



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.





Bready and District Ulster Scots Association

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The Sollus Centre in North Tyrone, was a ‘Place of Light’ amid the darkness and fear of the coronavirus pandemic. It is home to the Bready & District Ulster Scots Association run by former joiner James Kee and his small team of dedicated workers.

“There are few bright sparks about here let me tell you,” he said.

Based half way between Derry and Strabane on the site of an old Orange hall, Bready Ulster Scots, as it is known, was formed in 2001 as a cultural organisation.

Local farm groups and others identified the group as a way to lobby on issues impacting the mainly Protestant, unionist and loyalist community and its development.

Over the years they have developed a range of activities with young and old through local churches, bands, and lodges, tackling challenges around employment, mental health and bonfires.

“My job as coordinator of volunteers was about making sure we followed the rules and kept each other safe.”

“Many groups didn’t realise what they were contributing to the community until it was explained to them,” James said.

Bready Ulster Scots is an umbrella body to the Sollus School of Highland Dance and Sollus Cultural Promotions event management group. The focus of the work on Ulster Scots Culture education, arts, heritage and community development, which “draws people from all over the place” was immediately impacted by the pandemic.

Being rurally based presented challenges but quickly around seven groups – sporting, church, cultural, Orange lodges – coordinated themselves and responded to need in the community. Members of the local cricket club and the loyal orders were delivering meals and food parcels to those in need, including older and vulnerable people.

“For the first times in some cases it was groups supporting and helping each other out,” James said.

Knowing that parishioners were getting meals and seeing litter pickups on country roads “did my heart good” he added. James said so much was happening in the community “there wasn’t much time to think”. It was “shoulder to the wheel” time and everyone wanted to help in their own small way.

“It didn’t come as a surprise,” he said.

“We are used to volunteers stepping up to the line to deliver.”

And deliver they did.

Some 8,000 fabric coverings were produced for care groups, and hospital support staff through fundraising.

“The dancers started the pot with £200, and we matched it. Without asking anyone we raised £2,610.

“It snowballed out of proportion and a major surprise to us was the Secretary of State Brandon Lewis tweeting about it.”

Working on common goals helped people feeling anxious about the virus.

“My job as coordinator of volunteers was about making sure we followed the rules and kept each other safe.”

In the community people needed the basics delivered but many, particularly elderly people just “wanted conversation”.

The group recognised the prevalence of fear and loneliness and the impact of people losing their lives to Covid.

“Once it’s on your own doorstep then it becomes real,” he said.

“It has been one of the hardest parts not being able to say goodbye.

“Challenges to come will be dealt with “head on”

“We have had so many funerals. All the restrictions in place, people standing outside the graveyard social distancing. It made every sad occasion a lot worse.”

In the time ahead James is concerned about major mental health issues in both rural and urban areas. He noted that sales of alcohol appeared to rocket during the lockdown and is concerned about the long term damage this could have.

Burn out, loss of jobs, inequality in urban and rural needs and huge financial hardship will be felt “right across society,” he predicts.

“Community is going to have a more major role, particularly with advice services.”

Silver linings of what the community experienced included strengthening relationships, developing networks and getting to know others in places like Creggan where face coverings were delivered to.

“Networks of people have been coordinating, getting to know each other. New contacts and links being made. I am just so proud of the community,” James said.

Coping in different ways, and finding new ways of connecting through technology and so on has been a boost, though many people have been left feeling a little “Zoomed out”.

“We have coped,” James said.

Opening up to the New Zealand, Canada and USA dance worlds online was another positive side to the pandemic. And the Sollus dance group receiving the Queen’s Award for voluntary service at the start of June was also a mental lift.

“The timing of that was unreal. It gave us the boost we needed.”

Challenges to come will be dealt with “head on”.

“It has been a nightmare and god forbid if there is another phase.

“Covid created fear and there is always those who have deep down maybe been hiding emotions.

“People are forgetting what we have learned, more families are being bereaved so we have to hang on and stick it out.”