

# Creggan Enterprises

## “Peace building was easier to do in Covid”

Responding to the coronavirus pandemic in Derry has been “an education” for the hard-working team at Creggan Enterprises. The social enterprise, which was started by the local community in the 1990s works with women, men, youth and older people.

Amie Gallagher is CE’s Focus Project coordinator working with girls and women aged 16-50 to get them engaged in the community and addressing barriers for those with caring responsibilities. Improving women’s skills, and developing their voices, which can often be missing from the narrative, is ongoing.

Amie says Creggan is a wonderful community that is often viewed from the outside negatively, as having a reputation for anti-social behaviour and paramilitary activity.

Covid-19’s arrival in Ireland put a stop to group sessions and mental health workshops with parents, and recruiting people into the group. A quick online education was needed and then Facebook proved a useful tool in contacting people about their needs. Zoom suited more of the younger people but it did not always suit women with children and there was less opportunity for catch ups at the school gates and out and about because of the Stay At Home messaging from the governments.

“Trying to access people was hard,” Amie said. “Some people were already isolated, only take kids to school, or have difficult relationships, so I couldn’t grab five minutes and was worried about how they were coping.”

People were also busy working from home and a lot of women put themselves last.

“Self care was starting to slip,” Amie said.

Group work was difficult and a lot of time was spent on a one to one basis, dealing with issues around food parcels, free school meals, discretionary payments and “helping people falling between the cracks”.

For those reluctant to take parcels of food, a new vouchers scheme was more discreet as people could do their own shops or get free deliveries.

An Isolation Ideas Facebook group hit a slump after about a month as people came to terms with the impact of Covid being long term and mental health took hits.

Amie was pleased to have more partnership with Creggan Community Collection voluntary group supplying essential items, finding ways to support those not comfortable with accessing official channels.

“People have been able to see what we do,” she said.

“I has been an education, we have had to adapt

Funders have been supportive and CE is continuing to look for opportunities from what the community has experienced.

“Key workers are being appreciated more,” Amie said.

“Socio economic issues, housing issues are to the fore.

“They are often brushed aside but it is to the fore that they are basic rights as so many people have found themselves.

“I hope people continue to be more appreciative of all the workers we have all been applauding.”

Charity cannot be the only response to major events like coronavirus. It is an immediate response, but the goal of empowering people cannot be lost and a recognition that community acted before government gives hope for the future.

“At a government level, messages were skewed, there was too much of a delay, and it left people vulnerable. I hope the voluntary sector is appreciated more, as we deal with the fallout”.

Community gatekeeping and dissidents remaining disengaged are continuing issues for the local community, as are all the other pre-Covid challenges the group faced.

“Inclusivity, neutral help and resolving issues for the vulnerable and families of prisoners left outside the loop and those falling through the net is so important,” Conal said.

On a practical level Conal believes Zoom was useful for a certain level of response to the pandemic but more so for urban communities as there are gaps in provision for rural communities in the Derry and Strabane council area. As a social enterprise with charitable status CE was “open where open where others were closed”.

Remaining open and the community being able to access the pharmacy, shop and community centre etc was vital.

A lack of support from government “needs to change”. The high level of stop and search, intense security scrutiny while the community was relatively quiet in lockdown was another area of criticism identified.

“We have to pick up the pieces,” Conal said.

Positives of the episode including a range of cross community partnerships developed.

“Peace building was easier to do in Covid,” he said.

Social innovation was a plus with communities stepping up to make PPE and sanitisers. Delivering “hug in a box” care packages, over 1,000 food parcels funded through CE’s own reserves, and the Rathmor Centre linking up with a local supermarket, to help make 3,000 deliveries to shielders and those in isolation were all positive acts.

During lockdown honest dialogue around community differences around parades, armed groups not engaging in what they view as “community justice” were steps to build on in the future.

Conal feels there is a new appreciation and understanding of the importance of frontline low income workers and “hopes it won’t be forgotten about”. He was happy to see young people making a contribution to the community in lockdown through compliance with the regulations, distributing leaflets and “stepping up” to stock shelves, clean and help in care homes.

Technology helped to deliver CE programmes and funders being flexible was useful too. Community solidarity ensured good management of the pandemic challenges and now is the time for a properly structured forum to build on that and hold government to account.

Conal’s main learning was around the “importance of social innovation and collaboration”. There is fear about “recession and austerity”, and how the community and voluntary sector will be equipped to deal with that.

More fuel and food poverty, issues around alcohol and substance abuse, and mental health challenges are among the issues “coming down the tracks”.