

Statement from the Chairman for Radius's 6th AGM on 29th June 2023

Distinguished guests, fellow board members and staff, welcome to Radius's 6th AGM.

Without question we are living through a period of turbulence and change with matters globally, nationally and locally in a state of flux. We at Radius are seeking to respond to this uncertainty to ensure we continue to deliver for our tenants. To that end, we will host the leading UK and European Social Housing Providers in Belfast in November when we show-case our community investment and regenerative work. And regularly now our senior team and management are openly benchmarking and gaining best-practice insights from the UK's leading registered housing providers like Clarion, Wheatley and L&Q. We are looking both nationally and internationally to identify improvements we can adopt. However our staff are also developing best practice which we share with the sector and indeed I was privileged to hear our tenant Julia Gavin and Tenant Engagement Officer Lesa Kelly at the NIFHA conference last week speak on tenant engagement at the higher levels within an organisation. As a result, I recognise differing tenant priorities and that I as Chair and indeed the full Board may not always be representative of all our tenants' perspective. To try to address this, prior to 2022/23 we engaged with our stakeholder base using Consulting Experts, Creative Bridge, to be clear on their priorities and reflect these in our new five-year corporate planning cycle. Over 60 interviews across customers, communities, public representatives, commissioning partners and suppliers confirmed what mattered most to them. And over the next five years we have plans to step-up maintenance spend across existing homes, build more new energy efficient houses and apartments, expand our community support function, enhance customer engagement and modernise our support services. I am pleased to report in this our first business year of the new corporate planning cycle that we have made significant progress across the board, building firm foundations upon which to deliver our plans.

I want to use my report to the AGM today, I want to briefly touch on the achievements of the last 12 months in which you have all played a part and to look forward to the most pressing matters in the year ahead. Our purpose as you know is to 'improve lives and communities through our homes, care and support'. Alongside this is our vision of 'providing homes which build a better place for all'. Unfortunately we have all, particularly our tenants, had to contend with the out-workings of the pandemic, the cost of living crisis, the political vacuum at Stormont, Brexit or the NI Protocol and the effects of the war in Ukraine. It seems every day that our communities are having to develop new levels of resilience and coping mechanisms and I am never ceased to be amazed that they continue to do that.

Within a few years the roles of Radius and its peers have had to evolve rapidly in response to customer needs as we work to sustain more tenancies in these challenging times. So much so that we now have a broad array of direct and sign-posting interventions for their benefit. Strategically speaking we have no intention of duplicating established, tried and tested partner services. No, we value the knowledge and expertise of our partners and instead want to leverage this proven expertise into those of our communities who need it most.

We have set out our journey through four priorities or golden threads namely: Customer First; Great Places; Empowered People and Assured Business. So what are the highlights in each of these four key strategic areas. In the area of customers first:

Customer First

As the financial challenges hit tenants hard, so we have taken critical steps to shield them from around £2m of service and heating charges that should be passed on. In total we delivered £3.5m of value for money savings in the form of efficiencies, added services and free green energy. On top of this our benefit officers identified £1m of additional unclaimed benefits while our hardship and community chest funds helped those most heavily hit by the financial crisis.

We are delighted to see so many customers from across Northern Ireland engage with us through a growing network of committees, focus groups and community based events. Over 10,000 participants joined 260 community events, programmes and projects, jointly arranged with 110 statutory and community partners. Our Schools Biodiversity Project was one of several highlights in the year with 23 schools and 607 pupils coming together under the 'Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful' initiative, aimed at promoting good relations and inclusivity within the theme of better biodiversity. Radius is at the forefront of promoting shared-living and I believe we have utilised the benefits of the Housing-for-All (HFA) programme as much as we possibly can on our new-build projects. No less than 13 neighbourhoods have signed up to the government-backed initiative, each with detailed support plans, aimed at creating diverse, inclusive communities. And we have a further two HFA projects lined up in the year ahead.

This year we forged ahead with changes in our supply and contractor arrangements which more closely align delivery and performance with the specific needs of our tenants. We are grateful for those customers who contributed performance improvement proposals towards the new procurement and contract management processes. We do acknowledge customer concerns around dampness in housing stock across Northern Ireland and 12 months ago our Board committed an extra £25m towards eliminating rising and penetrative damp in our older homes. We have unfortunately seen rising cases of excess condensation and dampness as tenants struggle to adequately heat their homes. This despite our customer charge subsidies and making hardship payments. Our repairs and housing teams continue to work closely with tenants to reduce this effect and to advise on measures to reduce the risk of re-occurrence.

Great Places

Through 2022/23 we increased our investment in our existing homes, based on the priorities of safety, energy and fuel efficiency and essential component replacement. This commitment will see our spend rise by 16% to £29m in 2023/24. 85% of our housing stock already has an EPC rating of C and above which compares very favourably with the Northern Ireland average of 65%. Meanwhile all our new homes are being designed to at least EPC Level B. Indeed, where we have design control, we specify an EPC Level-A rating. And we are also trialling Near Zero and BREAMM standards in a number of building settings. Radius began installing PV panels on homes several years back and these today provide annually 700,000KWh of green energy for the benefit of our tenants. We also pleased to have cut energy usage by 3%.

As you know the UK and NI is in the midst of a housing crisis. And with all going on elsewhere it's easy to possibly lose sight of this fact. And the fact Radius has over 700 energy efficient homes under construction across 15 sites in Northern Ireland. This is positive news for those living in housing stress. Last year we commenced 430 new homes while taking handover of a further 189. We also commenced our first fully private development in East Belfast through our subsidiary Tealstone Developments. The profits of this project will help subsidise our core social housing activities, things like retrofitting, subsidising deficit cashflows on new homes and other priorities for our social tenants.

Empowered People

We are very proud of our 900 deeply committed professionals working at the heart of Radius and providing excellent care and support to all, as evidenced by first-class exit reports following unannounced RQIA inspections. These in addition to our annual CSE, ISO and TSA assessments and the feedback from customers. Not to mention the Department's positive regulatory judgement. Their efforts throughout the pandemic and the financial pressures of the last 12 months helped to sustain tenancies, reduce isolation and empower communities.

I do want to mention the excellent work of our Connect24 team who provide 24hr 'peace of mind', 365 days a year for 20,000 of our customers. We are fortunate to have such dedicated individuals looking after not only our most vulnerable customers but those of other housing associations on the island, North and South. Today we honoured Courtney for her actions which probably saved the life of a tenant at Springvale Fold. No doubt over the last 12 months there are other staff very worthy of our praise and appreciation. So on behalf of the Board can I say a big Thank you!

Our staff have embraced hybrid flexible working which bodes well for future customer services. In recent years we have invested in systems, processes and technology to empower our staff whether they are working in the community, from one of our offices or from home. And we have exciting transformative plans for our Customer Contact Centre and our IT management systems over the next two years. This year the Board approved the consolidation of our dual Head Office setup to a single site at Holywood. Under hybrid working arrangements we have plans to reduce our office footprint by around 40% when we complete in the Summer 2025 whilst the designs will be to sustainable BREAMM Standards. We will depart Russell Court in 2024, a site which has served us very well over the years. We are pleased that the site will now serve the whole community as a new cancer research venture between the City Hospital and Queen's University.

We are conscious of the challenges facing our staff both in their family and working lives and have put in place aids and safeguards to support our new working arrangements. Our latest annual staff pulse survey confirmed 93% felt connected to their colleagues and part of the Radius team. 23 of our team have been trained as Mental Health First Aiders and we put in place a 24/7 Counselling Service with the Belfast Trust. We also revamped our staff intranet site 'Our Place' with all its resources.

During the year we were delighted to see our esteemed board member and colleague Lorraine Campbell awarded an MBE for services to the community in Northern Ireland. Lorraine as you know had a stellar career with the Housing Executive but didn't stop there. Her roles as Chair of Supporting Communities and as a very active Radius Board Member show her to be a true champion of the needs of tenants and communities.

Assured Business

We were pleased to see further growth in turnover and satisfactory financial indicators during the year. This in spite of the unprecedented energy prices, rising contractor costs and our shielding of tenants from the true cost of services. We continue to operate safely within our banking covenants and to make preparations for our next fund-raising private placement, due in 2024.

We have retained our A1 Moody's credit rating and are now the last remaining UK housing association at this highest level of assurance. The Radius Board reviewed its governance systems during the year and moved to adopt the latest NatFed Code of Practice.

I do want to pay tribute to our board members. Each year we seem to be stealthily drawn into an increasing level of commitment reflecting the extent of activities and ambitions being undertaken by us. We are extremely fortunate to not only have knowledgeable and skilled members but also visionary people, aligned with our purpose and well able to challenge and support the management team in equal measure.

We sadly said goodbye and thank you to Melanie English and Robert Dunne who departed the Board this year, having served on our Development and Audit Committees. In their places we have welcomed Jaclyn Richardson and Niall Quinn who I know will do an equally valuable job for us. And this is regretfully the last meeting for Sloan Harper who has so diligently served on the Care and Support and laterally the Customer

Experience Committees of Fold and Radius. Sloan, can I wish you well in the future. We will have our Tenant Board Elections this year with Mary Smith having completed her terms – Mary, we greatly appreciate your counsel and advice on the living-experience of tenants over your term. As a Board and organisation we are the stronger for this unique customer insight.

I do want to put on record our thanks to the assembled senior and operational management teams who have provided excellent motivation and leadership to the wider Radius team. Your passion for social housing is clear for all to see whilst your achievements over the last 12 months have been most impressive.

Today Gillian Sommerville our Director of HR and Corporate Services also attended her last board meeting with us. Gillian has worked with Fold and Radius for 11 years building and leading a talented and competent team. We wish Gillian every success in the Health Sector where I'm sure she will do equally well.

And finally to our tenants, residents, and all our customers we thank you for putting your trust in us and our valued business and delivery partners. These last 12 months have been extremely challenging for all of you yet your resolve for stronger and thriving communities prevails. Radius is a learning organisation, keen to listen and see where we can improve and enhance our offering and we endeavour to keep doing so through the opportunities and challenges which lie ahead.

Martin Pitt
Chairman