

(Re)Instilling Civic Belonging: The Role of Cultural Infrastructure in Everyday Participation

About the Project

The Context: In Loughborough, over 23% of the population identifies as Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic (BAME), including 15.7% Asian or Asian British and 2.9% Black or Black British residents. However, this diversity is not reflected in equal access to services, support, or civic participation(1). The Loughborough Town Deal (2) report highlights that disadvantage is particularly acute among BAME communities, with clear indicators of lower income levels, reduced educational attainment, poorer health outcomes, and shorter life expectancy.

The Key Community Group: Equality Action, a Loughborough-based charity, has spent over 50 years addressing these inequalities through grassroots action. In 2023/24 alone, the organisation handled over 1,300 individual cases, supporting people from all backgrounds(particularly BAME communities) on issues including welfare, immigration, debt, housing, employment, and education. Its work builds vital trust and delivers tailored support through holistic advice services, wellbeing initiatives, and community-led integration projects.

The Proposition: Yet despite these ongoing efforts, the community hubs where civic life unfolds such as public buildings, community centres, and the local library often fail to reflect or support the rich social fabric of the communities they serve. Many public buildings and communal venues across Leicestershire and Rutland remain underused not because of a lack of needs, but because they are perceived exclusionary, or disconnected from the lived realities of these communities.

This research placement focuses on Equality Action's work as a lens through which to understand and reimagine civic belonging. It asks: how can we build cultural infrastructures that centre equity, emotional connection, and everyday participation? And how could this begin to take shape through the formation of a community-led civic hub embedded in the revitalisation of Loughborough's under-utilised historic Generator Hall.

About the project

Loughborough's historic Generator Hall is undergoing a £2m physical refurbishment through the Town Deal. Yet its transformation into an inclusive, community-led civic space will depend not on its physical structure, but on its programmes, social relationships, and capacity to generate shared communal meaning. This research placement aims to explore how cultural everyday practices can become a method for civic participation, to foster social connections and establish network resilience and hence facilitate the co-creation of a programme for the Generator Hall as an inclusive place of belonging.

This project has been co-created and is supported by researchers from Loughborough University, De Montfort University, and partners at Equality Action. The successful candidate for this project will be enrolled at Loughborough University.

Project Aims

The overall aims of this project are :

1. Explore what matters most to the wellbeing of forced migrants living in Charnwood.
2. Understand needs, preferences and challenges faced by local forced migrants, in particular among women, children, and youth, in accessing physical activity and sporting opportunities and spaces in Charnwood.
3. Collaboratively co-create recommendations for local community organisations in developing inclusive and needs-based sport and physical activity programmes with, and for, local forced migrants.

Supervisory Team

1. Lead Academic Supervisor: [Dr Cagri Sanliturk \(CS\)\(Loughborough University\)](#)
2. Academic Co-Supervisor(s): [Professor Rachel Granger\(De Montfort University\)](#)
3. Academic Co-Supervisor(s): [Dr Robert Schmidt III \(RSIII\) Loughborough University](#)
4. Community Supervisor(s): [Varsha Parmar \(Equality Action \(EA\)\)](#)

What will the successful candidate be doing ?

- Conducting a brief literature review by drawing on key texts on civic belonging, cultural infrastructure, participatory and inclusive research methodologies, Equality Action's community work, and the Generator's development plans.
- Deliver mapping workshops with community participants, using the outcomes and data collected through these to develop a visual ecosystem map and other resources.
- Produce a final, co-produced report that highlights your learnings and offer evidence-based recommendations.

Key Details

Host University:	Loughborough University
Start date:	Monday 06 October 2025
Funding offer:	Tax-free bursary of £1,300 (paid in 2 parts, in arrears)
Working hours	Part-time (11-14 hrs per week).
Working Style:	Primarily in-person at host university. Flexible working supported. Working pattern to be agreed between successful candidate and lead supervisor.

Competencies

Collaboratory Core Competencies		
Category	Competency	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)
Comprehension and evaluation	Strong understanding of the project and its subject matter.	A / I
	Analytical, researcher mindset with keen attention to detail.	A / I
	Communicate complex concepts with clarity and precision.	A / I
	Able to identify connections, patterns, gaps, and irregularities in information/data.	I
	Able to interpret data/information confidently with logic and empathy to derive meaning.	I
Social and emotional	Demonstrable experience of responding effectively changing contexts, information and demands.	A
	Ability to persevere in the face of challenges/failures and to remain constructive in developing solutions.	A
	Demonstrable passion for learning with clear drive and curiosity to undertake this specific research project.	A / I
	Willingness to immerse oneself in the research subject matter and make a contribute to new knowledge through a PhD.	A / I
	Strong desire to make a positive community impact through the research.	A / I
	Willingness to think deeply about complex concepts and engage with academic ideas and theory.	A / I
Preparedness and potential for success	Experience of working, collaborating and communicating effectively with different stakeholders.	A
	High level of self-motivation and ability to work with minimal guidance.	A / I
	Strong organisational and time-management skills with the ability to balance and prioritise multiple tasks.	A / I
	Ability to identify potential challenges and complexities and thoughtfully consider possible solutions.	A / I
	Able to identify the technical, personal, or professional skills required for a task and take action to develop these.	A / I
Community Context	Genuine desire to undertake community-engaged research over more traditional approaches to research.	A
	Understand the impact of and need for the inclusion of diverse experiences and points of view in research.	A / I
	Appreciation/understanding of the importance of community insight and experience in the generation of new knowledge.	A / I
	Awareness/understanding of the broader societal context related to the subject matter of the project.	A / I

Competencies

Project Specific Competencies			
Essential	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)	Desirable	Assessed: Application (A), Interview (I)
Ability to build trust and respectful relationships with participants through deep listening, sensitivity to lived experiences, and respect for diverse cultural narratives.	A / I	Ability to reflect on and analyse social issues with depth.	A / I
Experience of supporting or facilitating group discussions in community workshops, listening sessions or similar events	A / I	Skilled at locating, evaluating, and using diverse sources effectively.	A / I
Demonstrable commitment to fostering inclusive environments with the ability to be impartial and fairness when engaging with sensitive or potentially taboo topics.	A / I	Experience of presenting insights and information through visual formats like maps, infographics and diagrams	A / I
A genuine curiosity about how people connect through everyday cultural practices—like storytelling, celebration, food, or music and how public spaces can reflect and support diverse communities. Ideal for someone who cares about local voices, inclusion, and how places like the Generator Hall can bring people together in meaningful ways.	A / I	Experience of distil data into accessible and engaging, co-produced outputs.	A / I
		Experience with community or cultural projects such as previous involvement in grassroots, or civic initiatives.	A/I

References for Further Reading

- Vanni, I. & Crosby, A. (2023). Place-based methodologies for design research: An ethnographic approach. *Design Studies*, 85, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.destud.2023.101168>
- Dell'Era, C. & Landoni, P. (2024). Living lab: A methodology between user-centred design and participatory design. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 23(2), 137-154. <https://sweet-lantern.ch/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/DellEra-C.-and-Landoni-P.-2014-Living-Lab.-Creativity-and-Innovation-Management.pdf>
- Karvonen, A. & van Heur, B (2014). Urban laboratories: Experiments in reworking cities. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38(2), 379-392. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1468-2427.12075>
- MacKinnon, D. & Derickson, K.D. (2013). From resilience to resourcefulness: A critique of resilience policy and activism. *Progress in Human Geography*, 37(2), 253-270. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132512454775>
- Petrescu, D., Petcou, C., Safri, M. & Gibson K. (2021). Calculating the value of the commons: Generating resilient urban futures. *Env Pol Gov*. 31: 159-174. <https://doi.org/10.1002/eet.1890>