

AHRC Creative Communities

Community Innovation Practitioner 2025-26

Policy Paper

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

Northern Ireland

October 2026



Devolved Policy Context

Northern Ireland has held devolved legislative powers for culture since the [Northern Ireland Act 1998](#). However, no current policy for the historic environment exists, and the [museum policy has not been updated since 2011](#). The [Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme](#) aims to fill and update these policy gaps. It identifies the role of heritage, culture and creativity in reducing inequality, supporting wellbeing and encouraging partnership approaches.

Northern Ireland has the lowest per capita spend on [heritage](#) and [arts](#) across the UK. The recommendations of this policy paper are well positioned to articulate the value of a well-funded and supported sector that has community participation at its heart. This, alongside research and long-term evaluation that demonstrates positive change, will attract more investment and ensure maximum impact of existing spend. This can be achieved through collaboration between [Northern Ireland Executive departments](#), local and national funders, organisations from the community, arts and heritage sectors and UK research institutions.

Heritage in Northern Ireland can reinforce a sense of exclusion because of differing understandings of the past, emotional barriers and structural inequalities. This is sometimes called '[anti-belonging](#)', a process whereby marginal identities are further reinforced through everyday exclusions.

In [Northern Ireland's devolved context](#), attempts to address this challenge have focused on community relations, cultural inclusion and improved access and are shaped by [The Executive Office priorities](#). However, resulting interventions are often short-term or consultation only exercises that reach those already engaged. Work to date has struggled to address the emotional and structural barriers that exclude underserved communities from heritage sites in Northern Ireland.

The [Northern Ireland Department for Communities](#) (DfC) is developing a [Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme](#) focusing on participation, accessibility and inclusion leading to wellbeing. This provides an opportunity to develop and embed best-practice intervention models that treat belonging as a long-term, community-led process.

[BeHere](#) is a year-long research partnership between [Queen's University Belfast](#), [National Trust](#), [ArtsEkta](#), [The Link Family and Community Centre](#) and [Kilcooley Women's Centre](#). It provides a new evidence base for recommendations on how the DfC can better invest in inter-sectoral relationships and use participatory and creative methods to encourage people from underserved communities to create their own paths to belonging in heritage.

The recommendations of this policy paper are underpinned by the research and directed to the [Northern Ireland Executive's Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme](#). They articulate key actions for Northern Ireland heritage and creative sectors and aim to influence relevant policies across Executive departments, arms-length heritage and museum bodies, local government and beyond.

Recommendations

1. Work with the whole Northern Ireland community to shape heritage policy

Heritage belongs to everyone. When everyone participates, everyone benefits. Long-term, relationship-based, and cross-sector programmes enable organisations to build trust and to work with people who are disengaged or feel excluded from heritage in Northern Ireland.

Recommendation: Fund long-term, relationship-based programmes that reach beyond groups already involved in heritage to enable diverse groups to shape Northern Ireland heritage policy. This can be achieved by providing multi-year support for participatory work that builds capacity, leadership, and interest beyond ALBs and established organisations.

2. 'Do with' communities rather than 'do to' them

Our research evidences that co-design of heritage access interventions leads to higher community engagement and more equitable relationships. Co-design creates confidence and trust, helps communities to explore heritage on their own terms, and encourages heritage institutions to question their own assumptions about community needs. To be effective, co-design must qualify as a fundable activity, particularly to assemble groups before beginning wider funding application processes or where groups face barriers linked to inequality, trauma or inexperience.

Funding opportunities should mandate that applicants build community leadership and co-design into their proposals, instead of just community involvement and participation. They should also resource time to support overcoming emotional barriers linked to safety, unfamiliarity and inequality that limit how Northern Irish people experience local and national heritage spaces. Simple measures such as repeated visits, creative activity and open discussion can help people to feel more comfortable and develop a sense of belonging.

Heritage sites must also take action to create safe conditions that promote the inclusion of new more diverse audiences. Policy makers and funders should recognise and resource the work needed to build trust and relationships between heritage sites and new audiences and embed emotional support needs for underserved communities in planning and programme design.

Recommendation: Mandate trauma-informed, community-led approaches underpinned by equitable relationships and co-design to empower communities at every stage of Northern Irish funded projects to share knowledge and create a more resilient heritage ecosystem.

By prioritising and resourcing co-design models and rewarding community leadership in heritage funding, we can incorporate this approach into funding structures as a strategic priority. Funding will provide the necessary resources, including ring-fenced time for training and guidance for heritage staff, so that heritage organisations can meet people where they are and address the

unfamiliarity of many Northern Ireland heritage sites to many members of the local community.

3. Fund communities as researchers and problem solvers

Our research shows that community-led innovation is a highly effective form of cultural participation. When communities are empowered as co-researchers rather than just consultees, it strengthens community voice and builds community capacity, skills and confidence. This delivers ongoing benefits to communities and the heritage sector that reach beyond initial engagement. Communities are the experts on what they need. Active research models give communities space to identify, reflect on and address their own challenges and opportunities.

Recommendation: New devolved funding calls should support the development of participatory research models that enable communities to work as researchers and experts in heritage settings. Supported by cross-sectoral partners, funding processes should better support partnerships to work with communities to identify relevant research questions and to generate knowledge and produce outputs that matter to them.

4. Support organisations to change and to measure impact

Addressing barriers to Northern Ireland heritage sites requires local and national organisations to adapt how they work and how they measure change. This means co-creating new models of delivery and evaluation that invest in the people and place around them. This cultural shift is essential to building equitable, long-term relationships.

Transformative change develops over time and leads to high-value impacts, but funding usually only resources short-term evaluation of interventions. Long-term evaluation of public heritage investments must be resourced to better evidence what works and understand broader impacts on individual, community and organisational change.

Recommendation: Devolved funders and ALBs should communicate good-practice models of co-creation and embed expectations that cultural organisations take responsibility for reducing barriers to access and commit to long-term impact measurement in funding requirements. By encouraging Northern Ireland's heritage organisations to examine their internal practices, staff training, and institutional culture as part of funding commitments, this will prioritise long-term impact, learning and deep attitudinal change.

Further Information:

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

Contact the CIP

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