

# This is me

## Voices of Loudspeaker peer mentors

If you've been downtrodden you need, at some point to say —

### THIS IS ME

It made me feel free because you could express yourself. It makes me a part of something.

—MAGS—



I developed such a love for *Loudspeaker*, being able to

### HELP OTHER WOMEN

on that journey. I've come out the other side of it feeling very different and very good.

—LEAH—



You have to

### LOOK & LISTEN

You have to get to know each individual and see them as an individual.

When you're in a position of having to accept lots of help, which is absolutely what you need to do sometimes, it was that feeling of getting a little bit of self-respect back.

—STEPHANIE—



It did put me

### BACK ON TRACK

because it made me realise that I wanted more. It just made me feel so much better about myself — that I had something to offer people.

—NIKKI—



**Peer mentors: the women who moved from being a participant on the Loudspeaker programme to helping deliver activity alongside our staff team, were crucial to its success. They provided practical support, facilitated trust and shaped ways of working that responded to lived experience. This report shares their experiences of the role and perceptions of what it offers.**

## **Loudspeaker**

Loudspeaker was a unique programme that used galleries and creativity to make a crucial difference in women's lives. Our ten-week programmes provided women with new experiences, a safe and welcoming space, support and social networks.

The women who were part of Loudspeaker faced challenges in relation to domestic abuse, drug and alcohol use, mental and physical health, homelessness, and experiences of the criminal justice system.

Loudspeaker offered opportunities for women to take time out, and develop confidence, resilience, motivation and routines through weekly sessions exploring and making contemporary art together. Women set personal goals and documented their learning and each programme culminated in a public exhibition of their artwork.

Being part of the programme helped women see things differently – including their own creativity and potential. It supported positive mental health and reduced isolation and moved women closer towards training, learning, volunteering and work.

The programme was delivered between 2013 – 2022, in partnership with a network of specialist support services. In that time, we developed a strong national and local reputation. Activities were devised and delivered by an Associate Artist, working alongside a mental health support worker and peer mentors.

## **Peer mentors**

15 women became peer mentors. They were essential in helping women feel at ease and in helping staff understand how sessions might be experienced. They were consultants, advocates, role models and team members.

Relationships with peer mentors were sustained, typically over a year. Evolving from being a regular participant to peer mentor, and for some to becoming a volunteer, a regular independent visitor and Nottingham Contemporary staff.

## Sharing women's voices

Nottingham Contemporary's learning and engagement work is at the heart of what we do. We want to share stories about our local impact, platform the voices and contribution of local people and partners.

With our incredible peer mentors, we conducted interviews and created a series of portraits to platform and celebrate them and their work. Interview findings are presented here, and a vinyl artwork is displayed in our lower lobby next to the café.

## Research findings

With four peer mentors we explored their experience of the programme and role, and their reflections on the impact on them and those around them.

- Being a peer mentor was an opportunity to develop new experiences and skills, but also to adopt a new role and for people to feel differently about themselves.
- Peer mentors grew in their abilities to see beyond their own circumstances through their work supporting others. They described helping others as the best way to help themselves.
- It increased their confidence and sense of self-respect and was a way of looking outwards, of feeling part of something and useful.
- Peer mentors had a strong sense of responsibility to the women joining the programme and a desire to 'give back' to Loudspeaker.
- Peer mentors excelled in the role despite initially questioning their own ability or readiness. They soon eased in and found that they were very good at it.
- Success was confirmed through positive feedback from others and their own observations and reflections.

- Positive feedback and experiences of success added to their skills and growing confidences and was described as validating and hugely rewarding.
- Once settled peer mentors described the experience as relaxing and natural.

The following themes also emerged:

- The importance of a sense of **comfort** and safety through support, creating the right environment and shared experiences
- The contribution of the role to redefining a positive **identity**
- The contribution of the role to a sense of **empowerment** through experiences of success and self-reflection on their own qualities and skills.

## Comfort

Women told us of the need to feel safe and comfortable to take part. They told us how welcomed they felt.

**‘It always felt like home here. Coming here just felt like my happy place. Coming to Loudspeaker every week just felt so comfortable.’ - Nikki**

The design of the programme was described as inclusive and supportive. Women spoke of the sensitivity to individual needs and identified support measures put in place to support access. Women recognised the thinking and care behind programme planning and the balance achieved between creating and extending comfort zones.

**‘You all created a very supportive environment, but also challenging in the right way to have a go at things.’ - Stephanie**

The work of the team and their commitment to the programme was also noted and contributed to people’s sense of safety and comfort.

**‘You put your all into it and you all enjoy it. You can see it in your faces and the way you act.’ – Mags**

Reflecting back, they remembered their own worries going into the first session, but also that those worries soon lifted and each week their confidence grew. When offered the peer mentor role, women felt they could apply this knowledge to support other women.

**‘As a participant the first day I was absolutely terrified. I hoped I could offer a bit of reassurance from having that understanding of what was going to happen.’ - Stephanie**

Knowing that women were there for similar reasons and being together with people with shared experiences added to a sense of safety and collective support. This space for women was described as rewarding and empowering.

**‘It was so rewarding being in women only spaces.’ – Leah**

A safe space for creativity and fun aside from the things that might be happening in their lives was hugely important.

**‘... a space that wasn't directly related to what was going on, but at the same time was very sensitive to what was going on. Yeah, it felt very safe.’ – Stephanie**

## **Identity**

Some women felt that art and creativity was a part of their identity and a part of themselves they wanted to get back.

**‘My life was just being an ill person. I wanted to get something I enjoy back.’ – Nikki**

Others felt creativity provided an important means of expression and a way to voice an identity.

**‘If you've been downtrodden you need at some point to say, this is me. It made me feel free because I could express myself.’ - Mags**

Being a peer mentor was an opportunity to develop new experiences and skills, but also to adopt a new role.

**‘I've never been like a manager and told people what to do. I've always been told what to do, so it was like a different role.’ - Mags**

It also a way to feel differently about yourself.

**‘Helping other people, it just made me feel so much better about myself. Like I had something to offer people.’ - Nikki**

All the women described helping others as a way, and the best way to help themselves. They said it increased their confidence and sense of self-respect. It was a way of looking outwards, of feeling part of something and useful.

**‘When you're in a position of having to accept help, which is, absolutely what you need to do sometimes, it was getting a little bit of self-respect back.’ - Stephanie**

Women accepted the peer mentor role because they believed the support experienced as participants would continue, and they felt in control. It was their choice. The women were determined to continue their journey with Loudspeaker.

**‘I wasn't going to shy away from it because by that point, I was like, I want to do something with my life. It put me back on track because it made me realise I wanted more.’ - Nikki**

The women wanted to continue to develop their confidence and sense of self.

**‘It made me determined to carry on doing something for myself that wasn't anything to do with that stuff that was going on and try to rediscover a bit of myself that was like lost.’ – Stephanie**

They were determined to do the role well and had a strong sense of responsibility to the women joining the programme and a desire to *give back* to Loudspeaker.

**‘I developed such a love for Loudspeaker that I wanted to help other women on that journey.’ – Leah**

## **Empowerment**

Peer mentors were critical to the success of the programme. They shaped plans to better respond to women's experiences, offered reassurance, facilitated trust and provided practical support.

Women accepted and excelled in the peer mentor role despite initially questioning their own ability or readiness. They soon eased into the role and found that they were very good at it.

**‘It was hugely validating because not only is this something I want, it seems like I'm a good fit.’ – Leah**

Being a peer mentor helped Leah recognise the contribution their own quieter more reflective qualities can make in support roles.

**‘The impact on people was a bit surprising to me because I was quieter. I’ve come to find out that’s a good quality to have as well.’ – Leah**

It also contributed to the achievement of a personal goal of worrying less and a discovery of increased enjoyment of social situations.

**‘Worries I was anticipating didn’t materialise. This gave me a bunch of positive experiences for doing things on my own initiative and a pile of evidence that I can do this thing.’ – Leah**

Once settled into the role, women described the experiencing of being a peer mentor as relaxing and natural.

**‘In some ways it felt quite natural. I just kind of tried to look and listen and perceive what people needed. I felt very comfortable.’  
- Stephanie**

Peer mentors observed the difference they were making on the women in the group and described this as rewarding and a validation of their work. The difference their work and the programme made to other women formed the highlights of their own journey and brought a sense of accomplishment.

**‘[Favourite moments] seeing somebody easing into a situation or watching their confidence grow over the weeks.’ – Stephanie**

Women described the role as coming at the right time. A virtuous circle of success in the role and positive feedback, both directly and through their own observations and reflections added to their skills and growing confidences.

**‘I’ve come out the other side of it feeling very different and very good.’ – Leah**

## **Future programming**

Due to changes in funding Loudspeaker has now ceased. We continue to use creativity to support health and wellbeing and are planning further women's focused programming. We're keen to connect with community partners and are exploring ways to develop peer mentor roles and programmes like Loudspeaker. Our current partnerships include Nottingham Women's Centre, Juno Women's Aid and Imara.



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