



TRUSTEE REPORT

1 April 2022 to

31st March 2023

Trustee Report - Stepping Stones NI

1 The Organisation

Reference and Administrative Details

Registered Company number NI031411 (Northern Ireland)

Registered Charity Number 100727 **VAT Number** 701 428570

Date of Incorporation

October 1996

Registered Office

39 Seymour St
Lisburn
Co Antrim
BT27 4SY

Trustees

Michael Drayne
Ken Alderdice
Belinda O Neill
Karen Carmichael
Michael Scott (Appointed Chair Dec 22)
Kieran Corrigan
Brenda Mc Mullan
Diana Faralley
Melanie Jones (Resigned 4th April 2022)
Cormac O Donnell (Co-opted March 2023)

Company Secretary

Paula Jennings Chief Officer

Independent Auditors

Laurance Shearer: O'Hara Shearer
547 Falls Road, Belfast BT11 9AB
BT28 1XE

Solicitor

Donaldson Mc Connell & Co
8-10 Graham Gardens Lisburn Con Antrim

Bankers

Danske Bank
62-66 Bow St
Lisburn BT28 1YS

Chief Officer

Paula Jennings

1 Who we are

Stepping Stones NI is an award-winning charitable organisation and company limited by guarantee that provides training and employment services for people with learning disabilities, learning difficulties and Autism who often are furthest away from the labour market. We do this in conjunction with social enterprise activity. The company was first established in 1996 to fill the gap in service provision for people with learning disabilities who had no access to training to advance their skills towards employment and volunteering. Stepping Stones NI opened its doors in January 1998 providing training and supported opportunities for people with severe learning disabilities.

In this reporting period from 1st April 2022- 31st March 2023 we continued to deliver our range of services providing the opportunity for people with disabilities to advance skills, employability and overall health and wellbeing of our trainees and clients towards a life more fulfilled. January 2023 was the beginning of our 25th year of delivering services in Northern Ireland.

The services and social enterprises at Stepping Stones NI during the reporting period included:

- **Youth Service:** engaging with young people aged 16-24 who are not in any form of training or employment through a range of activities.
- **Transitions Service:** supporting school leavers with learning disabilities/difficulties to make the move from school to further education, employment or training.
- **Training:** offering training and outreach training to people in various courses leading to the attainment of accredited qualifications including; customer service, health and safety, work appropriate behaviour, catering, money management etc, anti-bullying etc.
- **Employment Service:** providing employment support to people with learning difficulties and learning disabilities. This includes help with; writing CVs, application form preparation, interviews preparation and support in the work place with employers. We help people to gain employment with more community participation.
- **The Courtyard Cafe:** The coffee shop is a registered site for NVQ catering qualifications in Food Preparation and Food Service and Customer Service providing a realistic training environment in which people can develop their catering and hospitality skills.
- **Pink Elephant Cards:** Social enterprise specialising in bespoke wedding stationery and greeting cards made by people with learning disabilities.
- **2nd Avenue Cafe:** social enterprise providing volunteering opportunities to adults with learning disability as well as an outside catering service and room hire.
- **Stepping Stones Picture Framing:** Social Enterprise offering training in picture framing and customer service to people with learning disabilities. Recognised by the

Fine Art Trade Guild as quality provider of framing services and staff trained to Guild Commended Framers standard.

- **The Gatelodge Café:** Social enterprise Café in Newtownards delivering quality training for people with learning disabilities in hospitality, customer service and food preparation.
- **Navigation House:** a new service and project for young people to advance their skills in horticulture and to engage health and wellbeing.

Stepping Stones NI ensures that people with learning disabilities and learning difficulties have the support and opportunity to develop their skills, realise their talents, try new things, attain accredited qualifications, live as active citizens in their community and find employment. We develop quality training and employment services for people with a variety of learning abilities who require the support they need to advance their training and gain the support to gain employment. The work during the period was supported by government departments, European Social Fund, contracts including Health Trust Contracts and income generated through our social enterprises which is reinvested back into the organisation to deliver create our social impact.

Our Mission and Values and objectives

Stepping Stones NI is a Limited Company with charitable status that has been delivering services since January 1998. It provides quality training and employment services for people with a range of disability who often are furthest removed from the labour market, helping those people to find a job if it is their ambition.

The Purpose and Mission of Stepping Stones NI is:

“To nurture the potential of people with a disability to thrive in a socially inclusive society”.

Our Vision

“A socially enriched world where every individual can take proud steps towards a life fulfilled”.

Our Values Drive Our Actions

We Respect everyone’s right to a life more fulfilled.

We Inspire employers and the wider community to see disability differently.

We Nurture all of our People to be their best.

We Empower each-other to make a positive impact on the world.

We are Driven, seizing every opportunity to create better lives.

We are Honest and always do the right thing.

We are Positively Charged to make things possible.

We are Quality Focussed, to always ensure the highest standard.

Our Objectives

- To develop services and social enterprises which will provide appropriate training opportunities leading to employment for adults with learning difficulties.
- To equip individuals participating in projects and services with knowledge, skills, attitudes and qualifications to enable progression to supported employment.
- To increase disability awareness amongst society.
- To promote independence, wellbeing and social inclusion amongst adults with learning difficulties participating in projects.
- To provide a quality service to stakeholders accessing Stepping Stones services and social enterprises.
- To promote cooperation and develop links with other relevant agencies to maximise opportunities for people with learning difficulties.

For the purposes of this report the expression "learning difficulty" shall include any learning disability, difficulties, and associated problem or those who appear on the autistic spectrum, a developmental disability of the mind, sensory impairment, acquired brain injury or mental health problem.

Strategy for delivery

Our strategic plan focuses on the following themes:

- 1. Social Enterprise**
- 2. Employment**
- 3. Skills and Training**
- 4. Health and Well-Being**

The board of Trustees met in March 2023 to review its Strategy with members of the senior management team of Stepping Stones NI .

Stepping Stones NI was incorporated in 1996 and is established under Articles of Association which sets out the objects and powers of the company, and the company is governed under its Articles of Association.

Our Public Benefit

In shaping the strategy and objectives of Stepping Stones NI the Trustees have taken into account the Charity Commission NI guidance on public benefit including the commissions

Public Benefit Reporting Document and confirm that they have complied with the requirements of section 4 of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008.

The direct benefits which flow from our purposes to advance education, relieve unemployment and develop the capacity and skills of individuals aged 16 and over with learning disabilities and learning difficulties, in particular are:

- to provide or assist in the provision of, programmes of education, including accredited and vocational training designed to assist the beneficiaries to lead to employment and volunteering opportunities and to enhance their personal development.
- to provide support and guidance to the beneficiaries in the transition towards employment.
- to establish and manage community-owned-business projects promoted by the company to create training and employment opportunities for the beneficiaries in the area of benefit.
- to advance any other exclusively charitable purpose as the directors may, from time to time, decide in accordance with the law of charity.

Our Benefits

The organisation is committed to delivering services to people with learning disabilities and learning difficulties that assist in their development and personal progression leading to employment we do this through:

- The provision of a range of services and social enterprises that provide the opportunity for people with learning disabilities and learning difficulties to gain qualifications leading to employment.
- The increased personal development and wellbeing of people with learning disabilities and learning difficulties.
- Attainment of qualifications and skills development of people with learning disabilities and learning difficulties.
- Youth service, transition service and employment service provide job support for people to gain volunteering and employment in the community.
- Social enterprises that provide a realistic working environment in which people can develop their work skills, gain qualifications and engage with customers thus increasing their self-esteem, confidence and independence.
- The development of programmes and services that will support people with learning disabilities and learning difficulties fulfil their full potential in society.



2 Achievements and Performance 2022/2023

Our Services

During 2022/2023 Stepping Stones NI our services continued to thrive with continued support from funders, employers and stakeholders. We continued to deliver and build on our quality services that support people with learning disabilities, learning difficulties and Autism to develop their employability skills and achieve qualifications leading to employment. We did this across Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council , Ards and North Down Borough Council, Newry Mourne and Down District Council and in Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and Belfast City Council areas.

We continued to deliver the provision of catering services at Lisburn Civic Centre, for Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, putting social enterprise at the heart of a community and civic space whilst generating income for the organisation.

With support from our funders, partners, employers, volunteers and a range of other stakeholders we made a positive impact to the lives of people with learning disabilities, learning difficulties, Autism and those with health conditions through our programmes. We

have a dedicated team of Staff and Trustees who work alongside our volunteers and community champions. This was the last year of the European Social Fund Programme to Northern Ireland and the final year of this funding stream for Stepping Stones NI with the UK exit from the European Union - Brexit.

Our Performance

Employment Service

The Employment Service supports clients to gain employment/jobs and/or voluntary placements of their choice.

The employment service provided people with opportunities to avail of :

- Innovative pre-employment “STEP INTO” academy training courses with industry specific companies that led to a paid job for participants. We embedded our “ Step into” Academies into the Stepping Stones to Employment delivery model to address local labour market skills shortages, as well as meeting individual employer training requirements. Since April 2022 there have been 12 academies, 50 referrals and 36 jobs secured. The academies were aimed at labour market employment gaps where we worked with premier employees in the following industries: construction, manufacturing, retail, hospitality and catering, IT and customer service. an Employment Officer to support people to prepare for employment or volunteering.
- Support to find and sustain employment or volunteering.
- Access to a range of training courses to help people prepare for work, including; CV building, job search , customer services skills, effective communication skills and essential skills
- Tailored career guidance to help people find a new job and career.
- A broadened curriculum to embed wider societal inclusion topics such as, LGBTQIA+, to promote equality and provide a safe space for participants.
- “Mini Wellbeing Retreats” during March 2023 to broaden the wellbeing curriculum for up to 40 participants to improve mental and physical health through horticultural therapy.

The Employment Service delivered its services across 4 council areas under the European Social Fund Programme – “Stepping Stones to Employment 2” funded until 31st March 2023 under Call 3.

- Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council
- Ards and North Down Borough Council
- Newry Mourne and Down District Council
- Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council.

Stepping Stones NI is delighted and proud to report that on our ESF Programme:

73 people gained paid employment : target exceeded by 200%

276 people with a disability or health condition participated in employment support: exceeded target by 126%.

55 people went into education and training with 338 accredited training courses delivered

Stepping Stones NI employment team continued to work together to achieve the best possible outcomes of people with disabilities in our communities. The team were instrumental in assisting employers and business to support our people to achieve employment and volunteering dreams.

Academies

Our Employer partnerships are very important to us and we are grateful to our employers for the increased inclusion and diversity in the workplace . During the period we delivered 12 employment “Step Into” academies across a number of industries in hospitality, retail and manufacturing to 50 people with 36 jobs secured through them . These academies provide accredited training in a group setting to a maximum of 8 people leading to a supported interview leading to employment for ring fenced jobs.

This is what Hendersons Foodservice had to say in our evaluation of our academy with them:

“These academies are much more than promoting equality but are a valuable part of an inclusive and effective talent strategy- we have been able to appoint highly talented individuals through the STEP into academies- one of our valued colleagues who joined as a result of a STEP into academy was subsequently an award winner within their team. The approach of the Stepping Stones NI team is one of the things that sets these initiatives apart in the first instance- there is a high level of interest in the needs of the job role and employer, together with a real concern for matching clients to a role that is mutually beneficial and therefore likely to establish long term employment and success. We are working together with the same objective in mind- the success of the employee on completion of the academy”

This is what the client has said :

“I started Stepping Stones NI in June 2018. I was quite nervous on my first day and lacked confidence in myself, but my NVQ course tutor, supported me and encouraged me and I soon relaxed and fitted in. I really have enjoyed my time at Stepping Stones NI, gaining my NVQ’s and working with the team. I got to learn new skills in cooking and baking. I was able to further develop these skills during work placements in Lisburn Cathedral Coffee Room, Pimento Cafe Moira, The Quirky Bird Tea Rooms and the Haslem Hotel.

I then got an opportunity to complete a Deli Academy with Henderson's and Stepping Stones NI and I am delighted to have secured a job working at the Deli Counter in the Spar, Glenavy Road, Moira. I love it there. Many thanks to my Employment Officer for all her support and encouragement throughout my time at Stepping Stones NI”

36 people successfully secured employment with support from the academies.

Stepping Stones
STEP INTO RETAIL
in partnership with **HENDERSON GROUP**

Stepping Stones
STEP INTO DELI
in partnership with **HENDERSON GROUP**

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www.steppingstonesni.com f t i

YOU Service (Youth Onwards and Upwards)

Young people aged 16-24 participated in our You Service with the opportunity to get involved in a range of activities that encouraged independence, improvements in self-esteem and overall confidence and team building in conjunction with attainment of qualifications and paid employment. The programme offered young people the opportunity:

- to gain accredited qualifications
- to develop soft skills
- to experience work tasters and educational tasters
- to develop as young people through The Youth Service
- receive support to achieve employment

The You Service delivered the following throughout the year :

- 4 people achieved paid employment
- 14 people progressed to education and training

- 35 referrals to the service
- 7 people participated in placements

During the year the You Service had:

- Educational/Careers talks from Belfast Met and SERC (local further education colleges, Skill Up Programme, Volunteer Now and Connected Minds).
- Work Tasters from Little Wing Pizza and Seagoe Youth Group (based on feedback about interest in hospitality and youth work).
- Advice and Guidance: Talks from Citizens Advice Bureau (Benefits and Entitlements), Housing Executive (Independent Living), Links Counselling (Mental Health), HYPE (Relationships/Personal Safety/LGBTQ+) and Common Youth (Sexual Health/Boundaries/Consent).
- Education/Training Providers for progression: Clanrye, Belfast Met, SERC, NRC, Ulster University.
- 5 in 1 Media Presentations: Opportunity to explore film industry and make films based on their disability.
- Participation with a LGBTQ+ support group

The YOU Service worked with with Atlas Counselling Service. Links Counselling Service, YMCA Lisburn and Lisburn City Council to provide opportunities for employability, horticulture experience and counselling support.

Training

Our Training Service supports people with learning disabilities and learning difficulties and autism on their journey to finding a paid job through the provision of a range of training courses that meet the specific learning needs and ability of the participants on the course. 338 accredited units were delivered and achieved during the year through our Stepping Stones to employment programme, with 1024 soft skill outcome achieved.

A comprehensive prospectus was designed in May 2022 detailing all the non-accredited and accredited training, and programmes available to a wide range of stakeholders.

Training for employers and other community stakeholders became a focus with over 142 courses delivered to over 10 community groups, providing upskilling opportunities to local people furthest removed from the labour market

338 accredited and non- accredited training units achieved by people with learning difficulties across the organisation.

1024 soft skills outcome achieved

Accredited Units

Accredited units successfully completed related to practical and industry relevant skills, life skills and personal development skills.

- Food allergens level 2
- Health & Safety level 1
- Food safety level 1
- Paediatric 1st aid level 3
- Manual handling level 2
- Fire safety level 1
- Emergency First aid at work 3
- OCN Level 1 Certificate in Appropriate Workplace Behaviour
- RSPH L1 in Food Hygiene Awareness
- COSHH
- World Host -Principles of customer service online
- Barista Training

Soft Skills Training

- Online safety
- Navigators
- Managing Stress
- looking after our planet
- Alpha Bravo Charlie
- Appropriate workplace behaviour
- Managing Money
- Talking loneliness
- Talking mental wellness
- Talking emotions
- Talking mental wellness
- Barista
- Culture & Diversity
- Sales Skills training
- Communication in the workplace



Living Life loving life

The training service supported people with a learning disability through its Living Life Loving life classes to trainees with a learning disability . The loving life programme supports our trainees to enjoy a range of activities that are engaging, fun and creative .

Transitions

Making decisions and moving from school to training, further education or employment can be a challenging time for parents and young people. The Transitions Service is a service that supports pupils and students with learning difficulties in their final years at school, to explore options for their future. The Transitions team supports pupils to make the move from school to further education, vocational training, or employment as seamless as possible by working with the young people, their families and key professionals.

Through the work of our Transitions team, we continued to work in partnership with local schools- Beechlawn, Parkview School and SERC Students availed of mentoring support to

improve their employability and personal development skills leading to increased progression pathways known as a Job Club.

Physical Activities and Football

Indoor football continues to be a great success with this year no exception with our Team playing every Wednesday night in Lisburn and was a great opportunity for people to increase their physical and mental health and friendships. In the past year the team have competed at the George Best Disability Cup and the Clanrye Cup and have won two friendlies with Harry's Place in Ballynahinch.

Navigation House will be used as for exercise and wellbeing into the future.

Social Enterprise

At the year-end **77** people with a learning disability were engaging and participating in training through Social Enterprise activity in:

- Pink Elephant Cards
- The Courtyard Café Lisburn
- 2nd Avenue Café Lisburn
- Stepping Stones Picture Framing Lisburn
- The Gatelodge Café Newtownards
- Civic Centre Lisburn
- Navigation House

Our Social Enterprises provide the working environment for people with learning disabilities to learn and develop employability skills in a realistic commercial environment /employability hub potentially leading to a paid job in the future. All income generated from our social enterprises is reinvested back into the organisation to support service delivery for people who access our services.

Day Opportunities Contract with South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust supports the activities for people with a learning disability across all our social enterprises to promote training and employment.

Pink Elephant Cards

Pink Elephant Cards social enterprise was impacted greatly by the pandemic and the challenge for the period was to rebuild the social enterprise as restrictions in relation to weddings eased. This social enterprise produces a bespoke range of handcrafted wedding stationery Pink Elephant Cards.

Picture Framing

As a member of the Fine Art Trade Guild our team provided a high-quality framing service offering a wide range of frames and mounts and was open during the pandemic in line with restrictions.

Our cafes and catering: The Courtyard Café, 2nd Avenue Café and The Gatelodge continued to trade and provide hospitality skills training for people with a learning disability .

Lisburn Civic Centre: During the year our catering team continued to provide catering services at Lisburn Civic Centre with Lisburn City Council , providing training and skills development for people with disabilities.

NAVIGATION HOUSE

During the year Stepping Stones NI was working on its projects to create services that would address the health and wellbeing of its clients and trainees. An exciting new development was realised in In February 2023 following the submission of an expression of interest and business case for the newly refurbished and restored Navigation House. Stepping Stones NI took the lease of Navigation House, 148 Hillsborough Road Lisburn a B listed building and site from Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council. This fantastic site located adjacent to the towpath aim is to create a health and wellbeing hub for participants engaging in Stepping Stones NI services through the creation of a horticultural project and social enterprise working with other community partners. With new staff to the project funded by Queens Jubilee Fund through The National Lotteries Community Fund a new polytunnel was erected to start our horticultural social enterprise, and new brand logo and brand identity created.

At Navigation House Stepping Stones NI will introduce programmes and activities that will enrich the lives of people who are Neurodiverse and create greater social and economic impact within Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council . At Navigation House Stepping Stones NI will:

- **Develop a horticultural social enterprise activity** focusing on the growing of organic and pesticide free produce herbs, edible flowers, fruit and vegetables involving people with a range of disabilities from the Lisburn and Castlereagh area.
- **Introduce learning in relation to environmental and green Issues**, circular economy, the world around us, and the roll out of Loving Life Programme and cookery programmes
- **Deliver OCN NI Level 1 Award / Certificate in Vocational Skills (Horticulture)**
This qualification is designed to provide learners with an introduction to skills

and knowledge required for working in Horticulture, as well as valuable general skills for the workplace

- **Deliver various employment Academies** to advance training leading to a paid job in partnership with local employers .
- **Roll out of Wellbeing Programme** to include Yoga, exercise classes, mindfulness and outdoor physical activities including walking and cycling groups for people with a disability.

Navigation House



Quality Standards

During the year we successfully achieved revision of the BSI ISO: 9001:2015 .

Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)

In November 2022, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carried out an ESF Call 3 visit to Stepping Stones NI on behalf of Department for Economy to evaluate the capacity of Stepping Stones NI to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of the provision of its Stepping Stones to Employment 2 programme.

During the visit, ETI evaluated the effectiveness of the quality improvement planning processes and focused on two of the key areas which the organisation had prioritised for improvement through its self-evaluation and quality improvement planning processes:

- to further develop the lesson observation process; and
- to review how the e-safety and safeguarding training for participants focuses on learning disability.

The ETI visit identified the following key findings as per ETI report:

- An appropriate curriculum is in place to underpin the three key overarching strands of the project: to support participants in their transition from both mainstream and special schools (transition); to provide participants with relevant training and employment opportunities (employment); and to support the participants' personal and social development (youth).
- All of the participants are assigned a key worker at the beginning of the project and a tailored programme is devised and delivered flexibly to meet their individual learning and development needs. Most of them have multiple and complex barriers to learning and progression.
- Stepping Stones NI employment academies provide the participants with relevant opportunities to work towards accredited industry and/or vocationally related qualifications at level 1 or 2, in areas such as food hygiene, health and safety, hospitality and catering, manual handling, and world host, as well as preparation for a guaranteed job interview with an employer. The participants and employers reported on the benefits of the academies, including the support for the participants to develop interview skills, and the disability awareness, and autism specific training provided for employers. Employers further reported that the clear communication between the employer, the participant and Stepping Stones NI is a key feature of their successful partnership. They commented positively on the level of pre- and post-employment support which Stepping Stones NI provides, including attendance with participants at interviews and the post-employment engagement with participants and employers.
- Additionally, there are skills academies which are used well to support the development of the employability, personal and social skills of those participants not yet ready to progress to employment. They help to build the participants' confidence and cover a variety of disciplines including communication, healthy living, mental health, and mindfulness.
- Stepping Stones NI has rebranded their youth work delivery model through a review and transformation of their youth services in consultation with the participants. In the Youth Onwards Upwards (Y.O.U) programme strand, the participants discussed and planned with one another for the forthcoming local Christmas market, developing customer service skills and creating products to sell on behalf of the organisation. Through this strand, the participants are making new friendships and social connections which are helping them overcome issues such as anxiety and social isolation. Their interactions with one another were good humoured, respectful, and confident and they have established an excellent rapport and trusting relationships with the staff.
- The employment and skills academies and the Y.O.U programme strand support the participants to make new friendships and social connections. The learning and development

sessions observed were effective. There was evidence of effective planning, mutually respectful relationships between the participants and the tutors, and most of the participants engaged well in their learning. They responded well when questioned, seeking clarification when appropriate, and most participated well in the small and larger group discussions. The participants were comfortable to share their personal and work experiences which enabled them to learn with and from one another. The positive affirmations by the facilitators were contributing to their self-esteem and confidence to speak out. An appropriate lesson observation process has been implemented across the organisation. This will be developed further over the coming year to support new tutors and encourage peer observation among staff.

- Stepping Stones NI have established five social enterprises which offer participants good opportunities to undertake a work experience placement in a realistic training environment. The three cafes, picture framing and wedding stationery businesses help the participants to develop a range of social and employability skills, including customer service and food hygiene. Participants working in the cafes have the opportunity to undertake national vocational qualifications at level 1 and level 2 in catering and hospitality.

- The needs and progress of the participants are recorded effectively by the staff. The regular reviews capture well their views on their learning and personal and social development, demonstrating an understanding of the challenges that they as young people face, and the effective support given by the staff. In discussions, the participants highlighted that what they are learning is useful; for example, in retail work environments they learn about roles, regulations and expectations. They stated that their learning is relevant to their work aspirations and that they find the regular contact from the staff supportive and helpful.

- The participants avail of a wraparound support service which is inclusive and delivered flexibly, responsively and sensitively to meet their individual needs. Appropriate links and partnerships have been developed with an extensive range of stakeholders, including community organisations, employers, statutory agencies, support organisations, and other key stakeholders for referral and recruitment purposes and to support and signpost participants to enable them to overcome their barriers to progression.

- The stakeholders interviewed reported that the participants are supported well to overcome challenges in their personal lives and in their workplaces, and cited the availability of wider family support, if required, as a notable benefit. In supporting an ethos and culture of inclusion across the organisation, Stepping Stones NI is currently reviewing the content of its e-safety and safeguarding training to ensure there is a clear focus on participants with a learning disability, and plans are in place to provide gender identity and sexual orientation training for staff, participants and other relevant stakeholders.

- Recruitment to the project has exceeded the overall target. The target for participants progressing to employment has also been exceeded, and to date, education and/or training is at 80% of the target set. All of the participants recruited have been retained on the project. The organisation is committed to ensuring that that all of the participants recruited,

and who remain on the project when ESF ends, complete and achieve their individual targets. Management is also currently reviewing how longer-term support can be provided for participants after the end of ESF if required.

- The project is well led at both strategic and operational levels. Management have taken appropriate action to address the areas for development identified at the previous monitoring visit in July 2021. The training accommodation and physical resources in place to support the delivery of the project are of a high quality. Additional accommodation to support participants interested in horticulture has been recently secured and planning is well developed to extend the curriculum offered to participants.
- The project staff are well-experienced in working with adults and young people with learning, personal and social development needs. Those interviewed, including a small number of new staff recruited over the past 18 months, report that they have good opportunities to undertake continuous professional development, that effective collegial working relationships exist among management and staff, and they feel well-supported by management. A number of incentives have been introduced by management to support the mental health and well-being of staff and promote a healthy work-life balance; this is viewed as a positive and welcome development by staff. Despite continuing to advertise job posts, management are finding it increasingly difficult to fill a number of current vacancies for the project.
- An appropriate self-evaluation and quality improvement planning process is in place. The documentation provides a concise evaluation of the quality of the provision and identifies key strengths and relevant areas for improvement. An appropriate action plan has been developed to address the areas for improvement. Overall, the leadership and management is planning effectively for learning and quality improvement, including planning for sustainability and progression of participants.

Safeguarding

Based on the evidence available at the time of the visit, the arrangements for safeguarding participants of the Stepping Stones to Employment 2 ESF project reflect current legislation and practice.

Overall outcome

At the time of the visit, and in the areas evaluated, Stepping Stones NI demonstrates a high level of capacity to identify and bring about improvement in the quality of provision for the Stepping Stones to Employment 2 ESF project

Awards during the year

Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council: Business Awards 2023: Winner of Best Social Enterprise

Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council: Business Awards 2023: High Commendation for Best Company to Work For

Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council: Mayor's Community Awards 2023: Transforming Lives

National Learning Disabilities & Autism Awards 2023: Sporting Chance Award (Disability Football Team)

National Learning Disabilities & Autism Awards 2023: Outstanding Contribution from Stepping Stones NI Chief Officer Paula Jennings

3 Structure, Governance and Management

Structure

Stepping Stones NI is a company limited by guarantee with charitable status, incorporated in 1996 and commenced delivering services for people with learning disabilities in Jan 1998.

Stepping Stones NI has a Board of 10 Trustees as per Articles of Association who meet 6 times a year and are responsible for setting the strategic direction and the policies in which the organisation is governed. The organisation has two sub committees of the board a Finance Audit and Risk Committee (FAR) and a Human Resource Governance and Nominations Committee (HRGN).

The Trustees serving from 1st April 2022 – 31 March 2023 were as follows:

1. Michael Drayne (HRGN Committee)
2. Ken Alderdice (FAR Committee)
3. Belinda O Neill (HRGN Committee resigned 1 February 2023)
4. Karen Carmichael (HRGN Committee)
5. Michael Scott (Chair)
6. Kieran Corrigan (HRGN Committee)
7. Brenda Mc Mullan (FAR Committee)
8. Diana Farrelly (resigned 4th January 2023)
9. Cormac O Donnell (Coopted 31st March 2023)

Company Secretary

On 1st April 2022, there were 8 Trustees on the Board. A scheme of matters reserved for the Board is in place and the day-to-day responsibility for the implementation of the strategy and the provision of services is that of the Chief Officer Paula Jennings. The Chief Officer works alongside the Senior Team which has operational, service delivery, marketing and finance responsibilities.

The Trustees manage the business of the company unless they are subject to any restrictions imposed by the Companies Act, the articles or any special resolution. Trustees of the Board should include at least one member who is a parent or carer of a person with a learning disability or a learning difficulty.

Stepping Stones NI Chief Executive is Paula Jennings who has the sole responsibility of leading and implementing the strategies set by the board of Trustees.

Recruitment of Trustees

Board Recruitment and Appointment

The recruitment of new board members helps to strengthen the corporate governance of the organisation. Stepping Stones NI conducts a skills and experience analysis of the existing board prior to advertising or liaising in networks i.e. Institute of Directors IOD, CO3, business community , to ensure the desired skills and experience are required with a view to attract suitable candidates to apply who meet the requirements of the board and ultimately govern the charity.

Following an initial expression of interest submission and interview the suitability of candidates is assessed on how the candidate meets the criteria, what skills and influence they bring to the board and how their experience and attributes fit with the organisational culture and vision and what they hope to achieve in the role. Following meeting with the Chair and Chief Officer a recommendation for the appointment of new Trustees is placed at HRGN Committee. This Committee will make the recommendation to the full board for approval and appointment as a Trustee of Stepping Stones NI.

The Office Bearers of the Company are appointed at the first meeting of the Board of Trustees after the annual general meeting. All new members are elected to the board at the AGM. A Trustee is on the Board for a period of 3 years were upon such members must retire but may be eligible for re-election. Trustees shall be elected at the annual general meeting AGM by the members present.

Trustee Induction and Training

New Trustees undergo an induction to brief them on their role as a Trustee of the company. New Trustees are provided with information to brief them on their legal obligations under charity and company law i.e. the content of the Articles of Association, the strategy and recent set of end of year accounts. All New Trustees are formally inducted to the organisation with the Chief Officer with visits to all sites of the organisation .

Decision making within Stepping Stones NI

The Board of Trustees comprises a - Chairperson and Trustees who bring a range of skills and experience appropriate to the requirements of the Board. They provide support to the Chief Officer and their purpose is to contribute to the effective governance of Stepping Stones NI promoting the vision, mission, aims and objectives of the organisation. The full board of Trustees meets bi monthly with sub group meetings and full board meetings.

The Chief Officer provides a report to the Board of Trustees at each board meeting, with updates on key performance indicators of the organisation presented on a Balanced Score Card format. This ensures that the Board of Trustees are fully informed of activities, performance, and achievements of the organisation.

The chair of each subcommittee i.e FAR and HRGN reports to the board at each board meeting.

All members of the Board of Trustees give up their time voluntarily and receive no financial or other benefits from the organisation.

Risk Management

The Finance Audit and Risk (FAR) sub group review corporate risk and financial information with reporting back to the Board of Directors. The corporate risk register details low, medium and high risk in the following areas – People, Operations and Financial which is continuously reviewed. Where appropriate mitigation steps are put in place to protect the organisation against risk.

The organisation has implemented the ISO quality standard 9001:2015 during the reporting period.

4 FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS

FINANCIAL REVIEW 2022/2023

In the reporting period we delivered the final call and year of European Social Fund funding to Northern Ireland. Call 3 of “Stepping Stones to Employment 2” funded through the European Social Fund (ESF) and Department for the Economy match funded by:

- Department for the Communities
- Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council
- Ards and North Down Borough Council
- Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council
- Newry, Mourne and Down District Council

This was a challenging and difficult year for the organisation and for the disability sector in Northern Ireland. It was the final year of ESF funding to Northern Ireland due to Brexit with uncertainty of replacement funding and future funding sustainability to the organisation, which had historically been supported by European Funding since inception in 1998. Stepping Stones NI through its Chief Officer during the year continuously attended meetings and seminars in relation to future funding arrangements under UK Shared Prosperity Funding (UKSPF) and lobbied local politicians to highlight a cliff edge scenario for many organisations without future funding. With an application process for UKSPF “People and Skills” launched in late December 2022 for submission on 26th January 2023. Stepping Stones NI worked to collaborate with a number of disability organisations to submit a bid for funding. Stepping Stones NI formed a collaboration with the following organisations for its submission : Triangle Housing Association , Compass Advocacy Network, ApplebyTrust and AEL.

On 31st March 2023 Stepping Stones NI was notified by Westminster that the collaborative funding application for UKSPF under People and Skills was successful.

The organisation recorded a deficit of £94,119 for the period . This was due to:

- the ESF funding model for Call 3 funding. Stepping Stones NI lost funding from its funding allocation when staff were not in post due to maternity, sickness and leavers to the organisation . The organisation lost £45,545 in funding contribution to overheads for this reason .
- Increased costs due to the cost of living crisis on food costs and utilities.
- Depreciation costs £47,558
- Contribution to new lease at Navigation House
- Cost of living crisis

We would like to thank our funders who supported us this year

- Department for the Economy
- European Social Fund
- Department for Communities
- South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust
- Lisburn City and Castlereagh Council
- Ards and North Down Borough Council
- Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council
- Newry & Mourne and Down District Council
- Rank Foundation
- Queens Jubilee Platinum Fund/The National Lottery Community Fund

And for everyone for their kind and generous donations received and employer partnerships.

Objectives and policies

Stepping Stones NI activities expose it to a number of financial risks including credit risk, cash flow risk and liquidity risk. The use of financial derivatives is governed by the charity's policies approved by the board of Trustees, which provide written principles on the use of financial derivatives to manage these risks. The charity does not use derivative financial instruments for speculative purposes.

Reserves Policy

An extensive reserves base is essential for Stepping Stones NI to continue to manage risk and deliver its services and social enterprises. The Trustees of Stepping Stones NI wish to continue to build a general level of reserves (excluding tangible fixed assets) that has a target of six months of unrestricted expenditure.

Stepping Stones NI needs to maintain this level of reserve for the following:

- Cash flow to ensure amounts due to creditors and fulfilment of contracts and leases.
- Gaps and loss in funding provision
- Organisational wind up and redundancy pay
- New development plans for service delivery in the future.

Stepping Stones NI reserves can be understood under the following areas:

- Protected Funds: to sustain and support at least 6 months organisational costs.
- Designated Funds: to prepare for potential redundancy costs at the end of a funding cycle.
- Infrastructure Funds: to support the refurbishment and renewals of Stepping Stones NI social enterprises and assets.
- Opportunity Funds: to explore future opportunities and projects that benefit people with disabilities.

Cashflow

Core funding activities are secured until March 2025 following a successful UKSPF bid in January 2023. Stepping Stones NI must ensure that adequate reserves are available to bridge any potential shortfall in funds and to allow enough time for replacement or additional funds to be found. Legally, Stepping Stones NI must be able to meet its debts as they fall due. Since restricted funds can only be used for the purpose for which they are given, Stepping Stones NI must always ensure that it can support at any given time (from its reserves cash or otherwise) viable and contracted programmes should it ever encounter difficulties. The cash reserves protected funds enables the organisation to meet its

obligations for six months if no funding becomes available. Stepping Stones NI must also ensure that it is able to respond to any cashflow problems as a result in delays from either funders or debtors.

Plans for future periods

Our aim to channel a more holistic approach to the delivery of our services. We understand now more than ever that skills development and work are just one aspect of an individual's life. Our focus and our scope of services include:

1. Social Enterprise
2. Employment
3. Skills and Training
4. Health and Well-Being

The implementation of the organisation's strategy will support the growth and development of the charity and as such enhance the lives of and create a better future for people with learning disabilities and learning difficulties. A strategy day took place in March 2023 attended by Trustees along with senior staff

During the year Stepping Stones NI acquired the lease from Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council for Navigation House to delivery health and well being programmes following the competitive submission of an expression of interest and business case .

Stepping Stones NI will work to ensure that opportunities presented through UK Shared Prosperity Fund will be maximised to ensure continuation of service provision and opportunities for people with disabilities into the future.

Cash flow risk

Stepping Stones NI activities expose it primarily to regular payments from funders. This is carefully managed and monitored by the FAR committee.

Credit risk

Stepping Stones NI principal financial assets are bank balances and cash, trade and other receivables, and investments. Stepping Stones NI credit risk is primarily attributable to its trade receivables.

Stepping Stones NI has no significant concentration of credit risk, with exposure spread over a large number of counterparties and customers.

Liquidity risk

In order to maintain liquidity to ensure that sufficient funds are available for ongoing operations and future developments .

Disclosure of information to auditor

Each trustee has taken steps that they ought to have taken as a Trustee in order to make themselves aware of any relevant audit information and to establish that the Charity's auditor is aware of that information. The Trustees confirm that there is no relevant information that they know of and of which they know the auditor is unaware.

Statement of Trustees Responsibilities

The Trustees (who are the Directors of Stepping Stones NI for the purposes of company law) are responsible for preparing the report of the Trustees and the financial statements in accordance with applicable law and United Kingdom Accounting Standards (United Kingdom generally accepted Accounting Practice), including Financial Report Standard 102 "The Financial Reporting Standard applicable in the UK and Republic of Ireland.

Company law requires the Trustees to prepare a financial statement for each financial year which give a true and fair view of the state of affairs of the charitable company and of the incoming resources and application of resources, including income and expenditure, of the charitable company for that period. In preparing those financial statements, the Trustees are required to:

- Select suitable accounting policies and the apply them consistently
- Observe the methods and principles in the Charity SORP
- Make judgements and estimates that are reasonable and prudent
- Prepare the financial statements on the going concern basis unless it is inappropriate to presume that the charitable company will continue in business.

The Trustees are responsible for keeping proper accounting records which disclose with reasonable accuracy at any time the financial position of the charitable company and to enable them to ensure that the financial statement comply with the Companies Act 2006. The Trustees are also responsible for safeguarding the assets of the charitable company and hence for taking reasonable steps for the prevention and detection of fraud and other irregularities.

Valuing our Volunteers and donations.

Stepping Stones NI values, the contribution that our volunteers bring to the organisation and the donations that we receive each year. We are grateful and thank them for their support which allow us to fulfil our charity objectives.

