

A man with tattoos on his arms, wearing a blue long-sleeved shirt, a tan baseball cap, and black work boots, is bent over a long wooden plank on a workbench. He is using a hand saw to cut the wood. In the background, there is a window and a teal power tool on the floor.

up **men**

Promoting positive mental health
through creativity and connection

Final Report

Oct 2021

RESTOKE
ORG.UK

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Introduction

Following the success of Restoke's performance project 'Man Up' in 2018, the company identified a strong desire and a vital need to continue exploring the theme of masculinity and mental health in participatory and creative ways. Many of the men who had spent a year in the co-development and delivery of 'Man Up' were determined to retain the bonds of friendship and creativity that had formed during the project. The Up Men, as they called themselves, were further buoyed by the powerful feedback from audience members, who expressed their gratitude and hopes that many more people would get to experience what they had just seen.

The resulting Up Men programme is steered by 5 self-selected participants from the Man Up project, who meet regularly on a voluntary basis, to discuss the programme's content as it develops.

In this report we summarise activity carried out during the second year of the planned programme, from April 2020-April 2021.

www.upmen.co.uk



up **men** Adapting to the challenges of Lockdown

We had anticipated that the second year of the Up Men programme would be developed in response to the successes of the first year, but with pandemic lockdown measures coming into force from March 2020, our full second year of activity largely had to be adapted for online delivery.

Rather than continuing to try out new and untested programme ideas in this limiting format, we placed emphasis on sustaining the successful elements of the programme so far, so that regular attendees could keep well connected on a regular basis online in the absence of in-person meet-ups.

up **men** Year 2 at a Glance

The Year 2 Programme included:

24

Up Men Sing sessions
with an average of

attendees per session.

18

Up Men Write sessions
with an average of

attendees per session.

2

Guest Workshops

New members

3

Up Men Podcast Episodes
reaching an audience of

103

people.

10

8

4



up **men sing**

March 2020- April 2021

The final Up Men Sing session before the March 2020 lockdown was our busiest yet, with 25 in people in the room. After a couple of months in lockdown feeling optimistic that we'd be back in the rehearsal room in no time, the reality of the situation became clear and we migrated Up Men Sing sessions online.

These online sessions were an opportunity to catch up, check in, and explore some familiar songs as well as new ones. However, singing in unison, as we usually do, wasn't possible in a live online setting.

To overcome this we each used guide recordings and sung whilst muted. So even though we couldn't hear each other, we could still enjoy the songs in good company. This meant that the sessions still provided a space for members to enjoy singing and continue to feel connected to each other.

On average, 10 people checked in regularly to the fortnightly online singing sessions, which we ran between May 2020 and April 2021.

"I live by myself and seeing fellow members of the Up Men- their friendly faces and voices- bridged a difficult time."

up **men** Activities

Guest Workshops

One benefit to online delivery was that it suddenly became easier to program guest workshops. The group pitched their ideas, and we found there was consensus in the group that exploring vocal warm up techniques would be useful. So we programmed a guest workshop from singer & composer [Verity Standen](#), which focused on vocal technique and useful vocal warm-up exercises.



Up Men Sing participation- Year 2

24

fortnightly sessions were delivered online.

16

participants took part in the sessions.

2

participants joined Up Men Sing for the first time.

As we reconvene to sing in person, Up Men Sing are looking forward to performing together at the end of 2021.

The guiding principles of Up Men Sing have clearly been cause for inspiration, and we recently started a new mixed-voice singing group based on the same principles, attracting 30 new participants.

up men Write

In the Autumn of 2020 we hosted 'What Now?' a series of 4 in-person creative writing sessions. The sessions were led by Jamie Thrasivoulou, who facilitated sessions and performed in the Restoke performance Man Up in 2018.

The workshops were designed to help the Up Men process what had happened in 2020, and face the many unknowns about the future. The workshops were an opportunity to collectively and creatively reflect, process and reimagine what a future might look like- asking *What is important now? What do we want to change?* and *What is in our control?*

Jamie guided participants through writing tasks, using these questions as starting points, with built-in opportunities to share and perform what they had written.

Soon after these initial workshops, we migrated to a longer-term series of workshops that were hosted on Zoom. These continued through to summer 2021.

"There are too many bits of writing and funny moments to mention, but everyone was cool, and the whole space, and openness and brotherly love, was both important for me personally during some volatile and hard winter months.

A shame I never got to meet you guys, at least not yet anyway.."



Guest Workshops

In 2020, Poet [Bohdan Piasecki](#), was delivering a residency in partnership with the Keele Institute for Social Inclusion at Keele University, where he was researching the subject of vulnerability. We were able to programme a workshop with Bohdan, in which he introduced the Up Men to some new and exciting writing techniques.

Regular attendee of the writing sessions Paul Forrester, penned his reflections on participating in the writing sessions and shared some of his creative writing on the word 'summit' on his [blog](#):

“We are not heads of state and nobody will change anything based on what we said or wrote, but still it felt like a summit; an ascent to creativity to remind us of what can be achieved when people commune, share, listen and explore what the events of the year have meant individually”.

- Paul Forrester, Up Man.

18

sessions were delivered.

8

participants took part in the sessions.

2

participants joined Up Men Write for the first time.



“During our sessions with Jamie we did countless exercises and one that I did was ‘The Mighty Dash’. We’ve all got the dash in our lives and it’s up to us to make it as full and positive as possible.” - David Dobson

The Mighty Dash

By David Dobson

Dash O Dash, you have been there from the birth of time.

Dash, you saw the Earth and the Stars being born.

Dash O Wonderful Dash, you’ve witnessed the Dinosaurs come and go.

Dash, in a speck of time you’ve witnessed Man reach for a distant Star.

O Little Mighty Dash, you know every language of Man and Beast.

O Small Mighty Dash, you know all that we do.

But, alas Minute, Mighty, Dash, Very few people know You.

Dash O Dash, it’s clear that when people open their eyes they will see You.

Dash You mark time from Birth to Depart and You, Dash, can be seen on their Stone.

1944 (dash) 2022.

The Mighty Dash Has So Many Facts To Tell.

For more on David Dobson, see his Case Study on page 16



up **men** Podcast

Even before the pandemic, the Up Men steering group had an ongoing interest in podcasting. Whilst much of the world readjusted to online living it seemed like a good opportunity to share, in the form a podcast series, some of the stories of people taking part in arts activity for positive mental health.

Over Winter 2020-2021 we held a series of conversations between arts practitioners and participants who were all engaging in arts activity with an acknowledgment that doing so was good for their mental health.

The aim was to produce a series of podcasts which celebrated the experiences of people engaging in the arts and to further promote a few of the free-to-access arts opportunities and support services available in Stoke-on-Trent.

We published abridged edits of these conversations as podcasts which can be heard [here](#).

Episodes

Singing – with Up Men

A conversation with Paul from Restoke and Up Men Jack and Sam, about Up Men Sing - a male voice choir who've been meeting every fortnight since Summer 2019; in which talking about mental health is as much a priority as learning a song.

Writing – with Up Men

In this episode Up Man Rob talks to poet Jamie Thrasivoulou and participant, Tony, who took part in a series of creating writing workshops called 'What Now?'. This was an Up Men project that offered an opportunity to process the events of 2020 and plan for an uncertain future.

Clay Sessions - with BCB & Stoke

Recovery

In this episode Up Men visit Jo Mills from the British Ceramics Biennial (BCB) and Wayne and Daz at the ReCast group- a collaboration between the BCB and Stoke Recovery Service. They discuss clay, addiction and recovery.



up **men** at The Ballroom

Restoring the Ballroom at Fenton Town Hall

At Restoke we had always planned to prioritise finding and moving into our own workspace in 2020. And as the potential for in person project work fell away, we found ourselves having more time on our hands to realise this ambition. In October 2020 we took on the challenge of restoring the Ballroom at Fenton Town Hall and turning this hidden gem into our workspace and community arts venue. As of September 2021 we will call it home until at least 2031.

“During a period where it was difficult to get out and about, socialise, keep active and maintain a sense of usefulness, I felt very fortunate to get so hands on with the restoration project. When restrictions allowed, many of the Up Men mucked in and gave their time, skills and support in driving the project towards completion...”

“Having spent the last 10 years exploring some of our city’s historic community buildings and learning how our communities even built some of them, It feels good to be doing something similar in the present and bringing into being a space where the community can enjoy some of the things that bring us together, and to celebrate the things we love about ourselves and each other. The Up Men volunteers can truly lay claim to this space, which will serve the community for years to come” Paul - Restoke Co-director



Background

Joe has spent much of the last 5 years traveling, and in April 2020, due to the pandemic, found himself traveling back from India to live briefly in Leek in the Staffordshire Moorlands. It was from here that Joe joined the Up Men programme entirely remotely, having never had the opportunity to meet the group in person.

At the end of 2020, Joe was feeling low, and someone he knew recommended the Up Men programme to him.

"I guess I've been in and out of depression since I was at university."
Says Joe *"I've just accepted it and been muddling through. I knew it would be good for me, going into the winter, to get involved in something like this."*

Finding Up Men Sing

"There was something there that resonated with me, so I jumped right on it. It was a combination of having the opportunity to develop my singing, the fact that it was an organised group, having had someone I knew recommend it, and that it was free...."

I hadn't done any Zooms for the whole of the lockdown- but when this came up I thought it was time to give it a try."

Participating Remotely

Joe describes the experience of Up Men Sing online as *"nice, exotic, and pretty unexpected to be singing these Georgian, really crazy and really beautiful songs that are almost impossible to pick up quickly."* But, being on Zoom, *"it was only ever a fraction of the experience of what it would be like to sing together."*

However, there were some benefits to joining Up Men Sing at a time of remote delivery...

"You're all in the same position, it's not like I'm in a room and I can see some people really getting into it while I'm feeling shy- there's no danger of that... I also found it really easy to listen to Paul's guidance and tuition on the vocal arrangements and get into the technical side of it."

Joe left Leek for Cumbria just before Christmas 2020, expecting that to be the end of his involvement with Up Men. But he found that the remote activity online meant he could stay involved.

"In my new County everything's miles away- I'm miles away from other people, and I don't want to have to drive long distances to take part in something, considering the economic and environmental costs. So I found that having sessions online with people I already knew was helpful. It's something that should be considered by charities in terms of engagement moving forward."

Up Men Write

After attending his first Up Men Sing session online, Joe was invited to the Up Men Write workshops 'What Now?' led by Jamie Thrasivoulou.

"It was great. Just to meet, learn the really important basics of writing and share your stuff- it was really good value. The best thing about it was thinking 'shall I share something or not?' and then sharing it, and feeling glad that I did. Being able to complement each other and give each other feedback made it feel like a proper group. I attended almost every writing session during that time."

Joe talks about some of the ways that the Up Men programme helped him through the pandemic...

"Lockdown was (hopefully) a unique situation; Being in an alien environment inside our own homes, but Up Men was something that really anchored me. Every week or two weeks it was something to look forward to. It really gave me a boost. It gave me the opportunity to talk to people, be creative, and for us to support each other. Lockdown was pretty grim at times. I don't know what I'd have done without it to be honest."

The Future for Up Men Write and Joe

As beneficial as the sessions were, Joe thinks that there is scope for further development in the writing group, and would like to explore working towards tangible outcomes to give the group more focus and momentum.

"Some of the members have talked about compiling our writing and publishing it in some way, which would be great. Having an end goal is really important. However, I also kind of liked the relaxed nature of it- the fact that I could just turn up and write. I think having the goal of trying to produce something that I wanted to share, that was probably enough for me actually."

As Up Men delivery gets back to in person sessions, Joe is thinking about how he can continue to include group creativity in his life in Cumbria.

"I really believe in it, it's a really positive thing. If I can't find it I'd like to try and raise some money for Restoke to get something off the ground. I could see myself facilitating the sessions with professionals brought in to lead workshops."

Joe has recently got back involved with Up Men Write, which continues to be hosted online. If and when he can, Joe plans to visit the Ballroom, meet Paul and the rest of the group, and possibly perform some of his own music there in the future.

"I hope they make the most of this amazing opportunity with the Ballroom, make that a really great hub for the community, and expand- slowly and steadily."

up men Case Study

David Dobson

Background

David describes himself as an *“independent Odd Bod”*, having grown up feeling out of step with his peers and society at large. He was born in a remote rural cottage in mid Staffordshire, *“with no running water or flushing toilets... and hens and pigs for play mates.”* It wasn't until he moved house at the age of 6 that he was exposed to other children.

“I had problems integrating into what we classify as schooling, at the age of eleven I was still a non reader and a very long way from being a team sports player... It wasn't recognised in those days, but now I would have been classified as dyslexic. Despite this, and my stubborn nature, I kept persevering. Even these days if things are not logical I have problems with them.”

David's first encounter with Up Men was at the Haka workshop back in 2019, in which he found himself very much at ease interacting with who he describes as his *“fellow Odd Bods”*. Following this experience, David joined Up Men Sing and felt like he'd found his place.

“With the direction of Paul Rogerson I felt like a hand in a comfortable glove”

David feels that he has benefited from all the activities offered by Up Men, and has also found it to be a valuable interpersonal learning experience.

“My first major lesson was not to be judgmental of others. We all have our journeys in life and many stormy times.”



David- Front row, 2nd from left at the Up Men Haka Workshop, 2019.

Up Men in Lockdown

During the lockdown, Up Men encouraged David to try his hand at what he regards as his *“weakest link”*- writing. He joined the ‘What Now?’ series of workshops piloted by Jamie Thrasivoulou.

“this truly has been an amazing adventure into the unknown... I must admit I found these initially very daunting- working side by side with fellow members that eat dictionaries for breakfast.”

But the guidance and encouragement he received built his confidence.

“No matter what I entered after a ten minute freestyle writing, Jamie was never negative but the opposite, he’s a true ambassador for writing.”

“The building of self esteem via the writing Workshops for me cannot be measured, it’s been humbling and exciting to have seen the standards of my fellow writers and their interpretation of the topics set.”

The Ballroom

When Restoke needed extra pairs of hands to help renovate the Ballroom, David was one of the first Up Men to volunteer to help.

“Due to being retired and God bless in good health, I’m now in the position to give time to the things that I see fit to support.... Paul, in the most polite of ways, asked for help with decorating/painting. I offered my limited skills... as a little way of saying ‘Thank You’ for helping me.”

David reflects on the help that he considers Up Men to provide, for him and fellow members...

“On this hurting World where the majority of men are very introverted and do not express their inner feelings, when you ask them ‘how are you?’ They simply say ‘I’m fine, nothing is wrong with me’, but deep down they’re often carrying deep scars due to what is or had happened in their lives. The Up Men sessions have and do give men the opportunity to express their inner feelings in a non judgmental environment, as and when they feel fit to do so.”

up **men** Steering Group

By the end of this programme, we had originally planned to work towards handing over the programming of Up Men to the steering group, with the support of Restoke to secure further funding. As 2020 proved difficult to keep things progressing according to plan, Restoke took the lead on sustaining regular activity. Now that we're returning to in-person sessions and continue to move towards a greater level of normalcy, we plan to meet as a steering group to reflect on the programme and discuss its future.

Support from the National Lottery Community Fund has allowed us to establish that there is an appetite for arts activity aimed at men, and that arts activity can have positive impacts on our mental health.

Singing and writing sessions for men will continue to be a part of Restoke's core offer at the Ballroom.

Acknowledgments

We really must thank the rich network of local arts and voluntary organisations who we have partnered with on this program so far, along with our local media outlets; online; in print; and on the radio.

Partnerships

Keele University
Keele Institute for Social Inclusion
Ambassador Theatre Group
North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust
Stoke Sings
Stoke-on-Trent City Council Departments:
- Adult Social Care
- Health Integration & Wellbeing
- Loneliness Strategic Partnership
- Community Development Manager

Funders and Collaborators

National Lottery Community Fund
Thomas Deane Trust
Toa Haka Workshops Sol
New Art Club
Mental Health First Aid England
Alice Thatcher & the British Ceramics Biennial
Keele Arts

Awards

Epic Award- Peer Award for Excellence for the Up Men's part in Man Up. Sept 2019. Issued by Creative Lives.

Press

<https://www.visitstoke.co.uk/whats-on/up-men-sing-p1137251>

<https://www.babababoon.co.uk/whats-on/united-kingdom/staffordshire/stoke-on-trent-1/free/up-men-sing/>

<https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/stoke-on-trent-news/were-here-doing-something-positive-3021043>

Broadcast and Publications

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FStJgRdlbkc>

<https://open.spotify.com/show/6F6gGOaLlZqYh2P1BhOQiA?si=9LoafkwqSAOy4g7oXuzUhg>

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