

Bogside and Brandywell Initiative

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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.”