



# **NIHE Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023**

## **Evaluation Report June 2024**

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## Acronyms

CIS – Community Involvement Strategy  
CHF – Central Housing Forum  
CWB – Community Wealth Building  
DfC – The Department for Communities  
NIHE – Northern Ireland Housing Executive  
NIYF – Northern Ireland Youth Forum  
HCN – Housing Community Network  
KPIs – Key Performance Indicators  
LGBTQIA+ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, or Asexual  
NI – Northern Ireland  
NIYF – Northern Ireland Youth Forum  
PfG – Programme for Government  
PCSPs – Policing and Community Safety Partnerships  
ROI – Republic of Ireland  
SROI – Social Return on Investment  
TEC – Tenant Executive Committee  
ToR – Terms of Reference  
OBA – Outcomes Based Accountability

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the willing participation and support of a number of people and groups, without whose input this research would not have been possible:

- NIHE senior management and external stakeholders who gave their time to take part in interviews and focus groups.
- The Central Housing, Disability, Youth and Rural Forums who participated in the focus group discussions.
- The Project Advisory Group, who provided support and guidance throughout the project.
- Various members of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Community Involvement team who assisted in the coordination of the data collection and consultation.

*The content of this report does not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Housing Executive. Responsibility for the information and views expressed lies with the authors.*

## Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023: Key Achievements

- **Baseline survey** undertaken to establish community participation and views across the Housing Community Network: feedback received from 211 groups. More than three quarters (77%) were satisfied with the Housing Executive's response to group views.
- Continued funding agreement with **Supporting Communities** to support the work of the Housing Community Network, enabling ongoing facilitation of groups and meetings and:
  - Establishment of **74 new groups**
  - Provision of one-to-one training for **1,277** individuals/committee members
  - Delivery of **Good Governance** training sessions, both in person and online, and associated online resources
  - A wide variety of other training opportunities, including scrutiny training, impact training, capacity building, social enterprise training and Grant Finder training
  - Support to HCN members and groups which enabled them to access more than **£4.5 million** in total for projects and initiatives
- Continued work with under-represented groups through the Rural Forum, Disability Forum, Youth Forum, facilitated by funding agreements with Rural Community Network, Disability Action, and Northern Ireland Youth Forum, as well as engagement with the Strategic Cohesion Forum.
- Youth Forum members supported to complete leadership and community training, Housing Rights training, Homelessness awareness training and training on committee structures and code of conduct.
- **£1,146,035** invested in the Community Grants Programme.
- **Regional Community Network** tier re-introduced in Belfast and South administrative Regions.
- **Tenant Scrutiny Panels** established in each of the 13 administrative Areas.
- Updated Central Housing Forum **Terms of Reference** developed and agreed, confirming, and enhancing accountability between the CHF and the Housing Executive.
- Six **Working Groups** provided input and review on key topics including Welfare Reform and Financial Inclusion, Digital Inclusion, Social Clauses, and Sustainable Development throughout the life of the strategy. A number of other groups were also convened for shorter periods of time.
- Central Housing Forum met monthly, including via online applications during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Three **Central Housing Forum Annual Reports** produced

- Two **Community Involvement Conferences** delivered by task and finish groups (in-person events were impacted by covid restrictions during the life of the strategy)
- Housing Executive website updated to include '**Community**' tab, which provides key information and contact details
- **Customer portal** introduced in May 2020, facilitating access to important information and enabling online transactions
- **Central Housing Forum Collaboration portal** created, enabling members to stay connected, keep notes, share files, manage meetings and papers, and assign tasks and to-do lists.

**“The Housing Community Network has been the bedrock of your community engagement for many years. The NIHE works with communities in ways that are well outside what could be considered normal for a social housing provider.”**

*(Customer Service Excellence report, 2022)*

## At-a-glance evaluation summary

<p><b>Aim 1</b>  <b>To promote community involvement across all NIHE communities</b></p> <p><i>Three objectives with five associated actions:  four fully achieved and one partially achieved</i></p>	<p>✓✓✓✓  ✓</p>
<p><b>Aim 2</b>  <b>To enable communities to challenge, influence and shape the Housing Executive's housing services.</b></p> <p><i>Six objectives with 33 associated actions:  28 fully achieved, two partially achieved and three not achieved</i></p>	<p>✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓  ✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓  ✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓  ✓✓  XXX</p>

## Section 1: Introduction and Context

### 1.1 Introduction

This report sets out an independent evaluation of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's (NIHE) Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023.

S3 Solutions were commissioned by NIHE in April 2023 to undertake an evaluation of the Community Involvement Strategy (CIS) 2018-2023. Launched in December 2018, the 'Inspiring Communities, Shaping Our Services' Community Involvement Strategy focused on empowering and enabling NIHE served communities to make where they live better for everyone by directly involving these communities in the everyday issues that affect them. Through implementation of this strategy, the NIHE has sought to involve a range of stakeholders in research, consultation, and participation, to work together towards mutually agreed outcomes.

The information presented in this report was gathered by the evaluators during the period April 2023 to September 2023.

### 1.2 Purpose of the Report

As set out in the terms of reference, the overall aim of this review was to collate, collect and review quantitative and qualitative data and insights, with the aim of assisting relevant NIHE staff to review the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023 and develop the new five-year Community Involvement Strategy. The objectives of the study were:

1. To review the Housing Executive's 2018-2023 Community Involvement Strategy and assess the extent to which its two key aims have been met.
2. To provide detail on relevant government policy and examples of good/innovative practice by other organisations or in other jurisdictions which may influence and/or have relevance for future community involvement approaches adopted by the Housing Executive.
3. Through the findings, help shape and inform the direction of the next strategy, alongside public consultation.
4. Based on analysis of operational data, stakeholder feedback, other relevant research undertaken for the Housing Executive and good practice examples, to provide insight and suggestions for future community involvement approaches.
5. To examine current information recording processes and offer guidance for future consideration with a view to improving the capacity for measurement of impacts and outcomes.



## 1.3 Report Structure

This report is structured as follows:

- **Section 2:** Overview of the NIHE and the Community Involvement Strategy.
- **Sections 3:** Evaluation methodology, including approach to data collection, data analysis, and limitations.
- **Section 4:** An overview of the strategic, policy and socio-political landscape within which the strategy was developed and delivered.
- **Section 5:** Review of Best Practice in Community Involvement across the UK.
- **Section 6:** Summary of the key deliverables and achievements over the period 2018-2023.
- **Section 7:** Overview of the consultation findings.
- **Section 8:** An analysis and summary of the key learning and considerations for future iterations of the strategy.
- **Section 9:** Recommendations.

## Section 2: NIHE and the CIS

### 2.1 The Northern Ireland Housing Executive

The NIHE is a non-departmental public body which was originally established by the Housing Executive Act (Northern Ireland) 1971. Assuming the housing responsibilities of some 65 separate authorities, it became Northern Ireland's Regional Housing Authority. NIHE's functions (which are made up of duties and powers) are laid down by statute. They are to be found primarily in the various Housing (Northern Ireland) Orders from 1981-2003. The strategic role of NIHE is coordinated from its headquarters in Belfast, with the main customer services delivered through a network of three Regional Offices, 13 Area Offices, a network of Local Offices throughout Northern Ireland, and six Grants Offices.

The Department for Communities (DfC) has policy responsibility for the NIHE. The broad policies and related procedures of the NIHE are agreed by DfC with the actions and decisions taken within policies and procedures the responsibility of the NIHE's Board. DfC also has approval of the NIHE budgets, and the payment by DfC of Housing Grant to the NIHE is conditional upon the NIHE's compliance with the terms set by the DfC. The Housing (Northern Ireland) Order from 1981 requires the NIHE to act in accordance with such directions.

The NIHE vision for housing in Northern Ireland:

*Everyone is able to live in an affordable, sustainable, and decent home, appropriate to their needs, in a safe and attractive, and climate-resilient place<sup>1</sup>.*

The central goal of NIHE is that everyone has access to decent, affordable housing and the organisation works with communities and other organisations to meet the housing needs of existing and future generations. The key strategic objectives are:

- Delivering better homes
- Supporting independent living
- Building stronger communities
- Delivering quality services

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from 'Energising Communities', the Housing Executive's three-year Corporate Strategy for 2022/23-2024/25

## 2.2 The Housing Executive and Community Involvement

With a stock of more than 83,000 dwellings<sup>2</sup>, the Housing Executive is the largest social landlord in Northern Ireland and remains among the largest in the UK. In addition to the core landlord functions, the Housing Executive invests heavily in the communities it serves, with the aim of helping to create vibrant, sustainable communities. Since the mid-1980s, the Housing Executive has facilitated activities to encourage the active and participative involvement of residents and community groups in the delivery of housing services. This involves a process of enabling, engaging and empowering communities to influence, challenge and lobby to improve Housing Executive services and connecting with community representatives, tenants, residents, and leaseholders through various Housing Community Network (HCN) forums.

This work has been underpinned by a series of community involvement strategies which precede the subject of this evaluation. The Community Involvement Strategy 2014-2017 resulted in some significant changes to the organisation's approach to community involvement, with examples including:

- The appointment of a tenant to chair the Central Housing Forum (CHF)
- The establishment of Tenant Scrutiny Panels resulting in policy changes
- Area Managers managing the Community Grants Programme
- Launch of the NIHE Social Enterprise Programme

## 2.3 NIHE Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023

The Housing Executive's 'Inspiring Communities, Shaping Our Services' Community Involvement Strategy was launched in December 2018 to cover the period 2018-2023. The strategy builds upon key achievements delivered through 40 years of involving communities in all facets of Housing Executive business. The context and drivers of the 2018-2023 Strategy were set out in full in the published strategy document; some of the key drivers included the *draft Programme for Government*, the *Social Housing Reform Programme*, and the *Housing Executive "Build Yes" Transformation Programme*, which are described in greater detail in Section 4. The strategy was developed to help deliver the Housing Executive's corporate objective of fostering vibrant communities and building stronger communities, with a vision to:

***"Work in active and meaningful partnership with our communities and to give residents, tenants and leaseholders a real say in making their neighbourhoods better places in which to live."***

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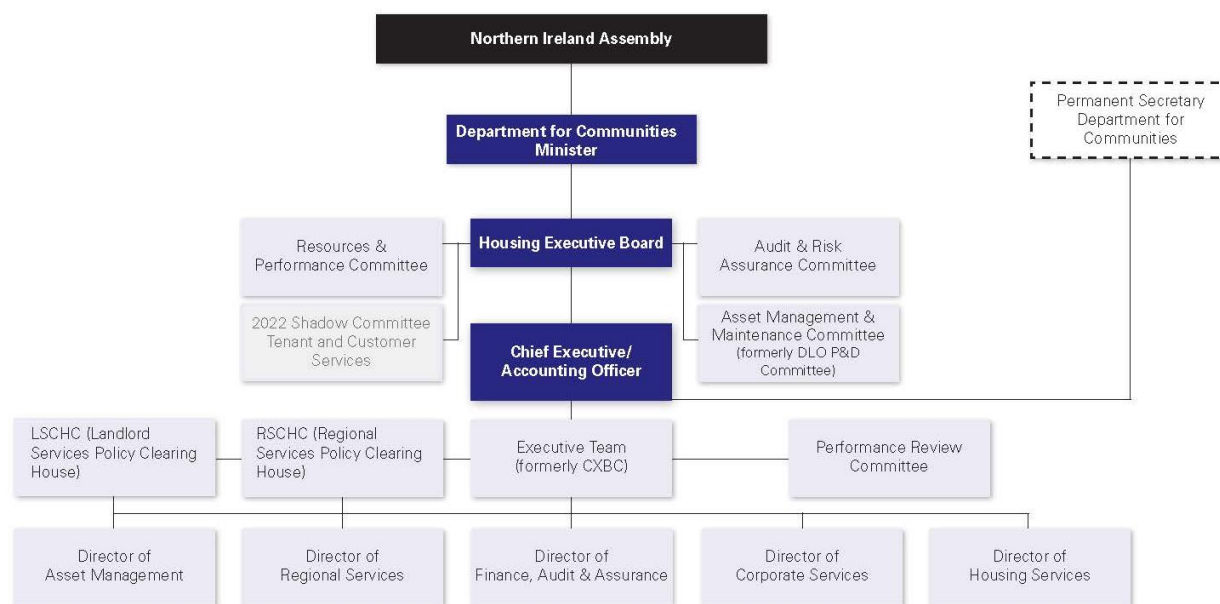
<sup>2</sup> As at March 2023 (source: NIHE Housing Analytics)

The 2018-2023 Strategy set out opportunities for involvement along with an action plan outlining the key priorities. The overall aims of the 2018-2023 CIS were:

- Promoting community involvement across all NIHE communities.
- Enabling NIHE communities to challenge, influence, and shape [the Housing Executive's] housing service.

## 2.4 NIHE Community Involvement Strategy Governance

The corporate governance structure of the NIHE is set out in Figure 1 below:



**Figure 1: Housing Executive Corporate Governance Structure (January 2022)**

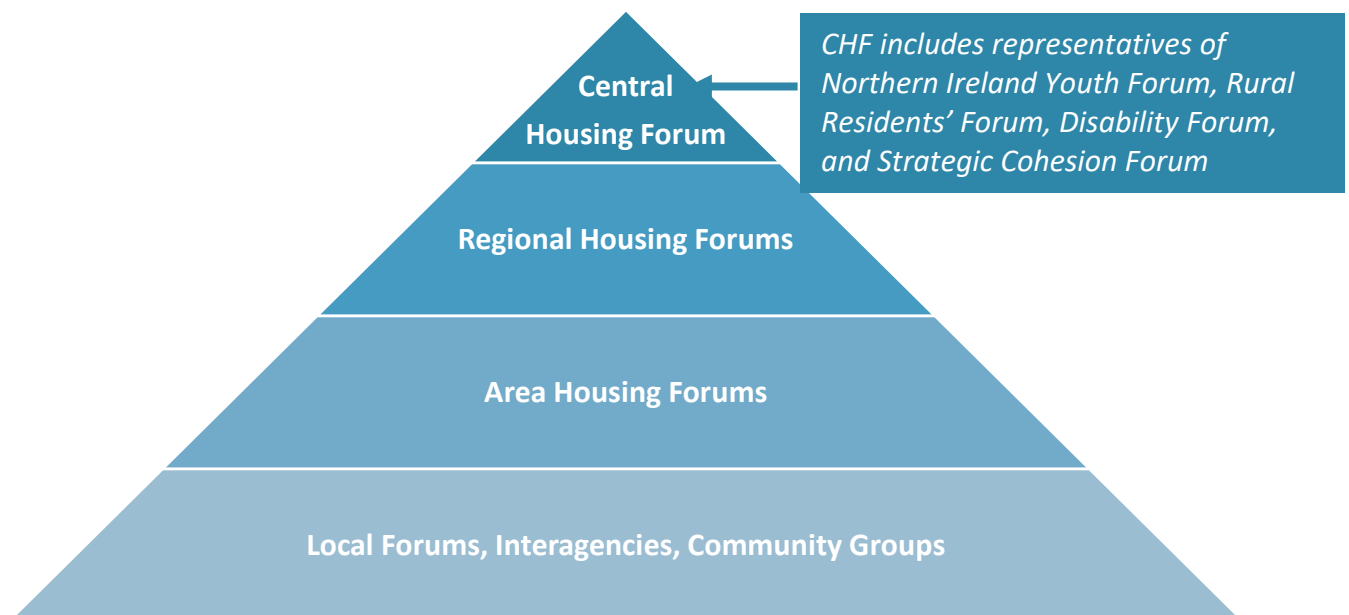
The Housing Executive has built on a community involvement framework connecting community representatives, tenants, residents, and leaseholders through a Housing Community Network (HCN) structure. Four levels exist, from a community network of approximately 500 representatives, through to the Central HCN, which comprises 15 representatives nominated by the Area network. This also includes underrepresented groups representing youth, people with disabilities and rural communities. The CIS is delivered through a partnership approach, via Funding Agreements with Supporting Communities, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Disability Action NI, and the Rural Residents Forum. These groups act as a secretariat to the various forums, ensuring an independent and fair record of events is kept and actioned, as well as providing training, funding advice and governance. This process is supported by the Community Involvement Unit Team.

## 2.5 Strategy Delivery Structure

The Housing Community Network (HCN) is a network of forums that was established in 1982 as a means of involving communities and residents in the discussion and development of housing services, as well as dealing with general housing issues. The HCN forms part of the wider community involvement framework and broadly operates on four levels:

- Central Housing Forum
- Regional Forums
- Area Forums
- Local Forums (including interagency work, estate inspections and community groups)

Figure 2 shows the structure of the Housing Community Network



**Figure 2: Housing Community Network Structure**

The CHF acts as a consultative panel to NIHE and is comprised of representatives from each of the 13 NIHE Areas, as well as under-represented groups such as the Rural Resident Forum, Disability Forum, and NI Youth Forum. A representative of the Rainbow Project (LGBTQIA+) has also sat on the Central Housing Forum. The CHF also meets with the NIHE Chair and Executive Team periodically to discuss pertinent issues. Terms of Reference were agreed and signed by the CHF and NIHE to ensure co-design is embedded in all working practice. Information and output from meetings at the various levels of the HCN flow up and down through the network. Tenant representatives are provided with regular updates on performance via the CHF, and this information is filtered down to the Areas and lower levels. Any issues that cannot be addressed at the Regional or Area level are escalated to the CHF by the relevant Area representatives.

Operation of the HCN is facilitated by Supporting Communities, a registered charity that acts as an independent tenant engagement body in the social housing sector across Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI). It organises the HCN network and acts as a secretariat to the various forums. NIHE provides funding to Supporting Communities, underpinned by a Central Funding Agreement which sets out the terms and conditions of the agreed funding and performance levels, and is monitored on a quarterly basis. Funding agreements are in place at Area level to monitor the performance of their assigned Supporting Communities Officer against a set of agreed Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

The NIHE has consistently endeavoured to involve residents and their local community associations in developing their local services and addressing housing issues. To achieve this, they established the Housing Community Network (HCN) in 1982. The HCN works on four levels:

#### **Local**

At the estate or community level, local office and Supporting Communities staff are available to assist communities in setting up bona fide associations to represent the views of their local community to the Housing Executive and other agencies.

#### **Area**

Area managers will look for representatives from tenants, residents, and leaseholders to come together at a neighbourhood forum. The forum will discuss service standards, service delivery and related housing issues.

#### **Regional**

There are forums in two of the Housing Executive's three administrative Regions (Belfast and South, with one to be set up in North) to which each Area HCN sends representatives. The Regional Housing Community Networks monitor and review services throughout their region.

#### **Central**

The Central Housing Community Network is the Housing Executive's central panel and advises on policies and procedures. The Central Housing Forum comprises tenant, resident, leaseholder, youth, rural, disability and community representatives nominated from the area networks.

## Section 3: Evaluation Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction

This section sets out the methodology used to inform the evaluation, including approaches to data collection and analysis.

### 3.2 Data Collection

A mixed method and multi layered approach to primary data collection was used. Overall, our approach was a qualitative descriptive approach complemented by a review of strategy-based data and outputs. The evaluation is informed by the following activity:

- Desk review of annual reports, monitoring reports, evaluations, and minutes of meetings to develop an aggregated and cumulative set of deliverables for the Community Involvement Strategy.
- Desk review of the strategic, policy and socio-political context within which the Community Involvement Strategy was developed and delivered.
- Observation of internal Housing Executive meetings including the Housing Executive Directors, Assistant Director of Housing Services/Head of Communities, staff across the Housing Executive's 13 administrative Areas, and Community Involvement Unit
- Qualitative semi structured interviews and focus groups with internal Housing Executive staff, focusing on the next Community Involvement Strategy.
- Qualitative semi structured interviews with high-level strategic contacts including Director of Good Relations, The Executive Office (TEO); NIHE Director of Housing, NIHE Assistant Director of Housing and NIHE Head of Communities.
- Facilitation of four workshops with forums related to the community involvement strategy – CHF, Disability Forum, Rural Residents and Shadow Youth Central Forum.
- Qualitative semi-structured discussions with senior staff in Derry City & Strabane, Mid Ulster, Fermanagh & Omagh, and Newry, Mourne & Down District Councils.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis was conducted using both thematic and narrative approaches. Categories were developed, coded, and reduced. Survey data, output data and thematic data from interviews was cross referenced to identify emergent themes and issues and to explore the relationships between issues. Participant sampling and data collection continued until no new conceptual insights were generated and the research team felt they had gathered repeated evidence for the thematic analysis, thus reaching theoretical saturation.

## Section 4: Setting the CIS in Context

### 4.1 Introduction

This section sets out a summarised policy and literature review relative to the NIHE Community Involvement Strategy. Several key policies and strategies are synthesised and reviewed in this section, which reflects the context within which the CIS was developed and delivered. In addition, this section takes account of the macro socio political environment within which the Strategy was delivered. Several other policies and strategies emerged or were updated during the lifespan of the 2018-2023 Community Involvement Strategy and have implications for the future of the strategy; these are also considered.

### 4.2 Programme for Government

The Programme for Government (PfG) is the leading strategic document of the Northern Ireland Executive, focusing on the major societal outcomes that the Executive wants to achieve, and provides a basis for all sectors to contribute to the development of plans and actions. The NIHE Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023 was developed and delivered under the auspices of the 2016-2021 Draft Programme for Government. The PfG comprised 14 strategic outcomes which, taken together, the Executive believed best described the society we wish to have. The outcomes were supported by 42 indicators which were clear statements for change. A number of outcomes in the PFG are relevant to the NIHE Community Involvement Strategy and its focus on the use of partnership and community involvement to share the housing service. In particular:

- We have a more equal society.
- We have a safe community where we respect the law, and each other.
- We care for others and we help those in need.
- We are a shared society that respects diversity.
- We are a confident, welcoming, outward-looking society.
- We have high quality public services.
- We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest.
- We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure.



Whilst the NIHE contributed across a broad range of indicators (i.e. improve the supply of suitable housing), as this evaluation will set out, the NIHE Community Involvement Strategy made a significant contribution to the 2016-2021 Programme for Government, specifically to the following indicators:

- Increase respect for each other (Measured through a respect index)
- Increase shared space (Percentage who think leisure centres, parks, libraries and shopping centres in their areas are ‘shared and open’ to both Protestants and Catholics)
- Increase reconciliation (Percentage of the population who believe their cultural identity is respected by society)
- Improve cultural participation (Percentage engaging with arts/cultural activities in the past year)
- Increase the confidence and capability of people and communities (Measured on the basis of self-efficacy)

Subsequently, the NI Executive set out a new draft strategic outcomes-based Programme for Government (PfG) which aimed to deliver real, lasting, and positive change in people’s lives. The delivery of the Programme for Government had been a key priority of the Northern Ireland Executive as established in the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement, which restored the government of the Northern Ireland Executive in 2020, after a three-year hiatus.

The new draft PfG proposed a framework of nine outcomes – these were statements of societal wellbeing which, taken together, were intended to capture the range of things that experience and research suggest matter most to people. Each outcome is supported by a range of ‘priority areas’, several of which align with the work of the Housing Executive’s Community Involvement Strategy. This is displayed in the Table 1 (overleaf).

The architecture of the NIHE Community Involvement Strategy and the Draft PfG demonstrates a discernable congruence between priorities and highlights the cross-cutting contribution of the Community Involvement Strategy, with a concentration on equal and inclusive society; safe communities; and caring societies where people want to live, work, and visit. This resonates with the priorities of the Community Involvement Strategy, reinforcing its strategic policy position and helping to shape a future iteration of the Strategy.

Outcome	Priority Area	Alignment
<b>We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect</b>	<b>Inclusion and Tackling Disadvantage</b>	Tackling the issues that lead to inequality and disadvantage and providing support where it is needed in both urban and rural communities.
<b>Everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other</b>	<b>Tackling Sectarianism, Building Respect, and Identity</b>	Supporting safe and resilient communities, building respect for cultural identities and rights of individuals, providing integrated and shared education, addressing hate crime, tackling sectarianism, ending paramilitary activity, and addressing the harm and vulnerabilities caused by it.
<b>We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives</b>	<b>Housing</b>	Facilitating and supporting housing associations, provision, and maintenance of appropriate social housing.
<b>People want to live, work, and visit here</b>	<b>Housing</b>	Tackling the issues to ensure everyone has access to good-quality, affordable housing and in promoting an integrated, shared society.

**Table 1: Community involvement related outcomes of the draft Programme for Government**

A further collapse of the Executive in February 2022 again stalled progress on adoption and delivery of the draft PfG. More recently, following restoration of the Assembly and Executive in February 2024, the First and Deputy First Ministers indicated that the Executive was focused on bringing forward a programme for government as soon as possible.<sup>3</sup> The extent to which an updated PfG continues to reflect the outcomes set in 2021 is likely to become clearer in coming months.

<sup>3</sup> Irish News, 28 February 2024: 'Executive 'focused' on bringing forward programme for government' [www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/executive-focused-on-bringing-forward-programme-for-government-EOUAK2JHLFBAJE2AZT4DOHBCJ4/](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/executive-focused-on-bringing-forward-programme-for-government-EOUAK2JHLFBAJE2AZT4DOHBCJ4/)

### 4.3 The Social Housing Reform Programme

Announced in 2013 by the then-Minister for Social Development, the Social Housing Reform Programme was Northern Ireland's first major review of social housing and sought to assess the effectiveness of existing delivery structures, including the Housing Executive, housing associations and the Department for Communities. The vision of the Social Housing Reform Programme was to

*'Create housing structures that support the provision of social and affordable homes, in successful communities where people are proud to live.'*

In particular, the Programme looked at the following steps for reform:

- Engaging, involving, and empowering tenants.
- Regulating the work of social housing providers.
- Making sure rents are fair, transparent, affordable, and consistent.
- Effective engagement of social housing providers with local councils.
- Providing the best possible homes and services for tenants in the long term.

The synergy between the Social Housing Reform Programme and Community Involvement Strategy are evident in the focus on engaging and empowering tenants. Additionally, the Tenant Participation Strategy produced as an outcome of the Programme<sup>4</sup> has been utilised for evidence of impact and change in this evaluation of the Community Involvement Strategy and contributed to the overall delivery of the Strategy.

### 4.4 Community Wealth Building

As part of the *Building Inclusive Communities* Strategy, DfC committed to grow and scale community wealth building (CWB) to support sustainability and inclusive growth. As a result, the Minister for Communities appointed an Independent Advisory Panel on CWB to undertake work with the intention of advising on the most effective and sustainable approach to embedding the principles of CWB into all relevant departmental investment, policy, and practice.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [Community Wealth Building in Northern Ireland | Department for Communities \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](https://communities-ni.gov.uk) (accessed November 2022)

The Panel produced a report in October 2022, which explained that:

*Community Wealth Building is a fast-emerging new approach to economic development that seeks to transform local economies based on direct community ownership and control of assets and wealth by the people of those communities themselves. As such, it extends democracy beyond the political to the economic realm, giving people real ownership and control over their own economic lives and destinies.<sup>6</sup>*

Furthermore, according to the report:

*‘Stabilising and sustaining public services is key to CWB by insourcing jobs and contracts that had previously been outsourced to the private sector, and by municipalising or nationalising important goods, services, and assets that have either been privatised or otherwise should be in public hands. Public services are (or can be) “anchor institutions” – large economic institutions that are rooted in place...’*

In this context, it is noted that CWB activities already exist in communities across Northern Ireland, with a well-developed community infrastructure that supports working-class and marginalised communities and a thriving social enterprise sector, as well as social value clauses in procurement and communities taking more control over land and property to use them more effectively and sustainably.

The report also highlights that, for areas that have benefitted least from desegregation in housing and mixing, local economic development is an important pathway to peace building, meaningful contact, and social progress. There are clear links between several Housing Executive activities and strategies – including Community Involvement, as well as other linked strategies highlighted in section 4.3 – and the concept of CWB, and we note that the Housing Executive’s Area Managers can get involved in CWB at the local level. The Housing Executive would therefore be well-placed to engage on and contribute to future community wealth building approaches in the region.

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<sup>6</sup> [Recommendations to advance Community wealth building in Northern Ireland \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](https://communities-ni.gov.uk/recommendations-to-advance-community-wealth-building-in-northern-ireland/) (accessed November 2022)

## 4.5 NIHE Strategies and Policies

In line with its vision that *everyone is able to live in an affordable, sustainable, and decent home, appropriate to their needs, in a safe and attractive, and climate-resilient place*, the NIHE has developed a range of additional policies and programmes either prior to, or during the lifespan of the Community Involvement Strategy. These strategies reflect its evolving remit, commitment, and vision, and ensure its alignment with the evolving socio-political context. Key policies and programmes that have links with the Community Involvement Strategy are considered below:

### 4.5.1 Northern Ireland Housing Executive: Community Cohesion Strategy 2015-2020

The Community Cohesion Strategy was launched in 2016 and was extended past its original expiration date until March 2022. The Strategy was developed to:

*“Contribute to the creation of more stable, safer neighbourhoods by working in partnership with others to address the complex housing needs of a diverse and divided society.”*

The strategy was formed around five central themes: Segregation/Integration; Race Relations; Communities in Transition; Interface Areas; and Flags, Emblems and Sectional Symbols. There is clear alignment between this Strategy and the Community Involvement Strategy, given its focus on partnership working, building community confidence, and ensuring NIHE efforts are relevant to the needs of local communities.

### 4.5.2 Customer Support and Tenancy Sustainment Strategy 2019-2022

During the life of the Community Involvement Strategy, the Housing Executive had in place a Customer Support and Tenancy Sustainment Strategy for the period 2019-2022. Recognising the negative consequence of tenancy failure for both the individuals/households concerned and the Housing Executive as a landlord, the strategy noted that:

*High levels of churn or ‘transience’ in our social housing communities can undermine cohesion, weaken social ties, and produce isolation and fear for vulnerable customers. Research indicates that strong communities are characterised by trust and reciprocity, which ultimately lead to good relations and less antisocial behaviour if people know, talk to, and trust one another. This sense of community is built over time and is helped by a stable set of relationships between people who live in a particular area for a long time. There is evidence to suggest strong communities offer a number of advantages including improvement of economic opportunities, higher levels of well-being, and reduced racial tensions and crime. More broadly, trust and reciprocity may help to build and sustain social networks that support people in various forms of need.*

The community involvement activity supported by the Housing Executive – in particular the work of Scrutiny Panels – was specifically highlighted in the Tenancy Sustainment Strategy as a means of ensuring that the organisation provides the services customers and communities need and want, at the standard they expect. While it is worth noting that the Tenancy Sustainment Strategy pre-dated the COVID-19 pandemic, which shifted the delivery context considerably, the links between Community Involvement and Tenancy Sustainment were apparent in the strategy.

Among the wide range of actions planned to support and improve tenancy sustainment, a number were connected with, and/or expected to be delivered in partnership with, the Community Involvement structures:

- Build a Tenancy Sustainability App in partnership with client group forums.
- Overcome barriers to digital inclusion in our communities through creation of Community Hubs/Digital Zones.
- Give specific consideration to rural customer support/sustainment and model for effective delivery of services.
- Engage with hard to reach groups in collaboration with the existing client group fora.
- Develop new groups in under-represented areas through targeting of resources.
- Link with Community Groups and Associations to deliver awareness sessions e.g. Health Checks, Mental Health Awareness, local community issues.
- Work in partnership with and provide funding to community based groups and Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) to address community safety, ASB and hate crime issues in our estates.

#### **4.5.3 Housing Executive Community Safety Strategy 2020-23**

Recognising its role in ensuring that its communities are safe and anti-social behaviour is tackled appropriately, the Housing Executive has published successive Community Safety Strategies, the most recent of which covered the period 2020-23. *Working Together for Safer Communities*<sup>7</sup> aimed to empower communities, build greater community confidence, raise community safety awareness, and improve support to vulnerable people within the Housing Executive's communities. The range of activity planned as part of the strategy was summarised within three key aims:

- Building Community Confidence
- Ensuring Local Solutions
- Working Together

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<sup>7</sup> [Community Safety Strategy 2020-2023 \(nihe.gov.uk\)](https://www.nihe.gov.uk/community-safety-strategy-2020-2023) (accessed February 2024)

The strategy noted that the work plan associated with these aims was cross-cutting and inextricably linked. In addition, as a key outcome of the Community Safety Strategy is that ‘Residents and Communities are engaged and informed about community safety issues and the action NIHE have taken in their area’, there are linkages between Community Safety and Community Involvement in terms of engaging and informing communities.

#### **4.5.4 Social Enterprise Plus Strategy 2020-2024**

In 2015, the Housing Executive developed its first Social Housing Enterprise Strategy to complement other community-based strategies in place at the time. The strategy recognised the challenges faced by communities in terms of social disadvantage and exclusion from the wider economy and sought to create social capital and value within local social housing communities and stimulate economically vibrant, self-sustaining communities. A key focus was to influence, engage and enable individuals and communities within Housing Executive estates.

The updated *Social Enterprise Plus Strategy*<sup>8</sup>, published in 2020, noted that the Housing Executive is uniquely positioned to assist in improving the life chances of many who are living as the most marginalised and excluded in society, and that its strong community infrastructure and relationships embedded across Northern Ireland are a key enabler in this regard. The Strategy had three key objectives:

1. To strengthen [the Housing Executive’s] communities
2. To improve the economic circumstances of [the Housing Executive’s] customers
3. To work in partnership with others

The Social Enterprise strategy is viewed as complementing and expanding the existing community-themed strategies (Community Cohesion, Community Safety and Community Involvement), which together create a continuum of social investment, geared towards supporting and inspiring community-led initiatives. At the time of writing, preparatory work had commenced on development of the post-2024 strategy.

#### **4.5.5 Financial Inclusion Strategy**

The Housing Executive’s Financial Inclusion Strategy 2016-2019 aimed to help tenants and housing customers access the financial help, support and services needed to manage their money better. The strategy was subsequently extended for a further three years to continue delivering the organisation’s aims.

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<sup>8</sup> [Social Enterprise Plus Strategy 2020-2024 \(nihe.gov.uk\)](https://www.nihe.gov.uk/social-enterprise-plus-strategy-2020-2024) (accessed February 2024)

In the wake of the impacts of pandemic response and in the context of a cost-of-living crisis, the most recent strategy for the period 2023-2028<sup>9</sup> seeks to address the needs of the Housing Executive's most vulnerable, complex, and financially challenged tenants and housing customers. The vision is that tenants and customers will be empowered to become more financially resilient and, concomitant with this, to reduce the volume of void properties, sustain neighbourhoods, develop more cohesive communities and reduce/prevent homelessness.

#### **4.5.6 Ending Homelessness Together – Homelessness Strategy 2022-27**

The Housing Executive became responsible for addressing homelessness in Northern Ireland in 1989. Subsequently, in 2010, a legislative duty was placed on the organisation to publish a strategy to address homelessness. The latest in the resulting series of strategies – *Ending Homelessness Together*<sup>10</sup> – was published in March 2022, covering the five-year period to 2027.

The vision of the strategy reflects a continued need for the Housing Executive to work with partners across the housing and homelessness sector to address the various factors that lead to homelessness, many of which extend beyond the provision of accommodation. A number of key enablers that would help deliver successful outcomes within the parameters of the strategy are highlighted: alongside housing supply and support, the role of community integration is noted, specifically:

- Using the Housing Executive's existing tenant and community involvement structures to consider the range of factors that impact on tenancy sustainment from a community perspective and explore community-based models to prevent repeat homelessness.
- Provide support, including funding to community groups to raise awareness of issues facing those transitioning from homelessness and consider actions that provide community support to sustainment.

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<sup>9</sup> [Financial Inclusion Strategy 2023-28](#) (accessed February 2024)

<sup>10</sup> [Ending Homelessness Together Homelessness Strategy 2022-27](#)



#### 4.5.7 Reaching Rural: Rural Strategy 2021-2025

The latest in a series of Rural Strategies published by the Housing Executive, the Reaching Rural, Strategy 2021-2025<sup>11</sup>, sets out the NIHE's plans to contribute to the sustainable and inclusive growth of its rural communities. The Rural Residents Forum features heavily in the Rural Strategy as a delivery partner, monitoring body and critical friend, with the strategy noting that:

*Local community groups and support networks in the community/voluntary sector are often ideally placed to identify and reach out to those who are most vulnerable in rural areas. Our Community Involvement structure enables a two-way flow of information directly from our various support-focused teams to the tenants and residents of our estates and communities. Our local housing forums and in particular our Rural Residents' Forum regularly communicate information on available services and initiatives.*

*The Rural Residents' Forum is comprised of tenants and residents from a number of our rural housing communities across Northern Ireland. The Forum, which is supported by Rural Community Network, scrutinises housing related strategies, policies and services from a rural perspective and provides an invaluable insight into the particular housing-related issues that are faced within their communities. Members are also involved with their individual Area-based housing forums and there is cross-representation at the Central Housing Forum and at the Disability Forum. This allows for relevant information to be disseminated directly from policy makers in the Housing Executive to community representatives who can in turn advise tenants and residents within their areas.*

*We will continue to develop and enhance the role of the Rural Residents' Forum, ensuring that they remain relevant and representative of our rural housing communities and that they provide a mainstream consultation service for all Housing Executive strategies and policies.*

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<sup>11</sup> [Reaching Rural - Rural Strategy 2021-2025](#) (accessed February 2024)

## Section 5: Practice Review

This section summarises the findings of a desk review, examining how Housing Associations across the United Kingdom involve, support, and invest in their communities.

### 5.1 One Manchester

*One Manchester* own and manage over 12,000 homes in central, south and east Manchester. Under the strapline “*More than just a Landlord*”, they aim to put their people and communities at the centre of the organisation. They are committed to reducing inequalities in the diverse communities they serve through work, skills, and wellbeing services. *One Manchester’s* Community Investment team work in partnership with local community organisations to help create inclusive, vibrant, and sustainable places where their customers and local residents can thrive and live well. They seek to achieve the following outcomes.

- Stronger, more resilient communities through building the capacity of local groups and individuals to support their own communities.
- Improved places and reduced environmental impact through decarbonisation and acting responsibly in relation to the environment.
- Stronger, more resilient local economy through providing support for their customers to develop employability skills to get the right job for them and keep it.
- Healthier and happier people in their communities through activities and services that improve wellbeing and reduce social isolation.

Their community fund offers grants of between £3,000 and £10,000 to local groups to fund programmes that make a real difference for their customers. Attracting more funding to invest in their communities, maintaining existing and creating new partnerships to help enable a more prosperous City and Greater Manchester area are key inclusions in their corporate plan.

Where tenant/community involvement is concerned, information provided on the *One Manchester* website<sup>12</sup> indicates that the organisation has a *Customer Voice* team and *Customer Voice* strategy, which collectively aim to create opportunities for tenants/customers to get involved, have their say and give feedback on services, so that *One Manchester* can hear and act on customer views.

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<sup>12</sup> [www.onemanchester.co.uk/our-performance/customer-voice](https://www.onemanchester.co.uk/our-performance/customer-voice) [accessed April 2024]

Four customer teams are involved in delivering the Customer Voice Strategy:

- Customer Co-creation team
- Customer Purchasing team
- Building Safety team
- Customer Scrutiny team

Each team involves customers from various backgrounds, who use their knowledge and experience to provide feedback and contribute to service design.

Based on our review of the available data and information, Community Involvement is not an explicit standalone strategy or priority; rather it sits within the broader ‘People’ priority (‘We’re determined to listen more to customers and use their feedback to shape brilliant services’)<sup>13</sup> and the theme of Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI). Manchester is a very diverse city and ensuring their services can be equitably accessed by racial minority groups and the LGBTQIA+ community is an important priority.

*One Manchester* do not appear to have a comparable structure to the HCN in place. Reference is made to the Customer Voice Strategy, as well as Equality Impact Assessments, to objectively assess the organisation’s policies, procedures, processes, strategies, and operating models to ensure they are applied fairly and equally to those who are impacted by their introduction.

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<sup>13</sup> ‘Prosperous Futures: Corporate Plan 2022-25, Year 2 update’  
[www.onemanchester.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/One%20Manchester%202023%20Corporate%20Plan\\_0.pdf](http://www.onemanchester.co.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/One%20Manchester%202023%20Corporate%20Plan_0.pdf) [Accessed April 2024]

## 5.2 Together with Tenants

One Manchester is an ‘official adopter’ of the National Housing Federation’s *Together with Tenants* initiative, which was first instigated in 2019 and focuses on strengthening the relationship between residents and housing association landlords<sup>14</sup>. *Together with Tenants* provides a four-point plan for change; over the long term, the aspiration is that all housing associations in England would support the plan. The National Housing Federation’s view is that *‘This will embed a culture across our sector that values the voice and experience of residents, and strengthens the relationship between residents and housing associations landlords’*.

### **Together with Tenants four-point plan**

- 1. A new requirement in the National Housing Federation Code of Governance for boards to be accountable to their residents**

Updated NHF Code of Governance includes provisions that the views and needs of residents and other customers must be at the heart of strategic decision-making.

- 2. A new Together with Tenants charter**

Charter designed to ensure all residents know what they can expect from their housing association landlord, regardless of where they live, what type of home they live in, or who their landlord is.

- 3. Resident oversight and reporting of progress against the charter**

Resident oversight and public reporting against the commitments set out in the charter will give residents a stronger role in holding their landlord to account. This aims to prevent Together with Tenants from becoming a tick-box exercise that does not drive change. Boards will be expected to respond and take action where required.

- 4. Giving residents a stronger collective voice with the regulator**

Resident oversight and reporting against the charter may uncover issues of interest to the regulator, including potential non-compliance with consumer standards. Linking Together with Tenants approach to regulation in this way will ensure that action is taken where necessary to protect the rights and interests of tenants.

<sup>14</sup> [www.housing.org.uk/our-work/together-with-tenants/](http://www.housing.org.uk/our-work/together-with-tenants/) [accessed April 2024]

The *Together with Tenants* charter includes six commitments, on *Relationships, Communication, Voice and Influence, Accountability, Quality* and *When things go wrong*. With regard to Communication, Voice and Influence and Accountability, the charter standards are:

**Communication:** Residents will receive clear, accessible and timely information from their housing association on the issues that matter to them, including important information about their homes and local community, how the organisation is working to address problems, how the organisation is run, and information about performance on key issues.

**Voice and influence:** Housing associations will seek and value the views of residents, and will use this information to inform decisions. Every individual resident will feel listened to by their housing association on the issues that matter to them and can speak without fear.

**Accountability:** Collectively, residents will work in partnership with their housing association to independently scrutinise and hold their housing association to account for the decisions that affect the quality of their homes and services.

The National Housing Federation has collated a number of best practice case studies provided by housing associations that have adopted the *Together with Tenants* approach<sup>15</sup>:

Creation of a <b>Customer Communications Group</b> to ensure all customer-facing communications (including letters, newsletters, website content and forms) are relevant, engaging, accessible and easy to read. (LiveWest)	Creation of a <b>resident engagement structure</b> - at the centre of which is a Tenants' Voice Scrutiny Panel - to empower residents to get involved in influencing decisions and help shape service delivery. (North Star Housing)
Creation of a <b>Customer Committee and Customer Charter</b> as a modern approach to resident engagement, strengthening the commitment to putting customers at the heart of operations and ensuring their voices drive meaningful change. (Salix Homes)	Establishment of a <b>Customer Committee</b> with direct access to the Board and two <b>customer panels</b> : Scrutiny Panel to review services and policies and Homes and Neighbourhood Panel with a focus on customer experience. (Nottingham Community HA)
Formation of a <b>Customer Voice Panel</b> (to independently review performance) and <b>Scrutiny Group</b> (to look into particular service areas and make recommendations for improvement). (Acis Group)	Creation of a <b>Resident Scrutiny Panel</b> , led by a resident Chair, which selects services for review and makes recommendations for service improvement. (Radcliffe Housing Society)

<sup>15</sup> [www.housing.org.uk/our-work/together-with-tenants/best-practice-twt-case-studies/](http://www.housing.org.uk/our-work/together-with-tenants/best-practice-twt-case-studies/)

### 5.3 North Star Group

An adopter of *Together with Tenants*, North Star is a housing association based in the North East of England. North Star Group's resident involvement structure (Figure 3, accessed April 2024)<sup>16</sup>, is illustrative of the types of involvement frameworks used by housing associations in England to engage with tenants and residents. Residents are able to 'dip in and out' of the Task and Finish groups, Policy Review Groups and the Consumer Standards Group according to their availability and interests, and it is indicated that an incentive is available for those who choose to participate.

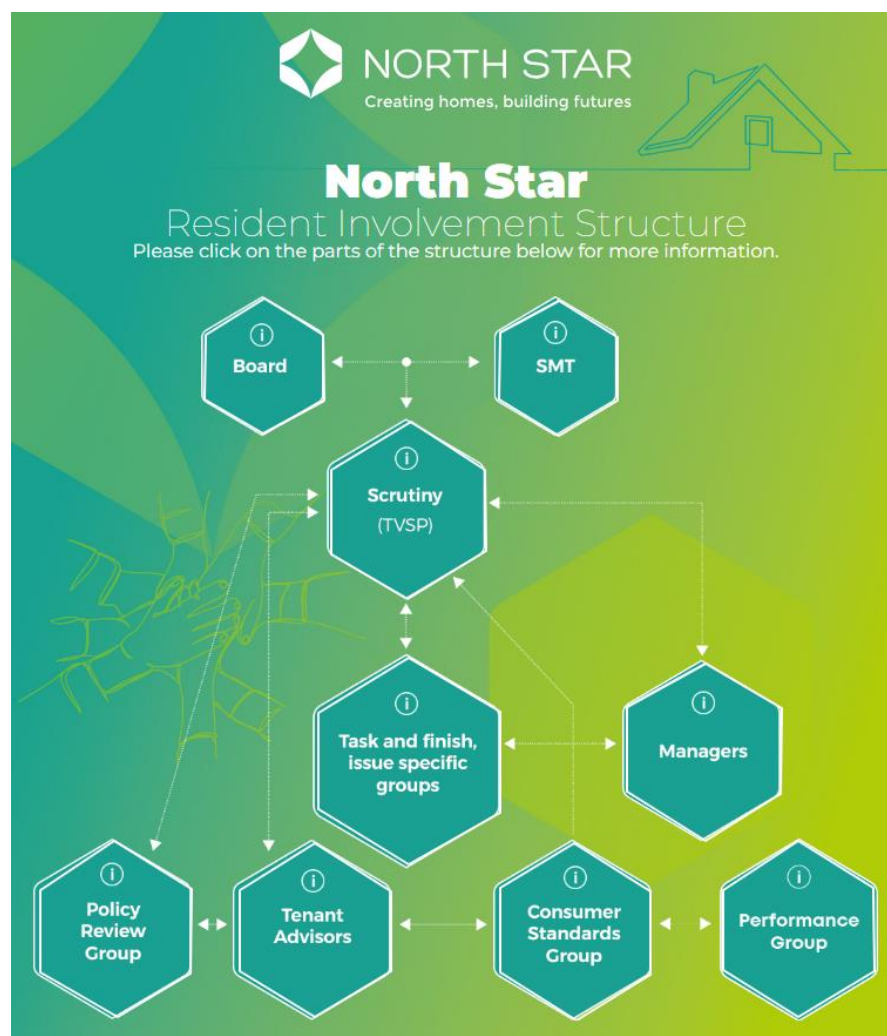


Figure 3: North Star Resident Involvement Structure

<sup>16</sup> [www.northstarhg.co.uk/get-involved/resident-involvement-structure/](http://www.northstarhg.co.uk/get-involved/resident-involvement-structure/)

More information on the organisation’s approach to resident involvement is set out in the *Tenant Connection Strategy*<sup>17</sup>, which highlights the concept of *sharing power* with tenants, allowing them to act as critical friends and giving them a voice within the business. The strategy notes that, as well as generating feedback for the organisation, the Tenant Connection process seeks to provide opportunities for tenants to develop and find fulfilment, and to provide a shared sense of belonging.

North Star monitors the impact of the Tenant Connection strategy through written reports, provision of updates, and production of an annual report to tenants. In addition, a section of the organisation’s social value report is dedicated to Tenant Connections. While the calculation methodology is not specified, the 2022/23 social value report indicated that eight tenant involvement groups had generated £97,000 of social value.<sup>18</sup>

## 5.4 Wheatley Group/Wheatley Homes Glasgow

Wheatley Group<sup>19</sup> is a housing, care and property management group, which owns or manages more than 93,700 homes and provides services to people across 19 local authorities in Scotland. The Group comprises a number of subsidiary/partner organisations, including Wheatley Homes Glasgow, which is Scotland’s biggest social landlord with more than 40,000 homes across Glasgow.

Wheatley Homes Glasgow provides support and services to help tenants keep their home, live in quiet and clean communities, with budgeting and guidance to ensure tenants are getting all welfare benefits due. Through “*Wheatley Works*”, they help people find jobs, careers, and training.

The overarching Group Engagement Framework, *Stronger Voices, Stronger Communities*<sup>20</sup>, was refreshed in early 2024, and places customer engagement and involvement within a broad vision of supporting customers to reach their potential. It is envisaged that the strategy will deliver ‘an unprecedented shift in the balance of power and control towards our customers’. Recognising that different customers are interested in different levels and types of involvement, the strategy notes that:

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<sup>17</sup> Tenant Connection Strategy 2019-2023 (North Star) [www.northstarhg.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/197807\\_North-Star\\_Tenant-Strategy-document\\_edit-11.21-Complete.pdf](http://www.northstarhg.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/197807_North-Star_Tenant-Strategy-document_edit-11.21-Complete.pdf) [Accessed April 2024]

<sup>18</sup> Social Value Report 2022/23 (North Star) [www.northstarhg.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Social-Value-Report-for-Web.pdf](http://www.northstarhg.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Social-Value-Report-for-Web.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> [www.wheatley-group.com/](http://www.wheatley-group.com/)

<sup>20</sup> [www.wheatley-group.com/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0029/127982/Customer-Engagement-Framework-2024.pdf](http://www.wheatley-group.com/data/assets/pdf_file/0029/127982/Customer-Engagement-Framework-2024.pdf) [accessed April 2024]

‘The emphasis will not be on expecting customers to form constituted groups, meeting in specified locations at set times. Instead, the approach will be to encourage **accessibility** – anyone can volunteer for an activity without further commitment – and **flexibility** – people can express views at a time and in a way that suits – online, 24/7, from home or in person.’ [original emphasis]

Wheatley Group’s *Stronger Voices* framework comprises four ‘pillars’ to support engagement (Figure 4).



**Figure 4: Wheatley Group 'Stronger Voices' framework**

A range of engagement mechanisms are associated with each pillar, varying from individual interactions with staff including Housing Officers, Lettings Advisors and Stronger Voices Officers, through traditional community group engagement and digital engagement, to initiatives such as the ‘You Choose Challenge’.



Pillar	Mechanisms
<p>We listen...</p> <p><i>You are heard</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customer conversations</li> <li>• Social media</li> <li>• Voice of the customer (identification of online feedback)</li> <li>• Community groups/meetings</li> <li>• Learning from complaints analysis</li> </ul>
<p>We consult and co-create...</p> <p><i>You influence and design with us</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultative processes (policy proposals, project proposals, surveys, focus groups)</li> <li>• Working alongside and supporting establishment of Registered Tenants Organisations</li> <li>• Group Scrutiny Panel</li> <li>• <i>Customer Voices</i>: customers who work alongside officers to inspect, advise on and design how services and projects are delivered</li> <li>• Customer journey mapping</li> <li>• <i>My Voice</i>: digital tool to gain instant feedback on a particular service</li> </ul>
<p>We give power to...</p> <p><i>You decide</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empowering customers to make decisions on their own homes and environments</li> <li>• <i>You Choose Challenge</i>: engaging customers in new-build communities to make collective decisions about priorities and resources (primarily green/sustainability activities: see Figure 5 below)</li> </ul>
<p>We support...</p> <p><i>Your voice is stronger and people listen to you</i></p>	<p>Encouragement and support for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Volunteering</li> <li>• Music and art</li> <li>• Youth development</li> <li>• Employment and training</li> <li>• Learning and accreditation for 'Customer Voice' participants</li> </ul>

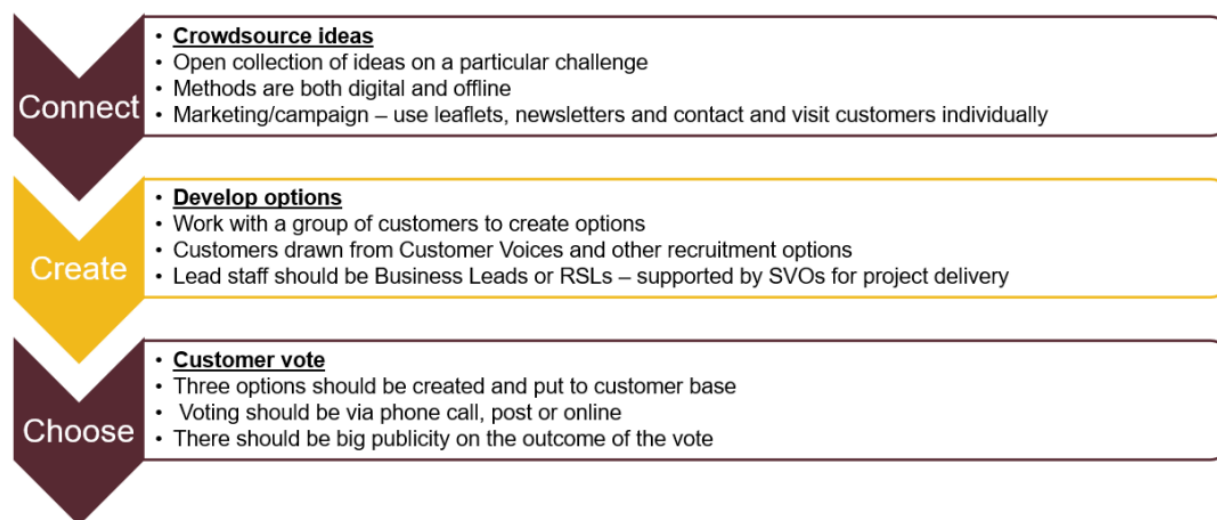
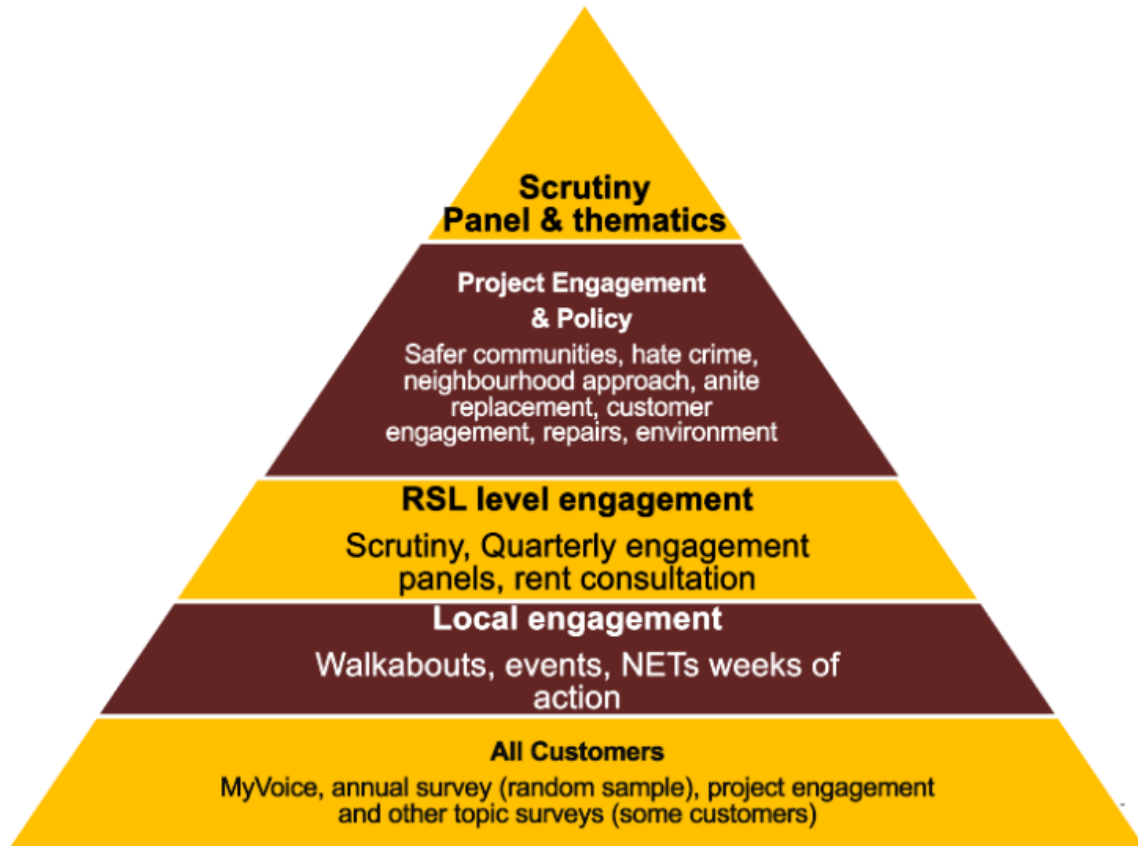


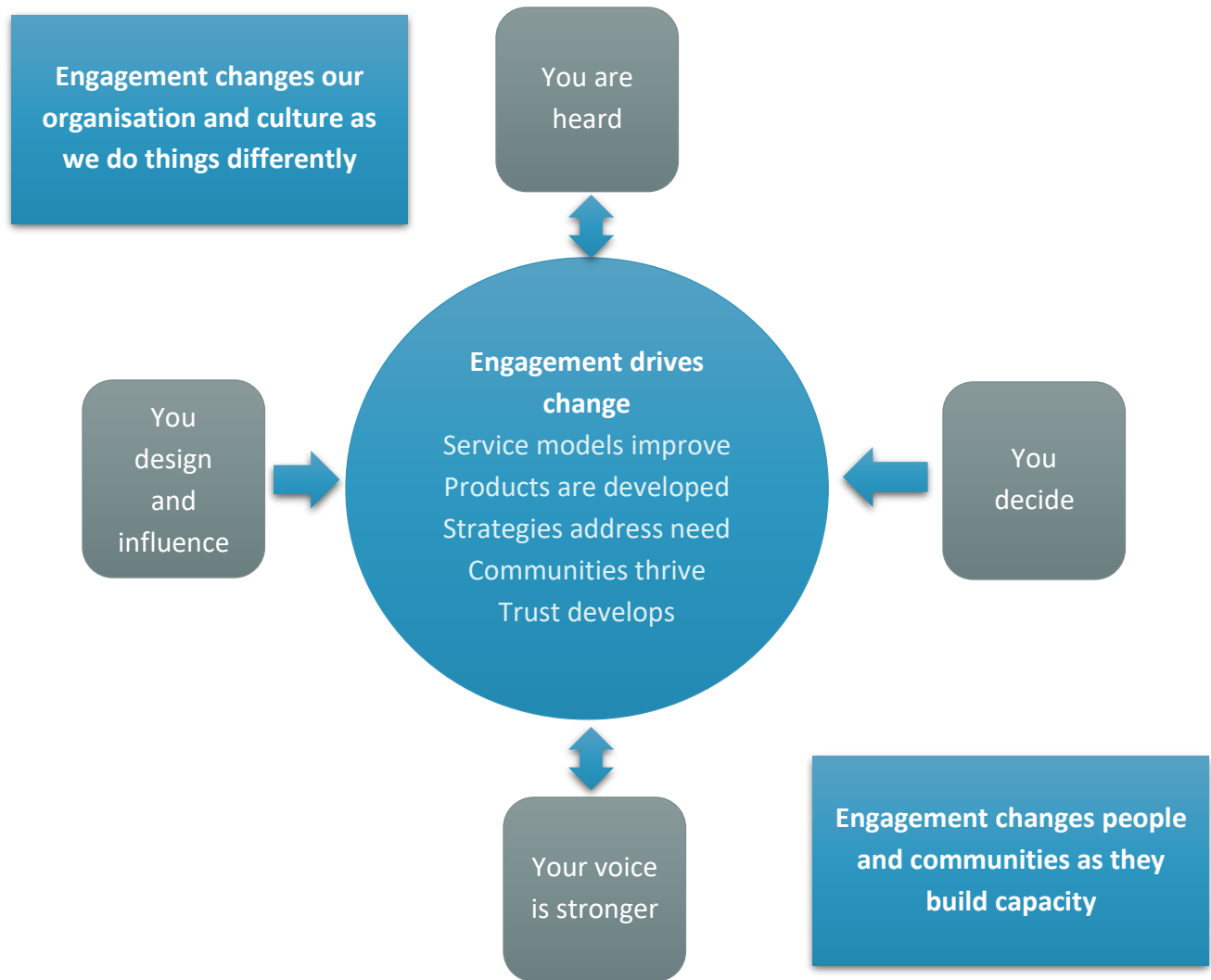
Figure 5: Wheatley Group 'You Choose Challenge' process

Wheatley Group’s engagement model, reproduced in Figure 6, is conceptualised in a way that has much in common with the Housing Executive’s Community Involvement structures, with similar tiers of engagement from a wide customer/community base to a centralised consultation panel.



**Figure 6: Wheatley Group Customer Engagement**

Making concluding comments on the anticipated outcomes, the *Stronger Voices, Stronger Communities* document includes a version of the schematic diagram overleaf (Figure 7), which illustrates the reciprocal benefits of customer/community involvement and engagement for both the organisation and customers. ‘Through this journey with our customers we hope that our communities will become stronger, more resilient and able to make their voices and their expectations heard more widely.’ Performance indicators associated with the strategy include: achievement of specific customer satisfaction levels; that 50% of strategic delivery plan projects include customer engagement as an early milestone; and that all customer facing strategic projects will include customer engagement.



*Figure 7: Wheatley Group Customer Engagement Framework outcomes*

### 5.4.1 Wheatley Homes Glasgow

Wheatley Homes Glasgow encourages tenants to get involved and help shape services.<sup>21</sup> In addition to contact via social media (Facebook or Twitter/X), or becoming a tenant Board Member, a range of other options are suggested. They include:

- Attending community events
- Attending office-based consultation events
- Taking part in the annual Tenants' Satisfaction Survey
- Joining a Scrutiny Panel
- Becoming a Customer Inspector
- Joining or setting up a Registered Tenant Organisation
- Joining a Local Housing Committee (14 of which operate across the City)
- Engaging with one of the Forums (Polish Forum; African Housing Forums; Welfare Reform Tenant Advisory Group)

Our desk review suggests that Community Involvement is immersed in the principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion which is at the heart of the common values shared across the organisation. These include the following commitments by Wheatley Homes:

- People with different characteristics are treated fairly and have access to equal opportunities
- Respecting and valuing individual differences and unique characteristics, both in their organisation and in their communities
- Making sure their employees and customers feel comfortable being themselves and that they feel valued, respected, and heard.

One material example of Community Involvement for Wheatley Homes is their *"People Networks"*, which comprises a Community of Excellence and six network groups, each of which has an Executive Sponsor from their Executive and Senior Leadership teams. The groups are tenant/client led, ensuring that their voices and lived experiences help achieve their ambitions and necessary change based on need. The groups are: Race and Multi-Cultural; Disability and Neurodiversity; Age Networking; LGBTQ+; Carers; and Menopause and Perimenopause. Combined with listening directly to colleagues they also obtain feedback from other more formal channels, such as recognised trade unions.

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<sup>21</sup> How to get involved and help shape our services (Wheatley Homes Glasgow) [www.wheatleyhomes-glasgow.com/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0025/166165/102441\\_WHG\\_Get\\_Involved\\_.pdf](http://www.wheatleyhomes-glasgow.com/_data/assets/pdf_file/0025/166165/102441_WHG_Get_Involved_.pdf) [accessed April 2024]

Their Board diversity monitoring has been formalised as part of their recruitment process and they have undertaken a baseline diversity assessment. The results of their board diversity monitoring indicate they have a good balance of gender, individuals with disabilities, ethnicity, and age range across their governing bodies. The results also indicate a diverse range of socio-economic backgrounds.

They do not appear to have an equivalent of the Central Housing Forum in providing “a challenge function” directly to the board in terms of services delivered to Wheatley tenants and communities. Neither does there appear to be anything comparable to the two-way process of information and communication that takes place in the NIHE between CHF and Regional, Area and Special Interest Groups which make up the HCN.

## 5.5 Manningham Housing Association

The 2019-22 Manningham Housing Association Community Investment Strategy (CIS) resulted in benefits for over 4,800 people from different and diverse backgrounds across Bradford. It attracted £391,000 external capital and revenue funding and strengthened relationships with local, regional, and national partners.<sup>22</sup> The aims of their 2023-25 CIS demonstrate how community development, cohesion, involvement, and engagement can be integrated under the overarching theme of Community Investment. These are:

- Connect strategy to the overall corporate plan
- Focus on tenants, residents, local communities, and specialist strategic partner organisations from statutory and Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector organisations
- Combine community development and tenant engagement efforts
- Identify and expand on community initiatives and its priorities
- Measure social return on investment
- Monitor performance in delivering the Community Investment Strategy
- Value what residents say, including which issues are important to them
- Evaluate internal information, including housing data and resident satisfaction Surveys
- Engage where difference can be made, based on skills and experience and those of other partner organisations

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<sup>22</sup> Manningham Housing Association Community Investment Strategy 2023-2025: Improving quality of life and making a difference <https://manninghamhousing.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/community-investment-strategy-and-action-plan.pdf> [accessed April 2024]

## 5.6 Housing Associations in Northern Ireland

**Choice Housing** is one of the largest independent housing associations in Northern Ireland with over 9,000 properties. They support individuals and groups to enhance their environments, skills, and prospects for long-term prosperity. Their work is focused on creating sustainable and thriving neighbourhoods that promote respect for everyone.

Choice provides a menu of tenant involvement<sup>23</sup>, which comprises:

- Choice Community Network – Regional networks meet every two months and provide opportunities to impact services in tenants' locality; volunteers engage with other residents and staff, and have the opportunity to avail of training including Community Development, Social Enterprise, and Tenant Participation accreditation
- Community Champions – representing tenants in the locality, working alongside staff to improve the neighbourhood
- Service Improvement Team – working with the housing association to improve service delivery
- Editorial Team – reviewing articles and showcasing activities for Choice News
- Financial Stakeholders Group – receiving information on annual rent increases and service charges, and an explanation of how they are calculated

Choice allocates £100,000 funding annually for a wide range of activities and projects aimed at addressing specific needs of customers, increasing capacity and employability within communities, and making a unique contribution towards society in Northern Ireland. Choice works with many different communities, each with specific needs, characteristics, and circumstances. These include groups who live in their general needs social housing and people who benefit from their supported living schemes.<sup>24</sup>

Choice's Financial Inclusion Team support tenants with their finances, which includes:

- Benefit maximisation and help applying for financial uplifts
- Housing cost entitlement checks and assistance to increase this where possible
- Securing grants to help set up home
- Support for tenants in arrears by establishing sustainable repayment plans based on the tenants' personal budget
- Applications to benevolent funds
- Support with Universal Credit applications and maintenance of claims.

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<sup>23</sup> [www.choice-housing.org/media/5640/choice-menu-of-involvement.pdf](http://www.choice-housing.org/media/5640/choice-menu-of-involvement.pdf); also [www.choice-housing.org/tenant-engagement/get-involved](http://www.choice-housing.org/tenant-engagement/get-involved) [accessed April 2024]

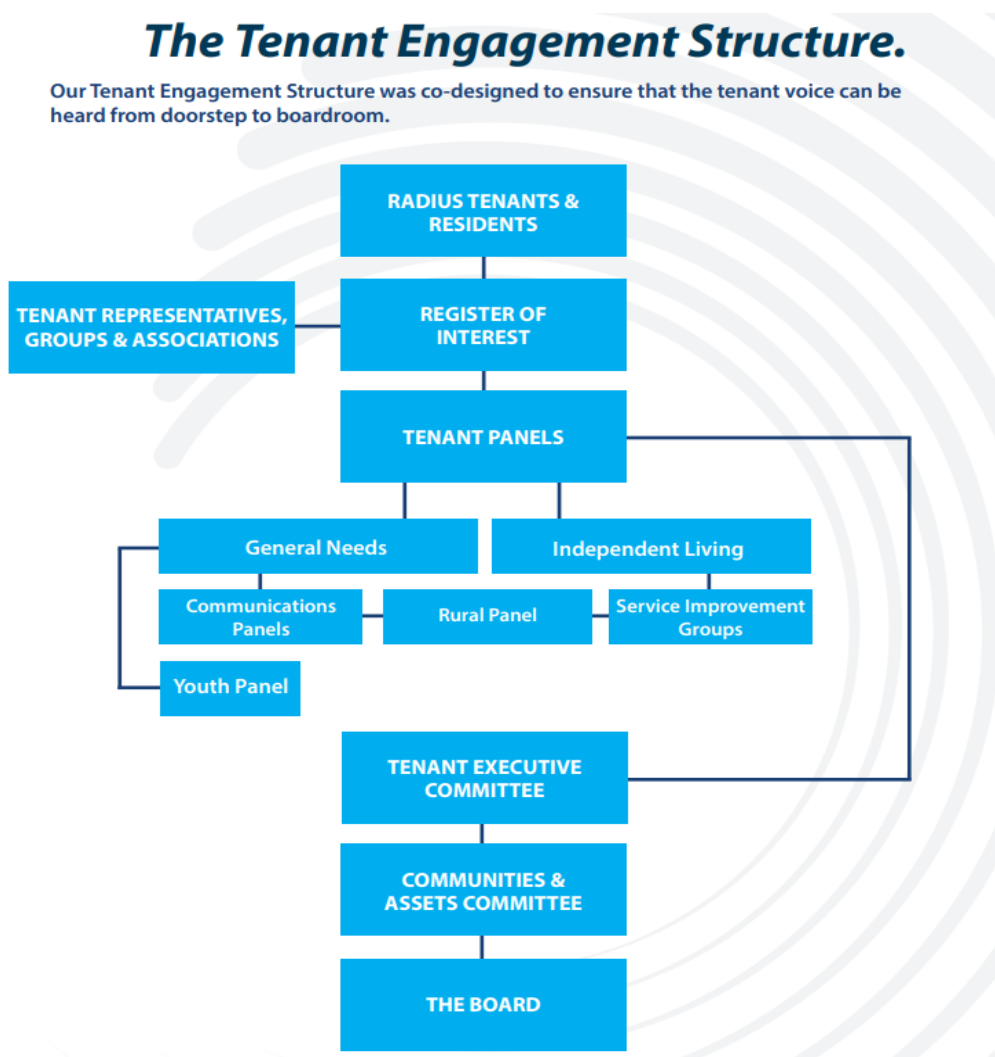
<sup>24</sup> [www.choice-housing.org/communities/community-investment](http://www.choice-housing.org/communities/community-investment)

**Radius Housing** provides care and support to over 33,000 homes across 80 towns and cities in Northern Ireland. They provide sheltered housing for over 55s and general-needs housing for families and single people. Radius also offer a range of specialist care and support facilities for the frail elderly, and people with dementia, learning disabilities and complex needs, such as homeless people and victims of domestic violence.

Radius has a ‘Stronger Together’ approach to tenant engagement, which aims to unite tenants, residents, and staff and provide opportunities for them to influence decisions and ultimately improve satisfaction. The organisation’s tenant engagement strategy<sup>25</sup> provides an illustration of the Tenant Engagement Structure (Figure 8) and identifies what they aim to achieve together, ensuring tenants remain central to service provision and decision-making.

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<sup>25</sup> Radius Housing Tenant Engagement Strategy 2022-2025  
[www.radiushousing.org/assets/documents/tenantengagementstrategy2022-25-1680705218.pdf](http://www.radiushousing.org/assets/documents/tenantengagementstrategy2022-25-1680705218.pdf)



**Figure 8: Radius Housing Tenant Engagement Structure**

Opportunities for tenants include:

- *Tenant Involvement Register* through which tenants receive letters of events and meetings in their areas and provide feedback.
- *Tenant Area Panel* where tenants meet with housing and property services staff to discuss strategic issues in your areas.
- *Estate Walkabouts/Inspections* during which tenants accompany staff on visits around their area.
- *Scrutiny Panels* which provide tenants with the opportunity to engage with staff to look critically at the services Radius provide and identify areas for improvement.
- *Readers Panel* at which tenants can meet with staff to review Radius documents before they go to the general tenant body.
- *Email Group* where tenants register their email address to receive regular communication and updates from Radius. The monthly Radius mail is available in 11 different languages.



The Radius Tenant Executive Committee (TEC) was established in 2018 to oversee the work of the Area Panels and steer direction of Service Improvement Groups. Members also sit on the Radius Board. The TEC is an effective link between the Board and Tenant Engagement structure ensuring every tenant can have their voice heard from the doorstep to the boardroom. Young people aged 13-18 and living with a parent/guardian within a Radius property, can join the Youth Panel to have their voice heard on future housing and make a difference in their community. Radius help members develop transferrable skills which can be used to improve future education and employment options.

Radius hold an annual tenant conference, with the 2023 event hosting speakers on topics such as: Building Sustainable Communities, Change and Continuous Improvement, Where rent is spent, Environmental, Social and Governance, Meet the Board, and the Radius Community Awards. The Radius Community Chest funding programme has been operating for a number of years and supports groups through payments of between £250 and £1,000 to fund local community projects. In 2022/23, 30 projects received a total of £19,972.51 awarded to tenants, service users, clients and charitable and voluntary organisations working within Radius communities. Activities included purchase of a greenhouse for an independent living scheme, funding for a men's wellbeing event, and delivery of a five-week arts and crafts programme at an independent living scheme.

Radius' Community Investment Strategy recognises that with over 13,000 households, Radius is well positioned to affect positive community change, beyond the development and maintenance of buildings. Strategic community investment is viewed by the association as an activity that leads to more sustainable and self-reliant communities, which will positively impact both Radius and the communities involved.<sup>26</sup> The strategy invests in the areas of, Employment & Education, Financial & Digital Inclusion, Health & Wellbeing and Community Empowerment.

## 5.7 Summary

While the terminology may vary, referencing *tenant*, *resident* or *customer engagement*, *involvement* or *connection*, the activities summarised in this section – including the National Housing Federation's housing association-wide tenant involvement initiative and associated best practice case studies – are closely aligned with the those undertaken and facilitated by the Housing Executive to encourage and enable community involvement. Indeed, in part due to the unique history, role and regional geographic remit of the Housing Executive, the extent and coverage of its community network and activity appears to be unique within the United Kingdom.

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<sup>26</sup> [www.radiushousing.org/tenants/tenants-engagement/our-strategy](https://www.radiushousing.org/tenants/tenants-engagement/our-strategy) [accessed April 2024]

In terms of the level of emphasis on customer/community involvement, the menu of involvement options, the professionalism and embeddedness of involvement practices, and the two-way flow of information between the Housing Executive and community groups and representatives, the Housing Executive's Community Involvement structures appear to be in line with, or more comprehensive and systematic than, those in place elsewhere.

Based on our review of available literature on a range of Housing Associations across the United Kingdom, there is a trend towards a more holistic approach to involvement, engagement and empowerment, which integrates community involvement and engagement within the broader theme of community investment, and evaluating the resulting outcomes using metrics underpinned by Social Return on Investment principles. Community investment programmes typically encompass:

- Community Development - Grant funded initiatives aimed at enhancing social cohesion, community spirit, and local infrastructure.
- Health and Wellbeing - Programmes to address physical and mental health, including sports, recreation, and support groups.
- Environmental Sustainability - Projects focused on creating green spaces, promoting recycling, and improving energy efficiency in homes.
- Education and Employment - Including skills training, apprenticeships, and support for local entrepreneurship.

Programmes are typically delivered by the Housing Association's community team in partnership with local organisations, businesses, and public services. They frequently involve volunteer initiatives with residents and local stakeholders using community centres and online platforms to facilitate wide participation. They work best when residents are engaged in a co-design approach with transparent communication and feedback mechanisms.

Regular monitoring and evaluation to assess impact provides evidence of the difference made to all Housing Associations stakeholders. The effectiveness of these programmes is often seen in improved community cohesion, enhanced local environments, and better socio-economic outcomes for residents. However, impact can vary based on programme design, delivery, and the level of community engagement.

## Section 6: Performance Against Objectives

### 6.1 Introduction

This section summarises the activity which was delivered against each objective and action of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023. The pages that follow explore each aim and underpinning objectives in more detail to analyse the success of the strategy. Table 5 at the end of the section presents an index of all documents referenced as evidence against the relevant aim, objectives, and actions.

### 6.2 Performance Against Objectives

#### Aim 1: Promote Community Involvement Across All Our Communities

**Objective 1: Conducting research to establish a baseline of current participation levels and participant views across our communities.**

Action Number	Actions	Success Status
1	In conjunction with the Housing Community Network and Supporting Communities, we will undertake a <b>survey of participants across the 500+ groups in our network</b> . This research will help <b>identify gaps in our network by location or customer profile</b> . It will also assist in ensuring we identify, encourage, and support difficult to reach/easy to ignore and <b>under-represented groups</b> to become involved.	
2	We will also seek <b>baseline community views</b> and <b>satisfaction levels</b> with our current community involvement structures, policies and procedures as well as identify any barriers to involvement.	

**Objective 2: Continue to develop new groups in under-represented locations and customer segments**

1	Review Service Level Agreements <sup>27</sup> with supporting agencies to ensure resources target under-represented areas	
2	Area and Regional Business Plans will include proposals to promote and engage with under-represented locations and customer segments.	

**Objective 3: Review the effectiveness of the existing Community Grants Programme and ensure resources are targeted to most effective activities**

1	Review the outcomes achieved to date from our community grants funding stream to inform future policy and procedure.	
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**Table 2: Community Involvement Strategy Aim 1 and Objectives 1-3**

<sup>27</sup> Terminology has subsequently changed, with 'Service Level Agreement' replaced by 'Funding Agreement and Action Plan'. However, for the purpose of this evaluation, the original wording is retained for consistency with the Strategy document.

**Objective 1: Conducting research to establish a baseline of current participation levels and participant views across our communities.**

**Action 1:** In conjunction with the Housing Community Network and Supporting Communities, we will undertake a **survey of participants across the 500+ groups in our network**. This research will help **identify gaps in our network by location or customer profile**. It will also assist in ensuring we identify, encourage, and support difficult to reach/easy to ignore and **under-represented groups** to become involved.

The evaluators reviewed documents 1-5 in the assessment of this action area. Key evidence was identified in the *Housing Community Network Baseline Survey (2021)* which correlates as the priority output of this action. The survey attracted 211 usable group responses from a wide range of community projects across the ethno-national divide. Responses came from across the North, South, and Belfast regions and across the 13 NIHE areas. The key findings from the survey included that the top three issues impacting across all groups were poverty, housing, and employment/unemployment. The survey also found that groups were largely satisfied with all organisational aspects of the HCN, noting benefits of involvement such as networking with other groups; sharing best practice; and information sharing. Whilst this survey did not meet the 500+ groups figure identified in the strategy, NIHE have conducted several other engagements which support the achievement of this aim:

- The *Tenant Participation Survey (2022)* utilised the HCN baseline study in conjunction with a telephone survey of 650 tenants and two focus group discussions with 18 members of the HCN. The survey identified that a large proportion of NIHE tenants are not interested in engaging with NIHE, and a lack of awareness among tenants about the existence of NIHE groups, panels, and forums.
- A 2020 Segmentation identified ‘segments’ of relatively homogeneous groups of tenants to enable a better understanding of NIHE customer need and to drive service improvement. Five tenant segments were identified with specific recommendations made on how best to engage with these individual groups.
- A 2023 NIHE Assurance Review identified inconsistencies in the approach across the HCN Regional and Area levels in place to support the customer / tenant voice and outlined opportunities and recommendations to improve the cascading of information throughout the levels of the HCN.

Whilst the above research included under-represented groups, it is further recognised that the existence of funding agreements with Supporting Communities, NI Youth Forum, Rural Resident’s Forum, and Disability Action evidence NIHE efforts to provide support for underrepresented groups.

Similarly, a 2018 Towerblock Residents Community Engagement and the creation of new Homeless Services User Panels in 2021 to understand the views of homeless people who interact with the Housing Executive further highlight efforts made to support underrepresented groups. NIHE Landlord Services also have numerous strategies and policies designed to support underrepresented groups, including the Travellers Strategy 2021-26, the Older People's Housing Strategy 2021/22-2026/27, the Rural Strategy 2021-2025, and the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for dealing with rough sleepers who have no access to public funds.

In consideration of the evidence outlined above, it is the opinion of the evaluator that this action has been **achieved**, with a wide range of demographics and groups represented on the HCN and considerable effort made to survey these groups, identify gaps in the network, and support under-represented groups.

**Action 2:** We will also seek **baseline community views** and **satisfaction levels** with our current community involvement structures, policies and procedures as well as identify any barriers to involvement.

The evaluators reviewed documents 1, 2, and 6 in the assessment of this action area. Key evidence which suggests a baseline of tenant views and satisfaction levels with the current HCN structure was identified in the *Housing Community Network Baseline Survey (2021)*. This includes that the majority of tenant group respondents were satisfied with all organisational aspects of the HCN; 77% with the support received from Supporting Communities; 70% with the level of communication from Central Housing Forum to their Group; and 79% with the relevancy of information received in terms of communication and feedback from HCN meetings. A key finding from this survey is evidence that 77% of tenant group respondents were satisfied with the Housing Executive's response to group views.

Further, the *Tenant Participation Survey (2022)* identified that a large proportion of NIHE tenants are not interested in engaging with NIHE and that there is a lack of awareness among tenants about the existence of NIHE groups panels and forums. The survey identified barriers to involvement among tenants including: a lack of confidence to become involved; lack of Patch Manager visibility in the community; a lack of funding and a joint approach between various social housing associations and NIHE; and previous negative experiences with NIHE staff.

Given that the documents outlined above evidence a baseline of community views and satisfaction levels with current community involvement structures, policies and procedures and the identification of barriers to involvement, the evaluator is confident in reporting that this action has been **achieved**.

## **Objective 2: Continue to develop new groups in under-represented locations and customer segments**

**Action 1:** Review Service Level Agreements with supporting agencies to ensure resources target under-represented areas.

The evaluators reviewed documents 8-17 in the assessment of this action area. Funding Agreements<sup>28</sup> have been created, reviewed, and updated throughout the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023 with Supporting Communities, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, the Rural Residents Forum, and the Disability Forum. Each agreement provides evidence of the allocation of resources to target under-represented areas/groups. Specific examples include:

- The establishment of 74 new groups in under-represented areas/estates by Supporting Communities during the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023.
- The provision of ‘one to one’ training for 1,277 individuals and committee members in the HCN and Member Groups by Supporting Communities during the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023.
- Members of the Northern Ireland Youth Forum were supported to complete leadership and community training (10 young people); Housing Rights training (12 young people); Homelessness Awareness Training (14 young people); and training around Housing Executive committee structures and code of conduct (12 young people).

It is the opinion of the evaluator that this action has been **achieved** as resources have evidently been targeted at underrepresented groups.

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<sup>28</sup> Terminology has evolved in line with updated practice since the publication of the Strategy, with Service Level Agreements replaced by Funding Agreements.

**Action 2:** Area and Regional Business Plans will include proposals to promote and engage with under-represented locations and customer segments

The evaluators reviewed documents 18-24 in the assessment of this action area. Business Plans were available to the evaluator from four areas; plans were not provided for other areas despite requests made from within the Housing Executive to Area Managers. In examining available Business Plans, commitment to the Community Involvement Strategy and to its delivery was identifiable in each area. However, the level of evidence relating to specific efforts to engage under-represented groups or locations varied between areas, with sufficient evidence identified in just two of the four areas for which Business Plans were received. Evidence identified includes:

- *Causeway Area Business Plans for 2021-2022 and 2022-2023:* attendance of Causeway representatives at both the Rural Residents Forum and Disability Forum’s update meetings with the interagency tenants panel and the Central Forums.
- *Causeway Area Business Plans for 2021-2022 and 2022-2023:* attendance at the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development which represented several different ethnic groups and traditions.
- *South Down Area Business Plans for 2021-2022 and 2022-2023:* attendance at the Newry, Mourne and Down Traveller Forum to “contribute positive solutions for issues raised by and on behalf of this group.”
- *South Down Area Business Plan 2021-2022 and 2022-2023:* attendance at remote Newry, Mourne and Down Intercultural Meetings to engage individuals from BME backgrounds and underrepresented groups; key issues presented included the necessity for foreign national applicants to apply for settled and pre-settled status prior to the EU Settlement Scheme.

It is the opinion of the evaluator that this action has been **partially achieved**, with more evidence of individual Area efforts towards engagement at the local level, and a more consistent cross-area spread, necessary to reach full achievement.

### **Objective 3: Review the effectiveness of the existing Community Grants Programme and ensure resources are targeted to most effective activities**

**Action 1:** Review the outcomes achieved to date from our community grants funding stream to inform future policy and procedure.

The evaluators reviewed documents 29-39 in the assessment of this action area. A total of £1,146,035 was invested in the Community Grants Programme throughout the lifespan of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023. The *Supporting Communities Service Level Agreement 2022/2023* reveals that a range of actions were undertaken which relate to this objective, including: members of the Supporting People team attending Community Grants assessment panels; providing support and guidance to HCN member Groups to complete Community Grant applications via 378 meetings/telephone calls; and arranging for a total of seven Community Involvement Grant evaluation reports to be completed.

The outcomes achieved through the Community Grants funding stream have been reviewed. The evaluator examined two examples of funded projects including application forms and monitoring and evaluation reports. These examples are outlined below:

**Granaghan & District Women's Group: Gardening Gurus (Mid Ulster):** £2,610.57 was awarded for the Gardening Gurus project delivered in autumn 2022, which focused on health and wellbeing. The project provided two hands-on, face-to-face, practical gardening workshops and one hands-on, face-to-face driftwood wall-hanging workshop. Funding also facilitated the purchase of two adult picnic tables and a range of gardening materials, tools, and a litter bin. The project produced 70 beneficiaries, of which 26 were Housing Executive tenants. Beneficiaries included a cross-section of society, and the project was found to have “enhanced the social, emotional, mental and community wellbeing of participants by improving community links and increasing pride and gratitude for what can be delivered voluntarily, locally and demonstrating demand for follow on activities.” Participants reported a sense of community, confidence to participate, social interaction, and learning a new skill.



**Market Development Association: Market Health and Wellbeing (South and East Belfast):** £2,500 was awarded for the Market Health and Wellbeing project delivered between October 2022 and February 2023. The project focused on health and wellbeing and provided fourteen health sessions with two therapists in the market community centre. Residents could access a range of free therapies and advice including podiatry; massage; physio; physical health checks; SureStart; and allergy testing. The project involved 264 participants, of which 200 were Housing Executive tenants. The project was found to have provided necessary health care to residents and a “period of relaxation in which they could de-stress and remember what it’s like to be cared for.” The therapists on site referred residents with extra needs to a Market Development Association Team Member who opened a resident’s inquiry and followed up on their cases over the proceeding weeks. Three residents were further recruited to the Market Development Association health sub-group. Participants reportedly experienced an improvement in mental health and an introduction to a support network.

In addition to evident reviews of Community Grants projects, amended guidance notes for Community Involvement Grants Funding Application have been created for 2023/2024. Based on the information outlined, the evaluator concludes that this action has been **achieved**.

## Aim 2: Enabling our Communities to Challenge, Influence and Shape our Housing Service

### Objective 4: Strengthening the Housing Community Network structure to maximise its input into service delivery by:

Action Number	Actions	Success Status
1	Re-focusing local Housing Community Network meetings to regularly review all housing services at an estate, local office, and area level. It was clear from the consultation exercise that community representatives wanted more focus on broader housing issues at all levels within the Network and maintaining strong local engagement.	
2	Re-introducing a regional tier within the network comprising representatives from Area Networks and other community fora within that particular region.	
3	Enabling Area, Regional and Central Networks to scrutinise services and produce both “Service Improvement Plans” at a local level and/ or recommendations on organisational policy or procedural improvements.	
4	Ensuring our communities are consulted on both Area and Regional annual Business Plans.	
5	Encouraging tenant chairs for local office, area, and regional network meetings.	
6	We will continue to provide a range of methods of involvement to encourage participation by all customers as either an individual or on a group basis.	

### Objective 5: Enhancing the Role of the Central Forum by:

1	Maintaining annual accountability meetings between the Central Forum, the Board and Directors and reporting outcomes to our Housing Community Network members.	
2	Supporting the Central Forum’s service specific working groups	
3	Producing an annual report on Central Forum activities and achievements.	
4	Connecting with other community network members and relevant stakeholders to share good practice.	
5	Continuing to ‘customer proof’ new policies and procedures	
6	Ensuring succession across the Network by establishing a shadow Youth Central Forum.	
7	Tracking progress of our Community Involvement Strategy, Action Plan and reviewing measures of success.	
8	Ensuring succession across the Network by establishing a shadow Youth Central Forum.	

**Objective 6: Encouraging involvement of our difficult to reach customers**

1	We will continue to support the Rural Residents' Forum, the Disability Forum, the Youth Forum, and the Strategic Cohesion Forum	
2	Respond to any research findings as detailed in Objective 1	
3	We will continue to provide a range of methods of involvement to encourage participation by all our customers i.e., a menu of involvement developed	
4	We will be working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and others to engage with young people to set up a shadow Housing Forum that will run parallel to the Central Housing Forum	

**Objective 7: Promoting digital inclusion**

1	Introduce/launch a revised Housing Executive website with greater emphasis on the provision of online services for our customers	
2	Provide internet access at all our reception areas to enable customers to access digital services	
3	Evaluate the Digital for Change (D4C) pilot project and assist customers to move increasingly to digital services	
4	Develop new apps on key service areas e.g. pre-tenancy	
5	Maximise the potential of our community lets as Digital Hubs	
6	Implement the recommendations of Supporting Communities Community House Internal Review	

**Objective 8: Developing the capacity of community groups by:**

1	Continuing to fund Supporting Communities to build capacity within our communities so that they can engage effectively in the HCN	
2	Ensuring adequate funding for our Area, Regional and Central Housing Fora with responsibility for managing their own budgets	
3	Encouraging and assisting groups to follow/adhere to/ achieve good governance principles across the HCN	
4	Signposting and assisting communities to access complementary funding/ training opportunities	
5	Provide opportunities for our community groups to avail of appropriate and timely training - accredited and non-accredited	

**Objective 9: Improving networking and sharing of best practice by:**

1	Supporting our annual Community Involvement Conference	
2	Developing a web-based community hub site for Network members to communicate with each other, share good practice and report on new initiatives across the network	
3	Publishing an annual report of HCN activities over the year	
4	Consider the development of a Central Housing Forum website	

**Table 3: Community Involvement Strategy Aim 2 and Objectives 4-9**

#### **Objective 4: Strengthening the Housing Community Network structure to maximise its input into service delivery by:**

**Action 1:** Re-focusing local Housing Community Network meetings to regularly review all housing services at an estate, local office, and area level. It was clear from the consultation exercise that community representatives wanted more focus on broader housing issues at all levels within the Network and maintaining strong local engagement.

The evaluators reviewed documents 40-47 in the assessment of this action area as a sample of HCN meeting minutes taken during the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023. Each set of minutes detailed discussions of housing services and broader housing issues at the estate, local, and area level. Attendees at the meetings included representatives from the Housing Executive; Supporting Communities; Residents Associations/Groups; Community Associations/Forums/Groups; Contractors; and underrepresented groups. An overview of discussions from a sample of meetings is detailed below:

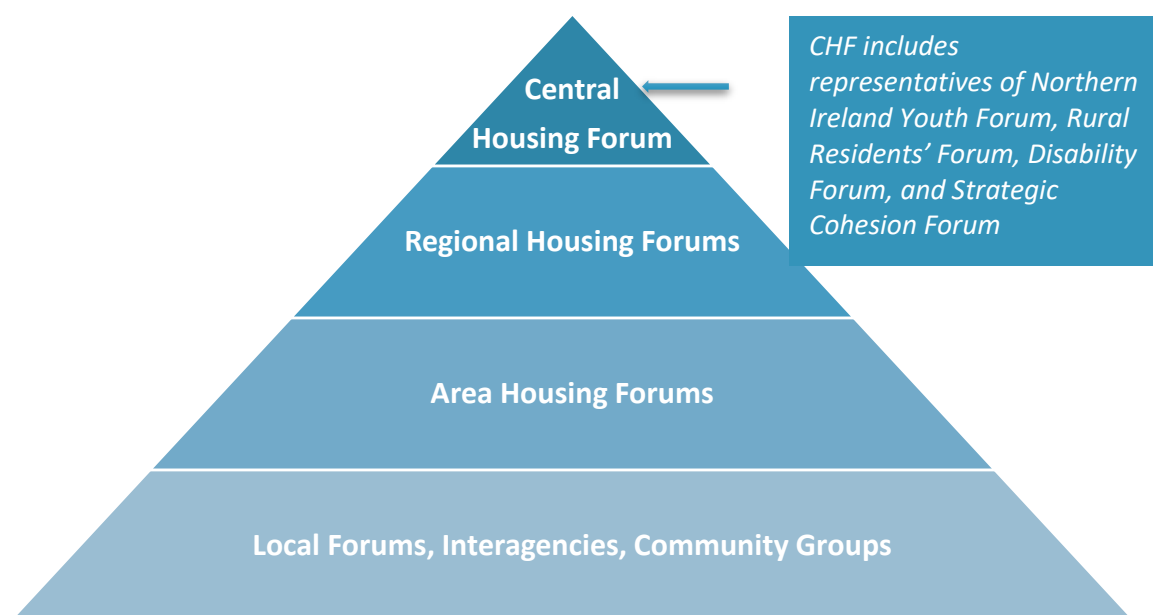
- **Ards & Down Area HCN (February 2023):** Discussion included the sharing of Housing Executive performance information such as arrears, voids and relet time, applications, staffing, anti-social behaviour, and maintenance, as well as queries about community lets, disabled adaptations, homeless applications, and care leavers. Local engagement was evident through the involvement of local resident groups and community associations, and updates were provided from the Rural Residents Forum and Disability Forum highlighting the consideration of under-represented groups.
- **Lisburn & Castlereagh Area HCN (February 2023):** Discussion included the Housing Executive performance information, updates from the Central Housing Forum, Belfast Regional Housing Forum, and Supporting Communities; and the topic of community involvement. A range of member updates and queries about operations at the local level were taken such as a query about the change of tenancy works in a property in Halftown and a query around the phases of a window scheme in Hillhall and Hill Street. Local engagement was evident through the involvement of local resident groups and community associations, and a new contractor (Greenview) was introduced. Further, Papyrus (Prevention of Young Suicide) provided an overview of suicide prevention services which it was felt might benefit members and local residents alike.

- **Mid Ulster Area HCN (February 2023):** Discussion included an overview of Supporting Communities training provided locally such as community development, good governance, CCNI returns, bookkeeping, running effective meetings, digital skills, and writing successful funding applications. Local office operational updates were provided including opening hours and changes to the Housing Selection Scheme, and updates were provided from local community groups; Supporting Communities; the Central Housing Forum, the Rural Residents Forum, the South Regional Forum and Scrutiny Panel, and the Disability Forum, highlighting the consideration of under-represented groups.

Based on the above information, the evaluator concludes that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 2:** Re-introducing a regional tier within the network comprising representatives from Area Networks and other community fora within that particular region.

The evaluators reviewed document 48 and examined the Housing Community Network structure.



**Figure 3: Housing Community Network Structure**

As per Figure 3, a regional tier is included within the network; the Regional Housing Forums are intended to improve communications between the Central and Area Forums. Whilst the Belfast Region has always had a Regional Forum, a South Regional Forum has recently been re-established in accordance with the Community Involvement Strategy. At the time of writing, the North Region does not have an active Forum and is therefore not actively involved in the HCN structure at this level.

Below the Regional Housing Forum tier, Area Housing Community Networks are represented. At the point of evaluation, ten Area HCNs were operational, and Area Managers had agreed to set up Area HCNs in both the West Area and South Down Area. The Causeway Area did not have an Area HCN or plans to create one. Finally, community groups and community champions are represented in the final tier, highlighting their inclusion in the Housing Community Network structure. Within the Central Housing Forum, five underrepresented groups are facilitated through Funding Agreements. This includes: the Disability Forum; the Rural Forum; the Northern Ireland Youth Forum; the Strategic Cohesion Forum; and the Rainbow Project (LGBTQIA+ representation).

Based on the information outlined, the evaluator concludes that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 3:** Enabling Area, Regional and Central Networks to scrutinise services and produce both “Service Improvement Plans” at a local level and/ or recommendations on organisational policy or procedural improvements.

The evaluators reviewed documents 1, 5, 18-24, and 40-47 in the assessment of this action area. A sample of evidence identified is outlined below:

- A 2023 *NIHE Assurance Review* identified that a service improvement panel was being constructed at the Belfast Regional Housing Community Network Level to consider Change of Tenancy processes.
- Tenant scrutiny panels have been established in each Area.
- Scrutiny/Service Improvement training is currently offered to Housing Executive Area Panels via Zoom or in person depending on the panels’ meeting arrangements.
- The *Causeway Area Business Plan 2022-2023* made commitments to service improvement and scrutiny including to “facilitate service improvement panels to empower tenants to scrutinize services. One tenants panel was held in February 2022.
- Minutes from a *South and East Belfast Area HCN Meeting in February 2023* revealed members expressing their views on the need for higher levels of funding from the Community Grants Programme; a need to ensure consistency of HCN structure across all three Regions; and a need for greater input from government departments, particularly Department for Infrastructure, in estate inspections.

Additionally, the *Housing Community Network Baseline Survey (2021)* further evidences opportunity for groups to discuss and input to organisational policy or procedural improvements.

Given evidence that the scrutiny of services, identification of service improvement opportunities, and recommendations for improvements to organisational procedures have occurred at the Area, Regional, and Central Network level, the evaluator is satisfied that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 4:** Ensuring our communities are consulted on both Area and Regional annual Business Plans

The evaluators reviewed documents 5, 6, 18-24 and 40-47 in the assessment of this action area. It is noted that whilst the Community Involvement Strategy required Regional and Area level groups to develop and maintain an Annual Business Plan, no such business plans exist at the Regional levels. (Document 5).

Area Business Plans were available to the evaluators. A range of community opinion data had been used in the construction of Area Business Plans, including findings from the *Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey* and *Tenant Participation Survey*. Similarly, as Area HCNs commonly feature community representation in the form of Community Associations, Community Groups, and Community Champions, they provide direct access to community opinion which can be utilised in the creation of Area Business Plans.

Despite the evidence of community consultation in the construction of Area Business Plans, the lack of Regional Business Plans has resulted in only **partial achievement** of this action area.

**Action 5: Encouraging tenant chairs for local office, area, and regional network meetings**

In conjunction with Supporting Communities, the Housing Executive has sought to encourage tenants/community representatives to take on the role of chairing local office, area, and regional network meetings. The aspiration has been written into the Terms of Reference for each Area and Local HCN. While a number of Area and Local HCNs were chaired by Community Representatives (e.g. West Belfast, Newry, Waterside) at the time of the evaluation, others continued to be chaired by Supporting Communities.

The evaluator noted that more work needs to be done on this action but given the progress and that tenant chairs are very much encouraged concluded that there has been **partial achievement** of this action.

**Action 6:** We will continue to provide a range of methods of involvement to encourage participation by all customers as either an individual or on a group basis.

The evaluators reviewed documents 49-52 in the assessment of this action area. The following reflects the options for involvement which are available to customers on an individual and group basis throughout the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-23:

- Central Housing Forum
- Regional Housing Community Network
- Area Housing Community Networks
- Disability Forum
- Rural Residents Forum
- NI Youth Forum
- Strategic Cohesion Forum
- Tenant Scrutiny Panels
- Mystery Shopping Exercises
- Village Voice

Working Groups also offer a method of participation for the community. Working Groups act as reference points for the Housing Executive’s Housing Services Division in specific matters and disseminate information/advice to tenants and residents across the Housing Community Network (HCN) membership. There are currently six Working Groups operational.

The evaluator is confident, based on the information outlined above, that a range of methods of involvement which encourage customer participation have been facilitated. Therefore, it can be concluded that this action has been **achieved**.

### **Objective 5: Enhancing the role of the Central Forum by:**

**Action 1: Maintaining annual accountability meetings between the Central Forum, the Board and Directors and reporting outcomes to our Housing Community Network members.**

The evaluators reviewed document 53 and 54 in the assessment of this action area. The new Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Central Housing Forum were developed and agreed in 2022. The ToR notes a purpose of the Central Housing Forum in providing *“a challenge function to all relevant Housing Executive Divisions in terms of services delivered to Housing Executive tenants and communities,”* and outlines that Central Housing Forum Members should *“ensure that a meaningful, two-way process of information and communication takes place between CHF and Regional, Area and Special Interest Groups which make up the HCN.”*



*Image 1 Signing of the Central Housing Forum Terms of Reference (2022)*



The ToR stipulates that the Central Housing Forum must engage with the Housing Executive Board, Chief Executive, and Directors and the Tenant & Customer Services Committee at least once per year respectively and establishes that the Central Housing Forum will meet once per month with a minimum of 10 meetings annually. The evaluator reviewed meeting minutes from the *April 2023 Central Housing Forum meeting* and is aware a further meeting was held on schedule in June 2023. Based on the above information, the evaluator has determined that this action has been **achieved**.

## **Action 2: Supporting the Central Forum’s service specific working groups.**

The evaluators reviewed documents 49-52 in the assessment of this action area. A total of six Working Groups were operational throughout the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023 as per table 4.

Group Title	Meeting Frequency	Main Purpose
<b>Welfare Reform &amp; Financial Inclusion</b>	Quarterly	This group is intended to influence, shape, and provide input to the Housing Services Division in matters relating to the implementation of Welfare Reform legislation.
<b>Digital Inclusion</b>	Quarterly	To act as a Reference Group for the Housing Executive’s Housing Services Division in matters relating to Digital Inclusion, Website monitoring, and the Online Forum-Portal.  To assist in disseminating information/advice to tenants across the Housing Community Network (HCN) membership.
<b>Social Clauses</b>	Not yet agreed	To act as a Reference Group for the Housing Executive in matters relating to the Social Housing Enterprise Strategy, Social Value, Social Clauses, Social Enterprise, Social Impact and Social Investment. To assist in identifying and sharing Best Practice in relation to Social Impact and Social Enterprise Projects across the Housing Community Network (HCN) membership.
<b>Events</b>	Based around Conference	To progress the annual Community Conference and other Housing Executive events.
<b>Sustainable Development</b>	Quarterly	To act as a Reference Group for the Housing Executive in matters relating to Sustainability and Climate Change.  Members should challenge and inform the Housing Executive in their role as a Landlord on the Sustainable Development Strategy & Action Plan.
<b>Adaptations</b>	To be agreed	To act as a Reference Group for the Housing Executive in matters relating to Adaptations, specifically Disabled Facilities Grants.

**Table 4: Central Housing Forum Operational Working Groups**

Several other Working Groups were active at various points during the life of the Strategy, but not throughout its entire duration. In addition, the CHF has had input into other issues such as the annual advisory panel meeting for the Continuous Tenant Omnibus survey, the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) Benchmarking process, and Community Involvement Strategy group meetings, set up as part of the review process for the outgoing and incoming strategies. Both Central Housing Forum members and Housing Executive staff sit on Working Groups and each working group is encouraged to raise queries and advise on their topic of formation.

Based on the information outlined above, the evaluator has determined that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 3: Producing an annual report on Central Forum activities and achievements.**

The evaluators reviewed documents 55-57 in the assessment of this action area. During the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023, Annual Reports for the Central Housing Forum were produced for 2017/2018, 2018/2019, and 2021/2022. Reports were not produced for 2019/2020 or 2020/2021 due to the disruption of work caused by COVID-19.

Given the unforeseen nature of the pandemic, the continued focus on enhancing the role of the Central Housing Forum during this time, and the resumption of annual reporting following the pandemic, the evaluators consider this action **achieved**.

**Action 4: Connecting with other community network members and relevant stakeholders to share good practice.**

The CHF met monthly during the delivery of the 2018-2023 CIS. Meetings were held in the offices of the Housing Executive in Belfast or Supporting Communities in Ballymena prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Virtual meetings were held via Zoom during the pandemic with in-person gathering resuming towards the end of 2022. During these meetings, the Housing Executive:

- o Ensured members were kept informed of relevant changes in policy or operational matters such as Rural Housing, Housing Executive Peace IV Projects, Ukrainian Resettlement Programme, and Asset Management/Contracts Updates etc.
- o Consulted members to ask for their views on a range of topics including the Housing Executive Homelessness Strategy, Housing Executive Draft Corporate Plan and Housing Executive Arrears Letters etc.
- o Invited members to actively participate in making a difference through working groups and reviews of Housing Executive strategy and practice.

Based on the above examples, the evaluators have determined that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 5: Continuing to ‘customer proof’ new policies and procedures.**

Evidence for the assessment of this action area was found in document 58. The Housing Executive has held the Customer Service Excellence (CSE) accreditation since 2008 and held Charter Mark in years prior. In 2022, the CSE assessor remarked that NIHE Landlord Services is, “without doubt one of the most customer focused services in Northern Ireland with tenants frequently stating to the assessor that if only other organisations were as responsive and easy to deal with, their lives would be so much better.” The CSE assessor referred to the following:

- The Housing Executive performs continued work “with many customer groups in order to better understand and meet their needs,” and scrutiny panels with HCN members continue to examine the service.
- The HCN at different levels ensures that all NIHE policies and strategies are checked and approved as much as is possible by customers.
- HCN members are regularly involved in helping to ensure that information for customers/tenants is easily understood and free from jargon.
- Front-line staff are trained to support customers who threaten suicide or self-harm and have developed relationships with the PSNI to provide speedy assistance to these people who need urgent help, and with the Alzheimer's Society to ensure those with dementia are identified and provided with the proper level of support and understanding.
- Customers/tenants are generally very positive about how NIHE staff understand the problems and needs of customers and tenants.

The evaluator feels significant effort has been made throughout the strategy cycle to seek and incorporate customer views into policy and procedure and to address existing needs. Therefore, it is concluded that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 6: Ensuring succession across the Network by establishing a shadow Youth Central Forum.**

Evidence for the assessment of this action area was found in documents 55-57. As of 2018, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum had successfully recruited and established a Shadow Youth Forum. In 2018/2019, the Shadow Youth Forum spent time building their capacity to increase their knowledge of the Housing Executive and its core functions through awareness training sessions and direct engagement with Housing Executive staff. In April 2021, it was decided that the Shadow Youth Forum would be restructured to allow development and succession planning for the future within the CHF and HCN structure. The existing group became a ‘year two working group’. A new developmental ‘year one group’ comprised of 14 young people was also recruited. The long-term aim is that the year one developmental group will complete the adequate training and join the Housing Executive’s various working groups. Given the establishment of the Shadow Youth Forum, the evaluators conclude that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 7: Tracking progress of our Community Involvement Strategy, Action Plan and reviewing measures of success.**

The evaluators reviewed documents 55-57 and 59 in the assessment of this action area. The three Central Housing Forum Annual Reports produced during the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023 highlight the range of work conducted by the Central Housing Forum in support of the Community Involvement Strategy. Each annual report includes reflection on progress at a local level, across all 13 Housing Community Network areas, and underlines the progress made by Supporting Communities, the Disability Forum, NI Youth Forum, and the Rural Residents Forum. Similarly, yearly Central Housing Forum Action Plans were produced which provide updates on progress against action areas.

Based on the information outlined above, the evaluators have determined that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 8: Providing feedback to the HCN on the various thematic working groups.**

Evidence for the assessment of this action area was found in document 58. The Customer Service Excellence Accreditation Report (2022) highlights the success of engagement and information sharing by the Housing Community Network:

*“The Housing Community Network (HCN) has been the bedrock of your community engagement for many years [...] The NIHE works with communities in ways that are well outside what could be considered normal for a social housing provider.”*

The CSE assessor also identified a “substantial two-way flow of information from the community and to the community via the members of the [Central Housing] Forum.” For working groups specifically, the CSE assessor noted that Central Housing Forum members sit on a number of working groups and input into strategies, contract procurement and standards of service. This facilitates learning and the incorporation of working group feedback into the HCN.

Based on the information outlined above, the evaluators have determined that this action has been **achieved**.

## **Objective 6: Encouraging involvement of our difficult to reach customers.**

### **Action 1: We will continue to support the Rural Residents' Forum, the Disability Forum, the Youth Forum, and the Strategic Cohesion Forum**

The Housing Executive currently facilitates five underrepresented groups through Service Level Agreements and the construction of five forums which are represented in the Central Housing Forum. In line with Housing Executive statements taken from document 48:

- The Rural Forum is facilitated by the Rural Community Network and works towards challenging and lobbying for social housing need in rural areas, including the development of a latent demand toolkit.
- The Disability Forum is facilitated by Disability Action. The Forum has produced an advice leaflet for people with disabilities on finding a home and carries out annual accessibility audits of Housing Executive offices.
- Young People are represented by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum. Having previously produced a series of films around various housing and homeless scenarios, the Youth Forum is currently working towards developing the capacity of young people to be able to attend and participate in three local area HCNs.
- The Strategic Cohesion Forum will influence, shape, and inform the Housing Executive's Community Cohesion Strategy. The forum will help communities transition in the journey towards good relations and assist communities move forward. They are critical friends in reviewing our Cohesion Strategy and developing an action plan to work towards.

The evaluator concludes that this action has been **achieved**.

### **Action 2: Respond to any research findings as detailed in Objective 1.**

As outlined under Objective 1 Action 1, a baseline of community views and satisfaction levels with current community involvement structures, policies and procedures was established through the *Housing Community Network Baseline Survey (2021)*. In discussion with Housing Executive and Community Involvement Team members, the evaluator concludes that the above research, in addition to the findings of the Tenant Participation Survey (2022) and a 2020 segmentation of its tenants, has been considered by the Housing Executive.

The evaluator concludes that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 3: We will continue to provide a range of methods of involvement to encourage participation by all of our customers i.e., a menu of involvement developed.**

As outlined under Objective 4 Action 6, a menu of customer involvement has been developed which includes:

- Central Housing Forum
- Regional Housing Forums
- Area Housing Forums
- Local Housing Forums
- Disability Forum
- Rural Residents Forum
- NI Youth Forum
- Strategic Cohesion Forum
- Tenant Scrutiny Panels
- Mystery Shopping Exercises
- Village Voice

Based on the information outlined above, the evaluator concludes that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 4: We will be working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and others to engage with young people to set up a shadow Housing Forum that will run parallel to the Central Housing Forum.**

As outlined under Objective 5 Action 6, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum had successfully recruited and established a Shadow Youth Forum as of 2018. The Shadow Youth Forum spent time building their capacity and in April 2021, it was decided that the Shadow Youth Forum would be restructured to allow development and succession planning for the future within the CHF and HCN structure. A 2023 *NIHE Assurance Review* further outlined that the Housing Executive is actively working in partnership with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum (NIYF) to “boost youth engagement, including participation in the CHF meetings.”

Based on this information, the evaluator concludes that this action has been **achieved**.

## **Objective 7: Promoting digital inclusion**

### **Action 1: Introduce/launch a revised Housing Executive website with greater emphasis on the provision of online services for our customers.**

A revised Housing Executive website was developed during the delivery of the Community Involvement strategy with support from the Digital Inclusion Working Group. The website now features a Community tab which includes information about Community Involvement and Community Cohesion; information about community safety; and avenues of support. The webpage highlights work happening in the community, reports, and strategies, and directs tenants to Good Relations Officers and others they can talk to.

As a revised website has been developed, the evaluator concludes that this action has been **achieved**.

### **Action 2: Provide internet access at all our reception areas to enable customers to access digital services.**

The evaluator is aware that internet access has been provided at all Northern Ireland Housing Executive reception areas which enables customers to access digital services. As a result, this action has been **achieved**.

### **Action 3: Evaluate the Digital for Change (D4C) pilot project and assist customers to move increasingly to digital services.**

The Digital for Change project was implemented for tenants across four areas of Northern Ireland. The project's objective was to improve the digital skills of tenants and combat social isolation. This was facilitated by training provided by Supporting Communities. A range of other initiatives have been actioned which focused on assisting customers to move to increasingly digitised services. This includes:

- The operation of a Digital Inclusion Working Group which supports the Housing Executive in all matters relating to digital inclusion, website monitoring and online forums.
- The creation of a Digital inclusion Strategy to promote and digitise the services and improve customer outcomes.
- The inclusion of digital inclusion as a theme of the Community Grants Programme: *"Digital Inclusion Projects should demonstrate how they will involve our tenants, residents, leaseholders and young people through digital initiatives and how they inspire communities to become digitally active and aware."*

- The delivery of the ONSIDE Project. Launched in 2019, the online training programme designed to improve the health and wellbeing of disabled people in Northern Ireland and border regions by addressing social isolation. 2,325 participants were trained and supported, and 1,939 digital inclusion sessions were delivered.
- The provision of a range of digital inclusion support by Supporting Communities, including the publication of dedicated funding bulletins for digital projects and 52 instances of digital inclusion support in 2022/2023 alone.

Whilst the evaluation of the Digital for Change Project did not occur, the extensive steps taken to promote digital inclusion and assist customers in moving to increasingly digitised services warrant that this action be marked as **achieved**.

**Action 4: Develop new apps on key service areas e.g., pre-tenancy.**

New apps have not yet been developed as the process has stalled. However, a Customer Portal was introduced in May 2020 which facilitates ease of customer access to important information and enables customers to raise concerns through the 'Report a Complaint' function. Additionally, a Central Housing Forum Collaboration Portal has been created which enables members to stay connected through online chats and discussions; keep notes; share files online; manage meetings and associated papers; and assign tasks and to-do lists. It is envisaged that the Collaboration Forum will improve collaboration by centralising all papers, minutes and meeting invitations and storing documents and discussions in an organised manner.

Despite positive progress towards digitisation, the app development process has stalled; as a result, this action has **not been achieved**.

**Action 5: Maximise the potential of our community lets as Digital Hubs**

The evaluator has reviewed progress in this area and discussed efforts with Housing Executive staff. Whilst the potential of community lets as Digital Hubs is being explored, actions have not been taken in a formal, structured way. However, it was reported that the majority of Community Hubs have some form of digital access.

Due to lack of observable evidence, the evaluator has determined that this action has **not been achieved**.



**Action 6: Implement the recommendations of Supporting Communities Community House Review.**

Through discussions with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the evaluator has learned that the implementation of recommendations from the Supporting Communities Community House Internal Review has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This review is scheduled to be completed in early 2024.

As such, this action has **not been achieved**.

**Objective 8: Developing the capacity of our community groups by:**

**Action 1: Continuing to fund Supporting Communities to build capacity within our communities so that they can engage effectively in the HCN.**

The evaluators reviewed documents 8-11 in the assessment of this action area. Supporting Communities has been funded throughout the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023 with Service Level Agreements/Funding Agreements constructed. This funding will continue following the conclusion of the Involvement Strategy.

Based on this evidence, the evaluator has concluded that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 2: Ensuring adequate funding for our Area, Regional and Central Housing Fora with responsibility for managing their own budgets.**

The evaluator has discussed the funding environment with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and learned that funding has stayed at the same level throughout the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023. All Housing Community Networks have their own budgets which are used for team building, transport etc. During the COVID-19 pandemic there were cuts to funding in line with the reduced need for expenses resulting from the required social distancing and 'stay-at-home' order.

This action has been **achieved**.

**Action 3: Encouraging and assisting groups to follow/adhere to/achieve good governance principles across the HCN.**

The evaluators reviewed documents 8-11 and 60 in the assessment of this action area. The *Central Housing Forum's Code of Conduct* outlines instructions which support the Housing Community Network to achieve good governance. Further, throughout the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023, Supporting Communities has supported HCN members and groups to adhere to good governance principles.

The Supporting Communities Service Level Agreement included a commitment to encouraging and enabling good governance for HCN Groups through support and capacity building. This involves support with finance, AGMs, the Charity Commission, and for Office Bearers and Good Governance Checks of Community Bases. Supporting Communities also directly provides Good Governance Training for the Housing Community Network. For example, 18 Good Governance Training sessions were delivered in 2019/2020 and 11 in 2022/2023. Good Governance Training was provided online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Supporting Communities published Good Governance content and resources online. In 2022/2023, this material attracted 142 reads and 682 impressions.

Based on the evidence available, the evaluator has concluded that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 4: Signposting and assisting communities to access complementary funding/training opportunities.**

The evaluators reviewed documents 8-11 and 61 in the assessment of this action area. Throughout the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023, Supporting Communities has provided a range of funding and training opportunities. Attention is brought to these opportunities by the *Supporting Communities Training Leaflet for HCN Members* and the advertising of opportunities on the Supporting Communities website.

The Support Communities website displays monthly Community Funding Bulletins and allows groups to contact Supporting Communities to arrange one-to-one specialist funding support and guidance. It also contains a funding application guide and directs users to the Grant Finder website. Finally, the Supporting Communities Events Listing section details upcoming support, and lists training opportunities which will be delivered in the near future. Update reports on Supporting Communities activity throughout the delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023 revealed that extensive training was provided (see Action 5) and that HCN groups and members were supported to access a total of £4,588,510.25 for projects and initiatives throughout the lifespan of the strategy. Based on the information outlined above, the evaluator has concluded that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 5: Provide opportunities for our community groups to avail of appropriate and timely training - accredited and non-accredited.**

The evaluators reviewed documents 8-11 in the assessment of this action area. Supporting Communities has provided a wide range of training opportunities throughout the lifespan of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023. This includes formal good governance training; scrutiny training; impact training; capacity building; ‘one to one’ training to individuals and committee members; online impact and social value training; Level 2 & 3 accredited OCN Training on Social Enterprise; and Grant Finder training.

Based on the evidence outlined above, the evaluator has concluded that this action has been **achieved**.

**Objective 9: Improve networking and sharing of best practice by:**

**Action 1: Supporting our annual Community Involvement Conference.**

The evaluators reviewed documents 62 and 63 in the assessment of this action area. Two Community Involvement Conferences were delivered during the lifespan of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023: one in 2019 and one in 2023. The COVID-19 pandemic impeded the delivery of conferences in other years in line with social distancing requirements and ‘stay-at-home’ orders. The delivery of Community Involvement Conferences was supported by a Community Conference Task & Finish Group. The Community Involvement Conferences provide an opportunity for community groups to share their experiences and best practice. In 2023, the Community Involvement Conference featured the following:

- Opening remarks with Central Housing Forum (CHF) Chair: Linda Watson
- Speaker: Grainia Long (Housing Executive)
- Video: Belfast Project(s)
- Speaker: Joseph Elliot (Joseph Rowntree Foundation). Research into poverty
- Video: North Region Project(s) Introduced
- Speaker: Pat Austin (National Energy Action)
- Video: South Region Project(s)
- Closing remarks with CHF Vice Chair: Patricia McQuillan
- Speaker: Nicole Lappin (Housing Executive Chair)

Given that the COVID-19 pandemic was outside of the control of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and efforts were made to deliver Community Involvement Conferences when possible, the evaluator has concluded that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 2: Developing a web-based community hub site for Network members to communicate with each other, share good practice and report on new initiatives across the network.**

A web-based community hub has been developed in the form of the Central Housing Forum Collaboration Portal which enables members to stay connected throughout online chats and discussions; keep notes; share files online; manage meetings and associated papers; and assign tasks and to-do lists.

At the time of writing, the Housing Executive was in the process of developing biographies of Central Housing Forum members for the portal to ensure internal Housing Executive staff are familiar with the members they will be engaging with. There are plans to publish these biographies publicly at a later date. Based on the evidence outlined above, the evaluator has concluded that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 3: Publishing an annual report of HCN activities over the year.**

The evaluators reviewed documents 55-57 in the assessment of this action area. Reports of HCN activities were published annual through Central Housing Forum Annual Reports. Each annual report includes reflection on progress at a local level, across all 13 Housing Community Network areas. Examples of updates from the *Annual Report for 2021/2022* include:

- A total of 102 HCN meetings across the 13 Areas including 21 in the South Area and 15 in the West Area.
- A total of £214,026 provided across the 13 Areas through the Community Grants Programme
- A total of 109 Community Lets delivered across the 13 Areas.
- A total of £466,617 of funding provided for Community Safety across the 13 Areas.
- A total of £339,886 of Community Cohesion funding provided across the 13 Areas.

Based on the evidence outlined above, the evaluator has concluded that this action has been **achieved**.

**Action 4: Consider the development of a Central Housing Forum website.**

The development of a Central Housing Forum website was considered during the delivery of the Communities in Transition Strategy 2018-2023. However, through discussion and trialing, it was decided that the Central Housing Forum Collaboration Portal supersedes the need for a dedicated website. (See Objective 9 Action 2). Based on the evidence outlined above, the evaluator has concluded that this action has been **achieved**.

Identification Number	Document Title	Strategy Aims Supported
1	Housing Community Network Baseline Survey (2021)	O1) A1, 2 O4) A3 O6) A2
2	Tenant Participation Survey (2022)	O1) A1, 2 O6) A2
3	Tenant Segmentation Report (2022 – Internal Draft)	O1) A1 O6) A2
4	Understanding Tenancy Terminations Report (2023 Internal Draft)	O1) A1
5	Customer Tenant Voice Management Response (2023 – Internal Draft)	O1) A1 O4) A3 O6) A4
6	Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey 2020	O1) A2
7	The Business Benefits of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Community Involvement Activities (Tony Manzi and Ian Simpson, University of Westminster, 2017)	O1) A2* - reviewed but not included due to date
8	Supporting Communities SLA 2019/2020	O2) A1, 3 O7) A3 O8) A3, 4, 5
9	Supporting Communities SLA 2020/2021	O2) A1, 3 O7) A3 O8) A3, 4, 5
10	Supporting Communities SLA 2021/2022	O2) A1, 3 O7) A3 O8) A3, 4, 5
11	Supporting Communities SLA 2022/2023	O2) A1, 3 O3) A1 O7) A3 O8) A3, 4, 5
12	NI Youth Forum SLA 2022/2023	O2) A1
13	The Disability Forum SLA 2022/2023	O2) A1
14	The Rural Residents Forum SLA 2022/2023	O2) A1
15	Housing Community Network Annual Report 2018	O2) A1
16	Housing Community Network Annual Report 2018	O2) A1
17	Housing Community Network Annual Report 2021	O2) A1
18	Causeway Area Business Plan 2021-2022	O2) A2 O4) A3, 4
19	Causeway Area Business Plan 2022-2023	O2) A2 O4) A3, 4

Identification Number	Document Title	Strategy Aims Supported
20	Mid & East Antrim Business Plan 2020-21:	O2) A2 O4) A3, 4
21	South Antrim Area Business Plan 2021-2022	O2) A2 O4) A 3, 4
22	South Antrim Area Business Plan 2022-2023	O2) A2 O4) A3, 4
23	South Down Area Business Plan 2021-2022	O2) A2 O4) A3, 4
24	South Down Area Business Plan 2022-2023	O2) A2 O4) A3 ,4
25	Customer Service Excellence Assessment Report for Landlord Housing Services, NI Housing Executive 2018	O2) A3
26	Customer Service Excellence Assessment Report for Landlord Housing Services, NI Housing Executive 2019	O2) A3
27	Customer Service Excellence Assessment Report for Landlord Housing Services, NI Housing Executive 2020	O2) A3
28	Customer Service Excellence Assessment Report for Landlord Housing Services, NI Housing Executive 2011	O2) A3
29	2023-24 Community Involvement Grants Funding Application - Guidance Notes	O3) A1
30	Community Grants Spend for 2018.2019 -2022.2023	O3) A1
31	CI Funding 2021-22	O3) A1
32	CI Funding 2022-23	O3) A1
33	CIG Application: Granaghan & District Women's Group (Gardening Gurus)	O3) A1
34	Community Grants Application Form PROD: Granaghan & District Women's Group	O3) A1
35	Monitoring & Evaluation Form: Granaghan & District Women's Group	O3) A1
36	CIG Application: Market Health and Wellbeing	O3) A1
37	Community Grants Application Form PROD: Market Health and Wellbeing	O3) A1
38	Monitoring & Evaluation Form: Market Health and Wellbeing	O3) A1
39	Information on Community Grants Themes	O3) A1
40	Ards & Down Area HCN Minutes February 2023	O4) A1, 3
41	Lisburn & Castlereagh Area HCN Minutes February 2023	O4) A1, 3
42	Mid & East Antrim Area HCN Minutes February 2023	O4) A1, 3
43	Mid Ulster Area HCN Minutes February 2023	O4) A1, 3
44	North Belfast Area HCN Minutes February 2023	O4) A1, 3

Identification Number	Document Title	Strategy Aims Supported
45	South & East Belfast Area HCN Minutes February 2023	O4) A1, 3
46	South Antrim Area HCN Minutes February 2023	O4) A1, 3
47	West Belfast HCN Minutes February 2023	O4) A1, 3
48	Housing Community Network: Community Involvement Structure	O4) A1
49	Details of Working Groups	O4) A6
50	Central Housing Forum Digital Inclusion Working Group TOR	O4) A6
51	Note Of CHF Climate Change Working Group Meeting	O4) A6
52	Note Of Community Conference Task & Finish Group Meeting (Working Group)	O4) A6
53	Central Housing Forum Terms of Reference 2022	O5) A1
54	Minutes Of Central Housing Forum Meeting (Wednesday 19th April 2023)	O5) A1
55	Central Housing Forum Annual Report 2017/2018	O5) A3, 6, 7 O9) A3
56	Central Housing Forum Annual Report 2018/2019	O5) A3, 6, 7 O9) A3
57	Central Housing Forum Annual Report 2021/2022	O5) A3, 6, 7 O9) A3
58	Customer Service Excellence 2022 Report	O5) A5, 8
59	Central Housing Forum Action Plan 2022 – 2023	O5) A7
60	Central Housing Forum Code of Conduct	O8) A3
61	Supporting Communities Training Leaflet for HCN Members	O8) A4
62	Note Of Community Conference Task & Finish Group Meeting	O9) A1
63	Community Conference Running Order (February 2023)	O9) A1

Table 5: Documentary evidence index

## Section 7: Consultation Findings

To build on the desk review summarising activity against each objective and action of the CIS 2018-2023, this section articulates the findings from consultations with stakeholders on the effectiveness of the interventions. This included one-to-one semi-structured discussions with senior staff in The Executive Office, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, District Councils and focus group discussions with the Central Housing, Disability, Youth, and Rural Forums. Findings are thematically analysed in the subsequent subsections around the objectives of the CIS.

### 7.1 Participation

All consultees, both individual and groups (n=12), were aware of the Community Involvement Strategy (CIS). Members of the various forums consulted felt involved in the strategy through the work of their groups. For the vast majority (n=9), the strategy was live, ambitious, and empowering which engendered a sense of ownership and connection.

In addition to their participation in the groups, contributors highlighted the range of opportunities through surveys and digital initiatives for NIHE tenants and stakeholders to have their say on representation, location-based issues, and barriers to involvement. Working groups were considered to offer a method of participation for the community, and consultees commented that they act as reference points for the Housing Executive's Housing Services Division in specific matters. The consultation in respect of participation endorses the finding from the desk review that the actions relating to research to establish a baseline of current participation levels and participant views across NIHE communities were fully achieved.

NIHE senior staff consistently referenced survey findings from tenants and the presentations at HCN and CHF meetings as crucial for their internal planning and review. It was acknowledged that many tenants are not interested in engaging with NIHE but noted that the Housing Executive is nonetheless committed to addressing underlying barriers such as lack of awareness about NIHE groups, and not having the confidence and capacity to engage meaningfully.

Those working in community relations felt that the participative approach enshrined in the CIS was a model of good practice which they have learned from and are applying in good relations work. They highlighted the effectiveness of targeting under-represented demographics, which neutralises and deflects the focus from orange and green.



## 7.2 Underrepresented Groups & Locations

Mechanisms to identify gaps in representation and location has over the strategy cycle informed NIHE funding agreements and collaborations with Supporting Communities, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Disability Action NI, and the Rural Community Network. 74 new groups were established by Supporting Communities in underrepresented areas/estates over the five-year period.

The evolution and growth of the Rural, Disability and Youth Forums was evident throughout the consultations. These groups had previously been identified as under-represented; however, with the provision of one-to-one training and capacity building over the period, the groups feel capable and empowered to represent the views of their constituents through the forums.

The Youth Forum is the most recently convened group and at the time of writing intensive work is ongoing in partnership with the NIYF to set up a shadow Housing Forum that will run parallel to the Central Housing Forum. Young people involved in this process referenced the capacity building support they have accessed, including training in leadership, Housing Rights, Homelessness Awareness, and the NIHE structures and code of conduct.

Members of the youth group emphasised that their representation will be an opportunity to highlight that access to housing and homelessness are the two biggest issues presenting for young people. This is evidenced by the statistic that 2% of NIHE tenants are aged 18-24 and this age profile is also where the highest concentration of homelessness prevails. Contributors felt that the current points allocation system makes it difficult for young people who do not fall within the disadvantaged criteria to get NIHE tenancies.

The consensus among the stakeholders was that future involvement of underrepresented groups must include LGBTQIA+ and Black Minority and Ethnic (BME) communities. To accelerate this, the NIHE are collaborating with the Rainbow Project who work to improve the wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ people and their families in Northern Ireland and Participation and Practice of Rights, who work with communities marginalised by ethnicity, asylum seekers and refugees, and those living in housing stress.

NIHE recognise that many of their tenants are struggling with addiction and mental health. Staff have received training to increase their awareness of drugs and alcohol, Autism, Alzheimers and Dementia. The NIHE are working collaboratively with Extern and Action Mental Health to facilitate tenant access to their specialist programmes.

### 7.3 Community Grants

The NIHE remain one of the largest investors in communities across Northern Ireland. A total of £1,146,035 was invested in the Community Grants Programme throughout the lifespan of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-2023. This fund provides an opportunity for the NIHE to support communities with good relations, cohesion, and reimagining. Beneficiaries over the five-year period included a cross-section of society and age profiles. Internal evaluations found that recipient communities experienced enhanced social, emotional and mental wellbeing in addition to improved connectivity and cohesion within their community.

Contributors from groups who were recipients of a community grant were appreciative of the funding and referenced the increased pride in where they live that they experienced when working on the grant funded project. This enabled the confidence to participate, increased social interaction and making new friends. Some reflected on the new skills acquired in respect of coordination and carrying out practical tasks. Experiencing what can be achieved through the grant and working together as a community has increased the motivation for some groups to pursue further development.

While the individual allocations per group are relatively small, the outcomes achieved suggest the fund achieves a positive social return on the NIHE investment (See Recommendation 9.3). All stakeholders want to see the continuation of the fund and welcome the amended guidance notes for the 2023/24 round. This includes flexibility to allow groups to apply for innovative projects to address the cost of living crisis and digital inclusion. Community grant funding is to be increased from £20k to £30k per Area. An innovation fund of £5k per Area will be available in 2023-24 for groups to engage in community planning and participatory budgeting with their local Council.

### 7.4 The Housing Community Network

Strengthening the Housing Community Network structure was an objective of the CIS. Contributors (n=10) felt that the HCN structure had become stronger over the five-year period. There are now more member groups discussing a greater range of housing related issues through the HCN.

Residents Associations remain well represented, many of which emerge from housing issues or pressure groups, though when that issue is resolved, they do tend to stay active. One of the concerns expressed was succession planning for some of the HCN groups in the longer established estates. Survey data from HCN groups found that the majority had 5 or less active members aged between 18-25.

The leadership of groups is getting older, and younger members are not coming forward. Some contributors felt that community activism and connection to the community is not as evident in younger generations while others suggested that these values and principles are there in younger people but may be expressed differently. To facilitate succession planning across the HCN, NIHE are working with the NIYF and others to engage with young people to set up a shadow Housing Forum that will run parallel to the CHF.

The number of community and issue-specific groups on the HCN has increased. It was felt that the HCN meetings are efficient, with a constructive engagement with the Housing Executive and Supporting Communities, who attend all meetings. HCNs are underpinned by the principles of community development and afford the opportunity to local groups to influence housing policy through a bottom-up approach encompassing local, area, regional and central network level. Contributors referenced the increased capacity of the HCN to scrutinise services at a local level and make recommendations on policy or procedural improvements. The network acts as a mechanism to get information/advice to tenants. For the NIHE, the HCN provides an insight into customers' needs and is effective in testing new approaches.

## **7.5 The Central Housing Forum (CHF)**

Enhancing the role of the CHF was a stated objective in the Community Involvement Strategy. New terms of reference for the CHF in 2022 augmented its accountability function, with the stipulation that the CHF must engage with the Housing Executive Board, Chief Executive, and Directors and the Tenant & Customer Services Committee at least once per year respectively and that the CHF meet once per month with a minimum of 10 meetings annually. This mandate renders the CHF a very powerful group: their relationship with the NIHE is not “benevolent”, rather the CHF challenges, and has a strong and respected voice with, the NIHE.

Supporting service-specific working groups is an integral part of the work of the CHF. To further quantify this, in the September 2023 update to the CHF, working groups were referenced on issues such as: Adaptations; Digital Inclusion; Welfare Reform; Financial Inclusion; Equality, Diversity and Inclusion; Sustainable Development; Events; and Community Wealth Building. There were six working groups operational throughout while a number of others were active at various points during the life of the Strategy, but not throughout its entire duration.

Participants in the consultation referenced the value of the CHF for connecting them with other members and groups, which frequently leads to information sharing and some form of collaboration. They felt it was an excellent information resource and forum for discussions. Members were consulted on the NIHE Homelessness Strategy, Corporate Plan, Community Cohesion Strategy Review, Community Involvement Strategy and NIHE Arrears Letters.

## 7.6 Digital Inclusion

To promote digital inclusion, consultees highlighted the revised NIHE website which was launched in the strategy cycle. The Digital Inclusion Working Group led this process and contributors referenced the effectiveness of the [Community](#) tab, which directs tenants to relevant information about inclusion, safety, and key contacts. HCN member groups recounted how the NIHE responded quickly at the start of the pandemic to provide iPads and access to Zoom and other online platforms to ensure that groups could continue to meet.

The ONSIDE online training programme was cited as further evidence of digital inclusion, this initiative increased the digital capacity of disabled people in Northern Ireland and in the process helped to reduce their feelings of isolation. HCN and CHF consultees welcomed the development of the CHF Collaboration Portal for members to stay connected throughout online chats and discussions; keep notes; share files online; manage meetings and associated papers; and assign tasks and to-do lists.

NIHE views greater digital inclusion as being essential to disseminate information but also in response to the reduced number of customers coming into their offices. For those who do come to NIHE centres, internet access is available in all reception areas. NIHE uses text messaging to alert tenants on first arrears letters. NIHE staff and group members pointed to the results of baseline surveys detailing that many groups still disseminate information through word of mouth and face to face conversations. In response, NIHE continues to support groups with information packs, community newsletters and the coordination of public meetings with communities, where necessary.

## 7.7 Networking & Best Practice

Sections 7.4 and 7.5 discuss the efficacy of the HCH and CHF as forums for networking, collaboration and sharing of best practice. All contributors (n=12) to the consultation welcomed the return of the Community Involvement Conference in 2023 after a break of three years due to Covid. This represents an annual opportunity to network and share best practice. The 2023 event themes were tenant led and included financial capability, addressing poverty and the cost-of-living crisis.

## Section 8: Analysis

This section presents an analysis and concluding thoughts on the evaluation of the Community Involvement Strategy 2018-23 with key challenges and critical success factors identified.

### 8.1 Evaluation Objectives

As set out in the terms of reference, the overall aim of the evaluation was to collate, collect and review quantitative and qualitative data and insights, with the aim of assisting relevant staff within the Housing Executive to review the 2018-23 strategy and develop the new five-year CIS.

### 8.2 Extent to which the strategy aims were met – Aim 1

Aim 1 of the strategy was *to promote community involvement across all NIHE communities*.

This aim was underpinned by three objectives and five associated actions. Section 6.2 documents performance against each objective based on a desk review of documents made available to this evaluation. It concludes that four out of the five actions were fully achieved with one partially achieved. It found robust research processes in place to capture satisfaction and participation levels and identify under representation by location and customer profile.

The Rural, Disability and Youth forums were established in response to those sectors previously being identified as underrepresented. Each of the forums contributed to the consultation with terms such as ‘influence’, ‘voice’ and ‘empowerment’ used by members to convey their connection with NIHE housing policy.

The emerging underrepresented groups are BME, LGBTQIA+, refugees, asylum seekers and the Irish Traveller community. While these represent a statistically very small proportion of their tenants, the NIHE have worked – and continue to work – with support organisations connected to these groups to mitigate barriers to engagement such as confidence and lack of capacity. Section 7 documents the challenges and barriers presenting for existing tenants in sustaining their tenancy including addiction and mental health. Recent (late 2023) presentation of anti-immigration signage in South and West Belfast is a source of concern.

The Community Grants Programme remains a significant investment by the NIHE in local communities across Northern Ireland. In return, it enables the NIHE to engage at the heart of the communities where they have estates. Beneficiaries consistently referenced the bond and solidarity experienced with community stakeholders and partners when working on projects funded by the programme. For many, it established the primacy of community over parochial issues and was a catalyst for further community development and regeneration.

### 8.3 Extent to which the strategy aims were met – Aim 2

Aim 2 was to enable communities to challenge, influence and shape the Housing Executive's housing services. To achieve this aim, six objectives were set, with an associated 33 actions. Section 6.2 finds that 28 of the actions have been fully achieved. The HCN and CHF have evolved into forums that constructively challenge and influence housing services. The HCN encompasses local, area, regional and central network and their meetings review and scrutinise housing services at all such levels, making recommendations for policy and procedural improvements. While work has progressed, the ambition to have tenant chairs for HCN meetings has not been realised.

New terms of reference for the CHF have strengthened the links and accountability structures between the CHF and the NIHE Board and Senior Management. The infrastructure is in place to facilitate NIHE communities to shape housing services through the CHF. Testament to this is the scale and scope of the working groups to progress specific issues and improvement initiatives. One such group is focussed on Sustainable Development and this should continue to be a priority in the next strategy. Working groups' update reports are presented at each CHF meeting. This is also the forum through which the Community Involvement Strategy is monitored.

The rural residents, disability and youth forums are enabling under-represented groups to influence housing policy. The youth forum has a dual function; it is engaging a cohort that statistically makes up about 2% of NIHE tenants and is seeking to address succession challenges across the HCN. Baseline analysis of current participation levels has identified BME, LGBTQIA+, Asylum Seekers, Refugees, and Irish Traveller communities as being underrepresented and collaborative work is being progressed with support agencies to increase their participation.

A pragmatic approach to digital inclusion has been adopted. The NIHE pivoted quickly at the outset of the pandemic to ensure groups had the necessary ICT infrastructure to remain operational. They have partnered in the ONSIDE project which has increased digital capacity among disabled people across Northern Ireland. Internet access is available in all NIHE centres and Supporting Communities have assisted many groups to increase their digital capacity. The CHF Collaboration Portal is making the business of the forum more efficient. Challenges for digital inclusion include connectivity and affordability of data bundles.

A recurring theme throughout the desk review and consultation was that groups have greater capacity to effectively engage with the HCN. They have been/are supported to adopt good governance principles and access complementary funding/ training opportunities. Groups also learn from each other and share good practice through the HCN and the annual conference.

## 8.4 Enablers for Success

This section explores the enablers for the successful delivery of the Community Involvement Strategy. The NIHE's commitment to involving its communities and empowering them to shape and influence housing policy is the key overarching enabler. The organisation recognises the strategic value that community involvement accrues in how it keeps the Housing Executive close to the needs of its customers. It is an effective form of early intervention, identifying and anticipating issues and putting actions in place prior to any escalation.

Investment in building the structures to enhance community involvement is crucial. The funding agreement with Supporting Communities is underpinned by the objective of building the capacity of community organisations who can feed into the HCN and CHF. There is a direct correlation between group capacity and community involvement. The scale and scope of the range of methods of involvement to encourage participation at individual or group level has removed barriers to engagement.

Building relationships and collaboration are further enablers for successful community involvement. The NIHE recognises that support organisations such as Rural Community Network, Disability Action, Action Mental Health, The Rainbow Project and Participation and Practice of Rights provide unique insights into the barriers and challenges the people they support experience in relation to housing. The NIHE works collaboratively with these agencies to design co-produced solutions. On the statutory side, local councils value the input of the NIHE into their community planning process.

Getting the right balance between digital inclusion and face-to-face engagement has been important. There is still a belief among stakeholders that housing is done best face-to-face, which is why the NIHE remains committed to initiatives such as estate visits, where tenants can raise issues directly with staff. Information packs in hard copy and public meetings are other non-digital mediums used by NIHE.

The availability of small grants has been a critical success factor for greater community involvement in urban, interface and rural communities across Northern Ireland. Survey results from beneficiaries provide evidence of increased pride in their area, improved community wellbeing and an enhanced appreciation of the value of working together and diversity within communities. The groups and organisations who sourced the funding reported enhanced capacity to maintain and develop community assets, support capital ambition, and enable further community provision and participation.

## Section 9: Recommendations

This section presents recommendations for consideration in relation to this future strategy development and implementation, many of which have been referenced with varying degrees of explicitness in the previous sections.

### 9.1 Architecture of Future Strategy

Given the multi-faceted and interconnected nature of involvement and cohesion, we recommend the merging of both themes into the new *NIHE Community Strategy*. This will encourage greater collaboration and sharing of knowledge between NIHE staff, leading to more focussed and streamlined services.

Continuing to engage with NIHE communities to promote community involvement and empowering them to influence and shape housing services should be stated aims in the new strategy. There must also be a commitment to enhance cohesion with and between NIHE communities. Building capacity of community groups, promoting shared spaces, and addressing mental health, social exclusion and financial capability should be among the priorities and actions underpinning the aims.

Each aim in the new strategy should have outcomes aligned to a relevant policy area. To provide a robust causal link between activities, outputs and associated change, each outcome should have measurable indicators to evidence success and achievement which could be captured through a theory of change/logic model. The process to achieve this would include:

1. Agree high level aims of the strategy
2. Agree on thematic areas of work under each aim. These themes can be used to categorise and group together the various activities and initiatives.
3. Identify the changes aspired relative to each theme (outcomes) and clarify who each outcome relates to (i.e. residents, organisations). The outcomes should align with government policy and in the case of Social Return on Investment (SROI) could align with an established financial proxy.
4. Discuss how the NIHE will know whether each change has been achieved (indicators). Agree on indicators of success – these will determine the approach to data collection.
5. Determine whether baseline data exists for each indicator, either in national datasets or in previous research.



## 9.2 Community Wealth Building

The 2022 DfC commissioned report on Community Wealth Building (CWB) noted that CWB activities already exist across Northern Ireland. It referenced a well-developed community infrastructure that supports working-class and marginalised communities and a thriving social enterprise sector, as well as social value clauses in procurement and communities taking more control over land and property to use them more effectively and sustainably. The NIHE have taken the lead in supporting such activities in their communities and Section 4.2.2 found there to be a strong strategic alignment between NIHE strategies and CWB.

The recommendations from the Independent Advisory Panel <sup>29</sup> set out the steps necessary to shape economic development that seeks to transform local economies based on direct community ownership and control of assets and wealth by the people of those communities themselves. The Housing Executive are well-placed to engage on and contribute to future community wealth building approaches in the region. To formalise this, we recommend inclusion of Community Wealth Building as a priority in the new NIHE Community Strategy with measurable actions and targets. The NIHE should also engage closely with colleagues in DfC on the implementation and roll out of the CWB recommendations made by the Independent Advisory Panel.

## 9.3 Data Collection & Impact Measurement

It is recommended that NIHE develop and implement a consistent system to store and report on all relevant output and outcome data for the next Community Involvement Strategy. The system should align with and be derived from the strategy architecture (see 9.1). Embedding SROI methodology should be considered to capture the social value generated by the next Community Involvement Strategy. However, to enable this, a systematic approach to data collection and storing is required. This evaluation has highlighted the extensive outputs and actions during the 2018-2023 Strategy; however, while the research to establish a baseline of current participation levels and participant views across our communities under Aim 1 did evidence some outcomes for individuals and groups, more work is required to capture the impact of future strategies on stakeholders.

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<sup>29</sup> [Recommendations to advance Community wealth building in Northern Ireland \(communities-ni.gov.uk\)](https://communities-ni.gov.uk/recommendations-to-advance-community-wealth-building-in-northern-ireland) (accessed November 2022)

We would highlight the Outcomes system implemented by the Housing Executive's Supporting People team as an exemplar; NIHE also has access to a Salesforce System for administering grant funding, whilst a range of purpose-built social value reporting systems are available and/or under development and merit consideration (although the inclusion of NI-specific community involvement, good relations and cohesion outcomes and proxies would be important).

Having such a system embedded facilitates a seamless transition from quantifying outcomes to applying a financial proxy and subsequent SROI calculations. Quantifying the social value of two new policy initiatives – community wealth building and social value in NIHE procurement for local communities – should be prioritised in the 2023-28 CIS. An input figure, i.e. the total amount invested in the strategy over its cycle, is essential for the application of this methodology. With the significant partnership and collaborative working, this process would also enable an attribution value for NIHE interventions. Furthermore, it would value NIHE inputs in areas where they are working on behalf of others or when external influences outside their scope are prevalent, such as in NIHE estates where there is a high level of home ownership.

A future monitoring and evaluation framework for the NIHE Community Strategy should be an amalgamation of SROI and Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) which is the framework used by TEO and is based around the questions.

1. How much did we do?
2. How well did we do it?
3. Who benefitted?