

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.”