



Community change and community participation in Claddagh

Background

Claddagh is an established small community nestled in the heart of Galway city. The name Claddagh originates from the Irish word 'Cladach' meaning stony shore. Its location across from the iconic Spanish Arch, as the river Corrib meets the bay, is like no other community in Galway. Formerly a small fishing village that lay outside the city walls, Claddagh was traditionally Gaelic Speaking with its own King, which is now an honorary title.

The Claddagh as a community is going through a period of considerable change. Although the urban landscape has remained the same in recent times the original thatch cottages that once populated the area in the early 1900s are long gone. The proximity to the city, and the scenic landscape that surrounds the community, makes Claddagh a much sought after place to live, with younger and more affluent families having moved into the neighbourhood in recent years. This means that the Claddagh consists of both an ageing, long-term resident population, and various groups of new comer residents.

Despite all these changes, Claddagh remains a unique community that harbours strong historical links to cultural and economic traditions based on Galway bay. Its strong sense of place and connection to the sea act as a fulcrum in the community that draws people to the area.

What is this brief about?

This project is focused on Claddagh, an area close to Galway city. The research work we are presenting looks at how changes shape Claddagh community participation for children and youth, older people and people with disabilities. In particular the research assists in understanding existing community relationships and what helps children and youth, older people and people with disabilities to participate more in their communities.

Our research is informed by two central research questions:

1. What is the role of Claddagh traditions in community integration?
2. What is the level of community connectivity by looking at community spaces?

The research presented in this brief is the result of a Citizen Researcher Training Programme run in collaboration with local residents from Claddagh, and researchers from the National University of Ireland, Galway, as 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 involvement in the training. This included a desire to understand the changes occurring in the community, and to recognise how the history and traditions in the community can impact on the lives of older people, children and youth and people with disabilities.

In addition to contributing to the overall participatory methodology of the project, there are also a number of important reasons 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 direct way to contribute to the research; to promote engagement with community issues at grassroots level; to help make sure that 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.



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What we did

The research presented in this brief was developed by eight citizen researchers from Claddagh 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.

Citizen-Led Research

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

- Exploring the role of Claddagh traditions in community integration
- Exploring the level of social connectivity through community spaces.

In the absence of securing direct involvement from a researcher representing people with a disability (physical, sensory and/or intellectual disability), we sought insight from a family member as a voice into community life in Claddagh for people with disabilities.

In addition to helping guide other research activities completed as part of the 3-Cities Project in Claddagh, citizen researchers identified key research questions based on these topics that they wanted to research. This led to the completion of two research projects.

Project 1: The role of Claddagh traditions in community integration

The aim of this project emerged from an interest surrounding traditions in the community and a potential in such traditions to encourage community integration of children and youth, older people and people with a disability in Claddagh community.

As part of this project we identified Bádóirí na Cladaig, a group that symbolised Claddagh culture and tradition. Bádóirí na Cladaig are involved in a community project restoring Claddagh boats. This community group was highlighted as an example of how existing traditions and resources in the community could bring about greater integration between children and youth, older people and people with a disability in Claddagh. Members of Bádóirí na Cladaig (8 older people) took part in a focus group.

The 3-Cities project focuses on Galway, Limerick and Dublin. The 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.

Project 2: Examining Claddagh social connections through community spaces

The aim of this project was to gain insights into how existing connections and relationships impact on children and youth, older people and people with a disability. This project consisted of two parts. Firstly, a group of children and youth wanted to look at space for children and youth in Claddagh. To explore this topic we took photographs (referred to as photo elicitation in research), where 5 children and youth from Claddagh captured aspects of the community.

Secondly, a group of older adult citizen researchers wanted to research how to bring different parts of the community together, which included residents from Claddagh village, greater Claddagh and Claddagh parish. To explore this we held a focus group with 6 Claddagh members to discuss this topic; 3 children and youth, 2 older people and 1 parent of a person with a disability.



What we found out

Project 1: Claddagh traditions and community

To assist with exploring and harnessing Claddagh traditions to increase community integration, the tradition of boat building was highlighted as a potential means of being inclusive for all groups, with current efforts directed to engage with children and youth from the community.

“It is here for everyone...it is their heritage too”

(Bádóirí na Cladaig Member)



Figure 1: (Top) Old hooker boat. (Bottom) Restoration of the boat in Bádóirí na Cladaig.

Understanding the history of Claddagh and encouraging the community to get involved with local activities such as boating, is something the community group were passionate about. This interest stemmed from a focus on bringing together older people and children and youth, not only to facilitate community integration, but to help keep the local traditions alive.



Figure 2: Galway Hooker, Galway Bay.

The group discussion also emphasised the importance of having support from external organisations in the community with regard to bringing about increased community integration across the life course.

Through engaging with children and youth, older people and people with a disability, local traditions embedded in the community, such as boat building, have the potential to be harnessed to bring about greater community integration leading to a more positive experience of community participation in Claddagh.

The value, culture, craftsmanship and social aspect embedded within boat restoration, highlighted the potential to use community groups such as Bádóirí na Cladaig as a means of community integration.

Project 2: Spaces for children and youth

By taking photographs, we got a better understanding of the importance of spaces for children and youth in Claddagh, in relation to community interaction.



Figure 3. St. Marys Church, Claddagh.

From our photographs, Claddagh Church was identified as a focal point in the community. The central location of Claddagh Church acts as both a formal and informal space for children and youth and older people, with children and youth also using the space as a meeting point in the community. The potential to increase the use of the Church and its facilities were also identified:

“Claddagh Church is a place that I pass every day. Some young people use the green in front of the church near the grave yard to play in”

(Children & Youth Researcher)

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Through discussing the photographs we heard how in times gone by, Claddagh space for young people centred on the streets around the community. However, with an increase in traffic and altered road infrastructure in recent years this is no longer a safe option for the community. Coupled with this structural change, and with the number of families and young people in the community decreasing in recent times, community interaction, particularly in relation to intergenerational elements, was seen as having declined.

“There’s a picture of my Mum here with 40 or 50 friends her own age, and now there are only around 3 or 4 of us that would be out like that. The kids don’t come out, no one ever comes out playing”

(Children & Youth Researcher)



Figure 4. The Piscatorial School.

Attention was also brought to the Piscatorial School as a space in the heart of Claddagh. This photograph represents a space that holds potential in providing a space to facilitate community interaction. Originally used to train people in sail and net skills, the Piscatorial School is no longer used by the community.

The Dominican Hall in Claddagh was also suggested to represent a potential space for children and youth in the community. We found for children and youth in the community, spaces similar to the Dominican Hall, offer potential resources that could act as a way of bringing about increased community integration with the three groups of interest.



Figure 5. The Dominican Hall.

“We are never allowed in there.. If the doors were open we could use it to play.. No-one except the school uses [it]”

(Children & Youth Researcher)



Figure 6. The Long Walk.

Along with the structural elements of Claddagh, another unique element we noted was Claddagh’s proximity to the sea. The location of Claddagh allows for unique integration elements to the area, such as an opportunity to engage in boating and sailing in the community.

Although largely seen as a positive, we also discussed how the location of Claddagh can impact negatively on particular groups’ levels of community interaction. We found that children and youth can often be restricted in the use of space due to the proximity to the sea. It was interesting to hear from children and youth in our group who spoke about the lack of a community space in this regard, highlighting how this safety concern impacted on where and how they took part in the community, particularly in relation to safe places to play and meet friends. Often this meant that children and youth do not use Claddagh as a space to socialise in, instead choosing to leave the community to use city centre spaces:

“The water isn’t safe for young people; it demands a different approach for young people here that in other areas in the city”

(Older Person Researcher)



Overall the photos captured how the community has the capacity to increase the utilisation of existing spaces for children and youth in the community. A lack of safe spaces for children and youth was evident, highlighting that although Claddagh has seen much change in recent years, the experiences for children and youth in relation to space and facilities has not been fully met.

Intergenerational spaces

The findings of this focus group echoed those from the photo elicitation with the children and youth group, identifying spaces that hold significant potential for greater community use.

The focus group highlighted numerous underutilised buildings that are currently not being fully used by the community: “so many places but no places”. We found that in Claddagh, the issue is not a lack of structural buildings, but focuses more on availability and use of space.

The group discussion highlighted how varied concepts of community and community boundaries impacted on community interaction between children and youth and older people. The boundaries included areas such as; Claddagh village, greater Claddagh and Claddagh parish.

The group discussion also highlighted potential solutions to increase social connections in Claddagh. One area identified related to a lack of communication in Claddagh. Potential solutions to address this issue were the development of a community notice board placed in a central location to allow for open sharing of news and events in the community. To meet the needs of different groups, a community social media presence was also suggested, allowing for intergenerational sharing of information across the community.

A potential community space also emerged from the discussion as a base for children and youth, older people and people with a disability. This potential space is a thatched cottage located in the centre of Claddagh. Identification of this space, along with other community spaces through our photo elicitation and focus group, show community interest in fully utilising Claddagh's resources to bring about greater community integration across the three groups.



The group discussion highlighted that although efforts have been made in the past to include people in the community, there is a strong need for a broader approach to social connectivity in Claddagh, recognising the needs of children and youth, older people and people with a disability in the community.

Figure 7: The thatch cottage, Claddagh.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Two sets of recommendations emerged from Claddagh community: harnessing Claddagh traditions in community integration and the need to utilise community spaces for social connectivity.

Greater use of community space was identified across the life course, particularly for children and youth in Claddagh. The research gathered indicated that better use of the facilities available in Claddagh would allow for greater community participation. Having a focal point where the community can gather in an informal capacity was something the participants felt strongly about. Increased community integration was also highlighted, where community members and representatives needed to work closely together to address community needs.

Awareness and renewal of Claddagh community history resonated throughout the research process. The strong sense of pride that is associated with Claddagh people through traditions such as boating emerged strongly from our research.

This research process generated a sense of interest and commitment to the community by children and youth, older people and people with a disability in Claddagh. The 3-Cities Project allowed us to identify potential areas warranting increased community efforts, and to engage with community groups and events, such as a community festival to link together the different generations, traditions and aspects in Claddagh community.

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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. This is achieved 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). The 3-Cities Project marks the first major programme of work undertaken by Project Lifecourse.

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