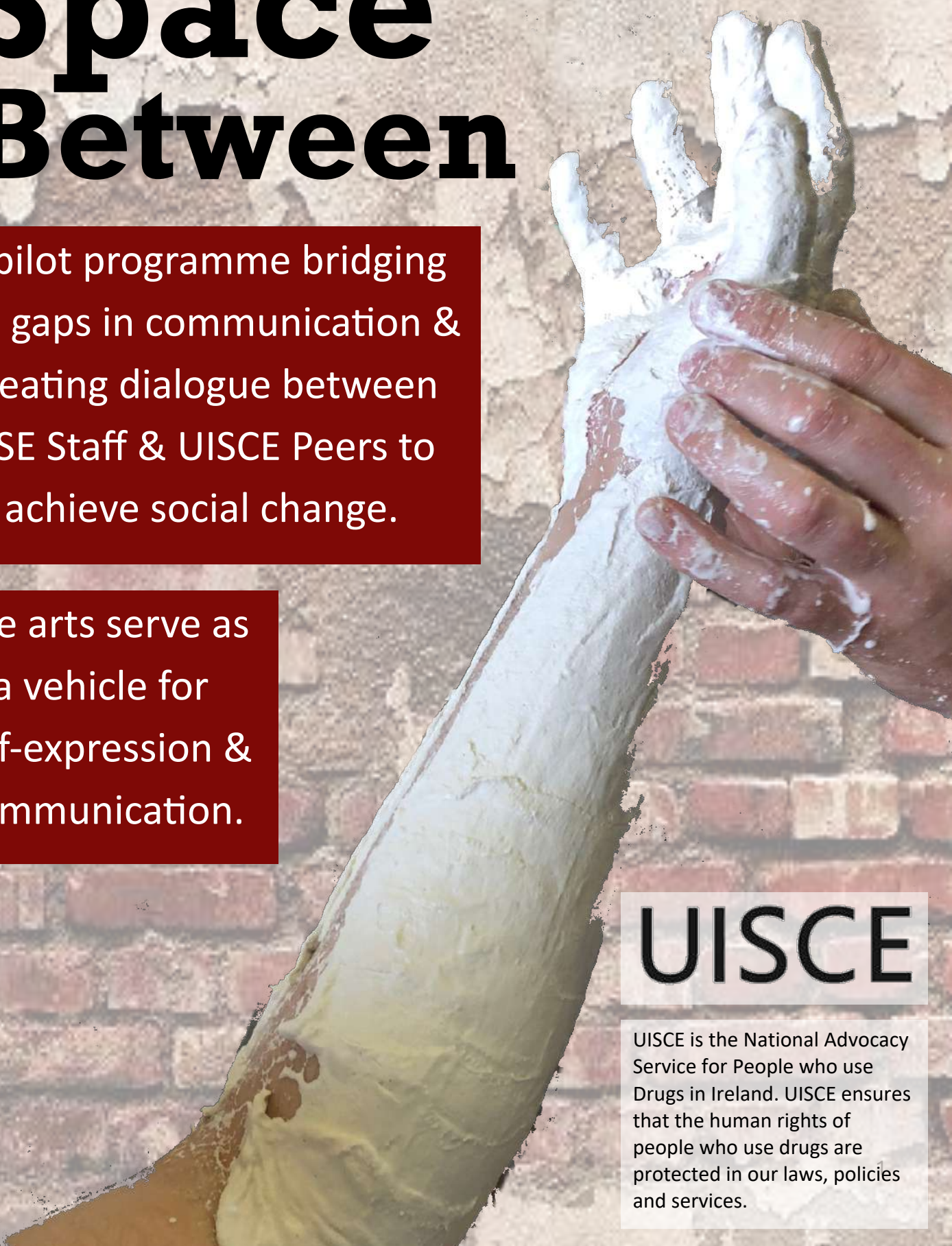


The Space Between

A pilot programme bridging the gaps in communication & creating dialogue between HSE Staff & UISCE Peers to achieve social change.

The arts serve as a vehicle for self-expression & communication.

A hand is shown applying thick white paint to a forearm. The background is a brick wall. The paint is being applied in a way that covers the skin, with some visible brushstrokes and texture. The hand applying the paint is also covered in white paint.

UISCE

UISCE is the National Advocacy Service for People who use Drugs in Ireland. UISCE ensures that the human rights of people who use drugs are protected in our laws, policies and services.

During February 2025, 5 General Assistants (HSE Staff) working at Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT) clinics and 5 UISCE Peers took part in a weeklong programme through UISCE in Dublin, Ireland.

Participants unpacked themes around stigma, unconscious bias, compassion fatigue, health system fatigue, social determinants, removing barriers impacting access to healthcare for people who use drugs, and identifying targeted solutions.

What is the Space Between?

We found common ground through team building exercises, shared honestly & openly during restorative justice circles, and unpacked what is working and what is not working. We identified collective solutions to remove barriers & expressed ourselves through the visual arts. Most importantly, we addressed the 'space between'; symbolizing both disconnection and an opportunity to foster open communication in a safe space; utilizing these varied perspectives and lived experiences as an opportunity to transition, transform, and build community connectedness. The 'space between' also represents the continued work to be done.

Healing the Broken Bits

The plaster gauze material used to create the 10 sculptures was chosen with intention. Not only are the arms and hands symbolic of reaching out/reaching toward, but the plaster castings are symbolic of healing/mending the broken or fractured parts of us.

Each UISCE peer partnered with an HSE staff in the process of creating their sculptures/castings.



What's the Story?

These 10 sculptures create 5 exhibits; each exhibit including 2 sculptures paired together representing the coming together of our UISCE Peers and HSE staff. The art installation serves as a portable, educational tool for the larger community.

After partnering to create each casting, participants unpacked more personal themes related to values, family, community, interest areas, & personal/professional goals. Participants unpacked what it is like working in their roles (UISCE Peers, General Assistants), the stressors faced day to day, and what is needed to feel respected, appreciated, and accepted. After processing and sharing our art and our stories, there was a deeper understanding of what each community needs from one another.

There is an important story to tell that gives voice to *all* involved. The art installation captures the barriers/challenges, stigma, social determinants, policies that have criminalized those who use drugs, organizations and their efforts to create policy changes, supports and solutions along this journey.



Paul Metcalfe

Mixed media

2025

The skin colour is my skin color which best represents my hand/arm. It sits upon the green grass, representing my childhood. We used to have horses. The glitter symbolizes a sparkling life, brightness and happiness. Inside the palm says the words "damaged hand, repaired life". My arms and legs have been broken in my life. The shape of this hand appears battered and bruised. The sculpture represents my healing.



Yvette

Mixed media

2025

The green symbolizes growth, the purple is spirituality, balance, and fragility. The brown represents the earth/being grounded, connection and community together. the different skin tones represent equality and that we are all one. The nature/moss symbolizes grounding growth. Overall, the piece symbolizes the importance of acceptance and connection of growth, regardless of social, personal or economic circumstances.



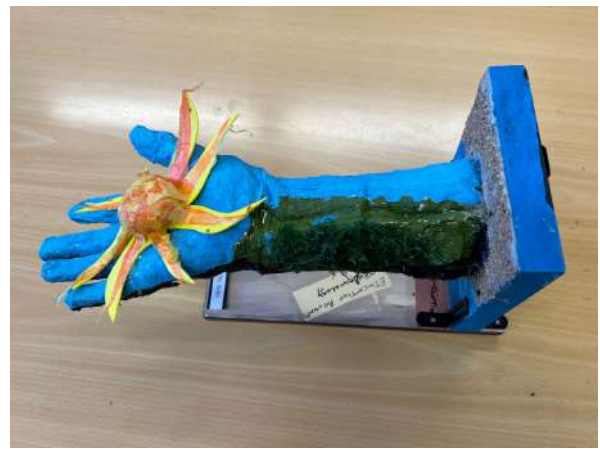
Annemarie
Mixed media
2025

The black and grey symbolize darkness. There is blue representing how in between the darkness there is light, and the darkness moves into light. The red, orange, and nails symbolize coming out of the darkness into the light. The nails are reaching for the stars. The photos in the collage on the base represent how people in addiction feel. There are themes of suicide; a black balloon represents the people we've lost. There are images of how we can help. The feathers represent our loved ones we have lost to addiction/mental health. The bright feather symbolizes hope and how our angels are all around us.



Niall Hickey
Mixed media
2025

My art is about self-reflection. The blue represents new beginnings, the start of my new life. It is also my favourite colour. The green represents nature. The mirrors symbolize my old life; reflects my new hand from my old hand. When I look in the mirrors, I see me and how great I look now as my hand would have looked at lot different in the past. The green material represents nature as I love walking and looking at nature.



Hope by Anto
Mixed media
2025

The black colour represents darkness. The green and blue represent life. The yellow is light and the sun in the palm of the hand represents how where there is light, there is hope. I added lyrics from the Smiths, "There is a light that never goes out". The land symbolizes life and growth. The sea represents longevity, it keeps going and is relentless.



Lynne
Mixed media
2025

The dots symbolize people, who are all different. The ear on the base of my art symbolize services uses and the words hanging down symbolize the influence staff at the clinics have on service users. The words represent me. The positivity represents recovery.



Jonathan O'Connor

Mixed media

2025

The colour blue represents Dublin. The wound and scar signify a tough life. The stitches represent healing. The hurley relates to always loving sports. Music helps me heal. The flag represents Ireland.



Ray

Mixed media

2025

The blue colour represents sky/light. The grey is the mountains/earth. The green represents nature. The eggs in the nest, held in my palm, represent family, home, the birth of a child and life. The band aid represents healing. The guitar strings are music, passion, community, art, and creativity. The musical notes are music. The smiley face represents drinking and drug use. Overall, my piece represents some of the things that are important to me. My family, my love for music, my healing journey, nature, and happiness.



Dan

Mixed media

2025

I chose to paint my skin colour on my sculpture so that I could add my ring, made of aluminium, and my tattoos, which represent the past part of my life and gang affiliation. The gray at the base symbolizes bricks/walls. I have used graffiti to write "UISCE" at the base.



Linda Ledwidge

Mixed media

2025

The orange symbolizes strength, the blue and lavender are calmness, and the pink and yellow are blossoming. The added eggshells represent walking on eggshells. The ladder symbolizes stepping on the ladder and climbing up in life. The leaves represent nature, growth and a new life. The flowers symbolize new growth and new beginnings; putting your feet on the ladder and climbing to the top. My hand is reaching out for change, represents people in addiction, walking on eggshells in their everyday lives, The flowers symbolize growth and blossoming to a new beginning.

The base or framing of a healthy relationship begins with respectful boundaries and communication.

What are the guidelines, framework/structure needed to have these challenging & courageous conversations between GAs/Peers/Administration?

What should the rules or norms around communication be?

- Respect
- Empathy
- Openness
- Teamwork
- Compassion
- Honesty
- Understanding
- Non-judgmental
- Listening
- Giving others voices, choices, and engagement
- Confidentiality / non-disclosure of information sharing
- Adhere to guidelines/
- Rules of clinics are implemented – apply to all staff and service users
- Respect staff, yourself, & peers
- Active listening
- Human rights and trauma-informed

What could be platforms to hold these important conversations, to deliver this communication, build rapport, and breakdown barriers? What types of programming or interventions could create these opportunities to communicate openly?

- Groups, art, anti-stigma training,
- UISCE's tool kit
- Ice breakers, activities less formal activities like outings and team building skills, safe space, drop in spots in clinics
- Coffee mornings
- Drop ins – GAs and UISCE
- Peer-led organizations
- Organizations having more workshops/trainings
- Trainings in conflict resolution
- Education; Dual diagnosis training

In a clinic, if a conflict arises between GAs/Peers/Administration, what could be strategies to communicate, help resolve difficulties, and repair relationships?

- Safe spaces to talk
- Calm approach
- Peer advocacy
- Mediation
- Building better relationships
- Peers meeting with administration
- Education around terminology
- Better communication/Better delivery
- Mediation between parties
- People who access services are better informed
- Peer-led
- Advisory board



As some of you may be aware, we launched our UISCE and TCD produced Peer Engagement Toolkit and Guideline, and the Research Report it informed by, at our 'Close the Gap' event at the end of 2024.

We welcome the findings of the Citizen's Assembly on Drugs Use and the subsequent Joint Committee on Drug Use which states we need new approaches that are informed and driven by people with lived and living experience of drugs, policies and the associated issues.

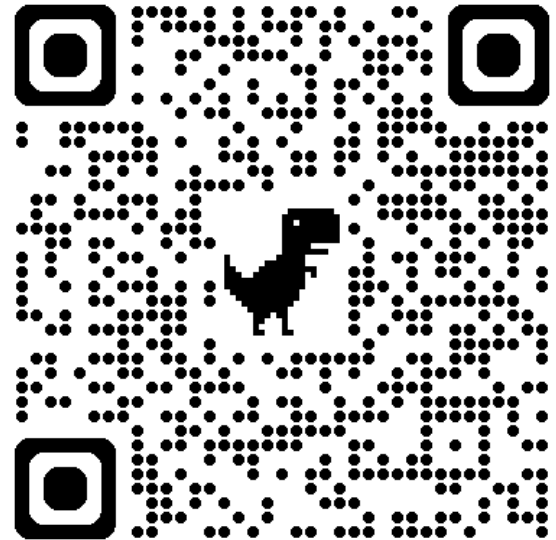
The new national drug strategy is currently being developed which presents us with an opportunity to ensure we have actions that can provide us with a framework to ensure the participation of people with lived and living experience of drugs in decision

To do this we must look at the research and evidence as to *how* we do this. This report and the subsequent toolkit do this. People tell us they value the services and agencies, but at times, do feel controlled within them, and have limited ability to have an independent space to explore the issues through their own living experience, develop their own analysis and be able to play a lead role in the design, delivery and evaluation of service provision and policy design.

To achieve the outcomes we all want to see it will mean a genuine sharing of power and opening up of our spaces and a changing of mindset that shifts from seeing people as a problem, or simply the recipients of a service not decided or designed by them to seeing us as valued partners who have a key role to play in identifying emerging issues and developing collective responses. In fact, it cannot be done without us.

The good news is this work is happening, its evidence based and back up by research. UISCE started as a 'service user forum' in Ana Liffey in the 90's. It was quickly realised by people who use drugs, the services, and the state, for it to be effective it needed to be independent and have an analysis of the broader issues and be able to create real change.

The Development of a Toolkit & Guidelines to Support Peer Engagement



In 2024 it's still here, is solely made up of people with lived and living experience of drugs and this year it has worked in partnership with our peers independently and with many organisations to develop and deliver peer-led training, workshops, research, campaigns, outreach, submissions and position papers and the supporting of setting up peer-led advisory boards and informing policy on a national level.

This report and toolkit are a response by people with lived and living experience of drugs through UISCE to a need identified across the country by our peers, communities, families, services, organisations, and state agencies who tell us people who use drugs are not represented well in decision making and they want guidance and support on how to incorporate what we do in UISCE, in their work.

This is an evidence-based framework informed by the structured, peer-led approach implemented by UISCE, international research and best practice which seeks to close the gap between those that have power and the ability to change things, and those that normally don't, but who everyone now agrees need to be central to it.

It's clear, its practicable and we bring it to you as a potential partner for change.

We know how to achieve change, change has been achieved, but we must be ambitious. We have structures, policies, and research opportunities but we need to ensure they provide genuine partnership and focus on a process that promotes participation and leadership which ensures the voices of those who are saying they feel cut off and left behind included and driving the implementation of actions which promotes the expert role PWUD have in driving the change we all want to see.

All our work is peer-led, issue led, ground up, and seeks to achieve social change through a high level of participation, collective decision making and collective action, it's this process and task that led to the production of this peer-led toolkit and then providing it to you.

UISCE Peer Engagement Toolkit & Guidelines



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