



'The Amp': Get Involved with Supporting Communities' New Engagement Tool

Supporting Communities has developed a new engagement tool to enable residents all over Northern Ireland to contribute their thoughts on a range of housing and community-related topics.

'The Amp' aims to amplify the voice of residents in order to influence a range of decision makers thus effecting real change.

We will use 'The Amp' to find out what matters to tenants and residents of all tenures and convey the results to regional governmental departments, local councils, and social landlords who will be able to use the data to better frame future housing policy and the delivery of improved housing services.



**Do you care about housing?
Your community?**

Tenants in Northern Ireland?

**Do you want to make it better?
Sign up for The Amp!**



supportingcommunities.org/the-amp

The Amp will publish surveys several times a year on topics of interest to tenants and residents. You can respond to them all or just the ones you are interested in. Everyone who signs up to our database will be able to take part and be in with the chance of winning a prize for each survey completed.

We are happy to facilitate a paper registration and postal survey to anyone who is not online.

Sign up on our website today to be included in the first survey to be announced soon!

Community Capacity Building in Whiteabbey

A mainstay of Supporting Communities range of training programmes, the Community Capacity Building series of OCN accredited courses is an excellent foundation in community development, designed for groups and individuals looking to delve into the practical skills needed to run projects and manage committees.

The Whiteabbey Community Group in Newtownabbey is just one of the groups to take part in this training this year. Already a thriving group, Whiteabbey provides a great variety of services and support seven days a week. Activities on offer include support groups, youth clubs, a Men's Shed and even line-dancing. The Centre aims to provide an inclusive environment for all through tailored activities and resources to meet the needs of their local community.

With support from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Connswater Homes, the management committee and volunteers at Whiteabbey have successfully completed their OCN Community Capacity Building (Levels 1-3) in just 4 months. The group has grown their capability in the areas of governance, funding, communication, planning and social enterprise to name a few.

Supporting Communities Training Officer Karla Turner said, "The Whiteabbey Community Group are such a motivated and hard working group. They have put a lot of hard work in to their OCN



qualifications over the last few months and I'm very proud of how far they have progressed, not just as a group, but individually. It's been an absolute pleasure getting to know this group. They have a lot of exciting plans to come and I cannot wait to see it all happen."

Our Community Development Officer for North Belfast and South Antrim, Lisa Clarke has also been providing hands on support to Whiteabbey Community Group with their meetings, finances and Charity Commission documentation. It was Lisa who steered them towards accredited training since they were eager to expand upon their existing community development skills and improve upon the terrific work of the Centre.

"I really enjoyed each of the CCB courses. I was apprehensive about getting back into education and completing assignments again, but we were able to work with Karla as a group on each assignment, which was brilliant – it even helped plan new ideas for our centre", said Doreen Minford, a member of the Management Committee.

Margaret King, the Centre's chairperson, who was also a participant in the D4C (Digital for Community) training, would like to be able create a Digital Hub at



Whiteabbey using tablets provided through the Housing Executive. The group plans to continue with additional digital training for the rest of the committee and volunteers. They would especially like to be able to help residents with accessing their benefits.

Volunteers at the Centre also enjoyed taking part in the course and getting a deeper insight into the running of a community centre.

“As a new volunteer, completing the community capacity building courses has provided me with the knowledge of what goes on ‘behind the scenes’ within community groups – something that I’ve always wanted to know more about, but never had the confidence to do myself. Completing my OCN qualifications with Supporting Communities has been fantastic. It was so informal, and I noticed that my confidence grew each week – others even noticed the change in me. I’m so glad I did it!” said Tom Larmour, a volunteer at Whiteabbey Community Group.

The Whiteabbey group will join with other successful graduates of our Community Capacity Building course and our other OCN accredited courses at a graduation event to be held in September.

Congratulations to all who took part!



“Completing my OCN qualifications with Supporting Communities has been fantastic. It was so informal, and I noticed that my confidence grew each week – others even noticed the change in me. I’m so glad I did it!”

Community Capacity Building Training Courses

Supporting Communities offers a range of accredited and non-accredited courses to suit community groups wishing to develop their skills. We can help you identify the course which is best suited to you and your group’s needs.

The Community Capacity Building series of accredited courses is an excellent foundation for any group and can lead on to further study at Ulster University for those who wish to continue towards a degree in Community Development.



Cardiff in July: 'Building Great Communities'

By Colm McDaid



It was my pleasure to have received an invitation to speak at a conference organised by our good friends, TPAS Cymru in Cardiff on 3rd July this year.

The conference, entitled 'Building Great Communities', was followed that evening with an Awards event recognising Best Practice in Tenant Participation across Wales.

The programme for the conference was varied and I was looking forward to hearing from the other speakers, especially the talk about the work of Tai Pawb in regard to 'Diversity in Communities' which was akin to the work of the Rainbow Project back home. The presentation from Street Football Wales and the Homeless World Cup this summer was also excellent. The passion of those involved mirrored the work of our very own NI Homeless Street Soccer Team who were competing and representing Northern Ireland in the games.

In the afternoon session, Dr. Bob Smith from the Welsh Government presented findings from a recent piece of research carried out by the Welsh Government's Housing Section on 'Hearing the Tenant's Voice' which very much resonated with me in regard to our own consultation with the Department for Communities officials around the development of the Tenant Participation Strategy for NI a few years back.

There was also an excellent presentation from a relatively new initiative called YouthShedz based



YouthShedz speakers

in Cardiff which follows a similar format to our own Men's Sheds Projects, but with a focus on younger people and safe spaces for them to 'hang out' while engaging through organised activities and programmes.

The presenters all spoke with great passion and afterwards I suggested that it would be great to have them visit Northern Ireland to chat further about their work.

I was allotted the final slot of the day and I was proud to reflect on the wonderful work that Supporting Communities do and the inspiring community work which our staff have been involved in over our 40 year history.

I managed to choose just three projects to talk about, one from each of the three regions across Northern Ireland, South, North and Belfast. I wanted to select work which would both inspire the Welsh audience but also provide some good practice in terms of the theme for the day. To this end, I presented the work of Drumellan Community Association in Brownlow from the South Area; Doury Road Development Group from Ballymena & North Region (which also just so happens to be where our own organisation started as a pilot project in 1979) and for the Belfast Region, I shared a video produced by the Housing Executive about the removal of the Peace Wall along Crumlin Road interface in 2015.

I am delighted to say that the presentation was very well received and quite a few people approached me afterwards to say that they were in awe of the work being delivered and that they would love to come visit some of the projects highlighted. These good practice visits are a great opportunity for everyone involved - community representatives and social landlords alike and I look forward to these exchanges taking place in the months ahead.

Thanks again to David Wilton (CEO) and his wonderful staff team at TPAS Cymru for a wonderful event and for their hospitality as always.

Kelly Foster: Boardroom Apprentice

Supporting Communities is thrilled to be taking part once again in the Boardroom Apprentice programme through Strictly Boardroom.

The Boardroom Apprentice provides training and support to people who want to serve on a board. It aims to bridge the gap between a person's aspiration and their reality by providing opportunities that most don't have through their normal work and life. The programme pairs apprentices with organisations who then invite them to join their board for a year to get hands on experience.

This year, we are delighted to welcome Kelly Foster to join our Board through this programme.



Kelly Foster with our Chair Lorraine Campbell and Chief Executive Colm McDaid

Kelly has worked in housing for 16 years, first as a scheme coordinator in sheltered housing, then as a support worker for homeless families and has now become the Homeless Services Manager for Ark Housing.

Kelly has been a life-long champion for resident engagement and participation making her a perfect fit for the Board of Supporting Communities!

Kelly told us she got involved with Boardroom Apprentice to push herself to try new things:

“I see the apprenticeship as an opportunity to develop my experience, skills and knowledge regarding the role of a board. I want to develop a sound understanding of good governance, realities and responsibilities of trustees.”

“I wanted to give something back and to push myself out of my comfort zone from working on the frontline. I have a real appetite for a fresh new challenge as my children are now grown up and I can fully dedicate my time. I want to

develop my own skills to make a positive impact on society. I see the apprentice as an opportunity to develop my experience, skills and knowledge regarding the role of a board. I want to develop a sound understanding of good governance, realities and responsibilities of trustees.”

Kelly joined us for her first Board meeting in June and was impressed to learn about the breadth of the work we do.

“My experience to date with Supporting Communities was in regards to tenant participation and I represent Ark Housing at the Tenant Participation Practitioners Network, but at my first Board meeting I was so impressed and surprised at the number of other areas that Supporting Communities is involved such as digital inclusion, funding support, social enterprise, etc.”

Kelly went on to say, “The Board is also set up with members from various backgrounds and expertise, it was clear the knowledge - and more importantly the passion - from everyone around the table will enhance my learning and experience over the next year and hopefully give me the skills and confidence to join a board in the future.”



Feature: Carnlough Community Association

The picturesque harbour village of Carnlough sits on the Coast Road beside the North Channel and at the foot of Glencloy, the second of the nine Glens of Antrim with a population of just over two thousand people. Right beside the harbour on the main road is where you will find the Carnlough Community Association Group, in their recently renovated property which houses their office, a popular cafe and a crafts shop.



Carnlough staff & committee members with Supporting Communities CDO, Gillian Forrest.

The current group took over from a previous community group which folded in 2005 and has been championed by a core group of volunteers ever since. This dedicated group has accomplished a great deal, creating numerous successful programmes that the small seaside community have embraced and made their own.

We talked to Patrica McConnell and Mary Watson about the group's early days, what they are doing now and their hopes for the future.

Patricia remembers, "We had a lot of anti-social behaviour in the area at the time and I thought there's no point in complaining unless I'm prepared to do something about it. So of course, I joined! None of us had done anything like this before so (the North Antrim Community Network) helped us get set up and get constituted and then, of course, Supporting Communities came along and have been helping us ever since."

The group was not afraid to try new things, and quickly implemented a string of programmes and initiatives, many of which are still running today. The Luncheon Club, for example, has been a community mainstay since 2007 and the Bowling Club, has become a self-sustaining group, attracting people from near and far. Patricia

noted that its cross-community appeal is the best kind, organic and naturally evolved.

Another incredibly popular programme is the Youth Club attracting 80 children in the area, but they need to recruit a qualified youth leader and longer-term funding to make it sustainable. "Unless you have that kind of provision, the young people resort to hanging around the harbour. This gives them a safe place to interact and do things together", says Patricia.

Mary Watson joined the Community Association when she moved to the village ten years ago so she could get to know people and to get involved in her new village. She quickly found herself taking on bigger and bigger pieces of work and has been instrumental in showcasing Carnlough's rich history.

Mary takes great pride in her volunteer role at The Heritage Hub at Carnlough Town Hall. She has been instrumental in setting up and running the interpretation centre across the street with the support of a group of over 20 World Host trained volunteers. It is definitely worth a visit.

There are officially 15 committee members. Their activities have grown more than what a group of volunteers can reasonably be expected to run and they are trying to make the case for a full time paid worker. Their current worker was initially limited to a 5 year grant, but her work is absolutely essential to the day to day running of the organisation.

At the same time, the mainstays of the committee find themselves nearing the age

"There's no point in complaining unless I'm prepared to do something about it. So of course, I joined!"

where they will have to pass their responsibilities on to new members and are finding the future transition difficult. Even as she is coming up with new ideas for the group, Mary reflects on this awkward truth. “I need to pull back and do less, my health is telling me that.”

The group is very active in the wider housing community as well. They sit on the Larne Inter-Agency Group, the Mid & East Antrim Housing Community Network, and the Rural Residents Group and have been involved with Supporting Communities for many years.

Deidre McCloskey, the previous Supporting Communities CDO for the area, helped them to secure a grant to do a Village Plan that has since been used to make improvements to the area’s physical infrastructure through the National Lottery Community Fund.

More recently, their current CDO, Gillian Forest, has helped them to change their legal status in regard to the building they own. They are now the sole member in the Carnlough Development Group enabling them to lease the cafe and crafts shop and use the rental income to modernise and renovate the Harbour House.

Gillian stated, “It is a privilege working with the volunteers and staff in the Carnlough Community Association and witnessing the impact that the group has made in their local community. Supporting Communities staff have engaged with the group for many years to provide support, training, advice and practical guidance to complete the many funding



Carnlough Harbour

applications required to deliver the range of programmes and events delivered by the community group annually. The funding secured has enabled the group to successfully deliver their Luncheon Club, various good relations projects, youth provisions, a summer scheme and environmental projects to name but a few.

Despite funding becoming ever more difficult to source, the group continues to ensure Carnlough residents have access to services which may not otherwise continue.



Mary Watson and Gillian Forrest

I am proud to support the Carnlough Community Association and in this rural area, it is clear to see that the Spirit of Community is well and truly alive!”

But Gillian agrees that they need to recruit some new people to eventually take a more active role in the group if they are to survive.

“The Community Association has many members now in their senior years who are on the lookout for younger members to

ensure the Community group continues for many years to come”, she said. “If this is you, get in touch with Harbour House!”

But Patricia is not ready to give up her many responsibilities just yet. “I’m just so passionate about the Village”, she said. “I can’t see me ever leaving the group entirely!”

The Central Housing Forum Gets Digital



CENTRAL
housing forum

The Central Housing Forum's (CHF) Digital Inclusion/Website Working Group met for the first time in May to agree their remit and to look at the newly launched Housing Executive website: www.nihe.gov.uk.

Executive test it and to see if it would be useful for the larger HCN as a communications platform

What do you think?

The representatives on the working group will be asking others in their areas for their input.



If you have comments or thoughts on the new website, please do feedback to the Central Housing Forum or contact the Housing Executive directly – you can even do it via the new website.

This new working group will have a dual role, first to act as a sounding board for the Housing Executive in matters related to their website and in the digital inclusion of tenants generally.

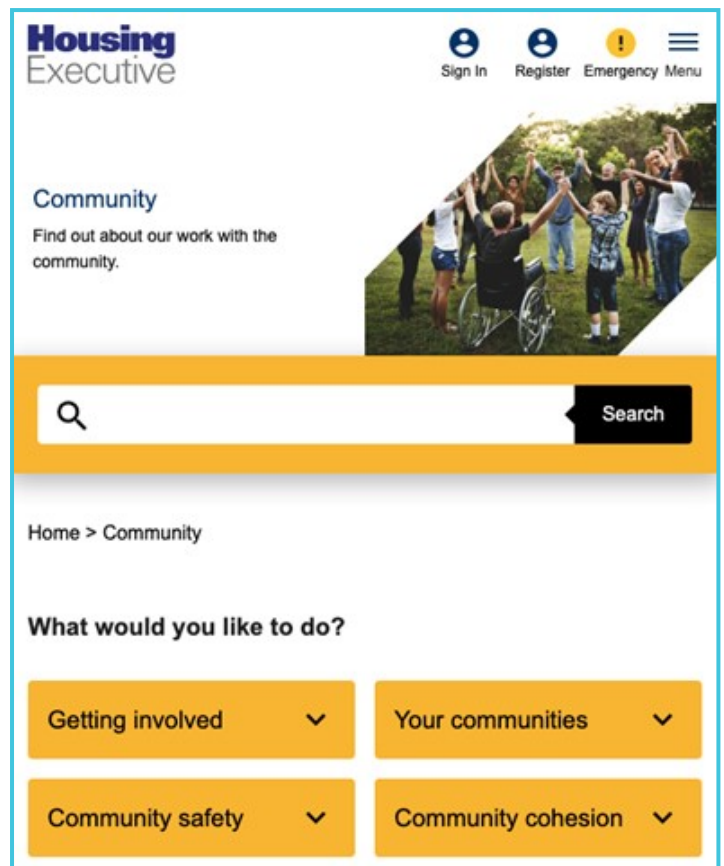
Second, this group will aim to share information about services available online through the Housing Community Network's (HCN) already established channels while considering ways to improve the networks communication by using online platforms.

The group is made of CHF reps from the North, South and Belfast Regions as well as the NI Youth Forum and staff from Supporting Communities and the Housing Executive. The inaugural meeting was an extremely positive one where members expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for the tasks at hand.

The first piece of work will be to test and evaluate the new website as it stands now and to make recommendations for the next phase of its implementation including the creation of a Tenant's Portal.

The group is currently considering how the Housing Executive can improve the existing community section of the site and what functions should be included in a future Tenant's Portal.

The group have also volunteered to contribute to a pilot project for a private 'group' function for the new website, to help the Housing



Apex: Shrinking the Digital Gap

People living in social housing continue to be more likely to be digitally excluded than their peers. This year, Apex and Supporting Communities with the support from the Dept of Finances, Digital Transformation Team, teamed up to help shrink that digital gap.

Apex, an established housing association in the North West, is delivering an innovative Community Investment Strategy focused on building stronger communities and supporting people living in poverty within these communities. Supporting Communities partnered with Apex to deliver a basic digital skills course to Apex Living Centre's users in the North West.

The centre operates an innovative social supermarket alongside the Foyle Food Bank to provide much needed services and help to families in crisis. Members of the Apex Food Club are encouraged to take steps to lift themselves out of food poverty and the Food Club offers members one-to-one advice and programmes on issues such as managing debt, house budgeting and food planning, employability, skills development and volunteering opportunities.

Apex felt that delivering digital skills to the centre users would help them to access the online world while also using the digital devices that many already owned or had access to. This course was engaging and interactive with all the participants reporting 100% satisfaction, regardless of their levels of knowledge at the beginning.

As more government services are making the move online, it has become increasingly urgent that everyone has the skills and confidence they need to make the most of the internet. Those who already suffer from some form of disadvantage whether it be educational, social or



Stephanie with some digital skills learners.

financial are the ones who are most likely to miss out on opportunities that the digital world offers.

Supporting Communities saw the Apex Centre as an opportunity to engage with the centre's users to help bring them into the digital world. Whether people wanted to use

the internet to find employment, manage their money online, learn a new skill or connect with family and friends, the course was very well received across the board with many requests for further training.

“Stephanie was excellent, her patience with us all was second to none. I would highly recommend this course to anyone who has limited knowledge around digital awareness.”

“I found this course to be very beneficial to me.

I now have more knowledge of the workings of my laptop with reference to emails, like how to send attachments. As my knowledge and confidence was limited in this area prior to attending this course, I also found the Cyber Safety Session run by Ulster Bank to be of great benefit”,
Apex Course Participant.



ITO News: Housing Policy Panel Annual Report

As part of our role as the appointed Independent Tenant Organisation (ITO) for Northern Ireland, Supporting Communities has been tasked by the Department for Communities (DfC) to develop a Housing Policy Panel (HPP) made up of tenants living within the social housing sector in Northern Ireland.

The Housing Policy Panel's role is to act as a consultative body for DfC with a focus on social housing related matters. The Panel also represents the interests of social housing tenants in the development of Departmental policies and provides a voice to ensure that tenants' rights and concerns are represented and considered at a strategic level.

"The Housing Policy Panel is a clear example of how tenants can influence housing related matters at a strategic level. Supporting Communities is delighted with the commitment of the Department in working alongside this Panel to make important changes and improvements to housing services in Northern Ireland." said Colm McDaid.

Since its inaugural meeting in September 2017, the panel, which is made up of tenant/resident representatives from both the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and many Housing Associations, has responded to a number of consultations, developed an action plan to take forward, and taken part in training and site visits to learn more about various approaches to tenant participation and engagement.



"The Panel has already made significant contributions to a number of consultations and other social housing policy areas."

"With the creation of the Housing Policy Panel the Department continues to demonstrate its commitment to giving social housing tenants a voice. The Panel has already made significant contributions to a number of

consultations and other social housing policy areas", said Shane Clements, Department for Communities .

The Housing Policy Panel has recently launched their Annual Report for 2018-19 which is available online at www.supportingcommunities.org



Empowering Communities: Focus on TPPN

Soon after Empowering Communities started, we quickly learned that housing association staff involved in tenant participation sometimes felt lonely in their role. Many housing associations only had one member of staff dedicated to this sometimes overwhelming and important area of work.

With that in mind, we created the Tenant Participation Practitioners Network (TPPN) to provide an opportunity for staff involved in this work to come together and share good practice. The group meets on a quarterly basis and the agenda is driven by the needs of the membership.

Speaking about the most recent meeting in June, Connswater Homes Communities Officer, Tammy Rountree said, “I enjoyed the discussions and the opportunity to chat through not only our success stories but also difficulties we encounter in our roles and how we can overcome them.”

Declan Morris from Extern Homes, who joined Empowering Communities as a result of our initial training opportunity around the implementation of the NI Tenant Participation Strategy, has found the support



TPPN members at one of their regular peer meetings.

useful in his work setting up Extern Homes. “I could see the fit right away, I could see the connection around what we wanted to achieve,” he said. “It was a great opportunity to lay some foundations and groundwork around the TP Strategy”, he said.

“The TPPN Forum is a fantastic opportunity to discuss what’s working and what’s not working and to pick up ideas and adapt them to your own work”, added Declan.

As a result of bringing people together who are all facing similar challenges, the TPPN is already benefiting the practice of the individuals involved leading to improved tenant participation in Northern Ireland more widely.

In turn, the TPPN members have contributed some terrific ideas to our growing organisation. One such idea has led to the development of several new training sessions designed to bring tenants from different housing associations together to network and learn from us and from each other. The first session was so popular, we have arranged a full series of these joint sessions which are available on our website now.

If you are interested in learning more about the Tenant Participation Practitioners Network or the work of Empowering Communities, visit www.empoweringcommunities.ltd or get in touch with Siobhan O'Neill on 028 38342792.

“

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss some of the issues we rarely talk about in the workplace.

- TPPN Member

”

Celebrating 40 Years of Supporting Communities

2019 marks 40 years since a single community project in Ballymena's Doury Road grew into what is now one of the larger Voluntary and Community sector organisations in Northern Ireland.

To celebrate, we have been looking back at the people and places that helped get us where we are today. Every month we are featuring a blog post from someone who has been a part of the Supporting Communities story. You can catch up on our website in the "SC Blog" section to see what stories have been told already.

We've also been running a series of #ThrowbackThursday posts with old photographs of groups, people and places that have been part of our work over the years - check them all out on our Facebook photo album 'Looking Back to Look Forward'.

Tell us Your Supporting Communities Story!

Get in touch and tell us how you have been involved and how Supporting Communities has impacted your own story.

If you have a story to tell, a memory to share, or photo to post about Supporting Communities, we'd love to hear from you!

Email:
healy@supportingcommunities.org
or message us on Facebook,
Twitter or Instagram with your old
photos and memorabilia.

