

A young child with long brown hair, wearing a grey t-shirt, is seen from the side, drawing a vibrant rainbow on a window pane. The child is using a blue marker to draw the purple band of the rainbow. The rainbow is already partially drawn with other colors. Below the rainbow, there are white, fluffy cloud-like shapes drawn on the glass. The background shows a bright window with a view of a building outside.

Communities and Covid

Stories of people, support and
mobilisation across NI communities



Foreword

A collective commitment to Build Back Better together

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.

The stories reflect the shared experiences of loss, isolation and fear, and the ways in which communities came together to support people, families and communities who needed access to basic day-to-day essentials, support services, human connection, care and solidarity.

They serve as a snapshot of the extent of community activity that has been crucial in responding. They highlight the wonderful community spirit, coordinated efforts and partnership working happening across NI. It is particularly heartening to see how groups rose to the challenge and how they grew strength from collaborating across community boundaries, with public bodies and many local businesses.

Some of the important learning that can help underpin a collective commitment to Build Back Better together are reflected through the stories. They point to the need to find better ways of dealing with the residual post-COVID issues including mental health and wellbeing, social isolation, financial hardship and unemployment.

As we think about Building Back Better it is clear that a vibrant and properly resourced community sector is one of the key building blocks required to complement strong and effective public services shaped by local community need.

We commend these stories to you and thank everyone who gave generously of their time and insights. Special thanks to the wonderful storytellers, Judith Hill (<http://www.tellitincolour.com/>) and Amanda Ferguson (<http://amanda.ie/>), who carefully gathered and powerfully captured the experiences of people and communities in words and picture.

Alternatives NI: East Belfast

“People were phoning in and saying they were struggling and couldn’t afford to eat”

“When you answered the phone you just didn’t know what you were going to be asked...” That’s how the last few months have been for Mandy Kearns, who’s manager of east Belfast Alternatives. Whether it was cries of help for food, someone to talk to, or support in fleeing domestic abuse; a team of volunteers in the east have rallied to cover this area’s lockdown needs.

When shutdown came, Alternatives – in partnership with 10 other stakeholders – coordinated an emergency leaflet drop across east Belfast. 33,000 went out and over 100 volunteers got involved in the response plan. The leaflets signposted people to help – and when the calls started to come through, they were then triaged to local communities. Council funding enabled the distribution of food parcels and meals.

“People were phoning in and saying they were struggling and couldn’t afford to eat,” Mandy says, “especially those whose circumstances had suddenly changed or who were self-employed.” It was heavy, challenging work for those involved in trying to meet an influx of practical needs, but after those early few weeks they noticed a real issue starting to surface...

“After 2 weeks – loneliness became the thing. Some people would just phone and tell you they were lonely, others wouldn’t – but you just knew in how people would talk to you. They could be on with you for half an hour,” says Mandy.

So befriending became a real priority for the team and significant numbers of volunteers from local churches signed up to help. 140 people a week needed that phone call to help get them through.

“People were eternally grateful,” recalls Mandy, “although we did get some pretty odd requests too.” From zimmer frames – to drums of oil – to 60 litres of fizzy drink – to printing out workbooks for families without devices and printers; the crew of volunteers responded as creatively and quickly as they could to it all!

One of the most rewarding responses was the support they were able to offer a family who had fled domestic violence during lockdown. Mandy says this moment summed it all up for her.

“We helped that mum and kids to be safe and we knew they had beds. It was a chance to help those who had nowhere else to turn.”

**stakeholders include EBDCA, ACT initiative, churches, community groups & local councillors

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But Mandy admits it's been an overwhelming and eye-opening time; “especially at the beginning because you realise you don't fully know what is going on in your own community – you suddenly see the gaps.”

“But community always fills the gaps,” she muses. “And it's been very rewarding. As a small team we've learnt a lot – we're a lot more empathetic towards the community now. And we know that they are resilient. There is so much community spirit out there.”

The team though have had tough days too; “we've been abused and shouted at, but when you lifted the phone to a group who were willing to go out of their way for others – that was where you saw the spirit.”

Alternatives and its partner groups are starting to decrease the hours now on their emergency helpline, as lockdown lifts. But they insist they can widen that out again if it becomes necessary.

For Mandy, this has become more than just an emergency response; her hope is that it will have life giving legacy in east Belfast.

“People have pulled together. With community work there can be competition and fighting for funding – but people have seen that coming together works. I hope east Belfast will now work together collaboratively. We're under the same banner and I just hope that's now the new way of working.”

Bogside and Brandywell Initiative

“And our hope is that new engagement with people will continue and they open up to us so we can provide help”

Developing community relationships has been among the positives to emerge from the coronavirus pandemic in Derry.

Donna McCloskey, manager of the Bogside and Brandywell Initiative (BBI) in Derry/Londonderry, has been working on a range of community development projects over the last two decades in the Brandywell and Creggan plus in the Fountain/Bishop Street and Bogside areas. Fifteen staff, over four projects focus on neighbourhood renewal, peace walls and more.

Covid-19 closed BBI's offices in March. Uncertainty about the scale of the plan needed and for how long was evident when the Triax neighbourhood renewal taskforce met.

Initially the response was about using community links and knowledge to help people, distributing food support packages, and engaging with the vulnerable through a helpline and other means. Leaflets and banners helped promote the phone line which was receiving up to 1,000 calls per week.

The level of need was quickly apparent.

After the initial shock of Covid-19, BBI staff were aware of the importance of managing their mental health and self-care. The moving stories they were hearing about people being furloughed, of them living in fear and isolation were huge in number. Hidden food poverty was exposed in a way that had not been before.

As caring people it was challenging to have to keep physical distance from others, there was lot of frustration and at times the level of need could feel overwhelming.

An issue around isolated older men became apparent.

“They perhaps don't engage with anyone, are living in a small bungalow or a one bedroom flat with very little household items,” Donna said. “Sometimes all they have is a sofa and microwave so a food package was a change in quality of life.”

The extreme level of poverty and previously hidden poverty needs to be tackled urgently, Donna says. The community and voluntary sector will respond to people's need, it “won't drop them high and dry. There is major need across the city and district,” she added.

“Scary but rewarding” sums up Donna's Covid-19 response experience.

She is busying herself with letting government department's know that new issues that were not there before need to be recognised and effectively resourced and dealt with.

“And our hope is that new engagement with people will continue and they open up to us so we can provide help,” Donna said. “Some are in full-time low income jobs and they can't make ends meet.”

“Hopefully it has broken down barriers and stigma with admitting help is needed.”

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.”

Creggan Enterprises

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

“Peace building was easier to do in Covid”

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”.

Drumbeg Residents Association

“We rapped 250 doors asking if people were shielding, in furlough, did they need a food parcel, cleaning products and the rest”

The challenges of the coronavirus pandemic were immense in Craigavon but it was also provided a good opportunity to connect with the community.

DRA was set up around 2003 by local activists concerned with fighting for the community over issues around housing and infrastructure.

Peace impact programme project coordinator Joanne Shortall said since then DRA has been busy running education employability, legacy and reimagining programmes, doing inter-generational and women’s group work, and developing community leadership in the area where barriers to progress include the impact of paramilitaries who “don’t like moving forward but we are getting there”.

The feeling around the pandemic was fear and a sense it was “unreal”. When local people the group knew were hospitalised it suddenly became very real. A very obvious, old-fashioned way of connecting got the community response going.

Knocking doors was a simple and effective way to consult with the community about what was needed, including among Bangladeshi and Portuguese residents.

“We rapped 250 doors asking if people were shielding, in furlough, did they need a food parcel, cleaning products and the rest,” Joanne said.

She added: “It was a good opportunity to get ourselves to every door and promote ourselves.”

Localised lockdown began in on the estate around St Patrick’s week in March, and ahead of the official government guidance.

“We were putting parcels on the doorsteps and running on,” she said.

Thoughts turned to how to keep people engaged so a youth work course started online in April. People learned how to use Zoom, social distance support was provided and the old community house was rearranged to accommodate other work.

Living in the community, it was obvious to Joanne about many of the emerging issues.

“I live in the estate so I was able to notice what was going on with antisocial behaviour, writing on the wall going up, cars being attacked, people being put out of their home,” she said.

“One young person was homeless, so we got him sorted out eventually.”

“Come up with new initiatives is important as not everyone likes or wants to use digital.”

Isolation among older residents was a big issue. Calls to doors which should have taken half an hour in total could take more like three hours as people wanted human interaction, a caring voice and a listening ear.

A plus side of the fallout is that these people and others now know where to access help.

A large scale community audit being conducted will find out exactly what all the issues and challenges are.

“I am trying to find ways to engage with people,” Joanne said.

“Come up with new initiatives is important as not everyone likes or wants to use digital.”

Street Bingo proved to be a useful initiative, as did Thirsty Clock DJs playing in the estate with people watching from their cars.

Coping with the pandemic was “difficult and stressful” but Joanne, the volunteers, the local GAA club and so on “just got on with it”.

It was clear that other areas outside of Drumbeg were not getting the help that was needed as the group got referrals from Lurgan and Bleary and other estates in Craigavon.

A new relationship was built up with North Lurgan Residents Association in Kilwilkie “they came to us to see if we needed help”. The Drumbeg Action Group – comprising Ardowen, Meadowbrook, and Drumbeg – and Fresh Start areas with the same challenges shared knowledge.

A sense of being “left behind” when it comes to the Good Friday Agreement and no relationship with policing gives Drumbeg and other similarly challenged places a certain “stuck in the 1970s” feeling,” Joanne said.

“People have a lot to contend with and we are worried about what is coming.”

Deeper research and consultation with people is required.

“We need to step back and focus on a smaller area,” Joanne said. “Craigavon doesn’t have a proper community development approach. We could maybe lead it.”

Éalú

“It enhanced our ability to use the internet which allows us to reach a bit further.”

Community solidarity and a growing network is helping Éalú members in Tyrone and North Armagh deal with the ongoing fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

Frankie Quinn, project coordinator of the support group set up four years ago for ex-prisoners and their families, says while Covid-19 brought serious challenges he has found hope in new relationships and a sense of community beyond traditional divides.

Éalú means escape, in this case of the mind, inspired by the poem Crime of Castlereagh by Irish republican hero Bobby Sands. The group tries to deal with PTSD by providing counselling, mindfulness and other services. Training, education and support to enhance employability and improve lives is a major part of its work.

The immediate impact of Covid-19 back in March was that group work ceased.

Prison experience of sticking to timetables and routines proved vital in lockdown.

Online solutions also helped, as live streaming, webinars and yoga classes could continue in this format. It meant people could engage and feel they were taking part in community structures.

The group's Listening Ear project started in April, with three counsellors available six days a week for two hours each to listen to people's worries and problems. Frankie said among the positives to glean from the health crisis was having greater reach through embracing technology.

“It enhanced our ability to use the internet which allows us to reach a bit further,” he said.

New relationships were also formed and existing relationships deepened. Engaging with foodbanks, the GAA, local councillors, and women's group among others means an expanded network for the group.

A Coalisland Response Team was set up during the height of the virus spread that helped with providing food parcels and other supports for those who needed it.

New relationships were formed and the group will continue to make a positive difference to local people in the time ahead.

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Casting his mind back to March, Frankie is critical of the “total and utter absence of support and leadership at Stormont”.

“Communities organised themselves,” he said. “Be it the GAA centres or Orange Hall, community structures provided help and support.”

“I think we should learn from all this,” he added. “It created a certain vision beyond sectarian politics because we were all in it together.”

Éalú formed relationships with ex combatants in Portadown, ex UVF and UDA, during lockdown.

“We ended up supplying them with PPE,” he said. “We made face masks and visors for private health care workers, they collected them off me, so we built a bit of a relationship there.”

Lockdown was challenging for many people and served to amplify difficulties that already existed. Pressure on young people, domestic abuse, families with alcohol and drug problems and isolation were all areas of concern during lockdown.

“We had concerns about vulnerable women and children but there was not a lot we could do,” Frankie said.

“We were aware that vulnerable adult men who would have sought company in bar were lonely.”

Mental health issues have come to the fore as have problems around finances and employment. What may lie ahead for communities is troubling people.

“There is going to be a massive recession,” Frankie said.

“The ramifications will be felt.”

Intercomm Ireland

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 says 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 to 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."

"Covid pulled back the curtain on the levels of poverty"

“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.”

Leafair Community Association

“It opened up networks and we had lots of shared learning”

Properly resourced mental health services will be key to supporting Derry people dealing with many of the difficult challenges the coronavirus pandemic will bring to communities.

Peter McDonald, manager at Leafair Community Association, which has been operating since the 1990s, says a focus on financial hardship and the mental health of people in his community will be areas of focus for his team in the months ahead.

Witnessing strong community cohesion at the peak of the pandemic, and the extra need that exists in society had made him even more determined to be a “champion for the underdog”.

What started out as a steering group in Leafair Park over 25 years ago turned into a community association looking at issues around housing, facilities and wellbeing in the outer north area of Derry.

Prior to lockdown in March a number of programmes were taking place from a well equipped community hub. A men’s shed and social enterprise, a women’s group, youth groups, catering services and Good Morning North West kept staff busy.

And Covid-19 meant they haven’t been able to make full use of a £1.3m health and wellbeing centre which was completed at the end of 2019.

“Because of Covid it was all pulled down,” Peter said.

The immediate impact of the pandemic in March was “panic and worry about health and safety”. When schools closed childcare became a major issue. Working from home was another challenge but Leafair managed to continue “on a skeleton crew and are still doing that”.

The team was busy putting in place hygiene and distancing measures as Covid-19 gradually unfolded.

“From March we have been slow,” he said. “We would usually be organising community festivals and now we are into bonfire season.”

The team tried moving services online and youth groups engaged quite successfully there. Peter was pleased to see partnerships building up in the city and beyond.

“It opened up networks and we had lots of shared learning,” he said.

Funding was channelled into the local foodbank to respond to what was happening because of the Covid-19 stay at home measures. Home packs were made for elderly people and “we tried to keep people amused”.

“We were fast in our response. We were able to handle it as best we could.”

Delivering parcels was at the heart of the community response while so many people’s movement was limited.

Coping with extra need was a major element of the work being done. Prior to covid Leafair Good Morning North West service had 200 clients. It has now 300.

“People were nervous and panicking,” Peter said. “They are in need, and not all are elderly. We were discovering people suffering with mental health and depression.”

The psychological and emotional impact on staff was another consideration for Peter and other groups. Counselling services were brought in for Leafair staff witnessing the damage in communities and responding to it.

“It was so they could unload,” Peter said.

At one point 1,000 parcels a week were going out to households in need.

“We were able to cope with what we were faced with,” Peter said. “We were fast in our response. We were able to handle it as best we could.”

For all the challenges faced during the peak of the pandemic Peter was heartened by the “great community cohesion” he saw.

“Community bonding is working really well,” he said. “We have great working relationships but collaborating with statutory bodies and voluntary sector was great.”

“Bonding was great. People were over the moon with the help provided.”

Lack of funding has been a major headache for Leafair and other groups in the area, Peter says.

“What comes in goes straight out,” he said.

Mental health packs promoting tools to help cope with hardship are part of the latest response from the group.

“People are going to face a lot of financial hardship and depression,” Peter said.

“In the foreseeable future they are the areas we are going to be looking at.”

Queenspark Women's Group

“We learned of people we had never had any close contact with. Finding out there are a lot of problems out there.”

Meeting new people on their doorsteps and identifying levels of need among those previously not known to the group has been a shocking but important result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Group secretary Carolyn and chair Ena say the most challenging months of lockdown proved “eye-opening” and “hectic”. The work done by the women’s group in the Queenspark area of Glengormley has developed a lot over more than a decade.

They have tried to improve its run down appearance, help tackle antisocial behaviour and fight for resources for young people and the rest of the community.

Doing cross-Border, cross-community and single identity work is at the core of QWG. It aims to help build a better society for young people and parents through education, employment and other activities.

The unfolding Covid-19 pandemic presented immediate challenges for QWG.

“It was all going well and then we were shut down,” Carolyn said. “It shut down our advice centre, women’s group, it closed the centre. We weren’t able to do anything.”

The Council got in touch with the group for help with food parcels. Carolyn had to shield for a month, but busied herself doing paper work and answering the phone.

Ena said: “We learned of people we had never had any close contact with. Finding out there are a lot of problems out there. We were meeting people on their doorsteps. It was a bad thing that happened but we got new people to come on board.”

A lot of work of the groups’ response was coordinated on the phone, through Whatsapp, Zoom meetings, and the Greater North Belfast Women’s Network, “a long time thing, cross community” presence.

“There are lots of mental health issues, even the young ones finding it stressful,” Carolyn said. “Lots of underlying mental health has been magnified.”

Reaching out of people previously not known was hard but rewarding.

“We have found new ways of working. It won’t go back to the way it was, not for a long time anyway.”

“The worst is knowing the amount of people who need help. And not just food boxes. Lots of people are proud, and won’t tell you what their problems are.”

“Lots of people just wanted someone to talk to. Being isolate for 13 weeks is difficult. Turning up at people’s doors helped.”

Light hearted moments included providing assistance for an elderly resident who had a 4-year-old donkey as a pet in the centre of Glengormley.

“We had to source hay for Toby,” Ena said.

While some of the government support for communities is coming to an end the people are still “there for each other”, and will watch plants and flowers planted in the community bloom and grow, the women said. Chatting to each other, sitting together, simply just being there for each other is a simple act that provides more than many could have realised.

“It has been eye opening,” Carolyn said. “Hectic,” Ena added.

“We have found new ways of working. It won’t go back to the way it was, not for a long time anyway.”

Rainbow Project

**“It’s a young
LGBT friendly
group about
owning your
space and
your voice
- and just
expressing
yourself”**

“I feel I haven’t been able to be myself since this began.”

This is the hard to hear lockdown experience of one young person, who’s part of the Rainbow Project’s ‘Out North West’ programme. And it is truth like this that galvanizes those who head up the project to keep reaching out to those feeling isolated, as they struggle without some of the support they had come to depend on.

“Many of the young people are out at home – but don’t talk about their identities there,” explains Colleen O’Neill, a youth worker with Rainbow.

“Often the biggest thing that connects the young people is the space in our centre – they can be themselves there, they don’t feel they have to adapt their behaviours, they can just breathe easy...”

Obviously in lockdown times, their centre was shut and drop-in services were transferred online within one week. But the loss of that space was a concern and a challenge for staff and young people.

“For some, the fear is if they’re at home and chatting online someone will hear,” explains Colleen, “So it doesn’t have the same confidentiality for them.”

But the group was creative in its approach to opening up online spaces. A Taiko drumming group, that has been running for 3 years, proved a great way to keep young people connected.

“It’s a young LGBT friendly group about owning your space and your voice - and just expressing yourself,” says Colleen.

Weekly classes were held online and there were sessions with leading players from around the world. While they may have missed the face to face contact, Colleen says it showed the spirit of the young people - who created their own home-made drums and kept showing up.

It’s been a testing time for many young people, cut off from their support networks – and Rainbow do report a significant increase in the numbers making contact with their counselling service.

“It’s been hard for young people, managing their mental health, while being mostly within family settings,” Colleen says. “I can jump in the car or go a walk when I’m struggling – they’re dependent on their parents. Energy and motivation can be low for them.”

“This is a place of love and something has happened in our project during this time, bonds have been strengthened, friendships built up.”

An added complexity for trans people during lockdown was high profile comments made by JK Rowling. Colleen says she witnessed these having a direct impact on some of their young people.

“It was heart-breaking to see. The world of Harry Potter has been a safe haven to many young people and it was as if that came crashing down for young trans people. It’s been a tough time.”

To combat some of the challenges, music and art became important avenues of expression and solace for the Out North West group. These were facilitated by the young people who performed on Zoom sessions.

“Signing in to zoom to chat can get stagnant,” laughs Colleen. “But what was great was that the young people were showcasing their talents to each other and there is a vulnerability in that; to say here’s what I know, here’s what I do, please treat me with kindness. And they are just so kind to each other. Those who facilitated have come away with new confidence. It’s been gorgeous.”

The group also set up its own discord server, designed usually for gamers. They created channels focussed around cooking, arts, movies and mental health people. Over 50 young people signed up and Colleen celebrates the fact it brought some together outside their usual friendship groups. They also had a Zoom drop in moment from Derry girl Nicola Coughlan, who wanted to show her support to the young people.

For Colleen, there’s been real encouragements but challenges and gaps have been exposed too.

“When you take your services online, geographical boundaries disappear & young people from rural areas, where there is no queer specific support, have been able to connect. We want that to carry on...”

“I grew up in a rural village, it wasn’t until I was in my early 20s I realised there were services for queer people there. And so this opportunity allows us to tackle that lack of infrastructure, to reach some of the most isolated young people. And that’s exciting.”

For Colleen the underlying message that is at the heart of the work they do – is kindness.

“This is a place of love and something has happened in our project during this time, bonds have been strengthened, friendships built up. And we just want to keep this going.”

R City

“I always say that feeling of supporting one another is addictive - and the more people we get hooked on it the better this world becomes.”

Alan Waite from the R-City Project is insistent - “We wanted to be available to them 24/7.”

R-City is a programme with a reach across North and West Belfast and when lockdown came the team’s gut response was to focus in on mental health support. Alan says their first thoughts were - “how do we support our young people, engage them and keep them focused.”

As he reflects on the lockdown months, Alan says the young people had a wide spectrum of reactions, experiences and challenges. There were some common themes too; that sense of being separated from friends, while some had concerns about difficult family relationships.

“But on the flip side,” Alan says, “positive relationships were also formed because families had opportunities to spend valuable time together.”

One issue his team noticed was most young people lost all routine very quickly...

“There was the tendency to stay up late,” Alan explains, “which then impacted on when they ate and how they engaged with the outside world.”

“With all this in mind we decided consistency was the key. We wanted to be engaging through creative sessions on Zoom, but then that soon became difficult. We had to adapt and create small online groups to allow for chill time and general catch ups or checks in.”

Daily and weekly lockdown challenges became a real focal point for the team. From Tik Tok challenges to home fitness work outs, the young people threw themselves into it, sharing their experiences online. Pizza and food parcels were also delivered to R-City members, as well as self-care packs and goodies. The young people also came up with the idea to support the Mater hospital, providing £1000 worth of PPE equipment.

For Alan, it’s been a time to really think through how they deliver youth work. He is quick to point out the real value in face to face relationships, but says they have learned from having that taken away. He is full of praise for his volunteers who, “give so much time and care for the young people.” Some provided phones and tablets for teenagers who were disconnected, and provided a listening ear to any young person who needed to be heard.

The young people too, he says, have been in reflective mode.

“Times were strange for them and they felt anxious at the early stages - but we could see a change towards the later weeks, as they took advantage of the hour or two of exercise.”

Alan is keen that this personal change would be a springboard for community change.

“I saw real community spirit and support when times were at their most difficult. The selfless acts of community volunteers like Donavan, Pierce stand out.

“I always say that feeling of supporting one another is addictive - and the more people we get hooked on it the better this world becomes.”

Regenerate Portadown

When people come together in common purpose amazing things happen, says Keith McCann of the Regenerate programme in Portadown. He characterises the coronavirus pandemic as “surreal, bizarre and unusual” but within the crisis come opportunities to help people more.

Regenerate was set up in 2012 with main focuses on community cohesion and safety.

A number of projects form its work, including around race relations and capacity building, supporting residents with project delivery, a veteran’s group, a war graves historical project, interface projects and improving relationships, and an open forum in the Annagh area which uses an urban voice model to deliver projects.

Community development work is based on a model by Cormac Russell.

“He says don’t go in to try to fix but build what is strong,” Keith said.

All the strands of work for the busy organisation were impacted by the pandemic.

“We tried to go on as best we could,” Keith said.

Regenerate’s building closed on March 19th and all projects were suspended. After taking stock of the severity of what was happening momentum built and the response started.

A telephone helpline was in place by the end of March to make contact with people who were vulnerable and isolated in their homes and to find out what the need was.

“We were keen to have the community involved in understanding what they needed,” Keith said.

Eleven volunteers manned the helpline which also had referrals from police, social services, the local council, and community. Early on the “biggest need was the decline in mental health”. Over 50 people who would appreciate a phone call were identified, and after panic-buying subsided around six weeks into the response the need for cooked meals and emergency parcels was apparent.

“There was huge amount of fear,” Keith said. “We watched the images, particularly of Italy and saw what was reported on the news. We had no answers and didn’t know how long it would last so fear was gripping people.

“Older people were afraid to express their fear to their family and support network because they didn’t want to worry them.”

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“Instead of lip service we have a visual representation. It strengthened the hand of the community.”

From April meals were distributed among Regenerate’s large network, in Portadown, Armagh, Banbridge, Lurgan and beyond.

“We utilised that relationship,” Keith said. “We partnered with resident groups who helped identify people in their own community who would benefit from a cooked meal once a week and our volunteers numbers grew to 108.”

Delivering a mental health first aid response came in the production of online videos to help people understand what they were feeling, why there were feeling the way they were and what they could do about it.

“It’s about fight or flight and attitude,” Keith said. “How to help yourself and others.”

A bonus of lockdown, with so many people working from home, furloughed and bored was the time to build family relationships. And Keith says what he has known for years became more apparent.

“When people come together amazing things happen. “Instead of lip service we have a visual representation. It strengthened the hand of the community.”

In total around 20 partner organisations came together. They could not have had much impact individually but with larger numbers there was buying power and in turn more ability to deliver for people.

“Covid gave us the ability to work together like never before,” he said. “It is the strongest positive for me.”

The worst was the negative impact on mental health “to a degree we are still trying to understand and perhaps deal with over the next months and longer”.

Now is about picking up the pieces, recovering, delivering the full range of services again and thinking about what is coming down the line and planning for it.

Young people’s needs must be considered carefully, as for the most part they were “set to the side a wee bit” during the peak of the virus.

As the furlough scheme ends there will be increased job losses, economic depression, and high unemployment so trying to address this and tackling mental health issues which flow from that will occupy a lot of Regenerate’s time.

Turas na nDaoine

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

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.”

Twaddell Ardoyne Shankill Communities in Transition

Finding new ways of working was among the challenges presented to TASCIT project coordinator Rab McCallum.

Challenging people to come out of their comfort zones is what TASCIT is all about.

Usually, while still a challenge, it is gentle and at participants' own pace but the coronavirus pandemic has no respect for that so the team and the local communities had to quickly adapt to a different way of life.

In some ways old barriers were easier to break down because there was a common fight and crisis that needed to be addressed.

The TASCIT peace walls programme is focused on bringing people together, on people getting to know each other, confidence building, and establishing relationships across interfaces.

Covid meant that bringing people on different sides of traditional divides together for discussion, challenging people to come out of their comfort zones and engage with each other had to be done in different ways.

TASCIT's Challenging Conversations group involving physical meetings, residential, and visits to places like Portadown, South Armagh, and Dublin, was an immediate casualty of Covid-19. People staying at home to protect their own lives and other people's lives meant all the usual ways of working had to be rethought, Rab says.

"We continued to engage people with the programme through Whatsapp," he said.

"We stayed in touch."

Collaboration started to take place, people helped with foodbanks, sewing face coverings and gowns for workers. Linking up with other community groups was a big plus. When one woman's sewing machine broke there was a cross community response to fix that. £500 was raised so she could get back to work.

"Celebrating the work of other was important," Rab said "And the gratitude being displayed was noticeable."

Spirits were raised in the darkest of moments by the developing sense of community in a fight against the same thing.

"There was huge positivity among people", Rab said. "People were facing a common problem."

**"People
were facing
a common
problem."**

“It was glaringly obvious the lengths people were going to, to help other who they wouldn’t see as political allies.”

“They seemed more willing to accommodate each other. “That made our work easier.”

Difficulties included finding it hard to recruit new people into the group as limitations on people’s movement was the reality of everyday life for a long time.

Inequality in access to technology was another barrier.

“People not tech savvy felt left behind,” Rab said. “Our programme is about getting to know people. Zoom is not the same.”

“You have to take a leap and go into communities.

“It was also hard to recruit new people in at a time like this.”

Getting those “not tech savvy” up to speed with technology was overcome as much as possible and as restrictions ease bringing programmes back is key. There was a human approach among people who usually would not.

“It was glaringly obvious the lengths people were going to, to help other who they wouldn’t see as political allies.

“People took a human approach and found a human level.”

The danger is the chance people “revert back” and goodwill fades.

“I am hopeful that people will see we have been in this together.

“We can explore what that means to us. It is an opportunity to think in new ways.”

If forced to sum up the experience in one word, for Rab it’s “strange” but also a chance for a “new way of working”.

TASCIT has built new relationships and sees the value in those being maintained.

“It’s been a strange experience. We try to take all opportunities to see if we can use them some way. It is important people see there is cooperation and collaboration. We extended the people we reach and found another network of people we hadn’t met before.”