

**National  
Theatre**

# A Generous Exchange

**Eight case  
studies from  
Theatre Nation  
Partnerships**



ART OF REGENERATION

The content of this report was researched and written  
by Emma Jackson and Polly Rodgers of Art of Regeneration.

# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Case Study 1</b> <b>National Theatre schools tours in North Devon</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Case Study 2</b> <b>Working in partnership to tell stories of place in Sunderland</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Case Study 3</b> <b>The successes and challenges of midscale touring</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Case Study 4</b> <b>Building new audiences at Wolverhampton Grand Theatre</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Case Study 5</b> <b>Creating community connections at Lowry, Salford</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Case Study 6</b> <b>Artist development : Florence Espeut-Nickless' story</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Case Study 7</b> <b>Tamika and Vicky: Career progression and development within Theatre Nation Partnerships</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Case Study 8</b> <b>The value of the network</b>	<b>42</b>

These case studies were commissioned by the National Theatre from Emma Jackson and Polly Rodgers of The Art of Regeneration to capture learning from the second cycle of Theatre Nation Partnerships, which ran from September 2022 to August 2025. Our thanks to the Art of Regeneration and to all the Theatre Nation Partners who contributed to this research.



Sunderland Culture  
and Sunderland Empire,  
**Sunderland**

Lowry, **Greater Manchester**

Theatre Royal Wakefield,  
**Wakefield**

Cast, **Doncaster**

Restoke, Regent Theatre  
and Victoria Hall, **Stoke-on-Trent**

Curve Theatre, **Leicester**

Key and New Theatres,  
Landmark, **Peterborough**

Wolverhampton Grand,  
**Wolverhampton**

Trowbridge Town Hall,  
**Wiltshire**

Queen's Theatre Hornchurch,  
**Outer East London**

Queen's Theatre and Landmark Theatres,  
Landmark, **North Devon**

# Executive summary

## Background

Theatre Nation Partnerships (TNP) was a collaborative network of arts organisations convened by the National Theatre and supported using public funding from the National Lottery through Arts Council England. Its key aim was build engagement in theatre, strengthening relationships with local audiences, schools and communities. Activities have included large and midscale touring, school tours, participatory projects, audience development initiatives and staff career development.

The first cycle of TNP (2017–22) brought together partner organisations from six areas of England (Doncaster, Greater Manchester, outer East London, Sunderland, Wakefield and Wolverhampton). From 2022–2025, this was expanded to work across 13 priority areas across the country, bringing together a wide range of organisations: Cast in Doncaster; Lowry in Salford; Curve in Leicester; Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch, outer East London; Restoke, Regent Theatre & Victoria Hall in Stoke–on–Trent; Sunderland Empire and Sunderland Culture; Landmark Theatres in Peterborough and North Devon; Trowbridge Town Hall in Wiltshire; Theatre Royal Wakefield; and Wolverhampton Grand. Partners’ include commercial and subsidised venues, town halls and community arts organisations.

## Aims and structure

This report brings together a range of voices and perspectives from those who have participated across the network to explore the contributions that TNP has made in and between these various locations. The report comprises eight case studies that together reflect the breadth of projects that have taken place within TNP. Four provide close-up reflection on programmes carried out in a particular location (see Case Studies 1, 2, 4 and 5). The other four focus on processes, programmes and impacts from work carried out across the network (Case Studies 3, 6, 7 and 8).

The case studies can be read as standalone pieces or together. Learning points are collated at the end of each case study. Here we pull out some of the key themes from across the report.



## Key Themes

### 1. Strengthened partnership working across regions and organisations

The relationships forged between individuals in partner organisations catalysed deeper engagement and opened up possibilities for collaboration between organisations. These organisations might otherwise have viewed one another through the lens of ‘competitor’, or else considered their differences – in scale, approach or capacity – too great to warrant meaningful partnership working. Through the network, previously faceless institutions became personalised and demystified. The connections made between partners also had a multiplying effect, meaning that partners had access to much wider networks through each other.

There were sometimes tensions between accommodating the needs of different organisations and their audiences when approaching projects such as mid-scale touring or schools tours. The pace of decision-making at scale also created challenges, with smaller organisations sometimes frustrated by slow reactions to decisions by the network and the National Theatre. Nevertheless, being part of the network has opened up opportunities for all organisations participating.

### 2. Sharing and developing best practice

TNP has worked as a forum for a generous exchange of ideas. The case studies in this report evidence how the network has enabled conversations about innovative approaches and programmes which have prompted organisations to adapt approaches from elsewhere within the network. Notable examples include the ambassador scheme in Wolverhampton Grand (Case Study 4) that seeded the idea for a similar scheme at Lowry, Salford (Case Study 5), and the dementia café at Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch that inspired the Wolverhampton Grand to set up their own.

The network has also provided a test bed for trying out new approaches. Case Study 3 chronicles how the approach to mid-scale touring was honed over time, feeding in new ways of developing productions for particular locations and responding to research on drama audiences. Case Study 4 illustrates how Wolverhampton Grand’s approach to audience development evolved over the TNP cycle, from standalone project work to integration into their core strategy.

### 3. Providing career progression and development opportunities

Theatre Nation Partnerships provided a unique learning environment that combined practical experience, peer support, high-level mentorship, and cross-organisational exposure that would be difficult to replicate through traditional training or career development approaches (see Case Study 7).

### 4. Theatre Nation Partnerships as a catalyst

TNP has acted as a catalyst, enabling partner organisations to build on existing programmes to work at a new and expanded scale (see Case Study 2, on Public Acts in Sunderland), or to try something new, for example actively seeking out input from schools into programming for school audiences. This report captures how TNP built ongoing relationships between schools and local theatres (Case Study 1) and provided the bedrock to enable consistency of community engagement (Case Study 5).

### 5. Legacy

TNP has produced a range of tangible outcomes and outputs including the **Public Acts and Speak Up toolkits**, **Indigo audience development toolkit\***, and ambassador schemes, as well as influencing the formation of new partnerships such as the Local Theatre Touring Alliance (see Case Study 3), and leaving the local cultural ecology stronger through brokering relationships between schools and local theatres (see Case Study 1). However, partner organisations share concerns over the future of this collective project now the funding has come to an end (see Case Study 8).

## Methods

Case study ideas were initially suggested by the partner organisations and the National Theatre. Art of Regeneration then conducted meetings with representatives from the relevant partner organisations to further develop the themes and focus of the Case Studies and to identify participants whose stories could contribute. We then interviewed 45 people – in a combination of group and individual interviews – spanning theatre practitioners, representatives from partner organisations, and community participants. Interviews were carried out online and in person and then transcribed. All interviews were conducted between May and August 2025.

We also carried out a reflection workshop with approximately 30 people from across the partner organisations in June 2025. The two-hour session explored three key questions:

1. What has the network made possible for partner organisations?
2. Has the network presented any challenges, and how have they been worked through?
3. What has the network seeded that is now beginning to show results, or that holds promise for the future?

Partners discussed these questions at facilitated tables that were captured on flipchart paper and then reported back. The reporting back discussion was recorded and transcribed. This session forms the basis for Case Study 8. See also page 43 for a wordcloud generated from this session.

\* //www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-us/research



National Theatre's 2025 schools tour of *The LeftBehinds*  
Image by Alex Brenner



01 CASE STUDY

# National Theatre schools tours in North Devon

**Read on for...** an exploration of building relationships between schools and theatres; the challenges and impacts of touring work into school settings; and the three-way partnership model of national and regional theatre partners and local schools.

The National Theatre's secondary schools tours were a key strand of work for TNP. *Shut Up, I'm Dreaming*, co-produced with *The Pappy Show*, and directed by Kane Husbands visited 37 schools in 2023. *Jekyll and Hyde* reimaged by writer Evan Placey and directed by Kirsty Housley visited 49 schools in 2024. *The LeftBehinds* co-created by Ned Bennett and Ross Willis and directed by Ned Bennett visited 39 schools in 2025. Relationships between the National Theatre and local schools were brokered by TNP partner theatres.

In North Devon, the partner was the Landmark Theatre Trust (LTT), a newly formed organisation running four theatres across North Devon and Peterborough, and joined TNP in the second phase of the partnership (2022–2025).

National Theatre schools tours are time limited and occasional. A long-term aim is therefore to build links which can be sustained between local theatres and schools. This case study focuses on the impact that schools tours had in two North Devon schools, and the relationships built with LTT's North Devon theatres. Braunton Academy, in Braunton, worked with the Landmark Theatre in Ilfracombe, and hosted *Shut Up I'm Dreaming* (2023), *Jekyll and Hyde* (2024) and *The LeftBehinds* (2025). The Park School in Barnstaple worked with Queen's Theatre in Barnstaple, and hosted *Jekyll and Hyde* (2024) and *The LeftBehinds* (2025).

*'If an alien came to earth and you gave them eggs and flour and butter and milk and a cake recipe, they'd make something that was cakey, but it would not be a brilliant cake...It's similar with these students. I can tell [them] about all of these [theatrical] elements... but until you've seen it and experienced it, [you can't] truly understand what's possible...We're always trying to explain concepts that are... easier just to show. And that's what the National coming [to our school] does. We can show them, in a really accessible way.'* **Laurie Milsom**

*'We've gone through all this stuff in lessons, but it just sort of showed us in person what they actually do, like all the different people [in the touring company]. So instead of just looking at a board, you can actually see them and what they're doing.'* **Braunton Academy Student**

Laurie Milsom, Head of Drama at The Park School, is passionate about providing live theatre experiences for her students. Prior to TNP's involvement, theatres in North Devon were not programming for schools and Laurie had to take her students to Bristol or Plymouth by coach to see theatre that met the curriculum criteria. Many students were unable to participate for financial reasons. As one student attests,

*'If you're gonna go to Bristol to watch something, the train's expensive, then the actual tickets for the performance are expensive... Watching TV and actually seeing something live is very different, and it's an experience I think a lot of kids miss out on because we get forgotten about.'*

As Laurie's analogy illustrates, without access to live theatre, the techniques and approaches used to bring theatrical scripts to life remain abstract to young people. Laurie uses the National Theatre Collection, a free resource for schools to watch recorded performances, and recognises its value in exposing students to a range of productions but, she told us, it doesn't compare to the real thing:

*'You put them in that space and say, "feel this". "Feel what it is like when that actor has stood right next to you". [The schools tour productions] are technically complex, but also intimate, because they have to be able to fit into your school hall. So it really is an extraordinary experience that they can't get anywhere else.'*

With guidance from the National Theatre, LTT initiated a conversation with Laurie to build understanding of what local theatres needed to programme to attract school audiences. National Theatre schools tours are developed with curriculum requirements in mind. As Laurie said, they *'always hit the mark in terms of what you need your students to experience from theatre... You know that you're going to have the whole range of all the creative disciplines expertly put together in a way that's really accessible.'* The challenge, then, was to build that understanding locally as well.

As a result of the conversation with Laurie, LTT programmed *Blood Brothers* at Queen's Theatre Barnstaple in September 2025, offering local school discount rates, and *The Woman in Black* in October/November 2025. Both productions hit the mark in terms of curriculum requirements, though *The Woman in Black* was scheduled in half term, suggesting there is still some work to be done embedding an awareness of the education system into local theatres' programming.

*'This is my 20th year of teaching, and I have worked all over the country. I have never worked in such close partnership with the local theatre in terms of a reciprocal relationship...In an area where aspiration is low, how amazing to say, "look, you can do this".'* **Laurie Milsom**

A few years ago, Laurie was approached by the Head of Drama at another local school who was interested in collaborating to put on a theatre festival to showcase their students' work. The North Devon Schools Festival ran at the Plough Arts Centre, Torrington, for several years but this year the festival was not financially viable for The Plough. Laurie's relationship with LTT meant she could approach the Queen's Theatre instead:

*'The festival this year moved to The Queen's Theatre, and they were so generous. They gave us the whole building for the day so we could run our workshops all over the building. They gave us all their technicians for the day so the students could work with the professional technicians as well. So they had their pieces miked and lit on the big stage.'*

The experience at The Queen's was a step up from The Plough in terms of professionalism and scale, and this meant that they were able to reach a wider audience, selling more tickets than expected, including to people with no immediate connection to the young people performing. Laurie hopes that this arrangement will continue in coming years, enabling them to grow the festival, include students in technical roles and reach an even wider audience. This was enabled by the relationship built with LTT through TNP.

Rob Carroll, Head of Drama at Braunton Academy, told us that his students had also accessed local theatre spaces through TNP initiative Speak Up, but was hoping that a more sustained relationship continued to develop over time. He envisioned being in a position to take his students on regular trips to see local productions, and actors coming into schools to offer workshops. Laurie warned that attracting school audiences to attend local theatre in the long term will depend on relevant programming and discounted tickets for local schools. More ambitious arrangements, that move beyond attending theatre shows towards the active participation that the Schools Theatre Festival embodies, and which Rob envisions, will be a mark of the successful legacy of TNP.

Both Braunton Academy and The Park School will be taking part in the National Theatre's New Views playwriting programme, an initiative that the teachers became aware of through TNP. Another incidental benefit that arose out of Braunton Academy's relationship with the National Theatre was a Year 10 workshop at the school with playwright Simon Stephens, who was visiting schools to research a new play commissioned by the NT. Rob went on to talk about culture change at Braunton Academy, and how this long-term project has been galvanised by the schools tours and resulting opportunities. He told us *'I am trying to create a theatre culture here.... There's a buzz...the attitude is changing, and people are coming, and they're asking, "what's next?"'*

Rob and Laurie both believe in the power of theatre to engage, empower and - in some cases - transform the lives of young people, particularly those who are struggling with school more broadly. Laurie articulated the impact that the schools tours, and the workshops that the actors offered the students afterwards, have had on some Year 11 boys:

*'[They] really struggled to engage with school. Their attendance was low, they found the whole concept of school very challenging. They hadn't come on any of the trips where they had to get a coach [to] Bristol or Plymouth. They could come and see [the NT school tour] because they didn't have to pay. And they were mesmerised, [it was] totally outside of their experience. The workshop afterwards... was so interactive. I watched these boys give suggestions to these professional actors who went away and acted on them. And it was so empowering. Kids who respond like that to school and life don't... have a massive amount of power, and they had it at that moment, and it had a profound effect. I saw a change in... one lad...[who] wouldn't always come in, but he came in if it was drama, because he had this sense of ownership, and self-esteem.'*

Rob felt similarly, remembering *'My parents dragged me to see the Bolshoi Ballet when I was 13. I didn't know what the hell I was seeing... But that was a galvanising moment, and these kids have had three of those moments in two years. That's just wonderful.'*

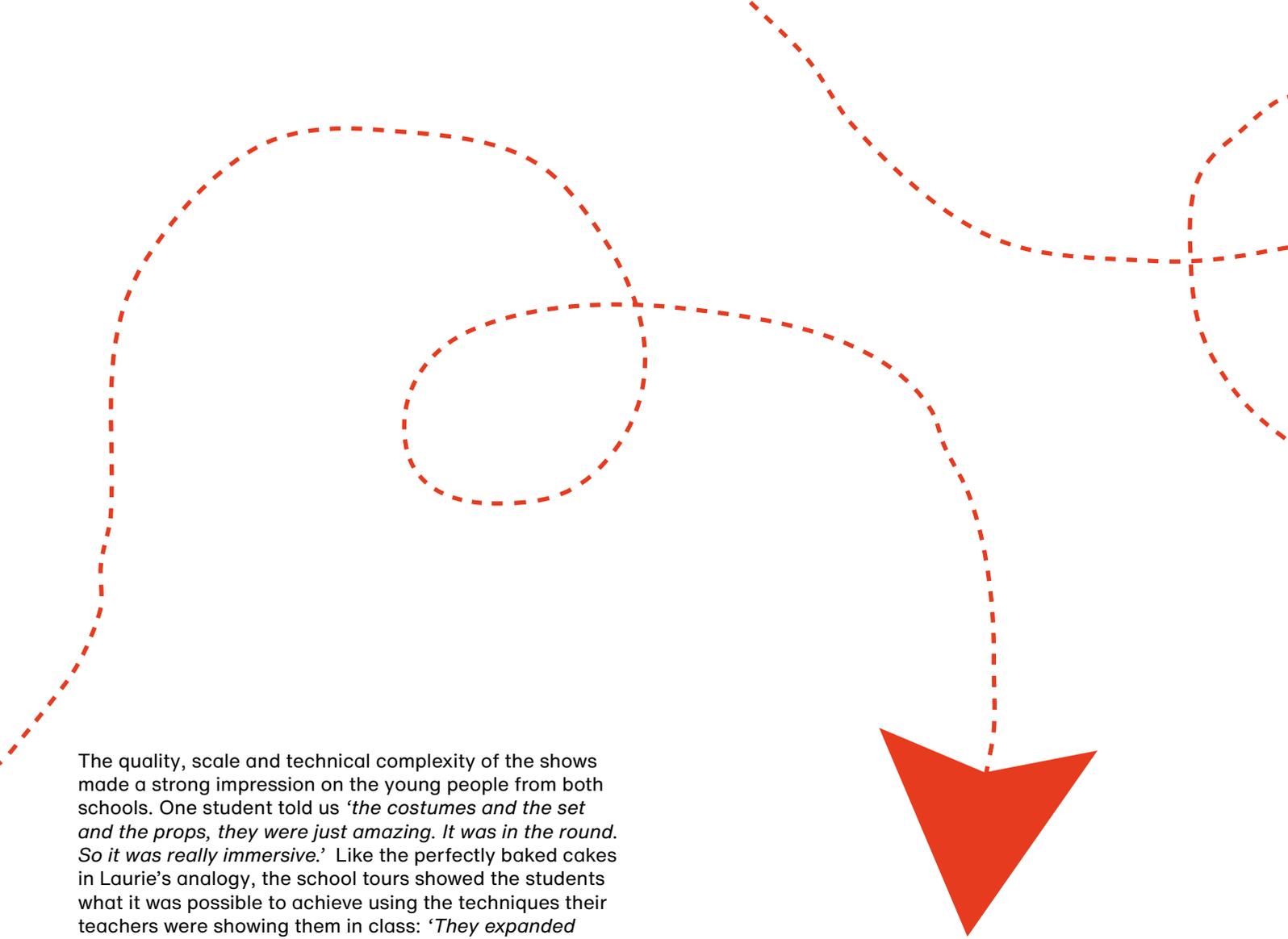
The students themselves articulated the impact that the shows have had. One young person remembered *'The LeftBehinds was so good. After everyone came out, we were still talking about it. Like, a week later, we were still referencing it.'*

Having the National Theatre in their school spaces challenged the perceived geographical barriers that the young people felt. As another young person observed:

*'It was really motivating to see people come to Devon and be really successful in drama, because we don't have that many opportunities in such a quiet area to do big drama pieces. And I think that enabled us to see that we actually can be successful...there are ways to do it.'*

Another student shared that:

*'When we watched Jekyll and Hyde, that's what made me realise I really want to get more into drama. I've always enjoyed it, but this year, I've taken it a lot more seriously.'*



The quality, scale and technical complexity of the shows made a strong impression on the young people from both schools. One student told us *'the costumes and the set and the props, they were just amazing. It was in the round. So it was really immersive.'* Like the perfectly baked cakes in Laurie's analogy, the school tours showed the students what it was possible to achieve using the techniques their teachers were showing them in class: *'They expanded our imagination... the workshop... really helped with our devising pieces.'*

All this said, bringing technically complex theatre into school halls is not without its challenges. Laurie shared how she had found the application process to be included in the school tours programme a little off-putting, explaining *'you did feel like you were trying to win them to come.'* Timetabling with education establishments is always a challenge and has to be confirmed months in advance; Laurie articulated some anxiety around preliminary confirmation that could have been alleviated through clearer communication early in the process.

While Laurie was confident that the relationship with LTT was firmly established, she expressed a real hope for the relationship with the NT to continue in the form of school tours. She added that North Devon's circumstances haven't changed and getting to London, or even Bristol or Plymouth, to see relevant theatre remains a huge challenge for her and her students.

Rob added: *'[I've always said], "wouldn't it be great to get something from the National? It'll never happen". It's happened, and it's so valuable. And for whoever the decision makers are on the South Bank: it will bear fruit. When I'm pushing up daisies, someone from this area is going to be down there at the Dorfman, doing a great job. And they're going to say, 'I had an experience [in North Devon] that changed my life', and that's worth it, that needs to be supported.'*

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ The combination of intimacy and ambition of schools tour productions was key to their impact: adapting to practical barriers whilst raising students' aspirations of what live theatre can achieve, and what a career in theatre could look like.
- ▶ The experience of watching schools tours and participating in post-show workshops engaged some students who were otherwise disengaged with school.
- ▶ The schools tour acted as a catalyst to broker relationships between schools and their local theatre, leading to a legacy that can be sustained beyond the NT's direct involvement.

# Working in partnership to tell stories of place in Sunderland



**Read on for...** examples of place-based community intervention through arts participation; new models of partnership working across different types of organisations, anchored in place; the creative potential of community voice and representation.

## Introduction

Sunderland has been a key area for Theatre Nation Partnerships since 2017, bringing together two local partners with the National Theatre: Sunderland Culture, a not-for-profit registered charity and Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation, and Sunderland Empire, an Edwardian theatre operated as a commercial venue by ATG. The partnership between Sunderland Culture, Sunderland Empire and the National Theatre has enriched the cultural life of the city, ensuring that theatre has played a key role in the remaking of Sunderland's cultural offer. The project has impacted on participants' perceptions of place and produced work that has Sunderland's stories at its heart.

As Nick Malyan describes: *'Sunderland Culture and the Empire have held the relationship with the National [Theatre] on behalf of the city – not necessarily on behalf of just the organisations – and produced work for and by and of the place.'*

For Marie Nixon, Theatre Director of the Sunderland Empire, *'the length and the depth of the relationship has been important.'* Significantly, pre-dating TNP, the National Theatre production of *War Horse* came to the Sunderland Empire in 2014. Marie reflects that many of the elements of TNP were trialled through *War Horse*, particularly in terms of community engagement. This previous production of *War Horse* was also significant for people who have gone on to participate in TNP, with participants from the 2014 *War Horse* community reminiscence workshops going on to perform in *Public Record* a decade later.

Reflecting on the seven years of work, Anthony Hope, Head of Creative Learning Partnerships & Development at ATG Entertainment, describes how the partnership between

Sunderland Culture and Sunderland Empire was an unusual one within TNP, as it was not focused on one venue: *'we had to feel our way about how we were going to work together on each of the elements. And in the beginning, it was a bit separate....'* At first, the Sunderland Empire took on responsibility for large scale and schools touring, using their existing contacts, and Sunderland Culture led on mid-scale touring. While there was some cross-pollination on social media and promotion of events and performances, working together was limited. However, over time a more city-wide approach was built between the two organisations.

The partners consider that their coming together enabled a sharing of expertise and skills. For example, Sunderland Culture brought their experiences of working with artists and directly commissioning work, while the Empire brought their infrastructure, and well-established creative learning programme. In addition, there were benefits in terms of capacity, particularly for the two large scale Public Acts productions.

While Sunderland Culture and Sunderland Empire have been involved in most aspects of TNP, in this case study we focus on Speak Up and Public Acts, to examine how the three-way partnership has enabled a civic intervention that centres stories of place and has deeply engaged with community participants. Looking back at the achievements of TNP in Sunderland, Marie Nixon asserts, *'it has been a galvanising force, and it has created momentum and propulsion.'*

Company in 2025 NT Public Acts production of *Public Record*. Image by Luke Waddington



## Welcome to Threnacia, the island of the sun God. It's a tiny bit like... Sunderland

Public Acts in Sunderland has consisted of two productions, *The Odyssey: The Island of the Sun*, Episode 4 of a five-part story of Odysseus' journey, created and performed by partner organisations across the country, and *Public Record*. Both were produced in co-creation with community members and both with a strong commitment to telling stories of Sunderland.

Director of *The Odyssey* Episode 4, Annie Rigby, described how writer, Lindsey Rodden, wrote the piece as being from the perspective of people living in a tower block in the city centre and looking out to the shipwreck on the coast. She reflects: *'It was such a brilliant choice that meant that the community company could really bring themselves ... and that kind of vision of the city into this idea of Threnacia.'* As part of the process, participants were asked open questions about what the city and the sea meant to them, thus shaping this version of Threnacia in the image of their experience.

For Annie, the lesson for the co-creation process was that *'ambition is rewarded.'* She found the community cast to be very talented especially in their musical abilities: *'I don't think I've ever worked with a more confident and able community company in terms of singing – and I think that's partly good luck and partly the very strong music culture in Sunderland.'* Discussions of developing the script and the use of a Mackem (Sunderland) dialect and accent prompted reflections on the changing voice of the city: *'And I think that for me was very exciting, that ability to say, this isn't a piece about what Sunderland was, this is a piece about what Sunderland is, and it is also a piece that is looking to what Sunderland is becoming.'*



Company in NT Public Acts production of *Public Record* at The Fire Station in Sunderland. Image by Luke Waddington

Some of the community cast from *The Odyssey* went on to perform in *Public Record*, a production celebrating Sunderland through its music: a community comes together to create an album recording the city's past, present and future. But for Diane Phipps, a retired teacher, *Public Record* was her first contact with Public Acts.

Diane was already involved with the Sunderland Empire's Creative Learning programme and credits the programme with helping her cope with her husband's death, reigniting her love for acting and dance. Reflecting back on *Public Record*, she stressed that the meticulous planning (*'a triumph of organisation'*) and the high level of care for participants translated into an atmosphere of trust and enthusiasm.

For Diane, being part of *Public Record* has had a lasting impact on her life, boosting her confidence and broadening her social circle:

*'It's given me wider opportunities ... we're doing things together. I've been to see some of them in theatre productions ... we're all going to the seafront on Saturday because there's a music festival, and some of them are in that. So, yes, it's made a difference in my life, like a pebble in the pond and the ripples spreading.'*

This company was wide-ranging in terms of age, ethnicity and culture. The experience has also impacted on her views on Sunderland and beyond:

*'I didn't realise that there were so many things musically going on. I didn't realise there were so many clubs. I didn't realise there were so many people doing things voluntarily to help and support people. ... Sometimes I see, well, anti-social behaviour, and you start to think, oh, is the world getting worse? But having done that, I thought, when you think about it, the majority of people are lovely and they're all trying to make the world a better place. So I feel a bit more positive about humanity.'*

## Beyond Davy lamps

Alongside Public Acts, Speak Up in Sunderland has also provided vital opportunities for telling alternative stories about the city and its region. Steph Durkin first joined the team at the Sunderland Empire as a Creative Learning Officer in 2019 and immediately began working on Speak Up. She describes how discussions about the changing global context and its impacts on young people gave rise to Speak Up: *'Could we do a project that helps young people talk about their experiences during Covid? Big events like Black Lives Matter had happened and young people were isolated and didn't have a chance just to talk about world events generally. So we came up with this idea...'*

Co-creation has been a central tenet of Speak Up. Speak Up was a TNP secondary school programme focused on youth voice, working in five Sunderland schools and another 50 across other TNP areas. Steph described working closely with one particular group of young people in a school based in the former coalfield area on the outskirts of Sunderland of Hetton-Le-Hole. While Speak Up usually worked with students over one academic year during their lessons, this group ran as an extra-curricular group project over three years. *'We just wanted to see what impact a long-term project would have. So we grew up with these young people'* – Steph.

Steph found that the young people were frustrated with the town's identity exclusively being celebrated in relation to its mining history, and were keen to tell their own stories of where they were from. They asked, *"Why is every art project making a Davy lamp?"* She reflects:

*'We had really interesting debates around, how do you honour your mining heritage? And they're dead proud of it ... But what is a future generation going to look back at this generation and remember?'*

The group tallied up that there were 17 mining statues in the local area, prompting questions about whether this money could have been spent on other projects for the community. This served as an artistic inspiration for the group. Steph describes their co-creation process:

*'We got a local artist to work with us and came up with some slogans. Some of them used graphic design, we used some digital design software, some just wanted to do charcoal and make big posters. We got them printed, and in the spirit of Speak Up, being a bit punk – and I hope this isn't incriminating to say! – but me and the artist just stuck them around the area. And in the corner of each of the posters was a QR code that you could scan that took you to a podcast that young people made where they talked about how they feel about their heritage.'*

There were some limits on how 'punk' and disruptive Speak Up could be, however. Steph found that when the group wanted to make work that was overtly political, it did not always align with the institutional politics of the partner organisations. She reflects: *'I'm not convinced at the end of it that this idea of being ... a bit edgy and having campaigns and speaking about things always aligns with how those three organisations want to project themselves.'*

Nevertheless, Steph is passionate about what Speak Up has achieved and the effectiveness of being able to work with groups over an extended time, *'Most projects are like six weeks and you barely scratch the surface. But we've got to know the ins and outs, the ups and downs. You've gone up through puberty with half of them.'*

The Hetton Academy group went on to win a Youth Voice Award (2025) from the Sunderland-based charity Together for Children in recognition of how their work amplified the voices of young people. Steph concludes, *'I think the impact has been that they have realised that their voices matter ... that they can make a difference when they come together as a collective, that there's adults who will listen and take them seriously.'*

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Having two Sunderland organisations work collaboratively in partnership with the National Theatre ensured that the local Sunderland community were able to gain maximum benefit from the broad skills, expertise, resources and infrastructure pooled across partners.
- ▶ Stories centring on place can offer an accessible and unifying start point to creative self-expression for participants of widely ranging ages and diverse backgrounds.
- ▶ Place doesn't need to equate to heritage; there is creative scope in exploring the present and future of an area with communities.

# The successes and challenges of midscale touring



**Read on for...** challenges of midscale touring in current theatre landscape and ways to address these; new frameworks for collaborative touring; embedding audience development into the producing process.

## Introduction

The decline of audiences for drama has long been a cause of concern for UK theatres. While this challenge was exacerbated by the Covid pandemic, the issue predates it and is ongoing. As Katie Town, Executive Director of Theatre Royal Wakefield, describes: *'it has the potential to be the "boiling frog"'* – in other words, a gradual but significant threat. The partnership responded to this challenge through the production of three midscale tours, aiming to develop audiences over three years, as well as commissioning live drama audience research and a toolkit for venues' use from Indigo.

Midscale touring was a feature of TNP from the outset, but the tour planned for the first TNP cycle (National Theatre's production of *Romeo and Julie* by Gary Owen) was cancelled due to the pandemic. In the second TNP cycle, a new approach was developed with the network: three midscale tours would be produced, each by one of the TNP partners, with the support of the NT and in collaboration with the network.

Throughout TNP, the choice of title has been a careful balancing act. The priorities, needs and expectations of partners – particularly around audience development – reflect a diverse range of scales and audiences across venues. Despite these differences, the programme has seen audiences for TNP midscale productions increase over the duration of the second cycle of TNP, with the third and final production (*Handbagged*, produced by Queen's Theatre Hornchurch) reaching more audiences (19,487) than the productions in year one and year two combined (19,141 altogether).

This case study traces how midscale touring has been built up successfully through the TNP programme. It examines how each iteration has learned from the previous production, and looks at how that learning has influenced new future-focused initiatives across partners.

### **Sucker Punch to My Beautiful Laundrette**

James Watson, Acting Chief Executive of Queen's Theatre Hornchurch (QTH), reflects that it *'felt quite natural'* when the first TNP midscale touring production landed with QTH. The theatre had both the experience of being lead producers and the internal resources (including a production team) required to take on the role. The first title was *Sucker Punch*, by acclaimed British playwright Roy Williams. Set in a boxing gym, *Sucker Punch* explored growing up Black in the 1980s. James describes how the approach to producing this first tour was *'an experiment'*, characterised by a quick production turnaround and trialling ways of collaborating across the partner organisations.

While audiences were excited by *Sucker Punch* (see Case Study 5 for how audiences responded in Salford) and partners recognised the quality of the production, for most it did not deliver on audience numbers or financial targets. An important learning to come out of this was the need for a longer lead time, so that resources for marketing and audience development work could be produced and used effectively by the teams in each touring venue.

These lessons were taken forward into *My Beautiful Laundrette*, with Curve in Leicester as the lead producer. This title had the advantage of being tied to a well-known film that was later re-adapted for stage by the original writer, Hanif Kureishi. Furthermore, Curve had already produced a short run of this production. Claire Ward, Executive Director of Curve, recalls:

*'We felt because of the link to the film and the fact that it was an existing [production] ... we had a suite of marketing assets that we were able to use and therefore supply to all the venues in advance of the announcement and on sale.'*

As well as learning through the process of the productions, audience research by Indigo, commissioned by TNP, was used to create a toolkit to support development of drama audiences. The findings and toolkit were trialled on the tour of *Handbagged*, with plans to share both more widely with the sector in future. For Claire, a key finding that has already been integrated into midscale touring is ensuring cross-collaboration within and between venues, between marketing, production, programming, and artistic directors across the network. She reflects: *'We as organisations, as theatres, cannot work in silos. Everyone needs to be part of that unified consensus of "why are we doing this piece of work and who for?"'*

### **My Beautiful Laundrette to Handbagged**

For the third midscale tour, Alex Thorpe, Co-Creative Director at Queen's Theatre Hornchurch, recalls that the partnership was looking for a title that organisations and their audiences could *'hook onto'*. Whilst *My Beautiful Laundrette* benefited from name recognition of the film, *Handbagged* has two recognisable main characters, Queen Elizabeth II and Margaret Thatcher. As Alex reflects, and the Indigo research bears out, *'audiences enjoy a story or character that they are familiar with'*.

The production used two significant pieces of R&D to ensure its success and relevance across venues. A week-long workshop at the National Theatre Studio focused on the production and how it could embed the aims of TNP; ideas for casting, music and set were explored, with a principal focus of creating a *'great night out'* for audiences. Attention to how these aspects of the play would resonate across the venues was key to the process. As Alex puts it, *'How does this feel like a show that is made for Wakefield when it's in Wakefield?'* This included exploration with partners as to how audiences in former mining areas might respond to the production and its portrayal of Margaret Thatcher.

Staff from partner organisations and from other tour venues were invited to a sharing at the end of the week, seeing sections of the play and initial ideas for music and set design, with attendees then invited to offer feedback on this early stage development. »

This attention to location was further developed in a second week of R&D, when a group from Queen's Theatre Hornchurch and the National Theatre visited all TNP venues taking the tour. Alex recalls, 'I went to visit every theatre that the play was touring to ... This investment of time resulted in people saying "Oh, it feels like it was made for this space." Well, surprise, surprise, it was!'. There was also significant discussion of audience development plans with venues, which informed QTH's subsequent approach to asset creation, and time allocated in rehearsals for TNP partners to create bespoke resources for their areas.

This attention to title, local context and a longer lead time for producing promotional materials translated into *Handbagged* performing strongly in the majority of venues, whilst also being the longest TNP midscale tour to date – touring to a total of 12 venues, including 6 venues outside of the network.

Take up by venues outside the network was swift, with first Blackpool Grand and then 'Very quickly, the title and the product, [the association with] the National and QTH's growing reputation secured five more venues', recalls Alex. Still, there was variation in what the production could deliver for venues in terms of audience development. Alex reflects, 'For some venues, *Handbagged* was about audience development. It was a fairly recent, lesser-known play. Whereas for others, this was more akin to their core programme [for existing audiences].'

Adam Knight, the CEO of the Blackpool Grand, decided to programme both *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Handbagged*. Elaborating on why, he says 'It was about elevating the programme. One of my priorities is to raise the profile of the Grand nationally. Having some National Theatre-badged work, even if it originated at other producing houses, was another good reason for doing that, and also to help drive and grow a drama audience.'

## Developments in midscale touring

While midscale touring has developed year on year, both Adam Knight and Katie Town agree on the limitations of what can be achieved in a three-year period for venues that are at an early stage of building their drama audience. 'It's just not long enough to build that audience up – you're just at the cusp' – Adam.

Aiming to respond to the issue at a national level, Adam and Katie have co-founded the **Local Theatres Touring Alliance (LTTA)**, alongside David Brownlee, Chief Executive of Data Culture Change. Katie describes:

*'We did a call out last autumn for other people across the midscale sector, people who produce work, promote work, run venues, sector support organisations, the Arts Council... and we had a town hall meeting in November [2024]... I've never seen that balance of people who are all coming together to say, we recognise this is a problem. We want to identify what the problem is and what we might be able to do. So, by the end of the day, we realised that we need to crack on and do something.'*

Out of this first town hall meeting, the organisers launched the LTTA, whose key aim is 'to ensure that there's a strong and viable touring ecology at the midscale, to be able to bring great work to smaller cities and towns around the country' (Katie). While LTTA is in its early stages, the aim is clearly resonating, with 160 organisations and individuals signing up since the launch.

Reflecting on the links between LTTA and TNP, Katie says: 'the TNP network gave a rich bed of venues who were thinking in a like-minded way, who were up for collaboration, who wanted transparent and open and honest conversations, and were happy to share information about collaborative marketing.'

Katie and Adam were keen to point out that, so far, the LTTA is unfunded and that development money would be very helpful in building it further. But they also both raise points about how the National Theatre could have a practical role in supporting the LTTA in other ways. The first is around intellectual property and the potential to make midscale versions of hit productions, 'How about allowing the network to have a licensable, smaller-scale version of a proven hit?'

The second relates to the National Theatre's convening power and its ability to advocate to Government on behalf of the theatre sector:

*'When you run a theatre in somewhere like Wakefield, the idea about political lobbying is beyond thought and it's beyond time available. [Theatres] are providing valuable cultural experiences. We need to get that message across.'*  
**Katie Town**

Several TNP partners are also **planning a new touring initiative which will build on the model developed through TNP**. As Alex Thorpe reflects:

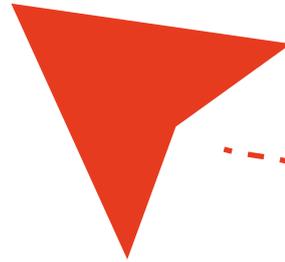
*'TNP and especially Handbagged have encouraged us to think differently about the way we make work in the future. The collaborative approach to the midscale tours, with TNP partners and the NT Learning team, has ignited an instinct to work in partnership across all of our produced work... it gives us the opportunity to work with other Artistic Directors, producers and wider theatre teams, sharing play ideas, audience development strategies, and learning and engagement programmes. It means the work is interrogated by our peers at an early stage, and working in partnership allows us to feed a diversity of ideas from a much wider pool into our planning and programming.'*

QTH, Curve and Lowry are now exploring plans for a three-year cycle of touring, embedding many of the learnings from TNP into the approach and taking 'audiences on a three year journey, with the ambition of engaging new audiences in year one with recognisable titles but retaining that audience and introducing them to bold new stories by 2030'.

QTH is also involved alongside TNP partner Landmark Theatres, Peterborough, in the newly-announced **East Anglian Touring Consortium**, which will draw on some aspects of TNP, particularly in relation to audience development, peer learning between organisations, and environmental sustainability. As Alex says, 'these discoveries of TNP are now being consciously replicated in new projects from their inception'.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ R&D periods that are attentive to differences in regional context can be used to mitigate the challenges of programming across scales of organisations, regions, and different audience demographics.
- ▶ R&D involving touring venues and over a longer lead time can also benefit marketing teams, ensuring they have relevant materials and the time to use them effectively.
- ▶ Initiatives such as the Local Theatres Touring Alliance and the planned 3-year touring model being developed by QTH, Lowry and Curve demonstrate how learnings and networks that have emerged from TNP are being taken forward to address the issue of drama audience development.





Company in Queen's Theatre Hornchurch TNP production of *Handbagged* (2025).  
Image by Manuel Harlan



# Building new audiences at Wolverhampton Grand Theatre

**Read on for...** targeted audience development initiatives building relationships with South Asian audiences; collaboration with community members to reach new audiences; embedding audience development into long-term business strategy.



War Horse puppetry workshop at Wolverhampton Grand (2025). Image by Graeme Braidwood

**Wolverhampton Grand Theatre has been a TNP partner since 2017. Prior to this, community development felt like a separate strand of work to Vicky Price, Director of Audiences at the Grand, rather than being integrated into the core running of the theatre.**

The TNP network has changed Vicky's approach, supporting her to integrate reaching new communities into the theatre's core strategy. For the first three years (the first cycle of TNP), community development was entirely funded by the NT's TNP budget. Today the Grand spends over £70k a year on community development, making it the single largest stream in their marketing budget, and since 2023 this spending has been almost entirely self-funded.

The Grand has focused primarily on building young, South Asian, and Black audiences, through ambassador schemes, a youth theatre, and a South Asian memory café, amongst other approaches. South Asian audiences at the Grand have grown by 20% each year since the start of TNP, reaching up to 20,000 bookings annually: demonstrating that committed community engagement - as well as facilitating a corporate social responsibility agenda - builds committed new audiences and helps to create theatre spaces that are open to all.

Vicky recruited Hardish Virk as a freelance audience development consultant when the theatre first joined TNP. Hardish developed the South Asian Ambassador scheme in 2018, recruiting people in his network to help him with the task of making the Grand more welcoming to South Asian communities in Wolverhampton and beyond. Eight or nine members now meet once a month to help Vicky ensure that the theatre's programme and engagement activities continue to reach these and other communities less likely to access the theatre. The scheme has provided the prototype for a Black African and Caribbean Ambassadors scheme, founded in 2021, and Generation Grand, a group of youth representatives (aged 8-21), who came together in the summer of 2022, and continue to represent the theatre. Speaking about the South Asian ambassador's scheme, ambassador Jaswant Sandhu (hereafter Jess) told us *'Within the group, there are so many people from different backgrounds. It's almost like a jigsaw... I always leave the meeting feeling very upbeat and I take that energy back into my school community.'*

## Jaswant Sandhu

*'I started going to the theatre at 15, when I worked at the Alexandra Theatre in Birmingham. I had a job selling ice creams. I wasn't really interested in selling ice creams. It was that I got to watch all the productions.'*

*'Why are so many South Asian people not attending the theatre? It's about breaking these barriers... once you go, it's almost like an addiction.'*

Jess is an English teacher at Sikh school Khalsa Academy in Wolverhampton, and has been an ambassador for a year. Jess (like Laurie Milsom in Case Study 1), believes that exposure to live theatre is the best way to introduce young people to the possibilities that theatre has to offer. Over the year that Jess has been working with the Grand, she has brought approximately 500 of her students to the theatre across eight productions. Jess told us: *'We have decorated our school with theatre information, so it isn't just an afterthought. It's part of our school community now.'*

Like Rob Carroll (see Case Study 1), Jess is trying to create a theatre culture within her school using strategies such as discount codes for students and families, a theatre board at the annual Year Six transition evening, and decorating the school with theatre posters. Jess actively engages her students in conversations about the themes that arise in the shows she takes them to see, even when they are not part of her curriculum. She reflected: *'They're learning life skills from a lot of these productions... all the productions [give] a sense of the difference between right and wrong... [it's] about shaping people to become good human beings.'*

To date, the South Asian ambassador group has been more focused on bringing audiences in through discounted tickets, while the Black African and Caribbean group has been interested in specialist programming that reflects their community and experiences. This is perhaps starting to change, with the recent co-production of *Surinderella*, a South Asian pantomime that the Grand are producing with Rifco Theatre Company for September 2025, which saw 55% of ticket sales going to first time attendees, as well as previous productions such as *Frankie Goes to Bollywood* in 2024.

Jess commented on the importance of South Asian representation in theatre for the young people she brings to the Grand, *'[Surinderella] is going to be the first big production where they can see themselves reflected in the theatre production. It means everything.'*

Jess works hard to introduce her students to theatre, but she is realistic about the challenges she faces. Aside from the familiar story about cost making a trip to the theatre inaccessible for many students, many of Jess' students face cultural barriers such as a lack of interest or understanding of the value of theatre from parents, as well as anxiety about children being out late.

There is currently no option to take drama at GCSE level at Khalsa Academy, though Key Stage 3 engagement is positive. Inspiring young people to consider theatre as a career option, and providing the relevant in-school teaching, are long-term goals for Jess who told us:

*'We do want the students to know that, actually, there are roles within the theatre. Maybe it isn't hugely on people's minds in that community, but it's available.'*

In the medium term, she hopes that her students' experiences of the theatre will make them want to go back and bring their families:

*'The whole experience is the deciding fact from whether they want to come again, whether they want to say to their parents, "You know, actually, Mum, Dad, could we go and see that show at the theatre?" Sometimes I will see students with their parents [at the theatre]. They've obviously gone home, spoken to their parents, [and] booked a production. It's lovely to see.'*

Jess told us how important first impressions were for young people who had never experienced the theatre before, reflecting on the welcoming atmosphere staff at the Grand have cultivated: *'As soon as the children enter, it's welcoming, I think that makes a big difference.'*

Reflecting on the impact that going to see theatre has had on the young people she works with, Jess spoke about how seeing *War Horse* had inspired a particular group of students,

*'Every time we go and see a theatre production there are children who come to me... "Miss. When's the next one? What are we going to see next?" The buzz in my English classroom [after War Horse], "Miss, it was just amazing. How did they do that? You forget they're not real horses.'*

There is no doubt in Jess' mind that the cultural capital the theatre provides for children and young people has a real impact on their lives:

*'I've got a reading club, and those students get priority to go to the theatre. I think a lot of them have just joined the reading club to go to the theatre, but it doesn't matter. Whatever gets them reading or whatever gets them going into the theatre... It's going to enrich their lives.'*

## Ranjit Khutan

*'When I used to come here people used to ask me, almost, "are you in the right place?''*

*[South Asian] people would say, "Oh, I don't really go there, because it's not really for me." People didn't go to the theatre. They went to cinemas. The stuff that was in theatres wasn't really appealing. The other audience members are from a certain class of people.... they felt out of place. Things have improved a lot, and I think the work that they're doing with the Grand really shows that.'*

Ranjit Khutan is an independent consultant who specialises in public health and higher education. He also has a long relationship with theatre as a writer, a reviewer, and an avid audience member. Ranjit recalls going to the press office at the Grand in the 1990s to collect his press tickets and finding the encounter awkward, as though the staff thought

he was in the wrong place. Ranjit resolved not to let the attitudes of others deter him. He kept coming to the Grand, reviewing shows and writing when he could.

He was approached by Hardish in 2018, to be among the first cohort of South Asian ambassadors. Though Ranjit initially thought the task was ambitious, he trusted Hardish's ethical approach, and wanted to be part of breaking down the barriers to theatre for other South Asians, so he agreed to join the group.

*'I'm thinking of some [South Asian] students that came. They were so excited. You could tell it was their first time. They had popcorn, they had expensive drinks, they had everything. And they really talked about it a lot afterwards. I try and listen, try and tap into that feeling again. Because I think once you've been so many times, you forget. It's interesting to see through their eyes. I think they came back to see something else, independently.'*

Ranjit's remit is simply to introduce people in his network, who might not otherwise access theatre, to the Grand. He brings people from various different networks and communities that he is a part of, including the LGBTQIA+ community; people involved in public health work; South Asian friends, colleagues and family; and students. Ranjit's engagement strategy is always relational and organic. Mostly he invites people to attend shows with him when he has free tickets or shares discount codes with his networks. He warns that completely free tickets can be undervalued, suggesting that discounted tickets encourage commitment from people. As well as inviting ordinary people to see shows, Ranjit sees the value in inviting community influencers, so that their positive experiences ripple out into the wider community.

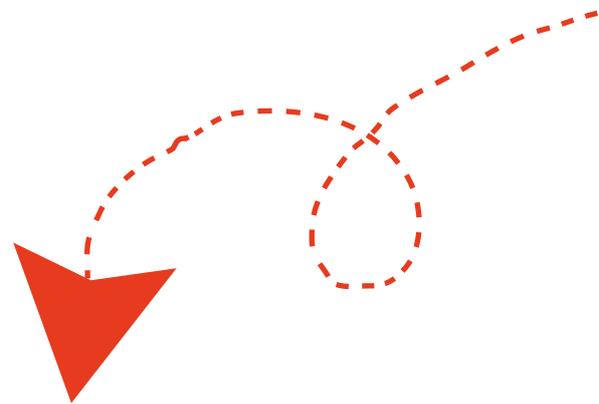
Reframing the old idea of 'hard-to-reach' communities, is central to Ranjit's approach. If there are particular groups of people who are not using the theatre space, he told us, it is because *'[they] found our services hard to reach, not the other way around'*. This reframing puts the onus on the institution to do the hard work of making contact, rather than expecting people to spontaneously start visiting spaces they have no cultural connection to, or - worse - have had uncomfortable experiences at (as Ranjit did in the 90s). This is a practice shared by other TNP partners (as Tessa Slack found in Trowbridge - see Case Study 6), and informs outreach and marketing methods such as distributing posters in South Asian neighbourhoods, sending representatives from the theatre to visit South Asian Melas and utilising the personal networks of trusted ambassadors through discount codes.

*'[The Grand] is not an anchor organisation like a university or a hospital, [or an] education institution, but I think it could see itself like that, because entertainment, theatre, is really important for people's health and wellbeing. I think that sense of joy is missing from people's lives.'*

Ranjit has a particular interest in the public health benefits of theatre and art more broadly. As public health funding is increasingly channelled into frontline services, Ranjit sees a role for theatres in public health prevention. Arguing for more public money to be spent on the arts, Ranjit reflected that theatre gets people out of their homes, connects them with others and generates a sense of joy and belonging which is missing from many people's lives.

Ranjit feels that the next challenge for the Grand is to think about reaching socially and economically deprived groups. He is already thinking about ways to work through some of the community health groups that he is part of, to bring more of these groups to the theatre.

The primary strategy for engaging South Asian audiences has been discounted tickets. With *Surinderella* coming to the Grand in September, and other shows in the pipeline, Ranjit is now starting to think about programming more broadly. That said, he is more interested in South Asian theatre that would have a broad appeal, than programming specialist theatre for a single audience group. With South Asian ticket sales reaching 20,000 a year, it is clear that these audiences are coming to see more than just South Asian theatre. The next step is reaching wide audiences through the broad appeal of theatre that happens to be South Asian.



## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Short-term external funding is vital to seed change but sustainable audience development requires long-term planning and internal ownership, including embedding audience development commitments into business plans and budgets.
- ▶ Meaningful community development begins at the small scale, working in a targeted manner with a few passionate members of a community to access their networks and act on their insights, rather than through broad-brush, large-scale marketing campaigns.
- ▶ Theatres have a role to play in public health as spaces for connection, joy and belonging.

# Creating community connections at Lowry, Salford

**Read on for...** community ambassador and community night initiatives for Global Majority audience development; formalising grassroots audience development processes; perspectives from community ambassadors.

## Introduction

Lowry in Salford is a well-established cultural hub, regionally and nationally, and was one of the original Theatre Nation Partnership organisations. Throughout the partnership, Lowry has been working on reaching under-served audiences. This includes the immediate neighbouring communities in Salford, where there are high levels of structural deprivation, and Global Majority communities from across Greater Manchester.

Jenny Riding, Director of Learning and Engagement at Lowry, describes how TNP funding has enabled consistency and continuity of engagement, which has facilitated the building of meaningful relationships with communities:

*‘One of the things we recognised is that we were picking people up and putting them down again a little bit. TNP provided us with an opportunity to have consistent quality product with resources to be able to support under-served communities to engage and get comfortable with the idea of theatre visits.’*

This is also an example of how working across the partnership has allowed the sharing of good practice, with work being done at Wolverhampton Grand (see Case Study 4) serving as one of the inspirations for the development of Lowry’s model. As Tim Manley, Head of Marketing and Communications at Lowry, describes, *‘We looked at the model that Wolverhampton Grand use and tried to see how we could use that inspiration from what they were doing.’*

Two departments at Lowry have developed this work of building community connections. One programme is based in the Learning and Engagement team and supports working with the community of immediate Salford residents. This strand of work focuses on bringing in groups through engagement who would never otherwise go to Lowry, and who may never end up paying for a ticket, largely through distributing free tickets. In parallel, the Marketing and Communications team are working to build Global Majority paying audiences across Greater Manchester, often through the selling of highly discounted tickets. Key to the success of both programmes has been creating new community connector and ambassador roles for people with lived experience in the communities that are being targeted, and putting on community nights linked to productions that are aimed at serving these audiences. This case study examines these ways of working through the perspectives of the Community Connectors and Arts Ambassadors who have been working at a grassroots level.

**Company in Queen’s Theatre Hornchurch TNP production of *Sucker Punch* (2023). Image by Manuel Harlan**



## Sharon Raymond and Samina Ali: Arts Ambassadors

*'Having the familiar face in the space helps when people come in, because they're just a bit nervous.'*

**Sharon Raymond, Arts Ambassador**

Sharon Raymond and Samina Ali both have long histories of working in theatre in Greater Manchester and have amassed a rich set of contacts and expertise. As well as working at Lowry, with Marketing and Development, they are theatre producers and work on a number of different projects across the city. As Arts Ambassadors, Samina predominantly works with South Asian audiences and Sharon with Black audiences; their role involves both advising Lowry and doing grassroots work to bring in these audiences.

Sharon started her career in theatre at the Palace Theatre, Manchester before moving to an arts marketing agency doing grassroots community work. Her work with Lowry involves a combination of going out to meet groups within communities and targeting particular community spaces – so, for example with *Sucker Punch*, a TNP midscale touring production set in a boxing gym (see Case Study 3), she describes:

*'I went out into the communities with my contacts, targeting young people, people that are interested in sports, but also people who might just be interested in the story. So, I've got a contact at the Moss Side Fire Station, they have a boxing ring, where all the young people train. It's rammed all the time. So the guy who I spoke to, he got his minibus, and he brought them to see the show. And they were buzzing! People just loved the story and they loved the energy around it. A lot of people came out who had not been here before.'*

At other times, the job involves *'lots of cups of tea'*, hanging out in cafés with printed information about a new production at her fingertips. She also attends events at Lowry, providing a reassuring presence as a trusted figure in the community. Sharon characterises this work as hard, and as taking patience but ultimately she finds it rewarding, commenting *'if you want to diversify the audience you have to put the work in.'*

Like Sharon, Samina Ali has had an extensive career in arts and media in Greater Manchester spanning 30 years. Her focus is on South Asian engagement and cultural development. She describes her role as *'cultural consultancy, looking at programming, looking at development, looking at audience development. How do we improve? How do we get audiences to access mainstream spaces such as Lowry?'*

Samina reflects that *'every production is different, and it serves every community differently.'* Thinking back across the TNP programme, she reflects on the potential and challenges of selling *My Beautiful Laundrette* to local audiences:

*'It's an absolute legendary film .. But that was very challenging, because you're looking here in terms of the LGBTQ community and that of Asian communities, trying to tap into that, but at the same time offering it to the wider community.'*

However, her job became even more challenging when she realised the touring week at Lowry fell during Ramadan:

*'I said "We're going to open the fast, that's what we're going to do, and we're all going to come together and we're going to break fast." It's like breaking bread together [...] So there was a prayer room that was allocated. There were boxes of food, the halal options were there, vegetarian. It was phenomenal. The feedback was amazing ... the audience loved it.'*

This is just one of the ways that appointing people with longstanding expertise in working with communities across Greater Manchester has enriched the TNP programme and the cultural offering of Lowry.

For both ambassadors, addressing practical issues of transport and access are key. There are areas of Greater Manchester that are not well-linked by public transport to Salford Quays, where Lowry is located. Like Sharon, Samina arranges minibuses with charitable voluntary groups and liaises with Lowry on issues of accessibility. *'How can we make this more comfortable for them in terms of accommodating them, to be able to make sure that their needs are met?'*

Samina notes the positive impact of her work on Lowry, including the increased sensitivity to community needs and cultural practices. In this way, the ambassadors' work is not only about bringing people into the theatre who might not otherwise attend, but in adapting the theatre to meet their needs. She can see the impact of her hard work, *'I love it, because these are people who weren't theatre goers, you know, these are people now who've come in and subscribed and are like, bringing other people into it as well.'*

For Sharon, this grassroots work makes a vital contribution during the current context of heightened social division: *'Everyone's upset, everyone's grieving the loss of something or other. And I think these spaces, with these projects, the National Theatre doing this funding, it's been amazing. It's changed people's lives.'*

## Michelle Mott: Community Connector

For Michelle Mott, becoming involved with Lowry has indeed been life changing. She was agoraphobic and had not left the house for 18 months when she was recruited into the show selectors group (a group given a budget by Lowry to commission work in their local areas). From there, she became a Community Connector. This is a role that grew out of more ad hoc arrangements that were put in place to bring local people into Community Nights.

Community Nights at Lowry started in 2019 during the first cycle of TNP with a National Theatre touring production of the Salford-based, Shelagh Delaney play *A Taste of Honey*. In this first iteration, communities were engaged more informally through people who were well-respected and known in the community. However, as Jenny Riding recounts:

*'We recognised that we needed to pay the people who were then being that Community Connector, so the people who were spending their time texting people, finding the people that have never been before, arranging where the coach might pick them up, making sure that everybody's on board and they've not left anybody behind that, you know, it's work, it's a job.'*

This role became formalised through the 'Community Connectors' scheme. At first the Connectors were paid hourly, according to which productions they worked on, and then this was changed to payment of a monthly retainer, which some of the Connectors felt uncomfortable with as there were months when they were not working for Lowry. Jenny reflects that valuable feedback has come through the Community Connectors, such as that staff wearing lanyards made people feel uncomfortable or that the unfamiliar food being offered was off putting. Now a longstanding Community Connector, Michelle reflects, *'People don't feel like the theatre is for them, that they can't afford it. You know, it's where the pretentious people would come.'* The Community Connectors try to break down these barriers.

The scaffolding for this programme was developed further by the appointment of Sarah Whitehead as Community Collaborator, to coordinate, recruit and work with the Community Connectors. Sarah knows the power of grassroots community work, as she was initially recruited on her doorstep by a nun and a local neighbourhood development officer for Church Action Against Poverty, becoming a community leader and setting up organisations including Community Pride.

Michelle and Sarah agree that free tickets offered to a Community Night is often the first way of engaging local communities with Lowry, then this can progress to becoming involved in other groups and projects. But even when there is not such sustained engagement or progression, engagement work can provide access to remarkable productions that can evoke powerful emotions. Sarah recounts:

*'With National Theatre, one that the groups raved about was The Ocean at the End of the Lane. That was amazing, the most fantastic show. And there's a lad in one of the groups who is in his 30s. He's had a difficult life, lost a lot of his family members through suicide and different things. He struggles a lot with his mental health, and he's been homeless, street homeless, for quite a long time, but is now in a property and getting back on track. And we went to that show, and he just cried the whole way through, and then he was laughing, and he was like, I feel like a five year old boy, like this is a joy I've never had.'*

In addition to the benefits for the community, working with Lowry has been personally transformative for Michelle who has since set up her own group for autistic children (A Quiet Space), received an award from the Theatre Drury Lane, and given testimony to a parliamentary hearing. She reflects, *'I think it's very important for the community that this continues and more people like me are picked out of the doldrums and put on the pedestal where they belong.'*

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ A holistic approach to first-time audience members' experience is vital to achieve a welcoming environment: this includes considering show timings, friendliness of the space and setting expectations in advance, not just the performance itself.
- ▶ Developing cultural sensitivity to different audience needs takes time and work - valuable learnings and opportunities can arise from unexpected intersections.
- ▶ The community ambassadors and community connectors have played vital roles in the success of these initiatives.
- ▶ Effective audience development sits across the work of both learning/participation and marketing teams. Using the ethos of community working to reach underrepresented audiences initially can support the growth of independent ticket-buyers in the long term.



Company in Curve's TNP production of *My Beautiful Laundrette* (2024).  
Image by Ellie Kurtz



DERS

The image features a neon sign with the word "DERS" in a stylized, outlined font. Above the text are several geometric shapes, including a diamond and a square, also in neon. A warm, yellowish light strip curves across the top of the sign. The background is a dark grid pattern. In the foreground, there is a large, dark, textured object, possibly a piece of fabric or a prop, and some blue and white balloons on the right side.

# Artist Development : Florence Espeut Nickless' story



**Read on for...** local artist development within a national programme context; investing in artists with local roots and lived experience; supporting artists through on-the-job upskilling.

## The Four Winds at Trowbridge Town Hall (2023)

*'I never thought I'd write a play for the National. I didn't really know you could be a playwright as your job when I was younger. Here we are. [Working on both The Four Winds and Bernadette has been] career changing... life changing.'*

TNP, and specifically Public Acts, has played an important role in playwright Florence Espeut-Nickless' career trajectory. Florence (hereafter, Flo), grew up in Chippenham, and was expelled from school. She went on to secure a place studying performing arts at Trowbridge College, which she describes as the starting point in her life in theatre, *'Why I work in theatre is a lot down to that place.'*

Trowbridge Town Hall is a newly refurbished community arts space in Trowbridge, and has been a TNP partner since 2022. Through previous commissions with Trowbridge Town Hall, Flo met the Public Acts team and was commissioned to write *The Four Winds*, Episode 3 of *The Odyssey*, in Spring 2022. Flo said *'They were like, "The Odyssey might be happening with the National...they want a local writer. Would you be interested?" I was freaking out... but I was like, "yeah, definitely"'*

Flo found that she was drawn to the crew on Odysseus' ship, rather than to the character of Odysseus. By focusing on the members of the crew, Flo was able to explore some of the themes that resonated with her own experience of the area:

*'There's a lot of army bases [in Wiltshire]. When I was growing up there was a lot of young, working class men that would be drafted into the army. They would come into our schools and the boys that were getting in trouble... [would be] kind of seduced into the army. I grew up with those boys. My boyfriend when I was younger, that's what happened to him. I could kind of tap into that working class military experience, about going off to war and then being separated [from your family].'*

Flo's personal experience of young men being *'seduced into the army'* formed the genesis of what became *The Four Winds*, which told the story of a young man from an estate in Trowbridge going to fight in Odysseus' war.

The community company that went on to perform *The Four Winds* had to be built from the ground up. As Tessa Slack, Community Engagement Manager at Trowbridge Town Hall reflected, *'We hadn't ever run a project like this before. [We didn't know] the importance of going out into the community... It was very much, "this is a town hall. This is what's happening here. Come and be a part of it." Whereas we learned from Public Acts... We had to go out into our community and say, "What can we do for you?"'* Tessa and Flo visited different community spaces in the town, including youth clubs run by local charity Trowbridge Future, and Trowbridge College, which was *'a big full circle moment'* for Flo.

Flo in *The Odyssey* ep3 rehearsal at Trowbridge Town Hall. Image by Joseph Lynn



Because the themes of *The Four Winds* were informed by Flo's personal experiences of Trowbridge, where she had spent time as a teenager, the first draft of the script was written with a young cast in mind. While Trowbridge Future and Trowbridge College provided a cohort of young people, other engagement activities attracted older community members. Flo and Jesse Jones, director of *The Four Winds*, adapted their vision to accommodate a multi-generational cast, and Flo continued the process of writing and re-writing in response to the people they were working with throughout the rehearsal period.

Showcasing working class voices embedded in place is as much a part of making theatre accessible and open to all as the communities it reaches, through initiatives like Public Acts. As Flo reflects:

*'I never thought I'd adapt a classic. I didn't think that would be something that I could do. I had to get through a lot of imposter syndrome... [But] I was in safe hands... Trowbridge Town Hall, and the Public Acts team, were very supportive and very encouraging and made me feel like I could do it. I guess you have ideas before you work for places, of how it's gonna be, or that everyone's gonna know all this stuff and be experts, but then everyone's just trying to figure it out.'*

## **Bernadette and other Teenage Folk Tales at Restoke (2025)**

*‘There was probably six months, might have even been longer, of working with these teenagers, having these sessions, trying to get a sense of what they might want the show to be about. I had to hold my nerve. Then it’s like, “right, the show’s happening. What’s it gonna be?”...It needs to be written quite quickly. There was a couple of months where it felt quite frantic.’*

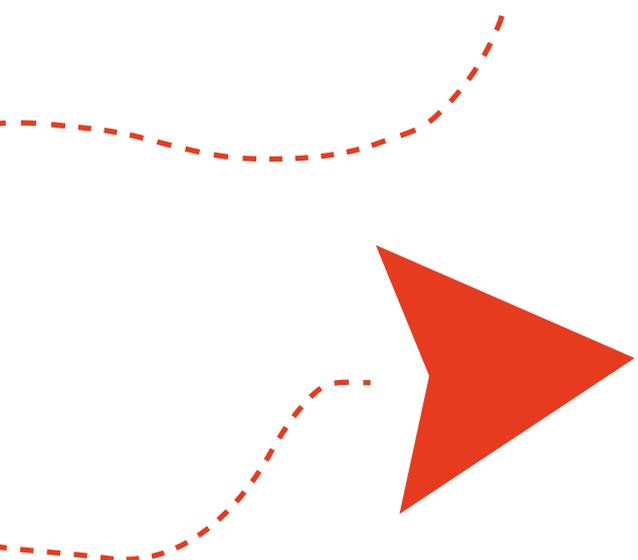
Working on *The Four Winds* brought Flo into contact with the creatives working on other chapters of *The Odyssey*. Episode One, *The Lotus Eaters*, was produced by Stoke-on-Trent based National Portfolio Organisation, Restoke. *The Lotus Eaters* involved 27 non-professional performers working alongside four professionals, and brought a company of participants aged five to 85 together. Writer, Gabriella Gay, and the community company co-created the show over 12 months, bringing themes from *The Odyssey* into dialogue with local participants’ lived experiences.

Flo met Clare Reynolds and Paul Rogerson (co-Directors of Restoke), Sarah Richardson (Restoke Senior Producer of Restoke) and fellow writer Gabriella through *The Odyssey* partnership. The Restoke team were impressed by Flo’s writing and the way she worked with non-professionals and invited her to write their upcoming show, then known only as *The Power Project*, in February 2024.

Public Acts had been formative for both Flo and the Restoke team, who described the collaboration as mutually beneficial. Public Acts raised Restoke’s practices of care, while also stretching their creative ambitions. Sarah reflected,

*‘There were some really good, robust conversations around things like, you know, Where is the line? In terms of care. Can you care too much? “Where do we set boundaries?”’*

At the same time, Restoke’s multi-artform approach, including the use of dancers in script readings, was a provocation to the National Theatre’s approach which was roundly embraced. Flo, in turn, was given the opportunity to work at scale and alongside diverse communities, and this cross-pollination of learning and ambition fed into what came next.



## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ A national network prioritising work with local artists in local contexts can support the sustainable development of an area's artistic ecosystem in the long term. Developing cultural sensitivity to different audience needs takes time and work - valuable learnings and opportunities can arise from unexpected intersections.
- ▶ Meaningful creative opportunities to work with local communities that embed support for artists can impact artists' development more than standalone training, establishing a sustainable model where artistic growth and community benefit reinforce one another.
- ▶ Creating with community groups helps to develop an artist's flexibility and provokes creative adaptation.

The following 12 months were to be a period of growth for all involved. Restoke's in-house methodology for working with community groups, Holding Lightly, stretched Flo's understanding of what it meant to co-create a show. Restoke works with different community groups in Stoke and North Staffordshire, weaving their autobiographical stories into theatre. Their practice draws heavily on dance and movement, and though they had worked with poets previously, this was their first time working with a playwright. The collaboration stretched both Flo and the team at Restoke creatively, culminating in *Bernadette* and other *Teenage Folk Tales* in March 2025.

*'In The Four Winds, there was a little mantra. It would be like, "Chest out Trowbridge!"; and everyone would chant that as a warmer. And you could just feel the pride they felt for being from Trowbridge. Having the National in Trowbridge was huge. Not just the cast of people that are involved, but to the town.'* **Florence Espeut-Nickless**

*'We still do that now, in the group chat. Like if somebody's got something coming up, or they're a bit nervous, that's the phrase that gets used: "Come on, guys, we've got this... Chest out Trowbridge.'* **Trowbridge Future Youth Worker**

TNP activity took place across 13 Arts Council England Priority Areas, where investment and cultural engagement has historically been low\*. As Flo observed, *'I think both [Trowbridge and Stoke] are places where people don't generally feel very good about being from there. [They're] places that are looked down upon and have been neglected in ways.'* Part of the programme's role was to help to instil a sense of pride in these places, and to create cultural opportunities that will have a legacy beyond the programme itself. Both *The Four Winds* and *Bernadette* were stories rooted in place and Flo, as the writer, played a significant role ensuring that the stories they were telling belonged in the places where they were being told.

Working on *The Four Winds* and *Bernadette* stretched Flo creatively, requiring her to adapt classic stories, work at scale with community groups, and embark on a rigorous co-creation process. The shift from writing material that she performed to writing for others, taught her that *'you have to let go. It's in other people's hands.'*

Both shows had a profound impact on the company members we spoke to. Flo herself reflected that *'[at the start of the process] some people find it hard to say their name to another person... Through both of the processes there was uncertainty around whether the cast would be able to stand on stage, say the lines, do the show. They absolutely smashed it...'* Beyond the show itself, the experience had a lasting impact on many people's confidence and aspirations, with several young people going on to study drama or performing arts at GCSE, A Level or degree level.

Three years on from *The Odyssey*, Flo was commissioned to write *Ride or Die* for the National Theatre's Connections programme. The play will be included in the National Theatre's 2027 Connections portfolio. She is currently developing a play for Bristol Old Vic, having done a stint as Writer in Residence there earlier this year. Flo has kept in touch with Trowbridge Future, and has since been asked to become their Patron.

TNP, in the form of Public Acts and through Trowbridge Town Hall and later Restoke, created environments that made Flo feel safe enough to challenge her practice and take creative risks. Each project built her skills and confidence at the same time as engaging communities, at both an individual and a collective level, establishing a sustainable model where artistic growth and community benefit reinforced one another.

\*Based on data that does not necessarily reflect local, grass roots cultural activity

# Tamika and Vicky: Career progression and development within Theatre Nation Partnerships



**Read on for...** professional development potential of cross-organisational networks; impact of devolved national working models on partner staff; value of peer support communities to individuals.

**Speaking to the theatre professionals working across Theatre Nation Partnerships, the value of the network for career progression and development has become very clear. Being part of the network has opened up opportunities for learning and experiencing other kinds of organisations.**

As a representative from a partner organisation said at the final Partner Day in Peterborough (June 2025) *'ideas have been freely shared and adapted across the network'* (see Case Study 8 for further discussion of the value of the network for partners).

In this case study we take an in-depth look at two people who have progressed their career trajectories through Theatre Nation Partnerships. The first is Tamika Gore, now the Creative Programmes Facilitator at Curve Theatre, Leicester. We trace her journey from Assistant to Manager and hear about her plans for her next career steps on the Shine project. The second is Vicky Price, Director of Audiences at Wolverhampton Grand Theatre, who significantly credits TNP with her sharp career trajectory.

Crosscutting both of these stories is the importance of TNP in providing peer support, mentoring and the benefit of exposure to other organisations and ways of working.

Tamika Gore at a Speak Up event. Image by Matthew Kaltborn



## Tamika Gore

Tamika Gore had been working as a Creative Programmes Assistant at Curve, looking after education, workshops, schools and partnerships, as well as artist development. Her experiences of coordinating different kinds of projects meant that when the person who had originally been appointed Project Manager on Speak Up at Curve did not take up the role, she was able to step up into the position. The learning curve was steep and Tamika describes learning on the job, first working to *'find out who those key stakeholders within the schools were, so that we could build that relationship to ensure that Speak Up was able fully cemented within the school'*, as well as building her understanding of *'what my roles and responsibilities were, and ensuring that everybody on the project – the teachers, the artists, the young people – knew what everybody's roles and responsibilities were.'*

Tamika's line manager, Lorraine Douglas (Schools and Community Partnerships Manager at Curve), describes Speak Up in Leicester as *'a beast of a project across five different schools.'* The breadth of Tamika's role on the project was wide and Lorraine reflected on the scale of the demands, *'To work with established artists ... How they're going to work with the teachers. You're also looking at travel, to get everybody down to London and get them home again safely... Being the calm voice when things are not going as planned.'*

Moving from being in a junior role into one with more responsibility was sometimes challenging, particularly when working with some of the same artists and teachers who had known her in this previous role, as one encounter with a teacher showed, *'He made a comment like, "oh, when you first initially came into the school, I saw you as this tiny little mouse, and now you're managing such a big project."'*

Tamika reflects on feeling like an imposter in her role on Speak Up at first, thinking back to monthly project managers' meetings where she was in the room with more experienced people. However, over time this changed and the regular monthly forum was key to this. Tamika recalls a moment of realisation:

*'Oh my gosh, I'm in a room full of people that are also going through some of the same challenges as me, and that we are able to share a common understanding and love for the project, but also I'm able to turn to these people and be like, "I don't know what the heck I'm doing. I don't know how to navigate this as such." So it was really nice to, yeah, be able to share and really feel, and be seen amongst the other project managers as well.'*

For Tamika, it wasn't just about being given the space but how it was facilitated and held by Matt Woodhead and Helen Monks, the Co-Artistic Directors of LUNG theatre company, who were Creative Associates on Speak Up with responsibility for training. She recalls, *'They made it feel like a safe space to really dissect particular challenges that we were going through. On a project like this, it is essential to really be able to have space to talk about those challenges.'*

This experience was also very useful for Tamika in learning how to run training sessions for artists: *'I was able to take specific things from training with Matt and Helen, and then deliver training, myself and Lorraine for our artists here, which was something that I would never would have done at the start of the project, simply because I didn't feel like I had the toolkit and the skills.'* Tamika credits being part of Speak Up as changing the way she sees herself professionally,

*'it's definitely allowed me to see myself as a project manager and producer'*; She reflects on how she is now comfortable taking responsibility for time management, budgeting and decision-making.

Post-Speak Up, Tamika is Creative Programmes Facilitator for the Creative Programmes Team at Curve, and Project Manager for Shine. Shine is a three year project being delivered by Curve in partnership with Sunrise Wellbeing and Randal Foundation, working with five schools across Leicester (three of these are schools from Speak Up) and focusing on young people's mental health and well-being (a key theme emerging from Speak Up). As she moves into this new project, Tamika describes herself as an *'advocate for continuous learning'* and highlights the beneficial effects of being *'pulled out of [her] comfort zone'* through Speak Up. She reflects,

*'When you're feeling like you're being challenged, where you feel like you're learning things, and where you're able to see things from a different perspective, but also, again, feel slightly uncomfortable about it, you are pushed to expand your learning as best and as much as you possibly can.'*

## Vicky Price

Shortly after graduating from university, and a six month stint working in a bank, Vicky moved into theatre, getting a part-time job as a Box Office Assistant at the Birmingham Rep, where she stayed for four years. Quickly confident that she wanted to pursue a serious career in theatre, Vicky took every opportunity going and tried her hand at whatever she was asked to do, from marketing to fundraising. When a Press and PR Manager role at the Wolverhampton Grand came up, Vicky applied for it and was successful. From there, her career trajectory was fast, becoming the youngest Senior Manager at the Grand in 2018, at the start of the first TNP cycle, and more recently being promoted to Director of Audiences. Vicky credits TNP with much of the learning that has supported her trajectory, saying *'it's just elevated me to a level that I don't think I would have got to without leaving [the Grand] and experiencing something else. It's almost been like working in lots of different venues and seeing good practice, bad practice.'*

This idea of TNP simulating the experience of working in multiple theatres was key to Vicky's sense of what the partnership offered her. She had the opportunity to visit venues across the country, observe how they operated, and learn from a wide range of people and practices. She described this as a unique and inspiring experience, saying,

*'It's like you've had a career working in all of these different [theatres]... I've been to all these amazing theatres who all do brilliant work. Some of them are doing it on a shoestring. Some of them are doing it at really high level. But I think ultimately, everybody cares, and that's the really inspiring part.'*

She went on to say:

*'During the TNP cycle, Lisa Burger, who was the Executive Director and joint CEO of the National Theatre at the time, attended every meeting along with Alice King-Farlow, the Director of Learning. What that meant was that I had almost direct access to the CEO of the National Theatre, who was very inspirational... literally, the type of person you want to be when you grow up.'*

Working with leaders at the National Theatre taught Vicky an immense amount about effective theatre leadership. She reflected on her own sometimes *'fiery'* personality, adding that prior to TNP that fieriness had occasionally *'spilled over into [her] work.'* The leaders Vicky worked with through TNP taught her that calm leadership helps a team to trust you and gives them space to do their jobs effectively.

Vicky told us that *'no money could have paid for a course for me to learn what I've learned... I've been exposed to so many different kinds of people, different kinds of leaders, different kinds of venues.'* This exposure to a variety of approaches, on a variety of budgets, and with various levels of staff capacity, gave Vicky the space to learn from others and the freedom to try things out for herself. She reflected that nothing she learnt through TNP felt prescribed, instead the ideas and approaches that were shared enabled Vicky to experiment and learn what worked in her particular context.

Now that Vicky's time with TNP has come to an end, she is going on to solidify her learning by embarking on an MBA in Strategic Leadership for Arts and Culture. She told us *'TNP has taught me... amazing work experience and CPD, but I also almost feel like I need a qualification to back that up, which is what I'm doing.'* She hopes that the MBA will give her the confidence to nurture the next generation of cultural leaders in Wolverhampton:

*'I've had a lot of autonomy... and I feel like I want people to have that autonomy so that they can grow in their roles. We've got some really capable, really brilliant people who work here, and we need to let them shine. I've had a real opportunity to shine, and ... it's time for me to step back now and let other people shine and then I would really like to be a CEO of a theatre at some point, once I've done my masters.'*

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Involvement in the TNP network enabled partner staff to gain skills, confidence and experience, helping to fast-track workplace progression. Travelling to other venues for Partner Days and gaining privileged insights into other organisations through working groups offered a unique opportunity to expand sector experience without having to move organisations.
- ▶ Working collaboratively on the same project(s) across different organisational and geographic contexts highlighted both shared challenges and context-specific considerations, which served to multiply potential learnings for partner staff.
- ▶ The genuinely collaborative approach to projects across TNP gave autonomy to partners and partner staff in each area, creating a sense of shared responsibility and a trusted community of industry peers.



Speak Up workshop at the National Theatre. Image by Matthew Kaltenborn



# The value of the network



**Read on for...** exploration of how to convene a collaborative national network at scale; the benefits of bringing together a diverse group of organisations; reflections on the impact on partners and individuals of a generous approach to network participation.

## Introduction

On 19 June 2025, representatives from each of the TNP partner organisations came together for a final Partner Day at New Theatre, Peterborough, to reflect on the achievements, challenges, opportunities and lessons of the seven years of TNP. The day included a session exploring the legacy of Public Acts, case study presentations on the impact of the Innovation Fund (a TNP seed-funding initiative to incubate new ideas within partner organisations), and a network-wide environmental sustainability insight sharing session. As part of the day, Art of Regeneration ran a reflective participatory session with all partner delegates, exploring the value of the TNP network. This case study centres the voices of the people who participated in that session.

The range of partners and their varied expectations, capacities and experiences emerged as both a strength and a challenge for the network. Over the course of the session, the partners reflected on the value of the partnership for them, their organisations, and for theatre in England. Here we outline four stand-out themes from the day.



opportunity continuity  
research audiences connectivity  
reach connections shared  
travel support interesting  
**community**  
**collaboration**  
reflection learning sharing  
new passionate catalyst  
dialogue opportunities  
reassurance experience

## 'The grab a coffee moment' - networking opportunities

Several partners spoke about how previously faceless institutions became personalised and demystified through the TNP network. These relationships catalysed deeper engagement and opened up possibilities for collaborations between organisations that might otherwise have viewed one another primarily through the lens of 'competitor', or else considered their differences (in scale, approach, capacity etc) too great to warrant meaningful partnership working. As one partner said, 'It wasn't just organisations, they were actual individuals.'

The connections made between partners had a multiplying effect, meaning that partners had access to wider networks through each other. The connections and relationships that were made beyond, but through, the network led to new projects and collaborations that would not have been possible otherwise (see previous page for partners' one-word descriptions of TNP).

These highly personalised relationships are necessarily human resource heavy, and some partners reported a need to attend every TNP partner session in order to stay in the loop. As one partner articulated: '...your presence in certain working groups and partner groups and sessions was vital, and if you missed a session, you were very quickly out of the loop. So there was a real pressure to attend everything, and it was very focused on individuals.' This pressure proved challenging for both smaller and larger institutions. Smaller institutions felt that while larger partners had entire teams or departments dedicated to, for example, community engagement, they were continually stretched in terms of capacity and their presence at meetings pulled them away from other vital work. Larger institutions felt that consistency in attendance could be challenging, but that it was important for relevant personnel to be kept up to speed with TNP developments, and this conflict could necessitate post-partner day meetings to ensure all team-members and departments were informed.

The hosting of Partner Days in regional theatre spaces across the country, rather than centred in London, was widely valued by partners. TNP brought theatre professionals together, in-person, at a range of venues to explore the possibilities of a decentralised, collaborative theatre network:

*'Doing stuff outside of London, and moving the meetings around, and the fact that we now all have a better sense of who each other are and where we're working, and we've seen each other's buildings, and we've eaten together in those buildings and shared stories in those buildings. And so we have a sense of the nation and theatre around the nation.'*

## Working across organisations

The diversity of organisations in the network is both a strength and a challenge when finding commonalities for projects like midscale touring and schools tours. As one participant commented:

*'One of the beauties ... is the diversity of organisations within this network. But that sometimes presents a challenge when actual work streams need to find a commonality, and one of those being midscale touring and trying to find titles that will work for everybody. When everyone's in different places and we've got different places and we've got different demographics, sometimes needing to find those commonalities is a real challenge.'*

However, finding ways to mitigate these differences had been honed over the time of the partnership, as another participant commented:

*'One of the challenges is people having varied expectations ... And one of the ways of working through that is setting those expectations at the start, which hasn't always happened, but through the three years [of the second cycle of TNP] has become more apparent. Assumptions were made in year one, but then in year two or year three were no longer the case, or have been challenged.'*

An example of this iterative learning process is how the approach taken to midscale touring has been honed over time (see Case Study 3). However, these tensions between accommodating the needs of different organisations and their audiences was raised both at the Partner Day and repeatedly in interviews conducted with partner organisations.

## Sharing best practice

TNP has worked as a forum for a generous exchange of ideas. The relationships forged meant that partners were sharing knowledge, skills and examples of working practices or initiatives with each other, instead of guarding them secretively. These examples became sources of inspiration, with several instances of partners observing another institution's approach to something and creating a version of it that made sense within their own geographical, political or social contexts. The network has enabled extended conversations about innovative approaches and programmes that were happening across the network. For example, Vicky Price, from Wolverhampton Grand reflects:

*'We've got a very successful dementia cafe here. I took that idea from what they were doing in Hornchurch and brought it here. Put our own slant on it, and we've won a National Alzheimer's Award. That was amazing. But then Lowry have really taken the work we do with our Ambassador Groups and put their own slant on it.'*

This has been beneficial for the partner organisations, and working across scale has created opportunities for learning. Tessa Slack, Head of Outreach and Community Engagement at Trowbridge Town Hall said:

*'When you come from a small team that does a bit of everything, you don't really have a person who does access, or a person who does marketing, or person who does specific roles, we have to generally be across most things. What I've learned is listening to those people who are in departments, and the way they work and ... the procedures that they've got in place. I find it really useful. And I do take it back to my team and say, "This is what we need to be doing"... It's been a really great learning opportunity.'*

## The size and scope of TNP

While creating these opportunities, the size and scope of TNP has sometimes been difficult to navigate. Participants pointed to the difficulty in explaining the network to others externally, the lack of branding or easy one-liners to describe it. Katie Town reflects, *'I often think about it as being a sort of smorgasbord of various different things, and you've got more of some, less of the others ...which makes it quite hard to explain what it is and what it isn't.'*

The pace of decision-making at scale also created challenges, with smaller organisations sometimes getting frustrated by slow reactions to decisions, one partner reflecting that *'small organisations are able to be quite responsive at a local level. But the scale of the National Theatre and the partnership as a whole makes that quite hard. So, there's a sense of things happening really slowly.'*

The challenges of transitioning from the first cycle of TNP to the second cycle of TNP were also highlighted by participants, including the expansion of the programme through the addition of new organisations:

*'There was maybe an assumption of an easy continuity, but it felt quite different. And it was a lot of new people, equally, that maybe TNP1 felt like it was more driven by and like the NT's project, whereas TNP2 opened up the opportunity to do more, like a genuine collaboration, because the actual funding for that was a collaborative approach. So there were challenges and there were positives.'*

## Beyond the network?

The question that loomed large for participants was what happens next, after the funding runs out? As one participant asked *'We've run out of road. What happens to that work?'* There was a recognition of the tangible outcomes and outputs from the project including the Public Acts and Speak Up toolkits, Indigo audience development toolkit, and ambassador schemes. Plus, relationships with creatives and artists that are ongoing. While there was enthusiasm and excitement about these achievements and new initiatives such as the Local Touring Theatre Alliance (see Case Study 3), there were also concerns voiced about how the network could continue without, as one participant put it, *'the strong arms of the National Theatre.'* Reflecting on the end of this institutional support, participants highlighted the importance of recognising the time, resource, and skill that had been required to hold the network together and to help it flourish. One participant shared *'There's a big worry about how TNP has drawn all this resource into this big group and there is a big question mark around what the model is without the money, without the funding.'*

The partners were cognisant of the challenge of reframing what the partnership could be in the future without this financial and human resource of the network. One participant suggested that, given the size of TNP, the most pragmatic way forward was to break it into smaller projects along the lines of programme strands, arguing *'It does break up quite neatly. Make it modular.'*

Participants also discussed how the legacy of the network could inform the future of each theatre. For example, how organisations can retain the learning beyond the individuals that participated directly in TNP. One participant highlighted the need to pass on these learnings within organisations: *'there's a lot of organisational memory in this room, and the sort of organisational memory which is held by those of us who've worked on this programme for the past three or the past seven years, and some of that won't be there.'*

Participants also stressed the need for the collective knowledge accumulated through TNP to feed into policy discussions (echoing Katie Town's suggestions in Case Study 3) and discussions across the sector about the future of theatre.

## KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Meeting in-person through quarterly Partner Days was a vital way to cement the partnership and encourage informal cross-pollination of ideas, going beyond TNP-specific projects.
- ▶ The variety in scale, geography, community demographics and types of organisation represented across TNP partners was rare and a unique strength of the network. The associated challenges of holding a network of such diversity were ultimately outweighed by the richness of perspectives and expertise offered
- ▶ With the conclusion of the funding in 2025, a challenge going forward is ensuring mechanisms to build on personal and organisational connections, passing on organisational memory and knowledge to the benefit of the wider sector.
- ▶ The learnings and research generated by the network, as well as ongoing cross-organisational partnerships and working groups between TNP partners, are key legacies of Theatre Nation Partnerships which have value for the wider theatre sector.



The Galley, *The Odyssey*, Public Acts Sunderland. Image by Joseph Lynn



Theatre Nation Partnerships was generously supported by Arts Council England's Strategic Touring Fund.

The Mohn Westlake Foundation supports the National Theatre's nationwide Learning programmes for young people.

National Theatre's nationwide Learning is also supported by Buffini Chao Foundation, Clore Duffield Foundation, Tina Alexandrou, Crevan O'Grady & Jane McClenahan, The Constance Travis Charitable Trust, Delta Air Lines, The Alchemy Foundation, The Anthony and Elizabeth Mellows Charitable Settlement, Tioc Foundation, MFPA Trust Fund for the Training of Disabled Children in the Arts, The Archie Sherman Charitable Trust, The Kartik Foundation, and Behrens Foundation, Marlow Trust, Susan Miller & Byron Grote, Cleopatra Trust, and The Andor Charitable Trust.

Speak Up was generously supported by The Mohn Westlake Foundation.

Secondary Schools Touring is supported by The Ingram Trust, The Dow Clewer Foundation, and Mike Staunton.

Public Acts was supported by Arts Council England's Strategic Touring Fund, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, The CareTech Charitable Foundation, The Mosawi Foundation, Susan Miller & Byron Grote and The Hadrian Trust.



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**

*Buffini Chao*  
FOUNDATION



**Funded by  
UK Government**

 **CareTech**  
foundation

the **Mohn  
Westlake** foundation

 **Esmée  
Fairbairn**  
FOUNDATION