An Evaluation of Stepping Out Theatre

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY **1**

INTRODUCTION **1**

AIMS OF THE EVALUATION 1

METHODS USED **1**

THE SURVEY 1

INTERVIEWS WITH A SELECTED SAMPLE 2

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES 2

DESCRIBING THE SURVEY SAMPLE **2**

ANALYSIS **4**

FINDINGS **5**

GLOBAL EVALUATION OF THE WORK OF THE SOT 5

Ratings of outcome and experience *5*

One word capturing the experience so far *5*

"What first comes to mind when thinking about the effect that your involvement has had on your life?" *5*

"Would you say that the Stepping Out Theatre meets a need (or needs) in your life?" .. *6*

WHAT IS REALLY GOOD ABOUT INVOLVEMENT? 6

MORE EXPLORATION OF PERSONAL IMPACTS 11

Gaining new skills *11*

Self confidence or self esteem *11*

Sense of achievement *12*

Reduced feelings of loneliness or isolation *12*

Physical health improvement *12*

Reliability *13*

Obtaining paid work *13*

Taking up educational or voluntary work opportunities *13*

SPECIFIC MENTAL HEALTH OUTCOMES 14

Improved mental health *14*

The ways in which mental health was judged to be better *14*

Reduced dependence on forms of coping *16*

Use of mental health services *16*

Effect on feelings about self as someone who uses or has used mental health services *17*

Effect on feelings about mental health services and the people that use them *18*

CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT 19

What is not so good or difficult about involvement? *19*

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE OF THE STEPPING OUT THEATRE AND THE PROJECTS IT RUNS 21

COMMENTARY ON THE EVALUATION PROCESS 22

CONCLUSIONS **23**

APPENDIX A. WORDING OF ITEMS IN THE ONLINE SURVEY ..... **I**

APPENDIX B. DIVERSE PERSONAL CONCERNS THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO GENERALISE TO THE WIDER COMPANY ..... **III**

APPENDIX C. SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN THE EVALUATION PROCESS. ..... **IV**

Executive Summary

- The evaluation aimed to provide an authentic account of the achievements and areas for improvement of the Stepping Out Theatre (SOT) using an online survey and interview method.

- The survey achieved a very positive response rate (58) from more than half of the potential population of people who might have responded. Six people were interviewed in more depth. The sample was very diverse, with 79% still actively involved with SOT. The average duration of involvement was seven years. Most people had multiple involvements in SOT with acting and going on social trips being the most frequent forms of involvement. 67% of the sample was current or past users of mental health services.

- Global ratings of the experience and outcome of involvement with SOT were extremely positive. Involvement appeared to have the biggest impact in expanding the range of friends and contacts creating a sense of belonging and significantly reducing feelings of isolation and loneliness. This was created through the establishment of a highly accepting, safe and welcoming environment characterised by practical and emotional support.

- Another very significant area of impact was the development of increased confidence and self-esteem through the creation of opportunities to learn and practice new and socially valued skills. Almost the whole sample felt that SOT had helped them develop new skills to some extent.

- For many the non-judgemental and flexible approach taken to people's mental health problems was an important feature, both from the perspective of people deriving a new perspective on their own challenges, and in being able to offer support to others.

- A sense of achievement in creating a socially valued, intelligent and challenging piece of work that impacted on people's awareness and understanding of mental health issues was also important for some.

- 80% of participants reported that involvement had a positive impact on their mental health to some degree. For 27% this impact was judged to be "huge".

- The most widely reported improvement in mental health was in reduced depression. People felt that SOT had helped through providing human contact, friendships, and a chance to belong. It provided purpose and direction and a sense of being valued.

- 70% judged that there had been some positive effect on their use of mental health services with around 30% of those who had used mental health services feeling that there had been some preventative effect with respect to the risk of hospitalisation.

- Involvement also had an impact on participants' self-assessment of their ability to obtain paid or voluntary work, or educational opportunities, though to a lesser degree than the outcomes described above. It had also had a positively rated effect regarding physical health, reliability and use of forms of coping such as alcohol and

drugs, though again to a more limited degree than the large impacts described above.

- Exploration of the effect of SOT involvement on feelings about oneself as a mental health service user echoed the findings above in stressing a sense of being part of something, and achieving a new level of confidence and self esteem that promoted an identity beyond being a mental health service user. Being creative among others experiencing mental health difficulties was experienced as empowering and validating.

- Inquiry into the effect on feelings about mental health services and the people that use them generated a strong critique of mainstream mental health services as overstretched, underfunded and often coercive. The importance of SOT as a non-stigmatising, creative, person-centred independent resource in this context was further highlighted. People also underlined the value they attached to deeper relationships with people with mental health problems, and the greater awareness of mental health issues that this had engendered.

- Where people were able to identify concerns or difficulties about SOT involvement these often centred on difficult interpersonal dynamics and issues surrounding challenging behaviours that risked compromising the experience for others. The dilemma of providing an alternative to mainstream services while also needing to maintain some duty of care to people at some risk to themselves and others was explored.

- In exploring hopes for the future of SOT, people clearly wanted the work that was already making such a significant difference to people's lives to continue while also urging significant expansion so more productions could be undertaken, in more locations and helping more people. People sought more publicity and recognition for this important and unusual work; unusual in that it brought together professional and non-professional actors and brings challenging high quality work to larger audiences. The need for increased and secure funding was strongly underlined to maintain and expand the range of activities.

- Internally there was a call for spreading responsibility among a wider staff group in order to reduce the burden on the Project Co-ordinator and to free up capacity for fundraising.

- The evaluation process itself was judged positively as comprehensive, easy, and well structured.

Introduction

Aims of the evaluation

The evaluation aimed to provide an authentic account of the Stepping Out Theatre and its activities, particularly from the perspective of experienced participants. It was agreed that the approach to evaluation should:

- Be solutions focussed. In this context this is about a focus on what works well with the aim of finding out how SOT and others might build on this experience.
- Provide learning to inform development by describing achievements, barriers to success, and areas for improvement.
- Be conducted in a way that is supportive to the aims and operation of SOT, and that helps to develop processes for ongoing and affordable evaluation.
- Where necessary provide feedback or challenge to SOT in a way that is objective and constructively critical.

The aims and the resulting methodology (including successive drafts of the survey form) were evolved in discussion with experienced SOT staff and especially the Project Co-ordinator. Data collection[*], analysis and reporting were however undertaken independently.

Methods Used

The study used an online survey and interview-based methodology.

The survey

An online survey instrument was developed to explore:

- ✓ The extent and nature of involvement with SOT in terms of whether currently involved, duration of involvement, and activities involved in.
- ✓ What is/was really good about it?
- ✓ What is/was not so good or difficult about it?
- ✓ What has changed for the participant as a result of their involvement?
- ✓ One word that captured the whole experience of participation so far
- ✓ Scaling on a 1 to 10 scale of the experience and results of the experience against an imagined perfect experience with perfect results
- ✓ What would have got participants to a rating of 10 on experience and results?
- ✓ How experience with SOT has affected feelings about self as someone who uses mental health services.
- ✓ How experience with SOT affected feelings about mental health services and the people that use them.
- ✓ Invited thoughts on evaluation, the form itself and how it could be better.

The form also captured details of participants' gender, age, and ethnic background, whether they were using mental health services either now or in the past, and if so for how long. A fee of £10 was offered for participation. The form was administered via Google Forms and accessed via a web link. For those that requested assistance in filling in the form, SOT staff and the evaluator were available to offer support, some of which took place in an evening and collectively.

[*] Except in the very few cases where help to enter data on computer was sought from SOT staff by participants

Interviews with a selected sample

A series of interviews were conducted to explore key issues in more detail. A group of nine people were approached using the criteria that they had long enough involvement to be able to give an informed account and were involved in a variety of activities.

All nine agreed to participate. Six interviews, with four men and two women, were completed within the study period.

The interview covered areas also covered by the survey form allowing more in-depth exploration. It asked the following questions:

- Please describe your experience with the SOT.
- What do you feel [has] worked/works really well for you?
- What have you **most** valued about your involvement personally?
- Do you have a story or example that captures SOT at its best?
- What aspects are more of a problem or a challenge?
    - What helps?
- What have you personally found **most** problematic?
    - What has helped?
- How has your involvement with SOT affected your life?
- Is there more that you would like to see SOT doing for you personally? If so what?
- What are your wishes for how you would like to see SOT develop?
- How have you found this process? Are there ways you feel you would like to see it improved if we ever did it again? If so what?

A fee of £40 was offered for the in-depth interviews.

Methodological issues

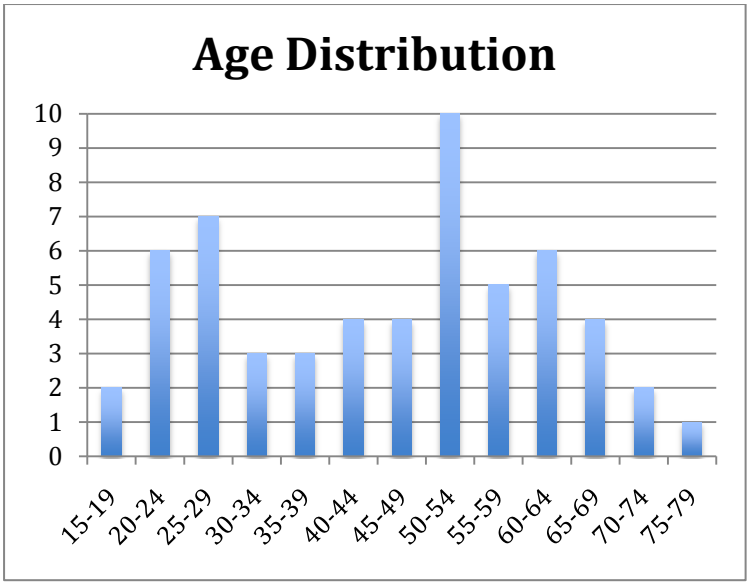
One weakness of this evaluation approach is that it did not collect the views of people who have decided not to engage with SOT or have not engaged for reasons beyond their control. However, this would require a more formalised research approach that would require ethical approval, and would have created significant methodological challenges with respect to accessing this population.

The fact that most respondents were still actively involved with SOT may have fostered a particular concern to promote its' positive aspects. In order to mitigate this effect as much as possible, in-depth interviews were used to explore the source of positive or negative global judgements and issues were approached in a variety of ways. Also confidentiality was stressed throughout and quotes are not attributed in this report[†].

Describing the survey sample

The survey was returned by 58 people of whom 36 were female. The age of people in the sample ranged from 15 to 76 and averaged 45 years. The sample is estimated to cover over half of the potential population of people with direct experience of SOT available.

[†] In the one case where the details may identify the participant concerned written permission to use the quote has been obtained.



Much of the sample was highly educated with nearly half having a “degree or equivalent”.

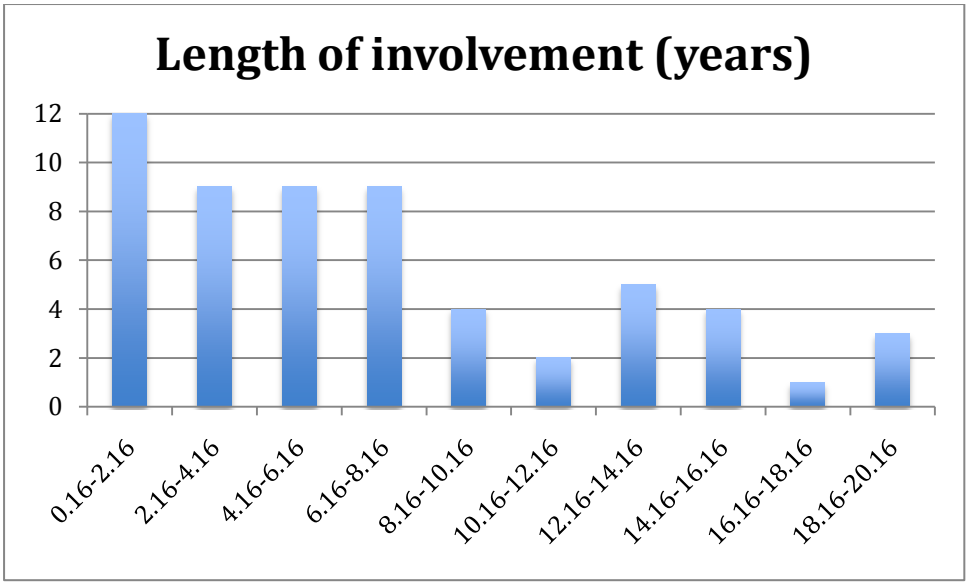
Degree or equivalent	**28**	47.5%
Higher education	**9**	15.3%
A level or equivalent	**3**	5.1%
GCSEs grades A*-C or equivalent	**8**	13.6%
Other qualifications	**8**	13.6%
No formal qualifications	**3**	5.1%
Don't know or unclear	**0**	0%

The ethnic group of participants was predominantly self-identified as white[‡] (84.5%). The next biggest category was “Other ethnic group” [§] (5.2%).

79% were still actively involved with SOT. The range of time since first involvement went from around six months to over 19 years. The average duration of involvement was seven years. Of the 12 people who were not actively involved, none cited negative reasons for leaving. Reasons for leaving included life changes (e.g. house move), competing commitments (due to exams, health problems or family) or the end of a specific involvement with a particular production.

[‡] With three other people specifically identifying as white Irish and one as white Australian

[§] Where people identified as Jewish, Danish, and Scandinavian; one person identified as “mixed/multiple white and black African” and one as “Black/African/Caribbean/black British- Caribbean”



The following frequency table described the nature of their involvement with SOT. 75% of the sample had multiple involvements. Where people described only one involvement it was usually acting except one occurrence each of designer, writing group and writing for cabarets.

Acting	**45**	76.3%
Writing group	**9**	15.3%
Leading my own project with support from the company	**16**	27.1%
Audience member	**32**	54.2%
Trustee	**14**	23.7%
A staff member who has been involved in running or planning events	**8**	13.6%
Social activities, e.g. trips	**27**	45.8%
Other	**21**	35.6%

67.2% currently or had previously used mental health services. However, only 58.2% reported having "received a mental health diagnosis of any kind," suggesting that seven participants had used mental health services without having received a diagnosis. 58.6% reported using alternative or complementary therapies to help deal with mental health problems or emotional distress.

Analysis

Text from the online survey and interview transcriptions was entered into a qualitative data analysis package[**] and analysed thematically using a Grounded Theory approach. Quantitative data was analysed using Microsoft Excel or Google Forms tools.

In reporting findings, those issues cited most often are given prominence. Material in italics and in parentheses are direct quotations from the survey instrument or interview material provided as illustrative examples.

[**] NVivo for Mac Version 10.2.1

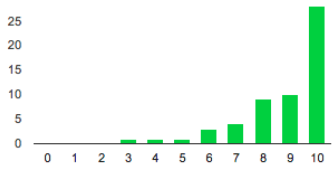
Findings

Global evaluation of the work of the SOT

Ratings of outcome and experience

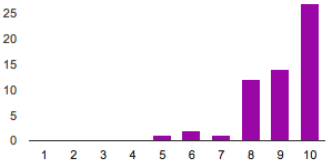
Participants were invited to rate both the outcomes of results of their involvement with SOT and their experience. The following graphics highlight just how highly valued the experience and outcome was with just under half of participants rating it as highly as they could.

If 10 was the best possible outcome or result of your involvement on a 1 to 10 scale, how would you rate the outcome/results of your involvement with Stepping Out Theatre Company overall?



Worst possible: 0	0	0%
1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	1	1.8%
4	1	1.8%
5	1	1.8%
6	3	5.3%
7	4	7%
8	9	15.8%
9	10	17.5%
Best possible: 10	28	49.1%

If 10 was the perfect experience on a 1 to 10 scale, how would you rate your experience with Stepping Out Theatre Company overall?



1	0	0%
2	0	0%
3	0	0%
4	0	0%
5	1	1.8%
6	2	3.5%
7	1	1.8%
8	12	21.1%
9	14	24.6%
Perfect experience: 10	27	47.4%

One word capturing the experience so far

Participants were also invited to provide one word that captured their whole experience of their involvement with SOT so far. They were overwhelmingly positive and are as follows (with the most frequent references first with numbers of references in parenthesis):

> Inspiring/inspirational/inspired, (7), fulfilling/fulfilment (3), fun (3), wonderful (3), life affirming (2), awesome (2), beautiful (2), brill/brilliant (2), educational (2), enriching/enrichment (2), gratitude (2), joyful (2), alchemical, amazing, community, embellishment, empowering, energising, enjoyable, enlightening, essential, excellent, exciting, expansive, eye opening, family, fantastic, funny, interesting, magnificent, roller coaster, stimulating, terrific, unprecedented, uplifting.

This finding is also represented on the cover of this report as a "word cloud".

"What first comes to mind when thinking about the effect that your involvement has had on your life?"

The value of achieving new relationships was what most frequency came to mind both in terms of reducing isolation (*"I was suicidal and very depressed I had no friends and only spoke to people on line. Now I interact with others"),* and in terms of relationships that have helped create new opportunities *("I have made a lot of good friends since joining stepping out and met professional actors, writers and directors, which I would not have met otherwise"*. The value of the social activities that SOT brings was often cited, and the fact that this created a sense of belonging (*"Stepping out is like one big happy family"*).

People also frequently mentioned the opportunity to use new skills, such as acting, writing or leading groups (*"..being able to use my talents and skills in the service of people who need them and of art"*). It is perhaps unsurprising then that confidence was the most frequently referenced feeling, manifest in increased self-esteem and self-expression.

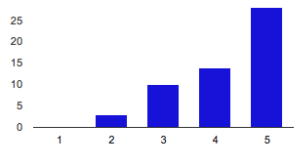
> *"Whether it was education, whether it was something I wanted to do, I was always 'It's not possible'. I had quite a lot of negative views of my ability to do things and the process of going through the challenge of it and realising that wouldn't be able to remember the lines, that I wouldn't be able to do it. There was a lot of nerves surrounding that. It kind of broadened my horizons, opened up a sort of avenue if you like of 'lots of things are possible'".*

These issues will be returned to later when exploring in more depth the benefits of SOT that people reported.

"Would you say that the Stepping Out Theatre meets a need (or needs) in your life?"

Just over half the sample reported that SOT "hugely" met a need in their life. The distribution of responses was as follows.

Taking account of all that you have said about your involvement, would you say that the Stepping Out Theatre Company meets a need (or needs) in your life?



Not at all: 1	0	0%
2	3	5.5%
3	10	18.2%
4	14	25.5%
Hugely: 5	28	50.9%

What is really good about involvement?

There were two key emphases that emerged in response to this question: new relationships and the opportunities to use or develop new skills.

One of the strongest themes that emerged with respect to new relationships was the sense of belonging that people reported (*"I felt for the first time I belonged somewhere"*). There were many references to SOT as a "family" or a "tribe".

> *"And when we all get on it is like a family, like no family I have ever had. .. I have brothers and sisters and people to look up to".*

> *"It is a tribe, a family of wounded individuals with a desire to go beyond the wounds and help each other to heal through creating something beautiful and dynamic together".*

This latter quote highlighted the experience for many that the sense of belonging was linked to the production of a collaborative project that people could be proud of. For others the fact that relationships were formed with people with mental health problems was important, (*"..good to meet people with mental illness issues but learn to see past that"*).

For most however, the importance of new relationships simply concerned making new friends and overcoming a sense of isolation. The value of social activities was frequently referenced.

> *"I was suicidal and very depressed, I had no friends and only spoke to people online. Now I interact with others".*

> *"The social aspect of Stepping Out has also been fantastic and enabled myself and others to come together for some great evenings out and trips to places that we would otherwise not have accessed".*

The emphasis on relationship was also manifest in the frequent references to support received:

> *"Support that is always there. You always know with Stepping Out that there is someone at the end of the phone that is sympathetic and will actually do something".*

> *"Support you get. It's like you could be having the worse day of your life. If people can see or sense that you are not 100% well they will just hone in on you and try to be supportive and stuff".*

There were descriptions of support manifest in references to caring relationships, the warm welcome offered, safety, trust and the accepting and positive atmosphere created.

> *"I joined the group thinking I was an outsider but as well as the very warm welcome, the journey with them has helped me realise I'm not an outsider".*

> *"..safe environment in which to produce the work.. isn't hugely pressured like the commercial theatre world to produce the goods or produce the product. You know you can actually explore, y'know there are budgetary constraints and all the rest of it, but you can push the boat out and a little bit of creative licence can come in".*

> *"They would allow me to go out and have a cry and come back in when I was ready, they looked after me more than my family did and for me that was what I needed".*

> *"I am not being judged for my mental health issues which is a bonus. I am not being called a psycho or a nutter behind my back".*

> *"One of things I love about it is that never once have I ever been asked about what my job is. Whether I own a house, what car I've got, what class background I've got. It's really very inclusive and I have been involved with others groups, in the real acting world, people want to know "Where did you train?". It is really not about who you are or where you have come from. No judgement or expectation about where you are in the social structure".*

> *"How they always seem to give the message about mental health that it is not always a negative. There's a positive. You are not just a sum of your illness, you're not just your symptoms, you're not just your medication, you're a human being and that's how they treat you".*

The care and support was described as very tailored to individual need: *"They cater to you. So if you didn't want to say a single word but still be on stage you could. That for me was nice and within two years I had a main part. It was like I found a family".*

> *"It all comes back, and is underpinned by the service users. They are absolutely at the centre of everything that Stepping Out does not matter how far afield they go, working in London musicals and this that and the other, the thing that is underpinning it are the services users. They are the beating heart".*

For some the importance of new relationships included how it allowed connection to people offering support to realise new work opportunities.

> *"..contacts which has lead to more work. So pivotal when wanting to start a career. Without it I don't know where I'd be".*

The word cloud below gives a graphical representation of the frequency of references to "people", "support" and "confidence" highlighted in the foregoing.

The opportunities to use or develop new skills was the other major areas of response, particularly where it created further new opportunities: *"I have had and will have opportunities to learn, do, earn and build through Stepping Out"*. In some cases being able to develop skills lead to the fulfilment of life-long ambitions.

> *"My dream from a little child was to have a book that was sold in shops. I am actually getting my book launched later this year. It's poetry. I won the [writing] competition in the end and it gets performed. That would not have been possible without Stepping Out".*

> *"I've always wanted to be involved in acting ever since I was a little kid. Always wanted to be involved in drama and so its opened doorways to me to the acting world".*

There were references to SOT helping develop quite specific new skills (like facilitation, or not *"gabbling lines").* More often though people described SOT creating a new purpose and direction in life for people, both in the sense of a new life-calling (*"To get published has given me direction, purpose and belief in my writing"*, *"I really don't know what direction my life would have gone in without it"*) and providing a purpose to the everyday (*"It just really does seem to give people a complete purpose for their year"*).

It is perhaps unsurprising that the most frequent reference to a good feeling that had emerged was an increase in confidence. Most often this was linked to increased self-esteem but there were also more specific reference to confidence in self-expression and fulfilling particular roles.

Other key aspects of the experience of SOT highlighted included the social value associated with theatre (*"Being able to show friends and support workers that I can do it", "By being seen and witnessed and celebrated as a company by the audiences"*).

People referred to a real sense of achievement and a sense that they were contributing to something important through helping others. This in itself inculcated a sense of commitment. The following quote captures the sense of responsibility that springs from the meaning that participants attach to the work: *"I can sort of tend to self medicate. You are not really allowed to have a beer before you go on. So that was something that I needed to get a handle on this year. I so wanted to be involved. Because the plays say something about mental health you kinda really want to do it".*

The importance of the connections to mental health also emerged in comments about making a positive contribution (*"It's made me feel like I am doing my bit in the community"*), and helping the wider public gain a better understanding of mental health issues through good quality, challenging productions.

> *"It helps with identification. You get members of the audience saying I can relate to that, that happened to me and that is hugely encouraging and hugely satisfying as a director and as an artist that you are creating work that is helping actually touch people".*
>
> *"[They are] quite intelligent productions I think, and that has worked quite well for me because you can get a rapport with the audience: a sort of shared understanding of the issues that we are exploring. That's great because it leads to.. really strong audience feedback and real sort of empathy between the audience and the performers, and production team and so forth. So it's not just a bit of entertainment. Of course it IS entertainment and it is emoting you can talk about with the audience. You can both go on a journey together. Quite weighty these and quite hard hitting, emotionally gruelling but the rewards are quite considerable".*

Others attached significant to the role of SOT in raising *their own* awareness of mental health and related issues (*"Performing in a play about domestic abuse enabled me to explore the darker side of human nature, but also to try to understand"*).

The experience of witnessing change in others was a key benefit for some:

> *"Watching people gain confidence and 'come out of themselves' as a result of their involvement with 'Stepping Out' has made a lasting impression on me".*

"..every year there has been an individual that I will watch appear, very nervous, very unsure of themselves and their surroundings, and they just slowly come into their own where they are laughing, you know in quite a challenging environment as it's quite a fearful thing to do. Always in all those years, every time I have noticed some individuals where there has been some transformative development within them".

For others, the relationship with their understanding of their own inner world was seen as important.

"[The] work itself is very challenging but in a good way. With Stepping Out work you are really living it because so much of it relates to myself. It is gruelling and emotionally draining but the rewards are much greater for all that because what happens on stage is from the heart, it comes from a very personal place and that's priceless when it works".

"Sometimes I would have a number of stepping out members come up to me after a show who would want to talk about what they had just seen and I could feel a weight loosen from them as they shared their own situation in a transformed light".

"..helped me to unleash bottled anger and negative emotions. Controlled anger through theatrical possibilities. I really enjoyed it. A real release. A breath of fresh air. They weighed heavily on me".

"Better understanding of myself and my own mind. A better understanding of my own psyche and where I've come from".

"I realise that in some ways a breakdown is a blessing and chance to restart one's life and live it better. It's a second chance for some, myself included. It is easy to spot the ones who haven't yet been touched by these issues. They carry on with the games! But they don't have much depth to contribute to the average conversation. It's like they live with their eyes shut unaware of their ability to access their truth".

Other feelings mentioned included pride, joy, happiness, rediscovering a passion, strength, warmth and fulfillment. Other positive outcomes highlighted included the sheer fun, humour, and enjoyment of participation, opportunities to showcase talent, a more positive outlook, better communication skills, improved personal relationships, and generally feeling oneself a *"better person".*

"It's had an incredibly positive impact on my life, not just professionally but personally. My relationship with people, my relationship with my partner, things like that. It's affected it all in a very, very positive way".

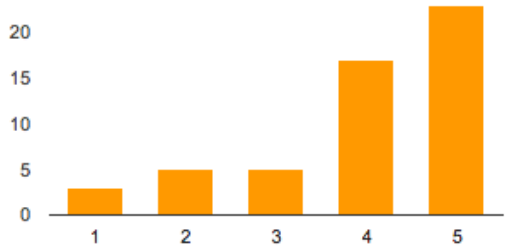
"I remember when I first laughed at Stepping Out. I think it was the first time in a couple of years. Now I laugh all the time".

More exploration of personal impacts

Gaining new skills

In part echoing the qualitative account above on reported benefits, only three people surveyed felt they had not gained new skills and over two-fifths saw SOT as having a huge impact.

Do you feel your involvement has helped you gain new skills?



Not at all: 1	**3**	5.7%
2	**5**	9.4%
3	**5**	9.4%
4	**17**	32.1%
Hugely: 5	**23**	43.4%

We then went on to ask people to describe the new skills that they have developed. The two largest bodies of responses concerned the specifics of acting or performing and skills in working with others.

In the first category, many people cited developing skills in improvisation, being expressive on stage, learning to project their voice and developing a character. There were also specific references to singing and dancing, making music and (as a man) learning to wear heels *("The ability to wear heels while dancing/galloping/jumping! Sounds funny, and it is, but it is also certainly a serious skill!"*). As with the benefits of SOT involvement generally, the building of confidence was frequently mentioned, including regarding *"Getting on stage in front of strangers"* and more general self-expression.

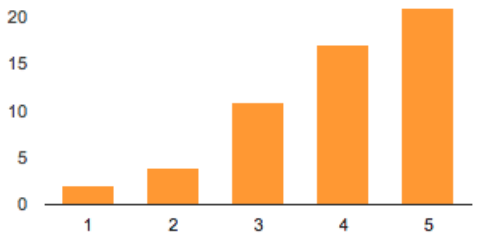
However, there were a similar number of references to new skills in being with others generally. For some this was manifest in more confidence in communication, and particularly listening and empathising. Some particularly valued new skills in working with a diverse group of people, including people with mental health problems. There was specific reference to new skills in facilitation of groups, leadership and learning to be patient, tolerant, tactful and diplomatic. This was sometimes grounded in *"deeper understanding of certain mental health problems and far more empathy toward those suffering from mental issues"*.

Other new skills cited included writing (both plays and poetry), directing and producing, make up, lights and sound, reading scripts and use of drama games and exercises. Some people valued new skills in understanding the arts world and fundraising more generally.

Self confidence or self esteem

Nearly two fifths of participants felt that involvement had hugely increased their self-esteem and only two participants felt that it had had no effect.

Do you feel your involvement has increased your self confidence or self esteem?

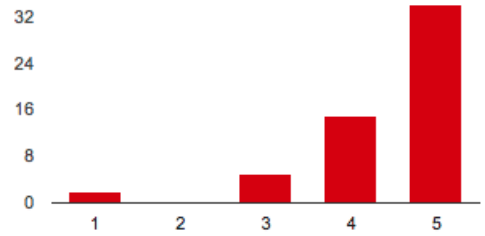


Not at all: 1	**2**	3.6%
2	**4**	7.3%
3	**11**	20%
4	**17**	30.9%
Hugely: 5	**21**	38.2%

Sense of achievement

This was an area where the vast majority of participants reported a significant impact of their involvement with 61% reporting a huge impact.

Do you feel your involvement has given you a sense of achievement?

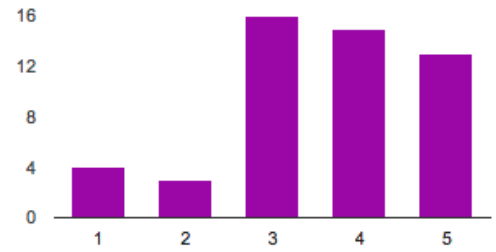


Not at all: 1	**2**	3.6%
2	**0**	0%
3	**5**	8.9%
4	**15**	26.8%
Hugely: 5	**34**	60.7%

Reduced feelings of loneliness or isolation

Ratings on this item showed a wider spread of responses, though only four reported that involvement had had no impact on their feelings of loneliness or isolation.

Do you feel your involvement has reduced feelings of loneliness or isolation?



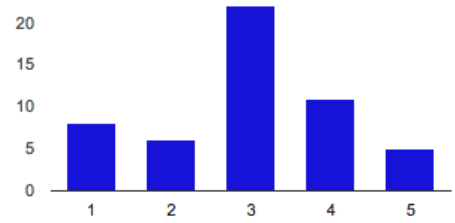
Not at all: 1	**4**	7.8%
2	**3**	5.9%
3	**16**	31.4%
4	**15**	29.4%
Hugely: 5	**13**	25.5%

"I have friends now. I talk to real people not some made-up person on the Internet no more. I have friends, we go out, we go clubbing and I really enjoy that. The only times I [used to] go out because I was so off my face. Now I remember things.. And I'm doing more things, getting out and doing more things".

Physical health improvement

This comparatively was an area where participants reported less impact though it is notable that nearly 84% of participants reported some effect.

Do you feel your involvement has improved your physical health through activities and exercises?

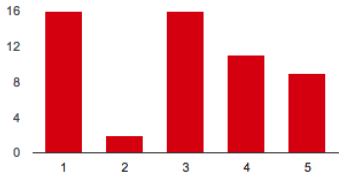


Not at all: 1	8	15.4%
2	6	11.5%
3	22	42.3%
4	11	21.2%
Hugely: 5	5	9.6%

Reliability

Although 30% of respondents felt that there had been no impact on their reliability, a similar proportion regarded the impact as significant (rated 4 or 5).

Do you feel your involvement has helped you become more reliable (for example being more likely to turn up on time for things)?

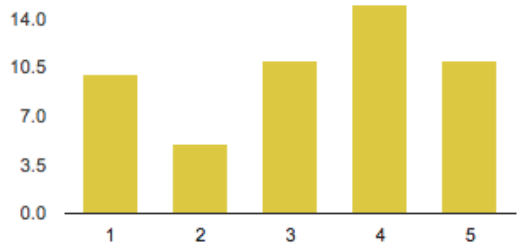


Not at all: 1	16	29.6%
2	2	3.7%
3	16	29.6%
4	11	20.4%
Hugely: 5	9	16.7%

Obtaining paid work

We explored for how many participants these new skills had helped them obtain paid work. Around a fifth reported no impact. This is difficult to interpret in that we did not collect data on the proportion of participants seeking paid employment at the time of their involvement with SOT. It is in this context perhaps even more significant that around 64% of participants scored at the mid-point of the scale or above with around a fifth describing the impact as significant.

Do you feel your involvement has helped you obtain paid work?

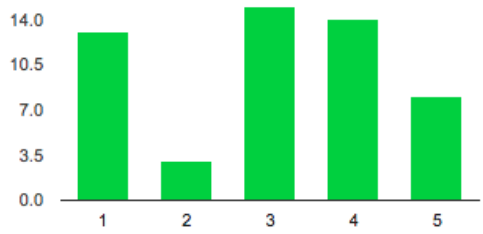


Not at all: 1	10	19.2%
2	5	9.6%
3	11	21.2%
4	15	28.8%
Hugely: 5	11	21.2%

Taking up educational or voluntary work opportunities

The impact on taking up educational or voluntary work opportunities was less marked, which again is difficult to interpret without knowing the extent to which people were seeking such opportunities. Again 64% of participants scored at the mid-point or above.

Do you feel your involvement has helped you to take up educational or voluntary work opportunities?



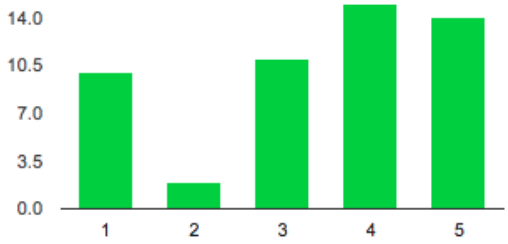
Not at all: 1	**13**	24.5%
2	**3**	5.7%
3	**15**	28.3%
4	**14**	26.4%
Hugely: 5	**8**	15.1%

Specific mental health outcomes

Improved mental health

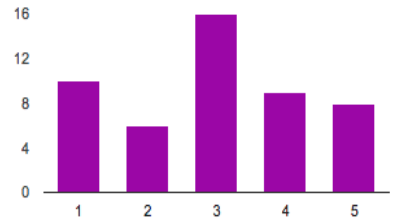
Only approximately a fifth of respondents felt that SOT involvement had not improved their mental health, either in terms of their own perceptions or those of friends, families or co-workers. For the rest of the sample an effect was reported, with a huge impact reported by 27% of people on the basis of their own views, and 16% as judged by others.

Do you feel your involvement has improved your mental health (in your own view)?



Not at all: 1	**10**	19.2%
2	**2**	3.8%
3	**11**	21.2%
4	**15**	28.8%
Hugely: 5	**14**	26.9%

Do you feel your involvement has brought about an improvement in your mental health as judged by friends, family or co-workers?



Not at all: 1	**10**	20.4%
2	**6**	12.2%
3	**16**	32.7%
4	**9**	18.4%
Hugely: 5	**8**	16.3%

"My mental health has improved a great deal since getting back involved with the group. I feel a lot happier, less depressed and more confident. My self-esteem has improved also, through having fun in the group. I have learnt how to live my life again instead of shutting myself away. I feel that life is worth living!"

The ways in which mental health was judged to be better

The questionnaire asked respondents to describe "the ways in which your mental health is better because of your involvement with SOT". In practice people responded with both specific differences in their mental health and the ways in which this was achieved.

Specific differences in mental health
The most frequently referred to difference (12 references) was to reduced depression. This may simply reflect the prevalence of depression among the population. However, it is notable that there were also frequent references to improved confidence and self esteem and references to more happiness, compassion and understanding: all factors that could be hypothesised to impact on the experience of depression.

Other specific differences included reduced anxiety (3 references), self harm (3 references), suicidal feelings, substance misuse, anger, hearing voices, obsessionality, and bad dreams.

> *"Personally I don't think I would be here if it wasn't for Stepping Out. I probably would have killed myself a long time ago".*

> *"It took me two years to get off the drugs. I don't think I would have been able to do that if not for Stepping Out. It's getting me through each day".*

The ways in which these differences were achieved
By far the most frequently mentioned way in which mental health was improved was through human contact, making friends, developing a sense of belonging and reduced isolation.

> *"I think I have always been a bit of a loner, and I have tended to isolate myself. I have really enjoyed being amongst the group, and the biggest benefit of this is feeling valued and purposeful".*

This reference to purpose and direction was one of the more frequently reported factors improving mental health.

> *"It gives me something hugely positive to get up for in the morning even in my darkest moments".*

People also found helpful being valued (being *"given a place where my words and thoughts and feelings matter"*), developing a more positive outlook, being distracted and busy (*"The creative work has given me something engaging to focus on, which helps stop my mind from creating new (and imaginary) problems for itself!"*), and learning specific personal coping strategies.

Importance was attached to the structure and stability that SOT offered. People also valued simply relaxing and having fun, experiencing success, and the ways in which it helped people to understand their own mental health better and accept that they have mental health concerns.

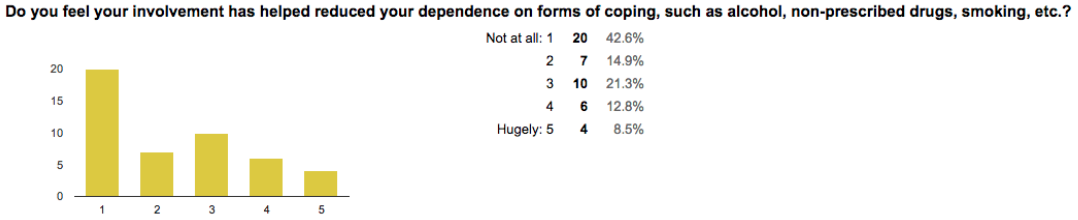
> *"I think I'm learning to accept that I have issues. I've been wanting to be more whole as a person and striving to achieve that and I believe Stepping Out is a big part of that journey".*

This latter benefit may be partly due to *"the safe and non-judgemental space created"*. One person noted, *"It .. helped reduce the stigma I had internalized as I learned other people had experiences similar to my own"*.

Mention was also given to the support and encouragement given, the importance of time out from other roles (e.g. as carer), the ways it created a valued identity (*"I am able to say 'I am a writer/playwright" and mean it"*), offered an experience of success (*"the success of the work has instilled in me a calmer, more tranquil mindset"*), supported involvement despite mental health problems (*"I have continued to act even when depressed and feel more confident that I will always be able to do so"*), and encouraged the personal development of spirituality.

Reduced dependence on forms of coping

Over half of respondents reported that involvement with SOT had some impact on their dependence on forms of coping such as alcohol, non-prescribed drugs or smoking, though to a comparatively limited degree.

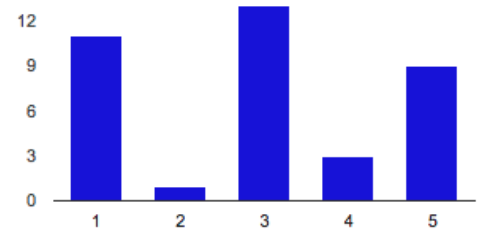


> *"I am less depressed and suicidal. I have been clean of self harm for 2 years now and clean from drugs for 2 years. I hear voices less and I get less angry with people".*

Use of mental health services

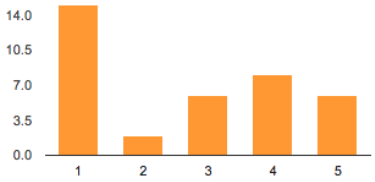
The responses below are from people who had self-identified as past or current users of mental health services. The first item shows that a significant proportion felt that SOT involvement had had a positive effect on their use of mental health services, though throughout the following items an equally significant proportion did *not* see SOT as having an impact on their use of services. The items below suggest that around 70% judged that there had been some positive effect on the use of mental health services, and that for around 60% the improvement in their mental health was judged to have been noticeable to mental health staff.

Do you feel your involvement has POSITIVELY affected your use of mental health services?



Not at all: 1	**11**	29.7%
2	**1**	2.7%
3	**13**	35.1%
4	**3**	8.1%
Hugely: 5	**9**	24.3%

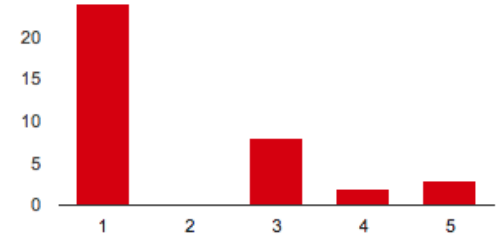
Do you feel your involvement has brought about an improvement in your mental health as judged by mental health staff working with you?



Not at all: 1	**15**	40.5%
2	**2**	5.4%
3	**6**	16.2%
4	**8**	21.6%
Hugely: 5	**6**	16.2%

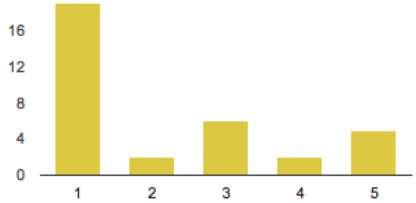
It is impossible to know how many participants would have been vulnerable to being hospitalised as a result of their mental health problems. The following suggests that around a third felt that SOT involvement may have had some preventative effect. Similarly around 45% felt that their involvement had reduced their use of prescribed medication to some degree and for 15% it was to a significant extent.

Do you feel your involvement has ever prevented you from being hospitalised?



Not at all: 1	**24**	64.9%
2	**0**	0%
3	**8**	21.6%
4	**2**	5.4%
Hugely: 5	**3**	8.1%

Do you feel your involvement has helped reduced your use of prescribed medication for mental distress?



Not at all: 1	**19**	55.9%
2	**2**	5.9%
3	**6**	17.6%
4	**2**	5.9%
Hugely: 5	**5**	14.7%

Effect on feelings about self as someone who uses or has used mental health services

The most frequently report effect was a sense of being less alone (*"it was helpful to know how common this is, and therefore to feel less isolated or helpless"*). Others just described themselves as feeling *"better in myself"* with again references to increased confidence and

self esteem and reduced shame (*"It has made me realise that I have nothing to be ashamed of"*). Other described more pride and positive self-image and a sense of empowerment (*"Being with people who have mental health problems but can still be creative is empowering"*). This was echoed with comments about achieving an identity that went beyond being a mental health service user.

> *"My need for using mental health services in the past is not my entire identity as a human being and that I am completely capable of achieving as much as someone who has not had to use mental health services".*

There was reference both to personal acceptance of one's own problems and *"An acceptance of mental health being normal, and equal in importance and relevance as physical health"*. Two people described feeling more open, with one reporting, *"More trust in being honest with mental health professionals, particularly from realising that there are many of us 'in the same boat'"*.

There was also mention of feeling more hope about the support available, more connected to others, more stable and more validated. One respondent told the following story:

> *"Some years ago I was in a psychiatric hospital where they used to let me out to go to a theatre group one night a week where I felt safe. However there was one male nurse who pointed to the long-term ward and said that it was full of frustrated actors like me, totally invalidating me. I remember that to this day. Now I am encouraged to perform within the safety of Stepping Out community theatre".*

One person specifically stated that involvement with SOT *"hasn't really [affected their feeling]"* but did nonetheless report a shift in perspective: *"I have shame about those things. I just think creativity is always the answer so I look at it all from a creative point of view rather than a mental health point of view".*

Effect on feelings about mental health services and the people that use them

The inquiry into people's feeling about mental health services sparked a critique of existing services as the most common response.

> *"I have seen close up how lacking in love the statutory services can be"*

> *"Being in Stepping Out has made me realise even more how negatively I feel about mental health services. Stepping Out and groups like it provide a real humanising alternative to mainstream mental health services which often do more damage than good".*

Mostly mainstream services were seen as over-stretched and under-funded though there was also a perception that they are *"generally based on coercion, faulty understandings of distress and corrupt and evil pharmaceutical companies".* This was linked to a general critique of a "medical model" approach with a sense that *"the philosophy and practice of Stepping Out is self-evidently valuable and better than any medication designed to suppress feelings, in that the theatre company uses creativity to deal with, and recover from, stresses and trauma that can affect anyone at some point in their life".*

The next most frequently reported effect was better relationships with people with mental health problems, based on a more informed perspective and greater empathy.

> *"I feel far more relaxed around people with mental health problems and am less afraid to engage with them".*

The next most frequent cluster of references concerned people taking the opportunity to underline the importance of organisations like SOT.

> *"I already had a good understanding of mental health services and people that use them .. but stepping out has shown me how the use of the arts and theatre can provide people suffering with these issues a safe and supportive environment and a chance to heal and explore talents that they may not realise that they had".*

Another strong theme was the need to avoid stigma and discrimination (*"I no longer have any desire to stigmatize people with mental health issues; I relish their company and respect and admire them; I realize they are inspiring"*). This was linked to a regard for people with mental health problems "as people": "*yes shows how we all have something to give we are not just our symptoms*".

Other effects reported included a broader awareness of the need for help for people with mental health problems, the importance of services that were independent of the mainstream, the value of services that are therapeutic without being therapy, social activities, talking therapies and counselling, the creative arts, and the need to value the art created. There was also recognition that mental health problems can offer a pathway to personal growth (*"I realise that in some ways a breakdown is a blessing and chance to restart one's life and live it better, it's a second chance for some, myself included"*).

Challenges and suggestions for improvement

What is not so good or difficult about involvement?

Notably many people used this opportunity to say that there was *nothing* difficult about their involvement, or to highlighted different thresholds for what constitutes an "issue".

For SOT generally by far the most widely expressed concerns related to difficult dynamics between people, and managing challenging behaviours. Though this was sometime framed as challenges arising from participants' struggles with mental health issues or addictions, it was also seen as characteristic of the work.

> *"Nothing really. There were tears and interpersonal dramas along the way but it was a drama project!"*

> *".. Also, creative/social differences or frictions with certain members of the group. But again, as inclusivity is such an important part of the group, this is inevitable and not overly problematic!"*

For some it represented a challenge of maintaining personal boundaries; balancing individual needs with the wider needs of the group.

> *"I can struggle with boundaries. I feel like at times my boundaries get crossed by some of the other members but that happens anywhere. Because everyone's mental health is so different, sometimes they clash".*

"If someone is having a difficult time, it can be hard to support them and to respect the needs of the rest of the individuals in the group".

The preferred solution, which is echoed in the next section, was to establish clear but fair boundaries.

"The need to put the boundaries in place and to be firm when they were transgressed. We have had to replace one participant because she was just not turning up, not communicating, but we did it in such a way that there was room for her to learn from the experience and to understand that so many people are dependent upon her and need her presence for them to feel safe and to be able to maintain their own commitment to the group. It was a challenge to be firm but fair, but through working with [other workers], I did this".

This issue connected with concern about how to stay true to SOT's role as separate to mainstream services while also providing the right level of care and support. The following quotes capture the dilemma:

"Should we do this or that to curb people's mental health [problems].. if you like give some kind of therapy or treatment? But then you become part of the system that is trying to change them. Finding that balance of sort of caring for people but letting them choose for themselves, letting them access services if they want, you know, just giving them a bit of freedom really".

"Where do you draw the line in being a mental health service that provides care and gets in touch with the authorities and decides whether or not you are fit to be in the community or not?.. So you are kind of in this limbo place where you would like to have a structured support for people but really there is a grey area where you are beginning to move back into the system that they are getting away from".

One respondent voiced a way that helps if not resolves the dilemma.

"I guess just talking it through with people who have been around it for some years, and the trustees themselves have experience of mental health problems. So talking to those people about how they would feel about being challenged, or suggesting that maybe they should go to a doctor. Are we something that is unique and allows freedom or are we something that dictates how it should be? But we do do it. There are certain points where [project co-ordinator] has to draw a line, or alert authorities or draw a line and say to this person that they need extra care or tell a parent. Because there is that duty of care, do we contact their parents or their loved ones? Where do we cross that boundary into sort of taking some sort of action into people's lives?"

The importance of SOT avoiding being seen by a substitute mental health services was voiced by one participant:

"They are not there to counsel me. They are not there to make everything better. They are there for me to go and do something involving others like me. And the mental health team seem to view them as my saviour, as if I don't need them, which isn't true. But if it wasn't for them I'd be back on Job Seekers in a job that I can't do cos I have a real problem with people. If I didn't have Stepping Out there and no help

as well I'd be screwed. I'd probably end up in a nut home or in a police cell. So without them they are sort of keeping me going until I can find the right support".

The next most often-raised issue raised was the question of funding: *"On a practical level it is about finding money, trying to get funding into place, without it it just won't carry on"*. This is also echoed in the next session.

There were three references to concern about the project co-ordinator role with respect to the workload, lack of support and lack of succession planning should the present incumbent be incapacitated for any reason. These comments were couched in very caring and appreciative terms with respect to the post-holder. Again this theme is picked up in the next section.

Others highlighted issues that were personal to them rather than concerns about the company itself. Aside from three individuals expressing worry about their own performance and general comments about involvement sometimes being exhausting or stressful, all the other concerns were very diverse and specific and were only voiced by one or two individuals. This is not to negate their importance. However, as opinion will inevitably be divided on their applicability, they are listed for reference in Appendix B.

Hopes for the future of the Stepping Out Theatre and the projects it runs

There were many references to the importance of the SOT continuing its important work (24) and entertaining people. The importance of continuing the community project and outreach work got a particular mention.

"They need to keep going, to give their actors a focus, something positive to be working towards. I have watched so many people return over the years, seen them grow in confidence and their social skills improve - it's quite heart-warming!"

However there were even more (52) references to the need to expand and grow. This included in terms of putting on more shows, more workshops, helping more people, doing more work beyond Bristol (with *"branches around the country"*), touring, raising awareness of mental health issues among a wider group of people and creating more work like it, for example through seeding new theatre companies. People particularly advocated continuing the large-cast plays and helping more service users throughout the year.

Inevitably in this context the hope for more funding was highlighted by many, particularly with long-term security in mind.

"I wish Stepping Out great future success in improving the lives, increasing the confidence and stability, and broadening the possibilities for all its current and future members. To do this, it needs a secure income, preferably one guaranteed for a decent length of time".

"..that it might secure the resources to increase effectiveness, showcase talents and encourage involvement, nurturing growth and personal development through theatre arts".

Echoing a theme from the section above, there was a hope expressed that responsibilities among the staff could be more widely spread, and specifically that the Project Co-ordinator's time could be freed up to allow a stronger focus on fundraising. There were two references to the involvement of more qualified clinical psychologists and psychiatrists to offer support

A connected theme was the need for more profile and publicity (e.g. national recognition, documentaries) in order to get more people supporting the company, and giving it a *"stronger voice"*.

> *"We don't get enough publicity I think that's quite sad because I don't think there are other mental health companies around".*

> *"I want Stepping Out to be discussed in offices at lunch".*

People were keen to stress the unique nature of SOT and what it offers.

> *"[There is] nothing quite like Stepping Out. You might have companies that were purely made up of mental health service users and they did work devised by themselves. Stepping Out is a bit different. Although it does do that it also does professionally written plays and by playwrights specifically for the company and so it can catch a wider audience so it can create better understanding among a wider audience".*

Other hopes included more social trips, more staff, a wider range of activities, less rehearsal time, more writing opportunities, more exploration of adventurous topics (including *"dark and troubling issues"*) and extending to fully professional productions.

Looking internally, there were hopes expressed concerning more support to staff and addressing the issue of problematic behaviour.

> *"I think because Stepping Out have to follow their code of conduct. It's hard for them sometimes to sort their problems out. Because their code of conduct is not set rules it is just a paragraph. It should be something that everyone gets sent because we have had people turn up drunk to rehearsals. There should be set rules, not just come here, and don't be nasty to anyone. There needs to be more substantial rules".*

People were also asked what more they felt that SOT could be doing for them personally. In the main, people felt that there was nothing further that SOT could do. Their focus was on the company expanding and doing more for other. The only responses concerning personal hopes were to get more parts, get a job, continuing to write for SOT and develop more acting skill.

Commentary on the evaluation process

Finally views on how best to evaluate the SOT were collected, including the participants' experience of filling out the form and participating in the interviews.

By far the most frequent response was simply to affirm that the process had been positive (22 references). In addition people highlighted that they found it to be very comprehensive, easy to do, easy to access, well structured with scope to express yourself.

"The form allowed me a lot of different angles with which to approach how Stepping Out has helped me. So it's a good form, because the help has been so valuable that it is easy to forget all the positive things!".

The most common concerns were that the form was repetitive in parts, stressful and too long (4, 3 and 3 references respectively). A more detailed breakdown of what was valued and what could be improved is appended. This is because views were contradictory, expressed by three or less respondents, and the material is likely to be of interest to a more limited readership.

The interviews were particularly valued: *"I found it really enjoyable to be honest. It was good to be able to express my opinion without anyone else being here to tell me what I should be saying. Relaxing atmosphere I guess. This did very well".*

More general suggestions included more evaluation of productions on the night using feedback forms, more one-to-one interviews and more use of informal groups

Conclusions

The word cloud graphic on what people experience as positive about SOT (p.8) summarises key themes well. It highlighted:

- **People.** People as people rather than primarily identifying as mental health service users, though this identity is also given value.
- **Support**. People as a resource to each other creating a sense of acceptance, belonging, validation and practical assistance. People made very frequent references to being "**helped**".
- **Confidence**. Creating new opportunities for people to develop and practice skills that promote increased confidence and self-esteem.

The same issue of people as people rather than mental health service users also underpins some of SOT key challenges in providing an inclusive, accepting environment that is independent from mainstream services while also sometimes needing to respond to difficult behaviours that risk undermining the experience of the wider group. SOT is clearly a place for creativity and innovation while also exercising a duty of care and creating safety for people when they are experiencing distress.

These issues are already being worked on, but it is recognised that the current staffing configuration places a lot of responsibility on too few shoulders. Investment is needed to create a more robust organisation that is well placed to meet the evident and widely held desire for SOT to extend its activities so that a more people can experience the very great benefits that it offers.

Steve Onyett
September 2015

We see evaluation as an ongoing process and so comments on this report are very welcome. Please contact either Steve Hennessy (Project Co-ordinator) or Steve Onyett (the evaluator) with any reflections that you would like to share.

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Appendix A. Wording of items in the online survey

- About how long ago did you first have contact with the Stepping Out Theatre?
- Are you still involved?
- If "No" when did your involvement end
- Please describe how and why your involvement ended
- Please describe what you have been involved in through your contact with the Stepping Out Theatre.
- What is or was really good about your involvement?
- What is or was not so good or difficult about it?
- What first comes to mind when thinking about the effect that your involvement has had on your life?
- Do you feel your involvement has increased your self-confidence or self esteem?
- Do you feel your involvement has given you a sense of achievement?
- Do you feel your involvement has helped you obtain paid work?
- Do you feel your involvement has helped you to take up educational or voluntary work opportunities?
- Do you feel your involvement has reduced feelings of loneliness or isolation?
- Do you feel your involvement has improved your physical health through activities and exercises?
- Do you feel your involvement has helped you gain new skills?
- If you answered anything other than "Not at all" please describe the new skills you have developed because of your involvement with Stepping Out, and how this has come about.
- Do you feel your involvement has helped you become more reliable (for example being more likely to turn up on time for things)?
- Do you feel your involvement has helped reduced your dependence on forms of coping, such as alcohol, non-prescribed drugs, smoking, etc.?
- Do you feel your involvement has improved your mental health (in your own view)?
- If you answered anything other than "Not at all" please describe the ways in which your mental health is better because of your involvement with Stepping Out.
- Do you feel your involvement has brought about an improvement in your mental health as judged by friends, family or co-workers?
- Have you ever received a mental health diagnosis of any kind?
- Do you currently, or have you ever used alternative or complementary therapies of any kind to help deal with mental health problems or emotional distress?
- Do you currently, or have previously used mental health services?
- Do you feel your involvement has POSITIVELY affected your use of mental health services?
- Do you feel your involvement has brought about an improvement in your mental health as judged by mental health staff working with you?
- Do you feel your involvement has ever prevented you from being hospitalised?
- Do you feel your involvement has helped reduced your use of prescribed medication for mental distress?
- How has your time with Stepping Out Theatre affected how you feel about yourself as someone who uses or has used mental health services?
- How has your time with Stepping Out Theatre affected how you feel about mental health services and the people that use them?

- If 10 was the best possible outcome or result of your involvement on a 1 to 10 scale, how would you rate the outcome/results of your involvement with Stepping Out Theatre overall?
- What would have got you to 10 on your rating of the outcome/results of your involvement?
- If 10 was the perfect experience on a 1 to 10 scale, how would you rate your experience with Stepping Out Theatre overall?
- What would have got you to 10 on your rating of the experience of your involvement?
- Taking account of all that you have said about your involvement, would you say that the Stepping Out Theatre meets a need (or needs) in your life?
- If there was one word to capture your experience so far, what would it be?
- What are your hopes for the future of the Stepping Out Theatre and the projects it runs?
- Please provide any thoughts on how we should evaluate the Stepping Out Theatre. For example how have you found filling out this form? What could be better? What worked well?
- What is your gender?
- How old are you?
- What is your level of education?
- What is your ethnic group?
- Further description of your ethnic group

Appendix B. Diverse personal concerns that are difficult to generalise to the wider company

Concerns voiced about the company and its practice from one or two respondents included the following:

- More time on acting needed (2 references)
- More variety of plays. (2)
- Concern that SOT is stuck on particular themes (2; e.g. *"every big play has Arabic dancing regardless"*)
- Better communication (2)
- Less wasted time at rehearsals (2)
- More accessible venues
- More one-to-one time with trustees.
- Anticipating the come down: *"The show is quite cathartic and stimulates people a lot and then there is a period where there is a sort of come down, you know. We are starting to try and look out for that and have trips that come after that. .. When the shows end people go back to their own lives. Just a case of managing the come down".*
- Wanting more professional support for dealing with personal issues
- Big shows are TOO inclusive
- Shorter breaks
- Shorter rehearsals
- A stronger stage management team
- Time consuming rehearsal schedule.

The personal concerns that were explicitly framed as personal and not applicable to the company included the following:

- Wanting bigger parts
- More variety of parts offered
- Wanting to change the balance of activities undertaken.
- Being challenged by the topics covered.
- Being made to face personal demons: *"Facing my own internal blocks and difficulties has been challenging, but also enriching. There is always a struggle dealing with your own demons".*
- Feeling their criticisms were being swept under the carpet and feedback ignored.
- Honouring the commitment to the project required.
- Concern over personal impact on others of their own mental health: *"My mental health can interfere with how I interact with others"*
- Learning the parts
- Meeting new people
- Wanting more opportunity to be involved at a professional level
- More payment
- More time to spend with SOT
- Wanting to read for people who are absent
- Wanting to offer improvisation workshops
- Wishing lived in Bristol
- Disliking the scheduling of the big play in the year

Appendix C. Specific recommendations for improvements in the evaluation process.

Aspects of the form liked.

- Comprehensive (4 references)
- Good mix of questions
- Easy to do (3)
- Structure (2)
- Scope to express yourself (2)
- Clarity
- Not too long
- Open items
- Use of scales
- Good to have tick boxes for those people who are less able to articulate their feelings
- The balance of fixed responses and open questions
- Item on meeting need
- Being reminded of the positive things
- Being able to help SOT
- Being paid

Suggestions for change

- Do it more often
- Establish a defined membership of SOT
- Include reviews from theatre productions
- Measure the proportion of audience members that are service users
- More on productions

Suggested changed to the form

- Less repetition (4 references)
- Shorten (3)
- Make less stressful (3)
- Not really geared to my role (3)
- Ask people if they “have an illness”
- More cues to skip items if note applicable, e.g. earlier routing around mental health questions if do not have a history of mental health service use
- Include a spell checker
- Have an indicator of progress (page x of x)
- Use “Not applicable” rather than “Not at all”
- More scope to describe what not liked.
- Paper version preferred
- Avoid scales