

Let's Dance! How dance improves physical and mental health: A briefing for the Cross-Party Group on Arts and Health

Introduction

David Bowie said: Let's dance! And he's right – dance is recognised as one of the most effective ways of getting fit, improving mobility, enhancing social connections, developing better cognitive skills and having fun while doing so. The shift away from traditional, hospital-centred models of care, as called for in *A Healthier Wales*, means that the time is right to realise the benefits that innovative dance initiatives can have on people's physical and emotional wellbeing. This briefing provides an overview of how arts and health practitioners across Wales are supporting people of all ages and abilities to realise the benefits of dance.

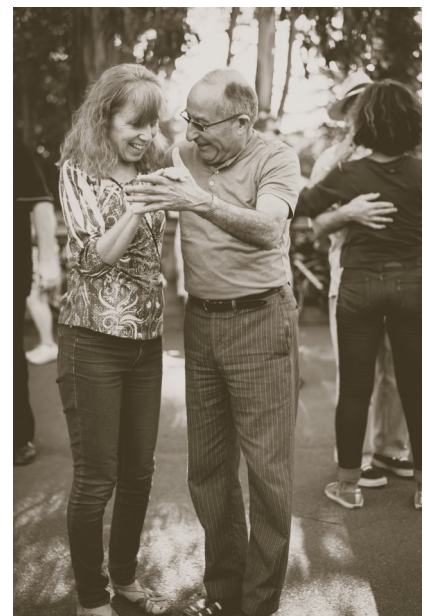
Dance is a natural form of creative self-expression that people of all ages, abilities and levels of physical fitness can enjoy. By incorporating music from a wide range of cultural styles - from hip hop to salsa, from ballet to contemporary - dance classes can be enjoyed individually, in small groups or as large classes as a great way to improve physical and mental wellbeing and develop new social connections.

The health benefits of dance include the strengthening of bones and muscles; greater lung capacity; and increased strength, stamina and endurance. The social aspect of dance means that it is also an effective way of improving a person's emotional wellbeing by reducing loneliness and isolation and increasing feelings of value and worth through active participation. Dance has also been shown to improve cognitive functioning and memory, particularly among older people living with dementia.

Dance activities also support the prevention agenda, not only by helping people to stay active and healthy in their local communities, but also by improving a range of traits that reduce the risk of illness or injury. For example, research suggests that regular participation in dance improves a person's balance, co-ordination and flexibility, which means they're at a lower risk of falling. Dance has also been found to lower the risk of osteoporosis; strengthen ligaments, tendons and joints; and even improve a person's vision.

Wales is well-placed to make the most of the health and wellbeing benefits that dance can provide. National Dance Company Wales, Ballet Cymru, The National Youth Dance of Wales, Dance Wales UK, Jukebox Collective and the vibrant network of community dance organisations across Wales provide an excellent platform to increase engagement between local dance activities and the Welsh population, and as our knowledge of the sector grows, the NHS can be a key partner as well.

To find out more about how Arts Council Wales invest in and support a dynamic and creative arts sector in Wales, see their [Arts Portfolio](#).



Improving physical and mental health through dance

The following section provides an overview of some of the ways that dance is being used to improve people's physical and mental wellbeing across Wales:

Movement for Stroke Rehabilitation, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board (UHB) and Rubicon Dance

Cardiff and Vale UHB have worked in partnership with Rubicon Dance to deliver the Movement for Stroke Rehabilitation project. The programme explores how the mood, confidence and social experiences of stroke survivors can be enhanced through dance.

The project was initially supported by Cardiff & Vale Health Charity and Age Cymru's Gwanwyn Festival, and devised and initiated by the Arts Team at Cardiff and Vale UHB. The project was delivered by the Stroke Rehabilitation Centre (SRC) at University Hospital Llandough and aimed to explore how dance could support stroke survivors by improving emotional wellbeing, movement and social interaction through shared creative activity.

The sessions are delivered weekly and organisers ensure that each session is tailored to specific patient needs, rather than delivering a prescribed programme. Between May 2018 and July 2019, 345 stroke survivors attended the sessions and the sessions are now embedded at the SRC.

Rubicon Dance, in collaboration with the Stroke Rehabilitation Centre, have evidenced a range of positive impacts on patients, including increased confidence, improved feelings of self-worth and a general improvement in participant's emotional wellbeing. These outcomes have been evidenced through a series of posters and feedback evaluation forms from staff, participants, carers and families.

As attendance figures grew, the team sourced additional funding. This funding was sourced from SRC Endowment moneys, Fusion, the Wales Millennium Centre and the Stroke Association, which enabled the project to develop. The group also shared best practice at conferences and engagement events, including the Welsh Stroke Conference in July 2019.



Rubicon Dance are also working with the Stroke Association to establish a community dance session that stroke survivors can be referred to once discharged from secondary care. The team are also building on the success of the project by developing new sessions in six wards for people living with dementia.

Ross Evans, Head of Stroke Support South Wales, said: ***“We were excited to progress this work with Rubicon to continue an offer into the local community. The project provides opportunities for people affected by stroke to rebuild their lives... Through this partnership, we are taking the expertise of both organisations to reach more people and increase support across Cardiff and the Vale”.***

Breakin' for Better Mental Health

In Cymmer, Neath Port Talbot, Avant Cymru have worked with local resident Jamie Berry to deliver *Breakin' for Better Mental Health*. The initiative involves both breakdancing and rap music as expressive art forms to improve young people's emotional and mental health.

The number of GP referrals for mental health support assessments in Wales increased by 47% between 2014 and 2018. Some public health experts now hope that a model which allows GPs to refer patients to community groups that may support them could help reduce this number and prevent people's emotional wellbeing from worsening.

Jamie tried to take his own life at the age of 13 after years of bullying. Jamie was an inclusive child with few social connections. He turned to breakdancing - which he refers to as breakin' - as he battled with his emotional wellbeing.

Jamie says: ***"Breakin' is the one thing that saved me. I went from a kid who always wanted to be outdoorsy but spent most of is time on my PlayStation and game consoles to... Now I just want to break. Now I just want to dance. Now I just want to keep moving and I want to keep expressing and I want to help people... In breakin', you're meant to be you, it's meant to be free. You're meant to express yourself and you're meant to be who you want to be and I think that's the most beautiful thing about it"***.



Classes are being promoted to help people with their mental health.

Jamie works closely with Avant Cymru to plan and deliver the *Breakin'* classes and says that many of the people who have joined the group experience feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Aside from the physical benefits that participants realise, the group has been an effective means of improving social connections between people and reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation. This gives them the confidence to speak openly about how they feel and share whatever concerns they may have with peers.

Dance for Parkinson's

Over 6,000 people in Wales live with Parkinson's, a degenerative condition for which there is no cure. Symptoms can include tremors, rigidity and slowness of movement caused by a loss of nerve cells to the brain. Across the UK, the figure is estimated to be 120,000.

National Dance Company Wales (NDCW) and The English National Ballet jointly deliver Dance for Parkinson's in Dance House, Cardiff and Blackwood Miner's Institute.

Classes are expressive, creative and promote feelings of freedom from the physical and social constraints of living with Parkinson's. They are delivered in three blocks of eight or ten terms per year and cost just £3.50 for participants to take part. Over the last year, more than 1,000 people have attended the classes at both locations.



Research undertaken by the University of Roehampton demonstrates that dancing as seen through the Dance for Parkinson's project can support people's physical and mental wellbeing in a number of ways. This includes strengthening core muscles; developing improved stability and posture; provides opportunities for self-expression and imagination; and supporting feelings of wellbeing, achievement, confidence and determination.

Some examples of the feedback on the classes are provided below:

Angela Harrison, participant: ***"It makes me feel I can cope better, I can walk better... it's the best medicine. I come in feeling like a little old lady, but I leave here feeling quite tall"***

Yvette Wilson, Dance Artist: ***"Its just having the confidence in themselves to feel that they are able to perhaps try different movements that they wouldn't have had the confidence to do beforehand. They come in perhaps with stooped posture, but by the end they're much more lifted, much more open"***

Sally Varrel, Volunteer at Dane for Parkinson's: ***"Being a volunteer for Dance for Parkinson's is joyful for the dancing, connecting, listening to and sharing life stories, supporting, contributing, belonging and laughing"***



Parkinson's Specialist Nurse: ***"What a wonderful session and interesting concept for all working, living and dealing with people with Parkinson's. I'm so glad I was able to attend. It inspired me to feel I would like to pursue dance more with people living with this condition"***

An explanatory film of NDCW's work in Wales can be viewed [here](#).

Dance to Health: A falls prevention project at Swansea Bay UHB

Dance to Health is a pioneering falls prevention dance programme for older people. It has been developed by Aesop (Arts Enterprise for a Social Purpose) and Swansea Bay UHB to show that arts interventions can address major health challenges in Wales and be scaled-up across the health and care system.

Dance to Health combines evidence-based falls prevention principles with the creativity, expression and energy of dance. Sessions are led by dance artists from leading dance companies who have qualified in falls prevention exercise.

An evaluation by Sheffield Hallam University (March 2019) concluded that: ***“Dance to Health offers the health system a more effective and cost-effective means to address the issue of older people’s falls”***. The evaluation report is available in full [here](#).



Aesop ran a successful Dance to Health pilot project in 2015 and 2016. The current £2.1 million ‘Phase 1 Roll-out’ began in April 2017. Swansea Bay UHB is the Welsh Health Partner and the National Dance Company Wales, the Dance Partner. Phase 1 began with six ‘Improvement Programmes’ – dance versions of the evidence-based Otago and FaME falls prevention exercise programmes. Four Welsh dance artists completed the same falls prevention exercise training that physiotherapists complete to become ‘Postural Stability Instructors’.

They then learned how to integrate the exercises into dance. The six Improvement Programmes each lasted the required six months and were followed by setting up three maintenance programmes where participants, volunteers and the local community have developed financially sustainable, weekly falls prevention dance groups. As well as Pontarddulais, there are groups in Gorseinon and Porthcawl.

Spurred on by the successes of Phase 1 and data showing that 1,000s of older people in the Swansea Bay UHB area could benefit from Dance to Health, the plan over the next four years is to:

- Create 80 volunteer-led, financially sustainable Local Dance to Health Groups in Wales, working with Local Partners and using a social franchise model;
- Run Improvement Programmes for groups of older people at particular risk of falls and high reliance on the NHS and social care;
- Undertake a randomised controlled trial of Improvement Programmes and develop the dance dimension of the whole programme; and
- Establish Dance to Health as a sustainable social enterprise, funded by:
 - a. Franchise fees for setting up new groups;
 - b. Annual support fees from established groups;
 - c. NHS fees to run Improvement Programmes;
 - d. Corporate sector partners (strategy approved by the Aesop Board); and
 - e. Merchandising surpluses (to be developed).

Further information about Dance to Health is available via the website, [here](#).

The Women in Pregnancy Gravida project

Gravida Project is the first project in Wales that looks at creativity through pregnancy and maternal mental health. Through research projects, Women in Pregnancy Gravida was born, funded by the Arts Council of Wales and supported by Chapter Art Centre. Working with midwives, pregnant community members and pregnant professional dancers, Gravida made a proof of concept for Context Oriented Dance Approach (CODA). In 2018, Gravida Project was showcased as a multimedia dance theatre exploration of pregnancy and maternal issues through body memory and emotional heritage. Using CODA methodologies, developed by Aleksandra Jones (recognized by UNESCO International Dance Council), Gravida enables artists, mothers and all women who have experienced, or are experiencing, transformations into motherhood.

CODA re-situates their experiences through embodiment and flow. This process allows for the body to reconnect with the mind and vice-versa; where the mother-dancer can reclaim her grounded physical, emotional and mental health and wellbeing.

Gravida Project works with professional dancers, community dancers and women who may have experienced postnatal depression, trauma through pregnancy and birth and difficulties transitioning from pre-motherhood into the multi-complexities of pregnancy and birth.

Gravida has four identifiable audience-participants:

- Women who are or have been pregnant—wishing reconnection to their self-hood through embodiment processes;
- Anyone (male or female parents, who have or have no intention of future pregnancies) with a strong connection to maternity who, by proxy, wish to empathise with pregnant mothers, or engage with the pregnancy process;
- Professional artists affected by pregnancy who have the desire to share their stories through creative means; and
- Professionals who work in health and wellbeing, maternity, mental health and social work who, through their own participatory embodiment of movement, connection and personal reclamation of the body, build an empathetic response to the pregnant mother.

To date, Gravida has involved community participants and pregnant dancers to explore the dramaturgy of pregnant movement, balance and changes in physical gravity and emotional centering.

Partnerships have been with dance practitioners and therapists; arts therapists and venues; and the Wales Arts for Health Network (WAHN). This has maximized the impact of the project beyond living audiences and has supported NHS Wales and National Theatre Wales to develop greater audience understanding.



Conclusion

Increasing evidence is showing how engagement with the arts can improve a person's physical and emotional wellbeing. Dance initiatives are person-centred interventions as they can be modified and adapted endlessly to incorporate different styles, different abilities and different age groups. Moreover, dance initiatives support the prevention agenda by helping people stay active and healthy outside of traditional health and social care settings.

As demand for health and social care services increase, the need to think innovatively about how health and social care services will be delivered is more pressing than ever. The Welsh Government's long-term plan for health and social care, *A Healthier Wales*, recognises this urgency and calls for the development of a whole-system approach that "is focused on health and wellbeing, and on preventing illness". Arts and health projects, like the ones covered in this briefing, are excellent examples of how the NHS is working in partnership with the wider public sector to deliver this vision. Challenges remain around the scaling-up of best practice and evidencing the impact of arts and health projects, but the overall landscape is one that is improving and progressing through partnership working.

The Welsh NHS Confederation and our members' aim is to build on our Memorandum of Understanding with The Arts Council of Wales through raising awareness and increasing engagement around arts and health initiatives to achieve a more vibrant, happier and healthier Wales.

How can the Welsh NHS Confederation help you?

Please get in touch if you want further details on any of the issues raised in this briefing. Please contact **Nesta Lloyd-Jones, Assistant Director**, on Nesta.Lloyd-Jones@welshconfed.org

The Welsh NHS Confederation is the only national membership body which represents all the organisations that make up the NHS in Wales: the seven Local Health Boards, the three NHS Trusts and Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW).

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