multiple Disadvantage, and Funding & Commissioning), which benefited from diverse participation, but did not hinge on the involvement of one particular community. The final section of the project was refocused on ethnic minority communities who have experience with the intersection of structural racism and homelessness. This was so that gaps in the Prevention Strategy could be addressed. Whilst the team of facilitators were not from a uniform gender, race, and life experience background, there was some concern amongst them about whether they were best placed to facilitate a process without having ties to the particular minority communities. This lack of ties on the part of both the facilitators and the partner organisations became apparent right at the recruitment phase, with one of the planned performances not going forward due to a shortage of participants, and the remaining two going ahead in a smaller scale and scope. Despite this, the smaller events were successful in producing policy suggestions, as well as providing a space for nurturing connections. To mitigate the issues stemming from a lack of pre-existing relationships organisers could allow for a longer recruitment period, as well as keeping to the planned thematic focus rather than using the LT method to address last minute blind spots.

“In the space the power is in the emotion, so to join in you have to make yourself vulnerable.”

“If you're a power holder, you have to feel in order to do your job properly.”

Existing networks and relationships are crucial in reaching out to potential participants. During the actor feedback session, it was clear that a majority of people decided to participate because they knew and trusted someone who had been involved in a previous or similar project, or had a positive relationship with someone who did. Such relationships not only help with interest, but also lessen possible feelings of apprehension when entering into a situation in which people are asked to share personal and sensitive stories. The lack of such relationships can lead to a non- or under-representation of certain communities, or an over-representation of others, which in turn restricts the topics which

can be addressed. A previous or positive relationship to theatre or creative expression was also a factor in interest in participation.

Participation of a broad range of people is pertinent to the audience as well as the actors. A successful LT process relies on both active involvement of the audience during the performance, as well as having the right people in the audience capable of championing the policy solutions.

The above highlights the importance of pre-existing networks and relationships in the reach and scope of the LT process. Whilst pre-existing relationships are important, Legislative Theatre is also an effective way of building and reinforcing positive relationships, but one that takes time to reach its full potential. This means that the more the process is used, the more it will build a community of participants able to address a wider range of issues.

Humanising the system

Legislative Theatre process builds policy suggestions from actual lived experience. Because of this, one word which appeared prominently in both actor and decision-maker evaluation sessions was “humanise”. Legislative Theatre humanises an otherwise predominantly abstract, data-driven, or bureaucratised process or interaction; it “brings the

“LT stays with you in a way a case study couldn’t.”

person back in”. By taking heed of the qualitative lived experience, LT presents another way of gauging the actual impact of legislation on people’s lives and interactions with organisations and services. Because policy and decision-making mechanisms are often abstracted and depersonalised, staging interactions from the perspective of lived experience shows a different perspective of decision-making mechanisms: LT makes ‘the system’ appear. LT also goes beyond the illustrative function of case studies by engaging participants on a personal and emotional level, presenting a visual and physical experience. This makes the stories more impactful than if they were told through more passive means like case studies.

LT helps to break down barriers for communication and participation for both people from outside of traditional power structures as well as those from within them. People in positions of power have to make themselves vulnerable and personally present in order to participate. By dispensing with the safety of taken for granted organisational and bureaucratic meanings and practices, the Legislative Theatre method forces people to pay attention and concentrate. This is heightened by the knowledge that the audience is an active participant, and members of the audience are called upon to engage and interact throughout the LT performance.

Another way LT humanised the system was through humour. Humour and fun played an important role in the experience of both the actors and the audience in creating the feeling of a more level playing field by mitigating some of the effects of power imbalances present in the space. This element also makes the experience generally more enjoyable for participants, as it presents a change of pace to meetings and other policy spaces.

“Humour is very special, it creates an equilibrium, and you can’t have a laugh in many [other] policy spaces.”

By presenting easily understandable, emotive, and engaging scenes based on and centred in lived experience, LT highlights power dynamics that may otherwise be obscured or taken for granted. It also makes an argument for the redistribution of some of that power to the benefit of people with lived experience. One of the avenues for such redistribution is the breaking down of barriers for inclusion of people with lived experience by working to demystify both the mechanisms and the language through which decisions are made and implemented. The use of esoteric or inaccessible language and terminology is a barrier for the wider involvement of people with lived experience in policy-making spaces. LT addresses this barrier by building a common language amongst the participants, and presenting an arena in which esoteric language is less likely to be used because of the need to communicate with people from a variety of backgrounds.

Funding and resource

The initial budget for the CA LT project was £15k, though the real cost of the project over its yearlong lifespan was retrospectively valued at closer to £45k. The project was kept

largely within the initial budget due to the volunteering of time and resources on the part of people supporting the facilitation and general running of the project. A further £3.5k was invested later in the year, which provided an amount of extra breathing space. Relying on volunteered time and resources to successfully run the project does not ensure stability or sustainability, which means future budgets need to reflect the full amount necessary to cover all costs. Despite the real cost of the project being closer to £45k, the cost is fairly minimal for the amount of engagement, knowledge produced, and relationships fostered. Keeping this cost-benefit balance in mind, though, participants expressed a level of anxiety about the method turning into a relatively cost-effective co-production box-ticking exercise, regardless of initial intentions.

Correct funding is a key concern in enabling a successful LT project. This is especially true when working with people who do not have the security of being able to freely volunteer their time. Paying people for their time sharing their stories and experiences recognises the value of lived experience as expertise. It is also the first step in contesting an extractive relationship which often arises when people are asked to share personal and valuable insights for nominal remuneration, the true value of which is then alienated from them.

Funding has an impact beyond the practical aspect of covering running costs. A commitment of funds acts as a hook that ensures a level of buy-in and concern in the process and results. It also lends value to the project in and of itself. The act of funding the LT process itself ensures a level of commitment to its success, and classifies the process as valuable. There is a recognition that the process also requires an active commitment of staff time throughout the LT project lifecycle. This includes opportunities for conversations and feedback loops throughout the rehearsal process, active involvement during performances, and engagement in the subsequent workshopping and application of the policy proposals. In terms of project funding and decision-maker involvement, there is a tension between high levels of commitment, and a low level of available resources.

The high organisational and institutional interest in and engagement with the LT process benefitted from a pre-existing openness to and broad familiarity with co-production within the Combined Authority. There may be more difficulties with integrating Legislative Theatre into the decision-making ecosystem in localities where there is less precedent for co-production. Regardless of the precedent for co-production specifically, Legislative

Theatre fits into the wider interest in integrating participatory methods into decision-making to address concerns of a democratic deficit in governance. Beyond this perspective, the ability of Legislative Theatre to address a wide range of key issues in a nuanced and in-depth manner provides the strategic hook in itself.

Balancing time and resources with nuance and complexity

Legislative Theatre exists at the intersection of professional and personal expertise. In

“[Through LT] you can tell the truth without having to tell your intimate story.”

order for the process to generate policy suggestions that are both true to the lived experience of the participants, and practically actionable, both types of expertise need to be

employed throughout the rehearsal process and beyond. This calls for a close involvement of people with practical, systemic, and professional knowledge of the topic at hand. During the rehearsal processes, it became apparent that attendance of key stakeholders with such knowledge who could provide constructive feedback and suggestions on technical aspects as well as the progress of the play in general worked to both encourage and focus the actors and facilitators.

Through the Legislative Theatre process, a potentially traumatic personal story becomes a group story, which lessens the pressure on any individual person that can come from retelling their story in such a public context. But this positive aspect of process which allows a personal story to become a group story can also have the unintended side-effect of mitigating some of the specificity of the stories, which can lead the themes of the plays towards the more general or generalised. A closer collaboration with people with professional expertise throughout the rehearsal process could help with developing a more targeted understanding of where and how to focus on specifics, and where the responsibilities for the implementation of specific aspects of policy areas lie. This in turn would help ensure that policy suggestions stemming from the Legislative Theatre process were more directly actionable, with fewer steps necessary between LT performance and implementation.

Whilst there is a definite need to hone the policy suggestions emerging from the LT performances into specific and actionable policies, the extent to which this possible depends on a balancing of available time, effort, and resource. This is especially true when aligning with the timeline and requirements of a project like the prevention strategy.

Successes

The overarching goal of this LT process was to feed into the Greater Manchester Homelessness Strategy. Overall, more than twenty suggestions gathered from the LT

“LT has given me more confidence for expressing my needs at the Job Centre.”

“Since our play I’ve learned to handle things more and speak out more on other’s behalf too.”

performances and subsequent workshops and discussions with decision-makers were included in the Strategy document. These suggestions focused on a wide range of issues, including harm reduction and dealing with traumatic experiences, relationship building

and co-operation, joint commissioning, valuing lived experience, and inclusivity. The influence of LT can be tracked throughout both the missions and principles, as well as being listed in full in the Strategy appendix.

Actors reported a positive impact on confidence from participating in the LT process, confidence to be an advocate for oneself as well as for others. In particular, a large number of actors proactively participated in the Prevention Strategy consultation process, lobbying for greater transparency and for the inclusion of more incisive policy suggestions stemming from the LT performances. Due to their experiences during the consultation process, actors argued for the need to formalise ongoing participation to ensure access and inclusivity. Actors who also fulfilled a professional decision-making role expressed that the LT process refreshed the value of collective decision-making and a genuinely person-centred approach that tend to fade into the background or be taken for granted in the day-to-day functioning of their roles.

The CA funded LT project showcased the ability of the method to address key strategic issues such as funding and commissioning and multiple disadvantage in a nuanced

and inclusive manner. This contributed to an appetite for further applying the LT process in other policy and decision-making spaces across Greater Manchester.

Discussion

Legislative Theatre provides a clear opportunity to showcase the potential of co-production and embedding of lived experience into the policy and decision-making ecosystem. LT creates a space in which exclusive or esoteric expert language, and habituated understandings of systems and power structures can be suspended and destabilised in order to allow for communication across personal and professional boundaries. It is through the presence and participation of both people with lived experience and people with policy-making (and related) expertise that lived experience is translated into actionable policy suggestions.

“Legislative Theatre helps demonstrate not only that people with lived experience are experts through that experience, but also how.”

An issue experienced in the LT process was that the expertise that was co-produced in the performances ended up having to integrate into the established practice and language of the policy-making sphere. This means that whilst the process of co-producing policy suggestions through Legislative Theatre is inclusive, the subsequent process of translating policy suggestions into policy can remain exclusive as the barriers to inclusion are re-introduced. This has implications for the capacity of people with lived experience to be included fully into the decision-making process. Unless proactive changes happen that alter the established expert language and practice, what kind of expertise is authenticated and how, as well as providing clear and consistent opportunities for people to be involved in the entirety of the decision-making process, true co-coproduction is in danger of remaining peripheral.

The appetite with which Legislative Theatre projects have been received in Greater Manchester, and the call for LT to be used in more locations and circumstances, speaks to a level of dissatisfaction with the way co-production has been implemented in the past. One barrier to embedding co-production, and with it lived experience, into the decision-making

ecosystem is the lack of a clear, coherent, and flexible method and methodology to use and reference in a wide range of contexts. LT provides a concrete methodology and set of methods that help focus and guide co-production efforts, directly addressing questions around the definitional and practical vagueness of co-production.

As expressed in the evaluation sessions and throughout the rehearsal process, there was a fear that Legislative Theatre could become just a box-ticking exercise used to present the appearance of genuine co-production without the subsequent follow-through. This is a common concern shared with other co-production efforts stemming from an imbalance of power between those asked to share their lived experience and knowledge, and those tasked with operationalising those learnings. It also stems from a degree of opacity when it comes to higher-level decision-making processes, and a lack of communication and feedback loops beyond the initial co-production stage. Some of the frustration with a lack of transparency could be mitigated by the establishment of more formalised and consistent avenues for communication, as well by managing expectations about which Legislative Theatre outputs it is possible to implement at what scale and timeframe.

Whilst the benefits of the relatively small-scale CA funded LT process have been considerable, impact and sustainability are likely to improve with a scaling up the involvement of LT methods into as many spaces as possible. A wider use would allow for a specialisation of the expertise and involvement of both facilitators and participants to better tailor the process and outcomes to specific areas of interest, locales, and communities. Further, wider use will work towards embedding the co-production ideals that LT promotes in a more systemic manner, moving from isolated use cases to a more widely accepted, understood, and utilised decision-making toolset.