



New Tenant Participation Standards for NI Social Landlords Launched

Speaking at an event celebrating the charity's 40th Anniversary in December, Lorraine Campbell, the Chair of Supporting Communities, announced the launch of a new Tenant Participation Standards accreditation for social housing providers in N. Ireland.

"We take very seriously our role as the appointed Independent Tenant Organisation and feel we can offer much more", she said. "Like our sister organisations, TPAS England, Scotland and Cymru, we are delighted to introduce this robust, structured and independent assessment in Northern Ireland. The accreditation is a method for social landlords to review their Tenant Participation Strategies, carry out a health check and ultimately improve the ways to engage with their tenants and residents."

Appointed in 2017 by the Department for Communities in the role of Independent Tenant Organisation, Supporting Communities has worked to raise the standard of tenant engagement in N. Ireland. 16 out of the 20 Housing

Associations in Northern Ireland are now members of our trading subsidiary with access to our expert support and advice around tenant engagement strategies, tenant panels, training for staff and tenants and a peer support network for participation practitioners.



"Supporting Communities believes the fundamental relationship between a social landlord and their tenant is not just that of provider and consumer; they are partners in building communities and making great places to live", said Sheenagh McNally, Head of Corporate Development.

"Engaging in a meaningful two way process is to everyone's benefit. Our new accreditation scheme will help raise the overall standard of tenant engagement in Northern Ireland which is good news for everyone."

The Tenant Participation Standards are an assessment framework designed to provide social landlords with an objective measurement of their Tenant Participation activities through three standardised levels of accreditation.



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Celebrating 40 Years of Supporting Communities: Anniversary Event

Supporting Communities marked its 40th Anniversary at an event in Stormont in December featuring testimonials from several key stakeholders and service users. The theme for the day was “Looking Back to Look Forward”.

Our Chief Executive, Colm McDaid, looked back at the origins of the organisation as a single project in the Doury Road area of Ballymena which empowered residents to stand up, be heard and hold statutory agencies accountable for providing and meeting the needs of their community.

Acting as a trusted friend who could help communities to access those in power making the decisions that affected them, the Project quickly gained recognition from the Housing Executive and other agencies who saw the benefits of involving residents in their processes through an independent and impartial mediator. This approach developed and expanded over the years into what is the key tenant participation and grassroots community development organisation in N. Ireland, now called Supporting Communities.



Staff members Stephen Marks & Murray Watt with Aaron Thompson and David McPhillips from Killynure Community Association at Stormont.

With staff based throughout Northern Ireland, the charity now supports over 540 active groups providing advice, support, training, funding help and information to empower communities to make their areas better places to live.

Representatives of three of these groups spoke about their own experiences with Supporting Communities, demonstrating the impact that the charity has had on their neighbourhoods and environment, their capacity to grow their own organisations and their personal development.

Dave McGuckin of the Doury Road Development Group detailed the range of practical and hands on support his group has received over the years to access funding and to work with statutory agencies to make life-affirming changes to an area which had a bad reputation for drugs and dereliction. A big part of that is the relationship his committee has developed with the staff at Supporting Communities and just knowing that help is there when they need it.



Dave McGuckin, Doury Road Development Group

“If it wasn’t for the personal support of the individuals like Gillian, Stephen and others that make up Supporting Communities, volunteers like ourselves couldn’t keep facing these challenges. To have someone smiling, advising, boosting morale and simply saying, ‘Go on, you can do it’, is invaluable”, he said addressing the audience in the Long Gallery.

Aaron Thompson and David McPhillips from Killynure Community Association spoke about their educational journey with Supporting Communities. Both had left school without any qualifications nor given much thought to any further study when they became involved in their Community Association. After taking a few courses through Supporting Communities’ training programme, they saw how the skills they were gaining could be put to good use for the benefit of Killynure. Over the course of a few years, Aaron and David completed every accredited course Supporting Communities had to offer which gained them enough credits to access the Ulster University where they both graduated with an Advanced Diploma in Social Enterprise.

They are now busy putting their education into practice, implementing exciting plans for their area including a social enterprise multi-use games facility.

“We wouldn’t have had the knowledge or the confidence to do what we are doing now. We always wanted to make changes and improvements in our area, but Supporting Communities gave us the pathway and support to get there.”

Patricia McQuillan also addressed the event with her personal story of participation and empowerment that has resulted from her initial involvement with Supporting Communities nearly 20 years ago. Coming from a small resident’s group in the rural hamlet of Moneydig, Patricia became involved at every level of governance and participation within the Housing Community Network, has been a board member of Supporting Communities, and of her local Policing Board and now sits on the Housing Policy Panel (to name just a few of her many roles!). Patricia was even recognised by the Queen with an MBE for services to rural communities.



Patricia McQuillan, MBE

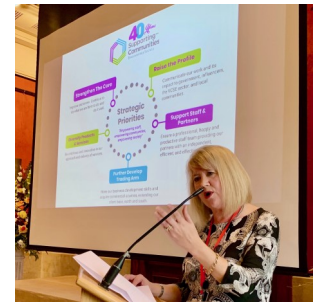
“Looking back, I can say I wouldn’t be sitting on all these important strategic groups if it wasn’t for Supporting Communities. They have been a constant in my ‘empowerment’ journey for the past 20 years and I know I can rely on their support in the future.”

Turning towards the future, the Chair of Supporting Communities, Lorraine Campbell, detailed the organisations’ ambitious new strategic priorities that will diversify and grow the organisation.

“You’ll note that our strapline is ‘Empowering Society’”, she said alluding to the organisation’s strategic priorities on screen. “This illustrates the breadth of our ambitions. It is our view that working with residents has a much wider impact than simply improving housing and communities, we empower people to let their voices be heard,

we help them to acquire skills to identify what needs to be done and we support them to make things happen.”

She went on to officially launch not one, but two new initiatives that illustrate the new, diverse, ambitious Supporting Communities; The Tenant Participation Standards and ‘the Amp!’



Lorraine Campbell, Chair

“We have been encouraged by housing associations’ efforts in developing their TP strategies, and there is some truly impressive engagement in the sector, but we feel we could take it to the next level with a set of standards which we will promote within a TP accreditation scheme.”

“The Amp is a new resident’s survey series which will enable everyone to easily express their views on a range of community and housing related issues. “We see this as another means of Supporting Communities giving tenants a voice”, explained Lorraine.

Several of Supporting Communities partners and stakeholders also spoke at the event to congratulate the charity on 40 great years and to express their support for our future developments including; Clark Bailie of the Housing Executive, Ben Collins from NIFHA, Caron Alexander from the Department of Finance, and Paul Price from the Department for Communities.

Concluding the event, Lorraine Campbell thanked everyone for coming and for supporting the charity. She had special words of praise for the service users who offered their own personal stories of empowerment through Supporting Communities.

“To the community representatives, I felt such pride at you all standing up here and speaking on both your own behalf as well as that of your own communities. Your words of thanks really resonated with me and as Colm mentioned, you are why we do this job.”

The ONSIDE Project Gets Underway

Supporting Communities welcomed two new digital inclusion staff members to the team this past November. Helen Maguire and Colin Patton will be delivering the digital training strand of the ONSIDE Project, a joint piece of work we are collaborating on with Disability Action NI, the Housing Executive and the Independent Living Movement Ireland supported by the EU's INTERREG VA Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body.

ONSIDE stands for Outreach, Navigation, Social Inclusion and Digital Engagement. The project aims to improve the health and wellbeing of disabled people through increasing their social and digital involvement in the community.

A wealth of evidence shows how positive relationships and shared activities contribute to overall health and wellbeing. Evidence also shows how physical and attitudinal barriers created by society towards disability can create loneliness and social isolation. ONSIDE aims to address these issues and empower disabled people to become socially engaged.

The ONSIDE team will identify disabled people who are seeking to improve their health and wellbeing through increasing their social networks both in the community and online.

It will fully support participants through a tailored development plan suited to their wants and needs. This plan will identify and address the barriers that make it harder for disabled people to access social networks in the community and



online. Each personal development plan will offer participants independence, choice and control.

Supporting Communities will deliver an eight week digital skills programme which will train, equip and support participants to become socially connected online.

The project will be based in eight geographic locations:

- Sligo and Donegal
- North West and North Donegal
- Fermanagh and Omagh
- Cavan and Leitrim
- Dungannon and Armagh
- Monaghan and Louth
- Newry and South Down
- Greater Belfast and Northern Region

Both Helen and Colin are excited to empower those with disabilities to become more socially engaged through technology. They have seen first-hand how people's lives can be transformed when given the opportunity to learn a new skill online.

Helen said, "I am pleased to be working on a project which has the potential to remove many of the barriers that prevent people with disabilities from making full use of technology and look forward to seeing how the project develops over the next few years."

To find out more, contact the ONSIDE project team on 028 9029 7880 or email info@onsideproject.org.



Helen and Colin with a group of new participants in Letterkenny.

Supporting Communities Staff Speaks at TPAS Scotland and Cymru Conferences

This past year Supporting Communities was proud to have staff members present our work to our colleagues and their members at both the TPAS Scotland and the TPAS Cymru conferences.

Aidan Kearney, our Senior Training Officer, delivered a workshop to delegates attending the Welsh TPAS conference entitled; ‘Tenant Participation in N. Ireland: Past Present and Future’ wherein he discussed the specific historical context of housing in N. Ireland, the challenges we face here in terms of religious segregation and the legacy of the Troubles and how Supporting Communities has been a part of bringing about changes including the implementation of the Tenant Participation Strategy.

“It was fantastic to meet and share stories with my Welsh colleagues. I was delighted to give the attendees a taster of what good work is going on in N. Ireland and in particular, the work of Supporting Communities.”
- Aidan Kearney



Still shot of a peace wall coming down from Aidan’s presentation.

“The session went really well”, Aidan reported. “All the seats were occupied and the participation was really good. Everyone was so interested in how we do things here and were really keen in particular to talk about the political divide, which is something they don’t normally experience in their communities.”

Sarah Harkness-Robinson, our Senior Community Development Officer, attended the TPAS Scotland event where she spoke about her recent Tower Block Project for the Housing Executive.

Sarah shared her approach to encouraging residents to get involved in a way and, at a level, that is right for them in places where there had been no previous community representation.

The key themes that Sarah’s presentation included were; communication, the importance of relationships & building of trust and consideration of the fact involvement is not a ‘one size fits all’ approach.

“The conference was very useful to me to learn more about housing in Scotland. There were some great networking opportunities and I was able to speak to a wide range of people and organisations. I’m really glad I went”, said Sarah.



Sarah and Gillian handing out the Tower Block Times newsletter

New Three Year Cushendun Project

For many years, the National Trust has been the major landowner in the picturesque village of Cushendun in County Antrim. Their portfolio includes many local amenities, shops and residential accommodation within the village. It is fair to say that over the years, the Trust's relationship with the local community in Cushendun has been somewhat turbulent with relations coming under strain at times. The National Trust realised that they needed a respected independent intermediary to help them re-engage positively with local stakeholders and the community in general.

The National Trust came to Supporting Communities due to our well respected track record and our 40 years of experience in community development to help them to build bridges and foster new and dynamic links with the community. In a new project that is the first of its kind anywhere in the UK, we aim to build consensus and relationships with residents in Cushendun so that they feel that they have a voice and a part to play in the future of the village.

The National Trust wants to become a trusted partner in the village and the surrounding area. By the end of the three year project period, our goal is that the community will feel empowered to work with the National Trust.

At the same time, we will have supported the Trust to develop proactive and participative approaches to identifying issues and solving problems in Cushendun in partnership with the local community. As an independent charity, we

are well placed to lead on this work and to provide an open and transparent process for everyone involved.



Beautiful Cushendun, County Antrim

We were delighted to appoint Cushendun native, Christine McNeill, as our newest Community Development Officer to join the Supporting Communities Staff Team and to lead the project. Christine is based in Glenmona House, a National Trust property in the village.

“Being from Cushendun myself, I understand the relationship the National Trust has with the community here. I applied for this job because I saw it as a challenge, but also an opportunity to make the changes we need and to be involved in a project that has never happened before”, said Christine.

“I am very passionate about the area I live in and this is an exciting opportunity to work alongside the community and to empower and support them around issues which they feel are important.”



An art class at Glenmona House, Cushendun

Since taking up the new post, Christine has begun to forge good working relationships with many groups, stakeholders and residents in the village. Several new projects are currently being planned in conjunction with the Trust, all designed to foster and grow good relations between all the stakeholders in Cushendun and the National Trust.

One of Christine's key roles is to develop Glenmona House into a thriving hub for community activity and to explore the potential of various ideas including locally-driven social enterprise projects.

Christine continues to engage with all groups in the village and is very keen to listen to their



Conor Flanagan and Colm McDaid with Cushendun's new CDO, Christine McNeill.

views and ideas for the future. To this end, we are conducting an area-wide survey and are considering establishing a new Inter-Agency Forum to be held on a regular basis allowing all interested groups and organisations, including the National Trust, to come together to address issues of concern, share good practice and discuss ideas and plans for the village.

“I am very passionate about the area I live in and this is an exciting opportunity to work alongside the community and to empower and support them around issues which they feel are important.”

-Christine O’Neill

This new three year project with the National Trust is a great opportunity for all stakeholders to come together with one main goal in mind; to foster positive partnership working to make Cushendun a better place to live for the whole community.

At Supporting Communities, we realise that anything good takes hard work and time but we are delighted to be working with the National Trust and the local community in Cushendun to take on this challenge together.

Free Online Course in Good Governance

Governance is about leadership and ensuring that an organisation is effectively and properly run. Across Northern Ireland, voluntary and community sector organisations are playing a key role, delivering local support services, helping individuals and groups and providing numerous benefits to the public. In turn, those organisations receive a range of support, from funding to volunteer time, skills and knowledge. That is why it is so important organisations are able to retain the public’s trust and confidence.

Good governance ensures the overall direction, effectiveness, supervision and accountability of an organisation. It demonstrates a willingness and ability to act in the best interests of the organisation, ensuring the operation of effective, open and ethical processes which adhere to the law and stand up to scrutiny. This helps reaffirm public trust and confidence in individual organisations and in the sector as a whole.

This course will cover the following key areas:

1. What is Good Governance?
2. Code of Good Governance
3. Charity Commission NI
4. Charity Finances
5. Annual Reporting
6. Financial Systems

Walk yourself through the basics with this online presentation of our essential Good Governance course on our website at:

**[supportingcommunities.org/
governance-training](https://supportingcommunities.org/governance-training)**

20 Years of Resilient Communities: The Annual Community Conference 2019

The 20th Annual Community Conference, a joint event with the Housing Community Network's Central Housing Forum, the Housing Executive and Supporting Communities, was held on 16th October 2019 at the Silverbirch Hotel in Omagh.

Over 300 community representatives, Housing Executive and Supporting Communities staff attended to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the event which was a 'Celebration of Resilient Communities'.

The Chair of the Central Housing Forum, Linda Watson, officially opened the conference by explaining the theme. "If there's one thing we know in the community sector, it's that it takes resilience, dedication and commitment to continue doing what we do day after day and year after year", she said. "We're no strangers to setbacks, snags and other stumbling blocks. Yet when faced with these difficulties, that's when we show our strength in our ability to persevere and overcome."



Darragh O'Neill of Supporting Communities grabs a selfie with Patricia McQuillan, Annette Kelly, and Linda Watson at the conference.

The Chair of the Housing Executive, Professor Peter Roberts, also tried to define what it means to be resilient. He told the assembled groups, "Resilience is in your DNA. It's part of who you are. Nothing stops you from providing the best levels of service for the people in your communities."

He went on to define it as 'Bouncebackability', a term that resonated throughout the day.

"Resilience is in your DNA. It's part of who you are. Nothing stops you from providing the best levels of service for the people in your communities."

- Prof. Peter Roberts



Colm McDaid, SC
Chief Executive with delegate
Gerry Maguire, Fermanagh

The main thrust of the day was to recognise and celebrate groups and individuals who have stood out as examples of commitment to community service and remarkable resilience over many years.

Three groups, one from each of our geographical regions, were highlighted in video presentations; Strathroy Community Association from Omagh, the Short Strand Community Forum in Belfast, and the Doury Road Development Group in Ballymena. Representatives from the groups were presented with special 20th Community Conference awards.

Six individual awards were also given to recognise life long commitment to community work. Annette Kelly of the famed Facebook account 'Little Penny Thoughts' introduced each award recipient as they came forward to accept the accolades of their peers.

The six recipients recognised were:

- Renee Crawford - West Belfast
- Liam Wiggins - North Belfast
- Valerie Rooney - Newry
- Isobelle Hamilton - Newtownards
- Mary Watson & Patricia McConnell (joint award) - Carnlough
- Rosemary McCaw - Coleraine

Annette also gave a keynote address in which she told her personal story of overcoming depression and anxiety going on to create a social media presence that helps hundreds of thousands of followers with daily positive quotes and inspiring mantras. She says one little idea can spark a ripple effect and noted what we have achieved here. “The people power here today is amazing!”

The day was a terrific celebration and recognition of all the hard work by so many that have come before to create the Housing Community Network we have today. It is the key tenant engagement structure in Northern Ireland and the envy of other regions working to develop similar arrangements.



Lorraine Campbell, Chair,
Supporting Communities

Lorraine Campbell, Chair of Supporting Communities, addressed the Conference to provide some context around the history and the creation of the annual conference 20 years ago and how it ties in with Supporting Communities’ journey as an independent support organisation.

“Looking back, the formation of the Central Community Advisory Group in 1997, which then became the Housing Community Network, was a foundational piece of work in Northern Ireland and has led the way in facilitating truly effective tenant participation. Twenty years ago, the CAG, NIHE and NITAP, as we were known at the time,



A group of conference delegates with
Community Development Officer, Gillian Forrest.

organised the first community conference to bring groups together to share ideas and promote best practice. It was hailed as a great success and thus our annual tradition was born!”

The HCN now has a recognised and meaningful role in the monitoring and decision making process of the Housing Executive and influences decisions affecting tenants and communities. Supporting Communities has continued to be there to ensure there is unbiased, objective support for that process in the form of Development Officers, training, advice, and funding assistance.

John McMullan, Vice-Chair of the Housing Executive, closed the conference with some thoughts on the investment and commitment from the Housing Executive in communities. He talked about the increasing importance of measuring the impact of our work to demonstrate it’s value.

By any measure, this year’s conference was a tremendous success. Thank you to everyone who worked to make it happen!



Linda Watson and Patricia McQuillan
Chair and Vice Chair of the
Central Housing Forum

SC Welcomes New Board Members

Supporting Communities is very pleased to welcome eight new board members who officially joined the organisation at our most recent AGM in December.

Speaking at a recent celebratory event for the organisation’s 40th Anniversary, Colm McDaid remarked, “We’ve just had a board recruitment exercise and were delighted with the interest in our organisation and the calibre of applicants. We think we now have the expertise to take the organisation to the next level with a really good mix of volunteers from the community, housing, legal, accounting and corporate worlds.”

Our strategic plan for the next three years sets out five key priorities for the short term that will help us achieve longer term goals.



“You’ll note that our strap line is ‘Empowering Society’, which illustrates the breadth of our ambitions. It is our view that working with residents has a much wider impact than simply improving housing and communities. We empower people to let their voices be heard, we help them to acquire skills to identify what needs to be done and support them to make things happen”, Colm went on to say.

“We were delighted with the calibre of applicants interested in joining Supporting Communities’ Board.”
- Colm McDaid

Our New Board Members



Anthony Kerr
Newington Housing Association



Patricia Connolly
PwC Northern Ireland



Justin Cartwright
Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH)



Ryan Black
Belfast City Council



David Lamb
Retired Asst. Dir. of Finance
Housing Executive



Ian McLaughlin
Lower Shankill CA
Belfast



Ivan Armstrong
Retired Area Manager
Housing Executive



Martin McColgan
Strathroy CA
Omagh

SC Graduation Ceremony: Celebrating Community Learners

On 9th September 2019, Supporting Communities held a graduation event at Belfast City Hall to mark the success of 30 graduates who have completed OCN NI qualifications. The learners came from seven different community groups to celebrate their achievements and to officially receive their certificates of completion in courses such as; Community Capacity Building (CCB), Understanding Social Enterprise, Community Development & Tenant Participation.

Opening the ceremony Sheenagh McNally, Head of Corporate Services, said, “This event marks the very first annual graduation ceremony bringing participants from many different communities together. I hope that this is only the beginning of your journey and that you grow in confidence and feel empowered to reach your full potential both personally and for your local communities.”

Stephen Marks, who taught the Understanding Social Enterprise Course Levels 1 and 2 said, “All of the students this year were excellent and displayed a good understanding of the subjects covered. We hope many of them will look to continue their learning and development with Supporting Communities.”

Adekanmi Abayomi, who completed the Level 2 in Social Enterprise told us, “I really enjoyed the course we did in the Market Community Centre. It opened up lots of opportunities for us and gave me the perfect setting

“Stephen is a great teacher. We have many ideas for possible businesses. Watch this space!”



Adekanmi Abayomi (right) at the Market Community Centre, Belfast.



Social Enterprise graduates with Lorraine Campbell, Chair of Supporting Communities.

in which to meet local people in the Market area.”

Another Social Enterprise student remarked, “Stephen is a great teacher. We have many ideas for possible businesses. Watch this space!”

Those gathered heard some words of encouragement from former students, Aaron Thompson and David McPhilips from Killynure Community Association, who accessed the Advanced Diploma in Social Enterprise at Ulster University through Supporting Communities training.

The ceremony concluded with Colm McQuillan, Housing Executive Director of Housing Services informing this year’s graduates to make the most of any opportunities that come their way. “Now that you’ve taken this step, keep going with your education as far as you can, for yourself and for your community.”

Congratulations to all!



**Supporting
Communities**
Empowering Society



Join 'The Amp'! Amplify Your Voice



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 the decision makers who can effect 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.

The Amp will publish surveys several times a year on topics of interest to residents. You can respond to them all or just the ones you like. 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!

Get Involved.

Register for 'the Amp' today!

→ supportingcommunities.org/the-amp