

Octagon Theatre funded to continue ground breaking project for women in Bolton

Last year the Octagon Theatre piloted a theatre group for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and women from marginalised communities. The project now supported by the Bolton Transformation Fund will continue in Bolton for a further two years supporting innovation across health and care.

Working with partner organisations, City of Sanctuary and Bolton CVS, the project recruits women from the local community who will benefit from taking part in the project. The project targets women from across Bolton supporting people to be less socially isolated and improving people's access to local services, groups and activities.

The group works with facilitators from the Octagon Theatre to create pieces of theatre which will be performed at community venues. The sessions are structured to enable the women to have fun, be creative and experience the pleasure of creating drama as a collaborative process.

The Womens Group takes place in the Octagon space at the Market Place – through the funding the Octagon offers food and travel expenses to participants, significantly reducing the barriers facing asylum seekers and refugees to access the group.

Through the use of storytelling and music, the participants are enabled to develop their communications skills, particularly as most of them do not have English as a first language. From the pilot we found that the sense of connection with an audience and performing in public enabled the women to feel an increased sense of confidence and visibility in their local community.

A participant of the Women's Group said: "Everybody has gone through different experiences. They have come from different backgrounds, and to me that's touching because I think to myself life's short. One day you are here and the next day you may not be. And you know its people who you day to day interact with who make our lives worth living" (Focus group transcript, 2018).

Social isolation is a huge issue for refugees. Independent charity The Forum highlights "All our interviewees, regardless of the duration of their stay in the UK, stated that they have faced or they still face problems related to loneliness. More than half (58%) of them described loneliness and isolation as their biggest challenge."

The women we will be working with are living on very little money so lack the financial resource to engage in social activity. The women are often going through the demanding bureaucratic processes of seeking asylum. For them the Women's Group was an important lifeline. We have a core group of women who are reliant on the group but who have also developed the confidence to say how they would like the group to grow. The group runs weekly and is currently open to new participants.

To find out more about the participation programme at the Octagon, or to enquire about taking part in the Women's Group visit <https://octagonbolton.co.uk/get-involved/> or email Participation@octagonbolton.co.uk

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For interview and other press requests please contact **Rachael Norris** on rachael.norris@octagonbolton.co.uk or call 01204 556505

Notes to Editors:

Octagon Theatre Bolton is a regional producing theatre with the belief that theatre can enrich communities and fundamentally change peoples' lives for the better. It aims to do this through creating a range of entertaining and thought-provoking theatre of the highest quality that inspires and ignites the curiosity of the people of Bolton and beyond. As well as providing opportunities for learning and participation to enable people to realise their potential, express themselves and to help them fly.

Bolton CVS is a charitable company which exists to support voluntary and community organisations and positively promote voluntary action in Bolton.

Social Media: **Twitter:** @octagontheatre | **Facebook** / OctagonBolton | **Instagram** @octagontheatre

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