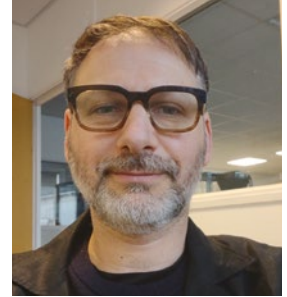


# THE POWER OF IMAGINATION



**By Athol Hallé**

**The use of imagination to engage people who feel powerless and create alternative futures is a theme emerging from our Sharing and Building Power cell. Athol Hallé writes about his experience of this here.**

I began to realise how impactful the power of imagination could be when I was running The Engagement Programme with Cardboard Citizens, a theatre company where all the actors were people who had experienced homelessness, back in the year 2000.

We specialised in a technique called Forum Theatre, created by the Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal. We did not put on shows in theatres, but rather in homeless services. We would go into a hostel, take over the lounge, turn off the TV, and put a on a play – often to the initial disgruntlement of residents, but that soon changed once the actors began sharing their stories.

With Forum Theatre the protagonist is a character that can relate to the lives of the audience, so with Cardboard Citizens shows this was always someone who was homeless and the story was based on the real-life experiences of the actors on the streets of London.

The protagonist faces challenging situations and difficult characters, getting themselves into deeper and deeper trouble, ending in a

crisis. One play ‘A Ridge Too Far’ saw the lead, Freddie, come up against an impatient benefits officer, get himself thrown off a training course and when faced with an unreasonable key worker he ended up kicked out of his hostel and back on the street.

Then we replayed the show, asking the audience to take part. If they want Freddie’s life to turn out differently, then they have to stop the play – get up on stage, take the role of Freddie and redo the scene – trying something different, with the actors improvising around the audience member.

You think no one is going to get up – but if they don’t intervene, they have to watch Freddie get in trouble again, and because people cared about him, someone always jumped up and shouted ‘STOP!’ People would attempt all manner of imaginative interventions – occasionally losing their temper with the benefits officer and making the situation worse but, between them, the audience always seemed to be able to get a result for Freddie.

The central message is that you can’t change the difficult situation or the challenging characters.

The only thing you can change is your own behaviour, but even with just that, there was a lot you could achieve. We tried to make the connection that if people can imagine things working out for Freddie, why not for themselves?

The key was following up that spark of imagination into tangible change. At first, I tried handing out leaflets after each show, promoting various opportunities, but as people barged passed me and up to the actors – their peers – we realised that was where the power was. People would have amazing conversations about imagining a better life and sorting things out.

Then, taking it further, we thought that leaflets were not enough to grab hold of the momentum, so we trained the actors as advocates, who offered there and then straight after the show to accompany people to go and attend services.

Taking that small crack of light opened up by imagination and turning it into direct action – for many it became a real turning point.

A few years later, at Groundswell, we were focusing on service user involvement and peer research. All our research was pointing to the fact that health was the biggest unaddressed issue for people experiencing homelessness. Despite it being free to access health services, people were not making it to appointments. Missing out on primary care meant letting health deteriorate, ending up in acute care instead – an expensive use of health services and at great personal suffering.

Now, imagination is not always inventing something new. Sometimes the best innovations are recycling existing ideas but putting them in a different context. So, I tried resurrecting the peer advocacy element of The Engagement Programme at Cardboard Citizens and applying it to health. We didn't have a

play, so we ran health promotion sessions in hostels and day centres. The peers who ran the sessions, all people who had been homeless themselves, offered to take people to health appointments there and then.

From day one, Homeless Health Peer Advocacy (HHPA) just worked. In the first five years it went from a small pilot with 100 appointments in one venue into a full service commissioned by ten London boroughs, supporting people for over 10,000 appointments, with over 60 volunteer advocates who had been homeless going on to get jobs. Since I left Groundswell, HHPA has developed further – now expanding across the country, as described in the essay by Lucy Holmes in this collection.

Now I am at TDC – a community development and youth work charity in Brighton which brings people together from under-served and excluded communities to create a more inclusive, healthy and resilient city. Unlocking the power of imagination will again be crucial as we seek to rebuild community life after the devastations of Covid.

**Athol Hallé is the Chief Executive of TDC, The Trust for Developing Communities, a community development charity in Brighton & Hove that leads a citywide partnership that tackles inequality and runs the award-winning Brighton Streets detached youth work project. Prior to that as Chief Executive of Groundswell for over ten years, Athol oversaw the creation of the Homeless Health Peer Advocacy project, with previous roles at Cardboard Citizens and Amnesty International UK and a few years as a support worker. Athol is also a Trustee of Community Base, a community building in central Brighton.**