

Company Chameleon: improving children and young people's mental health through dance and movement

Kevin Edward Turner, Artistic Director, and Sam Broadbent, Learning & Participation Manager at Company Chameleon meet Kat Taylor, GM i-THRIVE Arts, Culture and Mental Health Programme Manager to explore how arts and cultural provision can support emotional health and wellbeing for children and young people.

Arts and cultural engagement

[Research evidence](#) published by the World Health Organisation indicates that arts engagement can offer effective and engaging methods to support the wellbeing and mental health needs of children and young people. The arts can help develop a child's confidence, work ethic, resilience, emotional regulation, and communication skills. Arts and culture play a significant role in preventing illness from developing in the first place, and worsening in the longer term ([All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017](#)), and can help save money in health and social care through effective and safe interventions.

[The Five Year Forward View](#), published in 2014 by NHS England, sets a new vision for health policy, emphasising a need for rapid improvements in prevention and public health. Arts and cultural engagement have a vital part to play in this public health arena, as an option to enhance wellbeing and quality of life in people of all ages.



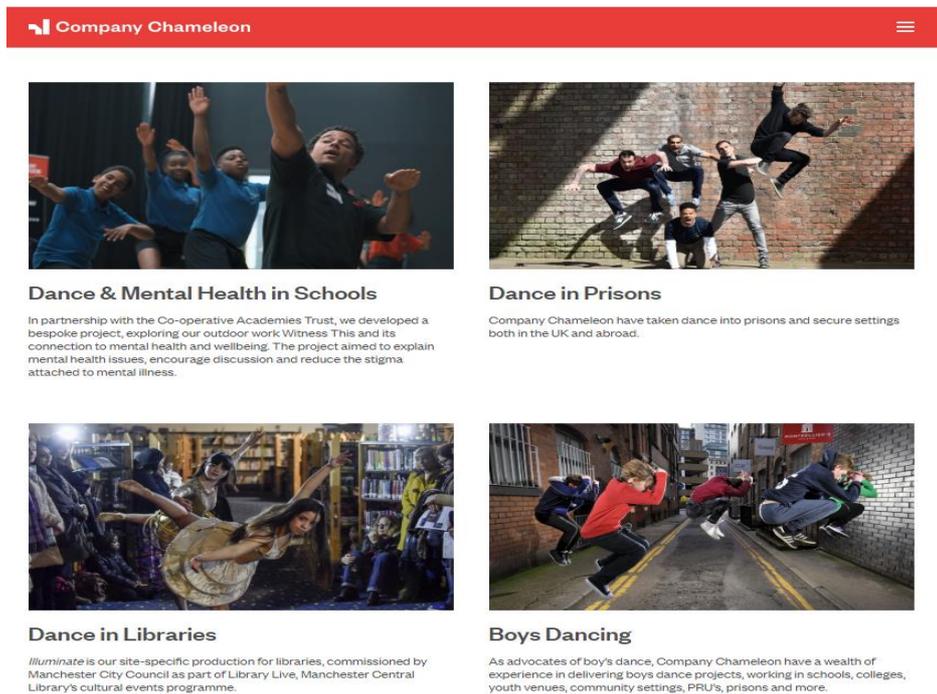
GM i-THRIVE Arts and Culture Mental Health Programme

The [GM i-THRIVE Arts, Culture and Mental Health programme](#) is unique to Greater Manchester in the context of a 30+ year history of arts and health research in Manchester.

The programme was established to support the broadening of options, increase shared decision-making, and promote the assets-led approaches of the [THRIVE Framework for system change](#) by exploring the role of creative and cultural interventions as part of a more versatile, empowering and sustainable clinical offer.

Company Chameleon: GM example of arts and cultural engagement

[Company Chameleon](#) is a Greater Manchester-based, internationally touring dance company, who lead dance-based workshops and projects and facilitate conversations about mental health. Their work was explored in BBC2's documentary *Dancing to Happiness* in 2018.



Dance & Mental Health in Schools
In partnership with the Co-operative Academies Trust, we developed a bespoke project, exploring our outdoor work Witness This and its connection to mental health and wellbeing. The project aimed to explain mental health issues, encourage discussion and reduce the stigma attached to mental illness.

Dance in Prisons
Company Chameleon have taken dance into prisons and secure settings both in the UK and abroad.

Dance in Libraries
Illuminate is our site-specific production for libraries, commissioned by Manchester City Council as part of Library Live, Manchester Central Library's cultural events programme.

Boys Dancing
As advocates of boy's dance, Company Chameleon have a wealth of experience in delivering boys dance projects, working in schools, colleges, youth venues, community settings, PRUs, prisons and more.

Q&A with Kevin Edward Turner and Sam Broadbent

Please describe some of the work company chameleon is involved in to help support children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing.

1. Dance and mental health in schools:

Kevin: In partnership with the Co-operative Academies Trust, we developed a bespoke project, exploring emotional health and wellbeing. With this project we aimed to explain what emotional health issues can be, encouraged discussions and in these ways educate young people, helping to address the stigma attached to emotional health distress.

A live performance of 'Witness This', a dance piece about mental health, was offered to 100 Key Stage 3 pupils from three Manchester Secondary Co-operative Academies and 240 KS2 pupils from four Leeds Primary Co-operative Academies. Young people then took part in creative workshops that explored the themes of the work they had experienced.

Each school then created its own work in response, with pupils expressing their thoughts surrounding mental health. The project culminated by bringing students together to perform alongside the professional company for an audience of family and friends, captured in [film](#).

Image 1: Dance & Mental Health in Schools workshop



What were the implications of these workshops?

Below is some of the feedback we received from the young people involved and the artist:

Young People:

'At the start I didn't really know about the message of the story, but I have learned that mental health is a common thing and it can happen to everybody'

'I think dancing about mental health can help loads of people because you can dance instead of saying it—show people in a creative way'

'I learned new techniques and how to show your emotions through dancing and facial expressions'

'You can learn about mental health problems, by trying to be that person and learning what it is all about'

Artist:

'By giving young people a piece of art to look at, gives them something tangible to look at experience, [mental health] won't be something abstract, it becomes something that's right there in front of them.'

'It gives young people platforms to discuss and debate, as well as raising their understanding of topic'

Image 2: Dance & Mental Health in Schools workshop



2. BROAD project (Building Resilience and Overcoming Adversity Through Dance and Drama)

BROAD is an innovative dance theatre pilot programme designed for vulnerable groups in prisons, secure children's centres and secure hospitals. It was co-created by [Odd Arts](#), who have a significant track record of working with theatre in such settings, in partnership with [Company Chameleon](#). Both partners worked with psychologists to design the programme, based on a 24-month research and development collaboration which included shadowing, co-design and delivery of specialist projects. The objective of workshops was underpinned by restorative approaches, non-violent communication, and trauma-informed approaches.

During the project (6-10 half day sessions), participants create their own theatre/dance performance based on feelings, emotions and experiences. Young people reflect on some of their choices and emotional needs. Facilitators assist young people to identify boundaries and goals they would like to achieve from participating in the project. At the end of sessions, participants can share their achievements with other staff and peers at a showcase event.

The BROAD project was funded by the Arts Council England and co-designed by [Company Chameleon](#) and [Odd Arts](#).



BROAD Project Aims and Design

- Increase the resilience and wellbeing of young adults in custody
- Improve communication and self-esteem thus reducing violence and harmful behaviours
- Improve mental health and overcome the barriers caused by adversity

How was the BROAD project evaluated?

Evaluation of the project was led by the Psychological Research Unit at UCLAN (University of Central Lancashire), the research and findings are available in the [BROAD -Building Resilience & Overcoming Adversity through Dance & Drama Research & Evaluation Report](#).

The project reported findings qualitatively, using the psychotherapeutic approaches that informed its design, and five overlapping themes to describe the workshop experience: performance; challenge; psychosocial and bodily integration; using space creatively; working in and through the group, and embodied learning.

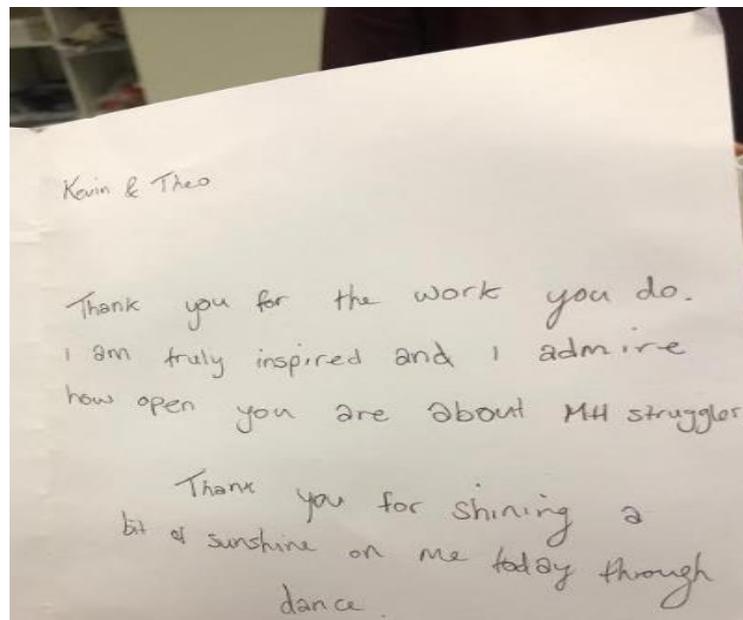
What was the impact of the BROAD project?

Through drama-led, embodied work, participants learned to use physical space freely as an expression of mental space. Learning from the collaborative approach modelled by the facilitators, participants developed their sense of safety in space with other people, and how to be vulnerable and respect the vulnerability of others. Participants found ways to re-claim parts of self that felt fragmented and 'split off' and experienced the integrative power of an environment that can be trusted. Performing in front of an audience and receiving positive and constructive feedback affirms skills and develops confidence.

The project:

- Provided creative ways of engaging and developing relationships with young people
- Helped young people develop confidence and break down communication barriers
- Delivered creative methods towards exploring ideas and feelings
- Provided a safe environment for young people to discuss difficulties

Image 3: Feedback from participants on BROAD



How does Company Chameleon's offer align with the THRIVE Framework for system change?

Thriving

We help support children and young people who do not need individualised support for their mental health and wellbeing needs, but may benefit from effective prevention and promotion strategies to maintain their emotional wellbeing. Through the different projects we help reduce stigma around mental health and let young people know that it is ok to talk about mental health challenges.

Getting advice and signposting

We also support children and families accessing support from the 'Getting Advice and Signposting' needs-based grouping who are managing their own health and do not want goals-based specialist input. If any mental health concerns arise during workshops, we have structures in place to enable young people to access advice and we can signpost them to other local services.

If you would like further information, please contact Sam at sam@companychameleon.com or Kat Taylor at Katherine.Taylor3@mft.nhs.uk