



Research Commission Brief

Independent action research inquiry:

How arts-led approaches help people and communities co-create more just, fair, equitable and peaceful societies?

Commissioned by: The Playhouse

Project funding: This research is commissioned as part of Making Peaceful Change (MPC), a project delivered by The Playhouse, Training for Women's Network, and Inishowen Development Partnership. It is supported by PEACEPLUS, a programme managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Key dates

Deadline for proposals:	Fri 11 September, 12:00pm
Appointment of researcher:	w/c 21 September
Delivery Dates:	1 October 2026 – 31 August 2028

Background

The Playhouse and partners are seeking to appoint a researcher to lead an action research inquiry exploring the role, value and extent of arts-led approaches in co-creating more just, fair, inclusive and peaceful societies.

This commission arises from the Making Peaceful Change (MPC) Programme, a PEACE PLUS-supported initiative focused on arts-led, trauma-informed approaches to peacebuilding, reconciliation and positive social change. However, the primary purpose of this research is not to evaluate programme delivery or measure whether specific activities have achieved predetermined outcomes.

Instead, we wish to undertake a deeper inquiry into:

How arts-led approaches help people and communities co-create more just, fair, equitable and peaceful societies?

We are living through a period marked by increasing social division, inequality, democratic distrust, political polarisation and conflict, both locally and globally. Despite significant investment in public

policy, peacebuilding, community development and social intervention programmes over many decades, many of the structural challenges affecting our communities persist.

Against this backdrop, we believe there is value in critically examining the contribution that arts and creativity may make to meaningful social transformation.

This research commission represents an opportunity to generate new knowledge, challenge assumptions and contribute to wider debates about the role of culture, creativity and participation in shaping more equitable futures.

Purpose of the research

The appointed researcher will design and lead an independent action research process that explores the contribution of arts-based and creative approaches to social change. The researcher will refine and develop the research question/s through an iterative process of interaction with the wider MPC programme activities; however the inquiry may explore:

- How arts-led approaches contribute to peacebuilding and reconciliation.
- Whether creative processes enable forms of dialogue, reflection and relationship-building that may be difficult to achieve through other methods.
- How artistic participation influences empathy, understanding, agency and collective action.
- The role of culture and creativity in addressing division, exclusion and injustice.
- The opportunities, limitations and tensions inherent within arts-led approaches to social change.
- The conditions required for arts-based practice to contribute meaningfully to more just and equitable societies.

The research should generate insights that are relevant beyond the Making Peaceful Change Programme and contribute to broader conversations across the fields of:

- Peacebuilding
- Reconciliation
- Socially engaged arts
- Cultural democracy
- Community development
- Social justice
- Participatory practice
- Public policy

Research approach

We are seeking a researcher who is comfortable working with complexity, uncertainty and critical inquiry.

Rather than approaching participants solely as research subjects, the action research process should create opportunities for collaborative exploration and shared learning.

The research should be informed by principles of:

1. Participatory inquiry

Research participants, artists, community members, partners and stakeholders should be actively engaged in shaping and informing the inquiry. The process should value lived experience alongside academic and professional knowledge.

2. Action and reflection

The research should incorporate cycles of action, observation, reflection and learning, allowing insights to emerge through practice as well as analysis.

3. Critical investigation

We are not seeking research designed primarily to validate existing assumptions. We welcome a researcher who is prepared to ask difficult questions, explore contradictions and critically examine both the possibilities and limitations of arts-led approaches.

4. Contextual understanding

The research should acknowledge the specific social, cultural and historical context of Northern Ireland and the border region while generating findings of wider relevance.

Scope of work

The successful researcher will be expected to:

1. Develop an action research framework

Design a research plan that outlines:

- Research aims and questions
- Methodology
- Data collection approaches
- Ethical considerations
- Stakeholder engagement processes
- Timeline and delivery schedule

2. Facilitate participatory research processes

This may include:

- Focus groups
- Learning conversations
- Workshops
- Reflective practice sessions
- Interviews
- Community dialogue events
- Observation and documentation

The precise approach will be developed by the appointed researcher in collaboration with the Making Peaceful Change programme team.

3. Collect and analyse evidence

The research should draw on a range of sources including:

- Participant experiences
- Community perspectives • Artist reflections
- MPC Programme activity
- Existing literature and research
- Policy and practice contexts

4. Produce case stories

Develop a series of qualitative case studies documenting personal, community and creative experiences relevant to the inquiry.

These should illuminate how arts-led processes are experienced and understood by those directly involved.

5. Support knowledge exchange

Support the delivery of dissemination events that encourage dialogue around the research findings and their implications for policy and practice.

One dissemination event will include a creative showcase linked to the themes emerging from the research.

6. Produce a final research report

Prepare a substantial research report which:

- Presents findings and analysis.
- Examines the role and value of arts-led approaches.
- Identifies key themes and insights.
- Explores implications for peacebuilding and social justice practice.
- Highlights areas for future research.
- Provides recommendations for practitioners, policymakers and funders.

Researcher profile

We are particularly interested in hearing from researchers, scholar-practitioners or research teams with experience in one or more of the following areas:

- Participatory action research
- Arts and social change
- Socially engaged arts practice
- Peacebuilding and reconciliation
- Community development
- Cultural democracy
- Social justice
- Conflict transformation
- Qualitative and mixed-methods research

We welcome applications from independent researchers, artist-researchers, consultants and organisations with research capabilities.

Essential Experience

Applicants should demonstrate:

- Experience designing and delivering independent research projects.

- Strong qualitative research skills.
- Experience facilitating participatory research processes.
- Excellent analytical and report-writing skills.
- Experience working with communities and stakeholders.
- Knowledge of Northern Ireland and border region contexts.
- Knowledge of ethical research practice.
- Ability to translate complex findings into accessible insights.
- Experience with trauma-informed approaches.

Desirable Experience

- Experience of arts and cultural research.
- Experience researching peacebuilding and reconciliation programmes.
- Experience of working within PEACE, PEACE IV or PEACE PLUS contexts.
- Publication or dissemination of research relating to arts, culture and social change.

Deliverables

The successful researcher will deliver:

1. An inception meeting and agreed work programme.
2. An action research plan.
3. Participatory research activities including workshops and focus groups.
4. Research documentation and analysis.
5. A series of action research case stories.
6. Contributions to dissemination events.
7. A final research report.
8. Recommendations for future policy, practice and research.

Contract Value

This commission has a fixed budget of €24,000 / £20,400 (inclusive of VAT and all expenses).

Applicants should submit a methodology and delivery proposal demonstrating how they would fulfil the brief within the available budget.

We anticipate this commission requiring approximately 55-60 consultancy days, although applicants may propose alternative approaches.

How to Apply

Applicants should submit the following:

- Curriculum Vitae (maximum of 5 pages, highlighting key relevant achievements)
- Cover letter outlining suitability for the commission.
- Proposed methodological approach (maximum 3 pages).
- Examples of relevant previous work.
- Availability and proposed delivery schedule (subject to co-design with the Making Peaceful Change project team).
- Contact details for two referees.

BY EMAIL: cassie.riggs@derryplayhouse.com

SUBJECT HEADING: 'Making Peaceful Change Action Researcher'

This commission is rooted in a belief that the arts can do more than communicate social change; they may help create the conditions from which social change emerges.

We are seeking a researcher who shares a curiosity about the possibilities of arts-led practice, while maintaining the independence and critical distance necessary to ask challenging questions.