



**NORTH WEST**  
COMMUNITY WEALTH  
BUILDING PARTNERSHIP



Department for  
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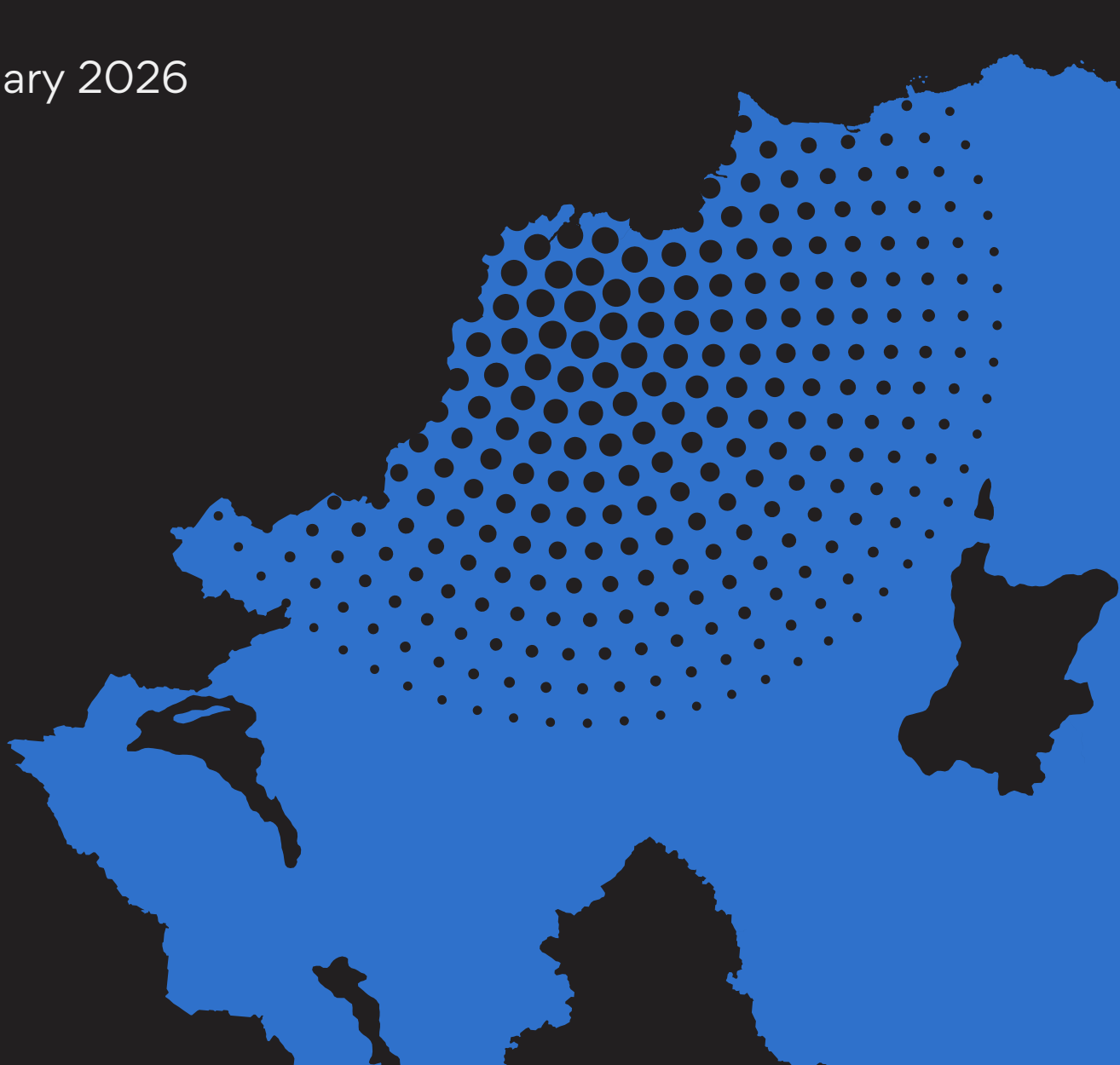


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# The North West Model of Community Wealth Building

## Reflections from Practice

February 2026



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# Introduction

This learning paper sets out the key lessons emerging from the development and early delivery of the North West Model of Community Wealth Building (CWB). It is written from the perspective of Development Trusts NI (DTNI) as a national organisation supporting the advancement of community wealth building across Northern Ireland (NI), with a particular focus on what has worked in practice, what has been learned, and what this means for future place-based economic development.

The North West experience demonstrates how CWB can move beyond policy aspiration into practical delivery when it is rooted in place, led by community anchor organisations, and supported by sustained partnership working.

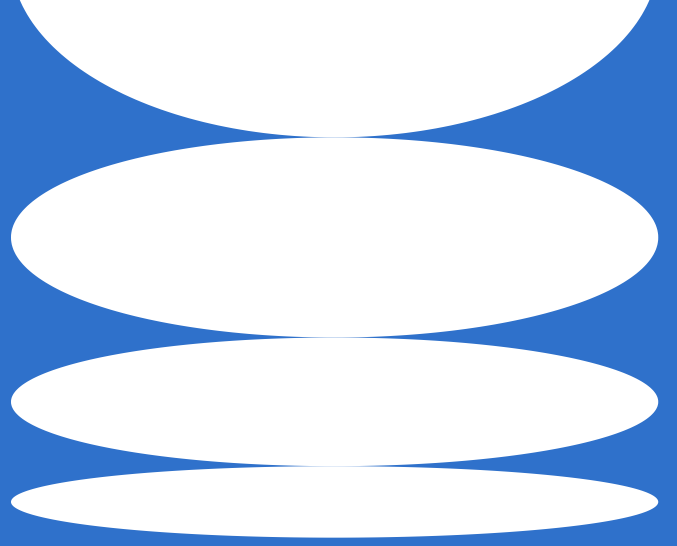




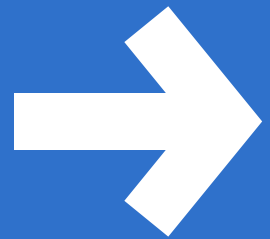
# Why a Place-Based CWB Model?

The North West region is characterised by long-standing economic and social challenges, including low productivity, underinvestment, and uneven access to opportunity. At the same time, it has a dense ecosystem of community anchor organisations, social enterprises, public institutions and civic leaders with deep roots in place.

The North West Community Wealth Building Partnership (NWCWBP) was established in 2022 to harness these assets through a place-based planning approach. Rather than importing external solutions, the partnership sought to co-design responses to local challenges by working collaboratively across sectors and organisations. A central learning from the outset was that CWB must be understood not as a single intervention, but as a whole-system approach that reshapes how decisions about land, labour, procurement, finance and ownership are made at a local level.



# Learnings





# Partnership as Infrastructure, Not an Add-On

One of the clearest lessons from the North West Model is the importance of treating partnership working as core component of the local economic development infrastructure. The NWCWBP brought together over 30 organisations spanning community, public and private sectors. Monthly partnership forums were designed as working spaces rather than reporting mechanisms.

These forums enabled:

- Shared understanding of CWB principles
- Collective problem-solving around live investment and development opportunities
- Alignment of institutional activity around agreed place-based priorities

## Learning 1.

*CWB partnerships require time, facilitation and clarity of purpose*

Trust and momentum were built through regular engagement, clear actions, and visible progress, rather than through formal structures alone.



# Building Capacity Before Delivery

## Learning 2.

*Investment readiness is foundational to CWB*

Without it, opportunities linked to capital funding, social value or local finance will continue to bypass community organisations.

A recurring barrier to inclusive economic development is the expectation that civic organisations can immediately absorb investment, deliver contracts or scale activity without adequate support. The North West Model deliberately addressed this through sustained capacity building and investment readiness support, delivered via North West Learning Academies and targeted one-to-one assistance.

This approach recognised that:

- Community anchor organisations are often asset-rich but capacity-constrained
- Investment readiness is a process, not a one-off event
- Technical support must be tailored to organisational context and stage of development



# Clustering Builds Ecosystems

Rather than focusing on individual organisational growth, the North West Model looked at new opportunities through social clustering. This involved supporting groups of community anchor organisations to explore shared opportunities linked to assets, services and infrastructure.

Clustering enabled:

- Peer learning and shared problem-solving
- Joint funding and investment proposals
- Alignment with wider regeneration, City Deal and inclusive growth opportunities

## Learning 3.

*Clustering shifts CWB from isolated projects to ecosystem development*

It helps move community organisations from a position of competition to one of collaboration.



# Social Value Drives Economic Development

## Learning 4.

*Social value returns should be treated as an economic development tool, not a compliance exercise*

When aligned with CWB principles, it can redirect significant spend into local economies.

The North West experience reinforced that social value is most effective when used proactively rather than reactively. Through the establishment of local Social Value working groups, the NWCWBP worked upstream with the local council (DCSDC), commissioners, housing bodies and to shape how social value was embedded in major contracts and developments.

Key features included:

- Early engagement with commissioners before contracts were drawn up
- Capacity building for community organisations to engage with procurement processes
- Development of infrastructure, such as the Social Value Portal, to connect contractors with local delivery partners



# Place-Based Social Finance

A significant innovation within the North West Model was the alignment of CWB with place-based finance, particularly through credit unions and social lenders, such as Waterside Credit Union and Community Finance Ireland (CFI). By working collaboratively with lenders, the partnership supported the development of new lending models that enabled community organisations to acquire assets and develop income-generating infrastructure.

## Learning 5.

*Local finance institutions are critical CWB partners*

When engaged early and supported appropriately, they can play a transformative role in retaining wealth locally and supporting long-term community ownership.



# Community ownership builds sustainability

## Learning 6.

*Land and property play a critical role in supporting sustainable social and economic development when they are held and managed by communities*

Experience from historical Community Asset Transfers in the North West demonstrates that community ownership can anchor economic activity locally, support social value creation and enable long-term, place-based regeneration. However, all community asset transfers to VCSEs need to reflect ‘less than best consideration’ in their value, to maximise the economic and social outcomes and retain these assets and wealth locally.

This learning recognises that:

- Community ownership enables assets to be used for social, economic and environmental benefit, not solely financial return
- Transferred assets can act as long-term anchors for local economic activity and wealth retention
- Community Asset Transfer processes must be shaped by meaningful engagement with communities and an understanding of their capacity, support needs and local context



# From Projects to Systems Change

While the North West Model has supported a growing pipeline of tangible projects, its most important learning lies in how it has begun to shift how the local economic development system functions.

This includes:

- Changing how institutions think about procurement and investment
- Embedding CWB language and principles into strategic conversations
- Ensuring representation from NWCWBP on strategic boards throughout the region
- Building confidence among community organisations to act as economic actors

## Learning 7.

*Community Wealth Building is as much about culture change as it is about delivery*

Systems change requires patience, consistency and visible leadership from anchor organisations across the community, public and private sectors.

# 7 Key Learnings

Reflections from Practice in The North West Model of  
Community Wealth Building

1

CWB partnerships require  
time, facilitation and clarity  
of purpose

2

Investment readiness is  
foundational to CWB

3

Clustering shifts CWB from  
isolated projects to  
ecosystem development

4

Social value returns should  
be treated as an economic  
development tool, not a  
compliance exercise

5

Local finance institutions  
are critical CWB partners

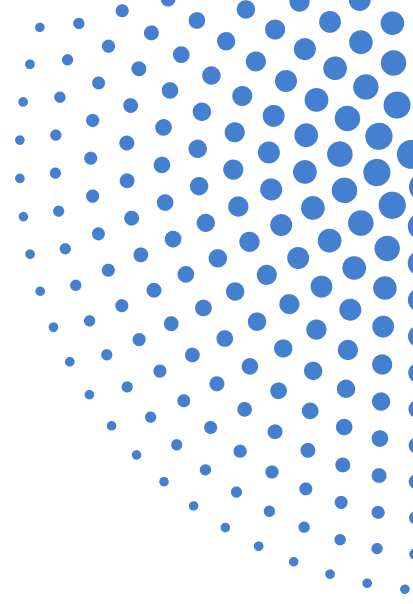
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Land & property are strategic  
assets for sustainable social &  
economic development when  
held in community ownership

7

Community Wealth Building is as much about culture change  
as it is about delivery

# Implications for Future CWB Practice

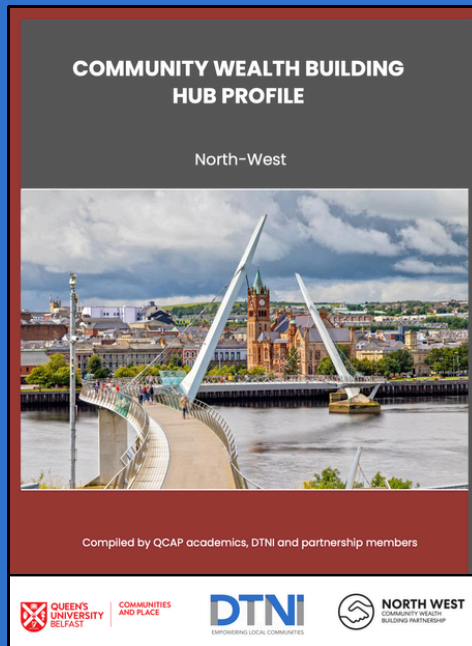
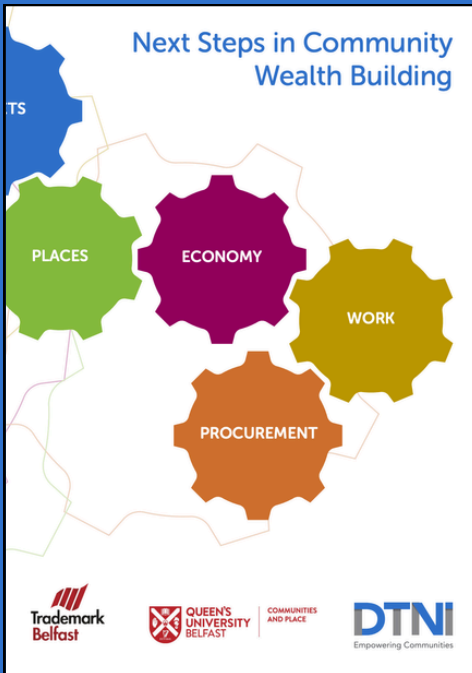
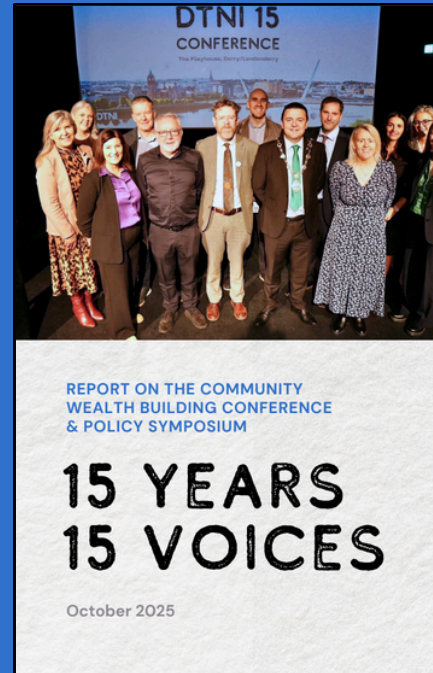
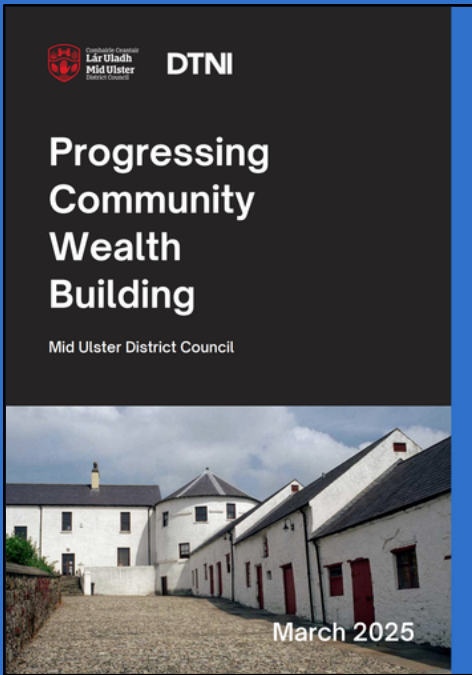


The North West Model offers several transferable lessons for other places:

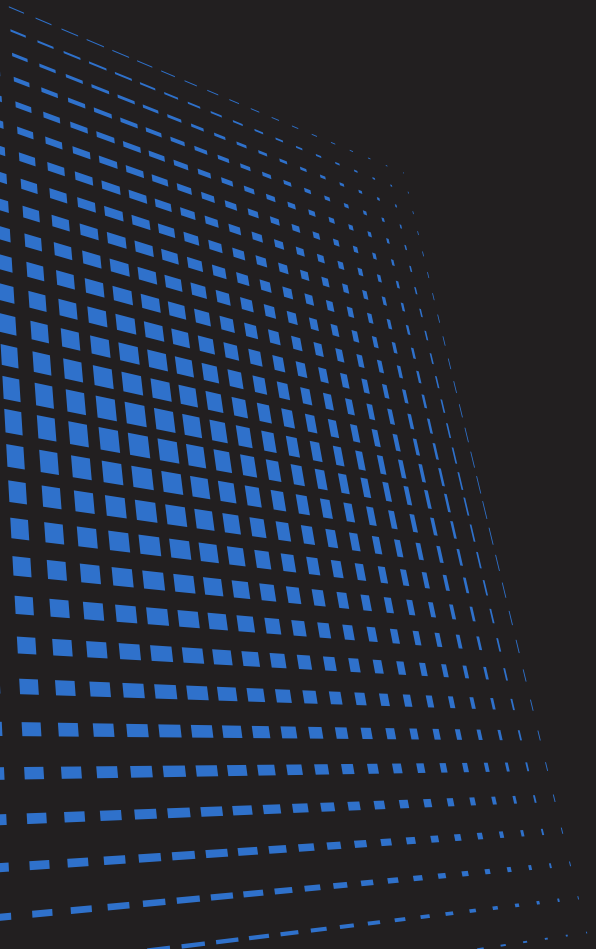
- **Start with partnership and shared purpose**
- **Invest early in capacity and investment readiness**
- **Use social value and procurement strategically**
- **Align finance with place and purpose**
- **Focus on systems, not just projects**

For DTNI, the North West experience reinforces the value of long-term, place-based approaches to economic development and provides a strong foundation for scaling CWB across Northern Ireland.

The North West Model of CWB demonstrates that locally rooted, bottom-up partnership-led approaches can create the conditions for more inclusive, resilient and democratic local economies. As this work continues to evolve, the learning from the North West will play a critical role in shaping future Community Wealth Building policy and practice, ensuring that economic development genuinely works for people and places.



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