

Turas na nDaoine

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Rebuilding the community spirit evident during the worst of the coronavirus pandemic would make a huge difference to people's lives according to Barry Murray, they project co-ordinator at Turas Na nDaoine (The People's Journey) in Lisnaskea, Co Fermanagh.

Turas Na nDaoine was set up in 2018 as an ex-prisoners/combatants group.

Its Peace Impact Programme around dialogue between republicans and the PUL community has been working “exceptionally well”.

Relationships have been built up in Magherafelt, Derry and Belfast. Work is ongoing to tackle mental health and alcohol and substance abuse issues, and efforts are made to keep young people away from armed groups and get them into education and training.

“We have been empowering and helping people have a say and think differently, to think outside the box,” Barry said.

The immediate impact of Covid-19 was being busy assisting people who had been left unemployed or furloughed. They were looking for benefits and other assistance so that took up a lot of time in the first period of lockdown, Barry said.

Utilising social media and Whatsapp was vital, and having access to an empty school building meant that production of face coverings, visors, and scrubs for healthcare workers going around houses and care homes could take place.

Turas Na nDaoine was flat out, along with many others, helping out where it could.

“We were busy,” Barry said. “We were careful with social distance but running about organising everything. It was a constant job. It is only when you look back now you realise how busy you were.”

He is realistic that new relationships that have been developed may not be long term as sometimes they can dissipate when a crisis is not at its worst but the pandemic has at least “raised the profile of the group beyond anything we have experienced before”.

Lots of people had issues, around being confined to their homes. They required deliveries from the local supermarket and chemist. After a month or so people were “getting restless and agitated”.

“We know from talking to people that there is a lot of people under more pressure than we realised,” Barry said.

“When you are in situation you develop a coping strategy.

“When it starts to lift everything comes to the surface.

“The next phase will be the downturn. It's worrying.”

“Covid was definitely a stop check. People paused and reflected. I heard that a lot.”

Turas Na nDaoine plans to do more around mental health, developing a model from Finland called Open Dialogue.

It is working with Participation and the Practice of Rights (PPR) around liberation theology, and dealing with causes of stress and mental health issue.

“We want to develop that,” Barry said. “We also want to base our work on themes – human rights, restorative practice and parenting. We have to focus on inter-republican mediation and across the divide too.”

“We will be using the empty school, creche, daycare, training, lots of wild and wonderful ideas.

Previous relationships with groups in Derry, Strabane, Cavan and Lisnaskea will continue and being part of tackling “stories behind stories” will be crucial.

“We are hearing stuff we hadn’t heard before about the level of need out there,” Barry said. “The stories behind the stories. There are going to be major issues around employment and inequality.”

“The least we can do is attempt to mitigate it any way we can and empower people to understand what is happening and why.”

Barry is hopeful from stories he has heard about families being strengthened by the forced pause and time the pandemic provided people usually caught up in the rat race.

“The number of people I met that have had time to spend with their family, do things they had not done before, some couldn’t contemplate going back to the rate race. It was amazing.”

Fear and reevaluation of life have been common themes among people Turas Na nDaoine has been engaging with.

“Covid was definitely a stop check. People paused and reflected. I heard that a lot.”

He added: “It is important that we try to keep the community spirit so obviously there throughout the pandemic height.

“Everyone was doing their little bit and there was so much spontaneous good will.

“If that community spirit could ever be rebuilt in some way it would be an amazing thing.”