

Top, middle and bottom left: NYB All In! classes. Photo: Jules Renahan. Top right: NYB All In! classes. Photo: Natasha Britton. Bottom right: National Youth Ballet. Photo: Lachlan Monaghan.

NYB All In! progress

An appetite for learning, a feast for inclusion



How are we making ballet more accessible to young disabled dancers? **Jo Meredith**, Creative Director, National Youth Ballet, captures what their NYB All In! inclusive project and young disabled leadership have revealed to them so far, what's needed, what's next, and how they hope to make an impact on the wider ballet industry in the future.

Introducing NYB

National Youth Ballet (NYB) offers ballet performance opportunities for young people aged 10-21 in a company environment offering them activities designed to prepare them for professional life.

We are driven by our mission to bring young people together through creative, joyful and inclusive ballet activities nurturing confidence, skills and positive values, and our vision that they are empowered to thrive, shaping the future of ballet and the world around them.

The organisation has evolved since its creation by our visionary founding artistic director Jill Tookey nearly forty years ago, but what hasn't changed is the company's focus on, and commitment to, providing unique performance and talent development opportunities for young people.

In the last four years, we have expanded our offer to make these special experiences more accessible to young people who may not have had a chance to access them before. Our first step was to create NYB All In! as a vehicle to enable more dancers to experience ballet.

About NYB All In! How it all began...

NYB All In! began in collaboration with Parable Dance and South East Dance both based in Brighton.

Combining Parable Dance's wealth of knowledge in inclusion with NYBs extensive knowledge of ballet, it was initially designed to explore how ballet could be taught and choreographed in a more inclusive way for

disabled dancers. What started as a teacher training and professional skills development opportunity, very quickly morphed into a performance project, as we realised that the best way to learn was to do, and that young disabled dancers were lacking challenging ballet opportunities.

In the summer of 2023, we gathered a group of disabled and non-disabled dancers together at South East Dance to form the first NYB All In! Performance Company with the creation of a new work inspired by Romeo and Juliet, performed at South East Dance's home, The Dance Space.

...how it all continued

Since then our NYB All In! Performance Companies from Brighton and Birmingham have performed at Sadler's Wells Theatre, created a dance film in collaboration with English Heritage at Kenilworth Castle and have another performance at Sadler's Wells Theatre planned for this summer. In addition, we have set up an NYB All In! Steering Group, created legacy classes in Brighton, led by our disabled young leaders, and one of our dancers is now working as a Beyond Ballet® (1) choreographer leading and choreographing our work.

What we know now...

At NYB, we believe ballet can be taught and learnt in a genuinely inclusive way whilst also remaining true to itself, and that a commitment to inclusion enhances, rather than compromises, the rigour and authenticity

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Above bottom far right: NYB All In! classes. Photo: Jules Renahan.

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of our art form. Working on NYB All In! has helped us to grow, learn and see this belief played out in action.

We have welcomed physically disabled, non-disabled, learning disabled and neurodivergent dancers into our projects and we found that every dancer can realise their full potential in ballet, if our teaching and delivery offers plenty of choice, and responds to the individual needs of each student. We strive to create opportunities and open pathways for careers in dance with rigour and compassion.

Along the way, we have met some incredibly talented disabled dancers who were looking for a rigorous ballet

experience, but for various reasons had been struggling to find a class that challenged them physically, whilst also offering enough support in the room. We learnt from these dancers that it was often systemic problems around the ballet class which made classes inaccessible, rather than simply the artform itself. In response to their observations, we worked with our NYB All In! Steering Group to find out what barriers young dancers regularly experienced and collated a research report compiling their observations, (which you can view via the link in the info section on p51).

It was interesting to observe that many of the barriers identified on the ‘student journey’ and also ‘within the studio’ were mainly challenges that had nothing to do with ballet itself, but rather how people were welcomed into the studio and how their individual needs were met through organisational structures. Indeed, through our project, we have learnt that ballet lends itself well to an inclusive approach, as its focus on storytelling and the structure of the technique allow dancers to engage with it in a myriad of ways.

Through conversations with our steering group and participants in our projects, we became aware of a lack of progression routes for talented young disabled dancers across the uk. These challenges were referenced more broadly in the Barriers to Progression Employment in Dance Arts Council England (2) report created in collaboration with Candoco, Stopgap, Corali,



Above left: NYB All In! performance. Photo: JulesRenahan. Top right: NYB All In! Performance Company. Photo: Grace Abercrombie.

People Dancing and Tin Arts aka The Working Group (3) published last year.

In response to the clear lack of progression routes, we have been endeavoring to create opportunities for young disabled dance leaders to develop their skills, not just as dancers, but also as leaders. We hope that this initiative will not only support the development of our leaders, but also inspire a younger generation of disabled dancers who see themselves represented by the teachers they work with. We are building bespoke training pathways for the dancers we meet, including progression to our Beyond Ballet® programme.

The biggest thing that we have learnt is that change takes time! You can't rush the development of this work, and in order to create meaningful change you need to work collaboratively with a wider network of teachers and organisations to promote good practice and to offer opportunities to more dancers.

...and what we want to do about it

The Ballet for All event (4) that NYB delivered with Birmingham Royal Ballet, Suzie Birchwood and Dance Leaders Group in July 2025, was a brilliant opportunity to bring more voices into the room. This exciting day brought practitioners from across the country to share practice, discuss and reflect and whilst it was undeniably a great day, it was commented on that it was attended by like-minded people and that, in order to make future

change at an organisational level, we needed artistic directors from established ballet companies to attend, to witness and hear the power and importance of inclusive ballet. We created a report about the day, also available on request, and we have been excited to join the ABC Collective (5) facilitated by Stopgap Dance Company to continue to develop and build on the conversations from the Ballet For All event.

We have discovered that there is a real appetite to learn across the UK dance sector and we plan to share the skills and knowledge we have developed to a wider audience through CPD and workshop opportunities.

We continue to learn that embedding change within our own organisation is also a slow and steady process. There is always more to learn! One key thing identified internally with our steering group, is that traditional charitable structures of working with unpaid board members make access and representation at all levels of an organisation very challenging.

The learning from all aspects of NYB All In! informs our wider approach and practice, and these discoveries are promoting change both within our other programmes and our organisational structure. For example, we have created an easy-read application form for job applications, and offer questions in advance of the interview, which we hope makes the process more accessible. Simultaneously, we are considering how we can create equitable opportunities for all young dancers >>

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across the breadth of all our programmes, not just the one focussed on disabled dancers. We have already started work implementing inclusive practices within our residential performance company, with preparatory participant packs, a visual timetable, a quiet space and extending our age range up to 21 for disabled dancers, but there is always more to do!

What next for NYB All In!?

We plan to create impact beyond our organisation by sharing our learnings with a wider audience, working with organisations such as People Dancing, BBO (British Ballet Organisation) and ISTD (Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing) to reach more ballet schools and dance teachers nationwide and deliver CPD informed by our learning journey.

In the short term, we aim to bring our NYB All In! Performance Company to more dancers in the historically underserved North of England and our long term vision is that the NYB All In! ethos will be so embedded across our wider programmes there will be no need for a separate NYB All In! Performance Company and, instead, our NYB All In! programme will be focused on sharing research findings, our CPD offer and advocacy for a more accessible and inclusive ballet culture.

And we are so excited to put this into action at People Dancing’s 2026 Summer Workshop Programme at De Montfort University Leicester! On Tuesday 21st July, we are delivering a one-day inclusive ballet workshop where I will teach alongside Grace Thompson, disabled, neurodivergent inclusive facilitator, consultant, and artist

Below: National Youth Ballet. Photo: Lachlan Monaghan.



whose work focuses on creating culture change around attitudes towards disabled people. Through Butterfly Hope, her platform for creative advocacy, she empowers others to engage in advocacy at all levels — from personal to systemic. We will also be joined online for a discussion by Natasha Britton our colleague from Parable Dance and ballet/contemporary professional choreographer, teacher and dancer Amy Groves. We extend a warm invitation for you to join us to explore our work in practice, especially if you are a ballet teacher, leader or company exploring inclusive approaches to ballet for the first time and hope to meet you there!

References

1. <https://nationalyouthballet.org/take-part/beyond-ballet/>
2. <https://www.beyondbarriersindance.info/>

3. <https://www.communitydance.org.uk/what-we-do/disability-and-inclusion/the-working-group>
4. https://www.brb.org.uk/stories/ballet-for-all#:~:text=Inclusive%20ballet%20is%20a%20conversation%20about%20equity,Birchwood**%20Disabled%20Dancer%20and%20Creative%20Access%20Consultant
5. <https://www.stopgapdance.com/story/abc-a-shared-commitment-to-change/>

Info

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www.communitydance.org.uk/training-and-qualifications/people-dancing-summer-programme-2026-2/nyb-all-in-introduction-to-accessible-ballet-pract

Link to report: <https://tinyurl.com/5t39tsk5>

“Challenges had nothing to do with ballet itself, but rather how people were welcomed into the studio and how their individual needs were met through organisational structures.”

Below left and bottom left: Still from Chimes of Change, filmmaker Romy Whai.

Below right: NYB All In! classes. Photo: Jules Renahan. Bottom right: NYB All In! classes. Photo: Natasha Britton.

