



CRITICAL MASS: A LEGACY OF MOVEMENT AND INCLUSION

United By 2022 Charity, a legacy of the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, champions the West Midlands by connecting businesses with community groups. Funded by a £5 million investment, it has continued five impactful programmes supporting volunteers, young people, and local grassroots organisations. The charity upskills community groups, enhances their resilience, and focuses on marginalised communities. Through civic engagement and community development, United By 2022 preserves the Games' spirit of pride and inclusivity across the region.

Critical Mass continues as a region-wide inclusive dance programme, offering opportunities for young people aged 5-30, with an emphasis on disability inclusion and cultural sector development.





Sustaining Inclusive Dance in Local Communities

For dance leader Natalie Haslam, the journey began with running two *Critical Mass* dance groups during the Games in Lichfield and Burton-on-Trent. More than a temporary initiative, these groups have continued to thrive beyond the Festival.

"We've kept both of those groups going," she shared. "We run the weekly sessions and have found that project-based working has worked really, really well. The groups value working towards something".

That 'something' often took shape in performances and films—tangible milestones that allowed participants to witness their own growth and celebrate their achievements.

"I think because we've sustained it, it's become something they do and a part of their identity. It's really important for them in their lives".

Emma Bright also shared how *Keep Moving* supported grassroots organisations.

"It highlights what our organisation does on a very grassroots level. We are a dance company, but we specialise in SENDD [Special Educational Needs and Disability Dance]. Seeing those people, who were not dancers, grow has been really important. It's not just about dancing—it's about social interaction, friendships, and self-esteem".

Ruth Pugh, who works with the Black Country *Keep Moving* group, shared a similar sentiment about the programme's long-term impact.

"We work with the Black Country Critical Mass Group in Tipton, bringing together Walsall and the Black Country as one. We started with more dance technique classes, and as more performance opportunities became available, we started working towards them. I reckon we've done about four performances this year alone".

These achievements extended beyond dance, fostering leadership, peer support and personal growth.

"Some of them have really become leaders in the group," Ruth added. Julie Wright explained, "They bring everyone else together and support each other. We've seen huge changes in the level of [peer] support—whether it's helping with choreography or holding someone's hand backstage because they're nervous."

For Clare Wood, *Keep Moving* helped participants challenge themselves in new ways.

"For some of our participants, it's them taking the next step into trying something completely new. So it's that stepping outside of their comfort zone, upping their sense of confidence, and seeing themselves as able to do more".

Expanding Boundaries and Changing Perceptions

For many, *Critical Mass* was an opportunity to challenge societal limitations and redefine what was possible—not just for the dancers, but also for audiences and professional artists.

This was especially evident at Birmingham Weekender 2024, where a collaboration between Linden Dance Company and Stoppap showcased how inclusive dance can challenge expectations. By bringing in diverse guest artists—from commercial voguing to beatboxing—Sara Macqueen and Christopher Radford from Linden Dance encouraged participants to step outside their comfort zones.

“For a lot of our participants, they would never have had the confidence to attend these classes independently,” Sara explained. *“But by introducing these styles in a familiar space, they not only engaged but also redefined their own expectations of what they could do.”*

The performance had an impact far beyond the dancers themselves. One professional artist, after witnessing the piece in the Bullring, admitted to Sara who paraphrased, ***“I didn’t know inclusive dance could look like that. That’s blown my mind. I’d always had an idea of what inclusive dance was supposed to look like, and that wasn’t it. Now I want to learn more.”***

For Ruth Pugh’s group, the opportunity to collaborate also built confidence and strengthened community ties.

“They had the opportunity to rework a piece they created last year. It was great seeing them integrate new people into something they were already familiar with—it built their confidence and allowed them to share their ideas in new ways.”

Similarly, Natalie Haslam saw *Keep Moving* broaden opportunities for her dancers beyond the studio.

“A couple of our Burton group travelled independently by train to watch the Lichfield group perform. They’d never travelled independently on a train before, but because they wanted to see the other group perform, they made a plan to do it. That’s just incredible—it opens up a whole new world for them.”

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Ruth Pugh, Keep Moving Group

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Strengthening Connections Across Communities and the Dance Sector

Beyond artistic expression, *Critical Mass* helped build deep connections within and between communities. In the Black Country, Ruth Pugh and Julie Wright saw firsthand how the programme brought people together.

"It's been amazing to see them connect," Julie noted. *"We used to have a distinct Walsall group and a Dudley group, but now they are one. They're willing to work together, to support each other, and to step out of their comfort zones."*

This sense of community extended beyond dance.

"For some of our participants, this is their only extracurricular activity," Natalie Haslam explained. ***"It's their one thing outside of work or college, and I hate to think what would happen if we weren't here. It makes a real difference to them"***.

This ripple effect extended to families as well. Ruth also noted that the programme helped shift expectations for both participants and their families.

"Sometimes parents would assume their child couldn't do something, but when they try, they surprise everyone—including themselves. It's changed the way some parents view their children's potential".

This was echoed by Rachel Liggitt from Shropshire Inclusive Dance described how seeing their children perform transformed parents and carers.

"Seeing their children on stage, performing with confidence, has been uplifting. For some, it has provided a much-needed break-time to do something for themselves while knowing their child is happy and engaged".

Connections were not limited to communities and their families but have also been seen to grow and develop amongst the wider dance sector across the region. Clare Wood echoed how the programme broadened connections across the region.

"The biggest impact has been knowing each other—who's doing what and a joined-up dance sector across the whole region. For us, in a small rural place, we sometimes don't feel part of the bigger things that happen. But our dancers now feel like they are part of something bigger".

As Rachel Liggitt explains: ***"For some artists, it was their first time working with learning disabled dancers... The biggest impact is a joined-up dance sector across the whole region."***

The Future of Inclusive Dance

Perhaps the most profound impact of *Critical Mass* was on the dance sector itself. The programme helped forge new partnerships, strengthening the infrastructure for inclusive dance in the region.

"It has allowed us to connect with organisations we never would have worked with otherwise," Keep Moving lead from FABRIC Sophie Humphries noted. **"For example, we linked Herwood College with the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry to create a sustainable dance programme. It's about ensuring that these groups continue beyond this funding".**

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However, sustainability remains a pressing concern.

"There is some sustainability work happening, but the masterclasses, in particular, are expensive," Clare Wood admitted. *"They're never going to wash their own face in terms of costs, so securing future funding is a real worry".*

Natalie Haslam echoed this concern.

"Being part of Keep Moving has given us time to apply for funding to keep things going, but it's always a question of what happens next. Without that funding, I don't know if we'd be able to continue at the same scale or ambition".

Despite the uncertainties, the sense of community and commitment among dance leaders remains strong.

"We're not just creating dance opportunities," Sophie Humphries reflected. ***"We are reshaping what inclusion looks like in the sector."***

And as long as there are dance leaders, dancers, and supporters willing to keep moving, that legacy will endure.

