

# Intercomm Ireland

## “Covid pulled back the curtain on the levels of poverty”

The generosity of people in Carrickfergus during the peak of the coronavirus pandemic was humbling for the team delivering Intercomm Ireland’s peace impact project.

Project manager Winston Irvine say Covid-19 “pulled back the curtain” on the inequality of life and the “distress and dire need” being experienced by many people in the town.

The project’s usual work is around training and employability, conflict transformation and peace building, and capacity building in an area which is impacted greatly by paramilitarism.

Remote working was the immediate response to Covid-19 lockdown and people “very quickly realised how serious the pandemic was”.

“People started to self organise and we acted as a conduit and support,” Winston said.

“There was a real strong sense of community spirit.

“We set up a localised community response, and contacted the police commander.”

Police added the group to a designated essential workers category so they were able to move around, Winston says.

A traffic light system displayed in home windows brought structure of the response, giving a sense of who needed help. A database of residents was gathered, indicating where support was needed and food, medicines and other essential goods were distributed.

Social media helped highlight the services on offer. Young people started fundraising, and local businesses and groups got on board including Costello Italian restaurant, Barne United and Carrickfergus Rangers.

Pockets of deprivation and previously hidden poverty became apparent.

“Covid pulled back the curtain on the levels of poverty,” Winston said.

“To see people living in distress and dire need compounded the inequality of life.”

“That was difficult to come up against.”

# “The generosity of the local community and businesses is really striking”

Many lessons have flowed from what the community experienced including around feuding which has beset the area over more than a decade.

“We learned ironically it has helped break down some barriers and some differences between some local people,” Winston said.

“This has allowed some old sores, some people who wouldn’t have been in the same Zoom room have been able to set aside those difficulties in a time of emergency.”

As well as beginning to help with levels of community cohesion linking up with business and sport “has been an unintended and unforeseen by product, going forward”.

“There is a keenness to nurture and forge relationships.

“There is a growing sense of partnership for a community who feels it hasn’t always had a voice.”

Generosity of others particularly during the time of crisis has had an impact on Winston.

“The generosity of the local community and businesses is really striking,” he said.

“Going into underserved communities there are people who would give you their last.”

“It was really humbling to see.”