

B⁰LSTER COMMUNITY

Belief, Quietly Held, Changes Lives

IMPACT REPORT

2025/6



Welcome



OUR MISSION

Bolster Community is a charity and social enterprise providing practical support to families and individuals facing life's toughest challenges.

We work alongside individuals, families and the community, to support improved opportunity, and health and wellbeing – and we support individuals of all ages.

OUR VISION

A better-connected community, where everyone has access to the opportunities needed to reach their potential.

OUR VALUES

- People-First
- Integrity
- Compassion
- Collaboration
- Inclusion

1

Real People. Real Support. Real Change

Contents

A year of impact – told as
honestly as we know how.

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**Thank you, to every funder,
volunteer and partner who
made this year possible.**



Backing Potential – Taking a Chance to Make a Change

BOLSTER
COMMUNITY



Jacinta Linden - Chief Executive

At Bolster Community, we see that belief transforms lives every day. We support families under pressure, older people experiencing loneliness, and individuals navigating disability, autism, financial hardship, homelessness, poor mental health and major life transitions. Often, the turning point is not a service alone, but someone who sees possibility where others see barriers.

This report highlights the impact of that belief in action. It shares the stories, achievements and partnerships that have helped people overcome challenges, build resilience and create brighter futures. Behind every outcome are staff, volunteers, funders, partners and community members working together to ensure that no one has to face difficult times alone.

Our Everyday Heroes Conference reinforced a simple truth: lasting change rarely starts with grand gestures. It begins with people taking action – a volunteer giving their time, a staff member going the extra mile, a funder investing in a vision, a partner opening a door, or a neighbour connecting someone with support.

One of the greatest compliments we receive is hearing Bolster's name mentioned in a room we are not in. Whether through a family member recommending our support, a professional making a referral, a funder championing our work, or a supporter encouraging others to get involved, these acts of trust help people access the support they need.

I have been especially proud of our staff team this year. Through their compassion, professionalism and commitment, they help people overcome challenges and realise their potential every day. I am equally grateful to our volunteers, trustees, funders, donors and partners, whose support makes this work possible. This year has also been one of the most significant in Bolster's history. After more than two decades leading the organisation, I have taken up a secondment opportunity with the Department of Health to support the implementation of Together for Families across Northern Ireland. While stepping away from day-to-day leadership was not an easy decision, it reflects the principle that has always guided Bolster: recognising potential and investing early creates better outcomes for children, families and communities.

As I begin this new chapter, I do so with complete confidence in the leadership of Allison Slater, my colleague, friend and trusted partner for more than fifteen years. Allison has been instrumental in shaping Bolster's growth and impact and is exceptionally well placed to lead the organisation forward. While leadership may change, our values remain constant. We will continue to champion potential, focus on people's strengths, and support those facing difficult times as we work towards communities where everyone can thrive.

As I reflect on this transition, I do so with immense gratitude. The achievements outlined in this report belong to the many people who have contributed to Bolster's journey over the past twenty-two years. Bolster Community will always hold a special place in my heart. It has been a privilege to witness the kindness, courage and resilience of the people and communities we serve.

As I begin a new chapter, I do so with great confidence in Bolster's future and deep pride in all that has been achieved together.

Thank you for being part of the journey.

Real People

Stories told carefully – by the families, young people and older neighbours we work alongside.

Real Numbers

Every figure is grounded in our outcome tools – Family Star Plus, My Star and Spectrum Star.

Real Change

Twenty years on, the work continues – bolder, kinder, and more connected than ever.

Our Services



SENIORS

- Home to Hospital · Mournes
- Home to Hospital · Slieve Gullion
- Clover Club for Seniors
- Discover & Connect events
- Star-Bites57 · Social Kitchen

FAMILY

- Newry & Mourne Family Support Hub
- 1-1 home-based Family Support – Newry & Mourne, Craigavon & Banbridge
- Evidence-based parenting programmes
- Mourne SureStart · Kilkeel & Annalong
- Building Futures · women into work
- Summer schemes & activity sessions
- Tots & Tea

ABILITY

- Bolster Buddies
- Autism Connect · social hubs
- Walking Warriors
- Creative Collective & Silent Reading
- Autism & Me – psycho-social programmes
- My Mentoring – 1:1 and small group mentoring for autistic adults
- Layered Lives · education programmes
- An Droichead · The Bridge
- ACORN Social Enterprise

**New For
2025/26**

What we added this year

Layered Lives

New Ending Violence Against Women & Girls education programme for neurodivergent adults and those with a Learning Disability.

An Droichead

New DFE-funded Learning Disability transitions programme delivered in partnership with St Paul's High School, Bessbrook.

Walking Warriors

New peer-led inclusive walks within Autism Connect

RAISE Friends for Life

16 new resilience programmes in designated Newry schools and funded by DE

Craigavon and Banbridge Family Support

Home-based family support extended to reach more families in need

SureStart Parents Forum

New participatory forum shaping Mourne SureStart's future services.

**Every service is
shaped by the people
who use it.**

**9,791 people supported across our
services in 2025/26 - improving
opportunity, health and wellbeing.**

The Numbers Behind The People

Behind every number is a person. A child settling into school. A parent finding their footing.
An older neighbour no longer travelling alone.
This year – as need grew, so did we.

9,791 people supported across our services
this year
Improving opportunity, health and wellbeing.

11,645

personal support sessions

3,599

Seniors connected with through
services and events

589

Organisations and community
partners

557

Home to Hospital trips completed by
our volunteer drivers

92%

parents reported feeling better
equipped to respond to their child's
needs

91%

children felt better able to
manage their emotions

86%

parents reported improved
wellbeing and confidence



5

£1.3M

Invested Across Our Community
Turned into support,
opportunities and
community impact.

Everyday Heroes Conference

Twenty years. One challenge.

In May 2025, more than 150 professionals, policymakers, educators, healthcare leaders and community organisations gathered at the Canal Court Hotel in Newry to mark Bolster's 20th anniversary.

The Everyday Heroes conference was both a celebration and a stark reminder of the work still ahead. Child poverty is rising. Services are stretched. Families are struggling. The need for bold, collaborative action has never been greater. This conference provided a focus and a platform for change, recognising those who make a difference, ensuring they are seen, heard and supported. It was a real opportunity for policy makers, educators, healthcare professionals and community leaders to come together, share knowledge and drive forward real solutions that can change lives.

150+

Everyday Heroes

90+

Everyday Hero nominations
from the public

20

years of Bolster Community



Potential is everywhere. Opportunity is not.

The challenge from our 2025 conference — Be the difference in someone's story.

Real Support



We had exhausted every avenue for recruiting classroom assistants. Through the programme we have been able to source five people we would not have found otherwise.

Feedback from a local primary school who engaged with Building Futures Classroom Assistant Programme





Support At Every Stage Of Life



Bolster's work reaches people across every stage of life – from babies and parents finding their feet, to young people building confidence, adults seeking opportunity, and older people reconnecting with community.

Across our services, the approach is the same: practical help, trusted relationships, and support shaped around the person.

SureStart

In Kikeel and Annalong, Mourne SureStart gave children the best possible start – and gave parents the confidence and the tools to keep that going.

This year we expanded our home visits, deepened our programmes, and welcomed more fathers and male carers into family support than ever before. A new Parents Forum is shaping the services we deliver next.



334

home visits supporting 140 children and 192 adults

52

programmes reaching 342 children and 330 adults

49

workshops and events with 293 children and 384 adults

Listening Loudly. Reaching Wider.

Strengthened Family Engagement

Greater father and male-carer engagement across home visits and groups.

Enhanced Co-Design

Our new forum helps us deliver what parents want and need, in a way that works for them.

Extended Community Engagement

We have been working hard to extend our visibility and engage better with the wider community.

Layered Lives

Funded through the Newry, Mourne and Down and Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Councils' Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) Change Fund, Layered Lives was developed in response to a stark reality.

Research suggests that autistic women are significantly more likely to experience domestic abuse and sexual violence than neurotypical women, with some studies indicating they may face up to seven times greater risk.

This sits against a wider backdrop in which Northern Ireland continues to grapple with high levels of violence against women and has been identified as having one of the highest rates of femicide in Europe relative to its population.

Without programmes like Layered Lives, many autistic women may never have the opportunity to explore topics such as healthy relationships, boundaries, consent and personal safety in a way that reflects their experiences and communication needs.

Too often, information and support are not designed with neurodivergent women in mind, leaving some to navigate complex relationships without the knowledge or confidence needed to recognise risk, seek support or advocate for themselves.

By centring autistic voices and lived experience, Layered Lives created a safe space for learning, discussion and reflection. The programme aimed to increase knowledge, build confidence and empower women to make safer, more informed choices, while reinforcing a simple but important message: every woman deserves to feel safe, respected and heard.

The Four Pillars of Layered Lives

PREVENTION

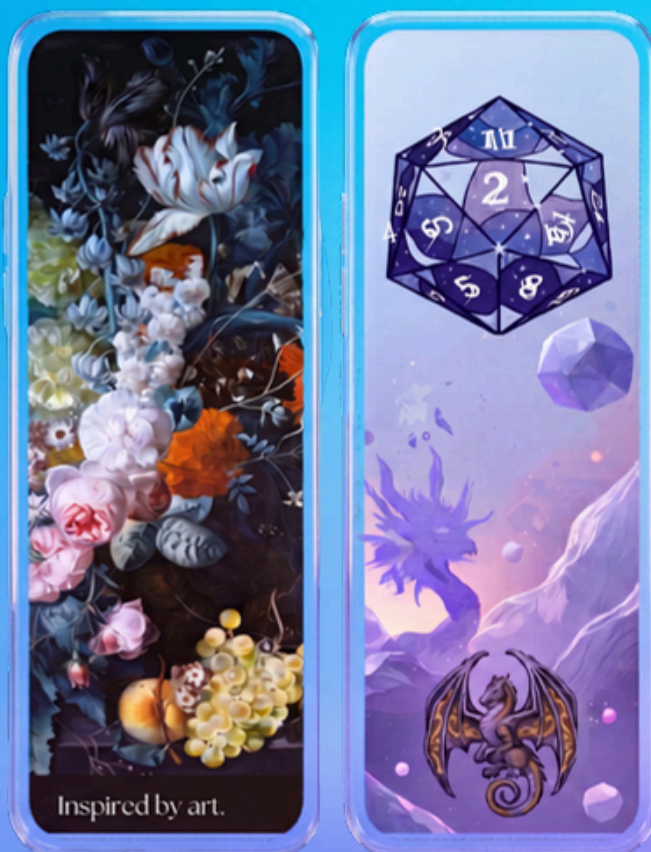
Trauma-informed conversations on consent, boundaries and healthy relationships – built around what participants are actually facing online and offline.

HOLISTIC SUPPORT

Autism-friendly delivery, co-designed with participants. Sensory needs, processing time and individual communication styles shape every session.

“I've learnt the importance of respecting others - for their decisions and who they are.”
— Young male participant

Bookmarks Designed By Layered Lives Participants



By The Numbers:

122

PARTICIPANTS

Total reach across NMD (67) and ABC (50). To be reconfirmed before print

95%

NMD ATTENDANCE

week-on-week attendance from the Newry, Mourne & Down cohort

96%

ABC ATTENDANCE

Among the strongest seen in any Bolster prevention programme.

EARLY INTERVENTION

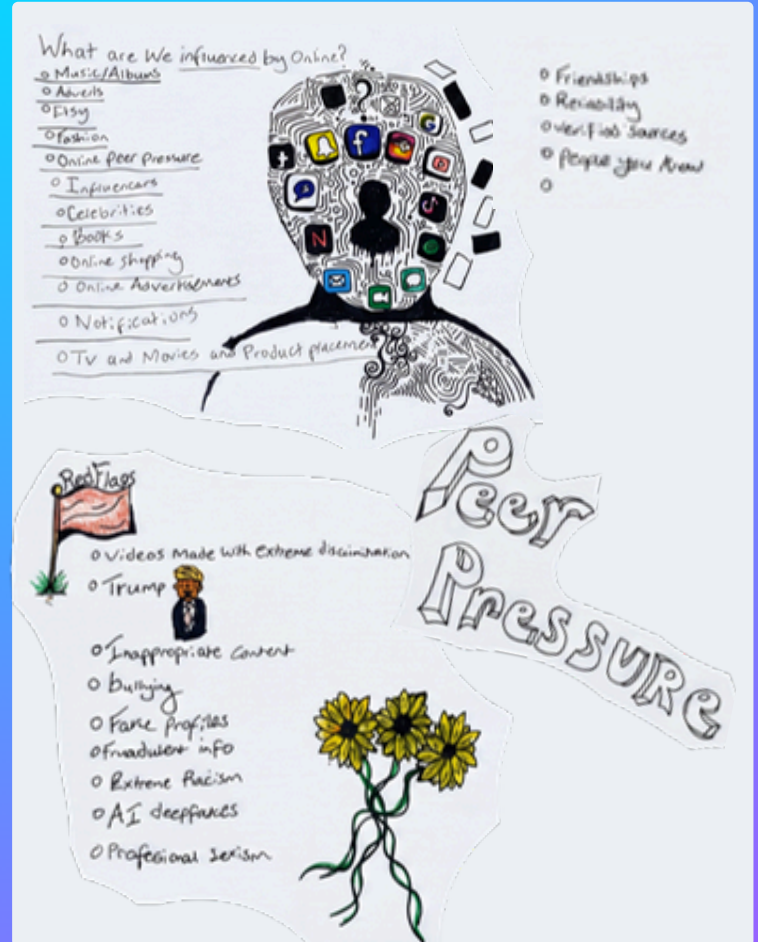
Reaching young people before patterns of harm, isolation or exploitation take hold — particularly autistic teens navigating new social pressures.

COMMUNITY CONNECTION

Delivered alongside grassroots community partners across NMD and ABC, ensuring the programme reflects the communities it serves.

“ It is good to be yourself — without feeling the need to change who you are to fit in.
— Layered Lives participant

“ Make the right decisions - be faithful, loyal, trustworthy, kind and honest about yourself.
— Layered Lives participant



Autism Connect / Bolster Buddies



Seen, Heard and Supported

Across social hubs, residents, walking groups, art therapy and creative collectives. Autism Connect and Bolster Buddies create spaces adults with autism and additional needs - are met with understanding, not assumption.

This year we reached 108 adults across Newry, Mourne & Down and ran a residential that took 17 participants away together for the first time.



The Programmes

SOCIAL HUBS

Peer-led groups, mentoring and practical learning, helping participants develop friendships, navigate everyday challenges and creating stronger social connections.

CREATIVE COLLECTIVE / SILENT READING & WALKING WARRIORS

Sensory-friendly creative sessions, quiet shared reading circles and guided walks. Different energies, same welcome.

MY MENTORING

Personal, flexible support through 1:1 and small group sessions, creating space to explore concerns and solutions. Accessing the right help at the right time through trusted relationships.

AUTISM & ME

Guided discussion and professional support to explore topics such as relationships, anxiety, employment, communication, boundaries and wellbeing.



Acorn Candles



Acorn is Bolster's social enterprise

hand-poured candles produced by Bolster Buddies participants.

Every candle represents real paid work experience:

- measuring
- mixing
- labelling
- packing
- selling

Skills built session by session. Confidence built scent by scent.

BOLSTER BUDDIES

If you follow our social media you will know that our members know how to have fun. But Bolster Buddies is about much more than having the craic.

This year, members achieved OCN Level 1 qualifications, helped shape future learning disability services in Northern Ireland, improved their health and wellbeing through a wide range of activities, and developed skills for greater independence through personal safety, online safety and resilience training. They also gave back to their communities by delivering workshops, supporting local events, mentoring young people and sharing their experiences with parents and professionals.

Bolster Buddies continues to show what is possible when people are given the opportunity to thrive, contribute and be heard.

15,456

Social, educational and wellbeing hours for adults with learning disabilities

SCAN
TO
LEARN
MORE



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MORE



An Droichead – The Bridge



11

YOUNG PEOPLE
Supported through An Droichead this year.

185

SESSIONS
Delivered across the academic year.

//

HB was able to speak in front of an audience, which I don't think she would do before.

— Parent of An Droichead participant



73%

IMPROVED
CONFIDENCE

73%

ARTICULATED
STRENGTHS

67%

INTO TRAINING
OR WORK

When the Department for the Economy launched its Apprenticeship Inclusion Challenge Fund, it was looking for innovative ideas that could help more young people with additional needs access education, training and employment. In partnership with St Paul's High School Bessbrook we submitted a proposal that was much smaller than the others. We proposed supporting just twelve young people. What we offered was something different: a belief that meaningful change happens when support is personalised, relationships are strong, and young people are given the confidence to imagine a future they may never have thought possible.

The Department took a chance on that idea. For young people like Tony (anon), that belief has been life-changing. When he first joined the programme, he often hid behind his hands and spoke about himself negatively, saying things like, "I'm not meant to be here" and "nobody likes me."

Over time, something changed. Through work placements, mentoring and encouragement, Tony began to recognise his own strengths. He proudly told a visitor from Southern Regional College, "I am very good at media," and spoke about travelling independently to college. His work placement supervisor saw the same transformation, describing a young man who moved from one-word answers to confident conversations and approached his work with enthusiasm and pride. For many people, this might seem like a small step. For Tony, it was the beginning of believing in his own potential.

This is the impact of An Droichead. It is not simply about qualifications, placements or destinations. It is about helping young people build the confidence, skills and self-belief needed to take the next step into adulthood. This year, twelve young people were given that opportunity because somebody backed possibility.



Building Futures



Building Futures

"Honestly, taking the Classroom Assistant course was such a brilliant move for me. Before I signed up, I was a stay-at-home mum and really wanted to get back into work after years of focusing on the kids."

Kim's experience reflects the journey of many women supported through Building Futures. After years spent caring for her family, she wanted to return to employment but felt uncertain about how to take that first step. Funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) Levelling Up Programme and delivered in partnership with WomensTec and Women in Business, Building Futures supports women to rediscover their potential and build pathways into employment.

Through employability training, accredited learning and personalised support, participants are encouraged to recognise the value of the skills and experience they already possess while gaining the confidence and qualifications needed to move forward.

For Kim, the programme provided practical support with CV preparation, interview skills and training opportunities, but it also offered something less tangible: belief. Belief that the years she had spent raising a family had equipped her with valuable, transferable skills and that employment was not only possible, but achievable.

Today, Kim works as a Classroom Assistant, a role she loves and one that fits around family life. Her story is a reminder that when barriers are removed and potential is recognised, women can achieve far more than they sometimes believe possible.

107

Women re-discovering their potential.

CONFIDENCE IS THE QUALIFICATION

29

Women secured long-term employment

76

Accredited qualifications achieved.

16

Women progressing into further training.



Nobody Should Carry This Alone

A Community In Need

Families arrive at our door carrying things no one should carry alone, bereavement, family breakdown, poverty, mental ill health, bullying and domestic abuse, a child struggling in school, a parent losing their footing. Our family support practitioners work one-to-one — in homes, in schools, in community spaces — building the trust that lets real change begin.

160

Parents building skills through evidence-based parenting programmes

92%

Parents reported that they felt better able to meet their child's emotional needs after engaging with our services



Behind every statistic is a person trying to rebuild

When families are recovering from trauma, the challenge is not simply getting through today – it is believing that tomorrow can be different.

This year, we worked alongside a family rebuilding their lives after domestic violence, providing practical and financial support at a critical time. Working in partnership with Women's Aid, who were supporting mum, we helped reduce immediate pressures by replacing essential household items, funding access to extended counselling and providing financial assistance that made it easier for their child to re-engage with school.

None of these actions changed their circumstances overnight. But by easing some of the daily pressures and creating space for healing, they helped restore stability, dignity and hope. Most importantly, they sent a powerful message: that this family was not facing their journey alone, and that a different future was possible.



Facilitators were understanding, kind and supportive – they made us realise we can do this, and we are not alone on what can be a lonely road.

— Parent • Parents Plus programme



REDUCING ISOLATION, BUILDING CONNECTION

SENIORS & SOCIAL CONNECTION

Yvonne's Story

Yvonne began using our Home to Hospital service after her husband - who had always driven her to appointments - became too unwell to continue. After he passed, she was living alone in rural Killeel, her closest family more than three hours away.

She was attending regular appointments at Mater Hospital and Belfast City Hospital - a 94 - mile round trip.

Bolster volunteer drivers made sure she could attend every appointment, including collecting her at 6am for a 7.30am day surgery so she could travel without stress.

After surgery, drivers regularly phoned to check on her - reminding her that she was not alone.

557

Home to Hospital trips this year

52,3578
Miles travelled this year

24
Medical facilities accessed

More than transport. A lifeline.

Loneliness is now recognised as a major public health challenge with research suggesting that prolonged social isolation can be as harmful to health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. For us, tackling loneliness is about more than bringing people together. It's about ensuring older people remain connected to their communities, maintaining the relationships, routines and support networks that help them live well.

Reducing isolation across the year...

“

It was lovely to meet up with people I haven't seen in years - including some I went to school with.

15

— Discover & Connect attendee

3

Discover & Connect Events. Over 400 seniors reconnecting with their communities.

504

Opportunities to connect and thrive through Clover Club.

2.8k

Star-Bites 57 Social Kitchen - together, less loneliness

Real Impact



//

He has matured so much and has gained a confidence in himself that was not there before. This programme is invaluable and has had a massively positive impact on my son.

— Parent of An Droichead participant



What This Year Has Taught Us

What This Year Taught Us About Possibility

This year reinforced something we have long believed: people are capable of more than they are often given credit for. Across our work with children, families, older people, autistic adults and people with learning disabilities, we saw the difference that early support, strong relationships and community connection can make. If there is one thing this year has taught us, it is that when someone backs possibility, change becomes possible.

EARLY SUPPORT WORKS

1

The earlier we intervene, the greater the opportunity to prevent problems from escalating. We saw time and again that helping people before they reach crisis leads to better outcomes, stronger relationships and more sustainable change.

2

CONNECTION IS NOT A LUXURY

Whether working with older people experiencing loneliness, autistic adults seeking belonging, or families feeling isolated, one message was clear: connection is fundamental to health, wellbeing and resilience.

3

PEOPLE WANT TO BE HEARD

From young people discussing relationships and mental health to adults with learning disabilities helping shape future services, people engage when they feel their experiences and opinions matter

4

OPPORTUNITY CHANGES EXPECTATIONS

When people are offered opportunities rather than limitations, aspirations grow. We saw people gain qualifications, find employment, build confidence, take on leadership roles and achieve things they never thought possible.

5

COMMUNITIES ARE FULL OF EVERYDAY HEROES

Lasting change rarely comes from one organisation alone. It happens when neighbours, volunteers, professionals, families and local communities work together to support one another and create opportunities for people to thrive.

Looking Ahead

01

Early Support, Earlier



Deepen our early intervention and prevention work.

02

Growing With Families



Grow direct support for children, families and carers.

03

Ability, Recognised



Expand opportunities for autism, learning disabilities and additional needs.

04

Routes To Work



Strengthen pathways into employment, training and independence.

05

Partnership Power



Build stronger community partnerships across the region and beyond.

06

Sustainable Impact



Grow social enterprise and unrestricted income, and keep listening.

No One Thrives Alone.

Every programme in this report was made possible by organisations willing to back bold ideas and invest in communities before crisis takes hold. To our funders, statutory partners, employers, volunteers and supporters – Thank You

589

organisations and community partners working together to create change.

13

Funders supporting our work this year

Closing Reflections

As we reach the end of this report, I am reminded that behind every statistic, programme and achievement is a person whose life has been changed because somebody took the time to listen, support and believe in them.

Throughout these pages, you have seen the impact of that belief in action. From children and families receiving help at the right time, to autistic adults building confidence and connections, to older people rediscovering friendship and purpose, the common thread is simple: positive change happens when people are given the opportunity to thrive.

This year has also been one of transition for Bolster Community. We said farewell to two board members and former Chairpersons, Martina and Eamonn, whose leadership and dedication helped shape the organisation we are today, and welcomed new trustees Briege, Geraldine and Willie, whose skills and experience will help guide our future.

We also marked an important leadership milestone as our founder and CEO, Jacinta Linden, stepped into a new role after twenty-two years of dedicated service to Bolster Community. Her vision, determination and belief in people have helped build an organisation that has transformed thousands of lives across Northern Ireland. On behalf of the Board, I would like to thank Jacinta for her extraordinary contribution and wish her every success in this next chapter. We are equally confident in the leadership of Allison Slater as she takes the organisation forward, building on those strong foundations while continuing to respond to the changing needs of our communities.

On behalf of the Board, I would like to thank our staff, volunteers, funders, partners and supporters. Your commitment, compassion and belief in what is possible make this work achievable. Together, you have helped create opportunities, strengthen communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland.

As we look ahead, we do so with confidence. The challenges facing our communities remain significant, but so too does the determination of those working to address them. We remain committed to early intervention, community-led solutions and ensuring that every person we support is seen not for the challenges they face, but for the potential they hold.

Because lasting change often begins with one simple act: somebody backing possibility.



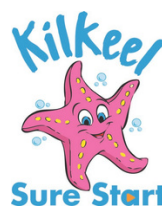
Gerry Flynn
Chairperson

BOLSTER
COMMUNITY



With Gratitude,
To those who partnered and walked
alongside us this year, Thank You.

BOLSTER
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