



THE CRISIS AVERTED JOURNEY

In 2018, SAVVY met with the Arts Co-Ordinator from Crisis Skylight, Croydon to discuss possible engagement opportunities for their service users.

They already had a weekly drama group meeting at Crisis, with the aim of developing confidence, however their plan was to move people out of homelessness and relying on their services.

SAVVY had just announced our imminent move into our new studio home at Fairfield Halls, so our initial meeting was to explore a potential partnership project, to see if there were pathways for their members, into accessing our services.

Our journey of working with Crisis from 2018 to 2021 has helped us to clearly define and illustrate our successful model

of engagement, which has informed our way of working throughout our various programmes.

Firstly we had to acknowledge the high-level of support the participants needed, including:

- general social anxieties
- past history of homelessness
- ongoing issues regarding substance abuse
- support with personal care issues / lack of available clothes washing facilities
- poor diet / lack of food
- limited social support network

Therefore it was decided that the first level of engagement would be inviting the core group (who were already accessing regular weekly sessions at Crisis) to watch the SAVVY Pantomime (which was performed by an inclusive community cast from across our membership).

We worked closely with Crisis on the risk assessment, pre-show tours to meet with the facilitators who would be working with them in the new year, and we also invited the group to meet with the cast prior to the show (some were even invited onstage to take part in the audience participation sections of the show).

This was their first introduction to SAVVY and the feedback from the group and Crisis staff was all very positive, noting that it gave the group something to look forward to in the new year.

SAVVY provided two free taster workshops for this core group of 10 in February 2019, at the Crisis Skylight venue on Surrey Street in Croydon. It was a small art studio space, and it was imperative that we provided what we call a 'Safe Seat' drama workshops i.e. games that can be done while sitting down, that don't put anyone on the spot with no danger of 'failure', can be accessed and adapted for any level of

engagement, but overall, are fun and provide a sense of achievement.

Arts Council funding was then secured for a 12-month project, starting in May 2019. The main aims were to:

- continue developing their drama skills and relationship with SAVVY
- facilitate the move of their established weekly group at Crisis Skylight to our studio at Fairfield Halls
- explore whether there was scope for some members to move into our already established weekly Take Part programme

It was imperative that our studio became a 'safe space' for them, so managing the move became paramount. We were also working towards their first public showcase, with a short performance as part of our planned SAVVY Studio launch event in October 2019.

From May – July we continue to host our weekly sessions with the group at Crisis Skylight which was a space and time they knew and it allowed us to introduce new ideas and theatre conventions – primarily Full-Face Mask work. We decided to use mask for their planned showcase as there is an instant gratification and achievement when creating with them, it takes away the 'need to speak/be funny/be heard'. However there is also the freedom to have non-masked characters should any actors prefer.

From September we started meet the group at Crisis, before walking with them up to Fairfield Halls and our new studio space.

We continued rehearsals in the space, introduced them to the lighting state and audience layout and worked closely to mitigate any potential anxieties.

It is important also to note, that all of this was supported by the Arts Co-Ordinator at Crisis Skylight. She held all contact information on members, was responsible for risk-assessments, safeguarding, and was their first point of contact should any issues arise.

Our launch event took place on 16th October 2019, with performances from across our weekly groups, however it was the newly self-named Crisis Averted company that stole the show!



From then on, they made their own way to our SAVVY Studio at Fairfield Halls for weekly rehearsals (still accompanied by the Arts Co-Ordinator from Crisis), saw our 2019 Christmas production of Treasure Island, and started working towards what was going to be their first solo production in March 2020.

Then the pandemic hit!

Although one of the original aims of the project, was to explore whether members could be amalgamated into any of our existing groups, it was clear, that they were developing their own group identity. We had already been in discussion with Crisis about the possibility of SAVVY taking over the management of group and what would be needed in terms of support – suddenly, with the impact of the global pandemic and the country in lockdown, the need to keep the group together, provide pastoral care and a weekly (online) vehicle for communication and creativity was vital.

We created a WhatsApp group chat for members to maintain communication throughout the week, developed programmes of work through Google Classroom and met members each week at their regular session time, albeit on Zoom!

It was during the first lockdown that management of the group was also ‘handed over’ from Crisis to SAVVY and this began with a number of open conversations with Crisis on member support. In addition to our required application forms, we also employed an additional drama assistant, and it was decided that one member in particular could only continue attending if their keyworker was on hand to support each week.

Creatively during the pandemic the Crisis Averted group took part in the National ImagiNation Festival hosted by Theatre Centre (their work was even chosen for the final online festival), created a Dragons Den prequel for our Jack & the Beanstalk panto (which they performed at the Ashcroft Theatre in July 2021), and they started developing their Grimms Season play ... entitled “The Real Housewives of Grimm County” (that finally premiered January 2022 in our Studio at Fairfield Halls).

Of the original core group of 10, we have managed to keep 7 and now, our engagement model is being used to

help bridge the gap with organisations including Mind and InMind to provide potential new members with the steps needed to join us. We are also hoping to return to Crisis Skylight and start work with a new core group there too.



“It was great to see the performance of Crisis Averted on Saturday. I have supported a number of members in the group, and it is wonderful to see what great confidence and

skills they have developed. I was so impressed with their professional performances, and the enjoyment they get from taking part in the group. It is so important for people to have a sense of a community, particularly as they move on from Crisis and it's really great to see they have achieved this with Crisis Averted."

— Jo Keil Wellbeing Coordinator, Crisis Skylight Croydon ,
Jan 2022



"The partnership between SAVVY Theatre and Crisis Skylight Croydon has been hugely successful for our ex-members who have found a home for their creativity with Sheree Vickers and her team. The 10 members who participated in the project were on a 'move on' pathway out of our Crisis service and had shown commitment to drama whilst taking part in the outreach and in house classes at our centre, where we provide a range of holistic support, learning, housing, and wellbeing services to homeless adults

in Croydon. The aim of the partnership was to help our members to increase their self- confidence; to build trust and connections with others, and to help improve their overall feeling of wellbeing as they moved away from homelessness to more permanent sustainable accommodation.

It was clear from seeing their performance (Saturday 22 January 2022 in the SAVVY Theatre Studio, Fairfield Halls) that the group has formed into a creative and inclusive ensemble of individuals who have grown immensely in confidence and trust in each other. It was a joyful and moving experience to watch them work together. Their use of space, connection to each other and work with the audience were all striking features of their devised show 'The Real Housewives of Grimm County'. All of this along with Savvy's trademark professional production values and stagecraft made it a really special event.

After the show, one ex-Crisis member told me that he is now doing psychology at college, is deeply engaged with his recovery journey out of alcoholism and that the creative outlet at SAVVY Theatre keeps him well. He says he feels his life is 'in balance'. I think this really says it all about the project, and I hope that our two organisations can come together again to help end the crushing isolation of those we work with and bring them into supportive, compassionate, and creative communities like those formed in fun and friendship at SAVVY Theatre Company."

— Denise Keane , Arts Coordinator, Crisis Skylight
Croydon Jan 2022