

'A breath of fresh air' - Abbeyfield & Wesley's new Community Garden in Carrickfergus



Pictured at the opening of the community garden are: (back row l-r) Roy Beggs MLA; David Maxwell, BBC Radio Ulster Gardener's Corner presenter; Paula Bradley MLA; Geraldine Gilpin, chief executive, Abbeyfield & Wesley Housing Association; Barbara Kelso, Garden Designer, students from Carrick Model Primary School.

Photo: Kevin Boyes / PressEye

A new community garden was unveiled on 15th October at Abbeyfield & Wesley Housing

Association's headquarters and sheltered housing scheme in Carrickfergus, as part of Abbeyfield's 'Breath of Fresh Air' programme.

BBC Radio Ulster Gardener's Corner presenter, David Maxwell, officiated at the opening.

Geraldine Gilpin, chief executive, Abbeyfield & Wesley Housing Association, explained why developing the outdoor space is important. "Abbeyfield's 'Breath of Fresh Air' programme aims to improve and enhance the health and well-being of older people by supporting them to connect with nature and enjoy the outdoors.

"Research has proved that being outdoors boosts mental and physical well-being, strengthens immunity and helps maintain a good sleep pattern. Active hobbies such as gardening can cut the risk of heart disease, while sunlight generates Vitamin D, which is essential for maintaining healthy bones. So, it's therefore important that we use our immediate environment effectively to support the well-being of residents and the wider community.

She outlined how this particular project came about. "There was a large expanse of grass at the front of Rocklands House here which provided an attractive area of greenery but which was not actually used. The management board was keen to transform the lawn into a community garden."



*Pictured are (l-r): David Maxwell, BBC Radio Ulster Gardener's Corner presenter; Wesley Court residents Sheila Bruce and Rita Murray; Mrs Lily Gault, who has been a resident at Wesley Court since the scheme opened 22 years ago; and Geraldine Gilpin, chief executive, Abbeyfield & Wesley Housing Association.
Photo: Kevin Boyes / Press Eye*

Funding for the initiative was generated from a legacy, grants from The Gills Trust and Mid & East Antrim Borough Council, and general Abbeyfield & Wesley fundraising.

Local garden designer, Barbara Kelso, was commissioned to design a versatile outdoor space. Ms Kelso said the brief was “to create a multi-purpose community garden with various zones that could accommodate people undertaking different tasks or activities at the same time. As Rocklands House is a Grade 2 listed building, the garden had to be in keeping with it.

“The final design,” she added, “creates interesting vistas at every turn, as paths wind around flowers and vegetables growing in raised beds – all leading to seating and picnic tables. The planting is designed to provide interest throughout the year. For the more energetic, there is low impact gym equipment which provides an opportunity to keep fit.

“Overall, this beautiful garden offers a place where people within the community can take ownership of a space and also personalise it by growing their own fruit and vegetables. People can come together and socialise in it and it is also a lovely place where people can rest and relax, surrounded by the calming influence of nature.”

A greenhouse in the Community Garden was recently renovated with assistance from the Conservation Volunteers and a team from McDonalds. Not only is it popular with the keen gardeners, but it is also a hub for social interaction.

Mrs Lily Gault, who has been a resident at Wesley Court since the scheme opened 22 years ago, welcomes the opening of the garden: “We’re really going to enjoy the garden, throughout the seasons. As it’s a focal point for people to spend time together, it’s benefits will be felt throughout the wider community.”

David Maxwell, BBC Radio Ulster Gardener’s Corner, presenter, adds: “It’s really good to see the benefits of gardening recognised by the creation of this community garden in Carrickfergus. Having somewhere to potter about and connect with the natural world is so important at any age. I’m quite sure it will not only have mental and physical health benefits for those living in this sheltered housing scheme, but it will also provide a beautiful space for families and friends to enjoy time together and make precious memories.”

There are two Abbeyfield societies in Northern Ireland and both are charities. Abbeyfield Belfast Society operates seven supported sheltered houses in South and East Belfast. Abbeyfield & Wesley Housing Association manages 18 supported, sheltered houses in Ballycastle, Ballyclare, Ballymena, Ballymoney, Banbridge, Bangor, Carrickfergus, Donaghadee, Downpatrick, Greenisland, Holywood, Lurgan, Newtownabbey and Portstewart. In addition, the charity also runs a residential dementia care home in East Belfast and three sheltered schemes in Carrickfergus, Newtownabbey and Belfast.

For further information, please visit the [Abbeyfield & Wesley website](#).