

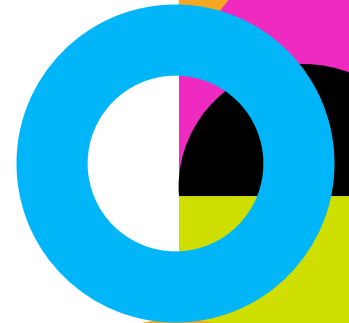


FABRIC

Solara

Critical Mass Dance Collective

Evaluation 2023





About Critical Mass

Critical Mass was the Birmingham 2022 Festival's flagship participation programme. It saw 242 young people from across the West Midlands engage to form a dance collective that performed at some of 2022's most significant events, including the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games Opening Ceremony.

The Critical Mass collective was an integrated cast with people identifying as D/deaf, Disabled and non-disabled working side by side to show how genuine inclusion can be achieved in mega-events.

Critical Mass was conceived through a unique collaboration between the Birmingham 2022 Festival, FABRIC, Arts Connect, and Dance Leaders Group (DLG) and was generously supported by Spirit Of 2012.

The project sought to redefine inclusion within mega-events by achieving the following outcomes:

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

This report looks at the extent to which continued investment in activity for and by Critical Mass participants meets these outcomes.



About Solara

As part of Birmingham Festival 23 and celebrating the first anniversary of Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, Critical Mass Dance Collective was invited to create a new piece of work to be premiered at FABRIC's EveryBody Dancing Day on Sun, 30 July 2023.

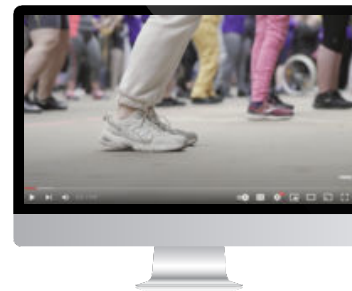
Zoie Golding MBE, first appointed Artist Lead for Critical Mass in 2022, returned to work with the collective to make Solara in another epic act of co-creation on a mass scale. Commissioned by FABRIC, supported by Dance Leaders Group (DLG), and funded by United by 2022.

The Concept

Solara is no ordinary star.

She brings life, strength and protection to the communities who look up to her and provides energy for them to harness. Day after day, Solara arrives, and the work begins. It has been like this for as long as anyone can remember, with Solara and the communities she powers relying on each other, all living in harmony, all dancing to the same tune. When an unusual event occurs one day, it disrupts the universe they all know.

Watch here...



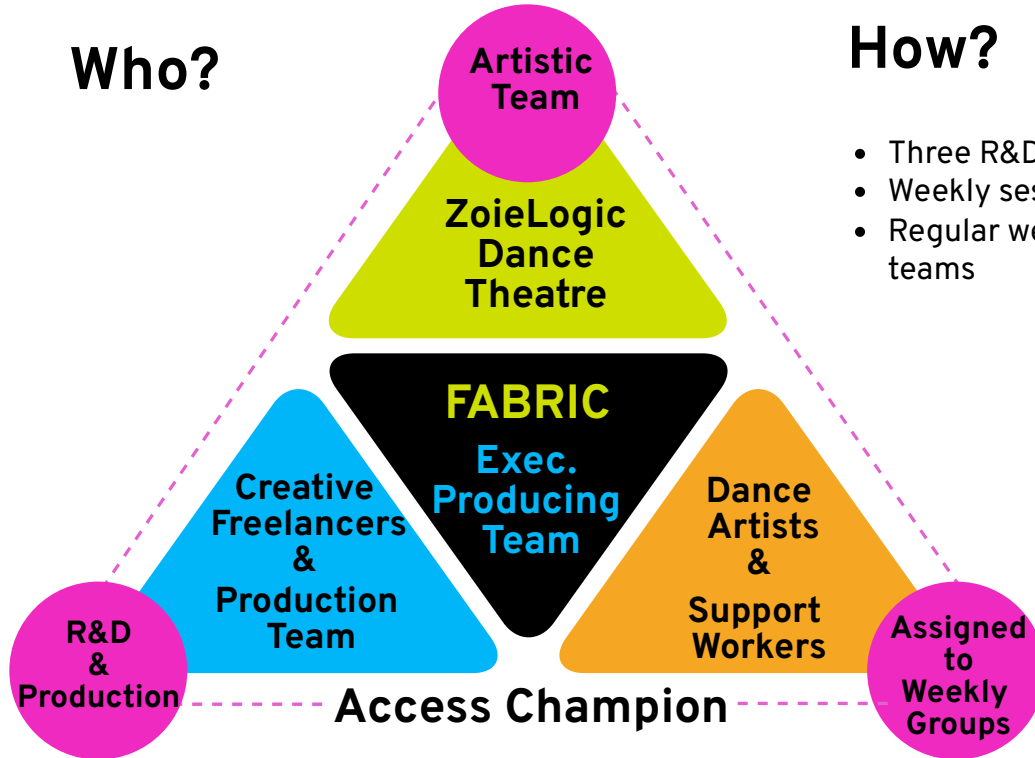
Participant Film



Performance

Project Structure

Who?

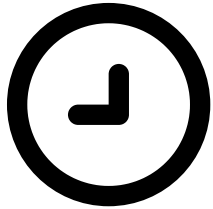


How?

- Three R&D days with the delivery team
- Weekly sessions and nine mass rehearsals
- Regular weekly meetings with delivery teams

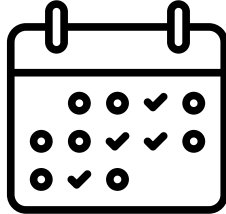
Solara in numbers

139 hours

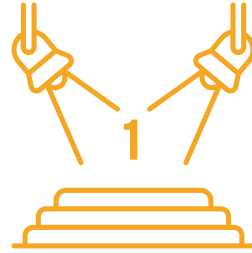


of engagement

9 Mass

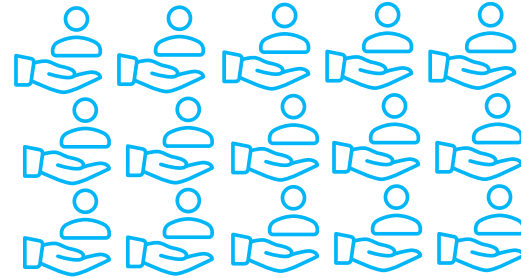


Rehearsals

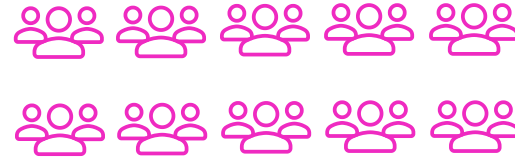


Performance

15 Support Workers

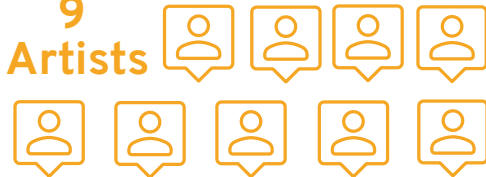


10 Groups

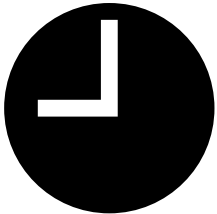


9

Artists

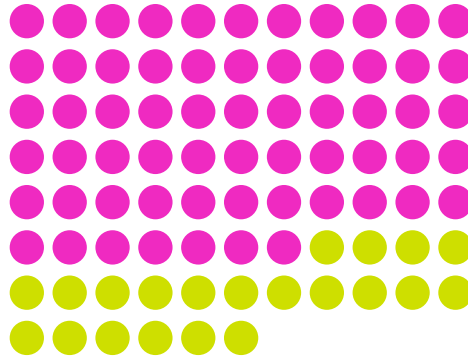


40 minutes



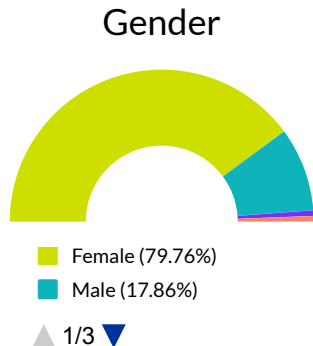
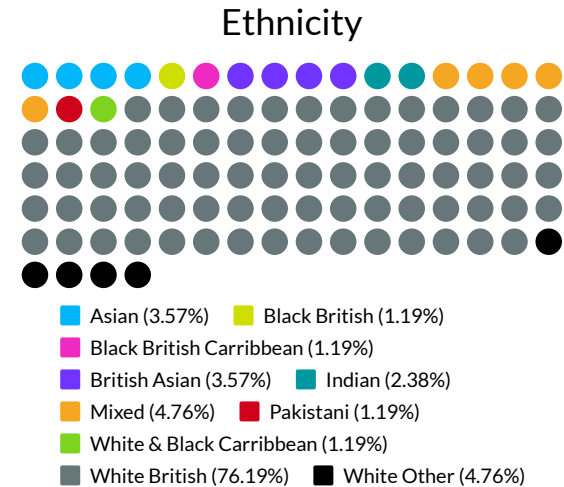
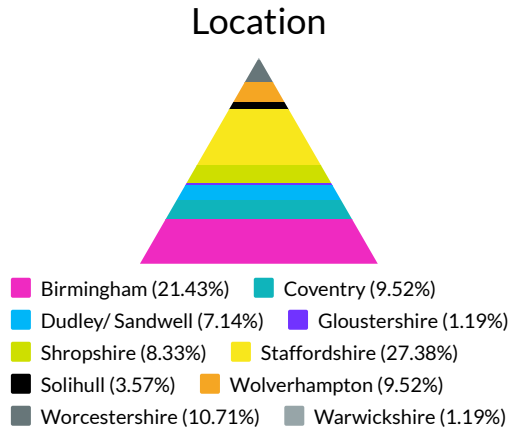
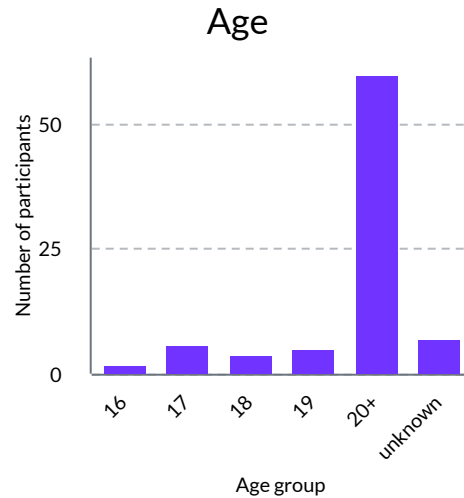
of performance

83 Participants



75% of the cast identify as having a disability or other health condition

A diverse pool of participants



Participant data shows that adults over 20 years were most engaged with this opportunity, reflecting the need for performance opportunities for inclusive groups well into adulthood.

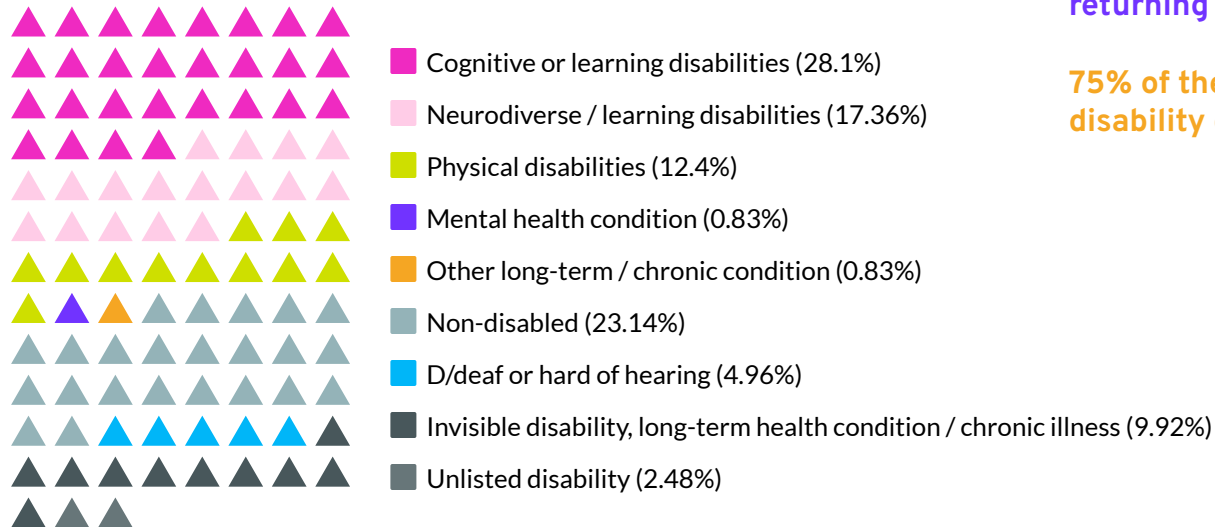
With representation from groups across the West Midlands, Critical Mass is crucial for inclusive practice and creating pathways for dancers with inclusion needs. Birmingham and Staffordshire representing nearly 50% of participants,

19% of the participants represent the ethnically diverse communities within the region. Critical Mass's integrated and inclusive approach and environment means it is an intersectional space that welcomes all genders and ethnicities. Participants feel comfortable, welcome, and celebrated for who they are, and in turn, they are confident about sharing their identities.

A diverse pool of participants

The number of returning Critical Mass participants highlights the demand for continuous opportunities of this nature. A few attendees participated throughout the rehearsal and chose not to perform. This shows how vital and limited the chances are for disabled people to be confident and supported to dance. Creating space for people to participate and engage in the process without performing is critical for supporting and developing those participants to be willing to engage in future cultural opportunities. The team enabled a group with diverse needs to thrive and succeed by creating an environment of open language and care. Nearly 78% of participants self-identified as disabled, neurodiverse or having a long-term health condition. This is a 73% increase from the previous year, proving the importance of building trust and repeat activity for people to feel confident to identify any disabilities or conditions.

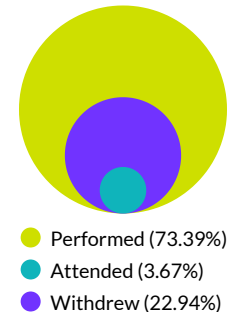
Participant Access Support Needs



86% of the participants were returning members

75% of the cast identify as having a disability or other health condition

Participation





"You can't just have 'one' singular inclusive practice. It totally depends on who is in the room and how you (as a practitioner) adapt your practice to the room at that particular moment."—Dance Leader.

"It has been nice taking my disabled group and integrating them with a non-disabled group who they didn't know and how best to support that process. They have got to know each other well over a short period of time and now support each other."
- Dance Leader

"I've really enjoyed Solara. I feel a lot of our previous feedback has been taken on board, and it felt inclusive and challenged us. It was nice doing so much with the wider group & mixing." - Participant feedback.



Key Learning

What are the critical factors to successfully deliver a mass participation event?

Trust

Trusting in the skills and knowledge of the delivery team and partners is essential. As a mass participation project with groups across the Midlands, the lead organisation must create an environment of support and the right expertise to deliver high-quality experiences and production successfully. This trust then extends to developing confident participation and parental/carer relationships.

Co-creation culture and shared principles

Ensure that all artists and organisations value and understand a co-creation approach that is based on an artistic vision. Creating a high-quality final production through a process-driven framework leads to improved outcomes.

Inclusion and quality need to be effectively resourced

To produce inspiring work that enables participants to feel valued and represented and audiences to challenge their perceptions requires investment. Access requirements to ensure successful participation may shift weekly. Creating a bold spectacle that goes beyond several people requires resources for costumes, styling, music, and visuals.

Effective Structure and Team Setup:

From a participation producer to the support workers, these roles inform the creative practice by managing the environment, addressing access requirements and reducing barriers to successful participation. These roles create the conditions for creative leads to focus and nurture a co-creation process. This allows everyone to be confident in their positions without expecting everyone to do everything all the time.

Clarity and understanding of Roles

The pastoral care and support of individuals with various support needs and disabilities is essential to the process. Alongside dance artists and a lead creative partner, it is necessary to have clarity and understanding of individual roles. Providing participants with an accessible list of people and their purpose creates structure and reassurance of who to talk to for specific matters.

Quality of experience

77% of the participants provided feedback

Participants were asked to state their level of agreement about a series of statements representing a quality of experience.

A maximum of 4% of participant respondents disagreed with any statements, and 8% felt unsure of their answer.

These statements reflect well-being and skills development measures that all contribute to the impact on participants.

100% rated the experience as excellent or good

90% rated it as excellent, an 8% increase compared to the previous year, which is unsurprising as 98% felt that the experience had improved.

96% would participate in the future

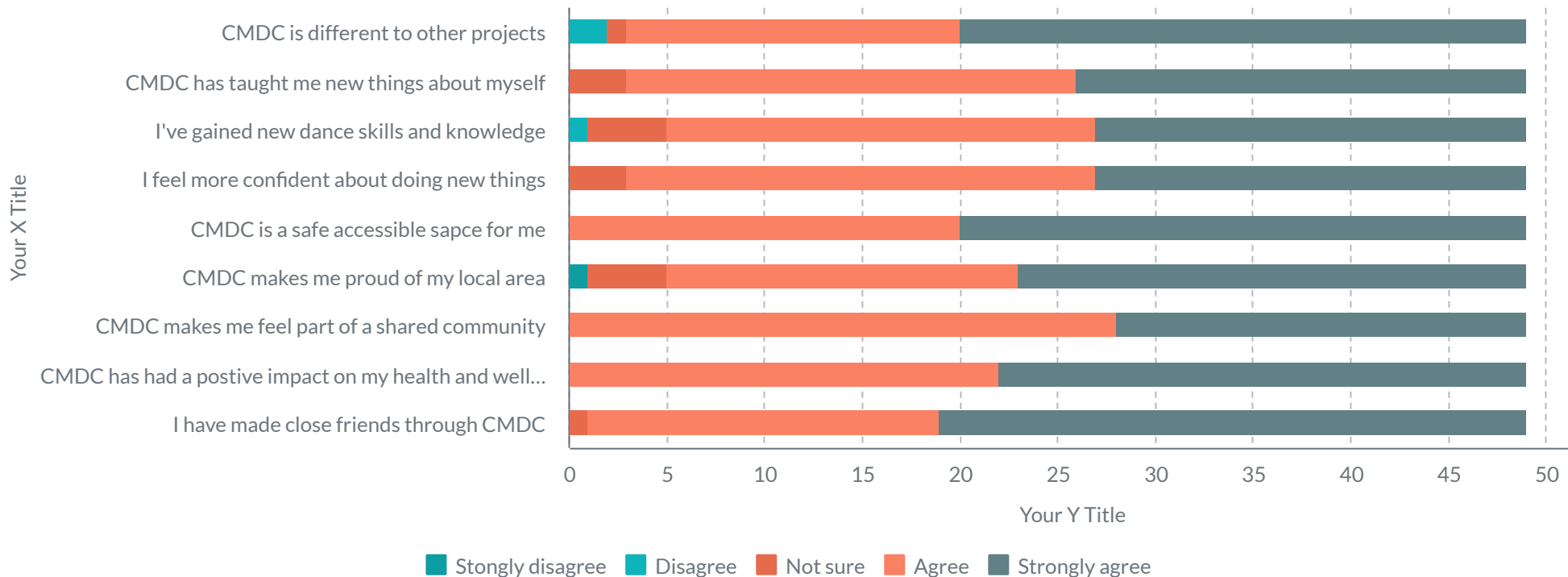
The demand and desire for continued activity highlights the quality of the experience and the need for increased investment in sustained activity.

"WOW! Watching the performance today, I was obviously proud of my daughter and all the participants from Liberty. They had obviously worked so hard during rehearsals and could perform perfectly for a full 40 minutes. Performing with their peers and members from other groups, it was easy to see from the smiles on their faces how they were all thoroughly enjoying performing. This has been a wonderful opportunity for these young people to take part in this event. They all left the performance with their heads held high and should be very proud of what they have undertaken and achieved."

- Participant parent

Quality of experience

Quality Measures



Impact on participants

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

- Continuous dance participation and large-scale performance opportunities have had a positive impact on participant well-being. Providing consistent, inclusive and nationally visible opportunities to perform has resulted in participants maintaining positive mental health. This provides participants with regular active opportunities that meet social, emotional and physical well-being needs, creating a balance in their mental health.

100% of participants felt that the experience had a positive impact on their health and wellbeing

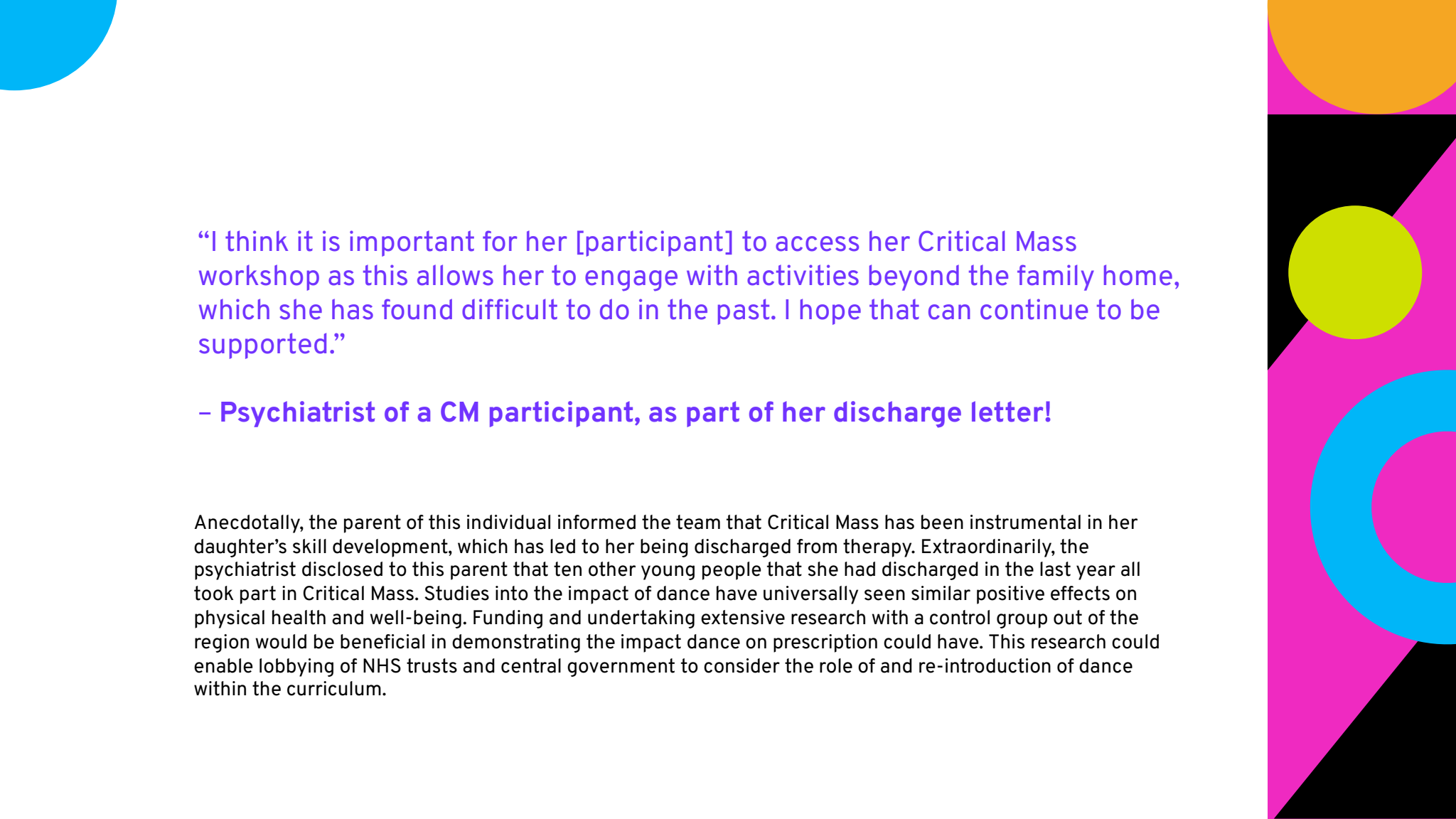
98% had gained new friends, a measure of positive well-being

"I've loved seeing old friends and also making new ones." - Participant feedback

- The scale of the mass participation event ensures that there is a celebration of everyone, which means no single individual with support needs feels isolated or burdensome. This can happen in less inclusive environments and negatively impacts wellbeing levels.

100% of participants felt that CMDC was a safe and accessible space for them

"Thank you for providing me with an opportunity to combat my stage fright. As a neurodivergent creative, it is especially important to me to be part of a project that makes a difference, challenges us and makes us feel seen and heard."- Participant feedback



“I think it is important for her [participant] to access her Critical Mass workshop as this allows her to engage with activities beyond the family home, which she has found difficult to do in the past. I hope that can continue to be supported.”

– **Psychiatrist of a CM participant, as part of her discharge letter!**

Anecdotally, the parent of this individual informed the team that Critical Mass has been instrumental in her daughter's skill development, which has led to her being discharged from therapy. Extraordinarily, the psychiatrist disclosed to this parent that ten other young people that she had discharged in the last year all took part in Critical Mass. Studies into the impact of dance have universally seen similar positive effects on physical health and well-being. Funding and undertaking extensive research with a control group out of the region would be beneficial in demonstrating the impact dance on prescription could have. This research could enable lobbying of NHS trusts and central government to consider the role of and re-introduction of dance within the curriculum.

Impact on participants

- The growth in trust, confidence, and skills by participants and their families means they feel invested in, valued and more than capable of the next big thing.

90% of participants agreed they had gained new dance skills and knowledge

94% feel more confident trying new things

“Wow wow wow it was amazing to see my child dance and grow so well. Makes me feel so proud Anil has come a long way since he has been at liberty. Thank you to Critical Mass for all the hard work you put in.”

- Participant Parent

- The visibility and quality of the event has the greatest impact on increasing inclusive dance opportunities when delivered on a mass participation scale.

“Huge thank you to the collective team! You’ve inspired me to do more things like this in the future. You’re doing angel work!” - Participant feedback

“I’ve loved being part of an inclusive group of people, helping our group to learn about the dance industry and dance world, and to shine.” - Participant feedback

Impact on participants

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

- The ability of 98% of participants to have made friends in this environment creates a level of connectedness that supports positive well-being. This is an increase of 9% compared to last year, highlighting the importance of these spaces to meet more like-minded people with similar interests. Inclusive spaces and activities have a geographically small community. This opportunity allows people to connect and make friendships across the region; this is particularly important for those who are more vulnerable and trusting when meeting new people. It provides the systems of care around a participant with the reassurance that they are interacting with new people in a safe space.

100% of participants felt part of a shared community

90% felt proud of their local area

"I just want to thank all FABRIC staff, Rachel, Ellen, and Natalie H, for your help and patience during rehearsals and lessons on Tuesday's group with Daniel. I hope this is the beginning to carry on with more annual projects involving dancing. And Maggie H, thank you for letting us know about the Commonwealth games last year and this year to the FABRIC team." - Participant parent

""[I am] absolutely blown away by today's performance. You could tell by the dancers' faces how much they enjoyed it and how connected they were to the dance and each other. Building these friendships and connections is just priceless. The whole experience is so well organised and inclusive.

They didn't even mind about the rain. Well worth it and so proud of everyone involved, just amazing.'

- Participant parent

Key Learning

What are the essential elements to successful co-creation?

Everyone is valued in the research and development process

The process gathered the groups' contributions and ideas to inform the choreography.

"{What has been successful is...} involving them from the start, inviting their ideas and opinions and enhancing understanding of the narrative through the storyboard and synopsis has made it much more straightforward for the participants to understand what they are doing" - Dance lead

Establishing effective feedback and communication systems

Creating structured processes and points of contact with consistent language ensures appropriate people are responsible, accountable, consulted and informed. These systems are used continually in sharing movements and understanding the intent to create and disseminate shared choreography.

Democratising decision making

Deepening co-creation through stages of R&D with regular check-ins and clarifying understanding ensures participants feel valued and decisions are democratised to them.

Accessible processes

Exploring ways to gauge and hear from all participants, including non-verbal communicators, included drawn responses, dot voting and film to ensure participant perspectives were included and they felt listened to

Crediting contributions

Committing to consistency in visual communication enabled the team to map and translate the creation of the choreography so that participants could identify their contributions. This creates a feeling of pride and value in participants. Celebrating groups' and individuals' contributions publicly on social media demonstrates a public commitment to co-creation.

"they own the movement and will therefore understand the meaning and sentiment and then be able to perform it better"
- Dance Lead.

Key Learning

"Process-led and performance-driven approaches can often create tension in achieving high-quality experiences for participants and audiences. The delivery approaches used create a distributed model for co-creation across a mass participation project that enables representation of participants within the vision of the creative producer."

- Dance lead

'It was a nurturing collaboration which meant much of our vision could come to life. It was a well-funded, well-resourced and thoroughly loved process that made everyone shine. I think today, we brilliantly showed what uncompromising choreography for an inclusive cast can look like. It was a pleasure walking with all of you.'

- Martina Bussi, Exec Director at Zoie Logic Dance Theatre

How do you maintain quality of artistic excellence in a mass participation experience?

Duration

The piece's duration was kept short to ensure that all participants could successfully learn and deliver a final performance within the rehearsal timeframe available.

Consistent visual aesthetic

Matching production values with creative values to service the narrative of the performance increases the accessibility of the storytelling to the audience and creates a wow factor in the presentation.

Dramaturgy

Checking in with participants about the compositions and meaning and asking questions through feedback during the R&D phase grounds everyone in the themes of the work and the intent of the movements' delivery.

Evolving Score

The composer continued to develop the music alongside the intensive dance rehearsals, responding to the participants' movements and emotions to better serve the dance with their score.

Overall successes

Benefits of authentic co-creation

- Continuous dance participation and large-scale performance opportunities have had a positive impact on participant well-being. Providing consistent, inclusive, and nationally visible opportunities to perform has resulted in participants maintaining positive mental health. This provides participants with regular active opportunities that meet their social, emotional, and physical well-being needs, creating a balance in their mental health.
- The scale of the mass participation event ensures that there is a celebration of everyone, which means no single individual with support needs feels isolated or burdensome. This can happen in less inclusive environments and negatively impacts well-being levels.
- Participants' and their families' growth in trust, confidence, and skills means they feel invested in, valued, and more than capable of the next big thing.
- When delivered on a mass participation scale, the visibility and quality of the event have the greatest impact on increasing inclusive dance opportunities.

"What an amazing journey our young adults have achieved yet again! Today I stood there in the rain full of pride watching them all perform that amazing routine with very short notice of rehearsing it all.

Each one of them was smiling with confidence and the utmost respect of what they were doing in front of complete strangers. Not only my child, but they all make me so proud of who they are and continue to be."

- Participant parent

Overall successes

Impact on sector skills and learning

- Having built a team of skilled support workers from year one activity alongside new recruits meant that skills were shared amongst peers. New systems of care were set up to provide welfare check-ins with support staff to identify and problem-solve any challenges and issues as delivery continued.
- Dance artists and support workers are more skilled at delivering and supporting activities that are inclusive to a wide range of learning and physical disabilities. The team intuitively applied the knowledge from last year in planning and structuring the project.
- Investment in CPD and more comprehensive project skills development of dancers and support workers leaves an embedded legacy for self-led continued activity. The dance artists recognise that there is always more to learn and see investment in additional inclusive training opportunities as an important legacy of activity.
- Dance practitioners and support workers across the West Midlands have experienced the logistics and organisation of a mass participation event with co-creation and inclusive practice. Their knowledge of 'how to' has fostered passionate advocates for increasing inclusive approach, visibility, and representation at community, professional, and audience levels.
- The diversity of dance leads and support workers creates new connections and networking opportunities for future activity within the sector.

"I've learned the empowerment of participants through a co-creation approach. Dance syllabus teaching often creates the circumstance for dancer leaders to drive ideas and teach specific choreography. This experience has built a foundation of collaboration and creative expression between dance leads and participants." - Dance lead

Overall challenges

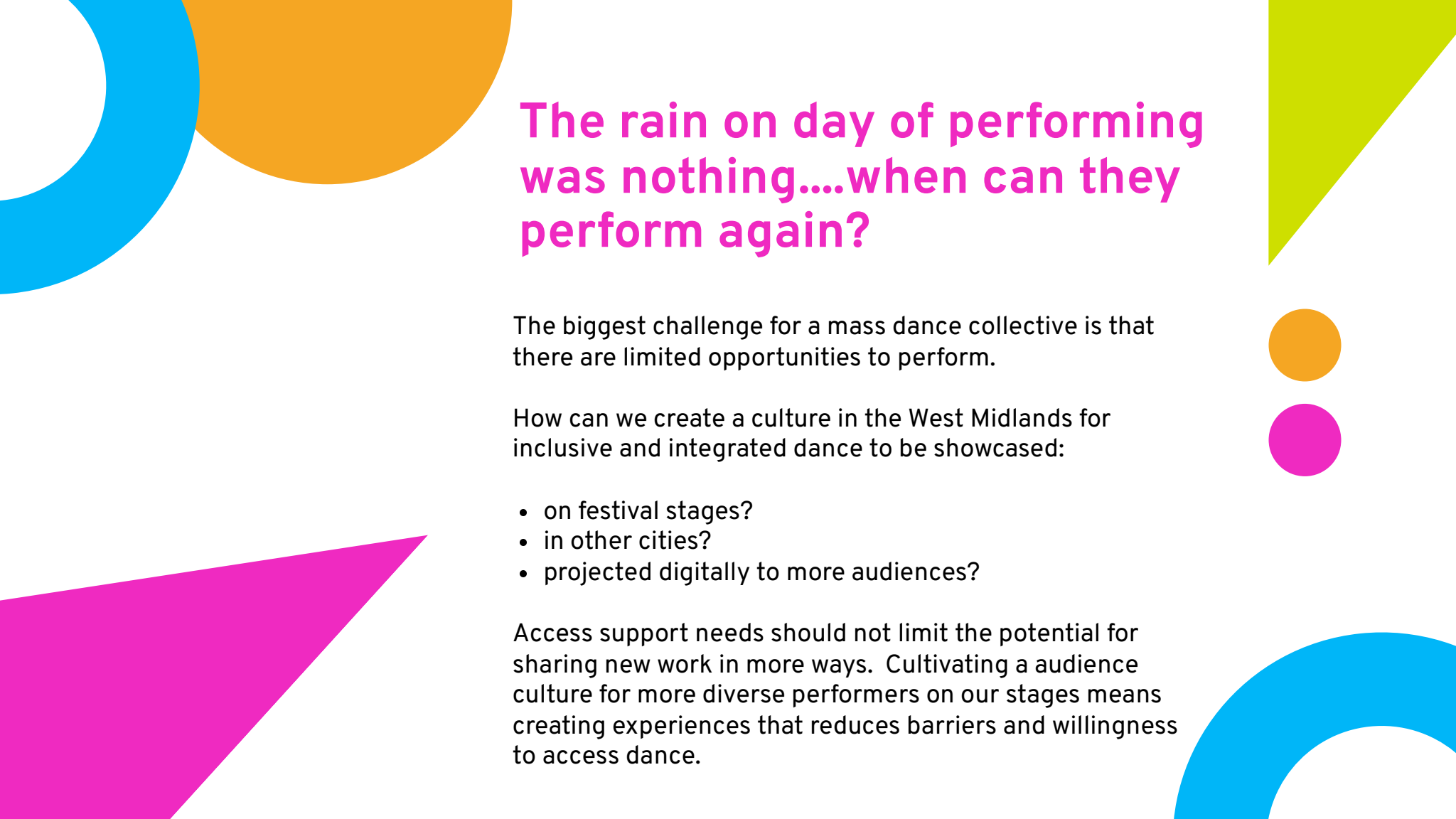
- To deliver inclusive dance opportunities that welcome all with high access to support cost. To ensure the team can minimise all barriers to participation and engagement, enabling participants to be present and successful, often meant incurring higher accommodation and transport costs due to inconsistent public transport and limited accessible accommodation within the city.

'My daughter has again loved the whole experience - the bus, the packed lunch, the special costume, and the Burton group who make her so welcome on the journeys. The support workers have again been so supportive, calm and encouraging whilst making it fun' - Participant parent

- Identifying and hiring a suitable rehearsal venue within budget was challenging. It had to meet both the scale in numbers and accessible needs of the group, which included confidence and journey time to reach potential locations. A warehouse in Digbeth was utilised as a rehearsal location.
- There will always be inclusion challenges regardless of how trained and skilled the team are; the three recurring challenges for the collective on this occasion were:
 - confidence in entry and exit of the stage and when the team could have this set up for rehearsal
 - choreography counts, including uncertain and changing counts. Where participants had good memories and were fixated on the accuracy of the information, the deviation of the count was challenging to manage; for others, musicality and counts can be harder to pick up.
 - despite portable mics, the way sound travelled across such a big rehearsal venue made it difficult to ensure clarity of instructions to groups

Overall challenges

- Despite the many returning members, recruitment was challenging in some locations. The short lead-in time impacted people's ability to commit and for some existing groups to fit the R&D and co-creation activity for Solara into their weekly schedules.
- The delivery schedule across the Summer holidays, combined with the short notice, made it challenging for participants to maintain consistency in attendance.
- The collective rehearsal days were long and demanding, especially for those who started their pastoral support of participants on the coach journeys to and from the venue. Additional support for that period would free up dance leads to travel separately and enable them to be present at team briefings at the start of the day.
- The dance leads, and support workers didn't always feel the artistic decisions were inclusive of participant needs. Resolving this will always be a challenge throughout the delivery process, as all groups and individuals will need different processes and levels of support to be successful.
- Dance leads facilitated the co-creation process on the ground, meaning their ideas and contributions weren't part of the artistic process. Creating space for them to have a voice with the lead choreographic organisation to create a balance between artistic vision and participant needs. This may mean that participants aren't as challenged or pushed outside their comfort zone, which is more easily achieved from an outside perspective.
- The support worker team included roving support workers. This was a new addition to respond to the different structures and needs of the groups as delivery continued. This was received with mixed success due to the need to build trust and knowledge of the participants and how the groups operate.



The rain on day of performing was nothing...when can they perform again?

The biggest challenge for a mass dance collective is that there are limited opportunities to perform.

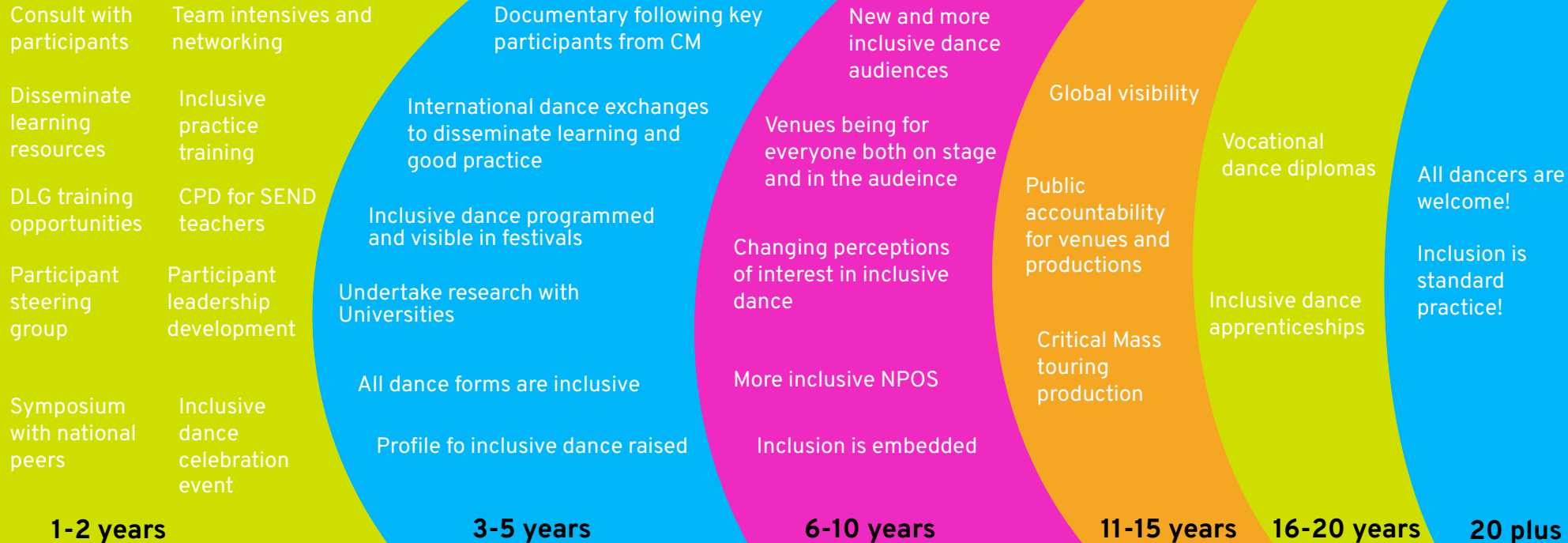
How can we create a culture in the West Midlands for inclusive and integrated dance to be showcased:

- on festival stages?
- in other cities?
- projected digitally to more audiences?

Access support needs should not limit the potential for sharing new work in more ways. Cultivating a audience culture for more diverse performers on our stages means creating experiences that reduces barriers and willingness to access dance.

What next? The future potential of inclusive dance

Throughout: cities become inclusive and accessible spaces, audiences and venues continue to be challenged. This is achieved through a biennale inclusive dance event





"It has been a privilege to grow with my son & other members of CMDC. As a parent who has seen the struggles for 25 years, I am so grateful for the inclusion that should have been available since the beginning. We are all part of the change of consciousness that is CRITICAL MASS. Thank you."

- Participant parent

"Being able to step back and watch my learners fully immerse themselves in the project and being a part of the community of dancers, and not need my support has been the biggest highlight" - Dance lead

Final thought...

The real legacy of Critical Mass for inclusive dance may not be known for the next 5, 10 or 20 years.

Critical Mass dance leaders, artists and support workers have had their practice influenced to be accessible for a wide range of support needs. This experience has seen artists deliver a people-centred approach with high-quality artistic experiences for participants and audiences. Its achievement is a testament to what can be achieved with suitable investment and people.

As these professionals continue their careers, the ripple effect of this process-driven, co-created, and inclusive approach to dance choreography and mass participation should be monitored and tracked as a longitudinal study of dance ethos and practice.

The importance of maintaining social connections for participants was flagged in the Commonwealth Games evaluation, the positive impact of which has been evidenced in this additional year of activity. The investment in continuous weekly opportunities to dance locally, alongside a highly visible opportunity to perform, has dramatically impacted the health and well-being of all participants. Consistency of engagement, pathways to development, and creating more opportunities to challenge the perceptions of inclusive performances are crucial to realising the commitment to the future of inclusive dance across the region, nationally, and internationally.



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