



# **How older people's dance groups become ongoing and regular**

Mary Schwarz

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## Executive summary

This report is the result of research commissioned by the arts charity Aesop in partnership with People Dancing, to uncover the ‘stories’ behind the ‘stats’ – the statistical findings – from the research report *Older people’s dance activities – the first UK survey (2016)* written by People Dancing, co-commissioned with Aesop, that 90% of activities were ‘ongoing and regular’.

The purposes of the research were to inform how Aesop could meet the aim for its Dance to Health falls prevention maintenance programme groups to become self-run after 12 months and to share learning about the success factors for older people’s dance groups more widely.

Research methodologies were based on a qualitative approach. Observational visits were made to three dance groups, which also involved informal conversations with a total of 15 group members, and 16 semi-structured interviews (face to face and by telephone) held with a mix of dance artists, dancers and people in support roles. In addition, the raw data from the People Dancing report was trawled for relevant information and a small review of other dance and health related reports undertaken.

Key headlines from the research findings were:

### *Setting up and running older people’s dance groups*

- Practical success factors related to the appropriateness of venue; space; travel; transport and timing in relation to the specific dance group
- Volunteers contributed in organisational, social and artistic roles; there was a clear need for appropriate support and training; and a person centred, asset-based approach can uncover skills within a group
- The constitutional status of groups was informed by a chosen ‘form follows function’ approach; independent groups can retain an active relationship with the organisation that started them
- The maximum number of ‘people in the room’ (as opposed to group members) was determined by a duty of care and quality of experience, so is specific to the group, space and nature of the activity

### *Artistic vision, mission and activities*

- Groups successfully reflected what they did artistically and who they wanted to communicate with in their vision, mission and/or promotional material
- Performances and a wide range of social and other cultural activities helped sustain and develop members’ interest

### *Financial models of ongoing and regular groups*

- Groups had a similar pattern of development in terms of a well-funded start and a combination of member fees and grant or in-kind support needed to continue once the original funding had ceased

- Groups were sensitive to balancing economics, quality and safety with due attention to their members' situations

### *Public engagement and communications*

- Offering taster sessions was a key way of generating interest, while some groups were established by working with, under or for health-related initiatives
- Health, enjoyment, variety, creativity and social aspects were key messages in communications, along with having a professional dance artist
- Aside of groups comprising members referred through health services, word of mouth was the most used and most successful form of recruitment
- Retention was a concern of many groups leading to regular recruitment campaigns, where member involvement in designing material evidencing the participant experience was valued and effective
- Generation of a spirit of belonging in the group was influenced by the dance artist and their relationship with the group as well as relationships within the group; there was a recognition of the time it takes for a group identity to develop; and both dance artists and group members made particular efforts to make new members feel welcome

### *Quality and qualities*

- The quality and qualities of the dance artist (their artistic, teaching and personal skills and attributes) were key determinants of success
- The quality of experience for group members was based on the aesthetic integrity of the activities

The research showed that across the range of different types of dance groups, there were many commonalities in terms of needs and challenges, while to be successful, groups had to be sensitive and responsive to their local context and specific members.

Findings have generated key considerations and possibilities for venue choice, constitutional status, financing, recruitment and retention that can be applied and pursued by other dance groups.

Key factors enabling sustainability – within the realistic context that to become ongoing and regular, a group requires subsidy of some form – are the quality of the joint endeavour of the dance artist and dancers making dance and the active involvement of members in the development of a group.

*'The teacher is the one thing that is the most important.'*

Dance group member

*'I think every group will have a particular context and it's important to acknowledge and respond to this. It makes the group stronger.'*

Dance artist

## 1 Introduction and brief

This report is the result of research commissioned by Aesop, an arts charity dedicated to realising the potential of the arts to transform lives, and People Dancing, the development and membership organisation for community and participatory dance, working in the UK and internationally.

Aesop is currently focused on arts and health, and is running a falls prevention programme, Dance to Health, which offers older people the choice of a dance-based alternative to existing exercise-based programmes. Following a successful pilot which completed in July 2016, a Phase 1 Roll-out 'Test & Learn' programme is taking place between April 2017 and September 2019, comprising Improvement ('treatment') and Maintenance ('social prescribing') programmes.

The research brief was to uncover the 'stories' behind the 'stats' – the statistical findings – from the research report *Older people's dance activities – the first UK survey* (2016) written by People Dancing, co-commissioned with Aesop, that 90% of activities were 'ongoing and regular'.

The purpose of the research, which took place between October 2017 and January 2018, was to:

- inform how Aesop can meet the aim for its Dance to Health Maintenance programme groups to evolve within 12 months into affiliated self-run Dance to Health groups
- share learning about the success factors for older people's dance groups more widely in support of this area of work

This report covers:

- research methodology
- findings
- what this tells us

Appendices include the research questions provided by Aesop, consultees and documents reviewed.

The report uses the term 'dance artist' to encompass those who call themselves dance practitioners or dance teachers ie those who lead dance sessions and 'dancer' or 'group member' for those participating, in the context of an inclusive approach to older dancers.

## 2 Research methodology

A research inception meeting was held with Tim Joss, Chief Executive and Founder of Aesop, and Chris Stenton, Chief Executive of People Dancing.

The brief required a mainly qualitative approach, which comprised visits to dance groups and one-to-one semi-structured conversations, face to face or by telephone. In addition, a short document review was undertaken to elicit any contextual evidence, including trawling the raw data from the *Older people's dance activities – the first UK survey* for relevant findings.

Three different types of groups were visited:

- an independent, self-led group
- a dance artist led group
- an organisation led group

The visits involved observation of the session and its context, along with informal conversations with group members beforehand and in the social time afterwards. Conversations involved a total of 15 dancers.

Specific one to one discussions were held with:

- three dancers
- six dance artists
- seven people in 'supporting' roles, including artistic direction, management and coordination

While specific research questions were provided by Aesop (see **Appendix I**), in practice these were used as prompts within conversations, rather than as an ordered list to work through. Consultees were very generous with their time and taking a less formal approach supported them in telling their story and sharing their ideas. A full list of consultees is given in **Appendix II** and their vital contribution to this research is acknowledged with sincere thanks.

## 3 Findings

This section brings together the research findings under the Aesop provided research headings, with summarised questions, and includes other areas arising through the conversations.

### 3.1 Setting up and running older people's dance groups

*The success factors and barriers for an older people's dance group to set up effectively and develop, self-run and sustainable*

Consultation revealed a range of success factors – principles as well as practicalities – which underpin effective set up and continuation of an older people's dance group.

Practically, these include the following:

- venue and space, which needs to have the following characteristics:
  - welcoming (in terms of the physical environment, host and venue staff)
  - accessible (including *'literally being able to get through the door'*)
  - clean, preferably sprung, floor
  - heated and lit appropriately, with ready access to environmental controls
  - enough and stable chairs
  - enough room for the number in the group
  - near to where members live (although in one case, given the specific health related benefits of a group, some members travelled quite a distance)
  - preferably a general community or arts space when people are able to travel
  - an appropriate room in a care setting whenever dance activity needs to be brought to people living there, which can also – but not always – be used successfully for other older people. In the latter situation, consultation with prospective venue providers and users is key: care settings may be positively keen to open up their facilities to the wider community as well as help prepare people for a potential move from their own home and on the other hand, older people may not want (at least to start with) to associate themselves with such institutions.
- travel and transport:
  - near to a bus stop
  - with parking, that is free, available and easy to negotiate
  - with shared lifts, taxi cards etc possible to arrange
- timing:
  - regular and for many consultees, as continuous as possible rather than just term time
  - for groups where some members are working, 6 to 7 pm fits well
  - with a dedicated social time with refreshments

In terms of principles, several consultees noted it was a good underlying principle to have dance groups specifically for older people – and at the same time, not apply restrictive stereotypes. These related to the different ideas about the *'ages of older'*, with an emphasis on what people can do (which can include more than they think) rather than a deficit model, and on people's creativity and contribution rather than them being passive recipients. The quotations below show this:

*'Buy in comes from when you're not treated like older people as such.'*

*'Start from the dance... Leave age outside the door.'*

*'How old is old?'*

*'Where are the old people? I'm 87 and I'm not old!'*

*'The right age group...having a group solely for older people makes the participants feel more relaxed. We all learn things at different speeds and we all help each other, something that [our dance artist] also actively encourages.'*

*'It's about a creative way of engaging with ageing well, rather than an approach of "Let's stop you doing this".'*

While the focus is on dance, recognising the social element of a group is also a key principle, one to be valued and supported (see more detail in the sections below).

The consultation showed that fruitful decisions about a group are best made when everyone's view is taken into consideration, regardless of whether the group is self-led, dance artist led or organisation led, while respecting where control lies.

*'Decisions? Everybody makes them. Ideas are filtered through me – that's part of the call – but I don't make decisions.'*

Other less positive examples were heard, as follows:

- a dancer feeding back to a coordinator on the difference between the advertised and actual time of a group, commenting on the impact this could have on people organising other aspects of their lives. It appeared group members had not been involved in any discussion about this
- dancers not fully understanding the background to the 'start stop' nature of the group. While they had a broad appreciation of the group being funding dependent, which led to a feeling of *'being in the hands of others'*, the details of the situation had not been explained to them. This militated against them being able to contribute actively to the future of the group

Individual autocratic committee members can create significant problems, but if a committee makes a decision, that is what will happen – with the contracted dance artist (who has been through a rigorous appointment process) needing to accept it.

While the research included examples of thriving committees running groups, to become self-run and financially sustainable takes time – and strategic, sensitive support for a step-by-step process that starts small, for example:

*'Ask them to run the tea and coffee and little by little, they'll learn how to take over.'*

Another consultee shared how a community development approach would be required: supporting group members to understand what's required to run a group,



encouraging them to offer their ideas, building on their commitment and energies, uncovering, developing and harnessing their skills and expertise.

The People Dancing research consultees also commented on the need to be clear about intentions and the involvement of members in the future of the group, as in these examples:

*‘Be clear about what the group is and what you want to achieve. Make this clear to the participants. Quite often, when people see ‘dance’, they will have their own fixed impression of what this is going to be and what they want they want to get out of it. If what they then experience on arrival does not match with these expectations, it can cause a lot of anxiety or conflict. If a leader then wants to allow their members to contribute towards the shape of the company and its activities, they can do, but at least there is a structure in place that will set some boundaries.’*

*‘Be clear about your aims, what you are offering, but be responsive to ideas from the group so they feel respected and invested in the sessions.’*

*‘Allow for participants’ suggestions, contributions to give ownership to the group.’*

#### *The nature and role of volunteers*

Volunteers with the groups contributing directly to this piece of research were current or past group members. This is interesting to consider in relation to the comments about community development above, and also the spirit of belonging as below, in terms of a ‘ground up approach’ to the development of a group.

Volunteer roles can range from the organisational to the artistic, including supporting other individuals in the group and running warm ups or part of rehearsals in groups that are well developed artistically. Peer Motivators can be key to recruitment and settling people in, and, with appropriate training (see below), could provide a level of carefully managed support. Having a similar aged person lead and show movements has its advantages in terms of providing specific encouragement and motivation:

*‘If they see you doing something they will try. The dance instructor moves in a different way. I’m stiff, so when they see me, they try a bit harder. You follow someone if they’ve the same problems.’*

One consultee noted that some groups were in areas of disadvantage, which meant that there were not the ‘ex-professionals’ to draw on that might be available in other places. However, with a people centred, asset-based approach, the range of skills and experiences which dancers bring with them – waiting to be uncovered or translated into this different context – and planning from the start to support and develop members into organisational roles, dance groups were seen to have the potential to ‘grow their own’.

The *Older people's dance activities – the first UK survey* reports just over a half (53%) of respondents used volunteers. The data set behind the report provides some further information about the nature, role and training of volunteers, showing this is particular to the type and purpose of the group. Although training was not always provided, consultees in this research were very clear this was needed.

Aesop's own experience of volunteers within the Dance to Health programme includes 'Buddy' volunteers – a family member, friend or carer interested in encouraging and supporting their loved one to take part in the programme to build or regain their independence and confidence. Buddies have been shown to have a positive impact on continued attendance and better outcomes, evidencing a key volunteer role among others that support the success of a group.

### *The advantages and disadvantages of different constitutional forms*

Groups consulted or described during the research fell into the following types:

- unincorporated association / community constitution
- company limited by guarantee
- company limited by guarantee and registered charity
- *and groups run by a self-employed independent dance artist*

No consultees questioned their group's constitution or legal status, which seemed to suit their needs, in terms of 'form follows function': they constituted to reflect and support what they wanted to do. One group had recently successfully applied for charitable status as this would open up new funding possibilities. For another group, being an unincorporated association with a bank account was sufficient for their scale of operation and acceptable to local funders. In one case, dance artists had become an artists' collective with a community constitution to manage funding that had been secured for group with which they had been working.

Dance artists consulted worked as described in the People Dancing report – as '*microbusinesses, operating a range of business and financial models*', with a mixed economy of running groups directly and being contracted to run groups, as well as deliver other types of dance work eg mentoring, consultancy.

Rather than focusing on how their group was constituted, consultees explored the advantages and disadvantages of being self-run, which included the following:

#### *Advantages*

- the dance artist being '*free to do the creative stuff*', with organising, hall bookings, money taking and so on the responsibility of committee members
- being able to gain more local support and interest as its '*run by the people*'
- being able to access local funding – whether from:
  - local businesses as sponsors

- businesses locally (for instances the local donation schemes supermarkets such the Cooperative and Waitrose run)
- Trusts making awards on a location and/or age basis
- parish/town and district councils
- other connections group members have

There was also an example of a group that had become self-run and was raising funds for itself but was also still partnering with the dance organisation that set it up originally. The dance organisation still made the arrangements with the dance artist or any substitute needed.

#### *Disadvantages*

- not being part of an organisation makes recognition of the group's work difficult, although this was mitigated where the local dance agency convened activity around older people's dance
- opportunities are more difficult to pick up on, such as getting involved in dance gatherings and festivals
- *'being in receipt of funding makes you beholden'*

#### *The maximum feasible number of members*

The research showed the following were key factors in relation to attendance, rather than membership per se:

- safe practice: meeting individual needs and group space requirements in terms of the venue and dance artist to dancer ratio
- financial viability: securing an adequate average attendance from the total number of dancers belonging to a group, usually achieved through maintaining a consistent core membership in the context of knowing the group's financial break-even point
- group identity: the group's sense of itself as a group, which can conflict with financial viability (for example, a group which did not want to grow beyond its original eight members)
- artistic dialogue: being able to dance with everyone, with meaningful engagement

With an older people's dance group there can be specific medical condition related attendance challenges in addition to 'normal' ill health, holidays, work commitments etc that any group experiences. Also, when a group gets too large for safe practice, it is not always possible to find enough new people to form two financially viable groups. Splitting a group can also of course affect the sense of identity that has been established. This approach may come from the perspective of 'running a class'

rather than developing 'a group' and where it is the 'numbers' (people, income) that may be driving development rather than the quality of the group experience.

Similar to the findings in the *Older people's dance activities – the first UK survey*, consultation for this research found that groups ranged from 8 to 25 members. Dance artists had some clear views on size in terms of 'people in the room'. While one reported that working on their own with 20 in a non-health specific group working in a medium sized was too many, another reported that working with another artist with 20 in a health specific group in a large hall was also too many. As one consultee said about numbers:

*'You work back from the duty of care.'*

Many consultees talked about *'trying to get a difficult balance right'* in terms of numbers, bearing in mind that, as one example, with a group membership of 25, there may be 18 people regularly dancing.

While the issue of numbers is important, who those people are and what they experience is also significant. For one group consulted, having one third who had taught dance, one third who danced as a child and one third who had never previously danced *'makes it work'*.

*'We like each other. We've nothing in common. People have all sorts of expertise, all sorts of experience, all parts of life. It keeps us going.'*

So why people attend is also a factor that plays into the numbers issue. For instance, Aesop's understanding from a major national classical ballet company is that 25 is seen by older participants as the maximum number: this may be based on active older people who want the experience of ballet class per se, but not necessarily wanting to develop as an older people's dance group with strong social and/or health motivations.

### **3.2 Artistic vision, mission and activities**

#### *Artistic vision and mission*

The following artistic vision and mission statements are taken from the websites of two groups consulted for this research:

Moving Memory works to improve the health and wellbeing of older people through a distinctive, peer-led, creative practice which enables people to tell their own stories and express their individual identity.

Our vision is for a society where older people live longer, healthier and more fulfilling lives because they participate in artistic, creative and physical activities. Our mission is to provide participation and performance opportunities that celebrate the vitality of participants, consider the funny side of things and draw out the stuff of life. We use movement, music, spoken

word and digital projection as ways of revealing and presenting peoples' stories.

...

The GGDC approach to dancing and creativity is all about the flexibility of body and mind.

We are free to adjust, to change and to adapt, we dance to our own tune.

Others may label us this or that – we remain proudly unidentifiable and label free – a collective of individuals.

The motivation behind GGDC was to nurture and celebrate the experienced lived in body, its stories and its wisdom....to dance with people not agendas.

These powerfully state values and intentions with a distinctive voice and in some detail, while other groups state their purpose in a short sentence:

*'We meet to make and perform dance.'*

*'Marple Movers, fun, friendship and laughter!'*

As with the choice of constitution matching how a group wants to operate, how a group describes itself is well matched to what it does artistically and with whom it wants to communicate.

More broadly in terms of the artistic content, consultees often noted it was the variety of styles and genres that they really enjoyed, which included getting them *'to do things they never thought was possible'*.

#### *Activities that help sustain and develop members' interest*

Artistic activity in addition to the regular sessions was in the form of performances, which for dancers who took part, were certainly an aspect of developing and sustaining their interest. With dancers consulted, there was a significant split between those who were prepared or keen to perform and those who weren't interested at all. With the first type, several talked about having to get over some fears and anxieties:

*'It takes a while before you feel you're not going to make a fool of yourself in public.'*

Once they had performed – whether initially keen or not – dancers talked about the 'high' they experienced and the huge sense of achievement: as a long-standing group member said:

*'When they do it, they all love it!'*

Groups enjoyed sharing their work with other groups, and as well as performing at county-based gatherings and celebrations of older people's dance groups, one group performed locally specifically as a way of contributing back to the town that supported them. Groups set up with a specific health need focus were seen as having a different starting point and did not consider performance possibilities – at least not at their particular stage of development.

Across the groups referenced or visited in the research, there were different purposes and balances in terms of participation and performance. For some, performance is the key rationale and motivation, that ensures the group is '*self-perpetuating*', as one consultee noted:

*'If there were no performances, people would not be as diligent about turning up.'*

For another group, performances were seen as '*vital for raising confidence*'. Holding performances in the park, for instance, helped the less experienced to enjoy themselves. One group produced films rather than live performances, which dancers taking part in found less stressful. With an emphasis on high quality choreography that wasn't too dependent on memory and with the filming and editing process, there was less to remember and no need for laborious dress rehearsals.

The People Dancing research evidenced the following types of artistic activity outside of regular classes:

- workshops, including with visiting dance artists and companies
- performances at festivals, conferences and in care settings
- projects with other dance groups, schools and other organisations

Other activities which help to sustain and develop people's interest are social and wider cultural ones, as described below in the section about generating a spirit of belonging within the group.

### **3.3 Financial models of regular and ongoing groups**

Consultation showed a similar pattern of development, from a financial point of view. Groups benefitted from some sort of well-funded start (whether as a direct grant or in terms of being run by a funded organisation, sometimes under a specific scheme) and when that finished, then either secured further funding or in-kind support, plus started taking member fees, or ceased – or at least paused, until new resourcing could be put in place.

Expenditure typically included dance artist fees, space hire, refreshments, costumes and travel. For established dance companies, there were all the overheads and other costs relating to running an arts organisation.

Income sources (not all open or applicable to all groups) were:

- grants (including from the public sector – arts and/or health, lottery, trusts and foundations, local care service providers)
- business donations and sponsorship
- cultural commissioning
- member fees.

Other income sources referenced through the People Dancing research included:

- adult education
- local support groups eg for Parkinson's
- local community foundations
- town improvement funding programmes
- housing association
- physical activity/skills schemes
- subsidy from host organisation or venue, from their ongoing funding or specifically raised grant
- individual donations
- higher member fees from those living outside the borough

Support in kind was key for many groups and often in the form of space provided (eg from the local higher education institution in two instances). For one group, *'moral support'* and *'being invited to perform by the local dance agency'* was important, given its benefits for members and profile.

'Pay as you go' was the most common (and for the dancers, welcome) fee regime arrangement: in other words, a set fee per class attended. There was one example of a reduced rate 'deal' for paying for a set number of sessions in advance. This served to provide some financial stability in terms of some guaranteed known income, mitigating to some extent the vulnerability for the group of 'pay as you go'.

In terms of group members' payments, a 'cliff edge: from free to fee' situation can be a problem – that is, when a group starts off fully subsidised, and then member payments are needed to keep it going. There were examples of groups losing members after the free period.

Payments ranged from £2 to £6: some groups had raised the amount over time, with one wanting to take a planned, proactive approach to this rather than a reactive one. Both dance artists and group members were aware of 'local market rates' for similar kinds of provision and how the quality and impact of the experience was a key factor, not merely a direct price comparison. In other words, a dance group could be seen as greater value for money than an exercise class that cost the same. Rates varied according to the place and neighbourhood, with, for example, Pilates £5 a session in a working class village and £15 in a middle class suburb.

The fixed and low incomes that many older people have can be a real barrier to participation. For active older people participating in other groups as well, the total of different weekly payments can build up quickly, and for couples it is a case where two is twice the cost of one, rather than offering an economy of scale.

Two groups consulted made an additional charge for refreshments. With one of these, a member had suggested it would be better if people paid £2 for this to go to group funds, rather than keep going to the local café after the dance session, as they had been used to doing.

In terms of managing financial risk, smaller groups were acutely aware of their potential vulnerability with uncertain member fee income, which they mitigated by keeping a healthy reserve – called *'back up money'* or a *'buffer'*. The downside of this was an instance of being turned down for a grant as it looked as if they were not in need.

For independent dance artists, there is often a cross subsidy and income mix: the income from one group may not always cover more than the hall hire, but another group may bring in a good fee – and both may in effect be subsidised by the artist's other work.

Many consultees commented on how significant finances were, with this comment an example:

*'It's all down to the money. It's a juggle between economics, quality and safety.'*

A recurring theme across some groups was the lack of understanding about overall finances. This included being able to appreciate fully the rationale of going from 'free to fee' or fees being raised; why there might be organisational overheads; or how a session fee for the time and work from a freelance dance artist works out in comparison to the national living wage and an annual salary. It would be essential to support such understanding if working with a group for it to become self-run.

### **3.4 Public engagement and communications**

#### *Generating interest across the local community in the setting up of the group*

Offering a free taster – or series of tasters – and then free sessions (if funding was available) was often the main technique used to generate interest across the local community in the setting up of a group. Where dance organisations or agencies were involved, best practice was that they spent some time in the community getting to know what matters to people, where support was available and with which potential partners to network. This maximised success in both setting up a group and its continuance.

In some instances, dance providers were able to start up groups by working with, or under, health related schemes such as Drink Wise Age Well or through receiving anti-smoking health promotion funds. Groups also began within programmes focusing on falls prevention, commissioned by or in partnership with NHS Trusts and Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs), such as Aesop's Dance to Health programme and those of county-based or other independent dance agencies.



### *Messages used to engage the public and potential members*

While one consultee said, *'The whole world knows dance is good for older people'* and there is certainly plenty of research to evidence this, the health and wellbeing message is still used – and needs to be used – to engage the public and potential members. This is alongside the enjoyment, variety, creativity and social aspects of belonging to a dance group and a carefully worded reference to age. The expertise of the dance artist (or dance organisation) is also key to the message.

Some examples from dance group flyers:

Come and discover the joy of dancing with others over the age of 50. Try out Bollywood, ballet, contemporary dance, musical theatre and explore your own creativity.

*Stepping Out, Teignmouth*

...

Dawlish Dancers are a group of ladies aged 55 to 70+ who love to dance. Some were non-dancers in previous lives but we all feel that now is our time and firmly believe that 'anyone can be a dancer'.

We have a friendly, professional dance teacher who creates our dances using elements of many different dance styles and set to a wide variety of music.

Our weekly sessions are a lot of fun and whilst we try to be as good as we can be, you will hear a lot of music and laughter coming from our hall on a Wednesday. Dance keeps your brain active and your body moving. Why not join us on Wednesday afternoons?

...

Dance to Health is a new, pioneering falls prevention dance programme. It combines physiotherapy with the creativity, expression and energy of dance.

- Get fit and improve strength, balance and flexibility
- Make new friends and have fun
- Refreshments served
- FREE for the first six months

If you have fallen, are worried about falling, or just want to stay steady, then maintaining your health and fitness by strengthening your muscles and improving your flexibility is important. Participants attending Dance to Health regularly report that it eases aches and pains and helps retain independence and quality of life.

...

The latter flyer also has two participant quotations – and many research consultees emphasised how important it is to *'get people's stories out there'*, through a *'see and tell'* about what can be dramatic positive health differences through dancing. As one consultee noted and then advised:

*'It's all about confidence and wellbeing – about improving everything – a holistic approach. Pass on the stories and experiences. These are real people. Keep a record.'*

### *Recruitment*

Aside of groups that primarily comprise people referred through health services (eg GPs, falls prevention clinics) or are taking place in a specific care setting (eg with residents in a residential home), word of mouth is the overwhelmingly most used – and most successful – form of recruitment.

Word of mouth can include a range of connections, including recommending a group to a:

- friend – including going with a friend(s) from the start (enjoying doing something different together) as well as getting a friend to join later
- fellow member of another leisure interest group (eg scrabble)
- new acquaintance (eg which can be through all sorts of seemingly 'random' routes: the example from the consultation being '*showing your garden to someone who is interested in using the same landscaper*')
- fellow congregation member at a place of worship

Friends also talk to other friends and other recruitment examples were '*a chat at the supermarket*' and going out door knocking with a local councillor, including returning the following week to give a taster in the home. Tasters are also held in GP surgeries.

A key factor in turning the possibility of recruitment into a reality and then supporting retention, is actually 'taking' the new person to the group. This can help mitigate the range of difficulties and challenges people can experience in going somewhere new, with people who are new to them but not new to each other. As one consultee said:

*'It's daunting to go without knowing anyone.'*

And another:

*'I took four with me to the taster. They'd seen the difference the group had made to me. They'll all come back.'*

Other recruitment methods were posters and leaflets in:

- local shops and libraries
- GP surgeries – although some people found it difficult to get past the 'gate keeper' practice manager to get permission to do this
- sports centres – when it was possible to convey that a group was not '*another business*' '*in competition*' with their offer, but rather complementary provision for community good

There were also examples of using the listings in local newspapers, community and local council newsletters and directories. One small local self-run group is developing an idea to do a 'roadshow' – dancing in five other venues not just to encourage new members but also new groups in areas nearby.

Performances – with supporting literature – were also used as recruitment drives and there was a welcome awareness that:

*'Our name goes out in communications the dance artists make.'*

Where groups have developed or been set up as dance companies per se, they operate with a website and use social media as with any arts organisation.

Retention was a concern of many groups – *'We're constantly battling to keep the numbers'* and *'It'll fold if there are no new people'* – and recruitment campaigns therefore a regular occurrence. Pride was expressed in designing posters and flyers that presented a group positively in visual terms and words: showing and telling it *'as it is'* – and also how it could be, in terms of raising aspirations. This was part of challenging stereotyped views about older people and in the context of different definitions of older. Group members themselves are of course well placed to contribute to recruitment material.

Two organisations used videos and photographs to a large extent, both for recruitment and dialogue with potential funders and supporters, finding this worked better than talking. With the inclusion of participating dancers, these formats showed just how much people were enjoying themselves – as well as evidencing, for instance, physical developments (such as reach, stability) from a better adherence than going to the gym.

*Generating a spirit of belonging within the group*

*'I love coming even if I don't do much dancing.'*

*'It's the focal point of my week.'*

A spirit of belonging within a group is generated in several ways and associated with what happens outside the dance sessions, as well as within them.

The dance artist can have a significant positive impact, in terms of:

- bringing their own enthusiasm and energy
- taking an inclusive approach, for instance explaining activity in terms of its different levels in relation to comfort and challenge and supporting individual dancers as needed

*'If someone can't manage turns, for example, then they don't do them, [our dance artist] provides an alternative step. If a dance is too fast or too complicated then there is an option to sit that one out. No one is made to feel left out or inadequate.'*

- being aware of any tensions between people and taking care when setting pair and small group work
- getting to know members on a personal basis, checking in with them before or after a session in terms of what they have shared about what is going on in their lives – *‘and not having favourites’*

One consultee described the significance of the relationship between the dance artist and the group developing so:

*‘...the dance artist doesn’t want to let down the group members and the group members don’t want to let down the dance artist...it’s not just their group, it’s our group too.’*

Another consultee noted that not all dance artists work with such a focus on the dancers – saying about one particular person:

*‘She was a dance teacher only.’*

Preparing for and holding performances – with its associated shared sense of endeavour, overcoming fears and anxieties about showing your work to the public – can support a spirit of belonging in what is primarily a participation group. For one such group, this is an opportunity to show off their powerful group identity, visually represented by bespoke group t-shirts (also worn for sessions) and zip-up jackets:

*‘They see us coming off the bus and know we’re a group.’*

Group names are powerful identifiers in terms of locality, practice, ambitions and/or values, with the following being noted in the consultation:

Dawlish Dancers (previously Dawlish Divas)  
 Grand Gestures  
 Growing Old (Dis)Gracefully  
 Leap of Faith  
 Marple Movers (previously Mature Movers)  
 Moving Memories  
 Silver Shakers  
 Stepping Out

Committee and longer standing group members are also key to establishing and maintaining a sense of group spirit:

- watching out for and actively mitigating concerns, complaints and potential gossip – *‘Did you know so and so...?’* – about other group members, knowing how infectious negativity can be
- sharing with the dance artist the responsibility for ‘holding’ the group and its emotional energy

- helping out newer members of the group who may find things a bit quick to grasp at first

Other examples of the spirit of belonging given were:

- dancers letting another group member know if they weren't able to attend
- offering a lift to and from sessions
- people meeting others *'from down the road'* for the first time, having been brought together for similar health reasons and appreciating getting to know new people with the same sorts of experiences as them
- the group being *'part of the weekly routine'*

The consultation evidenced many examples of what members themselves bring to a sense of belonging – organising tea parties in their homes for the group; going to the theatre or out to play skittles. The social side – whether the chat as people arrive, the tea/coffee and biscuits (or homemade cake) or other organised activities – is very important for many groups.

For other groups without a post-session social, a sense of connection grows through the session itself through working with others – in pairs and small groups, rehearsing and devising movements and routines.

*'We don't talk together, but we make something together.'*

For a well-established performance orientated group, there was a shared sense of *'feeling we are part of a company'* with shared purpose and responsibilities:

*'Everybody wants to make it right for everybody else.'*

This also resulted in other people being *'impressed by our professionalism'*.

The consultee from another performance orientated group explained that the spirit of the group grew through long term engagement – a sensitive process of supporting and empowering members. They noted: it takes time for people to get to know each other; the process is very personal; and the regularity of meeting is very important in building an atmosphere of trust, with socialising as well as class time. With the core company, they *'don't just want to move, they want to say something'*; they also act as ambassadors, run workshops and talk about how they work.

In many groups, friendships forged were fundamental, as with the following example:

*'We came together because of dancing: friendships keep us dancing.'*

All these things help the dancers *'gel as a group'* and with all the groups visited, there was a strong sense of the truth of the often quoted:

*'A class is something you go to; a group is something to which you belong.'*

One dancer described their group as:

*'... an ongoing social event – but it wouldn't exist if it wasn't for the dancing.'*

The strength of the social side was evident too from the People Dancing research, as in this example:

*'It provides very valuable social community for the members of the group enabling people to have a time in which they can leave all their baggage outside the studio door.'*

### *Making new members feel welcome*

The welcome in one sense starts from the moment someone comes into the building and in another, before that, in the conversations that encourage someone to join – or the telephone call that reminds them about the session. As one consultee said:

*'It has to be worked at. For an incomer, they must think everyone knows each other, talking about their grandchildren and things, and it's hard to make sure they feel part of the group.'*

Groups visited showed the importance of the dance artist or committee members arriving early to set up the space, ready for the welcome at that point.

This can be challenging with a group based on referrals, when dance artists do not know who to expect each time, and new people need to be asked some basic health questions to ensure safe practice, while they are also taking in the money. However, as part of the group spirit (see below), group members also help setting out chairs and ensuring people have signed in, or been helped to sign in. That initial welcome has a key impact for everyone, not just new people, as one group realised:

*'We used to have someone who was rather dour taking the money when people came in. She didn't smile. So subtly, we changed things to make for a more welcoming "meet and greet".'*

The welcome extends into the session itself with introductions and also exercises to share names, and dance artists are particularly attentive to how they pair new people and put them into groups. At the end of a session, dance artists were observed making time to have a particular reassuring chat with newcomers – as did long standing group members.

*'You have a chat, but don't be overbearing.'*

### **3.5 Quality and qualities**

*'The teacher is the one thing that is the most important.'*

*'You need someone with the impetus and drive – a professional with passion.'*

When asked what made their dance group successful, every dancer consulted gave the name of the dance artist working with their group. They were very clear about the quality of the teaching they were receiving and the personal and professional qualities on which this was based. In addition to what is listed above as ways dance artists support a spirit of belonging in the group, these qualities were seen as:

- flexibility and adaptability (often with these being applied unseen)
- responsiveness to using dancing and music genres and styles that are culturally appropriate and challenge appropriately
- different teaching strategies to meet different learning needs, being able to provide activity that stretches and supports when people have different dance abilities
- keeping people's interest and being interested in people
- listening and being empathetic
- noticing everyone, including when people get tired and haven't realised it themselves
- treating group members as equal adults

As one consultee said:

*'You can train to teach older people, but you're not necessarily going to be good at it... A dance artist has to fit the personality of the group... It's about the connection they make with older people so they feel comfortable and confident.'*

And another consultee:

*'[Our dance artist] is totally empathetic and dedicated to our needs. Friendly and approachable, she gets the best out of all of us. Her choice of music is inspired as is her choreography... Any success that we might have as a group is very much the result of her hard work.'*

Dance artists were clear about the aesthetic integrity of their practice – and that of the dancers, which they would not compromise:

*'Even if the money's from health, I still make it art, not just falls prevention.'*

*'I don't want to quash the creativity – I've seen that happen in colleagues.'*

*'There is a clear aesthetic quality which gives participants a sense of achievement.'*

*'Do you want to be a silver swan...or deep down and dirty?'*

*'It's about the benefits of dancing for the whole person.'*

*'We celebrate individuals and the stories held in the body.'*

Group members deeply appreciated the quality dance experience and what distinguished it from other activities in terms of its specific qualities. The following are examples of this:

*'It's expression not exercise.'*

*'Our teacher recognises what we CAN do.'*

*'We can have our own creative input.'*

*'We're shown, not told, what to do. At the falls clinic it's very medical and regimental. Here we have a laugh.'*

*'I had intensive physio – it's the most boring thing in life. We do some of the same movements in dance and there's an enjoyment to it.'*

*'I exercised at Tai Chi, but it was serious.'*

Plenty of people mentioned the 'F' word: Fun. One consultee offered more F words:

*'Fun. Fitness. Fellowship. And Fame, if you decide to perform.'*

#### **4 What this tells us**

*'I want to come. I enjoy it.'*

*'They'd do anything to keep the group going.'*

The short document review in **Appendix III** is indicative of some of the type of material available about older people's dance: the policy and funding context; academic research on health benefits; and project information and evaluation; and toolkits – which sits alongside work on the aesthetics of the practice.

Building on the *Older people's dance activities – the first UK survey*, this research has sought to add to the field by exploring, from a variety of perspectives, the organisational, social and artistic factors which support an older people's dance group to become ongoing and regular.

Covering a range of types of group with different aims but each with its own artistic and social impact, the report evidences many commonalities in terms of needs and challenges in relation to:

- venues and spaces
- travel, transport and timing
- constitution, finance and decision making
- recruitment and retention
- volunteers



While these factors are all important, it is the quality of the joint endeavour of the dance artist and dancers making dance that is the essential success factor for a group – within the realistic context that to become ongoing and regular requires subsidy of some form.

This reflects comments from respondents from the *Older people's dance activities – the first UK survey*, such as:

*'Consult your participants – co-production is key. Work in partnership. Don't under estimate the value of an ARTISTIC experience.'*

*'Don't underestimate what older dancers can and want to achieve.'*

*'Generate a simple culture of looking after each other and a supportive atmosphere where everyone feels equal and can thrive.'*

*'Don't expect it to take off overnight unless you already have an established group. It took about three years to firmly establish [our group] but hanging on in there has paid off.'*

In providing a more detailed narrative about how older people's dance groups work, through the generous contribution of consultees, the shared learning from this current research will hopefully contribute to strengthening this area of dance. There will always be the need to maintain a focus on what is particular and specific to any group, as one consultee in the People Dancing research commented:

*'I think every group will have a particular context and it's important to acknowledge and respond to this. It makes the group stronger.'*

## Appendices

### Appendix I Aesop research questions

1. SETTING UP AND RUNNING OLDER PEOPLE'S DANCE GROUPS
  - 1.1 What are the success factors for an older people's dance group to:
    - i. Set up effectively?
    - ii. Make fruitful decisions on the development of the group?
    - iii. Become self-run and financially sustainable?
    - iv. Being run by older people themselves (as opposed to the dance session leader)?
  - 1.2 What are the barriers?
  - 1.3 What volunteers are involved? How did become involved? e.g. participants or participants' family members? What are their roles? At what point did they become involved? How has their role changed over time?
  - 1.4 What are the advantages and disadvantages of different constitutional forms such as voluntary association and company limited by guarantee with charitable status?
  - 1.5 How did the group involve the local community in its development?
  - 1.6 What is the maximum feasible number of members?
2. ARTISTIC VISION, MISSION AND ACTIVITIES
  - 2.1 What types of artistic vision and mission do the groups have? Which have been shown to be particularly inspiring and effective?
  - 2.2 What activities help sustain and develop members' interest?
3. FINANCIAL MODELS OF ONGOING AND REGULAR GROUPS
  - 3.1 Income sources and levels.
  - 3.2 Membership fee structures including pricing, whether termly or per session
  - 3.3 Sources and required levels of fundraising income.
  - 3.4 Expenditure items.
  - 3.5 Trends over the previous three years.
  - 3.6 How financial risk is managed.
4. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS
  - 4.1 What techniques were used to generate interest across the local community in the setting up of the group?
  - 4.2 What messages are used to engage the public and potential members?
  - 4.3 How are members recruited?
  - 4.4 How are volunteers recruited?
  - 4.5 What helps generate a spirit of belonging within the group?
  - 4.6 How are new members made to be feel welcome?

## **Appendix II Consultees**

Dancers from:

Dawlish Dancers, Devon  
Stepping Out, Teignmouth, Devon  
Dance to Health, Abingdon

Diane Amans, Independent Dance Artist

Evelyn Charles, past dancer and current Peer Motivator, Dance to Health Southend

Caroline Colclough Moss, Dance Practitioner (including for Dance to Health Oxfordshire) and co-founder, Dance Creative

Angela Conlon, Dance Practitioner (including as Lead Dance Artist for Dance to Health Oxfordshire and Southend) and co-founder, Dance Creative

Clare Farmer, Dance Well Project Officer, Akademi, London

Hannah Gray, Dance to Health Coordinator, Oxfordshire

Karen Hamilton, Head of Programme, Dance to Health

Anna Leatherdale, Dance Artist (including for Dawlish Dancers and Stepping Out, Teignmouth)

Judy Smith, Coordinator, Growing Older (Dis)Gracefully Dance Group, Liverpool

Sue Smith, Director, Dance in Devon

Rhonda Sparrey, Dance Practitioner (including for Dance to Health, Oxfordshire) co-founder, Dance Creative

Sian Stevenson, Creative Director, Moving Memory Dance Theatre Company, Margate

Paula Turner, Artistic Director, Grand Gestures Dance Collective, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne

Gwen Wheddon, Dawlish Dancers and Chairman

Sheila Williams, Dance to Health, Banbury dancer

Martin Wrigley, Mayor, Dawlish Town Council

## Appendix III Documents reviewed

Akademi *Teaching South Asian dance with older adults – Dance Well resource book 2017* <https://akademi.co.uk/learning-and-participation/dance-well>

Provides a thorough guide for South Asian (and other) dance practitioners working in a range of settings and environments with older adults, with tools for planning and delivery.

All Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (2017) *Creative Health: the Arts for Health and Wellbeing* <http://www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/>

Findings from a major two year enquiry providing context to the field and including examples of dance for older people.

Cutler, David (2017) *The Role of Local Authorities in Creative Ageing Second Edition with New Case Studies from across the UK* (The Baring Foundation: London) from web page <http://baringfoundation.org.uk/publications-by-topic/#Arts>

Includes descriptions of older people's dance group projects

Cutler, David (2017) *Towards the End The Baring Foundation's Arts and Older People Programme 2010-2017* (The Baring Foundation: London) from web page <http://baringfoundation.org.uk/publications-by-topic/#Arts>

Includes descriptions of older people's dance group projects

Department of Health South West & Dance South West (2011) *Cool facts, hot feet Dancing to health: a review of the evidence*

<https://www.communitydance.org.uk/developing-participation/health-and-wellbeing#>

Academic and grey literature review about the health benefits of dance for children, adults, older people and those with specific medical conditions

Eaton-Lewis, Andrew (2017) *Late Opening: Arts and older people in Scotland* (Luminate: Edinburgh)

<http://baringfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Late-Opening-Arts-and-Older-People-in-Scotland.pdf>

Includes case studies of older people's dance groups and companies, with a focus on addressing assumptions

Mental Health Foundation (2011) *An Evidence Review of the Impact of Participatory Arts in Older People* (Mental Health Foundation: London)

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/evidence-review-impact-participatory-arts-older-people>

Includes summary of four studies on dance programmes and one piece of grey literature

People Dancing (2016) *Older people's dance activities – the first UK survey* (People Dancing: Leicester) <https://www.communitydance.org.uk/developing-participation/dance-and-older-people>

A snapshot of current practice in older people's dance, co-commissioned with Aesop.

The Baring Foundation (2015) *Getting on – arts and older people A Baring Foundation Programme 2010-2014* (The Baring Foundation: London)

from web page <http://baringfoundation.org.uk/publications-by-topic/#Arts>

Explains why the Baring Foundation has been funding arts and older people activity and describes what we have supported for the first five years of our programme

Wallace Consulting (2017) *Evaluation of the Arts and Older People Programme Final Report January 2017* (Arts Council Northern Ireland: Belfast)

[http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/images/uploads/publications-documents/Arts and Older People 2013-2016 Programme Evaluation.pdf](http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/images/uploads/publications-documents/Arts_and_Older_People_2013-2016_Programme_Evaluation.pdf)

Includes descriptions of older people's dance group projects