



Damnit Danceit!

MOVING MEMORY DANCE THEATRE COMPANY



UK Research
and Innovation

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About Damn It! Dance It!

Overview

Damn it! Dance It! piloted placing Moving Memory's creative movement practice, 'Moving Well,' into two shopping centres.

Moving Well is a unique, older-person designed practice which has demonstrated multiple health and well-being benefits. Damn It! Dance It! tests whether facilitating this practice in the public domain has further benefits for participants and audience.

Damn It! Dance It! took place in two shopping centres, The Pentagon in Chatham and The Royal Victoria Place in Tunbridge Wells. The two shopping centres serve very different populations – The Pentagon, in postcode area ME4 4HY is in the top 20% most deprived areas in the country, while RVP, in postcode TN1 2SS, serves an area which is in the 10% least deprived (Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019).

The project took place over two phases (spring and autumn 2022) with six sessions of activity in each shopping centre, ending in a public performance in each shopping centre.

Moving Memory worked with MB Associates as a critical friend to support them to implement a robust evaluation process, based on Culture³.



Participants during a weekly session

Story of Change

Overview

HOW?		WHAT?	WHO?	WHY?	
<i>Inputs</i>		<i>Delivery</i>	<i>People we work with</i>	<i>The difference we make</i>	
Principles	Investments, Resources	Activities	Stakeholders	Short term outcomes	Long term outcomes
A developed and experienced offer to ALL	Staff time, space from the shopping centre	Creative sessions in a public space, open to anyone	SBRI / Innovate UK		
Quality that is affordable to investors	Funding from the Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) at Innovate UK	Series of 6 sessions in each shopping centre - spring & autumn (a total of 24 sessions altogether)	Participants	Increased physical activity	Healthy aging
MM extensive previous experience, including in shopping centres	Experienced team of creative-movement facilitators	Pop-up performance in each shopping centre - spring & autumn		New social connections	
Accessible and Inclusive		Rehabilitating the space		Improved confidence	
		Shopping centres support recruitment and promotion	Shoppers/General public	Enjoyment in the moment	Increased pride in place
		Deskwork into shopping centres follows first spring project –so second phase can be more sophisticated			Positive opinion of older people
			Shopping Centres	Increased understanding of the value of community led creative activity	Regular programming of community activity in shopping centres
			DiDi leaders and facilitators	Developed skills and practice	
			Funders/Strategic partners	Increased understanding of the value of community led creative activity	Increased understanding of encouraging healthy ageing and the healthy ageing challenge

What did we learn?

Overview

Moving Memory created a visually inclusive and accessible programme of creative movement workshops located in view of the general public within two shopping centres.

Moving Memory's three research questions for Damn It! Dance It!:

1) Did Damn It! Dance It! increase the physical activity of older people?

Almost all participants of Damn It! Dance It! fed back that taking part in the rehearsals and performance had significantly increased their physical activity.

2) Did Damn It! Dance It! improve the social connections of older people?

Friendship and connection was a strong theme throughout all the feedback, and this started from the early weeks of the programme.

3) Did Damn It! Dance It! provide an activity that shopping centres value?

There is evidence that since Damn It! Dance It! has been present in the shopping centres that more community activity is taking place, suggesting the centres recognize the value of community-based work. One of the involved shopping centres has expressed an interest in finding additional funding, while

another shopping centre (not involved in this project) have offered future funding.

Key Points:

The team was key to the success of the programme:

A safe and supportive atmosphere created by a group of experienced facilitators enabled them to share their vulnerabilities whilst keeping safe. A continual reflective practice meant problems were solved in real time, improvements made to sessions and training needs highlighted. In future, the need for strong support around mental health and access needs to be recognised and resourced.

Damn It Dance It! provided a 'front-line' service

The number of people accessing the sessions who disclosed a mental health issue was high. Many participants were suffering from hidden social isolation, a cut in support or grief. Damn It! Dance It! provided a sense of purpose, social interaction which grew into friendship, as well as the physical benefits of movement. Importantly, Damn It! Dance It! also provided participants with fun and moments of joy, that helped lead them to a change in their state of mind. Participants talked about entering the session in one 'mental space' and leaving in one much more positive.

“For me it came at the right time. I’ve been off work with stress. So was looking for something to help me relax and having fun at the same time.”

Workshop participant



Participants during a weekly session

Who we engaged with...

Evidence of impact

The target of participants engagement was exceeded at both shopping centres. Both included a 'core' group that attended week on week and several other attendees who dropped in.

One of the main principles of the project was to remove as many barriers to engagement as possible. With this in mind, demographic data was not collected from participants but some assumptions were made through observations or by collecting anecdotal evidence over the weeks.

- The project primarily attracted older people
- There was a high proportion of people with mental health challenges – 90% of participants in Chatham and 40% of people in Tunbridge Wells disclosed having a mental health issue.
- Multi-generational family groups took part together, in particular groups of women (daughter/mother/grandmother) but usually on a drop-in basis.
- The sessions coincided with the end of the school day which meant there were groups of young people in the shopping centres when rehearsals were running. Engagement was positive, with young people asking permission of the older people to join in with their contributions.
- Moving Memory was socially prescribed for the first time and the participant joined multiple sessions and the performance. So positive was their experience that this participant has gone on to join Moving Memory as a volunteer.

Chatham had a small core group but they were supportive of each other throughout. Chatham's location in the shopping centre was more public, meaning there was more engagement with the general public and more dropping in and out of sessions.

Tunbridge Wells had a larger group but was located in a shop unit, this meant there was less engagement with the general public until the day of the performance.

“It's been the most exciting project in terms of diversity and has evidenced the importance of the value of the work .”

Sian, Creative Director

The difference we made to participants...

Evidence of impact

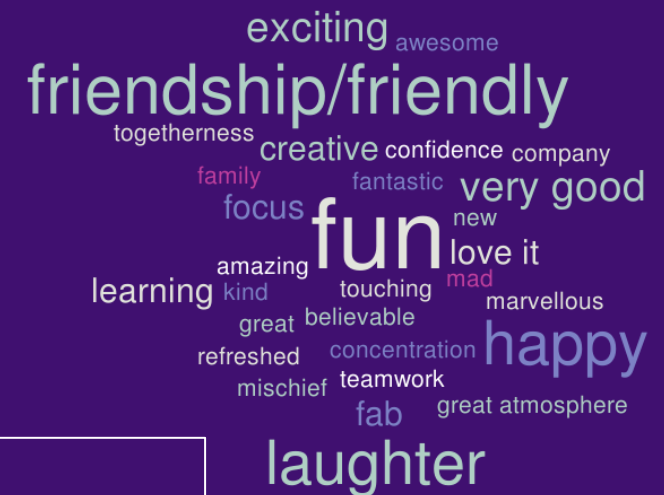
Participants fed back through a variety of easy evaluation tools, the overall picture shows indications of increases in self-confidence, an increase in physical activity, new friendships made and an overwhelming sense of fun.

As an accessible and inclusive activity, the evaluation needed to reflect these principles and was therefore light-touch in approach. The spring phase collected evidence at the end of the final session and in the autumn, the tools were used each week, giving a journey through the project.

Participants were asked to describe their experience in three words. The larger the word in the cloud, the more times it was repeated. At both locations **'fun'** and **'friendship'** are the standout words from this activity.

Other common words included **creative**, **exciting**, **energetic** and **laughter**. All the words were positive and the proximity to the time of the session of the question being asked we can confidently attribute these feelings to the Damn It! Dance It! workshops.

Chatham



Tunbridge Wells



Word clouds created from 'What three words' by participants

Changes in physical activity...

Evidence of impact – Research question 1

'Where do you stand?' questions enable us to see a journey for participants. For almost all participants, being involved in Damn It! Dance It! increased their physical activity.

In the spring this question was asked at the end of the final session. All the participants answered that the sessions had increased their physical activity.

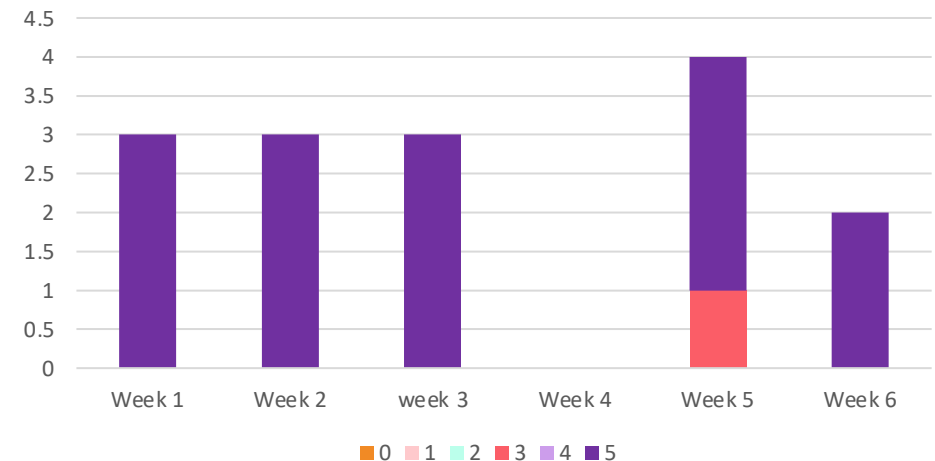
In the Autumn phase, in Chatham, participants consistently said that week on week Damn it! Dance It! was contributing to them increasing their physical activity. In Tunbridge Wells, most participants agreed that the dance sessions were increasing their physical activity, although a couple of participants did not seem to feel their activity was changing very much. Potentially they are already quite physically active, so the sessions were not a huge increase, or they were replacing a different physical activity with the dance workshops.

When participants were asked at the end of the programme what the most important differences made to them were, both groups talked specifically about dance. Either having learnt new dance moves or rediscovering dance.

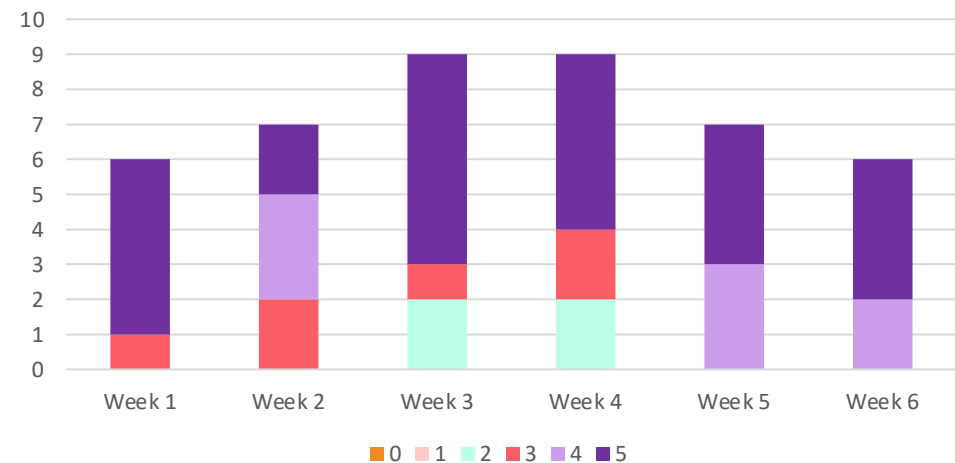
"I've loved moving my body again."

Workshop participant, spring

**Chatham - DiDi has changed my physical activity
(0= not at all / 5 = a lot)**



**Tunbridge Wells - DiDi has changed my physical activity
(0 = not at all / 5 = a lot)**



Making new friends...

Evidence of impact – Research question 2

There are multiple evidence sources showing that participants in the workshops made new and significant friendships during the programme.

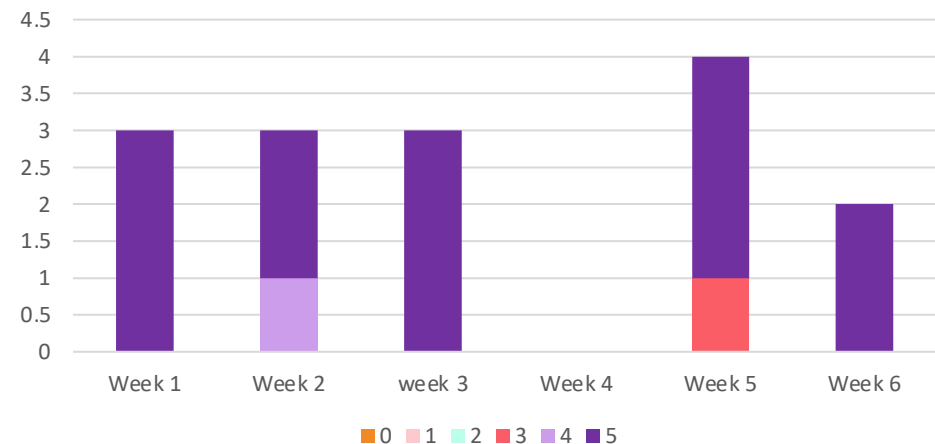
In both Chatham and Tunbridge Wells, participants fed back that the sessions were introducing them to new friends. In Chatham, one person gave a neutral answer in Week 5, but otherwise all participants fed back positively. In Tunbridge Wells the response is a little more mixed, with 1-2 participants in the middle week not feeling they were making new friends. This could be that they had not met anyone new that week.

The spring phase gave a similar result with 8/9 participants asked responding they had made new friends.

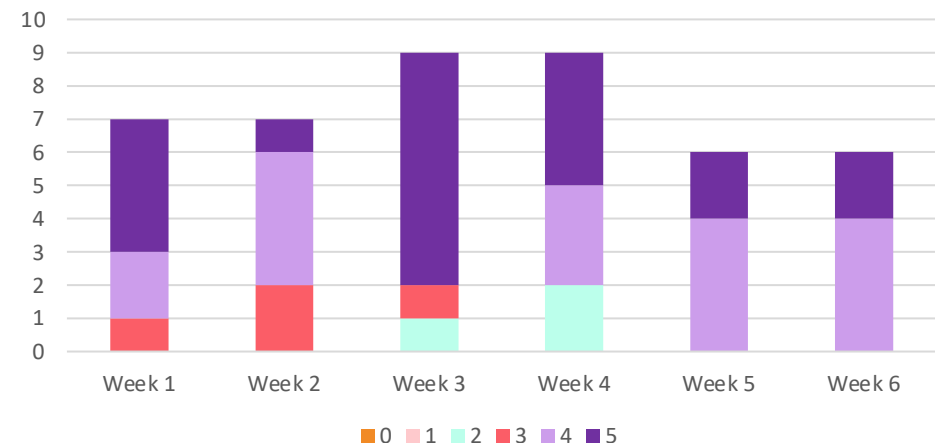
The social connections were noted by facilitators too. As early as week 3, participants who did not know each other at the start would hug on arrival at the sessions. By week 6 participants were sharing experiences of mental health issues and neurodiversity, an indicator of how much trust had been built within the group. One of the facilitators noted that people were actively reworking their schedules to attend sessions because, “they don’t want to miss out on spending time with their friends”.

At the end of the programme, participants were asked what were the most important differences made to them, for both groups **making new friends** and **connections** were in the top three most important.

Chatham - DiDi introduced me to new friends (0 = not at all / 5 = a lot)



Tunbridge Wells - DiDi introduced me to new friends (0 = not at all / 5 = a lot)



Participant outcomes...

Evidence of impact – Changing perceptions

Participants identified their own outcomes as well as answering the 'Where do you stand' questions. At the end of the programme, as well as a sense of fun, an increase in physical activity and new friendships, other outcomes included an increase in confidence, a sense of achievement and purpose, and exceeding other people's expectations.

Participants were asked each week if they thought friends and family were surprised about their involvement with Damn It! Dance It! As the weeks progressed more participants gave higher scores suggesting that although not initially surprised, friends and family were surprised by their commitment and working towards a performance, which requires a level of confidence.

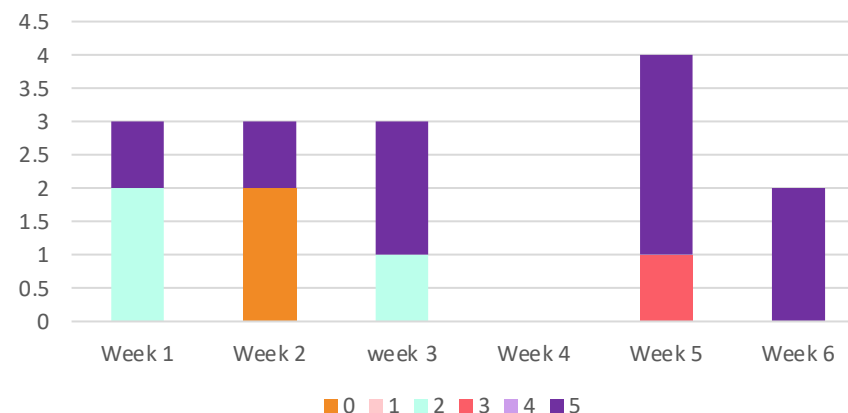
Participants feeling a sense of achievement and purpose is evident and reinforces Moving Memory's company objective to change the perceptions of older people in society. Damn It! Dance It! has enabled people to feel validated and this is changing the perceptions they have of themselves.

This [reflective video](#) made in the autumn phase reinforces that people feel more confident and have made new friendships and that they have a new sense of empowerment.

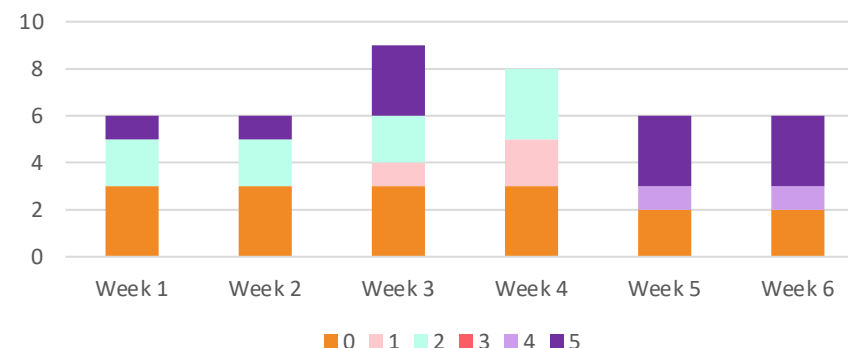
**"I arrive in one space
and leave in much more
uplifted one."**

Workshop participant, autumn

Chatham - Friends & family are surprised by my involvement (0 = not at all / 5 = a lot)



Tunbridge Wells - My friends & family are surprised by my involvement (0 = not at all / 5 = a lot)



Unexpected outcomes...

Evidence of impact

The confidence of the groups grew to the point that both groups agreed to do additional performances in their communities and DiDi enabled Moving Memory to engage with socially prescribed provision.

These performances were not pre-planned and were not originally part of the programme, however, both groups, when asked, took the opportunity to perform at community events. In Chatham the group were a core part of a community and procession, which included performing alongside professionals, fostering a real sense of achievement. In Tunbridge Wells the group performed on stage in a contemporary dance showcase at the Trinity Arts Centre.

These performances stretched the groups beyond initial expectations. They performed in unfamiliar locations and to hundreds of people. This not only shows how their confidence has grown but also goes further to cement their sense of achievement and purpose.

Further to the performances, two participants agreed to go on local radio to be interviewed about the programme.

Moving Memory has a strong track record of groups they have established going on the 'self-run' for many years. This is now a potential aspiration for these groups and will be further discussed and supported.

DiDi enabled Moving Memory to be socially prescribed for the first time. The prescriber (link worker) attended a session to better understand the practice. and fed back how valuable the sessions had been to their client and that she would be recommending them to more people in the future.



Participants doing the WAVE performance as part of community event August Bank Holiday

Value to the shopping centres...

Evidence of impact – Research question 3

Moving Memory Dance Theatre Company's initial long-term ambition for Damn It! Dance It! was to roll the programme out to shopping centres across the country, linked to the company's overall aim of changing the perception of ageing amongst the general population.

The shopping centre managers were interviewed at the start of the process and neither were interested in the impact the project had on footfall or spend and so this was discounted as a measure of success. Both centres were interested in social outcomes including:

- having fun (participants)
- a positive customer experience (general shoppers)
- engaging the local community
- people having a positive perception of the shopping centre
- experimenting with what was possible in the space
- Participants have clearly fed back the enjoyment and fun they gained from the sessions.

As a transient audience, it was challenging to collect feedback from the general public, both during workshops and at the final performance in week 6. Feedback questions were available on postcards and via a QR card but there were no digital responses and only a handful of postcards returned. Of those who did give feedback, 100% left with positive feelings towards the shopping centre.

There were further indications of positivity from the general public, as noted by facilitators observing the audience, including people smiling at each other and the participants during the performance, picking up information and on one occasion saying, "wow," and pointing.

Shopping centres are facing new challenges, having regained footfall post-pandemic, the summer heatwave in 2022 and the rising cost of living meant footfall was down 18.6% in July 2022, compared with July 2019. A report by Knight Frank suggests that shopping centres need to look to diversify their offer in order to survive competition from online retailers and that between 2018-2022 the largest income profile increase was in the leisure sector.

Anecdotally, Moving Memory observed that other community projects were using shopping centre space, following the spring workshops. Although this cannot be directly attributed to Damn It! Dance It! it is an indicator that the shopping centre managers felt the experience was worthwhile. Added to this that both centre managers were happy to agree to the autumn phase of workshops.

For taking the programme forward and rolling out to other centres, the challenge is often that centres have a reduced staff team and rarely one centre manager with who to build a relationship. Furthermore, centres can view this activity as 'entertainment' and use external agencies to book. Although they are willing hosts to the final activity, the partnership required to support ongoing activity with community value requires relationship building, which often is not viable because accessible staff are not the decision makers. Often, this success relies on an individual within a role recognising value and wanting to make something happen. A shopping centre manager at another shopping centre (not originally involved in the project), on hearing about Damn It! Dance It! made an immediate expression of interest and funding match offer.

Changing perceptions...

Evidence of impact – Changing perceptions

One of the long-term outcomes of Damn It! Dance It! is to create positive opinions of older people and change the perceptions of what they are capable of and contribute to. Already, in the two six-week phases of this project, we can see indicators of this happening.

Audiences at the performances were asked to describe their thoughts in three words. This word cloud represents those responses:



All used positive words to describe the performance. One used the phrase, 'Never too old' suggesting the audience seeing older people positively.

Observations of the general public during rehearsals and the performances also give indications of people feeling positive towards the group.

- Audience members referring to the group as “their shopping centre, flashmob company,” the feeling of ownership suggesting pride.
- People stopping to watch with their mouths open, suggesting they are surprised by what they see.
- Audience members smiling and laughing and whooping and applauding at the end of the performance, showing their enjoyment.
- People taking photographs/selfies suggests they want to share the experience.
- Young people joining in with the dancing or copying the moves further shows the removal of barriers to creative movement and a sense of ownership.
- Audience members remarking, “This is what we need more of.”
- Audience members written feedback applauds the diversity of the group.

This audience feedback echoes audience feedback from other Moving Memory performances in public spaces, “It goes to show that just because you’re older doesn’t mean you can’t be spontaneous and have fun!”

“I love the inclusivity, such a range of people... Amazing what you can achieve.”
Audience feedback, Damn It! Dance It!

“Every week I feel so much better for being here. I even turned down my support time to be here for the final.”

Workshop and performance participant



Participants during rehearsals

What went well...

What we learnt

The experience of the facilitation team was a significant factor in the sessions working well and the differences participants experienced.

The facilitation team was comprised of five, highly-experienced women, all trained in Moving Well practice, under the direction of Sian Stevenson, Moving Memory's Creative Director.

The facilitators role is to nurture and support the shaping of individual stories through creative movement, however, the diverse nature of the group meant the facilitators needed to provide support in other ways too. They did this by creating a safe and trusted environment, in which people felt they could share their vulnerabilities is positive but did come with challenges. It is questionable whether less experienced facilitators would have been able to create this atmosphere.

The reflective practice of the facilitating team meant lessons were learnt each week and fed into the next session, so the programme was constantly evolving. Lessons were also learnt from the spring phase and fed into the autumn. For example, the team recognized the need for more intensive safeguarding training and this was put in place. This highlighted the need for clear boundaries to be set, for instance agreeing to a welcome 'elbow shake' rather than hugging.

What worked well:

- Creating a **welcoming** and **inclusive** atmosphere from the start
- The structure and **flexibility** of the sessions
- Having an **experienced team** with physical and **emotional awareness**
- Being in the shopping centre **removed barriers to access** for some participants
- Working together towards a **creative output**

“The way the company is able to put members both new and old at ease and encourage, inspire and engage (whilst maintaining fun) is wonderful to see and be a part of.”

Laura Jeffree (facilitator)

Overcoming challenges...

What we learnt

The reflective practice of an experienced team meant that challenges were dealt with in the moment or problem-solved within the team for the following session. This meant between the two phases and continually week on week, the team learnt and put into practice a robust programme.

Managing Needs

The need to manage a diverse group with differing needs meant facilitators felt very aware of sensitivities within the group and described some sessions, 'treading on eggshells' or 'teetering on the edge of counselling'. This management put a lot of pressure on the team, although they felt supported by each other and some additional training.

Solution: The management team at Moving Memory have decided that in future there needs to be an additional team member dedicated to managing mental health concerns. All future bids will include budget for an 'access coordinator.'

Setting boundaries

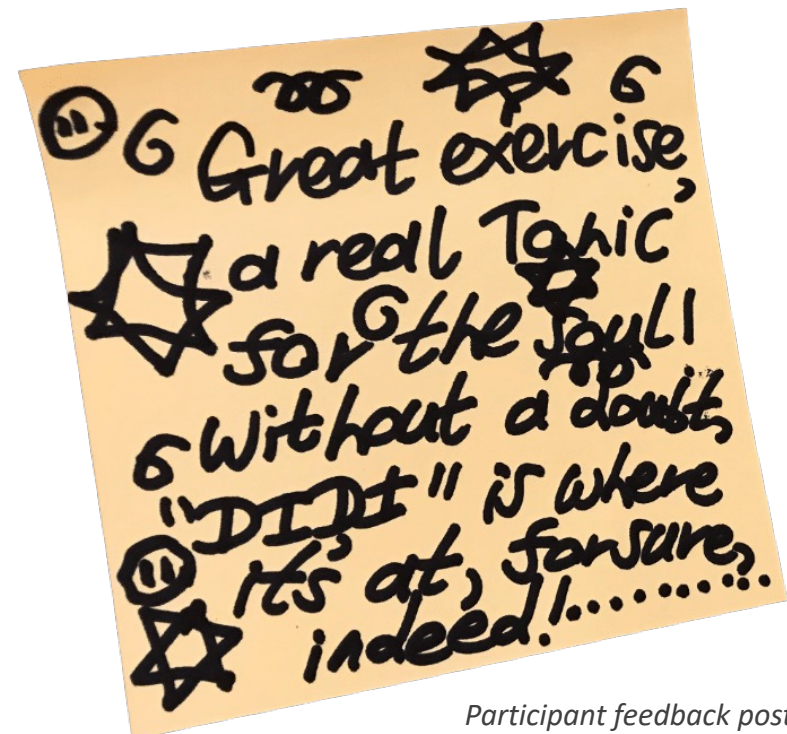
Lessons learnt from the spring phase meant better boundaries were made clear for the autumn workshops. However, there were still challenges in some participants monopolising facilitator time, particularly during breaks. Although this shows the trust and strong relationships, sensitive conversations were difficult to walk away from. Facilitators agreed a 'code word or phrase' to alert another facilitator to assist, however, verballising it was not always possible.

Solution: Agree a hand gesture as well as verbal cues

Physical needs of participants

There was a balancing act for facilitators with different physical needs within the group. People with physical disabilities or people who got tired more quickly were free to sit out for a while but then they were disconnected from the group.

Solution: Include some chair-based moves from the start and have one facilitator sitting down so that it invited others to do the same.



Participant feedback post-it

Considerations for the future...

What we learnt

These programmes of work are filling a significant gap in people's lives. Many participants fed back that Damn It! Dance It! was the highlight of their week and many disclosed significant and prolonged difficulties in their lives and social isolation, which these sessions were helping them to overcome.

A robust and supportive programme:

- Continue to invest in an experienced team and build in plenty of resource for this.
- Continue to invest in time for a reflective practice and training should support needs arise.
- Continue to make inclusivity and accessibility the core principles of this programme. The visually inclusive, no barrier location, low stakes engagement enables people to take the first step – once they have built a relationship with Moving Memory, people can be signposted to other opportunities occurring in closed spaces (e.g. Groovin' Well).

Healthy aging and public health:

- Consider collecting evidence of wellbeing outcomes. Participants are self-identifying them anecdotally but there is not data to show 'distance travelled' at this stage. Building in evaluation that collects a baseline on wellbeing will allow for a more robust evaluation of these outcomes and provide information on impact to potential future funders.

“The group showed no signs of doubt, they were confident and I was so surprised that this group of varied, complex, shy, quiet, all-aged people would look so free and happy to move.”

Facilitator feedback



Participants doing the WAVE performance as part of community event August Bank Holiday

References

Sources of evidence

Primary Data Sources

- Where do you stand tool (participants)
- Observations (of audience and participants by facilitators)
- What three words (participants)
- Reflective logs by facilitators
- Audience feedback surveys

Secondary Data Sources

- <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/aug/04/visits-to-shopping-centres-and-high-streets-dip-below-pre-pandemic-levels>
- <https://www.knightfrank.com/research/article/2022-04-08-shopping-centres-the-changing-face>

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