

DTNI 15 CONFERENCE

The Playhouse, Derry/Londonderry



**REPORT ON THE COMMUNITY
WEALTH BUILDING CONFERENCE
& POLICY SYMPOSIUM**

**15 YEARS
15 VOICES**

October 2025

Table of Contents

3

Introduction

4

Summary of
Keynote Themes

7

Panel
Discussions

11

Breakout
Sessions

13

Recommendations

15

Action Summary

Introduction

The DTNI 15 Conference & Policy Symposium (the CWB Symposium) drew over 120 delegates from across Northern Ireland (NI) and the border regions, representing a broad spectrum of sectors, including community development, social enterprise, local and central government, credit unions, academia, the arts, health and wellbeing organisations, and public agencies.

Attendees included representatives from the Department for the Economy (DfE), Department for Communities (DfC), local councils, housing associations, enterprise agencies, community development trusts, and social finance institutions, alongside grassroots leaders from organisations such as Gasyard Development Trust, Inishowen Development Partnership, EastSide Partnership, Waterside Credit Union, and The Workspace Group, to name but a few.

This diverse gathering reflects the degree of interest, collaborative and cross-sectoral nature of the community wealth building movement, demonstrating strong regional commitment to embedding social and economic justice in local economies.

The CWB Symposium marked fifteen years of the work of DTNI and its representation and advocacy for its members; community development trusts, associations and social enterprise agencies.

15 Years 15 Voices restated the role and significance of communities in leading and delivering social and economic justice programmes in NI. The event brought together policymakers, practitioners, academics, and community leaders to reflect on the evolution of Community Wealth Building and to explore future frameworks that embed this approach within government policy, regional economic strategy, and local delivery.

The conference theme, "Social Development & Local Economy: Communities in the Lead", considered the need for a new economic model in NI, one in which community development trusts and citizens better utilise assets, investment supported by political, social and economic networks working collegiately to shape inclusive prosperity. Central to this conversation were two keynote contributions:

- Neil McInroy, Global Lead for Community Wealth Building (The Democracy Collaborative) – "A Wealth-Building Economy." And Mark Lee, Acting Deputy Secretary for Economic Policy within DfE
- Professor Laura Bradley-McAuley (Ulster University) and Sarah McKinley (Chair, Independent Advisory Panel on CWB NI) – "Community: From Social to Economy."

Together, their contributions provided delegates with a framework for understanding wealth building in local, regional, national and international settings, with reflections on lesson learned for advancing a Community Wealth Building Framework for NI.

Summary of Keynote Themes

Neil McInroy A Wealth-Building Economy

McInroy outlined the principles and global application of CWB, framing it as "a movement for genuine change, to reclaim the economy for people, place, and planet."

His address identified three essential pillars for success: practice, policy, and networks — the "three legs of the stool" that sustain systemic transformation.

Key reflections included:

- The economy is a social construction; it can and must be reimagined to work for communities, not against them.
- CWB is not another project but a systemic approach that in its outworking redirects wealth and control back to local people through procurement, land use, ownership models, and financial innovation.
- Scotland's Community Wealth Building Bill (2026) was presented as a benchmark, demonstrating how legislative commitment can institutionalise CWB principles across government and local authorities.
- McInroy warned against cultural and institutional barriers, the "aye been" mentality, slow-moving bureaucracy, and outdated economic thinking.
- He urged Northern Ireland to recognise its "competitive advantage" in its strong community sector and to build on early anchor institution work that once influenced the Preston Model.



"It's time to make the whole economy social, not just have a wee fluffy social economy on the side."

Policy Implications:

- Develop a regional CWB action plan embedded across departments and local councils.
- Review and revive the 2012 Belfast Anchor Institution Study as a framework for local procurement and ownership models.
- Create enabling conditions for community ownership, fair employment, and ethical finance.



Professor Laura Bradley-McAuley & Sarah McKinley

Community: From Social to Economy

The second keynote explored the intersection of social enterprise and CWB, examining how the social economy transitions from “marginal” to “mainstream” within a new economic order.

Laura Bradley-McAuley

- Highlighted the definitional challenge of social enterprise in Northern Ireland, without clarity, measurement and support remain inconsistent.
- Emphasised the need for a formal social enterprise strategy and definition, supported by DfE's ongoing co-design work and action plan.
- Identified opportunities for education, clustering, and shared services to strengthen sustainability and reduce grant dependency.
- Advocated for visibility: “You can’t be what you can’t see.” Social enterprises must be profiled, celebrated, and resourced.

Sarah McKinley

- Positioned social enterprise as a vehicle for systemic change, not simply service delivery.
- Warned against replicating extractive economic behaviours within the social economy as it scales.
- Called for democratised enterprise, shared ownership, fair work, and mission-driven innovation.
- Urged a realignment of public resources:

“We have everything we need. The policy levers exist. The question is why those resources aren’t being directed to the social & foundational economy.”

- Emphasised the growing urgency amid global economic volatility, identifying the foundational sectors, food, care, and energy, as the bedrock of future community resilience.

Key Learning & Themes

1 From Policy Rhetoric to Practice

Both keynotes underscored that CWB is not a fringe policy idea; it's a foundational strategy for reordering of economic priorities. Implementation requires horizontal collaboration across departments, including DfE, DfC, DoF, DAERA, locally elected government and its statutory community planning partners.

2 Institutionalisation through Legislation

Scotland's example provides a legislative model for embedding CWB principles across government and statutory bodies. Northern Ireland should explore a similar approach, potentially through a CWB Act or Statutory Framework underpinned by measurable social and economic indicators.

3 Building a Community Wealth Ecosystem

Scaling impact requires alignment of social enterprises, anchor institutions, credit unions, cooperatives, and community development trusts. Clustering and shared services can amplify outcomes and enhance financial resilience.

4 Education & Culture Shift

The next generation of entrepreneurs must be nurtured through education reform, university programmes, and sector-wide leadership development, embedding CWB values in curricula and practice.

5 Foundational Economy & Resilience

The transition from globalised extraction to place-based sustainability must prioritise sectors that meet daily human needs, food, care, housing, and local energy, delivered through community-led interventions.

Panel Discussions

The panel discussions, chaired by broadcaster Lynette Fay, featured a range of practitioners, policymakers, and academics, including Dr. Mairead McCormack (Glenshane Development), Dr. Lisa Wilson (Nevin Economic Research Institute), Dr. Conor Patterson (Newry & Mourne Enterprise Agency), Sarah McKinley (Independent CWB Expert), and Neil McInroy (The Democracy Collaborative). The discussions expanded upon keynote themes and offered lived perspectives on implementing CWB in Northern Ireland.

Restoring Localism & Trust

- Speakers repeatedly highlighted the erosion of local control through centralisation and administrative reform.
- Dr. McCormack's account of the Glenshane Enterprise Centre illustrated how grassroots mobilisation and community-led finance once catalysed local growth before decision-making became overly centralised.
- Panellists called for the re-establishment of local economic partnerships and for councils to be empowered as delivery agents within a regional CWB framework.
- There was a shared view that "localism builds accountability", local people scrutinise local spending more effectively than distant bureaucracies.

Embedding Good Work & Social Value

- Dr. Wilson connected CWB to the Department for Economy's four pillars: good jobs, productivity, regional balance, and decarbonisation.
- She advocated expanding the "good jobs" agenda using the Carnegie framework, ensuring employment quality, autonomy, pay fairness, wellbeing, as a core policy metric.
- McCormack and Patterson warned of the decline in volunteering and the loss of wrap-around employment programmes such as ACE, calling for new models that support people furthest from the labour market.
- The panel reinforced that economic and social wellbeing are interdependent, not parallel goals.

Risk, Trust, & the Culture of Delivery

- McInroy and McKinley both argued that policy should create enabling conditions for communities to take managed risks and innovate.
- There was agreement that Northern Ireland is not risk-averse, but "conflict-averse", willing to accept large systemic risks in extractive models while discouraging local experimentation.



- The panel urged government to trust community-led delivery agents with multi-year funding rather than short-term grants, which currently fragment projects and waste capacity.
- A recurring call was for a shift from compliance to confidence: policy frameworks that enable learning from failure rather than penalising it.

Energy, the Foundational Economy, & Local Ownership

- A point of contention was the new renewable electricity support scheme, seen as offering only “crumbs from the table” to communities.
- Panellists cited Scotland’s community energy models and land reform frameworks as reference points, while noting infrastructural and policy barriers in Northern Ireland.
- There was consensus that energy democracy, community ownership of generation and reinvestment of surplus, could be a pillar of future CWB strategy.
- The energy transition must therefore prioritise local benefit, community reinvestment, and cooperative ownership structures.

Political Complexity & Policy Continuity

- Speakers acknowledged the difficulty of embedding CWB in Northern Ireland’s multi-party, multi-council landscape, yet argued that local consensus is easier to achieve than regional consensus.
- McInroy suggested that CWB has “something for everyone”, from small business networks to trade unions and should be framed as common-sense economics rather than partisan policy.
- McKinley added that the absence of perfect conditions “should not delay progress”, CWB advances through practice, not permission.

Reframing the Economy: From Extractive to Generative

- Closing reflections from Suzie Cahn offered a holistic lens: balancing governance, community, and economy within planetary limits.
- She argued that current economic systems are degenerative, prioritising extraction over care, while community wealth building represents a generative model rooted in regeneration, reciprocity, and social capital.

Cahn's Venn diagram metaphor — governance, commons, and economy in balance, captured the symposium's ethos: rebuilding the economy as an ecosystem of care, creativity, and belonging.



Key Learnings & Cross-Cutting Themes

1 From Rhetoric to Practice

CWB must move from concept to coordinated delivery. Departments and councils should co-design practical pilots that demonstrate measurable social and economic return.

3 Work, Wellbeing, & Productivity

The “good jobs” agenda aligns directly with CWB’s values, employment quality is not a by-product but a central outcome of wealth building.

5 Foundational Economy & Energy Democracy

Future resilience lies in community-led models across food, care, housing, and energy. A regional energy partnership model should be explored.

7 Public Understanding & Education

Communicating CWB beyond “the choir”, making it relatable to businesses, citizens, and civic leaders. This will build the social licence for long-term reform.

2 Decentralisation & Local Empowerment

Restoring local decision-making, funding autonomy, and economic partnerships is essential to rebuild trust and relevance.

4 Risk & Innovation

Policy frameworks should reward innovation and treat local experimentation as a strategic investment, not a compliance risk.

6 Social Capital & Volunteering

Rebuilding volunteering and intergenerational participation requires valuing local knowledge, storytelling, and social infrastructure.

8 Generative, Not Extractive Growth

CWB represents an ethical reorientation, from accumulation to regeneration, from extraction to stewardship.

Breakout Sessions

Complementing the keynote sessions and policy discussions, four breakout workshops offered delegates the opportunity to engage with the practical dimensions of Community Wealth Building across key thematic areas:

Financing Community Wealth

Led by Dr. Aoibheann Walsh (Irish League of Credit Unions) and Colleen (Waterside Credit Union)

This session examined the critical role of community finance in sustaining and expanding the community, voluntary, and social enterprisesector. It showcased how credit unions and ethical lenders can provide accessible, locally rooted financial solutions that enable community ownership, strengthen resilience, and unlock social and economic potential.

The Arts Economy – Driving Community Wealth

Led by Brian Dougherty (New Gate Arts) and Annmarie Gallagher (St. Columb's Hall)

This session examined the critical role of community finance in sustaining and expanding the community, voluntary, and social enterprisesector. It showcased how credit unions and ethical lenders can provide accessible, locally rooted financial solutions that enable community ownership, strengthen resilience, and unlock social and economic potential.



Place & Regeneration – Building Stronger Communities

Led by Brian O'Neill (Enterprise North West) and Selina Horshi (Inner City Trust)

Focused on the regeneration of towns and neighbourhoods, this session explored how community-led planning, social enterprise development, and strategic investment can revitalise local economies, support inclusive growth, and foster a renewed sense of belonging.

Rural Development – Growing Community Wealth in Rural Areas

Led by Claire Russell (Easilink) and Jim McColgan (RAPID)

This discussion addressed the distinct challenges and opportunities facing rural communities. Delegates examined practical strategies for retaining wealth locally, supporting rural enterprises, and building sustainable social infrastructure through collaboration between community groups, businesses, and development agencies.

Note: Full summaries and reports from each breakout workshop are available upon request from Development Trusts NI



Recommendations for the Department for the Economy

1 Develop a Cross-Departmental CWB Framework (2026–2030)

- Align DfE, DfC, and DAERA policies under shared CWB outcomes.
- Embed measurable targets for local procurement, community ownership, fair work, and carbon reduction.
- Create “CWB Delivery Partnerships” at council level.

2 Establish a Long-Term Community Sector Investment Model

- Replace annual grant cycles with multi-year investment agreements.
- Prioritise enabling risk-taking and capacity-building in local delivery agents.

3 Formalise the Social Enterprise and Good Jobs Strategy

- Integrate the Carnegie Good Jobs Framework within DfE’s Social Enterprise Action Plan.
- Provide tax incentives and encourage social value weighting in procurement.

4 Revive and Update Anchor Institution Research

- Map procurement and land use opportunities to maximise local retention of spend.
- Establish Local Procurement Compacts between councils, health trusts, and universities.

5 Support a Social Finance and Cooperative Investment Ecosystem

- Expand access to credit union lending, cooperative investment, and ethical finance.
- Create a Community Investment Fund aligned with Programme for Government goals.

6 Profile and Champion the Sector

- Launch a “Communities in the Lead” media campaign highlighting local case studies.
- Fund leadership exchanges and storytelling initiatives to scale learning and visibility.

Conclusion

The DTNI Conference confirmed that Northern Ireland stands at a pivotal inflection point. The CWB model offers a pathway to address inequality, rebuild trust in local governance, and strengthen the economy from the ground up. As Neil McInroy reminded us, “The time for community wealth building is now.” The Department for the Economy can play a transformative role, not simply as a regulator or funder, but as an enabler of an economy of belonging, dignity, and social justice.

Action Summary

PRIORITY AREA	LEAD PARTNER	SUGGESTED ACTION	TIMELINE
Cross-departmental CWB Framework	DfE, DfC, DAERA, DTNI	Establish interdepartmental taskforce	2026
Social Enterprise Definition & Strategy	DfE	Formal adoption and alignment with CWB pillars	2026
Anchor Institution Review	DfE / Councils / DTNI	Commission update to 2012 study	2025–26
Community Investment Fund	DfE / Credit Unions	Pilot in 3 regions	2026–27
CWB Legislation	Executive	Develop draft bill with consultation	2026
Sector Profiling & Leadership Programme	DTNI / UU	Annual “Communities in the Lead” showcase	Ongoing

**Thanks to our
members & partners**

Acknowledgements

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