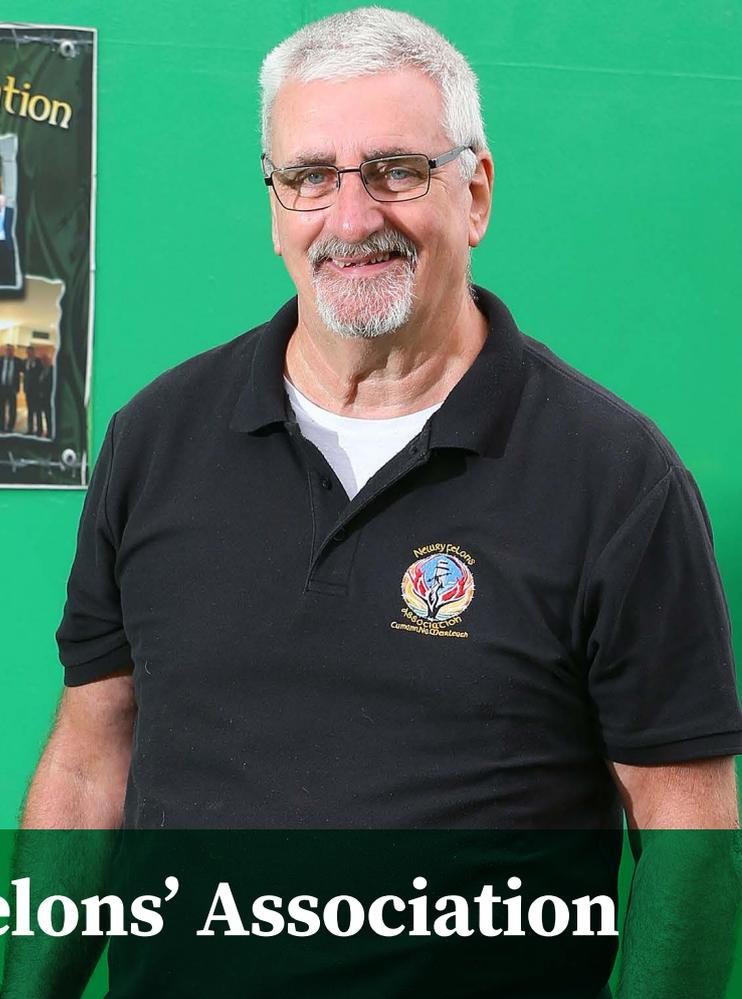
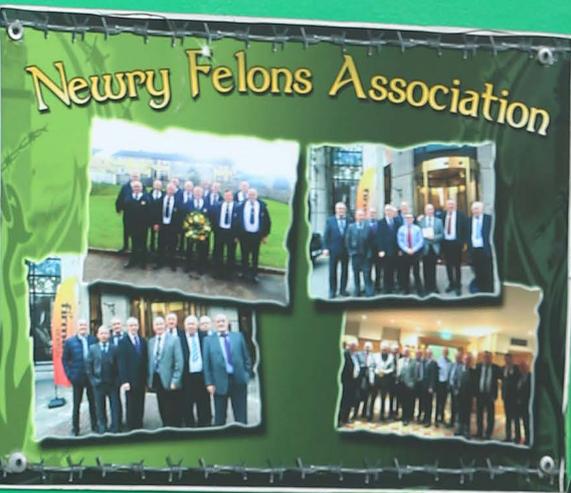


Communities and Covid

Stories of people, support and
mobilisation across NI communities

Social Change Initiative (SCI), the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI), and the St. Stephen's Green Trust (SSGT) are working together to offer peacebuilding and social justice programmes that help support "positive peacebuilding" within and across communities.

The "Communities and COVID-19" story telling project sets out to capture the stories of the ways in which groups being supported by SCI, CFNI and SSGT responded to the new realities and impact of COVID-19 over the last 5 months.



Newry Felons' Association

“We have been making connections and people are showing an interest in what we are doing.”

Comradeship and a listening ear was at the heart of the Newry Felons' Association response to the coronavirus pandemic. The group was set up in 2014, originally for ex-prisoners from the Newry and Mourne area to come together, “have a bit of craic and tie in with one another” says it's chair, Belfast man Frank Johnston.

Over the years the group has developed from pub meetings to forming relationships with an ex-prisoner group in South Armagh and other activities including trips to the republican museum in Belfast, and also Crumlin Road Gaol.

“Why would be want to do that?” Frank says, and laughs.

At meetings the members decided to set up a community group and Newry Felons' was opened up to members of ex-prisoners families, then others supporters and friends of ex-prisoners and their families. The proviso is you have to be supportive of the peace process. The whole ethos of Newry Felons is around shared experiences, comradeship and a listening ear.

This would prove useful when the possible impact of Covid-19 became apparent.

“It was very frightening because nobody knew anything about it,” Frank said.

“The garden was also a place of great comfort for a member whose wife died after a period of illness. “If the garden hadn’t been there he wouldn’t have been able to cope,” he said.

The first weeks of lockdown were focused on keeping occupied with household tasks. There were no formal physical meetings because of the Stay at Home message from the government. Meetings, Irish classes and legacy events all stopped because of the threat of the virus and many among the membership were shielding because of age and health challenges.

Frank, like others, had the added concern of family working on the frontline. His wife is a care worker and granddaughter worked in retail.

“It was a worrying time for the group,” he said.

“Everything completely stopped. It was very hard not being able to see each other or work.”

Newry Felons’ experienced non-Covid related loss during lockdown with two members passing away.

“We would have put on a big funeral with a flag over coffin and so on,” Frank said.

“Samuel O’Hare, who was active in the Men’s Shed, we couldn’t do it for him. We couldn’t honour him the way we wanted so he went out quietly.”

“Another lad died at home.”

“We went to both funerals but in small numbers and are planning something for their gravesides when we open up more.”

Over the months of lockdown the group stayed in touch through a Felons’ Whatsapp group.

“I would ring around some of the more vulnerable members on a regular basis too,” Frank said.

Food parcel drops took place during lockdown and Frank found other comfort in a neighbourhood watch group set up among neighbours just before Covid-19 became part of everyone’s lives.

“It’s like a self help group,” he said.

As lockdown restrictions eased more the Men’s Shed in the community garden, developed in association with the Barcroft Community Association, at Barcroft Community Centre in Newry became more of a focal point for Newry Felons’.

“People came to the garden to maintain it, to get out, within the regulations.”

“Orders for wheelbarrow planters, Irish cottages, and hanging baskets were taking off.”

The garden was also a place of great comfort for a member whose wife died after a period of illness. “If the garden hadn’t been there he wouldn’t have been able to cope,” he said.

A bonus of the so-called new normal is new members people outside the group are starting to engage with the garden.

“We have been making connections and people are showing an interest in what we are doing.”

While the group initially felt fear about Covid-19 the lockdown element of the pandemic was not as challenging as it might have been for others because of their prison experience and of having liberty curtailed.

Frank is hopeful that communities being pro-active and more willing to help each other is something that is sustained long term. And an appreciation for meeting in real life is another lesson learned by the group.

“I hope we can hold on to the community pulling together in a time of crisis in the time ahead,” he said.

Frank is unimpressed with the response from Westminster and Boris Johnson in particular. He argues the British prime minister was “too slow to react initially”.

“Johnson has been diabolical,” he said.

“The whole government being led by him you wouldn’t expect anything else.”

Frank wants to make sure that society does not lose “the sense of community built up”.

“Activism in the true sense of it, initiating stuff, that will continue,” he said.

Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford forcing the government in London is an example of the type of thinking people should be aiming for.

What society in Ireland and elsewhere has been given is “a sense of ownership of their own lives, hopefully,” Frank adds.

“We have to keep on going,” he said.

