

A man in a dark jacket with his arms crossed stands in the foreground. The background is a wall with graffiti, including a large figure of a person. The entire image has a warm, orange-toned overlay.

Communities and Covid

Stories of people, support and
mobilisation across NI communities

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.





Stonewall

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“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.”