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Evaluation of Road Safety Scotland's Theatre in Education Performances

Executive Summary

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Background

Each year, Road Safety Scotland (RSS) commissions educational theatre performances, carried out for the benefit of primary and secondary pupils across all of Scotland's 32 local authorities, as well as a number of community audiences around the country. The theatre programme is part of a wider approach to present important road safety messages to as wide an audience as possible and to protect some of Scotland's most vulnerable road users.

Four performances are currently included within the programme, these being:

- The Journey (for Primary 6 or 7 pupils) - which explores developing relationships between a group of young friends as they journey through primary school towards secondary school and looks at different influences on their behaviour
- School Daze (for Secondary 1 pupils) - which focusses on peer influence and personal choice in relationships and risk-taking at the point of transition to secondary school
- Friends Disunited (for Secondary 5/6 pupils) - which deals with the enjoyment and responsibilities involved in becoming a driver and getting your first car. It follows the lives of four friends at secondary school and into adulthood
- Better Late than Dead on Time (for community audiences) - an inter-generational performance that looks at the impact of driver and pedestrian behaviour on one family

An independent evaluation of the Theatre in Education (TiE) programme was commissioned by Transport Scotland to establish if it was fit for purpose as well as to explore value for money of the programme. Recommendations for improving the programme and performances were also posited.

Methodology

The evaluation focussed on the impact that the performances had on their audience's attitudes towards road safety, as well as capturing self-reported change in behaviour that may result from watching the shows. It also explored the processes involved in delivering the programme, wider awareness of the RSS TiE resources and how the theatre performances fit alongside other road safety activities at the school and local authority level.

School performances

School audiences completed baseline and follow-up surveys (i.e. before and after watching the shows) capturing self-reported propensity for engaging in a range of dangerous road safety behaviours, as well as attitudes about how risky those behaviours were (tailored to the content of each show). Pupil focus groups/workshops were also run to gather feedback on the day performances were delivered and teachers provided feedback either in person or by telephone. Each performance was evaluated separately in four different schools.

Community performances

For Better Late Than Dead on Time (BLTDOT), a more opportunistic approach was required, based on willingness of organisers and audiences to take part, ethics and practicalities of gathering feedback on the day performances were delivered (e.g. some audiences were transient and varied week-to-week, and others accommodated vulnerable adults or young people who were unable to give the required consent to take part). Feedback was collected in different ways, to fit with the needs and preferences of the different audiences and the organisers. This included a mix of mini-groups, focus groups, exit interviews, surveys and interactive feedback tasks. Overall, four sites were visited to evaluate BLTDOT.

Local authority interviews

All Scottish local authorities were invited to contribute to the evaluation by way of a short telephone interview. Interviews explored awareness of the RSS TiE programme, perceptions of its usefulness and impact as well as information on local delivery models for road safety education more generally. A total of 16 local authorities took part in the research.

Main findings

Audience perceptions and impacts

Overall, feedback for each performance was very positive, and audiences appeared to engage well, commenting positively on both content and mode of delivery. There was very little that audiences suggested could be done to improve the performances except, perhaps, some streamlining of messages and making shows even more interactive (especially for school audiences).

Despite very positive feedback, however, the evaluation showed that there was no measurable impact on attitudes to road safety risks or on self-reported frequency of engaging in risky road safety behaviours. For school pupils, this was largely because audiences were already confident in their road safety awareness and felt that they were 'safe' in their current behaviours. There was some evidence of increased willingness to challenge the unsafe behaviours of others as a direct result of watching the performances, but this was not widespread. Verbal feedback and posters produced by children clearly showed that they had paid attention, and had extracted core messages around risk. Overall, however, it seems that the

performances helped to consolidate children and young people's existing road safety knowledge and awareness, rather than substantively adding to it.

For the community performance, although it was not possible to evaluate impact *per se*, a broad demographic of audience members took part in the research and again, provided positive feedback. BLTDOT was seen as having 'something for everyone' and thus meeting its objective as an inter-generational resource with wide appeal. Audiences perceived that they were already 'road safety aware' and felt that the performances enhanced their existing knowledge and behaviours rather than teaching them anything new.

Teachers

Teachers reported positively on the programme at all levels of the curriculum, and delivery of road safety messages by a touring theatre company was particularly welcomed by schools. Teaching staff indicated that pupils preferred this particular mode of delivery and especially liked the relatability of the performances for pupils (which was reiterated by pupils themselves). Learning professionals confirmed that there was little other road safety education delivery at any of the stages targeted by the performances, especially at secondary level. There was also negligible follow-up activity for the performances in schools. Learning professionals suggested that, if the programme were removed, other competing priorities, as well as a lack of space in the curriculum, may mean that road safety messages are not delivered at all.

While teachers were perhaps unsure that directly measurable outcomes or impacts would result, they welcomed that the programme provided useful reminders for children and young people to help keep them safe, especially at the key points of transition from primary to secondary school, and at the point of increased independence entering adulthood.

Local authorities

Local authority representatives, including Road Safety Teams and education contacts, provided unanimous support for the theatre programme. They endorsed many of the views of learning professionals regarding the quality of the programme and the positive engagement demonstrated by audiences. They also reiterated that, without the programme, schools were unlikely to receive alternative provision, due to limited resources and competing priorities for local authority staff, including those with designated road safety roles.

Community group organisers

Organisations working in the community to accommodate the BLTDOT performance also reported very positively and saw this type of programme as something that could be promoted even further in the future to reach an even wider audience. Improving accessibility by giving communities more advanced warning of the tour, to allow them to plan suitable spaces and advertise the performance to their potential audiences, was seen as the best way to maximise reach and impact going forward.

Wider cross-cutting themes

Understanding and relatability

Understanding of the content of performances was clear, with no ambiguity about the road safety themes being conveyed. Relatability was seen as a real strength of all tours and the use of humour, empathy and emotional impact to draw people into the performances seem to work well. All plays resonated with their target audiences, giving age appropriate messages.

Recall and mode of delivery

Recall was also strong in the short term and both school and community audiences alike welcomed theatre as a mode of delivery. This was especially true for older school pupils and communities where exposure to educational drama of this kind was described as limited. The performances provided 'something new' which made them more appealing than alternative road safety resources. The fact that performances were seen as relevant and credible also possibly aided recall. All performances were considered to be dynamic and the length of time was also appropriate to keep audiences engaged (the exception, perhaps, being *The Journey* which was seen as slightly too long for some of the younger children).

There was particularly good immediate recall of hard-hitting statistics presented in the performances; however, the evaluation noted that there was scope to ensure that statistical data is presented more accurately and in a way that people can clearly understand, otherwise there is a risk of causing unnecessary alarm. The theatre approach allows complex messages to be conveyed face-to-face with an opportunity for audiences to ask questions, and for actors to communicate the context of some of the statistics which, if taken at face value, can easily be misinterpreted.

Other observations

There were no clear gender differences observed in findings across any of the audience groups and no notable differences by geography. This is encouraging as it indicates that all tours have equal resonance for all.

The youngest audiences perhaps showed the greatest awareness of the need to be a positive role model for others, especially younger peers. This was less evident for older groups. What does seem clear, however, is that children, young people and adults are more likely to see themselves as victims of others' unsafe behaviour rather than as perpetrators of risk themselves. This is something which could perhaps be challenged further in the future to make clear that positive intentionality does not necessarily link to immunity to accidents.

Overall, there were no measurable impacts on road safety attitudes, or self-reported frequency of engaging in risky road safety behaviours, largely because audiences felt that they were already safe in their road safety behaviours. This was especially true for adult audiences although all age groups expressed confidence in their

existing road safety awareness. Despite this, the programme provides a useful reminder to all and reinforces what audiences already know.

The findings in context

A review of other types of road safety interventions delivered in the same or similar way to the TiE programme, and to similar audiences suggests that theatre is a very popular way of delivering important health and safety messages but that it is extremely challenging for such resources to change attitudes or behaviours at the objectively measurable level. This inevitably means a reliance on more individualised qualitative feedback which, in the case of RSS resources, was unanimously positive.

The independent evaluation corroborated many of the findings from the in-house evaluations of the TiE programme that are run each year by the commissioned theatre company i.e. pupils and adults provided positive feedback regarding the educational content and relatability of shows and the evaluation showed that the programme was in high demand. It did not, however, replicate in-house findings related to impacts. The main difference in approach between the ongoing and independent evaluation was the time at which pupils completed the surveys, with in-house follow-up evaluations completed on the day or very shortly after watching the performance. This may suggest, therefore, that while change in attitudes and intention to change behaviour are present early on, this diminishes over time. Indeed, at the two/three-month follow-up period used for the current research, these changes could not be seen. This provides important insight into what might be needed to ensure that learning is maximised including, for example, following up TiE delivery at suitable intervals in schools to ensure that road safety messages are retained amongst the plethora of other new knowledge that pupils receive.

Value for Money

Other than reducing the reach of the TiE programme, the evaluation showed that there appears to be little scope for cost savings - money is already spent efficiently, and there are few costs incurred beyond the core RSS allocation. Added value is achieved from the guaranteed reach that theatre provides when compared to online and printed resources, i.e. captive audiences. There is also a strong probability, based on learning from the research, that if TiE was removed or reduced, it would not be replaced with alternative provision by schools or local authorities themselves. Indeed, there was nothing to suggest that local authorities or individual schools would proactively explore options to fill a gap left by TiE if this occurred, as competing priorities in the curriculum alongside limited local authority budgets means that other activities are prioritised. The value in retaining TiE, although not measurable, is that this situation of 'no provision' is avoided.

Recommendations

Given the positive feedback and additionality evidenced by the evaluation, it seems that little change is needed to ensure continued engagement of audiences with the TiE programme and to maximise value for money in the future. Only four improvement recommendations were posited, based on the learning, these being:

Recommendation 1:

To reduce the volume of different messages covered by The Journey, to maximise engagement, recall and impact of the most important road safety themes for this audience. Specifically, retaining the focus on pedestrian behaviour but strengthening this further to reflect new and changing social pressures which might influence child pedestrians seems appropriate. Exploring opportunities to make this performance even more interactive may also be appropriate.

Recommendation 2:

To consider expanding the School Daze performance to include S2 pupils, as this performance seems to be particularly well received. This would also make performances more staggered across the P7 to S5 range meaning that there are no significant gaps in road safety education during this phase.

Recommendation 3:

Reducing delivery of Friends Disunited to younger pupils only, (i.e. those in S5) and to reconsider the content to make it more interactive. Pupils generally seemed receptive to receiving new road safety messages but, given the crowded curriculum at this particular stage, it may be that following up S5 face-to-face delivery with a complementary 'take away' resource at S6 is a more effective way of consolidating learning for this group, i.e. something that reminds pupils of the key messages but can be read in pupils' own time and at the time of their choice.

Recommendation 4:

More advanced planning of the community performances to ensure that diversity in audiences is achieved and audience numbers are maximised. This may need to involve local authorities or RSS being more proactive in identifying and recruiting suitable audiences and more lead time being made available to the theatre company to facilitate bookings. Identification and recruitment of suitable community audiences needs to be something that occurs on a continuous basis, rather than occurring only late in the calendar at the point that the tour is ready to commence, it seems.

A fifth recommendation was posited that relates not to the TiE performances directly but rather to the onward consolidation and measurement of impact going forward:

Recommendation 5:

To explore ways of more robustly measuring impacts of the performances on pupil attitudes to risk and risk-taking behaviour as well as incorporating measures of increased knowledge in the short, medium and long term.

Although ongoing evaluation by the commissioned theatre company helps to capture this to some degree, introducing a more robust and independent benefits management system seems appropriate. This should include accurately identifying, quantifying and analysing audience feedback and planning ongoing changes in response. This, in turn, would enable value for money to be assessed more reliably in the future and optimisation of the benefits that the programme seeks to deliver.

Conclusions

Road Safety Scotland's theatre in education programme was universally welcomed and praised by all who took part in the current evaluation. Findings from the research were all very positive and suggest that there is a strong appetite for the continued delivery of TiE among learning professionals, pupils and local authorities alike. There was little by way of criticism of the organisation or co-ordination of the programme and only minor suggestions for changes to the content to make it even more accessible.

While there may be some scope to refine targeting of different audiences, especially community audiences, the biggest challenge appears to be around getting key partners more involved in consolidating the messages that the programme delivers, especially learning professionals and local authorities. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation also seem key. It is recognised that measuring impacts of this type of resource is challenging, and is not unique to the TiE programme, but more reliable and independent means of assessing impact on an ongoing basis will help to inform the assessment of value in the longer term.

That being said, it is clear that the programme as it currently stands is enjoyed by audiences and provides a valuable opportunity to reach large numbers of children, young people and adults to reinforce the importance of staying safe on Scotland's roads.



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