

## More manifestation, less manifesto

An ArtsProfessional  
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Promises are powerful formulations reflecting genuine intentions. But, **Richard Watts** argues, they must be accompanied by concrete actions.

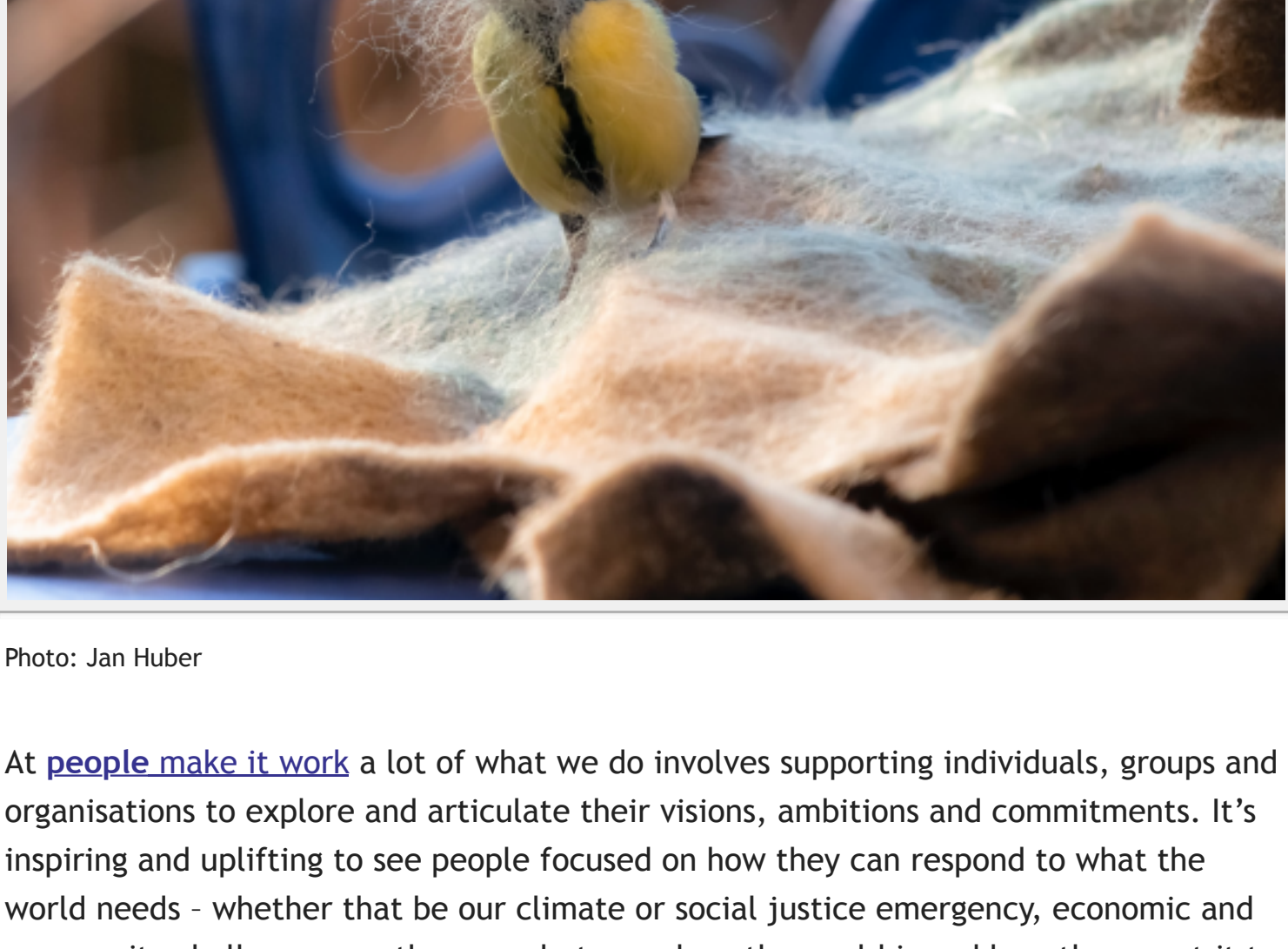


Photo: Jan Huber

At [people make it work](#) a lot of what we do involves supporting individuals, groups and organisations to explore and articulate their visions, ambitions and commitments. It's inspiring and uplifting to see people focused on how they can respond to what the world needs - whether that be our climate or social justice emergency, economic and community challenges or other gaps between how the world is and how they want it to be.

So much of the work is about promise: the ideas and initiatives that look promising, the promises that people make to themselves and others and, at this moment in the English cultural calendar, the promises we make to funders and partners in the form of ACE NPO applications.

I love the moment when ideas and frustrations coalesce into a compelling response. I love the ability of a promise to move individuals, shift what's possible, generate coalitions and build collective energy.

But an empty promise, wishful thinking, and good intentions demand actions to match. When they're broken a corrosive cynicism replaces hope. While we sit comfortably with our own well-meant promises, others view them with scepticism, waiting for their manifestation. Promises need keeping. Intentions demand actions. Manifestos need manifesting.

## What does manifestation look like?

Much of the work we do involves stories that are not ours to tell. But as examples, look at [Sara and Zak's](#) work in Birmingham or [Pegasus Talent's](#) work in diversifying opera, see what the [Projekt Europa](#) team are up to. I think they are all manifesting promises they've made in concrete and exciting forms.

Of course, we have experienced our own shifts and learning at [people make it work](#). Over more than 20 years, we have taken pride in being a positive, empowering, collaborative, self-aware, constructive and supportive organisation - made up of like-minded, freelance colleagues committed to supporting change across the sector.

That's both a reflection of our intentions and a description of what we have mostly achieved. But does it also smack of some complacency? Helping others develop their organisational practice, ours must be perfect, right? Wrong, of course, our ways of working can and should improve.

Our unconscious biases need to be surfaced, tested and mitigated. Our assumptions and habitual practices need healthy scrutiny, reflection and refinement. So, I've been asking a series of questions: How do we address the inequity in our ways of working and thinking to generate greater transparency, choice and agency? How might a future model look, informed by values rather than habit or pragmatic response? How could our good intentions and practices be rebuilt to ensure good results? How do we rebalance inequitable power relations, expressed in our everyday actions? Fundamentally, how do we ensure that we are our best selves always, everywhere?

## Fundamental organisational shifts

Some of the concrete things we've changed in our practices include shifting our leadership model and restructuring the way we deliver work. Freelance colleagues have become Directors, receiving parity of pay and position and a commitment to equality of power and influence.

Other freelancers have begun to move into permanent roles of leadership and influence within the organisation giving staff and associates the support they need. Those who have power and security in our organisation fundamentally reflect the society we live within and serve. We have also committed to a distributed leadership model, embedded in a broad matrix of project oversight and programme leadership responsibilities.

These changes are designed to make fundamental shifts in the organisation, brought about by a process of interrogating the alignment (or not) of our values with our practices. We made the decision to do this at a point of high engagement and confidence between colleagues, rather than wait for challenges, complaints or risks to develop. Hopefully, we fixed the roof while the sun was shining.

## Transformational programmes

Cultural organisations make a lot of promises: to transform representation, to renew governance, to remake the ways they create work with audiences and communities, to develop new ways of working with creatives, to address the climate emergency, to build place-based partnerships.

Each requires extraordinary focus, and concrete plans. Our [transformation programmes](#) are precisely aimed at connecting promises with action and, in turn, action with impact. They include free resources, peer leadership programmes as well as tailored advice, protocols and practices. They are delivered by people who've often had to make such changes in their own organisations and have supported others to do so. Here are some of them:

- [Greenlight with Invisible Dust](#) is a masterclass series to support you to develop creative programmes related to climate now, when they are needed.
- [The Office for Leadership Transition](#) supports you to keep promises about leadership (who's leading, power distribution, leadership development, changing of the guard).
- [Creating Transformation](#) uses a peer learning model to help you address particular knotty issues to achieve concrete change and breakthrough impact (dealing with anything from representation to your business model).
- [Transforming Governance](#) will help you rethink governance for the current context.

## Things we can all do

- Put our heads above the parapet** - stand up for your values in public because people are knocking others down, even when that feels risky. Values require leadership.
- The power of your people** - their tremendous power and energy is often underestimated and over controlled. Staff can be powerful allies and agents for change often more ready to risk implementing change than leaders. Engaging everyone is a powerful transformational strategy.
- Join me as a self-styled **organisational activist** to champion and celebrate what is positive and transformational. Be relentlessly challenging of those you think need to explore and adopt new perspectives. Your persistence does them a great service.
- Promise, Plan, Perform** - review your promises to ensure there is a credible plan to honour them. Review your plans to ensure they are set, resourced, scheduled and announced. These should happen with the same certainty as your creative work.
- Mutually assured construction** - make commitments and build partnerships and coalitions that demand mutual action for success.
- 'Fleadership'** - explore being the flea that bites the elephant and makes it move (thanks to Dan de la Motte, Fearghus O Conchúir and Charles Handy for the concept).

Manifestos are authentic, collectively crafted messages of intent. Promises offer tremendous power and hope. But they only take us so far. They are empty calories if they aren't followed up with the nourishing substance of fulfilment.

So, let's make brave, courageous promises about the climate emergency, the social justice emergency, political vacuity and economic precarity. But let's make sure we have equal commitment and clarity about how to achieve them. Our audiences, places, colleagues and the global community deserve nothing less.

Richard Watts is a Director at [people make it work](#).

[www.peoplemakeitwork.com/](#)

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*people make it work* is a group of 60 freelance cultural leaders who work together with a shared mission. Together, they support the cultural sector to change, develop and transform. They do that with direct strategic consultancy for organisations and cities, transformational programmes for organisations, leaders and creative individuals, and by offering free tools, guidance, advice and resources that everyone can access. They do all this to realise a fairer, more representative, resilient and relevant cultural sector.

This article, sponsored and contributed by *people make it work*, is [part of a series](#) sharing insights and learning to support the cultural sector change and develop to meet the challenges it faces.

Link to Author(s): [Richard Watts](#)

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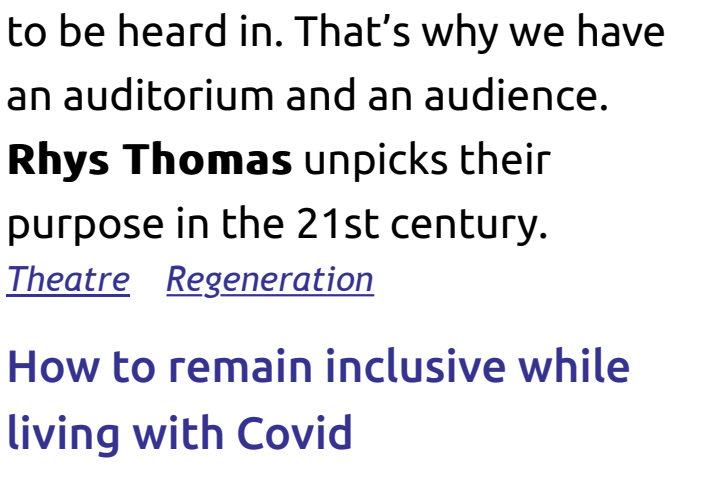
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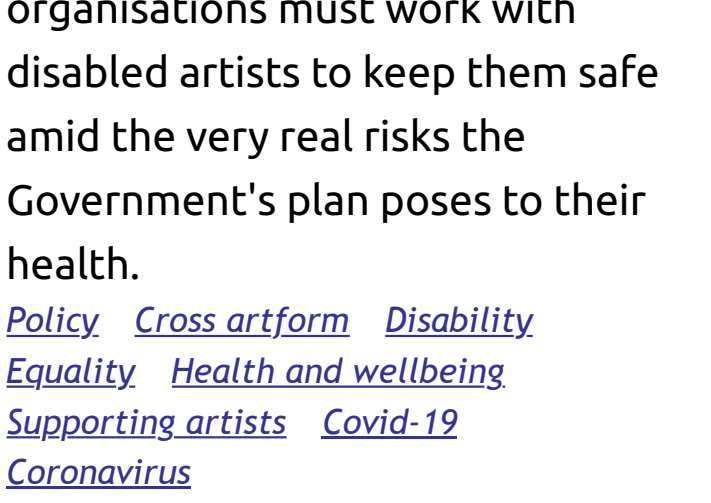
Theatres have always been spaces to be heard in. That's why we have an auditorium and an audience.

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**the spark**  
arts for children

**Artistic Director**  
East Midlands  
Salary: £42,000 - £45,000 (per annum)

**MARKETPLACE**

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East  
Salary: £35,000 - £40,000 (per annum)

**Senior Leader (Operations)**  
South East  
Salary: £42,000 - £42,000 (per annum)

**ROYAL COURT**

**Head of Finance and Administration**  
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South West  
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North West  
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**MIP**

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North West  
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**PD**

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**MIP**

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**national dance company wales**  
cwmni ddwng cenedlaethol cyrnau

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Wales  
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**P&P&P&A**

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**CHICHESTER FESTIVAL THEATRE**

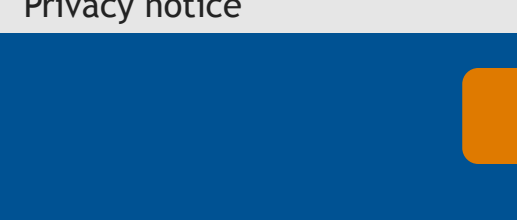
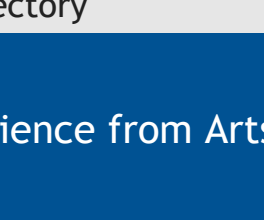
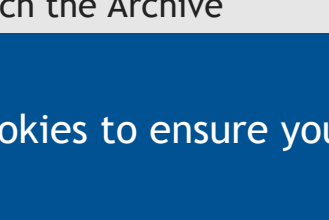
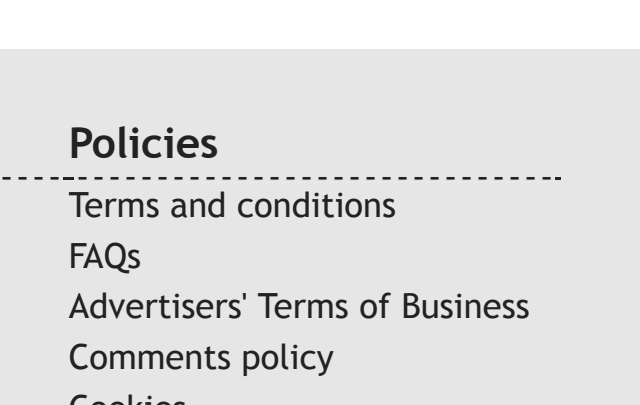
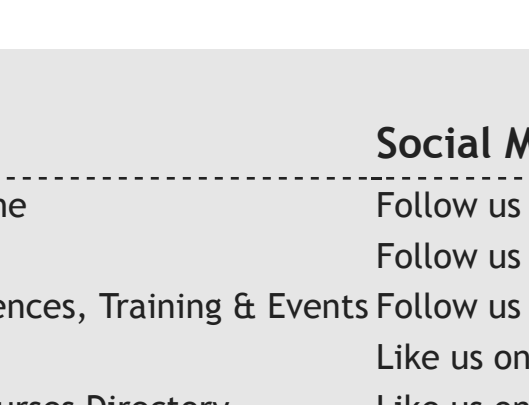
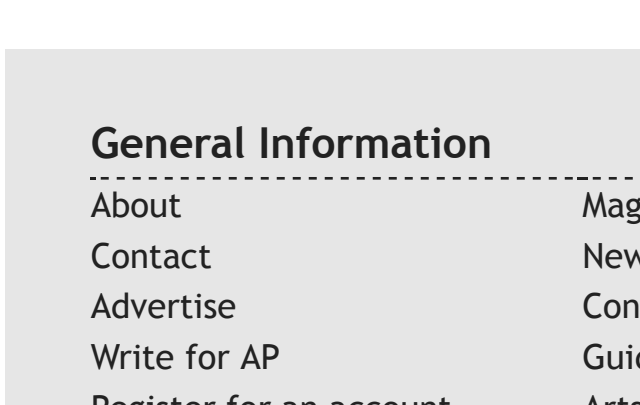
**Head of Human Resources (part time)**  
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