



IMPACT NETWORK NI

A source of Excellence promoting Ambition, Knowledge, Involvement and Wellbeing

Communities and Covid

Stories of people, support and mobilisation across NI communities

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.





Impact Network NI

“We want to show people we will get through this – that there is light.”

“People have been in tears on their doorsteps; they were asking - how did you think of me?”

Wendy Kerr, who manages Impact Network NI, talks with passion as she articulates how many of the connections they forged during the coronavirus period had a depth to them.

“People were talking more, there were emotional chats at their doors, men were opening up more about their mental health.”

Impact Network NI spans four council areas across central Northern Ireland and works with communities to challenge the impacts of poverty and economic crisis. When lockdown became real, the team co-ordinated an emergency response in terms of rescue packs – but how people were doing mentally soon became their focus.

“This is an area that has suffered major job losses and actually a lot of people had just got back into work,” Wendy reflects. Over recent years Impact Network NI had set up a series of skills workshops in response to a number of manufacturing companies closing in County Antrim.

“We had been engaging with people on a very personal basis; a lot of men had opened up to us about their concerns. So, a massive focus for us during Covid became how could we retain these conversations and work through it with them.”

Food parcels became a way in to people’s lives and as the team connected out in the communities, they encountered a whole mixture of emotions on the doorsteps.

“We found we came to people’s homes and they were finding it difficult to connect,” Wendy explains. “So honestly, people were just so glad to see another face. Disconnect for many was real. People were so scared physically to go out of their homes – elderly people hadn’t even seen their neighbours and so connection was crucial.”

But poverty was very to the fore too. Wendy Kerr says they encountered some people who didn’t have more than 2 slices of bread left.

“People don’t want to be seen as down and out; and when they lift the phone to ask for help they can feel a failure. What we are trying to communicate is that this is a strength.”

As well as knocking doors the Impact Network team checked in with over 1500 community groups. They also commissioned a mental health survey to get an honest picture of what was going. They found that 45% of people were experiencing negative mental health and wellbeing because of lockdown; that 40% were more anxious and half of those surveyed with struggling with lost social connections.

This reality formed the basis of their work during Covid – they held a men’s health week where they hosted workshops on mindfulness and cookery. Some men, Wendy says, have contacted their GP with health worries, as a result.

They plan to step up this type of activity over the summer with horticultural packs, slow cooker packs and community challenges.

“We didn’t want to disempower people,” Wendy explains. “People can easily feel worthless but we want them to feel like they have so much worth and value.”

“We want to show people we will get through this – that there is light. We see people build up resilience – it’s not just about giving and then leaving people to it; it’s about encouraging people to connect and to keep that going.”

In the 3 months since lockdown began Impact Network NI has connected with over 2 thousand people through packs and they have summer plans to extend their reach further.

For Wendy it’s been about communities finding their own resilience: “It’s been about people seeing how they can react positively to something horrific in their minds and how to convert it into a positive; there’s such a strength in that.”

“We’ve struggled with building good relations for so long here, but how communities really connected through this time mean a lot to people.”

