



**Stories of
Change**

A Crisis is also an Opportunity when You Care

Covid Stories

August 2020

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**SOCIAL
CHANGE
INITIATIVE**

Foreword

This report captures some of the many impressive ways in which community-based organisations from across Northern Ireland stepped up to respond to the needs created by the Covid 19 pandemic.

Its particularly heartening to see how groups rose to the challenge and provided an innovative and diverse suite of high-quality responses to help vulnerable people and their communities. The scale and reach of what they delivered is impressive.

By listening to their communities, groups were quickly able to work out what was most needed. They were willing to think outside the box and prepared to adapt beyond their traditional modes of operation. This is what the pandemic called for and community organisations were not found wanting.

Because of their existing networks, track record and credibility they were trusted. Frequently they were the catalyst or focal point for wider community action. Community buildings, trusted community workers and willing volunteers were key to the success of the efforts.

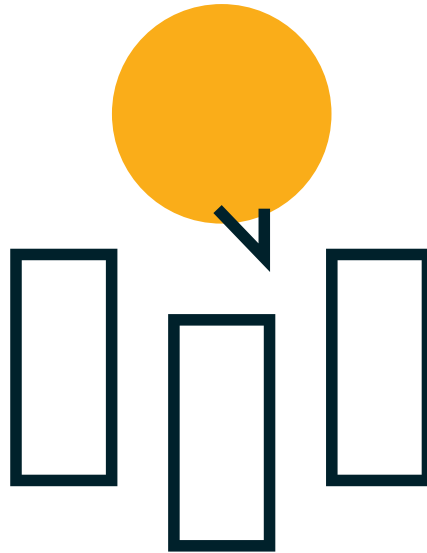
Features of the response included collaboration often well outside traditional partners and innovation in response to need.

The information in the following pages highlights the invaluable role played by local community-based organisations.

Over many years, this same sector has seen significant erosion of public funding for the vital role which it plays holding communities together and meeting pressing local need.

As we think about building back better its clear that a vibrant and properly resources community sector is one of the key building blocks required to complement strong and effective public services shaped by local community need.

Martin O'Brien
Executive Director
Social Change Initiative



A crisis is also an opportunity when you care

The Covid-19/Coronavirus crisis mobilised people over the past five months in a manner that highlights the importance of community and local activism. In telling the stories of a cross-section of community-based initiatives, The Social Change Initiative, St. Stephen's Green Trust and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, believe that there is important learning that can underpin a commitment to Build Back Better. The stories reflect experiences across Northern Ireland and are a snapshot of the extent of community activity that has been crucial in responding to the pandemic.

The Challenges:



Community assets:

The importance
of community
'hubs/spaces'

Trust and relationships

Solidarity

Credibility of local
community activists

Collaboration between
local organisations

“At the start it was about checking in with everyone on their mental health. Young people were shocked and afraid, because much of what they were consuming on line was the worst case scenario. Also, it was scary for them to suddenly be at home all the time”

Sean Madden, Youth Worker, North Belfast

“There was a huge amount of fear. We watched the images, particularly of Italy, and saw what was reported on the news. We had no answers and didn’t know how long it would last so fear was gripping people. Older people were afraid to express their fear to their family and support network because they didn’t want to worry them.”

Keith McCann, Regenerate, Portadown

“Once it’s on your doorstep then it becomes real. It has been one of the hardest parts not being able to say goodbye. 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.”

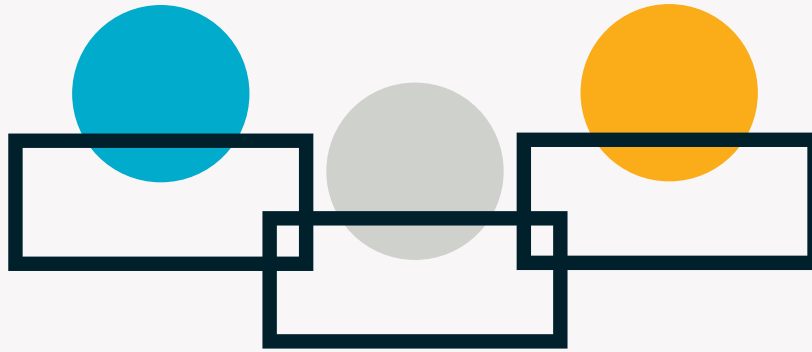
James Kee, Sollus Centre, Bready, Co. Tyrone

Getting to grips with what often seemed a surreal state of affairs meant that community activists had to take a deep breath, take stock of the situation and change ways of working, while at the same time dealing with their own personal and family circumstances. Seamus Corr, from the Black Mountain Shared Space project in West Belfast recalls – *“We quickly arrived at the conclusion that this is not an individual effort – but collectively we have the skills to do this.”* The group consulted with other community organisations in both the Springfield and Highfield areas – on both sides of the formidable peace walls that divide this area. Local activists agreed to take charge of specific areas and identified representatives who would be points of contact on every single street. *“Street representatives were coming back to us quickly and you were hearing what people need. We created the structure, then the needs came back, street by street.”*

The Intercomm community-based workers in Carrickfergus also adjusted their way of working. Winston Irvine describes how people *“Very quickly realised how serious the pandemic was. People started to self-organise and we acted as a conduit and support. There was a strong sense of community spirit. We set up a localised community response and contacted the police commander.”* This allowed local activists to be designated as essential workers so they were able to move around the community. A database of residents was compiled which indicated where support was needed.

There were a number of factors that helped with the initial response.

- Community workers and activists already in place with local recognition and credibility.
- A community premises that could act as a local hub/space for the gathering of information, liaison with other organisations, service-provider centre and point of contact.
- Activists with the confidence, knowledge and connections to plan a response to local priorities.
- A point for local people to volunteer their time and skills.



The importance of collaboration



“Be it the GAA centres or Orange Hall, community structures provided help and support. I think we should learn from all this.”

Frankie Quinn, Éalú, Dungannon

“Young people started fundraising, and local businesses and groups got on board, including Costello Italian restaurant, Barne United and Carrickfergus Rangers. . .We learned ironically it has helped break down some barriers and some differences between some local people.”

Winston Irvine, Intercomm, Carrickfergus

Community groups met in Ballykeel Presbyterian church hall in March when the severity of the situation became obvious. A community leader with the Carson Project was there to *“Talk about how we might deal with the issues emerging. Local councillors, charities and other groups were trying to bring the whole town together.”* The Carson Project premises acted as a hub for local community groups and registered people with the local District Council for food aid and other necessities. Leanne Abernethy, a worker with Ulidia Training in Bushmills, was also involved in a collaborative initiative which established the Bushmills Coronavirus Support Group (BCSG) just before the official lock-down measures were introduced. Three community groups came together from the Ballymoney area, with all the benefits of more pairs of hands and understanding of the various coronavirus challenges. *“It has been brilliant”,* says Leanne. *“The community spirit has been 100%, the businesses and local people. Perceptions about other people you may not normally speak to were challenged and relationships are being maintained.”*



As Derry shut down in response to the ‘stay at home’ pandemic call, the North-West Migrant Forum faced a number of challenges. It was found that many minority ethnic residents either did not qualify to access certain types of help, or didn’t know how to navigate the system. Representation and social media pressure alerted the Department of Communities to the fact that emergency food parcels needed to take account of religious observations around diet. Lilian Seenoi-Barr found that *“It is all about partnership working. No competition and community politics, just people coming together to serve the community and seeing the purpose of groups. We had lots of volunteers to help us.”* Up the road in Bready, the local cricket club and Orange Lodges, joined community, church and cultural groups to deliver food parcels to people in need. *“For the first time, in some cases, it was groups supporting and helping each other out,”* said James Kee. It was *“shoulder to the wheel”* time.

Across the North, in East Belfast, a range of stakeholders came together in collaboration. This included East Belfast Community Development Agency, ACT (Action for Community Transformation), local councillors, the local churches and community groups. Mandy Kearns, from Alternatives NI (a restorative justice project in East Belfast), celebrates the fact that *“People have pulled together. With community work there can be competition and fighting for funding, but people have seen that coming together works. I hope East Belfast will now work together collaboratively. We’re under the same banner and I just hope that’s now the new way of working.”*

But collaboration does not just happen. A number of learning points emerge -

- Many funding approaches currently in place hinder collaborative working, placing an emphasis on competitive grant-making and tendering.
- Effective collaboration requires organisations that are confident in their purpose and objectives rather than being funding-driven.
- Positive collaboration occurs when there is a willingness to adopt inclusive area-based approaches rather than only responding to exclusive member interests and needs.

The response to the crisis

“Chatting to each other, sitting together, simply just being there for each other is a simple act that provides more than many could have realised. It has been eye opening.”

Carolyn, Queenspark Women’s Group, Glengormley

“Utilising social media and Whatsapp was vital and having access to an empty school building meant that production of face coverings, visors and scrubs for healthcare workers going around houses and care homes could take place.”

Barry Murray, Turas na nDaoine, Fermanagh

“People were phoning in and saying they were struggling and couldn’t afford to eat, especially those whose circumstances had suddenly changed or who were self-employed.”

Mandy Kearns, East Belfast Alternatives

Of the sample of 25 community case study stories (captured in interview and film) a variety of crisis responses were noted –

Food parcels

Food parcels, together with other necessities, were delivered to people who were in ‘lock-down’ and without personal support networks. A community initiative in the Clonard area of West Belfast reported the delivery of some 15,000 parcels between March and June. ACT, working in the Greater Shankill said *“We didn’t want people in their houses worrying about the basic stuff – bread, cleaning materials”*. They turned a mobile ice cream van into a fresh food delivery van, making headlines in Ireland and Pakistan. In Creggan (Derry) the Rathmor Centre delivered ‘hug in a box’ care packages and linked with a local supermarket to deliver 3,000 parcels to people who were shielding. Peter McDonald of the Leafair Community Association agrees that delivering food and other essentials was at the heart of the community response. The Impact Network NI, in Randalstown (Co. Antrim) reckons that it has connected with over 2,000 people through the delivery of packs. Wendy Kerr says they plan to extend this contact.





PPE

Turas na nDaoine in Lisnaskea, Fermanagh, worked flat out to make face coverings, visors and scrubs for health and social care workers. An ex-prisoner/ex-combatant group, Coordinator, Barry Murray, pointed out *“Covid was definitely a stop check. People paused and reflected. I heard that a lot. We were careful with social distance but running about organising everything. It was a constant job. It was only when you look back now you realise how busy you were.”* William Mitchell (ACT) commented on similar developments in the Greater Shankill *“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.”* Two Tyrone projects, Éalú, in Dungannon and the Sollus Project in Bready worked overtime in producing face masks and visors; and when one woman’s sewing machine broke down in the Twadell/Ardoyne area, there was a cross-community effort to raise the £500 needed to repair it so that she could continue stitching PPE equipment.

Listening ear

The importance of a listening ear was mentioned by many of those involved. In Portadown, Keith McCann ensured that a telephone helpline was in place to maintain contact with people cocooned in their own home. Eleven volunteers covered the helpline which also took referrals from the police, social services, the local Council and members of the community. Donna McCloskey, Manager of the Bogside & Brandywell Initiative (Derry) referred to the leaflets and banners that promoted a phone line which was eventually receiving up to 1,000 calls a week. The issue around isolated older men became apparent. James Kee agreed that many people – particularly isolated elderly people – *“Just wanted conversation”*. Both Drumbeg Association, in Craigavon, and Mandy in East Belfast, identified with this – a spokeswoman for Drumbeg saying *“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.”* Mandy agreed *“Some people would just phone and tell you they were lonely, others wouldn’t – but you knew in how people talk to you. So befriending became a real priority for the team and significant numbers of volunteers from local churches signed up to help.”* Existing services such as Good Morning neighbourhood phonelines in West Belfast, Leafair (Good Morning North West) and Ballymena proved their worth, with requests for their services increasing.

Isolation took various forms. Fergal McFerran from Stonewall speaks about the loneliness and anxiety of LGBT people *“We took stock quickly and knew that because LGBT people experience more forms of isolation, Covid-19 would exacerbate these challenges. 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.”* The concept of community, and indeed family, can be both inclusive and exclusionary depending on the circumstances.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands and arms as they use a shovel to dig in a garden. The person is wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt and dark blue rubber boots. The shovel has a wooden handle and a metal blade that is partially filled with dark, rich soil. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting a garden or field. The lighting is natural, highlighting the texture of the soil and the person's clothing.

Social distancing

Where people have to maintain social distance from each other communities had to be imaginative about how they can help maintain community spirit. Frank Johnson, Newry Felons' Association, found comfort in the self-help Men's Shed and community garden at Barcroft Community Centre. *"People came to the garden to maintain it, to get out, within the regulations. Orders for wheelbarrow planters, Irish cottages and hanging baskets (that the group makes) are taking off. We have been making connections and people are showing an interest in what we are doing."* Leanne Abernethy, working in Ballymoney, mentions gardening, on-line mental health sessions, embracing Tik Tok and other apps to reach isolated people; whilst a Walk and Talk social distance project in the Woodvale Park (Greater Shankill area) helps people who feel the need for emotional support and contact. The Sollus group followed up on its Ulster Scots cultural interest, linking in with the New Zealand, Canada and USA dance world online which offered a new dimension for its local dance group. On-line yoga and socially distanced street bingo were on offer in Dungannon and Craigavon, with the Drumbeg Community Association also organising Thirsty Clock DJs playing at a drive-in estate gig.



When people don't have enough to eat

“Covid pulled back the curtain on the levels of poverty. To see people living in distress and dire need compounded the inequality of life. That was difficult to come up against.”

Winston Irvine, Intercomm, Carrickfergus

“There is major need across the city and district. Our hope is that new engagement with people will continue and they open up to us so that we can provide help. Some are in full-time low income jobs and they can't make ends meet. Hopefully it has broken down barriers and stigma with admitting help is needed.”

Donna McCluskey, Bogside & Brandywell Initiative, Derry

“There are people completely socially isolated, in poverty, we didn't know about them. So we can look at ways to sort that out.”

Leanne Abernethy, Ballymoney

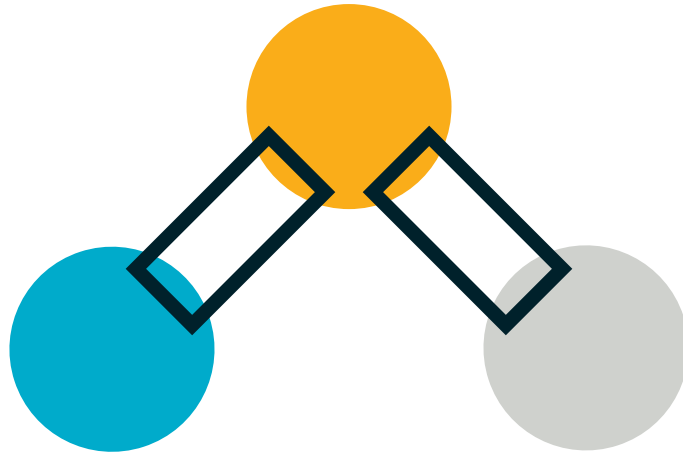
Community-based work over the pandemic crisis certainly did pull back the curtain on the scale of poverty and social isolation. As activists went door-to-door or carried out community audits they heard stories of need that had previously been hidden. From Fermanagh to Ballymena, and all areas in between, awareness was sharpened – *“We are hearing stuff we hadn't heard before about the level of need out there. The least we can do is attempt to mitigate it any way we can and empower people to understand what is happening and why,”* says Barry Murray. The Carson Project agree that Covid-19 has *“highlighted inequality”* even more than normal. The contribution of Food Banks has been incredibly important: but why are they needed in one of the wealthiest countries in the world?

There is also a shared understanding of the importance of not stigmatising people. Ena and Carolyn, Queenspark Women's Group in Glengormley, acknowledge that reaching out to people who were previously unknown was hard but rewarding, however *"The worst is knowing the amount of people who need help. And not just food boxes. Lots of people are proud and won't tell you what their problems are."* Wendy Kerr is conscious of the same dilemma. She speaks about encountering some people who hadn't more than two slices of bread left but *"People don't want to be seen as down and out. 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. We didn't want to disempower people. People can easily feel worthless but we want them to feel like they have so much worth and value."*

A specific issue raised was the cost and accessibility of internet connection and use, particularly with the additional pressures of home schooling.

Taking forward this new level of understanding, it is important to –

- Continue to build on this new awareness of the extent and impact of poverty and disadvantage at community level and campaign for changes in social policy and social security in addition to arguing for resourcing of local advice services.
- Challenge the macro-narratives that have been prevalent over recent years that depict people in receipt of welfare benefits as 'scroungers', 'claimants' and other derogatory terms.
- Develop advocacy that questions current levels of inequality on the basis of evidence gathered from Food Banks, community groups, issue-based organisations, etc.
- Raise the issue of the cost and accessibility of essential internet connectivity (a campaign is currently being supported by PPR – Participation & Practice of Rights).



Supporting young people

“Young people’s needs must be considered carefully, as for the most part they were set to the side a wee bit during the peak of the virus.”

Keith McCann, Portadown

“It’s tough 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 (North Belfast) and we were in the middle of it trying to stop it.”

Sean Madden, Youth Action

“On the flip side positive relationships were also formed because families had opportunities to spend valuable time together.”

Alan Waite, R-City Project, North & West Belfast

For young people, as for other groups in the population, the recent months have been startlingly different. With education and employment largely suspended, many young people have found themselves lacking routine. Faced with this the R-City team went to work – *“With all this in mind we decided consistency was the key. We wanted to engage 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 check ins.”* The team developed a programme of daily challenges, which ranged from Tik Tok to home fitness workouts. They delivered pizza, self-care parcels and goodie packs as well as, in some cases, mobile phones to the young people. For their part, the teenagers organised themselves to raise £1,000 worth of PPE equipment for the local Mater Hospital. The support of volunteers in this work was crucial.

Similar approaches were taken by Sean Madden in North Belfast, a play station account was set up, socially distanced walks and bike rides organised, which developed into bike self-repair

workshops. Sean is acutely aware that the young people that he supports still need face-to-face contact to really address their fears and uncertainties. *“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. . . 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.”* The number of young people volunteering with local community initiatives often goes unrecorded.

Both Rainbow and Stonewall are working with young people in the LGBT community. *“Many of the young people are out at home, but don’t talk about their identities there,”* explains a youth worker with Rainbow. *“Often the biggest thing that connects the young people is the space in our centre – they can be themselves there, they don’t feel they have to adapt their behaviours, they can just breathe easy.”* Lock down poses particular challenges for such young people. Even the idea of being overheard chatting online can be off-putting. For some young people more time spent at home increases the sense of family spirit, but this is not the case for all. Rainbow ‘Out North West’ programme is encouraging participation in online Taiko drumming, as well as creating channels that focus on cooking, arts, movies and mental health. They were particularly excited with a Zoom drop in moment from Derry Girl, Nicola Coughlan, showed her support for the young people involved.

Fergal McFerran speaks about the potential for online channels to reach LGBT people who are isolated. Rural areas are a specific target. *“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.”* One innovative aspect of Stonewall’s response to the pandemic period has been to develop home schooling packs that affirm different types of families and stories about LGBT people throughout history.



Concerns about a mental health tsunami

“We see people being killed, dying here with trauma and mental health issues.”

Lilian Seenoi-Barr, North-West Migrants’ Forum

“There are lots of mental health issues, even the young ones are finding it stressful. Lots of underlying mental health has been magnified.”

Carolyn, Queenspark Women’s Group, Glengormley

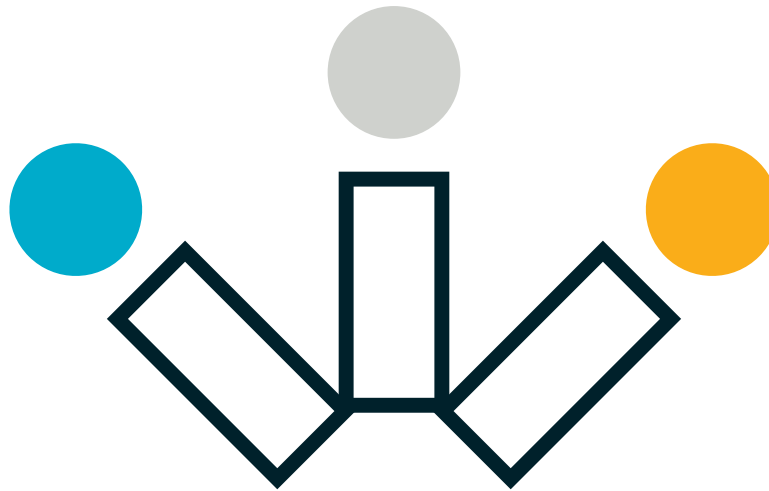
“People were nervous and panicking. They are in need, and not all are elderly. We were discovering people suffering with mental health and depression.”

Peter McDonald, Leafair Community Association, Derry

All of the community case studies touched on the issue of mental health in their areas and their fears of depression and related mental health issues being a legacy of the Covid 19 experience. A number of activists referred to the possible tsunami where this legacy overlaps with the existing mental health consequences of the Troubles and coping with deprivation. Éalú has been raising this issue as a priority even before the advent of Covid. 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. Originally established by political ex-prisoners the group is acutely aware of the need for counselling support for local people. The Leafair Community Association in Derry are preparing mental health packs to offer people tools to help them build resilience and cope with anxieties, whilst Regenerate in Portadown are delivering a mental health first aid response through the production of online videos to help people understand what they are feeling, why they are feeling that way and what they can do about it. *“It’s about how to help yourself and others,”* said Keith.

Lilian Seenoi-Barr reflects on the impact of the situation on the mental health of refugees and migrants in the North West. She speaks about the combined pressures of people, in some cases, having no resource to public funds despite losing their jobs. Then came the trauma of the Black Lives Matter debate. She is still optimistic – *“It has been a great learning curve. You get to understand yourself better and what you can handle. It has made people understand the strength they have. . . (We) are used to isolation so we have built resilience. Every one of us has left our own country so we have been prepared for challenges like this.”* She points out that there are a lot of conversations at the moment about mental health but not so much about resilience.

Fergal, working with Stonewall, reminds us that these are issues that cannot be ignored or delayed, he speaks movingly about a young student who returned home from university and reached out beyond his home situation – *“Unless these situations are dealt with in sensitive ways they can easily end in tragedy. There is real progress in Northern Ireland, but wider work needs to be done.”* Amie Gallagher also raises concerns about how much the burden of coping is falling on women. They are juggling so many pressures that *“Self-care is starting to slip”*. Activists, like Amie and Conal McFeely, in the Creggan (Derry) also note the importance of *“Inclusivity, neutral help and resolving issues for the vulnerable and families of prisoners left outside the loop, and those falling through the net.”* Even during a pandemic, the perception of who is vulnerable and who is providing assistance can remain an issue. It is also important that measures are in place to support the resilience of community activists themselves who often are in positions of stress.



Creating new relationships in a divided society

“It was glaringly obvious the lengths people were going to, to help others who they won’t see as political allies.”

Rab McCallum, Twadell Ardoyne Shankill Communities in Transition (TASCIT), Belfast

“This has allowed some old sores (to settle), some people who wouldn’t have been in the same Zoom room have been able to set aside those difficulties in a time of emergency.”

Winston Irvine, Intercomm, Carrickfergus

“I’m seeing new partnerships across communities. 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.”

Seamus Corr, Black Mountain Shared Space Project, West Belfast

Northern Ireland remains a region of divided communities, bounded by almost 100 urban peace walls or the less visible dividing lines in rural areas, but many activists comment on how the current crisis has brought people together. Community infrastructure groups that cross area boundaries can help, although greater emphasis was placed on the importance of localised responses that can identify with the needs and initiatives identified in similar communities. In Craigavon new relationships between local groups resulted cross-community support between two different single identity housing estates – the Drumbeg Residents’ Association and the North Lurgan Residents’ Association in Kilwilkie. There was also a sharing of knowledge between Ardowen, Meadowbrook

and Drumbeg through the Drumgas Action Group. Each recognised that there is a need for a well-grounded community development approach in the area to maintain and deepen relationships.

Similarly, when a community project in a mainly Unionist/Loyalist area was running out of protective clothing and masks for its volunteers, it was a project led by a Republican ex-prisoner who stepped forward to offer PPE equipment. The scale of the emergency put other concerns into perspective. Activists are acutely aware that there are still legacy issues and potentially divisive political challenges to be dealt with, but there is a greater sense that the views of local people should be listened to and valued.

“It is important that we try to keep the community spirit so obviously there throughout the pandemic height. Everyone was doing their little bit and there was so much spontaneous good will. If that community spirit could ever be rebuilt in some way it would be an amazing thing.”

Barry Murray, Fermanagh

“It’s been about people seeing how they can respond positively to something horrific in their minds and how to convert it into a positive; there’s such strength in that. We’ve struggled with building good relations for so long here, but how communities really connected through this time means a lot to people.”

Wendy Kerr, Randalstown

The Women’s Sector also created a cross-Northern Ireland partnership to develop a Feminist Recovery Plan when it was clear that gender factors were not being taken into account. These included PPE equipment being designed for men, when the majority of people in the frontline jobs were women; lack of resources to cope with increased rates of domestic violence and the need to lobby the Department for Communities (successfully) on maternity pay issues for furloughed workers who were pregnant. Rachel Powell (Women’s Resource & Development Agency) explained *“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”*

Taking the learning forward into the future will require –

- Ongoing support for place-based community action which continues to reach out to the most marginalised people within their communities as well as to build trust and relationships that can bridge current divides.
- Consultation with community-based groups as how best to respond to mental health issues with early interventions at local level.
- Ensuring that the inequalities that have been highlighted over the course of the recent pandemic will not be further exacerbated by Government measures in the future.
- Recognising the role of grassroots activism within more formal community infrastructure and the voluntary sector.
- Ensuring that community activism is inclusive and intersectional in approach, taking account of equality and justice issues as they apply to everyone.
- Take account of how the Covid 19 pandemic impacts on specific groups of people within the population and ensure their views are reflected in decision-making. The Feminist Recovery Plan is a model for a collaborative approach.



Stories of Change

A selection of the stories that informed this report are available on the Tell It in Colour website – www.tellitincolour.com

Many thanks to Judith Hill and Amanda Ferguson for conducting the interviews to gather stories for this report.



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