

YORKSHIRE
DANCE



Sharing learning: Yorkshire Dance - In Mature Company



In Mature Company, Seacroft Grange. Photo: Aaron Howell

CENTRE FOR
CULTURAL VALUE

Working in partnership with funders to foster learning

“In Mature Company has provided a template for a way of working with funders in the future, a partnership based on open communication and ongoing dialogue... It would be good to see more funders and organisations replicating this approach.”

Rachel Kingdom, Development Manager, Yorkshire Dance

What's the story?

This case study draws on learning that we have acquired through practical experience of developing the project In Mature Company. The company began in September 2018, as part of the city-wide programme Time to Shine, delivered by Leeds Older People's Forum and funded through the National Lottery Community Fund Ageing Better. Through the [‘test and learn’](#) strategy adopted by the Time to Shine programme, Yorkshire Dance has from the outset been able to test new ways of working, to explore, fail, learn and identify what works.

In Mature Company built on Yorkshire Dance's previous work and research with older people - in particular, the three year We Danced project in Sheffield care homes which commissioned academic Lisa Heller to carry out Dementia Care Mapping™ (DCM) as a methodology for examining wellbeing during dance sessions. These DCM trials identified that during moments of hand holding or touch, residents' levels of wellbeing spiked and this significantly informed the development of the research questions and methodology for In Mature Company.

As a Time to Shine project, our research aims for In Mature Company were clear from the outset: to work with care homes to explore the impact of creative dance sessions on reducing social isolation and loneliness for older adults living with dementia. Activity was to be delivered by a team of six dance artists and musicians in nine local care homes across three years. We had three initial research questions:

- Does platonic or emotional touch in dance sessions have an impact on the wellbeing of care home residents?
- How does the frequency of dance sessions increase impact and engagement with people with dementia?
- Is it possible to engage the more socially isolated residents through a ‘pathway approach’ which involved leading them from sessions delivered in their own rooms, to small group sessions and then finally larger group sessions?

As part of the ‘test and learn’ framework, we were encouraged to review our research questions as we went. Initially we planned to tackle each of these questions separately, through different stages of the project. However as we began our first year with the research into touch, we also started to find answers for the other two research areas. For instance, we found that the positive impact on wellbeing that the sessions had on participants began to reduce after the session ended. We could therefore conclude that more frequent creative sessions would benefit all residents, but that the model of delivery might need some thought to take into account financial constraints of most care homes.

The structure we had painstakingly developed in the initial stages of planning was not applicable for every care home. In the original bid we planned to deliver creative activities through a combination of larger groups, smaller groups, and one-to-one sessions. However we realised that establishing smaller groups in some care homes was a challenge. When you're working with care homes that don't have lots of funding for external activities, they understandably want as many residents as they can have in the group sessions, otherwise they feel like they are leaving people out. Luckily, while we had agreed set targets for the number of people we would work with (110 regular participants per year) at the beginning of the project, everything else was flexible. That's the thing that was most important - to give us space to learn and adapt.

Instead of the initial project delivery targets being set in stone at the beginning of the project, the project evolved and adapted to produce more sustainable, and ultimately better outcomes. As we were open and honest with our funders, explaining what had happened and what we proposed to do about it, we were able to continuously adapt and improve our delivery methods and evolve the original three 'test and learn' questions allowing our findings to inform their further development.

In the project's final year (which has been significantly delayed due to Covid-19), we hope to focus our research on how we can make a more collaborative, and more sustainable model for the sector. For instance, delivering more sessions more often is not realistic given the financial constraints of most care homes. We needed the flexibility to adapt the project to overcome barriers and evolve the research and to refocus on the most urgent and pertinent questions, for example: "How can care home staff work with artists within sessions to increase residents' wellbeing?" and "Can care home staff be trained to adopt more creative activities within their day-to-day roles"?

The project team remains in dialogue with Leeds Older People's Forum throughout, meeting quarterly to discuss emerging barriers, learning and future plans. Our Grant Manager has been out to visit the care homes and really understands the project and what it's about. This quarterly reporting includes a mixture of key statistics, such as the number of people we have worked with, but also includes answering more reflective questions about what's worked well and what hasn't worked so well.

Crucially the funders are open to receiving reporting documentation in different formats.

This has allowed us to pursue other ways to share our work and learning, not just through project evaluation but also through artist-led, creative outputs. Kirsty Arnold, one of the In Mature Company dance artists, wrote a rich and reflective piece of writing on the different people she's worked with and how it had felt to be an artist on the programme which we turned it into a film animation. The [Dancing the Small Moments animation series](#) was a way to disseminate our findings in a different format to a written report, which has been watched by over 200,000 people.

What's the learning?

What's striking is the impact the 'test and learn' research approach has had on how our organisation develops community engagement projects. So often fundraising can be disconnected from project delivery and so the project starts to develop once you have the funding. Sometimes the way projects are set up doesn't give much room for testing and learning. You are working towards specific targets you've set. Both the funder and the deliverer need to be open to change as the project develops. In the pandemic, it's been even more important because we have all had to adapt, for obvious reasons.

By embedding and foregrounding learning as a key priority from this early stage of development, you can engage the team a bit more. Overall embedding research in our approach allows for more honest evaluation: internally saying, "this could be a failure – and if it is we're going to learn from it". It's a great attitude to have because you don't have the same failure again and again, there is an internal rigour and analysis: "this hasn't worked – why?" and crucially "what other questions have emerged"? Reporting more regularly has forced us as a team to sit down every three months and analyse the project; we discuss what's working, what isn't working, and monitor our delivery.

While you might not always be in a position to negotiate for more flexibility in your project's deliverables and reporting to funders, for multi-year projects, there should still be some opportunities to build on this collaborative relationship. Of course it does depend on the nature and scale of the funding. It's easy to never really engage grant managers, who might be so time-poor that they only contact you once a year, but I think it's important to be as proactive as you can: for instance, engaging with them more regularly and inviting them into your project to see the work as much as possible.

The ethos and approach of our artistic team is to 'be with' rather than 'do to'. Ultimately to achieve impact it was important the team understood the partner's contexts and took real time to get to know participants, their lives, stories and memories. It's crucial that you don't just think about the needs of your funders but also the needs of your participants, partners and project team. Within a project like this where you need to adapt, respond and work flexibly it's vitally important to create space for everyone in the team to test and learn.



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Additional information

Yorkshire Dance is a dance development organisation, which creates opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to benefit from seeing, making and taking part in high quality contemporary dance. Visit their website for more details: yorkshiredance.com

Programmes Director: Hannah Robertshaw
 Project Manager: Adie Nivison
 Dance Artists: Kirsty Arnold, Ellen Turner, Rachel Clarke, Tora Hed
 Musicians: Will Fletcher, Ozzy Moysey
 Dementia Care Mappers: Lauren Clarke, Lily Craig

For more details on In Mature Company, visit the [project webpage](#). [Watch Dancing the Small Moments film series](#).



*Dancing the Small Moments Still,
Hungry Sanwich Club*

Further reading

- [Time to Shine – Our Evaluation and Learning Approach](#)
- [‘Yorkshire Dance presents’ podcast](#) which covers the Dementia Care Mapping research in more details
- [Research Digest - Culture on Referral](#)

*Case Study provided by Rachel Kingdom, Development Manager, Yorkshire Dance
 (Edited by: Emma McDowell, University of Leeds on behalf of the Centre for Cultural Value)*

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