

Case studies: How can the arts and creativity support people who are shielding or vulnerable during Covid-19?

Project: Dance On

Organisation: Yorkshire Dance

Region: Yorkshire & Humber

Introduction

Professional dance artists lead the sessions and explore & offer innovative movement experiences that challenge stereotypes of ageing. We had to reimagine our 'physical' dance sessions by adapting to online video dance sessions, weekly Zoom Dance On classes and Monthly Masterclasses (the first session focusing on Voguing, delivered by Darren Pritchard 'Vogue Mother of the House of Ghetto').



When I found out about the Zoom sessions it was like my prayers were answered. Obviously it's not the same but it was so nice seeing so many faces ... I love hearing the music, it makes you feel free ... It was great trying something new and different and it made me feel young".

We have also engaged participants in a non-digital way such as, sending 'keep in contact' postcards and setting up a dedicated Dance On telephone line. We have frequently telephoned participants for a chat.

When we went into lockdown, we understood that this would be a challenging time for our participants, freelance artists and staff. We wanted to make sure whatever we offered was at the right time and in the right way. We recognised the digital inequalities that would affect any adaptations to our programme. We started by a digital audit of our participants to assess how many of them had access to email/internet and the confidence to use zoom. We were also committed to supporting older people through a personal approach by sending a postcard to all participants, setting up a dedicated telephone number and regular calls. We recognised that the key to the programme's success is enhancing social bonds and connections.

Image credit: Sara Teresa

Funders

Sport England & Public Health Bradford & Leeds

Who is it for?

The Dance On programme is aimed at inactive older people from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Leeds, Bradford and Doncaster. The aim of the programme is to improve health and wellbeing by increasing physical activity and building social connections through dance.

The sessions provide physical activity for people aged 55+ years “disguised” as fun, social dance activity. The sessions are open to all and can be adapted to welcome people with limited mobility and no dance experience. Many of the participants are living with long term health conditions and during the Covid pandemic, have been asked to shield. A high proportion of our participants live alone and have limited social contacts.

What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

Supporting physical health, encouraging social inclusion, combatting loneliness, connecting people who know each other and making new friends.

Where is it happening?

Yorkshire: Bradford/Leeds

Are you working in partnership?

Dance On is a partnership project with One Dance UK, Yorkshire Dance, Doncaster Community Arts (DARTS) and the University of Leeds. At a local level, we work with public health colleagues and a partnership of community networks and voluntary organisations. In Leeds, a key partner is the Neighbourhood networks and the ward community hubs that deliver essential food parcels, medicines etc to vulnerable older people during the Covid pandemic. These organisations helped tailor our offer and promoted opportunities to dance at home to the people they were supporting.

We also offered Zoom Dance On sessions in partnership with Leeds Playhouse to their Heydays members.

We are working with The Mount Hospital (The Leeds Older People Inpatient Services NHS – working with people with mental health needs, dementia and learning disabilities) The occupational therapists encouraged patients to dance together and the team have joined

How many people took/are taking part?

We have had over 150 attendances at our Zoom session May-June 2020

We have had approximately 10,000 views on the Dance On videos (YouTube, Facebook).

For how long has it been happening?

Pre-lockdown, we led over 20 regular weekly sessions in community spaces across Leeds and Bradford. After we went into lockdown, we had to consider how to best support our older participants.

We started offering Zoom sessions in May and also uploaded 8 Dance On videos to our website for people to access at any time and dance at home. The Dance On artists who had been delivering the ‘physical’ sessions made a series of videos varying in style from contemporary, to disco (seated and standing), pop fusion, jazz and funk & soul. It enabled the Dance On participants to ‘find’ their tutor and dance with them. This work is ongoing and we are hoping to update the videos on a regular basis

What were/are the main outputs?

Online classes and workshops

Evaluation:

The Dance On programme is a research project investigating the health and wellbeing benefits of dance as a physical activity for older adults.

The University of Leeds is the research partner and for the (physical sessions) used a combination of ways of gathering data including wearable technology, questionnaires and focus groups. Some of the key headline stats from pre-lockdown have been very encouraging and we are hoping to publish the research in the autumn. Health economic data was also gathered from participants and again looks like showing the Dance On programme is cost effective.

This research has been paused for the time being but we are looking at other ways to evaluate including participants feedback, quotes and focus groups. We are always led by our participants and an example of this the Zoom participants requesting 'staying on for a cuppa' after the session had finished. Our aim we is to listen and respond to older people.

Feedback:

Pearl, 78 years, had been attending and enjoying our weekly Dance On sessions in her local community centre. She had previously taken part in a performance of a flash mob style dance 'Beige' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DN5i2M7blzk&t=13s>

When we went into lockdown Pearl says 'it felt terrible, I just didn't know what I was going to do, I just love dancing. When I found out about the Zoom sessions it was like my prayers were answered. Obviously it's not the same but it was so nice seeing so many faces. Some people I knew – and could say hello but some I didn't. I love hearing the music, it makes you feel free. I do go wrong but then just laugh – at myself and everyone else – not in an unkind way! I was part of the masterclass, I'd seen Michelle Visage on 'Strictly' doing Voguing so sort of knew what it was. It was great trying something new and different and it made me feel young".

Activities Coordinator Kirsty at Ravensdale Care home, Leeds, says "I heard about the Dance On videos and was looking at something fun and uplifting. She continues "residents really enjoyed following the movements on the TV. It was something different and easy to follow and with the support of the staff they managed to be involved. The activity team enjoyed this resource as it supported them"

What have been the challenges and successes for you?

We have made no assumption about what older people would/wouldn't want to do. We have offered a range of ways to engage and stay in contact. We chose not to launch our Dance offer too quickly understanding that most older people needed to adjust to their 'new normal' and ensure that they were being properly supported with food, medicines etc.

- Challenges of digital inequality.
- Success of offering something unusual which doesn't play into ageist stereotypes (e.g vogue workshop).
- Success of the social aspect of the zoom classes – request for a zoom social to complement the existing offer.
- Success of auditing at the beginning to understand our participants varying needs. Responding and reacting to the older people we work with rather than the situation.

Further information

www.yorkshiredance.com/project/dance-on

www.dance-on.org

Yorkshire Dance is a charity employing 20 people and part of Arts Council England's National Portfolio. The charity champions the value of dance and its development in Yorkshire, creating opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to see, make and take part in high quality dance.