

Environmental, Social and Governance Report

2023-24

Empowering
our tenants and
communities to
make a positive
and sustainable
difference

choice
Together we enrich lives



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FOREWORD

Over the past 12 months, the housing sector has faced a complex landscape of global economic and political challenges. The impact of high inflation and the ongoing high cost-of-living continues to be felt right across our communities, while geopolitical tensions threaten the affordability and security of energy.

Against that backdrop, we have maintained our focus on being a responsible business, creating value for our stakeholders by delivering for our tenants, communities, employees and investors. Our Group Strategy to 2027 is underpinned by a commitment to decarbonisation. The changes in the external environment and those within our business, underline the importance of our vision ‘to excel in everything that we do in the eyes of our tenants, partners and staff’.

We continue to focus on reducing our direct impact on the environment. The data shows a 2.4% reduction in our Scope 1 emissions compared to last year. Whilst our scope 2 emissions have increased, reflecting an increase in the UK emissions factor for electricity, as a group we reduced out electricity consumption by 4% when compared to last year. This demonstrates the hard work put in across the Group. Future work is also being planned to consider our wider scope 3 emissions, as part of our pathway to net zero.

Aside from our own emissions, the greatest impact Choice can have on clean energy transition is in retro-fitting current homes and building new homes to support the decarbonisation of the

energy system and provide cost savings to our tenants. Choice has continued to invest in fabric improvements, alongside lighting and heating upgrades at a number of housing schemes. In 2023/24 over £1.2m was invested in new heating systems. Additionally, heating controls have been upgraded across a number of communal heating schemes.

Choice Group committed over £20m to refurbish 302 former Victoria Housing Estates (VHE) properties, and since 2020 we have completed full refurbishment works to over 155 homes. The works included improved insulation, replacement of windows and doors, and the installation of new and efficient heating systems. A number of these properties have significantly increased their EPC rating from Band F (31) to Band C (74), an improvement of 43 SAP points.

Choice progressed two of our ‘deep’ retrofit projects in 2023/24. The improvement works to these properties is much more extensive, with the principles of PAS2035 being adopted. Improvements included enhanced insulation and air tightness measures, mechanical ventilation, modelling of thermal bridges and again the installation of new heating systems with user friendly controls. Solar panels are being installed to provide free renewable electricity for tenants, and future proofing for electric vehicle charging points is also part of our investment.

As we build new homes across Northern Ireland, we will continue to work closely with policymakers

and regulators and encourage the NI Executive to provide financial assistance in order to accelerate our progress to Net Zero targets. We also recognise that we need to manage the impact on our customers and communities to assist with the transition to clean energy. Our customer satisfaction scores remain strong, but we recognise the need for further support, particularly for those facing higher energy bills.

In addition, we are helping to develop the future workforce. We are providing access to skills development opportunities for young people from disadvantaged communities, as well as investing in attracting and retaining an inclusive and diverse workforce to help us tackle the challenges ahead and deliver the clean energy future. One of the priorities for the Choice Group, where female colleagues are the majority in part-time and lower-paid roles, is to close the gender pay gap. Over the last year, we have succeeded in closing the gap from 26% in 2023 to 19.4% in 2024.

The following report highlights both the progress we have made in the last year in Choice, but also the significant work that we still have to do. We remain committed to being a responsible business and believe that working in partnership with our stakeholders, we can continue to make progress in delivering the change that we all want and need.

Caroline Young, Group Chair

Michael McDonnell, Group Chief Executive

ABOUT US

Choice Group employs over 400 people and maintains 12,000 high quality homes across 11 council areas to meet the diverse needs of c30,000 tenants and residents.

Our Vision to 2027 is ‘to excel in everything that we do in the eyes of our customers, partners and staff.’

Our Mission is ‘to enrich the lives of our tenants and communities through the provision of great homes and services.’

Our Values We are Caring; Committed; Creative.

Sustainable Reporting

Choice was the first Housing Association in Northern Ireland to adopt the voluntary Sustainability Reporting Standard (SRS) Framework. The SRS focuses on 12 core themes and 46 criteria for ESG reporting which are fully aligned with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals. Our ESG report not only measures our performance against set industry led goals, but it is a clear pathway to how we can minimise our impact on the environment, deliver social value, and support thriving sustainable communities.



ESG IN NUMBERS



Reduction in our Scope 1 emissions

2.4%

Investment in new heating systems

£1.2m

£20m

to refurbish 302 former Victoria Housing Estates (VHE) properties

83%

overall tenant satisfaction rating

£71.8m

Gross Value Added to the local economy

Estimated 1,243

jobs sustained throughout the supply chain

£6.98m

financial support secured for tenants

1

the highest level regulatory grading/status

90%

of employees completed a training course



ENVIRONMENT



Climate Change



C1 Distribution of EPC ratings of existing homes (those completed before the last financial year).

Criteria	Measurement Unit
Distribution of EPC ratings of existing homes (those completed before the last financial year).	9,343 existing homes with an EPC
	1,173 (11%) homes without an EPC
	85 (0.8%) Band A
	3,266 (31.1%) Band B
	4,580 (43.6%) Band C
	1,344 (12.8%) Band D
	68 (0.6%) Band E
	8 (0.08%) Band F properties
	There are no properties under Band F

C1

Average EPC rating for this data is

76

(Choice overall average EPC rating is approx. 76.5).

C2 Distribution of EPC ratings of new homes

Criteria	Measurement Unit
Distribution of EPC ratings of new homes	227 new homes with EPCs in 2023/24
	48 (21%) Band A
	157 (69%) Band B
	22 (10%) Band C
	There are no new homes under Band C

C2

Average EPC rating for this data is

85

(Choice overall average EPC rating is approx. 76.5).

C3 Choice has a Sustainability & Energy Strategy (2022-2025) which includes a commitment to net zero by 2050 and a three stage net-zero plan. This approach is under review and is intended to be revised as part of our new strategy from 2025, to take into account more recent policy direction and any financial support available in Northern Ireland.

C4

What retrofit activities has the housing provider undertaken in the last 12 months in relation to its housing stock? (Retrofitting is where new features and technologies are added to older homes to make them more energy efficient.)

Choice have continued to invest in fabric improvements, alongside lighting and heating upgrades at a number of housing schemes. In 2023/24 over £1.2m was invested in new heating systems. Additionally, heating controls have been upgraded across a number of communal heating schemes.

In line with our Sustainability & Energy Strategy (2022 - 2025), and as part of our plan to deliver net zero by 2050, Choice have focused on retrofitting properties which have a lower EPC rating (Bands E, F & G). In 2022 the number of properties known to have Band E-G ratings was 215, which has now reduced to under 70 (with no known Band G properties).

At the end of 2023/24 Choice had EPC data for around 85% of our housing stock, with plans in place to increase this coverage further in 2024/25 through additional assessments and modelling, where appropriate.

Choice committed over £20m to refurbish 302 former Victoria Housing Estates (VHE) properties, and since 2020 we have completed full refurbishment and betterment works to over 155 properties. The works have included improved

insulation, replacement of windows and doors, and the installation of new efficient natural gas heating systems with improved heating controls.

Building on previous ‘shallow’ retrofit projects, Choice progressed two of our ‘deep’ retrofit projects in 2023/24, with works anticipated to be completed in 2024/25. The improvement works to these properties is much more extensive, with the principles of PAS2035 being adopted. Improvements include enhanced insulation and air tightness measures, mechanical ventilation, modelling of thermal bridges and the installation of new energy efficient heating systems with user friendly controls. Solar panels are being installed to provide free renewable electricity for tenants, and appropriate future proofing for electric vehicle charging points is included.

Going forward, as part of our ongoing pathway to net zero we intend to continue to prioritise properties with lower EPC ratings, moving on to a review of those with a Band D rating. We will also continue to engage with local Government Departments as local climate change legislation develops further, with an aim of setting a carbon baseline and identifying future improvement measures for our stock, in line with appropriate targets and available financial support.



C5 Scope 1, Scope 2 and Scope 3 Green House Gas emissions

Criteria	Measurement Unit
Scope 1, Scope 2 and Scope 3 Green House Gas emissions	Scope 1: 3,621 Tonnes of CO2e
	Scope 2: 1,099 Tonnes of CO2e
	Scope 3: 93 Tonnes of CO2e
	Total: 4,813 Tonnes of CO2e

*scope 3 emissions data only relates to staff business mileage at present.

C6

How has the housing provider mapped and assessed the climate risks to its homes and supply chain, such as increased flood, drought and overheating risks?

Choice have numerous processes in place to regularly assess current and emerging risks, with climate resilience and adaptation recently added to our risk registers as an emerging risk. Climate risks are currently addressed through our ongoing policies and procedures, and regular engagement with our tenants and relevant stakeholders e.g. local authorities and Government Departments. Alongside current mitigation measures Choice intend to undertake a climate adaptation plan as part of our new Sustainability & Energy Strategy from 2025, which will assist in specifically mapping

future climate risks, such as increasing risks of flooding and rising summer temperatures. Choice mitigate risks associated with climate resilience in a range of ways including:

- In 2023/24 we reviewed and enhanced our design requirements for new homes.
- Regular engagement with tenants allows us to identify any areas of concern with subsequent action taken where required. This also allows any patterns or common concerns to be identified.
- As part of our annual planned maintenance works a range of factors are considered, including

the condition of our homes and tenant concerns.

- Choice have a dedicated Sustainability & Energy Team who review heating controls and settings across our housing stock.
- Through our Group Structure, Choice have increased control over our supply chain by utilising Choice Services.
- Regular engagement with relevant stakeholders such as local authorities, Government Departments and NI Water, allows us to identify and communicate any areas of concern so that appropriate action can be taken.

C7

Does the housing provider have a strategy to enhance green space and promote biodiversity on or near homes?

Choice’s Sustainability & Energy Strategy (2022-2025) includes a planned outcome of enhanced biodiversity and associated eco-system services. Biodiversity improvements are being embedded within our grounds maintenance contract so that opportunities for improvements can be delivered. As part of our grounds maintenance contract any invasive species are identified and appropriate remedial action taken.

Work is progressing on two projects at existing housing schemes, to create improved community spaces for residents and local community groups, in Belfast and Ballymena. A pipeline of future community projects is also being developed. Choice continue to work with a range of stakeholders, including local authorities, Ulster Wildlife, RSPB and our grounds maintenance contractor, to assess opportunities for improvements at new and existing schemes.

Our design requirements for new homes have been updated to include additional biodiversity measures, taking account of the specific attributes of any new site before work commences, and identifying opportunities to improve those sites. This includes the requirement for native or wildlife friendly planting and consideration of appropriate bird and bat boxes. Specific improvement measures at five new housing developments are also progressing.

Promotion of biodiversity among tenants and staff is important to Choice and in 2023/24 plans were put in place for a staff and tenant biodiversity competition, and a biodiversity week, which have taken place. Biodiversity will be considered further as part of our plans for a new Sustainability & Energy Strategy from 2025, which will build on work to date and also consider options to adopt principles related to Biodiversity Net Gain.



Ecology

C8

Does the housing provider have a strategy to identify, manage and reduce pollutants that could cause material harm?

Choice have a range of policies and processes in place to identify, manage and reduce pollutants including:

- Asbestos management processes to keep an up to date register of asbestos and take appropriate remedial action, with information made available to staff and contractors.
- Ongoing measures to reduce pollutants in our new homes, including VOCs, through appropriate selection of materials, as outlined in our revised design guide requirements.
- A PowerBI dashboard is in place to identify any properties where damp or mould has been raised as a concern, allowing remedial action to be taken where required and also allowing patterns to be identified so further improvement measures can be undertaken. Linked to this, relevant staff have received training in relation to damp & mould, and information is regularly provided to our tenants on areas such as ventilation.
- Asset details are regularly updated as part of annual stock condition surveys, which identify improvement measures to be taken as part of our annual planned maintenance programme.
- Relevant supplier contracts have appropriate specifications and are managed to ensure that any instances of spills or pollution are avoided, or appropriate action taken where these occur.

C9

Does the housing provider have a strategy to use or increase the use of responsibly sourced materials for all building and repairs works?

Choice seek to use responsibly sourced materials where possible as part of our building and repairs works. Choice Services procure responsibly sourced materials where possible and as part of our procurement processes our specifications seek to also consider appropriate materials, balancing this with ensuring value for money is delivered. Recent revisions to our design guide for new developments have also highlighted the need to use responsibly sourced building materials. We are also seeking to build evidence for our new homes in relation to building materials and working with consultants and relevant organisations to consider whole life carbon costing.

C10

Does the housing provider have a strategy for waste management incorporating building materials?

Whilst we do not have a standalone strategy in relation to waste management, this area is covered across a range of relevant strategies, policies and procedures, including our Energy & Environmental Policy. Examples of action in this area include measures taken by Choice Services to reduce waste and recycle, monitoring performance. We also consider waste management practices for our properties and opportunities to support local authorities with wider targets to reduce waste and improve recycling rates. As part of our recent revised design requirements for new homes we have considered opportunities to improve waste management at our new schemes, and provide support to our tenants, whilst ongoing monitoring of waste is often carried out by our contractors as part of their environmental standards, particularly when developing new homes.



Resource Management

As part of our plans for a new Sustainability & Energy Strategy from 2025 we intend to consider this area further.

C11

Does the housing provider have a strategy for water management?

We are planning to include water management as part of our new Sustainability & Energy Strategy from 2025, alongside appropriate consideration as part of other relevant strategies, policies and procedures. Monitoring of water is often carried out by our contractors as part of their environmental standards, particularly when developing new homes. We have recently engaged with NI Water and will seek to work closely with them to manage our existing accounts and consider opportunities to reduce water use across our sites. We will also seek to provide further advice to our tenants and stakeholders on how they can reduce water use, and in turn their environmental impact.



C12

Rent compared to median private rental sector (PRS) rent across the relevant Local Authority

% of PRS rent

63%

C13 11,814 total homes owned and managed

Criteria	Measurement Unit
General Needs	7783
Supported	1838
Housing for Older people	1909
Private Rental Sector	284

C14 250 total number of new homes 2023-24

Criteria	Measurement Unit
General Needs	164
Supported	18
Housing for Older people	59
Private Rental Sector	19



Affordability and Security

C15

How is the housing provider trying to reduce the effect of high energy costs on its residents?

Choice have continued to take a proactive approach to improve the energy efficiency of our properties, reduce energy costs where these are within our control and provide energy efficiency advice and support to our tenants. We have continued to invest in fabric improvements, alongside lighting and heating upgrades at a number of housing schemes, with over £1.2m invested in new heating systems in 2023/24. We have focused on retrofitting properties which have a lower EPC rating (Bands E, F & G), and now have under 70 properties in these EPC bands.

We are continuing to develop homes to high energy efficiency standards, which alongside our improvements to our existing stock, has meant that our average EPC rating for our stock is around 76.5. At the end of 2023/24 Choice had EPC data for around 85% of our housing stock, with plans in place to increase this coverage further in 2024/25 through additional assessments and modelling, where appropriate. This will allow us to identify any additional properties with lower EPC ratings and consider options for future improvement works.

Choice is responsible for landlord electricity and heating costs (for communal supplies), with a spend of over £2m in 2023/24. Most of this cost is passed on to our tenants through heating or service charges and so Choice are acutely aware of the need to manage these costs effectively to deliver financial savings for our tenants. Existing variable energy contracts were extended where required in 2023/24 to take advantage of reducing wholesale energy costs, with regular invoice validation taking place, assisted by our ongoing use of an energy management platform.

Choice operates a large solar PV portfolio, managing around 400 systems, which directly or indirectly reduce costs for our tenants, with 475,000kWh of renewable electricity generated in 2023/24.

Choice support Northern Ireland's annual energy week and in 2023 Choice published articles and information on a range of subjects, including retrofit, energy saving tips and energy efficiency. Our Energy booklet was also revised and published on our website to provide further information and advice.

Information on available energy suppliers is made available to our tenants, including during the sign-up process for new tenants, to encourage our tenants to make sure they are not paying more than they need to for energy, and to encourage them to switch & save, or consider other options to reduce their energy bills.



C16

How does the housing provider provide security of tenure for residents?

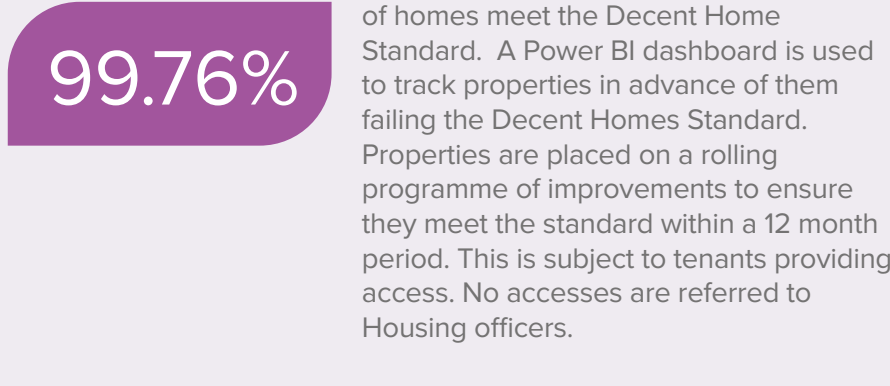
Choice provides accommodation for applicants on the social housing Waiting List. New tenants are offered an Introductory Tenancy, which will automatically become secure after a period of 12 months providing they adhere to the terms and conditions of their Tenancy Agreement. A Secure Tenancy then offers residents a home for life as long as tenancy obligations are fulfilled. In addition, the Association is committed to providing high quality Lifetime Homes which are designed to allow the property to be adapted at minimal cost to meet the changing needs of the household. More extensive adaptations can also be carried out, where possible, upon receipt of an Occupational Therapist to facilitate tenants who have a disability.



C17
Describe the condition of the housing provider’s portfolio 2023-24, with reference to:



C18
Describe the condition of the housing provider’s portfolio 2023-24, with reference to:



C19

How do you manage and mitigate the risk of damp and mould for your residents?

In November 2022, Choice set up a cross directorate Damp & Mould Working Group. This reported to the Senior Management Team on a monthly basis and at each Board Meeting. The Working Group identified a series of actions that were endorsed by the Board. These included best practice as identified in the sector and via Department for Communities (DfC) communications. Actions included the production of a new Policy and Procedure, more robust IT and data collection, changes to our Housing Management system including a Case management system with associated processes, a new integrated electronic damp and mould survey and associated tenant communication, improved staff awareness, specialist training and equipment, and improved tenant and contractor advice on reporting and mitigation. Our new Damp & Mould Policy was approved by our Board on 23rd August 2023.

With many of the actions moving to day to day business activity (similar to other compliance related matters) and after the adoption of the new Policy, the Board agreed that Damp & Mould matters would be monitored by the Development & Assets Committee with any major issues escalated to the Board. An update on Damp & Mould issues and statistics on complaints is now a standing reportable item at Senior Management Team and Development & Assets Committee. In addition the Development & Assets Committee agree targets and monitor performance for our stock condition surveys and all other areas of property compliance and hazard reduction and management. The Audit & Risk Committee (ARC) instructed an internal audit of Damp and Mould which was completed in May 2024. This audit reported a ‘Substantial Assurance’ outcome.



In addition, the Senior Management Team and the Development & Assets Committee agree targets and monitor performance for our stock condition surveys and all other areas of property compliance and hazard reduction and management.



Resident Voice

C20
What are the results of the housing provider’s most recent tenant satisfaction survey?



For 2023/24 we achieved a tenant satisfaction rating of 83%.

Area Managers review feedback on a monthly basis and will call tenant back where appropriate to address any issues raised and engage with other staff members as necessary to reach a resolution.

Additionally surveys are completed throughout the year on a monthly basis by telephone. Surveys are completed by IFF Research, an independent research company based in England, who completed 1310 surveys in 2023-24.



C21

What arrangements are in place to enable residents to hold management to account for the provision of services?

At Choice, we believe that effective tenant engagement is essential to ensuring tenants have the opportunity to shape the services and decisions that impact them. This commitment is integrated into the Choice Group Strategy 2024/27 and across key departmental strategies.

How Tenants Hold Us Accountable

- Dedicated Tenant Engagement Strategy**
We have developed a robust Tenant Engagement Strategy supported by dedicated resources, including staff, budgets, and infrastructure. This strategy facilitates meaningful tenant participation in decision-making processes and fosters a two-way dialogue between tenants and management.
- Measurable Outcomes and Monitoring**
Our strategy is driven by annual action plans with clear, measurable outcomes, such as increased tenant participation, improved collaboration, and stronger community dynamics. Progress is regularly reviewed by senior teams, including the Regional and Central Network, Senior Management, and the Group Board.
- Roles and Responsibilities**
The Tenant Engagement Strategy clearly outlines the roles and responsibilities of tenants, staff, and management to ensure accountability and clarity in all engagement activities.
- Tenant Representation**
Tenants are encouraged to participate in decision-making bodies, such as Community Networks, advisory groups, and committee meetings. Tenant representation is included in the Tenant & Client Services Committee, which oversees and reviews operational performance within the T&CS Directorate.

Examples of Tenant Participation and Accountability

- Service Improvement Team (SIT)**
The SIT, consisting of trained tenants, collaborates with staff to review and improve services. For example, tenants contributed to the Design Guide, helping align future property designs with tenant needs and preferences.
- Consultation and Feedback**
Tenants are consulted on key decisions through surveys, focus groups, and community meetings. This ensures that their feedback is considered in policy-making, service changes, and resource allocation.
- Financial Stakeholders Group (FSG)**
The FSG meets bi-annually and allows tenants to review financial decisions, such as service charges and rent increases, alongside staff from various departments.
- Tenant-Led Stage 2 Complaints Panels**
An Independent Tenant Panel reviews and makes recommendations on Stage 2 complaints. In 2023/24, the panel reviewed six complaints, providing detailed reports with actionable recommendations.
- Digital and In-Person Engagement**
We offer both digital platforms (MS Teams, Zoom) and in-person meetings to ensure tenants can participate according to their preferences. Communication is also facilitated through social media updates, community surveys, and access to Choice Service Centres for support.
- Focus Groups and Community Champions**
Tenants can join focus groups to shape key initiatives, such as the Tenant Portal, or contribute to community development initiatives. We also support Community Champions who lead local engagement efforts.
- Consultation on New Developments**
We engage tenants during the consultation process for planned works and new developments. Tenant Liaison Officers ensure collaboration on projects that affect tenants’ homes and communities.
- Tenant Groups**
We support tenant groups within housing schemes, where tenants can collectively address common concerns, organise events, and advocate for improvements in their living environment.
- Accessibility and Transparency**
We are committed to making decision-making processes accessible to all tenants by offering services such as translation, alternative formats for documents, and ensuring physical accessibility to meeting spaces. Regular updates keep tenants informed and involved.

C22

Complaints
In the last 12 months, the NI Public Services Ombudsman determined that maladministration took place in 0 complaints.

C23

What are the key support services that the housing provider offers to its residents?

Financial Inclusion Service:
The aim of the service is to assist tenants to navigate the benefit system and to support them to manage their finances and cope with more restricted budgets, avoiding increased levels of rent arrears and failed tenancies where possible.

All financial inclusion activities throughout the year have been focused on providing high levels of support to those tenants that have been financially impacted by the high cost of living and supporting them with extensive advice to promote tenancy sustainment.

- Performance outcomes delivered by the Financial Inclusion Team include:
- **969** Cases Received for review
 - **£6.98m** financial support secured for tenants
 - **502** Referrals to DfC grants
 - **£864k** Grants accessed for tenants
 - **408** Assisted with Universal Credit Claims
 - **£2.1m** Housing Costs secured.

Choice continued to implement its Tenant Financial Support Fund (TFSF) throughout 2023-24. The Fund was created to support tenants experiencing financial hardship and to provide real support in areas where tenants struggle to sustain tenancies. Working in partnership with local charities, Trussell Trust and Homeless Connect, practical support packages were provided to the most vulnerable in our society.

During the year, £100k of the Fund was spent and reached c2000 households throughout Northern Ireland.

The Association provided donations to support our Food Poverty & Home Starter Pack Funding Streams. Working collaboratively with Trussell Trust, Social Supermarkets and Homeless Connect, both tenants and local communities were supported through these initiatives.

Choice continued to actively engage in lobbying activities in partnership with the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) and the Cliff Edge Coalition to ensure that the impacts and risks of Welfare Reform continue to be a key focus for all housing providers and government departments going forward. Our staff attended the North West Housing Forum, with a collective of housing associations and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), to discuss and address current operational issues with Welfare Reforms and Mitigation payments. The Association is committed to raising awareness of the various aspects of welfare reform through ongoing marketing initiatives using multiple media platforms.

During 2023, Choice partnered with Homeless Connect to deliver the Home Starter Pack scheme, funded by NIHE. This initiative provided essential household items to new tenants who met specific criteria, such as having been homeless prior to allocation. The packs were designed to help these tenants overcome initial challenges related to tenancy sustainment. Choice identified eligible tenants and delivered the packs directly to them.

Unfortunately, funding for this scheme ceased at the end of December 2023 as, due to resource challenges faced by NIHE, new eligibility restrictions were imposed, preventing housing association tenants from applying. Recognising the significant benefit of these packs for new tenants, Choice allocated funds from its Tenant Financial Support Fund to ensure that eligible tenants could continue to receive this support throughout Q4 of 2023/24. 454 starter packs delivered under the NIHE funded scheme and 130 were delivered in Q4 of 2023/24 through the Choice funded scheme.

C24

Describe the housing provider’s community investment activities, and how the housing provider is contributing to positive neighbourhood outcomes for the communities in which its homes are located.

Community Investment
In the reporting year Choice spent £975,061 on initiatives, (some of which are listed below) generating £8,685,860 of additional Social value. The estimate Gross Value Added to the Northern Ireland economy through Choice’s business activity is GVA £71,877,451 sustaining an estimated 1,243 jobs throughout the supply chain.

The Rio Ferdinand Foundation (RFF) Community Programme
Our partnership with the RFF continues to grow and, following the success of the pilot programme in South and East Belfast, we invested £59,000 to keep the South & East Belfast programme running and contribute to a new programme in Derry~Londonderry for 12 months.

Choice Housing Scholarships
During the year, Choice also continued to work with Queens University and Ulster University to provide financial support to students facing financial, social or logistical barriers to furthering their education through its scholarship programme.

Brian McKenna Student Placement Programme (incorporating the Brian McKenna Prize)
Brian McKenna, who passed away in February 2019, was a member of the Choice team for more than twenty years and, during his time with the organisation made a huge contribution to the lives of tenants, colleagues, and the communities he worked in. In memory of Brian, the 2023-24 student placement programme offered six students the opportunity to work for a year in the ICT, Assets, Finance and HR departments.



Street Soccer NI – Four Nations Challenge Cup
Choice have supported Street Soccer NI (SSNI) on a number of occasions to attend the Homeless World Cup. SSNI provide programmes that tackle homelessness, unemployment, addiction and mental health issues.

USPCA – Community Partnership
Choice partnered with USPCA to introduce a programme for tenants relating to animal welfare, community engagement and education. The programme spanned 6 months and reached over 200 tenants through workshops and community events.

Women’s Aid Conference Sponsorship
A small donation was made to help sponsor Belfast/Lisburn WA conference. The aim of the conference was to keep the matter of violence against women and girls, including domestic abuse specifically, in the public consciousness constantly and not just following a tragic event such as the murder of a woman.



SOCIAL



Housing For All

Choice is committed to promoting inclusive and diverse communities.

Throughout 2023-24 we continued to deliver on the Together: Building United Communities (T:BUC/Housing For All) shared housing programme. We are committed to participating in models supporting shared housing, and are key partners in a new Peace Plus partnership working through a new peace building bid for the housing sector. Ballymaglave Court, Ballynahinch and Manse Court, Saintfield have successfully completed their five-year Good Relations Action Plans, leaving Hulls Hill, Lisburn, and Nursery Close, Ballymena as fully occupied Housing For All schemes.



The new shared housing scheme in Mullaghmore Road, Dungannon will be ready for handover in September 2024 and we have been very active partners in the Joint Advisory group in Dungannon, delivering various good relations initiatives in preparation for our new tenants moving into their new homes. Stiles Way, Antrim is planned for completion in early 2025 and will further expand our portfolio of shared housing schemes.

Our new Housing For All scheme in Ballyoan, Derry~Londonderry was accepted onto the Shared Housing programme in November 2023.

The partnership approach used by Choice of working with local authorities, statutory, community, and voluntary sectors in the delivery of the T:BUC/ Housing for All programme is a key factor in helping to meet the outcomes of improving good relations, promoting community integration and successfully delivering the shared housing programme.



Place Making

GOVERNANCE



C25

Choice is registered with the national regulator of social housing, the Department for Communities.

C26

Our most recent regulatory grading/status – 1 (the highest level).

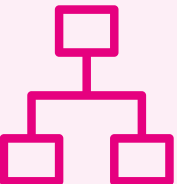
C27

Choice follows the UK National Housing Federation 2020 Code of Governance.

C28

Choice is a not-for-profit organisation and registered charity.

Structure and Governance



C29

Choice Board manages risks through its risk management policy and procedures which are based on best practice as set out in the Government Publication “The Orange Book”. As the Group’s objectives are established and updated, any risks that may prevent their achievement are identified and assessed in terms of their impact on the organisation and their likelihood of occurrence. This activity is carried out at appropriate levels throughout the Group. The Board sets the risk appetite for differing categories on an annual basis. For any risk which falls outside of the agreed appetite, a response plan is required to deal with the risk. Regular updates are reported to the Audit & Risk Committee and Board until the risk can be rescored and is no longer outside of the risk appetite.

C30

Choice has not been subject to any adverse regulatory findings in the last 12 months.



GOVERNANCE

C31

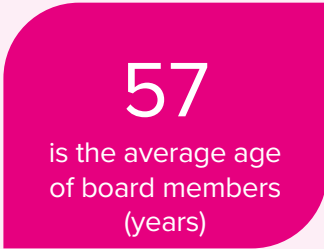
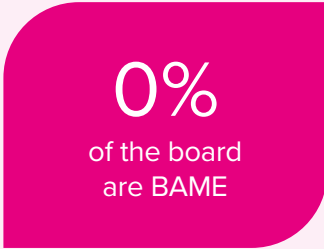
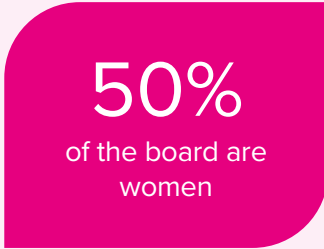
There is a formal process for the appointment of new Board members with an external Executive Search firm being appointed to lead the process. External reviews of Board effectiveness are carried out every three years. The appointed company carry out an independent review of the composition and skills of Board membership and make recommendations regarding the findings. Board members serve a maximum tenure of 9 years.

The Chair of the Tenants Central Network is a member of the Tenant and Client Services Committee and meets with the T&CS Group Director and Group Chief Executive and the Group Chair regularly. Our Menu of Involvement ensures tenants have a strong voice and input into the design and delivery of our services.

C32

16.6% of Choice’s Board have turned over in the last two years.

0% of Choice’s Senior Management Team have turned over in the last two years.



Board and Trustees



GOVERNANCE

C33

There are 2 Board members on the Audit & Risk Committee with recent and relevant financial experience including chartered accountancy/ corporate and retail banking/credit risk management/operational risk management.

C34

100% of the Board are non-executive directors.



C35

A succession plan been provided to Choice’s board in the last 12 months.

C36

Choice’s current external audit partner has been responsible for auditing the accounts for 2 years.

C37

The last independently-run, board-effectiveness review was carried out February 2022. The next one is about to commence.

C38

Choice handle conflicts of interest at the board and committees through a process whereby conflicts declared at the meeting and those involved do not take part in discussion or voting and on some occasions may absent themselves from the room. All conflicts are recorded in minutes and reported to the Regulator – the Department for Communities annually. There is also an annual Declaration of Interest process for all staff and trustees.



GOVERNANCE

C39

Choice pays the Real Living Wage

£12
minimum hourly rate

C40

Median Gender pay gap 19.38

19.38

C41

CEO: median-worker pay ratio 5.14:1

5.14:1

C42

Choice ensures equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) is promoted across its staff through our Dignity at Work policy, Diversity Strategy Equality & Diversity training. Choice also participates in events such as Pride and Mela. Choice complies with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the Act) which requires the organisation to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and regard to the desirability of promoting good relations across a range of categories outlined in the Act . In our equality scheme we set out how Choice proposes to fulfil the Section 75 statutory duties and we report on this through our Annual Progress Report on an annual basis. Equality & Diversity is promoted through our recruitment and selection processes and staff training.



Staff Wellbeing

C43

Choice supports the physical and mental health of our staff through our Sickness Absence and Health and Wellbeing policies. Choice offers a health cash plan which includes, Dental, optical, specialist consultations, complimentary therapies, alternative therapies, EAP. Choice also refers employees to Occupational Health, if required.

Choice also has, First aiders, Mental Health first aiders, DSE assessors, Health & Wellbeing Champions and Menopause Champions. There is also defibrillators on site and a number of staff are trained to use it. PPE is provided to staff who require it and lone worker app which is a personal protective system for out of office use.

C44

Professional development of staff is a growing area of importance for the social housing sector.

During 2023-24:

- 284 employees completed a training course ie 90%
- 7,100 = total no. of training hours
- 22 hours = average time per employee spent on training

Professional Qualifications

During 23-24 a total of 20 employees completed a qualification relevant to their professional development ie. 12 females, 8 males = 6% of overall number of employees.

GOVERNANCE

C45

How is social value creation considered when procuring goods and services?

Social Value themes and indicators reflect social, environmental and ethical aspects in terms of zero carbon, ethical and resilient supply chains, increasing secure employment and skills and promoting wellbeing.

There is an opportunity for key subject matter aspects i.e. Technology and Energy and Sustainability to review and comment on Procurement Plans/ Business cases to ensure that they reflect key sustainability initiatives and “are future proofed”.

For below threshold procurements, Social Value clauses are included as part of construction contracts with the appointed Contractor expected to deliver social value initiatives to a minimum value of 100 points per £1,000,000 of contract value (or pro-rata).

Choice continues to liaise with the supply base to understand ways in which they can support initiatives which will have a positive impact on it schemes and tenants.

Where social value weightings are agreed and included in invitations to tender, the submissions are evaluated and following award, contract management meetings are put in place with social value included on the meeting agenda to enable targets to be monitored.

Contracts which are above threshold are monitored via the SIB portal with vendors logging the activity undertaken during the contract term. A monthly report is provided by SIB which is distributed to internal stakeholders to enable them to discuss progress at monthly contract reviews.



Supply Chain

C46

How is sustainability considered when procuring goods and services?

Sustainability is considered as part of the development of business cases and discussed and agreed with internal stakeholders as part of preparing a procurement plan to seek approval to proceed with procurement activities.

The weighting of environmental impact is discussed and agreed with internal stakeholders as part of preparing a procurement plan to seek approval to proceed with procurement activities.

Weightings are agreed and stated in the plan and incorporated into the Invitation to Tender documents. Where above threshold, PPN 01/21 themes and indicators are used as a basis for requesting vendor submissions which includes zero carbon.

Weightings will vary depending on the type of procurement and spend threshold but are considered on a case by case basis.

Procurement run a financial status check on all vendors who participate in tender competitions to check the vendor’s financial sustainability prior to making any contract award.

Once a report has been run, vendors are monitored through the financial provider’s portal and any changes in status are notified to the Procurement team. This enables Choice to monitor a vendor’s financial position through the contract term.

Choice has tiered it’s supply base to ensure that appropriate contract management measures are in place.

A Contract Management policy has been drafted in line with guidance from CPD and includes guidance on frequency and content of contract reviews, how to address non-performance etc.

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