

# Critical Mass

## Learnings and Evaluation for Critical Mass, an Inclusive Dance Project as Part of Birmingham 2022 Festival

- Birmingham 2022 Festival  
commonwealth games

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LEARNINGS AND EVALUATION FOR CRITICAL MASS,  
AN INCLUSIVE DANCE PROJECT AS PART OF BIRMINGHAM 2022 FESTIVAL

CRITICAL MASS WICKEDOUS STORIES  
(IMAGE CREDIT: MATTHEW LEWIS GETTY IMAGES)

**Critical Mass shows how genuine inclusion can be achieved in mega-events such as the Commonwealth Games.**

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### **Acknowledgements**

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# Foreword

Thinking back to the origins of Critical Mass in 2020 – a time when for so many the world became smaller, lonelier and restricted – it's both strange and fitting that the vision conceived would bring about the opposite: an 'epic act of collaboration' that would expand perceptions and horizons, forge new, lasting friendships, and celebrate the freedoms of physical movement and expression. That it would do this specifically to include those who face barriers to cultural participation under normal circumstances isn't a sign of how ambitious the idea was, but how audacious it needed to be to happen.

In real terms, we accepted Critical Mass would probably be the biggest single delivery challenge of the cultural programme for the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games that was being developed at the same time. It would be the flagship participatory programme cutting across a 6-month arts-led festival, through to the most high-profile cultural moment of the Games - the Opening Ceremony. Standing on the shoulders of every inclusive, participatory, youth and community arts project we'd delivered or known, and the invaluable learnings shared by Spirit of 2012, we set out to re-design the way mass performance is approached so that anyone could be part of these iconic cultural opportunities presented by the Games. It felt possible to spark change that could shift the dial towards genuinely inclusive mega events for years to come.

Of course, none of this was feasible for a new team and a one-off festival alone. Early on we were presented with the Dance Development Leaders Group's (DDLG) existing vision and network for dance participation across the West Midlands – it too had proclaimed itself audacious and ambitious, and it was the perfect vehicle for the opportunity ahead. From this, the Critical Mass Partnership was formed, giving the project access to the region's existing skills, expertise and dance provision from Fabric (formerly DanceXchange), Arts Connect,

Birmingham Royal Ballet, and the wider DDLG network of freelance dance artists and companies. Many from this extended network would go on to form the more practice and industry-driven Critical Mass Steering Group.

Despite a complex and interlinking project structure, this report highlights that Critical Mass has at core been about doing, learning and adapting – a generative process of discovery for the delivery team and partners, as well as for the participants and their support networks. From a commissioning vantage point, it has been a privilege to watch the impacts detailed in this report ebb and flow across every aspect of project and event production, from artistic and operational, to administrative and legal, through to safeguarding and communications. Every potential barrier – perceived or real – would play a part, and so everything had to be challenged to a greater or lesser extent. And here lies the conceit of the project: that whilst participants have genuinely been at the heart of Critical Mass, the structures, institutions, spaces, influencers, leaders and ideologies around them had the furthest to go in terms of change.

Practically speaking, the impacts and learnings that follow give insight to what happens when the conditions for inclusive dance are applied to a cultural and sporting ‘mega event’. All of us involved hope that this work marks not the ending of a project, but the beginning of a legacy, and with it, comes an invitation for others to pick up where Critical Mass 2022 left off. For others, to try a different approach with the same bold principles, to challenge what they already do with the smallest adjustment, or just to be inspired by the possibilities that come from being audacious about inclusion.

**Raidene Carter**

(Executive Producer, Birmingham 2022 Festival)

**Tara Lopez**

(Senior Producer, Critical Mass)

# Executive Summary

## Background

Critical Mass was a high-profile dance and movement project that engaged hundreds of participants aged 16-30 years old from the West Midlands who were representative of the diversity of the region.

The project seeks to redefine meaningful inclusion for mega events, addressing the following outcomes:

1. Participants' personal wellbeing (mental and physical) improves through sustained creative participation.
2. Participants feel a sense of belonging and connectedness through mass creative participation in a mega event.
3. A diverse pool of participants has their perceptions (including self-perceptions) of disability and impairment challenged (note 1).
4. Integrated, inclusive dance practice in the West Midlands will be embedded and sustainable, and West Midlands dance organisations and practitioners acknowledged as sector leaders.

**“Dance offers a creative inclusivity that other art forms may not ... The all-consuming intuitive nature of dance both mentally and physically means you are 100 percent present with yourself and others. Watching critical mass transform from smaller groups into a mass collective demonstrated the importance of coming together and showed the world how our bodies become our voice and through it we can be heard”**

– lead artist



# Critical Mass in Numbers

- **242** Participants aged 16-30 years
- **22** Staff
  - 15** Freelance artists
  - 12** Support workers
- **45%** of participants identified as disabled, neurodiverse or having a long term health condition
- **66%** of participants said they will continue to take part in dance as a result of critical mass
- **22,048** in-person audience members
- **100%** of participants were from the West Midlands
- **91%** joined to be a part of the commonwealth games
- **92%** of participants rated their overall experience as either 'good' or 'excellent'
- **89%** felt that the biggest difference made was meeting new people and making new friends
- **16** Weekly Sessions Across 15 different locations incl. online
- **How Participants Defined Their Ethnicity:**
  - White backgrounds 70%
  - Mixed heritage 8%
  - Black or Black British 9%
  - Asian or Asian British 11%
  - Other 2%
- Participants reported feeling more happy and less anxious while taking part

## Summary of Key Learning

Learnings have been grouped in relation to the outcome areas outlined previously. However more extensive, general learnings can be found in the recommendations section.

### **Outcome 1: participants' personal wellbeing (mental and physical) improves through sustained creative participation**

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Critical Mass improved participants' physical health and wellbeing, however, intense moments within the project cycle resulted in feelings of fatigue and heightened stress levels. Although common in physical activity and performance related participation, planning for managing these moments is essential, developing schedules that reduce participants' waiting times where possible and making additional provisions for managing spikes in emotions at performance events. For example, through equipping staff with mental health first aid training and liaison with first aid personnel. Factoring in time for reflection and making physical safe spaces can facilitate better monitoring and digesting of emotions.

Although reading top line and average results illustrate the positive impact that Critical Mass has had on participants' personal wellbeing, taking a more nuanced approach through inclusive design can reveal greater depths of understanding into individual circumstances and life experiences. This is particularly useful when understanding the experiences of a voluntary cast, with additional priorities, and accounting for nuances in the experiences of marginalised groups.

## **Outcome 2: participants feel a sense of belonging and connectedness through mass creative participation in a mega event**

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Critical Mass facilitated a sense of belonging and connectedness for participants. This was evident in the bonds that were developed within weekly sessions and rehearsals, and in the togetherness experienced through the mass participation element of the project. The online group was a particular success in this area, in facilitating connections amongst group members.

Social media played a significant role in maintaining friendships outside of the project for the wider cast. However, some participants in the online group reportedly found it difficult to sustain connections post-project as they had never established regular in-person meetings outside of Critical Mass. Therefore, digital social spaces were successful in democratising access to the project but had limitations in cementing long-term ties. Participants' connections to Birmingham and the West Midlands somewhat improved, however only 49% of participants felt that they had developed connections with the wider community. Although not an aim of the project, connecting with other groups as part of Birmingham 2022 Festival may have improved participants' social connections to the wider community.

Dance and mass performance brought the participants together, particularly following more insular weekly group sessions, where strong ties were developed. Informing participants of wider artistic choices, when working on character segments, can remedy feelings of competition when choreography and design differs between group sections. Including the cast in wider creative decisions can empower their individual and collective sense of agency.

## **Outcome 3: a diverse pool of participants has their perceptions (including self perceptions) of disability and impairment challenged**

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Critical Mass was successful in engaging a diverse pool of participants who self-identify as disabled, neurodiverse or having a long-term health condition (note 2). On average, across the midpoint and endpoint surveys, 45% of participants self-identified as disabled, neurodiverse or having a long-term health condition, exceeding the original project target of 35%.

Of those who were captured during the baseline, 28% of participants said they had a high or very high level of experience working with people who have disabilities. At least 30% of those who had high/very high levels of experience identified as having a disability themselves. Therefore, the majority of participants were working with people that they do not usually have the opportunity to rub shoulders with.

Critical Mass was successful in changing perceptions (including self-perceptions of disability) with 60% of respondents reporting that the project had made the biggest difference to their understandings and perceptions of disability.

An effective project structure was implemented to provide pastoral support to participants, and open and transparent discussion around access provision and adjustments took place. We observed a culture of mutual regard and care across participants and staff which was key to changing perceptions (and self-perceptions) and developing understandings of disability and inclusion.

Participants' individual and collective sense of action evolved with the project and a deep sense of pride in coming together en masse emerged. The project was successful in facilitating an

inclusive and integrated mass performance. However, the wider industry needs to further adapt to service this achievement to its full potential.

## **Outcome 4: integrated inclusive dance practice in the West Midlands will be embedded and sustainable, and west midlands dance organisations and practitioners acknowledged as sector leaders**

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Critical Mass was developed from a strong vision and partnership basis and built on previous learning. The project's relationship with funder objectives was well aligned and staff were representative of the project. However, it was felt that more could have been done at project inception and design stages to involve people with disabilities and their parents/carers in decision making.

The core team was made up of skilled professionals who shared the same set of values, including the ability to adapt, reflect and implement learning on an iterative basis. This was key to driving the project forward. However, there were clear gaps identified within the core team. This included the provision of an Access Coordinator to take responsibility for practical management of access provisions. Instead, this tended to oscillate between Fabric and the Inclusion Champion, whose role was designed to be more consultative.

When asked if they had developed new skills and knowledge in inclusive and integrated dance practice and plan to use these skills to facilitate more accessible opportunities in the future, staff gave an average score of 8. out of 10. Furthermore, when asked if inclusive dance practice in the West Midlands is stronger as a result of Critical Mass, staff scored this 8.4 out of

10. This is evident in the ongoing developmental plans being taken forward by the Steering Group and DDLG.

Co-creation was a key enjoyment factor for participants and Dance Leaders. The project design and creative involvement of participants maximised inclusive practice and feelings of artistic challenge, which is potentially an area for future artistic investigation as part of the legacy plans.

# Context

“I’m now part of Birmingham history. I never thought I would get an opportunity like this in my life and to be able to do it with newfound friends was beyond my wildest dreams”

– participant

Critical Mass boldly integrated three areas of practice – volunteering at mega events, creative mass participation and inclusive dance. To set the scene for this innovation we examine the possibilities and challenges that this context provides.

The impact of volunteering on mega-events has been recognised as multi-faceted, bringing personal, social, economic, cultural and political benefits. Moreno et al (1999) argue that in addition to economic and political benefits “it represents the uniting of individual energies into a common project, a new form of participation and the expression of a great public momentum.” However, as Darcey et al (2014) (note 3) note, people with disabilities face significant barriers to participation at mega events due to a range of environmental, organisational and social factors.

The London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOPG) made significant progress in this area, proactively targeting and recruiting volunteers with disabilities. However, the proportion of volunteers with disabilities recruited by LOPG was 5% which is significantly lower than the 19% proportion of those who make up the general population (note 4). Furthermore, those recruited had low support needs or did not self-identify as having a disability but as needing access requirements. This suggests ‘that people with high levels of support needs did not apply, were excluded, or were overlooked in the recruitment process’ (Darcey et al, 2014: 443).

This highlights two challenges for Critical Mass:

1. Removing environmental, organisational and social barriers to participation for people with disabilities.
2. Recruiting an ambitious target of 35% of participants self-identifying as disabled, neurodiverse or having a long-term health condition.

As a model for achieving reach and engagement, creative mass participation activities integrated into festivals and events is an approach with clear positive outcomes for participants, artists and organisers. Projects such as '**Processions**' and 'we're here because we're here' (note 5) illustrate the powerful ways in which volunteer participants can contribute scale and impact for an event in physical, economic, social and artistic terms. However, these projects often exist inside their own parameters with producers in control of the organisational, environmental and social conditions.

**Critical Mass, therefore went further to ask the question, how do you integrate an inclusive cast into the arena of a mega event through mass participation?**

The ambition of Critical Mass was to create the conditions for this to happen, working to a formula involving inclusive dance practice and continued creative participation leading into a suite of performance opportunities. Discourse surrounding inclusive dance is rich and diverse, however it is characterised by an environment that welcomes all to dance, whether that be a person with or without a disability. Furthermore, it challenges the concept of the "ideal body" in dance (Matos, 2008:80) (note 6) and celebrates the possibilities of thinking in new ways about movement. Backed by the force of the DDLG, including Fabric and an army of dance specialists from Birmingham, inclusive dance would provide the conduit for bringing a diverse group of participants together; challenging the apparent exclusivity of mass participation at mega events and paving the way for new learning.



# Project Overview

## Project Outline

Critical Mass was originally conceived through a unique collaboration between Birmingham 2022 Festival, Fabric, Arts Connect and Dance Development Leaders Group (DDLG) and was supported by Spirit of 2012.

## Roles

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- Arts Connect and DDLG - Advisory Support as members of the partnership group and co-chairs of the Steering Group
- Birmingham 2022 Festival – Executive Producers
- Fabric - Lead delivery partner
- Spirit of 2012 - Funding Partner

Based on their experiences of delivering Paralympics and Commonwealth Handover ceremonies, executive members of the Birmingham 2022 Festival team felt more was needed to make the 2022 Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony genuinely inclusive in a way that hadn't been achieved in previous iterations. The Festival's Executive Producer then conceived the idea of Critical Mass - a long-term sustained participation project that would touch on every part of the cultural programme: including performances at the festival opening, Queen's Baton Relay, FESTIVAL SITES and the opening ceremony. Following initiation, Birmingham 2022 Festival continued their involvement in the project by transitioning to lead on wider project management, governance structures, and relationship management with the production teams during performance moments.

Fabric was the lead delivery partner focused on the participation elements of the project. Fabric is a new strategic dance development organisation based in Birmingham and Nottingham. Fabric is created from the formal merger of DanceXchange and Dance4, bringing together over 60 years of combined experience. Fabric's vision is to inspire people through dance, transforming lives, communities and places. As an active partner in DDLG, and the executive producer and project commissioner for #DanceConnect and Beyond Borders, this paved the way for Fabric to take the role as Lead Delivery Partner on Critical Mass. Their key responsibilities included:

- Recruitment, training, contracting and management of the creative and delivery teams (50+ individuals), including the Lead Artist, dance leaders, support workers and Inclusion Champion.
- Leading on the recruitment of a diverse cohort of young people, including those with disabilities and complex additional needs, taking overall responsibility for their pastoral care to ensure a positive and beneficial experience.
- Ensuring communications were inclusive, representative of, and relevant to the diverse range of participants involved - and working collaboratively with wider Festival teams to share the story of Critical Mass.
- Produce the Critical Mass commission Sense, as the opening event at Birmingham International Dance Festival 2022.

Arts Connect works with a variety of partners including education, arts, culture and local government in the West Midlands to ensure that all children and young people can benefit from engagement in high quality arts and cultural activities. As an Arts Council England Bridge organisation for Children and Young People, it develops skills and amongst

participation and engagement professionals, supports the formal education and learning sector sector, and leads change by working in partnership with the arts and culture sector. Arts Connect established and coordinated DDLG and provided strategic leadership for the network and support for the network's Steering Group.

For Critical Mass, Arts Connect and DDLG provided overarching advisory support. They provided project development support, helping recruit participants through connecting with schools and communities. They will also play a key role in ensuring the legacy of the programme.

Dance Development Leaders Group (DDLG) are a professional network of 70 member organisations and independent practitioners from the West Midlands dance sector, committed to developing dance participation. A network founded and coordinated by Arts Connect, formed in 2018, they explore potential for collaboration, shared ambition and mutual support. In 2020 they delivered their first pilot project 'Dance Connect', exploring dance collaboration on digital platforms. They delivered a follow-up project 'Beyond Borders', to develop the ambition of the 2020 pilot phase in early 2021 which supported their involvement as strategic partner for Critical Mass.

Spirit of 2012 Trust funded the project. What's more, their learnings and experience of working on the London 2012 Olympics set a mandate for Critical Mass to build on. The Trust believe that enabling people to participate in a wide-range of inclusive activities and engaging together in their communities will:

- Improve the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities and society as a whole
- Improve perceptions and attitudes towards disability and impairment
- Lead to greater social cohesion and understanding

**“Being part of the community and participating in a big event - such an opportunity isn’t easy to come by. I really like how dance has brought people from different walks of life together”**

– Participant

## **Critical Mass And D-Sign Timeline**

### **2021**

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- **13-18th July**  
Delivery team induction and training
- **Summer Holidays**  
Dance summer camps
- **2nd Sept**  
Delivery team creative session and access training
- **w/c 20th Sept**  
16 weekly sessions begin
- **30-31st Oct**  
Critical Mass and Motionhouse 1st intensives
- **4th Dec**  
Critical Mass social
- **10th Dec**  
Participant recruitment closes

## January

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- **Weekly**  
16 weekly sessions
- **6th**  
Dance leaders day with Motionhouse for wondrous stories
- **15-16th**  
Wondrous Stories full all day rehearsal
- **29- 30th**  
Wondrous Stories full all day rehearsal

## February

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- **Weekly**  
16 weekly sessions
- **9th**  
Wondrous Stories full all day rehearsal
- **19-20th**  
Wondrous Atories full all day rehearsal
- **24th**  
Critical Mass team session and TAA session
- **26- 27th**  
Wondrous Stories full all day rehearsal

## March

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- **Weekly**  
16 weekly sessions
- **1st and 9th**  
Opening ceremony welcome sessions
- **5-6th**  
Wondrous Stories full all day rehearsal
- **11-14th**  
Wondrous Stories tech and on-site rehearsals
- **16th**  
Wondrous Stories dress run
- **17- 20th**  
Wondrous Stories performances 5-10pm

## April

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- **Weekly**  
16 weekly sessions
- **20th**  
Critical Mass team session
- **21-22nd**  
Sense creative planning and co-creation training
- **23-24th**  
Opening ceremony creative intensive

## May

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- **Weekly**  
16 Weekly Sessions
- **18th**  
Opening ceremony longbridge site visit
- **24th**  
Sense rehearsals
- **27th**  
Opening ceremony longbridge soft launch
- **28th**  
Sense rehearsals

## June

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- **3rd**  
opening ceremony rehearsal
- **4th**  
sense intensive rehearsal
- **9th**  
Opening ceremony alexander stadium site visit
- **10th**  
Opening ceremony rehearsal and costume fitting
- **11-12th**  
Sense intensive rehearsal

- **13-16th**  
Sense production prep and dress run
- **17th**  
Sense performance at Birmingham International Dance Festival
- **24th**  
Opening ceremony rehearsal and costume fitting

## July

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- **1st**  
Opening ceremony rehearsal and costume fitting
- **10th**  
Opening ceremony rehearsal at Alexander Stadium
- **15-16th**  
Opening ceremony rehearsal at Alexander Stadium
- **18th**  
Critical Mass performance at Shrewsbury Queen's baton relay
- **20th**  
Critical Mass performance at Lichfield Queen's baton relay
- **22nd**  
Critical Mass performance at Worcester Queen's baton relay
- **23rd**  
Opening ceremony rehearsals



- **24th and 26th**  
Opening ceremony transition and dress rehearsals
- **28th**  
Opening ceremony performance

## **August**

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- **7th**  
Smithfield Festival site performance
- **15th**  
D-Sign dance project team training
- **16-26th**  
D-Sign dance project intensive rehearsals
- **27th**  
D-Sign dance project 'Vibrations' performance at Birmingham
- **28th**  
End of weekly dance sessions

## **September**

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- **10th**  
Celebration event

# Methodology

Birmingham 2022 Festival commissioned nine evaluative reports. These are as follows:

- Birmingham 2022 Festival Evaluation -Indigo-Ltd Consortium
- Untold Stories: Case Studies – Indigo-Ltd Consortium
- Skills Development: Case Studies - Indigo-Ltd Consortium
- Inclusive Practise: Case Studies - Indigo-Ltd Consortium
- International Collaboration – The Audience Agency
- Critical Mass – The Audience Agency
- LGBTQ+ Space– Dr Roz Stewart-Hall
- Creative City Grants Programme - M·E·L Research
- Route 34: North Birmingham Alliance – Earthen Lamp

Suppliers for eight of these reports have collected qualitative data against bespoke evaluation methodologies, specific to the projects (or collection of projects) they are working with. This has totalled qualitative engagement with 52 projects across the programme. The consortium of our overarching report, Birmingham 2022 Festival Evaluation Report, have focused on collecting quantitative data. This has totalled quantitative engagement with 203 projects across the region. Qualitative-focused suppliers have then used quantitative data in their respective reports.

We have chosen to publish our evaluation as nine reports to adequately represent a large, broad, and diverse set of projects that make up Birmingham 2022 Festival. Whilst these reports come together to present the unified, collective narrative (outlined in Birmingham 2022 Festival Evaluation Report) they individually display tangible and nuanced learnings and impacts. We hope that in the combined reading of the macro and the micro the Cultural Sector and its wider stakeholders will

seek to take forward these learnings from our practise and impact.

## **Fabio Thomas**

Monitoring and Evaluation Manager  
Birmingham 2022 Festival

The Audience Agency (TAA) was onboarded in January 2022, to review and analyse existing baseline data, and co-develop and deliver an Evaluation and Monitoring Plan. As a primary funder, the evaluation framework includes mechanisms for monitoring change against Spirit of 2012's mandatory questions (note 7) including ONS subjective wellbeing questions as a core part of the process. A new evaluation methodology was built in response to the core project outcomes, considering accessibility needs of participants. TAA's framework builds on the excellent foundations laid by evaluator, Kirsty Hillyer from We are Frilly, who revised an early evaluation framework developed by Courtney Consulting. To support our evaluation methodology, a selection of evaluation tools were devised.

## **Participant Survey**

With We are Frilly, TAA designed a survey for participants of Critical Mass and evolved the existing methods for collecting participant survey data with a digital versions and training for staff and volunteers. Participant numbers were used to preserve personal anonymity of participants whilst allowing TAA to analyse change at an individual and programme level.

### **Our Evaluation Tools:**

- Participant surveys – delivering quantitative data against outcome indicators
- Stakeholder reflection groups – ‘Most Significant Change’ qualitative data
- Padlet process evaluation
- ‘Artist Takes’ – creative documentation

### **Supplementary Tools:**

- Staff, Volunteer and Audience surveys supplied by Indigo-Ltd Consortium

### **Reflective group definitions:**

#### **RG1: Producers**

Consisting of members of the project management and coordination team.

#### **RG2: Dance Leaders**

Each group has a dance leader who plans and delivers workshops and performances.

#### **RG3: Support Workers**

Each group has a support worker who looks after the wellbeing of participants and supports them to reach their potential.

#### **RG4: Participants**

The participants focus group contained young people aged 16-30 years old from the West Midlands, who took part in Critical Mass.

#### **RG5: Lead Artist and Inclusion Champion**

In this group, the two interrogated each other’s practice, identified conflicts and synergies.

We established a series of reflection groups who will take part in 'Most Significant Change', an evaluation technique that encourages participants to examine changes to their lives as a result of the project and then examine collective changes through storytelling. In addition to responding to key questions in relation to the project outcomes, the reflection groups contributed stories of change to a Padlet board then decided on which participant's story best illustrated change. Exploring the value of the project in this way, occasionally caused the mechanisms of change to shift and thus, generated new understandings into the objectives and outcomes of the project, connected practices, assumptions and future scope etc.

## **Padlet Process Evaluation**

Running alongside and in tandem to the evaluation of the three core participant outcomes was a Process Evaluation, which examined project delivery against 'learning themes' to critically reflect on practices of the project team in relation to Outcome 4:

- Integrated inclusive dance practice in the West Midlands will be embedded and sustainable, and West Midlands dance organisations and practitioners acknowledged as sector leaders.

TAA introduced a series of digital scrap books using Padlet to collect evolving insights and reflective group discussions with Producers, Dance Leaders, Support Workers and the Lead Artist and Inclusion Champion, to explore 'Most Significant Change' stories within and across the groups. Qualitative stories from these groups will also be mapped against indicators to explore the following learning themes or questions, developed in response to the wider framework and the aims and objectives of the project. These themes offered a starting

point to examine some of the key questions underpinning the project:

- Can an inclusive dance and movement programme change the way we approach participation in mega events?
- What it is about dance and mass movement, as opposed to other art forms, that is unique in creating the dynamics for achieving the intended outcomes?
- How does bringing together disabled and non-disabled young people change perceptions of disability?
- Are the underlying theories and ideas about the conditions required for inclusive practice and the bringing together of disabled and non-disabled people accurate, or do they need to be revised to provide greater impact in the future?
- Is inclusive dance practice in the West Midlands stronger as a result of Critical Mass?

## **Artist Takes**

TAA facilitated 'Artists Takes', a method where three artists acted as a 'fly on the wall' within weekly dance group settings. Three dance groups were selected by Fabric and the dance leads of each group were given a menu of opportunities for local artists. Interestingly, all three dance leads selected an illustrator each to attend their sessions and produce a visual artwork that captured their group. The artists documented and reflected on the physical and social interactivity facilitated through the project and any artistic and spatial/geographical significances present within individual groups settings. This method was particularly relevant in capturing the perspectives

of young people who are neurodiverse, to reflect on their experiences of the project in a more accessible, visually compelling way.

## **Inclusive Design**

In the key findings, and other areas of the report, we often refer to the ‘top line’ results or focus on where the majority of respondents have answered in a certain way. This helps to communicate Critical Mass’s impact clearly and effectively but there are limitations to this approach. In the spirit of Critical Mass, we’ve integrated the principles of ‘Inclusive Design’ into our evaluation report. When reading data, it is important to bear in mind the principles of inclusive design as set out by Jutta Treviranus, Director of the Inclusive Design Research Centre (note 8). The problem with focusing on averages or clusters of responses is that you lose a lot of other perspectives. This is illustrated by a “bell curve” model designed by the Inclusive Design Research Centre that demonstrates how narrow this insight is when examining a breadth of participant experience:

As opposed to the bell curve, inclusive design takes a pluralistic approach. The different types of people, opinions, wants, needs and desires involved in Critical Mass is difficult to neatly reconcile. Our recognition and support of this diversity is therefore pluralistic. ‘Inclusive design’ necessitates that we shouldn’t just focus on normative behaviours at the expense of those who appear on the periphery but rather take a holistic view. To counterbalance the marginalisation that occurs with top line results, we will present a series of journey mapping case studies in Outcome 1 of this report that demonstrate some of the different experiences people have had participating in Critical Mass. This should contribute to a more balanced and holistic view of the project.

[Page 26 of the standard print version shows a graph with a symmetrical normal curve, that rises slowly at first, then more steeply then slowly again to a maximum, then decreases slowly at first, then steeply, then more slowly again. The centre of the curve with the maximum is labelled as an average person. The central highest area is labelled as most people, and the smaller areas to the sides are labelled as some people.]

**“I joined for personal development originally, but I’ve realised that it’s so much more than that. I have my own little dance family now.”**

– participant



# Outcomes

## Outcome 1:

Participants' personal wellbeing (mental and physical) improves through sustained creative participation

## Key findings

Over the course of the programme, we monitored participant wellbeing. We did this through baseline, midpoint and endpoint data capture in the participant survey, using ONS subjective wellbeing questions, and in reflection group sessions with participants and staff.

- 7% positive increase in participants' self-assessment of how happy they felt yesterday
- 13% drop in participants' self-assessment of how anxious they felt yesterday
- 1% positive increase in participants' self-assessment of finding things worthwhile
- 3% positive increase in participants' self-assessment of how they feel about life at the moment
- Participants developed deep social connections and a sense of belonging through Critical Mass with other participants and staff. This is a consistent key theme across the qualitative data and has also been observed consistently by staff.
- 66% strongly agreed (40%) or agreed (26%) that they will continue to take part in dance as a result of Critical Mass
- 67.5% agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (29.5%) when asked if 'taking part in Critical Mass had a positive impact on my physical health and mental wellbeing'

- Critical Mass improved participants' physical health and wellbeing, however, intense moments within the project cycle resulted in feelings of fatigue and heightened stress levels. Although common in physical activity and performance related participation, planning for managing these moments is essential, developing schedules that reduce participants' waiting times where possible and making additional provisions for managing spikes in emotions at performance events. For example, through equipping staff with mental health first aid training and liaison with first aid personnel. Factoring in time for reflection and making physical safe spaces can facilitate better monitoring and digesting of emotions.
- Although top line and average results illustrate the positive impact that Critical Mass has had on participants' personal wellbeing, taking a more nuanced approach through inclusive design can reveal greater depths of understanding into individual circumstances and life experiences. This is particularly useful when understanding the experiences of a voluntary cast, with additional priorities, and accounting for nuances in the experiences of marginalised groups.

## **Overall experience**

Over the course of the project, participants' overall experiences improved. By the endpoint, a whopping 92% of participants rated their overall experience as either 'Good' or 'Excellent'. Furthermore, between the midpoint and the endpoint survey, there was a 12% increase in respondents rating their experience of the project using the best score available.

# How would you rate your overall experience of critical mass?

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[Page 30 of the standard print version shows a bar chart with the following information:

Response and Percentage of participants:

## Terrible

- Mid point: 1%
- End point: 0%

## Not very good

- Mid point: 2%
- End point: 4%

## It's been okay

- Mid point: 11%
- End point: 5%

## Good

- Mid point: 34%
- End point: 29%

## Excellent

- Mid point: 51%
- End point: 63%]

**“No matter what mood i turn up to the session in, i always leave with a smile on my face - without fail”**  
– participant

## Physical health and wellbeing

Critical Mass improved participants' physical health and wellbeing. In the endpoint survey, the majority (60%) of participants reported that Critical Mass made the biggest difference to them by 'Improving my physical / mental health and wellbeing'. Additionally, 67.5% agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (29.5%) when asked if 'taking part in Critical Mass had a positive impact on my physical health and mental wellbeing'. We know that the majority of participants' personal lives were enhanced through taking part as evidenced by 89% who reported meeting new people and making new friends.

**“Throughout the year I’ve felt my strength increasing and I feel much fitter with stamina improved. I feel more able to get out and enjoy things, feeling confident and talking to people. I’ve just generally had a good time on the project.”**  
– Participant

However, some participants felt that they had not been challenged enough physically through the choreography, which, due to the mass participation element of the project utilised more simplistic choreography.

**“Physically, even though there weren’t many intense dances, I learnt a lot of different dance styles which I had never done before.”**  
– Participant

**“I will definitely be continuing doing creative things. I did creative things like dance before i signed up for critical mass which will also continue after critical mass. To not continue would just feel weird to me so i will 100% be continuing!”**  
– Participant

## Continued participation in dance

When asked in the endpoint survey if they will continue to take part in dance as a result of Critical Mass, over two-thirds of participants responded in the affirmative with 'Strongly agree' (40%) and 'Agree' (26%) the most popular responses.

For some, Critical Mass was a reaffirming experience that expanded their creative horizons. However, for others, there was more trepidation about continuing to participate with dance as they were unsure whether other offers would fulfil the inclusive nature of Critical Mass.

While the majority of participants would like to continue to take part in dance in the future, it is important to recognise that further opportunities will, in some cases, need to meet the standards participants have come to expect from Critical Mass.

**“I would only continue with dance if there were groups based on inclusion. I would not feel comfortable attending a dance group if they do not focus on inclusion. Unfortunately, I feel inclusion is sometimes just a tagline and groups do not have that understanding. Critical mass clearly had that understanding which is why I continued with it.”**

– Participant

## Complex emotions and aftercare

We observed evidence of spikes in stress levels amongst staff and participants at different stages of the project cycle. When it came to participants, ultimately these were volunteers taking part in a professional dance production. As such, they were exposed to the psychological and physical strain that is typical

of the sector. Producers noted heightened emotions amongst the cast leading up to, and just after, major performances. This contributed to fluctuating emotional states, an increase in safeguarding incidents as well as general feelings of anti-climax.

**“I personally underestimated how much of an impact this would have. As a team, dance artists and support workers, we’ve all reflected on the come down. In the same way it ramps up and they go from anxious to really excited, there’s the other side of the curve that I think we too often forget about.”**

– Producer

## **Wellbeing change analysis**

Critical Mass did not exist in a vacuum for participants, who were managing their participation alongside other competing commitments.

Every participant had unique motivations, lived experiences, personal and professional relationships, journeys to and from their Critical Mass workshops that would have influenced the information they supplied in the surveys. Therefore, a wellbeing change analysis illustrates the nuances of participants’ individual experiences.

Over the baseline, midpoint and endpoint, there were four key subjective measures of well-being used by ONS. These were:

- How happy did you feel yesterday?
- How anxious did you feel yesterday?
- How much do you feel like the things you’re doing, such as school, work, Critical Mass etc. are worthwhile things?
- How are you feeling about life at the moment?

**“It has been a bit difficult balancing a full-time job with rehearsals and managing other commitments.”**

– Participant

## **Journey Map**

[Page 34 of the standard print version shows a graph of Participant rating out of 10 against Average participant response with 4 lines from the top downwards as follows:

Things are worthwhile

- Baseline: 8.4
- Midpoint: 8.3
- Endpoint: 8.5

Feeling about life

- Baseline: 7.2
- Midpoint: 7.5
- Endpoint: 7.5

Happiness

- Baseline: 6.7
- Midpoint: 6.0
- Endpoint: 7.4

Anxiety

- Baseline: 3.9
- Midpoint: 3.0
- Endpoint: 2.6]

Participants were asked to give a response across a 10-point Likert scale, with 0 being “not at all” and 10 being “very much so”.

Our researchers calculated the average responses of all participants and plotted them on a scale. Overall, the chart to the left suggests that, over the duration of the Critical Mass programme, participant wellbeing was impacted positively. Perhaps the best indicator of this is the 13% decrease in self-reported anxiety. Happiness was a little harder to read as the average score dropped by 7% at the midpoint before shooting up by 14% in the endpoint – the biggest survey-to-survey increase over any metric. Feelings about life and how much things are worthwhile fluctuated much less, with only a 1-3% swing either way and remaining relatively high and steady throughout suggesting very little impact or reinforcement of existing positivity.

The baseline was captured during the onboarding session where participants were likely to feel nervous and excited about joining the programme. The midpoint was captured in between two key performance deadlines where workshops were at their most intense and anticipation for the Games was beginning to ramp up. The endpoint was captured during the final workshops, as participants said their goodbyes. With this in mind, it is arguably more effective to view these datasets as a sequence of cross-sectional studies rather than its intended output as a longitudinal study. In this way, they could be seen as a series of snapshots or impact reports taken at specific moments in time that were influenced by a variety of environmental factors. This has contributed to our process of inclusive design as illustrated in the methodology.

## **Journey mapping case studies**

Using the unique participant numbers used in the data collection, we were able to track changes across some of the respondents to our surveys while maintaining their personal



anonymity. We have chosen to present five case studies on individual participants to visualise and describe the journeys that these people went through. The results should not be treated as synonymous with all results but rather an insight into the actions, behaviours and motivations of individual participants who took part in Critical Mass.

## **A note on how we selected participants for the journey map**

There were 21 participants that completed the baseline, midpoint and endpoint surveys. Of the 21, we put together a spreadsheet that displayed each participant's demographic data and qualitative responses. We then shortlisted participants who were representative of the overall diversity of Critical Mass – paying particular attention to disability, ethnicity, geography, age and gender. In selecting the final 5 participants, we also considered the depth and quality of their qualitative responses as to what insights could be gleaned. Finally, we cross-checked participant responses to the wellbeing metrics to see how widely dispersed they were. We were pleased with the overall breadth of responses. The most recent demographic data is used to profile each participant case study.

## **Case Study 1: Participant A**

Participant A's happiness levels rose over the course of the project. At the beginning, they were thankful for the opportunity to take part in Critical Mass and by the end they said their weekly session was something they look forward to.

Participant A's anxiety peaked at the baseline. They described their trepidation in initially joining but that they became

reassured by staff. Their anxiety levels dropped off during the midpoint but then picked up again by the endpoint. During the midpoint, they described their excitement to dance and looking forward to being part of the opening ceremony and volunteering at the Games. By the endpoint, they had just finished their final performance and were looking forward to starting a new job and were thinking about how they would keep in touch with friends. This was the only occasion that they said they “often/always” feel lonely having previously selected “some of the time” and “occasionally” in succession. Asked who they spoke to yesterday, they only ever described in-person interaction with friends at Critical Mass or family.

Participant A’s response to how much they feel like things are worthwhile remained high throughout. They said that the biggest difference Critical Mass made to them was making new friends, learning new creative skills, gaining confidence and improving their physical health and wellbeing.

Participant A’s feelings about life improved over the project, plateauing at a high level from the midpoint to the endpoint, despite saying that they “felt a little blue” on the day of the endpoint.

## **Profile:**

---

- 25 years old, female, lives in south-west Birmingham.
- Asian or Asian British: Other and were born overseas.
- They decided not to select any other identifying information although in the baseline they described themselves as Filipino and non-disabled.
- They originally joined Critical Mass for the social and community aspects and the opportunity to be part of a dance company. They had no level of experience working with disabled people before.

# Journey map

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[Page 35 of the standard print version shows a graph of Participant rating out of 10 with 4 lines from the top downwards as follows, with the following approximate information:

## Things are worthwhile

- Baseline: 10
- Midpoint: 9
- Endpoint: 10

## Feeling about life

- Baseline: 7
- Midpoint: 9
- Endpoint: 9

## Happiness

- Baseline: 5
- Midpoint: 6.2
- Endpoint: 7.8

## Anxiety

- Baseline: 5.3
- Midpoint: 1.8
- Endpoint: 3.8

Baseline: "I like how the staff didn't force me to do anything I didn't want to as I was a beginner in dance and did not feel confident in my abilities"

Midpoint: "Excited to dance"

Endpoint: Being here in my weekly session is.... " something I look forward to"]

## Case Study 2: Participant B

Participant B's happiness levels remained high throughout, peaking at the midpoint. Interestingly, this is also where her feelings about life dipped slightly. There is no way of ascertaining why this is but her responses to "what did you do yesterday" suggest she was less active around the midpoint, saying that she "just relaxed in the sun." Whereas, at the baseline, she had been "talking to some of my work mates. Making funny jokes was fun." At the end point she "went shopping in Birmingham and took pictures of the bull at centenary square."

Participant B's anxiety levels reduced considerably from baseline to midpoint and remained steady by the endpoint. Although improving her physical or mental health and wellbeing was one of her original motivations for joining, she did not select this as one of the biggest improvements Critical Mass had made. Participant B's response to how much they feel like things are worthwhile did not change, remaining high throughout.

As previously stated, Participant B's feelings about life had an antithetical correlation to their happiness which cannot be fully explained. That being said, she did score herself highly throughout and, on every occasion, when asked to complete the sentence "Being here in my weekly session is ..." she responded, "exciting".

### **Profile:**

---

- 23 years old, female and lives in Wolverhampton.
- Black or Black British: Caribbean and she does not identify as disabled.

- Participant B originally joined Critical Mass for the opportunity to learn from industry professionals, her health and wellbeing, social and community aspects, performance opportunities and the opportunity to be part of a dance company.
- She describes herself as having a moderately high dance ability and a low level of experience working with disabled

## **Journey map**

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[Page 36 of the standard print version shows a graph of Participant rating out of 10 with 4 lines from the top downwards as follows, with the following approximate information:

Things are worthwhile

- Baseline: 9
- Midpoint: 9
- Endpoint: 9

Feeling about life

- Baseline: 8
- Midpoint: 9
- Endpoint: 8

Happiness

- Baseline: 8
- Midpoint: 7
- Endpoint: 8

Anxiety

- Baseline: 7
- Midpoint: 3
- Endpoint: 3

Baseline: "Feels very inclusive that everyone with different abilities

Midpoint: Things I'm looking forward to..." Performing at the BDF this June and performing in the opening ceremony of the games"

Endpoint: I feel...."alright"]

## Case Study 3: Participant C

Participant C's happiness score dropped by half in the midpoint. Here, she told us that she was generally feeling very bored saying that yesterday she "went to work ". Apathy towards her job is the only reason we could determine for this dip in happiness saying elsewhere that Critical Mass weekly sessions were the "the highlight of my week."

Participant C's anxiety levels remained steady at '0' during the baseline and midpoint but peaked to '3' at the endpoint. During the endpoint, Participant C alluded to the added pressure she might have felt performing, saying she did it to "prove to myself that I am good at something. Allowing me to demonstrate what deaf people can do with dance."

Participant C's response to how much they feel like things are worthwhile remained high throughout. In and amongst her glowing feedback in the endpoint survey, she explained that she was looking forward to "seeing what the future holds. More opportunities to dance and perform."

Participant C's feelings about life remaining steady at '7' during the baseline and midpoint but peaked to '10' at the endpoint suggesting that whatever pressures she felt were worth it in life satisfaction gained.

## Profile:

---

- 28 year old, female and lives in Solihull.
- White (British) and identifies as LGBTQ and disabled - specifying hearing impairment or D/deaf.
- Participant C originally joined Critical Mass for the opportunity to learn from industry professionals, her health and wellbeing, social and community aspects, performance opportunities and the opportunity to be part of a dance company.
- She describes herself as having a moderately high dance ability and a very high level of experience working with disabled people before.

## Journey Map

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[Page 37 of the standard print version shows a graph of Participant rating out of 10 with 4 lines from the top downwards as follows, with the following approximate information:

Things are worthwhile

- Baseline: 9
- Midpoint: 9
- Endpoint: 9

Feeling about life

- Baseline: 8
- Midpoint: 9
- Endpoint: 8

Happiness

- Baseline: 8
- Midpoint: 7
- Endpoint: 8

## Anxiety

- Baseline: 7
- Midpoint: 3
- Endpoint: 3

Baseline: "Just be aware that I am able to see my interpreter at all times and that when people talk they're aware of where my interpreter is so they don't keep walking in-front of them (this means I either miss information or the interpreter has to repeat again)."

Midpoint: "I feel.... "inspired"

Endpoint: "Being here in my weekly sessions is..." special, a dream come true, life changing, amazing"]

## Case Study 4: Participant D

Participant D's happiness score averaged a '5' at both the baseline and midpoint before improving to a '7' at the endpoint. The baseline provided little further comment except for what he did yesterday: "Spoke a little bit to friends at school, but to no one at home." By the midpoint, he was most looking forward to "building in confidence." By the endpoint, he noted that Critical Mass sessions are "Amazing because I have the chance to meet up with my team and have a laugh with them as I don't go out any other time." Nonetheless, he did still explain that yesterday "I sit in my room when I come home from school and just listen to my music," suggesting that life outside of Critical Mass had not changed much.

Participant D's anxiety levels gradually decreased over the duration of the programme. He let us know that he appreciated



the helpfulness of staff in the endpoint when asked if there was anything else he'd like to tell us.

Participant D's response to how much they feel like things are worthwhile remained high throughout, peaking at the endpoint. At the midpoint, he described being in his weekly sessions as "excited, chilled, happy".

Participant D's feelings about life peaked to an '8' at the midpoint before plateauing.

## **Profile:**

---

- 18 years old, male and lives in Coventry.
- White (British) and identifies as disabled.
- Participant D originally joined Critical Mass for the opportunity to be part of the Commonwealth Games, have fun, meet new people, make new dance connections and learn new skills.

## **Journey Map**

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[Page 38 of the standard print version shows a graph of Participant rating out of 10 with 4 lines, with the following approximate information:

Things are worthwhile

- Baseline: 8
- Midpoint: 8
- Endpoint: 9

Feeling about life

- Baseline: 5
- Midpoint: 8
- Endpoint: 8

## Happiness

- Baseline: 5
- Midpoint: 5
- Endpoint: 7

## Anxiety

- Baseline: 7
- Midpoint: 5
- Endpoint: 3

Baseline: I feel...."[smiley face emoji][sleeping face emoji]"

Midpoint: I feel...."[smiley face emoji][smiley face emoji]"

Endpoint: Is there anything we can do to improve your Critical Mass Experience? "Keep Critical Mass weekly sessions going"

## Case Study 5: Participant E

Participant E's happiness levels leapt up from '3' in the baseline to '7' in the midpoint, remaining there in the endpoint. Despite this low score in the baseline, she said that she felt "good, just a bit tired [winking face emoji] [smiley face emoji]" as she had been to work yesterday. By contrast, at the endpoint she said that they felt "great and rested".

Participant E's anxiety levels were as low as possible until the endpoint where they shot up to '8'. However, she explained that it was her final day at work the day before and she was now looking forward to a new project in Jordan.

Participant E's response to how much they feel like things are worthwhile did not change, remaining high throughout. Participant E's feelings about life did not change, remaining high throughout.

## Profile:

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- 25 year old, female and lives in Birmingham City Centre.
- White (Other) stating that she's Lithuanian and mainly speaks another language other than English. She does not identify as disabled.
- Participant E originally joined Critical Mass to be part of the Commonwealth Games, have fun, meet new people, make new friends, and learn new skills.
- She describes herself as having a high level of experience working with disabled people before.

## Journey Map

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[Page 39 of the standard print version shows a graph of Participant rating out of 10 with 4 lines from the top downwards as follows, with the following approximate information:

Things are worthwhile

- Baseline: 10
- Midpoint: 10
- Endpoint: 10

Feeling about life

- Baseline: 9
- Midpoint: 9
- Endpoint: 9

Happiness

- Baseline: 3
- Midpoint: 8
- Endpoint: 8

## Anxiety

- Baseline: 0
- Midpoint: 0
- Endpoint: 8

Baseline: Things I'm looking forward to are..."Performing at the opening ceremony, working at the games, seeing my family, travelling"

Midpoint: Who did you see or talk to yesterday? "My work colleagues, family"

Endpoint: "I would like to say a **massive thank you** to the team, you did an amazing job! Thanks you so much!"]

## Outcome 2:

Participants feel a sense of belonging and connectedness through mass creative participation in a mega event

### Key findings

- 15% increase in participants 'never' feeling lonely and a 3% decrease in participants 'often/always' or 'occasionally' feeling lonely.
- 89% felt that the biggest difference made by the project was meeting new people and making new friends.
- 'Making new friends' was repeatedly reported as being the highlight of the project for participants. Participants meet and/or communicate with each other outside of sessions and rehearsals, suggesting it has positively informed their social lives outside of the project. Social media played a role in this, with groups communicating via WhatsApp and Facebook.
- 65% agreed (38%) or strongly agreed (27%) that taking part in Critical Mass made them feel proud of my local area.
- 61% agreed (42.5%) or strongly agreed (18.5%) that Critical Mass / Birmingham 2022 Festival had improved their perception of Birmingham and the West Midlands.
- 65.5% agreed (44.5%) or strongly agreed (21%) that Critical Mass / Birmingham 2022 Festival had improved their perception of Birmingham and the West Midlands.
- 100% of participants live in the West Midlands.
- Critical Mass facilitated a sense of belonging and connectedness for participants. This was evident in the bonds that were developed within weekly sessions and rehearsals, and through the togetherness experienced through the mass participation element of the project. The online group was a particular success in this area, in facilitating connections amongst group members.

- Social media played a significant role in maintaining friendships outside of the project. However, some participants in the online group reportedly found it difficult to sustain these connections post-project as they had never established meeting up in person outside of the parameters of Critical Mass. Therefore, digital social spaces were successful in democratising access to the project but had limitations in cementing long-term ties.
- Participants' connections to Birmingham and the West Midlands somewhat improved, however only 49% of participants felt that they had developed connections with the wider community. Although not an aim of the project, connecting with other groups as part of Birmingham 2022 Festival may have improved participants' social connections to the wider community.
- Dance and mass performance brought the cast together, particularly following more insular weekly group sessions, where strong ties were developed. Informing participants of wider artistic choices, when working on character segments, can remedy feelings of competition when choreography and design differs between group sections. Including the cast in wider creative decisions can empower their individual and collective sense of agency.

## **Meeting new people**

89% of participants reported that Critical Mass made the biggest difference to them meeting new people and making new friends, demonstrating the positive impact the project made to participants, particularly in relation to this outcome area.

Across the board, frequencies of feeling lonely reduced. Most significantly, there was an incremental increase of participants reporting 'never' feeling lonely across the baseline, midpoint

and endpoint. At the baseline 9% reported never feeling lonely. This led to an eventual 15% increase in participants reporting that they never feel lonely by the end point survey. This is supported by qualitative findings from across the evaluation, including reflection group sessions, Padlet boards and the Artist Takes method (see methodology), which suggest that Critical Mass went beyond a creative / performance opportunity for most participants and became something of social significance to their everyday lives.

## **Critical Mass has made the biggest difference to me...**

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[Page 41 of the standard print version shows a bar chart of Percentage of participants with the following information:

### **Area of difference:**

- Meeting new people / making new friends: 89%
- Learning new creative skills: 58%
- Learning new life skills: 47%
- Gaining confidence: 66%
- Advancing my career or professional development: 31%
- My understanding and perceptions of disability: 60%
- Improving my physical / mental health and well being: 60%
- Something else: 01%]

## **From Inclusive Dance to Mass Dance: 'Familiarisation' to 'Family'**

The structure of the 14-month project was designed to prepare participants, many who were new to dance, towards mass performance in a supported setting. This comprised of a 'familiarisation' period delivered from August to December 2021

before participants moved into rehearsals for their first mass performance of Wondrous Stories by Motionhouse as part of Birmingham 2022's Festival Opening Show on 17-20 March 2022. Bonds were initially developed within the context of weekly sessions, delivered in 15 settings across Birmingham and the West Midlands as part of the familiarisation period.

Within these sessions Dance Leaders and Support Workers skilfully used inclusive dance practice to build the confidence of participants and support the development of relationships within a creative and inclusive setting; facilitating what we describe in the next chapter as a 'culture of care'. Groups created team names, chants and warmups and many participants reported forming new friendships within more localised settings as a result, that were maintained outside of the project.

**"Being part of the community and participating in a big event. Such an opportunity isn't easy to come by. I really like how dance has brought people from different walks of life together."**

– Participant

**"Being part of a dance group of people from all different backgrounds but with the same love of dance. Opportunity to make friends from the local area with common interests which is something I have struggled with since moving to Birmingham for work."**

– Participant

**"They want to be in the session because they feel like coming to the session itself means something to them."**

– Dance leader



**“I have now got friends who are a similar age to me and I am hoping to go and do some leisure things with them.”**

**– Participant**

**“Participating in Critical Mass has enabled me to discover new friendships ... especially in my dance group ... we even started doing things outside. Also, it means now I have people who have shared the same experiences in Critical Mass and be able to talk about it with the new friends.”**

**– Participant**

**“I have met a beautiful group of people through Critical Mass. And in this, I have made some great friends. This has really helped me with meeting new people”**

**– Participant**

**“I think the most beautiful part is that people feel this is the journey ... to have the commitment to come to a weekly session despite the fact that you’re not in a performance, or to cheer on others ... that is something that I have not seen ... they are looking at it as teamwork.”**

**– Dance leader**

Many participants attended sessions even though they were not performing in certain events. This supports the notion that Critical Mass became of significance to many participants in their everyday lives, beyond the creative performance aspect of the project. Dance Leaders describe this aspect of the project as ‘unique’, with some participants feeling affiliated to the wider project and returning to support others.

Participants largely described enjoying the thrill of performing alongside peers from their weekly sessions as part of Wondrous Stories. However, a criticism of the project was that

participants felt disconnected from the narrative. When asked about this, project leads felt they had struggled to get information from creative partners in time so that they could relay this to the participants. Given the piece was inspired by 'stories of the city, past, present and future', there was a lack of communication with the participants around broader artistic decisions and the ways in which individual pieces of choreography connected to the overarching narrative. The Lead Artist observed some competition between groups who, up until this point, had worked solely in their group settings. This was in relation to their individual pieces of character choreography and costumes being different and sometimes more challenging and appealing compared to other groups. Communication around broader artistic choices is therefore essential in unifying a mass cast. This was remedied during the next stage of the project.

For the latter stages of the project, participants were required to join new groups away from their weekly group sessions. Although not originally anticipated, the swell of demand to take part in additional performances encouraged greater mixing of participants ahead of further mass performances which perhaps led to a more cohesive mass cast for the final stages of the project. As we explore in Outcome 3, participants and staff frequently referred to the project as a 'family', suggesting that a supportive and empathetic approach was fostered across groups settings within the latter stages of the project. In social terms, this momentum was particularly evident as the project built towards the crescendo of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony. The experience of inclusive, mass performance was particularly unifying for the cast and led participants to feeling a sense of pride in their personal and collective achievements.

**“It was always in the design that once we had gone into that mass setting, for Wondrous Stories, we would not go back to the same number of individual groupings. Part of that was to get people used to being in slightly bigger groups ... attending something every week to just participate which for some, that was a completely new experience ... then we needed to start getting them used to a mass context ... people would say, ‘oh, this is great. I love my weekly, I don’t want to do anything else’ ... but that’s not the project. The whole point is mass ... you might be stood next to someone who you’ve not met before.”**

**– Producer**

**“I felt so proud of everyone I still can’t believe we did that.”**

**– Participant**

**“Humbling to see everyone excited together and for the friendships we’ve made to blossom during longer rehearsals/ waiting backstage.”**

**– Participant**

**“Proud of what we had accomplished.”**

**- Participant**

**“Meeting strangers at the start who then became family after.”**

**– Dance leader**

## **Peer to peer support**

Participants provided essential peer-to-peer support in dealing with the physical, emotional and practical demands of the project. Participants relied on other group members for encouragement, morale and to meet the logistical requirements of the project, for example, travel to and from rehearsals, either through giving lifts or travelling together on public transport.

**“We went into Birmingham for our costume fitting. This was at a time when Worcester was quite flooded. So there were problems with trains and travel. Because we all went through it together, I think that it just brought us all a bit closer.”**

– Participant

**“I would say that it’s the teamwork that’s helped me to get on with my dancing. It was a challenge to keep going over things again and again.”**

– Participant

**“... How much everybody supports each other and is there for each other for logistical, you know ... like, driving them to a mass rehearsal or just as encouragement. I think it gives a sense of community that goes beyond and is almost even more important than the creative journey.”**

- Dance leader

**“They have relied on each other and supported each other throughout the process, they have made travel plans, gone for coffees and helped each other out.”**

– Dance leader

## Online group

The way in which social connections manifested within the online group is particularly noteworthy. The hybrid model of delivery was successful in being inclusive of individuals unable to attend sessions in person, and for fostering a similar level of social interactivity and belonging. The Dance Leader and Support Worker note the challenge of initially facilitating the sessions, with some young people reporting feeling nervous about turning their cameras on, due to feeling vulnerable about their personal surroundings. Gradually participants grew in confidence and, as the Support Worker notes, “everyone would put the cameras on then until the end.” The group was skilfully facilitated, with the Support Worker oscillating between the main room and breakout rooms to support participants on an individual and collective basis, whilst the Dance Leader cultivated a safe, warm and creative environment.

Voted on by other Dance Leaders as representing a significant story of change within Critical Mass, the Dance Leader shares their experience of the group celebrating ‘Galentine’s Day’. The connectivity of group members transcended screens and a shared environment was cultivated.

### **Artist Takes:**

“Naturally seeing members of the group in a grid layout on my computer screen through Zoom was something I wanted to capture in the composition as it was a big part of the shared experience for them, but without wanting this bringing a heaviness or dominance as it didn’t seem to be a restriction or burden to the group’s connections. The colours in the resulting piece make direct reference to the different colours of light in each of the group’s rehearsal environments; a magnolia kitchen; a pink living room; from light loft spaces to low light

environments, some of the group also with their cameras off. Building up the grid with these tones started to look a little like a cross section of a block of flats with different spaces side by side in their everyday environments. Capturing the figures in white was to highlight them from the everyday backdrops, and aimed to capture the idea of the soul and spirit of the dancers moving beyond the tangible world and their physical movement, and into a state of freedom and flow, which could connect them together despite them not being in a shared physical space.”

- Louise Byng, Artist in Residence

**“I didn’t realise how powerful this would become ... ‘don’t you have plans on Monday ... it’s the 14th of Feb!’ I said, ‘I’m sure my husband hasn’t thought of anything ... I’ll be here, teaching you ... And so, we’ll make it special.’**

**You know, we’re all girls in the group. I said, ‘so what do you want to do?’**

**They said, ‘let’s do Gal-entine’s day.’**

**I said, ‘how would you want to celebrate it?’ and they said they would bring some props in ... and we’ll all wear red ...**

**It was so beautiful to ... have an insight into somebody else’s life in this way, on this day. I think it really brought us all together. And as the performances are coming up, people are getting a little bit stressed. I think these kinds of things really help ... everybody feel they’re part of something really big and something really nice ... despite the fact that they’re not going to be performing next month. They want to be in the session because they feel like coming to the session itself means something to them.” -**

**– Dance lead**

## **Maintaining social connections**

Many young people formed an attachment to staff and their peer groups through the project. The loss of this from their lives has the potential to undo progress around personal wellbeing as explored in Outcome 1. Legacy plans to establish effective exit routes are currently being implemented, therefore it is beyond the scope of this evaluation to comment on their effectiveness.

**“I’m coping with it a little bit but I just miss everyone and all the dance leaders. [have you kept in touch with anybody since?"] Not much.”**

– Participant

Social media played an integral role in maintaining friendships within and beyond the project. However, perhaps unexpectedly, members of the online group felt that maintaining connections post-project had been difficult due the nature of their interactivity being remote; in-person meet ups had not been pre-established and participants were geographically further away from one another.

**“I think obviously it’s an online group. And so it was difficult to continue meeting people outside of sessions, because most people are like the people who are joining online, we weren’t in the similar area. And it’s a bit different for me, because we were online, but I know, some of the groups they did go out for a meal. But it was different for us, because we were online.”**

– Participant

## **Connections to Birmingham and the wider West Midlands**

Critical Mass improved participants' connections to Birmingham and the West Midlands to some extent. However, this was not as prominently articulated through the survey or reflection group sessions. Here, an overwhelming number of participants nominated stories of change related to relationships developed within the project itself. As explored previously, 89% of participants felt that Critical Mass had the biggest impact on them meeting new people and making new friends. 64% of participants felt that Critical Mass made them feel proud of their local area, however a large proportion of participants attributed their sense of pride to their individual and collective achievements as part of Critical Mass, as opposed to a civic sense of pride.

Where we saw unexpected positive progress in relation to this area, was the opportunity the project provided to physically connect participants to Birmingham City Centre. Encouraging participants to travel independently and/or with peers to project locations had a positive impact on their connections to the City Centre, as a place.

**“This project has given me a chance to travel to the city centre and walk around. I didn't go to the city much before the project but now I feel more confident coming to visit. I'm glad it gave me a chance to travel.”**

– Participant

**“Birmingham is a big city. But now I feel it's a community. I don't go down to Birmingham much but after this I might go more often. There feels like there's more to do.”**

– Participant



**“Going to Birmingham was quite scary at first. Through going there, it helped me get excited about traveling to new places to do new things ... I feel more connected.”**

**– Participant**





widespread ableism has traditionally required disabled people to be super-adaptive, resourceful, and willing to make significant personal adjustments just to fit in. But the arts and cultural sector has realised that achieving equality for disabled people is no longer simply about removing the physical barriers. It is increasingly understood that genuine inclusion requires proactive engagement with anti-ableist practice. Driven by disabled artists and activists, supported by the enlightened strategies of national arts councils, ableism is increasingly called out whilst mainstream creative opportunities are finally being shared with disabled creatives and working environments are finally being designed to meet everyone's needs.

- Andrew Miller: Critical Friend

- An effective project structure was implemented to provide pastoral support to participants and open and transparent discussion around access provision and adjustments took place. We observed a culture of mutual regard and care across participants and staff which was key to developing perceptions (and self-perceptions) and understandings of inclusion and disability.
- Participants' individual and collective sense of action evolved with the project and a deep sense of pride in coming together en masse emerged. The project was successful in facilitating an inclusive and integrated mass performance. However, the wider industry needs to further adapt to realise the potential of, and service this achievement to its full potential.

## Access provisions

Participants with disabilities who were present within the reflection group sessions, noted how adjustments had been made to support their participation, either through one-to-one support and more flexible arrangements or adjustments. Staff acknowledge how their approach to coordinating access provisions was, to a degree, iterative as plans had to be developed in conjunction with supporting a range of needs as participants were onboarded. Key lessons were learned at the recruitment phase of the project, surrounding collecting participants' specific access requirements in advance to assist planning and budgeting. In trying to make the project as inclusive as possible, fewer key questions were added to sign-up forms in order not to deter participants at the recruitment stage. This led to more forms needing to be administered later on in the project.

Although schedules had not been finalised, the team note that having more information outlining the commitments of the project, in advance of the summer recruitment camps and sessions, would have been beneficial. Although iterative, this may have prevented some participants, particularly those without a dance background, from withdrawing from the project.

The producers group 'voted' on this key piece of learning as one of their stories of 'significant change', acknowledging the complexities of trying to encourage and reassure participants from a range of backgrounds at an early stage, whilst giving them enough information to feel informed and be able to make realistic decisions about the level of commitment.

**“Critical Mass had already thought about adjustments before we had to ask them for it. Whereas in society now, you have to explain before you get the adjustment.”**

– Participant

## Covid-19

The project was a risk for many participants, particularly those with disabilities and long-term health conditions. Many participants noted feeling 'safe' as a result of the due diligence and care performed over Covid-19, which made some feel comfortable to attend in-person activities.

**“I was worried about going into doing dance because of covid, but then you had to do lateral flows and stuff, so I felt more confident going”**

– Participant

## Visibility

The narrative of visibility - of being present and included - is fundamental to inclusion. Indeed, for decades since anti-discriminatory legislation was first introduced, disabled people have been integrating proudly into the society from which they had long been excluded. But all that stopped abruptly in March 2020. Due to the medical uncertainties that surrounded the emergence of Covid-19, disabled people became some of the first to retreat home, many later ordered to shield by the government, and we were often the last to emerge from the pandemic due to on-going medical susceptibility. And with good reason, disabled people accounted for two thirds of all Coronavirus deaths in the UK. The British approach to “freedom” from Covid restrictions consistently placed the heavy burden of life limitations on disabled and “Clinically Extremely Vulnerable” (CEV) people. We were the ones who had to limit our lives by staying home to accommodate those libertarians who would not accept any limitations on theirs, putting us at most risk. The pandemic is still ongoing for many with compromised immunity, but for others returning to everyday life

the threat of Covid will remain a bitter reminder that despite the many advances of the social model, medicalisation is never far away.

- Andrew Miller: Critical Friend

## **Capturing demographic data**

Overall, 45% of participants self-identified as disabled, neurodiverse or having a long-term health condition. That being said, there were instances where participants spoiled their ballot or decided not to identify themselves as disabled, neurodiverse or having a long-term health condition, but then went on to describe their disability in their own terms in an open text box. In the endpoint, of those who selected “Prefer not to say” or “None of these”, five chose to use the description box to tell us about a disability, neurodiversity or health condition they have, and a further one used this box to tell us that “This is personal”. This amounts to a further 4% of the population. It was expressed, particularly via Support Workers during the collection phase of the baseline survey, that some participants felt that being asked for their demographic data was intrusive. In addition, participants expressed their discomfort in answering a survey question relating to changes in perception around disability.

## **Social model of disability**

Disabled people have been defined by their medical conditions for centuries. Historically this ‘medical model’ placed responsibility on disabled individuals to solve all the problems of access created by their impairment whilst society made few, if any, concessions to make life easier. For many disabled people today, this medicalised approach is associated with profoundly

negative experiences of social exclusion. Conversely the social model - developed in the 1970s by disabled people - states that it is society's structures and environments that disable us, not our impairments, and it places the emphasis of improvement and inclusion as a collective responsibility. So, it is perhaps not surprising that some disabled people altogether resist self-identifying in the language of medical impairment. The social model has revolutionised perceptions of disability in the cultural world - where it has long been embedded in disability-led arts practice - and it has opened up huge possibilities for disabled artists (see the work of commissioning agency Unlimited), audiences and participants, as illustrated by Critical Mass.

- Andrew Miller: Critical Friend

## **Perceptions of self and perceptions of disability**

60% of respondents said that Critical Mass made the biggest difference to their understandings and perceptions of disability. Interestingly, of the 60%, approximately half identified as having a disability themselves. This could also be linked to some participants telling us that their self-perceptions had changed due to them taking part in an inclusive dance project.

**“Personally, I’ve never had the experience to work with people of different disabilities ... it’s educated me to want be able to change my ways to work with people, and also educate myself of different disabilities that are out there.”**

– Participant

**“Because everybody within Critical Mass has got different abilities, I think we’re more all in the same boat if you like. Nobody’s judging because we’re all in it together.”**

– Participant



**“I don’t see myself as having a disability, I see myself as having the ability to dance.”**

– Participant

We have seen evidence that Critical Mass has built the confidence of participants by exposing people to different lived experiences than they are used to coming into contact with. This act of rubbing shoulders with one another has important implications for individuals, who then begin to think and act differently.

A participant’s parent further elaborated on this, explaining that their son rarely had the opportunity to meet a range of new people. They had actively accessed groups outside of Critical Mass, however these were primarily focused on engaging with other young people who identify as neurodiverse. Whilst these groups undoubtedly have value, and we wish to draw no comparison in the way in which different types of provision is focused, the participant’s parent stressed how Critical Mass had provided a rare opportunity for their son to develop his identity, outside of a space where he primarily connected with people because of his disability.

## **Audience and media perceptions**

Discussions around how Critical Mass was perceived externally centred on two polar perspectives. On the one hand, participants were delighted by the exposure they received, and the interest taken in the project overall. On the other hand, there was also a feeling that Critical Mass often had second billing promotion and there was a lack of balanced portrayal. Reflecting on how Critical Mass performances were captured during the Opening Ceremony, one of the producers remarked that this was in fact part of their plans.

However, accepting that we currently live in an ableist society, then we cannot afford to lose any ground on visibility of disability in culture, media and sport. Over the course of the project, we documented instances where planned press contributions from participants were condensed. One example came during the Critical Mass performance at the Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony.

**“I liked it because I was [participant name] the dancer and not [participant name] the boy with autism. I felt included. A lot of people who know me only know me with autism. It was nice to go somewhere where I was one of the rest of the group.”**

– Participant

## **Inclusive future**

As the cultural sector becomes a friendlier environment for disabled people to participate as artists, employees and audiences, the need for tokenism diminishes. But this has been a process that has taken decades and continues to evolve.

- Andrew Miller: Critical Friend

**“We wanted to blend in and be part of the whole because there was something about it not being a tokenistic thing, but showing that we were part of the mass.”**

– Producer

**“We had a whole list of bullet points about Critical Mass facts, things that a presenter will want to rattle off... that was how they (participants) rehearsed it. And so, everyone was really, really happy. And then on the actual day, we never got an answer. Something changed in terms of media, whether it’s time, whether there was an incident, I don’t know what happened. It’s just the world of media, I guess. So, it did not play out the way that it did in the dress rehearsal.”**

– Producer

The overall audience engagement figures for this event far-surpassed all other Critical Mass performances, with a 5.2 million television viewers peak (note 9). Critical Mass played out to a global audience and was directly referred to by commentators. However, there was still a sense that this could have gone further. In the 442 seconds that the Critical Mass ensemble were on stage, 89 seconds screen time was reserved for their performers – including 49 seconds of footage. In comparison, professional dancers received 198 seconds of total screen time. Further analysis, according to screen time for people with disabilities and non-disabled people, would add further to this point (note 10).

This was a disappointment for the performers, but we also question whether this was symptomatic of wider missed opportunities for greater press exposure of the project and its participants. According to the UN (note 11), the media is a vital instrument to “change societal misconceptions and present persons with disabilities as individuals that are a part of human diversity.” Questioning media practices is beyond the scope of this project but we believe this fits into a more general discussion of whether the external environment Critical Mass sits in is hospitable of inclusive practices.

## **Media representation**

Despite accounting for 20+% of our national population disabled people have remained largely under-represented and invisible. There is still a tendency in society when confronted with disability, to look away, to avert a direct gaze. And that aversion can also be found in mass media. Cameras rarely focus on disabled participants at major events or arrivals on red carpets, preferring to relay the normative to audiences at home. As one of the first generation of disabled kids tv presenters in the 1980's I helped ensure disabled people were visible on television and acted as a role model for others to follow. Progress in the years since has been, at best, inconsistent. Moments of equality have come and gone whilst few disabled stars have emerged. But in the last 5 years significant progress has occurred with the advent of groups such as the British Film Institute Disability Screen Advisory Group who since 2018 have led industry conversations on ableism and "cripping up", whilst advocating for authentic representation of disabled characters... In short, it's becoming harder to look away.

- Andrew Miller: Critical Friend

## **An aesthetics of care**

The infrastructure and team that was put into place for Critical Mass is a particular strength of the project, with highly skilled staff and freelancers collaborating to ensure a diverse range of participants could access the project. The diagram below illustrates the structure of the delivery team, with a central hub existing from Fabric, and a central producer's role, connecting with an Inclusion Champion and Lead Artist. These two roles, responsible for the artistic vision and accessibility and inclusiveness of the programme, liaised with staff at Fabric and

a team of Dance Leaders, responsible for delivering weekly sessions, and Support Workers, responsible for the pastoral care of participants. Consultants with expertise in equality, diversity and inclusion and dance, were drawn on throughout the process.

**“What has evolved is incredible. And when you see it is not on a ring at the Commonwealth Games, you see it in the dressing room, that's where you see it. Because actually, that's where there's no distinction between individuals”**  
– Inclusion champion

**“I think the most beautiful part is that people feel this is the journey ... to have the commitment to come to a weekly session despite the fact that you're not in a performance, or to cheer on others ... that is something that I have not seen ... they are looking at it as teamwork.” Judge.”**  
– Dance leader

[Page 59 of the standard print version shows a diagram made up of coloured boxes on top of 2 shaded areas in the background.

### **Blue shaded area on left: Birmingham 2022 Festival**

This contains the following boxes:

- Blue box 1: **Senior Programme Manager**  
(Safeguarding and Data Protection Lead)
- Blue box 2: **Executive Producer**  
(Senior Responsible Lead)  
links to blue box 4 and yellow box
- Blue box 3: **Strategic Partnerships Manager**  
links to pink box and blue box 4

- Blue box 4: **Senior Producer**  
(Senior Producing Lead)  
links to blue boxes 2 and 3 and orange box
- Blue box 5: **Evaluation and Monitoring Manager**
- Blue box 6: **Internal Comms**
- Blue box 7: **Finance, Admin & Coordination**

### **Green shaded area on right: Fabric**

This contains the following boxes:

- Green box 1: **Deputy Chief Executive**  
(Senior Responsible Lead)
- Green box 2: **Head of Learning and Participation**  
(Senior Producing Lead and Safeguarding Lead)  
links to yellow box and orange box
- Light green box 1: **Participation Delivery Team**  
(incl. Participation Producer, Participant Liaison, and Administration)  
links to orange box
- Light green box 2: Finance
- Light green box 3: Marcomms and Engagement Team
- Light green box 4: **Ground Delivery Team**  
(Incl. Dance Artists, and Support Workers)  
links to orange box

## In the centre:

- Orange box (overlapping both blue and green shaded areas):  
**Specialist Teams and Consultants**  
(incl. Lead Artist and Inclusion Champion)  
links to blue box 4, green box 2 and light green boxes 1 and 4

## Outside the shaded areas:

- Pink box (on the left of the blue shaded area):  
**Spirit of 2012 (Funder)**  
links to blue box 3
- Yellow box 1 (in the centre, above both shaded areas):  
External Production Teams  
links to blue box 4 and green box 2
- Yellow box 2 (on the bottom right, overlapping the blue shaded area): **External Agencies]**

We propose that the project structure, the values and the skill of staff fostered a culture of care. We draw on the work of Applied Theatre Scholar, James Thompson, to provide a theoretical framework for our findings as we observed an aesthetic emerging around the project through the ways in which it integrated art and care. In Care Aesthetics (note 12), Thompson explores the relationship between art and care.

He argues that through the process of working with people and materials, care takes place and equally, that high-quality care found in formal health settings or informally in our day to day lives, has a certain aesthetic quality. Thompson asserts that “greater attention should be paid to the caring possibilities of the arts so that we might realise richer, more life enhancing human experiences” (2022: 22). In articulating ‘care’ here, we are not suggesting that artistic work with people with disabilities

is 'care provision', rather we are suggesting that a reciprocal caring culture emerged through the project, with and between staff and participants (with and without disabilities) which became fundamental to the art itself and the sense of cohesion nurtured on and off stage.

Frequently, Critical Mass participants and staff fondly refer to the project as a 'family' and describe feelings of belonging and a shared commonality. A culture of respect and mutual regard was generated by both staff and participants, and this was cumulative; we witnessed a growing sense of cohesion evolving from weekly sessions to mass rehearsals. This also extended to the online group, where our artist-in-residence at the session as part of Artist Takes described observing "mutual care, support, co-operation and acceptance." Through this, a strong company ethos, with a distinct artistic and social language emerged from the project. This aesthetic was integral to developing changes in perceptions and self-perceptions of disability as participants and staff shared a clear common purpose and set of values.

The relationship between the Inclusion Champion and Lead Artist illustrates this. Rather than working as separate entities in tension, their practices integrated and worked in concert to develop 'careful art' (Thompson, 2022). Their relationship was essential to creating, as far as was in their power, the conditions for inclusive mass participatory dance where art and care shared a symbiotic relationship on and off stage.

This culture of care was modelled with and by the Dance Leaders and Support Workers and became embedded across the cast. Many Support Workers danced onstage with participants on a one-to-one basis, experiencing an intimate, embodied relationship which illuminates the aesthetic qualities of their pastoral care.



## **Social justice**

Social justice is defined as ‘the objective of creating a fair and equal society in which each individual matters, their rights are recognised and protected, and decisions are made in ways that are fair and honest.’ (note 13)

**“My inclusive practice awareness completely revolutionised through working not just on Critical Mass, but with [the inclusion champion] ... so that is now part of me, and my life, which was not necessarily there before ... I learned new models and ways to build structures to support the individual and the group come together as a company.”**

– Lead artist

**“I think mine and [the lead artist’s] relationship was very practical, and conversational, and personal - together we were seeking to understand. And it shifted between all those places.”**

– Inclusion champion

Emerging particularly in the latter half of the project, was a growing sense of participants having the confidence to make demands around their needs and ambitions for the project. In line with this, it was notable in the later reflection sessions with participants, that their confidence in articulating issues and challenges arising from the project had grown. There are examples of how the project is having a longer-term impact on participants’ confidence in realising equitable status within wider society.

**“I couldn't make the original rehearsal as my mom wouldn't be able to enter as a support. We didn't realise this until the**

**last minute. Without any form of support it would be really hard for me to take part, but I really wanted to after so much hard work ...I used my new confidence to get what I needed out of the project. It was amazing to be part of the Opening Ceremony and breaking down barriers. I hope people with disabilities will be included in big events and hopefully it will help people understand and not be too quick to judge.”**

– Participant (note 14)

Participants’ individual and collective sense of action evolved with the project. This is evident in the participants’ selection of their ‘Most Significant Change’ story.

**“During the Opening Ceremony, for some reason the main organisers left us out of things like the finale - I didn’t feel this was inclusive. Some of us weren’t happy and raised our voices and shared our concerns with the Opening Ceremony organisers. The leaders in Critical Mass backed our case which was really nice. In conclusion, some of us were invited to take part.”**

- Participant

We observed participants’ sense of pride in coming together en masse. In addition to the personal and creative experience that this provided, particularly through the Opening Ceremony, many participants drew on the socio-political importance of their collective contribution to the performance, as their highlight of the project.

**“Being part of something really big and showing the world that anyone can perform, no matter what.”**

– Participant

**“Being part of a mass integrated cast who have hopefully changed people’s perceptions of what dance can be! Seeing everyone dancing together on a professional platform with professionals, made me feel as equally important and valued.”**

– Participant

**“Performing together in an inclusive group with supportive people. Showing that dance is for everyone.”**

– Participant

What’s more, we observed instances of participants learning life skills and broadening their horizons. A participant with disabilities voiced that being part of Critical Mass has improved their confidence to a point that they feel more able to travel and visit places that they previously felt intimidated by:

**“Birmingham is a really big city. I don’t go down there much, but after this, I might have more days out there because it’s more than a city, it’s like a community.”**

– Participant

Feeling more confident to enter the city centre is a huge achievement on a personal level. Further, a possible ancillary benefit of increased diversity in our public spaces will be to make Birmingham’s social spheres richer as a result - increasing the likelihood of the general public being exposed to the lives of others. Further research is required to see whether this hypothesis holds true but in the immediate sense, it appears that within Critical Mass there are important lessons in how to foster an environment that encourages people to overcome a range of mental barriers.

## **Seat at the table**

Fundamentally inclusion relates to the quality of the human experience. It's definitely not a natural consequence of having a diverse team or organisation; we need to design for it. To do this effectively, we need to work with the people we're designing it for to fully understand what they need to feel valued and included in our work, policies, processes, physical and online environments. For way too long deaf, disabled, neurodiverse and learning-disabled people have not had a seat at this table - which is why so much of society alienates and disables us. Aiming for diversity means we need to acknowledge our differences, whilst inclusion asks that everyone can feel equally valued and are free to bring their authentic selves to the mission. Only then can social justice and equality be truly achieved.

- Andrew Miller, Critical Friend

## **Critical mass demonstrated inclusive practice. But was the project included in the wider environment?**

The structure of the project meant that it was exposed to an external environment. On the one hand, this maximised local resources as organisations shared knowledge, skills and opportunities with and from Critical Mass. On the other hand, this meant there were times when the inclusive and collaborative culture of Critical Mass was compromised by conflicting priorities of outside partners. Staff members across the reflection groups noted the friction between the aims and objectives of Critical Mass and the practical and artistic demands of working with external professional production companies. Balancing the needs of a voluntary cast with the

expectations, systems and processes necessary to produce a mega event was difficult to marry and remains a key question for those building on the legacy of Critical Mass.

The views and responses of audiences are interesting to note as inclusion can be visible but inclusive approaches are harder to see and comment on at the point of performance. For example, the audience response to Wondrous Stories was very positive: overall, 80% of audience members rated the event as 'Excellent' with some comments mentioning how it was good to see people with different disabilities taking part.

However, there was a view from some of the project team that a co-creation approach to working with Critical Mass participants would have brought about new/more possibilities for their development, even if this didn't change audience perception very much. Of the performance opportunities lined up for Critical Mass, it was pre-determined that a co-creation approach would only be possible in 1 or 2, and not with Wondrous Stories and the Opening Ceremony owing to their overall creative brief being established before Critical Mass had worked out its own choreographic creative direction.

**“Just because someone says, ‘we are really pro-inclusion, and we love what this project is all about’ ... what they don’t see or understand is what that looks like in really practical terms. So, at the moment I’m having a conversation with them about scheduling, or about why we can’t tell them that number right now, we need a little bit more time on that, or the fact that the process is quite iterative and based on participant needs. That’s where you start to see this clash of like, ‘yeah, we want to be inclusive, but we are working to this timeline and we’ve got a deadline to meet’.”**

- Producer

## **Outcome 4:**

**Integrated inclusive dance practice in the West Midlands will be embedded and sustainable, and West Midlands dance organisations and practitioners acknowledged as sector leaders**

### **Key findings**

- When asked if Inclusive dance practice is stronger in the West Midlands as a result of Critical Mass, on average staff scored this 8.4 out of 10 and freelancers scored this 8.0 out of 10
- When asked if they'd developed new skills in inclusive dance practice and will use these skills to facilitate more accessible opportunities in the future as a result of Critical Mass, on average staff scored this 8.3 out of 10 and freelancers scored this 8.2 out of 10
- When asked if they believed the projects partnership structure was well defined and channels of communication into the strategic, operational and artistic aspects were clear, on average staff scored this 6.2 out of 10 and freelancers scored this 5.5 out of 10
- When asked if they felt it connected them with other people in their field, on average freelancers scored this 8.7 out of 10
- When asked if they felt it provided opportunities for collaboration, on average freelancers scored this 8.3 out of 10
- 100% of freelancers rated their experience overall as either 'good' (57%) or 'excellent' (43%)
- Critical Mass was developed from a strong vision and partnership basis and built on previous learning. The project's relationship with funder objectives was well aligned and staff were representative of the project. However, it was felt that more could have been done at project inception and design

stages to involve people with disabilities and their parents/carers in decision making.

- The core team was made up of skilled professionals who shared the same set of values, including the ability to adapt, reflect and implement learning on an iterative basis. This was key to driving the project forward.
- However, there were clear gaps identified within the core team. This included the provision of an Access Coordinator, as responsibility for practical management of access provisions tended to oscillate between Fabric and the Inclusion Champion, whose role was designed to be more consultative.
- Co-creation was a key enjoyment factor for participants and Dance Leaders. The project design and creative involvement of participants maximised inclusive practice and feelings of artistic challenge, which is potentially an area for future artistic investigation as part of the legacy plans.

## **Project inception and development**

Critical Mass evolved from a strong partnership structure and ambition, which built on local knowledge and learnings from pilot project, Beyond Borders, delivered in 2021. The initial ideas for Critical Mass were developed by the Dance Development Leaders Group (DDLG), a unique strategic group made up of over 70 dance practitioners and organisations in the West Midlands. Harnessing regional skills and knowledge greatly benefited the project and there is significant potential to build on the impetus created through Critical Mass through the partners commitment to legacy.

29% of staff members identified as disabled, neurodiverse or having a long-term health condition. This is over-representative

compared to Birmingham's 2011 census data that shows 9.15% of the local population identify as disabled.

Despite this, it was observed by some staff members that more could have been done to directly involve participants with disabilities and their parents/carers in the initial development of the project.

## **Do you identify with any of ...**

[Page 65 of the standard print version shows a bar chart with the following information:

### **Percentage of respondents**

- None of these: 64%
- Disabled / neurodiverse / or having a long term health condition: 29%

There were no responses for the categories of:

- attending with children under 14,
- born overseas,
- mainly speak a language other than English,
- LGBTQIA+,

## **Project partnership structure**

When asked if they believed the project's partnership structure was well defined and channels of communication into the strategic, operational and artistic aspects were clear, on average staff scored this 6.2 out of 10. Freelancers rated this lower on average: 5.5 out of 10, suggesting comms could have been better cascaded.



Staff felt communication was at times slow further up at executive level, particularly getting approval from Birmingham 2022 Festival team for sign off on assets and changes of process.

The project's partnership structure was located within the West Midlands and responsible for different aspects of the project (strategic, methodological, operational) and its legacy. This brought a wealth of local knowledge and relationships to the project. In addition, 94% of staff were drawn from Birmingham and the West Midlands and were representative of the DDLG network and/or independent and company-based practitioners from across the region.

**“Who's in the room? ... is the parent/carer in the room? Have they been consulted? Are they co-creators? Yes, they are. Parents and carers are co-creators.”**

– Inclusion champion

## **Gaps in the core project team**

Key learning around the structuring of the core team was developed during the mid-stages of the project. Having additional full-time members of staff attached to specific project cycle would have provided more consistency and focus, and alleviated pressure from the stretched producing team.

It was also felt that having a dedicated Access Champion would have been beneficial as often responsibilities around the practical management of access provisions oscillated between the participant personnel role at Fabric and the Inclusion Champion, whose role was designed to be more consultative.

**“It would have been interesting to have a kind of slightly different structure that saw specific people focused ... Around each of the moments, but still had some consistency through.”**

**– Producer**

**“We quickly realised that not actually having people full time and dedicated to the project meant there were gaps specifically as things increase in intensity, or we realised how complex some of the scenarios are in terms of responding to need ... we did have to start to pull from other areas to kind of backfill some of those roles, or to bring in extra support at different times, which I guess may not have been needed, if we would have had a more consistent core team.”**

**– Producer**

## **Support workers**

Although embedding pastoral support into participatory projects is common practice within the arts and cultural sector, the integration of trained Support Workers into mass participation settings is arguably less understood and represents an area of success. The Support Workers acknowledge that their role, although scoped from project inception and through an induction, was something that evolved. The Support Workers at times reported feeling uneasy about the clarity in their role, particularly when working within a new group setting where they lacked understanding of the group’s needs on an individual and collective basis.

However, the Support Workers’ ability to listen, be flexible and receptive in these situations became key to the role. They

crafted an approach to supporting participants that drew on a particular set of skills and qualities, that we argue provides key learning for future projects. Essential to this, as described by the quotes, is the ability to listen, and make participants feel safe. Their ability to tune in and respond to the needs and dynamics of a space was integral to the role.

**“I have found myself feeling quite anxious going into some rehearsals and at times questioned whether my support is valid.”**

– Support worker

**“Just being there is much more than you think. That energy you carry for a person ... you are there for someone, even without you saying I’m there for you energetically, they can feel that they’re safe around you.”**

– Support worker

**“My journey shifted a little after the end of these first performances as I moved to different groups. This felt like starting again and involved getting to know a different group who were very different to the group I had previously been working closely with.”**

– Support worker

**“It was so complex. The variables were just enormous in those [mass] moments ... Those decisions about where am I serving this best? ...**

**You know, you’re scanning ... where can I see anxiety?  
Where can I see a problem?**

**There were all these practical issues that needed resolving all the time ... what can I do that’s really going to help or does someone just need me to sit and go and just wait for them to share ...**

**We were fluid.”**

**– Support worker**

This sense of tuning in to the needs of a space was not restricted to the in-person sessions but was evident in the setting of the online group, with the Support Worker noting how they found it difficult figuring out ‘how to be a Support Worker online’. Similarly, to those working in in-person groups, the Support Worker describes ‘scanning’ the ‘room’ and then using the chat function and breakout rooms as tools for unlocking conversations and relationships.

**“It was using the breakout rooms with the people that were keeping their cameras off and using the chatbox ... keep trying and try again.”**

**– Support worker**

**“I was working with a beautiful participant ... Dancing one-to-one with her and she was terrified. She was absolutely terrified, nervous about going on, and she would quite often not go on for a run and be physically sick.**

**And so it was this real challenge of reassuring her that you're getting her there ...**

**Whilst, you know, I was terrified as well about being there. And there was this wonderful moment on the actual day where we're standing, our heads towards each other in that moment, and the music goes quiet ...**

**She was just looking at me, and I could see, she trusted me. And there was that reassurance ...**

**And we did the dance.**

**And she did it beautifully and did it all the way.”**

**– Support worker**

## **A strong culture of adaptability, reflectivity and reflexivity**

A shared ambition for change amongst the Critical Mass team was evident, with clear understandings of both the specific challenges of the project and wider, systemic barriers to access and inclusion in the cultural sector and beyond. This suggests that project aims and approaches were well communicated and established, along with a solution-driven ethos; evident in the transparency and depth of the reflections elicited across the evaluation and the ways in which learning was actioned throughout the process.

Staff members felt that trust amongst team members was a key tenet to working on Critical Mass, particularly given the

ambitious and challenging nature of the project. Some staff members felt that making further space to come together as a team would have been beneficial to strengthen support networks, particularly for those who were working remotely. It was also felt that enabling further opportunities for reflective dialogue would have helped to digest some of the challenges and questions arising from the process, whilst supporting practitioners to grapple with newfound understandings and crystallise their learning. The Support Workers 'voted' on a similar story around having space to reflect on the process, as being of significance to their collective experiences. This suggests that further embedded peer-to-peer support and opportunities to discuss practice as it evolved would be beneficial learning to future projects.

**“What is this all about? Why are we here? Who are the people I am working with? What is their dance and performance experience? What is it like for them in this environment?”**

– Support worker

## **Developing skills, knowledge, and organisational practices linked to better facilitating inclusive dance practices**

When asked is inclusive dance practice in the West Midlands is stronger as a result of Critical Mass, staff scored this 8.4 out of 10. These included developing creativity and understandings of a range of needs to modify or translate dance routines, learning Makaton, skills around co-creation or collaborative working, inclusivity in mass participation, administrating access requirements and leadership skills in inclusive or mass participation settings.

Organisational developments to strategy around equality, diversity and inclusion include setting up working groups, embedding access provision and making adaptations, and developing future partnership work and provision.

**"I gained a stronger sense of purpose. My leadership, creative and observation skills all improved. I have become more confident in using my voice in artistic settings to improve others' experiences".**

– Lead artist

**"Understanding how to adapt dances to suit different dance abilities including, those with disabilities (more inclusivity)".**

- Dance leader

**"Bringing collaborative approaches to future dance classes, where the dancers/students have choices or opinions."**

– dance leader

**"I will use the skills learnt moving forwards in all aspects of my work ... considering always how to make activity more accessible."**

– Dance leader

**"There have been changes... font size, BSL learning, there's been training, there's been lots of things moving forward that we've taken from Critical Mass and embedded them into fabric."**

– Producer

**“It’s more of a personal development ... from being a participant in wondrous stories, and then being asked to be dance leader post-wondrous stories, and taking over a group ... I went from like a nobody to a somebody, because the project gave me the confidence, it gave me the skills, it gave me all the different kinds of tools I need to be somebody creatively and artistically.”**

**– Dance leader**

## **Personal development**

In parallel with the ‘journey’ described by participants, staff members have similarly evolved their skills, practices, and ways of thinking on a personal and professional level through Critical Mass. Increased confidence, awareness of issues surrounding equality and diversity and feelings of acceptance and growth were key themes to emerge across the evaluation with staff.

**“I kind of went in with the mentality that even though there were people there with disabilities, that I for some reason that with my own disability and conditions and insecurities that I was going to be judged ... I just felt so welcomed. We all came together ... even though I was supporting them ... I felt supported by them as well. There was one participant in particular ... even though she wasn’t in my group, I just really connected with her ... she would just come up to me and say, your skin is beautiful ... such a little thing ... but you know, I felt included.”**

**– Support worker**



**“I felt disconnected, because after the pandemic, I felt like far away from people ... so once I stepped into the big group sessions, slowly, I felt like people were coming to me sharing their feelings. And it was kind of healing for me as well.”**

- Support worker

## **Inclusive dance practice is stronger in the West Midlands because of Critical Mass**

When asked if Inclusive dance practice is stronger in the West Midlands as a result of Critical Mass, on average staff scored this 8.4 out of 10. This is evident in the legacy discussions; decision-making and outgoing developmental plans being taken forward by the Critical Mass Partners. At the time of preparing this report, the partnership is reworking its structure and purpose to one which will exist without input from the Birmingham 2022 Festival team, but supported with unspent project funds reallocated to contribute to a new DDLG programme, a dedicated project legacy steering group and a ‘softer landing’ project for some participants, dance artists and support workers to transition out of Critical Mass more gently. At the same time, the Festival team is commissioning the creation of project ‘Playbook’ as an active tool to begin to share learnings with the wider industry and to support others who want to explore genuine inclusion within mega or mass cultural event contexts.

## **Co-creation**

Sense was a project that was developed by Lead Artist Zoie Golding, in collaboration with Dance Artist Maiya Leeke and Fabric, and was referred to most frequently by participants and

Dance Leaders when describing their favourite elements of Critical Mass. The Lead Artist approached the project in a particularly inclusive way, drawing on feedback from participants who had struggled with the demands of previous rehearsal schedules to provide a rehearsal framework that allowed them to take part in as little or as much of the creative process as they were able to.

The artistic framework was based on co-creation which fostered inclusivity in terms of artistic and physical expression. As is described by the Dance Leaders below, the project provided a turning point for participants. In addition to the company feeling more 'blended' and less siloed in their weekly groups, as explored in Outcome 2, participants had the opportunity to take ownership of elements of the creative process and narrative. process as they were able to.

**“Working together creatively and in a social space was great. Dance facilitated different people with different dance abilities coming together and I enjoyed the development stage.”**

– Participant

**“It has been fun and amazing to witness participants’ engagement and Co-creation. I think they really valued the experience as they were able to draw from their personal knowledge and tool kit. They were given a voice and they used it loudly. They savour their moment to shine and have a laugh.”**

– Dance leader

**“It felt more personal because it was everybody’s moves coming together to create a performance.”**

– Participant

# D-Sign

## Introduction

In the summer of 2022, Walsall's Black Country Dance Hub (BCDH) delivered a brand-new dance project called D-Sign that worked with D/deaf or hard of hearing young people aged between 16 and 30 years old. Inspired by Critical Mass, the D-Sign project worked towards developing a group dance performance at Birmingham Weekender in the Bullring shopping centre on Saturday 27th August. The dance itself was created in conjunction with artists from Deaf Men Dancing, a collaboration of professional D/deaf dancers led by Choreographer and Artistic Director from Deaf Men Dancing. Taster sessions and rehearsals took place at Walsall Arena.

## Summary of themes and key findings

- Connecting with other D/deaf people
- Tailored support
- Inclusive practice = Innovative practice
- Collaboration
- Increased skills and confidence
- Issues with recruitment
- Social connections: enhanced networks
- Changed perceptions of disability and inspiration
- Legacy and wanting to continue
- Learning from others

# Initiation

The D-Sign project emerged in response to learning from Critical Mass. Namely, according to the minutes from the partner meeting, that “while 49% of the access budget was dedicated to D/deaf participation, only 2% of participants identified as D/deaf.” Likewise, according to baseline data, Black Country participants were underrepresented in comparison to other geographic regions. This sparked conversations with local arts organisations about ways in which to address this underrepresentation. Further discussions with Critical Mass’ sole funder, Spirit of 2012, revealed a reallocation of new funding to enhance the work of Critical Mass. This is how the D-Sign project was first conceived.

The project was brokered with Black Country Dance Hub to lead on project management. Negotiations with Deaf Men Dancing and Black Country Dance Hub had begun in earnest from May 2022, with Deaf Men Dancing looking to deliver on the creative vision and process for the performance itself. This central partnership proved pivotal in delivering D-Sign with a tight turnaround of two months over July and August 2022. The Audience Agency were brought on at the end of July to evaluate the programme, agreeing an evaluation framework and methodology to capture key outcomes (See Appendix). D-Sign’s original objectives were:

- Engage 30 young D/deaf people (aged 16-30), with the age limits possible to be reduced; the project will be delivered and planned with the express involvement of Deaf Men Dancing.
- Delivered over 2 months, July and August.
- The co-creative process will result in a performance at Birmingham Weekender, part of Birmingham 2022 Festival.

## Recruitment

Significant problems were experienced in the recruitment of participants for this project, which the project leads had to adapt to. We recorded multiple reasons for this from project leads:

- Black Country Dance Hub is immensely experienced in delivering projects in community settings but had not worked specifically with D/deaf communities before. This meant they were having to engage new audiences in new ways that were relatively untested.
- Recruitment was poorly timed around school holidays with no chance of embedding this opportunity into the curriculum.
- It was felt that there was inadequate lead-in time. Black Country Dance Hub have strong connections with local schools and youth services but to utilise this effectively, they suggested that 12 months, rather than 2 months would be necessary to achieve buy-in from this age demographic.
- Sign off on the project was too slow – although the partner meetings were useful, project leads found that sign off and initiation arrived too late to deliver on the target numbers they had in mind.

Of the target of 30, D-Sign was able to secure two participants from the D/deaf community, neither of which were from the Black Country region, but instead from Birmingham – having learnt about the project through their participation in Critical Mass.

## Adaption

Despite the disappointment in not recruiting as many programme participants as they would've liked, D-Sign was able to be proactive in response to these challenges and

reposition the project. It was agreed among key stakeholders that the emphasis of the work would switch to depth of engagement with participants. The project remains specifically focussed on participants who are D/deaf (in contrast to the 'inclusive practice' approach of the Critical Mass project as a whole).

On the 19th August TAA agreed with Birmingham 2022 Festival and the D-Sign project leads to update their evaluation plan to reflect this new direction. Instead of survey data collection, TAA readjusted its focus and resources to conducting one-to-one interviews with participants, to better understand the depth of individual participant experience. Additionally, greater emphasis was placed on discussions with project leads and digital learning journals to gather insights about the project.

## **Evaluation methodology**

As there were no performance moments which overlapped with other elements of Critical Mass and the timeline/structure is different, it was felt that collecting data from D-Sign according to the methods and frameworks of Critical Mass would do a disservice to the specific aims and needs of the project. Furthermore, this could potentially skew each project's findings.

As a result, we generated a refined framework and data collection plan for the project which sits in relation to, but is not part of the existing Critical Mass framework. Findings and data collected as part of D-Sign have been incorporated into the final Critical Mass evaluation report, as a section within the wider evaluation work. As many of the themes, as well as the overall intention, shares impact, it makes sense to collate the learnings into one output.

## Evaluation tools

A new framework was developed and evaluation tools were as follows:

- **Digital learning journals:** Learning journals have been designed to capture learning from artists, project leads and participants as the project unfolds, particular aspects of the project they are enjoying and any questions or ideas that the work is prompting or inspiring. The journals were hosted by TAA on the collaborative web platform, Padlet, and made anonymous so respondents can be honest and feel confident in documenting both positive and negative aspects of the project.
- **Participant interviews:** Baseline and endpoint interviews were conducted with the two participants. Although quantitative data collection wasn't appropriate given the small population size, some of this qualitative research has been quantitated – as will be discussed further in the analysis.
- **Project lead summative reflection sessions:** At the end of the project, we met with project leads from Black Country Dance Hub and Deaf Men Dancing to discuss all aspects of the project from their strategic vantage point.

## Digital learning journals

TAA led an online evaluation training workshop for artist facilitators and producers involved in the D-Sign project. The group were introduced to the evaluation framework and toolkit and a learning journal to support continuous capture and reflection through the project. The learning journal was hosted by TAA on a private channel using the platform 'Padlet'. When users searched the URL of the learning journal, they would arrive at a timeline of activity that they can then make additions

to. On Padlet, respondents can utilise multimedia to tell their story and feedback on the process.

The journal was utilised well – with positive feedback on the tool given by project leads: “with how we were using the learning journals... I know there's no right or wrong way, it was for future learning. So I really enjoyed doing that.” The tool helped to track the project’s journey and there was a mixture of observational quotes, video of workshops and vox pops from people in the room:

“I feel so proud!” a quote accompanying a video showing one of the dance leads celebrating with a participant on completing a complex piece of break dance choreography (observed by an assistant participant producer).

Overall, the digital learning journals proved a useful reflection tool for participants and evaluators. We were able to get a sense of what it was like to be in the room when workshops were happening and be led by those experiencing the activities in the moment. This influenced the topic guide of our interviews to a certain extent as we learnt what mattered to participants and producers based on the content, they chose to share with us through their journal.

## **Participant interviews**

For participants, we captured their experience of D-Sign through a baseline and endpoint interview. The baseline interview was captured during their first workshop and the endpoint was captured following the completion of the final performance. For some of the questions, we asked the participants to give us a score out of 10 at the baseline and endpoint.



We didn't repeat their baseline responses so as not to prejudice their response to the endpoint. The results show a near universal positive upswing in their self-assessment of confidence, communication, dance ability and performance skills and experience:

Q.1: In the context of a dance setting, how confident do you feel?

- Participant 1  
Baseline 5.5  
**Endpoint 8.0**  
**Points Difference (-/+)** +2.5 [dark blue]
- Participant 2  
Baseline 6.5  
**Endpoint 8.0**  
**Points Difference (-/+)** +1.5 [medium blue]

Q.2: How would you describe your communication skills?

- Participant 1  
Baseline 7.0  
**Endpoint 8.0**  
**Points Difference (-/+)** +1.0 [light blue]
- Participant 2  
Baseline 8.5  
**Endpoint 9.0**  
**Points Difference (-/+)** +1.5

Q.3: How would you rate your dance ability?

- Participant 1  
Baseline 7.0  
**Endpoint 7.0**  
**Points Difference (-/+)** 0.0

- Participant 2  
Baseline 6.5  
**Endpoint 9.0**  
**Points Difference (-/+)** +2.5 [dark blue]

Q.1: How would you rate your performance skills and experience?

- Participant 1  
Baseline 6.5  
**Endpoint 6.5**  
**Points Difference (-/+)** 0.0
- Participant 2  
Baseline 7.5  
**Endpoint 8.0**  
**Points Difference (-/+)** +0.5 [very light blue]

## Project lead interviews

We completed our data collection with project lead interviews. This included a final summative group discussion with members of Black Country Dance Hub, including:

- Project manager
- Producer
- Assistant participation director
- Support worker
- A separate one-to-one interview with the Director from Deaf Men Dancing was also conducted.

## **Themes and key findings**

### **Connecting with other d/deaf people**

Vox pops from the learning journals were used to capture thoughts in the moment. On one occasion, a participant talks about how important it is to be doing this project in the company of people with similar lived experiences to themselves. Later in the interviews, both participants revealed how they'd experienced discrimination in other areas of their life so it was valuable being in a room with likeminded people who understood what they were facing.

### **Tailored support**

The relative intimacy of D-Sign meant it was different to Critical Mass as it could tailor support and target specific access needs. As one of the participants explained, they occasionally felt like they had to sacrifice their own professional development in order to work at the same pace as people with more complex needs than their own. This was not the case with D-Sign where they were better able to push themselves. Participants also mentioned how much they've enjoyed mixing with people who have different levels of hearing loss and learning how to adapt dance infrastructure to be more inclusive of others.

### **Inclusive practice = innovative practice**

In being inclusive of D/deaf performers, there were instances of true innovation and learning being passed along. Examples of this include how audio speakers were lowered on to the floor to allow people to feel the vibrations better. This was remarked on

by Black Country Dance Hub's project manager who reflected on a significant moment when they entered a room and "could see the effect and feel the effect ourselves because you can feel the reverberation through your feet", continuing later: "not having worked with D/deaf people before, this was a whole different ballgame". There was agreement that the innovative use of sound equipment from Deaf Men Dancing facilitated the quality of the work.

A further example occurred when producers experimented with different sound frequencies, pitches and bass levels to match what each participant had sensitivity to. Workshops were occasionally stopped altogether so they could see a show of hands that everyone could pick up musical cues. This in turn shaped the piece, and denotes a symbiotic relationship between access requirements and artistic processes. Overall, this shows the benefits of working with experts who were confident and knowledgeable in their field. By sharing best practice, it cut the learning curve of partners considerably and forged a symbiotic relationship between inclusion and innovation.

## **Collaboration**

The final production was named 'Vibrations' and was strongly linked with the motif of the butterfly, a symbol of the deaf community and the vibration of its wings. The piece asks "what do you feel when you hear music?" and links with the aforementioned methodology of utilising sound wave vibrations. Deaf Men Dancing encouraged participants to come up with words that connect to the theme of vibrations. The BSL hand shapes for these words was then incorporated into ensemble dance moves. The collaborative nature of the work was noted in

the learning journal by Black Country Dance Hub's producer and then remarked on later:

For the director of Deaf Men Dancing, collaboration is a vital ingredient for developing work that's inclusive of D/deaf people. Their advice for others is to be collaborative and share ideas.

**“Be really collaborative and listen to other people. Especially young people. What they want and what they like - what style of dance they like. Encourage them to have their input into it.”**

– Director

**“There was just this moment where everyone just formed as one and just seem to get on like they'd been working together for so long”.**

– Producer

## **Increased skills and confidence**

Over the course of the baseline and endpoint interviews, the two biggest changes appear to be Participant 1's confidence in a dance setting and Participant 2's rating of their own dance ability. Beginning with Participant 1, when pressed as to why they rated themselves between a 5 or a 6 during the baseline, they explained that although they'd had some experience performing drama in these sorts of settings, they'd never been part of a dance group working with other deaf people. They were also at that moment getting the impression from their first day that D-Sign would be far more intense and busier than Critical Mass and there would be a lot more to do. In comparison, Participant 2 had been involved with D-Sign at an earlier stage so was feeling slightly more confident and had prewarned Participant 1

on social media that this was a step up from what they had experienced before. For Participant 2, they explained that they were very cautious entering the project, having only limited experience in dance settings prior to joining Critical Mass and D-Sign. By the end, Participant 2 said they had surprised themselves in how well they were able to pick up and follow routines, design their own choreography and input into the creative process.

## **Issues with recruitment**

Recruitment was arguably the most substantial unresolved problem experienced over the project cycle. In the final summative reflection session with project leads, it was noted that a longer lead in time was required to deliver this sort of project more effectively. In particular, the near total absence of any R&D work was cited as a prominent limitation of the project overall. As a D-Sign Producer says: “I think there needs to be maybe like your first month or so it's just literally finding out what is actually out there. How many people are deaf and hard of hearing?” Indeed, in our own desk research we found similar concerns from other sectors. A 2020 Healthwatch report (note 15) of inequalities for the Deaf and hard of hearing communities in Walsall found that “the exact numbers of Deaf/hard of hearing services users for Walsall could not be established”.

The Healthwatch report found that people who are D/deaf or hard of hearing are not easily and not readily identifiable, and drew similar conclusions to D-Sign project leads that time must be taken to build relationships.

## **Social connections - enhanced networks and co-operation**

The problems facing recruitment of programmes like this were further highlighted by one of the participants recollecting how sceptical they were when they first saw the opportunity advertised on Facebook: “When I saw the advert I thought: ‘that can't be real.’ So, I literally ignored it at first. I was like:

**“I definitely believe in myself a lot more with my dance ability now.”**

– Participant

**“If funders want to work with a specific demographic, I think it's really important to know who actually exists there and how many people, what activities are they interested in, if dance is something that they've ever thought about, so it's having those conversations with those groups, and really kind of getting to know them as a community”.**

– Producer

‘That's spam, that is’”. Only after reading information on the website did they have confidence that the opportunity was in fact real and free to participate in. On the other hand, both participants felt similarly that seeing Def Motion, a deaf dance company, perform at Birmingham International Dance Festival motivated them to take part in D-Sign. What's more, unbeknownst to them, one of the dancers they met from Def Motion took part in D-Sign. This made them feel more at ease when they arrived for their first workshop as they recognised somebody that they knew.

## Changing perceptions

Both participants were asked whether D-Sign had changed their perceptions of disability. Both answered in the affirmative but it was more the case that their pre-existing views had been strengthened through this experience. Namely, they felt empowered to do more and to challenge discrimination where they saw it. They also chose to talk about how this will support them in their professional roles as teachers as they will have more empathy with others when they're struggling to learn something new and consider what barriers they might be experiencing – especially invisible disabilities. One participant was keen to hear how non-disabled people's perceptions have been changed and to encourage more open dialogue around this topic more generally.

## Legacy and wanting to continue

For Black Country Dance Hub their priority in the future is to make sure that they don't lose the ground they've covered over the last year. They want to continue their research and consultation with the local D/deaf community with the view of delivering more work in 2023. Equally, there was wide agreement how much they enjoyed working with Deaf Men Dancing and that there was still a lot more to explore with them. Deaf Men Dancing were left in no doubt that they would like to return to Birmingham, to perform and collaborate with young D/deaf or hard of hearing people. For the participants, both are keen to continue dance but were again very keen to talk about how this experience could support their work as school teachers. One felt that bringing Dance Leaders into school settings could do wonders for building confidence of young people with disabilities. Rather than performing, they'd like to see Dance Leaders communicating with young people about



how they got into dance, the barriers they faced and how they've encouraged the sector to change.

## Learning from others

In our reflection sessions, Black Country Dance Hub demonstrated humbleness and openness in their prior inexperience of having not worked with D/deaf people before. What's more, they were clearly receptive and wanting to change. For example, their producer spent time researching papers and approaches of teaching dance to D/deaf people.

They found four key principles that they embedded into their approach, these were:

- Sequential presentation leads to sequential learning;
- Repetition is powerful;
- Judicious active instruction is beneficial;
- And a friendly environment is essential.

The project team actively demonstrated their willingness to learn from others – especially through their relationship with Deaf Men Dancing, who have expertise in this field. What's more, Deaf Men Dancing took curiosity in others - recognising that deafness is a spectrum and it is therefore important that all cast members input into the creation of projects. A support worker from the project told us how much they enjoyed learning different sign language from participants and then how to incorporate these signs into the choreography. This facilitated a bottom-up approach to learning where each individual's own lived experiences are respected and valued. With more time working together, it would've been worthwhile to see how BCDH and Deaf Men Dancing's twin attributes of collaboration and local knowledge could've been leveraged in the region.

## Recommendations

- Funders and policy makers need to build in adequate lead in time for R&D and relationship building. This is especially the case when working with people who are D/deaf in areas where evidence shows people are least likely to take part in publicly funded arts and culture (Walsall appears in the bottom 33% of places according to the Active Lives Survey on involvement in the arts – according to Arts Council England’s Creative People and Places (note 16) initiative).
- A more joined up approach is required to building relationships with communities. In the Black Country, there are organisations already working with D/deaf people who could be partnered with to leverage their networks and create a more rounded offer. Deaffest (note 17) in Wolverhampton is the UK’s leading Deaf-led Film and Arts Festival supported by Zebra Access (note 18), a deaf-led charity. Likewise, Sandwell Deaf Community Association (note 19) and Walsall Deaf People’s Centre (note 20) both run events for young people and teens and the National Deaf Children’s Society (note 21) website allows you to search for local support groups.
- Black Country Dance Hub are clearly committed to continue working strategically to build more opportunities for D/deaf people in the Midlands to enjoy dance. In supporting them to conduct a new project with adequate R&D, there’s potential to connect deaf-led organisations in the Black Country to the dance community.
- Festival organisers need to be more receptive to the needs of D/deaf performers. The space that was provided for the D-Sign performance was in a busy shopping mall where project leads noted that the heavy background noise and echoing chatter caused challenges for D/deaf performers needing to focus on audio cues. In future, consultation and consideration of different access needs should better inform festival planning.

# Participant Surveys

## Participant survey in full

Participants were asked to respond to questions over the course of the project, which is why there are several sources for this information. Where appropriate, we've calculated averages based on the midpoint and endpoint as these datasets were delivered within this scope of work, and are likely to give us the most reliable results. The midpoint received a total of 153 individual responses whereas the endpoint received a total of 99 responses. This gives a margin of error of at least 8% for a 95% confidence level across both datasets. Therefore, a good level of confidence can be given to the results of this quantitative data.

## Participant demographics

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- Critical Mass engaged 242 participants. This is 19.4% less than the original target number of 300 participants (note 22).
- Critical Mass succeeded in engaging an inclusive collective with 44.5% avg. of participants self-identifying as disabled, neurodiverse or having an impairment, exceeding the original project target of 35%.
- The ethnic diversity of participants remained largely the same over the duration of the project:
  - 11% Asian or Asian British
  - 9% Black or Black British
  - 8% Mixed Heritage
  - 70% White Backgrounds
  - 2% A range of other backgrounds

- Despite the project engaging young people from across the West Midlands, targets were set according to Birmingham census, which is more ethnically diverse than the region.
- There was an even spread across all age groups 16-30 with 64.5% avg. aged 16-24.
- 11% of participants self-identified as LGBTQIA+
- 81% avg. participants identified as female, 16% avg. male. Approximately 1% identified as non-binary or in another way while 2% avg. preferred not to say. According to the latest Taking Part (note 23) survey “Since data collection began in 2005/06, the trend has always been for men to be less likely than women to report having engaged in the arts.” Across all artforms, the survey found there to be a 6% gap between men and women, significantly less than the 65% gender disparity at Critical Mass

## **Participant gender**

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[Page 85 of the standard print version shows a pie chart with the following approximate information:

242 participants

- 81% female
- 16% male
- 1% non-binary or other way
- 2% preferred not to say]
- Based on target intentions, participants from Birmingham were accurately represented (38.6%). Whereas participants from the Black Country were underrepresented by nearly half (17.6%) and participants from West Midlands Combined Authority (excluding Birmingham and the Black Country) and Beyond the West Midlands combined authority were overrepresented (13.6% and 29.9% respectively).

- The target intentions set by the Birmingham 2022 Festival team group local authority areas into the following brackets:
  - 40% - Host City: Birmingham City Council.
  - 30% - Black Country: Sandwell Council; Dudley Council; Walsall Council; City of Wolverhampton Council.
  - 20% - Beyond the West Midlands Combined Authority: Herefordshire Council; Staffordshire County Council; Shropshire County Council; Warwickshire County Council; Worcester City Council West Midlands Combined
  - 10% - West Midlands Combined Authority Constituent Member Areas (outside of Birmingham and the Black Country): Coventry City Council; Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council

## **Location of participants**

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[Page 87 of the standard print version shows a bar chart of **Percentage of participants**, with the following approximate information:

### **Geographical location:**

#### Birmingham City Council

- Target: 40
- Critical Mass: 38

#### Black Country

- Target: 30
- Critical Mass: 13

#### Beyond the WMCA

- Target: 20
- Critical Mass: 30

WMCA member authorities

- Target: 10
- Critical Mass: 14]

## **Making a difference: participants**

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The following data shows us what participants thought of the project. Overall, there was a strong correlation across midpoint and endpoint results with the majority of participants responding in the affirmative to all statements:

- From the baseline to the endpoint, the following average difference was calculated across the ONS subjective wellbeing questions:
  - **How happy did you feel yesterday?**  
An average +7% positive increase in participants self-assessment of how happy they felt yesterday
  - **How anxious did you feel yesterday?**  
An average -13% drop in in participants self-assessment of how anxious they felt yesterday
  - **How much do you think the things you're doing like work, volunteering, helping family, school, university, being part of this project are worthwhile?**  
An average +1% positive increase in participants self-assessment of finding things worthwhile
  - **How satisfied are you feeling about life at the moment?**  
An average +3% positive increase in participants self-assessment of how they feel about life at the moment

- 92% of participants rated their overall experience as either 'Good' or 'Excellent' by the endpoint. Furthermore, between the midpoint and the endpoint, there was a 12% increase in respondents giving it the best score available.
- Across the midpoint and endpoint, 78-87% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that Critical Mass was different to things they had experienced before.
- When asked if Critical Mass has helped them to gain new insight or knowledge, participant responses were consistent over the midpoint and endpoint. An average of 55% agreed while an average of 22% strongly agreed.
- Similarly, midpoint and endpoint responses were also consistent on how much they agreed with the statement 'I improved my artistic skills through taking part in Critical Mass'. An average of 49% agreed while exactly 26% strongly agreed with this statement.
- When asked whether participants gained new skills through taking part in Critical Mass, on average, 50.5% agreed and 27% strongly disagreed. There was a slight <4% drop in affirmative responses across the midpoint and endpoint. 8% of endpoint respondents strongly disagreed with this statement.
- The majority of participants across the midpoint and endpoint agreed or strongly agreed that they did something they didn't know they were capable of through taking part in Critical Mass.
- Around three quarters (76% Midpoint, 71% Endpoint) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they felt more confident about doing new things now because of this experience.

**"When I started I was scared of big groups so when I went to the mass rehearsals it was overwhelming and scary but the support from everyone made me feel better and I have become more confident"**

– Participant

- In terms of feeling connected to a shared history/culture, less respondents strongly agreed with this statement compared to others but an average of 41.5% agreed with this statement. However, 15% strongly disagreed with this statement.
- The majority of respondents responded in the affirmative (65% Midpoint, 63% Endpoint) to the statement 'Taking part in Critical Mass made me feel proud of my local area'. Though, it's also worth noting that 16% of endpoint respondents strongly disagreed with this statement whereas 26% of midpoint remained neutral on the topic.
- When asked if 'taking part in Critical Mass had a positive impact on my physical health and mental wellbeing', on average 38% agreed and 29.5% strongly agreed.
- When asked if 'Critical Mass / Birmingham 2022 Festival has improved my perception of Birmingham and the West Midlands', on average 42.5% agreed but 23% remained neutral. Neutral responses were highest during the midpoint (31%).
- Participants were also a little undecided when it came to responding to 'Birmingham and the West Midlands are a good place to live, do business and visit'. While on average 39.5% agreed, 22% remained neutral. Again, neutral responses were highest at the midpoint (27%).also worth noting that 16% of endpoint respondents strongly disagreed with this statement whereas 26% of midpoint respondents remained neutral on the topic.



- The majority (67% on average) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I feel that Birmingham 2022 Festival plays an important role in promoting the cultural life of the area'.

## **These final summative questions were only asked during the endpoint survey:**

- Participants were asked to select how Critical Mass had made the biggest difference to them. This was a multiple-choice question and respondents could select many of the options as they liked. The most popular response by a fair margin was 'meeting new people / making new friends' (89%), followed by 'gaining confidence' (66%), 'my understanding and perceptions of disability' (60%), 'improving my physical / mental health and wellbeing' (60%) and 'learning new creative skills' (58%). The only two responses that less than half of respondents selected were 'learning new life skills' (47%) and 'advancing my career or professional development' (31%).
- When asked if they will continue to take part in dance as a result of Critical Mass, 40% strongly agreed, 26% agreed, 9% remained neutral, 12% disagreed and 13% strongly disagreed
- Being part of the Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony was a significant draw for participant recruitment. 91% of endpoint respondents said that to 'be a part of the Commonwealth Games' was the one of the main reasons they had for signing up to Critical Mass. Elsewhere, 78% selected 'have fun', 76% selected 'chance to perform in public' and 'meet new people', 72% selected 'make new dance connections', 52% selected 'learn new skills' and 17% selected 'had participated in Beyond Borders' .

**“Critical Mass had already thought about adjustments before we had to ask them for it. Whereas in society now, you have to explain before you get the adjustment.”**

**– Participant**

# Recommendations

## Project recommendations

The following section provides recommendations for future iterations of projects similar to Critical Mass.

### Project inception and development

- Draw on the ideas, knowledge and experiences of participants with disabilities and their parents/carers at project inception and design stages.
- Ensure there is artistic representation present at project design stage.
- Ensure community consultation is in place, drawing on partners who can mobilise regional connections.
- Recruit Steering Group made up of national representatives with specialisms key to project and lived experiences, who can affect advocacy and provide challenge and accountability.

**"The creative conditions, participant experience and perceptions directly link to the quality of art and final performance"**

- Senior producing and safeguarding lead

### Recruitment

- Obtain detailed information about the access needs of participants during the sign-up stages of the project, to inform effective planning and budgeting.

- Implement deadlines for receiving information about access needs from participants to ensure appropriate access provision is in place.
- In addition to access needs, establish what other participant information is needed prior to the recruitment stage - for example media consent and emergency contacts.
- Prepare baseline evaluation ahead of recruitment to be administered alongside the above.
- Produce clear and concise guidelines for participants into expectations around commitment. Even if timelines are iterative and evolving, this will enable participants to make realistic choices about their participation and maximise retention.
- Introduce digital taster sessions at the start of the project to improve project reach and access.

## **Building the team**

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- Implement a team structure dedicated to individual projects within the programme, supported by a consistent producing team to implement learning on an iterative basis and alleviate fatigue within the core team.
- Produce team mapping document ahead of project delivery with clear notes around responsibilities including across external teams.
- Recruit Dance Leaders from a range of backgrounds and offer meaningful progression opportunities.
- Ensure key dates are disseminated as early as possible across the project team.
- Consider use of co-lead artists to reduce pressure and diversify practices.

**"Care and support is needed around delivery staff to be able to hold and positively push their participants"**

- Producer

## **Inducting the team**

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- Ensure time is factored into the project timeline for team inductions and meetings to improve team foundations.
- Ensure all staff and partners are Disability Confident (note 24)
- Consider additional training for staff in disability awareness, safeguarding, mental health first aid, behavioural management.
- The provision of an Access Coordinator to take responsibility for practical management of access provisions.

## **Managing the team**

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- Implement regular opportunities for the team to come together to review the project and crystallise their learning.
- Implement quality assurance mechanisms for sessions and rehearsals, particularly where the project is geographically diverse.

## **Developing artistic foundations**

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- Agree where artistic influence lies to develop clear and realistic understandings and expectations around creative aims and license.
- Plan for creative R&D space before rehearsals to ensure greater artistic quality and improve participant experience.
- Clearly establish expectations around autonomy of style with Dance Leaders.

- Build in time with the artistic team to develop and build the artistic language of the project.
- Build in opportunities for the Artistic team to meet with external artistic teams before show creation to better understand and translate the vision.
- Develop opportunities for participants to co-create alongside Dance Leaders to maximise artistic challenge, autonomy and creativity.

## **Improving participant experience**

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- Consider participant experience throughout the project journey and how peaks in anxiety can be managed through relaxed activities and celebrations.
- Establish quiet spaces within external venues for participants who feel overwhelmed.
- Establish a company warm up suitable for all as a team to offer a grounding moment within each session.
- Explore the location of rehearsals and whether these can take place at more varied regional locations outside of the City Centre.
- Communicate artistic choices with participants so they are better informed of overarching narratives and feel empowered by their creative individual and collective contribution.
- Consider and communicate legacy plans, including creating online spaces where possible to retain connections developed through the project.
- Consider connecting with wider activities to promote cross-community / cross-group connections.
- Embed opportunities to co-create within the process.

## **Social media and marketing**

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- Ensure clear guidelines are provided by external companies for marketing content.
- Embed the comms team in project delivery to ensure stories from 'on the ground' are captured and disseminated as they happen.
- Consider use of captions, and easy read in addition to implementing other languages strategy and use of BSL interpreter to promote inclusivity across comms.

## **Project closure and legacy**

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- Consider implementing a longer exit from project that considers participant wellbeing.
- Establish where the legacy of the project resides and who manages this to maximise sector impact.
- Include legacy within the scope of the evaluation.
- Include participants and delivery team in legacy planning.

## **Sector recommendations**

- Inclusive practices must be more widely understood and fostered in the sector. Single projects can only go so far, inclusive practices require an ecosystem to work.
- Timelines for mega events need to be better synchronised.
- Professional casts must be more willing to be led by volunteer casts to a degree.
- Visibility and accurate media representation of people with disabilities still requires improvement. Marketing professionals and the mass media should be extra aware of this in their content creation.

- Better sharing, and willingness to learn, of best practice in the sector. New projects need to be built while standing on the shoulders of giants, not starting from the factory floor.
- Greater respect paid to the vital contribution made by volunteers to our cultural lives.

## **Playbook**

- A project playbook is currently in development which will draw together project recommendations for the sector to act as a 'blueprint' and learning tool.



# Conclusion

Former MP, Home Secretary and Education and Employment Secretary, David Blunkett, talking about progress made around disability rights in this country says:

**"There's an enormous amount to be done, but probably overall the most important thing is changing attitudes. We're getting there. William Blake's poem 'London' talks about "mind-forged manacles" and I think that's true both of people viewing disability and, if I might say so, the confidence building needed for people with disabilities and those around them." (note 25)**

This refers to the intangible restraints we impose on ourselves, others and our collective imagination. These mental barriers are often made by us. To undo them, an attitudinal shift is required. Social contact has been an effective method in reducing stigma and freeing participants of mental constraints and their own perceived identities within Critical Mass. This is in keeping with research on mass participation events (Evans-Lacko et al, 2012 (note 26)) that facilitating factors like “equal status, common goals, cooperation and friendship potential” are crucial contributories for changing behaviours and attitudes.

Interventions like Critical Mass could therefore be seen as a model for unlocking our “mind-forged manacles” and emancipating us from the attitudes and behaviours that are self-imposed and self-limiting.

Performing on mass is an outward statement and arguably affirmed and celebrated the participants shared commitment to the values of the project. Sociologist, Richard Sennett has explored the practice of cooperation and explored how a collective commitment to working together can turn ‘people

outward in shared, symbolic acts'. He argues that outward acts of cooperation can serve to counter the 'brutally simple: us-against-them coupled with you-are-on-your-own' (Sennett 2012, 280 (note 27)). What sets Critical Mass apart is the commitment to a 'shared, symbolic act'. This arguably catalysed the very core aims of the project, empowering an inclusive cast to make a statement through dance.

**“Showing the world that anyone can perform no matter what”**

– Participant

# Acknowledgements

As the lead evaluators of Critical Mass, The Audience Agency gratefully acknowledge the invaluable cooperation of Birmingham 2022 Festival, Critical Mass and D-Sign teams. The reflective and reflexive culture embedded throughout was a key area of success for the project and for the evaluation. We would like to acknowledge the following organisations that were partners for the delivery of Critical Mass and D-Sign Dance Project, for their support of the evaluation process:

- Arts Connect
- Black Country Dance Hub
- Fabric

We'd also like to acknowledge the work of our contributors, Kirsty Hillyer who led on the design and development of an accessible toolkit, acted as a vital critical friend to the evaluators and who produced the design for this report; Andrew Miller for providing expert critical reflections into our evaluation of Outcome 3; and the artists who developed creative responses to Critical Mass as part of Artist Takes.

## **Kirsty Hillyer - We Are Frilly (Evaluation Consultant and Creative Designer)**

Since starting We AreFrilly in 2010 a commitment to learning, research, experimentation and co-designing cultural programmes and creative evaluations continues. Working with partners, cultural organisations and participants to identify and create exciting cultural opportunities. We Are Frilly continues to create programmes of participatory arts, but have noticed a glaring gap within the arts sector - across art form and

specialism. Creative practitioners and businesses are failing to effectively measure the impact of their work, and are struggling to demonstrate the value of investment in creativity as a result. Kirsty specialises in developing accessible and enticing creative evaluation tools that are embedded within cultural activity.

## **Andrew Miller - Critical Friend**

Transforming perceptions throughout his 35 year career in the creative industries, Andrew Miller MBE is recognised as one of the UK's most influential disability advocates with extensive experience of the arts, film and broadcast sectors.

Starting out in broadcasting, Andrew belongs to the first generation of disabled presenters of British television and went on to produce and direct tv arts documentaries. Subsequently becoming the first wheelchair user to run a major UK arts venue, he is now a prolific cultural commentator and his consultancy supports major new cultural infrastructure from the University of Oxford Schwarzman Centre for the Humanities to Coventry City of Culture.

Andrew is a National Council member of Arts Council England, a trustee of the Royal Shakespeare Company and BAFTA. He is Chair of the BFI Disability Screen Advisory Group and in 2020 co-founded the UK Disability Arts Alliance #WeShallNotBeRemoved, where he developed the Seven Inclusive Principles which helped shape the cultural sector's pandemic recovery. Between 2018-21 Andrew was the UK Government's first Disability Champion for Arts and Culture, establishing the role as a powerful campaigning platform for greater inclusion across the arts, museums and film. His pioneering career has been recognised by The Stage and National Diversity Awards and he is currently placed in the Top 10 of the Shaw Trust Disability Power100.

# Acknowledgements

## Artist takes

### Jamila Thomas

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<https://www.jamilawalkervisualartist.co.uk/>

Midlands based Artist, Jamila Walker's practice uses found objects and demonstrates a fascination with minutiae of the everyday. Implied self-determined narratives, wit and humour suggest her ambivalent feelings toward her chosen subjects. Jamila creates candid work, from a vibrant palette of ideas, using various textures and colour.

Digital manipulation and mixed media enable her to construct visual worlds and characters. Jamila's use of photography is an opportunity to challenge the classic theory that "the camera never lies", for Jamila "the camera always lies".

In addition to being an exhibiting Artist, Jamila is also involved in Community Arts, commissions, a member of various creative collectives, including; Natural Outsiders and Elixir Arts . Jamila was an Arts for Health mentor for Telford Mind, Jamila has been invited to give artist talks at various galleries. Jamila has undertaken various artist residencies and had various creative roles within the heritage sector. Jamila has undertaken web layout and image design for Participate Contemporary Artspace.

## **Lou Byng**

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<https://www.linkedin.com/in/byng/?originalSubdomain=uk>

Louise Byng is an award-winning creative communicator with a penchant for learning-through-making. Since graduating from Arts University Bournemouth with a first class honours degree in Illustration in 2012, Byng has exhibited work internationally and completed a broad spectrum of commissions, working closely with cultural organisations to inspire audiences in new ways.

## **Zaina Mayat**

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[@zaina.mayat](#)

[www.zainamayat.com](http://www.zainamayat.com)

"I am an illustrator from the West Midlands, based in the heart of Birmingham. I grew up painting and sketching all the time and now as a digital illustrator I am able to create wherever I go. My artwork is inspired massively by bright, vibrant colours, using lots of them in my work to bring the piece to life! Sharing different parts of a culture is something that I love to do, whether this is through travel and food illustrations, or fashion and arts focused pieces. I hope that people can enjoy my work through their own experiences!"

# Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the following organisations that were partners for the delivery of Critical Mass and D-Sign Dance Project, for their support of the evaluation process.

## **Arts Connect**

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Arts Connect works with a variety of partners including education, arts, culture and local government in the West Midlands to ensure that all children and young people can benefit from engagement in high quality arts and cultural activities. As an Arts Council England Bridge organisation for Children and Young People, it develops skills and amongst participation and engagement professionals, supports the formal education and learning sector sector, and leads change by working in partnership with the arts and culture sector.

**[www.artsconnect.co.uk](http://www.artsconnect.co.uk)**

## **Black Country Dance Hub**

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Formed in 2013 with Dudley Performing Arts with the ambition to expand dance further across the sub-region, Black Country Dance Hub provides greater opportunities, and an equal dance provision, for children and young people across all 4 Black Country areas.

**[www.blackcountrydance.com](http://www.blackcountrydance.com)**

# **Fabric**

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Fabric is a new strategic organisation created from the formal merger of Birmingham's DanceXchange and Nottingham's Dance4.

Its vision is to inspire people through dance, transforming lives, communities and places, and delivers this through a range of participatory dance programmes and courses, artist development opportunities and showcase platforms, such as Birmingham International Dance Festival. Fabric is part of The Dance Hub Birmingham complex, situated in the heart of the city centre as part of the creative campus also housing Birmingham Hippodrome, Birmingham Royal Ballet and One Dance UK.

**[www.fabric.dance](http://www.fabric.dance)**

**"We are Critical Mass!" - everyone**



## Critical Mass: a unique collaboration

- Dance Development Leaders Group (DDLG)
- **Birmingham 2022 Festival**  
commonwealth games
- **Fabric** dancexchange and dance4together
- arts connect

### Generously supported by

- **Spirit of 2012** investing in happiness

### Evaluated by

- the audience agency

## D-Sign dance project a collaboration between:

- Deaf Men Dancing
- infuseDance photography film
- **Birmingham 2022 Festival**  
commonwealth games
- black country dance hub
- arts outburst

### Inspired by Critical Mass and generously supported by:

- **Spirit of 2012** investing in happiness

### Evaluated by

- the audience agency

# Notes

- 1 Originally, the term “impairment” was used within the funding bid and the baseline survey, however the language evolved as the project progressed and was adapted to “disabled, neurodiverse or having a long-term health condition” to be more inclusive. This also aligned with other Birmingham 2022 Festival evaluation providers’ terminology.
- 2 During the midpoint and endpoint surveys, participants were asked whether they identify as “Disabled, neurodiverse, or having a long term health condition” and were then able to provide more details if they wanted to.
- 3 Darcey et al (2014) ‘London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games: Including volunteers with disabilities - A podium performance?’
- 4 Darcey et al (2014) ‘London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games: Including volunteers with disabilities - A podium performance?’. Study approved by LOPG. Figures from 2014 report.
- 5 <https://www.artichoke.uk.com/project/processions/> and <https://becausewearehere.co.uk/> were commissioned by 14-18 NOW, the UK’s arts programme for the First World War centenary, with support from the National Lottery through Arts Council England and the Heritage Lottery Fund and from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.
- 6 Matos, L. (2008) ‘Writing in the Flesh: Body, Identity, Disability, and Difference’, In S.B. Shapiro (Ed.), *Dance in a world of change: reflections on globalization and cultural difference* (pp.71-91). Human Kinetics.

- 7 These are uniform Office of National Statistics measures for gathering information from individuals about personal well-being. They are used across projects funded by the Spirit of 2012:  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/methodologies/personalwellbeingsurveyuserguide>
- 8 Treviranus, J. (2019) Inclusive Design: The Bell Curve, the Starburst and the Virtuous Tornado:  
<https://medium.com/@jutta.trevira/inclusive-design-the-bell-curve-the-starburst-and-the-virtuous-tornado-6094f797b1bf>
- 9 'Birmingham 2022 delivers record 57.1m BBC streams':  
<https://www.sportspromedia.com/news/birmingham-2022-bbc-sport-broadcast-streaming-commonwealth-games/>
- 10 Note from the Critical Mass Executive Producer: "In this instance screen visibility of Critical Mass dancers is being compared with the screen visibility of professional dancers. Whilst the point is an important one to make, it's also worth bearing in mind is that professional companies will also feature people with disabilities that weren't part of Critical Mass.
- 11 UN (2016) Disability and the Media:  
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/disability-and-the-media.html>
- 12 Thompson, J (2022) Care Aesthetics. London: Taylor and Francis Ltd

- 13 Oxford Reference. Available at:  
**<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100515279>**
- 14 Note from the Critical Mass Senior Producer: “For the purposes of context, it is worth noting here that participants will not always have been aware of who 'main organisers', or 'Opening Ceremony' staff were in distinction to other teams across the project and externally. We recognise that in this instance whilst a participant may have felt 'left out' that was not a decision made by any one party alone and speaks more to the challenges around communication between teams, than to any one party's stance on inclusion.”
- 15 Inequalities report, February 2020:  
**<https://www.healthwatchwalsall.co.uk/report/2020-02-04/inequalities-report-february-2020>**
- 16 Creative People and Places:  
**<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/creative-people-and-places-0>**
- 17 Deaffest: **<https://deaffest.co.uk/about/about-deaffest/>**
- 18 Zebra Access: **<https://www.zebra-access.com/>**
- 19 Sandwell Deaf Community Association:  
**<https://www.sdca.co.uk/>**
- 20 Walsall Deaf People’s Centre youth group:  
**<https://www.facebook.com/funkykids20/>**
- 21 National Deaf Children’s Society:  
**<https://www.ndcs.org.uk/about-us/where-we-work/england/>**

- 22 Over the course of the project, the original target of 300 participants was likely surpassed but this evaluation has focused on the Spirit of 2012's definition of engagement, which meant that we only counted participants who had attended at least one weekly session.
- 23 Arts – Taking Part survey:  
**<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201920-arts/arts-taking-part-survey-201920>**
- 24 Disability Confident Scheme:  
**<https://disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk>**
- 25 BBC (2020) You and Yours: 50 years of Disability; Job Diaries; Virtual Reality  
**<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000n6qv?partner=uk.co.bbc&origin=share-mobile>**
- 26 Evans-Lacko et al (2012) Mass social contact interventions and their effect on mental health related stigma and intended discrimination, BMC Public Health
- 27 Sennett, R. (2012) Together: the rituals, pleasures, and politics of cooperation. New Haven: Yale University Press

- **Birmingham 2022 Festival**  
commonwealth games

**[birmingham2022.com/festival](https://www.birmingham2022.com/festival)**

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Graphic Design [standard print version]: We Are Frilly

Reports are available as interactive PDFs, Easy Read Versions  
and Screen Reader Versions. These are all accessible online  
at: **<https://www.birmingham2022.com/festival/evaluations>**

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