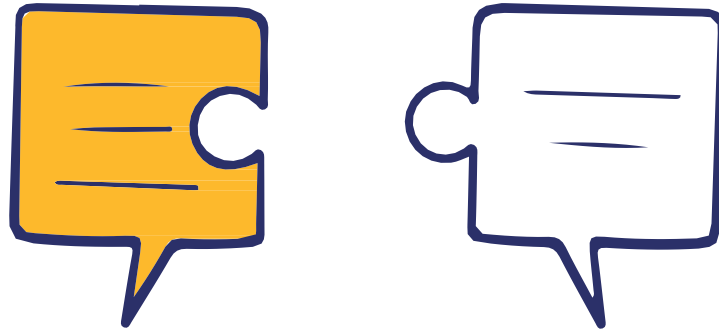




BeHere: Belonging, Heritage and Ecology – Community Co-Creation with National Trust Mount Stewart

Lisa Rea Currie, Queen's University Belfast

Community Innovation Practitioner Case Study

© 2026. This work is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](#)

For more information on AHRC Creative
Communities visit
www.creativecommunities.uk

Creative Communities is funded by the
Arts and Humanities Research Council
UK (Grant Agreement No
AH/X001555/1) and hosted at
Northumbria University, Newcastle.

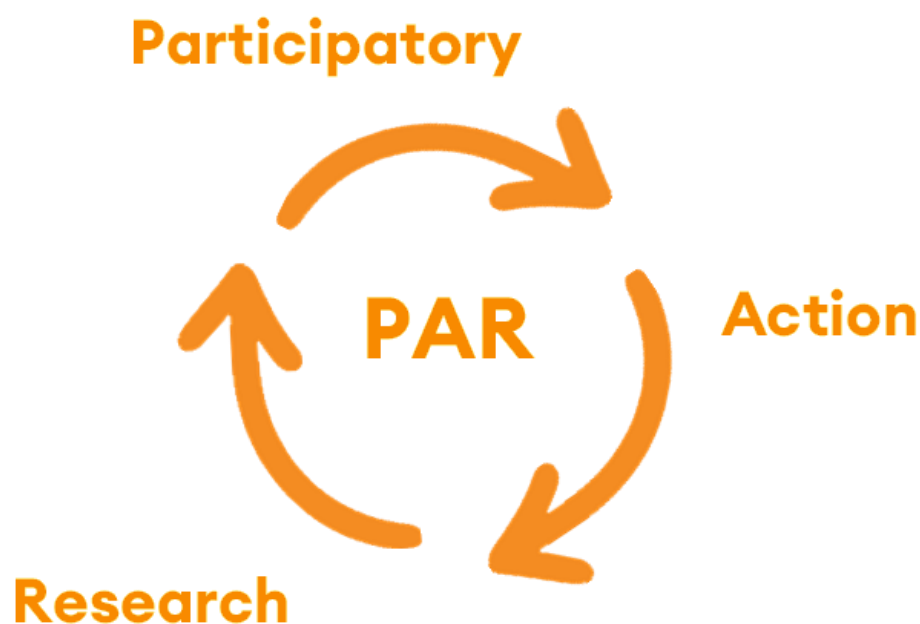


Summary

BeHere: Belonging, Heritage and Ecology in Ards and North Down, was a research project that explored what belonging means in relation to heritage for local under-served communities. The project focused on Mount Stewart, a nineteenth-century neo-classical house, formal gardens and estate managed by the National Trust. It sits on the shores of Strangford Lough, Northern Ireland (NI) in an Area of Outstanding National Beauty (AONB).

However, not everyone who lives nearby feels a sense of belonging in connection to the heritage asset on their doorstep. A research partnership bringing together Queen's University Belfast, National Trust participation and curatorial teams, arts facilitators from [ArtsEktā](#), community co-researchers, and local partners worked together to explore what the barriers to belonging are and how to overcome them.

Community-based [co-researchers](#) were recruited through existing relationships with our partner organisations: [The Link](#) in Newtownards and [Kilcooley Women's Centre](#) in Bangor. Rather than acting as project participants, the co-researchers were equal partners alongside the professional researchers and were involved in all levels of research from issue identification to evaluation. Through a [Participatory Action Research](#) (PAR) approach, we identified the key components of belonging as 'safety, familiarity and community'. We utilised creativity as a vehicle to design pathways to belonging that centred the co-researchers' needs and interests. This culminated in a touring exhibition documenting their journeys to connection. The research demonstrates that members of the local community are best placed to identify and solve their own challenges and to make heritage relevant to them, given appropriate support and resources.



Introduction

BeHere unlocked access to heritage and enhanced belonging in the context of complex, contested histories in post-conflict Northern Ireland. The model evidenced the social, economic and cultural impacts of heritage and belonging on under-served communities. It is particularly relevant to the development of the [Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme](#) by the Department for Communities and the National Trust's [current ten-year strategy](#) which both focus on participation, ending unequal access to heritage and the personal and societal benefits of engaging with heritage.

Based at the Centre for Public History at Queen's University Belfast, CIP Lisa Rea Currie facilitated co-creation to integrate community voice, inclusion and equitable access into the PAR process. She worked with co-researchers from the two community organisations who self-selected from groups of regular users engaged in social, creative or support activities.



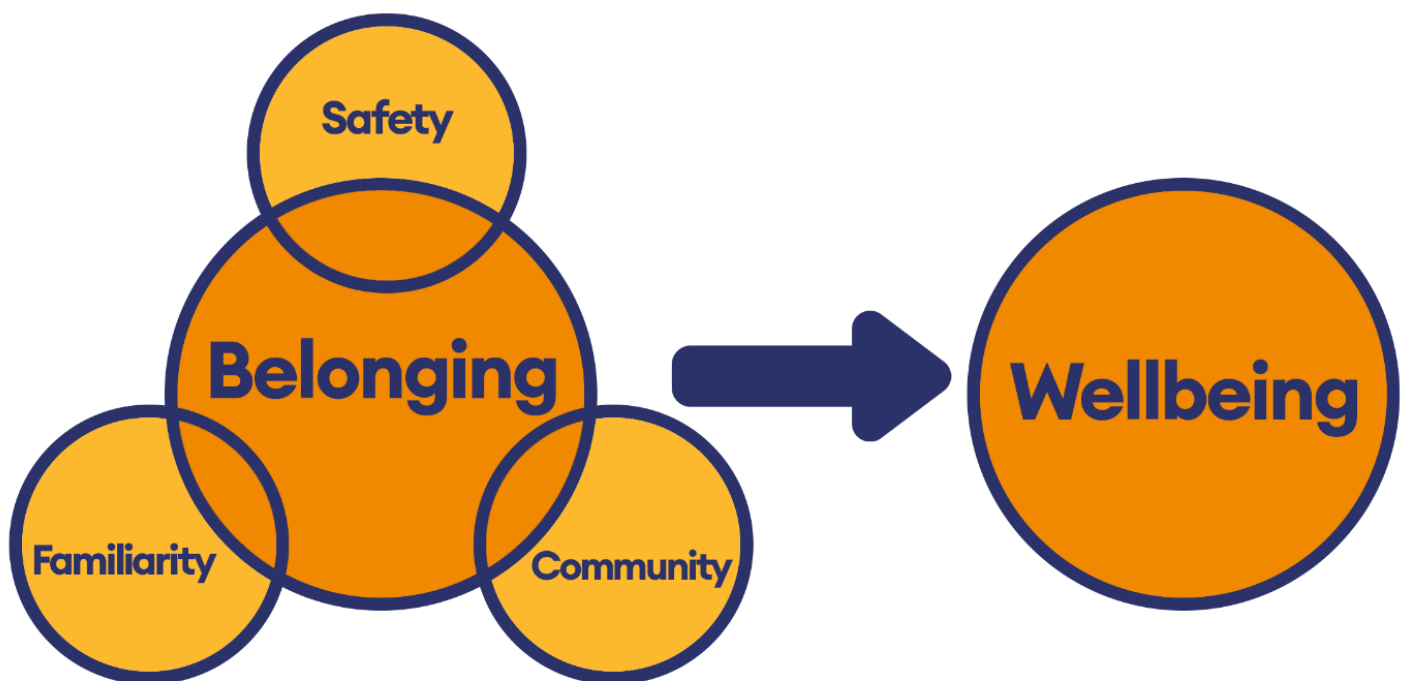
National Trust: Mount Stewart

Research Context

BeHere developed from the [Historic Houses Global Crossroads](#) research project. The HHGC team saw an opportunity to extend this work by enabling deeper integration of residents of Ards and North Down, using Participatory Action Research to investigate belonging. The beginning of BeHere also coincided with the National Trust launching a ten-year strategic [plan](#) that named ending unequal access to nature, beauty and history as one of their goals and considered both practical and emotional barriers such as distance and belonging.

Activists experiencing exclusion use the maxim “[Nothing about us, without us](#)”. To understand why and how people experience exclusion from nature, beauty and history represented in a historic site like Mount Stewart, the people experiencing exclusion must be part of creating understanding and solutions. Participatory Action Research is an inclusive and collaborative research approach defined by participation and a determination to produce knowledge for social change. It disrupts traditional power dynamics around how knowledge is created and engages directly with people affected by the issues. Community co-researchers are embedded in the entire process of identifying issues, designing interventions and evaluating results.

This methodology provided the foundation for BeHere. One of the first steps was to explore what the concept of belonging meant to the co-researchers. The two participating groups worked separately and yet identified remarkably similar concepts for the key features of belonging.



The key features of Belonging: Safety; Familiarity; Community.
Source: Lisa Rea Currie.

Safety emerged in both its physical and psychological forms, including accessibility and mobility concerns, as well as feelings of oppression or injustice when considering whether they felt safe in the space. Systemic inequality present in the house was an undercurrent throughout the process.

Familiarity was another key aspect. Co-researchers wanted to know more about the history of the house, gardens and family, and sought reassurance about what it might be like to spend time there. One co-researcher expressed concern about not knowing how to behave in an unfamiliar place, linking this to trauma and the need for an exit plan.

Community was also central. Seeing people with shared interests or familiar behaviours, whether visitors, staff or residents, mattered to them. One participant was relieved to see a staff member with tattoos. They wanted histories that reflected their lived experiences, especially working-class stories and accounts of servants' lives.

Wellbeing also emerged as closely linked to belonging, and the co-researchers began using this to measure their emotional and psychological connection to Mount Stewart.

Working collaboratively, the research team and co-researchers settled on the following research questions:

- Can community creativity linked to heritage sites help to enhance belonging and social cohesion?
- How can community creativity build stronger connections between communities in Northern Ireland and their heritage sites, contributing to an authentic and sustainable sense of place?
- Does creativity improve access to culture and heritage among Northern Ireland's diverse communities, and enhance wellbeing through connections to heritage?

Community Innovation

The BeHere activity programme was co-designed with the participant co-researchers in autumn 2025. Co-researchers began by exploring what belonging meant to them and how this related to their feelings about Mount Stewart. Through facilitated discussions, creative workshops, recordings and collaborative resource sharing, the group identified several themes that were central to enabling belonging: safety, familiarity, community and wellbeing. These were used to co-design specific interventions to address challenges and opportunities.

Most workshops were held in the co-researchers' community centres. Workshops were primarily discussion-based and included some collaborative desk research about Mount Stewart. This enabled co-researchers to understand the parameters of the research, explore what the PAR process would look like for them and fundamentally, to build trust between them, the CIP and staff at the National Trust, before asking them to move outside their familiar spaces.

Visits to Mount Stewart with the co-researchers incorporated photovoice methodologies to capture thoughts and feelings about being in the space in real time. Using prompts developed from earlier discussions they took photographs of the house and collections. In follow-up sessions, evidence was reviewed, and the materials gathered were used to shape new creative interventions.

During these photovoice workshops and later sessions, the co-researchers began exploring how they might create their own pathways to belonging. At this stage, the two groups began to diverge in their approaches. Thanks to ArtsEkta's partnership in the project, appropriately skilled arts facilitators with specialisms in glass, ceramics and mixed media were employed to support deeper creative engagement with Mount Stewart and unlock access to some of the site's hidden collections.



Co-researchers explore the garden during a visit to Mount Stewart.

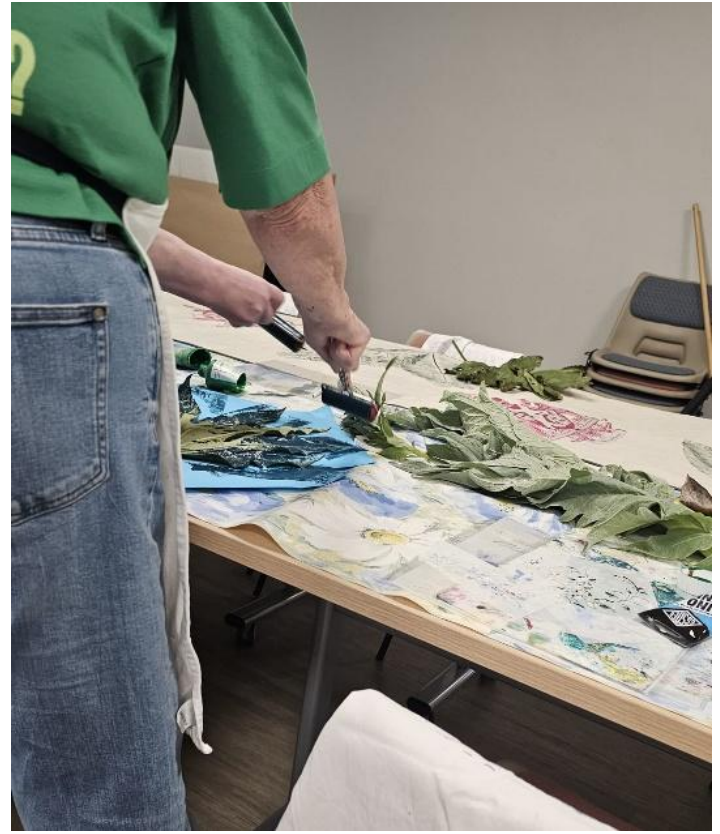
Image credit: co-researcher Gwen Johnston.

In the next phase, the groups used creativity to develop their reflections in more detail. The group from The Link were recruited from the MARC programme for people dealing with substance misuse. They learned early in their research that several members of the Londonderry family who built the property had experienced mental health challenges. This resonated strongly with them. They explored how leaving Newtownards for a green space and a historic house filled with art might support their wellbeing. They also reflected on the darker and colder rooms, preserved for conservation reasons, and the discomfort caused by systemic inequalities represented in the house. Thinking about light, space and mental health led them to Leonard Cohen's lyric, "[There is a crack in everything, that is how the light gets in](#)". This inspired their decision to work with fused glass and Kintsugi-inspired ceramics.



Co-researchers at Mount Stewart examine the chandeliers. Image credit: Lisa Rea Currie.

The Kilcooley group, made up of co-researchers with strong research skills and a love of crafting, connected with the house and gardens through familiar themes, such as gardening, material culture and history. They felt a strong connection to Lady Edith, designer of the gardens and a highly creative figure. They designed a creative intervention using linen, the source of the Londonderry family's wealth, incorporating representations of plants from around the world that Edith introduced to Mount Stewart. Early in the research project, the group recognised the economic disparities between the wealth on display in Mount Stewart and the comparatively poorer experiences of their own ancestors. To represent this in their creative response they embellished the linen by hand to acknowledge the '[flowering](#)' process that young girls and women were employed in cottage industries surrounding the estate.



Eileen embellishes the linen during creative workshop. Gwen prints the linen using foliage from Mount Stewart gardens. Image credit: co-researcher Mary Lappin.

For both groups, using creativity to explore belonging meant gravitating towards heritage and strengthening connections to place and to each other. Further visits enabled them to draw inspiration from the Mount Stewart collections and deepen their connection to the site. Co-researchers noted feeling different in the space over time and as a result became more comfortable with the tension between experiencing beauty and grandeur in a context of inequality, recognising, in their words, “the haves and the have nots”.

The project culminated in a co-designed touring exhibition over the summer of 2026, in which co-researchers shared their learning with friends, local stakeholders, the wider community and visitors at Mount Stewart and venues across NI, at a local history sharing day at Mount Stewart in June 2026, and at a workshop in August 2026 to connect with other local groups using creative practice to engage with heritage and place.

Key Learning

Heritage belongs to everyone, but BeHere shows that sense of belonging, ownership and connection is fragile and easily damaged by institutional policies; by disadvantage, exclusion and marginalisation; and when complex histories are ignored or obscured rather than explored with respect and care.

This research suggests that where the relationship between heritage and a part of the community breaks down, it can and should be repaired, for the benefit of both. But that requires work, and resources to support that work. The research suggests that communities, in partnership with researchers and other civic stakeholders, are best placed to solve these problems.

As a direct result of participating in BeHere, co-researchers reported developing deeper emotional and psychological connections to Mount Stewart as a heritage site, began to identify specific elements of the site that fostered belonging and developed creative outputs that translated their reflections into material forms. Since completing their creative responses as part of the project, the co-researchers have continued to engage in creative activities through projects offered by Mount Stewart and the National Trust.

The benefits of this project have reached beyond building a sense of belonging at Mount Stewart, and the relationships and the skills acquired during it have translated into heritage engagement on a wider scale. Co-researchers have gone on to visit other new heritage sites facilitated by their relationship with staff at the National Trust and have expanded their engagement with belonging as a result. Partner organisations also reported that the co-researchers have increased levels of confidence in engaging with other community resources.

An accessible, equal and collaborative approach to research was the core of the project. Creative research methods, such as photovoice, promoted confidence and comfort for the co-researchers and enabled real-time reflection. Honest discussion of systemic inequality helped co-researchers process discomfort.

Using PAR allowed for long-term engagement, with the same groups meeting weekly over a nine-month period. This time allowed for trust to be built between partners and a community to be developed between all the stakeholders. Several co-researchers commented that the weekly sessions held over several months provided a structure that fostered wellbeing. This shows that building equitable relationships and allowing time for trust to grow is imperative when working with communities. Familiarity with the site also improved through repeat visits.

Expecting people to adapt to unfamiliar environments without support does not work. Heritage organisations need to change, not communities. But when communities are invited in as experts in creating belonging in their own localities and given the tools to share their expertise, they can find solutions. The evidence lies in the co-researchers' discussions, photographs and evolving comfort in the space.

The project has generated measurable change among the partner organisations. The National Trust team at Mount Stewart are considering how to incorporate stories of servants and working-class people into interpretation as a direct result of BeHere. It has benefitted from new awareness of power dynamics and how to co-design more equitable collaboration and storytelling with communities in NI. The project has also measurably strengthened relationships between heritage professionals and local communities, laying foundations for future work beyond August.

For the research team, the project developed skills in participatory methods and co-creation practice and enhanced understanding of belonging as experienced by NI communities. The work has also significantly expanded research networks and enabled new partnerships across disciplines and organisations, developing new relationships to support impact-led and engaged research. Within NI HEI, it has contributed to institutional pathways for impact, providing vital evidence of the value of engagement specialists in the QUB Centre for Public History.

Partners are now exploring how to support ongoing relationships between the National Trust and the communities involved, to ensure that the learning generated from this work can be scaled across Northern Ireland.



Mount Stewart from the gardens.
Image Credit: co-researcher Gwen Johnston.

Recommendations

Cross-sector partnership between communities, heritage organisations and government is needed to identify and mitigate barriers to heritage access and belonging in heritage sites in NI. The NI Executive and Arm's-Length Bodies (ALBs) must ensure that their policies and funding are structured so that heritage and culture are made more accessible to under-served communities, especially in areas with poor infrastructure and in areas of high deprivation.

Co-creation, community engaged research and participatory methods are vital to explore belonging in contexts where disconnection and exclusion are the norm. Groups who do not regularly access heritage sites need safety, familiarity and community to make the first step across the threshold. Heritage organisations should listen to people's voices and recognise the emotional, practical and knowledge barriers created by inequalities, while recognising communities as the experts on their own needs.

Researchers, heritage organisations, funders and policymakers should recognise the time and effort that goes into unfunded pre-assembly of partnerships before funded activities can take place. In communities, especially those that are under-served, trust and equitable relationships take a long time to develop. The co-researchers in the BeHere project met together on a weekly basis for nearly two months before visiting Mount Stewart, but the foundation built during this time meant that individuals were able to process their discomfort in a safe and trauma-informed space.

Government and ALBs should use this research to invest in co-creation and develop an approach to long-term collaboration between NI heritage sites and their local communities. The project shows that change is required from institutions in the process of engaging new audiences. Institutions need to be resourced and supported to invest in system change, navigate a shared authority approach to interpretation and allow time for trust-building with under-served communities.



Looking Ahead

AHRC investment in the Community Innovation Practitioner provided long-term, flexible support which enabled a unique experimental collaboration across sectors in NI. It supported creative, participatory methods that have generated new knowledge and awareness of the barriers and opportunities associated with bringing new audiences to engage with NI heritage sites.

The project has built confidence in the delivery team and co-researchers, raised awareness in UK ALBs and NI Executive, and created new connections that can ensure sustainability and resilience for the work into the future.



National Trust: Mount Stewart

Further Information:

For more information on AHRC Creative Communities visit www.creativecommunities.uk

Contact the CIP

Lisa Rea Currie, Queen's University Belfast

l.reacurrie@qub.ac.uk

Creative Communities is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK (Grant Agreement No AH/X001555/1) and hosted at Northumbria University, Newcastle.