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ACCESS CROYDON

TESTING APPROACHES THAT BROADEN ACCESS TO
CONTEMPORARY DANCE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
IN THE LONDON BOROUGH OF CROYDON



1. Project Summary

Access Croydon was a dance development project led by Dance Umbrella between April 2018 and October 2019 in the London borough of Croydon. Built on the basis that children and young people are the audiences of today as well as tomorrow, and that dance has the potential to excite, engage and enable new ways of seeing the world, the focus of Access Croydon was to test approaches to broadening access to dance for young people in the borough.

Aims

- To give young people in Croydon opportunities to experience high quality contemporary dance
- To help develop and connect the dance community in Croydon
- To test ways to overcome barriers of attendance for young people
- To build audiences for contemporary dance performance in Croydon
- To offer creative development opportunities for young people

A range of participatory activities, performances and events were programmed to accomplish these aims including:

- *DU: Fairfield Takeover*: a two-day event at Fairfield Halls in which audiences could watch and participate in high-quality contemporary dance
- *DanceStory*: a performed lecture introducing new audiences to the history of contemporary dance, which you can watch in full [here](#)
- *Girls in Front*: a long-term dance participation project for girls aged 11-18 years which aimed to empower them, build confidence and make new friends through dance
- *Assemble*: a dance and music project delivered in partnership with Drum the Base, to create new collaborative performance work by young artists
- *Dance Festival Croydon*: a long-term dance audience and participation development project in partnership with Beeja, including *Next Level*, a choreographic mentorship for emerging young artists

Further information can be found in Appendix 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our evaluation was designed using a behaviour change model (Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB); Ajzen, 1985). Data was collected from participants throughout the project to track changes of behaviour in relation to dance participation and/or watching dance. We used a variety of methods including focus group discussions, one-to-one interviews and questionnaires with participants and audience members. Data was thematically analysed during the project, with findings interpreted using TPB. These findings informed decision making during the life of Access Croydon. Dance Umbrella learning was documented using reflective approaches, facilitated by an external evaluator, either as one-to-one conversations or through online blogging. Learning posts can be found at: danceumbrellaaccesscroydon.wordpress.com/blog/

Summary of Numerical Outputs

- 3539 people reached
- 2806 people saw dance as part of Access Croydon
- 733 people participated in dance as part of Access Croydon
- 1150 attendances were recorded as part of Access Croydon

2. Project Outcomes for Dance Umbrella

The following themes describe the outcomes we have learned through Access Croydon in broadening access to contemporary dance.

Working in Partnership

Partnership working was intrinsic to the viability of Access Croydon and will continue to be a key principle in establishing new audiences for us in future. In Croydon building one-to-one partnerships was a priority, especially amongst independent artists and educators with whom we wanted to create participatory projects and events. Being able to draw on their local experience and connections in reaching children and young people was critical. These partnerships took time to nurture and grow, and this will be factored into future planning. Additionally, ensuring that networks remain broad and connections are made with more than one person in any single organisations, is crucial to the long-term sustainability of relationships and activity in Croydon, and no doubt for future partners.

Barriers

The main barriers which preclude participants from attending are time (for many, managing homework demands and other activities in conjunction with hobbies was difficult for adolescents), money (when activities have a cost) and travel connections (Croydon is a large borough with poor transport links - getting to sessions after school is impossible for some). Other barriers included lack of understanding of what contemporary dance is and a preference for urban dance styles. As one participant explained, "contemporary dance has an image problem." Lastly, getting information about dance opportunities out to children and young people and their carers proved to be difficult.

Engagement Strategies

Barriers were addressed by keeping participatory activities free, and during the *DU: Fairfield Takeover* only four events were ticketed. We designed activities in different ways and times (regular classes, holiday and weekend workshops, intensive residencies) and placed activity in various locations around the borough to tackle geographical barriers. Consulting with young people helped ensure that our work was responsive, relevant and wanted, and included a range of different opportunities to make dance, learn new skills, learn about the context of dance, perform and watch others perform – all of which allowed them to access dance in different ways appropriate for them. We have learnt that providing a broad offer of participatory and audience opportunities at various times of year, in numerous places and with diverse choices about how to attend helps young people to access dance.

Understanding people and working in a person-centred way has been the most significant learning outcome of Access Croydon and acts as a thematic thread through our findings. By working in partnership we were able to capitalise on existing networks, raise our local profile and become more visible in the locality. This approach led to new projects emerging in response to need, a coming together of ideas and the drawing in of new audiences to Dance Umbrella from pre-existing communities and groups. In Croydon, the importance of 'local' was key. Working with local dance artists and organisations brought about support from the local community because the work had relevance to them. Audiences wanted to support what they perceived as local arts provision and home-grown talent, and this helped our visibility amongst people in the borough. We have learnt that having professional dance artists and musicians (also locally-based) leading projects brings aspirational role models into young people's lives, demystifying and educating them about the arts, as well as broadening horizons and awareness more holistically. The workshop leaders' responsive approaches included adjusting the level of sessions to the ability of participants and being responsive to the learning journeys that the young people were on – whilst simultaneously having the highest expectations of them. Exposure to national and international dance companies also contributed to broadening beneficiaries' horizons.

Initiating and maintaining participation at weekly classes was our greatest challenge; shorter term residencies and projects were more successful in terms of engaging young people, especially when external goals such as a qualification or performance were added into the learning experience. Furthermore, marketing strategies continued to be a testing ground for us. We learned that beneficiaries access information in many different ways, such as online or print materials, but that word of mouth is the strongest marketing tool for events and activities. Exploiting local networks using social media, education forums, parent-mail and local events' websites also helped us widen our reach. Maintaining connections with carers such as teachers and parents as a way of influencing children and young people's behaviour was also important, as was visibility in the community.

3. Project Outcomes for Beneficiaries

The people who benefitted from Access Croydon represented local and national audiences and participants. 82% lived in south London, representing socio-economically diverse areas typical of the Croydon locality. 57% identified as Black, Asian or Minority Ethnicities (BAME), Croydon's population is the most ethnically diverse of London boroughs, with approximately 50% of people identifying as BAME. 37% of those reached were children and young people aged 25 years and under. We were thrilled that 17 young people completed the Level 1 Dance Leadership Qualification through *Girls in Front*. More detailed information about the people Dance Umbrella reached is available in the Appendix 2, pp 4-5 and some anecdotal feedback for *DanceStory* can be found [here](#).

The following themes were factors which enabled children and young people to overcome the barriers preventing access to contemporary dance performance and participation.

Changing Behaviours

Our statistical analysis suggests that Access Croydon audiences and participants intended to change their behaviours in relation to dance. We asked participants and audiences about their existing dance attendance patterns and whether, as a result of seeing dance, or participating in dance with Dance Umbrella, they were likely to come again. 51% were new to dance/Dance Umbrella and 89% intended to continue to be involved in dance either as an audience member and/or participant. *Dance Festival Croydon* audiences grew by 240% over the course of four events. Young participants felt that experiencing dance changed their perceptions of it, meaning they were more likely to return. Having an end goal such as a performance or qualification aided commitment amongst young participants.

Social Connections

Participants in *Assemble* and *Girls in Front* identified that friendships were important outcomes from their participation. A broad community which was socially connected emerged from both projects to include participants, artists and organisers. An *Assemble* participant explained, "*I have found my tribe, and that includes Jose and Shri [the professional local artists leading project]. I've felt heard and valued in this project by them and everyone here.*" The community which developed allowed participants to begin to know each other, and realise their own and others' strengths. The social connections that the participants built became vital motivators in attending. Social connections were also important in encouraging audiences to attend *Dance Festival Croydon* events and the *DU: Fairfield Takeover*, often coming to support performers or organisers, or attending with friends.

Demystifying Dance

Audiences and participants throughout Access Croydon and *DU: Fairfield Takeover* in particular, said how seeing and/or participating in contemporary dance demystified it. This included developing knowledge and understanding of dance movements, vocabulary and language, and being able to create new dance in practical classes. *DanceStory* has been a significant contributor in helping audiences know more about the history of contemporary dance, how it emerged, what it looks like and who the key protagonists are. A wider education was also evident amongst beneficiaries. *DanceStory* audiences remarked on the role of

women in the development of contemporary dance. In other initiatives, *Next Level* choreographers learnt about the practicalities of making work outside the studio, whereas *Assemble* participants revealed the emergence of personal values through their participation, including tolerance and respect of others, and the realisation of their own identity of which music and dance were a part.

Developing Civic Pride

DU: Fairfield Takeover audiences attended because of their loyalty to supporting local activities, and a belief in building and contributing to their local community and its artistic capital. They felt that through supporting events like *DU: Fairfield Takeover*, cultural activities were more likely to thrive. They were proud that Croydon was a destination for dance work of this scale and quality. Audiences commented on the pride they experienced in watching young people perform, valuing their perseverance to create high quality art on their own terms.

Building Confidence

Participants of *Girls in Front*, *Assemble*, *Next Level* and *DU: Fairfield Takeover* identified an increase in confidence as a key outcome from dancing. *Girls in Front* participants said that dance classes were safe, inclusive spaces, welcoming of difference. One girl found *Girls in Front* “really reassuring, I can just be myself.” Another felt that she had found her “voice.”

4. Next Steps

The Access Croydon approach has promise and aspects of the project have worked well in broadening access to contemporary dance for young people. Working in partnership to provide high-quality specialist dance artists with skills in working with children and young people, co-designing project content, devising goals and activities to work towards, as well as providing links to the professional dance sector are tangible ways in which Dance Umbrella can better support locally-grown initiatives.

The exploratory focus of Access Croydon has also allowed us to be open-minded and confident in changing our planning if necessary to adapt to new environments, people and opportunities that arise whilst maintaining focus on the aims of our work. The model of Access Croydon will be taken to Hounslow, starting with a smaller takeover and participatory projects in 2020, with a view to developing a larger-scale offer in 2021. Some strands of Access Croydon will be echoed there. *DanceStory* has been a successful performance and education model in helping us to achieve our aims with a wide variety of people and it will tour to other London boroughs. We will also continue to focus on dance activity for young girls.

We plan to retain a presence in the borough through our partnership with Croydon Council who are bidding to become London Borough for Culture in 2023. Our plans include continuing our partnership with Fairfield Halls by touring dance work with wraparound activity for the under 5s and their families as part of DU’s Orbital London Tour 2020. In addition DU’s Artistic Director and CEO is part of the new Fairfield Advisory Board looking at future programmes. We will also work towards a large-scale event in the borough in 2023 with an ongoing presence during the intervening years. We are a consortium partner in Croydon Creative Collective, supporting activity to increase young people’s access to performing arts opportunities until 2022, and will continue to nurture our relationship with Beeja through *Dance Festival Croydon* in order to broaden access to dance and continue to build and sustain dance audiences for the future.

“Access Croydon has been a milestone for us in terms of the depth and breadth of our learning work. For the first time that learning has taken place over an extended period, and then been fully aligned and combined with DU’s artistic programme. The result has been genuine participation with Croydon audiences and groups that we hope opens new doors for them, and certainly creates new frames for us with regards to choreographic place-making”

Emma Gladstone, Artistic Director & CEO, Dance Umbrella