SPECIAL ISSUE ON ARTS AND JUSTICE
Edited by Sarah Armstrong and Kirsten Sams
Theatre • Music • Writing
Sculpture • Film • Architecture

ALSO
Richard Sparks and Kirstin Anderson on Inspiring Change
Angela Bartie and Alistair Fraser on the Easterhouse Project
Kath Murray on Stop and Search in Scotland
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“BUT WHAT ABOUT THE COMMUNITY?” I wailed, not for the first time, at another meeting of the national Arts and Criminal Justice Advisory Group in the very cultural environs of Creative Scotland’s HQ in Edinburgh.

I was delighted to be representing Scotland’s eight Community Justice Authorities (CJAs) in this newly strategic approach, and was more than impressed with the achievements of Inspiring Change and other prison initiatives (see Anderson and Sparks p5). But only a minority of people convicted are ever imprisoned: it is only part of the story.

There is no doubt that prisoners’ engagement with the arts can be life-changing, but like so much good work inside, there is such a disconnect when people walk through the gate. So you have sung in your prison choir, exhibited at the Koestler, completed drama workshops in custody but will your local community choir, art club or theatre group welcome you with open arms and are you brave enough to try?

If we agree that engagement in the arts reduces re-offending and that preventative spending works, wouldn’t we do better to focus arts investment earlier in the justice process?

The joint investment of £330K from Creative Scotland and the Big Lottery Fund in an ‘Arts and Criminal Justice in Communities’ fund was welcomed and a shared vision developed that:

- More community justice service providers offer arts activities for offenders, people at risk of offending and victims of crime, including young people.
- More arts programmes are integrated into community justice provision.
- Artists have increased awareness of community justice services and processes.

To be funded, initiatives had to be delivered in partnership with existing community justice service providers; strengthen community and family bonds; enhance through the gate provision (following people from prison to the outside); and/or create or strengthen links between existing arts and community provision and prisons.

So far, so good.

A pile of applications was received, but it was perhaps easier than we anticipated to identify proposals which met the ambition of this community justice fund.

We readily assume all things ‘justice’ are to do with police and courts and sheriffs and prisons. The idea that the community has a role in justice has been somewhat overshadowed. But we know that the biggest protective factors in both preventing offending and reducing reoffending are in our own homes and neighbourhoods, schools and community centres, colleges and workplaces. This is where both ‘community justice’, and ‘community arts’, have their heart.

The successful proposals ‘got’ this distinction between criminal justice and community justice, and put the community at the centre. They included a community-based arts studio for ex-prisoners; a restorative justice initiative involving the gifting of art work created by the responsible person to the person harmed; film-based storytelling; embedding an artist into a Whole System Approach for young people; a visual, storytelling-based community directory; and mapping referral pathways into community arts provision.

People living under the weight of negative labels have found new, productive talents and roles: for some, it’s the first time they have ever made anything

It was a privilege in writing this article to consult people working in some of these initiatives: quotations are from them.

Our discussions identified challenges in connecting-in a ‘non captive’ population:

“It has been very challenging. ... It’s really hard to get people to turn up consistently and to get people to engage [. . .] I think it’s really hard to achieve in the community to be honest. They have very chaotic and complicated lives, and added to that they might have economic and mental health problems or general health problems”.

COMMUNITY JUSTICE AND ARTS: CONNECTING PEOPLE

Justina Murray
Of course community integration is not just an issue for prison leavers but for all those excluded from communities through their crimes. Community-based arts activity can connect people with their geographical communities and communities of interest. For example new film-making skills gave a regular activist “a new way to have his voice heard” through filming local protests against the bedroom tax. This connected him and his colleagues into community activity and networks. Similarly the gifting of artwork to victims helped both individual and community healing in a remote rural community, where:

“One of the surprising things that came out of that was how well received it was – it has made a difference . . . It’s very powerful . . . The nature of a small community is that people talk, someone who’s received a gift will talk about it”.

Linking people into mainstream local arts activity is not easy, not least because “even if you signpost into the community, they are very unlikely to turn up, as most activity is very middle class”. Nonetheless several people had been linked into local theatre groups, community choirs, film-making courses and community projects. One initiative included a programme of supported cultural visits. Service users chose an Edinburgh Fringe show (involving their first ever visit to their capital, only a short train ride away): a “very difficult to watch” monologue piece about a woman awaiting sentence for infanticide and “they haven’t stopped talking about it, that was very powerful”.

Partnership working was identified as more naturally achieved in the community than custody, including opportunities for joint training and decision making, with further benefits:

“Partnership is the key to success of the project, and during the workshops all partners have to participate so that none of the young people can opt out . . .”

While it is still far from routine for artists to be integrated “into the mix” of wider justice teams, the benefits are clear for practitioners working with the hardest to reach. Rather than a luxury or ‘add on’, this can be a complementary resource where “each is valued equally”, giving practitioners new creative skills.

“It seems like a real expense, resource-wise, to have an artist and a social worker working alongside each other with a young person, but it needs that collaboration . . . An artist can start to generate an idea with a young person and can keep developing it and generating it to become a finished piece of work. Whereas the partner organisation […] can of course support the young person in other ways.”

A real depth of involvement was possible. For example, in the restorative initiative a young man diverted from prosecution worked for a year creating a garden bench for the people he had harmed. Similarly work was undertaken with the people harmed so both parties were ready to meet when the gift was made.

Creative approaches can reshape traditional justice relationships. When ‘Brushed Up Productions’ (a group of people serving Community Payback Orders) filmed an interview with Sheriff Lindsay Wood in Glasgow Sheriff Court, their difficult memories and experiences of court were replaced by “a very different experience”, with court staff taking them seriously in their creative roles and accommodating their production requests. The images of this professional group of film-makers hard at work in Sheriff Wood’s court, and the atmosphere of mutual respect provide powerful testimony.

Whilst it’s too early to say that these initiatives have reduced reoffending, there is little doubt that participants are “in the middle of a journey”, developing “a better frame of mind”, and even moving closer to a new and better life. With no guarantee of “stories of triumph over adversity”, participants are described for the first time as “animated”, “really proud”, “enjoying it”, “enthusiastic”, “connecting up to potential work and employment, developing skills”.

People living under the weight of negative labels have found new, productive talents and roles: “for some, it’s the first time they have ever made anything”. They are recognised as producing work of real artistic merit, and for the artist “she doesn’t know what their crimes are and it’s not important to her”.

“It’s one of the few activities that partners have managed to get young people to engage with. […] It could be seen to be a luxury to have an artist work individually or with a small group of people but nothing else has worked for this group to date.”

Looking ahead, many initiatives continue to be plagued by short-term funding, a focus on outputs not outcomes, and the common experience of funding ending just as things are flourishing. “More time” is a common request, as “follow-up is very important, but it gets forgotten”. Support for permanent coordinating roles was suggested, similar to the network of ‘Active Schools Coordinators’. These ‘cultural health visitors’ could play a valuable role in connecting people. Participants are confident that the programme is value for money and does work.

The focus of this Creative Scotland/ Big Lottery Fund investment on integrating arts initiatives with existing community-based services, partnerships and strategies is a key strength, and both investors should be congratulated for pursuing this more strategic and sustainable approach. But with the clock ticking quickly towards the end of this funding stream in March 2015, and the opportunities offered by the upcoming justice redesign, it is a good time for all of us to acknowledge the value of fully integrating and mainstreaming community arts within community justice.

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Brushed Up Productions’ films at: http://brushed-up-uk.tumblr.com/

Justina Murray is chief officer, South West Scotland CJA jmurrayswscja@north-ayrshire.gov.uk
We believe in the power of the arts to change and enrich our lives

Read Scotland’s multi award winning creative arts magazine by prisoners for prisoners.