

## Further research

### Young People

The focus of our ethnographic work came out of a series of meetings with various community interest groups in Culter. We are hoping to build on this work with a specific focus on the interests, activities and social networks of young people from the village.

### Local History

Combining archival research and oral history interviews, this will explore the changing relationship between work and leisure in explaining patterns of cultural taste and participation. In Culter, memories of the village's paper mill, which closed down in 1981, have been a recurring theme in the stories told to us by members of the local community, testifying to one of the ways that work continues to get 'under the skin of life'. Meanwhile, the impact of working patterns, career trajectories and global migration on the personal, family and social lives of oil industry employees offers strong qualification to arguments that work and leisure have become increasingly separate domains.

### Film

We are planning to produce a short documentary film about the project in Culter in late 2014/early 2015. Intended for academic and non-academic audiences alike, this will represent both formal and informal forms of participation in the village, at the same time exploring some of the key UEP research questions. Utilising the visual impact of local landscapes, the voices of Culter people, and some historic film and photographic archive material and photos, it will employ a mixture of both documentary and fictional film techniques to ask further questions about how communities are both 'made and unmade... through participation'.



Weekend teas at the Heritage Hall, Peterculter. Photograph by Jill Ebrey.

### Wave 2 Interviews

The first wave of household interviews focused on the nature and contexts of people's participation, including background influences and biographical factors. In the second wave, running from the end of October to mid December this year, we will develop some of these themes by exploring issues of change, focusing more on friendships, relationships and social networks, and examining local issues and resource in more detail.

UEP is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of their Connected Communities: Communities, Culture and Creative Economies programme. The project involves an interdisciplinary team of researchers based at the Universities of Manchester, Leicester, Exeter and Warwick. Dr Andrew Miles is the UEP Principal Investigator, and can be contacted at [andrew.miles@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:andrew.miles@manchester.ac.uk)

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## Overview

This project proposes a radical re-evaluation of the relationship between cultural participation and cultural value.

Orthodox models of culture and the creative economy are based on a narrow definition of participation: one that captures engagement with traditional institutions such as museums, galleries and theatres but overlooks the significance of more informal hobbies, pastimes and other, ostensibly mundane, day-to-day activities.

Our research in this project aims to paint a broader picture of how people make their lives and relate to each other through culture, and in particular how communities are formed and connected through 'everyday' participation. In doing so, it sets out to challenge the 'deficit model' of participation, which by privileging certain cultural forms and venues at the expense of others marks out social boundaries and reinforces inequalities. Working in collaboration with partner agencies and participant groups, we aim to produce a more democratic understanding of cultural engagement with which to inform practice for policymakers and organisations in the cultural sector.

We are particularly interested in the interplay between place, locality and participation, which is often overlooked in official statistics and by policymaking from the Centre. Between 2013 and 2017 focused fieldwork, supplemented by national level quantitative and historical research which commenced in 2012, is taking place in six main case study areas in England and Scotland: Manchester/Salford, Aberdeen, Gateshead, Dartmoor,

Stornoway and Peterborough, as well as secondarily through related PhD projects, in Barnsley and Glasgow.

## The oil capital and the suburban village

Our work in Aberdeen reflects Creative Scotland's policy interest in this north-eastern city as a community that is not only physically but also in certain economic, political and cultural respects on 'the edge' of the country. The domination of the oil and gas industry is the underlying theme of the project in this part of Scotland. While oil has brought extreme wealth to the city it has also widened inequalities between rich and poor and is a source of cultural dislocation as well as civic identity. We are interested in how the transformations wrought by oil work to frame and reshape the relationship between participation and community.

To explore this we have chosen to focus our research on the village of Peterculter, itself an 'edge' community, which is now located inside the city's south-western margins having previously been part of Aberdeenshire. Culter provides a microcosm of continuity and change. The site of the once dominant paper mill is now filled with expensive apartments occupied mostly by incomers. Yet the village retains, and inspires, a strong sense of local identity, which is rooted in its industrial and semi-rural past and underpinned by a range of vibrant village institutions. It is a very affluent community that nevertheless contains pockets of deprivation; a place where the number of older people in the local population is higher than the City average but which also attracts families with young children.



Culter Pipe Band going up Coronation Road, Peterculter. Photograph by Jill Ebrey.



## Mapping participation and assets with 'thick description'

When the word 'participation' is used as shorthand for taking part in a limited set of traditional activities, levels of engagement in these activities can then be used to rank local authorities. For example, respondents to the Scottish Household Survey are regularly asked about their participation in a number of activities including attending museums, playing musical instruments, and going to the cinema; respectively, 21%, 10%, and 61% of respondents in Aberdeen said they'd done each of these in the last twelve months, compared with 29%, 11%, and 54% for the whole of Scotland.

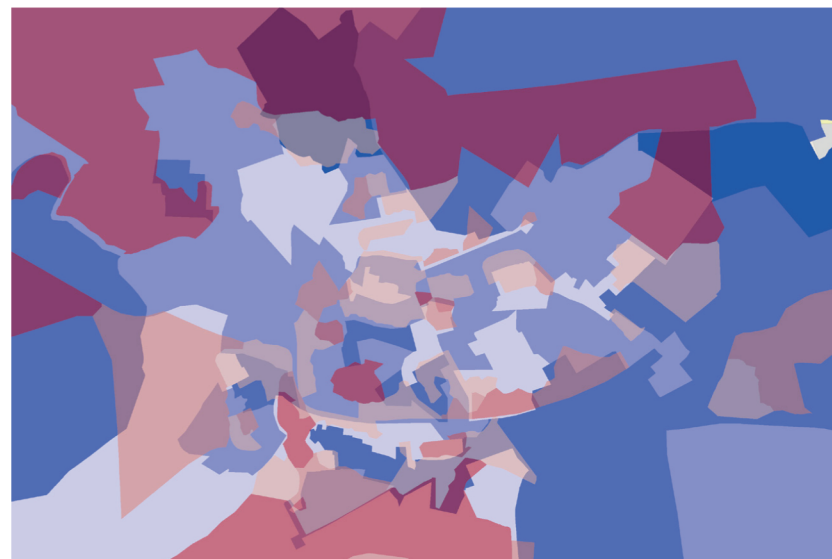
This impression of participation is partial. In UEP, we are employing multiple measures of participation, and combining these with information about cultural and community resources. These measures

of participation forms and assets are being mapped with other measures, such as demographic data derived from the 2011 Census, in order to generate a richer description of the dynamics of participation in and around Aberdeen and Culter.

'Cultural and community assets' is a deliberately broad term. While it is important to acknowledge institutions such as theatres, museums, art galleries, and concert halls as cultural goods, several other kinds of physical asset can be considered in this way, such as pubs, community centres, social clubs, schools, shops, rights of way, and parks: each of these has been named by some of our interview participants as important to their participation.

The mapping of cultural and community assets reveals the cultural and leisure offer in particular locations. This understanding of a place's resources can then be combined with information about other characteristics of different locations, with data derived from a number of sources. The map on this page reports the relationship between the fractions of residents who are members of Culter library, and those born outside the EU; these data suggests that any relationship

between these is weak. It is one of many maps we have developed around the dynamics of participation in Culter and in Aberdeen, with several individuals and organisations having been very generous in sharing data with us.



This is a map of Peterculter, and reports (in blue) the fractions of people in output areas who were born outside the EU, and (in red) the fractions of people in postcode units who are members of Culter library (darker is more).

## Ethnography: 'culture is ordinary'

In May and June this year project researcher Jill Ebrey spent two months undertaking ethnographic work (participant observation) in three settings: the Village Hall and Culter Mills Social Club, which are situated in the village, and Kippie Lodge Sports and Country Club, located just outside the Culter boundary in Milltimber. We chose these having become aware of the longstanding importance of local institutions and club life in the everyday lives of many village residents. They seemed ideal settings to explore the notion of participation as the sharing of activities and thereby to gain an understanding of the ways in which particular sites of participation and their social and cultural dynamics inform feelings of belonging and community identity.

Jill spent two days or evenings in each location every week over this period and was welcomed everywhere with extraordinary generosity. In the Village Hall she chatted with mothers, grandmothers, children and playleaders from the Mothers and Toddlers group and the Playgroup as well as the hall administrator, and took on the job of washing up after sessions. She played bingo at Culter Mills Social Club and collected glasses during the Culter Gala Dance and on Gala day. At Kippie Lodge, her time was spent behind reception and in Hair and Beauty, as well as participating in various classes and undertaking informal interviews.

Through these engagements Jill learnt a great deal about the different dimensions of village culture, history and social life, which we are still evaluating. What was particularly striking across the board, however, was the deep affection

## Household interviews

Our fieldwork in Culter includes two waves of 30 household interviews with a sample of residents that reflects the general characteristics of the local population. The first wave is completed and we have just started analysing this before the second wave of interviews (with the same people) commences towards the end of October this year.

Focusing on people's sense of belonging and identity, their life histories and participation narratives, the first round of interviews has produced a hugely rich and varied set of accounts. However some prominent emergent themes include the following:

### Participation

- People in Culter take part in a plethora of activities, across a range of settings and groups but often with a strong local and family focus
- Informal day-to-day practices such as cooking, gardening, eating out and visiting friends are important for reinforcing social relationships and affirming neighbourhood cultures
- Hobbies are an integral part of many people's lives and often involve intensive engagement with skilled activities such as crafts, traditional dancing, magic or creative writing
- Work is for most a defining feature of leisure. It not only shapes the time and resources available for cultural interests but often influences particular interests
- Participation changes over the life course, as people form relationships, have children, deal with illness or incapacity and retire. Sometimes such changes lead to new interests but more often existing interests are refocused, scaled down or adapted with age

for Culter they revealed, differently expressed depending on length of time resident in the village and perhaps most strongly articulated by those who had spent a lot of time working abroad, after a lifetime spent in the locality.

As a result, there is a strong commitment within the village to creating and sustaining shared, participative, spaces and to supporting them through fundraising (few if any grants received). Considerable amounts of time and effort are expended on volunteering. Examples include keeping open a leisure facility vacated by Aberdeen City Council, baking cakes for the Heritage teas in Culter, working with Brownies, Guides or Scouts or being a committee member of a local organisation. It was possible to detect some evidence of 'volunteer fatigue' and also of guilt at not being/feeling able to participate. Volunteering is not a simple or one-

### Culture

- Interest in formal culture is more often found among older people though Scottish culture appeals across a broader age range
- Engagement with traditional cultural forms happens as much in people's bedrooms, living rooms and at the Village Hall as in city centre theatres and galleries
- Aberdeen is seen as a rather staid and limited in terms of its formal cultural offer, without the variety or 'authenticity' of Glasgow or Edinburgh
- There is a sense of untapped potential in terms of cultural renewal in the city, including concern about a lack of investment in physical infrastructure

### Place

- Many Culter residents put an especially high value on the opportunities living in the village affords for living an 'outdoor life'
- Others appreciate its 'betwixt and between' position, offering easy access to both rural Aberdeenshire and city centre amenities.
- Local walks, the river and the views out to the hills are precious resources and the old railway line is for many a particularly important facility
- The relative remoteness of the village has helped to sponsor a strong voluntary associational culture and sense of local identity, though there are concerns that this will be lost with the passing of generations and the incremental loss of shops and other local amenities
- The use of the internet and social media is ubiquitous and varied across all age groups. It allows people to transcend physical space, through communicating and consuming culture across long distances, but at the same time underpins everyday habits, practices and relationships.

dimensional form of participation and while there are many ways of being a volunteer, not all are recognized as such. Flexible work, evening work, childcare and a particular culture around volunteering, mean that it is not an option for many. A redefinition of the idea may be useful.

In summary, it is difficult to overestimate the significance and value of the village institutions in which we undertook our research. For many, they are the sources of social and vernacular cultural capital. They generate profound friendships and conviviality and sometimes conflict and disappointment. As Raymond Williams, the Welsh academic, novelist, and critic, insists in a famous essay written in 1958, 'Culture is ordinary: that is where we must start'. This is where we started in Culter but on the way we found something extraordinary.