

# BEYOND A JOKE

Comedy and social change in the UK



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By Sam Beale, supported by Unbound Philanthropy, 2025

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To celebrate and advocate live comedy as a tool for positive social change, *Beyond A Joke* explores how comedy initiatives are building communities, reducing social exclusion and improving mental health, and examines the effectiveness of using humour as part of social justice campaigns.

The report features projects and organisations currently working in the sector, to identify existing good practice, and considers opportunities for expansion and key challenges for the field. It is divided into three themed areas, highlighting the principal ways that comedy and collective laughter can be catalysed for social change: **comedy and community; comedy, recovery and resilience; comedy and campaigning.**



Illustrative examples are loosely gathered under these themes with some crossovers. To support the report's interpretative overview of the field, each section includes the insights and reflections of comedy creators, and providers and participants of ongoing projects. These identify current applications and impacts of comedy for social change practices and the skills, methods and approaches this work requires.

Following is a summary of the key insights of the report under each themed area.

## Comedy and Community

**This section** identifies the ways comedy can be used in community contexts to increase social inclusion and reduce isolation and loneliness. It considers:

- projects which support **diverse comic voices** and recognise the importance of representation as a driver of social change, focusing on the value of comedy as an enjoyable and empowering way for marginalised or minoritised groups to tell their stories. Project participants include, for example, those from migrant and refugee backgrounds and people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

*Theatre in the Mill,  
comedy workshop*



- the growing potential of comedy for social change to foster **community cohesion** and **cross-cultural dialogue** in increasingly divided communities. This can be characterised as **collective sensemaking**, as participants are brought together through workshops and events to use humour and comedy to share and process their experiences and differences.
- performance nights and events which create their own **comedy communities**. These are examples of collectives carving out comedy spaces for themselves – taking hold of the mic, the arguments, and the power comedy has – to shift the conversation and the narrative. They include disabled-led events, POC and queer-led nights, and culture and faith-based comedy gigs and tours.

The candour of shared laughter can play a pivotal role in opening dialogue about difficult subjects and casting new light on challenging or polarising issues.

## Comedy, recovery and resilience

**This section** foregrounds initiatives applying comedy and humour to improve mental health, wellbeing and resilience. Central to this work are the impacts on participants' mental health, including improved self-esteem and self-confidence as they connect socially, develop their comic voices, and reframe their experiences *as* comedy. Case studies demonstrate that:

- comedy workshops are an accessible context enabling people to share their stories in a structured but relaxed environment and use humour to **reframe past experiences**. This can be transformative as part of mental health recovery.
- due to comedy's popular appeal in the UK, such initiatives can **engage traditionally hard-to-reach groups**, for example young people at risk of exclusion from schools, and men with suicidal ideation. As they laugh together, these comedy-led projects can build participants' confidence; enable them to move in and out of anxiety states within a supportive environment; and develop transferrable presentation and communication skills.

*Bright Sparks, Comedy Asylum show*





- reflecting the successes of such programmes and ongoing research in this area, there is growing support for **socially prescribed comedy** to be included across the UK as part of existing NHS creative health and social prescription programmes. Results of recent trials reveal measurable improvements for participants.



## Comedy and Campaigning

*Palestine Comedy Club workshop*

**This section** considers how campaign organisations can use comedy in their public engagement campaigns to influence attitudes, behaviour and policy, and reflects on some approaches socially engaged comedians use in their acts. It demonstrates that:

- comedy is increasingly being used by campaigners to counteract the fatalism that often accompanies issues-based communications strategies.
- recent scholarly research and creative campaigns exploring the persuasive potential of comedy to capture audiences' interest in climate campaigns have recorded positive outcomes.
- comic licence allows comedians to engage in open communication with their audiences around serious issues. As stand-up comedy is often autobiographical, comedians directly addressing, for example, the climate crisis in their acts can connect with audiences using 'shared vulnerabilities' including personal dilemmas, fears and flaws.

**This kind of comedy is a tool of resistance in the struggle over who has a cultural voice and who doesn't.**

## Summary of conclusions and recommendations

The report concludes that comedy for social change projects positively impact individual lives and can offer alternative ways for communities to think about, accept and potentially live more positively with difference. Furthermore, for participants, learning comedy writing and performance skills, finding your individual comic voice and the act of reframing past experiences as comedy, is an empowering and transformative experience which has significant measurable outcomes on mental health and wellbeing. For socially engaged audiences,

as comedians tackle serious subjects in their acts, shared laughter can be simultaneously challenging and restorative.

Highlighting these impacts across the themed areas, the report recommends the following measures to ensure sustainability and growth within the sector:

- the **recognition of comedy as an art form** in government policy and strategy – to ensure the sector is considered at policy level alongside theatre, music and dance, and to allow facilitators, organisations and comedians to access funding streams currently unavailable to them.
- the funding of **further research** into the mental health/ wellbeing and social/community impacts of comedy-led participatory projects and events.
- the creation of **training programmes** for comedy for social change facilitators, including **mentoring and support opportunities** for comedy creators/facilitators from marginalised backgrounds or communities.
- the establishment of a sustainable **comedy for social change network**, bringing together comedy creators, researchers, facilitators, mental health professionals, and social change makers. This will build on existing networks and research and encourage the sharing of good practice, resources and training materials.
- investment in **socially prescribed comedy** as part of the broader NHS creative health and social prescribing programme.

We all know how essential humour and laughter are in our everyday lives and interactions with each other. However, as a tool for social transformation we have not yet fully harnessed the power of comedy to positively change lives and strengthen community connections. This report suggests ways this can be achieved.



*Ro Dodgson,  
Head Held High*

Because of the  
imaginative  
freedoms  
it offers, as  
we laugh –  
as well as  
disturbing our  
understanding  
of the world  
as it is –  
comedy can  
also point us  
to alternative  
ways to think,  
behave  
and live.



# INTRODUCTION

“A joke implies that anything is possible.”

Mary Douglas

This report considers how live comedy can be used to create social change. The term ‘comedy for social change’ is used here to refer to a diverse set of initiatives including the creation of performances, spaces, events and participatory projects which foreground humour and comedy to progress social, racial and environmental justice. This work has been loosely divided under the following themes:

- **Comedy and Community:** comedy which fosters community cohesion, reduces social exclusion and empowers marginalised communities to tell their own stories – and their own jokes.
- **Comedy, resilience and recovery:** projects exploring the therapeutic potential of comedy and harnessing its benefits for improving mental health and wellbeing.
- **Comedy and campaigning:** comedy which advocates, informs and entertains around issues of social, racial and environmental justice.

The reflections and recommendations offered here are inspired by interviews with comedy creators, participants and facilitators of existing projects, health professionals, and campaigners. An initial overview of the relationship between comedy and social change drawing on primary research and desk research informs observations about the notable impacts of ongoing examples of good practice, and suggestions for future opportunities to strategically support and expand the sector.

Throughout the report ‘comedy’ refers predominantly to live comedy performances, comedy events, and participatory projects – reflecting the live sector’s particular set of challenges and potential relating to community engagement and social justice. Most initiatives featured predominantly use stand-up comedy practices, although some also embrace storytelling, sketch comedy, improvisation, poetry and musical comedy.

Liveness is key, although this sometimes includes ‘live’ online workshops which increase audience reach, accessibility and inclusion. Humorous online content shared via social media platforms is

Comedy can  
create rare  
moments of  
solidarity and  
connection that  
we all seek in our  
daily lives.

undoubtedly part of the growing comedy ecosystem and a few pertinent examples are mentioned here, but only as they relate directly to live comedy and comedians.

Humour and jokes can, of course, reinforce negative stereotypes, emphasise difference and exacerbate community divisions. However, this report exclusively features the uses of comedy as a positive agent for change, to promote social justice and improve the lives of individuals and communities. As such, it focusses unapologetically on progressive rather than disparaging or derogatory comedy.



Marena Riyad

The concept of 'change' is used here to refer to the practical application of comedy with intent to move beyond a joke and *do* something – for participants, audiences and wider communities. As the case studies featured in this report demonstrate, this may be comedy *as* change i.e. projects which create tangible impacts through active participation; or comedy *for* change i.e. comedy that seeks to spark conversation, shift attitudes or influence behaviour and policy.

*Beyond A Joke* seeks to establish that comedy is already achieving significant positive impacts. Indeed, some of the individuals and projects included here have been working in the sector for several decades. However, until now, it has been a largely unrecognised and loosely configured field offering few opportunities for practitioners to connect with each other, share successes, or collectively seek development opportunities.

This overview includes excerpts of interviews with practitioners and participants from selected projects running throughout the UK, but what is offered here is, necessarily, only a snapshot. The focus is on comedy for performance, leading to the inevitable exclusion of significant related fields of practice, for example, [laughter therapy](#). Similarly, some popular types of comedy performance are mentioned only in passing, e.g. comedy improvisation. Links to a few established examples in areas not covered are included at the end of the report. However, the list is far from exhaustive: apologies if your project is not mentioned.

This report is for those who create comedy; those who value it and believe in the power of collective laughter to positively influence our lives and communities; and those who are inspired by the possibility of becoming part of this nascent network by funding or otherwise supporting its evolution in the UK.

Who has  
hold of the  
microphone;  
whose  
perspectives,  
voices, and  
jokes are we  
hearing?  
In other  
words, who  
has the  
narrative  
power?

# MAPPING COMEDY FOR CHANGE

The contribution of humour and comedy to the cultural and social life of the UK is well established. Successive [IPSOS Mori polls](#) place a sense of humour as a one of the shared ‘national characteristics’ that British people most highly value. Comedy is an influential force in British popular culture, at home and abroad; live and screen comedy have long been among the UK’s most successful cultural exports, and the economic value of the comedy industry is significant and growing. In 2024, a report on the first comprehensive survey of the live comedy sector [The UK Live Comedy Sector Survey \(LCSS\)](#) estimated the total annual turnover for live stand-up comedy at over £1 billion.



*Selam Amare, No Direction Home*

## Current UK live comedy context

Live comedy sits in a unique place within the UK creative industries, and within the comedy ecosystem which now encompasses a dizzying array of content across audio (traditional radio and podcasts), online platforms, streaming services, and terrestrial television.

The live comedy event is distinctive in that it provides real-time, in-person connection. Such immediacy means that comedians can, as they always have, respond topically, locally and very specifically to a given time, space and audience. Even in the digital age, this ‘for one night only’ unpredictability remains central to the enduring appeal of live comedy for audiences.

There are now added opportunities – or pressures – on comedians to embrace online platforms and cultivate a consistently funny digital presence, and social media has become intrinsic to comedy marketing and distribution strategies. However, despite the world becoming accustomed to virtual events and experiences during the lockdowns of 2020-21, post-covid a renewed value has been placed on in-person shared experiences. As industry professionals regularly argue, the live comedy event – laughing together in one physical space – remains key to unlocking the full collective comedy experience. The live gig persists as the cornerstone of most comedians’ work and livelihoods, giving them regular access to audiences in towns and cities all around the UK, and perhaps unprecedented insights into UK communities’ shifting concerns and attitudes.

**“Comedy doesn’t  
change things.  
Comedy changes  
people. People  
change things”**

Sara Taksler,  
former producer,  
*The Daily Show*



## Comedy and community

To observe that political debate in the UK is ‘polarised’ is now worryingly cliché. Comedians routinely find themselves at the centre of online controversies, including arguments about accountability, freedom of speech, and the contentious notion of ‘cancellation’. Some comedy clubs maintain reputations as aggressive, male-dominated environments – typified by audience members’ continued reluctance to sit in the front row of a comedy gig, for fear of being singled out. In some cases, this caution remains justified with a few clubs building their success on such ‘bear-pit’ reputations.

However, this has never been the only way to perform or enjoy comedy: most comedians, and most regular comedy nights seek to bring people together, not to separate them, and this combative reputation belies the collective joy that is so often achieved in spaces dedicated to sharing laughter. The clubs, events and projects featured here are committed to using comedy to create rare moments of solidarity and connection that we all seek in our daily lives. Through humour we can both unite *and* challenge each other. If someone makes us laugh, we are more open to ideas that we might otherwise find uncomfortable, and more inclined to accept difficult truths.

Live comedy has always been a DIY cultural enterprise. In essence requiring only a room with enough space for a performer, a microphone, a light and some seats for an audience, it is relatively cheap to stage. As the Comedy and Community section reveals, in response to a lack of inclusivity on the mainstream comedy circuit, an increasing number of comedy nights have emerged to give stage time to comedians from marginalised communities.

Comedy clubs and comedians are often engaged in community events and causes. The report on the 2024 [LCSS](#) estimated that 80% of comedy venues regularly raise money for charity or host benefits, and more than half are regularly involved in local community projects. Indeed, comedy benefits are well established as effective fund raisers for charities, social justice campaigns and humanitarian emergencies (although their success often relies on comedians being willing to donate their fees or perform for free).

Many projects outlined in the report are local and user-led, and comedians and facilitators often work within communities they know or with groups whose experiences they share. Local accessibility is key, and many comedy venues and organisations are aware of their contributions to community cohesion and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of individuals in their areas.

**“Comedy is not only a significant contributor to the night time economy but also a cornerstone of creativity and community cohesion.”**

Michael Kill,  
CEO Night Time  
Industries  
Association

## Comedy and representation

Diversity on comedy line-ups has improved in many parts of the UK over the last two decades, as organisations including [Funny Women](#) have successfully campaigned for mixed bills. However, concerns remain around representation, inclusivity and safety, and comedians from economically poorer backgrounds and those from other marginalised communities continue to struggle to make a living in the industry. As Dr Sharon Lockyer, Director of the [Centre for Comedy Studies Research \(CCSR\)](#) at Brunel University told the [Department of Culture, Media and Sport \(DCMS\) state of play committee meeting on live comedy](#) in April 2025: “The playing field is not level or accessible to all groups in society.”

Central to an understanding of these challenges are questions about who has hold of the microphone; whose perspectives, voices, and jokes are we hearing? In other words, who has the narrative power? In their 2025 TEDxLondon presentation on internal biases and comedy, [why you think women aren't funny](#), comedian and drag king Jodie Mitchell/John Travula observed that “the more women and trans-masculine and non-binary people take up space, the more... perceptions are questioned and the more things will change.” This is an argument for both visibility and the unsettling of existing power dynamics in the live comedy sector and within the UK more generally, to ensure that performers with diverse experiences and backgrounds make comedy about their personal experiences and give audiences new perspectives, drawing their attention to social injustices, and offering them a fuller picture of contemporary UK society.



*Jodie Mitchell / John Travula*

## Comedy, policy and recognition

In the last few years there has been a shift among comedy professionals, researchers, and socially engaged arts organisations towards further recognition of the significance of the live comedy sector and its many contributions to British society.

[The Live Comedy Association \(LCA\)](#) was formed in 2020, initially to advocate for the sector during the pandemic. Since then, the organisation has continued to campaign for increased government support and to create a network for this fragmented industry. Comedy remains a precarious form of employment, and while opportunities to earn a good living from stand-up comedy may have increased for the highest earners as the commercial industry has grown, pay stagnation over decades was highlighted by many comedians in the 2024 [LCSS](#). Henry Palmer, founder of [The People's Comedy](#), notes in [Chortle](#): “I see a systemic reliance

on unpaid labour and precarious working conditions – the free gigs, the ‘bringer’ shows, and the ‘pay-to-plays’ – that actively burn out talented people.”

For the LCA and its partners at the Centre for Comedy Studies Research (CCSR), the current priority is for comedy to be recognised in arts policy, strategy documents and discussions about the creative industries alongside theatre, music and dance. Sharon Lockyer hopes that: “The legacy of adding the word comedy into policy and political debate will filter through to arts organisations’ understanding... which would then open up opportunities for comedians and comedy organisations to have access to funding, which they don’t have at the moment.”

Following the DCMS State of Play session on comedy in April 2025, the chair of the committee [reflected in a letter](#) to the then Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism, that:

*“The potential for live comedy to be part of a wider conversation about creative health adds to the need for its recognition as a distinct art form by policymakers. We plan to return to the issue of creative health in the coming months, to consider what more DCMS, the Department for Health and Social Care and other Government departments can do.”*

This also points to ongoing [campaigning and trials](#) to expand the current NHS social prescribing provision to include Comedy-on-Prescription®. As the [Comedy, resilience and recovery section](#) reveals, the work of projects and organisations applying comedy in community contexts around the UK for improved mental health, wellbeing and resilience is highly effective and this sector deserves enhanced recognition, government support and funding.



Diana Sweity  
Credit: Charlotte Knowles



# COMEDY AND COMMUNITY

“Through the blurring and blending of voices in collective laughter, the sound of equity is achieved.”

Edith Turner

As part of a comedy audience, people participate in a collective response to the ideas, stories and jokes being shared from the stage. In this way, at its best, comedy provides a uniquely interactive experience through which often quite complex social, cultural and political entanglements – including some of the most divisive issues of our time – can be leant into with good humour and honesty.

As the projects outlined below reveal, comedy can also be harnessed by people from marginalised or minoritised communities as they come together to share, process, and reframe their experiences, finding consolation and hope through communal laughter. Often the most significant impacts of this work in terms of community building are achieved by simply giving comedians a stage and a microphone to connect with audiences, tell stories and look through a comic lens at their daily lives.

This kind of comedy is a tool of resistance in the struggle over who has a cultural voice and who doesn't. As a form of autobiographical storytelling, stand-up gives control of the narrative to whoever has the microphone and although it is usually a solo performance, it is always a conversation. This fosters connection and a kind of collective 'sensemaking' through which comedians find humour in life's contradictions, in our common dilemmas, our vulnerabilities and flaws, our anxieties and our hopes. And, because of the imaginative freedoms it offers, as we laugh – as well as disturbing our understanding of the world as it is – comedy can also point us to alternative ways to think, behave and live.

## Comedy as cross-cultural dialogue

Since 2018, through [Counterpoints Arts' No Direction Home project](#), migrants and refugees living in the UK have been offering audiences insights into their experiences of migration and the UK asylum system. No Direction Home (NDH) is a stand-up comedy programme for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds living in the UK to learn stand-up techniques and

“One day I was on a tube, and a woman came and asked me: ‘are you Octavia Spencer?’ I said: ‘no, who is Octavia Spencer?’ She said: ‘an American actress.’ She thought she was helping me, but I wasn't happy – Octavia Spencer is worth \$14m! So, I told her: ‘when you see Octavia Spencer, tell her that she looks like an asylum seeker from Coventry!’”

Loraine Mponela,  
comedy set

perform comedy at gigs alongside professional comedians. For Loraine Mponela, a refugee from Malawi, through comedy:

*"We have a chance to tell who we are ourselves, instead of just hearing people saying things about us which are not true. **Here** is the truth. This is what you believe. But actually, here is **my** truth."*

As it is in the disturbance of our expectations that so many great laughs lie, comedy can very effectively remind us of our internal biases and push back against reductive (mis)representations of migrants and people from other marginalised communities. And, while limiting negative stereotypes undoubtedly persist, comedians can confront these directly in their acts as they simultaneously show audiences both the flawed, clichéd image of the stereotype *and* the real person it is supposed to represent.

No Direction Home comedian and live events producer, [Selam Amare](#), often starts her comedy performances by asking her audience – in a strong Ethiopian accent – if they know anything about Ethiopia. She then ‘helpfully’ sings the title line of the Live Aid song ‘Feed The World’ and says “That’s me! I’ve been fed. Thank you England!” before switching to her natural London accent and revealing she was born in Sweden: “Yes. This is what we look like now. It’s global warming!” Selam makes productive use of a tired and problematic stereotype – not as self-deprecation – but by playfully reversing its familiar intentions. By addressing their audiences’ assumptions head on, these performers demonstrate how shared laughter can contribute to cross-cultural dialogue, upending our fixed ideas about what any individual is or can be.

For Sam Avery of [The Comedy Trust](#) who since 2002 have used comedy to work with a wide range community groups in Liverpool and the North West of England, the purpose of these projects is clear: “When we start dehumanising each other, that’s a bad road we don’t want to go down as a society... So, for groups that people label in a certain way, it gives people within those groups a voice – and a memorable voice, an engaging voice, a *funny* voice – to talk about their experiences.”

Comedian and facilitator [Jojo Sutherland](#) knows from in her work with people experiencing or at risk of homelessness that “somebody who’s in crisis hasn’t got the tools or the energy or the confidence to go back into society, so they need help, and they need healing.” She notes the impact of connecting through humour in local community spaces where she runs workshops, sharing her personal stories of using comedy to overcome very difficult life experiences: “It can be somewhere to go and someone to talk to that isn’t a doctor, that isn’t a therapist...”



*“Laughter is the best. It’s a form of joy. You come back differently because you’ve made people laugh. It’s instant community... connections are made with the people that you never knew you would connect with.”*

Loraine Mponela

where other people's success of getting through hardship is reflected back." For the participants she has worked with: "Once you lift that veil of shame... I think it does give you a strength and resilience and just a release from constantly feeling like shit."

## Comedy as community

The community created during programmes of workshops, and the value of connecting with people who directly share your experiences is significant. For NDH comedians, who have experienced displacement or been through the UK asylum system, former participant and workshop facilitator Yasmeen Audisho Ghrawi observes: "It's a very genuine expression of joy and coming together and it does create a community. It's a bubble of breath, that's what it is."

**Theatre in the Mill** in Bradford runs regular **comedy workshops** for women and non-binary participants from a diverse mix of backgrounds and ages in the Bradford area.

Senior Producer at Theatre in the Mill, Ayza Akhtar notes that the workshops create a supportive community, offering space for participants from different cultures to share their thoughts about issues "that they maybe wouldn't end up sharing on stage, but just amongst themselves." Sometimes participants share "more traumatic interactions they might have had, microaggressions, or things like that. And so, they are getting to sort of exorcise all of that. And, in some cases, that does even transform into jokes."



"Whether it's  
working in  
prisons, working  
with people  
who are elderly  
or isolated or  
marginalised  
or migrants...  
everybody  
laughs  
in the same  
language."

Jojo Sutherland

## SELECTED PROJECTS

### Comedy in Ruins

Launched in 2024 by comedian Emily Bampton, Comedy in Ruins is a monthly, queer and POC-led comedy night based in Walthamstow, London. Tickets are available on a tiered 'pay what you can' system.

### Funny Women

Founded by Lynne Parker in 2002, Funny Women is "the leading female comedy community, helping women to perform, write and do business with humour." The organisation campaigns, runs courses and advocates for women in comedy and is best known for the Funny Women awards which has become a launchpad for the careers of many comedy headliners.

### Comedy Workshops at Theatre in the Mill

Founded at Theatre in the Mill in 2015 as The Women's Comedy Workshop by academic and facilitator **Natalie Diddams** as part of a research project exploring empowering women through comedy. It has since grown into regular series, currently led by comedian Seeta Wrightson, and attracts women and non-binary participants from a diverse mix of backgrounds and ages in the Bradford area.

### Laff-Uccino

Usman Khalid, founder of social enterprise Haven Coffee, and former No Direction Home participant now runs his own regular comedy gigs Laff-Uccino and Comedy Frothers. Laff-Uccino offers gigs and workshops for new comedians as well as running events featuring well-known headliners.



As they learn to write and perform comedy, participants “aren’t trying to speak to stereotype.” Instead:

*“People’s jokes are very rooted in their experiences. So, they will be telling jokes about their Punjabi parents, or about going to church being really important in their community, and then someone else talks about being Muslim and hijabi, and I think because people are honest and specific that, everyone’s really receptive, and just looking for the funny.”*

Ayza believes it is important for diasporic artists to be specific in this way about their experiences “because when you generalise, you actually become less relatable.” She has observed that developing material for comedy encourages this kind of specificity:

*“All that’s being asked of them is to find funny in their lives and I think there’s something a little bit free about the way that comedians are brought into that craft, because you have to excavate so much of yourself to achieve the craft, and then that’s celebrated.”*

## Laughter, resistance and joy

Sam Judd founder of [You Can Laugh, You Know](#), a disabled-led comedy night in Leeds, believes that comedy enables us to lean into difficult truths, rather than avoiding them. Writer, comedian, filmmaker and “believer that the greatest way to create positive change is through creative expression”, Sam is also a wheelchair user who speaks through a communication device he controls with infrared eye-tracking glasses. He believes: “Laughter is universal and healing. It’s you taking control of the worst thing that happened to you.” For him: “You can laugh, You know, particularly, has really helped me see that I’m just as valuable as anyone else, and I have something unique to say.”

Sam’s experience suggests that creating comedy can be about sharing joy despite a personal history of hardship and, as refugee from wars first in Iraq and then Lebanon, Yasmeen Audisho Ghrawi of NDH observes, it also offers the opportunity to *generate* joy as an act of resistance:

*“Asserting a right to experience joy, express joy and share joy is an act of resistance because you’re saying: I shall not be consumed entirely by the horrors. I insist to remember that I’m human through joy and through laughter. This is what coming together in these moments is. There is power in that because we’re saying we are human, we are still capable of experiencing joy, of generating joy.”*



**“Stereotypes  
are formed  
because people  
don’t listen.  
We make  
them listen.”**

Sam Judd

This idea is echoed in the work of [Palestine Comedy Club \(PalCom\)](#), a UK-based collaborative project which facilitates workshops and supports Palestinian comedians to write and develop comedy and stage their work inside and outside of Palestine. For [Alaa Shehada](#) actor and comedian and co-founder/co-artistic director of PalCom, Palestinians telling their stories through comedy is powerful:

*"It is good to celebrate our culture, our laughter, and be proud of it. The only way you hear about Palestinians is if they are killed or their lands are stolen. But it's good to put our comedy on the stage so that people outside of Palestine see that this is part of our community, that this culture has a street life, we laugh and make fun and joke with each other."*

## By us, for everyone: comedy and diversity

Comedy clubs and regular nights around the country create their own communities and some seek to establish inclusive 'alternative' spaces for comedians and their audiences. Often, they emerge in response to the restrictions of the mainstream comedy circuit, for example the continuing reluctance of some venues to regularly book acts from marginalised communities. In addition, performers increasingly want to create their own nights because of negative experiences on the circuit:

*"I don't want to get up and talk about myself in front of a bunch of drunk men who don't care what I have to say, even if it's funny."* Emily Bampton

[Emily Bampton](#) curates and hosts [Comedy In Ruins](#) a comedy night in Walthamstow, London, in association with Oxford collective [Undercover Comedy](#). She prioritises booking people of colour and queer comedians because, as a performer, it is harder to "bend yourself" to the tastes of the mainstream if you are marginalised in multiple ways – so for her and other performer-producers, the future is: "that sense of just wanting to get on and do it themselves."

This aspect of the contemporary live comedy scene is essential in terms of championing emerging talent from diverse groups and giving newer acts the opportunity to perform regularly and develop their skills. Such nights can provide a welcoming sense of community and perhaps a different experience to mainstream clubs which some people may feel excluded from. Emily notes that Comedy in Ruins has built a community of



Emily Bampton

*"No one's trying to apologise for their culturally specific jokes, and no one's trying to over-explain themselves or censor themselves."*

Ayza Akhtar

regulars who appreciate both the comedy and the atmosphere. She unapologetically observes that “it might just not be for some people”, though she is keen to stress that everyone is welcome: this is comedy “by us, for everyone.”

For James Ross, founder and host of the trail-blazing **Quantum Leopard** a comedy night established in 2015 which has won six **Chortle awards** since 2018, inclusivity and accessibility (including financial) are central. Quantum Leopard seeks to be “the kindest Saturday night of comedy in London”, says Ross, and is renowned for its high-quality line-ups and giving a host of well-known comedians their first paid gigs. The club is also celebrated for its pay-what-you-can payment structure and a ‘no picking on the audience’ policy, which includes an opt in/out sticker system for audiences to let the MC and the acts know if they are happy to be spoken to:

*“So many clubs I went to just had an empty front row, and so many people were just put off going to comedy because they were being picked on by acts. It’s like, why are you biting the hand that claps you?” James Ross*

Since Quantum Leopard launched in 2015 it has also been committed to a diverse booking policy for line-ups, clear ‘no punching down’ guidelines for comedians, and guaranteed minimum fees for all acts.



Anastasia Chokuwamba ,  
No Direction Home  
Credit: Paul Gilbey

## SELECTED PROJECTS

### No Direction Home

No Direction Home (NDH) was launched in 2018 by Counterpoints Arts and offers programmes of stand-up comedy workshops and stages gigs for aspiring comedians from migrant and refugee backgrounds at venues around the UK. The aim of the project is to “provide training, opportunities and career development and to help shift the narrative about who and what can be funny”. NDH gigs regularly sell out and feature NDH comedians performing alongside well-known headliners and comperes.

### Palestine Comedy Club (PalCom)

PalCom is a UK-Palestinian collaboration fusing comic traditions from both cultures to support Palestinian comedians, coach them in stand-up techniques, and collaborate with them to write and develop their comedy and perform it inside and outside of Palestine.

### Quantum Leopard

James Ross launched the multi-award-winning Quantum Leopard comedy night in London in 2015. It is well known for nurturing new comedy voices, high-quality and diverse line-ups, an inclusive atmosphere, pay-what-you-can ticketing and a ‘no picking on the audience’ policy.

### The People’s Comedy

The People’s Comedy was formed in Bristol in 2018 to platform underrepresented ‘comedians with a message’. The club fosters an alternative approach to the mainstream comedy circuit, featuring no headliners and ensuring equal pay for all acts.

### You Can Laugh, You Know

You Can Laugh, You Know is a disabled-led comedy club in Leeds, founded by Sam Judd in 2023. The club is committed to increasing disabled representation in comedy and the arts, campaigns for accessibility in comedy and runs fully relaxed performances.



Policies such as these are diversifying comedy line-ups and making comedy more accessible to performers and audiences who might previously have perceived it as not for them. This evolution in the UK comedy scene includes clubs, nights and tours which have successfully expanded comedy audiences and established their own regular base of supporters, such as: [Femmes of Colour Comedy Club](#); pan-Asian comedy improv group [Comediasians](#); BAME improv collective [Do The Right Scene](#); [Arabs Are Not Funny](#); [Arabs and Asians Stand-Up Comedy Show](#); and [Comedy Queens](#)

Some targeted cultural or faith-based community-based comedy occurs outside traditional comedy venues in spaces where diverse audiences may feel more comfortable. For example, on Bradford University campus, Theatre in the Mill's regular comedy nights of all women and non-binary acts featuring global majority headliners, attracts some audience members who have never been to a comedy show before. As Ayza Akhtar, suggests, some local people feel safer to attend "because it is not in a bar, it is in the theatre, and it's on campus."



*Manuel Santos  
Credit: Steve Best*



# COMEDY, RESILIENCE AND RECOVERY

Over the last few decades, research into the uses of humour and laughter to promote improvements in mental health, reduce stress and anxiety, and increase resilience, confidence and self-esteem has steadily increased. The work of organisations and collaborative initiatives around the UK support this evidence and demonstrate that creating and performing comedy have related wellbeing impacts including reducing social exclusion and isolation.

This report does not seek to offer a clinical assessment of these programmes. However, as a set of starting points for identifying good practice and recognising initiatives and approaches that deserve support and development, below is an overview of some of the key approaches and methods of delivery, and some reflections on beneficial impacts based on reports, feedback and interviews with participants, facilitators and audience members.

## Being heard

*"Telling our stories and having those stories heard is a fundamental part of our wellbeing... and comedy's a great way of making your story heard."* Rob Gee

Comedy is an accessible and enjoyable way of engaging people who, due to an often-complex mix of personal issues and discriminatory systemic barriers, are socially excluded or disadvantaged by a lack of access to appropriate services. As Sam Avery, comedian and director of The Comedy Trust in Liverpool, notes: "a lot of people feel like they're being ignored. I suppose you'd call them marginalised, misunderstood, voiceless." Through these projects, "to be able to actually give them a voice and make them feel like they're being heard is really powerful."

The intersections between displacement, migration, loneliness and mental health challenges are significant. Participants of the No Direction Home programme report that learning to write and perform comedy has had positive impacts on their mental health. Anastasia Chokuwamba believes that "the pain of being a refugee is feeling invisible." For her, there is solace in wearing her traditional Zimbabwean dress on stage as she reframes as comedy some of her most difficult experiences of fleeing abuse in Zimbabwe, arriving in the UK, and navigating the asylum process: "I love it because it is a peaceful environment to speak about my pain in a funny way. In other words, it's automatic cancelling because before... I felt pain in my heart, but now I can see the funny side of it."



**"That's what comedy does: it looks at the darkness and finds that little bit of light."**

Angie Belcher

NDH participant and facilitator, Yasmeen Audisho Ghrawi agrees: “I often use the word alchemy. I feel like it is an alchemical space because it allows me to access heaviness or access emotions that can be potentially exhausting or too heavy to simply name and talk about in ways that are serious.”

## Building resilience and confidence

Tash Alexander, comedy writer/performer and founder of London-based charity [Head Held High](#) leads programmes for young people at risk of exclusion from school including Stand Up For Yourself. She regularly sees the impacts of creating and performing comedy on participants, in terms of building confidence and developing assertive communication skills. For these often-vulnerable young people, comedy workshops can also provide a short cut to breaking down barriers and sharing their stories and feelings as they work together to craft material around subjects they might not otherwise talk openly about with their peers:

“For them to reveal their voice and not be told: Can you be quiet? Can you sit down? Or that’s too much – it really affects somebody’s self-esteem. It’s wonderful to see them with the mic, and they’re being heard. It’s about their voice, them owning their story. It’s such a good way to show people you’ve got the confidence inside to do this and, if you can do this, you can do other things”.

Sam Avery of The Comedy Trust agrees that the impacts of engaging young people in comedy projects can be significant. During the Trust’s course for young people, Laugh It Off, participants develop a comedy routine they then perform for an audience of friends and family: “There’s a sparkle in their eyes... and probably the reason is because no one’s ever listened to them before, and all of a sudden they’ve got this voice, this platform, and it all comes out”. Sam believes comedy also fosters essential life skills: “It’s about having that in your mental wheelhouse: to be able to laugh at yourself, dealing with setbacks, or feeling isolated, or not knowing your place in the world.”

## Mental health recovery

*“Our sense of humour is such an important part of who we are individually, so the regaining of that is a huge part of recovery. A lot of people in the midst of any kind of mental health episode, will say they’ve lost their sense of humour. ‘I can’t laugh anymore’. For the most part, although it feels lost... it’s simply dormant.”* Rob Gee

**“I think comedy is such an empowering tool to pull you out of your emotional state, or your limited self-beliefs, or the fact you could be dominated by your past actions, which a lot of the young people we work with are.”**

Tash Alexander

Yasmeen Audisho Ghrawi,  
*No Direction Home*





Projects around the UK apply comedy techniques as tools for recovery in mental health contexts via charities, local NHS trusts and Integrated Care Systems, and recovery colleges. Momentum is building for comedy to be routinely socially prescribed by the NHS and evidence to support this move has been building over the last two decades.

**The Comedy School** started its Wellbeing Project with a **programme of comedy improvisation workshops** in 2016-17

and has since offered several courses every year focussed on mental health and wellbeing. Its recent courses for veterans are part of an ongoing NHS study.



*Palestine Comedy Club workshop  
Credit: Charlotte Knowles*

Since 2007, **Rob Gee** stand-up poet and comedian has been lead artist with Comedy Asylum, run by Arts and Mental Health charity, **Bright Sparks**. Comedy Asylum works predominantly with adults with 'severe and enduring mental illness' and, since 2008, has run workshop programmes culminating in a sketch comedy show performed as part of the Leicester Comedy Festival.

As a former psychiatric nurse with over 15 years' experience, Rob has key insights into mental health treatment and recovery. He uses comedy writing, performance and improvisation techniques in both in-patient settings and community hubs, and advocates for comedy as a participatory art because he is convinced that "humour, specifically, is such a big part of people's recovery."

Edel McGlanaghy is a clinical psychologist and academic, currently leading a trauma-informed research programme at NHS Forth Valley, who has also performed **stand-up comedy about trauma-informed practice**. She sees a link between the key skills of the stand-up comedian and engaging in trauma-informed approaches to mental health care and interventions: "Stand up, to me, is about being authentic, being open, being willing to see things in a different way. If we're open and want to connect with people... it's a really valuable tool to use."

**"Our sense of humour is such an important part of who we are individually, so the regaining of that is a huge part of recovery."**

**Rob Gee**

Facilitators who include humour and comedy in mental health contexts, often do so as part of the **CHIME** recovery model, which characterises the stages of an individual's recovery process as: **C**onnectedness, **H**ope, **I**dentify, **M**eaning, and **E**mpowerment. A key strength of comedy in these environments, is that it avoids "the risk of perpetuating its own sense of victimhood", says Rob Gee. Participants can complain, speak about their problems with aspects of their treatment, or their difficult experiences, but "because you are making people laugh, comedy is positive and empowering." This recovery-focused approach is a potentially helpful way to think about applying socially engaged comedy more broadly in the community, as a tool for social inclusion and associated wellbeing benefits.

In 2022, in partnership with Rethink Mental Illness and the Recovery College, comedian, speaker and facilitator **Angie Belcher** led **Comedy on Referral**, a series of workshops for men culminating in stand-up performances by participants for friends and family at The Comedy Store in London. Devised as part of a programme for suicide prevention and suicide awareness within communities in

## SELECTED PROJECTS

### The Comedy School

Established in London in 1998 by Keith Palmer MBE, The Comedy School regularly runs workshops and performance projects in many community contexts with a commitment to using comedy to "enhance the lives of local communities" and as "an educational and rehabilitative tool."

### The Comedy Trust

The Comedy Trust was established in Liverpool in 2002 to use "humour and laughter to improve... mental health, increase confidence and develop new coping strategies." The Comedy Trust team works around the North West of England with a wide range of community groups and businesses and also collaborates with academics, comedians and grass roots organisations as part of the **Comedy For Social Change** network.

### Head Held High

Founded in 2013 by Tash Alexander, Head Held High is a charity leading motivational interactive workshops for young people at risk of exclusion. Head Held High's **Stand Up for Yourself** programme enables young people at risk to find their assertive, authentic and funny voices.

### Comedy Asylum

Comedy Asylum was launched in 2007 by Bright Sparks arts and mental health charity in Leicestershire. The team of comedians, writers and mental health service users run workshops, community comedy hubs and humour for recovery courses and create and perform comedy shows.

### Angie's Comedy Courses

Comedian and facilitator Angie Belcher runs programmes of comedy workshops in a range of settings. She launched the Comedy on Referral initiative in Bristol in 2020 as part of a collaboration with Wellspring Social Prescribing for Equality and Resilience team to explore the mental health and wellbeing benefits of comedy and laughter.

### Craic Health

Launched in 2024 by Louisa Jackson, Craic Health is a platform for Comedy-on-Prescription<sup>®</sup> providers. It is committed to uniting "all comedy-based wellbeing providers – individuals and businesses – along with their events, products, research, and connections to social prescribing and creative health networks across the UK, and beyond."



Rob Gee, Comedy Asylum

North West London, and piloted with trauma survivors in Bristol with the Wellspring Social Prescribing for Equality and Resilience (SPEAR) team, this course targeted a traditionally hard to reach group of men. Social justice issues including loneliness and isolation are frequently identified as suicide risk factors and a [report on the Comedy on Referral project](#) noted that, for men in particular, “overcoming taboos, including vulnerability and finding help in relation to mental health is important in suicide prevention work.” The report concluded that it was the “focus on comedy that had motivated the individuals to initially attend the course, and it became the mechanism by which participants felt they could safely explore their feelings and experiences and, importantly, having these heard by others.”

## Comedy as change

*“When you’ve got a performer on stage for the first time – particularly someone who would never have dreamt of going on stage a short while ago – whether they’ve got a mental health condition, or a learning disability, or they’re just shy and socially isolated, and there’s a room full of people – you see that bond happening between the audience and the performer. For me, it feels like alchemy. That’s what it is.” Rob Gee*

Participants regularly feedback that the process of reframing their experiences as comedy with a group and facilitators in a structured, supportive way and then sharing these with an audience is [transformative for them](#). Performing for an audience can also have significant confidence-boosting value for participants. One responder during the Comedy on Referral feedback focus group observed that: “Facing fear in the performance itself provided me with a blueprint to face fear generally. I can just apply the same way of being to walking over and standing with three people I don’t know.” Rob Gee observes this mechanism operating as participants work through states of anxiety while playing performance games in his workshop sessions: “It’s retraining your brain to move in and out of anxiety states... it’s about relearning the fluidity that, yes, you’re anxious now, but that will pass.”

Jojo Sutherland,  
Craic Health trial workshop



The initiatives featured here regularly receive positive feedback from participants that mirror the conclusions of the evaluation of the Comedy on Referral course which concluded that participants had experienced beneficial outcomes, including:

- suicide prevention
- improved confidence
- improved overall wellbeing and resilience
- new social connections and reduced isolation
- reduced feelings of stigma and shame

## Comedy-on-Prescription®

Louisa Jackson, founder of [Craic Health](#) “the Comedy-on-Prescription® hub”, is currently collaborating with comedians, workshop providers, [Dr Simon Opher MP](#) and NHS Integrated Care Systems to expand the social prescription of comedy projects on the NHS. As a GP, Dr Opher pioneered social prescribing in his Gloucestershire surgery in 2001 and is supporting Craic Health’s campaign for comedy to be included as part of NHS social prescribing right across the UK to improve mental health, offer alternatives to prescribing anti-depressants, and reduce NHS costs.

As an online platform, Craic Health seeks to integrate and expand the use of comedy by the NHS and to train and certify ‘CoPpers’: Comedy-on-Prescription® providers. Five Craic Health trial events were delivered in Westminster in 2024-2025, “to enhance mental health, foster social connections, and boost confidence.” The trials received overwhelmingly positive feedback and Dr Opher is confident that:

*“The Westminster pilots have shown that comedy can be a genuinely transformative form of social prescribing. We saw participants experiencing measurable improvements. Comedy works because it brings people together through laughter and shared experience, reducing loneliness and reframing how people see themselves and their challenges. Laughter itself has well-documented biological benefits — lowering stress hormones, boosting endorphins, and even improving cardiovascular function.”*

Socially prescribed comedy was also the subject of a follow-up parliamentary roundtable on the subject in [April 2025](#) and featured as part of a further parliamentary discussion about the London comedy industry in [October 2025](#).



**“For many, performing or even co-creating humour becomes a way to rebuild social confidence and re-enter public life. It’s an approach that can complement existing models of care, particularly for those who might not respond to more clinical interventions.”**

Dr Simon Opher, MP

# COMEDY AND CAMPAIGNING

“Cultural change precedes social change. Narrative drives policy. This is why we must be as strategic and rigorous in building narrative power as we are in building all other forms of power. Narrative is the space in which energies are activated to preserve a destructive system or build a better world for us all.”

Race Forward’s Butterfly Lab

In her [TEDxLondon 2025 presentation](#), Nathalie McDermott, founder and co-CEO of the charity [Heard](#) observes that campaign organisations often use stories of “pain and trauma” to communicate their messages to the public because they are effective in creating awareness of an issue. However, she asks: “Do they actually create change?”

For many campaign groups, creating awareness is no longer the priority. Most people are *aware* of the climate crisis, for example. A lack of awareness is not what prevents people from taking action – a sense of powerlessness is. Messaging focussed on the tragic impacts of issues as monumental as climate change, racism, child abuse, or homelessness too often prompts a paralysing sense of fear, rather than inspiring hope or positive action. Fatalism kicks in, as potential supporters are left feeling that a problem is overwhelming and nothing individuals do can make a difference, so there is no point in trying.

## Counteracting fatalism

As they consider alternatives to such counteractive approaches, campaign organisations are exploring the role humour and comedy can play in their communications strategies. In his toolkit for comedy creators wanting to address the climate crisis in their comedy, Matt Nida, Programme Manager for OKRE’s [Laughing Matters](#) programme observes: “Audiences need to move beyond terror and fatalism towards action – which means a deeper engagement with

Credit: Zoë Birkbeck



“The role of the comic and the role of the politician seem to have swapped in the last decade.”

Sami Abu Wardeh

how it's affecting us and our health, who's responsible, how our lives will change, and where we want to go." Social impact studies in the US on the effectiveness of satire and humour in communicating the science of climate change have concluded that comedy was "most engaging and persuasive for individuals who had less initial interest in the issue." (Borum Chatto and Feldman, 2020.) These scholars argue that, as trust in traditional media and governments wanes, comedians are in increasingly strong positions to offer social critique and act as **agents of positive change**.

Founder of creative climate communications campaign **Climate Science Breakthrough**, Nick Oldridge, agrees that comedy is an effective tool for engaging and activating audiences as the "brutal truth" and nightmare scenarios" of the hard scientific facts of climate science are often simply "too heavy" to present to audiences.

This work is about channelling the persuasive potential of comedy and counteracting fatalism by fostering hope and generating sufficient positive motivation to create change. This is no easy task and, as climate comedian and speaker **Stuart Goldsmith** observes: "There's a delicate balance to strike between making people laugh and making them care."

Climate Science Breakthrough's strategy is to put together two sets of **trusted messengers**, renowned climate scientists and well-known comedians, in a series of viral campaign videos entitled **Climate Science – Translated**. The films feature climate scientists who state the facts about the impacts of specific aspects of the climate crisis and stand-up comedians who 'translate' these facts into one-liners delivered straight to camera. Previous videos have included UK and US comedians: Nish Kumar, Jo Brand, Jonathan Pie, Kiri Prichard-Mclean and David Cross. These are personal, accessible and funny responses to complex science, mirroring the bafflement or anxiety audiences might experience, while activating humour to push past any accompanying sense of defeat as the comedians pithily distil the undeniable urgency of the message.

The key aims of creative climate messaging is shifting the culture and public opinion to a point of urgency which overrides what many campaigners recognise as the twin obstacles to global climate action and policy change – political apathy and the power of vested interests. Further research is needed into the impacts of 'informed optimism' following such campaigns and the likelihood that this leads to changes in audience behaviour and positive action. However, projects such as Climate Science Breakthrough indicate that comedians are uniquely placed in contemporary popular culture to contribute to this process, not only by effectively communicating the science for audiences but also by unravelling with them some of the



"Laughter is an extraordinary tool. It's disarming, uniting, and transformative. When people laugh, they listen – and when they listen, they open themselves up to new ideas."

Stuart Goldsmith



topic's most complex political realities, for example the intersection between climate displacement and global migration.

## Comedy as activism

Generations of comedians have used comedy to challenge the status quo and engage in [politically 'charged' comedy](#) directly seeking social and political change. The debate about the erosion of comedians' rights to speak out in the UK is ongoing. However, unlike those experiencing [direct censorship](#), imprisonment (and sometimes worse) in many parts of the world, UK comedians remain relatively free to openly explore political ideas, to criticise governments and powerful elites, and to find ways to open comic dialogue with their audiences about potentially divisive or unpopular subjects.

For some, material about social issues and challenging dominant political narratives are central to their acts. Their advantage is that, because their primary responsibility is to be funny, they can – unlike many journalists, for example – directly call out political hypocrisies, inadequacies and absurdities without being accused of bias. Some take full advantage of their comic licence to open conversations about divisive topics or call for political action. As a predominantly autobiographical form, stand-up is well-suited to addressing the relationship between the personal and the political. Whether tackling philosophical ideas, political concerns, or whimsical observations, it lends itself equally to bold, direct statements or individual uncertainty and ambiguity. It is also inherently participatory. Indeed, for comedy to occur at all, its audience cannot remain passive: whether they laugh or not, they are always active *interpreters*.

Humour can be very persuasive, however attempting to use it to convince people to make changes in their own lives or take action to achieve broader changes can be unpopular. Stu Goldsmith is well aware that most audiences do not want to hear jokes about climate change or his “eco dread”. For him, “shared vulnerability is where the conversation starts” because “if you’re willing to laugh at your own flaws, they’ll be more likely to reflect on theirs.” The worst approach to climate messaging is to blame or scold your audience: “probably the least effective sentence you could say... is ‘why aren’t you idiots as terrified as me?’” Instead, he recommends a mix of fascinating information, self-deprecatory honesty, and a healthy dose of silliness. When he jokes about “my own climate failings – like the time I realised I was considering driving my diesel van to attend a climate protest – it’s not just self-deprecating humour, it’s an admission that I’m part of the problem, just like everyone else.

“You may not know this, I didn’t know this: glitter is actually a microplastic. It’s a combination of aluminium and a plastic called polyethylene terephthalate, which is also my drag name.”

Stuart Goldsmith,  
[Live at the Apollo, BBC](#)

And in that moment, the audience and I are in it together. We're all hypocrites. We're all trying."

Comedian **Sami Abu Wardeh** believes that if you want to connect with audiences and use comedy to address serious political issues it is essential to "know your subject matter well and use that knowledge to choose your targets well and accurately. The more precise the object of your comic derision, the harder it is for people to disagree."

**Don Biswas** suggests that it is his non-aggressive, self-effacing stand-up style – rooted in his neurodivergence – that allows him to slip politics into his act: "People are more likely to listen to someone who's self-deprecating about themselves... then I can talk about immigration or Palestine." Biswas is known for his one-liners and notes that he often sets up a joke with the politics before the punchline takes the audience somewhere completely different:

*"Talking about the refugee crisis, I get it, because during the 1970s, my dad moved here to flee persecution from India... Unfortunately, my mum managed to track him down."*



Don Biswas  
Credit: Steve Best

## Restorative laughter

*"Finding a way to make people laugh is restorative."*  
Sami Abu Wardeh

Comedians have growing public influence through their live shows and online content, though how to channel this popular approval as comedy activism and the nature of the comedian's role as campaigner remains difficult to define, perhaps, as Sami Abu Wardeh suggests, because: "The role of the comic and the role of the politician seem to have swapped in the last decade."

Stu Goldsmith responds to accusations that his approach to climate comedy is 'preaching to the choir' with the reminder that: "people *do in fact preach to choirs!* If you can make the choir feel optimistic and empowered, they'll probably sing more passionately and lift the whole congregation!" Reflecting on audience responses to his 2025 show about resistance and his Palestinian identity and heritage, Sami Abu Wardeh says: "The most significant impact has been providing a space for people with a conscience to come and experience joy, resistance and the joy of resistance." For comedians seeking to inspire audiences to action as they navigate serious issues in their work, this points to collective laughter's potency as consolation, release and resistance.

# CONCLUSION

“Comedy isn’t just entertainment – it’s woven into the very fabric of our national identity. Laughter is how we process our shared experiences, navigate our differences, and find common ground in divided times.”

[Jon Petrie, Comedy Commissioning Director, BBC](#)

As the projects and approaches outlined in this report demonstrate, through collaborations across creative, community, health, and social change networks, comedy has the potential to positively impact individual lives and to inspire action for social justice. The many examples of current good practice included in the Comedy, resilience and recovery section confirm that the specific nuances of finding your comic voice and developing comedy techniques, and the act of reframing hardships or difficult past experiences as comedy can offer a liberating and productive approach to recovery and mental wellbeing. Participants repeatedly report that sharing their comic insights about their mental health, either in workshop settings or in public performances, successfully builds confidence, self-esteem and strategies for future resilience. Project participants and facilitators, along with health and social care professionals are, then, in no doubt that comedy and humour can offer significant benefits; and both the health and economic outcomes reinforce the already convincing creative health case for expanding the social prescription of comedy via the NHS.

Across the report’s themed areas, these projects offer people opportunities to address their challenges directly and express them in their own words. Initiatives such as No Direction Home demonstrate that celebrating difference through laughter can foster understanding as audience preconceptions are called into question and cultural insights slip under the comedy radar.

Of course, the underlying inequalities contributing to social isolation, poor mental health and serious community divisions – including those expressed as concerns about migration – are not resolved with punchlines. However, feedback indicates that the co-creation of comedy can contribute to reducing community



tensions and divisions. Regular workshops establish their own communities and sense of belonging as participants listen to each other's stories and work collectively to turn them into comedy. In this way, the personal nature of this work taps directly into the specifics of what it is to be human and why that makes us laugh, whatever our backgrounds. Sam

Avery of The Comedy Trust believes that "as society has become more divided than we've been in a while", humour and comedy can have an impact, "to actually get people in the same room who perhaps disagree, or see differently on certain issues, and to use humour to start a conversation."



*Credit: Steve Best*

In groups with diverse life experiences and perspectives, this process could operate as a form of comic licence – that mechanism by which laughter shifts our boundaries, if only temporarily – and opens us up to new ideas and new ways of seeing each other.

This perhaps points to the creation of local projects harnessing comedy's popular appeal to attract participants that arts programmes traditionally struggle to reach. Such initiatives to connect culturally mixed groups, including those marginalised by class, poverty, or lack of access could be designed to focus on shared values and strengthen community bonds, for example, via intergenerational workshops, or by highlighting local concerns.

Hope and joy are essential for engaging people and inspiring them to make positive changes in their own lives and communities, and the comedians and projects mentioned throughout this report suggest that the candour of shared laughter can play a pivotal role in opening dialogue about difficult subjects and casting new light on challenging or polarising issues.

Comedy for social change projects can have lasting social and health impacts and create spaces for the kind of comedy that moves far beyond a joke. In this way, they are doing the groundwork of demonstrating alternative ways to think about, accept and potentially live more positively with difference.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

“To scale up, we need sustained support from the NHS and other governmental departments. Recognising comedy as a legitimate wellbeing intervention within the broader social prescribing framework. Above all, we need to trust that the arts – and laughter in particular – can be powerful medicine for a healthier, more connected society.” Dr Simon Opher, MP

To build on the current momentum in this sector and extend the measurable benefits achieved for participants of interventions like the ones mentioned here, sustained support and investment is needed. This report confirms that, to exist at all, many initiatives currently rely on one-off project grants: an unpredictable and unsustainable model for development. Pockets of excellent practice regularly take place throughout the UK; however, providers rarely have opportunities to learn from or support each other, operating on the fringes of the equally fragmented and under-supported wider live comedy sector. The following section is addressed to policy-makers, funders, commissioners, NHS partnership and local authority managers. It outlines some suggested evolutions and key areas for development, funding and support.

## RESEARCH AND FUNDING

- Funders should invest in **further research into impact evaluation** for comedy and social change projects including social inclusion, mental health and wellbeing interventions.
- Support for **further trials assessing project impacts** and standardised reporting of impacts.
- Funding of research into the **strategic uses and impacts of comedy**: e.g. UK comedians’ influence on public opinion through live shows and online content.
- Establish a **funding stream/funding partnerships** for comedy for social change initiatives e.g. via local authority social impact investment funds, NHS Integrated Care Systems, charities, arts funding bodies.

## **POLICY AND RECOGNITION**

- Policy-makers should **recognise the significance of comedy** and its positive impacts on communities and individuals.
- **Recognise comedy as an art form** within government policy and strategy. Include the sector at policy level alongside other creative industries in strategy documents and discussions.
- Recognise comedy as a **legitimate art** for social change practice.
- Incorporate comedy into creative **health and social prescribing** initiatives.

## **TRAINING AND MENTORING**

- Develop a **mentoring and patronage scheme** to connect well-known comedians, comedy organisations, established large venues with specific comedy for social change projects.
- **Resource experienced providers** (established organisations and projects) to train and mentor new facilitators.
- **Establish training programmes** to create new comedy for social change facilitators.
- Support and mentor providers to **develop their networks** and build partnerships across sectors e.g. with potential partners in the community care and support, migrant rights, campaigning and charity sectors and the comedy and media sectors.

## **CREATING NETWORKS AND ENCOURAGING PARTNERSHIPS**

- Funders should support stakeholders to **develop a national network** of comedy creators, researchers, facilitators, mental health and social care professionals, and social change makers. E.g. roundtables to share good practice, objectives and aspirations. This will:
  - **establish partnerships** between social change providers with aligned charities, community and health providers and potential sponsors.
  - **identify opportunities** for local and regional networks.
  - **encourage dialogue** across sectors. E.g. applying aspects of the CHIME recovery model in community or educational settings.
- **Develop partnerships** between comedy for social change projects and established arts/cultural venues and organisations. E.g. to fund, commission, promote, host.
- **Support existing networking initiatives** for socially prescribed comedy.

“Supporting live comedy alongside other grassroots culture ensures a diverse cultural landscape that reflects and celebrates the UK’s creativity and it is crucial that comedy’s place alongside other art forms is recognised by the wider industry and Government.”

Mark Davyd,  
Music Venue Trust



## **DIVERSITY AND REPRESENTATION**

- Funders should invest in comedy programmes to **develop comic talents from marginalised groups** and mentoring and support opportunities for facilitators from marginalised backgrounds or communities.
- **Invest in local comedy initiatives** designed to connect participants from different communities marginalised by economic status and class. E.g. intergenerational projects, projects linked to food banks, libraries.

## **EDUCATION**

- NHS, DfE and local authorities, should **incorporate comedy into schools** via mental health and wellbeing initiatives and personal, social and health programmes to build on the measurable impacts of using comedy with young people.
- **Include comedy in existing curricula** in secondary and higher education, including communications, education, performing arts, and arts for social change programmes.

*Alaa Shehada  
Credit: Farouk Ebaiss*



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# ORGANISATIONS, LINKS AND THANKS

## Gigs/clubs/events

Abnormally Funny People  
 Aftermirth Comedy  
 Arabs & Asians Comedy Shows  
 Arabs Are Not Funny  
 Bring Your Own Baby Comedy  
 Comediasians  
 Comedy in Ruins  
 Comedy Queens  
 Cocoa Butter Club  
 Do The Right Scene  
 Everything is F\*\*ked Comedy  
 FOC It Up Comedy Club  
 Laff-Uccino  
 The People's Comedy  
 Quantum Leopard  
 Undercover Comedy  
 UK Kids' Comedy Festival/Big Difference  
 You Can Laugh, You Know

## Training

The Comedy School  
 The Comedy Trust  
 Angie's Comedy Courses  
 Comedy Asylum/Bright Sparks  
 Creative Veterans – On Parade  
 Funny Side Collective  
 Gaia Well Being Laughter Therapy  
 Head Held High  
 No Direction Home/Counterpoints Arts  
 Intergen Comedy Workshops/  
 Royal Exchange Theatre Comedy Workshops  
 Stand Up and Be Counted  
 Palestine Comedy Club

## Networks/platforms/campaigns

Campaign For The Arts  
 Climate Science Breakthrough  
 Craic™  
 Craic Health  
 Funny Women  
 Heard  
 The Live Comedy Association  
 Night Time Industries Association  
 OKRE

## Research

Centre for Comedy Studies Research  
 Center for Media & Social Impact  
 Comedy for Social Change Network  
 Mixed Bill network

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# BEYOND A JOKE

**Comedy and social change in the UK**

By Sam Beale, supported by Unbound Philanthropy, 2025

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