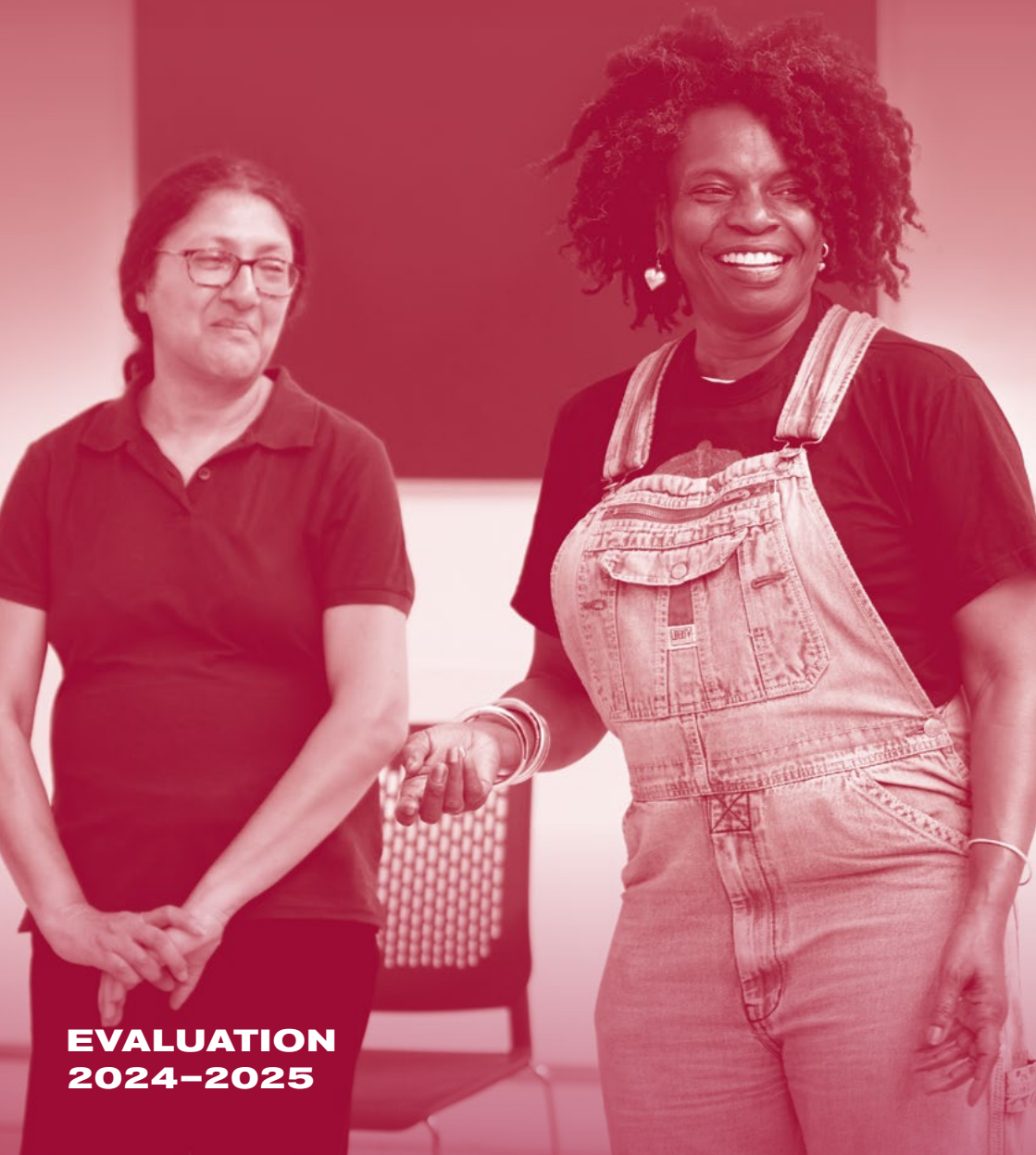


THEATRE CONNECTS AT THE OLD VIC



**EVALUATION
2024-2025**

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With generous thanks to all
 Old Vic staff and Associates

THEATRE CONNECTS

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The Linbury Trust

THEATRE CONNECTS

Theatre Connects uses theatre skills to support wellbeing and mental health for adults aged 18+ who face barriers to accessing the arts. The project offers participants the opportunity to build self-confidence and self-esteem through inclusive theatre-based workshops, and to cultivate meaningful connections with new people who share similar interests.

Delivered over six weeks, each course is led by an industry professional and focuses on a specific theatre discipline. Participants learn practical theatre techniques to explore how these tools can be applied to everyday life. The programme includes free theatre visits and backstage tours, helping participants to develop a deeper relationship with The Old Vic.

Wellbeing support is embedded throughout the programme in the form of a wellbeing facilitator at every session, and an access fund is available to help remove barriers. Referrals are accepted from link workers, community organisations, or via self-referral. Across May–Jun 2025 we held a pilot programme working with 20 participants from across London.

‘The whole time has been pure fun, I didn’t feel pressured at any time and I really appreciate this opportunity and what it has given me... the OV team were brilliant hosts and it’s been a real pleasure to come every week’

Theatre Connects Participant

EDUCATION & COMMUNITY AT THE OLD VIC

Our renowned education and community projects inspire learning and connection. Each year we work with over 6,000 people of all ages, from five to 100+, in London and beyond, as well as a further 25,000 through our online learning platform, The Hub. We reach people at all stages of life to support skills development, employment prospects and wellbeing.

Our programmes build community cohesion, open up access to the arts and develop the emerging theatre professionals of tomorrow. We do this through a range of initiatives, including free theatre tickets, workshops delivered at The Old Vic, in schools, in the community and online, and through innovative employability and training programmes.

Our programmes are free to access and focus on engaging with communities who are underrepresented in the theatre industry, or who have limited access to it.





RECRUITMENT AND CRITERIA

Applications opened in Mar 2025 and were open for one month. The process invited individuals across London aged 18+ to apply via a short online application form. Two taster sessions were delivered to offer potential participants the opportunity to meet the team and explore the course content before applying. We prioritised individuals who had experienced barriers to accessing theatre and applicants were assessed on the following criteria:

- If they had been referred via a link worker and/or a community group leader
- A clear understanding of the programme and interest in course content
- How much the programme might support their personal development, confidence and wellbeing.

Programme information was made available on The Old Vic's website and advertised through the theatre's social media channels, as well as an email campaign to our dedicated Matinee Idols mailing list, who are a group of over 1,700 adults aged 50+. As this was a pilot programme, we carried out significant outreach to ensure we engaged new individuals and those currently underserved locally. This included contacting link workers and organisations such as the Drive Forward Foundation and King's College London.

We received 42 applications; seven of which had been referred to us by a link worker and/or community group. We invited 28 applicants to attend an informal online selection session with the Education & Community team. This was an opportunity to discuss the project and our expectations in more detail, confirm participant understanding of the course, and clarify any final questions. Following this, we created a final shortlist of 20 Theatre Connects participants. All 20 participants took part in the programme.

DELIVERY

Workshops

The Theatre Connects pilot programme focused on voice and self-expression and was delivered across six weekly workshops between May and Jun 2025, each lasting one hour and 30 minutes. The sessions were led by professional voice coach Nancy Wigglesworth with wellbeing support provided by Ella Zgorska. Ella's role focused on ensuring participant wellbeing, fostering group connection and supporting access needs. Each workshop began with a fun warm-up game delivered by the wellbeing facilitator, designed to build group rapport and strengthen confidence in communicating.

- **Week one** introduced participants to the fundamentals of voice work, using anatomy and relaxation exercises to reduce tension.
- **Week two** focused on alignment and breath to promote bodily awareness and worked with text, such as Wendy Cope's poem *The Orange*.
- **Week three** explored vocal range and resonance using humming and vowel isolation.
- **Week four** focused on resonance and projection, using tactile partner work to explore sound vibrations in the body.
- **Week five** developed articulation through tongue twisters where participants created their own and shared them with the group to explore plosive sounds.
- **Week six** brought together all the techniques, with participants preparing and delivering lines of text in an informal sharing.

Each week participants reflected on their learning, and were given practical exercises, podcasts and articles to explore between sessions.

**'The podcasts were enlightening,
the exercises were fun, the pace
was just right'**

Theatre Connects Participant

Theatre visits

On Fri 06 Jun, participants attended a performance of *The Brightening Air* at The Old Vic. This theatre visit was woven into the six-week course content with Nancy facilitating group discussions before and after, which focused on the use of breath, alignment and vocal technique in the show. The trip aimed to build familiarity with The Old Vic's theatre spaces and productions and reinforced the technical learning from the workshops.

Follow-up event

On Tue 05 Aug, the group was invited back to The Old Vic for a follow-up event which included a backstage history tour of the building, before watching *Girl from the North Country*. This event further strengthened the group's connection to the theatre, the education and community staff, and each other. It also provided another opportunity to observe professional performers applying vocal techniques in action.

Building a community

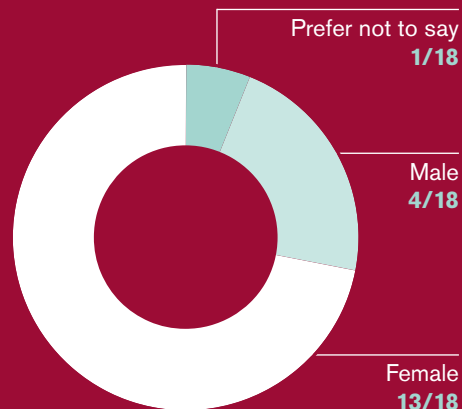
All participants have been invited to join our OV Community Network, a brand-new network offering continued engagement through regular newsletters, creative drop-in mornings and ticket offers. This network aims to build and strengthen the connections made between participants during the programme and to continue providing meaningful access to the arts for those facing barriers.



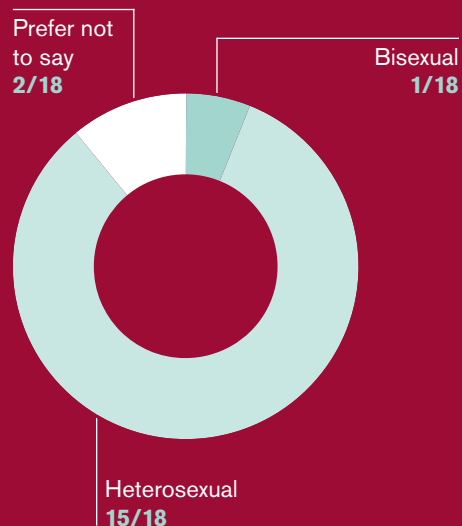
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

18 out of 20 participants filled out an Equal Opportunities Monitoring Form at the start of the programme.

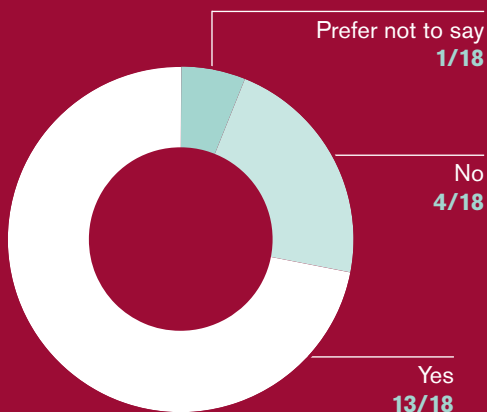
GENDER



SEXUAL ORIENTATION



DISABILITY



Of the participants who selected yes:
(able to select more than one response)

1/18 Hearing (e.g. deafness or partial hearing)

3/18 Learning, concentrating or remembering (e.g. dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia)

3/18 Mental health (e.g. anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder)

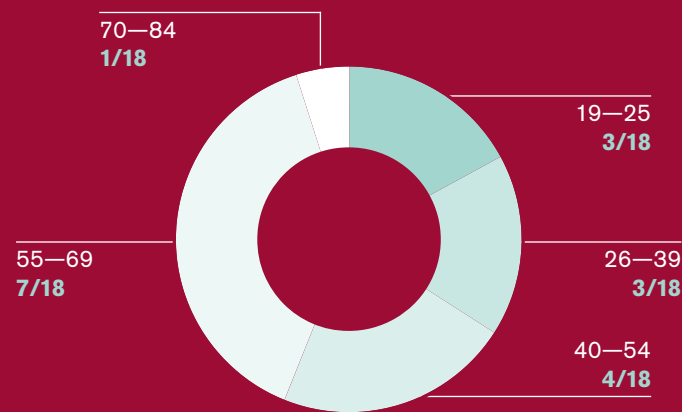
1/18 Mobility (e.g. difficulty walking short distances, climbing stairs, lifting and carrying)

3/18 Social or behavioural issues (e.g. neurodiverse conditions such as autism, attention deficit disorder or asperger's syndrome)

1/18 Stamina or breathing difficulty

1/18 Other (Participants specified: diabetes)

AGE

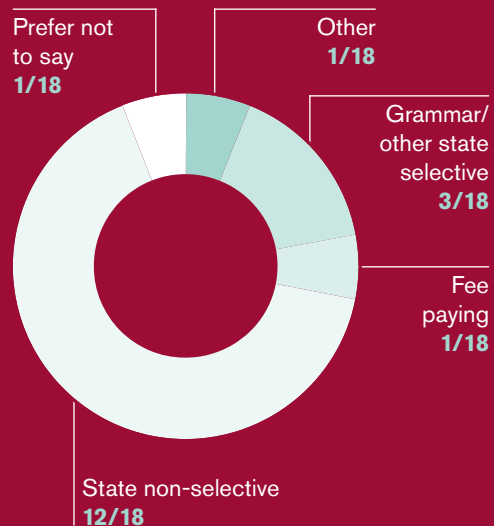


ETHNICITY

1/18	Asian or Asian British: Bangladeshi
1/18	Asian or Asian British: Indian
1/18	Asian or Asian British: Other
1/18	Black or Black British: African
3/18	Black or British: Caribbean
1/18	Black or Black British: Other
2/18	Mixed Other
3/18	White: British, English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish
1/18	White: Irish
4/18	White: Other

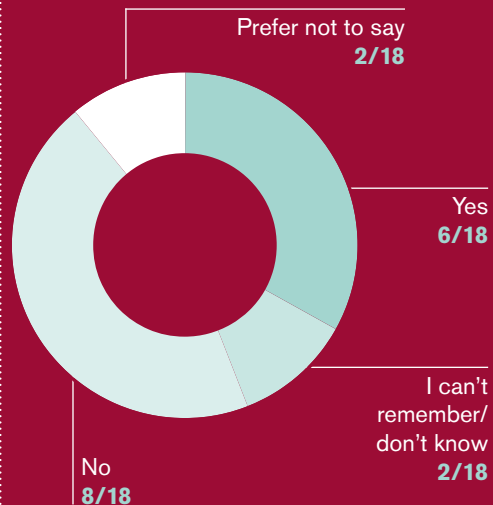
Participants specified: Eastern European, Indo Caribbean, Japanese, Jewish, Polish, Sri Lankan Tamil

EDUCATION



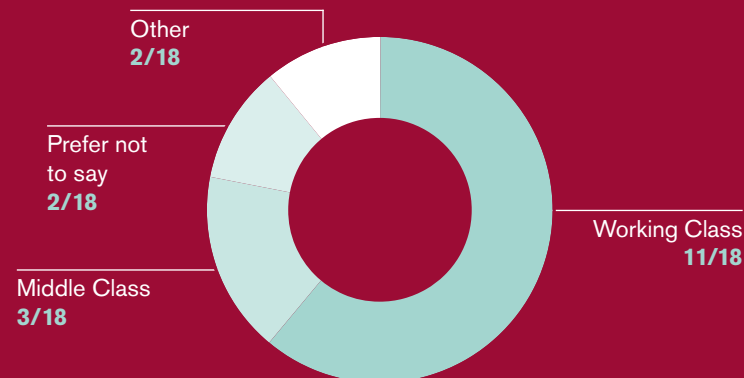
Participant specified: 'Realschule' in Germany

FREE SCHOOL MEALS

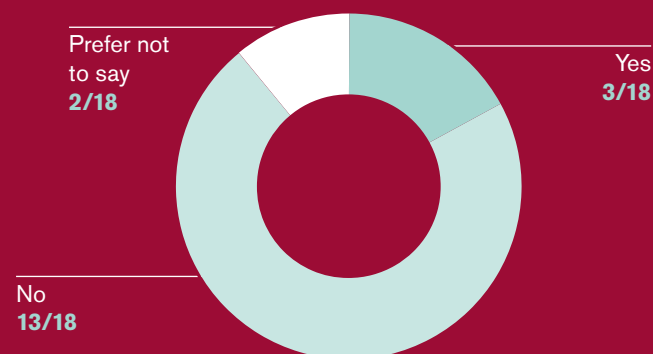


SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

What do you feel best describes your socio-economic background?



CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

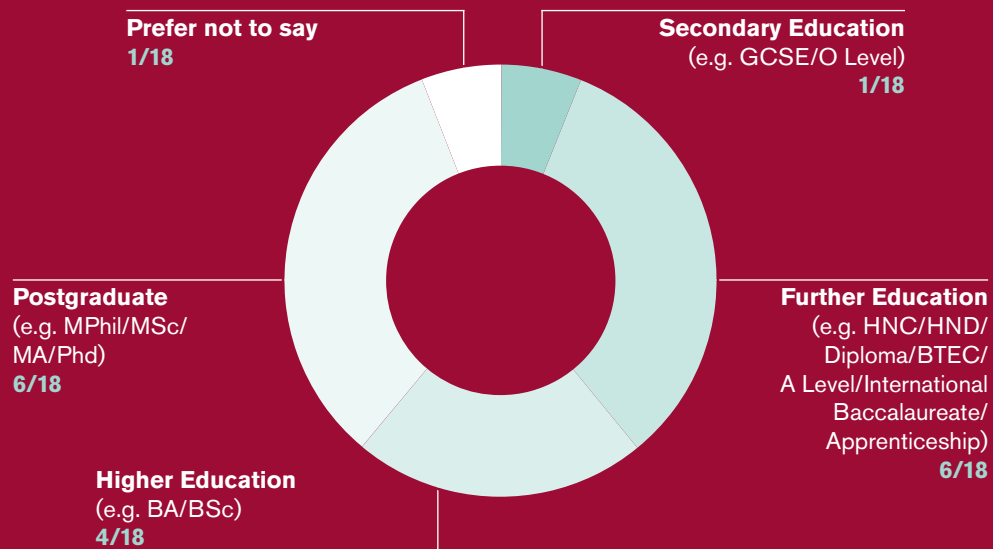


Of the participants who selected yes:
(able to select more than one response)

3/18

Primary carer of an older person

QUALIFICATIONS





PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

RELIGION AND BELIEF



1/18

Buddhist



8/18

Christian



1/18

Hindu



1/18

Muslim



4/18

Non-religious
(Atheist, Humanist etc.)



3/18

Prefer not to say

16 out of 20 participants completed both the baseline survey and the end-of-project survey. These surveys were designed to capture participants' initial perspectives at the start of the programme and their reflections upon completion. The results provide insight into whether the programme's objectives were achieved and highlight the value and outcomes experienced by participants.

BEFORE THE PROGRAMME

5/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt confident using their own voice

5/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt connected to The Old Vic

7/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt confident in their own skills and abilities

11/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt they had good communication skills

AFTER THE PROGRAMME

11/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt confident using their own voice

13/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt connected to The Old Vic

11/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt confident in their own skills and abilities

12/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt they had good communication skills

14/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt comfortable and welcome in the space

14/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt comfortable and welcome at The Old Vic.

15/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt comfortable and welcome in the space

14/16

participants strongly agreed or agreed that they felt comfortable and welcome at The Old Vic.

SCALE

On a scale of 0–100, to what extent do you feel that The Old Vic is an inclusive environment? The average score was:



On a scale of 0–100, how likely would you be to recommend this programme to a friend? The average score was:



‘Theatre Connects has inspired me to have more fun with speech, pay more attention to others and go to the theatre more often’

Theatre Connects Participant

PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

QUALITY AND IMPACT

16/16

of participants strongly agreed or agreed that:

The workshop leaders were excellent at creating an inclusive and welcoming environment.

14/16

of participants strongly agreed or agreed that:

During this project they did something they didn't know they were capable of

As a result of this project, their mental health and wellbeing had improved.

13/16

of participants strongly agreed or agreed that:

As a result of this project, they felt more connected to a community

As a result of this project, their confidence in themselves had improved.

'Theatre Connects has inspired me to be unashamedly myself, alongside a brilliant group of people'

Theatre Connects Participant

CASE STUDY PAUL

Paul was a participant on this year's Theatre Connects pilot programme. The conversation began by Paul sharing his reasons for applying for the project, *'I'm a fairly talkative kind of guy. I do like language and so when I read the prospectus, you know, what this course is about, I thought, "oh, yes, this is so up my street"'*. Paul volunteers for several community organisations and explained, *'my talking workload has become extreme, if you like. And this voice coaching came along at just the right time for me'*. He continued, *'as a communicator. I've always been interested in finding things out. It's not what we say so much is how we say it'*, he concluded, *'I thought that the voice coaching sounded really exciting, and it proved to be so great'*.

Paul shared that he is a *'first generation Irish immigrant'* and unlike his other siblings and parents, didn't speak with an Irish accent, instead he mentioned he, *'firmly adopted the North London accent, I believe, to fit in; just my little bit of camouflage'*. He explained how the course allowed him space to explore his own vocal identity, *'all my life I've had people saying, oh, you got an Irish name, but you don't sound (Irish)'*. Through taking part in the course, Paul learnt new terminology to explain his own identity, *'idiolect is the thing that's personal to us. And I thought that was really cool to find out about idiolect'*.



When asked how he would describe the project to a friend, Paul said *'I would recommend this to anyone who's interested in enjoying the way they talk, enjoying engaging with people. People engage so much more readily with a voice that brings something. And I think this voice coaching has shown me that there is so much more to my voice than I thought there was, for which I will be eternally grateful'*. He went on to explain how taking part in the project has made him feel, *'I feel now that there's a new me lifting up my vocal cords, allowing me to engage more forthrightly, more colourfully'*. He explained, *'imagine carrying a treasure around all your life in a box. But the box has never been opened. And then one day, someone gives you a key, and you can lift the lid, and you can begin to explore the contents of the box'*.

When asked whether he could have gained this experience somewhere else Paul said, *'I don't think I could have got this so concisely delivered in such a short period of time elsewhere in the world'*. He shared how the facilitators boosted his confidence, *'I treasure the words I got from Nancy; she referred to my brilliant energy, enthusiasm, and she referred to me as a wonderful group member'*.

He reflected on how the course had enabled him to connect with peers and develop his confidence in a group setting, *'I never considered myself a team player, because I'd spent so much of my life in isolation. So, to find that when I'm actually in a group that I do that well, that was really good to hear. And that's given me more confidence going forward. I'm going to be spending a lot of time in groups'*. He went on to explain, *'I think this course has allowed me to relate in a way that I hadn't quite related before. I've always been mindful that listening is a skill... this course has made a huge difference to me going forward, and I wouldn't have missed it for the world'*.

To conclude the discussion Paul touched on the pilot programme at The Old Vic, *'as it's a new venture, I feel quite privileged to have been there at the very start of something, something that I feel will be worthwhile for society as a whole'*. He ended the conversation explaining, *'talking, communicating, connecting. It's everything for me. And I feel that as a result of just this really brief six-week course. I feel ready to take on the world'*.

BUILDING PARTICIPANTS SELF-CONFIDENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM

One of the most significant impacts of Theatre Connects was the boost in participant self-confidence and self-esteem, particularly in their voice and communication skills. At the start of the programme, only five out of 16 participants who completed the baseline survey said they felt confident using their voice, and just seven agreed they were confident in their skills and abilities. By the end of the project, this had shifted considerably. 11 out of 16 participants reported improved confidence in using their voice, and 11 out of 16 said they now felt confident in their own skills and abilities. 14 out of 16 shared that their mental health and wellbeing had improved because of the course and the same number expressed that they had tried something that they didn't know they were capable of. One participant shared with us that because of the course, she felt confident enough to take part in an open mic spoken word event after the programme's conclusion. This was a huge milestone for her as at the start of the programme she had expressed a fear of public speaking.

'Theatre Connects inspired me to accept that the issues I have with speech are not a weakness. It has inspired me to investigate ways to develop vocal skills that I can be proud of.'
Theatre Connects Participant

'I went out of my comfort zone and felt a lot more comfortable using my voice, especially in front of other people'

Theatre Connects Participant

Participants also highlighted the value of the programme in connecting theatre techniques to practical skills for everyday life. Many appreciated the direct correlation between voice work and public speaking with one participant noting, *'the skills I learnt will really help me any time I need to speak in public settings, such as presentations and interviews'*. Another reflected on the benefits of the hands-on learning approach, *'practical exercises that immediately put what we were learning into practice in such a fun way, these were really helpful'*.

These comments reflect the empowering nature of the sessions, which combined technical voice work with playful, low-pressure exercises to encourage learning for all abilities. The facilitators created a supportive atmosphere where participants could try new things collectively without fear of judgment or mistakes.

'Theatre Connects achieved and exceeded my goals. I put old worries to bed and discovered ways to enjoy my voice in a fashion I could never have previously guessed.'
Theatre Connects Participant



CREATING CONNECTIONS AND COMMUNITY FOR ADULTS FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

The Theatre Connects pilot set out to reduce isolation and foster meaningful connections between people of all ages and backgrounds. [The health risks of loneliness](#) are well documented, research shows that isolation can increase the risk of early death by 26%, with social isolation having the same health impact as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. The need for intergenerational connection in the UK is also a pressing issue. [Intergenerational England reports that only 17% of UK adults regularly engage with people from a different generation, falling to 14% among those aged over 55.](#)

In response to this backdrop, the programme intentionally brought together an intergenerational cohort aged between 19 and 84, creating a space that promoted social cohesion. The group was also diverse in lived experience, with 13 out of the 18 participants who completed the baseline identifying as disabled. For marginalised groups, the health inequalities linked to isolation are even more pronounced. [Government research indicates that 78% of disabled people feel increasingly isolated and 75% report worsening mental health since the pandemic.](#)

In this context, opportunities to build social connection become especially important for those facing barriers to accessing the arts.

'I think this was a really valuable course and I can see it's potential to give a voice to people who feel silenced or unheard in other areas of their lives. It felt very supportive, inclusive and non-competitive.' Theatre Connects Participant

At the start of the programme, many participants reported having few social connections and low confidence in group settings. By the final session, 13 out of 16 said they felt more connected to a community, and 100% agreed that the facilitators had created an inclusive and welcoming environment. As one participant reflected, *'the course gave me an opportunity to meet new people I may not have connected with before'*. Another shared, *'X has become a lovely new friend... I am so pleased I've found a new community'*. Even within its short timeframe, the programme has helped to foster friendships and networks that extend beyond the sessions themselves, enabling participants to *'find a community [who] love theatre as much as I do and socialise'*.

A DEEPER RELATIONSHIP WITH THE OLD VIC AND WIDER CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

The final aim was to foster a deeper connection between participants and The Old Vic, supporting long-term engagement with theatre and cultural spaces. This was particularly important for the Theatre Connects cohort, as we prioritised a range of lived experience and access barriers, including mental health challenges. Research consistently shows that [increased cultural engagement can help reduce work-related stress and contribute to longer, happier lives.](#)

At the start of the programme, only five out of 16 participants felt connected to The Old Vic. By the end, 13 out of 16 participants agreed or strongly agreed that they now felt a connection to the theatre, an increase of over 60%. In addition to weekly theatre-based workshops, the group had opportunities to attend Old Vic performances and take backstage tours. These activities helped participants feel welcomed into the building and part of the wider theatre community, giving them exclusive access to areas that had previously been elusive and unfamiliar. One participant expressed this, *'Thank you so much for the opportunity to have a tour yesterday. It was absolutely fascinating and a real privilege to see behind the scenes and learn the history of The Old Vic, I understand it so much more now'*.

Building this relationship is key to long-term cultural participation. We have now invited all 20 participants to join our new OV Community network, ensuring ongoing access to theatre through newsletters, drop-in mornings and ticket offers. This alumni model is designed to keep participants connected and encourage repeat engagement, further embedding culture and creative expression into their lives.

'It really was a weekly highlight for me coming here as my workplace is not creative at all (but I am). It felt very inspiring and a piece that was missing! Thank you!'

Theatre Connects Participant



EMBEDDING A STRONGER CONNECTION TO THE OLD VIC FROM THE OUTSET

While data showed a significant increase in participants feeling connected to The Old Vic, our feedback suggested this relationship could have been established earlier on in the programme. Some participants recommended beginning the project with a backstage tour or welcome session to help everyone feel more comfortable with the space and our work from the outset. In response, we have designed a new welcome session for the next phase of Theatre Connects that will be offered at the start of each term. Delivered by the Education & Community team, it will sit additional to the main course content and offer cohorts a chance to get comfortable in our space, troubleshoot any travel logistics, and ask us questions about the project/theatre before the interactive learning begins.

Our ability to meaningfully welcome new cohorts from the start will be enhanced by the opening of our new Backstage building and dedicated education space in Oct 2025. From then on, we'll be able to invite future cohorts into the theatre from day one instead of beginning offsite. We hope this will create a much stronger bridge between the Theatre Connects programme and our wider theatre environment, making The Old Vic feel more accessible, familiar and encouraging from the very first session.

'I loved the workshop, but somehow don't necessarily connect it in my mind with The Old Vic, maybe because it took place in a different venue? I feel like the new building will drastically change this for next time'

Theatre Connects Participant

IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE

EXTENDING THE LENGTH AND STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAMME

Several participants commented that one and a half hour workshops often felt too short once check-ins, warm-ups, and the half-time tea break were all factored in. Our facilitators suggested that two hour sessions would also create a more relaxed delivery pace for them and reduce the sense of rushing. This would ensure full reflection at the end of each session, as this was often impacted by timing.

Additionally, participants recommended extending the programme from six to eight sessions to support group rapport and allow for more time to consolidate skills. One member shared, *'A longer course would be more beneficial to learn in more detail and depth. Also, it would give the group more time to get to know each other and connect'*. Another explained, *'I'm an introvert and was only just starting to feel comfortable'*.

We have taken on these thoughts and will be expanding Theatre Connects in Autumn 2025 to be delivered across eight weeks, and in two hour workshops. We will also be offering an end of year celebration event which will see all three cohorts invited back to The Old Vic for a day of celebration, sharing and connection. Expanding the programme in this way will help to maintain momentum, provide greater opportunities for social connection, and offer more space for participants to embed the takeaways from each course into their personal lives.

IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY AND PARTICIPANT SUPPORT

Accessibility remains a priority for Theatre Connects. While the 2025 cohort praised the programme for being inclusive, there are areas for improvement. For future delivery, we will send an access audit and a visual welcome guide to all participants before the course begins. This will include staff photos, images of the building and clear explanations of what to expect. This will help reduce pre-session anxiety, particularly for neurodiverse participants or those unfamiliar with theatre spaces.

To further reduce barriers to attendance, we will explore introducing a 'travel companion' system from the first session, where the wellbeing facilitator can meet participants at the nearest tube station and accompany them to our venue.

'Facilitators were beyond excellent, the space created was warm and welcoming. So much more than I ever imagined it could be... loved it... this is part of me now and I am a supremely happy man.' Theatre Connects Participant



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