

INVESTING
IN
COMMUNITY
LEADERSHIP

PUTTING PEOPLE IN
THE LEAD



Post Conference Report

Celebrating the Conclusion of the Investing
in Community Leadership Programme



10th April 2025



The Junction Dungannon

Introduction



(L-R) Sonya Johnston Deputy Director of Fermanagh Trust, Kevin Burns Development Programme Officer Holywell Trust, Kate Clifford Director of Rural Community Network and Paul Sweeney Northern Ireland Chair of The National Lottery Community Fund

The ***Investing in Community Leadership Programme*** was a bold, five-year initiative made possible through a £500,000 grant from The National Lottery Community Fund. It empowered over 2,000 individuals across Western Northern Ireland to lead, influence, and strengthen their organisations using Community Development approaches that promoted fairness, equity, and well-being.

Delivered through a strategic partnership between the Fermanagh Trust, Holywell Trust, and Rural Community Network, the programme combined sector-specific leadership development with a strong infrastructure for learning, networking, and collaboration. Its design was underpinned by a shared Theory of Change, which guided all elements of delivery, from youth philanthropy and accredited diplomas to short-term training and mentoring. This collaborative model significantly enhanced the ability of individuals and organisations to deliver sustained Community Development activity throughout the Western region, while also inspiring a new generation of changemakers within the voluntary and community sector.



Rural
Community
Network

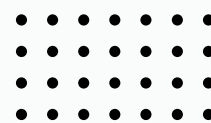


HOLYWELL
TRUST



COMMUNITY
FUND

Conference Overview



The Investing in Community Leadership Conference brought together participants, partners, and funders to celebrate the programme's achievements. The event featured powerful personal stories, panel discussions, and reflections that illustrated the programme's lasting influence on individuals, organisations, and communities.

Showcasing how strategic investment in local leadership can drive long-term change, inspire new pathways, and strengthen the voluntary and community sector, highlighting the importance of continued investment in grassroots leadership and community capacity building, it served as both a celebration and a call to action.

Key Messages to Funders and Government Bodies



**PRIORITISE
LONG-TERM
INVESTMENT**

Commit to sustained, multi-year funding to embed and expand the proven impact of community leadership programmes.



**STRENGTHEN
PROFESSIONAL
PATHWAYS**

Invest in structured development routes, including apprenticeships, to build a resilient and skilled community sector workforce.



**INTEGRATE
LEADERSHIP INTO
GRANT
STRUCTURES**

Embed leadership, governance, and capacity-building support within Community Development Grants.

Summary of Evaluation Insights and Emerging Themes

- The programme has transformed the landscape of community development and leadership in the West of Northern Ireland.
- A visible, accessible ecosystem of learning, development, networking, and support has been created.
- Participants are stepping confidently into leadership roles and making a tangible impact in their communities.
- There is a strong appetite for lifelong learning and progression in community development.
- The programme has reignited a passion for collective action and community improvement during challenging times.
- It has inspired further investment, including the creation of two additional Diplomas in Community Development Practice.
- The programme has enhanced cross-sector collaboration and the capacity to address shared challenges.
- A foundational infrastructure for community development learning and support has been established, agile and responsive learning pathways have ensured clearer career pathways and a sense of collegiality.



Programme Achievements



Over the reporting period, a total of 1,639 learners across the West engaged in our key sectoral learning initiatives, with 1,239 participating in person and 400 accessing online learning opportunities.



We successfully delivered 60 face-to-face sectoral skills courses, including accredited training in Facilitative Leadership, OCN Community Development Levels 1 and 2, and the Level 2 Award in Domestic Renewable Low Carbon Technologies.



In addition, 600 online courses were completed, expanding access to vital skills development.



Our targeted youth initiatives supported 50 young philanthropists aged 16–25, while the Future Leaders programme has engaged 66 participants to date, with further growth anticipated.



A further 42 learners enrolled in and graduated from the University of Galway with a Diploma in Community Development Practice, reflecting our commitment to fostering academic and practical excellence in community development.



Speaking at the event, Lauri McCusker, Director of the Fermanagh Trust, said “Strong leadership is the foundation of a thriving community and voluntary sector. The Investing in Community Leadership Programme has been transformative for the West of Northern Ireland, a region often overlooked. This investment in leadership and in young people will leave a lasting impact, strengthening communities for years to come.”



Paul Sweeney, Northern Ireland Chair of The National Lottery Community Fund, stated: “By delivering these important accessible development and networking opportunities, participants in the project are now better equipped to face sectoral challenges and lead change within their communities, which will continue to have a positive impact for many years.”

Panel discussions highlighted the programme's impact through powerful participant stories and tailored learning experiences

Panel 1: Young Philanthropists focused on empowering emerging talent, succession planning, and capacity building, featuring Fermanagh Trust's Young Philanthropists.



Case Study: Danny McNulty

Fermanagh Young leader: Empowered to lead, Inspired to Give Back

Danny McNulty joined the Fermanagh Young Leaders Development Programme in September 2023 while experiencing homelessness and living in supported accommodation in Enniskillen, not engaged in education, training, or employment. Despite coming from a very different background than his peers, most of whom lived at home and attended school, Danny quickly integrated into the group. The programme aimed to develop leadership skills among young people to support succession planning in the community voluntary sector, and participants were tasked with designing and administering a grant to improve lives in Fermanagh. Danny, passionate about addressing homelessness, proposed it as the grant's theme, and the group unanimously supported his idea, boosting his confidence and sense of belonging. The group went on to award seven grants to charities tackling homelessness and prevention. During this time, Danny secured independent housing through the NIHE, gained employment in youth work with the programme's support, participated in local council consultations and research on youth integration, and travelled to Rome on an Erasmus+ youth exchange. Reflecting on his journey, Danny shared:



“I’ve gone on to work in the community sector. I was inspired by this programme. It helped me realise where I could make a difference.”

Panel 1: Key Sectoral Skills and Networking

focused on investing in People, transforming organisations, supporting communities: A case for community-centred capacity building.



Case Study: Kerrie Flood

From Volunteer to CEO: Empowering Leadership Through Learning



Kerrie Flood, now CEO of Fermanagh Women's Aid, exemplifies the transformative power of accessible, sector-specific training. Having started as a volunteer, Kerrie progressed through the ranks to lead the organisation, and her journey was significantly shaped by her engagement with the Leadership Programme. At the conference, Kerrie shared how the programme's flexible, locally delivered training was a 'game-changer' for her and her team. Kerrie participated in several courses herself, using them not only to build her own leadership capacity but also to develop supportive peer networks, these connections allowed her to learn from others in the sector, share her own experiences, and strengthen her confidence as a leader.



Professionally, the training enabled Kerrie to strengthen her team, adapt to emerging challenges, and streamline operations. Under her leadership, staff recently completed over 60 courses, enhancing their confidence, knowledge and skills. This tailored approach not only improved service delivery and staff wellbeing but also fostered a culture of continuous learning and innovation. Organisationally, the shift to local and online training reduced costs, improved administrative efficiency, and allowed staff to manage their own development, freeing Kerrie to focus on strategic leadership. For the wider community, especially the vulnerable women and children supported by Fermanagh Women's Aid, the benefits have been profound, more responsive services, safer working practices, and a team that feels valued and empowered. Kerrie's story is a powerful testament to how investment in community leadership can ripple outwards, transforming individuals, organisations, and the communities they serve.

Panel 2: Future Leaders, Nurturing Talent, Strengthening Communities.



Case Study: Kevin Burns From Front Desk to Community Leadership



Kevin Burns began his professional journey facing significant challenges, including periods of unemployment and time spent on Jobseekers Allowance. His first step into community work came through casual shifts at the reception desk of the Holywell Trust, a local community centre. This role became a turning point, offering him insight into the complex social, economic, and emotional issues faced by local people.

Recognising Kevin's potential, Holywell supported his progression to part-time and then full-time roles, eventually encouraging him to apply for Assistant Programme Officer. As part of their commitment to nurturing leadership from within, Holywell enrolled Kevin in the Future Leaders Programme, a key strand of the Community Leadership initiative. The programme proved transformative. Kevin developed essential leadership skills—particularly in diplomacy, strategic communication, and confident engagement with decision-makers. He recalls gaining the confidence to interact with visiting experts, government ministers, and even Secretaries of State, reshaping his self-perception as a leader and changemaker.

Following the programme, Kevin advanced to Development Programme Officer, contributing to the very initiative that had supported his growth. He now works as a Project Officer at the Northwest Community Network, where he continues to apply the principles and practices learned through the programme. Kevin's story is a powerful example of how targeted investment in leadership development can transform individual careers and strengthen community capacity.

“I discovered a skill for diplomacy, asking good questions, and arguing my case with confidence.”



Panel 2: Community Development Diploma



Case Study: Kelly Donaghy

Diploma Leadership Training, a strategic investment in community resilience, building stronger, more inclusive communities



Kelly's engagement with the programme began when, as Administrative Co-ordinator at the Rural Community Network, she enrolled in the Diploma in Community Development Practice, a key component of our leadership initiative delivered in partnership with the University of Galway. Through a curriculum grounded in participatory practice, social justice, and community empowerment, Kelly gained the tools and confidence to take on more strategic roles in community development. Her graduation in November 2024 marked not just a personal achievement, but a milestone in her journey as a community leader.

The programme's impact was immediate and tangible. Equipped with new skills and a broadened perspective, Kelly advanced directly into the second year of the Community Development degree programme at Ulster University, which she completed in 2025. This progression reflects the programme's success in fostering a pipeline of capable, committed leaders ready to serve their communities.



Kelly's leadership is now evident in her current role at RCN, where she now co-ordinates the Rural Residents Forum in partnership with the Housing Executive. Drawing on the participatory methods and advocacy skills honed during the programme, she facilitates meaningful dialogue between rural residents and policymakers. Her work ensures that the voices of underrepresented communities are not only heard but actively shape housing and community planning.

Beyond her formal role, Kelly's roots in community volunteering through initiatives like Community Responders and the Breathru Project have been enriched by her training. She now approaches community challenges with a more strategic lens, fostering inclusive networks and building resilience from the ground up.

Panel 2: Community Development Diploma



Case Study: Una Leonard

Diploma Leadership Training. Investing in Leadership, Strengthening Community Support for Maternal Mental Health



Una Leonard's journey into motherhood was marked by a profound struggle with postnatal anxiety and depression, revealing a critical gap in services with no dedicated perinatal mental health supports.

Motivated by lived experience and a deep sense of injustice, Una and her sister co-founded Support 2gether, a peer-led initiative offering emotional support to families affected by antenatal and postnatal mental health challenges. Over 15 years, the organisation evolved from a small support group into a recognised community service. But sustaining and growing it required more than passion, it needed structure, confidence, and strategic leadership.

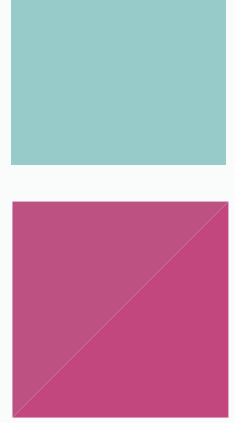
To meet these needs, Una enrolled in the Diploma in Community Development Leadership. She gained practical skills in advocacy, planning, and evaluation, and developed the language to articulate Support 2gether's value within the wider community and voluntary sector. The programme also helped her overcome personal barriers, including dyslexia, and reframe her identity as a capable, strategic leader.

The impact has been significant. With enhanced skills, Una revitalised the organisation's operations and vision. It now operates with greater structure, clarity, and confidence, better positioned to support families, engage stakeholders, and advocate for systemic change in maternal mental health services.

Looking ahead, Una plans to continue her development through further leadership and management training, ensuring Support 2gether remains a resilient, responsive, and respected voice for mothers across the region.

Una's story shows how investing in individual leadership through the Diploma programme directly contributed to stronger, more sustainable community services, especially where lived experience drives innovation and impact.

Conference Delegate Reflections on Impact of Investing in Community Leadership



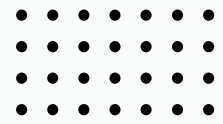
- Boosted confidence and peer connections.
- Encouraged diverse and non-traditional leaders.
- Promoted inclusive, collaborative, and accessible learning environments.
- Clearly identified huge appetite for short courses, with high potential for continued engagement.
- Emphasis on the continued need for hands-on learning, mentorship, and storytelling.
- A need for on-going support for succession planning, board mentoring, and peer learning.
- Investment in people and communities and a culture of continuous evaluation fosters pride and responsibility.
- The programme enabled and encouraged collaboration across sectors and communities.
- Highlighted the value of lived experience in policymaking.
- This model is effective, scalable, and replicable across other regions.



**Renewed hope and inspiration,
particularly among youth**



Delegate Reflections on Challenges within the Sector



Structural & Systemic Barriers

- Low pay, unclear career pathways, and risk of burnout.
- Bureaucratic processes and siloed approaches in government-funder relations.
- Limited access to leadership opportunities for youth, disabled individuals, and rural residents.

Funding & Resource Gaps

- Need for sustainable funding and fair compensation.
- Lack of long-term strategies to retain VCSE talent.
- Insufficient support for implementation and maintaining momentum.

Policy & Evaluation Needs

- Need for clearer routes to engage with policy.
- Importance of data-informed strategies and ongoing evaluation.
- Gaps in inclusive decision-making and structural support for leadership development.
- Clarity in the role of the public sector in supporting and sustaining community leadership



Reflections

- This initiative has shown that when local expertise is backed by meaningful investment, transformation follows.
- The success of this five-year programme is evident in the enhanced confidence, skills, and support among individuals using community development approaches to tackle disadvantage.
- As we look to the future, it is crucial to sustain and build upon this momentum.
- By fostering leadership skills and facilitating collaboration, we can ensure that community voices remain at the forefront of shaping the region's future.
- Together, we can continue to support collective action and empower communities to drive their own development, ensuring a brighter, more equitable future for all.



Future Outlook: Programme Sustainability

- Advocate for long-term funding (5+ years).
- Embed leadership development in grant structures.
- Maintain mentorship and rural training access.
- Build on successful elements and enhance programme integration.
- Explore wider relevance across Northern Ireland.
- Explore expanding partnerships with new stakeholders.



“This experience gave me permission to see myself as a leader. Before, I didn’t think I had what it took but now, I’ve stepped into a leadership role with confidence.”

“There is no other programme like this to bring disparate parts of the sector together. In terms of impact for the sector, it will take a while to filter through; these things take time. But we got as much learning from each other as from the course - all that networking and learning, it’s good for the sector.”

“Running a charity is a lonely place. I have sat around tables with decision-makers and felt dismissed. This has given me the terminology and confidence to sit at the table with different sectors and stand tall and shine bright. I want to be in the sector for another 15 years.”

“I’ve made connections that I wouldn’t have had otherwise. We’re still sharing advice and supporting one another.”



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Thank you to:

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

on the Investing in Community
Leadership Programme,
please contact:



leadership@fermanaghtrust.org