



Strategic Priorities

Developing Resilience for Sustainable Growth

Since our previous three-year plan ended last year, the Supporting Communities team has been reflecting on our past work and how we can take things to the next level.

Our board recently developed a new three-year strategic plan that builds on the successes of our previous strategy while acknowledging the many challenges and changes that the past three years threw at us all and the political and economic uncertainty we find ourselves in now.

We have identified six strategic objectives for the coming period to strengthen Supporting Communities to grow, improve, and meet the needs of tenants and communities throughout Northern Ireland and expand our reach and influence further in the Republic of Ireland.

We are thinking bigger and better to create a more sustainable organisation!

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ULSTER UNIVERSITY**

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INCLUSION**

**THE FIRST ALL-IRELAND
TENANT ENGAGEMENT
CONFERENCE**



Strategic Objectives for 2022-2025

1. Empower communities to create diverse and inclusive places where people are proud to live.

Our core work will continue as a priority, working to build up our existing groups. We will also help develop new groups in areas that need development. We will improve tenant engagement and community development practices across the island of Ireland so that people have a say in decisions that affect their areas.

We will also continue championing digital inclusion, working directly with groups and individuals to gain the digital skills needed to be active participants in today's society. We will work to support the creation of community-owned social enterprises that support jobs and meet needs.

2. Continue to drive performance and transformation

We aim to become a thoroughly modern organisation, able to succinctly demonstrate the value of our work to all stakeholders through good use of data and digital platforms that meet the needs of our members. We will ensure that Supporting Communities continues to be governed in line with the Code of Good Governance.

3. Increase visibility and presence across society

We will continue to increase the profile of tenant participation as a critical component of social housing provision and influence policymakers to raise the standard of tenant participation throughout the island of Ireland. We will develop awareness campaigns and build links and partnerships with others to spread the word!

4. Cultivate talent for the future

People are our best resource, so we plan to invest in providing them with the skills and experience required for the future. We want to nurture talent and find ways to retain high performers, equipping our current and future leaders to take us forward.

We aim to create an inclusive work environment representative of the communities we serve.

5. Improve financial sustainability

We will create a robust financial plan that secures existing income streams and uses resources effectively to ensure we are in the strongest position to make our mission and vision possible. We also intend to reduce our carbon footprint by leading by example and helping community groups and organisations to work towards a net zero goal.

6. Realise the potential of our trading subsidiary

Now that our trading arm has become more established, we are ready to take some risks and aim even higher. There is so much we can do with this business to generate profits that can be reinvested into our charity!



Getting the HCN Online with New Staff Member, Carla Mulholland



Carla Mulholland, Digital Inclusion Officer

You may recognise Carla Mulholland from the very successful ONSIDE Project, where she delivered digital skills training both online and in person. We're delighted to welcome her back to Supporting Communities in a new post as Digital Inclusion Officer to the Housing Community Network!

"I'm so happy to be back at Supporting Communities. I'm really looking forward to this exciting new project," said Carla.

"I've supported individuals to overcome their fears and explore a whole new online world through the Onside Project, and now I'll be helping the HCN to use digital skills to streamline and organise their work."

A working group of members from the Central Housing Forum have been testing an online 'collaboration portal', also known

as the Housing Executive Online Forums, which will eventually be rolled out to other levels of the Housing Community Network.

Not to be confused with the tenant portal, where you can manage aspects of your tenancy by signing in on the Housing Executive website, the collaboration portal or 'Online Forums' are designed to create a simple online environment for sharing files, online chat, discussions, managing meetings and associated papers and assigning tasks or 'to-do' lists.

"One of the first things we'll need to do is give it a good name," said Carla. "This is a tool that will greatly benefit the HCN, but we need to be clear about what it is."

The online forums will improve the network's ability to collaborate by removing the need to email papers, minutes, and meeting invitations which individuals can quickly lose. Instead, all the forum's documents and discussions will be stored in an organised way online where members can access them whenever needed.

"It may help to think of it as an online filing cabinet where everything is kept neatly for you," explained Carla.

Carla will liaise closely with our Community Development Officers and the rest of the Central Housing Forum to start the process. She will then offer training and support to the rest of the Housing Community Network as more areas take advantage of the online forums.

Outside of her time spent in the digital world, Carla says she loves nature and travel, especially anywhere near the sea. Her days off are often spent with family finding new places to explore, so tell her your top spots when you meet her!





Educational Opportunities Lead to Community Renewal in the Markets

The Market Development Association in inner-south Belfast has seen remarkable results from their community education programme.

They started with a ten-week lecture series based on a human rights approach to community renewal which addressed issues they had identified in their area. About 60 area residents got involved, coming along to the topics that interested them. Of this group, 13 people decided to take the next step towards further education with Supporting Communities.

Starting in January 2022, the group took on the first of our OCN-accredited courses with our trainer, Karla Turner. They were keen to keep the learning going, and in a matter of months, 11 people completed all three levels of our community development series, earning three OCN qualifications each. Five of our graduates then used this as a springboard to Ulster University's Community Development degree course, where they are currently working on their 3rd module of year one!

The group celebrated their accomplishments at an event at Belfast City Hall earlier this year. We spoke to a few of the people involved to learn more about their experience.

Fionntán Hargey, the MDA project worker responsible for organising the educational programme, hopes that it will revitalise community development in the area. He says it gave people a shot in the arm, post-Covid, to get involved.

"After the 10-week lecture programme, we thought we would also give residents a pathway to a more formal skillset and theoretical grounding in what they were doing, so that's where Supporting Communities and the OCNs came in," he explained. Fionntán hopes graduates of the course will feed back into their community and be leaders in the resident action groups that have formed around six key issues in the area.

Christine Farmer took part in the initial 10-week education programme, went on to do all three OCNs, and is now at Ulster University pursuing her degree. As a former youth worker, she says she is interested in the educational theme of



the MDA's work. She says she missed the connection she used to feel with her community and wanted to get involved again, so this came along at the right time for her.

"My aspiration is to help people," says Christine. "I hope to boost young people's abilities and get kids back into education. This OCN programme has already given a boost to people in the area beyond the participants. They are proud of us! I hope that others see me and think if she can do it, so can I!"

Christine says Supporting Communities helped her to believe she could go on to higher education.

"University was a bit daunting at the start, but I'm finding my balance now. As a child, I didn't get a great start in school, so getting back into education was scary, but Karla made it easy for us. She has such a lovely way about her, and she really helped me build my confidence."

Marcella Kelly had a similar experience. She also participated in the initial 10-week lecture series, which got her thinking about her future.

"I'd been at home taking care of my disabled daughter, and I hadn't given much thought to what I would do when she gets older, but the sessions made me think I'd like to get back into education myself. The OCN courses were made so accessible to us being in our community centre. Karla was so great. She made the material easy to understand and helped us to get everything done on time!"



Karla Turner with five of her OCN grads who have gone on to Ulster University with Dr Eric Crownie (standing in the back)

"When I get my degree, I'd like to work in the community and give back. I'm from here and grew up here, but studying community development has opened my mind, and now I'm looking at things from a broader picture. Breaking down the barriers to education in this area is so important for our future. I want to be a part of that. I want people to know that if school doesn't work for you, there are other avenues and other options. This community development degree has shown me how rigid our mainstream educational system is. It's failing so many people who don't fit the mould. Everyone should be treated equally and have the opportunity to further their education if they want to."

Both women say their success is down to a growth in self-confidence. Growing up in a working-class area, people aren't always told they are smart and capable enough to go to university, they explained.

"Karla really helped to reassure us that we could do it, and we did! Working as a group through the OCN courses was great. With the backing of the MDA and Supporting Communities, we helped each other get there."

Congratulations to everyone at MDA who has gotten involved in the community education programme. We're excited to see what you do next!





10 Years of Digital Inclusion

We reached a significant milestone last year. Supporting Communities has been teaching basic digital skills to communities in Northern Ireland for ten years and has trained 3,642 people! To mark the occasion, we spoke to one of our very first digital champions, Rosemary McCaw, from the Windyhill 50+ Forum in Coleraine.

Rosemary was part of the first group to take on our OCN Level 1 in 'Computer Essentials', as the course was known at the time. She made the most of it then and has continued to keep up her skills ever since. She credits this initial course with changing things for the better for her over-50s group.

"When Supporting Communities started to deliver free basic digital skills training ten years ago, I was really eager to ensure that our group took full advantage. It was a bit of a struggle to encourage people to attend at first. Many people think they don't need to learn digital skills or won't be able to learn anything. However, the training was aimed at our level, and we could all take part and learn together. I thoroughly enjoyed the training. It gave me the skills and confidence to get online and do things for myself rather than asking a member of my family."

“

"I encourage everyone to take part in Supporting Communities' digital courses. They will help you save money, keep in touch with family and enjoy learning new things online. You won't look back!"

ROSEMARY MCCAW

As a local 'digital champion', Rosemary became a bit of an internet guru in her neighbourhood by helping her neighbours to get things done online and bringing the Windyhill 50+ Forum into the digital age. Starting with the basics, Rosemary and the other participants progressed through a series of courses, including two OCN qualifications gaining the skills and confidence they needed to put their group online. They began



emailing minutes of meetings and using their Facebook page to keep in touch. They got their finances into shape by using spreadsheets and applying for funding online.

“I play an active role in my local community group”, Rosemary explains. “More and more funding applications were becoming digital only, and I needed to make sure I could complete the applications online.”

Stephanie McKillop, our Digital Inclusion Officer, has also been there from the start and has seen the project evolve over time to keep pace with the changing needs of our participants.

“I can’t believe it has been ten years since the project was first launched,” she exclaimed. “I am so lucky to have been involved. It has helped so many people. In the beginning, it was very much based around word processing on laptops and gaining a qualification; however, as time went on and we listened to participant feedback, we altered the training to incorporate tablets and mobile devices without strict learning outcomes, focusing instead on what each group wanted to get out of it.”

Rosemary has continued to be a great ambassador for our work over the years, even going with Stef to Dublin one year to interview for an AONTAS award. (Spoiler, we won!) She credits Supporting Communities’ local approach and Stef’s relaxed and friendly teaching style with her success and encourages everyone she knows to get online.

The personal approach is crucial in getting the more reluctant participants online. Stef finds a way to make digital skills valuable and relevant for every person she trains.

“Many people are wary when they hear the word digital”, she explains. “They think that it isn’t for them or that they would never be able to do it. I try to dispel any fears and show them how being digitally literate can help in their everyday lives. I like to listen to what they need and what they want and incorporate it into their training schedule. It is amazing to see people’s skills and confidence develop each week, as well as the friendships that flourish during the training.”



Rosemary McCaw, Stef McKillop, and Sally McDonald at the AONTAS Awards in 2017

Rosemary agrees. She told us, “I encourage everyone to take part in Supporting Communities’ digital courses. They will help you save money, keep in touch with family and enjoy learning new things online. You won’t look back! One of the best things I have ever done was buy a computer. I also have a smartphone that I use for Facebook, WhatsApp and Google.”

“It is so rewarding to be able to help people gain confidence and new digital skills and see them put into practice,” says Stef. “There are still so many more people to help throughout Northern Ireland. I can’t wait to see what the next ten years bring!”

The Department of Finance’s Digital Inclusion Unit funds this work as part of its ongoing Digital Transformation Programme. Our work with the Go On NI Initiative focuses on reaching older people and rural communities who may not otherwise access digital skills support.





Meet our New Board Members

Supporting Communities welcomes two new board members to our organisation this March, Karen Rodgers and Jillian Strain. We chatted with each of them to learn more about who they are and what they will bring to Supporting Communities!

Meet Karen Rodgers

Born and raised in Belfast, Karen has travelled the world and ended up back here, living just two streets away from where she grew up. With two children at home, she says she's glad to be living so close to family support.

Her career has spanned management roles in retail and the construction industry in the UK and Ireland, and she is currently the Communities Business Manager at Farrans Construction. She leads a team in building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with key stakeholders, advising on social value legislation changes, and promoting exemplary customer care practices.

We asked her to tell us what that entails!

"I joined Farrans just over five years ago," said Karen, "and I suppose the world of construction has changed since then around ensuring we make a real societal impact through our projects. My role is communicating with all of a project's key stakeholders and looking at the social value element of our work to ensure we leave a lasting legacy in the areas in which we operate. So that's looking at what the community's social objectives are and linking in with that, for example, improving employment skills, improving the environment and including the community in the works we're doing."

That sounds like it fits in very well with Supporting Communities' work! How did you learn about SC, and what made you want to join the board?



Karen Rodgers, new board member

"Social value delivery was the link. I've been having this conversation for a while, and with the introduction of social value legislation for public procurement in Northern Ireland, it has become more and more important. I see this as a huge benefit to communities in that they can use that requirement on construction and other sectors to benefit them in the longer term. I've been thinking about how we can work together and link into local areas to improve those connections."

There's huge potential there! How do you see SC growing as an organisation over the next few years?

"I see a massive opportunity for SC to do more work with the private sector, helping them provide communities with the skills they need. There's a need to develop [private sector] knowledge of how to link in with communities. I hope I can bring something to that element of the strategic plan. There is a lot of overlap



with Farrans' corporate plan that I work with, so there are opportunities to support each other. Public, private, and third-sector organisations can collaborate better to promote equality of opportunities and enhancement of communities.

I hope I can help with skills development within SC and support you on your journey! I'm really looking forward to joining the team, this is my first time as a board member, so I'm hoping I bring something to SC and that I develop new skills as well!"

Meet Jillian Strain

Jillian came to us through the Boardroom Apprentice programme last year and has proven a valuable asset to SC. We're delighted to welcome her as a new board member officially!

A Bangor native, Jillian now lives in Newtownards and works in the Department for Economy's Careers Service. We caught up with her to find out a bit more.

Tell us a bit about yourself. What do you do for fun?

"I love to travel and visited Rome in the autumn. I dusted off my (rusty!) Italian skills for the trip, and I've been practising on Duolingo ever since and am really enjoying it. I hope to be able to converse a little more fluently with the locals when I go to Florence later this year. I am a bit of a bookworm at heart and love learning. I have completed several courses over recent years, most recently a leadership and management course. When I get the chance, I also like to embrace my creative side and enjoy all things interior décor!"

What is your current job role?

"I have worked in the public sector for over ten years and spent part of this time working as a career advisor. I now manage a small team within the DfE Careers Service, producing information resources on developing local sectors. We aim to increase citizens' awareness of careers in demand and potential entry routes while also acting as a



Jillian Strain, new board member

conduit for local industry to communicate developments in their sector. My role pairs really well with my love of learning and enables me to work with a broad range of people, which I enjoy."

You know SC quite well already through your time as our Boardroom Apprentice. How do you see SC growing over the next few years?

"SC has big goals for the future, as it seeks to develop throughout Ireland and build a sustainable future. It will be critical to increase its visibility and presence and expand its offer and range of services.

SC adapted swiftly and successfully to the challenges brought about by the pandemic and continued to go above and beyond to deliver for stakeholders exemplifying what it means to be an agile and innovative organisation. This is a testament to the passion of the staff and board members, and I do not doubt that SC will succeed in meeting its goals for the future."





Funding Fairs are Back!

One of our favourite events to 'bring back' post-covid has been the Funding Fair! We love bringing communities and funders together to connect and discuss project ideas. Meeting face-to-face breaks down barriers and allows for honest conversations between people, not just between funder and applicant, which can make a real difference.

Working in partnership with the Housing Executive, our Funding Officer, Anita Doonan, has held several in-person events since she was given the all-clear. Last autumn, there were three fairs in the Mid-Ulster area, and so far this year, she has held two more in South and East Belfast.

The turnout for these events has been impressive. There have been upwards of 150 people at each fair in just the short space of a few hours. In some cases, actual busloads of people came!

Funders so far have included local Councils, PCSP, National Lottery Fund, Halifax Foundation NI, Community Relations Council, NIHE, John Moores Foundation, Heritage Lottery, Keep NI Beautiful, CDHN, Arts Council, BBC Children in

Need, and the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

Anita reports that the funders have been impressed at the number of enthusiastic groups attending. Groups have highlighted the need for funding support as a result of the cost-of-living crisis, something that funders are keen to respond to.

These in-person events have also been an excellent opportunity for Supporting Communities to connect with new groups.

"Many groups took on new volunteers over covid, so this has been an ideal time to reach out to newcomers", explained Anita. "We received several new group referrals and have had new people booking onto our training courses as a



result of coming to the funding fair. Groups who had never accessed funding before were amazed at the support that was available to them."

Anita has added new dates to her training calendar to accommodate the increased number of people interested in her course on 'Completing Successful Funding Applications'.

"This session helps people find and apply to various funders. The impact of this is immeasurable as groups gain the skills and confidence necessary to continue their journey and improve the services within their communities through the provision of funded activities."

If you'd like to sign up for an upcoming session, get in touch via our website's events section.



More funding fairs are in the works! We know there is an appetite for them since we had people travel from as far as Limavady and Newry to our Mid Ulster and Belfast fairs, so keep your eyes peeled on our website and social media for a funding fair near you.

Find more information about our funding support services online at www.supportingcommunities.org/funding.



"Groups who had never accessed funding before were amazed at the support available to them!"

ANITA DOONAN, FUNDING & SOCIAL VALUE OFFICER





The First All-Ireland Tenant Engagement Conference

Attention social housing providers, participation practitioners, community members and tenants who want to make a difference!

Get ready for the first-ever All-Ireland Tenant Engagement Conference, taking place on 13 June 2023 at the Carrickdale Hotel & Spa, located between Newry and Dundalk.

Supporting Communities is excited to bring you this island-wide event featuring involved tenants, leading housing professionals, and customer engagement experts to discuss the latest trends and best practices in tenant participation.

Whether you are a landlord looking to improve your services and increase satisfaction rates, or a tenant seeking a better living experience, this conference is for you. You will have the opportunity to network with like-minded individuals, participate in interactive sessions, and hear from industry leaders on topics such as:

- Why Tenant Engagement is Important to your Business
- A Customer-Centric Experience: Putting Yourself in your Tenant's Shoes
- Tenants Speak: Why I am an Involved Tenant
- The Journey of a Small Voluntary Housing Body Embracing Tenant Engagement
- The Evolution of Tenant Participation
- and more to be announced soon!

Book Your Tickets Online!

£65.00 Members

£75.00 Non-members



Sheenagh McNally, Head of Corporate Services, explained that this conference had been something she has wanted to do for a long time.

"I've dedicated my career to improving tenant participation in social housing, and an event like this has been in the back of my mind for years," explained Sheenagh.

"After Supporting Communities was appointed the Independent Tenant Organisation for Northern Ireland and we subsequently created our trading subsidiary, Empowering Communities, to allow us to expand our business into the Republic of Ireland, the idea really started to take shape for me.

Covid forced us to put it on the back burner for a while, but now the time is right, and it is all coming together!"



All-Ireland Tenant Engagement Conference

Sponsored by *Raising the Standard of Tenant Participation*

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“We tend to look across the water for good practice, but there is so much here! In many ways, we have been leading the way in tenant participation for a long time,” explained Sheenagh. “This conference is about showcasing the best we have to offer here at home and demonstrating our commitment to tenants to ensuring their voices are heard and showing them that they can make an impact.”

Supporting Communities is widely recognised as the participation expert in Northern Ireland, and we have now successfully expanded our reach to the south prompting an all-island approach.

“The programme for this groundbreaking conference is taking shape. We have secured a brilliant lineup of speakers, including tenant participation experts, newcomers to the practice trying new things, and, most importantly, tenants who have gotten involved and volunteered their time and energy to improve housing provision for everyone.”

“They say a rising tide lifts all boats, and that’s how I think about our tenant participation work. By advocating for a clear set of standards and implementing a method of benchmarking against those standards, we are raising the quality of tenant engagement for everyone, which ultimately improves housing and improves people’s lives,” remarked Sheenagh.

The Conference Line Up

Confirmed speakers thus far include:

Lesley Baird, Tenant Participation Expert Consultant

Grainia Long, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Alison O’Gorman, Director of Housing Services, Tuath Housing

Linda Watson, Chair, Central Housing Forum

Laura O’Dowd, Director of Housing, Ark Housing

Caroline Casserly-Farrar, Director of Operational Performance, Oaklee Housing

Liz Clarke, Director of Services, Circle Housing

More to be announced!



“I’m so excited for our first ever TP Conference! It is a dream I’ve been wanting to bring to life for a long time.”

Sheenagh McNally
Supporting Communities



Tenant Participation Standards & Accreditation

Drive your organisation forward and shape your services to meet the needs of your tenants and customers.

As the Independent Tenant Organisation for NI, we use accreditation to help landlords raise the bar for tenant participation and exceed the minimum standards as set out in the Tenant Participation Strategy NI. The Standards act as a benchmark against other landlords in NI, RoI and across the UK.



Learn [more here](#).

The Housing Policy Panel has a New Chairperson!

The Housing Policy Panel acts as a consultative body for DfC, focusing on social housing-related matters. The Panel also represents the interests of social housing tenants in developing Departmental policies. It provides a voice to ensure that tenants' rights and concerns are expressed and considered at a strategic level.

Since its first meeting in 2017, Supporting Communities has regularly convened the HPP. Until recently, they had postponed appointing a chairperson. The group felt they needed to form a solid understanding of their roles and learn more about each other before making a decision, and of course, the pandemic slowed things down!

We are thrilled to finally announce that the group has now selected a chair to act as Northern Ireland's first Tenant Advocate!

Patricia McQuillan, MBE, has been a longstanding representative for social housing tenants, serving on the NIHE's Central and Rural Housing Forums



Patricia McQuillan, MBE

for many years, as well as working tirelessly within her local community of Moneydig.

"I am delighted to have been elected as the first chair of the Housing Policy Panel," stated Patricia. "I will represent tenants and advocate for their involvement in decisions at the highest level to the best of my ability. I know my fellow panel members will support me in doing just that. I look forward to continuing to work with Supporting Communities to further our shared goals for tenant participation in Northern Ireland."

Learn more about the Housing Policy Panel online:
<https://www.tpsupport.org/housing-policy-panel>.