

# Drumbeg Residents Association

**“We rapped 250 doors asking if people were shielding, in furlough, did they need a food parcel, cleaning products and the rest”**

The challenges of the coronavirus pandemic were immense in Craigavon but it was also provided a good opportunity to connect with the community.

DRA was set up around 2003 by local activists concerned with fighting for the community over issues around housing and infrastructure.

Peace impact programme project coordinator Joanne Shortall said since then DRA has been busy running education employability, legacy and reimagining programmes, doing inter-generational and women's group work, and developing community leadership in the area where barriers to progress include the impact of paramilitaries who “don't like moving forward but we are getting there”.

The feeling around the pandemic was fear and a sense it was “unreal”. When local people the group knew were hospitalised it suddenly became very real. A very obvious, old-fashioned way of connecting got the community response going.

Knocking doors was a simple and effective way to consult with the community about what was needed, including among Bangladeshi and Portuguese residents.

“We rapped 250 doors asking if people were shielding, in furlough, did they need a food parcel, cleaning products and the rest,” Joanne said.

She added: “It was a good opportunity to get ourselves to every door and promote ourselves.”

Localised lockdown began in on the estate around St Patrick's week in March, and ahead of the official government guidance.

“We were putting parcels on the doorsteps and running on,” she said.

Thoughts turned to how to keep people engaged so a youth work course started online in April. People learned how to use Zoom, social distance support was provided and the old community house was rearranged to accommodate other work.

Living in the community, it was obvious to Joanne about many of the emerging issues.

“I live in the estate so I was able to notice what was going on with antisocial behaviour, writing on the wall going up, cars being attacked, people being put out of their home,” she said.

“One young person was homeless, so we got him sorted out eventually.”

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Isolation among older residents was a big issue. Calls to doors which should have taken half an hour in total could take more like three hours as people wanted human interaction, a caring voice and a listening ear.

A plus side of the fallout is that these people and others now know where to access help.

A large scale community audit being conducted will find out exactly what all the issues and challenges are.

“I am trying to find ways to engage with people,” Joanne said.

“Come up with new initiatives is important as not everyone likes or wants to use digital.”

Street Bingo proved to be a useful initiative, as did Thirsty Clock DJs playing in the estate with people watching from their cars.

Coping with the pandemic was “difficult and stressful” but Joanne, the volunteers, the local GAA club and so on “just got on with it”.

It was clear that other areas outside of Drumbeg were not getting the help that was needed as the group got referrals from Lurgan and Bleary and other estates in Craigavon.

A new relationship was built up with North Lurgan Residents Association in Kilwilkie “they came to us to see if we needed help”. The Drumbeg Action Group – comprising Ardowen, Meadowbrook, and Drumbeg – and Fresh Start areas with the same challenges shared knowledge.

A sense of being “left behind” when it comes to the Good Friday Agreement and no relationship with policing gives Drumbeg and other similarly challenged places a certain “stuck in the 1970s” feeling,” Joanne said.

“People have a lot to contend with and we are worried about what is coming.”

Deeper research and consultation with people is required.

“We need to step back and focus on a smaller area,” Joanne said. “Craigavon doesn’t have a proper community development approach. We could maybe lead it.”