

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES IMPACT 2023-24



University of
Staffordshire

TABLE OF CONTENTS

4 CONNECTED COMMUNITIES AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF STAFFORDSHIRE

6 CONNECTED COMMUNITIES EVALUATION
FRAMEWORK PROCESS

7 OUR YEAR IN NUMBERS

9 CO-CREATION AND COMMUNITY-
UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS

31 COMMUNITY GIVING AND EVENTS

45 PLACE SHAPING

56 UNDERSTANDING OUR COLLECTIVE
IMPACT



CONNECTED
COMMUNITIES

#ConnectedStaffs

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF STAFFORDSHIRE

The University of Staffordshire has civic at the heart of its strategy and has a long history of collaborative working between communities, civic and civil society partners, staff and students to make Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire a great place to live, work and study.

As part of our commitment to 'Next Generation Engagement', Connected Communities encompasses a range of activities, approaches and principles, developed in collaboration with our community partners. These principles aim to create the conditions for a better future in our region by supporting a resilient economy, strengthening social capital and reducing inequalities, reducing our carbon footprint and creating the conditions for environmental

sustainability, improving the health and wellbeing of our communities and coproducing a vibrant cultural sector.

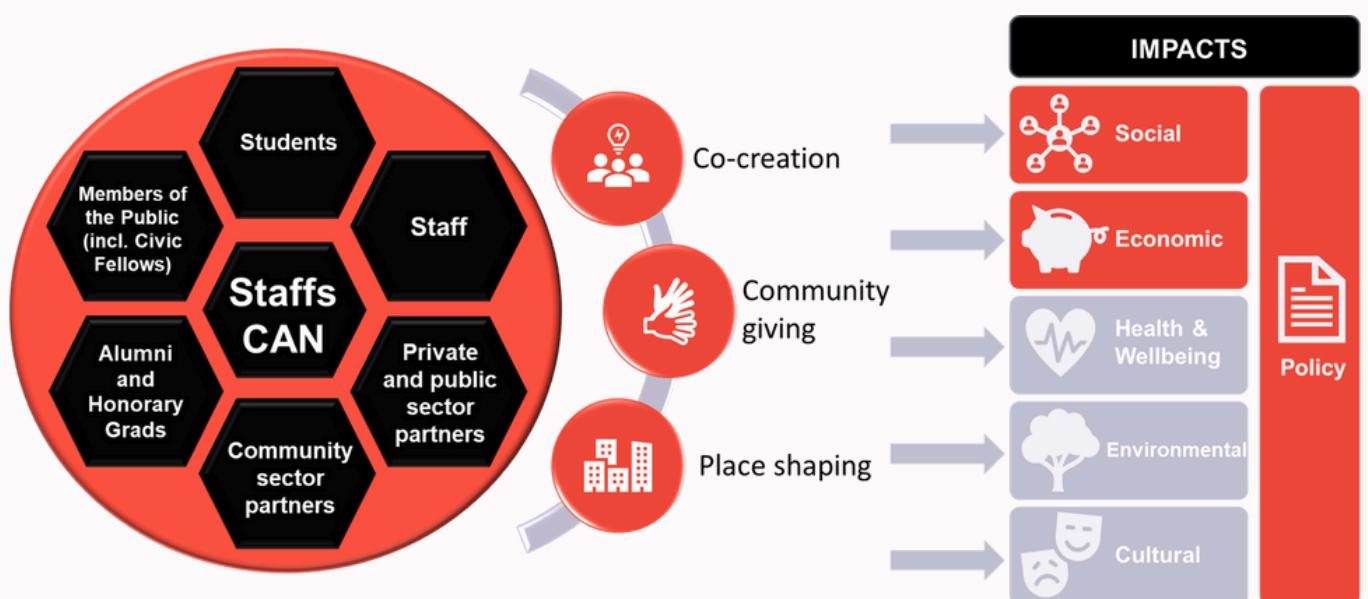
Our approach builds on our strengths and as a result has three priorities for action:

Co-creation, meaning Connected Communities is a collaborative effort between staff, students and community partners.

Community Giving, meaning we want to give back to our place, to ensure our community members and partners can benefit from our facilities, research and resources.

Place Shaping, meaning we work with partners to understand our place, raise aspirations for its future and work together to create a vibrant place for all residents to live, work and study.

The driving force behind Connected Communities is the Staffs CAN - the University of Staffordshire's Community Advisory Network. This diverse network is made up of members of the public, civic partners and community and voluntary sector representatives. The network has set a vision for our Connected Communities partnership and plays a central role in the evaluation of our Connected Communities work.



Connected Communities spans the University of Staffordshire and is mapped against 7 areas of activity:

1. Policies and structures
2. Partnerships and co-creation
3. Research
4. Teaching and learning
5. Service and knowledge exchange
6. Supportive and empowered peers
7. Students, graduates, and alumni.

Who is involved in Connected Communities activity

Staff from across the majority of Schools and Departments at the University of Staffordshire have delivered Connected Communities activity. This report outlines a number of these projects.

The Public Engagement and Research team are based in Research, Innovation and Impact Services. They facilitate and enable Connected Communities activity by supporting the development of the strategic vision for Connected Communities, facilitating Staffs CAN and the University's engagement with this group and leading the evaluation of Connected Communities activity to help all colleagues understand our collective civic and community impact. In addition, they deliver externally funded participatory action research and other commissioned projects and train staff and external partners in the use of community-based participatory action research and creative community consultation techniques. This report also includes some of this team's externally funded work.

How we evaluate Connected Communities at the University of Staffordshire

In 2022-23, the University of Staffordshire piloted the Connected Communities Evaluation Framework, and we were able to expand this evaluation into 2023-24. Any social, community or cultural events intended for members of the public or civil society partners, that have the primary purpose of having a positive impact on that community, are evaluated through the

Connected Communities Evaluation Framework. This includes activities such as:

- community engagement activities, like the Staffs CAN.
- public engagement in research activities, such as public lectures, webinars or exhibitions.
- collaborative projects with community partners, such as Young Community Researchers.

The evaluation does not cover business engagement or outreach activities designed for student recruitment as these are evaluated elsewhere in the University.

The purpose of the Connected Communities Evaluation is to understand our collective impact as an engaged civic university.

Connected Communities Evaluation Framework

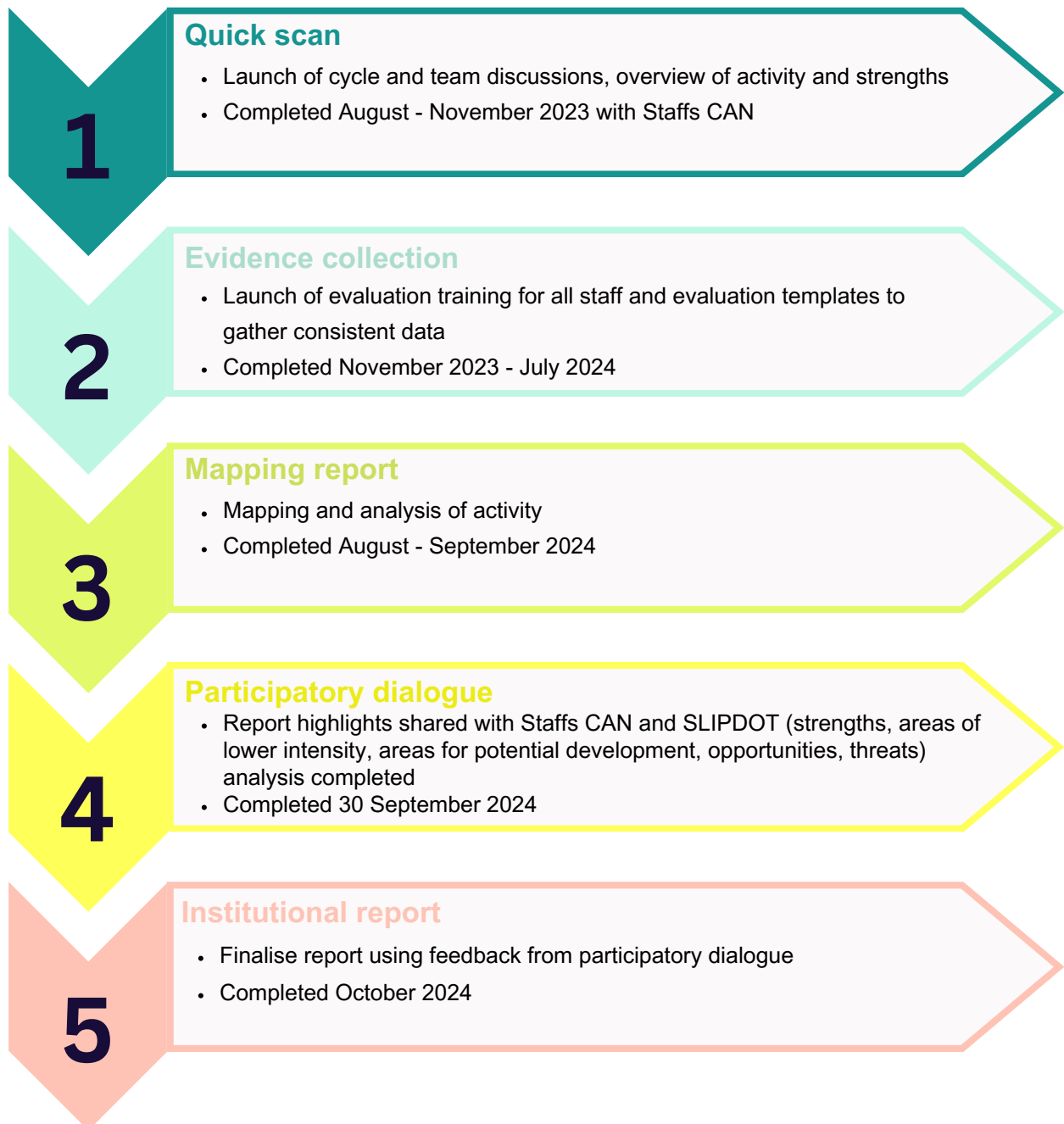
The Connected Communities Evaluation Framework draws on two frameworks for evaluating civic activity.

1. TEFCE (Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education) Toolbox
2. Civic University Network's (CUN) Civic Framework

We recognise that civic and community activity in higher education is complex, and place-based. The Connected Communities Evaluation Framework allows for:

- a co-created approach to understanding our civic and community impact, working closely with Staffs CAN.
- evaluation to be embedded into activity.
- an open learning environment where ideas can be tested, good practice can be celebrated, and improvements can be made to benefit everyone involved.
- a predominantly qualitative approach that allows for storytelling, reflecting the complex and multifaceted ways we work with communities.

CONNECTED COMMUNITIES EVALUATION FRAMEWORK PROCESS



OUR YEAR IN NUMBERS



31 public engagement
in research events



23 public
lectures



6 business
events



5 networking
events



4 Staffs CAN
events



4 community
trainings



4 family
events



3 religious
celebrations



3 conferences



3 performances



2 exhibitions



2 podcast series

WITH A TOTAL OF **30,118 ATTENDEES**





STAFFS CAN

Staffs CAN (the University of Staffordshire's Community Advisory Network) aims to foster meaningful connections between the University with local communities, encouraging collaboration and increasing civic impact. Since its launch, it has brought together a diverse group of community members, organisations, and university representatives to discuss key issues, build relationships and address local needs.

Over the past 12 months, Staffs CAN has created opportunities to engage with a diverse range of voices from across Staffordshire. Each meeting has strengthened our ties, with community members actively shaping how the University serves the region. With ongoing projects like Embrace Your Place, Staffs CAN is not only responding to community needs but also paving the way for deeper, more impactful civic engagement in the future.

The network meet quarterly throughout the year, and each meeting has a distinct theme. At our Autumn Staffs CAN, we shared a draft of the University's first civic impact report: the University of Staffordshire's Connected Communities Impact. Attendees were asked to engage in a group analysis to help the University understand its true civic impact and identify areas for development. At the Winter Staffs CAN, a year on from the launch, the group reflected on the first 12 months of the network. It focused on

the connections made and how people worked together. Attendees talked about how the network can improve and we introduced the Connected Communities Staff Operations Group (Staffs CCOG), which helps guide the University's community work.

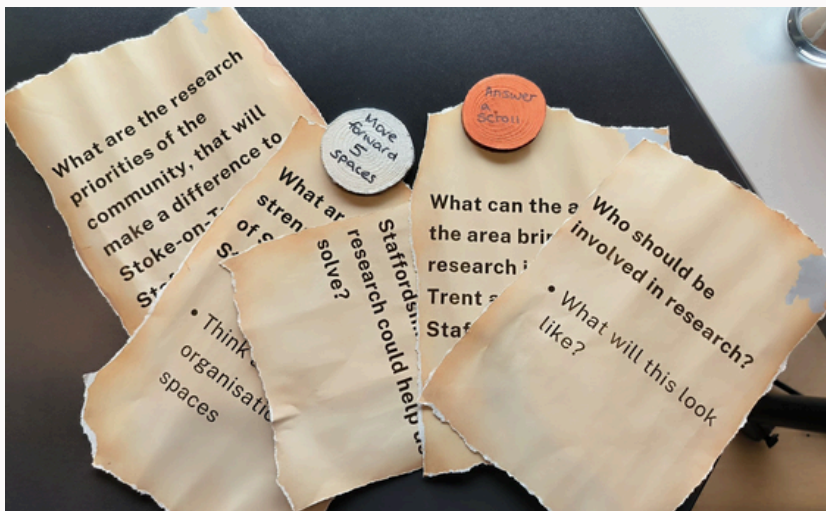
At the Spring event, we reflected on the sector's use of the term "civic" and asked our community partners what it meant to them. The discussion will help the University understand how it can better support community needs. And finally, we launched the Embrace Your Place project to help us understand what research matters most to the network at the Summer Staffs CAN.

The societal impact of the Staffs CAN has been significant, offering a valuable space for community engagement and collaboration between the University of Staffordshire and local partners. By incorporating diverse perspectives and encouraging joint problem-solving, the network has helped the University better understand and respond to local needs. Initiatives like Embrace Your Place reflect a growing focus on community-driven research, while ongoing conversations about civic impact ensure that the University's efforts are both relevant and beneficial. Staffs CAN continues to support meaningful connections and practical outcomes that serve both the University and the wider region.

A very positive community activity project in all spaces of this workspace

It's been great to have a sense of community and to connect with new people

Opened my eyes to the people in the community who are working hard to make Stoke and surrounding areas a better place



PAR PROGRAMME

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative research method which involves the communities who are directly affected by the issue being studied as researchers and equal partners. By including the voices of those most affected by the issue, we gain a deeper understanding of it and its impact. Community members are involved at every stage of the research process and are supported to extend the reach of the research by going out into their own communities and amplifying the voices of people who can often be excluded from traditional research. PAR is a way to make research more relevant and impactful when addressing important issues, and it empowers communities to take action on an issue and be part of the solution. The University of Staffordshire has long been working with teams of community researchers on PAR projects and have established a well-known “Get Talking” approach to PAR.

After the success of the first PAR Programme in 2022-23 which was funded by Research England QR funding, the Public Engagement and Research team ran a second cohort in 2023-24. The programme aimed to train staff in this methodology and increase its adoption among colleagues, supporting more impactful, community-driven research projects across the University. The programme provided grants of up to £900 to each project to support the formation of community researcher groups and begin the PAR process. The PAR Programme supported 11 colleagues to launch 11 projects. Participants engaged in the Get Talking process through a series of Lunch and Learn sessions, gaining in-depth, hands-on experience that they applied to a live project. By the end of the programme the projects were at varying stages of the PAR process, but all had successfully incorporated the principles of ethical and effective community engagement learned during the sessions. The programme concluded with a two-day retreat.

The immersive environment encouraged reflection and active engagement. Feedback highlighted the programme's positive impact on research culture, promoting inclusivity, ethical community engagement and collaboration, while encouraging a shift away from traditional practices that stifle creativity.

When asked to feed back on the programme, participants described it as transformative, reigniting their enthusiasm for research. They appreciated the chance to collaborate with communities and explore participatory methods, which many said they plan to incorporate into future projects. Participants in the programme took pride in their research's positive impact and expressed interest in an annual PAR research showcase. Through the programme, participants gained a deeper understanding of PAR principles and practical strategies for engaging community members. The creative approaches were especially beneficial, underscoring the importance of working with communities in a creative and engaging way. The programme significantly enhanced the research culture by

I can't emphasise enough what an amazingly positive experience the PAR programme has been for me! For several reasons in recent years I have struggled to lead on research projects and had come to view research as a stressful and unenjoyable part of my job. Having been introduced to PAR research I now feel enthusiastic and positive about my research again.

equipping staff and postgraduate students with essential tools and frameworks to encourage ethical community engagement and make research more accessible. Participants felt valued and supported, contributing to a more inclusive research environment within the university, with potential positive effects on community-based research. Overall, the PAR Programme empowered participants to adopt innovative approaches and cultivate a supportive research community.

In addition to the impact of the training programme itself, the PAR programme has supported a number of projects that have had a significant impact in the community. These will be covered elsewhere in this report, but include research around young asylum seekers' participation in sport, menopause and the workplace, barriers to perinatal mental health support services, healthy eating and autism, creative interventions in gender-based violence, town planning for people with dementia, diabetes stigma training, "outswimming cancer", and parental views on children's screen time. These are all projects that have had a clear impact outside of academia.

Over its two years, the programme has successfully established and grown a network of PAR advocates, taking the University a step further towards embedding PAR and ethical community engagement into the University of Staffordshire's research culture.

I've learnt that I am not an expert when it comes to researching the experiences of others, but rather it is those who have lived those experiences that should be moulding the research.

The biggest positive of this experience was when our research resulted in some small changes that had a big impact for my community group. It made me and my co-researchers feel very proud.



EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH CLEFT

As part of the first PAR Programme cohort, Julie Davies invited young participants from a previous study back as community researchers to analyse the research findings. This was a study that used photographs shared by young people with cleft, to understand issues that may arise with having a visible difference and sharing their image on social media.

Julie received overwhelmingly positive feedback from the community researchers about the positive experience of being involved in this way. One of the community researchers went on to present about her experience at the Craniofacial Conference of Great Britain & Ireland in April 2024, and the impact of this has been huge for her. Furthermore, she has been invited to several cleft projects and research meetings in her own right, away from this project.

Along with Dr Amy Burton, Julie has now secured further funding from the charity VTCTF to continue working with the young people. This study will be a participatory action research study, engaging twelve young people with cleft aged 16-25 as co-researchers in a Photovoice project to explore and enhance their feelings about their self-image.

They attended an online focus group and an in-person workshop in the summer of 2024. This involved several creative research activities as well as a session with a photographer who taught the group how to take quality photographs with smartphones. The group are now in the process of taking photographs to illustrate research questions around the impact of having cleft and empowering young people with cleft to feel more positive about their appearance. The aim is to analyse the photographs and make two videos, one that will empower young people with a visible difference to feel more confident about their appearance and sharing their image on social media and another to inform clinicians.



This day healed a part of my younger self who thought all clinicians were scary, mean people who wanted to sort you out and then discharge you. It awakened a real fire in me to carry out more research like this and I am even considering a PhD in Clinical Psychology.

RAISING VOICES: TAKING ACTION

Raising Voices: Taking Action is a community-driven initiative in Stoke-on-Trent designed to address poverty through collective effort. Funded by Civic Power and the Poverty Truth Network, and led by All the Small Things CIC, the project builds on previous efforts to combat poverty and hardship. Other partners include Expert Citizens CIC, the Public Engagement and Research team at the University of Staffordshire, and other community representatives.

The initiative empowers individuals directly affected by poverty by involving them in meaningful conversations and decision-making. A central activity is the Chat for Change events, which offer informal, supportive settings for discussing experiences and ideas about poverty. Since February, eight sessions have been held across the city using a specially developed toolkit to facilitate these discussions.

The project is also exploring the establishment of a Poverty Truth Commission in Stoke-on-Trent, which would involve people with lived experience of poverty collaborating with city leaders to develop practical and effective solutions.

In addition, project members are organising an Action on Poverty Conference at the University of Staffordshire in October 2024. The Raising Voices Steering Group has been instrumental in advising and supporting this event, which aims to bring together over 100 participants, including community members and leaders, to explore poverty solutions and discuss the potential for a Poverty Truth Commission. Raising Voices: Taking Action has made significant strides in raising awareness, empowering individuals, and fostering inclusive strategies for poverty alleviation in North Staffordshire.



SHAPING THE FUTURE OF CARE

At the University of Staffordshire, we are pleased to have a diverse team of 35 service users and carers who bring their lived experiences of health and social care services to our Nursing, Social Work, Paramedic, Midwifery, Operating Department Practice and Psychology students. Their insights provide students with a deeper understanding of the patient and service user experience, thereby enriching their educational journey and shaping their future practice.

The contributions of service users and carers are crucial in supporting our academic staff across various activities, including student and staff selection interviews, assessments, simulations, and the sharing of personal lived experiences. We consistently receive positive feedback from both students and staff regarding the support provided by our service users and carers.

Feedback from our students - the future health and social care practitioners - highlights the significant positive impact of having real people involved in their learning journey. But it's not just students that benefit from this collaboration. Service users and carers make a real impact in shaping the way our students interact with the people they will support as professionals, both in the community and in hospitals. Service users and carers also gain many benefits such as building relationships with other people in the team, encouraging and informing the next generation and gaining the satisfaction of knowing that they are making a real difference.

It was an invaluable experience. Without service users, we as students would not have the opportunity for safe learning before entering practice.

Participating with students practicing hands-on nursing under the guidance of highly experienced staff in a safe environment was a wonderful opportunity. It was a privilege to be part of it.



MENOPAUSE AND THE WORKPLACE

Dr Alison Owen and Dr Jennifer Taylor used the PAR programme to work with a group of co-researchers who work at the University of Staffordshire and are at some stage of their menopause journey. They ran a workshop to discuss experiences of the menopause in the workplace, using creative methods to encourage discussion around what is often seen as a 'taboo' subject. Playmobil Pro was used to elicit discussion at various points in the workshop, and people were able to share their experiences openly in a safe space.

I feel part of a powerful women's circle. Included, reassured

A second workshop provided a chance to explore the University's menopause policy and suggest ways to make the policy more helpful and more effective. Co-researchers were asked to bring along an item that depicted their experience of the menopause at work. People brought in things like scissors and handheld fans and talked about their experience. The group also cut up the workplace policy and placed the cuttings under the headings 'Good', 'Not so Good' and 'Suggested Improvements' along with their additional notes, before going back for a group discussion.

The feedback from co-researchers who attended the sessions was positive. Some of the participants felt emotional when discussing their experiences, and valued the opportunity to open up with a group of other women who shared their experience. For many women, it was the first time they had talked openly about the menopause, and reflected that it had been empowering and allowed them to feel understood and valued.

These sessions have resulted in the creation of a Teams space for University staff going through the menopause, with the aim of creating a supportive network of women who can advocate for themselves with a collective voice. The next step will be to analyse and publish the findings, and work with co-researchers to present suggestions and modifications to the University Menopause Policy based on lived experience. The hope is to go further out into the community to help make positive changes for employees and volunteers, from across all our civic partners, who are going through the menopause.



UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM SEEKERS IN SPORT

Dr Andrew Wilkinson and Dr Katie Sparks used the PAR Programme to improve youth participation in sporting initiatives. Along with the Together Active Charity, they launched the project with a "have a go" sports event at Northwood Stadium, to encourage people to try different sports. At the event, they asked for feedback which helped them to identify which sports were missing and recognise the importance of understanding the barriers to physical activity faced by unaccompanied asylum seekers.

The project then partnered with the Virtual School's charity at the Amity Hub in Newcastle-under-Lyme to schedule training sessions for several asylum seekers and host a World Café event to explore these barriers. Five individuals completed the training and helped facilitate the event. The first session covered research ethics and ground rules, then used creative activities to explore what a researcher is and what each person's individual strengths were, highlighting that anyone could become a researcher.

In the second session, researchers used Play-Doh to build the "perfect" athlete and discussed the obstacles preventing them from achieving this. They identified the changes they would like to see in their environments (shared homes, college, Amity Hub, etc). The discussions continued and informed the final set of questions for the World Café event.

At the World Café, the community researchers led discussions, using the learnt creative activities to encourage participation. It became apparent that football and cricket were the most popular sports, and attendees wanted more opportunities to play and join local clubs. However, barriers such as disorganisation, misunderstandings with Amity Hub staff,



limited awareness of local clubs, and unclear pathways to professional and semi-professional opportunities hindered further participation. In response, the Amity Hub agreed to extend sports sessions for refugees, and Andrew and Katie are now communicating the findings with local sports clubs to facilitate a regular opportunity for these individuals to try out.

Cultural and language barriers posed significant challenges throughout the project, particularly in conveying research concepts and ethical considerations, which required alternative explanations. The involvement of an Arabic translator or a community researcher in that role would have been beneficial. These reflections from the PAR project will guide Andrew and Katie as they move on to their next PAR project with a new group of young people.

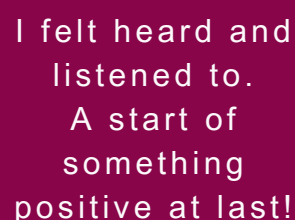
WORLD CAFE FOR PERINATAL MENTAL HEALTH

Dr Fiona Cust used the PAR programme to collaborate and network with stakeholders, clinicians, third sector organisations and peer support workers interested in perinatal mental health – these people made up the community researcher for the project. A World Café event was organised on campus in early summer, bringing together this diverse group to address local issues, identify barriers to support, and explore collaborative solutions for improving perinatal mental health. Given that approximately 15-20% of new mothers are affected by perinatal mental health issues, along with impacts on partners, children, and wider families, this is a significant national and global concern.

The World Café approach promoted a relaxed environment for sharing ideas and experiences over food and drink. Tables were arranged café-style, with paper tablecloths used for writing down ideas. Community researchers gathered these ideas, organised them into themes, and wrote their own thoughts on post-it notes before adding them to the relevant theme. This collective input from the discussions that followed led to the formation of new ideas, experiences, and potential future plans. A follow-up event has been scheduled to review and advance these ideas.

In line with PAR principles, community researchers were involved throughout the process, from designing the questions and data collection to analysis and planning next steps. They have expressed interest in publishing the results and have identified potential journals for submission, with Fiona's support. Additionally, in collaboration with all those who participated in the world café, a comprehensive document titled 'A Perinatal Mental Health Directory' will be created. This

directory will provide resources, signposting, tips, and information for stakeholders, clinicians, third sector workers, and volunteers involved in perinatal mental health. This initiative addresses a key issue highlighted during the event: a lack of awareness about available resources, which hindered engagement with mothers and families experiencing perinatal mental health challenges. The directory will initially be available in digital format, with future plans to develop a perinatal mental health resource app.



I felt heard and
listened to.
A start of
something
positive at last!

AUTISTIC YOUNG PEOPLE AND HEALTHY EATING

Previous research suggests that feeding difficulties are five times more common in autistic children compared to their neurotypical peers, displaying more reluctance to trying new foods and presenting more food-related sensitivities. These challenges can lead to physical, mental, and social consequences. However, conventional approaches to addressing these issues may not be accessible or effective for autistic young people. Understanding autistic adolescents' eating preferences or perspectives of healthy eating is essential to developing effective interventions.

Autism research often lacks involvement of autistic people, especially young people with autism, despite research stating that 9 out of 10 autistic people want to participate in research. Instead, a lot of autism research speaks for autistic people and, due to difficulties with social communication, can often be deficit-focused.

This research aims to address this gap by partnering with autistic adolescents as co-creators of knowledge to explore their experiences of healthy eating. To achieve this, it was crucial to adapt research methodologies to meet the needs and abilities of autistic young people. Photo-elicitation allows participants to express their thoughts, feelings, and experiences through photographs, providing a concrete and visual aid for those who struggle with abstract concepts. This method supports social, communication, and self-awareness skills by making it easier for autistic individuals to share their personal experiences. To ensure active and meaningful participation, the research project used photography, a method that has been previously used in autism research.

Autistic individuals can face communication challenges, including interoceptive difficulties (recognising and managing their own emotions and social interactions) and alexithymia (difficulty

expressing their emotions to others) making it additionally challenging to communicate personal information. This can render qualitative research methods that rely primarily on verbal communication potentially inaccessible. Photo-elicitation can be used as a participatory research method that actively utilises and empowers participants to 'voice' their thoughts, feelings and experiences more readily. This method can help to support autistic individuals' social, communication and self-awareness skills, as photographs act as a concrete and visual aid for autistic individuals who struggle to discuss abstract concepts.

This project has provided an inclusive space for autistic individuals using adapted communication methods within the research. Young people must have an active and meaningful research role to discuss their experiences of healthy eating. This will provide richer insight into their preferences and needs and provides further understanding of the lived experiences of the young autistic community. Feedback from the young researchers has been positive, commenting that they have enjoyed taking part, and that it has helped them gain more awareness of their own eating patterns and relationship with healthy eating.

Conscious efforts should be made by researchers to prioritise an inclusive and transparent approach within autism research, making reasonable adaptations so autistic individuals can freely voice their experiences

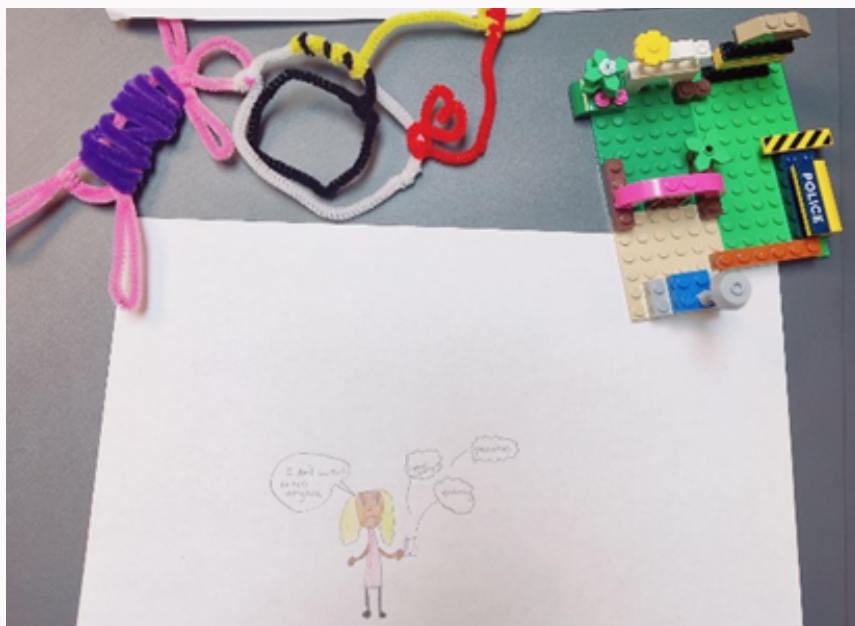
PARENTS AND CHILDREN'S VIEWS OF CHILDREN'S TECHNOLOGY USE

Dr Sarah Rose worked with a group of parent community researchers to identify questions that they wanted to know the answers to which related to their experiences of children using technology. The group worked together to identify the research questions and the methods of data collection, resulting in a short questionnaire being developed.

The community researchers decided to also get the views of children, so a section of the questionnaire was developed for that purpose. The community researchers shared this with their family and friends and on social media. In addition, some of the community researchers were involved in events where they could approach parents directly and ask them to take part in the research. It was clear that parents' views of children's technology use differ greatly, with some not allowing their children to use it at all and others saying that they could not live without it as a valuable tool for entertainment.

Currently 40 parents and 20 children have completed the survey. Taking part in the PAR programme had given a toolkit of ideas, which the community researchers engaged with during planning sessions, but when it came to deciding on a method of data collection the more conventional approach of questionnaires was chosen, perhaps because it fit with their preconceptions about what 'research' typically looks like.

The next stage is analysing and interpreting the data, which will be done with the community researchers. The plan is to develop an infographic which can be shared with other parents which will present our key findings and provide insight into views about children's technology use and parents' role in managing technology use.



CREATIVE INTERVENTIONS IN GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE



Associate Professor Laura Walton-Williams used the PAR Programme to explore how creative methods can empower survivors of sexual violence and abuse to share their experiences and take control of their recovery. Sexual Violence is a global issue, with 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men experiencing some form of sexual abuse in their lifetime (not including sexual harassment). Survivors often also suffer from depression, anxiety disorders and health problems in addition to low confidence, isolation and feelings of worthlessness.



Staff and service users from the Sexual Abuse and Rape Advice Centre (SARAC) in Burton-on-Trent worked with Laura to design a research project enabling people with lived experience of sexual violence to create and display pieces of artwork. The project was borne from the experiences of one survivor who had been advised to create pieces of artwork as a therapeutic approach to managing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The artwork depicted a range of emotions, including helplessness, anger, grief, shame and hope, and this inspired the research group to explore how other survivors might find art a positive step in their recovery process. The group were also keen to exhibit the survivors' artwork to raise awareness and improve understanding of the experiences and emotions of sexual violence survivors.



The community researchers devised a programme of free workshops for survivors to attend, and advertised these to SARAC service users, on social media channels and on Eventbrite. They identified the times, dates and locations of workshops (to be as accessible as possible) and

some of the community researchers also delivered specific workshops showcasing their artistic talents. Following the workshops, attendees were invited to showcase their artwork at a public exhibition (participants were able to display their work anonymously if they wished). Additionally, other service users who couldn't attend the workshops were invited to submit their artwork to include in the exhibition.

The exhibition was held at The Brewhouse Arts Centre from 11th July until 11th August (and then later extended to 22nd August) and was advertised through social media channels and on Eventbrite. The community researchers were involved in curating the exhibition, determining feedback methods and evaluating feedback from participants and visitors. A launch event for the exhibition was held on Thursday 11th July with over 40 attendees. Guests were invited to view the exhibition and leave comments and feedback in a Visitor Book and also on a 'Feedback Canvas'.

Survivors who exhibited their work fed back that they felt proud to be involved, felt honoured that their work was viewed as worthy to exhibit and, in some cases, felt overwhelmed at seeing their (and others') experiences reflected back at them. One of the community researchers was also later interviewed by the BBC at the exhibition to highlight the funding challenges that charities such as SARAC are facing.

Brilliant portrayal of all of those conflicting emotions and gives us hope that healing is possible.

It is an absolute honour to visit this exhibition, let alone to be part of it. Thank you for putting this on – such powerful stuff

What a fantastic and powerful piece of work capturing such a difficult subject with beautiful and emotive art. Well done!

REIMAGINING SHELTON THROUGH COMMUNITY WALKING



Reimagining Shelton is a collaboration between Mark Brown, who writes about literature, cities and psychogeography and Philippa Holloway, a novelist who explores the relationship between landscape, walking and identity, community members and stakeholders.

The purpose of the project is to bring together the community with representatives of organisations and institutions that have influence and control over the nature of the built environment. This was not about the planners 'consulting' the community, but the community working with these representatives on an equal basis to respond through artistic expression to ideas of place, community, the past and potential futures on an equal and democratic basis. As such, the ultimate artistic artefact is less important than the process, though the application of this method to multiple spaces and with multiple outcomes will begin to build a picture of Stoke-on-Trent as a city.



The University sits on the Shelton Community Partnership board and collaborates with faith and community groups in the area. Through this, the team began to make contact with community groups including the Hanley Park Walking Group and Under One Roof at St Mark's Church.




Two workshops were held either side of a community walk of the Shelton neighbourhood. The first workshop determined the nature of the walk and its route, and began the process of deciding on an artistic response to the environment. A range of activities were planned to encourage engagement and to discover participants' relationship with the neighbourhood. Positive comments included history and diversity,

while negative impressions included abandoned buildings, the University and student housing. A large map then became the object of attention. Using PAR techniques again, participants used small tokens to identify areas of the neighbourhood which they had a strong positive or negative response to. We then plotted a route around and through the neighbourhood. Finally we thought about the ways in which communities have responded or could respond to their built and natural environments through art.

During the walk, participants were invited to experience the urban environment using their senses. They paused to take photographs and make notes while being mindful of the sounds, textures, pedestrians, and traffic in both streets and green spaces. This 'data' would serve as the foundation for the artistic response. In the second workshop, the group came together to share their impressions. Using the maps, the group explored their personal connections to the areas they had visited and used text to reflect on how place influences expression. The poet/participant led fun activities that included cut-up poetry, map-making, tile-making, and decorating.

This project will have impact through engaging with community members and groups, through bringing together different parts of the Shelton community and, ultimately, through the artworks produced. The final artworks will be curated in an exhibition, alongside images and text derived from the process. The exhibition will be displayed at the University, St Mark's church and the Hanley Park community hub, allowing members of the wider community to view it and contribute to any future phases.



A new look at
old familiar
things

TOWN PLANNING NEEDS OF PEOPLE LIVING WITH DEMENTIA

Peter Kevern and Edward Tolhurst used the PAR Programme to understand town planning needs of People Living with Dementia (PLWD). Most PLWD find it difficult to adjust to change, and are happiest and most fulfilled if they can live in their own home and neighbourhood. As the number of PLWD continues to grow, geographers and town planners have started to consider what can be done to help them live at home for as long as possible without imposing impossible strains on their carers. A range of changes, from the very simple and affordable (better signage) to the very ambitious (purpose-designed road and neighbourhood layouts) may be relevant to Stoke-on-Trent.

Studies conducted so far have focused on towns that have a clear town centre or modern neighbourhoods with a grid system. The Potteries are different due to the polycentric nature, with a collection of small towns and a few central points such as the hospital.

It was important to include the experiences of PLWD and the people who live with them in this area: what made life difficult for them, what changes could be made to make it easier to continue to live well in this area? To answer these questions, Peter and Edward teamed up with Approach, a local charity that runs day centres and events for PLWD and their carers.

A total of 49 people across Bentilee, Burslem, Longton, Meir and Silverdale were involved, comprising people with dementia and family. The informal format generated some very useful discussions, and attendees were forthcoming with their opinions and perspectives. The discussions highlighted issues relating to the negotiation of the local environment. A key theme was the comfortable and safe use of public

transport. Technological advancements are also perceived to marginalise older people and those with cognitive impairments, with human interaction being replaced by apps and machines. Further themes included the difficulty presented by parked cars on pavements for people with wheelchairs. For drivers, parking restrictions are confusing and difficult to interpret. However, the challenges of relinquishing a driving licence, and the limitations this caused, were also highlighted.

The findings will initially be discussed at an Approach carer advice day in Burslem this October. The sharing of information and discussions at this event will help to shape further dissemination materials. Further collaborations with officers of Stoke City Council to put the report recommendations into practice will lead to positive changes that can contribute to the development of the environment of Stoke-on-Trent with dementia-friendly communities in mind. The project and its findings could also fit into a larger piece of work on place, frailty and dementia being led by the Place Board joint with the Integrated Care Board.



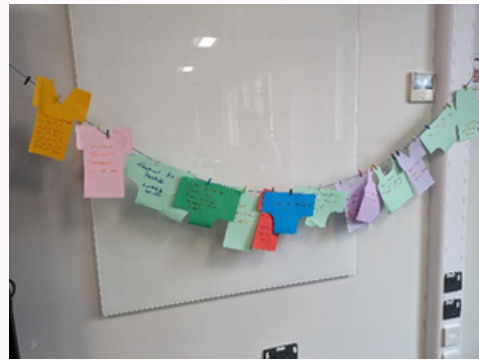
CO-CREATING A DIABETES STIGMA TRAINING SESSION

Associate Professor Rachel Povey used the PAR programme to co-create a training session for nurses and healthcare professionals on diabetes stigma. Two workshops took place, where creative methods were used to develop the structure and content of a 3-hour training session for nurses, which will be co-delivered at the University of Staffordshire.

After the “washing line” exercise was used to think about the difference between “good” and “bad” teaching and what makes a good teaching session, time was spent thinking about what the aims should be, and what content should be included. Creative methods were used including clustering post-it notes together to make “themes” and using jewels or stones to decide which themes should be included. Finally, a “road map” was used to plan the course of the 3-hour teaching session.

Participants enjoyed being involved with the project and felt empowered that they had been heard. The project gave participants “greater self-confidence” through enabling them to “be more open about my own experience” and giving them “confirmation that my experience is not unusual”. Participants enjoyed “listening and connecting with others” and “hearing the experiences of others”. The healthcare professionals who took part felt that it helped them “to think about my own biases” and “to remain curious and open in my clinical work”.

It is anticipated that this research will result in more awareness from healthcare professionals of the stigma experienced by people with diabetes, through learning about it from the people themselves.



SO MUCH MORE THAN JUST A FREE SWIM

OutSwimming Cancer is an initiative that supports adults who are living with or have recovered from cancer by providing a free swimming session once a week at Queen's Park Leisure Centre, Chesterfield. Dr Sarah Dean, Senior Lecturer in Health Psychology, collaborated with the group leader, Lesley Rechert, to explore people's experiences of attending OutSwimming Cancer as a way to evidence the value of the group.

Using PAR principles, they recruited a team of 13 community researchers to gather data in the leisure centre café after the weekly swim. Data was also collected through both poolside activities and in the pool using a waterproof dive board to take notes. The level of engagement was so high that the project had to be extended to accommodate everyone that wanted to be involved.

The research found that most group members had felt anxious about attending their first OutSwim session, but soon found that attending the group was a very positive, inclusive and freeing experience. People reported feeling liberated in the water and enjoying having the opportunity to do a "normal" activity that was nothing to do with their cancer treatment.

The research has demonstrated the importance and value of the OutSwim sessions to the community, and the group set out a list of priority actions based on the research. For the researchers, it was rewarding to be involved in work that had an immediate impact by bringing group members together to make the swim a more sociable experience - the group has continued to meet in the café even now the project has ended. The leisure centre has extended the swimming sessions to the summer holidays and now offers 15 minutes of



It's been nothing
but a positive
experience at a time
when everything
else is NOT.

That 'we' can be of
interest to science and
research and that voicing
your opinion can get
things going and improved
e.g. sessions during
holidays and aerobics
session. It pays to
express opinions!

The OutSwim group has had a significant impact on both its participants and the local community. Members have formed new friendships, creating a more social atmosphere, and their enjoyment has led to a stronger sense of connection within the group.

One member, inspired by the project, is planning to resume her MSc in public health after overcoming cancer, while another, who had been feeling isolated and undergoing dementia tests, credited the group's discussions and other activities with helping her and her doctor realise that her symptoms were due to social isolation. Furthermore, the project's preliminary findings have contributed to a funding bid aimed at creating similar sessions at another local pool.







COMMUNITY GIVING AND EVENTS

The University of Staffordshire sits in the heart of the community in Stoke-on-Trent. We continue to ensure that our facilities, assets and resources are shared with our wider communities, not just our staff and students. The year 2023-24 saw the University host 92 public events and numerous opportunities for local communities to enjoy the facilities.



UNIVERSITY OF STAFFORDSHIRE

SPORTS ACADEMY

The University of Staffordshire Sports Academy is a free holiday programme for children and young people. It delivers a range of outreach activities across sport and exercise science, sport and exercise psychology, sports coaching and performance, and sports therapy.

The Sports Academy sits alongside academic modules and is designed to encourage physical activity and raise aspirations among young people and communities at greatest disadvantage. In turn, student volunteers get real world work experience to boost their employability skills.

The Sports Academy supports students' situated learning and has given them the opportunity to work with academic staff, technical staff, and external partners. There are opportunities for placements, internships and it supports networking out in the community.

The impact of this extends beyond the educational impact on students. It has also provided an opportunity for the local community to access free childcare during the holidays so parents can continue to work while their children participate in enrichment activities.

I volunteered for the Sports Academy because it was a placement opportunity to gain experience in a versatile sports area. We deal with different athletes, different ages, different genders and I thought that was a good opportunity to be a part of.

GROWING PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH INNOVATION FUNDING

The Public Engagement Innovation Grants, funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF), and led by the Public Engagement and Research (PEaR) team at the University of Staffordshire, provided a crucial opportunity for colleagues across academic schools and professional services to receive financial support for their Connected Communities work. The grants, ranging from £500 to £2000, aimed to promote knowledge exchange and community engagement through innovative public engagement activities.

The grants could be used for activities such as public engagement in research, community engagement activities that lead to knowledge exchange or activities with a clear social impact purpose. In particular, activities designed to reach new audiences, amplify the University's civic mission, and enhance community involvement in research were encouraged.

Members of the Staffs CAN were invited to join the selection panel, along with staff from the Research, Innovation and Impact Services team. The projects were assessed against their reach, level of innovation, engagement of diverse communities, and value for money. Successful applicants were invited to an induction which covered power and ethics in community engagement, planning and hosting a community event, and the Connected Communities Evaluation Framework. Ongoing support was offered through online drop-in sessions where participants could discuss the progress of their projects and troubleshoot with members of the Public Engagement and Research team. The grants funded 5 projects, which will be covered elsewhere in this report.

The Public Engagement Innovation Grants were a great tool to encourage colleagues to explore creative and impactful projects. Colleagues fed back that the programme has changed their approach to community engagement and opened their eyes to issues of diversity and inclusion. These projects have successfully extended the University's reach into local and national communities and has encouraged more colleagues to embark on innovative ways to engage with communities.



AI ADVENTURES

Through AI Adventures, Senior Lecturer Benhur Bakhtiari Bastaki provided an opportunity for the University's immediate neighbours in Shelton to come on campus and enjoy a day of AI and robotics activities. Twenty local families attended and took part in innovative activities. They navigated a Sphero robot through an obstacle course to simulate a Mars rover mission, teaching them about Mars, robotics, and the materials a rover might encounter; they learned about the technologies used to automate various tasks and competed with the tech to identify objects on a conveyor belt; and in the Minecraft Hour of Code they built AI-powered inventions by correcting coding problems, solving puzzles, and using the principles of responsible AI.

The event was well-received, with interactive, game-based learning through Minecraft and robotics and coding being the key highlights. Children and adults left with practical knowledge in coding and AI, reinforcing the importance of interactive, tech-focused events that make abstract concepts like artificial intelligence more accessible. Feedback highlighted the potential for these activities to bring people together, learn about new tech, and inspire interest in IT and AI careers.

Continued engagement between the University and local communities was welcomed by attendees, with feedback suggesting the event served as a catalyst for community engagement and future career development, building confidence in both children and parents while opening the University up to the community to continue to develop a positive relationship with our neighbours.



FAMILY FESTIVAL OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND POTTERY

Post-graduate researcher and archaeologist Ermelinda Trinder used archaeological research from the Bronze and Iron Ages and the heritage pottery of Stoke-on-Trent to organise a Family Festival of Archaeology and Pottery. The aim was to engage with refugees, asylum seekers, and people from migrant backgrounds in the local community in a family-friendly, fun, and safe environment. This event was organised in collaboration with the local charitable organisation Asha North Staffordshire, and the Family Festival was an opportunity to support and help refugees, asylum seekers, and people from migrant backgrounds to feel a sense of belonging and civic pride in their local communities.

The Family Festival of Archaeology took place in June 2024 during Refugee Week. This event was part of a wide range of activities organised throughout the country and in Stoke-on-Trent to engage with local groups and provide them with a sense of belonging and home. More than 650 people from different countries, nationalities, and races attended Refugee Week and enjoyed a family day with music, dancing, children's activities, and support from police and fire-fighter services. The archaeology workshop included sandpit excavations, clay-making activities, arts and crafts, archaeological talks, and performing Bronze Age activities. This event was attended by more than 150 people, primarily children and their mothers, who spoke various languages but were united through the international power of archaeology and pottery to break down barriers.

The Family Festival of Archaeology and Pottery was a great success. The attendees requested that the archaeology event occur weekly, especially the clay-making and pottery fragmentation. Therefore, Asha continued to carry on some of the activities during their summer children's and women's activities. The event drew special interest from international media, and Ermelinda was interviewed by Euronews Albania. A poster and presentation were delivered during the European Association for Archaeologists, and future publications have been planned.

JOYFUL MINDS: UNVEILING INSIGHTS INTO 2 YEAR OLD THINKING AND SMILING

Francesca Brown-Cornwall's project brought together findings from three studies on higher-order thinking, smiles, and laughter in two-year-old children, aiming to create practical guidance for families and professionals. Through a series of online and in-person workshops, participants could explore these findings, receive hands-on tips, and engage in interactive exercises designed to help them apply the research in daily interactions with children. These exercises served as both a way to share knowledge and to gather input from attendees, leading to co-produced recommendations for everyday use.

Participants identified four key themes from the research that stood out as realistic and valuable for families and professionals alike: accessibility and practicality, shared responsibility, value of observation, and simplifying priorities. The research offers practical, inexpensive tips that are easy to apply and beneficial for anyone working with young children. A core message that resonated with participants was the universal power of smiles and laughter in early childhood. Attendees reflected on how impactful simple, joyful interactions can be, reminding participants of the importance of prioritising joy and connection in interactions with children.

Participants also highlighted the shared responsibility and opportunities all adults have in utilising the research findings. Everyday social interactions—such as a doctor's appointment or a health visitor's check-in—were recognised as opportunities to build meaningful relationships and communicate in ways that respect the child's world.

Another important takeaway was the need for time and reflection on children's physical responses, which play a key role in their development but are often overlooked in favour of academic milestones. Participants agreed that children's non-verbal expressions provide crucial insights and should be taken seriously. Suggestions included enhancing tools, like the two-year-old check, with questions that would prompt observation

There are many practical tips provided that are neither expensive nor difficult to do.

The power of a smile means we can all be experts in maximising smiles and thinking together

Everyone in contact with two-year-olds needs to use this research

of emotional responses. The final theme - simplifying priorities - emphasised focusing on eliciting joy and cognitive engagement in children rather than getting bogged down by other less important tasks. Participants welcomed this shift, appreciating the focus on happiness and engagement in early childhood.

To ensure these insights have a lasting impact, two main approaches for sharing the findings were identified. First is the traditional academic route: publishing research articles, attending conferences, and producing books to give credibility and assurance of the depth of the research. However, participants also recognised the importance of meeting people where they are, especially in a busy, digital world. This led to the second approach: creating a digital, multimedia presence to reach parents and professionals in their everyday lives. Participants suggested setting up an online resource hub, including learning modules, newsletters, podcasts, short videos, and “quick-win” strategies for caregivers and educators. One participant reflected, “As a mum with a full-time job in education, evidence-informed practice can only happen if it meets me where I am.” Social media was especially valued as an accessible tool, with another attendee noting,

Through Joyful Minds, families and professionals now have accessible, evidence-based ways to elicit joy, engagement, and cognitive development in young children, prioritising well-being and positive experiences in early childhood.



BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE POLICE AND COMMUNITIES

The University of Staffordshire recently hosted a series of events in Shropshire, Staffordshire and Warwickshire designed to strengthen the connection between the university and the local community, addressing critical issues such as domestic abuse and Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI). The purpose of these events was to listen to the concerns of community members and stakeholders, transform these insights into areas for student-led research, and commit to ongoing engagement by hosting similar events annually. This approach aims to ensure that research conducted at the University is relevant, impactful, and beneficial to the communities it serves, while also providing students with opportunities to contribute to real-world problem-solving through their academic work.

Each event began with presentations, followed by Q&A sessions, which allowed community members to express their concerns directly to law enforcement representatives. This began a constructive dialogue aimed at improving relations and mutual understanding. The discussions revealed a deep-seated need for ongoing engagement and highlighted the importance of addressing historical grievances to build trust between the community and the police. By hosting these events, the university demonstrated its commitment to facilitating difficult but necessary conversations that can promote community cohesion and positive change, with several potential research topics coming out of the discussions. The presence of numerous professionals from the public protection sector underscored the importance of academic research in informing policy and practice in this critical area. These events have strengthened the University's partnerships with local law enforcement and support agencies, and reinforced the potential of academic research to contribute meaningfully to tackling complex social challenges.



EMPOWERING EX-ELITE FOOTBALLERS

Dr Katie Sparks and her colleagues ran a training workshop for ex-elite male footballers in their 30s in mentoring younger footballers for the transition from academy (aged 16-18) to either professional football or exiting football. Mental wellbeing of ex-elite footballers can be low as they lose their athletic identity. Furthermore, they have often not completed all their education due to time commitments to the profession, so it is important that they receive training and support to venture into new opportunities. We also know that the transition from academy-to-pro or academy-to-exit can be challenging. Katie and her team began to apply their mentoring, transition and stress-mindset research to the ex-elite footballers to equip them with the skills ready to be mentors for academy players.

The team provided training in key principles of mentoring. Participants were asked to think back to a mentor they had and what made them a good mentor, and they began to see those characteristics in themselves, leading to increased feelings of competence and confidence. The Player Care Team from Wolverhampton Academy also offered safeguarding training and Wolverhampton football club will deliver the mentor transition programme over the next 12 months to their academy players.

Since the workshops, the ex-elite footballers helped to inform the mentor transition programme. The above will form a research paper and possible opportunity for this programme to reach other academies and clubs. Katie has plans to then deliver something similar within the women's game, as this is a growing area with minimal research. The aim is to impact policy change within football clubs and provide opportunities for ex-elite football players.



It allowed everyone to give insight into their particular area alongside the space to learn, share and outline what we need to do focus on going forward!

BUGFEST

In 2024, the Staffordshire Invertebrate Science Fair held its 9th annual free event for the general public. The event was organised by Senior Lecturer Dr Dave Skingsley and Ecological Consultant Andy Jukes under the umbrella of the Staffordshire Invertebrate Group. The event continues to attract both exhibitors, national recognition and local interest. On the day, 34 exhibitors from local and national wildlife groups, charities and specialist wildlife groups were in attendance.

The event hosted the Young Verrall lecture on behalf of the Royal Entomological Society as well as several scientifically based talks for the general public. The emphasis on the science of invertebrates was something the public and exhibitors really liked and led to the partnering with the Children's University.

The event attracted over 600 people from the retired to the toddling. The majority of people were from Staffordshire and surrounding counties but there was a growing interest in the event from further afield.

Wonderful event and so important to educate children and adults. A real highlight of my bee year. Thank you to all who put it on, it really is a pleasure to be a small part of it all!



RESTART A HEART

The University of Staffordshire partnered with the Midlands Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust to provide free CPR training sessions as part of the national 'Restart a Heart' Day initiative. The event, held at the University's Centre for Health Innovation in Stafford, aimed to equip the community with essential lifesaving skills, focusing on promoting the use of public access defibrillators. More than 150 local school pupils and 130 members of the public attended the sessions, gaining hands-on experience in CPR, a procedure that can double the chances of survival for those experiencing cardiac arrest. This collaboration demonstrates the University's commitment to civic responsibility by empowering individuals with the knowledge and confidence to act in emergencies, ultimately enhancing community resilience and potentially saving lives. By bringing together university expertise and healthcare professionals, this initiative highlights the powerful impact of educational institutions working alongside local services to address critical health issues and improve public wellbeing.



LEGAL ADVICE CLINIC

The Legal Advice Clinic at the University of Staffordshire is making a significant societal impact by providing free legal support to community members who might otherwise struggle to access justice due to the ongoing reduction in legal aid. Run by law students under the guidance of experienced professionals, the clinic not only addresses critical gaps in legal assistance but also equips students with essential hands-on experience, ultimately benefitting both the community and the University.

With legal aid cuts, court closures, and expensive court fees, many individuals and families in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent face significant barriers to legal representation. These barriers are especially challenging for communities already dealing with unemployment, poor housing, and other socio-economic issues. By offering free legal advice, the Clinic provides vital support in areas such as housing, family law, personal injury, and workplace disputes - areas where legal help is often scarce. The clinic is managed by Solicitor and Senior Lecturer Natasha Thomas, and is staffed by law students under her supervision. This setup allows students to gain practical experience and ensures that community members receive professional legal assistance. The students are able to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios, which helps them build confidence and competence as future legal professionals.

The issues surrounding access to justice are compounded by delays in the civil courts, as highlighted by the recent government Justice Committee enquiry. Natasha Thomas and fellow lecturer and solicitor Giles Gater, have provided evidence to this enquiry based on their experiences at the Clinic. They pointed out that underfunding of County Courts has led to

outdated technology, under-resourced buildings, and a lack of personal support for litigants. This environment is particularly challenging for individuals who are not represented by solicitors, making it difficult for them to navigate the courts and obtain justice.

Many people have genuine cases but are deterred from pursuing them due to high court fees and the lack of recoverable costs in small claims. This forces many to either represent themselves or abandon their claims altogether. This is where the Clinic steps in, providing crucial legal advice to help individuals understand their options before deciding whether to proceed with a civil case. By offering free, accessible support, the clinic reduces the burden on the local courts and helps alleviate the stress and anxiety faced by those involved in legal disputes.

The University of Staffordshire Legal Advice Clinic exemplifies how academic institutions can play a pivotal role in addressing community needs while enriching the educational experience of their students. Through the Clinic, the University of Staffordshire is not only improving access to justice for those who need it most but also preparing the next generation of lawyers to engage meaningfully and ethically with their communities.



CULTURE AND RELIGION

The University hosts a number of cultural and religious events throughout the year which are open to staff, students and the local community. This has proven to be a great way to welcome communities on campus to share traditions and learn about cultures. Events have included:

- Ramadan Iftar
- Diwali
- Eid
- Chinese New Year
- LGBTQIA+ Bingo
- Rosh Hashanah
- Christmas dinner

Feedback from these different events show that communities valued the University's commitment to celebrating culture and diversity, and appreciated having their own traditions celebrated and showcased on campus.







PLACESHAPING

In 2023-2024 Staffordshire University continued to work in partnership with a range of community, voluntary, civic and private sector organisations to shape Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire to be a great and vibrant place to live, work and study. These projects, and others, help us to understand our place and raise aspirations for its future. A big part of this is through the development of various networks which bring academics and communities together. In this section, Impact Manager Jackie Reynolds speaks to University of Staffordshire colleagues who have created impactful public engagement activities in this way.



STOKE CREATES

Stoke Creates is a cultural compact designed to connect people, communities, and organisations in Stoke-on-Trent with creative and cultural opportunities. Following the excitement and subsequent disappointment of the city's unsuccessful bid to become the UK City of Culture 2021, the partners involved in the bid consortium chose to build on the momentum and continue their collaborations. This decision led to the formation of Stoke Creates, with founding members including the University of Staffordshire, Keele University, YMCA, BCB, B-Arts, Cultural Destinations, Appetite, PiCL/LSEP, New Vic, and the City Council, under the leadership of Carola Boehm from the University of Staffordshire.

The initiative aims to foster a vibrant cultural hub in Stoke-on-Trent. Prior to the establishment of Stoke Creates, the University played a significant role in several large-scale, strategic, and culturally-oriented projects such as Appetite, Art-City, FACTORY, and the Create Place Co-Creation and Placemaking Leadership Programme. These projects, which emphasised creativity, creative industries, and cultural development, laid the groundwork for Stoke Creates and contributed to Stoke-on-Trent's first dedicated Cultural Strategy, "Making the Creative City."

Stoke Creates was officially registered as a CIC in 2021, marking the formal establishment of this cultural compact. A working group known as the Stoke Creates Exchange Forum was established to develop a strategy that continues to shape its vision, mission, and values. This effort helped define the direction and purpose of Stoke Creates.

Stoke-on-Trent is a city with unique cultural assets but also faces significant challenges,

Stoke Creates is the scaffolding that helps creatives create more, and to work towards our collective goal of making our places as creative as they can be. With it comes all different kinds of economic and social prosperities. So creativity and creative communities are evidenced to be some of the most important dimensions for placemaking policies.

including high levels of deprivation. Stoke Creates seeks to address these inequalities by leveraging the transformative power of culture. Although it does not deliver projects directly, it provides support to other organisations through collaborations, encouraging creativity, and prioritising inclusivity. The network has influenced local cultural policy, notably in 2022, when Stoke-on-Trent City Council invited Stoke Creates to contribute to an update of the city's Cultural Strategy. Through a participatory consultation process, the organisation ensured that a diverse range of voices were included, highlighting the value of incorporating varied perspectives in shaping cultural policy.

Stoke Creates has also made a significant financial impact on the local cultural sector, securing £1.3 million in investment for arts and cultural initiatives and projects. By March 2024, it was one of the partners chosen to lead the first Big Give Arts for Impact campaign, raising over £130,000 in just seven days. This initiative, conducted in collaboration with NPAC, MadeInStoke, and Arts Council England, matched individual donations to benefit seven local charities. Furthermore, Stoke Creates has played a role in increasing the number of



National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) funded by Arts Council England in the area, from three to eight, by enhancing connectivity between Arts Council England and interested applicants, and supporting organizations in applying for NPO status.

Looking ahead, Stoke Creates is focused on maintaining its momentum by strengthening its own sustainability and ensuring it can continue to drive cultural development in Stoke-on-Trent. The organisation is exploring charitable status to unlock new opportunities for supporting the region's cultural sector. Continued engagement with policymakers and sharing of insights aims to influence positive developments beyond the city.

A recent success in leading the application to the World Craft Council, in partnership with the City Council, has resulted in Stoke-on-Trent being recognised as a World Craft City. This accolade places the city among approximately 60 worldwide, demonstrating how cultural compacts like Stoke Creates can lead strategic initiatives with passion, expertise, and collaboration. It connects Stoke-on-Trent's local story with a

global network, enhancing the City's cultural and economic appeal.

Stoke Creates plays a vital role in realising the arts and culture component of the University of Staffordshire's Connected Communities vision. It serves as a strategic, policy-oriented framework that enables individuals and organisations with an interest in arts and culture to engage in impactful ways. As outlined in the book *Arts and Academia: The Role of the Arts in Civic Universities*, the arts act as a connector, enabling collaborative efforts for greater impact. Stoke Creates exemplifies how the arts can be a powerful tool for community cohesion, development, and regeneration, contributing significantly to the University's mission to foster meaningful connections between academia and the wider community.

PERFORMING UNDER PRESSURE

The Performing Under Pressure podcast, produced by a team of researchers at the University of Staffordshire, is an innovative project designed to enhance individual and workplace psychological health. Drawing on two key frameworks - the Theory of Challenge and Threat States in Athletes and Social Identity Leadership - the podcast provides a platform for individuals who have thrived under pressure to share their stories, aiming to inspire others and promote positive psychological practices. Its production at the University of Staffordshire ensures that each episode is underpinned by academic research.

Since its launch, the podcast has featured over 30 episodes, with around 2,500 downloads across 50 countries. The project addresses the significant public health issue of psychological stress, which affects individuals universally and can lead to long-term health challenges. By inviting guests to share their experiences of performing under pressure, the podcast offers valuable insights that inform the research team's interventions across various settings, including schools and sports organisations.

The knowledge exchange facilitated by the podcast has resulted in tangible outcomes. Insights from guests have influenced the team's approach to stress management. A memorable moment came from broadcaster Meg Baldwin, captain of Port Vale Women's Football Club, who stated, "I often don't like stress, but I still welcome it anyway." This perspective has been integrated into the team's work with young people, encouraging them to view stress as potentially beneficial, even if it is not enjoyable.

The podcast has also fostered new collaborations and projects. Conversations with four recently retired footballers - Matt Jarvis, Sam Winnall, Mark O'Brien, and Jake Jervis - led to a partnership with Wolves Football Club and the

University of Wolverhampton, focusing on a season-long intervention with Academy players. Another connection resulted in a workshop at Sheffield United Football Club. Featuring local voices, such as an outstanding local head teacher and a senior police officer, alongside international contributors, underscores the podcast's role in connecting diverse communities and professional fields.

One unique strength of Performing Under Pressure is its ability to highlight stories and perspectives often overlooked. Episodes have addressed important topics like menstruation for female athletes and provided a platform for competitive athletes with disabilities, such as an England footballer with Cerebral Palsy, to share their experiences. These discussions raise awareness of critical issues and contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment for all individuals facing psychological pressures.



The podcast has also proven to be a valuable resource for the University of Staffordshire students and alumni. Co-hosting episodes has allowed students to develop confidence and acquire new skills, while alumni have shared their journeys and accomplishments. One episode featured a former master's student from Uganda who supported the Ugandan team during their first Cricket World Cup, while another highlighted an Olympic Gold Medallist currently pursuing a master's degree at the University.

Looking ahead, the team behind Performing Under Pressure is dedicated to continuing the podcast, with plans to produce more episodes and explore new initiatives arising from the conversations. A recent book contract will enable the team to further disseminate the insights gained from the podcast, reaching a wider audience and enhancing the impact of their work.

The podcast aligns closely with the University of Staffordshire's Connected Communities strategy, providing a space for dialogue, collaboration, and knowledge exchange. By inviting guests onto campus and utilising university facilities, it strengthens relationships with the local community and alumni, while also humanising the role of academic researchers.



VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS HUB

In 2022, Dr. Em Temple-Malt and Dr. Laura Walton-Williams undertook a piece of commissioned research for the Police and Crime Commissioner and Staffordshire Women's Aid. They investigated why underrepresented ethnicities were not using support services for victims of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Through conversations with various organisations, it became clear that there was a lack of up-to-date knowledge and coordination surrounding existing services. Voluntary sector organisations lacked a forum to come together. Although a Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) Group existed, it was predominantly police-led and involved only commissioned services. This left voluntary sector services, often in competition for funding, with a pressing need for collaboration. A role was identified for the University as an independent institution that could develop a supportive network of organisations to share information and best practice. The network has met quarterly ever since, with around 40-50 people at each meeting. Sessions usually include guest speakers, networking opportunities, and facilitated introductions over tea and coffee.

The VAWG Hub brings together individuals and organisations supporting victims of sexual and domestic abuse and violence in the region, including those who support male victims. It connects voluntary sector organisations with representatives from the justice system, such as the Police, the Police and Crime Commissioner's Office, judges, solicitors, and the Staffordshire Violence Reduction initiative.

The Hub's activities have been developed in consultation with its members and often revolve around specific themes such as education, support for men and boys, and engagement with ethnically diverse communities. Recent meetings have included presentations from British

Transport Police, who discussed their initiatives to combat gender-based violence in transportation, and Whispers of Hope, a local charity that assists victims of domestic abuse or sex trafficking without access to public funds due to their immigration status.

The VAWG Hub facilitates immediate connections among organisations. Members can discuss the challenges they face to explore whether help is available in the room or through wider signposting. For example, Sexual Violence Liaison Officers in the the University of Staffordshire Student Support team attended the session with British Transport Police and invited them to speak during Freshers' Week to reach new students, many of whom will be regular commuters. When Whispers of Hope presented, several attendees expressed interest in volunteering.

The Hub also extends the impact of various university services and initiatives. The Legal Advice Clinic has actively participated, offering collaborative opportunities with members. The Hub accesses specialist information and knowledge, sharing details about free online webinars, the latest research on VAWG, and funding opportunities. A dedicated LinkedIn profile helps disseminate information and meeting slides, extending the Hub's influence beyond the in-person gatherings. Recently, the VAWG Hub partnered with Poppy Murray, a campaigner from Guernsey who started the BE LADS campaign in 2021 as a way to raise awareness about women's safety following the murder of Sarah Everard. This collaboration reflects the Hub's commitment to building broader alliances.

The VAWG Hub meetings provide valuable opportunities to share research findings and discover members' research priorities. This can

lead to new research projects, sometimes involving students.

The VAWG Hub is continually evolving, seeking innovative ways to strengthen connections. As part of the October meeting, members have been invited to attend the Centre for Crime, Justice and Security Annual Conference earlier in the day.

The Hub will continue to strengthen the involvement of people with lived experience and respond to community concerns and priorities, as well as the evolving political landscape. It's easy for people to feel powerless when a problem is so endemic, so part of the Hub's role is to enable voices to be heard by providing a platform, raising awareness, and linking with policymakers.

The Hub strives to be as inclusive as possible. By holding the VAWG Hub meetings at the University, easy free parking and refreshments are offered. Additionally, support such as the Legal Advice Clinic, Digital Marketing, media studios, and student placements is available. It's all about connections, collaboration, and elevating multiple voices to bring about positive change.

REBELLIOUS RESEARCH

Rebellious Research is an initiative designed to address the challenges faced by creative practice researchers, emerging in response to a notable lack of information and guidance in the field. The Practice Network of the British Association of Film and Television Studies, a network led by Agata Lulkowska, oversees this initiative, which encompasses multiple networks - both formal and informal - dedicated to creative practice research. Activities are developed to unite individuals interested in this domain, including university researchers and practitioners from various settings. A significant component of this initiative is the Rebellious Research Seminar Series.

The inception of Rebellious Research stemmed from Agata's own experiences as a PhD researcher, navigating the complexities of diverse topics such as film, visual anthropology, Latin American studies, and indigenous studies. Recognising the difficulties faced by others, the initiative developed connections among academics, artists, and creative practitioners, allowing for the sharing of experiences and knowledge across disciplines and professional backgrounds. This collaborative approach encourages exploration of common interests in creative practices.

Rebellious Research successfully brings together creative practice and research on a single platform, with online sessions allowing participants from around the world to engage. The initiative has cultivated a sense of community, with many participants expressing that they feel part of a network they were previously unaware of. Feedback from artists who have presented their work at Rebellious Research events indicates that they gained valuable insights into the broader societal implications of their creative outputs, transcending aesthetic considerations.

Looking ahead, there are plans to further develop the Rebellious Research network through mailing lists, LinkedIn, publications, invited talks, and a podcast series. Efforts are also being made to secure funding to sustain and expand the initiative, including the formation of a Global Advisory Board and the organisation of creative practice research workshops in various locations. A key goal is to engage more extensively with grassroots communities, reinforcing the message that creative practice research is accessible to all.

This initiative aligns closely with the University of Staffordshire's Connected Communities vision and strategy. It challenges the notion that creative practice research is confined to academic environments, striving to break down barriers between artists, academics, and communities. Rebellious Research aims to bring people together and create a more inclusive landscape for creative practice research.



STEP UP TO HE

For the past 18 years, Step Up to HE has offered a free 10-week Level 3 programme designed to support adults who may face barriers to higher education. By providing an accessible pathway into university, the course helps learners build the skills and confidence needed for a successful transition. Beyond individual transformation, Step Up also contributes to broader social change by addressing educational disparities and enabling more people in our local communities to realise their potential.

Many former learners have described their previous education as impersonal, often focused on results rather than personal growth. Step Up provides a supportive environment where students can develop their academic voice and use their life experiences to pursue meaningful careers. The programme helps break down barriers to higher education, ensuring that learners feel valued and empowered. Programme Manager Ashley Cotton describes the curriculum as “emancipatory and humanistic,” encouraging students to see their past experiences as strengths that shape their future and enable them to create positive change.

Despite its short duration, Step Up has a lasting impact, building confidence, independence, and a sense of belonging in the academic world. Graduates gain the knowledge and tools to navigate their educational and professional journeys, opening doors to new opportunities and allowing them to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

Kate Rowley, a Step Up alumnus and PhD student, dreamed of becoming a psychologist, but personal barriers like ADHD and dyslexia, along with struggles in an impersonal system that deemed her a ‘failing’ student, made academia seem impossible. She is now a first-class Psychology graduate and a PhD student. Step Up taught her to view education as a space where her voice had value and where her experiences could inform her growth.

The curriculum aims to be emancipatory and humanistic in its ethos, in that it not only helps students to understand themselves more deeply, but how past lived experience can be an excellent teacher, and serve a purpose in helping students who complete the course to become positive forces for good and the societal change makers of the future

The programme didn't just equip me for higher education; it reframed how I saw myself, and what I believed was possible for myself academically and, in truth, personally too.

KNOW YOUR PLACE

Know Your Place is a UKRI funded project all about building a young community research network across Staffordshire. The aim is to understand what things are important to young people, then connect them to change-makers to help make these things a priority for them, too.

The Public Engagement and Research team, in collaboration with the Staffordshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services, invited members of the Staffordshire Youth Union to be part of the steering group for the project. The Youth Union is made of up young people aged 11-25 from diverse backgrounds. They were invited to a 2-day residential at Alton Towers where they took part in a range of creative activities and games which helped the project partners to understand what it is like to be a young person in Staffordshire today, what are the things that influence their lives and the things that shape the way they view the world. The activities also got the young people to think about what research means to them, and question their assumptions of who can take part in research.

The 5 year project plan, which has since secured further UKRI funding, was then presented to the group in a visual and accessible way. This allowed the group to scrutinise the plan and make suggestions which would make the project more relevant and meaningful for young people.

The residential was an opportunity for the young people at the heart of the project to co-design the project, determine its goals, methods and desired outcomes. Using participatory action research methods, the project will ensure that young people are at the heart of decision-making.

The residential resulted in a co-created project plan, driven by the voices of Staffordshire's young people. The project aims to engage those disconnected from research, map local needs and priorities, and empower young people to influence policy and hold decision-makers accountable. By embedding young people at every stage of planning, Know Your Place has laid strong foundations for success.

We need to have some kind of say in how our lives are. It's our lives, and it's going to be the next generations as well. And I'd like to see every generation getting better and better.

We're really pushing for young people to have a voice. We could say: "Staffordshire, the place where young people have real power in their voice". And I think that would just be brilliant to really show the rest of the country. This is something we need to push for.

I want to make a mark, I want to have a say. I think that it's important that we all are allowed to say "I feel strongly and passionately about this". And I saw this project as an opportunity to do something with what I've learned here today.



UNDERSTANDING OUR COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Participatory dialogue is a key part of the Connected Communities Evaluation Framework so, once again, the first draft of this report was presented at the Staffs CAN, where attendees were asked to engage in a **SLIPDOT** analysis. This is where the activities that have fed into this report are scrutinised to identify the following:

- **S**trengths
- Areas of **L**ow **I**ntensity
- Areas for **P**otential **D**evelopment
- **O**pportunities
- **T**hreats

Below is a summary of the discussion.

Strengths

The Connected Communities projects demonstrate a commitment to supporting local people across a broad range of needs. Projects focusing on youth empowerment, cancer support, and free legal advice clinics have been particularly valued, as were efforts to help marginalised groups such as refugees and asylum seekers. The wide range of focus areas, from mental health and sports to introducing new technologies, has led the group to believe that the University is dedicated to making a meaningful difference across diverse groups.

Areas of Low Intensity

Despite the positive impact, some projects are not as widely known or utilised as they could be. Many participants noted that more could be done to promote the available services, events, and support. Limited capacity sometimes means not everyone who could benefit has the chance to take part. While these projects are valued, increased outreach and awareness are needed to ensure more people know about and can access them. It is worth noting that this was also raised last year as part of the participatory dialogue.

Areas for Potential Development

Participants identified a strong potential for projects to actively inform policy changes and influence broader impacts. Initiatives like Reimagining Shelton were viewed as valuable but could have even more impact if expanded. Partnerships between the University and the community also have room to grow by extending into other parts of Staffordshire, allowing a wider range of communities to engage and benefit from these projects.

Opportunities

Several new ideas emerged for future projects. Community health initiatives, such as reducing stigma around diabetes, partnerships for food security, and involvement in urban planning were suggested. Other ideas included developing resource toolkits, expanding social prescribing, and creating a regular newsletter to keep everyone informed about current activities. These steps could strengthen community connections and increase the impact of the University's partnerships.

Threats

Some challenges are currently limiting the reach of these projects. Funding, time constraints and accessibility issues like transport, were all mentioned. Other concerns include language barriers, misinformation, and a potential lack of interest among some groups. When university departments and community organisations are not well-coordinated, it can hinder effective resource sharing, which may impact trust and engagement.

David

you are amazing

CHOLE BREEZE
BA (HONS) ILLUSTRATION





University of
Staffordshire