

Get Portrush a Skatepark! Nurturing Skateboard Culture on Northern Ireland's North Coast

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CIP Case Study





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Summary

My Community Innovation Practitioner project considers the skateboarding community in Portrush, in Northern Ireland, as a ‘creative community’. The project re-centres the skaters (and the wider urban sports scene) as legitimate users of public space, through a series of co-created research interventions. These interventions draw upon the creativity of the skateboarding community and focus on three key areas:

1. the re-imagining of urban fabric and artistry of skateboarding practice in public places;
2. videography as a key means of creative expression and networking between local and global skateboarding communities;
3. Do-It-Yourself (DIY) building of urban sports infrastructure, especially ramps.

Key research partners for the project include Slaine Browne, an independent videographer, musician, and longtime skateboarder in Portrush, whose archive of skateboarding footage in the town forms the basis for subsequent videographical interventions. The research also partnered with [Causeway Association of Urban Sports](#), a lobby group who have been at the forefront of campaigning for dedicated skateboard facilities in the area.

Emerging from ongoing dialogue with our research partners and the wider skateboarding community, the CIP co-created interventions have sought to empower the skaters through recognition of their own productive agency. On screen, newly produced films have highlighted the history of skateboarding practice in Portrush, counterposing heritage with contemporary creativity to provide a platform for skaters to assert their legitimacy as users of public space. In terms of skills, new ramp refurbishment interventions have developed the Do-It-Yourself ethos of skateboarding culture, upskilling skaters to create and maintain their own infrastructure, while recognising the value of DIY as an expression of community grassroots autonomy.

The project findings lead us to recommend that creative communities, such as skateboarders, should harness their DIY energy and ethos. By organising and taking action collectively and locally, creative communities can assert agency and use this (re-)empowerment as a foundation for community self-management. The project frames this as a form of grassroots policy-making that embraces a strategy encompassing multiple tactical approaches to create a shift in approach and terminology from ‘Do-It-Yourself’ to ‘Do-It-Together’.



Introduction

As Community Innovation Practitioner and Research Fellow at Ulster University, my CIP project is titled:

‘Get Portrush a Skatepark!’ Nurturing skateboard culture on NI’s North Coast – innovating a grassroots campaign and policy-oriented lesson-learning.

Our policy context is at the local community level. This is significant, since the Portrush skateboarding community represents a grassroots alternative to the sectarian separation of cultural expression in the deeply divided society of Northern Ireland. Taking an unapologetically ‘parochial’ frame of reference is also important in terms of re-centring the skaters (and other urban sports enthusiasts) as legitimate users of public space and celebrating their creative practice. Our community partners include local videographer and skateboarder Slaine Browne and Causeway Association of Urban Sports (CAUS), a lobby group campaigning for skatepark provision in the local area.

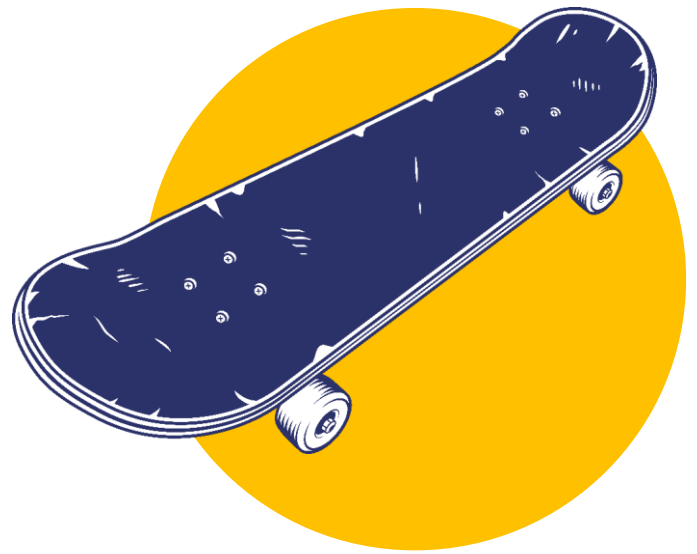
Slaine has been skateboarding in Portrush since 1995 and this has productively informed an aligned passion for videography. His significant collection of skateboarding footage from Portrush has formed the basis of the creative methodology for this CIP project. Until this research, Slaine’s video collection was held on obsolete formats (such as Super VHS, Mini DV). With access to the resources and technical expertise of the [School of Communication and Media at Ulster University](#), we have been able to digitise the footage for the first time, creating new opportunities to share it with wider contemporary audiences.



Causeway Association of Urban Sports have been campaigning for a skatepark in the area since 2010 (building on earlier campaigns dating back to the late 1990s). The positionality of this research project has consciously avoided ‘stepping on the toes’ of the long history of CAUS in terms of replacing their role as conduit between local government and the skateboarding community. This has allowed the research project to explore other avenues of community empowerment. Our relationship with CAUS connects the research project to that longer history of campaigning but provides us with the opportunity to be more innovative in thinking of our own interventions, complementing the repertoire of diverse approaches to achieving the goal of getting a skatepark in Portrush.

Research Context

Portrush is a small seaside town on the coast of Northern Ireland. It has been developed as a resort for tourists since the mid-1800s, but is undergoing particularly rapid redevelopment now, in a process which has been termed ‘resortification’ (gentrification in a touristic context). The tourist industry in Northern Ireland was significantly impacted by the Troubles and its legacy, and in many respects Portrush is playing catch-up with seaside tourist towns elsewhere in Northern Ireland and the UK that have already undergone similar resortification.



Skaters’ non-conforming use of public space and their demands for dedicated space for a skatepark in the town have conflicted with the local Council’s efforts to develop Portrush as a tourist resort. These lived dynamics of resortification form the backdrop to the marginalisation of skateboarding, as evidenced in the lack of facilities and absence from the local government agenda (including the Borough Council’s tourism or sports development strategies).

Land issues more widely have been a problematic issue for Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council. For example, in 2022 the [Northern Ireland Audit Office](#) found ‘significant governance failings in the Council’s transacting of land disposals and easements’. The Council was also censured over land issues by the [Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman](#) in 2023.

The skateboarding community’s demand for dedicated space in Portrush draws them directly into contact with these contentious land governance issues. The Council’s ‘proactive approach’ to ‘rationalise’ their [‘land and property portfolio’](#) and [‘presumption in favour of disposal of unused and redundant land and property’](#) is an important context for what makes this CIP research project and its interventions so vital. It is also essential to provide this contextual background to make sense of the skateboarding community’s sense of frustration, and the long history informing this work.

This local frustration at the lack of skatepark provision in Portrush has been magnified in recent years. Dozens of skateparks have been built by other Borough Councils in Northern Ireland since 2011, and there is increasing legitimacy of skateboarding in UK culture and society, recently evidenced by the inclusion of [skateboarding in the GSCE Physical Education curriculum in Northern Ireland](#).

This has led to frustration being expressed publicly through graffiti around Portrush. In one instance, on the front of the now derelict Portrush Youth Club (which previously hosted skateboard sessions), the message reads simply:

‘F**k the Council B*****s’.

While distributing flyers to advertise our screening of *Why Doesn't Portrush Have a Skatepark?*, a recipient turned it over and wrote ‘Cause the Council DON'T CARE’ and handed the flyer back to me.

This historical context has created a strong tradition of Do-It-Yourself cultural production among the Portrush skateboarding community. This culture has been made manifest in the autonomous construction of ramps, rails and other skating infrastructure by the community.

These DIY-creations are left in public places to be used by anyone. But this marking-out of space for skateboarding use also makes the ramps a particular site of contention around legitimate use of public space. Station Square in Portrush has become a locus of contention in recent years. It is an area of the public realm that has been significantly redeveloped since the 2010s, partly rendering the nearby Amphitheatre skatespot less skateable, but also adding ledges of various heights and smooth surfaces to Station Square, making it an attractive, inclusive space for skateboarders of all abilities.

The ramps on Station Square have been of key concern to our research, precisely because this area is so valued by a diversity of skaters and because the conflicts over public space are so visibly enacted here.

PORT RUSH



CIP Activities

Co-Creation Culture

The creativity of skateboard culture informs the creative methodology of the project, both in terms of the artistry of skateboarding practice and in the various processes of videography (filming, editing, producing). Anyone who is involved with skateboarding knows that its core creative energy stems from its playful re-imagining of public space. The terminology attached to skateboarding manoeuvres, tricks and body positions is akin to dancing, and this is augmented with collaborative learning and sharing of new techniques and tricks between skaters.

This research project's videographical outputs mobilise [Slaine Browne's archive of footage of local skateboarding practice](#) as a springboard to co-create new content, with the invitation for contemporary skaters to re-imagine their creative practice in Portrush (responding to social issues such as 'resortification' in the process, by visualising changes to the redeveloped urban fabric). In [one of the videos](#), our research collaborator Rory Friers reflects on the creativity of skateboarding:

'This is the beautiful thing about skaters ... Everybody's got their own thing they find nice in it. It's like painting'

Rory is talking about the Flowerbed Wall in Portrush, a site near the Amphitheatre skatespot on Kerr Street. For passersby, this is just an innocuous bit of street furniture. But for skaters, this wall has significance as a site of creative practice, with attached



Rory Friers, archive



Rory Friers, contemporary

mythology, connected to other pieces of urban landscape through lines and flows of movement. Every skater who interacts with the wall has a unique approach and they leave their own mark on the urban fabric (moving some materials, waxing a surface, scratching masonry with their skateboard trucks), signifying this object as a skateboarding locus to anyone who is attuned to the signs.

This deep connection between skateboarding and the civic fabric underpins the CIP research. Skateboarders are uniquely sensitive to changes brought about by the redevelopment of public space and acutely aware of the subsequent impacts these can have on skateboarding culture.

Videography is a crucial aspect of skateboarding culture, both as a focus of local creative activity and as a means of networking with global skateboard culture. Hours of effort go into the painstaking production of 'bits', typically just a few seconds long, which are collected into films.

As part of his role as a key research partner, Slaine processed more than 200 hours of footage to identify material that related to historic skatespots in Portrush. Collaboratively, Slaine and I collected and co-collated this footage into 'reels', which we screened for the contemporary skateboarding community at the local independent cinema.

We then invited the contemporary skaters who attended the screening to re-imagine the creative practice of those previous generations of skaters at the same spots in Portrush, making a direct connection with the skateboarders' own local cultural heritage, and exploring how redevelopment of public space has impacted on classic skatespots of the past. The new creative practice arising from this was also filmed, allowing us to juxtapose archive and new footage in our subsequent video outputs.

The creativity of videography is readily applicable to research methodologies – people can tell their own stories and help us see the world through their lens – but videography is intertwined with the practice of skateboarding, rather than something external or simply an extractive documentation. The interplay of artistic flair in performance, the re-imagining of public space, and its videographic documentation provides a unique package of skateboarding-as-creativity. Our research insights emerge when we tap into the critical dialogues that surround this creativity and this is a valuable window into skaters’ reflections on their lived experience.

Dialogue and Iterative Process

Our research process is iterative – that is to say, each step in the research is informed and shaped by the previous stage(s). It ensures that the co-created project is responsive to the needs of the skateboarding community and maintains dialogue as the driving force of the project’s evolution.

Each stage of the research creates opportunities for reflection on creative practice, which, combined with mini-surveys and online feedback, produces our research transcript. The video production itself is iterative, meaning that as newly shared outputs spark conversation among skaters, we can then collaboratively produce new video material in response to those reflections.



Talking with CAUS about their ambitions for the research project, and the value that it brings to their campaigning and lobbying, reminded me of the importance of the role and reputation of the university as a civic institution. As a direct result, we added a Ulster University logo to our street-lecture video titled *Why Doesn't Portrush Have a Skatepark?* throughout its duration. Leveraging Ulster University’s media and communications has been of direct benefit to raising the profile and legitimacy of the Portrush skatepark campaign.

Research as Intervention

The CIP project was positioned as an intervention to support the skatepark campaign by raising the profile of skateboarding as a cultural tradition in the Portrush area and creatively engaging skateboarders in critical dialogue about their practice and the shifting dynamics of a resortifying context.

However, the announcement of the project funding was met with scepticism from some quarters, with a handful of online commentators suggesting that the project diverted attention away from the grassroots history of the skatepark campaign. In response to this

concern, and in dialogue with the skateboarding community, an intervention to refurbish ramps situated at Station Square emerged as a key development in the CIP project. There was a clear need to make the benefits of the research project materially tangible to the skateboarding community. Ramps were an obvious means of engaging with skateboarders because they are a focal point for skateboarding practice and a site of community, as well as a point of contention for the use of public space.



Degraded Ramp

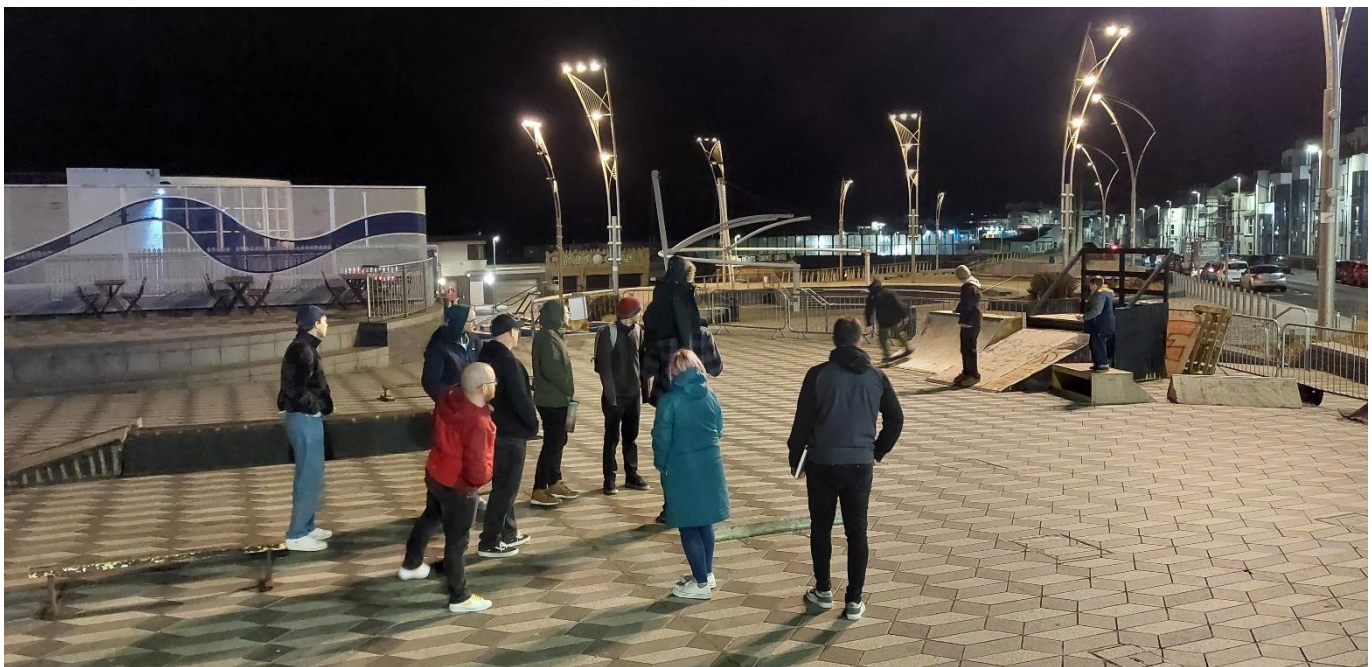


Refurbished Ramp

Before the CIP project, the condition of the skate ramps in Portrush was quite poor and this affected the quality of skateboarding experience. Their visual state of disrepair was also source of concern for the Borough Council. Refurbishing the ramps was therefore a real opportunity for collective action, bringing together various local stakeholders to

support the refurbishment. Younger skaters were also upskilled in ramp-building techniques with the help of professional carpenters and more experienced skaters.

These ramps are a focal point for the entire skateboarding community in Portrush, so it was important to bring all sections of that community along with us during the ramp refurbishment initiative. I organised meetings in the nearby Town Hall, where various ideas and arguments were exchanged. The meeting room directly overlooks Station Square, and these meetings all concluded with a 'site visit', allowing the skaters to materially illustrate their arguments by moving around the space itself.



Ramp Refurb Meeting

Ensuring a broad base of support was essential, and this was bolstered by the subsequent use and enjoyment of the refurbished ramps by wider sections of the skateboarding community and visitors to the town.



Beyond the opportunity for collective action and material communication of the benefits of the research project to the skateboarding community, the impacts of the ramp refurbishment have been transformative. As project partner Slaine Browne put it, the refurbishment has **'just brought the place back to life'**. This self-directed activity also effectively highlights inaction on the part of the local Council.

Results & Change

The marquee ambition to ‘Get Portrush a Skatepark!’ has not been achieved within the lifetime of this project but there have been successes in transforming the perspectives of the skateboarding community and other stakeholders, and our interventions have shifted the terrain of contestation in ways that should be beneficial to the local skatepark campaign going forwards.

The ramp refurbishment initiative was an opportunity to bring the skateboarding community together in a collectively negotiated activity that had immediate tangible benefits. Rose Smyth from CAUS recognised the impacts:

‘on the ground, it’s really energised the skaters [...]

‘you’ve now galvanised the young people to be making new ramps, parents getting involved [...] there’s been a lot has come out of this that’s really positive’

The project’s video outputs have been important in contextualising the campaign to ‘Get Portrush a Skatepark!’. As Rose puts it:

‘for us as a campaign group it’s maybe given us a bit of a new language and some perspective [...]

‘the work that Slaine’s doing in his videos [...] old videos that have been curated and maybe looked at differently, and they’ve been given a new [...] narrative’

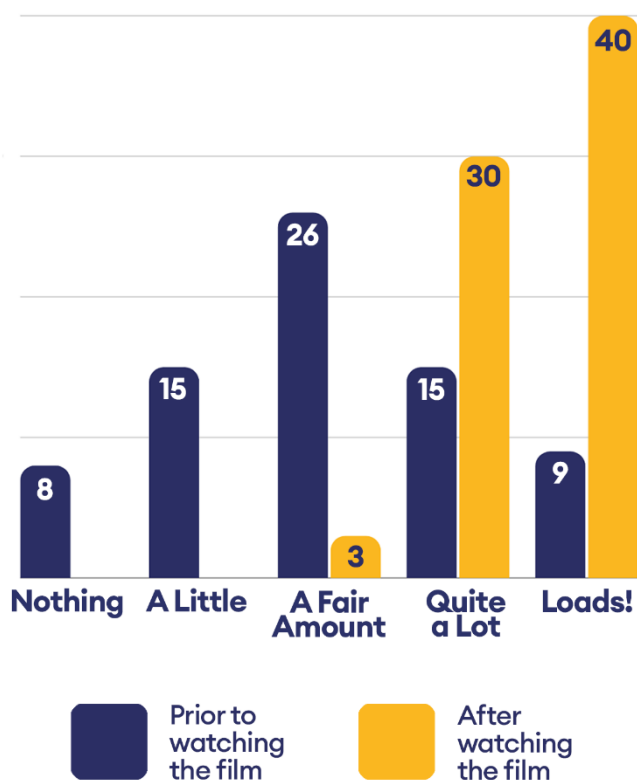
The premiere screening of our street-lecture video, *Why Doesn’t Portrush Have a Skatepark?* (30th May 2024), attracted a full house of 150 people to The Playhouse, an independent cinema in Portrush.

Surveys conducted immediately after the screening evidence transformed perspectives, both in terms of increased knowledge on the heritage and contemporary practice of skateboarding in Portrush, and its contextualisation within dynamics of ‘resortification’ in the town.

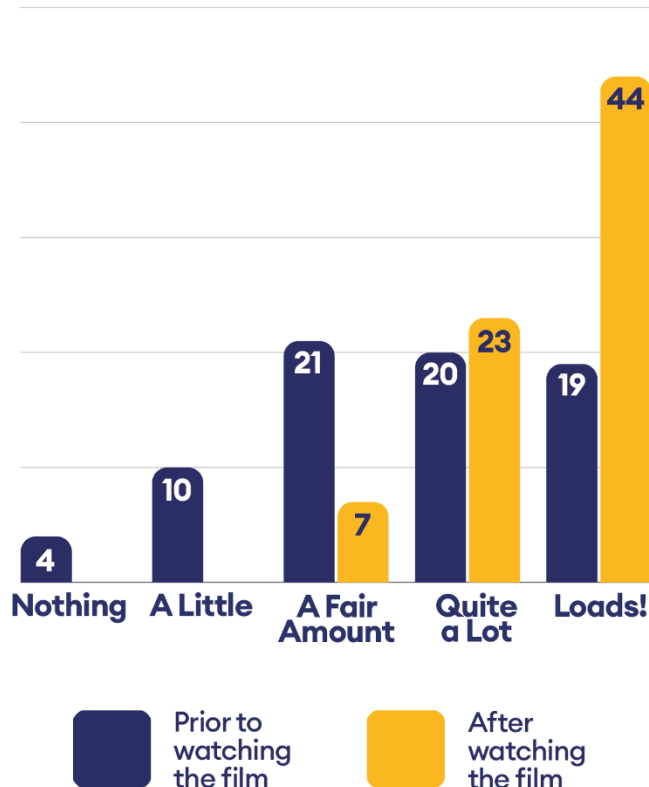


*‘Why Doesn’t Portrush Have a Skatepark?’
Screening*

How much did you already know/do you now know about resortification (or gentrification) culture in Portrush?



How much did you already know/do you now know about skateboard/urban sports culture in Portrush?



This transformation was further evidenced through supplementary written feedback on the surveys:



‘feel more aware now on how long this has been an issue’

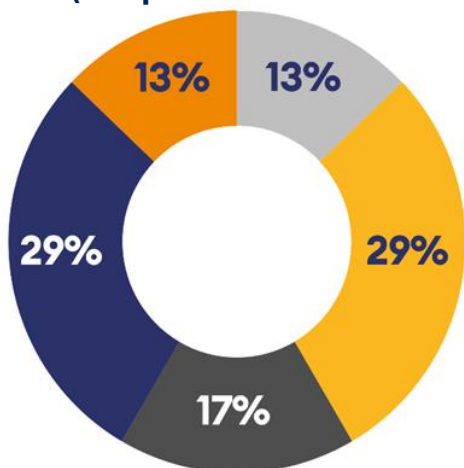
‘Informative, eye-opening, progressive’

‘It was really insightful to see the resortification laid out like that. It’s something we are all aware is happening around us but shocking to see it on screen’

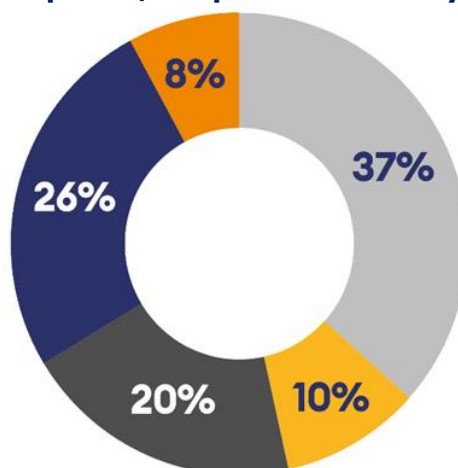
The engagement of our initiatives has been emphatically local, and purposely aimed at the local skateboarding community. This is borne out in the responses to surveys carried out around the ramp refurbishment and film premiere.

Both the ramp refurbishment surveys (16) and film premiere surveys (73) indicate significant numbers of current and former urban sports participants as respondents, at 40% and 46% respectively, with a further 28% and 26% describing themselves as ‘fans’.

Respondents' involvement with urban sports (ramp refurbishment survey)

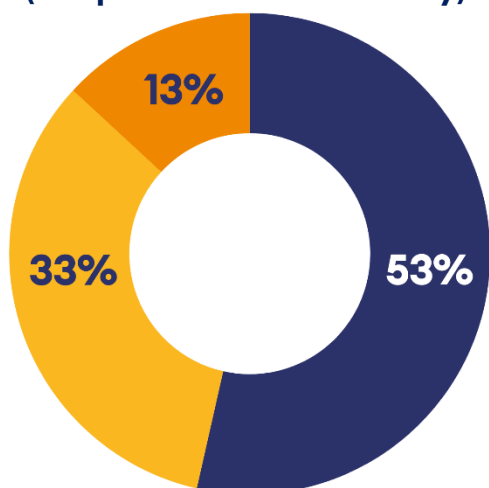


Respondents' involvement with urban sports (film premiere survey)

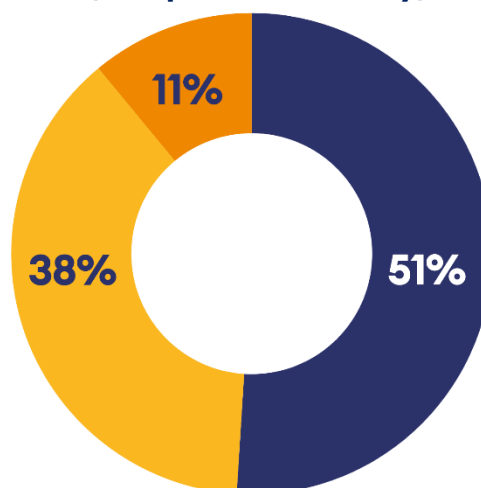


This engagement was also very localised. The ramp refurbishment survey responses indicate 53% were resident in Portrush with a further 33% in the wider Causeway Coast area (86% 'local' in total). Similarly, the film premiere survey indicates 51% resident in Portrush and 38% in the wider Causeway Coast area (89% 'local').

Respondents' residence (ramp refurbishment survey)



Respondents' residence (film premiere survey)



The project has contributed to Ulster University's Impact Acceleration Account (IAA) and the wider research culture at Ulster University. The CIP award has increased the profile of the research unit - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management - across the institution, and it has unlocked additional IAA funding to support my work and that of my community partners.

My local connections to Portrush have been foundational to this research project. Indeed, my longstanding friendship with Slaine led to discussions about his collection of footage and what might be done with it, which was the original spark for the wider project. This 'localness' has continued to be a rich resource as the project has developed. Following our public events, people have offered new support and assistance, neighbours have discussed the issue with interest, and this has opened new insights and opportunities. The support of the local community has been extremely gratifying, but this closeness has also been the source of some difficulties.

The transformation for my research partners has been significant. Slaine highlights the transformative impact on his own creative practice, and the community-level impacts of the research interventions thus far:

'Getting into this research project [...] you're asked to go through your own skate footage and put that together again, y'know, 20 [...] or 30 years after you filmed it. But that was great to go back and revisit it. It then opened up other pathways for people seeing the videos that we'd made and asking me to go and make more stuff for them [...] it's been great to suddenly have a lot more confidence in what I've been doing since I was a kid, which is playing with video cameras [...] Yeah, it's brilliant that it's reopened it for me and got me back to it again.'

I'd been filming skateboarding in Portrush since the late '90s, so basically my job was to go through something like 215 hours of footage that I have [...] It's been amazing because, for me [...] it feels like yesterday when I started skating here ... [but] it's been so long now that we've been waiting for this park to get built.'

A lot of the older ones like me, we came back because we saw there was a new generation [...] In all this community stuff that we've been doing with the skaters, I've noticed that the younger ones are fully into it. Y'know, they all wanna know, they wanna learn how to build ramps. Yeah, and it's just great seeing the reaction in the group chat [WhatsApp], whenever you're like 'we're doing this, we're doing that', and then you see how many people are coming down. It's good to know that we're all here together'



Rose, who has been working with CAUS since its inception, reflected on this contribution of the research project:

‘I think with you coming along, you’ve provided us with a lot of energy. You’ve provided us almost with a bit of validity [...][You’re coming from an academic perspective. So that’s different, that’s fresh for us [...] It gives us a bit of a context [...] and also like seeing what we’re doing fits in somewhere, y’know, in terms of a journey.

When you’re bogged down in the middle of it you can focus very much on what you maybe didn’t do, or what they [the Council] didn’t do [...] whereas I think actually there is a bigger picture here [...] the fact that you have taken the time to look through and get that overview, it’s just really important, I think, just in terms [of] morale. But also [asking] ‘are we on the right track?’ ‘Is there better ways we could have done this?’ ‘Are other things at play?’ Including, for example, things like gentrification?’

‘For us, we embrace you coming along, because I think it gives us a validity. It also places us’



Recommendations

Setting aside the lack of success regarding ‘getting a skatepark’ for now, across the CIP project we have learned a lot about grassroots innovation and grassroots policymaking.

The DIY approach that characterises skateboard culture has informed our grassroots policy recommendations – on the one hand, as a virtue that helps to build self-empowerment and collective consciousness, and on the other, as a practical necessity in the face of inaction from local government.

This methodological ‘fit’, whereby the core values of the community we are doing research with are retrenched within the project’s aims and approaches, is rooted in an ethically rigorous commitment to meaningful research relationships. This homologous (or commensurate) methodology also yields significant practical benefits in terms of mutual trust, access, and improved impact pathways of useful research outputs/interventions.

Other creative communities who encounter contexts of ‘policy failure’ at the local government level can learn from our initiatives, especially with regards to the core question of effecting change at and from the grassroots level. Our key takeaway concerns the distinction between big ‘P’ Policy (that is to say, government-centric, top-down policy making) and small ‘p’ policy (understood as a tool for community self-management) and this has particular implications for researchers and creative communities.

We have garnered significant publicity during the life of the project, with extensive media coverage, well-attended public events and high online engagement with video outputs. The premiere of our street-lecture mini-documentary, [*Why Doesn't Portrush Have a Skatepark?*](#), attracted a capacity crowd to Playhouse independent cinema in Portrush, as well as an invitation to speak about the issue on BBC Radio Foyle, and further news reports online. Subsequent sharing of the 15-minute video online garnered more than 7000 views in one week (just over 1000 each on YouTube and Facebook and more than 5000 on Instagram).



Our practical research interventions have also contributed to the ‘Get Portrush a Skatepark!’ campaign by providing another source of pressure on the Borough Council. On the one hand our interventions have empowered the skateboarding community to assert their legitimacy as users of public space. On the other, the self-directed activity of the skaters (refurbishing ramps, holding public events) highlights the absence of this provision by the Council.

The extent to which this approach works towards the stated goal of getting a skatepark in Portrush remains to be seen, but our interventions, publications and events have helped to transform people’s perspectives on co-creation of R&D and on skateboarding in Portrush.

Conclusion

The AHRC Creative Communities CIP award supports research that engages in co-design, co-creation and co-evaluation. This CIP project has put that into practice in collaboration with our research partners Slaine Browne and Causeway Association of Urban Sports. Co-creation of new R&D with these partners was instrumental in the co-design of the project and has continued to influence the co-development of the research as an iterative approach. By working together we have created new video outputs, refurbished important skateboarding infrastructure, and created new artistic and critical awareness of skateboarders as a creative community. The transformative impacts of the project on key research partners have been significant and an iterative evaluation will inform the next steps for our evolving research relationships beyond this CIP project.

By using co-creative and participatory research methods, we have committed ourselves to ethical rigour and sought to promote a 'more inclusive model of innovation'. This has meant giving a platform to, and protecting the integrity

of, research participants' contributions.

Our sensitivity to methodological 'fit' has engendered research processes and research outputs that resonate with the creativity of the skateboarders themselves.



The CIP project has been an opportunity to 'test new ideas and approaches to creating, sharing, and using knowledge to tackle' the challenges faced by skateboarders in Portrush. The research approaches of this CIP project are transferable to other contexts in which grassroots policy can be mobilised to empower creative communities to assert their agency through self-management, methodological innovations and a strategy of tactical diversity.

Further Information:

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

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