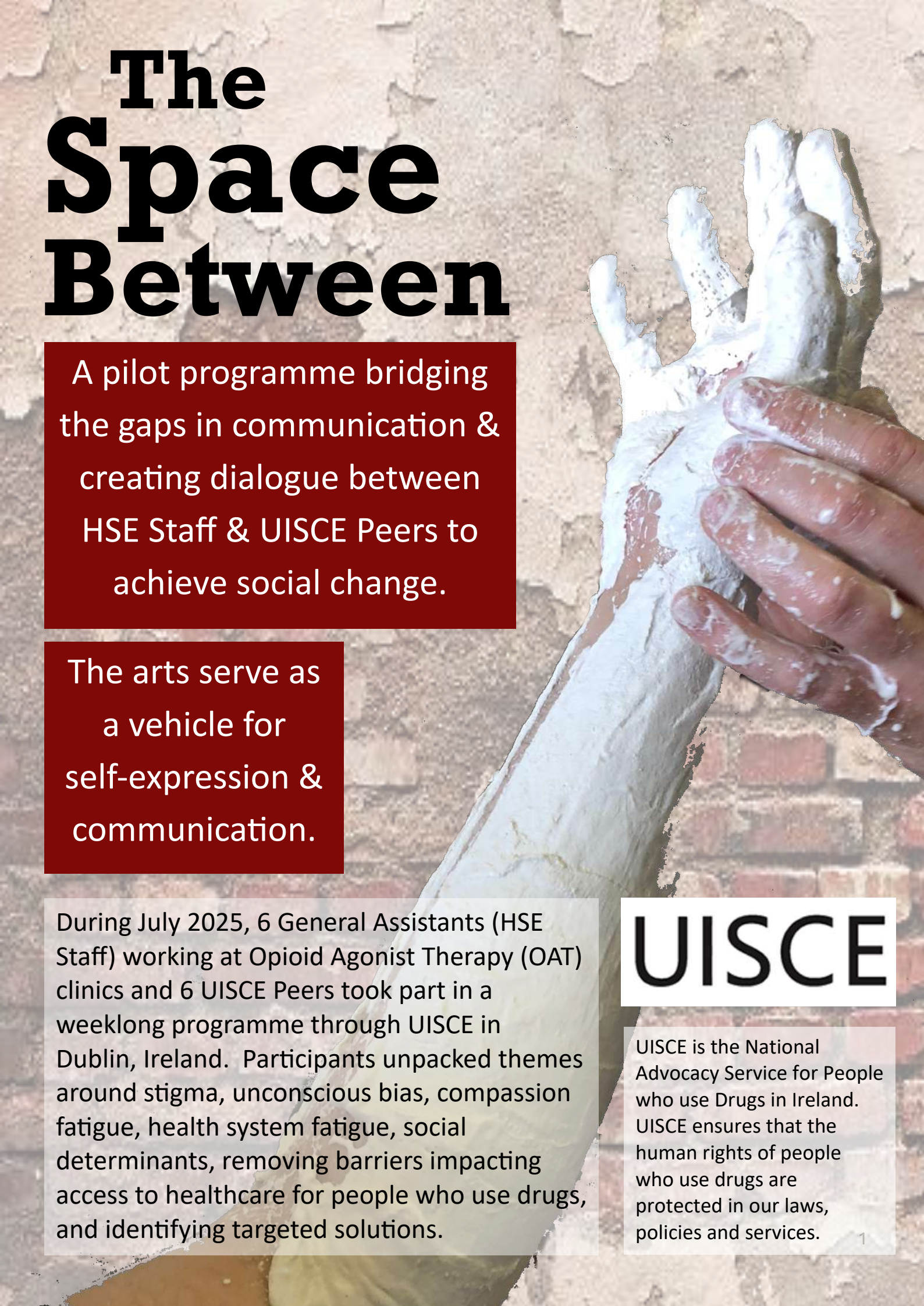


The Space Between



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

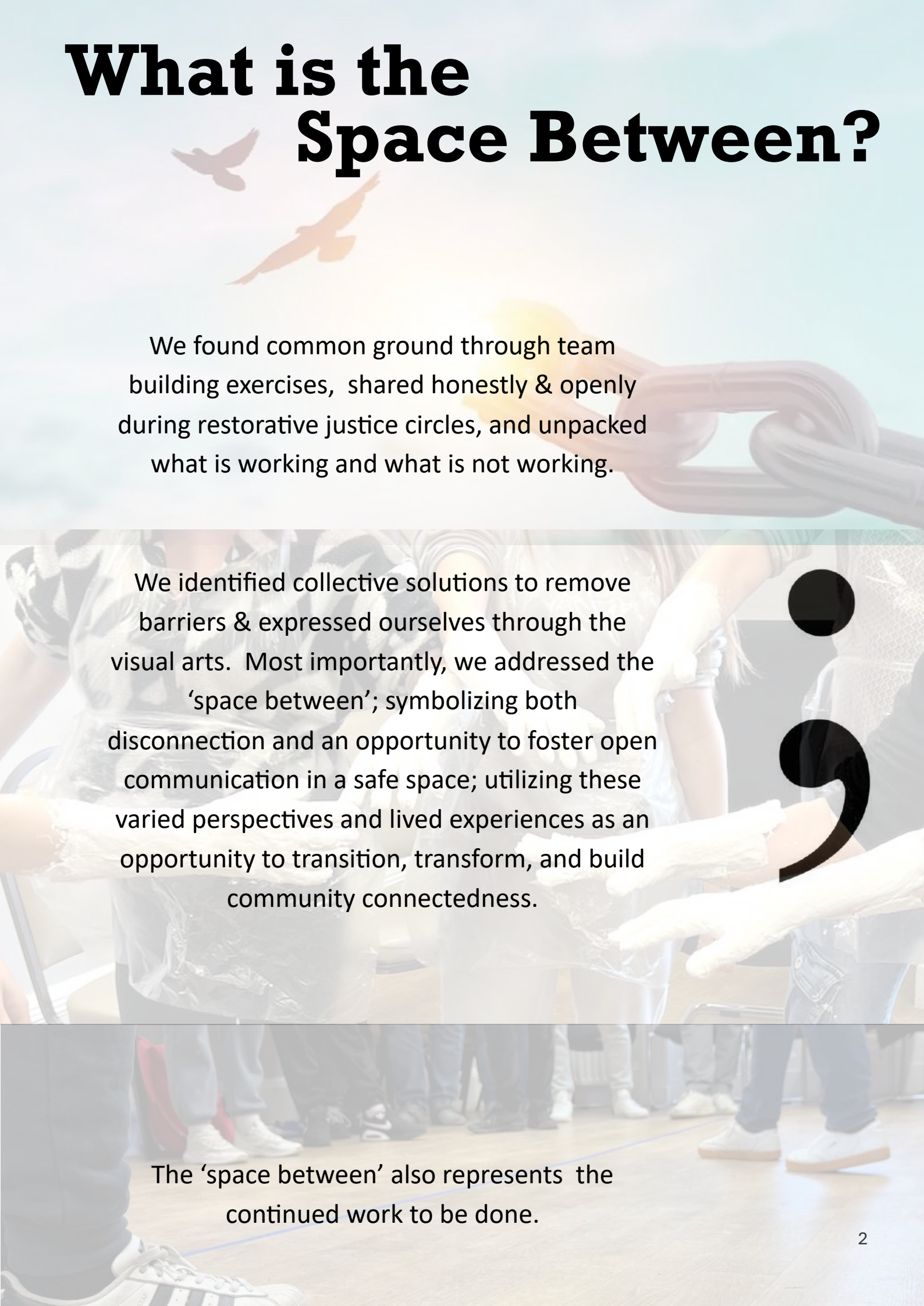
The arts serve as a vehicle for self-expression & communication.

During July 2025, 6 General Assistants (HSE Staff) working at Opioid Agonist Therapy (OAT) clinics and 6 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.

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.

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.

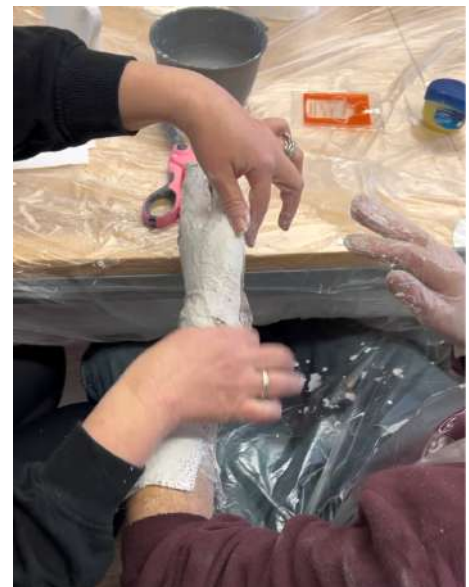
The 'space between' also represents the continued work to be done.

Healing the Broken Bits

The plaster gauze material used to create the 12 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 12 sculptures create 6 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.



Laoise
mixed media
July 2025

This piece blends two of my favorite things: nature and fashion. The green base symbolizes the natural world, while the colorful flowers represent individuality and vibrant self-expression. Jewelry and a bracelet introduce an industrial contrast, highlighting the tension between the organic and the man-made. The styled nails reflect fashion as a form of art, tying the elements together into a statement about beauty, contrast, and harmony.



Suzanne
mixed media
July 2025

This piece is a visual narrative of transformation, survival, and the tension between despair and hope. Drawing on personal and symbolic imagery, it reflects my journey through addiction, recovery, and reclaiming identity.

Blue represents the sex trade—marked by power, vulnerability, and the pursuit of freedom. Black conveys the emptiness of addiction and the emotional weight of detox. A single feather links to the phoenix, a symbol of rebirth, forged from wire to represent resilience and survival.

The phoenix battles a dragon, embodying the fight against inner demons—trauma, addiction, fear—and the enduring possibility of starting over.



Olu
mixed media
July 2025

This piece captures a personal landscape of peace, joy, and reflection. The sand, grass, and blue of the sea evoke the beauty of an island—where land, water, and sky meet in harmony. The beach serves as a space for calm, meditation, and inner peace. The golden elements symbolize a golden heart, a warmth that runs through the work. Stars remind us that even after darkness, light will return—they will shine again. The guitar represents music's power to bring happiness, while the ball reflects the simple joy of hobbies and play. Together, these symbols tell a story of hope, heart, and healing—framed by nature, guided by joy.



AnnMarie
mixed media
July 2025

This piece is about healing, loss, and the urgent need for compassion in how we address addiction. The birds flying toward the sun symbolize growth and hope rising from darkness. Purple feathers, clouds, and birds represent healing, recovery, and the spiritual journey toward peace. The globe stands for support—what should be offered, not denied. The ball and chain reflect how hard it can be to access help, especially in places like Ireland, which has the highest overdose rate in Europe. White feathers honour those I have lost—*all angels now*. The barrier around the globe shows the obstacles people face when seeking support. Yet, the energy from the fingertips and the world is positive—because helping people can truly change everything.



Robyn
mixed media
July 2025



Michael
mixed media
July 2025

This piece is rooted in where I'm from — Tipperary. The blue and yellow reflect county pride, while the green represents hurling pitches and open fields from home. The footballs speak to my own past playing hurling, and the stick and winning cup show my continued support and connection to the game. Hay bales, fields, and rural textures contrast with the feel of city life. This work explores that shift — from nature to urban — and how both landscapes shape memory and identity.



Niall Hickey
mixed media
July 2025

I grew up in Clondalkin and was brought up in a place that had no infrastructure but plenty of drugs. I started early as young as age 9. There was a lot of trauma in my life so taking drugs was an escape for me. My piece represents the joy I had being a DJ at raves and the darkness I entered. I hadn't had a lot of chances in life as where I come from is very impoverished. There was no place for us to express ourselves so I did drugs as a way to deal with stressors.



Chris
mixed media
July 2025

This work explores the deep influence of community and collective identity on personal growth. The green symbolizes the football pitch — a place of gathering, whether through football or any shared purpose. It represents connection, belonging, and the powerful impact that groups can have on shaping our lives. The hand, embedded in rich brown earth, speaks to grounding and rootedness. Community flags on each finger represent the diversity of groups we align with. These connections form the roots that keep us stable and resilient. The hand's open position alludes to release — a conscious gesture of letting go of what no longer serves us. It's an invitation to reflect on the people and influences we choose to keep close, and the importance of surrounding ourselves with communities that foster growth, healing, and strength.



Romanian Dan
mixed media
July 2025

This piece is a raw expression of pain, struggle, and the need for healing. The darker yellow reflects sickness—something unnatural beneath the surface. Chains symbolize the cycle of addiction. You need to break the chain in order to get free from it. Nails and wire convey the physical and emotional pain of that struggle. The ear represents the constant exchange of hurt—listening to others while carrying my own. This work gives voice to the powerful, often unspoken realities of addiction, and the urgent need for solutions.

Jimmy

mixed media

July 2025

This piece is a reflection of who I am and where I come from. The blue represents Dublin—my home and my pride. The fingers rest over Erin's Isle GAA Club, where I once played and where my sons now play. The grass beneath is a football pitch, grounding it all in community and connection.

The red stands for Man U, the soccer club I've followed since childhood. The wheels symbolize change—each day brings something new, and every person carries their own story. Bright colors reflect hope, reminding us that even when life is hard, a positive environment can lift your spirit.

Music plays a big role in my life—represented by the guitars and a QR code playing "*The Voice*" by John Farnham. I find peace through mindfulness, walks, time with my wife and kids, and the joy of concerts and karaoke. At the heart of it all are love, hope, and a simple goal: to be helpful, easygoing, and open to each new day.



Peter McKinley

mixed media

July 2025

This piece explores how mental health and addiction affect people in different ways, using color to express emotion and struggle. Red symbolizes anger and rage, blue reflects emotional highs and lows, and yellow represents sunlight and hope—those moments that lift us when things feel dark. The green football pitch connects to my love for Liverpool FC, with the pitch symbolizing both passion and life's challenges. The football on the hand marks a kickoff—starting over, even when the climb feels steep. "You'll Never Walk Alone," the club's anthem, echoes the message of support and solidarity for anyone facing addiction or mental health battles. The bracelet stands for love and reaching out. This work is about struggle, resilience, and the reminder that no one is alone—there is always hope.



John

mixed media

July 2025

This work reflects my childhood—open fields, wild horses, and the "Shanty" River, which ran through it all. The heart symbolizes Mother Earth; the fencing, the barriers we face in life, especially to healthcare and addiction treatment. The American flag is a nod to our art teacher during this project. My skin tone marks my presence; the brown is the soil we stand on. The horses move toward healing—toward better, more stable ground.

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

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.

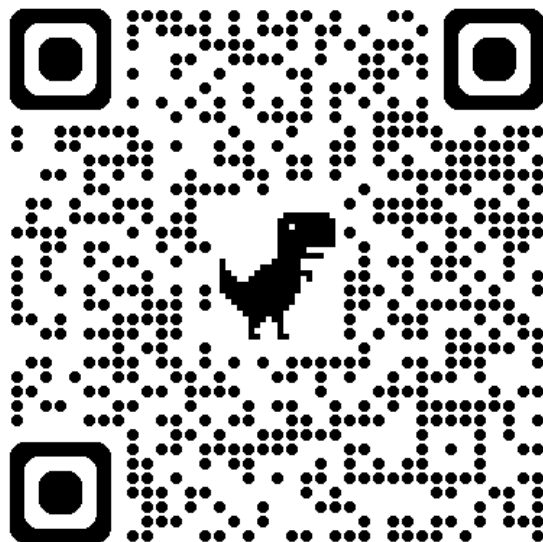
The new national drug strategy is currently being developed which presents us with an opportunity to ensure we have actions that can provide us with a framework to ensure the participation of people with lived and living experience of drugs in decision making.

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 2025 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.

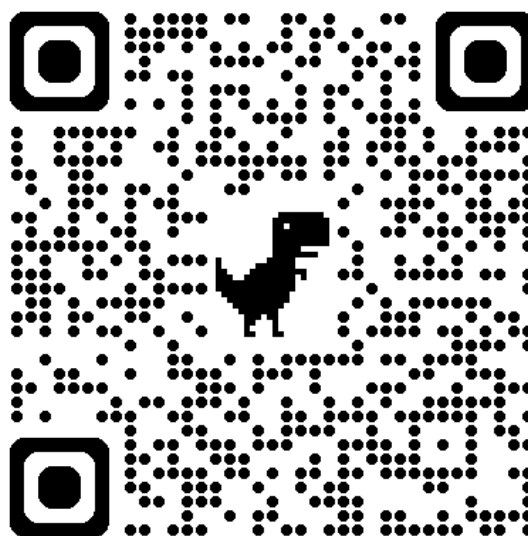
This is an evidence-based framework informed by the structured, peer-led approach implemented by UISCE, international research and best practice which seeks to close the gap between those that have power and the ability to change things, and those that normally don't, but who everyone now agrees need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