



Linen Biennale Evaluation 2023

linenbiennalenorthernireland.com

Acknowledgments

Primary Funder

R-Space Gallery was awarded a grant by The National Lottery Heritage Fund to produce the Linen Biennale 2023, creating employment, projects and new chapters in Northern Ireland's linen story.



Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction | 5 |
| Context – Threads of legacy: the cultural importance of linen | 6 |
| About the Biennale | 7 |
| The 2023 Programme | 8 |
| Outcomes 2023 | 9 |
| Key themes – Revive and Renew | 10 |
| Who was involved in the running of the Linen Biennale 2023? | 11 |
| Evaluating the Linen Biennale 2023 | 13 |
| Methodology | 13 |
| Limitations | 15 |
| Comparing the 2018 Linen Biennale with the 2023 Linen Biennale | 16 |
| Identifying Stakeholders | 16 |
| Logic Model | 18 |
| Analysis | 24 |
| Participant feedback | 24 |
| Partner and Collaborator Feedback | 32 |
| Staff Feedback | 44 |
| Audience Engagement | 48 |
| Case Studies | |
| Linen at East Block Fashion Market, Banna Block | 50 |
| Millie Moore Exhibition & Workshops (Time Traces & Threads) | 52 |
| Linen in the Mournes & The Story of Flax Bus Tour | 54 |
| Flax Paper Labs & Belfast Print Workshop | 56 |
| Were the Linen Biennale's outcomes met? | 58 |
| Quotes | 74 |
| Learning and recommendations | 78 |
| Conclusions | 81 |
| | |
| Appendix 1 - R-Space and the Biennale Team | 84 |
| Appendix 2 - Linen Biennale 2023 Partners and collaborators | 86 |
| Appendix 3 - Media coverage of the Linen Biennale 2023 | 90 |
| Appendix 4 - Responding to the 2018 Linen Biennale Evaluation | |
| Recommendations | 92 |



Linen garments by Annie Leona McColgan
Photo credit: Ruairí Jordan
Cover credit: Ruairí Jordan



Introduction

The Linen Biennale, deeply rooted in the cultural, agricultural, and industrial heritage of Northern Ireland, experienced a successful event in 2018. However, the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic delayed the next festival until 2023. Although some online activities occurred post-2018, the 2023 Linen Biennale marked a significant revival after a five-year hiatus, offering a renewed opportunity to explore and celebrate the rich narrative of linen in Northern Ireland.

The Linen Biennale is not just a reflection on the past; it's an exploration of the present and a catalyst for future developments in art, design, and sustainable practices. It serves as a bridge connecting the traditions of local linen production with contemporary applications. What sets the Biennale apart is a forward-thinking vision that celebrates the past while exploring new opportunities for the future use of linen and flax. The Linen Biennale acknowledges the economic potential and environmental sustainability that linen presents, making it a material of great significance in the modern era.

The Linen Biennale 2023's themes consciously overlap and interweave, reflecting a commitment to revive and renew our collective understanding of linen's legacy. Through collaborative partnerships, exhibitions, discussions, talks, tours and other events, the 2023 Biennale sought to stimulate new thinking about one of Ireland's oldest textiles. The Linen Biennale is more than a festival; it's a testament to the enduring legacy of linen and its potential to shape a vibrant and sustainable future.

In Lisburn, the heart of Northern Ireland's historic linen district, R-Space Gallery acts as the hub of the Biennale. The festival traces its roots to a feasibility study in 2015, funded by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, envisioning a cultural celebration of Lisburn's linen history with contemporary relevance. The inaugural Linen Biennale took place in 2018, returning after a post-covid delay in 2023.

This evaluation of the Linen Biennale 2023 seeks to comprehensively assess the various aspects of the Biennale to provide insights, feedback and recommendations; with the goal of enabling organisers to make informed decisions for future direction of the programme.



(Top) Linen Biennale Team Members Angela McMahon, Meadhbh McIlgorm & Robert Martin outside R-Space

(Bottom) Longest Linen Tabelcloth

Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography (all)

Context – Threads of legacy: the cultural importance of linen

Linen stands as a fabric intricately entwined with Ireland's rich social, agricultural, and industrial heritage. With its ideal climate for flax cultivation, Ireland has a longstanding history of linen production, evolving from a traditional cottage industry in the 17th century to the mass production that gained global acclaim in the 19th century. This industry significantly shaped Ulster's landscape, from fields flourishing with flax to towering linen mills dominating skylines. Known as 'Linenopolis,' Belfast thrived as a hub, with shipbuilding expanding to meet global export demands.

The impact of the linen industry extended beyond production, leading to the establishment of the Belfast School of Art in 1849, fostering creativity and education for designers, artists and makers. However, the 20th century witnessed the decline of Ulster's linen industry, yielding to the popularity of cotton. Mills closed, and once-dominant structures fell into disrepair. Yet, with growing awareness of the ecological impact of cotton, linen has experienced some resurgence as a sustainable, nature-friendly and enduring material.

In recent years, the demand for more environmentally conscious fabrics has rekindled the prospects of flax and linen. Recognised for its low environmental impact and durability, linen is once again poised to play a vital role in manufacturing and textiles, signalling a promising future for this historic material.



About the Biennale

The inaugural Linen Biennale took place in 2018, serving as a dynamic platform for dialogues on linen's profound impact on the narrative of Northern Ireland. Emphasising the celebration of our rich linen heritage, the biennale sought to delve into the contemporary inspirations drawn from flax and linen, influencing artists, makers, designers, performers and manufacturers.

The 2018 Biennale comprised over 80 events, including an international conference, engaging participants in a fresh discourse on flax and linen—using the themes recall, rethink, reform. While subsequent years sustained these conversations, the Linen Biennale NI fully reemerged in 2023, overcoming the challenges posed by the pandemic.



The Linen Biennale NI developed from the vision of Robert Martin and Anthea McWilliams, co-founders and co-directors of Lisburn's R-Space Gallery. The 2018 programme received funding from several organisations. Principal funders included The National Lottery Heritage Fund, The Arts Council of Northern Ireland, British Council Northern Ireland and Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council.

In 2023 The National Lottery Heritage Fund was the sole funder of the Linen Biennale, creating employment, projects, and new chapters in Northern Ireland's linen story.

The Linen Biennale showcases a diverse array of events, encouraging collaboration across various sectors and offering a range of engaging options for visitors. The Biennale team actively collaborated with organisations and partners spanning heritage, arts, creative industries, business, charities and museums. This interdisciplinary approach encouraged creative thinking, the establishment of new partnerships, and the exploration of fresh opportunities.

The 2023 Programme

The Linen Biennale 2023 took place during August, September and October, with some activities happening outside the three-month period.

This year's Biennale featured 111 events including:



17 Exhibitions



38 Talks, Tours & Demos



33 Workshops



23 'Other' Events

The Biennale worked with over 50 delivery partners which supported the hosting and programming of events. The programme took place in venues across Northern Ireland and attracted over 10,000 visitors .

Outcomes 2023

A wider range of people involved in heritage

The range of people benefiting from heritage will be more diverse than before the Linen Biennale's 2023 programme of events.

People will have greater wellbeing

Through engaging with the Linen Biennale, participants will experience an improved sense of wellbeing as they connect with the cultural and artistic expressions surrounding linen.

People will have developed skills

Attendees will have the opportunity to develop and enhance various skills through active participation in Linen Biennale activities.

The local area will be a better place to live, work, or visit

The Linen Biennale seeks to enrich the local community by contributing to its cultural vibrancy. The event aims to leave a lasting positive impact on the region, businesses, and visitors alike.

The local economy will be boosted

The Linen Biennale endeavours to stimulate the local economy in a number of ways, such as inspiring participants to learn more about the rich history of Irish linen and flax and support local businesses associated with the textile industry. The Biennale has become a platform for connecting artists and businesses working in various ways with textiles, fostering economic and community development goals.

Heritage will be identified and better explained

The Linen Biennale serves as a platform for recognising and revealing the significance of linen and flax in Northern Ireland's heritage. The Biennale aims to identify, celebrate, and provide a comprehensive understanding of the historical and cultural importance of linen, ensuring that this heritage is well-preserved and communicated.

People will have learned about heritage, leading to change in ideas and actions

The Linen Biennale strives to be an educational catalyst, prompting a transformative shift in perspectives and actions related to heritage. Attendees will not only acquire knowledge about the history of linen but will be inspired to incorporate this understanding into their daily lives, encouraging a cultural appreciation that transcends the duration of the event and influences long-term attitudes and behaviours.

Key themes – Revive and Renew

The Linen Biennale is a celebration of linen, encapsulating its intricate ties to Northern Ireland's social, agricultural and industrial heritage. This year's themes were 'Revive and Renew'. The theme of '**Revive**' marks not only the Biennale's return after a five-year hiatus, reinvigorating both its own narrative and also the enduring story of linen within the region. Through intentional intertwining, the Biennale also seeks to '**Renew**' our collective understanding and appreciation for linen's legacy, emphasising its present value and envisioning its expansive potential as an eco-friendly material for the future. In lieu of a conference, the 2023 edition introduced a range of short lectures and half-day seminars spanning August to October. These curated sessions delved into distinct sub-themes - '**material**', '**environment**', '**industry**', and '**narrative**'—fostering a rich tapestry of exploration and discourse.

Throughout the application process for the National Heritage Lottery Fund, various initiatives were undertaken in readiness for the 2023 Linen Biennale. An expression of interest phase allowed prospective partners to signify their interest in participating, involving the engagement of multiple stakeholders. Additionally, the services of an external cultural management consultant were enlisted to contribute valuable insights into the delivery framework and budget breakdown.



Meadhbh McIlgorm, Programme Manager
Photo credit: Ruairi Jordan

Who was involved in the running of the Linen Biennale 2023?

The National Lottery Heritage Fund granted R-Space Gallery funding to produce the Linen Biennale 2023, generating employment opportunities, initiating projects, and adding fresh chapters to the narrative of linen in Northern Ireland.

As part of the application process, detailed job descriptions and personal specifications were crafted, playing a key role in steering the recruitment process for these positions.

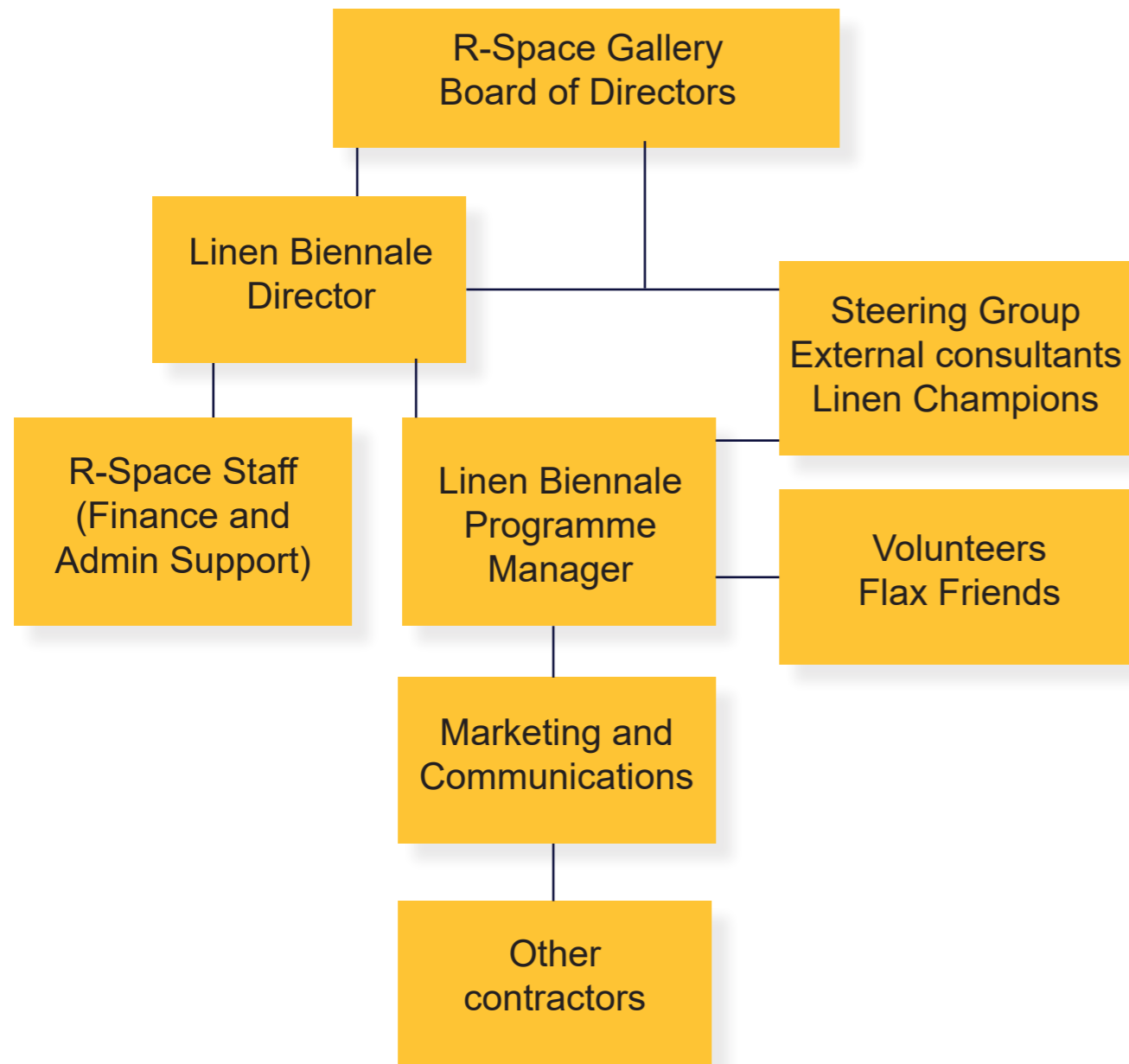
The project team consisted of a small group of freelance professionals, supported by the team at R-Space (see Appendix 1 for full staffing details). Key members of staff included Robert Martin, Director, R-Space Gallery; Meadhbh McIlgorm, Programme Manager; Angela McMahan of Flow Communications, Project PR & Marketing; Francesca Bondi, R-Space Office Manager, providing finance support; Kathryn Graham, R-Space Gallery Assistant, providing admin & event support; Fran Porter, Freelance Producer, providing remote content creation and admin support; and Rachel McMenemy of Moonlight, providing project evaluation.

Operating on a budget of £99,352.00, the Linen Biennale also benefited significantly from generous contributions in the form of gift-in-kind resources, expertise, and hands-on support. Key individuals included Anthea McWilliams, Co-director R-Space Gallery (voluntary), R-Space Chairman Alan Clarke and Professor Jane McCann. A number of non-cash contributions were also received from a range of partners, including venue and exhibition space, marketing support, workshop provision and advertising.

The Biennale relied on various partners and collaborators who ran a range of events throughout the Biennale programme including exhibitions, talks, tours, demos, workshops and other events. See Appendix 2 for the full list of partners and collaborators.

Finally, a number of volunteers offered their time to become 'Flax Friends' of the festival. There are approximately 17 people in the Flax Friends circle. Volunteers helped with event set up, leaflet/booklet distribution and collecting evaluation data.

Team structure



Evaluating the Linen Biennale 2023

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness and record the impact of the Linen Biennale, tracing the journey depicted in the logic model that engaged various stakeholders. This journey includes outcomes related to wellbeing, skill development, community impact, economic stimulation, heritage identification and educational impact.

A number of research methods were utilised to collate the necessary information to complete the analysis. The evaluation methodology was devised to ensure that data was comprehensively and holistically collected from all stakeholders – from partners, participants, other stakeholders and the Biennale staff team.

Methodology

Data was collected using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Collection was divided between external respondents (including event participants, collaborators and partners) and internal respondents (Biennale staff team), to include all stakeholders – from partners, participants, other stakeholders and the Biennale staff team.

The following data collection took place:

Internal

Monthly Staff Reflections – Biennale staff were encouraged to complete online ‘monthly reflections’ to enable them to record their experiences in running this year’s programme of events.

Staff event observations – Biennale staff were given the opportunity to provide their own feedback as staff members when visiting or participating in events, separate from the general participant survey as their perspective of events may be different as an internal party.

End of Biennale staff interviews – a final opportunity for Biennale staff to reflect on the programme of events, provide feedback post the Biennale and consider future editions.



Photo credits: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

External

Participant survey – After every Biennale event attendees were given the opportunity to provide feedback via an online survey or in paper format. QR codes were developed to enable event partners to facilitate and encourage data collection. Paper submissions were uploaded to the online collector by the Biennale Team. A total of 316 participant evaluations were completed.

Collaborator/Partner Survey – The Collaborator/Partner Survey was open to anyone who supported the programme of events, either by participating in (for example an artist taking part in an exhibition), facilitating or running an event as part of the 2023 Biennale. The online survey gave collaborators and partners the opportunity to feedback about the event they were involved in, their involvement working with the Biennale staff team, and their experience of this year's Biennale. A total of 65 partner responses were achieved.

Collaborator/Partner focus groups – In November 2023 collaborators and partners were invited to attend one of four focus groups to provide qualitative feedback at the close of the Biennale programme and to provide thoughts on planning for the 2025 programme. A total of 13 collaborators took part in these focus groups.

Comment books – Collecting participant feedback at exhibitions where visitors 'drop-in', compared to a time-bound event, is more difficult to collect. For seven of the exhibitions in the Biennale comments left in the 'visitor' books were also taken into consideration as part of the evaluation.



Alchemy of Print, Trish Belford
Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

Limitations

- The diversity in delivery partnerships introduces a potential source of variability in attendee experiences, which could impact individual participants' overall assessment of the event's success and effectiveness.
- Some respondents attended more than one event and may have increased outcomes compared to those who attended fewer events. In addition, where event numbers are provided by partner organisations, it is not possible to deduce how many of these participants attended more than one event, hence in some instances there will be double counting regarding the number of attendees.
- Participant surveys were completed immediately after the events took place, therefore longer-term outcomes are difficult to measure.
- Visitor numbers were provided by the partners who either completed the Partner/Collaborator survey or who communicated numbers with the Programme Manager, these numbers included estimates where exact numbers were not recorded. In some cases partners did not provide numbers of attendees. The number of attendees could therefore be an underestimation as total numbers cannot be measured.
- Some events in August overlapped with Craft Month, which had a separate evaluation process. This could present a limitation in the Biennale's evaluation as partners and participants may not have filled out both evaluation forms.
- In some instances, such as the East Block Fashion Market or the Gintlíocht Exhibition at Ulster Folk Museum, the connection with the Biennale featured as part of normal activities, therefore it is difficult to estimate how many people attended intentionally as part of the Biennale or unintentionally. In order to avoid extreme overestimation, the 300 plus attendees at the Fashion Market and 12,000 visitors to the Ulster Folk Museum have not been counted in attendance figures. However, a proportion of these people will have experienced part of the 2023 Biennale.

Comparing the 2018 Linen Biennale with the 2023 Linen Biennale

There are a number of differences to be noted between the 2018 and 2023 Biennales:

- **The number of funders** – In 2018 a number of principal funders supported the Linen Biennale including The Heritage Lottery Fund NI, Arts Council Northern Ireland, The British Council and Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council. Some financial and in-kind support was also provided by Arts and Business NI and Invest NI. In 2023 the Biennale had one primary funder, The National Lottery Heritage Fund. The difference in funders affects the scope of the programme and the intended outcomes being reported on in the evaluation.
- **Lead in time** - In 2023 there was limited time between receiving the grant and the beginning of the programme. The limited run-in time affected the ability to run large scale events such as the conference, the linen opera and the fashion showcase which featured as headline events in 2018. The 2023 programme relied on a larger number of smaller scale events. These events had a wider geographical spread and focused more heavily on partnerships with community groups than in 2018.
- **Integrated evaluation** - Evaluation of the 2023 Linen Biennale was planned and implemented from the outset of the programme and holistically designed to gather feedback from attendees, partners/collaborators and Biennale Staff. In 2018 feedback was received from partners exclusively and retrospectively of programme activity.

Identifying Stakeholders

The 2023 Linen Biennale engaged a number of stakeholders, contributing not only to the distinctive character of the entire program but also reinforcing its collaborative ethos. The primary stakeholders are outlined in the following table.

| Key Stakeholders | Description |
|--|--|
| Funders | The sole funder in 2023 was The National Lottery Heritage Fund. |
| R-Space Gallery | R-Space generously contributed time and expertise to the project. With key connections in the art, business, heritage, and textile sectors, the passion for the subject significantly enriched the Biennale. |
| Biennale staff | The project team consisted of a small group of freelance professionals, enhanced by the team at R-Space (see the Appendix 1 for staffing details). |
| Linen Biennale Steering Group | A steering group of key partners was established in 2023 to advise on program direction. |
| Artists and Creatives | A wide range of artists and creatives were utilised and engaged (see Appendix 2 for a full list of artists and creatives). |
| Academics | Academic speakers were involved in the programme's series of talks and lectures (see Appendix 2 for more detail). |
| Partner organisations – Linen/Textile organisations, Heritage/Museum organisations | A number of textile organisations and museums supported the programme delivery (see Appendix 2 for more detail). |
| Community Groups | A number of community groups were involved in running and facilitating events (see Appendix 2 for more detail). |
| Volunteers | A number of 'Flax Friends' supported the programme. |
| Attendees | Over 10,000 people attended the events as part of the 2023 Linen Biennale. These participants range in age and geographical location. |

Logic Model

The evaluation reflects the engagement of stakeholders throughout the range of Linen Biennale events. By exploring the overall theory, this study identifies a number of outcomes and highlights the changes experienced by stakeholders connected to the Linen Biennale. The evaluation systematically outlines the main inputs, outputs, and outcomes in relation to identified stakeholders, further detailed in the Input/Output model:

- Inputs (What was invested in the Biennale)
- Activities/Programme (What was delivered by Linen Biennale)
- Outputs (What was achieved through these activities)
- Outcomes (The impact on the stakeholders in the short, medium and long term)

Inputs – what was invested?

Financial Resources:

- Funding from The National Lottery Heritage Fund
- In-kind contributions from R-Space Gallery, key individuals and organisations

Human Resources:

- Organisational and planning expertise from the Biennale team
- Expertise and support from key individuals
- Volunteer time and effort

Partnerships:

- Collaborative partnerships with stakeholders, including artists, community groups, businesses and academics.
- Support from delivery partners (30 partners supporting hosting and programming)

Activities and Outputs - What did the Biennale do and who did it reach?

Activities

The Biennale ran as a three-month festival of heritage, arts, craft and design. It included events taking place across Northern Ireland. This year's Biennale included 111 events including:

- 17 exhibitions
- 38 Talks, tours and demos
- 33 Workshops
- 23 'other' events

The Biennale events focused on a variety of themes around flax and linen. The range of talks and lectures took place online and in-person and were curated around the following sub-themes: **Material, Environment, Industry, and Narrative**. The workshops were skills-based sessions sharing technical processes or expertise. They were varied and included natural dyeing, drawn threads, slow stitch on linen, tapestry weaving, paper making, block printing, stencilling and more. The majority were co-produced with partner organisations. A number of events took place in partnership with community groups, linen and textile organisations and heritage organisations enabling the Biennale to connect with the widest range of people.

Participants

The majority of people involved in the Biennale were from Northern Ireland but some were from further afield, including Canada and the USA. Participants were from a range of backgrounds and ages, including those with an interest in linen and Flax and those who attended due to links to the linen industry, either through location or family ties. The Biennale events brought a wide range of people together exploring joint heritage.

Outcomes – What is the impact on the stakeholders in the short, medium and long term?

Short Term:

- Increased sense of wellbeing and connection during the Linen Biennale events.
- Achievement of specific skills through hands-on participation in Linen Biennale activities.
- Immediate enhancement of artistic, crafting or other relevant skills.
- Increased vibrancy and cultural activity during the Biennale events.
- Positive impressions on visitors and residents regarding the cultural richness of the local area.
- Immediate economic impact through increased foot traffic and spending during some Biennale events.
- Collaboration and transactions between artists, businesses and attendees.
- Immediate recognition and celebration of linen and flax heritage during the Biennale.
- Enhanced understanding of the historical and cultural significance among attendees.
- Initial exposure to heritage-related information, sparking interest and curiosity.
- Attitudinal shifts towards a deeper appreciation for local history.

Medium Term:

- Sustained wellbeing as participants reminisce about their experiences.
- Formation of social connections and a sense of belonging within the Linen Biennale community.
- Continued skill development as participants engage in follow-up activities or workshops.
- Application of acquired skills in personal or professional endeavours.
- Enhanced local reputation and attractiveness as a cultural destination.
- Increased community pride and cohesion.
- Growth in local businesses associated with textiles due to increased awareness and support.

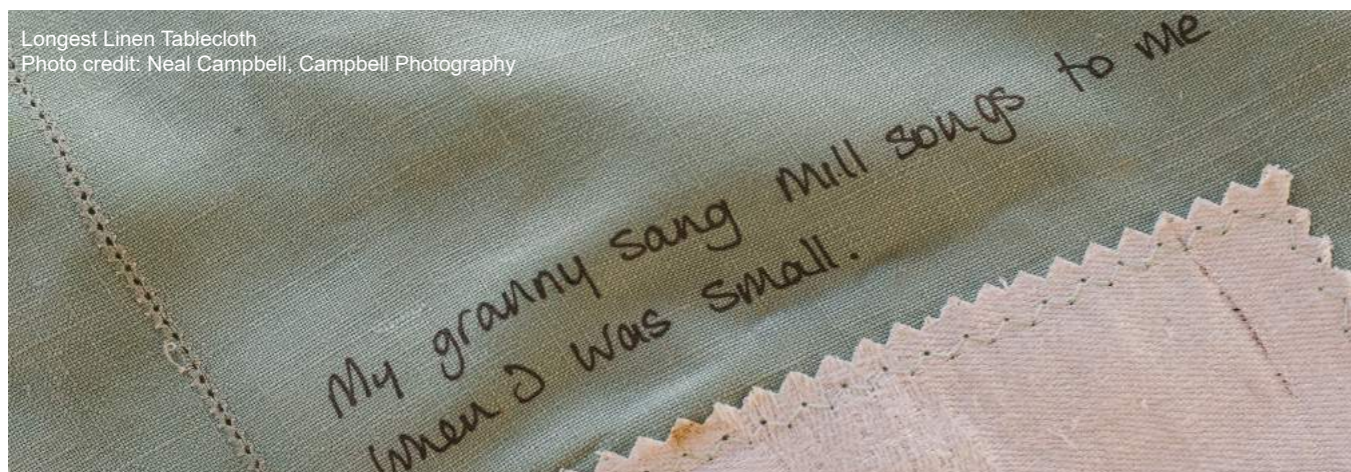
- Continued economic stimulation through the lasting connections forged during the Biennale.
- Ongoing documentation and preservation of heritage narratives.
- Increased accessibility to information about local heritage.
- Increased awareness translating into active engagement with heritage-related activities.
- Formation of a collective cultural consciousness within the community.

Long Term:

- Integration of cultural appreciation into daily life, contributing to a continued sense of wellbeing.
- Establishment of a lasting cultural legacy, positively impacting the overall wellbeing of the community.
- Establishment of a skilled community contributing to the creative and economic landscape.
- Skills passed on through generations, fostering a culture of continuous learning.
- Establishment of a sustained cultural identity, making the area a desirable place to live and visit.
- Continued community engagement and participation in cultural events beyond the Biennale.
- Establishment of Northern Ireland as a hub for textile-related businesses and artists.
- Economic sustainability and growth in the creative and textile sectors.
- Comprehensive understanding and appreciation of heritage as an intrinsic part of the community.
- Perpetual influence on attitudes and actions, shaping a community that values and actively participates in heritage preservation.
- Heritage becomes an integral part of the community's identity and decision-making processes.

Assumptions

The Linen Biennale operates on several key assumptions that underpin its logic model. It is important to note firstly that the 2023 event is the second of its kind, building on the foundations, lessons and legacy of the 2018 Biennale. Foremost, it assumes a keen interest and active participation from the community, anticipating that residents are willing to engage with cultural and artistic events centred around linen and flax. The Biennale also relies on the assumption that its activities will yield positive economic impacts by fostering collaborations and transactions between artists, businesses, and attendees. It further assumes that participants are enthusiastic about skill development, seeing the Biennale as a platform for enhancing various abilities. Additionally, the assumption prevails that events contribute to the cultural vibrancy of the local area, leaving a positive, lasting impact on residents, businesses, and visitors. Furthermore, the Biennale assumes that it serves as an effective educational catalyst, prompting a transformative shift in perspectives and actions related to heritage. Networking and collaboration among partners, artists, and businesses are deemed vital for success. The assumption is that the community's interest in linen-related themes will endure beyond the event, influencing long-term attitudes, and that the Biennale significantly contributes to the local cultural identity. These assumptions collectively guide the Biennale's activities and shape expectations regarding outcomes and impacts on stakeholders and the community.



External factors

- **External funding:** the availability and timeliness of funding impacts on the Biennale's programme and overall success.
- **Government Support:** Changes in cultural and arts-related policies at the local or national level can influence the Biennale's overall support.
- **Public Perception:** The way the general public perceives cultural events and their interest in linen-related themes can affect attendance, engagement, and the overall success of the Biennale.
- **Technological Advances:** Changes in technology can affect how the Biennale is promoted, accessed, and experienced. Embracing digital platforms and innovations may enhance its reach.
- **Environmental Factors:** Considerations related to environmental sustainability and awareness may impact the materials used, transportation choices, and the overall eco-friendliness of the Biennale.
- **Cultural Trends:** Evolving cultural trends and preferences may influence the types of exhibits, workshops, and events that resonate with the audience, requiring the Biennale to stay adaptable and relevant.
- **Competing Events:** Other cultural or arts events happening concurrently or in proximity may influence the availability of resources, attendees, and partners, affecting the Biennale's success.
- **Partnership Opportunities:** The availability and interest of potential partners and collaborators from various sectors may impact the richness and diversity of the Biennale's program.



Analysis

Participant feedback

Over the course of the 2023 Linen Biennale over 111 events took place. The range of events included exhibitions, talks, tours, demos, workshops and other events (see the Appendix 2 for the full list of events).



The programme took place in venues across Northern Ireland and attracted over 10,000 visitors .



30 delivery partners supported the hosting and programming of events, therefore visitors could attend events organised directly by the Biennale team or R-Space Gallery, or events organised by partner organisations.



A total of 316 attendees responded to the participant survey asking for their feedback on the Biennale event they attended.



Of the respondents who shared where they were from, the majority were from Northern Ireland (288), 9 respondents were from England, Scotland or Wales, and four respondents were from the USA.



A high proportion of attendees heard about the Biennale event they attended through social media (37%) (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Almost a third (32%) said that they heard through 'word of mouth'. Other channels included the Biennale website (18%), advertisements or local press.



Longest Linen Tablecloth
Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

The survey asked respondents why they attended a Biennale event. Of the answer choices, respondents could select as many as they felt applied to them.

A significant portion of attendees (45%) attended a Linen Biennale event because they had a personal interest in heritage or flax. This was followed by almost a third (32%) who stated that they had a curiosity about the heritage of linen and flax.

45% attended a Linen Biennale event because they had a personal interest in heritage or flax.

32% attended because they had a curiosity about the heritage of linen and flax

The majority of respondents therefore had an existing interest or curiosity about the Biennale's main themes. This suggests that a significant proportion of the people who attended a Biennale event were a dedicated audience with a genuine passion for and connection to the historical and cultural aspects of linen, or were seeking to broaden their knowledge and explore a topic they found intriguing.

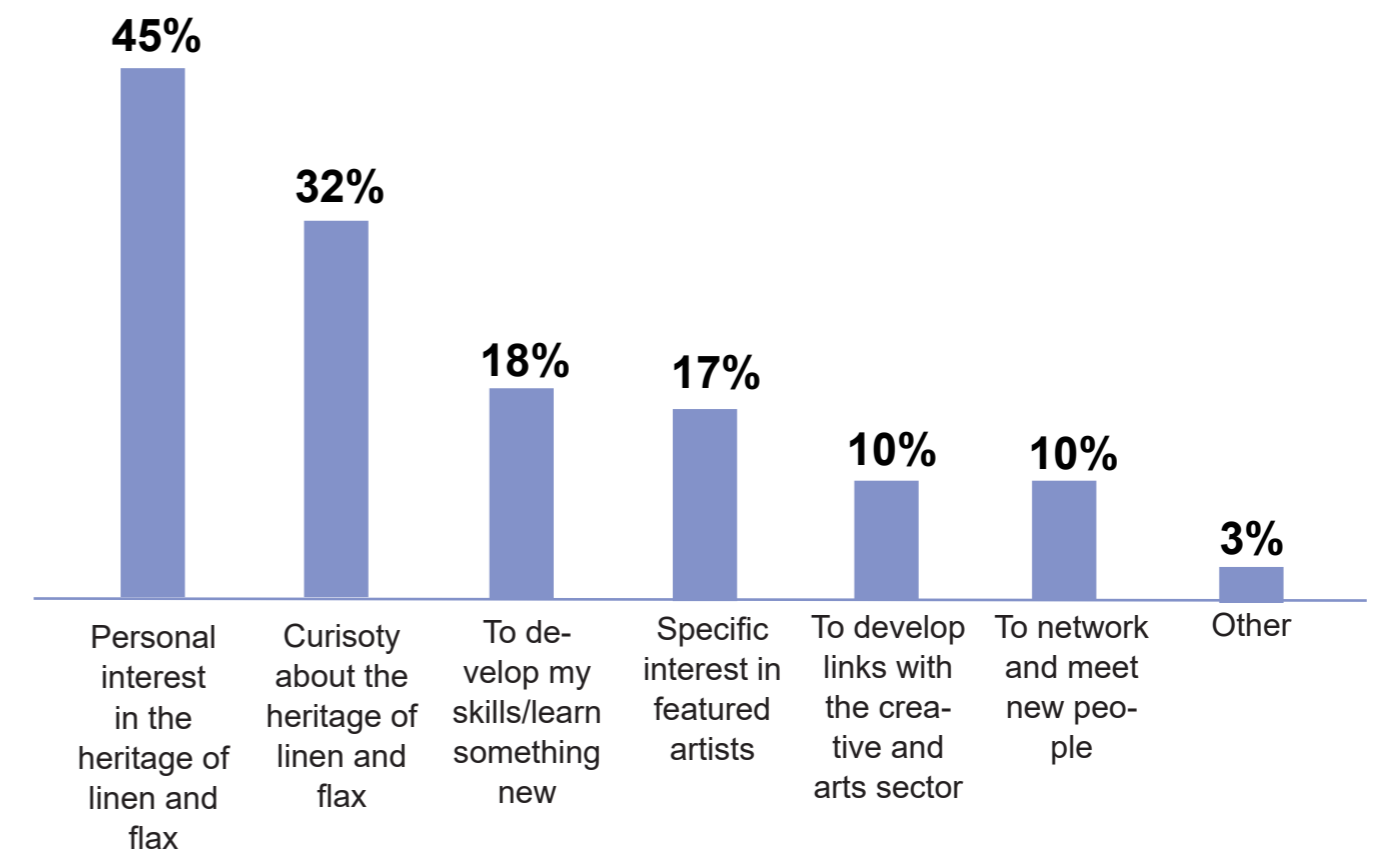


Chart 1: Why did you attend the Biennale event?

Heritage

Linen holds profound importance in the heritage of Northern Ireland, reflecting a rich historical legacy and cultural identity. With roots dating back centuries, the linen industry played a pivotal role in the region's economic development during the 18th and 19th centuries, becoming a global symbol of quality and craftsmanship.

Beyond its economic impact, linen is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric, with skills passed down through generations and the industry contributing to the artistic and educational spheres. The historical significance, global reputation, and symbolic value of linen underscore its enduring importance to Northern Ireland's heritage, making events like the Linen Biennale crucial in preserving and celebrating this integral aspect of the region's past.

Many of the Biennale's events focused on the heritage of linen and flax in Northern Ireland, such a range of talks focusing on the themes of material, environment, industry and narrative. A number of tours and workshops also centred on heritage topics.

95% of survey respondents stated that the Biennale event they attended helped them gain new knowledge about the heritage of linen and flax in Northern Ireland. Only 5% answered 'no' or were unsure.

In addition, 96% were inspired to learn more about the heritage of Irish linen and flax after attending a Biennale event, with over half (55%) stating that they were 'significantly' inspired.

In terms of knowledge and appreciation of the place linen and flax holds in our cultural heritage, 95% of respondents said that attending a Biennale event 'significantly' or 'to some extent' positively contributed to their knowledge and appreciation, with the majority (72%) stating 'significantly'.

95%

said the Biennale event they attended helped them gain new knowledge about the heritage of linen and Flax in Northern Ireland.

96%

were inspired to learn more about the heritage of Irish Linen and Flax after attending a Biennale event.

Changes in ideas or actions and skill development

The participant survey asked respondents if the Biennale led to any changes in their ideas or actions.

Some attendees expressed a reaffirmation of their use of linen in weaving, others were inspired to work with linen in upcoming projects, while others appreciated the depth of the linen-making process:

It confirmed my use of linen on my looms. Fortunately, I was able to source more new old stock linen, originally from one of the past Belfast mills, while in Northern Ireland. Already I have more plans for this linen, strengthened by being able to participate in the various Linen Biennale events held during the week I was visiting.

I'm interested in connecting with artists from the UK and Ireland who share an interest in flax culture and materiality.

Inspired me to want to work with linen in upcoming projects. I have a stash of linen but this has given me some new ideas.

Learning and ideas inspired by all events will feed into my linen weaving.

Some participants mentioned increased interest and plans to grow flax, help with harvesting or explore screen printing. Sustainability emerged as a common theme, with a desire to support flax/linen as a sustainable alternative to non-biodegradable materials:

I'll look more closely at the fabrics I wear.

I want to support the use of flax/linen as a sustainable fabric material as a substitute for non-biodegradable 'plastics' and other unsustainable materials in a range of industries and personal choice uses.

Made me think about the beauty of linen and why we should wear and use it more.

Definitely opened my eyes to a whole new world of textiles. I found it very inspiring.

I will try to buy more clothes made with sustainable fabrics.

The Biennale also sparked interest in local history. For some, it led to a determination to continue exploring the linen industry, visit mill sites, and engage in heritage preservation.

[I'm] now determined to continue finding out more about the linen industry in Northern Ireland especially locally to Lurgan.

I will tell people about Eugene McConville's scutching skills and his working of the last water powered scutching mill in NI- it was just so special to see him at work and he is possibly the last person to do this in this region.

Yes, we will definitely revisit two of the mill sites this year or next.

[I'm] more inquisitive to pursue and photograph and make investigations of many more places.

A number of the Biennale events were artist-led workshops which took place across Northern Ireland. Workshops included sewing, embroidery, screen printing, weaving and natural dyes - all working with Irish linen. We asked participants if attending the Biennale helped them develop new skills or enhance existing ones. 62% of respondents agreed that the Biennale event they attended helped with skill development. 22% selected the N/A option, this was available for attendees of events which were not specifically aimed at practical application.

62% felt that attending the event helped them develop new skills or enhance existing ones

Changes in ideas or actions and skill development

98% of participants were satisfied with the Biennale event they attended.

Many respondents left comments about the events they attended, praising them as professional, engaging, and well-organised. Some specific highlights include enjoying the mindfulness and wellbeing aspects of workshops, finding the events relaxing and informative, and appreciating the variety and inspiration provided by artists, curators and venues.

98% of participants were satisfied with the Biennale event they attended.

Positive feedback was given for events held in unique locations, such as a former linen weaving factory, and commendations were made for efforts to reinvent spaces like Portview Trade Centre as cultural hubs supporting the arts. Attendees commended the efforts of children in the Halftimers performance and recognised the importance of educating young people about heritage.

The audience found various talks and presentations interesting, informative, and well-delivered. Some expressed a desire for clearer sound or earlier starting times for lectures. Attendees appreciated the opportunity to learn about the history of the linen industry, gaining insights into the local linen story and discovering connections to personal experiences.

Workshops and exhibitions received praise for being enjoyable, beneficial, and thought-provoking. The creative aspects of events, including fibre art and slow stitching, resonated with participants, and they expressed a desire for more workshops and exhibitions in the future.

Overall, attendees found the Linen Biennale events to be inspiring, informative, and a valuable opportunity to connect with like-minded individuals, fostering a deeper appreciation for linen, heritage, and sustainability.



Conclusions

The participant feedback from the 2023 Linen Biennale paints a vivid picture of an impactful and well-received programme of events.

The Biennale participants represent a dedicated audience, predominantly from Northern Ireland, who demonstrated a genuine passion for heritage and flax, with 45% attending due to personal interest and 32% driven by curiosity about linen's heritage. The survey also reveals the success of the Biennale in achieving its intended outcomes, particularly in fostering knowledge and appreciation of linen's cultural heritage.

Heritage, a central theme, saw 95% of respondents gaining new knowledge about the heritage of linen and flax in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, 96% expressed inspiration to delve deeper into this heritage, underscoring the Biennale's role as a catalyst for continued exploration. Attendees overwhelmingly reported positive contributions to their knowledge and appreciation of linen's place in cultural heritage, with 72% stating a significant impact.

Attendees shared varied reflections, from reaffirming their use of linen in weaving to exploring new projects and supporting flax as a sustainable alternative. The Biennale's impact extended beyond the immediate event, fostering a commitment to local history exploration, heritage preservation, and sustainable practices.

The overall satisfaction with the Linen Biennale reached an impressive 98%, with attendees commending the events for their professionalism, engagement, and organisation. Specific highlights included the mindfulness and wellbeing aspects of workshops, knowledgeable speakers at talks, the unique locations chosen for events and praise for efforts to reinvent spaces as cultural hubs.

In summary, the participant feedback provides a compelling narrative of the 2023 Linen Biennale's success in not only meeting its objectives but also leaving a lasting impression on its audience. As attendees express satisfaction, share newfound knowledge, and commit to ongoing exploration and skill development, the Linen Biennale stands as a testament to the power of cultural events in fostering connection, appreciation, and inspiration within a community.



Flax and Fibres Celebration Day, Moneydarragh Hub
Photo credit: Ruairí Jordan



Tapestry Weaving with Rena Roohipur
Photo credit: Ruairí Jordan

Partner and Collaborator Feedback

The 2023 Linen Biennale programme ran in conjunction with a range of partners, from individual artists and makers, to larger organisations such as the Linen Hall Library and the Ulster Folk Museum.

Partners were involved in speaking at events, running workshops, participating in exhibitions, or in other programme delivery. 65 partners or collaborators gave their feedback via an online survey which gave them the opportunity to feedback about the event they were involved in, their involvement working with the Biennale staff team, and their experience of this year's Biennale.

Partner/Collaborator Survey

The chart below provides a breakdown of survey respondents, showing a good spread of partner/collaborator types for providing feedback.

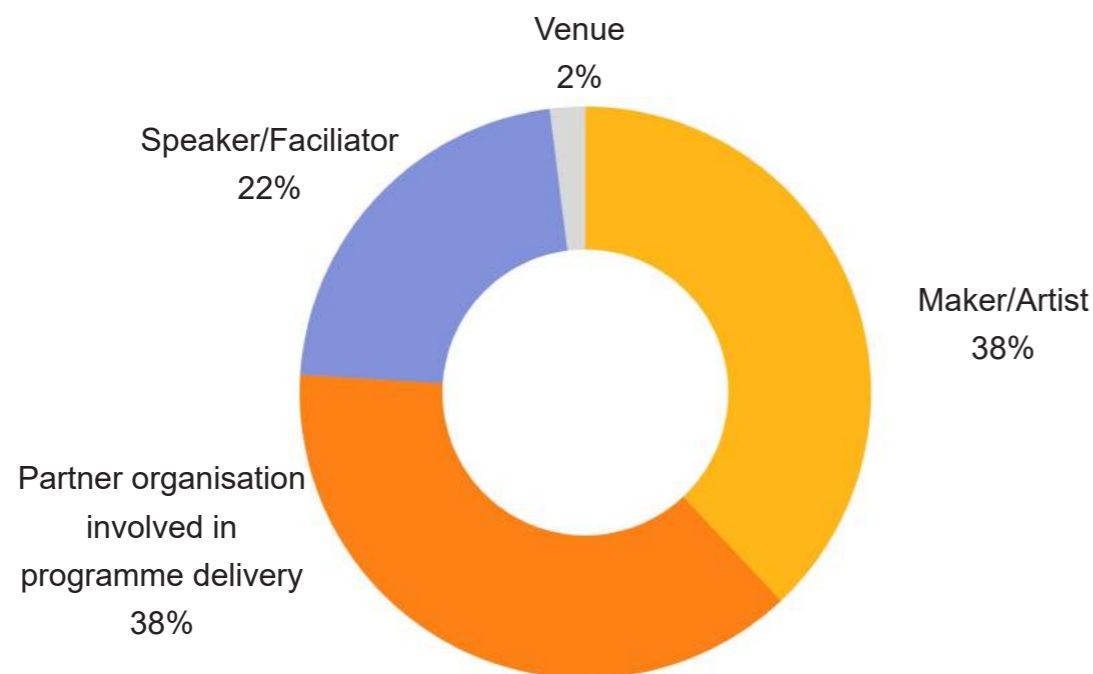


Chart 2: Breakdown of partner/collaborator respondent types

57 respondents were based in Northern Ireland, three were from Ireland, two from Great Britain, one from the USA, one from Turkey and one from Canada.

On working with the Biennale staff team, 84% of partners/collaborators rated their relationship as 'excellent' and 16% said it was 'above average'. 98% agreed that the support received from the Linen Biennale Team was sufficient.

Survey respondents shared positive comments about their experiences working with the Linen Biennale staff team. The team was widely acknowledged for being not only supportive but also offering proactive assistance to partners.

Partners appreciated the event promotion provided by the Linen Biennale and the team's 'excellent' communication and marketing efforts were highlighted, contributing to successful collaborations. Descriptions such as "brilliant", "accommodating" and "above and beyond" were used to express the team's commitment and support. Collaborators noted the impressive level of support throughout the process, emphasising timely information, on-site assistance, and active involvement in ensuring successful events.

The team's support for specific events and exhibitions, their attendance at launches, and their efficiency under tight timelines were appreciated.

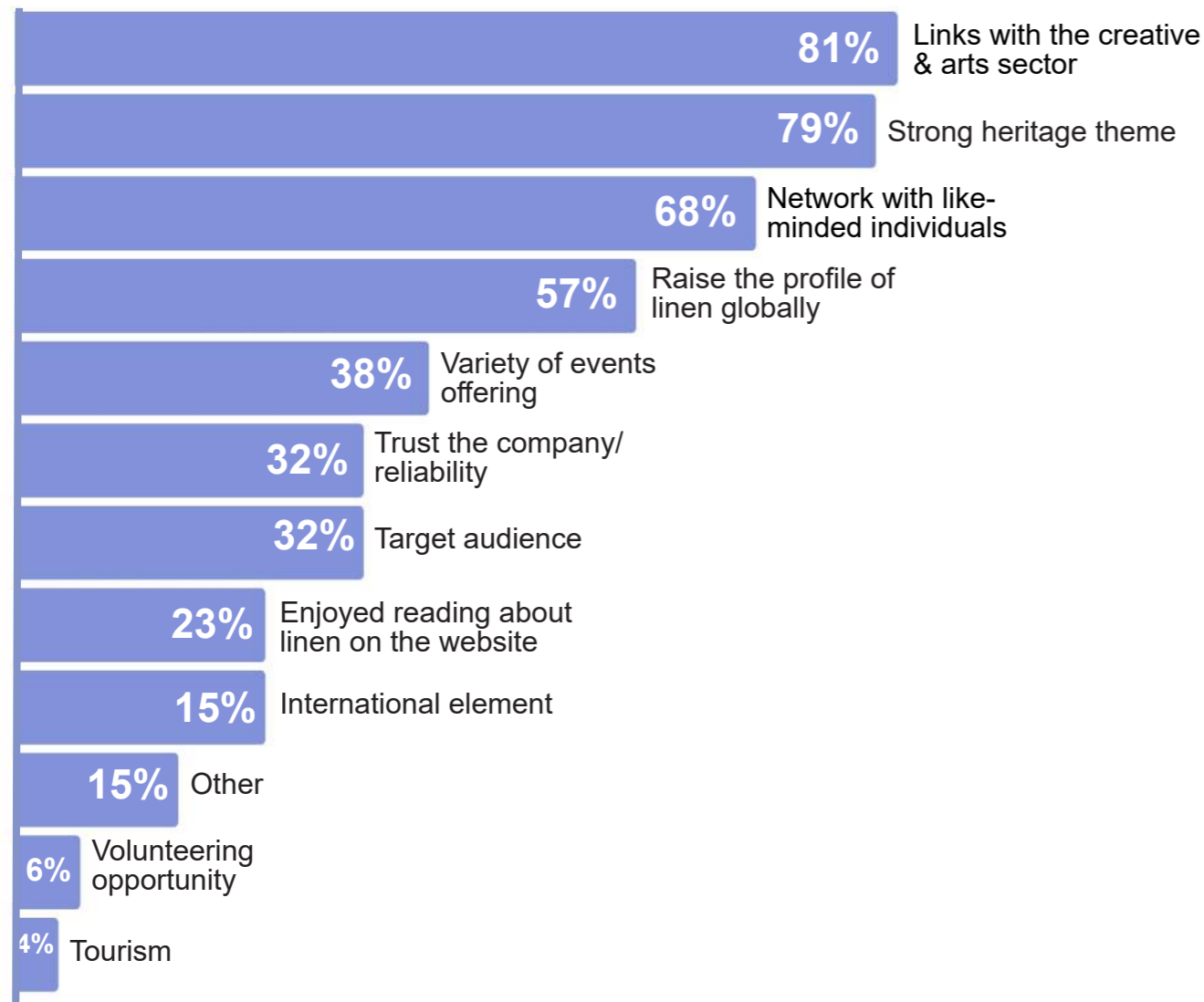
Why partners became involved in the Biennale

There are a number of reasons why partners became involved in the Biennale. The three most popular reasons given were 'links with the creative and arts sector' (81%), 'strong heritage theme' (79%) and 'to network with like-minded individuals' (86%).

Interestingly, in the 2018 Linen Biennale evaluation the main motivation for being involved in the Biennale was also 'links with the creative and arts sector' (86%), followed by 'strong heritage theme' (69%).

This trend underscores the Biennale's role as a platform for fostering connections within the artistic and creative community, emphasising the significance of collaborative endeavours and shared interests among participants. Additionally, the continued importance of the 'strong heritage theme' reflects the appreciation for the Biennale's commitment to heritage preservation as a compelling factor for collaboration.

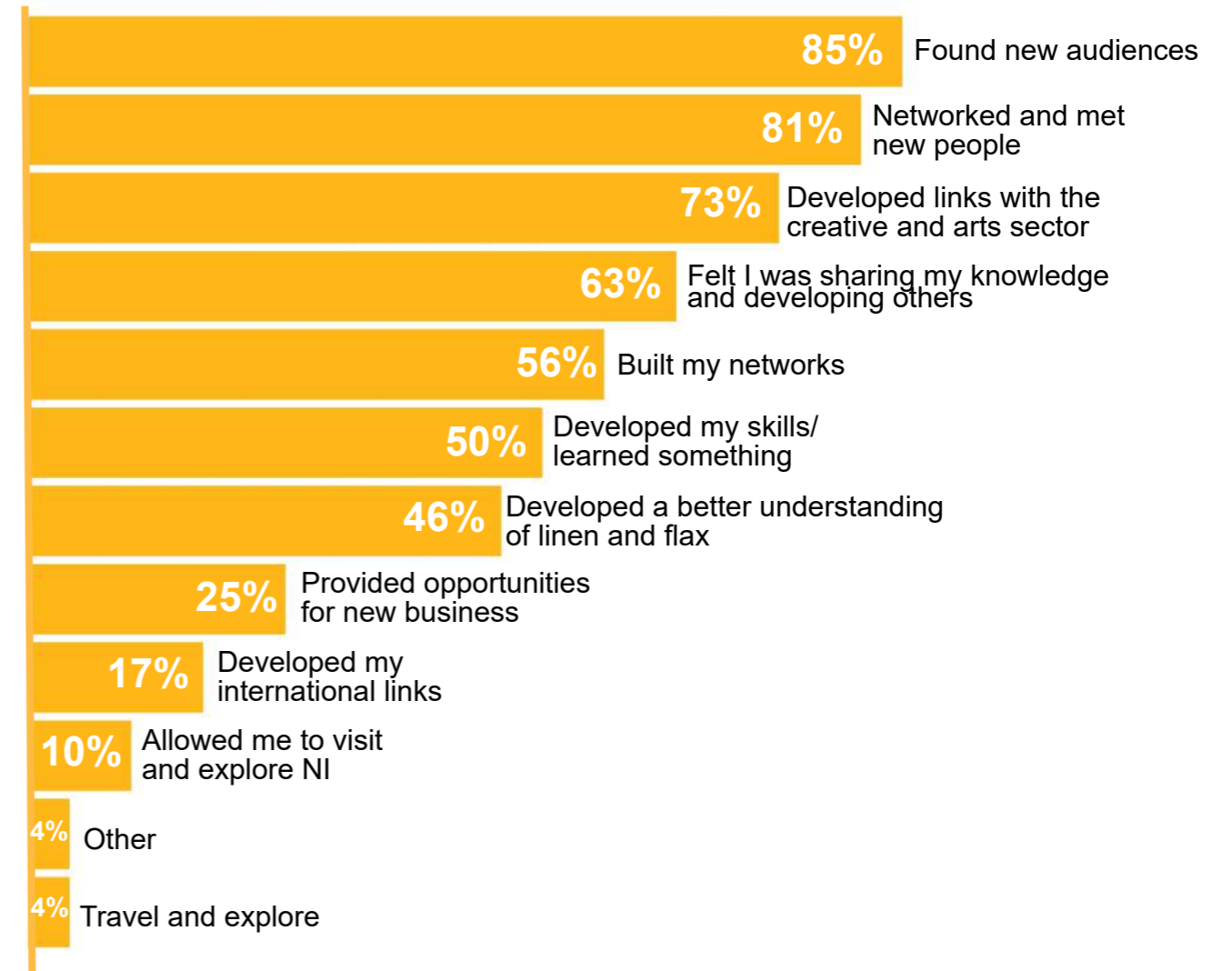
Chart 3: What are the main reasons you became involved in the Linen Biennale?



It is evident that the creative connections and networking aspects of the Biennale hold significant value for partners and collaborators.

In a subsequent question regarding the benefits of participating in the Biennale, corresponding themes emerged. A substantial 85% of respondents indicated that they 'found new audiences,' underscoring the Biennale's effectiveness in expanding reach and visibility. Additionally, 81% acknowledged that they 'networked and met new people,' emphasising the Biennale's role as a platform for fostering connections within the creative community. Furthermore, 73% said that they 'developed links with the creative and arts sector,' highlighting the Biennale's instrumental role in facilitating collaborations and interactions within the arts landscape.

Chart 4: How did the Linen Biennale benefit you?



The development of a better understanding of the heritage and flax is also noted in the partner/collaborator survey responses, with 46% of respondents stating this as a benefit, and corresponding with the participant survey.

It is also interesting to note that 25% of respondents said that the Biennale provided opportunities for new business and 17% developed international links. These findings underscore the Biennale's multifaceted impact, including economic opportunities for its participants. In relation to international links, the Biennale serves as a catalyst for global engagement and collaboration, fostering wider geographical connections outside Northern Ireland. 100% of respondents to the partner/collaborator survey said they were satisfied - very satisfied (92%) or somewhat satisfied (8%) with the 2023 Linen Biennale.

100% of partner/collaborators were satisfied with the Linen Biennale 2023

Additional comments

The survey asked respondents for any additional comments they may have. Many of the respondents expressed overwhelming support and appreciation for the Linen Biennale, offering congratulations and gratitude to the team for their hard work and dedication. The success of the 2023 program was acknowledged, even with the challenges of time constraints and some venue limitations. Some participants expressed excitement and anticipation for the next Linen Biennale in 2025, expressing a desire to work with the team again. Constructive feedback included suggestions to start planning earlier, the need for additional team members for enhanced support, and improved communication around program entries.



Rosalind Lowry: Endangered Species List 481
Photo credit: Rosalind Lowry

Suggestions for the Linen Biennale 2025

The suggestions and ideas for future Linen Biennales were diverse and insightful:

Programming suggestions

- Encourage the archiving of stories, memories, photos, poems, songs, etc., related to linen heritage.
- Consider exploring themes related to asylum seekers, drawing parallels with historical migrations and contemporary experiences.
- Broaden the scope of the event by showcasing alternative uses of flax.
- Incorporate more heritage events involving the public to capture stories from individuals with connections to the linen industry, such as the experiences of past workers in the industry.
- Explore the potential for participating artists to discuss their displayed linen pieces and overall work.
- A cultural linen exchange with countries, such as an artist from NI working with an artist from another

Event Structure and Planning

- Explore the possibility of spreading events over a more extended period or having stages throughout the year.
- Call for earlier programming and planning to enable better promotion.

Collaboration and Networking

- Facilitate discussions and exchanges among partners to share experiences and brainstorm future initiatives.
- Explore opportunities for international collaboration, fostering connections with artists from other countries.

Tangible Resources

- Consider the possibility of a publication emerging from the Biennale, documenting its impact and contributions.
- Provide a hard copy program of events for attendees, serving as a reminder and record of the Biennale.

Partner/Collaboration Focus Groups

In addition to the partner/collaborator survey, at the end of the Biennale programme 13 partners/collaborators representing a cross section of collaborations (artists, academics, community associations and others) provided qualitative feedback on the Biennale programme and discussed planning for the 2025 programme in focus groups.

The focus groups were structured around six key topics:

1. **Motivation for being involved in the 2023 Linen Biennale**
2. **How well the 2023 Biennale programme aligned with its objectives**
3. **Audience engagement**
4. **Collaboration and networking**
5. **Event organisation**
6. **Recommendations for 2025**

Some of the feedback provided through the survey was shared with the focus group participants. The following is an overview of the discussions and key points across the four focus groups under each of the six discussion topics.

Motivation for being involved in the 2023 Linen Biennale

Partners and collaborators who took part in the focus groups expressed a range of motivations for their involvement in the Linen Biennale. However, a number of key themes emerged, including collaboration, international links, the importance of heritage and the opportunity to showcase their work. The Biennale provided a platform for learning, networking, and engaging with the local community. Participants saw it as an opportunity to speak to a diverse audience and promote their space or work, particularly those with strong heritage links (for example being based in the Linen Quarter or being located in an old linen mill). The importance of promoting our shared linen heritage was a unifying factor. Many highlighted their love for textiles and the chance to meet like-minded makers. Additionally, partners aimed to raise the profile of linen exploring various aspects of linen in heritage and fostering connections with the creative sector.

How well the 2023 Biennale programme aligned with its objectives

The discussion on whether the Linen Biennale met its objectives highlighted several positive outcomes. Participants noted the success of a full program, providing good exposure and achieving significant milestones in a short period. However, some expressed challenges in keeping up with the quantity of events, but noted positively that the geographical reach improved compared to the 2018 Biennale. The absence of a conference, which proved beneficial in 2018 with potential for influencing policy and fostering networking, was mentioned by a couple of partners. However, the participants agreed that the Biennale events effectively explained the heritage of linen and flax, which will contribute to longer-term impacts. The focus on developing skills and promoting wellbeing through workshops was emphasised, encouraging the sharing of stories and meaningful connections.

Audience engagement

Partners commended the availability of online accessibility for some events in accommodating a wider audience who could not attend in person. This was praised as an effective avenue for disseminating information and ideas. Many partners were pleased with overall engagement with communities at their events, with numerous well-attended events, nurturing local connections. Some partners commented on the diversity of attendees at their events with varying backgrounds, while others expressed concern about the lack of younger people in attendance at some events, such as lectures. Feedback showed a shared appreciation for the heritage of linen showcased through the Biennale's range of events which contributed to a positive and inclusive atmosphere at events, fostering connections, storytelling, and skill-sharing among audiences of different ages and backgrounds.

Some partners acknowledged the need for academic involvement to enhance the Biennale's academic appeal, including a conference in the programme was one suggestion.

The success of the Biennale was attributed not only to its commemoration of the past but also its celebration of linen's present and future possibilities for artistic endeavours, ensuring its continued relevance.

Collaboration and networking

Partners expressed a range of positive experiences from partaking in the Biennale, in particular the discovery of new audiences and the enjoyment of collaborating with R-Space Gallery and the Biennale Team. Networking emerged as a vital aspect of the Biennale for many partners, contributing to the development and strengthening of partnerships. Some artists mentioned skill development through workshops, providing an opportunity for experimentation and knowledge enhancement. The Biennale was perceived as creating a community of partners and collaborators, uniting individuals with linen connections and providing a platform to connect. International links proved beneficial, fostering mutually beneficial relationships and aiding artistic practice.

The challenges for international attendees to engage fully in all events over three months was acknowledged, with suggestions for a conference to further sustain connections.

Event organisation

The Biennale team's commendable efforts in organising a well-planned and diverse program were acknowledged, but the impact of the constrained time frame was noted. Delays in securing funding resulted in a limited lead-in and delivery time, participants emphasised the importance of starting planning for the next biennale earlier to allow for comprehensive program development and avoid last-minute challenges. Issues related to late funding and programme finalisation were acknowledged, for partners the impact of this was less time to develop and implement ideas. For partners who were visiting from outside Northern Ireland the delay in finalising the full programme meant that planning to visit was difficult.

Some expressed challenges related to geographical logistics. The difficulty of visiting events which were geographically far apart, particularly for non-local participants, was highlighted, one suggestion was for the Biennale to organise transportation on select days.

While praising the quality and diversity of the 2023 program, some partners recommended a more streamlined approach with fewer events to maintain high standards. The lack of a conference in 2023 was also mentioned as a missed opportunity for partners, artists and academics to come together. Partners also proposed online meetings to facilitate connections among collaborators.

It was suggested that more collaboration with the Irish Linen Centre could be beneficial, however organisers commented that although this was a desire of the Biennale, the museum had already committed its resources and finalised its programming for the year, making it unfeasible for the 2023 Biennale.

Recommendations for 2025

The issue of funding future Biennale's was a key topic of conversation. A number of suggestions were made such as exploring different council areas, looking at EU funding opportunities, exploring other avenues such as the tourism strategy, or the potential of corporate sponsorship. There were also interesting suggestions about finding a 'Linen Champion' – a high profile figure who would champion the Linen Biennale. Connections to other festivals were also mentioned such as the film festival or other larger scale events such as the British Textile Biennale. It was suggested that looking at the scope of the Biennale and expanding on the themes, such as sustainability or innovation, could help secure funding for 2025.

On programming the 2018 Biennale was commended as an example of balancing a high-profile event, the conference, while also providing smaller groups and artists the opportunity to run their own events. In 2023 the limited run-in time did not allow for a larger scale event and the perceived lack of local academic interest was also noted.

Partners stressed the importance of capturing and archiving local linen stories and making place for them in the programme. It was emphasised that linen goes beyond heritage, serving as a material for the present and future. One partner suggested the potential of an augmented reality project as part of the next programme.

On practical issues, the partners commented on the need for a larger Biennale team. There was also discussion about how to effectively balance the digital elements with printed materials. There was a preference for a full printed programme, rather than a reduced hard copy brochure with full event listings online. There was also a call for the 2023 website to remain online as a legacy resource. The overall sentiment was supportive, urging the biennale to continue pushing boundaries and maintaining its impactful presence.



Longest Linen Tablecloth
Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography



Longest Linen Tablecloth workshop,
European Heritage Open Day
Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography



Field to Fabric - Flax Pulling at Mallon Linen
Photo credit: Angla McMahon

Partner/Collaborator Conclusions

The feedback from partners and collaborators in the 2023 Linen Biennale underscores the event's success in fostering meaningful connections, promoting heritage, and providing diverse opportunities for creative and artistic engagement. The overwhelmingly positive response to the Linen Biennale staff team highlights their exceptional support, proactive assistance, and effective event promotion efforts. The survey findings reveal that the primary motivations for partners to participate were linked to creative connections, heritage themes, and networking—a trend consistent with the 2018 evaluation, emphasising the enduring importance of these elements.

The Biennale's impact extends beyond artistic and creative realms, with tangible benefits such as the expansion of audiences, networking opportunities, and the development of links within the creative and arts sector. The survey results highlighted the significance of the 'strong heritage theme' as a compelling factor for collaboration, showcasing the Biennale's commitment to heritage preservation.

Partners commend the Biennale's multifaceted impact, including economic opportunities, the development of international links, and a deeper understanding of heritage and flax. The overall satisfaction rate of 100% among survey respondents attests to the Biennale's success in meeting the expectations of its collaborators.

The focus group discussions provide a deeper qualitative perspective and some useful suggestions of the evolution of the Biennale, from both strategic and practical points of view. The anticipation for the Linen Biennale 2025 reflects a collective eagerness to witness its progression and growth.

In conclusion, the combined feedback from partners and collaborators, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative insights, solidifies the Linen Biennale as a dynamic and impactful cultural platform.

Staff Feedback

As part of the evaluation process, the Biennale staff took part in ‘monthly reflections’ to document their experiences throughout the three months of the Biennale. In addition, staff had the chance to offer feedback from their unique perspective as internal participants during events. The culmination of this engagement was marked by ‘end-of-Biennale’ staff interviews, providing a final opportunity for reflection, feedback, and a forward look into the future of the Linen Biennale. The following are the key themes that emerged as a result of this process:

Initial Challenges and Team Dynamics

The Linen Biennale team faced significant challenges from the outset, coping with a constrained timeframe between funding notification and program initiation – a period of around four months. There was a marked collective effort and unity within the team, however the need for clarity about roles and responsibilities, the lack of continuity from the 2018 biennale, and overwhelming nature of the workload were notable obstacles. The timescale proved to be unrealistically tight, drawing comparisons with the more manageable pace and longer run-in time of the 2018 Biennale. However, amidst these challenges, the team were pleased with the success of the Biennale 2023 programme. Individual experiences of participating in the Linen Biennale reflected a mix of enjoyment, challenges, and insights. The team enjoyed event engagement, the networking aspects, and observing how others interacted with the program. Suggestions were made for a dedicated staff strategy day at the outset of the next Biennale to clarify objectives, roles, to streamline messaging and agree overall strategy.

External Influences and time constraints

External factors played a pivotal role in shaping the impact of the Linen Biennale. The team mentioned the public interest in Linen and Flax and the delayed funding decision as posing considerable challenges. The time constraints had a knock-on effect on almost every aspect of the Biennale - from staff recruitment, programme planning, securing partnerships and communication work. Examples include not being able to secure some venues and partnerships, as well as the compressed timeline necessitating a heavier reliance on social media over traditional PR methods.

The lack of a conference and other larger scale events such as the Linen Opera and Fashion Showcase which took place in 2018, negated much of the support requiring volunteers from the volunteer programme. While a number of volunteers (‘Flax Friends’) were enrolled, the 2023 Biennale saw smaller scale talks, impacting the extent to which the volunteer program could be fully utilised. The hope is that the program, initiated in 2023, will develop in subsequent editions.



Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

Biennale Outcomes

Despite the challenges, the Linen Biennale team agreed on success across multiple intended outcomes. Wellbeing, skill development, community impact, heritage exploration, and educational impact were recognised as strong areas of accomplishment. However, the intangibility of economic impact presented measurement challenges, particularly over the short three-month period. The team were collectively satisfied with the strong partnerships formed as part of the Biennale, particularly with community groups. Strong heritage links such as events in the Linen Hall and Portview Trade Centre were also notable inclusions.

Recommendations for Future Editions

It was agreed across the team that the 2023 Biennale had a good balance between community focused events and academic, educational focused events. Future editions of the Biennale should have a similar approach, however it was suggested in various ways that if the festival is to continue it cannot be ‘more of the same’. Staff members suggested ideas around different themes, such as focusing the next Biennale on ‘the present’ and the following one on ‘the future’.

There were suggestions to widen the scope, extending the Biennale to all textiles instead of only linen and flax. In response to support, it was proposed that perhaps future editions should concentrate on a different council area, such as the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon area where there is perceived to be more public and political support.

On practical matters, there should be consideration given to the length of the next Biennale, perhaps a shorter programme, with some events spaced closer together to facilitate non-local visitors. The size of the Biennale team was also discussed, with calls for a larger team, with better defined roles.

Where possible, staff emphasised the need for proper planning and run-in time for the next Biennale. Part of this process is keeping partnerships and connections warm in the period until the 2025 Linen Biennale. How this can take place without a dedicated project team, the illusiveness of achieving funding and a potential pivot in subject matter, was discussed. The establishment of a steering group to plan the next Biennale in 2024 was highlighted.

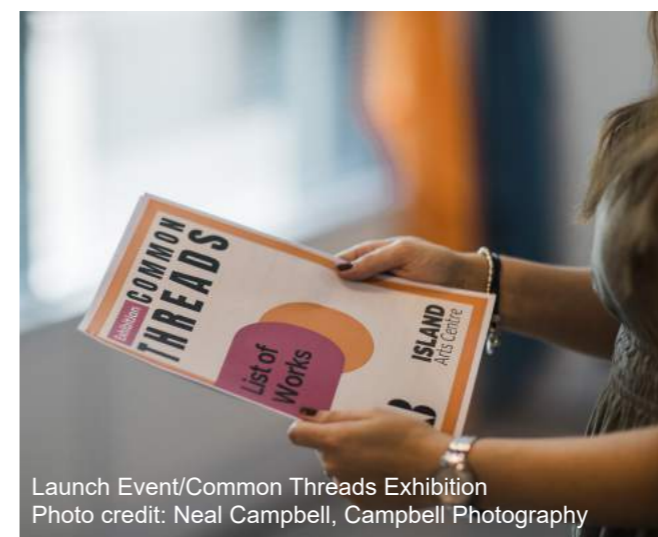


From Left: Suzanne Lyle (Head of Visual Arts, Arts Council Northern Ireland), Meadhbh McIlgorm, Anthea McWilliams, Robert Martin (Linen Biennale Team), Dr Sally Montgomery OBE (The National Lottery Heritage Fund Committee Member for Northern Ireland), Kim Mawhinney (Senior Curator of Art, National Museums NI and Craft NI Board Member).

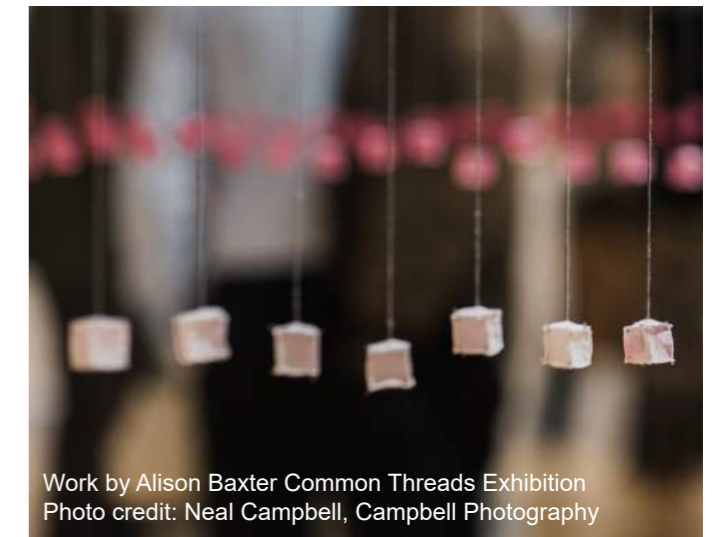
Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography



Designer Katie Larmour with her work, Common Threads Exhibition
Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography



Launch Event/Common Threads Exhibition
Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography



Work by Alison Baxter Common Threads Exhibition
Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

Audience Engagement

The Linen Biennale Website

In 2023 the website was relaunched on a different platform and became the online home of the Biennale, acting as a source of information and event listings. The new website launched in July 2023 and to date (December 2023) it has hosted 3.2k visitors, 13k page views and encompassing 5.4K sessions.

As the website hosting changed, the analytics relating to website activity during the previous Biennale cannot be compared. However, these analytics show a good level of engagement from a dedicated audience, the majority of which visited the website on multiple occasions.

The majority of users came directly to the site (39%) or through organic search (29%). A considerable proportion came via social channels (18%) or referrals (16%), likely partners posting about their Biennale events.

3.2k

Website visitors
(July-December 2023)

13k

Website page views
(July-December 2023)

Audience demographics

The Biennale's focus on digital communication enables the tracking of trends and changes in the audience demographics in response to programming and social media activity. Following the promotion of partnerships with a number of community groups, there was an increase in the percentage of Facebook followers in more rural areas. And a collaboration with Belfast's East Block Fashion saw an upsurge of engagement with women aged 25-34 and 35-44, with a marked growth in our Instagram followers (traditionally younger than Facebook or Twitter users).

Social media and email marketing



Twitter/X

- Followers 503
- Impressions 23k
- Retweets 135
- Likes 388
- Increase of 12% followers



Facebook

- Followers 818
- Reach 25,687
- Page likes 727
- New Followers 151
(738% on previous 3 mts)



Instagram

- Followers 1,404
- Reach 3,423 (inc. of 239%)
- New followers 522
(467% on previous 3 mts)



Email Marketing

- Subscribers 459
- Open rate 55.5%
- New subscribers 72% inc.
- Unique website visits 446

Media engagement

In addition to social media and email marketing, there was media coverage of the Linen Biennale through local and regional newspapers, as well as two radio appearances on Radio Ulster. The Biennale also benefited from a partnership with Translink NI who advertised the Linen Biennale at six of their key transport hubs from late August through to the end of October. The ads included QR codes to the Biennale Website.

See Appendix 3 for details of all media coverage.

Linen at East Block Fashion Market, Banna Block

Event overview

In a strategic move to broaden its reach and engage with a younger, urban audience, the Linen Biennale forged a partnership with Little Fox Events, organisers of the popular East Block Bazaar at Banna Block in Portview Trade Centre, the former Stand Spinning Mill in East Belfast. This collaboration took centre stage at the 3rd Fashion Market event in Autumn 2023. The Linen Biennale supported six emerging and established designer-makers—Anastacia McGivern, Annie Leona, Lucy Turner Print, Janet Hackney Textiles, Jupiter Red Linen, and Wild Kind—to showcase and sell their linen-based products.

The linen stalls were strategically placed in the premium spot within the banana-tree circle, creatively adorned with linen tablecloths and donated fabrics. The event attracted a significant crowd of approximately 300 people throughout the night, providing a platform for the participating designer-makers to showcase their creations and connect with a diverse audience. While the sellers reported very positive feedback, specific sales figures were not formally gathered.

Impact

The collaboration with Little Fox Events presented a unique opportunity for the Linen Biennale to diversify its audience. The event drew a younger, urban crowd, offering a distinct demographic compared to other Biennial events. The Linen Biennale team strategically positioned a table for distributing promotional material and gathering mailing list sign-ups, effectively reaching individuals who had previously been unaware of the Linen Biennale.



Linen at East Block Fashion Market, Banna Block
Photo credits: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography



In terms of foot traffic, the event at Banna Block exceeded the usual monthly attendance at R-Space, providing substantial exposure for both the Linen Biennale and the participating designer-makers. This collaboration not only served as a practical means of supporting local makers but also facilitated direct sales for the showcased linen products. Leveraging the expertise of Little Fox Events in market organisation ensured the seamless execution of the collaboration, tapping into an existing audience familiar with the market format. Overall, this venture marked a successful and mutually beneficial partnership, showcasing the versatility of linen within a vibrant and dynamic marketplace.

The following comments are from stall holders at the Fashion Market:

I had some wonderful feedback from attendees. Some great conversations about the increased interest in the Linen industry and overall interest in who, how and where garments are made.

Such a lovely and accommodating team! Felt very valued and welcome, it has been a true pleasure and honour to be a part of.



Millie Moore Exhibition & Workshops (Time Traces & Threads)

Event overview

Millie Moore, a visual artist based in Banbridge, Co Down, participated in the Linen Biennale in 2018 and continued to develop textile-based work. Her exhibition, 'Time Traces & Threads', showcased contemporary art pieces created from repurposed linens, exploring embedded memories in the cloth. The pieces incorporated traces of print and naturally dyed threads, symbolising the slowing down of time across the woven surface.

The exhibition ran for a limited period (August 15th-18th) at Banbridge town hall. Millie also collaborated with the FE McWilliam Gallery to host a 'Slow Stitch on Linen' workshop for their August Craft Month program. Due to its popularity and being oversubscribed, an additional workshop was arranged in October, which also sold out and received positive feedback.

Impact

This initiative had a significant impact on the individual artist, providing a platform to showcase and develop Millie Moore's practice. Being part of the Linen Biennale and August Craft Month extended the event's reach, enhancing its visibility. The positive comments and feedback highlighted the enjoyment of the slower pace of activity and the impact of simple yet meaningful concepts. Overall, the case study emphasises the importance of creating platforms for artists to showcase their work and the positive outcomes of collaborative events within the broader cultural context.

F.E. McWilliam Gallery & Studio said:

We received verbal feedback from participants from both workshops. All very positive feedback, one participant has told us she has since bought new materials and books to encourage her to continue her hobby after Millie's class. We've also had a lot of interest to host another/similar workshops. We have planned more workshops over Autumn.



Details from Time Traces & Threads Exhibition, Millie Moore
Photos: Linen Biennale

Linen in the Mournes & The Story of Flax Bus Tour

Event overview

Hilltown is a small village in the foothills of the Mournes. Hilltown Community Association (HCA) aims to develop and deliver projects to improve the village and the wider Clonduff parish, often in partnership with neighbouring towns. They were keen to participate in the Linen Biennale 2023 due to the massive linen heritage of the South Down area; they had been aware of 2018 events but not directly involved.

HCA secured financial support from the LB on the success of their 'Back from the Boley Rural Heritage Festival' which ran in 2022. They wanted to expand it to include linen skills and heritage in 2023 and engage other local groups and artists. They focused their programming into two stages; The 'Back from the Boley' festival in late August and a harvest time collaboration with the South Down Repair Cafe which ran late October.

A standout event was the 'Story of Flax Bus Tour' on August 28th, a music and story-filled journey led by Ciaran Mussen. The sold-out bus, accompanied by trailing cars, embarked on a tour of significant landmarks and sites, unravelling how the linen industry shaped the local environment. Stops included Annsborough, Dormore, and McConvill's scutching Mill, with breaks for lunch and dinner. The tour fostered a wonderful social atmosphere, providing ample time for participants to chat and share stories, collectively discovering hidden pieces of history.

Impact

The event created a wonderful social atmosphere and allowed participants to experience multiple sites as a cohesive group. The local engagement was particularly strong, resonating with audiences for whom the subject was relevant. Feedback emphasised that the tour vividly 'brought the heritage' to

life, capturing the audience's attention for the entire duration.

The financial support ensured the event was affordable to all, showcasing an exemplary community group partnership creatively bringing heritage to a local audience. This initiative by HCA effectively embedded the Linen Biennale in the community, fostering connections and celebrating the area's rich linen legacy.

The partners at HCS said:

It was fantastic to be involved and a brilliant opportunity to open up new doors and meet new people from other groups. It was such an exciting experience working with the team to bring a taste of Linen Biennale to Hilltown! We enjoyed it all and look forward to working on Linen Biennale 2025.



The Story of Flax Bus Tour
Photo credits: Linen Biennale

Flax Paper Labs & Belfast Print Workshop - August

Event overview

Regine Neuman, an instructor in Fibre Art and Papermaking at Bishop's University, Quebec, spent July and August as a resident artist in Flax Artists Studios, Belfast. Her FlaxPaperLab project, inspired by the digital FabLab movement, aimed to create collective learning networks and develop new strategies for working with flax pulp, integrating collaboration into the process. Simultaneously, Belfast Print Workshop (BPW), an artist-led studio space specialising in printmaking, organised an exhibition in their in-house gallery featuring 15 members responding to the theme of linen and flax throughout August. The exhibition was complemented by talks, workshops, and events.

Before arriving in Northern Ireland, Regine's information was circulated to relevant artists and organisations, including BPW, establishing a good partnership. BPW utilised its network and online communication channels to showcase and promote Regine's work. Regine delivered an artist talk at BPW, creating a connection between herself, BPW, and the Linen Biennale with many Belfast-based artists who might not have otherwise interacted with the Linen Biennale.

Impact

This collaboration facilitated direct networking opportunities, providing space and time for creative exploration. The inclusion of flax paper added a new dimension to materials explored in the Linen Biennale. Regine's collaboration with multiple artist members reached a broader community of artists in the city. The relatively small financial investment supported an engaged project with multiple positive outcomes. The case study exemplifies the power of effective partnership working and joined-up thinking, showcasing the potential for continued exploration of links with Canada and papermaking in future biennales.

Regine commented:

A highlight was meeting and collaborating with flax producers, artists and artisans. As well as having time for discussion and learning from each other.



Were the Linen Biennale's outcomes met?

The Linen Biennale 2023 aimed at several outcomes, including enhancing wellbeing, skill development, and the betterment of the local community and economy. This evaluation assesses the extent to which these goals were achieved.

A wider range of people involved in heritage

Building on the achievements of the inaugural Linen Biennale, the 2023 edition enhanced its reach and expanded the diversity of participants. A major focus was placed on extending the Biennale's reach to communities and individuals traditionally underrepresented in heritage experiences, often due to socio-economic disadvantages or geographical constraints. Working with 30 delivery partners and a geographic spread across Northern Ireland reaching seven of nine council areas, the Biennale actively involved rural communities, volunteers, adult learners, individuals in economic and cultural enterprises, businesses, older and younger people, as well as niche audiences and local history studies. In total over 10,000 people attended this year's Biennale. The establishment of new partnerships in 2023 played a vital role in achieving this outcome.

Through its inclusive programming and community-focused initiatives, the biennale has successfully broken-down barriers that may have previously limited participation in heritage-related activities. By offering a variety of events, workshops, and exhibitions, the Linen Biennale has made heritage more accessible and appealing to individuals from different backgrounds, ages, and interests. This inclusive approach has not only democratised access to cultural heritage but has also fostered a sense of collective ownership and pride in the diverse heritage of Northern Ireland.



Linen at East Block Fashion Market
Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

In particular there were two main outreach projects included in the 2023 programme to ensure undeserved and hard-to-reach groups could participate:

Toile de Jouy Print on Linen

Community groups across NI have been given the opportunity to take part in a skills workshop of printing on linen with artist Robert Peters. Over four sessions they have created designs that responded to valued green spaces.

Participating Groups:

Wise the BAP, Bangor, Upper Springfield Development Trust, Action Mental Health Lisburn, Action Mental Health, Belfast, Armagh Men's Shed, Action Mental Health Craigavon, Belvoir Community Hub, Belfast, Antrim Men's Shed, Mourneview Ladies Arts and Crafts Group Lurgan, Resurgam Lisburn.

Longest Linen Tablecloth Project

Since 2018 R-Space has been receiving donations of linen from the public (such as tablecloths, napkins, tray cloths, tea towels, all valued family pieces but no longer used). A legacy project for Linen Biennale will be the long linen tablecloth - currently 12 metres long and accompanied by a still-in-progress table running co-designed with the public and various community groups. Packs for groups to contribute to this project from across NI have been made-up and progress for it will continue until 2025.



Longest Linen Tablecloth
Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

People will have greater wellbeing

The Linen Biennale 2023 has had a significant and positive impact on the wellbeing of both participants and partners alike. It has fostered wellbeing through engagement, networking, and enjoyment, allowing individuals to connect with peers and engage in meaningful conversations and storytelling. Celebrating the rich heritage of linen has brought joy and pride to many. Moreover, participants have had the opportunity to meet like-minded people who share their passion for linen and heritage, forging connections and enriching their sense of community.

The Biennale has also contributed to wellbeing by providing creative and learning opportunities. Workshops such as the 'Connected Emotions Workshop' and 'Toile de Jouy Print Outreach' have enabled individuals to tap into their creativity, learn new skills, and engage in thought-provoking conversations.

Participants also expressed wellbeing through a deeper connection to their local area and economy. The Biennale has inspired many to explore their heritage further and support local businesses and artisans. It has also promoted wellbeing by offering skill development, with attendees acquiring new skills and enhancing existing ones.

Participants shared that the Biennale encouraged them to explore and learn more about the heritage of Irish linen and flax, deepening their appreciation for the cultural and historical significance of these materials. Nearly all (98%) participants expressed high levels of satisfaction, and a vast majority (95%) have gained new knowledge about the heritage of linen and flax in Northern Ireland. For partners, 81% said that the Linen Biennale benefited them by enabling them to network and meet new people.



The following quotes were provided in the evaluation surveys:

Participant feedback

Wonderful opportunity to network with others. Some highly interesting conversations - Flax and Fibres, participant feedback

Really enjoyed sharing the event with others located overseas and seeing/learning about new forms of art - Plant Communitas: Linum, participant feedback

Thought provoking conversations alongside engaging with the exhibition in a deeper manner. It really made me think about the meaning, process, and material.
- Connected Emotions Workshop, participant feedback

Enjoyed the printing workshop and learning something new was very educational and rewarding - Toile de Jouy Print participant feedback

Very helpful mentally and calming - Toile de Jouy Print, participant feedback

I very much enjoyed the mindfulness and wellbeing aspect of the workshop - Time, Traces & Threads workshop, participant feedback

Partner feedback

Everyone has been so supportive and there have been great opportunities to network and build relationships with other artists with whom I might not have previously had the opportunity to meet with - She Stitches Pieces of Material, partner feedback

A highlight of the event was meeting and collaborating with flax producers, artists and artisans. Having time for discussion and learning from each other - Common Threads, partner feedback

Learning, sharing and opening conversations about linen, both in the manufacture and the wearing - Time, Traces & Threads Slow Stitch on Linen Workshop, partner feedback

People will have developed skills

The Linen Biennale 2023 has been instrumental in helping people gain new skills and enhance existing ones, as reflected in the participant feedback. Participants have benefited from a diverse range of workshops and events, enabling them to acquire valuable skills and knowledge.

Participant feedback from various workshops and events speaks to the skill development achieved during the Biennale. For example, in the 'Connected Emotions Workshop', a participant noted that it was a "great workshop" and that even an 8-year-old boy had learned a new skill and enjoyed the experience. Similarly, in the 'Slow Stitch' workshop, participants expressed their delight in working with linen and their newfound ability to use linen scraps creatively.

The 'Toile de Jouy Print' workshops were another avenue for skill acquisition, with participants reporting that they enjoyed the classes and learned a lot about linen printing.

The evaluation survey data further supports the impact of the Linen Biennale on skill development. 62% of participants agreed that attending a Biennale event helped them develop new skills or enhance their existing ones. 18% of participants attended events specifically to develop their skills or learn something new. Moreover, specific workshops like the 'Bags of Style' and 'Natural Dyes Workshop' had a high percentage of participants acknowledging the acquisition of new skills during the event (85% and 100% respectively).



Tapestry Workshop
Photo credit: Ruairi Jordan

The following were provided in the participant evaluation surveys:

Great workshop. An 8 year old boy has learnt a new skill and loves it - Connected Emotions Workshop, participant feedback

Love working with linen and I've learned how to use all the scraps of linen and will keep recycling any linen from now on - Slow Stitch, participant feedback

Have looked forward to the class each week. Has been enjoyable to learn yet another skill - Toile de Jouy Print, participant feedback

Partner feedback

An amazing event with so many things to see and do, especially the learning and sharing of old time heritage skills and crafts - Flax to Linen, Newtown Men's Shed, partner feedback



Flax and Fibres Celebration Day, Moneydarragh Hub
Photo credit: Ruairi Jordan

The local area will be a better place to live, work or visit

The Linen Biennale 2023 has contributed to enhancing the local area, making it a better place to live, work, and visit. This positive impact is evident through participant feedback, partner feedback, and statistics reflecting the event's influence on the local community.

First and foremost, the Biennale has strengthened the local area by fostering a deeper connection to its cultural heritage. Participants' feedback reveals that the event has inspired a newfound appreciation for the local linen heritage for many. Attendees expressed a desire to explore this heritage further, demonstrating a sense of pride in their country and its rich textile history.

In terms of a better place to work, partner feedback highlights how many of the events have facilitated networking and collaboration opportunities for local artists, makers and businesses. The Biennale has provided valuable support to local businesses and artisans. It acted as a platform for local businesses and makers, such as Mallon Linen and Ulster Guild of Weavers, Spinners & Dyers, to showcase their work and collaborate with artists and artisans. This exposure benefits local businesses, promotes local products, and contributes to the economic vitality of the local area.

Finally, the event has led to changes in individuals' ideas and actions. Participants expressed a desire to be more involved in their local linen industry, a respect for their cultural heritage, and a commitment to exploring and documenting places of significance. These changes in perspective are a testament to the Biennale's role in encouraging an engaged and vibrant local community.



Photo credits: Mallon Linen

The following were provided in the evaluation surveys:

Participant feedback

I love linen and have decided to find out more about our linen heritage
- Connected Emotions Workshop, participant feedback

Helen and Charlie were so welcoming and I loved seeing their work and then loved meeting the very talented Ulster Guild of Weavers and what they do with the linen and being able to experience using a spinning wheel. Their knowledge of the processes is amazing. The whole event made my heart sing with a great pride in my country and where I come from - Field to fabric, participant feedback

Partner feedback

Through my participation in the Biennale with the Flax Paper Lab, I had the opportunity to experience the potential of locally grown flax to contribute to social change through collaboration and community building. The collective attempt in Northern Ireland to re-establish a regional flax textile production chain combines social, environmental, and economic development goals that I believe have a greater chance of being transformative if we see them as interconnected and interrelated - Flax Paper Lab, partner feedback

It's a wonderful festival that celebrates our rich textiles heritage, whilst inspiring the next generation, making connections across our islands and beyond - Fibre Networks - Growing Connections for Northern Ireland, partner feedback

A wealth of Flax and Textile knowledge shared across Northern Ireland, a combination of old skills and processes through to forward thinking new projects. Gorgeous people from across the world coming together looking to the past to create our future, sharing it with you through learning - Connected Emotions. partner feedback

A very poignant event with huge local significance. Large, very engaged audience
- Dirty Linen: Martin Doyle in conversation, partner feedback

The local economy will be boosted

Although this is a difficult outcome to measure for a three month event, the Linen Biennale 2023 has made some contribution to boosting the local economy. The range of events' impact on the local economy is evident through various avenues. One of the most apparent is the heightened sense of local pride and appreciation for the region's linen and flax heritage among participants. Feedback from participants reveals that attending workshops and exhibitions inspired them to learn more about the rich history of Irish linen and flax. This fresh appreciation often translates into increased support for local businesses, particularly those associated with the textile industry. As participants express a desire to explore and learn more about the heritage of linen and flax, they actively seek out and purchase local products related to these industries. For example, a participant in the Field to Fabric workshop said that they would actively follow and support local businesses Mallon Linen and the members of the Ulster Guild of Weavers Spinners and Dyers. The Guild also reported a surge in memberships in their September meeting, likely as a result of their public events over the summer for the Linen Biennale.

In addition, the fashion market at East Block Bazaar provided an opportunity for local designers and makers to generate sales, attract new customers, facilitate future collaborations and promote the local textile industry.



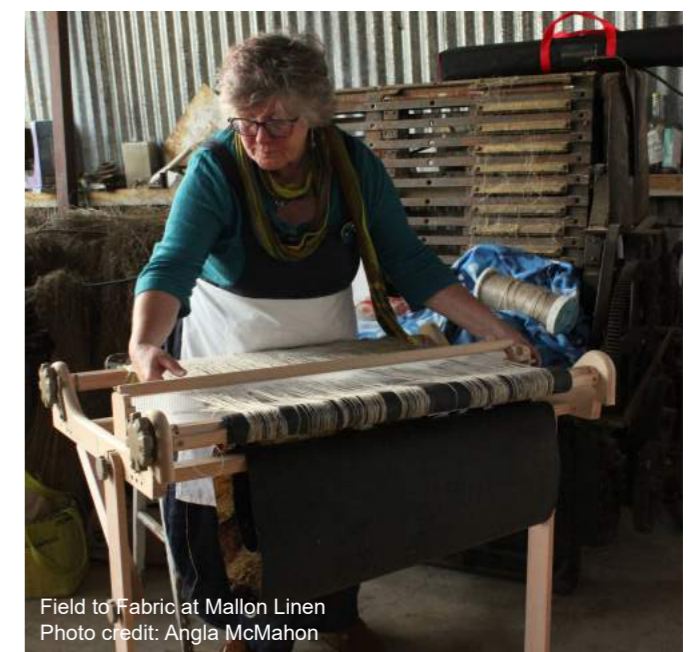
The Linen Biennale has also promoted local businesses and artisans through partnerships and collaborations. Feedback from partners highlights the networking and collaborative opportunities the event offered, leading to the potential of new business ventures and economic growth. For instance, the Flax Paper Lab partnership emphasises the importance of environmentally friendly flax cultivation and its potential to revive the local linen fibre economy.

The Biennale has become a platform for connecting artists and businesses working in various ways with textiles, fostering economic and community development goals. In fact, 25% of partners said the Linen Biennale provided the opportunity for new business.

Although many events were free - approximately 31 workshops were paid for events and 60% sold out in advance. This show's great demand for skill-sharing workshops and would have provided income for the facilitators involved although this was not a metric we recorded.

The following is feedback from a partner:

The Linen Biennale 2023 has shown that the cultivation of flax is an important first step towards reviving a local linen fibre economy. This is not only about the importance of environmentally friendly cultivation and the use of all parts of the plant, but also about ensuring that seeds for textile flax are available in the future - Flax Paper Lab, partner feedback



Heritage will be identified and better explained

The Linen Biennale 2023 has played an important role in the identification and comprehensive explanation of Northern Ireland's rich linen and flax heritage through the provision of a wide range of events, workshops, exhibitions and seminars. Many of these events were free to attend or have been made available online.

Feedback from participants and partners illustrates the impact of the Biennale:

- 97% of participants said that attending an event positively contributed to their knowledge and appreciation of the place linen and flax holds in our cultural heritage.
- 96% said the event they attended inspired them to explore and learn more about the heritage of Irish linen and flax.

Participants' testimonials reveal that the Biennale has ignited an interest and determination to delve deeper into the local linen industry. For instance, one participant said, "[I am] Now determined to continue, finding out more about the linen industry in Northern Ireland, especially locally to Lurgan." This demonstrates the Biennale's role in inspiring individuals to explore and understand their heritage.



Photo credits: Moume Textiles

Moreover, participants also report a heightened appreciation for their shared heritage. One attendee noted, "Greater appreciation for our shared heritage", emphasising how the event has brought the community closer to its historical roots. Another participant stated, "[It] made me want to be more a part of it and a new respect for the people that grow it." The range of Biennale events simulated conversations about the beauty of linen and its importance.

The following quotes were received from event participants:

Greater appreciation for our shared heritage - Gerard Muldoon at BPW, participant feedback

The Linen Biennale 2023 was inspiring, innovative and thought provoking. It was lovely to connect with our heritage and share stories in a warm and creative space - Facilitator feedback

Great to enjoy a celebration of our heritage. Linen is an amazing material - A Dress for Kathleen, participant feedback

The Linen Biennale 2023 was inspiring, innovative and thought provoking. It was lovely to connect with our heritage and share stories in a warm and creative space - Facilitator feedback

Fiona was extremely knowledgeable and clearly passionate about her work. I was very engaged and it proved how important this heritage is. Sad the industry has disappeared more or less - Fiona McKelvie Talk, participant feedback

Partner feedback:

It was an honour to share the stories of flax and linen through the archive films. The rich heritage of our stories, history and personal experiences has definitely been highlighted by the Biennale - Flax & Fibre film screenings, partner feedback

The Linen Biennale is a celebration of the heritage and the future of linen in Northern Ireland, and the 2023 programme has been a unique opportunity to engage as an artist with this precious history - Endangered Species List 481, partner feedback



ReGroup Exhibition
Photo credits: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

People will have learnt about heritage, leading to change in ideas and actions

The Linen Biennale 2023 has made significant strides in enhancing people's understanding of their heritage and encourages changes in their ideas and actions. Through a diverse range of workshops, seminars and exhibitions, participants have been actively engaged in conversations, leading to an increased appreciation of the significance of linen in their cultural heritage. Participants have expressed enthusiasm about exploring their heritage, as demonstrated by feedback such as, "[I am] Now determined to continue, finding out more about the linen industry in Northern Ireland." This interest has not only fostered respect for linen production but also generated a greater appreciation for their shared heritage. Participants have been inspired to delve deeper into the subject, with one noting that it has "fed an interest and no doubt will lead to further discussions."



ReGroup Exhibition
Photo credits: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography



Alchemy of Print, Trish Belford
Photo credits: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

Furthermore, the Linen Biennale has acted as a spark for change, particularly in encouraging people to explore and learn more about their heritage. Feedback from participants has demonstrated an increased curiosity about linen and the desire to document their exploration: "More inquisitive to pursue and photograph and make investigations of many more places." Participants expressed their intention to be more actively involved in their local linen industry. The Biennale's impact is underscored by the fact that 95% of participants reported gaining new knowledge about the heritage of linen and flax in Northern Ireland, ultimately contributing to a deeper connection to their cultural roots and a renewed commitment to preserving their heritage for future generations. Furthermore, the majority of respondents said the event inspired them to explore and learn more about the heritage of Irish linen and flax (96%).

The following quotes were received from event participants:

Thought provoking conversations alongside engaging with the exhibition in a deeper manner. It really made me think about the meaning, process, material
- Connected Emotions Workshop, participant feedback

I love linen and have decided to find out more about our linen heritage
- Connected Emotions Workshop, participant feedback

[I am] Now determined to continue, finding out more about the linen industry in Northern Ireland especially locally to Lurgan - McCaw Allan Tea Towel Exhibition, participant feedback

It made me want to be more a part of it and a new respect for the people that grow it - Field to Fabric, participant feedback

It fed an interest and no doubt will lead to further discussions - Gerard Muldoon at BPW, participant feedback

Made me think about the beauty of Linen and why we should wear and use it more
- Slow Stitch, participant feedback

I feel like I got a great introduction to linen in Northern Ireland. There is lots I want to research further! - Fiona McKelvie Talk, participant feedback

Summary

The Linen Biennale 2023, building upon the foundations laid by its predecessor in 2018, has made tangible strides in meeting its intended outcomes. Through workshops, exhibitions, and community engagement, it has positively impacted participants' wellbeing, skill sets, and local connections. The feedback received echoes a community enriched by the Biennale, signalling success in its objectives and leaving a positive imprint on both individuals and the local fabric of Northern Ireland. However, it's important to interpret these findings within the framework of the logic model, considering the assumptions made and acknowledging the methodology's limitations.



(From left) Annie Leona McColgan (fashion designer), Emma Whitehead (textile artist), Bronagh McAtasney (NI Screen Digital Film Archive), Rena Roohipur (weaver), Claire Mooney (silversmith) at Flax and Fibres Celebration Day, Moneydarragh Hub.

Photo credit: Ruairi Jordan



Photo credit: Mallon Textiles

Quotes

It's a wonderful festival that celebrates our rich textiles heritage, whilst inspiring the next generation, making connections across our islands and beyond.

Gawain Morrison, Brink!

An amazing event with so many things to see and do, especially the learning and sharing of old time heritage skills and crafts.

Caroline Shimmons,
Caroshim Art

A wealth of Flax and Textile knowledge shared across Northern Ireland, a combination of old skills and processes through to forward thinking new projects. Gorgeous people from across the world coming together looking to the past to create our future, sharing it with you through learning.

Jill Phillips, Artist

A thoroughly enjoyable experience and an important way to celebrate our linen past and future.

Partner

A wealth of Flax and Textile knowledge shared across Northern Ireland, a combination of old skills and processes through to forward thinking new projects. Gorgeous people from across the world coming together looking to the past to create our future, sharing it with you through learning.

Jill Phillips, Artist

A fantastic opportunity to promote and explore a natural resource, at the same time delving into its history and influence on our society and culture.

Anna Donovan, Artist

A fantastic opportunity to explore a rich piece of heritage in Northern Ireland which has impacted generations of lives.

Ruairí Jordan, Moneydarragh Hub

The Linen Biennale is such a brilliant initiative, raising the profile of linen and carrying it through to the next generation.

Partner

The Linen Biennale is a celebration of the heritage and the future of linen in Northern Ireland, and the 2023 programme has been a unique opportunity to engage as an artist with this precious history.

Rosalind Lowry, Artist

It was an honour to share the stories of flax and linen through the archive films. The rich heritage of our stories, history and personal experiences has definitely been highlighted by the Biennale.

Bronagh McAtasney, Northern Ireland Screen

The Linen Biennale 2023 has shown that the cultivation of flax is an important first step towards reviving a local linen fibre economy. This is not only about the importance of environmentally friendly cultivation and the use of all parts of the plant, but also about ensuring that seeds for textile flax are available in the future. Through my participation in the Biennale with the Flax Paper Lab, I had the opportunity to experience the potential of locally grown flax to contribute to social change through collaboration and community building. The collective attempt in Northern Ireland to re-establish a regional flax textile production chain combines social, environmental, and economic development goals that I believe have a greater chance of being transformative if we see them as interconnected and interrelated.

Regine Neumann,
Bishop's University,
Quebec

The Linen Biennale 2023 was inspiring, innovative and thought provoking. It was lovely to connect with our heritage and share stories in a warm and creative space.

Bridget Nugent, Art Therapist

A really joyful & enriching celebration of fibre, fabric and the people who make it. There is something for everyone at this festival of linen - a true democracy of creativity & industry.

Catherine O'Hara, Belfast School of Art

Linen Biennale 2023 allowed me to give tribute to my ancestors, a historic fibre, and their shared qualities of strength and resilience.

Margaret B. Russell, Handweaver from Byfield, Massachusetts

The Linen Biennale 2023, was a fusion of art, creativity, knowledge and culture, I was delighted to be involved.

Pat Griffin, Artist

'Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine' - It is in the shelter of each other that we live. Connections - something we crave more than ever. By connecting with each other, with our language and the land beneath our feet we can weave a new way forward. The Linen Biennale 2023 created a wonderful opportunity for us to do just that. With such wonderful designers, makers and growers prioritising sustainability, craftsmanship and community, it is in the shelter of each other that we can not only live but thrive.

Ciara Tinney, Wildkind Ireland & The Grow Slow Initiative

A really joyful & enriching celebration of fibre, fabric and the people who make it. There is something for everyone at this festival of linen - a true democracy of creativity & industry.

Catherine O'Hara, Belfast School of Art



Woven Hug at Flowerfield Arts Centre
Tere Chad & Cordelia Rizzo
Photo credits: Kavod Films

Learning and recommendations

- One of the main factors which impacted this year's Biennale was the time restraints due to the delay in securing funding. This impacted every aspect of the Biennale, from programming through to marketing and PR. Although the team worked hard to overcome the challenges presented, and put together a well-received Biennale, the experience serves as a cautionary tale to **ensure that the run-in time for the next Biennale is reasonable and that good foundations should be laid in the period until 2025**. Including keeping connections warm, developing a planning steering group in 2024 and ensuring that sufficient structures are in place to support the next staff team coming on board.
- **The funding model is unsustainable.** In 2023, in comparison to 2018, having fewer funders meant programming and evaluating against a succinct list of intended outcomes was more straightforward. However, the current funder is not in a position to fund a similar programme again. Organisers need to rethink the Biennale's themes and objectives in looking for potential new funders for 2025.
- As a follow on point, it is clear that the next Biennale cannot be 'more of the same' for various reasons including securing a funder and enhancing the reach of the event. **Consideration must be given to exploring what the next Biennale will look like, thematically, geographically and practically.** Expanding the scope to include all textiles, considering themes such as sustainability or industry, or exploring one aspect of linen in detail were suggestions provided. The potential of moving the Biennale to focus on a particular council area with links across Northern Ireland was also mentioned.
- Practically, a three-month programme every two years can pose challenges. **A smaller, more concentrated programme which balances academic and community events could be beneficial.** Traditionally the Biennale has overlapped with August Craft Month, there may be potential for links with other events which could enhance the impact and reach of the Biennale.

- **Agreeing the programme of events and partners well in advance can cater to a wider audience outside Northern Ireland.** Promoting the programme ahead of time enables forward planning, not only for potential visitors but also for programme partners. Supporting a mix of online and in-person events also holds potential for increasing the audience.
- **The Biennale should focus on refining its audience identification strategy.** Participant feedback indicates that the majority of attendees already possessed a keen interest in linen and flax. While the engagement from this existing audience is positive, there's an opportunity to broaden the reach and engage individuals who may not have a pre-existing interest in linen. Notably, community group events attracted a wider audience, especially those with familial ties to the linen industry. Therefore, the Biennale can explore ways to appeal to a more diverse demographic and capture the interest of those who may not have an inherent connection to linen. There is also a need to further identify if and how to engage the international and academic audiences as part of this work. Linking with other Biennales

such as the British Textiles Biennale could be a stepping stone.

- To enhance public engagement and provide an immersive experience, the 2025 Biennale should **explore the integration of innovative digital elements**, such as augmented reality (AR). One example could be to showcase the heritage of the Linen Quarter in Belfast through AR. Implementing AR technology would allow visitors to interact with historical narratives, virtual exhibitions, and engaging visual content related to linen and flax. This approach can make the Biennale more accessible and appealing to a broader audience. Collaborating with local tech partners and artists can contribute to the creation of unique, interactive digital installations that bring the rich history of the Linen Quarter to life and can incorporate storytelling techniques.



Tapestry Weaving with Rena Roohipur
Photo credits: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

- **The Biennale staff team should be larger with clearer roles and responsibilities set out from the beginning.** A staff strategy day at the outset would be beneficial in agreeing programming, audience identification, strategic plans and key messaging.
- **The 2025 Biennale should include a session for partners at the beginning of the programme** to discuss promotion of the Biennale, marketing efforts and key messaging. This would also facilitate networking for partners.
- There were many calls for a **hard copy programme**, while this was not possible in 2023, it should be considered, even at a limited print run, for 2025.
- This year's Biennale relied heavily on social media to promote and advertise the programme of events due to the limited lead-in time. In 2025 there should be **more of an emphasis on PR**, in addition to digital media forms for promotion.
- There was little support from local universities in the 2023 Biennale. While one of the strengths of this year's Biennale was the partnerships with community groups, if a conference was to be part of the 2025 programming, **links with academic partners would be necessary**. There should be thoughtful consideration from the steering group about what this would entail and how beneficial it would be.
- The 2023 Biennale benefited from links with local industry such as Ulster Guild of Weavers Spinners and Dyers and Mallon Linen. The fashion showcase was also a successful event for promoting local makers in the linen space. **It was suggested in the partner focus groups that a corporate partner could be beneficial**, however this concept needs further exploration. If a corporate sponsor was identified for example, their links with the Biennale would need to be mutually beneficial.



Conclusions

Success and Impact

The combined feedback from participants, partners and collaborators, and the staff underscores the resounding success and impact of the 2023 Linen Biennale. With high satisfaction rates, the program of events was well-received, leaving a lasting impression on attendees. The positive response speaks to the Biennale's effectiveness in achieving its objectives and engaging its audience dynamically. The notable impacts on knowledge, skill development, heritage exploration, and community engagement solidify the event as a dynamic and impactful cultural platform.

Participants, primarily from Northern Ireland, showcased a genuine passion for heritage, with 45% attending due to personal interest. The survey underscores the Biennale's achievement of its objectives, particularly in fostering knowledge and appreciation of linen's cultural heritage. A significant 95% gained new knowledge about linen and flax, while 96% expressed inspiration to delve deeper. Beyond event satisfaction, attendees reported positive impacts on skill development, heritage exploration, and commitment to sustainable practices. The overwhelmingly positive response, with a 98% satisfaction rate, attests to the Linen Biennale's profound impact in fostering connection, appreciation, and inspiration within the community.

Partner and collaborator feedback reinforces the Biennale's success in building meaningful connections, promoting heritage, and providing diverse opportunities for creative engagement. The unanimous 100% satisfaction rate among partners underscores the event's impact on audiences, networking opportunities, and the development of links within the creative sector. The collaborative approach of working with an array of partners to create the programme of events added to the overall success of the Biennale.

The Biennale stands out for its forward-thinking approach, simultaneously honouring the past and exploring innovative avenues for the future applications of linen and flax. Acknowledging the economic potential and environmental sustainability of linen, the Linen Biennale positions this material as profoundly significant in the modern era.

Diversity and Inclusivity

The diverse array of events, locations, and creative opportunities drew appreciation from participants and partners alike. The success in attracting a dedicated audience with varied interests underscores the Biennale's ability to provide a platform that appeals to a wide demographic, promoting inclusivity within its cultural offerings. Many of the events planned in collaboration with community groups opened the Biennale up to people who may not necessarily have engaged with a festival of Linen and Flax. Examples include the talks and tours in locations such as Killleagh and Hilltown and events such as the Halftimers production. A central theme throughout the feedback is the strong commitment to heritage preservation. The Biennale successfully fostered knowledge about the heritage of linen and flax, with a significant percentage of attendees gaining new insights. The emphasis on heritage themes and the overwhelmingly positive response indicate the Biennale's role as a preserver of cultural heritage.

The success of the Biennale extends beyond artistic and creative realms, with a significant impact on community building and networking within the creative and arts sector. Positive outcomes include the expansion of audiences, networking opportunities, and the development of links. The Biennale's positive impact on local history exploration, heritage preservation, and sustainable practices further reinforces its role in fostering community connections.



Forward Planning and Evolution

Acknowledging the initial challenges, especially related to time constraints and external influences, the Linen Biennale team showcased adaptability and a collective effort in overcoming obstacles. The recognition of challenges is coupled with an understanding of the need for adaptability in the face of unforeseen circumstances, contributing to the overall success of the event.

Overall, the team managed to curate an impressive array of diverse activities and events. The quality of speakers, range of attendees, and events was remarkable, especially considering the small team behind it. Their efforts are evident in delivering a broad and thought-provoking program, supported by strong marketing efforts and fostering collaborations with a varied set of stakeholders.

Recommendations for future editions focus on maintaining a balance between community and academic events, exploring diverse themes, and widening the scope. Emphasis is placed on strategic planning, maintaining partnerships, and establishing a steering group for continuous improvement. This forward-thinking approach from everyone involved in this year's Biennale reflects a commitment to the evolution and sustained success of the Linen Biennale for years to come.



Appendix 1 R-Space and the Biennale Team

The Linen Biennale is hosted by R-Space Gallery. Situated in The Linen Rooms in the vibrant city of Lisburn, Northern Ireland, R-Space Gallery is a dedicated visual arts and crafts space that curates and commissions a dynamic program of exhibitions and arts activities.

R-Space aspires to enhance accessibility, understanding and enjoyment of contemporary visual arts, crafts, design, and related artistic endeavours. It actively collaborates with a diverse array of talented and innovative artists and designers working across various media. By doing so, it offers audiences from diverse educational, social, and cultural backgrounds multiple avenues to engage with and appreciate the arts.

Anthea McWilliams and Robert Martin, Co-Curatorial Directors, R-Space Gallery

Anthea has been a freelance arts and culture professional since 1988, including her contemporary dance practice and work within R-Space.

Robert spent 13 years as Visual Arts Officer for Arts Council England. He heads up the Gallery's creative programming, which is primarily funded by Arts Council Northern Ireland.

Robert and Anthea established R-Space Gallery in 2011. The Gallery's opening exhibition was The Art and Science of Linen with Anna Dumitriu, which planted the first seed of what would blossom into the Linen Biennale.



Photo credits: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

Meadhbh McIlgorm, Programme Manager

Meadhbh McIlgorm is an artist-maker of things and experiences. As a creative producer she has worked with many artists and arts organisations managing events, exhibitions, public engagement programmes and professional development opportunities. She studied Craft Design and History of Art (NCAD, 2013) and Arts Management (QUB, 2015). She is particularly passionate about materials, process and the skills associated with production, repair and reuse.



Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

Special thanks the extended team working on the 2023 programme including:

Angela McMahon, Flow Communications - Project PR & Marketing
Rachel McMenemy, Moonlight - Project Evaluation
Francesca Bondi, R-Space Office Manager - Finance Support
Kathryn Graham, R-Space Gallery Assistant - Admin & Event Support
Fran Porter, Freelance Producer - Remote Content Creation & Admin Support
Ruairí Jordan, Ruairí Jordan Design - Graphic Design and Branding
Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography - Official Event Photographer
Gary Shaw, Consultant Advisor - Fundraising Development and Recruitment

Thanks to the R-Space Gallery Board of Directors:

Alan Clarke (Chairperson), John Bradbury, Ellen Hillen, Karen Mooney, Jo Watson and Norbert Sagnard.

Appendix 2

Linen Biennale 2023 Partners and collaborators

Programme Partners (Organisations)

National / NI Wide

The National Lottery Heritage Fund
Northern Ireland Screen Digital Film Archive
Royal School of Needlework
Ulster Guild of Weavers Spinners and Dyers

Ards and North Down Borough

Council Area
Creative Peninsula
Ulster Folk Museum

Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council Area

Lurgan Townscape Heritage Partnership
FE McWilliam Gallery

Newry, Mourne and Down District Council Area

Moneydarragh Hub
Top Floor Art Gallery
Newtown Together Men's Shed
Sir Hans Sloane Centre
Hilltown Community Association
Clanrye Lace Group

Belfast City Council Area

Flax Art Studios
Belfast Print Workshop
Portview Trade Centre
Little Fox Events
Ulster Museum
Public Records Office NI (PRONI)
The Linen Hall
Belfast School of Art
Banana Block
Centre Stage Theatre Company
Artists at the Mill

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council Area

Flowerfield Arts Centre

Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council Area

ISLAND Arts Centre
Historic Royal Palaces - Hillsborough Castle

Mid Ulster District Council Area

National Trust (Wellbrook Beetling Mill)
Mallon Linen

Outreach Projects Groups

Wise the BAP (Bangor)
Downpatrick Men's Shed
Upper Springfield Development Trust (Belfast)
Action Mental Health (Lisburn)
Action Mental Health (Belfast)
Armagh Men's Shed
Action Mental Health (Craigavon)
The Resurgam Trust (Lisburn)
Belvoir Community Hub (Belfast)
Antrim Men's Shed
Mourneview Ladies Arts and Crafts Group (Lurgan)
International Women's Group (North Down)

Artists and Exhibitors

Connected Emotions Exhibition:

Jill Philips

Time Traces & Threads Exhibition:

Mille Moore

Woven Hug Project:

Tere Chad (Chili) & Cordillia Rizzo (Mexico)

Stitching a Story Exhibition:

Helen O'Hare & Willimina Kirkpatrick

Common Threads Exhibition:

Gina Pierce (England), Alison Baxter (England), Ina Holohan (Ireland),

Angela Burns (Turkey), Birgit Schoenaker (Belgium), Margaret Russell (USA), Pat Griffin (Northern Ireland), Heather Richardson (Northern Ireland), Hilary Cromie (Northern Ireland), Anna Smyth (Northern Ireland), Amy Higgins (Northern Ireland), Katie Larmour (Northern Ireland), Caroline Moore (Northern Ireland)

Print & Linen Exhibition:

Elaine Megahey, Dónall Billings, Jenny Bailie, Dora McCavera, Margaret Ellis, René Mullin, Josephine McCormick, Marcus Patton, Pat Griffin, Margaret Woods Moore, Maura Lynch, Jonathan Brennan, Coby Moore, Anushiya Sundaralingam, Gerard Muldoon (heritage artwork loan)

Gintlíocht Exhibition:

Susan Hughes, Dorothy Hunter, Tara McGinn, Emma Brennan, artist collaborators Sinéad Bhreathnach Cashell, Jayne Cherry and Alice Clarke, Grace McMurray, Gerard Carson and collective Soft Fiction Projects

Clanrye Lace Group Exhibition:

Gemma Brolly, Frances Hamilton, Caroline McVeigh, Anne Morgan, Kate O'Hanlon

She Stitches Pieces of Materials Exhibition:

Caroline Moore

Curlew/Kuovi Exhibition:

Ruth Osborne, Jane McCann, Pirjo Seddiki (Finland), Sirpa Morsky (Finland).

Plant Communitas Flax Linum Crossings Exhibition:

Annemiek de Beer, Patricia Brien, Amanda Coppes-Martin, Bridget Kennedy, Geoff Diego Litherland, Angharad McLaren, Tim Parry-Williams, and Ilka White

Palimpsest Exhibition at Conway Mill :

Karen Daye-Hutchinson, Anna Donovan Ceramic, Marie-Louise Gormley
Melanie Woolley, Ruth Hamilton-Sturdy.

The Alchemy of Print:

Trish Belford

Ancestral Interconnections**Matrilineal Threads:**

Lynne Hocking

Endangered Species List 481:

Rosalind Lowry

reGROUP Exhibition:

Robert Peters, Anushiya Sundaralingam, Jane McCann and Regine Neumann

East Block Fashion Market - Linen**Stall Holders:**

Anastacia Mcgivern, Annie Leona McCoughlin, Lucy Turner, Janet Hackney, Jupiter Red Linen (Janet McNamee), Wild Kind (Ciara Tinney)

Workshop Facilitators

Robert Peters, Emma Whitehead, Rena Roohipour, René Mullin, Josephine McCormick, Linda O’Kane, Lynsdey McDougal, Valerie Wilson, Gina Pierce, Ruth Osborne, Jane McCann, Millie Moore, Caroline Shims, Regine Neumann, Sonia Lee, Madeleine McGreevy

Speakers & Guides

Catherine O’Hara, Sebastian Graham, Tim Parry-Williams, Malú Colorin, Kathy Kirwan, Laura Wilson, Amy Anderson, Heather Richardson, Fiona McKelvie, John Bradbury, Alison Gault, Siobhan Purnell, Mario Sierra, Roberta Braicc, Jane McCann, Helen Keys, Gerard Muldoon, Martin Doyle, Jason Diamond, Desmond McCabe, Ciaran Mussen, Shannon Welsh, Gawain Morrison

Strategic Partners

The National Lottery Heritage Fund
Arts Council Northern Ireland
Translink
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council -
Irish Linen Centre & Lisburn Museum
British Textiles Biennale
Fibershed Ireland
Linen Quarter Bid
National Museums NI
Our Linen Stories
Mourne Textiles
Ulster Architectural Heritage Society
Rural Community Network
Craft NI
August Craft Month
Ards & North Down District Council
Armagh Banbridge Craigavon Borough Council
Ulster University
Historic Royal Palaces
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council
CHOICE Research Project



Appendix 3 - Media coverage of the Linen Biennale 2023

Broadcast

- Anthea McWilliams interviewed on Radio Ulster's 'Your Place of Mine' - 12 August
- Emma Whitehead talks to Down About Down podcast - 12 August
- Heather Richardson on Radio Ulster's The Ticket – 8 September

Print

- Linen Biennale 2023 programme launch in Selvedge - 10 July
- Half Timers in Sunday Life – 16 July
- Half Timers in Northern Ireland World – 19 July
- Launch of the Linen Biennale 2023 Bloom - 26 July
- Launch of the Linen Biennale 2023 Newsletter - 27 July
- Launch of the Linen Biennale 2023 Northern Ireland World - 28 July
- Half Timers in Irish News – 1 August
- Palimpsest exhibition - Irish News – 31 August
- Longest Linen Tablecloth workshop in the Ulster Star - 6 September
- Hilltown's Linen Festival in Newry Reporter on 16 October
- Rosalind Lowry interviewed about Endangered Species in Belfast Telegraph – 27 October

Online

- Visual Artists Ireland - 8 July
- Love Belfast - Monday 17 July
- Launch of the Linen Biennale 2023 in Ulster Tatler - 18 July
- Half Timers - Belfast Live - 22 July
- Launch of Linen Biennale 2023 in Newry.ie - 27 July
- Launch of the Linen Biennale 2023 What's On NI - 25 July
- Launch of the Linen Biennale 2023 Yahoo News - 28 July
- Launch of the Linen Biennale 2023 Belfast Media - 29 July

- Launch of August Craft Month and the Linen Biennale 2023 Design & Crafts Council Ireland –31 July
- Sebastian Graham's talks in Ulster Architectural Heritage - 3 August
- Linen Biennale in Visual Arts Ireland - 3 August
- Linen Biennale 2023 programme launch in Discover Northern Ireland - 7 August
- Moneydarragh Hub in Newry.ie - 23 August
- Longest Linen Tablecloth workshop on Yahoo News UK – 6 September
- Martin Doyle talk (Dirty Linen) at the FE McWilliams Gallery in Northern Ireland World – 17 October
- Rosalind Lowry interviewed about Endangered Species in Belfast Telegraph – 27 October



Photo credit: Ruairí Jordan

Appendix 4 - Responding to the 2018 Linen Biennale Evaluation Recommendations

The evaluation of the 2018 Linen Biennale made a number of recommendations for the next edition of the festival. While some online activities took place between the 2020 and 2023 festivals⁽¹⁾, a full Biennale did not return until 2023. The table below outlines and responds to the recommendations from the 2018 evaluation. A copy of the 2018 evaluation report can be downloaded from the Linen Biennale website and appreciate the arts.

| 2018 Evaluation Recommendation | 2023 Response |
|--|--|
| Significant means for supporting this programme needs to be explored further. Currently the funding model is not sustainable. The co-curators and the textile professional are to be commended for what they achieved within their own time and efforts. None of these key players were remunerated financially. This needs to be rectified in the future. | The funding model is still unsustainable. This year, having fewer funders meant programming and evaluating against a succinct list of intended outcomes was more straightforward. Notably, improved resources allowed the core team to receive compensation, reducing dependence on voluntary labour. However, the current funder is not in a position to fund a similar programme again. Organisers need to rethink the Biennale's themes and objectives. Other potential funders will need to be sourced for 2025. |

(1) See <https://www.linenbiennalenorthernireland.com/2020> and <https://www.linenbiennalenorthernireland.com/2021> for more detail on these events.

| 2018 Evaluation Recommendation | 2023 Response |
|---|--|
| Different billing based on headliners within the programme. Some of the significant pieces (workshop and events) should have been given more priority such as the newly created tapestry by Cecelia Stephens which was exhibited at PRONI, Belfast. This will require participants to provide necessary programme information in a timely manner. | This year the full programme was located on the Linen Biennale website, with a reduced version in hard copy. The Brochure promoted a selection of events. Promotion via social media took priority in 2023 due to the lack of run-in time to establish PR connections and placements. There were some discrepancies in event promotion, some partners with larger resources and social media followings were better placed to promote their own events, compared to smaller community groups. This could be addressed with an optimal run-in time in 2025, which would give time for strategic foundational programming and communications work to be done well in advance, and time for support to be provided to groups who would benefit from it. |
| There needs to be more resources and additional team members with clear roles and responsibilities. With such a small team there can easily be overlaps as it is all hands-on deck. There needs to be clearly defined roles and responsibilities as well as standardised procedures and processes. | In 2023 the financial resource was similar to 2018 and the staff team was still small scale. Similar challenges with overlapping work, the need for clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and standardised procedures and processes also prevailed in 2023. Ideally a larger team, with defined roles, must be in place for 2025. |

| 2018 Evaluation Recommendation | 2023 Response |
|---|--|
| Utilise both traditional marketing including PR and magazine articles as well as digital media forms for promotion. Start promotion earlier and provide a student price that is reflective of what is affordable. | <p>It was intended that this would be the case in 2023, however the limited run-in time did not allow for it at the scale the team would have preferred. A reliance on social media and email marketing was developed due to time pressures. Some optimal press coverage was received, but had time allowed this would have been better.</p> <p>The pricing comment related to the conference which was part of the 2018 programme and is not applicable for 2023.</p> |
| Increase collaboration with universities and build upon relationships with Ulster University to understand how they can become more involved. | There was limited collaboration with local universities in the 2023 Biennale. While one of the strengths of this year's Biennale was the partnerships with community groups, if a conference was to be part of the 2025 programming, links with academic partners would be necessary. |
| Consideration for part or all of the conference to be managed by a partner organisation as it would then attract more academics looking to strive to be published. Some academics want to focus on peer reviewed conferences to help encourage global exposure. | As above. |

| 2018 Evaluation Recommendation | 2023 Response |
|--|--|
| The programme was extremely ambitious – this was stressful for staff and may have been overwhelming at times. Consideration for less events in the future and/or having a larger team would enhance the programme delivery. | This prevails in 2023, but with a higher number of smaller scale events. In 2025 there should be consideration for fewer events, perhaps over a shorter space of time, with some events grouped to facilitate non-local visitors. |
| Increasing the business audience and local industry engagement would be beneficial. Review messaging and identify some industry champions who can support the programme to the business sector. There can be a misconception in business that art and the creative sector is nice to have and not fiscally focused. Reality is that this conference identified how Linen can be fiscal and how industry can leverage it in an innovative way to benefit financially. | The 2023 Biennale benefited from links with local industry such as Ulster Guild of Weavers Spinners and Dyers and Mallon Linen. The fashion showcase was also a successful event for promoting local makers in the linen space. It was suggested in the partner focus groups that a corporate partner could be beneficial, however this concept needs further exploration and more development in advance of another festival programme. |
| Marketing packs could be provided to each organisation involved so that the Linen Biennale is leveraging the wide range of organisations involved and increasing outreach to a greater audience. This will increase marketing and channels as well as decrease pressure on a small staff team. | The staff observations confirmed that partners did sufficiently acknowledge the Biennale at events. However, consideration should be given to holding a meeting (online or in person) for partners to clarify objectives and explore marketing goals and opportunities. A marketing pack, including evaluation surveys could also be beneficial. |

| 2018 Evaluation Recommendation | 2023 Response |
|---|--|
| <p>Start conversations earlier to ensure that promotion is given a significant lead time as many outsiders need time to make plans, schedule additional meetings and make travel arrangements.</p> | <p>Once again, the run-in time did not allow for this, in fact the late confirmation of funding deterred some potential partners from getting involved in the 2023 Biennale. The need for programming to be confirmed and promoted earlier was also mentioned by partners and participants as necessary for those planning to visit. A steering group should be established to start discussions for 2025 early. Consideration also needs to be given to keeping connections with this year's partners warm.</p> |
| <p>Explore measuring and how to measure some of the major events. Discuss with key stakeholders as to what information they would like to obtain and explore. Ensure there are questionnaires or mechanisms for capturing data including some of the softer outcomes straight after events.</p> | <p>This year evaluation was considered from the outset, ensuring that the Biennale could be evaluated in a timely and holistic manner. Event participants were provided with surveys immediately after events, partners and collaborators were asked to complete surveys and take part in focus groups, and staff were encouraged to provide feedback throughout the Biennale.</p> |

| 2018 Evaluation Recommendation | 2023 Response |
|---|---|
| <p>Continue organic growth and collaboration in an open minded way for future programmes. It is valuable to have arts and creative organisations involved in developing the programme as they may approach the programme differently. There was also a strong feeling of co-collaboration where organisations worked together to create some of the events. This is a positive and should be continued.</p> | <p>This year's Biennale balanced a diverse range of events, with the programme including lectures, talks, workshops, tours and other events (such as the Halftimers production and the fashion showcase). There was a strong feeling of positive collaboration with partners which was confirmed by the feedback received.</p> <p>The discussions in the partner focus groups were very positive about the future of the Biennale. A steering group for 2025 should include a range of individuals, including partners from 2023.</p> |
| <p>Consider the use of external organisations to provide support such as marketing company and/or event marketing company. This would free up the team to focus on the elements that are most suitable to their skill set.</p> | <p>This year's team included a marketing expert which ensured that marketing efforts were excellent, considering key messages, a range of channels and audience engagement. The limited run-in time did not allow for more extensive PR work, the 2025 Biennale should include a higher proportion of PR work in the marketing strategy. There was also more generous admin support in 2023 to support the administrative side of social media</p> |

The Linen Biennale 2023 primary funder was The National Lottery Heritage Fund



Linen Biennale is a project led by R-Space Gallery



Everything we achieve at the Linen Biennale is about and built on partnership working. We want to thank everyone involved with our programme. Our community is growing everyday but key partners for 2023 include;



Details from Time Traces & Threads Exhibition, Millie Moore
Photos: Linen Biennale



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