

Darlington Arts Centre Pilot

“Excellent Youth Theatre”

Indicator Set 1: Creative, Inclusive and Responsive Organisations

Introduction

Darlington Arts Centre is a vibrant arts venue. It is rooted in the local community and offers a diverse programme of creative, performing and visual arts, outreach, education and engagement work, managed by the local authority arts team. The team also manage and programme Darlington Civic Theatre, a 900 seat Edwardian professional receiving theatre, hosting large and middle scale productions including drama, young people’s theatre, musicals, dance, opera, music, comedy and pantomime.

Darlington Arts Centre incorporates a 320-seat theatre, which is also used as a cinema, and two informal spaces for music, comedy and the spoken word, as well three exhibition spaces, including the Lounge Gallery, a community Gallery space and the Myles Meehan Gallery, hosting professional exhibitions. The Arts Centre is also home to the newly refurbished Studio theatre, a flexible 100-seat theatre and workshop space dedicated for work by and for children and young people. The Studio is the home of ArtsSpark Youth Theatre, the Arts Centre’s youth theatre.

Darlington Arts Centre is striving to become a centre of excellence for young people’s theatre. This vision is underpinned by the belief that theatre has the capacity to transform people’s lives, promote self-expression and self-esteem and empower young people to reach their full potential. It is also the home of Theatre Hullabaloo (a professional children’s theatre company) and the National Association of Youth Theatres.

ArtsSpark Youth Theatre

ArtsSpark Youth Theatre provides a safe, welcoming environment for young people aged five and over to create, explore and participate in quality drama and theatre activities leading to regular performance opportunities. ArtsSpark Youth Theatre is based in the Studio, a brand new professional performance and workshop space for children and young people at Darlington Arts Centre. Led by professional youth theatre leaders, each session explores a range of drama techniques including games, storytelling, trust work, improvisation, character building, devising and text work, around a chosen theme or style each term.

Aims

- To provide a programme of exciting, high quality youth theatre activity for all young people across Darlington.

- To create a welcoming, safe, positive environment for young people to work together regardless of age, culture, background or ability.
- To offer performance opportunities at the Arts Centre and various performing arts festivals locally, regionally and nationally.

Weekly sessions

Thursday:	4.30pm-5.30pm	5-7 year olds (school years 1-2)
Thursday:	5.30pm-7.00pm	7-9 year olds (school years 3-4)
Tuesday:	5.15pm-6.45pm	9-11 year olds (school years 5-6)
Wednesday	5.30pm-7.00pm	11-13 year olds (school years 7-8)
Wednesday	7.15pm-8.45pm	13+ year olds (school years 9+)

The development of ArtsSpark Youth Theatre

We are currently working on a development programme for the youth theatre, supported by NAYT through its Inspire training programme, as well as through the Excellence and Inclusion Scheme. As part of this work, a development and planning day was held with youth theatre leaders in September 2009 which looked at many aspects of our youth theatre, including:

- Identifying what makes good theatre (excellence, quality)
- What does our youth theatre currently look like (drawing exercise)
- What is theatre (types/styles)
- How we can develop a structure of skills learning/performances
- What skills we already have
- What skills we need to develop
- What is our dream for the youth theatre
- What do we want our youth theatre to look like in the future? (drawing exercise)

We began the session by exploring the questions in Indicator Set 1 as a group of youth theatre leaders, which was a great way of starting the development day and identifying need within the youth theatre based on the questions. We discussed and debated them as a group and recorded our responses on a flip chart. We then recorded our scores as individuals. We also used a very similar method when discussing the questions with our oldest youth theatre members. The responses to the questions are below.

We plan to share these results with all of our youth theatre staff, as well as with our young people, and compare and contrast the results. We will use the results to identify areas of good practice and areas where improvement and progression is needed, that we will inform our youth theatre development planning.

Is your youth theatre warm and welcoming?

Feedback from youth theatre leaders

- The group 'clique' can be an issue, as they all know each other so well. This can be off putting to new members, although members do welcome new members.
- The free first session - 'try before you buy' element is helpful here.
- It's good that new members don't have to walk in the room when they don't know anyone, as everyone sits and waits at reception before the whole group walks down together.
- The space is welcoming - bright, modern, friendly atmosphere. Parents can sit and wait in the lounge area, young people can walk in, see the youth theatre group sat waiting, and not feel intimidated about approaching. A member of staff is always there to welcome new members too.
- New members usually bring a friend for the first time - this is a positive, although the friend might not be engaged/as interested in the work! Also, when one leaves so does the other!
- We always begin the session - especially at the start of term with a name game/getting to know you/trust exercise - this is important to make sure each person knows each other, and to develop trust between members.
- We always make sure staff and other young people are welcoming, say hello and include new members.
- There is generally positive interactions with other staff members who work in the building, which makes the youth theatre members feel welcome.

Youth theatre leader 1 score: 4. Youth theatre leader 2 score: 3.5

Feedback from youth theatre senior management

- Our youth theatre itself is warm and welcoming. Young people are met in the lounge area by a member of staff and are also accompanied after the session to be met by parents/carers.
- We could improve on the induction process and also possibly follow up in a better way on why young people drop out.
- We could improve on general staff awareness of welcoming young people into the venue and we have plans to do this.

Score: 3.5

Feedback from youth theatre members

- Yes...
- Lovely atmosphere/everyone is smiley and welcoming "it's like entering a musical!"
- New member likes the group's humour - it made her feel at ease when she first came.
- We can make people feel welcome by including them in everything that we do.
- Everyone enjoys themselves which creates and maintains a welcoming atmosphere.

Does your youth theatre have a sense of community?

Feedback from youth theatre leaders

- There is more of a sense of community between individual groups rather than ArtsSpark Youth Theatre as a whole, although awareness of the other groups and a sense of community in the wider youth theatre is growing.
- Some groups compare to other groups – the 11-13s aspire to be in the older group – but they think that the older group is better somehow? It's great for them to be aware of other groups but we need to maintain equality between the groups and a sense that they are all part of one whole – 'older does not mean better!'
- Issues when younger members move up to older groups – will they like it? Will it be what they expected? - A solution to this might be to invite the ones who are moving up to join the older group for a session previous to a new term starting.
- A structure of skills/performances would help the young people to progress through the groups, and give the youth theatre a sense of 'wholeness'.
- Could we develop peer mentoring between the groups? Older members running games with the younger members? Should the groups have a generic game/warm up, that they all know, to bring them together when we work as a whole? This would help develop a sense of community.

Youth theatre leader 1 score: 3. Youth theatre leader 2 score: 3

Feedback from youth theatre senior management

- We have a clear set of core values for our youth theatre. This is promoted to parents/carers and to young people before they enrol and as part of the culture of the groups.
- The recent sharing which took place at the end of last term demonstrated that the groups were very supportive of each other and that they could learn from each other.
- We could do more to promote a sense of community alongside developing an identity for the whole organisation. We have plans to develop this in the future.
- Other social and creative opportunities are available to young people through their membership of the ArtsSpark membership scheme. They are also able to access free theatre ticket offers and discounted tickets to see work together or individually, via this scheme.
- There are opportunities for youth theatre members to feel part of the wider Darlington community by performing or taking part at community events.

Score: 4

Feedback from youth theatre members

- Yes...

- Because everyone in the group knows each other and if they don't they become one of the group very easily.
- Although we come from different backgrounds we blend together and mix well
- We talk about things other than theatre to help us bond/get to know each other better.
- We have an input into the sessions which gives us a sense of empowerment.

Does your youth theatre have a shared vision that has a strong sense of purpose and direction?

Feedback from youth theatre leaders

- Group leaders are developing a shared vision, through shared planning and development sessions, and our work with NAYT.
- Youth theatre staff with management are currently working on developing a clear structure/units of work, to help develop a strong sense of purpose and direction - youth theatre leaders should support each other, and share roles, ideas, develop joint planning and delivering within the structure.
- Youth theatre leaders are working closely with the arts management team to develop a shared vision and goals.
- Shared planning each term supports and underpins the shared vision.
- Young people need to be involved in the development of a shared vision/mission - what do they want/need/expect from their youth theatre?

Youth theatre leader 1 score: 3. Youth theatre leader 2 score: 3

Feedback from youth theatre senior management

- Our youth theatre is beginning to share some ideas around critical thinking. This needs to progress further.
- There have been a number of opportunities for young people to discuss their youth theatre and its future development, in order to inform our thinking and that of other groups working in the sector. Again this could become a more regular feature of youth theatre here.
- Youth theatre members have a lot of opportunities to see diverse work, I think we could follow this up more in sessions.
- Our youth theatre has not had very much contact with other youth theatres though this will definitely increase over the next 12 months and is a priority for development.
- We have staff that are well trained in inclusive practice so this should be a strength in our youth theatre.

Score: 3

Feedback from youth theatre members

- Kind of?

- We all want to enjoy making theatre.
- We all aim to devise a performance but it often isn't our main aim (a strong enough direction).
- Individually we have our own personal reasons but they compliment rather than go against the shared vision.
- We are aware of the other ArtsSpark groups and hear about opportunities to work together and watch other theatre shows.
- We have seen work from other theatres.
- We would like the opportunity to work or meet with other youth theatres but not all of the time.

Does your youth theatre value young people's opinions and recognise their needs?

Feedback from youth theatre leaders

- Young people's creative ideas are highly valued and extremely important throughout the development of the work.
- This is an ongoing process – young people's opinions and ideas should always be at the centre of any developments within the youth theatre.
- More work needs to be done on consulting with young people – maybe youth theatre assistants could be used in this? Young people might feel less inhibited giving feedback to Assistants rather than direct to youth theatre leaders.
- Informal evaluation takes place during each session, from what young people say, their energy levels, expressions, body language, etc.
- Evaluation does take place in the form of evaluation sessions within each of the groups, 'circle time' at the beginning and end of each session, feedback forms, but there is no formal process for this - youth theatre leaders and staff need to implement a more formal evaluation process.
- Youth theatre leaders have been asked to complete forms at the end of each session to assess how each session has gone, how young people have reacted to the work, to inform future planning and help assess members needs.
- The young people are already very involved in the creative process, and are beginning to get more involved with the development of the youth theatre as a whole.
- The young people feel empowered and valued.
- The youth theatre staff recognise how important it is for the young people to feel empowered and valued, and to have an ownership of the youth theatre.

Youth theatre leader 1 score: 4. Youth theatre leader 2 score: 4

Feedback from youth theatre senior management

- Work for and by young people is highly valued in our organisation. Young people have their own theatre and workshop space, which was specially developed by them. We have a member of staff whose whole time is devoted to

our young people's offer and all the arts team have this as a priority on their PDR (personal development review). If they are performing in one of the theatre spaces they have professional technical support.

- We offer the Arts Award as a form of accreditation, which can be followed as part of youth theatre membership.
- We could improve on involving young people in the leadership and management of the organisation and we will be looking at this further over the next 12 months.
- We haven't any formal method of recognising achievement either of groups or individuals. We need to build this into our future planning.

Score: 4

Feedback from youth theatre members

- Yes...
- It takes in our views and opinions like a student council.
- We can confide in leaders and feel valued.
- Sessions are tailored to ensure they are relevant to us.
- Our achievements are recognised by leaders praise.
- We have opportunities to develop by leading/directing.
- Praise and good feeling is better than a physical reward.

Does your youth theatre include all young people, regardless of ability or background?

Feedback from youth theatre leaders

- The youth theatre generally attracts young people from a middle-class background. It's situated in the West End of Darlington and attracts a fair amount of young people from this area, however it is open to all young people across Darlington, regardless of ability or background, and this is clear in the promotional material and plans for the youth theatre.
- There are young people from other areas of Darlington within the youth theatre and we are looking at the development of outreach projects in more deprived wards of Darlington to raise awareness of and promote access to the youth theatre.
- The youth theatre offers a 25% discount rate for low income families through the LiveDarlington card, which is a leisure saver type card across all of The Local Authority venues. This discount is offered to promote access to the youth theatre for families that would benefit from a reduced price due to affordability.
- Could we offer more discounts? For siblings of young people who already attend? Or young people that want to attend both youth theatre and youth dance?.
- All of the youth theatre groups are mainly made up of young people who are white middle class, able-bodied young people without disabilities. Are we truly

inclusive? Do we seek out young people who have disabilities and are from disadvantaged backgrounds? Should we be doing more of this?

- We currently provide some outreach youth theatre in different areas of Darlington, such as summer School projects, after School clubs. How do we make sure we use these projects target young people from disadvantaged backgrounds?
- The youth theatre booking form includes a section which asks parents/carers to write down anything that they feel is important for leaders to know to help with the planning and involvement of their child. This helps us to plan ways of involving all young people, regardless of ability in creative planning within the youth theatre.
- The youth theatre does currently include some young people with disabilities. How do we continue to make sure their needs are fully met?
- The youth theatre works closely with and supports an inclusive youth theatre based in another part of Darlington, which defines itself as inclusive by making sure young people with and without physical and learning disabilities are present within the membership.

Youth theatre leader 1 score: 3. Youth theatre leader 2 score: 3.5

Feedback from youth theatre senior management

- This is part of the core values that we adhere to. We communicate this through all of our information and marketing.
- We have staff that are trained in inclusive practice and are very experienced in running inclusive groups.
- We provide youth theatre members with the opportunity to see and be inspired by theatre from diverse arts groups/companies.
- Although we offer discounts to young people whose families may be under financial hardship. There is currently no way for young people who can't afford to pay anything at all to access the groups.
- Through our wider young peoples offer, we provide lots of opportunities for young people to try youth theatre activities for free in their own community settings, especially as part of the PAYP (Positive Activities for Young People) initiative.

Score: 4

Feedback from youth theatre members

- Difficult to answer as most of the are of a similar ability although are from different backgrounds.

Does your youth theatre connect with young people not otherwise being reached?

Feedback from youth theatre leaders

- Some young people who come to the youth theatre feel it is the only place they can be themselves.
- Through outreach work, we feel we can develop programmes that engage young people at risk – on the edge of society – and transform their lives through youth theatre. This work is already happening but could be further developed.
- We provide youth theatre work as part of the governments’ Positive Activities for Young People strand of work, working alongside Youth Services within the Local Authority to plan and deliver this.
- There are some young people, e.g. looked after young people, who may be categorised as ‘not otherwise being reached’ who currently access the youth theatre.
- Theatre is a very accessible tool when used correctly – we need to make sure the work that we are doing in sessions is right for those young people who already attend.
- The young people themselves often encourage young people that aren’t being reached – by word of mouth, encouragement of their own peers.
- Again, outreach work can further develop this.
- Are we promoting the youth theatre widely enough? To young people who are otherwise not being reached?

Youth theatre leader 1 score: 2. Youth theatre leader 2 score: 3

Feedback from youth theatre senior management

- Through our wider young peoples offer, we provide lots of opportunities for young people to try youth theatre activities for free in their own community settings, especially as part of the PAYP (Positive Activities for Young People) initiative.
- More could be done to look at potential barriers and plan to overcome them.
- We hope to run satellite groups away from our base to make it easier for young people to become engaged.
- We could focus more on learning.

Score: 3

Feedback from youth theatre members

- Yes...
- Young people who have no involvement with the arts (ie at school and home) are able and encouraged to attend
- Quite reasonably priced allows young people to attend

Does your youth theatre use an informal yet disciplined process that involves high expectations of young people?

Feedback from youth theatre leaders

- We felt that this question was a little confusing – is it asking – do we use a process involving discipline and rules within the youth theatre, or is it asking do we have an informal yet efficient process that involves high expectations i.e. are we organised and have a structure of work that involves high expectations? We think the use of the word ‘discipline’ is the difficulty here!
- The young people have mutual respect for each other, staff and the other groups.
- We sometimes develop a contract/set of rules for the young people in each of the groups, although we don’t have a joint set of rules. This young people come up with the rules/contract.
- The young people within each group like to have a focus/direction/end product to work towards – this sets the standard of what they are trying to achieve/what is expected of them.
- Each youth theatre leader approaches disciplining and controlling the groups in their own way, with the support and direction of the member of staff responsible for youth theatre.
- How do you deal with one consistently disruptive person in a group without singling them out? – Do you try and turn the situation around by giving them some responsibility and ownership for their behaviour?
- What are high expectations? Are we talking about standards of work, quality, focus, behaviour, product, and process, or all of the above? Should the young people determine what the expectations are? Do we need to adjust expectations to suit needs of the group?

Youth theatre leader 1 score: 4. Youth theatre leader 2 score: 4

Feedback from youth theatre senior management

- This is part of the core values that we adhere to. We communicate this through all of our information and marketing.
- We have a good relationship with parents/carers whose support is essential in achieving this is.
- The member of staff who is in overall control of youth theatre delivery is very well acquainted with all members and can support leaders when required if there are any issues around this process.
- There is an emphasis on fun and enjoyment within the sessions but this is tempered by the need for the whole group to be creative and also by the need to have focus on performance qualities. This is not imposed on the groups but is fostered by group ownership.

Score: 4

Feedback from youth theatre members

- Yes...
- We have a good balance between learning and enjoyment.

- Expectations are high – we all want to achieve and do well.
- We would like to be taken out of our comfort zone and challenge ourselves.

Does your youth theatre give young people opportunities to take part in performances?

Feedback from youth theatre leaders

- Yes!
- Young people currently mainly devise their own work based on a theme or style each term.
- We are currently working on the development of a programme of performance opportunities/structure of creative work that will enable the youth theatre to access more opportunities for performance.
- We want the youth theatre to access performance opportunities locally, regionally and nationally, and are very interested in involving them in festivals, and opportunities outside of the venue.
- We often provide performance opportunities outside of the venue at local community events/festivals.
- We also want the youth theatre to have more opportunities of working with texts and scripts.

Youth theatre leader 1 score: 4. Youth theatre leader 2 score: 3.5

Feedback from youth theatre senior management

- Taking part in performances does not seem to be of the same importance in our youth theatre as in others, but I may be wrong about this?
- We prioritise sharing work across the groups and providing positive feedback.
- Where performance opportunities present them we try to include everyone in them.
- We are able to provide interesting opportunities for youth theatre members to work with professional companies and develop skills in this context.
- We are beginning to look at performance opportunities outside the venue in a more strategic way rather than seizing random opportunities as they arise.
- Where performances take place in the venue we are able to provide a range of professional support to them as we are also a professional receiving house.
- We are trying to structure performance opportunities within a wider approach to the curriculum.

Score: 3.5

Does your youth theatre give young people opportunities to take responsibility for the organisation?

Feedback from youth theatre leaders

- Yes, through various methods.
- The young people feed into the development of the youth theatre both informally and formally – through feedback within sessions and through evaluation and consultation activities.
- The young people take responsibility for the creative development of the youth theatre work.
- Young people from the youth theatre often undertake their work experience with us, therefore gaining an insight into the running of the organisation.
- We did start a youth forum to provide opportunities for us to consult and engage with young people, and to provide opportunities for them to inform decision-making and planning within the venue. The youth forum has naturally developed into consultation within the youth theatre.
- We operate volunteering within the youth theatre, where older members can volunteer with younger groups, therefore taking responsibilities for supporting the delivery of the sessions.
- We would like to develop more opportunities for young people to take responsibility for the organisation as a whole.

Youth theatre leader 1 score: 4. Youth theatre leader 2 score: 3

Feedback from youth theatre senior management

- We could improve on involving young people in the leadership and management of the organisation and we will be looking at this further over the next 12 months. It will be in the PDR (professional development review) objectives for the person responsible for youth theatre.
- When we have tried to involve young people in forum type activities there seemed to be a lot of young people who wanted to be here just to do ‘youth theatre’. There wasn’t much appetite for formal committees – I think this could be integrates into sessions in a more creative less formal way and achieve the same end.
- Youth theatre members do already have a lot of say and control over the content of their sessions, but we need to do more to involve them in shaping the overall direction of the youth theatre.

Score: 3

Feedback from youth theatre members

- Yes...
- Our opinion is valued and we decide the vision for our performance.
- No formal forum as lack of meetings and not many people attended.
- No formal youth forum needed as we already discuss things in sessions.
- We achieve the goals of the youth forum through our informal less structured discussion in the sessions.