

# R City

**“I always say that feeling of supporting one another is addictive - and the more people we get hooked on it the better this world becomes.”**

Alan Waite from the R-City Project is insistent - “We wanted to be available to them 24/7.”

R-City is a programme with a reach across North and West Belfast and when lockdown came the team’s gut response was to focus in on mental health support. Alan says their first thoughts were - “how do we support our young people, engage them and keep them focused.”

As he reflects on the lockdown months, Alan says the young people had a wide spectrum of reactions, experiences and challenges. There were some common themes too; that sense of being separated from friends, while some had concerns about difficult family relationships.

“But on the flip side,” Alan says, “positive relationships were also formed because families had opportunities to spend valuable time together.”

One issue his team noticed was most young people lost all routine very quickly...

“There was the tendency to stay up late,” Alan explains, “which then impacted on when they ate and how they engaged with the outside world.”

“With all this in mind we decided consistency was the key. We wanted to be engaging through creative sessions on Zoom, but then that soon became difficult. We had to adapt and create small online groups to allow for chill time and general catch ups or checks in.”

Daily and weekly lockdown challenges became a real focal point for the team. From Tik Tok challenges to home fitness work outs, the young people threw themselves into it, sharing their experiences online. Pizza and food parcels were also delivered to R-City members, as well as self-care packs and goodies. The young people also came up with the idea to support the Mater hospital, providing £1000 worth of PPE equipment.

For Alan, it’s been a time to really think through how they deliver youth work. He is quick to point out the real value in face to face relationships, but says they have learned from having that taken away. He is full of praise for his volunteers who, “give so much time and care for the young people.” Some provided phones and tablets for teenagers who were disconnected, and provided a listening ear to any young person who needed to be heard.

The young people too, he says, have been in reflective mode.

“Times were strange for them and they felt anxious at the early stages - but we could see a change towards the later weeks, as they took advantage of the hour or two of exercise.”

Alan is keen that this personal change would be a springboard for community change.

“I saw real community spirit and support when times were at their most difficult. The selfless acts of community volunteers like Donavan, Pierce stand out.

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