

Theatre as a Route to Policymaking

A short guide to forum theatre and legislative theatre as a method of civic engagement, and the way they have been used across health humanities and creative health.



Theatre has long been used to tell stories about health, illness and care. Forum theatre and legislative theatre go a step further. They invite audiences, including people with lived experience and decision-makers, to step into the action, test new ideas and turn them into proposals for change. This guide introduces both methods and shares examples from practitioners and researchers working across creative health and the health humanities. It sits alongside the more traditional routes to policy covered elsewhere in this resource bank and is written for practitioners from across health and culture, researchers, members of the public, and policymakers, alike.

What are forum theatre and legislative theatre?

Both methods were developed by the Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal (see Boal 1998, 2000, 2002 or 2003 for more information).

In forum theatre, a short play shows a character trying, and failing, to get what they need. The barrier they face stands for a wider structural problem. The scene is then replayed, and audience members are invited to step in, take a character's place and try out a different approach. The aim is to understand the problem and rehearse ways of challenging it ([Lovatt et al., 2026](#)).

Legislative theatre grew out of Boal's time as a city councillor in Rio de Janeiro in the 1990s, when he used theatre with communities to develop proposals for new laws ([Nunes, 2025](#)). In the UK, it is now seen as part of a wider set of participatory democracy tools, alongside citizens' assemblies, participatory budgeting, deliberative polling and community forums.

The People Act ([n.d.b](#)) describes legislative theatre in four stages:

- **Watch:** community members create and perform an original play based on their lived experience and participatory research.
- **Act:** audience members come on stage to improvise alternatives, testing new rules and policies in real time.
- **Propose:** the audience, advocates and policymakers shape these ideas into specific proposals, then debate and amend them.
- **Vote:** everyone present votes, and policymakers and advocates commit to action – 'using theatre to spark concrete change'.

The main difference between the two methods is what happens at the end. Forum theatre explores a problem and rehearses ways to tackle it. Legislative theatre adds a formal step in which ideas become written proposals, are put to a vote, and are taken forward by the decision-makers in the room.

“Legislative Theatre, is an innovative, inclusive, and joyful participatory democracy methodology that directly challenges injustices in governments and institutions, bringing residents, policymakers, and advocates together into creative dialogue and offering a rigorous testing space for equitable, human-centred policy and practice.”

– Katy Rubin, Director, The People Act ([Homeless Link, n.d.](#))

Why consider theatre as a route to policy?

Legislative theatre places lived experience at the centre of policy development and changes the dynamic of the room. Matt Peacock, Co-Director of Arts & Homelessness International, describes how council staff and people with experience of homelessness build trust while making a play together. They see a problem from each other’s side, and the process builds the confidence people need to put their ideas forward. Follow-up is also built in. For example, in Coventry and Haringey, the cast stayed together as a scrutiny group to hold decision-makers to their commitments ([Peacock, 2022](#)).

“People nearest the pain are often nearest the solution.”

– Matt Peacock MBE, Co-Director, Arts & Homelessness International ([2022](#))

There is also a clear link to health. Samra Said, Arts & Homelessness International Co-Director, argues that co-creating policy matters most in areas such as housing and health, where decisions have long-term effects on wellbeing ([Said, 2026](#)). In a recent open-access book chapter, Peacock draws on creative health evidence, including work brought together by NCCH, to argue that arts and creativity should be a recognised part of homelessness prevention and recovery rather than a “nice to have” ([Peacock, 2026](#)). There, he notes that, in legislative theatre, using creativity to facilitate collaboration between people with lived experience and policymakers creates new ways of looking at old problems, producing policies that are new and innovative.

“Although the power divide between communities and decision-makers is still too great, Legislative Theatre and other lived-experience-led initiatives in the sector are showing that participatory democracy is not only more equitable, but also more effective.”

– Samra Said, Co-Director, Arts & Homelessness International ([2026](#))

Legislative theatre in practice

Tony Cealy - CAMHS Reimagined, Lambeth

[Tony Cealy](#) is a Brixton-based theatre practitioner and cultural producer who has used forum theatre for more than two decades in criminal justice, community, health and social care settings. In 2024 he led [CAMHS Reimagined](#), bringing together children and young people, parents, teachers, health professionals, youth workers, CAMHS staff and local councillors to explore racial prejudice, professional bias and long waits in child and adolescent mental health services.

Two legislative theatre performances led to recommendations, including extra support for young people while they wait for help. They also led to a new touring performance, *The Black Mental Health Manifesto*, building towards a parliamentary lobbying campaign. The main challenge was keeping in touch with policymakers and frontline staff after the event ([The People Act, n.d.a](#)). Tony draws on creative health tools such as the [Creative Health Quality Framework](#) (Cealy, n.d.a), and talks about his approach on the [Creative Health Stories podcast](#).

“As a theatre practitioner and cultural producer, I’m passionate about developing policy solutions alongside people most affected by them.”

– Tony Cealy, theatre practitioner and cultural producer ([n.d.b](#))

Small World Theatre - Amethyst, Wales

In West Wales, [Small World Theatre](#) partnered with Ffynnon Community Resilience (Ffynnon) and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to work with parents and guardians of young people with mental health issues across Pembrokeshire, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire. Funded by the Carer Support Innovation Fund and Arts Council Wales, the group turned their experiences into an online legislative theatre performance, exploring the rules and systems of mental health services in the region (Small World Theatre, n.d.).

The performance took place online on 18th March 2022 for an audience of policymakers, care professionals and others with an interest in the system. Breakout sessions followed, giving the audience space to respond to the issues raised and share ideas for building a better system. The project sat within *Amethyst* – Small World Theatre’s wider programme which used creative activities to support young people’s mental health and wellbeing (Small World Theatre, n.d.).

The People Act and Arts & Homelessness International, nationwide

[The People Act](#) is a hub for legislative theatre and creative civic practice, launched in 2024 by practitioner Katy Rubin. Katy has spent more than a decade developing legislative theatre across the US and UK. She is a Senior Fellow with People Powered and a Senior Atlantic Fellow at LSE, and her work with Greater Manchester Combined Authority won the International Observatory of Participatory Democracy’s 2022 award for Best Practice in Citizen Participation ([Atlantic Fellows for Social and Economic Equity, n.d.](#)).

[Arts & Homelessness International](#) organise exchanges and events with the arts and homelessness community to strengthen ties, share knowledge, generate resources, and advocate for the importance of the arts in the context of homelessness. The organisation is co-directed by Matt Peacock MBE, who founded Streetwise Opera in 2002, and Samra Said, who has co-ordinated and co-designed local government legislative theatre projects since 2020. Half of Arts & Homelessness International's board and staff have lived experience of homelessness.

Evidence of Impact

The People Act has designed more than 20 legislative theatre processes in the UK and internationally – some of which were delivered in collaboration with Arts & Homelessness International. Its *Legislative Theatre Policy Impacts* summary ([The People Act, 2025](#)) records changes to policy and practice, including:

- **Greater Manchester Combined Authority (2021):** a homelessness prevention strategy addressing failing drug recovery services and sanctions affecting people with mental health conditions. It created management-level co-production roles for people with lived experience, introduced trauma-informed training led by people with lived experience, and secured national *Changing Futures* funding.
- **Haringey Council (2022–23):** a rough sleeping strategy that reopened a 20-bed night shelter, introduced trauma-informed training for council staff, and embedded arts and creativity across all homelessness provision.
- **Trussell Trust (2022–24):** contributed to the Renters' Rights Bill, which ends section 21 “no fault” evictions.
- **Greater Manchester Moving (2023):** tackling harassment of women and girls (and its impact on reduced active travel and exercise). Outcomes included active bystander training for all transport staff and a public campaign on trams and buses.
- **Housing Rights, Northern Ireland (2024–25):** homelessness among women experiencing domestic abuse. Outcomes included a domestic abuse experts pilot in Northern Ireland Housing Executive offices and enhanced police training.

“Every step of the process, and every scene we co-created, made an impact on us as participants and actors, and then on decision-makers and policy in Northern Ireland [...] Those experiences that nearly broke me were used for change. It gave my pain purpose. Legislative Theatre shows that co-creation can lead to real-life change.”

– Satania Rowland-Miller, Participant, Belfast, Northern Ireland ([Said, 2026](#))

Arts & Homelessness International has partnered with The People Act on legislative theatre with Coventry, Haringey and Medway councils, each leading to a new co-created homelessness strategy, and with Housing Rights in Northern Ireland ([Arts & Homelessness International, n.d.a](#)). With funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Arts & Homelessness International is now running nine more legislative theatre projects up to 2028 and is inviting councils and other

bodies, including Integrated Care Boards, to take part ([Arts & Homelessness International, n.d.b](#)).

To find out more about Arts & Homelessness International's previous Legislative theatre projects and policy reports, visit: <https://artshomelessint.com/what-we-do/advocacy/legislative-theatre/>

The People Act also produces a range of useful [resources](#), including their [video explainer](#), [case studies](#), and their contribution to [People Powered's Participation Playbook](#).

Forum theatre in research

Professor Melanie Lovatt - Reimagining the Future in Older Age, Online

Researchers from the University of Stirling worked with Edinburgh-based theatre company, [Active Inquiry](#), and nine self-identified older people to devise [two Forum Theatre pieces](#) that challenged ageist narratives and offered alternatives. They performed live on Zoom in June 2021 to 153 people. The team found that forum theatre helped participants and audiences see how ageism works in everyday life and rehearse ways to challenge it. They also noted limits, such as the group being largely white and middle class, and audiences often being aware of ageism already ([Lovatt et al., 2026](#)).

"On the [Reimagining the Future in Older Age](#) project we used Forum Theatre as a way to involve older people in challenging dominant and reductive narratives about older age. Our premise was that if there were too few cultural resources from which to draw on in thinking about how we wanted our future ageing selves to be, then we had to create our own.

Film-maker [Ray Bird](#) made a [documentary](#) about the project which we circulated – along with other resources including a creative toolkit – on social media and sent to relevant organisations. Professor Donald Macaskill, Chief Executive of [Scottish Care](#), which represents the largest group of social care providers across Scotland, invited us to showcase the project at the 2022 Scottish Care conference and praised the project in his keynote speech:

'I hope...you have had the chance to drop by the stall ... from the University of Stirling and have learned more about the project [Reimagining the Future of Older Age](#). They have done some brilliant work including producing a gorgeous film...[that] challenges the dominant stereotype and cultural narrative which presents older age as nothing to do with the future...'

The following year I was invited back to the conference as a keynote speaker and presented the project to an audience comprising over 450 attendees of the Scottish care sector, with other keynotes including the Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing & Sport from the Scottish Government, and the Chief Officer of Public Health Scotland."

– Professor Melanie Lovatt, University of Stirling

The film, creative toolkit and recordings of the Forum Theatre performances 'Waiting for Dot' and 'Return to Wonderland' are all available on the project website:

<https://reimaginingthefutureinolderage.stir.ac.uk/>

University of Birmingham - Addressing health inequalities in maternity care, Birmingham

Researchers at the Institute for Research into Superdiversity (IRiS), University of Birmingham, and the [Community Interest Research Centre](#), led by Dr Lisa Goodson with Dr Marisol Reyes Soto, have worked with community researchers who are migrants to explore migrant women's experiences of maternity care in Birmingham.

In June 2026, at Healing Arts Birmingham - a creative health festival run by Birmingham City Council, in collaboration with Jameel Arts & Health Lab - the team performed their forum theatre piece at Midland Metropolitan University Hospital to hospital professionals, public health teams, and other creative health strategists and advocates ([Carpenter, 2026](#)). The play challenged audience members to critically reflect on service inadequacies, such as NHS translators restricting communication, doctors not referring to medical notes from a woman's previous country, and appointments being marked as "missed" by receptionists whilst women waited in appointment rooms for hours¹. The forum theatre piece was co-created with community researchers, who joined the audience in small group discussions before people were invited to step into the performance as one of the characters. The method helped audiences to explore issues of care, power and inequality, and how practice and systems might respond.

"I witnessed the vital role Community Researchers play in gathering powerful, real-life stories from migrant women about their experiences with maternity care in the UK – voices that are too often unheard yet essential for driving reform.

When I experienced the power of Forum Theatre firsthand [...] I saw how theatre can break barriers, spark dialogue, and empower communities to co-produce a Maternity Charter that truly reflects the richness of superdiverse areas."

– Sipuwe Takura, Community Researcher ([Community Interest Research Centre, n.d.](#))

Critical considerations

Theatre can bring new voices and ideas into policymaking, but there are critical considerations which can shape whether the outputs of legislative and forum theatre are legitimised and actioned by decision-makers.

Empathy for systems partners

Council officers and health professionals often work within rules, budgets and national policies they cannot change themselves. Matt Peacock notes that the process works best when council staff see how frustrating the system is to navigate, and people with lived experience see that

¹ Based on observations by Dr Jane Hearst, who attended the performance at Midland Metropolitan University Hospital as part of Healing Arts Birmingham in June 2026.

staff are often trying to help within inflexible rules (Peacock, 2022). If systems partners feel cast as villains, or pressured on stage into commitments they cannot deliver, they are less likely to treat the outcomes as legitimate or to follow them through.

How agreement is measured

People do not always say what they think in front of others, particularly where power is unequal or the room holds a clear majority view. Timur Kuran calls this “preference falsification”: people publicly support a view they do not privately hold, often to protect themselves (Kuran, 1995). For people who rely on the services being discussed, going along with the room may be a survival instinct. A show of hands can therefore make agreement look stronger than it is, which can weaken decision-makers’ confidence in the result. Anonymous or digital voting, and smaller group discussions before a vote, can make the outcome more credible.

Realistic proposals

“More funding” is often the most obvious answer to the problems shown on stage, but it is rarely within the gift of the people in the room. Proposals are more likely to be actioned when audiences consider what could change with existing resources, and what would need to be given up to pay for something new. Weighing up this “opportunity cost” helps turn ideas into commitments decision-makers can act on.

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