



The Grand Opening of the Gatelodge Café Newtownards

Ministers Dr Stephen Farry MLA and Simon Hamilton MLA officially opened the new supported employment service for people with a learning disability in Newtownards.



Ciara Brennan from Stepping Stones, the charity that operate the service, told us they have been around for 18 years and have been active mainly in the Lisburn area, but have now opened in Downpatrick as well as Newtownards. She explained how important social enterprises are, and how they provide training and experience for people with learning disabilities, to help them find paid work. The Gatelodge café is a new venture that Stepping Stones is immensely proud of.



TILII roving reporters Kim and John went on location to the grand opening to interview the people involved in the cafe's operation.

It was good to see so many people at the opening. There were lovely canapés and drinks, made and served by the trainees. Kim and John asked some of the guests what they thought of the food. They said it not only tasted fantastic, the presentation was professional. They also commented on how customer focused the trainees were even though they were also enjoying the opening ceremony.

Along with Minister Farrell there were other VIP guests including the Mayor of Newtownards, Alderman Alan Graham who said the café has a “lovely happy atmosphere” and he would recommend everyone pay the café a visit.



Bria Mongan, Director of Adult Services

Bria Mongan Director of Adult Services in the South Eastern and Social Care Trust also agreed to be interviewed. Bria emphasised the importance of projects that help support people with learning disabilities to achieve their full potential. The South Eastern Trust was happy to support this excellent opportunity in Newtownards and would be keeping an interested eye on the café and wish the trainees and staff long term success.

The guests were also entertained by a guitarist who played music, which added to the occasion, everyone was cheerful and happy to be a part of the opening of the Gatelodge Café. After everyone had eaten the canapés and listened to the music Minister Farrell unveiled the plaque, and then there was a round of speeches from trainees, staff at Stepping Stones and the VIP guests.



A happy trainee spoke to John

Jamie one of the trainees spoke to us between serving the guests. He said “The customers are great and the staff are amazing. They have helped me to learn how to make cappuccinos and tray bakes and I am really good at serving the customers. I cannot believe I am here today and that I am going to make a speech to all of the guests”.



Roisin supports the trainees in their placement with the long term goal of increasing their skills and capacity so they can eventually move on to external placements and towards fulltime employment. Roisin told us how important the opening ceremony was and how hard everyone has worked.

*Roisin, job coach at
Gatelodge, with our
reporters*



Adriana Paxton, Operations Manager at Stepping Stones, told us, “We are so proud to open the Gatelodge Café because it is an excellent training place for our trainees, both for vocational skills as well as social development skills. We provide a very structured training system that enables the trainees to build not only their skills, but increase their confidence and prepare them for the world of work”.

*Adriana, Operations Manager at
Stepping Stones*



The Gatelodge Café is housed within the historic gate lodge building at the main gate to South Eastern Trust’s Ards hospital. The building, c.1870, which was a former gate lodge for the Newtownards Union Workhouse, has been renovated by the South Eastern Trust to house the social enterprise café.

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