



Chartered  
Institute of  
Housing



# Good practice compendium

Sharing the lessons learnt from CIH 2021  
Housing Awards

Sponsored by:

**choice** 

The logo for 'choice' features the word in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font, followed by a graphic of a grid of dots of varying sizes, some of which are highlighted in white.



Together  
we enrich  
lives

Choice Housing Ireland Limited (Choice) is a registered voluntary Housing Association and charity. We are a 'profit for a purpose' social enterprise established over 40 years ago to provide decent housing and tenant support services at an affordable rent. We work with a whole range of like-minded partners to bring about positive change for our tenants and their communities.

Today, Choice has over 12,000 homes and employs almost 400 people in a Group structure that includes:

- Choice Services - our in-house repairs and maintenance service provider
- Maple and May - a professional landlord improving standards for private tenants as well as increasing the supply of affordable housing for sale.
- Oaklee Housing – a registered voluntary Housing Association in the Republic of Ireland providing customer focused housing and support services.
- Comhar FM - a consortium encompassing the financing, design, construction and maintenance of six social housing development sites located in and around Dublin.

Through our Group structure we are committed to using our significant resources and expertise to deliver more and better homes and services for all.

**We are delighted to sponsor this year's  
CIH 2021 Housing Awards, Good  
Practice Compendium.**

**Our mission  
is to enrich  
lives through  
great homes  
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# Welcome

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Welcome to the Chartered Institute of Housing's 2021 all-Ireland housing awards good practice compendium.

The past 12 months have tested the resilience of housing professionals and tenants in earnest. The priorities within housing have pivoted to ensure communities have support and safety during the coronavirus pandemic.

Counted among the particular challenges is work in respect of sheltered and supported housing, as well as care services. Our profession can hold its head high for the key services provided, making sure people receive the help that they need.

In any year housing professionals change people's lives for the better, but the public health crisis has shown us the importance of our profession like never before. This annual compendium contains exemplars of best practice and there is certainly no shortage of people who have gone the extra mile over the past year.

The publication has a vast range of brilliant examples from which we can all learn. Challenges will remain with us as we move beyond COVID-19, such as how to address ever-growing levels of housing stress.

There is cause for optimism. In Northern Ireland, minister Hargey's plan to classify the Housing Executive's landlord arm as a mutual or co-operative is very welcome, a move that would enable investment while promoting tenant involvement.

Now in its twelfth year, the standard of nominations for this year's awards was high. And where there is such a high standard of work, it was no easy task for the awards judging panel so I would like to thank them for their time and contributions.

I would also like to thank the awards headline sponsor Respond, and all the sponsors of the individual awards. With your support we have been able to share this fantastic content.

And thank you all for your ongoing support of CIH, and support for excellence in housing.



**Justin Cartwright CertCIH**  
National director - Northern Ireland  
Chartered Institute of Housing

<b>Best housing story</b>		<b>7</b>
Liscarroll Residents Group - coming together	Respond	7
Step down care at the bank	Choice Housing	8
The big sleep out	First Housing Aid & Support Services	10
Burnvale community association rises to the challenge	Radius Housing	11
House in The Wells	Apex Housing Association	12
Not just houses but homes	Habinteg Housing Association Ulster Ltd.	13
<b>Communications in a crisis</b>		<b>15</b>
At home should not mean at risk	Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid	15
Radius tenant engagement	Radius Housing	17
Covid communications strategy	Habinteg Housing Association Ulster Ltd.	18
Radius "Art from the Heart"	Radius Housing	20
Keep calm and carry on	Clanmil Housing Association Ltd	22
STAY HOMEless, PROTECT THE NHS, SAVE LIVES	Simon Community NI	24
<b>Excellence in customer service</b>		<b>26</b>
Innovation in Tuath Housing Tenant Engagement with focus on Digital Engagement with Older Residents	Tuath Housing	26
Supporting our customers during COVID-19	Co-Ownership	28
Apex Housing team delivering excellence	Apex Housing Association	29
Everybody In	Housing Executive	31
Simply the Best	First Housing Aid & Support Services	32
<b>Excellence in health &amp; wellbeing</b>		<b>34</b>
Extern alcohol housing support team	Extern	34
Radius promoting health and wellbeing in lockdown	Radius Housing	36
Tuath Care 2020	Tuath Housing	38
Reducing isolation promoting inclusion	Habinteg Housing Association Ulster Ltd.	39
Choice Employee Health & Wellbeing Programme	Choice Housing	41
Health & Wellbeing	Connswater Homes	42
Health and wellbeing in a pandemic	Clanmil Housing Association Ltd	44

<b>Excellence in housing innovation</b>		<b>46</b>
Radius design guide	Radius Housing	46
Pilot project to end destitution and homelessness	Choice Housing	48
Restoring the Georgian Heritage - Mountjoy Square, Dublin	Respond Housing	49
Prison resettlement team	MACS Supporting Children and Young People	50
Shared tenancy	MACS Supporting Children and Young People	52
<b>Excellence in championing equality &amp; diversity</b>		<b>53</b>
Listen share change	Housing Executive	53
Choice equality and diversity programme	Choice Housing	55
Radius championing equality and diversity through lockdown and beyond	Radius Housing	56
Old Mill Court, Sion Mills: housing for all	Rural Housing Association	58
<b>Housing team of the year</b>		<b>60</b>
Staying connected, staying apart	Clann Housing	60
Belfast floating support	MACS Supporting Children and Young People	61
Hope from home	First Housing Aid & Support Services	63
Housing team of the year	Radius Housing	64
Ark Housing development team	Ark Housing	65
Financial inclusion team	Choice Housing	66
Newington Housing Association team of the year	Newington Housing Association	67
<b>Working in partnership</b>		<b>69</b>
VHE and Choice investment project	Choice Housing	69
Working together to combat COVID-19 and Homelessness in Northern Ireland	Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland	71
Newington student bursary scheme	Newington Housing Association	73
Cliff Edge coalition NI	NIFHA, on behalf of the Cliff Edge Coalition NI	74
Festival in a box	Radius Housing	76
Joint support project for derry and strabane	Apex Housing Association	78
Turnaround in sheltered schemes' gardens helping transform lives	Alpha Housing	79
Onside - the Outreach & Navigation for Social Inclusion and Digital Engagement Project	Disability Action NI	81
<b>Inspirational young housing professional</b>		<b>83</b>
Mark Scott	Housing Executive	83
Gerard Lewsley	Housing Executive	84
Catriona McCann	Choice Housing	85

<b>Supporting communities award</b>		<b>87</b>
Supporting Carrosyl in lockdown	Carrowshee Park and Sylvan Hill Community Association	87
North Belfast connected homes project	Newington Housing Association	89
Community chest COVID-19	Radius Housing	91
Fareshare Northern Ireland	Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland	92
Respond	Repsond Housing	94
Clann housing	Clann Housing	95
Staying connected	Habinteg Housing Association Ulster Ltd.	96
COVID-19 community grants	Housing Executive	97
Simon Community Northern Ireland staff team	Simon Community Northern Ireland	99

<b>Housing hero</b>		<b>101</b>
Louise Grant	Respond Housing	101
Jim Dennison	Simon Community NI	102
Michael Lynch	Clann Housing	104
Rosemary Diver	Radius Housing	105
Barry Shields	Habinteg Housing Association Ulster Ltd	106

*In order to keep the authenticity of these projects, and to convey the passion felt by those involved we have not altered any of the text submitted to us as part of these entries.*

# BEST HOUSING STORY

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HOUSING GROUP

The award celebrates success stories in our sector over the past year. These shortlisted entries show good practice where people have gone above and beyond to make a positive difference in their community.

## Liscarroll Residents Group - coming together

### Respond



### Statement of support

When COVID-19 arrived, the age profile and demographic of Árd an Chaisleán, a small Respond estate in Liscarroll, Co. Cork, meant tenants were highly vulnerable. There was a high risk of tenants becoming completely isolated and very lonely. The Respond Housing team looked for a way to enable tenants to come together safely and support each other through the pandemic, in accordance with Government guidelines.

The local Respond staff collaborated with the tenants to work to improve the outdoor space in their estate. With the favourable weather on their side, some of the tenants started to plant some fruit trees on the shared green. Soon all tenants were involved and there were plenty of ideas for their immediate surroundings all while sticking to the public health guidelines.

### Resident Rory Keating:

"What started as a couple of neighbours getting together to plant some fruit trees in the green, has turned into a wonderful sense of community spirit and neighbourliness. One idea led to another and before we knew it we had planted, not only the fruit trees, but flower beds and creeper flowers to cover bare concrete walls. We repainted the windows in every home and redecorated the front of houses with dressed stone. One talented neighbour even built a beautiful wooden fence. Everyone pitched in to help in the back gardens with flower boxes, bird boxes and bird baths swapped and shared. All culminating in a 9-hole putting green, complete with numbered flags in each hole!"

The local Respond staff were on hand to support the tenants, offering support and advice as required, even developing a partnership with the local donkey sanctuary to provide well-rotted manure!

A roster for watering and pruning the plants was created and the results are clear - all have blossomed successfully.

Árd an Caisleán's oldest resident, Sean Keating 94, cleared the entire green edge of algae and moss with his trusty spade. A daily church goer, Sean said getting involved with the projects helped to fill the void of Mass and was a welcome opportunity to give back to his community.

Another resident, Shirley Flanagan said "I'm looking forward to what scheme we can come up with next! Not only is it a chance for us all to come together as neighbours, but with each new project we begin, we are enhancing our own living spaces."

## Outcomes and achievements

- Tenants are positive about how the work helped them tackle isolation and loneliness through a very tough time.
- The projects were good for both physical and mental wellbeing.
- There is a greatly enhanced estate environment and sense of ownership.
- The first Covid lockdown was the positive driver for the community to come together and they are already planning their next projects.
- Tenants have described a far stronger sense of community that will outlive the current pandemic.
- This was the catalyst for other community projects to start on other estates when ideas were shared by Respond staff.
- Tenants have remarked how it now feels like a real community rather than simply an estate.

## Step down care at the bank

**Lead organisation: Choice Housing**

**Partner organisation: Belfast Trust**



### Statement of support

In March 2020, the UK Government announced a national lockdown in the midst of an unprecedented crisis. The establishment of a Nightingale facility at Belfast City Hospital meant Belfast Trust needed to act swiftly to release vital bed capacity to allow the rapid expansion of its intensive care provision. Existing patients too would need protected from this rapidly spreading virus. Health Professionals desperately searched for bed-space solutions to a new and devastating problem; COVID-19.

One ward within the hospital accommodated acute mental health inpatients. Their needs were deemed capable of being met in a Supported Housing environment however there was no such accommodation available. Against the backdrop of a deepening crisis, the Trust urgently searched for suitable accommodation through its network of contacts.

An enquiry to Choice Housing Association produced a promising lead. One of its' subsidiary Companies, Maple and May, was completing a development of nine new-build apartments on East Belfast's

Woodstock Road - "The Bank". An inspection was hastily arranged and the Trust relieved to find that the bright, spacious new-build apartments would be eminently suitable for its patients needs.

Ordinarily, it would take months to agree Terms, prepare a business case, complete surveys and obtain approvals. As the virus continued to spread, Mary O' Brien (Belfast Trust) and Siobhan McCrystal (Choice / Maple and May) set about making the project happen in impossibly tight timeframes. Terms were quickly agreed and approvals urgently obtained. Even the solicitors responded, taking days to complete Lease negotiations which often take months!

In a world that was effectively locked down, the logistics were equally difficult. Long standing supplier relationships enabled urgent furniture deliveries from across the UK and Ireland against a wider backdrop of business closures and issues with supply chains. Contracts with utility providers were set up, boilers commissioned, bins delivered and final certificates obtained. In just a few short weeks, The Bank was being deep cleaned ready for its new Tenants.

Among the Tenants, there was perhaps a little trepidation in leaving the familiarity of the hospital ward particularly in these circumstances. Any concerns however were immediately dispelled on arrival at The Bank. Anyone would be happy to live there. The new-build apartments are bright and spacious, situated amongst shops and cafes with support available from neighbours and staff when required.

The story however, does not end there. Initially conceived as a short term "covid" arrangement, such has been the success of the project, the Trust has now decided to make it a longer term part of its step down care provision.

Mary O' Brien at Belfast Trust comments:

"At the outset of this work in March 2020, 25% of beds in Acute Mental Health Inpatient Centre were

filled with patients whose discharge was delayed. This has now reduced to less than 1% of the bed usage. The Woodstock Bank facility has been a crucial part of this journey providing a step-down option for patients from acute care, freeing up inpatient beds, providing recovery options for the patient's transition from hospital to community, and therefore enhancing their individual recovery journey. The view of current occupants is that having high standard accommodation in a community based setting has been transformative in their recovery".

The Bank provides tenants with privacy, dignity and autonomy in a modern, safe and supporting environment. But the accommodation itself is only part of it. The benefits of the community setting, in particular appear foremost in promoting recovery for service users to live as full a life as possible. The real credit therefore goes to the local people, shops and cafes who have welcomed new Tenants into their community.

## Outcomes and achievements

Firstly, working together with Belfast Trust, hospital beds were freed up and the risk of Covid infection reduced for vulnerable inpatients. What was achieved in terms of timeframes and logistics in extraordinary circumstances is testament to the "extra over" dedication that we so frequently see within the Housing Sector and throughout Care Partnerships.

Already good relationships across Health and Housing have been strengthened by mutual dedication towards a common goal and will be sustained by the apparent success of the project in terms of patient outcomes.

Second, as a Housing Association, our primary focus

is to provide accommodation for the most vulnerable in our society. A real difference has been made to the lives of people with severe and enduring mental Health difficulties. Borne initially from an emergency appeal, The Bank has become an innovative new pathway for community placements in a Supported Housing environment.

We are reminded of the clear links between Mental Health outcomes and the quality of housing provision. We are reminded too, of the importance of community and a sense of belonging in driving the recoveries of some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

# The big sleep out

## First Housing Aid & Support Services



### Statement of support

First Housing's Floating Support service delivers housing related support to approximately 300 families and vulnerable adults throughout Co Fermanagh each year. The team has a project co-ordinator and four support workers who in addition to providing one on one support, regularly go above and beyond their role making a positive difference within their local community. They routinely highlight homelessness in the county, what it looks like and how it feels for those who are unfortunate enough to be in this situation. They have created positive links with local businesses who have become part landscape in transforming the experience of homeless people through charitable donations. Businesses ranging from retail to hospitality, manufacturing to call centres have donated mobile phones, money, clothes, furniture and hot food. The team view these important relationships as an indirect method of transforming the lives of those who are struggling with the deeply personal and societal challenges wrought by homelessness.

One project which made a significant difference in the community, involving team commitment and the willingness to act beyond the requirements of their role was The Big Sleep Out of Christmas 2019. The aims in staging this event were to increase homeless awareness in the community, raise funds to address homelessness and give the team greater empathy with service users as they experienced walking a

short distance in the shoes of someone who is street homeless. By choosing a Christmas date they hoped to highlight the stark contrast between those heading home after a night of partying and celebrations and those that had no home to go to. They also hoped the Christmas spirit would have a notable loosening effect on purse strings! In addition to their case loads, staff enthusiastically embraced all the tasks required to make this project a huge success; from risk assessments to advertising, from liaising with relevant agencies, to setting up a Go Fund Me Page and collecting money during the event. The team were joined by three other participants, a service user, a volunteer and the manager of the local foodbank, one of their partner agencies. Members of the public, stakeholders, local councillors, and service users attended the event for varying periods of time to find out more about homelessness or to share their experience of the same. Live Facebook and twitter feeds throughout the night kept the community, service users and staff in other First Housing projects involved in this 12 hour journey. Reflecting on the experience the group said the hours from 2am - 6am were the worst. The town became eerily silent as people vacated it creating a sense of loneliness and vulnerability. Those still lingering in the town cultivated a wariness in group members as to whether they would be approached and the intentions of the stranger in doing so. Such wariness would have likely escalated into fear had some members of the team been alone. As temperatures dropped the body became less efficient in fighting the cold and succumbed to weariness and fatigue; aches appeared in muscles and the desire for the comfort, warmth and security of a home taken so much for granted was like a physical pain in their stomach. The group were overwhelmed as they discussed the physical and emotional toil repeated nights in such circumstances, would have on anyone forced to endure them. The Big Sleep Out met its aims and more and brought the following comments from service users "I still say youse are one of the ones that care" and "You could not be without a service like First Housing in Enniskillen".

## Outcomes and achievements

One of the obstacles overcome through this event is that of public perception: a greater understanding of homelessness now exists in the county as does knowledge of the organisations responsible for addressing it. Awareness has created a more compassionate and proactive response as members of the public have stated that they feel confident in approaching and signposting anyone they think might require housing support. Positive housing outcomes of acquiring and sustaining tenancies have been made possible through the £3,000.00 raised. The team can directly and immediately respond to crisis situations without the time delay and restrictions of a charitable grant. One beneficiary of these funds said "I went

from homeless to homed in 4 days". Money has been used for rent arrears, tenancy deposits, transport and frozen meals, the latter enabling service users who are residing in temporary accommodation, with only a toaster and a microwave, to have a hot meal. The lack of emergency accommodation in Fermanagh is a significant obstacle so in conjunction with The Big Sleep Out the team applied to the Homeless Prevention Fund to purchase emergency homeless packs, which are distributed in partnership with the PSNI, typically the first responders to out of hours homelessness.

# Burnvale community association rises to the challenge

## Radius Housing



### Statement of support

Burnvale Community Association was established in December 2017 with the help and support of Radius Housing and the T:BUC Shared Housing Programme.

The Community Association has 8 members who all have a common interest in making their community a safe and welcoming place for everyone to live. The group members faced some challenges in the initial stages of their development as most of them were never involved in a community association before and some had their own personal issues they were dealing with. As with any new community it takes time for people to trust each other and feel comfortable making their voice heard.

As the group developed, some within the wider Burnvale Crescent Community felt that the Community Group were interfering and busy bodies and had nothing positive to add to the community. This led to disagreements and mistrust among the community and some of the members stood down from the group.

Those that remained took up the challenge to change the way the community viewed them and started to engage with the wider community doing door to door surveys to establish what the needs were in the area and what activities and events the residents would like to see developed. They built up friendships with the other residents and encouraged them to get involved in the community. The group organised information events and coffee mornings to inform the other residents of what they were developing for the area and encouraged engagement and feedback from those attending.

The group has worked closely with Radius Housing over the last few years to develop and implement events and activities for the residents of Burnvale Crescent in Cookstown and the wider Cookstown area and have now established a strong working community association that the wider community call on when issues arise in the community.

They had a number of activities planned for last year but due to the restrictions around the Coronavirus a lot of the planned activities had to be postponed. This didn't discourage the Community Association they saw a need in their community to help and support their neighbours. They mobilised to provide much needed support to vulnerable and isolated members of their community impacted by the crisis.

The fantastic work this group have done to support their community shows that shared effort can create positive outcomes, and volunteering can have a huge and beneficial impact on both volunteers, and on those who are being supported.

The Burnvale Community Association, gave hope and help where it was lacking, and showed our heroes on the front line that their community was behind them. In a time of darkness and fear, community spirit shone out in a beacon of light.

## Outcomes and achievements

- 40 parcels of food/ household goods provided,
- 50 purchased toiletry items donated to local NHS staff allowing them to wash before returning to their families.
- liaised with local pharmacies collecting prescriptions for those shielding
- 10 isolated residents assisted with needs such as shopping on a weekly basis.
- established a tree of hope where youth hung messages of hope and support.
- 3 new volunteers recruited to the Community Association
- point of contact for the tenants answering calls from concerned neighbours and vulnerable people suffering from the effects of self isolation.
- 20 people referred to other organisations operating in the area for help with specific queries
- worked with organisations to link people to free online courses
- organised the NHS Clap on a Thursday playing music to keep everyone's spirits up
- held a Halloween best scary house competition
- fundraised to have a Christmas Tree erected within the development to raise community pride and spirit
- "We know that our work had a huge impact on the community. We eased the burden on pharmacies. Our community became more connected than ever, with neighbours helping to make sure that no-one went without, regardless of their circumstances." Spokesperson for Burnvale Community Association

# House in The Wells

## Apex Housing Association



### Statement of support

Nomination Declan Mc Laughlin Support worker, Tenants and staff of the House in the Wells, Apex Housing Association

The House in the wells is a 24 bedded homeless hostel situated within the local community which specialises in providing a harm reduction program, support and accommodation to men with addiction issues across a variety of age groups.

Declan mc Laughlin is a support worker within the hostel and he has worked there for 7 years. Declan has some musical background and has been able to implement his skills in this area within his role. Over the years he has been able to use art and music as a way of helping the men within the hostel express themselves, build confidence and have fun. Equally he teaches the men guitar and regularly preforms for

them, encouraging them to join in.

The reason I would like to nominate Declan, the Tenants and staff of the House in the Wells for the award of best Housing story is as follows:

As we all know with the COVID-19 pandemic, this year has been exceptionally difficult for everyone, but even more so in settings like the House in the Wells. Tenants and staff in the hostel have had to work together around the clock providing a programme of support whilst also dealing on a daily basis with the many challenges presented by the pandemic. It has been very difficult to maintain isolation when required, encourage social distancing as well as all the other restrictions to be implemented.

Very often men in Hostels do not have as many opportunities to express how they feel or be heard in the same way as other groups and as such Declan decided he wanted to find a way to give the men a chance to say how they feel about their situation and also be part of a group sending a message of hope especially at this time of year as it was close to Christmas.

Declan and his manager discussed how he could do this and it was agreed that it would be done in the form of a song and video so the message from this group of men could be shared with as many people as possible.

The song Mary's Eyes, was written a number of years ago by Declan and it is about the issue of teenage addiction and its effect on families. The song is performed by Declan and supported by a very emotive video made by tenants and staff

What is truly special about this song/video is how above and beyond the daily pressures in this current time of the pandemic, that Tenants supported by staff have sent a beautiful multi-cultural message of strength, the difficulties of life, love, friendship, hope, inclusion, peace and Merry Christmas at a time when

we all need to be reminded there is hope, and in their words 'Tomorrow will be better'.

What makes this song/video even more poignant is that they have dedicated it to a number of the men who passed away this year, and a staff member who passed away. Please see link below and enjoy

<https://youtu.be/R-PdwoYaGOW>

## Not just houses but homes

### Habinteg Housing Association Ulster Ltd.



#### Statement of support

Habinteg Housing Association NI is committed to providing a holistic approach to supporting our tenants. We are proud that all Habinteg staff embrace our values and provide HOMES where people can live fulfilling LIVES as part of an thriving COMMUNITY.

Habinteg wish to recognise the commitment of our staff during the pandemic by nominating Sandra McCoubry. Sandra is Habinteg's Welfare Advice Officer whose job is to ensure that tenants receive the benefits that they are entitled to. Like many of our team members Sandra is well known for doing her job and for frequently going the extra mile to help support tenants. This is one of many examples of Sandra's commitment to ensuring the needs of customers are met, regardless of how many people she needs to get involved to achieve this.

At the start of the COVID pandemic Sandra started working with a family, The head of the household was employed and was also the main carer for her severely disabled husband and two of her four children who were also disabled. The family was classified as homeless as they were living in a private rented property which was unable to meet the complex needs that her family required.

The family were identified for a new property with six bedrooms, two living rooms and three bathrooms, a perfect house for them to move into. However Habinteg seeks to provide homes not just houses and whilst this property met the needs of the family

the prospective tenant was extremely anxious about making the move and Sandra used her skills to support the family in making this house their home.

Moving in to a six bedroom house was ideal for this family however the idea of painting and furnishing it was a daunting prospect for the family.

Sandra worked with the tenant and enabled her to recognise that with some additional support her ideal house could become the dream home she wanted, meeting the various and complex needs of all her family.

Sandra mentored the family to reassure and work with them using zoom meetings. Sandra took into account the family's individual needs when assessing what was required to undertake this project.. As the family's confidence in Sandra increased, she introduced them to other colleagues, organisations and the wider community, and then working together she galvanized resources to implement and coordinate a multi-agency, personalised approach to ensure a positive outcome for the family. All done with safe distancing protecting everyone involved.

- Firstly Sandra looked at the customer's income and identified additional benefits which were outstanding, securing an addition £37.50 per week and housing benefit.
- By involving Habinteg's Maintenance department and encouraging other staff and volunteers from the local community the entire house was painted and, volunteers took care of the garden all before the family moved in.
- Habinteg colleagues and their family members donated bedding, lamps, lights, curtains and other household items.
- Various charities were contacted for additional support such as Children in Need who donated financial support towards a washing machine,
- Local Church supplied a cooker and St Vincent De Paul a fridge freezer.
- The Council for the Homeless gave a Starter Pack and also included extra bedding, crockery, towels and cutlery.

Sandra encouraged the tenant to contact the Nurses benevolent fund and some additional funding sourced a local removal company who agree a 'reasonable' fee to help with the removals.

Finally, adding the finishing touch Sandra contacted Carers NI who donated vouchers for spa treatments for tenant to treat herself.

### Outcomes and achievements

It took a group of people working together to give this family the confidence that they could make this move. People working positively together created a positive energy which infected all those around them. At a time when a pandemic was separating and isolating people, Sandra galvanized a team who provided this Family with the home they needed.

This family is now living in a comfortable, safe environment from which they can build their lives.

They are part of a supportive and caring community

Tenant is now a member of Habinteg's tenant forum able to contribute to Habinteg's work and support other tenants with their needs.

Sandra continues to provide welfare advice to other tenants supported by her colleagues at Habinteg

Barbara Scott Habinteg's Housing Manager said "Sandra is a huge asset to our Homes and Communities team, she has a quiet, friendly approach and deals with our tenants with real empathy reflecting her varied experience. She continues to emphasise the difficulties tenants can face, her approach and support to front line staff has influenced and changed the way we support I feel this change has been felt across all teams in the Association for the benefit of all."

# COMMUNICATIONS IN A CRISIS

Sponsored by:

## Housing Executive

In challenging times, being there for your community is exceptionally important. This award is to recognise landlords whose communication with their tenants and residents has been outstanding over the past year, keeping them fully informed and supported or helping them to stay connected. Nominations for this awards could be for a single project or refer to your general organisational approach to communication.

## At home should not mean at risk

### Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid



### Statement of support

Women's Aid were concerned about patterns of domestic violence emerging from Spain, Italy, France and China. Domestic abuse in NI were already high accounting for 16% of all crime, local PSNI attending a domestic violence incident every 17 minutes. Increased household tensions due to forced co-existence, economic stress and worries about the virus are all contributing factors to already stressed households, add domestic violence and abuse and it is extremely worrying family environment for women, children and young people.

With the announcement of the first lockdown measures many businesses/ services closed and many others moved to home working. We saw an initial drop off in our referrals 149 compared to 217 for the same period last years. This was despite PSNI and Helpline reports of increases in calls. We were alarmed that women would think Women's Aid was closed. During COVID-19 we have decreased

access to pathways to support, we entered this uncharted territory, access to GP, health providers, police and justice systems were now more difficult for women to gain entry to. This is extremely worrying in relation to physical assaults and injuries that women find themselves reluctant to access medical support because of fear of the virus. Increase in both psychological, coercive and controlling behaviours are prevalent currently as well as all forms of domestic violence and abuse including financial, sexual and physical abuse. People now find themselves in lock down 24/7 within a reduced or small space and this can cause tension and anger. Many controlling patterns of behaviour can become worse or can become accelerated during this time and women, children and young people, hear it, sense it and feel it just the same.

We knew we had to get the message out that we were open. We took to social media with 'At home should not at risk' campaign in March 2020. We focused on safety planning in key public messages and awareness raising of our service during this time. The message was simple 'We are here to help'. Sharing tips for safety planning online, developing quiz to engage women and raise awareness of domestic abuse. The Chief Executive contacted media outlets to share concerns and ask for support to raise awareness, this led to coverage on BBC NI TalkBack, Good morning Ulster and Evening Extra, Cool FM and Q radio news. We ran a poster campaign to support our online campaign. We contacted the pharmaceutical society and were able to get the addresses of the 110 pharmacies in the Belfast and Lisburn area to send posters to display. We contacted the Henderson Group who own much of the local Spar network, they were keen to help and asked

for posters for all their stores across NI. Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid were able to share our poster template with the other local Women's Aid groups to use. The major supermarkets also agreed to display our posters.

Through campaigning and increased awareness raising initiatives, both online and in the local community, we aimed to ensure that women affected by domestic abuse, were aware that our services were still available and where to access support. The introduction of our live Web Chat service exemplified

how we adapted to provide another channel for women to safely access information and support services where a phone call is not a safe option. This was set up in direct response to COVID-19 to make our service more accessible. We have had referrals into refuge and floating support services through this channel of communication. Our priority has continued to be accessibility of life-saving, frontline services for women and children.

## Outcomes and achievements

- These numbers have been calculated from 1st March 2020 to the 1st August 2020 to cover the period of the first lockdown.
- During this period Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid received 1030 referrals into floating support, refuges and other projects. BLWA supported 44 women who were victims of Human Trafficking, 112 women and their children in refuge.
- Webchat service launch in April
- Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid set up a web chat service without additional funding through the commitment and expertise within the staff team particularly Rebecca Grounds. Who investigated and researched and set up the service. Plus, trained the other staff to use it. Foyle Women's Aid joined us to expand the delivery of this service.
- Sarah Bruce manages our social media accounts (currently on maternity leave)
- Facebook (1st March -1st August)
  - Page reach: 93,705
  - Engagements: 25,471
- Twitter (1st March -1st August )
  - Impressions: 368,200
  - Engagements: 11,714
- Instagram
- Since being launched at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in order to reach more people we have continued to see growth. We now have 476 followers and have reached 1,294 accounts.

# Radius tenant engagement

## Radius Housing



### Statement of support

Radius Tenant Engagement Team continued to meaningfully engage and communicate with tenants and residents throughout 2020 despite the challenges faced by the ongoing pandemic. Maintaining our Tenant Engagement structure to ensure we keep our tenants at the heart of all that we do from armchair to Board is of vital importance particularly in difficult times.

As part of our Tenant Engagement Strategy we maintained our Tenant Engagement Structure despite not being able to meet in the traditional ways at our Area Panels, Tenant Executive Committee and Radius Board. We adapted and supported our tenants to digitally engage with encouragement, training, guidance and resources. Holding the meetings virtually was a new opportunity to stay connected and opened doors to tenants who previously hadn't attended meetings. It did however, also cause barriers for those without the technology or experience to communicate using devices, so we made devices with built in data available for tenant use along with digital training and telephone support to attend our meetings. We also welcomed tenants who participated in these meetings through phone and email; their views/comments were raised on their behalf and discussions fed back. Through adapting to this challenge we did not lose momentum ensuring our tenants had the opportunity to stay connected, share information, ideas and work with us during the pandemic. During the crisis, 55 of our tenants attended Area Panel Meetings via zoom, with some joining us at the meetings for the first time and from the comfort of their own homes. A number of tenants were reluctant to join us virtually as they were unsure and they preferred meeting face to face but with our support and guidance they took a leap and joined us and are now engaging and attending all meetings.

Through consultation with tenants and staff it was identified that many of our tenants had their own devices/smartphones but didn't have the digital knowledge or confidence to use them. We have trained & equipped 10 staff members to become Digital Champions who now support tenants daily. 20 Tenants have also taken part in Digital Skills training by Advice NI giving them more confidence, the skills, knowledge and awareness of online safety.

Virtual Coffee mornings enabled our tenants to join us from the comfort of their own home, to chat to other tenants and Radius staff. With our guidance and step by step support tenants, many of whom had never attended a remote meeting before, were able to join virtual coffee mornings via zoom with ease and feel part of the virtual community. During the coffee mornings tenants had an opportunity to raise any issues or their concerns that they were having in their area. This enabled us to reassure them during this difficult time that we are there for them and support them with their queries. It also gave them confidence to keep in touch with family and friends via zoom and avail of many of the online clubs/groups that we promoted and shared links to, reducing loneliness and isolation.

In 2020, our much loved Tenant Forums & Awards were postponed and we were delighted to invite our sheltered housing residents to the virtual Scheme Awards. They were overjoyed to find out the winners of each category: Best Kept Garden, Community Pride, Healthy Living and Learning and Good Neighbour Award. For many, it was their first experience of digital engagement. They were met with familiar faces from neighbouring schemes and also met many new faces from other areas.

"Radius Mail" our tenant newsletter along with "Boredom Busters" was created to keep our residents and tenants occupied and informed during lockdown. The included information on what's happening in Radius, Good News Stories, Recipe Ideas, Benefits Information and a Boredom Busters pack containing general knowledge, quizzes and trivia to keep everyone busy while they remained indoors in their own homes. Our newsletter has been adapted to communicate with everyone and has been translated into 5 languages, large print and audio to effectively communicate with all our tenants to suit their needs. Radius also utilised a texting service to keep all our tenants updated on welfare advice support and other Radius support services.

## Outcomes and achievements

- 53 tenants participated in our Area Panels
- 5 tenants were provided loan tablets
- In 6 months, we have delivered on 69 actions/suggestions raised with Communities, Assets and Finance colleagues.
- 5 tenants participated in Tenant Executive Committee with 1 attending Communities & Assets Committee and Radius Board.
- Overall the above tenants have volunteered 155 hours to tenant engagement.
- 10 staff became trained Digital Champions supporting 78 tenants to engage digitally. Tenants who received this support rated this support 4.9/5.
- 20 tenants attended Advice NI training developing their digital skills. Following training their:
  - Knowledge on digital devices increased from 2.8 to 3.9/5.
  - Knowledge of online services increased from 2.7 to 3.7/5.
- Confidence levels were at 2.9/5 pre training and increased to 4/5.
- 29 tenants joined virtual coffee mornings
- 76 tenants entered our annual Tenant Awards which were judged by Tenant Executive Committee Members and our Tenant Board Member. 75 tenants joined our virtual Tenant Awards Ceremony.
- We texted more than £13k tenants to support and inform them of information available through our website. Texts continued throughout the year to let tenants know about many other services such as our Boredom Busters pack.
- Please submit 2 images and/or a 60 second video to support your application. Please note: these may be used on social media and on our showreel presented at the virtual event.

## Covid communications strategy

**Lead organisation: Habinteg Housing Association Ulster Ltd.**

**Partner organisations: MCE Public Relations Ltd.**



### Statement of support

The unfolding scale and intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, and the growing potential of a national lockdown, forced organisations to prepare for a shift in the usual communications channels.

Habinteg Housing Association quickly moved to prepare tenants for the suspension of face to face contact, with a programme of telephone calls, text messaging, leaflet distribution across our tenancies. A Stay Connected initiative was implemented for all older tenants and those considered vulnerable. A dedicated COVID-19 information page was created for the Association's website, alongside a new homepage, linking the information page and, signposting graphics

created for Twitter and LinkedIn.

Habinteg acknowledged there were additional, untapped resources which could add to the efficiency of their response, particularly at a community level. The Association recognised possible gaps in terms of the speed and effectiveness, with which it could communicate with tenants. Lockdown restrictions prevented Housing Officers, Community Involvement Officers and Good Relations Officers from meeting with tenants in person. Meaning that many tenants were at risk of feeling isolated or disconnected from the Habinteg community. Additionally, the need for urgent messaging around changes to routine repairs and maintenance and essential health and safety advice was paramount. To address this communication challenge, Habinteg appointed award-winning PR agency, MCE to support the development and help implement a comprehensive social communication strategy, which involved Habinteg launching a new communication channel for the organisation - a dedicated Facebook account.

Combining Habinteg's vision and brand values with the limitations presented by the very context of operating within a pandemic, were at the heart of the strategy, and helped to form a content strategy, from the language and tone of voice that was used to the type of each piece content that would be published online.

Habinteg's Facebook strategy was based on a three-pronged approach:

- Build a dedicated Habinteg Facebook account to create a platform for two way dialogue
- Engage with tenants on Facebook through the creation of both informative and supportive tenant-focused content
- Cultivate this new online community by listening and responding to tenant queries via public comments or private messages, thereby creating a valuable communications tool and an open and trusted platform

MCE acts as an extension to Habinteg's team, working closely with each of the core departments within the organisation, from Asset Management, Homes and Community, to its in-house communications team. As part of the content creation process, MCE and Habinteg's Senior Management Team participate in weekly calls to provide updates on key messages, activities, events and news that can be created into suitable content in the form of weekly content calendars. As part of Habinteg's new Facebook strategy, content suggestions are aligned with an

agreed content mix that covers; asset information, public service messaging, Habinteg scheme-related developments and community focus. This 'content mix' was developed to ensure that Habinteg's Facebook audience was seeing content that would encourage interaction and two-way dialogue.

Habinteg's Director of Homes and Communities, Deborah Wooderson says "at the onset of the Corvid Crisis, Habinteg was concerned that remote working ran a risk of leaving tenants feeling "left out". Our commitment to ensuring all avenues of communication were utilised, has led to us challenging ourselves in finding new ways to engage and inform. Working in Partnership with MCE we have strengthened our engagement with our tenants and created stronger relationships and more dialogue.

Evidence of the impact our communication processes made during the pandemic is evident and moving into 2021 Habinteg has more than 80 new tenants wanting to become actively engaged in our regional and scrutiny panels, as well as getting involved in community activities and consultation events than we had before the Pandemic".

## Outcomes and achievements

Alongside the more established communication channels and the regular contact between Habinteg staff members and tenants, Habinteg's new Facebook account has added a more immediate and community centred method of information sharing. Following its launch in July 2020, Habinteg's Facebook moved quickly from a standing start to over 300 followers and has continued to grow as tenants become more aware of the page. With MCE monitoring the page daily, responding to tenant feedback and working closely with Habinteg SMT to ensure all enquiries

are actioned, Habinteg has demonstrated how it has expanded its communication channels in the face of a global pandemic, to effectively communicate to its key audience and enable tenants to still feel part of its close knit community. Given the complexities of this last year Habinteg has used not only Facebook but we have increased our Twitter presence, and produced a Communication Strategy which really does enable us to Build, Engage and Cultivate our presence and relationship with our tenants.

# Radius "Art from the Heart"

## Radius Housing



### Statement of support

The Art from the Heart competition was launched by Radius Housing in April 2020, with the aim of encouraging children of our residents and young people from across Northern Ireland to get creative and create art which would be shared and displayed in Radius care homes and sheltered accommodation, for the enjoyment of residents during the lockdown brought about by Coronavirus. These residents have been particularly impacted by the lockdown, due to health reasons, and were severely limited in the contact they were able to have with friends and family.

### Media Coverage

The competition was launched with a story in local and daily newspapers, as well as online, and encouraged these 'budding Banksys' to create a special piece of work in four age categories. The category themes included 'Your Happy Place' (Ages 3-7), Radius Mascot Design (Ages 8 -13), Community (Children and Young People with Special Education Needs) and Community Spirit (Ages 14-18).

More than three hundred entries were received and an expert judging panel were tasked with viewing all the pieces and selecting winners and runners up in each category, as well as an overall winner and runner up, who each received a special prize. The prestigious judging panel of experts, which included celebrated Derry/Londonderry artist Conor Larkin, Executive Director of ArtsEkta, Nisha Tandon, Conor Shields from Community Arts Partnership and Diana Fitzsimons, Chair of Radius Housing, noted the exceptionally high quality of entries to the competition across all categories, and the wide variety of style and mediums used to create the work.

The overall winner was 16 year old Shayna Velasquez from Belfast, whose piece entitled Solidarity stood out among all the entries, as it captured so many of the important public health and community spirit messages that resonated with us all during lockdown. A framed print of Solidarity was presented by Shayna and Radius Chief Executive John McLean to the

Minister for Health, Robin Swann MLA, to hang in the halls of the Department as a 'thank you' to all the front line health workers who have done so much to protect and support the public against coronavirus. Shayna's story, as well as all the category winners and runner-ups were featured in local newspapers across Northern Ireland.

Art from the Heart was covered across a range of newspapers, including the launch, winners and the outdoor campaign. The daily newspapers, including the Belfast Telegraph, Irish News and NewsLetter, carried the story, as well as key online news sites such as BelfastLive and LoveBelfast, as well as local newspapers in Omagh, Strabane, Antrim, Newry, Bangor, Coleraine, and Derry/Londonderry.

### Outdoor Campaign

To celebrate the work of the winners, and to publicly show all the doctors, nurses, caseworkers and other front line health workers how grateful the wider public is of their efforts, an Outdoor Campaign, incorporating billboard and adshel across key sites in Northern Ireland was executed. Working with a small budget, the 10 billboard and 15 Adshel Live sites were strategically selected in the locality of the winners, as well as at sites with high visibility, to maximise coverage of the winners and the message. The campaign ran over two weeks in July 2020.

With an aim of creating a striking billboard design, which could enhance the already impressive artwork, we created and developed a concept which housed the artwork as a framed piece in an art gallery, with health workers viewing it. The outdoor campaign brought the amazing work of the young people in the Art from the Heart Competition to a wider audience, and delivered the important message of thanks to the front line health workers.

Please state in no more than 200 words the project outcomes and achievements to date

The Art from the Heart Competition exceeded the expectations of Radius, in terms of the number and quality of the entries. The overall aim of encouraging children to create uplifting art to help care home residents through the coronavirus lockdown, mark the effort made by health workers

and to produce a lasting piece of art as a memorial piece was achieved. The extensive coverage in newspapers and online, alongside the outdoor campaign for the winning entries, has helped spread the key messages even further. Art from the Heart is an excellent example of a low budget, high impact campaign, connecting intergenerational groups and delivering a hugely successful campaign on a small budget giving a considerable return and impact across our community.

#### Billboard Campaign Statistics:

- Billboards, 10 sites:
- Opportunity to see per week - 128,906
- Visibility Adjusted Contact per week (Number of 'eyes on panel contacts') - 56,607
- Population Cover - 191,686
- VA Contacts (Number of views) - 1,132,132
- VA Avg Frequency (average number of visibility adjusted contacts) - 5.9

#### Adshel Live, 15 sites:

- 187,000 impressions, giving an 8% SOV (Share of Voice)

Campaign Budget £3,500.

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A "Stronger Together" tenant magazine was produced communicating safety, financial and wellbeing messages and positive community support.

We moved to virtual events to maintain connections and reduce social isolation.

Our scheme-based staff are maintaining person-centred communication, on-site throughout, to reassure and provide services.

We promote positivity and achieved NI-wide media coverage for socially distanced 100th birthday celebrations, intergenerational pen pals and elderly residents enjoying delicious meals cooked by a furloughed chef. We prepared for the worst, drafting holding statements and Q&As covering a range of COVID situations.

We've kept stakeholders updated and stayed in constant contact with partners to ensure services continue safely.

## 2. Internal

While prioritising communications for frontline staff delivering vital care and cleaning services, we shifted 65% of our colleagues to home working, quickly

procuring IT equipment and fast-tracking software solutions. The challenge was to communicate with a widely dispersed workforce, including some with no IT access. We surveyed and talked to staff about how they were managing the challenges of home working.

We constantly provide comprehensive FAQs for colleagues. Updated with each change in official guidance, these ensure consistent messaging, helping avoid confusion, allay fears, and ensure colleagues are clear on services and safe delivery to tenants. The principal message is reassurance, and the importance of protecting tenants and ourselves.

Our teams face unprecedented challenges daily and mental wellbeing was identified as a priority. Themed advice and fun wellbeing challenges issued weekly, messages from the Chief Executive and small treats delivered to colleagues' homes help keep us together while apart. Regular virtual team catch-ups happen and we check-in on colleagues. The message is "Be Kind" - to each other and ourselves.

Preparations for a phased return to the office included an in-house produced video to reassure staff and build excitement - we could be together again, at a distance!

## Outcomes and achievements

- We remain fully accessible. Tenants have been able to contact us every day during the pandemic.
- We updated to a digital phone system to maintain effective telecommunications.
- £100K was invested in IT equipment and software to support home working.
- 44% of tenants engaged with our support response. 500 people were supported with food and medicine deliveries and 230 localised services were offered to tenants.
- Staff volunteers phone 118 isolated people each week, including colleagues who don't normally connect with tenants. By September they had made 27,232 calls. Many received a call on Christmas Day.
- 11% of tenants received money advice. Cases handled increased by 57%, with £92,000 more income generated for tenants, compared to the same period last year.
- We ramped up social media as a customer service channel and contact from tenants via Facebook increased by over 330%.
- We help families stay connected with loved ones at our care homes using tablet devices and regular updates as visiting is restricted.
- 100 primary school children wrote to older tenants in our school pals project.
- Despite being apart, colleagues feel more of a team than ever before. 35 have volunteered to help in other areas in addition to their normal roles.

# STAY HOMEless, PROTECT THE NHS, SAVE LIVES

## Simon Community NI



### Statement of support

For the homeless sector, 2020 began with optimism as the 'New Decade, New Approach' deal placed housing and welfare as priorities for the Northern Ireland Executive. However, by 23 March, Simon Community - Northern Ireland's Leading Homelessness Charity - had entered a state of communicating in a crisis with the delivery of its first COVID announcement.

The communications team, now working remotely using video software, immediately planned with the charity's senior managers to identify need (financial, food, PPE and recruitment) and position this within the wider COVID-19 narrative. Communications focused on reminding audiences that Simon clients had stayed homeless, homelessness services eased pressure on the NHS and dedicated staff saved and changed lives.

#### 1 - Stay homeless

When government leaders advised people to 'Stay Home', the charity launched a key message across email, social media, press and web reminding people that, while individuals were off the streets, homelessness had not ended and 'a safe place to call home has never been more important!'

Social media and digital PR were major notification channels, allowing for speedy updates, profiling client stories and communicating donation needs direct to target audiences.

"I struggle with not being able to have face to face contact with my children. It is lonely but I have been using the arts and craft supplies to create cards for my kids to send in the post each week. They are my way of letting them know that I miss them." - Roisin, client

Such was the importance of social media that, thanks to funding from LandAid, the charity was able to partner with an English-based PR agency to benefit

from pro-bono support to fine-tune recruitment, donations and support messaging.

#### 2 - Protect the NHS

Simon has continually lobbied to have homelessness seen, and funded, as a health issue with frontline staff's work equally recognised. COVID-19 provided a unique opportunity to do more than #ClapForOurCarers by positioning employees as health and social care workers.

Using multiple communication channels, Simon kept external audiences informed of service developments and showcased the true work of staff in engaging clients to isolate, follow PHA guidance and protect the NHS. These included the recording of cookery videos for clients and the profiling of funded initiatives such as COVID Isolation Packs.

"After working with Simon Community on their Hidden Homelessness campaign in 2018, I am more tuned in to the needs of people who don't have a home. I contacted the charity to offer a platform to raise awareness of the changing needs of their organisation during COVID." - Cate Conway, U105 Radio Presenter

In addition, the establishment of a Multi-Agency Group, which was set up by four of the leading homelessness providers in Northern Ireland, provided an efficient streamlined form of communications to funders, Public Health Agency and political representatives. This collaborative approach to working, and communicating, ensured that the homelessness sector worked with a uniformed message.

#### 3 - Save lives

Communicating with staff was the charity's primary focus in the year.

The charity was committed to promoting the importance of ever-evolving PHA guidance and used weekly staff emails, resource folders, promotional materials and team meetings to update on policies. This proved useful in providing clarity and dispelling myths especially during a time when UK, NI and ROI measurements differed and everyone on Facebook seemed to own a science degree.

Additionally, the charity rolled out successful recruitment campaigns to find the quantity and quality of staff needed to help respond to the crisis. By communicating the lifesaving and life-changing role homelessness staff play, the charity could pitch stories to press as more than a recruitment drive.

## Outcomes and achievements

A major achievement was the opportunity to stress test the charity's new Business Continuity Plan. When a positive COVID case was detected, senior staff were able to quickly agree on key messages, action plans and stakeholder communications, which reduced staff concerns, assured funders of the charity's ability and mitigated client fear.

An additional achievement was the renewed political interest brought about by the work of the Homelessness Multi Agency Group who briefed Stormont's Committee for Communities and set plans in motion for future cross-departmental work.

Additional outcomes:

- 9.6 million people reached via positive PR
- 32,000 social media engagements
- 229% increase in web donations (versus 2019)
- 21% increase in career pageviews (versus 2019)

- 20% increase in social traffic to website (versus 2019)
- 4 successful recruitment campaigns
- 1 Social Media Strategy developed
- 1 Crisis Communications Plan created
- Increased client and staff communications engagement

"Stevie [client] is hyped about his interview with CoolFM and staff have been thrilled seeing their work acknowledged on social media and radio." Joanne, Project Manager

Moving forward, the charity will look to develop on its communications and recently partnered with a Public Affairs agency to ensure that in 2021, there is momentum on lessons learned from COVID.

# EXCELLENCE IN CUSTOMER SERVICE



In a rapidly changing environment, the need to deliver excellent service is more important than ever. This award recognises housing teams who go above and beyond to deliver truly outstanding customer service.

## Innovation in Tuath Housing Tenant Engagement with focus on Digital Engagement with Older Residents

### Tuath Housing



### Statement of support

Tuath Housing Association was established and registered in 2000, awarded Voluntary Housing Status by the Department of the Environment and is a member of the Irish Council for Social Housing. We provide housing to over 15,000 tenants and currently manage 6,000 homes. The accommodation provided by Tuath Housing is made up of a wide range of dwelling types including sheltered flats and apartments, family and supported housing.

As part of Tuath Housing's tenant engagement strategy our tenant engagement team support tenants to actively engage in the communities where they live. Engagement with communities reduces social isolation and loneliness for our tenants especially for older residents. We encourage and help tenants who would like to become involved in community events, to join residents' groups who promote community development and support environmental awareness through community projects.

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic we have had to adapt and change our tenant engagement model. Since March and throughout 2020 our tenant engagement officers have put together a host of virtual tenant engagement initiatives which we have received very positive feedback from our tenants. The events included virtual coffee mornings, mental health workshops, Health and Wellness events, virtual bingo, baking and photo competitions, socially distanced planting and clean up days, Home and Garden competitions, arts and crafts events and many more. We also created a tenant engagement section on our website [www.tuathhousing.ie](http://www.tuathhousing.ie) called 'Tenant Corner' which provides regular updates on tenant initiatives, training and events.

Celebrating Positive Ageing Week (PAW) with International Day of Older Persons with Age Action

Our tenant engagement and housing teams were delighted to join with Age Action Ireland to highlight Positive Ageing Week (PAW) in October 2020 with International Day of Older Persons. The Tuath housing team put together wellness packs for 180 residents throughout seven retirement schemes across the country. The packs included a host of wellness items to encourage holistic self-care. We received some lovely messages from our older residents following the event. The wellness packs and socially distanced visits by staff was much appreciated by tenants.

Launch of the Tuath Housing "Be Connected" initiative

In December 2020 Tuath Housing launched the "Be Connected" initiative providing many of our older tenants with new digital tablet devices ensuring they stay connected with friends and family members

whilst also allowing them to take part in Tuath's digital initiatives. Tuath was awarded funding for the "Be Connected" initiative as part of the Housing Finance Agency's Social Investment Fund. BHP Insurance also donated towards the initiative. Training on the set up and use of the tablets will be provided to older residents by Tuath's Tenant Engagement team. Tuath tenant David, living in Greystones commented on the initiative "I'm delighted to have received the tablet. It has opened a whole new world for me and brought me into the digital age. It really does help me keep in touch with everyone and everything that's going on. I'm learning things every day about how to use it and I never thought I'd be embracing new technology like this".

Tom Conroy, Head of Finance at the Housing Finance Agency said: "The HFA is delighted to be able to fund Tuath's 'Be Connected' initiative through our Social Investment Fund. This Fund, which was newly established, aims to support local projects to complement social housing communities."

We in Tuath are proud of the progress we have made in 2020 to increase our engagement with older residents and improve our digital services. We believe that tenant engagement and the introduction of new digital services has hugely enhanced our core standards for excellent customer service and inclusivity for tenants.

## Outcomes and achievements

In 2020 we achieved significant changes in how we communicate and engage with all our tenants especially our older residents. The virtual events, digital resources and training we were able to provide built tenants' confidence to use online resources to help them stay connected with their families, communities and Tuath. The digital resources also enabled tenants to take part in a host of virtual events during 2020. The new virtual and digital tenant service ensures that our commitment to tenant engagement and excellent customer service is at the forefront in the tenancy services we provide. In the words of our board member Professor Paddy Gray OBE "At Tuath, engagement with our residents takes pride of place

within our priorities. We value the important input that our customers can give us in delivering the services that they require. That's why resident participation is crucial so that we can deliver the best services possible."

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic will have long term consequences for some of our tenants and we believe that tenant engagement and new digital initiatives will ensure that tenants have the ability to engage with Tuath Housing and communities where they live now and into the future.

# Supporting our customers during COVID-19

## Co-Ownership



### Statement of support

When COVID-19 started to unfold we had two priorities: making sure our staff were safe; and supporting customers.

With the support of our staff we were able to maintain our service delivery, leveraging existing remote working technology. We prioritised our customer contact and worked through options to best support our customers. Over time we built on our technology to enable most people to work remotely.

### Helping Co-owners

There was an immediate rush of contact from co-owners whose employment was affected, afraid they couldn't make their rent payments and the impact on their home. We proactively encouraged customers to contact us so we could understand their situation. We agreed solutions with all our impacted customers until they got back on their feet. As the months have gone on, we continue to keep close contact with those customers, most have recovered and gone back to work or found new jobs. We've had good feedback that our approach really helped at a difficult time and our rent collection has been strong. To avoid further distress we agreed with our Board to forego our planned rent increase in April 2020.

### Housing Market Closing

We considered the impact of the market closing on our customers and quickly put into action a communications plan developed for business continuity planning. This included staff, customer and stakeholder comms, dedicated web content, media messages and social media content. Our focus was to minimise the impact on our customers and where possible support their home purchase or sale through to completion.

Spring is a busy time with lots of customers at various stages of the home buying process. We worked quickly to understand what we could do to support each customer group and let them know the impact. For those customers whose valuation had taken place their application could proceed. For those who were earlier in the process unfortunately we were unable to proceed and issued a full refund of the fees paid. As well as communicating digitally we spoke to each customer where possible to ensure understanding and address concerns.

For our co-owners who were in the process of buying out we took the same approach refunding where the valuation couldn't happen and progressing when we could. A core group of staff maintained service in the office throughout the lockdown to support these home purchases and sales.

### Reopening

The market reopened at short notice and this coincided with our office move. Our priority was to support our existing co-owners who wanted to buy co-ownership out. The volumes were staggering. We moved office on the 20th June and opened to new customer applications on 23rd. We proactively contacted everyone who had previously applied and gave them an opportunity to apply first.

The response was unprecedented - triple our normal volume. This is partly due to pent up demand but also because lenders had tightened their criteria requiring 20% deposits, making it much harder for first time buyers to become home owners and bringing new demand from people who previously would not have come to Co-Ownership.

The level of demand has had an impact on our funding needs and we have been working with the Department for Communities on additional funding to support this new group of people who would not normally be Co-Ownership customers to enable us to continue to support them.

### Managing Demand

We pride ourselves in giving customers a prompt response normally within 5 days. However, the tripling of application volumes meant our turnaround time dropped to 15 days. We had put in place additional resource and upskilled people from other areas. We made sure that customer understood our timeframes to prevent repeat callers. We were proactive on social media sharing videos and content to help customers get their applications right first time.

## Outcomes and achievements

By September, despite the continued high level of demand, we were back to issuing approvals in principle within 5 working days.

Our team pulled together to help support our customers and applicants. As our service delivery stabilised we started to focus on what more we could do to support customers and commenced outbound calls to older customers to ensure they knew we were available if they had any issues.

In December 186 families and individuals got the keys to their home - our highest month ever. We're lifted by the customers getting back on track and getting their new homes. 88% of our Trustpilot reviews are 5 star ratings. We've had a number of really positive customer testimonials showing that we have provided

a consistently high level of service to our customers.

'Co-ownership was more than helpful with any questions I had to ask. They were also fast and effective given the constraints with the current pandemic.' William

'Co-ownership were brilliant from the very start right through to the end of my application. I contacted their care team on at least 4 occasions and every single staff member I spoke with exceeded my expectations. They were friendly, informative, followed through on any action they needed to do quickly and efficiently keeping me updated at every step. If only all companies were as helpful. Thank you coownership :)' Annalea

# Apex Housing team delivering excellence

## Apex



## Statement of support

As Apex Housing Association entered Lockdown in March 2020, the Housing Team quickly adapted to an ever evolving and completely new way of working and since then, have continued to seamlessly deliver our essential landlord services with professionalism, dedication and commitment from everyone in our excellent housing team.

Throughout the last nine months, there are fantastic examples of the Apex housing team going above and beyond every day to ensure that we were there for all our tenants and communities when they needed additional support and reassurance from Apex.

Examples include our Allocations Team listening to new build applicants in Derry~Londonderry and personally making contact, very often out of hours, to advise of a delay to their new home handover due to the COVID-19 restrictions after their invaluable feedback highlighted many of the practical challenges of moving home at that time; Planned New Build handovers quickly taking place in Hogarth Street, Belfast and the Belfast Team being pro-active in developing new "social distancing" practices and protocols and supporting applicants

to allow these handovers to successfully proceed so that tenants could move into their new homes; new ways of working being implemented at the Apex Community Supermarket and other Apex Teams volunteering to work at this invaluable wraparound service; developing new ways of communicating with colleagues and tenants through various IT platforms to allow the delivery of online training and events for our HAIP and TBUC programmes; and supporting tenants to navigate through the complexities of the benefits assistance available whilst producing weekly KPI performance reports to allow us to monitor the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our service.

We saw great examples of community work and initiatives such as the daily exercise classes in the wider Creggan community, the distribution of food parcels throughout the North West by our invaluable community groups and through our Tenant Participation team we developed excellent joint working opportunities with community organisations throughout NI. Our Floating Support Officers have continued to provide an invaluable "listening ear" service through daily telephone consultations with tenants and signposting them to the relevant support providers and agencies.

Although our offices have remained closed, our Housing Officers continue to keep in regular contact with tenants by phone, text, email and letter. Home and office visits / appointments are continuing for lettings and managing tenancy issues such as Anti-social behaviour. We are currently piloting an innovative Anti-social behaviour dedicated team and we have teamed up with an out of hours service to allow us to pro-actively respond to cases of Anti-social behaviour at times when incidents are occurring.

Throughout the Summer months, Apex undertook a short tailored Telephone Survey initially through Survey Monkey followed up by telephone calls. The purpose of this survey was to allow us to determine

if tenants had any support needs or additional vulnerabilities that Apex could help with at this time and to ensure that contact details were up to date and to determine tenants preferred communications methods as we move the service forward.

A total of 4728 texts were sent asking tenants to complete the survey on a link to Survey Monkey. Those that didn't respond were telephoned by a member of staff. A total of 2103 general needs tenants (45%) completed the survey.

All of these developments have the potential to provide a unique opportunity for Apex to reshape how we deliver our services. It provides a fantastic opportunity to build on the community spirit and explore new ways to consult and involve our tenants whilst ensuring that our values where we cared, should be central to our service offering of the future.

## Outcomes and achievements

Since March 2020 :

- Housing Officers made 20,064 calls to tenants;
- Welfare Advice Officers made 2,649 calls, resulting in 1081 welfare checks being undertaken by telephone;
- Since 01/07/2020 our Allocations Team conducted 213 new build allocations / handovers up to Christmas;
- We've helped tenant's access more than an estimated £300,000 in annual entitlement, and thousands in backdated payments;
- Floating Support helped 30 people in our community; and
- 113 families have been supported through the Apex Community Supermarket.
- Quote from Floating Support service user :
  - "This service supported me emotionally and physically. It helped turn my life around."
- As a result of the feedback from the Tenant Survey, the following action has been taken:
  - 69 repairs being processed by our Property Services Department;
  - 721 email addresses were obtained through the text survey and 126 through the telephone survey and is currently being uploaded to our systems;
  - 40 Apex Community Supermarket referrals and 120 Foyle Foodbank referrals made;
  - 224 tenants have been referred to our Welfare Benefits Officer;
  - Housing Officers are working through 36 requests for Floating Support services and 96 requests for links to local community organisations; and
  - 35% of our tenants said that text is their preferred method of contact.

# Everybody In

## Housing Executive



### Statement of support

The 'Everybody In' approach has involved a collaborative approach whereby the Housing Executive has worked with organisations such as Welcome Organisation, Depaul and Extern to facilitate temporary accommodation for rough sleepers as part of the ongoing pandemic response.

- Accounting for needs/ experience of service users.

This support for the most vulnerable of service users has been facilitated by a Memorandum of Understanding between the Department for Communities, Department of Health which allows those who have No Recourse to Public Funds or are ineligible for housing support to be provided with temporary accommodation. In addition to the provision of temporary accommodation the needs of service users has also been accounted for in the provision of food and additional non-accommodation based support which has been vital in ensuring that the majority of these placements have been sustainable.

The COVID-19 Multi Agency Group has provided support in ensuring that any needs relevant to concerns or fears relevant to COVID-19 have been addressed while the Public Health Agency has been instrumental in coordinating a response relevant to the health needs of service users.

- High standards achieved in service delivery, including customer feedback.

The high standards achieved in service delivery are best exemplified in Section F of this application which notes the significant reduction in rough sleeping as a result of the Everyone In approach. While there was

no known rough sleeping for a considerable period of time it is now acknowledged that a small number have returned to rough sleeping as the perceptions as to the seriousness of the pandemic ease amongst some.

Staff from the organisations listed in this nomination continue to engage with all rough sleepers through the provision of support, food and temporary accommodation with a view to sustaining the placement in temporary accommodation. For those who have chosen to terminate their placements extensive efforts have been made to ensure any current rough sleepers are aware of the support available and this includes the provision of support during the day, including access to day services, within current public health guidelines.

- Positive and professional staff attitudes towards service users

The positive and professional attitude is best shown through the support provided as part of the Everyone In approach over the Christmas and New Year period. This involved the provision of meals on all days, including Christmas Day, to over 200 of the most vulnerable homeless applicants in Northern Ireland. Additionally, the regular interaction that is provided from staff in the organisations noted in this application will play a crucial role in assisting the Housing Executive in delivering a long-term solution to those individuals who have been assisted as part of this project. This support has operated outside core business hours during each and every day of the pandemic and has played a crucial role in building relationship with vulnerable service users who have previously been very difficult to engage with.

At the core of the Everyone In approach is a partnership to collaborative working which is reflective of the significant range of vulnerabilities and complexities that this client group presents. The partnership between organisations such as Welcome Organisation, Depaul, Extern, Housing Executive, Department for Communities and Department of Health has provided a template as to how we can continue to engage and support the most vulnerable in our society beyond the pandemic. In addition to the organisations previously listed there has been additional support provided on a case by case basis where individual rough sleepers have been identified as was the case in some of the more rural areas of Northern Ireland.

## Outcomes and achievements

The success of the Everyone In approach in Northern Ireland is firstly reflected in the Housing Executive and partner organisations assisting over 60 individuals who have been known to engage in rough sleeping. The primary success of this is helping the most vulnerable individuals in society, in firstly reducing their potential to acquire COVID-19 when sleeping rough and secondly, in the longer term helping these individuals to improve their chances of sustaining a placement in temporary accommodation with a view to ultimately delivering permanent accommodation for those who are eligible.

The success of the homelessness sector in Northern Ireland in addressing this, which is arguably the

most challenging issue in terms of the homelessness response to the ongoing pandemic due to vulnerability of rough sleepers, can be found in neighbouring jurisdictions having rough sleeping numbers that have increased since pre-pandemic. A specific example can be found in this link notes that 'New figures have revealed that the number of people sleeping rough in London during lockdown rose by a third when compared to the same period last year'. This stands in direct contrast to the success of Everyone In in Northern Ireland where there has been a significant reduction.

# Simply the Best

## First Housing Aid & Support Services



### Statement of support

Excellent customer care can be seen in the introduction of the Thursday Morning Drop In. Regularly missed appointments and erratic engagement patterns usually result in discharge from services and an inordinate amount of time is spent on waiting list as individuals are referred and re-referred to services. While understanding the reasons for this the team fear the escalation of issues as vulnerable people languish on waiting lists. To prevent this happening within their own project they started the Thursday Morning Drop In. Service users with a poor engagement history can call to the office any Thursday morning, without an appointment, and work with a team member to stabilise or resolve their dilemma. Further appointments are not arranged, but the service user can attend on any successive Thursday. Should a regular pattern of engagement emerge they can be transferred to a key worker for more in-depth and structured support. This response has proved successful as service users attend on their terms, meaningful support is provided and team members do not have the unproductivity of missed appointments.

In January 2020 the team sought to improve organisational accessibility by instigating a weekly walk through Enniskillen. They fostered community engagement and visited areas of the town where rough sleepers were known to frequent. Plans existed to extend this activity to other towns and villages and although lockdown paused these plans, they took the opportunity during Homeless Awareness Week to do a lightning visit to all 25 towns and villages throughout Co Fermanagh. They visited 5 areas each day for one week in an activity they named "25 in 5". This increased homeless awareness and created service accessibility in very rural areas of Fermanagh.

In addition to creatively fulfilling the organisations support package this team actively seek opportunities to improve the lives of service users and expand their horizons. Following the attendance of the First Minister to the project, service users expressed a desire to visit Stormont. A trip was arranged and service users met MLA's, enjoyed tea in the members lounge and debated in the chamber. Events like this not only provide new experiences but also provide an opportunity for interaction on a more equal footing where relaxed conversations build confidence and yield information that can incentivise support in a direction where service users not only survive but thrive.

The team believe in little things having a big impact. Service users utilising the service at Christmas always receive a Christmas card and every year at least one service user thanks the team saying "Yours was the only card I got".

These examples highlight a team committed to providing the best possible service and who pay attention to small actions as well as more prestigious activities in doing so.

The antennae of the team are always attuned to comments made by service users highlighting various needs and requests. These can be made in support sessions, informal gatherings like the annual Christmas coffee morning, quarterly pamper mornings or other extra curricular events; Facebook chatter, service user evaluation forms or even direct requests from past and present service users. Each are responded to by the team. Service users have been filmed for a television programme, participated in research on homelessness for the University of Ulster, took part in The Big Sleep Out, walked/ran Enniskillens 10k, formed a service user group, took part in a campaign

on the cost of leisure facilities, wrote letters to the local newspaper, had guided tours of the Enniskillen Town Hall and The County Museum. However outcomes for individual service users are just as important, as can be evidenced through the commitment of one support worker during lockdown as she met weekly with a service user for a socially distanced walk. This activity prevented his mental health from deteriorating to the point of hospitalisation. The final words belong to a service user whose evaluation form contained the words "Above & beyond, you REALLY deserve a medal".

## Outcomes and achievements

First Housing's Floating Support service delivers housing related support to approximately 300 families and vulnerable adults throughout Co Fermanagh each year. The team has a project

co-ordinator and four support workers, who work diligently and cohesively to provide a caring and progressive support service valued by service users and stakeholders alike. Comments on evaluation forms regularly attest to how service users have

experienced the team: "You rarely come across an agency like First Housing who are not only able to give very practical support but did this in an incredibly empowering way", "Thank you for not judging me or looking at me like I am nothing", "It would be no exaggeration to say that she perhaps saved my life" and "I feel my mother would have been left to die alone and forgotten by the so called caring professions, had it not been for you".

# EXCELLENCE IN HEALTH & WELLBEING

Sponsored by:



This award is for organisations who have demonstrated excellence in their approach to the health and wellbeing of staff and / or residents over the past year.

## Extern alcohol housing support team

### Extern



### Statement of support

Having a safe and stable place to call home is one of the building blocks of a happy and secure life, yet for so many of the people with whom Extern works, this cannot be taken for granted.

Issues such as poor mental health, problem drug and alcohol use and social isolation are all factors which can, if left unchallenged, lead to rejection of an individual within their community, and result in them becoming homeless.

### Demonstrating Excellence

Wellbeing and stability may not often be used in the same sentence as problem alcohol use, but for the staff of Extern's Alcohol Housing Support Team, that is what they strive to achieve for their clients every day. A team of two compassionate and dedicated Social Workers prevent over 100 people joining the homelessness statistics each year. But not only that, they also aim to give people the opportunity to manage their alcohol use in a realistic manner, to reconnect with their families and communities, and benefit from practical advice and guidance on how to stay healthy.

### Innovating to Increase Wellbeing

While some organisations may set defined targets or boundaries for those they choose to support, Extern instead seeks to find a realistic and workable solution, which respects the autonomy and dignity of each and every person.

Rather than focusing solely on the issues which the client may be experiencing, the project takes a person-centred approach, in which the contributing factors of the health and wellbeing difficulties faced by each individual are examined. At every stage, it is the clients who identify realistic goals for themselves.

Crucially, the team has two fully-qualified social workers, who have extensive experience of working with some of the most marginalised people in our communities. Their approach involves a mixture of therapeutic work and practical support. Harm reduction strategies, such as withdrawal management plans, alcohol diaries and relapse prevention work, are also agreed in partnership with clients - on their terms - to maintain and improve their wellbeing.

Another key aspect of the project is the building of positive relationships with landlords and housing organisations. This ensures that housing providers understand the complex needs of the client, and this has resulted in them maintaining, rather than terminating, people's tenancies.

### A Groundbreaking Approach

To date, this is the only such project of its kind in Northern Ireland, and this is in keeping with Extern's track record of breaking new ground and reaching in to areas of need where many others may be unable to go.

Uniquely, team members work with clients in their own homes. Not only is this more convenient for those who may have mobility issues or a fear of being

out in public, it also maintains a relaxed therapeutic environment in which they are more able to engage with the team.

### Coping with Covid

The arrival of the lockdown in March threatened to have a potentially catastrophic impact on those with whom the project works. This included increased anxiety and social isolation, as well as a practical impact on the ability of clients to access medical appointments, prescriptions and basic necessities such

as food and utilities. The team responded swiftly to the increased needs which the lockdown presented, for example by adapting the usual home visits to telephone and distanced face-to-face sessions (where appropriate and necessary), as well as delivering food parcels to those facing financial hardship or who were unable to leave their homes.

This adaptability and flexibility is one of the hallmarks of the project and is in keeping with the ethos of ensuring that the client is always at the centre of planning and delivery.

## Outcomes and achievements

The project received a total of 133 referrals in 2019/2020, surpassing the yearly objective of 100. Of this number who were referred, 95 were provided with a programme of intensive support (exceeding the objective of 70), and 94 of those 95 were enabled to stay in their homes.

Figures\* show that to support 30 people sleeping rough for 12 months, would cost over £600,000 a year in additional public expenditure in the UK. In comparison, the work carried out by the Alcohol Housing Support Team on an equivalent number of people costs just over £19,000\*\* a year (c. £638 per person), potentially saving the public purse over £580,000 annually.

### Case Study:-

Mr A had experienced a lifetime of horrific abuse and exploitation, which contributed to his dependency on alcohol, and a decline into homelessness.

Upon engaging with the Team, however, Mr A began to build a solid foundation upon which he could maintain his tenancy in a flat. The team assisted with practical issues, such as how to locate and top up the gas and electric meters in his property, and how to more positively engage with his local community.

Through the continuing support of the team, Mr A is now maintaining his tenancy well, and managing his intake of alcohol more positively. He has also managed to maintain positive contact with family and friends.

(\*Crisis charity - At what cost? An estimation of the financial costs of single homelessness in the UK, Nicholas Pleace, Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, July 2015)

(\*\*Based on project costs of £84,946/133 referrals = £638 pp)

# Radius promoting health and wellbeing in lockdown

**Lead organisation: Radius Housing**

**Partner organisation: Various - detailed on application**



## Statement of support

Health and wellbeing outcomes were very important for Radius to deliver during 2020/21 given the social isolation and mental wellbeing challenges for many of our tenants due to social distancing through the COVID-19 pandemic. We developed and delivered a range of innovative projects, working in conjunction with community partners. These programmes were funded through the Department for Communities 'Housing for All' Shared Housing Programme which has its origins in the NI Executive T:buc strategy

- Portadown Wellness Centre

Radius worked with Portadown Wellness Centre to provide elderly and vulnerable residents with weekly parcels of food and other household essentials. During COVID-19 lockdown restrictions the Hub reopened as a community logistics and distribution centre, providing locally donated food, fruit, garden plants and other household items to those in need of support in the ABC Council area.

- Adopt A Grandparent

The initiative encouraged young people to connect with older people in Radius' sheltered housing and care schemes by writing letters and sending in drawings, jokes and poems during lockdown. It was designed to bring a little happiness into the lives of those feeling lonely, bringing them a human connection.

"Thank you so much for this lovely picture, my daddy lives in the fold alone and this just made him so happy."

"Our young people and their parents really got into the spirit of this project. It was also good for our young people to think about how lockdown may be affecting others"

- Sow & Grow

The programme aim was to help raise spirits of people of all ages as they lived through COVID-19 lockdown restrictions and nurture a love of growing

Radius gave away cress, sunflower and wildflower seeds. Radius also gave away growing kits to schools and community groups, promoting recycling, and running out various competitions.

"Our residents have really enjoyed being involved with this programme. All tenants grew sunflower and cress with several more able bodied tenants sowing out wildflowers in communal areas"

- Reconnecting Schools Project

The programme addressed some the impacts that COVID-19 brought to young people living in disadvantaged areas and on low incomes. It promoted; social connections, physical activities, transitioning tips about returning to school, provided healthy snacks and cultural activities.

The Programme was delivered across 5 organisations to engage with small groups of children aged between 3-12 years including those from BAME communities.

- Do Something Healthy Programme

This programme provided youth training and mentoring in mental wellbeing to 12 young people from 4 community organisations situated in economically deprived areas from across Belfast. The programme provided;

- OCN Level 2 in Mental Health.
- UK Leadership Award.
- Each participant was allocated 10 young people to mentor providing peer intervention and support.
- Summer Nutrition Programme

A partnership project between 3 Shared Housing Developments ; Radius (lead partner), Clanmil & Apex . The programme provided healthy food and information on healthy eating to a wide range of participants including homeless, BME and refugee support; providing;

- Weekly food/snack packs
- Healthy Snacks/breakfasts/lunches during arranged activities
- Weekly activity sheets promoting good nutrition, good relations and cultural awareness.

“This programme has contributed to reducing food poverty among isolated older men and also raising cultural awareness”

- MS programme

Radius worked with members of the Dunganon MS Support group to enable those who were unable to attend their usual exercise and therapy sessions

due to COVID-19 to avail of these via Zoom video conferencing. Tailored health and wellbeing programmes were delivered which enabled members to remain active, be more independent and confident, and helped them to deal with the daily challenges of their disability. The project built friendships and provided support.

## Outcomes and achievements

- Portadown Wellness Centre
  - X10 Sheltered Schemes benefited
  - Over x300 tenants benefited
  - Reduction in food poverty
  - More engaged and connected communities
  - Reduction in loneliness
- Adopt A Grandparent
  - X118 Sheltered and With Care Schemes benefited
  - X3000 tenants received items
  - Over x300 items sent in by young people
  - More engaged and connected communities
  - Reduction in loneliness
- Sow & Grow
  - 60 schools and groups
  - 70 Radius Sheltered and With Care Schemes
  - More engaged and connected communities
  - Reduction in loneliness
- Reconnecting Schools Project
  - 5 partners
  - 179 children
  - 69 parents
  - More confident children and positive social connections
- Do Something Healthy Programme
  - 1 lead partner
  - 4 partner organisations
  - 12 young people trained and accredited in Mental Health and Leadership
  - A further outreach of 120 young people via peer mentoring and support
- Summer Nutrition Programme
  - 3 Housing Associations
  - 37 community partners
  - 150 information sessions
  - 1100 participants with all ages including BAME Homeless
  - Improved eating habits of participants & reduction in skipped meals
  - Reduced financial strain on families
- Dunganon Multiple Sclerosis Support Group Programme
  - 12 people connected to the Support Group who are housebound
  - 50+ people using Zoom telehealth conference facilities
  - Physical support through tailored programmes
  - Mental wellbeing through peer support

# Tuath Care 2020

## Tuath



### Statement of support

The year 2020 was a particularly challenging year for all. Tuath Housing have developed key training, supports and initiative that focus on inclusivity and maintaining connection and engagement in the face of the pandemic. Our goal has been and remains to be to promote and encourage positivity as the core of our Employee and Tenant Health & Wellbeing Strategy.

#### Tenant Wellbeing

Housing Coordinators hosted workshops with Mental Health Ireland and a virtual coffee morning with Bibi Baskin with a focus on Health and motivation through the pandemic. The goal was to reduce feelings of isolation with our tenants.

Housing Coordinators completed weekly 'Wellbeing Calls' to our tenants and check-ins. They provided community assistance to our elderly tenants by providing groceries and medication for those that were required to 'cocoon' due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### Employee Wellbeing

The Tuath CARE Team and Weekly 'Wellness Wednesday' bulletins were established.

The mission of the CARE Team is to:

C- Communication regularly with colleagues and teams

A- Action initiatives such a men's health focus, Challenges with Childcare, support group for those with elderly and vulnerable family members

R- Resilience ability and adapting to change. The create of our Tuath Spotify List played a role in this

E- EAP and promoting our programme with our partner Laya

Our Tuath Tribe Team launched in 2020 sends Feel Good Friday emails. These incorporate all four offices nationwide. We include birthdays and work anniversaries, employee news and organisational news. We often run competitions.

We trained a member of staff to be our Mental Health & Wellness Champion. She provides guidance and keeps us updated on support resources for staff and tenants.

In winter the Self Care Wellness Packs were delivered to every member of staff around the country which included a birthday treat for everyone celebrating a birthday in lockdown. Weekly Smile Photo Reels were completed with staff during the summer.

Monthly organisational Zoom Coffee Morning's took place with words from our CEO. Each Friday staff are invited to catch up with their team and meet new staff with Take A Break on Tuath.

Our Virtual Christmas Lunch & Staff day was launched in December with team building and a Just Eat voucher sent to each member of staff to get their Christmas lunch. Each employee was sent a Secret Santa E-Card from a colleague.

Tuath took part in Ireland's Virtual National Wellness at Work Day with the theme "Its good to talk". Team Tuath participated in the 2020 Darkness into Light, Run in the Dark and Santa Dash. Physical events are always encouraged. Our Sports & Social Committee often contribute to the costs of running or active events to contribute to staff physical health. There is a major emphasis on physical health and 1-1s with our health & safety expert and a Desktop Physio Mobile App. Staff were provided with support and a monetary allowance to purchase equipment for home working.

Tuath worked with Zevo Health to launch a Home Working Toolkit for staff. Staff can take time to attend webinars on balancing home and work life this year. They learn how to be equipped with checklists and diaries to help them in their working day.

## Outcomes and achievements

Increasing levels of communication and gaining vital feedback from staff has played a key role in increasing positivity levels and productivity. The HR team wanted to ensure that all staff felt connected and supported during this challenging time.

The HR Team undertook 4 staff surveys to identify the main challenges facing employees during the pandemic and thereafter acted upon the feedback.

Below are some anonymous comments from staff:

"As I have worked from home in previous businesses, I am used to this but am greatly appreciative of everything that Tuath offers in support of their staff working from home in these unusual circumstances. I feel privileged to be a part of such an outstanding organization."

"I think Tuath are doing an excellent job supporting staff, and that staff are doing an excellent job in terms of productivity, keeping positive, engaging etc".

"Just to say thanks for keeping the company running and staff safe during such an unprecedented situation"

Other measurables include a 66% approval rate for Tuath's communication efforts in March that has increased to 93% in November. In March, 64% of staff felt connected to their team. This number increased to 78% in November.

Our turnover and absenteeism rates have been exceptionally low this year and have been reduced in comparison to previous years.

# Reducing isolation promoting inclusion

**Habinteg Housing Association Ulster Ltd.**



## Statement of support

Health and Wellbeing - Reducing Isolation Promoting Inclusion

Habinteg Housing Association recognises the active role we need to play as a social landlord in the community. Habinteg's values are reflected through our Homes: Lives: Communities statement, demonstrating the way we seek to create positive opportunities for the communities we serve across Northern Ireland.

In addition to our core business, through the completion of community audits, Habinteg seeks to uncover the key social issues identified by both tenants and the communities we work within. Habinteg prioritises the identified issues which inform the design and delivery of our Community Involvement Strategy. This frequently involves partnership work with key stakeholders. Some of the key challenges faced by our community include food poverty, fuel poverty, financial worries, and physical and mental health issues. Since COVID-19 crisis the regulations have resulted in many elderly people being identified

as socially isolated individuals.

Faced with these challenges Habinteg very quickly worked to develop new and innovative ways to empower staff in building relationships with the wider communities to support our tenants. The team worked to ensure they could quickly and efficiently identify and support individuals and families who due to the restrictions the restrictions were most vulnerable in our communities.

In September 2020, we were successful in securing funding to deliver a Community Food Initiative at Home for nine families. This healthy eating programme was identified as a result of our one to one contact with tenants who identified the challenges of providing a nutritious diet for their children when they were not attending school therefore not receiving one free school meal per day. The programme provided an ingredient pack for each family weekly for five weeks, ensuring increased cookery skills by providing a free zoom cookery class and information from the Community Food Nutritionist. The weekly zoom sessions help build relationships between participants, including support with a question and answer session around fussy eaters, food allergies and replacement foods. Each participant received portion plates for children, handheld blender, 101 square meals recipe book and flyers on healthy eating.

Following the success of this programme, we were then successful in October 2020 in accessing funding to deliver a support programme for older people. This programme was designed following one to one consultation with tenants who were quarantined or self-isolation because of COVID or their underlying health conditions.

The consultation showed that people were suffering not only from isolation but feelings of being forgotten but society, that they were somehow worthless in this chaotic and frightening new world.

The project was a simple but very effective one, designed to promote feeling of being valued and remembered.

This project funding seven hundred Covid packs to tenants aged 60+. The packs were distributed in December 2020 as a method to engage with our

tenants face-to-face and contained a few simple treats the directory of services and our social calendar of activities which people could join in with on zoom.

Staff re-engaged with tenants whilst maintaining social distancing and following our Health and Safety Managers risk assessments.

The feedback was very positive and many tenants said they felt valued and cared about.

## Outcomes and achievements

The project was extremely positive with parents delighted at being able to make a healthy nutritious meal. One parent commented that she "only ever bought soup and couldn't believe how easy it was to make potato and leek soup and how everyone in the house really enjoyed her cooking now" rather than getting a takeaway.

"The cost of buying fresh products and making yourself is far cheaper than buying takeaway" commented another mother.

The activity connect a whole group of people who would never normally meet. Not only with each other but with Habinteg. This group is already involved in a zoom consultation with our Head of Procurement.

Whilst delivering one of the Covid recovery packs to a tenant the tenant commented that it was lovely to receive one Christmas gift at this time. When asked about this the gentleman said that he normally didn't receive any Christmas presents at all.

The packs helped show people they were still remembered and important. Whilst the Healthy eating programme not only produced the obvious benefits of providing families with access to a healthy hot meals, but showed that this is sustainable. We are now looking to do training with this group to encourage them to become mentors to other tenants.

# Choice Employee Health & Wellbeing Programme

## Choice Housing



### Statement of support

Choice employ over 300 people throughout Northern Ireland and highly values each individual. As an 'employer of Choice', the organisation already had a number initiatives in place to support employees' health and wellbeing including: flexible working; childcare voucher scheme; homeworking policy; support for mothers returning from maternity leave;; Domestic Distress/Marriage/Civil Partnership Leave, parental and paternity leave etc.

However, to further improve health and well being outcomes for staff, in 2017 Choice appointed four voluntary Health & Wellbeing Champions (H&WBC), with an allocated budget to drive the Health & Wellbeing agenda and plan and resource initiatives throughout the year. They produce a bi-monthly newsletter which includes useful information that staff have suggested including tips on how to look after your mental health and wellbeing; personal and home safety; budgeting; and healthy recipes. A health and wellbeing calendar highlights important health and wellbeing awareness dates i.e. dry January, world cancer day. At Choice's Annual Staff Conference reusable water bottles were distributed to all staff. Other initiatives include running a National Fitness Day and information sessions from Cancer Focus on staying safe in the sun.

Supported by the H&WBC, in 2019, Choice's comprehensive Health & Wellbeing programme was fully launched. Initiatives included offering a health cash plan for all employees free of charge, which gives access to private medical healthcare i.e. dental/optical and many different therapies. This includes money off gym memberships, access to a confidential counselling service 24/7, and the recent addition of Mprove App which provides staff with access

to mindfulness/wellbeing courses and meditation practices. In the last 12 months 308 staff have made claims: 19.4% for specialist consultations; 10.5% complementary therapies; and 9.4% alternative therapies. Choice has also introduced a Death in Service Benefit payment and arranged bespoke counselling for staff following the sudden death of a colleague.

The Learning & Development programme for this year was very much focused on health and wellbeing. Training was delivered virtually and, whilst the number of training courses facilitated in 2020 slightly increased from 2019, the main difference is that course attendance in 2020 increased on average by an additional 130 places being taken up. Courses offered to support staff this year included: Protecting Yourself When Homeworking; Vital Nutrition and Sleep Well Workshops; Building Resilience and Mental Strength; Panic Attacks; Suicide Awareness; Mental Health Awareness and Communication; Mental Health First Aid; and Financial Wellbeing. Managers also attended a course on Managing Health & Wellbeing at Work in order to help support their teams.

Choice signed up to the Mental Health Charter and appointed Mental Health First Aiders (MHFA) to support employees with the challenges they face, challenges made even more difficult due to the pandemic therefore, additional MHFA were appointed this year.

Throughout the pandemic, Choice has prioritised the welfare of its staff, responding swiftly and sensitively to employees' concerns about their health and employment as well as, supporting staff to nurture their own health & wellbeing. Over the summer, Choice carried out a staff survey to gather employee feelings and experiences of living and working through the pandemic. It included a question to understand if staff needed extra support regarding their mental health or issues with stress/anxiety; grief/loss; sleep; financial advice; addictions or other. 55 individuals answered that they would benefit from additional support and this was confidentially shared, by agreement, with their line manager to address any concerns arising.

Choice continues to support employees to work from home through regular communication and signposting to the initiatives and support services in place with a focus on building resilience to help people cope with the ongoing stress and uncertainty caused by Coronavirus.

## Outcomes and achievements

Choice is committed to providing a workplace that meets employees' needs and continually engages with staff to develop initiatives which improve their health and wellbeing. Its biennial staff survey includes a section to gather feedback on the organisation's approach to Safeguarding and Wellbeing. Overall, the results have improved:

	2017 Results	2019 Results
Satisfaction overall approach	69%	74%
Feel Choice cares about them as a person	70%	78%
Staff happy with work life balance	72%	
Levels of work related stress	Decreased by ~20%	

Staff sickness absence is on a downward trend (4.8% in 2019 to 3.8% in 2020) and is currently 2.7%, lower than previous years despite COVID-19.

This demonstrates that, through ongoing commitment, engagement and implementing the mutually complementary initiatives (such as Medicash, Learning & Development, MHFA), as promoted by the H&WBC, health and wellbeing outcomes have improved for staff. Learning and Development's rapid refocus in response to covid has helped employees to build resilience with one saying: "The Resilience training was great. I thoroughly enjoyed it and got a lot out of it. It was the first time in months that I've felt confident in getting myself back to work...I would definitely recommend it".

## Health & Wellbeing

### Connswater Homes



#### Statement of support

Connswater Homes recognise that when employees are healthy and feel satisfied, the experience of service users improves. Connswater Homes aims to support employees physically, psychologically and socially.

Helping to achieve this, the Association has an established Health & Wellbeing Committee. The aim of the committee is to promote healthy living. Each year the committee agree key areas of focus, such as physical, mental, nutritional, and financial wellbeing. The committee developed 'Lunch & Learn' sessions, which are held every three months. The idea is that staff forfeit their lunch time with the organisation matching this time, allowing for 1-hour sessions. The Association allocates a healthy budget annually for the committee to host these events for staff both inside and outside of working hours. A complimentary healthy lunch is provided for those attending. After each session employees are asked to complete a feedback form, allowing evaluation of what was

beneficial or recommendations for change moving forward.

In a bid to promote social relationships the Committee organise events held outside of working hours. The aim of these social evenings is to promote positive relationships throughout the organisation and to encourage departmental integration. It also aims at promoting a supportive, inclusive working environment.

The Association invests in an eLearning package for employees. This package includes a series of short courses created for employees on various subjects, including Smoking Awareness, Healthy Lifestyles and Stress Awareness. A number of these courses are rolled out to staff to promote health and wellbeing. This allows all staff to partake in the training at a time best suited to them, and to stop and start if required.

Staff are continually encouraged to self-develop with a generous training budget allocated annually. Learning can boost self-confidence and self-esteem, help build a sense of purpose, and help connect with others. Staff have also received training from a number of outside agencies, JAM card, Autism NI, The Rainbow Project, Women's Aid etc.

The Association's Communities Officer has promoted a range of Health and Wellbeing events for tenants. These include a 12-week programme on healthy eating, Eat Well for Less; a My Health Your Health programme and cookery classes.

The Association also has a community garden in

Mersey Street which enables the local community to get involved in growing fresh nutritious vegetables which they can take away and enjoy.

Further aims of the Association regarding health and wellbeing are to:

- invest in training and development, ensuring that employees complete at least 10 hours of Continued Professional Development (CPD) per year
- conduct regular 'one-to-ones' between individual employees and their line manager
- conduct an annual appraisal for all employees
- conduct an annual Employee Satisfaction Survey
- encourage internal mentoring of employees
- provide an employee suggestion box
- provide BUPA membership for employees
- provide a supportive culture within the workplace

An electronic staff survey is issued annually. This allows for confidentiality and offers employees the opportunity to raise suggestions or concerns.

The Association recognises that we are living in challenging times and staff and tenants need support now more than ever as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Information leaflets have been issued to employees offering support and online mental health training provided to tenants. The Association's social media platforms are kept up to date with support information and two employees are trained in Mental Health First Aid. A "zoom" lunch & learn session by vital nutrition was hosted and employees who participated enjoyed afternoon tea which was delivered direct to their doors. A virtual Christmas quiz was held in December and again each employee received snacks to enjoy whilst participating.

## Outcomes and achievements

The investment in employee health and wellbeing is evident in the number of employees who willingly attend the planned events. The current arrangements are benefiting staff, who have increased their knowledge in mental health, nutrition and financial wellbeing.

In 2020 the Association was awarded the Legal Island Inclusion and Diversity award and achieved Gold accreditation in the Investors in People standard.

During the current pandemic staff were still encouraged to continue with their personal development. The development manager is currently completing a Contract Law Contract Management diploma, hosted by the Institute of Civil Engineers.

Members of the housing, communities, and maintenance teams completed Striving to Achieve a Restorative Society (STARS training). This training was a pilot scheme which Connswater Homes were approached to be the first participants. Two employees are currently participating in an AM/PM (Aspiring Manager/Potential Manager) in-house training programme. This programme aims at allowing staff the opportunity to develop their knowledge of the entire association.

The success of the investment in Health & Wellbeing are demonstrated in the low levels of employee sickness absence, low staff turnover rate and from the data gathered from the annual employee surveys and Investors in People assessments.

# Health and wellbeing in a pandemic

## Clanmil Housing Association Ltd



### Statement of support

The wellbeing of staff is at the heart of all Clanmil does. Although we had a new Health and Wellbeing Strategy in place, the Covid pandemic made us stand back and reassess staff needs.

With the initial lockdown, Clanmil approached the pandemic in a systematic way, focusing on IT and wellbeing interventions for staff and residents, underpinned by strong communication and support.

IT demands were quickly identified and £100k invested in equipment and software, including a new phone system to keep telecommunications open for customers. This investment was supported by extensive online training. As a result, all employees who could work from home transitioned in just two weeks, helping them stay safe. Disruption to tenant services was minimised.

Preventative measures were introduced according to staff roles and risk exposure i.e. care home staff v office-based staff. COVID-19 Risk Assessments were tailored to roles, kept updated, published for all staff to see and influence, and complemented with appropriate PPE.

The availability of PPE was a major concern. Innovative ways of sourcing PPE from multiple suppliers, including hand sanitising gel from local distilleries and 3D printed visors from a local school, ensured it remained available throughout.

Work groups and systems were established to deal with suspected Covid cases, allowing us to act swiftly in line with PHA Guidelines. Daily contact was established between Care Homes, Supported Living Manager and HR to support with people related concerns.

Clanmil also took preventative steps to look after people's mental wellbeing. Staff guides were created regarding Financial Wellbeing, Staying Active and Childcare. Workshops were organised with partners such as AWARE, Parenting NI along with in-house safeguarding training.

Through a partnership with Chest, Heart and Stroke staff were surveyed on wellbeing and provided with personal action plans. A three-year programme of training and support will commence in January 2021. Mental health first aiders were increased providing a first point of contact for staff needing extra support.

A survey and focus groups allowed us to hear directly from staff on how they were adjusting, and findings used to introduce a new progressive Home and Agile Working policy that modernises how we work, described by one employee:

"At a time of great concern, I liked that it was reasonable; not in the sense of "OK", but in having been properly formed in reason. You acknowledged the concerns of all parties, the possible pitfalls and advantages, and the need to share both fairly. You prioritized Trust, Honesty, Cooperation over slavish adherence to bureaucracy. Grown-up talk. Different."

For tenants, staff organised daily contacts, food parcel and a wide range of activities including door-step bingo, entertainers and virtual coffee mornings. Based on staff feedback, a hardship fund was created whereby staff could make small payments of £25 to those in urgent need. Scheme staff stayed on site to ensure tenants had services they needed and to reduce social isolation.

Underpinning this all was strong communication. We pro-actively amplified the Public Health messages, pre-empted concerns and provided clarity. Weekly FAQ's contained updated regulations, changes to working arrangements, safety measures and common queries around travel, PPE etc. These were issued via various channels - email, text message with digital flipbook, post. Upbeat messages remind people to observe safety measures and a video and creative safety measures in the office keep staff safe.

A COVID weekly health and safety dashboard was established.

The pandemic has not been easy for anyone, but our health and wellbeing approach has helped Clanmil people stay safe and look after each other. Our absence is lower than last year, and we now have more progressive policies that support staff wellbeing.

## Outcomes and achievements

- Rapid delivery of working from home. Mobile devices (£100k) issued across entire business and DSE Homeworking Risk Assessments completed.
- Progressive home and agile working introduced. Core hours removed for increased flexibility.
- 20 editions of COVID-19 staff FAQs issued.
- Staff guides issued on physical, mental, financial wellbeing and childcare. Increased mental health first aiders and Counselling services promoted.
- Daily health messages to all mobile devices.
- New partnership with Chest, Heart and Stroke on health and wellbeing initiatives for next three years.
- Online staff survey and focus groups regarding health effects of home-working.
- Comprehensive Track and Trace within Clanmil. 180 suspected cases of COVID-19 tracked.
- Normal sickness absence decreased, particularly short-term absence.
- PPE available to all staff throughout pandemic (£30k).
- Innovative communication including video, text messaging and digital flipbooks.
- Comprehensive Risk Assessments for every role including controls and PPE.
- Weekly challenges to help staff stay active. Monthly kindness calendars with daily tips for kindness. Mental health workshops and interdepartmental chat channels.
- Hardship fund created so staff could immediately assist tenants in difficulty.
- Food deliveries to tenants. Staff volunteers assisting with People's Kitchen meal deliveries.
- Socially distanced and virtual activities for tenants to help them stay active and connected.

# EXCELLENCE IN HOUSING INNOVATION

Sponsored by:  Department for **Communities** | An Roinn **Pobal** | Mánnistrie o **Communities**  
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This award is aimed at programmes or projects which can clearly demonstrate how they have developed an innovative approach which has made a real difference to the lives of tenants and customers.

## Radius design guide

### Radius Housing



#### Statement of support

Following the collaboration of Radius Housing and RMI Architects to create a new, highly visual Design Guide document in 2019, we saw the outworking's of this proactive design intervention in 2020 when two of the three design competitions which were progressed as part of this wider excellence in housing innovation initiative achieved planning approval. Further schemes of varying scale and complexity which embed key principals of the guide to include sustainability, value for money and innovation are also at an advanced stage of design and will contribute to our ongoing business plan targets.

The initial design guide was developed to create an informative reference tool which would assist our diverse range of housing delivery partners to create a consistently high quality housing offering which would meet key design principles across our social, affordable and private housing products.

The desire to develop the new guide was influenced by a growing awareness that the existing Radius Design Documents issued to our design teams and development partners, were predominantly

characterised by lengthy technical documents which were dry and relatively uninspiring in getting our vision of design across in a clear, succinct and easily interpreted manner. Furthermore, the growing prominence of alternative procurement routes for design to include the introduction of design competitions for key development sites at Ebrington, Creggan in Derry/Londonderry and the St Patricks Ballymena Masterplan site, further compelled the need to create a more dynamic, interesting and "user friendly" design specification document which would establish a clear, high quality development benchmark.

Whilst the guide flags all of the wider mandatory standards which must be considered in conjunction with the design guide (e.g. building control, Secure by Design planning policy and the social housing standards) it focuses on emphasising the importance of integrating design excellence into our new build schemes in a very prescriptive way leaving no ambiguity.

The design guide's content is categorised into three key sections to include: "The Place" "The Home" and "Diversity & Sustainability". Each section covers consideration of all the features of the home and its surrounding context. Extensive research has unearthed UK best practise which is punctuated throughout the guide, with annotated sketch drawings illustrating the practical implementation of key design considerations. The ethos is not just about bricks and mortar but creating high quality, sustainable homes and more importantly communities which is embedded into Radius mission.

The principals of the design guide are reflected throughout our emerging design proposals associated with our ambitious delivery programme which includes a diverse range of projects to include the regeneration of the St Patricks site, a former MD site in Ballymena

, city centre living at the Gasworks project set in an urban context, the remodelling of our Durham House project to embrace NZEB and the mixed use/tenure signature project at Hope Street, Belfast.

We believe as an Association that we do not accept the "status quo" and with giving strong guidance on our design aims and objectives from the outset via our new Design Guide, this gives more scope to allow our Design Teams to embrace and fully utilise their skill set which promotes innovation on pushing design boundaries and affords the appropriate time to spend

on design development which is so important in effective place making.

"The Radius Design Guide has been a fundamental tool and resource in developing and fulfilling the needs and aspiration of our clients projects. The guide allows us to easily and concisely test our approach and designs, making sure that all aspects of design and development are achieved, creating high quality, sustainable homes and communities."

David Black: Director of Hall Black Douglas

## Outcomes and achievements

- The creation of a highly engaging 87 page design guide document which aims to challenge the perception of social housing whilst also raising design standards to ensure that Radius Housing consistently delivers high quality homes which seamlessly integrate with their surroundings.
- The design guide has been instrumental in aiding the promotion of Radius as a preferred housing delivery partner to a variety of investors (Radius Private Placement), contractors, developers and private sector interests over the last 12 months with 73 companies and individuals represented at our December 2020 new business seminar.
- The design guide has been a catalyst for the development of the new design competition procurement route and informed the exemplar design of the Ebrington and Sean Dolan's Creggan development projects which both secured planning approval in the past year.
- The design guide is considered as a "living document" and will continue to evolve and influence the incoming new projects which are currently in the design and planning stages.
- The design guide reflects a commitment to continuous improvement and raises the bar in terms of how NI Housing Associations present their design aspirations to design teams and project delivery partners.

# Pilot project to end destitution and homelessness

## Choice Housing



### Statement of support

Destitute asylum seekers are those who have had claims refused by the UK Home Office leaving them without entitlement to benefits or housing, often resulting in destitution and homelessness. Research carried out by Housing4All among destitute asylum seekers in Belfast found that 63% had been homeless on more than one occasion since seeking asylum in Northern Ireland, and 50% of these individuals had been homeless on more than three occasions.

These statistics demonstrate the need for this innovative pilot project, particularly as established approaches to dealing with such homelessness are denied in law. Initiatives such as this can provide immediate relief and act as an example of what is possible.

To explore the potential within the housing sector to secure accommodation for this client group, Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR), as project lead, established a project partnership group consisting of representatives from Choice, Housing Solutions (NIHE), East Belfast Mission (EBM), Communities Foundation NI (CFNI) and Housing4All (H4A).

Choice is committed to inclusion and alleviating homelessness and, in line with its charitable purposes, is keen to support initiatives to help the most vulnerable. In conjunction with its subsidiary organisation Maple & May, Choice provided 2 x

2-bedroom self-contained flats in South Belfast at no charge. Rent, utilities, furnishing and maintenance were provided by Choice while white goods and ongoing support was provided by project partners and Embrace NI. CFNI secured £22,000 to meet the living expenses and support elements of the pilot.

Four female residents moved into the accommodation in September 2018 and the pilot has been life changing for the women with one commenting: "Before... it was four years of destitution.... Destitution is not an easy thing... I don't wish for anyone to be destitute... you feel like you have a disease... you feel like no-one wants you...

Now it's so different...I know I have my freedom...I know when I go out there is peace in my mind, I know I'm going home to my own place: it's changed a lot for me - even my distress, depression...I used to take tablets for depression but now my stress is down- I'm coping. It's a wonderful thing, to have my own front door, to have my own room that is mine; I wish that everybody out there could have that opportunity".

Michael McDonnell, Choice Group CEO: "Choice believes that everybody should have a decent home, and whilst I don't believe anybody would disagree that the situation destitute asylum seekers find themselves in is a problem, I don't think anybody sees it as their problem. This pilot demonstrates how the housing sector can play a part in addressing what is another example of the scourge of homelessness."

H4A: "The project helped rebuild the women's sense of dignity, hope and encouraged them to start afresh. They had a sense of belonging once more. The project partners stepped in where the state failed to honour its obligations. We are proud to be a part of this ongoing project and look forward to it going from strength to strength."

The pilot is a powerful example of partners coming together with an innovative approach to achieve a shared goal of helping the most vulnerable in our society. Partners are eager to grow this model to make this enforced homelessness and destitution a thing of the past.

### Outcomes and achievements

The impact of the project has been massive for the women. Each described themselves as initially unable to believe that they were being offered a decent, clean and warm place to live, with their own room and their own front door. One said that it was hard to put into words how huge this was. She said she felt 'free', as did another resident. In terms of health, all four described their health as greatly improved. None are now taking medication for stress or depression.

Three of the four have made fresh claims in their asylum cases. These three, who had been destitute

for years, all said that they had been unable to do so whilst destitute. They were unable to think ahead and had no money for transport to solicitors' offices, and other various appointments. They are now able to plan and hope that their fresh claim will succeed.

The project has provided a vital evidence base to support the ongoing aim of seeking a much needed policy change within the housing sector to enable housing providers to use 'properties in transition' to offer temporary respite to the most vulnerable in society.

# Restoring the Georgian Heritage - Mountjoy Square, Dublin

**Lead organisation: Respond Housing**

**Partner organisation: Dublin City Council, Torca Developments, DHLGH, Housing Finance Agency**



## Statement of support

Respond's Mountjoy Square project is three refurbished, interconnected Georgian houses (no 1 and 2 Mountjoy Square and 69 Upper Gardiner Street). The combined buildings provide 31 new social housing homes, combining their period features with up to date sustainable facilities.

As a protected structure, the restoration had to comply with conservation rules, but also have high fire safety standards and be sustainable. All the apartments are finished to a high standard for the new tenants.

The buildings were unfortunately unoccupied for some time and in a fire damaged and derelict condition before the restoration. In 2017, Respond acquired the protected property with support from Dublin City Council for a social housing development. The restoration was completed in partnership with NDBA Architects and Chris Ryan Architects working alongside Respond and Dublin City Council's conservation officer, building control and fire officers. There were planning permissions for the protected structure, best-practice conservation and architectural heritage protection considerations. Some of the works that needed to be carried out include:

- Addressing significant fire damage.
- Re-insulation.
- Replacing sections of stairs to match the original; repairing and retaining as much staircase as possible.
- Repairing and restoring ceilings and walls.
- Cleaning and repairing original cornices.

Within the three houses there are now homes for a diverse mix of households including single person households, couples and small families. The three hallways have been connected internally. The original tiling on the floor of No 1 has been retained and the original sash windows restored. Between the buildings, there are three staircases, one of which was badly fire damaged and has been restored.

The 200 year old building is located in one of five Georgian squares in Dublin, and lies on the north side of the city centre just under a kilometre from the River Liffey. The square's own park has both playing areas for football, basketball and table tennis, playgrounds for children and a green park area. From its beginning as a Georgian square, through to its literary and political connections, to modern day movies and artists, Mountjoy Square has long played a large part in Dublin's history, architecture, community and culture. The house is of historical significance by virtue of its association with a time in history when Dublin was becoming a thriving city with great social and economic activity. This is reflected in the occupancy of the house by the Lord Chief Justice James Whiteside in the mid-18th century. It is assigned artistic significance on account of the extensive richly ornate stucco work thought to have been executed by plasterer and painter James Butler.

Some Mountjoy Square buildings fell into ruin in the 20th century and were demolished; the new infill buildings have reproduction façades. Respond are delighted that they have been able to preserve the three buildings and bring new life to a historic part of Dublin City by providing homes for 31 individuals and families. Respond are committed to maintaining and managing the buildings long term and ensuring the building can sustain people over a lifetime.

The building's new tenants came from Dublin City Council's housing list. Respond have managed the tenants' transition, creating a community from the diverse groups. There is a communal area outside that tenants are working to develop into a great outside space.

The restoration caused the Irish Times to wonder 'is this the most beautiful social housing in Dublin?' (Mar 21st 2020). Respond are proud to show that social housing can be beautiful and sustainable as well as addressing a social housing need.

## Outcomes and achievements

- New life has been brought to these buildings in the form of 31 families and individuals who now call this home.
- The initiative transformed three protected structures in the heart of Dublin city. Through partnership and innovation, the project has ensured that three buildings have gone from being derelict and fire damaged to having their beautiful features restored.
- It provided additional extra social housing in the heart of Dublin
- The tenants are now actively working together to enhance the outdoor areas and there is a strong sense of community

At one stage, there was a school in the three Mountjoy/Gardiner St houses. One of the school's past pupils is Michael Cumberton, now a tenant in the building.

"I found myself homeless three years ago. I had a serious neck injury from working on building sites. I lost my job, couldn't pay the rent, lost my place in Coolock. Only for the likes of Respond helping people like myself, I probably wouldn't have a place."

## Prison resettlement team

### MACS Supporting Children and Young People



#### Statement of support

MACS Floating Support provide support to young people who are homeless or at risk of homeless. Floating Support identified that there was an unmet need for young people that were leaving Hydebank Wood Young Offenders Centre, a gap in services meant that young people were often at risk of homelessness and reoffending. We approached Hydebank in order to complete research to identify how this unmet need could be met. At Hydebank we spoke with several staff members in the Prisoners Development Unit (PDU) as well as completing workshops with 19 young people, male and female between the ages of 18 - 25 - a mixture of first time and repeat offenders.

After completing our research, we felt that creating a post within our Floating Support team working specifically with young people (18-25) who are leaving prison would be beneficial to those young people that are leaving Hydebank as well as complementing the work that is already being completed in the PDU. This would also enable us to jointly meet the identified needs of young people leaving Hydebank.

We applied to Nationwide Community Grant for funding and were successful in receiving a grant that has allowed us to pilot a Prison Resettlement Worker offering an intensive floating support model that not only looked at housing needs but also encompassed factors to reduce reoffending such as routine and rituals.

Resettlement is a strategic priority for the Prison Service and as such, planning for each person's release should start on arrival, with a coordinated and constructive programme upon release. Early intervention and prevention work is an imperative factor for young people to succeed in life after Hydebank, stable accommodation and support being vital to prevent reoffending. This is something that our Prison Resettlement Worker has been able to identify and support young people with from their first meeting

Our aim is to prevent repeat homelessness and reoffending of young people leaving prison through an intensive floating support model, which addresses their complex needs and encompasses a co-ordinated and holistic approach to resettlement.

Through MACS Participation Service - Led by You Service we have been able to use the innovative approach of participating and dog grooming to reduce the risk of reoffending by offering young people support with routines and rituals when leaving the prison service. This is completed by identifying young people that want to reduce isolation and loneliness as well as promoting attitudinal change in the community in relation to young offenders. This is supported by offering young people the chance to volunteer in Muddy Paws (MACS Dog Grooming Service) this reduce young people's isolation, increase their social networks and provides practical workplace skills working with dogs.

"The support from the floating support has been great. It has enabled some of our young people to have support on release and for a considerable period after release, which has been invaluable to them when other services cease after a few weeks. It has also been a great as some of the young people are already known to your service gives continuity and as they would say they don't have to go over their life story AGAIN....

The support worker has been able to follow up with us in when the young person has been released and with

the sharing of information and joined up approached has made it easier for the young person to access services and gain support they require. We have had very positive feedback from the young people in our care about the service and the meeting of the support worker prior to release" - Beverly McDonald - PDU Co-ordinator.

## Outcomes and achievements

MACS gathers a variety of evidence to monitor the differences made in young peoples lives. MACS operates with an Outcomes Monitoring System (SPIN). SPIN enables comprehensive data capture and provides reports evidencing, personal details, referral routes, group activities, move on outcomes, section 75, and geographical areas. Young people's individual needs are identified using the homelessness outcome star. Our achievements and outcomes are:

- Piloting an Intensive Floating Support model for Prison Leavers to reduce reoffending and prevention of repeat homelessness
- Training in Housing First for youth due to intensity and complex needs of young people
- As a Floating Support Team we have increased the amount of young people we are supporting from 57 to 89
- Number of yp supported this year 38 our target was 20 young people
- 85% of young people have maintained accommodation
- Increases in referral pathways including Maghaberry, PBNI, NIHE, PSNI reduce reoffending team
- Demand for service means we have created a waiting list and work on a priority needs basis
- 5 young people are currently engaged with Muddy Paws
- Successfully engaged 9 young people to take part in the community garden allotments at Hydebank
- Research further models of intervention - Housing First to reduce chronic homelessness

# Shared tenancy

## MACS Supporting Children and Young People



### Statement of support

NIHE Identified within the Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2017-22 that single people, particularly males represent the largest proportion of homeless presenters in Northern Ireland. Affordable housing across NI was highlighted as a structural constraint in reducing homelessness. Move on options for young people are limited in not only social housing but private rentals also due to many reasons such as LHA rates, lack of guarantors and landlords perceiving young people as a risk to rent to.

MACS were keen to look at how to create new housing options that not only addressed the issue of having the right to a home but also isolation and loneliness. Funded and supported by Belfast Housing Executive MACS began to work on creating a Shared Housing Model to increase move on options for young people which is more affordable. Matching the right young people is key to the success of shared living. To this end MACS have developed a matching process which allows the young people to get to know one another before entering into the tenancy. This continues

throughout their first year as they are supported to hold house meetings and iron out any arising issues early. MACS Shared Tenancy Co-ordinator works with the young people for 6 months post move in before handing over to MACS Belfast Floating Support team who offer housing support for up to a further 2 years. To make tenancies more sustainable for young people who won't have had much experience managing their own homes MACS created a Tenancy Ready toolkit which is a modular based programme that allows a tailored approach to support.

As part of the initial research for the pilot MACS and NIHE have together approached external organisations and agencies who have since formed as a Shared Tenancy Steering Group. This group are looking at how to develop Shared tenancies to meet demand across the province.

The strong and collaborative relationship MACS have with Belfast Housing Solutions team is testament to its success.

"The Shared Tenancies project which MACS have been delivering has been an exciting and very successful pilot initiative aimed at broadening the continuum of housing options for young people facing homelessness. Although forcing new considerations, the coronavirus pandemic did not stifle this project's progress; the determined efforts of MACS staff and their collaboration with partners to achieve positive outcomes for young people has been hugely impressive. Seventeen young people have been matched and facilitated to move on from supported accommodation based services and have been thriving in their shared properties. This is an innovative and promising initiative and a credit to Beth and all the staff in MACS who have driven its progress." - Eileen Thompson Project Lead NIHE.

### Outcomes and achievements

- Developed a MACS shared housing handbook and created a match process and specific policies and procedures.
- Completed scoping of interest with providers across Northern Ireland
- Create processes around, referral, selection, matching, and case management model
- Established a shared housing steering group of relevant providers
- Strong partnership with NIHE/ Extern Homes/ Housing Associations/Private Landlords to identify shared housing properties
- Supported and managed the initial settling in period while new tenants build relationship
- 17 Young People accommodated through MACS Shared Tenancy programme and of those 17:
  - 14 are currently in some form of training/ education or employment.
  - 5 who were not employed at point of referral, accessed employment.
  - 2 who were not in any form of training are now accessing training opportunities.
  - 6 have accessed the EYH training and education grant (and 1 YP accessed Buttle) to support their T&E goals.
  - 2 Young People have accessed the MACS Housing Fund to secure a private let
  - 100% of young people in shared accommodation have maintained their tenancy

# EXCELLENCE IN CHAMPIONING EQUALITY & DIVERSITY

Sponsored by:



An Ghníomhaireacht  
Tithíochta  
The Housing Agency

This award will recognise organisations who are leading on promoting equality and diversity in their businesses.

## Listen share change

### Housing Executive



### Statement of support

Throughout the conflict the Housing Executive has continued to deliver housing services based on need, to all sections of our community regardless of religion, political belief, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability or race. We manage 87,117 homes across 800 estates assisted by a Housing Community Network of over 450 community groups.

Northern Ireland is emerging from many years of violent political conflict and while significant progress has been made, Northern Ireland remains a divided society. In response to this the Housing Executive sees itself as much more than a landlord and is committed to delivering peacebuilding through housing.

Two decades after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, more than 82% of social housing in Northern Ireland remains segregated on grounds of religious background.

Our Community Cohesion Strategy builds on what we have achieved and demonstrates a top level commitment to good relations which is in the DNA of everything we do. As the largest Social Housing provider in Northern Ireland, our continued success is

due to our commitment to a community led approach and getting the best outcomes and impact for our communities, by working within the challenges of a deeply segregated society.

Our Community Cohesion Strategy overarching objective is:

“To contribute to the creation of more stable, safer neighbourhoods by working in partnership with others to address the complex housing needs of a diverse and divided society.”

It is delivered across 5 key themes:

1. Segregation/Integration
2. Race Relations
3. Communities in Transition
4. Interface Areas
5. Flags, Emblems and Sectional Symbols

We pride ourselves on our ability to work in collaboration with groups, agencies and departments as we see this as core to delivering our Community Cohesion Strategy. With this in mind, the Housing Executive developed a partnership with Verbal Arts and secured Peace funding from SEUPB to deliver a community confidence building and capacity building programme relevant to the needs of our local communities.

LISTEN, SHARE, CHANGE has been developed through a co-design process which prioritises the individual. It is a Northern Ireland wide 3 year cross community, intergenerational programme which aims to promote positive relations within and across 52 Housing Executive estates by creating meaningful, purposeful and sustained contact between persons from different communities.

Key to the project's success is the innovative partnership between the statutory sector (the Housing Executive) and the community/voluntary sector (Verbal) which has a proven track record over the last 26 years in developing and delivering participatory cultural interventions designed to increase mutual understanding and build a more cohesive society.

LISTEN, SHARE, CHANGE aims to tackle and address the following needs;

- Increase the opportunities for residents and young people within the social housing sector to meet, engage and form relationships with others of a different religious or cultural background;
- Build the positive mental health and confidence of young people living within the social housing sector, combating lack of educational attainment and raising hopes and aspirations for the future;

- Engage young people in community structures in order to facilitate community cohesion in the future.

Following Verbal's Reading Rooms model, groups living in diverse and fractured communities are brought together regularly, to have a series of purposeful facilitated conversations in a shared and supportive space. Some of the barriers to social cohesion within diverse communities include language issues, perceptions of cultural difference and stereotyping, unemployment, fear of crime and racial harassment (Hudson et al 2007). Listen Share Change connects community members in a safe and respectful space where these complex topics can be explored through meaningful and transformative dialogues and shared experiences that are unlikely to occur outside of a guided context.

## Outcomes and achievements

Project is currently taking place within across:-

North Region

· Belfast Region

· South Region

The programme engages with groups and creates a space for groups of 12 participants to come together and take part in the programme. Groups are matched to support positive community bridging.

The sessions are facilitated by a trained volunteer practitioner (Neighbourhood Champion) sourced from the participating community. Neighbourhood Champions are trained to OCN level 2 in Facilitation Skills for Shared Reading and then mentored by Verbal.

Participants' experiences of the programme were explored using a novel focus group evaluation. The Perception Analyses is a real time dial testing research tool that bridges the gap between quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Key outcomes:

63 Groups participated on the programme.

130 Community volunteers trained in facilitation skills for Shared Reading

891 people participating in weekly storytelling and conversation sessions

12 Future Youth Leaders mentored and signposted to additional NIHE opportunities including:

The programme has provided an additional focus for the Housing Executive to engage and reach previously underrepresented groups across Northern Ireland and created the conditions to amplify participants' voices in a safe, secure environment with a view to building their capacity to become active citizens.

# Choice equality and diversity programme

## Choice Housing



### Statement of support

Choice strongly believes that everyone should be treated equally and this is evident through the organisation's relevant policies, awareness raising through induction and training, and the development of an Equality & Diversity strategy.

Recognising that its workforce consists of people from different backgrounds, Choice aspires to be representative of the community that it serves. Demonstrating its commitment to leading on promoting equality and diversity, in 2019, the senior management team overwhelmingly supported a request from staff that Choice be part of the annual 'Belfast Pride Festival'.

A voluntary committee was set up to devise a range of activities to raise awareness for 'Choice Pride Week' including:

- A History of Pride and the importance of celebrating it.
- A list of LGBT+ Support Services and signposting people to available services
- Case studies of LGBT tenants who have been affected by discrimination
- Sharing a personal story from a Choice staff member and member of the LGBT community
- Coffee Morning/Bake Sale in aid of 'The Rainbow Project' held at Choice offices.

Staff were overwhelmingly positive about 'Choice Pride Week' which culminated in Choice's Chief Executive attending Belfast Pride Parade along with 31 staff and family members: "Fantastic! So happy to work for an organisation that is inclusive", and "This is quite progressive...I have wanted this to happen for years". Another said: "Having a daughter who is gay and knowing the stigma and struggle she had to go through to be herself I feel very strongly that I should

support this in whatever way I can". Choice shared updates throughout the day on its Facebook and Twitter platforms, highlighting the Pride Festival and their participation in the event.

As well as championing equality and diversity in the workplace, Choice is committed to building stronger inclusive communities through leading on initiatives around regeneration, financial inclusion, employability and integration.

Throughout 2019/20 Choice continued to work with the 'Housing Associations' Integration Project' Peace IV and Together: Building United Communities (Housing For All) projects. These unique partnerships consisting of Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA), social housing providers, NIHE, and Department for Communities (DfC) aim to improve good relations, promote community integration and shared housing. Choice now has three TBUC schemes where our dedicated Community Support Officer provides community support initiatives and bridging events with adjacent neighbourhoods while actively promoting the benefits of a shared society e.g. Good relations workshops, Multi-cultural event, Cross Community Ceilidh, Men's Shed and 17 tenants and members of the wider community received funding to complete an OCN Level II accredited course in Good Relations and Civic Leadership.

Through its Building Futures programme, Choice continues its partnership with Bryson Future Skills to deliver WorkChoice, a programme aimed at upskilling people to help them secure long-term employment. WorkChoice equips participants with practical training alongside OCN accreditations whilst enabling participants to earn a salary. The latest programme commenced in January 2020 with five participants currently working in a range of disciplines across the organisation.

Part of Building Futures, Choice also believes that academic achievement should be open to all regardless of background and circumstances and is currently working with Queens and Ulster to provide much needed support to those who face financial, social and logistical barriers to furthering their education. Through these 5 year programmes, 3 prizes of £1,000 per year are being awarded to encourage students from under-represented groups to reach their full potential. One student recently awarded said: "I couldn't be more thankful to Choice for this award! I have been a lot more motivated in my studies since receiving it as I now feel the work I put in doesn't go unnoticed".

## Outcomes and achievements

These initiatives demonstrate that Choice is committed to championing equality and diversity and is making a positive, meaningful impact within its organisation and the communities in which it works.

'Choice Pride Week':

- Helped raise awareness of the challenges faced by LGBT staff members and tenants.
- Feedback from Rainbow training was very positive; staff have a better understanding of how to relate to customers from the LGBT communities - 95.24 % of trainees indicated they are now able to provide a support service and signpost to services if tenants or employees have any concerns.
- Attendance at Pride demonstrated that Choice is inclusive to all sections of the community.
- Promoting Integration
- 3 TBUC schemes completed with a further 2 TBUC progressing to promote a shared society.
- 17 attendees have completed OCN Level II accredited course in Good Relations and Civic Leadership
- Events held throughout the year to promote inclusivity and diversity
- Building Futures
- Through WorkChoice 17 participants have gained work experience and OCN accreditations with one participant having obtained permanent employment with Choice
- Scholarships awarded to 12 Queens and Ulster University students to provide support and offer them the chance to flourish, succeed and play a role in creating stronger, more inclusive communities.

# Radius championing equality and diversity through lockdown and beyond

**Lead organisation: Radius Housing**

**Partner organisation: Various - as detailed on application**



## Statement of support

Unprecedented changes to our society, of how we live and work, owing to the global pandemic COVID-19 meant many Radius projects of work for 2020 had to be redesigned to run out in a safe socially distanced way. Our Community Investment Team, designed and delivered a number of innovative projects which had a meaningful impact to our tenants and in the communities in which we work. We were determined that grass roots projects would promote equality and diversity in our communities when it mattered the most. The projects were funded by DfC Shared Housing Programme which has its origins in the NI Executive Together: Building United Communities Strategy.

- Festival in a Box

This project ran out on 21st September on the International Day of Peace 2020. Radius was the lead on this project which was delivered in conjunction with APEX and Clanmil Housing Associations.

The original planned Cultural Diversity Festival to celebrate diverse cultural traditions of communities living in south and east Belfast could not take place with Covid public health restrictions in place. Rather than let the opportunity to celebrate cultural diversity pass, it was decided to bring the cultural festival to the community in a box full of innovative ideas, recipes and activities from cultures across the world.

The Boxes include games, recipe ideas and music, with the aim of building understanding and respect for the many cultures in our diverse society. Whilst the box is full of recipes and cultural activities from around the world, it also highlights the local history and culture of the communities in which we all live in. The Schools and Community boxes had additional resources for ongoing use.

'the community box and individual boxes were fantastic.'

'Amazing.....the whole family doing crafts together, learning and teaching from the resources.'

- Connections Café

Connections Café is a new online platform for people of all nationalities to meet up, make friends and share stories, language cooking and craft. Developed as a direct result of COVID lockdown, the aim is to make this a physical space following current social

distancing restrictions. The Café is planned and facilitated by BCRC - Building Communities Resource Centre in conjunction with CMCF

Causeway Multi Cultural Forum. Members of CMCF act as cultural ambassadors at each event. To date we have had representatives from; China, France, Poland, South Africa, India and Syria. We have had a number of Syrian refugees attend this forum, and have facilitated their attendance with an interpreter.

'this project provides an opportunity to get to know people from different countries and cultures that you would not otherwise meet.'

- Include You, Include Me Event

The Include You, Include Me event, was in run in partnership with Forward South Partnership, Solas, RNIB and Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Disability Team. The event was to promote equality and diversity at the planning stages within delivery of events in the community sector. This was an event looking at the practical considerations and provided advice, information and resources to reducing barriers to inclusion for those with additional needs.

"this has been a really useful event which has given me a much greater understanding of how to plan events and activities to make them accessible to all."

## Outcomes and achievements

- Festival in a Box

Delivery of boxes to 1000 households,  
40 Schools and 40 community groups.

A total outreach of 1080 households.

A further extended outreach of 6000 participants over the year through schools and community groups ongoing use of resources to delivery to pupils and groups.

Increased awareness and understanding of cultural diversity

- Connections Café

Has successfully run for 6 months

Over 60 people using this platform

X12 cultural ambassadors

Increased awareness and understanding of cultural diversity

Combatting social isolation

Fostering inclusion and belonging

- Include You, Include Me Event

80 participants

40 organisations

13 information stands

Increased awareness and understanding of the barriers to inclusion

Ideas and information to embrace inclusion and take meaningful action

# Old Mill Court, Sion Mills: housing for all

**Lead organisation: Rural Housing Association**

**Partner organisation: Sion Mills Community Forum & Sion Mills Community Association**



## Statement of support

Throughout 2020 Rural Housing Association has proactively engaged tenants and local residents in a series of programmes focused on celebrating diversity and championing equality.

Despite lockdown in July 2020, we launched an exciting new Diversity Explorers project for residents living within Sion Mills. The Association partnered with Sion Mills Community Forum and Sion Mills Community Association to deliver a series of educational craft boxes exploring cultures from around the world to over 80 families in the area. The diversity packs were created by ArtsEkta, a leading cultural arts organisation that works to develop intercultural relationships at a community level across Northern Ireland. The project provided families with the opportunity to learn about eight cultures from around the world including India, Africa, Spain, China & Poland through a series of diversity packs, which were delivered to local residents' homes. Each diversity pack contained arts & crafts, cultural fact sheets, recipes, and links to ArtsEkta's online resources, all of which are aimed at increasing awareness of different cultures and promoting respect for diversity.

Alongside this Rural Housing Association hosted a series of socially distanced cultural events within shared outdoor community spaces including Old Mill Court itself. (A comprehensive risk assessment will be carried out based on Government Guidelines at

that time to ensure the safety of all attending.) The success of this diversity project enabled us to submit proposals to the Community Relations Council NI & Derry City and Strabane DC to expand this project to Ardstraw, Newtown Stewart, Victoria Bridge and Strabane, enabling us to offer the project to an additional 150 families.

During lockdown we also commenced a community bakery project, which saw the provision of fortnightly bakery boxes exploring traditional Irish and Ulster-Scots recipes. Residents participating in the project learned how to bake traditional Irish/ Ulster-Scots recipes from their homes through specially prepared bakery boxes containing instructions and ingredients.

Alongside their bakery boxes residents received fortnightly learning packs exploring the traditions associated with Ireland and with Ulster-Scots through the provision of learning materials developed in partnership with the Ulster-Scots Agency and Pobal Mhuileann an tSiáin. These learning resources helped residents explore both the Irish language and Ulster-Scots.

Fortnightly illustrated stories also helped residents explore the history, culture and traditions of Ulster-Scots and Ireland, looking at significant moments in history for both traditions.

These projects provide an insight into the variety of good relations & diversity work taking place in Sion Mills. We continue to use Old Mill Court as a location for safe socially distanced events (when safe to do so and within government guidelines). By using spaces where residents live as social arenas, we can help connect residents and build more inclusive communities for our residents to live.

This project has been funded through the Department for Communities and Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Housing for All initiative. 'Housing for all' schemes promote neighbourhoods that are inclusive, welcoming and safe places to live for all.

## Outcomes and achievements

To date Rural Housing Association has worked in partnership with ArtsEkta, Ulster-Scots Agency, Pobal Mhuileann an tSiáin, Sion Mills Community Forum and Sion Mills Community Association to deliver a diversity project exploring cultures from around the world to 261 residents in Sion Mills, Victoria Bridge, Newtownstewart, Strabane and Ardstraw.

Surveys results indicate that the project has achieved the following outcomes:

1) As a result of taking part in the diversity project 94% of participants indicated they had learned about the culture and traditions of others.

- 2) 84 % of participants indicated that the way they viewed others from a different culture had improved as a result of taking part in the project.
- 3) After taking part in the project 98% of participants indicated that they felt more strongly that the culture and traditions of people from different backgrounds adds to the richness and diversity of N. Ireland

In May 2020 Rural Housing Association was also awarded a Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors NI, Social Impact Award in recognition of the difference our diversity work has made within the local community of Sion Mills.

# HOUSING TEAM OF THE YEAR

Sponsored by: **apex**

This award is for a team who have delivered an outstanding contribution to their organisation and for the housing sector. It is designed to recognise achievement of something special, as part of developing new services, dealing with difficult situations or delivering the best services.

## Staying connected, staying apart

### Clann Housing



### Statement of support

The Clann Housing Team provide Age-Friendly Housing to tenants across the Country. They currently provide over 800 homes. Clann Staff are based on site and provide guidance and support to residents, ensuring they remain connected to their community, combating isolation and supporting individuals to live independently in their home for as long as they choose. In March, like many other Housing providers the Team found themselves restricted to working from home, a real challenge when their role is to protect those in our communities who were being told to cocoon. Never had the need to ensure that people are connected and not experiencing isolation and loneliness been more important. The Team quickly dealt with the issues head on and developed initiatives to ensure the well-being of all residents were met during this difficult time, these included.

- Daily & weekly wellbeing calls - these calls focused on the resident, their personal situation and needs. Some involved putting practical measures in place to support the person, for others it was a chat and a friendly voice, for some it involved comforting a person who was scared, unwell or who had

lost a loved one. These calls did not focus on rent or other housing issues but put the persons wellbeing at the centre. With over 800 residents, spread across the Country this was a significant piece of work in additional to normal activities.

- Connecting with community - The Clann Team linked in with local supports, identifying needs and linking residents in with community groups. Whether it was prescriptions being collected, shopping being delivered or even the arrival of a longed for 'bag of chips' for one resident who was cocooning, Clann staff found a way, and linked in with the community voluntary and business sectors to make it happen.
- Moving activities online - Part of the Clann Service offering is on site activities which residents can choose to engage in if they wish. The Clann Team moved events online, creating a series of Clann Zoom Activities which including breadmaking, virtual tours of art galleries, music sessions, 'Clann Desert Island Discs' & 'Art from Connemara' among others. Clann staff linked with ALONE and Vodafone to access smart phones and arranged for neighbours to teach each other so that no one was left behind. Residents were central in running and participating in these events.
- Supporting General Needs Housing - The Clann Team through interaction and feedback from residents recognised the positive impact that wellbeing calls were having on residents. They also recognised that older people living in our General Needs housing provided by Cluid Housing were not in receipt of the same service. Clann staff then extended the wellbeing calls to residents in General Needs over the age of 60 years, all of whom were contacted and given support both emotional and practical. The team provided support, comfort and guidance to these residents

who also began joining the 'Clann Zoom Events' to increase their connection to others.

- Providing forever homes - Despite 2020's series of lockdowns the Clann Housing Team continued to provide homes to some of the most vulnerable in society. Most impressive is the returning of our older Irish home to Ireland. In partnership with Safe Homes, Clann supported and facilitated the returning home for good of four individuals from

the UK and one from the USA who had immigrated many years ago and wished to return to their home country. A significant achievement in very challenging times.

The Clann Housing Team worked in partnership with communities across Ireland. They and residents truly were 'Stronger Together' and will continue so into the future.

## Outcomes and achievements

- Increased satisfaction - A survey was carried in 2020 with all Residents, the satisfaction level with the services provided by Clann was 98% satisfactions.
- Improved relationships - Clann aim to meet the needs of residents. It also believes that residents should be at the core of identify their own needs. The work carried out this year by the Housing Team has provided huge opportunities for the Clann Team to listen to our residents, hear needs and put plans in place to address these.
- Increased use of Technology - Residents have embraced the use of technology with the support of the Clann. One resident advised that she is now

reading the local newspaper from the village she used to live in in Egypt and has reconnected with people she used to know there, saying she now feels better connected to those she loves despite having to stay physically away from human contact. This experience is replicated by many residents living in Clann Schemes.

- No place like home - Moving is hard, moving countries harder, with a pandemic perhaps impossible? Five Irish people turned the keys in their own front door, lay down their suitcases for good and were welcomed home after years of living abroad.

## Belfast floating support

### MACS Supporting Children and Young People



### Statement of support

MACS Belfast Floating Support are a team that have delivered an outstanding contribution to MACS and the community they support. The team work with young people aged 16-25 and are homeless, at risk of homelessness or need help maintaining their tenancy. This is done in a flexible and young person centred approach. They work to prevent repeat homelessness through a casework floating support model, which addresses their complex needs and encompasses a co-ordinated and holistic approach to resettlement.

A team of dedicated and inspiring workers that have a friendly, relaxed, engaging and warm attitude that fosters positive communication between young

people and the organisation as a whole. Their work is always underpinned by the values of trust and integrity. Continuously willing to go above and beyond supporting young people - this has been at the forefront of this teams work and has come into full effect in the last 12 months - when they worked tirelessly and unwavering to support some of the most complex and intense young people in society and no pandemic was going to stand in their way

The causes of homelessness are complex and different for each individual - In Belfast Floating Support we have seen a significant increase in the amount of young people that are presenting in difficult and intense situations - we are finding that the young people are presenting with such complex issues that at time of assessment workers are having to complete short pieces of support work in crisis situations - with the current 89 young people that we are supporting 32 needed immediate support to access temporary accommodation. The team have seen an increase in drug use, mental health and intimidation as well as young people being moved into temporary accommodation outside our area. The team have continued to work purposefully to make sure all young people we supported had access to what they needed - allowing them to feel safe and secure. They are the most inspiring and determined people I have ever come across.

This year has no doubt been a transformational journey for Belfast Floating Support and we will continue to grow, develop and remain relevant in the housing sector as well as continuing to treat our young people with compassion inclusion and respect. Homelessness, for many young people has become much more complex than providing accommodation and the challenge now is to ensure that once accommodation is in place that support services are also in place to keep young people safe and healthy.

“The Belfast Floating Support team are great to work with. The team are all so passionate about young people and the service they provide. They build relationships and provide much needed support and assistance for young people which is instrumental in

making the right changes in their lives. The impact they have is life changing for many young people! We enjoy working in partnership with Macs. It has great benefits for us at Housing Rights and for the young people we work with” – Bethany Telford Housing Rights Young People Worker

“My worker has literally went above and beyond for me since the day we met but I never fully realised how much he loves his job he isn't in it for the money he isn't in it for the recognition but for the love and care of young people” – Young Person Supported by Belfast Floating Support Team

## Outcomes and achievements

MACS gathers a variety of evidence to monitor the differences made in young peoples lives. MACS operates with an Outcomes Monitoring System (SPIN). This monitors hard and soft outcomes and collates data to produce statistics and reports. SPIN enables comprehensive data capture and provides reports evidencing, personal details, referral routes, group activities, move on outcomes, section 75, and geographical areas. Young people's individual needs are identified using the homelessness outcome star.

- This last year our team has grown from 4 floating Support Workers to now include a Peripatetic Floating Support Worker, Prison Resettlement Worker and a Shared Tenancy Co-ordinator
- Piloting an Intensive Floating Support model for Prison Leavers to reduce reoffending and prevention of repeat homelessness

- Piloting a Shared Tenancy Model funded by NIHE this service has been developed to support young people experiencing homelessness who want to explore shared living.
- Training in Housing First for youth due to intensity and complex needs of young people
- Increase in the amount of young people we are supporting from 57 to 89
- Number of young people supported this year 245
- 85% of young people have maintained accommodation

# Hope from home

## First Housing Aid & Support Services



### Statement of support

First Housing's Floating Support service delivers housing related support to approximately 300 families and vulnerable adults throughout Co Fermanagh each year. The team has a project

co-ordinator and four support workers, who like many services hit by the restrictions of COVID-19

were determined to continue delivering an outstanding service by not only helping service users manage their housing circumstances but also the added challenges posed by the pandemic. While some support tasks remained the same, the duration of the lock down and infection spread brought about alternative support needs within the service user base. At all times the organisational ethos is the well being of service users and a progressive improvement in their circumstances so the team asked each service user what other support they required during this lockdown and at the weekly staff meeting discussed ways of addressing them.

Isolation and feeling forgotten about were two of the issues raised, so the team set about reassuring service users of their ongoing, albeit differently administered support and sought ways of keeping them connected with wider society. Out of this the Hope From Home campaign began - a predominately online project highlighting different topics and encouraging service user participation. Photographs were posted on Facebook of the staff on laptops and

zoom calls working on behalf of their service users and encouraging the stay home message. A large rainbow was painted on the office window and service users were asked to contribute pictures and messages about their experience of lockdown. One message from a service user for the window display was as follows, "HOMELESS LOOKING FOR HELP Young old lost lonely where here to help want to get your life back on track they are the only ones in town Iv been there many times and it is not nice out in cold rain snow under trees old cars. These people are first class just knock ring the bell it crazy its true any problems they are sunshine". (verbatim).

Mental health week was highlighted and each team member posted their thoughts on mental health and a photograph showing them doing something that improved their mental health. They posted photographs of themselves exercising, of their pets and of being in nature. Service users were encouraged to post photographs of the same. To address service users mental health, the team were spending more time in a listening role. However as the pandemic continued to reduce services and limit freedoms a placement was offered to a final year student counsellor at the South West College whose experience enabled her to support those service users who needed more intensive support. During even the tightest restrictions of the pandemic she was able to continue this vital service through telephone sessions.

The team were mindful of their own and each other's mental health and spent time ensuring that members did not become isolated while working remotely and that the bonds forged while working side by side in the office were maintained. This was achieved through a weekly staff meetings and a weekly hour long coffee break, both by zoom, daily contact through the teams whats app group, signing up as a group for on line training in resilience and mindfulness, availing of First Housings support bursary for personal development training and taking part in Hope From Home activities. Staff also took part in world homeless awareness week and each day, for a week, a different staff member shared photographs of themselves walking 11,323 steps, one step for each homeless person in N Ireland.

### Outcomes and achievements

Throughout the pandemic the team stepped up to ensure core tasks were maintained and new tasks could be accommodated morphing support to suit the current climate. The Thursday Morning Drop In for housing advice and support became an on line service, home visits were replaced by telephone calls, Facebook messages and al fresco conversations at a distance of 2 metres. The well being of service users and each other remained the focus of this exceptional team as they responded creatively and regularly to providing support options that addressed both practical and emotional needs. Where possible they continued their front line duties and often stepped in

to fill gaps left by other services. They helped service users set up new tenancies and sustain current ones, they decluttered a home rendered uninhabitable through hoarding, prepared the home of a service user who was transitioning from hospital, supported service users involved in the historical institutions abuse inquiry, helped set up repayment plans for rent arrears, prepared a service user for their on line driving theory test, applied for charitable grants, and provided help with benefits. Service users through their evaluations told the team "You have done all you could and more"

# Housing team of the year

## Radius Housing



### Statement of support

Radius Communities Department consists of Area Housing Management teams, a Community Investment team, Floating Support team, Business and Admin Support and Sheltered Housing Scheme staff.

At the beginning of the pandemic our shared goal was to continue to provide essential services and support to our tenants and the wider community. Within days of the COVID19 lockdown we enabled 111 staff to access all IT systems remotely including 56 call handlers. We ensured essential cleaning and staff cover at our 110 Sheltered Schemes, our Welfare Advice team were available to assist tenants affected by the pandemic and we adjusted our processes to reflect the changes in our working environment.

We made an additional 15,000 calls to over 4,000 of our older more vulnerable tenants which resulted in over 450 referrals for additional support. One resident with no family support was found extremely distressed with no food in the house. Our Housing Officer delivered essential food that evening; referred the tenant to a befriending service and arranged for a weekly food parcel delivery.

With so much change in a short period of time communication was vital. We utilised online meeting formats, our staff intranet, Radius website, and held tenant panel meetings via zoom. This has enabled us to provide continual updates to staff and tenants, share ideas and raise concerns. Together we have

worked to overcome and solve problems, utilising the skills and talents of our staff and tenants to adjust and respond to the unprecedented challenges COVID19 presented.

Collaborating with staff, tenants and 63 voluntary and statutory organisations we managed to successfully and safely deliver over 40 projects and events. These focused on improving mental and physical wellbeing, alcohol and drug awareness, overcoming isolation, cultural awareness and good relations. Some of highlights include:

- 'Adopt a grandparent' programme May 2020. Over 25 local primary school children produced drawings which were passed to over 1000 Radius Sheltered Housing tenants. The daughter of one of our residents said 'My daddy lives alone in one of the Folds and this just made him so happy'
- 'Operation Christmas'. Radius worked with local hospitality businesses to distribute over 3,300 hot meals to our sheltered housing tenants along with some Christmas baubles and entertainment. One of the residents wrote to Radius following the event: 'Thank you Radius for my lovely Christmas dinner, it was a very kind thought to cheer up residents at this difficult period in our lives. Thank you also for a most unexpected visit from Santa, it really cheered me up for I have been under a lot of stress over the last couple of weeks.'

In addition to this the Communities Department oversaw the award of almost £20k through our Community Chest grant scheme which was quickly adapted to support more community groups providing assistance to almost 16,000 of the most vulnerable people in our communities affected by the pandemic. These grants reached groups across NI carrying out a variety of projects.

In what has been an unprecedented and extremely challenging year the Communities department through our shared mission, continual communication and collaboration have been able to adjust and adapt and continue to provide a high level of service and support to our tenants at this time of great need.

### Outcomes and achievements

- 111 Communities staff set up for remote working from home along with 56 call handlers in place ready to take calls.
- 15,000 additional calls to 4000 elderly vulnerable tenants which resulted in 450 referrals for additional support.
- Over 40 programmes, projects and events throughout the pandemic.
- Collaboration with over 63 community and statutory organisations.
- 39 successful Community Chest Grants totalling £19,795 awarded to community groups across NI carrying out a variety of projects helping almost 16,000 people severely affected by the pandemic.

# Ark Housing development team

## Ark Housing



### Statement of support

As set out in the awards guidance, this award is for a team who have delivered an outstanding contribution to their organisation and to the housing sector as a whole.

We are immensely proud that our development team, consisting of Cathy Walsh, Susan Gibson and Lily Kennedy overwhelmingly delivered against both of those criteria during 2020-21 (despite the unprecedented challenges their department encountered through COVID19), and we are delighted to have the opportunity to highlight their achievements through the CIH awards.

By way of background, in November 2018, Ark Housing's Board approved an ambitious growth strategy for the organisation for the period 2019-2024 that would, if successful, result in the tripling of the number of homes under its management by March 2024. This plan would ultimately involve setting our relatively small but hugely experienced and competent development team one of the most challenging but rewarding objectives they had ever faced.

To put this objective into context, average annual Housing Association development growth rates across the four regions of the UK tend to be in single figures (Housemark Benchmarking Data). Our 40% per annum five-year plan was always going to be a challenge against that background, however the organisation had every confidence that it had the best people in place to deliver success and proceeded accordingly. The overall aim of our growth programme is to maximise

capacity and enhance our contribution as a social housing provider, to not only meet housing stress in Northern Ireland, but to deliver better outcomes and opportunities for people and communities.

Given the time lag in development activity, the initial two years of such plans are always critical to achieving absolute success. In those early years we laid the foundations for longer term success by nurturing relationships, identifying potential development projects, and where deemed viable, programming those projects for the years ahead. By the time that the COVID19 pandemic of 2020-21 arrived, we had had a very successful 12-18 months of preparation behind us, and we were about to commence on site with our first real significant tranche of new build numbers. We had 21 scheme starts planned for on-site commencement in 2020-21. These schemes equated to 293 units of accommodation, growth of over 66%, and a committed investment of over £43m.

However, as a result of COVID19, all of that hard work was at risk of not only delay, but significant derailment. The construction industry came to a standstill in the early part of the year. The development team was relocated to work from home and as a result had to establish new ways of working, and in addition, the fundamental support networks that underpin all of our development activity - legal, land registry, planning service and so on, were also greatly affected, meaning further risk to our fledgling programme.

Despite the uncertainty, our team remained focussed on their goal and rose to the challenge. Despite their physical remoteness they consolidated their strengths as a team and set to work problem solving and managing risk. They communicated relentlessly with stakeholders, identified and overcame many barriers, and they continued to build and maintain new and existing relationships which are vital to the delivery of our overall programme. They remained optimistic despite the challenges faced, and they continually provided assurance to both the Board and Management Team that success would be achieved by year end despite the very real external threat faced.

As the year comes to a close, our development team are on the cusp of realising a level of growth this year far in excess of what was expected from them just nine short months ago. These outcomes are set out in the next section.

## Outcomes and achievements

A total of 138 new build starts have been realised by our development team at the time of producing this awards submission. This figure on its own already represents a record level of growth achieved by the organisation in any one year over its thirty-year history. However, a further 143 new homes are on target to start between January and March 2021. Combined, these starts will equate to organisational growth of over 66% over one year where expectations were at their lowest and conditions at their most challenging. More importantly they equate to a total of 281 new homes that will be delivered to families right across Northern Ireland, improving lives and life chances for more than 1,000 people.

The £43m invested as a result of their endeavours, will have a multiplier effect of £2.84 on the economy for every £1 invested, giving a total economic boost of over £120m.

In one of the most difficult years that we have known as an organisation, as a sector, and as a society, our development team against all expectation, have not only safeguarded our long-term ambitions but they have delivered opportunity and hope for many families across Northern Ireland. We couldn't be any prouder.

# Financial inclusion team

## Choice Housing

### Statement of support



Choice is committed to sustaining tenancies by supporting customers with their money management skills. Our Financial Inclusion Team provide an invaluable service, ensuring tenants receive support and financial advice; offering a life line for many this year due to the impact of COVID-19 on their personal finances. In response to the difficulties presented by coronavirus this year, the Team adapted quickly and creatively to the new context and continued to put tenants' needs first. When the restrictions were first introduced, our housing staff made care calls to all tenants to identify any change in need which the Financial Inclusion Team could respond to, or help with.

During Q1 (1st April -30th June 2020), the Team saw an enormous increase in demand for their service, receiving 421 referrals compared to 93 for the same period of the previous year. The Team also reported that Q1 saw a 33% increase in tenants claiming Universal Credit compared with the previous quarter.

Over the last year the Team has helped tenants access £1.76 million in financial support, and worked with 745 tenants referred to their service to assist with:

- benefit maximisation and help applying for financial uplifts

- Housing Benefit entitlement checks and assistance to increase this where possible
- securing grants to help set up home
- support for tenants in arrears by establishing sustainable repayment plans based on their personal budget
- applications to benevolent funds
- support with Universal Credit applications and maintenance of claims.

During this time, the Team also continued to support those in need through their partnership work with local community organisations such as the Trussel Trust food banks and Debt Action NI. They are ambitious, with plans to branch out into full in-house debt advice in the future, and they intend to expand on partnerships with local Credit Unions and promote the Choice Savings Scheme so tenants can have peace of mind knowing they have savings set aside.

The Team regularly receive positive feedback and compliments from tenants and staff about the excellent service they provide and the difference it is making to tenants' lives.

A tenant recently contacted one team member to thank them for resolving the benefit issues that they had struggled with for some time saying: "Thank you so much for all your help, you have been the only person to clarify things for us, I cannot tell you how much I appreciate your effort for my family".

A member of Choice's housing team recently received positive feedback regarding the assistance provided to tenants at a newly completed scheme in Coleraine. The tenants confirmed that the help provided by the Financial Inclusion Team was instrumental in helping them to settle seamlessly into their new homes.

"The Financial Inclusion Team have been a great asset to Choice. They have assisted many tenants

and helped to ensure they are receiving all benefit entitlement and availing of all the help and support services available to them. They have made referrals to food banks for those in need and approach these issues with great empathy and tact. They have provided Housing Officers with much needed support in handling issues of debt management, budgeting and teaching them how to identify issues that Financial Inclusion Team have the experience and knowledge

to assist with. Their unique skills have helped many of our tenants deal with rent arrear issues rather than ignoring them and have received so much more support for other aspects of their lives in the process. This Team is a breath of fresh air in times where people are experiencing the greatest challenges of their lives”, LEEANNE MAGEE, Area Manager.

## Outcomes and achievements

Personal finances can be a challenge to confront, but the Team consistently display sensitivity and discretion, using their combined experience to respond to each tenants’ unique concerns. This year the Team has helped tenants access £1.76 million in financial support and worked with 745 tenants referred to their service to support them during these uncertain times.

Each individual member of the team is an excellent ambassador for the organisation and wider housing sector; the support they deliver has built a sense of trust and positive reputation amongst Choice’s tenants and colleagues alike.

A Choice tenant commented: “I cannot even start to put into words the help the team have given me. For two years I was not in a good place, and as a result I let my finances slip badly, I was facing eviction. The team helped me access £3,400 of benevolent fund money to stop my eviction and have worked with me since, helping me maintain my arrangement to pay and I feel like a new person. I really feel they went over and above and without them I believe I may have lost my home. My tenancy is stable and I’m able to manage my finances”.

# Newington Housing Association team of the year

## Newington Housing Association



### Statement of support

As the Coronavirus pandemic spread across Europe in early 2020 and cases were reported in NI, Newington Housing Association (NHA) commenced preparations to adapt working processes to ensure in the event of a lockdown service impact to tenants would be kept to a minimum. NHA was committed to ensuring the best possible housing services would continue to be delivered in line with public health advice. As a community housing association NHA was also committed to working with community and voluntary partners to support the local community.

NI went into lockdown on 23rd March 2020, by this point NHA had already completed preparatory work and contingency planning was in place. This early preparation ensured a seamless transition for staff and

tenants when lockdown came into effect and staff were immediately well placed to reach out to tenants during the pandemic.

Communication was essential and updates were and are now provided to tenants through the association’s social media, Facebook, website and twitter. A range of useful information is posted on NHA services, practical assistance through the food bank, welfare advice support, mental health advice among other things. Senior staff were in regular contact with community partners.

Early on it was evident of the crisis situation local people were facing with job losses and furlough, NHA immediately stepped up to help their local community. Responding to a surge in demand, funding was made available from NHA’s Community Investment Fund to the foodbank and NHA staff also volunteered at the foodbank packing and delivering food parcels helping to cope with the huge demand. Funding was provided to St Vincent de Paul to purchase gas and electricity for those in severe financial hardship.

Staff not working at the foodbank were involved in daily and or weekly calls to more vulnerable tenants and those of pensionable age to ensure they were getting essential supplies. 192 NHA tenants fall into this category and NHA staff were assigned 10-15 tenants to call and maintain regular contact with. A weekly check was carried out with local traders and pharmacists who could deliver to residents in the area

and details of this were passed on as part of the phone call to those who needed this service.

Contact was made with Family Support Hubs in the area who were continuing to support families remotely, details of the support was shared with the families who needed this support.

NHA Scheme Coordinator provided invaluable and ongoing support to sheltered tenants during the first lockdown and all subsequent restrictions. Weekly quizzes were circulated to all 47 households, shopping trips were carried for those unable to get out or had no family and daily reassuring phone calls from Kathleen to all tenants. Social distancing, she was always a welcome face and a listening ear for everyone at Camberwell.

During this period staff continually adapted to challenges and Senior Management and Board continually reviewed work practises to ensure as

restrictions eased the appropriate face-to-face services were introduced such as repairs, house moves and new tenancy signs, ensuring safety and social distancing in line with public health advice.

Staff in line with public health advice have continued to work from home, no NHA staff were furloughed during the period and community contacts have continued with the attendance at local meetings currently virtual.

The community support did not cease with the easing of restrictions NHA staff continued to support their local community and in the run up to Christmas were again asked to step up. A number of staff volunteered after work and at weekends to pack and deliver Christmas Hampers and toys to families and individual households in crisis in North Belfast.

## Outcomes and achievements

As a community housing association NHA board and staff have always been invested in the community. The personal response by staff stepping up in the early days of the lockdown volunteering to work on the frontline at the foodbank and the ongoing commitment through to Christmas. Matched with the financial assistance of NHA. Always working as a team and strengthening those bonds in doing so with each other and with the community they work for.

192 vulnerable tenants received daily or weekly phone calls for 10 weeks, assisted in tackling social isolation and health and wellbeing.

NHA provided £21,250 funding to North Belfast Advice Partnership and to St Vincent de Paul from its Community Investment Fund for crisis interventions.

274 referrals for benefit advice and support to a Welfare Advice Advisor match-funded by NHA, of which 131 were for NHA tenants. The Advisor generated £675,390 additional income for applicants.

Core work of helping and supporting tenants with housing matters, allocations, repairs and rent account assistance has continued over this period with tenants always have direct access to staff.

Outdoor summer activities took place at the sheltered scheme combatting loneliness and isolation.

Over 90 hours of volunteering in the run up to Christmas 2020 by NHA staff.

From NHA Board, who have shown strong and effective leadership throughout the crisis to every single one of the team, who all played pivotal roles in ensuring NHA continued to deliver when it mattered the most.

Supporting Evidence -

NHA Winter Newsletter 2020

Link: <http://newingtonha.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/winter-newsletter-2020-web-2.pdf>

See Page 1 of NHA Summer Newsletter 2020

<http://newingtonha.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/final-newington-ss-newsletter-web.pdf>

# WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP



Sponsored by:

**North & East**  
Housing Association  
Building & Supporting Communities

This award celebrates partnership and collaboration across the housing spectrum.

## VHE and Choice investment project

**Lead organisation: Choice Housing**

**Partner organisation: Victoria Housing Estates (VHE)**



### Statement of support

In January 2020, Choice Housing, one of Northern Ireland's leading social housing providers, along with Victoria Housing Estates Limited (VHE) announced it would be consulting with the tenants of all of VHE's 429 properties about a potential transfer to Choice.

The £20m stock transfer deal would result in tenants moving from VHE to Choice with the association taking ownership of the properties. This investment will ensure each home receives significant renovations and refurbishments to meet the Decent Homes Standard. Tenants who did not wish to move were offered the opportunity to purchase their own home, something which a number of tenants requested.

After taking over responsibility for VHE in October 2016, the all-new management team commissioned a stock survey to assess the status of their 429 properties. They discovered that, following years of underinvestment, the properties fell well below the Decent Homes Standard and required millions of pounds of investment to restore each home.

VHE was not in a position to be able to finance this work itself and was unable to raise the necessary funds, given the large sums required. VHE's tenants had rightly been calling for the improvements to their homes which Choice was able to offer them through the investment programme. By working together with VHE, Choice are able to offer its tenants not only the improvements their homes

need, but also a long-term and secure social tenancy agreement that will give them the same access to the quality services and support enjoyed by over 10,000 Choice tenants across Northern Ireland.

The proposals were developed in consultation with the Department for Communities and the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland. Tenant consultation commenced on the 3rd of February 2020 and was delivered in partnership with Empowering Communities (EC) and Housing Rights (HR) who

hosted pop up sessions and provided expert independent advice to tenants. Although face to face consultation was suspended as of the 16th March, ongoing engagement between VHE, Choice and tenants continued via telephone and other online platforms. There was a strong response to this consultation, with a 90.5% response rate from tenants.

Dawn Purvis, Chief Executive of VHE: "I was pleased to see the level of engagement from tenants throughout the consultation process, especially given ongoing challenges to the process as a result of COVID-19. VHE, Choice and tenants all adapted to the situation and found alternative ways of engaging to ensure information was received and where independent advice and guidance was required we sign posted tenants to the appropriate organisations.

"It was also pleasing to see some tenants take up the option of applying to buy their own home, an important element of the consultation process and

the options available to tenants, some of whom had previously expressed an interest in buying their home”.

The stock transfer deal was finalised in November 2020 when almost 300 previously managed VHE properties moved to Choice and more than 130 tenants opting to purchase their own home. As part of the transfer agreement, the properties now in Choice ownership will undergo a programme of renovation and refurbishment which will ensure they not only meet the Decent Homes Standard but they align with the quality services currently provided by Choice.

Michael McDonnell, Choice Group CEO: “This stock transfer further demonstrates our commitment to investing in sustainable social housing which will stand the test of time. Throughout this process we were acutely aware that this was more than an investment project between two organisations, this was about the future of tenants and their homes - their engagement and contribution was vital

to making this a successful outcome for all”.

Making it feel like ‘business as usual’ is undeniably something to celebrate.

## Outcomes and achievements

In November 2020, those tenants opting for the transfer moved to their new tenancy agreement with Choice and will see significant improvement to their homes. They will also have access to a range of support services not previously available to them including a Tenant’s Forum, the option to transfer to another property or supported accommodation and enhanced rights to repairs.

VHE were committed to ensuring the best outcome for their tenants this partnership ensures that Tenants keep their homes and the much needed investment in these properties is guaranteed.

Housing Rights Independent Adviser: “From the planning phase of the consultation through to

the completion of the transfer, VHE has shown a commitment to working in partnership with tenants, Choice and other supporting agencies such as Housing Rights and Empowering Communities. Their commitment to supporting tenants to make this critically important decision was shown in their decision to ensure that tenants had access to independent, specialist housing advice and knowledge free of charge.

Driven to find an innovative solution to the housing needs of their tenants, VHE worked tirelessly to ensure their partnership with Choice was a success and improved the living conditions and well-being of their tenants”.

# Working together to combat COVID-19 and Homelessness in Northern Ireland

**Lead organisation: Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland**

**Partner organisation: Northern Ireland Housing Executive**



## Statement of support

No one anticipated there would be a world-wide pandemic in 2020. A new approach was needed to tackle this public health emergency in a homelessness context to keep services running, safeguard service users and staff, ensure both were kept safe and supported and ultimately to prevent loss of life.

At the outset, a number of third sector homelessness organisations discussed the need for a sector wide multi-agency approach. This led to the setting up of a multi-agency group in conjunction with the Housing Executive (NIHE) to manage the response at a strategic level and an operational group of providers working to manage the situation across services and deal with practical issues on the ground.

Chaired by Jim Dennison, Simon Community NI CEO, the multi-agency group has representation from senior decision makers in public services and at government departmental level:

- Department for Communities (DFC)
- Housing Executive
- Health and Social Care Board (HSCB)
- Public Health Agency (PHA)
- Police Service NI
- Probation Board NI.

It also has homelessness sector representation through Nicola McCrudden, Council for the Homeless (CHNI) CEO.

The group has been meeting regularly (remotely) throughout the crisis, stepping up to weekly meetings during the second wave to assist with surge plan monitoring.

One of the main benefits of the group has been the

positive interactions between homelessness, health, and justice. Of particular benefit has been the support from PHA and the Homeless Nursing Teams as well as learning from the experiences of others working in associated areas e.g. children's/adult's/older people's social care. Another benefit is the way the group operates. It is very much sector led, and as such members of the group actively listen to concerns and problems facing frontline organisations and work with statutory agencies to address and pre-empt emerging issues. This has led to the development of public health advice, updating government guidance (with sector input), the provision of financial support, and the removal of obstacles allowing for flexibility.

This new way of working has led to innovative practices including a redesign of services, including shifting focus from in-reach to outreach.

"I endorse the exceptional work which has been accomplished by this group since March 2020. Service users I believe have throughout this exceptionally challenging time had the benefit of being cared for in a compassionate environment which recognises their holistic needs. We have gained so much learning on how we would want to work together in the future and have built strong relationships which have heightened our collaborative working and will hopefully produce better outcomes for the future." Judith Brunt HSCB

"From the start of the pandemic it was clear that a major response to the COVID-19 epidemic was required from all partners to support the homeless sector. The response brought together Housing, NIHE, Health, Providers and other agencies and ensured the best support for Homeless Schemes and their very vulnerable residents. I am very proud of what the group achieved and want to thank everyone involved from the bottom of my heart. Numerous MLAs and public figures highly praised the Homelessness Sector's COVID-19 response." David Polley DFC

An Operational Working Group was also established comprising senior management from service providers including hostels, outreach, and advice. Chaired by CHNI and working closely with NIHE the main purpose of the group is to:

- Document how operations have adapted to meet new challenges
- Evidence what is working and what improvements can be made
- Anticipate future challenges and how the sector might prepare in the longer term.

This new way of working has enabled providers to share experiences, support one another and to work collaboratively to develop new approaches/solutions.

## Outcomes and achievements

- NIHE funding to appoint a COVID-19 Homeless Sector Liaison post to coordinate communications & for the delivery of free well-being and self-care training and support for frontline workers / volunteers.
- Development of new interventions to tackle workforce challenges including mutual aid principles for staffing support in a crisis situation & funding for relief workers.
- A new and pragmatic approach to the provision and distribution of controlled medication for treating those with chronic addictions.
- Hostel-based nursing outreach services.
- Central procurement and distribution of PPE (via NIHE).
- Dissemination of timely information to the homelessness services network on latest developments and good practice guidance.
- Publication of reports: "Homeless Sector Experiences and Responses" & the NIHE's COVID-19 reset plan "The Way Home".
- Workshop event on emergency preparedness for the homelessness sector (with Belfast City Council).
- Outcomes
- Better housing and health operational interventions and new delivery methods.
- Enhanced working relationships and more effective communications.
- More collaborative and co-ordinated working within commissioned homelessness services, avoiding duplication and promoting closer connections and a culture of mutual support.
- Low numbers of positive cases amongst service users and no major incidents / outbreaks in hostels.
- "Everyone in" - either no or very low numbers rough sleeping

# Newington student bursary scheme

**Lead organisation: Newington Housing Association**

**Partner organisation: Newington Credit Union**



## Statement of support

Newington Housing Association (NHA) is a community housing association that is committed to developing opportunities for NHA tenants and the wider community in North Belfast. Working in partnership with Newington Credit Union (NCU) both organisations have been delivering an innovative Student Bursary project since 2012.

NHA provides social housing in North Belfast, an area which for many years has suffered from multiple levels of deprivation. Many of NHA's homes and families are located within the top 100 ranked most deprived Super Output Areas (out of 890) across Northern Ireland. NISRA Multiple Deprivation Measures 2017 indicates Waterworks 2 is ranked second in NI in overall deprivation and first in terms of Multiple Deprivation in Belfast. New Lodge 3 is ranked third in deprivation in Education, Skill and Training measure in Belfast.

Many children, young people and adults in the community continue to experience inequalities in education which can and has impacted on life opportunities. NHA working with NCU have taken a strategic approach to provide a route to increase life chances for people in the area. To this end the Student Bursaries Scheme was developed to provide financial support to individuals.

The Student Bursary Scheme initiative first developed jointly in 2012 and is awarded annually to coincide with the commencement of the academic year. NHA provides bursaries to individuals who meet the criteria and are residing within an NHA household. NCU offers

bursaries to NCU members and/or members of their household. Each year application packs are posted to all NHA households. Bursaries are awarded to students who have been accepted to undertake their studies in Northern Ireland, ROI or Great Britain. The Scheme is also promoted through NHA Tenant Newsletter and NHA website and NCU outlets.

Successful candidates are then awarded a grant of £400 to help support them with their course fees, travel costs, IT equipment or other essential items. The bursary is presented to individuals each year at a joint celebration event held by NHA and NCU, which is also attended by the local press. The event celebrates the achievements of individuals and recognises their success.

Once a student is awarded a bursary from NHA or NCU, it is renewed each year and financial support is provided whilst the students remain in higher or further education, usually for up to a maximum of three years (for degree studies) but can be extended to four years dependant on the course. This means NHA funds on average up to nine students in any one academic year and up to 30 students by NCU.

The successful candidates are also encouraged by both organisations to open a credit union account if they currently do not have one. Many credit unions follow a member-centric model, which generally makes them more people-friendly and accessible than banks. Access to credit union membership will ensure that the successful candidates can avail of the many benefits on offer, encourage a culture of saving and reduce the likelihood of them getting into a cycle of high interest loans from less reputable lenders.

These student bursaries help to support the successful candidates to achieve their own personal aims, aspirations, educational goals, and future ambitions.

The partnership is crucial to delivering the project and emphasises how deeply committed both organisations are in supporting and developing individuals to pursue their goals through education. This unique partnership supports individuals in a high area of deprivation with the financial assistance to enter and continue into higher education. It also creates awareness of the Credit Union and the important role it can play in helping support life-long saving and responsible lending for communities and individuals.

## Outcomes and achievements

The success and the achievements of the project has enabled 124 students to pursue their goals. Since 2012, the total amount in bursaries paid to students has exceeded £122,000, NHA awarded grants to 24 different students, and NCU to over 100 different students. Individuals have been supported in their achievements to attain degrees in business, teaching, film production, and ICT to name but a few.

Both organisations have seen the positive out workings of this project, the ripple effect of this has been other family members seeking bursaries to assist them. As well as positively impacting individuals and families this promotes young people and mature students in the North Belfast area for others to aspire to, to achieve for themselves.

NHA is aware from many of the successful students of their personal pride in receiving a bursary and the importance of the funding to them. Feedback from students-

"The bursary allowed me to buy the necessary textbooks for my course in primary teaching.... I was able to also buy other necessary equipment to complete my course, such as a headset at the outbreak of COVID-19 as my teaching was moved online."

Another student

"I am from a low-income background. Throughout 2020, I spent most of the year in my home, learning online, the student bursary helped with utility bills and online source material and software applications."

Supporting Evidence -

See approximately four minutes into video at link below (Student Bursaries at 3.50)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTkuwOxdhJM&t=215s>

## Cliff Edge coalition NI

**Lead organisation: NIFHA**

**Partner organisation: Over 100 Coalition members, 11 Core Organisations in Working Group**



### Statement of support

In 2015 the Northern Ireland Executive committed to a £585 million mitigations package to protect vulnerable people in NI from some of the harshest aspects of UK welfare reform such as "bedroom tax" and benefit cap. These vital protections were due to end in March 2020. In early 2019, facing the looming March 2020 funding cliff edge with no functioning NI Assembly to extend these crucial mitigations, the Cliff Edge Coalition NI was formed to campaign to ensure:

1. The current welfare mitigations were extended beyond the initial 'cliff edge' of March 2020 when they were due to end.

2. The mitigations are strengthened, accounting for new challenges such as Universal Credit, including the two-child limit, and cuts to housing benefits for private renters.

The campaigning heightened awareness among the public, elected representatives and other stakeholders about the looming crisis and soon reflected the urgency of extending and strengthening the mitigations.

Critically, the breadth of organisations involved in the campaign underlined the interconnectedness of issues relating to social security. The success of the Coalition has created a new space for organisations to work across sectors to address these challenges in partnership. From small beginnings and with little resource, the Coalition recruited over 100 member organisations across a diverse range of sectors from disability to housing (including nine housing associations, NI Federation of Housing Associations and Housing Rights) to women to trade unions. A working group was established, and funds raised for a media campaign.

Regular contributions to NI media outlets and 'Twitter Storms' generated awareness with the public, media and decision makers. By providing written and oral evidence during the Westminster Inquiry into Welfare Policy in NI, the Coalition gained support from MPs, as highlighted in their Inquiry report.

By developing policy briefings, collating constituency-specific statistics and meeting elected representatives, the Coalition built support from MLAs and Councillors across the political parties. During the power-

sharing negotiations, the Coalition gained further backing from MLAs by providing negotiating teams with costings to inform budget requests from the NI Secretary of State.

Upon appointment, the Communities Minister sought to immediately meet the Coalition and shortly after engaging, committed to extending and reviewing the mitigations. The Coalition was called to give evidence to the Committee for Communities and support for the Coalition's position grew further among Committee members.

Following the very productive meetings with the Minister and Committee, supportive videos were posted by both, welcoming the engagements, and outlining that welfare mitigations were a priority. The Coalition also worked with the Department for Communities press office to announce the extension and this gained broadcast and coverage in papers and housing publications.

Throughout the pandemic the Coalition continues to campaign virtually; meeting again with the Minister and giving further evidence to the Communities

Committee on loopholes in the legislation. The Coalition's goals became more urgent due to the pandemic, as the issues that led to the Coalition's formation became more pertinent as numbers relying on welfare rapidly grew. The Coalition is now more relevant and its role, bringing together partners in housing, advice providers, homelessness, local communities, and many other sector bodies, more critical than ever.

The Communities Minister, responding to an independent evaluation of the Coalition, stated that she would "...commend the Coalition membership for their efforts ...it is essential for grassroots organisations to contribute to shaping the policies that will affect so many people". She continued "The scale of interest ...highlighted the usefulness for the department of a single representative "voice" ...all this combined to ensure that policy officials were very aware of the Coalition and its aims".

## Outcomes and achievements

The public and political engagement campaign influenced several major developments:

- Inclusion in the New Decade New Approach deal, which restored the NI Assembly, of a commitment to reviewing and extending welfare mitigations beyond March 2020 which were sustained beyond the initial 'cliff edge'.
- The Communities Minister announced that legislation would be brought forward to extend bedroom tax mitigations indefinitely, protecting up to 38,000 households from an average loss of £50 per month and confirmed her intention to propose amendments to the legislation to close loopholes in the current arrangements which have left thousands unprotected from the bedroom tax and benefit cap.
- Department officials confirmed that regulations will be amended to extend other existing mitigations beyond March 2020. The extension of the benefit cap mitigations will, for example, protect up to 1,500 families from an average loss of £200 per month.
- The Minister also confirmed that a review will be carried out to consider areas where the mitigations package could be strengthened to address new challenges. The Minister publicly commended and committed to working in co-design with the Coalition, as well as 'experts by experience'; those people directly affected by welfare reform, who Coalition member organisations work to support.

# Festival in a box

**Lead organisation: Radius Housing**

**Partner organisation: Clanmil & Apex Housing Associations**



## Statement of support

This project was delivered on International Day of Peace - 21 September 2020. Radius was the lead on this project which was delivered in conjunction with APEX and Clanmil Housing Associations.

The original planned Cultural Diversity Festival to celebrate diverse cultural traditions of communities living in south and east Belfast could not take place with Covid restrictions in place. Rather than let the opportunity pass, it was decided to bring the cultural festival to the community in a box full of innovative ideas, recipes and activities from cultures across the world.

The Festival in a Box was delivered to 1000 homes, 40 schools and 40 community groups across Belfast and Newtownabbey Council areas.

The Boxes include games, recipe ideas, music and information about accessing customised on-line training sessions, with the aim of building understanding and respect for the many cultures in our diverse society. While the box was full of recipes and cultural activities from around the world, it also highlighted the local history and culture of the communities across Belfast and Newtownabbey. The Schools and Community boxes had additional resources for ongoing use.

The box included:

- One World Box with Recipes, craft activities and materials from around the world;
- Fighting Fit - 6 weeks of Online 'Zoom' Fitness Sessions;
- Activity Packs on Northern Irish History;
- Irish History and The Tin Whistle - including a tin whistle;
- Pizza Pack - make your own pizza at home;
- Radius Exercise Cards and Workout Logs; and
- Additional booklets and information sheets on culture, health and well-being.

The key to the successful delivery of this project was the partnership work with local community and voluntary sector organisations. Partner Organisations who contributing to the design, development and content of the boxes;

1. Alternatives Restorative Justice - Northern Irish History
2. An Droichead - Irish Language
3. BDACT (Alcohol Awareness) - Mocktail, Teas and Coffees from around the world and alcohol interventions material
4. Belfast Community Sports Development Network - development of 6 weekly on-line coaching sessions
5. Radius - T:buc Exercise Card Packs x 6
6. ArtsEkta - One World Boxes for households, schools and community organisations
7. Nico's Pizza - Pizza Packs
8. Support Services info folder - a range of support services in each area

Partner Organisations who volunteered to make up and pack boxes

1. Willowfield Church
2. Anndadale and Haywood Residents Association
3. Ballymac Friendship Centre and Christian Fellowship Church
4. Newtownabbey Arts and Cultural Network

"The aim of the cultural festival was to celebrate diversity and difference within our communities. Last year we were able to deliver the festival in the Ormeau Park with over 2000 in attendance, this year the Festival in a Box brought the smells, tastes and fun of so many cultures direct to homes and schools."

"the community box and individual boxes were fantastic."

"Amazing.....the whole family doing crafts together, learning and teaching from the resources."

Funding

This programme was funded through the Department for Communities 'Housing for All' Shared Housing Programme which has its origins in the NI Executive Together Building United Communities Strategy.

Radius Rangers App and Where in the World Am I Experience -free download

All boxes included a promotional flyer containing a link for the Radius Rangers App and Where in the World Am I Experience to download for free. It also included a link to download free walking trails via Brilliant Trails for historical and areas of interest walks across NI.

Cultural Performances x 18

6 performances, facilitated through ArtsEkta were delivered across 3 schools and 3 community organisations as part of the launch on 21 September.

A further 12 performances were made available to Community Organisations and schools.

## Outcomes and achievements

### Key project partners

3 Housing Associations working in partnership to address the complex good relations of a divided society via promoting cultural diversity - Radius Housing (lead partner), Clanmil & Apex Housing Association.

Best practice through joint up working and collaboration.

Sharing of staff and financial resources.

### Community partners

The project could not have delivered without the support and specialist knowledge from 6 community partners who contributed information and resources;

Alternatives Restorative Justice

An Droichead

BDACT

Belfast Community Sports Development Network

ArtsEkta

Nico's Pizza

Volunteers made up and delivered boxes from;

Willowfield Church

Annadale and Haywood Residents Association

Ballymac Friendship Centre and Christian Fellowship Church

Newtownabbey Arts and Cultural Network

### Festival Boxes

Delivery of Festival in a box to 1000 households.

Delivery of Festival in a box to 40 Schools and 40 community groups.

A total outreach of 1080 households.

A further extended outreach of 6000 participants over the year through schools and community groups on going use of resources to delivery to pupils and groups.

X18 cultural performances.

Increased awareness and understanding of cultural diversity through:

Providing opportunities to learn about other cultures through a variety of creative mediums.

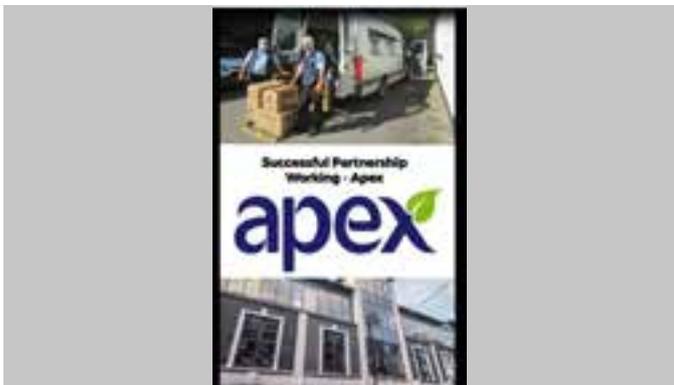
Promoting participation, inclusion and equality.

Promoting language, history and heritage.

# Joint support project for derry and strabane

**Lead organisation: Apex**

**Partner organisation: DC&SDC, GSAP, Triax, Waterside NP, Outer North CP, SCP, Easilink, SCPDV, Foyle Foodbank, Fareshare,**



## Statement of support

When lockdown happened on 23rd March, many community groups and charities that were supported by the Fareshare food charity closed. At the same time, many households already on a very low income were disproportionately affected by the virus (JRF April 2020). Many within Apex communities found themselves struggling to pay larger bills due to families being at home for longer periods of time, income being reduced due to furlough or because of redundancy

Fareshare and Apex adapted the existing service provided to charities. We contacted key partners within the DC&SDC area to set up a support scheme for delivering high quality food and support services to people in communities who were vulnerable/ suffering from financial distress. The project was so successful that it is now established within communities and is currently delivering Phase Three.

One community partner in each of the four districts in DC&SDC agreed to become the lead partner for their area and worked closely with many other statutory and voluntary groups to identify people who were vulnerable. Apex coordinated the project and provided a van/driver to collect/deliver Fareshare food for the areas twice weekly. Fareshare changed their working practices to ensure food was appropriate for individual households and community partners worked together to redeploy staff to distribute the food and provide support. This was a massive task for all groups involved, made more difficult by the risks

associated with Coronavirus.

This project ended in August ,DfC was keen to develop a model for supporting people between September and March 2021. The Apex model was hailed as a huge success and Fareshare used the model to work on a new project funded by DfC.

From September, and with the help and support of DfC and DC&SDC, the partnership was widened and was in a position to immediately deliver DfC's newly funded food and support scheme without delay. It was identified that vulnerable people in rural areas and areas within Strabane and District would benefit from the project and so relevant partners were asked to join the partnership.

Funding was provided by DfC to the local council to support people who were struggling financially. The council worked with all partners involved in the Phase One project ie Apex, Fareshare and four community partners and extended the structures to include three foodbanks so that there was no duplication of service, Easilink rural community network who were able to identify rural poverty and deliver food and a friendly chat, Strabane Community Project and Derg Valley Project who could reach people that were not reached previously, four strategic partnerships within Derry-Londonderry who have access to a network of services, support and volunteers. All partners met weekly on Zoom and sometimes up to three times a week to ensure that the project was a success.

It was important for the project to:

- use existing and local services to provide continuity of service for vulnerable people
- form a partnership with existing groups rather than setting up a new project. Ensuring there was no duplication and helped to support and sustain these groups
- ensure 'hard to reach' people were included, particularly those working and who had lost their jobs and had never asked for/needed help before and people living in very isolated areas.

Since all partners worked so well together the area is well placed to deliver on the new DfC approach to supporting people with the Brexit transition. A third project will be delivered between January and July in tandem with the current project to ease the implications of food poverty and food shortages as a result of the pandemic and Brexit.

## Outcomes and achievements

- During April to August 2020
  - 36,000 kgs of food was delivered to support families in need. This provided 9,500 food packs and 7,200 hot meals, delivered discreetly to the homes of people in financial distress.
  - A total of 1,577 days were dedicated to the project by 42 staff and volunteers who redirected their resources to the project.
- Between August and December 2020
  - 1,976 food parcels and support services were provided to 2,899 adults and 3,219 children in both rural and urban locations.
  - A total of 53 volunteers worked to ensure the project was a success

All beneficiaries received support with challenges they were dealing with in their lives.

The partnership is an excellent example of statutory and voluntary groups working together for one purpose ie to benefit those in need within our community, using existing services to deliver the support.'

Sharon McCullagh

DfC North West Development Office

'I had been self employed for over 30 years and found in August that I could no longer cope without help. The project has helped me from loosing my home.'

# Turnaround in sheltered schemes' gardens helping transform lives

**Lead organisation: Alpha Housing**

**Partner organisation: Outwork**



## Statement of support

Alpha Housing has joined forces with Outwork, a new grounds maintenance firm run by social enterprise The Turnaround Project. During 2020, Alpha's sheltered housing scheme gardens began to be transformed, while helping people serving sentences in the criminal justice system to make a fresh start.

Alpha Housing is a housing association providing mainly sheltered housing to older people in 30 schemes across NI. Although tenants rate Alpha's services highly, neither tenants nor the association had been happy with the sheltered schemes' gardens, which had not been maintained adequately by the previous mainstream contractor.

Therefore, when approached in mid-2019, Alpha was keen to explore options with start-up Outwork. Responding to tenants' wishes, Alpha saw an opportunity to improve gardens across its estate;

receive better customer service from a smaller contractor; and support Outwork's exciting social mission in rehabilitating young adult offenders.

Alpha appointed Outwork for a year-long trial partnership from January 2020 with the shared goal of providing a high quality and responsive grounds maintenance service. This may be the first time a NI housing association has used provisions in procurement law enabling direct awards to social enterprises through reserve contracts.

When Outwork started, Alpha noticed an almost immediate improvement in its sites. In a year plagued by difficulties and uncertainty, a solid partnership has been forged. Routine work, from grass and hedge cutting to flower bed and hard surface maintenance, has been completed with greater care and attention to detail. Outwork teams promptly respond to requests from scheme co-ordinators and tenants, such as re-planting previously neglected shrub beds.

Outwork teams typically comprise an experienced supervisor managing two or three trainees, including young men on day release from prison. On site, Outwork teams enjoy engaging with Alpha scheme co-ordinators and tenants. The regular praise the teams receive for their good work valuably reinforces the positive changes trainees are making in their journeys out of the criminal justice system. Outwork also provides its trainees with training pre-release and transitional employment for six months post release, together with strengths-based coaching to support them into conventional employment.

Supporting nature is central to the partnership. In many schemes, 'no mow' and wildflower areas

have been established, with composting bins built for cuttings. At Lowry Court, a sheltered scheme in south Belfast, Outwork has engaged with tenants and a landscape architect to develop a landscaping masterplan. In December 2020, this vision began to be realised with the planting of hundreds of native trees and shrubs, including a small wood of silver birch trees. As well as enhancing the quality of life for residents, the new trees and hedges will provide valuable new wildlife habitats on this site adjoining the Lagan Valley Regional Park.

In a grounds maintenance market primarily driven by price, Alpha's contracting with a social provider has enabled it to receive a better, more responsive

service. Monthly review meetings consider progress and refine priorities. Outwork supervisors post photos of each completed job on 'Workplace', Alpha's internal social media site, providing real-time interaction between Outwork and Alpha staff, and allowing any issues to be quickly resolved.

Alpha is delighted with the clear improvements in its first year working with Outwork, especially given the challenges presented by Covid, and has extended the partnership until at least March 2022. As well as further improving its gardens for tenants and nature, Alpha is excited about the potential for other social landlords to partner with Outwork, and in doing so, help give many people a much needed second chance.

## Outcomes and achievements

Key outcomes of the partnership so far include:

### Turning lives around

Outwork employed eight people during the course of 2020, including six who had served custodial sentences. Many of these individuals are making positive and sustained changes in their lives. For example, two of the recruits have now been appointed to newly created Supervisor Assistant roles, providing continued employment at a more senior level as the social enterprise continues to grow.

### Improving gardens and customer service for sheltered tenants

Comments on Outwork's performance on Alpha's Workplace social media channel:

'Thank you to Davey and the team for a fantastic job, scheme looking very well!' - Scheme Co-ordinator,

Sandy Row, Belfast

'Noticed gardeners were out yesterday power hosing and wants to pass on how pleasant the female staff member with them was.' - anonymous compliment from tenant

'These [Outwork] guys are fantastic - so friendly, just work, work, work!' - Margot, Lowry tenant

### New opportunities to improve services and deliver social change

Social landlords can deliver better services to tenants and increase their social impact by partnering with social enterprises like Outwork. This partnership shows how different approaches to procurement can be used to support service improvement and exciting social change.

# Onside - the Outreach & Navigation for Social Inclusion and Digital Engagement Project

**Lead organisation: Disability Action NI**

**Partner organisation: Housing Executive, Supporting Communities, Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI).**



## Statement of support

The Onside is a £5.6m cross border project funded by the Special European Union Programme Board Interreg V covering all of Northern Ireland and the 5 bordering counties in the Republic of Ireland.

This project is designed to be life changing and will provide 2410 disabled people with the digital technology and skills to connect better to services and communities improving their wellbeing, becoming more independent in managing their everyday needs. Ultimately it will empower disabled people to have an equal voice in shaping the provision of services including Housing and Health and be involved in their communities.

The lead organisation is Disability Action NI in partnership with NI Housing Executive, Supporting Communities and Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI). Each organisation brings their respective skills and expertise to the project

The project provides digital equipment, IT training and one to one sessions on achieving personal goals to improve general wellbeing. The project tailors solutions for all types of disability including sensory, physical, mental and learning difficulties as well as those with hidden conditions.

Disability Action NI and Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI) are both strong advocates for the rights of disabled people in their respective jurisdictions and provide expertise and peer support working with the project participants to move them forward in their personal development.

The NI Housing Executive manages 84,000 tenanted properties 43% of which include households with one or more members with a long term illness or

a disability. There is a strong housing community network and connections with various statutory and voluntary organisations which will help to identify potential participants for the project especially in those "hard to reach " groups. The Housing Executive is also responsible for managing the £1.4m digital equipment procurement budget.

Supporting Communities has wide experience in delivering digital training to people with little or no digital knowledge. They have designed an 8 session programme which includes signposting to other providers to help participants to continue their digital development journey.

The Onside launch took place in 12th March 2020 with a delivery plan based on home visits and group learning in convenient local community bases. The Covid 19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown from 23/3/20 meant it was impossible to follow the original plan.

Mutual trust and respect between the partners are corner stones in the success of this project and due to excellent communication and flexible and innovative thinking between the partners a new delivery plan was designed ready for June 2020.

- All applications for the project and the selection were processed by phone.
- IT tablets delivered direct to participants already set up with pre - loaded apps and email address along with a written "how to" manual with clear instructions.
- Training sessions were designed for online delivery to groups of 8 - 10 people
- Telephone support available to talk all participants through any IT problems.
- Ongoing support provided via webinars, phone and zoom for up to 6 months as required.

Andrea Brown Interim CEO of Disability Action says "Disability Action is proud to be the Lead Partner in the ONSIDE project. This has been a true partnership from the outset from working an idea into a viable project and since then in collaborative working across the staff of all Partner organisations, notably during the challenges of the continuing Covid pandemic. ONSIDE has been instrumental in enabling disabled people to get and stay connected on-line with family, friends and services in their local communities and as a source of support and information toward improving their health and well-being. We look forward to continuing to work with all of our Partners toward these shared goals".

## Outcomes and achievements

At 31/12/20, a total of 509 people with disabilities have engaged in the project and been provided with digital equipment and training. This represents approx. 20% of the target of 2410 to be achieved by June 2022. The range of disabilities is varied and includes people with macular degeneration, head injuries, MS, autism and learning difficulties as well as mental health conditions.

Thirteen people from an MS support group completed training and member Mark Gamble says this enabled them to move to virtual meetings - ( photo )

"I'm part of an MS support group and we would have met up regularly for a chat so we decided to move our meetings on line so we could still be there and give each other a lift during these crazy times"

Regulars webin



# INSPIRATIONAL YOUNG HOUSING PROFESSIONAL

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housing**

This award celebrates individuals who can demonstrate that they have shown passion, commitment and flair in delivering services for tenants and residents.

## Mark Scott

### Housing Executive



### Statement of support

Mark joined the Housing Executive in October 2018 as a Graduate Trainee based in Housing Services. In his 1st 2 years in housing Mark has shown creative and innovative approaches to advancing the graduate training programme and improving services to customers in a way that is exceptional for his short time in the Housing Executive.

### Solution finder

Mark is best described as someone who is always looking for the solutions and not just the problems. Mark identifies where there is room for improvement from a desire to continuously advance the way the Housing Executive does things for the betterment of staff and customers and pro-actively goes about finding the right resources to bring those improvements to life. For example, Mark identified a management development programme that would benefit future Graduate Trainee cohorts, compiled the relevant information for the Workforce Development Manager, identifying how and why the programme would help future graduates develop the skills necessary for leadership and management.

Subsequently, this shaped the 2020 Graduate Trainee programme. Mark regularly identifies and shares information re. relevant CIH events and various learning opportunities, seeking permission and organising attendance for him and graduate trainees. His commitment to the continued professional development of both himself and his colleagues by identifying beneficial training events and creative learning opportunities is testament to his character as a team player who takes joys in helping others learn, develop and succeed.

Since starting his career in the Housing Executive Mark has excelled in both frontline operational roles as a Patch Manager in Lisburn Castlereagh office and in strategic roles in the Estate Management Policy team. Mark's commitment to vulnerable customers is seen both by the way he worked with customers in the front line and subsequent policy work continuously seeking to improve service delivery to ensure customers receive the best possible service from the Housing Executive.

In January 2020 Mark started a placement with Estate Management Policy team as part of his graduate trainee programme. During this time Mark has worked to analyse response maintenance data to identify areas for improvement and provide recommendations based on facts and data to help management make best use of the Housing Executive's resources. During this period his desire to improve the lives of our tenants is seen further in his work with the Community Cohesion team developing good relations surveys to give tenants a voice on issues that matter to them and identify where the Housing Executive can continuously improve.

Mark Scott was one of 3 Graduate Trainees asked by Justin Cartwright to present a webinar at CIH's online conference in July 2020. Mark's webinar, "Bonfires to beacons: community cohesion in Northern Ireland"

examined the role social housing landlords can play in supporting communities to explore the diverse range of opportunities available to them in reimaging celebrating their cultural heritage differently, and looked at how we can learn from the journey's others have already embraced and how can we support positive expressions of culture. International best practice examples, local office case studies and findings from consultation with staff and customers

were explored alongside a series of practical initiatives designed to support communities' initiate conversations around change. Mark's excellence in communication was demonstrated through the webinar alongside his desire to learn from best practice and encourage others to work together to find creative and new ways of celebrating culture and identity.

## Outcomes and achievements

- Mark's excellence in communication was recognised in CIH's invitation to present his group webinar in July 2020 on "Bonfires to beacons: community cohesion in Northern Ireland."
- Mark's desire to improve services has resulted in recommendations to senior management regarding response maintenance processes.
- Mark's enthusiasm for supporting others on their professional journey has led to the identification of learning events, conferences, courses and opportunities that have better shaped the Housing Services Graduate Training scheme.
- Since joining the Housing Executive Mark has successfully completed a PG Cert in Business Administration at UUJ and has recently completed the CIH Level 5 Diploma in Housing.

# Gerard Lewsley

## Housing Executive



### Statement of support

Gerard joined the Housing Executive as a Graduate Trainee, after completing his course he was placed in Lisburn Antrim Street as a Patch Manager. He joined Housing Services Central Unit in 2019 on placement having shown an interest in reviewing the Planned Scheme Delivery Process. This was timely as the organisation was seeking to deliver new contract arrangements for the delivery of Planned Maintenance Schemes. Gerard has been key in representing Landlord Housing Services during this process and has led on co-designing the CTO55 Planned Maintenance contract in conjunction with Asset colleagues. As part of the process Gerard carried out a 360 degree review and has established clear key roles and responsibilities for front line Housing staff. Significantly he has developed templates to improve service delivery for tenants and assist staff and completely revised the Customer Consultation Form. This is particularly important as it will be used

to assist tenants in managing choices for kitchens and bathrooms and for establishing whether there are any vulnerability issues which require identification. Gerard will help to embed this approach corporately by delivering the training he has designed to front line staff. It is important to note that recognition of customer needs and the importance of the role of Local Office staff were very much reflected in Gerard's contribution to the process. Gerard ensured that the community voice was heard by consulting through the Housing Community Network and Central Housing Forum. In addition to this Gerard worked diligently to ensure that the contract included a range of social clauses relevant to our communities. His involvement in this project has been extremely successful with the contract issued for tender in November 2020. Gerard has developed his skills and can competently design and communicate policy changes. Gerard has done some initial work on requirements for a new IT solution which will complement this new way of working, which will happen during the next phase. In the interim he has ensured that staff can easily access documentation and guidance through a gateway facility and has uploaded all relevant work items. I have been extremely impressed with the quality and quantity of work Gerard has achieved. This is an area that required focused attention as a high number of new front line staff have no knowledge or experience in this area. Gerard managed to deliver on this in time for contract go-live. His maturity level and attitude to work is exceptional, a very diligent young man who has demonstrated a strong ability to adapt to different areas of work. He is very popular among his peers and has a lot to offer the organisation in the future as he shows very strong leadership qualities.

## Testimonials

Katherine Trainor – Senior Officer Asset Management  
- “Over the past year or so I had been dealing with Gerard Lewsley on developing the new SDP and tying up the loose ends on other bits and I honestly couldn't praise Gerard highly enough, nothing was ever a bother and his attention to detail and knowledge of his area was a fantastic assistance in progressing the SDP. He really was a pleasure to work with”.

Linda Watson – Chair of the Central Housing Forum  
- “Having previously worked with Supporting Communities, Gerard has a great knowledge and understanding of the Housing Community Network (HCN) and an empathy with the many community groups which make up the HCN. He has served several of the Central Housing Forum Working Groups, including the Social Clauses and Social Enterprise WG, and has shown great professional in all that he does.”

## Outcomes and achievements

Gerard's involvement in this project has assisted in creating a scheme design process that will deliver the best possible service to Housing Executive customers in relation to Planned Maintenance Scheme work. He has ensured that the process clearly sets out the roles and responsibilities and the standards of service our customers can expect both from the Housing Executive and from the Contractor. It is inclusive of innovative social clauses which Gerard designed after extensive discussions with representatives from our customer base. He has also worked to ensure the entire process has been endorsed by our Central Housing Forum and it will include a very clear role

for our customer reps going forward. In order to ensure that the process runs smoothly, Gerard has produced a comprehensive training package which includes newly developed templates and a detailed Step by Step guidance manual. He has demonstrated highly tuned negotiating and influencing skills which has resulted in meeting everyone's expectations. A finalised tender document incorporating the process and Landlord Services requirements identified by Gerard was advertised in November. Any future contract arrangement will be required to adhere to the specification and scheme design process.

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# Catriona McCann

## Choice Housing



### Statement of support

Having worked as a Housing Officer since 2014, Catriona McCann is currently an Area Manager for Choice. An invaluable member of the Choice team, Catriona is responsible for managing a diverse housing area incorporating general family housing, sheltered and supported living tenants. A true people person, Catriona thrives in a fast paced environment at the front line of service provision; she is effective at what she does and fosters trusted relationships with colleagues and tenants alike.

Catriona is a graduate of Ulster University with a BSc Hons in Housing Management. She has completed an

ILM in Leadership and Management and is a Member of Chartered Institute of Housing. Catriona is a perfect match for the Inspirational Young Housing Professional award; there are many examples where she has went the extra mile, for example, when assisting with the induction of new staff. Catriona is always the first to ensure that a new colleague is settling in and her “people centred” approach means that she is always on hand to point someone in the right direction or answer questions as they find their feet in an extremely busy team.

Her helpfulness to colleagues was particularly noticeable when the Tenant & Client Services (T&CS) directorate underwent a restructure bringing about major change to the organisation. This upheaval did not deter Catriona and her positive attitude to change helped those working with her through the transition. Catriona delivered training to the T&CS department and, of particular note, was the attention she paid to colleagues formerly from a Supported Housing team, who have now moved to a generic housing officer role. The follow up, one to one support and general encouragement she gave to these specific staff members has been vital to the success of the department as it moves forward.

“Catriona is a colleague you can always rely on, especially when having difficulty with a certain task or are new to a role. She takes the time to help

anyone, no matter how busy she is. She supports her colleagues and is an inspiration to work with”, Caoimhe McCollam, Allocations Officer.

“Catriona is helpful, approachable and a great team player. She is proactive, understanding and encouraging and as such, has been a great help to me in my own role as scheme co-ordinator”, Leanne Green, Scheme Co-ordinator.

Catriona has a straight forward style and is always transparent and proactive in her communication whether it is with fellow colleagues, management, tenants or partners. She is passionate, creative and fully committed in her approach to constantly deliver positive outcomes when faced with particularly serious problems. By working in partnership with a number of organisations, Catriona resolved a challenging issue regarding a tenant experiencing intimidation. This tenant was under threat locally due to her partner’s

anti-social behaviour. Catriona was able to counter and manage the demands of the local community whilst maintaining sympathetic support to the tenant at the centre of the issue. Liaising with multiple agencies including the PSNI, Housing Executive and community associations can be a challenge but Catriona takes it in her stride. She displayed incredible determination to reach an appropriate solution for the tenant and her family. Catriona builds a strong rapport with, and gains the trust of, all her tenants through her approachable, helpful manner. Catriona’s prompt response and follow up to any issue further strengthens the trust the tenants have in her. Furthermore, Catriona is always able to strike the right balance between strong support for tenants experiencing difficulties and firmness in handling breaches of tenancy. She works effectively with local support agencies, PSNI and Social Services to address ASB issues.

## Outcomes and achievements

Catriona is a rising star in the social housing sector; someone who is dedicated to her work, imaginative and resourceful in finding solutions to difficult situations, knowledgeable in all aspects of her work, yet still eager to learn from others”, Michelle McAnespy, Regional Head of T&CS.

A fine example of her dedication and commitment could be found in the way she was able to ensure a young tenant retained his tenancy, despite antisocial behaviour including violence and drug abuse. Through her own direct contact with the tenant along with inter-agency working with the police and probation service, his behaviour improved sufficiently for his tenancy to continue.

Throughout her career Catriona has successfully managed and resolved numerous contentious anti-social behaviour issues. Her excellent work in this area is an example to all Choice staff on the importance of listening to tenants, good communication and working closely with partner organisations.

“Nothing is too much trouble for Catriona. She is always happy to assist, support and encourage others. Catriona is adaptable, flexible and an excellent role model for Choice colleagues with her passion for housing work and complete focus on providing a first class service to Choice tenants”, Catherine Devlin, Area Manager.

# SUPPORTING COMMUNITIES AWARD

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HOUSING

This award celebrates projects, initiatives and organisations who have gone above and beyond, working to support their communities during these difficult times.

## Supporting Carrosyl in lockdown

**Carrowshee Park and Sylvan Hill Community Association**



### Statement of support

Carrowshee Park/Sylvan Hill Community Association (aka Carrosyl) in Lisnaskea, Co Fermanagh was established in 2001 by a group of concerned residents whose main concern was the major downturn in the local economy with three main employers having ceased their business. The resulting doom and gloom in the area manifested in an increase in anti-social and nuisance behaviours among the youth of the area, families struggling to cope with unemployment and poor circumstances.

This voluntary organisation has consistently provided services for the housing estate area (around 300 houses) for the past 20 years. During that time they have developed a local community centre (a sectional building which has outlived its useful life), and has funding for a new community and youth centre. The group has developed a play area and MUGA, run Homework and Youth Clubs for Primary and post-primary pupils and a club for the over 50s. They run a successful summer scheme and an annual Christmas Party for older residents. The group is run by a volunteer committee with two part time workers: Youth

and Community Development

The Covid crisis and Lockdown meant that the Group had to rethink how it was going to provide services to the community. The Committee wanted to do something positive to support the more vulnerable, keep in touch and connected, raise morale in our community and generally support residents through this crisis. They wanted to send out the message of a caring community, and help connect, reconnect, and keep their community connected into the future.

The initial response was to provide food hampers throughout the community, to older people and families initially, but each resident received support of some kind, as it was felt that no one could assume what anyone's needs and circumstances were. Basic provisions, fresh fruit and vegetables and sanitising equipment were provided, but also some pastime activities (mindfulness colouring, crossword books, wordsearch etc) and some localised gardening and knitting competitions to try to create a bit of a buzz among neighbours. Also included was information on local help offered to assist with shopping, prescriptions and essentials and information on helplines and supports that might have been needed.

All projects were in an attempt to connect the community in their isolation e.g. the children from youth clubs were asked to draw and colour pictures and write a message for older neighbours, which were included in support packs.

Children were provided with craft and activity packs at different stages during the year: Easter, summer, and Christmas. Older teenagers received self-care packages, to remind them of the importance of looking after themselves and positive mental health, a theme they had been focusing on before lockdown.

To keep the momentum going to reach out to all residents, Carrosyl ran a sunflower competition to

create some community spirit and local pride. Every house was provided with some sunflower seeds and prizes given for the tallest sunflowers, encouraging healthy competition!

As it wasn't possible to hold a Christmas Party for older residents, Christmas Dinners were delivered to the doors on the Sunday before Christmas, by a willing band of volunteers, joined by Santa Claus himself.

### Outcomes and achievements

Most of the provisions were bought locally, some on line and some delivered by suppliers. They were assembled to form a total of 400 food and basics supplies (80 per week over 5 weeks) delivered by a team of 15 volunteers.

100 children and young people were supported with craft and self-care packages

90 Christmas Dinners were provided to vulnerable and isolated older people

Approximately 700 - 800 benefited directly from this project.

Some comments posted on FB page:

'Thank you so much to Carrosyl Community Association for the unexpected delivery today. Such

And to encourage the spirit of 'giving', a Reverse Advent Calendar was organised in which residents were encouraged to leave non-perishable food items at the Community Centre over 15 days in the run up to Christmas, which were then distributed through the local food bank.

These activities were totally dependent on a very willing team of volunteers, and by funding from a variety of funders.

a wonderful community spirit and was gratefully received.'

'Blessed to live in a great neighbourhood. Paul and Celia.'

'Great work people! Solidarity is the best what we can do. Thank you girls! What a team and style'

'Thanks you ladies for my bags goodies i sat down when put it all away had cry .It was such a surprise . Xxx'

'Am so proud to say am from Carrowshee park what a great bunch of people here.'

'That has been the nicest thing anybody has done for me since lockdown and I appreciate it so much Thanks again Mary x '

# North Belfast connected homes project

**Lead organisation: Newington Housing Association**

**Partner organisation: North Belfast Advice Partnership**



## Statement of support

In late 2019, Newington Housing Association (NHA), committed to funding free independent advice and support, to NHA tenants and the wider community within North Belfast. NHA were able to provide funding to pay the salary for one-year. The role was to be recruited and managed by the North Belfast Advice Partnership as part of the overall advice team for North Belfast.

North Belfast is an area of high deprivation. NISRA, Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures 2017, show that five of the 10 most deprived areas in NI are in North Belfast. With low employment rates, New Lodge 2, is the most deprived area according to the Employment Deprivation Domain. NHA tenants have a high dependency on benefits with 77% receiving Housing Benefit or Universal Credit. On top of this North Belfast has multiple challenges, significant mental health issues, high rates of suicide, low educational attainment levels and high demand for social housing. NHA is working along with a very committed voluntary and community sector working diligently to assist residents through a range of fora.

This new initiative was developed by NHA and NBAP seeking to join up all the needs of the community and channel it through the new North Belfast Connect Homes Project. By doing this the post holder would determine the full needs of the client and as well as providing welfare and benefit advice they would make the necessary referrals other support services in North Belfast to ensure a holistic approach was taken to meet the client's needs.

Newington's Board approved funding of £34,000, as part of NHA's ongoing investment in the local area, to support the delivery of the project for one year. An opportunity arose to apply for match funding through Nationwide Building Society's Grant Fund. The application was successful and additional funding of £34,000 meant the post could be delivered for a minimum two years.

## Purpose of the Project

The project was designed to support individuals with unrestricted access and support with the Universal Credit application process and assistance with all aspects of UC including maintaining a UC along with IT and digital support, housing advice, money management, face to face appointments, the delivery of drop-in clinics, one of which was in NHA offices, as well as linking tenants with other services such as family support programmes, employability and training programmes, crisis intervention and support and independent debt advice. All clients receive a full benefit entitlement check, a better off calculations and access and support with the benefit's appeals process.

The postholder took up employment in January 2020 and quickly began to make a positive. Within weeks the Coronavirus pandemic hit NI within an immediate. Many NHA families needed immediate assistance from food banks and welfare benefit advice as many had to for the first time apply for welfare benefits.

For the initial crisis period, roles quickly adapted to respond to the pandemic. Food and essentials such as gas and electric pre-paid cards were provided by local foodbanks in the area. NHA with its close connections with NBAP and other community organisations again stepped up and quickly provided an additional financial assistance from the Community Investment Fund for essentials including food. Staff in NHA volunteered working to support the community at this crisis time to become part of the frontline support in the area working at the foodbank, delivering food, and making daily phone calls to tenants and referrals to the foodbank for intervention and referrals onto the Welfare Advice Officer.

The ongoing commitment by NHA and staff was reflected again in the run up to Christmas, NHA again provided funding and staff volunteered to work evenings and weekends in the foodbank packing and delivering essentials for Christmas to ensure all families had food and toys for Christmas Day.

## Outcomes and achievements

Listed below is the referrals the Universal Credit Advisor has dealt with from January to September 2020 -

### Client Referrals Total

NHA tenant referrals	131
Local hostels/youth support	42
Other Referrals	101
Total	274
Income generated	£675,390

In the first nine months of the role the Universal Credit Advisor has had an incredible impact and generated an additional £675,390 of income for the clients worked with during the period. With the introduction of furlough, job loss and self-employment support, more people needed access to advice than was originally anticipated.

Due to COVID-19, the service successfully adapted for service users to the new ways of working. The Advisor could not provide face to face appointments, but the support was still there and provided by telephone or email.

In addition to this NHA provided additional funding of £21,250 during the year to North Belfast Advice Partnership and to St Vincent de Paul from its Community Investment Fund. This funding provided food for the foodbank and Christmas toys as well as much needed gas and electricity top ups. Staff also volunteered in the run up to Christmas, evenings, and weekends, working more than 90 hours in the foodbank to ensure Christmas hampers were packed.

Going forward NHA intend securing funding for this role to continue beyond the two years. It is clear the impact it has made both in terms of the financial outcomes for local people but also in confidence building and working with many vulnerable people to get positive outcomes for them.

# Community chest COVID-19

## Radius Housing



### Statement of support

Radius Housing adapted their Community Chest small grants scheme to help local communities across Northern Ireland in response to . The grant was opened to applications in April 2020. Radius aimed to tackle inequality in funding provision by supporting smaller local groups and organisations, many of whom didn't qualify for other funding or have the knowledge & experience in dealing with funding applications. It was important that the projects supported showed value for money and were community led initiatives to support local people dealing with the immediate impact of COVID-19 and the effects of the pandemic in their community. Many voluntary groups within our local communities who received funding were empowered to carry out a diverse range of projects that supported people within their local community. We identified groups that needed our support with the funding application, and then ensured a member of our team became a key link to offer guidance and support with the application process. By having this link in place we were able to ensure groups didn't become overwhelmed with the application process, which has given them the confidence to develop their skills ensuring they highlight their achievements in future funding applications.

With links formed throughout the application process we have been able to build great relationships, and whilst it has been a difficult time these positive relationships have led to further joint projects with Radius for the benefit of these local communities. We look forward to developing on the positive work which has been carried out and made possible by the Community Chest funding received within the local communities.

Radius awarded £19,300 to 38 successful applicants from a wide range of groups across NI. Significant resource and effort was directed to ensure a speedy turnaround. On average it took 11 days to process, score and pay out funding to groups enabling them to react quickly to the needs of their community during the pandemic when they needed it most.

Evaluation of the grant scheme evidences that here have been many complimentary outcomes which have benefited communities beyond the criteria initially set:

- Tackling Food Poverty - indirectly supported 11,144 vulnerable people. One organisation supported 200 people and told us that the grant "has made a real and positive difference to our work during the pandemic. It has helped feed some of the most vulnerable homeless people in Belfast during this extremely challenging time."
- Supporting those with Poor Mental Health - 808 people. One organisation told us that "this grant helped vulnerable adults and people with mental health issues feel that they weren't alone."
- Supporting Young People in Education - 1,160 people. This group supported children in deprived households with educational resources and told us "this funding enabled the Association to extend the availability and range of items over a longer period of time."
- Personal Hygiene & PPE - supported 795 vulnerable people. One group told us that these "were well received at the door steps".
- Digital Inclusion & Connectivity - supported 372 participants. One group told us that the grant "made a huge difference to people with MS and their families as the committee was able to keep in touch with members through the COVID-19 pandemic."
- Supporting Volunteers - Supported 39 volunteers expenses. This organisation told us they were able to cover volunteer expenses to "deliver over 7,500 prescriptions and delivered 850 grocery parcels to local community with the support of Radius funding."
- Tackling Fuel Poverty - Funding supported 20 families financially impacted by COVID-19 keep up with the extra heating and electric costs of being at home during lockdown.

## Outcomes and achievements

- £19,300 awarded across 38 successful grant applications
- Have now established 38 mutually beneficial relationships for community groups and Radius Housing which we will continue to develop long term
- Helped to reach 13,429 vulnerable people in the community
- Groups involved benefited from the work of 549 volunteers
- Involved 136 members of staff in applicants organisations
- Funded groups worked in partnership with 88 agencies
- Reached a wide geographical area in both rural and urban areas.

# FareShare Northern Ireland

## Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland



### Statement of support

FareShare NI is the largest food redistribution project in Northern Ireland. It distributes surplus, nutritious food to hostels, charities, and foodbanks each week from its base in Mallusk. The project is managed by Council for the Homeless (NI), has a small staff team of 12 and relies on a network of volunteers to keep the service running.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges for individuals, families and communities. Lockdowns, shielding, and isolation caused major difficulties including access to food. For FareShare this meant a significant increase in requests for food from foodbanks and charities at a time when there were fewer volunteers available. However, the team stepped up to the mark to meet demand and throughout the crisis were able to maintain its weekly delivery service.

FareShare continued to support communities in need by undertaking the following:

- Streamlining the service, offering a higher tonnage of food to community food members and supporting five social supermarket partners with weekly deliveries of food.
- Creating a safe working environment by implementing a rota bubble system and introducing increased health & safety precautions, ensuring compliance with social distancing and PPE measures.

- Leading the voluntary and community sector response to food provision by partnering with councils and the Dept for Communities (DFC), identifying gaps in provision and by working with the food industry to ensure needs were met.
- Responding to offers of support and innovating e.g. by acting as a conduit between Boojum and a range of charities in Belfast to ensure distribution of 1,000 meals per week to vulnerable people during first lockdown. Recipient organisations included Welcome Organisation, Extern, HomePlus, Upper Springfield Development Trust, Root Soup, The Resurgam Trust, Stella Maris, and Lower Falls Community Partnership.
- Partnering with Lidl to organise an ambient food collection in 7 of Lidl's Belfast stores and redistributing additional volumes of food to charities donated by First Dunmurry NS Presbyterian Church, Co-op, and A&E team at Mater Hospital.
- Organising a shipment of an additional 124 pallets of mixed Tesco ambient product between March and May from FareShare UK, which was used for emergency food parcels throughout NI.
- Securing funding from DFC for additional warehouse space to increase capacity.

Throughout the challenges of 2020, FareShare NI has played a central role in keeping people fed and also building community prosperity through extensive partnership work. By engaging with FareShare NI, charities save on average £5,000 per annum, which supports their sustainability in these times when fundraising activities have been limited.

“During the lockdown the weekly deliveries from FareShare were the highlight of the week for our residents and they always looked forward to seeing what was in the delivery. The variety of fresh fruit and vegetables allowed us to prepare healthy and nutritious meals for them. The fact that the service from FareShare was maintained throughout the lockdown was a real boost to the mental health of our residents as it showed them that life was continuing and that

there was help and support for them. The deliveries of food from FareShare have also helped us financially to remain within budget at these difficult times.”

#### Apex Springwell House

“Food is a way of removing barriers and allows us to build up trust with those people and families we

support. During lockdown our involvement with FareShare allowed us to provide 220 healthy, nutritious well-balanced food parcels every week. Helping to reduce the stress experienced by many in our community at this time.”

North Belfast Advice Partnership and Foodbank.

### Outcomes and achievements

- Reduced risk of food poverty by delivering high quality food to 123 charities, hostels & foodbanks across NI, supporting 22,962 people every week with improved nutritional options through provision of frozen, ambient and a high percentage of fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Of these 23% are homeless support organisations, such as hostels and supported accommodation, with 3,510 individuals supported by them each week.
- Over 2020, FareShare NI has redistributed 591 tonnes of food with a retail value of £920,689, equivalent to 1.4 million meals.
- Reduced 2,185 tonnes of CO2 emissions by preventing food industry waste
- Contributed to creating a resilient voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland by saving the sector an estimated £615,000 in 2020, an average of £5,000 per organisation.
- Worked with Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda, Lidl, Dale Farm, ABP and 20+ local food industry partners, to tackle food waste and address food poverty.
- Established new food redistribution infrastructure by working in partnership to create 7 hubs, where smaller community groups can access surplus food. These hubs are provided by Apex, Derry, Strabane Community Project, Lisburn Foodbank, Vineyard Causeway, Vineyard Dungannon, Limavady Community Development Initiative & High Kirk Foodbank, Ballymena.
- Created 3 jobs, 2 van drivers and 1 warehouse supervisor.

# Respond

## Respond Housing



### Statement of support

Respond have two estates in Youghal, Shalom House and St Francis Court, both of which have elderly tenants, most of whom are in their seventies and eighties. These tenants would be considered extremely vulnerable to COVID-19. The local Tenant Relations Officer (TRO), who has responsibility for both estates, put the wellbeing of her tenants above all else when the pandemic hit. Very few of the 40+ tenants could do their shopping, pay their rent, or any other of their normal weekly duties. As a result, this TRO took on the responsibility for her tenants in more ways than one.

Employing some local support, shopping and errands were undertaken for the cocooning tenants. A system was established whereby shopping lists were collected and goods delivered on a weekly basis. In addition Meals on Wheels were organised to assist with some other more physically impaired tenants who would normally share meals with neighbours. There was also

linkage with other Respond staff to ensure all rent was paid and up to date and that every tenants housing requirements were met

Shalom House and St Francis Court are mature estates where Respond have facilitated tightknit communities over the years. There was a strong existing sense of community that helped bring them together during these difficult times. In the initial lockdown, Respond organised nature walks for the tenants to ensure their mobility did not deteriorate, all in line with public Health Guidelines. Communal gardens were utilised and those with an interest, were encouraged to join gardening classes and other sessions for tenants. All of this helped combat loneliness and encouraged peer support throughout the pandemic.

Socially distanced coffee mornings were organised, which slowly included poetry readings in line with Public Health guidelines. This acted as a creative outlet for tenants, many reporting they had rediscovered some old interests. They had poetry readings and quiz evenings all aided in keeping spirits high.

Most recently, a private donation was given to support the tenants of Shalom and Francis Court during the Christmas Period. Respond staff organised a number of events for them during a time where they would normally be with their families. Christmas dinners were delivered to those that wanted them and a small present was bought for each tenant with the donation. All done with due regard for public health guidelines.

Vulnerable tenants were placed at the very heart of all decisions made around the pandemic. Residents of each estate have regularly pointed out that they would have had some severe struggles with the pandemic had such a proactive approach been taken.

### Outcomes and achievements

- The results for this work are ongoing. Most importantly all of vulnerable tenants have been kept out of harm's way.
- The physical and mental health of tenants, which may otherwise have deteriorated during this time, has been maintained by the high level of engagement from staff. Although some of the work done was a continuation of existing initiatives, some new ideas have surfaced, such as the poetry readings and quiz nights that can continue after COVID-19.
- As reported by tenants, this pandemic has actually increased engagement with their neighbours and created a greater sense of community. There are more tenant led events taking place and it is hoped that this will also continue, where the community is very much a self-sustaining entity.
- This initiative has served as an inspiration for others to begin similar work in other locations.
- The work has created a template of how to create a sustainable and active community.

# Clann housing



## Statement of support

Oriel Lodge is age friendly housing in Belturbet, Co Cavan which is owned and managed by Clann Housing. It has 34 apartments and is home to 41 residents who range in age from 49 to 89 with a variety of medical needs who live independently in 1 or 2 bed apartments. They have shared communal rooms such as common room and kitchen. What makes Oriel Lodge such a special place is the community which exists within the apartment complex. Residents in Oriel Lodge pride themselves on the community spirit; from community events such as coffee morning and social outings to keeping an eye out for your neighbour.

In March 2020, with the developing situation with COVID-19 and with lockdown looming for the residents in Oriel Lodge this community spirit was put to the test, but with Clann's help both Clann staff and residents of Oriel Lodge met the challenge head on.

In mid-March, Clann staff met with residents of Oriel Lodge to discuss the needs and fears that the residents were facing. The local public health nurse attended the meeting and gave information to residents on how best to protect themselves and the community. Arising from this meeting a comprehensive list of local supports were put together such as phone numbers for local shops who were willing to deliver to food

to the local GAA. Residents also made their phone available to other residents. Clann staff linked in with Cavan County Local Development Association Food Centre Initiative which delivered food weekly direct to Oriel Lodge for residents most in need. This was aided by residents in Oriel Lodge who help collect the food for more vulnerable residents.

As Clann staff were working remotely, they provided weekly wellbeing calls to residents, many of whom were cocooning. These calls were invaluable in helping to arise the needs of the residents. Working in partnership with Alone and Vodafone, residents who previously didn't have access to a smartphone were given one which enabled them to keep in contact with family and friends through Zoom Calls.

In April & May, residents in Oriel Lodge came together following social distancing guidelines to care and maintain the garden which was morale boosting for residents. Arising from this feedback, Clann was able to provide funding for new flowers and shrubs for the garden. Clann also provides window flower boxes for all residents in Oriel Lodge.

With support from Healthy Ireland funding, chair aerobics classes were organised to take place in the garden with an instructor. These classes ran for 6 weeks during the summer which provided the residents with an outlet and allowed them to meet with their neighbours.

During Clann wellbeing calls, a need was identified by Clann staff for residents to be able to talk and discuss their experiences during the Covid crisis. It was felt by many residents as if their lives had been put on hold, others felt they had discovered their local community better and others felt worried for the future. Using this information, Clann staff met with a local artist who has agreed to hold a series of workshops with residents to discuss their experiences and produce a piece of art. Clann staff have secured funding from the National Lottery of Ireland.

## Outcomes and achievements

To date, Clann Housing has supported the residents of Oriel Lodge with linking them in to the different local support networks such as GAA and Cavan Development Food Initiative which has been vital in keeping the residents safe during this challenging time.

During the wellbeing calls to residents, Clann has identified different needs which they have then acted upon such as applying and securing funding for residents

such as the Healthy Ireland Grant and National Lottery Funding. This funding has and will provide necessary outlets to Oriel Residents.

But the best testament to Clann is how they have supported the continuing community spirit in Oriel Lodge which is very much alive and kicking in Oriel Lodge today.

# Staying connected

**Habinteg Housing Association Ulster Ltd.**



## Statement of support

Lockdown and the longer period of the pandemic has been difficult for staff and tenants alike. The challenges for our tenants has been maintaining their tenancies, while the world around them has changed drastically and for our staff it has been maintaining our high quality of service while working from home. All of these challenges have had a profound effect on mental health and Habinteg have sought to support both tenants and staff through this period.

As soon as the lockdown looked likely Habinteg immediately ramped up the level of contact with Tenants. We reached out to them to let them know that our Housing Officers whilst working from home were still available at the other end of a phone to support them with any issue. Habinteg Housing Officers and Community Officers worked alongside our Welfare Support Officer to ensure that anyone who was struggling with furlough, job loss or simply being at home alone had access to the best advice possible. This was to reduce stress and ensure that tenants weren't concerned about being made homeless in a pandemic.

The Homes and Communities Team made contact with all of our residents over the age of 60 either by telephone or mail. From these phone calls we were able to ensure that residents who wanted to talk to someone would have someone to talk too!. These tenants were contacted either one of our Community Involvement Team or Community Assistants on a

regular basis. We maintained these lists until the tenant themselves stated they wished to come off.

Not only were these calls a friendly chat but the contact and relationship enabled Habinteg staff to signpost tenants to other services. The team collected information of support services from across Northern Ireland and together created a directory of contacts, including names of organisation, telephone number and location. By creating this at the very start of the pandemic it meant Habinteg staff could quickly get other agencies involved in supporting tenants.

This support covering everything from access to food parcels, shopping or pharmacy shopping delivery, financial advice or more professional support with loneliness or mental health. The community team created a useful easily accessible go to directory which is really which helped support the comfort and safety of our tenants.

On top of this a number of different initiatives were set up. The Habinteg team have been running programmes over Zoom to ensure a sense of connectedness for our tenants. This has included Zoom quizzes, Zoom Bingo and Coffee catch-ups. These have been targeted to appeal to as many people as possible and to connect tenants with each other and maintain their relationship with our tenants. Through these activities we were able to provide maintain the connections with our tenants and provide some fun during an otherwise sombre and worrying time.

Using some additional funding the Habinteg Community Team provided packs at Halloween and Christmas. The Halloween packs were full of activities and were aimed at children in Primary school. Over 650 packs were provided and were delivered by our Community Involvement team and Community Assistants across Northern Ireland.

Comments from our tenants included "It gave me peace for the first time over half term, thank you".

At Christmas, over 2000 packs were given out to children, young people, over 60s and to tenants in our Housing for All schemes. They included activities that were age appropriate.

## Outcomes and achievements

The Covid Keep Connected scheme was led by the Community Officers but all the Habinteg Homes and Communities team were involved in ensuring that tenants were supported in as many ways as we could. This promoted a real team spirit across the department.

It also had an impact on our Community Assistants as following the initial lockdown by we could with safe distancing start to visit tenants to deliver the packs to doorsteps which enabled us to reconnect with tenants, and with an eye in December on January reiterated Habinteg was still here to offer support if there was another Lockdown.

It enabled us to demonstrate that the values of the Habinteg family were tangible actions not just words on paper and for our tenants and for our staff it proved important to stay connected.

Zoom has again been used for team meetings, 1 to 1 meetings and other support meetings.

Tenants and staff benefited from the Stay Connected project and directory

The Directory was so useful we have enabled other organisation to access it as a shared resources .

# COVID-19 community grants

## Housing Executive



### Statement of support

The Communities Department work to deliver Housing Executive values: making a difference, fairness, passion and expertise. The Housing Executive has an extensive and well-established community involvement network, supported through Supporting Communities Northern Ireland. This network includes a Central Housing Forum which meets monthly, and continued to do so remotely throughout the pandemic to support the Housing Executive response, supported by the Communities Department and SCNI.

The challenges posed to our tenants and communities by the pandemic were identified by staff and community representatives, as well as through local offices who delivered 800 phone calls to vulnerable tenants per week in the initial months of the pandemic, and independent research carried out on behalf of the Housing Executive. This allowed us to accurately and swiftly identify the challenges faced by our communities, and to develop appropriate plans to support them. This engagement assessed our communities as a high risk population and identified tenant priorities, including concerns about physical and mental health, social isolation, accessing services

such as pharmacies and shops and concerns about repairs and financial impacts.

In April 2020, the Communities Department established a COVID-19 Community Response Fund, based on early recognition that a response was required from the Housing Executive to support our grass roots community organisations to mobilise within our estates and reach out to those most vulnerable individuals.

Based on our community consultation, we were aware of needs and able to tailor our response to ensure these were met. We had to ensure that the framework and procedure was robust enough to allow us to deliver maximum support within designated parameters, while signposting tenants and communities to appropriate organisations to support them for requirements such as food and PPE that could not be delivered by us within the legal framework.

The Communities Department worked to quickly develop a robust process and financial framework to allow the organisation to make funding assistance available to groups. The newly designed framework included a new application form and guide for staff which outlined a new process and roles and responsibilities for all team members ensuring segregation of duties, conflict of interest checks and delegated authority compliance were clearly set out. Team members had to work through each application and adapt very quickly to a new way of working to ensure that communities received the emergency support they needed at a very vital time, and Good Relations Officers supported community groups in making their applications.

The fund opened on 21st April 2020 and closed on 4th May 2020; 224 applications were received and 203 of the 205 successful applications were paid by July 2020.

As a result, £277,000 was distributed via the Housing Executive Coronavirus Community Support Fund to constituted groups including Housing Community Network Groups, Organisations and Social Enterprises within Housing Executive Communities providing support within Housing Executive areas. Groups were entitled to apply for a maximum of £1500 each.

The Communities Team demonstrated beyond doubt their conviction to helping maintain the work that had been done by the Housing Executive over so many years to foster vibrant and sustainable communities. The range of services delivered by groups has been

truly inspirational; each project was tailored to meet the needs of those within their communities.

Projects delivered included financial assistance to facilitate the delivery of food parcels and medication, good morning calls to keep people connected and reduce isolation, and socially distanced community events such as bingo and physical fitness sessions. There was help to support families with young children by providing arts and craft materials to promote learning and improve emotional wellbeing during the time of high stress.

## Outcomes and achievements

The Housing Executive awarded £277k in community funds to 205 grant requests. Funding requests awarded included: emergency packs, children's packs, memory, trivia & quiz variety bumper packs, activity packs, volunteer travel costs/delivery costs, essential hygiene packs, leaflet printing and volunteer phone costs.

The work delivered through the project was recognised as outstanding good practice in our external Customer Service Excellence Assessment. Based on feedback from the community groups, the assessor noted the compliments provided about the speedy and responsive nature of the funding, which enabled swift responses to tackling the challenges experienced by communities during the pandemic.

"The community response to COVID-19 has been overwhelming and I commend the Housing Executive for being so supportive and responsive. Together we can ensure that no one in our community gets left behind and that we all emerge from this crisis as a united community." Chair of the Central Housing Forum

Testimonials from groups:

"Before the social distancing bingo, people didn't actually come out and speak to each other and now they all come out and chat waiting on our arrival."

"It has allowed us to purchase and distribute sanitizing packages for our older and most vulnerable residents, who have been extremely grateful."

# Simon Community Northern Ireland staff team

## Simon Community Northern Ireland



### Statement of support

Simon Community NI is Northern Ireland's largest homeless charity. Up to 636 people are supported daily throughout its services. Whilst a pandemic significantly impacted the World in 2020 the Simon Community team of 260 full time staff and 50 bank staff along with 137 volunteers ensured that all their accommodation projects and community support teams remained open and where needed staffed 24/7. This team continued to work tirelessly to ensure that all those who relied on them received the support they needed. During the pandemic, we welcomed 1,725 through our doors, giving safety and security in a time of great need.

However, like all of society the clients Simon Community NI support are challenged by the new restrictions, ongoing periods of lockdown, periods of self-isolation due to their vulnerability and in some cases periods where they are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19. As has been widely reported and acknowledged self-isolating can have a real impact on the mental health of those experiencing it with 80% of Simon Community NI clients already having complex needs. Simon Community NI are seeing a significant impact on client's mental health, and the strategies utilised to support people are proving to be difficult to implement due to social distancing. Already there are those that have attempted suicide, self-harmed, been detained and been admitted to psychiatric hospital. Simon Community are painfully aware that this is only the beginning of a surge in mental health challenges.

Simon Community's focus throughout the pandemic was to ensure that clients Stay Safe, Stay Supported and Stay Well. Simon Community staff worked creatively alongside clients to deliver a range of innovative and bespoke support which has included:

**Mind your head:** Each project had a focus on health and wellbeing.

Wellbeing packs have been developed; clients received hygiene products, new bed linen, and upgraded wifi or dongles were made available so that they could stay in touch with friends, family, and essential mental health services. The side of some of Simon Community's buildings were turned into outdoor cinemas, keep fit classes were offered and outdoor cooking was a feature alongside social distanced walks.

**Cook with us:** All Simon Community young people received a cook pack with all the equipment and food they needed to cook 7 meals, as well as a cookbook and online videos of staff cooking the meals so that the young people could follow it step by step.

"My mind is blown by the items I got, it will be great learning new recipes and showing off my skills to friends and family and acting like I knew the meals the whole time" Bailey 19

"I struggle with not being able to have face to face contact with my children. It is lonely but I have been using the arts and craft supplies to create cards for my kids to send in the post each week. They are my way of letting them know that I miss them" Client in Derry

Not only has Simon Community NI sustained and creatively responded to the pandemic, through listening and learning from our client's, but further areas of need have been identified to ensure the lasting impact of COVID-19 can be mitigated to some extent. In its Family Project, Simon Community support 24 families, with around 50 children. The service was awarded a COVID-19 response grant through Children in Need enabling recruitment of a Play and Learning Co-Ordinator who for the next 18 months will support families to engage in a range of bespoke play and learning programmes to ensure homeless children are not further disadvantaged due to the impact of COVID-19.

## Outcomes and achievements

While in the middle of a pandemic Simon Community services provided 774 people with the skills and confidence necessary to leave homelessness behind. These successes included 244 people moving back with their families, mended relationships, people with keys to their own front door. In addition, floating support services helped 77 people to maintain their own home, preventing them from getting to the point of crisis during a significantly challenging year for them.

Through a range of grants:

- 65 young people received a hygiene pack, which was full of domestic and personal hygiene products.
- 65 young people had a dedicated and individual lock down wellbeing plan, this was accompanied by Mind your head packs (a pack promoting positive mental health and emotional wellbeing)

- "It's like a huge care pack for my life right now, especially with what's going on in the world at the minute, it's nice to not be forgotten about" Sabrina, aged 18
- Simon Community's 14 adult accommodation services put together 'isolation packs' at the commencement of the first lockdown to be used where needed. The packs consisted of items that would assist them to stay connected.
- Individual cutlery, crockery was purchased, to be issued to anyone in isolation

# HOUSING HERO

This award celebrates outstanding individuals who have in the past year used new approaches to help solve housing problems they see around them.

## Louise Grant

### Respond



### Statement of support

Louise began her housing career with Respond in June 2014, joining the newly created Customer Services Centre (CSC) as a Customer Services Advisor. The CSC in Respond is the first point of contact for all tenants as well as any other general caller. The team deal with the vast range of tenant enquiries, aiming to resolve up to 85% of queries at the first point of contact. This then allows estate based staff across the country to focus their time working within their communities. Louise quickly earned praise from colleagues and tenants alike for her professionalism and caring approach.

In December 2019 she took on the day to day management of the CSC as the current manager went on maternity leave. At that time COVID-19 was still a relatively unknown risk and its implications little understood.

Fulfilling a key operational role, Louise quickly became an active member of the internal COVID-19 Response Group and was involved in almost daily discussions and planning sessions, ensuring the Organisation was COVID ready.

As things deteriorated in March, the lockdown preparatory plans became a reality. Louise was faced with the challenge of coordinating a team of Contact Advisers that could not continue to work safely on-site and were not fully equipped to work from home. As the key frontline service for Respond's tenants, it was essential for Louise to quickly move the team to remote working whilst maintaining the high quality of service the customers currently enjoyed.

With most of the Tenant Relations team working remotely the burden of physical administration increased dramatically. Housing applications, offers, rent forms, post and the ordering of PPE and safety signage all became additional responsibilities of the CSC. Louise took it upon herself to be the person who went to the office every day to coordinate these tasks and ensure ongoing support to the tenancy and maintenance teams, at all times adhering to Government health guidelines.

With extra demands hitting the service, the CSC grew and Louise had to manage recruitment and training of new staff members working remotely. Louise's focus remained ensuring her team was able to fully support her colleagues across the business as well as the tenants.

Along with members of the rent control team, she supported outward bound calls to tenants experiencing difficulties with rent because of changes in income due to COVID-19. Louise was a familiar and reassuring voice to many of the tenants she contacted, and as well as putting tenants at ease and resolving their issues, she was able to identify any other issues the tenant might have, whether psychological, financial or even inability to shop due to lockdown. She was then able to put tenants in touch with estate based staff who could identify solutions for them.

Despite the scale of change, and the enormous challenges presented to Louise and her team, she met them head on, supporting the team and ensuring the continuation of an excellent service. She maintained a calm and supportive approach throughout and was recognised companywide for her achievements. She had an enormous positive impact on those around her; her strength, support and resilience was recognised by all.

With a new confidence and a developing interest in rent management, Louise secured a new role as a Rent Control Officer (RCO) and has been able to hand the reins of the CSC back to the returning manager.

### Outcomes and achievements

- In a time of huge change and uncertainty Louise quietly developed her team and service to enable them to play a pivotal role within the organisation through a period of unprecedented upheaval.
- Her work and dedication allowed both existing and new team members to develop their skills and ensured that tenants always got the best service from the CSC.
- Tenants were ensured a compassionate and caring voice during difficult times.
- Louise's expertise and skill has grown significantly and she has successfully secured promotion into a permanent new role with Respond.

## Jim Dennison

### Simon Community NI



### Statement of support

In March 2020, the world entered a very challenging and uncertain period. Simon Community NI, led by Chief Executive Jim Dennison, along with the homeless sector faced the huge challenge of ensuring some of the most vulnerable people in our society were protected from the potentially deadly COVID-19 virus whilst also ensuring they still had a safe, secure and supported living environment to call home.

In addition, there was the significant challenge of operating in a restricted environment, the government had suddenly imposed the first set of 'lockdown' measures and numerous restrictions on working environments. The homeless sector had to act swiftly to ensure its workforce were adequately protected from contracting the virus and they were equipped to continue to deliver services safely to an ever-growing client base.

Within Simon Community NI, Jim Dennison demonstrated outstanding commitment and dedication by leading on a clear communications and operations strategy specific to COVID-19.

Its delivery ensured the mobilisation of the workforce to continue to deliver services in really challenging times. The creative initiatives that Jim Dennison led on, can be categorised into three key areas.

1. Workforce mobilisation and safety
  - a. Securing the correct PPE for frontline staff via effective delivery channels
  - b. Ensuring support/back office staff had the resources to enable them to work from home.
  - c. Provision of naloxone training for all staff
  - d. Commencement of recruitment exercise to support frontline delivery and projected short fall in staffing.
  - e. Ensuring staff equipped with necessary ID whilst travelling to work during lockdown.
2. Communications
  - a. Weekly emails to all staff
  - b. Interpreting and sharing important government guidelines as required
  - c. Regular reporting to Board introduced - bitesize updates in between formal meetings.

Chairman of Simon Community NI, Iggy O'Doherty complimented Jim's determination and regular communications with the Board of Directors

*"Jim has been an outstanding leader during this most surreal and dangerous time for staff and clients alike. He kept the Board well informed of preparations and precautions for every site. He diligently pursued the provision of PPE and cleaning services with a rigour like it was his own family he was caring for. The Board had regular detailed updates and many on-line meetings where Jim provided sound assurances on the good governance his team provided and the care and safety being provided to staff and clients. During difficult times like this real leaders show their strength and Jim has been nothing short of heroic."*

### 3. Collaboration

- a. Supporting Government departments to issue relevant information that is sector specific.
- b. Inviting key stakeholders to become members of a multi-agency approach (NIHE, DfC, PHA, PSNI, Health Trusts, PBNI, etc.)
- c. Sharing of key information across sector providers and linking in the right people to inform submission to Department and therefore helping to secure Covid-19 specific funding.

Significantly, Jim Dennison's positive contribution and commitment to solving homelessness is evident in his work to co-ordinate the Covid-19 response from the homeless sector to government. In March 2020, Jim set up the first meeting consisting of the main sector providers.

Jim quickly identified the need for a cross-agency strategic approach to address the fast-emerging issues and swiftly acted to bring together key stakeholders from relevant agencies to devise the first ever Multi-Agency Group. The group included representation from the NIHE, PHA, PSNI, PBNI, Health Trusts, among others who all played a key role in delivery during the pandemic. Jim Dennison Chaired the meeting on a weekly basis from March 2020. Nine months on and the group continues to play a significant role in guiding the sector through unprecedented times.

David Carroll - chief executive DePaul

'Protection of people who are homeless during the pandemic has been dependent on the cooperation between the voluntary agencies and statutory bodies. Jim has played a central part in enabling that to happen and as a result lives have been saved'.

In July 2020, Jim (along with DePaul, Extern and First Housing) was invited to give evidence at Stormont to the Committee for Communities on behalf of the sector. As a result of this representation, adequate funding was put in place in a fast and effective way.

As a result of commitment, dedication and initiatives Jim has led on this year, we believe he has demonstrated the criteria to be celebrated as an outstanding individual who has used new, innovative, and collaborative approaches to help solve the delivery of vital housing services during a global pandemic.

## Outcomes and achievements

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and collaborative approaches to help solve the delivery of vital housing services during a global pandemic.

# Michael Lynch

## Clann Housing



### Statement of support

Michael Lynch is a Clann Resident in Ard Carrig, Carrigtwohill, Co. Cork. Michael has always been active in his community and since moving into Ard Carrig has been focused on ensuring the development of a real meaningful community within the scheme. However, during the recent pandemic, Michael took the focus on his community to a different level, not only having a positive impact on where he lives but also bringing his love of music to the wider Clann Community.

A talented musician, Michael has in partnership with Clann Staff created and produced Clann Music Events on Zoom throughout 2020, bringing entertainment and joy to hundreds across the country. With his team of other residents Michael brought together musicians who reside in Clann Schemes and those outside of Clann and created hour long music sessions to keep our spirits high. These sessions have become treasured moments during very worrying times, allowing residents and staff to take a journey through music into the past.

His attention to detail in music selection has allowed people to travel back to their younger days of dance halls and romance, family memories and adventures and for a short period forget what was happening in the outside world. There have been joyful tears and heartfelt laughing throughout. Michael also arranged to prerecord music produced by friends who due to their rural local do not have Wi-Fi and subsequently brought music to them during brief periods when restrictions were relaxed. Always one to encourage others to shine, Michael worked with other residents to assist them in taking part and encouraged them to showcase their talents. Teaching some of his neighbours to use smart phones and Zoom for the very first time.

Michael also joined the new Clann Residents Advisory Group which was set up in 2020 to help facilitate greater participation of residents in the development and running of services provided by Clann. His participation in the development of this group, which also took part online during the pandemic has been invaluable.

It is extremely hard to put into words the impact that Michael has had on Clann Residents and Staff. He has brought relief and joy to staff and residents alike and supported the whole Clann community through these difficult times. From collecting shopping, a cheerful chat (at a distance!) to his Clann Zoom Music Sessions and his involvement with Clann Resident Advisory Group, Michael Lynch represents a true Housing Hero and deserves for be the one who is recognised having focused so much on keeping us all together. He has shown commitment and dedication, used his passion for music to inspire all the Clann Community and continues to work with Clann to constantly improve services and represent our resident's voices.

### Outcomes and achievements

- Clann Zoom Music Events – Michael created the concept, brought together the talent, hosted the events, ensured that everyone was prepared in advance and could use the technology and ultimately made these events happen. He reconnected people with their love of music and allowed people the opportunity to remember happier times.
- Clann Residents Advisory Group – Michael put himself forward to join this group. Participated in four developments session run in conjunction with Community Action Network (CAN) during the lockdown and helped to develop the groups goals and objectives for the year ahead.
- Advocacy – Michael is a strong advocate for independent living, a supporter of Age Friendly Housing and an advocate for older people and the need to recognise their ongoing contribution to society. Michael has been a shining light in showcasing the opportunities available to older people to remain living in their homes. He supports his neighbours and creates a real community atmosphere in his scheme.

# Rosemary Diver

## Radius Housing



### Statement of support

Rosemary has worked as a Scheme coordinator in Pinetree Manor and in the local area for 20 years. During this time she has worked tirelessly in the scheme to support tenants, some of who have very complex health and social needs and she has forged very strong links within the local community and supports many initiatives in the Poleglass area.

Rosemary has been involving in setting up the following projects including;

- Working with the staff and residents of Cloverhill Hostel as part of a project to integrate the hostel residents into the local community and improve the relationship and understanding between the younger and older generations in the area.

- Working with the local youth club as part of an intergenerational project Tenants in Pinetree Manor meeting with young people in the community.
- Facilitating Digital learning for tenants through Business In the Community
- Setting up the Men's Group in the area which meets in Pinetree Manor on a weekly basis.
- Inclusion in 60plus forum along with S.E.H.S.S. the other local groups with in the area.
- Working with tenants and the local community to create a community garden. She started a programme with Conservation Volunteers who provided tools and seeds as well as advice on what to plant at certain times of year; all the tenants participated. She then arranged an open day for the local community.
- During the recent lockdowns and restrictions Rosemary has worked tirelessly with local groups to ensure all her tenants received essentials such as weekly hampers, delivery of medication, additional daily welfare calls from the Good Morning Colin service and regular contact with the staff and the children of Cloverhill hostel to give the tenants a much needed lift during these difficult times.
- In the lead up to Christmas 2020 Rosemary and the tenants raised £500 for the Radius Christmas appeal to assist families in the community to buy essentials such as food and utilities cards.

### Outcomes and achievements

Working with Cloverhill Hostel - this project helped to integrate the residents of the hostel into the local community and improve the relationship and understanding between the younger and older generations in the area.

Community Garden Project - Tenants were able to benefit from the harvest of potatoes, beans, peas, beetroot and carrots. It was also likened to an 'Outside gym' by some. Tenant's mental health improved and neighbourliness grew week by week so much so that some tenants who had been living in Pinetree for years started to mix for the first time and enjoyed the gardening project.

Intergenerational project with local Youth club - the project linked the tenants in Pinetree Manor with

young people in the community and help to break down barriers and removed stereotyping of both groups.

Men's Group Project - improved the wellbeing of residents and men in the local community; socially, physically and mentally.

Projects during lockdown - regular contact with the staff and the children of Cloverhill hostel gave the tenants a much needed lift during these difficult times.

Due to all the great work Rosemary has undertaken for older people in both Pinetree Manor and the local community she was nominated as a Dementia Friendly awards finalist in September 2019.

# Barry Shields

Habinteg Housing Association Ulster Ltd



## Statement of support

Barry Shields joined the Asset Management team at Habinteg in mid-2019. Barry, an experienced Health & Safety Practitioner, like so many could not have foreseen the challenge of what lay ahead when the organisation and the world went into lockdown due to COVID-19 in March 2020.

Barry from day 1 championed a 'tenant first' health and safety approach. He also quickly seized the opportunity to facilitate and drive meaningful customer centred policy development, enabling Habinteg to move away from mere tick box compliance processes of the past.

As Health, Safety and Compliance Business Partner, Barry very quickly identified ways in which we could protect our tenants by rolling out defibrillator access to staff and community assistants. He also worked at pace with the Red Cross to provide training in their use and other advanced first aid skills. Alongside this he initiated the introduction of ISO 45001 and with members of the Assets Team undertook lead auditor training.

Although the depth of Barry's abilities and experience was clear from the start, it was not until COVID-19 and the resulting lock down which took everyone by surprise that his crisis management and leadership skills became apparent. Barry wasted no time in becoming the subject matter expert in all things Covid and housing. He quickly became a strategic advisor to the organisation's Senior Management team and Board, tracking the ever-changing government and housing sector advice, ensuring ultimately that our

practice and delivery ensured the safety and wellbeing of our tenants. To help staff through this very difficult time, Barry operates a confidential helpline service to advise and reassure staff who may be suffering as a result of Covid and provided them directly with up to date advice while signposting them on action required regarding self-isolation etc.

To ensure tenant safety, Barry created bespoke risk assessments for frontline customer-facing staff allowing them to assess and complete essential maintenance safely. He worked closely with service providers to agree safety measures and relayed this to tenants resulting in increased customer confidence allowing essential compliance inspections to take place. Barry's empathetic leadership skills emerged in his direct engagement with tenants, allaying fears and providing a listening ear. The 'listen and learn' approach at micro level is evidenced in the initiative to provide personal protection packs for tenants for use when contractors were in their homes. Barry's quick thinking also facilitated successful macro level responses in securing early procurement of PPE for the staff, thereby ensuring service continuity.

To help mitigate risks for staff and tenants Barry has provided advice and training around triaging calls by our call handlers and designed and implemented a bespoke Covid tracker which actively tracks instances of COVID-19 and self-isolation cases in both staff and tenants. This allows the organisation to plan in a meaningful way appropriate action to be taken in risk situations.

While Barry has the leadership skills and ability to seek strategic solutions to difficult situations he also is hands on and he delivers well beyond what is normally expected, he has and continues to travel the length and breadth of Northern Ireland often outside working hours to ensure all staff have the appropriate PPE. He understands emphatically the link between health, safety and wellbeing and his ability to advance the latter during such trying times.

His selfless commitment to helping people and working for the safety of others has set him apart and is also evidenced by his work with outside agencies to risk assess and supervise H&S precautions in our Community hubs, allowing the distribution of food parcels to those in need during this time.

## Outcomes and achievements

There can be no doubt that while raising Covid awareness across the organisation, Barry has also provided staff and customers with practical and innovative solutions to the problems it has brought.

This has resulted in a focused tenant safety approach to all we do and his communication skills have brought an air of confidence to our frontline staff. This in turn has created an atmosphere which has allowed managed access to tenants' properties to carry out safety responsibilities and ensure the Health and Safety for them and their families.

Barry has and continues to go above and beyond in reassuring, supporting and driving meaningful change. His warmth, resilience and empathetic leadership - truly set him apart as a housing Hero.

Staff praise for Barry and all his work during this period of time has been easy to find; Habinteg's Chief Executive Darren McKinney said "Barry has shone as a leader from the start of the Covid19 Pandemic going above and beyond to assist everyone both on a strategic Board level to operationally with staff and tenants. He has worked tirelessly and has provided reassurance to everyone in some of the darkest days".

Staff: "Barry risk assessments and PPE has given us reassurance and support in very challenging times, still makes us laugh!"