



Tenant Engagement is on the Agenda with First All-Ireland Conference

The All-Ireland Tenant Engagement Conference, held on 13 June in the Carrickdale Hotel, brought together tenant participation experts, social housing providers, and involved tenants and community members from all over Ireland and further afield to discuss ways to empower tenants and build stronger communities. The conference from Supporting Communities, which was the first of its kind, was a resounding success, with attendees leaving inspired and motivated to make a difference.

In a packed schedule of events, it was the tenants who told their personal stories that stood out. The day began with Grainia Long, Chief Executive of the Housing Executive, discussing the NIHE's approach to community involvement and service development. Then, Linda Watson, a NIHE tenant of over 30 years, took the stage to talk about her journey from getting involved in a local community group to chairing the Central Housing Forum

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and sitting on the board of several organisations. “Linda’s journey, how she got involved in her community and the big differences made was truly inspiring,” said one attendee.

The speakers from Circle VHA, the headline sponsor of the conference, were also praised for showcasing tenants from their newly established Tenant Advisory Group, David Kortukohun and Lorraine Gorman. They each explained how life had brought them to Circle and what drove them to get involved and volunteer. Liz Clarke, Director of Services at Circle VHA, discussed the journey Circle has been on in developing their Tenant Communication and Engagement Strategy and working towards the ultimate goal of tenant membership on the Board.

Good practice examples from Grainne Mullin and Judith Gray of Radius and Caroline Casserly-Farrar from Oaklee Housing had us ‘putting ourselves in our customers’ shoes’ and thinking about how every aspect of the social housing business can be improved with tenant oversight and input. After a plentiful luncheon sponsored by Newington Housing and the Housing Executive, there was a choice of three breakout sessions.

In the main room, we heard from Alison O’Gorman from Tuath Housing about how they had grown both their housing stock and tenant engagement programme exponentially in just four years. James O’Neill, Tuath tenant



Supporting Communities staff get ready for the big day!



Circle staff and tenants who spoke at the conference

and the chairman of An Garrán Residents’ Association in Tramore, provided some plainspoken wit and wisdom about what makes a community and how his little corner of the world had welcomed newcomers from all over and built a happy, cohesive community for all.

Next door, the ‘Meet the Regulators’ session gave delegates a chance to hear from Trudy Creane from the NI Department for Communities, and Steven Sheridan from the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority, who discussed their respective approaches to housing regulation and what they are doing to ensure tenant engagement is on the agenda.

In the third room, Sheenagh McNally from Supporting Communities and Laura O’Dowd from Ark Housing went through the process of getting a Tenant Participation Accreditation. This vital benchmark will help social housing providers improve their tenant engagement work and strive to take it to the next level.

The keynote address brought everyone back together for the last session of the day. Lesley Baird, the former CEO of TPAS Scotland, gave a frank and funny presentation about what she has learned about the importance of tenant participation over the years, offering some sage advice to those starting out that effective and meaningful engagement takes a lot of time and effort. Still, it can be an immensely satisfying journey. Enjoy it!



Lesley Baird delivered the keynote address

The final panel looked ahead to the next steps from the perspective of the policymakers. Patricia Leathely from the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland and Bob Jordan from the Housing Agency in the Republic gave an overview of what they are working on and the importance of learning from others.

can band together to speak with an even louder voice to improve social housing right across Ireland.

Patricia McQuillan, the new chair of the Housing Policy Panel, shared the last presentation of the day, wherein she explained how tenants are currently influencing policy in the north and her new role as Tenant Advocate. She left us wondering if tenants, north and south,

In his closing remarks, Colm McDaid, CEO of Supporting Communities, was adamant that we cannot rest on our laurels. There is always a 'next level' for tenant participation. Until we can honestly say that tenants are genuinely empowered to have control over all aspects of their housing and live in empowered communities, our work is not done.

He set us all a challenge when he said, "A new level around empowerment and citizenship is happening elsewhere, and I would like to see how we can enable or influence that conversation here through the creation of new TP legislation in the Republic of Ireland and by refreshing and improving existing legislation in Northern Ireland. I would love to see the island of Ireland become the benchmark for Tenant Engagement across these isles and, indeed, further afield."



Lorraine Campbell, Sheenagh McNally and Linda Watson at the close of the event

The All-Ireland Tenant Engagement Conference was a significant milestone for Supporting Communities and the tenant empowerment movement. Attendees left inspired and motivated to make a difference in their communities with a better understanding of the work needed on the ground and at a governmental level. We all have our work cut out for us as we continue to strive to raise the standard of tenant participation for all.



Photos from the first All-Ireland Tenant Engagement Conference





The Housing Policy Panel Makes an Impression at Stormont

The newly appointed Tenant Advocate and several Housing Policy Panel (HPP) members paid a visit to Parliament Buildings this summer to meet with the All-Party Group on Housing.

Patricia McQuillan, the chairperson for the HPP and Tenant Advocate for Northern Ireland, presented an overview of the Panel's work since its creation in 2017. She spoke about her new role and the importance of having a representative of the Tenants' voice at the table where decisions that affect them are being made.

Dave Maher, an HPP member representing Habinteg Housing Association Ulster, impressed upon the group the life-changing nature of social housing by telling his personal story of becoming a tenant. Two additional HPP members, Elishia Mullan (Clanmil Housing) and Pat Monteague (Ark Housing), were also in the gallery lending their support.

Supporting Communities, in our role as the Independent Tenant Organisation, has regularly convened the HPP since its inception, working with the members to develop their capacity to engage with decision-makers. Siobhan O'Neill, our Tenant Participation and Community Development Officer, provided the All-Party Group with a presentation on

our role in ensuring the aims of the Tenant Participation Strategy for Northern Ireland (2015-2020) are met on behalf of the Department for Communities. She spoke about the need for an updated Strategy to enable us to take tenant participation to the next level.

We have been invited to return to keep the group updated on our work and how the Executive can further our aims to put tenants at the heart of social housing.

Colm McDaid, CEO of Supporting Communities, remarked, "Today's meeting has been very positive and engaging. The Housing Policy Panel is a clear example of how tenants can influence housing-related matters strategically and in housing practice. We are delighted to support and work alongside these volunteers to make important changes and improvements to housing services in Northern Ireland."

Mid-Ulster HCN Members Online Forum Case Study

This past August, Housing Community Network members from Dungannon, Cookstown, and Magherafelt took advantage of training support from Supporting Communities to start using the new Online Members Forum.

The Members Forum is the new home for the Housing Community Network, including meeting agendas, minutes and other documents.

"It's good because if you miss a meeting, you can go on the platform to read the minutes and keep up with what's going on," said Phyllis Clarke from Fivemiletown Estates Group.



Dungannon group with Digital inclusion Officer, Carla



Cookstown HCN group with Supporting Communities staff members, Lucia and Carla

The session with Carla was excellent. She helped me get my emails sorted out on my tablet, so I am ready to go paperless!" she added.

Ursula Marshal from the Disability Forum also sang Carla's praises. Despite difficulties with the Wi-Fi at the training venue, Ursula was eager to compliment Carla's relaxed approach to digital skills. "She was so so good! So patient and able to help everyone with all different kinds of devices."

"I think the online forum will be useful for me to have materials in one place. I can let the disability forum know what is available there. I can also see how the chat function would be useful for groups to reach out to others. You could contact someone you don't have a phone number or email for," Ursula said.

Carla Mulholland, formerly of the ONSIDE Project, is the HCN Digital Inclusion Officer at Supporting Communities. She is working her way around to groups all over Northern Ireland, making sure that members have the skills they need to access their forums online. She aims to have all the Area HCNs signed up and using the Online Members Forums soon!





Magherafelt HCN group with Carla Mulholland

Carla has been working with our Community Development Officers, the Central Housing Forum's Digital Inclusion Working Group, and the Community Involvement team at the Housing Executive to ensure that the online forums are accessible to everyone.

Carla says the Mid-Antrim area meetings went well and should be used as a model for other areas.

"One of the best things about these training sessions was that Lucia (CDO for the Mid-Ulster Area) got the Housing Executive staff members to train alongside the group members. I think this helped everyone envisage how we can use the Online Forum to communicate and share things in a secure way," she said.

"I teach people to initially think of the Forums as a big online filing cabinet, but there is potential to use it for more as we all get used to using it," said Carla. These meetings with multiple groups and staff all together got that conversation going.

As with any new way of doing things, it may take users a little time to get used to it. Deidre Bradley from Granaghan & District Women's Group attended the Magherafelt training session. She says, "Carla showed us how to log on to the Forum and guided us around it and provided detailed notes

on how to do so. The session was very relaxed and informal. I feel the best way to maximise the use of the Forum is, unsurprisingly, practice".

That sounds like good advice! Practice makes perfect, and we encourage each Area Forum to make it their own by sharing information and keeping in touch online!

Supporting Communities has added a quick link to the main menu of our website to help members access the online forums. We encourage all area-level HCN members to give it a try, and if you need training support, Carla is here for you!



*"The hardest part is getting set up on the system!
After that, it is very easy to navigate to the things you need."*



Imagine a big online filing cabinet to start, but it can do much more!

Four Scholarship Winners are Headed to University

We are delighted to have facilitated four scholarship opportunities this year through partnerships with The Gallaher Trust and The James Kane Foundation. Congratulations to the successful applicants who will be pursuing their academic passions at university this autumn.

Gallaher Trust Scholarship Recipients



This is our second year working with The Gallaher Trust, a charity that promotes job creation, skills development and assistance to disadvantaged adults in the wider Ballymena community.

In 2022, we established a scholarship with them supporting two students per year who wish to study a STEM or business



Beth Hanna is headed to Queens to study Agriculture Technology

subject at either Queen's University, Belfast, or Ulster University. This award gives the recipients a £1,500 technology package and £2,000 per year for course fees.

Thanks to this year's scholarship, two young women from Ballymena have the financial support needed to continue on to higher education.

Elizabeth Hanna of Ballymena Academy is headed to Queens University to study Agriculture Technology.

Having grown up immersed in the daily workings of her family's dairy farm, Beth has cultivated a deep love for animal husbandry and aspires to build a career in agricultural science. Her daily hands-on duties caring for young calves, overseeing robotic milkers, and assisting with health treatments for cows and sheep have provided invaluable real-world experience.

Her participation in the three-year ABP Angus Youth Challenge allowed her to advance her skills in teamwork, interviewing, public speaking, and implementing agricultural technologies. With a proven dedication to the field through both her upbringing and extracurriculars, Beth is excited to delve further into the many facets of agriculture at the university level.





The James Kane Foundation Recipients

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The James Kane Foundation aims to advance education via grant-making and training. We teamed up with them to offer scholarships to students in the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon areas who plan to study towards a STEM degree. This award is for £2,000 per year up to a maximum of three years. We're thrilled to announce the first two recipients!

Tara O'Hagan of St. Ronan's College was awarded a scholarship to pursue Computer Science at Queen's University Belfast.

With a lifelong fascination with computer technologies and their societal impacts, Tara is thrilled to further her studies. Her high achievement in A-Level Digital Technology exhibits strong coding and website development skills. Tara has also demonstrated exceptional problem-solving and time management by juggling academics, work, and hobbies. Her technological pursuits have stoked her excitement to continue expanding her computer science knowledge.



Jemma Stirling will study Computer Science at Ulster University.

Jemma Stirling of Ballymena Academy will be studying Computer Science at Ulster University this autumn.

Showcasing both artistic flair and strong technological capabilities, Jemma has won multiple awards for her talents over the years.

Her A* GCSE Art and Design grade proves her attention to detail, while her Digital Technology and Maths prowess provides crucial foundations for computer science. Independent certification in game design has also expanded Jemma's skills in coding and problem-solving.

A well-rounded student, Jemma spent nine years in Girl's Brigade developing essential life skills and joined her local football club to build relationships and teamwork abilities.

Jemma is eager to creatively apply her array of talents to the dynamic field of computer science at university.



Tara O'Hagan will pursue Computer Science at Queen's University Belfast

Aidan Reilly of Lismore Comprehensive School is off to study Physics at Queen's University this year.

A gifted musician who has mastered piano up to Grade 5 level, Aidan impressively balances his artistic talents with a passion for science. His analytical thinking, logic, and knack for solving problems make him well-suited to excel in physics. Aidan has also shown great leadership as a STEM Ambassador for his school, guiding younger students in hands-on science activities.

Despite being registered partially sighted and diagnosed with ASD, Aidan has persevered to achieve top grades and a strong school attendance record. Aidan now looks forward to applying his well-rounded abilities and determination to achieve success in physics research.

Stephen Marks, who manages the scholarship programme, remarked, "I am thrilled to have been able to continue our Gallaher Trust scholarship this year and equally delighted to



Aidan Reilly is on his way to Queens!

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“We are passionate about ensuring these scholarships reach those most in need.”

The four young people selected are very well-deserving candidates indeed!”

STEPHEN MARKS

add The James Kane Foundation as a partner in a new scholarship.

At Supporting Communities, we are passionate about ensuring these scholarships reach those most in need, and I was pleased to facilitate a rigorous application and interview process for both funds. The four young people selected are very well-deserving candidates indeed!”

We wholeheartedly congratulate these exceptional students on earning their well-deserved scholarships. We wish them the very best as they embark on their academic journeys this autumn to cultivate their passions at university and beyond.

The future shines bright for these four talented scholars!





Meet Natalie Mayers - SC's New Net Zero Officer



Natalie has joined Supporting Communities in the new role of Net Zero Officer. She is a student in her third year studying environmental science at Ulster University and will be working with us as part of her degree.

Natalie's practical experience year will be spent investigating and developing a long-term plan for our organisation to become net zero, as well as educating us all on what that actually means!

Natalie explains that one of the roadblocks to net zero in Northern Ireland is the lack of understanding around the topic.

She says, "While I only have twelve months to help increase knowledge of net zero, I hope this small piece of work will make a significant impact in the long run. I plan on meeting with both community groups and social businesses to find out what they

already know and show them how a few small changes can help them reduce their carbon footprint and energy costs.

Natalie will also be researching ways the housing sector is making a difference by retrofitting tenant's houses, improving insulation, and installing heat pumps.

What is 'Net Zero'?



Net zero refers to the balance between the greenhouse gas emissions produced vs. those taken out from the atmosphere.

Net zero is achieved when the amount of carbon dioxide produced is no greater than the amount removed. The idea is to reduce the amount of human-caused emissions as much as possible and then remove carbon emissions from the atmosphere with initiatives such as reforestation or direct carbon removal.

Net zero for an organisation or group means achieving zero carbon emissions through its operations and activities. It demonstrates an organisation's commitment to environmental sustainability and leadership.



Comment: Tenant empowerment is the way forward for social housing



by Sheenagh McNally

The housing crisis sweeping across this island is not only a wake-up call to our governments but also an opportunity for us to recalibrate our attitude towards social housing. In the past social housing has been looked down upon as a tenure of last resort for the financially unstable or less fortunate, but now it is time to change that outdated perception and see it as an opportunity for active, involved tenants to create the kind of vibrant, sustainable communities we'd all like to live in.

With rising housing costs exceeding many household incomes, fewer people can afford to buy a home or rent privately. Social housing is starting to be seen more widely as an attractive alternative, even as a tenure of choice for its long-term stability. We must recognise that in addition to being an affordable place to live, social housing presents an opportunity to build places

where people are invested in their surroundings and feel a sense of community.

For this to work, however, it is imperative that those living in social housing have a real say in what happens. Residents must have the opportunity to be part of the decision-making process of their landlord, where they can suggest changes and make their voices heard on issues that affect them directly. The involvement of residents in the business of housing ensures that policies and practices are attuned to the needs of the people who live there - something that cannot be achieved by landlords or policymakers alone.

Tenant engagement is the key to making this possible. By providing residents with the tools and resources to actively participate in the governance of their communities, social housing can be transformed into a space that residents are proud to call home. This approach can not only improve the quality of life for tenants but also promote sustainable practices that benefit the wider community and the environment.

At the first-ever All-Ireland Tenant Engagement Conference, held on 13 June, Colm McDaid, CEO of Supporting Communities, challenged the assembly of social housing providers, tenants, and policymakers present, to take their tenant participation efforts further.

"We cannot rest on our laurels", he declared. "There is always a 'next level' for tenant participation. Until we can honestly say that tenants are genuinely empowered to have more involvement and control over all aspects of their housing and live in empowered communities, our work is not done."

The conference, the first of its kind for Ireland, featured experts, practitioners, and tenants with a shared goal of increasing the effectiveness of tenant engagement. We heard





from a range of housing providers at all stages of the 'ladder of involvement'. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive, who, in partnership with Supporting Communities, has been a pioneer in tenant engagement for over 40 years, gave the opening presentation detailing the work of the [Housing Community Network](#), the largest tenant engagement structure of its kind, made up of over 500 community groups across Northern Ireland.

The conference also heard from housing associations that are just getting started but who are committed to taking tenant participation to the board level, such as the event's headline sponsor, Circle VHA. Several landlords featured presentations from their tenants who spoke about their personal circumstances and reasons for getting involved, which really hit home with the audience.

The keynote address from Lesley Baird, former CEO of TPAS Scotland, assured the audience that tenant participation is both the right thing to do AND the smart thing to do for everyone involved and gave ample evidence of the success communities have had in Scotland.

In his closing remarks of the day, Colm McDaid issued a challenge to the room. "New levels around empowerment and citizenship are happening elsewhere", he declared. "I would like to see how we can enable that here by creating new legislation in the Republic of Ireland and by refreshing and improving existing legislation in Northern Ireland. I would love to see the island of Ireland become the benchmark for tenant engagement across these isles and, indeed, further afield."

The time is right for change. Investing in social housing and tenant empowerment can build a more equitable society where everyone has the chance to contribute and thrive.

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“We cannot rest on our laurels. There is always a ‘next level’ for tenant participation. Until we can honestly say that tenants are genuinely empowered to have more involvement and control over all aspects of their housing and live in empowered communities, our work is not done.”

COLM MCDAID



South & East Belfast Funding Fair Event

Come to our South and East Belfast Funding Fair to meet funders face to face, find out what they have to offer, and discuss your ideas for future projects.

Supporting Communities and the Housing Executive are hosting this event at the East Belfast Network Centre located at 55 Templemore Avenue, on Monday, 23 October, from 10 am - 1 pm.



The poster features a decorative banner of yellow and blue triangles at the top. The main text is in purple and black. It includes the event title, date, time, location, and logos for Supporting Communities and the Housing Executive.

South & East Belfast FUNDING FAIR Monday, 23 October
10:00 am - 1:00 pm

Meet the Funders! East Belfast Network Centre

 **Supporting Communities**
Empowering Society

 **Housing Executive**

For more information on this event or our funding service in general, contact Anita Doonan, Supporting Communities Funding and Social Value Officer at anita@supportingcommunities.org.

A Message from our Chief

In my role as a member of the Government and Voluntary & Community Sector Joint Forum, I'd like to provide you with an update on our recent work.

At our June meeting, the focus was on the public sector budget pressures, including the headline budget for 203/2024, the draft spending plans/proposals being developed by Government departments in response to this, and the impacts on the voluntary and community sector and those it serves.

Voluntary and Community Sector Panel representatives raised a range of issues with regard to the budget position, including the cumulative and potential long-term impacts of ongoing budgetary decisions on the sector and those most vulnerable in our communities, including equality impacts.

Panel representatives highlighted the urgent need for a strategic approach across government to adequately assess and mitigate these impacts and the need for much greater communication and collaboration with the sector regarding, given its central role and its contribution to many key areas of public service delivery – pressing that once services and expertise are lost, they will be almost impossible to replace.

Amidst this crisis, the importance of Governments' relationship with the sector and the pressing need for long-term and strategic investment was also discussed.



Com McDaid, CEO of Supporting Communities

Both the Permanent Secretaries and the other senior Departmental colleagues attending voiced their commitment to working with the Joint Forum and the sector more broadly, in showing strategic leadership and direction on tackling these complex issues.

Our next meeting is coming up soon, and I look forward to representing our membership at this important joint forum.



A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Com McDaid'.