

MACtile tours

Reducing the fear of the unfamiliar



Image courtesy of The MAC, Belfast

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The MAC, Belfast



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“We wanted to make theatre
at The MAC accessible to
everyone.”

Melissa McMinn

The MAC, Belfast



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The MAC, Belfast

Introducing MACtile tours

The MAC developed MACtile tours to help groups — particularly children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) — to see, touch and experience the venue prior to a visit.

The idea was sparked by years of working with school groups and by one incident in particular. A child with ASD, who was visiting the venue for the first time, became completely overwhelmed on a school visit. The space was busy and unfamiliar and that child never got beyond the foyer; they didn't experience the show.

We want every child that visits The MAC to feel comfortable here so we knew we had to do something. We had to find a way to make the venue feel familiar so groups felt safe and knew what to expect.



The solution

Our learning and participation team came up with the idea of MACtile tours.

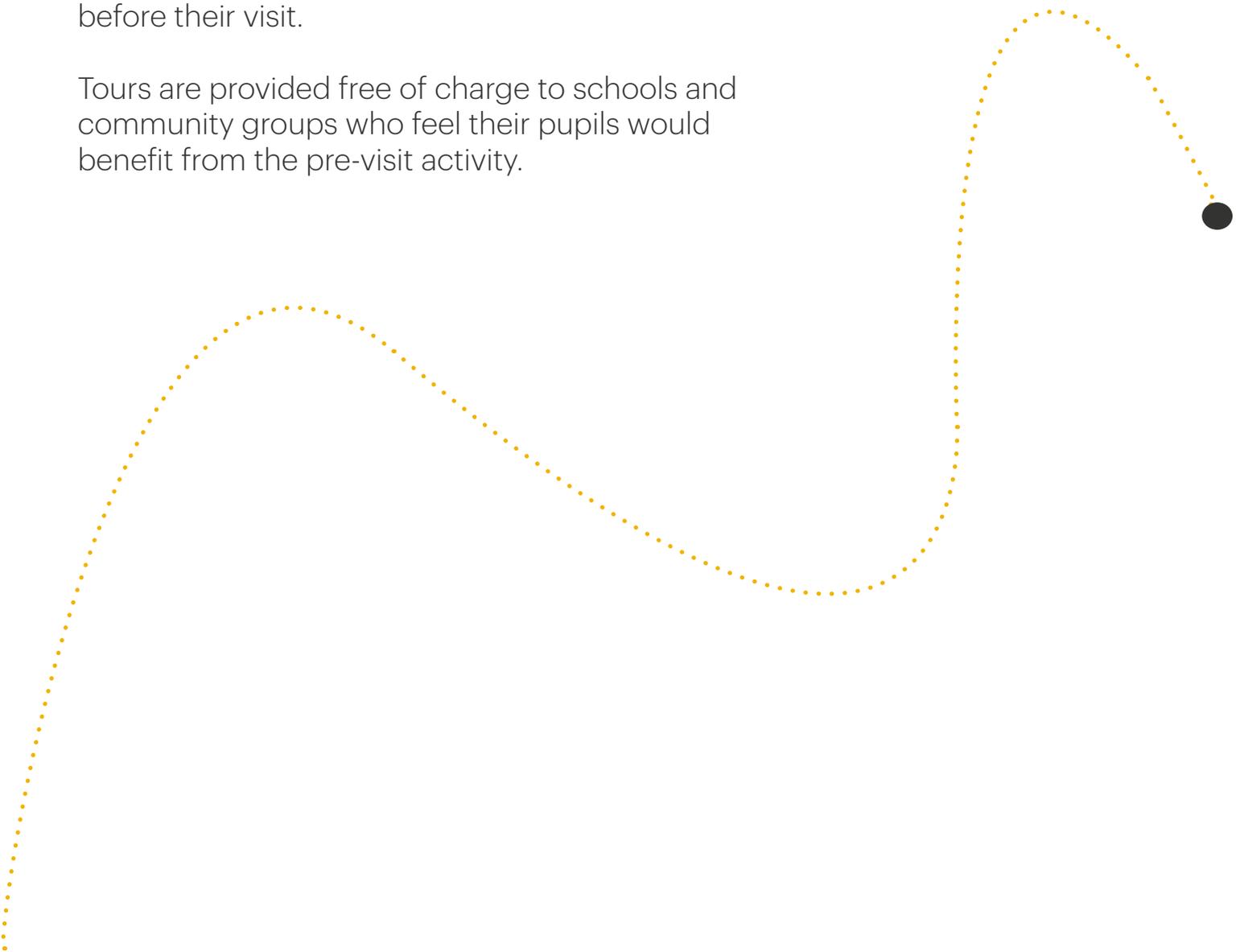
We had a replica of the largest theatre built, complete with model seats, lights, stage and actors. It fits neatly into a box, allowing us to transport it to schools and community groups.

Alongside the model, we developed tactile moodboards featuring samples of costume fabrics and other materials.

We also created a visual presentation in powerpoint showing photos of the venue and staff as well as production shots and snippets of music from the show.

The tours combine all of these elements and allow groups to see, touch and experience the venue before their visit.

Tours are provided free of charge to schools and community groups who feel their pupils would benefit from the pre-visit activity.



What does a MACtile tour involve?

A trained member of staff goes out to the school or community group, equipped with the tactile moodboards and 'theatre in a box'.

They talk children through how they will arrive in the venue, who they will meet, what they might see, and how they will access the theatre via a narrow corridor.

They play samples of music from the show and share photos of the production wherever possible. Sometimes they will show lighting gels and talk about how red might signify danger or blue might signal a cold atmosphere.

Gradually, they bring the venue and show to life and invite children to touch the props and explore the replica model.

The tours are designed to remove any fears of visiting an unfamiliar place so children can relax and enjoy their visit.

Watch the video about MACtile tours:

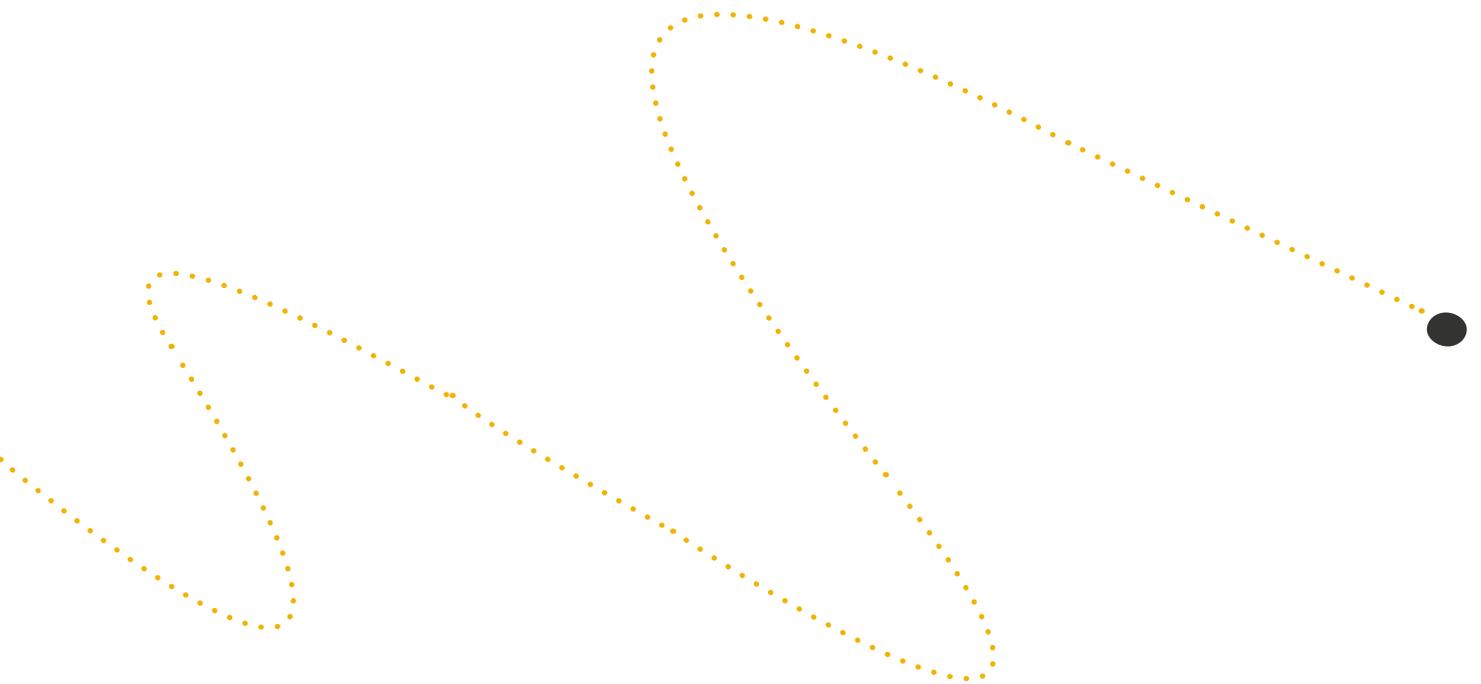


Relaxed performances

Groups who take advantage of the MACtile tours will then attend a relaxed performance. We describe the intended atmosphere of those performances as being the opposite of the 'Quiet Carriage' on a train.

The learning and participation team work with the producers of our Christmas show each year to develop a more relaxed environment. House lights are left up so people can move around and sound levels are reduced to avoid loud bangs.

We also offer a chillout space where children can take a break if they need it. We play a previous recording of the show on a TV screen in that room, which begins 5 minutes after the live show so they don't miss anything.

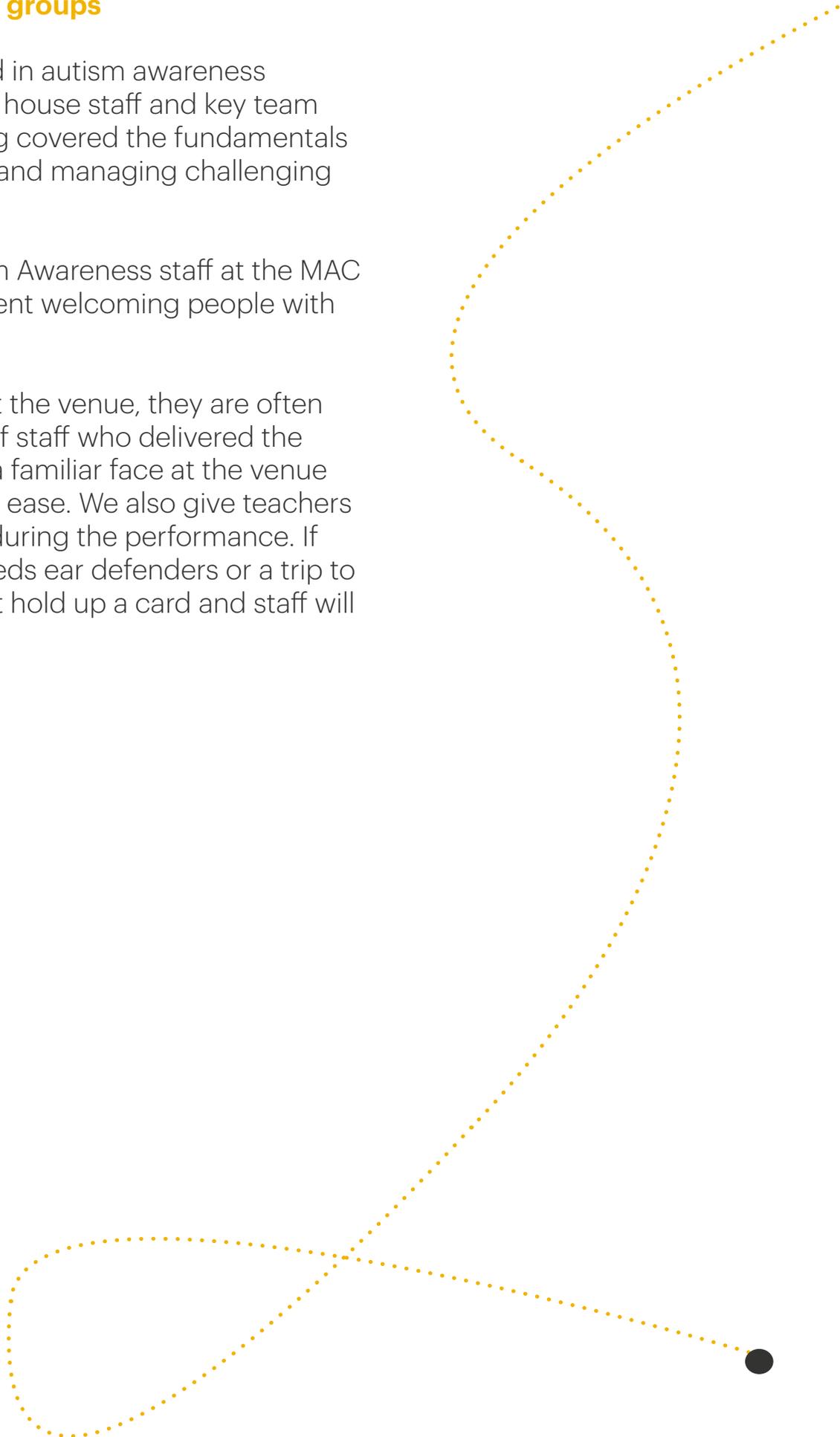


Supporting staff and groups

The MAC has invested in autism awareness training for all front of house staff and key team members. The training covered the fundamentals of anxiety awareness and managing challenging situations.

The accredited Autism Awareness staff at the MAC now feel more confident welcoming people with ASD to the venue.

When groups arrive at the venue, they are often met by the member of staff who delivered the MACtile tour. Having a familiar face at the venue helps set the group at ease. We also give teachers prompt cards to use during the performance. If one of their group needs ear defenders or a trip to the toilet they can just hold up a card and staff will

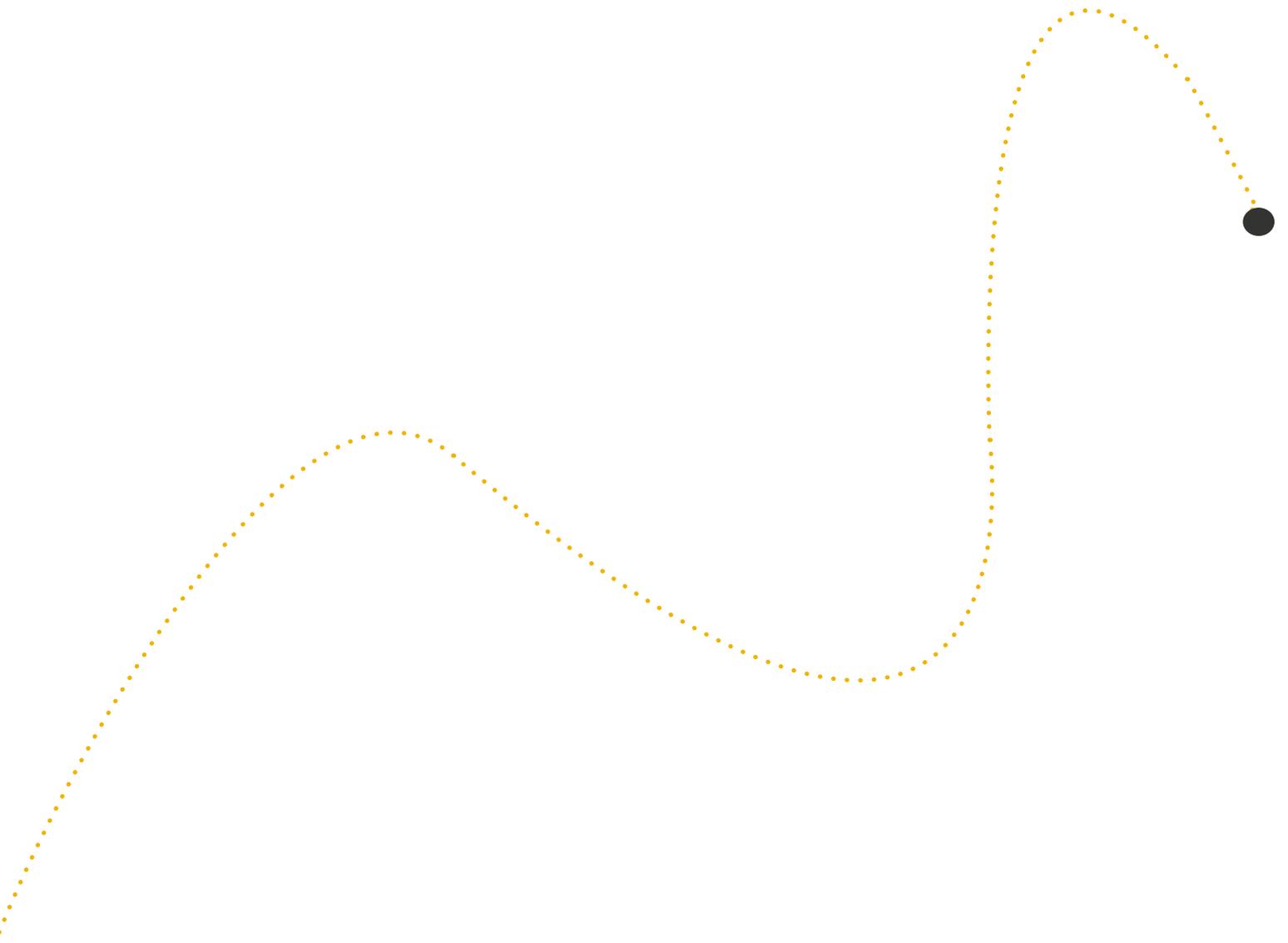


Funding and promotion

We received a small amount of funding in the first year of MACtile tours from Ulster Bank, Arts & Business Northern Ireland, BBC Children in Need and trusts and foundations. The initial funding enabled us to develop the initiative.

Now that MACtile tours are established, The MAC covers the costs of staff time and transport to deliver the tours.

The tours are promoted through the Schools and Community section of our website and offered to groups who book for relaxed performances.



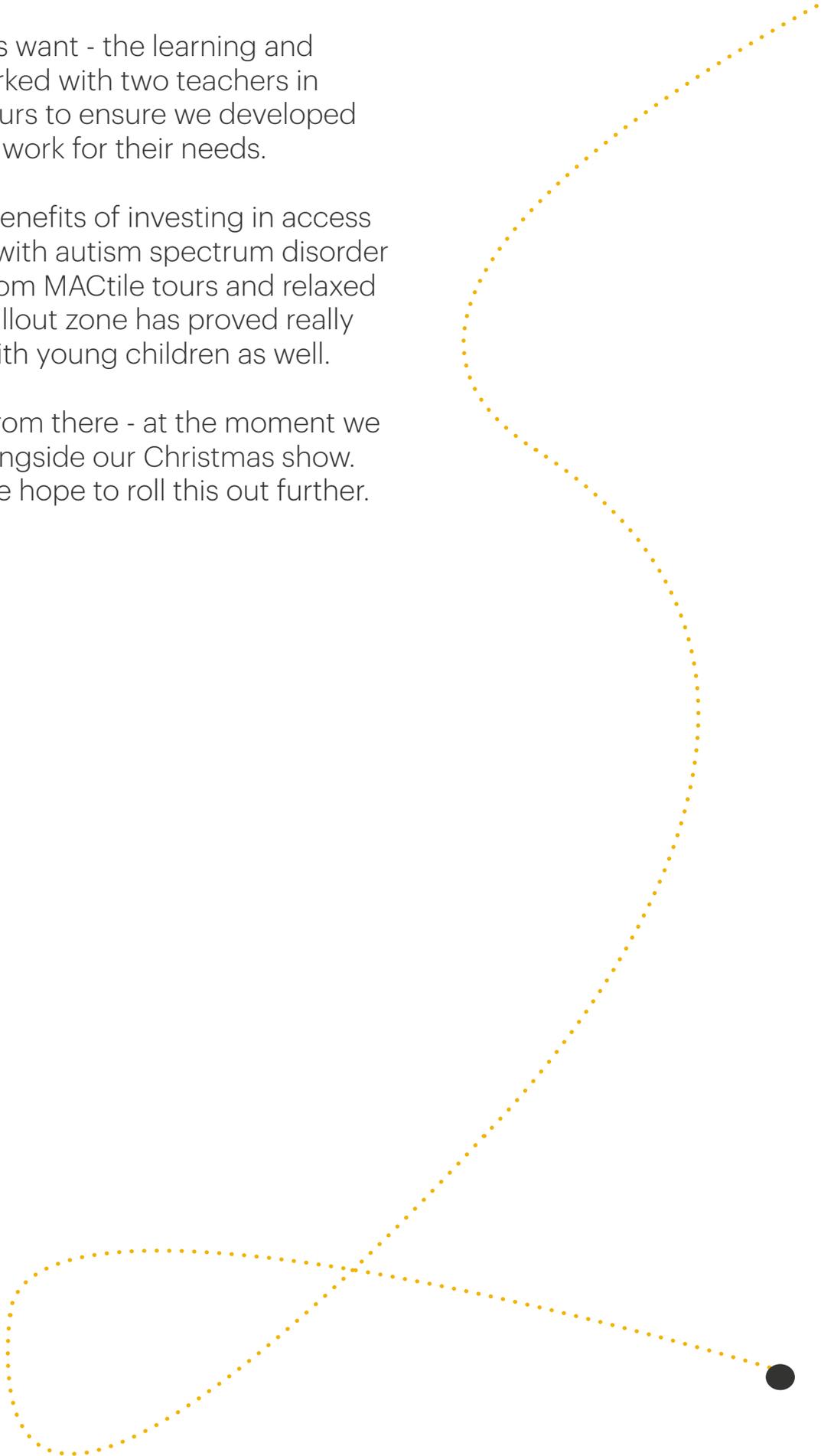
The impact

- Since the launch of MACtile tours in October 2015, 1,030 children have participated.
- The number of school visits to The MAC has increased.
- The child who previously didn't get beyond the foyer took part in a MACtile tour and has now enjoyed his first Christmas show at The MAC.
- Families heard about the chillout zone we provide for relaxed performances. Due to popular demand, we now offer a chillout zone for all performances of the Christmas show.



Recommendations

- Research what schools want - the learning and participation team worked with two teachers in developing MACtile tours to ensure we developed something that would work for their needs.
- Recognise the wider benefits of investing in access - it is not just children with autism spectrum disorder who have benefited from MACtile tours and relaxed performances. The chillout zone has proved really valuable for families with young children as well.
- Start small and build from there - at the moment we offer MACtile tours alongside our Christmas show. Resources allowing, we hope to roll this out further.



“People recognise that the venue has access in mind and really appreciate the attention The MAC pays to making theatre accessible.”

Melissa McMinn

The MAC, Belfast



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