

One Step Forward

During the spring and summer of 2010, Mean Feet Dance piloted their One Step Forward project offering creative dance tasters and short courses to mental health service users in Somerset. Here **Viv Gordon**, Artistic Director, Mean Feet Dance talks about the project, what she found out and some of the amazing people she met along the way

I have worked with a wide variety of Community Mental Health groups over the last 9 years, first when I was training at Dance Voice in Bristol and on placement with their Addicts in Recovery group during 2001-2.

Subsequently I have worked independently with adults in day centres, women with post-natal depression, homeless people and older people with depression, anxiety and mild dementia. All these groups have had a great impact on those involved – helping to reduce isolation, shake up stuck energy and reap the benefits of physical activity and creativity - but all have been temporary and geographically scattered. One Step Forward is my attempt to pull together these different strands and develop consistent and sustainable provision for Mental Health groups in Somerset. The pilot project combined research, delivery and time to form partnerships and collect evidence to support future applications to continue the work.

The pilot was funded by Neighbourhood Learning in Deprived Communities, part of the Somerset Skills and Learning organisation who identify mental health groups as one of their target groups. Their agenda is to reach people

who face barriers to accessing education, training and employment and they are thankfully creative about how they achieve this. While as a company we are focussed on the business of dancing, movement and creativity, we recognise the potential in this for 'soft skill' development. Amongst other outcomes, Creative Dance helps people to build confidence, get motivated, think creatively, work with others, communicate and express themselves and develop self-management skills which can all help them progress to take up further learning opportunities. We work towards these in a covert, undercover way so that participants experience feeling better, more engaged and more sociable without feeling that that's why they're there.

Before we set up any groups, I arranged to meet up with as many Mental Health service providers as I could get hold of to talk about the project and see how we could go about engaging their users. I met with the Somerset Partnership National Health Service, Somerset Primary Care Trust, Rethink (national mental health charity), Turning Point (UK health and social care organisation) and a few other smaller independent organisations. Frustratingly, I couldn't get hold >



Adult performance group

of MIND (mental health charity for England and Wales) at this stage but they more than made up for it later on by being brilliant project partners. Through these conversations, I discovered that there is massive support for physical activities as part of the recovery process and a growing understanding of the mind-body connection. But one message was coming through loud and clear - I was discouraged from offering dance to any groups in day centres or mental health settings. The current drive in mental health services is to provide groups in the community with an aim of achieving more community integration.

This ended up being the biggest challenge of the project: unfortunately the desire for community integration wasn't always backed up with resources to support the very vulnerable people we were trying to reach to actually come along and have a go. This led to a couple of groups that never got off the ground despite all the best efforts of everyone involved. Two of the courses we ran did however really take off, one in the Wells area and one in Yeovil (supported by Rethink and South Somerset MIND respectively whose staff accompanied their service users or helped arrange transport). Apart from that we reverted, eventually, to offering tasters in day centres to at least make initial contact with a wider range of people and organisations.

The Yeovil group surprised me by asking to perform at a Somerset Dance and Health event which was a completely new experience for all of them. They devised and performed a short piece based on a poem which takes a narrative journey from a closed, isolated state to an open, connected state – a metaphor for recovery and an experience the participants reflected they achieved while dancing together.

Overall, One Step Forward involved 46 people – here are some of their stories (names have been changed):

Sue attended the Wells group. She has long-term mental health issues which she manages well and is able to do voluntary work supporting others with mental health difficulties. She came along having not taken part in any exercise for a long time which she put down to low body-confidence and low self-esteem. Sue loved the classes and attended every week. She began to contribute more and more to the sessions and she expressed having unlocked a creative and playful side that she was unfamiliar with. Like many people with Mental Health issues, Sue did not have much fun as a child. She felt strongly that dance was helping her reclaim some of what she'd missed out on.

"I have learned to smile and laugh... to not be self-conscious... to enjoy social interaction. My body feels happier for using muscles which are usually dormant. I'm uplifted and I feel childlike."

Sue has since spoken at an event about how the course benefited her – she is our number one advocate! She has volunteered to support the development of the project in any way she can and I will be inviting her to sit on a steering group for the next stage.

Alice attended the Yeovil group. She has severe mental health issues and is on strong medication that makes participation difficult especially in physical activities. She

lacks spatial awareness and understanding of personal space. She finds rhythm and coordination difficult and has problems with sequencing and memory. She spent the first session retreating to her word search book whenever there was a break in activity. She also wanted to stand dangerously close to me whenever we were moving. Over the weeks she was able to be more present, forgot about word searches (apart from when we included them in a dance!) and socialised more within the sessions. She also gained an understanding of everyone's need for personal space with gentle reinforcement over the weeks. By the end of the course she had taken an active part in devising a dance, was able to talk about the emotional content of the movements and remember the sequence (with the odd bit of guidance). She performed publicly with her group and really enjoyed her achievement. She said, "I felt like I was flying. I love dancing. Doing the performance is something I thought I would never do."

John took part in a taster session at New Directions, the Bridgwater branch of MIND. He was incredibly motivated and energetic and as soon as I started the warm up I could see that I needed to throw out my session plan and go for a much more physical approach. The rest of the group seemed happy to go along with his lead and we had the breathiest, sweatiest session of the whole project! We did some creative work on the theme of 'warriors' as I felt this would give the group a chance to feel powerful contradicting how many of them felt in life. At the end John commented, "I've found a totally positive way to get rid of my aggressive energy. It's wonderful, I've had a spiritual experience."

The experiences of these three participants were echoed by many others who benefited from the opportunities to exercise, be creative, interact with others and enjoy safe physical contact:

"I felt better afterwards than I did before, it was an escape from life's problems".

"I loved dancing freely and being kind by hugging".

"It gave me a chance to express my feelings and thoughts and to feel supported".

Without getting lost in statistics, 100% of participants felt that dance was helping them feel better about themselves, more confident and more able to interact with other people. 93% said it was an enjoyable way to get active and 78% said it brought more fun into their lives and relationships.

The feedback from our project partners was equally encouraging, recognising dance as "a positive tool towards our clients' recovery and management of their mental health" and "a real asset to our clients' mental wellbeing". This response has affirmed that there is real potential for sustainable partnerships and groups focussed on Mental Health within Somerset. We are now looking towards the future at ways of growing the work through courses, advocacy and training. Watch this space!

contact info@meanfeetdance.co.uk
or 07907 853700 / **visit** www.meanfeetdance.co.uk

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