



Libraries Connected & Oxygen Arts: Into the Light: Pioneers of Black British Ballet

Evaluation of touring exhibition & events programme: summary

Sophie Ahmad, March 2026

"Overall, we were very happy with the programme and ... quality of the offer ... it stretched our marketing and content in new directions. We ... want to thank everyone involved wholeheartedly for the ... hard work we know this will have taken to make happen." (Library service)

"Not every day you get dance tuition from a ballet professional in a local library!" (Adult participant)

"Staff loved ... being able to interact with people viewing the exhibition. It provided a great talking point and introduction to the library." (Library service)

"My daughter has never tried ballet before, and this was a wonderful introduction. She was smiling and enthused all the way through ..." (Parent)

"There is no one else black in my ballet class, so I always felt different, but now I don't because there are other black dancers too." (Child participant aged 11-18)

"It was very inclusive ... It made me feel part of the local community, there were lots of different people there, all happy together." (Adult participant)

"The programme has significantly strengthened our partnerships across arts, media and community groups, creating new opportunities for collaboration, visibility and shared activity." (Library service)

"It made me realise ... how important libraries are to their communities and the benefits they can bring by opening their doors to events such as this ..." (Adult participant)

"It was a wonderful first ballet experience and I really enjoyed the Q and A which gave excellent insight into the process and the experience of the dancers." (Adult participant)

"When we all came up to the front and did some dancing, I really enjoyed it!" (Child participant aged 5-11)

"The programme has been received extremely positively, well beyond our expectations ... Feedback across the programme has been consistently enthusiastic ..." (Library service)

"I ... didn't know that libraries could put on such involved performance." (Adult participant)

"I really liked when we did the choreography. It was super, super fun!" (Child participant aged 5-11)

"It was a joy to listen to the panellists and learn about their experiences. I enjoy watching ballet but do not know much about it, so learnt a lot". (Adult participant)

"It's so unique and incredibly special that it is being offered to the library ... it's such a brilliant way to ... start conversations, raise awareness ... but in a really fun and exciting way ..." (Library service)

"This event has inspired me to keep pushing for what I want as not only is it possible, but it has been done before by others that look like myself." (Adult participant)

"None of this would have been developed ... without Libraries Connected being there to actually pull everything together and ... support it ..." (Library service)

Summary

Introduction

Libraries Connected is an independent charity that supports, promotes, and represents public libraries. Oxygen Arts is a creative production agency that helps communities to share their stories, supports arts organisations to reach new audiences, and works to achieve wider change within the creative industries. One of Oxygen Arts' main strands of work is the Black British Ballet Project (BBBP), which is based on the research of Dr Sandie Bourne and comprises a range of resources and activities that showcase the stories of pioneering Black dance professionals.

From October 2024 to the end of 2025, Libraries Connected and Oxygen Arts worked together to bring the BBBP to 29 libraries in the form of a touring exhibition, *Into the Light*, and a range of accompanying activities. The tour was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF)¹.

For Libraries Connected, *Into the Light* was an opportunity to bring a programme of cultural activity to libraries across the country, many of which may not have otherwise had the resources to get involved in an initiative of this kind. For Oxygen Arts, it was an opportunity to take the stories of Black British dance professionals to a much wider audience, continue to build its relationships with libraries, and develop some new offers.

The specific outcomes for the programme that partners agreed with NLHF were that:

- People will have developed skills
- People will have greater wellbeing
- People will have learned about heritage, leading to change in ideas and actions, and
- Heritage will be identified and better explained.

Oxygen Arts was the delivery partner for *Into the Light*. Libraries Connected acted as the link to library services, held the budget, provided governance, and managed the evaluation.

Library services made a small financial contribution to the programme. In return, they received the *Into the Light* exhibition, and a range of additional activities, which they could select from a menu of offers to suit their communities (including talks, workshops, and the BBBP's flagship ballet show *Island Movements*).

Libraries' motivations for taking part

Library services had a range of reasons for wanting to take part in this programme. For some, motivations were as simple as wanting to offer something different to local people and finding the programme intriguing. For others, motivations were more specifically about creating opportunities to reach out to and better serve diverse communities, and / or to expand access to cultural opportunities and diversify their cultural offer. Many services emphasised how challenging it can be to access the resources and expertise to put on programmes of this kind. In this context, the

¹ Libraries Connected and the Black British Ballet Project would like to thank the NLHF and National Lottery players for their kind support of this programme.

opportunity to take part in a national programme, with funding and wrap-around support, was especially welcome:

“It sounded an interesting project, which would bring something a bit unusual to the library ...”

“It was a fantastic opportunity to take part in a project working with communities that are underrepresented in the arts, and to facilitate access to arts and cultural activities in our libraries ...”

“Diverse programming we would struggle to have the contacts to arrange ourselves. Packaged with a menu of events and strengthened by being part of a larger programme.”

Reach of the programme

In c. 210 events across the 29 services, a conservative reading of the data provided by libraries suggests that 5789 opportunities were created to take part in a programme event or activity. In addition, tens of thousands of people have had the opportunity to explore and enjoy the *Into the Light* exhibition. Data from just 18 of the 29 libraries, which is heavily caveated, estimates that engagement figures for the exhibition across these sites only may be in the region of 44,716².

The programme has engaged a wide range of visitors, audience members, and participants, including: people of different ages (from small children to older adults); people from different ethnic communities; family, school / college and community groups, as well as individual sign-ups; and people with varying levels of ability in and knowledge about ballet and dance. While quantitative data is not of sufficient quality to understand the reach of the programme to non-library members, qualitative evidence suggests libraries have had some success in reaching people and communities who don't normally engage with their services.

Some library services were very pleased with the number and range of people they reached through the programme. However, there was also some disappointment about the relatively high number of cancelled activities (especially over the Summer of 2025 when members of the public may have been away or busy doing other things). Overall, it was common for leads to say it was a shame that more people didn't have the chance to take part, especially given the high quality of the events. While attendance has been challenging at times, there has been a lot of useful learning in this area (see below):

“We were keen to reach global majority audiences, including Black British but also Asian and minority ethnic communities in Bristol ... We also wanted to reach people who are not library members and who might not have attended a library event before ... it feels as though this project has been really successful in this regard, as audiences for ballet performance / in conversation were definitely more diverse than we typically see ...”

“We were pleased to see a variety of ages, genders, abilities, and backgrounds come out to these events, but we do feel we did not reach as many as we could have ...”

Reactions to the programme

Feedback from libraries on the quality of events, and public reactions to the programme, have been extremely positive. Twenty five of the 29 library services (86%) rated the quality of the programme

² Audience figures for the exhibition were only provided by 18 of the 29 library services and the nature of the data provided varies considerably (see full report for more details on how this figure was arrived at).

to be either very good or good. The overwhelming majority of respondents to the main participant survey (95%), said they would recommend the Black British Ballet Project to others³. All offers seem to have been well-received, with the show being a highlight for many, alongside some of the other workshops and events:

“The programme has been received extremely positively, well beyond our expectations ... Feedback across the programme has been consistently enthusiastic ... Overall, the programme clearly resonated with participants, created meaningful engagement, and demonstrated strong public appreciation for the partnership with Black British Ballet Project, Oxygen Arts and Libraries Connected ...” (Library service lead)

“The programme has been received exceptionally well ... Visitors and participants commented on the pride this programme has filled them with, to see the diversity of the community ... being represented ...” (Library service lead)

“A particular highlight was ... Island Movements ... This was a unique and memorable experience for participants and a significant achievement for our local cultural offer.” (Library service lead)

“I loved it! It was such a privilege to watch ballet en pointe in such a small, intimate venue ...”
(Participant)

Overall, the activities seem to have been so well received because they: were fun, interesting, and different; offered opportunities for interaction (with both the artistic team and other local people); provided powerful representations of success for Black and mixed heritage members of the community; and felt welcoming, inclusive, and inspiring for everyone:

“Not every day you get dance tuition from a ballet professional in a local library!” (Participant)

“It was a joy to listen to the panellists and learn about their experiences. I enjoy watching ballet but do not know much about it, so learnt a lot”. (Participant)

“Great that it felt like a discussion with an audience who worked to get into the issues ... Enjoyed the interactivity.” (Participant)

“As a black family, it was great to see ourselves in ballet.” (Participant)

“It was thrilling and thought provoking. My neurodiverse granddaughter sat still for 30 minutes in a ballet - a first! We both enjoyed it hugely.” (Participant)

“... One mother was so touched that her daughter in a wheelchair could participate in a dance class that she took the extra effort of emailing to thank us.” (Library service lead)

Impact & legacy

Achievement against NLHF outcomes

Evidence indicates that the programme has met all of the specific outcomes agreed with NLHF:

³ Of the 410 respondents to the main participant survey, 370 answered this question.

People will have greater wellbeing

There is a clear sense of joy in responses to the participant survey. The programme's mix of visual imagery, personal stories, movement, and music seems to have been particularly uplifting. Members of the public have clearly enjoyed taking part in creative activities and reconnecting with creative passions. Interactions on the programme also seem to have fostered a stronger sense of community and belonging. For many Black audience members and participants, and people of mixed heritage, the programme appears to have validated their experiences and reinforced a sense of pride in their identity. A wider group of people said they felt more confident and motivated to explore and pursue their dreams as a result of taking part in BBBP activities. All of these benefits for members of the public seem likely to contribute to improved wellbeing. In addition, the programme seems to have had some benefits in terms of staff morale and engagement, with services noting that staff appreciated the opportunity to take part in activities alongside members of the public:

"Well, I think [I'll] ... restart my creative journey - despite my older age!" (Participant)

"This event has inspired me to keep pushing for what I want as not only is it possible, but it has been done before by others that look like myself." (Participant)

"It made me feel part of the local community, there were lots of different people there, all happy together." (Participant)

"There is no one else black in my ballet class, so I always felt different, but now I don't because there are other black dancers too." (Child participant)

"In terms of staff ... it's been really great ... the joy and the feeling of community that it brought ..."
(Library service lead)

People will have developed skills

The evaluation suggests that child participants have developed their skills in dancing, story-telling, writing, communications, team-working, VR, and photography as a result of taking part in programme activity. There is plenty of evidence that adult participants have learned new skills too, including in dance, choreography, and photography. In addition, the evaluation suggests that staff at half (15) of participating library services and volunteers at three services have improved their skills as a result of the programme. The vast majority of improvements in staff and volunteer skills relate to the management of projects and programmes and the marketing and hosting of cultural events. Libraries report that staff are now feeling more confident to host cultural programmes and events, even where they have little prior knowledge of the themes and issues involved:

"I really enjoyed the delivery of the workshop, informal, encouraging and enthusiastic. I learned a few ... positions, choreography and how to work in partnerships and as a group ..." (Participant, dance workshop)

"Pitched perfectly for my basic camera knowledge. I thought it would be very professional and high level, but it added to my current knowledge nicely ..." (Participant, photography workshop)

"Working with Black British Ballet offered staff valuable opportunities to gain experience in delivering culturally specific, high-quality arts activity that is not normally part of our core programme. This included gaining confidence in event management within community settings ... We also developed new skills around audience outreach. We used AI tools ... to help compile sector-specific mailing lists and identify community groups to contact and target through our ... PR ..." (Library service lead)

“Staff [are] more confident in supporting and participating in events and activities that they have little knowledge of.” (Library service lead)

“We’re getting really good at running ... and hosting events of all types!” (Library service lead)

Heritage will be identified and better explained; people will have learned about heritage, leading to change in ideas and actions

For many members of the public, the programme has offered a unique and special opportunity to experience ballet and meet professional dancers that they would not have otherwise had. It has also been an opportunity for members of the public, and library staff, to learn about an important part of our cultural history and heritage that has been largely hidden from view. Comments from survey respondents suggest that most visitors and audience members had little prior knowledge of the history of ballet, and of Black ballet in particular. Programme events appear to have been revelatory for these people, while also offering new perspectives on history and heritage for those with greater prior understanding. The programme seems to have inspired many people to want to continue learning about the stories and experiences of Black ballet professionals:

“Fascinating to find out about something I knew nothing about.” (Participant, exhibition)

“It was fascinating to read the individual career stories and to see the interactions between dance companies over time. I had not previously appreciated what a pivotal role Dance Theatre of Harlem played in the careers of so many Black British dancers.” (Participant, exhibition)

“Through attending this event, I have found out about some more black dancers that are paving the way for other black ... upcoming and/or aspiring dancers. I now have the names of these dancers and can conduct my own research about them and their journey.” (Participant, BBBP presentation)

“The show was so wonderful. The ladies performing a ballet ... telling the story about the Windrush experience of our mothers and fathers who came to the UK. How we were treated ... also what we have done for the UK, our hard work, determination. It is good to put on performances that educate people and also bring joy and happiness to put a smile on people’s faces.” (Participant, Island Movements show)

Evidence suggests that the stories of talent, hardship, strength, and resilience at the heart of the BBBP also have relevance far beyond the world of ballet. The programme seems to have provided an opportunity to open up some challenging but important conversations about race, class, diversity, and aspiration that are likely to resonate for some time to come. There is some evidence to suggest that the programme may have been especially impactful in areas that have historically had lower levels of diversity, and where local people may have had fewer opportunities to encounter this type of content before.

Other achievements & impacts

Beyond the specific NLHF outcomes, the programme appears to have had a number of other beneficial impacts:

Among members of the public, there is some evidence to suggest that the programme has changed perceptions of local libraries, with people saying that they seem like more fun and interesting places to spend time as a result of the programme:

“I ... didn’t know that libraries could put on such involved performance.”

“It made me realise once again how important libraries are to their communities and the benefits they can bring by opening their doors to events such as this ...”

“I feel this event makes [the] library a more fun place to be ...”

Some library leads report that staff have a renewed commitment to serving diverse communities as a result of the programme. Most report new and / or strengthened relationships (with local partners, other library services, and Libraries Connected / Oxygen Arts), which in some cases have already yielded tangible benefits in the form of new collaborations:

“It was a poignant reminder to the team of how important it is that the Black community (and others) take part in shaping how their stories are told ... and celebrating their contributions ...”

“The programme has significantly strengthened our partnerships across arts, media and community groups, creating new opportunities for collaboration ...”

“We have managed to engage with a number of schools which we have previously struggled to form links with, we have also formed relationships with other organisations such as dance groups.”

“... The programme ... enabled us to build a meaningful and ongoing relationship with [our local] Camera Club. Representatives attended the ... photography workshop ... This has led to ... discussions around volunteering to photograph some of our future events ... potential income-generation opportunities, and ... a ... photography exhibition ...”

For Oxygen Arts, the programme has been an opportunity to work with a much wider range of libraries, and to deepen its understanding of how Libraries Connected operates. This has already led to new work with libraries in London and the South-East. The programme has also been an opportunity to raise the profile of the BBBP beyond the library sector. Notably, English National Ballet requested that the exhibition be displayed at their London headquarters in 2024 and 2025, and the exhibition was also loaned to the Royal Ballet School for display to their students and visitors, allowing even more people to engage with this history. Delivering the programme has also informed Oxygen Arts’ thinking about how the BBBP might develop in future. In particular, it has given the team new insight into the challenges of involving young people in ballet, which will prove useful in on-going activity to influence the ballet industry, and confirmed the value of working closely with communities to overcome barriers to participation.

Although Libraries Connected and Oxygen Arts were unable to clear the rights for the online exhibition to be available under a Creative Commons licence, all digital outputs from this programme will be freely available online. Another important way in which the programme will continue to have a legacy is through an extension of the exhibition tour to 32 library services through to March 2027.

All in all, this is a real achievement for the programme partners and the library services that have taken part.

Learning for the future

This has been an ambitious programme, involving a range of different types of activity being hosted in 29 different library services across England, over a fifteen/sixteen-month period. Perhaps unsurprisingly, evaluation evidence suggests it has been quite a complex and challenging programme to manage and deliver, both for the partners and for library services, especially those that had limited prior experience of running cultural events and/or were especially resource-

constrained. In addition to its clear positive impact, the programme has generated a great deal of learning that should prove useful for the future. Some of the key points are set out below. The majority of suggestions for improvement made by library services focus on project management, communications, and support.

Learning about the value of libraries as venues for cultural & heritage activity

Experiences on this programme have confirmed the importance of libraries as venues for cultural and heritage activity. The programme has demonstrated that libraries can help to overcome barriers to participation by bringing cultural and heritage activities closer to communities and hosting them in a friendly and relaxed environment in which people feel comfortable to take part.

The programme has demonstrated the value of libraries collaborating with leading arts organisations to bring fresh content to local audiences. It seems to have been helpful that Oxygen Arts offered a mix of different kinds of activity so library services could use their local knowledge to adapt the programme to suit their own communities. While all programme offers proved engaging and impactful, evidence suggests that dance has been particularly well received as a novel activity that is not often found in a library setting. The evaluation has identified a number of features that have proved particularly popular with local people (such as opportunities for interaction) that would be worth building into future programmes, where possible.

The programme has also shown how hosting a successful cultural and heritage programme can help to raise the profile and change the perception of libraries among members of the public and local partners, opening doors for future collaboration.

Learning for Libraries Connected

A productive model for working with library services

Experience on the programme has demonstrated the value of this way of working, whereby Libraries Connected supports heads of service to create and secure funding for an initiative, and then manages a national programme of cultural activity on behalf of, and in collaboration with, library colleagues. Library services have appreciated the role that Libraries Connected has played in running this programme. Many services confirmed that they would not have been able to host such activity by themselves.

Choosing & working with programme partners

Partnership working on this programme was made easier because leads at Libraries Connected and Oxygen Arts already knew each other, and Oxygen Arts were already familiar with how libraries work, how varied they are, and the types of challenges they tend to face. Oxygen Arts' team of dancers and facilitators were also highly skilled, had compelling stories to tell, and understood the programme's objectives. It seems likely that more time will be required at the beginning of a project to establish mutual understanding and expectations if working with a new partner in future.

While the original plan was for all activities to be held within the month allocated to each library service, in the end quite a lot of activity was rescheduled and took place over a longer period of time to ensure sufficient numbers of participants. Flexibility on the part of Oxygen Arts made this possible, and there were some advantages, not least more time to understand and tailor the programme to community interests. However, this also made managing logistics more complicated and meant later months of the programme were busier than planned for Oxygen Arts. This experience suggests that, in future, exploring a potential partners' willingness and capacity to be flexible in delivery should be a key focus of early conversations. Experience also suggests that more time and budget might be needed for delivery partners to communicate with and support libraries on an on-going basis, including with outreach.

Programme set up with library services

Learning from this programme suggests that the period from Expressions of Interest to library services being invited to take part is critically important. The delivery timeframes for programmes, however, often require activity to commence as soon as possible, and before all relevant information is available and details have been worked through.

One of the most important lessons from this programme is the need to build in a more substantial set up phase in which to explain the programme to library services, clarify roles and expectations (especially around outreach and marketing of activity), and identify any skill gaps and support needs. Learning from this programme suggests it might be helpful to do the following, in particular, as part of set up: provide guidance on the number of days each library / library service might need to dedicate each month to managing the programme; clarify space and technological requirements for hosting events (including for any audio-visual / VR elements); identify key contacts for different elements of the programme; and agree protocols for sharing information (including communicating any changes of personnel within library teams). Set up should also include clarity about costs and contracts (whether libraries can charge for events that are externally funded and who bears the costs if events are cancelled), and copyright and licencing issues (see below).

Ideally, programme leaders would convene a working group comprising library services operating in different contexts and with different levels of resource and expertise to explore and advise on these matters, identifying possible pinch points and barriers to address.

On-going communications with library services

Libraries Connected invested in communications with and support of libraries, with a whole host of resources made available on their Basecamp. Additional support was also made available in response to programme learning (for example a webinar to support library services with marketing and outreach). However, learning from this programme indicates a need to repeat communications and continually direct library services to available resources. This is particularly important with long programmes where there may be a substantial time period between launch and a particular library service's allocated delivery month. Scheduling some more regular check-in meetings and Q&A sessions throughout the life of a programme may be useful and a good way of picking up any delivery issues at an early stage.

Scheduling activity

Learning from this programme suggests that engagement can decrease significantly in both August and December / January due to competing priorities, such as holidays, and weather-related factors. Where possible, it would seem sensible to avoid launching new initiatives or scheduling major events or activities during these periods. Instead, these times can be used for design and planning, light engagement, and reflection.

Outreach, marketing, & PR

Experience from this programme suggests that engaging school groups is a good way of achieving consistent levels of participation. It would therefore seem sensible to prioritise partnerships with schools when planning future engagement, and to develop offers that align as much as possible with curricula demands, extra-curricular activities, and school calendars.

Beyond school groups, experience suggests that recruiting participants can be difficult even when activities are made freely available to library services and members of the public. Some library services have no budget for activities and therefore no mailing lists to use to advertise events. As part of a more substantial set up phase, it would be helpful to identify services that need additional

support to secure sufficient numbers of participants. The costs of providing this support should be built into supplier budgets.

The programme did receive some positive media coverage⁴. However, partners found that despite having some excellent photos and content, this was not often picked up by the press. For future programmes, it may be worth allocating some of the budget for specialist arts PR support. Learning from this programme (and other Libraries Connected projects) suggests this resource should be used to support libraries with local comms engagement, which is more likely to be successful than activity that is led by national programme teams alone.

Involving local artists

While the programme partners were keen for libraries to commission their own activities, and so create opportunities for local creatives, there was little take up of this aspect of the programme. As part of the scoping stage of any future programme, it may be worth exploring in more detail the appetite for this type of activity and the likely barriers and enabling factors. Targetted help for those libraries that lack contacts with their local creative ecosystem might be needed. Tapping into the networks of programme funders, issuing a call out to artist collectives via Libraries Connected regional groupings, or seeking advice from ACE-funded library services (who will have more expertise in this area) might be possible ways to take this forward.

Improving evaluation

Experience on this programme suggests improvements could be made to evaluation processes in future. Libraries Connected staff found it quite time-consuming to chase library services for evaluation data. Some services found the library survey onerous, with some questions they could not answer as they did not routinely collect the relevant data (e.g. on the age and membership status of people booking / attending events). The main participant survey was also not suitable for children, until simpler versions were created. In future, it would be worth establishing an evaluation working group (perhaps a subset of the group outlined above) as part of the initial set up phase. This group (comprising a mix of library services) could work together with the programme leads (and external evaluator if relevant) to co-design the evaluation framework, identify data sources that all library services have access to / can realistically collect, and review evaluation tools. Identifying some clear lines of enquiry from the start might also be useful in bringing focus to the design of tools, as well as to data analysis.

There were clear disadvantages in collecting monitoring data as part of the library survey, in particular this meant the surveys were long, and data was not always complete if surveys were returned before rescheduled events took place. It would be preferable to separate out processes for monitoring and evaluation in future, with libraries submitting a simple monitoring spreadsheet of events and attendance figures which could be more easily cross-checked with information held by the delivery partner. For programmes such as this, with multiple similar activities (e.g. the BBBP presentation, panel, and In Conversation events), steps need to be taken to ensure respondents (both library staff and members of the public) understand which event they are providing feedback on/data for, to avoid confusion. Ideally, more provision should be made for library service focus group discussions as part of programme evaluation, as these have additional benefits in terms of shared learning and community building (in line with the wider objectives of Libraries Connected). Discussions with the Project Board and other key stakeholders should also be built into the evaluation from the start, as the people involved will have important perspectives to share. An enhanced communications effort is needed to reinforce the importance of evaluation and support

⁴ See Appendix 4 in the full report for more details.

good practice. Library services need to be aware of evaluation requirements at an early stage, ideally before deciding to take part.

Evaluation budgets need to be increased to accommodate these changes. A minimum of 5% of programme costs might be appropriate in future.

Handovers & management within Libraries Connected

Once Libraries Connected was successful in being awarded funding for this programme, responsibility for delivery was handed over to a team that was not involved in the bid writing. In future, it may be useful to build in some early involvement of delivery teams before bids are submitted to ensure those teams understand what needs to be delivered, and any budgeting or other assumptions that have been made, and are ready to go as soon as projects are handed over.

The bid writing team at Libraries Connected used Google Docs, as this facilitated joint working with Oxygen Arts. The project delivery team continued to use this once the project was handed over, alongside Sharepoint (to manage information of relevance to Libraries Connected only), resulting in occasional confusion about what information should sit where. In future, as part of project set up, it might be helpful to more explicitly identify the types of information that will be needed for different purposes and audiences and decide which systems to use to accommodate this.

Partners found that showcasing this programme at various Libraries Connected events was a very useful way of generating interest among library services and attracting participants. It would seem to be helpful to build such opportunities into future projects and programmes. These events are also opportunities to share learning.

Licences

Programme partners need to carefully consider digital elements of any future application to NHLF to make sure that these can be lawfully released under a Creative Commons 4.0 licence that allows for commercial use. If they are unsure, and particularly where digital elements are not central to the project or programme, they should consider if these could be funded separately.

Learning for Oxygen Arts:

On-going programme management & communications

As outlined above, experience on this programme suggests that more time was needed for Oxygen Arts to manage activities, and communicate with and support libraries on an on-going basis than was originally planned for. This was especially the case given the need to reschedule some of the events. In future, and where possible, it would seem sensible to build some additional time into budgets for this from the start.

Flexibility on age categories

Library services appreciated it when Oxygen Arts took a flexible and collaborative approach to age categories to help ensure the best uptake and experience for their particular communities. Continuing to take such an approach in future seems advisable.

Marketing collateral

Library services have emphasised the importance of having suitable images available as soon as possible to support marketing efforts. It has also been suggested that there may have been missed opportunities to share early images of the programme in a library setting with those libraries that were due to host the programme further down the line (the setting for the show in Bristol was said

to have been a particularly striking photo opportunity). These might be things to consider further for the future.

Managing attendance

Towards the end of the run, Oxygen Arts began sending a confirmation email to libraries the week before programmed activity to check on numbers and logistics, and this proved useful. In future, more regular check-ins with libraries should be built into the programme from the start, especially for open access events.

Evidence suggests that Oxygen Arts were responsive and flexible in the delivery of this programme. However, in future, it may be worth thinking in advance about cut off points for attendance at particular events where it is no longer cost-effective to travel to venues. It may also be helpful to consider the point at which it is preferable to reschedule a whole month of activity, if recruitment isn't progressing to plan and library staff don't have sufficient capacity to take mitigating action.

Accounting for wear & tear

Finally, library leads receiving the exhibition towards the end of its run reported that some of the panels were (understandably) showing signs of wear and tear. In future, some contingency should be built into budgets to allow for re-printing / shipping, as required.

Case study: Redbridge

Vision Redbridge Culture & Leisure (Vision RCL) runs a network of libraries across the borough. The Black British Ballet Project (BBBP) was hosted at four of these libraries (Central, Fullwell Cross, Goodmayes, and Hainault) during Black History Month (October 2024), at the beginning of the BBBP tour. Vision RCL was the only library service to programme BBBP activity outside, in the public realm, reaching people who might not otherwise have engaged with their library. In addition to the *Island Movements* show and the exhibition, BBBP provided dance, ballet, photography, and creative writing workshops, as well as storytelling sessions. Activities were extremely well received, and taking part in the project has enabled library staff to strengthen relationships with key community groups and develop some useful new skills. Vision RCL's involvement was led by Viktoria Nourpeissova, Culture and Library Development Officer, who spoke to this author in April 2025.

About the library service

"We are a leisure trust, we're commissioned by the local authority to look after the cultural spaces, so theatre, parks, libraries ... We have 11 libraries in total ...

Redbridge is an incredibly diverse area ... Our main community is Asian, South Asian in particular ... We work closely with the local authority on their strategic priorities ... so, for example, we have South Asian Heritage Month ... We always programme for Black History Month as well ... and around that there's other activity to celebrate ... diverse voices and audiences ... Families are the main group that engage with us regularly ... teens and older people ... they are our target groups ...

My role straddles library development ... and the culture team ... [which] is mainly focused at the moment ... on ... Redbridge Outdoor Arts (ROA), which brings free, accessible performances to the high streets of low engaged areas ... ROA prioritises programming from organisations led by the Global Majority to address historical under-representation and promote greater diversity and inclusion in the arts. By actively supporting these groups, we aim to create a more vibrant, representative, and equitable outdoor arts sector. This focus also ensures that a wider range of perspectives and artistic voices are heard and celebrated, ultimately enriching the cultural landscape ...

Motivations for taking part

Redbridge is part of ASCEL ... the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (now Libraries Rising) ... The London group ... are really good at inviting speakers to come along and talk about projects ... That's how I met Marsha from the BBBP. She was talking about the project ... and it sounded amazing ... so I reached out to her after the meeting ...

At that point ... in 2023 ... it was just a pilot ... and I invited them to perform inside Redbridge Central Library ... in the foyer space ... I was really blown away by the idea of bringing something like this into a library space! ... It was the sort of ballet that was very accessible ... and ... it was such a strong story ... that it really resonated with a lot of the community ... [Then last year] Redbridge Outdoor Arts were looking for ideas for programming, and we kept coming back to that performance ... it just stuck with us. And we thought this would be amazing outdoors. We could get so many more people engaged ... We were keen to go for October, because it was Black History month ... we felt it would be perfect if ... the stars aligned! ... And, in the end, it made up the majority of our programme for Black History Month!

Activities and engagement

*The library contributed a small amount of money and got a menu of offers in return ... We very much saw the *Island Movements* performances as the showcase ... then there was the exhibition and VR headsets ... and other workshops ... So, it worked perfectly to create quite a cohesive programme for us ... A lot of the activities were programmed before the show, because we wanted people to get involved ... so they had that background knowledge and interest ... It was a way for us to promote the show in a more interesting way ... BBBP was a great community engagement and audience development initiative ...*

The show was held outside ... So, in Fullwell Cross library, we've got ... Ken Aston Square ... right outside, which is brilliant for performances. We had the show there ... and the dancers had their Q&A there too ... It

started to rain, but they were amazing! We had a local artist ... doing projects within that space. We also had crafts, and we did the arts award as part of it as well ... we really wanted to have that mini festival energy Then in Ilford, the library is a two-minute walk away from the high street where we held the show ... it's within sight ... And the numbers were huge! ... around a thousand for the shows ... whereas we would be looking at maybe 75% of that for our other outdoor arts shows ...

It was helpful to have a range of activities offered ... because I think the things that people need in different areas vary. So ... the east and south of the borough ... are ... not as high income as the west, so we tried to focus on those areas ... offering something ... that people might not have access to otherwise ... We still did some programming in the west, but ... more to engage kids in creative writing and ... the telling of stories from different backgrounds ... We were very lucky that the riots didn't really touch us last year. However, that feeling of fear was still around. So just ... having these diverse stories, and recognising that our history is so different, really resonated with people ...

The main feedback has been 'we want more of this'! It's been so lovely ... to hear ... 'oh, this really resonated with me' ... or 'this story spoke to me' ...

Highlights

I think the ballet workshops worked particularly well. We got a mixed range of abilities, which was brilliant ... And there were lots of little black girls just really inspired ... It reached that demographic and sparked something in them. You could really see it. And then seeing those little girls in the crowds at the shows was amazing! Because it was also an all-female led performance, it really spoke to them ...

Another thing that worked really well was having the virtual reality headsets ... that element of technology really hits those groups that maybe wouldn't necessarily engage with an exhibition ... So, we had a lot more teens and older kids interested ... Plus, we then got to give the headsets to our Knit and Natter group ... who'd never tried VR before ... It was a really good way of introducing a type of technology that a lot of people find daunting ... So, that was a hit! ...

We also worked with the Ageless Teenagers, a group of West Indian retirees ... They did a tea dance and a quadrille alongside the show, and they brought all their families along! ... It was brilliant to chat with them as well. Their stories were so beautiful, and ... the show sparked so many conversations ...

Impact on / lasting legacy for the library service

We've built some brilliant relationships with local communities because of the project ... The Ageless Teenagers come to do exercise in the library, but they hadn't really engaged with us before ... And Barkingside Art Club ... they are a group that offers art to children with additional needs. I asked Marsha and Sandie if they would be willing to do an adapted storytelling session of Onisere and the Ballet Queen ... and they were happy to do that ... The Club have Creative Ambassadors, a group of teens, a lot of whom are autistic or have additional needs ... One young man worked with the club lead to make an adapted version of the story ... So ... [the project] enabled us to experiment with different ways of working with them ... We also trained up quite a few members of staff on working with the headsets and ... I think they're interested in doing something like that again. And the workshops just stuck with staff too ... the joy and the feeling of community that they brought ... Overall, BBBP helped to raise ambition and elevate Redbridge libraries' reputation with the community and the wider library sector too, as I was asked to present at the Libraries Connected conference with Marsha, and support a BBBP webinar ...

Looking to the future

I would definitely recommend the programme ... It's so unique and special that it was offered to the library. It's such a brilliant way to start conversations, to raise awareness ... to engage, but in a different ... really fun and exciting way ... And everyone involved in the project, the dancers, Marsha, Sandie is just so lovely ... I'd love to work with them again ... that's definitely the dream. If we could get them back!

Case study: Bracknell Forest

Bracknell Forest Council runs a network of nine libraries across the borough. The Black British Ballet Project (BBBP) was hosted at Bracknell Library, in the town centre, from December 2024 to April 2025. In addition to the exhibition, BBBP provided dance, ballet, photography, and creative writing workshops, as well as storytelling sessions and conversations with BBBP dancers. Activities were very well received, and the Project has provided an opportunity to raise the profile of the library service in the Council and the community, and to build relationships with local schools. It has also enabled librarians to forge a strong relationship with Libraries Connected, which has led to Bracknell making a successful bid to take part in the Our Freedom Then and Now project. Bracknell's involvement was led, until November 2024, by Micheline Katts, Library Operations Manager, and after this by Anne Hayward, Adult and Digital Librarian, and Laura Colley Ward, then Digital and ICT Services Librarian. The three staff members spoke to this author in September 2025.

About the library service

Micheline: *"Having come out of Covid, there was quite a lot of change within the library service ... we recently underwent a review ... and there was a change in focus, with us adopting a community hub model ... things are still quite new ... but ... we're trying ... to align more with the council ... to work more closely with colleagues there ... it's about using our libraries as flexible spaces. We're like the face of the Council ... so lots of services where customers are coming in ... for bus passes etc ... it's now done at libraries ... so, we're a lot more than just books. We're a Net Zero hub ... since 2023/2024 we've been ... designated warm hubs ... we're about ... enriching cultural spaces."*

Laura: *"There are people from all walks of life that come into our libraries ... You have doctors studying upstairs and homeless people coming in for our data bank services and just to keep warm."*

Micheline: *"In the last three years, the community has also changed a lot ... we're trying to work more closely with the different communities, using our librarians to find out what it is that people want for this space ... Building partnerships and developing new projects is part of the new drive ... This project was one of the first ... since Covid ... and this change in focus."*

Motivations for taking part

Micheline: *"When the opportunity first came up ... everybody was like 'yes, yes, yes!' ... because ... at the time we were starting to talk about Bracknell libraries becoming more of a cultural centre ... obviously we then had to ... get the go ahead because we were contributing £500 ... and ... council budgets are always tight ... but we felt what we were getting back was going to be ... something new, something different for us ... it was just intriguing ... because it was ballet, so that's different. And then ... it was black ballet! ... With the community that we serve being so diverse ... we just thought ... wouldn't it be wonderful to see how it could go?"*

Activities and engagement

Micheline: *"When we were thinking about activities ... we were looking first at families, because we knew we would be able to draw them in ... we also then chose some of the In Conversation events ... which obviously were more adult focused ... We used one of the In Conversation sessions as part of our volunteer thank you Christmas Coffee mornings, so that was rather nice! ... Darren Panton from BBBP came in ... and his story was just absolutely electric! Everyone, I think, had a tear in their eye! He really was great ..."*

Anne: *"When I was contacting BBBP to discuss the events, they came back to me and said, 'oh we've got availability on these dates if you want to do any more'"*.

Micheline: *"So, we set up some further activities ... we went to a primary school ... and BBBP came and did the storytelling ... which was very popular ... I said to the children's librarian, 'is there a school close by that you think we should approach', and she said ... 'there's this one I've been struggling to get into, maybe this programme might just hook them' ... And obviously that did the trick because once we explained what it was, they brought the children in ... 70 or 80 ... they came with parents and teachers, and they could see and use the space ... We've got a good relationship with the school now, for the Summer reading challenge ... It*

was helpful to have events over a few months ... the numbers attending ... in the beginning ... were quite low ... but by the end ... you could really see the progression ... it's just about getting to know our community and what they would come out for."

Highlights

Anne: *"The talks were so inspiring ... both Darren's with the volunteers and Darren talking to the children during the dance workshop. He was very inspiring to the children ... he was so encouraging ... that close contact with a ballet dancer was amazing."*

Micheline: *"Julie Felix came to give a talk about her career ... and you got that lump in your throat ... her story ... hearing about the extra barriers she faced ... I think that's what really touched people ... that could have linked in with somebody else's experience ... so they think 'well, actually I'm not alone'. And Darren and Julie were so generous in being so honest ... I think that genuineness and generosity of spirit definitely came through ... People really enjoyed the exhibition as well ... it was in the centre of our library, so customers were like 'what's this?' And then of course ... the lovely photographs ... each of these three-sided stands had a different dancer, so people might recognise them, or ... say 'oh yes, I remember the 1970s' ... so it brought out other conversations ... everybody wants to access these things in a different way. So, it's great that they have different mediums for people to do that."*

Impact on / lasting legacy for the library service

Anne: *"It's really important to think about things that are just completely different to bring new audiences into the library, and that was what the benefit of the Ballet Project was for us ... it also really helped us to raise our profile in the Council because we were able to ... shout out about what we were doing, on the council's website, and across social media ... We were able to promote our events in the Council's newsletter, which we don't always manage to ... by being so different it helped us show case what we offer."*

Laura: *"We had the final event ... and ... there were lots of people at it ... we built a really great relationship with Tessa and Libraries Connected there ... and then we joined the Libraries Connected Basecamp ... where we're in touch with other libraries ... we chat, share ideas, and talk about projects and funding opportunities and good practice ... so not only did we get a fabulous offering in the Black Ballet Project ... which really our communities loved ... but as a library service ... it gave us a real opportunity to network with other libraries and with other professionals that maybe we wouldn't have necessarily had otherwise."*

Anne: *"We then got funding for the Our Freedom, Then and Now project through Libraries Connected ... art centres and libraries were invited to bid to create ... projects and ... events celebrating the end of the Second World War and exploring ideas of what freedom means to the community ... Tessa told us about it and recommended we apply ... it has been great to move on from the ballet project to this ... it's been amazing to be part of such a big campaign ... and something I hope will lead on to other good things too."*

Looking to the future

Micheline: *"The BBBP certainly made people think, 'oh look what a library can offer!' ... And from our side, I think it did create more awareness ... that this is what we want our libraries to be ... there's room to develop our skills a bit more, but the opportunities are there. And now I think it's about us having the bravery to say, 'yes, let's go for it!' like we did with this project ... it's helped us to grow and given us a really positive experience."*

Case study: Calderdale

Calderdale Council manages a network of 12 libraries across the borough. The Black British Ballet Project (BBBP) was hosted at the main Central Library, in Halifax, between October 2024 and April 2025. In addition to the exhibition and *Island Movements* performance, BBBP provided dance, photography, and creative writing workshops, as well as storytelling sessions and a talk with one of the BBBP dancers. Activities were very well received, especially with school-aged children who were a key target audience. More widely, the Project has helped to change conceptions about what a library can be and do within the Council and the community. Calderdale's involvement was led by David Duffy, Libraries Manager, and Roberta Crossley, Team Leader for West Calderdale Libraries. David and Roberta spoke to this author in September 2025.

About the library service

David: "We're in West Yorkshire ... we're basically two valleys, with ... a lot of the population around Halifax ... which is the largest ... conurbation ... It's a very mixed area ... with different communities ... we've got ... Hebden Bridge, which is known as one of the funkier places in the world! ... We've got the award-winning Piece Hall in Halifax, which is becoming nationally and internationally known, with big name artists coming ... but Halifax is where some of the deprivation is too ... We've got the areas which were about traditional manufacturing ... you're talking about the mills, the chimneys in the past. But we're also known for the countryside ... because we've actually got a relatively small population against the land area ... We have lower levels of people who don't class themselves as White British and ... who identify as Black in Calderdale, but in some ways, that makes it even more important to engage with their history in a positive way."

Roberta: "We do a lot of work with young people in schools ... that's a key priority, and we have a team that lead on that. And we are heavily involved with Valley and Library of Sanctuary ... we work closely with our local refugee community, with St. Augustine's, which is based in Halifax ... and as we have quite a few pockets of deprivation in Calderdale ... we do outreach work ... a lot of school visits to target children that don't have the opportunity to go to the library ... so it's all that ... along with the day job, which is the general public and the people who do come into libraries."

Motivations for taking part

David: "We were very, very keen to get involved in the project as soon as it was mentioned. Michelle Alford, the Director of Hull Libraries, was leading on it as far as Yorkshire and Humber is concerned. After Michelle mentioned it at one of our meetings, I dropped that email straight away to say 'this sounds really good ... we would be interested in being involved' ... Now, the reason why ... being involved ... was so important was, one, our commitment to Libraries of Sanctuary ... But from the ballet side too, there's a history here ... For a while Northern Ballet was based in Halifax. Until they got a better offer from Leeds! ... But there's a little bit of a tradition here ... at our theatre, the Victoria Theatre, there's good attendances for ballet ... It was also the opportunity to work with people ... to look at who we're targeting. So, a lot of it was schools ... but Central Library serves the town centre in Halifax ... including some wards that have high levels of deprivation. So, it was really ... looking at the arts as a way to reach people ... And it was on the back of our Year of Culture ... that was a driver too ... and it meant there was a chance to get support for ... activities because of that."

Activities and engagement

David: "We had the ...*Island Movements* show ... that was absolutely fantastic! ... Our Chief Executive came ... and he put his comments in the general Council newsletter ... We also had positive comments from one of our main contacts at Valley of Sanctuary ... there was so much positivity."

Roberta: "Initially we felt a bit of pressure ... to have the show at the theatre, which would hold hundreds, of course ... but it was really important to us that it was delivered in the library ... to make the association with the library ... that libraries are arts and creative venues ... We had an invited audience ... we worked with two primary schools, and to see their faces in reaction to the performance was absolutely fantastic! ... That was in October ... and then there was a gap to the exhibition ... in December ... Around then ... we had three workshops ... creative writing, photography, and the children's storytelling session, which was packed out! ...

The photography ... that was aimed at a slightly older audience and that ... sold out as well ... Then there was a gap until ... April ... when we did the contemporary dance class and talk with a dancer."

David: *"It was helpful to have the mix of activities ... we would have liked to have taken on more! There were ... things that we put into it as well ... like we commissioned a professional photographer to take pictures ... to help with marketing, promotion, and the archive ... and we used a lot of them on the network ... to get the message across to the rest of the team who weren't involved in this."*

Highlights

Roberta: *"I think the Island Movements show, and the photography were my two highlights ... It was such a powerful performance ... and it was so unique to have that in our library space ... And equally, the photography, which was very different, but there was just such good engagement ... And the range of people that were in that room, all ages, and some people who were very, very shy, and they were really coming out of themselves when they were taking the photographs and sharing them with each other ... So those were my two favourites."*

David: *"The Island Movements ... I can't say any more about that ... it was something you just had to experience! ... But the children's story-telling session ... it was a similar experience ... the creative writing too. I think everything worked really well. And you know, the quality! ... Sometimes there's a bit of scepticism about free events ... but this was such good quality."*

Impact on / lasting legacy for the library service

David: *"I think the legacy is ... the message about what ... libraries can do. We're very keen on them being seen as community hubs ... that's the message we've been trying to get over to other teams."*

Roberta: *"Yes, absolutely, and that we don't all walk around whispering and telling people to shush anymore! We're trying to banish that myth!"*

David: *"It's about offering that chance to experience culture ... research shows, especially in relation to children ... their first cultural experiences are often in relation to a library. So, if we can make that experience as wide as possible, that's a good thing, especially in those areas where maybe the scene is more deprived."*

Roberta: *"We'd never really had anything like this before ... this was unique ... and a bit of a learning curve for us as well, what was needed for a ballet, because we hadn't realised about the height of the room, for instance! ... So, we learned a lot ... It was quite hard work, because you've got to get a lot of things together, but if it were possible, we would have it again tomorrow!"*

David: *"None of this would have been developed ... without Libraries Connected being there to ... pull everything together and provide the support ... the enabling role they play is really important."*

Looking to the future

David: *"We were thinking, and we still may do this, of creating 'an exhibition from the exhibition' ... because there are some really brilliant photographs ... including by somebody who came to the photographic workshop ... he gave us all his photographs, and they're amazing! ... I've also been talking to ... colleagues in cultural services, because they're working on a new bid related to ballet ... I've written something ... about Black British Ballet ... that they're hoping to include ... So ... hopefully they'll be more work in relation to this ... to raise the profile of ballet."*

Roberta: *"It's been great and we're really hoping it does lead to other things for the future."*