

Éalú

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Community solidarity and a growing network is helping Éalú members in Tyrone and North Armagh deal with the ongoing fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

Frankie Quinn, project coordinator of the support group set up four years ago for ex-prisoners and their families, says while Covid-19 brought serious challenges he has found hope in new relationships and a sense of community beyond traditional divides.

Éalú means escape, in this case of the mind, inspired by the poem Crime of Castlereagh by Irish republican hero Bobby Sands. The group tries to deal with PTSD by providing counselling, mindfulness and other services. Training, education and support to enhance employability and improve lives is a major part of its work.

The immediate impact of Covid-19 back in March was that group work ceased.

Prison experience of sticking to timetables and routines proved vital in lockdown.

Online solutions also helped, as live streaming, webinars and yoga classes could continue in this format. It meant people could engage and feel they were taking part in community structures.

The group's Listening Ear project started in April, with three counsellors available six days a week for two hours each to listen to people's worries and problems. Frankie said among the positives to glean from the health crisis was having greater reach through embracing technology.

“It enhanced our ability to use the internet which allows us to reach a bit further,” he said.

New relationships were also formed and existing relationships deepened. Engaging with foodbanks, the GAA, local councillors, and women's group among others means an expanded network for the group.

A Coalisland Response Team was set up during the height of the virus spread that helped with providing food parcels and other supports for those who needed it.

New relationships were formed and the group will continue to make a positive difference to local people in the time ahead.

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Casting his mind back to March, Frankie is critical of the “total and utter absence of support and leadership at Stormont”.

“Communities organised themselves,” he said. “Be it the GAA centres or Orange Hall, community structures provided help and support.”

“I think we should learn from all this,” he added. “It created a certain vision beyond sectarian politics because we were all in it together.”

Éalú formed relationships with ex combatants in Portadown, ex UVF and UDA, during lockdown.

“We ended up supplying them with PPE,” he said. “We made face masks and visors for private health care workers, they collected them off me, so we built a bit of a relationship there.”

Lockdown was challenging for many people and served to amplify difficulties that already existed. Pressure on young people, domestic abuse, families with alcohol and drug problems and isolation were all areas of concern during lockdown.

“We had concerns about vulnerable women and children but there was not a lot we could do,” Frankie said.

“We were aware that vulnerable adult men who would have sought company in bar were lonely.”

Mental health issues have come to the fore as have problems around finances and employment. What may lie ahead for communities is troubling people.

“There is going to be a massive recession,” Frankie said.

“The ramifications will be felt.”