



Annual Trustee Report

1 April 2023 to

31 March 2024



Celebrating 25 years

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SECTION 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

Michael Scott Chair

Cormac O Donnell (Co-opted March 2023)

Karen Carmichael (resigned March 2024)

Kieran Corrigan (resigned March 2024)

Ken Alderdice (January 2024)

Sarah Johnston (February 2024)

Shirley Ann Smylie (February 2024)

Lisa Beers (February 2024)

Company Secretary and Chief Officer

Paula Jennings

Independent Auditors

Laurance Shearer: O'Hara Shearer

547 Falls Road, Belfast BT11 9AB

Solicitor

Donaldson Mc Connell & Co

8-10 Graham Gardens

Lisburn Co Antrim BT28 1XE

Bankers

Danske Bank

62-66 Bow St

Lisburn BT28 1YS

SECTION 2- 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, education and volunteering. Stepping Stones NI opened its doors in January 1998 providing training and supported opportunities for people with severe learning disabilities. In 2023 Stepping Stones NI celebrated its 25th Anniversary.

In the reporting period from **1st April 2023- 31st March 2024** we continued to deliver our range of services providing opportunities for people with disabilities to advance their personal and employability skills and overall health and wellbeing, towards a life more fulfilled.

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

- **Youth Service:** engaging with young people aged 16-24 who were not in any form of training or employment through a range of employability and personal development activities.
- **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, financial literacy, and mental health etc.
- **Employment Service and Academies:** providing employment support to people with learning difficulties and learning disabilities. This included help with writing CVs, application form preparation, interviews preparation and support in the workplace with employers. We also delivered Disability Awareness Training for five local employers.
- **The Courtyard Cafe:** Social enterprise Café in Lisburn delivering quality training for people with learning disabilities in hospitality, customer service and food preparation.
- **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.
- **Stepping Stones NI 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 Framer 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:** programme for young people to advance their skills in horticulture up to Level 1 OCNNI and to engage health and wellbeing activities

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 delivery period was supported by UK Shared Prosperity Fund, contracts including Health Trust Contracts and Department for Communities funding to deliver local labour market partnerships, as well as income generated through our social enterprises which is reinvested back into the organisation to deliver create our social impact.

Stepping Stones NI secured funding under the new UK Shared Prosperity Fund by collaborating with four other charities, Triangle Housing Association Limited, AEL Ltd, CAN Ltd and Appleby Trust to form a consortium named PROSPER. The PROSPER programme commenced delivery on 1st April 2023 for a period of two years .

In 2023 we celebrated our 25 year anniversary of the organisation with a gala event held in November 2023 at La Mon House and Country Club Belfast . This was hosted by Cate Conway and 300 invited guests attended to celebrate the organisation's birthday. Stepping Stones NI event received sponsorship from suppliers and business we supported the organisation for the event.

SECTION 3- Our Vision, 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 disabilities who often are furthest removed from the labour market, helping those people to find a job if it is their ambition.

Our Vision

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

Our Purpose

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

Our Values

Respect: We respect everyone's right to a life more fulfilled and respect each other in the process

Inspire: We inspire employers and the wider community to see disability differently

Empowering: We empower each other to make a positive impact on the world and in the organisation, we work

Our Values drive our behaviours and govern our actions. They are at the heart of our Culture and define who we are, and how we present ourselves every day.

Our Behaviours

Driven: We are driven, seizing every opportunity to create better lives

Honest: We are honest and always do the right thing

Positively Charged: We are positively charged and passionate about making things possible.

Nurturing: We Nurture all our People to be their best

Quality focused: We are quality focused, to always ensure the highest standard.

Our Culture

People and Purpose are at the centre of everything that we do. Through our culture our values will be instilled throughout the organisation, making a positive difference to people's lives

Our team will work with purpose and passion to go the extra mile for our people.

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. Neurodiverse refers to is a term that has gained traction in recent years to describe people with disability/difficulties as having a brain that works differently from the average or "neurotypical" person.

SECTION 4- Strategy for Delivery

Our strategic focus for the next 4 years (2024 -2028) is to channel a more holistic approach to the delivery of our services and to seize every opportunity for our participants and trainees. We passionately believe that people with disabilities should have access to every opportunity that leads to a life more fulfilled. We will sustainably grow our services and social enterprises for purpose for people with a learning disability and barriers to learning



Our Strategic Priorities

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

- 1. Quality:** Striving for excellence and the highest standard in all that we do
- 2. Team:** Attracting and developing a team of well skilled, confident, and professional people
- 3. Social Enterprise:** Building on and expanding social enterprises to grow our income always with a balance on our people and mindful of our Stepping Stones NI purpose.
- 4. Employment, Training and Youth Services and wellbeing:** Developing and delivering employment and training services to find jobs for people to prosper and live well.

5. Technology: Embracing technology to drive quality, performance and innovation.

6. Sustainability: Developing a more sustainable and responsible business model and financial sustainability with purpose at this core.

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. These articles were revised and updated during the reporting period by the board of Trustees and passed to the Charities Commission of Northern Ireland for review.

Our Public Benefit

In shaping the strategy and objectives of Stepping Stones NI the Trustees have considered 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, 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 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, training and employment service provide job support and delivery employer lead academies 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.

SECTION 5- Achievements and Performance 2023/2024

Our Services

During 2023/2024 Stepping Stones NI our services continued to thrive with continued support from new 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.

Employment Service

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

The employment service provided people with opportunities to avail of:

- Innovative pre-employment “**BE IN WORK**” academy training courses with industry specific companies that led to a paid job for participants. We embedded our newly branded “**BE IN WORK**” Academies into the Stepping Stones to Employment delivery model within the new PROSPER consortium, to address local labour market skills shortages, as well as meeting individual employer training requirements.
- Since 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024 there were:
 - 26 industry lead employment academies
 - 401 referrals from participants who were economically inactive/ with long term complex health needs /disability
 - 112 jobs secured for people accessing our service.
- 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.
- 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+, Mental Health First Aid to promote equality and provide a safe space for participants.

The Employment Service delivered its services across council areas noted below under the UK Shared Prosperity funded, PROSPER programme.

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

Stepping Stones NI is delighted and proud to report that on our first year under UK Shared Prosperity Fund- PROSPER Programme we delivered:

- **112 people gained paid employment**
- **401 economically inactive people with a disability or health condition participated in employment support: exceeded target by 105%.**
- **293 accredited qualifications were gained by our participants**

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.

Stepping Stones NI “BE IN WORK” Academies



Our Employer partnerships are very extremely important to us, and we are grateful to our employers for the opportunity to be a recruitment partner to ensure increased inclusion and diversity in the workplace. Our employer academies provide accredited training in a group setting to a maximum of 15 people leading to a supported interview leading to employment for ring fenced jobs.

What our employer partners said

“Thank you for the commitment and for getting us good people who want to work!”

“Thank you for all the support. Constant communication, great understanding and real dedication to their jobs. They are an asset to Stepping Stones!”

“The experience has been great and I will definitely tell other colleagues about it and if they could benefit from it”

“100% retention is a big thing for us and we know have staff that are committed”

“Definitely, the academies are a great concept and when launching new store I am sure Hendersons will continue to partner with the Stepping Stones NI ”

What our participants said

“The employment academy gave me a better insight into health and safety and etiquette for interviews and in person scenarios.”

“The employment academy got me back into employment again and got me my SIA licence again and gave me hope again.”

“I feel more comfortable interacting with people which is the greatest skill I learned there it will make my life easier if I know how to effectively communicate with others.”

Youth Service

Young people aged 16-24 participated in our Youth 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, further education or paid employment. The programme offered young people the opportunity:

- to gain accredited qualifications
- to develop soft skills

- to experience work tasters and educational tasters and work placement
- to develop as young people through The Youth Service
- receive support to achieve employment through CV building, completing application forms and interview prep

The Youth Service delivered the following throughout the year:

- **3 people achieved paid employment** in local businesses – Action Cancer Boutique- Soy Sauce Bistro and Omniplex.
- **8 people progressed to education and training**
- **25 referrals to the service**
- **7 people participated in placements**
- **39 Accredited Qualifications**

During the year the Y.O.U Service had:

- **Educational/Careers talks from:** Belfast Metropolitan College and SERC (local further education colleges), Skill Up Programme, Volunteer Now, Connected Minds, Resurgam Trust, Praxis Care, Tesco, Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, PSNI, Lisburn Library. The young people also attended Belfast and Lisburn Job Fairs
- **Work Tasters:** work experience from Little Wing Pizza, Sonas, Tesco, EE
- **Advice and Guidance:** Talks from Citizens Advice Bureau (Benefits and Entitlements), MACS (Independent Living), Links Counselling (Mental Health), HYPE (Relationships/Personal Safety/LGBTQ+), Relate NI (Relationship and Sexuality Education), Caroline McGrath-Southeastern Trust (Drugs and Alcohol awareness, Chi-Me) Shirley Camblin Brown (Art therapy for mental health), Invisible Traffik (Awareness of Human Trafficking and Exploitation)
- **Education/Training Providers for progression:** Belfast Met, SERC, Belfast Works Connect
- **Participation** with an LGBTQ+ support group
- **Personal Development** – Bells Lane Horticultural Programme with LCCC, Bryson energy (Healthy Eating Programme), Belfast City Hall (Local history tour), Self Defence Classes with Lisburn Castlereagh City Council
- **Accredited Training including;** World Host Customer Service, Mental Health First Aid, Health and Safety, First Aid at Work and Food Safety
- **Activities/Trips** – The Youth Service took part in the annual Lord Mayors Parade in Lisburn, the Twilight Parade, Lisburn Christmas Market (where we made and sold items to raise money for our Youth Service), attended The Ulster Museum and took part in the “Investigate Natural History” Workshop, Linen Museum for the travelling Hieroglyphics exhibition.

- We held a coffee morning for parents and carers where our amazing young people gave a presentation to showcase their success over the year and the qualifications they had achieved during their time on the Youth Service.

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

Training

The training services at Stepping Stones NI offers a comprehensive range of courses designed to support individuals with learning disabilities and learning difficulties in achieving paid employment or meaningful placements. Tailored training is designed and delivered to address specific needs of the client and business partners, we equip participants with the skills and confidence necessary to succeed in the workplace.

Our courses cover a variety of essential topics, including food safety & allergens, health and safety, world host principles of customer service. These accredited qualifications not only enhance employability but also provide participants with valuable knowledge and practical skills, build confidence and social skills. Additionally, we actively engage with community groups to deliver our training services, community groups thrive from the accredited and soft skills we deliver on both personal and professional basis.

We delivered to 185 participants working with business partners through bespoke academies and community groups throughout Northern Ireland, delivering 287 qualifications in total.

Accredited qualifications delivered included:

- Mental Health first aid Level 1
- Emergency First aid level 3
- Paediatric First aid level 3
- Food Safety level 1
- Food allergens level 2
- Health and safety level 1
- Fire safety level 1
- Manual handling level 2
- World Host Principles of customer care L2

Our soft skills focused on confidence building, communication and interview skills & money matters.

Living Life Loving Life and ASDAN

A programme of both soft and accredited is delivered on a weekly basis to our LD participants supporting 24 participants over 3 days per week in our Living Life Loving Life programme. Our outcomes for all sessions are directly linked to improving social skills, communication, employability and confidence through fun relevant activities and

outings, as well as embedding practice of functional skills, literacy, math and ICT. The introduction of ASDAN qualifications give participants the opportunity to gain accredited qualifications in everyday life topics such as, independent travel, basic money management and the world around us.

Our Stepping Stones NI Football Team

Football is an extracurricular activity that we offer with a multitude of benefits for the ten football enthusiasts. Beyond the physical aspects of the sport, it fosters essential life skills such as teamwork, discipline, and perseverance. Engaging in football has significantly improved participant's mental health by providing a positive outlet for stress, boosting self-esteem, and a sense of belonging. The team has participated in local football competitions George Best Cup in Northern Ireland and in doing so participants connected with peers, fostered friendships, learnt valuable social skills and creating lasting memories.



Local Labour Market Partnerships

Local Labour Market Partnerships (LMPs) were established in each of the 11 Local Government Districts (LGDs) in Northern Ireland (NI) to develop a range of new employability provisions that address the specific labour market needs and challenges of the local areas. The Department for Communities funds Local Labour Market Partnership (LMP) in each council area. Labour Market Partnerships develop programmes to help people find employment and training opportunities in their local area. In the period between 1st April 2023 and 31st March 2024 we were successful in tendering for LMP's in both **Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council LMP .**

Stepping Stones NI was awarded the contract by Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council (LCCC) following a competitive e-tender process to deliver its LMP programme to deliver the Economic Inactivity linked to Disability programme to support and connect a 24 people with disabilities / long-term health issues who are

unemployed/economically inactive with accredited qualifications, work placements and employment opportunities.

Lisburn and Castlereagh LMP : What we achieved/The Outcomes

Outputs	Target	Actual
No of participants in paid employment	9	9
Completers	17	23
Benefit 24 Participants No of participants Recruited	24	24
Satisfaction Rate Evaluations	100%	Average 4.9 out of 5 satisfaction rating
Gained qualifications	17	23
Into other education and training	7	7

Additional Outcomes

- 71% (17) participants complete programme- **100% (23) completed the programme**
- 71% (17) employers who reported satisfaction with the programme- **100% of employers was satisfied with the support from Stepping- Stones NI**
- 71% (12) of completing participants who reported satisfaction with the programme- **100% of the 19/23 participants who completed scored the programme an average of 4.9/5 for satisfaction**
- 63% (15) of completing participants who complete a work placement- **11/15 completed work placement as these were all participants that required a work placement**
- 80% (12) of completing participants who reported that the work placement was beneficial -**100% reported work placement was beneficial – 2 employers converted placements to jobs**
- 71% (12) of completing participants who gain a qualification- **23 participants completed a qualification**
- 41% (7) of completing participants who undertake further education of training following completion of the project- **7 participants continued with education**
- 53% (9) of completing participants gaining new employment- **9 participants gained employment with associated IRIs (evidence)**
- 44% (4) of completing participants still in employment 6 months post completion

6-month data (participants still in employment 6 months later) will not be available until December 2024 as participants did not commence employment until June 2024, as such this figure will be reported in next year's return

Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon LMP Outcomes

Stepping Stones NI was awarded the contract following a competitive tender process by ABC to deliver its Disability Employment Programme 2023/2024 to support the local economy and support local people with a disability into employment. Through the programme and our delivery Stepping Stones NI successfully made difference in Employability and Skills outcomes through its training provision and employment support.

Stepping Stones NI supported **22 people** with disabilities into employment in sectors including; retail, hospitality, catering, construction, warehousing, education, domestic services, despatch and facilities.

Additional outcomes

- **57 people were recruited** onto the programme with **49 completers**.
- **49 completers achieved an accredited qualification** in Excellence in World Host, Level 1&2 Mental Health Awareness Training, Level 1 Food Safety, Level 1 Health and Safety.
- **100%** of completed participants **felt more confident to apply for a job** following completion of the project.
- **95% of people** reported **satisfaction** with the project.

6-month data (participants still in employment 6 months later)

Number of Participants Employed because of the 23-24 LMP Programme	22
Number of Participants employed 6 months post programme completion	14

This is what people said who benefited from our support and service delivery

“Stepping Stones NI helped me to get my CV ready and I was able to apply for jobs. I am really pleased to have got a job now with the trust doing what I do best. I am very grateful for the Labour Market programme and support from Stepping Stones NI.”

“I have never had a CV before so having that for the first time has really benefited me in being able to see for myself what all I have achieved. I am also very grateful for the accredited training and support I have received. I am so happy to be in employment.”

Social Enterprise

At the year-end 79 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
- 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.

Our 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 changes in the wedding stationery market. This social enterprise produces a bespoke range of handcrafted wedding stationery and greeting cards Pink Elephant Cards and craft projects for trainees with a learning disability.

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 at Lisburn City Council offices in Lisburn, whilst at the same time providing training and skills development for people with disabilities through employment.

Navigation House



During the year at Navigation House Stepping Stones NI introduced programmes and activities that enriched the lives of people who are Neurodiverse and created greater social and economic impact within Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council.

Key activities during the year were as follows:

- Our first cohort of 5 young people commenced OCNNI Level 1 in Horticulture at Navigation House in February 2024. This OCNNI Level 1 comprises of specifically chosen units to meet the needs of the trainees. The first three mandatory units included; Personal Confidence and Esteem, Work Placement and Oral presentation skills. To consolidate industry relevant practical skills the three mandatory units, included; Pruning Plants, Skills for Plant Propagation and Soils/Growing Media. As part of the qualification the group also made an industry visit to CAFRE Greenmount Agriculture College. Placements for young people were secured and included Hillsborough Castle Gardens and Rowallane Gardens.
- In March 2024 three of the trainees grew and submitted entries to the World Daffodil Convention and two out of the three daffodils won the highest accolade!
- **We developed 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. With the addition of a Garden Shop selling baskets and containers of seasonal flowers and plants, grown by the trainees
- **Introduction of e 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
- **The 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.
- **External event bookings and Workshops** included over 14 workshops and external hire events across several public, council and charity organisations

Quality Standards

During the year we successfully achieved revision of the BSI ISO: 9001:2015 in July 2024

SECTION 6: 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 capacity for 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. There 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 2023 – 31 March 2024 were as follows:

1. Michael Drayne (HRGN Committee)
2. Ken Alderdice (FAR Committee)
3. Karen Carmichael (HRGN Committee)
4. Michael Scott (Chair)
5. Kieran Corrigan (HRGN Committee)
6. Cormac O Donnell
7. Sarah Johnston
8. Shirley Ann Smylie
9. Lisa Beers

Company Secretary

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 Officer 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, Engage Executive Recruitment, 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.

During the year an Engage Executive Recruitment were appointed to advertise for new Trustees to the board.

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 and was awarded reaccreditation following audit inspection.

7. FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS

FINANCIAL REVIEW 2023/2024

In the reporting period in April 2023 we ,started off on a positive note with confirmation of our funding for two years from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund under People and Skills of £2.3 million approximately over 2 years as the replacement fund for European Social Fund. This funding was welcomed as Stepping Stones NI was part of the consortium of 4 organisations that formed “Prosper” to deliver the SPF programme to reduce economic inactivity. This funding secured our market position but also enabled Stepping Stones NI to ensure sustainability following an uncertain previous year, and in particular it provided security in it’s the organisation celebrated 25 years of delivering services , social enterprise and creating social impact.

This boost of funding for the whole organisation also had a ripple effect on our social enterprises which for the fiscal year end 2024 saw sales from social enterprises up 16% on budget with the contribution up also on budget by 10%.

We are delighted to report also that our overall income in the organisation is up on budget by 8.4% for the year to £2,015,336. Considering our income 10 years for the same period was 50% less than our income in the reporting period now, demonstrating growth and development in which we are proud.

As always, we strive to obtain value for money in all our purchases while trying to remain socially responsible. Consistently we are looking for savings, income generation and the tendering our services into the supply chain. Overall, as an organisation we made savings of 2% on overheads on our forecasted budget.

Our year end surplus was £25,225 which was welcome. Salaries represent 82% of our total expenditure which has increased from 78% the previous year. This can be explained as we employed additional staff to work on our catering contract for Lisburn Island Centre in the delivery of its catering provision.

Cashflow is a measured target and it remains significantly healthy with £461,837 recorded in the bank with our reserves are recorded at £731,200. This is a drop in the previous year, however the board of Trustees during the year agreed to use the reserves throughout the year for expenditure not covered by UK Shared Prosperity Fund and until such times we are able to get non-funded activity funded.

We would like to thank our funders and supporters during this reporting period:

UK Shared Prosperity Fund

South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust

Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council

Ards and North Down Council

Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council

Newry & Mourne District Council

Rank Foundation

Kier Group

Fona cab

Danske Bank

Barclay Communication

MXB Marketing Agency

Henderson Food Service

RES

Stanley Gordon and Sons

TL Dallas

Mark McCall

Beyond HR

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. 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.

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.
