**DLG & Critical Mass - What Next 2022-2024 Evaluation Summary**

#### **Introduction & Background**

The Dance Leaders Group (DLG), a network of dance professionals in the West Midlands, has spearheaded projects to enhance dance participation, leadership, and inclusivity. Established by Arts Connect in 2018, DLG’s recent collaboration with the Commonwealth Games 2022 led to the Critical Mass project, which expanded into DLG & Critical Mass What Next (2022-2024). This project aimed to support the growth of the dance sector through leadership, diversity, and sustainability initiatives across three main strands: Network Leadership and Advocacy, Learning and Skills Development, and Sustainability and Resilience.

**Aims & Enquiry Themes**

**Project Aims**

1. To strengthen the region-wide network of dance participation leaders
2. To diversify the people and voices who lead the work of DDLG
3. To support growth in the dance sector and new business models
4. To enhance talent retention and development opportunities
5. To build digital opportunities to innovate and build new audiences for dance, especially young people.
6. To build on Critical Mass learning around inclusive integrated work and professional participatory practice development; amplify outcomes and legacy

**Enquiry Themes**

1. How to catalyse increased reach, connectivity, growth at sub-regional and regional level?
2. How to embed and develop inclusive and integrated practice across the Midlands
3. How best to amplify the outcomes and build on the legacy of Critical Mass in the Midlands?
4. How to diversify the people and voices who lead the work of DLG?
5. How to pilot an innovative joined up approach to professional development, placements and internships for dance professionals at all levels of experience, to enhance talent retention
6. How to build new audiences for dance in the region, live and online?
7. How to involve and engage young people across a range of dance and physical performance styles and those not currently involved in dance?
8. How to maintain the vision, ethos, values of DLG and to ensure that the quality and qualities of the work that happens is consistent with these?

#### **Key Activities and Outcomes**

**1. Network Leadership & Advocacy**DLG established six sub-regional hubs, each with appointed Convenors and Ambassadors, to represent and advocate for local dance communities. Regular DLG Summits fostered cross-regional collaboration, bringing together professionals from various dance forms and cultural backgrounds. The project also recruited a Project Manager to oversee activities and improve cohesion among the hubs and the DLG network.

**2. Learning & Skills Development**The project delivered over 18 CPD sessions and masterclasses, covering topics like inclusive practices and professional skills. These sessions included notable guest speakers and tailored mentoring for Youth Ambassadors, helping emerging professionals transition into the dance industry. Feedback highlighted the effectiveness of online and in-person sessions for increasing accessibility.

**3. Sustainability & Resilience**DLG worked with INSIGHT consultancy to refine its brand identity, enhancing its digital presence through a website and social media platforms. This rebranding process aimed to unify the group’s identity and increase visibility. Additionally, DLG conducted research into sustainable business models for dance, contributing to a report that provided artists with strategies for building resilient practices. The dance in education strategy group, secured additional funding for the creation of 4 interlinked advocacy films to lobby for the future of dance inclusion on school curriculums.

#### **Evaluation Findings**

The project demonstrated a substantial impact in strengthening and diversifying the dance sector across the West Midlands. Sub-regional hubs facilitated significant outreach, connecting local networks with the broader DLG community and enhancing the participation of previously underrepresented groups and geographies. Hubs established vital communication channels, organised training and workshops, and forged partnerships that extended the project’s reach to include youth, marginalised communities, and diverse cultural dance forms. Key achievements included increased engagement from South Asian and African Diaspora dance communities, alongside initiatives to foster youth leadership.

DLG Summits played a crucial role in fostering inclusivity and collaborative growth, with participation increasing from 40 attendees at the project’s onset to nearly 60 by Spring 2024. These gatherings allowed members to share best practices, explore advocacy strategies, and develop actionable goals for sustaining the network. Feedback from attendees highlighted the Summits’ impact on reducing isolation for dance professionals and energising regional connectivity. Structured networking activities, advocacy workshops, and discussions with leaders helped attendees gain practical skills in lobbying and community engagement, directly supporting DLG’s objectives of building a resilient, connected dance sector.

The project’s Learning & Skills Development strand effectively addressed professional growth, with over 18 CPD sessions tailored to the needs of the DLG network. Feedback indicated that the diverse session topics and accessibility (both online and in-person) met various learning needs and improved engagement. However, the evaluation noted challenges with attendance consistency for free sessions, suggesting a need for better scheduling and reminder systems. The mentoring program for Youth Ambassadors was particularly impactful, providing young dance professionals with crucial industry insights and confidence, although scheduling conflicts highlighted the need for flexible mentorship formats in future initiatives.

The Dance in Education Strategy Group exceeded its initial goals by not only mapping successful practices and identifying gaps, but also securing additional funding to produce a series of four advocacy films. These films aim to promote dance education’s value, and they are supported by a strategic dissemination plan. This proactive approach highlights the group’s commitment to lasting impact and advocacy for dance in educational settings.

DLG’s branding and digital expansion efforts significantly elevated its visibility and provided a cohesive identity that resonated with members.

#### **Recommendations**

1. **Enhancing Support for Sub-Regional Hubs:** Ensuring funding and infrastructure for hubs led by independent freelancers could help sustain regional connections and initiatives.
2. **Improving Project Management and Collaboration:** Structured agendas and better invoicing processes are recommended to streamline project operations.
3. **Fostering Greater Diversity in Leadership:** Continuing to involve diverse cultural forms and lived experiences in leadership roles will enhance inclusivity.
4. **Strengthening Digital Engagement:** Further developing DLG’s online presence with accessible formats and youth-targeted content is suggested for future growth.
5. **Building on Inclusive Practices:** Mandatory accessibility training for DLG leaders and increased availability of inclusive resources could help DLG further integrate inclusivity within its operations.

#### **Conclusion**

DLG & Critical Mass - What Next (2022-2024) made substantial progress in developing a resilient and inclusive dance network in the West Midlands. By prioritising diversity, network connectivity, and professional development, DLG has established a strong foundation for future growth in the regional dance ecosystem. However, to continue this trajectory, securing resources for ongoing support, enhancing digital presence, and maintaining inclusive practices will be essential.