

## Country Fest Celebrations



**Enter our summer competitions!**

p.24  
Good  
Neighbour  
Award

p.25  
Best Kept  
Garden  
Competition

p.26  
Biodiversity  
Photography  
Competition

## A message from Michael, our Group Chief Executive



### Welcome to the Summer 2025 edition of Choice News.

I'm delighted that Choice staff will raise funds for two excellent charities over the coming year, namely TinyLife and Community Rescue Service. TinyLife is the only local charity focused on supporting premature babies across the country. Community Rescue Service is a charitable search and rescue organisation operated by volunteers. You can find out more about both charities in this edition of Choice News.

There is lots about the important work that Choice Group does within our communities in this newsletter. I was delighted to attend a recent 'Celebration of Achievement' event for our tenants hosted by the Lord Mayor at Belfast City Hall. But this is only one of numerous events being held across the length and breadth of the country designed to build a sense of neighbourhood. We have recently launched a new Tenant Engagement Strategy which places people at the very heart of everything we do.

Please take the opportunity to read more about our innovative retrofit project at Riverdale. Against a backdrop of climate change and the need to reduce carbon emissions, Choice is leading the sector in energy efficiency both with our new build projects and in the upgrading of our existing homes. Year on year we continue to increase the energy ratings of our properties and prioritise affordability for our tenants.

This edition of Choice News also highlights our significant and ongoing investment in planned maintenance. Our sheltered housing scheme at St Bronagh's in Rostrevor is just one of a number of

proactive and significant maintenance projects which will invest millions of pounds in our homes over the coming years. Whether its improving your kitchen, bathroom or the quality of insulation in your home, Choice has a responsibility to ensure that your home remains fit-for-purpose for many years to come.

Finally, I'd like to welcome those tenants who have recently joined Choice following our merger with Connswater Homes. Any change is difficult, but I hope that you experience little disruption from the integration of the two organisations. Rather, I believe that you will see benefits from being part of the Choice Group in terms of the services and support that we can offer to you, your family and friends.

Thanks to you all for being a tenant of Choice and I hope you have a great Summer!

*Michael McDonnell*

## Connect with Choice



@ChoiceHousing



@choice\_housing



enquiries@choice-housing.org



Choice Housing Ireland Limited



Choice Housing



## Join us on Social Media!

Follow us on social media -  
from Facebook, X to YouTube  
and LinkedIn - we've got  
something new for you  
every day!

Feel free to like, follow, share,  
and ask questions on any of  
our social media platforms.



# Empowering the Next Generation: Youth Leadership Through Sport and Innovation

Choice and the Rio Ferdinand Foundation is transforming youth engagement across Northern Ireland, with Ballymena now joining the initiative alongside existing hubs in Belfast and Derry~Londonderry.

In partnership with Ballymena United Women's Academy, the latest programme launched with 28 young people aged 13–17, participating in workshops focused on leadership, inclusion, and wellbeing. Early sessions tackled issues such as racism and discrimination, and explored themes of women's empowerment, stress management, and leadership development.

Planned summer workshops will address mental health, the role of sport in wellbeing, and provide OCN Level 1 accreditations. The programme also promotes team-building and youth-led community events to help participants build confidence and lasting skills. The Rio Ferdinand Foundation, established by the former England footballer, has supported young people in Northern Ireland since 2016.

The Ballymena project continues its mission to tackle inequality and promote social mobility through mentoring and personal development.

A recent highlight of the wider initiative was 'Soccer Science', an event at Avoniel Leisure Centre as part of the NI Science Festival. The event brought together 80 young people from across the island for a day blending football and science, including a panel with Glentoran FC players and experts discussing injury prevention, nutrition, and performance technology — followed by a lively five-a-side tournament.

This growing partnership proves that with the right support, young people can become leaders, not only in sport, but in their communities and beyond.

**"This expansion reflects the success we've seen in other communities," said Michael McDonnell, Choice Group Chief Executive. "We're helping young people develop life skills, qualifications and a stronger voice in shaping their futures."**



**Rio Ferdinand said: "It's important that we support young people to build the confidence, skills and networks that will help them to find their career path and achieve their potential in life. This training course is a great first step for these young people in Belfast and I congratulate them on achieving their qualification and look forward to hearing how their journeys progress."**



**"We're not just educating — we're empowering. Football can break down barriers and open minds. This event inspired curiosity and built real connections." said Darryl Forsythe, Northern Ireland Programme Coordinator.**



## All Ireland Housing Awards

**Congratulations to our colleague Emma C Thompson who was recently awarded Learner of the Year at the CIH All Ireland Housing Awards.**

### ★ *Learner of the Year*

Congratulations to our colleague Emma C Thompson who was recently awarded Learner of the Year at the CIH All Ireland Housing Awards.

The award celebrates people who have demonstrated exceptional commitment to their professional development throughout their career. Emma joined Choice in May 2019 and her commitment to professional growth, active involvement in training programmes, and determination to enhance her skills, propelled her from an Administrative Assistant to Housing Officer within just five years.

Speaking about her win, Emma says, *“I was shocked to be nominated for the award and didn’t think there was a chance I would win given there are so many talented professionals in the sector doing amazing things, however it’s great to be acknowledged. I’m so thankful to have such supportive colleagues and management that’s been there to support me in expanding my knowledge which has enabled me to progress my career.”*

Emma completed a CIH Level 3 qualification in Housing whilst working full-time in her administrative role. She shadowed her colleagues to learn new skills and sought learning opportunities wherever she could. Emma was appointed Trainee Housing Officer in 2023.

After achieving her CIH Level 3 Qualification, she undertook the CIH Level 4 qualification in Housing. She diligently worked through a comprehensive checklist of tasks, constantly asking questions, attending training, and shadowing colleagues to gain practical experience.

Emma’s proactive approach meant that she was quickly entrusted as a trainee to deliver all aspects of a Housing Officer role. Her determination and experience paid off when she successfully completed her CIH Level 4 qualification in Housing and she secured a full-time permanent Housing Officer position.

Speaking about Emma’s success, Cathy Doyle, Choice Area Manager said, *“Emma is a real asset to the team. She has demonstrated exceptional commitment to her professional development through her engagement with CIH training, qualifications, and continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities. Her dedication to learning and professional growth make her a worthy winner of this award.”*



Choice were also delighted to win the Professionalism in the Workplace category. We are committed to facilitating opportunities for professional and personal development for employees, empowering them to continuously learn and develop their careers.

# Choice showcase £750K refurb project at local sheltered living scheme

Choice has officially completed their refurbishment programme for their sheltered living scheme – St Bronagh’s, located in Rostrevor. The scope of works included brand new kitchens, upgrades to communal areas and a range of fire safety measures in line with new standards.

The scheme, which has been at the heart of picturesque Rostrevor village for more than 35 years is home to 40 residents who enjoy sheltered living with a close-knit community which includes social communal areas and a scheme support team.

The refurbishment project included vital consultation and engagement with tenants and forms part of the housing associations’ Asset Management Strategy which aims to invest £52m from 2024-2027. This Planned Maintenance Programme will see schemes right across Northern Ireland get a range of upgrades and improvements to ensure a high-quality standard of living is sustained.

The scheme has also adopted a new Dementia friendly design aimed at supporting tenants to continue to live independently and feel safe and secure in their homes. Bright and colour coded doors, for example, has proven to enhance a person’s environment and help them with their surroundings. Changing plain colours into a brighter environment aids navigation and triggers reminiscence for residents suffering from Dementia.

- £ £750K INVESTMENT
- ✓ NEW KITCHENS
- 🔥 FIRE SAFETY UPDATES



Mr Daniel Robertson, tenant at St Bronagh’s is very pleased with the quality of the upgrades, *“Residents were able to choose the design and décor of their kitchens, and the quality of the upgrades, both internally and externally are excellent. I was particularly pleased that broadband access was brought straight to the door of each of the apartments, meaning faster internet access which I very much welcome.”*

*Choice remains dedicated to investing in the future of the community, ensuring that all tenants have access to safe, comfortable, and high-quality homes.*



Andrew Lamont, Head of Planned Maintenance at Choice said,

*“The upgrade project at St Bronagh’s is more than a physical refurbishment of the space, it demonstrates a commitment from Choice to continuously invest in our existing homes. With all of these projects, we work with our tenants to ensure that we deliver upgrades with minimal interruption but that will ultimately improve their living environment.*

*“We believe passionately in building and supporting thriving local communities, which have quality housing and effective support services for tenants at its heart. Choice is investing heavily in the upgrading and repurposing of our existing properties, that not only maximises the space available but also breathes new life into older buildings that have a positive role to play in the local community.”*

**The scope of works included brand new kitchens, upgrades to communal areas and a range of fire safety measures in line with new standards.**

# Choice completes energy efficiency retrofits in Belfast

An energy efficiency retrofit has been successfully completed at two homes in Belfast by Choice. Located on the city's Finaghy Road North and Riverdale Park South, the work has been carried out in partnership with McCusker Contracts, and Moore MacDonald and Partners.

Part of a larger programme of works investment that totals more than £16 million, tenants moved into their new homes in May. Recently, key stakeholders – including representatives from local government and the social housing sector – were shown around one of the homes to showcase the significant changes that have been made, and how these all work together to improve energy efficiency and reduce emissions.

The retrofit has resulted in a significant improvement in the homes' Energy Performance Certificate rating, which has increased a total of three bands, from 'Band D' to 'Band A', to make them some of the most energy-efficient homes anywhere in Northern Ireland. This was achieved using a range of innovative energy-saving measures, including External Wall Insulation to help thermal performance; the installation of triple-glazed windows for improved heat retention; and enhanced floor and loft insulation to reduce total heat loss.

In addition to this, the properties also boast mechanical ventilation systems to improve air quality along with efficient natural gas boilers that incorporate flue gas heat recovery for better energy use; weather compensation and low-temperature heating systems; and solar PV panels to generate renewable energy.

Brian Rankin, Choice's Sustainability & Energy Manager, says this latest project reflects Choice's ongoing commitment to improving the energy efficiency of its housing stock, reduce carbon emissions, and help tenants to slash their energy bills.

"These retrofitted homes are some of the most energy efficient in Northern Ireland. It's fantastic to see them completed and to share our experiences with others," said Brian.

"Going forward, we will be monitoring these homes – and engaging with residents – to further understand the benefits that this type of investment can help deliver."



Karen Roulston, Choice's Asset Services Project Manager overseeing the project added: "Choice would like to recognise the significant work that has been undertaken by McCusker Contracts and Moore MacDonald and Partners. They both worked closely with Choice on this project and were integral to its success."

WE WANT OUR  
TENANTS TO  
GET INVOLVED

## Choice empowering tenants to shape their own future

More innovative and interactive ways of communicating for tenants to participate in housing related issues will be developed as part of a new strategy that aims to further enhance the role tenants play in the future of their homes.

The Tenant Engagement Strategy, launched by Choice Housing, is focusing on providing a 'menu of involvement' to allow all tenants the opportunity to engage in a way that fits in with their lives and commitments. This ranges from offering a broader range of digital and virtual communications options as well as one to ones, group sessions and a range of events and workshops.

The strategy was developed in consultation with tenant groups which allowed for a better understanding of what elements of tenant participation and engagement were working and where improvements were needed.

Tenant advisory groups, workshops and events, surveys and community champions are all areas that have worked well for the housing association previously, with tenants willing to take the time to meet and discuss areas of interest, providing ideas and contributing to a range of housing related areas.



Tenant  
Approved



Interactive workshops have been developed to provide tenants with the opportunity to understand specific areas of interest in more detail and contribute, including tenants' rights, financial literacy, or personal development.

Tenants can also avail of the opportunity to join the Editorial Group allowing them to contribute to articles, stories, or other creative content to various Choice publications – showcasing tenant achievements, community updates or giving them the platform to share their story.

Jonathon Blakley Community Development Manager, said,

*"This new strategy ensures that we reach all tenant groups for a more inclusive contribution, building their capacity, and empowering them to influence and shape service delivery which meets the diverse needs across our tenant groups."*

The success of this new strategy will be measured across a range of Key Performance Indicators based on three key themes of, creating opportunities to engage and participate, empowering tenants to influence and shape service delivery and creating safe, inclusive communities.

The commitments outlined are also aimed at building on the recent Tenant Participation Standards Accreditation where Choice was awarded silver 'level 4' status by the Independent Charitable body, Supporting Communities.

Choice scored highly across all standards measured in the accreditation, including the information it provides to tenants as a landlord; the effectiveness of its tenant structures; the degree to which tenants are involved in making decisions; and its commitment to actively promoting equal opportunities.



## Celebration of achievement

We recently celebrated our wonderful tenants at Belfast City Hall as part of the Belfast City Council Learning Festival.

Our tenants gained accreditations in Community Development, Scrutiny and First Aid through our Community Network and will now be stepping forward with new skills, new confidence, and new opportunities!

A huge thank you to the Sing, Sign and Strum band from Atlas Centre, Lisburn for joining us in our celebrations!



## Spring Watch in Full Bloom Across Northern Ireland

This season, our Spring Watch programme has taken flight with a series of inspiring events across the region!

We were delighted to welcome pupils from Harryville Primary School in Ballymena, who explored local bird and bat life and learned simple, meaningful ways to help nature every day. We can't wait to continue our journey with them later this year!



At St. Patrick's College, Dungannon, award-winning local environmentalist Aidan Crean delivered a thought-provoking talk on the vital role birds play in our ecosystems and the small steps we can take to support them. A powerful reminder that every action counts!

Meanwhile, as part of the Belfast Festival of Learning 2025, pupils from Botanic Primary School and Scoil an Droichid gathered in Botanic Gardens for an educational Springwatch event. Aidan Crean once again shared his expertise on local bird-life, joined by Belfast's Lord Mayor, who showed great support for this community learning initiative.

Together, we're inspiring the next generation to appreciate and protect the natural world around them.

## Working Together to Support Young People in Our Community

Our Community Development Team recently delivered a programme focused on providing practical support, connection, and opportunities for young people.

Youth Empowerment Services (Y.E.S.), helped us to deliver this initiative through shared values and a mutual commitment to listening to and learning from young people. So far, it has involved a mix of activities — including mentoring and team-based workshops — with a group of young participants who bring curiosity, honesty, and a clear drive to contribute to their communities.

Our involvement is as much about learning as it is about offering support. Each session gives space for reflection, conversation, and skill-building. It's a collaborative process — and one that continues to grow as trust and relationships deepen.

We're grateful for the opportunity to work with the Y.E.S. team and the young people they support, and we're looking forward to what this evolving relationship may bring.



# YES

YOUTH  
ENVIRONMENT  
SPORT

## People Place Space: A Cross-Site Creative Writing Initiative

People Place Space is a poetry and creative writing project facilitated by Belfast-based poet Niamh McNally. This project was delivered across all of Choice's seven Housing for All (HFA) schemes, with a total of 21 literature sessions being delivered.

The workshops were open to individuals and groups and explored themes of place, identity, and storytelling through poetry. Participants were supported in developing their writing skills through a three-part workshop structure:

- Introduction & Getting to Know You
- Jumping Into the Space
- Developing and Editing

In addition to the core programme, the project connected with the Royal Hillsborough Tapestry Project, providing another layer of creativity and reflection.

People Place Space forms part of Choice Housing's broader Good Relations work, supported through the Together: Building a United Community Strategy. This initiative aims to foster meaningful interaction between individuals from different backgrounds and to create opportunities for shared learning and expression.

Though workshops in Ballymena were well attended — including sessions at the Carson Centre and the Braid — the project also ran in Antrim, Lisburn, Saintfield, Ballynahinch, Enniskillen, Dungannon, and Derry~Londonderry, reflecting its growing popularity and the diverse interest in creative expression across regions.

A collection of participants' work from all sites will be compiled and published in an upcoming anthology, due to be launched in September 2025 as part of Choice Shared Housing Week.

This collaborative, cross-community project highlights the role of creative writing in opening up dialogue, exploring identity, and fostering connection — both within individual communities and across the wider region.



If you wish to take part in People Place Space creative workshops across Northern Ireland, please contact us: 0300 111 22 11



# Choice unveils mental health and wellbeing artwork at Antrim estate



Choice, one of Northern Ireland's largest housing associations, has unveiled artwork dedicated to positive mental health and wellbeing at its Fountain Hill estate in Antrim. Created by Bangor-based artist Chris McGuiggan of Codo Drops, the community art piece was delivered as part of Choice's good relations initiatives and incorporates various hidden messages relating to mental health, wellbeing and community.

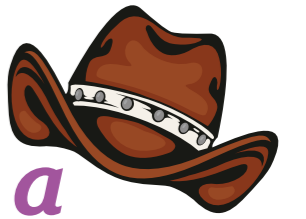
The design was created collaboratively, with artist Chris McGuiggan engaging with Parkhall Cultural Awareness Group to bring the artwork to life.

This community art piece is supported by the Department for Communities (DfC) 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.

A potential investment of £2.1m will be invested in the shared housing development - Fountain Hill and its associated five-year Good Relations Plan.

# Choice Wraps Up 5-Year Community Project with a Country Fest in Ballymena



Choice recently celebrated the end of a five-year community initiative with a lively Country Fest in Ballymena. The project, focused on building good relations among tenants in shared housing, was wrapped up with a day full of music, fun, and community spirit.

People from all backgrounds came together to enjoy live performances from Hugo Duncan, Country Harmony, Fiddler Adam, Boxcar Brian, and Bonny Stewart. The event, which was free and open to the public, took place at the Tower Shopping Centre in Ballymena and was organised by Choice.

Country Fest marked the fifth and final year of the Good Relations Programme, which was supported by the NI Executive's "Together: Building a United Community" strategy. The shared housing development at Nursery Close in Ballymena – backed by the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive – received a total of £2.3 million in funding, which helped support both the housing and the five-year community programme.



# Our Charities of the Year



Choice is pleased to announce that TinyLife and Community Rescue Service have been chosen as our Charities of the Year.

The two organisations secured the highest number of votes during a recent staff ballot.

Graham Woods – a member of Choice’s Fundraising Committee – said: *“We are all thrilled to welcome TinyLife and Community Rescue Service as our chosen charities.”*

*“Both organisations play a vital role in supporting families and communities right across Northern Ireland, and we are proud to partner with them. We look forward to working together to raise all-important funds and public awareness for these two incredible and worthwhile causes, and making a positive impact throughout the year,” added Graham.*

Community Rescue Service is Northern Ireland’s leading charitable search and rescue organisation and helps provide life-saving services to reunite vulnerable missing people with their loved ones. It was founded by Sean McCarry OBE and operates six units of volunteers across all eleven council areas.

Kerry Whitehouse, who has volunteered with its Belfast District for the past eight years, expressed appreciation for the support it is set to receive going forward. *“Community Rescue Service is an incredible organisation – it is driven by dedicated volunteers who selflessly give their time to help locate missing loved ones across the province,” she said.*

*“Our work is only possible thanks to the generosity of businesses and the public. We are truly grateful to Choice for supporting Community Rescue Service and helping us continue to make a difference in our communities.”*

TinyLife, meanwhile, is a premature and vulnerable baby charity dedicated to reducing premature birth, illness, disability and death in new-born babies by providing a wide range of support services that meet the growing needs of families of premature babies locally.

The charity, which was formerly called NIMBA, also supports crucial research to ensure every pregnancy has the best possible chance of a healthy outcome and a healthy baby. Joanne Morgan, the Chief Executive Officer of TinyLife, said: *“TinyLife would like to extend our sincere thanks to Choice for choosing us as one of their Charities of the Year.”*

*“Every year, almost 2,000 babies spend time in a neonatal unit, and the support we offer families is a real lifeline when they are feeling at their most vulnerable. Every penny donated by Choice will go toward ensuring we can continue to provide these much-needed services and support.”*

Meanwhile, a superb total of £6,500 was raised by Choice staff throughout 2024 for Women’s Aid and Dementia NI. Women’s Aid is a voluntary organisation that tackles domestic and sexual violence and provides services for appropriate intervention support services for women and children.

Dementia Northern Ireland is a charity that strives to empower local people with the condition to live well, while driving forward positive, lasting change that includes raising awareness of the condition and developing new, innovative services.

Graham added: *“This is a fantastic amount which will hopefully help both organisations continue to provide vital services in their respective sectors, and it is all down to the help, generosity, and support shown by Choice staff throughout the year. Well done!”*

# Choice launches framework to enhance planned maintenance

Choice has launched a new multi-supplier planned maintenance framework worth approximately £6 million per year, marking a significant investment in home improvements, community development, and local employment.

Tailored specifically to Choice’s needs, the framework will operate over an initial two-year period, with the option to extend for a further two years. It forms a key part of Choice’s asset management strategy, focusing on essential works such as kitchen and bathroom upgrades, redecoration, and roof, door and window replacements.

To ensure regional coverage and efficient delivery, the framework has been divided into two geographic lots: Hetherington Painting and Building Contractors will manage properties in the North and Bell Group will be responsible for the South.

*“This new framework is a major investment in the quality and sustainability of our homes,” said Andrew Lamont,*

*Head of Planned Maintenance at Choice. “By working with trusted suppliers who understand our tenants and communities, we aim to deliver better outcomes and long-term value.”*

Work commenced in April with Bell Group, with Hetherington expected to begin projects in the North in the coming months.

*“We’re proud to be part of this partnership and bring our expertise to the region,” said Colin Bunting, Operations Director at Bell Group.*

*“Our goal is to deliver high standards and meaningful change,” added Bosco Lyons, Senior Quantity Surveyor at Hetherington.*

This new framework reflects Choice’s ongoing commitment to maintaining high-quality homes while contributing to economic and social development across Northern Ireland.



# Our online tenant portal, 'My Choice' is available now to all Choice tenants

We have carried out some recent improvements to allow you to raise routine repairs at any time, as well as view the repair history for your home and the status of your repairs.

### What Services can I access through 'My Choice'?

You can quickly and securely:

- Access your rent account online to view your account
- Report a routine repair and view current/past repairs
- View your contact information and update your contact details
- Report an issue or concern

### How do I register for 'My Choice'?

You can register with 'My Choice' on your smartphone, tablet, laptop or computer. To register you will need the following information:

- Account Reference number (this can be found on your rent account statement)
- First Name
- Surname
- Date of birth
- National Insurance Number – format is AB123456C – capital letters and no spaces

You will also need an email address. If you do not provide an email address, you will not receive the activation token to allow you to complete the registration process.

To register now, simply scan the QR code or use the link below:



<https://my.choice-housing.org/>

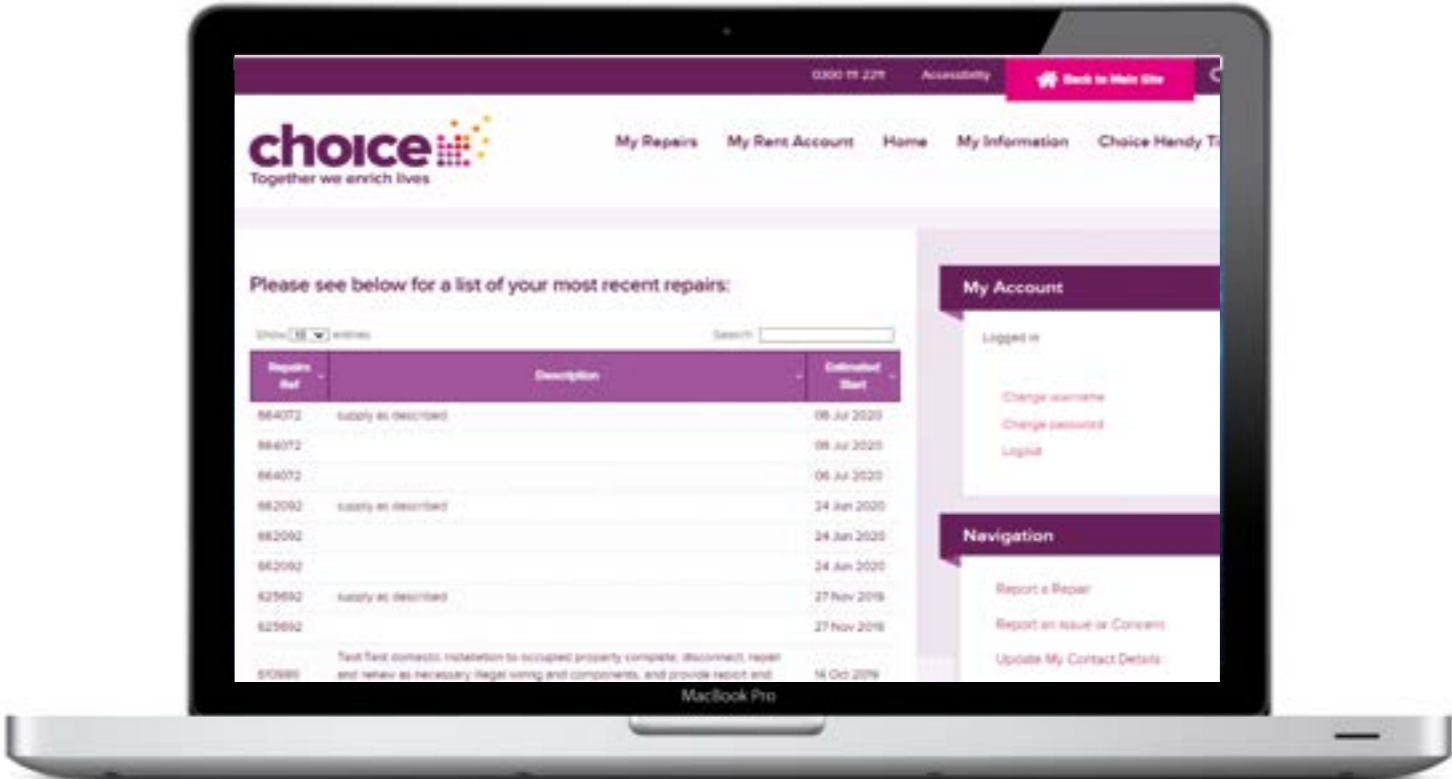
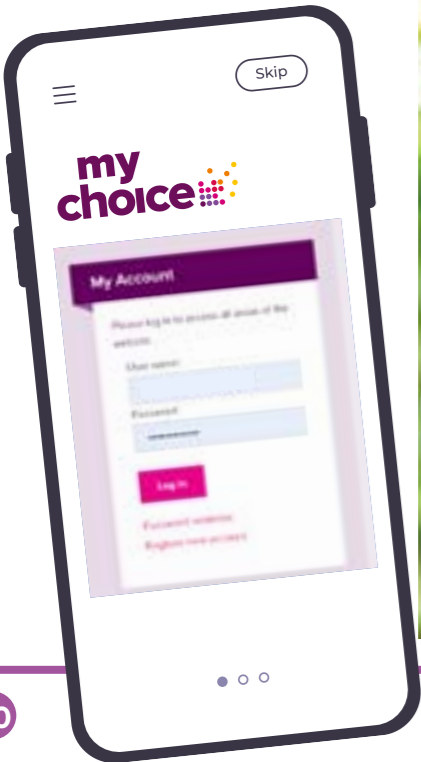
This will take you to the 'My Choice' Homepage. Click on 'Register New Account' and follow the instructions. If you already have an account just log in using your username and password.

If you experience any issues with login or registration you can contact [tenantportal@choice-housing.org](mailto:tenantportal@choice-housing.org) for assistance.



Clare, Tollgate House, Belfast-  
**'My Choice works for me as I can check my rent account or the status of a repair at any time of the day or night.**

**It's so easy to use and I would certainly recommend it to all Choice tenants.'**



# 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.*

## Useful Information



As a Choice tenant, we're here to support you. You can find essential information, helpful guides, and resources for your home available on our website:

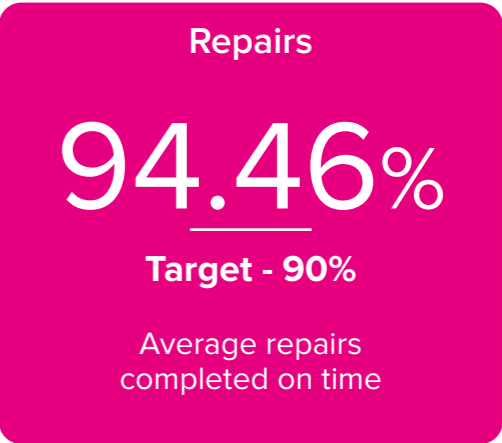
- Understand your rights
- Get tips on repairs and maintenance
- Find out how to get involved

Visit our website to explore: <https://www.choice-housing.org/news/useful-information-and-resources>

# 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.



**We want to hear from you!**  
**It is important that your voice, in relation to our services, is heard.**

Performance figures are from 1 April 2024 - 31 March 2025

# The Muriel Smyth Good Neighbour Award 2025

To assist you in your nominations here are a few guidelines of what the judges will be looking for:

The Muriel Smyth Good Neighbour Award will be judged by a panel made up of Board Members, Staff and the Community Network. You can nominate your neighbour by completing and returning the attached entry form. If you are unable to complete the form or require assistance, please contact the Services Centre on 0300 111 2211, who will be pleased to help.

- Have they helped you out at a time of crisis or are they a good neighbour all the time?
- Do they help you with your garden or do the shopping for you when you can't?
- Perhaps they have looked after your children so you can have a break or even go to work?
- Maybe they've just been there when you needed someone to talk to?
- The person nominated and the nominator must both be tenants of Choice.
- More than one person can be listed as nominator, however, anonymous nominations will not be accepted.
- Listing the special qualities that are the reasons for nomination of the person concerned will assist in the judging.

Ts & Cs apply.  
Closing Date:  
22nd August 2025

WIN  
£100  
Shopping  
Voucher



# Best Kept Garden Competition 2025

Green-fingered tenants are being urged to 'grow for it' as part of the annual Choice gardening competition.

Calling all keen gardeners! To the green fingered among you or your friends and neighbours, it's time to remind you of the annual Choice Best Kept Garden Award. You can nominate your own or another tenant's garden, or a scheme garden providing it is tended by the tenant and not Choice contractors.

If you wish to submit an entry please complete and return the information slip plus photo(s) of the nominated garden by **22nd August 2025** to the Editor, **Choice News** FREEPOST BEL2371, Belfast BT1 6BR.



WIN  
£100  
Shopping  
Voucher

Please be advised that this competition is open to Choice tenants only.

Ts & Cs apply.

## The Muriel Smyth Good Neighbour Award 2025

### Your details

Name: .....

Address: .....

.....

Tel: .....

### Nominee Detail

Name: .....

Address: .....

.....

Tel: .....

Reasons for nomination:

**All nominations should be forwarded to:**  
**Marketing Officer,**  
**Choice**  
**FREEPOST BEL2371,**  
**Belfast BT1 6BR**

**22nd August 2025**



## Best Kept Garden Competition 2025

### Your details

Name: .....

Address: .....

.....

Tel: .....

Email: .....

### Nominee Detail (if different)

Name: .....

Address: .....

.....

Tel: .....

Email: .....



# Choice Biodiversity Photography Competition

## Your details

Name: .....

Address: .....

.....

Tel: .....

Email: .....



- How to enter**
- 1. Capture a digital photograph of flowers, trees, insects, birds, and wildlife in our neighbourhoods. Your entries do not need to be of rare species, we simply want to encourage everyone to engage with the wildlife all around us!
  - 2. Submit via email to [energy@choice-housing.org](mailto:energy@choice-housing.org) along with your name and address by the closing date - 22nd August 2025.
  - 3. Our panel will judge the entries and winners will be featured in the next issue of Choice News!

Please be advised that this competition is open to Choice tenants only. Ts & Cs apply.



Our Sustainability & Energy strategy sets out how we will build upon our past successes and address challenges such as the climate crisis and biodiversity loss.

We are committed to a sustainable future for all.

In order to promote positive biodiversity behaviours in our communities we are delighted to launch our first annual biodiversity photography competition.

Simply snap a photograph and send it to [energy@choice-housing.org](mailto:energy@choice-housing.org) to be in with a chance of winning a £100 B&Q shopping voucher!

WIN  
£100  
B&Q  
shopping  
voucher

# Choice announces £2.7m Ballymoney investment

Choice is adding sixteen new properties to its portfolio worth £2.72m as part of an exciting development in Ballymoney, County Antrim. The build will comprise of 12, two-bedroom units; 3, one-bedroom own door apartments; and one, two person apartment that offers wheelchair-friendly access. Work on the scheme – which forms part of the town’s Greengage Cottages development – is already underway with final handover expected to take place before the end of the year.

Choice has been working in partnership with several key partners, including Glenoak Developments Limited, Doherty Architectural Services and DTL Construction. The new homes will blend elements of traditional heritage from the area with cutting-edge design. Inside, each property will have bright and spacious rooms that combine modern and comfortable open plan living to create the ideal home for couples or families. The location of the development also offers convenient access to transport links, amenities and activities as well as, local primary and secondary schools.

Commenting on the seven figure Greengage Cottages investment, Michael McDonnell – Group Chief Executive at Choice said: *“This development will deliver 16 modern, high-quality homes that have been designed to blend traditional heritage with contemporary living. This latest project reinforces Choice’s commitment to providing great homes and enhanced services for local communities.*

*“Investing in new, much-needed social homes is not just about providing shelter, it is about creating secure, sustainable communities where people can thrive,” he added.*

*“Quality, affordable housing forms the foundation for better health, improved education outcomes, and stronger local economies. When Choice invests in new home builds, we’re not just constructing buildings – we’re playing a key part in building futures.”*



## Financial Debt - useful information



### Rising Personal Debts in Northern Ireland: What You Need to Know

Recent findings of personal debt in Northern Ireland, highlights the significant impact of our current economic climate on households. A 2025 report, commissioned by the Consumer Council NI to analyse Advice NI's debt advice service, reveals a sharp increase in the average amount of personal debt, alongside worrying trends in how people are borrowing.



### The Growing Debt Burden

The report shows a significant 42% increase in average personal debts compared to the previous year. In 2022/23, the average debt for those seeking advice was £9,136. Fast forward to the latest findings, and this figure has jumped to £12,989 per person.

Feedback from those who sought debt advice points to a clear culprit: the rising cost of everyday living. People are feeling the pinch, and this pressure is manifesting in increased financial strain.



### “Unprecedented Surges” in Everyday Costs

One of the most striking findings is the “unprecedented surges” in debts related to essential services. Higher prices for energy and telecoms have led to a significant rise in outstanding payments to broadband, mobile phone, gas, and electricity providers. The debt service has seen a significant 367% increase in individuals presenting with broadband debts, with all other categories also showing substantial increases.



### The Rise of High-Interest Lending

High-interest lending is on the rise across Northern Ireland with Advice NI's statistics showing a 16% increase in individuals seeking debt advice due to illegal lending. These unlicensed money lenders typically charge exorbitant interest rates, trapping vulnerable individuals in a cycle of debt.

Advisers are also reporting a frequent reliance on other high-interest products, such as “buy now, pay later” loans, store card credit, and catalogue credit debts. These avenues, while seemingly convenient, can quickly lead to unmanageable debt.

## Where to Find Help and Support

If you're struggling with financial pressures or debt, remember that help is available.

### Choice's Financial Inclusion Team:

Our dedicated team can provide support with budgeting and benefit-related issues. If you need a benefit health check, please contact us at: [financialinclusion@choice-housing.org](mailto:financialinclusion@choice-housing.org) or call 0300 111 2211.

### Choice Website Resources:

On our website, you'll find our Choice budget planner. This is an excellent tool to review your household spending and gain a clearer understanding of where your money goes.

### Consumer Council NI:

The Consumer Council NI website offers valuable resources to help you manage your household costs. You'll find tools to help you get the best energy rates in Northern Ireland (regularly updated) and a regional oil price comparison tool to advise you on average oil prices in your area.

### Smart Shopping Tips:

Always shop around! For services like telecoms, comparison sites are invaluable. For comparing broadband deals, [www.uswitch.com](http://www.uswitch.com) has up-to-date deals.

Keep records of your contract dates! This includes 12-month electricity tariffs, mobile phone contracts, and broadband agreements. Knowing these dates allows you to plan ahead and shop around before your contract ends, potentially avoiding price hikes or even reducing your bill.

### Advice NI's Debt Advice Service:

If you're struggling to maintain payments on personal debts, Advice NI offers a free and confidential debt advice service. Reaching out is the crucial first step towards regaining financial control. You can call them on freephone 0800 915 4604.



## Choice Services continues to improve its health and safety standards with safety certification

The Team at Choice Services is delighted to have recently achieved a Safe-T-Cert, a scheme designed to certify the Safety Management Systems of contractors working in the construction industry. Achieving the certificate means Choice aligns with industry health and safety standards required by third-party contractors who tender for Choice projects. Safe-T-Cert is externally audited, and organisations must provide up to three months evidence in running the safety management system.

Choice Services adjusted existing systems to meet the requirements of Safe-T-Cert and provided evidence to the auditor for assessment. The auditor then completed a site inspection to ensure the system was applied appropriately.

Benefits of this third-party health and safety management system include compliance with regulations and reduction in workplace risks. The system also provides expert, unbiased assessments which enhance efficiency by streamlining safety processes, minimising incidents, and lowering insurance costs. By fostering a strong safety culture, employee morale, engagement and wellbeing is boosted and absenteeism is reduced. Additionally, Safe-T-Cert strengthens the organisations reputation, and supports industry certifications, giving the business a competitive edge.

Speaking about the Safe-T-Cert, Alfred Smallwoods, Choice HSQE Manager said, *"Safety has become the most important focus of Choice Services outside of contract performance and there has been a considerable buy-in across the organisation. Achieving the Safe-T-Cert is testament to the hard work and dedication of staff over the years. This milestone serves as a catalyst for continual improvement."*



## A Warm Welcome to New Choice Tenants and Staff



A warm welcome to our new Choice tenants and former Connswater team who have transferred to Choice Group following the successful merger with Connswater Homes. The merger follows a period of extensive consultation and engagement with tenants, staff and other stakeholders.

Bringing together the two organisations in the one group will provide significant opportunities for further investment in housing across Northern Ireland. The skills, experience and knowledge of the former Connswater team will also augment the existing resources and talent across Choice.

Michael McDonnell, Choice Group Chief Executive:

*"Throughout this process we were acutely aware that this was more than an investment project between two organisations, this was about the future of tenants and their homes - their engagement and contribution was vital to making this a successful outcome for all."*

*"The skills and experience of the team at Connswater will be a huge asset to the Choice group and will further enhance our role in delivering social and affordable, sustainable housing right across the region."*

Our new tenants will avail of a wide range of Choice support initiatives including training and accreditation, financial support and tenant and community engagement initiatives across our regional networks.



# Choice Celebrates Milestones at Sheltered Living Schemes in Lurgan and Belfast

Choice has marked two major anniversaries across its sheltered living schemes this year, celebrating 35 years at Hill Court in Lurgan and 30 years at Ballydown Court in West Belfast.

These landmark events brought together tenants, staff, local dignitaries, and family members to honour the vibrant communities that have flourished within these schemes for decades.

## 35 Years of Independent Living at Hill Court, Lurgan

Located just a short walk from Lurgan town centre, Hill Court has been a cornerstone of independent living since it opened in 1989. The scheme offers its tenants a safe and welcoming environment, supported by an active programme of activities such as quizzes, bingo, karaoke nights, and the ever-popular “Friday Fry-Day.”

The 35th-anniversary celebration was attended by Lord Mayor of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough, Councillor Sarah Duffy, and Cllr Mary O’Dowd, who joined tenants and Choice staff—including former coordinator and current resident Joan Wright—for a joyful day of recognition.

*“I was delighted to visit Hill Court and wish both the tenants and all at Choice a very happy 35th anniversary of serving the people of Lurgan,” said Cllr Duffy. “There was a great atmosphere amongst the tenants, which makes Hill Court very special.”*

One resident, Jean Morrow, has called Hill Court home since its beginning and will celebrate her 104th birthday later this year—an extraordinary testament to the enduring sense of belonging and community the scheme fosters.

## Ballydown Court: 30 Years of Community Spirit in West Belfast

A few miles away in West Belfast, Ballydown Court commemorated its 30th anniversary. Opened in 1995, this Glen Road scheme provides 38 accessible, self-contained apartments with excellent transport links and proximity to local amenities such as the Westwood and Kennedy shopping complexes.

Ballydown is known for the strong bonds among its residents, fostered through weekly coffee mornings, seasonal events, and charity fundraisers.

At the heart of the celebration was Kathleen Egan, the scheme’s longest-standing resident at age 97. She led the ceremonial cake-cutting surrounded by her daughter Eileen, highlighting the personal histories that give Ballydown its unique spirit.

Carol Ervine, Choice Group Director of Tenant and Client Services, attended both milestone events and praised the schemes’ shared values of connection, inclusion, and independence.

*“Hill Court and Ballydown Court are shining examples of what sheltered living should be - communities that empower residents to live independently whilst staying connected and supported,” she said, “These anniversaries remind us of the importance of investing not only in new developments but also in our sheltered living schemes that continue to enrich lives year after year.”*





# Children's Colouring Competition

Open to children 16 years and under

Win  
a family  
pass to  
Belfast Zoo!



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.

One lucky winner will receive this great prize! Entries must be received by

**Friday 22nd  
August 2025.**

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



**POST TO:** Choice Housing Ireland LTD Freepost BEL 2371 Belfast BT1 6BR

Tenant's Name: ..... Child's Name & Age: .....  
Address: .....  
Tel: ..... Email: .....

# 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](http://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.

## Have you registered for My Choice?

**You can pay rent, report a repair and more through My Choice.**

Use the tenant portal- 'My Choice'- a minimum of two times before September 2025 to be eligible to be entered into the prize draw to win a £50 voucher.

4 winners will be selected at random per month! Ts&Cs apply. To get started simply register today by scanning the QR code.



# Out & About

Choice has more than 13,000 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!

## Contact us at:

[editor@choice-housing.org](mailto:editor@choice-housing.org)



### A SPECIAL SURPRISE AT TUGHAN COURT

Tughan Court in Bangor was filled with joy and celebration this Good Friday as tenants gathered for a lively Easter party - with an extra special surprise in store. The event doubled as an early birthday celebration for long-time resident Lilly Fleming, who turned 99 on April 19th.

Lilly, a cherished member of the Tughan Court community for over 30 years, is well known for her active lifestyle and warm spirit. She still attends afternoon tea twice a week and enjoys a daily walk around the scheme. Pictured here with fellow tenant and friend Nancy Green, Lilly was delighted by the celebration in her honour. It was a heart-warming day of laughter, community, and well-deserved recognition for one of Tughan Court's most inspiring residents.

Happy 99th Birthday, Lilly - and here's to many more!



### DEMENTIA FRIENDLY SERVICES

Thank you to Sarah-Jane from Forward South Partnership for joining our coffee morning at Benmore Court recently. Sarah-Jane provided an information session on dementia friendly services for residents. We look forward to her visiting again soon!



### MAKING A DIFFERENCE: MCNEILL COURT'S GENEROUS DONATION

Our wonderful tenants at McNeill Court in Larne have raised £114 for Women's Aid-ABCLN. Their fundraising efforts will help change the lives of women and children in their local area. Well done everyone at McNeill Court!



### COURAGEOUS COLIN!

Meet Colin Hughes, a resident at The Beeches Dromore, who recently made an incredible gift—donating one of his kidneys to change someone else's life.

"I've done so much in my life and it's all been good. I simply wanted to give somebody the freedom to do the things that make them happy," Colin says. "I move a little slower now and don't need two kidneys anymore. In fact, I feel no different than I was before!"

Colin's deep faith inspired his selfless act, and we are beyond proud of his compassion and bravery.

**Did you know?** Around a third of all kidney transplants in the UK come from living donors. Colin is proof that one person really can make a life-saving difference.



### KNEADING COMMUNITY: JIM SHARES HIS SODA BREAD SKILLS

At Aughrim Court in Kilkeel, resident and talented baker Jim treated everyone to a special demonstration on how to make traditional soda bread. Pictured enjoying the experience are Teresa, Danguole, Jim, Veronica, and Nancy — a wonderful snapshot of community life at Aughrim Court!



### SWEET TREATS AT WESTBRIDGE HOUSE

Tenants at Westbridge House in Enniskillen were all smiles recently as they enjoyed a surprise visit from the ice cream van.

It was a simple but joyful moment, bringing sweet treats and a touch of summer fun to the day!





## NUTRITION AND HYDRATION WEEK

Our residents at Benmore Court were recently joined by Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, Health Improvement Team for an information session on nutrition and hydration, as part of Nutrition and Hydration week. Barbara Redmond, health & lifestyle facilitator (BHSCT) demonstrated in her information session, how small changes to what we eat and drink everyday makes a big difference.



## TUNING IN TOGETHER AT ROTHERSEY COURT

Tenants at Rothersey Court in Coleraine came together with community spirit and a shared vision, voting to add a TV to their lounge. To help fund it, they hosted a coffee and raffle morning, combining the proceeds with leftover funds from their recent 45th anniversary celebration and generous donations. Their efforts raised an impressive £470.57! Now, residents are looking forward to enjoying rugby matches, soaps, and quiz shows together in comfort and good company.



## LUNCH DATES ARE BETTER WITH FRIENDS!

The afternoon tea group from Tughan Court in Bangor recently enjoyed a lunch at Teddy's of Bangor! They enjoyed lovely food, great laughs, and made memories!



## BANGOR TOWN HALL VISIT

The tenants at Tughan Court in Bangor had the wonderful opportunity to meet with Mayor of Ards and North Down Borough Council Councillor, Alistair Cathcart. They enjoyed a tour of Bangor Town Hall, learning about the History of Bangor and finding out about new and exciting projects for the city.

A huge thank you to the Mayor and the team for their time and commitment to our community. Looking forward to what's ahead!



## BRINGING GENERATIONS TOGETHER: VE DAY CELEBRATIONS IN CARRYDUFF AND BELFAST

Thanks to the support of Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council, tenants at Edgar Boyd Court in Carryduff came together to honour the legacy of VE Day with two meaningful and joyful events that celebrated community, history, and connection.

On VE Day itself, residents welcomed P4 pupils from Carryduff Primary School for a special intergenerational afternoon. Together, they enjoyed afternoon tea, traditional games like jacks, and a spirited singalong — but most importantly, they shared personal stories that brought history to life for the younger generation.

Later, the commemorations continued with an evening of food, film, and memories. Mayor Kurtis Dickson and Councillor Brian Higginson joined tenants at the sheltered living scheme for the event, highlighting the significance of remembering the past while fostering community spirit.

Meanwhile, at Medway Court and Elm Court in Belfast, tenants also marked VE Day in style, taking full advantage of the glorious weather. The day was filled with song, stories, and an indulgent afternoon tea — complete with plenty of cake — as residents gathered to reminisce and celebrate together!



## LISNAVAR COURT BLOSSOMS WITH BIODIVERSITY

Residents at Lisnavar Court in Derry~Londonderry, with support from their scheme coordinator, have transformed their shared spaces into a haven for wildlife. From vibrant flower beds to a thriving vegetable patch, the gardens now attract bees, butterflies, and birds.

Recent efforts to brighten the frontage with pots, baskets, and window boxes have added even more colour and life—showing what's possible when communities grow together.

AVAILABLE HOUSING

## Donal Casey Court

OVER  
**55s**

## *Your new home with Choice*

Donal Casey Court,  
Derry~Londonderry

We have immediate availability

Call **0300 111 2211**  
to apply today!



### *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**   
Together we enrich lives

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

T: 0300 111 2211  
E: [enquiries@choice-housing.org](mailto:enquiries@choice-housing.org)

[choice-housing.org](http://choice-housing.org)

f X in