

SCENE

SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES BI-ANNUAL MAGAZINE



**Supporting
Communities**
Empowering Society



Meet our New Board Members!

The year got off to a great start as we welcomed two new board members to Supporting Communities at our December AGM and a further third new member in February. Each brings something different to the table but they all have incredibly useful and important skills and experiences to share.

Jim Ripley has worked in social housing for more than 35 years and has recently retired from his role as Chief Executive of Phoenix Community Housing in London.

Jim has been a passionate believer in the resident-led model throughout his career and wishes it were more prevalent in the housing sector, which is one of the reasons he was interested in Supporting Communities and our work with the Housing Community Network and housing associations developing tenant participation strategies.

"The ethos and purpose of Supporting Communities aligns well with my vision for how housing works best," says Jim.

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BELFAST**

**TENANT ENGAGEMENT IN
THE REPUBLIC OF
IRELAND**



Meet our New Board Members (cont.)

"I am excited about this opportunity to serve on both the board of the charity and as a director for Empowering Communities, the trading arm working to raise the standard of tenant participation throughout the island of Ireland. The team at SC is doing fantastic work. I look forward to bringing my years of experience to support the organisation to grow and learning more myself!"

A native of Whitehead, **John Mulholland** was an Investors In People (IIP) Practitioner for over 20 years advising and assessing leading-edge clients locally, nationally, and internationally. As owner and managing director of PDQ Solutions Ltd., John provides assessment, consultancy, and training services to a wide variety of organisations.

John first got involved with SC years ago through an IIP assessment. Over many years and several more assessments, first in IIP and now for Customer Service Excellence, John says he has seen the organisation grow in both professionalism and confidence. When the opportunity presented itself to become a director for Empowering Communities, John jumped at the chance.

"I was absolutely bowled over by the progress the business has made. It's very much in line with the ethos and values of Supporting Communities and my own values", says John. "I would like to use the skills and knowledge I have to channel it in a slightly different direction. The cross-border element is attractive and the commercialisation - I might be able to give some guidance to the board there."

Geraldine O'Kane is a committed member of the Greencastle Community Empowerment Partnership working to help people into social housing. With over 30 years of experience in the community sector, she has worked closely with the North Belfast Housing Strategy and the Housing Executive on community development and housing issues affecting her area. Her community group has had a close connection with Supporting Communities for many years giving Geraldine first-hand insight into our training, advice, and support services.

"Supporting Communities has always been there to help me and my community over the years so I was delighted when there was an opportunity to join the board. I look forward to helping the organisation develop and grow!"



Jim Ripley



John Mulholland



Geraldine O'Kane



Celebrating Tenant Participation with 50 Years of the NI Housing Executive

The Housing Executive's 50th Anniversary celebrations have been a wonderful opportunity to showcase the many tenants and community members that contribute to making it the organisation it is today.

The Housing Executive has undergone considerable changes over the years, but one of the most important was to start involving tenants in the decisions that affect them.

Supporting Communities has been a proud partner as well as a 'critical friend' to the Housing Executive for over 40 years, starting out as a small project and growing into the NI-wide organisation we are today. Working with the Housing Executive and communities all over the country, we have been instrumental in creating and developing what is now the key forum for tenant and community engagement in Northern Ireland, the [Housing Community Network](#).

The HCN is made up of over 500 community and resident groups, ensuring tenant voices are part of the Executive's decision-making process and can influence the way the business is run.

[Listen to Valerie Rooney](#) (pictured above), the South Down representative to the HCN, talk about her role in the 50th celebrations and what she does as part of the Central Housing Forum.



Valerie Rooney, HCN representative

Our outgoing Chair, Lorraine Campbell, worked for the Housing Executive for many years and remembers the start of our journey early in her career. On the occasion of our own anniversary, she wrote,

"Back in those days, there was little in the way of tenant participation, and I remember hearing with interest about a project in Ballymena where tenants were actively encouraged to say what they thought needed to happen to make their community better. It resonated with me as a sensible thing to do. Little did I imagine then that 40 years later, I would be the Chair of that organisation that pioneered tenant involvement in housing management and that the Housing Executive would be an exemplar of tenant participation."

We are lucky to have so many volunteers at all levels of the HCN who are dedicated to the work of tenant participation and community empowerment. The network is an ever-evolving piece of work for us. We will continue to grow with it ensuring it is relevant and effective with fresh members ready to step up and take part as they are needed.

Watch more tenant stories on the Housing Executive's website: <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/>





Building Digital Capacity & Confidence in Rural Northern Ireland

Supporting Communities has embarked on a partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to build digital skills in rural areas, many of which are finally getting high-speed broadband through [Project Stratum](#).

The project will initially involve 50 people identified through the Local Rural Support Networks who will receive a tablet computer and take part in a six-week training course. We will make links with broadband providers, banks, and other organisations that can feed into the programme.

Stephanie McKillop, Digital Inclusion Officer, is excited about this new opportunity to expand her reach.

"Digital inclusion means having access to the internet and the skills and confidence to use it well," she said. "This project addresses both and can make a real impact on people's lives. Over the pandemic, I have seen first-hand the difference that it made to those who could manage their affairs and stay in contact online compared to those who did not have the skills to do so. The experience has only served to reinforce how crucial digital literacy is to our mental, social, emotional, and financial wellbeing."

Gareth Evans, Deputy Director of Rural Affairs at DAERA, commented, "We understand that digital exclusion can limit communities and that it is crucial that everyone is given the opportunity to gain essential digital skills. We have made a significant investment in ensuring broadband reaches every part of Northern Ireland so we are delighted to be working with Supporting Communities to help rural communities make the most of the internet and reap all the benefits it can bring."

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"Digital inclusion means having access to the internet and the skills and confidence to use it well. This project addresses both."

STEF MCKILLOP, SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES



Stories from the ONSIDE Project

The ONSIDE Project is well into its third and final year now, and we have all learned a lot from this transformational programme.

We have reported many times about the incredible impact this work has had on the participants' lives. They learn new skills and gain real connections, but the project has made its mark on the staff involved as well.

Our fantastic team of digital trainers gets to experience the ONSIDE journey of each participant, from the initial trepidation and anxiety to the 'penny dropping' moment right through to flourishing digital skills.

Our digital trainers talk about ONSIDE's impact on them in this video.

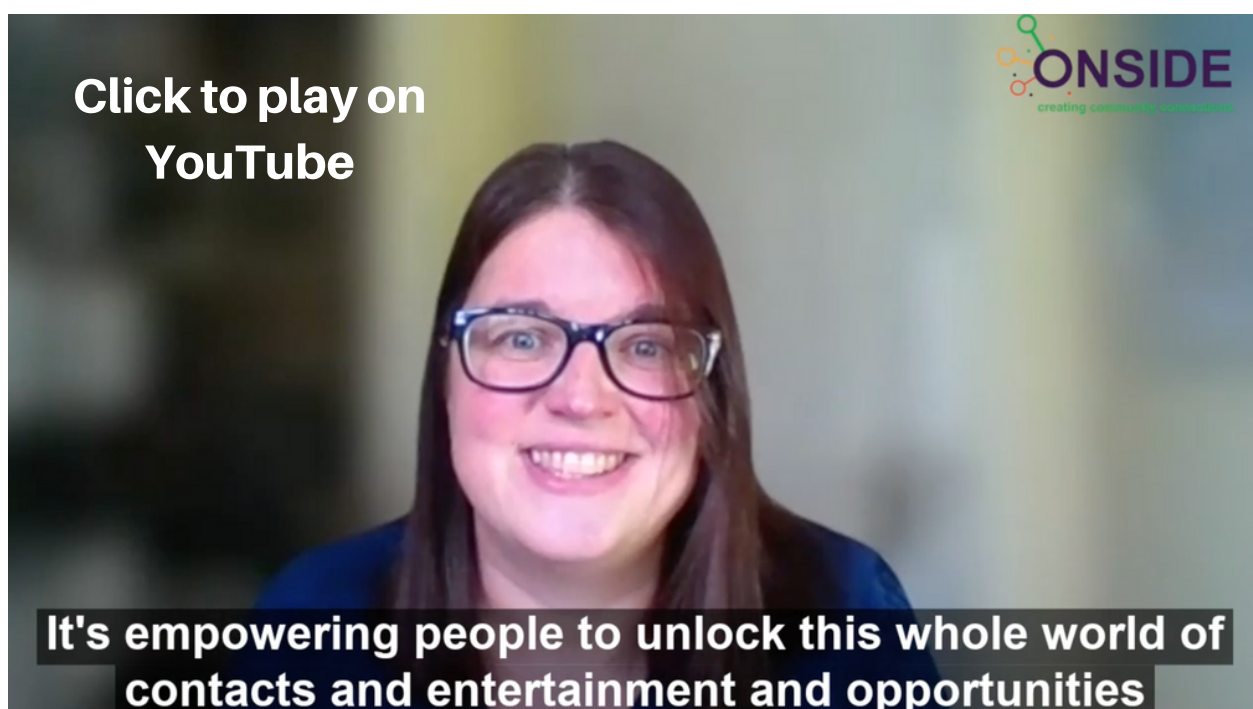


"I've gained massive job satisfaction. It's an absolute joy to show people things that you might take for granted. Getting to see that penny drop moment."

MATTHEW MCKEOWN, SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES

Digital inclusion work has been essential over these past two years to keep people connected and involved. However, Northern Ireland continues to be one of the most digitally excluded parts of the UK, so we hope to keep projects like ONSIDE going as long as they are needed.

If you'd like to try some new digital skills for yourself, the ONSIDE team has built a library of video tutorials on a range of valuable topics available to anyone on their [YouTube channel](#).





Urban Farming in West Belfast with the St. James Community

It all started with a bit of abandoned land down by the bog meadows. Damien 'Limbo' Lindsay decided to revive an old vegetable patch and needed some help to manage it. A friend sent some volunteers from a homelessness project he was running, and soon the small patch grew to become a large one.

"Someone suggested we get a few chickens too," said Damien. "We got 12 rehomed chickens that brought about so much positivity. There was nothing in this community, but now we had kids coming naming the chickens and opening the farm to feed them before school."

Enthusiasm for the project grew, and they got some goats as well. The Community Forum embraced the fledgling farm, and Damien became part of the leadership committee.

The farm has been running for seven years now and boasts quite the menagerie, including pigs, goats, Sheila the sheep, a Shetland pony, and plenty of rabbits, chickens, and ducks. There are even two wayward peacocks that like to fly the coop and have been seen walking down the street before being recaptured!

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"It's unbelievable the difference it has made. There's a real ownership of the farm by the community. You don't get any other farms in inner city Belfast!"

DAMIEN LINDSAY, COMMUNITY LIAISON FOR ST. JAMES FARM

The farm is not funded, but the workers are constantly coming up with creative ways to make money and keep it running.

Residents help with a recycling scheme that pays for feed, and the farm reuses rainwater to save on bills. "We make the most of what we have, says Damien. The community supports us so much by donating materials for fencing, acting as volunteers to care for the animals, and taking part in events. We sold 350 tickets to our Christmas event!"



Children love to get involved with the animals and the fundraising too. They can sponsor a chick egg to hatch, giving them a sense of ownership in the project. Teenage volunteers take on real responsibility for the running of the farm and are trusted with keys to open and close.

"Our volunteers are so dedicated. They tell us they get much more out of the work than they put in. It's been so good for people's mental health and wellbeing that they don't want to go home! There's a real feeling of ownership of the farm by the St James Community. You don't get any other farms in inner-city Belfast!" Damien exclaims.

The farm has regular spring and summer markets where anyone can come and buy fresh vegetables. Damien says folks will throw in a donation when they do, and people are very generous. "People around here don't have much, but they're willing to share."

There's also a significant cross-community element to the farm. Community groups from the other side of the motorway in the Village area are regular visitors.

"Everyone is welcome and will be treated like royalty. It's free to visit the farm and always will be. Sometimes the divide is all in our heads," says Damien.

There was some concern about possible antisocial behaviour affecting the farm in the early days. Damien says there was a gang of young fellows that everyone said might wreck the place. "We just went and talked to the lads on the corner about getting involved and sponsoring the animals. They bought into it right away. They were the first ones down with their tenner a month to sponsor an animal, and there's never been any bother."

"This is one of the most impressive projects I've ever encountered and I am proud to have helped them in a small way. The work that has gone in and the scale of the development is immense and all involved have my admiration", said Supporting Communities CDO Murray Watt.



Looking after the animals is fun for everyone!

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“Start small. Build on it. Get a few chickens.”

DAMIEN'S ADVICE FOR ANYONE STARTING A PROJECT LIKE ST. JAMES' FARM

"Murray has been very good," says Damien. "I've been involved in community work for 28 years, but I'd rather be out working with young people on the ground than doing admin and paperwork! Murray helps us with funding ideas and he helped us get our charitable status. He's very knowledgeable and keeps us right."





OCN Capacity Building Courses: Changing Communities & Careers

Kirsty and Joy: Stoneyford Community and Youth Association

Joy Luke and Kirsty McKeown are members of the Stoneyford Community and Youth Association in Lisburn. They came to Supporting Communities to develop their skills and to help their group grow. Currently working through the Level 3 course, both women are excited to implement the things they've learned.

Kirsty writes, "We would highly recommend this course to anyone who is part of a community or voluntary group. It has taught us so much and helped us understand more about good practice and the roles everyone has as part of the association. Through the training, we realised that as a group we weren't reaching our full potential. Now, we both have the confidence and knowledge to make some changes to our group."

We really enjoyed taking part in the training, so much so that we have discussed the possibility of completing the Ulster University course. This would allow us to consider a career in community work."



Rebecca Chambers: Lisburn Downtown Centre

Rebecca is a coordinator at the Lisburn Downtown Centre providing mental health support to the community. She says these courses came along at the perfect time for her.

She writes, "Lisburn Downtown Centre has allowed me to pursue my passion for mental health, but I knew a limited amount about community development when I first began. The Supporting Communities courses have developed my understanding of the values, processes, and principles underpinning community development and the benefits and challenges of community development practice."

Completing the courses online has made it much more flexible and convenient – learning from the comfort of your own home without the worry of traveling, expense of fuel, or parking. Plus, you can do it all in your pyjama bottoms!"



Funding Support: Find the Right Funding to Make it Happen!

Whatever your fundraising goals, Supporting Communities can help through our funding support service.

We help community groups in Northern Ireland find up-to-date and relevant sources of funding that will match their project's aims.

Our funding officer holds regular one-to-one funding clinics and group training sessions providing guidance on the overall fundraising process.

We can help you access GrantFinder, Europe's leading grants and policy information service featuring over 8,000 continuously updated funding opportunities.

If you have an idea for a project in your area, contact us to complete a funding search, and we'll produce a report detailing available funding that matches your goals, area, and demographics.

Get in touch with our funding officer or fill in a [Funding Enquiry Form](#) online. This is a free service for Housing Community Network members and just £35 for non-members.

Don't forget to follow us on social media, too! We post new funding opportunities to Facebook and Twitter almost every day!





Expanding our Reach: Tenant Engagement Workshops in Ireland

Supporting Communities collaborated with [The Housing Agency](#) in Ireland last year to deliver a series of tenant engagement workshops for Irish housing practitioners.

The Housing Agency has a remit to provide training and educational opportunities for the Irish housing sector. Their research indicated that tenant engagement was seen as a growth area of wide relevance to housing staff in both Approved Housing Bodies and Local Authorities.

Alex Dowdall from the Housing Agency explained in a [recent blog post](#) for our TP Support website that there is a perception amongst housing practitioners that the field of tenant engagement is underdeveloped in Ireland compared with other countries. In response, we developed a workshop focusing on networking, peer-to-peer learning, and presenting examples of international best practice.

Initially, we planned one workshop for an audience of about 40 to 50 people. However, when the workshop was advertised it generated so much interest that we decided to run the event

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“The workshops revealed a strong commitment among Ireland’s housing practitioners to further develop the principles and practice of effective tenant engagement – a commitment that will no doubt lead to exciting new developments in the field.”

Alex Dowdall, The Housing Agency



Alex Dowdall, The Housing Agency

on two further dates to accommodate demand. Over the three days, a total of 131 participants took part!

Attendees came from all sorts of roles including front-facing staff dealing with tenants every day and senior management interested in developing tenant engagement strategies. There was also a wide range of experience, from those working in their roles for less than a year to those with 20+ years of experience.

The workshops were a lively affair during which participants considered how tenant engagement can improve service delivery; how it can promote community building; its benefits in terms of maintenance, rents, and finance; and how it allows tenants a greater sense of ownership over their living situations.



In terms of the challenges of tenant engagement, participants identified issues around capacity and resourcing, communication, the management of expectations, and securing buy-in from tenants, communities, and other stakeholders.

Practical measures to progress tenant engagement were discussed, including training, ways of improving understanding of the benefits of tenant participation, how to manage tenant expectations, securing organisational buy-in, and collaborative working.

We were thrilled with the discussions on what the future of tenant participation in Ireland might look like, with participants considering issues relating to governance and organisational matters, improved tenant forums, the increased use of technology, and fostering more active forms of engagement.

Alex Dowdall was also happy with the outcome of the events. He wrote in this blog, "Overall, the workshops revealed a strong commitment among Ireland's housing practitioners to further develop the principles and practice of effective tenant engagement - a commitment that will no doubt lead to exciting new developments in the field."

Sheenagh McNally, Head of Corporate Services at Supporting Communities remarked, "It was a pleasure working in partnership with The Housing Agency in the planning and delivery of the Tenant Engagement workshops. The participant discussions showed a clear desire to embrace tenant involvement.

Since last summer I'm delighted to report that Supporting Communities is assisting a number of Approved Housing Bodies to develop their first-ever tenant engagement strategies.

Thank you to the staff of The Housing Agency, and Alex in particular for giving us the platform to share our tenant participation experiences from Northern Ireland with our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland."



"Thank you to The Housing Agency for giving us the platform to share our tenant participation experiences from Northern Ireland with our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland."

Sheenagh McNally, Supporting Communities

New Members in Ireland

Our trading arm, Empowering Communities, which works with housing providers to raise the standard of tenant participation, has continued to grow and expand its reach this past year. We are particularly excited to welcome several members from the Republic of Ireland, including Circle VHA, Tuath Housing, and Fold Ireland.

The staff at all of these organisations show a clear commitment to embrace and grow their engagement activities as we support them through training, peer networking, and bespoke consultancy services.

The future of tenant participation in Ireland is looking bright!

TP Support
from Supporting Communities

Find out more about tenant participation support from Supporting Communities on our new website, www.tpsupport.org.



We're adding more training events soon!



Keep an eye on our website for upcoming dates.

Update on the VCS Joint Forum

I have continued to attend the Voluntary and Community Sector Joint Forum (JF) meetings as one of 15 community and voluntary sector representatives joined by various senior public sector representatives from across all NI central government departments and local government.

The Joint Forum held its second full meeting on 13 October 2021 and several thematic sub-groups have now been established.

I am excited to have joined the sub-group looking at Communication and Engagement, an essential part of the work we hope to do.

We recognise that communication will be the lynchpin to driving progress across all the other action areas identified. This sub-group will identify how the Joint Forum can improve its communication within and across both sectors by agreeing on a clear plan and mechanism of engagement.

We will also aim to inform and influence how our sector and government communicate with each other more broadly, including across some key areas

of policy and strategy development.

The group will also explore how the VCSE sector can most effectively feed into and inform the NI Government's Covid Recovery and Renewal Agenda and how further engagement on NICVA's Manifesto for Change can best be taken forward across government and the sector.



Colm McDaid

As we advance, the Joint Forum and its members will consider proposals for new structures to improve the coordination of non-statutory VCS organisations and individual volunteers in planning, response and recovery activity relating to emergencies.

I'm looking forward to our next meeting soon and will continue to report on our progress.

Watch this space!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Colm McDaid'. The signature is stylized and written in a cursive-like font.