Community Research Toolkit: A Toolkit for Collaboration

"Research is formalized curiosity.
It is poking and prying with a purpose."

— Zora Neale Hurston

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

INNOVATION ZONES

CDI Childhood Development Initiative

Generation Shankill ZONE

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments

The three partner organisations which developed this Toolkit are grateful to the Shared Island Fund for enabling us to collaborate on and share our learning in relation to the meaningful involvement of communities in research.

We are indebted to all the participants who made this such an enjoyable, fun and connected experience. The staff from the Greater Shankill Partnership, CDI, and the Innovation Zones at Queens University Belfast, all brought huge energy and experience to the exchanges; the Institute for Population Health at Trinity College Dublin offered guidance and encouragement, as well as hosting one of the exchanges; the women from An Cosan in Tallaght engaged with relentless humour and deep insight, whilst the young people from Include Youth ensured that we stayed grounded in the principles of community participation, resulting in relationships developing which are built on trust, non-judgement and inclusion. We very much hope that our collective learning is helpful to other organisations wanting to develop ethical and robust partnerships.

A Note from Us

Like so many other community-led initiatives, the motivation behind this Toolkit came from many formal and informal discussions between the partner organisations. Over time, we came to recognise that experience in and a deep motivation regarding the meaningful engagement of communities in research processes was a common driver for all of us. We believe that collectively, we have experiences which will be of value to others with a similar objective. All three organisations also focus on improving outcomes for children, young people and families, and alongside our long-term, well established working relationships, this formed the basis for our partnership in relation to community research.

Funding through Shared Island enabled us to come together over four periods. The first, in May 2025, focused on team building and getting to know each others' communities. The Northern partners were amused to hear that Tallaght is best known for its spice bags, while the Dublin contingent listened in rapt silence to the history of the Shankill and the devastation caused to the community through the troubles and economic change.

The second gathering was in Tallaght and involved introductory training in relation to peer research approaches and the 'conversations' process, including modelling of the latter. This proved to be transformational to the group dynamic as participants were listened to deeply and gently held as they thought about their hopes and ambitions for the future. This experience was built on in the third exchange, held in Belfast and hosted in both the Greater Shankill Partnership and Queens University. Arriving the day before the D-Day celebrations, the Shankill Road was strewn with far more Union Jacks than usual, giving cause for plenty of comment from the Dublin participants!

The final day, again in Belfast, consisted of a reflection on what we've learned, consideration of what it takes to ethically engage communities in research, and presentation of certificates to participants by local playwrite Nuala McKeever.

Each of these occasions was peppered with laughter, good food, warm welcomes and a growing connection between the individuals participating. This is despite the diversity in the group in terms of not only geography and religion but also age (with participants spanning five decades), and experience. Some participants work in communities, others were volunteers; some had travelled extensively, others have never left the community in which they were born; some are care leavers, many were parents. This Toolkit is evidence of the creativity which can flourish when we are given the space, and a common focus, to collaborate on.

1. INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction

1.1 The Community Research Toolkit Project

This Toolkit is the result of a partnership between the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI), the Greater Shankill Partnership (GSP) and Queen's University Belfast (QUB) Innovation Zones. The Toolkit has been developed in collaboration with community workers and community members and reflects lived experiences, priorities, and insights.

The project enabled the partner organisations to share their experiences in, and approach to, engaging with vulnerable children, young people and parents, particularly in relation to community led research. This was undertaken through an exchange of learning, professional development and experience, and to develop strong working partnerships on which to build larger scale collaborations in the future.

The learning exchange focused on conducting community-led research that promotes constructive and inclusive dialogue in and between communities and academia to identify concerns, issues, problems, and desires. This is based on the understanding that community led processes have a greater potential for achieving transformational change.

An additional objective of the project is that, through the process of two groups of community members learning together, sharing experiences of life in their respective communities, and collectively identifying avenues for future action and change, sustainable cross border civic relationships will evolve between the two communities. This enables participants to recognise common experiences as well as identify differences enabling constructive and inclusive consideration of opportunities and challenges at a local, regional and all-island level.

The project also aims to develop a strong working relationship between the civic society organisations overseeing the delivery of this project, CDI and GSP, QUB and further embed and integrate the academic outreach processes, potentially leading to larger cross border collaborations in the future.

1.2 Childhood Development Initiative

The Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) was established in Tallaght, Dublin, in 2007 to design, deliver and evaluate new ways of working which both draw on and produce research on how to improve outcomes for children and families. CDI is part funded through the Government's national Area Based Childhood Programme (ABC), which builds on the learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP). The ABC Programme aims to break the cycle of child poverty in areas where it is most deeply entrenched and to improve the outcomes for children and young people in communities which are significantly poorer than elsewhere in the Irish State.

Working nationally, CDI supports the delivery of a suite of programmes across a spectrum of local needs including language, literacy, health, early years, conflict management and community safety. All CDI programmes are evidence-informed, manualised and delivered through existing structures.

CDI's overall objective is that every child in Ireland is thriving, healthy, happy, and free from poverty. CDI works in partnership with communities and those working in them, taking a strengths-based, family- and child-centred approach; using evidence, innovation, and prevention and early intervention approaches to underpin our work. In addition to the direct work to improve outcomes for children and families, CDI supports parents to enhance their confidence and skills to enable children to achieve their milestones and delivers capacity-building initiatives for professionals.

Working in partnership with the community has led CDI to develop training and mentoring approaches aimed at enabling local residents to not only inform, but to undertake research. CDI have utilised this approach on many occasions in Tallaght and beyond, and see this as a central element of our community development ethos.

1.3 Greater Shankill Children and Young People Zone: A Community-Led Transformation

The Greater Shankill Children and Young People Zone (Shankill Zone) is a long-term, community-led approach to transforming the lives of children and young people in the Greater Shankill area of Belfast. This area has faced deep, historic challenges. In past generations, people didn't need formal qualifications, jobs in the shipyard, linen mills, and engineering were the norm. But by the 1970s, the heavy industry had collapsed, redevelopment reduced the local population from 76,000 to 26,000, and the area became a frontline of the NI conflict.

As a result, three generations of children have grown up with fractured pathways, facing some of the highest levels of poverty and poor outcomes in education and health in Northern Ireland (NIMDM, 2017). Despite years of external interventions, none have been transformational. . A new approach was clearly needed, one that was long-term, child-centred, investing in the future and rooted in the community itself.

In 2014, the Shankill community took a bold step: it declared itself a Children and Young People Zone, committing to support the 5,968 children and young people (CYP) living there. The goal is simple but powerful, every child deserves a better future, and this community is determined to make that happen.

The Shankill Zone acts as both a framework and a physical and relational space where transformation can take place. It brings together a "coalition of the willing" from within the community and beyond, including external partners like Queen's University Belfast (QUB), Ulster Orchestra, and National Museums NI.

Each child's journey is then supported by the network of Zone partners, providing what they need, when they need it, and for as long as it takes. This could be anything from light-touch support to more intensive help. The approach is flexible, personal, and most importantly, led by the child's own aspirations.

This work is still in its early stages, but the principles are clear:

1. **Start with the child** – listen to their voice.
2. **Support their outcomes** – not someone else's version of success.
3. **Stay with them** – this is a generational change, not a quick fix.
4. **Keep learning** – this is an evolving journey, not a set plan.

Ultimately, the Shankill Zone is about justice for this generation of children, building a fairer society and lasting peace from the ground up, one child at a time, for all children in the Greater Shankill area.

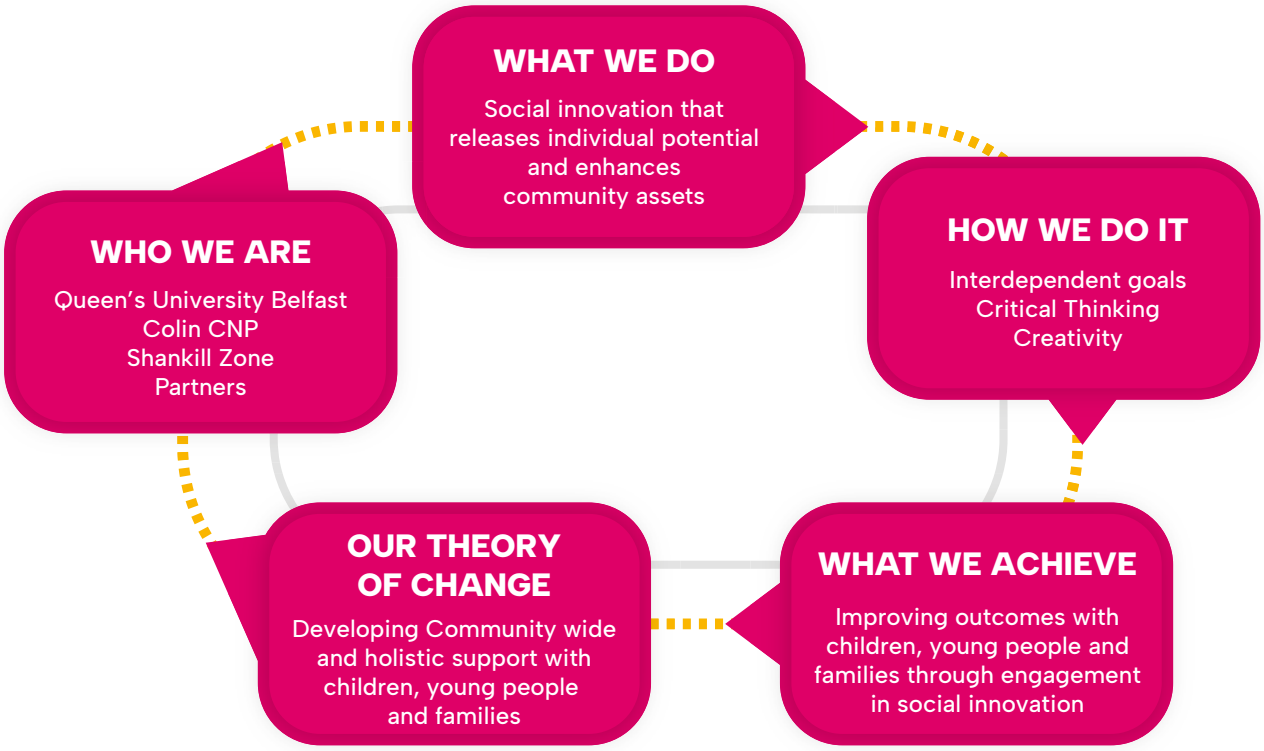
1.4 Innovation Zones: Connecting Communities and Research for Social Change

The Innovation Zones are long-term, place-based partnerships between Queen's University Belfast and the Greater Shankill and Colin communities. Established in 2015, they aim to connect academic research with community priorities through equal partnerships between universities and areas facing disadvantage. Trust, shared purpose, and tangible community benefit are at the heart of the approach.

Core Idea

Community knowledge and lived experience matter as much as academic expertise. The partnership begins with listening and building mutual understanding to co-create solutions that are meaningful, evidence-based, and scalable.

Figure 1: Summary of Innovation Zones Approach



What We Do

Working with local partners, the Innovation Zones develop social innovations, i.e., programmes and practices that ask "What works, for whom, and in what context?"

Their methods are inclusive and flexible, designed to reduce the burden of research, value local expertise, and make participation worthwhile. Key areas include:

- Understanding communities' research interests and priorities
- Building research capacity within both the community and university
- Promoting engagement with data, evidence, and innovation
- Supporting ethical, collaborative learning between academics and residents

Examples of collaborative projects include:

Conversations: A child-centred process that identifies children's goals, challenges, and supports for transformational change (O'Hare et al., 2022).

Crescendo: A partnership with the Ulster Orchestra using music to build children's social and emotional skills (Poland, O'Hare, & O'Hara, 2022).

Common Health Assets: A UK-wide study exploring how Community Led Organisations improve health and wellbeing (Baker et al., 2023).

How We Work

Our work is guided by four key principles:

1. Shared Goals: Research is co-created to benefit both the university and community, ensuring shared ownership and genuine partnership.
2. Long-Term Relationships: Building trust requires consistency and presence. Since 2015, sustained partnerships have enabled honest dialogue, inclusion, and co-ownership of outcomes.
3. Critical Thinking: We question assumptions and learn from both evidence and lived experience, using feedback loops to ensure findings are accurate, relevant, and accessible.
4. Creativity: Collaboration among researchers, practitioners, artists, and policymakers encourages innovative, locally meaningful approaches.

What We Aim to Achieve

Our mission is to improve outcomes for children, young people, and families in disadvantaged communities by creating opportunities often out of reach, such as world-class music experiences or involvement in research that informs health policy.

We work to overcome apathy and the legacy of distrust toward research by making engagement transparent, enjoyable, and beneficial. Central to this is giving voice to those often excluded from conversations about change, especially children and young people.

In short, the Innovation Zones are about doing research with and from communities, not to or for them, helping build a more just, inclusive, and opportunity-rich society.

2. HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

2. How to Use this Toolkit

2.1 Who the Toolkit is aimed at

This Toolkit is aimed at individuals and organisations undertaking research or consultation in communities It is intended to offer guidance to those from communities and populations being researched, as well as those working in organisations who want to understand and work with such communities. The Toolkit offers examples of what real partnership in community research looks like, and practical tips on how to achieve it.

The Toolkit will be of value to the range of community and voluntary organisations working at local level to support families and communities, and who either undertake research themselves or commission external bodies to do so on their behalf. This document also has relevance for statutory organisations wishing to understand service uptake and gaps, or to plan for future needs. In addition, academic institutions wishing to undertake research with communities rather than to/for them, and private consultants commissioned to explore the perspectives of residents or service users may also find relevant insights and tips below.

The Toolkit is also relevant to those who fund research, as it sets out the resources needed to truly work in partnership with communities, and so may inform future funding allocations.

Finally, those who make and influence policy will be interested in understanding how to meaningfully engage community representatives in all aspects of research in a way that is equitable and respectful.

2.2 Definitions

The following are all processes which can and should engage community representatives both as participants, but also as co-designers. Any one of these may use focus group discussions, interviews, desk research, and so they are very similar, but there are some important distinctions too.

This Toolkit can be used to inform these approaches. For simplicity, we will refer to 'research' throughout the Toolkit, which includes all three categories.

- **Research**

  This will often involve an academic institution and will require ethical approval. This brings with it heightened credibility but also considerable requirements, such as lengthy consent forms, and processes to ensure consistency of approach such as agreed questions for focus groups or interviews. Research may be undertaken in communities to inform service development for example analysing census data for a particular geographical area; or focusing on a specific population within the community such as lone parents or young people.

  Research will often produce articles for academic journals, which is important for those working in higher education, policy and wider society.

People often distinguish between 'primary' and 'secondary' research. Primary research relates to data and findings which are new, for example conducting surveys, or focus groups, and producing a report based on these. Secondary research is when we use existing data for example, reviewing census information or HSE statistics to draw conclusions.

- **Consultation**

  Generally a less rigorous approach than research, consultation does not require ethical approval. Whilst interviews and focus groups will be planned, there is flexibility to respond and react. Consultation will often be undertaken in communities in order to understand how people use services, and to identify unmet needs.

  Consultation processes will often be used by organisations internally, to inform their planning, and reports summarising the findings will often be published and even launched.

- **Service Evaluation**

  This is a particular form of research which is undertaken to find out whether a particular programme or approach has been effective. If the service evaluation is being carried out by a third level institution (e.g. a university) it will require ethical approval. However, it could also be undertaken by an independent consultation or be carried out in-house. In these circumstances it probably won't go through an ethical approval process.

  Service evaluations should not be completed by either the people who designed the service or those who deliver it. This is to maintain objectivity and reduce any likelihood of bias. Due to resources however, organisations do sometimes carry out their own internal service evaluation.

3. FUNDAMENTALS OF COMMUNITY RESEARCH

3. Fundamentals of Community Research

Whilst this Toolkit describes two specific models of community research, we came to recognise that there is considerable commonality in the underpinning principles and key skills required for both approaches. We will therefore discuss these first.

3.1 Benefits of Community Participation in Research

During the process of developing this Toolkit, academic researchers were described as being 'from another planet', and at the very least 'not from the community'. We recognise the knowledge, expertise and rigour which formal researchers can bring to community-based processes but believe that the best results come from meaningful collaboration with other stakeholders. In particular, those who are the subject of the research can significantly enhance the research process and findings.

We have collectively identified the following benefits which result from the involvement of community populations in all stages of research:

- Improved access to participants
- Increased trust in the research process and its objectives
- Knowledge of local history and how this may impact on engagement
- Greater depth to the information gathered and conclusions identified
- More accessible findings for community stakeholders
- Greater ownership and sense of responsibility for the research and its implications
- Improved longevity of engagement with the research

3.2 Organisational Readiness

The decision to involve community participants as partners in research should not be taken lightly. Not only are there resource considerations but organisational ethos, expectations, and commitment are all factors to consider. Those leading the research need to not only be motivated to engage with a potentially disparate group but will also need to have the communication and relationship-building skills to enable a positive rapport to be established quickly.

A quick review of the following questions might inform you about whether your organisation is ready or if additional preparation is needed:

» Is everyone on board with the approach?

» Have we given sufficient thought to how we will engage community representatives as partners?

» Do we have agreed (written) expectations of partners?

» Do we have adequate resources?

3.3 Knowing your Audience

Whilst being authentic is critical to gaining rapport, there are also lots of ways in which we can enable engagement by thinking about who we will be working with and adjusting our approach to minimise barriers. This includes:

- **Location** – community partners will know local venues where people feel comfortable and welcome. Don't expect people to turn up at places they don't generally attend
- **Language** – Use clear, accessible language and avoid technical or academic jargon; create a shared vocabulary early in the project
- **Clothes** – think about the setting you're going to be in and wear something appropriate. Wearing a suit for example may create unnecessary barriers

It's also important to have some sense of the community's history. For example, have they been involved in research or consultation before? If so, what happened with the research? Have residents got reason to be cynical or distrust that this process will have any positive impact? (This is often called 'research burden'). How will this process be different? Community partners need time to consider these questions and to help identify their implications for the research being planned.

This will take some preparation.

3.4 Encouraging Participation

How can we motivate people to get involved in research? In some circumstances people will get paid for this or enter a draw. For example, we've all seen online messages asking us for feedback on a particular website or product noting that we are 'in with the chance' of winning a voucher. This is a type of incentive. However, this may not always be an option, as resources may not allow this. In addition, if the research has been through an ethical approval process, it's unlikely that the project will be allowed to pay participants, as this creates concern that they won't be objective, or that they will say what they think you want them to say.

Of course, payment isn't the only way to incentivise people to take part in an interview or focus group. Here are some other suggestions:

- Highlight the potential for the research to positively benefit the community, but be realistic! Is it likely that services will be informed based on the research? Will the research enable the draw down of additional resources?
- Provide a nice venue, with good quality food and make it sociable
- Put in place childcare or pay participants the costs they have met to free themselves

- Enter participants' names in a raffle for something related to the research. For example, if you are looking at arts in the community, you could offer tickets to a show; if the focus is on literacy, you could provide a book bundle or voucher for a book shop; if the research is about women's health you could provide a voucher for a massage or Reiki session
- Invite participants to take part in an education programme after the research. Again, this should be related to the research focus. For example, if you are interviewing new mothers, you could offer them free places on a baby massage course; if your research is about additional needs, you could provide a series of talks about managing challenging behaviour for the participants.

3.5 Accessing Hard to Reach Populations

Lots of different terms have been used to refer to those populations which are difficult to engage with, including 'underserved', 'excluded' and 'hard to reach'.

Depending on the focus of the research, you may want to engage a particular population or have specific criteria for inclusion. It could be challenging to access the people you most want to hear from and the engagement plan should always be tailored to the specific group.

One of the main benefits of engaging community representatives in research is that they will be better placed to access others in the community, are likely to experience fewer barriers and be able to establish trust quickly. Being from the community (whether that's a geographical area or a specific target group) will give them an immediate connection with and access to the group being researched.

Some practical tips for accessing hard to reach populations are to consider the following:

- Who does this group engage with? What established links do you have with this connection?
- Where do they 'hang out'? (This might be the school gates, a particular coffee shop on certain mornings, the Post Office, or a specific service at a known time). What are the opportunities for engaging them through this space? Who else is here that can support the engagement?
- Who has credibility with this group? How can you use that dynamic?
- Are literacy or language skills likely to be barriers? If so, find people who can talk directly to the intended participants about the research, so they aren't asked to read leaflets
- Consider some of the suggestions above regarding ways to motivate engagement.

3.6 Interpersonal and Communication Skills

The skills required of researchers and community partners are the same as those we look for in any relational work. Specifically:

- Being open to doing things differently
- Non-judgemental
- Comfortable not being the expert
- Being relatable, sharing own stories and experiences to help connection
- Strong active listening skills
- Compassionate
- Empathetic
- Ability to build trust and rapport
- Adaptability

3.7 Recording Data

Primary research of any kind, whether one-to-one interviews or group discussions, will need to be recorded so that it can be analysed and inform findings. There are a number of ways of doing this, and ethical approval will clearly state how data should be recorded. Some of the most common methods are:

- **Audio recording, using a Dictaphone or mobile phone:** This can be very effective and enable easy transcription, but if it's a large group or the acoustics are bad, this may not pick up all contributions
- **Video recording:** This has the advantage of enabling the transcriber to determine which participant made which contribution. Some online platforms such as zoom will also automatically transcribe the discussion if its being held online. If the group is meeting in person, filming it could seriously impact on the level of comfort in the room and may inhibit full participation
- **Flipchart notes:** The researcher (or a second person) can write up contributions on a flipchart sheet, for typing up later. However, it will be difficult to write up full quotes, and the process may be distracting for participants
- **Notetaker:** Having a second person in the room specifically to take down notes and quotes can work well but it is resource intensive.

Following transcription of notes or recordings, the originals should be destroyed in line with the data protection measures outlined in the ethics approval. These processes require good organisational skills and clear policies.

3.8 Consent

Again, the ethics approval will describe in detail what is required in the consent and/or assent (for under 16-year-olds) forms. This is often a long and complicated document and rather than asking people to read it individually, the researcher may talk it through at the start of an interview or focus group, and then check understanding.

3.9 Structural Issues

The discussion which informed the development of this Toolkit identified a number of issues which impact on how communities are engaged in research, but which are beyond the scope of this project. Nevertheless, we feel they are sufficiently noteworthy to be summarised here:

- **Funding community research:** some funding mechanisms do not allow the time or resources required to enable meaningful community engagement, upskilling and mentoring of local participants as partners. A commitment to meaningful civic engagement as a fundamental principle of any research process will address this
- **Dissemination:** research projects frequently fail to give sufficient resourcing for the dissemination aspects of research. Particular attention is required to ensuring appropriate feedback loops with community participants, who so often are the subject of research but are rarely engaged in interpreting the findings and identifying solutions
- **Methodological Practices:** Those involved in researching communities or vulnerable populations need to be confident and skilled in a range of methodologies, including group work, motivational interviewing, and creative approaches to facilitate those for whom reading and writing is challenging, as well as engaging the right side of the brain
- **Ethical engagement:** the relationship between communities and academics/researchers is necessarily short term in nature as it is time limited according to the funding and methodology. Disadvantaged communities and vulnerable populations can experience research fatigue, with a cumulative distrust of such processes and reluctance to engage. The meaningful engagement of and ongoing support for local residents can minimise this. However, their role must be protected and a responsible approach be taken to avoiding local representatives being exposed to negative responses if the research fundings are locally unpopular.

4. CDI'S PEER RESEARCH APPROACH

4. CDI's Peer Research Approach

4.1 Rationale and Evidence Base

Peer research empowers communities by gathering insights directly from people with lived experience. Focus groups are a particularly effective method for exploring perspectives, generating ideas, and identifying solutions. This aspect of the Toolkit provides practical guidance on training community residents to prepare, facilitate, and manage focus group discussions (FGDs) with others living in the community, to identify local issues, strengths and solutions.

CDI has used a peer research approach on several occasions, including completing door-to-door surveys (2004_How_Are_Our_Kids.pdf; CDI-How-is-our-Neighbourhood-web.pdf); one-to-one interviews (Promoting family wellbeing through parenting support in ECEC services: parents' views on a model implemented in Ireland) and group discussions (CDI-Over-The-Fence.pdf; HAOF 210X210 FOR WEB_Layout 1). We have used the approach both in our Tallaght work, and in other communities where we have been commissioned to undertake research and consultation.

A review of the experiences of peer researchers found that benefits included 'increased awareness of the organisation's work, enjoyment of the process, exposure to learning new things, and continued networks among peer researchers' (Leitao, Shumba and Scott, 2023).

4.2 Participant Criteria

CDIs criterion for participants is generally that they are aged over 18 and are living in or are a member of the community being researched. It will often be necessary to require that people have sufficient technical skills to use (for example) an online survey or mobile phone recording. An ability to both speak and write in good English is also required.

Generally, Peer Researchers will require Garda Vetting.

On occasion, we may include additional specific criteria, such as being a parent.

4.3 Recruiting Participants

We use our local networks to recruit Peer Researchers. Critical information which we prepare includes:

- A brief and simple description of the role
- Participant criteria eg do they have to live in a specific community? Level of written and spoken English; technical skills
- Payment: see below
- Required hours of training (including the dates, times and venue)
- Start and end dates.

This information is circulated through networks such as the local Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC), Home School Liaison Teachers, Family Resource Centres and other family support services. If the research is focusing on a specific population (eg lone parents or families living in homeless accommodation) we will aim to recruit researchers from these communities. This will inform the networks we target.

4.4 Remuneration

CDI pays those taking on a Peer Researcher role on a hourly basis. We align this rate to the current rates for other community-based roles, such as CDIs Associate Quality Specialists Meet Our Associate Quality Specialists | Childhood Development Initiative. Sometimes our Peer Researchers are in receipt of social welfare benefits which place a limit on any additional income they can earn, without impacting on these benefits. We discuss this with each individual, and clarify how many hours of paid work they can engage in with us. Given that this is short-term, part-time employment, it is vital that engagement with CDI does not negatively impact on income which is relied upon on an ongoing basis.

4.5 Peer Research Training Content

Over the last number of years, we have refined our training, and it is always reviewed and adapted according to the skills and needs of the participants. The following are key elements of CDIs Peer Research training:

- Children First and Adult Safeguarding:
  - Completion of the online Children First Child Safeguarding Training
  - Understanding CDIs safeguarding policies
  - Managing disclosures and signposting
- Data Protection:
  - Collecting, storing and destroying data
  - Anonymisation and limitations to this
- Ethical considerations:
  - Explanation of the ethics approval process
  - Principle of 'do no harm'
  - Managing distress (CDIs Distress Protocol)
  - Non-directive questioning
  - Gaining informed consent/assent
- Data collection methods
  - Qualitative and quantitative data
  - Different approaches: interviews, surveys, focus groups
  - Real life experiences
  - Pros and cons of each approach

- Preparing for a Focus Group:
  - Obtaining and recording consent / assent
  - Practicalities (venue, timing, hospitality, childcare, transport, equipment, handouts)
  - Agreeing session plan and roles
- Manging Group Dynamics
  - Establishing ground rules
  - Facilitating dialogue
  - Managing conflict
  - Staying focused
  - Role plays
- Inputting and Analysing Data
  - Software eg SPSS, Excel
  - Identifying key messages and findings
  - Reports
- Dissemination
  - Who needs to know what we found?
  - How can we tell them?

4.6 Ongoing Mentoring

Critically, Peer Researchers require ongoing support and mentoring following completion of the training. We have found that regular phone contact and easy access to support is required in order to maintain motivation and confidence. Inevitably, life can get in the way of the best laid plans, and sometimes participants can feel guilty about not completing the target number of surveys or interviews. This can result in a tendency to avoid contact with us, and so a well-established rapport, strong relationship and regular communication are very important.

Sometimes CDI staff will have an existing relationship with the Peer Researchers in advance of them taking part in the training. If this is not the case, it is vital to utilise the opportunity to establish trust during the course of the training. For this reason, we always deliver training in person.

Following completion of the Peer Research training, the agreed point of contact within CDI will be in phone contact regularly (ie at least a couple of times a week), meet researchers informally every week or so, and depending on the extent of the research, hold group check-ins and reflective sessions to share learning and solutions.

5 ‘CONVERSATIONS’ PROCESS

5 'Conversations' Process

One of the most important elements of the work of the Shankill Zone and QUB Innovation Zones is the ***'Conversations'* process**. Through and community and academic co-designed process trained community workers called *Pathfinders*, the Zone engages directly with children and young people (or their families if they're too young) to ask a simple but powerful question: *What do you want the story of your life to be?* The *Conversations* help uncover each child's personal goals, hopes, and aspirations. The process is designed to be **welcoming, accessible, and grounded in the local context**, recognising the **history and legacies** that shape the community. The data is then co-analysed with QUB partners to shape individual support pathways and community level development.

5.1 Rationale and Evidence Base

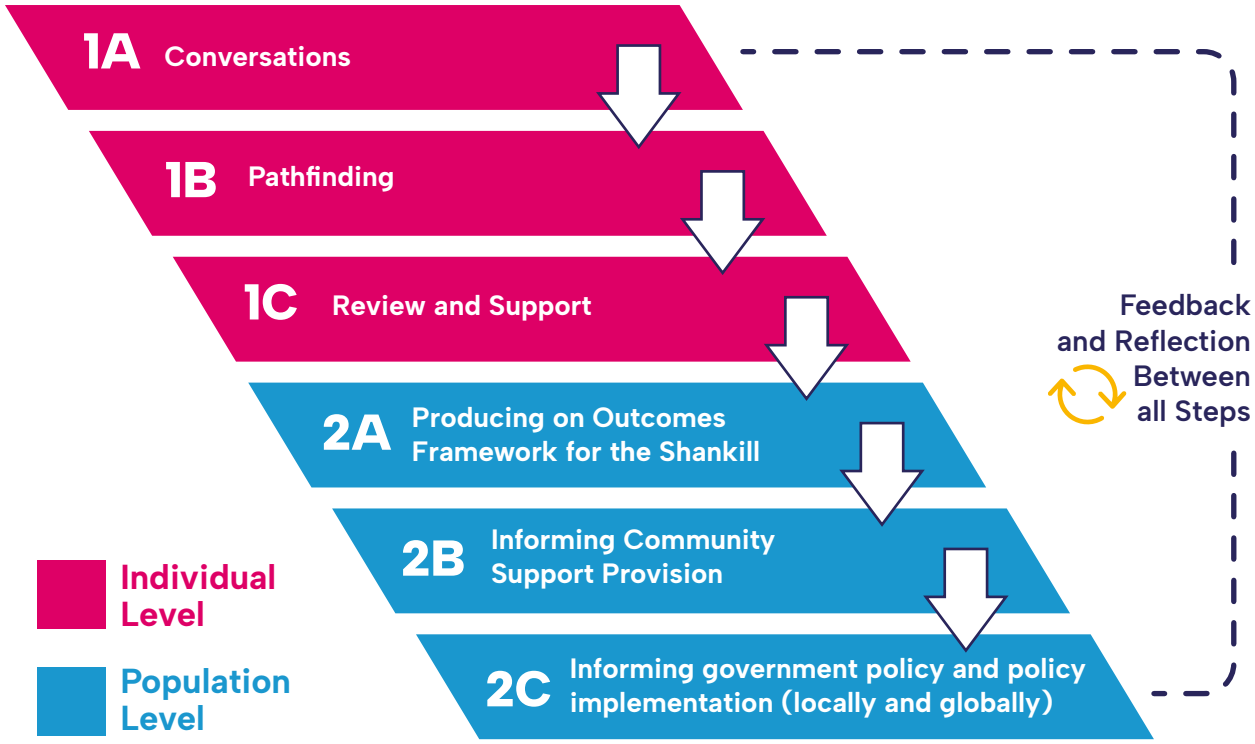
Children and young people (CYP) in the Greater Shankill area face persistent inequalities in education, health, wellbeing, and life opportunities. Despite decades of government initiatives, the area continues to rank among the most disadvantaged in Northern Ireland. Evidence shows that many CYP in this community do not have access to the same life chances as their peers elsewhere. The causes are complex and deep-rooted, including generational poverty, population reduction, underinvestment, and the legacy of conflict. These structural and historical challenges contribute to what some community members describe as a **"legacy of distrust"** and even a sense of **"learned helplessness."** The Conversations process seeks to counter these feelings through **inclusive, ground-up engagement** that rebuilds confidence and ownership over change.

Research and policy emphasise the importance of listening to children's voices when shaping services and supports. The Northern Ireland Children and Young People's Strategy (2020–2030) identifies eight key outcomes that all CYP should experience, such as being healthy, learning well, living safely, and feeling respected. However, for children in disadvantaged areas like the Shankill, these outcomes often feel out of reach.

The **Conversations Project** responds to this challenge by asking children directly: *"What do you want the story of your life to be?"* The aim of the Conversations is to support children in achieving their desired outcomes/ story. As well as inform the design services and supports around the collective aspirations and hopes that CYP express for themselves, their families, and their community. This approach is informed by robust research evidence, frameworks and theory including Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC,).

Rather than designing services for children, the Conversations approach seeks to develop supports with them. It adopts a place-based model of transformation that considers children both as individuals and as part of families, schools, and communities. This model deliberately avoids the **bureaucratic barriers and academic jargon** that can alienate community participants. Instead, it creates a **common language** through shared meaning-making and reflection, helping research feel relevant and empowering rather than extractive. The individual and population/ community level goals of the Conversations process are summarised in the following model.

Figure 2 Summary of the Conversations process



Research Questions

To address the disadvantage and poorer outcomes experienced by CYP in the Shankill community, the Conversations Project sought to explore and understand the life stories that children want for themselves. In doing so, the project aimed to empower CYP, stimulate their agency, and identify support pathways that could help them achieve their desired futures.

The questions were designed to be clear, conversational, and meaningful for children, avoiding formal or technical phrasing. This reflects the importance of **accessible language** and ensuring that children and young people feel ownership of the process and its outcomes. The research operated at both individual and population levels, in line with the overall Conversations process:

At the individual level:

1. What is the story you want your life to be?

At the population level:

2. What outcomes and aspirations do CYP in the Shankill want now and in the future for: themselves, their families, and their community?
3. Are there identifiable patterns (pathways) in the outcomes and aspirations of CYP in the Shankill?

5.2 Recruiting Participants

The *Conversations* research project engaged 98 children and young people aged 5 to 19 from the Greater Shankill area between 2018 and 2021. These CYP were already connected to the Integrated Services for Children and Young People (ISCYP) team, meaning they came from families receiving community support, but were not in immediate crisis. This allowed for thoughtful, safe, and reflective Conversations.

The sample included:

- 87 CYP who had one Conversation session
- 11 CYP who had follow-up Conversations
- 60% were girls and 40% boys
- 64% were aged 5–11 (primary), 25% were 12–16 (post-primary), and 10% were 17–19
- 80% were eligible for free school meals
- 17% had special educational needs

Children were from across the Shankill community including Woodvale, Ballysillan, Glencairn, Highfield, and Oldpark areas. The sample reflected a cross-section of children who often don't have a voice in formal decision-making. However, as participants were already receiving family support, the group did not include those in acute crisis or those completely outside support services, so the findings are valuable but not fully representative of every child in the area.

Recruitment focused on **trust-based relationships**, children and families were approached through people they already knew and trusted. Conversations took place in **familiar, welcoming locations**, creating a safe and supportive environment. The recruitment strategy ensured that CYP felt safe, understood the process, and had pre-existing trust with the adults facilitating the *Conversations*. This was key to the depth and honesty of the responses collected. This approach reduced barriers to participation and acknowledged the importance of **local knowledge, community dynamics, and inclusion**. It also respected the emotional wellbeing of children and families, balancing ethical care with meaningful participation.

5.3 Training Community Researchers/Pathfinders

A key strength of the Conversations process was the development of **local research capacity**, equipping community members to take active roles as Pathfinders. This approach demonstrates how **community undertaking research can bring depth**, authenticity, and long-term impact. To deliver the *Conversations* process, a group of trained community-based researchers, called **Pathfinders**, played a central role. These individuals were responsible for carrying out one-to-one *Conversations* with children and collecting the qualitative data that underpinned the entire project.

The main aim for Pathfinders was to talk with children and young people about **"the story they want their life to be."** This involved exploring their aspirations across short, medium, and long-term timelines, for themselves, their families, and their communities.

To ensure the quality and consistency of data collection across different Pathfinders, a **Pathfinder Guide** (O'Hare et al., 2022) was co-developed by the Shankill Zone, Queen's University Belfast Innovation Zones, and the Pathfinders themselves. This guide offers extensive detail and summary information about how to conduct *Conversations*. It covers a wide range of practical and ethical areas, including:

- Engaging parents and guardians
- Establishing trust with children
- Building children's capacity to form and express views
- Criteria for selecting children and assessing readiness
- Safeguarding, child protection, and informed consent
- Planning, conducting, and recording Conversations
- Working with vulnerable or disengaged children
- Using creative tools such as drawing and storytelling
- Collecting qualitative data in a way that does no harm

All Pathfinders completed professional development workshops covering the "art" (relational and listening skills) and "science" (data collection and analysis methods) of the *Conversations* process. In total, **22 Pathfinders** participated in these workshops and were had the opportunity to operate as trained community researchers.

Of these, **12 Pathfinders were employed by the Greater Shankill Partnership (GSP)** as part of the ISCYP team. This team supports families with a wide range of issues, offering holistic, non-judgmental support to improve life outcomes for children. The ISCYP Pathfinders were particularly well-placed to carry out the work because:

- They had pre-existing relationships with many children and families
- Children were already in stable circumstances (not in crisis)
- They were experienced in safeguarding, working safely and ethically
- They were able to reach children who are traditionally hard to engage

Throughout the project, regular workshops were held to gather feedback from Pathfinders. Their insights directly shaped the development and improvement of the *Conversations* process and the Pathfinder Guide. Regular reflection sessions encouraged feedback loops where Pathfinders could share experiences and refine practice. This ensured that learning was collective and responsive to the realities of community work. Though not every piece of feedback was formally recorded, the iterative nature of the process ensured that the tools remained responsive, usable, and grounded in real-world practice.

5.4 Ongoing Support, Analysis and Findings

Once the Conversations were completed, the next stage was to analyse what children had said. Throughout the analysis phase, the partnership remained attentive to **power dynamics** between academic and community researchers. Both groups engaged in the analysis of the data **thus ensuring co-ownership** of the data. A variety of methods were used to ensure a deep and well-rounded understanding of the data:

- Content Analysis: Coded the most common themes and goals (e.g., happiness, education, family, safety).
- **Factor Analysis:** Looked for groupings or clusters of aspirations that might show patterns across the children's responses.
- **Narrative and Grounded Analysis:** Explored individual stories and deeper meanings behind what was shared.

Importantly, the data collected remained anonymous and was handled with care. ISCYP staff managed any personal information, while Queen's University analysed only anonymised responses. All ethical safeguards, including consent, confidentiality, and child protection, were firmly in place.

The findings showed that children had a wide range of dreams and hopes. Many wanted happy, safe lives with close families and good relationships. Education, work, and independence were also key themes, but so too were more emotional goals, like peace, freedom from stress, and better community cohesion.

Children often described difficult experiences, but these were balanced by hope and ambition. Many had positive role models, and while some saw barriers in their way, most imagined a better future. However, the report also highlighted that many children lacked a sense of connection to power structures like universities, corporate business, professional roles, or wider political influence.

The team recognised that the data was more than statistics and analysis, they are children's stories and should be treated with care and purpose. The team also recognised that while strong themes emerged, more conversations and longer-term follow-ups are needed to support CYP in the Shankill and build a full outcomes framework that can drive service and policy reform across the community.

5.5 Benefits and Outcomes

The Conversations process showed how **shared ownership, trust, and community-led inquiry** can generate real value for children, practitioners, academics and systems alike. The *Conversations* project produced a number of important benefits for children, practitioners, academics and the wider community.

For Children and Young People:

- CYP had the opportunity to speak about their own lives in ways they hadn't before.
- Many described feeling heard, understood, and respected.
- They were able to reflect on their goals and explore what they wanted for the future.

For Pathfinders and Practitioners:

- Pathfinders reported that participating as researchers built a stronger sense of **inclusion, wellbeing, and professional pride**, as well as greater understanding of the community's strengths.
- The training enhanced staff capacity in ethical research, qualitative data collection, and child-centred practice.
- Practitioners deepened their understanding of what children value, not just traditional "outcomes" like education, but also emotional security, strong relationships, and community pride.

For the Community, Academics and Systems:

- The project gave voice to often-overlooked children and helped raise awareness of their strengths, aspirations, and needs.
- Feedback loops helped improve research and methods for academics in real time.
- Data collected can inform more effective, responsive research, services and government policy.

The report also highlighted that while the benefits were significant, there are limitations:

- The sample was not fully representative (i.e., no CYP in acute crisis).
- More repeated *Conversations* are needed to map pathways over time.
- A larger and broader participant base would support stronger generalisation.

Still, *Conversations* has demonstrated a powerful and respectful way to place children's voices at the heart of community transformation. It shows that, with the right support, every child can be part of shaping their own story, and the story of their community.

The full Conversations report is available here.

6. CONCLUSION

6. Conclusion

Community-based research (CBR) and community academic partnership (CAP) represent some of the most transformative and accessible ways to generate meaningful knowledge, strengthen partnerships, and improve lives. As demonstrated through the development of this Toolkit and the collaborative efforts of the Childhood Development Initiative, the Greater Shankill Partnership, and Queen's University Belfast Innovation Zones, research conducted with and from communities, rather than on or for them, produces richer, more relevant, and more actionable results.

At its heart, community research is not an abstract or overly technical exercise; it is an act of shared curiosity and purposeful inquiry. It begins with listening, creating safe, inclusive spaces where individuals can explore their experiences, articulate aspirations, and help shape solutions. The process is inherently democratic, rooted in respect for lived experience, and sustained by the conviction that every voice has value. This Toolkit shows that effective community research does not require vast resources or complex infrastructures. What it demands instead, is openness, preparation, and trust. The tools, questions, and approaches described here can be applied easily and flexibly in almost any community or organisational context.

The benefits of community-based research are multidimensional. For communities, it builds confidence, ownership, and social capital. It allows people to see themselves as agents of change, not subjects of study. For practitioners and organisations, it offers access to insight that cannot be obtained through external evaluation alone, contextual knowledge that grounds services in real needs and experiences. For academics, it deepens understanding of social systems and inequalities, transforming theory into practice and practice into evidence. Together, these benefits create a virtuous cycle of learning, empowerment, and innovation that strengthens the fabric of community life.

Importantly, community research also fosters collaboration across boundaries. The Toolkit's development process, supported by the Shared Island Fund, demonstrated how practitioners, residents, and researchers from different jurisdictions, generations, and traditions can co-create knowledge through mutual respect and shared purpose. When communities in Tallaght and the Shankill came together, they discovered that despite their differences, their challenges and hopes were strikingly similar. This kind of cross-boundary learning not only enriches the research process but also contributes to social cohesion and peacebuilding, showing that collaboration is both a research method and an outcome in itself.

To do community-based research well is to commit to ethical practice, humility, and shared benefit. It involves being comfortable with not being the expert, recognising that genuine insight often lies in local narratives, and ensuring that findings are returned to the people who made them possible. It also means embedding feedback loops, so that research leads to tangible change rather than ending with publication.

In essence, this Toolkit affirms that community-based research and community academic partnership is both achievable and transformative. It is a method that humanises evidence, making it accessible, relational, and directly useful. By equipping communities and partners with the skills and confidence to engage in research, we create the conditions for long-term collaboration, methodological rigour, social innovation, policy innovation, and improved outcomes. Ultimately, community research is not only about understanding the world but about shaping it together.

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