

Embedding Wellbeing in Northern Ireland
Peer-to-peer learning webinar on working with communities post COVID-19
Held via Zoom
Thursday 10 September 2020, 10:30am-12.00pm

Welcome

Aideen McGinley, Chair, Embedding Wellbeing in Northern Ireland project Advisory Group

Aideen welcomed the participants to the peer-to-peer learning webinar, and thanked them for their attendance at a challenging and unprecedented time.

Aideen reflected that the webinar was a crucial milestone for the Embedding Wellbeing in Northern Ireland project, and provided an opportunity to share learning not just between the three Community Planning Partnerships participating directly in the project, but also the wider Community Planning network. It was explained that the webinar was an opportunity to learn for the future, whilst also looking back at what has been learnt so far over the duration of the project, and to add value to the final project report which will be published in spring next year.

Aideen introduced Suzanne Lodge, Deputy Director (Communities and the Environment) at Lancaster City Council. Aideen explained that the Trust is currently engaging with Suzanne on the response of Lancaster City Council to the COVID-19 pandemic, as one of many across the UK, through its COVID and Communities project. Aideen expressed her hopes that the experience of Suzanne and colleagues in Lancaster could provide valuable learning, as an example of partnership working between a Council and the local community in England.

Building trust between the local authority and community

Suzanne Lodge, Deputy Director (Communities and the Environment), Lancaster City Council

Suzanne thanked Aideen and the Carnegie UK Trust for the opportunity to present at the webinar. She explained that her presentation would reflect her own experiences and learning, and would give an overview of what appears to be working well for Lancaster City Council in working with the local community.

Suzanne provided a brief background of the Communities and the Environment Directorate, the frontline services provided by Lancaster City Council, and the demography and political make-up of Lancaster, as context for her presentation. Suzanne then gave an overview of her work as a member of the Poverty Truth Commission, which began two years prior to the onset of the pandemic. With a strapline of '*nothing about us, without us, is for us*', the work of the Commission is person-centred, inclusive, and based on how the local authority can best support individuals' needs. This process of being prepared to let go of power has changed the nature of the relationship between the local authority and the community, and set the context for the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Suzanne reflected that building trust is about kindness, vulnerability and being human. She explained that life experience is to be valued - people should not be included in shaping services on this basis in a tokenistic way. Staff at the Council are encouraged to do the right thing to support people and their individual needs, which is also the human thing to do.

Suzanne explained that Lancaster City Council had three strands to its response to the pandemic - supporting vulnerable people; supporting the business community; and maintaining critical services. Suzanne led the strand of work supporting vulnerable people. The local authority supported the local food bank financially, provided staff to support its operation, and provide premises. The community hub was open seven days a week, and the Council took an early, proactive approach in getting the message out to residents about where they could access support. The Leader of the Council wrote to every resident with information on sources of support; the local authority seconded staff to work in the community hub; and the Council supported a local church to develop a volunteer coordination app. The Council also created a GIS map of local services and support; supported a COVID urgent response fund; and contacted as many vulnerable residents as possible, undertaking 28,000 welfare visits and calls by mid-June. These actions were supported by relentless social media content to publicise the help available, which received fantastic feedback from those in the community.

Suzanne reflected that there was strong political leadership in the response to the pandemic, with Cabinet members organising virtual weekly meetings with the third sector from outset, which were well-attended. The meetings acted as a source of support, an opportunity for intelligence gathering, and a forum for information sharing. They were informal, open and inclusive. Attendees included representatives of other public sector organisations, such as the NHS, fire, police and education services; universities; faith groups; parish councils; residents groups; and charities. The meetings became a building block for the coordinated volunteer scheme and a platform for 'community conversations' in which members of the public could join in open conversations and form peer support groups. An example was provided of several residents with lived experience of homelessness forming a peer support group, 'Let's Befriends'. The peer support group was involved in the design process, outcomes, and awarding of a contract to provide support to those experiencing homelessness. The local authority is also hosting a series of conversations led by different agencies on a range of topics, such as community power and resilience, wellbeing in the district, and climate emergency, as it seeks to engage with residents in the development of the Council's ambitions and plan for 2030.

Aideen thanked Suzanne for sharing her experiences and asked Suzanne questions posted by attendees in the webinar chat function in response to her presentation. Replying to a question on which groups the Council found hardest to engage with, Suzanne reflected that there were challenges in establishing a dialogue with the gypsy traveller community. While the local authority was able to reach them with offers of support, there was no uptake from the community. When asked about financial assistance from the UK Government and strategic partners, Suzanne advised that the support provided by the local authority was paid for out of its reserves, which they were fortunate to have.

Aideen thanked Suzanne for her responses, and introduced Katharine Wheeler as the next speaker, to reflect on the role of culture and the arts in community-led regeneration.

The Stove Story

Katharine Wheeler, Visual Artist, The Stove, Dumfries

Katharine thanked Aideen and the Carnegie UK Trust for the opportunity to present on the work of [The Stove Network](#) in Dumfries. Katharine provided a brief background on The Stove, explaining that it is an independent, values-based and community-led organisation interested in the role of the arts in encouraging collaboration, building relationships, and involving the community in shaping the

future of the town. The Stove has two roles, it is a career development hub and vehicle for community-led planning. It is a place at which creative place-making; community learning, development and planning; and career development come together to deliver community projects. The Stove provides a space for local groups to come together, to celebrate the community, and to involve it in the development of the town. The door is always open for ideas and they seek to reach as many groups within the community as possible. The team also try to feed in to the national conversation about Scotland's places, by demonstrating meaningful change and impact at the local level as a result of their projects.

Katharine reflected that as with many market towns across the UK, Dumfries has struggled with an over-reliance on large retail and a lack of local agency, investment and collaboration. The town centre had a number of empty units, a lack of spaces to support local businesses, and no affordable accommodation. When The Stove came together, they wanted to answer the question 'what is the purpose of a rural market town in the 21st century?' By placing artists on the high street, they sought to be used as a tool within the community to support problem solving and develop strategies to address the town's challenges. The Stove's regeneration strategy is to grow collaborative partnerships, events and wider activities. To deliver this change, The Stove has built trust with the community through a monthly programme of events and by taking forward ideas from the community, while not over-promising on projects which cannot be delivered.

The Stove was described as an engine for ideas, such as the [Midsteeple Quarter](#) project, to grow. Midsteeple Quarter is a Community Benefit Society which has been set up to enable local people to help shape a prosperous, compassionate and vibrant Dumfries town centre for the future. The aim of the Midsteeple Quarter is to take ownership of a group of disused buildings on the high street in Dumfries, refurbish them and steward them for the community, as an affordable enterprise space at street level and good quality flats for rent on the floors above. Over a period of five years the Midsteeple Quarter project grew, involving many different groups of people and using creative practice to test ideas. [Embers](#), another project developed within The Stove Network, examines the role of creativity in effective place-making to inspire change and grow local activity and projects which are designed to improve community wellbeing.

Aideen thanked Katharine for sharing the experiences of The Stove Network in supporting creative community-led regeneration, and reflected on the power of the arts in bringing people together. Questions were invited for Katharine following her presentation. In response to a question on the impact of COVID-19 on The Stove, Katharine commented that the biggest impact has been on the loss of the space for people to come together, and the isolation that some, particularly freelancers, have felt as a result. The Stove has therefore focused on staying connected with these people.

Aideen thanked Katharine again and introduced Karen Smyth, Head of Policy and Governance at NILGA, as the next speaker, who gave an overview of the relationship between local authorities and communities in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 crisis.

The relationship between local authorities and communities in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic

Karen Smyth, Head of Policy and Governance, NILGA

Karen thanked Aideen and the Carnegie UK Trust for the opportunity to present at the webinar on NILGA's research on how the councils in Northern Ireland have been working in partnership with their local communities since March 2020.

In normal circumstances, local authorities are civic leaders, agreeing on and delivering local priorities; being accountable for public money and resources; delivering services; and providing facilities, events and activities. During the pandemic these roles stayed much the same but the context, priorities, services delivered and financial considerations changed radically. The councils and communities had to be flexible, responsive, and develop strong relationships in a rapidly changing situation. With the new priority of keeping people alive, safe and well came radical changes. Income generating services, such as theatres, arts venues, leisure centres, and community centres were brought to a halt. Facilities were re-purposed as food distribution centres, changing facilities for health care workers, and as PPE production centres. Advisory services were enhanced and extended, and innovation in the use of technology and new ways of working grew. How money was being spent altered dramatically, being redirected to, for example, support community organisations, community resilience, and sports hardship funds.

New roles were developed, such as to deliver food, fuel and cleaning materials, collect prescriptions, and reduce loneliness and isolation. The Department for Communities, Health Trusts and community response teams from the community and voluntary sector were supported by council staff, by building on existing collaborative relationships. The robust Community Planning structures have therefore been tested since March, however, they have enabled coordination on the ground and encouraged and supported volunteers through the development of community hubs. Community hubs provided a focus for the response to the crisis, and a wider picture of the pandemic for councils.

Karen explained that alternative service delivery methods were also developed. For example, waste collections became more frequent while Household Waste Recycling Centres were closed. Virtual services, such as arts and culture, were developed to support wellbeing. Civic leadership was also delivered through social campaigns on, for example, kindness, respect, and supporting victims of domestic abuse, thereby reinforcing public health messages. Elected representatives also relayed public messages of support, and provided practical, local assistance. Finally, good work in challenging circumstances was recognised.

Councils took a holistic approach to supporting wellbeing during the pandemic. In terms of social wellbeing, local authorities coordinated and supported the distribution of food, prescriptions and arts supplies; coordinated volunteering efforts; and conducted campaigns designed to support mental health. To support environmental wellbeing, councils tackled fly tipping; promoted biodiversity; and encouraged home growing where possible. Volunteers came out in significant numbers to assist with these activities, helping to foster a sense of community cohesion. Support for economic wellbeing included providing business grants, job opportunities, advice and promotion of local businesses. A key part of the civic leadership of councils was also to build relationships and to recognise when people went above and beyond the call of duty, and to encourage others to do so.

Karen reflected on the learning from lockdown. Karen believes that the response to the pandemic has demonstrated that Northern Ireland has strong, flexible and responsive councils and communities, and that elected members and council officers are ready and willing to 'muck in'. Good coordination is vital to avoid duplication and confusion, in this regard the pre-existing Community Planning structures were immensely helpful, and enabled councils to act quickly. Volunteer Now and NICVA were critically important in helping to address the overwhelming volume of offers of help and

volunteering. Finally, councils now appreciate the need to improve Northern Ireland's digital connectivity, and how a crisis can be used by some as an opportunity.

Looking to the future, Karen reflected that councils will have to manage increased expectations on diminishing resources. It is also likely that Northern Ireland will experience increased and continuing deprivation, poverty and isolation, and that councils will have to rethink the community services it provides. The current change to working patterns and locations may also become permanent for many, necessarily leading to a change in development plans and a change in council income. Karen also believes that there is a need to build on the growth of social capital that has emerged during the crisis – in the more connected communities, new relationships and build-up of trust – and on economic wellbeing and recovery.

Aideen thanked Karen for sharing NILGA's research findings, and added that there was much to reflect on in the council and communities' work in the last six months. Aideen advised participants that for the following session they would be allocated into break out rooms, to reflect on the presentations and to continue the discussion in smaller groups.

Break out room discussions

The participants were divided into 10 break out rooms to discuss the opportunities and challenges of working with communities post-pandemic. Attendees were asked to collate their reflections onto two Google Jamboards during the break out rooms, which will be used by the Trust to inform the findings and recommendations of the Embedding Wellbeing in Northern Ireland project. The Jamboard on attendees' reflections on the opportunities can be accessed [here](#), and the Jamboard on their input on the challenges can be found [here](#).

Reflections from discussions

Aideen McGinley, Chair, Embedding Wellbeing in Northern Ireland project Advisory Group

The Jamboards were shared to show comments made by participants from across all of the break out rooms. Aideen reviewed the participants' comments on the challenges of working with communities in the recovery, and reflected that bureaucracy and the space and time to proactively build on the two-way trust between councils and communities featured heavily. Being prepared to let go of power; mental health challenges; and being able to share knowledge were also self-reported challenges. However, Aideen reflected that the demonstrable strength and adaptability of the community and voluntary sector; the kindness displayed during the pandemic; and the trust and relationships established also presented opportunities to improve citizens' wellbeing in the recovery. There is a need to build on the relationships between central and local government, and ensure that resources are delivered down to the local level to enable community groups to deliver well.

Close

Aideen McGinley, Chair, Embedding Wellbeing in Northern Ireland project Advisory Group

Aideen thanked participants for their time, participation and reflections of their experiences. Participants were invited to provide the Trust team with information and examples on working with communities to inform the final project findings and recommendations, and to advocate for the Northern Ireland Executive to continue to invest in a relational and outcomes based approach.