

HOW TO LIVE TOGETHER? A STORY FROM THE CLIMATE FUTURE

Report on Collective Listening Events for
the 'Imagining Climate Future Narratives' research project

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Edge Hill University 



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ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT

This research project *Imagining Climate Futures Narratives through Speculative Fiction: An Experiment in Collective Immersive Listening* (2024-2026) [number SRG2324/240699] funded by the British Academy involved collective listening events across five different locations in the North of England and Scotland.

Researcher-practitioners, James Marriott and Lena Šimić, co-creators of the audio play [*Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future*](#) (2023) facilitated the listening events of the extracts from the play with people from various communities. Overall 64 people participated in the events. The spaces included Stove Café in Dumfries; Bidston Observatory Artistic Research Centre on the Wirral; Kitty's Launderette in Anfield, Liverpool; Glenlivet Estate Office in Tomintoul; and Cornucopia in Hawick. The main research aim for the listening events was to use the play in order to engage audiences in discussions around climate futures in their specific locations.

The research questions of the project were:

- In what ways, if any, does the collective immersive experience of listening to speculative fiction of climate future narratives enable social and political action, and change?
- How are audiences affected by the existential challenges that the *Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future* play poses, which are not only about the climate crisis and upheaval, but also about imagining different ways of co-existing together in future worlds?

The project has already generated one published article in *Body, Space, Technology* journal [*Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future – Creating Community Resilience through Collective Listening Events*](#) (2026) and a publication of a further article on audio plays and literature of climate displacement is currently in development.

The communal experience of listening to a dramatized climate future narrative, and the conversations that followed, drew out from the participants a sense of engagement in their collective present as well as the future. This created a space in which the participants could listen to each other. What follows is a contextualisation of the audio play including the outline of its main themes, short stories from each location where listening events took place and a set of recommendations for arts and community organisations, policymakers and climate activists based on the research.



THREE SISTERS: A STORY FROM THE CLIMATE FUTURE

- The Context

Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future

sits in the context of audio plays that explore climate futures and ecological crisis. In the summer of 2024 we listened to an array of these. Among the strongest we found:

- *Forest 404* (2019) - Timothy X Atack
- *Song of the Reed* (2021) - Steve Waters
- *Farewell Falsterbo* (2022) and *Memories from the Transition* (2022) - Fredrik Pålsson
- *Voices from the End of the World* (2023) - Lucy Catherine
- *Ignite Climate Shorts* (2021) - series
- *Wild Woman of the North* (2023) - Gary Brown and Pauline Harris
- *The Secrets of the Last Greenland Shark* (2021) - Mike McClelland
- *Invasive Species* (2023) - Rachele Atalla
- *Ground Up* (2021) - Fiona Glen - BBC New Creatives and Wireless Theatre

The full play *Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future* can be listened to here:

<https://www.thebiglight.com/commissioned-audio/three-sisters-a-story-from-the-climate-future/>

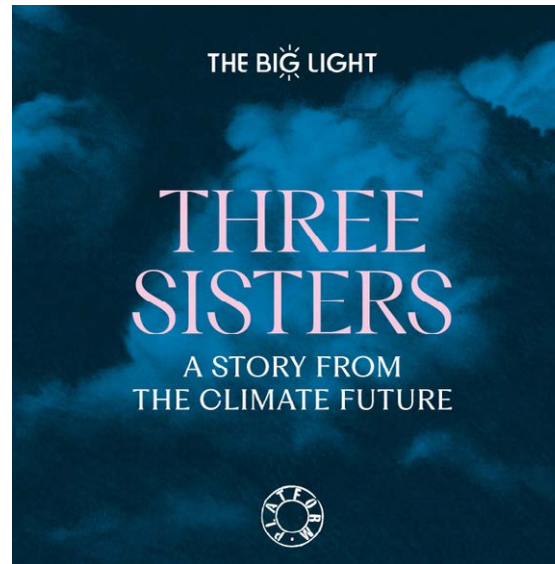


Figure 1: A postcard/marketing logo for the audio play, 2023.

ALEX: ... and then there are just a few people like yourselves, living in your oddkin households but engaged in the world, who are making a model of how to live in the future. You are a part of incremental change. When everyone starts living the way you do, in communities, with oddkin, life on Earth will be a whole lot happier as all the animals, birds, rivers, trees, and all the peoples upon it will be loved and cherished. Humanity longs for a world like that. It isn't here yet, but we must plan for it. In order to do that, we need to know and sense more than our parents and grandparents did. We need to see the world feelingly.

An extract from the play



THREE SISTERS: A STORY FROM THE CLIMATE FUTURE

- The Development

The question of 'how to live?' lies at the heart of the challenges as we face climate chaos. How to live – practically, emotionally, politically? It is the central question that we have tried to explore through the medium of an audio play, *Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future*, and the events that have been created in its development. What follows is a record of our attempts.

In the depths of the Covid lockdown, we started rewriting Chekhov's play *Three Sisters*, adapting it to address these times of pandemics and climate chaos. The original script, written in 1900, was set in the recent past by Chekhov. Our adaptation threw it forward into the future, into the later 2030s. Whereas in the original, the three sisters famously long to return to Moscow and are unable to do so, in this adaptation the sisters yearn for the London of their childhood. Yet returning is equally impossible, for the metropolis has largely been abandoned following the impact of flooding.

The three sisters in our adaptation live in a sprawling house near New Abbey by Dumfries, South West Scotland. They are relatively cut off due to storms bringing down the power lines. Long journeys have become increasingly rare. The house, abandoned, threatened by flooding and uninsurable, has been the place of refuge for this family from London.

When the play opens the sisters' mother and father have been lost to the Pandemic and floods. The household that remains is one they describe as 'oddkin'. Two elderly friends of their parents take on the roles of guardian figures and make the house intergenerational. An influx of visitors including locals provides a stream of excitement and opportunities for falling in love. Although reasonably sheltered from the wider climate chaos, almost all of the household long to be elsewhere, imagining a different kind of life.

The first production of *Three Sisters: a Story from the Climate Future*, was performed online in November 2020. Taking place at the height of the Pandemic, when each of the cast of 11 zoomed in from their separate homes. The piece created a temporary sense of community. Just as the play script explored the question of 'how to live' in isolated times, so too the production experimented with how to create together in isolated times.

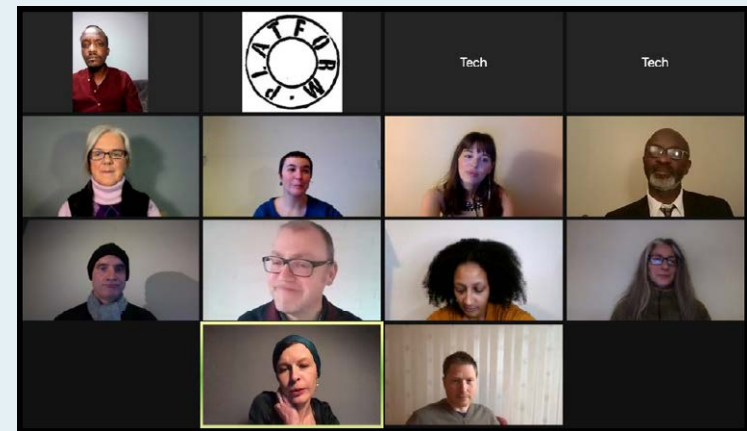


Figure 2: A screenshot from the Zoom production, November 2020.





Figure 3: Cast and crew at Kirkconnell House, August 2022.

The following year, in August 2021, whilst on a writing retreat to redraft the play, we came upon Kirkconnell House, near New Abbey, on the flood plain of the River Nith. The play had suddenly found its true setting. The script was further reworked to become an audio piece, built around

the rooms and gardens of this ancient building. In August 2022 a new cast was assembled at Kirkconnell, living together, rehearsing and recording. Once again a temporary community, and an enactment of the household as imagined in the play.

A year on, in October 2023, we created an immersive production of the play in Kirkconnell House, as a part of the annual Wild Goose festival in Dumfries & Galloway, coordinated by the Stove Network. The audio was broadcast throughout the rooms of the building, with the house appearing to give a fictional account of its future residents. This three and a half hour event, moved from space to space, including the garden, living rooms and bedrooms, and concluded with a discussion.

The same autumn the audio play was released online as a four-part series. However, the medium of a podcast, powerful in reaching a national and international audience, is essentially an isolating technology. The audience listens to the work



Figure 4: Authors Lena and James during an immersive performance, October 2023.



alone – at home, out walking, in the car, and so on. Although there were nearly 7,000 downloads¹ of *Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future*, feedback and exchange with listeners was scant.

We wanted to see if we could overcome this isolating aspect of the medium of audio plays, and instead use the recording as a tool to provoke climate future conversations and create further temporary communities. To use the play as a trigger to create listening events where participants would be encouraged to discuss issues at the heart of the climate crisis. In distinct places across Northern England and Scotland, we chose venues that were ideally outside the norms of arts production – including a café, a launderette, and an agricultural estate office.

The audience drawn to each event, listened to a section of the *Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future* and then discussed together. At these gatherings participants essentially listened to each other, engaging first in the question of ‘what will your town be like in ten years’ time?’ and then ‘how are we to live?’

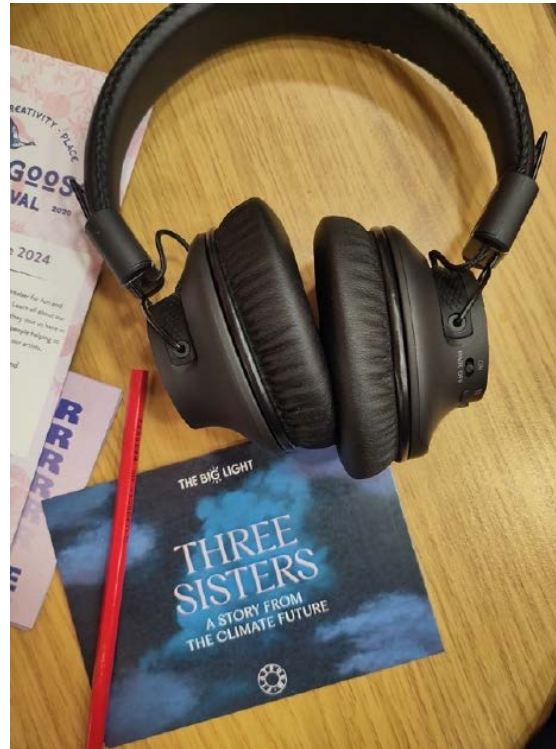


Figure 5: Listening event at Stove Network, October 2024.

Each of the listening events was unique, but common themes arose. At each event we took notes, then put together a rough transcript, and from this drew out the following short stories. We present them here to give a sense of the understandings gathered.



¹ Data from Big Light Productions – November 2025

The Locations of the Listening Events





STORY 1: THINGS DON'T TURN OUT THE WAY YOU EXPECT THEM TO

Climate Kitchen at Stove Café, Dumfries, Dumfries & Galloway - 11 October 2024

The Stove Café on the High Street is a place for eating and drinking, a cinema for film nights, a venue for music, and much more. Dumfries has been battered by industrial decline and Stove is an initiative to revive the town through cultural programmes. The evening of our event, Stove is the meeting place for the Climate Kitchen, run by a collective of residents in Dumfries and the surrounding area. We are tapping into a pre-existent community whose website declares: “We care deeply about our planet and want to find solutions to the climate and biodiversity emergencies threatening our futures through community-building and activism.”

As is customary at these monthly meetings, a stew is made from food stuff discarded by the supermarkets. Dinner bowls in hand, attendees settle at one of the 12 tables arranged around the café. Some sit in pairs, others sit alone. Several have about them an air of easy familiarity.

We sit nervous at the fringes, fussing over the headphones, wondering how many people will show up. Too few for us to generate the right energy and atmosphere? Or too many for us to use the 16 headphones that we have? And when they are here will they have the patience to sit and listen whilst staring into space? Will they be uncomfortable to do this in company? Will we be uncomfortable? Eventually we have 15 participants, the ideal number.

Following introductory words from the organiser, we explain the coming 90 minutes:

Tonight, we want to explore the future together with you, to think about the climate future. This is a research project and your thoughts and our collective conversations will help inform a clearer picture of how audiences in different towns and regions imagine their future.

It can be hard to visualise our future as intensely as our past which we remember vividly. We often tell stories of our past, whether those be stories of work last week, a holiday a few years back, or events in our childhood. We want to try to help each other to imagine future stories in a similarly powerful way.

The participants try on the headphones handed to each of them. When thumbs up are given, we are ready to run. It is a powerful sight, everyone sitting randomly around the room, silent and focused.

We listen to the play together. The first 18 minutes of Act 1 starting with the Narrator’s opening:

NARRATOR: *The house has off-grid power. It needs it – the storms and floods downed the electricity lines. And the people who live in Kirkconnell House come from all over. Some by choice, some by chance. It’s an ‘oddkin’ household. ‘Oddkin’ – an unlikely collection of intimate people. Otherwise known as The Project. The house was chosen carefully – abandoned but large enough to accommodate many souls. Families, friends and lovers, displaced by the climate.*



Once the recording stops, each person is asked to write down reflections from the play on the postcards they are given. They then talk to a neighbour and, after a few minutes, contribute what the two of them have said to a discussion amongst the whole group.

The dominant voices in the conversation are critical of the play's characters being a wealthy bunch. Whilst their future living might be 'good enough' for them, with their intergenerational household and ability to occupy a large abandoned property, the majority of population will not have such luxuries. Some protest that whole sections of the UK's population are likely to migrate north to Scotland. Whilst the majority of people in Britain will continue to live in misery, the 'good enough' future will only be there for the few. One participant says: 'When I think of the people who live in the terraced houses in Liverpool where I used to live, this view of the future is faintly ridiculous.'

Our second set of questions focuses on imagining the place you live in, in this case Dumfries, ten years into the future. Parts of Dumfries are repeatedly flooded by the River Nith, so we expect the conversation to be around flood defences and inundation.² However, it is about migration. Perhaps this is provoked by the second extract of the play we listen to, the words of Baz in Act 3.

BAZ: *When your dad and all you lot moved into this area, you bought one of the biggest houses and said you would be 'welcoming to strangers'. But actually, you only mean certain kinds of strangers. Nick's very welcome, of course. The right kind of stranger. It's just a mirror of how people like you deal with climate refugees. Only the right kind of refugees get to be cared for.*

Or perhaps it is because of the people in the room? Only a few are 'born and bred' in Dumfriesshire. The majority are from elsewhere, from London and Lancashire, from Poland, Morocco and Spain. Concerns quickly turn from the local to the global. Some participants share their own migration stories, explaining the difficulties of moving, and the importance of knowing they are well received. Others ask themselves as to whether they will be as welcoming as they would hope when the going gets tough?

A quick exchange unfolds:

'Well, that depends on whether you will need to be protecting your family or not. If it comes to having to share food, people get very vicious and there are conflicts.'

'There are two types of people, those who are territorial and those for whom such things don't matter. With so many people coming from other countries, like Africa, it could be more difficult.'

'I disagree ... It all depends on density of the flow of the immigrants. If there are few of them, they are interesting.'

'... but when Africa becomes a desert and those people move, millions of them ...'

We have started to feel uncomfortable. As we are running over time, we are happy to bring the discussion to a close. Our expectations of the future are being confounded. We had not imagined that the conversation would run this way.

Yet, migration is a 'fact' of climate chaos, as indisputable as the realities of increased wind speeds, or rising sea levels. The climate future is not only about things that are relatively 'comfortable' to contemplate, but also those that are 'uncomfortable'.

² Giancarlo Rinaldi and Luke Jarmyn (2023) 'The Dumfries street that has flooded more than 200 times' BBC news, available at [The Dumfries street that has flooded more than 200 times - BBC News](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-dumfries-66666666)

On reflection, the lesson of the evening is that things don't turn out the way you expect them to. We need to be able to face the discomfort of the conversations in the room. We need to open our minds to the future, to be able to hear the future. To overcome the fear that leads us to block our ears to the future.



STORY 2: PREPARING FOR THE COMING STORMS

Bidston Observatory Artistic Research Centre, Wirral - 26 October 2024

We stand on the roof of the world. Below us the woods, and the roads – headlights beginning to twinkle into night. Beyond the houses, Liverpool Bay. Beyond them, the future. The panoply of the wind farms. Close to, Burbo Bank. Far off, Gwynt y Mor in front of the purple smudge of Anglesey. There's the sense of the wind farms as heralds of the coming world. After the expressions of surprise die down the audience stare in amazement. The evening is unseasonably warm. Only a light breeze blowing from the South West.

The former Observatory is set on the high sandstone ridge at the heart of the Wirral, a peninsula surrounded by water. To the east the Mersey. To the north Liverpool Bay. To the west the estuary of the Dee. Nine out of 12 participants come from points across the Wirral – including Ellesmere Port in the south, New Ferry in the east, and Hoylake in the north.

We gather in one of the former telescope towers. A room accessed through ever steeper stairs. A room set apart from the world. Set at a perfect distance for considering the future. In addition to the opening section of the play, we decide to listen to Erin's breakdown from Act 3, delivered in the midst of a night of storms.

ERIN: *Oh, Olivia, where ... where has it all gone to? Where is it? I'm forgetting everything ... there's nothing but mush in my head ... I can't even seem to remember life in London before all the Chaos began ... what*

was it like then? How did we live then? Before the storms, the fires and the wars. Every day I'm forgetting more and more, and it will never, never come back ... We will never go ... and we will lose even the memory of it.

As the conversation flows amongst us, a striking reality floats to the surface. One participant has consciously moved to Irby, onto the higher land at the centre of the Wirral. Another one explains that she carefully studied the flooding information before deciding to live on the Wirral. 'I moved here from North Wales to stop being on a flood plain.' Through these asides comes the unnerving sense that people are on the move. Private decision by private decision, there's a migration happening here.

As in other parts of Britain, people are moving to higher ground. These are inevitably, in the main, people who have the wealth or time to be able to choose where to live with careful consideration. Once those that had the means to do so chose to move to the coast, searching for the premium of a sea view. Now that same class of people are leaving the seas' edge and moving to the hills, searching for the premium of security and lower house insurance costs. A slow retreat inland.

This is particularly striking on the Wirral, for the peninsula was utterly transformed in the 19th century by the movement to build houses overlooking the sea. From this grew the towns of West Kirby, Hoylake and New Brighton. And the peninsula is now severely threatened by flooding from three sides.



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A map of Britain showing areas most likely to be flooded in the coming decades reveals the Wirral encroached upon from the east, the north, and the west.

Throughout the night of the 9th April 2024 the winds from the Atlantic drove the seas against the concrete walls around the peninsula.³ The defences were breached. There was extensive flooding in West Kirby and similar impacts in Hoylake and New Brighton. The storm surges were followed by days of clear-up and recriminations, from residents outraged that more had not been done to ensure that the defences were sufficient to hold back the floods.

In truth the battle is not only over the rising seas but also over the rising cost of keeping those seas at bay. How long can the economy – local, regional and national – continue to pay for the concrete walls to protect the Wirral from the power of the Atlantic? At what point will land and parts of these seaside towns be sacrificed to the sea, and the houses and citizens retreat up the hill?

As we move to close the event, the mood is sombre. Someone remarks that the world the play portrays in 2035 is not more apocalyptic than the present. *'Erin's condition is our human condition at any time in history, we must break the illusion that there's some other reality from the one we are in now. We need to keep living and explore living in the new communities we create.'* The message that the ***Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future*** holds is similar: to keep on living regardless.

After the event we stand once again on the roof. Looking out to the South West. Looking out at the coming storms.

³ Wirral Council (2024) Flood Report Investigation: West Kirby 09 April 2024, available at [Investigation Report West Kirby Flood Event 09-04-2024 \(wirral.gov.uk\)](https://www.wirral.gov.uk/investigation-report-west-kirby-flood-event-09-04-2024)



STORY 3: LIVING IN THE STORM OF CAPITAL

Kitty's Launderette, Anfield, Liverpool - 27 October 2024

Dark night and rain. Wet coming in from Liverpool Bay. The waters of the Atlantic on the roofs of the houses. Rain running through the streets away down the slopes of Everton Hill, down to the valley of the River Alt. Kitty's Launderette is just east from the top of the ridge that is Everton Brow. We are nearly two miles inland, and over 150 feet above sea level. There is no risk of storm surges on Grasmere Street.

Here the rage of the Earth's climate comes from the gutters and drains. Rain working past loose tiles and in through ceilings. Rain cascading from broken drainpipes. Rain filling the storm sewers and driving up the manholes. Rain pooling at the road sides forcing cars to swerve and splash.

We gather in Kitty's on such a night. There are only five participants to start with, even when the event was sold out on Eventbrite and advertised extensively on social media. Plus flyers in Kitty's, and word of mouth. Where and when is it suitable to be thinking about the future of a certain place? Who are the people who booked for a Sunday evening event, but decided not to show up?

We listen to the opening of the play and then plunge into the questions. 'What will Anfield look like in ten years' time?' we ask. A young woman, who works at this community owned and run launderette, answers:

'It will be busier at Kitty's, for the wrong reasons ... more people will struggle as energy companies will put up the prices and bills ... more people will come to Kitty's for the 'Free Wash' we offer, and the warm space we provide

... it'll be busy here because of people trying to keep warm from the cold, dry from the rain.'

Kitty's, in a row of terraced houses, is at the point where the three wards of Everton North, Everton East and Anfield meet. This trio of neighbourhoods, as they are delineated by the state's political geographers, have some of the highest rates of household fuel poverty anywhere in England. In Anfield 26.5% of households live in fuel poverty. That means approximately 1,595 homes. How many people, how many women and men, how many children and elderly, are living in the cold and damp?⁴

The few of us gathered represent a great expanse of time. The oldest grew up half a mile away in the 1950s. The youngest might live in Anfield until the 2080s. A stretch of 130 years.

The two elders among us disagree on a fair amount about the present. But about the past, they are surprisingly united. They paint a vivid picture, as they talk of the life in the streets of Anfield:

'People went in and out of the bakers, and the butchers and the greengrocers and you knew everyone and people knew you.'

'People made things themselves ... they didn't think 'oh I'll just go and buy it in the shops' ... They made it themselves, furniture and things ... We knew what to make, and how to make it, and how to use it.'

⁴ Liverpool City Council 2025 Ward Profiles. Available at <https://liverpool.gov.uk/council/key-statistics-and-data/ward-information/ward-profiles/> [Last accessed 3 November 2025].



They talk of the habits of the families who lived here:

'In the 60s and 70s you had deadlines to meet, but you didn't have to stress about it all. We did things calmly. People wouldn't be rushing out of a place like Kitty's at the end of the evening and rushing onto the next thing.'

They talk of the homes in the terraces:

'The old houses, they were solid and it didn't cost so much to heat them ... yes you always had a cold room, but half your family was in the main room. Everyone was in there and it kept it warm. All those aunties and uncles.'

It is easy for us to be fogged by cynicism, to see these stories as rosy tinted childhood, but what if there's truth in these memories? What if this knowledge, held by elders, is a guide through the growing storms? What if memory is crucial to surviving into the future?

Here are fellow citizens who have lived through several phases of capitalism. They have lived through several phases of the history of this city: the expansion of the 1950s and 1960s with full employment, tower blocks being built on Everton Brow and the glamour of The Beatles, Bill Shankly's LFC and The Mersey Sound. The decline of the 1970s and 1980s, mass unemployment, the closure of most of Liverpool's docks, *The Boys from the Blackstuff*, and the demolition of the tower blocks on Everton Brow. The growing inequalities of the 1990s and 2000s, with the city centre being rebuilt as Liverpool One and Albert Dock drawing the crowds, whilst North Liverpool languished. The grinding 'austerity' of the 2010s and 2020s, with new estates of detached houses in Anfield and the shopping malls on the roads out of town, alongside the closure of libraries and shops.

We are discussing the future. But perhaps what we want in the future is what

we know we had in the past? What we have lost. Or more precisely, what has been taken from us. The elders are clear on one of the drivers of change:

*'Then ASDA came along and the community was dispersed.'*⁵

ASDA, which began as Associated Dairies and Farm Stores based in Leeds, owned itself for the first 50 years of its life. But who is it now? Since 2021, it has increasingly come under the ownership of the private equity firm TDR, based in London. TDR is itself controlled by Manjit Dale, Stephen Robertson and Tudor Capital. TDR also own EG Group garages who run a swathe of petrol stations across the UK, branded BP, Esso, Texaco and Shell. Alongside fuel sales they have franchises of Spar, KFC, Subway, Starbucks, Burger King, Greggs and Leon. Their outlets are dotted across Liverpool. They also own house builders, such as Keepmoat who are constructing housing just to the east of Kitty's Launderette. And they own the David Lloyd leisure clubs, one of which is in Speke and the other in Knowsley.

We could explore further who owns what, but the pattern is clear. The recent past and, most likely the future, of Anfield is designed – or heavily influenced – by the capital holdings of a few wealthy men living in London, New York, Boston and Los Angeles. The men in the shadows.

What have the decisions made by these men to do with the climate future of Anfield? Unwittingly it seems, their actions have dispersed the community and reduced its resilience.

If the key to facing the present and coming storms is community and resilience, then Anfield needs forces that drive people together and not apart. As one of the elders says:

'It is so sad that people say they can't live here anymore and want to move away as soon as they can.'

⁵ ASDA at Utting Avenue, Clubmore – <https://storelocator.asda.com/north-west/liverpool/utting-avenue>



The counterweight to destructive pressures such as ASDA are initiatives such as Kitty's Launderette. And nearby the Homebaked Community Land Trust with its range of activities, and the Homebaked community owned bakery and café. These projects are places where some of those who live locally gather. These ventures echo what was said of the past. The memory of bakers and butchers. And this guides a desired future.

It's time to close the evening. It is still raining outside. We cover our heads and rush to the car. Rushing out, just as the elders had described.

How to face the climate future is not only about roofs that do not leak and rooms that are warm, but also about weathering the storms that tear through the city's fabric. Storms driven by distant capital. And to face these winds, the shelter of community is key.



STORY 4: THE PRESSURE FROM THE SOUTH

Glenlivet Estate Office, Tomintoul, Moray - 28 March 2025

The prefab building is filled with the sound of the wind in the trees. The roar of the branches, of Pines and Birches swooshing and rushing. Timber limbs stirred by the stiff North Westerly driving up Strath Avon, and away to the east.

We are arranged in a loose circle in the bland meeting room of the Glenlivet Estate Offices at Tomintoul. All of us locked into the narrative of *Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future* and the howling gale of Act 3. There's a concentrated stillness in the room. A sense of us brought together by the experience of listening alone to the same piece as we sit together. Imagining in solitude, whilst seated in company. It makes for an uncommon sense of communality.

A Wren bursts into song just outside and the participants begin to speak. Scraps of observation that build a picture of the impacts of the changing climate in the small town of Tomintoul and the surrounding area.

This is one of the most remote townships in Britain, with a population of around 700. Proud of its claim to be the highest in the Scottish Highlands, Tomintoul lies in the Cairngorms National Park. It is built on a low ridge on the vast Glenlivet Estate that belongs to The Crown. This was a new township, a 'model village', a community designed on a drawing board and laid out as a grid in 1775. It was a town for refugees. A town for those that had been forced off the land, often from settlements dotted over the nearby hills and glens. Farmers evicted from ancestral homesteads by the owner of the Estate, Alexander Gordon, 4th Duke of Gordon, as he attempted to 'develop' his domain.

Time and again in the conversation the impacts of climate change in Tomintoul are identified. The Head Ranger on the Glenlivet Estate explains, *'It has been a very mild March. Normally there is a lot of snow by now. We used to get dramatic snowy winters, but not now. This has a huge impact on the skiing industry. Especially on the Lecht Ski Center. The slopes get closed early in the season. And then there's the madness of using diesel to run machines that make fake snow!'*

Since 2018 there has been drier weather and a lack of the snow that normally feeds the springs. The drying out of the land means the roots of the trees become weaker and the trees less resistant to the strengthening winds. The gales, often coming from unpredictable directions, flatten swathes of forestry. The drought leads to landslips and road closures. There is one just outside the township now. It makes it harder to get in and out of Tomintoul, and harder to move the cattle from pasture to pasture. All of this impacts the viability of the farms and has placed the Post Office under a threat of closure.

However, Tomintoul is still a place of refuge, a high land into which people retreat driven by fears and dreams. We meet a couple, in their late 40s, who have moved here from the suburbs of Ashford, in Mid Kent. She was a secondary school teacher, whilst he worked in youth mental health. He speaks of how their situation became ever more desperate: *'Mental health dropped off a cliff in about 2010, due to the prevalence of smartphones.'*

They decided to quit their jobs, both aged 46. They put all that they needed into their rucksacks and walked. They walked for 18 months until they came



to Tomintoul and settled two years ago. Both of them speak glowingly of the township. He explains, *'I came from a big town. They don't have the community you have here. You have got people around here. They give you positivity'*. Whilst she adds, *'Hold onto your neighbours. I lived in a big town for decades and never came to know my neighbours. I have only lived in Tomintoul for two years and I know so many people here now.'*

The long tail of Covid still stirs conversations in the room. Another resident is 76 and eager to retell her story. She arrived in Tomintoul, 53 years ago. Aged 23 or so, she met and married her husband who was ten years older than her. They live in the farmhouse in which he was born, the Mill House, a white building standing out against the buff green hill on the other side of the valley from the Glenlivet Estate Offices. She relates the story of how her daughter, now aged 30, was due to be born there. But as she was a relatively older mother her doctor was concerned that the birth should not be at home. Cairngorm was deep in snow. The roads out of the town were blocked. To her utter astonishment a Sea King helicopter landed in the field by the house. She was bungled in and flown away along the coast to Aberdeen Hospital. The whole episode being filmed and featuring on the TV news.

She tells us that Covid has altered the township. *'The village has changed dramatically in the last few years. People want to get out of the cities. Also, property prices are so high in the South and low here, they are able to buy houses in Tomintoul. But won't be able to afford to return to the London area. I used to know everyone in the village, not so now.'*

Her words echo a conversation we had had a few months before. Walking along a trackway on the Old Military Road, passing by the Estate Offices, through the woods and onto the moor, we had chanced upon a man in his 70s. We fell to talking. He explained that he'd lived in Tomintoul all his life.

But it had changed. Due to the influx of new people. *'The pressure from the South'* he said in a doleful tone. The phrase stuck in our minds. Here again, in the conversation around [Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future](#) was that sentiment, delivered by the long-standing residents and embodied in the story of the couple who had arrived: they had escaped the pressure in the South, and had unwittingly become part of the pressure from the South.

But there is a sense of defiance in the room. A sense that practical actions can be taken. That the Post Office can be defended from closure. That the shop in the village can be supported. That the onslaught of residents going to ASDA and Tesco in Elgin can be resisted. And the lifeline of public transport – in the form of the *Heather Hopper* bus – can be maintained.

This gathering could have been melancholic, but it feels optimistic. The ability of people – individually or collectively – to avert global climate change, and its impacts locally, is minimal. But the ability to build the community that will help shelter us from those impacts does lie within the power of those gathered in the room. And in this task the pressure from the South can be utilised, can be channelled, for the good of all.



STORY 5: HOW TO LIVE TOGETHER?

Cornucopia Room, Hawick, Scottish Borders - 23 October 2025

‘It was waist high in water ... waist high,’ the Butcher is describing the days of the great flood of 2015 when the River Teviot and the Slitrig Water engaged in an almighty brawl at the heart of the town of Hawick. The torrents that drained off Kiln Knowe, Maiden Paps, Lightening Hill and Ladder Law, met and did battle in the lee of the High Street and the closes that run off it to the Teviot’s edge.

The heaving mass of brown water tore through the town and at Sandbed, where the Butcher runs her shop *Going Native*, it inundated everything. For long hours in the days and the nights, the waters fought, until eventually they exhausted themselves and slunk away, back to the bed of their familiar channels. They left a layer of silt, a rotten stench, and a fear that they would come again.

This was not the first time the rivers had terrorised the town. There had been equally devastating floods in 2005, and there is no doubt that the scale and frequency of the flooding has increased in this century. By 2009 a plan was initiated, and the funds raised from the Scottish Government, Scottish Borders Council, SUSTRANS and Scottish Water, for a fight back.

From 2020 to 2023 new flood defences were built along the banks of the Teviot. We see them as we walk the paths of pristine grey concrete, smooth and reassuring. The new river walls, rising above head height, are interspersed with sheets of engraved plate glass so that those that wander this riverside can gaze upon the Teviot from behind this safety screen. The river has been

separated from the citizens, caged like a ferocious animal of the town’s nightmares.

Hawick was always a river town, harnessing the force of the Slitrig Water to grind corn. From the mid 18th century its fortunes were entirely entwined with the torrents of the Teviot which powered the mills underpinning Hawick’s booming woollen industry. However, in the first two decades of the 21st century the textile mills were shattered. The empty buildings litter parts of the town and their fame has dimmed. The population of the town dropped from 11,285 in 2011 to 10,728 in 2022.⁶ With the passing of the woollen industry has gone the steady stream of bargain-hunting tourists that thronged the summer High Street. The town turned its back on the river. Yet the waters did not abandon the town. They returned each winter with violence. Or the threat of violence.

How is the town to ‘live with’ the waters? This question echoes the question at the heart of the discussion that bubbles up in our listening event in Hawick.

A small group gathers in the soft lit warmth of the Cornucopia space. The walls hung with carpets and lined with bookshelves, in this bookshop and events venue in former mill buildings close on the banks of the Slitrig Water.

The atmosphere of the space and the tight knit crew of audience seems to lend itself to a discussion whose length and depth surprises us all. It is as if together we roam the hills of our imaginations and arrive at a place none of

⁶ https://www.citypopulation.de/en/uk/scotland/S12000026_scottish_borders/



us has expected to come upon. After running a full hour over time, it feels like it is the moment to draw proceedings to a close. There hangs in the air a sense that this exchange could roll on for hours and hours, deep into the night as the rivers flow by.

'How to live?' is the central question in the audio play. Quickly the participants seem to grasp that the question should be extended to ask, as the Singer points out, *'How are we to live together?' What are the skills that we need in order to enable us to live together?*

The majority of the people in the room have at some point of their lives lived 'elsewhere' and migrated to live in Hawick and the region around it. One had grown up in London. Another in New Zealand. A third had come here from Edinburgh. There is a sense of the souls gathered together almost randomly in this old mill town. The Poet. The Butcher. The Singer. The Commercial Director. The Actor. And more. Like the characters on Chaucer's pilgrimage. How are they to live together? How are we to live together?

The Poet talks of his experience of living in communes. About the challenges of leaders arising. The question of how can each be enabled to realise their particular skill. To realise themselves and also to work together. By contrast the script of Chekhov's play seems to describe a gathering of souls who are particularly unsuited to living together, to recognising their collective fate.

How to learn the skills of collective living? This may not mean the prospect of people living in the same building, as the characters largely do in ***Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future***. But how to live in the same neighbourhood? How vital is the neighbourhood that the participants in the room describe? The shop of the Butcher is barely two minutes' walk from the flat of the Poet.

The event provokes between us two, the authors of the work, an unfolding discussion about communities. What are the communities that we have lived in over the course of our separate lives? In which villages? In which towns? In which cities? Which of these neighbourhoods have we felt at ease in? Which not? What is the difference between a neighbourhood and a community? What do we expect of our neighbours? What do we offer our neighbours in return? How do we 'live with' them?

At one point of the evening the Actor describes how the storms in the Scottish Borders around Hawick are becoming more intense. *'When the winds howl and lash the trees, the rains come with such intensity that it is terrifying. We cannot go outside. We shelter in our homes, all crammed together. We can't get away from each other 'cos we are living inside.'* Her lines echo the play and ask the question – what of the neighbours beyond the house? What is the strength of our connection to those neighbours? How can those links be built so that they are there in the storms of the coming years?

As the evening's conversation closes, we are struck by how we have been talking of the future. However not along habitual paths such as 'Will smartphones and the Internet still work?' Or 'What will the scale of the floods be?' But around the question – 'How will we live together?'

This is a skill, a technology, that we can be sure to need. That we know we will need not only out there in the future, but also now in the present. And we know it is simple enough to start. But we also know that we are fearful of beginning. Fearful of the changes that this might imply. Are we prepared to make the changes now that the climate will force upon us soon? For as the Poet said: *'We should not wait for disaster to happen ... for it is already happening'*.



PARTICIPANTS' RESPONSES

Three weeks after each listening event, we methodically emailed every participant a questionnaire, asking them to reflect on their experience of the piece. Many replied, writing of their appreciation of a sense of community, of coming together and educating one another. We draw out a few representative quotes:

Dumfries

"I think the event has made me feel safer conceiving big changes."

"We all need to discuss these topics more often and with more people."

"Collective listening allows you to discuss the event with people who've shared the experience, better than listening at home."

Bidston

"I found it comforting. It was interesting to hear different perspectives and understand how other people's experiences contribute to forming their outlook. I think discussing things in safe ways and finding common ground is always beneficial. I came away feeling inspired and it gave me lots to think about."

"It made me feel more hopeful about community and connection to nature. It made me want to work on my own artistic projects that are related to climate futures."

"It has reinforced my belief that to find a way forward we need to figure out how to live in greater harmony with each other. And from my side to keep on my research as a psychoanalyst into the way the human psyche relates to the world."

Anfield

"I think the discussion was nice in particular connecting ideas and experiences across generations."

"It made me think more about what linked up action can take place between local businesses, activists and local people."

"I think the only way things will change is through action on the ground so I think this would be a useful next step – reclaiming land, setting up communal veg plots and feeding the community!"

"It was great to collectively listen to the play. Being in each other's company but listening to it independently created an interesting contrast."



Tomintoul

“I am more likely to engage with the subject with the community members who attended the workshop - we see each other quite regularly and have already had some conversations about the workshop.”

“Yes, it helped me recognise how people in our communities here see themselves in the context of climate change, and what they feel they could do, and it’s affected my work in how I support this to happen.”

Hawick

“Increased my commitment to programme more climate action events.”

“Listening to it together, but also separately because of the headphones, was a kind of contemplation.”

“The discussion was the best bit of the evening. I think the play acted well as a stimulus for the ensuing conversation. It was a very engaged discussion with eight participants. The small size of the group was good and everyone got sufficient turns at chipping in. The most memorable aspect for me was the discussion around communal living (and other non-nuclear models) and how this might be driven by economic conditions in the not-too-distant future and how this might make a lot of ecological as well as social/relational sense.”

“There is a profound and widespread disregard for what it means to be a human being that respects and honours our time on this earth, to that which connects us, and our place in the universe – I am not Christian or religious but consider this to be without doubt a very great spiritual crisis. Conversations that do not include this consideration, will always ultimately miss the point and fall short in my view. The indigenous peoples around the world have repeatedly shared their messages to civilisation – but still not enough people want to listen it seems as yet. And so it goes on ...”



AFTERWORD

Throughout the unfolding process of *Three Sisters: a Story from the Climate Future*, we have experimented tentatively: with how the online performance in November 2020 would work; with the process of recording the play in Kirkconnell House; with the launch of the podcast online; with how the audience would engage with the immersive production at Kirkconnell.

Finally, we experimented with the listening events. Would people sit comfortably in public while engaging in something that is audio only? An experience so different to sitting in the dark watching a film together. An experience so different from the norm of listening alone to audio in the privacy of your home, or your car, or your daily walk. How long would people concentrate for?

Our concerns were unfounded. Attendees sat patiently absorbed in the play for stretches of between 18 and 30 minutes. Not a single person distracted a fellow attendee from their own listening. In the atmosphere of deep concentration no one looked at their phone. Furthermore, the method of using collective

listening to a play seemed to open up wider in-depth conversations.

As we became more confident with the medium, we learnt to deviate from our plans. In one event we set aside listening to a second section of the play in order not to disrupt the flow of the conversation that was underway. We learnt to abandon our desire for participants to 'like the play' and came to see any objections to, or confusions over, the script as usefully provocative. If the play's portrayal of the near future appeared 'wrong' to a listener, then surely it was provoking in them a 'correct' image of the 2030s, against which ours was being measured.

We understood evermore clearly that the events functioned as places in which the participants, who in the large part had never spoken with each other at length, sat and listened to each other. Each listening event was less about participants listening to the play, and more about neighbours listening to each other. We had been worried that audience numbers would be low, but we came to realise that the key was the depth of the exchange and for this small numbers were helpful.

With a group of 6 to 8 as opposed to 12 to 15, people conversed more and pronounced less. Participants were able to engage in a gentle back and forth rather than delivering statements.

And fluidity was key. The events seemed to show the importance of leaving space for people to come to their own conclusions and the value of open-ended prompts to explore the climate crisis. Open questions are a welcome counterpoint to the usual hailstorm of directives that assaults the citizen: drive less, fly less, eat differently, heat efficiently.

To the organisations-connected and self-selected 64 individuals that participated in the listening events, the implications of climate change were clearly obvious. It seems that the logics of the impacts are so deeply embedded in British culture that they no longer need to be explained. Only one of the attendees argued that climate change was not anthropogenic. A remarkable national shift has taken place over the last decade or two.

Several of the participants commented that we are already living in the future portrayed in the



play. Those climate impacts in an imagined 2030s are here in daily life. The chaos described is already visible in places such as Anfield; a capitalist chaos as much as a climate one. The premise of *Three Sisters: a Story from the Climate Future* is that London has been abandoned, its communities have dissolved, and people have moved elsewhere. In Anfield and Bidston we could feel the tremors of such a shift underway. Whilst the reasons for such internal moves were other than the flooded capital, on the Wirral we have learnt that the people have started making private decisions about housing, and in Anfield, social deprivation is pushing residents towards movement out of the area. There was an abiding fear among participants that things are likely to get a great deal worse: a sense that people are living within, and long accustomed to, the devastating impacts of shifts in capital – from the closure of industrial plants in Dumfries, to the corrosive effects of supermarkets in Tomintoul.

The rooms we worked in conveyed a sense that climate impacts will compound this and further undermine communities. The ideas that arose in the conversations were often surprising and occasionally uncomfortable, in particular the fears about migration in Dumfries. But they repeatedly focused back to the idea of community as being the essential defence against climate impacts.

However imprecise and loosely defined this community is, the yearning for it seems apparent and echoes the yearning within the play itself.

This conclusion poses a usefully provocative challenge: **if this ‘community yearning’ is the desire, then how is it to be approached, let alone satisfied?** What is the ‘bigger political intent’ of this work? It is not to encourage individuals ‘to make shifts in their daily lives’, or reduce their carbon footprints. Rather it is **to create temporary enactments of community and provoke participants to think about strengthening the communities within which they live.** These may seem like small acts but they are no less vital for that.

The closing speech of *Three Sisters: a Story from the Climate Future* by Olivia includes the lines:

OLIVIA: (puts her arms round both sisters) ... *My dear oddkin, life ... for us and for the more-than-human ... is not finished yet! Life is going to live! And maybe if we wait a little longer, we shall find out how to live ... Oh, if only we knew ...*

Life is going to live is a powerful instruction drawn from Chekhov’s original play. The experience of creating both the audio play and the listening events has come to feel like a plunge into that life that is living.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

Since the intent of this work is to create temporary enactments of community and provoke participants to think about strengthening the communities within which they live, we are keen to encourage this through concrete actions. Drawing from our research, and following discussions with the event organisers, we have a few recommendations.

Recommendations

Climate action takes place and is enabled by many different individuals and groups. Our recommendations are divided between three different interest groups who we have considered and interacted with over the past six years of work. At least two of the characters in the play see themselves as climate activists, and a key part of our audience was drawn from this community. Local government officers also feature strongly as characters in the play and we considered carefully how they would operate in the potential climate chaos of the mid 2030s. We would hope that this work reaches them. Finally, in order to realise the listening events in five places, we worked closely with arts and community organisations, and with their support developed our creative methodologies. That experience feeds our suggestions beneath.

These recommendations are interdependent and are most effective when enacted through collaboration between arts organisations, local authorities and community-based climate practitioners.

Arts and Community Organisations

- Develop arts projects slowly over time. This project has unfolded over a six-year period and benefitted from the time to experiment with different formats, places and audiences. Work that addresses complex questions such as climate futures needs time to grow, test ideas and build relationships, and may require advocating for funding structures that support longer-term development.
- Create listening events and conversation-based arts practices. The audio play functioned most strongly as a stimulus for discussion. Commission formats where audience-

participants listen together and then reflect collectively, allowing people to arrive at their own conclusions through engagement with the artwork and with one another.

- Combine intimate local audiences with the wider reach of digital distribution. While in-person listening events work best with small groups (often under 20 people), the digital form allows the work to travel widely. Of the 6,969 downloads of the audio play (at the time of writing), 49% of listeners are in the UK, 41% in the USA and Sweden the next largest segment at 7%.
- Extend creative methodologies into climate-focused contexts. Community organisations can adapt participatory, story-led and place-based methods to work more explicitly with climate themes, while maintaining openness, ambiguity and audience-led reflection.



Cultural Policy Makers in Local Government

- Provide organisational support and resources for community building that is patient and patchwork by adapting commissioning and evaluation frameworks to support long-term, process-led work (for example through multi-year funding and qualitative impact measures). This kind of work is difficult to quantify and often open-ended, but it helps build resilient communities and trust between artists, organisations and local participants.
- Embed climate questions within broader local stories: rather than presenting climate change as the explicit subject, situate it within narratives about housing, migration, landscape, work or heritage. This helps audiences engage with the issues without feeling they are being “preached to”.
- Commission and support the use of creative methodologies in public engagement. This includes funding arts-led approaches (such as storytelling, listening events and participatory practices) as part of climate, planning and community consultation processes, recognising their role in reaching wider and more diverse publics.

Climate Activists

- Draw deeply from place, where possible in collaboration with artists and cultural organisations. Work rooted in local landscapes, histories, buildings and social realities brings climate questions closer to home. *Three Sisters: A Story from the Climate Future* was created very specifically for New Abbey, Dumfriesshire, but was also re-worked in relation to five other distinct places (Hawick, Tomintoul, Anfield, Bidston and Dumfries).
- Work with stories that emerge from the community itself, potentially using creative and participatory methods developed in collaboration with arts practitioners. Using prompts such as local memories, everyday objects or shared histories can widen participation and reach beyond the “usual suspects”, inviting people who may not normally attend arts or climate events.
- Incorporate creative methodologies into engagement strategies where appropriate. Approaches such as storytelling, listening and collective reflection can complement campaigning and advocacy work, helping to build deeper, more sustained forms of public engagement.



Our future plans

- Continue developing the audio play format linked to specific places and contexts. Future work will build on this form as a way of bringing people together to listen collectively and reflect on climate futures through storytelling.
- Uncover stories from the past connected to particular landscapes. Research into local histories, memories and archives can help inform and guide future imaginaries, allowing climate futures to emerge from the layered histories of place.
- Work with communities throughout the process of art making. This includes the early stages of idea development, collaborative storytelling and the delivery of community-based listening events that prioritise discussion and shared reflection.
- Experiment with shorter, adaptable pieces that can travel between places. A flexible artistic framework (for example a shorter audio play) can be re-imagined with fewer characters and tailored to different communities, while still keeping the central themes intact.
- Develop a larger creative research project centred on place, ecologies, past narratives and future imaginations. Apply for further funding to support this work. Future funding applications will aim to expand the network of communities involved, deepen the artistic research and continue exploring how audio storytelling can bring people together around climate futures.

Together, these plans aim to deepen the relationship between art, place, ecology and community, while continuing to explore how shared listening and storytelling can help people imagine and navigate climate futures.





This report has been written by James Marriott (Platform) and Dr Lena Šimić (Edge Hill University).
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