



This year, we are going places to meet 100 people in all 11 council areas of Northern Ireland. Our third stop was at Portico of Ards in Portaferry, in Ards and North Down Borough, where we ran interviews with 10 locals. This is what we found:

## Cultural engagement in Ards and North Down Borough Council: Let's bust some myths and assumptions

### Not buying tickets does not equal low engagement, to the contrary.

As we've already seen in the council areas of Belfast and Derry, **engagement with arts and culture is not strictly about going to purpose-built venues**. The activities people do at home and outside of traditional arts spaces are as important to their lives as attendance, whether it's painting, playing music or reading.



*"It's just everywhere. I don't think it's a question that you can say, where would we be without it? Because it's something of humanity."*

### Many of us tend to dismiss the cultural value of natural heritage.



We even once heard *"a walk to the local beach is not culture"*. People we talked to in Ards and North Down Borough seem to think differently. **Outdoor heritage seems to have a significant place in their day-to-day activities**. Several participants mentioned often visiting Castle Ward and Mount Stewart, or simply taking in the beauty of their local area while on their walks. A few of them also said they enjoyed traveling all across Northern Ireland to enjoy its outdoor sites and scenery.

*"Ballyholme beach [...] it's just in every painting I do. It's always in there. So I did a lot of abstract techniques and abstract processes. Carrickfergus will always be there, you know, that view across from Ballyholme. That's why we live here because it is one of our favourite places."*



*"COVID I think taught us to appreciate our own surroundings an awful lot more, especially if you were here. I mean, you know, COVID was really rather nice, because you could just go out and walk along the shore and you've met people along the way."*

**History is something that came back a lot during our conversations**. Some participants are members of local historic societies, some love visiting museums on a regular basis and others often take part in heritage workshops and projects.



*"I love going old houses. You know, Castle Ward, Mount Stewart, if we go down south at all - all the history. I love them and the gardens."*

*"I must admit, I go to museums no matter where I go. [...] It's the stories and the history of it...and part of it's where I grew up. [...] Like going back in time. You know, how many people have sat here? What are they doing here? How did they feel, you know? I just love it!"*

Our sample of Ards and North Down audience members **enjoy staying local and are proud of the culture available on their doorstep**. They had lovely things to say about their local area:



*“Portaferry always kind of has, like, they always have an arts and culture background. [...] It's always shows or events or you know, like a thing with the kids. Yeah, the community put together. And that's going back right to my Mummy's day.”*

*“Anything that's on in Newtownards, I'd try and go, and support them. Mostly exhibitions and stuff like that, you know. I love getting out and about now that I'm retired.”*



*“We were at a concert two weeks ago, over in Bangor in the walled garden. And it's just one big sort of tent. And I'd say it was Eddi Reader. Oh, I went to see her years ago. And then when I'd seen it on, I booked the tickets right away. And again, was a good night out, like! So it is. As I get older, I like not going too far away, unless I'm out on holiday, you know?”*

Some of them occasionally travel to Belfast to see a play, go to a concert or visit a museum, but it can be difficult to travel outside of their local area for culture. **Most of those interviewed cited the lack of public transport**, with infrequent trains and buses. As there aren't many options, for them, going to Belfast must be planned in advance.



*“When you don't live in Belfast. It's that little bit harder. We have a group of friends and we would organise. My husband drives here down in the community transport, so he can have the minibus for the day.”*

*“I live out in Bangor. Belfast is a lot easier and it was easier to take it for granted. Now, I'm just like, yeah, it's not as easy to socialise. You got to do it. You have to really like pump yourself up to get out there. [...] Once you get a car it will be very easy to get back and forth to Belfast. So I'm looking forward to that. It will probably open that back up to us a little bit more, I hope.”*

## What do arts and culture mean to people's lives?



Similar to what we found in other council areas, **engagement with arts and culture starts at a young age, passed on from parents and other family members**. When we asked participants what their first memory of arts and culture was, most of them talked about the first event or art class they attended as a child. However, when asked more specifically about how people in their family households influenced their individual engagement, the majority never even considered the impact their upbringing had on their passion for arts and culture. For some of them, art was always present in their life in some shape or form, so much so that they didn't think of it as arts and culture anymore.

*“My mom sewed although didn't have a creative day job. You know, that was always her release. And that was always going on. There was always knitting, there was always sewing, those kinds of things. My dad's a winemaker. So again, you know, not a creative job. But that was always the release, creating things. [...] There was always DIY projects going on and yeah, wardrobes being painted and that kind of stuff. [...] So I suppose it was something that was never pushed on us.”*



*“No, the working class didn't. No, we wouldn't. I mean, things like the Opera House and so on were for the upper classes in those days, and the middle classes. My family couldn't have afforded it. [...] I don't ever remember being taken anywhere as a child that I would have considered cultural. [...] My parents went to the pictures. They also were musical, my mother and father met in a dance band. My father played the fiddle, and they needed a new pianist. And my mother auditioned for the part. [...] On Saturday nights, relatives came. And my mother played the piano or her sister played the piano. And we had to do a wee turn. Now, that was fine for my three brothers who were musical.”*

For many of our participants, engaging with **arts and culture allows them to take their minds off things, relax and cope with life's ups and downs**. Some talked about grief, others about learning difficulties that could be dealt with through art.



*“We discovered at seven she was very dyslexic. And so drawing was her first mode of communication. It wasn't reading, it was verbal. But outside of that, it was never about writing and reading, it was always about drawing and paint.”*

*“I find that it relaxes me. To be honest, especially the ones you don't need to think about, you just play them. And you don't need to think about anything else. It just clears your head, and it's relaxing. And that's how it makes me feel. I see it as a release.”*



*“My really close friend, she died actually a few years ago. Just before COVID, it all happened in February 2020. So I feel like, I guess when you go through something like that, it's just on my mind every day. So I guess being an artist, the only way I could kind of express that was through film. So I decided to make a film basically just reflecting the emotions of grief. [...] I found it quite therapeutic as well. Dealing with things, a kind of sense of loss, but also appreciating the beauty of the world and anger or feeling confused, those kind of emotions.”*

*“I suppose an awareness that there is another world out there, escapism as well. I mean, that's what I would get mostly from it. [...] But I think it's just the participation in another world. And total escapism, I can remember one of my first teaching practices was at a school called Blythe Street, which is way down the Sandy Row. And when you're in teaching practice, you know, they pop in at odd times to see you. And this lecture, it was a Friday afternoon, and I had the kids all sit on the floor, and I was reading some ridiculous story, but they were loving it. And afterwards, when he was speaking to me, he said, Really, we're in the middle of the Troubles in Sandy row, don't read them that rubbish. I was so angry. They escaped those troubles for 30 minutes. But you know, that's what arts and culture is. It's escaping from your reality, whatever your reality is. And let's face it, no matter how healthy we are or good our lives are. Everybody needs a bit of an escape.”*



Finally, when asked where they would be without arts and culture, **they had heart-warming things to say (and strong opinions!)**:

*“Without arts and culture, life would be dull, dead, without imagination, we have nothing. We would just live with the reality of life. And it's mundane and that's not nice.”*



*"I feel sorry for people who don't give it a try. Because you're missing so much."*

*"I don't think I would be here without it. Honestly. I don't think I would because I think it helps me connect with the greater human race or whatever. And it makes you feel less alone. And it connects you with other people as well."*

*"We'd be very boring. And I think that's the bottom line. You can go into a whole speech and say, or I'd be at this, this, this. It'd be boring. If you'd nothing to enjoy, nothing to go to? Or nothing to talk about? What are you living for? Are you living to work? Are you going to, like have a family and then that's it? And after that you have your kids and they're brought up to school, education, work? That's not enough."*

