

Choice News

choice 
Together we enrich lives

Issue 14, Autumn Winter

*Choice celebrating
better days ahead*




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Meet the new
Sustainability
and Energy Team

A message from Michael, our Group Chief Executive



Welcome to the Autumn/Winter edition of Choice News.

With a challenging winter ahead, our newsletter focuses on the range of support available for tenants and communities through Choice. Whether it's advice around how to manage energy costs, guidance in relation to welfare changes, help with household budgeting, or concerns about the impact of winter weather, my colleagues are ready and willing to assist. So please contact our customer services centre or use our social media platforms to reach out.

In a sign of a gradual return to pre-Covid 'normality', I was delighted to attend in person a recent sod cutting event at Fortview in Dungannon. We are investing £3.4m in this new shared housing development, with support from the Department for Communities and the NI Housing Executive. The site is located on the Mullaghmore Road in Dungannon and will provide 28 two-bedroom general needs homes in an area of increasing housing demand. Choice is delighted to lead on another mixed community scheme as we advocate for more diverse and integrated neighbourhoods.

We are also making good progress on a number of mixed tenure new build projects across the country. Working closely with our statutory partners in local and central government, Choice is committed to the creation of multi-dimensional developments, where social rented, private rented and home owners live side-by-side in high quality and affordable housing. In the view of the Choice Board, mixed tenures can provide a real foundation for settled and successful communities.

It was a pleasure to visit one of the recently refurbished void properties in the Harmin area of Glengormley over the summer. You might recall from our Spring Newsletter that Harmin was one of a number of former VHE locations where homes recently transferred to Choice. The refurbishment project is progressing well with void properties currently being upgraded across North, West and East Belfast and in North Down. These will act as essential decant properties to enable significant investment in the remaining homes.

Colleagues at Choice are delighted that despite a really difficult year, we have recently been awarded a four-star rating and classified as an 'Outstanding Organisation' by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). This is a tribute to the hard work of teams across the Group over recent months, as we try to live up to our values of being caring, committed and creative. We were the first local organisation to be assessed under a revised business excellence framework and whilst the outcome is encouraging, everyone at Choice recognises that we have so much more still to do.

Thanks for being a tenant of Choice and I hope everyone has a safe and enjoyable Christmas and New Year.

Michael McDonnell

Connect with Choice



@ChoiceHousing



@choice_housing



enquiries@choice-housing.org



EFQM®



Choice have been awarded a 4-star rating and accredited as an 'Outstanding Organisation.'



Following the tournament the charity tweeted: "So many heartbreaks over the years in competitions. We finally win a men's tournament and bring a trophy home. Now we get ready for the Homeless World Cup next year where we take on 48 other countries. Let's go NI!!!"

Street Soccer Success

Northern Ireland's street soccer men's team returned home with a trophy after winning the inaugural Four Nations Challenge Cup in September this year.

The team, made up of eight men from homeless and disadvantaged backgrounds, beat England 7-3 to win the UK-wide event. Along with the Housing Executive, Choice were proud sponsors of the team.

The two-day tournament in Edinburgh took the form of four-a-side matches, with each game lasting 14 minutes.

Street Soccer NI took 16 people to Scotland for the tournament, with the women's team also reaching the final but missing out to England, despite defeating them in a previous round.



Street Soccer NI's co-founder, Justin McMinn said that they don't yet know the location of the 2022 Homeless World Cup, but are excited to attend as it was cancelled last year due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

"England actually beat us in the group so they were a tough team, and then we just raised our game and hammered them in the final. We've only brought the one trophy home but both teams did great," he said. Street Soccer NI works with 150 people every week, offering free access to football sessions.

After players engage, they are offered help with housing, employment, education, addiction and more. The charity holds weekly football sessions in Belfast, Derry~Londonderry and Coleraine, and plans to branch out to Strabane and Downpatrick.

We are delighted to announce that Choice has recently been awarded the Committed to Excellence Award through EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management).

EFQM Committed to Excellence is an assessment and recognition scheme that helps organisations introduce an excellence initiative and deliver improved results. The aim of the programme is to benchmark the organisations' processes, systems and performance against the EFQM Excellence Model, and best practice, in order to provide a clear overview of strengths and areas for improvement.

Based on the programme, Choice effectively developed appropriate strategies to address key improvement priorities that will enhance performance and, in achieving this award, we have demonstrated improved levels of organisational development and customer service.

We are always aiming to improve our services in any way we can and are delighted to be able to show our customers and service users that we are committed to continual progression and development.

Well done to all Choice staff involved in achieving this award!



New £3.4m 'Housing for All' Scheme cuts its first sod in Dungannon

A new £3.4m shared housing development in Dungannon has been launched by Choice Housing in partnership with the Department for Communities, NI Housing Executive and Westland Developments (NI). The 'Fortview shared housing development' on Mullaghmore Road in Dungannon is a general needs housing scheme and will provide 28 new two-bedroom homes.

Housing for All is the Department for Communities and Housing Executive's Shared Housing Programme, and it forms part of the Programme for Government. The new development is expected to be completed by October 2022, contributing to the growing demand for housing in the area.

Choice continues to work in partnership with local statutory, community and voluntary sectors as well as engaging with a wide range of other local stakeholders and residents to develop the scheme's good relations plan. The Plan will include key initiatives and projects tailored for the Fortview community and for residents from surrounding communities. Nurturing these partnerships is a vital element of delivering shared housing options.

Michael McDonnell, Group Chief Executive of Choice said, "Developments such as Fortview allow us to engage extensively with tenants, residents and community groups to identify community projects and initiatives that will be a benefit to that area. This is all part of the shared housing approach promoting meaningful engagement between residents and surrounding communities."

"There are almost 2,000 people on the housing waiting list in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency, of which more than 1,200 are in housing stress."

Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey said: "Increasing our supply of social housing for those who need homes is a priority for me and is why I am committed to delivering more homes, to the areas they are needed most. Everyone has the right to a home and I am pleased to see that with significant support from my Department, this development will deliver 28 new two-bedroom homes to help meet housing need in Dungannon. This Housing for All scheme will also mean that housing continues to play its part in delivering a more shared society."

Fortview is supported by the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's 'Housing for All' Shared Housing Programme. The Programme has its origins in the NI Executive Together: Building a United Community Strategy which reflects the Executive's commitment to improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society. £3.4m has been invested in the Fortview shared housing development and associated five-year Good Relations Plan which is aimed at developing meaningful community relationships.

Choice provides a mix of supported, sheltered and general needs housing across Northern Ireland, providing over 12,000 homes across the region. The association currently operates five shared housing developments across Northern Ireland, alongside Fortview, these include developments in Ballynahinch, Saintfield, Ballymena and Lisburn.

The Fortview Good Relations Plan includes 'Bridging' events which are delivered to the wider community to encourage a range of good relations outcomes which include Health and Wellbeing, Education and Training showcasing the many benefits this type of housing can have on our communities.



Clare Cosgrove, Choice Good Relations Officer, Liam Lavery, Policy & Project Manager of DfC Shared Housing Programme, Michael McDonnell, Choice Group Chief Executive and Richard Mealey, Choice Community Development Manager.

"Increasing our supply of social housing for those who need homes is a priority for me and is why I am committed to delivering more homes, to the areas they are needed most. Everyone has the right to a home and I am pleased to see that with significant support from my Department, this development will deliver 28 new two-bedroom homes to help meet housing need in Dungannon. This Housing for All scheme will also mean that housing continues to play its part in delivering a more shared society."

Communities Minister, Deirdre Hargey



Michael McDonnell Choice Group Chief Executive and Liam Lavery, Policy & Project Manager of DfC Shared Housing Programme

Choice showcase £660K transformation of Harmin and Farmley Park

We have unveiled the first of our newly refurbished former VHE properties acquired as part of a stock transfer last year. The ten refurbished properties in Harmin Avenue, Harmin Drive and Farmley Park, Glengormley were void at the time of the transfer and will now be used as decant housing to facilitate upgrades to occupied properties also part of the transfer.

Upgrading works to the occupied properties are expected to commence later this year, with a completion date of Spring 2023. Following completion of these upgrades, the properties in Harmin and Farmley Park will then be made available to let. As part of the transfer agreement between ourselves and VHE, the properties which moved to our ownership have been included in a £25m renovation and refurbishment programme. Our team were joined by partners including Department for Communities (DfC) and contractor Fusion Heating to unveil the new properties.

The £660K refurbishment of the properties in Glengormley included new roofs, kitchen and bathroom installations, all new electrical and heating installations, new UPVC DG windows and composite SBD external doors, upgrade of fiberglass insulation and external site works. This extensive upgrade ensured that our new properties not only meet the Decent Homes Standard but align with the quality services currently provided to more than 12,000 Choice tenants across Northern Ireland.

Communities Minister Deirdre Hargey said: "Increasing our supply of social housing for individuals and families in need is a key priority for me and is why I am taking forward the biggest reform of social housing in over 50 years. It is pleasing to see ten previously void properties brought up to a high standard of living and available for those who need them".

Geraldine Reynolds, Deputy Principal in Social Housing Policy Housing Division and Michael McDonnell, Choice Group Chief Executive.

Andrew Lamont, Planned Maintenance Manager, Lorna Brown, Asset Project Liaison Officer and Chris Graham, Building Surveyor.



Choice Group Chief Executive, Michael McDonnell said, "Following the transfer agreement last year, we worked to agree a programme of refurbishments specifically for the void properties that would allow tenants to move into a safe and upgraded home whilst more intensive work was carried out on their properties. Our priority now is to complete the next phase of refurbishment which formed part of our agreement with tenants and for which we consulted extensively with them. It is great to be here to see all the hard work come together and I must pay tribute to my own team as well as, key partners who together made this phase 1 refurbishment programme a success."

Choice Secures £50m loan to further invest in Social Housing

Choice has announced that we have secured a £50m loan from bLEND Funding Plc which will allow us to further invest in our social homes provision across Northern Ireland. The transaction between Choice and The Housing Finance Corporation (THFC) and their bLEND funding framework was completed in August which secured the funding at an effective rate of 2.14% fixed until April 2054.

Borrowing at such a low rate provides the stability for us to continue to invest and grow in our social housing offering whilst managing risks associated with for example, the impact of a global pandemic.

We are one of the largest independent housing associations in Northern Ireland currently operate over 12,000 properties in the region will use this funding stream to fund our Social New Build Programme aimed at delivering over 800 new social homes over the next 2-3 years.

Choice Group Chief Executive, Michael McDonnell said, "We are pleased to announce this new funding from THFC/bLEND, a first for Northern Ireland. As a result of this arrangement, we were able to access the capital markets quickly and effectively and fixed our cost of long-term finance at historically low rates.

"The pandemic has impacted every sector across society and social housing is no exception and whilst our performance in terms of meeting our social homes targets has been good, particularly in maintaining a high level of service provision during the pandemic, multiple lockdowns has had an impact on our development plans.

Choice Group Chief Executive, Michael McDonnell said, "We engaged with THFC to find a tailored, competitive financing solution that aligned with our wider business objectives but that ultimately provided us with the freedom to invest more in our social housing pipeline."

As an existing borrower from THFC group, Choice Housing's bLEND loan indicates the strengthening of a longstanding relationship, and bLEND's entry to the Northern Irish social housing sector.

Piers Williamson, CEO of bLEND and parent company The Housing Finance Corporation (THFC), said: "Not only does bLEND provide quick and easy access to long-term funding at very competitive rates, but it now offers a reliable deferred drawdown option, allowing our borrowers to take advantage of the current rates environment to meet future funding needs".

Choice was supported throughout the process by Savills Financial Consultants. Alex Morgan, Director at Savills Financial Consultants added,

"This is a fantastic outcome for Choice and reflects another successful step in their funding strategy. Savills Financial Consultants are delighted to have supported Choice throughout this transaction, which is the first Northern Irish participation in the bLEND Programme".



Post Office card accounts are closing... find out what this means for you!

Got a Post Office Card Account?

Here's what you need to do- Post Office Card Accounts are to close in Northern Ireland meaning 51,000 people need to find a new account for benefits and pension payments.

If you have a Post Office Card Account the Department for Communities is advising you to withdraw your money from your post office account and then update your details by contacting the Department for Work and Pensions on Freephone **0800-085-7133**.

If you need to arrange withdrawing any remaining balance and move to another account, you will have to arrange this directly with Post Office on Freephone number **0345 722 3344**.

Universal Credit claimants: can update their bank account details via your online account or if you need telephone support contact 0800 012 1331.

You can find more information about the Post Office Card Account closure from the Advice NI:

<https://www.adviceni.net/policy/publications/payment-exception-services-post-office-card-accounts>

There is also information on NI Direct: How benefits and pensions are paid | nidirect

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/post-office-card-accounts>



The Post Office card account service will close in November 2022.



House Sales Scheme Ending midnight 27 August 2022



As many of our tenants are aware, legislation has been passed in the Northern Ireland Assembly which has resulted in the forthcoming end of the statutory House Sales Scheme. This legislation means that Choice tenants will need to apply to the scheme before midnight on 27 August 2022 should they wish to purchase their property. **Choice tenants will no longer be able to avail of the statutory House Sales Scheme after midnight 27 August 2022.**

Choice completed a mailing to tenants in eligible properties in October and have had many enquiries since then with tenants contacting us to check their eligibility to purchase before the August deadline. We have listed below some of the most common queries which have come up in relation to the end of the scheme and the house sales scheme in general.

When will the House Sales Scheme end?

The House Sales Scheme will end at midnight on 27 August 2022. Tenants who are eligible and wish to apply to buy their home must ensure that their application is received by Choice before this date. Choice Housing will not take any responsibility for applications not received, lost, delayed or received after this deadline. Applications received after this date cannot be accepted.

How do I know if I am eligible to buy my property?

Tenants must have a minimum of five years tenancy with Choice Housing or other qualifying landlord to be eligible to apply for the House Sales Scheme. (Please note restrictions below.)

Full eligibility criteria, including the list of all qualifying landlords, is detailed in the House Sales Scheme Guide to Tenants which you can download from our website or request via post or email. Please note that Victoria Housing Estates is not a qualifying landlord.

The property must be the tenant's only or principal residence.

Who cannot buy?

The following property types are excluded from the scheme:

- Tenants of sheltered/group dwellings.
- Tenants of 1 and 2 bed bungalows.

Instances of tenancy misconduct may restrict your ability to purchase.

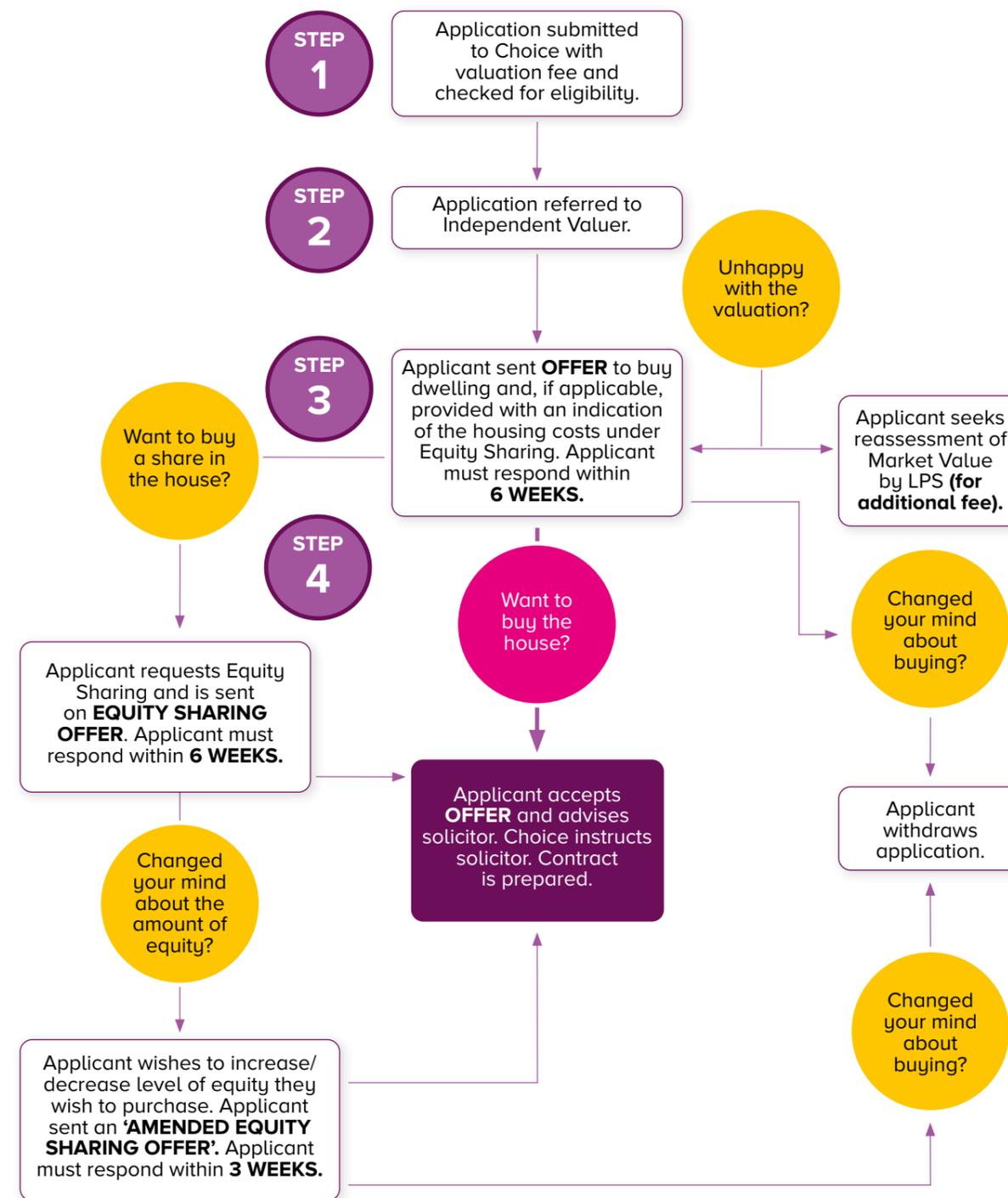
Am I entitled to a tenancy discount?

Tenants may be eligible for a discount depending on a range of factors including the age of the property in which you reside. For example if your home was built/purchased within the last 11 years, discount may not be applicable. This scenario is referred to as Historic costs and is detailed in the House Sales Scheme Guide to Tenants.

What if I have bought equity in my home and wish to buy more after the Scheme has ended?

If you have previously bought some equity in your home you will still be able to purchase more equity after 27 August 2022. The reason for this is because you entered the House Sales Scheme including equity sharing before the date the scheme was abolished.

House Sales Incorporating Equity Sharing Process - Main Steps



How do I get more information?

If you would like more information and to find out if you are eligible to purchase your home, you can contact Choice Housing in the following ways:
Call on 0300 111 2211 for an application pack, and we will send this out to you by post,
Email: treasuryteam@choice-housing.org, Visit our website at www.choice-housing.org for House Sales Scheme information and to view and download an application pack including the House Sales Scheme Guide to Tenants. For the official guidance on the House Sales Scheme visit the Department for Communities website at www.communities-ni.gov.uk/disposal-housing-association-property

Shared Housing Scheme welcomes new residents to Lisburn

Residents of a new shared housing scheme were recently welcomed by neighbours and some special guests at an event in Hull's Hill in Lisburn.

Hull's Hill is one of five Shared Housing schemes which are operated by Choice. The new development has 17 properties, delivering much needed social housing to the local area. Shared Housing is an NI Executive commitment through their Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) Strategy and we have committed to providing this type of housing provision to communities across Northern Ireland.

The welcome event allowed new tenants to meet with neighbours and encourage relationship building aimed at creating strong community ties. During the event, a mobile petting zoo as well as catered lunch was provided to facilitate new residents getting to know their new area and neighbours in a relaxed and fun environment.

Michael McDonnell, Group Chief Executive of Choice said, "Shared Housing is an important part of our work, aimed at improving good relations and building a more shared and united society. Shared neighbourhoods bring a range of positive and sustainable benefits not only for our tenants but the wider local community.

"Schemes such as Hull's Hill allow us to engage extensively with tenants, residents and community groups to identify community projects and initiatives that will be a benefit to that area. These 'bridging initiatives' are used to promote meaningful engagement between residents and surrounding communities showcasing the many benefits this type of housing can have on our communities.

"In delivering Hull's Hill and our four other share housing schemes currently operational in NI, significant collaboration and partnership took place across the statutory and community and voluntary sector as well as engagement with a wide range of relevant stakeholders. Nurturing these partnerships is a vital element of delivering shared housing."

Hull's Hill consists of 17 properties which includes a mix of 2 and 3 bedroom apartment and houses. Choice currently operates five shared housing schemes in total, alongside Hull's Hill this also includes Ballymaglave Court in Ballynahinch, Manse Court in Saintfield, Nursery Close in Ballymena and a new scheme in development on the Mullaghmore Road in Dungannon.

Choice Group Chief Executive, Michael McDonnell added, "It is encouraging to see that tenants and the wider community are open to being involved in schemes such as Hull's Hill. Providing these opportunities and collaborating with a range of local organisations allow people to learn together, live together work together and socialise together. Through this tailored approach to shared housing, providing quality housing for all reflects the vision and future of social housing in Northern Ireland."

Choice Group Chief Executive, Michael McDonnell said, "Shared Housing is an important part of our work, aimed at improving good relations and building a more shared and united society. Shared neighbourhoods bring a range of positive and sustainable benefits not only for our tenants but the wider local community."



Green Fingers in the North West



Our Community Development team are always on the go and during the Summer they were with some of our tenants in the North West.

Planting workshops at Strand Road and Clements Court Derry~Londonderry, were held safely bringing the community together to reconnect in the outdoors after a difficult year. These informal events are a great way for our Community Development team to listen to and take on board the ideas of our tenants and wider community, ensuring that policies and services are more responsive to changing needs and aspirations.

If you would like to arrange a similar event or to talk to our community development team about events for your area please contact **Anne McAllister** on **0300 111 2211** or email enquiries@choice-housing.org

Getting Involved with your Community

We loved being part of a Community Information event with Lagan Valley Youth Community Group in October to showcase our services and ways for the local community to get involved with Choice!



Good Relations Week 2021

This year Good Relations Week took place in September. This annual week long campaign shines a light on the peace building and cultural diversity efforts of young people and the challenges they are facing.

Good Relations Week is the celebration of the work that goes on all year round to build peace and good community relationships. The week's activities are drawn together by the Community Relations Council with the help of a steering group made up of representatives from The Executive Office, Department for Communities, Department of Justice, Education Authority, Libraries NI, Cathedral Quarter Trust, and the Nerve Centre.

During Good Relations Week, Choice held a number of events across the province in Ballynahinch, Belfast and Lisburn. Our events invited participants to take part in art, dance, music and more. Our workshops were facilitated by fantastic partners from Wheels Works Art, Food at Fired and Gathering Drum.

One event in partnership with Ballymacash Regeneration Network, saw a group of young people from Ballymacash take part in a trip to Colin Glen where they had the opportunity to use the newly opened Black Bull toboggan course and zip wire course. The participants truly stepped outside of their comfort zone.

The theme for this year's showcase 'Brighter Days Ahead' focused on the ability of young people to act as a catalyst for meaningful change in our society. It also explored how society can better meet the needs of young people and tackled some of the difficult issues affecting their lives today including: mental health, isolation, education, and abuse.

Our event at Assumption Grammar was an explosion of art and creativity, children were treated to a Chinese Dragon display, tasted Asian cuisine and crafted with friends and neighbours.

Richard Mealey, Community Development Manager said: *"Good Relations Week is a key event in our annual calendar, one that both staff and tenants very much look forward to. Throughout the week the events make a real positive impact as so many people come together, connect and enjoy their community."*



Are You Using a video-equipped doorbell device or CCTV system?

The installation of a video-equipped doorbell (ring doorbell) or CCTV requires written permission from Choice and must be in accordance with the Association's policy on alterations.

The following advice from GOV.UK's website will help you to understand what you need to do if you are considering installing, or have already installed, a CCTV system (or similar technology, such as video-equipped doorbell devices) on your home. A CCTV system includes the camera, storage, recording and all associated equipment.

Information Commissioner's Office

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) regulates and enforces the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA).

If your CCTV system or doorbell captures images of people outside the boundary of your private domestic property – for example, from neighbours' homes or gardens, shared spaces such as corridors, or from public areas – then the GDPR and the DPA will apply to you. You will need to ensure your use of CCTV complies with these laws. If you do not you may be subject to appropriate regulatory action by the ICO which can include a fine, as well as potential legal action by affected individuals.

The ICO has published guidance on the use of domestic CCTV and a CCTV checklist, which will help you to better understand and meet your obligations under data protection law. It is important that you read this guidance as well as the checklist, as this provides a fuller explanation of your obligations under data protection law. The ICO has also published guidance for people being filmed by domestic CCTV.

If you have any questions about the use of domestic CCTV, you can contact the ICO <https://ico.org.uk/global/contact-us/> or call 0303 123 1113. If you are unhappy about the use of a domestic CCTV system, use the ICO's online tool to determine the best course of action in your situation.

You may be considering using a CCTV system as a necessary means to protect your property from acts of crime and anti-social behaviour. A domestic CCTV system needs to be operated in a responsible way that respects the privacy of others.

Below is a list of general considerations to help you reduce the risk of your CCTV system intruding on the privacy of others.

1. Reasons for considering a CCTV system

Think about:

- why do I need CCTV?
- could I use another means to protect my home, such as improved lighting?
- what do I want my CCTV system to view and record (this could be the front door, a parking space, the back yard, a shed, and so on)?
- does it need to record all the time?
- does it need to record audio?

2. How your CCTV system affects others

It is important to consider the privacy of others.

Ask yourself:

- where will I position the CCTV to minimise intrusion into my neighbours' and other people's privacy?
- will the range of the cameras include my neighbours' property, gardens, pavements or other areas? If so, you could consider systems that can reduce intrusion, such as those which have privacy filters
- how will my neighbours feel about my CCTV?

3. Letting people know about your CCTV system

Ensure that you are transparent to those around you when installing your CCTV system. You can do this by: informing your neighbour(s) about your system and/or putting up a notice informing people that recording is taking place.

4. Taking responsibility for your CCTV system

If you are thinking of installing a CCTV system on your property, and it records images beyond your private domestic property, you must be aware of your responsibilities:

- it is your responsibility to make sure that the CCTV system is installed correctly
- you are also responsible for all the information that is recorded by your system
- you must make sure that the information is not used for any other purpose than protecting your property
- make sure you read the manual, and if necessary, ask your installer to show you how to operate it and how to export footage if required
- you will need to be aware of individuals' data protection rights and make sure you take steps to allow the people you record to exercise these rights effectively (for example, you will need to respond appropriately to any subject access requests you receive from the people you record).

5. Storing the recorded information

Ensure you bear the following in mind when storing the information you record on your CCTV system:

- you should make sure that the date and time on your system are accurate
- it is important to check that you have enough recording space
- you should not store any information or images for longer than is necessary to protect your property which means you should delete the information once it is no longer required
- you should make sure that the information recorded is used only for the purpose for which your system was installed (for example it will not be appropriate to share any recordings on social



6. Maintenance

Once you have installed your CCTV system, you should regularly check that:

- you are complying with the GDPR and the DPA if your CCTV system captures images outside the boundaries of your home
- you regularly delete the recordings and do not keep them for longer than is necessary for the protection of your property
- your CCTV system is still needed
- it is important that you check your system regularly to make sure that it is working properly (this may include cleaning any debris affecting the CCTV device and wiping it down after bad weather)
- you should also check the position of your CCTV device from time to time to make sure it still captures the right images and privacy intrusion is minimised.

For more information visit:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/domestic-cctv-using-cctv-systems-on-your-property/domestic-cctv-using-cctv-systems-on-your-property><https://ico.org.uk/your-data-matters/domestic-cctv-systems-guidance-for-people-using-cctv/>

Winter Weather Advice

Protecting your home from extreme cold weather is vital during the winter months. This information will help you prepare and assist you if you experience any problems during the cold weather.

It is important to recognise that when there is extreme weather and subsequent high call volume we will prioritise repairs such as complete heating failure where there are young children, elderly or people with medical or mobility problems. Due to call volume, access difficulties or where other agencies are responsible, repairs may not be completed within the designated time frames. Once you have reported your repair, try to avoid repeat calls to our Services Centre. Our contractors will deal with repairs issued in order of priority.

We appreciate that this may be a difficult time for tenants and your co-operation is very much appreciated.

Prevent your pipes from freezing

The following tips will help stop the pipes in your home from freezing:

- Turn your heating on for short periods throughout the day and night.
- Leave the heating on at a low level when you are away from home. This can be done by lowering the main heating control thermostat and turning thermostatic radiator valves down but not off. Consider leaving a key with a family member, friend or neighbour who can check your home regularly.
- Don't leave taps dripping or running as the water in waste pipes can freeze.
- Allow hot air from the main house into the loft, this may mean opening a trap door during extreme cold periods.
- Open the cupboard under the sink to ensure warm air can circulate round the piping.
- Ensure that all doors throughout the house are slightly open for warm air to flow around the house.

How to deal with frozen pipes

Most frozen pipes are found in the roof space and below sink units.

- Turn the water supply off at the stopcock. The stopcock is a valve for turning off and on the cold water system in your home. Stopcocks are

usually found in your kitchen below the sink unit. However, in some houses the stopcock is found in a front or back hall. Please ensure that you know where the stopcock is located. You can shut off the supply by turning the stopcock in a clockwise direction. To turn the supply back on, turn the stopcock in an anti-clockwise direction. We recommend that you test the stopcock now to ensure it operates.

- To thaw frozen pipes put hotwater bottles or a thick cloth soaked in hot water over the frozen pipe. A hairdryer at its lowest setting can also be used. Please be careful not to warm the pipes too quickly as this may lead to the pipe bursting. It is important that you thaw along the pipe starting from the end nearest the tap which you should open.



What to do if a pipe bursts

- Turn off the stopcock by turning it clockwise
- Try to block the escaping water with thick cloths such as towels to stop the leak spreading.
- Turn off your central heating, immersion heater and any other water heating systems.
- Once you have shutdown your water heating, turn

To report burst pipes
please contact the
Choice Services
Centre on
0300 111 2211

on all your taps to drain the system. Flushing your toilet several times may help.

- If water leaks near anything electrical switch off the mains electricity immediately. If the mains switch is wet, don't touch it as you risk electrocution.
- If water has been leaking for some time and ceilings are bulging, the room may not be safe to enter. If the ceiling has started to bulge or water is leaking through a ceiling, you could punch a small hole in the ceiling with a screwdriver. Use a bucket or basin to collect dripping water.

COMMON FAULTS WITH GAS HEATING

Frozen condensate pipes

Modern boilers produce significant volumes of condensate (water) which normally discharges into a gully. In very cold weather this condensate may freeze particularly where it discharges to an external gully. To prevent this you can place a hot water bottle on the pipe close to where it discharges (this advice also applies to some oil boilers). In exceptional circumstances we may need to disconnect the condensate pipe internally and allow it to drain into a basin. The basin will need to be emptied regularly and the pipe reconnected when the weather improves.

Frozen gas regulators

There may be a small amount of water vapour in the gas regulator which if it freezes will cause the gas supply to your boiler to fail. You should cover your meter with a towel or old clothing to provide some

insulation. Place a hot water bottle on the regulator (grey metal fitting on the top left hand side of the meter) and remove once it has thawed any ice. Dry the regulator immediately.

Home Contents Insurance

Please be aware that it is your responsibility to insure your home contents. Choice insures the buildings only. Any damage to your personal property, including flooring and decoration, regardless of the cause, is not insured by Choice.

Help your neighbour

During extreme weather conditions please check on your neighbours if they are elderly, have a disability or are housebound as it can be a difficult time for them to get out and about. A friendly visit from a neighbour will be appreciated.

Further advice is available from your gas supplier and water service, which may include helpful hints and video tutorials.

How can I find out more?

For further information please contact Choice at:
Choice Housing Ireland Limited
Leslie Morrell House,
37-41 May St, Belfast,
BT1 4DN Tel: 0300 111 2211
Email: enquiries@choice-housing.org

Meet the new Sustainability and Energy Team

We are pleased to introduce Daniel Egerton, our Sustainability & Energy Manager. Here's what Daniel has to say about his new role with Choice.

"Choice have a longstanding history for delivering above and beyond in tackling fuel poverty and managing energy. Such successes have resulted in a reputation for sector leading environmental stewardship, and to be given the opportunity to be part of this organisation's future is both exciting and daunting. As I strive to pick up the reigns from the legacy that the former Energy Manager built, the sustainability issues that we all face have never been more present nor time sensitive. Thankfully, in the short time I have been with Choice it has become clear that this is an organisation eager to face these challenges head on and lead a socially just Climate transition to Net Zero.

Although the pathway to Net Zero is not laid out in perfect detail, we must collectively ensure that this transition protects the most vulnerable in society, whilst addressing the Climate Crisis with urgency. Although I view the Climate Crisis as the greatest threat of our time, I also believe that the only way to overcome this enormous challenge is to put people in the driving seat for change. In aspiring to this goal I hope that we can all embody the spirit and make the most of the opportunities we have in delivering a prosperous and green future for all.

I look forward to working alongside you in making this change a reality!"

Daniel Egerton,
Sustainability &
Energy Manager



From left: David McNeill, Building Services Engineer, Daniel Egerton, Sustainability and Energy Manager and Connor Heaney, Energy Officer



Electricity prices are increasing

Electricity prices are increasing for all consumers and unfortunately this will also affect the Association's electricity consumption for communal areas in housing schemes. As your landlord we have shopped around to try and find the best deal for our tenants but unfortunately these rising costs are beyond our control and will have implications for your service charge next year.

When will the cost increase appear in my bill?

The cost increase will be reflected in the 2022 service charge calculation alongside other costs, and will be issued to tenants from April 2022 onwards.

How much extra will I have to pay?

The cost increase to the electricity will vary depending on several factors and will be determined in the first months of 2022. We will inform you as soon as we have this information.

If you do not have an individual electricity meter in your property and therefore pay a weekly electricity charge to Choice the cost increase indicated in this letter will relate to electricity consumed in your property as well as to the electricity for communal areas of the building which is included within your service charge.

Why are electricity costs going up?

Energy is expensive at present due to several issues within the global energy market, some of which are a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Energy production reduced during the pandemic as demand for energy dropped when countries went into lockdown. After lockdowns came to an end, energy demand increased which has resulted in a global shortage of energy.

This means our suppliers are paying more to purchase energy and this cost is passed on to Choice and our tenants.

What is Choice doing as my landlord to help keep costs down?

Choice tender for landlord electricity through a competitive exercise, suppliers provide their best price in this tendering exercise and suppliers who provide the lowest cost are awarded the contract.

To get help with electricity costs Choice recommend that you:

- Contact our Financial Inclusion Team on 0300 111 2211 or email financialinclusion@choice-housing.org to ensure that you are receiving all available support.
- If you purchase your home electricity via direct debit or key pad, your supplier may be able to provide additional financial assistance. Choice advise that you contact them if you are struggling with your bills.
- Visit our website for energy advice www.choice-housing.org/energy which includes tips on reducing your energy usage, how to manage your heating systems and getting the best deal with your supplier.

For further advice speak to your Housing Officer or Scheme Coordinator if you live in a sheltered housing scheme. For energy advice contact our Sustainability and Energy team on 0300 111 2211 or email energy@choice-housing.org

Help with your money



Money Advice
for our Tenants



Feedback from tenants who we have helped this year:

“Thank you for all your help in dealing with our housing benefit issue. You were a wee angel.”

“I cannot tell you how much I appreciate the effort for my family.”

“We had struggled for some time and did not understand the benefit system, thank you for helping.”



As we move through autumn towards winter we appreciate that many of our tenants may experience financial difficulties. For many, job security and the impact of the pandemic on personal finances are a primary concern, especially when we have now seen an end to the furlough scheme, recent increases in energy prices and the removal of the top up from Universal Credit. At Choice we are ready to support all our tenants through what will be a challenging few months.

Our Financial Inclusion Team are on hand and available to speak to you should you have any questions or feel you would like practical advice about money issues.

Personal finances can be a challenge to confront, but our dedicated team are always sensitive and discrete. The Financial Inclusion Team have been able to use their combined experience over many years, responding quickly and creatively to tenants' concerns. The team are delivering value for money for both the organisation and tenants alike. In the last year the team helped tenants access 2.7 million in financial gains, such as:

- Benefit maximisation and help applying for financial uplifts
- Housing benefit entitlements checks and assistance to increase this were possible
- Securing grants to help set up home
- Support for tenants in arrears by establishing sustainable repayment plans based on the tenants personal budget
- Applications to benevolent funds
- Support with Universal Credit applications and maintenance of claims.



It's much easier for us
to help if you get in
touch straight away.

Give us a call and see how we can help.

0300 111 2211

Anti-social Behaviour

Support for our customers

Choice appointed Insec Security to provide assistance to tenants whenever problems are encountered in relation to Anti-social Behaviour (ASB). This may include problems with excessive noise or threatening behaviour.

Insec Security
028 9020 0080

Please note the following:

- This service is only available to Choice tenants **OUTSIDE OFFICE HOURS**.
- Tenants should continue to report all cases of ASB to the Services Centre on 0300 111 2211, during normal office hours.
- Any tenant who has concerns for their own safety, or believes that a crime has been committed, should contact the PSNI.
- Tenants living in sheltered housing schemes should continue to report all cases of ASB directly to their

Scheme Co-ordinator or to the Services Centre on 0300 111 2211, during normal office hours.

- Insec Security will only visit the person who is causing the ASB.

INSEC WILL NOT VISIT THE TENANT MAKING THE COMPLAINT. THIS PROCESS IS TO ENSURE CONFIDENTIALITY IS MAINTAINED.

Please contact the Association if you require further information regarding this service.

Look out for the Tenants' Forum Calendar 2022

Our Editorial Team have been working hard on the Tenants' Forum Calendar 2022. We hope you enjoy it and find it useful throughout 2022!

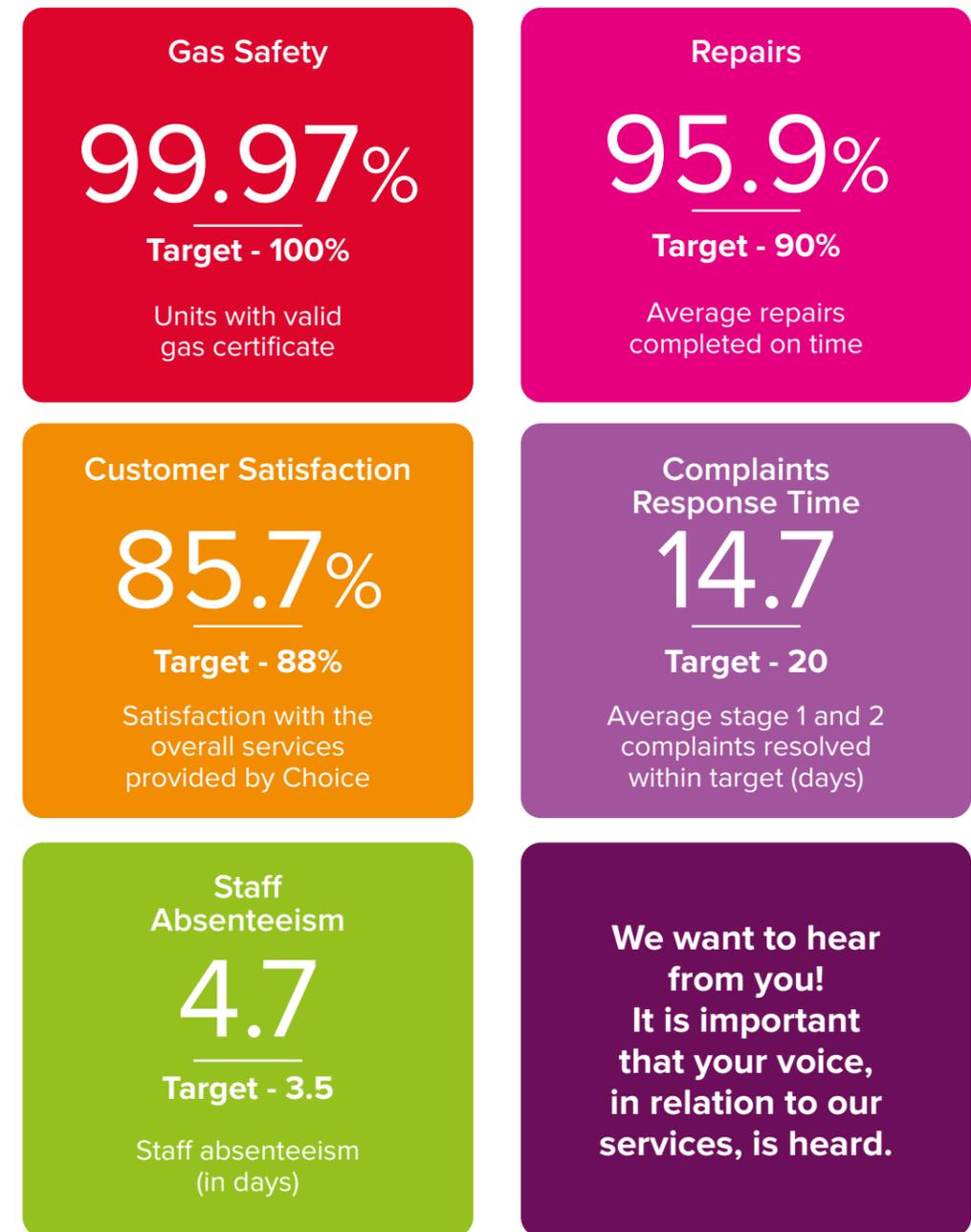
If you would like to join our Editorial Team and contribute your ideas to our tenant publications, please contact our Community Development Team on: **0300 111 2211** or email enquiries@choice-housing.org



How we're performing

Choice are at the forefront in the provision of social housing and are committed to delivering quality housing and excellent customer services that enhance the lives of customers and communities.

It is important that your voice, in relation to our services, is heard as the feedback that we receive is vital for Choice to identify and correct any problems within our service delivery and to ensure that we meet the needs of all our customers.



Performance figures are for the period April - October 2021

Delivering New Homes In 2021

We are working on new housing developments across Northern Ireland to deliver much needed homes.

Hull's Hill, Lisburn

Choice, with support from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive have provided much needed social housing on the Moira Road, Lisburn, where demand for quality affordable social housing is high.

The development, named Hull's Hill, located at 198-200 Moira Road was completed on 29 June 2021 providing 17 new homes consisting of:

- 4no. 4-person 2-bedroom apartments
- 4no. 3-person 2-bedroom apartments
- 1no. 6-person 3-bedroom house
- 8no. 5-person 3-bedroom house



227 Woodstock Road, Belfast

This new attractive scheme was the location of the former Willowfield PSNI Station which had been disused for a number of years and had fallen into disrepair. After social need had been identified for CAT1 apartments, Michael Whitley Architects were successful in the IDT Mini Competition with an ambitious scheme of 19 two bedroom apartments including 2 wheelchair apartments, along with a landscaped decorative rear courtyard. MJ McBride were appointed as the building contractor in February 2019.

On the corner of Woodstock Road and Willowfield Drive, the design is three storeys on the Woodstock elevation and two storeys on Willowfield, reflective of the prevailing character and streetscape, and built in traditional red brick.

There are two separate lift cores; one serving the 9 apartments in the Woodstock elevation and the other 8 on Willowfield Drive with the two wheelchair apartments having their own doors. There are two internal communal mobility scooter stores with individual charging points. The shape of the site and necessity to locate the structures as per the existing building line lent itself to a courtyard area to the rear which has been landscaped featuring decorative paving, pergolas and numerous trees and raised beds creating an enviable external environment for tenants.

The scheme was successfully handed over to Choice on 19 August 2021 and within budget at £2,282,000.



Out & About

Choice has more than 12,000 tenants, over 400 staff and works with numerous partners and stakeholders; so it's no surprise that there is always plenty of activity going on in all the communities we support.

Read our Out & About section to find out more and don't forget to let us know about your events!



WEDDING BELLS

Wedding bells rung at Craignagore in Newcastle for our tenant Stephen Hammerton who recently tied the knot with his beautiful bride Mary! Many congratulations to you both!



MEMORY LANE GARDEN

Choice were delighted to attend the opening of "Memory Lane", a newly created Sensory Garden located at The Croft in Newtownabbey with Praxis Care. The garden is a wonderful addition for tenants at the supported living scheme to enjoy!



BELFAST CITY MARATHON

The Choice Belfast City Marathon relay teams raised £2155 for our fantastic charities: Action Cancer and Alzheimer's Society. We are grateful for every penny donated, thank you to everyone who supported us!



COLOURING COMPETITION

Congratulations to Maci-Lee Clarke from Clougher for winning the colouring competition!

Maci-Lee's creativity and imagination really shone through her entry, which impressed the judges. We hope that Maci-Lee and her family enjoy her prize of a £40 voucher to Streamvale Open Farm.



LILIAN IS ON THE MOVE!

After 35 years, Lillian Scott is moving on from Elm Court, Belfast.

Lillian moved into the Sheltered Living Scheme in 1986 just a couple of months after it opened. Over the years Lillian has become an integral part of life at Elm Court and she will be missed greatly by both her neighbours and Choice staff, all of whom were able to send her off in style. At 97 years young she is taking her glamour and good cheer to Taylors Court in Belvoir and everyone at Choice wishes her happiness in her new home.

Time for a new home!

Out & About



BENMORE BANANA BREAD

Busy bee at Benmore Court in Belfast, bakes banana bread! Our talented scheme co-ordinator at Benmore Court delivers tasty treats every 2 weeks for all tenants.



GROW YOUR OWN AT MEDWAY COURT

Tenants at Medway Court in Belfast have created a wonderful community herb garden for all to enjoy!



HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

A very special happy birthday to Miss Christina Jordan from Medway Court in Belfast. Christina is our oldest tenant at Choice who recently turned 104!

CONGRATULATIONS! TENANT REPAIR FEEDBACK WINNER ANNOUNCED.

Mrs Martha Dickson at Elmgrove Manor in East Belfast has won the Tenant Repair Feedback voucher. Martha completed and returned a short survey about a recent repair, each completed survey is entered into a prize draw. At Choice we are committed to delivering excellent customer service, and we use the information gathered from tenant repair feedback surveys to improve our services and build on what we are doing well.



Kind food donations

CONNSWATER COMMUNITY SPIRIT

A huge thank you to Connswater Community Centre who kindly donated food hampers to our tenants at Tamar Court in Belfast. Our tenants were delighted with the hampers and the generosity of their local community!

A FOND FAREWELL FROM HILL COURT

Lisa Flynn is moving on from Hill Court, Lurgan. Lisa has worked at Hill Court as a cleaner for the last 5 years, during this time she has built up a friendly relationship with every tenant. Although the staff and tenants were very sorry to see her go, she has promised that she will continue to visit every now and again. Hill Court has already welcomed their new cleaner Aideen, who has been welcomed into her new role and is settling in well.



Blooming Marvellous!

Stephen Dougal, Windemere Pass, Lisburn, wins our coveted Best Kept Garden Award 2021. Stephen takes a creative and meticulous approach to his beautiful garden in the city.

Many of us are spending more time outside in local green space and in gardens, this is great to see as gardening has such a positive impact. Gardening can improve cognitive functioning and emotional well-being; reduce depression, anxiety, obesity and heart disease; increase life satisfaction, quality of life and sense of community; and support recovery from illness, reduce stress, blood pressure and muscle tension.

Our Best Kept Gardening Competition is always highly contested. The panel are interested in how outside space is used, presented and maximised. This is always a difficult one to judge as everyone has different outside space which can include lawns, balconies and communal gardens. This year the panel, made up of staff and tenants, were very impressed with how well the garden was maintained.

A huge thank you to everyone who entered, blooming gardens are a treat to the senses for owners and passers-by alike, and bring some much needed cheer.

Congratulations Stephen from everyone at Choice.

STEPHEN DOUGAL
winner of the
Best Kept Garden
Award
2021



The Muriel Smyth Good Neighbour Award 2021

Congratulations to Mrs Elizabeth Bittle, of Orchard Court in Newtownards. Mrs Bittle has won the 2021 Muriel Smyth Good Neighbour award. The award is an opportunity to nominate a fellow Choice tenant who embodies the values of a good neighbour. There are many reasons someone would be deserving of this award, have they helped you out at a time of crisis, help you with your garden or do some shopping for you when you can't? Maybe they have just been there when you needed someone to talk to. The entries for this competition are always inspiring and this year was no different. The judging panel read through the many entries and were blown away by the accounts of kindness, thoughtfulness and community that shone out.

In the end it was a very personal entry which won. Elizabeth Bittle was nominated by a few neighbours, which detailed the important ways Elizabeth makes a difference.

*"Elizabeth has a smile for everyone, and helps many."
Congratulations Elizabeth!*

ELIZABETH BITTLE
winner of the
Good Neighbour
Award
2021





Children's Colouring Competition

Open to children 16 years and under



It's really easy to enter, just pull out this page and colour it in anyway you like! Then pop it in the post along with your name, age, address and telephone number in the reply slip below to:

The Editor,
Choice News,
FREEPOST BEL2371
Belfast BT1 6BR.

One lucky winner will receive this great prize! Entries must be received by **Friday 14th January 2022.**

*(Please note that the parent or guardian must be a tenant of Choice Housing Ireland).
Ts & Cs apply.*

Win a family pass to a local Open Farm!

POST TO: The Editor, Choice News, FREEPOST BEL2371, Belfast BT1 6BR

Name	Age
Address	
Daytime Tel.	Evening Tel.

Different ways to pay your rent and other charges

In order to make paying your rent, rates and service charges both safe and easy, we offer a wide range of options that will mean you can choose how you pay. Ways to pay your rent:



Direct Debit – You can set up a Direct Debit agreement. Please contact the Income Recovery Team on 0300 111 2211.



Going Online – You can pay your rent online at www.choice-housing.org by clicking on 'Pay Rent' on the homepage.



The allpay App – You can pay your rent via the allpay App which is available to download from the Apple App Store, Windows Phone Store or Google Play.



Phone us using your debit or credit card – You will need to give us your rent reference number (on your rent payment card), your debit or credit card details, and the amount you want to pay.



At any Post Office, shop, garage displaying the Paypoint sign
You can pay cash and show your rent payment card. Make sure you get a receipt and keep it safe.



Post – Send a cheque or postal order to our head office. Never send cash. You need to allow three days for your payment to reach us on time.



Universal Credit direct payment – if you claim Universal Credit, the housing cost element is automatically paid directly to your rent account. However, if this does not cover the full amount of your rent you need to pay the difference.

We welcome your input

Here is your chance to become involved in future editions.

If you would like to submit a feature for consideration – such as a poem, a personal achievement, an interesting story, or indeed anything you feel would be of interest to other Choice tenants – then please send your article(s) to:

The Editor, Choice News,
FREEPOST BEL2371,
Belfast BT1 6BR



Choice
Leslie Morrell House
37 - 41 May Street
Belfast
BT1 4DN

T: 0300 111 2211
E: enquiries@choice-housing.org

choice-housing.org





Plants and Flowers

Do you know your flowers as you should
Why not test yourself and see
No they're not just colours on wood
You can certainly take it from me.

We'll start with a rose- now that is a treat
For variety and beauty it so hard to beat
There're Ramblers and Tea Rose
Climbers and Shrubs
Large flowered bush
And miniatures in tubs.

There're names that would floor you
And prices to match
But their scents and aromas is always the catch

Some flowers are exotic
While others are shy
Some are so bold
They'll look you in the eye.

There are flowers that last
for only a day
While many start their flowering
in May.

There's the Lady of the Night
You might think that can't be right
But no word is needed
When her perfume is meted.

There are plants that can take
Up to sixty years
Before you'll see their beauty appears
Others can take up to a hundred years before it bears
What does that tell you
About our few short years.

So all you garden lovers
How well do you know your flowers
Why not take an hour
And see what you can discover.

By Loraine Kerr – Craignagore, Newcastle