

extern

# CREATIVE IRELAND REPORT



extern

CREATIVE  
YOUTH  
PROJECT

Partnered with  
**THE MAC BELFAST**



Creative  
Youth

Clár Éire Ildánach  
Creative Ireland  
Programme

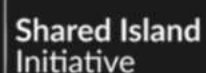


Shared Island  
Initiative

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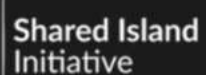


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# CREATIVE YOUTH PROJECT

## GRANTEE:

Extern Northern Ireland (Lead) in partnership with Extern Ireland and The MAC Belfast

## FUNDING PROGRAMME:

Creative Youth on a Shared Island – Creative Ireland Programme

## PROJECT DURATION:

August 2024 – December 2025



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## CHERYL O'DWYER PROJECT CO-ORDINATOR & DIRECTOR

Creative Youth on a Shared Island was a cross-border, issue-based theatre project delivered by Extern Northern Ireland in partnership with Extern Ireland and The MAC Belfast between August 2024 and December 2025. Grounded in Theatre of the Oppressed and trauma-informed practice, the project placed young people's lived experience, voice and agency at the centre of a shared creative process, culminating in high-quality public performances and significant personal, social and systemic outcomes.

Across the lifespan of the project, 32 young people engaged, with 25 achieving meaningful and sustained participation and 16 forming a committed core ensemble who co-created and performed the final production 'Still We Weave'. Participants included young people aged 14–22 from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, many of whom were navigating complex challenges including homelessness, substance use, school refusal, family breakdown and poor mental health. The project responded to these realities with consistency, care and flexibility, ensuring safety, dignity and access remained central throughout delivery.

The creative outputs exceeded original expectations. The project delivered two sold-out performances at The MAC, Belfast, followed by a touring performance at Droichead Arts Centre in the Republic of Ireland, accompanied by an art exhibition. Additional outputs included a 40-minute original script, three professionally recorded music tracks



a professionally designed programme, and a distinctive visual identity shaped through a participant-led digital mood board. These achievements demonstrate the artistic excellence possible when young people are trusted, supported and resourced as co-creators.

Evaluation was embedded continuously throughout the programme through daily opening and closing circles, facilitated reflection, creative evaluation tools and direct participant feedback. While the final evaluation residential and completion of Teen Outcomes Star measures are scheduled for January 2026 to allow time for reflection and retrospective insight, substantial qualitative and observational evidence already demonstrates significant positive change across all outcome areas. These include improved wellbeing, staff observed reduced use of substances, increased feelings of safety and belonging, positive behavioural change, re-engagement with education, strengthened relationships with family and key adults, and greater hope and confidence for the future.

Importantly, the project also demonstrated exceptional responsiveness to participant welfare. During the programme, four young people were supported through homelessness, one participant engaged in further support to address substance use, and one participant was supported through a serious physical health crisis, with staff providing practical, emotional and advocacy-based support. These interventions, while unplanned, reflect the project's deeply trauma-informed, relational ethos and its capacity to meet young people where they are.

Audience engagement and public impact were equally strong. Post-performance Q&A sessions, evaluations and unsolicited correspondence evidenced meaningful audience reflection, increased awareness of core issues and sustained dialogue beyond the performance space. The work challenged dominant narratives around young people, marginalisation and the criminal justice system, aligning strongly with the aims of the Creative Youth on a Shared Island initiative.

Overall, this project stands as a robust, evidence-informed and highly effective model of creative youth engagement. It demonstrates that Theatre of the Oppressed, when delivered with skill, care and adequate time, can generate profound artistic, personal and social impact. The outcomes achieved strongly support the case for continuation, scaling and further investment in cross-border, trauma-informed creative programmes for young people with complex needs.

**Funder Assurance Statement**

This evaluation provides clear assurance that Creative Youth on a Shared Island – Theatre of the Oppressed Project delivered against its agreed objectives while also responding flexibly and responsibly to participant needs. The project achieved high-quality creative outputs, demonstrated strong safeguarding and governance,



embedded evaluation throughout delivery, and generated measurable and meaningful outcomes for young people and wider audiences.

The decision to schedule the final evaluation residential and completion of Teen Outcomes Star measures in January 2026 reflects best practice rather than delay, prioritising depth, reflection and participant voice over procedural haste. Interim evaluation evidence already confirms strong impact, with final measures expected to further consolidate and evidence the outcomes achieved.

The project not only met expectations—it exceeded them. It offers a compelling, transferable model for future Creative Youth and Shared Island initiatives and provides strong justification for continued support and development of this work.

Cheryl O'Dwyer

# PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF EVALUATION

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness, impact, and quality of delivery of the Creative Youth on a Shared Island project, as outlined in the Service Level Agreement dated 25 July 2024. The evaluation examines the extent to which agreed outputs and outcomes were achieved and identifies learning to inform future Creative Ireland and Shared Island initiatives.

## EVALUATION OBJECTIVES :

- Assess delivery against agreed outputs (Section 4 of the SLA)
- Measure progress and change against agreed outcomes (Section 5 of the SLA)
- Capture the experiences and voices of participating young people
- Examine the effectiveness of Theatre of the Oppressed as a methodology
- Identify strengths, challenges, and areas for improvement
- Provide evidence of impact for accountability, learning, and reporting purposes



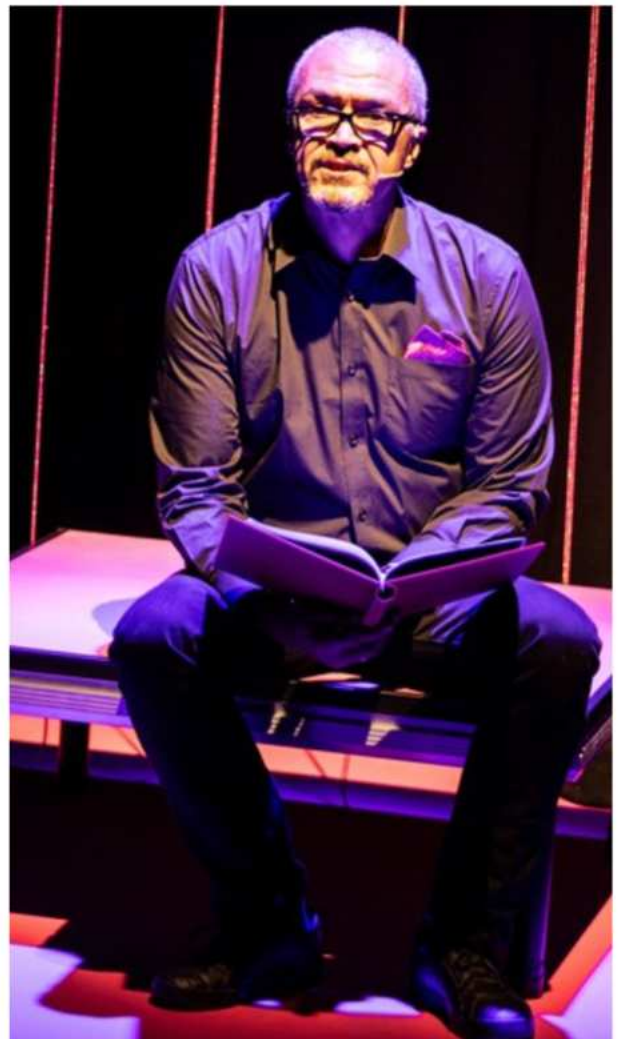
# PROJECT DESCRIPTION

## PROJECT RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND

The Creative Youth Project was inspired by the writings of Patricia Farren, which recount the true story of brothers Charlie and Sean Conlon. This criminal justice memoir offers a powerful insight into the human story behind imprisonment, highlighting how early life experiences, trauma and social context can shape a person's identity, worldview and relationship with systems of authority.

In line with the Creative Youth Plan 2023–2027, which recognises creativity as a key contributor to young people's wellbeing, voice and agency, the project placed lived experience at the centre of its creative approach. It provided a safe and supportive space for young people who are often marginalised and underrepresented to explore and articulate their own stories through theatre.

By amplifying the voices of young people who refuse to be defined by their past, their upbringing or their mistakes, the project sought to challenge dominant narratives within the criminal justice system and wider society. In doing so, it contributed to the Creative Ireland Programme's vision of creativity as a catalyst for individual wellbeing, community connection and positive social change across the island of Ireland.



The project also directly delivered on the aims of the Creative Youth on a Shared Island initiative by bringing together young people from across the island of Ireland in a shared, cross-border creative process. Through collaboration and the use of Theatre of the Oppressed methodology, participants were supported to challenge assumptions, build empathy and develop understanding across communities and traditions.

The project uses Theatre of the Oppressed as its core creative methodology. Developed by theatre practitioner Augusto Boal, Theatre of the Oppressed is a participatory, socially engaged theatre practice that supports individuals and groups to explore lived experience, power dynamics and social issues through creative means.

Young people are actively involved as co-creators rather than passive participants. Drawing on their own experiences, they work together to develop scenes that reflect real-life situations, challenges and moments of conflict relevant to their lives. The process creates a safe and supportive space for expression, reflection and dialogue.

The methodology encourages participants to explore different perspectives and consider alternative responses to challenging situations. Through techniques such as image theatre, role-play and forum theatre, young people are supported to rehearse new strategies for communication, problem-solving and conflict diffusion in a non-judgemental environment.

Within the project, Theatre of the Oppressed supports confidence-building, empathy and emotional literacy, while also enabling young people to develop a collective narrative that is shaped into a script and live performance. The final production provides an opportunity to share these stories with wider audiences, provoke discussion and promote understanding, in line with the aims of the Creative Youth on a Shared Island programme.

The project culminated in three live theatrical performances complemented by an art exhibition marking a significant moment of public engagement and shared learning. The first two performances took place at The MAC, Belfast, followed by a touring performance at Droichead Arts Centre in the Republic of Ireland. Bringing together participants from Extern Northern Ireland and Extern Ireland, the productions showcased the young people's collective stories, insights and creative development. Presented to public audiences North and South, the performances created a powerful platform for young people to challenge perceptions, humanise lived experience and stimulate meaningful dialogue around the issues explored throughout the project, reinforcing the Shared Island ethos of connection, understanding and collaboration.



# EVALUATION

## EVALUATION SECTIONS

1 DELIVERY AND OUTPUTS

2 OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

3 METHODOLOGY

4 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

5 LEARNING AND SUSTAINABILITY

## DELIVERY AND OUTPUTS



Both Parties agree the following outputs by the Grantee outlined below:

- To host a launch event after the official press release on 29 July 2024
- To engage with 20 young people (10 young people from ROI and 10 young people from NI)
- To deliver relationship building residentials / day sessions
- To deliver shared lived experience residentials / day sessions
- To Deliver 'Telling the story' sessions
- To host two productions in The MAC in November 25, (original dates from SLA were not available in the venue.)
- To host a final residential / day session with the 20 young people to capture evaluation findings

## DELIVERY

To host a launch event after the official press release on 29 July 2024

As agreed with the funder, Creative Ireland, recruitment for the programme was supported through a soft press approach that reflected the nature of the participant group and the values of the project. This approach ensured that the dignity, safety and agency of young people remained central throughout the process and that recruitment was carried out in a trauma-informed manner. Working through trusted partner organisations and existing relationships supported appropriate engagement with participants while fulfilling the agreed outcome set out in the SLA. (Appendix a)

## DELIVERY AND OUTPUTS

To engage with 20 young people (10 young people from ROI and 10 young people from NI)

The final cohort reflected a higher participation from the North (14 young people) than the South (3 young people). This imbalance was largely influenced by the structure of the referral pathways and the location of the project coordinator, who was based in the North and therefore had more direct access to established networks. In the South, referrals required a multi-layered process, with information passing from directors to programme managers, project managers and then to key workers, which limited direct engagement with young people and reduced opportunities for the full potential of the project to be clearly conveyed. This contributed to a lower intake from the South and, in turn, influenced the age profile of participants, with the core group being closer to 17 years old rather than the early twenties as originally anticipated during planning. Learning from this, future cross-border programmes would benefit from earlier, more direct engagement within southern partner organisations, including the involvement of a locally based coordinator to support clearer pathways, stronger relationships and more balanced participation.

To deliver relationship building residentials / day sessions

To deliver shared lived experience residentials / day sessions

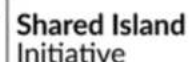
To Deliver 'Telling the story' sessions

To host two productions in The MAC in November 25, (original dates from SLA were not available in the venue.)

Participate in training sessions provided by Creative Ireland Programme

Engagement with young people evolved over the course of the project, reflecting the complexity of the cohort and the realities of working with young people with multiple and complex needs. In total, 32 young people participated in project sessions at various stages, 25 attended more than session and 16 young people engaging consistently in the creative process and contributing directly to the development and performance of the final production. In addition, a small number of young people chose not to perform but gave permission for elements of their stories to be incorporated into the final work.

An additional group of young people were initially identified for participation but were unable to engage or sustain involvement due to factors including immigration status, competing personal commitments, loss of interest, or anxiety about joining a new group. These factors were managed in line with a trauma-informed and youth-centred approach, ensuring that participation remained voluntary, appropriate and safe.



## DELIVERY AND OUTPUTS

All training requirements as set out in the Service Level Agreement (SLA) were completed in full and in accordance with the agreed timelines. Training provision met the compliance standards required by the funder and supported the delivery of the programme in line with agreed safeguarding, governance and quality assurance expectations.

### Were activities delivered on time, safely, and to an appropriate standard?

All but one programme activity, end of project evaluation residential was delivered within the agreed timeframes and to a consistently high standard, directly supporting the aims of the Creative Youth strand. The programme provided meaningful, high-quality creative engagement, with young people's voices, lived experiences and agency placed at the centre of delivery. Strong planning, skilled facilitation and a responsive, youth-led approach ensured positive creative experiences throughout, contributing to outcomes that align closely with Creative Ireland's commitment to access, participation and the creative development of young people.

Evaluation was embedded as a continuous and integral part of the programme, rather than limited to a single end-point. Daily opening and closing circles, regular reflective check-ins, facilitated group discussions and direct questions to participants were used throughout the process to capture ongoing feedback relating to engagement, learning, confidence and personal impact. This approach ensured that participant perspectives informed delivery in real time and supported a reflective, trauma-informed environment. The evaluation residential with the young people is scheduled for January 2026 and has been intentionally designed to take place following a period of distance from the performance phase, allowing for deeper reflection and more considered evaluation.

While the Teen STAR outcome measures will be formally completed during this residential, the insights gathered to date demonstrate strong engagement and impact, and the final measures will further consolidate participant voices and lived experiences within the overall evaluation outcomes.



## OUTCOMES AND IMPACT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Across the evaluation feedback, young people consistently describe the project as a turning point in their wellbeing, identity and relationships. A strong theme is that the programme functioned as a psychologically safe space where participants felt accepted “as they are”, enabling them to take creative and social risks, build trust and develop a sense of belonging. Many describe the group as a “family”, and several link this directly to improved mental health, reduced isolation, and increased motivation to engage with daily life (e.g., getting out of bed, leaving the house, travelling independently, returning to routines). The public performance milestone strengthened this impact by providing a shared goal, a sense of achievement and social recognition, which young people describe as “healthy”, confidence-building and future-facing.



### What changes occurred in young people in relation to the SLA agreed outcomes :

- 1) Changes in perceptions
- 2) New strategies in dealing with challenging situations
- 3) Provision of skills in the diffusion of conflict situations
- 4) Increased confidence and hope for the future

#### Changes in perceptions

Young people report clear shifts in how they view themselves, other people, and the world around them. Several describe moving from cynicism, shame or self-judgement to self-acceptance, self-worth and pride (“I’m not defined by my trauma”; “I’ve learned to love myself”; “I feel like myself again”). Perceptions of others also changed: participants describe becoming less judgemental, more curious and more empathetic—recognising that people may be struggling beneath the surface and that different opinions can coexist respectfully. Importantly, participants also describe a shift from feeling unheard to feeling listened to, which strengthened their willingness to speak, participate and consider other perspectives.



# OUTCOMES AND IMPACT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE



## **New strategies in dealing with challenging situations & Provision of skills in the diffusion of conflict situations**

Participants describe concrete changes in how they handle conflict. Common shifts include: pausing before reacting, listening to all sides, communicating feelings more clearly, and resolving disagreements without escalation or relationship breakdown. Young people report learning to “survey a situation”, understand underlying reasons behind behaviour, and move through arguments calmly without “marking people as enemies”, holding grudges, or withdrawing into harmful coping patterns. The ensemble nature of the work—combined with Theatre of the Oppressed techniques that invite reflection, re-playing situations and perspective-taking—appears to have strengthened emotional regulation, accountability and respectful dialogue.

## **Increased confidence and hope for the future**

Confidence gains are one of the strongest and most consistent outcomes. Young people describe moving from high anxiety and avoidance (fear of being seen, fear of the stage, fear of leaving the house) to increased social confidence, comfort in their identity, and pride in being visible. Many explicitly link this to feeling safe, supported and accepted by peers and staff. Hope also increased: participants describe believing they have talent, feeling capable of pursuing goals, and being more open to opportunities. Several report clearer future aspirations—particularly in drama, acting, music and creative work—and a stronger belief that these aspirations are valid and achievable.



## OUTCOMES AND IMPACT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE




### **Coping, resilience and problem-solving strategies**

Feedback indicates that young people developed healthier coping strategies and greater resilience. The project provided routine, purpose and a positive focus (“something to look forward to”), which supported mood, motivation and self-care. Participants describe learning that it is “okay to not be okay”, that vulnerability is safe, and that talking through emotions helps. Practical problem-solving is evident in their language about thinking before acting, making fewer rash decisions, owning mistakes, reaching out for support, and persisting through setbacks rather than being “knocked down” by them. Peer support emerged as a major protective factor: many describe knowing who they can turn to, feeling less alone, and being able to manage difficult moments because the group connection remains.



### **Effectiveness in supporting personal and social development**

Overall, the project was highly effective in supporting both personal and social development. Personally, young people describe improved wellbeing, self-confidence, identity development, emotional literacy and agency. Socially, they report stronger communication skills, deeper empathy, greater openness to difference, and sustained friendships that extend beyond the programme. The creative process also strengthened civic and relational development: participants learned to express opinions, contribute ideas, respect others’ experiences, and collaborate towards a shared goal. The combination of trauma-informed facilitation, consistent relational safety, and high-quality creative challenge (culminating in performance) created conditions where young people could rehearse new ways of being—then experience those changes as real, durable and transferable into daily life.

 (Young people’s evaluations appendix B)

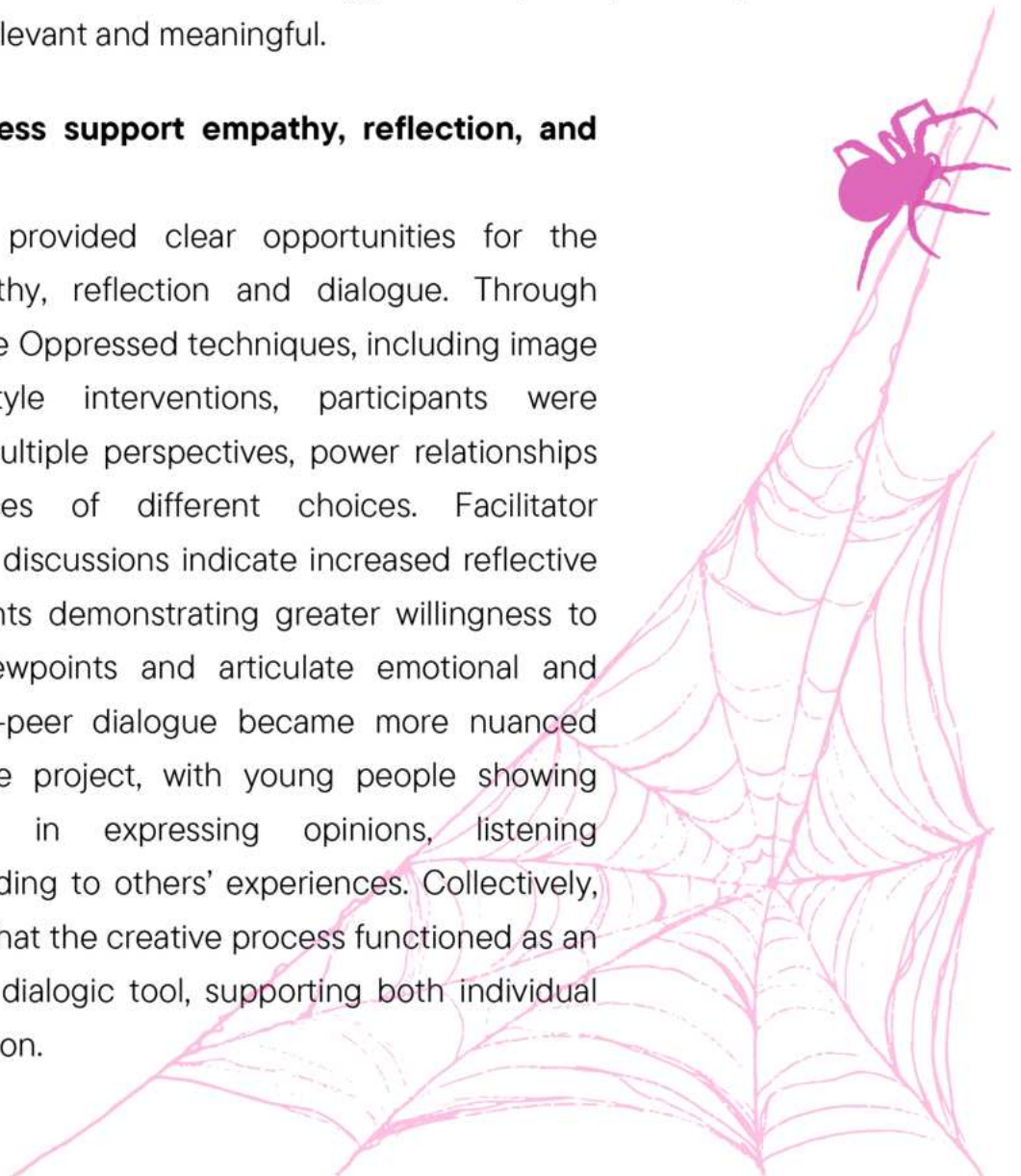
# METHODOLOGY

## **How effective was Theatre of the Oppressed in engaging young people with complex needs?**

The Theatre of the Oppressed methodology was demonstrably effective in engaging young people with complex needs. Evidence from session observations, attendance patterns and participant feedback indicates that the participatory and non-hierarchical nature of the approach supported sustained engagement over time. Young people who initially presented as hesitant or disengaged increasingly took active roles within exercises and creative decision-making. The use of embodied, image-based and scenario-led techniques reduced reliance on verbal articulation alone, which proved particularly effective for participants who experience barriers to traditional discussion-based or educational settings. The consistency of attendance and progression from exploratory workshops to performance-based outcomes suggests that participants experienced the process as accessible, relevant and meaningful.

## **Did the creative process support empathy, reflection, and dialogue?**

The creative process provided clear opportunities for the development of empathy, reflection and dialogue. Through structured Theatre of the Oppressed techniques, including image theatre and forum-style interventions, participants were supported to explore multiple perspectives, power relationships and the consequences of different choices. Facilitator observations and group discussions indicate increased reflective capacity, with participants demonstrating greater willingness to consider alternative viewpoints and articulate emotional and social impacts. Peer-to-peer dialogue became more nuanced over the course of the project, with young people showing increased confidence in expressing opinions, listening respectfully and responding to others' experiences. Collectively, this evidence suggests that the creative process functioned as an effective reflective and dialogic tool, supporting both individual insight and group cohesion.



# PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

## Audience Engagement and Reach

Audience feedback indicates the performances achieved very high levels of engagement and endorsement from those who attended. 104 feedback forms were returned, with audience enjoyment ratings overwhelmingly at the top end of the scale (the vast majority recorded 10/10, with additional responses rating 9/10 and above). Recommendation intent was also exceptionally strong: audiences indicated they would recommend the production to schools (101), youth groups (99), friends (93) and colleagues (89), showing that the work resonated across both public and professional audiences and was viewed as relevant for young people, educators, and services. (*Audience reflection Appendix c*)

In terms of dissemination and appetite for further reach, responses repeatedly called for the production to be shared more widely through touring, school and youth-group performances, professional training settings (social work, youth work, health), conferences, and broadcast/recorded formats (TV/online). This demonstrates not only strong engagement in the room, but a clear perception that the production has ongoing value as an educational and practice resource beyond a one-off event.

### Discussion, awareness and wider impact



The feedback provides clear evidence that the production provoked discussion and increased awareness of core issues (including youth mental health, addiction, trauma, stigma and systemic barriers). Audience comments describe the work as “powerful”, “thought provoking”, “hard hitting”, “humbling”, and “life changing”, and repeatedly highlight the importance of hearing “real stories told by young people” to challenge stereotypes and shift assumptions.

Crucially, audiences did not frame the piece as solely emotive; they framed it as a call to action. Many comments explicitly urged that the work “must be seen by decision makers”, commissioners and politicians, with multiple references to Stormont, government departments, and “the system” needing to listen. The longer written feedback echoes this: audience members proposed structured use of the recorded performance in staff training, school/youth settings, Tusla/professional contexts and conferences, alongside guided questions or workshops to deepen dialogue. This shows the work functioned as a catalyst for sustained reflection and practical conversations about how services, education and policy should respond to young people’s lived realities.

# PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



## Overall summary

Taken together, the evidence strongly suggests the performances and dissemination activity achieved significant public and professional engagement, generated high satisfaction and strong advocacy for wider reach, and successfully provoked dialogue and awareness of the core issues—while also creating momentum for the work to influence practice, training and decision-making beyond the performance space.

## Audience Engagement and Reach

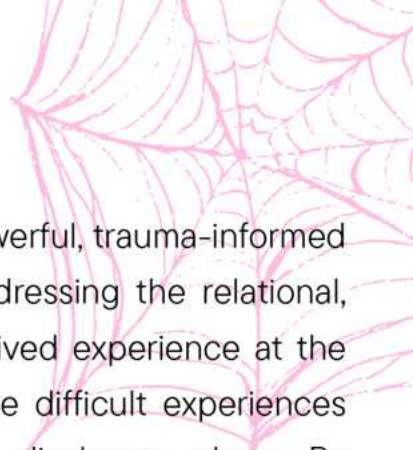
The performances and associated activities engaged wider audiences to a significant extent. Audience responses observed during performances, alongside levels of participation in post-show discussions, indicate a high degree of emotional and intellectual engagement. The post-performance Q&A sessions provided clear evidence that audiences were not only attentive but actively invested in the themes presented, with questions and reflections demonstrating thoughtful consideration of the issues explored within the work. Engagement extended beyond the live events, with project leaders receiving follow-up emails, text messages and written feedback that further evidences sustained audience interest and impact.

## Wider Discussion and Awareness

The project successfully provoked wider discussion and increased awareness of the core issues explored. Audience contributions during Q&A sessions consistently reflected deeper understanding, empathy and critical reflection, suggesting that the performances functioned as effective catalysts for dialogue. This was reinforced by post-performance evaluations and unsolicited correspondence, in which audience members articulated how the work challenged preconceptions, prompted personal reflection and encouraged ongoing conversations beyond the performance space. Collectively, this qualitative evidence demonstrates that the project achieved its aim of extending impact beyond participants, fostering broader awareness and meaningful discussion among diverse audiences.



# LEARNING AND SUSTAINABILITY



## What worked well and why?

Theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed and allied arts practices offer a powerful, trauma-informed response to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) by directly addressing the relational, emotional and social impacts of early adversity. These forms place lived experience at the centre of the creative process, allowing young people to externalise difficult experiences through story, image, sound and movement rather than verbal disclosure alone. By embodying experiences safely through character and metaphor, participants can explore complex emotions, regain a sense of control over their narrative, and begin to separate their identity from past trauma. This process supports emotional regulation, reduces feelings of shame or isolation, and helps counter the internalised beliefs often associated with ACEs.

Theatre of the Oppressed actively challenges powerlessness, a core feature of many ACEs, by positioning young people not as passive recipients of care but as agents of change. Techniques such as forum theatre invite participants to rehearse alternative choices, responses and outcomes, strengthening problem-solving skills, resilience and self-efficacy. Working collectively builds empathy, trust and social connection—key protective factors that buffer the long-term effects of ACEs—while increasing awareness of how emotions, stress and trauma can influence behaviour. Together, theatre and allied arts cultivate a sense of belonging, shared understanding and hope, reinforcing strengths and protective relationships that support long-term wellbeing and more positive life trajectories.

Another key strength of the project was the responsive and flexible nature of the sessions and rehearsals. Rather than adhering rigidly to pre-set plans, the team consistently met young people where they were emotionally and socially on the day, prioritising safety, trust and being heard over artistic output. This approach reinforced a trauma-informed ethos, communicating to participants that their wellbeing mattered more than performance deadlines and that their experiences and emotions were valid and worthy of attention.

This responsiveness also created meaningful learning opportunities. For example, pausing a technical rehearsal for four hours to address a conflict between cast members allowed the group to reflect collectively on the impact of anger, reactive language and thoughtless communication, including messages sent in the heat of the moment. By slowing the process and addressing the issue in real time, young people were supported to practise conflict resolution, accountability and empathy, while recognising the consequences of their words and actions on others. These moments strengthened emotional awareness, social skills and group cohesion, contributing to a safer, more respectful creative environment.



## LEARNING AND SUSTAINABILITY

This trauma-informed and responsive approach was further evidenced when one participant shared that they had never experienced sitting down to a meal, a disclosure that was echoed by several others in the group. Recognising the significance of this moment, the project adapted immediately to address an unmet but fundamental need for care, routine and connection. In response, time was intentionally built into every session and rehearsal for the group to share a meal together.

This simple but meaningful intervention created a sense of safety, consistency and belonging, reinforcing positive social rituals that many participants had not previously experienced. Eating together supported relationship-building, informal peer connection and emotional regulation, while modelling healthy group dynamics and mutual respect. By responding directly to what young people disclosed in the room, the project strengthened trust and demonstrated that participants' lived experiences actively shaped the process, further embedding care, dignity and wellbeing at the heart of the work.

Another aspect that worked particularly well was the involvement of industry professionals throughout the project. The full creative and production team brought not only high levels of skill and experience, but also care, consistency and respect for the young people and their stories. The relationship with the MAC was especially significant; the space became a place of belonging, where participants felt genuinely welcomed and valued. For many, the MAC came to be experienced as a second home, reinforcing a sense of legitimacy, pride and ownership within a professional arts environment.

The professionalism and generosity of the creative and production team elevated both the standard and ambition of the work. Young people were supported to create high-quality material in the first instance, which was then fully realised in partnership with industry professionals, ensuring their voices were honoured without compromise. This collaborative process validated participants as artists in their own right and resulted in a powerful and carefully crafted theatrical piece—one that reflects the depth of the young people's lived experience and is a source of immense pride for all involved.



# LEARNING AND SUSTAINABILITY



Another positive element of the project was the accompanying art exhibition, which ran alongside the performance. This provided an important platform for participants whose work did not translate directly into the live production, ensuring that their creative contributions were still seen, valued and celebrated. By offering multiple modes of expression, the exhibition reinforced the project's inclusive ethos and recognised that young people communicate their experiences in different ways.

The exhibition also enriched the audience experience by introducing key themes, ideas and issues in advance of the performance. This created a reflective entry point for audiences, encouraging empathy and deeper understanding before encountering the live work. In doing so, the exhibition extended the impact of the project beyond the stage, honouring the breadth of the young people's voices and strengthening the overall artistic and social resonance of the work.

The time, care and intentional energy invested in nurturing and maintaining a safe, respectful atmosphere within sessions and rehearsals was another significant strength of the project. Creating this environment required consistency, clear boundaries and a shared commitment to trust, allowing young people to feel emotionally and physically safe enough to take creative risks and engage honestly with the work.

This carefully cultivated space supported openness, mutual respect and collaboration, enabling participants to express themselves without fear of judgement. As trust deepened, confidence grew and relationships strengthened, reinforcing a sense of belonging and collective responsibility. The safe atmosphere became the foundation upon which both personal growth and artistic excellence were built, contributing directly to the depth, quality and integrity of the work created.





## WHAT CHALLENGES WERE ENCOUNTERED AND HOW WERE THEY ADDRESSED?

### Recruitment challenges

Recruitment remained a significant challenge throughout the project, largely due to the project coordinator not being based in the south of Ireland, which limited sustained access to local networks and referral pathways. Despite efforts to engage services, consistent recruitment support was not realised, and this continued to impact participant numbers in the South for the duration of the project. The team responded by maintaining open access, allowing flexible entry points where possible, and adapting delivery to the cohort that did engage, ensuring that the experience remained meaningful, supported and impactful for those involved.

### A completely new and untested project

The project was new on multiple levels: it was Extern's first theatre-based initiative, the first cross-border project of its kind, and it was led by a staff member new to the organisation. This required time to build shared understanding, confidence and effective working processes. These challenges were navigated through clear communication, reflective practice, regular check-ins and a willingness to learn and adapt as the project evolved.

### Ever-changing needs and mental health of participants

The fluctuating emotional wellbeing and mental health needs of participants made forward planning, particularly for rehearsals, difficult. A trauma-informed approach was prioritised, allowing the creative process to remain flexible. If participants had experienced a difficult week, rehearsals were adapted to avoid re-traumatisation, ensuring that care and safety were always balanced with artistic progress.

### Cross-border differences and governance requirements

Delivering the project across the North and South of Ireland presented challenges relating to differing legislation, organisational policies, governance requirements, currencies and cultural contexts. These complexities were managed through close collaboration between Extern NI and Extern Ireland, careful administrative planning and clear communication, ensuring compliance while maintaining a consistent and supportive experience for all participants.

# LEARNING AND SUSTAINABILITY

## WHAT LEARNING CAN INFORM FUTURE SHARED ISLAND AND CREATIVE YOUTH INITIATIVES?

The following learning points emerged from the project and would be valuable in informing future Shared Island and Creative Youth initiatives, particularly those working with young people who require time, trust and consistency to engage meaningfully.



### Earlier start and extended timeline

Recruitment for this project began in January, with sessions commencing in April and a final performance in November. Future projects would benefit from starting earlier and allowing a longer overall timeline to support thorough planning, deeper relationship-building, and extended recruitment, particularly across jurisdictions.



### Stronger relationships with staff in the South

Developing relationships with staff and services in the south of Ireland at an earlier stage would strengthen shared ownership of the project, improve referral pathways and support sustained engagement throughout delivery.



### Foundation or pilot project to demonstrate impact

Having an initial foundation or pilot project to demonstrate artistic quality and participant outcomes would support recruitment and trust-building. In this instance, engagement relied heavily on personal recommendation, rather than an established track record visible to staff and young people unfamiliar with the practitioner.



### Increased staffing and cross-border expertise

Future projects would benefit from a larger staff team to ensure participant-to-staff ratios are consistently upheld. In particular, having a designated team member with expertise in cross-border governance and legislation would strengthen compliance, reduce administrative pressure and support smoother delivery across both jurisdictions.

# EVALUATION METHODS

The evaluation uses a mixed-methods approach including:

## QUANTITATIVE METHODS

- Teen Outcome STAR (*Appendix d*)
- Attendance and participation records (*omitted in the interests of anonymity*)
- Number of sessions, residentials, and performance delivered.



## Number of sessions, residentials, and performances delivered

- Sessions delivered: 39
- Group work engagement: 4054 hours
- 1:1 support: 170 hours
- Total participate engagement: 4224 hours
- Residentials: 3 (Rocor)
- Performances: 3 (2\* The MAC Belfast; 1\*Droichead Arts Centre)
- Total audience: 260
- 16 young people became the core group - 14 from the North of Ireland and two from Republic of Ireland, 1 Trans male, 5 male and 10 female aged between 14 - 22
- Additional 1 YP in south & 5 from NI who participated in development of storyline and exploration stages of programme and gave permission for aspects of their story to be included
- A session in a professional recording studio to lay down three tracks which were used as part of the performance.
- Project included sessions with 9 industry professionals who worked in collaboration with the young people to co-create the play, performance and all technical/ creative elements of 'Still We Weave'.

# QUANTITATIVE METHODS

## CREATIVE TEAM



- Elaine Ford – Producer
- Tony Macauley - author & playwright
- Claire Shephard – Stage Management
- Jen Shephard – Production Manager
- Jonny Berlinger - Musical Director
- Ciaran Bagnal – Lighting Design
- Lou Dunne - Costume and Set Design
- Fergus Wachala Kelly - Illustrator and animator
- Chris Fitzpatrick – Sound Design

*“The impact of the project was that it gave young people a platform to speak their truth, to give voice to their lived experience and to honour their past. They were given the opportunity to experience the joy and accomplishment of live performance by sharing their stories. And the impact on the audiences was clearly profound with standing ovations and audience members clamouring to engage with, praise and acknowledge the young people during the Q&A sessions post show.”*

*Claire Shephard – Stage Manager*

*(Creative & Staff team feedback - Appendix E)*



## QUALITATIVE METHODS



### **FACILITATED REFLECTIVE SESSIONS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE**

As part of the end-of-project evaluation, facilitated reflective sessions were used as a core qualitative method and were intentionally embedded throughout the entire programme. Each day began with a wellness continuum check-in, where participants physically indicated how they were feeling: the right hand represented how they felt in that moment, while the left hand represented their overall or baseline wellbeing. This simple yet powerful visual tool supported mental health awareness by helping young people distinguish between temporary feelings and longer-term states, while also allowing the group to see, at a glance, who might be experiencing a particularly difficult or positive day. Participants were then invited—never compelled—to share the reasons behind their responses, creating space for peers to offer support, encouragement, practical advice, or, in some cases, celebration and affirmation. These daily openings proved crucial in nurturing an open, honest and generous group culture, strengthening trust, empathy and collective responsibility.

Each rehearsal also concluded with a closing feedback circle, providing a structured opportunity for participants to express thoughts, worries, reflections or feelings about the session or the wider project. Together, these reflective practices generated rich qualitative insight into participants' emotional experiences, group dynamics and personal development, while simultaneously reinforcing a trauma-informed, participant-led environment.

## CREATIVE EVALUATION TOOLS

As part of continued evaluation, creative evaluation tools were embedded throughout the programme to gather rich, qualitative insight in accessible, trauma-informed ways. These included:

### DRAMA-BASED REFLECTION EXERCISES

- Image Theatre to physically and symbolically represent experiences, emotions and change over time
- Dramatised Theory of Change to explore individual and collective journeys, identifying inputs, barriers and outcomes through performance
- Role-on-the-Wall to examine shifts in identity, self-perception and how participants felt they were viewed by others
- Use of metaphor to enable reflection on complex or sensitive experiences in a non-literal, emotionally safe way

### STORY-BASED EVALUATION ALIGNED WITH THEATRE OF THE OPPRESSED PRINCIPLES

- Character exploration to examine lived experience, power and systems through fictional or semi-fictional roles
- Speaking through third characters to allow participants to reflect on personal and systemic issues at a safe emotional distance



## CREATIVE EVALUATION TOOLS

### VISUAL AND CREATIVE FEEDBACK METHODS

- Wellness continuum check-ins to provide a visual representation of emotional wellbeing and change
- Participant-led music choices during end-of-session circles to express mood, reflection and closure
- Guided meditation to support regulation, reflection and calm, while offering insight into participants' internal states

Together, these methods generated meaningful qualitative evaluation data while reinforcing participant agency, consent and creative ownership throughout the project.



# OUTPUTS REVIEW (SLA SECTION 4)

## SUMMARY OF AGREED OUTPUTS



Output	Date Delivered	Progress	Evidence
Launch event	7th Feb '25	Soft launch as agreed	Appendix a
Young people engaged	20th Feb - 4 <sup>th</sup> Dec '25	32 young people engaged through the lifespan of the project, 25 attended more than one session, 16 formed the core ensemble	Photographs Previous progress Reports (Appendix f)
Relationship building sessions	5 <sup>th</sup> Apr - 11 <sup>th</sup> May '25	Completed	Photographs Previous progress Reports (Appendix f) Young people's eval (Appendix b) Staff testimonials (Appendix e)
Shared Lived Experience	21 <sup>st</sup> May - 22 <sup>nd</sup> June '25	Completed	Photographs Previous progress Reports (Appendix f) Young people's eval (Appendix b) Staff testimonials (Appendix e) Still We Weave Script (Appendix f)

# SUMMARY OF AGREED OUTPUTS

Output	Date Delivered	Progress	Evidence
Shared Lived EXperience	21st May - 22 <sup>nd</sup> June '25	Completed	Photographs Previous progress Reports (Appendix f) Young people's eval (Appendix b) Staff testimonials (Appendix e) Still We Weave Script (Appendix f)
To deliver 'Telling the Story' sessions	2 <sup>nd</sup> July - 27 <sup>th</sup> Aug '25	Completed	Photographs Previous progress Reports (Appendix f) Young people's eval (Appendix b) Staff testimonials (Appendix e) Still We Weave Script (Appendix f)
To deliver 'Sharing the Story' sessions	17 <sup>th</sup> Sept - 23 <sup>rd</sup> Nov '25	Completed	Photographs Previous progress Reports (Appendix f) Young people's eval (Appendix b) Staff testimonials (Appendix e) Still We Weave Script (Appendix f)
Productions at the MAC	28 <sup>th</sup> & 29 <sup>th</sup> Nov '25	Completed	Photographs Previous progress Reports (Appendix f) Young people's eval (Appendix b) Staff testimonials (Appendix e) Still We Weave Script (Appendix f)
Final Evaluation Session	Date TBC	Delayed until Jan '26	Interim evaluation's with young people created - (Appendix b)



## STRONG DELIVERY AND MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

- The project was delivered with care, ambition and consistency, beginning with a soft launch that successfully supported early trust-building and engagement.
- 32 young people engaged across the lifespan of the project, with 25 achieving meaningful, sustained participation, demonstrating both reach and depth of impact.
- All relationship-building sessions and shared lived-experience workshops were fully delivered, laying a powerful foundation for creative, personal and collective growth

## OUTSTANDING CREATIVE ACHIEVEMENTS

- The project culminated in two sold-out performances at The MAC, a clear marker of artistic excellence, audience demand and the strength of the young people's work.
- The creative outputs went beyond the original plan, reflecting the confidence, commitment and momentum of the programme:
  - A tour of the performance to the Republic of Ireland, extending the reach and impact of the work on 4<sup>th</sup> December.
  - A 40-minute original script rooted in lived experience, evidence.
  - Three professionally recorded tracks in NewLife Recording studio on 17<sup>th</sup> November 2025, elevating the production quality of performance.
  - A professionally designed programme, reinforcing pride and professionalism.
  - A digital mood board that shaped the distinctive aesthetic and tone of the production, proudly described as “pink steampunk”

These outputs demonstrate not only creative success, but young people's ability to deliver work of professional standard when properly supported.

## RESPONSIVE, VALUES-LED ADAPTATIONS

- The adaptation of the age limit was a deliberate and values-driven decision, enabling more young people to participate and ensuring access was guided by need and opportunity rather than restriction.
- The final evaluation session was scheduled for January 2026 to allow time and distance from the performance period, strengthening the quality and depth of reflection rather than rushing outcomes.
- Evaluation remained live and continuous throughout the programme, with insight gathered through video testimonials, reflective questioning and facilitated discussions, ensuring participant voice remained central.
- Exceptional participant care

## COMMENTARY ON PROJECT OUTPUTS AND DELIVERY

### THE PROJECT DEMONSTRATED OUTSTANDING RESPONSIVENESS TO YOUNG PEOPLE'S REAL-LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES:

- Four participants were supported through periods of homelessness, with the project actively contributing to securing safer, more stable placements.
- One participant chose to engage in a new programme to address substance use, motivated by the confidence and connection developed through the project.
- One participant was supported through a serious physical health scare, with staff providing transport, accompaniment and ongoing practical support.



These interventions reflect a deeply trauma-informed, relational approach, where young people were supported as whole people, not just participants.

### OVERALL ASSURANCE AND IMPACT

- This project worked—artistically, socially and relationally.
- It delivered high-quality creative outcomes while fostering safety, belonging, confidence and aspiration.
- The combination of skilled facilitation, participant-led practice and flexible, responsive delivery resulted in a programme that young people committed to, audiences responded to and staff are deeply proud of.
- The project stands as a strong, evidence-informed model for creative youth engagement that merits continuation and further investment.

# OUTCOMES REVIEW

## TEEN STAR OUTCOMES RESULTS

### OBSERVED IMPACT

#### Drugs and Alcohol

- The project coordinator observed significant positive change in participants' relationships with substance use.
- One participant with a long-standing addiction to cocaine and other substances described the post-performance experience as "the best rush of my life," stating it was "better than drugs" and "healthy" because it was shared with peers.
- Another participant, previously minimising their cannabis use, independently chose to engage in an additional support programme to address their substance use during the lifespan of the project.
- These moments indicate increased awareness of alternative, positive sources of connection, achievement and emotional regulation.

#### Wellbeing

- Participants consistently reported improvements in wellbeing, including feeling less isolated, more heard and more valued.
- Participants identified the development of new friendships, a strong sense of belonging and the achievement of a shared creative goal as key contributors to improved mental and emotional health.
- Participants consistently expressed increased confidence, pride and hope for the future.

#### Safety and Security

- All participants reported feeling safe and secure within the project space, with the trauma-informed approach contributing to trust, consistency and emotional safety.
- Increased feelings of connection to others within the group directly supported participants' sense of personal safety.
- Four participants experienced homelessness during the course of the project; through their engagement, the project was able to support them during this period and assist in securing safer, more stable placements.

# TEEN STAR OUTCOMES RESULTS



## Behaviour, Engagement and Citizenship

- The project coordinator observed noticeable behavioural changes across the group, including reduced anger and frustration and an increased capacity for listening, reflection and self-regulation.
- Three participants who were previously school refusers reported increased confidence in managing educational challenges and successfully re-engaged with school.
- One participant completed GCSE English, achieving a stated personal objective.
- A further participant, who had no initial plans to return to education due to age, chose to re-enter education to pursue further learning opportunities, citing increased hope and optimism for the future.

## Family Relationships and Other Key Adults

- Several participants shared during early sessions that they experienced strained or difficult relationships with parents and family members.
- During the final performance, parents and family members publicly expressed pride in the young people, stating that they saw, heard and accepted them.
- Participants reported that this affirmation was unprecedented for them and deeply impactful, particularly as it was expressed in a public setting.
- This moment represented a significant shift in family relationships and validation from key adults, contributing to participants' sense of worth and belonging.





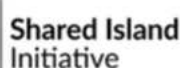
# YOUNG PEOPLE'S VOICE AND LIVED EXPERIENCE

## PERCEIVED IMPACT ON CROSS COMMUNITY AND CROSS BORDER ENGAGEMENT

For many young people, this project offered a rare chance to build real relationships across the border through a shared creative process. For at least one participant, it also marked their first ever visit to the Republic of Ireland, making the experience both creatively and personally significant. Working together as an ensemble—through sessions, residencies and rehearsals—helped participants move past “difference” and connect through what they had in common: lived experience, humour, creativity, challenge and resilience. Young people consistently showed greater trust, openness and willingness to collaborate over time, and the cross-border performances reinforced a sense of shared pride and belonging, proving that their voices and stories matter North and South.

## PERCEIVED IMPACT ON CONFLICT AWARENESS AND BEHAVIOUR

Young people developed a stronger understanding of conflict and how to respond to it. Using Theatre of the Oppressed techniques, they were able to pause moments of tension, explore what sits underneath them, and rehearse different choices in a safe space. Staff observed less reactive behaviour over time, with more listening, reflection and problem-solving, alongside greater confidence in speaking up without escalating. Young people also became more aware that conflict is often shaped by systems and power—not just individuals—which helped them feel more agency and clarity about what needs to change.



# PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND WIDER IMPACT

The project achieved strong public engagement and extended its impact well beyond the participating young people, reaching audiences, families and wider communities. Across three live performances, a total of 260 audience members attended performances in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Audiences included family members, community representatives, arts professionals and practitioners working with young people, creating a diverse and engaged cross-section of the public.



Audience responses during performances and post-show Q&A sessions demonstrated a high level of emotional and intellectual engagement. Feedback consistently highlighted the honesty, bravery and authenticity of the young people's stories, with many audience members reflecting that the performances challenged assumptions and deepened understanding of the realities facing young people with complex needs. The facilitated discussions that followed each performance created space for meaningful dialogue, reinforcing theatre as a powerful tool for reflection and social connection.

The impact of the performances was also strongly felt within families. Parents and carers reported noticeable changes in atmosphere and relationships, describing young people as more joyful, more hopeful and more open following their involvement in the project. Several family members shared how seeing the young people perform, and hearing their voices valued in a public setting, shifted how they related to them—expressing increased pride, understanding and optimism for the future. These moments of affirmation were deeply significant for participants and contributed to strengthened family connections beyond the life of the project.

# PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND WIDER IMPACT



The project's influence extended beyond the live events. Project staff received positive written feedback, emails and messages, indicating sustained reflection and ongoing conversation. Notably, audience members—including practitioners and professionals—expressed a desire for the insights shared by the young people to inform policy, service design and decision-making. There were specific suggestions to share learning from the project with politicians, policymakers and senior stakeholders, recognising the work as a credible and compelling vehicle for amplifying young people's voices and influencing systems.

Overall, the project successfully positioned young people not only as performers, but as agents of change within their families, communities and the wider public sphere. By bringing lived experience into shared cultural spaces North and South, the work fostered empathy, hope and dialogue, and demonstrated the potential of creative youth practice to generate lasting social impact.



# EQUALITY, INCLUSION AND SAFEGUARDING

Equality, inclusion and safeguarding were central to the design and delivery of the Creative Youth on a Shared Island project. From the outset, the project adopted a child-centred, trauma-informed approach, ensuring that participation was equitable, safe and responsive to the individual needs of each young person. Inclusivity was not treated as an abstract principle but was actively resourced and operationalised throughout the programme.

Practical measures were taken to remove barriers to participation and ensure meaningful access for all. An additional staff member was engaged to work alongside a participant with severe mobility needs, enabling them to participate fully in rehearsals, residencies and performances. This support ensured that creative opportunities were genuinely inclusive and that the participant's experience and contribution were valued equally



within the ensemble. Similarly, a third worker was assigned to support a young man experiencing significant addiction challenges. This role focused on maintaining engagement in the project while also offering consistent guidance, emotional support and signposting to appropriate addiction services, balancing creative participation with safeguarding and wellbeing.

## EQUALITY, INCLUSION AND SAGEGUARDING



The project's trauma-informed practice was evident across all aspects of delivery. Sessions prioritised emotional safety, choice, consent and regulation, with facilitators responding flexibly to the changing mental health and emotional needs of participants. Young people were never required to disclose personal experiences and were supported to engage through metaphor, character and creative distancing. When challenges arose—such as heightened distress, conflict or instability—plans were adapted in real time to prioritise care over output, reinforcing trust and psychological safety. This approach reflected a deep understanding of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and the importance of predictable, respectful and relational environments.



Safeguarding considerations were robust and applied. All staff and creative practitioners were appropriately trained, vetted and safeguarding procedures were embedded within daily practice. Clear boundaries, supervision structures and reporting mechanisms ensured that risks were identified early and responded to appropriately. The project demonstrated strong responsiveness during periods of increased vulnerability, including homelessness, addiction and



physical health crises, with staff providing advocacy, practical support and referrals where needed.

Data protection and consent were managed in full compliance with organisational and legal requirements. Informed consent was obtained for participation, data collection, creative content and public sharing of work, with clear explanations provided in accessible language. Young people retained agency over how their stories were used, including the option to contribute anonymously or through fictionalised material. Personal data, evaluation materials and media assets were securely stored and handled in line with GDPR and organisational policies.





# CHALLENGES AND RISK MANAGEMENT

The delivery of the Creative Youth on a Shared Island project involved working with young people who were navigating complex and often unstable life circumstances. As anticipated, this presented a number of challenges and risks, which were actively managed through a trauma-informed, flexible and responsive approach.

One of the primary challenges related to fluctuating mental health and periods of crisis experienced by participants. At times, young people arrived at sessions experiencing heightened distress, instability or external pressures that made it inappropriate to proceed with planned rehearsals or to engage with emotionally demanding material. On these occasions, sections of rehearsals were paused or adapted, prioritising emotional safety and regulation over artistic output. While this occasionally slowed creative progress, it was a deliberate safeguarding decision that reinforced trust and prevented re-traumatisation.



Absenteeism and inconsistent attendance also presented challenges, particularly during the rehearsal and performance development phase. Factors contributing to this included mental health difficulties, housing instability, substance use, family issues and competing statutory appointments. These risks were mitigated through flexible scheduling, open-door policies where appropriate, regular one-to-one check-ins and maintaining multiple entry points into the work. Scripts and staging were

developed in ways that allowed for adaptability, ensuring that the production remained robust despite fluctuations in attendance.

## CHALLENGES AND RISK MANAGEMENT

External factors further impacted delivery, including cross-border logistical complexities, differing governance requirements, and the coordination of venues, transport and safeguarding procedures across jurisdictions. These risks were managed through clear communication to maintain continuity for participants.

Risk management was also strengthened through increased staffing at critical moments, clear safeguarding protocols and responsive decision-making. When individual participants required additional support—such as during periods of homelessness, addiction or physical health crisis—creative expectations were adjusted and additional staff resources were deployed to maintain both engagement and safety.

Key learning from these challenges highlights the importance of realistic timelines, built-in flexibility and adequate staffing ratios when working with young people with complex needs. Future projects would benefit from extended rehearsal periods, contingency planning for attendance fluctuation, and dedicated roles focused on participant wellbeing and cross-border coordination. Importantly, the challenges encountered did not diminish the project's impact; rather, they reinforced the value of trauma-informed practice and demonstrated that prioritising care, adaptability and relationship-building enables meaningful creative outcomes even in unpredictable contexts.



# KEY LEARNING AND GOOD PRACTICE

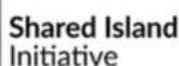
The Creative Youth on a Shared Island project generated significant learning and demonstrated strong, values-led and transferable good practice, particularly in relation to creative collaboration, inclusive delivery and trauma-informed youth engagement.

## WHAT WORKED PARTICULARLY WELL

A key strength of the project was the consistent application of a trauma-informed, child-centred approach that prioritised emotional safety, trust and relationship-building over artistic output. Embedding daily opening and closing circles, reflective check-ins and shared meals created predictability and a strong sense of belonging, supporting sustained engagement. Young people responded positively to being positioned as co-creators rather than participants, resulting in increased ownership, confidence and commitment. The balance between high creative ambition and flexible delivery ensured the work remained both safe and artistically rigorous.

## INNOVATIVE APPROACHES AND METHODOLOGIES

The use of Theatre of the Oppressed as the core creative methodology proved particularly effective. Techniques such as image theatre, forum-style interventions, character exploration and dramatised theory of change enabled young people to explore complex personal and systemic issues without the pressure of direct disclosure. Creative evaluation tools were embedded throughout the programme rather than confined to a single end-point, allowing for real-time reflection and responsive adaptation. The integration of a live performance with an accompanying art exhibition further expanded access and validated multiple forms of creative expression.





# PARTNERSHIP, COLLABORATION AND CREATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Strong, respectful and collaborative partnerships were central to the project's success. The relationship with Tony Macauley, who worked closely with the cast to co-develop the script, ensured that young people's voices, language and lived experiences were authentically represented. His collaborative approach reinforced trust, creative ownership and pride, with participants seeing their stories honoured without compromise.

Equally important was the contribution of the creative and production team, who designed and realised the show with the cast rather than for them. Designers, musicians and technical practitioners worked alongside young people throughout the process, supporting professional-level outcomes while remaining responsive to participants' needs, ideas and wellbeing. This collaborative model elevated the quality and ambition of the work while reinforcing participants' sense of legitimacy and achievement within a professional arts context.

The partnership with The MAC was particularly impactful. The venue provided a safe, welcoming and inclusive space where young people felt genuinely valued and respected. Over time, participants described the theatre as a place they now feel confident accessing independently—an important outcome in terms of cultural inclusion, confidence and future engagement with the arts. For many young people, this was their first sustained experience of belonging within a professional cultural institution, contributing to pride, aspiration and a lasting sense of connection.

## TRANSFERABLE LEARNING FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

The project demonstrates that meaningful engagement with young people with complex needs requires time, flexibility, skilled facilitation and strong, values-aligned partnerships. Early involvement of writers, designers and venues that understand trauma-informed practice strengthens both process and outcomes. Future initiatives would benefit from extended timelines, increased staffing ratios and built-in flexibility to respond to fluctuating attendance and wellbeing. Embedding evaluation as an ongoing, creative process enhances learning and impact, while partnerships with welcoming cultural spaces help ensure that creative access and participation continue beyond the life of the project.



# CONCLUSIONS

## Overall Project Effectiveness

The Creative Youth on a Shared Island project was highly effective in delivering a safe, ambitious and trauma-informed creative programme for young people with complex needs. The combination of Theatre of the Oppressed methodology, skilled facilitation and responsive delivery enabled sustained engagement, deep creative participation and meaningful personal and social change. Evidence from attendance, observation, participant feedback, staff reflection and public engagement demonstrates that the project not only met its aims but exceeded expectations in terms of creative quality, youth voice and impact.

## Achievement of SLA Outputs and Outcomes

The vast majority of outputs outlined in the Service Level Agreement were delivered in full and to a high standard. These included meaningful engagement with young people, relationship-building and lived-experience sessions, professional staff training, and high-quality public performances, culminating in sold-out shows and a cross-border tour. The final evaluation residential was intentionally scheduled for January 2026 to allow for reflection and retrospective insight; in the interim, continuous evaluation methods ensured robust evidence of progress and impact. Outcomes achieved include improved wellbeing, increased confidence and hope for the future, strengthened conflict-diffusion skills, positive behavioural change, enhanced feelings of safety and belonging, re-engagement with education, improved family relationships, and increased agency in articulating lived experience and systemic change.

## Safety and Security

- All participants reported feeling safe and secure within the project space, with the trauma-informed approach contributing to trust, consistency and emotional safety.
- Increased feelings of connection to others within the group directly supported participants' sense of personal safety.
- Four participants experienced homelessness during the course of the project; through their engagement, the project was able to support them during this period and assist in securing safer, more stable placements.



# CONCLUSIONS

## Value within the Creative Youth on a Shared Island Context

Within the Creative Youth on a Shared Island context, the project represents a strong and credible model of cross-border, youth-led creative practice. By bringing young people together in a shared process rooted in empathy, dialogue and collective storytelling, the project fostered meaningful cross-community connection and challenged narratives of division. The public performances extended impact beyond participants, stimulating dialogue, influencing attitudes and prompting calls for learning to be shared with policymakers and decision-makers.

Overall, the project demonstrates the unique value of creative, trauma-informed approaches in supporting young people's voice, wellbeing and civic participation. It stands as a compelling example of how sustained investment in youth creativity can generate lasting personal, social and cultural impact, and provides a strong foundation for future Creative Youth and Shared Island



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## LEARNING FROM PRACTICE

### Time as a Creative and Ethical Resource

Future Creative Ireland-funded projects should treat time as material, not administration. Young people with complex needs do not enter a rehearsal room ready-made; trust, safety and imagination are built slowly, through repetition, consistency and care. Longer timelines allow relationships to deepen, stories to surface safely and creative risk to emerge without pressure. Evaluation, too, should be given time—embedded, reflective and alive—rather than rushed at the end of a process that is still unfolding.



### Cross-Border Work as Shared Making, Not Symbolic Exchange

Cross-border youth engagement is most powerful when young people are brought together to make something together, not to represent difference. Shared creative processes dissolve borders quietly, through laughter, disagreement, collaboration and pride in collective achievement. Future initiatives should prioritise sustained, shared rehearsal time and touring opportunities that allow work to be seen and felt across the island, supported by clear structures that carry the administrative weight so the creative work can remain human and relational.

### Trauma-Informed Drama as Core Practice, Not an Add-On

Trauma-informed drama practice should be recognised not as a specialist intervention but as essential practice when working with young people with complex lives. Theatre of the Oppressed and allied forms allow young people to speak without exposure, to rehearse without consequence, and to step in and out of story with agency. Investment must be made in skilled practitioners, appropriate staffing ratios and environments where care is prioritised over productivity. The most powerful moments often happen when the rehearsal plan is put down and the room is listened to.

# LEARNING FROM PRACTICE

## The Rehearsal Room as a Place of Policy Learning

The rehearsal room is not separate from policy—it is where policy is felt. Young people understand systems viscerally, through their bodies and lived experience, long before they can name them in reports. Future programmes should create pathways for this knowledge to travel beyond the stage, allowing creative work to inform practice, service design and decision-making. Performances, conversations and creative outputs should be treated as legitimate forms of evidence and insight.

## Ambition with Care: Designing for Both Excellence and Safety

Young people respond to ambition. Being trusted with professional standards, industry collaborators and public stages communicates belief and respect. However, ambition must be held alongside care. Programmes should be designed with flexibility, allowing for pauses, rewrites and recalibration when life intervenes. The work is stronger—not weaker—when it moves at the speed of the people in the room.

## Cultural Spaces as Places of Belonging

When young people feel welcome in professional cultural spaces, something shifts. Theatres and arts venues should be positioned not just as hosts, but as partners in belonging—places young people can return to, claim and imagine themselves within. Future projects should prioritise partnerships with venues that understand this responsibility and are willing to hold space with generosity and warmth.

## Legacy as Relationship, Not Just Output

Sustainability is not only about what remains on paper, but who remains connected. Future programmes should build pathways that allow young people to continue accessing creative spaces, opportunities and education beyond the life of a project. Legacy lives in confidence, curiosity and the belief that one's voice has a place in the world.



# CLOSING REFLECTION

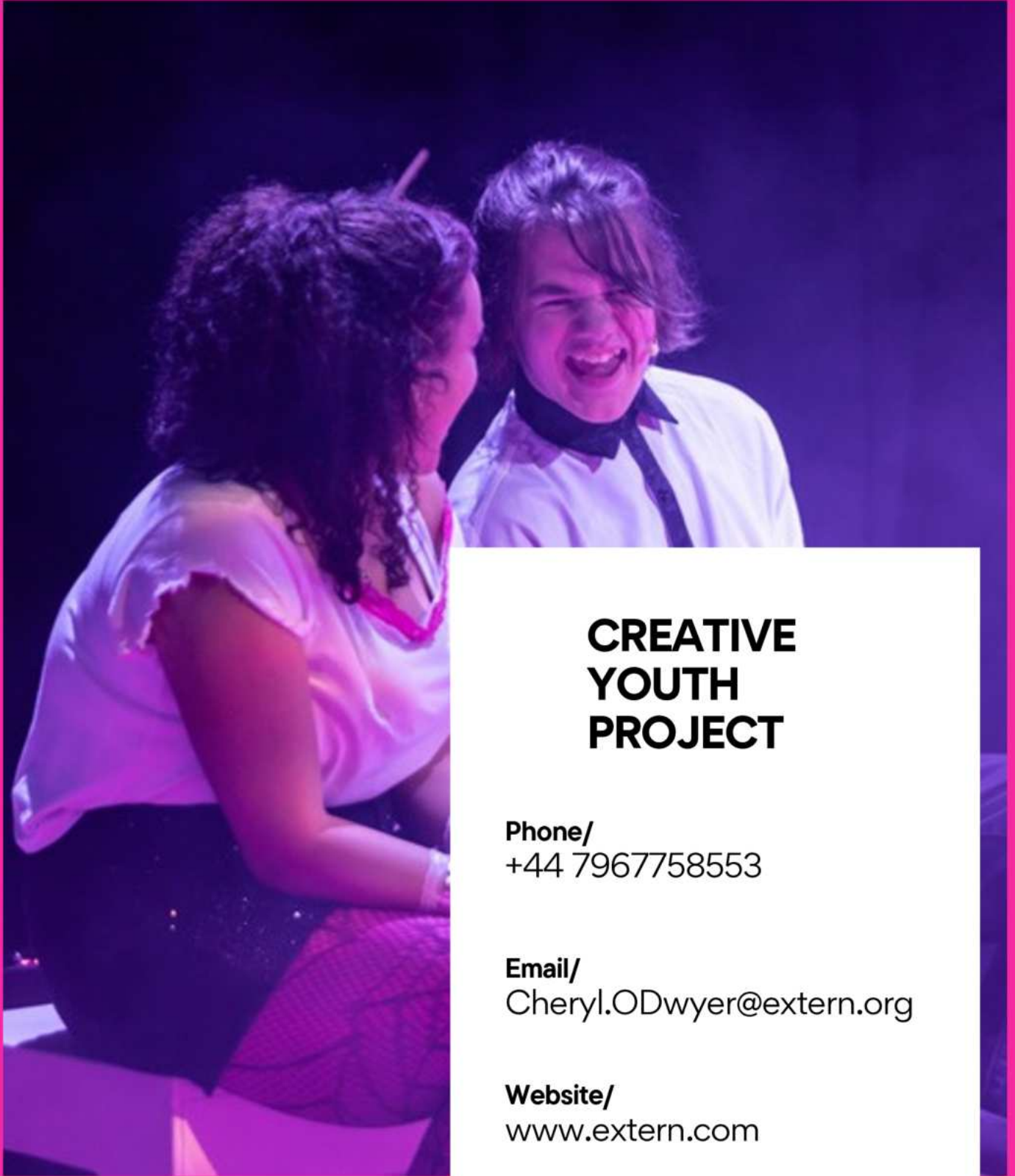
This project demonstrates what becomes possible when young people are met with time, care and genuine creative ambition. Across rehearsal rooms, shared meals, moments of conflict and moments of pride, the work consistently showed that trauma-informed drama practice is not only effective, but necessary when supporting young people whose lives are shaped by complexity, instability and resilience.

The Creative Youth on a Shared Island project was not simply about producing a performance; it was about creating a space where young people could belong, be heard and be trusted with their own stories. The Theatre of the Oppressed methodology allowed participants to rehearse change, examine power and imagine alternatives—skills that extended far beyond the stage and into how they relate to themselves, others and the systems around them.

What this evaluation makes clear is that when projects are given the time to breathe, when partnerships are grounded in respect, and when care is held alongside artistic excellence, the impact is deep and lasting. Young people did not just take part—they showed up, stayed, reflected, changed and created work of integrity and courage. Audiences listened. Families shifted. Conversations began.

As this chapter closes, the learning from this project offers a strong and hopeful invitation forward: to continue investing in creative spaces where young people are not asked to perform resilience, but are supported to discover it; where borders soften through shared making; and where theatre remains a place not only of expression, but of possibility.

# CONTACT US



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