Growing Up in the Market; Year 1 Brief Report

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At a glance summary

This report summarises the first-year findings of 'Growing Up in the Market' (GUIM) — an ongoing, 3-year longitudinal study, which began in 2022 in which we interview children, young people, and their families about the experience of living in an under-resourced, working-class community in South Belfast.

Our partner community, 'the Market', faces significant socioeconomic challenges including high unemployment, inadequate housing, disadvantages in education, poor health outcomes, and conflict-related legacy issues. However, not everyone in the community experiences the same worries, and this makes us wonder about how where you live affects your life.

The study employs qualitative interviews to explore how the community context shapes residents' trajectories across key life domains including education, employment, health, and wellbeing over time. What residents say about the types of capital available in their area, and how this shapes the community's context, helps us to understand how these inequalities keep happening or sometimes change. We believe it also guides the big decisions people make in their lives.

To understand the specific reasons behind this, in-depth, place-based research like our study, is necessary. The voices of residents inform the actions of our wider initiative - Queen's Communities and Place (QCAP) and how we, as a university and civic institution, can support local communities improve their conditions.

Background and Methods

The research utilises a qualitative longitudinal design, collecting narrative interview data from participants across three years. Purposive sampling recruited 61 participants in year one across four cohorts: primary school children, secondary school pupils, young adults, and parents/guardians. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, audio-recorded and analysed using a blended inductive and deductive coding approach.

The study's central research questions are:

Research Question 1 How and why does community context impact attitudes, aspirations and outcomes in wellbeing, health, education, and employment?

Research Question 2. How can these insights be harnessed to co-produce targeted interventions supporting the community to address identified needs?

Key Findings

Analysis revealed multifaceted insights into participants' community experiences and navigation of key life domains. Interrelated themes emerged around community identity and bonds, stigma, substance use concerns, educational pathways, and support needs.

- ❖ Participants expressed strong community identity and close social ties, fostering perceptions of safety, trust, and mutual support. However, these tight bonds sometimes hindered accessing services, networks and opportunities located externally.
- ❖ Many noted escalating substance use issues driving disrupted community relations and safety concerns. Tackling these challenges through accessible treatment services was seen as vital.
- ❖ In education, some felt opportunities were limited by financial constraints, lack of information and normalised low expectations. But many adults hoped their children would surpass their own attainment and pursue desired careers.
- ❖ Cost-of-living: people in the community are often managing on low incomes, however the rising costs particularly of gas and electricity coupled with food prices are creating a great deal of stress.
- ❖ Participants underscored needs for more accessible local services alongside options outside community boundaries to expand horizons and networks.

Actions

Given the most pressing need indicated, emerging findings were fed back into the action working groups whereby several immediate actions were planned and initiated.

- ❖ A co designed community level substance use intervention programme.
- ❖ A response to the cost-of-living crisis focused on healthy eating on a budget.
- ❖ Several education interventions aimed at improving access to opportunities for children and young people and supporting adults in returning to education.
- ❖ A creative co-created project addressing intergenerational trauma.

While not empirically generalisable, these findings illuminate relevant dynamics which may provide insights when working within similarly challenged communities. The research highlights the importance of holistic, localised and co-produced interventions engaging residents to counter stigma, expand educational horizons and promote individual and collective agency.

The study's longitudinal approach will continue to track evolving experiences and perspectives over participants' developmental trajectories. Early insights underscore how community identity and social relationships shape access to services, education and wellbeing. Unfolding impacts of wider societal crises alongside local interventions will also be examined more over time. Ultimately the research aims to inform community-centred policies to catalyse the social changes communities aspire to.

The Market Community

The pilot partner community for QCAP is the Market in Inner South Belfast. The Market is one of the oldest working-class communities in Belfast. Located on the banks of the Lagan, it is historically linked to the city's industrial revolution in the 19th century. Housing was built for those working in waterfront businesses such as factories, distilleries, abattoirs, and several markets including the famous St George's, which survives to this day. Through this thriving commercial landscape grew a community, which benefited from the available jobs and the abundant fresh food. Unfortunately, Belfast suffered serious decline beginning in the 1960s which was greatly exacerbated in the 1970s and 80s by the civil unrest of the 'Troubles'. The conflict impacted the Market and other inner-city working-class communities whose traditional occupations were lost. Gradually many of these communities were lost to city centre shopping and financial development, while their residents moved out to housing estates on the outskirts of the city.

The Market community was also significantly impacted by strategic planning decisions taken to disperse the commercial and industrial activity out of the city centre and across the country. Despite the difficulties and decline of the area the residents developed their own plan for community regeneration in 1973, though the agreed upon development did not materialise. What ultimately materialised was the Lanyon Place Complex and several other large-scale developments surrounding and encroaching on the Market area, which brought financial investment and benefits back to Belfast, though the community was largely locked out of those benefits both socially and physically.

A community-led survey published in 2019 collected the views of 226 residents over the age of 16 providing the views of the community on six specific human rights indicators. Overdevelopment, road safety, housing, health, education, and employment. This existing evidence provided QCAP and the community partners with a starting point from which to develop goals and priorities. For example, 94% of those surveyed felt that commercial over-development posed a threat to the future of the Market (Hargey, 2019). Prior even to the collection of this data strong involvement in activism clearly demonstrated the community's views, wherein the residents have championed campaigns directed to the preservation of the historic sites, retention of community assets, and prevention of damaging development.

A key example of this community led action was the 'sunshine not skyscrapers' campaign which protested the proposed building of a 14-story skyscraper next to two story family homes The proposed build would have blocked light from these homes for a significant portion of the day and was planned on a site which would have impacted access to the historic east bridge tunnels. The east bridge tunnels pass under the road and in the past connected the community to the city centre. During the large-scale commercial development of Lanyon Place including the building of the Waterfront and the Hilton Hotel, the tunnels were closed off with the justification being that people living in the market community presented a threat to the desired patrons of the Lanyon Place complex. The campaign to prevent the skyscraper being built at the Stewart Street site was successful at the high court but continued threats of overdevelopment necessitate that activism be ongoing.

The anchor community partner of QCAP is the Market Development Association (MDA). The MDA was established in 1995 to promote the well-being of all residents living in the Market area of South Belfast and it aims to develop the community into one where people want to live, work, and socialise. The MDA engages with statutory agencies, government departments, political representatives, the private sector, and other stakeholders to advance the development of the Market area into a vibrant and sustainable inner-city working-class community. QCAP recognises the strengths already present in the work of the MDA and are working to support the organisation to increase capacity while building on the existing assets. The community is characterised by a strong sense of cohesion and close family bonds, with many extended families remaining close to each other within the area. Unfortunately, there is ongoing concern about sufficient housing to allow young people to remain living in the area when they leave home and increasing concerns about the allocation of social housing in the area. As in many working-class communities, in recent decades there have been social changes that have impacted the close connections that were previously enjoyed.

Partnership relationships in community-led working take time to develop and require the building of trust, especially given past mistakes made by research institutions against research participants (Mullans et al., 2020). Communities have memories, and, in disadvantaged areas, this often includes a catalogue of failures and missed opportunities on the part of government and institutions. Short-term or ineffective interventions therefore lead to a lack of trust and potential reluctance to engage with future projects (Cochran et al., 2008). QCAP is highly aware of the sensitivity of this collaboration and the need to begin and proceed with a culture of respect as detailed in our Community Engagement Charter. As was stated in a Lankelly Chase historical review of place-based approaches, "Beginning work in an area requires a commitment to learning about the place and respect for what is already there […] too many past approaches have failed on this count […] the sensitivity and skill with which a funder uses local knowledge is the most important aspect of best practice" (Buckley & Taylor, 2017).

Demographic data on the market comes from the 2011 census and the 2021 census which has not been published in full at the time of writing, therefore we have utilised data from both as indicated

below. Today the community comprises approximately 1981 individuals according to the 2021 census data (NISRA, 2024). Most residents are ethnically white 86.27% and identify within the nationality of Irish only (52.65%) or Northern Irish only (16.73%) a smaller proportion of residents in the market identified as British only (11.07%). Other than White the next most common ethnicity in the market area was Indian (6.46%) (NISRA, 2024). (n.b. These figures reflect NISRA data zones, through which we can approximate the neighbourhood of the Market, though they are likely to include streets that Market residents would not define as within their area.) This ethnic make-up differs from the rest of NI, which is 96.55% white, and in terms of national identity, 19.78% identified as Northern Irish, 29.13% as Irish, and 31.86% as British (NISRA, 2024).

Census data indicate that in 2011 32.62% residents had no qualifications, which was higher than NI overall at 29.12% (NISRA, 2023). Based on this same census data 758 residents (29.41%) were "economically inactive," again higher than NI overall (24.5%). Additionally, among residents of the Market, only 95 individuals (3.69%) reported being a student, which was substantially lower than the rest of NI (6.18%).

On the health status of residents of the community, the 2011 census indicated 28.72% of residents in the Market reported being in good health, lower than what was observed for NI overall (31.79%). On the other end of the spectrum 2.72% reported being in very bad health. This was higher than what was observed for NI overall (1.19%) (NISRA, 2023). Data for mental health suggests that the prevalence of "emotional, psychological, or mental health" conditions is nearly twice as high for the Market (16.5%) as what was observed for NI overall (8.68%) (NISRA, 2024).

Background and policy context

Combining experiential knowledge from the community with academic insight, Queen's Community and Place (QCAP) employs a place-based approach to co-create solutions addressing persistent physical, economic and social challenges, while strengthening the engagement between Queens and the communities it serves (Higgins et al., 2023). Central to QCAP is the three-year qualitative longitudinal (QL) study Growing Up in the Market (GUIM) exploring inequalities in the lived experiences for children and families in the Market area, identifying barriers and enablers to inform effective interventions over time.

QCAP launched its pilot initiative with the Market Development Association in 2021, co-designing initial activities and aiming to ultimately expand into other communities in Northern Ireland. In common with other UK regions, Northern Ireland has significant wealth, income, health, wellbeing, and education disparities differentiated by class, race, religion and location (Amin, 2022; Department for Communities, 2023). Securing sustainable progress from the Good Friday Agreement requires addressing issues within Northern Ireland's most deprived communities, which continue to face substantial division and inequality despite wider peace impacts.

Place-based approaches strongly feature across contemporary UK research, innovation, and policy landscapes, evidenced by a new national office, the Office for Place within the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities (see also Kings Fund, 2021; UKRI Place Toolkit). While place may be an agenda item nationally, successful place-based initiatives occur primarily through local, contextualized efforts. They are also not new, for example, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has long examined place-focused policies and systems impacts on local communities. And for over 20 years, the National Literacy Trust has utilized place-based initiatives targeting low literacy, arguing

neighbourhood and system-level factors critically shape educational outcomes, exerting stronger influence than other elements like social class (Crew, 2020; Dyson et al., 2012).

There is growing recognition among funders that the issues they want to address, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas, where past interventions have historically failed to yield sustainable improvements, are likely to require a place-based, multifaceted, and holistic approach (Cairns, Buckley and Taylor, 2015; Buckley and Taylor, 2017). Communities are shaped by complex ecologies in which a series of systems, including family, school, and culture, interact in the context of place to affect outcomes directly and indirectly. Initiatives which address only one aspect of these ecologies will have limited impacts and holistic, area-based approaches are required to address the societal challenge of sustainable improvements to outcomes. In response, policymaking at national and international levels is increasingly informed by a 'place-based' agenda (McCann, 2019).

Within Northern Ireland, the 1991 Targeting Social Need (TSN) initiative aimed to address significant socioeconomic differences across Catholic and Protestant communities (NIO, 2002), with mandated employment targets for disadvantaged areas. The initiative was strengthened in 1998, and relaunch as NewTSN. NewTSN was also identified in the Good Friday Agreement as one of the Government's socio-economic commitments. Recent place-focused approaches emphasize maximizing disadvantaged areas' capacities for 'levelling up' and equalizing opportunity as a driver of national growth and improved living standards (Tomaney & Pike, 2020). The people and Place review currently underway within the Department for Communities seeks to provide an evidenced informed approach to place making policy within NI.

GUIM originated from engagement with the local community and a range of key stakeholders highlighting interconnected, compounded issues. This included a changing post lockdown education landscape; increasing concerns about a rise in the cost of living, exacerbated by the pandemic and pre-existing priorities around qualifications, employment, health, wellbeing and housing based on earlier engagement and surveys (Hargey, 2019).

Methodology

The Growing up in the Market (GUIM) study is a central engaged research mechanism allowing us to gather the lived experience of residents of the Market community. The qualitative longitudinal methodology was selected to examine transitions and trajectories over several years, allowing researcher to 'walk alongside' participants creating an in-depth picture of family life in this community (Neale and Flowerdew, 2003). As a longitudinal study, there is a keen focus on trajectories and following participants through key stages with a focus on health, educational and employment outcomes in order to explore the how and why of these areas which highlight inequalities (Amin 2022).

With this knowledge we designed GUIM as a cohort study to include children at different educational stages, points of key transition and their parents or guardians. These were:

- Year 7 pupils in primary schools
- Year 10 pupils in post primary schools
- Year 12 pupils in post primary schools
- Age 16 + into young adulthood
- Parents or Guardians

Research Question 1 How and why does community context impact attitudes, aspirations and outcomes in wellbeing, health, education and employment?

Research Question 2 How can the insights from the lived experience data be harnessed to co-produce targeted interventions supporting the community to address identified needs?

Sampling and Recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to select and recruit 61 participants from specific age cohorts living in the Market area which encompassed five key educational transition points. Recruitment commenced in March 2021, following ethical approval from the School of Social Science Education and Social work Research Ethics Committee (REC). An established relationship with our partner community organisation, The MDA, facilitated recruitment through their community engagement networks. Despite this partnership and the thank you vouchers being offered to participants initial recruitment was slow. We were alerted to community anxiety about university researchers conducting home interviews. We sought funding and engaged a local coordinator and a local administrator post to support the overall QCAP model and recruitment to the GUIM study. This subsequently transformed our approach and community perceptions. The addition of the local co-ordinator post within the QCAP model resonates strongly with evidence of what has worked well in other successful place-based initiatives (see Davies, 2019). We achieved the full sample by November 2021.

Data collection

Participants received information sheets and gave written informed consent with assurances of anonymity, confidentiality, and rights to withdraw. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using cohort-specific schedules covering perceptions of community, education, digital inclusion and mental health. Interviews lasted 30-60 minutes on average, with younger participants having shorter interviews. Most interviews occurred in participants' homes facilitated by the local coordinator introducing the researcher. Some interviews took place in the community centre to provide a neutral space. Younger cohorts were interviewed in a local youth club. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Field notes were kept throughout data collection reflecting on the process. These noted the challenges of multiple participants being present during interviews due to limited space in homes. While ideal to interview separately, sometimes maintaining participant comfort took priority over full privacy. Over time, familiarity with the area grew through community immersion during data collection. A humble, learning attitude was maintained throughout, recognising participation occurred through community goodwill.

Analysis

Verbatim transcripts were analysed using a hybrid approach of framework analysis and inductive thematic analysis in NVivo. An initial coding framework was created based on the interview schedule and research questions. Descriptive open codes were applied to transcripts, adding emergent themes. Two researchers independently coded with a third coding a subset for interrater reliability. The framework matrix enabled within-case reflection to inform case study analyses.

Deductive and inductive codes were analysed through a categoric aggregation process to identify themes and patterns. Four researchers engaged in regular analytical discussions throughout to

debate insights and interrogate findings. Coding meetings aided collaborative and timely inter-coder checks. The framework matrix and NVivo coding iteratively informed each other.

Headline Findings

In year one of the GUIM project we interviewed 61 residents across different cohorts (See table). We set out to answer the question;

How and why does community context impact attitudes, aspirations and outcomes in wellbeing, health, education and employment?

Cohort	Key Stage	School Year	Age	n=61
Children	KS2	Primary 7	10-11	11
Young People	KS3 KS4*	Year 10 Year 12	13-14 15-16	9 8
Young Adults	Post-16*	6thForm/FE/HE/Employment/NEET	16+	11
Parents/Families	N/A	N/A	Varies	22

A wealth of data has been generated from year one alone with many interesting elements deserving of focused attention. It is also important to establish the baseline cross sectional and intergenerational lived experience of the community. Below are some of the headline findings that will be presented in an upcoming publication. Publications focusing specifically on education and educational transitions, as well as implications for community wellbeing, are also forthcoming.

Perception of community

The vast majority of adult respondents spoke positively about their community describing it as 'close knit' and a 'good community' people also praised the availability of 'help' and 'support' from those around them if needed. Our respondents shared that feeling close to and knowing their neighbours and living close to family created a sense of safety and reflected the strong in group identification and cultural identity of people as 'Market people'. Some respondents, across the cohorts shared a sense of embarrassment or shame about being from or living in the market when interacting with outsiders. This seemed related to experiencing stigma outside the community from people who believe the area has a negative reputation, a perspective likely rooted in classism and sectarianism. For example, both adults and young people shared experiences of discrimination, in education, that they experienced due to being from The Market.

Despite this there was overwhelmingly a sense of pride at being from The Market, with many people keen to confirm they were 'born and reared' or that they had family going back several generations. Generally, respondents also felt this was a safe community, family focused and a good place to bring up children or to have grown up. However, in recent years, this perception had been disrupted by two factors. First, the increasing prevalence of drug-related issues had begun to erode the sense of safety among the residents. Second, outsiders who were not native to the area have increasingly relocated there, altering the community dynamics.

Community Wellbeing

The main concerns about the increasing drug landscape came from adult respondents.

> *Addiction has just took over the place, it has got really bad around here and it's due to all the mental health…. That's where it starts, people ring up, oh I'm not feeling very well and they are getting prescribed, then they are ringing back, and they are getting prescribed again and the next thing they can't do without it so they are going to buy it. I had a friend who died, she bought something, and she took it. (F7)*

In contrast the younger respondents, children up to the age of around 14 did not have a lot of knowledge of substance use in the community. However, from around age 16 respondents were able to recognise the prevalence of drug use. Some shared how others their age took drugs, and they were able to share how easy it was for young people to buy them. Young people were also more likely to have a pragmatic attitude to the substance use in their area expressing that *'everywhere is just the same.'*

In addressing the current challenges, respondents emphasised the need for more localised services to tackle social issues such as mental health problems, addiction, and unemployment. Some expressed that existing services located outside the area were not easily accessible or were less preferable to services within the community. However, there was a contrasting view from others that any service located inside the area would not be able to be confidential. People felt that while social support in the community was helpful there was a lack of provision of formal services. Respondents shared experiences of people they knew seeking help and not being able to find an appropriate service, not having a good response from GPs or being turned away from medical or psychological services.

Adult respondents had grown up in the area and remembered a time when it felt safer. Nostalgically recalling a time when children freely played outside, and people did not feel the need to lock their doors. However, they also acknowledged the impact that the 30 years of conflict had on the area. Many of the adults shared details of the impact of the 'troubles' while very few of the young people mentioned this. Like many working-class communities in Northern Ireland, both pre and post cease fire, paramilitaries were in operation within the area. This led to a heavy policing and army presence and naturally to incidents where those two forces came into contact with residents, often violently.

> *I mean, there was bomb scares everywhere, you were going to school in the mornings, and you were getting put out and then you were told to go back to the house, "There's a bomb scare in (redacted) Street". (F11)*

The events which took place in this neighbourhood would have had an impact on a great number of people and we know this is likely to have a continued legacy intergenerationally (Downes et al, 2013; Austin, 2019).

The Community's Experience of Education

A community's collective experience of education is a complex and nuanced phenomenon mediated by environmental and place-based factors that cannot be properly understood without the integration of multiple, diverse, local voices. The purpose of the GUIM study, from an education point of view, was to contextualise and test the assumptions of existing public data and to avoid the traps that have often claimed place-based approaches for addressing education inequality in the past—failure to adequately capture the lived experiences of residents.

Existing data on the community's education outcomes, available through the NI statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), indicate that a high number of residents living in the Market area have low levels of qualification (NISRA, 2017). Data from GUIM verify that the community suffers from relatively high levels of low or no qualifications, while adding further context to the educational challenges faced by the community, drawing particular focus upon the place-based nature of (under)achievement. It is clear from our sample that there is no universal nor uniform experience of education and that the community's collective experience is an amalgam of intergenerational perceptions, sentiments, and trajectories.

We find that participants' attitudes towards education are rooted in the socio-emotional experiences of the community. Residents' perceptions and approaches to education are significantly shaped by the collective emotions and social experiences within the Market. The enduring impact of intergenerational trauma, stemming from the conflict in Northern Ireland, has had a profound influence on how residents perceive and engage with education. Dissatisfaction with personal educational experiences among the adult respondents, including experiences of stigma, has resulted in a sense of mistrust and scepticism towards institutional structures, which subsequently influences attitudes toward their children's education.

> *You got it in school. Even the teachers, do you know, thought because you were from the Market area, do you know? "Them Market ones," or "Them Strand ones," And I actually had a go at one of the teachers one day and says, "Listen, just because I'm from the Market doesn't mean that I don't have the same qualities or whatever is Jessie over there from the Long Road," I says to her. "Don't be looking down your nose at me because a lot of good people came from my area and worked very hard". F13*

Parents, predominantly mothers, lacked qualifications beyond GCSE or NVQ, and a lack of confidence hindered their interest in further study. Residents, both children and families, often used a language of deficit and exhibited negative patterns of thinking when discussing education. This included filtering, polarisation, overgeneralisation, and externalising/blaming, indicative of deep-seated attitudes that could impact their engagement with formal education. Parents expressed concerns about their children's future, aspiring for them to achieve their full potential and lead happy lives, emphasising the pivotal role of their own educational experiences in shaping these expectations.

Understanding the intricate interplay between intergenerational trauma and educational attitudes is crucial for developing nuanced interventions. Interventions should aim to foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment within communities like the Market, recognising the need to address historical trauma to facilitate positive change. In summary, this finding highlights the deep interconnection between socio-emotional experiences, historical trauma, and attitudes toward education in the Market community. Recognising and addressing these complex dynamics is essential for shaping interventions that resonate with the unique needs and challenges of the community, paving the way for a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape.

The broad perception of education appears to be that pathways are linear, fixed, and determined by academic ability. This perception, deeply embedded in the community, presents significant challenges for residents, echoing broader issues faced by working-class communities like the Market. Residents grapple with a narrow definition of success where academic achievement takes precedence over diverse talents and skills. This bias creates barriers, hindering residents from accessing opportunities that fail to recognise and reward their unique abilities and interests. The perceived rigidity of educational pathways constrains residents from exploring alternative routes to success.

A noteworthy gender difference emerged, with boys' primary aspiration being professional footballers with the concessionary option of training in a trade, while girls exhibited more pragmatic aspirations from the outset, often centred around careers associated with hair and beauty. Participants widely acknowledged the significance of qualifications as a form of currency essential for career aspirations and social mobility. However, despite evidence of aspiration, these aspirations often align neatly with existing, narrow pathways, potentially perpetuating educational inequality.

While residents spoke of 'choice' and opportunities within the community, barriers, such as inadequate information about options and timing, hindered them from making the most of available opportunities. Positive cases emerged where residents challenged the linearity of traditional pathways, with some recognising that attainment extends beyond the post-primary school period. However, such cases were outliers, suggesting a need for more alternative pathways through education and into employment.

> *Well, at first when I left school, I was looking to go to the Uni but then I looked at the finances and stuff and that's what put me off but then I found out the tech like they help you and stuff and that and they don't really… you don't be in debt if you get me.* YA4

Digital Inclusion

Digital inclusion was identified with our community partners as the challenge area for year one of GUIM. At the time, the Market residents were in the midst of a Covid-19 lockdown as part of the pandemic response, which had underscored how various forms of inequality are exacerbated by digital exclusion. There was widespread agreement among all our respondents on the need for children to have access not just to a device, but to have an appropriate device for each child. This was particularly obvious for families that had children of different ages and at different educational stages (e.g. primary school and post primary).

> *Is essential… yeah. It's not a luxury no more. They need to have it if they're going to be able to keep up with the workload… yes, it is an essential. Five, ten years ago? No. But definitely now… and I don't know… teachers assume that children have access to them because they just…sent out online work… well [the Primary School] actually did say "does anyone need a device?" but [the Post-Primary School] didn't, so I don't know whether they just assumed…F1*

The increased use of digital technology has been at a steady increase and the impact of the COVID pandemic only accelerated this. This includes the method by which parents communicate with their children's school.

> *It's not actually that difficult [for the children], but it's difficult for parents. If I want to ask something I have to go through the app, I can't go to the school to ask them like before. … I prefer to go and walk and ask the teacher directly, but they said everything is on the app now and I have to text and ask them. F19*

Conclusion

We set out to discover how community context impacts attitudes, aspirations and outcomes in wellbeing, health, education and employment. Findings point to ways in which community identity and social relationships shape access to services, education and wellbeing. Respondents also highlighted a persistent pattern of challenges that reverberated both across generations and within families. Several parents shared their personal experiences of growing up amidst the turmoil of the troubles, underscoring a shared history of trauma and loss within the community. Throughout QCAP's engagement with the community it has become increasingly clear that this is a traumatised population, as are many communities in Northern Ireland. In trying to address the need for social change, trauma and the intergenerational transmission of trauma is recognised to be part of a complex myriad of challenges faced. This legacy of adversity was further compounded by the disruptive influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, still very much ongoing as the project began, which not only disrupted the educational journeys of many children and young people but also deepened the existing sense of hardship. Moreover, in the aftermath of the pandemic, the escalating cost of living crisis added another layer of strain, significantly impacting the lives of community members.

In moving forward, part of QCAP's future work should focus on offering alternative educational pathways to residents, illustrating that pathways can be cyclical, flexible, and non-deterministic. By challenging and reforming the perception of education as a linear and fixed journey based solely on academic ability, we can contribute to the creation of a more inclusive, empowering, and equitable educational environment for all individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Actions from Evidence

The overall QCAP initiative within which the Growing up in the Market study (GUIM) sits is a highly responsive engaged research project. Therefore, it was important to be able to rapidly reflect findings from the data and take action on key priorities reflected by respondents. The second research question of the study reflected this as it asked;

How can the insights from the lived experience data be harnessed to co-produce targeted interventions supporting the community to address identified needs?

In year one of the GUIM project, during data collection and early stages of analysis it was clear that respondents were strongly expressing the need for interventions to address problems negatively impacting people in the community e.g., mental health, substance use and the cost-of-living crisis. Researchers drew together this early information and produced evidence briefs.

QCAP's partnership with community is operationalised through a series of Action Working Groups made up of residents, community workers and academics. The findings from the evidence briefs, were used by the working groups to inform several immediate actions as well as medium- and long-term strategies.

Tackling substance use together

Findings from GUIM related to mental health and wellbeing, substance use, and the cost-of-living crisis were fed into the Action Working Group on Health. Several PAR projects then stemmed from this. For example, the significant concerns around substance use and risk of overdose in the community led to a peer led Naloxone training for community residents. Residents and community workers were trained in the use of this overdose reversing drug and the community was supplied with around 100 doses. The engagement that occurred on this evening indicated that the community wanted to see more interventions around substance use and this has been developed into a programme of work. A significant element of this is a codesigned community drug education and awareness programme. Running alongside this codesigned intervention is a family support group, which has already proven to be an excellent support for those involved. Further plans exist for increased signposting about existing services and preventative work with children and young people.

The Community Wellbeing Kitchen

Respondents in the GUIM study discussed the cost-of-living crisis and in particular concerns about food poverty. The immediate action in this case involved supporting the local community organisation the MDA with a Christmas hamper for over 170 residents.

It was clear that there was a desire from the community for more support around how to maintain healthy diets on a budget. This experiential evidence coupled with knowledge around the link between healthy diet and overall physical and mental wellbeing (Garcia et al, 2017; O'Neil et al, 2014) led to the development of a PAR project around healthy eating based on the Cook it! programme It is hoped this project will lay the foundations for the permanent establishment of a community wellbeing kitchen.

Education

The key contextual points for education are that the community experiences high levels of 'low or no' qualifications, relatively persistent levels economic inactivity, there is a strong desire to access education and training, and the existing education infrastructure in close proximity to the community is fragmented and not meeting its needs. Young people are doing well, as learners, relative to older members of the community. Residents also need support to build capabilities around digital technologies. Our focus is therefore on enhancing connections between education stakeholders and the community and providing education touchpoints for residents beyond formal provision.

The following actions have been taken to address these challenges:

Market School Network

Transition between education phases, specifically between primary and post-primary, was associated by GUIM participants, with a range of issues. In response, QCAP has convened the local primary schools and closest post-primary school to develop a community schools' network. The intention is that the network will support children and families as the pupils transition between the schools, by aligning curriculum provision, and identifying the CPD requirements of staff. QCAP has already begun the latter by working with principals and teaching assistants, with a view to also offering CPD support for middle leaders.

Tech Creators STEAM Scheme

Children from the community told us about their aspirations for education and aims for their careers, which appear to be mediated by paths taken in education by their family members and also the availability of opportunities to engage with alternative careers. The GUIM participants specifically told us that they wanted more opportunities to engage with the University. In response to these identified needs, QCAP leveraged experts and resources from across the University to deliver a STEAM focused summer scheme for residents, aged 8-12 years old. The scheme called Tech Creators featured activities both on and off the QUB campus, exposing the group to learning opportunities they wouldn't frequently get at school. Participants explored biodiversity at the Queen's Marine Lab, sampled creative media at the Sonic Arts Research Centre, played with autonomous vehicles at the Robotics Lab and experimented with researchers from the Patrick G Johnston Centre for Cancer Research.

Read more about Tech Creators here.

Smart City-zens

Learning opportunities beyond school, grounded in the community's context, was identified by participants as lacking. Furthermore, young people said that they would be keen to become more involved in research across the community. Across all the age cohorts we interviewed it was clear that digital inclusion was also an area of challenge area, specifically understanding data and how to use their devices more effectively. In response to these identified needs, QCAP (in partnership with the Global Innovation Institute) has developed a programme of citizen science for 16–18-year-olds from the community, called Smart City-zens. The overarching objective for this programme is to foster (technologically) intelligent, innovative communities that have agency over their own data and actively contribute to the co-design and inclusive innovation process.

Read more about Smart City-zens here.

Community Innovation Practitioner

The findings from GUIM clearly show that intergenerational trauma persists in the Market, with silence being a key transmission mechanism by which the past continues to impact the present. This intergenerational transmission is a significant factor in substance use/dependency among young people and their families in NI.

In response to these findings, Action Working Groups and a community consultation evening with residents impacted by substance use were arranged to discuss potential ways forward. Key takeaways from these discussions were the importance of addressing community needs and facilitating community-based solutions to this problem. These solutions needed to take into account the lived experiences of substance use in the community as well as the cumulative effects of trauma across generations. Consultations also revealed a pressing need to give younger people more influence; Also a priority was that the interventions include accessible media to ensure the greatest possible reach, with theatre and exhibition being popular formats for arts-based approaches.

This led to a successful application to the Creative Communities fund and the appointment of a Community Innovation Practitioner in the Market. Through this funded project it is hoped that a group of young people can be engaged to produce a piece of theatre aimed at addressing how trauma is transmitted from one generation to another (Harris, 2020).

Implications for people, policy and practice

This first phase of interview data has demonstrated how, for most adults and young people, the close bonds and connectedness of family and neighbourhood life were important resources to generate positive self-conscious emotions such as pride, trust and hope. These findings reinforce the existing literature on the social determinants of wellbeing and the role of community connections, social networks and social cohesion play in enhancing individual and community wellbeing (McElroy et al,2021; Linton, Dieppe and Medina-Lara, 2016; Roffey,2013). Our findings are also endorsed by the recent review of the ONS Measures of National Wellbeing, which have added several new measures considered important drivers of wellbeing which include 'Hope for the Future, Fair treatment and Local community integration' among others (ONS, 2023).

However, existing tensions around increased substance use and the changing social composition of the area showed potential for disrupting these networks and, consequently, increasing risks to people's wellbeing. An associated potential threat to wellbeing was the belief, expressed by some participants, of these factors intensifying stigmatisation of the local community by others. A key policy message therefore would be that maintaining and developing these networks can preserve valuable social resources that promote social development and health for local communities. Our findings offer strong support for policies and interventions which enhance opportunities to engender positive self-conscious emotions like pride and hope, for example by using participatory approaches and valuing lived experience when public policy is being formulated, particularly policies relating to neighbourhood and place.

The findings further suggest that it is important to understand how people living in this community negotiate boundaries and that this is relevant to the delivery of health, education and other social supports. Most respondents agreed that existing services located outside of the community were difficult to understand, navigate and access. Given the high rate of mental ill health (Bunting et al, 2020) and substance use (DoH, 2022) in NI, discovering how to improve access to services is crucial. People need information about existing services, and how to access them. While some respondents indicated a preference for services within the community others suggested that this would be less satisfactory due to privacy issues in such a close-knit area.

There were clear indications of the impact of trauma on the community as respondents shared collective and individual experiences of adversity. This is borne out by the increasing levels of substance use and suggests that addressing intergenerational trauma and the transmission of adversity is needed to ensure the effectiveness of potential policies or interventions. A trauma informed approach should be used – across the board, including in education and within our research partnership.

Publicly available education data indicates that the number of residents living in the Market area with low levels of qualification is higher than the national average (NISRA, 2011). GUIM data verifies this, adding further context to the educational challenges faced by the community, drawing particular focus upon the place-based nature of (under)achievement. The headline finding from year 1 in terms of education, is that residents' experiences of education appear to be rooted in the socio-emotional context of the community. By this we mean that persistent exposure to trauma in the

form of legacy issues, economic pressures, local substance use, and various perceived injustices have had a profound influence on how residents perceive and engage with institutional structures, including education. Connected to this was the broad perception that pathways in education are linear, fixed, and determined by academic ability—an interpretation of how residents discussed narrow definitions of success, qualifications as currency, and well-worn pathways from the local primary school to non-selective post-primary and early school-leaving, alongside constrained options, and opportunities. This perceived rigidity of educational pathways appears as a barrier to residents from exploring alternative routes to success. NI Education policy needs to enable and support communities to transform their socio-spatial contexts into places that enable better educational outcomes. We see this as an opportunity for QCAP and education policymakers to respond. As the action plan for A Fair Start is scaled back in the context of budget pressures, there is potential for QCAP to offer an alternative mechanism for delivery, particularly around key area 4, 'Promoting a Whole-Community Approach to Education' and the Reducing Educational Disadvantage (RED) programme. We also note that the end-to-end review of school improvement also provides an opportunity to reframe the role that community contexts have in relation to family-school engagement, with our data reinforcing the need for place-based approaches and interventions that genuinely support the involvement of residents and integration of local lived perspectives.

Digital inclusion was identified with our community partners as the challenge area for year one of GUIM. At the time, the Market residents were in the midst of a Covid-19 lockdown as part of the pandemic response, which had underscored how various forms of inequality are exacerbated by digital exclusion. The ubiquity of using digital devices as a means of mitigating isolation and sustaining education or employment became increasingly prevalent. The data gathered through GUIM offers a more nuanced picture of digital inclusion and the barriers encountered by residents during lockdowns and since emerging from them. A high number of parents conceded that they lack digital awareness, hindering their ability to fully support their children with their homework and creating some apprehension around online communication with the school. For many of them, this challenge preceded the pandemic, with many participating parents stating that they never had a chance to learn ICT skills in school. The changing digital landscape (and being able to fully participate in it), was acknowledged as being a concern, especially as opportunities for building the necessary ICT competences were difficult to access. There was widespread agreement among all our respondents on the absolute necessity for children to have access not just to a device, but to have an appropriate device for each child. Many households were able to access multiple devices, but this did not always mean a desktop computer or laptop. For example, some residents were forced to complete schoolwork on smart phones. This issue of appropriate devices was particularly challenging for parents that had children of different ages and at different educational stages (e.g., primary school and post primary), who were found to be sharing access to tablet computers and rationing time with them. The Department of Education's Fair Start Action Plan in 2021 committed to supporting equitable access to learning by providing appropriate devices to schools with high levels of FSME. An OBA report card for this particular action published in late 2023 indicated that over 9000 devices had been delivered over two years, which far exceeded targets—a positive achievement (Department of Education, 2023). The challenge now is providing schools with the necessary levels of IT support for maintaining and refreshing these devices, whilst also honouring commitments made within the Fair Start action plan to give staff the necessary training to develop their own digital skills and support pupils.

These findings align with the Digital Skills in Northern Ireland report (NISRA, 2023) that highlights lower levels of basic digital skills in adult populations living in the region's most deprived areas. The GUIM data also demonstrate that the development of digital poverty programmes, such as the NI

Executive's project Stratum (NI Executive, 2021), need to be supported by a range of policies and strategies that not only focus on infrastructural challenges, but that help parents to have access to skills and supports to effectively participate in an increasingly digital society. This is particularly relevant for the Market community who sit as the only one in inner-Belfast within the footprint of Belfast's emergent innovation district as part of the Urban Innovation Framework and Smart Belfast[1]. The general focus of this framework is to digitally transform Belfast's urban landscape and support the priorities of the 10x economic vision for NI[2]. A vision that highlights the opportunities for NI in terms of digital, ICT and creative industries alongside the pressing need to develop a digital spine for the region by enhancing digital skills[3]. It is important to impress that a lack of strategic focus on digital inclusion has the potential to widen the digital divide and lock working class communities out of the digital regeneration of the city and the opportunities that this brings (NI Assembly, 2021).

It was a positive finding that the many of our parent respondents had hope that things might be better for their children than what they had experienced. Maintaining hope requires people to trust that the government will work to make a difference in the lives of our young people and work in their best interests (Pleeging, Burger and Axel, 2019). However, NI has been without a fully functioning executive since February 2022 following the collapse of power-sharing over disagreement by the DUP on the Brexit Protocol. Recent research which measures the wellbeing of people across the UK reports a 'democratic crisis' in NI, with levels of trust in government and other institutions much lower in NI than elsewhere in the UK, with most people feeling that they cannot influence the NI Executive or local level decision makers (Wallace and Paylor, 2023). One of the most important implications for the NI Executive, if and when it its re-established, is the fundamental need to build trust with the people by proving it understands local people's priorities.

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[1] https://smartbelfast.city/story/belfast-urban-innovation-framework-2022-2026/

[2] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/10x-economy-economic-vision

[3] https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/Skills-Strategy-for-Northern-Ireland-Skills-for-a-10x-economy.pdf

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