Improvising Generations

Evaluation Report
Spring 2021

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Forming Connections

On an empty floor
We came together.
We formed connections,
Emerging from the shadows
Into the spotlight.
We lost our inhibitions
And blossomed to find infinite pathways
Thereby building a safe space
In which to pursue our desire to
BEEE Creative through dance.

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Executive Summary

Improvising Generations

What was the project about?
Improvising Generations was an intergenerational dance and music project led by BEEE Creative with Hertfordshire Music Service between January 2019 and June 2021, bringing young people and adults together. The focus was on helping people overcome loneliness and social isolation by offering group activities to socialise with others and exercise and create dance, music and film work together; and outdoor events at sites across Hertfordshire, to engage communities with local green spaces.

What did we aim to do?
Improvising Generations was driven by the positive impact that dance and music, combined with working outdoors can have on people's social, physical and psychological health and wellbeing. The project aimed to challenge inequalities to cultural access and tackle issues of loneliness. In evaluating Improvising Generations 2019 - 2021, we aimed to find out whether participating in an intergenerational dance and music project can reduce perceptions of loneliness and improve participants' subjective wellbeing; and explore how intergenerational dance and music making and being outside can build positive connections amongst participants and contribute to their positive subjective wellbeing.

What was the impact of our work on participants?
As a project, Improvising Generations reduced feelings of loneliness through short-and longer-term participation and, despite the challenges of a global pandemic, helped to ensure that the frequency with which loneliness is experienced did not increase. The project positively contributed to participants' subjective wellbeing, helping them to feel good and function well across both short- and longer-term participation.

Participants reported that Improvising Generations provided a sense of belonging, aiding their motivation and commitment to continue to attend because of their perceived responsibilities to others. Whilst asking some participants to step outside their comfort zone, being outside offered many a sense of achievement, contributing to perceptions of improved mental health. In producing work for others to see, participants also described their pride in what they had done; being seen by others was a point of significance in participants' and artists' evaluations. Learning new technological skills was a real delight to many, as something they never would have encountered were it not for Improvising Generations and need to transfer the project using online tools. Overall, the project brought "more colour" to people's lives and as a result, participants and artists alike expressed gratitude in having such an opportunity to make art and be together.

What did we learn artistically and as an organisation?
Organisationally, we learnt about the importance of adapting to the context we find ourselves in as agilely as possible, to trust our creative instincts to support people's engagement with what we offer. Overall, we noticed that it is difficult to identify lonely people and that, in widening participation for this project and removing barriers to help them take part, we need to be responsive to the individual's needs. Simple acts such as touching base with people, welcoming participants in before we start dancing and making music together are key drivers in this practice. This has also meant that we have diversified our offer significantly, to include a blend of face-to-face and online participation opportunities, sending out activity packs, encouraging painting, drawing, writing, photography and filming activities and ensuring that opportunities to drink tea and eat cake are always included!

Artistically, the basis of improvisation is important as it offers an opportunity for people to be met where they are at. And yet for many, improvisation is daunting, and so through this project, we were reminded of the importance of clearly articulating the working process throughout, to take small steps, and logically progress tasks to help new participants grow in confidence. The combination of live music and dance was vital in glueing people together. There came about a unifying objective, where everyone could contribute. Building connections between people seemed to occur when participants were authentically responsive to one another through their different artistic mediums. Improvisation helped participants to be in the moment and to respond to changes as they occurred, and we conclude, has the potential to bring very different people together equitably.

Improvising Generations

Improvising Generations was an intergenerational dance and music project led by BEEE Creative with Hertfordshire Music Service between January 2019 and June 2021, bringing young people and adults together in Hertfordshire arts venues and outdoor spaces. The focus of Improvising Generations was on helping people overcome loneliness and social isolation by offering:

- Group activities for people to come together to socialise with others, exercise and create dance, music and film work together.
- Outdoor events at sites across Hertfordshire, to engage communities with local green spaces.

The project was evaluated to explore the impact that participatory dance and music activity, combined with working outdoors, can have on people's social and personal health and well-being, with a particular focus on tackling loneliness. The aim of Improvising Generations was to use dance, live music, film and outdoors spaces as tools to inspire and motivate individuals to connect with other people in new ways. The anticipated impact of Improvising Generations was that a community of artistically engaged people could be built, who perceived that they had agency over their individual and collective ownership of local heritage in local spaces and in so doing, could bring about a sense of belonging and connectedness. It was anticipated that by engaging in dance and music in this way, participants' perceptions of loneliness could be reduced.

A specific focus of the project was on engaging vulnerable young people and older adults who may be at risk of experiencing loneliness, by removing barriers to their access of dance, physical and cultural activities, and in turn, enhance their wellbeing. This evaluation focuses on activity occurring between January 2019 and December 2020, although attendance and participatory data is included until March 2021. The project itself is due to run until June 2021, at the time of writing.

It's important to read this evaluation report in conjunction with the films and projects produced as part of the Improvising Generations. Links to these can be found on the next page.

Film and Documentation

A number of outputs have emerged from Improvising Generations, three films from project residencies early in the project, a film which was devised as part of the online provision during the COVID-19 pandemic, and an evaluative e-book which captured participants' creative responses as to why Improvising Generations was an important part of their lives. A final documentary which captures participants' evaluative comments should be viewed alongside this document. It can be found here: https://vimeo.com/533583738

https://vimeo.com/325148649

https://vimeo.com/366708898

https://vimeo.com/399185030

https://vimeo.com/458942050

https://vimeo.com/440736134

Cassiobury Park
A film introducing the principles of Improvising Generations, ways of working and the impact that the project has on participants' lives. Filmed in Cassiobury Park in Watford in February 2019 over a 4-day period. Produced by Think About It Films.

Hampson Park
Using the theme of play, participants worked over a 3-day period at Hampson Park Community Centre in Stevenage in July 2019. Although much of the process of this project happened outside, the film is filmed indoors due to the summer heat at the time. Filmed by Dominique Rivoal and Claire Loussouarn.

The Box Moor Trust
Using wool and walking outside to inspire movement and music ideas, this film was created during a 3-day project at The Box Moor Trust in Hemel Hempstead in January 2020. Again, outdoor walks informed the process of making this piece, however all filming took place indoors due to inclement weather and equity of access to outside spaces for all participants. Filmed by Dominique Rivoal and Claire Loussouarn.

Play
Commissioned as part of BEEE Creative's #TAG project, created by Improvising Generations' participants on Zoom and personal devices.

Participants shared their childhood stories of play and imagination from train sets and action man, to climbing trees, hopscotch, sand castles and make-believe worlds. That sense of play can get lost, but how then can we recapture an element of fun and silliness in our lives? Funded by Arts Council England. Filmed by Dominique Rivoal and Claire Loussouarn.

E-Book
Undeterred by the COVID-19 pandemic, we brought our project online in April 2020, building connections with each other through monthly afternoon tea meetings and dance workshops to chat and socialise, dance together again, take photographs, write poems and stories about how dance and music makes us feel and make short dance films, even when we weren't able to physically be together. This book documents participants' photographic, poetic and danced responses to how dance and music makes them feel. Compiled by Elsa Urmston.

The Project

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Project Aims

Improvising Generations was driven by the belief in the positive impact that dance and music engagement, combined with working outdoors can have on people's social, physical and psychological health and wellbeing. Previously piloted as an arts and wellbeing project in 2017 and 2018, Improvising Generations evaluation findings from that time pointed to the importance placed by participants on the connections they made with other people, particularly those who came from different backgrounds to themselves. Meeting and socialising with others and creating new friendships through a common interest were reported as the best things about the project by those that took part.

Building on this evidence, the project aimed to challenge inequalities to cultural access and in so doing, tackle issues of loneliness.

In evaluating Improvising Generations 2019 - 2021, we aimed to find out:

- whether participating in an intergenerational dance and music project can reduce perceptions of loneliness and improve participants' subjective wellbeing.

- how intergenerational dance and music making and being outside can build positive connections amongst participants and contribute to their positive subjective wellbeing.

BEEE Creative CIO

BEEE Creative is a small arts charity working across Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. We connect artists, practitioners and cross-sector partners to optimise opportunities for people to access and enjoy the benefits of dance. Our work reaches a broad demographic with participants ranging in age from a few weeks old to 100+ years old and includes people living with disabilities, long term health conditions, mental health conditions or sensory impairments.

BEEE Creative devises and delivers bespoke projects that identify and address barriers to participation to meet the needs of local communities including structural inequalities such as socio-economic disadvantage. Additionally, we service the dance sector as a whole at a local level by supporting, developing and investing in local artists, interns, volunteers and county initiatives, encouraging new collaborations, and co-ordinating and sharing good practice. We build strong artist networks, enable interns to progress their dance careers and engage with schools, museums, local councils, organisations, cultural venues and community groups through activities inspired by dance.

BEEE Creative works within communities to bring their unique and moving stories to life by co-creating dance with participants that showcases the diverse experiences and achievements of local people. It is important to us that our participants' voices and contributions are heard and valued.

The Creative Team

Carrie Washington
Carrie Washington is the Director of BEEE Creative. She is a professionally trained dancer (English National Ballet School, Middlesex University and University of Bedfordshire) and has worked for twenty-three years in the dance sector, including dance teaching and management roles (Rambert Dance Company, dancedigital and others). Carrie is also a visiting lecturer at Middlesex University and Trinity Laban.

Laura Chiabolotti
Laura Chiabolotti is a dance artist and dance movement psychotherapist, working with people of different ages, needs and abilities. Her creative work brings together her experience as a performer, and her training and interest in psychological and social phenomena, and is supported by somatic, improvisational, site-specific and interdisciplinary practices.

Matt Smith
Matt Smith is a flutist and composer whose works are published by United Music Publishing (UMP) and Trinity College London. His music is performed around the world as part of CD recordings, recitals and exams.

Hannah Delaney
Hannah Delaney is a professionally trained dancer (University of Chichester, mapdance), working freelance in performance, teaching and project management roles (BEEE Creative, Emily O'Shea Company, Springs Dance Company, Dance Equation and others). She is the Project Management Assistant and Artist Facilitator for BEEE Creative.

Project Design

Initial project design

The initial project design had two core delivery strands, combining regular monthly Sunday workshops to work with a group of participants on an ongoing basis, and six 4-day project residencies to reach new participants and create short films from the process. Participants could take part in the project as dancers or musicians, although for some, these roles did cross over. Musicians usually joined in physical warm ups and some of the movement-based creative tasks as well.

Strategic adaptations to project design

After the second project residency in July 2019, it became clear that the project overall was successfully cementing relationships between participants who already attended dance workshops with BEEE Creative. Whilst the work was hugely beneficial for them to feel connected with one another, we wanted to reach people at risk of loneliness that we didn't already know. Small numbers of new participants signed up to join in the project, but the challenge was sustaining their participation, with over 50% of participants who signed up failing to attend at all. It became clear that having an existing link to the people involved in the project or BEEE Creative as an organisation was key in helping new participants continue to attend. In order to widen participation and sustain attendance, project residencies were initially shortened in length to free-up resources for targeted residencies, with the aim of reaching new participants by building connections with people before they joined any core activity. After February 2020, project residencies were halted and we removed the explicit focus on making short films. Instead, we worked in partnership with other community organisations, planning to work in participants' own community context to build trust, confidence and experience in our ways of working. As discussed below, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted face-to-face delivery with all participants; we were unable to meet new targeted residency participants before the first lockdown, except for four workshops with participants at Redbourn Care Group in late February and early March 2020. Other targeted residencies began in October 2020. Much of this later work happened outside, allowing us to protect public health and relate back to the original aims of the project in appreciating nature and connecting people to the outdoors. Although delivery was not consistent due to local and national lockdown measures during the Autumn 2020 period, by switching to a targeted residency approach, we have seen nine people who attended targeted residencies then transfer to regular group sessions with the core group of participants.

Contextual adaptations to project design

The COVID-19 pandemic meant a significant re-design of the project was required, following the suspension of face-to-face activity due to lockdown and physical distancing. We began monthly online afternoon tea meet-ups by using Zoom. In order to ensure access for as wide a group of people as possible, we were able to support participants in using Zoom, helping them with the platform's functionality and to join meetings using whatever device they owned. With this approach, we were able to sustain over 75% of our existing participants' engagement. We maintained offline communication with participants unable to join sessions via Zoom, making regular telephone calls to simply say hello and check in, and sending activity packs to all participants to dip into when they wished. We also began a Postcard Pen Pals initiative in the second lockdown (November 2020), to encourage participants to be in touch with each other in non-digital ways and this has since developed to include students at Middlesex University, diversifying those involved in the project and building intergenerational connections amongst participants with new people. Regular communication with and amongst participants unable to take part during the pandemic has been a crucial aspect of building and sustaining connections.

During the first and second lockdown periods, we continued the artistic aspects of our work with participants, increasing online delivery to weekly sessions for June and July 2020, and November 2020, alternating social online get-togethers and dance workshops, and setting tasks for participants to complete outside of the workshops and share with the group. We created an e-book which documented the participants' perceptions of participating in Improvising Generations during a time when we could not physically be together. We also made a dance film as part of a wider Arts Council England-funded project, taking creative advantage of the opportunities that the cameras on participants' devices could provide, as well as Zoom itself, in supporting participants' creative engagement with the original aims of the project. The focus was on sustaining connections amongst participants by providing a sense of purpose at a time when physically being together was impossible.

As lockdown restrictions eased, we sought to work face to face with participants in COVID-secure ways wherever possible. Throughout, our emphasis has been on agilely moving between face-to-face, online and offline delivery of Improvising Generations since the start of the pandemic, being responsive to the associated restrictions which protect public health, with the aim of lessening the pandemic's negative effects on participants' feelings of loneliness and subjective wellbeing. A timeline of events is shown on the next page.

Project Timeline

February 2019 to December 2020

February 2019

- Monthly workshops begin, alternating between Trestle Arts Base in St Albans and Mid Herts Centre for Music and Arts in Hatfield.
  These continued for the duration of the project until December 2020, increasing in frequency during the COVID-19 pandemic to fortnightly and weekly sessions in response to participants' desire for connection and maintaining momentum in artistic delivery.
- 4-day residency at Cassiobury Park in Watford.

July 2019

- 3-day residency at Hampson Park in Stevenage

September 2019

- Emphasis placed on widening participation by working in partnership with community organisations

February 2020

- 3-day residency at The Box Moor Trust in Hemel Hempstead
- Targeted residency with Redbourn Care Group begins, but is cut short because of the lockdown associated with the COVID-19 pandemic

April 2020

- Delivery moves online for all participants in response to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Activity packs sent to participants for continued engagement during lockdown

October 2020

- Targeted dance residencies begin with partnerships forged at the start of 2020 at Priory Memorial Gardens, Royston, MIND in Mid Herts, Stevenage and Manor House Playing Fields, Abbots Langley
- Targeted music residency at Sir John Lawes School
- Regular monthly workshops resume face to face for smaller groups of participants for shorter time periods in line with COVID-19 safety guidelines

November 2020

- Delivery returns to solely online weekly delivery due to second national lockdown

December 2020

- Online delivery continues for monthly workshop participants
- Face to face delivery able to resume for targeted residencies and regular monthly workshops in line with COVID-19 safety guidelines

Evaluation Design

The evaluation design is largely grounded in an interpretive methodology, combining mixed methods of data collection.

Demographic Data Collection

Participants' demographic data was sought when they joined the project. This related to personal characteristics such as date of birth, gender, ethnicity, whether participants considered themselves disabled, their employment and educational status, postcode and whether they had encountered BEEE Creative's work before. Participants were also asked about their previous experience, physical activity levels and the kinds of physical activity they did, as well as their attendance at cultural events.

When working in partnership with community organisations, it was sometimes not possible to collect participants' demographic data as recruitment for participants was carried out by the partner organisation. Personal data remained with the partner and, due to GDPR legislation could not be passed on to us for analysis.

Therefore, not every participant is represented in the demographic data presented here; nevertheless, the sample is broadly representative of those attending the project.

Qualitative

Qualitative data was collected in a variety of formats. Focus group discussions and interviews were held with participants, as well as all members of the creative team at regular intervals during the project. A variety of strategies were used to encourage the participants to reflect on their experiences including semi-structured interview questions and stimulated recall interviews using film and found items from outdoor walks to encourage discussion. Artists also completed regular reflective journal entries usually as audio-recorded voice notes or as written email notes. Observations of live sessions and discussions during sessions also contributed to the data collected.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we continued evaluative discussions using Zoom, and reached out to people who were not able to participate online using written evaluation forms.

In reporting qualitative data, all participants' names have been changed to protect anonymity. The people in the creative team are named throughout.

Quantitative

Quantitative data was collected to explore changes in participants' loneliness and subjective wellbeing. Participants completed the UCLA Three-Item Loneliness Scale (2008) with an additional question asking participants how often they feel lonely, and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (2006) as a measure of subjective wellbeing.

With regular participants, this data was collected three times, once at the start of their participation, once in the middle and once at the end of the project. We also collected this data from regular participants at the end of the first national lockdown period in May/ July 2020. During residency projects, participants completed the questionnaire once at the start and once at the end of the project.

Some data could only be collected at one time point due to the pandemic and projects with new participants ending prematurely. These data have been included in order to provide an indication of trends across the groups.

Data Analysis

Analysis of demographic data was undertaken utilising Google analysis tools in order to summarise and seek out trends from the range of data collected.

An inductive mode of data analysis was undertaken with regard to the qualitative commentary sources. Data was analysed transcribed during the project and subsequently using Nvivo (v.12) to determine themes in the data; both convergent and divergent themes were identified and are reported here.

For thorough and meaningful interpretation of the quantitative data, statistical analysis was not possible as participant sample numbers were not large enough to ensure reliable significance in the findings. Similarly, participation was not consistent over the course of the project and at the different points of data collection. Instead, trends in data were sought as a way to further illustrate the qualitative data we collected.

Literature Review

Providing a context for how intergenerational dance and music participation in outdoor settings can impact people's social and personal connectedness as a way of tackling loneliness.

Written by Elsa Urmston and Louisa Petts

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Defining loneliness

Loneliness and social isolation are often interchangeable terms and yet, they are conceptually distinct.[1] Loneliness has been defined as a person's perception of insufficient quality or quantity of social interaction, manifesting as an aversive, distressing experience,[2] and so, it is subjective in nature.[3] Conversely, social isolation objectively describes individuals with few social contacts.[4] A lifestyle with few social connections is not mutually exclusive with feelings of loneliness.

Loneliness can be a transient state, where experience is largely dependent on the context of the individual.[5] Equally, loneliness can exist as a prolonged state, potentially affecting aspects of psychological, social and physical health. Affecting people of all ages, loneliness has been recognised as a public health concern, experienced by younger and older people alike.[6] Smoking, lack of physical activity and poor sleep are all health behaviours influenced or affected by loneliness,[7] and it has been suggested that social isolation can lead to an increased likelihood of premature mortality.[7] Maintaining social connections, particularly stable interpersonal relationships is considered instrumental for psychological and social wellbeing and key to one's quality of life.[7] Humans are born with an innate need for social contact, a longing for interpersonal connection that remains throughout the lifespan.[8] Therefore, exploring loneliness amongst people of different ages and abilities appears increasingly appropriate.

Loneliness in the time of COVID-19

Physical distancing and lockdown measures have been essential steps in containing the COVID-19 outbreak and ensuing pandemic during 2020-21. In limiting social interaction, there have been increasing concerns about the impact of such measures on the population's mental health.

Numerous studies in different countries worldwide have determined that the effects of the pandemic vary in relation to people's experience of loneliness. In Canada, elevated levels of psychological distress were reported amongst adults during spring-summer 2020 lockdown periods,[9] whilst conflicting research in the United States (US) suggests that changes in perceptions of loneliness did not change during "stay-at-home" periods in 2020, with participants perceiving increased support from others at that time.[10] Conversely, Killgore and colleagues[11] suggest that loneliness has been significantly higher than normal during the COVID-19 pandemic in the US, with 43% of respondents scoring above published cutoffs. In the United Kingdom (UK), the COVID Social Study[12] suggested that there was no significant increase in the prevalence of loneliness during the first 2020 lockdown, although those who felt most lonely prior to the pandemic experienced higher levels of loneliness during physical distancing and lockdown measures. Whilst not specific to COVID-19, being young, living alone, having a low income, being out of work and living with existing mental health symptoms were risk factors for loneliness during the lockdown period.[12, 13] The least lonely people in the study became less lonely, and living with others or in a rural area, and having good social support were protective factors.[12]

Whilst the research about the impact of COVID-19 on loneliness appears to vary, it remains important that opportunities for social interaction can be facilitated, in order to lessen people's experience of loneliness despite not being able to physically come together, and finding ways to do this with diverse populations whilst still providing an emphasis on dance, music and being outside has been a particular focus for this project.

Loneliness across the lifespan

Authors stress that social isolation and loneliness can be particularly influential on the wellbeing of older populations.[14] There are a number of risk factors that contribute to loneliness amongst older people, including loss of a partner, retirement, decline in functional capacity, physical disability, frailty or poor health.[15] These risk factors can affect both physical and psychological states of being. Lonely older people have been found to be at increased risk of cardiovascular disease[4], and the depletion of social networks has been described as the most significant contributor to late-life depression in older age.[16]

Psychosocial group interventions appear to be meaningful to older participants. Senior dance classes have been reported as an effective intervention that present opportunities to try new things and make new friends. Participants can talk about their experiences of loneliness with people like them, who understand how they feel. Additionally, participants explain their joy in anticipating pleasant experiences, such as social dancing, which could also prevent loneliness. Indeed, when social interaction and strong feelings of attachment within a community are higher, lower levels of loneliness are associated.[17] Since loneliness can contribute to poor physical, social and psychological health amongst older adults, it is suggested that healthcare practitioners ought to take perceptions of social relationships into account to provide insight into a person's wellbeing.[4]

Research has indicated that older people continue to acquire new acquaintances and rekindle former relationships that may have weakened.[16] Engagement in physical activity may contribute to (re)building such connections. Indeed, social interactions with peers have been found to promote or motivate physical activity, whereas low levels of moderate physical activity amongst older adults have been associated with social isolation and loneliness.[18] Studies suggest that physical activity, regardless of its nature, leads to a reduction in self-perceived loneliness.[19] Furthermore, decreases in loneliness have been related to positive changes in perceived social support received from fellow group members participating in physical activity.[20] Therefore, the quality of relationships formed in the context of physical activity could contribute to the degree of loneliness that each individual experiences. Dance can be considered a physical activity which not only promotes wellness and potentially improves flexibility, muscle tone, coordination and fatigue, but also acts as a social activity.[21] Thus, it can be theorised that not only can relationships be formed with others in a dance context, but can promote physical wellbeing and social reconnection.

Loneliness is not confined only to older populations, but is dominant in adolescent groups too.[5] It is theorised that when young people enter puberty, they are faced with challenges during this transitional stage of physical and psychological development.[5] These changes may contribute to increased feelings of loneliness amongst young people as they develop. In fact, experiences of loneliness may be due to the inevitable ageing transitions that both younger and older people experience. The ability to establish close personal relationships can be instrumental in the social development of children and young people. The quantity of social relationships and friendships can be a more important factor in predicting loneliness in young childhood compared to adolescence, whereas the quality of friendship appears more important to older children and adolescents.[5]
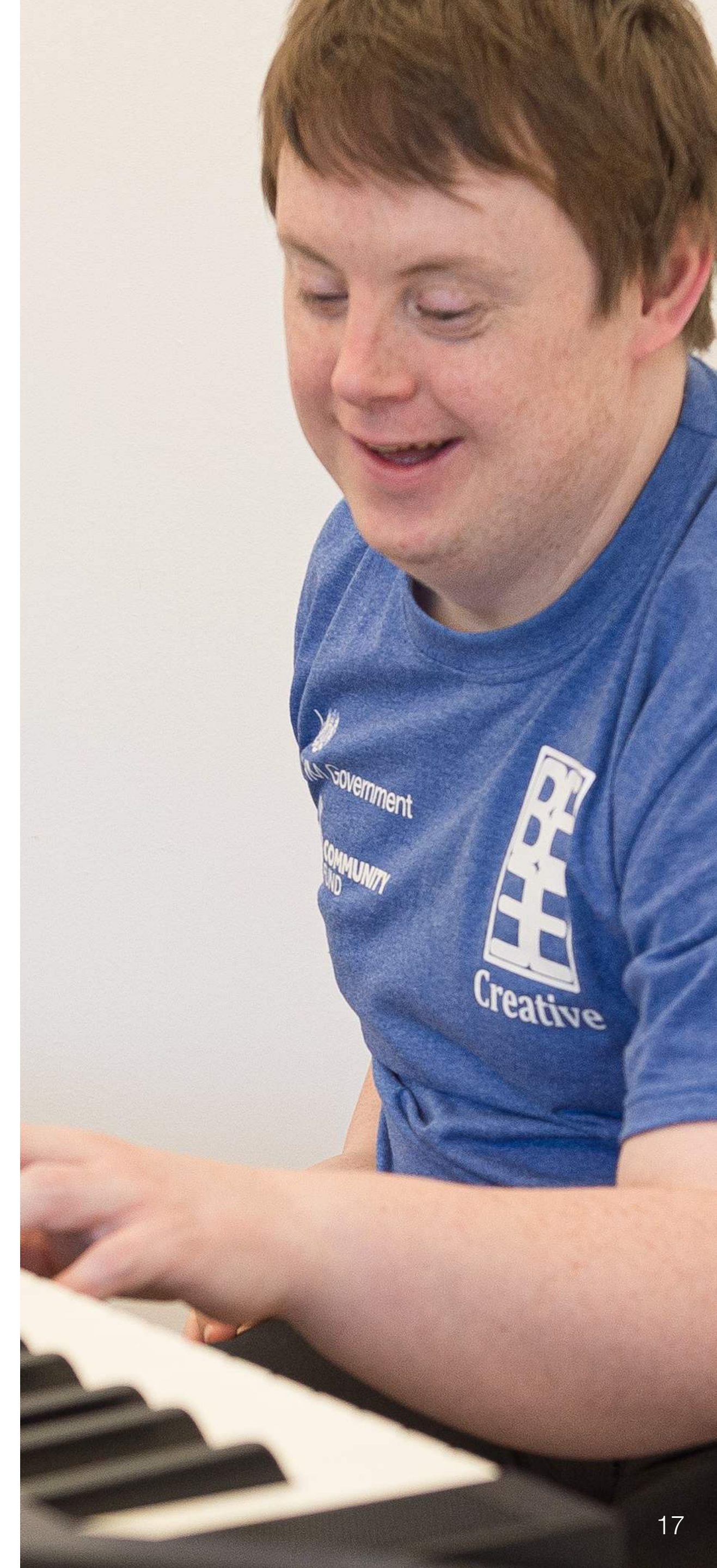
Predictors of loneliness for young people include peer rejection and victimisation.[22] As a result of these predictors, these individuals are likely to be socially isolated, less involved in social activities, and withdraw from existing social relationships, thus increasing the risk of feeling lonely.[23] Adolescents listen to music in an attempt to fulfil social and emotional needs.[24] Listening to music in private may reduce feelings of loneliness, reduce tension and help get through difficult periods of adolescent maturity and growth.[24] Music has been stated to 'bring to life' solitary thoughts and memories, acting as a comforting energy to combat loneliness.[25] Music is inherently communicative, often able to harness human expression through the medium of storytelling. Referred to as communicative musicality, social behaviour is promoted through the marriage of dancing, gestural movement and music. Thus, music is described as a 'felt' experience which, when partnered with dance, can culturally centralise humans, facilitating togetherness and vitality.[25]

From a public health perspective, previous literature has also highlighted the need for better understanding of social factors in the influence of physical activity participation for young people. Physical activity for adolescents has been found to be associated with their significant relationship with others, specifically friends and family as they feel 'closer' to their relatives.[26] This could suggest that participating in a shared interest or activity not only promotes psychological and physical benefits, but can contribute towards social connection and holistically living well.

Disability and loneliness

In a recent study exploring social relationships in deprived communities, nearly a third of adult respondents, who described themselves as sick or disabled, experienced 'frequent' loneliness.[27] The experience of loneliness for adults with learning disabilities and intermittent support needs has also been explored. Social networks appear most effective when they include opportunities that involve disabled and non-disabled people together, although being with people who share similar life experiences is also important.[28] Creating an environment promoting inclusion is key in ensuring that disabled people can form social and emotional networks as valued members of the community.[29] This directly encapsulates a notion of relatedness, one of three basic human psychological needs, also including autonomy and competence.[29] Relatedness is a concept frequently explored amongst wellbeing models and describes the feeling of social connection.[29] Relatedness typically concerns feeling understood, belonging and feeling significant amongst other people. Through dance and music as a shared interest, connections can be built between people living shared realities, contributing to overall psychosocial wellness.

The promotion of relatedness can bind a group or community together, where learning and making art implicitly requires overcoming limitations. Group activity not only leads to shared feelings of togetherness, but can illustrate to older participants that they are capable of doing familiar and new things. This has the potential to strengthen the sense of empowerment, self-esteem and mastery over their lives, relevant not only to older populations, but disabled people, who may experience barriers in society.[30] Arts-based interventions can alleviate loneliness and socially-activate participants.[30] Learning about and sharing experiences of dance and music, which focus on the *process* of making art in the community, has the potential to tackle loneliness amongst different groups in our society.[31]

Dance and loneliness

The implementation of creative and artistic activities in group environments may expand an individual's social network. Contact with a group of people, wider than close friends and relatives, may aid gaining knowledge and practical skills that promote wellbeing.[32] Thus, participating and creating dance as art could also reduce isolation and cultivate new skills as a mode of expression and social reconnection. Over nine months, 'Dance 4 Health' assessed the impact of dance in communities on participants' psychological wellbeing and social inclusion. The group included young people aged 11-15 years, older people over the age of 50, frail older people and adults with physical and learning disabilities. Participants reported that social wellbeing benefits were intrinsic to the project outcomes and its sustained appeal to participants' continued engagement.

Other interventions have been suggested for older adults to motivate interpersonal relationships and social reconnection.[5] In a dance-specific study, community ballroom dance classes aimed to reduce social exclusion amongst older adults.[33] Classes were intergenerational, encouraging older participants to dance with children and adolescents. However, in some Western contexts, ageing bodies are arguably viewed through the hegemonic decline of the body and self, where bodies are aged, gendered and classed.[34] Older adults have also been stereotyped to be rigid and inflexible in their approach to life.[35] Therefore, an intergenerational dance environment potentially avoids fostering 'exclusionary attitudes', where dance accessibility is actively promoted regardless of age or physical ability. [33] This environment can encourage individual expression and strengthen social connections. The community ballroom dance classes were said to have, 'created a culture of inclusion…understanding and acceptance…which in turn might improve [older adults'] quality of life'.[33] Participants described dance as being 'playful' and 'entertaining', promoting 'only good thoughts during classes.' Dance made participants feel 'at peace' and full of 'youthfulness'.[33] Argued to be particularly relevant for this population, this study cited Brazilian culture to particularly value youth and physical beauty. Therefore, this population may feel excluded from their society due to their ageing bodies and reinforcing ageing as a process that may demotivate physical, social and emotional stimulation. Yet through dancing, participants disclosed that they experienced higher self-esteem and creativity, as well as bodily qualities of elegance, lightness and flexibility. By promoting dance as a vehicle for socialising and as a participatory activity that all ages can do, dance has the potential to foster wellness and improve quality of life for older adults. Sustaining creative outlets may not only reduce experiencing loneliness but also reflect resilience to the social status society may have accorded to them.[35]

Being outside

Spending time in the natural environment is said to improve mental health and wellbeing, combating loneliness and promoting a sense of community.[36] A study of Wildlife Trust volunteers aged between 18 and 76 years and with low self-reported levels of wellbeing, found that 95% of participants experienced an improvement in mental wellbeing after volunteering outdoors for a 6-week period. Qualitative insights revealed that participants felt increased confidence and reduced social isolation. Volunteering was associated with statistically significant improvements in feelings of positivity and connection to nature as well.[37] Additionally, numerous health and wellbeing benefits were exhibited by all 139 participants. In this context, continued attendance to shared, group activity enhanced social confidence. Critically, participants also reported an increased value of wildlife and nature, where being outside allowed them to feel grounded with a renewed sense of purpose. Activity in urban green space has been shown to facilitate social inclusion amongst children and adolescents of different cultures and backgrounds.[38] Meeting in open, public spaces acts as a platform where social integration can take place. Urban green spaces can be neutral, shared areas, acting as a catalyst for social integration and communication across cultural domains.

Literature illustrates how participation in music and dance activity can act as a vehicle for social connection. Loneliness can affect people of all ages, with dance and music often cited as an outlet for expression. Exposure to green, outdoor space has been contributory to holistic wellbeing and reconnection to existing communities. The unification of music, dance and being outside together with cross-generational integration has the potential to foster wellbeing and build connections amongst participants, as a way to tackle loneliness.

Evaluation

04

Key Statistics

14736
audience members
(indirect beneficiaries)

632
attendances

188
participants
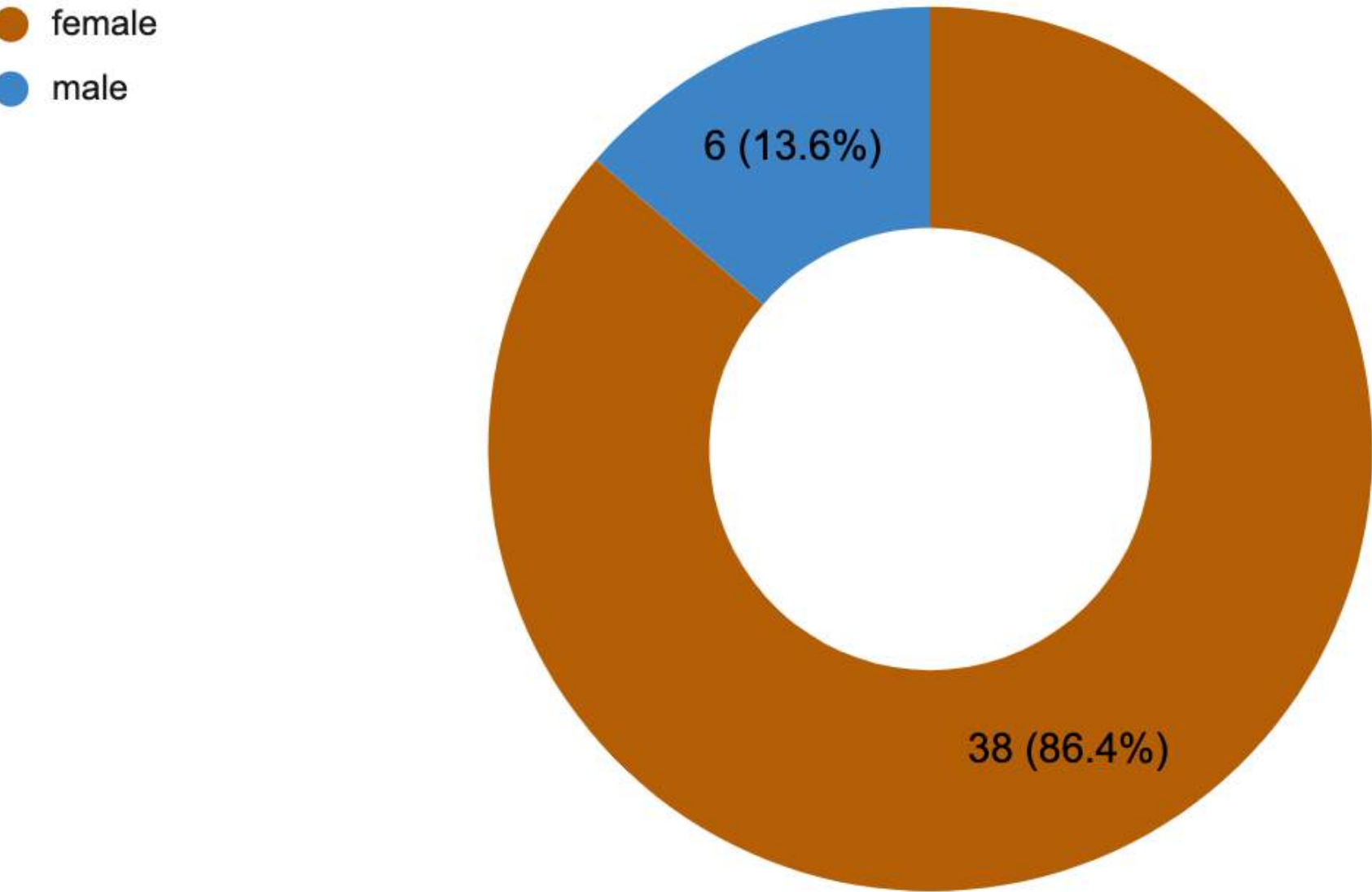(direct beneficiaries)

6
volunteers

About the Participants

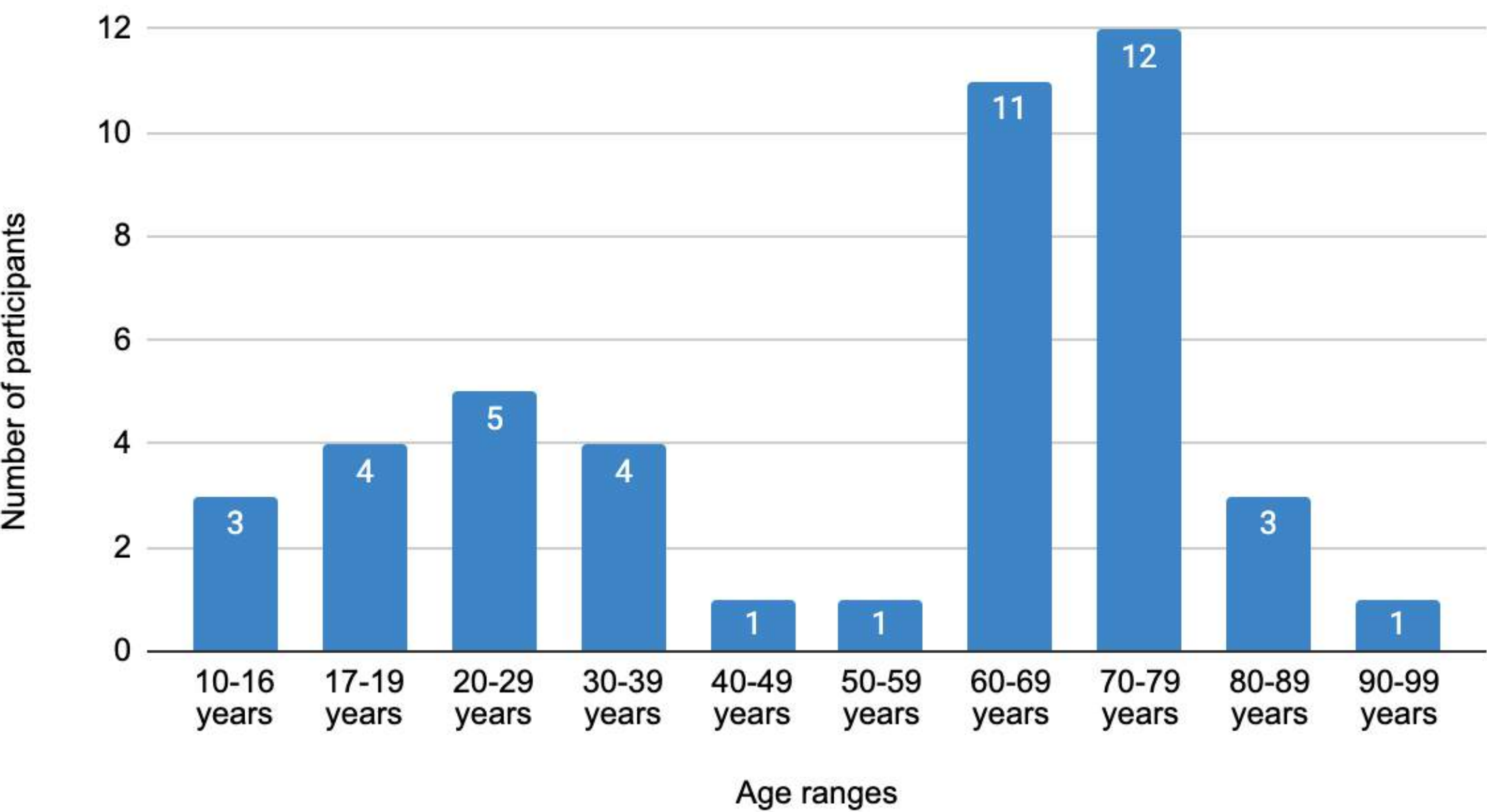## Participants' gender, age, education and employment

Many of the participants in this project were female and most commonly aged between 60 and 80 years, although certainly the span of ages reached confirms it as an intergenerational project. However, not all participants were able to participate with all ages, all the time. Reaching younger people was relatively successful in residencies which took place during holiday periods, although their engagement was challenging to sustain beyond a one-off project. Young people reported being daunted by participating in a project with older people, and would often sign up with good intentions, but then not attend for the project. Coming to the group with a friend made attendance more likely amongst this group. However, once young people did attend workshops and residencies, they placed huge value on their interactions with older participants, recognising growing confidence and willingness to step out of their comfort zone.

With the predominant group of people in the project being older people, most participants were retired. 22% of participants worked part-time, in a self-employed capacity or were looking for work. Nine participants were in education.

Improvising Generations: Participants' Gender

- female
- male

6 (13.6%)

38 (86.4%)

Improvising Generations: Participants' Age Ranges

Number of participants (y-axis): 0, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12

- 10-16 years: 3
- 17-19 years: 4
- 20-29 years: 5
- 30-39 years: 4
- 40-49 years: 1
- 50-59 years: 1
- 60-69 years: 11
- 70-79 years: 12
- 80-89 years: 3
- 90-99 years: 1

Age ranges

About the Participants

Where participants come from

Participants were located in areas across Hertfordshire, with one participant coming from Essex and three from Bedfordshire. Where activity was targeted to widen participation, participants were very local to that location. Relative to measures which represent indices of multiple deprivation, most participants across all activities during the project lived in areas with least deprivation when compared with national averages.
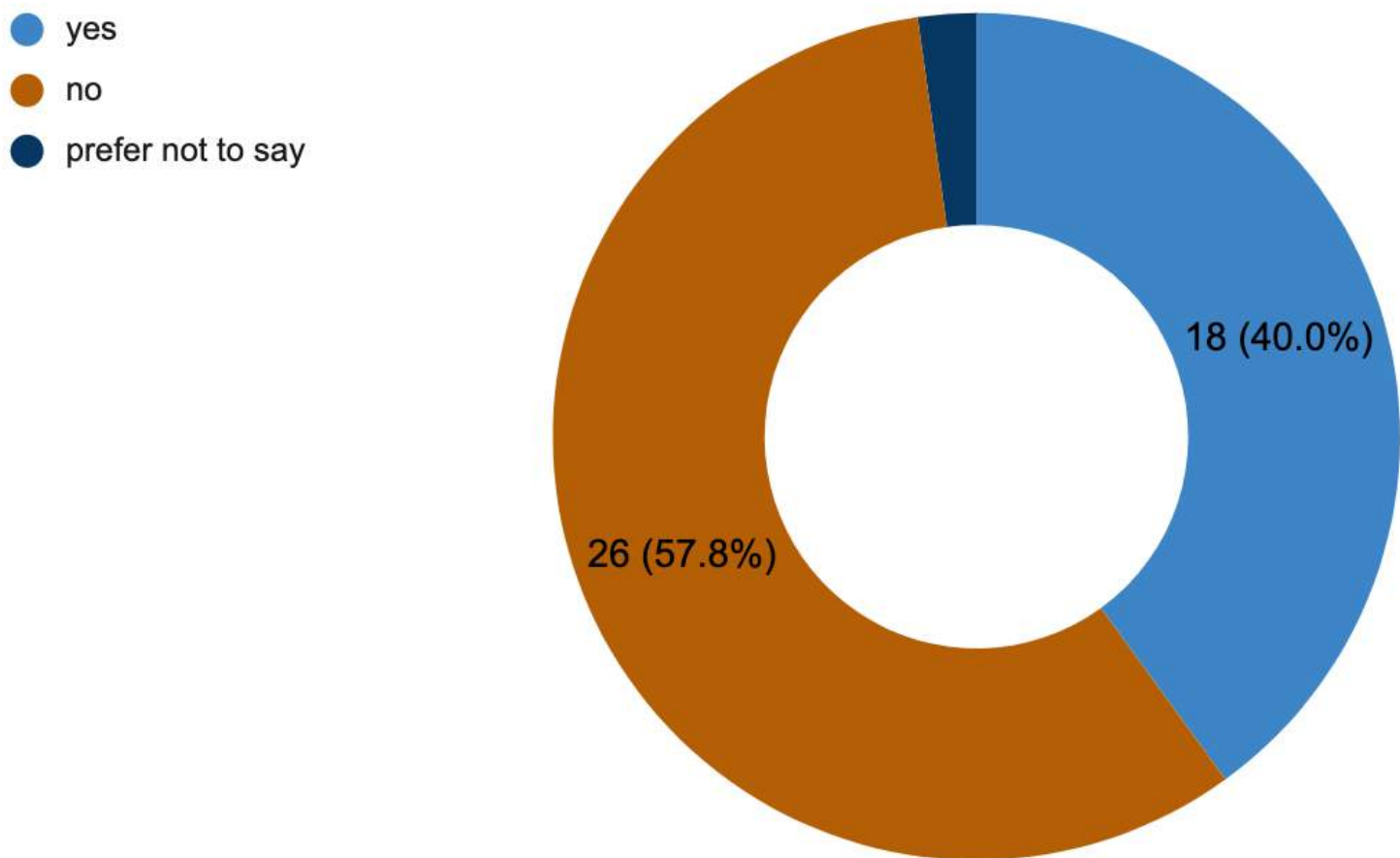
Improvising Generations: Where Participants Live

Improvising Generations: Where Participants Live Relative to Indices of Multiple Deprivation
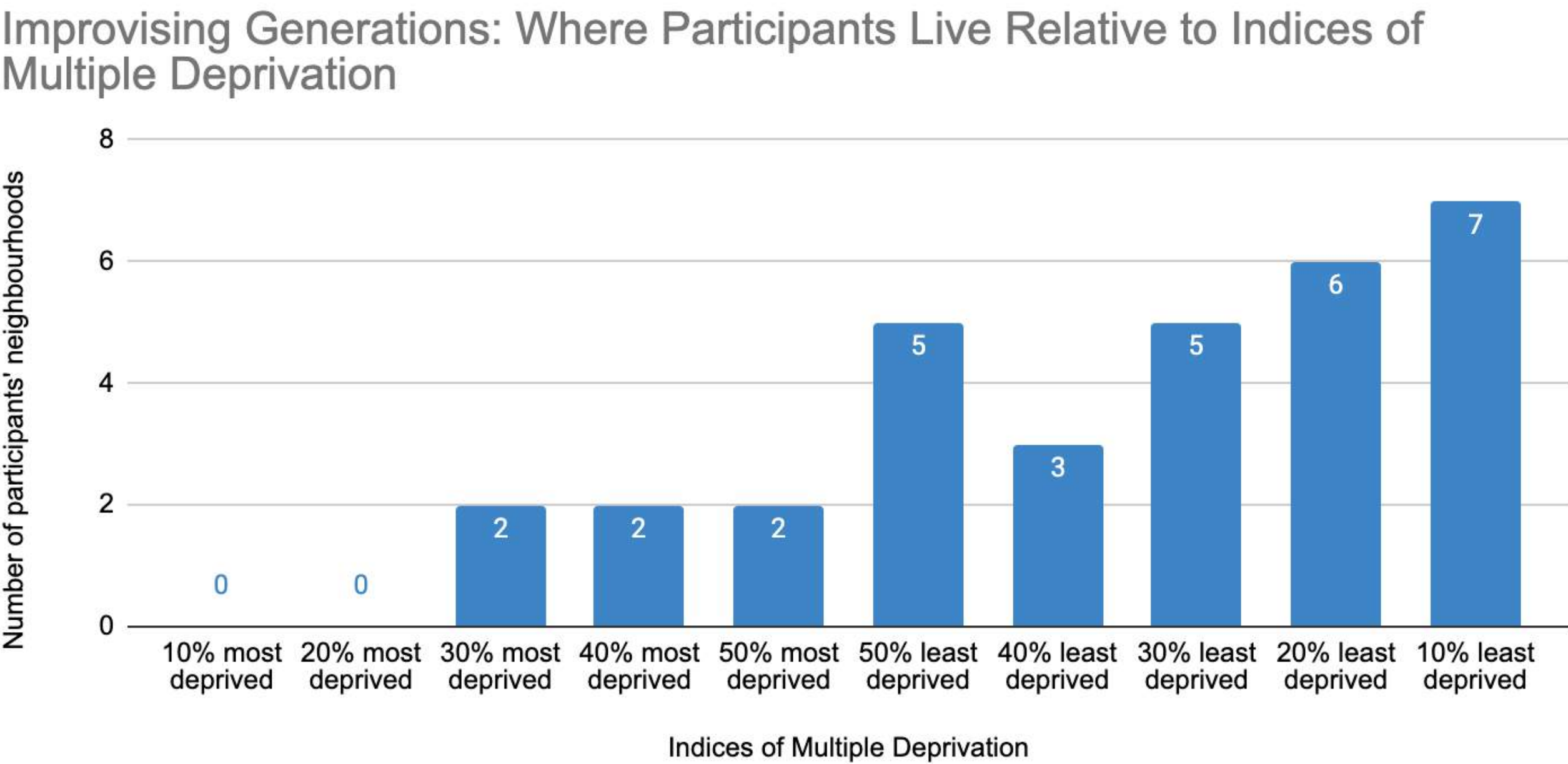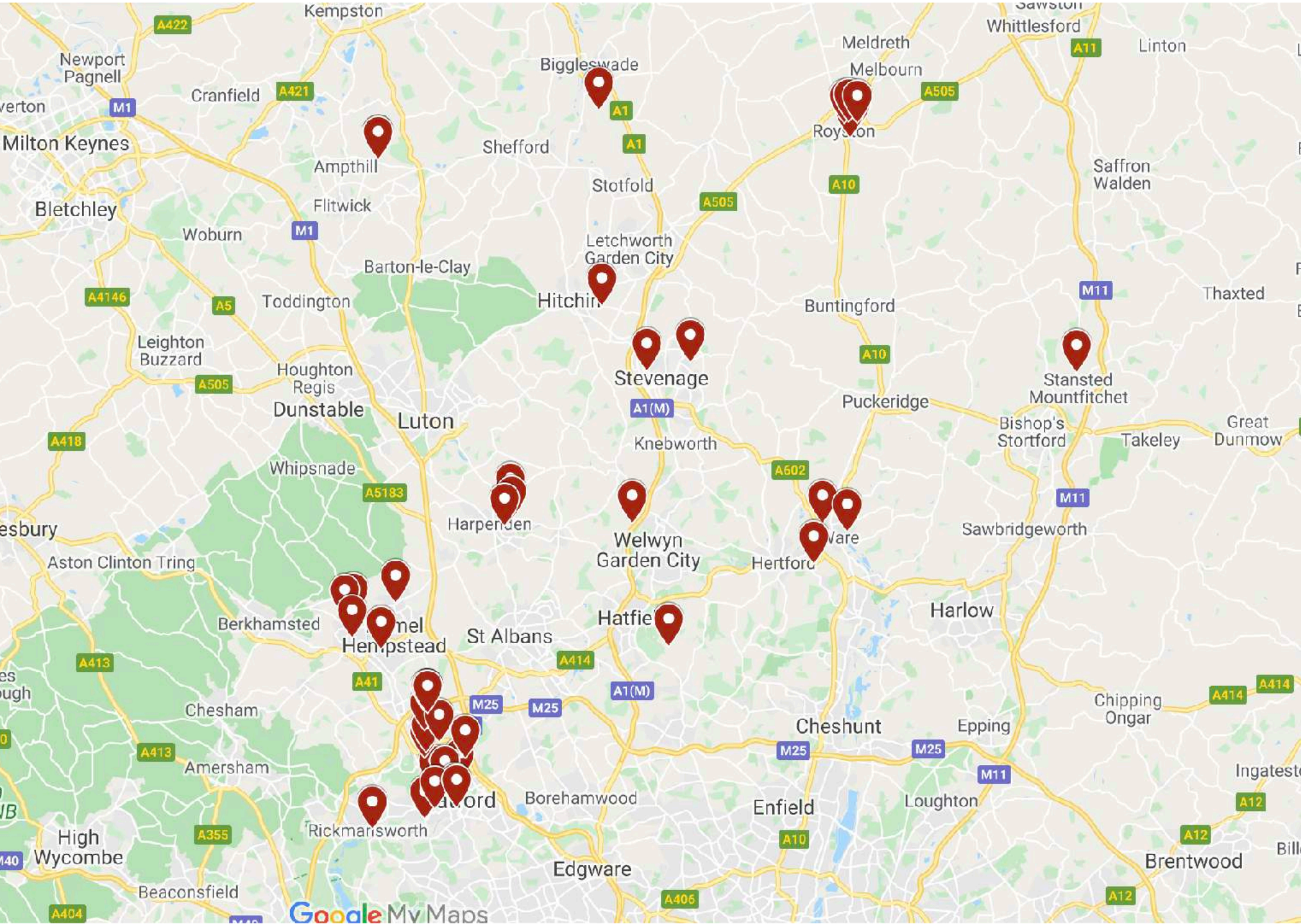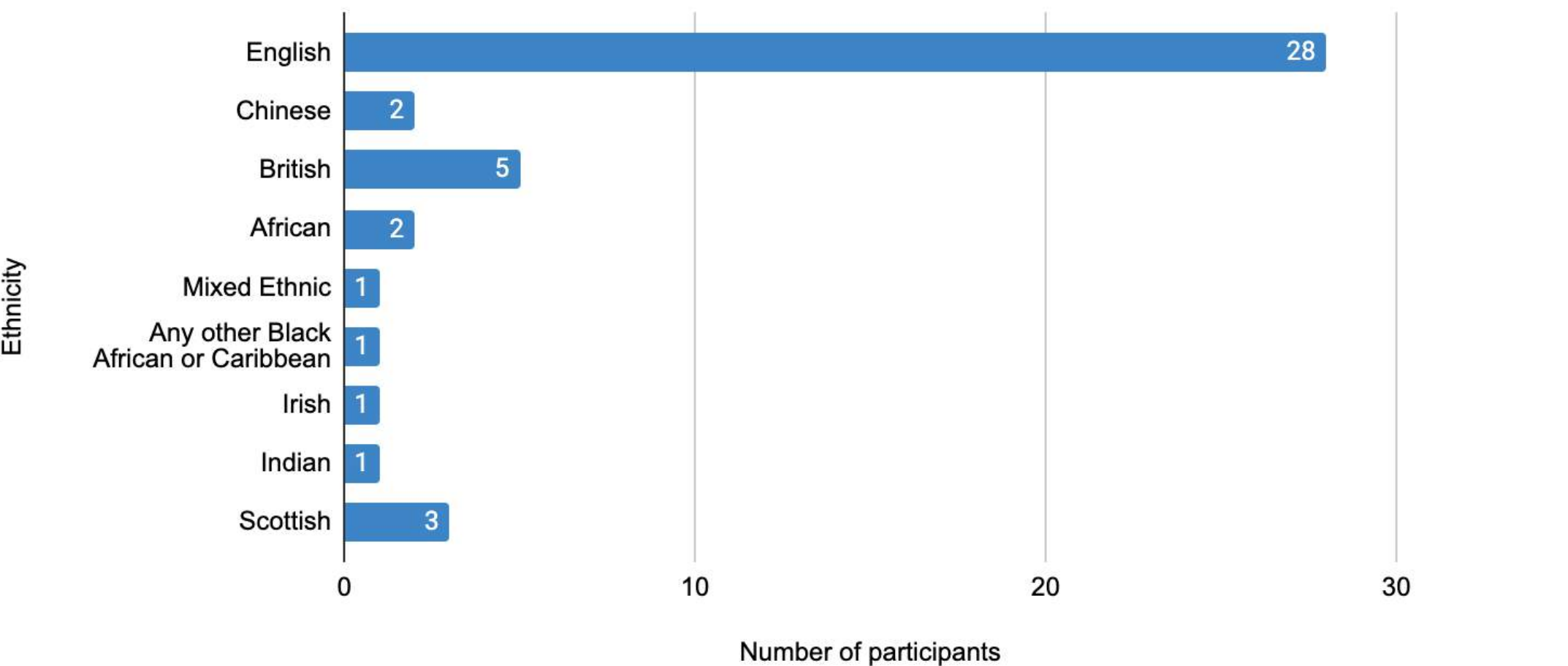
About the Participants

Participants' ethnicity, disability, religious and sexual orientation

In order to understand the diversity of our participants, we asked them about their personal characteristics. The majority of our participants are English, Christian and heterosexual. 40% of our participants consider themselves to have a disability, including specified learning differences, learning disabilities, physical disabilities and disabilities associated with advancing age.

Improvising Generations: Participants' Disclosure of Disability

- yes
- no
- prefer not to say

18 (40.0%)

26 (57.8%)

Improvising Generations: Participants' Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number of participants
English	28
Chinese	2
British	5
African	2
Mixed Ethnic	1
Any other Black African or Caribbean	1
Irish	1
Indian	1
Scottish	3

Improvising Generations: Participants' Disclosure of Religious Belief

Religion or belief	Number of participants
Christian	24
Hindu	1
Other religion or belief	9
Prefer not to say	4
Not religious	4
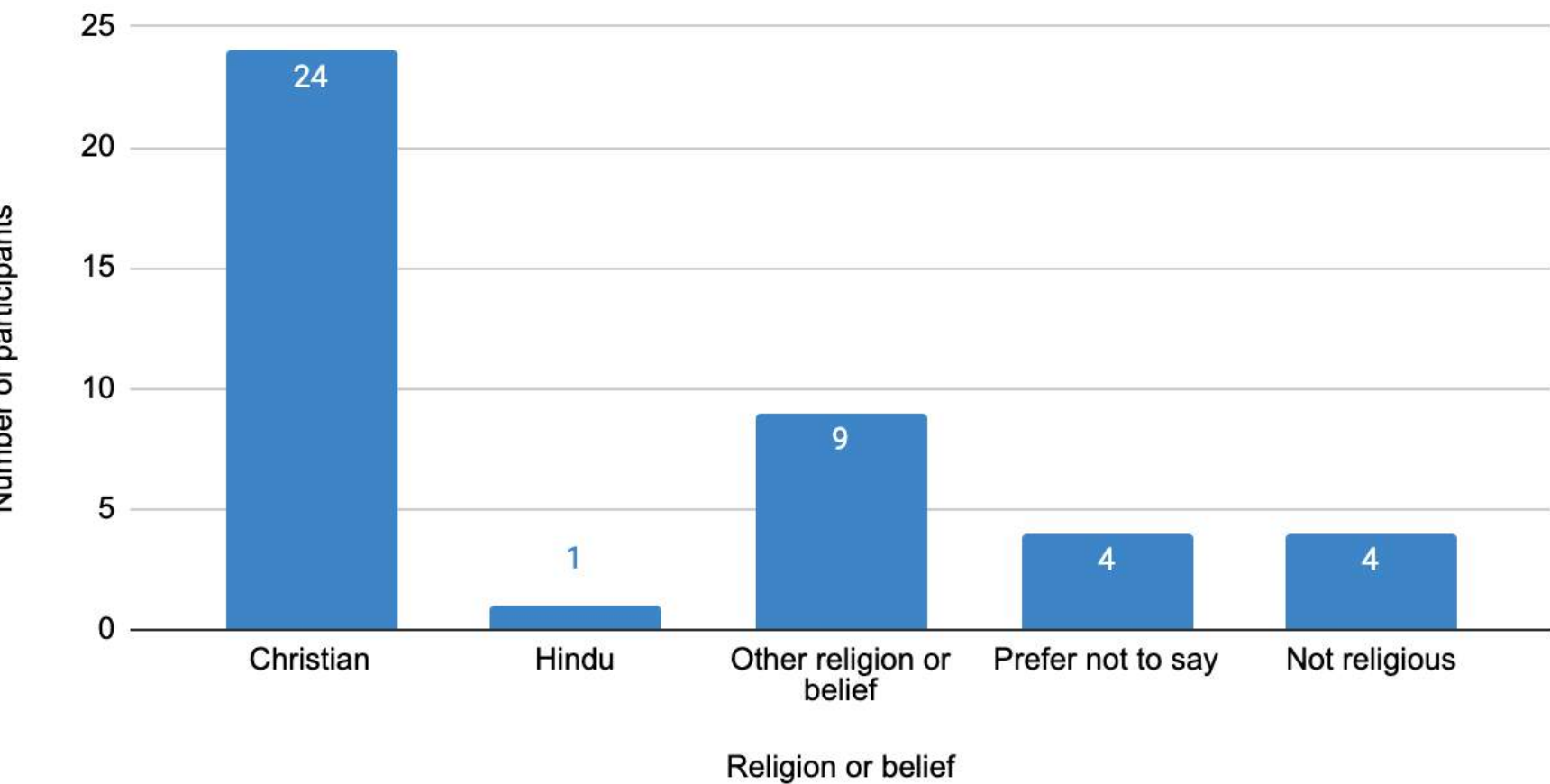
Improvising Generations: Adult Participants' Declaration of Sexual Orientation

- heterosexual
- prefer not to say

8 (25.8%)

23 (74.2%)
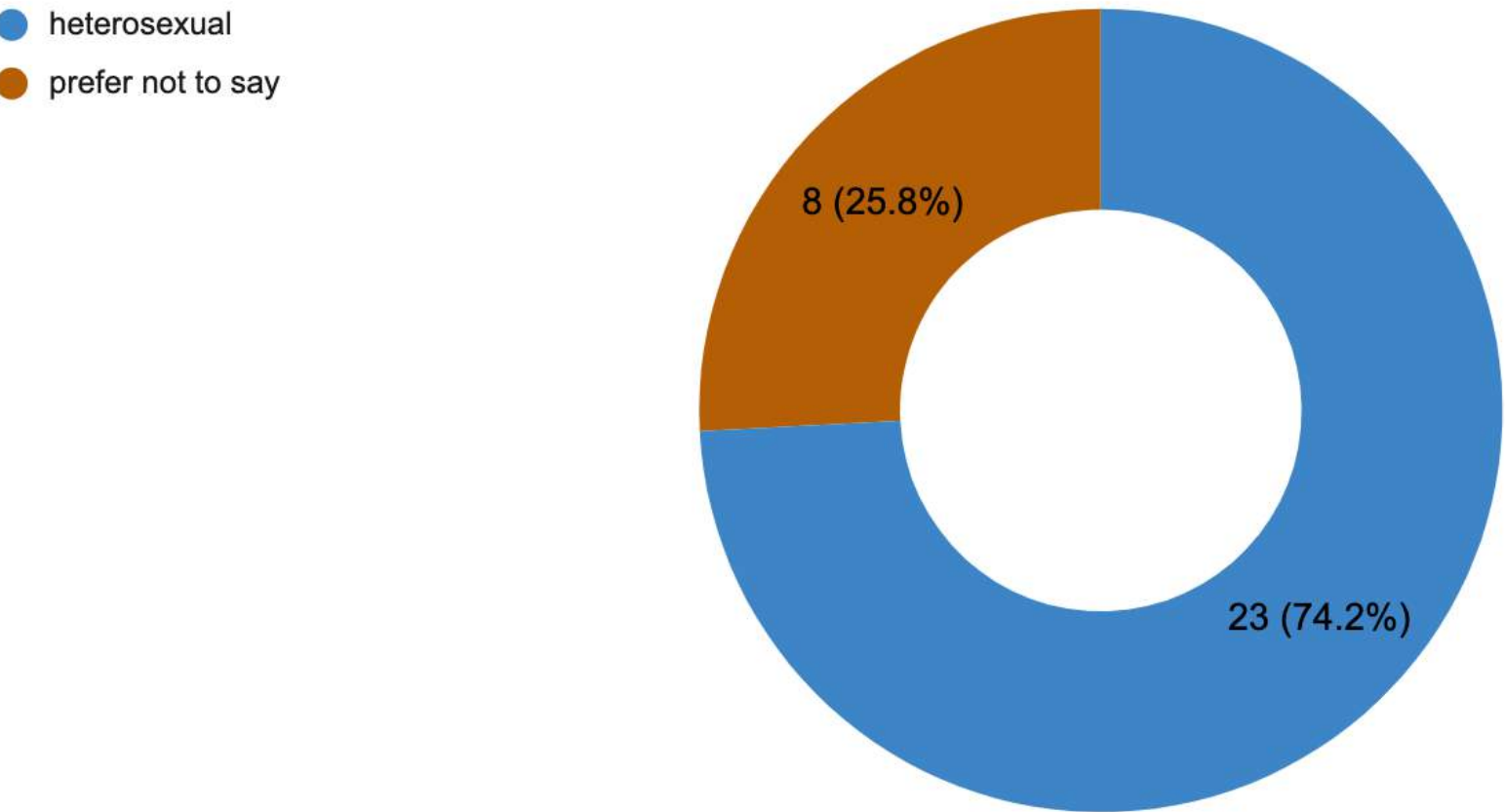
About the Participants

Participants' engagement in physical activity and cultural activity

Our participants were active, and engaged in cultural activities often. This would suggest that the participants In Improvising Generations were engaged with activities beyond their own home and that through these activities, our participants encountered, met and interacted with other people in their everyday lives. That is not to suggest that our participants were lonely, or not, but merely that their activities lent themselves to building connections with other people. Participants' physical activities included: dancing, walking, jogging, yoga, housework, gardening, swimming, Pilates, Tai Chi, bowling, netball, keep fit, boxing and PE. Participants' cultural activities included: acting, dancing, singing, playing musical instruments, volunteering, going to the cinema and theatre, attending exhibitions and lectures, visiting art galleries and museums, painting and crafting.
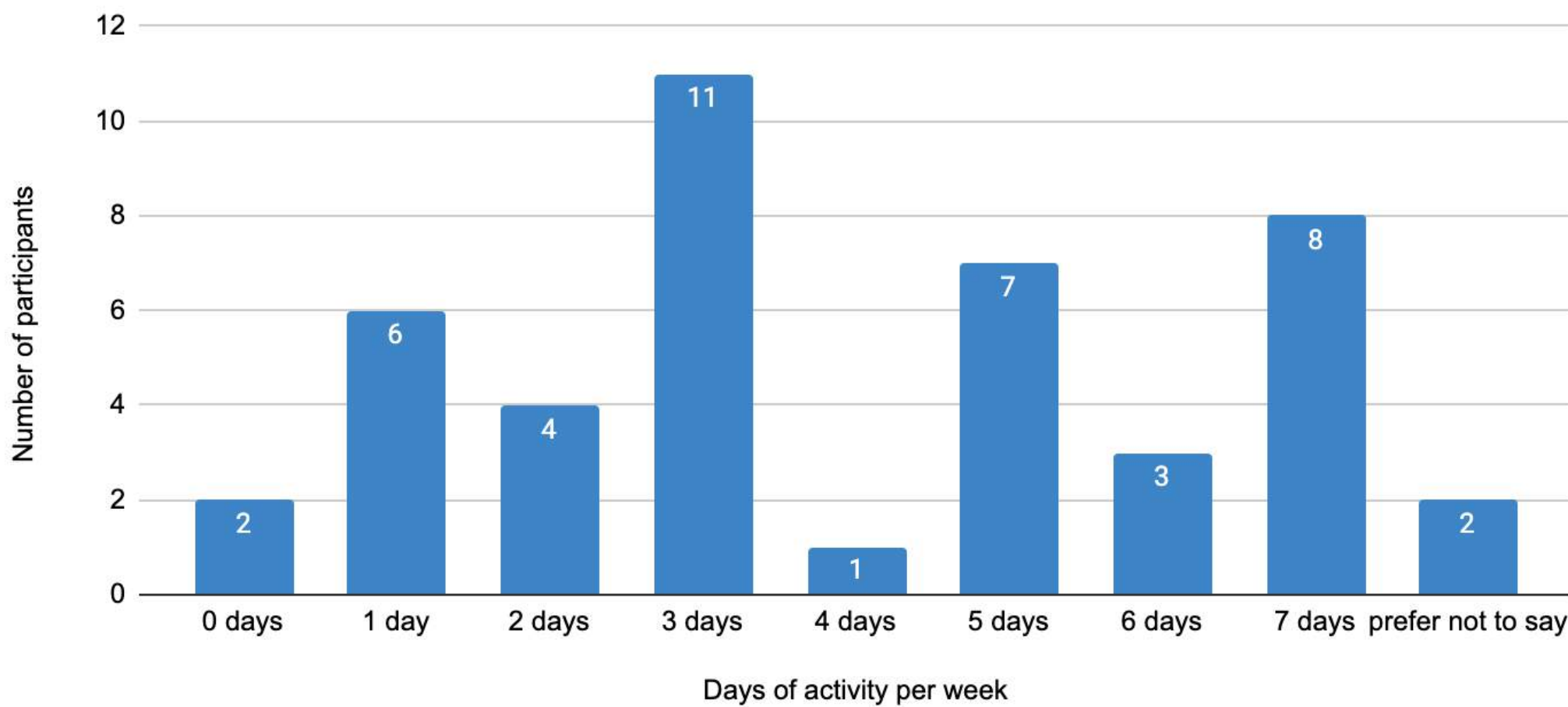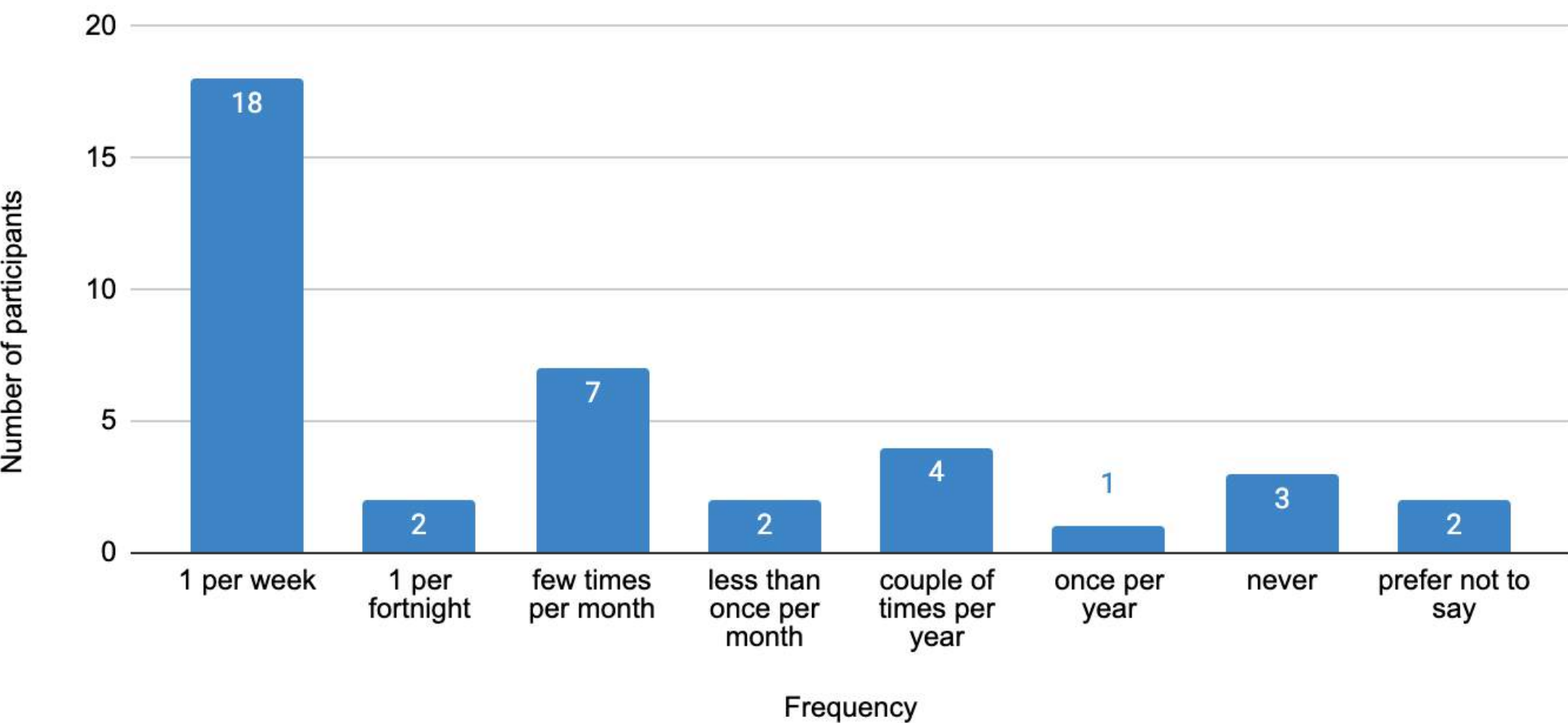

Improvising Generations: Participants' Weekly Physical Activity Levels

Improvising Generations: Participants' Frequency of Cultural Experiences

The Impact of COVID-19

Participants' positive responses to Improvising Generations during the pandemic

Participants' responses to the delivery of Improvising Generations during lockdown periods were largely positive; for many, the opportunity to connect with others, albeit online, provided a regular opportunity to socialise, share in activities which had originally brought them together, and sustain the friendships that had been fostered through participating in the project face-to-face before the pandemic began. Many were grateful to be busy with the tasks that were set during lockdown periods, and emphasised the sense of belonging and therefore commitment to the group to contribute to the activities and show up.

Once lockdowns were eased, participants expressed a real joy in being able to dance with others again in a physically distanced way as these participants explained:

"just what was needed to bring body and spirits back to life"

"it was good for my soul… to move the whole of my body in a group, both under instruction and following my own volition, after such a long time, felt very healing and healthful."

When targeted residencies began, in some instances in outdoor spaces, the appreciation and liberation of being outside came in contrast to the constriction they felt during lockdown and on Zoom.

Barriers to participation

More vulnerable, regular participants reported loss in motivation and confidence, and increased anxiety because of circumstances beyond their control. For some, it was much harder to connect with people through the screen because for example, the format was not accessible to them, or the phone screen was very small. Both the artists and participants commented on how the social aspects of dancing together physically cannot be replicated online in the same way.

Other barriers included participants reporting that they did not know what to expect and that the activities would have taken them beyond their comfort zone. Others did not like dancing at home, alone, or in front of family members and others were wary of using the internet.

As Laura observed:

"the spontaneous chit chat, ease in connection, responding naturally to signals… can't happen. The act of physically preparing oneself to meet others, to remove oneself from the environment and transition to a different place seems to have importance… Home may be different to us all and not all welcome this type of connection for various reasons, we may not have comforts, we may not want to be seen by parents, we might not want others to see and enter our private space."

The Impact of COVID-19

Artistic challenges

Particular artistic challenges presented themselves with the transfer of activities online. Specific instructions for activities were difficult to translate online, particularly when supporting a diverse group of people with different cognitive abilities. For example, simply asking people to work in profile to the camera was difficult to explain and demonstrate in relation to the fixed screen that participants were working with. The challenges of live music in an online environment are well documented in wider literature, and we also experienced latency in when the sound was made and when it was heard by participants, creating synchrony issues for all. The live interactions between music and dance were therefore difficult to maintain in this setting, and resulted in musicians composing music which was then recorded for the dance participants to respond to. The beneficial interactions between music and dance were very difficult to maintain in an online context, and so activities tended to happen in isolation.

Both participants and artists observed that the use of technology was creatively liberating in many respects, with participants' confidence in the use of technology being a significant outcome for many, providing lots of creative opportunities they had not previously considered. And yet, artists and participants felt that their creativity was, in many aspects, restricted because of the two-dimensionality of the format and the confines of the camera frame.

The artists documented their own learning during this time, as new ways of working and relating to others had to be developed. Of significance was the fostering of resilience for both the artists and the participants. Laura noticed that it was especially important to value and listen to experience, by giving time to notice, reflect and share. Activities that encouraged self-awareness and supported participants to find their own meaning and ways to artistically express themselves were vital. In many ways, the participants led the creative direction of the work during the pandemic and this supported opportunities to build independence and agency, as well as value participants' diversity, by identifying individual potential and giving space to explore ideas spontaneously. It was important to not try to do too much in online sessions, and to continue to reflect and adapt material and ways of working much in the same way you would in face-to-face interactions. Whereas those adaptations might be more spontaneous in a live encounter, it was important for the artists to take their time in those decisions, meaning that responsiveness of face-to-face delivery was somewhat lost. Relatedly, self-care for the artists was important at this time; whilst the work was rewarding it was also exhausting, and it was important to not be too hard on oneself.

The Impact of COVID-19

Organisational outcomes

Prior to the pandemic and associated lockdowns, we had sought to widen participation through targeted residencies. Separate residencies with the Guideposts Trust, Monday Club in Abbots Langley and ASCEND Charity had been set up in March 2020, to particularly work with people with learning difficulties, but had to be cancelled. It has not yet been possible to restart those plans at the time of writing, due to the restrictions that the pandemic has brought. Nevertheless, we have initiated other partnerships which have been able to happen in a combination of live and online delivery formats during 2020 and beyond.

The impact of the pandemic for the organisation has been significant, requiring increased capacity to support participants in accessing online provision and considering how face-to-face delivery can happen in a COVID-secure environment. Nevertheless, we have proudly adapted to the demands that working in a pandemic brings, maintaining delivery throughout and building connections with participants in ways which reach beyond dance and music-making. In particular, the increased frequency of sessions and ongoing technical support for participants has built even stronger connections between the organisation and those who access our work. Both participants, artists and managers have expressed their gratitude in the opportunities to connect with one another during such challenging times. There is a strong sense of the reciprocal impact that the online projects and activities have had on both those that participate and those that deliver and organise the work itself. Yet alongside this, there has been inevitable increased need to provide emotional support for participants, as their connections with us strengthen, and they trust us to be able to talk about how they feel. It has been important to listen to their experiences but also balance this with not overstepping our roles as artists, ensuring our own wellbeing and resilience in supporting participants and signposting them to appropriate onward services.

The Impact of COVID-19

Changes in participants' feelings of loneliness and subjective wellbeing

We specifically collected quantitative data from regular participants to understand how their feelings of loneliness and subjective wellbeing had changed from the mid-point data collection period (pre-COVID-19 pandemic in the UK: December 2019 and January 2020) to after the first national COVID-19 lockdown in May/ June 2020. When comparing the mode (most frequent score) of feelings and frequency of loneliness, feelings of loneliness increased, whereas the frequency with which loneliness was experienced, stayed the same. Perceptions of subjective wellbeing reduced slightly from an average score of 52 to 50 (slightly below the average norms for the UK adult population).

From before to after 1st lockdown

Feelings of loneliness *increased*
from 'hardly ever' to 'some of the time'

Frequency of loneliness *stayed the same*
at 'occasionally'

Perceptions of subjective wellbeing *decreased slightly*
from 52 to 50

Lessening Loneliness

Quantitative Trends

We asked all participants to complete the UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale at the start and end of their participation in the project; responses were based on a 4-point semantic scale: never, hardly ever, some of the time and often. They also responded to the stand-alone question asking how often they felt lonely; responses were based on a 5-point semantic scale: never, hardly ever, occasionally, some of the time and often. Regular participants also completed the questionnaire mid-way through the project. Although regular participants also completed this questionnaire in May/ June 2020, this data is not included here, as it is outlined on the previous page in direct relation to the impact of COVID-19.

In analysing the statistical mode of participants' responses, all participants across project and targeted residencies felt less lonely after their involvement in the project. On average, participants' responses moved one place down the semantic scale. The regular monthly participants' feelings of loneliness decreased halfway through the project, but increased to pre-project levels by the end of the project in December 2020. All participants experienced loneliness less frequently when comparing the mode of participants' responses pre and post-project; on average, participants' responses moved one place down the semantic scale.

We can conclude that these figures suggest that our project can contribute to people feeling less lonely over short and moderate time periods. Similarly the frequency with which participants feel lonely also reduces. In collecting data from regular participants in December 2020, they repeatedly stated that the effects of the pandemic were taking their toll on their sense of connection with others, not necessarily just our project but in the wider context of their lives and this may well have contributed as to why we see feelings of loneliness rise post-project. Data was collected just before the Christmas 2020 holiday period and the prospect of not being able to spend time with loved ones may have heightened their awareness of feeling lonely at this time. Furthermore, these findings might be explained by participants' increased connection with the project and with us organisationally; participants may simply have been more honest with their responses because they knew us well and had built significant trust in us since the start of the project.

Data Collection Period	Regular Monthly Participants		Project Residency Participants		Targeted Residency Participants	
	Feeling lonely	*Frequency of feeling lonely*	*Feeling lonely*	*Frequency of feeling lonely*	*Feeling lonely*	*Frequency of feeling lonely*
Pre-Project	Some of the time	Some of the time	Some of the time	Occasionally	Some of the time	Occasionally
Mid-Project	Hardly ever	Occasionally	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Post-Project	Some of the time	Occasionally	Hardly ever	Hardly ever	Hardly ever	Hardly ever

Lessening Loneliness

Qualitative Outcomes
Generating a sense of belonging
Participants' placed much emphasis on the sense of belonging that they felt through participating in Improvising Generations. Participants described the group, project and the wider organisation of BEEE Creative, as a *"family", 'dance company"* and even a *"shelter"* for them to come and be themselves. They regularly remarked on the value they placed on their relationships in Improvising Generations:

"She said she really enjoyed dancing with Kitty, because she'd met Kitty before, but didn't get a chance to dance with her.. so there's this idea of layering and building up those relationships. It's hard, as an adult and a teenager, it takes time to do those things, to really build those relationships."

"I remembered her and her eyes brightened up when she saw me I think and she told me that she was so happy to see me. We connected from the last project, and we were able to recognise each other again."

Certainly, the activities that encouraged people to work together were most successful in helping them to belong to the group and are exemplified in more detail on page 34. However, the idea of working together with other people on something, regardless of individuals' differences brought into sharp relief the principles of inclusion as an underpinning value of Improvising Generations and the wider work that we, as BEEE Creative, do. Participants demonstrated so much care in their engagement with others, helping them to achieve simple activities such as getting up from the floor, lifting each others' mood, ensuring people are heard, showing interest in each others' lives, welcoming new people when they can't quite find their place, and realising through dancing and making music together that everyone's differences were key in helping solve the creative problems they faced together. As one participant remarked:

"actually, our differences are the very things that solve the problems, it's like a catalyst or a game of ping pong where each idea leads to the next."

Both artists and participants observed that the activities themselves became the conduit through which to connect with other people and build belonging to the wider group. Dancing, making, playing and walking became ways to interact with other people, both within the artistic activities themselves, but also significantly in the social activities which surrounded the art-making. Being able to walk outside and chat about parts of one's life beyond the project acted as an important way to build relationships amongst the different groups; ensuring time was set aside for tea and cake also fostered dialogue amongst the groups so that old friendships were cemented and new friendships forged. Ensuring time for this kind of social chat became an important feature in our online delivery too; alternating weeks of arts activity with social get-togethers helped to maintain connections despite physical distancing.

As a result of deepening connections, regular participants felt more able to share parts of their lives, growing in confidence and demonstrating more willingness to take risks in their participation. Numerous participants commented on the safe environment that had been created, where equity amongst participants was a fundamental driver for their continued involvement because they could be honest and authentic, and trust the support the group provided for them.

Lessening Loneliness

Motivation and commitment
Of the participants interviewed, all remarked on how the sense of belonging to the groups gave them a strong sense of purpose, to engage fully in the process of working together and invest time and effort in contributing to the groups' activities. They discussed the sense of shared responsibility they had to each other and this acted as an incentive to come along, even when one's mental health was compromised:

"seeing each other provides just some respite for that short period."

"it's a powerful feeling, not letting the external environment affect us, the pressure of everyday life."

This shared responsibility was heightened during lockdown, when much of the activity happened online, as tasks were set and there were dates for their completion. As one participant remarked, the sense of expectation from oneself and others provided focus, guarding against the loss of friendships:

"From my point of view, I haven't been lonely. But I can see that this project, had I been in that position, would have been a lifesaver. Having said that, it's been a lifesaver for me too, in giving me a focus and things to do all throughout the project but particularly during lockdown. Because when lockdown first happened, it was, well, what are we going to do now? That there was a sense of loss? And so this, this has really mitigated that sense of loss."

And with such focus, participants explained that there was an imperative for them to turn up, despite the difficulties of each day and because of that, a sense of significance in the activities emerged, that participants were contributing to something beyond themselves.

The impact of technology
In delivering sessions on Zoom, we noticed the paradoxical effect of technology on tackling feelings of loneliness for different members of the groups. For some, the use of technology became an equaliser, particularly amongst groups who were shielding and unable to leave the house. Others learnt new skills and gained confidence in their use of technology. The opportunities that technology provided enabled one participant to *"stop disintegrating."* Another participant exclaimed that at the start of lockdown, they were scared of becoming lonely, that all their normal ways of living in the world were curtailed:

"I'm an outgoing person and I love going out and doing things, and I felt zoom really brought me back to myself … because when you are on your own you think about things. But once you've got something… to do the videos and see people, you know you've got Zoom today. Now I've been on Zoom with my family, which is lovely, I can do things to get my brain working and my body working."

Lessening Loneliness

In online sessions, participants were often asked to complete writing, drawing and dancing tasks at home in their own time and for them to share these artefacts for the next online session. However, this flipped approach to working, for some, highlighted the fact they lived alone, particularly as tasks were completed individually, even though they always contributed to a larger group-based activity or product. Whilst not directly contributing to participants feeling any more lonely, in face-to-face activities, of course, such activities were more likely to be completed with others during the workshop time, and for some, this contrast highlighted the sense of being physically alone when that would not normally be the case.

Others were unable to connect with the group because of digital inequities; some encountered access issues in using screens and others were reluctant to use the internet through fear, preference or lack of familiarity. One participant said that they particularly felt left out of activity because she was reluctant to come online. In response, we diversified our provision to also include offline non-technology-based activities such as activity packs and pen pal activities, promoting involvement in dance, nurturing relationships between old friends and more recently, building connections with others beyond the group. The importance of regularly checking in with everyone, whether online, off-line or face-to-face is a mainstay of our activity too.

Welcoming people in
In evaluating what did and didn't work artistically in supporting participants to build connections amongst one another, we noticed the importance of always greeting participants individually, allowing time for social interactions and always being very clear about the purpose of the work, who we were and what we did. We focussed on this particularly when working with new people, and the reiteration of these principles enabled the shared value of inclusion to become a cornerstone to the way of working for the organisation, artists and participants alike.

Regular participants who had been with the group for a while were intrinsic in helping new participants feel welcome. When young people attended, they often found it especially difficult to connect with adults and didn't know what to say or how to make the first move. Yet, when reflecting on these experiences, two young people explained how they were helped to break the ice:

"I've made friends because the older people just come and talked to me and asked me questions about me and it's been nice and they also have so many stories that they've told me. I feel, like, they just have, like, such wisdom and that's, like, really nice."

"I remember on my first day, we had a conversation. I hadn't even met her before, we hadn't spoken but we just had a conversation about our backgrounds, she just asked me about school and that was really nice because it's someone that you've never met before, but you are able to create that connection."
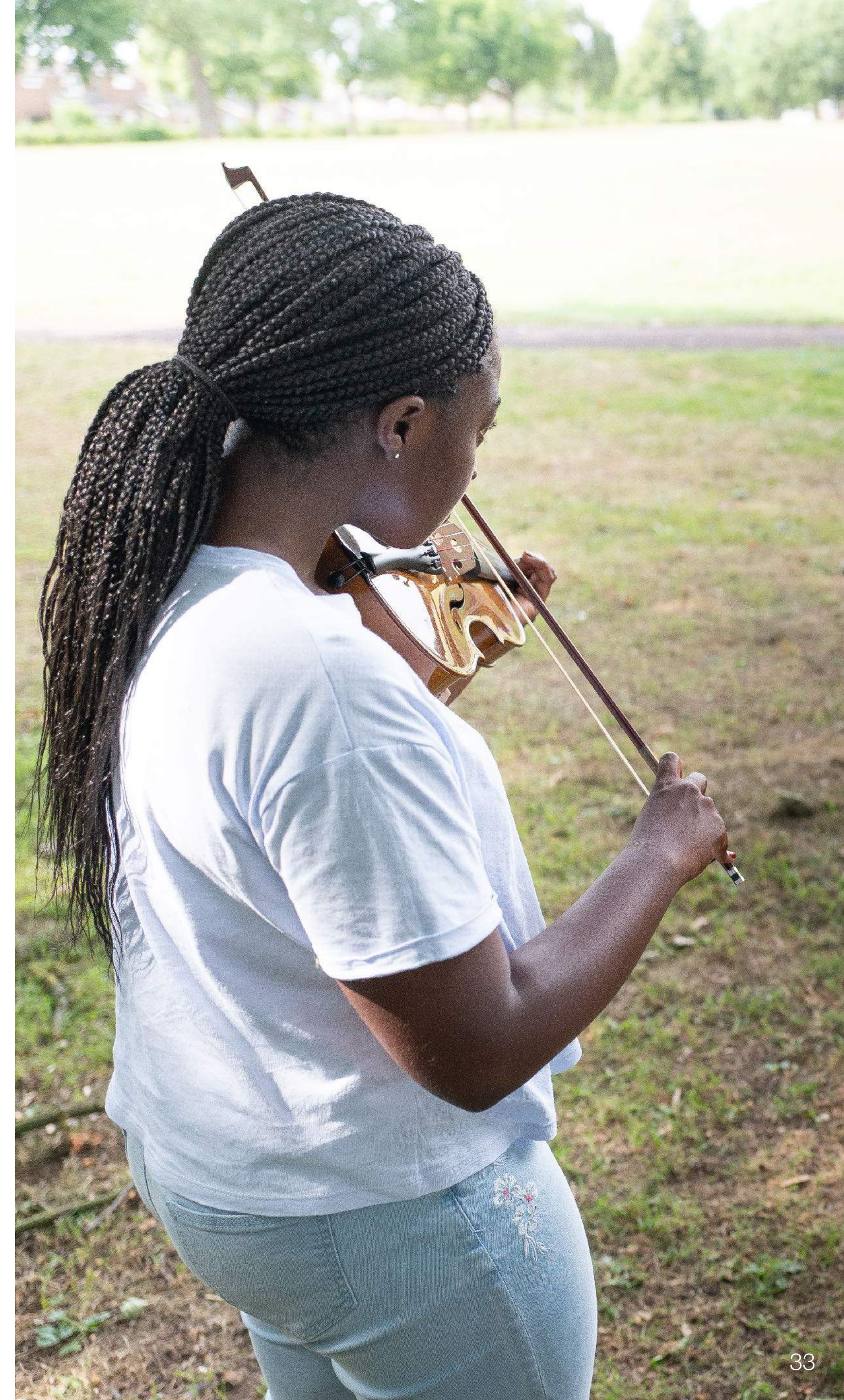
Lessening Loneliness

Nevertheless, this doesn't always work for everyone joining the project. One participant felt very awkward because of the strong connections between existing group members; because of the strong bond between participants, she felt left out and did not feel able to return.

As the project has evolved, in response to feedback like this and in reaching new participants, the role of volunteers, particularly during targeted residencies has been especially important in enabling new people to hear about the work from people like them, and to gain insight into the significance of being involved in Improvising Generations in their lives. Volunteers were mainly drawn from the regular group of participants and worked with artists in targeted residencies. They talked about the project and the value they placed on doing these kinds of activities with other people. The volunteers acted as familiar faces for new participants if they decided to join regular activity, acting rather like a buddy-system to help new participants settle in.

Improvisation
The artistic approach to Improvising Generations was based on meeting people where they are at, using improvisation to support the diverse physical and cognitive abilities of the groups. From a dance perspective, this allowed freedom in response to tasks, with ideas emanating from participants and promoting shared ownership over what they did. Many participants discussed the importance of non-verbal communication and eye contact in fostering connections between them. Through embodied connections between each other, without the need for verbal language, relationships were forged and strengthened. Proximity and the use of touch were also important tools in this process, although for some, being physically close to other people could be misinterpreted. For some new participants the improvisatory approach could be daunting. It became important then, for the ways of working and processes employed in Improvising Generations to be clearly articulated throughout, to take small steps, using a logical progression of tasks to help new participants grow in confidence.

The improvisatory approach was also difficult to balance, especially when there was an emphasis on producing an outcome such as a film. From a musical perspective, it was difficult to work with diverse musicians with different skills and often with little improvisatory experience, whilst trying to compliment dance material in real time. Whilst the dance could continue to be improvised in a filmed piece, using recordings of the improvisatory music from filmed content became logistically difficult as the quality was compromised. Additionally, music would often become unintentionally discordant and disconnected from the movement as musicians learned to improvise as an ensemble, in relation to dancers' movement. We found that the music needed to be composed for it to work in a filmic context, given the skills of the musicians and the film-based product. However, when workshops are focussed on exploration, the relationship between music and dance was critical for many participants in building the connections between them. Sometimes the music led the movement, enabling expression amongst the dancers; many dancers found it especially powerful when they realised their movement was guiding the musical accompaniment.

Although we began Improvising Generations with young musicians, their exams precluded their continued involvement at times. To support Matt, we included Jason Anderson, an additional professional musician in some residencies and workshops, which enabled more improvisatory scope and tonal shifts between instruments. These variations appeared to support how the dance participants were able to make connections between the music and dance elements of the project and between themselves.

Lessening Loneliness

An example of activity that promoted connection amongst participants

A particularly successful and tangible activity which promoted connection amongst participants from a dance perspective was the 'stick' task. Working in pairs, with the stick between each other's hands or index fingers, each duet had to push and yield, physically listening to each other's responses and adapting their movement to ensure that the stick did not fall. This task extended to moving through the space, dancing with the stick and maintaining the physical connection of the stick between each other. The artists discussed that this task in particular provided a common ground and that participants have to work out how best to control the prop to complete the task that is being asked of them:

"it sort of shreds that inhibition doesn't it, because you're too busy worrying about dropping the stick and figuring that out. I think it's that sense of playfulness that came from it and … that actually brings around a different type of connection"

Different types of recorded and live music were included in this activity to prompt different ways of moving in response to the accompaniment they heard. Partnerships were changed around so people worked with different people to establish and build different relationships. Participants and artists developed the task together, building and layering complexity in an experimental way that responded to what was happening in the moment.

After exploring ideas, the musicians and dancers began the task afresh which gave the task a sense of performance. Matt observed that this provided a:

"sense of performance, it was as if the community of people performing, worked together, sort of instinctively; they had that close relationship that enabled them to respond to the music and each other, and enabled everybody to create a piece form nothing, together. The improvised music really helped foster the creation of that piece and in turn, doing so made the community sort of work together and become a family that have managed to figure out that nobody really knows what is going to happen but they respond to each other and have that real sense of enjoyment in bringing people together."

The artists went on to discuss the impact of live music and how tasks immediately become more engaging when live music begins, relating how the energy from live music glued people together, connecting them in the activities they are doing. There came about a unifying objective, and although its outcome was not necessarily known in advance, the journey towards the goal was one which everyone could contribute to. It forced participants to be in the moment and to be utterly attentive to what was happening and to respond to changes as they occurred. The artists concluded that it was that process between music and dance improvisation which had the potential to bring very different people together equitably.

Lessening Loneliness

The significance of being outside

For many participants, the opportunity to go outside was very welcome, both in the project and targeted residencies. Nevertheless, there were challenges which meant that not everyone wanted or could join in outdoor activity. As the project progressed, it was more important to ensure that outdoor spaces were safe, accessible and local for those taking part, and whilst the creative objectives were important, the safety factors were more important.

When working outside was possible, participants commented on the sense of place, positioning themselves and discussing their sense of connection to something bigger than themselves, that being outside during the project provided. Walking with others offered time to share stories, reminisce and recall previous visits. Artistically, Laura explained that working outside is:

"a way to value your surroundings and establish a sense of belonging; I was considering the history, what can you imagine in this place that happened, and now imagine a new scenario, a new use of the space."

One regular participant in particular often avoided going outside, but at The Box Moor Trust expressed a real sense of achievement in being able to get up and down the hill. Some felt their energy change, getting out of breath and flushed they said made them feel alive.

During the first lockdown, regular online participants were asked to contribute photographs which represented how participating in music and dance made them feel and many of those images captured the importance of outside scenes in participants' lives as a point of connection for them. One participant used this as a metaphor to explain how dance has helped her understand herself more clearly and connect with other people. They wrote:

"A cherry tree in full bloom set against the manicured hedge of our neighbours opposite and the stark blue of the sky. I love the colour contrasts. It also, I think, reflects me in that I've been told throughout my life that I can appear a bit aloof or stand-offish, which is never my intention, but I'm not naturally gregarious and used to worry too much about what "people" might think. I see that in the hedge, which is always clipped and never permitted to become out of control. However, dance has convinced me that it really doesn't matter what others might think, I'm allowed to move freely, to lose my inhibitions and be frothy and exuberant – a bit like the pink blossom. All this in the company of lovely people whom I would perhaps not have met without the catalyst of dance."

After The Box Moor Trust project, connections to the outdoors lessened, in part because of the restrictions that lockdown brought, but also partly because of the logistics in ensuring that everyone could access the outdoors if they wished, and the limitations of creating and recording music in the outdoor context. After lockdown restrictions were lifted and we were able to resume some COVID-secure ways of dancing face-to-face, we facilitated workshops in outdoor spaces once again which rekindled the significance of the outdoors for the project. After being confined and unable to see people for so long, dancing outside now represented a sense of freedom and liberation for the participants.
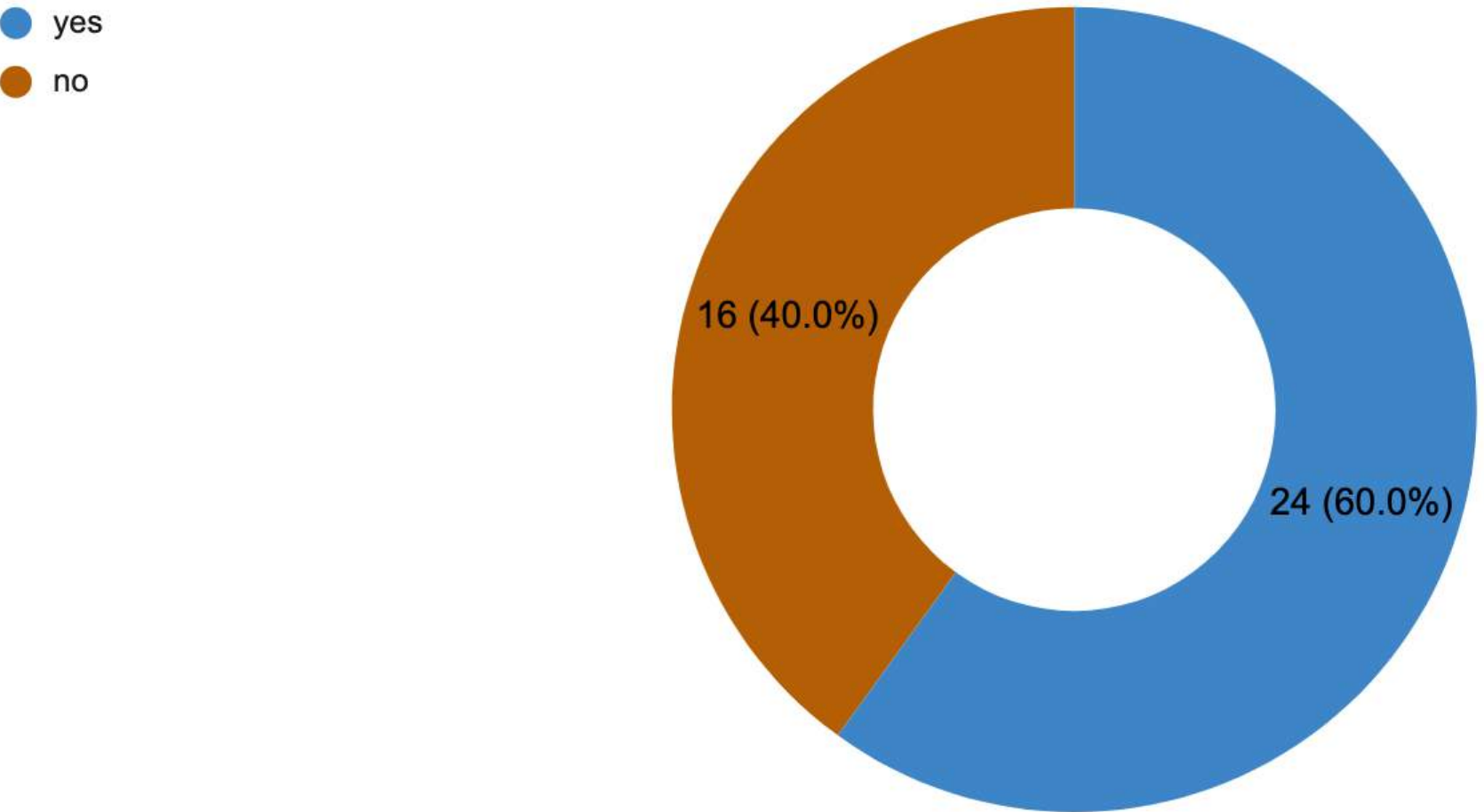
Widening Participation

Reaching new people

One of the particular challenges we faced was reaching people beyond the existing network of participants we know as an organisation. This was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in not being able to build connections face-to-face with new people. Our data shows that 60% of participants had worked with BEEE Creative before, and over 85% of them had danced before doing dance styles such as ballet, contemporary or street, and social dance such as salsa, line dancing, Lindy-hop and disco. Some had trained in dance more formally in the recent or more distant past (e.g. Laban Guild Creative Dance Leaders Course, London Contemporary Dance School). Other participants took part in dance performance groups.

Although we could observe the positive wellbeing and socialisation effects of Improvising Generations on those taking part, we were keen to find ways to diversify participants and reach new audiences. This led us to the strategic redesign of the project, to no longer deliver project residencies in parks during holiday periods, but focus on targeted residencies in people's own locations. The aim was for these to act as one-off projects, but also provided a way to feed the regular group and welcome new participants if/ when they felt ready to do so.

This approach required working in partnership with charities acting as gatekeepers to new participants. The outreach strategy was, and continues to be, very time-consuming managerially. Time is an important factor to consider in planning this way of working, building trust from the charities themselves, then supporting participants to attend, managing their expectations about what they will be able to experience and how it might support them in their lives. The targeted residencies were successful in reaching groups of older people or those with disabilities. A particular challenge has been in meeting and recruiting young people to the project. Despite information being shared, talks offered and in-school taster workshops, the combined pressure on school curricula, as well as the nature of young people's lives (studying, working etc.) has meant less take up amongst this group of people. These factors are in addition to the aforementioned fear that some young people may feel in joining a group which is so diverse and possibly beyond their previous experiences; finding ways to reach young people through different avenues and normalising difference amongst different groups in our society remains a priority going forward.

Improvising Generations: Had Participants Worked with BEEE Creative Before?

- yes
- no

16 (40.0%)

24 (60.0%)

Improvising Generations: Participants' Previous Dance Experience

- yes
- no

6 (14.0%)

37 (86.0%)
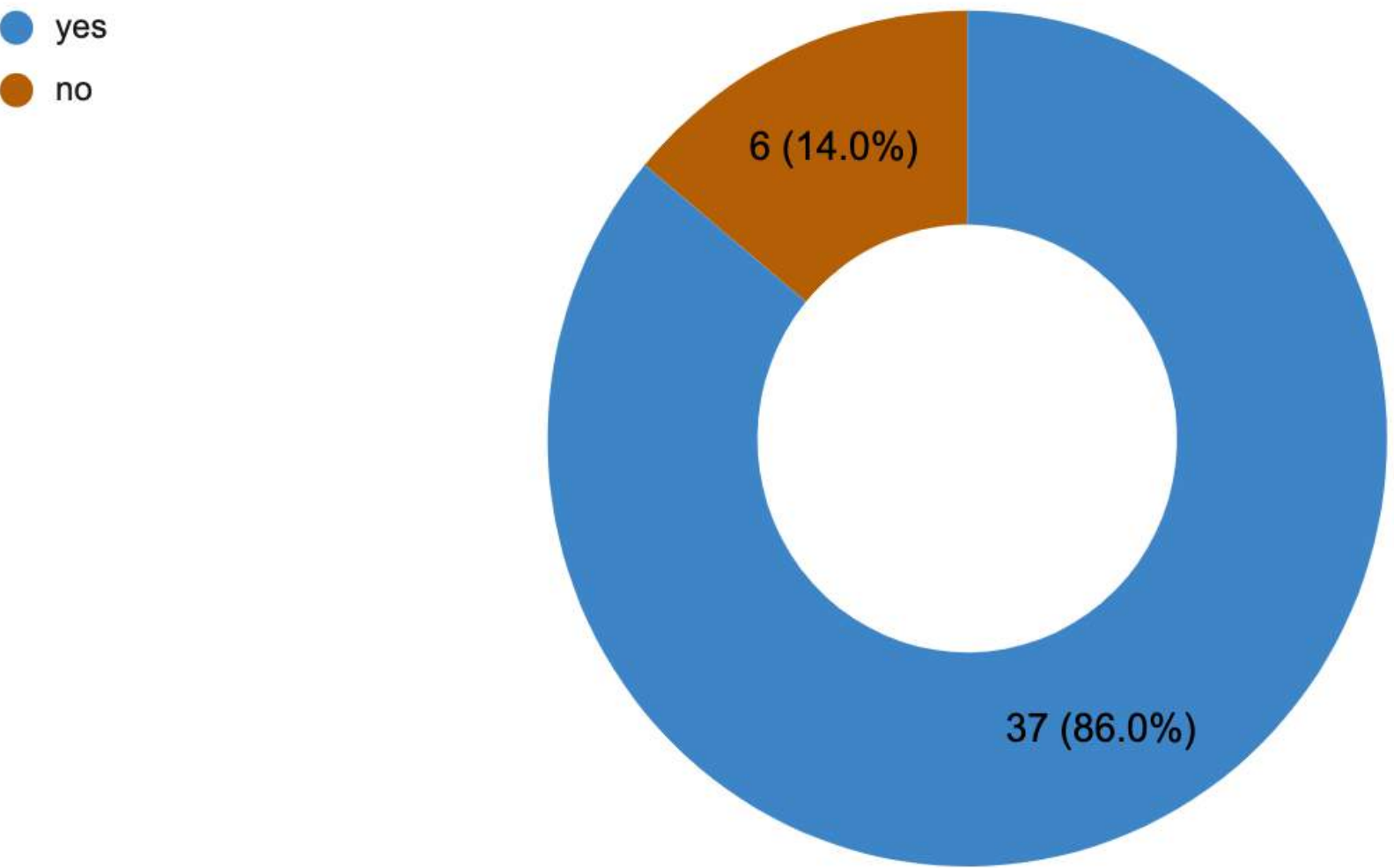
Widening Participation

Modes of communication

It was important for us to understand how participants found out about our work. For this project, most participants found out about the project through their own networks and word of mouth such as friends, family and teachers. Current online marketing formats that rely on internet sources and social media were not used by any of the participants in the project, and indeed we found that most of our marketing and evaluation strategy required print and postal approaches, an additional time-based challenge for the management and organisation of the project.

The role of volunteers has become an important addition to widening participation and ensuring that we have influential advocates for our work is vital. Again, these approaches take time to establish, as does being able to describe and really help people understand what the project is about, and how the work happens in order to manage people's expectations. Finding and using the appropriate language, as well as drawing on other formats such as the films and documentation we have produced for Improvising Generations is an important part of this approach.

Improvising Generations: How Participants Find Out About the Project
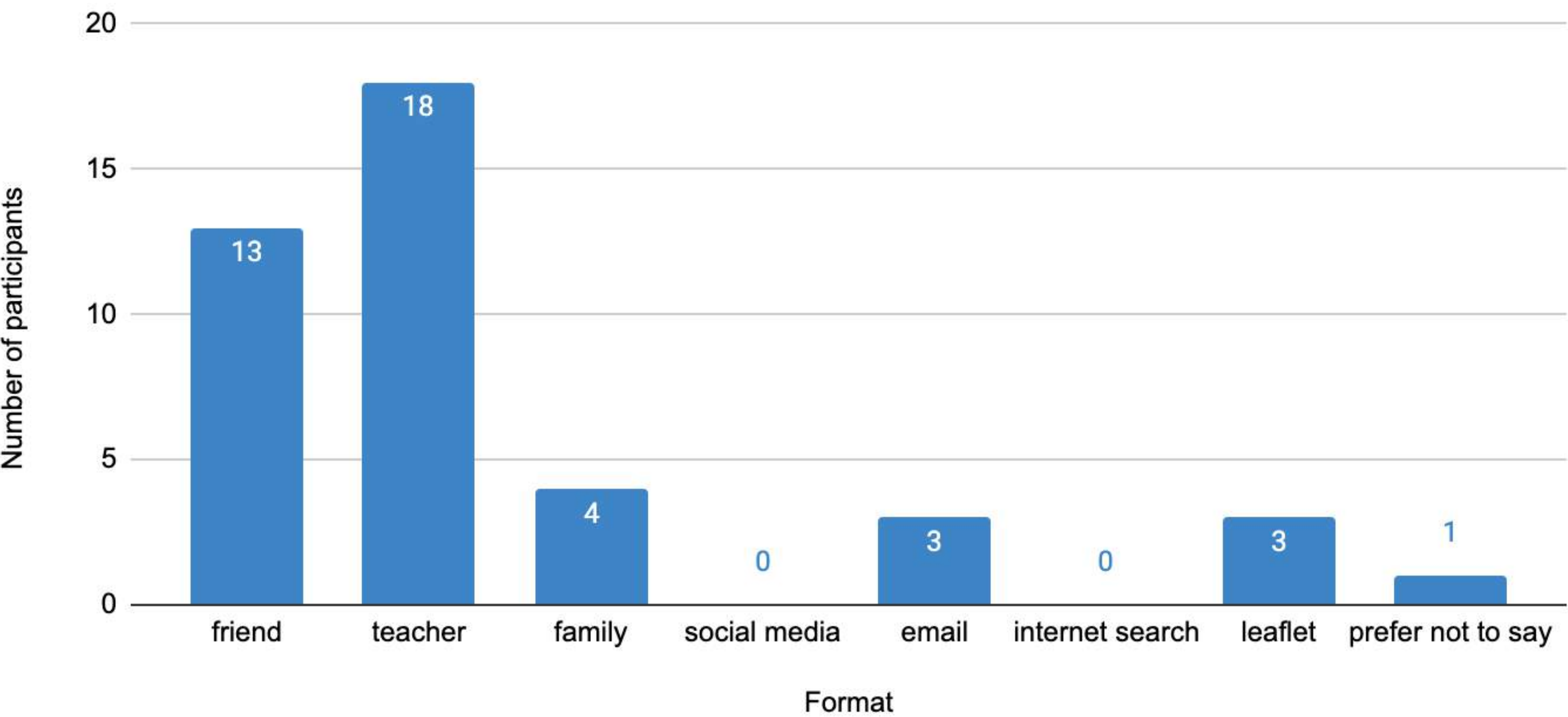
Widening Participation

Programming perspectives

A significant area of learning for the organisation in programming Improvising Generations has been to provide a diverse programme of activity for a variety of people, that considers when activity happens, time of day, location and mode of delivery, that can give people different options for how they wish to engage with the project. Certainly, this diversity of provision has been highlighted through the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, by offering online and offline opportunities, face-to-face engagement, creative activities which extend beyond music and dance that can be completed synchronously and asynchronously, offering activities in highly-localised areas for specific communities to access as well as regular workshops, and simply keeping in touch with people with a friendly call. All are activities which fall into the Improvising Generations' remit.

In understanding what loneliness is and how it is experienced, and what this means for programming projects such as Improvising Generations, Carrie writes:

"I have been mulling over the question about loneliness and what I have learnt. I'm not sure I have any clear answer. However, I think actually the learning is just that - it is really hard to define. Going into the project, I may have had preconceptions/ misconceptions or even a very generic view of what loneliness is and how it is experienced. Through the project, I have come to understand that loneliness is really less to do with factors or circumstances like if you live alone, have less or more social interactions or the number of family or friends someone has (although they may contribute). But more to do with the personal, emotional responses to those factors. From a programming manager's perspective it's really challenging to identify who the people are that are experiencing loneliness (unless they self-identify). So, with my project manager's hat on, tackling loneliness is the same as dealing with barriers to participation - it is unique to each individual and our response and the actions we put in place to support, as best we can, need to be tailored accordingly."

Enhancing Subjective Wellbeing

Quantitative Trends

We asked all regular participants to complete the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale at the start, in the middle and at the end of the project. We also asked project residency participants to complete the scale at the start and end of the project to see if there were any very short-term wellbeing effects even after a few days of taking part in Improvising Generations projects. We chose not to collect subjective wellbeing data from targeted residency participants, so as to focus on the impact of the work on their feelings of loneliness specifically. Although regular participants also completed this questionnaire in May/ June 2020 as outlined on page 28, this data is not included here.

We summed participants' responses to create a global score for each participants' subjective wellbeing; these sums have been averaged to understand the mean group subjective wellbeing scores and how these changed over time. We saw increases in subjective wellbeing at all time points for both groups, suggesting that our activity can have a positive impact on how people feel good and function well. We can also compare these scores to adult population norms in England which is 52.3. Regular monthly participants began the project scoring lower than the average population norm, although over time, we saw subjective wellbeing improve to meet these population norms. Over short periods of time, we saw project residency participants' subjective wellbeing exceeding population norms at the start of their participation and then improve by some 4 points. Of course, it is not clear whether these changes are wholly attributable to the Improvising Generations project, nor whether they were sustained over time. All averaged scores are higher than cut-off points for subjective ill-being, suggesting that our participants have largely positive perceptions of their wellbeing overall.

Data Collection Period	Regular Monthly Participants	Project Residency Participants
Pre-Project	49	54
Mid-Project	52	n/a
Post-Project	53	58

Participants' Subjective Wellbeing

"Life becomes more colourful"
Many participants expressed how their participation in Improvising Generations changed how they felt both physically and psychologically. Numerous collective discussions focussed on how dancing, to music, being outside, with others like and unlike them, made them feel alive and at ease with themselves and with those around them. Some participants focussed on the physical benefits of dancing, helping them to feel that they had enhanced their fitness by dancing. Older participants observed that despite expending energy, dancing helped them to feel less fatigued during the day and sleep better at night.

Participants also discussed the mood-enhancing benefits of participating, such as this young volunteer:

"I noticed a pattern of feeling uplifted after every workshop. It doesn't matter how crumbly I may feel in the morning or how tired or even if I'm having a good day anyway, I have always left the workshops feeling positive and motivated and just generally better than I did before."

Another participant explained how Improvising Generations made life a little more colourful, giving them a lift, energising them and enabling an emotional expression in relation to music and others which was a very special part of their lives.

"Life's become a bit more colourful, the creative processes help. Things become a little bit monochrome. The use of the imagination and thinking about how to make something, having ideas and thoughts really gives me a good sense of wellbeing especially in that shared environment."

Aiding mental health
Participants living with mental health diagnoses were particularly forthcoming in how Improvising Generations helped them to feel more confident and have an improved sense of self-esteem. One participant felt nurtured which contributed to a greater acceptance of who they are:

"The dance makes me feel, like, something wild. Untamed. And it's only recently where I've actually started to realise that I've found an art form which allows me to do anything. Because you aren't trying to conform to anything, you are just making a big statement to the outside world that says, 'well this is who I am, if you don't like me, it's not my problem.' Once you've made that discovery it is so powerful, so transformational. It transforms the way you act. It's that discovery, I am a dancer. I don't just dance to make up the numbers."

For others living with degenerative conditions such as dementia, activities helped them remember things they might otherwise forget:

"I look back over the things we have been engaged with and can remember so many delightful moments quite clearly, which is comforting as I forget much else."

Participants' Subjective Wellbeing

Sensing achievement
Although not all the activities which made up Improvising Generations were goal or outcome-oriented, many participants discussed the value they placed on enjoying the journey involved in working towards a goal. The sense of purpose and then achievement contributed positively to their wellbeing. Some said how astonished they were, to have created so much in a short time period; others commented on the sense of power they felt in being able to improvise and create their own movements and music, taking the initiative and contributing to the group's overall development. The notion of feeling empowered was a theme which resounded in the data we collected. Many acknowledged that the work took them out of their comfort zone with one participant commenting that:

"I always think back to this and I'm like, well, I did that, so I can do this."

The knock-on effect of participants sensing their achievements in this way, was the confidence that it brought, as one participant explained through this danced encounter:

"I was very brave with Carrie, it was a tiny little incident, but I don't know her very well at all except through a bit of organisational stuff. She was dancing near me and sat on the floor and she started to roll back very slowly and I just pushed my foot forwards so she landed on my foot and she just left it there, which was delightful. I was starting to get up and my hand touched her hair, and I just fondled it a little bit and she just let me, and it was very powerful."

Learning
The opportunity for life-long learning was important to a number of participants' subjective wellbeing. In many ways, perspectives of what dance and music could be were widened and this brought new experiences for many. In particular, shifting activities online brought opportunities to learn new technological skills with support from the BEEE Creative team, not just in terms of functionality, but also in using technology for creative arts-making activities as well. Other more implicit learning outcomes were however also important, as one participant describes:

"I've been able to learn so much more about myself and other people, we've had time to absorb the energy from every person, the way they move, the way they interact and I've learned that everyone is so unique. It's challenged me and I want to be challenged again, to understand a little about other people's challenges and realise the amazing gift of keeping on being able to learn that we have here."

Pride
All participants expressed huge pride in their contributions to Improvising Generations and of the wider group as a whole, particularly in the context of not necessarily identifying as artists per se, and yet being able to make high quality art with normal people going about their normal lives. Participants' readily shared their work and were eager to spread the word about the groups' activities to their families but also their wider networks, to encourage new people to get involved.

Participants' Subjective Wellbeing

Being seen
The artists particularly noticed the impact on participants of dancing outside where others might see them, of being filmed and of being witnessed through watching the film. They observed participants feeling validated in what they were doing by being seen in their performance of the movement material. Laura explained:

"the beauty of being seen to offer something that attracted new people passing to enquire and take interest. I feel like if we weren't coming out of a quiet isolation, passers-by would have been less inclined to notice something new happening, but with usual intrigue or the joy of seeing community activity after so long, we seem to have attracted attention in person."

The sense of empowerment is again critical here, linking participants' sense of pride in the activity and of the group. Whilst participants themselves did not discuss this often, one participant described the sense of being noticed through the relationship of the music and dance itself:

"having the music adds a quality, bringing awareness to what you're doing, a quality through a different medium. It describes what you're doing, so you feel 'oh, someone is seeing what I'm doing', that's the magic of it."

Gratitude
Participants' sense of gratitude grew throughout the project, especially in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and the continuation of activities which focussed on bringing participants together in different ways. Participants reflected on how they felt privileged to be able to be involved in such a project, particularly when other aspects of life were challenging. Others talked of their appreciation of small acts of kindness, such as keeping participants in close contact and unexpectedly receiving packs and postcards in the post, especially when liberty and physical connection had been taken away during lockdown. Ensuring that spaces were COVID-secure, that there was support in getting online, transferring digital files and logging on to Zoom were gratefully acknowledged by participants so that they were able to,

"keep dancing even though everything else is closed down. I am just so grateful for this experience, an experience I had never expected when I retired."

Gratitude was reciprocally expressed by artists and by us, as an organisation, too. Our gratitude in working with people so inspired by the project contributed to our own wellbeing too.

Participants' Subjective Wellbeing

Implications of Improvising Generations on other parts of life
By being involved in Improvising Generations, participants discussed the impact that the project had on other parts of their lives. One very tangible outcome for participants often discussed, was simply being more connected with distant family by being more confident with technology. The importance of supporting and upskilling participants technologically, whilst not an explicit aim of the project, has really enhanced their quality of life in this way.

More philosophically, for one participant, they noticed they had a new outlook on what art can be, that their perceptions had shifted, they noticed simple things much more and had a far greater enjoyment of nature and interest in photography. Another focussed on finding the importance they have placed on others:

"it's that blend, some people can be the spice, some people can be the chickpeas, ha ha, it's just a lovely metaphor for how rich life can be if we only take the time to step back and observe and realise that such opportunities become quite rare."

For many, their consciousness has altered, variously described as growth, change and awareness. The opportunity for change has enhanced participants' wellbeing from their own perspectives, through opportunities to learn, achieve and have a sense of pride in what they do.

The Magic Ingredients

In talking about the magic ingredients, the artists discussed that they felt this came about when the entire group worked together creatively through improvisation. Because the practice of improvisation includes spontaneity, but structure, risk and playfulness, artists and participants connected this to being in the moment and feeling authentic. It seemed to occur when the participants taking part in the music and dance were authentically responsive to one another through their different artistic mediums. The participants felt similarly. When asked what they thought the magic ingredients were in Improvising Generations, the things that made it work, for helping them feel more connected to others and feel well within themselves, participants responded:

"it's the moments of interplay between music and dance, the music sets the mood, the dance paints the pictures, it's a magical relationship."

"how it elicits the movement from different people, how we interact with one another to come up with a narrative was just very powerful. We didn't know quite what to expect, and then it happens. The connection with different people is just very touching."

"variety is the spice of life. It never becomes boring and repetitive. It doesn't matter whether we've done filming, wherever we've done it, and with whomever, it has been a different experience each time."

"the magic ingredient really is the inclusiveness, the diversity and the unexpectedness, and the fact that every generation can bring something to the whole."

"it's the creativity from all the other elements. You can't do it by yourself, or if you do, it's something different."

"there are no rules, like there's no right or wrong. You can do anything you want. It doesn't matter where you're from, your background, what you can do. It's open to everybody. That's the main thing… and that is the magic."

"the magic is this. In the words of Billy Elliot, 'I feel a change. I feel the change in my body. It's like, electricity, yeah, electricity."

Participants' Overall Responses

We asked the participants to describe the impact of the project on them in three words. A summary of their responses form this word cloud; they placed particular importance on the collaborative nature of the work, which focussed on connecting with other people in new, creative ways, with new people. For many, participants emphasised the sense of transformation they felt through participating in the project, helping them to feel alive and have a sense of freedom.

Concluding Thoughts

What was the impact of our work on participants?
As a project, Improvising Generations reduced feelings of loneliness through short-and longer-term participation and, despite the challenges of a global pandemic, helped to ensure that the frequency with which loneliness is experienced did not increase. The project positively contributed to participants' subjective wellbeing, helping them to feel good and function well across both short- and longer-term participation.

Participants reported that Improvising Generations provided a sense of belonging, aiding their motivation and commitment to continue to attend because of their perceived responsibilities to others. Whilst asking some participants to step outside their comfort zone, being outside offered many a sense of achievement, contributing to perceptions of improved mental health. In producing work for others to see, participants also described their pride in what they had done; being seen by others was a point of significance in participants' and artists' evaluations. Learning new technological skills was a real delight to many, as something they never would have encountered were it not for Improvising Generations and need to transfer the project using online tools. Overall, the project brought "more colour" to people's lives and as a result, participants and artists alike expressed gratitude in having such an opportunity to make art and be together.

What did we learn artistically and as an organisation?
Organisationally, we learnt about the importance of adapting to the context we find ourselves in as agilely as possible, to trust our creative instincts to support people's engagement with what we offer. Overall, we noticed that it is difficult to identify lonely people and that, in widening participation for this project and removing barriers to help them take part, we need to be responsive to the individual's needs. Simple acts such as touching base with people, welcoming participants in before we start dancing and making music together are key drivers in this practice. This has also meant that we have diversified our offer significantly, to include a blend of face-to-face and online participation opportunities, sending out activity packs, encouraging painting, drawing, writing, photography and filming activities and ensuring that opportunities to drink tea and eat cake are always included!

Artistically, the basis of improvisation is important as it offers an opportunity for people to be met where they are at. And yet for many, improvisation is daunting, and so through this project, we were reminded of the importance of clearly articulating the working process throughout, to take small steps, and logically progress tasks to help new participants grow in confidence. The combination of live music and dance was vital in glueing people together. There came about a unifying objective, where everyone could contribute. Building connections between people seemed to occur when participants were authentically responsive to one another through their different artistic mediums. Improvisation helped participants to be in the moment and to respond to changes as they occurred, and we conclude, has the potential to bring very different people together equitably.

Improvising Generations Connectedness

Walk, crawl, roll and run
Slide and glide, reach high
Whirling, swirling, spiralling down
The journey's only just begun

In the shared dance space
Roaming together
Body and mind connected
Buried dreams come up for air

As we gather and form
A circle
With invisible threads that connect us
Across the space
We have courage to
Break away
Explore
And still connect
As we weave for ourselves
A new dance

The music begins
Sometimes bright and sparky
Sometimes dark and eerie
Can be sweet and soothing
Can have twists and turns
Always an invitation to
Connect to a new experience
And tell it out

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