

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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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.

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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.