Positive Stories For Negative Times

Presented by

WONDER FOOLS

In association with

TRAVERSE THEATRE

Impact Report Season 3: 2022/23



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Positive Stories For Negative Times

Impact Summary

The Project

- **84** youth organisations and schools signed up
- **2,600** young people in 140 groups participating
- **160** drama practitioners participating
- **10** countries represented
- **55%** of organisations from Scotland
- **4 new plays** commissioned (3 reprised from Season Two)
- **49** artists employed
- **98% of young people** now feel confident participating in drama-based activities
- **100% of group leaders** felt their group had developed new skills
- **66% of young people** felt their wellbeing had improved
- **78% of group leaders** felt Positive Stories for Negative Times had increased their young people's access to culture
- **9** group bursaries distributed



Global engagement of Season 3

The Festivals

- **4 festivals at theatres in Edinburgh, Ayr, Inverness, and Perth**
- **322 young participants**
- **44 group leaders**
- **35 workshops**
- **22 performances by 22 groups**
- **1437 audience members**
- **9 bursaries distributed**

"I would do it all over again, any time, a million times over; I would do it every day if I could!"

PSFNT participant

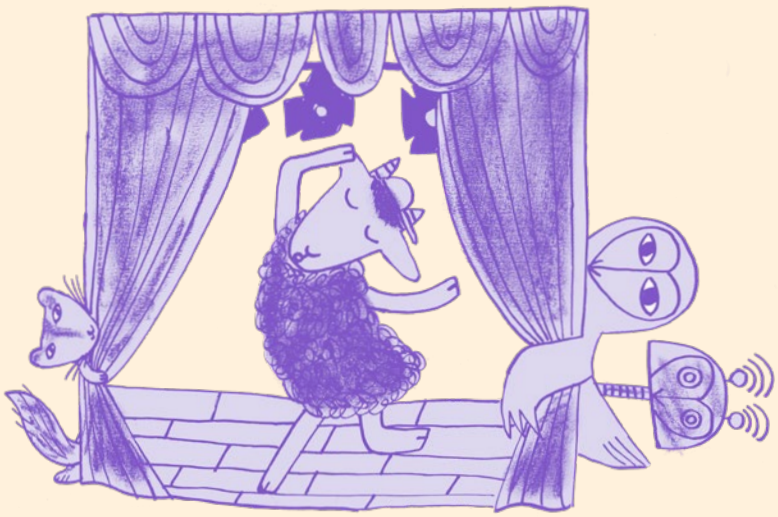

PSFNT Festival Performance

Seasons 1, 2 & 3 have culminated in:

- **8,747 young people participating (from 652 groups)**
- **17 countries represented**
- **16 newly commissioned plays**

1. Introduction





1.1 Positive Stories for Negative Times

Positive Stories for Negative Times (PSFNT) is a free participatory theatre project for young people, produced by Wonder Fools in association with the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh.

Conceived during the pandemic as an online response to the rapid reduction in participative creative activities for young people, PSFNT has quickly grown into a significant opportunity for drama groups and schools (in Scotland and beyond) to access high-quality new writing and professional support.

Season Three launched in December 2022 with the announcement of four newly-commissioned plays by Sara Shaarawi, Leyla Josephine, Robert Softley Gale, and Tim Crouch. Three scripts by Bryony Kimmings, The PappyShow, and Wonder Fools (commissioned for Season Two) were reprised again this season, offering a choice of seven plays with different age advisories, aimed at young people aged 8-25. All are provided free of charge and given to groups to use as they wish.

Following the mode of previous seasons, interested youth drama groups and schools were invited to a series of preliminary events allowing them to meet the playwrights and find out more about the project. This included a launch event at the Traverse Theatre in February 2023 curated and presented by the Wonder Fools Youth Board and online workshops with all the writers.

A significant change for Season Three has been an ambitious programme of four in-person theatre festivals on successive weekends in June and July 2023, based at four hub theatres: The Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, the Gaiety, Ayr, Eden Court, Inverness, and Perth Theatre. These festivals represented the culmination of weeks and months of work by participating groups and schools from across Scotland, supported by Wonder Fools throughout with training, advice, and visits to the hub theatres. The planning and management of the festivals were supported by Youth Theatre Arts Scotland (YTAS) who present the National Festival of Youth Theatre in Scotland every two years, support included mentoring and the sharing of existing resources. Along with final performances by the young participants, each festival featured two days of drama workshops, creative and social activities.

Many groups also participated in Season Three remotely, with youth theatres and schools from as far afield as Milan and Cape Town taking part. Where possible, leaders from these groups were encouraged to share documentation and film of their performances with Wonder Fools to be showcased on their website. Groups will continue to work with the Season Three scripts remotely until the end of 2023.

1.2 Participants

Participants were recruited by two Participation Associates who researched and contacted all primary and secondary schools across Scotland and England, drama teachers' forums, UK youth theatre networks and regional venues that worked with young people. The project was also promoted via Youth Theatre Arts Scotland and the four venue partners and via a social media and PR campaign. Participant groups consisted of primary and secondary schools, youth theatre and community groups. 64% of groups were based in Scotland, with the rest from around the world. Notable groups demonstrating the range of groups involved include:

American Space (Valencia), ZigZag Theatre (Australia), What Happens Now (an outdoor drama group based in Glasgow), Perth Autism Support Scotland, Opera North, Storyhouse (Chester), An Lanntair (Stornoway) and Acorn Young People's Theatre (Penzance).

A full list of all participating youth groups and schools is included as an appendix at the end of this report.

1.3 Target Outcomes

PSFNT has adapted and evolved since its online inception in 2020, however the core ethos of the project – to give all young people a more equitable opportunity to engage with drama – has remained consistent. For Season Three, the following outcomes were devised as targets describing what the project hoped to achieve:

1. Young people will have improved self-confidence.
2. Group leader skill sets and confidence in facilitating creative activity will improve through continued professional development.
3. The quality and range of plays for young people will improve.
4. Young people and group leaders will have greater access to culture.
5. Young people will feel more authentically represented in the arts in Scotland.





1.4 Evaluation methods

This impact report was produced by independent evaluator Eric Hildrew and primarily aims to demonstrate the extent to which the project's target outcomes were achieved, what was learnt along the way, and how PSFNT might be further improved in future seasons. It draws on a range of quantitative and qualitative sources, including:

- A baseline pre-evaluation survey with 37 participating group leaders, completed early in the project in order to gauge group leader start points and establish some benchmarks.
- A follow-up post-evaluation survey with 10 group leaders.
- A post-festival evaluation survey with 81 young participants
- 1-2-1 post-performance interviews with 15 group leaders and 34 young participants.

Caution is urged around attributing significance to small percentage differences in survey data shown in this report. Although survey response rates were healthy for a relatively contained project, the small overall number of responses means there is a significant margin of error. For example, 'before and after' percentage changes between the baseline and post-project surveys should be interpreted as indicating a direction of travel, as opposed to supporting precise conclusions. There are also many groups that participate in the project without officially signing up so it is likely, as in previous years, that the total figure of participants/ participating groups is much larger than stated.

A huge thank-you is due to all of the group leaders, young participants, and hub theatre partners who freely gave their time and energy to this evaluation.







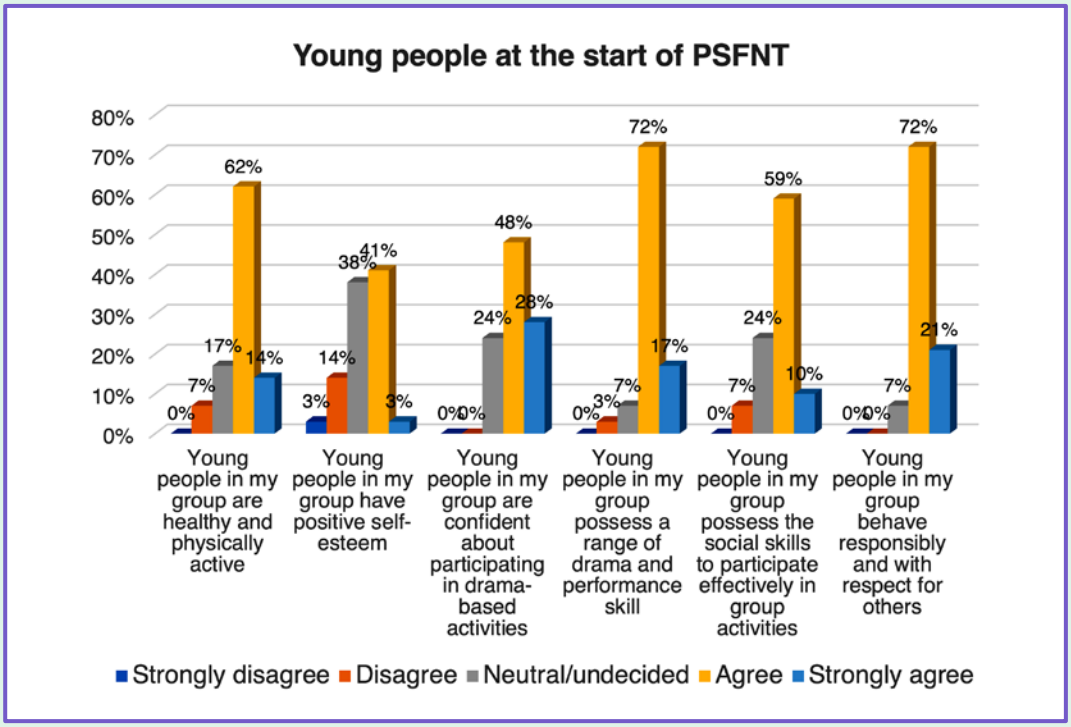
2. Target outcomes

2.1 Outcome: 'Young people will have improved self-confidence.'

It is becoming clearer from recent evaluations across a wide range of sectors which support children and young people that the pandemic has cast a long and continuing shadow on young people's confidence and skills around learning, socialisation, and self-expression. Building confidence, in the form of raised self-esteem, the ability to bond and work with a peer group, to take on new skills, and to demonstrate these in front of an audience, is one of the core goals of participation in Positive Stories for Negative Times.

2.1.1 Young people at the start of PSFNT Season Three

Group leaders were asked about their young people's health and skills across a number of themes in the baseline survey at the start of the project (for the purposes of the survey, they were asked to generalise rather than comment on individual differences).



- The majority of group leaders considered their young people to be healthy and physically active, though many commented on the ongoing effect of isolation during the pandemic and the way this continues to impact on young people's ability to concentrate and commit to organised routine (e.g. rehearsals).

- Opinion was split on whether their young people have positive self-esteem, though in contrast perceived confidence levels around participating in drama were high.

- Group leaders also expressed confidence in their young people's drama and performance skills, and in their behaviour and respect towards other people.

- Although most group leaders agreed their young people had the ability to participate effectively in group activities, confidence was slightly lower for this measure and 7% felt this wasn't the case for their group. Again, the pandemic was felt to be a factor here and leaders were keen to emphasise that PSFNT Season Three was a first for many of their young people in terms of bonding and working with a group in-person.

> *"It has been challenging post-Covid. A lot of our young people are used to being online but have struggled both with consistency and commitment, and with idea that doing something live carries consequences."*
>
> **Group Leader, Toonspeak**

> *"Coming out of Covid, resilience and mental health has been terrible. Things like learning lines has become a very difficult thing, so there's been bumps on the road in this production."*
>
> **Drama teacher, Beath High School**

- One school drama teacher described starting up an extra-curricular drama club which had been discontinued since the pandemic. However, with almost three years of activity lost to Covid, her third and fourth years simply didn't have the same skills or confidence as this age group had pre-2020 after three years of drama learning so she had to quickly adjust to their reduced level of experience.







2.1.2 Hopes and expectations from participation in PSFNT

Group leaders were asked about their hopes and expectations for their young people as a result of participation in PSFNT.

- Without exception, all group leaders expected their young people to be more confident individuals as a result of participation (41% 'strongly agreed' this would be an outcome).
- All group leaders expected their young people to learn new skills (45% 'strongly agreed').
- All leaders also expected their young people to have a sense of pride and achievement after taking part (75% 'strongly agreed' they would).
- Almost all (97%) expected young people's wellbeing would improve as a result of participation.

> *"I liked that it was about bringing on children's confidence in the run out of Covid. Nairn Youth Theatre is about resilience and friendships, not training talent for the stage. This felt like a very warm environment to bring kids back into."*
>
> **Group leader, Nairn Youth Theatre**

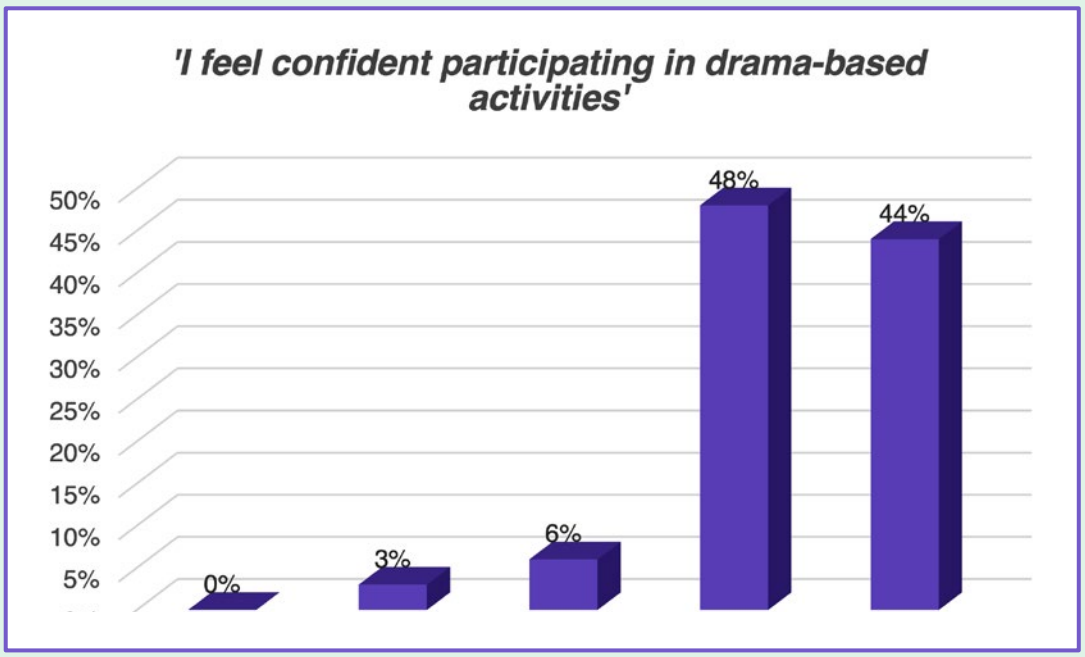
> *"I participated in Season Two online. I was 12 – so young! This year I'm excited to have access to a script, to a stage, to an audience."*
>
> **Young Person, Toonspeak**





2.1.3 Young people at the close of PSFNT

Although it wasn't possible to survey young participants at the beginning of the project, over a quarter of festival participants completed a survey after they'd performed in person at one of the hub theatre festivals.



Assessing their own confidence around participation in drama-based activities, young participants presented a more confident overall impression of themselves than group leaders had indicated at the start of PSFNT.

- No young people felt they had zero confidence.
- The vast majority (98%) expressed some confidence or more, with almost half (44%) feeling 'highly confident' about participation in activities.

Confidence about performing was similarly high, with 90% of young people expressing confidence in this area.

Young people's confidence was also high around working with other young people in their group (86% confident, including 55% who were highly confident).

"I think it's really helped with projecting my voice and appearing more confident on stage. You have to try hard to reach the people at the back and I've learnt how to do that."

Young Person, Firrhill High School

"I think 'The Day The Stampers United' was an amazing play and that our teacher gave us roles that made us very confident."

Young Person

'We never thought we'd be performing here in front of people, I never imagined it, we are used to performing in front of parents...the best part was after the play was done and you felt so accomplished."

Young Person, What Happens Now

- A large majority (89%) of group leaders also felt that participation had increased confidence in their young people and all of the leaders (100%) felt their group had developed new skills and a sense of pride and achievement.

Group leaders who were interviewed all described the positive changes in self-confidence they'd observed in their groups to varying extents. For some, this was about the group coming together and displaying maturity by pursuing a goal and rising to the occasion of a festival.

> *"Knowing that they're going to perform in front of an audience has given them a big responsibility and a big achievement that they're going to have under their belts. The performance element really shifts things in a good way and gives them a goal to work towards."*
>
> **Group leader, Toonspeak**

> *"It's been quite impactful on their confidence I think, and on their perceptions of their boundaries and limitations. It's very different from performing in a little country hall to a local audience."*
>
> **Group leader, Fintry Amateur Dramatic Society**

> *"There are a lot of kids in our drama group who have additional support needs, are neurodivergent, LGBTQ+ who for one reason or another are maybe just not that confident. This has really given them a chance to be themselves and it's done wonders for them."*
>
> **Drama teacher, Beath High School**

Other leaders talked about the progression in self-confidence shown by individuals within their group. Fintry Amateur Dramatic Society's leader described one girl who had initially been the only young person in the group to say she didn't want to speak any lines. By the end of the rehearsal process, she was confident enough to ask if she could in fact say a few lines, which she did on stage at Perth Theatre in front of a large audience. For this particular young person this progression was a huge and impactful step.

2.1.4 Social skills and team-building

A notable outcome reported by both group leaders and young people was that bringing a group – sometimes with a broader age range than usual - together around a shared goal for PSFNT had developed young people's social confidence and ability to work together. One spoke of a young person who was experiencing problems at home and didn't have many friends before they joined the group. By the end of the project, they felt part of a community and had people that they could speak to.

> *"The highlight for me was seeing the groups come together and work as a team towards an ensemble piece. We've managed to get rid of that competitiveness of 'I want a bigger part than you.'"*
>
> **Group Leader, Dramalama**

> *"Today, on that stage, I saw them come together as a team. I think that's come from the confidence of knowing that if something goes wrong, they're not going to let that bother them."*
>
> **Group Leader, Toonspeak**

> *"Meeting people in the older group and hanging out was probably the highlight for me."*
>
> **Young Person, Nairn Youth Theatre**

"Meeting new people is scary but when you know they like the same things as you, it's a lot easier."

Young Person, Gaiety Young Company

"When I joined the Gaiety Young company, I was really, really shy, I didn't know how to talk to anyone, but I met even more people thanks to Positive Stories for Negative Times, and that was amazing. It's helped me socialise a lot more"

Young Person, Gaiety Young Company

2.1.5 Drama and performance skills

Young people's confidence at the close of PSFNT was high around possessing a range of drama and performance skills, though less so than some other topics, with 85% confident overall, but only 19% highly confident. This is understandable, given the young age of most PSFNT participants and the impact of the Covid years.

- 84% of young participants reported having increased their drama and performance skills as a result of PSFNT.

Some of the group leaders described the PSFNT scripts they worked with as more challenging for young people than the material they were used to working with, e.g. due to the rhythm of the language and dialogue, the concepts explored in the work, and the need to learn lines (where often a devised or improvised process has been the standard model for the young people). For the most part, group leaders felt these challenges had been positive and motivating, leading to growth and confidence despite some difficulties, especially early in the rehearsal process.

Some did feel their groups were a little too young to really get to grips with their chosen scripts and felt the age suitability advice from Wonder Fools could have been revised upwards.

"It was quite difficult. The choral work and the repetition – that took time to stick and they really struggled at first."

Group leader, Drama Mill

"It was really quite abstract for them, especially at first, but they've really started to grasp the point of it in the last two weeks. I had to find ways of making it fun and engaging for them and it's been fun for me as well."

Group leader, Dramalama

"It's been good for the group, but it has been really tricky, with a rhythm that repeats all the time so you can see them wondering 'are we at page 12 or page

Group leader, Nairn Youth Theatre

When asked to elaborate on new skills acquired, young people tended to talk about their performing and stage confidence being built, developing dramaturgy skills, as well as song-writing and character development.

"I learnt that it's not that scary to perform in front of an audience."

"I'm usually a very shy person but this is also my first show and it made me more confident and less shy."

"Drama, confidence, and teamwork skills."

"My dramaturgy skills have improved tenfold, as well as building a sensitive and caring feedback practice."





Practical skills mentioned included juggling, learning lines, voice projection, and using film equipment.

"I learnt about projecting my voice and talking to the cast and the audience together."

"I learnt how to make a film!"

"Learning my lines and practicing as much as possible."

"I want to be an actor and work in theatre and build up my career and this gave me a massive kickstarter. If anyone tells me I'm not suited for a part, I'll say "I played at the Traverse,"

Young Person, Beath High School

2.1.6. Life skills

It's important to note that many of the group leaders interviewed were keen to stress that the ethos of their youth theatre was based on building skills for life through drama, not training young people to be professional performers – a distinction which also emerged in some of the interviews with young people.

"Making a show makes you a more confident person in everything you do. It doesn't mean you have to go into the theatre world. Standing on stage with a group will help in everyday life."

Group leader, Nairn Youth Theatre

"Ever since I joined the Youth Theatre my confidence has just been getting better and I've been able to do more stuff. My confidence outside of drama has been building as well."

Young person, Beath High School

"I'm pretty sure that when I'm a lot older I'd like to have drama as a hobby, but I'm going to be an engineer. I've already built a hot tub and a pizza oven."

Young Person, Nairn Youth Theatre

Spotlight On: Wonder Fools Youth Board

The youth board was founded as part of Season Two and consists of 20 young people from across Scotland between the ages of 16 – 25. All members identified as being at a transitional period in their lives when they joined and were keen to expand their skill sets, amongst other benefits of being on the youth board.

The board have met online every two weeks since May 2021 and have played a central role in the commissioning of the plays. Each playwright has met with the board at treatment phase and then first draft. The board have provided feedback to ensure plays are relevant, exciting, usable and accessible to young people.

"It's really cool to be part of a process where you can see where our feedback as the youth board as shaped what each play has become today"
— Youth Board member

They have also benefitted from a series of skills workshops, covering topics from dramaturgy and directing to producing and facilitation. They performed one of the plays at the Traverse as part of Season Two and at the Gaiety in Season Three, this time also directing the piece and designing the movement and lighting design. Several members of the board have also been employed as event assistants helping to manage each festival and led their own youth groups to stage productions.

"it was such a great experience, um, to be part of the whole process of the play and getting to see the ideas, the first drafts, second drafts, and then getting to see the production bit to life through being in a production and then get to come to the festival and supporting other young people." **– Youth Board member**

"It's great to be involved in the project in a different capacity, gain some more facilitation skills, and see a bit more how the pieces have impacted the groups." **– Youth Board member**

All have talked about the benefits of learning new skills through collaborating with people actively working in the industry (something not offered as part of accredited courses). This includes experience in their own specialism but also being given the chance to try out new areas including production, event management and facilitation. They have also spoken about genuinely being valued members of the team, being treated as equals and their opinions being valued and actioned by established playwrights.

"I have never learned so much in a week. It's incredible just being able to be with Robbie and Jack and the whole team and being able to really see how to put on a show."
– Youth Board member

"I think Wonder Fools have equipped me with facilitation skills, dramaturgy skills, all have helped break down imposter syndrome - all things that will help me so much in being able to create a show for the youth theatre, for hopefully my own productions in the future." **– Youth Board member**

All praised the diversity of the group and the sense of camaraderie and connection with other theatre makers from across Scotland and the wider industry, especially those studying in England and those from the Highlands.

"And really the program's amazing. I could go on and on about all of the fantastic plays and artists we've worked with. But I think just the community that we've built has been the best part of all of it. I wouldn't have met any of these people if it hadn't been for the Youth Board." **-Youth Board member**

"So it's quite nice that we have such a diverse group of people that meet up about, well, a lot of us meet together once a year because we're from so many different places in Scotland, so it's nice that when we do come together, we realise, oh, we're actually capable of doing quite a lot because we've got so many different parts of the puzzle of the jigsaw that we can put together and then to culminate in a show that we're doing at a festival." **– Youth Board member**

They also spoke about the balance of support and responsibility given by the Wonder Fools team.

"You feel held, but you also feel like you're being given space that you don't often get at this age to do something like direct" **– Youth Board member**

"The mentoring of Jack and Robbie to sort of guide us in the right direction, but it's almost felt as if we've all been quite equal through this process to collaborate. It's kind of gone magically well." **– Youth Board member**

The only improvement requested was to include more in-person meetings throughout the process in future iterations of the project.

"Joining Wonder Fools (youth board) has been one of the best things I've ever done" **– Youth Board member**





2.1.6 SHANARRI Indicators

Through its 'Getting it right for every child' policy, Scottish Government endorses eight indicators of wellbeing which are intended to give a holistic view of young people's wellbeing.

Safe – growing up in an environment where a child or young person feels secure, nurtured, listened to and enabled to develop to their full potential. This includes freedom from abuse or neglect.

Healthy – having the highest attainable standards of physical and mental health, access to suitable healthcare, and support in learning to make healthy and safe choices. Achieving – being supported and guided in learning and in the development of skills, confidence and self-esteem, at home, in school and in the community.

Nurtured – growing, developing and being cared for in an environment which provides the physical and emotional security, compassion and warmth necessary for healthy growth and to develop resilience and a positive identity.

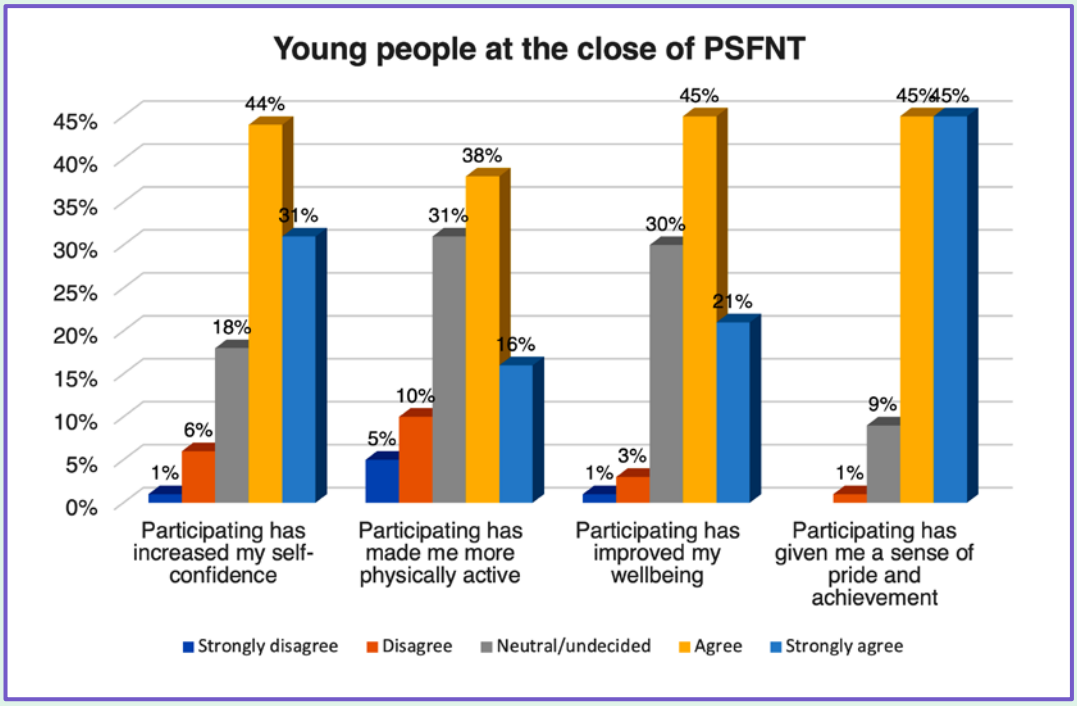
Active – having opportunities to take part in activities such as play, recreation and sport, which contribute to healthy growth and development, at home, in school and in the community.

Respected – being involved in and having their voices heard in decisions that affect their life, with support where appropriate.

Responsible – having opportunities and encouragement to play active and responsible roles at home, in school and in the community, and where necessary, having appropriate guidance and supervision.

Included – having help to overcome inequalities and being accepted as part of their family, school and community.

SHANARRI indicators were used to inform a series of survey questions aimed at assessing wellbeing in relation drama practice in a group and young people's experience of PSFNT.



- 90% of young people felt that participation had given them a sense of pride and achievement.
- Three-quarters of young people (75%) felt that participation had increased their self-confidence.
- Two-thirds felt that participation had improved their wellbeing.
- Young people were less sure that participation had made them more physically active. Although a majority said it had, 15% disagreed and almost a third (31%) were unsure, suggesting that for many young people the physical activity over the course of the project was not unusual for them.
- Young people also said they felt safe and respected in their drama group - 93% were confident this was the case, including 63% who were highly confident.

"This has helped my anxiety."

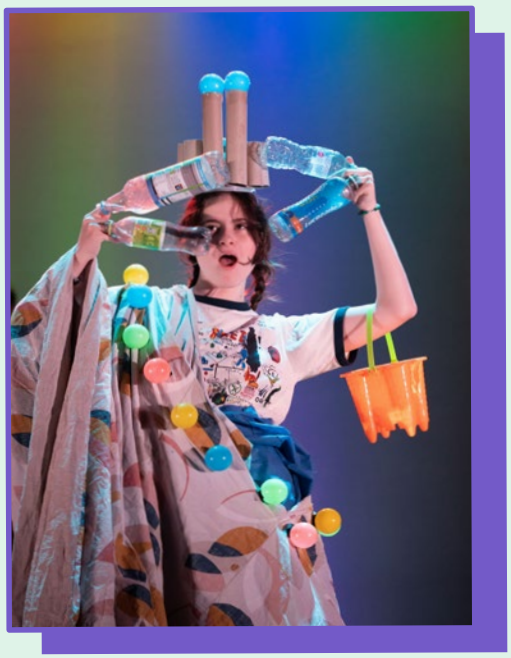
Young Person

"It's really good for mental health. A lot of young people in Ayrshire can be quite ostracised – they don't really meet a lot of other people."

Group leader, Gaiety Theatre

"Pretty much everyone in the drama club I wouldn't have known if it hadn't been for this performance. It's really nice to meet people who have the same interests as you."

Young Person, Firrhill High School





2.1.7 Group leaders observed changes in young people

At the close of PSFNT, group leaders indicated that overall their group had shown progress against a number of the SHANNARI indicators.

	PSFNT start	PSFNT end
Young people in my group are healthy and physically active.	**76%** agree	**90%** agree ↑
Young people in my group have positive self-esteem.	**44%** agree	**70%** agree ↑
Young people in my group are confident about participating in drama-based activities.	**76%** agree	**100%** agree ↑
Young people in my group possess a range of drama and performance skills.	**89%** agree	**100%** agree ↑
Young people in my group possess the social skills to participate effectively in group activities.	**69%** agree	**90%** agree ↑
Young people in my group behave responsibly and with respect for others.	**93%** agree	**100%** agree ↑

As might be expected given the focus on drama throughout PSFNT, confidence around drama participation and skills was unanimously felt to have increased. However, positive self-esteem and social skills were also reported as being improved compared to the baseline survey results.

A number of group leaders also cited confidence and belief in themselves as the most obvious benefits the young people in their group had experienced as a result of participation. Some also praised Wonder Fools and the venues for creating a safe space for their young people.

"Confidence and belief in themselves has been the main benefit."

"Self-esteem is a tricky question as sadly there are many factors that impact on it. However, I do agree being involved in performances increases self-esteem."

"It really encouraged our young people to have a voice and to voice their opinion. The project really helped to give young people confidence and conviction in their own artistry, it was a great opportunity to push them out of their comfort zone and create something they've never been a part of before." Group Leader, Eden Court Collective

"My group loved the gender-neutral toilets at the Traverse, were pleased that their pronouns and preferred names were respected in the workshops and felt supported by the staff and other groups throughout."

Anonymous survey response

Spotlight On: Firrhill High School

Firfhill is a large secondary school located in southwest Edinburgh. The group leader started there as a drama teacher relatively recently and, having participated in previous (remote) PSFNT seasons with another school, was interested in leading a mixed year group drama club (11-15 years) to take part in the festival at the Traverse Theatre in June 2023.

The school has been badly disrupted by Covid and the teacher was keen to make connections beyond the school gates to show pupils new perspectives and experiences. PSFNT offered them the structure they were looking for to give the drama group a focus and goal, but also to allow them to lead the extra-curricular group without taking on a daunting additional workload.

The drama teacher visits the Traverse regularly and has an interest in new writing but doesn't find obtaining fresh scripts for young people straightforward. PSFNT appealed because the scripts are free to access, have lots of parts and opportunities for adaptation, and carry no pressure to perform an outstanding show at the end of the process.

"It's quite accessible. The scripts are free so there's no pressure of 'Oh we've paid for the rights, and we need to do the show!'

Many of the group had never visited a theatre previously and their excitement of arriving at the Traverse out of school hours and being shown their dressing rooms backstage was palpable. The teacher reassured the group that their nerves were normal and showed they cared about their performance, but was impressed and proud by how ready the group seemed for their performance. Being treated like young adults by the Wonder Fools and theatre staff meant the pupils acted more maturely than at school and rose to the occasion.

"It's like they aren't being treated like little kids – they're being treated seriously, like performers. I think that makes them rise up to meet it."

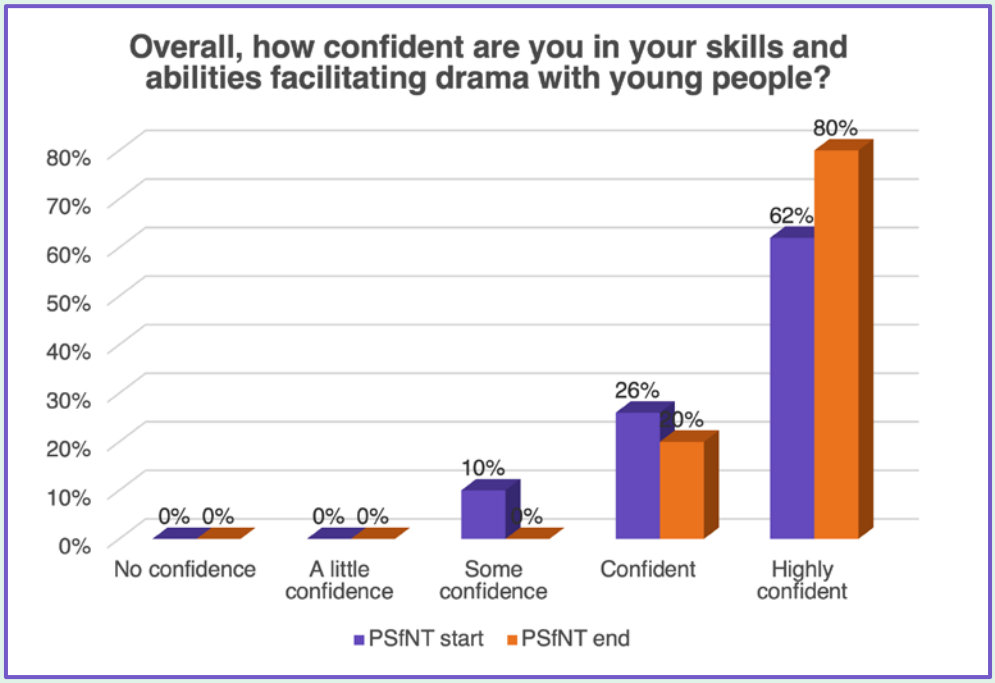
Following the performance, the drama teacher cited the main benefits to their pupils as being the coming together of young people from different year groups around a shared interest and goal, which they had committed to together and overcome their nerves to successfully achieve.

2.2 Outcome: 'Group leader skill sets and confidence in facilitating creative activity will improve through continued professional development.'

2.2.1 Group leader confidence before and after PSFNT Season Three

The baseline survey of group leaders established that self-reported confidence levels amongst participating drama leaders were relatively high at the start of Season Three.

- 62% described themselves as 'highly confident' in their drama facilitation skills and abilities with young people, 26% described themselves as 'confident' while the remaining 10% expressed 'some confidence'.



- Despite the relatively confident starting point, 97% of group leaders still indicated that they expected participation in PSFNT to make them a 'more confident practitioner'.

- At the close of PSFNT, group leaders did express more confidence in their facilitation skills and abilities. No group leader reported being anything less than 'confident' and 80% described themselves as 'highly confident' in this respect.

2.2.2 Confidence in other areas

- Confidence was also high at the start of PSFNT around following best safeguarding practice for young people (60% highly confident, 30% confident) and had increased further by the end of the project (75% highly confident, 25% confident).

- Group leader confidence was slightly lower around directing young people in performance (48% highly confident, 39% confident, 7% 'some confidence) and supporting young people's wellbeing (48% highly confident, 45% confident, 6% 'some confidence). Following PSFNT, confidence around directing young people had risen to '75% highly confident', while confidence in supporting young people's wellbeing had also risen to '75% highly confident'.

- At the start of PSFNT, group leader confidence was lowest around trying new creative approaches with young people. 23% of group leaders said they had either 'a little' or 'some' confidence in this area, suggesting that support with new ideas and approaches to drama is something group leaders could benefit from. This figure had reduced to 13% by the close of PSFNT.

> *"This is huge for me as it's the first play I've directed on my own! There's been a whole heap of learning in this for me, in terms of trusting my own creative instinct and in giving the kids the agency to make it their project."*
>
> **Group leader, Fintry Amateur Dramatic Society**

> *"This show was quite different stylistically and not my usual type of play. I thought 'this is going to suit more biomechanics and physical theatre, which isn't what I'm used to."*
>
> **Drama teacher, Beath High School**

2.2.3 Group leader CPD

- Group leaders were asked in the baseline survey to what extent they agreed that *'I have opportunities to develop new skills in drama-based youth work via continuing professional development.'* 21% disagreed with this statement and a further 21% were undecided. While just over half (53%) agreed they do have opportunities for CPD, just 7% said they strongly agreed.

- 86% of leaders also expected participation in PSFNT to extend their support network. At the close of PSFNT, 67% agreed they had 'a network of other practitioners I can draw on for support' and 72% agreed that participation had extended their network.

- Many group leaders aren't used to working with scripts with their young people – devised work tends to be their default practice. Evaluation of previous seasons suggests this is often due to the lack of quality and appropriate scripts available to them. PSFNT has pushed them in a different direction and leaders praised Wonder Fools support in this process. They found it refreshing that Wonder Fools had no direct stake in how the plays were performed and were very flexible and supportive around each group adapting them according to their needs.

- Group leaders also said they greatly appreciated the opportunity to spend time online with the writers.

The indication from group leaders, therefore, is that Wonder Fools are addressing a need for CPD in this sector, where despite high professional confidence, opportunities to develop new skills are felt to be missing by many practitioners.

> *"Youth Theatre Arts Scotland and other training groups do offer lots of opportunities for personal growth but they tend to be when we are running our workshops, so often our facilitators can't take part."*
>
> **Group leader**

> *"I am an experienced drama practitioner of over 25 years but working in a challenging and under-resourced theatre/cultural environment."*
>
> **Group leader**

> *"It's been a great opportunity to sit down and examine my own practice. It's like shaking off the rust! So re-learning, evaluating how I'm doing, and talking to other practitioners. It's been good for me, but definitely challenging."*
>
> **Group leader, Nairn Youth Theatre**



PSFNT Festival Performer



PSFNT Festival Performance

Spotlight On: Charleston Academy

Charleston Academy is a secondary school in Inverness. After signing up to lead the project, the teacher then left the school. A 17-year-old student then stepped up to lead the group as the only person studying higher drama in her school. She brought together a group of 10 students aged between 13-16 and not only took part in the project but brought the group to perform *The Day The Stampers United* by Sara Shaawari at the festival at Eden Court, a production that she also directed and performed in.

The play is set in a warehouse and is about how collective action begins with solidarity within the community. In addition to the script, their production also included hard hitting statistics of sweatshops, worker's rights and gender pay gaps which had been researched by the group.

Between the upheaval of exams and summer holidays, the school also had to close due to infestation and still they continued by rehearsing in their local park. The production was given additional support from Wonder Fools with regular check ins, a bursary and was granted additional rehearsal space at Eden Court.

With no provision for recreational drama at their school, many of the performers had not experienced being on stage before.

"It's been a great opportunity for the people I'm working with too, because some of them would have never gotten into theatre or drama because we don't have a drama club. So, I guess from that perspective, there's a whole pool of talent there that isn't tapped into and will probably eventually be lost. But through this opportunity, so many of them have been able to really connect to the stage, costumes, makeup, learning lines and the about the possibility of other careers/areas of interest in the arts."

Though unorthodox, this production achieved many outcomes of the project with the additional outcome of empowering young people to lead and create their own work.

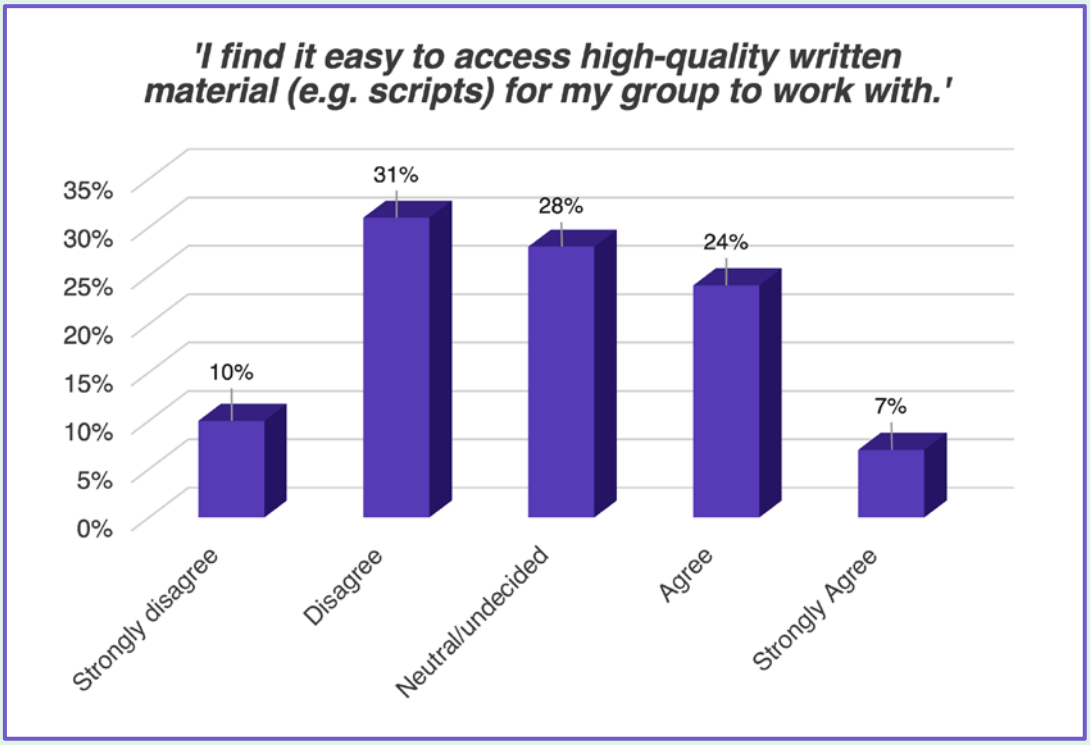
"I would love to do Positive Stories for Negative Times again. At the drop of a hat, I would do it again."

2.3 Outcome: 'The quality and range of plays for young people will improve.'

The UK is home to a vibrant contemporary theatre sector, supporting new writing and creative talent, both emerging and established. However, the quality and range of contemporary plays specifically written for young performers is limited. At the same time, youth drama practitioners in Scotland express an appetite for Scottish-based new writing. New scripts are also expensive to commission and to licence making them inaccessible to many groups. Positive Stories for Negative Times aims to redress this imbalance, providing opportunities for young people to access scripts by leading playwrights working in Scotland which speak to their lives and concerns. All are provided free of charge removing financial barriers and allowing group leaders to take risks on new work or styles of work.

2.3.1 Accessing new writing

In the baseline survey, group leaders were asked whether they 'find it easy to access high-quality written material (e.g. scripts) for my group to work with.'



- 41% of group leaders did not find it easy to access high-quality written material, while 31% said that they did.

The group leaders interviewed consistently cited accessing good, contemporary, and affordable scripts as an ongoing struggle, which often led to devising processes being their default way of working with young people.

Particular challenges were felt to be finding scripts which were suitable for a broad age range of young people, contained accessible language and a large array of small parts, and which were adaptable to specific needs and preferences. The PSFNT scripts were rated highly by group leaders as effectively answering this brief.

"I like new writing but it's something I really struggle with. I don't know how to find them! We do lots of devised pieces but I've never been able to bring writers in. It's nice to have another company that will do that legwork."

Group leader, Drama Mill

"There are so many scripts where the language is problematic – either for different age groups or for parents. What was brilliant about this script was that the language was just perfect. They know those phrases because they encounter them all the time."

Group leader, International School, Milan



2.3.2 Feedback from young people

Young people were asked what they had thought of the play they'd worked on and performed. The vast majority of feedback was positive, with young people remarking on their enjoyment of working with their chosen play and the fun had by their group:

"It was great fun to make and perform."

"It was really fun to create!"

"Amazing, I'm going to remember these lines forever because some of them were so funny."

Some young people spoke eloquently about how rich and multi-layered the plays they'd worked on were, and how they had prompted wider conversations.

"And the name for that is..." is a deeply layered play which provoked many great discussions throughout the rehearsal process especially in terms of the characters' disability."

"I personally appreciated the magic and possibilities of the play so much more once we rehearsed and explored it, versus sitting and reading it."

"I thought it was brilliant, it made us as a company ask questions about ourselves and the world, and hopefully it'll have the same effect on the audience."

"I liked the fact that there was kind of a moral at the end of our play, which is speak out about what's right and stand up for yourself."

Young Person, Drama Mill

Young people and group leaders also appreciated the opportunity to put their own creative stamp on the work, and the way the plays could be adapted to suit different groups.

> *"They feel like the play has been written especially for them. There's room in there for them to make it their own and take ownership too."*
>
> **Group leader, Elms Ensemble**

> *"It's any drama teacher's dream to be given a script like that, which will work with any size group and where if someone drops out you can just take out that line and it still makes sense."*
>
> **Group leader, International School, Milan**

> *"It was very interesting and allowed many possibilities for different groups."*
>
> **Young Person**

> *"The scripts are tailor-made for young people but then we can mould it ourselves so it's like a building block."*
>
> **Group leader, Toonspeak**

> *"I really liked it because we got to be creative with it*
>
> **Young Person**

Several group leaders also spoke about the relevance of the scripts and how they had been used them as vehicles for big conversations about subjects such as disability, workers' rights, and gender.

2.3.3 Writer development

Another area of professional development experienced was that of the writers. Several of whom has not written for young people before, some have not worked in Scotland and many have not worked internationally so have the project has provided them with platform to engage new audiences all over the world.



Spotlight On: Spotlight Youth Theatre

Spotlight Youth Theatre is based in Cape Town, South Africa, and operates as an extra-curricular option in a girls school. Group leader Deborah has taught drama both in schools and out for 30 years and her ethos for the youth theatre is about developing the 'whole child' through creative thought and by working in groups to build respect and communication skills. The group also took part in Season Two.

Deborah is always on the lookout for new scripts but feels new material is limited in South Africa so she often looks further afield.

"If you go into a book shop here in Cape Town and ask where the drama or theatre in education section is, there simply isn't one. I'm not part of the University so I don't have access to their library."

This season Am I a Robot by Tim Crouch jumped out as the obvious play to work on with her group as the themes around social media and the ethical issues raised resonated with her group.

"I thought it was a relevant play. It was educational and entertaining, it wasn't just singing and dancing. It was new and refreshing."

Working on the play produced some (familiar) challenges around cast illness and lack of rehearsal time, but Deborah also found the text itself challenging.

"It created an interesting challenge for me as a director in terms of how to stage it as the characterisation was unusual. I liked that challenge as I've been teaching for 37 years. I thought 'I can do something different with this. It will stretch me.'"

On the day of the performance two main cast members were ill and unable to perform. Deborah was hugely impressed with how her young cast responded to this situation by rallying around each other. Deborah feels this example of teamwork was one of the biggest learning benefits of the entire project.

"I think it's incredible that these young people had the resilience, the grit and determination that it didn't matter what happened, they were going to do the play."

Deborah describes the huge confidence boost and sense of pride and achievement her group got from performing Am I a Robot? and feels that part of this came from knowing a film of their performance would be shared with Wonder Fools in Scotland. She hopes to participate in PSFNT again in future seasons.

2.4 Outcome: 'Young people and group leaders will have greater access to culture.'

Scotland is a relatively small country but it features markedly varying opportunities to access culture which often reflect areas of deprivation or geographic isolation. Positive Stories for Negative Times Season Three was designed to reach children and young people of all social backgrounds and to provide an opportunity to participate in drama regardless of location. Funded bursaries were offered for the first time this season in order to reduce financial barriers to participation.

2.4.1 Access to culture

At the start of Season Three, group leaders were asked about their young people's access to culture. The results suggest a lack of opportunities for young people to engage creatively outside of school:

- Almost half of group leaders (48%) felt their young people did not feel a connection to their local theatre.
- A similar proportion (44%) felt their young people did not have opportunities to see drama and performance locally.
- Just over a quarter (28%) felt their young people weren't regularly involved in creative activities outside of school.

> *"I think a lot of my young people probably don't even know what their local theatre is."*
>
> **Group leader**

> *"Maybole and West Kilbride are quite rural areas. There are community centres where they do performances but they don't really have theatres."*
>
> **Group Leader, Dramalama**

> *"I realised as we walked in (to the Gaiety) that most of my young people had never been here before. So that in itself is golden. I think we'll always remember this."*
>
> **Group Leader, Toonspeak**

> *"A lot of my group have never even been in a theatre before so to get a look backstage and stuff is just such a good opportunity. To see that you don't have to be posh to go the theatre and it doesn't matter if your parents don't go."*
>
> **Group Leader, Firhill High School**

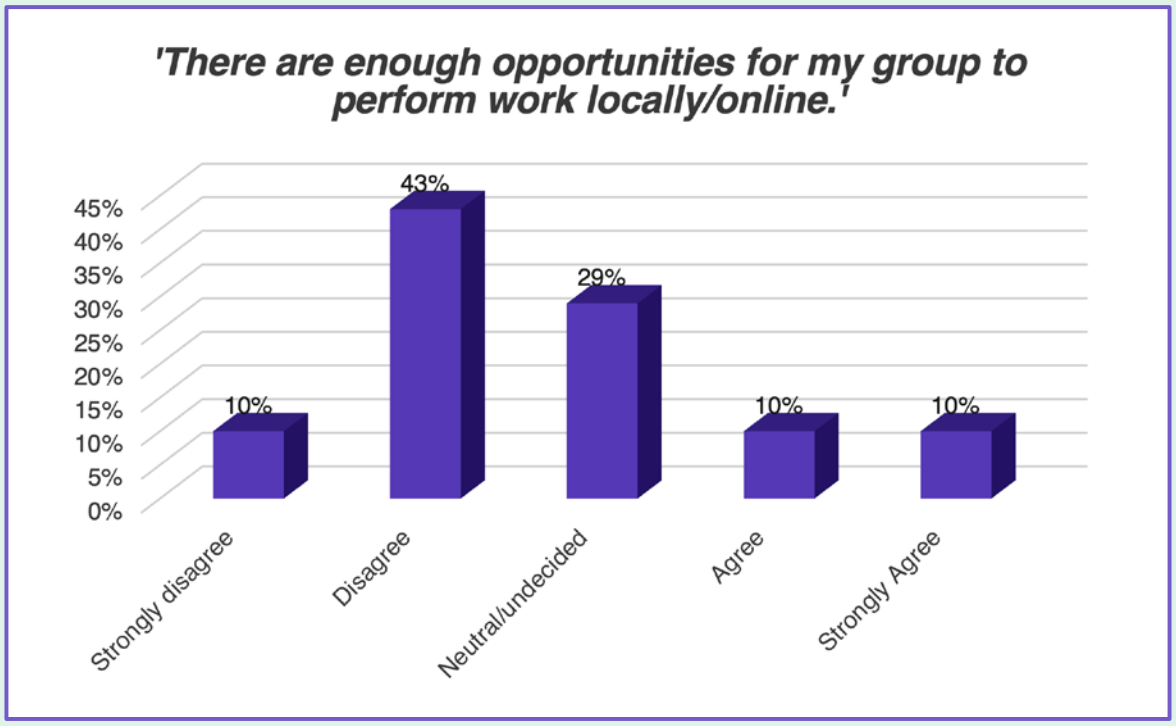
One school drama teacher described her school catchment area as deprived and post-industrial. They are based in Cowdenbeath, Fife, and are in the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland based on the Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). Teachers at the school notice a lack of aspiration in young pupils in part due to a lack of role models at home and a lack of worthwhile employment options locally. The group's chosen play, *The Day the Stampers United*, spoke to this situation and provoked discussion on worker's rights and social mobility.

2.4.2 Hopes and expectations from participation in PSFNT

- The vast majority of group leaders (86%) felt that participation in PSFNT would give their groups greater access to cultural opportunities.

- Just over half expected participation to lead to a 'stronger relationship' with their local theatre.

In the baseline survey at the start of PSFNT, group leaders made clear that opportunities for their young people to perform work locally (or online) were limited. Less than a quarter (20%) agreed that enough opportunities existed, indicating that PSFNT helped to bridge a significant gap.



- In addition, almost a third of group leaders (30%) did not feel they had a good working relationship with their local theatre. Just over a third (37%) felt that they did, suggesting a split picture amongst youth drama groups involved in PSFNT.

- The four PSFNT festivals, spanning southwest, central, and highland Scotland, brought 22 groups together in person over four weekends. Some groups (e.g. Gaiety and Eden Court Youth Theatres) were very local, while others (e.g. Fintry Amateur Dramatics Society and Firefly Arts) travelled significant distances to reach the festivals.

- As might be expected, more rural or isolated groups in general reported having fewer opportunities to engage with a professional theatre, however even some youth theatres attached to a hub venue felt it was rare to be given the opportunity to perform on the main stage.

- Common to all of the young participants in the PSFNT festivals was the experience of not just visiting a theatre but actually inhabiting it for two days and spending time in the studio spaces and backstage, as well as performing on a main stage with professional production.

- Building a sense of familiarity and belonging with theatres amongst young people, it is hoped, will make them more likely to stay culturally engaged as they grow older (something Wonder Fools are keen to work with hub theatres on tracking over time).

> *"I've never been to this theatre before but the whole vibe is really nice. It's so cool backstage. I've got used to this place quite quickly."*
>
> **Young Person, Drama Mill**

> *"Quite often we'll perform in local community centres but this has given us the chance to work towards something that connects with mainstream theatre and meet other young people in different areas."*
>
> **Group Leader, Toonspeak**

> *"Theatres are way out of our league due to high costs."*
>
> **Group leader**

> *"It's been a game changer for our young people to associate themselves with a national festival and part of an international project with such a huge reach. It gives us and them credibility and the belief that's there's more out there than our village hall and that they are deserving of it."*
>
> **Anonymous survey submission**

> *"It makes me realise the magic that's possible when lots of youth theatres and creatives come together and that we're not like satellites and there are so many other like-minded people that otherwise might not be able to meet through not having access to theatre through home life or school. You don't realise what it gives you until you come here."*
>
> **Group Leader, What Happens Now**

2.4.3 Access to culture by the close of PSFNT

It is, of course, difficult for one, time-limited, project to make large inroads into a complex issue such as equitable access to cultural opportunities in Scotland. Nevertheless, the post-project survey with group leaders indicated some positive changes:

- 78% agreed that participation in PSFNT had increased their group's access to cultural opportunities.
- The proportion of group leaders who felt their young people did not feel a connection to their local theatre had decreased from 48% to 30%.

> *"Coming to Perth was the highlight! None of us have ever done anything this big before."*
>
> **Young person, Fintry Amateur Dramatic Society**

> *"A personal highlight for me was seeing the group walk into a theatre for the first time and realise it could be a space for them too."*
>
> **Group leader**

> *"Wonder Fools say they've got a play on over the (Edinburgh) festival, so maybe I'll try and bring an older group along to that."*
>
> **Group leader, Drama Mill**



PSFNT Festival Performance



PSFNT Festival Performance

The group leaders interviewed also spoke about the idea of young people's 'cultural capital' and the positive effect which the sharing and seeing element of the PSFNT festivals had in raising this.

> *"Yesterday was just such a good atmosphere. Getting the chance to see other groups' work – there's such a high value to that as it's not something they necessarily have a lot of access to."*
>
> **Group Leader, Toonspeak**

> *"I'm a big believer that if they see good stuff, they'll make good stuff. It increases their cultural capital so much. I want all our kids to have that experience of seeing quality live theatre."*
>
> **Drama teacher, Beath High School**

2.4.4 Bursaries

Cash bursaries were offered as part of the application process to PSFNT Season Three. These could be used flexibly depending on the needs of the group and tended to contribute to groups' travel to and from the festivals, production costs and the cost of additional support staff/ chaperones.

Group leaders whose groups had received bursaries were emphatic that this support, along with the fundamental PSFNT principle of free participation and access to scripts, had enabled their participation as otherwise costs for their young people would have been prohibitive. Bursary holders included:

- Two schools and one youth theatre in Cowdenbeath, Edinburgh and Glasgow all of which work with young people living in the some of Scotland's most deprived areas (SIMD deciles 1-3).
- Two youth theatres who are unfunded and offer free to access participation to all young people.
- Two youth theatres for whom travel would have been a barrier to their young people participating in the project.

> *"Seeing young people perform on stage in front of a live audience in a new venue was a personal highlight. Without Wonder Fools, this would be very unlikely to happen for most of the young people we work with. I think it was a game changer for some of the young people. There was such a sense of achievement and pride amongst the group."*
>
> **Group leader, Toonspeak**

> *"That was the one question mark we had – how we were going to get them here and who would pay for the little bits and pieces we'd need. We wouldn't have been able to fundraise for all of that so knowing we had the bursary to fall back on made things so much less stressful."*
>
> **Drama teacher, Beath High School**

> *"The bursary was vital. Nairn Youth Theatre is funded to be free for all, but that means we don't have a budget for transport. We've hired a bus and I don't think we would have managed to come to the festival without that."*
>
> **Group leader, Nairn Youth Theatre**

Spotlight On: Firefly Arts

Firefly Arts is a West Lothian-based charity which uses creative practice to upskill and empower young people through weekly, low-cost, after school programmes and outreach work in the community and in schools.

Like some of the other groups involved in Season Three, Firefly had initially become involved in PSFNT during the pandemic, when lockdown had created a need to move online and find connections and opportunities for young people.

Firefly's group leader was used to either devising work with her group or spending a lot of time looking for scripts. It has often been a struggle to find quality scripts which are appropriate for a broad age range, or which don't require a fee to use.

Thanks For Nothing by The PappyShow appealed because it provided a dramatic framework but also plenty of licence for the group to devise its own material. The group leader recounts that although it took a long time, they were determined to commit to the process recommended by The PappyShow in its entirety, to fully explore the issues and produce the best possible production at the end of it.

The young people involved described how fun the process of activities and improvisation had been.

"The young people's confidence has flourished through the process but actually just working together as an ensemble, being open to each other and listening to each other's stories – that's what made it more impactful and exciting."

Firefly's funding doesn't stretch to covering performance costs or travel, so the group took advantage of the bursary scheme in place for Season Three.

"Having the bursary allowed us to get all the young people here without having to worry. It did make it more accessible because it was like 'you know what, we're all getting the train. It wasn't reliant on whether they could get a parent to drop them off.'"

The young people in the group described their satisfaction in being able to express themselves by inputting into the final script, and their pride in overcoming their nerves to perform on stage in Perth, in front of people they didn't know:

"All the nervousness just kind of went away. It felt like we were rehearsing it again."

Following their festival appearance, Firefly will perform *Thanks for Nothing* again in front of their friends and family in West Lothian.

2.5 Outcome: 'Young people will feel more authentically represented in the arts in Scotland.'

Positive Stories for Negative Times aims to facilitate participative drama processes for children and young people, where their own creative talent is given space to develop and grow and where their voices can be heard. By commissioning contemporary writers with the ability to connect with young people in Scotland and working in consultation with the Wonder Fools youth board through the script-drafting process, PSFNT facilitates authentic representation of young people on stage and gives them agency over the kind of theatre they engage with.

2.5.1 Feedback from young people

Of the five core target outcomes which PSFNT Season Three set out to deliver, this was perhaps the most subjective and difficult to quantify. Nevertheless, in interviews with young people and the group leaders who know them well, strong evidence emerged to support this outcome.

Young people talked about how pertinent and relatable their PSFNT scripts were, and how they had been enabled to adapt and tailor scripts so that their own voices and preferences could also be expressed.

"I think it was really well written and totally captured the atmosphere of high school."

"It was very good and relatable."

"There are references to contemporary culture. The whole first scene is very relatable and exactly how lunchtime at the academy I went to was. It's what your life is like and it's capturing that."

"I liked how my group changed it into our own."

Young People

"I think what really sets Positive Stories for Negative Times apart is that these aren't adaptations of adult stories for young people. They're stories specifically crafted for them where they're at and it meets them there."

Youth Board member

Young people and group leaders both welcomed the chance to work with scripts which had been written specifically for young people, something which made them feel considered and better-represented.

"They feel valued in terms of knowing the scripts were specifically written for their age group." **Group leader**

"In the panto normally it's adults who get the main roles. This play was more centred on us and I picked up acting tips more easily. We got to put our feelings out and it felt more real." **Young person**

'It's also great because a lot of the parts are young people, they aren't having to play adults, so it's much more relatable." **Youth board member**

2.5.2 Feedback from group leaders

There was also a strong sense from group leaders that the experience of young people growing up in Scotland isn't well represented in the mainstream media or culture. While the breadth of contemporary themes explored in plays such as Tim Crouch's *Am I Robot?* were seen as making them relevant, there was also a desire to work with Scottish writers and to make work that expressed local experiences as well as universal truths.

> *"A highlight was being able to draw together personal experiences and creative ideas of both our adult leaders and youth participants to create a piece of work that dealt with important issues that are relevant in our community."*
>
> **Group leader**

> *"This is the first time they've worked with a proper script, written by a Scottish writer."*
>
> **Group Leader, Toonspeak**

> *"The north of Glasgow is a deprived area so it does always get that negative press. To be able to say 'look what the young people did – we're going on the road and representing at the Positive Stories festival – that's such positivity! It's amazing."*
>
> **Group Leader, Toonspeak**

- One group leader described the conversations around capitalism and ideology prompted by one of her young people who is a Ukrainian refugee. Ultimately the young person decided she didn't feel comfortable performing the work (other Ukrainian refugees did perform) but the group leader still felt it was positive that the group had discussed the issues/wider context and understood that the play's content was open to interpretation. The young person subsequently joined a partner poetry writing group instead and is now writing her own poetry.
- A drama teacher talked about how educational their chosen play had been for her students and complimented them on the maturity and breadth of their discussions around a number of political topics.
- As described, the Wonder Fools Youth Board were central to the commissioning process and acted as a sounding board during the writing process and fed back to commissioned writers on early drafts.





Spotlight On: Eden Court Collective

Eden Court Collective is a group of young people, drawn from across Eden Court's creative programme (including dance and music as well as youth theatre) which is brought together for specific projects. For the first Collective project since the pandemic, a small group convened to produce a devised drama performance using the PSFNT times text *Thanks for Nothing*, by The PappyShow.

Eden Court's arts practitioner for theatre, whose role includes teaching the youth theatre as well as working in local schools and the community, was tasked with leading an intensive 'play in a week' process for the Collective at the start of the summer holiday.

Thanks for Nothing is based on a series of 15 drama activities which the group participated in over three consecutive days before working their material up into a performance over the final two days. This was the group leader's first experience of leading a 'play in a week' and they found The PappyShow script well suited to this goal. By completion of the activities, the group already had enough content to begin shaping into a performance.

"I was amazed by how much content came from the script, without actually realising it was being created. It did it in a devious way! That was great."

The group were encouraged to be 'rebellious' and decided to adapt the recommended structure of the play themselves.

"The group were all aged 14-17 so they're old enough to make those creative choices. I trusted their judgement on what they wanted to do."

Despite the intensive timescale, changes were observed in the group over the course of the week. One participant (the youngest in the group) was described as being bright and intelligent but sometimes lacking in performance confidence. Over the week they grew in confidence daily and began to shine. The group leader attributes this to feeling supported by the group, which was able to bond during the intensive time spent together.

"I didn't realise how creative they would be and how forward they'd be in giving their opinions and advice. They've also seen a different side to theatre they haven't experienced before."

Although very pleased with the outcomes from the intensive week, the group leader hopes to participate again in PSFNT in the future and work with a script over a longer period of time to produce a more polished performance.

3. Young people's experience

As important as the target outcomes and dialogue with group leaders are, an essential outcome for PSFNT was that the young people participating enjoyed themselves and took something from the process, regardless of whether that aligned with adult expectations (or the evaluation framework!) This section considers the highlights and challenges young people experienced in their own words, and includes feedback received on the project overall.

3.1 Highlights for young people

Young people were asked what the best thing about participating in PSFNT had been. For many of the festival participants, their performance itself and the opportunity to perform on a professional stage were their standout highlights.

Many of the young participants felt the social aspect of their PSFNT experience stood out and had offered them both the chance to meet new people and to spend time with existing friends doing something creative together.

Overall, 77% of young participants agreed that PSFNT had led to them meeting new people.

What was the best thing about participating in PSFNT?

"Performing on stage at the theatre and bringing the story to life."

"Getting to work on a proper stage."

"Performing our play in front of an audience."

"Getting the opportunity to perform live in a real theatre."

"Since when do groups like us get to come to proper theatres in massive towns and get dinner? It's been amazing!"

3.2 Challenges for young people

Young people were also asked what had been most challenging about participating in PSFNT.

Top of the list as reported by many young people was learning lines and coping with short timescales to prepare their show. This was particularly applicable to participants working on intense or scratch productions, but also true for some young people whose groups began working on plays in the spring but only met once a week (the vast majority of groups involved hold weekly sessions).

"Definitely meeting other young & upcoming creatives from other youth groups. Meeting new people and making new friends."

"The community it fosters and the range of opportunities it creates for young people in Scotland."

"I just love coming together with the friends and colleagues I've made through PSFNT. I instantly feel at home within these spaces and wish I could live in the bubble forever!"

"I would do it again, a million times over, I would do it every day if I could"

"How much better was it than I expected? 1 spectialian percent! Better than I ever thought,"

A significant proportion of young people also cited nerves and anxiety about getting up on stage and performing as the main challenge they had overcome.

"Performing as confidently as I did when I was practicing."

"The nerves and nausea before going on stage."

"People looking at me."

"Probably just performing in front of a crowd under pressure but I'm more confident now."

"It's half stress, half buzz, but that balance creates a good show."

Interestingly, though many young participants said that socialising and meeting new people had been their favourite thing about PSFNT, a significant number said that meeting new people and learning to work together had been the most challenging aspect of participation. It seems likely that these two experiences aren't mutually exclusive, and that many young people found the social aspect of PSFNT both challenging and rewarding.

"The most challenging thing was mixing with other people!"

"Trying to understand and get along with everyone."

"Socialising with the other groups. They were a fair bit younger than me and were a lot for me to handle."

"Being myself around the people I did not know, but I soon felt comfortable."

A number of young people also took the time to compliment the Wonder Fools team and workshop facilitators for their work.

"All the Wonder Fools staff have been great and really good at adapting to the group."

"The brilliant facilitators really did their job well."

"It was great. The crew from Wonder Fools were so lovely!"

When asked for three words to describe the project/their experience answers included:

'Again, again, again!'

'Life changing, amazing, fun'

'Awesome, nerve-wracking, supportive'





4. Hub theatre feedback

A major change from the first two seasons of PSFNT in 2023 was the mounting of four live (in-person) festivals on consecutive summer weekends, hosted at hub venues across Scotland to allow the project as broad a geographical reach as possible. Festivals all followed a similar design over a weekend, with four to seven youth theatre or school groups converging on the hub theatre for facilitated workshops, performances of their PSFNT work, and social/networking opportunities in the form of games and meal breaks etc.

Key contacts at the hub theatres were interviewed and asked for their feedback on working with Wonder Fools in the build-up to the festivals, the festivals themselves, and on PSFNT's wider significance within the theatre sector.

Hub Theatre	Festival Dates	Young Participants	Audience
Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh	24-25 June	149	414
Gaiety Theatre, Ayr	1-2 July	61	238
Eden Court Theatre, Inverness	8-9 July	55	182
Perth Theatre	15-16 July	57	289
Total		**322**	**1437**

4.1 Wonder Fools – a trusted brand

In speaking to hub contacts it became clear that some of the initial motivation to partner with Wonder Fools on this project and to offer in-kind support for the festivals stemmed from Wonder Fools' reputation within the Scottish theatre sector as an innovative and credible theatre company. Hub venues were aware of Wonder Fools' track record and wanted to deepen existing relationships with the company.

- Partners spoke of Wonder Fools positive ethos towards youth theatre – with an emphasis on co-creation and high-quality writing, along with recognition of the role it plays within the theatre ecosystem – as being aligned to their own.

"It's run by a Scottish theatre company and that feels like the sort of thing we should be supporting, and it's very much about participating, not the final product."

Eden Court

"What came out of the pandemic as a reactive response and meeting of minds has become something strategically really important for us in terms of how we engage in new work creation and in young people's theatre-making."

Traverse

"We think all the work they (Wonder Fools) do is really great and we wanted to develop that relationship and give our young people the chance to work with professional artists, which is quite rare."

Perth Theatre

"It's taking youth theatre seriously. This is leading Scottish playwrights and a young and innovative theatre company saying that youth theatre matters."

Gaiety

4.2 Meeting a clear need for youth theatre in Scotland

Hub theatres all described PSFNT as responding to a clear gap in Scotland's youth theatre landscape.

- A number described a hollowing-out of local youth theatres which had intensified during the pandemic, resulting in a significant number of groups closing and others consolidating or relaunching. There was a strong desire to rebuild networks and find opportunities for young people to meet and share.
- Some hubs had previously participated in the annual National Theatre Connections project, but there was a consensus that this no longer met their needs and didn't closely align with their values.
- The National Festival of Youth Theatre (hosted biennially by Youth Theatre Arts Scotland) was viewed as a beneficial initiative, but its infrequency left space for further activity and it was seen as more of a one-off showcase than a planned process to engage with over a number of months.
- All of the hubs spoke about the paucity of high-quality new writing aimed specifically at young people. For the Traverse, the focus on new writing in PSFNT aligns directly with its mission as a home for new writing (PSFNT is produced in association with the Traverse, which funded 50% of the new play commissions).

"I think for the Traverse's perspective, what we really want to do is just make sure that as many young people here in Scotland and around the globe have the sense of cultural agency that theatres are spaces that they feel welcome in, that they can come into. So having the festival, having this manifestation of bringing our communities together, more of that is what we'd love to see."

Traverse

"It's really important to us as an organisation to break down barrier to the arts so it's so it's really exciting to be able to give them a free, good quality project of this scale on their doorstep is really exciting"

Perth Theatre



"There's a coherence to Positive Stories, with all the young people having gone through a similar process before getting to the festival. The National Festival of Youth Theatre doesn't have that thread connecting through."

Gaiety

"Positive Stories feels more flexible and accessible (than NT Connections). It's open to a wider and younger age range, the scripts are really varied, with a couple of devising scripts which a lot of youth theatres will prefer."

Eden Court

4.3 Communication and organisation

Hub partners were generally very complimentary about Wonder Fools communication and liaison in the build-up to the four festivals. Hub staff appreciated the early planning meetings and visits as well as the additional liaison from Wonder Fools with hub technical teams.

There was recognition from some that a small theatre company mounting an ambitious series of festivals on consecutive weekends was inevitably likely to encounter hiccups and learning along the way, but where issues did arise the good working relationship between the hubs and Wonder Fools meant they were addressed and solutions found.

"Steph was a great driving force behind everything – she made everything super clear and the communication between Wonder Fool's production manager and our technical team was also great."

Perth Theatre

"We're a hard-pressed, under-resourced organisation and so are Wonder Fools! So it's perhaps inevitable that sometimes neither side responded within the ideal timescale but there were no major problems."

Gaiety

"As a small company they are excellent communicators."

Eden Court

Some hub partners expressed a desire for a clearer delineation of responsibilities so that they knew who to contact at Wonder Fools depending on their query, but also reflected that knowing more about the project (having now experienced it) they would better understand where responsibility for liaison should lie within their own theatres in future.

"We weren't entirely sure who should hold the relationship with Wonder Fools and I'm not sure we got that entirely right but it's something we'll have an awareness of next time."

Eden Court

Over the festival weekends themselves, the hub theatres complimented Wonder Fools on their team enthusiasm, resilience, and willingness to adapt to challenges as they arose.

"Everything ran really smoothly. There were loads of people there to guide everyone and it was all really well organised, even the down time."

Gaiety

"The weekend from our point of view felt very smooth and bump free."

Eden Court



"Their enthusiasm throughout the festival and the fact they had so many young volunteers was great. It didn't feel chaotic, it felt really calm, which I think is quite rare when you're working with young people and it's a festival!"

Perth Theatre

4.4 Audience development

Hub theatres each described their relationship with youth theatre participants and their families slightly differently.

- For Perth Theatre, this audience was relatively established and regularly encouraged to attend professional performances via discounted tickets

- At the Traverse, the adult-focused programme means that youth audiences aren't a regular part of the theatre's community so PSFNT offered a welcome opportunity to increase their representation and strategically coincide with other outreach projects within their programme.

- The Gaiety is in the process of re-launching its youth theatre after a few years of disruption. The theatre welcomed the opportunity to begin re-building its network and to raise its profile as an organisation which is committed to youth and community development.

All of the hubs were pleased to be hosting visiting youth companies from other areas as well as their own. They saw this as a vital opportunity for young people to take ownership of their stages as well as learn and develop their emerging practice by seeing the work of their peers and sharing their own.

> *"Although for our Youth Theatre the Gaiety is their home a lot of them hadn't actually set foot on the Gaiety stage. It was important for them to feel like it was their stage and to welcome other people in."*
>
> **Gaiety**

> *"We had people coming through the door who'd never been to our theatre before"*
>
> **Traverse**

> *"It's just really important for our young people to realise that they're part of this bigger network and to see work by other young people. It's such an important part of their aspiration-raising."*
>
> **Eden Court**

- The importance of realising they are part of something bigger was also reported by Wonder Fools' event assistants, who helped deliver each festival and were all emerging local artists. One example was two assistants who run an emerging company in Inverness and who felt Wonder Fools bringing the festival to their city allowed them to make more contacts with young artists and helped them (and the participants) to feel more connected to work happening in other parts of Scotland.





5. Improving PSFNT

Group leaders, young people, and hub theatre partners were all asked for their suggestions on how to improve PSFNT in future seasons. Though many suggested they were quite happy with the format as experienced in Season Three, and others framed suggestions as ways to further enhance an already strong model, constructive feedback was received across a few key themes.

All of the group leaders who were interviewed or completed a post-project survey said they would like to work with Wonder Fools again in future.

5.1 Timing

Season Three was launched later than initially planned due to delayed receipt of funding meaning both planning and delivery was done in nine months with groups only having six months work on their chosen script. Planning for Season Four will begin in January 2024 and will run over 18 months, the programme will be launched to groups in June 2024 (before schools break for the summer) and conclude with live festivals in July 2025, giving groups 12 months to work on their scripts coinciding with the school year.

- As might be expected therefore, a number of school group leaders suggested an earlier launch of Season Three would have helped them plan their participation and likely increased uptake from other schools.

- A few group leaders suggested moving the PSFNT timeline so that final performances/ festivals fell at a less busy time of year, though there was no clear consensus about when this should be.

- A few group leaders felt that scheduling the festivals over a full weekend was perhaps too big a commitment and strain for their young people, with the effort of travelling to a hub theatre making itself felt on the Sunday in particular. Some suggested on balance a Friday would be a better day for a one-day festival.

- While the planning and organisation from Wonder Fools were praised as excellent, some group leaders felt clearer advance information on the festival schedule and precise start times would have helped them better plan their travel arrangements.





5.2 Capacity

- Virtually all groups interviewed had faced lots of practical issues with turnover of young people, through sickness, other commitments, planned holidays, changing interests and motivation.

- While this proved stressful for the groups, this was mitigated to an extent by the flexibility of the PSFNT scripts and the ability of the groups to adapt and support each other in taking on new parts and lines at short notice.

- It is therefore worth bearing in mind at the commissioning stage in future seasons, that scripts which can accommodate a high turnover of young cast members and which can be adapted to suit specific circumstances, are likely be well received by participants.

5.3 Alternatives to performing

Although they constituted a relatively small minority, there were some young people who participated in PSFNT not as on-stage performers but as creative contributors in other ways. One example was a 13 year-old who (with some mentoring support from an adult) designed the sound for his group's production of *Thanks for Nothing*. They (and a small number of other young people) found the festival workshop content very performer-orientated and didn't feel comfortable taking part. Group leaders suggested that the content of workshops could be made more explicit in future, and that consideration might be given to developing young theatre practitioners with more backstage interests.

5.4 Festival coverage

A number of group leaders suggested extending the geographic coverage of PSFNT in future seasons by incorporating more Scottish theatres and also by mounting an online festival for groups based outside of Scotland. This was partly in order to expand the opportunity to more young people, and partly to better deliver the outcome of connecting groups with their local theatres as for a few groups which travelled some distance to a festival hub in Season Three there are other theatres closer to home.





6. Conclusion

At the heart of the Positive Stories for Negative Times project is Wonder Fools' ethos that practicing drama builds confidence and resilience in young people, and that this opportunity should be available across Scotland, regardless of their location or resources.

There is a wealth of evidence in this report, from the survey numbers to the more nuanced conversations with participants, to indicate that both of these aspirations have been successfully realised in Season Three. What remains is a need to meld all of the inevitably fragmentary pieces of data presented here together into a coherent impact story of its own.

Over three years since the start of the first UK Covid lockdown, the picture which emerges from this research is one of a Scottish youth theatre sector still very much in recovery mode. Youth theatres have been lost, others are still in the process of re-establishing themselves, and networks have diminished. Group leaders and teachers working with young people consistently report ongoing impact from the pandemic on their group's ability to concentrate, organise themselves, and commit to goals.





For the majority of young people participating in Season Three, Positive Stories for Negative Times has constituted a series of significant firsts: working with a mixed age group, working with a professional script, performing in front of audiences beyond their families and peers. For many of those young people who attended a festival, the list was even longer: first time travelling to a theatre, first time backstage, first time on a professional stage with a live audience, first time seeing other youth theatres perform. The significance of these experiences for the individual - the memories formed and foundations of character built – cannot be easily measured in a simple project evaluation. Instead, we must put our faith in the young people themselves and trust that the assets Positive Stories for Negative Times has helped to nurture – self-confidence, teamwork, shared purpose and achievement – will help them in navigating whichever life path they choose.

By enquiring about group leader's confidence at the start of Season Three we learnt that, in fact, youth theatre practitioners in Scotland and beyond lack opportunities to develop their practice more than they lack confidence in themselves. The leaders interviewed share Wonder Fools ethos on youth theatre being about far more than training young people to perform on stage. They want to feel connected to a network of other practitioners, professional writers, and theatres. To be, as more than one expressed in interview: 'part of something bigger'.

As well as telling a story about young people and the pandemic, Positive Stories for Negative Times reveals much about the connectivity and symbiosis between writers, theatres, and young people in Scotland. We have learnt that youth theatres are hungry for contemporary new writing which speaks to young people on their own terms. We know that theatres are passionate about developing young audiences, both on their stages and in the stalls as active future theatre-goers, but it can be hard to initiate this work alone.

The future of the theatre sector depends on this joined-up cultivation of talent and audience, and we have learnt that Positive Stories for Negative Times is meeting a pressing need to connect these constituents in Scotland. Commissioning writers to produce work for young people nurtures their creative ability and brings drama alive for young people. Youth theatre practitioners want to stretch themselves, work with new scripts, and expand their professional networks. Scottish theatres want young people to have a stake in their organisations and feel a sense of belonging which will be strongest if embedded through engagement at an early age. Most importantly of all, young people want to be given the opportunity to explore their own creative potential, find their voices, and to be treated as deserving of access to the main stage of their local theatre.

If Season Three represents a chapter called Recovery, following the Covid-afflicted start to this project's story, Season Four remains to be written. The commissioning of this independent impact report is a strong indication that Wonder Fools is a learning organisation. Feedback received here and suggestions made will influence plans for what happens next. What is clear is that the project has identified and begun to meet a range of important needs for a variety of stakeholders. These are strong foundations on which to build an even more enduring story in the future.

For more information about the project visit:
www.wonderfools.org or **www.positivestories.scot**
or contact Executive Producer Steph Connell at **steph@wonderfools.org**

Thank you

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Creative Scotland, Gannochy Trust, Hugh Fraser Foundation, Trades House of Glasgow Commonweal fund and Gordon Fraser Foundation.

Appendix 1. List of participating youth groups and schools

Youth Groups:

(Scotland)
Royal Lyceum Youth Theatre, Edinburgh
Toonspeak, Glasgow
Firefly, West Lothian
Perth Autism Support, Perth
Eden Court Youth Theatre, Inverness
Eden Court Collective, Inverness
Theatre Royal Dumfries, Dumfries
What Happens Now?, Glasgow
Drama Llama Youth Theatre, Ayrshire
Edinburgh Acting School, Musselburgh
Fintry Amateur Dramatic Society, Fintry
Highland Youth Theatre, Forres
Perth Youth Theatre, Perth
Falkirk Youth Theatre, Falkirk
The Drama Mill, East Linton
Borealis Theatre Arts - Nairn Youth Theatre, Nairn
An Lanntair, Stornoway
Ayr Gaiety, Ayr
Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow
Spotlights Community Youth Theatre, Dundee
Dundee & Angus College , Dundee
hidden route, Dundee
Right Left & Centre Theatre School, Shotts
Blairgowrie Players, Blairgowrie

(UK, International)
American Space Valencia, Spain
Stageability, Reading
Zig Zag Theatre, Bundall, Australia
Elms Ensemble, Northampton
Limelight Creative, Oranmore, Ireland
Opera North, Leeds
Somerset Youth Theatre, Taunton
Belgrade Theatre, Coventry
Hathershaw College, Oldham
Thunk-It Theatre, York
Spotlight Youth Theatre, Cape Town
Frist Act Drama Club, Cape Town
Storyhouse, Chester
LM Stage School, Leeds
Torch Youth Theatre, Pembrokeshire
Performance Classes 101, Northampton
Backstage Youth Theatre, Longford, Ireland
Clare Youth Theatre, Co Clare, Ireland
Mountrath Youth Theatre, Co Laois, Ireland
Rural Youth Theatre, Selby
Pitch & Pulse, Co Longford, Ireland
Leeds Playhouse, Leeds
Naturwissentschaftliche Mittelschule Horitschon, Austria
Roscommon County Youth Theatre, Ireland
County Carlow Youth Theatre, Ireland

Schools:

(Scotland)
The Edinburgh Academy, Edinburgh
Rosshall Academy, Glasgow
Wester Hailes High School Drama Club, Edinburgh
St Joseph's Academy, Kilmarnock
Inveralmond Community High School, Livingston
Firrhill High School, Edinburgh
Beath High School, Cowdenbeath
Erskine Stewart's Melville College, Edinburgh
Nairn Academy, Nairn
Charleston Academy, Inverness
Community School Auchterarder, Auchterarder
Kirknewton Primary School, Kirknewton
Castle Douglas Primary School, Castle Douglas
Errol Primary School, Errol
Gretna Primary School, Gretna
Loreburn Primary School, Dumfries
Ardersier Primary School, Inverness
Hayshead primary School, Arbroarth
St Andrews High School, Kikcaldy
St Ninians Primary School, Stirling
Maddiston Primary School, Falkirk
Perth Academy, Perth
Larbert High School, Falkirk
Kilgraston School, Bridge of Earn

(UK, International)
Tornmead School, Guilford
International School of Milan, Milan
St Joseph's CBS, Dublin
Samuel Layock School, Ashton-under-lyne
Beauchamps High School, Essex
Outwood Grange Academies Trust, Wakefield
All Saints RC School, York