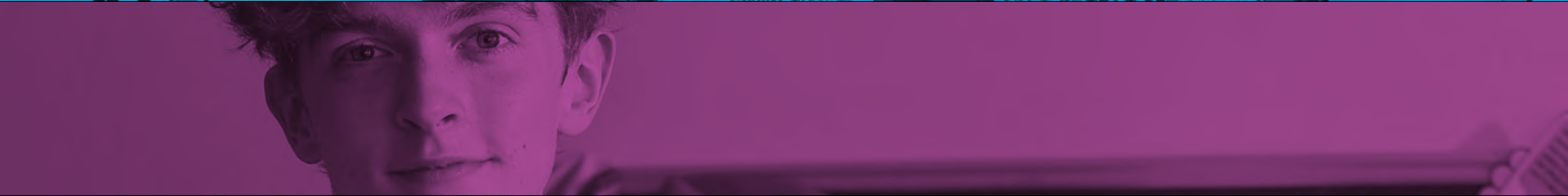




Communities and Covid

Stories of people, support and
mobilisation across NI communities





Foreword

A collective commitment to Build Back Better together

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.

The stories reflect the shared experiences of loss, isolation and fear, and the ways in which communities came together to support people, families and communities who needed access to basic day-to-day essentials, support services, human connection, care and solidarity.

They serve as a snapshot of the extent of community activity that has been crucial in responding. They highlight the wonderful community spirit, coordinated efforts and partnership working happening across NI. It is particularly heartening to see how groups rose to the challenge and how they grew strength from collaborating across community boundaries, with public bodies and many local businesses.

Some of the important learning that can help underpin a collective commitment to Build Back Better together are reflected through the stories. They point to the need to find better ways of dealing with the residual post-COVID issues including mental health and wellbeing, social isolation, financial hardship and unemployment.

As we think about Building Back Better it is clear that a vibrant and properly resourced community sector is one of the key building blocks required to complement strong and effective public services shaped by local community need.

We commend these stories to you and thank everyone who gave generously of their time and insights. Special thanks to the wonderful storytellers, Judith Hill (<http://www.tellitincolour.com/>) and Amanda Ferguson (<http://amanda.ie/>), who carefully gathered and powerfully captured the experiences of people and communities in words and picture.



Blackmountain Shared Space Initiative

“I’m seeing new partnerships across communities... I think it’s another step forward for all of us.”

“We’ve all come through so much in Belfast; there’s so much more to these communities than ever gets out; the number of people who are just so quick to switch on and help.”

Seamus Corr, from Blackmountain Shared Space Initiative, reflects on the last few weeks and the mammoth community efforts going on to reach into the homes of those in need.

As soon as the coronavirus lockdown was announced, Seamus and representatives from a cluster of community organisations in Upper Springfield and Whiterock sprang into action. The group also consulted with community organisations in the Springfield and Highfield areas, to agree how they could work together.

Within a week they had coordinated an emergency response that has seen every patch of their area receive help. From prescription collections, to morning phone calls and food deliveries – their response has been swift and widespread.

Street by street, home by home – they aim to leave no-one out of their care plan.

“We quickly arrived at the conclusion that this is not an individual effort – but collectively we have the skills to do this,” says Seamus. “Our question was though – how do we get this onto the ground and into people’s living rooms who are affected?”

And that’s exactly what they’ve managed to do. They consulted with people who agreed to be in charge of each area in their patch of Belfast and then identified representatives who would be points of contact on every single street.

From the morning phone calls, which come from the already established Good Morning West Belfast service, to the deliveries of non-perishable goods and hot meals; already their team of volunteers have reached into hundreds of homes.

“Street representatives were coming back to us quickly,” says Seamus. “And you were hearing what people need. We created the structure, then the needs came back, street by street.”

Hundreds of non-perishable packs have been given out over the course of the lockdown so far, with hundreds of hot meals distributed and thousands more frozen, stored & ready to go.”

“Each representative is coming back saying how delighted and proud they are of their community being able to do this. They’re finding nothing but good will out there. And there won’t be a street that is not covered.”

Seamus tells us there are so many stories coming back to them of the people being helped.

“One couple in Gort na Móna are housebound,” he says. “Their carer had to self-isolate and one of our reps rapped the door. The wife is bed bound and her husband is in a wheelchair. We’re now supplying them meals and it’s taken the pressure off them and the carers.”

He recounts another call that impacted him from a woman on the Shankill who is partially blind and was struggling. The teams were able to ensure she got food and support.

“I’m seeing new partnerships across communities,” he insists. “I think it’s another step forward for all of us.”

“I think our communities were already on a path of togetherness for a while. But we need to give people hope and we need to start talking this place up; there is just so much good.”





Youth Action: North Belfast

“Youth work is about face to face and that needs to be kept on the agenda.”

When lockdown began, a group of young men contacted north Belfast youth worker Sean Madden. Anxieties were heightened, they were feeling uncertainty, cut off from friends and some of them had been furloughed. They were reaching out, looking for connection...

Sean, who works for Youth Action and is a youth worker at Holy Family Youth Club on the Limestone Road, was passionate about plugging the gaps that lockdown had thrown up.

“The young guys wanted a bit of meaning,” he said. “Some of them were out of work, some of them were conscious about their drinking and they were just dealing with fear and uncertainty.”

“They were definitely a focus for us,” Sean reflects. “We’ve been working with them a while, had them away on international trips and were happy with how they had been getting on. Then suddenly we were worried about their support networks, we knew they needed additional support.”

The youth workers were able to support some of them in applying for universal credit and relief funds. Beyond the practicalities, the youth club also came up with some creative responses - setting up a playstation account that kept the teenager connected until, according to Sean,

“they hit a digital wall”. Socially distanced walks and bike rides also came into play, as well as connecting some of the guys to a personal trainer. In the later stages of lockdown they were able to re-introduce their bike fixing workshops, which have proved popular.

“At the start,” Sean says, “it was about checking in with everyone on their mental health. Young people were shocked and afraid, because much of what they were consuming online was the worst-case scenario.”

“Also, it was scary for them to suddenly be at home all the time.”

In response to this reality, youth volunteers reconfigured activities online, but Sean admits this brought challenges in trying to support young people who didn't have good access to internet.

To add complexity to the lockdown situation, interface tensions were rising to the surface in north Belfast.

“It's tough,” Sean reflects, “because some of the young people's alternatives have been taken away and there are gaps. We've seen face to face fighting in Alexandra Park and we were in the middle of it, trying to stop it.” With funding challenges a continued issue for the youth sector – most of those out intervening when tension flares have been volunteers.

But Sean says what kept him going is his passion for north Belfast and its young people.

“I have a real affinity for North Belfast and I can see myself in those young guys. The only alternative I had growing up was youth work or sport. I have mates who are in jail or who are dead now and someone helped me choose the right path. So I know what route these guys could take and they know we're not bullshitting them. They see genuineness from us. And these young men have been brilliant to us.”

For Sean, it's been a testing time in this part of the city but he says it's fired his passion for youth work and magnified just how crucial it is in Belfast.

“Youth work is about face to face and that needs to be kept on the agenda; there is genuinely no replacement for that. We have had some successes online, but fundamentally we need to get back to being with young people in person.”





Impact Network NI

“We want to show people we will get through this – that there is light.”

“People have been in tears on their doorsteps; they were asking - how did you think of me?”

Wendy Kerr, who manages Impact Network NI, talks with passion as she articulates how many of the connections they forged during the coronavirus period had a depth to them.

“People were talking more, there were emotional chats at their doors, men were opening up more about their mental health.”

Impact Network NI spans four council areas across central Northern Ireland and works with communities to challenge the impacts of poverty and economic crisis. When lockdown became real, the team co-ordinated an emergency response in terms of rescue packs – but how people were doing mentally soon became their focus.

“This is an area that has suffered major job losses and actually a lot of people had just got back into work,” Wendy reflects. Over recent years Impact Network NI had set up a series of skills workshops in response to a number of manufacturing companies closing in County Antrim.

“We had been engaging with people on a very personal basis; a lot of men had opened up to us about their concerns. So, a massive focus for us during Covid became how could we retain these conversations and work through it with them.”

Food parcels became a way in to people’s lives and as the team connected out in the communities, they encountered a whole mixture of emotions on the doorsteps.

“We found we came to people’s homes and they were finding it difficult to connect,” Wendy explains. “So honestly, people were just so glad to see another face. Disconnect for many was real. People were so scared physically to go out of their homes – elderly people hadn’t even seen their neighbours and so connection was crucial.”

But poverty was very to the fore too. Wendy Kerr says they encountered some people who didn’t have more than 2 slices of bread left.

“People don’t want to be seen as down and out; and when they lift the phone to ask for help they can feel a failure. What we are trying to communicate is that this is a strength.”

As well as knocking doors the Impact Network team checked in with over 1500 community groups. They also commissioned a mental health survey to get an honest picture of what was going. They found that 45% of people were experiencing negative mental health and wellbeing because of lockdown; that 40% were more anxious and half of those surveyed with struggling with lost social connections.

This reality formed the basis of their work during Covid – they held a men’s health week where they hosted workshops on mindfulness and cookery. Some men, Wendy says, have contacted their GP with health worries, as a result.

They plan to step up this type of activity over the summer with horticultural packs, slow cooker packs and community challenges.

“We didn’t want to disempower people,” Wendy explains. “People can easily feel worthless but we want them to feel like they have so much worth and value.”

“We want to show people we will get through this – that there is light. We see people build up resilience – it’s not just about giving and then leaving people to it; it’s about encouraging people to connect and to keep that going.”

In the 3 months since lockdown began Impact Network NI has connected with over 2 thousand people through packs and they have summer plans to extend their reach further.

For Wendy it’s been about communities finding their own resilience: “It’s been about people seeing how they can react positively to something horrific in their minds and how to convert it into a positive; there’s such a strength in that.”

“We’ve struggled with building good relations for so long here, but how communities really connected through this time mean a lot to people.”





TransgenderNI

“The reality is lockdown and coronavirus exacerbated the issues that already existed.”

Transgender NI is dedicated to improving the lives of trans people across Northern Ireland, “focusing on legal reform, strategic policy, community resources and creating lasting change”.

Director Alexa Moore said the closure of its Belfast office and community space presented challenges during lockdown but the group was able to reach new people by moving services online.

“We had to close the office and the community space and were unable to run any in-person meet ups so we moved everything online.”

“It was important, particularly so at the start of lockdown, to have somewhere for people to be themselves.”

“The reality is lockdown and coronavirus exacerbated the issues that already existed.”

“Loneliness, isolation, incidences of domestic violence and abuse within homes did come up throughout lockdown.”

“The mental side of things was impacted.”

“Trans healthcare services have almost completely collapsed at this point over the last two and a half years.”

“Again this is not because of Covid but it has been exacerbated it.”

Online drop ins and community space, video game evenings set up “by a stroke of luck” before Covid became an issue, ran throughout lockdown.

Providing an online space that is moderated, safe and accessible was vital, Alexa explained.

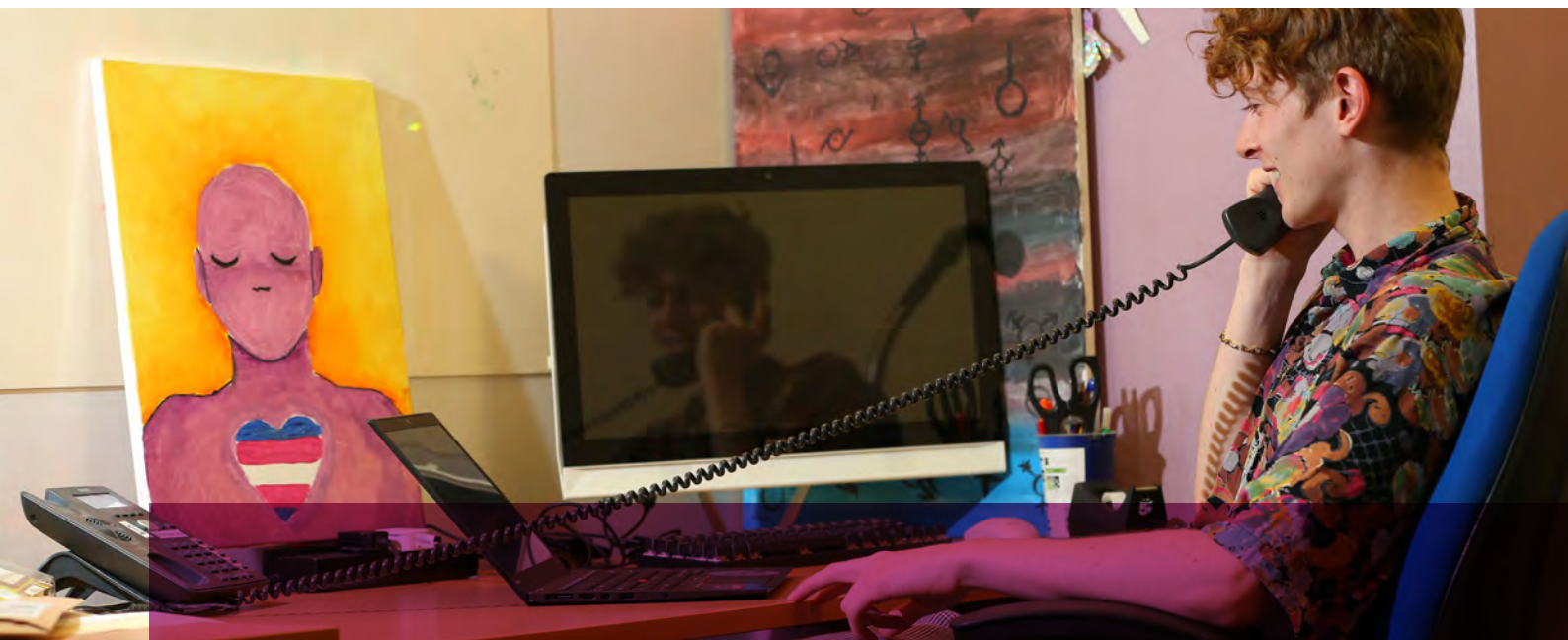
“This provided a lot of help over a hard time for many folks,” she said.

“We reached people we didn’t reach before by doing things online, reaching people into rural communities and trans people who live outside Belfast.”

“We will be taking this forward after lockdown.”

While challenging in so many ways, Transgender NI director Alexa Moore believes that benefits of supporting and connecting with trans people online can be blended into their future approach:

“Providing an online space that is moderated, safe and accessible was vital”, Alexa explained. “This provided a lot of help over a hard time for many folks. We reached new people in rural communities and trans people living outside Belfast. We will be taking this forward after lockdown.”





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Ulidia Training

“We are trying to move the PUL community forward and give them a voice.”

The key learning for the team at Ulidia Training in Ballymoney is that community development work must be tailored more to suit the needs of the people it aims to reach.

Leanne Abernethy from Bushmills is a restorative practitioner at the group working with marginalised loyalist communities in the Causeway Coast and Glens, north Antrim area of Northern Ireland. Different strands to the group’s working include restorative justice, working with paramilitary organisations about how to transition to peace, and the Dalriada Training Services community interest company.

“We are trying to move the PUL community forward and give them a voice.” Leanne said

“It was all laughed off to start with, and people thought it would be a non-starter, but then funders starting offering advice and we realised how serious it may be,” she said.

The Bushmills Coronavirus Support Group (BCSG) was set up before Prime Minister Boris Johnson introduced lockdown measures and

The darkest feelings over the peak of the virus were feelings of isolation, not always having the answers and “not being able to hug”

while some communities were still in a bit of denial. It was formed for “the worse case scenario, but not really believing it was going to happen, that schools would shut and so on”.

“I am quite laid back,” Leanne said. “I tend to panic over stupid stuff and don’t worry about major things.”

Group meetings were the first casualty of the pandemic and the team at Ulidia had to work out some administration issues and how to work from home. It was challenging.

“We kept going and worked in our three-storey building and then once the kids finished school it change things.”

It was an “absolute nightmare” until around Easter time.

BCSG was vital for local people. Its work included phone calls, supporting people, helping people, keeping up to date with proper guidance and disseminating that.

“We are funded by the Red Cross for some of what we do so they were very useful,” Leanne said.

The uncertainty weighed heavily on the team at Ulidia’s minds.

“Were we giving volunteers the right information,” she said. “We were going with gut instinct around gloves and hand washing.”

Working collectively and online was identified as a major bonus. Similar work was ongoing in Ballymoney so three community groups were brought together from the area, and all the benefits of more pairs of hands and understanding of the various coronavirus challenges was felt.

“It has been brilliant,” Leanne said.

“The community spirit has been 100 per cent, the businesses and local people.”

Perceptions about other people you may not normally speak to were challenged and relationships are being maintained.”

Keeping the group ongoing on “an ad hoc basis on topics” is the plan for coming months. Gardening, online mental health sessions, embracing Tik Tok and other apps along with supporting isolated people with food parcels have all raised community morale, as did winning a Sunday Life newspaper’s community award.

The darkest feelings over the peak of the virus were feelings of isolation, not always having the answers and “not being able to hug”. Zoom fatigue kicked in after a while, as there wasn’t always time to do them and there was a sense that funders need to sometimes take a distant approach and “just let us be”.

Community spirit is alive and society proved itself to be less selfish than might have been expected. Discovering high levels of need was sad but also a bonus because overlooked or unknown people are now visible.

“We can work out how to tackle that,” Leanne said. “There are people completely socially isolated, in poverty, we didn’t know about them, so we look at ways to sort that out.”

Another lesson Leanne would like funders to realise is that “bums out seats doesn’t always work”.

“We have to be going out to the people,” she said.

“I would like everyone to look again at how they approach things. Look at more localised responses and listen to the community.”

For now the group is easing into the so-called new normal, “taking stock of life” and focusing on their hashtag of the moment – #CommunitySpirit.





North West Migrants Forum

“No competition and community politics just people coming together to serve the community and seeing the purpose of groups.”

The Covid-pandemic provided a “great learning curve” for Derry-based Lilian Seenoi-Barr, director of programmes at the minority ethnic community led organisation.

Established in 2012 to support migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, it is concerned with community integration, culture, advocacy, education, information, housing welfare advice, support on racism, discrimination and hate crime, and capacity building to help influence positive change.

Back in March NWMF were quick to respond to the pandemic through information from the World Health Organisation. Lilian said the group was quite prepared in terms of promoting health messages, changing practices, and introducing safety measures, as the whole region did not wait to be told what to do by the government in London.

“Derry shut itself down,” Lilian said.

She said the timing was “lucky” to an extent as it was the end of the financial year and projects were “wrapping up” ahead of a new year. Service users – including people from 28 different African countries,

“You get to understand yourself better and what you can handle. It has made people understand the strength they have.”

Poland, Iran Iraq, Syria, Egypt, across the Middle East, Russia, Slovakia and Romania – were part of social network and safe office environment so were left shocked by the immediate lockdown, particularly those were no recourse to public funds and work.

Work with youth and the Friendly Faces Club moved online, a hardship fund helped pregnant women and others shielding and in need with food and links to the outside world.

“We had lots of volunteers to help us,” Lilian said.

A challenge presented by Department of Communities food parcels was that religious observations around diet had not been taken into account so “didn’t meet needs” as it should. Social media presence helped there, signposting to the Belfast Islamic Centre and NICRAS, a refugee community organisation.

Lilian said hardship was a major challenge, with service users not qualifying to access certain help or not knowing how to navigate the system. A new network of people, who had no reason to work together before has been built up, and links with social services and other partners have been positive.

“It is all about partnership working,” Lilian said.

“No competition and community politics just people coming together to serve the community and seeing the purpose of groups.”

The Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the midst of lockdown, a response to the death in the US of George Floyd, was to prove a major area of focus for the NWMF.

There was limited community buy-in about the reported higher risk of Covid-19 to the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community – and the overriding concern was death through racism.

“Inequality in health and education and institutional racism was the driving force,” Lilian said. “Communities doubted the information about the level of risk to them and saw it as another way of controlling the community.

“Racism is killing us so why should we be so scared of Covid-19? We see people being killed, dying here with trauma and mental health issues.”

“We are not ourselves because we cannot get jobs, our qualifications are not recognised and so on so Covid-19 was another pandemic and there was not a strong enough argument for us to stay home and not protest.”

Lilian is unhappy with the Stormont government response and policing to the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, and what she says is a lack of consideration about how people were feeling.

“We have seen double standards exposed,” she said. “It felt like an attempt to silence us in Northern Ireland.”

Lilian, a British citizen originally from Kenya, says the Black community was fighting for rights.

“We had to go out as we were scared and felt if we take leadership and have respectful protest that would protect each other and keep everyone safe.

“It was a great opportunity to demonstrate what we know that others deny or pretend doesn’t exist.”

Lilian wants people to listen more and help respond to the difficulties that lie ahead.

“It has been a great learning curve,” she said. “You get to understand yourself better and what you can handle. It has made people understand the strength they have.”

There are a lot of conversations ongoing around mental health but not so much about resilience. Lilian believes service users coped well in a challenging period because they are “used to isolation so we have built resilience”.

“Every one of us who has left our own country so we have been prepared for challenges like this,” she added.





Bready and District Ulster Scots Association

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

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.”



Action for Community Transformation

“...the generosity of people and commitment to communities has been outstanding.”

Unknown, unforeseen and challenging are just some of the words ACT initiative project director William Mitchell associates with the response to coronavirus in Northern Ireland.

The ACT Initiative is a conflict transformation initiative which aimed at supporting the reintegration of former combatants on their journey from conflict to peace.

William oversees programmes in Greater Belfast, and in Mid and North Ulster, helping people to “act differently” by preparing them to “engage differently”.

Over the years hundreds of people have been through in programmes and currently nine “voluntary area action groups” operate throughout Northern Ireland. Positioned in loyalist communities the work ACT does involves family challenges, interventions in the community, collaboration across interfaces and with police, anti-social behaviour, bonfires, and promoting self regulation as demonstrations of culture.

William says the actions groups “mobilised people before the official lockdown”.

A local ice cream van was converted into a fresh food delivery van, making headlines in Ireland and Pakistan.

From word of mouth ACT knew of networks of vulnerable people who would need support and soon “social media pages swung into action”.

When official lockdown was announced towards the end of March ACT offices shut immediately, however a women’s groups was allowed access to assist in the production of face coverings.

ACT is brilliant at organising when needed, William says.

“On the ground across the area action groups we mobilised volunteers,” he said.

“We coordinated our response in collaboration with other community groups like the Greater Shankill Partnership in the Spectrum Centre.”

Tapping into resources for the common good included in East Belfast, with a new arrangement with Connswater Community Centre.

“We learned that some groups, particularly the statutory linked ones had earlier access to resources but not the manpower,” he said.

“So it was an easy fit.”

Volunteers helped with the distribution of fresh fruit, food parcels, and medicines.

There was collaboration with the cross-community North and West Belfast soup kitchen and identifying isolate older men for “friendly doorstep chat”.

Thousands of face coverings and hundreds of bottles of hand sanitisers, including many from a local tattoo artist, were distributed to frontline workers and care homes.

Deaths in society, through coronavirus or otherwise have been “heart wrenching” as funerals were restricted and normal rituals around people’s passing could not be observed.

The impact this has had on people’s mental health is an area being explored by the group.

A Walk and Talk social distance project in Woodvale Park had helped people who needed emotional support during lockdown for a variety of reasons.

“One of the consequences of this is going to be people’s mental health so we are trying to get early interventions,” William said.

Isolation was identified as even more of an issue in rural areas so leaflets were distributed in Ballymena, Kells and Clough which gave and opportunity for a phone call or a delivery.

Murals paying tribute to the NHS and key workers were another way for communities in north and east Belfast to reflect their gratitude for those helping on the frontline in the fight against the virus.

William said “nothing was too much” for volunteers.

“So many men and women giving up their time to support the less fortunate,” he said.

New ways of delivering programmes is a priority in the time to come, taking account of the restrictions placed on society and the challenges emerging around the economy and mental health.

Austerity, and how families and children are impacted by this will feature in programmes.

“It will be front and centre,” William said.

Enhancing previous mental health programme including through hiking, walking and fishing will be priorities.

“Covid has exacerbated it and brought it more to the fore which is helpful but will be a drain on public resources so it needs to be funded,” he said.

“On a positive note the generosity of people and commitment to communities has been outstanding.

“Hopefully clouds do have a silver lining.”



Women's Policy Group

“We’re really calling for no more excuses...”

As soon as Covid-19 began to impact here Rachel Powell could sense what was coming for women in particular...

Rachel, who is the Women's Sector lobbyist for NI and part of the Women's Policy Group, said her gut reaction was that women would be disproportionately affected.

“Initially we were just so concerned – we knew from early on that domestic violence was on the rise and that job discrimination was a feature of life for some.”

“I knew I needed to be raising this, I needed to be lobbying for women – some of whom were surviving on so little as they just tried to feed their kids.”

Research and expertise were key tools which the Women's Policy Group deployed. From early on in lockdown they lobbied government on issues especially affecting women, such as ill-fitting PPE for frontline workers.

“Women were telling us that the universal fit for PPE was actually designed for men,” explains Rachel. “The fact that 79% of health &



“So, there was progress but we felt we were barely scratching the surface.”

social care workers are women meant it was important we lobbied on behalf of nurses, who weren't fitting into their gear.”

Another major source of stress for pregnant women who were furloughed, was that many suddenly fell below the threshold for maternity pay and found themselves ineligible. Again, Rachel and the Women's Policy Group stepped in.

“This came to light within the first week. We got a win through the Department for Communities, who made a guarantee that any woman who fell below the threshold would receive the maternity pay they would have got before.”

“So, there was progress but we felt we were barely scratching the surface.”

It's that drive that caused this coalition of women representatives to really push for better support for mums, carers and those suffering domestic violence. But Rachel says despite their passionate efforts, there was real frustration they weren't being properly listened to.

“Domestic violence charities missed out on fresh government funding in Northern Ireland – it was incredibly frustrating; they need greater resources than they've ever had.”

“We found women's sector groups were left out of certain conversations... we were being forgotten about again...”

And so the group set about developing a feminist recovery plan based on all the learning they were gleaning from lockdown.

“We had written so much and had been working non-stop & so we pulled it all together to look at the issues & what had got worse for women. There were 127 pages & the economic analysis was dire, with women being worst hit.”

Rachel is adamant their plan proves just how much reformation of thinking is needed when it comes to care work, the economy and childcare.

“We’re now creating a year-long strategy. Some of these issues have existed for a decade - we can’t keep putting them off. For example, on childcare we’ve been asking for a strategy for over a decade. We’re really calling for no more excuses...”

Rachel’s passion is crystal clear. She says that was borne out of her reaction to the financial crisis.

“I’m from a working-class community in south Armagh, I was the first one from my family to go to university. Then I started working in investment banking – and saw myself as my family’s way out of poverty. But I was disgusted at how that sector was part of the crash and when I saw how austerity was affecting people, I knew I couldn’t do it. I wanted to be able to work for people.”

“And it’s the same with Covid. I saw how this would impact women and knew I needed to be lobbying for them. And the best thing throughout this has been collaborating with other women; doing it together has been amazing.”





Newry Felons' Association

“We have been making connections and people are showing an interest in what we are doing.”

Comradeship and a listening ear was at the heart of the Newry Felons' Association response to the coronavirus pandemic. The group was set up in 2014, originally for ex-prisoners from the Newry and Mourne area to come together, “have a bit of craic and tie in with one another” says it's chair, Belfast man Frank Johnston.

Over the years the group has developed from pub meetings to forming relationships with an ex-prisoner group in South Armagh and other activities including trips to the republican museum in Belfast, and also Crumlin Road Gaol.

“Why would be want to do that?” Frank says, and laughs.

At meetings the members decided to set up a community group and Newry Felons' was opened up to members of ex-prisoners families, then others supporters and friends of ex-prisoners and their families. The proviso is you have to be supportive of the peace process. The whole ethos of Newry Felons is around shared experiences, comradeship and a listening ear.

This would prove useful when the possible impact of Covid-19 became apparent.

“It was very frightening because nobody knew anything about it,” Frank said.

“The garden was also a place of great comfort for a member whose wife died after a period of illness. “If the garden hadn’t been there he wouldn’t have been able to cope,” he said.

The first weeks of lockdown were focused on keeping occupied with household tasks. There were no formal physical meetings because of the Stay at Home message from the government. Meetings, Irish classes and legacy events all stopped because of the threat of the virus and many among the membership were shielding because of age and health challenges.

Frank, like others, had the added concern of family working on the frontline. His wife is a care worker and granddaughter worked in retail.

“It was a worrying time for the group,” he said.

“Everything completely stopped. It was very hard not being able to see each other or work.”

Newry Felons’ experienced non-Covid related loss during lockdown with two members passing away.

“We would have put on a big funeral with a flag over coffin and so on,” Frank said.

“Samuel O’Hare, who was active in the Men’s Shed, we couldn’t do it for him. We couldn’t honour him the way we wanted so he went out quietly.”

“Another lad died at home.”

“We went to both funerals but in small numbers and are planning something for their gravesides when we open up more.”

Over the months of lockdown the group stayed in touch through a Felons’ Whatsapp group.

“I would ring around some of the more vulnerable members on a regular basis too,” Frank said.

Food parcel drops took place during lockdown and Frank found other comfort in a neighbourhood watch group set up among neighbours just before Covid-19 became part of everyone’s lives.

“It’s like a self help group,” he said.

As lockdown restrictions eased more the Men’s Shed in the community garden, developed in association with the Barcroft Community Association, at Barcroft Community Centre in Newry became more of a focal point for Newry Felons’.

“People came to the garden to maintain it, to get out, within the regulations.”

“Orders for wheelbarrow planters, Irish cottages, and hanging baskets were taking off.”

The garden was also a place of great comfort for a member whose wife died after a period of illness. “If the garden hadn’t been there he wouldn’t have been able to cope,” he said.

A bonus of the so-called new normal is new members people outside the group are starting to engage with the garden.

“We have been making connections and people are showing an interest in what we are doing.”

While the group initially felt fear about Covid-19 the lockdown element of the pandemic was not as challenging as it might have been for others because of their prison experience and of having liberty curtailed.

Frank is hopeful that communities being pro-active and more willing to help each other is something that is sustained long term. And an appreciation for meeting in real life is another lesson learned by the group.

“I hope we can hold on to the community pulling together in a time of crisis in the time ahead,” he said.

Frank is unimpressed with the response from Westminster and Boris Johnson in particular. He argues the British prime minister was “too slow to react initially”.

“Johnson has been diabolical,” he said.

“The whole government being led by him you wouldn’t expect anything else.”

Frank wants to make sure that society does not lose “the sense of community built up”.

“Activism in the true sense of it, initiating stuff, that will continue,” he said.

Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford forcing the government in London is an example of the type of thinking people should be aiming for.

What society in Ireland and elsewhere has been given is “a sense of ownership of their own lives, hopefully,” Frank adds.

“We have to keep on going,” he said.





Stonewall

“There is real progress in NI, but wider work needs to be done.”

“When it started we knew there would have to be a rethink to support LGBT people, who are already much more likely to feel isolated and removed from parts of wider society.” This is how Fergal McFerran, from Stonewall, recalls his instant reaction to lockdown.

“We took stock quickly and knew that because LGBT people experience more forms of isolation, Covid-19 would exacerbate these challenges.”

Engagement and demand for services rose across the spectrum of agencies who support the LGBT community; whether it was counselling and peer to peer support through Rainbow and other organisations such as Transgender NI.

Fergal says the beauty of lockdown time is that they have been able to reach a wider audience, especially those in rural communities. He insists that this is the challenge going forward.

“What I’ve understood to new depths is to the extent to which many people do not feel accepted in their own homes - and when you’re 100% at home then that created a whole range of issues that we have to think about.”

“What’s encouraged me most, has been how people have come together”

He speaks movingly of one young person who contacted him for support when universities shut and they came home to Northern Ireland. This student had to reach out beyond their home situation because they weren’t sure how family would respond to them.

“Unless these situations are dealt with in sensitive ways they can easily end in tragedy,” says Fergal. “There is real progress in NI, but wider work needs to be done.”

One strand of the Stonewall lockdown response was to create learning packs for home schooling families. These included art, English and computing lessons that were affirming of different types of families & stories about LGBT people through history. Part of the aim of this was to reach into people’s homes and help bolster them in their own environments.

“How people feel in their own homes is important,” says Fergal. “Even during Pride there are easy to click buttons on the webpages of the various online celebrations – so people can opt out quickly if they need to. This paints a picture of just how fearful LGBT people can be in their own homes.”

But against this reality there have been major encouragements. With lives being played out in our own homes, Stonewall and other LGBT organisations have seized the moment to host some significant conversations.

“I think Black Lives Matter has thrown much focus on issues of equality,” reflects Fergal. “So we’ve been thinking through – how do we stay authentic and reflect the origins of protest that Pride has.”

“Until we all experience equality we are not done. It’s really held a mirror up - we need to speak with authenticity and work collaboratively to open up the conversation to ensure equality and justice for everyone.”

Working and interacting digitally has had its strengths too with more people able to access support without always having to travel.

“Northern Ireland is a very relationship based place,” says Fergal. “We’ve always been of the mind-set that we need to do face to face, but if it’s better for some to do it online – then we should continue to offer that service.”

At a time of real fear for many what’s emerged for leaders in the LGBT sector is a hopeful sense of what community can be.

“What’s encouraged me most, has been how people have come together,” reflects Fergal. “But it also looks like we have had a wider realisation of the need to listen to other people’s experiences. That’s allowed us all to really think about what we mean when we talk about community – and what we really need to truly operate as one.”

