



# Exploring Day-to-Day Community Life and Change in the Liberties

## Background

The Liberties is a historical neighbourhood in Dublin with a strong collective sense of place. This sense of place is reinforced by long-established traditions and heritage which has been passed on from generation to generation of people living in this area.

The Liberties community heritage is to a degree borne from historical experiences of poverty and hardship. Manifestations of these can be identified in the urban fabric of the area. The Liberties has, for example, one of the highest percentages of children living in social housing in Ireland.

However this is also an area marked by change. Much of this change has been driven by urban pressures related to demographic and economic growth which has seen a high number of people moving into the Liberties.

The day-to-day life of people living in this area is marked by these different factors. In many ways, and despite strong traditions, community interactions in this neighbourhood are in transition. Understanding the implications of these changes is crucial for future service provision in the Liberties.

## What is this brief about?

This project is focused on an inner city area of Dublin known as the Liberties. The research work we are presenting is focused on tracing some of the day-to-day exchanges (such as getting together to meet) between people within communities and, in particular, identifying the places where these occur. We hope that this exploration can lead to a more refined understanding of existing community relationships and of what helps children and youth, older people and people with disabilities to participate more in their communities in general.

This is particularly relevant in the context of a community that is experiencing change, as is the case of the Liberties in Dublin.

Our research is informed by two central research questions:

1. Which public spaces contribute to community interactions in the Liberties?
2. Where is migration and community change most visible in the neighbourhood?

In particular, we wanted to understand the relevance of spaces of interaction in the neighbourhood for children and youth, older people and people with disabilities and how such spaces encourage integration and intergenerational connections. We also explored patterns of change in communities in the Liberties, with a focus on immigrant populations.

The research presented in this document is the result of a Citizen Researcher Training Programme run in collaboration between local residents and researchers from the National University of Ireland Galway, as a part of the 3-Cities Project.

The 3-Cities Project focuses on children and youth, older people and people with disabilities and their participation in their communities and cities. The backgrounds and individual profiles of the citizen researchers are diverse, as are their motivations for participating in the research process. A combination of factors motivated residents to become involved in the training.

# Exploring Day-to-Day Community Life and Change in the Liberties

This included appreciation for the area, the desire to share knowledge of the Liberties to a wider public, contributing to the community, querying fixed ideas of community life in the Liberties, acquiring research skills, and interest in being involved in a collaborative research project.

In addition to contributing to the overall participatory methodology of the project, there are also a number of important reasons for why the 3-Cities Project team wanted to work with citizen researchers. These included: providing local children and youth, older people and people with disabilities with a way to contribute to the research directly; the aspiration to promote engagement with community issues at grassroots level; to help make sure the 3-Cities Project is relevant to the lives of children and youth, older people and people with disabilities; and to harness the insights of local residents on what it is like to live in their community.

## What we did

The research presented in this brief was developed by four local citizen researchers from the Liberties in collaboration with two researchers from the 3-Cities Project.

The Citizen Researcher Training Programme encompassed three workshops which covered the main stages of research, from developing a research question, to designing a research study, to collecting data and, finally, to interpreting and reporting what was found. Key issues around how to conduct research in an ethical manner were also covered in these workshops.

## Citizen Led Research

The citizen led research presented here is part of other research activities conducted by the 3-Cities Project team in the Liberties<sup>1</sup>. The 3-Cities Project research involved a Collaborative Forum with key community stakeholders and local children and youth, older people and people with disabilities who identified important topics around community participation. In the Liberties these topics included:

- Exploring the value of informal places to meet in the Liberties,
- Exploring implications of processes of change in the Liberties in terms of participation in the community.

In addition to helping to guide other research activities completed as a part of the 3-Cities Project in the Liberties, we as citizen researchers identified key research questions based on these topics. Two primary research questions were identified, which led to two distinct projects being completed.

The 3-Cities project aims to engage in a collaborative process to re-imagine services and communities to maximise participation for children and youth, older people, and people with disabilities in their localities and cities. The project focuses on Galway, Limerick and Dublin.

### Project 1: Identifying relevant public spaces of interaction in the Liberties

The aim of this project emerged principally from a wish to identify significant spaces of community interaction in the Liberties, and some of the positive and negative elements of these spaces. In particular, we wanted to explore how these spaces can encourage community integration and intergenerational interactions between younger and older generations in the neighbourhood.

We took photos (referred to as photo elicitation in research) in order to capture the information we needed.

A focus group with six people who lived and/or worked in the Liberties was also completed in order to dig deeper into this research question.

### Project 2: Exploring migration and change in the community

In this project we also used photography to capture and explore key experiences, observations and opinions around community daily interaction and change. To capture this we were interested in taking photos of religious and commercial spaces.

Field observations aimed to capture change through noting the visual significance of change brought by migration across the Liberties. We reflected as a group on what the visual data in the form of photos signify and we discussed how change is represented in these.

<sup>1</sup> The 3-Cities Project includes dedicated focus groups with service providers and residents in the area representing the relevant groups of children and youth, older people and people with disabilities. Other methods entailed discussion of themes in a collaborative forum and in-depth data collection using Experiential and Lifecourse interview methodologies.



## What we found out

### Project 1:

The material that we collected by and large reinforced the view that there were few current public spaces to meet up with people from the Liberties.

The main reasons that we identified as why this is the case were:

- few attractive green areas
- accessibility
- safety
- social divides
- outdated and unkept public spaces.

We grouped existing public spaces into three categories and we assessed their collective value in a more detailed manner.

### 1. Green public areas

In relation to green public areas, we found that there are few green areas in the Liberties and by and large there does not seem to be one space collectively used by the community of the Liberties. St Patrick's Park and Oscar Square were the two most mentioned green spaces in the area.

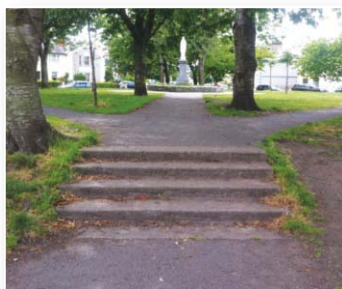


Figure 1. One of our pre-identified green areas. Oscar Square, Dublin 8.

The observations we collected from younger people at the focus group indicate that by and large their perception of public spaces in the Liberties is poor and is strongly associated with social divides and lack of amenities. The following two quotes capture some of the issues discussed at the focus group.

“Basically we can't walk down the street sometimes without people slagging us off”

(Focus Group Participant 2)

“...even walking through the area you can see that it is a bit run down. I am not surprised that young people want to just walk out and go somewhere nice and fresh”

(Focus Group Participant 1)

Both data derived from the focus group and emerging themes from our researcher team discussions suggest that lack of collective interaction is often connected to social divides in the community. Particularly for younger people, there are concerns over safety and not fitting in with an urban space marked by social problems such as drug use, under-aged drinking and violence.

We discussed future plans for Weaver Park at the focus group and the majority of people felt that this would require adequate management in order to ensure safety and inclusion of everyone in the community.

### 2. Managed and unmanaged green areas within housing complexes



Figure 2. Managed area within a housing complex. Iveagh Trust Flats. Kevin Street, Dublin 8

The Iveagh Trust flat complex has been deemed an example of architectural design that promotes and accommodates community engagement and interaction (McDonald, 2000). The Iveagh Trust is a social housing complex that is over one hundred years old, but there are many other social housing and gated community complexes that can be found in the Liberties.

# Exploring Day-to-Day Community Life and Change in the Liberties

Some of these housing complexes contain communal areas, but the quality of these spaces varies substantially. Some areas adjacent to these housing complexes are managed by either the city council or a housing authority and they would contain a small play area or small green managed spaces. However, there are also some community spaces that are unmanaged, such as enclosed open areas in the form of a yard or a field.

By and large, our exploration of these existing spaces reinforces previous research in the area which has reported on the declining quality and availability of these spaces particularly in the new infill development areas. These new developments, we would argue, are seen not to encourage greater interaction amongst residents (Haase, 2008)

## 3. Commercial Areas



Figure 3. Commercial area in the Liberties. Meath Street, Dublin 8

Liberties community life is strongly linked to its key commercial areas which include Thomas Street, Francis Street and Meath Street. In our exploration of public spaces, we have found that these areas continue to be an important component of community life in the Liberties. However, there are indications from our focus group discussion that these commercial spaces are becoming less significant for the younger generations and furthermore they are also problematic for people with physical disabilities such as wheelchair users.

## Project 2:

### Visual aspects of change in the Liberties

The material that we collected led to a deeper understanding of change.

We started this process by capturing through photography some of the visual elements and symbols that we believe are associated with migration, change and existing communities in the Liberties. Religious icons and places of religious worship were felt to be one of the main visual signifiers of migration. Catholic, Jewish, Protestant and Muslim communities are strongly represented in the area.



Figure 4. Sophia Housing, Cork Street, Dublin 8

The group discussion of these visual materials resulted in a greater appreciation for religious diversity and migration in the Liberties. For example, we noted the dominant presence of Catholic Symbols (see figure 4) and buildings in the area while also appreciating changes in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the community with several buildings such as Sophia Housing in Cork Street (see figure 5) now serving more secular functions.



Figure 5. Sophia Housing, Cork Street, Dublin 8

We also investigated the relatively recent presence of Muslim religious buildings and symbols which we feel collectively represent a new group of people living and taking part in community life in the Liberties.



The Dublin Mosque in South Circular Road (see figure 6) was originally the Donore Presbyterian Church for example (Donore Avenue Parish, 2015).

It was interesting to note that across the road from the Dublin Mosque there is an existing office building that used to be a Synagogue. This comparison between the new visual presence of Muslim culture and religious practices and the presence of the less visible yet still significant history of Jewish community in the Liberties led to a deeper understanding of minority communities in this area. We debated the legacy of Jewish culture in the area and we agreed that, while it has a strong imprint in the history of the Liberties, it is in decline. By the same token we also discussed the fact that the protestant community is also in decline in this neighbourhood.

These themes highlight for us evolving changes regarding both the emergence of a greater secular community, as may be the case for growing numbers of Irish people in the Liberties, and also the emergence of a new community in the area which we associate strongly with religion.



*Figure 6. Dublin Mosque, South Circular Road, Dublin 8*

Overall, the findings suggest that change and migration has been a constant theme in the Liberties where migration and mixed cultures were always present. The way in which buildings such as the mosque have adapted to the presence of new groups and the decline of others is a telling reminder of how communities and cultures evolve over time.

Commercial areas: visual hot spots of change

Our project on change in the Liberties also focused on exploring the visual significance of shops that cater for the growing migrant population in the Liberties. These shops are particularly abundant and varied at the edge of the neighbourhood in both South Circular Road and Clanbrassil Street. In our view they capture visually the growing number of shops dedicated to the needs of migrant populations. We also noted that there is much diversity of groups in the area and that they utilise different commercial spaces in the community. Meath Street and Thomas Street remain significant social areas for the community in the Liberties. We found that big chains, such as Lidl

Supermarket, are a hub in terms of being a central place of activity which caters for most groups in the community. We see potential in these spaces in terms of access and communication with the wider community.



*Figure 7 at the periphery of the Liberties, South Circular Road, Dublin.*

# Exploring Day-to-Day Community Life and Change in the Liberties

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Our exploration of day-to-day life in the Liberties has led to some interesting conclusions about community life in the area and the spaces where this takes place. Most significantly, we found that the Liberties, although it is an area with a strong sense of identity, has a weaker connection in terms of shared spaces and areas where community life is performed. Commercial areas such as Meath Street and Thomas Street are to an extent the strongest focal points of community life and interaction as it relates to the Liberties. However, these areas are losing appeal to younger populations and they are also largely inaccessible for people with disabilities like wheelchair users. We hope that raising awareness of these matters will contribute towards making these spaces more accessible and appealing to the community.

## Research Team

### **Delia Gaffney,**

Citizen Researcher,  
Liberties, Dublin 8

### **Gavin Fannin,**

Citizen Researcher  
Liberties, Dublin 8

### **Ciara Reynolds**

Citizen Researcher  
Liberties, Dublin 8

### **Fidhnait Canning**

Citizen Researcher  
Liberties, Dublin 8

### **Orla McGarry**

Post-Doctoral Researcher  
Project Lifecourse,  
NUI Galway

### **Alexandra Revez**

Post-Doctoral Researcher  
Project Lifecourse,  
NUI Galway

3 Cities Coordinator

### **Kieran Walsh**

Senior Research Fellow  
Project Lifecourse  
Institute for Lifecourse & Society  
NUI Galway

## **Project Lifecourse**

The 3-Cities Project marks the first major programme of work undertaken by Project Lifecourse. Project Lifecourse is funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies and represents Ireland's most visible contribution to the growing international field of life course studies. By combining and harnessing existing strengths and international networks from across the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (CFRC), the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology (ICSG), and the Centre for Disability Law and Policy (CDLP).

**Institute for Lifecourse and Society**

NUI Galway, Galway, Ireland

Telephone: +353(0)91492934

Website: [www.nuigalway.ie/lifecourse/the\\_3\\_cities\\_project.html](http://www.nuigalway.ie/lifecourse/the_3_cities_project.html)



**NUI Galway**  
**OÉ Gaillimh**



**Institute for**  
**Lifecourse and Society**