



Communities and Covid

From community response
to long term recovery



About our community stories

Aspirations for a fairer, more peaceful and inclusive place

In September 2020, we launched our “Covid and Communities” storytelling publication. It captured 25 diverse stories of great community spirit, and tremendous on-the-ground response, connection and partnership working that came to the fore within and across our communities to meet the needs of people experiencing the impacts of a global pandemic. They uncovered the challenges, fears and uncertainty that suddenly gripped, disrupted and endangered our everyday lives, our future, and the wellbeing of our communities.

Since April 2020, we have been through another two waves of Covid and periods of extended restrictions that have hit communities hard that are already struggling to cope with increasing loss and isolation, and deepening inequalities. The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI), the Social Change Initiative (SCI) and the St. Stephen’s Green Trust (SSGT) wanted to engage further with the groups being supported through our peacebuilding and social justice programmes to listen to their lived experiences and learning as this crisis continues, and hear their perspectives on what this means for the longer term recovery of communities as we seek to build back fairer.

As 2021 unfolds, the vaccination programme is proceeding at full speed and brighter days are being heralded. However, the impact of the pandemic and the pressure for community leaders and activists to effectively respond to growing needs is deepening. Listening to and empowering grassroots voices as we move through this global pandemic is more important now than ever. The further 8 stories of response and recovery, as told by community and social change leaders, give policy makers, funders and service providers a timely and compelling insight into the challenges and needs that have been amplified and deepened within communities during the Covid crisis.

Sadly, the second and third wave of Covid meant more people contracted the virus, more families experienced huge pain and loss, tensions increased, much important community work was delayed and many issues continued to mount; growing inequalities, mental health, isolation, burn-out, pressure and fatigue on an under-invested community sector, on essential support services, on education, on young people, on women, on society.

The “Covid and Communities” stories are an important contribution to our collective learning from community experiences of **response**, and the thoughts of community activists around pathways to **recovery**, and their aspirations for a fairer, more peaceful and inclusive place. For nearly a year now, activists have been highlighting what needs to be done by policy makers, government, politicians, statutory agencies, funders and communities. Together, our 33 community stories place the emphasis where it should be – to build back fairer for all.



Gaining the trust of young people

Sean Madden, Holy Family Youth Centre

“Some young people are realising they are not too different from each other”

It is everyone’s responsibility to be active in the peace building that has continued in divided communities despite the unique and challenging circumstances of the pandemic.

Youth worker Sean Madden has seen the toll the last year or so has taken on children and young adults in the north Belfast and Newtownabbey areas.

He wants more “joined up” work among stakeholders and more trust shown by funders to let youth workers do what they know is right to build peace and inclusion in the communities they serve.

He stresses the importance of building up relationships between young people and youth workers, and with the police, fire and ambulance services.

A more coordinated approach to outreach work and communication between youth centres is making a positive difference which needs to be supported to grow.

Peacebuilding efforts have taken a hard hit during the pandemic. The focus of youth workers is on engaging with “hard to reach” young people with multiple barriers that have intensified during lockdowns.

Deep-seated issues such as drug and alcohol misuse, mental health challenges, and negative behaviours that flow from social media has made it harder to connect with young people who lack interest in youth clubs

often because they did not become engaged with these sorts of services at an earlier stage in life.

Children and young people are being drawn from different parts of Belfast and beyond to meet in places like Alexandra Park for organised fights between divided communities and sometimes within their own communities.

This worsened when restrictions were at their most limiting on freedom and when easing out of lockdowns.

Toxic masculinity and the adrenaline rush of violence continues to appeal to some young people and hamper relationship building, reconciliation and peacebuilding.

“Fighting is seen as masculine and portrayed as being a defender of their community.”

Reconciliation efforts can be strained by politicians and paramilitaries “stirring tension” by making unhelpful comments.

“Hatred on social media is spilling into their communities,” Sean said.

There are also wider issues around online misinformation and difficulties managing emotions and disagreements online.

“Innocent online comments often lead to fights you can tell the young people don’t actually want.”

Building on the “brilliant work over lockdown” among communities, between divided communities and with youth workers will be vital.

“Maintaining the feeling that young people have of being part of the community is the challenge.

“Some young people are realising they are not too different from each other.”

Online services set up after the initial lockdown provided good opportunities for youth workers to stay connected with young people, and will continue as part of blended learning post pandemic, however, “there is no substitute for face-to-face work”.

Sean feels communities have developed more understanding and appreciation of youth and cross community work during the pandemic.

There is also a more coherent approach among youth workers and the Education Authority to what is known as ‘detach work’ - working with young people in parks and on street corners.

“The end game is encouraging young people to come into the youth centres.”

Youth centres are working more with each other in recent times and working relations between communities, statutory agencies, police, NGOs, and others have also changed in a positive way.

“It got better during the pandemic. Outreach teams take responsibility for engaging with the PSNI. They support each other.

“Belfast City Council has supplied us with park keys so if there is a potential for violence gates can be closed. Wee things like that are making a difference.”

Peacebuilding has been made more challenging by the pandemic, but single and joint identity projects among groups such as Holy Family and Mountcollyer and the different relationships with young people are strengthening all the time and giving them alternatives to violence.

“It is a slow process. It does not happen overnight. We have to get to the stage where they feel comfortable that it is worthwhile.”

Projects underway are focusing around our shared past, and on issues around crime, travel, jobs and Covid restrictions.

Social action work like graffiti removal is making a difference, as is young people helping plan events for Alexandra Park such as ‘Lark in the Park’ this Twelfth of July.

Sean says providing as many sport, music, and other facilities and opportunities for young people is key to recovery, as is trust at all levels.

“There needs to be trust in the people on the ground to make positive differences,” he said.

“And funding should be provided to meet the needs of young people in our communities rather than youth workers being asked to change the work we are doing to meet the asks or needs of funders.”





Investing for the long term in rural communities

James Kee, Bready and District Ulster Scots Development Association

“We want to encourage people to view themselves as effective and progressive leaders”

Supporting the new community leaders that emerged in our rural areas during the chaos of the pandemic, and getting more community-based boots on the ground will be vital to tackle the challenging recovery period ahead.

A full audit of rural communities’ needs is required, as is a focus on longer term investment in projects.

Project coordinator James Kee says the lack of equality between urban and rural areas in Northern Ireland, be it through resources, infrastructure or services, must be addressed without delay, and that more staff on the ground will help to tackle the challenges presenting in communities.

A network of diverse groups coordinated by Bready including sports clubs, churches, marching bands and cultural associations are continuing to forge strong connections and bonds. Between them, they are providing day-to-day contact in their local communities, and delivering essential support through these disruptive Covid times.

“There is a realism that there is a lot of ability in the community,” he said.

The pandemic brought home to people the sense “we can deliver” for ourselves, and also being realistic about where strengths lie, and where we can all help.

“There seems to be a lot more dovetailing now,” James said.

“In the past groups were very parochial. There is more sharing of information now and being realistic about whether groups fit criteria for certain projects.”

Between the initial lockdowns and more recent periods of restrictions positive momentum grew, groups diversified, and digital solutions increased.

While the number of volunteers is no longer what it was in the initial stages of restrictions when people had more spare time, “capacity has been raised” across the community. They are feeling more incentivised to engage in shaping their own futures, and people are more aware of the need to feed directly into consultations from local and central government.

“People are speaking for themselves more.”

James says the major change between lockdowns that was obvious to him was the sheer numbers of people testing positive for Covid, the difficulties of trying to communicate with people through windows, and the rising death toll.

“Stories were more localised, more harrowing this time,” James said.

As always, community spirit, cohesion and simple human kindness was at its best during the dark times. One personal tragedy that hit hard was a young man from a single parent family, who was due to head to university, becoming orphaned. Locals “jumped on board, they became mammy and daddy”.

“And there were lots of funerals in the area. People who were older but were not ready to die. It was a trying time.”

Working with Protestant, Unionist, Loyalist people in his “normal” community and peacebuilding role, James has seen the political challenges that are still there and having to be juggled with the ongoing pandemic response.

There are hard day-to-day issues to tackle including “a lot of distrust of politicians” at Council and Stormont level.

Northern Ireland’s centenary, Brexit, bonfires, and celebrating culture in a positive way are some of the themes he continues to explore with the community.

There are some positive signs. When thinking about future investment in leadership and community development, James has noticed over the last year or so “there are potential leaders in our communities”.

“We had three years without Stormont. People had to diversify. There are a number of people out there who don’t realise they have the skills to be leaders in their community.

“We want to encourage people to view themselves as effective and progressive leaders.”

And there has been “a little bit” of recovery.

“People are looking forward. Vaccines are rolling out. It has created an element of light at the end of the tunnel, but many people are at the end of their tether and have let their guard down. There is fatigue.”

James says he can see “burnout taking place” among “frazzled” colleagues which should be tackled through “down time, expert mental health, therapies and other supports”.

He also feels funding projects beyond one or two years’ commitment “would stop good work disappearing because nobody is there in a paid capacity to focus on it.”

Staff being spread too thinly and getting more people “on the ground” is vital.

“We live in hope,” James said.

He notes the rural farming community are a “naturally self-sustaining and proud community”, and will not necessarily ask for help. Needs can be hidden.

“It has been surprising some of the doors you have to knock to offer support.

“It can be hard to identify if you are getting to everybody.

“A lot of this is local knowledge, that’s why you need community workers on the ground.”





Valuing and supporting the integration of migrant communities

Polina Malcheva, Community Intercultural Programme NI (CIPNI)

“Bulgarian and Bulgarian Roma people like it here. They are happy but are not yet able to fully integrate”

You cannot do everything over the phone.

And during the pandemic online services could only achieve so much, says Polina Malcheva who works with the Bulgarian Roma community through her role as a community advice worker with CIPNI, a migrant support organisation in Portadown.

Isolation, limited communication channels, language and literacy issues, and a lack of digital skills, are some of the major barriers facing those who are making their homes here.

During the Covid lockdowns when full services haven't been available, children have felt isolated from their peers and their education has been severely impacted.

She also notes that the crisis makes migrants more vulnerable to exploitation, facing increased discrimination, and feeling cut-off from the trusted support provided within the community.

As lockdown eases, Polina is looking forward to her office opening up safely, and more physical meetings being allowed to help address difficulties people are facing beyond the pandemic around a diverse range of issues including child benefits, tax codes, basic form filling, and landlord engagements, and the EU resettlement scheme.

Official figures indicate more than 86,000 people in Northern Ireland have applied to remain in the UK post-Brexit.

Brexit has been challenging for migrants, and because of the added impact of the pandemic many have now moved home or moved to another country.

Covid was “the final challenge that made their minds up to leave”, Polina says.

Workers who remain here are dealing with the added pressure of feeling discrimination from employers, and also from within different migrant communities.

“Covid worsened everything.”

Polina would like to see employers taking a role in helping migrant workers learn English. Many are doing 12 hours shifts so having time or access to education outside the workplace can be difficult.

People are adjusting to life in Northern Ireland and not being able to speak English makes participation hard, particularly for women who may traditionally stay at home and look after children.

“Bulgarian and Bulgarian Roma people like it here. They are happy but are not yet able to fully integrate. I would love to see them become well established like the Polish and Lithuanian communities.”

Education is vital to opening up full participation for the Bulgarian Roma community.

“I would love to educate them a bit more, and not enough information is translated so progress on that would also help as we begin to recover from this pandemic.

“It is about accessibility and inclusion, not only when it comes to Covid but also Brexit, and more.”

CIPNI supports a range of people from the Arabic, Bulgarian, Bulgarian Roma, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Romanian Roma, and Russian communities.

Among them are Lurgan-based Naska Nikolova and her pastor husband Danail, from the Bulgarian Roma community, who have been learning English and living in Northern Ireland with their children since 2017.

Danail became seriously ill with Covid in 2020 and later lost his job working night shifts in a food processing factory.

“It was really difficult. It was difficult for myself, my wife, the kids. I couldn’t do ordinary stuff and ended up in hospital. It has been very difficult to cope mentally.”

He added: “When you are sick you are not working and

then relying on £90 per week. It is a tight budget to pay all the bills.

“That is why a lot of Bulgarians didn’t want to stay at home even if they had Covid symptoms. They had no option but to go to work. There was no other way of survival.

“It is also an extra challenge when you work in a company that has zero hours contracts.”

Naska said: “It has been a very hard year. Difficult.”

Naska explains when her family first came to Northern Ireland they were among 15 people living in a two bedroom house, that life was very challenging, and they needed “so much help”. Things are turning around. The family is in a house of their own and enjoying church activities and helping others in their community.

CIPNI services continue to help “make life easier”.

“Most women stay at home so it is quite challenging with the language barriers, dropping off kids to school and communicating,” Naska said.

“It is good to go to English classes. This was giving hope to the women. Education and training would definitely help us.”





Older people, isolation and regaining confidence

Frances Kerr, South Lough Neagh Regeneration Association (SLNRA)

“They may be active but they are still vulnerable”

Building confidence, a slow and steady reintroduction to social life, and investment in support services is key to helping older people adjust to post-lockdown reality.

SLNRA board member Frances Kerr from the Birches, between Portadown and Dungannon, says pandemic disruption to normal daily activities has had a major impact on the emotional, mental and physical wellbeing of many of our senior citizens.

SLNRA oversees the Loughshore Care Partnership (LCP) which is focused on a network of clubs and centres for older people.

When Covid entered our lives in 2020 the immediate impact on older people was that meetings and events stopped, and churches closed, so there was no social outlet other than interaction with family and neighbours.

LCP volunteers leapt into action, stayed connected with each other, and kept in contact with members through phone calls.

Health trust and group’s own funding, received through donations, meant that older people still received the weekly hot meal they would usually get at community centres and other club events delivered to their door.

Loneliness is a big problem so phone calls and doorstep chats were very important to those who “found it challenging to be on their own so much”.

“Members look forward to that chat,” Frances said.

“They are passing on news about other members so they are feeling involved.”

The impact on the health, mobility and independence of many older people as a result of the lockdown restrictions have been intensely felt. Some talk of not being able to drive about the place as they used to, and others are seeing the toll that not getting out for regular walks and exercise is having on their health and wellbeing.

Psychologically, whilst some older people have missed visits and getting out and about with friends and family, many are now very nervous of leaving their homes as restrictions are lifted.

The number of Covid deaths across the world has made people think more about mortality.

Frances believes an increase in the average life expectancy of people has led to some thinking that older people are not as vulnerable as they once were.

“They may be active but they are still vulnerable.”

Health and mobility needs have worsened so increased support and investment in physiotherapy and mobility schemes are needed now more than ever.

“Confidence building and making them feel safe and secure is vital.”

“Before Covid, clubs would traditionally have organised social events where older people could come together, and go away on trips together, and that is going to be challenging to do safely.”

The vaccine programme has “given people hope” but what lies ahead is “difficult to know”.

Working with smaller numbers of people, building confidence and capacity among 20 or so before building up to 150, which was common pre-pandemic, will be important first steps back.

As will making the most of outdoor events, weather permitting that is!

She is hopeful the loss of life and isolation felt by our older people over the last year or so will prompt a real focus among the public and service providers about how to best support our growing elderly population as we move from lockdown to recovery.

Frances acknowledges it can be difficult to make time but that simple gestures, a phone call or a card “means a lot”.

Properly structured, ongoing, inter-generational work would help in the rebuilding that lies ahead for everyone, and would prove to be an “enriching experience for everyone involved”.

Younger people participating in reminiscing projects with older people has built up connections between the generations but it must not be sporadic, “it needs to be ongoing”.

For now, the challenge is building resilience to cope, and taking small steps.

“Some have been quite shaken by all this. Giving them that confidence in life again will be important for people of different ages but particularly for the elderly and the frail”.

Nora Lavery (95) coped well with lockdown. She enjoys her own company, and reading, is pleased to have been vaccinated but did miss visiting charity shops.

“I like getting out but I haven’t been able to,” she said.

“But we have had a lot of parcels and deliveries from all directions, flowers and everything.”

She is following all the latest Covid updates.

“We seem to be doing very well but it is all so uncertain. I will do what I am told!”





Growing the voice and leadership of local women

Amie Gallagher, Focus Project, Creggan Enterprises

“We are looking at accessible activism”

Staying connected, nurturing women and presenting them with opportunities to grasp with both hands is part of the inclusive peacebuilding strategy being pursued in the North West.

Pre-pandemic, Amie Gallagher’s work with local women, as Focus project co-ordinator, had been around mental health, individual support and crisis management to tackle the barriers they face from low self-confidence and lack of childcare, to the fear of speaking out because of potential negative consequences.

Covid turned lives upside down, and overnight, she recalls “we had to change things up”.

The more traditional paths of personal engagement and face-to-face connection with women went out the window and things switched to online. This hampered the good work that was underway in nurturing relationships and bonding as a group.

Not to be held back by adversity, new activities were quickly put in place to support the women struggling with the challenges they were facing being stuck indoors and the challenges for families that came with the new reality.

Between lockdowns, Amie’s focus has moved to getting the women more actively engaged in their local community, and supporting them to link in

and collaborate more with existing groups in the area. “Engagement with women in the group can be difficult for political reasons, lack of confidence, and lack of awareness of what is available,” Amie says.

She is more conscious of the need for women to engage with activism in realistic ways that acknowledge their individual circumstances, limitations and available time, so doing what is achievable for them.

“We are looking at accessible activism,” she said.

Women have struggled with isolation throughout the pandemic, and the community response seen earlier in the crisis just wasn’t the same the deeper into the journey we all got.

However, a positive consequence of the pandemic has been a deepening of connections among grassroots and cross-community groups.

“It has definitely improved and it has been nice to build those links,” Amie said.

Challenges remain around childcare, community gatekeeping, policing, and finding neutral spaces to connect with communities who are less comfortable with formal bodies and the administration requirements they have.

The specific challenges around marginalised people not wanting to access statutory agency help has not been tackled well.

“It is back to how it was before the pandemic,” Amie said.

Amie has no doubt that the most recent phase of Covid restrictions has been tougher than the earlier days.

Fatigue has set in and the impact of the pandemic on the community has become starker with more financial troubles and difficulties paying basic bills.

Looking forward Amie feels continued assertiveness training and improving communication skills are both key in building women’s confidence and capacity.

And exploring the role of women in leadership and representation has been a good opening into how the women might feel about structured positions in a Creggan women’s forum.

“It’s about bringing women’s own life experience and skills they already have,” Amie says.

“We have single parents, people with addiction experience, and children with additional needs. We want to nurture and encourage women to become peer advisers so that government is supporting local people working with and on behalf of their own community”.

As restrictions ease bringing different cultural and

creative groups together and intergenerational work will help enrich lives.

“It will be great for younger women to learn from older women,” Amie says.

“Before all of this we were all a bit more individual so working together has been lovely.”

Flexibility in how programmes are delivered is important and the stability of longer-term investment is needed as “it can take such a long time to build capacity so that the women can feel comfortable to engage”.

Tackling the stigma that some women feel around their social class and encouraging them to get active in the community will empower and benefit wider society.

Feeling “stuck” in lockdown has provided many women with thinking time about the future and what they want from life.

“Women are experts in their own lives. Loads of the women are already confident they just don’t get a chance.”

As we move forward into recovery Amie believes in nurturing grassroots vibrancy and the importance of “meeting people where they are at”.

“I live where I work. We have shared experiences, they can see I get it, I sound like them so that helps with the openness needed to build trust.”





Extending the reach of LGBTQI+ support networks

Lee Cullen, Cara-friend

“The learning we have had over the last year is going to inform our future practice”

During lockdown young LGBTQI+ people have been soul-searching and evaluating what they want from life.

As a result, there has been a “rise in young people coming out and also disclosing mental health issues they had been struggling with before the pandemic” says Lee Cullen, head of LGBTQI+ youth services for Cara-Friend.

Cara-Friend youth services are based in Belfast and offer regional youth groups support across Northern Ireland, supporting LGBTQI+ young people between the ages of 12 - 25. Until Covid became part of our lives in the early part of 2020 there was lots of individual and group work done on a face-to-face basis.

As restrictions came down, the youth work sector became more inventive in how to keep connections open with young people. Still, the organic growth of relationships were undoubtedly hampered by computer screens and talking over each other.

“While Cara-friend’s digital services are fantastic, there is still a big preference for face-to-face.

However, the pandemic meant that everything moved online to “the next best digital services”.

Emergency one-to-one responses were available and the team also assisted people with the everyday basics including access to food and medication.

Setting up digital safe spaces for young people so they were not relying entirely on social media was vital as many are marginalised and isolated,

living in home environments that are not always supportive to them.

There have been some positives. Young LGBTQI+ people have had “less actions to do”. Not going to school, and not being able to socialise with friends meant the immediacy of life was taken away, and day to day distractions largely disappeared.

“During lockdown, young LGTBQI+ people have been soul-searching and evaluating what they want from life. They are thinking more, have become more introspective, and are more able to recognise their own feelings and thoughts because they don’t have as many distractions.”

Lee has noticed that young people are increasingly demonstrating greater self-awareness, and during the pandemic they have shown the skills of self-leadership and emotional management sometimes beyond what would be expected from their respective age groups.

One outcome of moving away from the structure and intensity of formal education was that LGBTQI+ young people had time and space to examine their own feelings.

“We notice that young people being sources of expertise in their own emotions and experiences, particularly their own sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as issues affecting them like drugs and alcohol, poor mental health and more.”

“It is not true for every single young person but it is a general trend.”

For some young people, a negative home environment was worsened during lockdown with no break from parents or emotional distance offered simply by having other places to go. This led to people feeling “tightly wound” and “ready to burst”.

“There has been a lot of emotional labour for young people because of a switch in the power dynamic. As young people get better at explaining their own lived experience as being LGBTQI+, this power dynamic shifts”.

Cara-friend has seen a notable increase in contact with parents who are engaging more, working positively, and addressing some of the ignorance and phobias around what it means to be LGBTQI+.

“We see a spectrum in attitudes towards LGBTQI+ identity in our work with parents. If we placed these attitudes on a scale, the 5 per cent at the bottom would be LGBT phobic and 5 per cent at the top would be LGBT affirming, there is a lot of space in between. That can be not knowing about LGBTQI+ identity or how to show your acceptance, or it can be picking up stereotypes and lies about LGBTQI+ people.”

Lee is interested in looking deeper into the gap in understanding about the different views of LGBTQI+ young people among families from society’s diverse range of backgrounds.

He is witnessing more openness from young people in general about their experiences, but he is also noticing that pre-existing issues have got worse for some, “so there is lots to do and many challenges to work on.”

As society recovers from this turbulent period of

history, Cara-friend’s “usual” youth provision continues but its focus is switching more to working in different towns and counties, and among local communities. There is a need to expand their presence out further into those rural communities where the pandemic has allowed Cara-friend to reach more young people through their digital services who hadn’t previously engaged with them. Young people do not have to feel that they have to travel large distances to meet other LGBTQI+ young people.”

Common themes that are ongoing for Cara-friend to encounter is casual and entrenched queerphobia and misogyny, poor media representation, and a lack of understanding around intersectionality.

Lee feels the LGBTQI+ community needs further and long-term investment from statutory funders and specific funding streams dedicated to LGBTQI+ communities.

“We need to have a specific look at LGBTQI+ young people and making it a dedicated area of ongoing funding” he said.

LGBTQI+ young people leading at the forefront in conversations with influencers and policymakers, furthering the outcomes posed in the Children and Young People’s Strategy (2020 - 2030), improved mental health services that are fit for purpose, and involved in addressing structural problems and sector-wide funding issues are key parts to the recovery from Lee’s perspective.

“The learning we have had over the last year is going to inform our future practice. Our increase in young people availing of youth services from rural backgrounds across Northern Ireland really highlights a need for more LGBTQI+ service provision in local communities.”

In addition to developing local groups across Northern Ireland, Cara-Friend will continue to offer a, “a web of digital support youth groups” in addition to their regional provision.”

“Lots of young people are in untenable situations and that needs to be addressed urgently. The Cara-Friend Team are interested in exploring the gaps in understanding and the different views among families from society’s diverse range of backgrounds to better ensure that conversations that could happen will happen.”





Youth-led voices core to our recovery

Adam Taylor, Lincoln Courts Community Youth and Community Association

“Some young people are quiet. That doesn’t mean they don’t have something to say”

Being a teenager is hard enough when coping with body changes, developing relationships and navigating emotions.

Add on top of that the Covid pandemic, and being in and out of school for well over a year, and it’s not hard to understand that it has been a “tough time” for the young people that Lincoln Court’s youth leader, Adam Taylor, works with.

Youth club activities came to an abrupt end when society entered Covid lockdown.

The pause on meeting up in a positive and safe environment for young people in the area meant online services were quickly introduced to keep young people connected together and with their youth club which was good but not an equivalent substitute for engaging face to face.

“It’s not the same interaction online,” he said.

The Covid crisis saw the entire community being more open and willing to engage with different groups in the local area, a positive Adam would like to see continue as the challenges of recovery emerge.

“We won’t see the real impact of the last year or so until we are well into a recovery period or when Covid is finally over.

“I would like to see the community spirit and cohesion that has built up during this pandemic to continue. It is important to listen to everyone and

make sure that the voices of our young people lead our recovery”.

Fears around antisocial behaviour, young people being drawn into paramilitaries and wider worries around jobs and budgets were all in the mix before Covid, and continue to be areas of focus and concern for Adam in his work.

Workshops have been delivered in person where possible, and “phasing back into some sort of normality” is happening as the easing of regulations allow.

As a whole in the community there is still a lot of vulnerability and fear around Covid, and for young people in particular “fatigue” has set in.

In the year and more ahead Adam says mental health issues are going to be a major focus.

We need people to work together, adapt services to meet the individual needs of young people, offer counselling support, and above all we need to grow more awareness of mental health and wellbeing among our young people. Anxiety and depression are huge issues so self-care will be vital to recovery.

On top of the mental health challenges, the increased use of drugs and alcohol during the pandemic is going to require concerted focus and ongoing attention.

Risk taking behaviour is part of growing up, but Adam has noticed drug and alcohol use during the pandemic has moved from sporadic to “a lot more consistent abuse”.

Programme planning is underway around confidence building for young people, and overcoming substance abuse to address issues in Lincoln Courts, but it is limited by the restrictions in place.

Recent street violence in the north west presented a crisis within a crisis.

A “wee bit of everything” fed into the scenes that unfolded, and lockdown perhaps “quickened the process of something that was always going to happen”.

“Young people don’t fully understand what is going on, about why they are fighting,” he said.

Adam lives where the violence took place and had success, along with others, in minimising participation.

“It’s an adrenaline rush. They see it as exciting. People were throwing petrol bombs and rocks and bricks so it was important to get them away from it and provide young people with positive alternatives.

“I have a concern about the summer. We are coming up to bonfire season, and there are definite concerns about what happens next around the poor relationships with policing and further tensions.”

Youth centres in areas impacted by violence were swiftly opened up by Stormont after months of

restrictions. Adam is “glad we have the young people in the centre”.

The senior youth club, and young men’s and women’s groups are being steered away from antisocial behaviour.

The reopening of the youth centre has helped with providing structure, and a safe place to focus on the issues building around mental health, drugs and alcohol abuse.

If Adam could wave a magic wand his wish would be for a “youth-led voice” be a priority for decision makers in plotting out the recovery over the next few years.

“It has to come from them,” he said.

“Some young people are quiet. That doesn’t mean they don’t have something to say so we need to make sure we don’t miss anybody”

Better connection between NI-wide youth committees and existing youth organisations, more regular use of social media to communicate, and an emphasis on reaching every young person by going into the hearts of their communities and reaching out to them directly is needed now.

“We want to get our centre filled with the community. The last year has been difficult, challenging. But we are all still together which is the most important thing.”





Working together to tackle domestic violence

Cillian McGivern, Upper Springfield and Whiterock Integrated Partnership

“Serious mental health implications are another identified challenge coming out of the trauma of the pandemic disruption”

Dealing with complaints about pot holes and traffic calming measures, to focusing on capital regeneration and lobbying for a new leisure centre is all in a day’s work for Cillian McGivern, Upper Springfield and Whiterock Integrated Partnership.

Cillian has been working in a range of areas including community safety, anti-social behaviour, environmental issues, physical improvements, wildflower projects and community clean ups.

In March 2020, the impact of Covid on all our lives meant these important community projects were sidelined and all efforts were invested into Covid community response. Local people assumed community leadership roles.

Working from home became Cillian’s new reality, as did working collaboratively as part of 16 local organisations providing support such as food parcels, toiletries, gas and electric for those shielding and in need.

“Street reps were identified for every street in Upper Springfield which meant there was a point of contact to check in on almost everyone.

“If anyone had to isolate they were bringing it to our attention.”

Coming out of the first stage of lockdown, Cillian and others met with police who informed them of a frightening statistic. There had been a

160% increase in calls about domestic violence, a largely unreported crime to date in the experience of the police.

“Unreporting to the cops is another issue in this area in general, so to see such a spike in domestic violence reports rang alarm bells,” he said.

“People must have been so desperate.”

“Ballymurphy and Whiterock do not traditionally call the cops. It was shocking to me.”

Funding was secured to tackle the issue and the experts were called in.

“I am only a 25 year old wee lad so I don’t know everything. We reached out to West Belfast Community Safety Forum and it became evident across all of West Belfast that the issue of domestic violence was widespread. So we reached out to the experts - the cops, Belfast Women’s Aid.

The awareness campaign was localised, at the corner of your street, and at the same time Women’s Aid were launching a web chat service.

“We could use this campaign to advertise this new service and explain in emergencies to call police.”

Posters were placed across West Belfast and online, advertising Belfast Women’s Aid and the PSNI.

More widely building relationships with police can prove “tricky”.

“In general we work closely to try to improve people’s trust and faith in reporting issues to the cops. It’s tricky. Wider controversies damage trust.”

On top of the campaign to help tackle the scourge of domestic violence, other initiatives got underway to help the community stay connected during Covid restrictions and remain engaged through art and family activities.

Cillian has been working through each period of lockdown over the last year or so.

After the first lockdown in the spring of 2020 there was “a bit of normality”, so some social distanced activity was able to resume like community clean ups. But by autumn another lockdown paused everything again.

Cillian has been working closely with Whiterock children’s centre on the lockdown impact and damage caused to young people, parents and families that need to be thought about as we move to recovery.

Children’s education has been severely impacted and there are issues with underachievement so after school clubs, out of hours teaching and facilitating children to get caught up with require more resources.

“Some young people haven’t had the same support as others. I would pre-empt it being an issue moving forward.”

Campaigning for the redevelopment of the Whiterock Leisure Centre is another area of focus after Covid highlighted “a serious disconnect from this community and the health world”.

“We suffer some of the worst health inequalities in the north of Ireland. We need better connection, better connectivity. There are barriers to health care provision so we need a GP service. We have evidence to say we need proper GP health services. “We need a one stop centre. A one-stop shop, a health and wellbeing centre.”

Serious mental health implications are another identified challenge coming out of the trauma of pandemic disruption.

A community audit of needs and damage will reveal what is needed but Cillian is already clear that it should be a local intensive response.



