

# Leafair Community Association

**“It opened up networks and we had lots of shared learning”**

Properly resourced mental health services will be key to supporting Derry people dealing with many of the difficult challenges the coronavirus pandemic will bring to communities.

Peter McDonald, manager at Leafair Community Association, which has been operating since the 1990s, says a focus on financial hardship and the mental health of people in his community will be areas of focus for his team in the months ahead.

Witnessing strong community cohesion at the peak of the pandemic, and the extra need that exists in society had made him even more determined to be a “champion for the underdog”.

What started out as a steering group in Leafair Park over 25 years ago turned into a community association looking at issues around housing, facilities and wellbeing in the outer north area of Derry.

Prior to lockdown in March a number of programmes were taking place from a well equipped community hub. A men’s shed and social enterprise, a women’s group, youth groups, catering services and Good Morning North West kept staff busy.

And Covid-19 meant they haven’t been able to make full use of a £1.3m health and wellbeing centre which was completed at the end of 2019.

“Because of Covid it was all pulled down,” Peter said.

The immediate impact of the pandemic in March was “panic and worry about health and safety”. When schools closed childcare became a major issue. Working from home was another challenge but Leafair managed to continue “on a skeleton crew and are still doing that”.

The team was busy putting in place hygiene and distancing measures as Covid-19 gradually unfolded.

“From March we have been slow,” he said. “We would usually be organising community festivals and now we are into bonfire season.”

The team tried moving services online and youth groups engaged quite successfully there. Peter was pleased to see partnerships building up in the city and beyond.

“It opened up networks and we had lots of shared learning,” he said.

Funding was channelled into the local foodbank to respond to what was happening because of the Covid-19 stay at home measures. Home packs were made for elderly people and “we tried to keep people amused”.

**“We were fast in our response. We were able to handle it as best we could.”**

Delivering parcels was at the heart of the community response while so many people’s movement was limited.

Coping with extra need was a major element of the work being done. Prior to covid Leafair Good Morning North West service had 200 clients. It has now 300.

“People were nervous and panicking,” Peter said. “They are in need, and not all are elderly. We were discovering people suffering with mental health and depression.”

The psychological and emotional impact on staff was another consideration for Peter and other groups. Counselling services were brought in for Leafair staff witnessing the damage in communities and responding to it.

“It was so they could unload,” Peter said.

At one point 1,000 parcels a week were going out to households in need.

“We were able to cope with what we were faced with,” Peter said. “We were fast in our response. We were able to handle it as best we could.”

For all the challenges faced during the peak of the pandemic Peter was heartened by the “great community cohesion” he saw.

“Community bonding is working really well,” he said. “We have great working relationships but collaborating with statutory bodies and voluntary sector was great.”

“Bonding was great. People were over the moon with the help provided.”

Lack of funding has been a major headache for Leafair and other groups in the area, Peter says.

“What comes in goes straight out,” he said.

Mental health packs promoting tools to help cope with hardship are part of the latest response from the group.

“People are going to face a lot of financial hardship and depression,” Peter said.

“In the foreseeable future they are the areas we are going to be looking at.”