

Animated Article: Developing a regional infrastructure for Dance and Health **Vanessa McGuire- Learning Manager, Dance4**

Background:

Dance4 is a national dance agency based in the East Midlands. We are an organisation interested in supporting artists and practitioners, with a particular focus on challenging the boundaries of dance and performance. Within our artistic and learning programmes, we play a role in improving the health and wellbeing of dance participants. For us, this runs alongside the wider holistic benefits of engaging in creative practice. We work with a range of partners from a variety of sectors to influence and shape dance practice, which at the same time raises the importance and value of movement and creativity within government health agendas. In addition to this, we have also connected with health improvement programmes, GP referral schemes, Healthy Living Centres, Sure Start and health staff training schemes.

A personal journey of developing a Dance and Health infrastructure for the East Midlands

Eight years ago I wouldn't have dreamed that my role as a local community dance practitioner would evolve to become part of the strategic development of dance and health within the region. I was well aware from childhood that there was a strong connection between dance and health, it was not just about the physical benefits, it was about giving me permission to let go, to develop personal identity and connect to other people - a form of communication.

The transition from practitioner to championing dance and health was surprisingly organic 'it just felt right'. Throughout life I've always been pro-active, my philosophy to work is 'let's just get on and do it'. Being employed by Dance4 to, amongst other things, enhance the working relationship with health professionals was an exciting challenge.

Dance seeks to improve an array of health and wellbeing issues, benefits include improving life expectancy, reducing obesity, improving quality of life and enhancing community cohesion, good health is more than not being ill. This has undoubtedly been supported by the substantial media interest that has been generated through programmes such as *'Strictly Come Dancing'* and the recent Foresight report on *Tackling Obesity: Future Choices 2007 'By 2050, Foresight modelling indicates that 60% of adult men, 50% of adult women and about 25% of all children under 16 could be obese'*.

The dance sector can influence health agendas, but this isn't an overnight journey. We've taken time to reach a position of knowledge in this field and it now feels like the right time to consolidate our delivery programmes. In doing so, we hope to contribute significantly to relevant health agendas.

The defining moment of my own personal development was in 2005. One of the first major projects I devised in my new role as Learning Manager at Dance4, was a national dance and health conference. **Advance** attracted a range of delegates; dancers and dance workers, local authority arts development officers, representatives from sports and youth, primary care trusts, arts and health forum members, voluntary sector and older people's groups, arts organisations, and key policy makers. In doing this, we

noticed a critical turning point in people's perception of our role in the dance and health agenda. We were in an exciting position to develop fresh and innovative ways of promoting health to enrich people's lives.

Since the conference our dance and health provision has evolved, making a conscious decision to place strategic development at the heart of our business plan and to really 'get a grip' on who, what and where dance is situated across the relevant associated sectors.

Our role as a national dance agency is more strategically focused on planning, facilitating, supporting and training artists and practitioners however, we feel that without the community engagement, without trying and testing practice, there is little opportunity for us to be at the forefront of creative approaches. One of the programmes we have been responsible for devising and delivering is the Newstead Healthy Living programme *Young@Heart*. This partnership with the Nurse Practitioner Service provides a dance referral programme for older people in the village. In 2006 the group received an award for the 'best partnership' through the East Midlands Public Health group. An Evaluation report is shortly to be released, written by researchers from the School of Nursing at the University of Nottingham.

Young@Heart gives us the opportunity to be at the forefront of dance and health delivery, however it is also important that we recognise and work with the array of arts and health providers within local communities.

There are examples of pioneering programmes within the East Midlands including:

Leicester Comedy Festival: The hosts for the Arts and Health initiative funded through ACE and DoH, providing networks, newsletters and working closely with the regions' partners to gain greater working partnerships within the Health sector.

Lincolnshire Dance: Deliver an older people's programme 'Freedom In Dance' which includes an accredited course, networking events, managed programmes of work and profile raising 'road shows'.

Derby Dance: Work with The Revive Healthy Living Centre in Chaddesden. Running dance/physical activity workshops at Revive, for a girls group aged 7-11yrs. The Revive Centre has a designated Physical Activity Officer and a purpose built Physical Activity Space

Understanding the Health sector has certainly been a learning exercise; raising several questions about how the arts is portrayed within other sectors. As quoted in Culture East Midlands- Culture and wellbeing document 2006 *'Health agencies need to understand how culture shapes users' concepts of well-being and their lifestyle choices'*.

Dance4 is closely networked across many sectors, including a close engagement with the Obesity and Physical Activity agenda, through the Department of Health East Midlands, advocating for a major role in the development of physical activity frameworks and supporting the development of the 2012 health legacy. Conversely there is significant work taking place within the East Midlands, not necessarily through the arts sector, and it's becoming more evident that there are workers from sport and health delivering their own programmes of dance with little or no dialogue with the dance

providers in their areas. It is essential that we strive to enhance these working relationships.

The health service provides a range of high profiled conferences, unified training packages, setting benchmarks, constant evaluation mechanisms and social marketing campaigns. Although we are fully aware that funding sources differ for the arts, there is still a need to 'step up our game' if we want to be considered a valued partner.

So what's happening? The East Midlands Dance Strategy Group (EMDSG) of which we are part of (alongside the region's Dance Agencies) is working collectively with representatives from the health sector to find a unified working approach, one that is taken seriously, measures quantitative and qualitative outcomes and is aligned to relevant health agendas. Regional and county networks are emerging with representatives from the EMDSG including: Community Sports Networks, Physical Activity and Obesity Networks, working cohesively to create local community activities. We continue to work at a regional level, writing a regional dance development plan for young people, convincing health professionals of the benefits of dance and pushing government agendas on the impact that dance can play on health and wellbeing. Call me an optimist, but it's only a matter of time before the position of dance is placed firmly within the health sectors provision.