



Supporting Communities Awarded Customer Service Excellence Quality Mark

We are delighted to announce that we have successfully achieved the Customer Service Excellence accreditation as verified by the Centre for Assessment.

“We do not intend to rest on our laurels”, said Conor Flanagan, Head of Community Development and project lead for the accreditation process. “We will continue to put our customer focus front and centre and all our staff will continue to provide the highest level of customer service that we can as we strive to keep the community at the heart of everything that we do.”

Customer Service Excellence (CSE) is a national quality mark that seeks to reward organisations with a truly customer-focused commitment to all they do while providing a positive steer for customer-centred change.

Certification takes place through a rigorous assessment process to establish whether an organisation meets the requirements of CSE.

**CUSTOMER
SERVICE
EXCELLENCE®**



IN THIS ISSUE

**OCN STUDENTS TAKE THE
NEXT STEP TO ULSTER
UNIVERSITY**

**SUCCESSION PLANNING
THE CARNAGAT WAY**

**A GLOWING SOCIAL
ENTERPRISE**

**TENNANT-LED
ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY
AT CIRCLE HOUSING**



OCN Learners Take the Next Step to Ulster University

Online training has thrived over the last 18 months. We have seen rising numbers across all courses, particularly our OCN accredited courses. Since May 2020, a total of 149 learners have registered to complete our OCN Levels 1,2 & 3 Community Development courses alone.

Using a mixture of Google Classroom, Ambition and Zoom, we have provided a blended and flexible learning platform to suit various learners. With ongoing assessment and digital support to fit around the needs and interests of each learner, we have reached out to more learners and community groups from across the province than ever before, including those who may not have been able to attend our face-to-face training previously due to other commitments.

More and more, our learners are now also interested in continuing their education in Community Development at Ulster University. Supporting Communities' Training Officer, Karla Turner, organised an online information session with Dr. Rosemary Moreland, Course Director and Senior Lecturer at Ulster University, to help learners take that next step.

Seventeen staff and volunteers attended from across the country. The session provided an opportunity for our OCN learners to ask questions and explore what their next options could be. We're delighted with the results - six learners are set to begin their degree in September!

"I'm delighted that our online training continues to be such a huge success," said Karla. "Our OCN training courses have never been busier. Seeing learners progress from Level 1 to 3 and then continue their education at Ulster University is amazing. Getting to know each learner and watching their confidence grow each week has been a huge highlight for me. They all have so many exciting plans for the future, and I cannot wait to watch it all develop."

Claire Crawley from the Ulster Towers Residents Association is one of our students headed to university next semester.



Claire Crawley, headed to University!

"Never in a million years did I think I would go to University."

She told us, "I love volunteering in my local community and always wondered could I be good enough to do this as full-time work.

When I was offered to complete the OCN qualifications with Supporting Communities, I jumped at the chance. I wasn't feeling too confident, but Karla was an amazing trainer. She was very understanding and helped me every step of the way.

I am now completing my 'Unblocking Potential' course with Ulster University over the summer and starting my BSc. Hons. Community Development in September.

None of this would have been possible without the help and support from Karla and Supporting Communities. I cannot thank Karla enough for making me believe in myself and showing me that I can do this.

If anyone else is doubting themselves and wondering if they can do it... the answer is yes, you can! Reach for those goals. I did, and I am not looking back."



Connecting During Covid

The Connecting During Covid project has made tablets and training available to 10 people who otherwise could not access the internet.

Participants include families who needed a device to help with homeschooling children and older people living in isolation who can now see their families and attend community activities without ever leaving home.

Kathryn from Newtonhamilton had no device for her children to use for homeschooling. They tried to use her phone, which she says was too small and not really up to date enough. The internet was very slow on it, making for a frustrating experience. The children were not able to take part in their school's online classes.

Now with the tablet at home, her children were able to get online and get connected!



“Having access to the tablet provided by Supporting Communities has meant my two boys can access all the homeschooling activities they were missing out on. It is a vital piece of equipment in my house now. Thank you!”

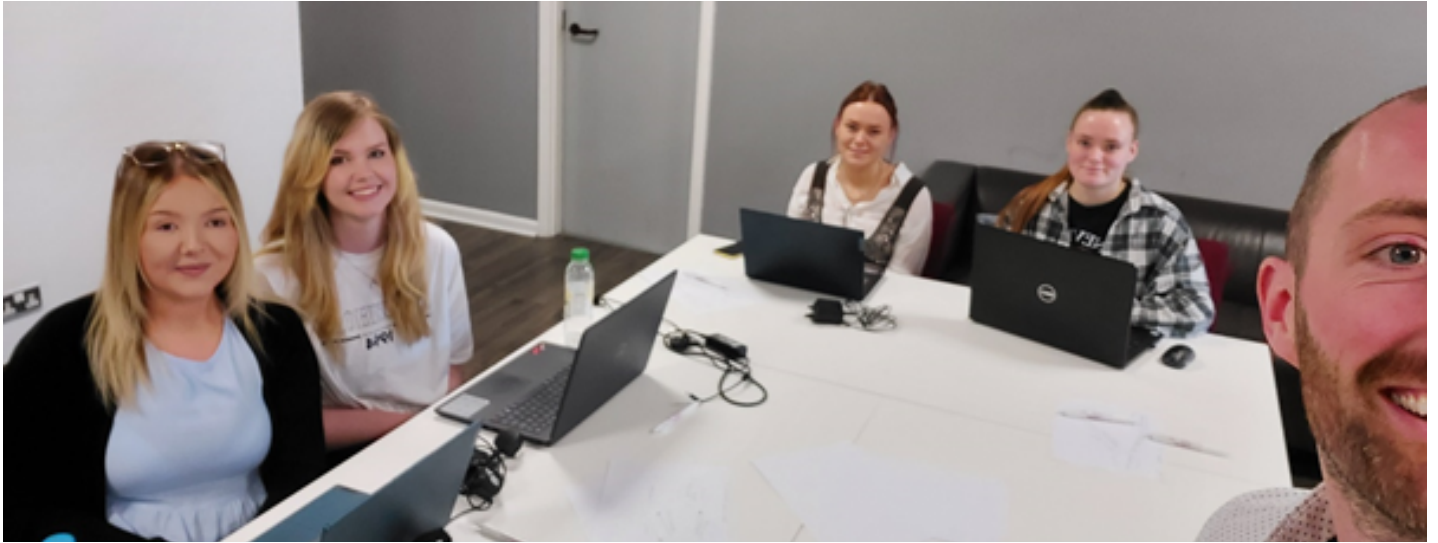
KATHRYN FROM NEWTOWNHAMILTON

Eileen felt very isolated during lockdown and had no way to engage in online activities in her community that she would have liked to try. Stephanie McKillop, our Digital Inclusion Officer, got her set up with a tablet and some training to use it, and now she's doing all sorts online and feeling much more connected to the world.

"At nearly 80 years old, I really didn't believe I could learn to do anything online. I don't even have a mobile. But since getting help from Supporting Communities, I can now use Google, watch church services, and video call my son and grandchildren. I live alone and have recently broken my arm, so this really is a lifeline to me."

- Eileen from Rasharkin





Aidan Kearney delivers an OCN Level 2 Understanding Social Enterprise course

You GLOW Girl!

Glow NI is a charity focusing on empowering women and girls with life skills to increase confidence and self-esteem. Supporting Communities has been delivering OCN Level 2 courses in Understanding Social Enterprise to their members to help them run their business which supports their work.

Established in 2011 in North Belfast, Glow NI provides social programmes, training, and wellbeing workshops. The charity facilitates activities designed to involve, inspire and empower women and girls across Northern Ireland. They have established a social enterprise called You GLOW Girl, a clothing and merchandise store. Volunteers and staff members will be operating this business through their online store via their website and various face-to-face retail opportunities.

Supporting Communities were contacted by Paula Murphy-Gibson, the You GLOW Girl coordinator, and we couldn't wait to deliver our OCN accredited course to their staff and volunteers. Volunteers included members of a youth group who are also doing other courses with Glow, as well as taking up apprenticeship roles within the charity to support future activities and assist with the running of the social enterprise.

In partnership with OCN NI, Supporting Communities have used the new Ambition online delivery platform for learners to access course materials, virtual classrooms, and resources, as well as instantly contacting tutors and viewing grades and feedback.

Through this platform over the course of eight weeks (and a one-off, face-to-face visit), volunteers from Glow NI have gained their OCN Level 2 in Understanding Social Enterprise and will be using their learning to shape the operations of You GLOW Girl in the coming months and years.

Feedback from participants has been extremely positive, and several learners are planning on progressing to our Level 3 Developing Social Enterprise Course.

Check out [Glow NI online](#) and follow them on social media to see some of the great merchandise for sale!





Stories from the ONSIDE Project

The ONSIDE Project continues to thrive under this year's unusual circumstances. In total, we have now delivered our six-week digital training programme to over 1,200 participants across Northern Ireland and the border counties of the Republic of Ireland.

Many of these participants had never used Zoom before and have learned so many new skills and developed their confidence over the course. In fact, 99% of participants stated that they learned something new during the course.

ONSIDE Trainer Matthew tells us how he watched participants' confidence grow over the 6 weeks. "One participant that really stood out to me was Ivan, an older gentleman who had never used this type of technology before in his life. He was anxious at the beginning and needed a lot of assistance, but by the end of the project, he was one of the first people linked into the Zoom call, and I could see a big shift in his confidence."

"I think the project is a great catalyst for social and digital inclusion. A lot of my participants had little to no social interaction and loved the project both for the education and the communication side of things. I had one participant who joined in right after having her appendix removed at the hospital because she didn't want to miss out. That's quite a testament to the impact of the project!"

"We've had some groups who've gotten on so well that they've used the digital skills they learned on the course to form a book club together where they download books on the Libby app and then meet up on Zoom to discuss them."

Online safety is also an integral part of the project. We devote a whole session to giving participants tips on protecting themselves from scams and staying safe when shopping online. Many of our participants have reported back to us that they have been able to spot a scam because of the training they received from us.



"Chronic illness can be very isolating, and confidence is low. I was nervous about joining the course, but now I am sad it is finishing. It has opened up a new world for me that I didn't even know existed. There's so much to do and try and I'm really excited about exploring it all further now."

ONSIDE Trainer Colin tells a success story from one of his participants. "In one of my first groups, I had a man who said he liked to do things face to face, not on computers. By week 5, however, he was proud to report that he had now booked his dog into the vets online, renewed his driving license online, had regular Zoom sessions with a forum for drone photography, and saved himself £200 by replacing his drone camera himself, a skill he learned from watching a YouTube video."

And, because age is no barrier to learning new skills, we also have to mention Louisa, a 99-year-old participant who sent her first-ever email!





Carnagat Community Association Committee Members

Succession Planning the Carnagat Way

Succession Planning is the process of identifying and developing new group members who can replace existing members when they leave or retire. Encouraging new members to be involved, especially younger people, is critical to the sustainability of community groups.

Many organisations struggle to attract new members, making them vulnerable to the sudden departure of key people, but not Carnagat Community Association!

Carnagat in Newry has found a system that works remarkably well for them, ensuring there is always someone ready to step up into a new role as needed.

We spoke to Paula McGuigan, a long-time committee member, to find out the secret of their success.

One key thing that they do is to actively rotate the management roles and have a "vice" of every position so that everyone has a chance to learn and develop all the skills needed. They value the contribution of their committee members and are sure to show their appreciation through trips and fun activities, and more serious training opportunities.

“

*"Get them young!
Our young people are given
more responsibilities over
time to plan and organise
their own activities and
help out as youth leaders.
We allow them to make
real decisions. Young
people are not token
members. They take
ownership of things."*

PAULA MCGUIGAN, CARNAGAT CA

In terms of attracting new people to the group, Carnagat runs many activities for children and young people in the area. There is a natural progression for those interested in coming up through the various groups and eventually becoming youth leaders ready to progress to committee members.



At their recent AGM, Carnagat inducted several new committee members who have come through all their programmes since childhood. Their youngest committee member is just 18 years old, and they now have seven under 25-year-olds on a committee of 15 members. The current Vice Secretary and Vice-Treasurer are both in their 20s.

"We like to keep things relaxed and fun," said Paula, who has served in several roles over the years. "We make sure to reward our committee members, so they get as much out of it as they are giving us. For young people, we can help with filling in CVs and being a reference for them when they start to go for part-time jobs. It's a win-win!"

"Volunteering is something we recognise," she went on to say. "We count their hours and they can go for the Millenium Volunteers award as part of their work with us. We throw them in the deep end - that's the best learning!"

At Carnagat, personal development really does equal community development. Putting time and effort into their youth groups ensures a good long-term result for the group and the whole community.

Paula also emphasised that the young people are not token members. They take ownership of things and have a genuine say in the running of the community association.

"It's all about the attitude and giving young people a true voice. Letting them see the results of their hard work encourages them to keep going. And you need that energy - it's vital. It sustains our group to keep going, and the young people in the area see the benefits of it," said Paula.

Some of the new committee members also told us why they got involved and what motivates them:

"I enjoy volunteering as I like offering help to those in our community and working with children and young people in the area. It has helped my confidence and allowed me to help make a difference," said Niocol Campbell.



Carnagat Youth Group



"I volunteer because I like to see the happiness and difference we can make to a child's day, especially those who mightn't get these opportunities at home."

NICOLE FARRELL, COMMITTEE MEMBER

"Volunteering allows me to connect with my community and make it a better place. It has boosted my self-confidence and self-esteem and offers me the chance to give something back to the community or make a difference to people around me. It broadens my horizons and gives me lots of different experiences. I feel it is a valuable asset to my future," said Nadine Campbell.





The First Tenant-Led Engagement Strategy Rolls out at Circle VHA:

An Interview with April Gregg, TAG member

Supporting Communities has been working with Circle Voluntary Housing Association in Dublin to help them create their first Tenant Engagement Strategy and set up a tenant advisory group (TAG), ensuring they have the tools and structures in place that will lead to a meaningful partnership between tenants, staff and board.

Since December 2020, tenants and staff have been taking part in our training and focus group work to develop a common understanding of tenant engagement and how they want to proceed.

We are delighted to report that their board has just approved a brand new Tenant Engagement Strategy, written by the tenants themselves. This is a major milestone for the organisation with many hours of work behind it. The strategy is accompanied by a 3-year action plan also written and designed by tenants and staff, which we look forward to helping them put into operation.

We recently sat down with April Gregg, one of the tenants who has been involved in the process from the start.

SC: How are you finding the engagement process so far?

April: I enjoy it. It's nice to know I'm going to be a part of something that makes a difference in people's housing and in their lives. It's not just about giving someone a house. It's about their needs and wants and helping communities get along. It's really good!

SC: What made you want to get involved?

April: I was asked! There was Covid, and there was a lockdown, and it was new people to talk to. It was a bit of banter and a



"It's not just about giving someone a house. It's about their needs and wants and helping communities get along."

APRIL GREGG

chance to do something good. It focused me away from not being able to do anything.

SC: One big thing that you were instrumental in was writing the strategy. What's something in it that's important to you?

April: Working with people and understanding their needs better. I'm a hairdresser, and I have some clients in wheelchairs who could be stuck in their sitting room all day because they can't



get through their doorframes the way they are built. Circle was really interested to know that – going forward, they will be making sure that every house has a standard size doorframe so that if someone, god forbid, any of us ends up in a wheelchair, they can get around their home! They are actually going to make this change and have a standard to work to.

SC: It seems like Circle has been very responsive to your feedback and wants to make positive changes going forward; what's something that you're looking forward to?

April: Yes, they are talking about more plans in terms of improving antisocial behaviour and mental health. They are talking about linking people in with resources and services and taking that on board, and not ignoring the causes of problems but finding ways to help people grow mentally and get on better and live better. Everybody makes mistakes and has problems. We need to be directing people to free resources to help them rather than just ignoring them or telling them to leave because they broke a rule.



“They are actually listening. Circle won't be just for housing anymore; it will be a well-being housing body! ”

APRIL GREGG

SC: And that was your idea, wasn't it?

April: Yes, housing is a human right. Sticking people who aren't ok, and nobody is ok every day, into an estate somewhere and then leaving them doesn't help. Actually, helping people change and grow and learn new things is what we need.

SC: That's great to hear!

April: They are actually listening. I've been with Circle for years, and they've hit walls in the past. There are so many people in Dublin in housing estates, and there's so much more crime and antisocial – they didn't know what to do with all the complaints coming in. So now they are asking the tenants to find out what people really need.

SC: At the start of the process, some staff might have been a bit skeptical about involving tenants in decision making, but now they really see the benefits of listening to the tenants, don't they?

April: Yes, attitudes have definitely changed! There are some high-up people that were kind of stern and standoffish when we first met. But now they're getting into the whole thing - we broke 'em! It won't be just for housing anymore; it will be a well-being housing body!

SC: I think you just gave them their new tagline there!

Supporting Communities will be chairing the TAG until the tenants are ready to take over. We will help with implementing the action plan and recruiting more tenants to get involved in a range of ways that suit them.



Circle's new stamp of Tenant Approval





Radius Housing Awarded Silver Tenant Participation Accreditation



Radius has become the first housing association in Northern Ireland to achieve the Tenant Participation Standards Accreditation from Supporting Communities.

The TP Standards are ten criteria for tenant involvement that an organisation must meet to become accredited. Accreditation is awarded at three levels based on the Scottish model and adapted for Northern Ireland by Supporting Communities.

"It is a brave decision for any organisation to put their activities under the microscope to be independently examined. Radius was braver still to be the first in Northern Ireland to do so," said Sheenagh McNally, Head of Corporate Services.

The accreditation process includes a self-assessment, focus groups with tenants, board, and staff from throughout the organisation, an independent assessment by Supporting Communities, and finally independent validation from an external panel, in this case, chaired by Lesley Baird, CEO of TPAS Scotland.

Sheenagh McNally and Colm McDaid from Supporting Communities presented a plaque to Radius' Chief Executive, John McLean, in recognition of this tremendous achievement.

"First of all, I must pay tribute to the staff team involved in completing a very impressive self-assessment that included two very large lever arch folders of documentary evidence," Sheenagh remarked.

"Radius Housing has made significant strides in engaging tenants over the last four years since its merger in 2017. There are excellent examples of good practice throughout the submission that can be described as sector leading."



"As the first housing association in Northern Ireland to put your tenant engagement activities under the spotlight, you have certainly set the bar high for other organisations wishing to do likewise," Sheenagh told Radius.

Supporting Communities led a robust assessment of Radius' tenant participation work to date, highlighting good practice and making suggestions for improvement in areas. An independent panel then individually rated the standards against a set of competencies before collectively discussing their findings and awarding an overall rating of Silver Level 2. A remarkable achievement straight out of the gate!

Radius Housing Chief Executive, John McLean, remarked, "It is paramount that tenants have a meaningful say in how we prioritise and deliver our services. Right from the outset at the planning stage of new homes through handover to the creation of diverse and shared neighbourhoods, we learn so much from our tenants and welcome their input.

We have hard-working staff engaging daily with tenants, building thriving communities. But we know we can do even better, and that's why we embraced the Tenant Participation Assessment, overseen by Supporting Communities.

Yes, we are delighted to be the first NI-based recipient of the assessment and to win the much-coveted Silver Award. However, more importantly, we look forward to enhancing our partnership by implementing the really positive recommendations from the assessment panel. I have no doubt that the TP Assessment will increase tenancy sustainability and resilience across all Radius communities and, indeed, the wider

social housing sector, should other providers follow suit."

Tenant Participation accreditation will help raise the standard of tenant involvement in Northern Ireland. It is a robust and structured process for assessing how well landlords involve tenants and residents in their services and flagging opportunities for improvement.

Colm McDaid, Chief Executive of Supporting Communities, said, "We look forward to working with many more housing providers to achieve the standard and improve the ways in which they engage and involve the people that matter most - their tenants. The TP Standards are one more way we can take tenant participation to the next level in Northern Ireland."

Find out more about the TP Standards on our new website, www.tpsupport.org.



"We learn so much from our tenants and welcome their input. We have hard-working staff engaging daily with tenants, building thriving communities. But we know we can do even better and that's why we embraced the Tenant Participation assessment."

JOHN MCLEAN, RADIUS HOUSING



Online Training is back in September!



Keep an eye on our website for new dates.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S MESSAGE

I attended my first full meeting of the Government and Voluntary & Community Sector Joint Forum (JF) on 23rd June. Despite the virtual limitations, this was a useful first meeting with energised cross-sectoral sharing and discussion.

Able chaired by *Anne-Marie McClure, Start 360 (JF Chair, VCS Panel)*, the Forum's membership, which as well as myself comprises 14 other community and voluntary sector representatives from across the sector and representatives from all NI central government departments and local government, had a packed agenda to consider.

Amongst the items under discussion was an updated Work Programme for the Forum, which includes streams on Tackling Bureaucracy in Government Funding; Maximising Social Value in Commissioning, Funding & Procurement processes; and Post Covid Recovery and Renewal.

Throughout this new term, the Forums membership will continue to work on establishing the long-term vision and direction for the Joint Forum, including its structures and practices. Once this work plan is finalised, the Forum will progress work on these

issues through a series of joint sector/government task groups. I look forward to including some of the lived experiences from the grassroots community groups whom we support.



The first meeting also included reflections from *Sharron Russell, DfC*, and *Public Sector/ Joint Forum Co-Chair* on 'Lessons and Learning' from the COVID-19 response, particularly how it has informed and influenced the government's relationship with the community and voluntary sector and ways of working. I am delighted to say that many of the groups that Supporting Communities supports will have helped inform this important learning as we advance.

The next full Joint Forum meeting is scheduled to take place in September 2021. I look forward to playing my part as best I can and keeping all community representatives informed on any progress made via our various communication channels.