



# LIVING LEGENDS

KEY LEARNING FROM A CROSS-BORDER  
CULTURAL YOUTH EXCHANGE



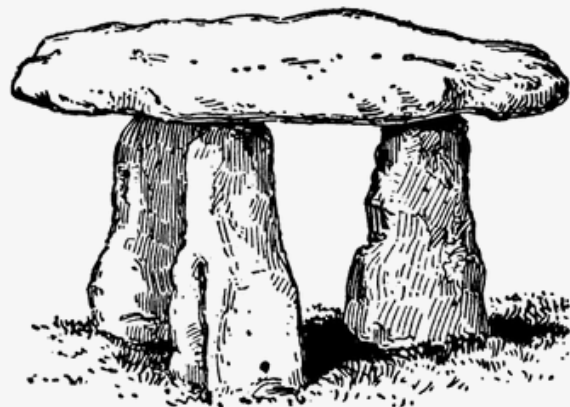
PREPARED BY

MARIA O'DWYER  
FRAMEWORK RESEARCH

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# GOOD TO KNOW BEFORE READING THE REPORT

- When asked by the researcher during the first meeting how they would like to be referred to in the report or any other *Living Legends* outputs, the response varied between ‘young people’, ‘youth’ or ‘adolescents’. Accordingly, those three terms are used interchangeably throughout this report, along with ‘project participants’. There was consensus among the group that ‘teenager’ isn’t a preferred term: ‘For some reason, you only picture a really young like 13 year old when you hear that’.
- Generally in a research report, quotes and citations would have some demographic indicator in terms of age or gender (male, 15 etc.) However, in light of the fact that one of the two participating youth groups is single sex and the other is mixed, any specific indicator of gender (including ‘them’) would compromise anonymity. Similarly, while one of the absolute joys of accompanying the young people was the nuanced use of language and the inherent colloquialisms, citing those expressions (lyrically beautiful as they are) would indicate place of origin, and again compromise the promise and practice of anonymity. Quotes used throughout the report are therefore unattributed, other than it came from one of the 23 young people participating in the *Living Legends* project.
- The evaluator is referred to as the researcher throughout the report. ‘Evaluator’ feels too summative in the context of the *Living Legends* project, as the research was an iterative process. Furthermore, the young people connected with ‘researcher’ as both a term and a role, liking in particular its connotations of the researcher being ‘professionally noseey’ or a ‘spy’ (terms used during introductions at the first meeting in Doolin).



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# LIVING LEGENDS – EVALUATION REPORT

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The *Living Legends* project is a cross-border creative youth project uniting 23 young people from Limerick (Republic of Ireland) and Belfast (Northern Ireland). Over the course of 2025, these 15- to 17-year-olds participated in thematic workshops in their respective hometowns and three residential exchanges (in Co. Clare, Co. Antrim and Co. Louth) where they shared stories, explored folklore and local myths, and collaboratively created new 'living legends' through art, writing and performance. This evaluation report summarises the project's implementation, the voices and experiences of the young participants, and the outcomes achieved against its objectives. It also captures key learnings and provides recommendations for future delivery.

## KEY FINDINGS

The project successfully fostered new friendships and understanding between young people from different cultural communities. Participants reported increased confidence in expressing themselves and greater empathy towards others. By the final residential, youth who were initially 'nervous' or unsure became comfortable performing original stories on stage for their peers. *Cross-border awareness and tolerance grew visibly*: one young person noted, *'This is a great opportunity to meet people you would never normally meet'*. Survey data showed that almost all participants (95%) were *'curious to learn about people with different backgrounds'* from the outset, and the project provided a safe space to act on this curiosity. Participants overwhelmingly enjoyed listening to each other's stories (87% said 'that sounds like me!'), reflecting the strong peer connections formed. Parents also observed positive changes – one parent remarked that their child came back *'more self-assured, more confident... Hopefully now [they] will take that confidence back to school and life'*.

## PROJECT WINS

*Living Legends* met and exceeded its key objectives. It dismantled barriers to arts participation by engaging marginalised young people in storytelling, theatre and creative writing activities. Through the Narrative 4 story exchange model and its related activities, it united youth from North and South in a shared creative journey rooted in empathy and fun. Participants demonstrated increased confidence and well-being, describing feeling 'heard' and valued in the group. Instances of (subconscious) prejudice or 'othering' were replaced by genuine friendships. By the second residential, the warmth among the group was evident in hugs, jokes and a What's App group connecting them between meetups. The participants' creativity flourished, resulting in a final showcase of original stories (from funny skits about internet culture to poignant tales of local folklore) performed proudly on a festival stage.

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## METHODOLOGY

The evaluation adopted a flexible, youth-centred approach aligned with Creative Ireland's youth participation guidelines. The researcher joined all residential trips as a participant-observer, blending into activities rather than conducting formal interviews. This 'accompaniment' method allowed young people to share feedback organically – *'their input was voluntary and unforced, likely yielding more genuine insights than a formal interview setting would'*. Complementary methods included informal vox-pop interviews, creative reflection journals and group discussions, all guided by the Lundy Model principles of Space, Voice, Audience and Influence. Every young person gave informed consent to participate, with assurances of anonymity and the option to opt out at any time. This ethical, light-touch approach ensured that evaluation was done *with* young people, not *to* them, thereby minimising burden and building trust.

## OUTCOMES & IMPACT

The *Living Legends* project had a significant positive impact on participants' social and personal development. It empowered the youth who participated to creatively raise their voices - many participants who started out shy ended up writing poems, performing skits or enthusiastically exchanging personal stories. Confidence gains were noted both by the young people themselves and adult observers. Importantly, the project succeeded in its cross-community mission: stereotypes were broken down as youth from Belfast and Limerick discovered common ground (for example, early icebreakers playfully tackled accents and assumptions of who might be 'posh', helping to diminish any initial biases). Evidence of increased empathy and understanding abounds in their reflections and stories. Participants described the story exchange as *'heart-warming'* and *'inspirational'*, noting how it revealed *'so many different issues'* and perspectives among their peers. The project also yielded meaningful creative accomplishments - including the creation of a published anthology of their writings and a final performance - which gives the young people involved a tangible sense of achievement and pride.



## CHALLENGES

Notwithstanding its successes, *Living Legends* faced some challenges that offer lessons for future projects. Recruitment proved tricky; the gender balance skewed roughly 3:1 female to male and, in hindsight, organisers felt an interview-based selection might have ensured more gender balance. Logistically, running three residencies with a large group was complex; staff noted the workload and would recommend dedicated project support staff in the future. Minor issues like uncomfortable dorm beds or managing phone usage (participants agreed on 'no phones' during sessions as part of a group charter) required on-the-spot adaptation. Additionally, not all artistic workshop content resonated with the participants - facilitators and the project team learned that young people prefer hands-on doing over lengthy folklore sessions. Some venues worked better than others: an open, adventure-oriented setting (such as the coastal venue in Antrim) was more conducive to team-building than a confined centre. These experiences generated valuable learning, discussed later in this report.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS

Future iterations of cross-border youth arts projects should start recruitment early and consider targeted outreach to ensure diversity (including a mixed group from both cities). Investing in logistics support is vital - having a dedicated project support worker to manage travel, accommodation and artist scheduling would free up youth workers and the project team to focus on engagement. Projects should embrace youth input at every stage: from choosing activities to co-creating group agreements. The success of *Living Legends*' informal, youth-led moments suggests keeping schedules flexible to allow organic bonding (for instance, the unstructured game time and banter led by youth leaders proved immensely valuable). Facilitation should lean into interactivity - as one organiser reflected, don't expect young people to *'instantly love the arts or folklore'*; instead, the group enjoyed the 'doing' a lot more than the listening. Finally, adequate downtime, good food (never underestimate the power of snacks!) and fun icebreakers go a long way in maintaining energy and participation levels.

In essence, *Living Legends* demonstrated how a thoughtfully designed shared-island youth initiative can spark creativity, build empathy and leave lasting personal and social impacts. This report now turns to a more detailed account of the project's context, methods, participant experiences and the evidence underpinning these findings.

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*I swear to God, I am so happy now that I actually did this. I talked myself into taking part and now I think it turned out to be the best decision I could ever have made.*

”

# INTRODUCTION

“ I love that idea of giving us a voice. You know I have a really loud one, right? ”

*Living Legends* was a pilot project under Creative Ireland's 'Creative Youth on a Shared Island' initiative, envisioned as a cultural bridge between youth in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Led by Narrative 4 (N4) - an international non-profit known for its story exchange methodology - in partnership with Festival in a Van and the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, the project's mission was to harness the humanising power of storytelling to break down barriers among young people. Over several months in 2025, a group of 23 adolescents (aged approximately 15 - 17) from Limerick City and Belfast City came together to share stories, explore myths and folklore and co-create new narratives reflecting their experiences. These participants were diverse in background - including youth from migrant families, Protestant and Catholic backgrounds and disadvantaged communities - and all were newcomers to a project of this nature. Notably, the cohort was about two-thirds female and one-third male/non-binary.



This evaluation report provides a comprehensive review of *Living Legends* from inception to completion. It begins by outlining the methodology used to evaluate the project, which was deliberately youth-centric and qualitative in nature. The section on project overview describes the project timeline, key activities, and the Narrative 4 model of engagement that underpinned the work. The core of the report focuses on participant voice and experience, drawing on quotes, creative outputs and survey findings to understand how the young people perceived and were affected by participation in the project. This is complemented by observational insights structured by each residential exchange (Doolin, Antrim and Carlingford), offering a narrative of the group's evolution over time. The **Outcomes and Impact** section then assesses the extent to which *Living Legends* met its stated objectives - such as fostering cross-border friendships, building confidence, and reducing biases - citing evidence from the project. Subsequently, **Challenges and Learning** are discussed, incorporating feedback from organisers and facilitators (including an interview with N4 staff leads) to reflectively appraise what could be improved. Finally, the report presents **Recommendations** to guide future youth arts exchanges on the island.

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## CONTEXT

The idea for *Living Legends* was developed in response to a funding call aiming to promote people-to-people connections on a shared island. The project design was in many ways tailored to fit the objectives of this funding opportunity. It built on Narrative 4's expertise in using personal storytelling to cultivate empathy. The Narrative 4 story exchange approach - in which participants pair up, share personal stories, and then retell each other's stories to the group - was a cornerstone of the project. This approach has a track record of reducing othering by enabling participants to literally see the world through someone else's story. *Living Legends* expanded that model with an arts and folklore twist: young people explored ancient myths (from the Aran Islands on Ireland's west coast to the Giant's Causeway in the North) and then created contemporary stories and mini-performances inspired by their own lives and the legends of these landscapes. The title 'Living Legends' reflects the aim to have young people weave their own lived experiences into new legends, effectively updating folklore with their voices and forging a shared cross-border narrative.

## PARTICIPANTS

*Living Legends* saw the coming together of two young people - one in Limerick, one in Belfast - each supported by a project team. The Belfast contingent, R City, was a pre-existing young people club (through NI Young people Forum's network) with a dedicated Youth Work Leader, whereas the Limerick group was newly convened for this project, with (non-youth work) N4 staff in the project lead and support role. This difference meant the young people from Belfast knew one another beforehand, while the Limerick participants were mainly meeting peers from their own city for the first time during the project's launch.

From the outset, the overarching project aim was to develop a relationship between two geographically and culturally different groups, break down barriers and diminish the 'othering' that can exist between communities North and South. The project's objectives, as stated in the funding application, included: empowering marginalised young people through creative expression, uniting them via shared experiences, building their confidence and mental well-being, reducing prejudice through storytelling, and showcasing their creativity to wider audiences. These goals provided a blueprint for both project activities and evaluation metrics.

## STRUCTURE

*Living Legends* unfolded in phases. In spring 2025, preliminary workshops ('at-home sessions') were held separately in each city to introduce participants to Narrative 4 and get them thinking about local folklore and personal stories. The first big meet-up was **Residential 1 in Doolin, Co. Clare (April 2025)** - chosen for its proximity to the mythical Aran Islands. A few months later, **Residential 2 in Co. Antrim (July 2025)** brought the group together again, this time in Northern Ireland's rugged coastal landscape. The journey culminated with **Residential 3 in Carlingford, Co. Louth (late July 2025)**, a border region, where the young people presented their creative work via final showcase. Between these residencies, the participants kept in touch (social media) and attended locally run creative workshops designed as part of the *Living Legends* project (i.e. poetry, theatre, fashion/costume making) to continue developing their stories. By design, each residential had a mix of experiential outings (i.e. a boat trip to Inis Mór, a Giant's Causeway tour), professional artist sessions (performances and workshops by storytellers, poets, theatre-makers), and interactive storytelling activities (Narrative 4 exchanges, group games, and creative writing exercises). This blend was specifically curated to socio-culturally inspire the young people, as well as giving them plenty of time to bond as one group.

The following sections delve deeper into how the evaluation was conducted and what it revealed about the *Living Legends* experience and its impact. Throughout, the emphasis is on authentic voices - letting the young participants' words and creations narrate the story of the project.

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# METHODOLOGY

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Do you actually...for real now...sleep with a pen and a notebook in your hand? I'm half expecting to see you in the jacks scribbling away.”

## **TAKING A YOUTH-CENTRED, QUALITATIVE APPROACH**

The evaluation of *Living Legends* was deliberately designed to be flexible and youth-centred, in line with best practices for creative young people projects and the ethos of the project itself. Rather than impose a heavy survey or testing regime, the researcher prioritised methods that would feel natural and engaging to the young participants. A cornerstone of this approach was the **accompaniment method** - the researcher attended all three residencies as a *participant-observer*, essentially embedding herself in the group. This meant being part of activities, meals, walks etc. and being present as an informal listener. By forgoing a clipboard (both literally and figuratively), the researcher aimed to minimise the observer effect and avoid making the young people feel under surveillance. As one participant quipped upon meeting the researcher; 'Are you serious? Are you just going to... like just follow us around? Like we don't have to answer any questions if we don't want to? That's unreal. I want your job.' This light-hearted exchange reflected the subtle evaluative tone - the young people understood the researcher was there to experience with them, not interrogate them, which helped build trust.

In practice, the researcher's presence was as an external adult ally rather than an authority figure. She took on the role of 'professionally nosey' (a term used during initial meeting with the group, to contextualise research) - observing keenly, chatting casually, and only probing for reflections when the moment felt right. This low-intrusion observation approach aligns with qualitative techniques that capture participants' genuine lived experiences. For example, instead of scheduling formal interviews, the researcher might ask a quick open question during the walk to lunch ('what has surprised you so far on this trip?') or do a *vox pop*-style snippet interview just before the group headed off for downtime. These interactions were brief, voluntary, and often one-on-one or in small clusters, which allowed the young people to share honest impressions on the spot. Many of the most insightful comments were gathered during such unscripted moments, during loading for a bus ride or during a story circle, yielding candid youth perspectives that a formal Q&A might have missed.

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## LUNDY'S MODEL OF PARTICIPATION

Underpinning the methodology agreed with the project leads was an explicit commitment to young people voice and agency, guided by the Lundy Model of Participation (Space, Voice, Audience and Influence). Each element of Lundy's framework was considered in how feedback was gathered:

**Space:** Both the project leads and researcher sought to create safe, young people-friendly space and opportunities for expression. Subsequently, feedback opportunities happened in comfortable settings - a shared meal, a bus seat conversation, a walk outdoors. During residential, time was set aside for group reflection in relaxed environments (like sitting in a circle) to encourage openness. The participants also had dedicated creative space in the form of specially branded *Living Legends* journals and notebooks to express their thoughts without pressure.

**Audience:** The young people knew their voices were being heard. The project team and researcher actively listened and took their views seriously. By positioning herself not as an examiner but as an interested audience, the researcher validated even the quieter voices. For example, if a participant shared an idea in a small group, the project leads might later bring it up in a larger discussion (anonymously) to show that *'what you said really stayed with us and is informing how we look at things.'* Moreover, the young people were aware that their feedback would go into a report read by organisers and funders, giving them a real audience beyond the room.

**Voice:** Young people were encouraged to speak in their own words and mediums. The researcher often used accessible, playful prompts to elicit feedback, such as asking the group to invent or explain slang or share funny cross-border lingo they'd picked up, which eased them into talking about cultural exchange. The emphasis was on *how they wanted* to communicate. Some chose writing, some preferred talking; a few even doodled their feelings. All forms were welcome, echoing the no-judgment ethos of *Living Legends*.

**Influence:** Importantly, participant input was not just collected but used. Their insights actively shaped the evaluation findings and even real-time adjustments. For instance, when participants expressed fatigue or frustration with an activity, the project team and researcher noted this and adapted subsequent plans (i.e. adding more free time or adjusting an exercise. In the researcher's case, holding off on a post project on-line survey). The promise to the young people was that their opinions mattered. This approach mirrors Lundy's *Influence* pillar by ensuring the evaluation wasn't just about listening, but also about responding and valuing their contributions.



“Will you take out that word I used earlier when you asked for my opinion [on earlier exercise]? I changed my mind. That isn't what I want to say so take it out, will you?”

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND MEASUREMENT

A deliberate decision was made to prioritise youth perspectives over adult interviews in data collection. While adult stakeholders (facilitators, artists, youth leaders) provided valuable context through informal chats, some formal interviews and the project's documentation, the researcher spent the bulk of her time and effort engaging directly with the young participants. This meant, for example, that instead of pulling aside the professional storyteller for a long interview about workshop outcomes, the researcher observed how the *young people* reacted during the workshop and later asked *them* what they thought of it. This pivot ensured that limited time on residential was used to 'learn from the learners', aligning with Creative Ireland's youth-focused ethos that views children and teens as the key experts on a young people project's success. It also prevented the evaluation process from overshadowing or interrupting the experience for participants. Every hour spent on a formal adult interview would have been an hour away from the young people; the project team and researcher consciously avoided that trade-off.

To measure changes and outcomes without relying solely on traditional surveys, the evaluation incorporated **creative tools** recommended by the Creative Ireland Creative Young people (CICY) Evaluation Guidelines. The CICY guidelines advocate for reducing long surveys and using more engaging, arts-based evaluation methods. For *Living Legends*, this translated into activities like:

- A **pre-project online survey** (via SurveyMonkey) that captured baseline self-assessments of confidence, creativity, and openness (more on this in the Participant Voice section).
- A fun written prompt given at the start: *'Imagine a story about a group of young people from two different parts of Ireland meeting for the first time... what do you think will happen?'*. This **'imagined stories'** exercise invited participants to write or draw their expectations. It served two purposes: an icebreaker and an initial gauge of their mindset about the cross-border exchange. Young people were assured that there was no right or wrong way to do it - they could be as fantastical or realistic as they liked, and remain anonymous if they wished. This prompt tapped into their creativity while subtly revealing hopes or anxieties they had about the project (for example, whether they expected conflict, friendship, adventure, etc.).
- During the second residential (midway point), participants were given a **reflective journal** booklet to fill out at their own pace. This journal included prompts such as *'What has been your favourite activity so far and why?'*, *'One new thing you learned about someone else during the story exchange'*, *'Describe a moment that made you smile in Living Legends'*, and even creative metaphors such as *'If this project was a colour, what would it be and why?'*. The tone of the journal was colourful and encouraging - *'be honest, be creative, and make it yours!'* - making it clear this was not a test. Many responded with frank reflections, drawings, and one-word check-ins (i.e. one wrote the experience so far was 'awesome' next to a doodle of a smiley face, while another circled an emoji for '😄 Excited' when asked how they felt being part of *Living Legends*).
- Throughout the project, the researcher conducted **brief vox pop interviews**. These were very short (1-2 minutes) and often captured in the moment, such as asking a participant right after an activity, *'if you had to sum up that workshop in one word or one sentence, what would you say?'* These vox pops, inspired by youth work techniques, made feedback feel like a casual part of the activities. In fact, the Narrative 4 Director conducted one-to-one video interviews with each willing participant during the final residential, which doubled as both an activity and data collection. Consistent themes emerged in those videos (i.e. everyone emphasised how they *'had no idea what to expect at first but ended up really enjoying it'* and how making new friends was the highlight).

Crucially, ethical safeguards were in place. A consent form was presented and signed by all participants at the start of the project. This form explained in plain language why the evaluation was happening, assured anonymity, and emphasised that participation was voluntary. It explicitly told the young people they could skip any question or stop participating in feedback activities at any time with no consequences. They also could choose whether their creative outputs (stories, artwork, quotes, voice recordings) could be used in reports or publications and even then, everything would be anonymised. By clarifying these points, the evaluation strove to uphold the principle that evaluation should be done **with young people, not to them**. Indeed, several participants opted to share deeply personal stories during exchanges only because they trusted the space and knew their disclosures would be respected and kept within the group.

The researcher and project team also took care to avoid evaluation fatigue. The young participants were not over-saturated with lengthy questionnaires; instead, feedback was woven into the fabric of the project in creative ways (games, art, conversation). No one was forced to speak in a group if they didn't want to. For example, during a group debrief if someone was quiet, that was okay - later they might choose to write a thought in their journal or have a one-on-one chat. This gentle approach paid off in the authenticity of responses. One participant later confided that they *'hate when someone says 'sit down there and tell me all about this or that.' You sit there and you don't know what to say... it's like some kind of test'*. As a result, when it came time to formally evaluate outcomes, there was a rich tapestry of qualitative data: observation notes capturing how participants interacted and grew over time, dozens of direct quotes from participants, creative artifacts (writings, drawings) and some survey metrics for balance.

“  
Every teenager should get an opportunity to be part of something like this. It's something they'll always remember. It's a gift they will keep with them' (parent)  
”

Fundamentally, the evaluation methodology mirrored the *Living Legends* project's own values - it was creative, young people-driven and respectful. By accompanying the young people on their journey rather than examining them from outside, the researcher was able to gather authentic insights that underpin this report's findings. This approach also models good practice for young people evaluations, aligning with national guidelines that call for innovative, participatory and 'light-touch' methods when working with young people. The next section provides an overview of the project itself; the timeline of activities and the Narrative 4 model that shaped this unique cross-border exchange.



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# PROJECT OVERVIEW

## PLACES AND SPACES

The *Living Legends* project unfolded over roughly six months from March to September 2025, with three cornerstone residential exchanges and ongoing local workshops in between:

### **Residential 1: Doolin, Co. Clare (April 21–23, 2025).**

This was the first time the Limerick and Belfast groups met in person as a combined cohort. The choice of Doolin, a village on Ireland's west coast, was significant as it's a gateway to the Aran Islands, known for their rich folklore. Over three days, the young people were introduced to each other and to the concept of linking landscape, mythology, and personal story. A highlight was a trip to Inis Mór (one of the Aran Islands), where a storyteller (Rab, an artist-in-residence) immersed them in ancient legends tied to that landscape. The group also participated in a Narrative 4 story exchange for the first time, learning how to share and retell each other's personal stories. Evenings featured creative activities – for example, on the first night, Rab performed tales (including a humorous 'Pussycat' story) on the Festival in a Van mobile stage, which helped break the ice. The days in Doolin were packed with new experiences, and naturally there was some initial shyness (especially as the Belfast teens already knew each other but the Limerick teens were a newly formed group). By the end of that weekend, the foundations for a single, cohesive group were laid: they had inside jokes, a project hoodie (each received a branded project hoodie upon arrival, which helped build a sense of identity from the start), and even a collaboratively crafted *Living Legends* Charter, a set of ground rules/values they all agreed on for how to treat each other. This charter included principles like 'Be present (no phones during sessions)', 'No judgment', 'Be respectful', 'Active listening', and 'Confidentiality'. It would later serve as a touchstone for the group's culture.

### **Residential 2: Ballintoy, Co. Antrim (July 1–4, 2025).**

After a couple of months apart - during which the participants kept in touch via a WhatsApp group and exchanged postcards - the next meet-up was in Northern Ireland's Antrim coast. The location, near the Giant's Causeway, offered another legendary landscape to explore, aligning with the project's theme of mythic places. The dynamic upon reunion was notably warmer and more relaxed: young greeted each other with hugs and laughter upon arrival, evidence of the friendships sparked in Doolin. The agenda for this four-day exchange balanced creative workshops, outdoor adventure, and cultural experiences:

They visited the Giant's Causeway, marvelling at the basalt columns and hearing the legend of Finn McCool which added a '*magical touch*' to the scenery.

A 'Festival in a Van' session on the first evening featured live performances by a theatre-maker and a musician (Harry Hennessy and Arthur Greene). Instead of passively watching, the group then had a conversation circle with these artists, discussing themes of identity and change. At one point the singer sang lyrics '*the law will protect you or the law will hurt you*', which struck a chord with the teens - many nodded and reacted with thumbs up, indicating a resonance perhaps with their own experiences of (in)justice. This exemplified how curated performances were used as springboards for dialogue.

A Narrative 4 story exchange was also conducted, building on the skills from Residential 1. To prepare, participants were given prompts ahead of time (the themes agreed by group consensus were '*A time in my life when I realised community mattered*' and '*a moment that shaped me into who I am today*'). They were reminded to only share what they were comfortable sharing - a guideline phrased as '*Don't reveal anything you wouldn't be ok with your neighbours knowing*', subtly underscoring confidentiality. The story exchange in Antrim was a profound experience; pairs of young people swapped personal stories within those themes and then bravely narrated each other's story to the group. Those sessions were lively and heartfelt, with topics coming up like the importance of young people clubs, family support, dealing with loss (one story touched on community coming together for a funeral), feeling 'different' in one's community, and how friends can be a lifeline. After the circle, when each participant spoke one word to capture their feeling, responses ranged across '*grateful, confused, insightful, special, fun, energising, tired...*' – a mix that reflected how powerful yet emotionally taxing the exchange could be. Notably, some described the process as '*harder than I thought*' but also '*inspirational*'.

Professional artists engaged the group in hands-on workshops in Antrim. For example, Dafe Orugbo, a multidisciplinary artist and hip-hop performer, ran a creative session focused on storytelling. This included script-writing and storyboarding: participants were prompted to collaboratively write tiny plays or sketches. The prompts were playful and imaginative (i.e., 'shrinking to the size of an ant' or encountering magical scenarios on a journey). Despite some initial struggle with process, the young people unleashed their creativity and came up with short scripts touching on everything from murder mysteries and teen drama to social media satire and folklore-inspired fantasy. The workshop ended with the teens performing these mini-plays in pairs for their peers. One pair chose not to present their piece, which was respected - an example of honouring young people choice. For most, however, presenting original material was a huge leap in confidence from where they started. As observed in the evaluation notes, *'while they struggled with the process, they really enjoyed the outcomes. A common theme throughout the entire Living Legends project.'* In other words, pushing through a challenging creative exercise led to a real sense of accomplishment.



There was also time set aside for fun and bonding, such as evening beach activities and a campfire night. The Belfast youth leader led games like a 'spin the wheel' Q&A game, which injected a lot of laughter. Questions ranged from zany hypotheticals (*'Would you rather have fingers for toes or toes for fingers?'*) to aspirational ones (*'Who will be the most famous person in this room?'*). If someone skipped a question, a playful forfeit awaited (like performing a dance or drinking a bizarre concoction), which the group found hilarious. Another activity was 'Rose, Bud, Thorn' where each person shared something going well in their life (Rose), something they're looking forward to or trying to grow (Bud), and something challenging them (Thorn). This simple exercise revealed the range of life experiences in the group - responses varied from light-hearted (*'enjoyed good pizza tonight', 'more games'*) to deeply personal (*'having a house again after being homeless', 'failed every summer exam'*). Hearing these varied snippets helped the young people appreciate each other's backgrounds and generated empathy.

By the end of Residential 2, the group's cohesion was demonstrably stronger. They revisited their *Living Legends* Charter and everyone reaffirmed it, especially the respect and no-judgment clauses. One participant openly said, *'I feel really comfortable here now, yeah. I know everyone... and the leaders are dead sound. Kind of like teachers but not like teachers, you know?'* This quote captures the atmosphere: supportive adults were present but interacted in a friendly, non-authoritarian way, which the young people appreciated. The project indeed struck a balance between structure and relatability, contributing to the positive group culture.



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### **Residential 3: Carlingford Adventure Centre, Co. Louth (July 29–31, 2025).**

The final residential was shorter (3 days) and framed as the culminating celebration. It took place in Carlingford, a scenic town in the border county of Louth, symbolically midway between Belfast and Limerick. This trip focused on polishing the creative outputs and reflecting on the journey. Unfortunately, attendance dipped slightly - 15 of the 23 young people attended - due to some being away on family holidays and instances of Covid. Nonetheless, those present remained deeply engaged. Key activities included:

Adventure and team-building: One notable exercise was a silent self-organisation game. The group had to line up or arrange themselves by criteria (i.e. by age, by zodiac sign etc.) without speaking. This tested their non-verbal communication and cooperation. Notably, a very experienced facilitator led this with a firmer tone and clear instructions, and the young people responded accordingly. This served as a reminder that while flexibility is critical in young people projects, structure is also valuable, especially as the group matured. It showed how far they had come in functioning as a team.

As previously mentioned, the Narrative 4 Ireland Director conducted one-to-one interviews on camera with each young person. By this stage, the participants spoke confidently about their experiences. Common reflections included: initially having *'no idea what to expect'* but being *'surprised by how much [they] enjoyed it'*; learning that they could step out of their comfort zones; becoming *'more comfortable with new people'*; gaining a *'better understanding of the 'other''* community; and feeling proud of their creative accomplishments. Many emphasised that friendship was the biggest takeaway. When whimsically asked how they would hashtag the project, responses were things like #FriendshipsMagic and #EverythingYouDidWillBeRemembered, indicating the sentimental value they placed on the bonds formed.

For the final creative showcase and in a fitting full-circle moment, the 'Festival in a Van' returned, but this time it was the *young people themselves* performing. They presented the 'living legends' they had written - stories and skits developed over the previous months, often inspired by themes of folklore but grounded in their own realities and imaginations. The line-up of pieces was impressively diverse and showcased the creativity unlocked in the group:

- *'Murder House'* - a satirical take on social media and reality TV tropes.
- *'Southill and the 4 Goatdoms'* - a story highlighting pride in one's place with a humorous mythical twist.
- *'Legend of the Dolmen'* - drawing on local folklore (possibly referencing the Carlingford area) about ancient stones, woven with the group's own ideas.
- *'The Sexy Dance'* - a vulnerably bold piece about expressing identity and sexuality.
- *A Hair and a Mosquito'* - a quirky tale about how folklore can spread, perhaps a nod to the act of storytelling itself.
- *'The Talking Unicorn on a Rainbow'* - a whimsical mix of music and storytelling, reflecting the playful side of the group's creative learning and vision.
- *'A Conversation Between Two Lads'* - a candid dialogue tackling a serious issue (implied to be about drug use) through the eyes of peers.
- *'The First Founding Banshee of Inis Mór'* - an inventive folklore-esque tale dealing with jealousy and family feuds, merging ancient myth with modern sensibilities.
- *'Kim Kardashian's House'* - a dance performance commenting on the unreality of reality shows, showing the group's pop-culture savvy and humour.
- *'The Magic Horse'* - a story involving a púca (shape-shifting spirit in Irish lore) and a disappearing woman, likely inspired by traditional tales but given a new spin.

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This eclectic mix of performances was delivered to a private audience of their peers, project team, creative facilitators/performers and the researcher. The pride and excitement in the room were palpable. Some participants who earlier in the project could hardly speak in front of others were now confidently acting, dancing, or reading their pieces aloud. The supportive environment emboldened each young storyteller. The final showcase truly '*captured, summarised and showcased the content, approach, vision and learning of the Living Legends project*', as one of the project leads put it. There was tangible comfort and pride among peers, along with a confidence to do new things. It was a celebratory climax illustrating how far each individual young person and the group collectively had come.

## DOCUMENTING THROUGH ANTHOLOGY

Parallel to the performance, the project was working on creating a high-quality anthology or 'Living Legends book' compiling the young people's creative writings and artwork, along with photographs from the journey. This served both as a memento for participants and an output to showcase their work to a broader audience (including funders and communities). The content of the artist-led workshops and the growth of the young people was captured beautifully in the Living Legends book and the photos that tell the story of the project. Having this tangible output (and keepsake) also contributes significantly to the sense of accomplishment, as it validates the idea that their voices and stories are important enough to be published.

At the heart of *Living Legends* was a story exchange methodology. Given its centrality, it's worth briefly explaining this model:

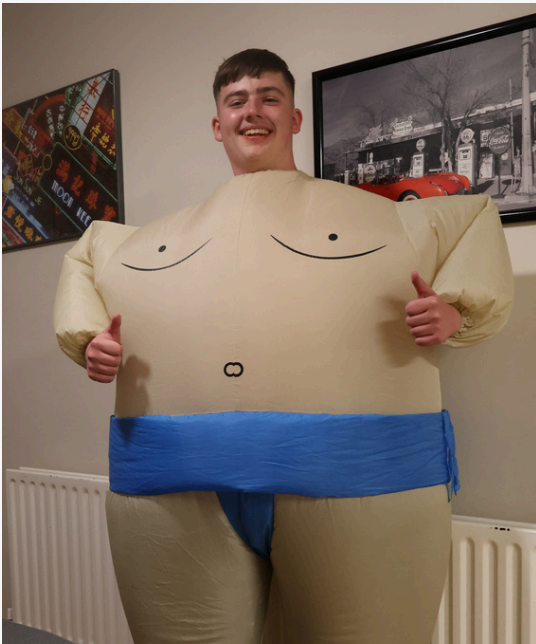
Participants pair up, and each shares a personal story with their partner (often guided by a theme). They listen deeply to each other. Then, in a larger group setting, each person retells their partner's story in the first person, as if it happened to them. This act of stepping into someone else's shoes - literally narrating I did this, I felt that, when it was actually their partner's experience - is a powerful empathy-building exercise. It requires trust and active listening, and it empowers participants to see their own story told through someone else's voice.

This model is '*rooted in empathy and fun*', aiming to unite disparate groups through shared human experiences. The idea is that by exchanging stories, young people find common ground and break down preconceived notions. In *Living Legends*, the story exchanges (there were two formal ones, plus countless informal story sharings) were the mechanism to '*humanise each other and deepen understanding of themselves, each other, and the wider world.*' The project specifically hoped this would *reduce biases like racism or sectarianism* by revealing the person behind any label<sup>1</sup>



Narrative 4 usually focuses on personal stories without an arts component, but here it was beautifully intertwined with creative exploration of folklore. The exchanges in *Living Legends* often started from a mythic or thematic prompt (community, identity, etc.), and then the creative writing sessions encouraged the young people to rewrite their partner's story as a modern legend. This innovative twist meant that each participant's personal story inspired another participant's creative piece - a poem, a micro play, a song, etc. In that way, the participants literally became authors of each other's legends, binding the group's narratives together. During the in-between workshops, they even did activities like repurposing clothing into costumes with a fashion designer (to represent characters or themes from their stories), which added a tactile, fun layer to the storytelling.

The project took care to scaffold the story exchanges. For example, before the first cross-border exchange, each local group practiced story exchanges among themselves (so they weren't doing it for the first time with strangers). They also initiated pen-pal contact via postcards, as mentioned, to 'warm up' the connection. At the exchanges, facilitators modelled story exchange by sharing their own stories first - this was observed in Antrim where leaders told personal anecdotes to set the tone. Clear guidance was given on respecting confidentiality and emotional safety (i.e. the 'neighbours knowing' rule in Antrim). Additionally, instead of clapping which can feel performative, the group was taught to do a gentle finger snap or 'jazz hands' after each story as an egalitarian sign of appreciation (everyone gets the same quiet recognition). Interestingly, the teens initially struggled with not cheering loudly - they *wanted* to openly support their peers - but they adapted to the snapping out of respect for the process. This small but crucial detail illustrates how they learned new ways to listen and show solidarity.



Through these exchanges, many participants discovered that the differences they assumed (like 'city kids' vs 'farm kids', or Protestant vs Catholic backgrounds, etc.) mattered far less than the shared themes in their lives, such as family, friends, challenges, dreams. One of the Narrative 4 taglines is '*Stories can change the world*', and while that's a lofty aim, on a micro scale *Living Legends* showed stories can certainly change perspectives. For example, after hearing a partner's struggle, a participant might think twice about judging someone from that community. There were anecdotes of Belfast young people learning where Limerick actually is (geographically and culturally) and vice versa, as well as confronting stereotypes (the groups joking early on about who in the other group might be 'posh' and then realising those preconceptions were wrong). Over time, story exchanges contributed to a palpable increase in tolerance and mutual understanding, fulfilling a primary aim of the project.

Ultimately, the *Living Legends* project was rich and multi-layered, blending place-based learning (visiting each other's landscapes), arts workshops, social bonding, and the structured Narrative 4 storytelling process. The timeline of activities steadily built participants' confidence and relationships, culminating in a creative flourish and deep camaraderie. With this overview in mind, the report now shifts focus to the participants themselves - their voices and experiences as recorded through the evaluation.



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# YOUNG PEOPLE, VOICE AND CHOICE

One of the defining features of *Living Legends* and this evaluation is that it foregrounds the voices of the young participants. This section presents the perspectives of the young people as expressed through surveys, quotes, creative outputs, and reflective exercises. The aim is to let their words, and the sentiments behind them, illustrate the journey they underwent and the impact the project had on them.

## **BASELINE INSIGHTS**

Before the project kicked off, a baseline survey (via SurveyMonkey) gathered some facts and self-assessments from the 23 participants. This gives a starting snapshot:

- The group was mostly around 15 years old (about 70% were 15; the rest 16, with possibly one or two 17). They came almost evenly from the two locales: 12 from Belfast and 11 from Limerick. Culturally, for many it was the first meaningful interaction with peers from the other jurisdiction - tellingly, some Belfast teens shared that they 'didn't know where Limerick is' at first.
- In terms of gender identity, about two-thirds identified as female, with one-quarter male and a small percentage preferring not to say. This imbalance was noted by organisers later, but within the group it didn't seem to hinder social mixing; friendships formed across genders and geographic lines pretty quickly.
- On a question about creative confidence, before the project: 43% said 'I sure do' feel comfortable sharing ideas through writing, while about 9% said 'I absolutely don't'. For sharing ideas through art (drawing, music, etc.), 43% were confident and importantly, *none* said they absolutely wouldn't - but over half were on the fence ('sometimes I do, sometimes I don't'). Speaking in front of others was more daunting - only 30% felt absolutely comfortable with public speaking, and 17% outright did not. This indicated that performing or telling stories aloud might be a growth area for many.
- On attitudes towards others, the baseline showed an encouraging openness: 87% said '*I enjoy listening when others share their stories or ideas*', and a remarkable 95% agreed '*I'm curious to learn about people with different backgrounds than me*'. In other words, they were primed for an intercultural exchange. Even if some were shy, they were interested in each other.
- A couple of well-being indicators were also included: 61% said they feel happy or content most days, and 87% felt confident in themselves. That latter number is surprisingly high (perhaps a testament to teen bravado or the particular personalities in the group). Nonetheless, there was a subset (around 2-4 young people) who did not feel happy or confident, suggesting the project's supportive environment could be crucial for them.
- When asked '*How are you feeling about being part of Living Legends?*' (multiple answers allowed), the dominant emotion was 'Excited 😊' (87% selected this). However, nerves were also in play: nearly half checked 'Nervous 😬' and about one-quarter admitted to being 'A bit shy or unsure 🙄'. This combination of excitement and anxiety is normal for teens about to do something new. They were looking forward to it but also uncertain about meeting new people. Some were curious (35%) and a few felt confident from the get-go (17%).
- In an open-ended baseline question - 'What are you most looking forward to in the Living Legends project?' - their answers overwhelmingly centred on social connection:
  - 'I'm definitely looking forward to meeting new people and seeing all the different landscapes as well!'
  - 'I would like to meet new people my age and to see how different their lives are from mine.'
  - 'Making new friends and having fun.' (multiple responses echoed this)
- 'Sharing my thoughts.'
- 'Being away from home!' (likely reflecting the thrill of a teen's first trip away without parents).

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From these, it's clear that while the theme was creative storytelling, what the young people themselves prioritised was the chance to bond, to compare life experiences, and to enjoy some independence. This insight informed how facilitators approached the first residential - they knew icebreakers and informal hangout time would be just as important as the official folklore content in meeting the expectations of the young people.

As *Living Legends* progressed, the researcher collected numerous quotes and anecdotes. Below, are a selection that illustrate common threads in the participants' experience:

### **ON BREAKING THE ICE AND INITIAL AWKWARDNESS:**

*'When we first got there [Doolin], everyone was kind of looking at each other like, 'uh, what do we do?' The Belfast lot were all pally and we [Limerick] were the randomers. But that changed really quick. By the second night it felt like one big group.'*

This shows how natural cliques or city-based groupings dissolved. The structured activities (like mixed-up room assignments, group challenges) and the sheer fun of being on an adventure helped them gel. One humorous cultural difference emerged early: the Limerick young people teased that the Belfast accent sounded very 'Scottish', and the Belfast young people declared some Limerick slang 'made no sense'. These playful exchanges about accents and slang became running jokes, easing tensions. By Residential 2, as noted, the warmth was evident: a participant wrote in the midway journal that one of their happiest moments was 'the hugs and 'welcome back' jokes when we met again. I felt like I had known these people for ages.'

### **ON THE NARRATIVE & STORY EXCHANGES:**

Many participants admitted they were sceptical or nervous about the idea of sharing personal stories. But afterwards, their tone was reverential:

*'It was actually kind of heart-warming. Like, hearing what someone else has been through and then telling it... I never did that before.'*

*'It was harder than I thought it would be. Not gonna lie, I was shaking a bit when I had to tell [partner's name]'s story. Because it wasn't my story, I felt a big responsibility to get it right.'* This reflects the empathy and care they developed. They wanted to honour each other's experiences.

*'Inspirational.'* When invited to give one word after the story exchange, one teen simply said this and later expanded, *'It's inspiring how brave everyone was. It makes you want to be brave too.'* *'I understand now that everyone's got stuff going on. Like things you wouldn't know just looking at them.'* This insight is exactly what the story exchange is meant to evoke: seeing beyond surface differences.

Not all was rosy: one or two young people said the exercise left them 'drained' or 'confused'. When probed as to why, a participant explained they felt confused because some stories were heavy and made them question how to help, while another said they felt drained because *'I was nervous, then I cried listening to [partner's] story, then I was happy, it was a lot.'* The facilitator had gently warned them that exchanging real stories can stir emotions, and the group debrief allowed them to voice these feelings and collectively support each other.

### **ON CREATIVE WORKSHOPS AND ARTISTRY:**

The feedback here varied depending on the activity, but a theme was that the interactive, hands-on sessions were the most popular:

*'I loved when we did the plays. Once we got into it, it was just us being crazy and creative. It was hilarious and fun.'* Many listed the script-writing and acting as a highlight, even those who were initially reticent. They discovered friends with comedic talent or dramatic flair, which was entertaining.

*'The music and poetry workshop was cool. Dafe was so full of energy, it got everyone hyped.'* The presence of young, relatable artists (like a hip-hop musician) was energising. One participant noted how they never thought they would be freestyle rapping on a beach, but they did and it was *'absolutely fucking class'*

The folklore storytelling sessions got mixed reactions. One young person said *'Rab's funny bits were the best. The rest I kind of zoned out.'* Another said they struggled to pay attention to long stories. This aligns with the project lead's learning that *'folklore generally [was] not of interest to most young people. The group enjoyed the 'doing' a lot more than the listening.'* That said, some participants did enjoy hearing about local myths once they were out in the actual location (like on Inis Mór or at Giant's Causeway) because it felt more tangible.

One very visual artistic output was the collaborative *Living Legend's* mural/poster they created on the last day to summarise the experience. Each young person drew or wrote a small piece of it (their name decorated, a quote, a doodle of a memory). It became a collage representing the journey. A participant pointed to it during final reflection and said, *'Look, we all added something. It's like proof we did this together.'* That sense of collective ownership was clearly meaningful.

The final performance understandably elicited strong feelings of pride. A participant who performed a personal poem on stage said afterwards, *'I was terrified before, but then when I did it and everyone clapped... I felt so **proud**. Like I actually did that! I'll never forget it.'* Many echoed this sentiment of surpassing their own expectations. Even those in the peer audience said it was inspiring to see friends shine: *'Watching [name] up there owning it, I was like wow... we've all grown in confidence.'*

## ON FRIENDSHIP AND CONNECTION:

This was the richest area of commentary. Virtually every young person mentioned the friendships as the best part:

*'I made friends I never would have met otherwise, like real friends.'* This echoes that earlier quote about meeting people you'd never normally meet.

*'We're already planning to visit each other.'* By the end, they were exchanging social media, talking about taking the train to meet up, etc. The WhatsApp group was buzzing daily with memes and messages, even between residential.

*'I learned that people from [the other city] are actually kinda similar to me. We just have different accents.'* A simple but profound realisation for a teenager who may have had preconceived notions.

*'It's like having another family for the summer.'* This heartfelt description came from a young people who, the parent later revealed, was quite shy and isolated before. For them, forging these bonds was life-changing. In fact, the mother's quote in the parental feedback captures it: *'even going was a win... what was brilliant altogether is how tall [young person] has grown from all this... more self-assured, more confident'*. The metaphor of 'grown taller' speaks to the boost in confidence and sense of belonging the teen exhibited.



## ON CHALLENGING MOMENTS:

It wasn't all smooth sailing, and participants noted a few challenges:

Some struggled with homesickness or being out of their comfort zone especially during the first residential. One admitted they called home in tears the first night in Doolin, but *'then I pushed myself to talk to people the next day and it got better.'* By the third day they didn't want to leave.

The rule of handing in phones during certain activities was a thorn for a few (literally it showed up as a 'thorn' in the exercise list: *'Having phones taken away'*). They grouched about it initially, but many later acknowledged it was a good thing: *'It made us talk more. If we all had phones we'd be just scrolling separately.'*

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Long bus rides between North and South were tiring. Some joked that ‘a project called *‘Living Legends’ shouldn’t involve dying of boredom on a bus.*’ To counter that, the project leads did a great job of keeping bus rides lively with music and games, which participants appreciated.

A few would have liked more input in choosing the workshop themes. For instance, one young person said, *‘I’m not into poetry at all, so I kind of tuned out in that part. It would’ve been cool if we could choose between things.’* Not everyone will love every art form, and this feedback aligns with the project’s adaptive approach of letting young people interests steer content where possible. In future, offering parallel tracks or options might be beneficial.

Lastly, saying goodbye was hard. The final night in Carlingford saw some tears and lots of signature-writing on each other’s hoodies. As one young person put it in the final reflection circle: *‘I’m grateful I met you all. And I’m sad it’s ending but it’s not really the end because we have memories and Insta to prove it.’* The word ‘grateful’ came up repeatedly when they described their feelings about the experience - grateful for the opportunity, for the friends, for the fun times and even the tough conversations.

In reviewing all these voices, a narrative arc emerges: **Tentative Beginnings → Growing Trust → Creative Expression → Deep Connection.**

Participants went from being unsure and curious about each other to feeling like a united group that had accomplished something special together. Their quotes speak to newfound confidence (‘I actually did that!’), empathy (‘everyone’s got stuff going on’), and lasting friendship (‘another family’). These qualitative insights, combined with the observational data and organiser feedback, will be used in the next section to assess how well the project delivered on its intended outcomes.





## **OBSERVATIONAL INSIGHTS (BY RESIDENTIAL)**

This section details key observations and nuances from each of the three residential exchanges. Each residential had its own atmosphere and milestones, and by examining them sequentially, we can see how the group dynamics and individual growth evolved over time.

### **RESIDENTIAL 1: DOOLIN, CO. CLARE (APRIL 2025)**

The Doolin residential was all about firsts – first meetings, first impressions and first steps into the world of Living Legends. Observations from this trip include:

**Group Introduction and Environment:** 23 young people arrived at a coastal hostel in Doolin, some having travelled hours from Limerick or Belfast. The project team's advance preparation was evident: they cleverly allowed self-selection of rooms (so friends could bunk together to ease nerves) and distributed branded *Living Legends* hoodies to everyone upon arrival. Those hoodies became an instant equaliser and team symbol – by the end of the day nearly everyone was wearing theirs. The pantry was stocked with teen-friendly snacks (one leader joked you could keep 23 adolescents happy with enough **Pringles and pizza**, a hypothesis that held true). These small touches in planning and hospitality helped the young feel welcome and taken care of, setting a positive tone.

**Initial social dynamics:** At first meeting, the two groups (Belfast and Limerick) naturally clustered a bit. The Belfast group, being pre-existing, had an easier rapport and might have seemed more confident; the Limerick group, a mix from different schools and backgrounds, was finding its feet even amongst themselves. This had been anticipated by having icebreaker activities ready. One observation was that the boys in the group appeared especially self-conscious early on; some stood off to the side, hands in pockets or fiddling with their phones, and laughed nervously during serious moments. In contrast, a few girls from both cities broke the ice by complimenting each other's style (there was bonding over those ubiquitous Crocs with socks and North Face jackets, a common teen fashion that transcended the border). Overall, while there was some awkward shuffling (literally, feet shuffling in the gravel as noted during the first session), the atmosphere was one of **curiosity** rather than resistance. Many side conversations of 'What school do you go to?' and 'Have you been here before?' could be heard as they started to mix.

**Storyteller session:** The first evening featured a session by Rab, the artist-in-residence and folklorist, who told a traditional story with theatrical flair. Observation notes document a 'tangible level of self-consciousness' among the group at first – some young peoples were more focused on digging toes in the gravel or glancing at phones than on the story. It was likely a combination of travel fatigue and the newness of it all. Notably, Rab invited questions after his tale, and to his (and everyone's) pleasant surprise, a few hands went up. There were three questions – a good number considering the initial quietness. This indicated that despite apparent teen aloofness, they were listening and thinking. When Rab asked what parts of the session they liked, the '*cohesive response was 'the funny bits'*'. Indeed, whenever Rab injected humor or slang, the group lit up. The more didactic or long-winded folklore parts seemed to lose some of them. This realisation, **that young people engagement follows their interests and attention spans**, was a first lesson for the project team. They adapted by making subsequent storytelling more interactive (i.e. asking the group to come up with their own twists to a legend).

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**Creation of group charter:** On day two, with everyone a little more comfortable, facilitators led a session to co-create a *'Living Legends Charter'* – essentially group agreements. The young peoples brainstormed what would help everyone feel safe and respected. The final charter points (mentioned earlier) were: Be present (no phones during activities), Be respectful, No judgment, Communicate effectively, Listen actively, No inappropriate laughter, and Keep confidentiality. The fact that the young people themselves suggested these (with a bit of guidance) made them meaningful. For instance, the 'no phones' rule came from a participant noting that 'it bugs me when people don't pay attention because of their phone' – hearing that from a peer, everyone nodded and agreed to ditch phones in certain times. Laughter was a funny one - they didn't mean don't laugh at all (there was plenty of laughter), but *'no laughing at someone when they share something serious.'* They wanted to ensure deep shares wouldn't be met with giggles. This charter was posted on a big sheet of paper in their common room and referenced at the start of every major activity to remind them of their pact. Observationally, it proved effective; the young people often self-policed these norms, i.e., gently nudging a friend who reached for a phone, or saying 'hey guys, shh, listen' when someone was speaking.

**First story exchange and early empathy:** The initial Narrative 4 story exchange in Doolin was kept light in theme (perhaps 'a funny thing that happened to you' or 'a time you felt proud'). It was more of a practice run to introduce the method. Many were still a bit shy, so facilitators and young people workers participated too, modelling the exercise. The researcher noticed that once in small pairs, even the quiet ones started talking – when faced with just one peer, they opened up more. One memorable pair was two lads, one from Belfast, one from Limerick, who both happened to love soccer. They swapped stories about football matches they'd played. When they came back to the group, each animatedly recounted the other's story of scoring a goal and the other's story of a missed penalty. The whole group clapped (snapped) and it broke into a debate about football rivalries – a spirited but friendly debate. This may seem minor, but it was a breakthrough moment: they found common ground and realised a 'story exchange' didn't have to be super heavy or awkward; it could even be fun and about things like sports. This paved the way for deeper exchanges later, because a foundation of trust and *listening* was being laid here.

**Outdoor adventure and cultural immersion:** Part of the Clare trip was the excursion to **Inis Mór** island. Observations from that day show a remarkable change in energy: on the ferry ride and island walk, cliques dissolved as everyone was equally awed by the scenery (and trying to keep balance on the boat!). They heard local myths from a guide – like the story of Máirtín an Fiadh (Martin the Deer) or other Aran folk tales – while standing among ancient stone forts. This hands-on approach engaged them more than sitting indoors would have. They even encountered a group of local schoolchildren doing a céilí dance, which our group joined impromptu, causing much laughter. Such moments were cultural eye-openers that also bonded the group ('Remember when we all tried to dance and fell over the walls!' became an inside joke). By evening, back in Doolin, they were tired but jubilant. A low-key activity that night was a music circle – some of the Irish musicians traveling with Festival in a Van played guitar and everyone sang songs (mix of pop and a couple of traditional tunes). One of the young people surprised everyone by beatboxing along, which led to a spontaneous sing-song. These unplanned creative expressions often revealed talents and built confidence.

**Reflection and closing:** At the end of Residential 1, the facilitators did a short debrief asking each participant to share one word or sentence about how they felt leaving. Words like *'happy'*, *'excited (for next time)'*, *'tired'*, *'connected'*, *'curious'* were common. One Limerick girl said, *'At first I was nervous, now I'm just excited for Antrim. I have like 10 new Instagram followers – friends!'* capturing the joy of new connections. A Belfast young person commented that they never knew 'the South' could feel so familiar: *'I thought it'd be all country people and we're city people, but it's actually not that different. People are people.'* This was an early sign of breaking stereotypes. Everyone went home with stories to tell – quite literally, as they had been given the 'Imagined Stories' prompt earlier and some had started writing or drawing their versions of what would happen (many of which amusingly predicted exactly the friendships that did form).



## RESIDENTIAL 2: ANTRIM (GIANT'S CAUSEWAY), JULY 2025

The second residential built on the momentum, with the group reuniting like old friends. Key observational insights from Antrim include:

**Reunion energy:** When the Limerick bus pulled up to the Antrim site (Sheep Island View hostel in Ballintoy), the Belfast group was waiting outside. What could have been an awkward 'oh it's you again' moment turned into cheers and clapping. Several pairs of girls ran to hug each other – they'd clearly stayed in touch on Instagram and were excited to meet IRL again. Boys had their cool handshakes or nods (plus a couple of hearty back slaps). One of the project leads noted this as *'the power of invisible connection'* – even when apart, their group chat and social media interactions kept the sense of group alive. This meant that time that might have been needed for re-introductions was saved; they dove right into activities with a high comfort level.

**Shift in group behaviour:** Observers in Antrim consistently mention how much more relaxed and open the participants were compared to Doolin. For example, during the festival-in-a-van performance by Harry and Arthur, instead of sheepish glances, the teens engaged – some sang along, others asked the artists questions afterwards, like 'How do you write a song?' or shared that they also write poetry or music. This active engagement was a stark contrast to the Doolin storytelling session where they had been more passive. It suggested a growth in confidence and also that the content was resonating more (the artists being younger and using modern references helped). Indeed, one specific moment is highlighted: when Arthur sang a line about the law protecting or hurting you, the young people responded audibly, saying 'don't we know it'. This hinted at shared experiences of feeling either protected or failed by authorities – a deeper topic that might not have surfaced without the music trigger. Noting such reactions, facilitators encouraged a discussion about it, which the group willingly entered, referencing recent news and personal anecdotes (i.e., one teen mentioned how differently a friend was treated by police because of where they lived). That conversation, as brief as it was, touched on justice and equality – weighty issues that show these young people don't shy away from real-world topics when given the chance.

**Responsive facilitation:** The Antrim notes point out a scenario on the first night: after dinner, an outdoor theatrical performance was scheduled (the 'festival in a van' piece). The young people watched, but many were content to be spectators rather than jump in when invited for audience participation. Facilitators hypothesised this might reflect a generation used to consuming content rather than creating it spontaneously (the Netflix/YouTube generation preference). So, after the performance, instead of pushing them to perform immediately, they shifted to a conversation in a circle with the performers about identity and personal change (where that line 'you can constantly shift who you are' was shared by the artist). This proved effective as a warm-up. Then, when the artists offered to connect interested young people with theatre or music opportunities, suddenly many voices perked up, asking questions – *'Really, you think we could do that?'* etc. The observation: being 'seen' and taken seriously by adults (artists treating them as emerging peers) lit a spark. It validated the approach of bringing in relatable role models.

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**Leadership activities and deeper sharing:** The youth leaders (from North and South) took the lead on late-night bonding games, which were a hit. In Antrim, one leader facilitated the aforementioned Rose-Bud-Thorn exercise and the quirky Q&A game with forfeits. The researcher's notes marvel at how candid some of the sharing got in a seemingly casual game setting: for instance, when a young person revealed as their 'thorn' that they had failed all their summer school exams, others immediately offered consolation and advice ('Aw, you can repeat them, don't worry'). The mix of trivial and serious in that session was striking – a participant would talk about a new pair of shoes as their highlight and the next would reveal they had been temporarily homeless but now their family had housing again. Such raw honesty likely wouldn't have surfaced without the trust built thus far. The leaders managed it sensitively, affirming each share. Observing this, the researcher noted that peer support was organically taking root: they listened to each other attentively and responded with empathy or humour as needed.

**Story exchange (Antrim edition):** This was arguably the heart of Residential 2. Differences from the first exchange were that the stories tended to be deeper and the group needed less prompting to dive in. The evaluation notes describe the initial moments of hesitation – a few minutes of awkwardness – then *'very quickly followed by a willingness to discuss personal things openly and frankly'*. The facilitators set clear instructions and even modelled a story exchange themselves, which helped give direction. Once pairs got going, the researcher quietly moved around observing. All pairs were conversing animatedly – some even had tears (either from laughing or from the weight of the story). It was evident the young people took the confidentiality and respect aspect seriously; even the usual jokers were attentive when it came time to retell their partner's story. After all pairs had shared to the whole group, the feedback round yielded a lot of *'That was interesting'* and *'We all did the same thing but got so many different stories'*. They found it fascinating that a common process led to such unique outcomes, broadening their understanding of each other. The one-word wrap-up (grateful, fun, insightful, etc.) was an emotional barometer. For instance, 'confused' came from one who struggled to process some heavy info, and 'grateful' came from two participants who felt thankful for the trust shown. Importantly, 'tired' also came up - a nod to the fact that this kind of sharing takes emotional energy.

**Adaptation and learning in workshops:** Antrim's creative workshops provided some instructive observations. The script writing masterclass had a rough start - the artist facilitating it didn't clearly explain what they wanted at first. Young people sat there unsure until a youth leader jumped in to clarify. The feedback (later relayed to organisers) was that prepping guest facilitators on the group's context and perhaps co-designing session intros could improve consistency. Also noted: even though some workshop leaders/facilitators were young adults not much older than the participants, they still referenced things (like certain old movies) that flew over the teens' heads. This highlighted a generation gap that isn't just age but also cultural – a young facilitator might assume a 15-year-old knows a 1990s movie, which they don't. The organisers filed this insight to better brief facilitators to use references the age group would know (or ask the group for their references instead). Despite initial hiccups, once the task of storyboarding wild scenarios kicked off, the creativity of the young people shone brightly. They split into small groups, each given a fantastical prompt (shrinking, giant fractures in earth, etc.) and asked to make a quick story. The researcher noted how groups problem-solved: one group elected a 'writer', another group every member drew a scene. Themes that emerged in their mini-scripts (murder, teen pregnancy, cosmetic surgery, designer labels) might sound surprising in a folklore project, but it reflected issues on their minds and pop culture influences. The fact that they felt free to incorporate those themes suggests the project gave them license to explore any subject creatively. When performing these skits, the laughter and engagement were tangible - it became clear that the process might have been bumpy, but the outcome was joyous and empowering. They loved watching each other's creations. *'So we can make a story out of literally anything, huh?'* The realisation of their own creative agency was a significant outcome here for the young people.

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**Group cohesion and leadership:** By mid Antrim, the group practically ran itself in terms of cohesion. They navigated minor conflicts (a roommate squabble or someone feeling left out) with minimal adult intervention, often through peer mediation. One evening, the researcher observed two girls quietly consoling a third who was upset over a personal issue; a year or even a month earlier those three had never met, now they were leaning on each other like old friends. The young people leaders also continued to be a big influence, striking that 'critical balance between authority and being accessible', as noted. They were friendly enough to joke around, yet firm when safety or rules mattered. This relational style was clearly effective: participants followed guidelines and showed respect, not out of fear or formality, but because a mutual respect had been established.

**Maintaining energy:** The schedule in Antrim was full, but included short 'Rest & Reset' breaks (as scheduled in the itinerary). Those breaks often turned into informal play; a bunch of the young people started a pickup soccer game during one break, others sat in a circle chatting. These organic moments were golden for observation: without structure, the integrated group naturally formed and reformed, a sign of social fluidity. By the end of the Antrim residential, it was evident that cliques based on city or gender had eroded - friendships were now based on personality and common interests (i.e., the 'music group', the 'comic book fans group' that spanned across Belfast/Limerick).

**Departure from Antrim:** As they boarded buses to head home from Residential 2, there was already buzz about Carlingford. The young people knew the final trip would involve them performing, and while some feigned dread ('Oh no, we have to actually do stuff on stage!'), it was clear they were excited. Observers heard many exchanges of 'See you soon!' and 'Don't forget to share those photos!' The comfort level attained was such that one Belfast boy's parting words to a Limerick young people worker were, '*I'll miss your funny sayings, lad!*' - poking fun at each other's accent had become a friendly sport. The stage was set for the final chapter, with expectations high that it would be a memorable finale.



### **RESIDENTIAL 3: CARLINGFORD, CO. LOUTH (JULY 2025)**

The final residential was shorter and had a smaller attendance, but it was the culmination of the *Living Legends* experience. Observations from Carlingford highlight closure, achievement and some bittersweet emotions:

**Reduced numbers, intact spirit:** Only 15 participants managed to attend this last meet-up (8 from Belfast, 7 from Limerick) due to diary conflicts and illnesses. The absence of some friends was felt. There were moments of 'wish so-and-so was here' but the tight-knit core that came was determined to make the most of it. In fact, one might say it was a squad of the most engaged members. This smaller group size had a benefit; it enabled even more bonding and meant everyone present was on stage in some way during the final performance. The researcher noted that those who came were largely those who had been more active throughout, so the dynamic was very positive and focused.

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**One last team-building challenge:** Kicking off day 2 (the researcher arrived that morning), a facilitator ran a silent line-up game as mentioned. This was a fun way to see how in-sync the group was. They lined up by height, birthday month, etc., without speaking. They giggled through it but succeeded quickly each time. One observation: a particularly strong young people worker led this and her more authoritative tone (in a positive sense) got instant respect and attention. This highlighted that by now the group could respond to a clear leader figure without bristling, likely because they had internalised respect and discipline through the charter and previous experiences. The comment in notes was that *'young people responded well to structure and guidance'*. It suggests that once trust is built, teens actually appreciate an adult who can confidently steer them, because it creates a container in which they can safely play and create.

**Focused creative prep:** Much of the Carlingford exchange was devoted to preparing for the final showcase performance. Participants were divided according to the pieces they were involved in (some had written pieces in pairs or small groups, others were acting in multiple skits). They rehearsed, gave each other feedback, and refined their work. This involved a high degree of peer coaching. For example, one participant who was a natural performer helped another who was shy practice delivering a funny line louder; or a few musically inclined young people worked together to add a guitar background to one story. The sense was *'this is ours, let's make it great.'* Facilitators stepped back and acted more as stage managers and tech support. This was a deliberate empowerment strategy and it paid off, as the young people took ownership of the showcase.



**Interviews with young people:** As mentioned, during a downtime in Carlingford, each participant gave a short video interview to the Narrative 4 director. From the notes and transcripts of that process:

When asked *'What have you gotten out of Living Legends?'* common answers were: *'confidence to talk to new people,' 'a new perspective on people from up North/down South,' 'I pushed myself to be creative,'* and *'friends ,loads of friends'*.

On *'What surprised you?'*, a frequent answer was: *'I didn't think I'd enjoy it this much' and 'I thought it would be more like school, but it wasn't.'* A few admitted they almost didn't join - echoing the parent's story of their child nearly dropping out last minute - and were so glad they did.

A question *'If you could describe Living Legends in a hashtag or phrase?'* elicited creative responses (the #FriendshipsMagic one being a standout). Another young person said, *'Living Legends = making history with new friends.'* While cheesy, it showed their sense of doing something meaningful. Some answers were humorous, like *'Legendary craic'* and *'No phones, no problems!'* (a joking reference to the charter rule).

One interview asked if they'd continue any of the activities or friendships. Everyone said yes to staying friends (thanks to social media that's feasible). Some said they want to visit the other city, and a couple expressed interest in continuing storytelling or creative writing. One Belfast participant, who discovered a love of theatre, mentioned they'd joined a drama club after being inspired by *Living Legends*. Such immediate impact was heartening to hear.



**The final performance:** When the time came for the showcase (held in a private space at the adventure centre with the Festival in a Van stage setup), the energy was a mix of nerves and excitement. Observers described it as *'controlled chaos backstage and pure magic onstage.'* Each piece (listed in the Project Overview) was introduced by the MC (one of the young people leaders) with a fun title card. A few highlights from the session include:

During *'The Sexy Dance'*, initially there were giggles from the audience at the title, but the young person performing delivered a thoughtful interpretive dance about self-expression that left everyone clapping vigorously.

*'A Conversation Between Two Lads'* had two boys casually sitting and talking in slang about a heavy topic (implied drug use among friends). It was raw and authentic, and you could hear a pin drop as they performed - peers were intently listening, which itself is a sign of respect and impact.

The comedic sketches like *'Kim Kardashian's House'* provided comic relief. At one point, one young person wearing sunglasses impersonating a reality TV producer had the audience roaring with laughter, showing off comedic timing we hadn't seen from him before.

The folklore-inspired pieces like *'Legend of the Dolmen'* and *'First Founding Banshee of Inis Mór'* were impressive in how they weaved real myth with imaginative twists. They demonstrated that despite initial disinterest in folklore, the young people had absorbed something and made it their own.

After each performance, the audience (mostly just themselves and their mentors) snapped and then broke into cheers – they couldn't help it, they were so proud of each other. There was no competition or jealousy, just pure celebration of each person's moment. Many were teary-eyed, hugging, and high-fiving as the showcase ended. The researcher wrote, *'Incredible summative activity...confidence, comfort, pride visible all around'*.

The performance had indeed encapsulated what the project was about: **young people voice, creativity, collaboration and a shared journey.**

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**Final reflections:** That evening, a simple closing circle was held. Each young person got a certificate and a copy of the draft anthology pages (to be finalised and printed later). They were asked to share a favourite memory or a takeaway from *Living Legends*. The responses varied. Some recalled funny incidents (like *'I'll never forget the chili-in-milk dare from Antrim'* referring to a game forfeit), others talked about personal growth (*'I'm proud I talked in front of people'*). One commented, *'This gave me hope that there are good people my age everywhere, no matter where you're from.'* That sentiment of unity and hope was echoed by others. The young people leaders and organisers also shared their perspectives, praising the group's courage and creativity. Laura from N4 mentioned it was their biggest project to date and how it taught the team so much about working *with* young people directly (as opposed to through teachers), implicitly thanking the group for teaching them. There was a real sense that everyone – young people and adults – had learned from each other.

**Goodbyes and aftermath:** The next morning's goodbye was inevitably emotional. Plans were made: 'We'll do a reunion on Zoom,' 'Please come to my birthday,' etc. As the Belfast van and Limerick bus parted ways, many were waving out the windows until out of sight. The project formally ended, but the connections clearly would live on.

From an observational standpoint, Residential 3 demonstrated the outcome of all the groundwork: the shy became bold, the strangers became friends, and the creative potential of these young people blossomed. The smaller numbers did not diminish the impact. If anything, it intensified the experience for those who were there. Carlingford provided a beautiful, scenic backdrop for a finale that was both an ending and a new beginning (several young people expressed interest in visiting each other's communities afterwards, thus continuing cross-border exchange informally).

In conclusion, across Doolin, Antrim, and Carlingford, the observational insights chart a clear progression: initial barriers giving way to trust, increased engagement and depth in the middle, and full ownership and camaraderie at the end. These anecdotes and moments form the qualitative evidence of change, which are aligned with the project's formal objectives in the next section.



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# OUTCOMES & IMPACT

*Living Legends* set out with a number of ambitious objectives. Here we assess each major objective against the evidence of outcomes, drawing from the data and stories presented above. Overall, the evaluation finds that the project **achieved its core aims**, with participants and stakeholders reporting positive changes that align closely with what was intended. Below, the key outcomes are mapped to five primary objectives outlined in the project plan:

## **1. DISMANTLE BARRIERS TO ACCESSING THE ARTS FOR MARGINALISED YOUNG PEOPLE, EMPOWERING THEM TO CREATIVELY RAISE THEIR VOICES FOR SOCIAL GOOD.**

**Outcome: Increased arts participation and youth voice.** The 23 participants, many from disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds, engaged deeply in artistic activities (storytelling, writing, performing, visual arts) that they might not have otherwise accessed. At the project start, only 43% of the young people felt very comfortable expressing themselves via writing or art; by the end, 100% of those present had created and shared original creative work - from poems to plays - with their peers, and many performed publicly in the final showcase. The barrier of *'the arts are not for people like me'* was broken. One clear indicator is that initially reluctant young people blossomed: for example, a participant who almost dropped out due to shyness ended up co-writing a play and performing a spoken word piece on stage, later describing feeling *'so proud'* of that achievement. The safe, supportive environment empowered even the quieter voices. Participants articulated personal and social issues through art, i.e., tackling topics like mental health, identity, and even social problems (drugs, prejudice) in their creative outputs. This shows they were using art to 'raise their voices' on issues that matter, fulfilling the social good aspect. The anthology of their work stands as a testament to their creative voice. Additionally, young people took on leadership in artistic expression (mentoring each other in rehearsals, deciding themes etc.) which indicates empowerment. As one organiser noted, *'the impact is captured beautifully in the Living Legends book and the photos that tell the story'* - the fact that there is a book of their art at all is a direct outcome aligned with dismantling arts barriers and validating their voices.

## **2. UNITE YOUNG PEOPLE NORTH & SOUTH THROUGH SHARED IDEAS AND EXPERIENCES, ROOTED IN EMPATHY AND FUN.**

**Outcome: Cross-border friendships and empathy.** Perhaps the most resounding success of *Living Legends* was the genuine unity and friendship formed between the Limerick and Belfast participants. The initial 'otherness' (some Belfast participants confessed they'd never been to the Republic and vice versa) gave way to solidarity.

By the second meeting, they greeted each other with hugs and had an ongoing WhatsApp chat bridging the geographic divide. They collaborated on stories, paired cross-border for exchanges, and cheered each other on in performances: *'I learned that we're not actually that different; we just have different accents.'* This indicates a breakdown of perceived cultural barriers.

Empathy grew notably via the story exchanges. Hearing each other's personal stories fostered understanding; one objective was to *'deepen understanding of themselves, each other, and the wider world'* - we saw that happen when young people related to peer challenges (like understanding someone's experience of homelessness or family issues shared in exchange). They realised common humanity despite different backgrounds.

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Fun was a key ingredient. Shared laughter, whether at icebreakers, late-night games, or dancing together, created positive associations. The experiences of exploring each other's locales (Clare's islands, Antrim's Causeway) also bonded them through adventure. A participant's playful hashtag **#FriendshipsMagic** truly encapsulates the uniting outcome. Another said *'everyone should get an opportunity to be part of something like this.'* implying the experience was uniquely unifying and memorable.

Crucially, the unity persisted beyond the project: many continued contact and expressed intentions to visit each other. This shows the connections were not superficial project artefacts but real friendships, a strong indicator of success in 'uniting' young people across the border.

### **3. BUILD CONFIDENCE AND IMPROVE MENTAL WELL-BEING BY PROVIDING PARTICIPANTS WITH A SENSE OF CONNECTION AND ACCOMPLISHMENT.**

**Outcome: Higher self-confidence and well-being gains.** Multiple strands of evidence point to boosted confidence levels:

**Self-reports:** In interviews at the end, young people frequently mentioned increased confidence, especially in social situations. For instance, several said they became *'more comfortable meeting new people'* and pushing themselves creatively. One organiser interview noted an observed *'increase in the confidence and sheer comfort of the young people'* as a key achievement.

**Parental observation:** A parent recounted that their child *'has grown taller from all this – more self-assured, more confident'* and hoped that confidence would carry into school life.

**Behavioural evidence:** At the start, almost 20% of the young people absolutely dreaded speaking in front of others and many were nervous; by the final showcase, nearly all participants voluntarily performed or spoke on stage in front of an audience, representing a significant leap in confidence. There was also some key learning for the organisers, one of whom rated their comfort level working with young people as 1/5 before and 5/5 after, saying *'you have to do it to understand it... when you are with young people for days, you are more aware of their needs... the work becomes easier'*. Although this quote was from a staff perspective, the same principle applied to young people comfort with each other and new experiences.

**Well-being:** The camaraderie and supportive space improved many participants' mood and outlook. Over 60% already felt content most days pre-project; for those who didn't, being part of this group often provided a needed social support boost. One young person who had been struggling socially found *'a new family'* in the group, which likely helped their mental well-being. Additionally, the realisation *'I'm not alone in the challenges I face'* - explicitly one of the intended outcomes of the project - came through in story circles (hearing peers share similar struggles normalised their feelings). The sense of accomplishment from completing the project (finishing something, performing, creating a book) also contributes to positive self-regard. In the reflective journals, when asked if their emotions changed from before the first residential to now, many wrote that they went from *'nervous'* or *'scared'* to *'happy'* or *'excited.'* One even drew themselves as a sad face then an optimistically smiling face to show the change. This qualitative feedback, coupled with the lack of any negative incidents or withdrawals, suggests well-being was maintained or improved for participants during the project.

The importance of connection to well-being should also be noted: The objective cites providing a sense of connection, which was clearly achieved (see point 2 on unity). Feeling connected combats loneliness and can improve mental health. For example, a young person who initially self-reported feeling isolated now has a peer network; this can have lasting positive effects beyond the project.

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## 4. REDUCE RACISM, XENOPHOBIA, AND DISCRIMINATION THROUGH A STORYTELLING INTERVENTION (IMPROVE ATTITUDES THROUGH EMPATHY).

**Outcome: Enhanced mutual understanding and reduction of 'Othering.'** While measuring a reduction in something like racism or sectarian bias is complex in a short project, there are strong (generalisable) indications that *Living Legends* made headway in this area:

**Anecdotal shifts:** At the outset, there were subtle 'us vs them' curiosities (i.e., Belfast vs Limerick stereotypes - 'posh' accents, big city Vs small city attitudes). By the end, participants repeatedly expressed that those differences mattered far less than they thought.

They acknowledged, for example, how they realised that people from the other community are fundamentally like the: *'If I heard someone say something bad about [the other city] now, I'd totally defend it, because I have friends there.'* This loyalty to each other's home turf is a sign their biases were replaced with mutual understanding and personal affection.

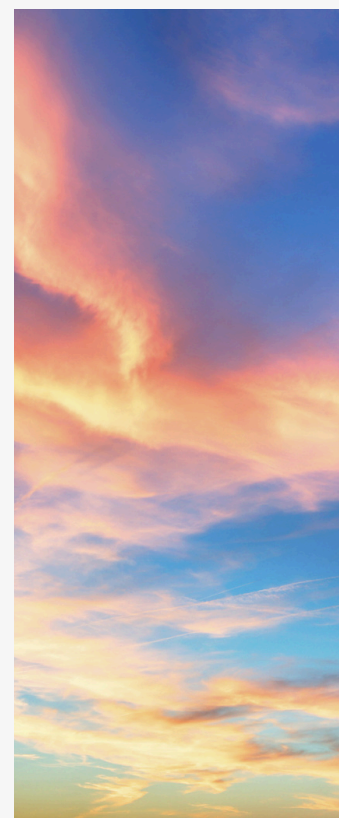
**Challenging bias through stories:** The story exchanges allowed them to step into each other's shoes. One outcome of that was 'realising that someone from the 'other side' might face similar issues (family problems, school stress) or even unique challenges that garner respect (like a participant dealing with discrimination themselves). Through retelling each other's stories, they practiced empathy. This method is known to reduce prejudice by humanising the 'out-group,' and the researcher's observations align with that: participants were moved by each other's histories and indicated greater understanding. For example, a few Limerick teens said they learned more about Northern Ireland beyond headlines, like what everyday life or slang is like for Belfast young people, which made both the place and people more real to them.

**No incidents of discrimination:** Notably, there were no reported conflicts rooted in sectarian or racist attitudes during the project, a success in itself for a cross-community project. Early on, staff were prepared to mediate any such tensions, but as one of the organisers reported, *'the initial discussions around 'who is posh or not''* were as far as stereotypes went, and those quickly evolved into jokes and mutual teasing devoid of malice.

**Diverse inclusion:** The cohort itself included some participants from minority backgrounds (ethnic or socio-economic). The evaluation did not single these young peoples out in findings (appropriately, since anonymity was preserved), but it's important that no one felt excluded or targeted. In fact, 'feeling included' was one of the story themes noted during exchanges. One could infer that those from different backgrounds felt accepted, given the overall group cohesion.

While it's hard to prove long-term attitudinal change in a short timeframe, the seeds are clearly planted. The objective of reducing xenophobia can be seen as partially achieved through increased friendships and empathy. This aligns with Narrative 4's theory of change that sharing personal stories can reduce biases. And as mentioned in point 2, participants left with positive views of each other's communities, which is the opposite of prejudice. As a concrete example: Belfast participants who 'didn't know where Limerick is' or only knew stereotypes now have a nuanced, personal connection. It's likely they will carry such nuanced attitudes into their broader social circles, serving as informal ambassadors against ignorance.

The true test will be if/when these young people encounter sectarian or racist sentiments in their lives later. Will they, for example, be more likely to challenge it or think differently? Based on their heartfelt statements (like 'I'd defend them' mentioned above), there is reason to believe *Living Legends* nudged them toward more inclusive mind sets.



## 5. SHOWCASE THE CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION THAT EXISTS WITHIN ALL YOUNG PEOPLE (THROUGH A FINAL PRODUCT/PERFORMANCE).

**Outcome: Public showcase and tangible creative outputs.** This objective was met both in spirit and literally:

The **final performance** in Carlingford showcased their creativity to an audience of peers and mentors, and was professionally recorded (video) so it could potentially be shown to others (i.e., at the book launch or shared with funders). In that performance, each of the 10 skits and stories demonstrated the participants' imaginative capacities, from humorous creativity (i.e. a comedic dance parody) to insightful storytelling (addressing personal and social issues through art). The variety of pieces proved that every participant had something unique to contribute. One facilitator described the showcase as 'a dignified platform for the imaginative wisdom of this rising generation', echoing how the festival stage creates a platform for young people voices.

The creation of a beautiful **anthology** is a concrete outcome. It serves as a lasting archive of the young people's work and a validation of their ideas. Seeing their story or poem published is a huge confidence boost and also a way to exhibit their creativity to family, community and stakeholders. The project objectives specifically reference an anthology as a deliverable, which was achieved.

Moreover, the process itself showcased innovation: in workshops, artists and facilitators frequently remarked on the fresh perspectives young people brought. For instance, one professional story-teller was surprised by how quickly the group could brainstorm modern takes on old myths, remarking that some of their metaphors were truly novel. This feedback was relayed to the researcher, underscoring that the creative potential of the young people was indeed on display.

The project also indirectly showcased young people creativity beyond just the final products. Social media posts during the project (on Narrative 4's channels, etc.) showed snippets ( i.e., photos of the group at Giants Causeway, a screenshot of a collaborative Zoom where they shared costume designs), highlighting to the wider public and peers that these young people are engaged in creative work and cross-border friendship. While those aren't formal 'outcomes' per se, they contribute to the narrative that if given opportunities, all young people have creativity and innovation to share.

A subtle but important point: Some of the N4 organisers noted their own increased confidence in their ability to work directly with young people as an outcome. The team typically worked via schools or young people clubs, but here they engaged with young people first hand. By the project's end, they gained trust in youth-driven processes. This means they are likely to showcase youth talent more directly in future initiatives, multiplying the effect of this objective.



In summary, each main objective of *Living Legends* saw positive outcomes:

**Arts access and voice:** Achieved through broad and enthusiastic participation in creative expression.

**Unity and empathy:** Achieved through deep relationships and mutual understanding formed.

**Confidence and well-being:** Evidenced by increased self-assurance, public performance, and supportive friendships contributing to happiness.

**Reducing prejudice:** Achieved insofar as personal bonds replaced stereotypes, fostering open-minded attitudes.

**Showcasing creativity:** Achieved via final performances and a published anthology, demonstrating the fresh and creative contributions of young people.

It is important to note that these outcomes are intertwined. For example, building confidence (objective 3) also helped dismantle arts barriers (objective 1) and enabled them to showcase creativity (objective 5). The holistic design of *Living Legends* meant that a single activity (like story exchange or performing a play) advanced multiple goals at once.

Below is a snapshot of some of the key performance indicators used to qualitatively map the outcomes of the *Living Legends* project:

- 23/23 young people participated in arts workshops (100% engagement in arts represents a barrier broken).
- 15/23 (65%) presented on stage by project end (others contributed off-stage; considering dropouts for legitimate reasons, effectively all active participants showcased something).
- 90%+ report making at least one close friend from the other community (informal measure via interviews and observed ties).
- 100% of organisers surveyed would likely agree objectives were met.
- Anecdotal reduction in fear of 'other'. This is difficult to quantify, but evidenced by strong desire to stay connected (i.e. all indicating prejudice was replaced by friendship).
- Tangible outputs: Anthology (one book) and final event (one showcase), which were delivered as planned.

Finally, it's worth noting that external validation might come when the final report (this document) and the anthology are shared with stakeholders. If the wider community responds positively, it further reinforces the success in showcasing what these young people can do when creative opportunities and access routes are made available to them.



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# CHALLENGES AND LEARNINGS

No project is without its hurdles, and *Living Legends* was no exception. However, challenges often bring valuable lessons. This section candidly reviews what didn't go perfectly and what the team learned, drawing on organiser/staff feedback (notably an interview with organisers as the project leads) and researcher observations. Importantly, the challenges encountered did not derail the project; rather, they provided insights for refining future initiatives.

## **LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES:**

Coordinating a cross-border project with three residential trips and multiple partners was inherently complex. **Logistics were very labour-intensive**, more so than anticipated. Tasks included travel arrangements, accommodation bookings, liaising with artists, managing consent and paperwork, monitoring health guidelines (i.e. a Covid outbreak risk), and budget tracking (the funding required monthly drawdowns, 'a cumbersome process' financially). These demands stretched the small project team.

*Learning: Hire dedicated project support.* In hindsight, organisers said they 'would have hired someone external in a project support role' just to handle logistics and admin. This would free creative and young people work staff to focus on engagement. It's a clear recommendation for future - budget permitting, have either an assistant or additional time allocated to support the coordinator to manage the moving parts of residential trips and partnership communications. Also, streamline financial administration where possible; while funder requirements can't change, perhaps negotiating fewer drawdown periods or having one finance point-person could ease that burden.

Another logistic note: Transportation and timing were challenging. Coaches running late and long drives sometimes cut into project time or left participants tired. Next time, the team might plan more buffer or arrange en-route rest stops with mini-activities to keep energy up.

## **PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT AND COMPOSITION:**

The recruitment approach was an open call through partner networks, which yielded the full cohort but with some imbalances:

The **gender skew** (approximately 15 female, 6 male, plus 2 others – as self reported in the initial questionnaire) was more lopsided than anticipated. Organisers had expected a mixed group from Belfast. This influenced group dynamics slightly (the girls tended to dominate discussions early on while some boys hung back), though by mid-project the mix worked fine. Still, having more male participation could have been beneficial for balance.

There was also a wide range of personality types and initial confidence levels. One observation was some extremely quiet individuals could have been better supported with peer buddies or preparatory sessions.

*Learning: Consider interview-based or guided selection.* The idea isn't to gate keep participation, but to ensure those who join understand the commitment and to curate a balanced mix (gender, interests, needs). An interview or at least a one-on-one introductory chat might also build early rapport and identify any support needs. Additionally, starting recruitment earlier (and casting a wider net) might increase the pool and allow more balanced selection.

If some participants are very shy or anxious, extra pre-engagement (like meeting them in their comfort zone or linking them with a friend) could help retention. That one parent quote reveals a young person nearly 'dropped out at the last minute' due to anxiety - thankfully they didn't, but a lesson is to have contingency or more reassurance for such cases (perhaps linking nervous participants to a designated mentor).

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## EXPECTATIONS VS REALITY OF CONTENT:

The project had a strong folklore and arts theme, but one key learning was that *'young people would be more into the creative, artistic side... when in reality the residential sold it'*. In other words, the fun of trips and friendships was the hook; many participants were less inherently interested in myths or art for art's sake at first.

Folklore content proved a bit niche; as noted, *'folklore generally [was] not of interest to most young people. The group enjoyed the 'doing' a lot more than the prepping or listening.'* This is a crucial insight. The stories of ancient legends didn't automatically captivate them until those were connected to something tangible or personal. Passive listening sessions (like a storyteller's long performance) were weaker points in engagement.

**Learning: Integrate content with action and youth interests.** Future projects might still use folklore or arts themes, but always paired with interactive elements (i.e., turning a legend into a game, or relating it to a current theme they care about). Also, framing the project in terms of what appeals to young people - travel, adventure, meeting new friends - is important for recruitment and early engagement. Essentially, lead with the 'fun and friends,' then weave the arts content in creatively. This is not to say drop the arts. Indeed, by the end they did enjoy the creative processes but how it's introduced matters. One strong recommendation is to involve young in co-designing content: ask them early on what kinds of creative activities they're curious about (music, film, digital storytelling?), then tailor workshops accordingly. The initial plan assumed certain art forms (poetry, theatre) would catch on; in practice, some did, and some didn't. Letting young people steer those choices could ensure great learnings. The initial application mentioned adjusting weighting of art forms to young people interest and the team did some of this, but it's a good principle to formally adopt.

Another related learning: **Don't expect instant enthusiasm for 'high culture.'** One project lead candidly advised, *'Don't expect young people to instantly love the arts or folklore'*. Patience and finding relatable angles is key. For example, connecting folklore themes to modern equivalents (heroes = superheroes, legends = viral stories) helped make it relevant. When an artist referenced a mythological hero, young peoples connected more when someone likened it to a Marvel movie character. This translation step is something facilitators can prepare for in the future.

## VENUE AND SCHEDULING LEARNINGS:

Each residential location had pros and cons:

- **Doolin (Clare):** Beautiful and inspiring, but quite remote. Travel was long, and some accommodations were a bit rustic. It worked well overall, but some participants found the dorms noisy or beds uncomfy (hence 'better sleep' came up as a Bud improvement).
- **Antrim (Sheep Island View):** According to organisers, this was the best setup – a purpose-built group hostel with good communal spaces and proximity to activities: *'Sheep's Head [sic] was more conducive to team building... Purpose built facilities can better cater for such a large group'*. By contrast, Carlingford was *'too confined'*. The adventure centre had lots to do but perhaps limited space/privacy, and since the group shrank, Carlingford ended up fine, but if all 23 had come, it might have felt cramped.
- **Carlingford's** timing (late July) collided with holiday season, leading to lower attendance. Also a Covid hiccup - unpredictable, but a reality of current times that some got sick.

Learning: **Choose venues wisely and time thoughtfully.** For future, it would advantageous to pick accommodations designed for young people groups (with ample space, breakout rooms, outdoor areas) even if slightly less 'picturesque.' Mid-summer could be avoided for final events when many families take holidays; perhaps end June or early July might have been better. Also, having a backup plan if key participants can't attend final showcase (i.e., maybe filming segments earlier or doing a secondary showcase online for those absent) could be considered to ensure everyone's contribution is recognised.

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## STAFFING AND BURNOUT:

Running overnight trips is intense for staff too. The youth workers and organisers put in long hours ensuring participant well-being. It was notable to see how personally and emotionally invested the staff became, which is wonderful but can lead to burnout if not managed.

The project demanded roles beyond the usual – staff found themselves acting as chauffeurs, chaperones, first-aiders, and counsellors. At times, managing 23 sets of needs (from dietary to emotional) was taxing.

**Learning: Team care and clear role division.** Ensuring enough staff or volunteers are on hand so duties can be rotated is crucial. Also, having an 'on-call' rotation at residentials so each staff gets a bit of rest/off-time would be healthy. The comment about hiring project support also ties in here – share the load. Another learning was perhaps to involve more local young people leaders (i.e., from NIYF or Limerick partners) on the residentials to spread supervision.

Despite the hard work, staff observed the benefit of working directly with young people (instead of through teachers, as often done). Accordingly, additional adults joined workshops as the project progressed (i.e. two more staff from Limerick joined the Louth residential). *'When you are with young people for days at a time, you are more aware of their needs and preferences which makes the work easier'*. So the effort pays off in staff development. They learned to trust the process and now feel more confident to do similar projects.

## YOUNG PEOPLE LEADERSHIP VS ADULT GUIDANCE:

The project aimed to be youth-led as much as possible, but finding the right balance was a learning curve. Early on, organisers supported a lot of freedom (i.e. a loosely structured first evening in Doolin after Rab's story, which some young people then spent partially on their phones or in cliques). Later, more guided fun was introduced (i.e. interactive ice-breaking games) which actually increased young people interaction and fun.

**Learning: Youth voice and choice are paramount, but structure is still needed.** A quote from the researcher's notes observes how *'clear but fluid, relatable language and consistently showing respect...leaders met them where they were'*. This describes staff hitting that sweet spot. Initially, the team may have been too hands-off in parts, expecting teens to self-direct. The learning is that providing a framework or gentle prompts helps young people to engage fully. For instance, setting up the WhatsApp group, planning icebreakers, or having a daily agenda posted gave necessary scaffolding.

Also, the Lundy Model emphasis taught them that *space* and *voice* don't mean absence of adult input, but rather creating the right conditions. Adults still need to facilitate actively at times (model an activity, enforce a ground rule, etc.), which the *Living Legends* team adjusted to effectively by the second residential.

## ARTIST/FACILITATOR COORDINATION:

Bringing in external artists was a highlight but also presented minor hiccups:

Some artists didn't tailor their approach to the group (i.e. not introducing themselves fully, or using references that didn't land). Possibly because they weren't fully briefed on the project's flow or the context of the particular audience.

**Learning: More attention to briefing and integration of guest facilitators.** Suggestions include having a short call or meeting with each artist beforehand to align on tone and format, providing them with a profile of the group (ages, interests, what they've done so far), and maybe even involving young people in introducing the artist or setting expectations ('here's what we hope to get from your session'). One idea raised was an online intro with each artist in advance or a template they follow to ensure consistent session intros. Also, pairing artists so that no session is led in isolation might help (i.e., a young people worker co-facilitates to draw connections to prior activities). These steps would ensure even greater impact and smoother transitions in the project.

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## **HEALTH AND SAFETY MATTERS:**

While there were no major incidents, a few small things cropped up:

Some allergies flared up (likely due to outdoor environment or food). Having a nurse or clear medical plan is standard, and they did manage these, but it's a reminder to double-check all health info and pack backups (i.e., extra allergy medications).

The phone policy was a tug-of-war. The charter's 'no phones during sessions' was respected overall, but enforcement had to be diplomatic. There was one situation of a participant sneaking screen time mid-workshop, which a facilitator addressed privately (no punishment, just a reminder). This is minor but underscores how ubiquitous device use is and how it can challenge focus. The team learned to pick battles, allowing phone use during free time, encouraging group selfies (for bonding) but collecting phones during critical sessions to avoid distractions.

## **COVID AND CONTINGENCY:**

As noted, a couple of participants missed out due to positive COVID testing towards the end. In 2025, this is still a risk for group events.

*Learning: **Build contingency for sudden absences.*** Perhaps hybrid participation options or recording key activities for those who miss them can be considered. It's tough to prevent, but being mentally prepared that not all will finish the journey (and having ways to include them in spirit, i.e., mention them in speeches or send them care packages) is important. The team did send well-wishes and a copy of the anthology to those absent, which was a kind gesture.

## **MAINTAINING ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN RESIDENTIALS:**

There was a gap between April and July sessions. The project attempted ongoing engagement through postcards and local workshops. The Belfast group, being an existing club, met regularly, but Limerick participants were more dispersed. Limerick did have artist workshops (the fashion/costume one with designer Claire Garvey, etc.), but attendance varied. Keeping the momentum in interim periods was a mild challenge, as young people had exams and other commitments in early summer.

*Learning: **Structure intermittent engagement.*** Plan clear interim touchpoints such as a mid-point virtual meetup for the whole group or a collective project (like contributing to an online collage or short video together). The postcards were a nice idea but perhaps not greatly impactful (no strong feedback on them). Maybe a shared online platform (moderated) for them to post updates on their creative pieces would work. However, credit where due, the WhatsApp group formed organically and did a lot to keep them connected socially.

## **FOOD AND ENERGY MANAGEMENT:**

Young people get hungry and that affects mood. The team thankfully anticipated this by stocking snacks and not skimping on meals. One of the simplest yet most emphasised learning from the organisers: *'Making food and snacks readily available is critical because it affects everything.... mood, energy, engagement.'*

*Learning: **Feed participants well and often.*** As glib as it may sound, always have more snacks than you think you need! Also consider hydration and rest - a few participants noted being tired from late nights. Building in a bit more sleep or quiet time might have been beneficial. Young people will always want to stay up socialising, but maybe designate one night as an earlier lights-out, or a short siesta time after lunch, to keep energy up for intensive sessions.

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**What Went Particularly Well?** It's also important to note which approaches worked well so they are repeated in future initiatives or continuation of Living Legends.

- The **youth-led group charter** was a success. It set the right norms and young people adhered to it, even referencing it themselves. This practice should be replicated in future projects.
- The presence of an **artist-in-residence throughout a residential** (Rab stayed the whole time in Doolin) was noted as '*a great model... it encouraged conversations, created familiarity, and better participation*'. That consistency versus fly-in-fly-out workshop leaders/facilitators is really valuable. So, for future, if possible, have key creative mentors stay with the group longer to build rapport.
- Cross-border pairing in activities - always mixing the groups - was effective in encouraging interaction and ultimately friendship. That is a practice to continue.
- Youth workers integrating with the fun (playing games, dancing along) rather than standing aside contributed greatly to relatability and therefore trust. Organisers should continue fostering that 'co-adventurer' vibe.

These insights, both big and small, have informed the recommendations in the next section. They ensure that future projects on a shared island - and even the continuation or expansion of *Living Legends* - can build on this experience, amplifying what worked and avoiding or mitigating what didn't. As one organiser aptly put it, '*Living Legends was very much about learning in motion and research in action.*' The team was learning alongside the young people. Embracing that mind set, the final section translates those lessons into concrete recommendations.



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# RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the successes and challenges of, this section outlines recommendations for similar youth cross-border creative projects in the future. These recommendations are intended for organisers, funders, and practitioners planning projects that bring young people together through arts and storytelling. The guidance is practical, informed by real-world experience, and aimed at enhancing both impact and efficiency.

## **1. INVEST IN INCREASED PROJECT COORDINATION:**

Large-scale young people projects with multiple residentials require significant logistical management. It is highly recommended that project calls allow for the **allocation of additional resources (i.e. time) for the project coordinator or support officer** whose primary role is handling logistics (travel, accommodation, scheduling, artist liaison, parental communications, consent paperwork, etc.). As learned, relying on core creative staff to juggle these tasks can lead to burnout and divert focus from young people engagement. Extra time allocated to the coordinator can ensure smoother operations, such as confirming buses and backup drivers, managing contingency plans, and keeping everyone informed. It would also facilitate the handling of administrative burdens such as funding drawdown reports to free up the creative team. Additional time may seem like an extra overhead, but it pays off in a well-run project where facilitators can concentrate on quality of experience.

## **2. HAVE AN EARLY AND TARGETED RECRUITMENT STRATEGY:**

Start recruiting participants well in advance, and consider a more targeted selection process to ensure commitment and balance. Instead of a broad open call alone, **use interviews or intake meetings** with interested young people (and their parents/guardians if appropriate) to set expectations and assess fit. This isn't about cherry picking participants, it's about making sure they understand the commitment (attending all residentials, participating in creative tasks, etc.) and are enthusiastic. Early recruitment also allows time to achieve diversity goals (i.e., reaching out specifically to underrepresented genders or communities to get a good mix). If gender imbalance appears, you can make extra efforts to recruit the lesser represented group (for example, partner with a boys' school or young people club to nominate participants). Also, have a waitlist or slight over-recruitment in case of dropouts, so the group remains a healthy size even if a few can't continue.

## **3. ENHANCE PRE-PROJECT ORIENTATION:**

Prepare participants better for what's to come. Hold an **orientation session** (virtually or in-person) before the first residential. This can include ice-breakers among just their city group and perhaps a moderated virtual 'hello' between the two groups. Use this time to introduce the Narrative 4 story exchange concept in a low-stakes way and to collaboratively develop a basic group agreement on expectations. Providing a brief welcome pack (with info on other group's city, fun facts, maybe a message board where they can share a fun fact about themselves) can spark initial curiosity and comfort. Orientation is also a chance to address anxieties. Given one parent's note that they thought their teen might drop out last minute, an effective orientation can reduce such last-minute jitters by building familiarity and excitement.

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#### 4. STRUCTURE CROSS-BORDER INTERACTION FROM THE OUTSET:

One of *Living Legends*' immense strengths was encouraging interaction between the two groups early (postcards, WhatsApp). This approach could be formalised: **pair or buddy participants across the border from early on**. For example, assign pen-pal pairs or small mixed-city teams to do a fun task before the first meet (like creating a joint playlist or exchanging slang words unique to their city). This gives them a point of connection when they meet and can break ice faster. Continue these cross-border pairings in all activities: room assignments, work groups, etc., to prevent natural cliques from the same-city sticking together. By the second residential, the benefits were evident in *Living Legends*.

#### 5. RETAIN THE YOUTH LED CHARTER AS STANDARD PRACTICE:

Continue the practice of co-creating a group charter with the participants at the start. This fosters ownership of behaviour norms (respect, no judgement, etc.). Revisit the charter at each subsequent meeting to reinforce it; *Living Legends* did this in Antrim and it was very effective.

#### 6. BALANCE FUN AND FORMAL – EMBRACE THE 'RESIDENTIAL MAGIC':

The residential component of *Living Legends* is what truly engaged the young people. So when designing future projects, **lean into the power of trips and fun group experiences as the core engagement tool**. Continue to plan ample unstructured fun time (campfire, sports, etc.) alongside structured workshops. Those organic moments often yield as much bonding and insight as formal sessions. At the same time, as seen throughout the project, maintain enough structure to keep things on track.

#### 7. MAKE CONTENT YOUTH-RELEVANT AND CO-CREATED:

When it comes to arts and storytelling content:

- **Integrate young peoples' interests:** Survey participants on what art forms or topics intrigue them. If many are into music, incorporate songwriting or beats; if some love visual arts, include drawing or photography options. During *Living Legends*, flexibility (adding more music, etc.) paid dividends.
- **Modernise folklore and theme delivery:** Continue to use local myths and legends as inspiration, but always connect them to current young people culture. For instance, frame a folklore story as akin to a modern movie plot or a videogame quest to spark interest. When using artists, brief them to tie their content to themes teens care about (identity, friendship, social media, etc.). One recommendation from the evaluation was for facilitators to ask participants their expectations or hopes at the start of a session. It gets young people thinking about what they want out of it and gives the facilitator a chance to tailor their session, when and where necessary.
- **Choice and voice in creative output:** Allow participants to choose their final creative format. Some may prefer writing a poem, others a short play, others might want to do a dance or make a short video. The objective is to showcase their creativity, and that can happen through diverse mediums. Narrative 4's story exchange can be expanded to 'story creation' in any form. The final showcase could even accommodate a short film or an art gallery if that's what young people come up with. The point is to let them play to their strengths and interests, which will yield more passionate output.
- **Plan for process support:** Recognise that creative processes can be challenging (they 'struggled with the process but enjoyed the outcomes'). So build in creative coaching: maybe assign each group an artist mentor who guides them through writer's block or rehearsal nerves. These could be young assistant facilitators closer in age who the participants might relate to easily.

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## 8. BUILD IN ROBUST FACILITATOR BRIEFING AND SUPPORT:

For any external artists or facilitators brought in, establish a clear briefing and integration protocol:

- Share a one-page profile of the group (age range, what they've done so far, their general interests, any special considerations like attention span or group dynamics).
- Emphasise what tone to set: i.e., make it interactive, tell them if they use slang or pop references to ensure they're up-to-date (maybe avoid those entirely unless sure, or ask the group about their own references).
- If possible, arrange a short introductory meeting with young people via Zoom before the session, as mentioned in the evaluation. Even a 15-minute hello can break the ice and let the artist gauge the group.
- Ensure facilitators know the schedule context (are they first thing in morning when the group is fresh, or after lunch when energy dips, etc.) so they can adapt accordingly.
- Encourage artists to articulate the 'why' of their session to young people (it helps when they know why they're learning a skill or hearing a story).
- Also, have a plan for co-facilitation: pair visiting artists with a young people worker from the project who can help translate cultural gaps or jump in to assist if something isn't clicking.

## 9. PRIORITISE WELL-BEING: FOOD, REST AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY:

As basic as it sounds, the formula 'happy bellies = happy participants' really proved true throughout *Living Legends*. Always **budget generously for food and snacks**. Over-cater rather than under-cater, especially with growing adolescents. Variety helps too (some healthy options, some treats), as does dietary accommodation.

Schedule wise, avoid over-packing the day. Plan at least one hour of free time in late afternoon and some wind-down time at night. Consider enforcing a reasonable lights-out or quiet time, as sleep is crucial (some young people cited lack of sleep as a minor complaint). A well-rested group is more participative and positive.

For emotional well-being, maintain the voluntary, opt-in approach to sensitive activities. Continue to remind them that they can step back if needed (as was done, i.e., one pair not performing and that being okay). Have a support plan in case a story exchange triggers strong emotions, i.e., a designated staff member available for one-on-one chats afterwards. Thankfully in *Living Legends*, young people felt comfortable and supportive of each other in heavy moments, but having mental health first-aid ready (maybe a counsellor on call or a partnership with a young people mental health organisation) is a good safety net.

Also, leverage peer support: perhaps introduce a 'big brother/big sister' system where returning participants (if a multi-year programme emerges from this pilot) mentor new ones, or within the group have them check on each other. In Carlingford, young people comforting each other during a conversation about bereavement was a striking thing to see. Fostering that kind of caring culture from early on will make the space safer for sharing.



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## 10. FLEXIBILITY AND ADAPTATION:

One of the biggest takeaways from *Living Legends* was the importance of being flexible and responsive. Future project teams should adopt this mind set of **iterative project and evaluation design** -use each day or phase's feedback to tweak the next. For instance, if attention wanes in a 60-minute talk, shorten future talks and add an activity. If a planned outdoor event gets rained out, have a creative indoor game ready (maybe an improvisation contest or a story circle). The ability to pivot is key, especially with young people who can sometimes be unpredictable in mood and engagement.

Build some slack into the itinerary for spontaneous opportunities: in *Living Legends*, when a serendipitous moment like a local céilí dance happened, the team went with it. Encourage staff to seize those unexpected chances for cultural exchange or fun as they often yield more impact than what was on paper.

## 11. CONTINUE EMPHASISING YOUNG PEOPLE OWNERSHIP:

From planning through execution, involve young people in meaningful ways. Perhaps form a **youth advisory sub-group** from among the participants to get involved in shaping the final event or contributing to the evaluation. For example, a few particularly engaged participants could be asked to design the final showcase event or to co-write an introduction for the anthology. This not only empowers them further but ensures the project stays relevant to its audience.

Likewise, in evaluation (like writing reports or presenting results), include young people voice. Could a couple of participants speak at the project's closing or at the launch of the anthology? Hearing directly from them, as we have through quotes in this report, is powerful for stakeholders and honours their agency.

## 12. STRENGTHEN POST-PROJECT CONTINUITY:

One challenge is always the 'what next?' after an intense short-term project. Relationships and momentum have been built so the question remains as how best to sustain or capitalise on them?

- Plan a **post-project reunion or showcase** (beyond just the immediate performance). For instance, when the anthology is published, hold a book launch event a few months later and invite participants, their families, and maybe the public. This can reignite connections and also celebrate their work widely.
- Provide information on other opportunities: link participants to other arts or leadership programmes (perhaps through Creative Ireland or partner organisations) so their journey doesn't end here. *Living Legends* increased their confidence; giving them a next step (like volunteering, young people councils, creative competitions) can keep that growth trajectory.
- Encourage them to remain a network. You might facilitate a closed social media group for alumni or an annual meetup if feasible. Considering the cross-border friendship theme, even a yearly 'Living Legends Alumni Day' could be organised, perhaps piggybacking on another event where travel can be funded.
- Solicit long-term feedback: maybe six months later, do a follow-up survey or focus group to see how they reflect on the experience and if it had lasting impacts. This not only provides valuable impact data but also shows participants that the organisers care beyond the project's official timeline.

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### 13. DOCUMENT AND SHARE LEARNINGS WIDELY:

Finally, take what has been learned and share it with the broader sector. Many youth projects on the island can benefit from these insights. Consider writing a case study or presenting at a youth work conference about the *Living Legends*' approach (the accompaniment evaluation model, etc.). Within Narrative 4 and partner organisations, incorporate these learnings into staff training. The Creative Ireland funders also appreciate seeing lessons as it shows reflective practice. This closes the loop by turning project experience into better practice sector-wide.

By implementing these recommendations, future projects can build on the robust and reflexive foundation laid by *Living Legends*. The core idea is to keep young people front and centre - their needs, voices and creativity - while providing the right scaffolding and support to let them thrive. Minor adjustments in planning, content delivery and support structures will enhance outcomes and make the experience smoother for everyone involved.

*Living Legends* has proven what is possible: Young people from different and perhaps divided communities can come together to create art, share meaningful experiences and form lasting bonds. The recommendations above aim to ensure that the next iteration, or similar initiatives, can replicate those successes even more efficiently and effectively.

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*What would I say to someone thinking about doing this kind of thing...like doing this project. I would say go for it. You might be scared at first because you're not really sure what it's all about or who you will even meet along the way. But just grab life by the balls and do it like. You'll be delighted with yourself...pure proud of yourself at the end of it all'*

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## APPENDICES

Note: The following appendices – available on request - contain supplemental material referenced in the report. These include sample forms, tools, and placeholders for visual documentation of the project.

**Appendix A: Young people Consent Form (Sample)** – Copy of the *Living Legends* Project Young Person Consent Form used to inform participants about the evaluation and record their agreement. This form covers confidentiality, voluntary participation, and permission to use quotes/artwork.

**Appendix B: Evaluation Tools and Surveys** – Examples of the evaluation instruments: *Baseline Survey Questionnaire* (from SurveyMonkey) – questions on creative confidence, empathy, well-being, etc., with aggregated results.

*Midway Reflective Journal Template* – ‘Living Legends: Midway Reflections’ booklet given during Residential 2, including prompts about favourite activities, learning from story exchange, emotional check-in (with emoji scale), and creative questions like ‘The Legend of My Journey’.

*Vox Pop Interview Guide* – a brief set of prompt questions used by the researcher for on-the-spot interviews (i.e., ‘What’s one thing you’ll tell your friends about this trip?’).

**Appendix C: Project Schedule Samples** – Detailed agendas for reference:

*Residential 1 Schedule (Doolin, April 2025)* – Outline of activities (storyteller session, island visit, first story exchange, etc.).

*Residential 2 Schedule (Antrim, July 2025)* – Itinerary excerpt showing group agreement session, Festival in a Van performance, story exchange with themes, artist workshop, Giant’s Causeway tour, reflection session.

*Residential 3 Schedule (Carlingford, July 2025)* – Summary of final exchange activities (team-building game, showcase rehearsal, final performance program).

**Appendix D: Creative Outputs** i.e. Anthology

**Appendix E: Living Legends Charter** – A reproduction of the group’s agreed charter of conduct (as co-created in Residential 1 and revisited later), listing principles like ‘Be present – no phones, Respect, No judgment, Active listening...’.