Belfast City

The Covid Response in Lockdown One – making sure no-one was left behind

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Introduction

COVID-19 has impacted and changed people's lives significantly since March 2020. It has been particularly severe on those in the most disadvantaged areas of our city. Those who were shielding, and other vulnerable residents, faced many challenging financial issues including fuel and food poverty. Many other challenges were also faced with isolation, loneliness and mental health and well-being concerns brought to the fore. Covid 19 has impacted upon and changed people's lives in Belfast significantly since March 2020. As of April 1st 2021, it has taken the lives of 2,905 people in Northern Ireland, of which 561 lived in Belfast.

The world reacted with unprecedented measures to curb the pandemic. Overnight, new phrases in everyday language became commonplace in homes around the World: "Lockdown; social distancing; shielding; daily cases; confirmed clusters; testing and death rates".

The media had everyone at "attention". The focus of the world was on Italy with soaring infection rates and deaths.

With pictures broadcast around the world, fear grew within communities; information changed daily, and an uncertain future was becoming a reality.

In March 2020, people's lives changed significantly. This was what we now know as "lockdown one".

At this time, our Belfast communities were suddenly and unexpectedly fighting against an invisible yet deadly enemy in an effort to protect their families, friends and neighbours. Many people felt vulnerable, were self-isolating for weeks, and many others lost jobs or were furloughed. Community services and activities ceased. Schools closed. Financial hardship was experienced by countless households and families. Many people working on the front line didn't know the impact of the pandemic on their own health and wellbeing yet worked tirelessly for others.

Communities on the ground across the city and Belfast City Council swiftly responded. Phase one of the response ensued.

This paper explores Belfast's immediate response to the pandemic **through the lens of good relations,** a city in transition and normalising from conflict. It looks at how investment in **Good Relations and Peace building** has helped to build the city's resilience and strengthened **relationships between and within communities.** It looks at the effect this has had on meeting the needs of vulnerable people and communities. It examines **lessons learned** and whether a focus on the **common good** helped improve the Covid response and re-set Good Relations across the city. It also asks if the COVID-19 pandemic actually helped to create the **conditions for increased cooperation** between and within communities across the city, leading to greater collaboration on an intra and inter community basis.

As stated in **Belfast City Council's Inclusive Growth Strategy**, it is in no one's interest to leave people behind. With so many communities in Belfast still experiencing poverty and deprivation and some still experiencing the effects of the conflict, compounded by fears among some around their cultural identity, the pandemic created an **emergency response unlike no other.**

Analysing the response to Covid through a "good relations lens" can help evaluate the **value of investment in community relationships** on a journey to normality. Peace and Good Relations in the City are currently supported by a focus on social inclusion, combating poverty and increasing labour mobility. An integrated, shared, reconciled and intercultural Belfast and an interdependent, just, equitable, open and diverse society are based on the way citizens create and sustain relationships.

Belfast is a **City of resilience** - one of 100 worldwide cities of resilience. Its framework describes the capacity of cities to function, so that the people living and working in cities – particularly the poor and vulnerable – survive and thrive no matter what stresses or shocks they encounter. The framework for Belfast provides practical ways of ensuring that the Belfast Agenda and the Local Development Plan can better withstand the unexpected. **This pandemic was unexpected**, but while strategies talk about the importance of leadership, integrated development and new ways of thinking, planning and collaborating across sectors, an examination of how the COVID-19 Pandemic was addressed across the city will help understand whether **strategies and actions** are making a difference and **whether building "good relations" has contributed to this resilience.**

In 2019 a new **Good Relations Strategy** for the City was launched; the vision of which was "A Shared City - a city re-imagined, connected and resurgent delivering inclusive growth that leaves no-one behind". This shared city vision is a long-term one which fully complements the Belfast Agenda. It requires Council, elected members, other government agencies, the private sector and local people to work together, collaborate and make it happen.

In this report and through the themes of the Good Relations Strategy, we will examine how the intention of this strategy was borne out **during the emergency response to the pandemic and** understand how the learning can contribute towards recovery in the longer term.

The themes of the Council's Good Relations Strategy are as follows:

- **Theme 1:** Strong, Positive and Transformative Civic Leadership - Inclusive Governance with local community change makers

- **Theme 2:** Shared & Connected Spaces - a smart, connected city driven by inclusive & transformative place making

- **Theme 3:** Shared Services - focusing on prevention, co-design, co-creation, & social innovation

- **Theme 4:** Structured collaboration, partnerships & resourcing

- **Theme 5:** Respectful cultural expression within the rule of law

Executive Summary

Local community organisations, social enterprises and voluntary sector organisations alongside their numerous volunteers have been an integral part of Belfast's response to the pandemic. This has been supported by strong leadership from the sector linked to robust leadership and support from local and central government. During the pandemic, while much of society and the business sector were asked to close down, the community and voluntary sector in Belfast was never busier. It was involved in the delivery of essential services across the City. The shock of the pandemic to the City, precipitated an immediate and agile response from the community and voluntary sector. They were the first out of the blocks within local communities, immediately mobilising their human resources and using their tacit knowledge of their communities to plan and deliver services to those most in need and to the most vulnerable, in local areas.

The pandemic and the sector's reaction to it drove a significant amount of creativity and innovation to the delivery of local services. It demonstrated the ability of the sector to work hand in glove with central and local government in planning and managing the effects of the pandemic. It demonstrated an acute awareness of local people's needs and the importance of decisive decision making. It demonstrated how connected local community leaders and their staff and volunteers were to those who live within their communities.

Local became the new global. The lockdown and context in which services could be delivered enabled communities to pause and take a look at what was happening with their neighbours. It brought the importance of a sense of place and belonging into focus. It enabled local communities to stop and understand the local environments and neighbourhoods within which they lived.

However, the strength of the community and voluntary sector infrastructure in Belfast which has enabled this innovative practice during the pandemic to flourish, did not happen by accident. Over the last number of decades there has been a strong recognition of, and commitment to the importance of investing in the City's community infrastructure - by both central and local government, by EU PEACE funding, International Funds and by numerous trusts and philanthropic organisations. This has included investment in single identity community development work with a focus on building the confidence and resilience of local communities through to sector specific investment in women or youth-based activities; right through to cross community development, with a focus on building sustainable, meaningful and purposeful cross-community relationships. While there are still some areas and groups that require support, this has resulted broadly in a sector that is well connected within its own community as well as outside of its own boundaries with its neighbours and indeed beyond.

This investment has resulted in the development of social capital. Social capital refers to the links and bonds formed through friendships and acquaintances. There are three different types of social capital – bonding, bridging and linking. Social capital helps communities to flourish.

Bonding social capital describes the connections between similar groups of people that share the same or similar characteristics. This might be age, hobbies, relationships, sports teams, family members, close friends and neighbours. It exists between 'people like us' and who typically have strong close relationships. It is through these connections that people are willing to help each other out and gain 'social capital'. We are more likely to help someone and go out of our way for someone with whom we have a bond as opposed to someone we know nothing about.

Bridging social capital differs from bonding given that the ties are not so strong. Instead, the links come from weaker connections such as friends of friends, or colleagues and associates. The

connection is 'bridged' through one person being introduced to another through an intermediary. That intermediary is effectively 'the bridge' that brings the two parties together. There is greater diversity in this type of social capital. Bridging social capital is developed horizontally between people from similar socio-economic groups.

Linking social capital is an extension of bridging. Linking occurs vertically between socioeconomic groups. Those who are in similar socio-economic groups are often referred to as a 'community'. It is outside of those communities that linking takes place. Linking social capital has many indirect community benefits such as connecting government with the people with the lived experiences of the policies that government may develop.

Through the Pandemic, the Communities in Belfast have demonstrated all three types of social capital, to differing degrees. From the interviews carried out as part of this piece of research it would seem that many parts of Belfast display **strong bonding social capital,** community ties and friendships within local neighbourhoods, estates and areas. This kinship ensures people look out for one another; people, in the main know their neighbours and interact with them. There is a strong sense of place with many people having a deep tie to where they were born or grew up.

Belfast is a city that is still very segregated, where 90+ physical barriers still exist and where many of the city's residents live in segregated areas. Over the years of the conflict the people of Belfast built up a strong resilience to the many shocks and ongoing stressors they experienced during the "troubles" with a fervent will and desire to keep going and help and support those most in need. This ability to "get back up again" was vividly demonstrated at the start of the pandemic where many within the community and voluntary sector were "the first out of the blocks" in terms of helping people. These communities demonstrated a forensic knowledge of the needs of individuals within their communities which assisted in an ability to "hit the ground running" and access those people in most need quickly and effectively.

Bridging social capital is also apparent in Belfast but slightly less so than bonding social capital. In many parts of Belfast, this has been supported through the likes of the Council's and other good relations programmes, the various EU PEACE programmes and through community development activities which has brought people together to discuss and network on issues of common concern e.g., peace building, social justice or poverty related issues. This has resulted in strong relationships across communities of slightly different religious or community backgrounds but in many cases similar social economic backgrounds.

Linking social capital has also been apparent across Belfast through for instance Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships, Shared City Partnership, the former Peace Partnerships, District Policing and Community Safety Partnerships, Children And Young People's Strategic Partnerships, the Young People's Forum and many more. This has helped communities link with people in government departments to discuss policy issues that are relevant to their local neighbourhoods. These partnerships have influenced their lived experiences and enabled the development of policies and programmes on the ground. It is the investment in these types of partnerships over the last 20+ years that has helped Belfast to move from a city affected by the conflict to a city healing from the conflict and building relationships for the **common good of all**.

However, as the good relations strategy says, "while a lot has been achieved, there is still more to do".

A whole system approach which brings all sectors together to deliver a better society – central and local government, the community and voluntary sector and private businesses - requires everyone to understand and respect each other. This is what has been evident through the pandemic. **What**

united people was the common invisible enemy, something that affected everyone in the same way but about which no one had control. COVID-19 ignored and continues to ignore the traditional community boundaries that for many years have caused division within the City. Some of the 90+ physical barriers have been metaphorically broken through by this virus. The same types of issues and hardship are seen on both sides of these 90+ physical barriers with family heartbreak being reaped upon families of all religions, race, ethnicity, gender, age and class. Communities understand each other and are both fighting against this invisible yet deadly enemy in an effort to protect their families. Many people have been left isolated, many face financial hardship, many have had to self-isolate for days and weeks, while many others have lost jobs or been furloughed for months. Many have had to go to work in low paid, low skilled jobs while others in the city are helping fight the virus in our hospitals.

Volunteers have been the backbone of all supports offered by the community and voluntary sectors, without whom less would have been achieved. These are the unsung heroes that also need recognition and ongoing support.

Some of the **learning from a good relations perspective** is included below to provide insight as to what this document explored.

Leadership

- The same unity of purpose which has driven decision making during the crisis, could be harnessed to drive future co-design, co-production and collaborative decision making moving forward. New Decade, New Approach embraces the concept of co-design and co-production
- The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of leaders thinking strategically and embracing the concept of longer-term resilience planning in partnership with communities
- Implementation during the emergency response can and should build understanding of how learning can contribute towards recovery and improved service delivery for those most vulnerable in society in the longer term
- Connecting residents and participative democracy to representative democracy and elected members is vital in time of a crisis
- The community voluntary sector has stepped up into a new space within a more whole system and holistic approach and have demonstrated their crucial role in making things happen on the ground. They have also recognised more clearly the role of government and more trust and respect has been created
- Statutory bodies have recognised the crucial role of the CVS and once again more trust and respect has been created across sectors

Information sharing and communication

- A coordinated approach to data and information sharing is of paramount importance
- Community and voluntary sector infrastructure is a core ingredient to improved service delivery. Recognising and supporting this crucial third leg in the stool (public, private and community) is crucial to improved service delivery in a divided society.
- Creating clear messages from all agencies around need and eligibility can help to ensure a reduction in the duplication of effort that occurred across some elements of the programme delivery during the pandemic
- It is important in a crisis like this that need is not replaced with dependency – developing mechanisms to help people to move towards a more sustainable lifestyle is important

- From a central government learning perspective, better data co-ordination and avoiding duplication in one central point can significantly assist with service planning - greater investment in data streams and dashboards to help make evidence-based decisions easier can help service planning. Some services for those in crisis such as Advice NI, the Health Trust, BCC and Good Morning Services along with some community groups had all established helplines before the other crisis support services were established.
- When working at an area-based level, other thematic needs such as for minority communities for S75 groups also need to be factored in
- The challenge for many staff, residents and volunteers was inequality of access to digital connections, devices and reliability
- While GDPR protects the most vulnerable, it should also protect staff and volunteers – weekend work and a lack of work or volunteer based mobiles meant that many were sharing personal mobiles during these times of need

Relationships are important

- Relationships are strengthened when there are frequent meetings and a common goal
- With less emphasis on what divides people but rather what they share in common, more can be done to improve the lives of everyone
- The investment in programmes, activities and capacity builds trust, changes mindsets, builds relationships and strengthens social and human capital in local areas
- Innovation in community activities creates new skills which are transferable to the creation of other opportunities

Infrastructure

- The pandemic demonstrated the importance of a strong community infrastructure from grass roots to government and including the elected members and private sector and a system that is connected, collaborative, co-ordinated and enabled through relationships and good communications - there are still some areas where investment in capacity is required to continue to grow resilience in all parts of Belfast
- Strategic partners at grass roots level enable connectedness between community, funders and providers of services. When linked to Area-Based Integration Teams from Council an enhanced co-ordinated and collaborative way of working became a game charger for many organisations

Gaps in the infrastructure

- Gaps in infrastructure need to be addressed. Areas like Dunmurry and Suffolk and areas in the Outer East were identified as areas where greater investment is required in order to build resilience for any shocks or ongoing stressors. Some of these areas are new to Belfast which perhaps shows the effects of different legacy council led investment strategies in community infrastructure and the strength of this investment in the Belfast area
- Some areas across Belfast are fractured because of legacy and geography, but co-ordinated responses through area working teams and leadership at local level is improving relationships in such areas
- Sometimes service user voices were not heard in the crisis because the focus moved from the immediate response to other needs, demonstrating a need to continue a proactive approach in engaging with local communities and those in most need

- Affluent areas presented gaps because of a lack of community organisations and was often characterised through larger homes, elderly people, fuel cost issues, and isolated individuals not being able to easily access food and medicine due to shielding
- Minority grouping, new communities and transient communities have different levels of confidence, trust and ability to communicate and connect locally where they live. Dedicated help services, translation and signposting support is needed to ensure they are not left behind
- Reaching out beyond Council boundaries or beyond the geographical or sectoral remit of organisations' constitutions has highlighted the limits of what, where and how organisations can operate and increased the need to signpost where possible to others who are able to facilitate in such areas in times of crisis. Where gaps exist, then these may need to be supported.

Networking

- Despite there being many communities who were well connected, there were still many more who needed to connect better; some communities still don't have the confidence to share because trust in others is not there and capacity is not as strong
- Collaboration and co-ordination between organisations in a crisis are strengthened when all stakeholders are linked and part of an interdependent ecosystem
- During times of shock those who are most vulnerable are sometimes more visible and are no longer "easy to overlook". It is important now to reach out and build trust with these communities and enable new relationships, competencies and confidence to develop to build the capacity of communities most in need

Co-design, innovation, transformative services

- Co-design takes time but during the stage of recovery this needs to be speedier, learning the lessons from this initial reaction stage
- Many positive changes have resulted from the crises in terms of awareness of the social needs, housing needs and income deprivation issues faced by many in Belfast. There is now a need to examine ways to sustain the changes made during the crisis, looking at the positives of transforming public services and meeting people's needs in a sustainable way which builds the resilience of individuals, families and communities
- We need to capture the learning and share it
- Being able to react to issues as they arise is important. There is now a need to continue to build proactively for the future

Ways of working – area-based approaches

- Area based teams were effective and beneficial. Thematic work needs to be knitted within this right across the City with linked networks and signposting thus avoiding duplication
- Moving from a reactionary approach in a crisis to a more proactive, agile, co-designed and blended style of working during the recovery phase needs further consideration; one that sustainably addresses the needs of the most vulnerable and builds on the assets of local communities with a focus on getting the best out of all staff and communities
- A greater blend of working in the future for staff in the office, at home and on the ground within communities, which saves time travelling, uses appropriate technology to support this and with a focus on net zero carbon targets could deliver more benefits
- The need to avoid duplicating work due to the size of the Council area is not always possible, but data and integrated communications has facilitated progress in many areas

- Staff across all sectors and elected members need time to reflect on the lessons learnt from this initial shock to the city and the changing work patterns that have ensued. Investment in the personal development of staff is important and can help sustain positive ways of working which have been learnt from user experience and cross sectoral co-design practice supported by good information sharing and data manipulation
- Training for staff and community leaders around personal resilience is also needed - moving from crises management to sustainable living through diet, nutrition, health and wellbeing, exercise, mental health etc.

Focus on poverty

- One of the major challenges with this crisis is that some further stresses are still likely to become a reality. Many people are still furloughed including many staff from the community and voluntary, private and statutory sectors. These people may not have been part of the "new way of working" so may be coming back to a very different working environment and will need time and support to adjust quickly. Allied to this is the likely rise in unemployment especially among young people. This more worrying issues associated with lost jobs could include further child poverty, fuel poverty and financial inclusion issues for many households across Belfast. Resilience building around employability will need to be a core focus moving forward.

Section 75 – Vulnerable groups

- Anti-social behaviour in the city for vulnerable people became an issue when the city was quieter. From the shadows, the vulnerability of those on the streets, especially those who are homeless, was more exposed
- Schools reported greater numbers of pupils with mental health issues in 2020, some directly related to lockdown and increasing levels of poverty and the impact of this on young people and their families
- In primary schools concerns for development of early language and reading skills, including the children's phonological awareness and application of phonics was frequently referenced. In addition, the development of mathematical concepts, gross and fine motor skills along with a home schooling environment affecting work/home life balance, negatively impacted on their emotional health and wellbeing[1]
- Many people of all ages have lost confidence because of the restrictions and getting out again has created anxiety and depression, impacting widely on their health and mental well-being

The crisis has encouraged Good Relations

- A focus on the common good for all has helped to improve the Covid response and fast-forwarded Good Relations across the city
- The COVID-19 pandemic helped to create the conditions for increased cooperation between and within communities across the city leading to greater collaboration between and within communities
- Tension monitoring demonstrated the levels of tension clearly dropped during the lockdown
- Reported Sectarian and racism incidents were down over the first lockdown, because less people were outdoors
- Investment in Good Relations builds relationships, strength and resilience at all levels of the city enabling communities to get to know one another and live more cohesively together

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[1] https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-56595413

Leaving no one behind

COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the most disadvantaged groups in our city. It has shone a light on those social issues that already existed prior to the pandemic; issues such as food and fuel poverty, isolation among the elderly, education, social exclusion, domestic violence, mental health, alcohol and drug misuse. Many of these issues have worsened over the last year. There have been both economic and social consequences created through the crisis. Any plan of recovery must address these systemic issues if we are to ensure that no-one is left behind.

- Resuming regular essential services for the elderly, the poorest and those with a disability
- Supporting women and children who have been in 'lockdown' in an environment of abuse
- Supporting migrants, refugees and minority ethnic communities suffering significant financial, food, fuel, migration issues and digital poverty
- Supporting young people with poor or limited access to digital devices, broadband, quality Wi-Fi, lack of printers; addressing the growing educational disadvantage as a result of lockdown home schooling
- Supporting those with drug and alcohol addictions in home and lockdown environments
- Supporting carers in their home who require respite from the demands and were unable to access support
- Prioritising life threating diagnosis and timely treatments in the health service
- Supporting so many people suffering from mental ill health and well-being
- Developing solutions for first time people experiencing poverty as a result of furlough of those who have missed out because of the pandemic

While solutions exist, issues are often complex; transcending legacy relationships, systems, available resources and leadership. However, the real challenge now is in how we support people to rebuild their lives, communities and our city.

Good Relations is a prerequisite to helping people access opportunities and enable citizens to fulfil their potential. Getting out of poverty through investment in skills, feeling safe to connect and travel across the city, visiting shared spaces and providing and engaging in shared services are a part of enabling individual, families and communities to a build positive future for our city. Where there are "good relations", there is trust and people feel safe.

The next steps

Lessons from the first lockdown demonstrates the importance of continued investment in community infrastructure to supporting the recovery. There is never a time for complacency. We are often affected by outside influences like Brexit and the fallout from political differences in which the most vulnerable in our city often lose out.

The gains made during the Covid response cannot be allowed to disappear and move back into a business-as-usual scenario. A whole systems approach means including all sectors in the conversation and investing in how the city can start to retain and create good well-paid jobs that help people out of poverty and onto a more sustainable household footing.

Building the capacity of the community and working with the sector and other partners to create a new community support framework based on the new agile working methods that have emerged as a result to the pandemic response, should be pursued.

There is a strong drive for the city to examine the concept of community wealth building. Above all citizens need to be placed first in terms of the recovery making sure that this is where priorities lie.

A **transformation journey has started** – there is now a new connectedness within local areas, between local areas and between local areas and the statutory and private sectors. It is now time to continue to grow capacity and bring partners and collaborators together.

Recovery plans should seek to maximise and harness benefits from new strategic investments, emerging developments and funding opportunities. Immediate, medium and long-term opportunities exist to create and shape economic opportunities. A recovery framework which is mindful of minimising the human cost, providing relief to communities and delivering essential day-to-day services should be the focus. At the time of writing a six-pillar recovery plan was being drafted. Its focus was on helping to support communities and the economy to recover by building on our strengths and assets as a city and a wider city region.

The pandemic will most likely **further intensify existing inequalities and create significant economic and social challenges for our communities** in coming years. The impact of COVID-19 on health inequalities, mental health and wellbeing, social isolation and vulnerability and financial worries including income, food and fuel poverty are all too obvious. Council will need to work with government to scale up projects to help address these issues. Leadership at all levels is vital and decision makers will need to engage with communities, evolve and deliver, ensuring a thread of good relations runs through everyone's business. The good relations commitments within Together, Building a United Community are outlined against four key strategic priorities. Each of these key priorities must continue to be supported by the shared aims:

- **Our Children and Young People:** to continue to improve attitudes amongst our young people and to build a community where they can play a full and active role in building good relations.
- **Our Shared Community:** to create a community where division does not restrict the life opportunities of individuals and where all areas are open and accessible to everyone.
- **Our Safe Community:** to create a community where everyone feels safe in moving around and where life choices are not inhibited by fears around safety.
- **Our Cultural Expression**: to create a community, which promotes mutual respect and understanding, is strengthened by its diversity and where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced.

We should remain committed, steadfast and focussed on these.

The journey ahead will not be easy, but the infrastructure in communities, the relationships across the city, the focus on the common good which exists across the community and the spirit of hope which focuses on a prosperous future for all, demonstrates that as a city emerging from conflict, we have more in common than divides us. With one of the youngest populations in Europe, **Belfast has youth, innovation and the creatively to drive it forward positively**, **leaving no one behind**.

The Context

The Belfast Agenda, the Community Plan for Belfast, was created by a strong partnership led by Belfast City Council. It identifies the work that all stakeholders focus on to unleash the energy and ability that exists in Belfast's people and communities.

The Vision for Belfast in 2035 as outlined in the **Belfast Agenda** is:

"a city re-imagined and resurgent. A great place to live and work for everyone. Beautiful, well connected and culturally vibrant, it will be a sustainable city shared and loved by all its citizens, free from the legacy of conflict. A compassionate city offering opportunities for everyone. A confident and successful city energizing a dynamic and prosperous city region. A magnet for talent and business and admired around the world. A city people dream to visit".

The Belfast Agenda outlines five outcomes...... by 2035 Belfast will be a city:

- where everyone benefits from a thriving and prosperous economy;
- that is a welcoming, safe, fair and inclusive for all;
- where everyone fulfils their potential;
- where everyone experiences good health and wellbeing; and
- that is vibrant, attractive, connected and environmentally sustainable

Leaving no-one behind

One of the outcomes of the Belfast Agenda is that Belfast is a welcoming, safe, fair and inclusive city for all. By 2035, Belfast will be a place where everyone will continue to feel welcome and safe and will be treated fairly with equality and respect in a shared city that values diversity and encourages civic participation.

Belfast's Good Relations Strategy provides a long-term vision, values and outcomes for good relations in Belfast. The council's Shared City Partnership facilitates an integrated approach to the promotion of good relations in the city, delivering the outcomes of the Belfast Agenda, resulting in effective urban development and management and more cohesive communities. The vision of the Good Relations Strategy is of shared city: *"a city re-imagined, connected and resurgent delivering inclusive growth that leaves no-one behind".*

The Good Relations Strategy seeks to create a vision for the city in which everyone can benefit from good relations being apparent, front and centre. The Strategy believes that making progress on improving good relations will be for **the common good** of all within society, creating the conditions for increased cooperation between and within communities across the city.

In a city seeking to improve good relations, the concept of the common good challenges everyone to view themselves as members of one community, respecting and valuing the identity, culture and traditions of others within the community, for the common good of everyone. Citizenship, collective action and active participation in the planning of the city and the development of public services can achieve a more inclusive society with a focus on the common good for all. The Good Relations Strategy aims to prioritise building the capacity of individuals and communities to engage in the creation of a more inclusive society as well as helping people to think about their own roles and responsibilities in this task.

Within the Good Relation's Strategy, the council aims to set the standard for the emergence of a better future for communities across the city and develop a new enabling environment which supports

empathy and respect. This will be for the common good of everyone within society in the knowledge that good relations is indeed everyone's business.

Belfast's Resilient City Strategy states that the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998 was a milestone in the city's history. Since then, the creation of new institutions, implementation of key aspects of the peace agreement and dramatic reductions in conflict related violence in the city have created the conditions for a more resilient Belfast.   However, it states that the legacy of conflict has manifested itself in division, which continues to directly impact on the city and to undermine its urban resilience. Some examples of this include:

- Division between communities remains prevalent with low levels of trust and high levels of residential, educational, physical and social segregation in many areas;
- Belfast contains the highest number of interface areas in the region where segregation remains high. Inter-community tensions are reducing but continuing. There are estimated to be around 97 security barriers and forms of defensive architecture across residential areas in Belfast;
- Many people within our society still think of Belfast in binary terms - of a society made up of two communities; Catholic and Protestant. In many ways this binary view and its influence on public service decision making has accentuated division in our society by duplicating services and hampering the connectivity between people and communities; and
- Physical and psychological barriers between communities make travel around parts of the city difficult. This has resulted in people avoiding certain areas perceived to be unsafe.

Many individuals in the consultation about Belfast City's Resilient Strategy contended that until Belfast was truly a connected city, it would continue to be vulnerable to many risks.

The Resilience Strategy notes that several studies exist that demonstrate that conflict in cities significantly lowers their overall resilience to key risks. The existence of conflict or the threat of conflict exacerbates shocks and stresses, often making them more complex or expensive to solve. It also mentions the following regarding the importance of building resilience within a city.

- If the residents of Belfast continue to think, travel and live in a binary way - the city's ability to respond to significant risks is weakened considerably;
- The provision of parallel services adds to the cost of public services, reducing capacity in the system to respond to unexpected shocks;
- Crisis management tends to be less effective when systems are disjointed or separate. Resilience requires integrated systems and cities, where a single decision is rolled out universally and speedily;
- When cities are well networked, capacity can be shared - sometimes human capacity. This is made more difficult and sometimes more expensive in cities where residential segregation is prevalent; and
- Lack of trust between communities, particularly those living in close proximity, means they are less likely to support each other - this adds to a city's vulnerability in times of crisis.

So, how then have communities in Belfast reacted or dealt with this new invisible enemy that raced into the city in the Spring of 2020? Were the communities of Belfast prepared for this onslaught or in fact had the investment in good relations and peace building over the last 20 plus years built a foundation for a more resilient reaction to the pandemic than perhaps may have been expected?

The Good Relations strategy identifies the need to avoid binary decision-making which compounds division. This means shifting the dialogue to delivering on the Belfast Agenda in a way that involves people in an innovative city conversation on how services are delivered in a way that can foster sharing and build good relations. Has the pandemic demonstrated even more clearly the importance of this?

This current policy context within Belfast City Council creates the baseline for how services are delivered within our City. These questions above, and more, were explored as part of this report and helped guide an assessment on how far Belfast has actually come over the last number of years.

The Role of Different Actors

The initial response period from March to September 2020 is the subject of this report. In the report, we aim to chart some of the stories of the responses to the pandemic from a good relations perspective, the role of each of the players and the impact of their collective and collaborative action.

Figure 1: The Stakeholders involved in the Belfast COVID-19 integrated response

Resilient Communties with a focus on leaving no one behind

In March when the lockdown came, community groups responded quickly to support their local residents. Communities moved swiftly and met to discuss the challenges and resources which might be required. This included local politicians, church, sporting, community groups and volunteers. In some areas, helplines were already being set up and social media helped mobilise information sharing with immediate response to the lockdown. It appeared as if Belfast City Council buildings had shut and sent everyone home. However, the Council's staff were adapting and working efficiently in the background, many from home. Council established a **Community Response Hub** and four new Area Teams to coordinate the response work in partnership with local Community and Voluntary sector organisations alongside statutory partners. The hub serviced all of the city's geography as a customer helpline, remote contact centre and distribution hub.

A **Helpline** which involved Belfast City Council departments and partner agencies, including Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT) and other key statutory and community and voluntary organisations, was established and worked together to provide services. The helpline's new area staff teams were flexible and responsive and included a mix of city and neighbourhood staff with invaluable local knowledge and contacts who quickly linked to other strategic and community partners who were

able to co-ordinate a range of groups. Almost overnight, a new way of working emerged. It was agile, connected and co-ordinated with a "can do" attitude to problem solving and decision making with a focus on meeting the needs of people and communities across the city.

The helpline sought to support those who were 'shielding' as well as other vulnerable residents. The helpline provided thematic funding to a range of community organisations across the City to support the delivery of essential services at the local level. These services included a localised coordinated response to support people who required food, medication, emotional support and advice. This support was funded by the Council and the Department for Communities.

Belfast City Council
12 May 2020 · 🌐

If you are a Belfast resident and need any advice on welfare issues, or a listening ear to provide emotional support, you can contact our community helpline.

We can also help with prescription pick-ups.

Our lines are open daily, 9am-5pm.

☎ Freephone 0800 587 4695
📧 covid19@belfastcity.gov.uk

For more info, visit www.belfastcity.gov.uk/helpline

#staysafebelfast 🌈

Local communities were empowered and able to naturally connect, problem solve and innovate; taking appropriate measures to address any risks. A significant amount of community volunteers were mobilised as a result of the initiative. Alongside the Council helpline, communities also established localised community helplines, all of which collectively handled more than 14,000 calls.

Over a 16-week period the community hub was responsible for:

- delivery of 107,407 food parcels and hot food, 50,522 as part of the Department for Communities led scheme and 56,784 through local community providers;
- 9,320 deliveries or prescription pick-ups on behalf of residents;
- handling 9,770 calls from residents across the city.

The Council-run hub also distributed £1.6 million of emergency funding, supported by the Department for Communities to over 130 community and voluntary groups, enabling them to provide urgent support within their local areas.

The strength of infrastructure and relationships across the city were demonstrated in the multiple layers of co-ordinated and collaborative actions on the ground and the speed of response when the crisis was first announced. A proactive approach of action at all levels was apparent within hours of Government statements.

Sharing data carefully while adhering to GDPR guidelines allowed all players to maximise their human, financial and logistics resources to reach out and connect with the most vulnerable and shielding residents. It also helped to calm the anxious and reassure those who felt lonely or isolated.

Belfast City Council was able to appoint **nine community strategic delivery partners**. These were mostly organisations with whom the council had existing established relationships and all of whom had well-developed and coordinated local networks in each area of the city. The partners were connected with their local community groups, many of whom were already mobile on the local doorsteps of those in need. Additional volunteers joined in to provide support and to ensure that the needs of all residents were met on their doorstep and in their homes.
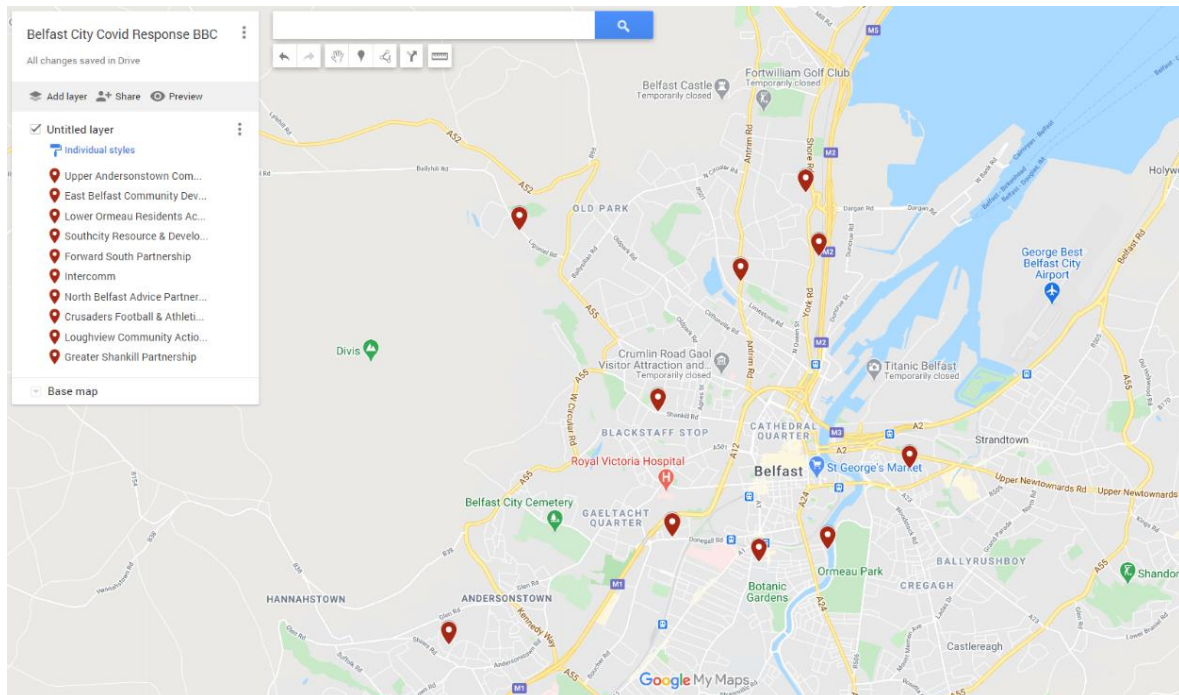

Image: Google Maps Image: Mapping the Strategic Partners across Belfast City Council area

The Covid Response

The timeline for the response is outlined below and demonstrates the fast pace of the virus as it invisibly raged into communities and the responses of various actors along the way.

Figure 2: Belfast City Council COVID-19 Timeline

RESPONSE TIMELINE

February 2020 - first tests for Covid 19 were done- all returned negative

27th February - first positive case, presumed to have travelled from Italy

9th March - Belfast City Council vote to cancel St Patricks Day parades- cases reach 52

19th March - first death recorded and cases reach 77

22nd March - second death and cases reach 128

20th March - UK Government announces measures closing leisure and social facilities

20th March - Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme announced

25th March - cases rose to 309 with two more further deaths

28th March - The Executive announced new stricter lockdown measures-emergence regulations

4th April - Northern Ireland's first coronavirus testing centre for healthcare workers opened at the SSE Arena, Belfast.

20th March - Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme announced

6th April - Orange Order announced 12th July celebrations were cancelled

9th April - Economic experts predicted a deep recession in Northern Ireland following the crisis

15th April - lockdown in NI extended

21st April - first peak of cases starts to flatten the curve

7th May - Northern Ireland Executive met to discuss a roadmap to ending lockdown restrictions

8th May - Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) reported 516 deaths linked to COVID-19 - 50% of deaths were in care homes and 75% people over 75.

12th May - lockdown extended to the end of May- with a roadmap to exit safely announced- five step plan

6-9th June - first time zero deaths announced since March

16th June - NI Statistics and Research Agency announced unemployment figures had doubled between March and May due to COVID-19 restrictions

25th June - social distancing was reduced from 2m to 1m

End of June - total of 5,760 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland, with 551 deaths

July saw a flood of restrictions lifting with many businesses able to open

End of June - total of 5,760 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland, with 551 deaths

10th July - saw face masks become compulsory on public transport

30th July - the contact tracing app Stop COVID NI released

5th Aug - cases passed 6000

6th Aug - PHA announced highest increase in cases since middle of May

20th Aug - reintroduction of indoor restriction indoor (10 to 6) and outdoor (30 to 15)

Sept 2020 - second wave starts as number continue to rise

The response to the pandemic was multi sectoral – community, voluntary sector, volunteers, council, other government bodies working together within and across the city. This report shines a light on

their stories through different case studies that demonstrate how the city has reacted to the pandemic from different perspectives.

The response from a one of the nine Community Strategic Delivery Partners

The community's reaction – a story from one of the nine community Strategic Delivery Partners

"Strong community infrastructure and supportive social networks helped our community to provide the support that was needed and acknowledge the importance of people's resilience during this emergency".

"A real positive to come out of this experience is that it has brought the community even closer. We have developed a stronger community team of residents and volunteers, which is truly invaluable".

- We have made new connections and built a strong resilient network of people
- We set up a telephone network to offer support and a listening ear to the befriended, a network that would offer comfort and support during confusing or distressing times
- We received calls from residents and provided a variety of services, including the delivery of 1000's of food parcels to the community and the collection of 100's of prescriptions.
- We spent a lot of time on, 'walk-arounds,' to make sure that all the residents in the area were coping well, and to check if they had any housing or universal credit issues, but also, just for a quick chat, which the residents loved
- We did people's shopping, collected prescriptions, waited in queues at the shops and chemist.
- We gave comfort food to our local pensioners, added flowers in our resilient packs and little notes to let our community know that they were not alone.
- We sourced the purchase of the bulk food from the supplier to allow the 30 groups involved in the network to have access to food for their areas
- We spent countless hours delivering hundreds of food parcels over the 15 weeks, but also a friendly face.
- The little chats and time spent together helped to generate a real sense of community spirit and inspired many residents to get involved and offer their time and support too.
- We could not have delivered so many of these parcels without the support of local businesses.
- Doorstep deliveries to people who needed help. We delivered thousands of information leaflets
- Private home layout reconfiguration, or in simple terms, we were furniture removers.
- We sourced and delivered PPE to numerous health care providers
- Churches and volunteers prepared and delivered food parcels to our older/ vulnerable/ self-isolating residents
- We were able to provide a variety of packs containing food and fruit, as well as toiletries and cleaning products
- We provided resilience packs and VE Day packs, which the kids really enjoyed
- We played street bingo and everyone sat in their own garden and enjoyed a bit of fun.
- We undertook one-to-one work with young people and some of our counselling sessions continued online
- We co-ordinated groups to sew cotton face masks to share with the community
- A team of volunteers secured property for victims of domestic violence, and provided and installed recycled furniture for families in need
- Family learning packs for both pre-school and primary school children were distributed, containing a wide variety of resources to support home learning and fun, family activities & helped children with home schooling via zoom
- We delivered many zoom activities with our two-year-olds, which were always noisy and lots of fun!
- We maintained the meals on wheels service through 100 days of lockdown
- We phoned people in the community and those with deeper issues, our counsellors offered phone calls
- We offered a telephone befriending service to address the impact of loneliness on older people
- We provided an extensive telephone check-in service, production of a newspaper for older people (to reach those who aren't online), and various online activities

The response from Belfast City Council Staff

Belfast City Council was a key player in the response to the pandemic in Belfast, having set up the Community Response Hub.   Its staff were often the golden thread which linked communities to vital and responsive help, resources and support.

Belfast City Council staff reaction

Belfast City Council is large organisation with many people serving the community through its various departments, facilities and services. When lockdown came most services were shut down, facilities closed and staff sent home. Many were redeployed to manage the crisis. This meant working remotely, with challenges of digital connectivity and access to mobile devices. Staff needed to quickly adjust to new ways of working in virtual spaces, with new software and new systems rolled out for the community response hub. Home became the office – without other staff beside you. Home also meant families occupying the same spaces, and schooling, child care and domestic duties all existed in a new "working" environment. Adapting, learning, and coping in a crisis situation where needs were immediate for many set challenges for staff. Many vulnerable staff members were able to continue to work from home effectively without concerns; many worked relentlessly, while at the same time missing that crucial social and professional interaction available in office environments. A balance was lost for many between work and the home environment, as they were on constant call to respond. Other staff were out on the frontline leading, co-ordinating and delivering to the city residents on the ground. They too had concerns about their own protection, not knowing where or how the virus was spreading as advice changed on risks from the PHA almost daily in the early part of the lockdown.

There was however an overwhelming agreement from the CVS sector that the Council staff were often **the golden thread** which linked communities to vital and responsive help, resources and support. Community relations staff were often the "go to" people for connections in the community ensuring no one was left out or behind. While there were pockets in the city which did not have the same community capacity and connectedness, they were quickly identified through the Response Hub Call Centre and community workers in neighbourhood areas.

Not just a job….

Information sharing, co-ordination and collaboration among BCC staff was excellent because of a common goal and a duty of care for all residents of Belfast. New agile and innovative solutions were created reducing bureaucracy. While there was increasing fatigue towards the end of Lockdown One as services resumed, there has been a fast-forward button pushed which has created a new energy and focus for many. There is however concern for those staff members who were not involved and may have been furloughed. They will need to be brought up to speed with this new agile way of working once back at work in order to ensure that a whole system approach is maintained.

The response from within the community

While community and voluntary sector groups worked at speed to react to the community need on the ground. Local residents and volunteers also responded in a manner demonstrating the depth of community spirit and common good across the city. Thousands of residents and volunteers have contributed to helping their communities get through the crisis.

Healthy Living Centre – Care worker
On Tuesday 12 May 2020, International Nurses Day, Shaftesbury Healthy Living Centre as part of the Healthy living Alliance took part in a regional celebration of care workers! In partnership with BHSCT we delivered over 100 Florence cakes to 24 care homes across South Belfast for all the fantastic care workers, nurses and staff looking after the most vulnerable in our community during this pandemic.

Selfless individuals…
Riah, a young autistic girl from East Belfast, dedicated herself to baking scones for vulnerable people during lockdown. Riah wanted to help the elderly who could not get to the shops, so she spent on average six hours a day baking in the kitchen with her mum.

This resulted in about 1,500 scones a week. The scones were given out to food banks in Belvoir, Cregagh, Clonduff, Taughmonagh and the Connswater area across the community in the food parcels.

Lord Mayor of Belfast, Frank McCoubrey, presented Riah with a special medallion for her amazing work.

Young foreign students
Queen's PhD student Nermin Al Sharman from Jordan volunteered as a translator during the pandemic, helping the Arabic speaking community in Belfast. As soon as the lockdown began, Nermin, 27, knew that her skills as a translator put her in a unique position to help the community.

"I reached out to some of the locals in Belfast to offer my help," she says. "Originally, I wanted to volunteer as an on-call interpreter to help healthcare providers and patients in hospitals or health centres. Unfortunately, as I'm not a medical or nursing student and I'm not a pharmacist, I couldn't help alongside the healthcare providers. However, as a translator I can still help and make a difference by translating material related to the pandemic," she says. Nermin also discovered she wasn't alone in wanting to help. "Other people wanted to help as well, so a COVID-19 pandemic community response WhatsApp group and Facebook page covering Belfast/Greater Belfast was created. Knowing that I'm bilingual and that I'm a translator, one of the WhatsApp group members told me that they might need my help translating from English to Arabic and that's how I got involved."

Building our resilient communities

A number of interesting revelations have come to light as a result of this work. These include:

- the stark reality of the vulnerability of many of the residents of Belfast, where up to 50% of the population live in disadvantaged areas
- The positive impact of the work of the community and voluntary sector in the delivery of the localised response across all parts of the City - the human and social capital (volunteering) that exists and the neighbourliness demonstrated across the city and across communities - based, in many respects on the investment in the CVS infrastructure in areas, which for years, suffered as a result of the conflict
- The connectedness of the CVS with their local communities and the robustness of the community infrastructure across the city
- The strong "on the ground" presence of the statutory sector and their networks of CVS contacts and the linking social capital that exists between it and the community and voluntary sector
- The importance of the community and voluntary sector to accessing hard to reach vulnerable residents at a time of crisis and leaving no one behind, reflecting the ethos within the Belfast Agenda
- The effectiveness of the partnership between the council, the CVS and other statutory bodies, reflecting the collaborate gain that can be achieved through working together - an important ingredient in the Belfast Agenda
- The good relations outcomes - reports of communities traversing across interface areas and peace lines to support their neighbours, in many parts of the City, demonstrating that good relations is everyone's business as outlined in the Council GR strategy
- The focus on and the ability to "leave no-one behind" of the entire initiative, demonstrating the significant resilience of the city in a time of crises

These next five chapters aim to demonstrate how dealing with the pandemic has helped to deliver on the five priorities within the good relations strategy for our city and why good relations will continue to be important in the recovery agenda moving forward

Why is Good Relations everyone business?

Good relations is a core ingredient in the vision and outcomes of the Belfast Agenda and essential to supporting its top priority of "*delivering inclusive growth and leaving no one behind*." It is also a critical component needed to achieve the vision of the Belfast Local Development Plan, which is that "*In 2035, Belfast will be a globally successful and smart regional city that is environmentally resilient with a vibrant economic and social heart.*" This Strategy aims to position Belfast to be ready for the challenges of a changing world and to engage positively in facing these challenges head on. Many people in the city still think in binary terms, of communities, defined by two religions; protestant and catholic. The binary divide has in many ways created a public service delivery model that has serviced division in the past and compounded those divisions.

This section examines the five themes of the good relations strategy and examines in what way the communities of Belfast have reacted and addressed the impact of the pandemic on their lives and examines if they have been able to ensure that "*good relations is everyone's business*" breaking out of the traditional binary ways of thinking about Belfast.

Theme 1: Strong, Positive and Transformative Civic Leadership - Inclusive Governance with local community change makers

The Good Relations Strategy seeks to promote and build strong positive and transformative civic leadership which can support the diversity and inclusion of all people and communities living in the city. The role of those in positions of leadership is vital in this task. The need for strong and positive leadership extends well beyond politics and into the civic sphere. All those in positions of leadership in education, media, faith, sport, cultural, voluntary and community, private business, and others, have a role to play in transforming Belfast's society into a rich diverse community.

> Civic Engagement is "working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make a difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes."
>
> *Thomas Ehrlich, (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching)*

This civic leadership and engagement was clearly demonstrated during the pandemic with many change makers from different walks of life demonstrating their leadership skills at a time of crises in a range of ways.

Political leadership was demonstrated through Elected Members working together to make decisions quickly. They exhibited a shared sense of purpose in addressing the crisis within the city through working in the public interest for all. Party politics were put aside and the common good became a strong driver in making things happen quickly and efficiently for all. This included geographic and thematic community sharing of resources to meet immediate need.

Central and local government bureaucracy which at times can slow down decision making and stifle creative or innovative thinking was replaced with a more agile system of decision making with access to senior decision makers and clear lines of communication with staff who met on a regular basis.

Crisis management and relationship management systems were put in place. Dashboard, information flows and critical communications pathways were established with supporting user guides for all staff engaged in the covid response within Council to know and understand their role and response pathways to ensure every enquiry was acted on appropriately.

Community leaders were very quick to respond to the crises and in some cases "were the first out of the blocks" in terms of getting things moving locally. Many were linked into their local communities and organisations, who knew the local needs at grass roots level.

A traditional silo-based approach to government decision making and activities was replaced with a "whole system" approach. Horizontal and vertical relationships were developed through Belfast City Council's new Area-based teams across Belfast which connected with central government decision makers within the Department for Communities, the Belfast Health Trust, the Public Health Agency and others. New ways of addressing issues were proposed and implemented with a focus on getting things done quickly. This led to speedier decision making at all levels.

A solutions based practical approach to front line services was adopted and put into action quickly by all engaged. This was driven by the existence of strong bonding and linking social capital driven by strong cross sectoral relationships that have been developed over many years between council staff and elected members working locally with community leaders. Tacit knowledge was exhibited by local community, local elected members and local government staff – local knowledge, connections and relationships provided real strength to shaping an effective response, one driven by a strong understanding of what would

Leadership & community change makers…

Bob Stoker, a community leader at South City Resource Development Centre demonstrates one of many examples of strong, positive leadership which crosses the geography of Belfast. While Bob comes with a civic leadership record dating back many years, a crisis often shows up the inclusive change makers of our city in different ways.

While Bob's focus was on the south of the City his relationships and collaborative efforts reached far beyond. Strong relationships across Belfast with many community organisations during the response to Covid helped deliver services and support to residents in need. Many times, out of hours and on weekends when resources were thin on the ground and people were in need, calls were made and without question people delivered across the community and traditional divided geography. With a crisis action plan for events such as social, economic or environmental challenges already in place under Bob's leadership, developed a couple of years ago, the team were ready to react when the pandemic was announced. While no one could have predicted the pandemic would take the shape it did, preparation to respond quickly in an organised and co-ordinated manner was made possible because of the action plan.

Understanding "local", having also completed a house survey which identified those who may need help if a crisis struck, also demonstrated the power of up-to-date data. Bob and his team were able to act on this data and immediately understand who would need support with food, medicine, fuel, finance or even in some cases where residents may become isolated quickly. While the community is growing and transient in the south of the city, like many other areas, core links to activities around the community centres also allowed them to remain connected and understand the community to pin point need. Employing local people, running pre/after school care, expanded the networks and linked to parents, families and friends in the neighbourhood. These expanded networks brought important local understanding and connectedness. Links to church groups and a range of community groups helped to delegate responsibility to different areas of the community and covered needs like isolation, signposting or support. Often translation issues were challenging but, these were overcome through children, sometimes having better language skills or connecting to other cultural groups for support. At the heart of leadership, organisation and co-ordination was communication. As described by Bob, the Council Area Team Mangers and support from the Department for Communities, was easy, highly responsive and the City Council stepped up to the mark. This in no small part key to ensuring no person was missed and needs were supported and met.

work or wouldn't work within local areas and one that was quick to identify the most vulnerable within local areas and the types of solutions necessary to addressing their needs.

The goodwill exhibited by Council staff demonstrated an emphasis on the common good, another focus of the good relations strategy. Council staff were re-deployed willingly and quickly and were able to use their strengths, skills, relationships and experience to flexibly work together with other statutory and community partners in getting things done; in identifying creative solutions and in planning and executing actions quickly. This resulted in increased relationships and collaboration across sectors.

Significant resources were allocated to local communities from the Department for Communities and were distributed to local communities through Council. Council staff worked with local communities to distribute this with less bureaucracy while simultaneously ensuring good governance. The Council also managed a range of its own support funds for local communities through its departments directly.

Solutions and permissions around data were sorted quickly to respond appropriately.

There were, however, some leadership gaps in small pockets across Belfast where perhaps community infrastructure has not been fully developed or is still at an early stage of development. This, in many respects, acts as a counter factual to those areas where investment in community infrastructure has been strong and the differences that this investment can make to making communities more resilient. Many such people and communities who would normally not have accessed the support were enabled through the new ways of working and because of the circumstances during the pandemic response.

The Good Relations Strategy aimed to progress a number of actions, many of which have been positively progressed as a result of the pandemic.

- The pandemic has proven that this journey is progressing and that transformative leadership at all levels can come together in a crisis and create change agents that can make the city better for everyone.   Transformative leadership skills among civic leaders, local community change agents and statutory policy makers or service providers has been tested during the crises and has demonstrated an ability and willingness to work together based on a strong tacit knowledge of local communities that can make things happen quickly and effectively
- Social innovation has been demonstrated through the area-based teams, through the Belfast Community Response Hub and the Strategic partners on the ground, resulting in evidence-based solutions to problems that contribute collectively to the city, area and neighbourhood regeneration framework
- Within these Area Based Teams there has been opportunities for open dialogue on how each part of the city can become more resilient to shocks and stressors
- Processes and existing structures, formal and informal, have been challenged and reshaped in the short term. The challenge will be how this type of momentum can be maintained moving forward and how it can be used to address good relations stressors for the city moving forward
- The reaction to the pandemic has enabled and built more intercommunity trust by providing more networking opportunities within the area-based teams. The strong existence of bridging, bonding and linking social capital within and between communities has been demonstrated across the city.
- Community and voluntary sector leaders in particular have been able to shine a light on those citizens and communities within in the city which are marginalised or disengaged from other social or community activities, many of whom were hit hardest by the pandemic. Empathy has been

built with a greater understanding and awareness of the perils of poverty and vulnerability among many people across the city. The city feels like a more cohesive place.

A civic Leader and a mobilised community reaching out and beyond…

Leadership at local level which impacts and transcends a City has been demonstrated many times during the Covid Response. Community stories have emerged through this research of people responding selflessly to the needs of others. On the Shankill Road a soup kitchen was initiated by one of the council's elected members. The kitchen started making soup for local people including those who were shielding, refugees and people with no recourse to public funds or who were referred through the Belfast Hub helpline. A call was put out on social media for volunteers and within hours there was over 60 responses from cooks, drivers and skilled administrators. A mix of people from across the North Belfast area joined in and ran the kitchen for three months making over 200 cups of soup a day all of which were delivered to those in need. The diverse nature of response for a city in transformation was demonstrated through the make-up of the volunteers within the soup kitchen at a time of social need. There were drivers from a loyalist ACT initiative, volunteers from Loaf Catering, a social enterprise working with people with learning difficulties and autism actively engaged and volunteers on furlough. Everyone worked seamlessly together immaterial of their community background consciously recognising the value of volunteering and of working together on a common cause. Most importantly, relationships between the volunteers developed organically because of the common goal, sense of purpose and dedication which was driven by the leadership of a local civic leader. For many this was a life changing experience venturing out of their comfort zones, developing skills, making friends and providing new ways of thinking. As a result some are even thinking about working in the CVS or volunteering more regularly into the future

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COVID-19 COMMUNITY HELPLINES

South Belfast	Belfast-wide	Northern Ireland
South Belfast COVID-19 Helpline	COVID-19 Coronavirus **Belfast Community Helpline** Need a helping hand? Food parcels Advice Prescription pick-ups Emotional support	**CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)** COVID-19 COMMUNITY HELPLINE **FREEPHONE 0808 802 0020** 7 DAYS A WEEK 9AM TO 5PM
Many community organisations, churches, sports clubs, food banks and voluntary groups are offering support in your area including: - Food parcels - Benefits Advice - Friendly phone calls - Posting items - Prescription collections If you need support and would like to find out who can help in your area please contact us **07394 569 155** Open Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm We are not able to provide medical support or advice Email: enquiries@forwardsouth.org	Belfast City Council Community Helpline 0800 587 4695 covid19@belfastcity.gov.uk 7 days a week 9am to 5pm Working closely with community, voluntary and statutory service providers across Belfast to make sure that our residents' needs can be supported The freephone helpline is run by volunteers and Council staff, who can provide: • Information about food parcels • Information about prescription pick-ups • Help with emotional support • Advice	COVID-19 Community Helpline 0808 802 0020 covid19@adviceni.net 7 days a week 9am to 5pm A freephone helpline set up by the Department for Communities, and managed by Advice NI. It aims to help those in vulnerable groups to access information, advice and guidance in relation to COVID-19. You can also get in touch by text message. Text: ACTION to 81025.

Thank you to our colleagues at EBCDA for sharing the original template for this information.

Theme 2: Shared & Connected Spaces - a smart, connected city driven by inclusive & transformative place making

The Good Relations strategy outlines that segregation remains high in Belfast, resulting in significant costs to those who live in the vicinity of these areas, such as the 90+ physical barriers that still exist across the city. The impact on relationships, labour markets, the inefficient use of services and facilities, significant urban blight, poverty and educational disadvantage are all characteristics of divided areas. The strategy aims to promote sharing over separation and the economic, social and environmental benefits of such. It outlines the need to continue to create spaces for communities to interact and make connections with each other, moving from parallel living to meaningful relationships and casual interactions. Has the pandemic achieved this? Many consulted would say that "yes it has".

One of the actions within the Good Relations strategy is the creation of opportunities for greater connectivity and sharing and the need to continue to build relationships within and between communities to increase the confidence of people in using and developing shared spaces and services. The Area Team approach has brought area-based representatives together regularly, co-ordinating and building trust, in enabling the sharing of information thus building the planning of shared services across the City.

The strategy talks about how technology has a significant role to play, creating opportunities for the creation of greater virtual shared spaces and connectivity between communities. The pandemic has created numerous virtual shared spaces which has sped up the concept of promoting sharing over separation and the resultant economic, social and environmental benefits. The Call Centre at the heart of Belfast's response has kept communities connected to the Council and other service providers. Social media also became a shared space to share information and support to local communities.

Many of the community and voluntary sector programmes have adapted quickly to online provision and while many people are suffering zoom fatigue, many older volunteers are happy to engage in online sessions as it can help address some of the loneliness felt by many during these unprecedented times.

Building relationships in the area-based partnerships helps to build relationships across communities that can in the longer-term increase confidence in using and developing shared spaces and shared services. The area-based partnerships and many of the local projects has created opportunities for bridging and linking social capital to be developed perhaps more quickly than would have been possible in "normal" times, building on the already developing relationships across the city. Many of the projects have helped to create spaces for communities to interact and make connections with each other, moving from parallel living to meaningful relationships and casual interactions.

With lockdown came the need for people to get out and about and engage in some form of physical activity. Parks and other open spaces across the city became important places to get out and exercise and get some limited socially distanced social interaction. People started to explore spaces across the city which they had never engaged in before and started to realise what was on their doorstep. These free experiences opened people's eyes to the physical assets on their doorstep and the importance of embracing these as part of a healthy lifestyle moving forward. However, some parks also became places for anti-social behaviour, but much of this was because people had little to do and nowhere to

go. For some young people they became hang out areas as there was nowhere else for them to meet with their friends. For some older people this type of engagement by young people in parks was seen as intimidating while for young people, they just needed somewhere to meet safely. These experiences identified the need for embedding the shared space principles as outlined in the Good Relations strategy ensuring that everyone feels comfortable in shared spaces and the need to support the development of a sustainable, transferable and scalable approach to the management and promotion of shared spaces.

For some, physical and psychological barriers were still a challenge even in lockdown, with some stating "it's not my patch, not my people".

The city as a safe and shared space for all was also challenged in how the city addressed those with vulnerabilities like homelessness or substance abuse challenges. ASB in the city for vulnerable people such as drug users became an issue when the city was quiet and led to an increased focus on the need for a Pharmacy Needle Exchange programme which was initiated. This also highlighted the vulnerability of some of the city's residents and the ongoing need to build on the existing multi-disciplinary approach to supporting these people. The pandemic response resulted in the inclusion of different communities, reaching out through the community including the Roma community and asylum seekers.

The impact of closing community centres and all of their activities meant that many vulnerable groups were deprived of meeting places and things to do, replaced by zoom meetings and phone calls. This demonstrated the importance of the social interaction delivered by the community and

Place making in Lower Ormeau

Life in the lockdown changed many lives and routines. A new appreciation by local residents, for local shops, the park and neighbours developed. With more time at home people started bumping into neighbours and getting to know them a little better.

A community entry behind people's homes was blocked with barbed wire and rubbish and was unsightly and untidy adding to a sense of no-one cares. During lockdown the community came together and cleared and power hosed the entry; neighbours started painting their fences and walls and following this collective tidy up a new shared place was created where people could relax, and children could play safely.

During the process neighbours donated paint, rollers and brought coffee, pastries and shared conversations. Pots plants and garden furniture decorated the space. Neighbours became connected in new ways, and a realisation of friendship and a culturally diverse neighbourhood richer for its local people and place emerged because of the time spent together with a common purpose – creating a shared neighbourly space.

voluntary sector and the impact this has on social isolation and loneliness. It demonstrated how important the use of arts, heritage, sports and technologies are in animating shared spaces.

The Good Relations strategy aims to help transform contested spaces in the city. For some groups living in interface areas, their relationships and the support infrastructure has been strengthened through a common purpose around initiatives like making masks and delivering these to hospitals as well as making referrals across and into other communities.

Belfast Friendship Club during lockdown…a virtual shared space

Usually, Belfast Friendship Club would meet at Common Grounds Cafe, University Avenue. But lockdown changed all that. During normal times, Belfast Friendship Club is a safe shared space and place:
- a space for all humans, regardless of race, gender, cultural or religious background (or no religion) sexual orientation, disability etc
- a space to be friendly and supportive, bring cheer to each other and combat social isolation
- a place for solidarity not charity, we aim to interact as equals
- a friendship club, not a dating agency
- it's not a place for trying to convince others of one's religious or political views

Well, here is a quick story which summarises a smart, connected city driven by inclusive and transformative place making. Belfast Friendship Club adapted to look after its members, all in a virtual World but all in a smart, connected, and transformative manner, making a **new virtual space**.

A buddy system: members are linked together for regular phone contact. Currently 30+ people have been matched on this scheme and more continue to come forward.

Keep talking: BFC asylum seekers can apply to receive phone credit remotely on a monthly basis during the lockdown and the scheme continues.

A virtual craft table: members take turns to lead craft activities using simple household materials and these have been so prolific that we're able to offer them twice weekly in the form of pre-recorded video, live video or a photo montage. They have all been inclusive, easy to do and generated an enthusiastic following. Members have learnt how to decorate eggs with home-made dyes, created simple greetings cards, sew protective face masks, learned to knit, make soda bread, banana bread, flat breads, coriander juice, wind chimes and so much more.

Virtual BFC online: a weekly welcome to join other members for a chat, see and hear familiar faces and voices. We offer a choice of two break out rooms (a) music and a chat or (b) games.

IT support: accessing Zoom via email / phone, setting up Zoom Pro, setting up WhatsApp on desktops, managing events / invitations via Facebook is offered by one of our members.

A fitness group: one of our members leads a weekly online cardio fitness session for others

A mindfulness group: one of our members leads guided meditation sessions and a chance to talk about our mental well-being in a supportive environment.

Chief pirate's check-in with the crew: a weekly video message to reach out to and reassure our wider membership, boost morale, flag new opportunities and serve as a reminder about sources of help and support. Held live on Facebook.

A weekly BFC music podcast: took off at 8pm on Friday 27th March 2020, finding an immediate and enthusiastic audience, due, in no small part, to the professionalism of the host and the knowledge of the musical guru. Music plays a central and very popular part of BFC activities/events and the podcast gives members a chance to unify around the musical choices, announcements and dedications that usually take place at the club. The future potential for this is clear as a means of including members who cannot physically attend BFC for various reasons. This clearly has the potential to continue beyond COVID-19 and the possibilities are endless!

Theme 3: Shared Services - focusing on prevention, co-design, co-creation, & social innovation

The Good Relations Strategy states that segregation and division has led to a duplication of services for communities that live side by side but do not integrate or share easily. Improving cohesion and transforming contested spaces requires communities to create new lines of contact, empathise with one another and develop meaningful engagement and interaction, moving from conflict management to city transformation and fostering and creating the conditions for change. It states that the city needs to build on what connects people and use its assets (human, social, physical and capital), that make areas tick, with a focus on the positives rather than the negatives. It could be argued that one of the positive impacts of the pandemic, is that it has helped to create some of the foundations for transformation, demonstrated what can connect people, as well as illustrating the value of garnering and coordinating local and city-wide assets (human, social, physical and capital) around a common cause.

One of the key actions from the Good Relations Strategy revolved around the use of data and evidence-based planning. Data was at the heart of the pandemic response with the Customer Response Hub Dashboard and the Community Response Hub Programme Pack being used to pull together and coordinate data on vulnerability and facilitate better decision making, information sharing and signposting among the statutory, voluntary and community players. This improved data has enabled the co-design and co-creation of new solutions to challenging issues and promoted integrated planning, all key actions of the Good Relations strategy. A seminar with council and the community and voluntary sector was also held in June to capture learning, share experience and work together to problem solve for future challenges.

Greater innovation has been created as a result of co-designing projects together, informed by good data, of using the lived experiences of those in the community and voluntary sectors working on the ground and with a focus on outcomes. Innovative projects have emerged, supported by the range of funding options on offer from the council and DfC. These have built the capacity of organisations and communities to be confident in accessing services throughout the city with many people accessing support from organisations with whom they had never had contact before and people being more comfortable to accept support from a wide range of sources outside of their local areas. New ways of working and new capabilities have been developed, and greater trust and respect based on the skills and resources of the community have been garnered to great effect.   Practical solutions were co-designed by experienced and skilled officers and volunteers across all sectors. More time was spent in building and strengthening relationships, much of which was achieved as a result of flexible working through virtual meetings and the time saved by not having to travel. For many their confidence has grown in the ability of getting things done more effectively in a shorter space of time by working together across different sectors and in partnership with the community. The unique value and contribution of the community and voluntary sector has been highlighted to many as has the working practices of the public sector.
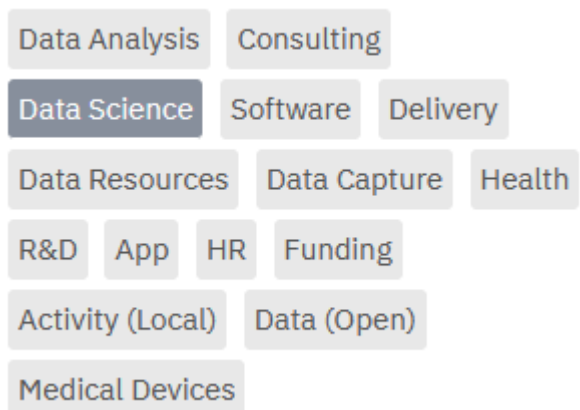
Service deliverers have been encouraged to cut across into areas beside them in order to help others out which has supported greater attitudinal and behavioural change. This has positively challenged the binary way in which many communities live, particularly those living close to peace lines where division exacerbates social and economic issues.

Some of the highlights of the shared services focus is evidenced in the Strategic Partnerships across the city and against which support was coordinated locally. This resulted in strategic partners Service Level Agreements with the Community and Voluntary Sector groups in local areas.

Interviews with local community and voluntary sector groups demonstrated that some area-based organisations already share information and collaborate and communicate with others from other areas on a frequent basis across the geography of the city.

The interviews also illustrated that all of these organisations are already connected with a wide range of statutory agencies including the PSNI. This linking social capital has enabled agencies from different parts of the city to react quickly as a result of their relationships with each other and to utilise local knowledge to meet the needs of those vulnerable people at the time of the crisis.

Belfast City Council's City Innovation Team as part of the City's Smart Belfast Programme manages a very innovative project - the Covid Connect NI project (https://covidconnectni.com/). 'Smart Belfast' is about finding better ways for the city's innovators – universities, businesses, policymakers, start-ups, and community activists – to collaborate on innovative solutions for the benefit of all the city's citizens. Belfast City Council is working with government, universities, and the community and voluntary sector to support a coordinated contribution by the innovator community to solving COVID-19 challenges across Northern Ireland. It aims to connect organisations and match challenge owners with potential digital solutions. It lists a range of offers and requests for digital support.

The site encourages local businesses, universities and innovators to use their digital expertise, capacity and resources to help tackle challenges during the COVID-19 crisis, and, where possible, to do so on a pro bono or discounted basis. This is another example of cross sectoral work aimed at building a resilient city of the future, one that can respond to the shocks and stresses that resilient cities encounter.

Programmes are so important for our city and when Covid came, innovation came too. Planned during lockdown one, a co-designed/co-created programme for youth and social innovation provided so many young people with an opportunity, experience and learning of shared services.

Succession planning - our future volunteers
The Vine Centre managed the coordination of the Foodbank Volunteer programme. The group co-ordinated 30 Young people aged from 13-21 as volunteers on a weekly basis at their foodbank. The young people involved were from all over North Belfast, including Ardoyne, Oldpark, Lower North, Antrim Road, Shankill, Cliftonville, Ballysillan. The participants represented local schools including, BRA, St Malachys, Blessed Trinity, Boys Model, Girls Model, Mercy College and BMC.
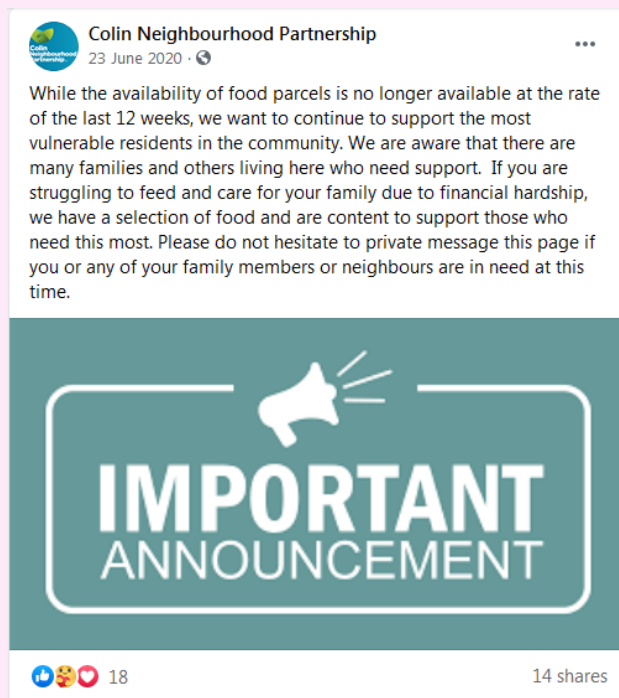
The purpose of the project was to give the young adults a chance to work alongside others from different communities, to help them overcome the challenges they faced as a result of the lock down and to give them an experience of serving other communities with whom they would not have come into contact previously.

Over a 12-week period the participants volunteered a total of 3,500 hours between them. The participants enabled the group to pack 2,040 food parcels, 300 school lunches for children, 1,440 homeless outreach packs, 700 Spread the Love NB Packs, 400 #LetsTalkMoney@home packs, 2,000 toiletry Gift sets for older people and 100 kids activity packs. At the end of the project some of the older youth volunteers have expressed an interest in staying on in the project as longer-term volunteers.

Developing an understanding of social innovation, active engagement and working with different communities to serve others is part of the future fabric of Good Relations being everyone business. As one of the youngest city populations in Europe, programmes which bring this type of focus can only strengthen future decision makers at local level and create succession for older more experienced volunteers.

The West connected to the Rest

Connected communities that have been supported through Neighbourhood Renewal, Good Relations and PEACE funding over the years has enabled many parts of the city to respond at grass roots level. This has been echoed time and time again through interviews and stories heard from those in West Belfast.

Colin Neighbourhood Partnership
23 June 2020

While the availability of food parcels is no longer available at the rate of the last 12 weeks, we want to continue to support the most vulnerable residents in the community. We are aware that there are many families and others living here who need support. If you are struggling to feed and care for your family due to financial hardship, we have a selection of food and are content to support those who need this most. Please do not hesitate to private message this page if you or any of your family members or neighbours are in need at this time.

IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

18   14 shares

Greater Shankill Partnership
21 April 2020

Again, another fantastic project making the difference ... so pleased to have been able to support them with distribution of funding, a base and cheering them on for their fabulous efforts

NORTH & WEST BELFAST SOUP KITCHEN

A strong co-ordinated community infrastructure, local knowledge, leadership, strong messaging and communications and volunteers willing to go the extra mile for their neighbours was demonstrated from the outset in the west of the city. The local community were committed to providing any help and assistance they could. "There was so much kindness and community spirit demonstrated".

While some areas on the fringes are maybe not as well connected as others to support systems or sometimes because of legacy of the troubles, during the pandemic response, everyone pulled together to make sure every street was supported.

While the west of the city area is often be viewed as being like a large self-sufficient village, there is no mistaking its strength in co-ordination and understanding of local need when demands are put on its community. Upper Andersonstown Community Forum headed up the strategic partnership in the west of the city and worked closely with the Greater Shankill Partnership, who co-ordinated over 14 different groups in its geography.

The response following covid lockdown announcements was immediate with food parcels supporting its 70 electoral wards allocated based on need. Many neighbourhood groupings came together and volunteers on furlough helped co-ordinate, pack food parcels, drive and deliver across the area. This swell of volunteers were able to help and support out when people needed it most. Messaging on social media reflected the spirit of # stronger together, # working together and #StaySafe!

Groups joined forces and came together to help protect the most vulnerable in the local community. This included s coordinated approach through Colin Neighbourhood Partnership with local organisations such as Sally Gardens Community Centre, Colin Safer Neighbourhood Project, Conservation Volunteers, Lagmore Community Forum, Mount Eagle Community Centre, Good Morning Colin and Youth Initiatives.

A co-design process was initiated with Council and at the same time connections were made with weekly meetings set up between the Health Trust to connect the area and ensure the needs of the most vulnerable were met.

Areas like Suffolk were identified and were quickly supported by the surrounding Lenadoon, Colin and Poleglass community organisations and when resources from the Department for Communities were being divided up, **a fair share for all was enabled in the allocation and support.** Outlying areas like Hannahstown were also supported through the Belfast Hub and community on the ground helped deliver the much-needed support.

Regular engagement with the Greater Shankill Partnership ensured ongoing relationships and needs of the community were all connected into a support system that ensured people were helping one another and that no one was left behind. In neighbouring areas in the South and North of the City strong existing relationships ensured no one on the fringes were missed, and even on weekends there were examples of working across the geographies to help deliver prescriptions, attend to isolated people in need of food, take people to hospital or make sure elderly people felt safe.

The strategic partners connection to the Council's Area Teams and a understanding of a collaborative role within the geographies of North, East, South and West, enabled everyone to share learning, find solutions and proactively react across Belfast in a co-ordinated new way of working.

Greater Shankill Partnership
4 April 2020 ·

It's been 2 long weeks since we retreated to our living rooms to work, but the pace hasn't stopped !! Here's some stuff we have been doing to ensure Greater Shankill is safe and looked after 😊

☀️ We have set up a central helpline number, operated via a team of call handlers who have been deployed from our ISCYP programme

☀️We have developed a database of services, supports and networks helping local people

☀️We have acted as the lead body for effective distribution of the £10,000 BCC money for emergency relief to 13 local groups doing amazing work 👏

☀️We have printed 10,000 leaflets, erected banners and launched a Facebook promoting the Community Helpline

☀️We are have had our first Zoom meetings with our community partners so we all work together

☀️We have provided our Cafe as a venue for cooking and distributing the new N&W Soup

AND

☀️ our ISCYP programme still continues to support 76 families, 12 counselling clients and 14 young people engaged in mentoring.

☀️Our Artist has distributed packs to local Elderley accommodation settings such as Hemsworth, as well as some online resources.

#inthistogether

Greater Shankill Integrated Services for Children & Young People
Spectrum Centre The Foundry Cafe

👍❤️ 19   3 comments 5 shares

Colin Neighbourhood Partnership
18 November 2020 ·

Thank you Séadna - your kindness is so much appreciated in the community ❤️❤️

South-West Belfast foodbank
17 November 2020 ·

This young man is absolutely one in a million😍. Young Séadna emptied his own money box this year (and not for the first time either) and donated a whopping 149.44kg worth of food, over a tenth of a tonne🤩🤩
Séadna's donation will feed 39 familes within the community 3 meals a day for 3 days, (I can just hear him saying, Can I not do more?😊)
Séadna you are a credit to your community, your family and St Colm's High School Belfast👀👀. We couldn't do hugs this year but then you might well be getting too big for those, elbows will have to do for now. Séadna you have no idea how many people's lives you have touched by your generosity. You will always have a special place in our ❤️❤️, we cannot thank you enough😘😘

👍❤️😆 34   1 comment

Theme 4: Structured collaboration, partnerships & resourcing

As outlined in the Good Relations Strategy, the Belfast Agenda and community planning aim to improve the connection between all the tiers of government and wider society, through partnership working, to jointly deliver better outcomes for everyone. The Belfast Agenda identifies long-term priorities for improving the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of the city and the people who live here. The Shared City Partnership is one of the mechanisms through which the City will ensure that good relations is at the heart of what the city does. Area-based planning approaches will be used as vehicles for the delivery of the shared city goals - enabling city neighbourhoods to think strategically about how they benefit from area and citywide ambitions. The Strategy states that the council will prioritise sharing over separation in all its policy, planning and financial decisions. Once again, the pandemic has assisted in fast tracking some of the ambitions of this Good Relations outcome.

Strategic approaches to supporting the Roma Community, refugees and asylum seekers

Strategic Partners in areas across Belfast co-ordinated by an Area Integration Manager within BCC was for many in the community and voluntary sector a game changer during the Covid response. It allowed many organisations to "join the dots" and bridge the gaps in services while also connecting to the understanding, knowledge, experience and commitment of BCC staff around the needs of local communities. The new Area Team roles brought structure, better networking, communications, information sharing and problem solving not only to one area but across the city. Food was the initial priority. Thematic funding for assisting a range of communities who were identified as having vulnerability was recognised early through the area management teams and members in Council.

Understanding local groups and people and linking between food banks and connecting families in need of support, with the ability to signpost on, became an essential part of everyday support systems. The partnerships co-ordinated and connected local people with services including advice support on health, education, housing and universal credit as well as assisting people where language issues were challenging. New ways of reaching hard to reach groups of people were explored.

Through the employment of a key worker within Forward South, service deliverers were able to connect to **the Roma community**. A dedicated helpline was set up and an understanding of needs was established. The Forward South key worker was able to guide and shape the communication messaging in the Roma language to meet many of the needs of this community, bridging the gaps in services. Such was the need in the Roma community that calls started to come from Roma Communities right across the city. Through the Area Managers working together with other strategic partners across the city such as the food banks, the Health Trust, housing support services and the Department of Education, confidence and trust was established, and support services started to flow to these communities. As within many new communities, the importance of building an understanding of the complex family needs of these communities and the dedicated resources and bespoke communication methods and one to one support needed to engage with these communities, was highlighted. Leaflets and text messages were replaced with sound bites in WhatsApp messages in their mother tongue for clarity. Support for children's needs like baby milk, free school meals, referrals for digital devices and empowering parents were part of the problem solving and signposting activities that has enabled this community to start to feel more a part of the fabric of Belfast City - no-one left behind.

The service also found other new black and minority communities in similar situations and calls to the Forward South helpline also came from outside of Belfast City Council demonstrating the need.

Working locally with refugees and asylum seekers, Embrace NI also distributed food parcels, signposted and triaged people with a shortage of finance, support and advice. Digital deprivation for young school going children and challenges of mental health and well-being were magnified during the period of lockdown for many. While many refugees and asylum seekers are resilient having endured journeys from desperate situations in their own countries the pandemic posed a different threat to their lives and families. From a good relations perspective however partnerships between a wide range of BAME support groups such as the Sudanese Community Association, Northern Ireland Somali Association, South Belfast Roundtable among others ensured that, as far as possible, everyone's needs where met. Families were connected to local volunteers who could speak their language and who were able to assist young people with home-schooling and isolation. This transformed some of the everyday issues and enabled the young people to progress during a very tough time.

The strength of commitment by community and voluntary services was demonstrated in these stories. Many went beyond the remit of their specific service offerings to reach out, problem solve, refer and represent the needs of isolated and minority communities. All of this work was carried out in a sensitive manner, particularly around data sharing and safeguarding. BCC also worked closely with these specialist CVS support organisations to provide advice, to connect and share information learned in one area to pass on to other areas and thus avoid duplication across the city. This was very relevant given the often-transient nature of some of these communities. The building blocks to confidence and trust require ongoing support beyond the response to the pandemic.

One of the actions from the Good Relations Strategy under this theme was shifting the conversation from a binary political focus of division and segregation to a collegiate approach around the Belfast Agenda that focuses on the longer term, is pragmatic and creates opportunities for sharing. The pandemic has precipitated the swift implementation of an area-based community planning approach – one that has used a holistic area-based approach building on the strengths of local community and strategic players with local awareness, knowledge and networks. Information was easily shared and as a result signposting was responsive to need and effective.

New networks of people working together have been built up, often linked to the needs of various Section 75 groups. These groups received support and funding and were well supported during the initial phase through these area-based partnerships.

Funding opportunities, decisions and processes were quicker with anecdotal evidence demonstrating the delivery of greater value through these projects.

Given the nature of the area-based partnerships, there was evidence of much more collaboration across sectors than before. The community and voluntary sector demonstrated a strong and unique ability to pinpoint acute need down to streets and households, something that surpassed the ability of any data driven approach to do so at such speed and with such accuracy. This resulted in greater collaboration between government departments, the voluntary and community sectors and the business sector resulting in a coordinated support approach to these households during the crisis in comparison to what was happening before the crises. Building on this experience is something that many actors wish to see moving forward.

This has resulted in greater awareness of the unique roles of each of the collaborating partners, improved relationships and respect for others' skills and resourcefulness and resources. This understanding is the building block for improved working relationships moving forward and must be built upon if the longer-term vision of the Belfast Agenda is to be met.

The collaborative effort has resulted in the establishment of new relationships and new ways of working. Many statutory respondents during the research stated that this collaborative and agile approach to work has resulted in better outcomes often with less resources.

Respondents also noted that having a common goal resulted in a greater focus on co-design and co-production, more innovative thinking, a shared sense of accountability and greater trust between the different cross sectoral partners.

Being able to engage more effectively with civic society as well as considering good relations outcomes in all of the council's policy, planning and financial decisions were two of the actions from the Good Relations Strategy under this theme. Community representatives, many of whom are on the front line, felt that during the pandemic response process that their voices were heard and that solutions to support them were being turned around faster, resulting in their ability to help those most in need more quickly. However, while the roll out of grants from Council and the Department was well supported, some stated that there was too much money which needed to be spent in a very short period of time with not enough strategic thinking around how this related to need and to the long-term effects of this short-term increase in funding. Many also stated that while the roll out of micro grants was an easier way to obtain resources, for many on the front line during a crisis, there were still too many processes for applicants and that moving forward a more flexible and strategic approach was required.

East Belfast Coronavirus Community Support Group (EBCCS) was established in late March 2020, by a group of community organisations, churches and local politicians. The purpose of the group was to collectively co-ordinate practical responses in local communities throughout East Belfast during the Coronavirus pandemic.

The success of the response emanated from the fact that it was conducted at a local level, by local people who had a connection to, and understanding of the communities they served. They were able to identify local issues and provide local solutions. EBCCS acted quickly and decisively, with regular meetings facilitating an adaptable approach as the situation developed. Innovative ideas were sought and groups encouraged to play to their strengths. Although East Belfast already had a strong community infrastructure, the coming months revealed an unprecedented level of co-operation.

The group acted as a catalyst to mobilise and co-ordinate the community sector in East Belfast. The purpose was to ensure that every resident had access to information and support.

It established a telephone helpline, operating seven days a week, 12 hours a day. Social media was also mobilised to share information, and a Facebook site was created. EBCDA (East Belfast Community Development Agency) agreed to manage a WhatsApp group "EB Local Response Updates", allowing those directly involved in delivering services to maximise and share resources. The Helpline was operational within two days and would run for 101 days, responding to over 1,200 calls. Within 17 days of being established, 33,000 leaflets advertising the Helpline were delivered

to individual homes. The response to the crisis included 35 existing groups delivering services across East Belfast, from the Short Stand to Tullycarnet and from Sydenham to Braniel. Other individuals and groups assisted with logistics, funding and specialist support. As new needs emerged and trends were identified, EBCCS responded accordingly. "Fone Friends" was established so that groups could reach the isolated and unconnected, to alleviate angst and loneliness. While supplying food parcels and meals became a mainstay of the response, providing reassurance and making contact with the vulnerable, and those shielding, was also key.

When funding was released from the Department for Communities and Belfast City Council, it was overseen by EBCCS and managed by EBCDA. The groups were able to: source and distribute PPE Equipment, (10,000 bottles of hand sanitiser and 12,000 pairs of protective gloves), distribute food parcels (4,200) and supply cooked meals (5,000). This progressed to providing educational packs for children and resilience packs for the elderly and families, 850 packs in total.

Communities made themselves central to the response. The concept of a partnership approach, involving the community, was truly embedded in relationships at all levels with government.

Theme 5: An intercultural city and respectful cultural expression within the rule of law

The Good Relations Strategy states that diversity is an important aspect of the city's future success and international experience demonstrates that the cities that are most successful are those that have embraced diversity. The strategy aims to foster strong and positive relations between people from all different cultures, religious beliefs, political opinions and identities, where no one is left behind. While acknowledging the positive role that cultural activity plays within society, the strategy also aims to lead the task of transforming Belfast into a successful, shared society, in which good relations and inclusion can flourish and one where cultural expression can be celebrated and undertaken within a culture of lawfulness.

One of the actions of the Good Relations Strategy was to demonstrate leadership in addressing the negative impact of the relationship between political identities and public expressions of culture. Lockdown came at the end of March 2020 and with it the cancelling of the St Patrick's Day celebrations and the 12th of July demonstrations, two of the most important yearly cultural festivals in Belfast. Leaders across Belfast played a significant role in ensuring that the cancellation of these celebrations was not seen as the curtailment of anyone's right to celebrate their cultural identity.

St Patrick's Day Celebrations 2020 cancelled

Lord Mayor of Belfast Daniel Baker in March 2020 said:

"*Our St Patrick's Day celebrations are always hugely anticipated and a great day out for people right across the city, so it's obviously very disappointing that this year's event will not go ahead as planned. The decision to postpone this year's event has been taken as a precaution given members' and the public's concern around coronavirus.*"

Despite this, there were still some events in the Holyland area of South Belfast among students on St Patrick's Day.

12th July Demonstrations 2020 cancelled

Edward Stevenson, Grand Master of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland in April 2020, said:

"*In the current circumstances, the gathering of hundreds of thousands of Orangemen and women, together with their accompanying bands and spectators, would not be responsible. I appreciate that our culture and traditions are very much a way of life for the Orange family, however in light of the current situation we must prioritise the safety of not only our members, but of the entire community*".

Local communities and residents embraced these curtailments recognising the greater common good that was required in order to keep people safe. Instead of the events, people celebrated in their homes and local areas, respecting lockdown rules and regulations broadly within a culture of lawfulness. Bands had virtual practises and played on the street for the NHS on Thursday nights, within which all communities could engage and embrace the music and its role in thanks to others

who were risking their lives during the pandemic. Music became a source of healing rather than something that defined communities and their identity.

Another of the actions from the Good Relations Strategy was the need to foster strong and positive relations between people from different cultures, religious beliefs, political opinions and identities. The community leaders of many of the City's different institutions demonstrated leadership and helped to foster strong and positive relations between people from different cultures, religious beliefs, political opinions and identities which helped to demonstrate progression against the City's Good Relations aims under this theme.

The Orange Order across Belfast was very strong in donating PPE. The Orange Order centrally purchased a shipment of personal protective equipment (PPE), included masks, aprons and hand sanitiser, to distribute to healthcare workers across the island of Ireland. The shipment was divided among its 12 County Grand Lodges on the Island for distribution through 108 District Lodges including those in Belfast. The lodges were active in raising money, sharing much-needed supplies and helping older people in their own communities.

As a result of the pandemic greater awareness was raised around the intercultural nature of Belfast as a City and the need to develop solutions that responds to these different needs. During the first phase of the pandemic some 56,874 food parcels were distributed across Belfast. During this distribution awareness was heightened about the multicultural nature of Belfast and the different cultural diets and needs that existed, demonstrating that no one food parcel suited all people.

The George Floyd death in the United States and the growth of the "Black Lives Matter" movement in the city also highlighted the different levels of fear that existed across the City's diverse population to the pandemic and the need for a nuanced response to it in different parts of the city and among different cohort groups. People of colour seemed concerned about the virus affecting them with growing concerns about deaths among this population. Alongside this was an increase in negative racism on social media which also heightened fear among the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic population in the City and demonstrated the need among policy makers to be mindful of the types of stressors that can reduce resilience within a city at a time of crises and once again the need for nuanced responses to such threats.

Virtual area-based meetings which discussed strategies to address the effects of the pandemic locally brought people into conversations together which may have been difficult in normal circumstances. In virtual meetings only one person can talk at a time, meaning that active listening to the opinions of others was much more prevalent. Virtual meetings took away some of the fears that some people had in crossing into other areas – the virtual nature of the meetings acting as a bridge and creating new relationships with people in safe spaces.

Conclusion - Leaving No-one behind

COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the most disadvantaged groups in our city. It has shone a light on those social issues that already existed prior to the pandemic; issues such as food and fuel poverty, isolation among the elderly, education, social exclusion, domestic violence, mental health, alcohol and drug misuse. Many of these issues have worsened over the last year. There have been both economic and social consequences created through the crisis. Any plan of recovery must address these systemic issues if we are to ensure that no-one is left behind.

- During the pandemic, essential services were limited for the elderly, the poorest and those with a disability. There have been gaps in face-to-face service provision, limited or no access to facilities, and a lack of regular support services.[2] Fuel and food poverty, issues which already existed, have been exacerbated and amplified.[3] While those who were shielding were provided with regular support, what happens to them after this support is no longer there? How will regular services resume and resume to meet the emerging needs of vulnerable people?

- How will we support women and children who have been in 'lockdown' in an environment of abuse and who have been trapped without the provision of regular support services? Issues of domestic violence, of being in 'lockdown' with an abuser, of not being able to leave the situation, must be a terrifying place to be. How will society support those who have had to endure such scenarios, so that they still have their future and potential? [4]

- Many migrants, refugees and minority ethnic communities have suffered significant poverty since lockdown with many not being able to fall back on the welfare state due to their immigration status and having "no Recourse to Public Funds". Many have been isolated due to not having the same social or family connections as most of the indigenous community. Cultural, linguistic and low community capacity has created enhanced challenges for migrant communities, with many not having access to their jobs during the pandemic.[5] How do we ensure that the issues that the pandemic exacerbated - food, fuel, migration issues and digital poverty will be addressed post-pandemic?

- Problems for young people with poor or limited access to digital devices, quality Wi-Fi, broadband, lack of printers and multiple members of the family sharing a single device, has created educational, social and connectivity inequalities. Furthermore, the educational gap, which already existed prior to the pandemic will only have widened, particularly in areas where young people were being taught at home by parents who themselves have low educational attainment. How will our education system and wider society support those who lost out with the 'home schooling' approach because their parents simply couldn't undertake it, through no fault of their own? [6]

- People at home who were already addicted to alcohol and drugs will have been confined to their homes without support and an alternative outlet in their lives. Further evidence of increased alcohol consumption during 'lockdown' means that our health and social care system could be facing huge physical and mental health challenges in the future in dealing with the consequences of this.[7]

- Carers in their home will not have received the required respite because of the demands at home with limited access to support.[8] How will society support the parents of children with emotional

[2] https://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-press/articles/2020/10/age-uk--research-into-the-effects-of-the-pandemic-on-the-older-populations-health/

[3] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jan/11/poor-families-living-costs-have-surged-during-pandemic-uk-study-finds

[4] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-52076789

[5] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-53780303

[6] https://cpag.org.uk/sites/default/files/files/policypost/Digital-exclusion-during-the-pandemic_0.pdf

[7] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-essex-53684700

[8] https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/news/2020-10-05/exhausted-family-and-friends-spent-92-million-extra-hours-caring-loved-ones

and physical challenges and carers of people who are elderly, disabled or infirm as we come out of the pandemic?

- The Health system prioritised dealing with the pandemic. Many people who have life threatening illnesses or are waiting on a diagnosis, had consultations and surgery cancelled or postponed. [9] How will our system support those who have been unable to receive care or treatment in a timely way?
- A well-documented issue concerns people suffering from mental ill health and well-being. This was already a significant issue. However, while those who entered the pandemic with a pre-existing mental health challenge will have found 'lockdown' extremely difficult. The 'lockdown' in itself will have created mental health challenges for people who were not previously experiencing mental ill-health. Coupled with the reality that counselling, therapy services, support groups and other interventions fell during the 'lockdown', society needs to urgently set about supporting those who are struggling with mental ill-health as we emerge from the pandemic. [10]
Not only has poverty become a real issue for the first time for people on furlough, they will also have missed out on the new ways of agile and responsive working that have come into play in many workplaces as a result of the pandemic.[11] How will we re-integrate and upskill those who have not had the benefit of work over the last year?

At the time of writing COVID-19 has magnified poverty, health and inequality in different and cross sectoral ways. We need to understand the causes of this as well as the consequences of poverty in our society. For this we need good data and we need to plan together and to track progress in creating a more equal and cohesive society. While solutions exist, issues are often complex; transcending legacy relationships, systems, available resources and leadership.

The cost of the imposed regulations around COVID-19 is often higher for people with lower incomes, leaving poor people with insufficient means to protect themselves. The closure of many social services infrastructure has led to the reduction in the ability of social safety nets and other measures designed to protect the most vulnerable, to work as effectively as they once did. The changing regulations and the opening and shutting down of society created uncertainty, gradually leading to increased dependency on crisis support systems.

The emergency response of urgent intervention through the provision of food, medication and schemes such as furlough and the increase in the weekly rate of Universal Credit helped people just about 'get through' the pandemic and 'lockdown'. The community and voluntary sector made sure that in the provision of essential interventions, that no-one was left behind. However, the challenge now is in how we support people to rebuild their lives, communities and our city.

Ensuring that no-one will have been left behind means an urgent and effective strategy by all in our society to address the needs of those who continue to suffer: those who are still in poverty, exhausted carers, our migrant population, victims of abuse, those grieving the loss of a loved one, people who have lost meaning, people who need medical care, people suffering from addiction, young people who need a boost to their educational attainments and those who continue to suffer from mental ill-health.

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[9] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-55916465#:~:text='Battling%20Covid%2D19',operations%20cancelled%20in%20one%20week.&text=That%20could%20include%20surgery%20for,head%2C%20neck%20and%20colon%20cancers.
[10] https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/mh-impact-covid-pandemic.pdf
[11] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-56515487

When we emerge from the pandemic, society simply can't wipe it's brow in relief that it is all over. We all have a responsibility to direct the resources at our disposal to the task of rebuilding the lives of those who have suffered and continue to suffer, through no fault of their own.

Belfast City Council has a leadership role to play in this regard. It is a part of a wider support infrastructure, which through working together can achieve more. The Draft Programme for Government outlines the outcomes that all government departments and local government should work to achieve. The pandemic has demonstrated how central and local government can work alongside the community and voluntary sector and the private sector in a crisis and get results. We should now be examining how we build on this co-production activity in "normal times". These future pathways will also require adjustments to get back to a sense of normality, while working with a focus on citizens and our communities in recovery first.

The next steps

Lessons from the first lockdown demonstrates the **importance of continued investment in community infrastructure** to supporting the recovery. There is never time for complacency. We are often affected by outside influences like Brexit and the fallout from political differences in which the most vulnerable in our city lose out.

The gains made during the Covid response cannot be allowed to disappear and move back into a business-as-usual scenario. There is a need to **continue to cultivate integrated services at a local area-based level** building on the new area based working model, while not forgetting the importance of thematic approaches. This type of model has the potential to really help all of the city's stakeholders to take **a strategic view of the needs of the city** at an area basis, to help the city **break down barriers** that stifle progression and to identify projects and programmes that can help areas recover. **Investing in neighbourhoods** and creating that sense of belonging, trust, confidence and hope among residents to move across the city freely is important from a good relations perspective.

Taking a **whole systems approach** means including all sectors in investing in conversations about how the city can start to retain and create good well-paid jobs right across the city, that everyone feels comfortable and safe in accessing and that help people out of poverty and onto a more sustainable household footing.

Building the capacity of the community and working with the sector and other partners to create a **new community support framework** based on the new agile working methods that have emerged as a result to the pandemic response process should be pursued. This **should have at its heart a good relations golden thread,** recognising that a city at peace with itself can become a thriving and prosperous one. It can **build on the tacit knowledge, skills and capacity of all players** but particularly those in the community and voluntary sector whose capacity has been built up over many years both during and after the years of conflict and community rebuilding. We should remain cognisant of the aging nature of those individuals who have travelled the journey towards a more peaceful society and the need to **cultivate and embed new relationships** within and between our communities. Many of these human assets within our communities will retire eventually. It is important to **ensure that their knowledge is shared before they move on and that succession planning becomes a top priority with our young leaders**. Knowledge of key workers in CVS organisations and their contacts also play an important role in the **future of networking** for the city. This needs to be built on and shared constantly to ensure continuity in service. Developing **our young volunteers and leaders** is vital for the future relationships across the city.

There is a strong drive for the city to examine the concept of **community wealth building**. CLES[12], the national organisation for local economies states that traditional economic development practice and developer-led regeneration are failing to address the economic challenges of our time. Community wealth building is a new people-centred approach to local economic development, which redirects wealth back into the local economy, and places control and benefits into the hands of local people. Resourcing the sector to deliver and create community wealth and maximize the opportunities presented by investment in the city to stimulate the local economy and deliver social and economic value is a focus of the city's recovery plan. In order to achieve this there is a need to keep building on the relationships between organisations and the new ways of working. There is a need to continue to keep collaborating and being **imaginative, agile and resourceful** and remembering what has been accomplished in such a short period of time in terms of how things are done from a service delivery

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[12] https://cles.org.uk/

perspective, during the pandemic response. Above all citizens need to be placed first in terms of the recovery.

Good, plain English communication is very important so that people understand what is being planned and how they can engage in decision making moving forward. Investing in good communication methods and channels is vital. Sharing but yet protecting data in particular about those who are most vulnerable is essential. Developing the right processes for all organisations in the community and voluntary sector around data management and handling is essential.

A **transformational journey** has started – there is now a new connectedness within local areas and between local areas and between local areas and the statutory and the private sector. It is now time to continue to grow capacity and bring partners and collaborators together.

Integration across sectors is crucial as is mainstreaming of policy thinking into the everyday lives of people. The community and voluntary sector is connected on a day-by-day basis with local communities. They are and need to be recognised as the lynchpin that makes integration work. The community and voluntary sector faces both the community and government agencies and other public bodies and needs to be seen as a solid trustworthy delivery partner by all stakeholders. More traditional habits of doing things needs to change among all stakeholders and new pathways with positive views taken. If **the whole system** is seen as one coherent unit working for local citizens, then **co-design and co-production of services will work effectively**. Investing in staff support and training among all stakeholders will build trust.

While facing new challenges, the Belfast Community Planning Partnership, should **continue to deliver on The Belfast Agenda's ambitions,** while the council should continue to build on the Corporate Plan, the Inclusive Growth Strategy, the Resilience Strategy, the Good Relations Strategy and other city plans and strategies that can drive forward transformative change across the city.

Building **business resilience, community capacity and digital innovation** with a focus on public safety and developing people skills is key to recovery. Working in collaboration with partners to regenerate and reshape the city centre and increase community connectivity between the city and arterial routes will play a role in reducing poverty and increasing good relations through cohesion and cultural connectedness.

Increased focus on **sustainable economic development** must take account of impacts on the environment and deliver on quality of life and wellbeing within our communities. It is the shared responsibility of communities, the NI Executive, its departments and Council city partners to sustain a positive, solution focussed approach, proactively, co-designed and engaged to deliver and improve on the outcomes for Belfast and its citizens who live, work and harmoniously engage together.

Recovery plans should seek to maximise and harness benefits from new strategic investments, emerging developments and funding opportunities. Immediate, medium and long-term opportunities exist to create and shape economic opportunities. A recovery framework which is mindful of minimising the human cost, providing relief to communities and delivering essential day-to-day services should be the focus. At the time of writing a six-pillar recovery plan was being drafted. Its focus was on helping to support communities and the economy to recover by building on the strengths and assets as a city and the wider city region.

The pandemic will **further intensify existing inequalities and create significant economic and social challenges for our communities** in the coming years. The impact of COVID-19 on health inequalities, mental health and wellbeing, social isolation and vulnerability and financial worries including income,

food and fuel poverty are all too obvious. Council will need to work with government to scale up projects to help address these issues. Leadership at all levels is vital and decision makers will need to engage with communities, evolve and deliver, ensuring a thread of good relations runs through everyone's business. The good relations commitments within Together, Building a United Community are outlined against four key strategic priorities. Each of these key priorities must continue to be supported by the shared aims:

- **Our Children and Young People:** to continue to improve attitudes amongst our young people and to build a community where they can play a full and active role in building good relations.
- **Our Shared Community:** to create a community where division does not restrict the life opportunities of individuals and where all areas are open and accessible to everyone.
- **Our Safe Community:** to create a community where everyone feels safe in moving around and where life choices are not inhibited by fears around safety.
- **Our Cultural Expression**: to create a community, which promotes mutual respect and understanding, is strengthened by its diversity and where cultural expression is celebrated and embraced.

We should remain committed, steadfast and focussed on these.

The journey ahead will not be easy, but the infrastructure in communities, the relationships across the city, the focus on the common good which exists across the community and the spirit of hope which focuses on a prosperous future for all, demonstrates that as a city emerging from conflict, we have more in common than divides us. With one of the youngest populations in Europe, **Belfast has youth, innovation and the creatively to drive it forward positively**, **leaving no one behind**.

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Many thanks to all who took precious time out of their busy schedules to contribute to this good relations project and its findings.

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Organisations Support References
NICVA Survey Updates
Community Relations Forum
Volunteer Now
Forward South Partnership
South Belfast Community Resource Centre
Upper Andersonstown Community Forum
Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group
Southcity Resource and Development Centre
East Belfast Coronavirus Support Group Stories- A Connected Community
Intercomm
Colin Neighbourhood Safety Partnership
North Belfast Advice Partnership
Crusaders Football Club
Loughview Community Action Partnership
Greater Shankill Partnership