

Creative Connections

Evaluation Summary July 2025



BEEE CREATIVE
Dance connections in Herts & Beds

Vacani
SCHOOL OF DANCE



Contents

01 Introduction

02 Term 1

03 Term 2

04 Term 3

05 Outcomes



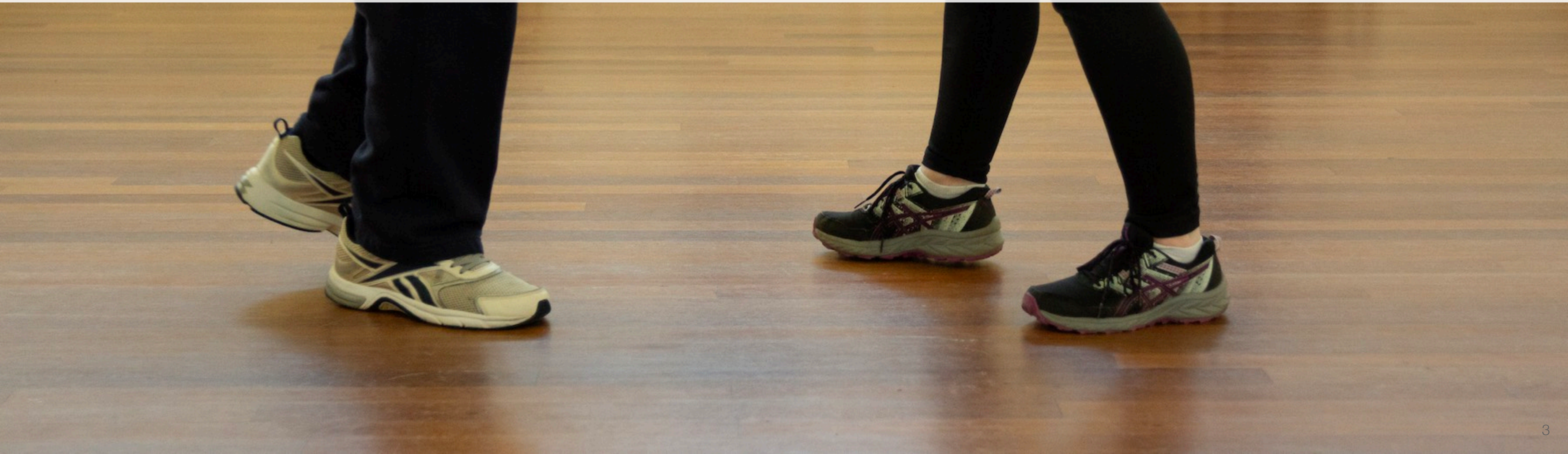
Creative Connections

Creative Connections is a community dance participation programme that brings together adults with learning disabilities and those with neurodegenerative conditions such as Parkinson's in separate sessions, to explore movement, identity and social connection. At its heart, the project:

- Encourages creative expression and personal agency through participant-led dance practice.
- Tackles social isolation by fostering trust, companionship and shared experiences.
- Promotes equity and visibility, challenging assumptions around disability and lived conditions through joyful participation in dance.

Sessions are designed to be flexible, responsive and inclusive, with facilitators adapting to individual and group needs, enabling participation across a broad spectrum of abilities. Participants report a stronger sense of self, expressing their identities through signature movements and creative choice-making; the value in building meaningful social relationships, often referring to the group as “family”; and increased confidence and willingness to engage in this and other community activities.

Key outcomes include that participants engage fully, often in ways that carers have not previously seen. Participants also take active leadership roles, leading segments of class, suggesting themes and thinking about how they might support reaching other groups.



Introduction

Project Summary
Aims and Objectives
Project Design
Evaluation Design

01



INTRODUCTION

Project Summary

Creative Connections is an inclusive dance programme that brings together adults with a range of learning disabilities, and neurological conditions and their carers, to foster creativity, connection and wellbeing through movement. From September 2024 to July 2025, Creative Connections was delivered in Central Bedfordshire (Amphill, Silsoe and Leighton Buzzard) and aimed to prioritise access and agency, creating spaces where participants could feel seen, heard and valued.

Participants in Amphill and Leighton Buzzard lived independently and travelled to community centres in which our activity took place. These participants lived with neurodegenerative conditions such as Parkinson's. The dance sessions in Silsoe were run in partnership with MacIntyre. They were attended by adults with learning disabilities and support workers that came from MacIntyre centres in Amphill and Milton Keynes.

Led by dance artists, Kezia Jolly, Vacani School of Dance (all groups) and Carrie Washington, BEEE Creative (Silsoe group), the sessions were deeply responsive to participants, grounded in inclusive facilitation that supported individual expression while nurturing group cohesion. Creative exploration was centred around themes chosen and developed collaboratively, that sparked imagination and had a personal resonance. Beyond dance, the sessions served as vital spaces of social connection, where participants built trust, confidence and friendship.

By actively challenging barriers to participation and celebrating diverse modes of communication and movement, Creative Connections not only aimed to enhance participants' sense of self and wellbeing, but also promote equity and visibility for disabled communities. It is a model of relational, community dance practice that embraces difference and celebrates those who attend.



INTRODUCTION

Aims of Creative Connections

Creative Connections aimed to build strong relationships across communities, bringing people with a broad spectrum of backgrounds and lived experiences together, by:

- Supporting communities that experience multiple barriers to participation and tackling participants' associated loneliness and isolation;
- Increasing participants' confidence to come out and take part in community activity;
- Challenging assumptions, stereotypes and discrimination by raising awareness of disability and promoting equity.

By using arts activities to value people's resources and individual lived experiences, and as a way to emphasise participants' contributions and voices, the project:

- Provided opportunities to build relationships and engage with a range of different people around a common activity which allowed them to experience something bigger than themselves;
- Created space for participants to experience a sense of enjoyment, fun, play and laughter;
- Offered consistent opportunities for participants to take part and learn new skills.



INTRODUCTION

Project Design

1 year

of activity from September 2024 to July 2025

103 x 1.5 hour

workshops were delivered

72

people were reached by this project



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INTRODUCTION

Evaluation Design

The evaluative focus for the project was on how taking part in Creative Connections could build and support participants’ sense of self and relationality with others.

We asked the questions:

- How are participants made visible, heard and valued in Creative Connections? What does this mean for participants’ sense of self? What is that sense of self?
- What is the significance of dancing in making connections with others? What dance activities, and activities beyond dancing, aid social connection?
- Who are participants connecting with? Why and how? What are the indicators of social connection?
- What approaches in facilitation, artistic values and beliefs aid participants’ social connection? Why? How do these manifest?

Our evaluation took a different focus each term:

Term 1:

How does dancing and being a part of Creative Connections highlight and bring out your character, your identity and who you are?

Term 2:

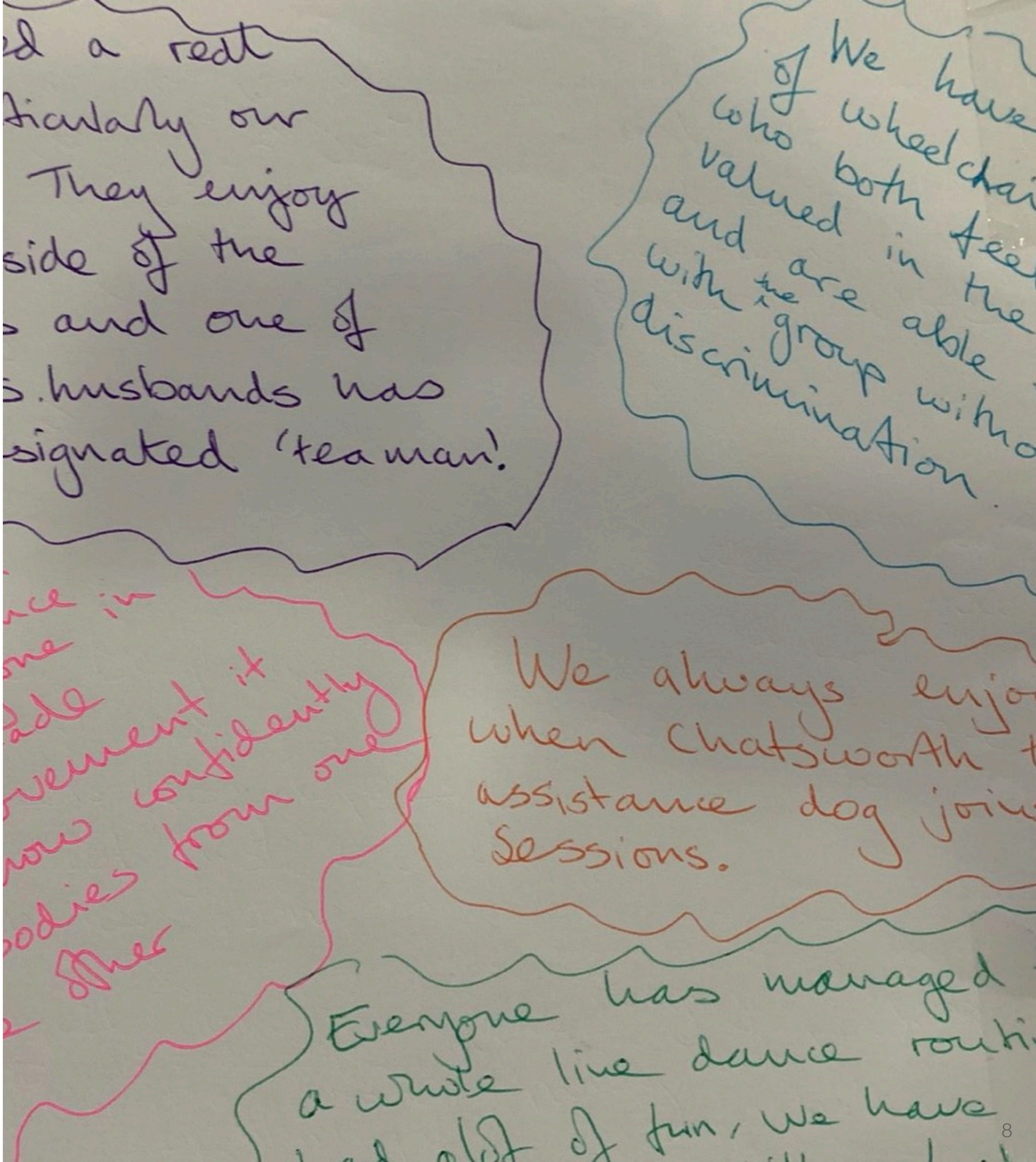
Why do you enjoy dancing in Creative Connections?

Term 3:

Who else can benefit from Creative Connections? Why? How?

Data was gathered using different means. Participants in Ampthill and Leighton Buzzard chatted during and after class, with Kezia gathering data in written form. This, alongside photographs, were added to a scrapbook. These participants were also encouraged to bring artefacts to class, to act as metaphors representing their experiences and understanding. Macintyre participants’ reflections were guided using easy-read activity sheets in which they could write or draw their responses.

Analysis took place in two phases. From September 2024 to May 2025, evaluation for terms 1 and 2 was managed and analysed by Hannah Delaney, mentored by Elsa Urmston. After May 2025, data from term 3 and the project overall was analysed by Elsa before writing this evaluation summary document.



Term 1

Exploring Identity Through Movement

02

TERM 1

Exploring Identity Through Movement

In Term 1, we invited participants to reflect on and express their individual character and identity through dance. Overall, dancing in Creative Connections served as a powerful means for participants to express and affirm their identities, allowing their character to emerge in ways that might not be visible in other aspects of their lives.

Findings suggest that the sessions created a space where participants felt seen and valued, encouraged to explore movement without judgment. Key themes reflected how dancing highlights identity, such as:

- **Adaptability & Presence:**

The mood and dynamics of the groups shifted weekly, influenced by attendance and individual energy. Facilitators responded intuitively to these changes, ensuring each participant could engage in a meaningful way.

- **Confidence & Pride:**

Participants often surprised themselves with their ability to achieve movement challenges. One participant shared their hesitation before attending but later expressed deep satisfaction and pride in their joining in.

- **Feeling Seen & Valued:**

Wheelchair users noted that they felt fully included and recognised within the sessions, an experience they don't always find in other spaces.

- **Creativity & Individuality:**

Participants from MacIntyre contributed ideas in ways that suited them, which was different for each individual, allowing space for one-to-one work, small group environments or, for some, performing individually to the whole group. Facilitators made space for every voice to be heard and movement ideas to be honoured.

- **Emotional Connection & Familiarity:**

Relatable themes, such as food, sparked engagement and brought out unexpected enthusiasm, as seen in one dancer's animated response, something their support worker hadn't witnessed for a long time.

- **Transformation Through Dance:**

Some participants reported feeling disconnected or less active in their daily lives, but in dance sessions, they described themselves as more relaxed, confident, and energetic, often embodying roles they wouldn't otherwise experience.



Term 2

Enjoying Dancing

03

Enjoying Dancing

Participants' enjoyment of dancing was multifaceted, with their reflections including an overwhelming sense of joy, connection and emotional fulfilment. In many ways, term 2's findings point to an expansion from individual identity to relational identity - how participants understand themselves in connection with others.

Participants demonstrated increased agency, asserting their creative ideas and collaborating with others. A greater willingness to support others also surfaced: some participants helped facilitate prop use and themes like *the great outdoors* invited storytelling, with participants sharing personal narratives. This helped create common ground, strengthening group cohesion.

Participants enjoyed dancing in Creative Connections as explained by the following themes:

- **Energy & Vitality:**

One participant's metaphor likened the experience of dancing to inserting batteries in a torch; dance lights them up and energises them.

- **Sense of Community, Belonging & Support:**

Many described the group dynamic as a "comfort blanket," offering warmth and reassurance. Some participants noted that, despite initial hesitations, they were welcomed and quickly felt at ease, reinforcing their desire to keep coming back. The Leighton Buzzard group described their experience as "all being in the same boat," emphasising the emotional and practical support they found in the sessions. Participants treasured their shared experiences, likening the group to family.

- **Freedom & Expression:**

Across all groups, dancers showed enthusiasm when repeating movements they'd created together, reinforcing a shared identity and boosting confidence in their own creative contributions.

- **Physical & Emotional Transformation:**

Participants reported shifts in their mood and energy levels, with some arriving subdued but leaving uplifted. In the MacIntyre session, meaningful moments of connection were witnessed when participants were given the opportunity to dance in duets, strengthening their connections with each other.



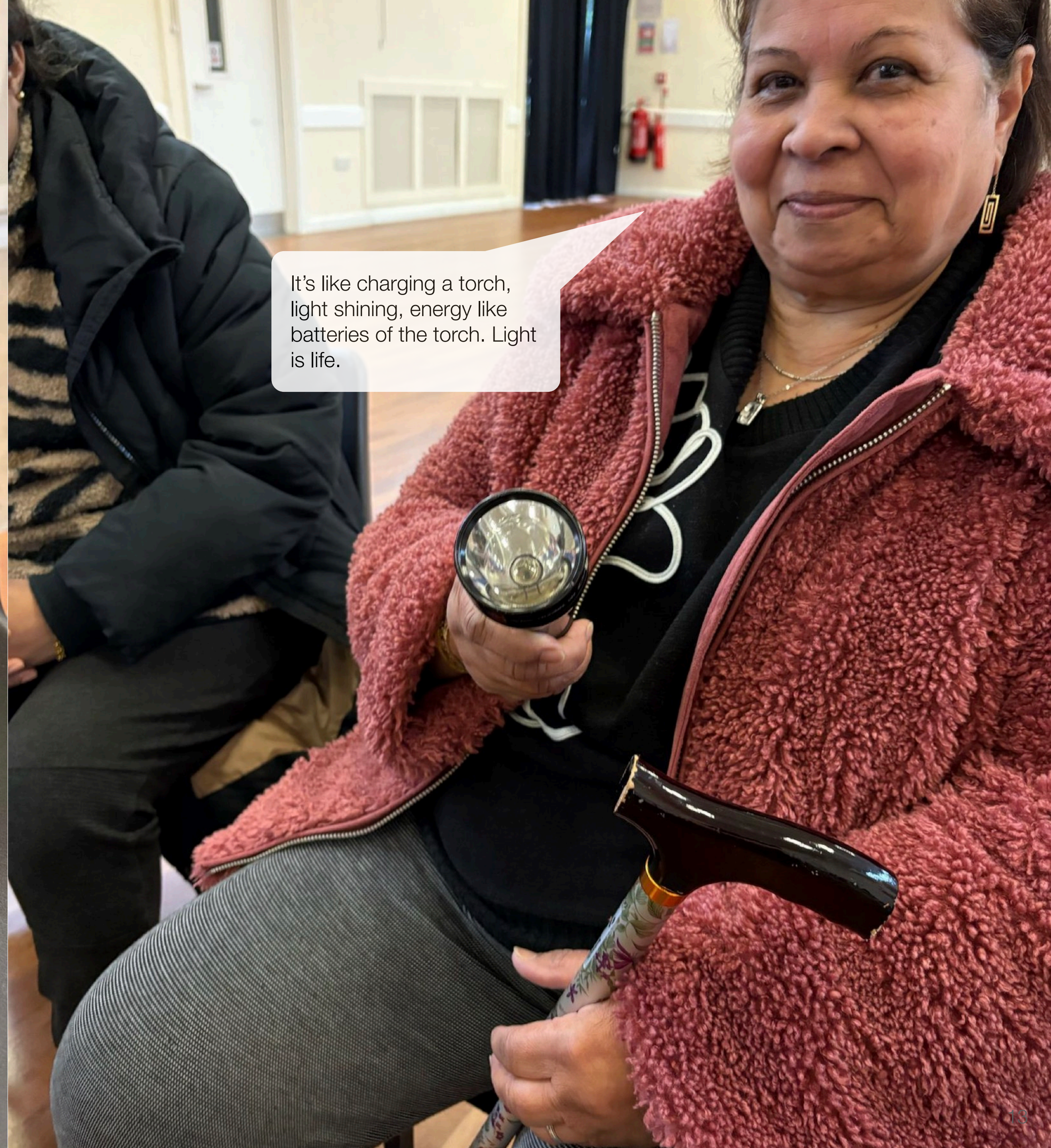
TERM 2

Enjoying Dancing

She's bubbling, fizzing after sessions. Her temperament is sweeter.



It's like charging a torch, light shining, energy like batteries of the torch. Light is life.



TERM 2

Enjoying Dancing



Joy



Bright, light, hopeful

Term 3

Widening Participation

04

Widening Participation

In thinking about how Creative Connections might widen its reach and consider who else could benefit from taking part, findings suggest that Creative Connections enhanced participants' confidence because of the opportunities for social interaction and physical engagement with other people like them. The structured yet flexible approach of sessions seemed valuable for individuals with Parkinson's and other mobility-related conditions. Attendees participated for connection. The welcoming environment and shared movement experience provided a way for individuals to build social bonds and feel part of a community. Ideas for widening participation include:

- **Support workers and caregivers**

While some support workers and caregivers took an active role, others stepped back to allow participants' autonomy. From carers' perspectives, Creative Connections offers an opportunity for their partners to engage in activities, to gain confidence and chat to others without them.

- **Other community activity groups**

There was interest in sharing group activities with similar groups. Bringing Creative Connections into support centres or community spaces could help more people access its benefits.

- **Taster sessions**

Existing participants could act as ambassadors, helping introduce new groups to the experience through trial sessions.

- **Partnerships with healthcare and social organisations**

Expanding collaborations beyond existing partnerships to include other centres and charities could increase access. This has already begun with the Tibbs Dementia Foundation funding new sessions after hearing about Creative Connections.

- **Alternative engagement methods**

Drawing from participants' interest in outreach, pride and storytelling, there is scope to explore artistic documentation (such as video, creative writing, and storytelling) to evoke the experience for wider audiences who cannot physically attend.

- **Structured progression options**

Linking Creative Connections to BEEE Creative's Dance Re:Ignite model of delivery could allow more confident participants to take their experience beyond the session space.



Outcomes

Answering Our Four Questions
Building and Supporting Participants'
Sense of Self and Relationality
Summary

05

Answering Our Four Questions

How are participants made visible, heard, and valued in Creative Connections? What does this mean for their sense of self? What is that sense of self?

- **Ownership & Recognition:**

Participants strongly identified with their creative contributions. Some participants liked to highlight when they recognised a movement they had contributed, showing deep investment in their choices. Other participants had 'signature' moves that others in the group recognised.

- **Confidence & Independence:**

A key shift was observed in how participants engaged with the sessions. Some who previously relied heavily on facilitators took ownership of props, initiating movements, or assisting facilitators, demonstrating growing autonomy.

- **Feeling Seen & Included:**

Wheelchair users reported feeling fully engaged and valued in sessions. Support workers affirmed that participants showed sides of themselves in dance that they rarely expressed in daily life.

- **Emotional Transformation:**

One participant was initially hesitant and withdrawn, but stopped using visual cue cards for emotions over time, signalling increased comfort and confidence in expressing herself.



Answering Our Four Questions

What is the significance of dancing in making connections with others? What dance activities and non-dance activities aid social connection?

- **Physical Interaction & Group Energy:**

Certain movements and themes sparked joy and shared participation. One example was the scarf activity, where participants collectively navigated movement patterns, fostering teamwork.

- **Thematic Connection:**

The dance themes helped participants relate to each other on a personal level. The transition from *food* (which was enthusiastically embraced) to *the great outdoors* was initially met tentatively, until MacIntyre participants started integrating personal experiences, like seaside trips into the movement which reinforced social bonds.

- **Experiential Experiences:**

Participants actively contributed movement ideas, supporting shared experiences. This allowed connections to develop not just through movement, but group decision-making too.

- **Tea & Coffee Chats:**

Post-session social time allowed informal interaction, deepening connections beyond the movement sessions. For some, this was a crucial part of their weekly routine where they felt heard and included.



Answering Our Four Questions

Who are participants connecting with? Why and how? What are the indicators of social connection?

- **Peer Relationships:**

Participants engaged with one another more directly, often helping each other with props or contributing to joint choreography. Over time, they built familiarity and trust, reinforcing a sense of belonging.

- **Facilitators & Support Workers:**

The dynamic between facilitators and participants was a key indicator of social connection. Facilitators responded adaptively to individual needs, and support workers reported seeing sides of their participants that don't usually surface.

- **Extended Networks:**

Participants expressed a desire to share their experience with others. This resulted in discussions about taking sessions to other groups they attended or acting as ambassadors in broader outreach initiatives.



Answering Our Four Questions

What approaches in facilitation, artistic values, and beliefs aid participants' social connection? Why? How do these manifest?

- **Flexible & Adaptive Facilitation:**

Facilitators adjusted sessions based on energy levels and individual engagement. For example, recognising one MacIntyre participant's preference for personal space and offering her an alternative prop allowed her to participate on her terms.

- **Creativity as Connection:**

Dance themes evolved to reflect participants' contributions, making them feel heard. The food theme lasted far longer than anticipated simply because participants continued to engage with it enthusiastically.

- **Structured Rituals for Familiarity:**

Repeating certain warm-up and cool-down exercises provided predictability, helping participants feel secure and included.

- **Encouragement of Ownership:**

Facilitators created opportunities for participants to lead elements of the session, strengthening their confidence and social engagement.



OUTCOMES

Building and Supporting Participants' Sense of Self and Relationality

Taking part in Creative Connections deeply nurtured participants' sense of self and their ability to connect meaningfully with others. Two key themes emerged:

Building a Sense of Self

- **Confidence & Ownership:**

Over time, participants took increasing ownership of their movement and choices. For instance, some confidently assisted in handling props or contributed to choreographic ideas, marking a significant shift from passive engagement to active participation.

- **Feeling Seen & Valued:**

Those who use wheelchairs expressed feeling fully recognised in the sessions, a contrast to their experiences in other spaces.

- **Creative Identity:**

Participants asserted their individuality through movement. Some were quick to correct facilitators when identifying "their move," showing deep personal investment in the work.

- **Emotional & Physical Freedom:**

The space offered a rare opportunity for participants to embody roles and express themselves in ways their everyday environments might not allow.



OUTCOMES

Building and Supporting Participants' Sense of Self and Relationality

Strengthening Relationality with Others

- **Social Bonds & Community:**

The sessions strengthened social bonds, fostering camaraderie and mutual support. For some, they provided the primary avenue for social interaction outside their homes.

- **Supportive Engagement:**

Facilitators and support workers intuitively responded to individual needs, creating an environment where everyone felt respected and included.

- **Experiential Marketing Through Connection:**

Word-of-mouth and direct experience proved effective in reaching participants. Participants and carers recognised the potential power of sharing their experience to encourage new members, reinforcing the relational nature of the work.

- **Group Dynamics & Adaptive Facilitation:**

The structure accommodated fluctuating energy levels and moods, ensuring that everyone could engage meaningfully.



Summary

Creative Connections successfully met its aims by creating inclusive, relational spaces where participants from diverse backgrounds and with varying support needs could explore movement, build confidence, and form lasting social bonds. Through responsive facilitation and participant-led creative exploration, the project enabled individuals to feel seen, valued and celebrated for their unique contributions to challenge social isolation, fostering a sense of self, and cultivating a strong sense of community. Participants reported increased confidence, stronger interpersonal relationships, and a growing sense of agency, both within sessions and in the wider community.

Key learning from the project included the importance of adaptable facilitation that is responsive to participants' mood and energy and the importance of social time as part of the offer in ensuring social bonds are strengthened beyond dance. Future delivery of Creative Connections will focus on outreach across more settings, and building opportunities for participants to contribute to widening participation efforts as ambassadors and advocates of the work.



This report has been produced for BEEE Creative by Elsa Urmston
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Images: Cheniece Warner Photography, Facilitators and Participants

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