



Communities and Covid

Stories of people, support and mobilisation across NI communities

Jaiden's Ices are the nicest



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.





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.”