

Fit To Dance

With growing concerns about the state of the nation's health the government is increasing pressure on schools, colleges, local councils and community service providers to encourage people of all ages to lead more physically active lifestyles. The government is focused on improving access to sport and physical recreation facilities and to help educate the nation about the benefits of leading a healthier lifestyle. The government is particularly targeting areas of poor social and economic welfare, where health issues, such as obesity and smoking and alcohol related diseases are more prevalent.

The government white paper on health sets out key principles for supporting the public to make more informed choices regarding their health, which include more opportunities for participation in formal sport and recreational activities and better access to information about leading healthier, more active lifestyles.

In the neighbourhoods of East Brighton a community dance programme is being used successfully as a tool for delivering many of the goals of this agenda.

The East Brighton Dance Development Programme (EBDDP) was formed from an initial partnership between South East Dance, (a National Dance Agency) and Positive Futures, a nationwide programme aimed at encouraging young people at risk to participate in positive activities. The success of this project, which worked almost exclusively with 10-16 year olds, led to an application by South East Dance to eb4u (formerly New Deal for Communities) for a 3-year programme of inclusive dance provision, which began in October 2002. This project was targeted across the communities of Whitehawk, Moulsecoomb, Saunders Park and Bates estate, four wards of Brighton that had been highlighted as areas of deprivation. It incorporated dance provision for Older People, Parents & Toddlers, Boys, Men, senior and youth groups and sessions for people with physical disabilities and those with mental health problems.

I have been managing this programme of work from the start and have witnessed many of the positive changes that have been brought about through the EBDDP. The fact that so many local residents have participated in the programme highlights the fact that with careful programming of the right activity and encouragement from key workers dance can be a hugely popular and accessible recreational activity.

Although it is difficult to quantify the level of effect that the programme has had on its participants we have seen increased levels of self-motivation and self-esteem amongst young people. Better integration between the different communities in East Brighton, a reduction in anti-social behaviour in after school clubs due to the focus that an activity like dance provides and an increase in skills like co-ordination, and flexibility. The participants with physical disabilities have also shown marked improvements in their motor skills and concentration. From discussions that we have held with youth service providers in Brighton one of the main benefits from the programme is the opportunity for young women to be referred to a positive diversionary activity.

Obviously delivering dance in an area like East Brighton, where there are high crime figures, high rates of truancy, poor general health and high levels of substance misuse is very challenging. Additional practical difficulties such as the lack of suitable dance spaces and lack of support workers also compounds the problem faced by the EBDDP. It was important to ensure that good lines of communication existed between residents, youth workers, parents and participants. In order to avoid potentially difficult situations, lone-working was forbidden and where possible we would work in partnership with local youth workers or resident volunteers. Much time was spent meeting with resident groups and consulting with key members of the community to ensure that the programme was meeting the needs of the participants.

This was also central to ensuring that we were working inclusively, and that we were not excluding any sector of the community from accessing the programme. This meant ensuring access was available to ethnic minority residents and those with disabilities.

In the chapter on "Choosing Health", the government states that "looked-after children, disabled children and black and ethnic minority children face more problems of health and well-being than others."

The historic lack of facilities and provision within areas of poverty such as East Brighton has traditionally meant limited opportunities for participation in sports and other recreational activities amongst residents. By providing free or low-cost dance sessions and opportunities for participation in other dance related activity such as workshops with professional companies, theatre trips and performances, the EBDDP has enabled residents to access physical activity on a regular basis within their community.

One parent commented on the fact that the value of the classes meant that she could afford for her son to attend on a weekly basis, whereas most of the other local activities were very expensive.

The project has to date delivered more than 400 regular dance sessions, to more than 350 residents of East Brighton. More than 70 young people have been given Brighton & Hove Youth Awards for their ongoing participation in weekly sessions and 5 young women have received Bronze, Silver and Gold Duke of Edinburgh Awards. There have been 11 theatre trips for residents to see shows such as Random Dance, Stomp, Bounce, The Cholmondeleys and the Featherstonehaughs and 9 workshops ranging from Contemporary Dance to Bollywood and Hip Hop. 11 young women have been awarded Community Sports Leaders Awards in Dance and more than 140 individuals have performed in dance showcases at local venues.

There has been a 68% increase in the number of individuals who have participated in the project, 369 at the end of 2004, compared to 220 attendees in 2003. These figures consist of residents ranging in ages from 2 – 75 and include young people on referral and residents with physical and learning needs.

The main aims of the project were to combat feelings of isolation amongst residents, improve levels of fitness, self-esteem and motivation, provide opportunities for accreditation for young people outside of formal education, and reduce anti-social behaviour by providing diversionary activity.

The variety of the programme ensures that it is attractive to all members of the community and the delivery is regularly reviewed to ensure that it meets the needs of the participants. The regular sessions are primarily street dance classes with music and movement sessions for Parents & Toddlers, creative dance classes for those with disabilities and break dance classes for the boys.

One parent of a young boy with dyslexia said it was the only after school activity that he enjoyed doing because of the boost that it had given to his self-confidence. All of the freelance workers are carefully selected to ensure that they have the necessary skills not only to deliver quality dance sessions but also to deal with and respond to the varying needs of the client groups that we are working with.

Monitoring of its' success and the impact that dance provision is having on local residents is measured through regular verbal and written evaluation with the participants, funders and workers.

The East Brighton Summer Showcase attracts more than 400 local residents, and workers and is a chance for us to get direct feedback from the community. Feedback forms are issued and the results are then reviewed to assist with forward planning for the project. The responses on some of the questionnaires have demonstrated the value of the programme.

When asked why they thought it was valuable to hold a dance showcase in East Brighton. Some of the responses were as follows:

"Give young people opportunity to develop self confidence and pride."

Female Audience Member, 23

"To boost positive outlooks and help promote healthy lifestyles."

Female Audience Member, 34

The programme works in partnership with local youth centres, youth workers and substance misuse agencies such as R-U Okay and Odyssey, as well as with the Brighton Youth Offending Team and the East Brighton Youth Inclusion Project. The government has identified that diversionary activities such as dance can have a positive impact on reducing crime and disorder, particularly where these problems are associated with alcohol and substance misuse.

One of the key objectives of Positive Futures is to combine diversionary activities for young people with educating them about issues relating to drugs awareness. This work has been extended to the EBDDP and practical dance sessions have been combined with work on substance misuse, smoking, alcohol and in particular sexual health. This is an important factor to the work of the dance programme as many of the benefactors are young women at risk of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

The fact that the dance programme is so attractive to young women is partly what has made this project so successful. The opportunity for becoming involved in sports and other physical activities is far greater for boys and young men. Before the start of the dance classes in East

Brighton there were far less young women attending youth centres because the activities were male dominated, focusing on football, skateboarding and basketball.

Because dance is not a formal sport and can easily be adapted for varying ages, abilities and levels of fitness it has also been very popular with the older residents of East Brighton. A recent government review of the National Service Framework for Older People identifies the need for improving health amongst the elderly. Whilst most of the other provision for older people in East Brighton is either sedentary or requires a moderate level of fitness, dance can be tailored to the needs of the individuals and adapted according to the range of mobility and levels of fitness.

The residents of East Brighton have reported improved joint-mobility, better posture and co-ordination, as well as the benefits of interacting with other residents, meeting new people and keeping their mind and body active.

The opportunity for social interaction as highlighted with the older people's group is also recognised as one of the positive aspects of the programme for young people. Many of the younger participants are hard to reach young people, many of whom are targeted by the Youth Inclusion Project (YIP) as the core 50 'most at risk' young people in East Brighton. Through participating in dance classes at their local youth centres the EBDDP provides a regular point of contact with youth workers as well as the chance to make new friends and access information services and providers such as the Young People's Centre, Connexions and Positive Activities. The East Brighton YIP, has used the experiences of some of their young people who participated in the Hip Hop Summer School as an example of excellent diversionary provision for 'at risk' youngsters.

The young people were all aged between 14 and 16 years old. They had sporadic school attendance and one of the young people had not been in formal education since he was 11. They all had aggressive and volatile tendencies and one had recently given an ASBO for an attack on a fellow pupil. Although these young people had expressed an interest in dance they found it difficult to participate in activities that involved other young people who were not residents from their own estate.

However, with appropriate support from their key workers and the staff of the EBDDP all of them completed the week-long summer school with the Hip Hop Collective, a professional touring company managed by "Independance". More than 60 other young people attended the workshops, and the week culminated in a performance at the Windmill Theatre, performed by the young people and the Hip Hop Collective. All participants received a Silver level Youth Award for their involvement in the project.

Their youth worker said, "It is difficult to measure the total developmental benefits that this one example of the impact of joint working through South East Dance, YIP and Positive Activities for Young People has had on the lives of these young people. However, I believe they have included increased patience, tolerance, motivation, commitment, co-operation, self-awareness, confidence, self-esteem and self-worth."

It is experiences like these that reflect the effectiveness of projects like the EBDDP, where dance or other similar art forms have been used to indirectly combat the issues faced by residents of deprived areas. A concern in an area like East Brighton is obesity.

"The prevalence of obesity in children aged 2-10 years has increased from 9.6% in 1995 to 15.5% in 2002." (Health Survey for England 2002)

Through dance we can involve people in exercise and combat obesity and poor physical health as well as address emotional health, by nurturing creativity, self-confidence, positive body image and feelings of isolation and exclusion.

As we are now approaching the end of this particular project I feel strongly that there should be additional projects set up across the country in similar areas. A potted history of the programme, with feedback from participants and workers is currently being compiled into a 15-minute film called "Dance in East Brighton", which is being made by film-maker Becky Edmunds. This will be used to celebrate the project and advocate for its' value as a community education project with the hope of attracting new funding for the continuation of this work.

At the current time the future of the EBDDP is currently unstable, as the 3-year funding will end in September 2005. South East Dance are looking at ways to utilise the experience that has been accumulated through the project and hope to disseminate these models of working across the

region and nationally, by working in partnership with the agency's Creative Dance Apprenticeships programme.

New funding applications are also being launched to try and ensure long-term sustainability for the East Brighton project and its' participants.

A dance film project with Rosemary Lee is being planned the future, which will integrate the specialism of dance for the camera that South East Dance has forged and build upon the 3 years of community work that should be celebrated in East Brighton.

"I have lots of problems at home and dance is the only thing that keeps me going - so coming to dance helps me to relax and get rid of my worries."

"I feel so happy that I have done it [performed] and feel so proud of myself. It's a great achievement."

Female, 15 community participant with East Brighton Dance Development Programme

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