

# Alternatives NI: East Belfast

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“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.”