

Clár Éire Ildánach  
*Creative Ireland*  
Programme



**BALLYHOURA**  
DEVELOPMENT CLG



## Final Report

### Executive Summary

Building Bridges – A Community Drama Project was a two-year initiative designed to engage and empower young Travellers aged 15 to 24 in East Limerick who were not in education, employment or training. Rooted in inclusion, participation and creative expression, the project offered a safe and supportive environment where participants could explore their aspirations, develop coping strategies and contribute their perspectives to issues affecting their lives.

Co-designed with the participants, the programme used participatory drama techniques to build confidence, foster self-expression and develop problem-solving and social skills. Activities included character development, metaphor work and collaborative storytelling, enabling young people to share experiences on topics such as school, marriage, fears and personal ambitions. Drama was also introduced as a practical coping tool, helping participants manage societal pressures.

Over 24 months, the project engaged 20 young Travellers through a structured, multi-phase approach. The first phase focused on staffing, recruitment and forming a steering group. From months 6 to 18, four main blocks of drama workshops were delivered, complemented by additional sessions supported through SICAP to maintain engagement. The final phase featured performances, including an Inner Dialogue event attended by key stakeholders, and the production of a short documentary.

Coordinated by Ballyhoura Development in partnership with Friar's Gate Theatre and TASC, the project was supported by ongoing action research. This evaluation measured outcomes before, during and after delivery, providing evidence of increased confidence, greater inclusion in community

life and stronger youth voice. Key findings highlighted the value of integrating the project with other supports and training, the importance of wraparound services, and the need to balance flexibility with structured planning.

The results demonstrate that participatory drama can be a powerful approach for engaging disadvantaged youth, offering both personal development and social inclusion benefits. The report concludes with recommendations for scaling the model to support other marginalised groups, ensuring that young people are heard, seen and valued.

## **2. Introduction and Background**

Building Bridges was developed in response to the persistent social and cultural exclusion experienced by young Travellers in East Limerick who were not in education, employment or training. Evidence shows that Travellers in Ireland face significant barriers to participation in civic, cultural and educational life, often linked to discrimination, social stigma and a lack of culturally responsive services (Pavee Point, 2024; Watson et al., 2017). These barriers begin early, with research highlighting high rates of early school leaving and lower access to further education or training opportunities among Traveller young people (Carron-Kee et al., 2024).

The project was designed to provide an inclusive and creative space where participants could explore their identities, voice their perspectives and imagine new possibilities for the future. Central to the design was the belief that young people are experts in their own lives and that meaningful change is most likely to occur when they are actively involved in shaping the programmes that affect them. The co-design process ensured that the content of the workshops reflected the lived realities, cultural values and priorities of the group, rather than being imposed from the outside (Creative Ireland, 2023).

Participatory drama was chosen as the primary method because of its proven ability to encourage self-expression, build confidence and develop problem-solving skills in a safe and supported environment (Neelands, 2009). Techniques such as character development, metaphor and collaborative storytelling were used to explore personal and collective experiences. This approach allowed participants to address sensitive issues, including discrimination, mental health and societal expectations, in ways that maintained emotional safety and fostered empathy within the group.

Ballyhoura Development led the initiative, working in partnership with Friar's Gate Theatre and TASC (Think Tank for Action on Social Change). Ballyhoura Development's long-standing relationships with the Traveller community in East Limerick, built over years of community development work, were

instrumental in gaining trust and sustaining participation. Friar’s Gate contributed expertise in socially engaged arts practice, while TASC supported the integration of action research principles into the project to monitor progress and capture learning.

Building Bridges also recognised that creative engagement alone is not always sufficient to overcome the deep-rooted challenges faced by marginalised youth. The programme therefore integrated wraparound supports and opportunities for personal development. Alongside drama workshops, participants took part in visual arts activities, mindfulness sessions and practical training such as driver theory preparation, construction safety and manual handling certification. This holistic approach reflected findings from the All-Ireland Traveller Health Study, which emphasises the need for interconnected supports to address the overlapping social and economic barriers faced by Travellers (School of Public Health et al., 2010).

Public sharing of creative work was an important element of the model. Performances and film screenings, such as the Inner Dialogue piece, provided a platform for participants to communicate their perspectives directly to audiences that included community members, service providers and policymakers. These opportunities not only helped challenge stereotypes but also strengthened participants’ sense of agency and belonging (Creative Ireland, 2023).

The project’s combination of co-design, participatory arts and wraparound support created a model that addressed both the personal development of participants and the broader societal barriers they face. The experience of Building Bridges contributes to a growing body of evidence on how culturally responsive, community-driven arts initiatives can advance inclusion and give voice to seldom heard young people, aligning with commitments in national policy frameworks such as the Creative Youth Plan 2023–2027.

### **3. Outline of team and key participants**

#### *Profile of Key Organisations*

**Ballyhoura Development CLG** is a community-led local development company serving communities across East Limerick and North Cork. It delivers a wide range of social inclusion, rural development, and lifelong learning programmes, with a particular focus on supporting disadvantaged groups and building sustainable, vibrant communities. Ballyhoura Development has established strong, long-term relationships with Traveller families in the region, providing a trusted foundation for the Building Bridges project.

**TASC – Think Tank for Action on Social Change** is an independent public policy research organisation dedicated to addressing inequality and promoting inclusive economic and social

policy in Ireland. TASC combines research, public engagement, and policy advocacy to inform national debates on equality and social justice. Its expertise in participatory research and policy analysis ensured that the Building Bridges evaluation was grounded in robust evidence and connected to wider policy frameworks.

**Friar's Gate Theatre**, based in Kilmallock, County Limerick, is an arts centre committed to accessible and community-focused arts programming. With a track record in socially engaged theatre and youth arts, the theatre provided artistic leadership, creative facilitation, and performance space, helping participants to develop skills in drama, storytelling, and public performance.

### **Outline of Team and Key Participants**

The Building Bridges project was delivered by a multidisciplinary team, combining expertise in community development, participatory arts and research. This blend of skills ensured that the programme was both culturally responsive and evidence informed.

#### *Project Coordination*

The role of Project Coordinator was initially held by Jacki Hehir of Ballyhoura Development CLG until June 2024, after which Laura Moloney McCarthy took over the position. Both coordinators were responsible for the overall management of the project, maintaining strong relationships with participants, partners and funders, and ensuring delivery met agreed objectives.

#### *Traveller Peer Support*

From the outset, the project placed importance on peer-led engagement. Martin Ward, a Traveller Peer Link Worker with Ballyhoura Development CLG, supported participant involvement until July 2024, providing culturally relevant guidance and encouragement. This role was later complemented by the appointment of Aoife Power as Support Worker in September 2024.

#### *Creative Practitioner*

The drama programme was led by Aisling Ryan, an independent drama facilitator contracted by Friar's Gate Theatre, whose participatory approach formed the creative backbone of the project.

#### *Research Roles*

Dr. Shana Cohen of TASC acted as Democracy Researcher, and Sara Singleton of TASC served as Social Inclusion Researcher, embedding action research methods throughout the project to capture outcomes and learning.

### *Participants*

Over the course of the project, 20 young Travellers aged between 15 and 24 engaged in structured drama workshops and supplementary activities. All were from East Limerick and not in education, employment or training at the time of joining. Participation was voluntary, with young people contributing directly to the design and focus of activities.

### *Steering Group*

A steering group, chaired by Nora Mooney from Kilmallock Traveller Women's Group, met periodically to guide the project. Representatives from local statutory agencies and community organisations that support Travellers, as well as representatives from the project participants attended, ensuring that the programme remained relevant to community needs and connected to broader supports. Meetings took place on 29 February 2024, 13 May 2024, 11 November 2024 and 15 April 2025.

## **4. Outputs and Outcomes**

The Building Bridges delivered a significant range of outputs and outcomes across the project period, directly aligning with the agreed objectives set out in Sections 4 and 5 of the Service Level Agreement (SLA). Activities were structured to ensure that participants – in particular young Traveller men not in education, training, or employment – gained creative, personal, and vocational skills, while also contributing to broader social inclusion and community engagement goals. The project combined structured drama facilitation, targeted training, additional creative and wellbeing supports, and the development of original performances, ensuring a multi-layered approach to impact.

### **4.1 Steering Group Engagement**

The Steering Group played an essential role in guiding and shaping the project. It was composed of representatives from agencies and services whose decisions and actions directly influence the lives of young Travellers, alongside members of the Traveller community and political representatives.

The group met on four occasions – **29 February 2024, 13 May 2024, 11 November 2024, and 15 April 2025** – with each meeting building on the previous one to refine project delivery and ensure alignment with both community needs and SLA objectives.

From the outset, the Steering Group was led by the Traveller community, with **Nora Mooney** appointed as Chairperson. Attendees included:

- Representatives from the Traveller community in East Limerick
- Ballyhoura Development CLG
- TASC (Think-tank for Action on Social Change)
- Friar's Gate Theatre
- Limerick Arts Office
- An Garda Síochána
- HSE, DSP, and Tusla
- CYPSC Limerick
- Limerick Youth Service and Foróige

The initial meeting in February 2024 introduced the project, discussed its objectives, and invited input from members on specific elements. At this stage, Ballyhoura Development was in the process of recruiting a Traveller Peer Worker, and Friar's Gate was appointing a Drama Facilitator. Early discussions also focused on how to best support young Travellers in the region to participate. Subsequent meetings were used to review progress, discuss participant engagement, and plan for public showcases.

#### **4.2 Additional Activities and Supports**

Beyond the core drama programme, the project secured additional funding through SICAP, CYPSC, and the "As Darragh Did" fund to deliver a series of supplementary activities over summer and into late autumn 2024. These were designed to enhance integration, develop practical skills, and support wellbeing. The activities were separate from the main drama workshops but complementary in their impact.

#### **Creative and Therapeutic Workshops**

- *Paint Punch*: An art-based workshop enabling self-expression through painting, culminating in an exhibition at The Gaff's new building launch.
- *Songwriting Workshops*: Sessions that combined lyrical composition and music-making, encouraging creative storytelling.
- *Equine Therapy*: Therapeutic horse-based sessions promoting confidence, mindfulness, and emotional regulation.
- *Mindfulness Sessions*: Focused on stress reduction, emotional awareness, and mental wellbeing.

#### **Health and Fitness**

- *Boxercise and Circuit Training*: Energetic classes combining boxing techniques with cardiovascular exercise, improving fitness and discipline.

## Skills Development and Certification

- *Driver Theory Preparation*: Supported participants in preparing for the driver theory test, complemented by a driving experience day.
- *Safe Pass Training*: Health and safety certification for those entering construction.
- *Manual Handling Certification*: Practical workplace safety training.

## Community Engagement and Civic Participation

Participants attended and contributed to events such as:

- The **Youth Led Local Development Erasmus Project – Strengthening Young Voices within the Community** event, discussing how disadvantaged young people view democracy in Europe.
- **The Gaff Launch Event** (with Paint Punch artworks displayed).
- A **TASC Workshop in Dublin** on democracy in Ireland.
- **The Gaff Film Screening** in Abbeyfeale.

## Traveller Wellbeing through Creativity Showcase – 13 November 2024, IMMA

Participants attended this national celebration of Traveller creative work, supported by the Limerick City Traveller Health Programme. The event included contributions from Traveller projects across Ireland and a keynote by HSE CEO Bernard Gloster, who publicly commended the Building Bridges initiative.

## 4.3 Core Drama Workshops

The central strand of the project comprised four structured blocks of drama workshops:

- **Block 1**: Commenced 21 March 2024
- **Block 2**: Commenced 21 May 2024
- **Block 3**: Commenced 11 November 2024
- **Block 4**: Commenced 18 February 2025

In addition, **20 extra drama workshops** were delivered with SICAP funding, allowing for deeper creative development and more regular participant engagement.

## 4.4 Showcases and Performances

A defining feature of the project was the development and public presentation of original participant-led performances, ensuring that creative work translated into tangible public outputs.

- **Live Script Reading – OECD Rural Development Policy Review Visit (24 June 2024)**  
A group of ten participants performed an original script reading reflecting identity, community, and rural youth challenges. The audience included OECD peer reviewers from multiple countries.
- **Traveller Education Change (TEC) Project Report Launch (23 January 2025)**  
A two-person “inner dialogue” piece was performed at Mary Immaculate College, adding a creative dimension to a research report on Traveller education.
- **“Inner Dialogue” – Mental Health Performance and Animation**  
Developed entirely by participants, this work tackled the stigma surrounding mental health in the Traveller community. It premiered live at Friar’s Gate on 15 April 2025 during a Steering Group meeting, followed by a second live performance and the premiere screening of the animated version at the Traveller Pride event on 26 May 2025.

#### 4.5 Evaluation Report

The evaluation report is provided as a separate addendum to this final report. Prepared by TASC in collaboration with Ballyhoura Development CLG it records the project’s aims, methods and outcomes and offers guidance for future policy and practice.

The evaluation draws on co-design workshops, focus groups, interviews, audience surveys, facilitator observations and a review of creative work including scripts, film and visual art. It summarises evidence of increased confidence, communication skills and civic participation among the young Traveller participants and documents positive shifts in audience attitudes toward Traveller culture and mental health after the public performances.

This final report provides an overview of key findings, while the full evaluation/policy paper presents detailed analysis and recommendations for scaling and replication.

#### 4.6 Outcomes in Relation to SLA Objectives

These combined activities and outputs delivered measurable progress towards SLA Section 4 and 5 objectives:

- **Improved employability** through accredited training and driver theory preparation.
- **Increased confidence and independence** via performance opportunities and skill certification.
- **Enhanced social inclusion** by integrating participants into arts, cultural, and civic spaces.
- **Stronger civic participation** through democratic workshops and engagement with policymaking audiences.
- **Health and wellbeing benefits** from creative, cultural, and therapeutic activities.

- **Breaking cycles of disadvantage** by intervening early with targeted, inclusive programming.

## 5. Public Engagement Outcomes

Public engagement was a defining element of the Building Bridges, both as a way of sharing the creative work of participants and as a deliberate strategy to spark dialogue, challenge stereotypes, and connect young Traveller voices to audiences at multiple levels – local, regional, national, and international. These events provided vital opportunities for participants to present their lived experiences directly to the public, policymakers, and arts practitioners, ensuring their perspectives were both seen and heard in spaces that often exclude them.

The engagement strategy unfolded across the project’s lifetime, moving from intimate local gatherings to high-profile national and international events. Performances, exhibitions, and screenings not only showcased artistic achievements but also positioned participants as cultural contributors, advocates, and storytellers. The impact of this public work was amplified through targeted media coverage and an active social media presence.

### 5.1 Audience Engagement and Participation

A key strength of the project lay in the quality and diversity of its public engagements, which ensured that participants’ work reached audiences that could influence policy, shape public opinion, and strengthen community cohesion. Performances were carefully staged to reflect themes that emerged organically from the drama workshops: identity, belonging, mental health, discrimination, and rural youth experience, while also maintaining authenticity to Traveller culture and voice.

Notable public performances and appearances included:

- **OECD Rural Development Policy Review Visit – 24 June 2024**

Ten participants performed a live script reading developed through the drama workshops, exploring identity, community, and the pressures faced by young people in rural areas. The performance formed part of an official OECD peer review visit to East Limerick and was attended by approximately 40 delegates, including representatives from Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The reading was followed by a facilitated discussion that allowed delegates to speak directly with the young men about their perspectives, linking lived experience to rural development policy considerations. The *Limerick Leader* reported on the event, highlighting the innovative use of community drama to inform policymaking.

- Traveller Education Change (TEC) Project Report Launch – 23 January 2025**

Participants performed a two-person “inner dialogue” piece at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. This powerful work examined the challenges, internal struggles, and resilience associated with Traveller educational journeys. It formed a creative response to a Participatory Action Research project led by the Limerick Traveller Network. Attendees, including academics, policymakers, educators, and Traveller community representatives, described the piece as one of the most compelling aspects of the event. The *Limerick Post* carried coverage that commended the emotional depth of the performance.
- “Inner Dialogue” Live Performances – 15 April and 26 May 2025**

First presented as a four-person piece at Friar’s Gate Theatre during a Steering Group meeting, “Inner Dialogue” was later performed during Traveller Pride celebrations at the same venue. The second event also marked the premiere screening of the animated version, expanding the work’s accessibility beyond live audiences.
- Traveller Wellbeing through Creativity Showcase – 13 November 2024, Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA)**

Building Bridges participants attended and contributed to this national showcase, which brought together Traveller-led creative projects from across the country. Supported by the Limerick City Traveller Health Programme, the event was addressed by HSE CEO Bernard Gloster, who praised the Building Bridges initiative for its role in supporting Traveller wellbeing through creativity.
- The Gaff Arts Space Launch and Abbeyfeale Film Screening**

Participants’ “Paint Punch” artworks were exhibited as part of The Gaff’s official opening, providing a prominent platform for their visual expression. They also attended a community film screening in Abbeyfeale, fostering connections with the broader arts scene in the region.

These events attracted varied audiences, from international policy specialists to local community members, and ensured that participants were able to represent themselves on their own terms, without mediation or interpretation by external voices.

## 5.2 Media Coverage and Communications

Media coverage played an important role in extending the reach of the project beyond event attendees. Coverage included:

- *Limerick Leader* – Feature on the OECD Rural Development Policy Review performance, emphasising the role of creative expression in rural development discourse.
- *Limerick Post* – Article on the TEC Project report launch, noting the emotional power of the participants’ contribution.
- *Clare FM* – Radio interview with the Project Coordinator discussing project aims, outcomes, and participant experiences.
- *Travellers’ Voice Magazine*-Article on the 2025 East Limerick Traveller Pride celebration which featured a Building Bridges performance.

Alongside this traditional media presence, social media platforms were used strategically to share photographs, short video excerpts from performances, and participant reflections. Posts surrounding the “Inner Dialogue” animation were particularly effective in prompting online conversations about mental health within the Traveller community. Audience engagement on these posts was strong, with comments frequently acknowledging the courage and authenticity of the work.

In addition to direct audience engagement, the project’s visibility was further amplified through social media promotion by partner organisations involved in key events. For example, IMMA and the Limerick City Traveller Health Programme shared event highlights, photographs, and participant stories from the Traveller Wellbeing through Creativity Showcase across their channels. These posts significantly extended the project’s reach beyond local audiences, engaging national and international followers and generating positive online discussion around Traveller creativity and wellbeing.

## **6. Summary Project Evaluation**

### **6.1 Overview of Evaluation**

The evaluation of the Building Bridges project was undertaken to provide a robust and balanced account of its relevance, effectiveness, inclusivity, and impact. The primary purpose was twofold: to generate learning that could inform future practice and to ensure accountability to funders, partners, and the communities involved.

Building Bridges was designed within the framework of the Creative Youth Plan 2023–2027 and grounded in rights-based practice, particularly Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which guarantees the right to participate in cultural and artistic life without discrimination. In this context, the evaluation sought to examine how effectively the project

delivered on its objectives of fostering inclusion, creativity, and participation among young Traveller men who were not engaged in education, training, or employment.

A developmental approach was adopted, recognising that the project was both a creative process and an intervention for a group of young people facing significant structural barriers. The evaluation therefore paid close attention not only to outputs and outcomes but also to the quality of engagement, the degree of participant influence over the process, and the enabling or limiting factors that shaped delivery.

Specific attention was given to how the project supported developmental capacities highlighted in the Creative Youth Plan, including curiosity, resilience, imagination, discipline, and collaboration. The evaluation also examined how the co-design model functioned in practice, the transferability of skills developed through drama and creative activities, and the wider community response to the performances and public events generated through the project.

The resulting findings are based on evidence gathered at three stages – pre-project, mid-project, and end-of-project – using a mixed-methods approach grounded in action research principles. This structure allowed for reflection and adaptation during the life of the project while ensuring that the final analysis is both reflective of lived experience and grounded in verifiable data.

## **6.2 Evaluation Framework**

The evaluation framework was designed to balance the need for accountability with the project's commitment to continuous learning. It was informed by the Creative Youth Evaluation Guidelines, the Lundy Model of Participation, and the principles of rights-based evaluation.

### *Purpose of the Evaluation*

The evaluation was intended to:

- Assess the relevance, effectiveness, inclusion, and impact of the Building Bridges project against its stated objectives and the commitments set out in the Service Level Agreement (SLA).
- Identify learning to inform the future design and delivery of creative, participatory projects for seldom heard youth, particularly young Traveller men.
- Document and share practice insights with partners, funders, and other stakeholders to support sector-wide improvement.

### *Evaluation Questions and Criteria*

Four overarching evaluation questions guided the process, each linked to the SLA and Creative Youth Plan goals:

1. **Relevance** – How well did the project respond to the needs, interests, and lived realities of the young Traveller men it aimed to engage?
2. **Effectiveness** – To what extent did the project achieve its objectives in terms of inclusion, creativity, participation, and skill development?
3. **Inclusion** – How successfully did the project remove barriers and create equitable opportunities for participation, particularly for those experiencing multiple disadvantages?
4. **Impact** – What changes, benefits, or outcomes emerged for participants, the community, and other stakeholders as a result of the project?

### *Link to Creative Youth Plan*

The evaluation framework was aligned with the five developmental capacities identified in the Creative Youth Plan 2023–2027:

- **Curiosity** – Encouraging exploration of new ideas, art forms, and perspectives.
- **Resilience** – Building confidence to navigate challenges and persist in creative and civic endeavours.
- **Imagination** – Enabling participants to generate and express original ideas through performance and storytelling.
- **Discipline** – Developing focus, commitment, and responsibility in collaborative settings.
- **Collaboration** – Strengthening interpersonal skills and the ability to work constructively with others.

Each of these capacities was examined in relation to the participants' starting points and observed progression over time.

### *Developmental Focus*

Given the complex needs of participants, the evaluation approach recognised that meaningful outcomes could include small but significant shifts in confidence, communication skills, and community connection. The framework also allowed for the identification of unintended outcomes, both positive and negative, and the conditions under which these arose.

By combining a policy-aligned framework with a developmental, participant-centred lens, the evaluation ensured that both strategic objectives and lived experience were central to the analysis.

### **6.3 Methodology**

The evaluation of the Building Bridges project was led by TASC and designed to ensure that participant experiences, creative outputs, and community responses were captured comprehensively and meaningfully. It was grounded in action research principles, emphasising collaboration, continuous reflection, and iterative learning throughout the life of the project.

#### *Approach*

A mixed-methods approach was adopted, with qualitative methods forming the core of the evaluation, supported by targeted quantitative measures. This combination allowed for both a deep exploration of participant narratives and the measurement of shifts in attitudes among audiences and stakeholders.

Evaluation was carried out at three stages:

1. **Pre-project (baseline)** – establishing participant needs, aspirations, and perceived barriers.
2. **Mid-project (formative)** – identifying emerging changes and informing programme adjustments.
3. **End-of-project (summative)** – assessing impact and drawing out lessons for future replication.

#### *Data Collection Methods and Sources*

##### **1. Co-design Workshops and Focus Groups (Pre-project)**

- Led by TASC in collaboration with the project team, involving participants, parents, and the steering group.
- Explored aspirations, barriers to participation, and ideas for project content.
- Included: 6 young Traveller men, 8 members of the Traveller community from a team of community health workers, and 13 steering group members.

##### **2. Semi-Structured Interviews (Mid-project)**

- Conducted with 6 participants, 3 parents, and 5 project staff.

- Explored participant experiences, observed changes in confidence, and feedback on facilitation and structure.

### **3. Pre- and Post-Attitudinal Surveys (End-of-project)**

- Administered to steering group members and audiences (n = 48 total).
- Measured changes in perceptions relating to Traveller culture, inclusion, and mental health awareness.

### **4. Participatory Observation (Throughout)**

- Undertaken during workshops, rehearsals, and performances to capture behavioural shifts, group dynamics, and skill development.
- Observations were discussed with the evaluator during **mid-point interviews**, ensuring emerging insights informed ongoing delivery.

### **5. Review of Creative Outputs (Mid- and End-project)**

- Included performance scripts, video recordings, and artworks.
- Analysed for evidence of thematic development, narrative agency, and personal expression.

### **6. Midway Presentation of Emerging Findings**

- TASC delivered a presentation on early evaluation findings to the steering group and project team at the mid-point.
- This session informed ongoing delivery by highlighting emerging strengths, challenges, and opportunities for adaptation.

#### **6.4 Findings**

The evaluation findings are drawn from pre-project co-design workshops, mid-point interviews, participatory observation, audience surveys, and review of creative outputs. They demonstrate that the Building Bridges project achieved significant outcomes in relation to inclusion, confidence-building, and creative participation, while also highlighting the structural and personal barriers that young Traveller men face in sustaining engagement. The findings also reflect the critical contribution of a dedicated peer support worker whose primary role was to engage with, recruit, and support the young people to attend and remain involved.

#### **6.4.1 Participation and Inclusion**

The project succeeded in engaging a group of young Traveller men who were largely disconnected from education, training, or employment. All participants were early school leavers, and one had not completed primary school before disengaging from youth services entirely.

Workshops were structured to create a safe and culturally affirming environment where participants could explore personal and collective identities without judgement. Facilitators reported that trust was a slow but steady process, facilitated by consistent attendance, peer support, and visible respect for Traveller culture.

The sense of safety and belonging created by the project was reflected in participants' feedback. As one young person put it:

“It was the first time I felt proud of myself in front of people.”

Participation extended beyond the drama workshops. Many young people attended additional creative and skills-based activities such as equine-assisted therapy, songwriting, and driver theory preparation, which further supported their inclusion in community life. The peer support worker played a key part in encouraging and accompanying participants to these activities.

#### **6.4.2 Confidence and Self-Expression**

Interviews and facilitator observations revealed notable increases in participants' self-confidence over the course of the project. Public performances, particularly of the *Inner Dialogue* piece, provided opportunities for participants to speak openly about sensitive issues such as mental health and stigma within the Traveller community.

One member of the project team observed:

“Even having the space encourages them to go. It's like having a room of support, and once they trusted myself and the peer support worker, then we could encourage them to keep going.”

A young person reflected on how performing gave them the courage to speak about issues that had previously been avoided:

“They could not talk about mental health, and now they feel confident talking about mental health — and that they have made something in their dialogue to help everybody else.”

The use of metaphor in drama allowed participants to address complex issues while maintaining emotional safety. *Inner Dialogue*, for example, personified self-doubt and fear as an intrusive “inner voice”, enabling participants to externalise and challenge these feelings in performance.

### **6.4.3 Experience of Co-Design**

Co-design was a defining feature of Building Bridges and a central reason for sustained participation. Rather than working to a fixed curriculum, facilitators adapted sessions based on participant interests and priorities.

One of the participants explained:

“Originally, I was like, okay, it's going to be theatre or it's going to be film, but it ended up being so much more than that. So we went into script writing, we went into theatre skills, we went into film skills.”

This flexibility helped maintain engagement despite significant challenges such as housing instability, caregiving responsibilities, and community unrest. It also reintroduced participants to learning in ways that felt relevant and non-threatening. As one of the drama facilitators noted:

“What really kind of broke my heart, in a sense, was that those boys, they're not in school anymore, and they were reading novels. They were sitting for two hours reading novels with me.”

Co-design also fostered ownership. Participants developed original scripts, designed performance formats, and took on roles as peer mentors and co-facilitators. This process directly reflected the Creative Youth Plan’s commitment to giving young people a voice in shaping cultural experiences.

### **6.4.4 Power Dynamics and Representation**

A recurring theme in participant, facilitator, and stakeholder feedback was the value of embedding Traveller representation at every level of the project. This was not limited to participant involvement but extended into project governance and delivery roles. Traveller representation on the steering group ensured that decision-making processes were grounded in lived experience, while also creating opportunities for mutual learning between community members and service providers.

Project staff emphasised that the presence of a Traveller drama facilitator was particularly important in building trust and sustaining early engagement, especially among young people who were wary of formal programmes:

“Having a peer support support workere from the Traveller community has really helped with that early engagement, and it shouldn’t be taken for granted for its impact.” — Project team member

The steering group itself also played a strategic role in engaging stakeholders from a range of services that interact regularly with Travellers, including An Garda Síochána, the Health Service Executive, the Department of Social Protection, and local youth services. These meetings created a space for dialogue that was both creative and pragmatic, enabling service providers to gain a deeper understanding of Traveller experiences while participants saw their concerns addressed in a civic forum.

By embedding Traveller leadership within both the creative and governance aspects of the project, *Building Bridges* helped challenge traditional power dynamics, shifting the balance towards shared ownership and culturally informed practice.

#### **6.4.5 Skills and Behavioural Development**

Through drama-based activities and the additional workshops offered, participants developed a broad set of transferable skills that extended beyond performance. Facilitators observed gradual but clear progress in communication, teamwork, emotional regulation, and creative problem-solving. These changes were most visible in the drama room but also evident at public events.

At the outset, facilitators reported that some participants were reluctant to speak in group settings or engage in structured activities. Over time, they showed an increased willingness to work alongside others, contribute to group decisions, and listen to alternative viewpoints. Attention spans improved, with several participants able to remain focused on rehearsal tasks or script development for much longer than in the early sessions. Parents interviewed at the midway point noted this change in their children:

“He wouldn’t usually stick at something for that long. Now he I know he will sees it through to the end once its started and owes it to the other lads there.” — Parent

Drama also created opportunities for participants to explore emotions indirectly through characters and stories, allowing for safe expression without feeling exposed. This was particularly important in scenes that touched on mental health, family pressures, or discrimination.

“If I say it as part of the play, it’s different. You can say more without it having to be about you.”

Participant

Teamwork and trust developed gradually. Participants became more willing to rely on each other to deliver lines, adjust to changes in the script, or step in when someone forgot a cue. They also learned to resolve disagreements quickly so that rehearsals could continue more smoothly.

Some participants took on roles at external events, such as the Youth Led Local Development Erasmus project, where they joined discussions on democracy and youth voice. For many, this represented a significant change from the early project stages, when speaking to unfamiliar adults, particularly in formal settings, was avoided.

“He’s talking to people now, speaking up to people he doesn’t even know. He wouldn’t have done that before.” — Parent

The group also developed problem-solving skills under pressure. When staging *Inner Dialogue*, unforeseen changes in lighting, space, and timing required quick thinking. Participants adapted without losing confidence or momentum.

“Things went wrong but we kept going. Before, I think have I would have just left it.” — Participant

Overall, the programme supported the development of skills and attributes that extend well beyond the arts, including focus, adaptability, and self-confidence. These align with the *Creative Youth Plan’s* emphasis on collaboration, resilience, and imagination, and reinforce the value of providing sustained, culturally appropriate creative opportunities for seldom heard young people.

#### **6.4.6 Community Connection and Changing Perceptions**

Public performances and high-profile events were central to the Building Bridges model, offering participants an opportunity to connect their creative work with audiences that extended beyond their immediate community. Performances were delivered at key occasions including the OECD Rural Development Policy Review visit, Traveller Pride celebrations, and the Traveller Education Change Project launch. In addition, participants attended national events such as the Traveller Wellbeing through Creativity Showcase at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA), where their work was promoted through the museum’s social media channels, amplifying their reach to national and international audiences.

The most significant body of audience data was gathered from *Inner Dialogue* and its associated performances, which were staged across events including Traveller Pride. In total, 48 audience members completed a post-performance evaluation using a five-point Likert scale (from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree) in response to the following statements:

- “I feel comfortable interacting with Travellers” — 36 of 48 respondents reported an increase in agreement, representing **75%** of the audience.
- “I am familiar with the challenges Travellers face” — 33 of 48 respondents reported an increase in agreement, representing **68.75%** of the audience.
- “I believe Travellers face unique challenges regarding mental health” — 37 of 48 respondents reported an increase in agreement, representing **77.08%** of the audience.
- “I believe Travellers deserve greater support from the community” — 40 of 48 respondents reported an increase in agreement, representing **83.33%** of the audience.

These results indicate that the performances not only humanised the lived realities of young Traveller men but also deepened public understanding of the structural inequalities they face. Feedback collected during post-performance discussions revealed strong emotional responses, with many audience members acknowledging that the content had challenged their assumptions and increased their awareness of the intersection between ethnicity, exclusion, and mental health.

Such shifts in perception were the result of deliberate artistic and thematic choices. *Inner Dialogue*, in particular, offered a poignant portrayal of mental health stigma within the Traveller community, using metaphor and layered narrative to address a topic that participants themselves had once found difficult to discuss openly. In the short evaluation form, one audience member wrote:

“They could not talk about mental health, and now they feel confident talking about mental health — and that they have made something in their dialogue to help everybody else.” — Audience member

The performances acted as bridges, connecting marginalised voices with broader public discourse and creating spaces for empathy, dialogue, and change. They served as both a mirror, allowing Traveller participants to see their value and strength reflected back, and a window, offering audiences an unfiltered view into lived experiences too often absent from public narratives.

#### **6.4.7 Enablers and Barriers to Engagement**

**Enablers** included:

- Culturally responsive facilitation and Traveller leadership.
- Co-design processes that valued participant voice.
- The integration of creative work with practical training opportunities.

**Barriers** included:

- Persistent discrimination and prejudice in wider society.
- Socioeconomic disadvantage, including housing insecurity.
- Mental health challenges and stigma.
- Exposure to substance misuse, domestic violence, and criminality in the community.
- Limited project resources relative to the high level of participant need.

These barriers underscore the need for wraparound support and sustained multi-agency collaboration in future iterations of the project.

#### **6.4.8 Challenges in Delivery**

While overall engagement remained strong, the project team encountered behavioural challenges that at times resulted in individual participants reducing or ending their involvement. These difficulties reflected the complex realities many young people faced, including housing insecurity, community unrest, and exposure to substance misuse. Addressing such challenges required specialist facilitation skills, flexible scheduling, and robust safeguarding frameworks. The capacity of the facilitators and the peer support worker to maintain trust and re-engage participants when possible was a notable strength of the project. These experiences highlight both the resilience of the participants, who often returned after periods of absence, and the persistence of the project team in sustaining meaningful engagement despite significant obstacles.

#### **6.5 Recommendations**

The recommendations set out below are grounded in the evaluation findings and reflect the learning generated through the Building Bridges project. Each recommendation addresses specific needs identified in the evaluation, with the aim of strengthening future delivery and maximising the inclusion, participation, and developmental outcomes for seldom-heard young people, particularly young Traveller men.

### 6.5.1 For National Policy Makers

#### **Recommendation 1:**

*Finding:* The evaluation demonstrated that co-designed, participatory arts programmes were effective in engaging young Traveller men who were otherwise disconnected from education, training, or formal youth provision.

*Recommendation:* Provide sustained investment in co-designed creative programmes as a means of social inclusion. The Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) and the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (DCCS) should allocate ringfenced, multi-annual funding to support community-based creative initiatives that are co-developed with marginalised youth. These initiatives have demonstrable impact on inclusion, participation, and personal development.

#### **Recommendation 2:**

*Finding:* Creative methodologies, particularly drama, proved highly effective in enabling expression among young people who may not engage in conventional consultation processes.

*Recommendation:* Embed arts-based methodologies in national youth consultation and participation frameworks. National youth voice mechanisms (e.g. Comhairle na nÓg, Youth Participation Framework) should integrate participatory arts as a core methodology. DCDE should provide training, guidance, and funding to mainstream these approaches.

#### **Recommendation 3:**

*Finding:* Cultural relevance and community leadership were critical to engagement, with Traveller-led facilitation and governance cited as key enablers.

*Recommendation:* Prioritise culturally responsive, community-led initiatives in funding decisions. DCDE and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (DRCDG) should revise funding criteria to explicitly prioritise projects that demonstrate cultural relevance and are delivered in partnership with local development companies and Traveller organisations.

### 6.5.2 For Local Authorities and Services

#### **Recommendation 4:**

*Finding:* Peer-led mentoring and outreach were essential in building trust with participants, particularly in contexts where institutional trust is low.

*Recommendation:* Support peer-led models of engagement. Local authorities, Tusla, and Local Development Companies (LDCs) should promote and resource peer-led outreach and mentoring as an effective approach to increasing engagement among seldom-heard youth.

**Recommendation 5:**

*Finding:* Collaboration between statutory services and socially engaged arts organisations brought unique capacity to support expression, well-being, and confidence-building.

*Recommendation:* Establish collaborative partnerships with arts organisations to promote inclusive practice. Local authorities and community services should develop strategic partnerships with socially engaged arts organisations to design and deliver inclusive, locally relevant programming.

**Recommendation 6:**

*Finding:* Creative outputs such as performances and artworks served as powerful forms of evidence and feedback, yet are often undervalued in formal evaluation.

*Recommendation:* Integrate creative outputs into monitoring, reporting, and evaluation. Public bodies and funders such as Pobal, DCDE and DRCDG should formally recognise creative outputs as valid forms of community feedback and participation evidence.

**6.5.3 For the Education and Youth Development Sectors****Recommendation 7:**

*Finding:* Facilitators required advanced skills in participatory arts, co-design, and culturally competent practice to deliver effectively in complex settings.

*Recommendation:* Invest in training and capacity-building in participatory and creative methodologies. The Department of Education and Youth (DEY) and DCDE should fund and facilitate training for educators, youth workers, and guidance staff in these skills.

**Recommendation 8:**

*Finding:* Drama and the arts were central to confidence-building, identity formation, and civic participation for participants, and should be recognised as integral to youth development.

*Recommendation:* Recognise drama and the arts as central to personal development and inclusion. DEY and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) should reflect this recognition in funding allocations and youth development curricula.

**Recommendation 9:**

*Finding:* The Lundy Model of Participation provided a useful framework for ensuring space, voice, audience, and influence for marginalised youth, and creative approaches provided accessible routes to enact it.

*Recommendation:* Apply the Lundy Model of Participation in youth programme design. Programmes across education and youth services should embed this model, supported by creative methodologies, to ensure meaningful participation for all young people.

## **7. Videos, links and Articles**

### **Building Bridges: Young Traveller Showcase – “Inner Dialogue”**

[Building Bridges: Young Traveller Showcase – “Inner Dialogue”](#)



**Youth Inclusion**

[Youth Inclusion](#)



**Our Story: Building The Capacity Of Young People For Active Participation in Society.**

[Building The Capacity Of Young People For Active Participation in Society](#)



**Newspaper articles:**

*Limerick Post - Traveling towards better health through creativity.*

[Traveling towards better health through creativity](#)

*Limerick Leader - Paint to Punch exhibition marks new location for The GAFF.*

[PICTURES: Paint to Punch exhibition marks new location for The GAFF - Page 1 of 14 - Limerick Live](#)


Travellers' Voice Magazine-Ballyhoura: From Screen to Stage.

[OneDrive](#) Page 40

**Building Bridges LinkedIn posts**

**Ballyhoura Development CLG**  
824 followers  
4mo · 🌐

We are incredibly proud of our Building Bridges Community Drama Project participants for their powerful and deeply moving performance. Through raw, emotional storytelling, they shone a light on mental health and the impact ...more



6 reactions · 1 repost

Like · Comment · Repost

Comment as Ballyhoura Development CLG...

Organic impressions: 156 Impressions · Hide results

**Post performance**  
Targeted to: All followers

156 Impressions	22 Engagements	14.1% Engagement rate
15 Clicks	9.62% Click-through rate	6 Reactions
0 Comments	1 Repost	

**Ballyhoura Development CLG**  
824 followers  
1yr · 🌐

**Press Release: The First Building Bridges Steering Group Meeting**  
Ballyhoura Development recently hosted the first Building Bridges steering group meeting in Kilmallock.

The "Building Bridges" community drama project is a pilot project delivered by Ballyhoura Development in collaboration with TASC - Think-Tank for Action on Social Change and Friars' Gate Theatre in Kilmallock. It will provide a safe space for young Travellers aged 15-24 to explore their aspirations for their future while actively engaging in decisions that have a direct impact on their lives.

The steering group will be key to guiding the project over the next 18 months, representatives of services and agencies that provide key services and make decisions that impact on young Traveller lives as well as political representatives were invited to participate.

Read more on our website <https://lnkd.in/eApAgng7>

This project is funded by the Creative Ireland Youth Nurture fund with match funding provided through Limerick Arts Office, Limerick Children and Young People Services Committee and the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme.

#BuildingBridges #CommunityLeadership #YouthEmpowerment #TravellerCommunity #Kilmallock #SocialChange #Inclusivity #SocialImpact #SICAP Creative Ireland Limerick City and County Council HSE Library Tusla - Child and Family Agency

**The First Building Bridges Steering Group Meeting**  
ballyhouradevelopment.com

4 reactions · 1 repost

**Ballyhoura Development CLG**  
824 followers  
1yr · 🌐

**Exciting News!** Introducing the "Building Bridges" Community Drama Project  
We're delighted to announce that Ballyhoura Development will partner with TASC and Friars' Gate Theatre in Kilmallock to deliver the "Building Bridges" community drama project.

This pilot project, scheduled to commence in October 2023 and spanning a two-year period, is set to provide a safe space for young Travellers aged 15 to 24, enabling them to explore their aspirations for the future while actively engaging in decisions that have a direct impact on their lives.

Focused on co-design, inclusivity, and participation, the "Building Bridges" project is designed to empower participants to discover their own and others' viewpoints with the objective of opening up access to inclusion in the wider community.

The Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media have awarded funding for this project through the Creative Youth Nurture Fund, which through the Government's Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027 aims to provide children and young people with a voice in the planning and implementation of their creative activity.

Read more on our website <https://lnkd.in/eeMQKr55>

#BuildingBridges #BuildingBridgesDramaProject #YouthEmpowerment #InclusivityMatters

**Launch of "Building Bridges" Community Drama Project**  
ballyhouradevelopment.com

6 reactions

**Post Analytics**

**Ballyhoura Development CLG** @BallyhouraDev · Apr 16

We're incredibly proud of our #BuildingBridges Project participants for their powerful, moving performance highlighting mental health and inner dialogue. A true testament to courage and connection. @CreativeIreland @LimerickArts...

1 reaction · 1 repost · 0 comments

Impressions 92 · Engagements 9 · Detail expands 2

Profile visits 0 · Link clicks 0

# Building Bridges - Facebook Posts



**Exciting News! Introducing the "Building Bridges" Co...**  
 August 29, 2023, 8:00PM  
 ID: 688909446605807

Interactions: 5 reactions, 0 comments, 2 shares

**Performance**

Overview			
Reach	Impressions	Interactions	Link clicks
153	172	5	--



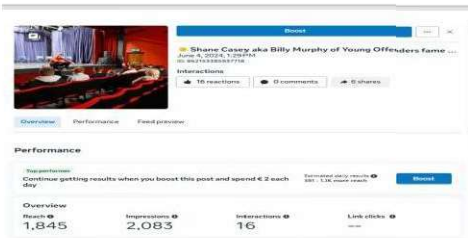
**Drama Facilitator Opportunity at Frier's Gate Theat...**  
 December 12, 2023, 8:00PM  
 ID: 7036200244919

Interactions: 14 reactions, 2 comments, 11 shares

**Performance**

Top performer: Continue getting results when you boost this post and spend € 2 each day. Estimated daily reach: 561 | 1.6k reach

Overview			
Reach	Impressions	Interactions	Link clicks
2,003	2,238	17	3



**Shane Casey aka Billy Murphy of Young Offenders fame...**  
 June 4, 2024, 1:00PM  
 ID: 9074348033774

Interactions: 10 reactions, 0 comments, 0 shares

**Performance**

Top performer: Continue getting results when you boost this post and spend € 2 each day. Estimated daily reach: 561 | 1.6k reach

Overview			
Reach	Impressions	Interactions	Link clicks
1,845	2,083	16	--



**Press Release: The First Building Bridges Steering G...**  
 November 30, 2023, 8:00PM  
 ID: 74431587721470

Interactions: 8 reactions, 0 comments, 1 share

**Performance**

Overview			
Reach	Impressions	Interactions	Link clicks
525	611	9	19

This post received less reach compared to your recent Facebook posts.

Reach: 525



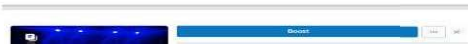
**Amazing artwork created by the Paint Punch technique...**  
 June 21, 2024, 5:35PM  
 ID: 9178822280888

Interactions: 38 reactions, 0 comments, 4 shares

**Performance**

Top performer: Continue getting results when you boost this post and spend € 2 each day. Estimated daily reach: 561 | 1.6k reach

Overview			
Reach	Impressions	Interactions	Link clicks
1,478	1,703	20	--



## Building Bridges Instagram posts

**Exciting News! Introducing the "Building Bridges" Co...**  
 August 29, 2023, 9:03 PM  
 ID: 179437460020913

Interactions  
 7 likes 0 comments

Overview Performance Feed preview

**Performance**

Overview

Reach	Impressions	Interactions
22	22	7

This post received less reach compared to your recent Instagram posts.

Reach  
22

Audience  
Age & gender

**Shane Casey aka Billy Murphy of Young Offenders fame...**  
 June 4, 2024, 1:29 PM  
 ID: 16128163247487

Interactions  
 6 likes 0 comments

Overview Performance Feed preview

**Performance**

Overview

Reach	Impressions	Interactions
207	261	6

**Press Release: The First Building Bridges Steering G...**  
 November 30, 2023, 8:00 PM  
 ID: 1797000897360097

Interactions  
 19 likes 0 comments

Overview Performance Feed preview

**Performance**

**Tip:** Continue getting results when you boost this post and spend €2 each day. Estimated daily reach: 281 - 899 more reach. [Boost](#)

Overview

Reach	Impressions	Interactions
367	375	21

**Amazing artwork created by the Paint Punch technique ...**  
 June 21, 2024, 5:27 PM  
 ID: 16128098832688

Interactions  
 13 likes 0 comments

Overview Performance Feed preview

**Performance**

Overview

Reach	Impressions	Interactions
203	250	13

**Drama Facilitator Opportunity at Frior's Gate Theat...**  
 December 12, 2023, 8:00 PM  
 ID: 179437460020913

Interactions  
 3 likes 1 comment

Overview Performance Feed preview

**Performance**

Overview

Reach	Impressions	Interactions
207	221	5

**We are incredibly proud of our Building Bridges participants...**  
 April 16, 2023, 10:56 AM  
 ID: 16128163247487

Interactions  
 9 likes 0 comments

Overview Performance Feed preview

**Performance**

**Tip:** Continue getting results when you boost this post and spend €2 each day. Estimated daily reach: 281 - 899 more reach. [Boost](#)

## **8. Relevant Findings**

The project provided a rare and valuable opportunity to work intensively with a group of young Traveller men and boys. The evaluation of the programme, alongside observation and participant feedback, has identified a number of recurring challenges, as well as key insights into the factors that can enable meaningful engagement and lasting impact. These findings are critical for informing future interventions.

### **8.1 Key Challenges Identified through the Project**

#### **8.1.1 Discrimination and Prejudice**

Participants reported frequent experiences of discrimination in schools, public spaces, and online environments. Their ethnic identity was regularly associated with negative stereotypes, resulting in exclusion from mainstream cultural and civic life. This exclusion has a cumulative effect, reducing self-confidence and reinforcing disengagement from the wider community.

#### **8.1.2 Socioeconomic Disadvantage**

Many of the young people involved in the project lived in inadequate housing, often lacking permanent electricity or heating. These conditions directly affected their health and wellbeing and indirectly limited their ability to attend community-based or cultural events.

#### **8.1.3 Educational Barriers**

School retention rates among participants were low and all were early school leavers. One participant had not completed primary school and had disengaged from youth services before reaching the Junior Certificate stage. Many had experienced bullying and isolation in school settings, discouraging participation in school-based initiatives and reinforcing a sense of being unwelcome in structured educational spaces.

#### **8.1.4 Mental Health and Confidence**

The legacy of exclusion, coupled with a lack of safe and affirming spaces to express identity, had left many participants with low self-esteem and persistent mental health challenges. Several reported feeling invisible or unheard in discussions that affected their lives. These issues were central to the “Inner Dialogue” performance and animation, which directly addressed stigma and mental health within the Traveller community.

### **8.1.5 Lack of Representation in Decision-Making**

Opportunities for young Travellers to participate in civic dialogue or influence policy are scarce. Few platforms exist for them to share their experiences or perspectives in meaningful ways.

### **8.1.6 Digital Discrimination**

Social media platforms were frequently cited as spaces where young Travellers encountered racism and hate speech. This exposure had both emotional and practical consequences, discouraging online engagement and creating further isolation.

### **8.1.7 Intersectional Challenges**

For young Travellers who are also LGBTQ+, disabled, or female, the challenges are compounded by intersecting forms of discrimination, resulting in even greater barriers to participation.

## **8.2 Project-Level Challenges: Resource Limitations**

The depth and complexity of need among participants exceeded the original scope and resources of the project. Many required more intensive, tailored, and sustained support than could be provided within the project's capacity. This highlighted a clear need for additional investment and multi-agency collaboration to sustain engagement and address the underlying causes of exclusion.

## **8.3 Additional Complex Challenges Faced by Participants**

Alongside systemic issues, the young Traveller boys involved in the project faced individual and community-level difficulties that created further barriers to participation. These included:

- **Substance Abuse and Addiction** – Some were directly affected by substance misuse, creating instability and necessitating trauma-informed, non-judgemental approaches.
- **Domestic Violence and Community Unrest** – Experiences of violence and unrest contributed to emotional distress, disrupted routines, and a lack of psychological safety.
- **Involvement in Criminality** – Exposure to or engagement in criminal activity, often linked to limited opportunities and peer influence, added complexity to support needs.
- **Homelessness and Housing Insecurity** – Housing instability made consistent attendance difficult and limited access to services.
- **Young Parenthood and Caring Responsibilities** – A number had caring roles for children or siblings, including those with additional needs, requiring flexible, family-aware engagement strategies.

## 8.4 Cross-Cutting Insights from the Evaluation

The evaluation reinforced several key principles for working effectively with this cohort, which have direct implications for programme design, delivery, and policy:

- **Integration with Other Supports** – The project demonstrated the absolute necessity of linking activities to wider support networks, including SICAP, CYPSC, Traveller community groups, youth services, and other community-based provision. This integration ensured participants could access wraparound supports that extended beyond the creative space.
- **Value of Social and Creative Activities** – Supplementary activities such as sports, equine therapy, and visual arts workshops were essential for building trust, promoting social integration, and maintaining engagement over time. These activities also provided low-barrier entry points for participants who were initially hesitant to engage in drama.
- **Wraparound Support and Holistic Needs** – Sustained engagement required approaches that addressed the interconnected realities of participants’ lives, including cultural identity, education, mental health, and practical needs such as certification for employment readiness. The presence of Traveller-led facilitation and governance further strengthened this wraparound approach by embedding cultural relevance at every stage.
- **Balancing Flexibility with Structure** – While flexibility was essential to accommodate participants’ complex lives and unpredictable circumstances, the project also showed that a consistent structure offered stability, routine, and opportunities for personal accountability. This balance was a key factor in retention.
- **Creative Expression as a Coping and Empowerment Mechanism** – Drama provided a safe space for processing lived experiences, exploring sensitive issues through metaphor, and rehearsing solutions to real-life challenges. Public performances amplified these narratives, transforming personal coping strategies into community education tools.
- **Participant-Led Content and Co-Design** – Allowing participants to develop their own creative work, rather than prescribing themes, resulted in authentic narratives that reflected their lived realities. Topics included mental health, school experiences, early adult responsibilities, and aspirations for the future. This participant ownership directly supported the findings that co-design fosters long-term engagement.
- **Unheard and Unseen** – A recurring sentiment, voiced by both participants and parents, was that “they are not heard, they are not seen, they are not cared for”, reflecting a wider social

context in which young Traveller men are pushed prematurely into adult roles without adequate support. The project's success in amplifying these voices illustrates the importance of culturally responsive, community-led practice.

- **Shifting Perceptions and Building Empathy** – Evaluation evidence showed measurable shifts in audience perceptions following public performances, with between 68.75% and 83.33% of attendees reporting increased understanding, empathy, and willingness to support Traveller inclusion. These findings underline the potential of youth-led cultural work to influence public attitudes and strengthen social cohesion.

## 9. Conclusion

The Building Bridges project illustrates the capacity of co-designed, participatory arts to foster confidence, agency, and cultural inclusion among young Traveller men who are not currently engaged in education, training, or employment. Developed within the framework of the Creative Youth 2023 to 2027 plan and grounded in rights-based practice, the project provided an inclusive and structured model through which young people could explore identity, express lived experience, and contribute to public dialogue through creative performance.

Central to the project's success was its sustained, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed approach. Through regular engagement, peer support, and skilled facilitation, participants were able to build trust and a sense of belonging. Despite facing multiple and overlapping barriers including discrimination, early school leaving, poor mental health, and housing insecurity, participants demonstrated consistent commitment and creative investment. Their contributions, particularly the development and performance of original drama works such as *Paint Punch* and *Inner Dialogue*, not only reflected personal growth but also generated increased public awareness and empathy towards Traveller experiences.

The project's design placed co-creation at its core. Rather than imposing themes, facilitators encouraged participants to define the issues they wanted to address, ranging from schooling and marriage expectations to mental health, fears, and boxing. This participant-led approach fostered a genuine sense of ownership, giving participants the confidence to take risks, share personal narratives, and represent their community on public stages. Leadership opportunities, including peer mentoring and collaborative decision-making, further strengthened engagement and reinforced the value of young people's perspectives in shaping cultural outputs.

Evaluation findings highlighted the transferable benefits of drama-based methods. Participants developed skills in communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional literacy. For many, creative practice became a coping mechanism, providing a safe outlet for expressing frustration, processing trauma, and imagining alternative futures. These gains have implications beyond the arts, contributing to broader personal development and employability.

The project's impact extended into the wider community. Public performances prompted audience members to reflect critically on discrimination, mental health, and the visibility of Travellers in civic life. Feedback indicated shifts in understanding, empathy, and willingness to support greater inclusion. Partner organisations and cultural institutions amplified this impact through media coverage and social media promotion, broadening the project's reach nationally and internationally.

However, the project also underscored the resource-intensive nature of this work. Many participants faced complex, intersecting challenges—such as substance abuse, domestic violence, and caring responsibilities—that required sustained, multi-agency responses. Future replication or scaling of the model will require strategic partnerships across youth, education, and arts sectors, alongside investment in facilitator training, cultural competence, and long-term infrastructure for creative engagement.

To sustain and expand this model for other seldom heard communities, it will be essential to provide flexible funding, policy alignment, and safe, consistent spaces for creative exploration. The Building Bridges project demonstrates that when young people are given genuine agency, culturally relevant tools, and the support to express themselves on their own terms, the results can be transformative, not only for individuals but for communities and public discourse as a whole.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: Focus Group Questions Steering Group – Project Start**

1. Can you describe your typical interaction or engagement with young Travellers?
2. What are some common challenges you face when working with this demographic?
3. Are there additional challenges to engaging young Travellers who are not in education, training or employment?
4. How do you feel young Travellers perceive the work that you do/your organisation?
5. How do you tailor your approach to effectively communicate with young Travellers?
6. In your experience, what are the main needs and preferences of young Travellers?
7. Is there any way currently that young Travellers could express concerns or what is important to them to policy makers and decision makers?
8. What strategies do you use to ensure the safety and well-being of young Travellers?
9. Can you share any memorable experiences or success stories from your work with young Travellers?
10. How do you address cultural differences or language barriers when interacting with young Travellers from diverse backgrounds?
11. What resources or support do you believe are essential for effectively assisting young Travellers?
10. How do you measure the impact or effectiveness of your work with young Travellers?
12. What changes or improvements would you like to see in the support/services available for young Travellers?
13. How do you stay updated on what's important to young Travellers?
14. What advice would you give to others who are interested in building trust with young Travellers?/  
What has worked to build trust from your experience?

## Appendix 2: Questions Drama Group: Midway

1. Introduction:
  - Why did you decide to join the "Building Bridges" drama project?
2. Project Engagement:
  - What parts of the project do you like the most?
  - Have you faced any challenges in being involved?
3. Goals:
  - What are some things you hope to achieve in the future?
  - How do you think being in this drama project might help you reach those goals?
4. Impact
  - Have you noticed any changes in yourself since starting the project?
  - How do you think this project helps connect your community with others?
5. Working Together and Being Included
  - Do you feel like you have a say in how the project is run?
  - Does everyone feels included in the project: why/why not?
6. Making a Difference in the Community
  - How do you think this project will help Travellers in and around Kilmallock?
  - Can this project change how others see the Travelling community?
  - What do you want people outside the project to learn about your community?
7. Future Plans
  - Would you tell other young Travellers about this project?
  - Is there anything from the project you'd like to keep doing in the future?

### **Appendix 3: Questions Focus Groups – Project End**

#### **I. General Reactions to the Performance**

- What were your initial thoughts and feelings after watching the performance?
- Was there a particular scene or moment that stood out to you? Why?
- Did the performance challenge any pre-existing beliefs or assumptions you had about the Traveller community or mental health?

#### **II. Understanding & Awareness**

- What new insights did you gain about mental health in the Traveller community?
- Do you feel that the performance accurately represented the struggles Travellers face regarding mental health? Why or why not?
- What aspects of Traveller identity and culture were highlighted in the performance?

#### **III. Emotional & Personal Impact**

- Did you relate to any part of the performance on a personal level? If so, which part and why?
- How did the performance make you feel about the role of stigma in mental health discussions?
- Did you experience any shifts in empathy or understanding toward Travellers?

#### **IV. Social Change & Action**

- Do you think performances like this can help reduce stigma around mental health in the Traveller community? Why or why not?
- What actions can be taken to improve mental health support for Travellers?
- Has this performance inspired you to change anything in your own behavior or attitudes regarding mental health or the Traveller community?

#### **V. Feedback & Suggestions**

- What aspects of the performance were most effective in delivering its message?
- Were there any parts you felt could be improved or further explored?
- Would you recommend this performance to others? Why or why not?

Interview and focus group questions (steering groups, health team, boys x2, parents, staff)

- Pre and post survey
- Project timeline

## Appendix 4: Pre and post-performance surveys

Name/Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

### Instructions:

Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement by ticking one box per question.

1. **Travellers make a positive contribution to society**

- 1 – Strongly Disagree       2 – Disagree       3 – Neutral       4 – Agree  
 5 – Strongly Agree

2. **Travellers enrich our culture**

- 1 – Strongly Disagree       2 – Disagree       3 – Neutral       4 – Agree  
 5 – Strongly Agree

3. **I feel comfortable interacting with Travellers**

- 1 – Strongly Disagree       2 – Disagree       3 – Neutral       4 – Agree  
 5 – Strongly Agree

4. **I am familiar with the challenges Travellers face**

- 1 – Strongly Disagree       2 – Disagree       3 – Neutral       4 – Agree  
 5 – Strongly Agree

5. **I believe Travellers face unique challenges regarding mental health**

- 1 – Strongly Disagree       2 – Disagree       3 – Neutral       4 – Agree  
 5 – Strongly Agree

6. **I believe Travellers deserve greater support from the community**

- 1 – Strongly Disagree       2 – Disagree       3 – Neutral       4 – Agree  
 5 – Strongly Agree

## **Appendix 5: Full Evaluation Document/Policy Brief**

### **Supporting Traveller Inclusion Through Creative Youth Initiatives: Lessons from the Building Bridges Project**

#### **Abstract**

This paper examines how co-designed drama projects can support youth voice, inclusion and confidence-building among seldom heard young people. Using *Building Bridges – A Community Drama Project* as a case study, it explores how participatory drama techniques created a safe and creative space for young Travellers aged 15 to 24 in East Limerick who were not in education, employment or training (NEET). Over a 24-month period, the project, co-developed with participants, fostered self-expression, agency and constructive social engagement. A mixed methods action research approach was used to evaluate outcomes, drawing on focus groups, interviews, surveys and participant observation. The findings offer insights into the design of arts-based interventions with young Travellers and inform recommendations for inclusive youth and cultural policy, with particular relevance to frameworks such as the *Creative Youth Plan 2023-27*.

#### **1. Introduction and context**

##### **1.1 Arts-Based Practice and Seldom Heard Young People**

Arts-based approaches, particularly those grounded in co-design and participation, are increasingly recognised for their capacity to engage and empower seldom heard young people. This paper examines the role of co-designed drama in supporting self-expression, inclusion and confidence building, through a case study of *Building Bridges – A Community Drama Project*. Delivered over a two-year period in East Limerick, the initiative engaged young Travellers aged 15 to 24 who were not in education, employment or training (NEET). The project aimed to provide a safe, inclusive and creative space in which participants could explore their identities, articulate their concerns and contribute to decisions that affected their lives.

Centred on participatory drama methodologies, *Building Bridges* was co-developed with participants and delivered through a collaborative partnership led by Ballyhoura Development CLG, with support from Friar's Gate Theatre and TASC (Think Tank for Action on Social Change). The partnership brought together complementary expertise in community development, socially engaged arts practice, and research-informed approaches to programme and policy innovation. Ballyhoura Development CLG, in particular, played a pivotal role in the project's success, drawing on its longstanding experience and established trust within the Traveller community in East Limerick.

To assess the outcomes of the project, a mixed methods evaluation was undertaken, informed by action research principles. Data collection included workshops, interviews, surveys, participatory observation and a review of creative outputs. This approach supported a contextualised

understanding of impact, drawing on the experiences of young participants, parents, project staff and audience members.

This paper draws on these findings to explore the value of co-designed creative practice in fostering youth voice, building agency and enhancing social inclusion. It also identifies key barriers and enabling factors, offering practical recommendations for policy and practice. In doing so, it contributes to the development of inclusive frameworks such as the *Creative Youth Plan* and national youth inclusion strategies.

## **1.2 Barriers to Cultural and Civic Participation for Young Travellers**

Young travellers in Ireland face persistent barriers to cultural and civic participation. Research on marginalised groups more broadly highlights a range of obstacles to cultural participation, whether as audience members, amateur participants or professional artists. These include physical, attitudinal, communication and information barriers (Leahy and Ferri, 2022). Social exclusion is a key underlying factor influencing access to culture and is strongly linked to individual wellbeing (Orozco et al., 2024).

For the Traveller community, experiences of prejudice, discrimination and systemic exclusion are extensively recorded both in Ireland and across Europe (Murray, 2014). The *All-Ireland Traveller Health Study* outlines how social exclusion contributes to poorer mental and physical health outcomes (School of Public Health et al., 2010). Structural discrimination is evident across key domains including education, housing, healthcare and employment. While Travellers make up less than 1% of the population in Ireland (estimated at approximately 36,000 individuals), they experience disproportionately high levels of social and economic exclusion (Pavee Point, 2024). For instance, unemployment among Travellers was 61% in 2022, compared with 8% in the general population (Carron-Kee et al., 2024). Discrimination in employment and public services is also markedly higher: Travellers are up to ten times more likely to report discrimination in seeking work and 22 times more likely in accessing private services, contributing to widespread mistrust of institutions (Pavee Point, 2024).

The demographic profile of the Traveller community underscores the need for structural change to address persistent inequalities in access to education, culture and public services. In 2022, nearly half of all Travellers in Ireland were under the age of 20 (Carron-Kee et al., 2024; Pavee Point, 2024), yet systemic exclusion continues to shape their experiences from a young age. Educational institutions, in particular, are often structured around the norms, values and expectations of the

majority settled population, with little accommodation for cultural diversity. As a result, Traveller pupils may encounter environments that are neither culturally responsive nor inclusive, contributing to feelings of alienation and exclusion (Harding, 2014). Rather than reflecting a deficit within the Traveller community, these outcomes point to institutional practices that fail to recognise and respect cultural difference.

Research and frontline accounts indicate that cultural misunderstanding, negative stereotyping and deeply embedded societal prejudices continue to shape how Traveller young people are perceived and treated within mainstream systems (Mahon, 2011). These dynamics do not occur in isolation but are sustained by broader social structures that reinforce power imbalances and marginalise minority communities. Anxiety around being judged or mistreated by professionals and peers contributes to the understandable reluctance among many Traveller youth to engage with services that are nominally inclusive but experienced as exclusionary in practice.

Discrimination and bullying within schools further compound the issue, leading to disproportionately high rates of early school leaving among Traveller children (Watson et al., 2017; EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). This in turn reduces opportunities for participation in structured cultural and civic activities. The Cork Traveller Visibility Group (TVG, 2022) has drawn attention to the damaging impact of discrimination on the mental health of Traveller youth, contributing to heightened stress, anxiety and a sense of exclusion. These attitudinal barriers significantly limit access to cultural platforms and wider civic life.

Structural racism also affects children's everyday experiences of play, leisure and expression. Recent research has shown how discriminatory legislation, policy, and societal attitudes intersect to limit access to play for Traveller children, even when opportunities formally exist (Bergin et al., 2023). Addressing these issues requires not only removing practical barriers but also developing culturally responsive approaches that actively challenge prejudice and engage Traveller communities on their own terms.

### **1.3 Cultural Rights and National Policy Commitments**

The rights-based case for inclusive cultural participation is well established under international law. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) guarantees every child the right to rest, leisure, play and full participation in cultural and artistic life. It also obliges states to ensure that all children have equal opportunities to participate, without discrimination.

While powerful in scope, Article 31 has historically been under explored in both theory and practice, particularly beyond the domain of play (Davey and Lundy, 2010; Bergin et al., 2023).

General Comment 17 (UNCRC, 2013) provides detailed guidance on state responsibilities under Article 31. It asserts that participation in cultural and artistic life is essential not only for children's development and wellbeing, but also for fostering mutual understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. The comment emphasises that participation must be supported by access, resources and opportunities for children to express themselves creatively and meaningfully in their own cultural contexts.

For Traveller children, who belong to a recognised minority ethnic group, the right to cultural participation is both an individual and collective entitlement. However, as outlined above, structural and normative exclusion often renders these rights unrealised in practice (Pavee Point, 2024).

Ireland's national policy reflects a growing commitment to addressing such inequalities. The *Creative Youth Plan 2017–2022* recognised the need to reach children and young people who face barriers to participation due to ethnicity, socio economic disadvantage, disability and other intersecting factors (O'Sullivan and O'Keeffe, 2024). The plan's final review found that 58% of funded projects demonstrated an awareness of inclusion and diversity barriers and actively sought to address them.

The successor strategy, *Creative Youth Plan 2023–2027*, builds on this foundation with a clearer emphasis on targeting seldom heard groups, including Traveller youth. It outlines specific measures such as embedding creative practitioners in youth services, expanding Creative Youth residencies beyond formal education settings, and supporting place-based pilot projects that respond to local needs and community contexts (Department of Education, 2023). These actions reflect a broader commitment to flexible, inclusive programming and culturally responsive practice.

Implementation of the 2023–2027 plan is coordinated through a partnership between the Department of Education, the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, and Creative Ireland, with support from local Creative Youth Coordinators. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are embedded in the strategy, including periodic progress reviews and public reporting, to ensure accountability and continuous learning (Department of Education, 2023; Creative Ireland, 2023).

These developments align closely with the UNCRC's call for equitable access, and with international evidence on the benefits of cultural participation for youth inclusion and mental health (Orozco et al., 2024).

## **2. The Building Bridges Model**

The Building Bridges model utilises co-design, participatory drama, structured steering group engagement, and storytelling techniques. It is grounded in rights-based frameworks, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Lundy Model of Participation and the Creative Youth Evaluation Guidelines by Creative Ireland.

Central to the model is co-design, a process embedded in the belief that Traveller young people are not passive recipients but active co-creators of their creative journeys. This philosophy reflects the commitment in the Creative Youth Plan that "children and young people will be heard and will inform all aspects of this work" (Creative Ireland, 2023, p. 2). Youth participants played a central role in shaping workshop content, generating creative material, and taking on leadership roles as peer mentors or co-facilitators.

Drama workshops formed the core of the model. These were designed as supportive and responsive spaces where young people could explore their identity, culture, and future aspirations through participatory and performative methods. As encouraged by the Creative Youth Evaluation Guidelines, this approach allowed for safe creative expression of lived and imagined experiences, promoting personal reflection and confidence-building. The use of metaphor was particularly effective in enabling participants to explore complex or sensitive topics, such as mental health, discrimination, and exclusion, while maintaining emotional safety and symbolic distance.

Storytelling played a central role as a method of verbal and creative expression. Participants were encouraged to develop both personal and fictional narratives, articulating experiences of resilience and imagining alternative futures. One of the most powerful examples of this was Inner Dialogue, a collectively written and performed piece that explored internal struggles with mental health and stigma within the Traveller community. This work was performed live and adapted into a short film, both of which were showcased at multiple public events including Traveller Pride and the launch of the Traveller Education Change Project.

Oversight and collaboration were supported by a multidisciplinary steering group. As there are no Traveller organisations operating in East Limerick or Limerick as a whole, representation was provided by Traveller community members, including the Kilmallock Traveller Women's Group, which is a community group focused on recreational activity and some advocacy supported by Ballyhoura

Development. This group included representatives from Ballyhoura Development, the TASC, Friar's Gate Theatre, Limerick Arts Office, An Garda Síochána, the Health Service Executive, the Department of Social Protection, the Child and Youth Services Committee in Limerick, Limerick Youth Service, and Foróige. Importantly, the steering group was chaired by a member of the Traveller community. It created a space for shared leadership, accountability, and responsiveness, ensuring the project remained rooted in community priorities.

Delivery was led by one drama facilitator, supported by a Traveller Peer Link Worker. The Peer Link Worker's main role was to engage with, recruit, and support young people to attend and remain involved, working alongside the facilitator and project coordination team. The project extended beyond drama through a wide range of additional supports and activities, funded by the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, the Child and Youth Services Committee, and the As Darragh Did fund. These included visual arts workshops such as Paint Punch, songwriting, mindfulness sessions, and equine-assisted therapy. Practical certification programmes such as driver theory preparation, construction safety training, and manual handling were also offered, directly supporting participants' readiness for employment or further training.

Engagement with public and civic events was a deliberate feature of the model. Participants attended workshops on democracy and youth voice, showcased their work at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, and performed for international delegates from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development during their Rural Development Policy Review visit to East Limerick. These opportunities amplified young Traveller voices and reinforced the value of creative expression as a form of civic participation.

### **3. Methodology**

The evaluation of the *Building Bridges* project adopted a mixed methods approach, grounded in the principles of action research. This methodology emphasised collaboration, reflexivity, and continuous learning, and was well suited to a project that prioritised participant voice and adaptation over time. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods enabled a nuanced understanding of impact across different stages of the project.

Data collection was carried out at three key phases: pre-project, mid-project, and post-project. At the outset, co-design workshops and focus groups were conducted with participants (n = 6), parents (n = 8), and members of the project steering group (n = 13). These sessions explored young people's aspirations, perceived barriers to participation, and baseline levels of confidence. This early phase

not only informed project design but also provided comparative data for assessing developmental change.

At the mid-point, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with young people (n = 5), parents (n = 3), and project staff (n = 4). These interviews focused on participants' experiences within the project, observed behavioural shifts, and adaptations made in response to emerging needs by project staff. Participatory observation and facilitator notes were also recorded during drama workshops, offering additional context. Creative outputs—such as performance scripts, visual artwork, and rehearsal materials—were reviewed both as evidence of participant development and as reflective expressions of individual and group journeys.

In the final phase, evaluation centred on impact. Pre- and post-performance attitudinal surveys were conducted with audience members (n = 48) to capture shifts in perception and engagement. Informal feedback from community members, family, and local stakeholders was also collated to assess broader social responses.

Peer methodology formed a specific strand of engagement: the Traveller Peer Link Worker undertook targeted outreach, supported attendance and re-engagement following gaps, and acted as a culturally trusted bridge between participants, the facilitator, and services. Creative and participatory tools played a central role throughout the evaluation. Young people contributed video content through a partnership with Paintpunch Films, and reflective creative activities and visual surveys were used as both expressive tools and sources of data. These approaches offered culturally relevant, accessible, and meaningful ways for participants to communicate their experiences, while deepening the evaluators' understanding of impact beyond traditional metrics.

## **5. Findings**

This section explores the outcomes of the Building Bridges project through five key policy-relevant questions. Drawing on multiple sources, including co-design workshops, end-of-project interviews, focus groups, and direct observations, it highlights the ways in which participatory drama fostered inclusion, agency, and skills development for young Traveller men, while also surfacing the structural and systemic challenges that constrained participation. Participant and facilitator quotes have been used to deepen interpretation and centre lived experience.

### **5.1 How did the project influence young people's sense of agency and inclusion?**

End-of-project interviews and creative reflection sessions revealed that participants developed a strengthened sense of identity, self-worth, and confidence through their involvement in drama.

Many described the project space as a rare environment of emotional and psychological safety. As one young participant shared, “It was the first time I felt proud of myself in front of people.”

One drama facilitator explained:

“Even having the space encourages them to go. It's like having a room of support, and once they trusted myself and the other facilitator, then we could encourage them to keep going.”

The sense of validation through being listened to was echoed across sessions. The Inner Dialogue performance, which addressed mental health stigma within the Traveller community, emerged directly from the young people’s expressed sense of feeling “unheard” and isolated. Performing their words to live audiences—some for the first time—allowed them to reclaim narratives that had previously been shaped by external judgement or discrimination.

## **5.2 What role did co-design play in sustaining participation?**

The participatory model relied heavily on co-design from the outset, enabling young people to choose themes, shape storylines, and define the direction of their creative work. Rather than following a fixed curriculum, the drama facilitators adapted their methods to align with the group’s evolving interests.

As one facilitator noted:

“We explored a lot of mediums... Originally, I was like, okay, it's going to be theatre or it's going to be film, but it ended up being so much more than that. So we went into script writing, we went into theatre skills, we went into film skills.”

This flexibility helped retain engagement over a prolonged period, especially given the multiple challenges participants faced—including housing instability, caregiving responsibilities, and exposure to community unrest. The project’s responsiveness allowed individuals to drop in and out without stigma, while still returning to meaningful creative work.

Co-design also supported deep engagement from participants who were otherwise disconnected from formal learning. The facilitator reflected:

“What really kind of broke my heart, in a sense, was that those boys, they're not in school anymore, and they were reading novels. They were sitting for two hours reading novels with me.”

This highlights how creative projects can reignite educational curiosity in young people who have been failed by the formal system, while also offering flexible learning that honours their life realities.

### **5.3 What evidence is there that drama supports the development of transferable social and emotional skills?**

Qualitative data gathered through reflective journaling, facilitator notes, and participant interviews points to significant development of soft skills—including communication, emotional literacy, and collaboration. In group settings, participants increasingly expressed empathy for peers and demonstrated improved self-regulation and listening skills.

Participants who had once struggled to speak publicly took leadership roles in performance contexts and civic events. For example, they contributed meaningfully at the Youth Led Local Development Erasmus event, and travelled to Dublin to take part in a TASC workshop on democracy.

Skills development extended beyond artistic competencies. As facilitators observed, the drama process “created structure and space for focus,” allowing young people to stretch their attention spans, engage in dialogue, and explore hypothetical situations through metaphor and role-play. These capacities are transferable across multiple life domains—including employment, family relationships, and civic participation. Participants also reported that the combination of drama and peer support improved their confidence to interact with unfamiliar adults and services, which they linked to applying these skills in community and civic events.

### **5.4 How were power dynamics between stakeholders and participants addressed?**

Building Bridges adopted a collaborative governance model, with Traveller representation embedded at every level—from project design to delivery. This included youth voice within the **steering group**, alongside Traveller community leaders, youth workers, artists, educators, and state actors.

Crucially, the recruitment of a Traveller Peer Link Worker was instrumental in early-stage engagement and in fostering trust. As the drama facilitator reflected:

“Having someone from the Traveller community was essential for that early engagement, and it shouldn’t be taken for granted for its impact.”

This helped balance traditional power dynamics and modelled a form of leadership rooted in shared identity and lived experience. Youth participants were gradually encouraged to take on peer mentoring and co-facilitation roles, building confidence and deepening their involvement.

While some service providers initially defaulted to conventional top-down approaches, the participatory format required them to adapt and centre youth voice. Feedback from both youth and adult stakeholders confirmed the importance of creating decision-making spaces that are genuinely accessible to marginalised young people.

### **5.5 How did community perceptions shift as a result of the performances?**

The series of public performances delivered by participants played a pivotal role in raising awareness, building empathy, and shifting attitudes among community members, policy actors, and service providers. In total, forty-eight audience members attended the Inner Dialogue and associated performances across events including the Traveller Pride celebrations.

Audience members were asked to complete a short evaluation form using a five-point scale, responding to the following statements:

- *Travellers enrich our culture*
- *I feel comfortable interacting with Travellers*
- *I am familiar with the challenges Travellers face*
- *I believe Travellers face unique challenges regarding mental health*
- *I believe Travellers deserve greater support from the community*

Initial analysis of this data suggests that the performances not only humanised the lived realities of young Traveller men but also deepened awareness of the structural inequalities they face. Feedback collected during post-performance discussions reflected strong emotional responses, with many audience members acknowledging that the content had challenged their assumptions and increased their understanding of the intersection between ethnicity, exclusion, and mental health.

These shifts in perception were not accidental but were carefully nurtured through the structure and themes of the performances. The Inner Dialogue piece, in particular, offered a poignant portrayal of mental health stigma within the Traveller community and served as a powerful educational tool for audiences unfamiliar with these experiences.

A drama facilitator reflected on the courage it took for participants to centre mental health in their creative work:

“They could not talk about mental health, and now they feel confident talking about mental health—and that they have made something in their dialogue to help everybody else.”

This quote reflects the dual impact of the project: it supported personal healing and transformation for the young participants, while also promoting cultural understanding and solidarity among wider audiences.

The performances thus served as bridges—connecting marginalised voices with broader public discourse, and facilitating spaces for empathy, dialogue, and change. They provided both a mirror for Traveller participants to see their value and strength reflected back, and a window for others to see into their world with greater clarity and compassion.

## **5.6 Challenges in delivery**

The project team encountered behavioural challenges that, directly or indirectly, led to some participants reducing or ending their involvement. These episodes were linked to wider contextual stressors including housing insecurity, community unrest, exposure to substance misuse, caring responsibilities, and fluctuating mental health. In response, the project relied on specialist facilitation skills, flexible scheduling, and robust safeguarding frameworks. The presence of the Traveller Peer Link Worker and the sustained commitment of project staff was critical for de-escalation, re-engagement after breaks, and maintaining continuity of contact. These experiences highlight both the resilience of participants, many of whom returned after absences, and the persistence of the team in sustaining meaningful engagement under complex circumstances.

## **6. Recommendations**

### **6.1 For National Policy Makers**

- **Provide sustained investment in co-designed creative programmes as a means of social inclusion**

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) and the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport (DCCS) should allocate ringfenced, multi-annual funding to support community-based creative initiatives that are co-developed with marginalised youth.

These initiatives have demonstrable impact on inclusion, participation and personal development, particularly for Traveller and other seldom-heard young people.

- **Embed arts-based methodologies in national youth consultation and participation frameworks**

National youth voice mechanisms (e.g. Comhairle na nÓg, Youth Participation Framework) should incorporate participatory arts as a core methodology. Creative processes enable expression among young people who may not engage through conventional consultation approaches. DCDE should support training, guidance and funding to mainstream these approaches.

- **Prioritise culturally responsive, community-led initiatives in funding decisions**

DCDE and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht (DRCDG) should revise funding criteria to explicitly prioritise community-led initiatives that demonstrate cultural relevance, particularly in engaging ethnic minority and Traveller youth. These projects should be developed in partnership with local development companies and Traveller organisations.

- **Resource peer-led outreach and safeguarding capacity**

DCDE and the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht should fund peer link roles alongside specialist facilitation and safeguarding training. Multi-annual funding should recognise the time required for trust-building, re-engagement after breaks, and coordinated response to complex needs.

## 6.2 For Local Authorities and Services

- **Support peer-led models of engagement**

Local authorities, Tusla, and Local Development Companies (LDCs) should promote and resource peer-led outreach and mentoring models as an effective way to build trust and increase engagement among seldom-heard youth. These models are particularly important where institutional trust is low.

- **Establish collaborative partnerships with arts organisations to promote inclusive practice**

Local authorities and community services should enter into strategic partnerships with socially engaged arts organisations to design and deliver inclusive, locally relevant programming. Arts partners bring unique capacity to support expression, well-being and confidence-building among marginalised youth.

- **Integrate creative outputs into monitoring, reporting and evaluation**

Public bodies and funders such as Pobal, DCDE and DRCDG should formally recognise creative outputs (e.g. performances, visual art, video) as valid forms of community feedback

and participation evidence. Evaluation frameworks should be adapted to incorporate and value these outputs in assessing programme impact.

### 6.3 For the Education and Youth Development Sectors

- **Invest in training and capacity-building in participatory and creative methodologies**

The Department of Education and Youth (DEY) and the DCDE should fund and facilitate training for educators, youth workers and guidance staff in participatory arts, co-design and culturally competent facilitation. These skills are essential for engaging excluded youth and delivering rights-based practice.

- **Recognise drama and the arts as central to personal development and inclusion**

DEY and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) should formally recognise arts-based practice as a key dimension of youth development, with particular relevance for confidence-building, identity formation and participation in civic life. Funding and curricula should reflect this.

- ***Apply the Lundy Model of Participation in youth programme design***

Programmes across education and youth services should embed the Lundy Model as a framework for meaningful participation. Creative methodologies provide an accessible and empowering route for ensuring space, voice, audience and influence for all young people.

- **Embed peer methodology within programmes**

Education and youth services should include funded peer link roles to support attendance, re-engagement, and culturally trusted communication between participants and staff.

## 7. Conclusion

The Building Bridges project illustrates the capacity of co-designed, participatory arts to foster confidence, agency, and cultural inclusion among young Traveller men who are not currently engaged in education, training, or employment. Developed within the framework of the Creative Youth 2023 to 2027 plan and grounded in rights-based practice, the project provided an inclusive and structured model through which young people could explore identity, express lived experience, and contribute to public dialogue through creative performance.

The project's design enabled individual growth through sustained creative engagement, peer support, and trauma-informed facilitation. Despite facing multiple and overlapping barriers, including discrimination, educational disengagement, mental health challenges, and housing insecurity, participants demonstrated meaningful and consistent engagement. Their creative contributions, particularly the development and public performance of original drama pieces, not only supported

personal development but also contributed to positive shifts in community awareness and understanding.

The project's outcomes underscore the critical role of co-design in fostering long-term engagement. Meaningful youth participation was facilitated through culturally appropriate approaches, peer mentoring, and leadership opportunities, allowing participants to shape both process and content. These dynamics enhanced participants' sense of ownership, trust, and inclusion within a creative learning environment.

Evaluation findings also highlight the transferable value of drama-based methods. Participants developed communication skills, emotional literacy, teamwork, and problem-solving capacities. These outcomes reflect the potential of creative participation to support broader personal development goals, especially for young people who have been underserved by mainstream systems.

Importantly, the project demonstrated its wider community impact. Audiences who attended public performances reported increased empathy, awareness of Traveller mental health, and stronger support for inclusion. These responses affirm the potential of youth-led cultural interventions to influence public attitudes and civic discourse.

To replicate and scale this model in other seldom heard communities, several conditions must be met. These include strategic partnerships across youth, education, and arts sectors; investment in facilitator training and cultural competence; and the provision of safe, sustained spaces for creative exploration. Scaling should also include funded peer link roles, strengthened safeguarding frameworks, and resources that recognise the time required for trust-building and re-engagement. Flexible funding and policy alignment will be essential to ensure long-term impact and meaningful inclusion.

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