

# Blackpool Dance Research 2022-23



Blackpool Tower with lights reflected in the sea water on the front.

Rosie Watt

## RESEARCH

Research Question 1: How do communities in Blackpool want to engage with dance?

Research Question 2: Can dance be used as creative expression in Blackpool to tackle multiple disadvantages across the community and make a positive impact?

This research is intended to be a small offering that can be added to by other practitioners and organisations, encouraging a joined-up strategy to bring investment and creativity to Blackpool.

Commissioned by Dance Consortia North West and undertaken by Rosie Watt, a Producer, Fundraiser and Arts Practitioner from Blackpool.

## METHODOLOGY

1. Working with Blackpool & North West based dance artists and organisations to reach the community (Coalesce Dance Theatre, Hannah Dial, House of Wingz)
2. Community consultations via dance and creative workshops, meetings and a Survey Monkey questionnaire for participants
3. Conversations with local cultural organisations and practitioners (The Old Electric, House of Wingz, Blackpool Council, Leftcoast, The Grand Theatre)
4. Conversations with local voluntary organisations (Renaissance, Empowerment Charity, Lancashire Women).

## LEARNING FROM COMMUNITY PARTICIPANTS

87.7% of community participants reached have watched dance before, 10.7% of others who have not seen dance would like to. 71.4% would take part themselves if given the opportunity.

The majority of those reached expressed they had seen ballet (“Sleeping Beauty at the Opera House Blackpool”, “A Russian Ballet Company at a Blackpool Theatre”), and Musicals in Blackpool and London’s West End. Further responses included Hip-hop and Street Dance through House of Wingz artists and productions, seeing dance at local dance school children’s classes or student shows, Strictly Come Dancing on TV, and other one off performances such as Cirque du Soleil, Zonation, and Starstruck by Scottish Ballet.

71.4% of those reached had taken part in a dance class at some point in their life, which was followed by dancing at home (50%), at parties, clubs/bars, and in dance performances. A few also mentioned trying ballroom, lindy-hop and street dance.

We know that community participants have a brilliant response to dance and that dance can make a positive impact on people's lives. Participants said they felt "free", "alive", "happy", "amazing", "energised", "excited", "liberated", "joyful", "good", "carefree and spiritually free", "empowered", it "makes me feel good about myself and I can express my movements", "my body is more capable of things I didn't realise", "I felt relaxed and connected", "it's good to try new things".

A fantastic example of the positive impacts of dance in Blackpool is from Elliot Mather from the Children's Independent Domestic Violence Service at Empowerment Charity. Elliot said that he is "supporting one of the girls who attended on a one to one basis and she was extremely positive about the class. This is great testament to you as she has very low self-esteem and struggles to engage in a lot of our group activities. She also told me that she has made friends with the girl she was paired up with and has been in daily contact since the class. Again, this is excellent, as she has stated beforehand that she struggles to make healthy friendships. She said she would 100% do it again and commented that she thought she would never get up and dance in front of other people."

Furthermore, Coalesce Dance Theatre tell us that though "the students at House of Wingz have an incredibly strong background in hip hop and breaking, the more classically based Contemporary dance styles were a little out of their comfort zone to begin with, but we noticed huge improvements in confidence and drive to learn as we went along." From this we can see even those with more engagement in dance can benefit from trying new styles from new practitioners.

78% participants reached said they would utilise dance to boost their confidence, 72% said they would like to improve their physical health, 58% said they would like to use dance to improve their mental health, make new social connections, to be creative and try something new.

Though dance is making a positive impact here and has the potential to improve people's lives, there was a sense that people are "nervous", underconfident and have a low self-esteem and sometimes "feel embarrassed to do it." Some participants said "it was good to have an introduction to movement in a safe relaxed setting, that is not too daunting full on dance, even Zumba can feel too much sometimes. It was good there were no mirrors." This shows the importance of dance in a safe setting, relaxed classes, slow introductions to movement, and taking time to build trusting relationships.

The styles communities reached most want to try are Ballroom (46%), Street / Urban dance (43%), Creative Choreography (39%), Latin Dance (36%) and Contemporary dance (35%), Modern dance (32%) also dance related exercise

such as Yoga, Pilates, Zumba, Barre (32%). Between 20-30% of people wanted to try African dance and Afro-Diaspora dance, Ballet, Tap, Jazz, Disco, Social dance, and Tik-Tok social media dances.

Lower scoring (10-20%) includes Irish dance, Scottish dance, Flamenco, Northern Soul, Swing dance, Pole Dance, Capoeira, Line Dancing, Drag dance. Lowest votes at under 10% were for Circus/Arco, Folk dance, South Asian dance, Ritual/Spiritual dance, and Butoh. The 'other' category listed one response being Voguing.

The biggest barrier to communities taking part in dance or seeing dance is "not knowing about opportunities in Blackpool" – "I have personally found it hard to find dance classes locally. I'm not saying there aren't many, I just haven't been aware of them." This suggests better marketing and a joined up approach to sharing what's on is needed here. Further key barriers include money/financial barriers and confidence. Other areas include busy life schedules, childcare and family responsibilities, location, discrimination and judgement.

Ideas for dance performances in Blackpool, directly from the community include:

- Fusing street dance with narrative shows like House of Wingz do
- A World Cup final break dance piece
- More ballet
- Lyrical dance
- More hip-hop theatre shows
- More Shakespeare and Gothic
- Contemporary performances
- Variety shows back in the theatres
- Strictly workshops
- Bollywood dancing at a venue in Blackpool and classes at a local studio
- Dance from different countries
- Burlesque
- Ballroom dance
- Flash mob dance at Christmas
- Empowerment for women through dance
- Large musicals old and new
- Things that incorporate the old traditions of Blackpool's heritage with modern interpretations to involve everyone using the beautiful venues
- I love sitting at the Tower Ballroom watching folk dance but I wonder how long that will continue
- I do love ballet but it's expensive
- I miss going dancing in the club of my youth so a chance to get up and dance again without going to a night club would be great

- Blackpool already has many different dance performances
- Something in a shopping centre – something easily accessible
- Anything that’s easily accessible
- There is an obesity issue with children in Blackpool and dance could be a great way to help with positive physical activity that is non-competitive and fun
- Creating a safe space where everyone is supported
- Something that gets folks together
- More Belly dance, spiritual dance
- I do love 5 Rhythms and have tried Lindy Hop but I had to travel to go to this
- A golden opportunity to put something positive in our lives with the grim news of the cost of living crisis

## LEARNING FROM INDUSTRY

Through conversations with industry professionals, artists and organisations some key themes emerged. This included:

1. **Collaboration and sharing resources** – The DCNW was awarded to local Producer, Rosie Watt, but shared to local Blackpool and North West practitioners and organisations. Coalesce Dance Theatre state “This funding has allowed us to deliver our practice in a different town, with new students who don’t always have access to Contemporary Dance. Without this, it would not be possible for us to travel to Blackpool on a weekly basis to deliver these workshops to young people. Sharing resources and funding amongst artists and organisations is a great way for us to connect with new communities. Through this collaborative approach, organisations can work together to provide better provision for young people across the North West.” House of Wingz commented that “The Impact for us is that it has linked us with another dance organisation who have a wonderful energy and whose ways of working complimented our visions and values. It’s opened up new ways of devising for our young dancers and has sparked an interest in another style, they also fed back that it has helped them gain a new awareness of new ways of playing with movement.”
2. **Lack of resources and commissions** – There are willing creatives in Blackpool with the drive to make things happen, but with very few available resources (such as in-kind studio space) and commissions for their independent research and projects. Commissions and support for dance in Blackpool, Priority Places and the North West is vital for artists to survive and develop. These commissions would unlock much needed Arts Council England funding for artists in Blackpool and the surrounding areas, but without these it really is a struggle to compete with other ACE applications from outside the area. ACE suggest having 10% match funding for

applications however in reality artists/companies need much more than this to compete, and ideally confirmed cash match.

3. **Competition and sensitivity** – Artists and companies outside of the region have shown interest in working in Blackpool as it is an Arts Council England Priority Place. Many artists and companies are all trying to survive across the UK and are dynamically responding to the Arts Council England strategy in an increasingly difficult funding climate, post-pandemic and in the midst of a cost of living crisis which is why there is an increased interest in working in Priority Areas. It is really important to be aware, if you are one of the artists or companies coming in from outside of the Priority Area, that local artists who have long term relationships with communities in their hometown cannot access the same commissions, funding and opportunities. Sensitivity is required here as well as making sure to collaborate and get locals involved wherever possible particularly in leadership roles. Practitioners outside of Priority Areas need to consider if it is ethical to work in the Priority Area and if they are genuinely contributing to the local need rather than trying to access funding.
4. **Creative community and local representation** – There are community members already leading creative workshops and have been for years without traditional qualifications and professional accolades, particularly community members connected to voluntary sector organisations. Can we find and involve locals like this in our projects?
5. **Trust & building relationships over time** – It's best to take a fair bit of time to build relationships, safety and trust with partners and communities in Blackpool and other 'Priority Areas' and show long-term investment in these towns. This means being on-the-ground, in person, having conversations with industry and community members, visiting groups and shows, taking part and offering support. For artists and companies developing projects for areas like this, consider how activities can continue beyond the funding so those involved still feel supported and connected.
6. **Access** – Community groups reached via projects in Blackpool, particularly more vulnerable people, will need access provisions to be considered. This includes adapting workshops and movement to be inclusive to all abilities and levels, no mirrors, creating relaxed, safe environments, taking a 'down-to-earth' approach, building relationships over time, and introducing creativity slowly in various ways before going straight into dance and movement which can feel daunting.
7. **Joined-up approach** – The cultural organisations in town have noted there's a need for joined up thinking and planning - The Grand with other cultural organisations in town have formed a cultural strategy group to inform future projects, more independents and the community will feed into this.
8. **Lack of funding / NPOs** – Maturing independent organisations in town are working hard to sustain their venues and organisations but this can be difficult, particularly without NPO funding.

9. **Partnership support** – Local potential partners might be more readily available for projects that tell stories and experiences of people in Blackpool, projects that have a wider benefit to the town such as tourism generated by a festival, making sure projects tie into existing cultural offers such as the Winter Garden's ballroom championship and Lightpool, and projects that commission other local artists and organisations to support the local ecology.

## CONTEXT

Blackpool has been highlighted as an Arts Council England (ACE) Priority Place. Blackpool is a place where investment from ACE has been historically too low and there is a call to change this within the ACE strategy. Investment here has the ability to make a huge impact and help communities thrive through a collaborative approach to culture.

In terms of local statistics, Blackpool unitary authority is ranked as the most deprived lower-tier local authority in England (out of 326) on the 2019 IMD rank, plus seven other measures, including income, health, local concentration and the percentage of people employment deprived.

Further disadvantages include:

- Multiple deprivation & disadvantage
- Highest rate of "Looked after Children's in England – LAC are disproportionately represented in groups of people experiencing problems in life"
- Poor education in Blackpool: Only 1 out of 7 secondary schools judged as 'good' by Ofsted, high levels of exclusion, average reading age of 11 years (including adults)
- Lack of opportunities, employment and low aspirations
- "Overstretched health and social care systems" with lack of capacity to deal with the local mental health crisis, higher suicide rates, and high rates of dependence on antidepressant medication
- Higher levels of drug and alcohol dependency, debt, domestic abuse, larger family sizes, unemployment / low earnings, all affecting family and home life.

Participation in creative and cultural activities can be instrumental in helping people and communities to overcome poverty, social exclusion and health inequalities, "build skills", "improve social mobility" and "solve problems" (European Union, DCMS Commons Committee Inquiry, WHO, The Borgen Project). Therefore, creativity and dance has the ability to make positive change in people's lives in Blackpool and other areas with high rates of disadvantage.

## CONCLUSION

Blackpool and other Priority Places have been identified as a 'priority' due to having a much higher need for investment, opportunity and creativity. We understand that this investment would help people in these areas have a better chance in life.

However, there are still many barriers to developing artistic work and dance in Blackpool and delivering this with communities here. Local Blackpool (and Priority Place) artists have much less access to commissions, resources and support than their counterparts outside of these areas, so they struggle to compete in the Arts Council England application process. This means it's easier for artists and companies outside of the area to come in to deliver projects, whilst developing their own creative practice, networks and artistic works, and as a result, secure more commissions and support whilst local artists are left behind.

Though, it is still important to bring new creative opportunities, resources and funding into these areas from elsewhere, we also need to understand the value of local practitioners and community members who have a long term investment in the area, people and places and how important this is for building trust, safety, genuine connections, simply sharing what's on and making sure people feel it's for them.

External artists and companies should have longer term investment in the area, share resources, collaborate and get locals involved through paid opportunities to train, advocate to the community and lead creative project work for example.

If areas like Blackpool are a 'priority' then commissions, match funding and in-kind available studio space must be provided to local practitioners, and/or the need for match funding needs to be waved for artists based in these areas. Fundraising and producing support would be of benefit to help artists write the applications and understand the ACE strategies when developing project ideas.

It's worth noting that the North West has much less Arts Council England investment than other areas across the North of England. Due to this, the infrastructure for support is much less available in the North West. Investing in the region as a whole has the potential to benefit Priority Areas through more commissions, funding, in-kind space, retaining representative talent and more.

## CONTACT

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