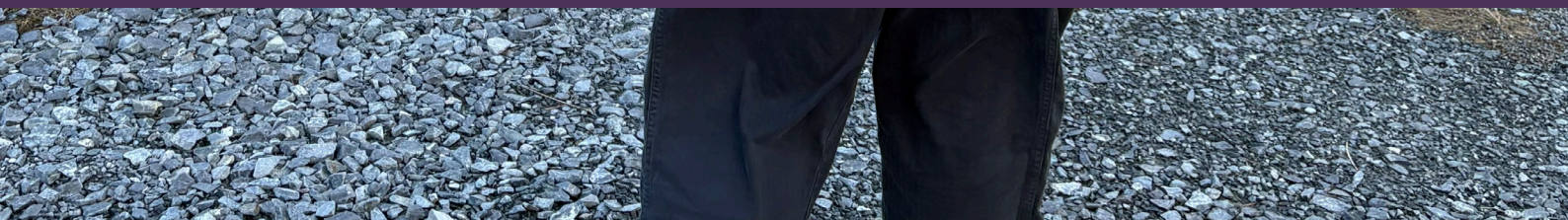


Stepping into Belonging

A PEACEPLUS project exploring community, nature and creativity in the Crotlieve DEA





Stepping into Belonging

Join walking events for wellness and wonder with artists, musicians, photographers and guides in Warrenpoint, Rostrevor and Hilltown



PEACEPLUS
Northern Ireland - Ireland
Co-funded by the
European Union
UK Government
Northern Ireland Executive
Rialtas na hEireann Government of Ireland

A project supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB)

kitabna
كتابنا

Comhairle Ceantair an Iúir, Mhúrn agus an Dúin
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

About our project

Stepping into Belonging was a programme of nature and wellbeing walks, creative workshops and shared experiences across the Crotlieve District Electoral Area in Northern Ireland. Our programme was largely developed to support women, survivors of the Northern Ireland Troubles, ethnic minorities and the LGBTQ+ community.

The project set out to bring people together through a shared interest in nature, landscape and creativity, introducing participants to local artists and practitioners who could teach them new skills and inspire them to explore new hobbies. With the winter months approaching, we wanted to create opportunities for people to discover creative activities they could continue independently, while also introducing them to artists living and working in their local area.

The programme brought together a wide range of activities, including mosaic making, mountain photography, coppersmithing, mindful walking and textile arts. These experiences took place in some of the region's most beautiful natural settings, from the Rostrevor shoreline and Warrenpoint coast to the Western Mournes, Hen Mountain and the forests surrounding Leitrim Lodge.

Participants came from different backgrounds, age groups and communities, bringing their own experiences and perspectives to each gathering. A central part of every workshop was spending time outdoors. Through accessible walks and creative activities, participants were encouraged to enjoy the physical and mental wellbeing benefits of movement, fresh air, companionship and engagement with the natural environment.

Even when the weather was challenging, we found opportunities to get outside, explore the landscape and enjoy time together. Above all, Stepping into Belonging was about creating welcoming spaces in which people could try something unfamiliar, discover local creative opportunities, build friendships and develop a greater sense of connection to the places around them.



Kitabna's connection to Northern Ireland

Although founded in Lebanon in 2014, and now based in England, Kitabna undertook several projects for the Northern Ireland Education's Intercultural Education Service between 2019 and 2022. This included working with schools, children and teachers to create multilingual children's books celebrating the land and relationships across cultures and counties in Northern Ireland.

Our children's books can be read online anytime by following the link below:
www.kitabna.org/therapeutic-stories.html

Recruitment approach and communication

To recruit participants we created a strategy of approaching local organisations linked to hiking, culture, arts, nature and heritage in the Newry, Mourne and Down council area, and in-person visits to bookshops, libraries, heritage spaces and community centres to flyer and personally invite people to join us. We worked with the council to share our events across social media, attracting a total number of 73 participants signed up from across the region, and over 42 participants attending our events, from young children to the elderly.

Word of mouth helped, along with connecting to popular local venues with strong community links.





Artists in Residence: supporting local talent in the area

Kitabna advertised for six Artists in Residence to join us in facilitating the project, each from a unique background. Through national and local art galleries and social media, we received several applications, and interviewed artists to find out how they wished to engage with our project themes of heritage, community and language in the landscape. Our artists often had connections to local venues, making it easy to offer our participants beautiful experiences.

Please take note of these wonderful practitioners and venues to plan projects for the future!



Our Team



Helen

Helen Patuck is Creative Director of Stepping Into Belonging and founder of Kitabna - Our Book, working across literature, illustration and peacebuilding in the humanitarian sector with the UN and in the UK-European context.



Cristina

Dr Cristina Martínez López has a background in TESOL and holds a PhD in language and place at Queens University Belfast and supports Stepping Into Belonging as a Programme Assistant.



Frances

Dr Frances Kane researches at Queens University Belfast and has worked for years on the Northern Ireland Placenames Project. She brings years of experience to her role as cultural advisor and facilitator in Stepping Into Belonging.



Sinead & Fintan

Sinead and Fintan Thompson have many years of experience leading walks in the Mournes area and beyond. They are longstanding members of The Down Danderers Rambling Club, and both currently sit on the board of the Ulster Federation of Rambling Clubs.

Our Artists in Residence



Claire

Claire Mooney is a silversmith and community based artist who explores the land and lore within her work. Inspired by people, their stories and the ever evolving natural environment her pieces aim to capture the changing sensibilities of the landscape and its communities.



Sarah

Sarah O Prey is a mixed-media artist whose work centres on textured layers, colour interplay, and the movement that emerges through process. She works through experimentation and intuitive making, allowing each piece to form gradually through shifts in technique and surface. Her practice sits at the intersection of creativity and wellbeing, where movement, colour, layered texture, and the feelings that arise in the making are as important as the finished piece.



April

April Feng is a Chinese artist based in Rostrevor, County Down. Inspired by her deep connection with the Mournes and the landscapes around Carlingford Lough, she creates work in oil, pastel, watercolour, mixed media and mosaic. April's practice is rooted in a love of nature, place, recycling and restoration. She collects sea glass, ceramics and other found materials from the local shoreline, transforming these fragments into mosaic artworks.



Polly

Polly Garnett is the project coordinator of Maps & Memories and works as part of the NI Science Festival team. Alongside her role with Maps & Memories, Polly is a documentary photographer and community artist based in Belfast.



Sanda

Sanda Baretić is a Croatian-born visual artist and textile designer based by Carlingford Lough, working under the artist name WITH SANDA. She holds a BA in Fashion and Textile Design from the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia, and studied Textile Design in India. Her multidisciplinary practice brings together painting, textiles, sewing and wearable art, exploring colour, nature, symbolism, sustainability, identity and personal expression.



Naomi

Naomi Savage is a Northern Irish Photographer specialising in Landscapes, specifically The Mountains of The Mournes. With a background in Graphic Design, Music and Portrait Photography she now spends her time hiking and capturing the beauty of Northern Ireland creating professional spectacular Fine Art Prints and Calendars for her website.

Stepping into Belonging



Our small team works closely with PEACEPLUS & Newry, Mourne and Down Council to bring together events this Autumn 2026

PEACEPLUS
Northern Ireland - Ireland
Co-funded by the European Union | UK Government
Northern Ireland Executive | Rialtas na Mínistear Government of Ireland

A project supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB)

Comhairle Ceantair an Iúir, Mhúrn agus an Dúin
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

kitabna كتابنا

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

iver of Rushes"
nna "the bulrush river"
n river"

mnə ˈrĭvər

himna River seems to derive from the Irish
ne is the gen. sing. fem. form of
hean; *Ó Dónaill* sv. *simhin*). Flanagan
iver name in Cos Kerry and Galway where it is
In the Co. Down example the *-mh-* in the original
delenited in the anglicized form Shimna (see
Lamagan).

An older name for the Shimna would appear to be
as is clear from Harris' description of the course of
From the North-side of Slieve-Neir, in the Barony
which uniting into one Form the River Hundock,
merick's Deer-Park near Tullamore, washes
Harris Hist. 143)

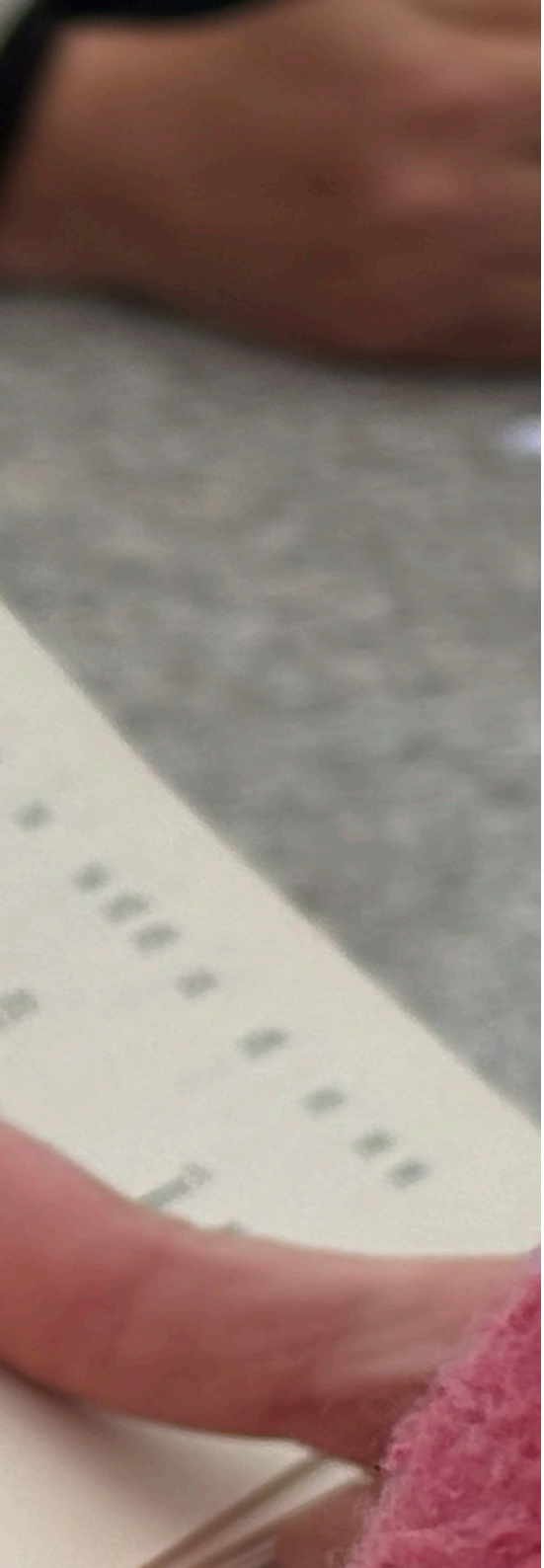
Spinkwee or Cascade River
J 3330

1. do 'spinjkwi
2. do 'kas'ke:d

Dinneen records *spinnc* and *sponc* which, he states, are both [illegible] for the
splimnc). *Ó Dónaill* has *spinc* and *sponc* "crag or cliff". Unfortunately, on the first two
crag or pinnacle" is not marked on any of the modern maps and names of this type
of a river. One cannot be sure that it was ever known as Abalone to those for whom
the Spinkwee River may be a hybrid form consisting largely [illegible]
definitely an English form; *cascade* is another word for waterfall.

Srupatrick
J 3828

1. Owrypatrick
2. Sancte Patricke Water
3. Owyn Patryke
4. Owenpatricke
5. Owne Patrick
6. Strew Patrick
7. Sruth Phadruig
8. Sruth Phadruig
9. Sruthan Paitre
10. sruth
11. sruthpatrik



Queen's University Belfast and The Northern Ireland Placenames Project

One of our project's biggest inspirations is The Northern Ireland Placenames Project, which Dr Frances Kane at Queen's University Belfast worked on for several years. By linking the landscape to the language beneath it, be that Irish, Ulster Scots or other languages of settlers of Ireland going back thousands of years, it was a natural place to start. With a searchable database, participants were able to uncover the stories of their villages, towns, townlands and localities.

It's easy to link to the website here:

https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/9b31e0501b744154b4584b1dce1f859b



Session 1: Treasures from the Shore

Mosaic Making with April Fenn at An Cuan, Rostrevor | September

Our first session took place at the beautiful An Cuan Community Centre, situated close to the Rostrevor shoreline, where local artist April Fenn introduced participants to the art of mosaic making. We began by gathering together, introducing ourselves and sharing some of the ways we look after our wellbeing. This created a welcoming atmosphere for a group spanning different ages and backgrounds. On a gloriously sunny day, April led us onto the shoreline at low tide, showing participants how she collects pieces of sea glass and discarded ceramics to incorporate into her artwork.

Together, we explored the beach at a gentle pace, taking time to notice the colours, textures and shapes of the materials beneath our feet. Children and adults alike enjoyed the opportunity to search for small treasures while experiencing the shoreline through mindful walking.







Returning to An Cuan, we shared sandwiches and conversation before beginning our mosaic workshop under April's guidance. Participants learned how to arrange their collected materials into small decorative mosaics, creating individual pieces that could be taken home as fridge magnets.

For many, this was their first experience of mosaic making, and the results were beautiful. Each piece reflected the maker's personal choices and the materials discovered during the walk. It was a wonderful introduction to the programme, combining gentle exercise, creative exploration, environmental awareness and the satisfaction of making something to keep.





Session 2: Through the Mountain Lens

Mountain Photography with Naomi Savage at Hilltown and Hen Mountain | September

Our second workshop began at Hilltown Community Centre, where participants gathered for tea and conversation before meeting local mountain photographer Naomi Savage. Naomi introduced us to her photographic practice and the important role it plays in her own wellbeing. She described how getting outdoors to capture sunrises, sunsets and the changing light across the Mournes has become a meaningful part of her life.

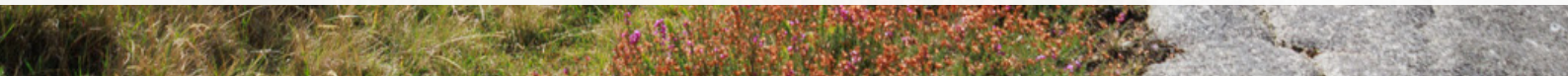
She also generously shared a calendar of her mountain photography with the group, offering a glimpse into the beauty of the landscapes she regularly explores.



We then travelled to Hen Mountain, where Naomi guided participants along the mountain paths and introduced practical techniques for photographing the landscape using everyday mobile phones.

Participants learned about wide-angle photography, ISO settings, composition and the ways natural light can transform an image. The workshop demonstrated that beautiful landscape photography does not necessarily require specialist equipment, but can begin with the camera already in our pockets.

We walked together as far as a waterfall, where Naomi also took portraits of participants in the surrounding landscape. At this point, the group divided according to individual preferences and fitness levels. Some participants continued towards the summit of Hen Mountain, while others chose to return along the path at a gentler pace.





Back at Hilltown Community Centre, we enjoyed more tea and conversation, reflecting on the walk and the photographs we had taken. Many participants later shared their images through the project WhatsApp group, extending the experience beyond the workshop and allowing everyone to appreciate the different ways people had captured the same landscape.

The session encouraged participants to see photography as an accessible creative practice that could support wellbeing, inspire future walks and deepen their appreciation of the Mournes.





Session 3: Leaves in Copper

Copper Pendant Making with Claire Mooney at Hilltown and Rostrevor Forest | October

Our third workshop brought participants together for a creative exploration of the natural world through metalwork, led by local silversmith Claire Mooney. We began at Hilltown Community Centre with a welcoming cup of tea before travelling to the Yellow Water area, at the foot of Rostrevor Forest.

Under Claire's guidance, we learned how to shape, hammer, file and finish pieces of copper, transforming them into delicate leaf-inspired pendants.









For many participants, this was their first experience of metalworking. There was a real sense of surprise and achievement as everyone discovered what they could create in a relatively short time.

Accompanied by our walking guides, we followed a gentle woodland route beside the river, taking time to observe the surrounding trees and collect fallen leaves of different shapes and sizes. These leaves would become the inspiration for our copper pendant-making workshop later in the day. Claire also brought a drone to document the walk from above, capturing beautiful footage of the group moving through the forest. She later shared this footage with participants, offering a wonderful new perspective on the landscape we had explored together.





Returning to Hilltown Community Centre, participants were introduced to the tools and techniques of working with copper. Each finished pendant was unique, inspired by the natural forms encountered during our walk and shaped by the hands of its maker. The session beautifully connected the outdoor experience with a practical artistic skill, allowing participants to carry home a small, personal reminder of the landscape.





Session 4: Different Ways of Seeing

Polaroid Photography with Polly Garnett at Leitrim Lodge and the Mournes | October

Our fourth workshop took place during a particularly stormy weekend in October, when challenging weather conditions threatened to disrupt our plans. Despite the storm, we were delighted that so many participants still came to join us for a creative photography session led by artist Polly Garnett.

Polly began by introducing the group to Polaroid photography, explaining the distinctive qualities of instant film and how it can be used to capture fleeting impressions of the landscape. We then travelled to Leitrim Lodge car park, at the foot of the Mournes, where we set out on a gentle walk with our cameras. We enjoyed sandwiches together outdoors before returning to review the photographs we had taken.



Polly provided a series of photographic prompts, encouraging participants to look closely at their surroundings and respond creatively to the shapes, textures, light and atmosphere of the landscape.

Rather than focusing on technically perfect photographs, the workshop invited everyone to experiment, notice unexpected details and explore their own ways of seeing.

The Polaroid images developed in wonderfully unpredictable ways. In the unusual light and weather conditions, some appeared almost ghostly, while others captured striking contrasts and atmospheric details.

Looking at the finished photographs together revealed how differently each participant had interpreted the same environment. The session became a joyful celebration of individual perspectives, creative experimentation and the pleasure of spending time together outdoors, even in less-than-perfect weather. It also reminded us that creativity and wellbeing do not depend on ideal conditions! Sometimes, the most memorable experiences emerge when we embrace the unexpected!



Session 5: Walking with Waves

Mindful Walking and Painting with Sarah O'Prey at Warrenpoint Parish Rooms | November

Our fifth workshop, Walking with Waves, took place in Warrenpoint, where local artist Sarah O'Prey invited participants to explore the relationship between creativity, mindfulness and the simple art of noticing. We began at Warrenpoint Parish Rooms, where Sarah introduced us to her paintings and shared an important idea: that creativity does not always begin with a particular skill or an intended outcome, but with giving ourselves time to play, observe and explore.

With this in mind, participants gathered around the table to reflect on the activities and experiences that bring them joy and support their wellbeing. The conversation ranged from reading literary fiction and exploring maps to walking dogs, spending time with pets, gardening, enjoying nature and participating in a local Men's Shed.

It was a beautiful moment of shared reflection, revealing the many different ways people find comfort, purpose and happiness in their everyday lives.

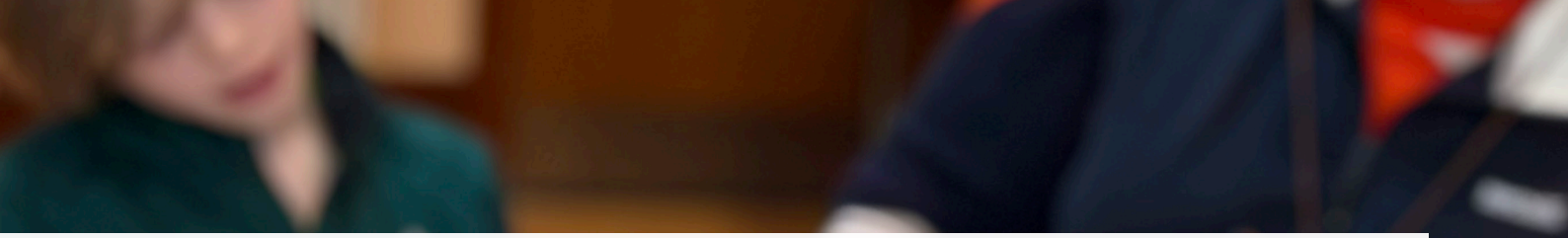






We then set off on a gentle walk through Warrenpoint town, passing through the park and continuing towards the shoreline. Along the way, Sarah encouraged participants to slow down and practise noticing the small details of their surroundings. We skimmed stones, explored the beach and took time to appreciate the changing textures, colours and atmosphere of the coast.

During our walk, we also discovered that the first section of the new Narrow Water Bridge had arrived from Belgium. This provided an unexpected opportunity to reflect on a significant moment in the area's history: the construction of a new cross-border connection between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.



The bridge offered a particularly meaningful symbol for a project concerned with belonging, connection and the relationships between people and places. After returning to the Parish Rooms for a shared sandwich lunch, Sarah introduced a painting activity inspired by our observations.

Using masking tape to divide and frame four sections of paper, participants experimented with paint, colour and composition to capture different impressions of the walk.

When the masking tape was removed, the individual paintings were revealed as beautifully framed collections of observations, each reflecting the participant's own way of seeing the landscape. The results were wonderfully varied and personal, demonstrating how a shared walk can inspire many different creative responses.

Walking with Waves offered a gentle reminder that creativity and wellbeing can begin with something as simple as giving ourselves permission to pause, notice and play.





Session 6: Leaves of Belonging

Nature, Language and Collective Textile Art with Dr Frances Kane and Sanda Baretić at An Cuan and Fairy Glen, Rostrevor | November

Our final Stepping into Belonging workshop brought participants together at An Cuan in Rostrevor for a celebration of nature, language, creativity and the connections developed throughout the programme.

We began with tea and conversation, reflecting on the sense of belonging that can grow through our relationships with particular places. Our artist facilitator, Sanda Baretić, shared some of their own experiences of making Carlingford Lough and the surrounding landscape a home, opening up a thoughtful discussion about what it means to feel connected to a place. We then set off for a gentle walk through the beautiful Fairy Glen, accompanied by Dr Frances Kane, who introduced us to the Irish place name Gleann Sí and the histories and meanings preserved within the local landscape.





Surrounded by spectacular autumn foliage, participants explored the colours, shapes and textures of the trees, learning the names of different leaves and trees in Irish and Croatian as we walked.

We gathered fallen leaves along the way, selecting different shapes and textures to bring back to An Cuan for a collaborative textile workshop. Under Sanda's guidance, participants worked together to print and paint the leaves onto a shared piece of fabric, creating a colourful collective artwork inspired by the autumn landscape.



Once the textile was complete, Sanda divided it into individual pieces so that everyone could take home a section of the artwork they had created together. It was a particularly meaningful way to conclude the programme: each participant leaving with something personal that was also part of a larger shared creation.

As we reflected on our experiences, participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunities to learn new skills, explore familiar and unfamiliar landscapes, and connect with people from different backgrounds.



We encouraged everyone to remain in touch through the project WhatsApp group, continuing to share creative opportunities, experiences and news beyond the workshops. The final gathering was a celebration of the friendships, skills and discoveries made throughout Stepping into Belonging, and a reminder that belonging is something we can continue to create together.

Project Legacy: Continuing to Belong?

Although the six workshops of Stepping into Belonging have concluded, the relationships, creative discoveries and opportunities developed through the programme offer a foundation for continued community engagement.

One of the project's most important legacies is the WhatsApp group established for participants and local artists. This provides an informal network through which members can continue to share creative opportunities, upcoming events, exhibitions, personal achievements and invitations to future activities. The programme also created new connections between local artists, community organisations and venues, some of which have already led to further opportunities.

Supporting Local Artists

Mountain photographer Naomi Savage, who led our photography workshop at Hen Mountain, met a representative from Kilkeel Library through the programme. This connection led to an invitation to exhibit her mountain photography at the library during autumn and winter. This is a wonderful example of how bringing people together through creative activities can generate opportunities beyond the original workshops, helping local artists share their work with wider audiences.

Celebrating Community Achievements

Participants have also shared news of their own community activities and achievements. Donal, who joined the programme, introduced us to the work of his restored Men's Shed, which received a UK Men's Shed of the Year award during the final week of the project! Sharing achievements such as these has helped participants discover and celebrate the valuable community initiatives already taking place around them.

Creative Skills Beyond the Workshops

Across the programme, participants were introduced to mosaic making, mountain photography, copper jewellery, polaroid photography, painting and textile art. These activities offered opportunities to develop new interests, experiment with unfamiliar materials and discover creative practices that can be continued independently. Participants also became more familiar with the work of local artists and practitioners, creating possibilities for future workshops, exhibitions and collaborations.

Friendships and Community Connections

The programme brought together people of different ages, backgrounds and experiences through a shared interest in nature, creativity and wellbeing. The informal conversations that developed during walks, workshops and shared meals were an important part of the experience, helping participants build relationships in welcoming and accessible environments. The continued use of the WhatsApp group offers a way for these connections to develop beyond the funded programme.

Looking Ahead

Participants have expressed enthusiasm for future activities, and we hope to support opportunities for the group to continue meeting, learning and exploring the landscape together.By introducing participants to local artists, community spaces and creative networks, Stepping into Belonging has helped establish connections that can continue to grow.

The project's legacy is therefore not only the artwork produced or the skills learned, but the relationships, confidence and sense of possibility that participants carry forward.

PS. So what does it mean to “belong”?

Over six workshops, Stepping into Belonging invited participants to explore the landscapes of the Crotlieve DEA through walking, photography, mosaic making, metalwork, painting and textile art.

From collecting sea glass on the Rostrevor shoreline to photographing the Western Mournes, making copper leaves, experimenting with Polaroid cameras and painting impressions of Warrenpoint, each session offered a different way of engaging with the natural environment.

The programme demonstrated that creativity can be accessible to everyone, and that opportunities for wellbeing and connection can be found in the landscapes, community spaces and artistic traditions close to home. Perhaps most importantly, the workshops created opportunities for people to spend time together, share their experiences and discover common interests across different backgrounds and generations.

Our final collective textile offered a fitting symbol of this experience: many individual contributions coming together to form something beautiful, before each participant took a small part of the whole home with them.

Stepping into Belonging was not simply about discovering new places or learning new skills. It was about finding new ways to connect with the landscape, with our communities and with one another. And although the workshops have ended, we hope that the friendships, creative interests and sense of belonging they helped nurture - within themselves and others - will continue to grow.



Stepping into Belonging

Join walking events for wellness and wonder with artists, musicians, photographers and guides in Warrenpoint, Rostrevor and Hilltown



PEACEPLUS
Northern Ireland - Ireland
Co-funded by the
European Union | UK Government
Northern Ireland Executive | Rialtas na hEireann Government of Ireland

A project supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB)

kitabna
كتابنا

Comhairle Ceantair an Iúir, Mhúrn agus an Dúin
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

Feedback from participants...

"The project was lovely, great and very inclusive. Nice to meet different people and do activities together."

"I've had a very enriching time paticipating in the events, sharing experiences and trying new things."

"A great experience to meet a varied team of facilitators, local people and exploring different venues across the area."

"I found it to be a positive and inclusive experience, with no downside that I could find."

"I have enjoyed meeting lovely new people & artists from different backgrounds. Learning new skills & appreciation of my natural surroundings."

"Great experience and would love to participate again in the future."

