

# Improving physical activity for autistic adults through dance



Speakers: Dr Kelly Birtwell, Dr Claire Planner

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**The Ada Study**  
*Access to Dance for Autistic adults*

## The team:

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## Funding:

Three NIHR Schools Mental Health Award



Project website:



## Outline

- Part 1: overview of the project & community involvement
- Part 2: selected research findings
- Part 3: how to make dance more accessible
- Questions and answers

### **Please provide feedback on the Padlet:**

<https://padlet.com/claireplanner/by-providing-feedback-here-you-are-giving-permission-for-you-h3xlerq65fdoxlxl>



# Part 1

## Overview of the project and community involvement

# Overview of the project

Project aim:

To support engagement in physical activity through recreational dance and improve physical and mental health amongst autistic adults.

Three studies plus development of resources.

# Overview of the project

Study 1: online survey

Study 2: interviews

Aim: to explore how autistic adults experience dance in different settings: at home, socially, and at dance classes. Including benefits, barriers, and facilitators.

Development of resources: films, written materials

Study 3: focus groups

Aim: to see if the resources are usable and acceptable to link workers, dance providers, and autistic adults.

➔ Refined the resources based on feedback

# Community involvement: throughout the project

Autistic PPI\* co-applicant

(\*PPI = patient & public involvement)

Autistic project advisors: 5

Staff stakeholders: 2 GPs, a dance movement therapist, 4 dance providers, and 5 link workers.

(Some of whom were autistic)

# Community involvement: shaping the studies

Study adverts, information sheets, questions

Online survey: pilot tested by 15 autistic adults

# Online survey: feedback

 **Dr Kelly Birtwell** @kellybirtwell.bsk... 1mo  
Love dancing? Hate dancing? If you're #autistic, age 18+, in the UK, please take part in our survey (designed with autistic project advisors). We want to hear about why people don't dance, dancing at home (kitchen disco anyone?), socially, or at dance classes. For more info: [tinyurl.com/Aut-dance](https://tinyurl.com/Aut-dance)

Ada study survey advert: V2 29/04/2025

**Research opportunity!**

**The Ada study**

**Access to Dance for Autistic adults**

Researchers at The University of Manchester seek autistic volunteers for an **online survey** about dance.

**ARE YOU:**

**1. Autistic?**  
(diagnosed or self-identifying)



**Effectively Weird**

@effectivelyweird.bsky.social

Follow

FINALLY a survey where my answers don't skew the data! All surveys need to be made by autistic people. I didn't get mad at any point because I could explain my answers and context. And the questions had context! **CONTEXT FOR ALL**



**Dr Kelly Birtwell** @kellybirtwell.bsk... 1mo

Love dancing? Hate dancing? If you're

# Community involvement: shaping the resources

Films and written materials informed by research findings and stakeholder views

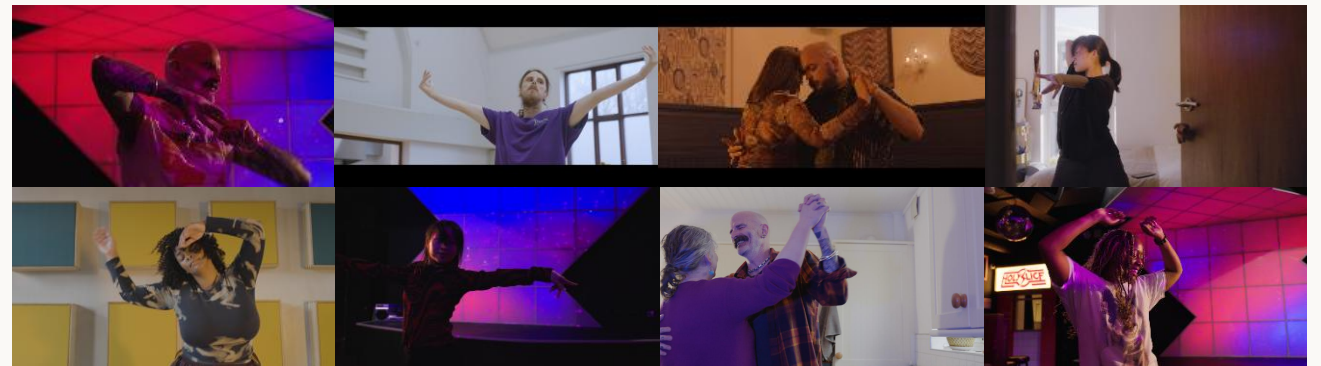
Autistic filmmaker: Sophie Broadgate

Films featuring autistic individuals dancing and being interviewed



# Community involvement: summary

- Enriched the project
- Meaningful and relevant
- Enjoyable process



# Film 1

What it's like to be autistic: general autistic experiences.

This film is for:

- Autistic adults: to show similar or different experiences, support people learning about themselves, a resource to share with others
- Link workers and dance providers: to help increase awareness about autistic experiences and needs



Autism in our words

What it's like to be autistic



# Part 2

## Selected research findings

# Background

- Physical activity (PA) is beneficial for physical and mental health.
- Autistic adults participate in PA less frequently than non-autistic adults and view it less favourably.
- Dance can provide similar benefits to other types of PA, is non-competitive and can be done with few resources.

# Aim and methods

Study 1: online survey

Study 2: interviews

Aim: to explore how autistic adults experience dance in different settings: at home, socially, and at dance classes. Including benefits, barriers, and facilitators.

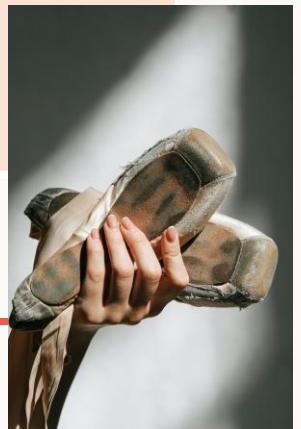
# Methods

## Online survey- Qualtrics

- Open and closed questions
- Gold DSI
- Open for 3 months
- Advertised – social media, local groups, networks
- Descriptive statistics and reflexive thematic analysis

## Interviews

- Semi-structured
- Objects, music and images
- October 25 – Feb 26
- Advertised – social media, local groups, networks
- Reflexive thematic analysis



# Study 1: online survey

122 participants

- Mean age: 41 (ranged from 20 – 75)
- Non-speaking sometimes: 31 (25.4%)
- Learning disability: 23 (18.9%)
- Health conditions impacting ability to dance: 68 (55.7%)

# Study 1 participants: gender & sexual orientation

<b>Gender identity:</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Female	68 (55.7)
Male	20 (16.4)
Non-binary	12 (9.8)
Identify in a different way	11 (9.0)
Gender queer	6 (4.9)
Gender non-conforming	4 (3.3)
Prefer not to say	1 (0.8)

<b>Sexual orientation:</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Heterosexual	48 (39.3)
Bisexual	24 (19.7)
Asexual	12 (9.8)
Lesbian	8 (6.6)
Different sexual orientation	8 (6.6)
Gay	4 (3.3)
Prefer not to say	6 (4.9)

# Study 1: ethnicity & education

<b>Ethnicity:</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
White	106 (89.6)
Different ethnicity	14 (11.5)
Did not respond	2 (1.6)

<b>Education:</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Degree (or equivalent)	107 (87.7)
Further education (A levels or equivalent)	12 (9.8)
High school (GCSEs or equivalent)	2 (1.6)

# Study 1: ADHD status

83 (68%) definitely or likely ADHD:

Self-identify / suspect ADHD	37 (30.3%)
Diagnosed as ADHD	34 (27.9%)
Seeking a diagnosis of ADHD	12 (9.8%)
None of the above	37 (30.3%)
Prefer not to say	2 (1.6%)

# Study 2: interviews

16 participants

- Mean age: 41 (ranged from 24 – 59)
- Non-speaking sometimes: 5 (31.3%)

# Study 2 participants: gender & sexual orientation

<b>Gender identity:</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Female	11 (68.8)
Male	3 (18.8)
Gender non-conforming	2 (12.5)

<b>Sexual orientation:</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Heterosexual	6 (37.5)
Bisexual	4 (25)
Pansexual	2 (12.5)
Queer	1 (6.3)
Prefer not to say	3 (18.8)

## Study 2: ethnicity & education

<b>Ethnicity:</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
White	14 (87.5)
Mixed	2 (12.5)

<b>Education:</b>	<b>N (%)</b>
Degree	9 (56.3)
Masters	4 (25)
Doctorate	2 (12.5)
PG Cert	1 (6.3)

## Study 2: ADHD status

11 (69%) definitely or likely ADHD

# Study 1 survey findings: how many participants dance?

- Never danced: 3 (2.5%)
- Danced at some point: 119 (97.5%)
- Currently dance: 56 (45.9%)
- Attended dance classes at some point: 87 (71.3%)

# Survey findings: type of dance classes



## Survey findings: why do you dance?

“I used to dance to express myself and socialise, mostly. Sometimes to let go of excess energy and frustrations” (pt.116)

“The urge to stim and get lost in music. Like the audio euphoria can't be contained” (pt.121)

“for emotional regulation - excitement, sad or angry, to connect my brain and body so they learn to communicate together, for mindfulness” (pt. 129)

## Survey findings: why do you dance?

“I have cognitive alexithymia, meaning that I can struggle to put words to my emotions. Closing my eyes and dancing to particular genres of music helps me figure out what emotions I'm feeling. If I want to listen to jungle or hardcore and start stomping around, I will understand that I'm angry. If I want to listen to piano house and start jumping and swinging around, I will understand that I'm feeling joyful.” (pt.153)

“I enjoy rehearsing as movement and learning choreography means I do not need to speak to people much and we are all focussed on achieving the same thing. I love to learn the routines, the repetitive nature of dance and sharing this with others.” (pt.171)

# Study 1 & 2 findings: what can make dance challenging?

Sensory differences

Information processing styles

Practicalities

# Study 1 & 2 findings: physical and psychological safety

Participants described the importance of:

- having agency and control over their sensory environment, particularly in relation to dancing in their own space;
- being accepted by themselves and others (e.g. regarding body size, dance ability, disabilities)
- and having access to safe spaces and people, that are free from harassment

## Study 2 interview findings: what do you want other autistic people to know about dance?

You can dance by yourself in your house, and no-one has to see and no-one really has to know...I think you can find a love for it that way, you can feel really silly and maybe you'd hate it but there's minimal, like, risks. (Pt 4)

That it can be, for everybody, and it can be really beneficial, and that being autistic isn't a barrier to doing it. That if you want to give it a go, it might seem really scary, and it's always scary to get across the threshold of anything, that's just the way the world is, but if you can do that, if you can take that step, that there is actually a huge amount of benefit from it, and that it can be a really empowering experience, if you think it's for you. (Pt 3)

# Interview findings: what do you want dance providers to know?

Having an open attitude to discuss things as they come up, treat me not as a customer... but as an individual with needs and preferences (Pt 12)

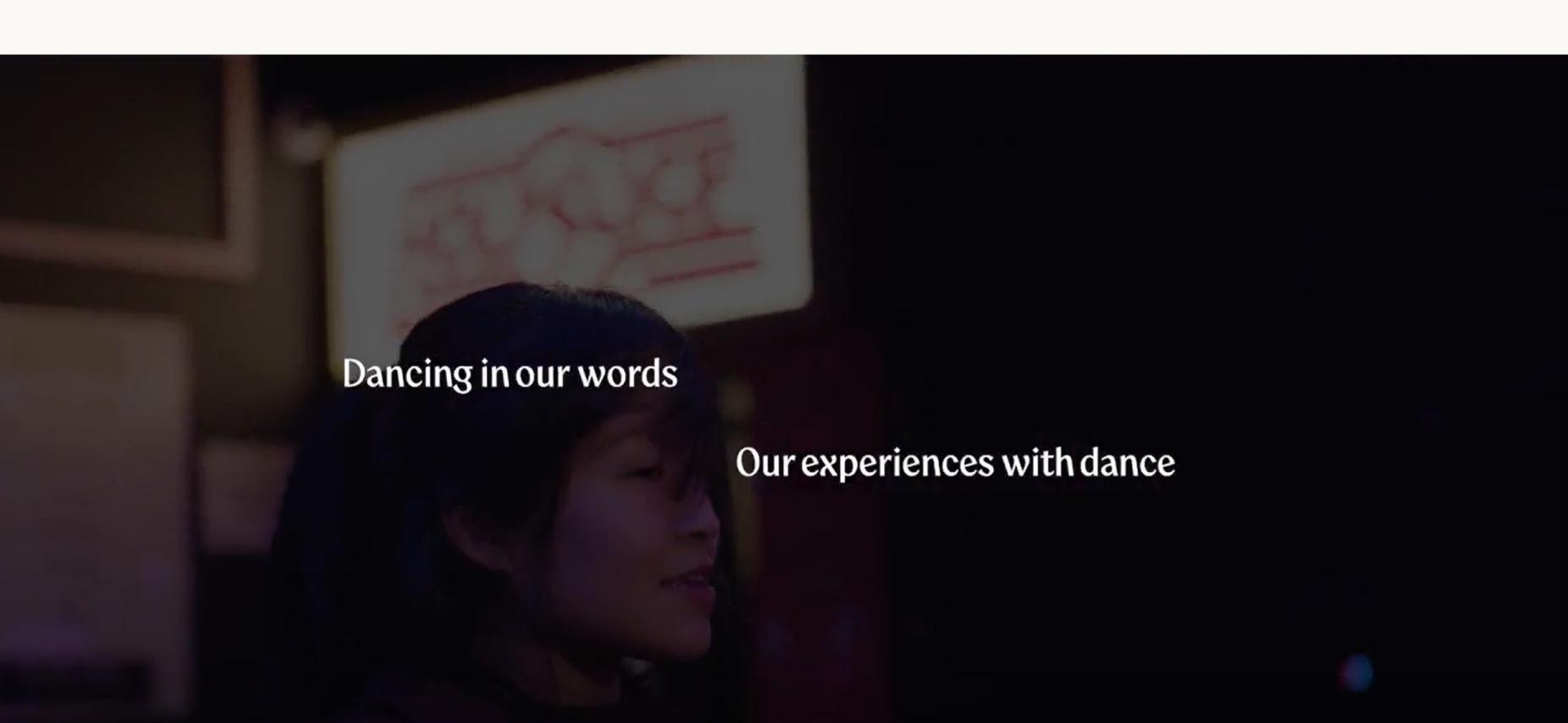
if you've met one autistic person, you've met one autistic person. I guess it's trying to be adaptable and accessible (Pt 5)

## Film 2

### Autistic adults' experiences of dance.

This film is for:

- Autistic adults: to raise awareness about dance as a potentially fun hobby that can support health & wellbeing
- Link workers: consider recommending dance (home or other settings)
- Dance providers: know there could be autistic dancers in your classes or studios, welcome new autistic dancers

A woman with dark hair is shown in profile, looking towards the right. In the background, a whiteboard is visible with red diagrams or text on it. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting an indoor setting like a classroom or meeting room.

Dancing in our words

Our experiences with dance

## Part 3

# How to make dance more accessible

# How to make dance more accessible

- What to expect
- Different spaces
- Different options
- Sensory environment
- Information processing
- Other people
- Finding joy

# What to expect

- Venue information
- What to do on arrival
- Social expectations
- Structure of class/event
- Invite questions

## Venue information

### How to get to the venue

Friends' Meeting House is in Manchester city centre, just behind Central Library and close to the Town Hall. It is within 3 minutes walking distance from the nearest tram stop and 15-20 minutes walking distance from local train stations, i.e. Oxford Road station, Victoria station, Piccadilly station.

The full address: 6 Mount St, Manchester M2 5NS.

The full information and a map can be found here:

<https://meetinghousemanchester.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Map.pdf>

This is what the front of the building looks like:



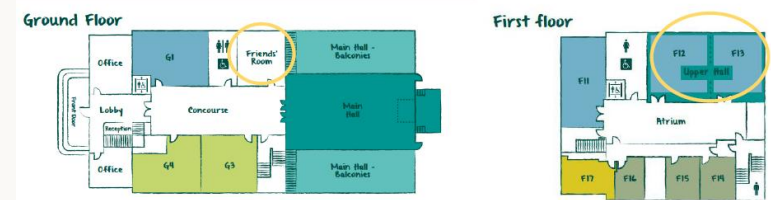
Inside the Upper Hall:



The capacity for the Upper Hall is 48 people in the above layout. About 30-35 people will be joining our event.

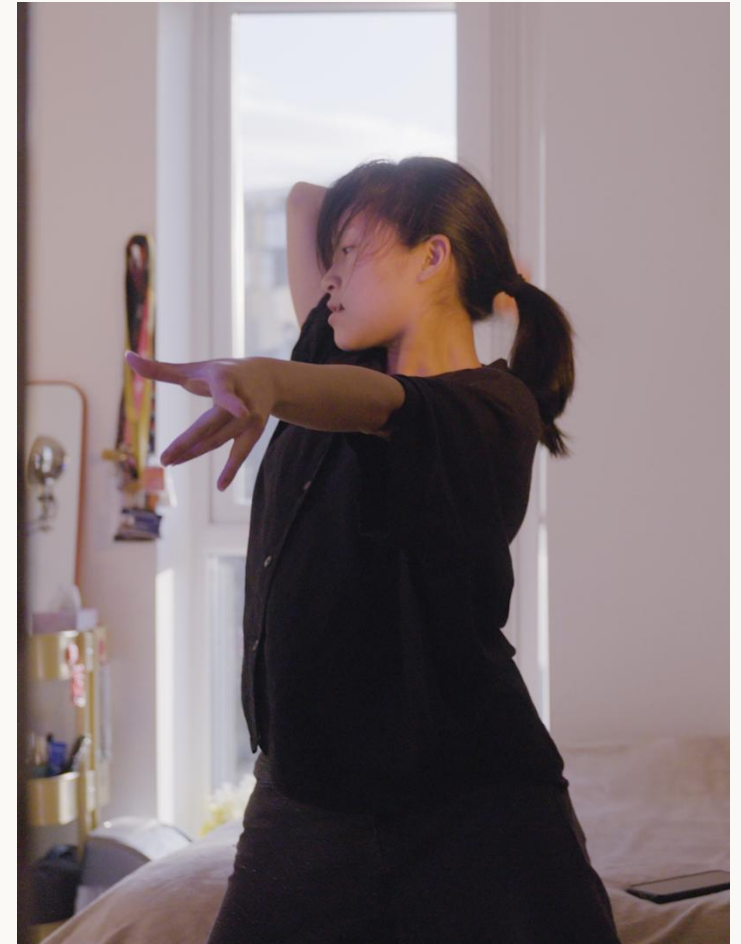
There are toilets, including accessible toilets, on each floor. On the first floor, they are next to the Upper Hall and opposite the Upper Hall. On the ground floor there are non-gendered toilets on your left just as you enter the concourse.

Here is the floor plan:



# Different spaces

- Consider dancing round the house
- Recorded online demos and classes
- Live online classes to join from home
- Videos with movements broken down
- Autistic only



# Different options

- Consider intentions
- Explore and acknowledge music choices
- Offer choice where possible
  - Breaks, options for moves/adaptations
  - Online classes – video on or off



# Sensory environment

- Lighting, sounds, smells, temperature
- Information and adjustments
- Ventilation
- Number of people
- Venue visits

“Not enough space, music too loud, lights too bright, too hot and lack of ventilated spaces (sweaty smell)” (pt.177)

# Information processing

- Time to process
- Repeat instructions
- Visual demos, diagrams?
- Position of teacher
- Break down movements
- Video demonstrations

“I need clear instructions and time to process the movements” (p.182)

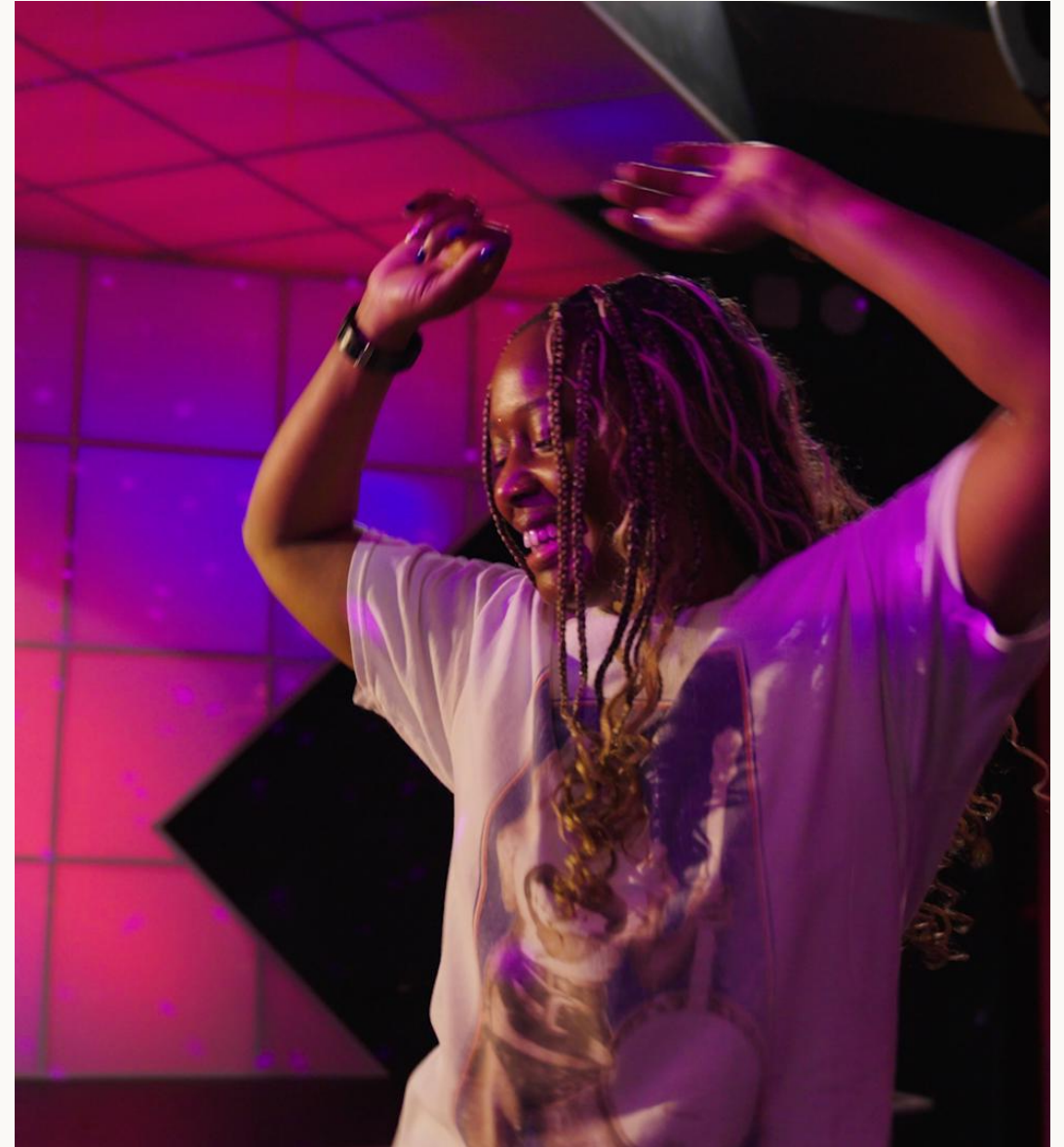
# Other people

- Dance in own space
- Bring someone to a class/event
- Make key contact people known
- Normalise difference
- Acceptance: body shapes, sizes, dance ability, disability aids



# Finding joy

- Physical health, mental health
- Emotion regulation
- Self expression
- Social connection
- Joy of movement to music



# Summary

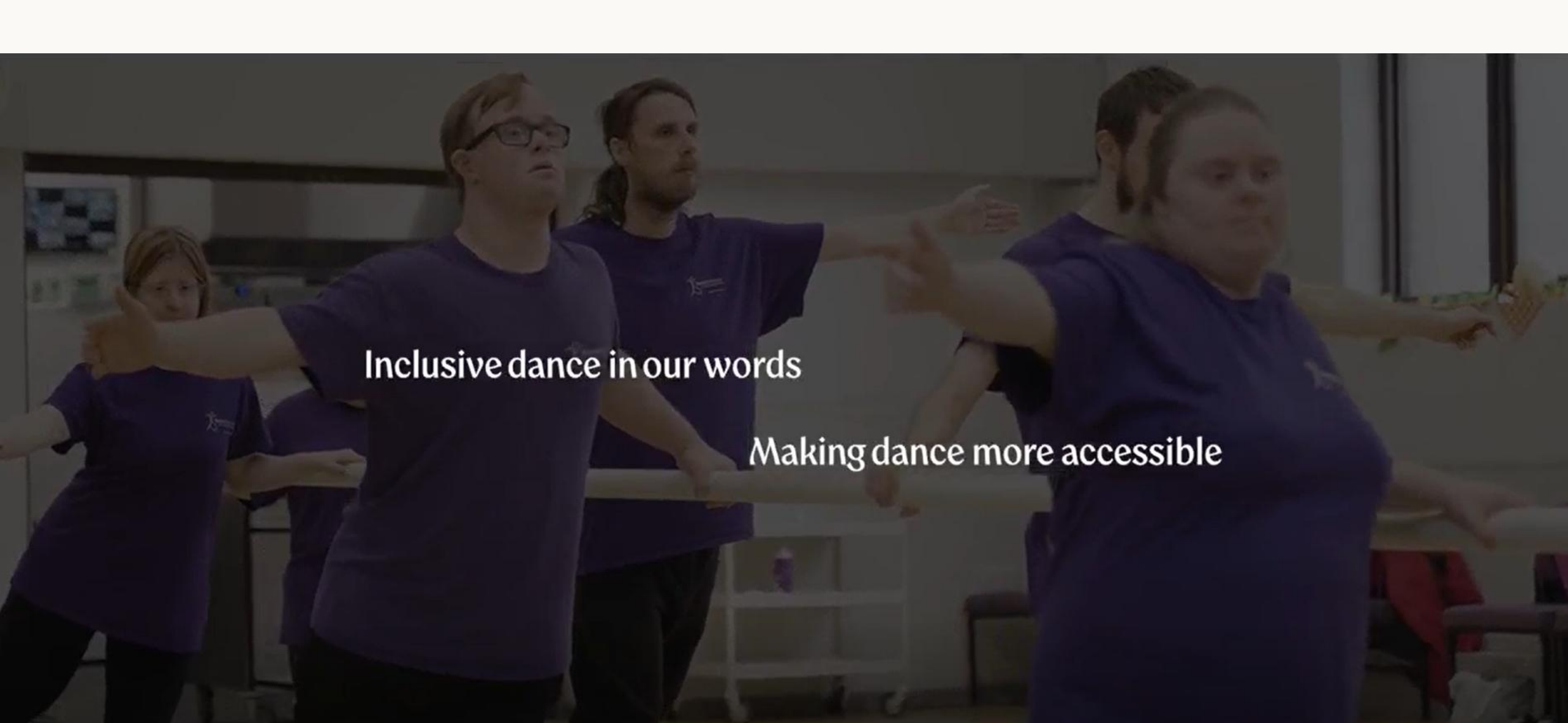
- Simple changes can make a big difference
- Invite questions and feedback
- Find the joy!

## Film 3

How dance spaces can be adapted to be more accessible and inclusive for autistic adults.

This film is for:

- Autistic adults: to support self-advocacy for adjustments
- Link workers and dance providers: to increase awareness about simple adjustments that could be made so dance spaces are more accessible and inclusive



Inclusive dance in our words

Making dance more accessible

## Next steps



- Continuing to analyse data from all studies
- Films and written materials will go on website
  - <https://www.autism.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/ada/>
- Funding for a longer film

# Ada: Access to Dance for Autistic adults



- Visit the project website
  - <https://www.autism.manchester.ac.uk/research/projects/ada/>



- Please provide feedback via the Padlet:
- If you would like to be notified when resources are available, please email us
- Thank you for joining us and to all involved in the project!

**“Dance is what I am. It's how I inhabit my body, and best meet the world; dancing is my main form of stim, and helps me live, rather than barely exist, in the world.”**