



The MAC's submission to the Culture, Arts and Leisure Committee's  
'Inquiry into Inclusion in the Arts of Working Class Communities'

## **Background to the MAC**

The MAC opened in April 2012 to critical and popular acclaim. The venue was built with significant capital funding support from DCAL, the Arts Council, DSD and Belfast City Council, trusts and foundations and the corporate sector.

The MAC includes two theatres; three visual art galleries (which are the largest purpose-built contemporary art galleries to have been created in Northern Ireland in generations); the Den - a focal point for our Learning and Participation programmes; the Family Room; four multi-purpose spaces designed for workshops, rehearsals and conferences and dance classes; offices for four resident companies; an artist-in-residence studio, and a café and bar.

Reaching as many people as possible and positively impacting upon their lives is critically important to the MAC. We believe that the arts have the power to communicate with everyone if presented in the right way.

Public funding was secured in pursuit of the following benefits:

### **Construction Phase Benefits:**

- 1.1 Regeneration
- 1.2 Employment (construction)
- 1.3 Accessibility (physical accessibility of the building)
- 1.4 Sustainability (environmental)

### **Operational Phase Benefits:**

- 2.1 Economic (additional cultural tourism and associated revenue spend)
- 2.2 Investment (private sector investment levered as a result of the development of the MAC)
- 2.3 Improved arts provision in Belfast
- 2.4 Accessibility and participation in the arts (increased participation in the arts – visual and performing)
- 2.5 Employment (operations)
- 2.6 Social Inclusion (volunteering)
- 2.7 Social Inclusion (accessibility)

In the most recent iteration of the Benefits Realisation Plan (September 2013) the project's SRO examined the MAC's performance against the targets set within each projected area of benefit. The MAC was found to have realised all the targeted benefits (Benefit 2.2 Investment [private sector investment levered as a result of the development of the MAC] was judged to be pending as it is a 25 year target).

The project's final Gateway Review 5 Operations Review and Benefits Realisation took place in October 2013 and scored a Delivery Confidence Assessment of Green which is the highest possible ranking.

## **Introduction**

The MAC's mission is to be a centre of artistic excellence that makes a positive difference to people's lives.

We achieve this in many different ways; through our live events, visual art, and Learning and Participation programmes.

The MAC aims to be a world-class arts centre in which writers, musicians, dancers, poets, visual artists and actors, from Northern Ireland and around the world present ground-breaking work. To date the MAC has welcomed 582,066 visitors and engaged with 46,380 people through our Learning and Participation Programmes.

We take very seriously the fact that too many people in Northern Ireland think the arts are not for them – we think the enjoyment of and participation in great art should not be 'owned' by any one section of the population. We are focused on the fact that as a brand new contemporary art venue the MAC may be intimidating to people who think the arts are for the economically affluent alone. We are aware that arts venues are imposing for a large section of Northern Ireland's population and that there are still widespread misconceptions that the arts are elitist and exclusive. This is simply not true of the MAC and we have worked hard to break down perceived and real barriers to participation; but we are aware that we can always do more. And so, in response we have taken a wide range of measures (across all areas of the organisation including artistic programming, operations and marketing and communications) to convey an inclusive message that encourages everyone to take part in the arts through the MAC.

Our Learning and Participation programmes (examples to follow) are focussed on including people who are less likely to fully participate in all aspects of civic society, not just the arts, due to inequality and poverty caused by multiple factors that may include issues connected to their economic status, mental and physical health, ethnicity, sexuality, geographical location and political affiliation.

We have worked really hard since opening in April 2012 to make the MAC a welcoming space for everyone and as accessible to the largest number of people as possible and we are delighted that the feedback we have received from our customers has been overwhelmingly positive. Based on our customer research we have achieved one of the

outcomes that is of critical importance to the MAC's sustainability: our shows, workshops, visual art exhibitions and other programmes are being used by a very broad demographic of Northern Ireland's population. We have extended opening hours and welcome our customers 364 each year.

Our audience data shows that our top 50 postcodes, in terms of ticket buyers include a wide cross-section of Belfast and Greater Belfast communities. Key bookers for performances at the MAC, analysed by postcode area include:

BT7	Donegal Pass/University/Holy Lands
BT6	Cregagh Road/Castlereagh
BT23	Newtownards – Glen/Scarbo/Westwinds
BT11	Riverdale/Lady/Suffolk
BT17	Dunmurray/Derriaghy
BT16	Cherryhill/Grangewood/Dunlady/Old Mill
BT14	Fortwilliam Antrim Road
BT1	Belfast City Centre
BT27	Lisburn (PT) – Hillhall/Saintfield Road/ Ballynahinch Road (PT)
BT23	Newtownards- Victoria/Bangor Road
BT7	Markets/Lower Ormeau
BT11	Turf Lodge/Andersonstown
BT14	Cliftonville/Old Park/Westland/Sunningdale
BT9	Stranmillis/Malone (PT)
BT7	Annadale/Ormeau/Ballynefeagh
BT8	Fourwinds/Cairnshill
BT5	Ballyhackamore/Orangefield/Orby/Clarawood
BT36	Glengormley/Newtownabbey
BT37	Whiteabbey/Fernagh/Jordanstown/Monkstown
BT38	Carrickfergus

Please note that this data relates only to ticket-buying customers and does not represent a full analysis of the MAC's 582,066 customers who have visited the venue to view exhibitions, participate in workshops, school tours and learning and participation programmes or simply to enjoy the venue as a shared space in the city centre.

Customer feedback is telling us that the MAC is experienced as an accessible venue (in the broadest definition) that isn't elitist or snobbish. In January 2014 the MAC achieved a NetMums' Award which voted the MAC the best theatre in Northern Ireland. NetMums is a UK-based family of local websites set up and run by mothers. Netmums has over 1,500,000 members, 4 million unique users a month, and over 27 million page views a month, making it the UK's most popular social networking, advice and support website for parents.

*Dear Curator*

*Just a brief note to say thank you for the curatorial efforts at the MAC thus far. What I know of the arts you could write on the back of a postage stamp. But my appreciation for art is increasing so much with every exhibition, that I would like to go on record as saying, that the MAC is actually driving tangible improvements in my quality of life.*

*The new treasure of Belfast.*

*Many thanks,*

*C*

*PS: I seen the Kara Walker exhibition today, sensational!*

*27 January 2014*

## **Learning and Participation Programme**

The MAC's Learning and Participation programme delivers wide-ranging audience development strategies that will attract and retain new audiences from under-represented communities who may have misconceptions about the elite nature of arts venues. The work is delivered under the following strands:

- Education: schools, further and higher education;
- Communities: young people and adults in hard-to-reach communities and those who do not traditionally engage in arts and culture;
- Families and children: increasing audiences for all art forms with particular reference in to visual art;
- Adults: professional development, artists talks, gallery tours;
- Young People: mainly those aged 14-18 outside school hours.

Some examples of this work includes:

- The MAC Family Room
- Family Fun Workshops

- Dance School
- Rock school
- Drama schools
- MADE Festival
- Schools' Symposium
- Seasonal holiday activities
- the Den Collective
- Creative School workshops
- Gallery talks and tours
- School competitions
- Passport to the MAC transport scheme – subsidised travel for those schools for whom transport costs are a barrier to attendance
- MACcommunity
- MACtivist volunteer programme.

We have two Learning and Participation Officers, one of whom is dedicated to work with Schools and Families and the other to Youth and Communities. Their work is enriched by the MAC Artist Collective, a rostra of 40 artists of all disciplines experienced in high-quality community-based practice. Learning and Participation at the MAC is a deliberately broad programme which aims to offer a range of opportunities to as inclusive a range of participants as possible across all social backgrounds. These programmes play a major part in our efforts to embed the MAC as quickly as possible within the fabric of Northern Ireland's civic infrastructure and to engender a sense of ownership within the hearts and minds of our population so that we can build audiences and deliver increased rates of participation (especially within working class communities) on an ongoing basis.

## **1. Young People**

Our work with young people is central to our goal to be a vibrant and relevant arts space. We work with schools, providing outreach sessions, tours, specialised shows and a school symposium. We work with young people who are not in education, training or employment, to build their skills and confidence and to increase their opportunities for re-engaging with positive paths. On their first visit to the MAC one of our participating groups stood outside on the pavement, unsure and uncertain about entering the venue. This group now feels so at home in the MAC that they use the building as a meeting space for all their activities and they are contributing themes and ideas as part of our Learning and Participation Officers' thinking about

how to most effectively work with particularly hard-to-reach young people. We plan to support the young people we work with to the point where they feel able to act as ambassadors for participation in and enjoyment of the arts within their communities. We feel strongly that the best way to engage with harder to reach groups is through the encouragement of their peers, rather than by traditional methods of promotion and marketing.

Over the next 3 years we will also develop our work with MACommunity (see Point 4 below), where we work in partnership with community groups to create tailor-made projects for young people supporting them in learning core skills such as verbal communication techniques, customer care or arts management skills. We lend expertise, provide free space and provide hands-on experience and behind-the-scenes insight from a team of skilled arts professionals.

## **2. MADE**

The MADE Festival (Music, Art, Dance and Everything in between) is a 7-day festival for 14-18 year-olds curated by young people for young people. There have been two MADE Festivals so far, in October 2012 and 2013 and we intend to run the event annually. We promote the MADE festival in areas of social deprivation working with community groups to engage young people in arts activities and events in the MAC.

1467 people attended 25 events in MADE 2013. Events included everything from career workshops (Meet the Maker) to live music gigs and quirky sell-out events like Fright Night in which 25 young people slept in the MAC overnight. In addition to a host of ticketed events, the MAC created a games area and hang-out zone where young people could relax, meet new friends and feel part of the Festival.

The festival was co-curated by the MAC's youth panel, the DEN Collective (see below).

Participating groups included:

- Bytes
- Upper Springfield Development Trust
- Action for Children young carers.
- Larne YMCA
- The Response Project – the Doc Arts Centre, Carrick-on-Shannon
- Blackie Community Centre
- Tar Isteach
- The Now project (young people with learning disabilities)
- Inclusion and diversity project BELB

### **3. Den Collective**

Our Den Collective is a group of twenty 14-18 year-olds who meet in the Den on a weekly basis to work together and with our Learning and Participation Officer to contribute ideas and inspiration to the MAC's artistic programming and vision, to ensure that we retain our links to the next generation of artists, audiences and participants.

### **4. MACommunity**

In 2013/14, following extensive consultation with community-based groups and organisations we created the MACommunity programme to groups such as New Lodge Arts, the NOW Project and the Young Carers' Association to realise their own community-based projects. The MAC provided free space in the Den for a period of 6-12 weeks, with our staff team on hand to provide intensive mentoring and practical support throughout in the form of advice, guidance and insight into the processes necessary to the creation and delivery of high-quality arts and cultural events.

MACommunity was created directly in response to the discussions that took place with 30 community groups during the MAC's roadshows in 2012/13 during which we asked the groups two questions: What can the MAC do to give you practical help? and How can the MAC add value to what you do? MACommunity is only one example of among many of how the MAC seeks to share facilities and work in new ways with the communities that surround us.

Some examples of the groups that have participated in MACommunity include:

- NOW is a social enterprise that works to help people gain qualifications and life/work experience and support them to move into jobs with a future. 20 young people from NOW who were not in education, employment or training made use of the Den in the MAC and the skills and experience of the MAC's artistic and technical team over a 12-week period to create a theatre performance in the venue.
- Part of a BELB project, 15 young people who are part of a cross-community, mixed ability youth group consisting of young people from very different backgrounds in terms of their culture, language, ethnicity, education, religion, gender and sexuality are helping us deliver a schools symposium in April 2014 - ID 2014 (Identity Day). This will be a major schools event which will focus on young people's views on their



identity in 2014. ID 2014 will explore how identity in Northern Ireland is evolving beyond traditional boundaries and what this means for our future.

*"I work with the most underrepresented groups of young people in Belfast. I use the MAC every Wednesday night with one of our groups, as part of the MACommunity project. Included in this group are young people that are disabled, deaf, LGBT, asylum seekers, minority ethnic, ASD young people & young people from faith-based groups.*

*We have found that the MAC is an exceptional place in which the young people feel they are all treated like equals and have never been talked down to or judged (like other venues). The staff are fantastic with them. On several occasions members of staff have come up with jugs of water with lemon and the young people feel that touches like that go a long way.*

*The young people find the venue inspiring and very importantly it is a neutral place in which the group can meet. I have searched around the city for somewhere for this group to meet that met all their individual needs and there was nowhere like the MAC.*

*Also the young people feel so welcomed and that they now come to the MAC independently and meet for coffee in their spare time.*

*One particular young person in the group is in a wheelchair and MAC staff always come up to him and offer to help which is great as he doesn't seem to get that in other venues and he really appreciates it.*

*I can't recommend the MAC highly enough for the beautiful interior, its accessibility, the fact that it's in a neutral part of the city where young people feel safe and because the MAC's ethos in terms of how it works with young people is the best I have encountered in Belfast. "*

***Stuart Kennedy, BELB Youth Service Inclusion and Diversity Team***

- 10 young people from New Lodge Arts have taken part in an arts development programme learning about the different roles within the arts sector from Technician to Marketer to Administrator to Front of House Officer. MAC staff from across all departments meet with the group to share their knowledge within the cultural industries.

These groups of young people now use the MAC frequently outside their involvement in MACCommunity. They use the space independently to meet up outside of any project they are participating in the staff welcome them as regular MAC users.

We are currently working with Belfast Interface building relationship with new community groups in north, south, east and west Belfast through our community roadshow programme.

## **5. The Lighthouse Project**

During Sept 2013-March 2014 the MAC ran a men's project with Lighthouse (the suicide prevention charity that supports individuals who are in crisis and at risk of self-harm or suicide as well as those who have been bereaved through suicide). The 15 participants came from different and traditionally opposing communities and all came from working class communities. None of the men had been in the MAC before the project and none of them were regular attenders at arts events. The men were introduced to the MAC through the Mystery of Tears exhibition <http://themaclive.com/whats-on/the-mystery-of-tears/> and went on to create photographic artworks that were exhibited in the MAC. During the course of the project the men came to feel an intense sense of ownership of the venue. Several participants described their growing understanding of and appreciation for the MAC and its programmes as life changing. They attended the opening of the Kara Walker exhibition (which followed the Mystery of Tears exhibition) en masse and with friends and family. The men have extracted a commitment from their support worker within Lighthouse that visits to the MAC and meetings with the MAC's curator will be a core part of their activities in the future.

Michael Carson was a participant in the Lighthouse project and he wrote a poem inspired by his visits to the MAC and his response to The Mystery of Tears exhibition. Michael read his poem aloud at the opening of the Lighthouse group's exhibition in the MAC and was kind enough to give us a copy which he is happy for us to share. Please refer to Appendix 1 *Michael's Poem*.

Since participating in the programme Michael has booked to see three shows at the MAC.

Please refer to Appendix 2 *Lighthouse Article* – a newspaper article in response to the MAC's project with Lighthouse.

## 6. Schools

182 schools have attended performances at the MAC, participated in workshops and/or had a tour of the venue.

We worked with DCAL economists and devise a matrix based on the level of free meals in schools to determine the level of social deprivation within our participating schools. In this way we have tangibly targeted schools and communities in socially deprived areas engaging them in MAC Learning and Participation projects ultimately giving communities and young people who normally would not engage in the arts the opportunity to fully experience and participate.

18 primary and post primary schools out of the top 40 with the highest percentage of Free School Meals (as the most appropriate proxy for social deprivation) have participated in various ways through our workshop/performance/Passport to the MAC scheme.

Our Learning and Participation Officer (Schools) has worked with 10 schools in the most socially disadvantaged areas of greater to directly promote ways in which the schools can benefit and have easy access to MAC programmes.

Sam, a 10-year-old customer who came, very reluctantly, to our 2013/14 Christmas show, had never been to the theatre before and told us:

*"That was better than X-Box!"*

**Schools Workshops** - a series of innovative and creative workshops that link with the curriculum to encourage both primary and secondary schools to visit the MAC.

**School Talks and Tours** – bringing art alive to primary and secondary school pupils and their teachers through the gallery talks, artists' talks, building tours, captioned and audio described performances, workshops through our Artists-in-Residence programme and post show talks inspired by our live events and visual art programme.

**School Live events and Teachers' Resource packs** – these learning tools are created and devised by the MAC to accompany targeted school shows so that school children get the most value possible from their visit to the MAC.

**Masterpiece for the MAC** – an annual Northern Ireland-wide primary school competition that supports teachers in the delivery of the curriculum's learning

objectives around the arts and culminates in an exhibition in the MAC. In the four years of Masterpiece for the MAC 3123 primary school children from 284 schools throughout NI have taken part in the competition.

**Passport to the MAC** – a transport scheme that provides free transport to the MAC’s Christmas show for schools that otherwise would not be able to afford to attend.

900 Primary and 49 Special Needs Schools are invited to join the project.

This project builds awareness of the MAC, encourages participation, provides access, and reduces barriers to arts engagement.

**Schools roadshows** – In 2014/15 the MAC’s learning and participation team will aim to visit 40 schools throughout Northern Ireland introducing over 240 teachers and students to the MAC’s schools programme and inviting them to participate in MAC activities and shows.

## **7. Families**

**The Family Room** is the hub from which families can relax, explore or just chill out before a show. It is comfortable tactile space where children can interact with art materials and children’s literature. Seasonal workshops, exhibitions and storytelling take place in the Family Room. We promote the Family Room, workshops and family shows to community groups, Sure Start groups and community nurseries in areas of social deprivation.

**Family Fun Workshops** encourage local communities, families and young people to visit the MAC. We deliver a series of artist-led workshops designed to complement the visual arts and live events programme.

**Summer Activities** - Dance School, Rock School and Drama Schools.

**Seasonal Holiday activities** - workshops and storytelling during the October half term, Halloween and over the Christmas period.

## **8. MACTivist Volunteer Programme**

One of the ways in which we will make sure people from all backgrounds continue to feel welcome in the MAC will be by maintaining our team of volunteers – our MACTivists – who provide a particularly warm welcome to the MAC building for visitors who may think the arts are not for them.

We currently have a team of 104 active MACTivists, of all ages and a broad range of backgrounds. MACTivists bring a distinct energy and commitment to the MAC. They volunteer with us because they believe passionately in the MAC's vision of bringing world-class art into the centre of our city for the enjoyment of all and they want to be part of achieving this.

MACTivists are trained to have a sound understanding of the MAC's artistic programmes so that they can welcome visitors to the MAC, helping them to navigate the building and the art. Our MACTivists play a key role in helping us break down barriers for customers who may never have visited the MAC, or any arts venue, before. It is natural to feel anxious in unfamiliar surroundings and our MACTivists are well placed in the foyers and the galleries to make our visitors feel genuinely welcome. On arrival our customers are met by a smiling volunteer who looks like them, talks like them, is dressed like them and thinks like them. Our MACTivists are helping us engender a sense of familiarity and ownership among our visitors and this will help us in our aim to build audiences among all constituencies in Northern Ireland.

## **9. Ethnic Minority Participants**

We have established a baseline for the number of members from ethnic minority backgrounds who took part in activities in the MAC in 2013/14 with the aim of increasing participation rates from within this demographic group. We are now designing and delivering programmes to achieve this.

## **10. Disabled Participants**

The MAC operates at the highest levels of access to disabled people and as a result, Adapt NI has officially adopted the MAC and its approach to disabled groups as a model of best practice in access issues. The MAC has an Access Charter which we advertise and promote on our website and which outlines our commitment to doing everything possible to meet individual customer needs. We make our artistic programmes accessible by regularly offering audio described, captioned and signed performances in the theatre spaces. We will continue to deliver relaxed performances - a new way of encouraging groups of disabled people to feel welcome in the MAC and helping them to fully engage with the breadth of the artistic programme. We offer building tours for customers using guide dogs. We will continue our work with special needs schools and create bespoke creative

workshops inspired by our visual arts and live events programmes to suit the needs of each group.

## **Conclusion**

Prior to the opening of the MAC the senior team was acutely aware of the weight of expectation and level of public scrutiny on the MAC. In light of this we wanted to ensure that all areas of the venue's core business (art – its creation and enjoyment) could function as close to full capacity as possible as quickly as possible.

We wanted as many aspects of the MAC as possible to be based on best practice. And so in advance of the venue's opening the senior artistic and management team (all of whom are still in place in the organisation) conducted a series of meetings with chief executives from the most successful venues in the UK and Ireland. We also carried out a number of study visits to venues that are recognised for the breadth and quality of their work with hard to reach communities.

We wanted to gain knowledge about others' successes and failures so that we could learn from the former and avoid the latter.

Although every venue had a different way of implementing their access and participation schemes and the programme variety was significant, one overriding theme emerged that was common to all of the most successful work in the area: the level of organisational success was commensurate with the degree of commitment to the principle of universal access among the senior staff. Conversely, committed and talented learning and participation teams had limited impact within organisations that were not driven by an ethos that prized community engagement.

This led us to conclude that organisation-wide buy-in from the Board down was one of the most important factors that would determine how effective the MAC's learning and participation work would be.

All of the work described above has been informed by our analysis and adoption of existing best practice models from throughout the UK and Europe.

The MAC deploys many of the same policies as other arts organisations in our sincere and sustained efforts to remove barriers to participation from the constituency which is the focus of this inquiry as well as all hard to reach constituencies. These measures include subsidised transport schemes, subsidised ticket schemes, innovative marketing and communication strategies including imaginative use of digital media, partnerships with schools, community groups,

umbrella organisations, partnership boards etc, access and sensory supports for disabled people, extended opening hours, central location, nearby parking.

Our customers have told us that having attracted their attention and persuaded them to come to the MAC by the use of the methods above it is the warmth of the welcome they receive when coming to see a show, view an exhibition or participate in a workshop that finally makes them reject the belief that 'the arts are not for me'.

MAC staff and volunteers make welcome anyone who comes to the MAC regardless of their economic status, ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, gender, race, religion or political affiliation. They do so with enthusiasm because this behaviour reflects the MAC's core organisational values of achieving excellence, acting with integrity and treating everyone fairly and equitably.

Our ability to extend the MAC's reach to involve more people in our learning and participation, live events and visual art programmes is constrained only by the resources available to us.

# HOPE IN SIGHT

I thank my God for the gift of sight  
Even though my day is night  
This would be my second year  
of moving in and out of tear

I wake each day to see the light  
and look outside to such a sight  
My sky is blue and full of hue  
with so much more, that's in my view

I start the day, as granted thee  
and travel to "The MAC" so free  
To join friends and think of hope  
Deciding on our projects scope

I see the joy in each one's face  
or maybe it's, this peaceful place  
sitting watching, as we talk  
I feel the need to take a walk

around the open floors, so bright  
I see so many rays of light  
As I gaze upon, the strands of steel  
There's so much more that I can feel

Warmth and love is at its heart  
I think I've found a place to start

As I reflect at, end of day  
I've seen the world in a special way

And thank the Lord with all my might  
For his grateful gift of sight.

Michael Carson





# SAM'S IN RIGHT FRAME OF MIND

## A NEW ST-ART GROUP WAS A LIFE SAVER

### Depressed man helped by photography

By Maureen Coleman

**A NORTH Belfast man who was on the verge of suicide has told how the art of photography helped save his life.**

Sam Turtle, 65, who comes from the Shankill area, suffered from depression for many years and attempted to take his own life on several occasions.

Then he turned to the charity Lighthouse for help, where he was encouraged to join a cross-community photography group. Facilitated by Kelly Morris, the group of 12 men, aged between 25 and 65, learned to use photography as an outlet for expressing their feelings.

Following a Hope-inspired exhibition at Lighthouse last year, the group went on to display their work at Queen's University and Stormont.

Now they've teamed up with the MAC in St Anne's Square, to exhibit their pictures. Using a previous MAC exhibition *The Mystery of Tears* to inspire their work, the group produced a series of self-portrait paintings, a short film and a collection of photography.

#### DARK

And Sam, who has 37 grandchildren and seven great grandchildren, credits the photography course for steering him away from dark thoughts of suicide.

He said: "I've lost lots of friends and relatives to suicide. Only last year my son's girlfriend took her own life. Then a friend of my daughter's committed suicide too. I remember her around this house when she was just a kid.

"There have been times the depression got out of control and I found it hard to open up to anyone. Men tend to keep things to themselves. I did try and take an overdose some years ago. Things just got on top of me.

"But coming to Lighthouse, meeting Kelly and joining the photography group changed my life. To be honest, I don't think I'd

be here if it wasn't for the photography. It's given me something positive to focus on and it's been great to meet other people who've gone through similar experiences. I can open up now and talk to people. I could never have done that before."

Sam, who addressed the audience at the exhibition launch at the MAC, said he was pleased to see the issue of mental health being highlighted in the arts.

"It's important that we talk about depression, suicide and self-harm," he said. "People need better education, especially young people. There are still too many cases of suicide in Belfast and more needs to be done."

#### THRILLED

Each of the men, who worked with the MAC for four months, submitted one black and white photograph for the MAC exhibition.

Sam said he was thrilled when he saw his work on the wall.

"I was so proud," he said. "Not just for me, but for all the guys. It's been such a boost."

Latest addition to the group, 35-year-old Conor Shannon, said he had always been interested in photography and had jumped at the chance to join the Lighthouse group.

But he said that never in his wildest dreams had he imagined where the journey would take him.

"I always wanted to do photography but never did anything about it until I went to the exhibition last year at the Lighthouse," he said.

"When I joined the group a few months ago, I must admit I thought it was just going to be dealing in the basics. But Kelly is brilliant and we've all learned so much from her.

"Some of my family were at

the launch at the MAC and were as proud as punch. It's amazing to think I have a photograph on the wall of the MAC. It's just unbelievable."

Conor said the course had helped him gain confidence and self-belief.

"I've definitely got a lot more confident," he said. "When we were at the MAC, we did art and film-making. I hadn't drawn a picture since school, so to be able to use that creative side was great."

Kelly Morris, who facilitates the photography group, praised the support from the MAC.

"When I went to see the MAC about the possibility of hosting an exhibition, they told me they wanted their building to be open to everyone and they've been true to their word," she said.

"Some of these young guys now have it on their CVs that they've exhibited at Stormont, Queen's and now the MAC."

■ The exhibition runs in the Studio at the MAC until April 6.



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PICTURE THIS: Sam Turtle with some of his photography work that is currently being displayed at The Mac