



We are Norwich Theatre

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Reflections on the
Creative Experiences strategy

“This commitment reflects our belief that those who bring our organisation to life every day should be able to live well, feel valued, and share that security and thriving with our audiences and participants.”

Nick Lloyd,
Vice Chair of Norwich Theatre



Introduction

Over the past four years, Norwich Theatre has delivered its **Creative Experiences strategy**, a wide-ranging programme that has reshaped what it means to be a theatre in the 21st century. This review brings together the story of that work, not only for Norwich Theatre, but for the communities, artists and audiences whose stories have become inseparable from our own.

What began as a strategy has grown into a movement: thousands of people discovering creativity for the first time, rediscovering their confidence, building new skills, forming deep connections, and seeing themselves reflected on our stages, in our workshops, and throughout our buildings.

When the pandemic forced theatres to close their doors, it also forced a profound reckoning about why we exist, who we serve, and what value we bring to the cultural life of our city, region and nation. Creative Experiences emerged as our answer to those questions. It has guided us to become more open, more ambitious, more people centred, and more rooted in the lived realities of the communities around us. Above all, it has been grounded in a belief that creativity is a human right.

Central to this has been recognising that Norwich Theatre's impact happens not just in the auditorium but far beyond as well. Our front of house spaces – the bars, cafés, foyers and gathering places that frame a visit – have become vibrant community spaces in their own right. They are places where people meet friends, find company on days when they might otherwise be alone, take part in creative tasters, or simply feel held by the warmth of a public space that belongs to everyone. The success of our Open Days exemplifies this spirit: a huge celebration of open access in which thousands encountered creativity on their own terms, many for the first time.

Creative Experiences has strengthened our commitment to presenting and producing world class theatre. We have welcomed hundreds of performances that spark joy, curiosity and wonder, and remind us of the simple pleasure of sitting side by side with loved ones, sharing in a story. The togetherness of watching live performance, whether comedy or dance, opera or drama, is a quiet but powerful thread that runs through this reflection. It is a reminder that creativity is an experience we make with one another, not just for one another.

This review tells the story of Creative Experiences through its four interconnected pillars: People, Performance, Place and Prosperity. Each chapter gives voice to those who have shaped our journey – artists and participants, volunteers and partners – and traces how their experiences have transformed the organisation.

In Performance, we show how bold artistic ambition, co-creation, and risk taking have expanded what theatre can be, from internationally significant partnerships to shows staged in extraordinary spaces. In People, we explore the human heartbeat of Norwich Theatre: the individuals whose stories illuminate the power of belonging, welcome, and creative expression. Place reveals how deeply Norwich Theatre is woven into the cultural, emotional and economic fabric of our city, region, and sector. And in Prosperity, we reflect on how creativity can change lives and how a more equitable, inclusive and sustainable future is being built through long term commitment and community collaboration.

Together, these chapters reveal not just what Norwich Theatre has achieved, but what creativity makes possible when it is shared, nurtured and owned by everyone. Creative Experiences has never been about a single project or programme. It is the story of a theatre evolving from a place where people come to watch performance, into a creative home where people come to participate, connect and co-create, and a creative force at the heart of local, regional and national ecologies.

Performance

'Great performance can happen anywhere, from an epic scale to a shipping container,' says Stephen Crocker, Chief Executive and Creative Director.

'Through the course of Creative Experiences, we have been proud to support a diversity of stories and storytelling, from local to international. And this has meant even better experiences for artists and for audiences at Norwich Theatre,' says Wendy Ellis, Creative Programmes Director.

The pandemic laid bare both the importance and the vulnerability of freelance artists and creators. Throughout our Creative Experiences strategy, we have built relationships with early-career creators and with local theatre companies.

This groundwork laid the conditions for deeper creative partnerships across the region. We found that supporting individual creators naturally led to new forms of partnership, with peers across the region, and with companies whose practice resonates with our evolving artistic identity. Over the past four years, we have played an active role in convening and collaborating with regional organisations, recognising that a connected cultural ecology amplifies impact for artists and audiences alike.

An early example was our role in the East of England consortium behind **The Birds and the Bees**. This first-of-its-kind co-production between Norwich Theatre, New Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich and Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds enabled a new East Anglian adaptation of the play. Critically it piloted a collaborative touring model across the region, strengthening relationships between peer venues and demonstrating the power of joined-up cultural infrastructure and leading to the establishment of the East Anglian Touring Partnership. For Norwich Theatre, it marked a significant moment in our commitment to place making: a shared investment in local stories, local artists and the regional ecosystem that supports them.

Our Creative Development programme now offers support to many local artists. 'Our role is to strengthen the wider infrastructure of Norfolk as a cultural powerhouse,' says Natalie Songer, Creative Development Producer. 'We provide really bespoke support. Physical space is something very effective we can offer. But support might look like business planning, identifying and overcoming barriers to creative careers, or any other form of artist development. We talk a lot about reciprocity in our relationships with artists.'

Creative Experiences has also seen us welcome our first Associate Company. Limbik Theatre, a Norwich based physical theatre company, has become a strategic partner whose practice aligns deeply with our ambition to develop audiences, nurture artists, and expand the ways performance can take place across the city.

'Co-creation has been at the heart of our two year journey,' reflects Sarah Johnson of Limbik. 'As has mutual learning.' This reciprocity has shaped a collaboration that is less about individual productions and more about testing new models of relationship, practice and place based performance.

At the centre of Limbik's approach is a commitment to gathering voices to shape the creative process. As Sarah explains: 'We like to start with a theme or a subject or a story and then ask as many people as possible what they think about it, to get their ideas. It's very much what we did with **Edgeland**.'

Edgeland became the clearest expression of the partnership's ambitions. It sought to understand how audiences and participants could experience performance beyond traditional theatre buildings, and how a sense of place could be co created between artists, communities and the landscape of Sweet Briar Marshes. Developed with community participants and school groups, and underpinned by the growing Creative Development team at Norwich Theatre, the process centred on gathering stories and perspectives to build a shared understanding of the site. 'The more people you ask, the stronger the sense of place' Sarah adds.

"Support might look like business planning, identifying and overcoming barriers to creative careers, or any other form of artist development. We talk a lot about reciprocity in our relationships with artists"

Natalie Songer,
Creative Development Producer



“Unique and original is something that should not be taken lightly. It’s something that is not easy to do. I think in many ways we have managed to make something very original and I’m very, very proud of it. It is the most profound feeling at the end of the day when people that have contributed come together and say: wow, we have delivered this amazing thing”

Carlos Acosta CBE,
Founder & Artistic Director, Acosta Danza



Image: Hamilton UK Tour, © Danny Kaan

For Norwich Theatre, **Edgeland** offered vital organisational learning. It tested what it means to treat outdoor and off site locations as part of our performance ecology and required both organisations to work together on audience experience, logistics and communication. ‘There was learning on both sides about the buses,’ Sarah explains, and Natalie laughs. ‘People asked us: You want to take Norwich Theatre audiences to a marsh?’ The project ultimately became a co-created performance blending recorded audio and live presence, delivered by community participants and supported by teams across Norwich Theatre. Above all, it affirmed a shared ambition to reimagine the relationship between performer and audience, and to cultivate performance that is embedded in place and shaped by communities.

The learning from these collaborations strengthened our artistic confidence and expanded our sense of what performance could be. In many ways, **Edgeland** exemplified our thrilling fifth performance space – Norwich Theatre Beyond – which sees us staging shows in novel ways in a range of extraordinary settings. Traditionally bound to our three physical spaces – Norwich Theatre Royal, The Playhouse and Stage Two – the pandemic in many ways freed us, inspiring us to take first class performance both online – through our Digital programme – and into local spaces. In addition to Sweet Briar Marshes, Norwich Theatre Beyond spaces have included The Great Hospital, where we staged **Kiss Marry Kill**, and a shipping container outside The Forum, where we put on shows from **DARKFIELD**, ground-breaking performances in complete darkness, using binaural sound.

‘In the past four years, we have grown in confidence in taking creative risks, working in new ways and nurturing collaborative practice,’ says Stephen Crocker. ‘And more comfortable saying that we ourselves are doing something bold. Telling the world: these are our values, this is who we are,’ says Will Hill, Productions & Buildings Director.

This growing ambition shaped not only our work across the city and region, but also the partnerships we were ready to pursue on an international scale. Nowhere has this been truer than in our globally significant partnership with Acosta Danza. Conceived during the pandemic, with a revival of Carlos Acosta’s powerful, autobiographical **On Before**, our partnership has since co-created his **Nutcracker in Havana**. The show premiered at the Theatre Royal in Norwich in 2024 before twice touring the UK, to critical and commercial success.

Beyond its scale and ambition, the partnership has been defined by shared curiosity and trust, a meeting of teams whose combined expertise has enabled work of exceptional precision and imagination.

Carlos is full of praise for the many people of Norwich Theatre who have enabled his artistic vision. ‘It’s a very complex production and there is no margin of error. But the crew of Norwich Theatre, who are very skilled, meant that the production was in safe hands. I love that. I love when two teams come together and make an idea richer. And that’s exactly what happened in this production.’

He is grateful too for the opportunity the partnership has offered – and will continue to offer – to the young cast and crew of Acosta Danza, taking their first professional steps in performance. ‘We play Norwich pretty much to full houses every time,’ he says. ‘Being on that stage and seeing the audience standing on its feet and reacting very positively to their dancing: what a way to start a career. Imagine the psychological impact. It gives them a lot of reassurance that this art form – that they’ve been investing in – could very well be their career going forwards.’

In many ways, the partnership with Acosta Danza represents the fullest expression of what Creative Experiences has made possible, a collaboration rooted in shared values, artistic ambition and a belief in performance as a bridge between communities.

Carlos is most excited by what **Nutcracker in Havana** has delivered on stage, thanks to Acosta Danza’s collaboration with Norwich Theatre. ‘Unique and original is something that should not be taken lightly. It’s something that is not easy to do. I think in many ways we have managed to make something very original and I’m very, very proud of it. It is the most profound feeling at the end of the day when people that have contributed come together and say: wow, we have delivered this amazing thing.’

Reflecting on Creative Experiences, Sam Bain, Head of Programming and Producing says: ‘Through this period of change we have drawn deeply on our values and driven sectoral shift. Performance has become our way of deepening relationships – with artists, audiences and each other – and of imagining a more connected cultural future for our city and our region. There’s power in the act of performance.’



People

'I look upon the theatre as my second family,' says Esme Wilson Staniforth, tears brimming in her eyes. Esme has been a volunteer steward at Norwich Theatre for more than 20 years, since she retired to the city, and has participated in our workshops for a decade. 'One of the things that helps me is the love and friendship that the theatre gives everyone. They put action into words. They keep an eye on you.'

Our people are the beating heart of everything we do at Norwich Theatre. Without our people, we are nothing. For James MacDonald, Head of Visitor Services, every aspect of our work begins with people feeling at home. 'People need to know they are always welcome in our buildings,' James says.

Listening to people – their perspectives, their ideas, and their concerns – has been central to our Creative Experiences strategy. At the core of this approach was our Creative Assembly, through which we sought to meet the needs of audiences, artists, participants and visitors, but also – crucially – the needs of people who might never think to visit us. 'We wanted everyone to feel a connection with Norwich Theatre,' James says, 'but we knew that some people might not see themselves represented on our stages or might feel they didn't belong in our buildings. So we asked: do you come to the theatre? No. Great, tell us why!'

What we heard through these conversations shaped the steps we took to remove the barriers people told us were holding them back. Working with Ramps on the Moon, we have looked at every aspect of Norwich Theatre – and challenged all our assumptions – from the perspective of members of the theatre community with disabilities. We have made our online ticket-booking process accessible, whilst still retaining a staffed box office counter at a time when many theatres have closed theirs. We offer tickets at inclusive prices for those on low income. In addition, more than 3,000 tickets to our pantomime are gifted every year to charities supporting people using foodbanks, displaced people and sanctuary seekers, and others who might otherwise be unable to attend the theatre.

For many families, cost and confidence can be real barriers to taking part in creative activities, so we introduced a 'pay what you feel' approach to many of our family sessions, ensuring parents, carers and children could join in without financial pressure. Alongside this, we created opportunities for families to explore and make art together through our much loved family festivals and hands on creative events. These programmes have encouraged creative togetherness across generations, giving families the chance to play, discover and create side by side, and helping them feel that Norwich Theatre is a place where they truly belong.

Without our valued staff and volunteers, there could be no audiences, no workshops, no work with schools, no touring shows. In the four years of our Creative Experiences strategy we have applied ourselves to making Norwich Theatre a place where our staff can afford to work including committing to Living Wage accreditation to guarantee everyone is paid fairly and can thrive. We have also invested more widely in training such as British Sign Language awareness and Mental Health First Aid, ensuring our teams have the skills to support and welcome people in ways that truly matter. This commitment reflects our belief that those who bring our organisation to life every day should be able to live well, feel valued, and share that security and thriving with our audiences and participants.

This philosophy applies equally to our community of loyal volunteers, across our venues, without whom our shows would simply never happen. Over the course of Creative Experiences, we have looked carefully at the whole experience of volunteering at Norwich Theatre, what it means to volunteer with us, and how we embed these important voices within our decision-making and recognise the phenomenal contribution our volunteers make.

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James MacDonald,
Head of Visitor Services



“There is an irony in that there is nothing that Norwich says that is performative in any way. I’ve come to learn that my part in anything that I do with Norwich Theatre is that I just have to turn up and be me”

Joe Tracini



Image: Joe Tracini, © Richard Jarmy

Esme’s experience shows how profound the impact of volunteering can be. She speaks of the deep bonds that form within the volunteer community, the informal ‘Thursday stewards’ who keep in touch, support one another through difficult moments, and celebrate the joy of shared purpose. ‘It’s the love and friendship that the theatre as a whole, especially the paid staff, give out to all of us. They are there for us and appreciating us as volunteers.’ Even the practical realities of stewarding – from seating to show schedules – are part of a meaningful relationship between volunteers and the organisation, one built on mutual respect and the shared belief that theatre is at its best when people feel valued, supported and part of something bigger than themselves.

This deep connection between people and our work is also reflected in our approach to co-creation. More than ever before our people have been at the heart of the stories we have told throughout Creative Experiences. ‘We believe in co-creation of our work in the broadest sense,’ says Wendy Ellis, Creative Programmes Director, ‘in decision-making, in listening, in research and in consultation. We firmly believe that creativity belongs to everyone, at every age. It is a life-long journey. We want to provide the platform where people’s stories are not only shared, but where they actively influence and inspire the art we present on stage.’

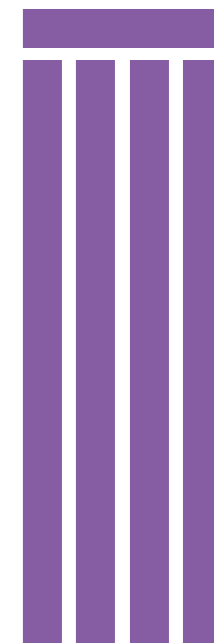
Co-creation is as fundamental to our in-house workshops, and the performances that arise from them, as to our professional productions. This shared approach not only develops new skills and confidence but also ensures that the work we make reflects the people who help create it. That same spirit of shared ownership has driven the growth of our co-created touring productions, extending these collaboratively developed stories beyond our own stages.

Our co-creators include Joe Tracini, who writes our pantomime and whose one man show **Ten Things I Hate About Me** we have co-produced from its earliest stages. The show premiered at Norwich Theatre Playhouse, went on to become one of the best reviewed shows at the 2025 Edinburgh Fringe, and was nominated for the Mental Health Foundation Fringe Award. A Channel 4 documentary about the making of the show, *Me and the Voice in My Head*, filmed with the support of Norwich Theatre, went on to win two Grierson Awards, and the production will embark on its first UK tour in 2026.

‘I ended up at Norwich Theatre at just the right point in my life,’ Joe says. ‘It’s changed my life in so many different ways. They have helped me. They have stuck by me. They have supported me in ways that I will never be capable of supporting myself. They have done so much for me and continue to do so much for me.’

Unsparingly honest, Joe speaks directly to the heart of our ambition for people through Creative Experiences. ‘Norwich Theatre are very open with the fact that they’re inclusive and supportive of how people feel. And I think a lot of businesses say that, but then they don’t do that. Norwich Theatre support me in any way that I need, even if that is just being with me while I’m writing. There is an irony in that there is nothing that Norwich says that is performative in any way. I’ve come to learn that my part in anything that I do with Norwich Theatre is that I just have to turn up and be me.’

From our audiences – loyal friends and brand-new theatre-goers – through our talented staff and volunteers, to our many co-creators, we are honoured and proud to have held people at the heart of Norwich Theatre’s work throughout Creative Experiences, and to continue doing so.



Place

'A year and a half ago, I had a stroke,' says Karen Vermeulen-Grainger, choosing each word with care. For three months afterwards, Karen found herself unable to speak. 'Everything happens in here,' she says, tapping her head, 'but I can't express it.'

Before her stroke, she had never appeared on stage. 'I am a writing person,' Karen says. 'I didn't perform. The pleasure was seeing my own words performed.' Once well enough, however, she returned to Norwich Theatre's Creative Ageing programme. 'Fortunately for me, it wasn't words, it was art. It was a good opportunity to be with the people I love.'

Karen made art with the rest of the group. 'Then at the end of the term,' she recalls, 'they said: now we're going to do performance of the art. I was confused and worried and couldn't get the words out.' But, determined, Karen stayed.

Creative Ageing's contributors rehearsed in pairs for their performance. But on the day of the show Karen's partner was unable to attend. Courageously, Karen took the stage alone. 'They saw my frustration that I couldn't get the words out,' she says. 'There were tears, actually. But the Stephen Crocker asked to see me, I had moved him so much. He wanted me to perform. That's how I ended up in **Green Girl**.'

Green Girl is a new work, first performed in September 2025 as part of **Norwich Hamlets**. This community co-production, in partnership with RSC saw community responses to Hamlet, and the stories local people wanted to tell. It imagines Ophelia in her sixties, looking back on moments through her life. Karen played the central role of Effie.

Karen's experience exemplifies the pillar of place in our Creative Experiences strategy. 'It's about having a place in people's hearts,' says Commercial Director & Chief Operations Officer, Stephen Wright, 'a place in the city of Norwich, in the Arts sector.' The place we occupy in our community begins with countless people like Karen, for whom Norwich Theatre is culturally, emotionally or economically important.

Over the course of Creative Experiences, our place in the heart of Norwich and Norfolk has enabled us to play a full and active role within a range of consortium including Norwich Culture Compact, Norfolk Arts Forum and Norfolk and Suffolk Culture Board.

Norwich Theatre's sense of place also extends into the wider fabric of the city's cultural and economic life. Our network of around 60 businesses reflects a community that sees the theatre as part of its own identity. This support sits alongside our growing role in tourism and the cultural economy, where audiences, visitors and partners look to Norwich Theatre as a marker of what makes the city distinctive.

Deep roots in the community of Norwich and Norfolk helped expand our work on local, regional, national, and international stages. 'We know our place in the world.' Stephen reflects. 'We see our scale and being among the largest arts organisations in the region as a responsibility and will always step up and lead where we can have positive impact for the whole regional sector. We have grown in confidence about how we can best use our voice and own our position at the centre of a city, county and regional economy and ecology.'

"If I hadn't had Creative Ageing I would never have performed... I was swollen inside, rich with words, but nothing I did had any meaning to anyone else. Look at me now! I regained my voice. I returned"

Karen Vermeulen-Grainger



“Right from the very first meeting, there was great synergy between the two of us... Our partnership stems from our shared belief that opera and music theatre need to be supported. And we need to be doing interesting titles to bring a new audience into the venues”

Michael Williams,
CEO, Buxton International Festival



Image: The Land of Might-Have-Been, © Richard Jarmy

One new partnership that has grown out of Norwich Theatre's place in hearts and in creative conversations is with Buxton International Festival. In 2022 Michael Williams, CEO of BIF, approached Stephen Crocker with a new show he was writing, based on the tragic First World War experience of Vera Brittain and on the music of Ivor Novello.

'Right from the very first meeting, there was great synergy between the two of us,' Michael remembers. 'We mounted **The Land of Might-Have-Been** as a joint production. We brought it to the Buxton Festival in 2023 and it went on to Norwich Theatre Royal. It was a momentous success in Norwich. Our partnership stems from our shared belief that opera and music theatre need to be supported. And we need to be doing interesting titles to bring a new audience into the venues.'

This partnership – between Buxton International Festival and Norwich Theatre, between two organisations rooted in place and two creative teams – has, in Michael's words: 'given us good reason to expand our programming. To look at titles that would work in Norwich and work in Buxton. The second year,' he says, 'we took on Peter Brook's version of Bizet's **Carmen**. Last year we did Bernstein's **Trouble in Tahiti**. Norwich Theatre has been the reason that this has all become possible. And what's been lovely, over the last three years, is that these pieces have been very well supported. We're attracting new people to our own festival now.'

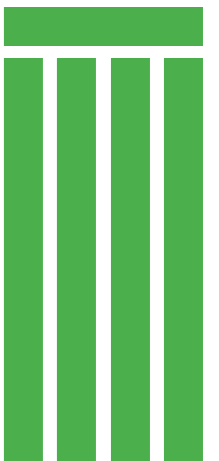
In the face of devastating cuts to touring opera in the UK, we undertook a major survey – Opera Voices – which found that demand for the genre had not dropped since COVID. Critically, we also found that funding cuts had been discriminatory against people with access needs and our disabled audiences. In response, we have used our place in Norwich life to continue bringing opera to the city and – in partnership with Buxton International Festival – create a model which is both financially and critically successful and which has attracted the attention of the culture sector.

Our place in the community of Norwich and Norfolk helps us tell a wonderful diversity of stories. Miche Montague is Creative Community Producer at Norwich Theatre, where she leads a Theatre Makers programme focused on Creative Ageing. 'When we were thinking about what was important to Norwich Theatre,' she says, Creative Ageing was all about reminiscing. Younger artists were invited to use creativity to reinvent themselves but the 60+ community was focussed on retirement. We should be offering the same creative opportunities for all ages.'

Story and place are at the heart of all creative work and older people have the greatest wealth of stories and the deepest relationships with place. While much of the sector still relies on paternalistic 'not too late' narratives, rather than recognising older people as full creative collaborators whose stories deserved ambition, rigour and respect, what emerged at Norwich Theatre was a values driven shift, grounded not in sentiment but in belief. 'We have moved on radically,' says Miche. 'We have built a strong foundation. Now it's time to be bold and brave. I firmly believe we could lead in this work. We just have to be brazen enough to do it. It's time to be bold.'

Already Miche and the Creative Ageing group are making Norwich Theatre known as a place for storytelling in older adulthood, positioning Norwich Theatre as part of a growing movement reshaping how the sector understood creativity in later life.

At the heart of our work are people's stories, which Norwich Theatre has the place – both physical and cultural – to help them tell. Karen is among them. 'Quite honestly,' she says, 'if I hadn't had Creative Ageing I would never have performed. The aphasia that filled my mind wouldn't venture past my lips. I was swollen inside, rich with words, but nothing I did had any meaning to anyone else. Look at me now! I regained my voice. I returned.'



Prosperity

'Covid took us to ground zero,' reflects Stephen Crocker, Chief Executive and Creative Director of Norwich Theatre. 'Since then, we have tried to put down roots as deep as our branches reach up, laying the groundwork for a prosperous, independent future. We asked ourselves: what is it we're going to make prosper here? What's the difference we can make? And we came to understand that equity, diversity, inclusion, impact and legacy are powerful drivers of change.'

Helping children prosper has been central to our Creative Experiences strategy. Nowhere has this been clearer than our Wise About Words initiative. Our practitioners work in Norfolk schools to help teachers develop the skills of immersive pedagogy. 'It's about training teachers to use drama games and techniques within their classroom, so that their classroom is more immersive,' says Jo Reil, Head of Creative Learning. 'So the children get to do something physical, to help them understand. It's about building confidence in children, building language and communication skills, building their aspiration and their understanding of a different way of learning.'

For Sarah Waterfield, Executive Head of three of our partner schools in the Wensum Trust, Wise About Words addresses several urgent societal problems. 'We know that our little people are coming into school not as ready for school,' she says. 'The curriculum has not changed but without a doubt our children have.'

In today's world of technology, Sarah says, many children start school lacking critical skills for learning. 'Tablet and device use reduces communication, so straight away our children arrive with poorer starting points for speech and language. Not just their articulation of sounds but also their understanding of language.'

Children are now slower to develop physically too. 'Many children are now more sedentary,' she says. 'Movement is key to all learning. We're starting at a significantly lower point. This is not through deprivation, but because the world has changed.'

Wise About Words targets these and other problems increasingly faced by teachers in the classroom. 'It gave us a carefully aligned toolkit,' Sarah says, 'to develop teacher skills, engage children physically and emotionally, and strengthen their oracy. So real practical skills within the classroom.'

For Jo Reil, Wise About Words is only the start. 'We hear from teachers that children who haven't spoken since reception are finding their voice for the first time,' she says. 'Looking ahead, we want this work to reach more schools across Norfolk. Our hope is to influence national policy, setting out how immersive, creative theatre can transform the primary curriculum. It's ambitious, but we believe in it wholeheartedly.'

Beyond Wise About Words, over the course of Creative Experiences, our work with schools has gone further and deeper than ever before. 'Everything we do is about taking the world of theatre to children,' Jo says. 'It's about children experiencing creativity through workshops, shows and talks.' Our education work has enabled us to deepen our relationships with touring partners, for example Royal Shakespeare Company and Matthew Bourne's New Adventures.

Throughout the four years of Creative Experiences, we have kept up our issue-based seasons of work entitled Creative Matters. It explores the many challenges faced by society today. In the past four years, by means of film-showings and discussions, creative workshops, shows, talks and other participatory activities – across our buildings and beyond – Creative Matters has delved into such issues as Loss and Grief, Climate Stories, The Shape of Family and Kindness Through Creativity.

"It's about building confidence in children, building language and communication skills, building their aspiration and their understanding of a different way of learning"

Jo Reil,
Head of Creative Learning



“When we first came here we didn’t know anyone. We had no one... It’s too hard to be no one in a new country. Thanks to Norwich Theatre, we feel like someone again”

Deniz Calik



Image: 3 Migrant Women, © Richard Jarmy

We passionately believe prosperity is for everyone in society and we are fiercely proud to be a Theatre of Sanctuary, accredited by National City of Sanctuary. ‘Being a Theatre of Sanctuary means actively welcoming asylum seekers and refugees,’ says Sam Dawson, Assistant Director for Impact and Engagement. ‘It’s a full organisational commitment influencing everything from programming choices to the languages of our welcome messages.’

In 2025 we were joined by 22 Theatres of Sanctuary from all over the country for an away day, as part of Platforma Festival in partnership with Counterpoint Arts and City of Sanctuary UK. ‘The day sparked new collaborations and helped us collectively imagine how our theatres can offer deeper welcome and creative opportunity for people seeking sanctuary,’ says Sam. ‘The conversations from that day are now shaping how we develop future sanctuary work.’

Being a Theatre of Sanctuary has sometimes meant taking a stand in line with our core values. ‘Sometimes being a Theatre of Sanctuary means taking a stand,’ muses Sam. ‘We went into the big asylum hotels in Norwich and Diss last year – where protests had taken place – and delivered creative sessions in each. It has been the most contentious and volatile time during our Theatre of Sanctuary status. People housed in the hotels have no positive shared space. We brought them together for a cultural celebration. The music was joyous.’

In our home city of Norwich, we run two long-term groups with refugees and displaced people, one off-site with Norfolk County Council’s People From Abroad team and one in-house. Meeting in Stage Two for two hours each week, our Being Migrant group has created a powerful new work with support from Gecko Theatre, entitled **3 Migrant Women** which will be touring the UK in 2026.

Three of the founder members of Being Migrant are displaced people from Turkey. Suat and Deniz Calik – themselves theatre professionals in Turkey – and their little daughter Alaz.

‘English is too hard after 36 years old,’ jokes Suat, with a ready smile. ‘When we first came to the UK, we didn’t know about theatre life here,’ says Suat, his words translated from Turkish by his wife Deniz. ‘I worked backstage with this theatre. I had a chance to do research on physical theatre on the Gecko Theatre residency. Then I performed **Turk Hamlet** in Turkish in City Hall, from the Mayor’s Chair. After that we went to Stratford, to the RSC. I learned so much.’ Suat took part in Stage Door 10, a placement made possible in partnership with Good Chance Theatre, created to support artists from displaced backgrounds to build skills, confidence and professional experience within UK theatre. The programme brings participants into the heart of the organisation, recognising the insight, resilience and creativity they contribute. ‘Through Stage Door 10, I had the chance to keep learning and to understand theatre life here more deeply. It helped me grow as an artist, and now I hope I can give something back in return.’

Asked what Norwich Theatre has come to mean to her family, Deniz replies unswervingly: ‘I don’t feel alone. When we first came here we didn’t know anyone. We had no one. At Being Migrant, we became like a family. Alaz feels she belongs. She knows all of **3 Migrant Women** and she performs for us at home. It’s too hard to be no one in a new country. Thanks to Norwich Theatre, we feel like someone again.’

‘We’ve taken fundamental steps,’ says Becci Winton, Finance Director & Chief Resource Officer, reflecting on the four years of Creative Experiences. ‘We’ve helped certain communities prosper. Prosperity means you have to change. But we believe in ourselves and, as we write our next strategy, we are renewing our values and we are unafraid to drive for change.’





Tom Sleigh Chair of Trustees

Looking back over the four years of Creative Experiences, I am struck by just how deeply Norwich Theatre has come to sit at the heart of the communities it serves. The stories in this review make one thing abundantly clear: this is an organisation that means something to many different people and which is unique in its ability to foster a sense of welcome and belonging.

As Chair of Trustees, it has been my role to look not only at the work happening today, but at the organisation we are building for tomorrow. What I see is an institution that has strengthened its roots in Norwich and Norfolk: through partnerships with schools, universities, cultural organisations, community groups and anchor institutions; through the thousands of people who come through our doors every year; and through the confidence that local audiences, businesses and civic partners place in us. That sense of place is one of our greatest responsibilities, and one of our greatest strengths.

Creative Experiences has also illuminated the profound social value of creativity. Whether through Creative Ageing, Wise About Words, Theatre of Sanctuary, or our work with families and volunteers, we have seen that creativity can and does change lives, build resilience and strengthen communities. As trustees, we take seriously the responsibility to ensure this work continues and that it remains accessible, equitable, and designed with justice and inclusion at its core.

But impact of this scale only happens when the foundations of the organisation are strong. Over the past four years we have invested in skills, infrastructure, partnerships and financial resilience. We have worked to ensure sustainability and accountability underpin our approach. And we have supported the development of a culture that listens – to audiences, staff, volunteers, artists and the wider community – and responds with care and clarity.

As we look to the future, we do so with both ambition and steadiness. The coming years will undoubtedly bring change, both within the cultural sector and in the communities we serve. We must not only sustain what we have built, but grow with purpose, strengthening our contribution to the region, deepening our partnerships, and continuing to open pathways for creativity in every corner of our communities.

Norwich Theatre has always been a place where stories are held. The next chapter is one we will write together, with seriousness about our responsibilities, openness to what we will learn, and pride in the role this organisation plays in the life of our city and region.



Stephen Crocker Chief Executive and Creative Director

One of the great benefits of being an independent and self-subsidising organisation is that we measure ourselves by the impact we have on people, not by the boxes we have to tick for funders. That is why we have chosen to put human stories at the centre of this review of the Creative Experiences strategy, rather than shape our reflection around a list of figures.

Of course, there is significant data behind the impact we measure, and I am immensely proud of what it tells us. Over the past four years, we sold nearly 2 million tickets to more than 200,000 individual bookers, including 21% new bookers. One in three bookers lived outside Norwich, drawing audiences from Suffolk, Cambridgeshire and far beyond. We do not just reach our region, we represent it: 29% of our audience come from technical, semi-routine and routine occupations, exactly matching the East of England population in those roles.

We have also worked hard to keep the doors open to everyone. More than 28,000 of our bookers live in the 30% most deprived neighbourhoods in England, where our free-ticket rate is roughly double that seen in our least-deprived areas. This reflects deliberate access schemes and discounted ticket programmes, not coincidental reach.

What audiences tell us matters just as much as who they are. Across post-show surveys, they consistently rate performances 4.8 out of 5 and service 4.9 out of 5, with feedback returning again and again to the same themes: Norwich Theatre is a safe, friendly and welcoming place to spend an evening. Those numbers matter because they describe trust, reach and belonging.

They also give us a platform to be bolder. The past four years have shown what happens when creativity moves beyond our stages and buildings, into the hands, imaginations and lived realities of the people we serve. That experience has changed the organisation and sharpened our sense of what Norwich Theatre can be.

The stories in this report illuminate the path ahead. The courage of our people, artists, communities and participants has strengthened our belief that we can make work that speaks more clearly to the world around us. The work we have created and platformed - on our stages, on tour, and in unexpected spaces - has revealed new forms of artistic expression and encouraged us to think bigger about how and where great theatre can emerge.

Equally, our work with children, families, older adults, volunteers, sanctuary seekers and displaced artists has shown that creativity can be life-changing. From Wise About Words, where children found confidence and communication, to Creative Ageing, where participants found voice after loss or illness, to Being Migrant, where displaced artists forged community and artistic identity, we have seen what creativity makes possible when it is woven into daily life.

We have also learned something vital about place. Norwich and Norfolk - their people, landscapes, stories and civic partners - have shaped us as much as we have shaped them. The partnerships forged across the city, the pride reflected back by audiences and participants, and the creativity emerging from local collaboration all point to a future in which our role as a cultural anchor grows in scale and significance.

As we close the chapter on Creative Experiences, we look forward with a new and confident creative intent. What comes next will demand imagination, bravery and care. It will ask us to dream ambitiously, listen deeply and stay true to the values that have carried us this far. We have the foundations, the partnerships, the trust of our communities and, most importantly, the shared belief that through boldness and endeavour we can have wide-reaching positive impact.

We give our heartfelt thanks to all who have supported us over the past four years: charitable trusts and foundations; our creative, civic and corporate partners; our staff and volunteers; our loyal community of Ambassadors, Supporters and Friends; our audiences and customers; and all who have made a donation.

Each and every one of you has played a part in countless stories of the positive and profound impact of Creative Experiences.



