

Research Project Reflective Report

Distinctiveness in the Poetry Activity of the Leeds City Region

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Introduction

Poetry allows us to see the world in new and transformative ways. As both an art form and a means of expression, it carries the potential to connect, heal, and challenge. Through the project 'Distinctiveness in the Poetry Activity in the Leeds City Region', I have come to see how vital it is that poetry is made accessible to everyone, not confined to select spaces or voices.

Through the Laidlaw Leadership and Research Programme, I have been working in collaboration with the National Poetry Centre on this project exploring Leeds' poetry scene to map, analyse, and critically reflect on community-based poetry activity in the city. In this report, I aim to document my understanding of the Leeds poetry ecosystem, including its tendencies and gaps. The objective is to analyse my findings and critically reflect on their impact on the scene and on my personal journey.

Defining the project

At the initial meeting with Nick Barley, Director of the National Poetry Centre, and Emily Penn, Operations Manager, it was agreed that my research partner, Susanna Nash, and I would each focus on distinct aspects of the project (though it was clear from the outset that these areas would inevitably intersect). My research partner and I were asked to submit a research proposal draft. This draft aimed to identify the research vision, motivations, research methodology, and main output objectives.

Prior to composing the research proposal, I had only a vague understanding of the requirements of the project; I was uncertain about what the National Poetry Centre envisioned or how the research process itself would unfold. I was grateful to the Poetry Centre and Professor Whale for giving me the freedom to shape the project myself by defining my own focus and pursuing the aspects that most interested us. I was awarded the opportunity to look at the poetry scene through a community lens, motivated by the prospect of exploring meaningful ways of amplifying hidden voices. As a linguist, I was especially drawn to the way this project brings community and language together, highlighting how poetic expression can foster belonging. Looking back, submitting the research proposal was a pivotal moment in my project journey, as it compelled me to reflect on my motivations for pursuing this endeavour and identify my key inspirations for focusing on specific areas.

Research conducted

I had intended to conduct in-person interviews to ensure full immersion into the communities I was investigating, but this wasn't always possible due to intersecting schedules and the location of the venues. I had the opportunity to meet some individuals in person in the city centre and visit some venues, but the majority of my interviews were conducted online.

My list of interviewees quickly grew beyond what I could realistically cover, as each conversation generated new contacts. To capture this wider network and visualise the current

literary landscape, I compiled and shared my findings from surveys and other materials in the form of a digital interactive map. See figure 1 below.

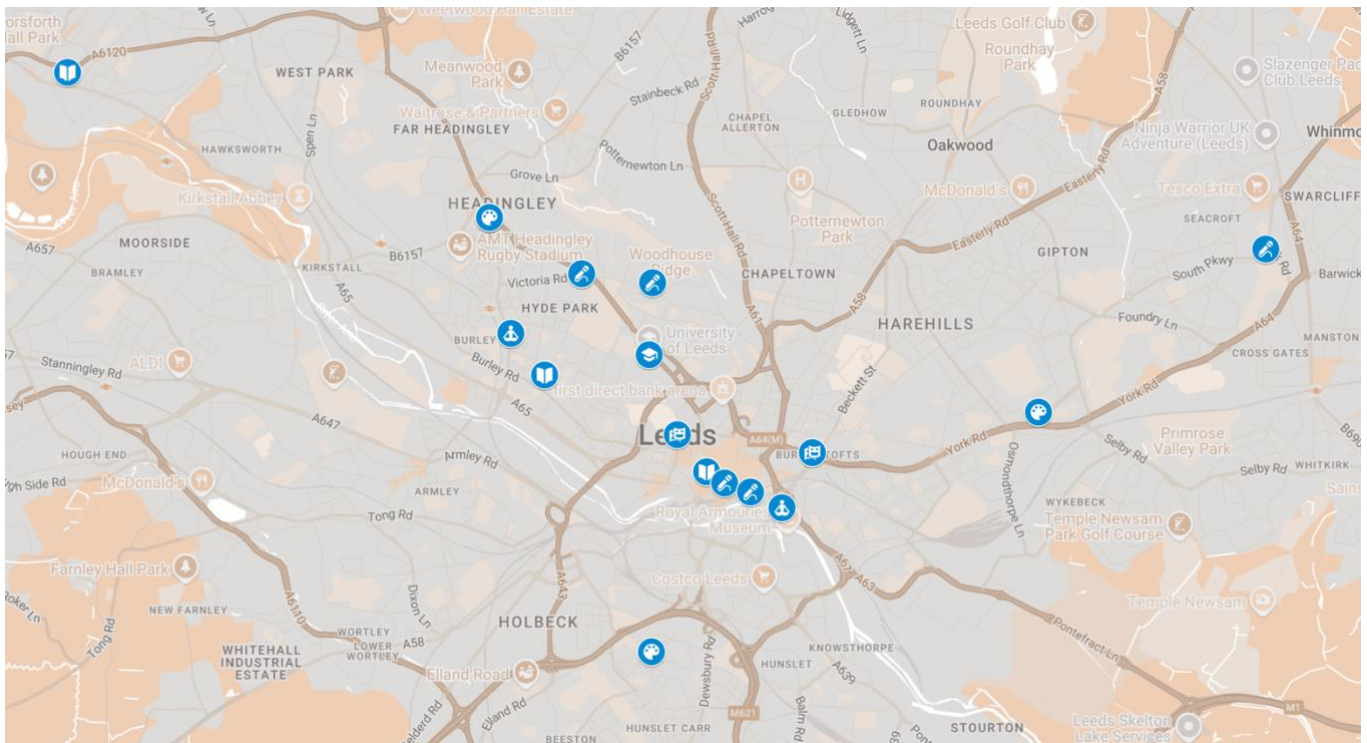


Figure 1: Digital map of Leeds poetry activity.

https://www.google.ca/maps/d/viewer?mid=1vIseUTq0to9l_Fnoyqx0H2PGfQP_lIY&usp=sharing

The final set of interviewees I was lucky to speak to comprised 13 individuals, whose contributions can be categorised into the following distinct groups:

Publishers / Presses

- Peepal Tree Press (Jacob Ross and Adam Lowe) → Independent publisher specialising in Caribbean, Black British and South Asian writing.

Arts / Community Organisations

- Left Bank (Sue Jennings) → Multidisciplinary arts and community space.
- Space2 (Jelena Zindovic) → Arts charity using creativity for community development.
- Arts & Minds (Toby Thomas) → Network connecting artists and people who use creativity to support mental health.
- Purple Patch Arts (Hannah Greenwood and Róisín Reynolds) → Arts organisation/workshops and creative projects.
- Brave words (Chris Singleton) → Socially engaged theatre company.

Libraries / Cultural Institutions

- The Leeds Library (Ian Harker) → Membership subscription library and literary hub.

Media / Broadcasting

- Chapel FM (Peter Spafford and Tony Macaluso) → Community radio and arts centre.

Individuals / Writers / Poets

- Jaimes Lewis Moran
- Matt Abbott
- Khadijah Ibrahim
- Adam Lowe
- Dalton Harrison

Findings and analysis

Within the community lens, the questions I had prepared focused on how poetry functions in the interviewees' lives and their groups and on the effect of its public celebration on their sense of belonging: both in their community and in the Leeds poetry scene.

Based on the interview findings and desk research into the scene, I was able to draw evidence-based conclusions and identify trends and gaps in community poetry in the Leeds poetry scene. The following categories are not exhaustive and are very dependent on perception.

1. Genre

The term 'genre' can be adapted to represent different practices and the type of poetry performed, rather than a restrictive definition. Genre is one of the more helpful counters in categorising poetry, and yet, I have found that it is almost resisted in Leeds, emerging less as a fixed literary category than a fluid practice shaped by community and performance.

Many have highlighted the uniqueness of the Leeds poetry scene, describing it as 'vibrant' and a 'distinctive hub', where many organisations are focused on helping the disadvantaged communities. Independent presses such as Peepal Tree Press and Yaffle Press emphasise diasporic and marginalised voices, while organisations like Chapel FM, Brave Words, and Left Bank prioritise spoken word and performance-based practices that foreground inclusivity and social engagement. Meanwhile, groups such as Arts & Minds, Purple Patch Arts, and Space2 highlight poetry's therapeutic and educational functions, positioning it as a tool for wellbeing and empowerment. This hybridity challenges traditional genre boundaries and reflects a distinctively grassroots, DIY character in the Leeds poetry scene, where community practice, active promotion of poetry and the encouragement of inclusive involvement often outweigh formal literary conventions.

2. Mental health

As a large part of my research concentrated on community groups, I was very interested in how poetry acted as a connecting bridge for people. A recurring theme in my findings has been poetry's ability to provide a space for healing. Many interviewees have referenced poetry's therapeutic value, explaining that it can provide an outlet for complex emotions, particularly for those who might feel silenced, and connect a writer to similar people in their community. Community organisations across Leeds also consistently highlighted poetry's role in wellbeing, emphasising its capacity to give people a voice, foster confidence, support disability inclusion, and promote positive mental health.

3. Accessibility

While poetry builds connections in Leeds, it can also be very unwelcoming to newcomers. Reflecting on the demographics of the participants I have interviewed, the majority are established voices. This is related to the fact that poetry is still often perceived as elitist, inducing fear and uncertainty in emerging or aspiring poets. There has been a common trend in the interviewees' responses, with them all sharing the sentiment of a lack of opportunities — especially paid — in the poetry scene. Individual poets were keen to comment on the lack of infrastructure in Leeds, with a lack of venues for poetry events, particularly physically accessible spaces, which might feel discriminatory for disabled people. With a note of a slow surge of literary spaces, interviewees also noted the lack of poetry activity outside of pubs, a large hindrance for many who choose not to be around alcohol for religious or personal reasons.

Poets and organisers expressed concerns about the dominance of competitive formats, which can be both empowering and exclusionary. Digital platforms were seen as a mixed force, expanding opportunities but leaving some behind, while most physical spaces remain competitive and fragmented. These challenges in accessibility and visibility raise the question of how Leeds can build stronger structures that could unite poetic communities.

4. Connectivity

The analysis of accessibility to poetry across Leeds provides a background to the level of connectivity and networking capacity in the city. The influence of London-centrism and a lack of pathways to support poetic voices mean that many organisations are unable to gain visibility. Manchester was often brought up as a point of comparison, described as more confident and casual in showcasing its cultural identity, with established festivals and larger venues that foster connections. By contrast, Leeds is seen as more modest and self-deprecating in tone.

Although most participants in this research were aware of each other, it had become evident that they often operate independently, with limited collaboration. One of the exceptions consistently cited as an accommodating and integrative presence is Chapel FM. This is explained by the accessibility of the radio station, considering its successful integration of poetry into community practice and its location in an area that suits the demographic. Overall, while most contributors to this research expressed satisfaction with their place in Leeds' poetry ecosystem, they also conveyed a desire for stronger communication and collaboration across the network, for example, through a poetry hub.

5. Value of an external organisation

The lack of connectivity across the Leeds scene highlights the need for an external organisation, such as the National Poetry Centre. Most of the interviewees have confirmed this hypothesis, stressing the need for an infrastructure hub of poetry in the city. The interviewees expressed hope that the Poetry Centre could become an epicentre for Leeds, building the kind of network between organisations that the city, or even the entirety of the UK, has long lacked.

If I were to reflect critically, I would note that some groups may prefer to retain autonomy rather than be absorbed into wider networks, while others risk being victims of performative inclusion if visibility is sought without meaningful support. This raises important implications for the National Poetry Centre: whether all groups should be supported, and how to balance the advantages and disadvantages of doing so.

Methodological reflections

One of the desired research outputs was spotlighting the unique voices and creative practices that shape community-based poetry. However, a key question emerging from these findings is whether every group should be made more visible. It is crucial to acknowledge that the poetry scene will always exist beyond what we can see; resource constraints mean that not all initiatives can be equally promoted, raising questions about how to prioritise and who decides. This has posed one of the biggest challenges in defining the project and its scope, determining category and genre definitions, and identifying key stakeholders to contact. My initial research was also complicated by the limited prior work on the Leeds poetry scene, meaning that I was diving into the unknown, which left me uncertain about whether I could adequately represent the National Poetry Centre and contribute to identifying ways to support its goals.

My eagerness to coordinate the Leeds poetry scene initially drove me to reach out to as many people as possible, before realising that such breadth was impossible within the six-week scope of the project. Creating the map also prompted me to reflect on its limitations: it cannot capture intangible dimensions such as perceptions, loyalties to Leeds, or the porous boundaries of participation. Consequently, my findings and their presentation should not be understood as exhaustive, which points to limitations of this type of research and sets the possibility for more refined thinking and an openness to flexible labels.

A central conundrum that has emerged is how to define what constitutes the “scene” itself: if certain individuals or groups do not feel included, does that place them outside of it? This is the manifestation of the perception of significance. The variety of perceptions makes such debates potentially endless. This created complications in analysing the findings because the degree of satisfaction with the current state of the scene could be dependent on the perspective of the individual interviewed, meaning that it should not be taken as representative of the entire group. Such complexities underline the importance of further research into the

scene, which can address not only who is visibly active but also the fluid and shifting nature of what we call the Leeds poetry scene.

These practical limitations highlight the need for the National Poetry Centre to coordinate the contradictory sets of affiliation and identity, balance inclusivity with sensitivity to each community's wishes, and to recognise that visibility is not universally desired or uniformly beneficial.

Dissemination of research

To share my research findings, I have created a digital map (See Fig. 1) which aims to outline the most prominent organisations and venues in the Leeds City Region. This was extremely valuable in helping the Centre understand where and how the poetry activity takes place. For now, it is just an initial roadmap of starting points, but there is scope for it to be expanded on in the future so that it can become a proper illustration of a network of venues operating within the Leeds poetry scene.

I have also written a blog post reflecting on my research journey, which highlights the voices shaping community-based poetry in Leeds, examines barriers to the literary world in greater depth, and offers creative reflections on how the scene's visibility and sustainability might be strengthened. In addition, I produced a digital brochure designed as a snapshot of individual voices across the Leeds City Region — from independent poets to those affiliated with organisations — complementing the blog by featuring participants who could not be included there. I hope that these outputs can be published on the National Poetry Centre's website or shared in print form.

In terms of engagement, I consistently introduced the Laidlaw Programme during interviews, clearly outlining both the aims of the programme and my own research. Framing the work within this context emphasised that the arts, and literature in particular, remain a valued area of inquiry at the University of Leeds and nationally. This transparency fostered trust and participation among respondents, encouraging them to contribute meaningfully to a project connected to a wider intellectual and cultural legacy.

I have also attended several poetry events across Leeds, such as the Chemistry at the Chemic Tavern and Peter Spafford's poetry launch at the Heart Centre. These events were extremely valuable for me, as I had the opportunity to listen to fantastic open mic performances, form my perception of the scene, and share my research project ideas with other poets while connecting with them.

Impact

Impact on the community

The research work I have been undertaking is arguably the most significant for the communities I engaged with. In line with my initial aim of documenting marginalised and often

overlooked voices within the Leeds poetry scene, I have made every effort to make sure that participants felt understood and heard — especially in light of the competitive nature that currently characterises much of the poetry world. Through inquiries into their work, I have gathered valuable insights into the diversity and complexity of poetic activity in Leeds. These perspectives provide the National Poetry Centre with a more nuanced understanding of the scene, helping to avoid assumptions and preconceptions about specific communities or groups and laying the groundwork for stronger connections in the future.

Seeing and feeling the interviewees' passion for poetry and willingness to support my research reaffirmed how meaningful it can be simply to be approached and included. By documenting and amplifying poetic voices through public-facing outputs, I hope to contribute to greater visibility for poets and organisations in the city. This increased visibility, in turn, will continue to foster collaboration across the city to achieve sustainable, community-driven development toward a more inclusive environment.

Impact on the National Poetry Centre

My research findings have also been beneficial for the National Poetry Centre as I have laid the groundwork for a database of poetry-affiliated organisations, people and venues in Leeds. The creation of a digital interactive map is an early foundation for future developments, either through expanding it or inspiring new forms of research outputs. For example, the map could be extended to cover Yorkshire, which would reflect the 'National' aspect of the Poetry Centre. Demographically and geographically, the map provides valuable insight into the tendencies and patterns of venues used for poetry-related activity, highlighting areas with lower levels of participation and informing strategies for outreach.

Acting as a representative for the National Poetry Centre, I also had the opportunity to introduce the organisation to members of the Leeds poetry scene, helping them understand its vision and aims. This process enabled me to gather perspectives from those who could become future collaborators, offering early insight into what different individuals would hope the Poetry Centre might provide following its official launch in 2028. This is significant for future exhibitions, publications, promoting engagement with the art form and fostering creativity across all ages and backgrounds – one of NPC's primary missions.

Nick Barley and Emily Penn have emphasised that my contribution offered valuable, first-hand insights into how poetry is practised and sustained at a grassroots level in Leeds. As the National Poetry Centre aims to understand participation in Leeds—what enables people to write, perform, and connect through poetry—my research helped illuminate the existing networks, barriers, and opportunities within the local scene. This was facilitated by the opportunity to engage directly with poets and organisations as a student researcher, providing perspectives that might otherwise remain unheard.

Impact on me

My research project has been highly fruitful for my leadership development and academic growth. Despite being pre-defined, the project was mainly self-led, as it was up to me to

determine the areas of focus in a way that would both follow my interests and benefit the National Poetry Centre. Working in cooperation with the National Poetry Centre allowed me to understand how to contribute to the aims of an external organisation while pursuing my own goals in research. Learning how to work alongside a non-university partner has given me a chance to practice my leadership skills under supervision, particularly in adapting academic research to meet real-world organisational needs and communicating effectively across different professional contexts. From drafting my first-ever research proposal to independently conducting interviews, I have grown my confidence and communication skills immensely.

While my initial aim was to explore the Leeds poetry scene through the lens of refugee communities and language, I encountered significant time constraints and a limited availability of information on these specific topics within the project's timeframe. Hence, I diverted my focus toward a community lens, exploring the connectivity of poetry activity across the city and ways to improve it. From a leadership perspective, this taught me the importance of flexibility and strategic decision-making — learning to adapt my focus, reassess priorities, and still deliver meaningful outcomes despite unexpected limitations.

At the beginning, I was uncertain about producing a meaningful research piece on such a broad topic, but as I progressed, I learnt to be more hopeful and to have faith in my ability to nurture growth. Putting myself out there and leading conversations with a diverse group of people in a community setting was exactly what I needed to become more resilient. With conflicting schedules and many interviews to conduct, arranging meetings was often challenging, requiring me to learn how to adjust to people and circumstances. The project was highly demanding, requiring me to exercise diplomacy, think on my feet, and respond effectively to unexpected challenges. This taught me adaptability and agility as I learnt to accept that not everything will always unfold as planned; flexibility in the face of inconsistencies and change is a vital quality of effective leadership.

The Laidlaw value I highlighted in my application for the Laidlaw Programme was 'Brave,' and through this project, it has grown even stronger. Where I once feared challenges, I now feel ready to face them and to stand firmly by my convictions.

Future directions

Although I was initially disappointed not to be selected for my first-choice project, I could not be more grateful to have been chosen for the Laidlaw Programme and to spend this summer exploring the poetry of Leeds. This project has been highly stimulating not only for my mental growth, but also for my pursuit of literature at university. Applying my passion for contemporary poetry to cultural research has stimulated my enthusiasm for the arts, whichever industry sector I end up in. Looking ahead, I would like to continue developing the skills and knowledge I have acquired, linking them closely to my career interests.

Being among the first to contribute to a research project on local poetry in Leeds has been extremely rewarding, not only for its potential to drive change in the city I live in but also for its multidimensional relevance across several disciplines. The project has deepened my skills in

ethical reporting and sharpened my awareness of its nuances, particularly the need to search for counter-narratives. I have also developed my interviewing, public speaking and investigative skills, which are fundamental if I choose to pursue journalism. This will strengthen my storytelling for wider communities and reinforce my commitment to serving the public good. The project has also given me a great understanding of publishing networks, which could support a career in the Leeds literary sector, while the close reading and linguistic analysis involved in the project have also sharpened skills directly applicable to translation — another career path I have in mind.

In Year 2 of the Laidlaw Programme, I plan to build on this foundation by focusing on the experiences of hidden voices within communities abroad. Beyond the programme, I see potential for public-facing outputs such as publications, blogs, or digital platforms, which would not only disseminate the findings more widely but also enable me to continue to engage directly with communities.

This research project has been deeply meaningful to me, and as I continue shaping my career path, I remain committed to using my voice to amplify those who are too often hidden.