

# THE YOUTH THEATRE CENSUS

SUMMARY REPORT 2024



## FOREWORD

"This report, based on a thorough survey and analysis of youth theatres across the country, is to be welcomed. It demonstrates an intricate and wide-ranging picture of youth theatre provision across England, highlighting the vital role these organisations, and importantly the people who run them, play in the lives of the young people who are able to access them. The report also demonstrates a sector that is both thriving and facing challenges on several fronts, given the context in which the arts sector is currently operating.

It is not until an area of activity is defined in this way that its successes and vulnerabilities can be seen in totality, and this report vividly outlines those both in the statistics it presents and in comments from the survey's contributors. It allows us the opportunity to consider how we might support the contribution these organisations play in the lives and development of young people, but also the rich diversity they bring to the artform.

This report will be invaluable to all of us working with young people in theatre and will allow us a detailed reflection as to how we can support youth theatres and theatre making in communities across the country."

— Neil Darlison

**Director of Theatre at Arts Council England**

## YOUTH THEATRE MEMBERS TOLD US

“Taking part made me feel happy & very joyful. I have learnt confidence and taking part - expressing myself more through acting.”

“Bringing stories to life on stage is something I will never forget.”

“I joined Youth Theatre because at school I feel like I am judged by other people in my class but here I’m comfortable with everyone and I’m not afraid to try things that are out of the box that I wouldn’t be in school.”

“This experience has deeply influenced my life, improving my acting skills and confidence, and expanding my networking opportunities.”

“I enjoyed the people and experiences because it helped with my confidence a lot. Taking part made me feel part of a family.”

“It has helped me be more brave and to share my ideas.”

“I just love it. I love performing in that theatre and everyone is always so welcoming.”

“I was overwhelmed by the sense of welcoming and understanding by my fellow cast mates and director. Being a part of this has allowed me to learn new skills, build confidence, and form lifelong friendships.”

“Youth theatre is about a community where you aren’t afraid to show who you are.”

“Youth Theatre was a lifeline for me. It was the only place I could say what I wanted to say and people actually listened to me.”

“No-one judges anyone and we are each others’ drama friends, we have a group chat that everyone is on and we just laugh and support each other a lot”

“Drama makes my belly flutter magically”





## INTRODUCTION

**YOUTH THEATRE IN ENGLAND IS A CRITICAL PART OF OUR CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM: A SPACE FOR CREATIVITY, SELF-EXPRESSION AND WELLBEING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND AN IRREPLACEABLE GATEWAY INTO PROFESSIONAL THEATRE.**

**IT IS IMPORTANT,  
TRANSFORMATIVE,  
VIBRANT.. AND FRAGILE.**

**The Youth Theatre Census - the first national survey of youth theatres since 2011 - shows the incredible scope and range of youth theatre, its importance to young people, and the dedication and care of the people who make it happen. It shows how overstretched the sector is and lays bare the need for better investment, recognition and support. It tells us that:**

### **Youth Theatre is big.**

There are at least 414 groups supporting more than 100,000 young people, representing almost every area of England. They employ more than 4,000 permanent and freelance staff and more than 3,000 volunteers and deliver a wide range of activities. They reach nearly half a million people through plays, sharings and digital work.

### **Youth Theatre is underfunded and unequally resourced.**

The sector relies on an estimated annual income of under £25m - just over £200 per participant. A third of youth theatres survive on less than £10,000 a year and groups in the North, Midlands and East of England are in particular need of investment and support.

### **Youth Theatre is meeting complex needs.**

The sector provides support for young people with the cost of living crisis and mental wellbeing, with around nine in ten groups offering pastoral, financial or educational support to their members alongside workshops and plays.

### **Youth Theatre is not accessible enough.**

Only 20% of youth theatres offer all their participants free places and 18% have no access provision for Disabled young people in place. Activity around demographic data gathering and removing barriers to participation is limited and inconsistent across the sector.

### **Youth Theatre leaders are struggling.**

The increasing complexity of working with young people in a challenging social and economic context weighs heavily on the leaders (many of whom are freelancers or volunteers) who run youth theatres. They feel over-stretched, isolated, underappreciated and exhausted.

As CEOs of companies with the privilege of NPO funding, we know that high-quality, consistent and accessible work with young people only happens with investment and support. We want to use our position and this report to ensure the whole sector benefits from this, not just a few of us.

That is why we are calling for a resourced and coherent national strategy for youth theatre, led by a new development agency for youth theatre in England, similar to those that operate successfully in Scotland and Ireland. We set this out in more detail at the end of this summary report.

Youth Theatre is a crucial part of our national life and it should be more than just a passion project. We hope that this report is the beginning of a more sustainable and inclusive sector, in a country where every young person who wants to join a youth theatre can do so - wherever, and whoever they are.

— Vicky Holliday (**Burnley Youth Theatre**),  
Liz Arday, Nuna Sandy (**Company Three**),  
Kiz Crosbie (**Mortal Fools**),  
Mark Powell (**Prime Theatre**),  
Rachel Ashton (**Theatre Factory**),  
Leanne Jones and Keith Saha  
(**20 Stories High**)

# YOUTH THEATRE IS BIG

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**“IT’S A MASSIVE PART OF MY LIFE.  
YOUTH THEATRE IS LIKE A SECOND  
FAMILY TO ME.”**



# 414 YOUTH THEATRES

WITH AN ESTIMATED ANNUAL TURNOVER OF  
**£23.3 MILLION**

WORKING WITH

# 100,883

## YOUNG PEOPLE

RUN BY

# 1,097

SALARIED STAFF

# 3,306

FREELANCERS

# 3,382

VOLUNTEERS

# 899

TRUSTEES

# 92%

involve young people  
in organisational  
decision-making

DELIVERING

# 71,415

## WORKSHOPS, REHEARSALS AND OTHER ACTIVITIES

INCLUDING

*(% of youth theatres)*

PERFORMANCE TRAINING

# 98%

DEVISING

# 86%

MUSICAL THEATRE

# 62%

TECHNICAL THEATRE

# 61%

WRITING

# 59%

DIGITAL WORK

# 36%

As well as Theatre trips (59%), Social events (51%),  
Artist development sessions (36%), Training for artists (31%),  
Youth activism (18%), Residentials (8%) and more.

REACHING

# 470,468

## AUDIENCE MEMBERS

THROUGH

*(% of youth theatres)*

PLAYS IN THEATRES

# 83%

PLAYS IN OTHER SPACES

# 41%

SHARINGS AND SCRATCH WORK

# 55%

SHOWCASES AND TALENT SHOWS

# 39%

DIGITAL WORK (E.G. FILMS)

# 25%

PRINTED MATERIAL

# 12%

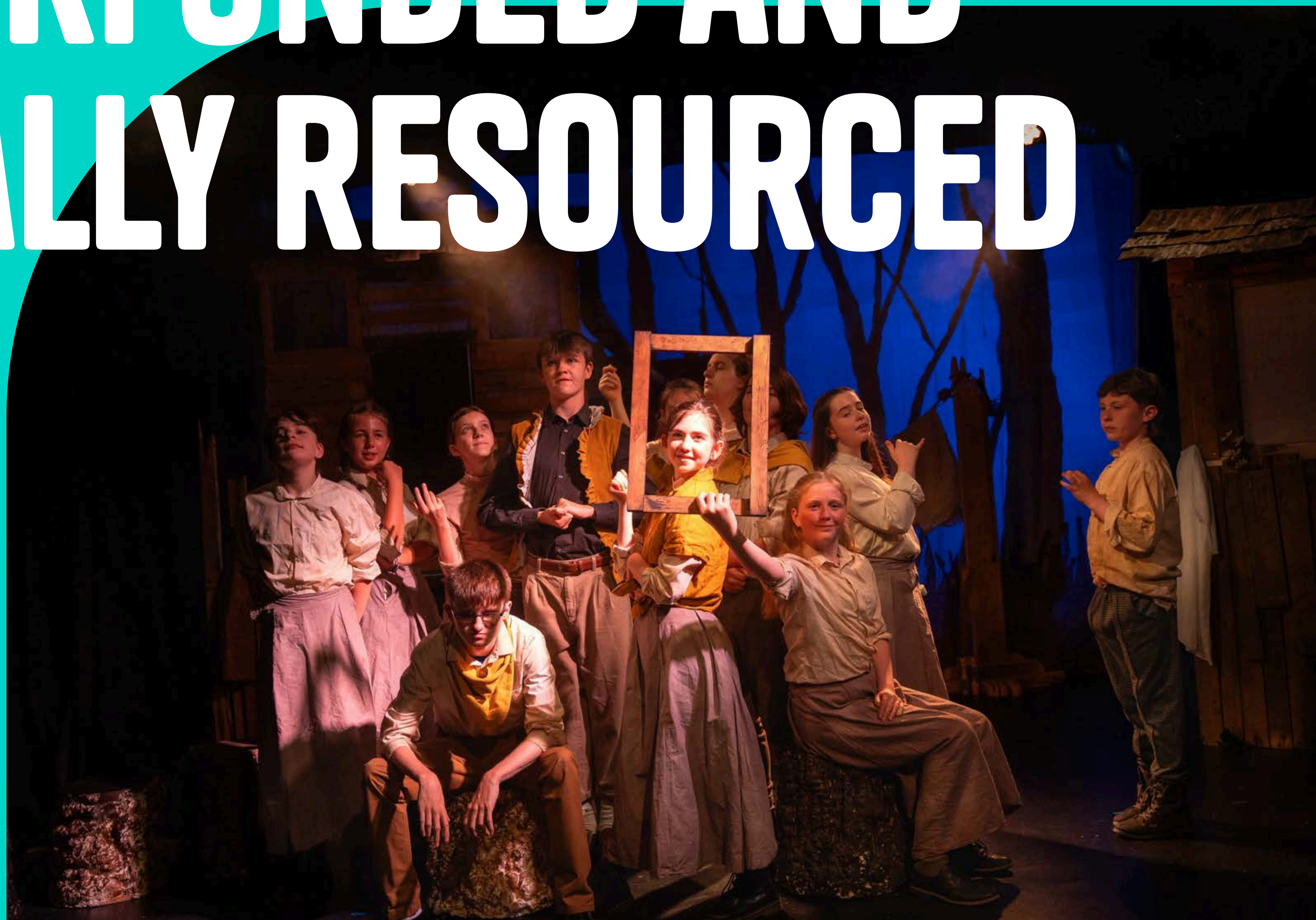
STREAMING

# 7%

# YOUTH THEATRE IS UNDERFUNDED AND UNEQUALLY RESOURCED

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**“I REALLY LIKE THE DRAMA GAMES,  
BUT I REALLY LIKE IT WHEN WE DO  
THINGS LIKE MAKE MUSIC VIDEOS -  
THAT'S REALLY FUN. EVERYONE IS  
JUST KIND, WHICH IS WHAT IS  
MOST IMPORTANT.”**





Youth Theatre delivers a huge amount of value for a small amount of investment. There is an average spend per participant of around just £231 a year (for comparison, a young person would expect to pay £1,080 to take part in three terms of classes at Stagecoach, a commercial performing arts organisation).

**31%** RECEIVED LESS THAN £10,000

**3%** HAD NO INCOME AT ALL

Income for youth theatre is unequally distributed across the country, with almost half of the total turnover in London. The East of England (1%), North East (3%) and West Midlands (3%) accounting for the smallest share.

34% of youth theatres (often the smaller, informally structured groups) are primarily reliant on a single source of income (often fees paid by young people), a potentially precarious position during a cost-of-living crisis.

Only 34% of youth theatres received any trust and foundation funding in the last year. 15% received investment from Arts Council England through National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding and 11% received project grants or other funding from ACE.

Only 4% of independent youth theatres are currently NPOs. 31% of companies (119 groups) told us they hope to apply for NPO funding in the next round - a process that requires significant time, resource and support.

## YOUTH THEATRE LEADERS TOLD US...

“It is a struggle to balance the books in our current structure, as room hire, bursaries and staff wipe out funds each term and we always worry that we won't make ends meet.”

“This year we have had our local authority contract significantly cut. We are struggling to make up the shortfall.”

## YOUTH THEATRES INCOME BY REGION



# YOUTH THEATRE IS MEETING COMPLEX NEEDS

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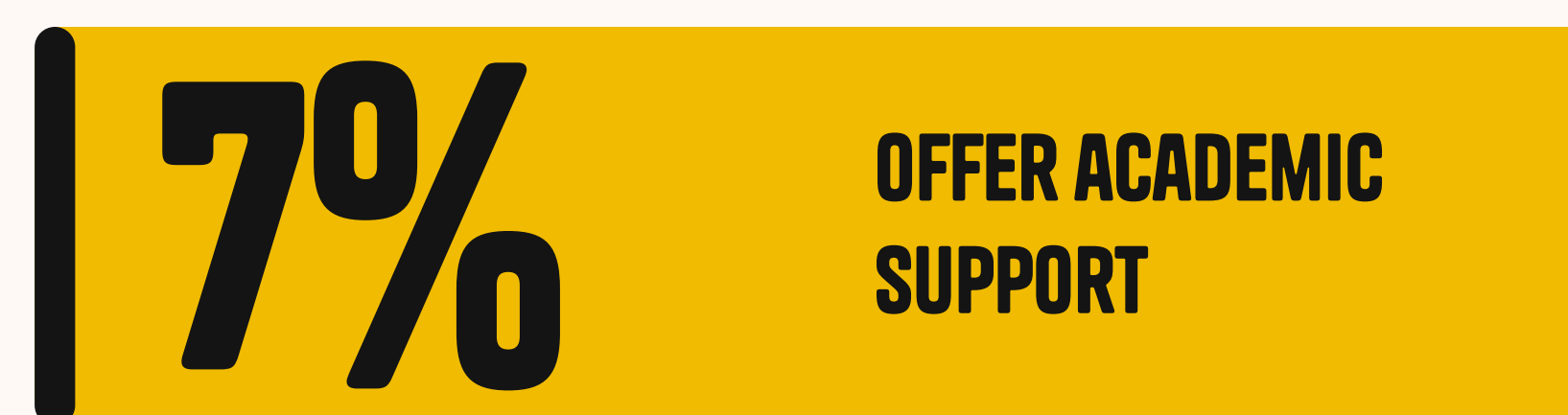
**“WHEN I JOINED I KNEW THAT WE’D DO LOTS OF GAMES AND MAKING PLAYS, BUT I DIDN’T EXPECT HELP WITH SO MANY OTHER THINGS IN MY LIFE TOO.”**



Youth Theatres today do much more than make plays.

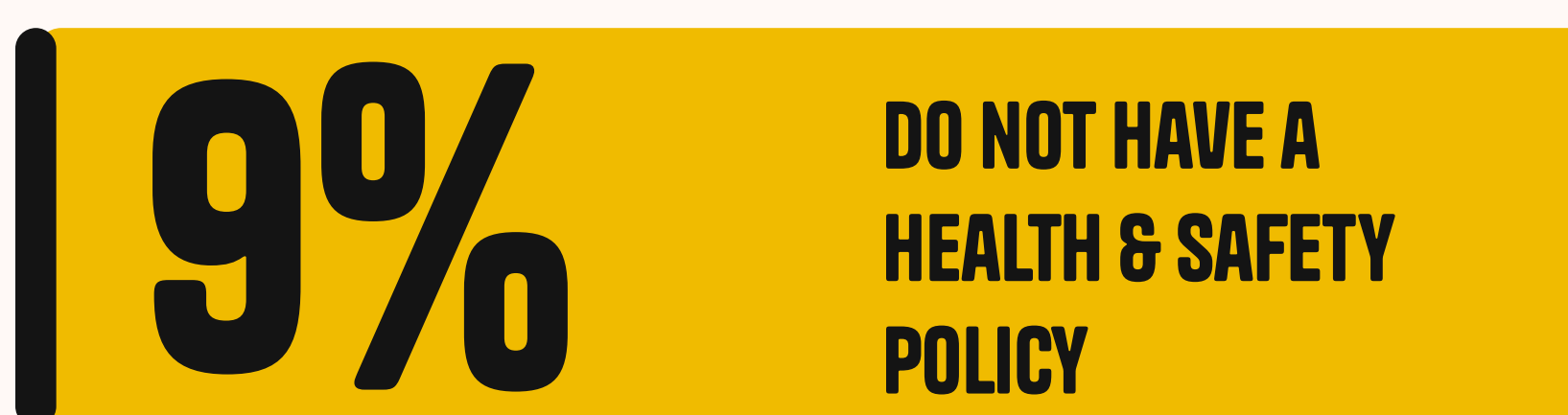
The Census shows how youth theatres are meeting the increasingly complex challenges of supporting young people in a cost-of-living crisis and with all the other contemporary pressures that young people feel.

The impact of the cost-of-living crisis was the third most cited challenge faced by youth theatres (42% of youth theatres), while young people's mental wellbeing was next (40%).



All these things take time and cost money, increasing financial pressure on organisations and the individuals who run them. They also, in some cases, require specialist knowledge and skills outside of theatre - something out of the financial reach of many smaller and volunteer-run organisations.

Working with young people requires rigour and high professional standards, and while most organisations had a suite of relevant policies to ensure this, some did not.



## YOUTH THEATRE LEADERS TOLD US...

“It is challenging to meet the various demands from and for young people and our communities. Considering their needs, mental health, identity journeys, cost of living crisis.”

“Mental health issues are noticeably higher in recent years amongst our members and so our safeguarding and child support has to be a focus at all times.”

“The challenges young people face now and the pressures on them mean that youth theatre is more important than ever.”

# YOUTH THEATRE IS NOT ACCESSIBLE ENOUGH

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**“YOUTH THEATRE IS ABOUT A COMMUNITY WHERE YOU AREN'T AFRAID TO SHOW WHO YOU ARE. IT'S A SPACE TO DEVELOP YOUR CREATIVITY AND WORK WITH PEOPLE TO ACHIEVE SOMETHING YOU ARE PROUD OF THROUGH TEAMWORK, PASSION AND DEDICATION.”**



The complex needs of young people today and the decrease in creative arts provision in formal and extracurricular education means representation and access to the arts for young people has never been more important. Youth Theatre should play an essential part in meeting this need, but needs to have more robust, universal and comprehensive ways of collecting data in order to demonstrate this.

Only 22% of youth theatres collect a broad range of demographic data from their participants, making it very hard to fully understand and analyse access and inclusion in youth theatre. We cannot say, therefore, what youth theatre looks like in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability and other areas of identity - or how well youth theatre is doing at ensuring that everyone is represented within our sector. We consider this a major weakness and something that needs to be addressed collectively if we are to take positive and proactive action in this area.

**80%** CHARGE FEES FOR THEIR ACTIVITIES

*63% offer some form of fee bursary. NPO-funded organisations are most likely to offer all their activities for free.*

**47%** DO NOT HAVE SPECIFIC DISABILITY POLICIES

*82% of youth theatres do have some mechanisms in place to remove barriers to participation for Disabled young people.*

**16%** DO NOT HAVE A DIVERSITY, EQUITY & INCLUSION POLICY

**29%** SAY DISABILITY AND ACCESS ARE KEY TRAINING NEEDS

Our data indicates that the better funded an organisation is, the more likely it is to collect a wide range of demographic data and be able to proactively remove barriers to participation through policies, training and other mechanisms. Good access costs money and with so many youth theatres surviving on small incomes, it is reasonable to assume that financial pressures contribute to a lack of access provision.

We believe this is an area that requires joined-up work on a national basis - to bring consistency to the collection of data and build good practice together.

## YOUTH THEATRE LEADERS TOLD US...

“The price of running youth theatre is ridiculously high and we are struggling to find sponsorship or funders and as such we are raising our fees which is driving members away.”

“We are finding it tough to keep paid spaces to an affordable cost and also offering bursary places and also paying our freelancers fairly. We can't cover our costs and are always looking for external funding.”

# YOUTH THEATRE LEADERS ARE STRUGGLING

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**“THE KINDNESS AND SUPPORT FROM THE PRACTITIONERS LETS ME SHARE IDEAS AND TRY NEW THINGS WITHOUT BEING AFRAID. I AM THANKFUL TO BE INCLUDED IN SUCH A BEAUTIFUL GROUP OF PEOPLE AND FEEL INSPIRED BY EVERY SESSION WITH THEM.”**



Youth Theatre in England is made possible by the passion and dedication of 8,685 members of staff, freelancers, volunteers and trustees. The high number of volunteers in this mix (3,382 - supporting the work of 64% of youth theatres) and the anecdotal evidence of paid staff members working beyond their hours indicates the extent to which our sector is sustained by unpaid labour.

25 (6%) youth theatres were operated by freelancers and 52 (13%) were only operated by volunteers and trustees in 2023-24. With so many youth theatres solely reliant on freelancers and volunteers, we are concerned about the risk of burnout on youth theatre provision - especially as the range of challenges that groups are dealing with continue to increase.

Respondents in all types of youth theatre told us how hard it is to run youth theatres at the moment, with many feeling isolated (13% of youth theatres described this as a key challenge), unrecognised and fatigued.

Rates of pay vary considerably, including on a geographical basis. Freelance youth theatre leaders in the East Midlands and East of England are paid least, while leaders in the West Midlands and London were paid best. NPOs had a higher average daily rate for freelancers than non-NPOs.

## AVERAGE DAILY RATE FOR LEADERS BY REGION



As with participants, youth theatres do not collect enough data about their employees and volunteers to properly analyse levels of representation and access - something we think needs to be addressed on a strategic basis across the sector.

## YOUTH THEATRE LEADERS TOLD US...

“Running a youth theatre is the most rewarding thing I do. It is also painfully without recognition or celebration.”

“We know we're doing important work but it's the hardest thing any of us have ever done.”

“I largely work on my own, which is usually fine, but I occasionally get real creative and emotional fatigue.”

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**THE YOUTH THEATRE CENSUS SHOWS HOW MUCH YOUTH THEATRE MATTERS - TO OUR YOUNG PEOPLE, OUR COMMUNITIES, AND THE THEATRE INDUSTRY.**

Such an important national activity should be more than just a passion project, held together by unpaid work and goodwill.

That is why we're calling for a new national strategy for youth theatre in England, to transform our sector forever.





**Youth theatre is widespread, vibrant and vital - but it is also under-recognised, under-resourced and precarious. Its success relies on the extraordinary dedication of leaders who are often overworked, underpaid, or not paid at all.**

Those leaders, even in the best funded organisations, often work in silos - busy, isolated and unable to keep up to date with best practice or personal development and forge the kind of partnerships we need for the sector to thrive.

As youth theatre leaders with many decades of experience, we believe that the time has come for a cohesive, properly resourced national strategy, delivered by a new national development agency for youth theatre. We need this body to help protect and develop youth theatre, advocate for our work, bring in and redirect investment, consolidate shared development needs, and drive consistency in data, policies and access.

The proof of the value of this approach already exists in Scotland with the excellent work of Youth Theatre Arts Scotland, whose regular survey of Scottish youth theatres inspired us to create our own version in England. There are similar bodies in Ireland and across Europe.

We think the first priorities for a new development agency should be to:

- Support those organisations working with the least resource by utilising existing experience within the sector to support the development of policies and practice.
- Increase investment to expand to the number of free places for participants across the sector, with a particular focus on Priority Places identified by Arts Council England.
- Drive and champion a consistent data collection system so we can better monitor equalities and other data, and take action to improve access to our work.
- Create and maintain a database of youth theatres so young people can more easily find them - and youth theatres can build connection and community.
- Encourage practice sharing and collaborative training between companies.
- Support ambitious medium-sized youth theatres to develop their business strategies and apply for longer-term funding, including NPO funding.
- Continue to survey the sector on a regular basis, allowing us to see longer-term trends and the impacts of interventions.

## **NEXT STEPS...**

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Over the next few months, we will do the following:

- Publish this summary report and the full independent report and share it widely within and outside the sector.
- Collectively fundraise to bring youth theatres and other stakeholders together to discuss the report and decide on our next steps.
- Create an online database of youth theatres to help build connections within our sector, and to help young people everywhere find a youth theatre near them.



## CASE STUDIES

"I really like it here. I like doing drama but my favourite thing is colouring and art. We get to do it all here."

— Umaymah

**Mind the Gap's** youth theatre has been running for just over a year in Bradford, starting with a Summer School in 2023. In their first week two young people attended - they are now at full capacity with 20 Learning Disabled and/or Autistic young people aged 11-18. In January 2024 they introduced a sensory play space that runs alongside the youth theatre. Most members hear about the group through word of mouth and recommendations. The sessions are co-designed by the participants and allow participants to explore a range of art forms including puppetry, music, improvisation and devising. Their aim is for the youth theatre to be a pathway onto Mind the Gap's Performing Arts Courses at College and University level. Providing the right support to allow young people to access the youth theatre adds significant cost - but it is vital to ensure they get the same experience as someone who requires less support.

"I just wanted to say how happy I am to be a part of this theatre group, I am endlessly grateful for the amazing opportunities."

— Isla

**GL4 Youth Theatre** is based in Matson, a social housing estate just outside Gloucestershire. GL4 was started eight years ago by two women from the estate to make arts and creative opportunities available to its members. The group recently received a grant of £15,000 from Children in Need to cover their delivery, but are reliant on a patchwork of other grants to pay their staffing costs. Local young people don't have much access to drama, so it often takes a big leap of faith for them to join. The group works in local community and church halls. They recently made a new devised play and dream of a full production with lights and sound, or a promenade piece telling the story of a young person living in Matson.

"It has helped me be more brave and to share my ideas. I felt amazing and confident."

— Stephanie

**BLAST Youth Theatre**, part of Elevator Arts, works in Southend and Basildon in partnership with Welcome to the UK and Signpost, charities guiding newly-arrived immigrant families on their journey to embracing life in the UK. They focus on 8-12 year olds who have English as an additional language, helping them improve their language skills, build confidence, have fun and make new friends. They recently made an entertaining and thought-provoking show about plastic pollution on the coastline involving puppetry, music, and a cleverly-designed translation machine that helped sea creatures talk to humans. Fundraising, recruitment and finding suitable spaces to work in are significant challenges. The project had to pause in 2023 while awaiting fundraising decisions.

“This experience has deeply influenced my life, improving my acting skills and confidence, and expanding my networking opportunities.”

— Jude

**Deafinitely Youth Theatre** was founded in 2010. Based in Brent, in London, they serve a national deaf community and their youth theatre is open to anybody in the deaf community between the ages of 14-21. They currently work with 100 young people every year - for many members it is the first time they meet other deaf peers. They run skills workshops, panel events, work experience placements, theatre trips, backstage tours. All the sessions are deaf-led, with a minimum of two BSL interpreters at each session. They offer Arts Award and created a BSL library of resources for those undertaking it. All their sessions are free to attend, which means fundraising is a big challenge. Since Covid they have also struggled with recruitment because many young people tend to be more disengaged with youth services.

“I am thankful to be included in such a beautiful group of people and feel inspired by every session with them.”

— Amber

**Make/Sense Youth Theatre** started in January 2021 and works with more than 60 neurodivergent and disabled young people aged 4-33 in and around Reading. Young people come based on recommendations from local councils, social workers, early help and short breaks teams, charities and parents groups. Their only regular source of income is fees paid by parents, though they recently received a grant of £5,000 for their end of year show. They would love to provide more free spaces for young people but can't afford to at the moment. They work with a large team of assistants and 1-to-1 support staff, with 75% of the staff team identifying as neurodivergent. They run a supported internship scheme for neurodivergent young people to learn to be drama practitioners. All their shows are written for and by their members - their most recent show was *The ODDyssey*, inspired by the 1980s and *Stranger Things*.

“I started when I was 6 and I don't want to think about the time when I may have to leave because I am too old.”

— Jamie

**Store Room Youth Theatre** started in the back of an old Tesco store (hence the name) in 2014. They work with children and young people aged 4-19 in Hornchurch in Essex and receive £3-4,000 a year, with members paying around £5 per workshop. There is no audition process - everyone is welcome. Everything they raise goes towards drama workshops run by voluntary tutors in their current venue, a church hall. They've represented Havering in two New Year's Day parades and have recently been granted Jack Petchey status. They dream of participating in a youth drama festival - bringing other young companies from around the country together to camp in a field and perform work for each other. Their biggest challenges are the rising cost of their venue and insurance and maintaining commitment from parents.

“Bringing stories to life on stage is something I will never forget.”

— Robyn

**Henfield Theatre Company Youth Theatre** in West Sussex works with a core group of around 12 teens from Brighton, Storrington, Worthing & Haywards Heath, and with around 20 younger children attending their holiday summer schools, which they launched in 2023. Both projects are led solely by volunteers, with adult members of the company dropping in to support. They have access to a proper stage with professional tech and the group has recently produced plays like *Blood Brothers* and *An Inspector Calls*. This winter a group of their younger members performed as part of the adult company show for the first time.

“After all the hard work that is put into the production, there is an amazing show that makes everyone feel a real sense of achievement and pride.”


— Bethan

**Grantham Youth Theatre Society (GYTS)** is a musical theatre society in Lincolnshire for young people aged 16-30, mostly recruited through word-of-mouth and social media. They raise around £300 a year through fundraising events and ticket sales and are run by a volunteer committee who are all aged between 19 and 27. They work in village halls, local churches and a local scout hut - producing performances at a local school theatre. Their most recent show, *Shrek The Musical*, was a huge financial challenge, but provided loads of opportunities for members to get involved in costume and set design.

“If it wasn't for Reading Rep my confidence wouldn't be where it is now.”

— Charlie

**Reading Rep Youth Theatre** was founded in 2012. They work with more than 2,500 participants - from 1 year olds all the way through to young adults across a range of needs and personal circumstances. They run school workshops, holiday projects, and weekly workshops in acting, directing and technical theatre, as well as masterclasses in singing, dancing, acting for film and more. This year they're producing a pantomime and a new production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. One day they'd love to take performances into local nursing homes.



**“Theatre and community are great ways of exploring some of the big questions we have around life and our part in it. It gives us the opportunity to confront, challenge, discover and change in hope of bringing about a better world.”**

— Youth Theatre leader

The 2024 Youth Theatre Census was commissioned by a group of National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) Youth Theatres who wanted to better understand and support the development of youth theatre across the board in England.

They are: [20 Stories High](#), [Burnley Youth Theatre](#), [Company Three](#), [Mortal Fools](#), [Prime Theatre](#), and [Theatre Factory](#).

The Census was funded by Arts Council England and created and delivered by independent researcher [Ruth Stevenson](#) and freelance consultant [Ned Glasier](#).

A wider strategy group supported the development and distribution of the Census: BarrowFull, Get Into Theatre, the National Association of Youth Theatres, National Theatre Connections, National Youth Theatre, National Youth Music Theatre, SOLT/UK Theatre and NODA (National Operatic and Dramatic Association).

This summary report was written by Ned Glasier on behalf of the commissioning companies. The full independent report was written by Ruth Stevenson. This details its findings in comprehensive detail and includes notes on the methodology and process.

**[Download the full report PDF here.](#)**

We defined a youth theatre as “any activity that engages young people aged 5-25 as participants on a non-professional basis in theatre”. 414 organisations responded, with 387 completing the survey in full - the statistics in both reports reflect the answers of these youth theatres.

While we were delighted with the range and depth of the responses, it is important to note that there are more youth theatres in England who did not know about or complete the survey this time, as well as many other commercial and educational spaces in which young people in England engage in youth drama.

Design by [Studio Kissme](#)