



New Chair Brings Fresh Perspective to Supporting Communities

We are thrilled to introduce Dave Maher, the new chair of Supporting Communities. Dave is a tenant with Woven Housing and a member of the Housing Policy Panel. He is passionate about empowering tenants to improve the social housing system.

In a recent interview, the new Chair outlined his aim to help people take control over their lives and communities. "We need to foster inclusivity and social cohesion within communities," Maher says. "I would like to see us help promote programs to bring people of different ages and backgrounds together."

While he admits to having a "very steep learning curve" after being elevated quickly to the role, Maher is diving in with enthusiasm. "It all happened so fast - I never really thought about what it might entail," he says. "The seriousness of it has struck home, and I am very committed to doing a good job. I have a tough act to follow, so no pressure!"

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Coming from Outside the Housing Sector

Unlike our previous chair, Lorraine Campbell, who had a long career at the Housing Executive, Maher didn't come from inside the housing sector. Originally from Dublin, Dave spent his working life in the transport business before getting involved with the housing association movement a few years ago through Habinteg, now known as Woven Housing.

"I've gone from being moderately right-wing...to having views more along the lines of socialism," Maher says with a laugh. He says his views shifted after going through his own experience with homelessness, which gave him a new perspective on social exclusion and deprivation.

"People need to feel involved," Maher insists. "If they feel like they're on the outside, that's not a good thing."

Having retired, he now wants to use his time to give back. He aims to be a voice for the voiceless. "If people feel excluded, it leads to anti-social behaviour, as we have all experienced," he says. "I hope that as an organisation, we can champion community support that promotes inclusivity and equality."

Maher says he feels like "a small fish in a very big pond" among the many talented leaders at Supporting Communities. "Everyone has been so nice. I'm getting a lot of support to learn on the job."

Pushing for Real Tenant Participation

One of Maher's core principles is the need for genuine tenant participation and empowerment. As a tenant himself, he's been disappointed to find others so disengaged, with a common refrain of "Why bother? It won't do any good."

He plans to push for flatter hierarchies that distribute power and get tenants' voices truly represented in decision-making.



Dave Maher and Colm McDaid at the December board meeting

"I would advise anyone and everyone to become more involved in all community matters, not just in housing," he urges. "One of my regrets is that I didn't become more involved when I was much younger. I know there are plenty of young, capable people out there. I would advise them to grasp opportunities to become involved in building a fairer society in whatever way they can."

An All-Ireland Approach

Dave is enthusiastic about Supporting Communities' expansion into the Republic of Ireland, which will allow an all-island approach to improving tenant participation.

"I think we both have so much to learn, North and South," Maher says. He believes the different management styles from each tradition could complement each other. While not taking partisan



stances, Maher sees cross-border collaboration as a way to break down “them and us” mentalities. “We have far more in common than people might like to acknowledge,” he says.

With his long career in business, working with companies across Ireland, Maher has experienced how involving people can unite different perspectives and produce positive synergies.

Bold Ideas and Big Expectations

Dave says he is learning a lot from sitting on the Housing Policy Panel and researching social housing methods in other places like Scandinavia.

Maher is brimming with ideas, large and small, for transforming the housing sector. From abolishing bright signage that identifies and segregates social housing to restructuring how communities are designed in direct consultation with future residents, he’s keen to shake things up.

“I hope I don’t frighten people too much with my radical ideas!” Maher says. Yet, at the same time, he wrestles with self-doubt, wondering if he’s really up for such a weighty role when his qualifications are life experience rather than academics.

In the end, though, Maher is undaunted by the challenges ahead. “There’s never a good time for it - just get involved,” is the advice he says he’d give tenants considering stepping up to a board or other leadership role. “I can’t see a time when somebody would regret it.”



Dave (front left) with other members of the Housing Policy Panel at Stormont last year.

With his working-class roots, passion for equality and democracy, and an uncompromising vision for change, Dave Maher seems poised to inject fresh energy into Supporting Communities.

We’re excited to work with Dave as he finds his feet in his new role!



“I would advise anyone and everyone to become more involved in community matters. I know there are plenty of young, capable people out there. I would tell them to grasp opportunities to become involved in building a fairer society in whatever way they can.”

DAVE MAHER





Meet our New Board Members



Kelly Foster (left) and Caroline Casserly Farrar (right)

In addition to Dave Maher, our new chair, we are delighted to welcome four more new board members to our organisation: Kelly Foster, Caroline Casserly Farrar, Ian McCrickard, and Joanne Vance. We chatted with each of them to learn more about who they are and what they hope to contribute to our organisation.

Kelly Foster

Kelly is a returning member, having served as our Boardroom Apprentice in 2019/2020, and we are delighted to have her back!

Kelly is the Community Investment Manager for Ark Housing Association, where she has worked in various roles for over 20 years. She is currently responsible for overseeing the delivery of a shared housing programme, aiming to improve community cohesion within shared housing schemes and surrounding neighbourhoods.

Kelly is also responsible for delivering the Tenant Participation Strategy within Ark, an area she has championed throughout her career in social housing. She uses her role to advocate for the tenant's voice to be heard.

"The work of Supporting Communities is so closely linked with my own at Ark Housing that I feel I can offer the board a good perspective from someone doing this kind of work on

the ground," said Kelly. "I hope I can be a fresh set of eyes and help to marry the strategy with the groundwork."

Caroline Casserly Farrar

Caroline is the Director of Operations for Oaklee Housing, based in Dublin. She first learned about Supporting Communities a few years ago at an event with the Irish Council for Social Housing and has since become a supporter of our work, including speaking at last year's All-Ireland Tenant Engagement Conference.

"Giving tenants a voice is important to me - giving them a platform to have a say in how their homes and estates are run, so that it's bottom-up, not a top-down type of paternalistic approach. That's why when I was approached about joining the board, I said, well, this fits into my values and what I try to achieve, so of course, I want to be part of that!"

Caroline remarked, "I like the all-Ireland approach that SC is speaking about now because we don't really have anyone here advocating for tenant participation, and when you're already doing the kind of work that is needed, why not stretch it a little bit more down the road? The principles are the same for tenants, their needs, and how we engage them."

Caroline also brings a wealth of experience in governance and business that will stand us in good stead as we grow our operations!



Ian McCrickard

Ian had a long and noteworthy career at the Housing Executive, retiring in 2022 from the role of Assistant Director of Housing Services, where he had responsibility for Housing Policy and, in particular, the Community Involvement Strategy, so he is no stranger to our work at Supporting Communities.

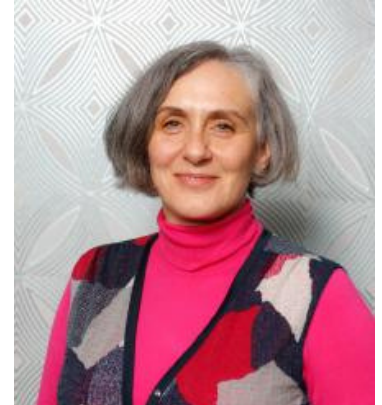
Ian brings a wealth of expertise to the organisation, including strategy development, policy development across a range of areas, budget management, community development funding streams, and personnel management.

Given his long experience of working in public housing, Ian says he hopes to bring additional perspectives to the board and would like to help advance the organisation to maximise community involvement in the housing service across all landlords.

“I have been a passionate advocate of involving the community and encouraging community participation in the Housing Service, and membership on the Supporting Communities board will enable me to continue doing so.”

Joanne Vance

Joanne is the Director and Company Secretary of the Community Development and Health Network (CDHN), an organisation working to use community development and social determinants of health frameworks to end health inequalities.



Ian McCrickard and Joanne Vance

With 30 years of experience in the community and voluntary sector, Joanne brings a wealth of experience in social research, community development, health promotion and public policy evaluation. She is interested in co-design and community-based participatory research approaches to develop interventions to improve well-being and ensure equitable access to public services.

Joanne says she joined the board because she shares “the social and community development values of Supporting Communities. Participation is at the heart of what your organisation does, and I believe that building trust and developing the skills and responsibilities of people at the local level helps to support our democracy. It empowers people to speak about what they know and contribute to decision-making to improve the services and amenities in their communities.”

“Supporting Communities knows the value of collaboration at all levels,” she continued. “I hope to contribute to this way of working and make a difference.”

We are delighted to welcome them all aboard!

Supporting Communities is in good hands with so many talented, committed people joining our board.





Service Spotlight: Funding Support

For community groups across Northern Ireland, finding and securing funding for projects and activities is a constant challenge. Costs have gone up across the board, putting a strain on already tight budgets, and the funding landscape has become more competitive. Many volunteer-run groups feel they lack the know-how and the confidence to be successful when making a funding application. That's where Supporting Communities' funding support service comes in, offering expert guidance from start to finish.

Anita Doonan is Supporting Communities' Funding and Social Value Officer. She works with Housing Community Network groups to identify funding opportunities and put their best foot forward with applications. But, as she explains, it's about much more than just finding the funding.

"It's not just identifying the resources, but making sure the group is funding ready," says Doonan. "There's a lot of background work groups need to do first."

This preparatory work includes ensuring a group is registered with the Charity Commission, has up-to-date financial accounts, has consulted with their community to demonstrate the need for the proposed project, and has scrutinised their project plan and budget projections. Anita and her colleagues provide training to walk groups through every aspect of the process.

For groups taking that first leap into larger, multi-year grants, Anita provides ongoing mentoring and evaluation support. For example, after working with the Devenish Partnership Forum in Enniskillen on a successful application to the National Lottery's Empowering Young People Programme, Anita has continued to meet quarterly with their worker to ensure their five-year grant is monitored and reported on correctly and that any activities are adapted as needed.



Anita Doonan, Funding and Social Value Officer

Anita really gets to know the groups she works with, going the extra mile with support that can lead to even more opportunities and synergy.

"By keeping in touch with the Devenish group, I've been able to link in with our CDOs to seek out other groups that have similar projects to share best practice. For example, there's a group in the northwest, the Cathedral Youth Club, who were also awarded money from the Empowering Youth Fund, so we are helping to make that connection, and who knows what might come of it!"

Social Value Impact Measurement

Another aspect of Anita's work is helping groups to measure and articulate the social value and impact of their work.

Working with Rose Regeneration's Social Value Engine, Anita helps groups



calculate their Social Return on Investment by dividing the value of a project’s outcomes by the cost of delivering them.

This is an in-depth process which Anita says has been made easier by the introduction of more Northern Ireland-specific proxy values for things we place worth on, like ‘cohesion’ and ‘good relations’ that may not be discussed in quite the same way elsewhere.

This quantitative data is pivotal for convincing funders of a project’s worthiness and potential positive outcomes, as well as demonstrating a group’s effectiveness to themselves and their community.

Advice to Newcomers

There is sometimes an overwhelming amount of work going on in the background to make even a small project come together, but Anita’s calm, organised manner puts her clients at ease.

“Start small, build up your confidence, and always reach out for support. There is no such thing as a stupid question.”
ANITA DOONAN



All smiles with Anita at a Cookstown Funding Fair

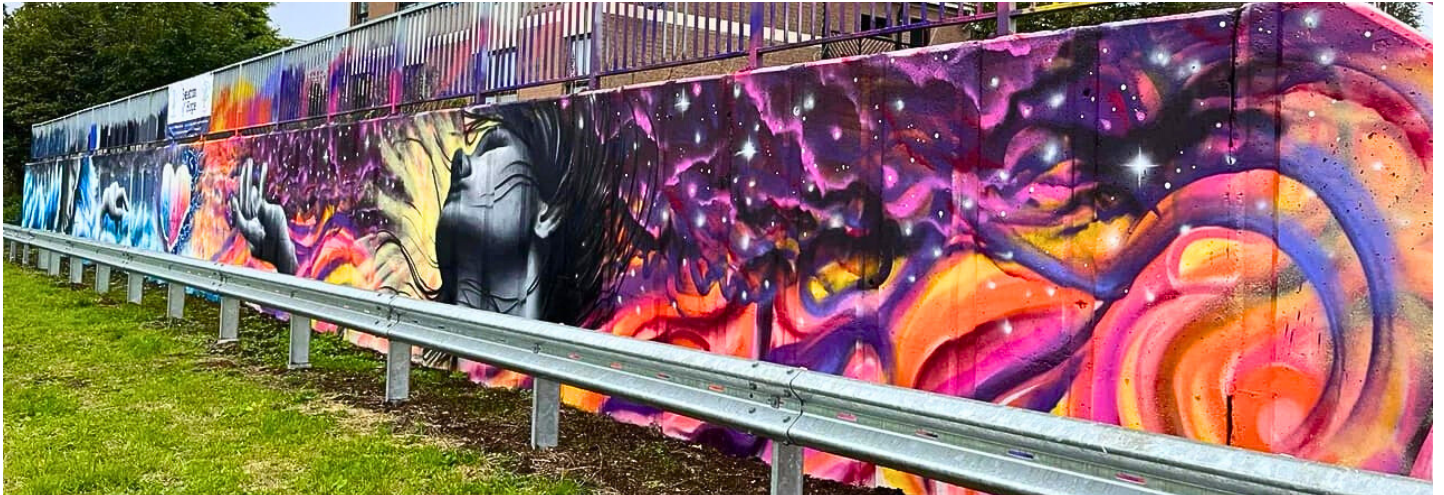
“Start small, build up your confidence, and always reach out for support,” she advises first-time applicants.

Anita encourages groups not to feel intimidated by funders, “They are happy to discuss issues with groups because they want to understand grassroots needs.”

“There’s no such thing as a stupid question,” she says. “Start a dialogue because your perspective could help the funder think about something in a new way.”

With regional funding fairs, online clinics, and regular publication of likely funding opportunities online, Supporting Communities offers numerous resources aspiring grant applicants can look to. As Doonan exemplifies, a little guidance can go a long way in helping good ideas come to fruition.

When asked what she likes best about her job, Anita said, “Meeting with groups and seeing how passionate they are about what they are trying to do for their communities. It’s nice to be part of that process and to think that I’ve helped them to achieve their goals.”



Beacon of Hope Mural in Ballykeel

Best Practice: BallyKeel 1 Moving Forward Together

The Ballykeel 1 Moving Forward Together community group in Ballymena has been providing residents of their estate with activities and projects for almost ten years now, and while it's not always been easy, they've definitely learned some lessons over the years!

The group has recently secured a second large block of funding from the Big Lottery to continue its programme of events for another two years. Committee members Chris Bowyer and Rosemary McCrory sat down with us to share the secrets to their success.

Plan Ahead & Don't Get Burned Out

"Getting this funding has given us a new lease of life!" Rosemary exclaimed. "You do get days when you're tired, and you think, maybe I should put my energy into something else. You know, I want to give up, or I don't know what the long-term future is for the group...we all go through stages like that. But this gave us a wee extra buzz - something to look forward to!"

"We are a small group, but we're proactive!" says Chris.

Planning out a programme of events over several years has been key to not getting burned out.

The group has an incredible lineup of activities planned for all ages over the coming years, as well as managing their ongoing community "Chatty Café" (which was recently featured on BBC news!), but the pair say they have learned



Happy Easter from Chris!



to manage the schedule so they don't take on more than they can handle, although the temptation to always do more is clearly there!

Get Support and Ask for Help

"You have to listen to your community and hear what they're telling you first and foremost," says Rosemary. "But I think relationships and working with other people is so important. You can't do it all on your own."

"The likes of Supporting Communities, our CDO's Marie-Louise and Gillian Forrest, have just been a great support to this group over the years. It's good for us to know they're there at the end of the phone. We might not need them all the time, but when we do, we can just call."

"Marie-Louise was very helpful and supportive with this recent funding application. The teamwork there was as important as the volunteers turning up to help out for the activities."

Chris and Rosemary also have a very good relationship with their funders, particularly the Lottery, the Council, Halifax, and the Housing Executive, all of which they were quick to acknowledge. They aren't shy about going back to ask for changes to the project as needed and keeping them informed about their progress.

Teamwork Makes the Dream Work

Rosemary and Chris certainly make a great team. They recognise their different strengths and complement each other well.



Rosemary getting into the Christmas spirit

"I'm pretty new to community work", says Rosemary. "Chris has been doing it for a long time! I have a lot of learning to do in relation to applications and funding. Chris has the experience, but it's getting it all down on paper where I can really help."

"You always need people with different strengths to come together. Rosie is fantastic at IT and at organising me!" says Chris.



The group are keen to organise more educational and historical trips in partnership with other groups like this visit to the Doagh Famine Village





"We've been working together for a year and haven't had cross words yet," Rosie laughs.

Chris says he can always call on a variety of people to pitch in during specific events or activities, but the running of the group is down to just a handful of folks who are passionate and believe in what they are doing.

Another aspect of teamwork that Rosemary is keen to explore is making better use of a local umbrella group, the Ballymena South Cluster, which is made up of about 12 area groups. She says the groups are starting to work together a bit more, and she'd like to move that along.

"There are some projects that maybe Ballykeel1 would like to do, but we don't have the manpower to do it. Maybe collectively, we can!"

Finally, Say Thank You!

The group is using some of its new funding to throw a celebration event marking its 10th anniversary and thanking all the volunteers who have been a part of it.

The idea started last year when they had an underspend due to having to close their café while the community centre was renovated.

They approached the Lottery and asked if they could use the money to hold a volunteer recognition event, which turned into a summer banquet for not just Ballykeel 1 but included all the groups in the area who have come together to support various events and activities and to collaborate on more expansive projects.

"It was a really enjoyable day, a celebration of volunteers and our local area. We invited all the local community groups, and it was such a success!" remarked Rosie. "We thought we should keep it going every year because it's not very often anybody says, 'thank you' or 'you're doing a great job' to volunteers."



The old oak tree holds centre stage in the community garden. This landmark was the inspiration for the group's logo.



Check out some of the amazing work they are doing on their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Ballykeel1MFCG>



HCN Online: Area Forums Are Getting Connected

The Housing Community Network (HCN) is embracing the digital age in a world where technology connects us like never before.

Carla Mulholland, Supporting Communities' Digital Inclusion Officer, is on a mission to bring Northern Ireland's largest housing network together through new online forums. The Online Members Forum is the new home for the Housing Community Network, including meeting agendas, minutes and other documents.

This past March, Carla hit the road, visiting Ballymena, Larne, and Carrick to showcase the power of these virtual gathering spaces. With her guidance, group members and NIHE staff learned to navigate the user-friendly online filing system, opening doors to cross-borough collaboration.

Imagine chatting with fellow community members across town or even the entire region, all from the comfort of your home.

The Online Members Forum, specially designed by the Housing Executive to streamline the network's resource sharing and meeting management, is also like a social network exclusively for HCN members, ensuring a secure and dedicated space for our community.

The Mid and East Antrim sessions offered more than just technical know-how. They



Julie Rodgers (D3 MAC), Lorraine Wilson (NIHE), Marie Louise (SC), Cllr Beth Adger (MEA)

HCN Members Forum Registration session March 2024

also provided a valuable opportunity for members to forge new connections beyond the confines of formal meetings.

Carla and area CDO Marie-Louise McClarey also shared practical help with digital skills and funding support, helping attendees make the most of the sessions.

"As with any new way of doing things, it may take users a little time to get used to it," says Carla, who encourages groups to think about how they can make their online area forum work for them by sharing information and resources as well as keeping on top of meeting minutes and presentations.

Roy McClean, NIHE Area Manager, joined in on the action, learning how to upload and share information on the system. His endorsement speaks volumes: "The training was extremely useful, and I advise groups to get in touch with Supporting Communities if they need any help getting their group on the system."





Make the Most of Digital: Accessing the Tenant Portal

In today's fast-paced digital age, staying connected and empowered is crucial. That's why Supporting Communities and the Housing Executive's Customer Excellence team joined forces to conduct online safety sessions with a particular emphasis on password security and email best practices.

Held during the West Area District HCN meetings in March, these sessions aimed to equip residents with the digital literacy skills needed to navigate the Housing Executive's Tenant Portal confidently.

"The tenant portal has a very low uptake in the West Area," Nuala Kildunne, CDO, explained. "Our goal was to connect with community representatives, empowering them to support tenants in embracing this new way to engage with the housing executive online."

And embrace it they did! Digital Inclusion Officer Carla Mulholland's informative presentation on creating secure passwords and enhancing email security was a hit, leaving attendees feeling empowered and ready to take on the digital world.

According to Ciara McGivern from NIHE, "The tenant portal provides secure, 24/7 instant access to information about your tenancy. You can report and track the progress of repairs, send a message to a staff member, and make payments online. It's the most convenient way to manage your tenancy, stay in touch, and get the help or advice you need."

'My Housing Executive' is available from any internet-connected device, no matter where you are. The power to stay on top of your tenancy is now at your fingertips.

Getting started is easy: Visit www.nihe.gov.uk and click on the 'Sign In' icon in the top right-hand corner of the homepage. If you need assistance, don't hesitate to call the dedicated helpline on 03448 920 910 and speak with a knowledgeable staff member.



We're on the Path to Net Zero!

In the last edition of SCENE, we introduced Natalie Mayes, our Net Zero student placement officer.



On loan to us from Ulster University for the year, Natalie has been developing a long-term plan for our organisation to become net zero, as well as educating us all on what that means!

Natalie reports that she has been estimating our carbon footprint over the past few years and working to implement new company policies to help staff make improvements. She tells us that calculating our carbon footprint is vitally important for our journey towards being a Net Zero organisation. It will highlight the areas where we need to make the biggest changes.

She has also been out and about working alongside the Housing Executive doing site visits to the 300 houses in their Low Carbon Project (LPC300) in Strabane, Newtownards and Dunmurry. These houses are being retrofitted to be more energy efficient by installing new cavity wall insulation, solar panels, storage batteries, air source heat pumps and ventilation systems.

"It's exciting to see projects like this happening in Northern Ireland", says Natalie. "Social housing providers are well

placed to be real leaders in Net Zero by retrofitting existing stock and building new houses to energy efficiency standards."

"I've learned a lot working on this project. I've been thinking about topics like placemaking, local approaches to heat decarbonisation, and new business models to fund net zero," she said. "Still, our initial challenge remains education and increasing the public's understanding of the topic."

As part of the Housing Executive's Corporate Sustainable Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022-2027), Supporting Communities will be delivering training on energy awareness and carbon literacy to community groups. We're all in this together!

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.

Engaging Young People in Tenant Participation

Join us for a special open meeting of the Tenant Participation Practitioners Network on 15 May to share good practice in engaging younger tenants in your housing association's/AHB's activities.

Open to members and non-members from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, let's talk about what works and what doesn't and share ideas to get more young people talking about housing.

If you are not a TPPN member, please register for this free event. [More information here.](#)



ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

IN YOUR TENANT PARTICIPATION STRUCTURE

Online Discussion Group
15 May, 10:30 am



A Message from our CEO

As I reflect over the past six months, I am incredibly proud of our staff team, now nearly 30 people strong, who are held in high esteem by our stakeholders, professional partners, and customers alike.

Our staff continuously seek to develop innovative ideas to solve problems; they are confident, dynamic, and, most importantly, trusted by those we serve and support. Although we are a growing and ever-evolving organisation, we will never forget that the behaviours that set us apart are our friendly manner, our inclusive approach, and our personal touch.

As leader of Supporting Communities, being a trusted partner is key. As I look ahead to 2024/25, we will continue to deliver a professional and dedicated service to our key stakeholders, the Housing Executive and the Department of Finance, and further our work with social landlords across the island of Ireland to improve tenant and community engagement.

With the return of the NI Executive and Assembly, I look forward to the long-overdue Tenant Participation Strategy for



Com McDaid, CEO of Supporting Communities

NI being renewed. Time is of the essence for an updated Strategy to take social housing to the next level in terms of standards and opportunities for tenants to play an even more active role.

There are many new opportunities on the horizon for us to collaborate or partner with others, add value, and make a positive difference in people's lives.