

A People's Tapestry: Sharing Stories, Breaking Cycles, Building Connections

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CIP Case Study





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Summary

This case study examines the application of co-creative methodologies to a cultural intervention in the Market community, Belfast. The Market, a historically working-class neighbourhood, faces intergenerational challenges including unemployment, poverty, health inequalities, and political segregation. These challenges have been exacerbated by the legacy of the Conflict in the North of Ireland (NI), with change hindered more recently by a policy vacuum due to a period of suspended government.

The Conflict is a significant factor associated with [mental ill health](#), [substance use \(SU\)](#) and related problems in NI. The increasing rates of [drug-related deaths](#) and mental health (MH) issues reported in NI have become pressing issues in the [Market](#) too. The Community Innovation Practitioner (CIP) project aimed to address these complex issues through an arts-based, intergenerational, community-led intervention.

The CIP project emphasises equitable partnership and co-creation, integrating community experience and knowledge, academic knowledge, arts and cultural expertise to empower participants. It mobilises a place-based response to identified challenges, aligned with [national/regional](#) strategies and [learning](#), to maximise impact.

Co-designed and implemented with the Market Development Association (MDA) and satellite partners, the CIP facilitated arts-based workshops through cross-sector collaboration. Seventeen participants, in two intergenerational groups, engaged in nine workshops from November 2023 - March 2024, with no attrition.

Using community-based participatory research (CBPR) and taking a trauma-informed approach, the research employed arts-based co-creation methods including drama, creative writing, poetry, visual mapping, and photography (photovoice) to explore cultural responses to trauma and SU. These methods enabled participants to share their stories, build a collective narrative, and foster community connection, enabling open discussions on trauma, SU, belonging and civic identity.





The research culminated in a co-created, co-curated photographic exhibition, ‘The Market: A People’s Tapestry’, displayed in April 2024 at 2 Royal Avenue, an arts venue in central Belfast, attracting approximately 7000 visitors.

The exhibition launch gained significant media coverage on television ([BBC Newsline](#)), radio ([Radio Ulster](#)), and [social media](#) (>58,300 views across posts on X) raising awareness about community challenges and tackling stigma around trauma and SU.

Evaluation data suggests that the project tackled stigma, empowered participants, strengthened community resilience and inspired successful follow-on initiatives with other funders. The CIP project demonstrates the transformative potential of arts-based interventions in addressing complex health issues in marginalised communities and recognises the added value of devolved funding for cross-sector cultural R&D in NI.



‘The Market: A People’s Tapestry’ exhibition poster

Introduction

As the Community Innovation Practitioner in QCAP, Queens University Belfast, I was responsible for project delivery including:

- Establishing and maintaining effective partnerships
- Recruitment, facilitation, resourcing and co-creation
- Capturing knowledge through inclusive research practices

My CIP research project aimed to co-design a community-led arts-based intervention that responds to an intergenerational community need relating to SU and trauma. The project was collaboratively conceived by QCAP, the MDA and Market residents. It was also particularly timely, in light of an emerging focus on place-based, person-centric working in NI strategy on SU.

The Conflict and economic adversity are recognised risk factors for increased SU, with the most deprived areas in NI reporting the [highest rates of deaths](#) (44.5% of drug-related deaths, 44.4% of drug-misuse deaths) in recent years. Approximately 28.5% of the NI population experience significant mental health issues, with the [majority of these linked to the Conflict](#). A [widespread exposure](#) to trauma has significant implications for intergenerational transmission, as communities continue to deal with the psychological aftermath.

Intergenerational trauma (IGT) is a recognised contributing factor in SU in NI. IGT occurs through mechanisms including communication style, genetic predisposition, and cultural narratives, with silence recognised as a powerful transmission mechanism. The CIP project sought to use culture to break these cycles of silence.

The research explored the potential of a working-class community to tackle complex health issues of SU and trauma through cultural collaboration, research and creativity. It was based in the Market, a historic neighbourhood in South Belfast (≈2,500 residents). We used co-creation and cultural R&D to empower participants to tackle these complex challenges.

The project was informed by academic expertise and insight into the complex relationship between trauma, SU and deprivation. It was multigenerational, involving adults and young people in tackling the silence and stigma that serve as transmission mechanisms for trauma, mental health and SU.

Partnering with arts practitioners, using a range of arts-based methods including drama, poetry, creative writing and photography, participants began to translate emotions, thoughts and feelings – such as anxiety, trauma and shame - into verbal and non-verbal media that enabled art and culture to give voice to and share lived experience.



Markets Development Association (MDA)

The MDA was the lead partner in the Tapestry project and the umbrella community organisation in the Market; it helped to recruit and support residents to participate in the Tapestry project and co-facilitated sessions with the CIP and artist.



Pangur Bán

Pangur Bán is the lead arts organisation in the community, established by residents in 2014 to promote working class culture and art. It runs a calendar of events including book clubs, song and story nights and theatre projects. Pangur Bán helped recruit and support residents into the project.



Market Youth Council

The Market Youth Council represents the voice of young people in the community. The Market Tapestry project youth group was comprised of members of the Youth Council.



Matt Faris

Matt was the artist-facilitator who worked on the Tapestry project with the CIP. Matt is an actor, writer and director who has worked in theatre for over 25 years. Matt's particular speciality is Arts and Theatre in a Community Context.

ArtEZ
University
of the Arts

ArtEZ University of the Arts (Netherlands)

ArtEZ is an arts university in the Netherlands with a student placement programme in Belfast. The Tapestry project saw two ArtEZ students on placement, working on the project for six weeks, sharing their expertise, and helping to facilitate creative methods and photography.



RedHead

RedHead is a graphic design company and worked with the Tapestry participants to curate their photographic exhibition.

Research Context

There is a growing public health crisis in NI driven by the rise in SU. This has significant economic, social and cultural implications for communities and wider society. Recent data highlights worrying statistics in the devolved context of NI:

- Second highest number of drug-related deaths on record in 2021
- Highest rate of drug deaths among younger age groups (18-34) in the UK
- Higher numbers of drug deaths in the most deprived communities
- Alongside Scotland, the highest level of alcohol-specific deaths in 2021

The Conflict has resulted in NI experiencing unique levels of SU and trauma, with those who grew up during that period reporting [higher rates of mood and SU disorders](#). Trauma can significantly impact on MH, not only for those exposed to the trauma, but also for [subsequent generations](#), and IGT remains pervasive among [young people in NI](#). One of the most powerful mechanisms of trauma transmission across generations is [silence](#), which generates curiosity in the next generation.

Poverty and deprivation, exacerbated by the Conflict, were widespread in Belfast and [pose key risks](#) for heightened anxiety and SU. It is clear that [‘growing up in an economically deprived area with direct or indirect exposure to trauma’](#) increases the risk of SU and development of poor mental health. Within this context, working-class communities find themselves at a double disadvantage, being the most exposed to Conflict violence, and also the poorest.

The Market is one of Belfast's oldest working-class neighbourhoods, located in

the inner city. Since the 1970s, industrial decline, poor planning, and the Conflict have led to spiralling unemployment, increased poverty, and political and economic segregation. The population has dropped from 6,000 to 2,500, and the area has physically shrunk in size, leading to a sense within the community of being [squeezed out of the city centre](#).

Despite a generation of relative peace, the legacy of the Conflict continues to negatively impact health, education, and employment. The Market is among the top ten percent most deprived communities in NI and ranks in the top five percent for homelessness, educational under achievement, health, and economic inequalities. Poverty, alienation, addiction, lower life expectancy and poor mental health are all markers of life in the community.



In 2021, Queen's University Belfast's 'Queen's Communities and Place' (QCAP) partnered with the Market Development Association (MDA), offering a unique opportunity to address place-based inequality through targeted research, data

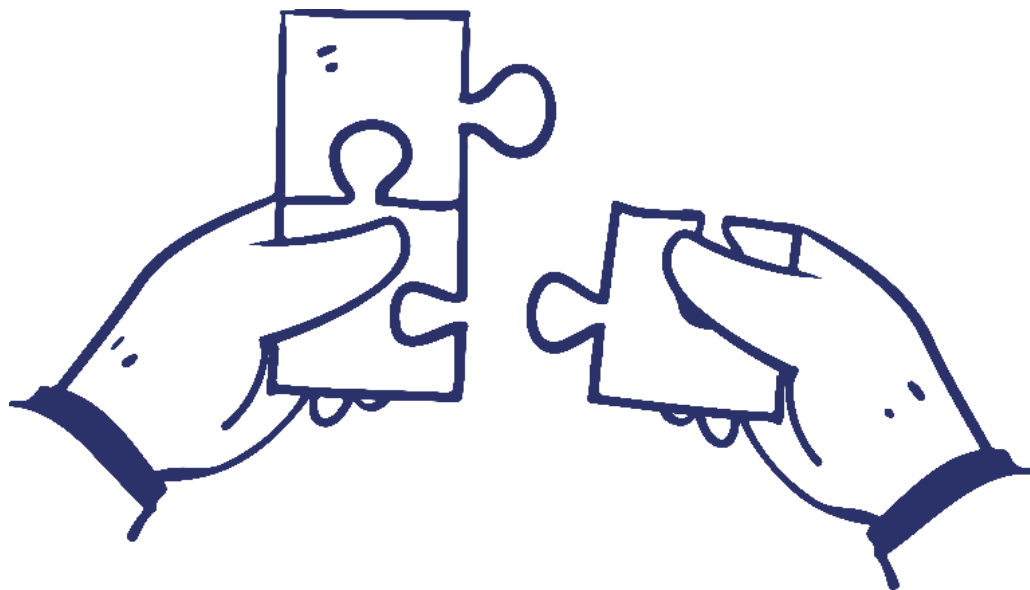
democratisation, and community-based learning. This partnership aims to disrupt knowledge hierarchies by elevating local voices in the inquiry process. Together, they established action working groups focused on education, health, and community wealth building, comprising of residents, MDA staff, local stakeholders, and QCAP academics. Meeting monthly, these groups set the strategic direction of work and engaged residents in a consistent co-design process. It is against this backdrop that ideas for a creative intervention around trauma and SU first emerged.

'Growing up in the Market' is a longitudinal, qualitative study involving children, young people, and their families, exploring challenges related to mental health, wellbeing, education, employment, and disadvantage in the Market. Year one findings highlighted an urgent need to focus on SU and develop interventions to address this issue and its underlying causes in the community. This demand arose, in part, from the rising number of suicide and over-dose deaths in the

community over the last number of years, as well as the acknowledgement that SU issues in the Market had risen sharply.

The health action group convened a SU community co-design process, including residents impacted by SU, trauma and mental health issues. The process reflected that any interventions should be rooted in community, engaging and delivered through accessible media ensuring widest reach.

Arts-based interventions can empower people, building confidence and self-esteem, improving awareness and changing attitudes towards SU. Creative interventions allow a medium through which people can explore and express their thoughts and emotions. These offer a 'less threatening' option by which people can access and articulate trauma and begin to correct its effects. However, for arts-based interventions to be effective they must consider the needs of their target population, current context, culture and lived experience.



CIP Activities

Our research employed CBPR, taking a trauma informed approach, to explore how the Arts can effectively respond to community hauntology, breaking cycles of silence to create change. Its purpose was to co-design a community-led arts-based SU intervention that explored contributing factors including IGT and deprivation.

The co-design process ensured the intervention was live to contextual and cultural aspects necessary for efficacy. By addressing the complex interplay of SU, mental health, and IGT through arts-based intervention, the project empowered the community to confront these challenges. In doing so, the research sought to address immediate need, but also aimed to break cycles in future generations and create a legacy of arts and culture to enable future working beyond the duration of the CIP award.



CIP Project Aims:

1. *Build Partnerships*

The project built upon a strong and established partnership with local stakeholders and the community, creating a genuine coming together of people with the goal of creating an innovative SU intervention through co-creation. Our creative community was founded on equitable partnership, with no hierarchies of knowledge between the community, partners or the university, meaning all involved were positioned as ‘experts’. This differed from past research projects by engaging the community in its co-creation and refinement. This approach ensured that the project was contextually appropriate and targeted community need.

2. *Embed a Team*

To facilitate partnership building, the CIP was embedded within the Market over a one-year period, based two days a week in the local community centre working alongside residents and partners. The CIP was from the community and still lived there, and this experience-led dynamic meant the research element of the project was viewed as being done ‘by’ the community and not ‘to’ it. By being physically present and actively engaged, the CIP team was able to build trust and rapport with the community, which in turn encouraged open and honest dialogue. This proximity allowed better understanding of community dynamics, challenges, and nuance.

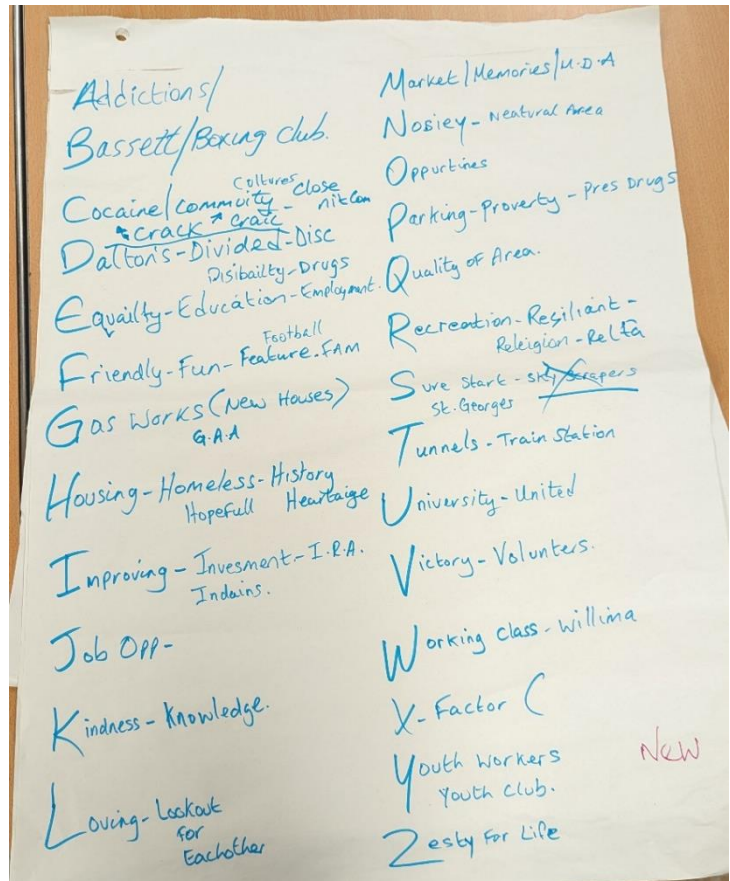
3. Front-load Engagement

Often, research and arts programmes are developed by organisations such as universities, and presented to communities as packaged projects in which they can participate. This creates a disconnect with communities from the outset; they know little about the projects and have no vested interest in their success.

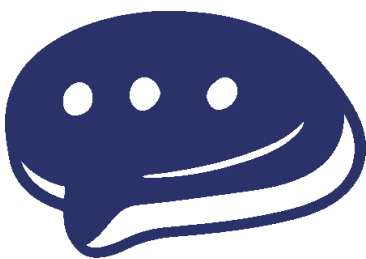
The CIP project did things differently by 'front-loading' engagement with the community, working with them from the beginning to conceive the research idea, design the project and gain their insights into planning and implementation. Front-loading engagement aided recruitment and retention because residents were connected to it from the outset. The CIP research recruited 17 participants, all of whom remained engaged and retained as collaborators throughout the project.

4. Find an Anchor

The research methodology initially avoided direct mention of topics like drugs, addiction or trauma. Instead, the approach focused on building group identity and trust by inviting participants to explore two things: living in the Market community, and the working-class experience in 2024. These two themes 'anchored' our workshops and from these workshops all-subsequent creativity flowed. These themes naturally led to discussions about community challenges, including SU, trauma and loss. One participant noted the project's evolving nature and the safe, supportive environment that facilitated the sharing of experiences:



Participants create an A-Z of Market life



'One night I wasn't having a good night...we had a chat...I opened up... Then somebody else opened up and you were able to do that, feeling safe, together in a group. Your photos of your pain and grief...when you were showing them that you were able to share your emotions... It was very, very good' Adult group participant

5. Mix Methods

The photographic output of the research utilised a technique called photovoice, a method based on participatory action research which is often used in [arts-based research](#).

Photovoice sees people use photography to capture images of their daily lives, experiences, and communities, with these images then discussed further. Research shows that photovoice works well for people dealing with [mental health issues](#), [substance use](#), [homelessness](#), and [suicide](#). It is also an effective method for working with [teenagers](#).

In the CIP study, photovoice was used to look at the history of SU issues in the Market, understand the current experiences of participants and generate dialogue across generations in the community:

‘For me, it was more so whenever we took the pictures...and we went like ‘What does this represent to you?’...That was opening up my own mind...when you started to hear other people’s viewpoints around your pictures as well, and...your viewpoint to other people’s pictures’ Adult group participant



Workshop participants discussing photographs

Participants used mobile phones as cameras to document their experiences throughout the project. Technical aspects of photography were not the focus: the emphasis was on using photography and other creative methods to explore participants' relationships with their community and share their stories. To facilitate this, diverse creative methods were used by the CIP and facilitators during the weekly sessions to foster group cohesion and create an atmosphere conducive to openness.

Different methods proved more effective than others in practice. For some, photography resonated most deeply, while for others creative writing or drama provided the most suitable means to share their stories. It thus became crucial to embed flexibility within the CIP project, offering a variety of arts-based methods to meet the group's needs and maintain their engagement.

'We used different artistic exercises, it included making maps, some drama, some writing and obviously some photography. The main core was about trauma, it was about substance use...the reason we used all these different techniques was to really engage with people. Some people felt more comfortable writing something...(or) some taking photographs' Matt Faris, Arts facilitator

Workshop Sessions:

Each of the groups (adults/young people) met weekly in the local community centre with the CIP and artist for a two-hour evening workshop. The workshops ran from 6-8pm and dinner was provided at each session. Mealtimes proved vital in promoting group bonding and relationships.

The workshop sessions ran over five months (October 2023-March 2024), with a break for Christmas. Workshops were co-designed with the CIP, artist and partners in advance and aimed to engage participants in a new creative method on every occasion. They were delivered during the winter and early spring and as a result, a lot of the outdoor photography exercises happened when it was dark. Participants were encouraged to go out in their community during the daytime to capture photographs to complement this, as it was understood that the same place can have a different feeling dependent on the time of day.

The workshops were structured in three phases:

- **Phase One:** Grounding in place - Participants explored life in their community, formed a group identity, and were introduced to photography.
- **Phase Two:** Identifying themes of community life and capturing photographs that best represented these themes.
- **Phase Three:** Co-curating and showcasing the community story through a photography exhibition and creative writing.

Photos taken by participants were reflective of personal stories and lived experiences, but they also acted as a mechanism by which people began to share stories with one another and reflect on difficult issues:

'I felt even talking about some of the troubles and the punishment beatings and things like that, that I thought I would never be able to speak about...It really helped me. I spoke about it, and everybody was ... sympathetic. Everybody has their own backgrounds but was able to open up and ... talk about some pretty deep issues'

Adult group participant





Participants group photos around the theme of 'community'

Photographic Exhibition:

Participants played a leading role in the co-production and co-curation of the photographic exhibition, 'The Market: A People's Tapestry' which served to share their photos and stories. Through dialogue and consensus, the adult and young people's groups identified six key themes of life in the Market: pride, challenges, home, loss, resilience, and community. Participants submitted photographs that represented each theme, selecting three to be showcased in the exhibition. These formed the backbone of the exhibition.



Entrance to the Tapestry Exhibition

Participants met regularly in their two groups to review photographs and narrow down over 100 pictures to 51, ensuring every participant and each theme was represented. The CIP and artist worked with the group to identify a narrative that tied the photos together and amplified the community's collective voice. This narrative was 'Sharing stories, breaking cycles, building connections'.

The title, 'The Market: A People's Tapestry' was proposed by the young people's group and agreed upon by the adults, as it symbolised the different stories and experiences that thread together to shape the Market community and its identity. The groups worked together with Matt, Áine and programme partner Redhead Exhibitions, to agree exhibition branding, premise and layout. The process of co-creation also saw participants choose a venue for the exhibition, help manage the launch event, share personal testimonials from the CIP project during the launch, and involved the wider Market community in the project by inviting them to add their family stories to the Tapestry exhibition.

'If someone sees someone else confident enough to...take photos and talk about their problems... (they can see) 'I can do that as well'... I think the art exhibition was also a big inspiration for other communities' Young People group participant



The Tapestry Exhibition on display

Results & Change

The project has started to break cycles of silence that serve as transmission mechanisms for trauma across generations. Through arts-based methods, participants were able to ‘voice’ aspects of stigma or shame around trauma and SU that they have previously kept hidden or silenced:

‘I just started opening up about so much, things that I never thought that I’d open up about...I’ve been able to talk more about things and been able to express my feelings more’

Young People group participant



Using a co-creation, place-based and person centric approach, underpinned by research evidence and lived experience, was necessary to ensure the space and safety needed by programme participants to speak more openly about challenges of SU and IGT. Participants appreciated the supportive nature of the group, and the methods used, which encouraged these disclosures:



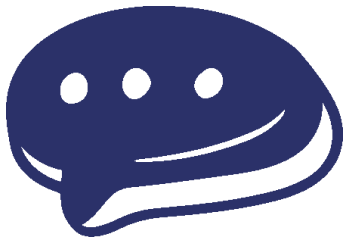
Adult group using creative writing to discuss community issues

‘It’s really bonded everyone together, people opened up on experiences they’ve had around drugs and trauma for the first time, and it felt like a weight off’

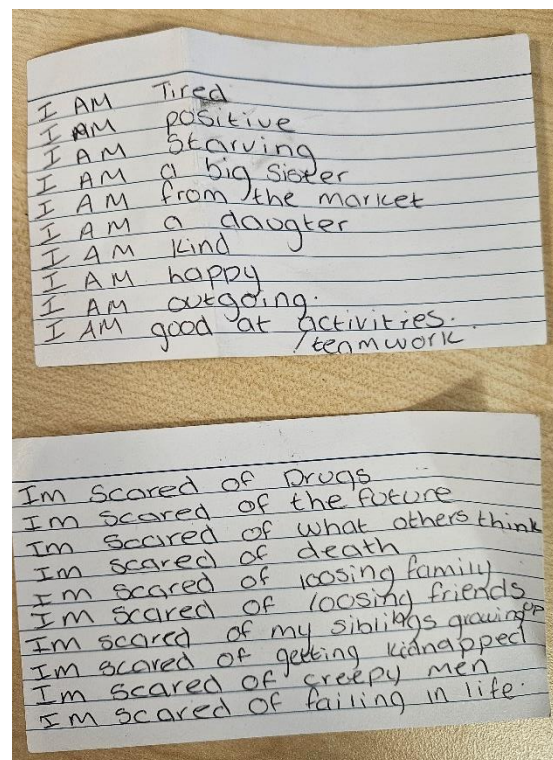
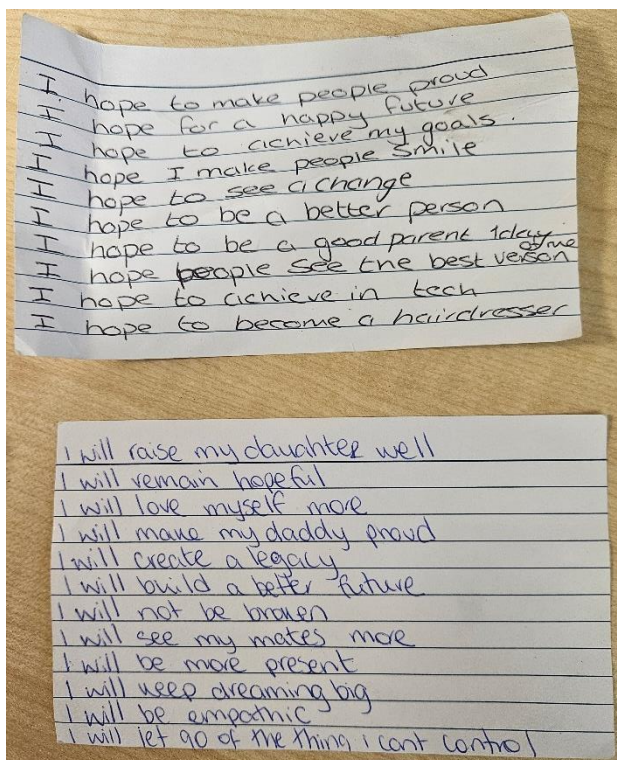
Adult group participant

'By having that group experience and chatting together, you realise not only is there sympathy and empathy, but there's a recognition of problems, with no judging' Adult group participant

The arts and culture-based methods offered different opportunities for people to express their worries, fears, and traumas, but also reflect on their strengths, resilience and support. The CIP project has had a profound impact, serving to share stories and build connections, and to empower community participants and mobilise cross-sector partnerships.



'We did get into deep, personal experiences of things that are going on in the Market with substance abuse, with trauma, generational trauma... how things that have happened to our parents, to our grandparents, that we're still dealing with the fallout today... We've been able to come back out the other side and produce something amazing' Young People group participant



Example of participants creative writing

Engaging in arts-based, co-created research profoundly impacted on me as a CIP. It has enabled me to explore and express complex human experiences and emotions that traditional research methods can fail to capture. The time I spent embedded in the community effectively 'short circuited' a lot of the relationship building needed between participants and a researcher when dealing with such sensitive topics. The variety of artistic methods used enabled deeper connections with participants and uncovered rich, multi-layered data on SU and trauma, enhancing the depth and authenticity of the research.

Leading a project involving multiple partners pushed me to think critically and innovatively, challenging boundaries of conventional research paradigms. It encouraged me and the QCAP team to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty, cultivating a shift to a more flexible and open-minded research approach.

Managing a cross-sector partnership was crucial throughout the project, requiring the CIP to leverage expertise and resources from partners. The MDA contributed additional funding and staff time, while other partners assisted with recruitment, facilitation, exhibition design, and promotion. An unexpected outcome of the project was partner organisations reporting increased engagement:

'We have people involved who would have traditionally felt alienated in the community and never really participated in community life. Now, because of participating in the CIP project, they're coming into the community centre more often, they're engaging with our services and volunteering to be community activists' Siobhan McDonnell, MDA

What was initially a three-month photography project turned into six months. This required flexibility, managing expectations, sourcing funding and moving timelines. This shift in mindset improved the research team's ability to collect and communicate findings effectively and create more holistic and relevant research.

Programme partners have embraced arts-based methods and co-creation approaches, recognising the impact of these in unlocking aspects that traditional research methods have struggled to unpick and understand.



'This exhibition is the culmination of months of hard work by residents to document their place in the city. It demonstrates the transformative power of the arts to tackle issues like depression, addiction and substance use in a way that is as constructive as it is creative' Fionntán Hargey, Director, MDA





Market workshop participants at their Tapestry Exhibition launch event in 2 Royal Avenue



Members of the public at the launch of the Tapestry Exhibition

The CIP project has created an appetite for ongoing arts and culture-based working, recognising the power of co-creation within a scientific, evidenced based framework which serves to support, rather than stifle, creativity. The project has demonstrated that strong

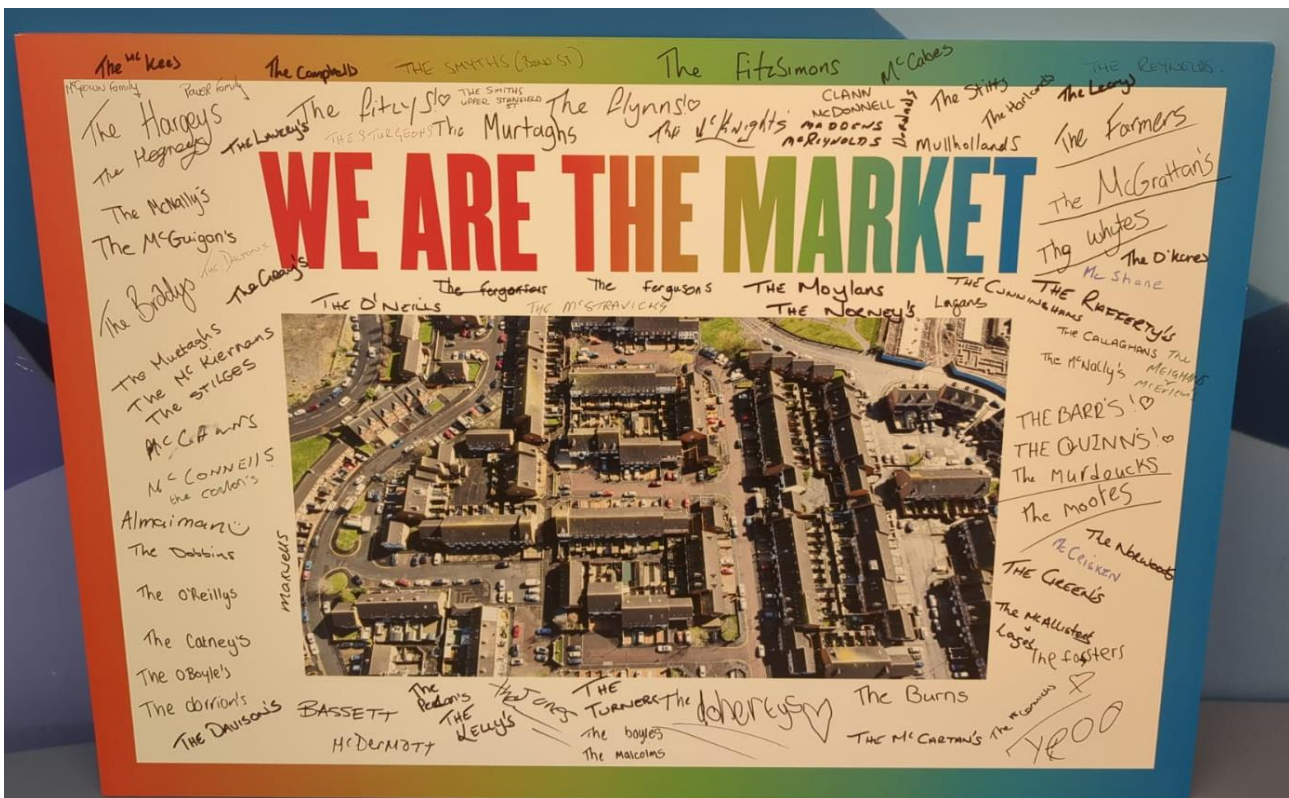
programmatic work can also influence and shape innovative and equitable R&D in devolved contexts.

Our research findings highlight the transformative power of personal storytelling and creative expression in fostering empathy, understanding, and promoting wellbeing. Findings underscored the importance of community connections and personal relationships in addressing challenges of addiction, trauma, and MH. The consensus was clear: a co-created, community-centred approach, prioritising previously silent voices and harnessing the power of arts, culture, and storytelling, is essential for promoting wellbeing and identity in the Market and beyond.



'I don't want this to just be over when this focus group ends, I want it to be like going forward and being here every Wednesday and talking about all this'
Young People group participant

A key legacy of the CIP project is that participants are now working with programme partners to identify opportunities to amplify community voices through arts and cultural co-creation across sectors.



Market residents attending the Tapestry launch event were asked to add their family names to the tapestry

As a direct result of AHRC CIP investment, £34,500 additional funding for this work has been secured for future work from the Lottery Fund (Awards For All), AHRC IAA at QUB (Leading Impact Fund) and an internal QUB Fund (Early Intervention). The work will include storytelling and songwriting workshops, a co-developed play on community challenges, and a documentary following the play's development. The exhibition will act as a data 'trigger' for these.

The documentary will follow the development of the play ensuring a continued legacy of community cross-sector agency around public health issues of SU and trauma.

QUB IAA

The CIP project was hosted in the Queens AHRC Impact Accelerator Account (IAA) and reflects the core IAA aims of co-production in research and impact. This has been evidenced through the CIP workshops and exhibition, and the international reach of the project seen in the scale of media interest, the diversity of those attending the exhibition launch, and the community interest in becoming part of the follow-on drama and documentary. The development of the toolkit and arts-based resource resulting from the CIP research speak to the IAA commitment around knowledge exchange and increasing opportunity for impact. The IAA objectives of partnership and place have made it an ideal home for the CIP project.

This project has made a positive contribution to the QUB AHRC IAA, developing enduring external partnerships, working collaboratively to address place-based challenges and ensuring appropriate knowledge exchange mechanisms to increase the impact of the project.

AHRC IAA representatives at QUB identified an opportunity to share the learning from the CIP project through the development of a 'Masterclass in arts-based methods' for an academic audience, to be included in the IAA Impact and Engagement Academy training offering. Our IAA colleagues have also assisted with introductions in the policy field, connecting our team with IAA external partners to help in this endeavour.



Recommendations

Community experience is key in tackling persistent and complex place-based challenges. It is important to ensure arts-based approaches are underpinned by research evidence and lived experience of place

Hyperlocal research can have wider resonance and impact. The issues explored in the Market community have resonance and reach within other communities in NI. As such, effective dissemination plans are key. For example: the selection of the exhibition space was key, with [2 Royal Avenue](#) being a recognised creative space within Belfast. The exhibition was housed here in April 2024, allowing approximately 7000 people to view the 'Market Tapestry'.

Sustained Resourcing is required for culture to play a role in helping to tackle complex and persistent community challenges. There is a need to properly resource culture-based projects on a longer-term basis to maximise their reach and impact.

Follow on mechanisms should be more fully explored. In this creative community there is momentum around this programme of work, and ambition to utilise arts and culture to continue to facilitate difficult conversations and encourage change. Enabling mechanisms for this should be explored or signposted.

Cross-sector co-creation with communities can be more powerful than solo research. There is a need to recognise the unique and powerful value of place-based, community level responses to complex, persistent, and overlapping community challenges. Often SU and IGT interventions are therapeutic and target individuals only. The CIP project has highlighted the benefits of co-creation methods and new cultural R&D in generating trust, building partnerships and sharing knowledge across sectors that will sustain beyond the life of the CIP project, and into future collaborative working.



Conclusion

This CIP research project facilitated change in a short period time through equitable, cross-sectoral partnerships. The shared language, due to the methods used, generated trust between participants and partners, enabling participants to share stories, build connections and break generational cycles of silence.

Co-design was central to the project, which served to empower the Market community and opened conversations affecting change locally. The equal weighting of academic expertise and lived experience was key in empowering participants.

The devolved funding model was central to project success. It spoke to the heart of place-based working, allowing for the R&D to be orientated within the community. The project design acted as a framework allowing participants to thrive, rather than a cage of prescribed processes, which community research projects often are.

Project legacy needs consideration beyond the life span of the award. In this project additional funding has been secured for future innovation and research to continue the arts and culture initiatives in the Market community.

The exhibition highlighted community strength and resilience, shifting perceptions of the Market community and fostering pride among residents.

The project's success underscores the need for community-based evidence in policymaking. We are working with the Knowledge Exchange Manager in the NI Assembly to advance this conversation around equitable evidence in decision making within devolved contexts.



Further Information:

For more information on AHRC Creative Communities visit <https://creativecommunities.uk/>

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