

How does Underground Lights embody, explore and enact its member-led and values-led approach with people who have experienced homelessness and/or mental health issues?

By Nadine Holdsworth with Jennifer Verson

TAKING THE LEAD



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SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS:

- Underground Lights facilitates opportunities for people who have experienced homelessness and/or mental health issues to participate in creative exploration and decision-making that extends members creative identities and supports their health, well-being and wider life skills.
- Underground Lights has a robust trauma informed and compassionate approach that promotes safe spaces and interactions for its diverse membership, many of whom have complex needs.
- Underground Lights demonstrates its commitment to being community-led via its interactions, workshop processes and performances, which contribute to members feeling seen and valued.
- Underground Lights encourages members to be connected to and responsible for each other, which results in peer-to-peer support, learning and lived experience leadership.
- Underground Lights facilitators are creative, supportive and flexible in order to maximise engagement, safety and to underpin positive affirmation for all members.
- Underground Lights members value having their creativity amplified via access to the Belgrade, a venue with cultural capital, which leads to enhanced self-esteem and empowerment.
- Underground Lights is underpinned by inclusive partnerships and effective collaboration that is driven by shared values around cultural access and inclusivity.
- The partnership between Underground Lights and the Belgrade, as small-scale and large-scale arts organisations, is driven by mutually reinforcing values, goals and practice that contributes to the future evolution and sustainability of both organisations.
- Underground Lights demonstrate ways in which work towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals can be supported by creative processes with members who have diverse backgrounds and complex needs.

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INTRODUCTION



This report considers the work of Underground Lights (UL), a member-led and trauma informed community theatre organisation founded in 2018 by Dr Emma Ormerod and Lewis Ford for people experiencing social disadvantage, homelessness and/or mental health issues.

UL aims to have people with this lived experience at all levels of the organisation from members, volunteers, staff and trustees. It has a remit to **a)** bring together adults who are at risk of experiencing social isolation, loneliness and marginalisation **b)** increase the confidence, skills and friendship networks of individuals and **c)** create more mentally healthy communities. To do this UL employs creative methods including drama, movement, music, puppetry and film-making. This work is undertaken through a term-time programme comprising weekly drama workshops and a more informal drop-in creative café. UL was a springboard company at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry from 2019-2022. It still runs its workshops in association with the Belgrade and receives in kind support including access to space and mentoring.



TAKING THE LEAD



Taking the Lead aimed to foster conversations and knowledge sharing around what it means to be a values-led and lived experience-led organisation, how that's evident and what alternative working models this demands. The project coincided with the publication of UL's Strategy and Sustainability Plan 2022-2025 (SSP 2022-2025), which was funded by Coventry City of Culture Trust and developed between October 2021 to March 2022 by a core strategy group made up of members and trustees alongside UL and Belgrade staff. This document states that UL's mission is: *'To be a safe and inspiring creative community, for people on the margins of society, that is owned and run by us.'*¹ This mission is backed up by 4 core values:

Creative: we encourage and inspire each other to explore and grow our own creative identities, to tell the stories that are important to us, to be curious, radical, transformative and fun!

Community-led: we are led by and accountable to the people we serve. Our community includes people experiencing (or at risk of experiencing) homelessness, mental or emotional distress, trauma, social isolation and marginalisation

Compassionate: we strive to be a safe, encouraging, caring and hopeful organisation. We support each other and work together to make sure that all our activities are accessible, welcoming and empowering.

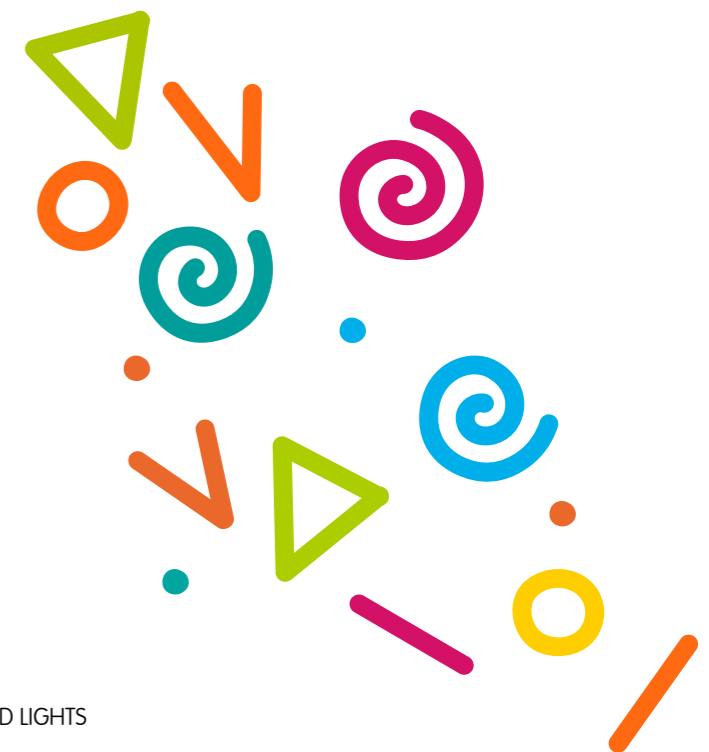
Connected: we want everyone involved in our collective to feel a sense of belonging. We create a safe and nurturing environment where people can grow and care for themselves and others.²

The *Taking the Lead* project tracked two drama groups facilitated by Beth Fiducia-Brookes, with support from Alisha Kadir and Hayley Harman, that met for two hours a week over the course of twelve weeks between April and July 2022. These groups explored what these values meant to the members and how they might interpret them via a multi-modal approach that encompassed discussion, music, found poetry, movement and devising practices. This report investigates how these sessions embodied, explored and enacted UL values as a way of probing what a values-led approach looks like and how it benefits UL members. The report connects this activity to an understanding of how these practices enhance health and well-being and reduce inequalities within a wider framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).³

¹ Underground Lights Strategy and Sustainability Plan 2022-2025

² Underground Lights Strategy and Sustainability Plan 2022-2025

³ See <https://www.globalgoals.org/> (accessed 20 July 2022)



UNDERGROUND LIGHTS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Understanding the work of UL in terms of SDGs corresponds to three different, but inter-related, sustainability goals. The first part of this report responds to SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), reflecting on how the work of UL contributes tangible improvements in the health and well-being of members and the trauma-informed interactions that enable this. The second part connects to SDG 10 (Reducing Inequalities) and the commitment UL has to fostering an inclusive environment in which members with diverse and complex needs can engage in creative practices and inhabit cultural spaces. The third part considers UL's practice in relation to SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) which stresses the advantages of working in collaborations that are driven by shared values and principles. In conclusion the report briefly addresses the potential for arts and creativity to support and develop capacity for unique ways of working in partnership and how UL demonstrates the potential of creative workshops to contribute to sustainable development goals.

SDG 3: GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



I have slept rough before and I am doing great now, and I am doing great because of all the creative things that I have been involved in, so it's really had an impact on me personally, and I see in Underground Lights how creativity has an impact on other people too.⁵

I went from being a shut-in near-mute who was scared of just about everyone to wanting to run drama sessions for quite large groups of total strangers. I think that says it all.⁶

Whilst the interplay between creativity and well-being is non-linear and nuanced, during *Taking the Lead*, UL members spoke consistently about how their participation helped them to feel more connected to and accepted in the community, enhanced feelings of self-worth, developed their confidence and supported their overall health and well-being. As Matthew put it: 'it keeps my mind free and relaxed'.⁷ Researchers heard compelling evidence that corroborated co-founder Emma's comment that 'members come and say to me that Underground Lights hasn't just helped them, it hasn't just enriched their life, that it's actually saved their life'.⁸ The SDGs define health and well-being through thirteen targets, with work towards each target measured by indicators. Target 3.4, for example, aims to: 'By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being'. Indicator 3.4.2 measures this target by the suicide mortality rate.⁹ Considering such targets and indicators offers an initial step in understanding how the data gathered through this research connects UL's creative and community practice to sustainable development goals.

The following section focuses on a cluster of practices that contribute to tangible impacts on SDG 3 indicators. Specifically, it gives an overview of the modes of interaction that took place during the *Taking the Lead Project*. These working methods are the DNA of Underground Lights and model how organisational values are enacted in real time.

METHODOLOGY



During the course of the twelve-week term, researchers attended ten workshops and the final informal sharing of performances on Friday 15th July that took place in the B2 Theatre in the Belgrade. This report draws on a mixed method approach to data gathering and analysis including desk research; participant observation; semi-structured interviews; photo elicitation and creative methods of documenting events including diary entries and photography. In UL's SSP 2022-2025 it states that, 'In keeping with our trauma-informed approach we aim to be sensitive to the shifting power dynamics and hierarchies that operate within research and evaluation settings'.⁴ With this aim in mind, there was a focus on qualitative methods to generate richly detailed data that foregrounded the activities, opinions and expertise of members and their lived experience. This approach relied on embedded participant observation, informal discussion and some semi-structured interviews. At the start of the research process, members were given a journal where they could reflect on their activity with UL via visual or text-based means. The journals contained a series of prompts related to the values the groups were exploring during the term.

⁴Underground Lights Strategy and Sustainability Plan 2022-2025



⁵Hayley, interview with Jennifer Verson, 30 November 2021

⁶<https://undergroundlights.org/about> (accessed 31 August 2021)

⁷Matthew during final session debrief, 15 July 2022

⁸<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qUhxzIWDc> (5 September 2022)

⁹See <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/3-good-health-and-well-being/> (accessed 24 August 2022)



INTERACTION

TRAUMA-INFORMED AND EMPATHIC

Trauma-informed practice seeks to recognise, acknowledge, understand and respond to the far-reaching consequences of trauma on people's lives. The approach prioritises physical and emotional safety and aims to empower individuals to re-establish control of their lives by emphasising strengths and achievements.¹⁰ UL draws its reference points from definitions and working practices of the National Survivor User Network (NSUN). NSUN is a membership organisation and a network of community groups and people who have experience of mental distress, ill-health or trauma who come together to create, challenge, and campaign.¹¹ UL differs from NSUN by choosing to define its remit more generally as experience of homelessness and/or mental health issues, which directly reflects the experience of the UL co-founders, but NSUN's commitment to centring a plurality of lived experience, a redistribution of power and meaningful coalitions and networks is key to UL's ethos.¹²

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UL staff are alert to the fact that their members will likely have encountered trauma connected to their homelessness and/or experience of mental distress. This knowledge demands a finely calibrated trauma-informed approach to all interactions and creative work with staff and members. Members are encouraged to practice self-awareness and during the first session of the term were invited to complete the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale.¹³ This activity invited self-reflection on how members were feeling and provided UL facilitators with valuable information on members' current state of play. It would have been beneficial to follow up with members at the end of term to see if their responses had shifted at all, even though any positive change could not necessarily be directly mapped onto UL involvement.

Members are also encouraged to avoid contact with topics or sensory stimulation that might be triggering for them. They are free to leave the room and can elect to observe rather than participate and can talk to staff if they feel comfortable to do so. Members have agency to navigate what is possible for them physically and emotionally without having to explain themselves. Given that UL aims to have people with lived experience at all levels of the organisation, trauma-informed practice begins with staff as evidenced by team meetings where 'weather checks' are often used to gauge how people are in the virtual or in-person space. As Emma explained:

Sometimes in our team meetings we talk about a weather report, what's your internal weather today. So, before we get going with a team meeting, we might just say a little bit drizzly today or it might be storms coming, I am in the eye of a storm or I can see a tornado on the horizon, or it might be I am having blue sky, lots of sunshine. So maybe without saying, this happened in my life this morning, we can just check in and know as the meeting progresses if someone's being triggered by certain things or responding in a certain way. We all have that understanding that maybe at the start of that meeting they said, feeling a bit stormy today. I think there's something about the acknowledgement of where people are in terms of their own well-being.¹⁴

This practice extends to the drama workshops, that always begin with a similar 'weather check' after members have arrived, been greeted warmly and encouraged into a circle where they engage with each other and share what they had done since the last session. Small acts from planting vegetables on an allotment to attending a jubilee picnic are celebrated.

¹⁰ See Julie Wilkinson (2018) 'Developing and leading trauma-informed practice', Research in Practice, <https://rce.researchinpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Developing-and-leading-trauma-informed-practice.pdf> (accessed 5 September 2022)

¹¹ <https://www.nsun.org.uk/about-us/our-mission/> (26 August 2022)

¹² <https://www.nsun.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/> (accessed 26 August 2022)

¹³ See <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/>

¹⁴ Emma, interview with Jennifer Verson, 6 December 2021



This informal catch up segues into a 'weather check':

How are people feeling today and what action can convey that? Actions are positive and affirmative. People are pleased to be here. The atmosphere is gentle, welcoming and encouraging as the facilitator Alisha prompts members to recall the previous session - What did we do last week? Can we remember our 'C' words?¹⁵

Asked to think about how they are feeling, responses are embodied as people reveal themselves through an expansive jolly gesture or a more subdued shrug of the shoulders. Even when members are feeling low and express reluctance to contribute Beth and Alisha commend the fact that they found a way to the group and have chosen to enter a space of creativity.

¹⁵ Nadine's fieldnotes, 27 May 2022

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INTERACTION

SAFETY AND SAFEGUARDING

Without a sense of basic safety (in your body, in the room, in your relationships with others), it is unlikely you will feel able to be authentically brave in a workshop or rehearsal room. We believe that safe spaces should always be co-created rather than assumed by a facilitator and power within the space needs to be acknowledged and shared.¹⁶

When UL refer to creating safe conditions for members, they are referring to an integrated mesh that incorporates a convivial and supportive atmosphere, knowledge of a member's background, trauma-informed practice, formal safeguarding processes and active signposting to support services. It was clear from all of the sessions observed that safety is paramount and integral to facilitation methods and the cultivation of a shared sense of responsibility for each other's safety and well-being. UL's SSP 2022-2025 states: 'We're not talking here about "safety" in a way that is creatively bland and anodyne. Nor are we coming from a place that patronises or infantilises. But we are talking about taking some very basic and active steps to work in a way that is respectful of people's experiences'.¹⁷

Working within the remit of trauma-informed practice, UL facilitators are aware that trauma can resurface despite the creation of 'safe spaces' and that this requires vigilance and flexibility. This approach was paramount in one session that became fraught as one member was clearly having a poor mental health episode that resulted in persistent negativity directed at members, the group and activities. Beth acknowledged this was happening, made it clear that she would talk to the member during the break and rapidly adjusted her plans for the session.

First, she introduced an exercise where members drew around their hands and passed the image around the space so that other members could write something positive about each person and their value to the group. This was augmented by accessing and sharing photos from prior shows and allowing space to reminisce and celebrate prior successes. This quick thinking stopped a potential spiral of decline and brought the focus back to the group, its core values and achievements. On another occasion, Emma took a member aside to discuss the origins of a physical injury, completed a formal safeguarding referral and contacted social services to request additional support. This partnership working is a crucial aspect of safeguarding and relies on having robust membership processes that ensure UL staff are equipped with the appropriate information to signpost and refer when necessary to other types of health-related services. Safeguarding is also a recurrent item in the weekly de-briefs after sessions with facilitators who discuss 'roses/thorns/buds/safeguarding' as a way of noting what went well, what went less well, what things emerged that could be nurtured and any safeguarding issues that need to be noted and followed up.

¹⁶ Underground Lights Strategy and Sustainability Plan 2022-2025

¹⁷ Underground Lights Strategy and Sustainability Plan 2022-2025

INTERACTION

TAKING TIME

UL has a commitment to working with people over a period of time in order to get to know members and a sense of what they want to do and achieve. Taking the time to garner knowledge enables activity to be tailored and safeguarding to be maximised as UL staff can often pre-empt if a topic, character or mode of working could be potentially triggering and steer members to creatively intervene in a way that is safe for them. As UL state, 'if you have been bullied frequently in your life, it may not be helpful for you to be playing a character who is bullied unless there is active and obvious transformation within a piece'.¹⁸ Taking time in this way also extends to the creative workshops themselves. One of the striking qualities of the workshops was a temporality that privileged deliberate slowness that enabled members to develop their creative practice at their own pace in an unpressured environment. Although the facilitators and members were working towards a public sharing of material, slow evolution was promoted over the usual accelerated time pressure of professional practice. There is a safety in slowness that contributes to well-being. Within this, tea breaks are important interruptions that create informal opportunities for community mutual aid and knowledge exchange. In these moments members chatted about their lives and re-affirmed bonds that are crucial in sustaining feelings of connectivity and belonging. As such, relationships are facilitated and mediated through the sessions, although it is not always obvious whether members actively engage with each other outside of these arts-based activities.

¹⁸ Underground Lights Strategy and Sustainability Plan 2022-2025



SDG 10: REDUCING INEQUALITIES



This world is not inclusive for people with mental health or learning disabilities – we are the black sheep.¹⁹

Being a member-led organisation is manifest in a commitment to co-creation in all aspects of UL's work 'where power is shared, decisions are taken together, and we are actively inclusive'.²⁰ This approach had been evident in the processes that led to the generation of UL's SSP 2022-2025 and the identification of UL's core values. Members were integral to discussions on what UL had achieved, what was challenging and how it might evolve. For Hannah Barker, a Creative Producer at the Belgrade leading on participation and talent development, who was involved in this strategy refresh exercise, this member-led approach meant an enrichment of the pool of ideas, greater empowerment and buy-in. As she described it members were 'empowered to make decisions, see those decisions realised and hopefully benefit from those decisions and benefit from what that's done for them going on the journey of being a decision-maker'.²¹

This member-led approach connects to SDG 10 (Reducing Inequalities), especially targets 10.2 and 10.3 to respectively 'promote universal social, economic and political inclusion' and to 'ensure equal opportunities and end discrimination'.²² This is evident in UL's ethos that everyone should be able to access opportunities to be creative in their lives. As the organisation states 'many of our members have implicitly or explicitly received the message that theatre isn't "for them". We seek to challenge that and move to a place that defies expectations – our own and those of our audiences'.²³ This quality of inclusivity is warmly appreciated by members who have previously experienced exclusion leading to social isolation and marginalisation. Two relatively new members to the group articulated their experience in the following ways: *'What I love about it is how welcoming everyone has been' and 'They seem to accept my wackiness...they seem to see who I am and take me as the whole package instead of thinking he's an oddball'*.²⁴ Another member wrote in their journal that *'it's what I do to make friends and be in a group. Something to do where people respect and accept me'*. The research consistently demonstrated that members felt a sense of belonging to UL, with several warmly referring to their UL family. UL not only offers an inclusive environment, it has also developed practices that facilitate members with complex and diverse support needs accessing opportunities to explore their creativity.

¹⁹ Member comment during a discussion of Underground Lights values

²⁰ Underground Lights Strategy and Sustainability Plan 2022-2025

²¹ Underground Lights Strategy and Sustainability Plan 2022-2025

²² See <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/10-reduced-inequalities/> (accessed 24 August 2022)

²³ Underground Lights Strategy and Sustainability Plan 2022-2025

²⁴ Comment after the final sharing on 15th July 2022 and William in conversation with Nadine, 10 June 2022

REHEARSING VALUES: CREATIVE WORKSHOPS

As previously indicated, the *Taking the Lead* project tracked a term when UL explored the company's core values with members. The sessions were iterative, building on conversations and activities developed in previous weeks, but enabling members to explore the core values of connection, community-led, creativity and compassion in different ways. UL's facilitators displayed a nuanced expertise in creating flexible activities that balanced challenge with incorporating existing skills. During the twelve weeks members engaged in discussion, flag-painting, physical theatre, lyric writing, creating dramatic scenarios, working with puppets and found poetry.



In one session, discussions around UL's core values were thoughtful, engaged and members shared their thoughts verbally and on post-it notes to open up reflection and debate. At one point a member admitted they were not sure what 'community-led' meant and another member stepped in to explain by reminding him how he had developed his piece for the *Streams of Consciousness* walking tour performance that had taken place during the previous term. He stressed how the member had initiated an idea that was accepted, nurtured and progressed by the group, a prime example of how community-led is manifest in UL's practice that puts member agency at its heart, but also how members understand and narrate this approach and evidence peer-to-peer learning.

In another session Wes, a musician, was brought in to work with the groups. As members assembled in a circle, he told them he wanted to write a song that encapsulated UL and its core values. He prompted the members by asking: 'If Underground Lights had an anthem, what would it be?' Going round the circle each member contributed an idea for a lyric – many were striking: 'accepted not rejected', 'friendship and family' and 'sounds of the underground'. Susan had a moment of creative inspiration – 'I'm sitting here shaking with fear thinking all thoughts that just disappear. Help me to stand by taking my hand to take away the fear'. This impromptu creative flow was greeted with warm applause and cheers – staff and members celebrate each other's achievements, which contributes to positive affirmation and enhanced well-being. The members were also invited to explore the themes through improvisation and embodied devising practices that provided a space for sharing ideas and crafting material through rehearsal with support from Beth, Alisha and Hayley.

Writing about an 'aesthetics of care', James Thompson notes that it is 'about a set of values realised in a relational process that emphasises engagements between individuals or groups over time'.²⁵ UL provide ample evidence of this as working together to generate creative outputs offers the chance to put the value of compassion into practice. Caring for others means being open to their reality and attentive to their lived experience. In some cases, this led to minor adjustments in the workshops to accommodate the needs of members as Jennifer noted:

Sitting in a circle, Alisha lets us know that we are in a ship. One by one people are asked to add a sound that would be heard at sea on a boat until the whole group makes a sound scape. The cacophony is a bit too much for some members, and the volume is dialled down a bit.²⁶

²⁵ James Thompson (2020) 'Towards an aesthetics of care' in *Performing Care: New Perspectives on Socially Engaged Performance*, Manchester University Press, p. 44

²⁶ Jennifer's fieldnotes, 13 May 2022

Similarly, when the group were invited to create small-scale movement pieces inspired by Frantic Assembly's chair duets around the themes of connection and community-led, participants were offered ribbons so they could negotiate the varying personal space requirements exhibited by members at the same time as utilising a creative tool for devising.

Collaboration requires patience, kindness and a willingness to embrace different abilities with small groups often consisting of members with a range of physical disabilities and other complex needs. During our research we witnessed members regularly demonstrating compassion by offering peer-to-peer support that took multiple forms from reminding people what was achieved the previous week to helping people to develop their characters, material and confidence in performance. Nadine observed:

*Nikola has a good memory of things set the previous week and she guides others gently and patiently. When Matthew arrives he steps in to direct Arshak and Susan to take up positions to enhance the movement/action. Each time the piece is performed the actions are more secure.*²⁷

14 When people gather to write in their journals, working together and helping each other out are common themes, with Craig noting that 'I was working with two people. They helped me to get on and know what to do'.²⁸ Members also had to accommodate multiple changes in the composition of the group as attendance proved patchy during this term due to a variety of factors including ill-health and hospitalisation. This demanded compassionate understanding and flexibility from facilitators and members as plans had to be persistently revised. Yet, at the same time the regularity of the meetings and the convivial, inclusive ethos proved crucial as members knew that they could attend when they were able, would receive a warm welcome and be swiftly reintegrated into the group without having to explain or justify their absence. So, while there was fluctuating attendance over the course of the research, we would suggest that it is not the attendance that matters so much as the consistency of provision in order to achieve the SDG impact on health and well-being.

There are numerous ways in which these workshop processes enable members to rehearse UL values that connect to the enhancement of wider life skills. For example, elimination-based drama games used as warm-up exercises were approached in a light-hearted way that seemed to build resilience in members to the micro failures and setbacks that are part of everyday life. Members narrated how opportunities to devise pieces meant that they were engaged in negotiating with others, getting their ideas across and they clearly valued how their performances evolved in collaboration, which meant that they felt part of something bigger than themselves. Rob recorded in his journal: 'Today I loved to be part of creating in a group and bouncing ideas off one another - loved it'.²⁹ Others explained how drama had helped them to build confidence in expressing themselves that fed into their relations beyond the workshop space.

*I think being in Underground Lights has definitely helped me be more forthright... More able and willing to stand up and speak because you have to do that in drama anyway - there is no getting away from it and I guess you just get more used to standing up and speaking or performing or doing something so that kind of moves into your real life then, you know, I think I can get up and do a silly movement in front of a group of people then surely in my real life I can stand up and say something that is important to me, so that has definitely helped my confidence.*³⁰

²⁷ Nadine's research diary, 27 May 2022

²⁸ Craig's creative journal entry, 27 May 2022

²⁹ Rob's creative journal entry, 27 May 2022

³⁰ Hayley, interview with Jennifer Verson, 30 November 2021

The multi-modal creative approach also encourages members to explore and extend their creative identities. On the one hand there is a sense of familiarity fostered as favourite warm-up games and exercises reoccur. As Jennifer noted in her research diary there is: 'a shared vocabulary of warm up games that has been part of creating the UL culture, whether it is a collective groan because everybody hates it, or a sense of knowing what happens when everybody knows the rules and only need to be gently reminded... certain language from previous experiences was clearly informing what they considered drama and people were easily understanding how to do choreography and create tableaux of ideas and emotions'.³¹ Experienced members of UL also have a toolbox of creative skills that they regularly reference during devising processes, which demonstrates that repeated practices of drama and devising become habitual.

When invited to expand their creative repertoire, some members found this an uncomfortable departure and they demonstrated resistance when moved beyond their drama-based comfort zone into the realms of physical theatre and found poetry. As Jennifer noted regarding the mood of the session held on 1st July, 'there is a rejection of the poetry, poetry is not drama and we have come for drama'.³² This resistance raises a question about how member-led the aesthetics of UL are. Some members evidently relished the chance to experiment with other forms, which connects with the UL value of creativity and the aim to inspire creative curiosity. This approach had worked well in the previous term when members had developed *Streams of Consciousness*, an outdoor walking tour performance around Coventry. Members spoke warmly of the project's member-led origins, the devising experience and how they had developed the confidence to perform in the street and local shopping centre. Nonetheless, there were clearly members who wanted a more traditionally drama-focused experience and a chance for structured progression, which responds to UL's strategic goal to challenge low expectations.

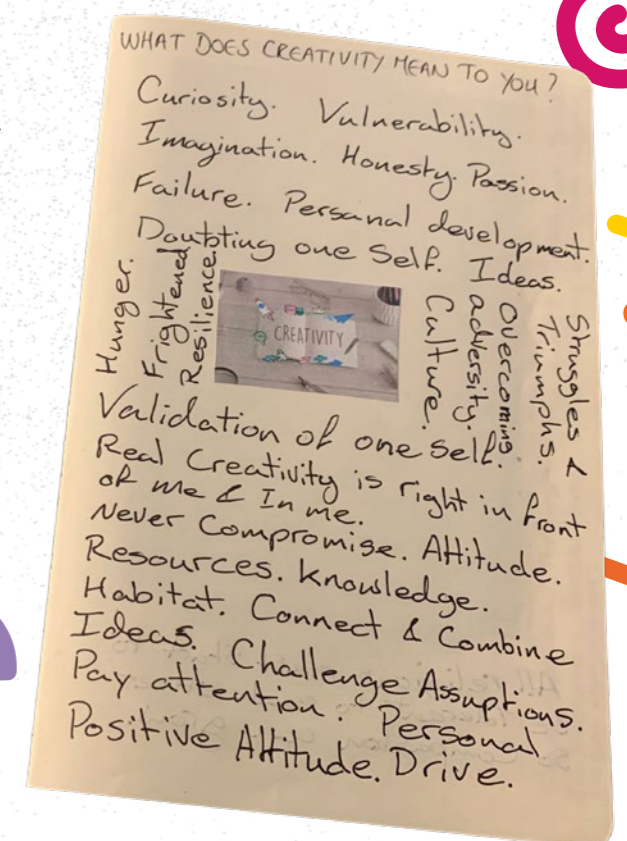
In line with their commitment to reducing inequalities and sharing power, UL also open up opportunities for members to take on more responsibility in the organisation if this is right for them. This was evidenced by members being invited to run warm-up exercises, to being involved as part of the Core Strategy Group, volunteering to take minutes for trustee meetings and to employment in one instance. All these activities support individual growth and develop capacity among members for Lived Experience Leadership.³³ Narrating her trajectory, Hayley explained how 'I started off at Underground Lights as a member and then became a volunteer and now I am a member of staff. They have a very strong ethos of having people with lived experience being part of the staff team, trustees as well...it's been great for me'.³⁴

³¹ Jennifer's research diary, 13 May 2022

³² Jennifer's research diary, 1st July 2022

³³ See <https://www.nsun.org.uk/resource/lived-experience-leadership/> for a discussion of Lived Experience Leadership

³⁴ Hayley, interview with Jennifer Verson, 30 November 2021



PERFORMING VALUES: PUBLIC-FACING SHARINGS

In his work on an 'aesthetic of care', James Thompson questions 'the preeminent place of the show or display', instead stressing the aesthetic value of collaboration, co-creation and 'building mutual activities of sharing, support, co-working and relational solidarity'.³⁵ As demonstrated in this report, these qualities are fundamental to UL's values and creative processes, but working towards a public performance of some kind is also a significant part of UL's practice and this section of the report considers the rationale behind and impact of this aspect of UL's work. Since its foundation in 2018, UL members have produced devised pieces *Werewolf* (2019) and *The Time Jump Adventure* (2019) that were performed in the Belgrade's Patrick Suite and *No Time for Christmas* (2019), a festive show staged in the Shopfront Theatre in Coventry. Outputs during the Covid pandemic included an online screening of shadow puppetry in 2021 and the generations of two films: *The Shed* (2021) and *Digital Divide* (2021).³⁶ In addition, participants in the creative café regularly stage open mic events of songs, poetry, stand-up comedy, sketches and movement pieces. These events are open to an invited audience of family, friends, support workers and UL advocates, with the spring show in 2022, *Streams of Consciousness*, moving into new territory as it took to the streets and public spaces in Coventry, which members experienced as demanding, but rewarding.



The term-time structure of workshops means that there is an established temporality of creative workshops leading to a performance in the final week of term. These informal sharings provide a focus for the term, a sense of direction that means members are always moving towards an end goal, which requires a degree of discipline that can be challenging. William was acutely aware of the balance UL facilitators strike between being member-led and predominately process-led, at the same time as steering the group towards public sharing. He explained:

*Sometimes UL staff have to turn round and take the reins to keep everything on track. It's a partnership. You can have a community-based, members-led group, but if you don't have somebody saying, 'right let's get to the next part' and keep you on track, you can have the best ideas in the world but nothing's going to come from it.*³⁷

As previously indicated, during this term attendance was irregular which meant that the sharing felt especially precarious. Members who had missed sessions due to hospital stays or ill health returned to the group in the week before the end of term but some long-standing members who had regular attendance missed the final sharing. Members displayed admirable flexibility and spent time adjusting their short scenes to accommodate absences. Alisha and Hayley were on hand to step-in and take on roles that enabled scenes to be performed. In the final sharing, diverse forms and scenes were brought together in a way that meant both the individual and the group were seen, which contributes to individual and collective affirmation. Ultimately, the final performance was a celebration of the strength of the community and demonstrated a quality of UL that 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. After the sharing members reported that they were pleased to be able to bring the two groups together, which further highlights the core UL value of connectivity.

³⁵ James Thompson (2020) 'Towards an aesthetics of care' in *Performing Care: New Perspectives on Socially Engaged Performance*, Manchester University Press, p. 46

³⁶ To see *The Shed* visit <https://undergroundlights.org/about>

³⁷ William in conversation with Nadine, 10 June 2022

On this occasion the group were given access to the Belgrade's B2 theatre, a space the members associated with cultural capital and prestige. For them, access to a 'proper' performance space elevated the event, with several commenting on this opportunity in the post-show de-brief. Francesca noted, 'I'm glad to say I've performed in the B2' and Craig spoke enthusiastically about how he'd been coming to the theatre since he was a child and now he'd had the opportunity to perform there. People who have experienced homelessness, mental health issues and social isolation often refer to their sense of marginalisation and invisibility. They feel unseen and unheard in public life. The chance to perform in the B2 theatre enhanced the members sense of their visibility and in terms of reducing inequalities, asserted the fact that they had been welcomed to inhabit this cultural space in a large, professional civic venue.

The presence of an audience shifted the dynamic of the informal, laidback workshop sessions to an extent, but the emphasis was still on members situated in the audience acknowledging and celebrating what each other had produced in a display of mutual regard and respect. In terms of the small, assembled group of friends, family and support workers, they heard from Beth that the term had been difficult and that she appreciated their presence and patience. As such, the audience was primed to be supportive despite some understandable glitches and they responded accordingly with tacit understanding and warm applause. Feedback from the audience was heartfelt and encouraging.

One person praised 'the inclusive spirit of the individual artists and drama topic and plays'; another noted that they

'loved the movement, the use of puppets was wicked, I really enjoyed the poetry but also the silent performance. I've seen the group do a silent piece before and it's always inspiring. Seeing the group perform in the B2 was BRILLIANT!!!'

After the sharing, the group were brought together to reflect on their performance as a way of further affirming individual achievement and positive group dynamics. Going systematically around the group, every member was invited to contribute, a practice familiar from the weekly sessions that advances the fact that all responses are valid and welcome, as does the warm applause that greets each contribution. The comments are testament to their sense of achievement, their pride in what UL enables them to do and how this empowers them: 'we've all done a brilliant job', 'today has been exhilarating', 'Everyone should be super proud' and 'I'm so pleased to be back at Underground Lights, my heartbeat'. The positive affirmation continued from the group to individual members via an exercise that entailed everybody getting a photo of themselves documenting their recent UL activities. After each photo was distributed the group was invited to say what they value about that person, which prompts an outpouring of positivity. Nikola is told she is 'a ball of lovely energy in the group. You brighten the room'; Arshak hears he has 'a calming energy' and Sue is informed that she is 'great to work with. She helps me and is a joy'. For members of a community that may have experienced marginalisation and social isolation, this exercise and the positive portraits it fostered, provides further evidence of UL's values of compassion and connection in practice.

SDG 17: PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS



SDG 17 makes it clear that progress towards the UN's Sustainable Development Goals is reliant on forging effective partnerships and cooperation 'at the global, regional, national and local levels – built upon principles and values, and upon a shared vision and shared goals placing people and the planet at the centre'.³⁸ There is a very well-developed and mutually supporting cultural ecosystem for arts and homelessness activities in Coventry, which has been further enhanced by Coventry, UK City of Culture support for HOME Arts and Homelessness Festival in October 2021 and on-going legacy projects.³⁹ For Emma, Coventry, UK City of Culture offered a chance to forge partnership with like-minded individuals and organisations including Crisis arts worker, Ben Davenport. Connection made with Arts and Homelessness International will focus attention on leadership training and professional development for its members in the next phase of UL's activity. These collaborations rooted in the shared values of opening access to the rich benefits of arts and creativity are crucial in sustaining and enhancing UL practice and growing this burgeoning sector.

Being a member of NSUN facilitates access to advice, resources and vital peer support from members of the network with shared values around the importance of lived experience and member-led organisations for healthy communities. Rather than operating in isolation, connections made via NSUN contributes to sustainability as UL are part of a movement that generates momentum around shared values and practices. In a report *What do user-led groups need?* (2020) co-written by Emma Ormerod for NSUN it states that:

*'Practical, contextual support provided to user-led groups and organisations by a more established body attuned with the objectives and intentions of those groups/organisations could increase the impact of those groups.'*⁴⁰

For UL, this connects to the vital role that the Belgrade has played in nurturing and enhancing the work UL has been able to do with members. The Belgrade's Springboard programme is designed to assist artists and organisations that have reached a certain stage in their evolution where they would benefit from three years of targeted support to help realise their ambitions. UL became a springboard company with the Belgrade in 2019 and the association has fostered tangible benefits such as space to meet, perform and store materials, as well as access to expertise and informal mentoring. In addition, there have been more intangible impacts such as raising the status of the work for members, as demonstrated by the showing in the B2 in July 2022, and the ability to secure a long-term physical home that contributes to a sense of security, safety and continuity. However, it is important to stress that this is not one-way traffic, it is a 'mutually beneficial relationship and we [the Belgrade] have learned as much from them as they have from us' which is reliant on shared values around cultural access and inclusivity.⁴¹

³⁸ <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/globalpartnerships/> (accessed 5 September 2022)

³⁹ See Nadine Holdsworth and Jennifer Verson (2022) HOME: arts and homelessness report, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/staffintranet/rss/impact/news/arts_homelessness_in/

⁴⁰ Mark Brown and Emma Ormerod (2020) What do user-led groups need? <https://www.nsun.org.uk/resource/what-do-user-led-groups-need/> (accessed 6 September 2022)

⁴¹ Hannah Barker interviewed by Nadine Holdsworth, Belgrade Theatre, 14 June 2022

When UL became a springboard company, the Belgrade was beginning a significant process of organisational change and a shift in values instigated by the wider context of an impending period of Coventry as UK City of Culture 2021, the appointment of a new diverse artistic leadership team and the recruitment of an embedded community producer. According to Hannah Barker these changes heralded critical reflection on the theatre building and its role as a civic space in the city that needs to serve its diverse communities. She recalled that 'we had identified that we were not serving certain communities and part of it was going, okay what's out there that is serving those communities using artistic practice'.⁴² This approach propelled the Belgrade to invite UL to apply for the springboard programme in recognition of the fact that the company had developed effective creative methods to attract members of a specific community who had experienced homelessness and/or mental health issues. In turn, this relationship has enabled the Belgrade to learn from the expertise UL staff and members bring to questions of community engagement, inclusivity, participation and the benefits that can accrue from processes underpinning UL's ambition to be meaningfully member-led. As Hannah reflects:

*From our perspective I don't know if the member-led aspect of UL has affected this building in terms of how we interact with UL, but we have learnt a lot about our own practice through watching that journey of them becoming a member-led organisation...It's been brilliant to be able to see that journey and to learn from it and borrow from it ourselves.'*⁴³

For both UL and the Belgrade, as small-scale and large-scale arts organisations, this partnership has enabled them to continue to evolve in a way that is driven by mutually reinforcing values, goals and practice that contributes to future sustainability.

⁴² Hannah Barker interviewed by Nadine Holdsworth, Belgrade Theatre, 14 June 2022

⁴³ Hannah Barker interviewed by Nadine Holdsworth, Belgrade Theatre, 14 June 2022



CONCLUSION

This report explores and documents the multiple ways that UL's working processes and modes of interaction demonstrate how a members-led and values-led approach can be realised.

It considers the alternative working models this demands and provides robust qualitative evidence for how members engage with and narrate their experiences being part of UL. In particular, the report pays attention to the mission and values articulated in UL's SSP 2022-2025, reflecting on the ways in which these are evident in the day-to-day operations of the organisation. This entails consideration of how UL fosters an inclusive, compassionate, creative community that is underpinned by an embedded trauma-informed practice that places member safety at the heart of all its activities. In addition, the report draws attention to the significance for UL of collaborative partnership with allied artists and organisations that offers a model of best practice in the sector. It especially notes the mutually beneficial relationship forged with the Belgrade as both organisations seek to evolve their activity in a values-led way that will contribute to sustainable impacts for individuals and diverse communities in the city of Coventry.

Taking the Lead was funded through the University of Warwick's Getting Creative with Sustainability initiative which supports researchers working with local artists, creatives and regional organisations to share 'knowledge and insights around sustainability research in its broadest sense'.⁴⁴ With this in mind, a thread running throughout the report is an exploration of the potential of grassroots community organisations such as UL and creative activity targeted at those who have experienced homelessness, mental health issues and social isolation to contribute meaningfully to the UN's sustainable development goals, in particular SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 10 (Reducing Inequalities) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). The multi-modal and qualitative research tools which underpin this report map potential correlations between creative interventions by UL and these SDGs. Clearly, arts interventions which map impact on SDGs in the years to come will need nuanced methodological tools in order to develop a robust and traceable evidence base that records to what extent arts interventions are making tangible contributions as this report suggests.

This report goes a substantial way towards bridging the knowledge gap which connects and correlates the affective practices of grassroots organisations and creative sessions with quantitative indicators associated with SDGs.

⁴⁴ <https://warwick.ac.uk/about/cityofculture/artists-researchers/creative-sustainability/> (accessed 5 September 2022)

Underground Lights Environment

Safe

Compassionate

Diverse

Underground Lights Activities

Flexible

Multimodal

Creative

Underground Lights Interaction

Empathic

Member-led

Formal/Informal

BIOGRAPHIES

Nadine Holdsworth is Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Warwick, UK. She has research interests in citizenship, cultural democracy, space, community, class, amateur creativity and cultural participation. She has published *English Theatre and Social Abjection: A Divided Nation* (2020); *Joan Littlewood's Theatre* (2011), *Theatre & Nation* (2010) and *Joan Littlewood* (2006, second edition 2017) and co-authored *The Ecologies of Amateur Theatre* (2018). She is currently working on a new body of research on arts and homelessness.

Jennifer Verson was a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow in the School of Creative Arts, Performance and Visual Cultures at the University of Warwick. She received her PhD from The Centre for Trust, Peace, and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University where she was one of the first recipients of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Studentship. Jennifer's research focuses on building knowledge and understanding of the potential of multimodal performance for social repair, particularly in the long aftermaths of genocide, slavery, and colonialism. She is co-founder and Artistic Director of Migrant Artists Mutual Aid (MaMa).



TAKING THE LEAD



UNDERGROUND LIGHTS

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