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# Dancing for Well-Being Evaluation Report 2023





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# Introduction

In June 2022 a research team from York St John University conducted a study with members of Dancing for Well-Being groups to assess the impact on older adults of taking part in a weekly dance sessions. The study aimed to identify if the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' framework (Foresight Report 2008, National Economics Forum NEF 2011) mapped across the work of Dancing for Well-Being and to use these guidelines to inform the evaluation of the experience of people who attended regular sessions. It was the first time this framework had been used as an evaluation tool for DWB. As well as providing an evidence base for the future development of DWB, the study outcomes provide data as a foundation for future funding bids and research related to the benefits of dance activities for older people.

## Methodology

The Five Ways to Wellbeing have been used to to promote and maintain positive mental health and the messages developed reflect the types of behaviour that people can undertake to act and engage in living well (NEF 2011). There is agreement in the Foresight Challenge Reports (Huppert 2008) that more work needs to be completed on intervention-based strategies to better understand the effects of activities that aim to improve personal well-being. For this study, we therefore, chose a mixed method approach to gather quantitative and qualitative data based around the five key themes: connecting with others; physical activity; learning; giving and taking notice. Participants in the study completed a short questionnaire and took part in focus groups across seven Dancing for Well-Being groups in the Harrogate district. A total of 50 out of 150 members completed the paper survey (49 female, 1 male, mean age 80.4 years) and 85 took part in focus groups. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The information gathered has enabled us to identify some of the physical, emotional and social outcomes from attending Dancing for Well-Being. From participants' perspectives it is very clear that the vast majority of those attending these sessions have an overwhelmingly positive experience.

# About Dancing for Well-Being

Dancing for Well-Being (DWB) is a Community Interest Company established in 2015 by Jackie Terry-Schumann with the aim of enriching older people's lives through dance. The sessions take place in accessible community venues that members can travel to independently. Some of the key values embedded in DWB's practice and ethos are to have fun whilst participating in something meaningful, stay physically active, enjoy dancing to music, and stay socially connected. These goals also feed into the Government's Ageing Well guidance (Department of Health 2014) and Public Health England's (2017) action plan for 'Productive and Healthy Ageing and Musculoskeletal Health'.

Each group is led by a professional dance facilitator who choreographs dances based on the ethos of Circle dance, a form that derives from traditional folk dances and 'the process of learning movement and positions takes place within a social and cultural context' (Norris 2001, p.111). There is also an assistant facilitator who supports people in the group with specific needs. Participants can sit or stand as they follow movements demonstrated by the facilitator. The dances consist of repetitive patterns of movement dictated by the rhythm and style of music. Dancing for Well-Being facilitators choreograph bespoke dances to a broad range of musical styles from popular music to world music and folk songs.

*"When finding music and choreographing dances we think about what will appeal to members, what will feel good, what will make us laugh, what will lift their spirits, what will be relaxing, what will help us engage with each other, if we'll be able to sing along, what members will manage easily, what may be challenging physically and mentally and stretch them a bit. We also think about trying to make every dance accessible for members with more severe health and mobility problems and interesting/challenging enough for the members who are more mobile and healthy. In the programme of dances at each session we try to ensure we're moving different parts of the body and moving in different planes and directions and at different speeds, so members feel they've moved much more than they do in their daily lives and feel they've done some exercise"* Jackie Terry-Schumann (2023).

The integration and inclusion of people with all levels of mobility is fundamental and there is an emphasis on group dynamic encouraged by dancing in unison, holding hands and sometimes turning to move with a partner. The dances are designed to encourage and increase balance, co-ordination and mobility. Adaptations are always available to suit the varying range of abilities. Swaying, rocking, simple steps into and out of the circle, are all part of the gentle repertoire that emphasises relationship and togetherness. Although the primary aim is not around creativity or individual expression, there are occasions where participants respond in their own way to music using a prop, such as a ribbon sticks or scarves, and here the dances take on a more improvisational nature where physical expression is inherent. Props such as shaker eggs and pompoms are also used in some dances adding and increased sense of rhythm and enjoyment. After one hour of dancing, the group comes together for refreshments and time to chat with one another; a time also to celebrate birthdays and special occasions.



# The Five Ways to Wellbeing

## ○ Connect with other people

Good relationships help build a sense of belonging and self-worth. Connecting with others provides an opportunity to share positive experiences and give or receive emotional support.

## ○ Be physically active

Exercise not only improves physical health and fitness but also causes chemical changes in the brain that help to positively change mood. Setting goals or achieving something that is challenging can also raise self-esteem.

## ○ Keep Learning

Gaining knowledge and understanding can help build a sense of purpose and acquiring new skills gives a sense of achievement. It is particularly important in later years to help maintain brain function.

## ○ Give to others

Acts of giving create a sense of reward, purpose and self-worth. Listening, saying thanks, spending time with others and being linked to a wider community can be incredibly rewarding.

## ○ Take Notice

Being curious, paying attention to the present moment including our thoughts, feelings, bodies and the world around us and taking time to reflect on this helps increase an awareness of self and give perspective on how to approach challenges.



## Five ways to wellbeing

Aked, J. Marks, N. Cordon, C & Thompson, S. (2008)

## 98% agreed that attending Dancing for Well-Being helped them to feel more connected to others

“Companionship” was a frequent response when members were asked what they felt they gained from attending the groups and is one of the most important factors highlighted in the Ageing Well programme:

*‘The influence of social relationships on the risk of death are comparable to other established mortality risk factors such as smoking and alcohol consumption and exceed the influence of physical activity and obesity,’ (Department of Health 2014)*

Dorothy Jerrome suggests that dancing in a circle offers a social situation where ‘dancers make reference to each other and share the experience of movement in unison’ (2002, p168). This not only emphasises an unspoken relationship but also a group solidarity and inter-subjective shared experience that brings heightened awareness of the self and others in the circle.

Findings indicated that connections and friendships were formed in the groups that also existed and continued outside for many of the members. This has been important for people who are new to the area or have experienced life changing events such as the death of a spouse or health conditions.

Laughter appeared to be the most significant connector, and shared moments of laughter were regularly highlighted in the comments and reflected upon in the focus groups.



Example comments from focus group:

A: “I think it’s a happy group don’t you?”

B: “A friendly group”

A: “Definitely”

B: “It’s surprising who you meet..I haven’t seen a lady who doesn’t live that far from me for 20 odd years and she’s suddenly there.”

“Because you can look over there and that person is doing something else and you think ok I’m not the only one”

“Yeah we’ve got older in the lockdown. I don’t think it did anyone any good. But we all know that laughter is very healing and we have lots of laughter here”

# Be Physically Active

## 81% agreed mobility and fitness has improved since starting Dancing for Well-Being

Engaging in physical activity is paramount to ageing well and regular exercise has been linked to improvements in immune function, heart health, mobility and balance. The evidence base supporting the benefits of exercise and dance is well established however, evidence shows that physical inactivity increases with age and there is a shortage of provision for people over the age of 70, so finding a class or activity that offers a suitable level can be a challenge (Biddle 2005, DoH 2014).

At DWB there is a balance between challenge and strain and as everything is done in good humour getting it right is not the most important thing and as one member states “everyone has their own way of getting it right!”.

The joy of dancing was evident in members responses. Music and memories of dancing at other points in their lives gave people a sense of being capable with 100% agreeing they felt a sense of achievement from attending. Many suggested they moved their bodies beyond where they may have expected. In addition to the known physiological benefits, dancing has also been shown to elevate mood and increase self-esteem. When asked “What do you gain from coming to Dancing for Well-Being?” a dominant response related to feeling uplifted and a sense of positivity and enjoyment. These findings are in line with other studies that demonstrated the psychological and physical benefits of dance for older people (Fernández-Argüelles et al., 2015; Hwang & Braun, 2015; X. Liu et al., 2021)



“Dancing takes you back, it brings memories that have been dormant and they come back to you and you think oh we did that at that time”

“Apart from the exercise its also the socialising which is great”

“Its companionship... you’re meeting other people ... you’re getting out”

“ You’re moving parts of your body that you don’t use the rest of the week”

“And your joints feel better for it. When I walk home, I feel better for coming, not so stiff.. because I did when I came.”



## 100% agreed Dancing for Well-Being brought a sense of achievement

Several frameworks have been advanced for capturing the links between ageing, learning, quality of life and wellbeing: active ageing, productive ageing and positive ageing were all designed to counter the observation that as adults age, they disengage from society physically and socially and that, in turn, society withdraws from them (Charles & Carstensen 2010; Gonot-Schoupsinsky, Garip & Sheffield 2022).

Two European Commission (EC 2001, 2006) reports defined lifelong learning as “all learning activity throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective” (EC 2001, p9). Lifelong learning among older adults can advance not only personal wellbeing but that of an entire community, ‘that is, the notion of a locality where people are socially interconnected in healthy and prosperous ways can be fostered by promoting lifelong learning for older adults’ (Merriam & Kee 2014, p 130).

The learning at Dancing for Well-Being goes well beyond the cognitive skills and competencies required to remember a new sequence of dance movements. There is learning through the physical experience of moving in synchronisation with others, which in turn brings self-knowledge and awareness of one's own body and of others in the group. The ability to know one's body, control movement and move in synchronisation with others brings fulfilment, pleasure and a great sense of achievement and, through repetition, the movements become more familiar and dancing them comes with greater ease.



“...well I just love it the dancing...I just love it when I can do it”

“...just exercise and smile and let off a bit of steam as it were”

“...its attractive because you know you've got good music and I find that I do the movements that I know I should do at home but I never do....”

“It doesn't matter that they're older. I think everybody keeps very busy and there [are] all sorts of things that are going on, and perhaps we're a bit slower at doing them so to come out once a week and do exercises especially for us is good”

# Give to others

In the Five Ways to Wellbeing guidelines, giving is defined as ‘doing something nice for a friend or stranger. Thank someone. Smile. Look out as well as in.’ (NEF 2011). It is a difficult concept to measure and the act of attending a group is one example of how somebody may give as they are linking themselves into the wider community. Any kind of social connection that helps people see that their happiness is linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding. Companionship, a shared experience, seeing other people and having fun together were common themes that occurred in the focus groups.

Members were asked if they felt they had opportunities to present ideas for songs or dances to the group leaders. Those who reported improvement in confidence were significantly more likely to present ideas compared to the members who did not report improvement in confidence. This area is worthy of further investigation and links to concepts of belonging and feeling valued, which received a higher percentage of responses in the ‘somewhat’ category than other statements on the questionnaire (see fig 2)

The perception of giving amongst participants appeared to relate to physical acts of giving such as baking cakes for refreshments, bringing in ideas for music and sharing photographs and memories, all of which are encouraged. Acts of kindness, offering a listening ear, transporting neighbours to the sessions, and spending time with other people maybe more subtle definitions of the term but are still considered to provide feelings of self worth and purpose.



“It’s someone to talk to”

“You get support if something has happened or if you’re not very well or if you’ve had a bereavement”

“Its companionship, you’re meeting other people... you’re getting out”

“It’s the sociability that I think is important particularly after with the covid session which I think has not been very helpful to a lot of people so to get together and have a laugh and a chat while you’re dancing is good”



# Take Notice

## ‘Reflecting on your experiences will help you appreciate what matters to you’

(NEF 2011)

The act of noticing, being in the moment, being fully present and aware of self and others in a gentle and accepting way are all principles of mindfulness. Widely documented as good practice in managing stress and reducing anxiety and depression, studies suggest that practicing mindfulness can have positive psychological and physical effects.

The act of dancing, in particular Circle Dancing, has been shown to bring heightened awareness of self and others and that ‘gentle repetitive movements communicate acceptance directly and without words’ (Jerrome 2002, p165 ). Almqvist and Andersson (2019) suggest that the aesthetic experience of dance brings awareness to the non-verbal expressions of others and that seeing, imitating and taking in movements of others requires presence together with emotional connection. In other words, the act of following others and dancing together in a circle formation is constantly an act of noticing and reflection whether that is conscious or unconscious.

What the focus groups in this study worked to do was prompt people to verbalise these reflections. This is not always an easy task, particularly with dance where much of the understanding of what happens is actually embodied knowledge and difficult to articulate. However, this was a useful time for reflection and provided an opportunity for noticing experiences both during sessions and in what is taken away afterwards.



“Dancing for well-being helps with my coordination and keeps your mind active. Also something to look forward to. From other fellow members learn about life from different parts of the UK. All helps to make life a bit more worth while.”

“Well it makes you feel a bit more positive for moving forward”

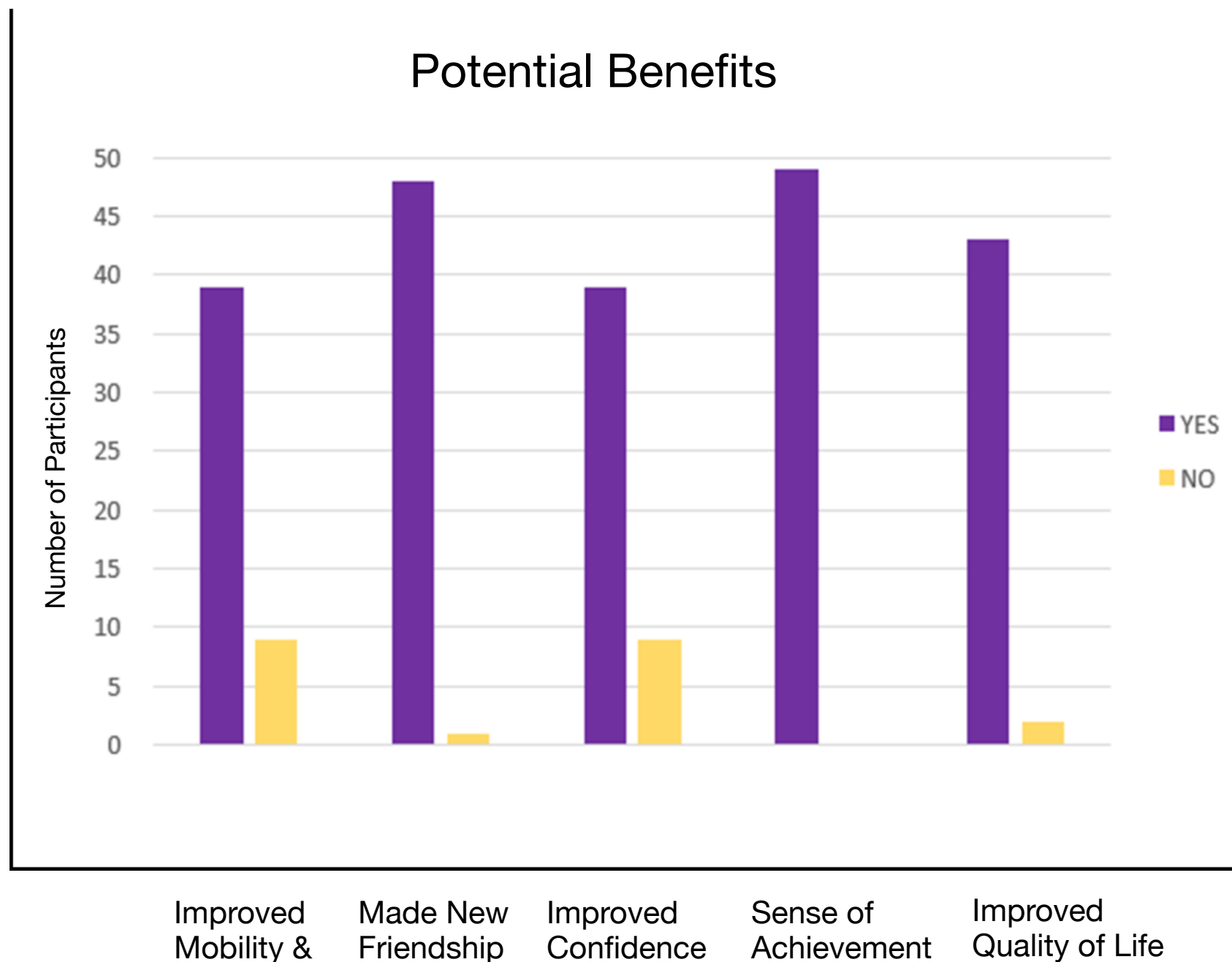
“If you want to live a bit longer then it helps you along the way”

“Makes us happy...makes you feel good on the way home”

“I’m going left when I should be right .....and it makes me laugh at myself and I just... I love it, yeah. I love it. It’s great!”



# Members Views on the Benefits of Dancing for Well-Being



- A total of 50 participants completed the survey (49 female, 1 male; mean age 80.4 years, SD 5.69)
- Data was analysed with descriptive statistics and thematic analyses



Not at all



A Little



Somewhat



A Lot

1. Dancing for Well-Being helps me feel more connected to other people	0%	6%	32%	62%
2. I feel valued at Dancing for Well-Being	0%	10%	26%	64%
3. I enjoy Dancing for Well-Being	0%	0%	8%	92%
4. The music is important at Dancing for Well-Being	0%	0%	6%	94%
5. Dancing for Well-Being helps me forgot my worries	0%	14%	26%	60%
6. Dancing for Well-Being makes me feel physically healthier	0%	10%	30%	60%
7. Dancing for Well-Being improves my mental health	2%	6%	48%	44%
8. I have the opportunity to present ideas to group leaders	9%	15%	47%	29%
9. Dancing for Well-Being offers me the opportunity for self expression and creativity	0%	20%	46%	34%

# Additional Themes

## The Music

“I think it’s the music that is played. We have tunes or songs that people in the group can remember and join in with. I think that helps.”

“you know the one about the coconuts... you know that some fit in with the general age of the people and they know the song and the tune and the words...and they can join in ...and I think the joining in is important”

“You hear old songs and you can dredge them up and know all the words”

“You find when you are at home and a piece of music comes on [we use] your feet are going or something you know you cant keep still that’s how I find it”

“Yeah, movement and music I think really yeah, makes you feel a lot happier really.”





# Summary

In summary, the application of the 5 Ways to Wellbeing provided a useful framework for this evaluation and the data collected has created an informative and detailed overview of the experiences of those who participate regularly in Dancing for Well-Being sessions. The responses from participants who completed the quantitative surveys demonstrated statistically significant positive outcomes in the area of improved quality of life and sense of achievement. The messages identified in the 5 Ways to Wellbeing offered prompts for participants and staff to reflect on aspects of the dance activity that are important to their well-being and connection, laughter and having fun with others were of recurring themes. Some areas of the framework were less easy to explore in this evaluation such as concept of giving to others together and taking notice. The focus groups were able to unpick these areas in more detail and highlighted the different forms and definitions of giving, sharing, being present and reflecting on the activities in a more meaningful way.

Areas that would benefit from further research and evaluation are participants perceptions of creativity and how this might benefit wellbeing as well as a more thorough exploration of dance, self-expression and embodied understanding of self. Since this study the number of male members at the groups has increased and as with other studies around dance participation in older adults, men were underrepresented here so this is another area worthy of further investigation.

Overall, this evaluation indicates that participation in a dance group is effective for maintaining and promoting wellbeing and can improve social determinants of health such as social isolation, lack of physical activity and a reduction in motivation. The Dancing for Well-Being sessions provide a positive experience that offers an appropriate level of physical and cognitive challenge resulting in an overall sense of achievement and enjoyment.

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Dancing for Well-Being

enjoying music, fun and laughter together