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Institute of Community Research and Development

Beyond Text: lessons learned from creative arts engagement with diverse communities in Walsall

Project report

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1.0   Executive Summary

Designed and implemented by researchers at the Institute for Community Research and Development (ICRD) at the University of Wolverhampton, Create Walsall (CW) was a place-based community research and engagement project exploring the adoption of arts-based methods in the as part of a **co-creative social research project** that aimed to develop ways to support social cohesion and wellbeing within and across five communities in Walsall.

In designing Create Walsall we adopted a three-pronged approach which included a co-creative research model (Durose et al., 2011), an arts-based approach, and peer-research model, forming an interdisciplinary framework that incorporated participants' lived experiences, community needs, and the results of artistic co-creation. As the project developed between late 2022 and early 2023, through creative and adaptable iteration we were able to combine community peer-research, arts-based methods, and a co-creative research model to generate evidence gathering activities to collate the views of Walsall community members on the role of place, green spaces, art and culture on social cohesion and wellbeing in local communities. The delivered activities were **designed to support communities in telling their unique experience of living in Walsall, highlighting ways in which the creative and cultural climate of the town impacts their wellbeing, sense of identity and belonging**.

Aims
- To amplify voices within local communities to enhance agency, nurture responsibility, and explore the role of place in participants' sense of belonging.
- To identify and better understand the specific needs of communities through dialogue and artistic co-creation.
- To establish a transferrable methodological approach for using co-creative arts as a tool for promoting social cohesion and wellbeing in communities of Walsall.

Create Walsall amplified the voices and experiences of individuals living in Walsall. As well as supporting previous research (Durose et al. 2011, Caulfield et al., 2018, Coemans and Hannes, 2017, Leavy, 2020), the project contributes to new understandings of, and needs for, using arts-based methods as a tool for supporting social cohesion and wellbeing in local communities. The project identified a need to review the current funding distribution systems initiated by local authorities to prevent a sense of competition intercepting local communities from seeking collaboration with one another. It also identified a need for greater continuity in arts-based projects, and a stronger presence of locally available opportunities for experiencing arts and culture. Furthermore, the project showed the ways in which arts-

based interventions bring to the surface community-rich, unique data which would be harder to access through conventional qualitative research methods (for example interviews). However, implementing an arts-based approach requires that researchers are well embedded in local communities which can bring its own challenges.

KEY POINTS

Two main themes emerged from the data-gathering comprising qualitative interviews, focus groups, and observations, and arts-based activities. In the first theme, **'issues identified by Walsall's communities'**, participants reflected on their experiences of living in Walsall in relation to their perception of social cohesion and wellbeing. Specifically, this theme allowed us to explore neighbourhood problems, lack of equality of access to green spaces, information, services, art, and culture, and highlighted a strong need for local, community-driven art and culture centres, and a need for stronger collaboration within local cultural ecosystems.

The second theme, **'critical reflections on the project'**, focused on the methodological lessons learned from conducting the project in relation to its original aims. As using arts-based methods in social research is still considered by some as experimental (Leavy, 2020, p. 3), although not a unique approach (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2017), it has a well-established base in practice-based community research across interdisciplinary fields within the social sciences (Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Aure & Bergaust, 2022; Huss & Bos, 2022). In combination with a community peer-research model, an arts-based approach provides an effective basis for both data collection, and dissemination (Coemans & Hannes, 2017), and contributes to a growing methodological understanding of the implications of utilising arts-based methods in the context of social research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Walsall Council

1. Review the current funding application systems for Walsall's local communities in relation to: a) making the language more accessible b) illuminating unnecessary complexity of the required information c) encouraging collaboration and partnership working between local communities through funding applications.

2. Develop/increase available opportunities for high-quality learning and experiencing arts and culture locally.

3. Promote a continuous presence of arts-and cultural projects locally (vs short-term parachuting approach).

4. Revive some of the lost landmarks of local cultural identity, such as Walsall Illuminations and Walsall Market.

5. Support long-term collaborations between local communities, and arts organisations.

For researchers:

1. Plan for sufficient time 'on the ground' to build local networks and reduce duplication and/or mis-communication.

2. Use multiple channels for recruitment of both participants and community peer researchers (CPRs) (such as local authorities and organisations, community leaders, volunteer groups). Plan sufficient time for recruitment.

3. Work locally in venues that are familiar and convenient to the residents. Do not expect the participants to come to you.

4. Keep in mind religious holidays and seek a common ground to mitigate cultural differences (female researchers will have more chance to be accepted in women-only groups for instance).

5. When adopting a Community Peer Researcher (CPR) model – ensure CPRs' thorough and early involvement in the process. Ensure that they understand the importance of being present at all activities with communities as a way to build trust and relationships.

6. Make sure researchers have a good understanding of the local demographics, history, and issues facing the local communities in focus.

7. Allow for flexibility and spontaneity during arts-based activities.

8. Use a visitor book to collect visual and textual feedback in multiple languages from attendees during the exhibition as a way of capturing evidence of cohesiveness and potential impact.

9. Invest additional planning time into sustaining the engagement of white working-class communities.

Acknowledgements

2.0   Introduction

2.1. Background and Context

Walsall is a metropolitan borough that consists of urban, suburban, and semi-rural communities located to the northwest of Birmingham, in the Black Country sub-region of West-Midlands, with a population of just under 300,000 people (Insight, 2023). Historically an active industrial area, it has in recent years experienced continuous economic decline (Hawksbee, 2018; Intelligence, 2018), associated with complex social challenges such as health and wellbeing inequalities, inconsistent access to, and quality of green spaces, reduced sense of safety, lack of social cohesion and sense of belonging, lack of access to arts-related experiences, and other typical symptoms of post-industrial decline. Walsall is an ethnically and culturally diverse borough with almost a third of its population coming from minority ethnic backgrounds. People of Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi background form the largest minority ethnic groups, whilst people of Eastern European backgrounds form the largest newly emergent communities. With a challenging history of ethnic integration in the West Midlands (Moore, 2021), the demographic challenges and social cohesion are potentially exacerbated by a history of continuous economic decline – although local views suggest that Walsall has avoided the worst of community tensions experienced in other parts of England. Therefore, there is a need for research methodologies that work in the context of a local desire to support social cohesion and wellbeing in communities of Walsall (as well as places with a similar recent experience).

There is a lack of evidence regarding using art-based methods for supporting social cohesion amongst communities suffering post-industrial decline. Whilst there is some evidence of art-based methods promoting community wellbeing and cohesion (Goldstraw, et al., 2020; ARVAC, 2018; Eriksson, 2023), projects offering such evidence often rely on short-term, "parachute" approaches to interventions (Velasco, 2008). Create Walsall used a three-pronged approach to research design, making the research:

1. Co-creative
2. Arts-based
3. Involving community peer researchers

Following Durose, et al. (2011), Create Walsall put into action a framework of researching with communities, underpinned by a co-creative approach to research, and minimising the use of textual, conventional academic research, which is more likely to enhance participation, and promotes the ability

to learn from communities' own experiences (ibid, 2). On the other hand, arts-based methods were used to capture insights which are otherwise not easily accessible through conventional qualitative methods by opening avenues for generating 'personable' data (Fraser & Sayah, 2010), and promoting creative expression, sense of ownership, authenticity, recognition, and a shared public value of creative outputs. Involving community peer researchers allowed the project team to engage people with knowledge and build on their lived experiences to support understanding of issues central to the place.

Crucially for the ethical basis of the project, CW presented a critical position to the colonial and extractive approach to research where researchers gather data from communities without leaving any value in return (Tuck, 2009; Smith, 2013). The legacy of the project will stay with communities in the form of publicly accessible creative and research outputs, visibility and enhanced acknowledgement of some underserved communities for public services, a blueprint for further collaborative initiatives between the University and local community organisations, and for future initiatives for co-creative place-based research in Walsall.

The rationale behind choosing an arts-based approach was manifold. First, it supported the non-discursive approach to academic research through which we were able to negotiate issues of power between researchers and communities in focus (Nathan et al., 2023; Boilevin et al., 2019; Durose et al., 2011; Foster, 2011). That was especially important given the specificities of local groups, with which engaging through the traditional qualitative methods alone was not always possible due to vulnerabilities such as limited linguistic, or cognitive abilities, or cultural unfamiliarity with Western social norms (Cosenza, 2010; Mullen et al., 2005). An arts-based approach enabled us to limit the focus on the written and verbal transmission of knowledge and concentrate on other means of communication (Foster, 2011), such as photography, painting, poetry, and the creation of shared listening spaces. Some of the communities we engaged with were considered to be 'off the radar', underserved by local services, or were difficult to reach because of the limitations mentioned above; these were also groups who were less able to make their voices heard (Coemans et al., 2015, p. 34). The arts-based approach enabled us to create a more equal ground for engagement across these communities, enabling participants to co-create research outputs, and inviting the participants to play an active part in the generation and presentation of the arts-based/research material, supporting the sense of agency and ownership of the project, and feeling of empowerment (Purcell, 2009). Further, the arts-based approach was used as a tool to access the fundamentals of human experience in the context of community building and social research (Finley, 2005), enabling the participants to see 'private troubles as public issues' (C Wright Mills in Purcell, 2009), and empowering them to critically reflect on their community at large (Thiele & Marsden, 2003).

Given a wide range of communities engaged in the project, it is necessary to address ambiguities surrounding notions of what "community research" might present in various contexts (Ryan et al., 2010). We refer to a form of community-based research which implies a direct involvement of community members (Minkler, 2015), and local community organisations (Edwards et al., 2006). We know that communities are not static social entities, and acknowledge the danger of speaking for "the community" as a whole (Bolognani, 2007, p. 291), especially as outsiders of these groups (Minkler, 2015, p. 692). Engaging community researchers aimed at narrowing the gap between the research team and members of communities in focus by engaging individuals who are "community 'insiders' who have relationships of trust, empathy, connectedness and integrity with study participants" (Ryan et al., 2010, p. 51). We know, however, that involving individuals who might be perceived as "peers" to the participants may provoke a sense of self-censorship (Lundy & McGovern, 2006), and fears of privacy breach and local gossip (Brownlie, 2009). We are also aware of the naivety of the assumption that CPRs act as mere transmitters of knowledge between communities and the professional researchers and instead that they will inevitably interpret the data and construct the meaning in accord with their subjective tendencies (Temple, 2002). These issues were mitigated by the public accessibility of the data generated through the co-creative activities.

3.0   Methodology

The methodology of Create Walsall had two rationales: a) the process of participation in the co-creative activities, and b) the data-gathering process, including working with CPRs. The first aimed to bring people together by introducing an activity which is new, enriching, social and cohesive; the latter aimed to a) support local stakeholders in understanding the issues residing in the local communities, b) through experimentation, learn more about how to conduct arts-based projects, c) build networks of local community organisations, individuals, and community peer researchers; and finally d) develop ties between the research team and these networks.

The methodology consisted of a mixture of qualitative interviews/focus groups, and arts-based workshops comprised of listening and attention-building exercises and reflection (Oliveros, 1971), poem writing, photography, and storytelling. The workshops were conducted with groups of women, people from ethnic minority and migrant backgrounds, and elderly people. The interviews were led by the CPRs, whilst the focus groups were integral to the arts-based co-creative activities and took place during the workshops. The data derived from the mixture of qualitative and arts-based methods were intrinsic to the co-creative activities, which were designed to enhance connection with the place, local heritage, and social capital available within communities in focus, reflecting lived experiences affecting wellbeing of

participants. The collected data was used in relation to the aims outlined at the start of the project. A post-project reflection allowed the project team to assess the effectiveness of the approach.

In addition, the CPRs conducted structured interviews of approximately 30 minutes, aiming to understand the views of participants on issues of social cohesion, local provision of arts and culture, and issues of wellbeing. These interviews took place outside the workshops, or break-out conversations during the last (fourth) workshop. During the interviews the participants were asked about their perceptions of Walsall in relation to their wellbeing, feelings of safety, quality/equality of access to green spaces, services, arts, and culture (see question guide in the appendix).

Both qualitative and arts-based data were recorded through a variety of means, including audio and video recording, collective and individual notetaking, photography, and reflective writing. CPRs contributed to observing some arts-based workshops and made their own interview arrangements with members of communities. The project culminated in a public exhibition, showcasing the arts-based co-created outputs developed during the workshops. The analysis of the data and the critical reflection on the project were led by the research team, whilst the writing up of the results was completed with the involvement of CPRs.

3.1. Co-creative activities

The arts-based co-creative activities took place over four sessions, which lasted approximately 1.5 hours each. The participants were first invited to join a listening exercise, after which they were asked to contemplate on "what the sound of Walsall is to them", how it made them feel, and what that sound(s) tell us about the place. The newly arrived communities were asked to compare the sound of their birthplace (or a place they called home), to Walsall, or illustrate by, and with support of pictures, if they felt unsure expressing their ideas in English. Examples of discussions and sharing of experiences of living in Walsall were captured through an audio-visual output, presented as "Sound of Walsall" film in the exhibition.

Five groups from across Walsall were involved in the arts-based activities[1], which took place over the course of four weeks between April and May 2023, in local community centres. There was some interruption in the delivery of the workshops due to the religious holidays such as Easter and Ramadan.

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[1] Our understanding of arts-based methods is based on the following definition: "The arts play a primary role in any or all of the steps of the research method. Art forms [...] are essential to the research process itself and central in formulating the research question, generating data, analyzing data, and presenting the research results''(Austin & Forinash, 2005, p. 458–459)

No preliminary knowledge or experience was required of the participants to take part in the activities. The workshops were structured in the following way:

Week 1: Introduction to Deep Listening method (Oliveros, 1971); listening exercises; focus group discussion.

Week 2: Presentation of different types of sound sources (geophony, biophony, anthropophony) as a framework for creation of the audio-visual piece ("Sound of Walsall"); discussion of the *Sound of Walsall* inviting the participants to make decisions about the piece collectively. Participants were asked to bring photographs of significant places to them in Walsall, to form a part of the exhibition.

Week 3: Presentation and discussion of photographs – what do they tell us? *Sound of Walsall* discussion: what is the sound of Walsall to you? Filming of the workshops.

Week 4: Poetry-writing workshops; filming of the activities. Visit from Froglife (see 3.3 below), discussion of green spaces in Walsall.

Based on Austin and Forinash's definition (2007), the arts-based activities were essential in the design of the study and intertwined with the production of research outputs, data generation and analysis.

The arts-based workshops started with deep listening exercises (Oliveros, 1971) with the purpose of a) creating a shared space for listening and expression, b) providing a background for creating the audio-visual output (Sound of Walsall), which included geophonic, biophonic and anthropophonic sounds[2], and c) focusing on the experience of the environment and creating a shared background for a dialogue. The sonic experience of the exercise was further translated to the visual context of the piece, which included urban, green, and community spaces in Walsall.

Figure 1 Urban, green, and community spaces in "Sound of Walsall"

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[2] Geophony – non-living sounds from the environment; biophony – living sounds from the environment, except human – made; anthropophony – human made sounds.

Focus group discussions were integral to the listening exercises, in relation to a) exploring the shared experiences of listening to the surrounding geophonic, biophonic, and anthropophonic sounds, b) experiencing urban, green, and community spaces in Walsall. In that way the experience of the collective listening acted as a framework for further discussion and co-creation of *Sound of Walsall*.

Poetry-writing workshops were initiated with an instruction to create a verse describing "your Walsall". The verse did not have to rhyme, and could be a piece of a contemplative prose, as long as it portrayed a personal experience of living in Walsall. The participants could compose the verse as a group, or individually. The results showcased a wide variety of themes, ranging from experiences of being unsafe, to praising the nature of Walsall as inspiration for a better understanding of self and a source for feeling belonging. Many participants acknowledged an increased emotional response to the topic they chose to write about, whilst highlighting the feeling of empowerment and increased ties with the other participants, promoted by using imagination and creative writing as a group. Examples from the literature support this understanding (Aladini & Farahbod, 2020; Starz, 1995; Iida, 2012).

The introduction of photography allowed the group to develop new perspectives on familiar places. The participants were asked to bring photographs of personal significance, taken in Walsall, and discussed their choices with the group. The exercise collated a better understanding of what aspects of living in Walsall the participants appreciated, and where they would like to see change. The photographs were used as a prompt for discussion, as well as a material for thematic analysis. The richness of data, in addition to the cohesive and wellbeing-promoting value behind the process of participation in the arts-based activities, supports the use of this approach in social research.

3.1.1. Methodological challenges (and learning) from the co-creative activities

Each of the groups participating in the project required some degree of tailoring the activities to their abilities and interests. Although the initial focus of the arts-based work was put on the use of audio technology and learning the basics of audio recording, it did not receive the necessary interest in any of the participating groups. Supporting the ethos of a bottom-up co-creation the research team decided on an alternative solution, making the recordings as a dialogue with participants. That allowed the team to

keep the original focus of the co-creative output on the production of an audio-visual piece, whilst incorporating other examples of community creativity into the exhibition.

To make the research accessible and reciprocally beneficial the team was negotiating 1) cultural (such as only accepting working with a female researcher in Muslim communities), 2) linguistic (newly arrived communities), and 3) cognitive (such as dementia) challenges:

1. All workshops were conducted in English. Working with groups where the participants spoke little English was assisted by visual representation of the material, including additional black-board illustration and notation, and a break-out group discussion for promoting a feeling of low-risk situations. Although there was some capacity of speaking foreign languages within the research team, the need of speaking languages such as Urdu in one of the groups could not be met. The translating assistance was provided by one of the community leaders, a native speaker of both Urdu and English languages. Listening exercises helped to create an environment for supporting listening skills in groups who might otherwise struggle with understanding detailed verbal instructions. Sharing the lead researcher's own linguistic backgrounds (multi-lingual, English as a second language speaker) promoted a further breakdown of barriers. Limited knowledge of English was a challenge in that it constrained participants' ability to verbally express the richness of their experience and feel confident speaking up in a group setting. Incorporating other means of expression such as photography helped to break down such barriers. These groups were particularly enthusiastic about poetry workshops, as it allowed them to use the English language in new ways. Many wrote the verses in their first languages, and it was later further translated to English.

2. Groups with cognitive challenges such as dementia required working in close collaboration with the specially trained community leaders. Whilst in some groups the listening exercises took place outside, that was not possible with groups suffering from dementia. In response to this limitation, the listening exercises were carried out inside, however, with open windows and doors to allow the sounds from the outside to travel into the workshop space. In that particular group the workshops were delivered in a way which built a sense of a basic reassurance and predictability by presenting similar structure of workshops throughout four weeks, repeating activities if needed. The activities were explained in a simple and clear manner to provide a further sense of reassurance and confidence. An emphasis was put on discussing Walsall of the past to stimulate memories and enhance a sense of identity (AgeUK, 2023).

3. Working with culturally and religiously diverse communities required additional planning. First, the Muslim communities were not able to participate in workshops during the month of Ramadan

and this had to be considered in scheduling of all events. Second, the importance of the lead researcher's gender (female) came as an important factor for groups of Muslim women, for whom working with a male researcher was not appropriate due to religious and/or cultural norms.

The research team encountered several challenges in relation to the arts-based approach, one of which was to encourage the participants to take the activities seriously, and to recognise the benefits of participation for themselves, and their community. Supporting the participants to understand the link between the arts-based approach and formal research was another challenge, alongside an acceptance of the arts-based outputs as a way of communicating the research outcomes. The research team had to address these challenges in conversations with participants.

Whilst the primary focus of the co-creative activities was put on the sonic experience of Walsall, the idea of supporting the audio material with the visual context of the neighbourhoods came up during focus group discussions. Supporting the ethos of co-creation, the research team prioritised taking onboard the creative ideas of the participants, resulting in incorporating the video material into what was originally thought of as an audio piece. Discovering other creative interests across communities such as painting, photography and poetry-writing, a decision to incorporate these elements into the exhibition was made. To assist the technical aspect of film production, a master's degree student from the University of Wolverhampton's School of Media and Production was recruited. Their responsibility included filming of workshops (sessions 3 and 4), cutting the footage, and putting the selected elements together into the final production. The audio part of the production was prepared by the members of the research team. The curating of the exhibition took place in dialogue with the communities and included collective decision making in relation to presentation of paintings/sculptures, and ways in which to showcase the photographs and poetry. All examples of photographs and community poetry submitted for the project were presented at the exhibition.

3.1.2. Recruitment

From the outset, developing a local network of organisations, communities, and individuals was one of the major challenges of the project. The physical presence of the research team on the ground in Walsall was instrumental for recruiting participants and establishing personable, trusting relationships. The initial process of developing trust and interest for the project took multiple visits to the community centres, before the final recruitment of the participants was established. Initially, the project team was in touch with several community groups, including groups of young people and communities of residents from economically-deprived white backgrounds. The maintenance of interest towards the project in

those communities proved to be challenging, with a lack of interest in staying involved. In all groups, community leaders acted as points of contact and community gatekeepers, instrumental in the process of recruitment of the participants. In a few cases when the community leaders (for unknown reasons) discontinued the project-related communication, it negatively affected the outcomes of the recruitment process. From the point of the research team, the aim of nurturing a mutual contact with the participants to avoid impersonal and dehumanising perception of the research (Boilevin et al., 2019), was one of the key priorities.

3.1.3. Data Collection

Attendance of the workshops was varied, and often challenging for the execution of the planned sessions. As the workshops required at least five participants to be present, we had to have an alternative plan in case of a lower attendance. The minimum number of five participants was necessary to collectively develop the direction the arts-based activities in relation to of a) *Sound of Walsall* b) other elements of the exhibition. As in cases of lower attendance the cohesive element of a collective decision-making was not possible, the research team was conducting alternative activities, such as interviews using the question guide developed in conjunction the CPRs. The data from the two interviews taken as a result of lower group attendance was classified as CPR data collection material.

3.1.4. Barriers for participants

Digital hesitancy/ low English literacy skills was another barrier for which we had to accommodate. Whilst aiming to bring communities together through means of arts-based co-creation, and investigate arts-based methods as a tool for supporting social cohesion, we realised that additional platforms for bringing communities together were needed for reasons of a) logistical challenges of travelling b) need for a community place with a capacity to host 60 participants c) physical/cognitive challenges preventing the participants from travelling outside their communities d) other personal circumstances/commitments of the participants. To find an alternative, a proposal of scheduling online "in-between" sessions was made. The aim of these sessions was to support the opportunity of having informal discussions of the project and providing communities with spaces to meet each other. Organising of online "in-between" sessions was not successful, and neither, therefore, was the aim of bringing different communities together to a shared online space. Whilst we recognise that digital fatigue in the post-Covid era can be a barrier for new digital initiatives (Amponsah et al., 2022), working with elderly and people with multiple needs (Choi & DiNitto, 2013) showed a lack of interest in using digital communication platforms not seen in other demographic groups participating in the project.

Other unexpected interruptions such as religious holidays, unforeseen cancellations, or surprising collaborations and opportunities required a great degree of flexibility and thinking-on-the-spot from the researcher team.

3.2. Participants

Qualitative interviews/focus groups and the arts-based activities were conducted with 60 participants (12 males, 48 females), out of whom 6 were community leaders, during April-May 2023. The number of participants in each group varied from five to thirty-eight individuals. The choice/target of the demographics of the participants was based on the Walsall Community and Integration Strategy (see www.walsallforall.co.uk). All of the participants were living, working, or studying in Walsall. The participants were recruited from five communities in Walsall:

1. Black Sisters Collective (BSC). The organisation is a registered charity securing community-based provision for people of ethnic minority backgrounds in Walsall. The workshops were run in conjunction with the BSCs project *Tree of Life*, aiming to support elderly people from various areas of Walsall Borough. The workshops took place at a central location at Bethel Lighthouse Restaurant on Caldmore Road in Walsall. The number of participants varied from one session to another, keeping stable at around 20 individuals.

2. The Romanian+ Community Centre of Walsall is a community organisation based in Bloxwich, Walsall, comprised of people of Romanian and other (Central and Eastern European) backgrounds. The number of participants varied from seven to fifteen. The workshops took place at a privately owned location in Bloxwich.

3. Simple Steps (Birchills Mosque) is a community organisation supporting language and cultural provision for women of religious minorities, based in Birchills Mosque in Walsall. The number of participants averaged around 15 across the four sessions.

4. Bloxwich Community Partnership is a local charity supporting provision of services, activities, leisure, and cultural opportunities for the local communities. The demographics represented in the group were primarily elderly people of white working-class backgrounds. The workshops took place at the Stan Ball Centre in Bloxwich, Walsall. The number of participants varied from 2 to 6.

5. Agenda 21 is a local resident support group based in Reedswood Sons of Rest House in Birchills. The number of participants varied from 3 to 7, representing a wide ethnic, age, and gender composition.

The following themes were identified during the arts-based activities, interviews, and focus groups (see Table 2 in the Appendix).

3.3. Learning from unexpected collaborations

Create Walsall brought together unexpected collaborations with other local organisations and prompted new relationships between local communities and authorities. The project team initiated a collaboration with Froglife, a national wildlife conservation charity supporting preservation of the UK's reptile and amphibian species and their associated habitats. Specifically, the collaboration was initiated with a local to Walsall Froglife project titled *From Coal face to the Wild space*. The reason for collaboration arose out of spontaneously emerging focus on the importance of green spaces for local communities in Walsall, and specifically, for families with young children. The collaboration became a part of the arts-based co-creative output. It was agreed that the soundscapes and poems co-created during CW arts-based activities could be used subsequently as part of new sculptures being created as part of *From Coal face to the Wild space*, which were to be located in seven parks around Walsall. The soundscapes and the recited poems were to be identified through a QR code on each sculpture and made accessible to a wider audience. *From Coal face to the Wild space* is scheduled to conclude in 2025.

Undoubtedly, collaborations within cultural ecologies of Walsall need further development, as there are many organisations working for similar purposes without any visible contact, nor mutual support. In the frame of CW, a collaboration with Froglife, highlighted unequal access to local green spaces, and especially, high-quality green spaces. This collaboration ensured the legacy of CW and supported the continuity of arts-based projects in the region, whilst strengthening the cultural ecology of Walsall.

Another important collaboration was initiated between the local authorities and a self-organised community of people with Central and Eastern-European background, previously unknown to the Council. Due to the lack of accessible information and inability to navigate local support systems, the community have never been on the radar of the local authorities previously, despite the large numbers of their members, and several years of active presence in Walsall.

3.4. Working with community peer researchers

3.4.1. Recruitment

Four CPRs were recruited as part of Create Walsall. The recruited CPRs were selected on the basis of their knowledge of local communities of Walsall, alongside their interest in social research. The

researchers were all women from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Only one of them had previous experience of participating in social research projects in various academic settings.

They were asked to carry out community-based research, act as a bridge between the research team and the project participants, support the evaluation of the project and help the research team to understand its impact. The initial plan was for CPRs to conduct interviews in the communities, observe the arts-based workshops and the exhibition for later evaluation, and contribute to the following writing up of the results.

3.4.2. Training

The CPRs were provided with four-weeks training in social research, which was developed, and delivered online by the ICRD research team. CPRs were recruited on the basis of their knowledge of local communities, and their interest in conducting community-based research locally.

The sessions were conducted online and took place between March and May 2023. Each training session was led by the one of the project's team researchers, covering different learning objectives:

Week 1: Introduction to social research

Week 2: Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviewing and focus groups

Week 3: Observation framework and research ethics

Week 4: Data collection and analysis

3.4.3. Data collection

After concluding the training, CPRs were asked to be present at the co-creative activities' sessions 3&4, and the final exhibition with the aim to conduct interviews, observe focus groups and interaction between the participants, and assess the delivery of activities. Between the research team and CPRs, an interview topic guide consisting of ten questions was developed as a basis for semi-structured interviews, which were designed to gather the views of some of Walsall's community members on social cohesion and arts provision in neighbourhoods and the wellbeing of the participants. The focus for observation of the final exhibition was decided on two aspects: social cohesion and community

interaction. CPRs supported the process of writing-up in relation to proof-reading and double checking the findings in line with their in-depth understandings of the needs of the communities.

3.4.4. Challenges and methodological learning

The challenge of meaningfully involving CPRs was centred around issues of timing, both in relation to the overall timeline of the project (tight chronology of the events on the ground) and having enough time to collectively co-develop a vision of their involvement. Due to the limited overall timeframe available for CPR training, some of which coincided with religious holidays such as Easter, Ramadan, and Vaisakhi, as well as some personal commitments, this had a knock-on effect on CPRs' ability to attend the majority of the co-creative workshops, which had already been scheduled.

The project budget enabled us to recompense CPRs for their involvement in the project. Whilst CPR training sessions were paid in vouchers, which makes administration more straightforward, some of the CPRs felt that this form of remuneration was a barrier to their fully committed participation. However, views on this varied: other CPRs felt that they could only accept a voucher payment. The flexibility of allowing both types of payment was not possible in the frame of this project. Such practical matters were perceived as challenges by both the renumerated participants, and the research team.

Each community had an idiosyncratic internal culture to which the research team had to adopt. Only female researchers were able to work with the Muslim women group, as no male member of the team was allowed to attend the workshops without special permission. We concluded that demographics of the researcher working on the ground are significant for the performativity of the project.

Working with dementia patients required additional adjustments to workshop contents. For safety reasons and ethical considerations, the research team was not able to conduct the one-on-one interviews with participants suffering from dementia.

3.5. Data analysis

The ICRD team transcribed recordings of interviews/focus group discussions for further analysis, partially using the Ottar AI transcribing software, and partially manual transcription. The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Caulfield & Hill, 2018; Ezzy, 2018). The themes for further analysis emerged from the coded data (inductive coding). Analysis of the arts-based co-creative activities were approached thematically, supporting the conclusions derived from qualitative interviews/focus groups/observations. Analysis of arts-based activities showcased a strong emphasis on culture, community wellbeing, and social cohesion.

The transparency and accessibility of gathered data was ensured by audio/video recording of each co-creative activity session (with participants' consent). The recordings were used as the basis for creating the "Sound of Walsall" audio-visual work and provided rich insights into the data generation process. Other artifacts such as poems and photographs are accessible on the project's website, alongside the audio-visual presentation. Because of the public accessibility of a large part of the data (arts-based outputs), the thematic analysis was accompanied with a group reflective process by the research team. Community peer researchers contributed to the revision of data in relation to their observations of the workshops, and pre-existing knowledge of the communities in focus.

4.0   Findings

Our distillation of themes from the qualitative interviews, focus groups, observations, as well as arts-based co-creative activities led to the findings outlined below. Supported by audio/video recordings of each session we were able to connect the qualitative and arts-based approaches. Guided by thematic analysis, the findings presented in this report are divided into two main themes, each with seven subsequent subthemes, as listed in Table 2. Each theme is discussed with reference to the relevant literature for providing the context to the findings, and illustrated by the quotes derived from interviews and focus groups which were conducted throughout the project.

Table 1: Overview of themes and subthemes

Issues identified by communities	1. Neighbourhood problems. 2. Decline in local volunteering. 3. Lack of equality of opportunities in relation to:
	    a. greenspaces
	    b. health care
	    c. information
	    d. experience and making of art
	    e. access to local places to experience art and culture.
	 4. Need for local, community-driven art and culture centres. 5. Lack of a unifying theme for building a local identity for young people. 6. Weak collaboration/cohesion between communities. 7. The funding system promotes competition and lack of collaboration between communities.

Evaluation of the project	1. Intention to measure social cohesion did not work out. 2. Need for a long-term approach to research-design in similar projects. 3. Trust amongst community members is a crucial component of the project's success. A solid local knowledge is crucial for the researcher. 4. Demographics of the public-facing researcher are significant for the performativity of the project. 5. Brought together unexpected collaborations.

| | 6. Exhibition had a strong cohesive and identity- building effect, however not enough to make any conclusive measures. |
| | 7. Importance of CPRs to participate in the on-the-ground delivery from the outset. |

4.1. Issues that arose from Create Walsall

This theme explores the experiences of living in Walsall recollected by the members of communities in focus and reflects the impact of these experiences on the participants' perceptions of social cohesion and wellbeing. The participants were invited to share their vision of a better Walsall. The arts-based approach allowed us to capture a wide range of findings, extending from issues typical for poorer neighbourhoods, to specifically social cohesion, wellbeing, identity and belonging.

4.1.1. Neighbourhood problems

During conversations all participants spoke of their perception of the place in relation to the subthemes outlined in **Table 1.** The participants expressed their concerns regarding neighbourhood issues such as noise, fly-tipping, decreased feeling of safety, street violence, homelessness, increased traffic, lack of safe spaces for children, and poor quality of air and water (Appendix 1).

> *"There are lots of police sirens in Walsall. And ambulances! We hear them all the time, and when you hear it you think: "Oh gosh, what happens now … Parents do not feel safe letting their children to go play on their own… And now parents get the blame for letting them out at a certain time. And now there are so many cars, it is so easy for children to get hit. Children playing in private gardens, you do not see them in public parks!" Aidna*

> *"So, freedom seems to be shifted,*
>
> *As CCTV is looking down*
>
> *Once peace, now violence due to gang rivals"*
>
> *Black Sisters Collective, poetry group 1*

The issues identified by the communities are mutually reinforced by socio-economic and cultural exclusion processes (Morrison, 2003), which are fortified by increased inequalities of access to societal fundamentals such as quality green spaces, health care, information, access to local places to experience art and culture.

4.1.2. Decline in local volunteering

The participants have mentioned their concerns about a decline of local volunteering in communities. Whilst UK governmental support towards local charities continues to decline (Tabassum, 2022), the participants addressed the effect of the decline on local neighbourhoods in relation to an increased feeling of being unsafe, insufficient litter picking, and loss of vibrancy in their communities.

> *"We used to have so many people here before! Now it has really slowed down… So the community work is a lot harder now" S.*

4.1.3. Inequality of access

The perception of inequality of access to services has been reported primarily by the Eastern European newly arrived communities, for whom lack of local networks and linguistic accessibility has a profound adverse effect on wellbeing and cohesion (Madden, Harris, Blickem, Harrison, & Timpson, 2017). ET AL Alongside extensive discussion in the literature (Jenny, Aspinall, & Thompson, 2016; Geary, et al., 2021; McCormick, 2017), inequality of access to high-quality local green spaces was repeatedly mentioned by the participants.

> *"In Romania we feel more protected. Here no one can do anything. The same with the health care system. In Romania if we have a problem the doctor will help you, but here, most of us, had dramatic experiences. We need more access to medicines in one way or another… Every time I go to Romania I get medicine, because I cannot rely on the pharmacy here. When calling a doctor they give me an appointment after three months…" Elena*

Of particular interest was the understanding that the need for high-quality local green spaces was highest amongst families with children.

"We need more access to local parks, especially for children! They have nowhere to play and discover nature" Errol

4.1.5. Need for local art -and culture centres

Many participants expressed a need for accessing local, community-driven art and culture centres. Whilst there is a general sense of respect towards established, high-profile venues such as The New Art Gallery of Walsall, there is some hesitance in attending these venues due their perception as "Ivory Towers" by the local communities.

"I have never been (to the New Art Gallery)! It is too posh!" Nash

There was a frequent report of never/rarely attending venues of that kind. Our focus group discussions showcased that communities feel that high-profile places of art and culture are not easily accessible and representative of their culture and heritage. Moreover, participants expressed a need for the locally situated, accessible venues practicing a bottom-up approach to curation and facilitation of arts and cultural events.

"There are no local places for the arts, where I live, no! I have to drive to the centre (of Walsall)" Samantha
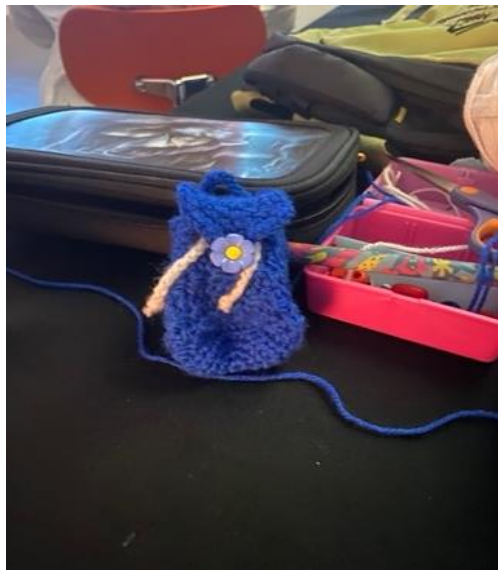

Figure 2 Example from Samantha's crochet practice

Such understandings are supported in previous research (Perkin, 2010). Based on the focus group conversations, communities have poor access to experiencing or making art locally.

4.1.6. Local identity

Participants described the leather industry as a shared point of identity across the communities of Walsall. However, the participants had concerns about the young people living in Walsall not having enough knowledge about the rich industrial heritage of the place.

"We have saddles! Even the Queen used to have several bags from Walsall!" Aidna

Because of a lack of a contemporaneous, directly relevant industry/trade/special feature around which young people could gather their identity, several participants, some who identified as being of an older age, expressed their concerns about young people developing an understanding of Walsall as a suburb of Birmingham, rather than a place with a rich and independent historic identity.

"There is nothing going on for young people in Walsall… We see ourselves as a suburb of Birmingham" Rob

 Some literature highlights that having strong place-based attachments leads to a proactively caring attitude towards preservation of green, cultural, and urban local spaces (Devine-Wright, 2009; Daneri, Krasny, & Stedman, 2021).

4.1.7. Lack of collaboration

Participants working within community organising roles expressed a view that there is a considerable lack of collaboration amongst different communities of Walsall.

"The community leaders have their favourites and will prioritise giving the funding to their contacts. It is not about what you can do, but it is about who you know… There is a big competition. And the funding as it comes down, it is skimmed down, as well… And the application form it is so complicated, they make it very difficult on how you fill this out" S.

Our interview analysis led us to an understanding that the lack of a collaboration amongst communities is likely caused by the current, increasingly competitive system for funding applications. Despite Walsall taking part in the Levelling-Up Agenda first proposed by the Conservative Government in 2019, the internal collaboration within Walsall's communities needs to address the staggering local differences and an internal economic exclusion (Leyshon & Thrift, 1995) within the communities of Walsall. Moreover,

there is little cohesion within Walsall's cultural ecosystem (Henley, 2020); whilst many organisations are working to achieve similar goals, there is little to no collaboration amongst such initiatives.

4.2. Critical reflection

4.2.1. Measures of social cohesion

We consider a notion of social cohesion aligned with a common, in political and academic circles, definition of the term as a "glue' and a "bond" between societal layers and diverse groups, supporting a basic understanding of social integration. Measuring social cohesion is often achieved by conducting wide population surveys and questionnaires (Oberndorfer et al., 2022; Dickes et al., 2014), but we wanted to adopt a different approach. In the frame of Create Walsall measuring the proposed arts-based interventions as a tool for supporting social cohesion was unsuccessful. The background for this conclusion is multi-fold.

Firstly, the research design did not account for the practical difficulties of bringing communities together into a shared physical/virtual space, leading to the researchers' inability to observe how members of different communities interact whilst taking part in arts-based interventions. The practical reasons included participants' inability to travel, their varied level of engagement, cultural differences amongst communities, and digital illiteracy. As we were working with already established groups who, did not always have a strong interest in meeting other communities, the interventions took place in locations and at the time where/ when the groups habitually meet. Finding a suitable, non-threatening space outside community hubs was another challenge, due to perceptions of larger venues and the university being an "ivory tower".

4.2.2. Final public exhibition

The public exhibition took place on May 27, 2023, at the New Arts Gallery Walsall. The exhibition featured a piece of an audio-visual work, *Sound of Walsall,* which documented some of the discussions and activities undertaken during the co-creative phase, capturing the story of Walsall, seen, and told by the local residents (https://youtu.be/eHJo9jCMqOU). Written feedback from the exhibition attendees was collected in a visitor book during the event.

Figure 3 Create Walsall public exhibition, New Arts Gallery, Walsall

Geophonic, biophonic and anthropophonic[3] sounds (Pijanowski et al., 2011; Krause, 2016) presented in the film were recorded during the project in the localities of the communities, emphasising the place-based focus of the output. The footage including green and public spaces, was recorded in the local neighbourhoods (Walsall Arboretum, Walsall Market). To emphasise the importance of local green spaces for the communities we created a separate place-based footage of canals, fields, and local parks, which during the exhibition was projected simultaneously with the *Sound of Walsall* film.

Figure 4 Footage of green spaces in Sound of Walsall

Other elements of the exhibition consisted of examples from local creativity such as painting, sculpture, and creative writing, photography, and poetry, all of which were co-created during the workshops. The entire creative output is accessible on the project's dedicated website, createwalsall.wordpress.com.

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[3] Geophony: non-biological ambient sounds generated by the natural world. Biophony: biological ambient sounds generated by living organisms (not humans). Anthropophony: ambient human generated sound (Krause, 2016).

Figure 5 Pictures from the exhibition

4.2.3. Pride and agency

Bringing communities together for the final event initiated the mixing of groups and a cross-communal dialogue. The one-day exhibition attracted 98 visitors in just six hours. The community members were proud to share their creative outputs with their family and friends, many of whom took part in the final exhibition:

"The exhibition was engaging and catered for everyone's interests. Walsall is home, and sound of Walsall is sound of community!" Ritu

"Great exhibition reflecting the old and the new, capturing different voices, and the diversity of our beautiful town" Sahia

"It brought together people from different communities" Nash

"We are all so happy to be here… it is very nice to see our work, with all the variation, and enjoy the time with people of Walsall" Gabi

"The project culminates ALL sounds of Walsall in the best positive way, was great seeing all the communities come together in one place" Craig

4.2.5. Being heard

The community members were eager to showcase their contribution to both creative outputs and the research. A possibility of their voices being heard by the local authorities was an especially strong impetus for their participation:

"No one is listening to us – the council people just do what they want" Ann.

"I do not even vote anymore – what is the point!" Errol

"I hope we will be heard through your project!" Rob

Those participants who contributed to setting up the exhibition space experienced an additional sense of agency and importance in the project:

"I loved working with the project…I feel proud! if we open our hearts and minds, we will see our future" Colin

Despite the success of the exhibition, the final event did not produce enough evidence of the arts-based interventions supporting social cohesion.

4.2.6. Local centres for arts and culture, continuous presence

Participants described a need for continuity of arts-based projects and events conducted in their area:

"There is nothing around my area… I do my crocheting on my own!" Samantha

"There are some activities for the school children around where I am… But nothing for the grown-ups!" Errol

"You've gotta be in the town centre to see art…" Ann

A sense of frustration was illuminated by the lack of continuity of arts-based projects in local communities:

"There are so many short projects… It is hard to keep track, everything changes so quickly… I am not interested." Rob

We know from the literature that successful arts-based projects require a continuous presence in local communities to earn trust of the residents (Holler 2019; Boilevin et al., 2019). The approach when an artist is being "parachuted" into local communities to conduct arts-based projects, notoriously leads to a sense of saturation and loss of interest in communities in a long term (Velasco, 2008). Learning from Create Walsall supports this understanding.

4.2.7. Local knowledge

Experiences from Create Walsall showcased the importance of pre-existing knowledge of local communities, key contacts and networks for researchers, and the community peer researchers alike.

A large part of the project was dedicated to making connections with, and within local communities. Whilst the local authorities provided the initial support with key local contacts, it was the work on the ground that ensured the recruitment of participants. Prior to the field work phase, the research team had multiple onsite visits, talking to community members and leaders, generating interest around the project, and recruiting participants for workshops. The possibility of sharing the lived experiences with their community and the local authorities generated most interest and prompted participation.

Community researchers who took part/observed the arts-based workshops had a better interaction with communities and received richer data from their interviews than those who only conducted interviews. Our observations showed that the mitigation of power relationships between the researcher and the interviewee is best achieved within the research design, ensuring the community researcher's involvement and presence throughout interventions. (Fletcher, 1990; deMarrais & Lapan, 2013).

5.0   Recommendations

5.1.   For Walsall Council

1. Review the current funding application systems for the local communities in relation to: a) making the language more accessible b) illuminating unnecessary complexity of the required information c) encouraging collaboration between local communities through funding applications

2. Develop/increase available opportunities for high-quality learning and experiencing arts and culture locally.

3. Promote a continuous presence of arts-and cultural projects locally (vs short-term parachuting approach).

4. Revive some of the lost landmarks of local cultural identity, such as Walsall Illuminations and Walsall Market.

5. Support long-term collaborations between local community, and arts organisations.

5.2.   For researchers

1. Plan for sufficient time on the ground to build local networks.

2. Use multiple channels for recruitment of both participants and CPRs (such as local authorities and organisations, community leaders, volunteer groups). Plan sufficient time for recruitment.

3. Work locally in venues that are familiar and convenient to the residents. Do not expect the participants to come to you.

4. Keep in mind religious holidays and seek a common ground to mitigate cultural differences (for example, female researchers will have more chance to be accepted in women-only groups)

5. If implementing a CPR model – ensure CPRs thorough and early involvement in the process. Ensure that they understand the importance of being present at all activities with communities as a way to build trust and relationships.

6. Ensure researchers have a good understanding of the local demographics, history, and issues facing local communities in focus.

7. Allow for flexibility and spontaneity during arts-based activities.

8. Use a visitor book to collect visual and textual feedback in multiple languages from attendees during exhibition as a way of capturing evidence of cohesiveness and potential impact.

9. Invest additional planning time into sustaining the engagement of, white working-class communities.

6.0   Conclusion

Given the abundance of rich data gathered through Create Walsall, this project supports the evidence of the effectiveness of using arts-based methods in community engagement projects. Whilst literature supporting this conclusion is growing (Foster, 2011; Brady & Brown, 2013; Perry et al., 2011), this report reinforces the significance of voicing the lived experiences of local communities to better understand issues concerning social cohesion and wellbeing of its citizens.

From the analysis of interviews, focus groups, and arts-based activities, it is clear that local communities in Walsall are facing multiple concerns which go beyond the current cost-of-living crisis. Consistent with previous research, participants shared their experiences of inequality of access to green spaces, information, services, and arts and cultural activities/venues. The importance of access to high-quality green spaces was especially highlighted by families with children. Difficulties in accessing vital information about services, support networks, and community engagement was shared by newly arrived communities of European descent. A need for a better provision of art and culture locally was shared across communities. Of particular interest was the perception of central cultural venues as "ivory

towers", which are inaccessible to the local population. Participants expressed a strong interest in participating in long-term arts-based projects and shared a need for partaking in creative activities locally. Community leaders, on the other hand, voiced a high level of frustration with local funding systems, which in their view promote competition between local communities and organisations, and defeat purposes of social cohesion. They also shared their dissatisfaction with inaccessibility of language that funding schemes are using, given the volunteer basis on which the leaders are doing their engagement work. Many leaders considered themselves being excluded from the opportunity of applying because of linguistic and conceptional challenges of funding applications.

Create Walsall has laid the foundations for further evaluations of application of arts-based methods in social research. We conclude that the place-based nature of the engagement requires an in-depth understanding of local communities, networks, and structures, which is applicable to both the main research team, and the community peer researchers. The rich and versatile data gathered during the project highlighted the effectiveness of the approach in relation to community engagement. However, understanding the effects of an arts-based approach on social cohesion requires careful planning and an appropriate research design which accounts for many practical issues of bringing different communities together.

Participants of this study valued the opportunity for sharing their lived experiences and voicing their concerns about developmental trends in their local communities. Participation in the exhibition highlighted an increased sense of pride, feelings of belonging, and a sense of agency and appreciation of being a part of a local community. This supports the role of co-creation, sharing, and listening to voices of residents in assisting the individuals and local authorities to regenerate local communities together in a democratic collaboration.

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8.0   Appendices

8.1. Table 1. Themes emerged from conversations with the participants.

	Neighbourhoods' problems	Declining voluntary sector	Lack of equality of opportunities	Need for local, community-driven art and culture centres	Lack of a unifying theme for building a local identity	Weak collaboration/cohesion between communities	Funding as a cause for lack of cohesion	Total number of ICSs
Andy M								
Ruth F								
Teresa F								
Rob M	Y			Y	Y			3
Michelle F								
Concetta F								
Gloria F								
Puvie F	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y		5
Ann F	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y		5
Errol M	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			5
Denis M								
Jackie F								
Natalie F								
Sharron F	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	7

Claudia F								
Rose F								
Veronica F								
Eve F	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**7**
Mariana-Mihaela F	Y		Y	Y		Y	Y	**5**
Claudia F	Y							**1**
Sorin M								
Elena P F								
Simona F	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**6**
Elena F	Y		Y	Y		Y	Y	**5**
Michaela F	Y		Y	Y		Y		**4**
Alina F	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	**6**
Stefan M	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	**6**
Florian M	Y		Y					
Nicoletta M	Y		Y					**2**
Teodora F	Y			Y	Y	Y	Y	**5**
Nasreen F								
Naz F	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**7**
Shenaz F	Y							**1**

Joy F	Y							**1**
Nazree n F	Y							**1**
Nimra F	Y			Y				**2**
Kiran F								
Shibley F								
Narwat F								
Kisanet F								
Imane F								
Robina F								
Gaby F	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			**5**
Najiba F								
Saika F								
Helin F								
Zamda F								
Hina F	Y		Y	Y		Y		**4**
Azra F								
Amal F								
Trevor M	Y	Y		Y			Y	**4**
Rob M	Y	Y		Y				**3**
Mel M	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			**4**
Attiah F								
Shokt M	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	**7**
Colin M	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	**6**

	Neighbourhoods' problems	Decaying voluntary sector	Lack of equality of opportunities	Need for local, community-driven art and culture centres	Lack of a unifying theme for building a local identity	Weak collaboration/cohesion between communities	Funding as a cause for lack of cohesion	Total number of ICSs
Nash F	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	6
Naz F	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	5
Samantha F		Y	Y	Y	Y			4
Suman F	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	6
	31	16	23	25	15	18	15	138

Total participants: 60

8.2. Interview topic guide

<u>Introduction</u>

- Welcome and introductions.
- Explanation about research project
- Housekeeping & Ethics: remind participants of the interview length, expectations, that we are recording.

Could you tell us a bit more about yourself?
- How long have you been living in Walsall?
- Do you feel proud of living here?
- Where do you live
- Do you like it here?

Cohesion

1. What sort of things do you get up to in your local community e.g. volunteering, and/or participating in local activities?
2. Do you think that you, and people in your local communities have enough easily accessible, clean, and friendly (or welcoming?) public/community spaces?
3. Do you think the local authorities do a good job with the upkeeping of public and community spaces in your local neighbourhood? Why/why not?

Do people come together, or is Walsall a divided place?

4. Do you feel that people get along in this neighbourhood (in Walsall)? Is it friendly and trusting? Do you feel safe in Walsall?
5. Do you mix with people from different backgrounds? - communities/areas, and how does that happen?
6. We're interested in places or (safe) spaces where people are comfortable to mix. For you, or for people in your community, do such places exist in your local area? If not, do you have to go elsewhere?
7.

Wellbeing/arts and culture

8. What is important for your sense of well being and belonging in Walsall? Are arts and culture in your local community important for your wellbeing, and wellbeing of your community? Why/why not?
9. Do you use any arts and culture- related activities when you feel low? If yes, what helps you, can you share any examples of what you do?
10. Are you satisfied with how many arts/culture activities are available in your community, and what would you like to see more/less of in relation to the arts/culture activities in your area?
11. Are there any places in /characteristics of Walsall that you would like to recover from the past, preserve in the present, and see in the future of the town?