



The Crypt at Newcastle Cathedral will host the Story Chair in September.

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Pioneering North East programme ready for national launch

The learning from a unique programme, supported by the North East Probation Service and designed to help women accessing the criminal justice system, is ready to be rolled out nationally following successful delivery across the region.

Story Chair - a collaboration between national charity [Changing Lives](#) and Northumbria University - has been facilitated over the last 12 months and involved more than 50 women across Newcastle, Ashington, North Tyneside

and Sunderland taking part in an eight-week programme.

Through a series of workshops, the women involved with the programme explored story-telling techniques, enabling them to tell their own story and take control of their own narratives moving forward. The programme also explored how arts and cultural venues feel for the women and how they could be made more welcoming for those who might not feel represented there.☒☒☒

Speaking about the course, one woman, said: “It’s a safe space. You can be safe here which is a good thing, especially for women like us who have suffered from domestic violence and other trauma.”

Another added: “We’ve talked in depth about really major things in our lives and then we can still have a laugh and be joyful.”

Although the programme looked at the seven different ways to tell a story, the first session, titled ‘Overcoming the Monster’ proved to resonate the most with the women.

“Sadly, the majority of the women were referencing the monster as being an ex-partner”, said Dawn Harrison, Changing Lives Service Manager for Criminal Justice, Northumbria.

Dawn, who created the programme in partnership with Dr Angelika Strohmayer from Northumbria University, continued: “All of the women used words such as ‘restricting’ and ‘consuming’ and the colours of the fabric chosen in their work were dark with many layers. Some had huge eyes but no other facial features. It was always a very powerful session.”

Speaking about the learning taken from the programme, [Dr Strohmayer](#), an interdisciplinary researcher based at [Northumbria School of Design](#), said: “Throughout the programme, women crafted alongside us, creating spaces for difficult conversations in a safe way. An important lesson for me was how the women were encouraged to express their thoughts, emotions and experiences in alternative and hopeful ways, on their own terms.

“We have spent time together literally crafting infrastructures of inclusion

which we hope will be embraced and adopted by arts, cultural, heritage and community venues.

“Informed by direct experience, we have developed a toolkit and are currently building a website where organisations will be able to download informative resources to support their own work on inclusivity and creative service delivery.”

Following completion of the programme, a physical story-telling chair composed of the women’s artwork, is currently being built and will be used across the country to open up conversations with cultural venues about what they can do to make their spaces more inclusive.☒☒

Crafted using wood donated by the National Trust’s Gibside Estate after one of its giant Oak Trees was pulled down in a storm, the Story Chair will be unveiled during a launch event at Newcastle Cathedral this September.

“The crypt within Newcastle Cathedral plays an integral part in the journey as this is where the Story Chair programme was born”, said Dawn.

“Historically a small room which would have been used for people to come and say goodbye to the dead, following an invitation to visit the cathedral, the women were particularly taken with the idea of having a space to leave behind something, such as an old narrative which was no longer true or useful.

“The Cathedral responded by investing in the space and welcoming the women to bring the chair back to continue its journey, a very clear statement which reinforces the Cathedral’s ‘radical welcome’ and ensures the women’s stories are welcome there.”

She continued: “We hope the launch event will support people to lean into sometimes difficult conversations about representation. The women supported by Changing Lives have every right to have their stories heard and should be supported to actively engage in their own history making.”

Seaton Delaval Hall - a National Trust Grade I listed country house in Northumberland - will be the first venue to host the chair once it leaves the Cathedral, and staff will be offered training on how to deliver the toolkit,

which has been developed as a result of the programme, in a creative and responsive way.

The project has also been supported by funding from The British Academy - the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences – and chosen to be presented at their Summer Showcase in London at the end of June.

The Summer Showcase is an annual festival of Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts for People and the Economy (SHAPE) research and ideas. This year it will be condensed into one jam-packed day of pop-up talks, performances, film screenings, panel discussions, roundtables and workshops. Dr Strohmayer will be leading a workshop with Dawn titled *Crafting Inclusion: Using Creative Materials to Talk About Difficult Topics*, drawing on this research into inclusion policies in arts and heritage venues and service delivery for criminal justice support organisations.

Organisations wishing to take part or host the Chair should get in touch directly on the following emails:

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About Changing Lives

Changing Lives is a nationwide charity helping people facing challenging times make positive change - for good.

The charity supports over 14,000 people annually through 100+ schemes, stretching from Northumberland to Merseyside and now London. Changing Lives is dedicated to supporting people to reach their potential, including addiction and recovery programmes, employment guidance, help for people in prison or on probation, and support for people experiencing sexual exploitation and domestic abuse.

By focusing on their strengths, potential and opportunities, Changing Lives helps people overcome their challenges and live safe, successful, independent lives. Changing Lives is the operating name of The Cyrenians.

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Northumbria University is a research-intensive university that unlocks potential for all, changing lives regionally, nationally and internationally. Based in the heart of Newcastle upon Tyne, which is regularly voted the best place in the UK for students, Northumbria was named UK University of the Year 2022 in the Times Higher Education Awards.

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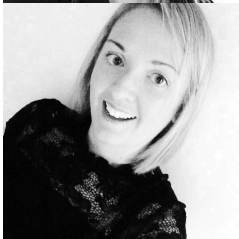


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