Northern Ireland in 100 stories

This year, we are travelling to meet 100 people in all 11 council areas of Northern Ireland. Our 11th and final stop brought us to the Seamus Heaney Homeplace in the Mid Ulster District council area. We asked people from all over Mid Ulster to tell us about their experiences with arts and culture, and we learned a lot about them!

Cultural engagement in Mid Ulster District Council: Let's bust some myths and assumptions

People in Mid Ulster take part in lots of different arts and culture activities, including **music**, **theatre,** and **literature-based activities.**

The people of Mid Ulster love arts and culture for a range of different reasons, but a lot of them see it as an **escape from the stresses of day-to-day life.**

"I like music, I like to dance away or tap my leg, or a really good laugh. You're just embracing everything. You get lost in the moment, you get lost in in what you're doing, you're not thinking about anything else."

"It's so therapeutic for other people to come in here. You actually see people's shoulders going down, like they're releasing something."

People from Mid-Ulster reported having to **travel** outside their region to engage in arts and culture, whether that's for attending events or accessing professional creative opportunities. This involved travelling to Belfast or further afield in order to find the activities they wanted. Some expressed **dissatisfaction** with the **underfunding** of creative resources closer to home, and frustration at the **lack of support** for the arts locally, when compared with abroad.

"I would love if there was just more of it, and even closer to home. So like, the closest village to me is Moy. And there might be more there or there's probably a lot that I'm just not aware of. I would love more theatre shows to happen."

"When you just leave home and see how people run things, I'm like, we need more of a boost here in terms of like, marketing for shows advertised and getting the word out because there are brilliant productions that happen here in Ireland."

"[A local hall] it's sitting empty. There's plenty of places not being used…. There's plenty of available spaces. A woman's lodge in Magherafelt, they put on classes as well. I think it needs more funding available."

A lot of our interviewees told us that arts and culture involvement has a strong **positive impact on their mental health, happiness** and overall **wellbeing**. It helps them to feel **grounded** in themselves. In addition, a lot of our interviewees take a lot of **joy** and **meaning** from **sharing their creativity** with others, either in the **community or further afield.**

"Freedom, I think. Balance in my life, balance in myself as well. And I think it's given me... a bit of pride. You know, whenever you see people coming in here really stressed or like, having no confidence and then they see what they're able to produce? You know, it just makes me so happy. You know? Happiness really, that's what it's given me. Happiness."

"[On knitting hats for charity] so I knew a group in Tobermore were sending stuff right so I gave them to them… They were out in Ukraine… All the pictures of the children, and all the children were wearing my hats. It was so great, I see, that's all the wee children, they have my hats on"

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

Involvement in the arts for the people of Mid Ulster tended to start when they were **young**, and generally **in the home**. People were generally encouraged to get creative by a **family member**, and some of them have carried this behaviour forward **through the generations**, into how they raise their own children.

"Probably, through my father, teaching me to play music, because I do that too. Teaching me ways of expressing myself. Allowing me the freedom to do that. And I always sort of kept it up one way or the other."

"My dad was quite into music. He had a friend who used to come and he played the fiddle. He'd come up, always on Christmas Eve and sat down and played the fiddle."

"…my aunt. She was into that (knitting) And I was always a person who had to be doing something. See during the school holidays, I'm fed up. I'm bored. I want something to do. So she taught me how to knit and how to crochet. I've been doing it ever since."

"I'm not a big fan of 'I'll just stick them down and watch a DVD' because there's no interaction. They just sit there and half have seen it before anyway. So that sort of get involved get people up. It's a bit of activity. And a lot of them enjoy just the feel of it."

People we spoke to mentioned the arts as a way of **getting through tough times**, and **processing their emotions**. One respondent also mentioned that it can **bring people together** in the community, **despite their differences**. However, it was also expressed by several respondents that things like **cost and distance** keep them from getting as involved as they'd like in the arts. Again, it was raised by interviewees that they struggle to find arts activities close to home.

"Personally to me, it's not about flag waving. And it's not about, you know, triumphalism, and I know that in this particular event, and it's very much a community come together, enjoy the music, enjoy each other, have a bag of chips, and have a nice night."

“I use my time and my talent to help people and they appreciate that little that I had done for them.”

“I would love if there was just more of it, and even closer to home”.

“I think for the arts, it's very Belfast centred, very focused there. I don't think maybe there's that much in terms of here. ”

As has been the general consensus across all the regions we’ve visited so far, our interviewees from Mid Ulster expressed that life without arts would lack **meaning,** and wouldn’t be as **joyful.** Some mentioned they **wouldn’t be the same person** without access to the arts**.**

"I would know less about myself… it's made me more kind of more self-aware, more interested and better person.”

“I can't imagine a world without it.”

"Oh, life would have so much less. You do need those occasions for you just for the sheer enjoyment less than to a piece of music or watching someone who's a real expert in whatever it happens to be. So, that enriches life. It’s interaction between people.”

Northern Ireland in 100 stories is supported by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland. The Mid Ulster District Council area one-to-one interviews were held on 8th March 2023 in-person in the Seamus Heaney Homeplace, as well as online, with 12 participants.