



Linen Biennale Evaluation 2023

Executive Summary

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.



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The Linen Biennale 2023 was independently evaluated by Rachel McMenemy of Moonlight. The full evaluation report can be accessed via the Linen Biennale website at www.linenbiennalenorthernireland.com/evaluation



Details from Time Traces & Threads Exhibition, Millie Moore
Photos: Linen Biennale
Cover credit: Ruairi Jordan



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

Introduction

The Linen Biennale is a celebration of linen, encapsulating its intricate ties to Northern Ireland's social, agricultural, and industrial heritage. In 2023 the Linen Biennale's themes were 'Revive and Renew'. The theme of 'Revive' marks not only the Biennale's full 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 Lisburn, the heart of Northern Ireland's historic linen district, R-Space Gallery acts as the hub of the Biennale. The inaugural Linen Biennale took place in 2018, returning in full after a post-covid delay in 2023. The Linen Biennale showcases a diverse array of events, encouraging collaboration across various sectors and offering a range of engaging options for visitors.

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.

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 .

Evaluating the Linen Biennale 2023

The purpose of the 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. 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).

The full evaluation report details the limitations of the data collection and provides a comparison with the 2018 Biennale. A logic model was developed to identify a number of outcomes and to highlights the changes experienced by stakeholders connected to the Linen Biennale. Please see the full report for extended detail.

Analysis

Participant feedback

The participant feedback from the 2023 Linen Biennale paints a vivid picture of an impactful and well-received programme of events. A total of 316 attendees responded to the participant survey asking for their feedback on the Biennale event they attended.



Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

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.

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.

62%

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



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

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.



Longest Linen Tablecloth
Photo credit: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography



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

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. In addition to the partner/collaborator survey, which 65 partners completed, at the end of the Biennale programme 13 partners/collaborators representing a cross section of collaborations (artists, academics, community associations and others) also provided qualitative feedback on the Biennale programme and discussed planning for the 2025 programme in focus groups.

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.

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

85% of partner/collaborators found new audiences

73% developed links with the creative and arts sector

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 highlights 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.

Key themes emerged from the staff feedback, shedding light on various aspects of the Biennale. The team faced initial challenges, including time constraints, role clarity, and workload overwhelmingness. Despite these hurdles, the success of the Biennale program was acknowledged. External influences, such as public interest and the delay in securing funding, significantly impacted the event's planning and execution. Despite challenges, the team recognised achievements in areas such as wellbeing, skill development, community impact, and heritage exploration.

Recommendations for future editions included maintaining a balance between community and academic events, exploring different themes, widening the scope to include a wider range of textiles, and considering different council areas.

Practical considerations involved the length of the program, team size, and better-defined roles. The importance of a longer planning period, keeping partnerships warm, and potential establishment of a steering group for the 2025 Biennale were emphasised.



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



Photo credits: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

Were the 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 outcomes 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, Banna Block
Photo credits: 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 were 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. One final piece per participant was stitched into a large linen banner which will tour libraries and community centres over 2024.

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 gathering donations of linen from the public (such as tablecloths, napkins, tray cloths, tea towels, all valued family pieces but no longer used). The Longest Linen Tablecloth is a legacy project for Linen Biennale 2023 - 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 for distribution and progress for it will continue until 2025.

Contributing artists: Emma Whitehead (tablecloth design) and Anthea McWilliams (engagement & workshop facilitation)



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.



Field to Fabric at Mallon Linen
Photo Angela McMahon

The following quotes were provided in the evaluation surveys:

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

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

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).

The following were provided in the evaluation surveys:

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

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



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.



The following were provided in the evaluation surveys:

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

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

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

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



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

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

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.

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.

- **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.

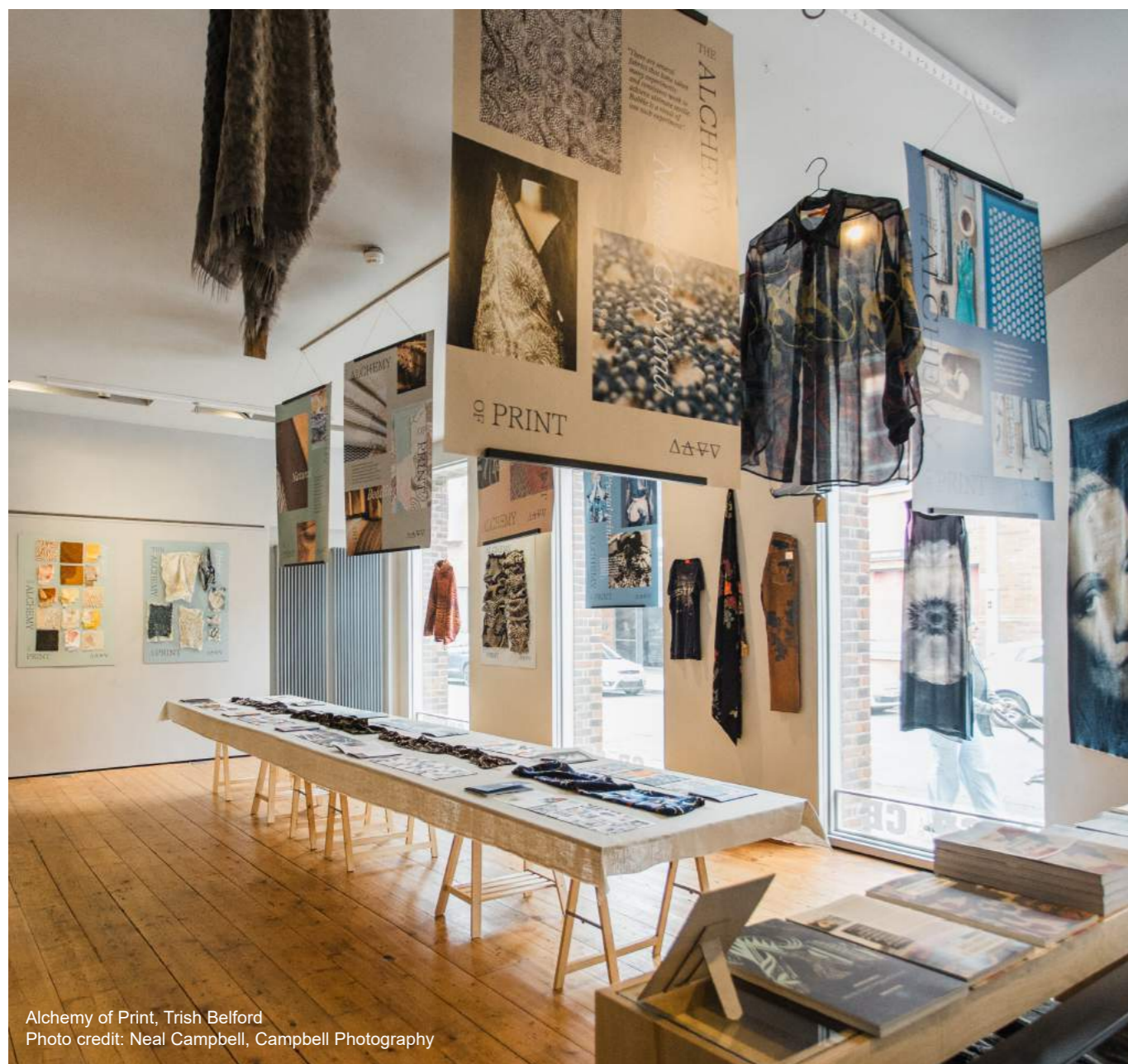
Participants, primarily from Northern Ireland, showcased a genuine passion for heritage, with 45% attending due to personal interest. The survey underscores the Biennale's achievement of its objectives, particularly in fostering knowledge and appreciation of linen's cultural heritage. A significant 95% 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.



Linen garments by Annie Leona McColgan
Photo credit: Ruairi Jordan

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.



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

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.



Common Threads Exhibition
Photo credits: Neal Campbell, Campbell Photography

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.



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;





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