

Carson Project

Trying to bring Ballymena together to tackle a common cause was the focus of the Carson Project's coronavirus pandemic response.

Established in 2008 the Carson Project is a group with an "ex-combatants theme" made up of individuals based in Ballymena who have had some role through the conflict, as former members of the UDR and ex-prisoners. Its work is around men, women and young people, capacity building, job skills and training, cultural awareness, legacy and housing, reconciliation and peace building.

Cyril Rainey, is a community development support worker on the Carson Project's peace impact programme. He said in March, as panic buying became evident community groups met in Ballykeel Presbyterian church hall to "talk about how we might deal with the issues emerging".

Local councillors, charities and other groups were "trying to bring the whole town together".

CP's office was closed to the public, work had to shut down on programmes immediately and cross-community events were cancelled. Ensuring basic needs were met was the priority.

"We homed in on food parcels," Cyril said. "Community aid was a focus. Some of the community groups had no access to their base so we stayed in touch to make sure there was a good distribution of help."

It took some time to get the operation flowing smoothly but eventually all those who needed help were identified after reaching the most vulnerable in society early. CP registered people with the local council for food aid, and distributing hygiene packs became an important consideration too.

At this point Cyril was frustrated about how information was flowing and critical analysis of the work being done.

"We felt there was real lack of communication from the council to the various groups," he said. "We feel things could have worked a lot better. We want to feed that into system."

A lack of joined up thinking between Good Morning Ballymena, the council and so on meant there was a "lack of knowledge of the overall picture". Cyril is very aware that what has been experienced to this point is still "early on" in the process and that this has to be acknowledged by those in power.

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“The harder impact on the economy is to come,” he said.

Poverty, disadvantage, an employment issues in Harryville is even starker when compared with other areas, he says.

“We have a population comparable with the garden village of Broughshane, but they have good pensions, and are in a better position to give something back. We don't have that. We want to further develop our work around social need.”

Covid-19 has “highlighted inequality” even more than normal.

People's mental health issues have been more evident as the pandemic has made people “wound up”.

“Early on people were in denial about the seriousness of it all,” Cyril said. “There are still some people like that but I think Boris Johnson getting it brought it home to people. When he went down with it, some people finally got it.”

Food, hygiene and medication deliveries were and essential part of the early response. As lockdown eased “the clean-up started”.

Cyril feels that over the last decade there has been less contact between groups in the community as “people got into silos”.

He is clear that re-establishing neglected connections, perhaps through a forum of some description would help people engage and stay in contact.

“Lots of groups had got comfortable with the bits there were providing,” he said. “Maybe 15 years ago there was more bigger thinking and maybe people had got complacent. It has been shown we can learn from that.”