

# **Peacebuilding and Covid in Northern Ireland**

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## Table of Contents

<b>I. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. DECISION MAKING ABOUT IMMEDIATE RESPONSE .....</b>	<b>5</b>
1. HEALTH AND WELLBEING AS A PRIORITY .....	6
2. ADAPTING EXISTING PROGRAMMING .....	6
3. RESPONDING TO EMERGING NEEDS .....	9
4. VARIABLES IN RESPONSE .....	10
<b>III. CHALLENGES .....</b>	<b>11</b>
1. OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES .....	11
2. ACCESS, INEQUALITIES AND DIGITAL POVERTY .....	11
3. DIGITAL SAFEGUARDING .....	12
4. FACILITATING SENSITIVE CONVERSATIONS .....	13
5. BURNOUT AND 'ZOOM FATIGUE' .....	15
6. UNCERTAINTY AND LONGER-TERM PLANNING .....	16
<b>IV. LESSONS AND GOOD PRACTICE .....</b>	<b>17</b>
1. RISK ASSESSMENT AND TROUBLESHOOTING .....	18
2. OVERCOMING OBSTACLES TO ONLINE INTERACTION .....	18
3. REPLICATING INFORMAL INTERACTIONS .....	19
4. COMMUNICATION AND FLEXIBILITY .....	19
5. PARTNERSHIPS .....	20
6. STAFF WELLBEING .....	21
7. OPPORTUNITIES .....	21
<b>V. MACRO-LEVEL CONDITIONS .....</b>	<b>23</b>
1. FUNDING .....	23
2. COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR .....	25
<b>VI. IMPACT ON COMMUNITY RELATIONS.....</b>	<b>27</b>
1. BUILDING COMMUNITY .....	28
2. GENERALISED CONCERN .....	29
3. COMPETITION AND PROTECTIONISM .....	30
4. POLITICISATION OF COVID .....	30
5. SOCIAL MEDIA VACUUM .....	31
6. MENTAL HEALTH .....	31
7. GENDERED IMPACTS .....	32
8. IMPACTS ON YOUNG PEOPLE .....	32
9. FUTURE OF PEACEBUILDING WORK .....	33
<b>VII. SUMMARY AND KEY LEARNING .....</b>	<b>33</b>

## I. INTRODUCTION

Although attention on peace in Northern Ireland often focuses on negotiations, power sharing and (dis)agreements at a political level, some of the most difficult and critical processes of building peace occurs at a societal and interpersonal level through sustained work to build and maintain relationships between individuals and communities. This work, which is often variably labelled peacebuilding, reconciliation, and/or community relations work, is dispersed, varied and much of it is undertaken within the community and voluntary sector. It comprises different methods and activities, engages different demographics, and is orientated towards a range of specific objectives, however the core of this work lies in *bringing people together*, whether within social groups or across communal divides, to address the direct and/or indirect legacies of conflict and to build relationships and transform conditions to develop a stable, sustainable peace.

This report outlines the findings of a study examining how organisations engaged in peacebuilding work responded and adapted to the immediate impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic on their ability to ‘bring people together’. The study also examined the structures and constraints which impacted their responses, and participants’ early reflections on the impacts of this period on peacebuilding and community relations in the shorter and longer term.

### Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten individuals working across nine community and voluntary organisations whose work may be described as peacebuilding. Interviewees were recruited with assistance from the Community Relations Council and through the researcher’s existing contacts in the community and voluntary sector. The organisations they represent are primarily based in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, though provide some programming outside of these cities, and one organisation works entirely in rural areas. Some of these organisations explicitly focus on women’s needs in the context of peacebuilding and in wider social, political, economic and cultural life, others on the needs of young people, while others work with a wide range of participants. The methods for delivering this work varies across organisations as well. Many deliver a variety of initiatives involving dialogue, communication, coordination, storytelling, creative writing, training and personal development and otherwise general community development. Others’ deliver their work through more specific modes, including sport and/or the arts. A number of participants requested their contributions remain anonymous, so for the sake of consistency, as far as practical, all interviewees have been anonymised.

Interviews were conducted in May-August 2020 via online platforms (Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype) and over the phone. Transcripts from these interviews were analysed several months later, and it must be acknowledged that much had changed over the intervening time. Similarly, the interviewees represent only a small portion of those working in the broad and varied field of peacebuilding and community relations, and interview questions were designed to gather their own self-perceptions of their organisations’ responses to the pandemic and the contexts within which those responses took place. The recommendations presented at the end of the report take into account that their views may not represent all who do such work, nor every organisation’s experience of structural constraints or assessment of the impacts of the pandemic on community relations.

### Context

In late 2019 and early 2020, the Coronavirus pandemic was beginning to make news in Northern Ireland. The first known case in the region was recorded on 27 February 2020, and by 23 March a nationwide ‘stay at home’ order came into effect. Lockdown restrictions were formally introduced in Northern Ireland on 28

March. Along with schools, businesses and places of worship<sup>1</sup>, community and voluntary organisations had to rapidly respond to the new circumstances which prevented their normal operations in virtually every conceivable way.

Several exceptions were provided for in which people could leave their homes including to obtain basic necessities, to seek medical assistance, to provide care or assistance and to access critical public services<sup>2</sup>. 'Social distancing' was required in the course of these essential activities, which meant that individuals from different households needed to maintain a space of two metres between them.

Some of these restrictions began to ease over the summer which enabled limited activity to begin taking place in person with significant modifications. On 19 May, outdoor meetings of small groups were permitted and from 23 June, indoor meetings of small groups were allowed. This continued throughout the summer months and schools re-opened in September 2020, however as autumn progressed restrictions were once again introduced and Northern Ireland would return to a full lockdown.

The organisations represented in this study responded in a wide variety of ways to the challenges presented across this period, and to the restrictions which evolved as the pandemic progressed.

### **The report**

This report is organised in five parts: (1) the priorities and decision making in adapting programmes and responding to emerging needs at the introduction of lockdown restrictions; (2) the primary challenges involved in those responses; (3) lessons learned, and the identification of good practice and opportunities presented by the adaptations; (4) the impacts of macro-level factors of funding schemes and resourcing of the community and voluntary sector on organisational responses; (5) reflections on the impact of the pandemic on peacebuilding and community relations in the longer term; and (6) recommendations for practitioners, funders, policymakers and researchers.

Core findings of the study are summarised here, and elaborated in greater detail throughout the report:

1. Resourcing was a significant determinant of the responsiveness of organisations in the early phases of the pandemic, whether in terms of access to funding, technological equipment and capacity, or the availability of staff and volunteers to meet emerging needs. The variables in mode and speed of response largely came down to what resources were at the disposal of organisations, how flexible funders were in terms of meeting objectives set out prior to the pandemic, the technical knowledge and capacities of staff and volunteers as well as the time and energy to step back and be strategic about how organisations could be most effective with their priorities.
2. Some activities lent better to online formats than others. When it came to some of the thornier obstacles that emerged in that initial period, particularly around safeguarding and online engagement, guidance from funders and statutory organisations was limited. Organisations largely relied on their own ingenuity and/or the sharing of practices with other organisations.
3. Regardless of the method, demographics or content, relationships are at the heart of peacebuilding work, and the pandemic produced considerable challenges to the conditions under which new relationships could be built and existing relationships could be maintained, strengthened or transformed.
4. Organisations saw first-hand that impacts of the pandemic were not felt equally across society, and the disproportionate and unique impacts experienced by certain demographics exacerbated existing socio-economic and political inequalities. Whether increasing the gendered labour required of

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<sup>1</sup> For similar analysis on the responses of churches to the Covid-19 pandemic, see Ganiel (2021) *Something other than a building: A report on Churches on the island of Ireland during the Covid-19 pandemic*. Available at: <https://www.irishchurches.org/cmsfiles/Final-Something-other-than-a-Building.pdf> (accessed 29 July 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions legislated under Regulation 5 of *The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020*. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2020/55/regulation/5/made> (accessed 29 July 2021).

women in lockdown, increasing incidences of domestic violence, socio-economic challenges facing deprived communities, or the isolation of young people, these experiences place additional strain on community relations both in the shorter and longer term.

5. The impact of the pandemic on peacebuilding appears to have been somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, it has presented significant challenges with regards to building and sustaining relationships, a fact which was not helped by politicisation of aspects of the pandemic. On the other hand, new and innovative opportunities for engagement have been created through necessity and new solidarities borne of common needs and experiences presented by the pandemic.
6. The 'resilience' narrative of the community and voluntary sector undertaking much of the work of peacebuilding and community relations has been a double-edged sword, exemplifying the dexterity and innovativeness of organisations in the face of unprecedented challenges while obscuring the material deprivation and insecurity in the sector which necessitate such 'resilience'. Organisations have risen to the challenges presented by the pandemic because they have always had to be flexible and responsive to rapidly changing environments with limited resources. This research reflects the abiding drive and commitment of people working in the area to ensure that their own groups and wider communities are safe and working towards a more stable, equitable peace. However, this narrative of resilience obscures the high rates of burnout and illness that characterise the community sector in Northern Ireland, where funding cycles are systemically short term and project staff often work from one precarious contract to the next with no guarantee that their funding will be renewed, or their posts maintained.

## II. DECISION MAKING ABOUT RESPONSES

Interviewees reflected on the factors and variables at play in their immediate organisational responses upon news of the stay-at-home order and lockdown. For most, this included a resolve to prioritise the health and wellbeing of staff and participants and the considerations involved in adapting or pausing programmes as well as responding to emerging needs.

Reflecting back on their initial decision making, participants expressed feelings of significant anxiety and overwhelm about impacts the pandemic would have on their work and their lives, with one describing the process as 'very much seat of pants, figuring out what on earth do we do now as you go along. And every day it was like a whole new terrifying roller coaster of how do we do this? And also do it properly?' (INT03).

Some organisations, whether because of the nature of their funding or because of the particular stage of their programmes at the time, were afforded the opportunity to pause their activity at least momentarily to decide how to proceed into the unknown. This helped to alleviate the sense of 'crisis management' responses (INT06) some organisations described, and enabled them time to assess the situation and their capacity, and to develop more strategic responses:

*our immediate response was to see and to take stock of what it was we were doing. And how we could do it in a way that kept contact with people, and also help to deliver some of the programmes. (INT04)*

*We made a conscious decision across organisations to take a step back and say, 'look, let's hold on awhile and do something that's meaningful, and purposeful and respond to people's needs'. So that's what we did. For the first few weeks we kind of got our ducks in a row behind the scenes. (INT11)*

Others described a sort of dual process where some in their organisation were handling day-to-day responses to urgent needs while others charted their more strategic approaches and policies:

*some of our response was reactionary of going oh my goodness right, how do we like get this done, try and get this done within these restrictions as quickly as possible? And then while I was like running around*

*like a headless chicken and [a colleague] was in the background, writing our Covid policy kind of leaders' response in terms of how are we, as an organisation, going to do this. (INT08)*

The remainder of this section reflects on some of the decision making and thinking around how organisations responded in the early stages of lockdown and considers the range of variables in their nature and speed.

### **1. Health and wellbeing as a priority**

In terms of priorities, interviewees naturally described the health and wellbeing of participants and their own staff as core to decision making about how their organisations would respond and adapt to their new realities. This refers of course to Covid-related health and safety, but also to the impacts of isolation and uncertainty on individuals' wellbeing. Organisations adapted their programming and developed responses to address these emerging pastoral, mental health and wellbeing needs.

Many organisations had already begun a phased response as restrictions were introduced across Europe and by the Irish government. For staff with health vulnerabilities this meant taking early precautions to work from home and relying on others to implement hygiene protocols in offices and shuttle supplies back and forth. In those early days, some interviewees described how they had to be adamant with facilitators about the need to develop alternatives to in-person activity:

*I'm responsible for those people, and my target audience are going to be over 50, and some of them will have probably been shielding, and some of them are in ill health. So, the answer's no! If you want paid, you're going to have to learn how to do that virtually. And it was awkward conversation, but it had to be like that because [...] I'm not working with children and young people; my audience normally are 40+, and through the lockdown I have learnt that so many of them have had ill health or shielding. (INT01)*

Ensuring the most critical wellbeing needs were met became of primary importance, which involved identifying those in the most vulnerable situations 'and making sure that women who needed to be linked into food banks or any kind of mental health support, or counselling services were able to do that' (INT10).

Pastoral care has always underpinned the work these organisations do, but with increasing isolation and uncertainty, many organisations initially responded to the wellbeing needs of participants by increasing opportunities for virtual social connection: 'the Network meetings, instead of having one a month I'm having one every other week. So, we've had three Network meetings and that brings everybody in around the table through Zoom' (INT02). This need was emphasised particularly by those working with young people, one of whom said that 'We knew that our priority was to continue having a presence for the kids. And to still allow them and give them a space to connect' (INT05).

As the lockdown was extended and then eventually eased over mid- to late-summer 2020, the prioritisation of health and wellbeing continued to be top of mind in decisions around organisational responses and adaptations to programmes as in-person activities were re-introduced in some cases.

### **2. Adapting existing programming**

Deciding how best to adapt existing work depended greatly on organisational resources and the nature of their programming. The organisations that participated in this research are positioned very differently in terms of sources and scale of funding, demographics of participants, modes of activity and project objectives. These variables surfaced in the complex balances struck by organisations in deciding about how and whether to adapt or pause 'normal' programming in the shorter term. They also determined the nature and speed of organisational responses in the early period of Covid restrictions.

The specific activities undertaken by interviewees were diverse and often unique to the circumstances, objectives and demographics of the respective organisations. Activities undertaken virtually, or in some cases with social distancing, during the first lockdown included podcasts, lectures and seminars, storytelling and photography projects archiving experiences of lockdown, coffee mornings, mediation, personal development training and mentorship, games like Pictionary and 'first to the camera', creating social media spaces and YouTube videos, sports workouts and training, shared history workshops, dialogue, creative writing, interactive tours of museums, delivering care packages, Q&A sessions with politicians, comic book creation and community safety co-ordination.

For organisations deciding how to respond to the lockdown and social distancing restrictions, a major variable was the nature of their existing programming and the degree to which aspects of that programming could be adapted to an online space. Whereas all activities might nevertheless be more optimal in-person, some activities were more straightforward than others to replicate online. For example, **lectures, talks, trainings and co-ordination** type work (i.e., community safety meetings with residents, PSNI and the Housing Executive) could be adapted online without major disruption to the content or delivery.

Of course, the successful replication of lectures online depended largely on their objectives. One interviewee described how a seminar series intended to draw in both academic and community voices in discussion struggled to replicate the community response dimension in a virtual format:

*it was supposed to be a seminar, some of it held at the university, some of it held in community venues with a university speaker and a community respondent... So, that's moved to an online event which has meant a lot of international engagement and people who wouldn't have normally been at it. We've only had one where there's been a community respondent because it's been a bit tricky to try and most of the community respondents are busy trying to keep their organisations going. So, it has been an interesting way of getting engagement, getting speakers, we're now getting some international speakers we might not have got. But I kind of feel it's a bit – I can see how it works academically – but I just kind of feels it falls short from our point of view because, it isn't that engagement, it isn't people out meeting. There's a little bit of people going 'hi' 'hello' in the chat, arranging to meet up but, as far as I can tell that's people whose theses resonate with each other rather than a community engagement (INT06)*

Organisations whose work was based around specific activities like **arts and sport-based programmes** were slightly more challenging than merely replicating those activities virtually, but could still be creatively adapted to deliver programming in line with their original objectives where resources were available:

*Fortunately, basketball, we're lucky enough it's a sport that you can pick up and play in the living room, or the garden [...] as a Northern Ireland wide team of coaches we developed the whole YouTube videos – like 15-minute workouts that we did live with the kids in their living room; mindful of everybody's equipment and things like that. So, where we had kids that didn't maybe have access to basketballs, we were teaching them how to make their own basketball. Or, whenever we were able to socially distance drop off some basketballs to kids as well. And actually it was great, quite a few of the kids and families were sharing equipment. So, you know, we've got three in our house, you can have one and dropping off an old basketball hoop. (INT05)*

*I mean, some of the things we have done before lockdown were around photography and film making and virtual reality. We're always trying to use new and emerging tech so we were still able to do that just to a certain degree, with the likes of our photography project – with some of it and some of it was more traditional sharing computer based exercises, but then lifted and put it into the digital world through Zoom and Slack as well. (INT11)*

The most challenging activities to replicate were those **dialogue and conversation-based programmes** most explicitly designed around relationship-building. This included programmes engaging in sensitive dialogue and involving visits and residential as well as those aspects of talks, trainings, arts and sport that involve conversations directly about conflict and peacebuilding themes, psychological and emotional wellbeing, and so forth. Determining how and whether to carry on with this specific work involved close consultation with project participants, listening to their priorities, co-designing activities and ultimately taking a step back where deeper, sensitive or serious activities felt inappropriate or not constructive under the circumstances.

*in terms of what we do that's about relationship building and there's a lot of talk about how much we could do by Zoom [...] so while technically we could have brought people together to have those conversations, we didn't feel it was a good use of people's time or resources or was going to be such a minimal way of doing what we do that we wouldn't [do it]. (INT06)*

*I can still feed the information in, I can still give people you know, support, maybe not hands on support, but I can find out if they need something, I can recourse it. So, I'm not so concerned about the Network stuff, I'm more concerned with the hands-on personal development and the good relations stuff that I do. (INT02)*

There was an acute recognition across all interviewees that relationship building is core not only to their work but wider visions of peace, and shared concern about the difficulties of delivering this work virtually (specific challenges around virtual relationship building are discussed in greater detail in Chapter III):

*if we can maintain what we've finished with... and not have to go back and start all over again, I think that would be us keeping good relations going. (INT02)*

*what we usually do and what we wanted the focus to be on was still providing opportunities for those relationships more than anything. So, you know, whatever way you had to be creative to allow that to happen was our priority. (INT05)*

A core objective during this time, then, was described as protecting and preserving progress that has been made and not moving backwards in individual interpersonal relationships, relationships between groups involved in programmes and a more collective sense of the accumulation of communal relationships over the course of the tenuous peace.

Some described the dialogue and decisions around how to adapt their work meaningfully to the Covid environment to have been a valuable exercise for re-focusing on the core objectives of the organisation and individual projects, for some this involved 'nam[ing] the relationship building in a way that we'd not named it before' (INT06) as a descriptor of their work.

A number of projects ultimately were concluded prematurely, some due to the above issues around the feasibility of adapting the activity to a virtual space, however this was not the case in every instance. Many projects were winding up at the time the restrictions were introduced, and the upheaval around responding to the pandemic and the changing environment knocked them off of their participants' priorities:

*they are not thinking about this stuff. It's very low down on the list of priorities, especially even more so for the groups that don't have a women's centre or something behind them, because they don't have the targets they have to meet so they can just let it drop. (INT03)*

In other instances, planning for programmes that required in-person activities like residential were paused or 'put on the long finger' (INT04). For some organisations that paused or reduced their activity due to the limitations in how effectively they could operate under the circumstances, many also cited in that decision a



recognition that other organisations were better placed to deliver services effectively and ‘much as it would be nice to be on a full salary and things, that’s not where things are needed’ (INT06) with some organisations much more dependent on the scarce funding available.

Decisions and practice around adaptation of programming continued as the pandemic progressed and restrictions evolved. Later sections examine the challenges, learning and good practice identified in this time and reflect on implications for the future of peacebuilding practice.

### **3. Responding to emerging needs**

Many organisations stepped beyond their traditional remits to respond to specific needs emerging from Covid and lockdown restrictions. They contributed through various forms of direct aid, mental health support and looking after more general pastoral needs, often crossing traditional communal divides to do so.

Direct aid was one of the primary ways organisations responded to emerging needs in this early phase of the pandemic and addressed many of the critical impacts of the pandemic on those dealing with unemployment and other forms of precarity. In some cases, this direct aid involved coordinating hubs for delivering food or distributing funds to provide utilities and in some cases resources such as technology and wireless data to enable individuals to participate in programmes and children to access schoolwork.

*in Larne, and in Carrick, and in north Belfast, [our organisation was] involved with setting up the hubs for to distribute food out to people. (INT04)*

*So, Bangor is I suppose where I have been focused most of my time. They were allocated [a pot of funding] and the group, the community that we have been working with there, so we've eight community organisations that were linking with. Then they would have begun a referral process. So, we've been able to help something like 200 households with gas, electricity, food, vouchers, oil, the odd cooker, and some digital kind of some tablets. (INT07)*

*once we got past who needs help immediately, who needs linked into a foodbank, there's also some requests, some of the families were asking for, they didn't have tablets or any kind of IT for their kids to do their schoolwork. So, I spoke to the council and they were able to give us some tablets to loan out to families. (INT10)*

*in some areas as well and they were able to sort of volunteer with the local response of doing like delivering food packages. And a couple of our volunteers in Downpatrick actually took over running the food store house, and so it was that our staff then actually supporting our volunteers in running that. (INT09)*

Importantly, these direct aid efforts were not seen as separate to the core work of building relationships, and interviewees described how they strengthened interpersonal relationships within groups and fostered a sense of interdependence and common experience beyond ‘traditional’ communal divides:

*we were delivering food parcels and food packages as part of the community response, [...]. But in our other hubs it might look more like you know what, actually I need I need to go to the pharmacy here and pick up this, this and this for one of our young people who just had a baby and she can't get out or she hasn't got the money for this and so it's a lot, and I think that's why I just came down to the relationship and pursuing the relationship. (INT08)*

*And one of the funny things about that was I was talking to a number of young people recently and it actually didn't matter what was in those care packs. It didn't matter what the prize was, it was the fact that somebody came to their door and then he would see different face. (INT08)*

*[A group of refugees involved in previous programmes] have been making scrubs and it was just, it's been a really interesting because our programme is about dialogue, it's about race and ethnicity, and I'm trying to get people to build those relationships and get to know each other. But no better way than a practical kind of, you know, response to something like this where you have men from who come from Syria who have only come to Northern Ireland, saying I can sew [...] sharing, you know, I've got some material. I've got a sewing machine. What do you need? Do you need more thread? You know and then kind of I've left a bag here, you know at the bottom of your garden you know, come and get it [...] they're building relationships, and they're getting to know each other on a very basic, practical kind of level. (INT07)*

These direct aid efforts of course evolved as the pandemic progressed and as government agencies caught up with some of these most urgent emerging needs.

#### **4. Variables in response**

The above decision making and adaptations in response to the pandemic were subject to a range of additional variables including flexibility with funding, resourcing and, perhaps most obvious, familiarity with technology. Many interviewees described the learning curve involved in individually getting up to speed with the technology required to deliver activities online:

*...technology and me just don't fit. So we contacted some facilitators and thankfully now a lot of them in July are up to speed. But we hadn't given facilitators a long time to learn the techniques themselves. (INT01)*

*I suppose I was a bit slow to start a Zoom group because I needed to get to grips with it myself and I needed to do it from home seemed like an immense chore for me, when you got down to it. (INT10)*

Of course, this new reliance on technology meant that there were learning curves and barriers for participants as well, and this is one of the primary challenges outlined in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Beyond individual struggles, there was also a chasm in terms of the technical capacities of organisations, both regarding their resourcing and technological literacy. This was particularly evident in the disparities between organisations whose circumstances enabled a more rapid move to remote working and remote delivery of activity, and the chronic under-resourcing of others which is endemic in the voluntary sector in general and women's sector in particular.

*because we do work kind of remotely at times and we work all over the place, all of the staff of a laptop, and we all have a mobile phone with pretty good data on it, if not unlimited, so that that was easy. Everyone had their own laptop, so they didn't have to go in and get a physical computer an because we have Office 365 everything's online as well. So, we were probably at a huge advantage there. (INT07)*

*we probably didn't notice that it was that bad, until Corona came. And then we looked at our computers, you know I mean our computers at work don't even have a camera in them, you have speakers. And then you had to sort of way how can you work from home and have Zoom meetings if you don't have a laptop? I was lucky, I had one. But I know not everybody, not all the members of staff had laptops, you know. (INT02)*

The prioritising of health and wellbeing and addressing some of the most acute needs emerging from the pandemic, coupled with constraints around resources and capabilities, gives an idea of the decisions being made and factors impacting how peacebuilding and community relations organisations adapted and responded in this time. Drawing from this context, the remainder of the report explores the challenges

peacebuilding organisations faced, the lessons and good practice they identified, and reflects on some of the macro-level factors that enabled and constrained their responses.

### **III. CHALLENGES**

For what is already an incredibly challenging area of work, the new terrain of working almost entirely remotely presented new complications and considerations for those doing peacebuilding and community relations work. Organisations were navigating complex, overlapping challenges at the time of the research, many of which have certainly taken new shape in the intervening year. Interviewees spoke of course of operational challenges to delivering their work under significant restrictions, but also of structural obstacles to ensuring activities were accessible, safeguarding and facilitating sensitive interactions in a virtual space, coping with online burnout and facing uncertainty about how to plan for the longer-term.

#### **1. Operational challenges**

Organisations were strained operationally in many ways, with staff simultaneously adapting their programming to meet the changing environment and adapting their own home and working lives within a global pandemic.

Some of these challenges related specifically to adapting to working from home, including both sourcing the technology and aids to support increasingly screen-based working:

*all the staff were very quick to adapt to be able to do everything they could from home. But that obviously meant spending quite a lot of time at the beginning just getting used to those new setups which some of our staff, myself included, have young children and so being able to handle that and trying to juggle that as well. (INT11)*

*I had to go and buy some cheap glasses because my eyesight, because we plug our laptops into a bigger monitor, so I have a kind of a small screen because to make it light. (INT07)*

As noted earlier, some staff with health vulnerabilities were restricted in their mobility and ability to assist with retrieving and delivering supplies for their various programmes. Others were restricted because they lived far outside of the areas in which they worked so could be less involved in the direct aid work with local communities: 'there's only two of us left in Belfast that were able to do things in person if needed' (INT05).

As part of the new reality of remote working and coping with an ever-present crisis, many faced challenges relating to the physical and emotional exhaustion that accompanied adapting to frequent online interactions and having to be digitally accessible for longer periods of time.

*We then had to reel some of that in because one of the challenges was that staff, we're too accessible, so everyone's kind of lifestyle pattern changed [...] Staff who were at home maybe with a family or who were trying to do other bits and pieces and then keep themselves in a routine, that then was becoming a bit of a challenge and also just for people to get to grips [...] When you've been delivering online training it's exhausting, it's a different kind of energy (INT07)*

In many ways, these operational challenges described by practitioners reflected the very same challenges their participants would experience, which may have indirectly created additional understanding and accommodation between those involved in on-going programmes.

#### **2. Access, inequalities and digital poverty**

The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated many of the deep social, economic and political inequities rife in Northern Ireland and around the world. In the context of adapting peacebuilding work, issues of access to

technology, poor or no internet connection brought to the surface the severe and multiple forms of deprivation facing many involved in such activity. Many practitioners mentioned this in interviews, describing the ways they were or were not able to negotiate such challenges to ensure equitable access to their programmes:

*In the areas that I work they would be the most deprived communities in Northern Ireland. You know, and everybody assumes that everybody has everything, but you know, they may have a mobile phone, but is it a smart phone? (INT02)*

*the hardest thing in all of this was excluding young people because of their Wi-Fi, poverty or digital poverty type ideas. So, how do we ensure just because somebody doesn't have Wi-Fi doesn't mean they don't still take part in things? So that's why the phone calls became an important part. And then as we got less fearful, I suppose, or we started to like home visits, as in doorstep visits and did find us with little goodie bags and the box at the bottom of driveways. (INT08)*

*some of the participants they worked with in south Belfast didn't have access to tablets and the internet in the same way that other families did. And so, where we were sending out and emailing out downloadable packs they were going to our office (again socially distanced) but arranging a time period to come and pickup be it a basketball or be it, things like that. (INT05)*

Others described how access to online activities presented frustrations for those whose familiarity with technology was limited:

*we're talking also for people who aren't maybe that technologically minded. So, they have their phone on. They can do what they need to do, but now we're asking people to do something different. And you know when you need to learn a new skill often that can take a lot of repetition and somebody with you. And if you're on your own or if you're with somebody else who doesn't really know what they're doing, it can go wrong, and those frustrations can kind of grow. (INT07)*

These access issues also exacerbated existing geographical exclusions between rural and urban groups, both in terms of rural internet quality and the reality that funding and programme activity are traditionally concentrated in urban areas:

*Northern Ireland is such a small place, but there are so many disparities in terms of rural and urban with Wi-Fi connection and things like that. (INT07)*

*I think there's already a feeling that because although we originally were based in Belfast, there's already a feeling that the Belfast ones have better access to everything, including to us and to our sort of set of priorities [...] so I didn't want them to feel left out and make sure everybody was understanding what was happening. (INT03)*

Where possible, organisations were able to draw down funding for limited numbers of tablets to share with participants, sim cards with pre-loaded data for internet access, or even communicating by post, by land line, or walking people through consent forms or technology over the phone.

### **3. Digital safeguarding**

There were well-documented digital safety and privacy issues with many of the virtual platforms in the early months of the pandemic, which interviewees of course raised as an issue. However, perhaps the more crucial and challenging element of safeguarding for many of them was how to account for the safety of participants in this online realm of interaction with others engaged in the activities.

Decisions were made early on, sometimes proactively and sometimes after some initial trial and error, about what practices and protocols might be most effective for digital safeguarding especially for younger or particularly vulnerable participants.

*even like the apps... we're not using this and we're not using this because they're not secure and they're not safe [...] And here you know, here's what we think actually we can have a level of control over I mean record all of our sessions and we can have safe-guarding sort of procedures in place within these apps. (INT08)*

*we decided not to use House Party because private chat could exist in all of these kind of things... whereas on Zoom you can disallow private chat so it's like everything is visible, you can disable recordings so that nobody else can record. (INT09)*

*we gave guidelines to young people, so when they came on to a Zoom they would know what they expect and all that kind of stuff. And then we went back to very basics as well. Phone calls, my goodness, phone calls became a very big thing... and again we had we took policy and procedure around that, about if you're doing calls you have to complete contact logs afterwards. (INT09)*

*where people have finished the session, could I, you know, stay on to have a chat with you and they have stayed on and then the disclosures being made and you're kind of left and we have, you know sessions aren't being recorded. So, there's those kind of new ways of working with vulnerable adults as well that would happen to be more mindful off and think about, um, inappropriate behaviour and things like that. Like some of the participants have been, you know, on their phone when they're laying in bed. (INT07)*

*because our Slack channel was turned on all the time, 24-7, we were quite apprehensive early on that about keeping an eye on that and if someone posts something at two o'clock in the morning, someone is there to take it down. [...] that adds a lot of pressure on staff, so myself and four other members of staff have notifications turned on for that channel all the time and there's at least three or 400 people maybe taking part, 200 people active people within the workspace. (INT11)*

These concerns around digital safety aspects of online activity added additional hurdles overcome in the context of challenges discussed below which were more specific to peacebuilding and community relations work.

#### **4. Facilitating sensitive conversations**

Bringing people into the (virtual) room and setting out digital safeguarding policies would only be part of the battle, as much of the sensitive work of facilitating dialogue and discussing contentious, emotive issues was strained by the virtual interface amongst participants themselves and between participants and facilitators.

*How do we deal with really, really hard issues when we're not sitting face-to-face? How, when people are hurt and upset and are talking about very, very difficult stuff... we'd have to begin with that because since the point of our work is to get down to the hard, difficult, painful stuff and then make people feel able to face it and move on. Then we'd have to work out how to do that in this kind of artificial [space]. (INT10)*

As part of their 'normal' practice, facilitators carefully hone their expertise in reading and responding to peoples' body language, the tone of the room and any ensuring tensions bubbling under the surface of interactions are dealt with constructively. Many noted how this was incredibly difficult to do online when they could only see people's two-dimensional faces on a screen:

*I've had to learn people's body language and even the aura around them when they come into a room. I usually can sense they're not happy, or they're not comfortable, or even a look they give you, or the*

*movement of the head, or the arms. [...] how do you do the more contentious stuff? Because you can't read body language online. (INT01)*

Others described the importance of the space and atmosphere in which these interactions take place, and how much more difficult it was to develop and sustain a virtual space for such work:

*it works so much better when you're actually looking at people's faces, and you've got the atmosphere that I was talking about earlier to quite relaxed, comfortable, like a like, a kitchen table chat, where you can be a bit vulnerable and you're not judged. [...] you can't create that sort of safe space atmosphere online, in the same way as you can as in person. (INT03)*

There is also increased potential for misunderstandings given the idiosyncrasies of virtual platforms, for example if and when audio cuts out or cuts across different speakers, that can curtail engagement or even cause distress and undermine relationships:

*It's sometimes even hard to actually pick up exactly what a person said, especially when it's several people in the room at once, and people might speak over each other. You can end up with people who are really hurt and upset, and you have no way of talking to them one on one, trying to trying to sort it out. (INT03)*

*there's still that issue of people talking over each other. You know, like someone this week had news about her mom who's terribly ill and someone was cutting in as she was talking about it. And I can see it and then you can see people don't mean to, people don't mean to, it's hard to be practised in Zoom. Even when you say we'll all take our turns to talk, you know. (INT10)*

Whereas certain features of online communication technology, like breakout rooms, are designed to theoretically relieve some of these issues encountered in larger group discussions, they created additional challenges for facilitating the conversations taking place within them:

*I could go between the two breakout rooms, but then my worry is if I'm concentrating on the quieter ones, and making them, trying to coax information out of them, are the more talkative ones, going to get into a row in the other group that I can't see. (INT03)*

Another frequently raised concern related to the reality that most participants would be located in their homes as they engage in challenging, sensitive conversations. There was a sense that this could have serious implications for how people process the emotions and thoughts these interactions may provoke:

*there's one other worry that I have... which is sometimes you talk about really difficult things and then you say, 'okay, bye everybody' and you shut down and they're sat in their home. Sometimes on their own with these really heavy feelings that they know we should talk to. In person that happens, but I was, you know, standing and chatting to a person or sit down have a cup of tea with them or whatever for as long as it took. (INT03)*

*And the other the other thing, about bringing people together in a virtual sense is realistically what you're doing is you're inviting all those people into your home. They're inviting all those... So, to me I think it has to be very careful and cautious, right? (INT04)*

Others did note potential advantages to participants engaging from the comfort and safety of their own homes, without physically sharing space with others around whom they may still be hesitant or uncomfortable:

*It has its pros and cons, because number one people you know, people who don't like sitting in the same room as people from different backgrounds and stuff like that, can have those conversations without actually sitting in the same room as them. So, again you can build upon that so as at some stage you will be able to get them into the same room. So, there is that certain comfort of being in your own surroundings. (INT04)*

It was the case for some that there was little difference in the online conversations, though they acknowledged this had to do with the depth of relationships developed in-person, prior to the pandemic.

*I think it's been amazing how we've been able to get a lot of the aspects of our face-to-face work onto Zoom. It will never be the same, then having face-to-face you know good contact and the atmosphere that creates, but there's been really good conversations and really good relationships. (INT09)*

Conversely, many found that while they were able to replicate certain aspects of peacebuilding work online, it was particularly difficult to develop relationships with new individuals and groups who did not already have an established rapport:

*The biggest problem with that I found so far is recruiting groups. I mean, that was a problem that's difficult anyway because you've got to build up some sort of relationship with these people before they're willing, I suppose, to talk about some very tough topics with you. But it's even more of a problem now when you're trying to do that relationship building online, which just takes longer and it's harder to do. (INT03)*

For all of the reasons above, some took decisions to try to keep conversations and activities lighter than they would be if they were happening in person, and attempted to ease people into more sensitive discussions:

*I can't do all the risky stuff online, could I? ...because if you hit a nerve then you're not there sort of way to counsel. So, you have to be very careful... it's about making sure you don't cross that line, that you're going to be leaving somebody vulnerable once you switch your computer off. [...] That concerns me of my duty of care to those participants. (INT02)*

*I think we have to be very sensitive in what learning that I can do that builds good relations but, do it with a bit of fun, instead of having a wee bit of a row, just have a wee bit of fun, and then have a wee bit of a row. [...] I haven't really worked it out yet, that's why I'm trying not to put anything in that could raise tensions within themselves and take them back to a place that they wouldn't be happy about being. (INT02)*

Facilitating sensitive conversations virtually remained one of the most challenging aspects of adapting programmes during Covid lockdowns, though many found ways to replicate (as far as possible) aspect of in-person activities and to minimise the awkwardness of online interactions. These practices are described in detail in Chapter IV.

## **5. Burnout and 'Zoom fatigue'**

Though this research was conducted within the first few months of the pandemic, interviewees were already noticing that for many participants the novelty of virtual interaction was waning. Maintaining relationships and engagement in this virtual space also challenging with high levels of burnout and 'zoom fatigue' coinciding with higher levels of attrition reported.

*[Before the pandemic] we would sit and we would talk for an average two hours. That's another thing that's changed as well, because now online people don't want to sit in front of the screen for two hours*

*[...] we'll only do an hour and we'll space it out you know that way, because they are staring at a screen.* (INT03)

*I think one of the things that has also been a bit of a challenge is the overwhelming amount of Zooms and Facebook lives and information and packs and this and that. And that has been really, you know, there was a conference I was meant to be on for the last two days. I completely forgot about it because it was on Zoom and I was doing other things and suddenly it was like shit, I'm meant to be, you know, you just know in the back of your head I'm meant to be [somewhere].* (INT07)

*I think once the whole 'oh, isn't this brilliant' wears off then we need to start looking at other ways to do this type of stuff.* (INT04)

Putting limits on screen time and over-subscribing programmes with the understanding that many participants may ultimately not feel up to joining were amongst the ways that interviewees responded to this particular issue.

## **6. Uncertainty and longer-term planning**

During the first lockdown, few could predict with any certainty how long people would be confined to their homes, social distancing would be required, and activities would continue to have to be adapted or delayed. This produced substantial concern amongst interviewees about longer-term logistical questions, uncertainty about how peoples' needs would evolve and what their capacity would be to respond to those needs.

One interviewee expressed a desire not to even consider the possibility of dealing with Covid restrictions in the longer term, saying 'I'm sort of closing my eyes to that and hoping it wouldn't happen. I was just hoping we'd get back to normal' (INT10). Others conveyed similar feelings about the challenges of planning with so many unknowns:

*I don't know whether to push it back until the new year and hope, maybe get the winter and all over us, and then maybe this time next year it could be face-to-face...I don't know whether I should do some of it virtual before Christmas and then it's hard to know, it's really hard to know what to plan.* (INT01)

*it's sitting in that tension of the uncertain thing going like, well, we can't actually do anything, you know, you can't force anything to happen, so you have to just try and operate within that uncertainty within that tension.* (INT08)

Logistical issues raised concerned both more practical planning issues such as venue and travel capacities with prolonged social distancing requirements, as well as when practitioners would be allowed to do outreach and recruit new participants.

*if we said we were going to have 50 people at an event, I think my, the maximum amount we could probably have is maybe 10 or 12.* (INT04)

*how do I start up across community program again whenever I can't transport people from one side to the other in big numbers. [...] and then, even if I'm taking 25 you know, young people from West to get the Glider over to East. You know, well am I allowed to have all 25 on the Glider is that going to be? So, doing this so there's loads just those questions and trying to work out that kind of stuff.* (INT08)

*How do you recruit new young people if you can't get out and meet them? Or you can't bring them to a building to build relationships with them? And so there's a lot of things that we're trying to, we're trying to work out. And in fact, at schools like at what, when are schools going to allow us back in, you know, if they consider us visitors, you know? When are we allowed to go back into schools?* (INT08)



There were also a number of concerns that inequalities will be exacerbated as people feel more or less safe engaging in physical spaces as they begin to open back up. At the time of later interviews, plans were emerging for lockdown restrictions to ease over the summer months. The health vulnerabilities of older demographics were front of mind for those working with older participants, as well as the need to take into account their sense of safety and comfort interacting with others in-person:

*We need to find out from people, I don't know how willing, we've got an older women's group for example, we don't know how safe they'll feel to come out. We've had a slot for them in the centre for a long, long time. And we don't know how safe they'll feel. (INT10)*

*I do worry kind of going forward that we'll get to a point where a number, particularly victims and survivors, are going to be in a position where they shouldn't be going out and can't be going out. Do you have meetings with the people who are fit and well and certain people on Zoom? (INT06)*

Finally, these longer-term challenges also touched upon more existential questions and uncertainty about how peoples' needs, priorities, behaviours and attitudes will have changed over the course of the pandemic, and where peacebuilding and community relations work would fit in such new patterns of living:

*when that's your area of work you've always got to keep reassessing it, both the macro and the micro. And so yeah, we could come out of this and people have got different priorities, people have got different ways of engaging, or we could come out of this and people could feel so glad to be back in a room together they'll be rushing to anything that's about engagement and relationship as opposed to like going to the cinema, you know? Because they are so sick of everything being on a 2D screen you know. It could go either way or neither. (INT06)*

*I suppose it all depends on what happens, but if we continue on and lockdown or some kind of restrictions are imposed again then it may just have a knock on effect in how we can act as people and how people will take part in the programmes. (INT11)*

Lockdown restrictions were ultimately re-imposed in December 2020 for several months, causing serious disruption to programmes once again. These long-term planning challenges aside, many of the difficulties raised above were negotiated with varying degrees of success in the first few months of the pandemic. The following section explores some of the learning and good practice developed in the face of these obstacles.

#### **IV. LESSONS AND GOOD PRACTICE**

Even at such an early stage of the pandemic, interviewees were able to draw out some lessons and aspects of their practice that worked well from the initial few months of adapting and responding to the challenges described above. A handful noted that the short interview was the first space they had to reflect on their responses:

*I think there's lots of positives that have come out of this and will continue. We've probably not really taken a breath like honestly [the organisation] have never been busier. We have we're working night and day, and I think we probably haven't taken time to breath to think, okay, what have we done really here? (INT07)*

Once again, these lessons ranged from developing methods for piloting and troubleshooting the new technologies organisations were relying on to carry out their work, to learning about how to replicate aspects of in-person interactions in a virtual space, to reflections on the necessity of both formal and

informal communication with participants, partnerships between organisations and the need to protect staff wellbeing rather than rely on their 'resilience'.

A perhaps less tangible lesson, but one described as useful in terms of re-focusing the overarching purpose of peacebuilding and community relations work, is how the constraints of the pandemic drove home the centrality of relationships to every aspect of this work. Beyond formal 'relationship building' often used to describe the broad objectives of peacebuilding, the individual relationships amongst participants, staff and volunteers are at the heart of the work:

*delivery wise it's been the value of those relationships and as much as the formal learning and ticking those learning outcomes, I think the kids have just needed the social engagement. And the fact that we are able to have them sit in each other's homes as such has brought quite a lot of them closer together. (INT05)*

The lessons outlined below all directly or indirectly reflect the efforts made to preserve and strengthen these relationships in the face of the immense challenges presented by the pandemic.

### **1. Risk assessment and troubleshooting**

A few interviewees described the troubleshooting processes they undertook before rolling out programmes on various virtual platforms. This includes in some cases test runs with staff, or amongst a small group of regular participants to both get comfortable with the functions of the technology and to assess the risks that may be posed to participants:

*we trialled [new technology] just amongst staff first of all and imagined that we all were participants just went through the process of posting and yeah troubleshooting for the first little while. (INT11)*

*I didn't advertise it on Facebook. I just approached about 20 women who had been involved in cross-community work and said, do you know about Zoom? Would you be interested in trying a Zoom group? I kept it to, I had to keep it small to be able to manage it myself. (INT10)*

*we were very conscious the whole time of risk assessments; this is all brand new stuff we have to be careful about Zoom bombers and things like that, [...] we did trial runs where we had our coaches all on a Zoom call and you had to pretend to be 40-year-old Jimmy from up the road... and how do we manage that and how do we provide a safe, again, a safe and secure environment for our kids in person and how do we continue to provide that virtually as well. (INT05)*

### **2. Overcoming obstacles to online interaction**

Adapting to online engagement was challenging for many people, though interviewees working with younger people, and in particular younger girls, noted this demographic struggled to feel comfortable having their camera on or speaking on camera. They described the efforts they made so that participants would feel more comfortable engaging, whether by encouraging people to keep their cameras off if that made them feel more secure or by introducing creative activities that would take the focus off the faces on the screen:

*What we said for them is that we still want you to be engaged, how would you feel about being on the call camera off, muted and you communicate through the chat? And we sort of, we tried to provide different means for people to contribute to the conversations. (INT05)*

Introducing activities where focus was diverted to tasks and competition rather than speaking to one another directly on screen:

*what we did do is try and front load that more the competitive side of things so that if you were having to speak on camera, you weren't conscious of it being I have to get all my words right, it was I'm trying to do this quickly to get points for my team. And so, where that, inhibitions start to filter off a little bit. (INT05)*

Sometimes these competitive activities, especially for young people, helped to incentivise engagement:

*if you're doing stuff on Zoom or having your sessions or workshops where you're having games, we would then then have winners, and so the staff would then drop prizes round to the front doors and so he knew that there was a prize and some people go here, I'm going to go, I'm going to join that session today. I may get the hot noodle and a can of Coke. (INT09)*

It was, of course, acknowledged that participants responded in a variety of ways to this online form of interaction, and that some found it actually enabled their engagement in ways in-person activity would not have:

*for young people who have anxiety about you know, walking into your room with people that they don't know and adults as well, you know, only showing this amount of your face, or even being able just to kind of turn your video off and be there, be present, you know verbally has also been really helpful for some; for others, it's being really detrimental. (INT07)*

### **3. Replicating informal interactions**

A significant amount of progress in peacebuilding and relationship building occurs in the informal interactions taking place in the margins of organised activity. A recurring theme in conversations with practitioners was how such informality in particular was lost in online programmes: 'for many people who go to seminars and stuff like that, you know, it's the tea and coffee breaks that the learning happens in. It's the meeting and greeting at the start' (INT04). Many nevertheless found ways to replicate these informal interactions by leaving space for participants to chat online before and after sessions, or creating other spaces for conversations to continue:

*we've kind of opened the rooms up or sessions or whatever platform were using maybe 10 or 15 minutes early to allow like that kind of, you know, gathering of people and you can check in, how are you? Oh, look at your nice plant that's doing well. You know, just some of that social kind of interaction that we need, and then after meetings as well. (INT07)*

*off the back of some of those programmes, participants have went off and set up their own Facebook groups to stay in contact with one another and to keep those conversations going [between activities]. So, all in all largely successful and you know, out of a pretty chaotic time we were able to think of some ways to continue some of that engagement. (INT11)*

### **4. Communication and flexibility**

Interviewees described that much of what they have been able to achieve over the first months of lockdown was due to their practices of maintaining communication with participants, whether formally or informally and approaching all aspects of their work with flexibility.

*The staff were quite good at making contact with everyone either by email or by phone and if they were dropping off, finding out why that was the case, seeing how we could offer help and assistance in trying to get them back and involved. For the most part people appreciated that. (INT11)*

*Some people like to look at your face and they want to do something like this to have a conversation, even if it's just short conversation. Other times people prefer the phone, they prefer WhatsApp, text, whatever. Opening yourself to as many different lines of communication as possible and trying to maintain*

*relationships or build new ones on whatever platform or whatever way that works, is I think was going to if we come out of this in one piece with a decent good relations programme. (INT03)*

*Staying in touch with our stakeholders across the board, make sure because we don't have those environments where we would meet at other people's events and things just to be saying, 'oh have you heard this? Have you seen that?' Which is a big kind of part of how we engage on the issue... And then finding ways to keep, to keep that space for people. [...] I realise now that so far people have appreciated that we don't need an hours chat to find out how their family are coping with lockdown, it is just a 'hi, how's things' and a kind of exchange of news and info. (INT06)*

Maintaining these avenues for communication enabled organisations to be flexible and responsive to the needs of participants as well as staff. In some instances, this flexibility amounted almost to a co-production of activities with participants which gives them a greater sense of agency and ownership in the programmes:

*I think what helps more than anything else, is flexibility and a willingness act like and eagerness even put it front and centre of your approach to be as flexible as you can to accommodate people. [...] it feels like that kind of flexibility, communication almost constant communication without nagging people, you know constantly being open for conversations has helped. (INT03)*

*I let the group have a say, their say. You know, it's not about what I want, it should be what they want. So, it's maybe a conversation before I start anything with the group 'if anybody feels vulnerable, if anybody, how do you's want to deal with this?' You know, let them ones come up with their own you know, so they have a wee bit of ownership of it. (INT02)*

*I think the learning for me, and probably as an organisation, is listening more. And asking questions to better inform, not asking questions just to say, to tell me that I'm doing the right thing, but asking questions to, what are we doing wrong? What could we do to do it better? (INT05)*

This level of communication and flexibility further enabled organisations to provide opportunities for meaningful engagement rather than overloading participants who suddenly found themselves with too many opportunities for online activities:

*we tried to be as active as possible in the areas we felt would be most beneficial to people... it's really that sustained and meaningful engagement that really helped. And the feedback from that, from participants who took part was that they genuinely appreciated it and it helped them through that time. (INT11)*

*it's a matter of trying to keep people engaged and trying to bring things that people will be interested in... So again, it is a matter of just trying different things and trying to try our best. (INT04)*

## **5. Partnerships**

Drawing upon existing partnerships across organisations, and developing new networks, was integral in adapting responses to complex and interrelated issues emerging from the pandemic. These partnerships provided a range of benefits, including helping organisations to facilitate effective use of resources and collaboration in programming:

*We know what our strengths are but we know where other people's strengths are... I think you'll see a hell of a lot more of collaborative work happening. (INT04)*

*we have a sort of an understanding that we do not reinvent the wheel. If one of those organisations is running a programme then everybody else will support it, then we can run something different, and then everybody else. So, it's about, because resources are very light on the ground, we find it's a way that we*

*can share the resources that we have between all of us; rather than one group getting everything; and other groups getting nothing. (INT02)*

*we were kind of just working, and because we work in partnership with other organisations and we're not the lead, it was also trying to work with what they have, and everyone has slightly different capacity in terms of technology. (INT07)*

Partnership working in the ways described above provided other benefits to organisations during the early months of the pandemic, including a sense of support and solidarity amongst others working within the sector and coping with the impacts of the pandemic:

*what is most encouraging is when you're in contact with your partner organisations and we're all willing to do the same thing. It makes you feel less isolated, that you're not just sitting talking to your own computer in a corner here. That there's a purpose in what we're doing. (INT10)*

*during the lockdown then those partners, we haven't maybe been able to do any formal activity with each other, but they are still checking in, and they're still contacting, and were still liaising about where are you at? How are things for you? Where's [your organisation's] thinking? Here's where we're at. The funder has said this. What do you think? (INT01)*

## **6. Staff wellbeing**

Always mindful that the interviewees themselves and their colleagues were also navigating challenging personal and professional burdens stemming from the pandemic, many organisations implemented practices directed specifically at the wellbeing needs of their staff. For staff as well, there were fewer opportunities for informal interactions they would normally benefit from when meetings and conversations are mediated via a screen, so this was something organisations had to consciously enable:

*I think that's something that you lose very quickly if you don't have that camaraderie in the office or in your hub or the time to just sit and have lunch together or something happens and natural conversations [...] It becomes a very business-like and you lose relationship, so that that was really important I think in terms of just trying to maintain a little bit. (INT08)*

*we developed a staff wellbeing pack and that is really important and how we look after the mental health and emotional wellbeing of our staff [...] in our pack was the opportunity to speak with a counsellor [...] we instituted 1/2 days in May, June, and July. (INT09)*

## **7. Opportunities**

Finally, many of the lessons gleaned at this point in the pandemic included how their responses to the situation had created opportunities to span geographical boundaries in the short term and would enable new ways of working and new opportunities for creativity once restrictions would be relaxed. One benefit identified by a number of interviewees was that coordinating online would reduce the time and environmental impacts of their operations:

*it should cut down on a lot of unnecessary journeys that you might have, because you know sometimes you know you're traveling like an hour and a half to do an hour's meeting to travel back down again. So, I think that those type of things will be really, really useful. (INT04)*

*environmentally there's a responsibility there, let's try and not pump everything with our car fumes, so can we do something a bit differently there. Can we use these platforms to have people come in? Maybe have somebody in the room but have somebody join us by this. (INT07)*

In a similar vein, the online platforms used during the pandemic have overcome geographical barriers that would otherwise have limited access for those without the time or resources to travel and enabled groups to make connections across regional and even international boundaries.

*there was 44 at our meeting last week and all over the province, so, you know, I was able to tap into people who I probably wouldn't have if I wasn't at a Zoom meeting with them. I know them but, would I have tapped into them? Don't know, don't think so. (INT02)*

*our traditional face-to-face programme was, when we organised those, we may bring two groups from Belfast together, traditional PUL group, traditional CNR group and bring them together in a project. But because these programmes were open and available to anybody across the region to take part, what we found was we had people from Derry, and Belfast, and Coleraine, Enniskillen, and Monaghan... and that came throughout in the feedback from people, they appreciated the fact that they could speak to people who they otherwise wouldn't get a chance to speak to and hear a different perspective on things. (INT11)*

Others spoke of the creativity that the experience with new forms of technology would enable for future work, especially in terms of who can participate:

*if I've got a group down in Dublin, what I'd be able to do is I'll be able to basically even broadcast from Dublin to the ones back in the office or they recorded or whenever, or to put it up Live to say we're now in St Patrick's Church. (INT04)*

*now we're starting to think you know, nobody else is doing a basketball game here, nobody else can do one, so if we're doing it virtually, what other doors does that open to us, you know? We could probably, we've got connections with the NBA, could we get somebody on for 10 minutes to open it up, you know? We're starting to think it's allowed for a lot more creativity, which we're definitely appreciating. (INT05)*

This creativity was also mentioned in terms of opening up the activities and engagement this technology makes possible:

*there's been a kind of an allowance to do things differently out and be creative... And I think some of the staff have really are really risen to that and have really enjoyed that opportunity to be creative and think and do things differently. (INT07)*

*we're planning out our summer programming and we're doing something brand new as well, which we haven't done before, but part of that is using an app that the kids can connect through that has all our sessions, like our schedule on it that they can check in and out of, we post notifications. A lot of the logistical connection can happen through this one app. And we're looking at it now to see if this is something that could make our life a fair bit easier in person as well you know, keeping everything in one space. (INT05)*

*I think we've learned some stuff through this like I think, actually, that we we've learned how actually, you know, how we can use our social media better. And I think we've realized actually there are some things Zoom can be really useful moving forward in our work, we don't have to abandon it completely. (INT08)*

*I think something like Slack or even a closed group or something like that for people to stay in touch and to share experiences in the project or in some instances some of the chatter and the chat that we get through Slack it's... just that human interaction that people weren't getting. That happened quite a lot, so I think that one of the things that we might look to do when we do get back to face-to-face engagement is*

*having a mechanism that people can stay in touch between times, because... the feedback has told us that that has been beneficial. (INT11)*

Most of the workarounds and good practices developed over these early months of the pandemic were achieved through the determination, partnerships and problem-solving abilities of the organisations themselves. It remains to be seen the extent to which these lessons and even the opportunities identified at this stage will be effectively shared across the wider peacebuilding and community relations sector, and the following section outlines a number of the macro-level conditions that interviewees described as either conducive to developing and sharing their responses or constrained their ability to meet the challenges of building peace in a pandemic.

## **V. MACRO-LEVEL CONDITIONS**

The wider structures within which these organisational responses and adaptations have been made must of course enter into any discussion of how individual organisations have responded. Variable funding practices and government policies have in a very significant way enabled and/or constrained how organisations proceeded in these early months of the pandemic. The material and structural conditions of the community and voluntary sector itself are also crucial to acknowledge both in terms of understanding the adaptability or 'resilience' of the organisations persisting under the pressures of the Covid pandemic as well as the stark realities of underfunding, insecurity and burnout that necessitate such adaptability and resilience.

In many ways, the issues identified below have long been present in the broad arena of peacebuilding and community relations work in Northern Ireland. Many of the challenges raised earlier around uncertainty for the future, lack of clarity regarding funder expectations and fears for the future of peacebuilding work stem from funding and policymaking practices, both as part of longer-term patterns and specifically with regards to Covid responses.

### **1. Funding**

Peacebuilding and community relations work in Northern Ireland has been resourced by a complex web of funding bodies over the past two decades, each funder with their own sets of policies, practices and objectives. A 2018 report commissioned by Corrymeela identified and outlined a range of issues with the peace funding infrastructure that has at once invested an estimated four billion dollars in peace-focused initiatives, while also producing dynamics which are seen to constrain progress in building peace<sup>3</sup>. Findings included a substantial reduction in funding since the mid-2010s, bureaucratic conditions attached to funding, insecurity in funding that has led to loss of expertise and knowledge as staff positions are lost, and a pervasive sense that such work is undervalued. The report also found that such conditions necessitated more strategic practices which resonated with this study, such as an emphasis on partnership working to use funds more efficiently rather than competing with other organisations for funding or duplicating provisions.

When it came to the ways that funders enabled (or constrained) the responses of peacebuilding organisations in the early months of Covid, interviewees spoke of how crucial the flexibility extended by some funders was in how flexible they in turn were able to be in developing their responses and adapting their programming. One critical area interviewees felt was lacking, however, was that guidance and support provided by funders for how to deal with the emerging challenges of undertaking their work remotely was uneven and could have been more practical.

### ***Flexibility***

The reality that Covid regulations largely prevented organisations from delivering the activities for which they were funded necessitated this flexibility, yet there was also uncertainty about the extent to which that

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<sup>3</sup> Morrow, D, Faulkner-Byrne, L & Pettis, S (2018) *Funding peace: A report on the funding of Peace and Reconciliation work in Northern Ireland and Ireland 2007-2017*. Belfast: Corrymeela.

flexibility would be honoured and implemented when it came to monitoring and reporting outcomes and indeed how those outcomes during the Covid period would impact upon their ability to secure future funding. At least one of the interviewees I spoke with during this study did not have their funding extended into the next period.

*So, our engagement, the amount of engagement time in certain projects we asked for a reduction, which the funder were quite good with that, as long as there was a rationale there. And we sought permissions they were quite flexible in allowing this to change that early on, which helped us then to go off and be able to draw these plans up. So, we are quite lucky in that regard [...] it's been an ongoing discussion with them. (INT11)*

*we got flexible headings in which case we could like move some of the budget around, but the headings are there so that things like the exhibition and that could still happen. But that they would fund us to basically stay in touch with people and stay on top of the issues. So, we asked for less budget, but more of it towards kind of those kind of practicalities and staffing. (INT06)*

*The funders have been absolutely fantastic because they are actually taking their lead from the practitioners on the ground. [...] I've been quite fortunate whereby I have been able to have conversations with the Community Relations Council, with the Executive Office, about the type of stuff that we're doing that still falls into what it is we're funded for. But yet we're not delivering on the specifics, given the fact we can't, you know, but what we are trying to do is look at innovative ways to do that... they have been 100% behind us. (INT04)*

Of those who noted flexibility from their funders, many suggested this was more readily granted where there was an existing relationship with that funder and a track record of delivery:

*I'm very lucky... I'm not doing the work that I would do if I was out there in hands on, because I've been around all the groups and everything else, and [the funders] recognise that. (INT02)*

In many cases, the stakes of identifying funders who are flexible and willing to work with practitioners to fund the activity they can deliver in Covid circumstances meant the difference between maintaining whatever level of activity was feasible and shutting down:

*I'm not looking at any other funding because there's absolutely no way you can deliver what funders need. The only funders that look for process not delivery are Joseph Rowntree who finished funding us, Department of Foreign Affairs, who thank goodness are still funding us, and then luckily getting this grant which is process/product, but not kind of in a measurable delivery kind of way, you know. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here. (INT06)*

Even with positive reports about the flexibility granted in principle by funders, there was still substantial uncertainty about how this flexibility would be implemented in practice and fears that the decisions made in adapting or reducing activity during the pandemic would ultimately confront the reality of what funders were willing to compromise on:

*I suppose with their flexibility comes a challenge as well, because it's like, you know, do anything and then you're like, can we really do anything? Do you really mean... And not knowing you know, in six months' time when people begin to look at finances and things like that, are they going come back and say 'where all your sign in sheets?' You know, 'where's your evidence for this?' (INT07)*

*when asked directly about potential flexibility about targets, about doing the work in different ways, they said we're willing to be flexible and then, given no guidance on what they're willing to be flexible on, or*



*how flexible are willing to be, or on flexible on target numbers of individuals or on target groups, on dates on, you know, on methods delivery delivered. I have no idea [...] I understand that they're in the same positions as us, they're still trying to figure out how to do their work from home. But, I'm very concerned about line in the sand, inflexible targets, no clear way as to know if I'm meeting them. (INT03)*

### **Guidance and support**

Interviewees described a mixed bag in terms of the guidance they received from funders on the practicalities of adapting their work in response to the pandemic, whether that be use of technology and digital safeguarding or more substantive challenges around facilitating sensitive conversations online. Some highlighted shared learning opportunities where funders invited practitioners from different organisations to come together and share how they have adapted their programmes, however others noted that the learning from these sessions was not applicable to their work, and issues that were raised were not always addressed.

*they've given us no guidance on, for example, how to safely do Zooms online when people you might believe in, people with these feelings which numerous people have raised. They have given no guidance on how to approach doing in person work if such a circumstance arises in a few months' time. There have been no practical answers to any questions... There is no area in which they couldn't do better when it comes to guidance as for how we're supposed to go by doing our job. (INT03)*

*what might have helped almost like a bank of safe resources that could have been helpful or platforms to use. We were finding out from other people globally about the Zoom risks; where it would have been helpful to have our funders say we would suggest you use, this, this, this. It probably would have been helpful for us. (INT05)*

Where guidance was not necessarily forthcoming from funders, organisations shared their own protocols and policies to assist one another.

## **2. Community and voluntary sector**

The community and voluntary sector have long been relied upon for delivering the difficult and everyday work of peacebuilding on the ground often with limited resources and without joined up thinking in policy and funding infrastructure. The organisations that have survived these conditions are flexible and adaptable, used to working under pressure and problem-solving – the resilience and creativity on display through this time not surprising, but is often lauded without acknowledging the impacts of burnout on those doing the work.

Especially in the early weeks of the first lockdown, the community and voluntary sector absorbed and address many of the societal needs emerging from the pandemic:

*I think the voluntary community sector needs to be acknowledged for what they have done during this period of time. And this isn't about putting blame on councils are for anybody else, but we need to be going to be working much better together [...] what I have witnessed is the voluntary community sector just going and even putting the accelerator on. (INT07)*

The lack of resources and no continuity between short term funding cycles were not novel problems emerging from the pandemic but have indeed been persistent in the sector. This precarity and insecurity for both organisations and individual staff was brought to the surface in their responses to that first lockdown:

*it was only when something like this hit that you realised. I knew we were badly resourced, but I didn't really realise how badly resourced. And that's not just Shankill, because them other communities that I'm*

*on to they are all from the Women's Sector, all from the Women's Movement, and they are saying the same things. Now, when it comes to a crisis like this we're not, we're not armed. (INT02)*

*There's no continuity with funding. Where even, I'm not saying give me 10 years, even if they would give you 5, but even if you got 3, it means that I can focus on you know, 3 different/4 different groups. I wouldn't have the time to do that in a year because I would be leaving them dry come March and not know if I could take them to the next step. And I'd be probably leaving them in a vulnerable situation. You know, there's no continuity there. (INT02)*

*I think the Executive could, do something around supporting youth organizations and voluntary sector in terms of financing. And I suppose what we say is we don't need money for programmes. If we have people, we can have programmes, but if we don't have the staffing we can't have the programmes, so can you divert the funds from paying for that residential, at three grand or whatever it is, that's a salary for two months or more time or for six months. (INT09)*

Some interviewees expressed a sense that this short term-ism and chronic under-resourcing indicated a lack of recognition and valuing of the critical contributions made by the sector:

*You know, and if we withdrew all that community help and all that community support, it would cost them a hell of a lot more. It would cost them and every one of them is doing it free, voluntary, unpaid. So, I think they need to put a wee bit of that back into the people who are actually doing the work on the ground. (INT02)*

A few interviewees also highlighted the gendered division of labour and the reality that substantial work in the sector is carried out by women<sup>4</sup>, and how that should be acknowledged in the context of increasing and uneven burdens on women regarding domestic labour throughout the pandemic:

*When you see the amount of women that's out there doing that. I'm not saying there's not men, absolutely, there is, but when you see the amount of women that's out there and they're home-schooling, they are looking after elderly parents, and they're doing the food banks, they're doing the prescriptions, they're doing the messages, and they're keeping the house, they're doing their washing, they're doing their ironing [...] I think that there has to be a level of appreciation to the women within all the communities that's actually got out there and done something. (INT02)*

Where government policy has been rolled out – at the time of the interviews the first lockdown restrictions were beginning to ease and a 'roadmap' had been introduced for how this would occur – there was limited recognition of the position of the community and voluntary sector, nor did these policies provide any guidance to the sector:

*when I look at the NI Executive guidelines, the voluntary sector wasn't mentioned once in those guidelines, you had retail, education, transport, do you know all of these, but the voluntary sector didn't get a look in. (INT09)*

*I think it would be, it would be helpful if kind of the top-down stuff, if the top-down organisations, you know, whether that's the NIO [Northern Ireland Office] or politicians or statutory organisations have an understanding that those of us not in those big structures are going to have more difficulty dealing with things. (INT06)*

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<sup>4</sup> Data from the 2018 NICVA Workforce Survey confirms this, showing that three quarters of paid staff in the community and voluntary sector were women ([www.nicva.org/stateofthesector/workforce](http://www.nicva.org/stateofthesector/workforce)).

The successes in responding constructively to the conditions of the pandemic and adapting to address challenges presented was attributed by some to resilience within the community and voluntary sector:

*I think there's a resiliency within the voluntary community sector where people and I have to say my staff are phenomenal, they just they move, and they blend and they try things out and if it doesn't work and they kind of go right, that didn't work let's try something different. (INT07)*

Of course, this resilience narrative has been a double-edged sword for the sector, as much of the apparent resilience has been developed through years and even decades of underfunding, insecurity and the nature of their work on the coal face of social, economic and political issues within communities and results in significant pressure and burnout for those doing the work.

All of this culminates in the scale of burnout and health impacts experienced by people working on a voluntary basis and/or with limited resources. A frequent theme in interviews was how staff and volunteers in community organisations were stretched to the limit prioritising the needs of others, and even feeling guilty for not doing more:

*they're all burnt out. And even the people who were furloughed from the community and voluntary sector, I have seen them all over Facebook you know, volunteering. I don't even know if you're allowed to volunteer if you're furloughed, I haven't a clue. But they just feel so responsible and even during the furlough that they haven't took any time off. (INT01)*

*And a lot of those women are missing out on a whole lot of lot of other stuff, and they're not looking after themselves. (INT02)*

*it's responding to the kid's needs, and then us second. (INT05)*

*I've been sort of doing that too, keeping in touch with practitioners and workers as well. So, I didn't have to... I felt that guilt during the lockdown. Because I kept saying to my husband all the time, if I was well enough, if I didn't have that [shielding] letter, I know I'd be out there helping the community; but what can I do here? I can do nothing... it's a hard space for community and voluntary sector because I think because they felt that you know, that they had to be delivering over and above. (INT01)*

As interviewees state above, the crucial contributions of the community and voluntary sector throughout the pandemic must be acknowledged and organisations doing this work should be properly resourced so that they may develop long-term, sustainable programming.

## **VI. IMPACT ON COMMUNITY RELATIONS**

It would have been difficult to predict, at the time of the study, the longer-term impacts of the pandemic – or community and statutory responses to it – on community relations in Northern Ireland. Several high-profile events occurred amidst the interviews which were seen to raise tensions and concerns, including the Bobby Storey funeral<sup>5</sup> and the Twelfth of July, the spectre of which would continue to be raised in justification of unrest that came over several nights in April 2021.

From the vantage point of the time (May-August 2020), interviewees highlighted the ways they felt that community relations, both in the short and long term, would be impacted by responses to the pandemic. In terms of the positive, constructive impacts there was the range of mutual aid-type initiatives that coalesced around a sense of common need and experiences arising from the pandemic and created scenarios where

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<sup>5</sup> BBC News (2020) 'Bobby Storey funeral: O'Neill 'sorry' for grieving families' hurt', 3 July. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-53271201>.

people delivering food and other parcels to one another felt invested in a wider sense of community and crossed geographical and territorial boundaries many would not have done under 'normal' circumstances. However, there was also, at the time, a generalised concern shared amongst interviewees that the pandemic could have more detrimental impacts on community relations and the state of peace in Northern Ireland. In the shorter term, it was observed that some of the mutual aid responses were insular and that there was politicking and competition over who was to be seen to be delivering community support. Other troubling impacts in the longer term were associated with consequences of the restrictions themselves, including the long-term mental health impacts of sustained isolation, the exacerbation of gendered harms under lockdown and the impact on younger people during this time, as well as the politicisation of covid-related incidents. Further to these issues, many expressed concerns about the future of the sector itself.

### **1. Building community**

Many spoke optimistically about how they saw people building relationships and community on the basis of the common experiences they were sharing, and the generosity that was being extended across and beyond 'traditional' communities:

*it has brought people together who would never ever, ever be in the same room together. Just it has made people go in the areas that they would never, ever thought of going into. And again, it you know for one of the I suppose one of the good things it is actually come out of this whole thing is that whole sense the community, that whole sense of people helping each other and looking out for their neighbours. And looking out for neighbours that they probably would never have considered were their neighbours. (INT04)*

*Now there's no thinking. If there's a parcel needs to be delivered, they're not looking at an address going 'ach I can't go there'. [...] I lived through the Troubles, so communities did come together and the difference with this and communities coming together during the conflict – the Troubles here – each community came together in their own areas, this time, all communities are coming together, and it doesn't matter what community. (INT02)*

*if anything, for the older programme it's brought them closer together, because there's that humanity, there's people on that screen, it's not just such and such that would have been on the other team – it's not the opponent anymore. It is just somebody else that's going through the same thing as me. So, having that opportunity I think was really good for them to share that vulnerability, but still be safe in their own home as well. [...] we've actually had some really cool opportunities in that you know, our kids come to us and now we're going to them. But they're sitting technically in each other's homes, and they're able to see, oh that's what your house looks like and having conversations like that. (INT05)*

*some of the groups that we're working with [...] are responding on the very practical level and building relationships and building trust within that kind of group but also within the community has been really positive. (INT07)*

One interviewee shared that, while they were not yet sure what the reasoning was, their programme evaluations measuring attitudinal change suggested a greater positive change than their in-person programmes had:

*one of the things we ask on our baseline and end evaluations is you know, it's some of the traditional peace questions around traditional backgrounds and things like that, and how you feel about members of the opposite community. And when face-to-face the results from that evaluation forms were proving that people were you know, getting a rewarding experience, developing new creative skills and learning something new; but also changing their attitudes around people from different faiths and backgrounds.*

*That's actually increased now that we've been online and the feedback showing that people are more likely to change their attitudes as a result of this programme. (INT11)*

Another interviewee hoped that the communal response during this period could have a knock on effect whereby the sense of recognising just what shared responses to common needs can achieve.

*if there do end up being positives, you know, that we sort out our massive amount of hospitals and coordinate them around the service need rather than community affiliation, you know. There could be benefits like that that would have a wider cross-community benefit. (INT06)*

## **2. Generalised concern**

These optimistic assessments of the shorter and longer-term impacts of the pandemic gave way to a more generalised sense of concern about the need to be on 'high alert' (INT04) about the short and long-term impacts of the pandemic on peacebuilding and community relations:

*I hope in my heart of hearts that this is paranoia and not reality, but I think I can see the beginnings of a sort of a maybe fear motivated retraction into your own community. So, I think a lot of people are afraid of what happens when I go out to shop? What happens when I go when life reopens again? Will I feel comfortable going about my role in my life? And because, there's a different kind of discomfort associated with doing cross-community work and going physically into places that aren't your area. So, now they've got to overcome a physical discomfort about their health, as well as an emotional discomfort about what they're going to be confronted with having these conversations. So, I'm a little concerned that it might be harder to get people to reach out who weren't already doing that work anyway... I'm a little concerned that I'm seeing a start of like we do our thing; you do your thing. You look after yours we'll look after ours. It could be paranoia based on all this, um look how much we're doing for our community, versus how much they are doing for their community is continual competition. This, you know, politicisation of the virus. But yes, I'm a little concerned it might be hard to get people to going to their own buildings, let alone them'uns buildings. (INT03)*

*you know I don't like social distancing; I think it's the wrong term, I think it should be called physical distancing. And I worry even just the psychological damage just being told that we're socially distancing when peacebuilding is about relationships. It's quite interesting where in the week that John Hume has died and people are quoting him and realising that peacebuilding is about relationships, you know, between communities here, between east and west and north and south. And there is a real possibility that this could take us a step backwards. You know, we're used to steps backwards feeling like a big fissure because something politically happens and you can see community tensions; but it could be a step backwards just because we are all socially distanced, by which I mean properly socially distanced, not physically distanced... we may be three steps backwards from where we were, and in a quite intangible hard to measure way. (INT06)*

This sense of concern also arose out of the reality that many found it harder to gauge the community relations climate in this vacuum of social contact. Many of those working in peacebuilding and community relations would spend significant time having conversations, meeting with people, going into different areas to keep tabs on the general state of community relations. With limited in-person contact, and especially for those workers quoted below who were medically vulnerable and shielding, these interviewees described feeling more detached and less aware of the dynamic and complex environment:

*I don't know, because I'm so used to knowing by being out and about talking to people, and being in west Belfast, being in east Belfast, being in north Belfast. You know, having coffee with somebody, being at an event and sitting beside somebody that I know, or somebody that I don't know. I kind of feel like my antennae are cut off... (INT06)*

*just before the 12<sup>th</sup> I messaged them all and said, hi guys look at the minute you's are the eyes and ears for me here... I need you to keep your eye out here for flag, emblems, for any dissident activity, anything that's happening over band parades, or anything to do with bonfires – please keep your eye out. [...] those connections are still kept with people that I still have got a good idea of what's been happening, not a great idea. (INT01)*

### **3. Competition and protectionism**

Another concern arising out of discussions about direct aid responses to Covid and lockdown was an increased sense of competition and protectionism about providing for one's 'own community' that countered the sense that bridges were being built across traditional communal boundaries:

*some groups were really open and transparent about what they were doing and then there's other groups maybe just served their own community or whatever. So, you're hearing wee bits and pieces that are coming out of lockdown that maybe you think things weren't all as rosy maybe as we thought they were... still a wee bit of protectionism there, a wee bit of competition and you know, who can give out the most. (INT01)*

*I think part of it is because some people can't resist the temptation to politicize everything and so therefore it's 'look what we are doing for our community'. 'It belongs to us'. 'It is ours'. As opposed to 'look what people are doing within our community as a whole'. It's understandable why political parties do that; obviously, they have everything to gain and nothing to lose. But it's too easy to let ourselves slip into that way of thinking to and I think, especially when it has been very emotionally difficult for people to be involved with cross-community work, all it needs is something like that for to push them away. (INT03)*

### **4. Politicisation of Covid**

There were also several instances where regulation and observation of lockdown restrictions as well as Covid itself became politicised<sup>6</sup>, which interviewees identified as detrimental to community relations. One interview in the lead up to the Twelfth of July expressed concern that breaches at the Storey funeral would be used to justify further breaches at parades:

*this is the first time that I can remember the 12<sup>th</sup> of July celebrations being cancelled, right? [...] Do you see, if this [funeral] had just happened maybe two weeks ago, we'd be in a different situation with the Twelfth of July and bonfires and all that there type of stuff. Do you see now that the screws have been loosened a little bit I think what's happening now, and you only have to look at north Belfast at some of the stuff that's happening up there, whereby I believe we've went backwards instead of forwards. You know to do with things of slogans being put up on walls, people not feeling welcome in church spaces. [...] I do believe that there's people who will take opportunities to exploit the situation for their own benefit and stir up tensions. (INT04)*

Controversial events that strain community relations are certainly not anathema to Northern Ireland, but one interviewee pointed out how the inability to meet and discuss such issues in person due to the pandemic allowed the funeral in particular to become a more polarising issue:

*I think it's hard to counter what's in the news just now about Michelle O'Neill at the funeral. So, if that's coming up and people were angry about it from you know, that could be discussed in a, you'd be in a group and you'd be in the centre and you talk... But when you're not seeing each other, when you're not*

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, statement by then DUP Minister of Agriculture Edwin Poots that 'the difference in transmission between nationalist and unionist areas was "around six to one"'. BBC News, 'Coronavirus: Call for DUP's Edwin Poots to apologise' 19 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-54598528> (accessed 5 August 2021).

*engaging that same way, then maybe you do become more polarised. You're not really hearing the other side. (INT10)*

## **5. Social media vacuum**

In this absence of public interaction, much of the discourse around Covid restrictions and various political events, of which the Storey funeral was just one, became focused on social media platforms like Twitter. One interviewee highlighted how inflammatory the discourse on social media was becoming in this time, and that it was often gendered and misogynistic in its tone:

*I think the social media stuff, I think it's gone, definitely gone during coronavirus, I think it's allowed for a gap and largely meeting face-to-face, so the only engagement they've been having is online. And you had the funeral, then you had the tweets about the bonfires, and now you have the misogyny. And it's just boom, boom, boom... what do you do with that and where do you take that? (INT01)*

*the misogyny happening with women at the minute is just unreal. It's just been terrible what I've read in the last week about some community workers, and journalists, and bloggers, and influencers, and women seem to be getting a really tough time at the minute online. (INT01)*

## **6. Mental health**

Another impact of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions that interviewees raised was the short- and long-term mental health implications. Many drew a direct connection between the negative impact the isolation of lockdown will have had on individuals and communities with community relations work itself:

*I'm doing a whole lot more stuff that I wouldn't be doing [pre-Covid] and mental health is one of those, because if we can't work with people with their mental health there's not going to be good relations happening. (INT02)*

*I would say that coming out of this whole thing what we're going to be looking at is lots of mental health issues. Suicides, alcohol and drug dependencies, domestic violence, child welfare difficulties and problems. Because, because the kids haven't been at school and nobody can pick up on what's happening to them in the house or whatever. So, you're basically going to be looking at all of this tsunami coming down the road. And I think what people are trying to do, and certainly what we're trying to do anyway, is gear up for that, so at least it's not just going to be oh my goodness, where did all that come from? So, working on strategies and working on interventions to try and cope with what's coming; I think it's a major part of our plan at this particular point in time. (INT04)*

*I think that the mental emotional health and wellbeing of young people. The reality is that everybody is going to have some form of PTSD and trauma as a result of this. (INT09)*

*And also seeing how lonely and isolated some people can be... I think we're seeing a massive impact on mental health [...] for those people whose lives were already chaotic this has been quite a challenge for them, never mind the fact that there's illness, you know there are people dealing with health issues as well and that's significant (INT07)*

The isolation of lockdown also held the potential to evoke troubling memories of conditions during the conflict that could have deeply concerning impacts on people who are living with the legacy of trauma and loss:

*I realise just talking to the women and speaking to the women and having the meetings that I'm having there is a very big still dependence here in Northern Ireland to meet, to be with people; that social interaction is vital. And I don't know if that's anything to do with our history of the Troubles, because we*

*were isolated then in our own areas, and maybe it's a memory coming back to people? I don't know. I mean I will be speaking to the women on the other side of this and I will be asking those type of questions off them. [...] The big thing, because we were isolated in our own communities you couldn't have went into town, there was a whole lot of things that you couldn't do during the conflict here, and now we're back there again. (INT02)*

## **7. Gendered impacts**

One particular area of concern, both directly and indirectly related to peacebuilding and community relations, was the gendered impacts of the pandemic. Many of these wider policy concerns and disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women are reflected in the *Feminist Recovery Plan* (2020) developed by the Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland.<sup>7</sup> Speaking specifically about the gendered impacts on peacebuilding work, interviewees raised barriers of childcare and domestic labour, as well as misogyny and domestic violence preventing women from taking part in and contributing in the work of relationship building.

*one huge impact for women obviously has been lack of childcare and lack of not being in school. So, I know there's a group of women who would have loved to take part in Zoom groups and seeing their friends again and try to get their online working, but they can't. They've got kids at home. [...] That's going to expose a group of women who really it will really set things back, so far. (INT10)*

*We know that lockdown has affected women who experience domestic abuse. We know that, and the advice workers are getting far more calls about it and they are doing home visits when they can. But it's at the door visits. So, that's a, for the women's centre it does feel like we've just gone back. I know this has been expressed everywhere, but we've just gone back into a war in terms of domestic abuse. In terms of women being able to engage in education and work, or even thinking about getting out to work. (INT10)*

*It worries me because a lot of practitioners are women too, so, that would concern me. Because it seems to have got very, very negative. Very negative so, I don't know what the implications will be for me as a woman going back out again. (INT01)*

## **8. Impacts on young people**

For those working with young people, they too raised the reality that Isolation and other impacts of the pandemic are felt acutely by children and young people in ways that have significant consequences for peacebuilding and community relations. One practitioner noted that:

*we're going to be with a generation, and it could be impacted for the next five, seven years, whatever it is of lower educational attainment. And what does that mean? How do we support young people who are getting handed predicted grades? Why would I bother going to university in September? Like I think if anybody asks me, saying defer, don't go for this year. But what does that look like? What family damage has been done? [...] So, we need to look at how do we help young people build resilience? How do we help them unpack what these four months, six months a year, two years whatever it's going to be, how that has impacted them? (INT09)*

Unfortunately, the sustained unrest that occurred in April 2021 brought to bear many of these concerns about the impacts on young people.

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<sup>7</sup> Women's Policy Group Northern Ireland (WPG) (2020) *Feminist Recovery Plan*. Available at: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WPG-NI-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-2020.pdf> (accessed 5 July 2021). The plan was updated with new evidence gathered in the year that followed, and a Supplementary Research Report was launched on 28 July 2021, available at: <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/WPG-Feminist-Recovery-Plan-Research-Report-Womens-Voices-at-the-Core.pdf> (accessed 30 July 2021).



## **9. Future of peacebuilding work**

Finally, many of the interviewees spoke about the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on the work of peacebuilding and community relations.

*So, what we're long-term concerned about and I'm trying to push very far to the back of my head because it is completely out of my control is what does the community sector look like at all, in a year's time? Are they giving out funding for the kind of work that we do when we can't do it as we normally would? This is one of the reasons I'm trying my best to deliver the best program I can in limited circumstances [...] So that you can show the value of the work you do. (INT03)*

*I think a lot of things – like lockdown and washing hands and staying two metres apart – a lot of things changed overnight like that and we can see all of that. But I think there are other things that are going to change subliminally in terms of priorities and issues and things like that [...] I worry that peacebuilding is such an ethereal kind of activity that it will lose emphasis, or I don't know what the word is, I think it's going to suffer but not in a measurable way. And I don't know how we – and by we I mean everybody, I don't mean us as an organisation, I mean us as a society – how we prepare for that? (INT06)*

The projections above regarding how the pandemic would impact upon peacebuilding and community relations in both the short- and long-term can be viewed with hindsight nearly a year later. Some were thankfully not as acute as predicted, whereas others, such as gendered harms experienced across different arenas and the impacts upon younger people, have unfortunately rung true. Close attention to the on-going and longer-term impacts of the pandemic on peacebuilding and community relations in Northern Ireland will be required for as long as it continues, and beyond.

## **VII. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study provided an opportunity for practitioners to pause and reflect on their responses and adaptations in the early months of the pandemic, though only tells a partial story. At the time of writing, the pandemic has continued through additional lockdowns, roll out of vaccines and mutations of the virus threatening the re-introduction of restrictions. It will be important to reflect on how the responses described above have evolved in this time.

Several key recommendations in response to the study are summarised below:

- 1. Formal recognition must be given for the work accomplished throughout the pandemic, not only in terms of its direct responses to the pandemic itself but for continuing to creatively push forward with core peacebuilding and community relations initiatives under such circumstances.** This recognition should include a commitment to better support grassroots peacebuilding and community relations work through more sustainable, longer-term funding, and initiatives to gather and share learning for the development of future work.
- 2. Regardless of the method, demographics or content, relationships are at the heart of peacebuilding work, and the pandemic produced considerable challenges to the hard work of maintaining relationships and building new ones. Restoring and strengthening relationships in the wake of the pandemic should be an explicit objective of peacebuilding funding, policymaking and programmes going forward.** These relationships may refer to those built, strengthened or transformed during cross-community activities, within traditional community structures or groups, in partnerships between organisations whose objectives align and even those relationships of individuals with themselves and their past experiences. The strain of the pandemic on this crucial

relationship work was tangible and acutely highlighted the need to foster and maintain the many interwoven relationships which sustain and drive forward peacebuilding in the region.

3. **It is crucial to be proactive in addressing issues emerging from and exacerbated by the pandemic, including deteriorating mental health conditions, the gendered impact of the pandemic and its acute impacts on young people, which will have long term impacts on community relations and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland.** Most interviewees highlighted the severity of the mental health crisis being exacerbated by the pandemic in its own right, and many made direct links between mental health and community relations. Similarly, research undertaken in the development of the Feminist Recovery Plan highlights the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women, whose are crucial stakeholders in peacebuilding processes. The impacts of the pandemic on young people, too, must be addressed and the unrest around Easter of 2021 highlights the necessity of engaging young people directly in peacebuilding and community relations. There remains overwhelming need for well-resourced, sustainable peacebuilding work that is responsive to other, interrelated social issues.
4. **Practical guidance and frameworks from funders and statutory organisations who are better positioned to reflect holistically on the breadth and scope of peacebuilding work would enable more joined up support for and responses to specific needs emerging from the pandemic, as well as wider peacebuilding needs.** Interviewees acknowledged that attempts were made to do this early in the pandemic, but some expressed frustration that shared learning opportunities were often not broadly applicable. Developing and sharing specific guidance in areas such as digital safeguarding and capacity building for online delivery would be particularly helpful. Many peacebuilding and community relations organisations that were sustained through the early period of the pandemic did so by virtue of their own grassroots partnerships and sharing of resources.
5. **Further attention is needed to understand the opportunities identified as a result of innovations and adaptations made by peacebuilding and community relations organisations during this time, and how these opportunities may be built upon the future. This attention should be accompanied with broader efforts to gather, reflect upon, and share learning from peacebuilding activity in the region.**