

# Community engagement for challenging times

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Third Peter Townsend Memorial Conference  
Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK



## Pilot questions

How can we make poverty research more meaningful to low income communities?

How can we support the emergence of alternative narratives from those living in poverty?

How can we link these local experiences to national research?

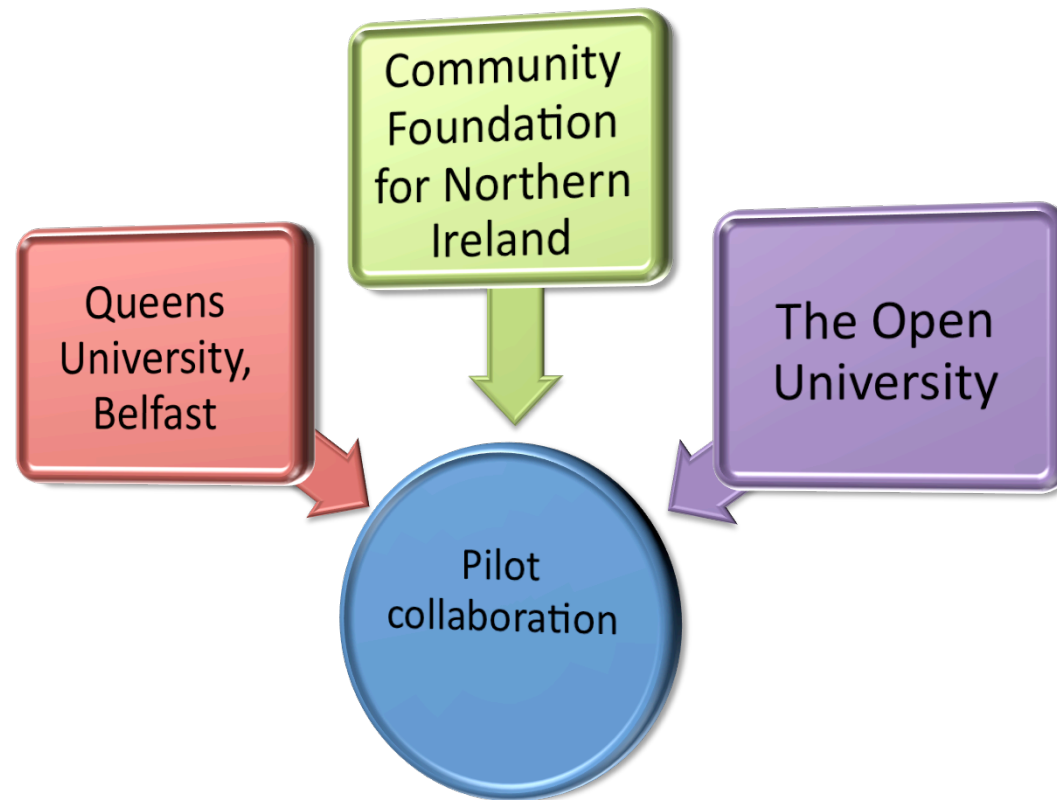


# Overview: PSE engagement project in Northern Ireland

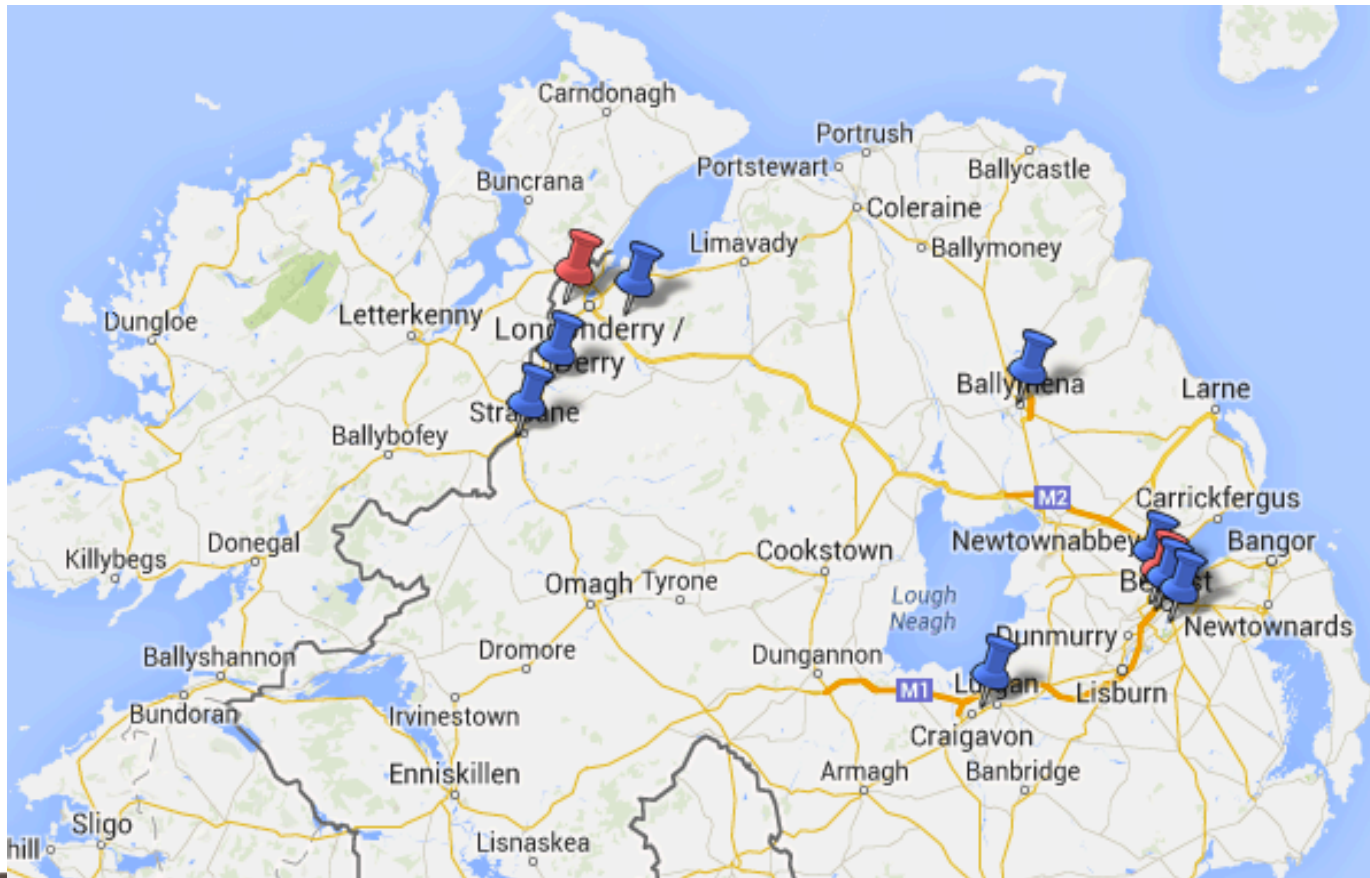
- Partners
- Context
- Process
- Outcomes
- Lessons learned



# Engagement Partners



# 8 communities located in areas of high deprivation



# A cross community project



# Context

Legacy of sectarian conflict

Segregated communities

Divisions in employment/ unemployment

Social isolation

Area stereotyping



**36%** of households in Northern Ireland are multiply deprived (PSE UK:2012)





# Stigma, fear and isolation

Policies of shame (Walker et al 2013)

Over a quarter of a million adults in Northern Ireland (19%) have felt embarrassed because of having a low income (PSE NI)

**“People have a lot of pride, so they won’t talk about their situation”**

(Community practitioner, Country Antrim, 2012)



# Community activist expectations

**“If it’s just a wee community group doing a bit of research, it is not going to go anywhere. My hope is that with this our voices will be heard”**

(Community practitioner, County Armagh, 2012)



# Engagement challenges

## Practitioners concerns

- Local reluctance and suspicion about formal research - people not wanting to talk
- Expectations and fears: 'We can't make films/ No-one will agree to share their stories....
- How will it lead to action/ change

## Different methodological approaches:

- Participatory Action Research v Traditional research project



**“I think universities and academia forget  
people don't have the literacy skills.  
Older generations don't like to write and worry  
about spelling”**

(Community practitioner Belfast)



# Co-developed methodology

- Anonymity and confidentiality paramount
- Community gathered qualitative data
- Focus group questions areas linked to PSE national living standards survey
- A process to lead to action and change



# Step 1: Collecting community evidence

Systematic qualitative 'evidence and experience' gathering supported by:

- Focus group training
- Digital recorders and transcriptions
- Question sets linked to the PSE national Living Standards surveys



# Data gathered between 2012 and 2014

60-80 participants

3 rounds of questions sets covering:

- Living standards (income, housing, bills etc)
- Necessities questions (items and activities)
- Debt and financial insecurity

Opportunities for gathering longitudinal data

27 transcripts produced



## Step 2. Purposeful storytelling





# Methods co-developed to be: accessible, engaging and adaptable



## 4 x community produced films

Community identified themes and priorities.

Different context specific approaches used.

Photo based films of illustrative objects and places  
(rather than people)

- **Surviving on the edge** (Debt)
- **Going backwards** (Housing repossession)
- **The forgotten estate** (Area deprivation)
- **Hopes and Dreams** (Digital divide)



# For example: Hopes & Dreams

Emerging issues from focus group:

- The legacy of the troubles (and no escape for young people from ongoing tensions)
- Area deprivation
- Stigma (benefits; single parent families)
- Digital divide:** (*22% of households with children in Northern Ireland do not have a computer with internet access (PSE NI 2013).*)



**The youth produced film *Hopes & Dreams*  
can be viewed at:**

[www.poverty.ac.uk/community/  
northern-ireland/ardoyne](http://www.poverty.ac.uk/community/northern-ireland/ardoyne)

The background of the lower section is a blurred photograph of a white wall. A prominent feature is a yellow circular sign with the word 'Free' at the top, 'WiFi' in large letters in the middle, and 'Spot' at the bottom. To the right of the sign, there are faint, curved lines suggesting a signal or a hand gesture.

## Step 3: Linking local with national

- Sharing findings via PSE website:  
[www.poverty.ac.uk](http://www.poverty.ac.uk)
- Supporting groups to produce webpage material
- Making links between local experiences and PSE national findings





Search

#### Search by subject

[Low pay](#) [Poverty measurement](#)

[Benefits](#) [Poverty](#)

[forecast](#) [Inequality](#)

[Low-income households](#) [Europe](#)

[Child poverty](#)

[Government cuts](#)

[Government policy](#)

[View all subjects](#)

## Community collaboration

The PSE: UK research team collaborates with community groups, pressure groups, organisations and networks of people working on the frontline of poverty across the UK.

In [Northern Ireland](#) we are actively involved in a project called [Communities in Action](#), which is working with community groups from some of Northern Ireland's most disadvantaged areas. In this project we are drawing on the PSE national surveys to help communities research what is happening in their own area and to track the impact of the economic recession and changes to the benefits system and public service.

In the [North East of England](#) we're developing close links with networks of community practitioners and researchers, to exchange information and resources. We have also linked up with community participatory research projects in [Scotland](#) and will be adding further information on these as well as new collaborations elsewhere over the coming months.

## Community updates

#### Tweets

[Follow](#)



**PSE2010Team**  
@PSE2010

2h

How bad is poverty for your health in General? Pauline Heslop explains - and you may be surprised @#PSE Conference [poverty.ac.uk](#)

Expand



Hard times: 2014



Money worries: 2013



Poverty Alliance: challenging...



Communities in Action

Findings

>Hard Times: 2014

>Money worries: 2013

Ardoyne

Bready

Cregagh

Donegall Pass

Doury Road

Fountain Street

Lettershandoney

Taghnevan

Methods

## Northern Ireland

In this section you will find information about our work in Northern Ireland, including our work with an innovative participatory research project, Communities in Action (CiA). This collaboration is between the PSE team, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) and eight community groups. These groups represent a number of communities across the region, facing social and economic deprivation.

In 2012 Queen's University and the Open University teamed up with the CFNI to support people living in deprived communities to document life on low income and to make short films based on their local research. Watch some of the Community produced films [here](#) and visit the [CFNI Communities in Action section](#) for more films and information about the projects and themes.

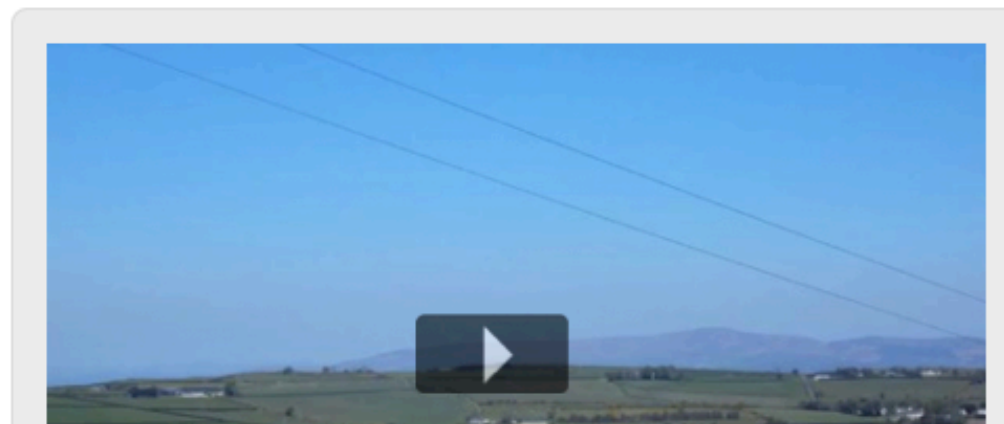
**36%**  
of households cannot afford three or more basic necessities

### Search by subject

**Benefits** Inequality

Low pay Poverty forecast

Child poverty





Search

Home

Definitions of poverty

PSE research

Living in poverty

Communities

Take part

News and views

North East England

Northern Ireland

Scotland

Communities in Action

Findings

>Hard Times: 2014 >

>Money worries: 2013

Ardoyne

Bready

Cregagh

Donegall Pass

Doury Road

Fountain Street

Lettershandoney

Taghnevan

Methods

Search by subject

## Hard times: 2014

*Author/s: Communities in Action and PSE team members*



The latest Communities in Action **Hard Times** reports, provide evidence gathered by communities themselves on the impact of austerity and cuts on families and young people across Northern Ireland between July 2012 and February 2014. Many of these findings are supported by PSE national statistics. The four **Hard Times** reports also highlight examples of community resilience and set out recommendations for action.



## Outputs: April 2012-Sept 2013

- 27 community conversations
- 5 community findings reports
- 4 community produced films
- 2 CiA presentations in Stormont
- Community presentations to local decisions makers, MEPs and their local community
- Presentation at the Mayor of Belfast working group on poverty
- CiA funded projects to address identified needs
- First steps in creation of a shared knowledge bank



# Impact for participants

- Solidarity through an understanding of common issues
- An empowering process - kindling peer support and enabling collective community led responses
- Amplifies voices and experiences of those living in poverty
- Promotes alternative discourses in the public and policy realm



**“Before no one wanted to talk. Now we have people knocking on the door to join a discussion group and take pictures.”**

(Community practitioner, County Antrim)



# Collaboration Legacy

- A pool of skilled local researchers
- A network of focus groups
- A collective lobbying power
- A body of evidence produced by communities (e.g. Hard Times reports)



# Lessons learned

- Aim high: being aspirational can be inspirational...
- Importance of dedicated worker(s) with practical expertise to nurture process and maintain momentum
- Importance of linking with and support existing programmes (in this case CFNI's communities in Action programme)
- Importance of partnerships
  - Each with different individual and institutional roles/ expertise
  - Project is the sum of our collective skills, expertise and networks.



## But...

- Time, labour and resource intensive
- Local leadership, internal politics and skills of local community workers may determine levels of local success
- More support needed on analysis and how to use data effectively – opportunities for future academic/community work in this area



**“Being part of this collaboration means we are sitting with the big people now.**

**People know we exist.”**

(Community practitioner, Lettershandoney, Country Derry 2013)



# Acknowledgements

With thanks to the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, the Communities in Action programme and all the community groups and local participants from Ardoyne, Cregagh, Donegall Pass, Doury Road, Fountain Street and Springhill Park, Lettershandoney, Taghnevan and The Villages Together.

## **The collaboration team:**

CFNI (CiA project worker Geraldine Wilkins)

Open University (PSE Community engagement Gabi Kent)

Queens University (PSE NI academic team Mike Tomlinson, Grace Kelly, Paddy Hillyard and Mary Daly)

Thanks also to Joanna Mack (Open University) for supporting this pilot engagement project as it continued to evolve and expand over the past two years.





Please visit the **communities** section on the PSE website

**[www.poverty.ac.uk/community/  
community-collaboration](http://www.poverty.ac.uk/community/community-collaboration)**

And CFNI's Communities in Action programme website:

[www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/  
Communities-in-Action-](http://www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Communities-in-Action-)



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