



Creative Climate Action project final report, March 2025.

1. Executive Summary

The complex and existential threat of climate change means people struggle to feel their actions can make a difference. This effect is compounded for rural communities, who will bear the brunt of climate change but are often forgotten by decision-makers. 'We Built This City on Rock and Coal' empowers people across the west coast of Ireland by co-creating live shows and workshops that spark climate action, adapted to the concerns of each unique location.

The live shows are co-created using audience contributions and a cast of improvisers and scientists. These experts build comedy and theatre on the spot, creating space for facts and figures alongside affective responses to the issues. We partner with local musicians and performers, a dedicated arts producer and local community organisations. We then host sustainability and climate chats to make space for discussions about the show content, and spark or enhance local climate action initiatives.

2. Introduction/background

The complex and existential threat of climate change means people struggle to feel their actions can make a difference. This effect is compounded for rural communities, who will bear the brunt of climate change but are often forgotten by decision-makers. 'We Built This City on Rock and Coal' empowers people across the west coast of Ireland by co-creating live shows and workshops that spark climate action, adapted to the concerns of each unique location.

The live shows are co-created using audience contributions and a cast of improvisers and scientists. These experts build comedy on the spot, creating space for facts and figures alongside affective responses to the issues. We partner with local musicians and performers, a dedicated production team and local community arts venues. Before the show visits each location, we contact community organisations and connect them with biodiversity or storytelling citizen science projects, depending on their interests, to enable audience members to become part of the scientific process of studying climate change. We then host sustainability workshops, providing opportunities for communities to share best practice, to further empower the people who take part.

The run of events funded by the Creative Climate Action call in 2024 has seeded an ecosystem of empowerment and climate action in the coastal and rural communities visited. The events are hopeful and fun, making space for the full range of feelings about climate change while also inspiring and enabling climate action at all levels.

3. Outline of team and key participants

Each show was a collaboration between scientific researchers, improvisers on and off-stage, and the local audience in attendance. Our full team is as follows:

Co-directors: Jessamyn Fairfield, Katy Schutte

Production team: Elaine Donovan, Tonya Lenhart

Stage Improvisers: Luke Benson, Orla Mc Govern, Diane O'Connor, Mark Cantan, Paul Mone, Niall McKenna

Technical Improviser: Niceol Blue

Scientists: Gesche Kindermann, Fergus McAuliffe, Victoria Susin, Hannah Othen, Tom Curran, Yuanyuan Chen, Periklis Karamanis, Ciara Lynch, Sneha Unnikrishnan

Workshop facilitators: Diane O'Connor, Nathalie Pavone, Ceara Carney, Averil Rafferty

Total number of Creative Practitioners/Artists who received funding through this agreement: 14

4. Outcomes and outputs

We put on 19 shows during our Creative Climate Action call funding period, primarily in rural and coastal communities including 5 offshore islands. We collaborated with local partners who ranged from arts centres to community centres to sustainability centres, and also collaborated with the Wilderland Creative Climate Action project in Mayo. The show dates and locations are as follow:

30 May - Galway City 1pm Preview with Arts in Action @ University of Galway
 1 June - County Cork 8pm @ CECAS
 2 June - County Cork 11am @ CECAS
 8 June - Wild Nephin National Park 8pm @ Bangor Erris Parish Hall
 9 June - Wild Nephin National Park 12pm @ Ballycroy Visitors Centre
 10 June - Mulranny Arts Centre 8pm @ Mulranny Arts Centre
 12 June - Ionad Cois Loch, Donegal 8pm @ Dunlewey Centre
 13 June - Arranmore, Donegal 8pm @ Comharchumann Forbartha & Fostaíochta Árainn Mhór
 17 June - Rathlin Island 7pm @ Manor House
 18 June - Hollywood, Antrim 7pm @ Cleaver Restaurant
 21 June - Athenry, Galway 6:30pm @ Athenry Heritage Centre
 22 June - Interface Inagh, Galway 11am @ The Hatchery
 27 June - Inishbofin, Galway 8pm @ Inishbofin Community Centre
 16 August - Stradbally, Laois 6pm @ Electric Picnic, Global Green Stage
 17 August - Stradbally, Laois 5pm @ Electric Picnic, Global Green Stage
 20 September - Warrenpoint, Down 8.30pm @ Warrenpoint Town Hall
 16 October - Sligo 2pm @ Number 45
 17 October - Inis Oírr, Galway 8pm @ Áras Éanna Arts Centre
 19 October - Clare Island, Mayo 7pm @ Clare Island Community Centre

Additionally, we held 13 sustainability workshops in communities following these shows, in collaboration with The Sustainable Life School.

It is worth noting that our original proposal contained funding for 9 shows in rural communities, and the total number of shows more than doubled. This was achieved in the first part by partnership funding from the University of Galway for our rehearsal week and press preview, which took place on campus with venues provided free of charge. We also obtained funding for an additional 3 shows in County Galway thanks to the generous support of a Galway County Council Creative Ireland bursary, in advance of the June tour.

A further 6 of the above shows happened after our June tour, as a result of the positive press and reviews the project received. We put on the additional shows in collaboration with the Global Green stage at Electric Picnic, the Shifting Tides Creative Climate Action project, and the BiOrbic centre's Bioeconomy Ireland Week. Finally, we also performed a short taster of the We Built This City format at The Gathering, with other Creative Climate Action projects at the Aviva Stadium on October 21.

5. Public Engagement Outcomes

The deeper impact of our events in communities are explored in section 6. But we can report the following metrics for engagement with the shows, website, and online content after these 19 live shows and 13 workshops in rural communities:

Audience at Live Shows	~430 (60% self-identified as living rurally)
Instagram Accounts Reached	4,883 accounts reached (272 followers)
Vimeo Views	154
Website traffic	5,077 unique visits

Working with Lisa Regan PR, we had coverage for We Built This City from a variety of local radio stations and newspapers, as well as a feature piece in the Irish Times. The full list is as follows:

- Irish Times
- Futureproof (Newstalk)
- iRadio
- Midwest Radio
- Connaught Telegraph
- Connemara Bay FM
- Galway Bay FM
- Galway City Tribune
- Galway Daily
- This Is Galway
- Cork Independent
- Belfast Telegraph
- Utopia The Edit

6. Project Evaluation

'We Built This City on Rock and Coal' was evaluated by an external evaluator, Dr Claire Murray, using a series of qualitative and quantitative data. This included audience and artist surveys and artist interviews, combined with in situ and post-show reflections. A central connecting theme across this evaluation was to understand the impact on attitudes in relation to climate action and associated behaviour change.

To understand the starting perspectives of both the audience and artists in relation to how worried they are about climate change, we used pre-show surveys which could then be repeated after one event, for the audience, or after the full run, for the performers. These surveys explored climate change worry, as well as confidence talking to friends and family about climate change, and confidence taking action.

The audience shows a small decrease in their worry about climate change before and after the show, but there is a larger decrease in performer worry, presumably because they were present for a larger number of events. For both audiences and artists in WBTC, there is an increase in the number of people who feel more confident talking to friends or family about climate change after the show. The themes explored by the

artists are often built on situations relating to interactions around climate change between family and friends, which may have increased the audience's awareness of their own similar interactions.

Moving beyond discussing climate change, we wanted to understand whether the audiences or the artists feel like they can take action to mitigate climate change. Whilst this is not itself a direct measure of behaviour change, it is one way of gaining insights into if the show might have affected people's inclination to take action directly after the show. For the audience, there was a small shift upwards in confidence that they could take action to mitigate climate change. However, for the artists there is a clear shift upwards that began after their first show and continued to rise through the tour. Many artists reported in the post-show interviews that the engagement with the scientists and with Sustainable Life School had subsequently influenced their behaviour, compounded by conversations with communities in rural Ireland. This was particularly evident through the fact that after the show run, many of them had committed or recommitted to changing their behaviour as climate action. The post-show workshops by the Sustainable Life School also initiated small behaviour changes in the communities we visited, where they shared best practice and experiences from other communities as well as sharing practical actions and interventions. This format combining the show and the workshop sparked conversations between the audience and the artists, giving people the space to connect and talk about climate action together.

7. Images

Provide a selection of high-quality images (with all permissions in place) and/or digital video content for promotional purposes by the Creative Ireland Programme Office



8. Additional Findings

a. Learnings from the internal project team

Much of the project worked as originally envisioned: the shows were a great success, the workshops followed up with deep engagement of attendees, and in fact as the

project progressed, we found ourselves sharing knowledge between communities via the workshops, acting as connectors for local best practice instead of sharing from a central source. We also received great press and reviews for the shows, which resulted in further event opportunities as the year progressed.

In discussions with potential partners at the start of the project, there was some concern expressed that we might end up with "an audience of already convinced people". Based on our activity in 2024, we can definitively say that this was not the case, and in fact the cast had many interactions both during shows and before/after in communities with people who were sceptical of the 'climate change agenda'. This was a relatively small proportion of audience members, but the fact that these people came to our events and felt comfortable expressing their opinions and engaging in dialogue demonstrated the validity of the methodology.

At the start of the project, our partnerships with the Sustainable Life School for workshops and the University of Galway, iCRAG and BiOrbic research centres for scientific involvement, were established and intended to weave into all events. However, we also ended up working with the following partners who helped shape local events and enabled us to expand the original run of shows:

- Centre for Climate, Biodiversity and Sustainability (CECAS) in West Cork
- Interface Inagh "where art meets science" in Connemara
- Áras Éanna on Inis Oírr
- Comharchumann Forbartha & Fostaíochta Árainn Mhór
- Global Green Stage at Electric Picnic
- Shifting Tides Creative Climate Action project in Carlingford Lough
- Wilderland Creative Climate Action project in Wild Nephin National Park

Our key moment of impact was our final show, on Clare Island. We had chosen coastal communities to work with because they are more vulnerable to sea level rise and intensifying storms as a result of climate change, despite having contributed less to the carbon emissions that caused it. We learned hours before our show that, due to Storm Ashley, if we stayed on the island to do the event, we would be stranded on the island for at least an extra day because all ferries were being cancelled due to the storm. Some of our cast had to go home, but enough people could stay that we were able to do the show and workshop that evening, with half the audience staying for the workshop and 3 people inviting us to their homes the next day for further discussion about the issues raised. Instead of being perceived as outsiders, the fact that we stayed through a storm helped us gain credibility with the local community, and we learned a lot about local actions for sustainability which we have captured in this video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljNW_WHtmMg

b. Creative Reflections

The show was entirely shaped by the audience's perspectives on climate change and climate action, but these perspectives were not prescriptive nor were they extensive. This created space for artists to openly explore their own interpretations of these prompts, with all artists reporting in the evaluation interviews that they did not feel that their creative process was limited by these perspectives.

Artists created improv theatre individually and/or collectively in response to audience responses to three questions relating to climate change, specifically:

1. What have you appreciated about the outdoors recently?
2. What has you worried about climate change?
3. What makes climate change hard for you to talk about?

The repeat of prompts proved to be both a challenge and a creative opportunity. Initially the artists felt this repetition was a little frustrating, but they then chose to use these prompts as an opportunity to directly interact with the audience to get more information. They also explored new approaches for the prompts, which opened up small chances to further develop their creative and improvisation skills.

The travelling nature of the show and the prompts meant that many of the improvised scenes were directly informed by the communities and the locations the artists visited. Direct feedback from the artists in the post-interviews revealed that they wanted more time in the communities to connect and engage before the show started, which is something we are taking on board for our 2025 tour. The artists also needed to interact with scientists as part of the show, engaging with their input and creating space for their contributions. Some artists also supported the scientists by training them in improvisation, delivering sustainability workshops or recording media to promote the show.

Feedback from the performers was collected via a series of short pre-, post first show- and post-show run-surveys reflecting on the use of improvisation in climate change communication and how the artists felt about climate change. All artists also participated in an hour-long interview exploring their role in the project and how the project may have influenced their behaviour. All of these qualitative and quantitative evaluation mechanisms were formally approved by the University of Galway Research Ethics Committee, and some of this feedback will be included in academic paper(s) currently in preparation.

A key finding was that the majority of artists improved or renewed their commitment to reduce their carbon footprint after the show. A number of artists also positively highlighted the opportunity to explore improv for a longer period of time, with the act of professional development in improv from other artists on the team repeatedly being mentioned and celebrated.

9. Conclusion.

'We Built This City on Rock and Coal', despite dealing with the topic of climate change and societal adaptation, is a project about hope. We believe in hopepunk, the idea that communal resistance in the face of apocalypse is essential, and we believe that coastal places, which will bear the brunt of climate change but did the least to cause it, should have their voices heard. In our events we have tried to listen and connect with the communities we visited and adapt in response to their needs (and not our own perceptions of their needs). There have been measurable markers of the impact this project has had on local self-efficacy around climate change, but there have been immeasurable impacts as well, from the cast joining a local community for a sea swim, or audience members discussing the challenges of modernizing sheep farming in a sustainability chat after a show. The listening inherent in our format was both an artistic choice and an engagement necessity, and it made space for mutual flourishing.

We delivered more than double the original number of shows planned, and obtained nearly double the original Creative Climate Action grant in partnership funding. In addition, the project team has obtained funding from Research Ireland for a 2025 run of shows covering new locations, which will also support the development of a policy brief using the data we have collected from rural communities. We have multiple research articles in progress about the impact of this interdisciplinary community engagement work on rural climate action, and as these are published we will make them available on our website:

<http://www.webuiltthiscity.ie>