

DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES COVID-19 SUPPORT ACHIEVEMENTS

S U M M A R Y



Department for
Communities

An Roinn

Pobal

Department fur

Commonities

www.communities-ni.gov.uk



MARCH 2021



Department for
Communities

An Roinn
Pobal

Department for
Commonities

www.communities-ni.gov.uk

**Supporting
people**

**Building
communities**

**Shaping
places**

beobje
gnoboruđ

commonities
gnoboruđ

bracez
gnoboruđ

HOME / CONTENTS



Click the icons below

MINISTERIAL FOREWORD



Since March 2020, we have all experienced the profound impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has changed so many aspects of our lives.

It is safe to say that our communities, particularly where poverty already existed, have felt the impacts of the pandemic deeply. And while the introduction of restrictions by the Executive have been essential to help keep us safe, there has been a heavy price paid by all, including across our Sports, Arts, Culture and Heritage sectors who have not been able to operate fully during this prolonged period. This has significantly constrained their ability to generate the income they rely on, but from a broader societal perspective we have all experienced the loss of not being able to avail of their facilities or to enjoy their events, which play such a critical role in our physical and mental wellbeing. Our Charity, Social Enterprise and Community sectors have also experienced the full force of the pandemic, and have experienced a significant increase in the need for their services.

While these challenges have been significant, I am extremely proud to say that my

Department responded innovatively and at pace from the outset, and to date, we have provided over **£300 million** in supports to the people, communities and sectors who have been directly impacted by this unprecedented pandemic.

This Department, through partnership working across central and local government, with our Arm's Length Bodies, with the Community and Voluntary Sector and with other essential delivery partners, has put in place an extensive range of measures to mitigate the immediate social, economic and wellbeing effects of COVID-19 upon our communities. This joined up working enabled us to move quickly to protect vulnerable people and safeguard the organisations they depend on.

This summary provides an overview of the range of initiatives and interventions my Department has provided to date, while at the same time, it has continued to deliver many key strategic priorities.



Minister Hargey on a visit to the 174 Trust in Duncairn Arts Centre North Belfast

Unfortunately the pandemic has only served to highlight long-standing and worsening inequalities within our society, and an effective and sustainable approach to recovery is needed to address those issues strategically.

In planning and delivering our recovery from COVID-19 we must collectively focus on building a fairer society. I am continuing to plan for how the longer-term effects of the pandemic can be mitigated through:

- Tackling unemployment and delivering inclusive economic growth
- Protecting the vulnerable including through delivering a cross government anti-poverty strategy
- Improving the supply of decent and affordable Housing
- Working with local councils to support town & city centre recovery
- Providing support for our communities and the organisations that support community development
- Supporting the recovery of our culture, arts and heritage sectors
- Supporting a safe return to sport and physical activity

My Department's plan for social and economic recovery in the wake of the pandemic, 'An Inclusive Social Recovery', will focus the need for co-ordinated policies and interventions, alongside a targeted focus on poverty and social deprivation.

During what has been a difficult year for us all, I want to express a huge thanks to every member of staff across the Department. You have worked tirelessly to ensure this expanse of support was delivered to those most in need, and you have shown an outstanding commitment to public service delivery.



I also want to acknowledge and thank our partners across the voluntary and community sector, our advice sector and all our many grassroots organisations and community activists who played a vital part in working with us to deliver these important interventions.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Deirdre Hargey".

DEIRDRE HARGEY
COMMUNITIES MINISTER

RÉAMHRÁ ÓN AIRE



Ó bhí mí an Mhárta 2020 ann, tá aithne againn uilig ar thionchair mhóra na paidéime COVID-19 a d'athraigh roinnt gnéithe éagsúla dár saol.

Is fíor a rá gur chuir an phaindéim isteach go mór mór ar ár bpobail, go háirithe sna háiteanna a raibh an bhochtaineacht iontu cheana. Cé go raibh géarghá leis na srianta a chuir an Feidhmeannas i bhfeidhm chun muid a choinneáil slán, is daor a dhíol muid uilig as, sna hearnálacha Spóirt, Ealaíon, Cultúir agus Oidhreacht san áireamh, earnálacha nach raibh in ann feidhmiú le linn na tréimhse fada seo. Chuir sé sin srian lena gcumas ioncam a shaothrú, ioncam a mbíonn siad ag brath air, ach ó dhearcadh na sochaí ginearálta, tá aithne againn uilig ar an chailleadh ann nach bhfuil muid ábalta leas a bhaint as a n-áiseanna ná sult a bhaint as a n-imeachtaí, rudaí a bhfuil ról fíorthábhachtach acu inár bhfolláine intinne agus coirp. Chuir fórsa iomlán na paidéime isteach ar na hearnálacha Carthanais, Fiontair Shóisialta, agus Pobail agus tháinig méadú mór ar an ghá lena seirbhísí.

Cé gur suntasach iad na fadhbanna seo, is údar bróid domh a rá gur léiríodh stuaim sa Roinn nuair a chuathas i ngleic leis na

fadhbanna go gasta ón fhiorthús. Agus go dtí an pointe seo chuir muid **£300 milliún** i dtacaíochtaí ar fáil do dhaoine, pobail, agus earnálacha ar chuir an phaindéim seo nach bhfacthas riamh isteach orthu.

Trí chomhpáirtíocht trasna an rialtais áitiúil agus an rialtais láir lenár gcomhlachtaí páirtspleácha, leis an Earnáil Pobail agus Dheonach agus le comhpáirtí seachadta, shocraigh an Roinn réimse mór beartas chun maolú a dhéanamh ar éifeachtaí láithreacha an COVID-19 ar ár bpobail i dtaca leis an tsochaí an geilleagar agus an folláine. Chuir an obair chomhleanúnach seo ar ár gcumas daoine leochaileacha a chosaint, chomh maith leis na heagraíochtaí a mbíonn siad ag brath orthu.

Léiríonn an achomire seo léargas ar chineálacha éagsúla tionscnaimh agus idirghabhála a chuir an Roinn ar fáil go dtí an pointe seo, agus ag an am chéanna, lean sí de bheith ag tabhairt go leor príomhthosaíochtaí straitéiseacha chun críche.

Ar an drochuair níl i ngearchéim na paindéime ach deis againn míchothromaíochtaí seanbhunaithe atá ag dul in olcas inár sochaí a thabhairt chun solais, agus ní mór cur chuige chun téarnaimh atá éifeachtach agus inbhuanaithe a bheith againn chun dul i ngleic go straitéiseach leis na ceisteanna sin. Chun an téarnamh ón COVID-19 a phleanáil agus a thabhairt chun críche ní mór dúinn díriú ar shochaí níos cothroime a chothú.

Tá mé ag leanúint de bheith ag pleanáil maidir le cad é mar is féidir le héifeachtaí fadtéarmacha na paindéime a mhaolú trí na rudaí seo a leanas:

- Dul i ngleic leis an dífhostaíocht agus fás eacnamaíoch ionchuimsitheach a thabhairt chun críche.
- Daoine leochaileacha a chosaint lena n-áirítear trí straitéis trasrialtais in aghaidh na bochtaineachta a thabhairt chun críche;
- Feabhas a chur ar sholáthar tithíochta sóisialta atá maith inacmhainne.
- Ag obair i gcomhar le comhairlí áitiúla lena chinntiú go dtiocfaidh láir cathracha agus láir bailte i dtreis arís;
- Ag tabhairt tacaíochta dár bpobail agus do na heagraíochtaí a thacaíonn le forbairt pobail;
- Ag tacú lenár n-earnálacha Cultúir, Ealaíon agus Oidhreachta teacht i dtreis arís; agus
- Ag tacú le spórt agus gníomhaíocht coirp a bheith ann athuair;

Is é ‘Téarnamh Sóisialta Ionchuimsitheach’ teideal phlean na Roinne, le haghaidh téarnamh sóisialta agus eacnamaíoch agus sa phlean seo tarraingítear aird ar an ghá le cineálacha éagsúla beartas agus idirghabhála, i dteannta béim láidir ar an bhochtaineacht agus dealús sóisialta.

Le linn na bliana seo a bhí an-deacair dúinn uilig, ba mhaith liom buíochas a thabhairt do gach ball foirne sa Roinn. Rinne sibh sár-obair gan stad gan staonadh lena chinntiú go bhfuair na daoine ba mhó gá an réimse mór tacaíochta agus b’iontach an tiomantas a léirigh sibh don seirbhís phoiblí.

Ba mhaith liom aitheantas agus buíochas a thabhairt dár gcompháirtithe san earnáil dheonach agus pobail, san earnáil comhairle agus na heagraíochtaí cosmhuintire agus na gníomhaithe pobail a raibh ról ríthábhachtach acu chun na cineálacha éagsúla idirghabhála seo a thabhairt chun críche.



DEIRDRE HARGEY
An tAire Pobal

MEENESTER'S FORRIT



Sine Mairch 2020 ivryboadie hes hed the unco impacts o' the Covid - 19 pandemic at hes althered sae monie pairts o' oor lifs.

Hit's richt tae alloo at oor communities, an maistly thaim at wur pur tae stairt wi', hae hed a waefu impact fae the pandemic. Whiles the bringin' in o' restrictions bae the Executive wus needit fer oor safetie, ivryboadie hes hed tae pay a waefu price. Amang thaim oor spoart, airts, cultur an' heirskeip sectors at havnae bein fit tae waark richt aa this tim'. Thon hed waefu ootcums oan thaim bein fit tae mak' the catter they ir needfu' o'. Hooiniver, mair braidly, we hae aa felt the loass o' no bein' fit tae uise thair facilities ir heid tae thair events an' daeins at ir gyely important fer oor weilness o' mon' an' boadie. Oor charity, social enterprise an' community sectors hae felt forebye the fu' force o' the pandemic langside a stie rise in need fer thair waark.

The mair at thon ir baag challanges A'hm gye croose tae alloo at mae Department maide a quaak an' airtfu repone fae the stairt, an, sae far, we hae gien mair nor **£300Million**

tae bield the fowk, communities an' sectors waefuly impacted bae thon byordnar pandemic.

This Department bae pairtnerscheip waarkin across central an' locail government, wi' oor airm's length boadies an' wi' the community an' voluntary sectors an' wi' ither important delivery pairtners hae brocht aboot a clatter o' missures tae bield agin the furst social, economic an' healtht waefu ootcums o Covid - 19 fer oor communities. Thon weill thocht oot waarkin maide iz fit tae ect quaak tae bield vunerable fowk an' the boadies they hae need fer.

This summin' ap gies an owresicht o' the differ ections mae Department hes tuk sae far whiles, forebye, hit hes carriet oan deliverin monie important strategic priorities.

Waefully the pandemic hes onie heighlit lang stannin an' wor' getting' inequalities in oor

society an we ir sair needfu' o' finnin richt waarkin an' sustainable wies tae bettherment gif we ir tae address thae issues strategically.

Tae plen an' cairry oot oor getting owre o' Covid – 19 we maun luk aa hoo tae bigg a fairer society.

- A'hm fer cairryin oan plennin fer hoo the langer term ootcums o' the pandemic can bae gat owre bae;
- Taakin oan unemployment an' gien graith fer ivryboadie
- Bieldin thaim at ir vulnerable includin' bae cairryin oot a croass government strategy agin poverty
- Supplyin mair gid an' affordable hoosin.;
- Waarkin wi' locail cooncils tae support toon an city centre recovery;
- Gien support fer oor communities an' tae thae organisations ettlin aa community development;
- Supportin' the recovery o' oor cultur, airts an' heirskeip sectors an';
- Supportin' a saife restairtin o' spoart an' physical daeins.

Mae Depairtment's plen fer social an' economic recovery efter the pandemic "An Inclusive Social Recovery", wul airt hitsel aa the need fer co-ordinated policies an' daeins langside a targetted focus oan poverty an' social deprivation.

In what wus a gyely haird yeir fer ivryboadie A'hm wantin' tae thank ivryboadie waarkin tae the Depairtment. Ye hae wrocht haird tae mak' siccar at thae supports an' bieldins wur gien tae thaim at wur maist needfu' o' thaim. In daein thon ye hae shewn an ootstannin commitment tae deliverin' public service. Forebye thon A'hm wantin tae acknowledge an' gie thanks tae oor pairtners acroass the voluntary an' community sector, an' the clatter o' gressroots boadies at did sairly needfu' waark langside iz tae deliver what fowk wur needin.



DEIRDRE HARGEY
MEENESTER FUR COMMONITIES

PERMANENT SECRETARY FOREWORD



No-one could have predicted the challenges that each of us would face since the pandemic took hold in March 2020, and every one of us has experienced the impact of COVID-19 on our lives at work and in home in ways we could never have anticipated.

The pandemic has also significantly impacted the people and communities we serve and the sectors that we, as the Department for Communities, support.

This publication highlights some of the great work we have delivered in partnership and in response to the pandemic, including the wide range of interventions and initiatives we established to mitigate the consequences of COVID-19. It demonstrates a performance that reflects the energy, capability and unrelenting commitment of our teams who quickly and proactively adapted to new ways of working to help deliver urgent support and assistance to the most vulnerable people and communities in our society.

The economic and social repercussions of COVID-19 has hit our most vulnerable communities hard and will be with us for many years to come; and as we look ahead, this Department will remain at the forefront of

supporting recovery within our communities and in responding to the effects that the pandemic will have upon our economy, our society and our well-being.

I believe that the lessons learnt from the delivery of our emergency responses gives us a strong platform from which we can move forward and we will continue to consider how we can best target and deliver our services to support those in need, and to develop new services to meet new demands.

In our response to COVID-19, we have worked hand in hand with our Arms Length Bodies (ALB's) and built powerful collaborations with a range of partners inside and outside of Government including the sports, arts, culture, heritage, local government, community and voluntary sectors. We must reaffirm our commitment to build upon this partnership working and embed the lessons we have learnt about increased agility and

responsiveness as we grow and extend our work to meet the new challenges our Strategy, Building Inclusive Communities 2020-2025 sets.

This will include working with our partners to support the wellbeing of our communities ensuring people have access to leisure and sport as well as arts and heritage reopening facilities when it is safe to do so. The arts and culture sectors will also provide opportunities to reflect on, and interpret the pandemic, as well the promise of sharing music and laughter together again.

Our excellent relationships with local councils have highlighted that our shared and distinct strengths need to continue to be deployed collaboratively to maximise public sector impacts and achieve shared outcomes for our communities.

Whilst I recognise there are many challenges still ahead I am immensely proud of our collective response to deliver public services for our communities despite the unprecedented circumstances we have faced over the last 12 months. This allows me to look forward with optimism to how we will continue to respond to challenges and the opportunities that are ahead for us all.

Tracy Meharg

TRACY MEHARG
PERMANENT SECRETARY



THE DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITIES

The Department for Communities is the largest government Department in the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS).

The Department employs around 8,600 people including around 1,700 agency staff. It has an annual budget of over £8 billion. We are supported in delivering our services by 15 Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) and a number of Advisory Groups.

The Department provides support to meet the needs of some of the most disadvantaged citizens, families and communities and as a

department we aim to deliver our services by working collectively towards our common purpose, **Supporting people, Building communities and Shaping places.**

There are five main Groups within the Department and throughout the pandemic they delivered a wide range of support, interventions and initiatives as well as continuing to progress key strategic projects.



COVID-19 FUNDING ALLOCATIONS



March 2020 - March 2021

Funding to individuals



£44.3m
COVID-19 Heating
Payment Scheme

£3.0m
Discretionary
Support

£1.2m
Jointly Supported
Living Scheme

Delivery of Public Services



£5.0m
Social Security
Benefit Delivery

£6.5m
IT Equipment

£0.5m
Accommodation

Culture & Arts



£8.0m
Culture Resilience
Fund

£26.0m
COVID-19 Cultural, Languages,
Arts & Heritage Support Programme

Local Government



£85.3m
Council Funding

£12.0m
Revitalisation
Programme

£9.5m
Community
Support Fund

NI Housing Executive



£1.6m
NIHE Supplier
Relief

£4.5m
Loss of Rental
Income (NIHE)

£1.1m
NIHE Supporting
People PPE

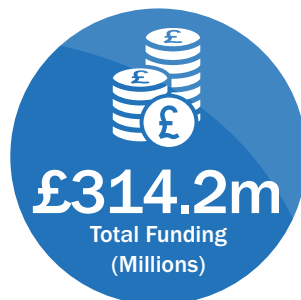
Charities, Voluntary & Social Enterprise



£20.9m
Charitable Grant
Fund

£3.8m
VCSE Sector
PPE

£9.3m
Social Enterprise
Support Fund



Co-Ownership



£13.0m
NICHA Stimulus
Funding

Sports



£28.2m
Sports Funding

Programmes



£0.5m
Help to find
employment

£7.1m
Homelessness

£8.4m
Supporting
People

£14.5m
Access to Food

All expenditure figures quoted in this publication are subject to Audit review



Engaged
Communities Group

ENGAGED COMMUNITIES GROUP

Engaged Communities Group (ECG) acts as the government gateway for the voluntary & community, social enterprise, culture, arts, sport, languages, museums, libraries and heritage sectors, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has delivered programmes and initiatives and provided additional funding and flexibilities to sustain existing capacity and services and support the most vulnerable.

The creation of a Voluntary & Community Sector Emergency Leadership Group led by the Minister was crucial in bringing all the stakeholders together at the outset. This enabled ECG to lead a comprehensive Emergencies Response Programme in supporting the voluntary and community sectors.

ECG worked at pace in collaboration with our Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) and other partners to bring forward innovative funding schemes to support the culture, languages, arts and heritage sectors, the sports sector, the social enterprise sector and the charities sector. The allocation of funds by the Executive recognised the profound and pressing challenges for organisations and individuals in these

sectors. We engaged widely with partners across central and local government, as well as ALB's and people from the sector, to ensure that funding was distributed quickly, fairly and in ways which maximised its impact.

For example, working with the Deaf Community and with colleagues in the Health and Social Care Board and Department of Health, ECG helped introduce the Health and Social Care Remote Interpreting Service at an early point in the pandemic to enable British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) users to access vital services and information.

All of the initiatives were developed through co-design with a wide range of partners, with the aim of addressing objective need as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic.



The key to the successful design and delivery of programmes was using existing connections and creating new networks that worked.

ECG is very grateful for the excellent support received from across the Civil Service, local government and the voluntary and community sectors.

Many of the unique challenges presented required a multi-disciplinary response and people and organisations rose to the challenge, playing to their strengths, and overcoming obstacles that would have thwarted progress in the past. A new trust has been developed and the co-operation demonstrated around delivery on shared goals has reinforced the importance of these connections and the need for these to be nurtured and built upon.



ECG adopted a flexible approach to funding which was essential in responding to time critical pressures. It has demonstrated determination, flexibility and commitment during difficult times and has developed new ways of working and used evidence and data to inform our interventions and programmes.

The pandemic has proved a fertile testing ground for new ways of working and we have all learnt a great deal. The Department is committed to taking forward further work in partnership with the sectors to embed the lessons learnt together, including addressing unnecessary bureaucracy and maintaining strengthened relationships.

SUPPORTING THE COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Emergency Leadership Group

The Emergency Leadership Group (ELG) was established in March 2020, following engagement prior to the pandemic between the Department for Communities, the Red Cross, local council emergency preparedness structures and the voluntary and community sector. The vital role of the voluntary and community sector in civil contingency response and recovery was recognised during a series

of devastating flooding incidents and major emergencies prior to 2020. The ELG brought together leaders from the sector and central and local government to exchange information and discuss immediate and future actions.

Emergency Response Programme

The Department's Emergency Response Programme was established to provide vital support in response to immediate needs from March 2020, and during the first lockdown which saw vulnerable people advised to shield themselves and have no contact with others.



Minister Hargey visits a food bank in Strabane

“ We are delighted that through the Warm Well Connected project we have been able to engage with thousands of people in their homes delivering a broad range of health and wellbeing and connectedness programmes. ”



Tony Doherty
Healthy Living Centre Alliance

The Programme was coordinated across a number of work streams in partnership with key delivery bodies:

Community Helpline – Working with Advice NI, over 40,000 calls were answered by the COVID-19 Community Helpline providing a one stop shop for services and supports that vulnerable people could access.

Access to Medications - Working with the Community Development and Health Network to ensure the safe delivery of medication from community pharmacies to vulnerable and isolated people who were self-isolating or unable to arrange for the collection of their medication.

Volunteering – Working with Volunteer Now to ensure volunteers were supported and organisations involved in coordinating volunteers were given support and robust guidance, particularly in relation to regulated volunteering and safeguarding vulnerable people. Volunteer Now ran a public campaign using our regional online volunteering platform, BeCollective, to coordinate new volunteers and match them to opportunities to maximise their impact.

Access to Food - Access to food for vulnerable people was a critical element of the COVID-19 response. At the height of the first wave the Department quickly established a food box scheme to support vulnerable households and in excess of 204,000 food boxes were delivered. This support package was taken forward in partnership with local councils and other stakeholders.

Wellbeing NI Partnership – working with Inspire, a wellbeing charity, to support the development of a virtual online Wellbeing Hub supported by 15 mental health charities and 28 Healthy Living Centres.

Access to Food Package support continued throughout 2020/2021 – £14.5million

Following the closure of this scheme on 31 July 2020, the balance of funding has been utilised for a range of alternative support for those facing food insecurity as a result of the pandemic. In excess of £1million has been provided to Fareshare, a food redistribution charity, to increase their capacity and the supply of food to community food providers. Funding of £4.75million has been allocated to Councils to help deliver more strategic responses and support community food providers to respond to local need. In addition to this £750,000

was provided to charities including St Vincent De Paul, the Salvation Army, Barnardo’s and Save the Children to bolster the support they traditionally provide across the Christmas and New Year period providing people with access to food and essential items.

From January 2021 a Food Pallet Scheme was established to bulk purchase £1.25million of food and essential items to further bolster resources of community food providers until the end of March 2021.

COVID-19 Community Support Fund – £6.5million

This Fund provided financial support via local councils to grassroots organisations who responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Fund provides additional budget, over and above Councils’ annual Community Support

“ The Access to Food Programme has allowed us to deliver food to people’s doors and has been a real lifeline for those most vulnerable in our communities. ”



**Donna McCloskey,
Bogside Brandywell
Initiative**



Programme allocations, to support actions in line with the four high level Community Support Programme objectives and in line with three broad criteria, specifically related to the coronavirus pandemic including financial, food and connectivity.

Many organisations responded by adapting to provide COVID-19 related services within their local communities, such as:

- food delivery/supply
- childcare for key workers
- providing learning and support online, by telephone, social media and home delivery of learning materials

Warm, Well and Connected – Winter 20/21 – £3million

This initiative was introduced to provide practical wellbeing support to those most acutely impacted by the pandemic over the winter period and for those in extreme need and unable to heat their home during winter 2020/21.

In total, the initiative has reached more than 433,571 beneficiaries through community based wellbeing projects addressing loneliness,

isolation, connectedness, improving emotional wellbeing and to promote physical activity and eating well. The 'warm' element has to date provided direct fuel support for more than 8,188 people with over £750,439 allocated and ran until the end of March 2021.



These flexibilities provided vital 'breathing space' which enabled organisations to focus on supporting those in most need given the extraordinary circumstances and prevented the collapse of the voluntary and community sector as groups were forced to adapt at pace to needs on the ground.

SUPPORT FOR THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE SECTOR

Grant Flexibilities

In recognition of the impact of the pandemic, the Minister approved immediate and wide reaching grant funding flexibilities in March 2020 including:

- advance payment of up to six months of agreed discretionary grant awards

This allowed the continuation of salary contributions and running costs even where groups were forced to reduce or cease delivery due to restrictions

- temporary suspension of grant monitoring arrangements such as vouching and requiring organisations to seek prior approval for re-profiled spend within already approved budget. This freed up staff time to deliver much needed support to the community

Through this grant flexibility process some 300 Neighbourhood Renewal projects valued at £18.06million were able to flex their funding to meet the challenges of COVID-19 within their communities. VCD allocated £16million of funding to 80 voluntary organisations supporting 448 posts. Grant flexibilities enabled these organisations to adapt to the changing environment presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Voluntary, Community and Social Economy Sector COVID-19 Recovery Fund – £3.8million

The Voluntary, Community and Social Economy Sector COVID-19 Recovery Fund has provided £3.8million to organisations to assist with the purchase of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and IT equipment allowing

these organisations to continue to deliver vital services to the most vulnerable within our communities. The Fund was distributed by Co-operation Ireland in partnership with the Rural Community Network.

SUPPORTING THE SOCIAL ENTERPRISE SECTOR

Social Enterprise Fund - £9.25million

The COVID-19 Social Enterprise Fund supported social enterprises that deliver services and products but found themselves in financial difficulties directly as a result of the pandemic. The aim of the fund was to help social enterprises to stabilise and manage cash flow. This fund was co-designed with key sectoral leaders and delivered by Community Finance Ireland.

SUPPORTING THE CHARITIES SECTOR

On 8 April 2020 the UK Government announced a £750million package of support for charities, social enterprises, hospices and the wider third sector, which resulted in a £22million Barnett consequential. The Northern Ireland Finance Minister announced on 6 May 2020 that, of the £22million, £6.5million would be allocated to support local hospices and £250,000 for the Cancer Fund for Children. The Executive allocated the remaining £15.5million to DfC in May 2020 and the COVID-19 Charities Fund Programme was established.

The Programme was designed to support the local charities sector and prevent the forced closure of any charity due to the pandemic. It provides support for unavoidable costs

“ Due to COVID-19, fundraising at Action Cancer and many charities has been decimated but thanks to the Department for Communities Charities Fund, the support received has allowed us to deliver our lifesaving breast cancer screening services. ”



Gareth Kirk
CEO Action Cancer

and deficits accumulated by charities from 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021, with individually tailored awards of up to a maximum of £75,000 per charity.

Phase 1 of the COVID-19 Charities Fund was administered by The National Lottery Community Fund during summer 2020. It disbursed £8.8million of support to 501 charities impacted by the pandemic for the period up to 30 September 2020. This phase prevented closures and loss of vital services for charities employing over 3,000 employees and 20,000 volunteers.

Phase 2 of the Fund was announced in December 2020 and charities were asked to present their needs for the period 1 October 2020 to 31 March 2021. Community Finance Ireland is administering phase 2 and have distributed £7.2million to 386

applicants. The total amount to distribute to local charities was £16million.

SUPPORTING THE CULTURE, LANGUAGES, ARTS AND HERITAGE SECTORS

The Minister recognised the substantial contribution the culture, languages, arts and heritage sectors make to our local economy, our quality of life, our health and wellbeing, and in shaping our standing as a great place to live, work and visit.

During July 2020, the Executive allocated £4million to support the arts sector (with an additional £1.5million contribution from DfC and Arts Council NI). A further £29million was allocated by the Executive on 24 September 2020



Dunluce Castle

to support the wider culture, languages, arts and heritage sectors impacted by COVID-19.

The COVID-19 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Support Programme 2020/2021 was developed to mitigate the immediate negative financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and to generate renewal activity to underpin longer term recovery with a focus on social recovery and tackling poverty.

The Programme aimed to stabilise the sectors and secure a future which is representative of their spread, diversity and reach prior to the pandemic. This included geographic spread and access; diversity of sub-genre and sectoral groupings, to ensure that no sub sector was lost; The Programme also aimed to

ensure that the benefits delivered to citizens were preserved with no section of society disproportionately impacted by loss of services and in terms of access.

The Programme comprises 20 funding schemes covering all sectors and these were designed collaboratively and delivered in partnership with over 13 sectoral delivery partners.

Sectoral Stability Funding Schemes

- **Arts Council** - The Arts Council received over £24million to deliver a range of interventions to support organisations, including commercial and self-employed and freelance individuals as follows:



- The Stability and Renewal Programme for Organisations which is distributing nearly £11million of funding to 168 organisations to eliminate deficits accumulated as a result of the pandemic and invest in reopening and adaption actions
- The Individuals Emergency Resilience Programme of just under £7million made nearly 3,000 awards to individuals during the 2020/2021 financial year
- Arts Council delivered support to deaf and disabled artists through the University of Atypical and a renewal project in partnership with the BBC – ‘Culture in Quarantine’
- **National Lottery Heritage Fund** - The National Lottery Heritage Fund administered £5.5million to support 50 organisations and 41 individuals in the heritage sector who have been impacted by the pandemic
- The National Lottery Heritage Fund have also delivered a Community Heritage Fund to invest in renewal projects at community level, awarding £240,000 to 30 organisations for projects ranging from heritage trails to delivering video storytelling sessions to people with dementia and providing genealogy workshops
- **Ulster-Scots Agency** – The Ulster-Scots COVID-19 Resilience Fund distributed nearly £1.48million in small grants, larger grants and language grants to support the sector and catalyse renewal activity
- **Conradh na Gaeilge** - delivered £630,000 over two funds, the SPG+ Relief & Relaunch Fund and the Seachtain na Gaeilge le Energia 2021 to support the Irish Language sector impacted by the pandemic
- **Ciste Infheistíochta na Gaeilge** - delivered £740,000 of support through their Comharchiste COVID-19 to support Irish language centres impacted by the pandemic
- **Sign Language Support** - through the £430,000 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage funding and the £230,000 Sign Language Partnership Group funding, ECG has supported the Deaf Community through a range of initiatives. These include financial support to BSL and ISL interpreters and tutors to sustain their continued employment in the community and helping them to move their services online

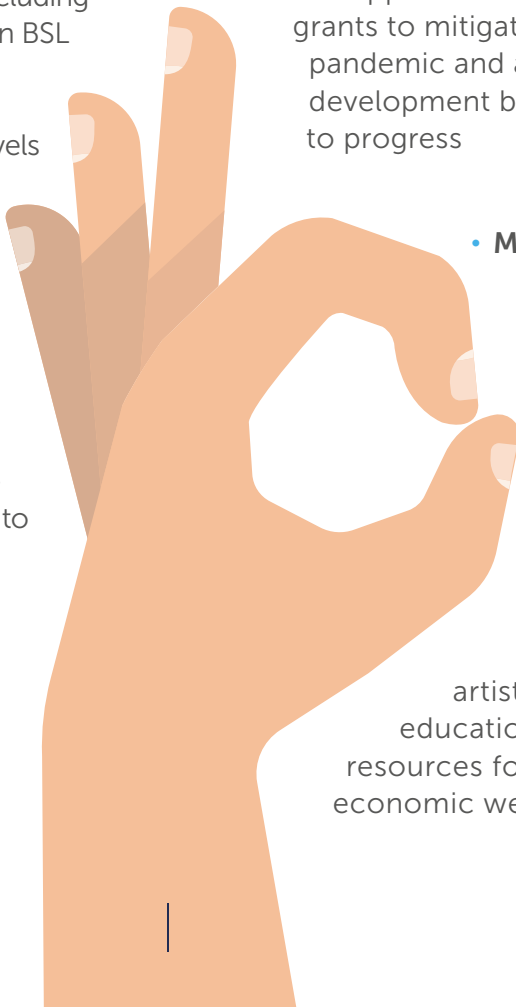
Support has been provided for the transition of vital BSL/ISL courses, including the vital Family Sign Language courses, and social and educational projects to online resources. This financial support included the provision of laptops, iPads and portals by Deaf organisations to loan to those struggling financially in the community to help them access these online resources. Community interventions, to help tackle the increased social isolation experienced by the Deaf Community, have been supported including access to mental health counselling in BSL and establishment of an online Deaf Women's Support Group by deaf women. In addition, to tackle high levels of social isolation in the older Deaf Community, ECG has supported local Deaf groups to keep in touch online with older BSL/ISL users to access services they need, including basic shopping, and provision of a remote Deaf befriending volunteer service for BSL/ISL residents in care homes who are particularly isolated – both through the use of funded, easy to use portable tablet devices

Renewal Funding Schemes

- **Community Arts and Heritage Projects** – the Community Foundation for NI in partnership with the Rural Community Network

delivered the largest renewal scheme under the Programme with a £2million budget. Competitive awards of between £2,000 and £20,000 were distributed to 158 organisations to deliver a diverse range of arts, culture and heritage projects with a healthy geographic spread

- **Heritage Buildings** – the Architectural Heritage Fund and National Churches Trust supported heritage buildings with grants to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and allow maintenance and development building projects to progress
- **Museums and Libraries**
 - Support for partners in the Museums and Libraries sector in their work designing, adapting and expanding the digital services they deliver that have continued to allow citizens access to artistic, cultural, scientific, educational and leisure resources for social and economic wellbeing



- **Creative Industries** - NI Screen in partnership with the Nerve Centre are delivering a range of renewal projects to catalyse the creative industries, inspire young people and provide access to training, skills and music
- **Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships** – over £480,000 distributed to Neighbourhood Renewal Areas to support creative renewal projects to reanimate communities and inspire new creative content

PROTECTING AND REALISING THE VALUE OF OUR HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

- ECG has continued to work on many of its key statutory activities including our responsibilities as custodians of the 190 State Care monuments, providing public access when the regulations have allowed and progressing conservation schemes at a number of these. We have dealt with high levels of planning consultations from district councils, receiving 2,125 consultations between 1 April and 31 December 2020



- ECG also provided grants totalling £242,000 for distribution to local heritage projects through the Community Heritage Fund. This will fund a diverse range of projects and make a huge impact on many communities

We have also provided renewal funding to heritage activity through the Architectural Heritage Fund and National Churches Trust

SUPPORTING THE SPORTS SECTOR

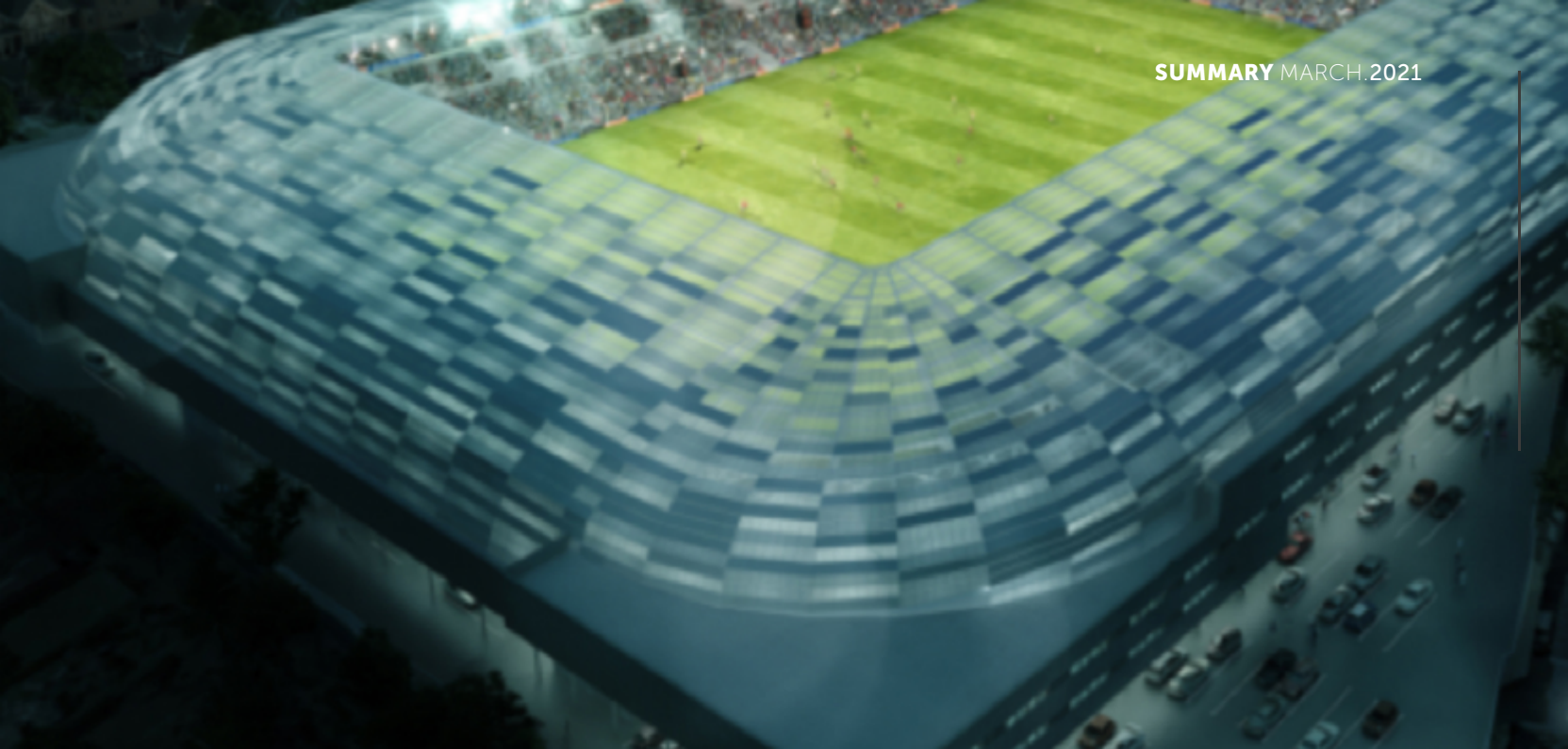
- ECG and Sport NI have provided both financial and practical support to the sports sector. This has included advice on accessing COVID-19 related relief programmes, maintaining the health and wellbeing of members and specific protocols for a safe return to sport. ECG, in partnership with Sport NI, are delivering three grant programmes to the sports sector. These are the Sports Sustainability Fund, the Sports Hardship Fund and the COVID-19 Safe PPE Sports Pack. Funding assigned to Disability Sport NI and Special Olympics whose activities have been severely impacted during the pandemic has also been protected

- The Sports Sustainability Fund provided grant funding to our diverse sports sector to help support and sustain governing bodies, clubs and sporting organisations during the ongoing challenges due to COVID-19. As at 31 March 2021, Sport NI has issued payment of £23.01million to Sports Governing Bodies benefitting 429 individual sports clubs and 21 governing bodies
- The Sports Hardship Fund aims to help sports clubs and organisations meet essential

maintenance costs for sports facilities during lockdown and also to help clubs and organisations with the hire of sports facilities as sport returns. As of 31 March, 1,642 applications have been received from 1,140 clubs / groups. So far over 900 clubs have received funding totalling over £2million

- The COVID-19 Safe PPE Sports Packs Project aims to assist Sports clubs with the provision of a COVID-19





safe environment when the as activities recommence. Contracts valued at £790,000 were put in place to provide 2,000 PPE packs to over 1300 clubs. The packs contain essential COVID-19 related safety products such as hand sanitisers, aprons, gloves, masks and are being distributed by Sport NI's delivery partners USEL. Distribution of the packs commenced on 18 January 2021, with approximately 200 clubs per week receiving their packs

- ECG also made a successful bid for sports clubs to be eligible for the £25,000 Hospitality, Retail, Leisure and Tourism scheme administered by Department for the Economy

DEVELOPING CASEMENT PARK AND REGIONAL STADIA PROGRAMME

- The Department for Infrastructure advised of its intention to approve the Casement Park planning application in 2020. There continues to be significant ongoing engagement with the GAA in relation to the development of the Casement Park project. Work on developing and agreeing the full Business Case is continuing
- The Sub Regional Stadia Programme is a priority in the New Decade, New Approach agreement and the Department is committed to its implementation. Officials are undertaking

work to provide a robust and up-to-date evidence base for the Programme. This includes a club survey and a series of strategic discussions with the key stakeholders who oversee the game, operate the facilities, support football and play the sport at all levels. A Working Group has also been established with representatives from the key stakeholders involved, including Councils, Irish Football Association (IFA), Northern Ireland Football League (NIFL), SportNI and the Department. This will ensure a collaborative approach to developing the shape and scope of the programme. This work aims to ensure that the programme reflects the current and future needs of local football. A full analysis of the outcomes of both of these exercises, along with benchmarking and research, will inform proposals on the future of this Programme

PROTECTING AND PROVIDING PUBLIC ACCESS TO OUR PUBLIC RECORDS

- **Supporting Victims of Historical Institutional Abuse** – ECG through PRONI worked successfully with the Department of Justice and the Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board facilitating onsite access for Redress Board researchers and providing digital information about applicants to support the work of the Redress Board during the pandemic

- **Supporting Victims and Survivors** – Despite the negative impact of lockdown PRONI successfully provided nearly 500 court and inquest files mainly to victims and survivors of the conflict
- **Supporting community positive mental health and wellbeing** – ECG, through PRONI, successfully moved its onsite programme of public events to online by effective and innovative use of technology and great flexibility by PRONI staff with the aim of increasing access to PRONI’s archives and supporting members of the public who were experiencing isolation and loneliness as a result of lockdown. PRONI continues to seek ways to better provide access to the archives and support positive mental health and well-being for example the Stay Home Memories initiative





Housing, Urban Regeneration
& Local Government Group

HOUSING URBAN REGENERATION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT GROUP (HURLG)

During the pandemic HURLG worked closely with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE), Councils, Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association (NICHA) and other Departments to ensure a range of supports were delivered during the pandemic. We will build on the collaboration achieved as we move forward ensuring structures are in place to enable us to deliver collectively post COVID-19.

The COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme provided a good example of a cross-Executive approach, with DfC, Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) working together to reduce the impact of the pandemic in towns here. This has informed the Department's approach to regenerating smaller settlements, and we will shortly commence working with DfI and DEARA to develop a new programme for interventions in these rural towns.

The Programme funding was paid to councils using the Local Government (Finance) Act (NI) 2011, which allowed the Department to react rapidly to the emergency and issue Tranche 1 payments in a matter of days following

approval of the business case. This approach could be considered in the future should similar urgent interventions be required.

To provide support for Homelessness it was vital that the the Department worked with all partners to ensure the available information was able to better inform decisions. The NIHE has used detailed data analysis to ensure decision making and priority setting is informed by experiential evidence and relevant contextual evidence. Specifically, DfC worked closely with the Department of Health (DoH) and NIHE in terms of rough sleepers who are persons from abroad and who have no recourse to public funds (NRPF) and therefore are not eligible for housing assistance. A Memorandum of Understanding



- Homelessness Scheme - **£7.1m**
- Supporting People Scheme - **£9.6m**
- Housing Market Support - **£13m**
- Funding/Emergency Grants to Local Councils - **£85.3m**
- COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme - **£19.3m**



MADRUCADA VERDE / SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

(MOU) between DfC, DoH and NIHE was signed in March 2020 and extended to March 2021 to facilitate the necessary arrangements for support for this group of people for the duration of the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Identifying and establishing a fully representative cross sectoral group of professionals and specialists early on ensured that a comprehensive proposal to reopen the housing market was backed by evidence and a commitment from the sector to meet public health guidance and Regulations. This group enabled Housing officials to draw on expertise and access evidence from the sector quickly in response to amendments of Regulations and the sector in turn benefitted from real-time updates on potential impacts. Maintaining

these connections has allowed access to a broader range of expertise across the sector to inform recent policy work.

Working with NIHE, it was recognised that due to the restrictions, new ways had to be found to support vulnerable clients dealing with loneliness and isolation caused by the pandemic. Supporting People funding enabled providers to use online activities to encourage socialising, befriending schemes and community support referrals. In addition, use of the SP Provider Innovation Fund (PIF) enabled users to make the best use of digital technology including the provision of additional fibre broadband, and the purchase and installation of digital hardware.

SUMMARY OF INTERVENTIONS/ PROGRAMMES

Homelessness Scheme - £7.1million

The Department has made £7.1million available to the Housing Executive which enabled them to introduce a range of responses to homelessness and to address additional demands resulting from the pandemic. This included the provision of temporary accommodation, furniture and electrical goods, funding to outside agencies, additional housing first units and staff resource.

We joined with the NIHE, Health, Homeless providers and others in a multi-agency group to manage the response at a strategic level ensuring more collaborative and co-ordinated

working which has resulted in low numbers of positive cases amongst service users and no major incidents / outbreaks in hostels.

Supporting People Scheme - £9.6million

The Supporting People Programme grant funds delivery partners who provide practical support services to help vulnerable people to maintain independent living in the community. This Scheme has provided support to Supporting People providers who have incurred additional costs (such as infection prevention measures, staff training, sick pay) and reduced income (for example through closure of social enterprises and loss of Housing Benefit due to a lower client density) as a result of COVID-19. This scheme is made up from £8.4million from the Department as well as £1.2million from the Department of

“Funding to the homeless sector has enabled us to provide temporary accommodation to people who are homeless, moving them off the streets and also providing support to people who have lost their home as a result of COVID-19.”



**Nicola McCrudden, CEO
Council for the Homeless NI**

Health to cover proportionate costs within jointly-funded schemes.

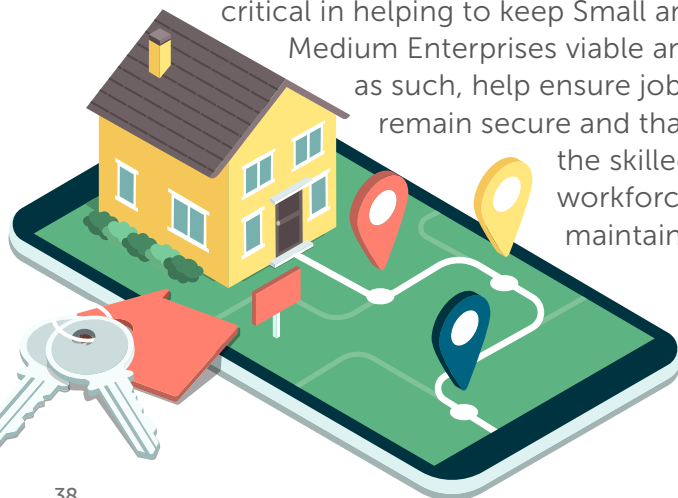
Supporting People PPE - £1.1million

Supporting People Providers have had access to a Housing Executive created PPE supply chain since mid-June, which has safeguarded staff and service users.

Housing Executive Supplier Relief Payments - £1.632million

Supplier Relief Payments have been made to support Housing Executive Tier 1 response maintenance and heating contractors, who were unable to work as a result of the pandemic. The payments gave Housing Executive Contractors the ability to cope with the crisis and fulfil their contractual obligations as restrictions lifted. The payments have been

critical in helping to keep Small and Medium Enterprises viable and as such, help ensure jobs remain secure and that the skilled workforce is maintained.



Loss of Rental Income: Housing Executive Landlord - £4.5million

The Housing Executive rent increase for 2020-21 was temporarily suspended on 1 April 2020 for a period of six months, with a revised implementation date of 1 October 2020. This resulted in lost income to the Housing Executive Landlord of approximately £4.5 million, which would normally have been spent on much needed investment in Housing Executive stock. The purpose of the temporary suspension was to afford some protection during the crisis to the minority (25,000-30,000) of Housing Executive tenants who pay their rent but do not receive Housing Benefit / Universal Credit Housing Costs Element.

Housing Market Support - £13million

An additional £13million of Financial Transaction Capital funding was secured to support first time buyers who are now struggling to obtain a mortgage due to tighter mortgage criteria imposed by lenders. This additional funding will supplement the £36.25million already in place for Co-ownership for 2020/21 and will bring the total funding provided by the Department to £49.25million for this year, which is targeted at delivering 1,422 homes to First Time Buyers.



Private Rented Sector

In May 2020 we introduced the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Act (NI) 2020 extending the notice to quit a private landlord must give a tenant from four to 12 weeks and providing security of tenure during the pandemic. Guidance for private tenants and landlords was also produced and discussions held with Department of Justice (DoJ) and representatives of the judiciary to ensure the guidance was adhered to in any possession cases which progressed to court. There are around 136,000 private tenancies in Northern Ireland. This legislation has recently been further extended to 30 September 2021.

Reopening the Housing Market

We produced a detailed proposal for the Department of Health (DoH) for the reopening of the housing market. This proposal and associated guidance was produced in conjunction with a cross sector group of housing sector specialists and professionals (Virtual Housing Panel) established to provide comprehensive insight and liaison with all relevant sectors to ensure full compliance with public health guidance. Regulations were amended to include house moves and associated activities as an exempted activity and this has remained the case through all subsequent iterations of the Regulations.

“

I received funding from the Department which helped me buy an awning and sanitisers for my business which gave my customers a much better experience.”



**Brendan Lowe,
Lowe Brothers Butchers**

Housing Regulation / Inspection Branch

As a consequence of the pandemic, Housing Regulation has had to adopt new ways of working to respond to an increase in demand for advice from stakeholders such as Registered Housing Associations (RHAs), MLAs and UK Housing Regulators. We regularly survey RHAs to determine the impact COVID-19 is having on the sector and provide assistance and advice as necessary. Specific guidance on COVID-19 was published on our website: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/housing-regulation-coronavirus-COVID-19> offering links and advice in relation to gas safety, cleaning and other emerging issues.

Funding/Emergency Grants to Local Councils - (£85.3million)

Funding totalling £85.3million has been allocated to support local councils with financial pressures that have arisen as a direct result of the pandemic. COVID-19 restrictions

have created a financial challenge for our 11 councils as they have lost practically all of their self-generated income through the closure of council facilities such as leisure centres and theatres. This funding has helped councils with their cash flow and supported them in the delivery of the vital services they provide, as well as helping to limit the financial impact on ratepayers going forward.

COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme - £19.3 million

A capital COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme has been allocated to councils to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on town and city centres and to provide a safer environment for shoppers, visitors and workers. DfC has contributed £12million towards the Programme, with additional contributions of £5million and £2.3million from DfI and DAERA respectively. Over £8million of the allocation has been used



by councils to pay business support grants to retailers to allow them to install social distancing measures in their premises.

Business Improvement Districts - £450,000

Recognising the important role that Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have the £450,000 COVID-19 Support Fund supported BIDs so that they can continue to play a key role in bringing local businesses and other stakeholders together to help regenerate their areas and to improve their local trading environments. This provides support to eight

Business Improvement Districts, which have been greatly impacted by the lockdown.

Remote District Council Meetings

In April 2020 regulations were put in place to enable councils here to hold meetings remotely. The Regulations further modify existing legislative provisions to enable requirements for public access to council meetings and associated documents to be complied with by remote means and website access. The Regulations also allowed councils to postpone their annual meeting until 30 September 2020 and to hold other meetings as needed.

Cremations

Local Government and Housing Regulation Division provided input to the Coronavirus Act 2020 with regard to cremations during COVID-19. This has allowed a streamlining of the process by removing the requirement for a confirmatory medical certificate which reduces the burden on healthcare professionals, freeing them to support the response to the pandemic with other duties.

Housing Reform

The Department is undertaking a major reform of the housing sector with the recently announced plans for the need to revitalise the Housing Executive. There is a huge investment challenge facing the Housing Executive and options are being assessed that will enable it, as a landlord, to borrow in order to deliver the investment required for its existing stock and ultimately even to enable it to build new homes again. Revitalising the Housing Executive to enable this investment will provide security for current tenants and homes for future generations. In the new build social housing programme, delivered in partnership with the Department, NIHE and registered Housing Associations, ring-fencing will be re-introduced in order to prioritise areas where there is the highest housing need.



Reform licensing and gambling laws

Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill was introduced to the Assembly in October 2020. The objective of the Bill is to introduce a balanced package of measures to update the law in respect of the retail sale of alcoholic drinks and to make it more responsive to the current social and economic environment, while recognising the harm caused by alcohol misuse. Proposals to reform gambling laws, which have not been updated since 1985, have been developed to modernise and update the law in this important area.



Strategic Policy & Professional
Services Group

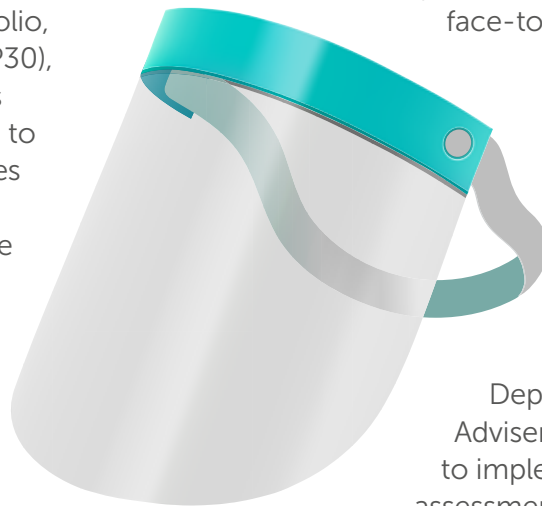
STRATEGIC POLICY AND PROFESSIONAL SERVICES GROUP

Strategic Policy and Professional Services Group (SPPSG) plays a key enabling role and supports a range of functions across DfC. The Group responded quickly from the outset of the pandemic to ensure the continuation of critical corporate services and support for Minister.

We established a Departmental Operations Centre to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 and ensure they were resolved with minimum impact on our customers. Our economists, statisticians, Portfolio, Programme & Project Office (P30), finance and governance teams collaborated with policy teams to develop evidence based policies and programmes, ensuring essential support for vulnerable people, communities and sectors worst affected by the pandemic could be delivered in a timely manner and with appropriate financial and governance controls.

In March 2020, as the risks of COVID-19 became apparent, we directed Assessment Providers, who carry out health assessments on behalf of

the Department to determine a claimant's entitlement to benefit, to temporarily suspend all face-to-face assessments. This helped to protect claimants and supplier employees from the higher risk of COVID-19 infection posed by face-to-face consultations.

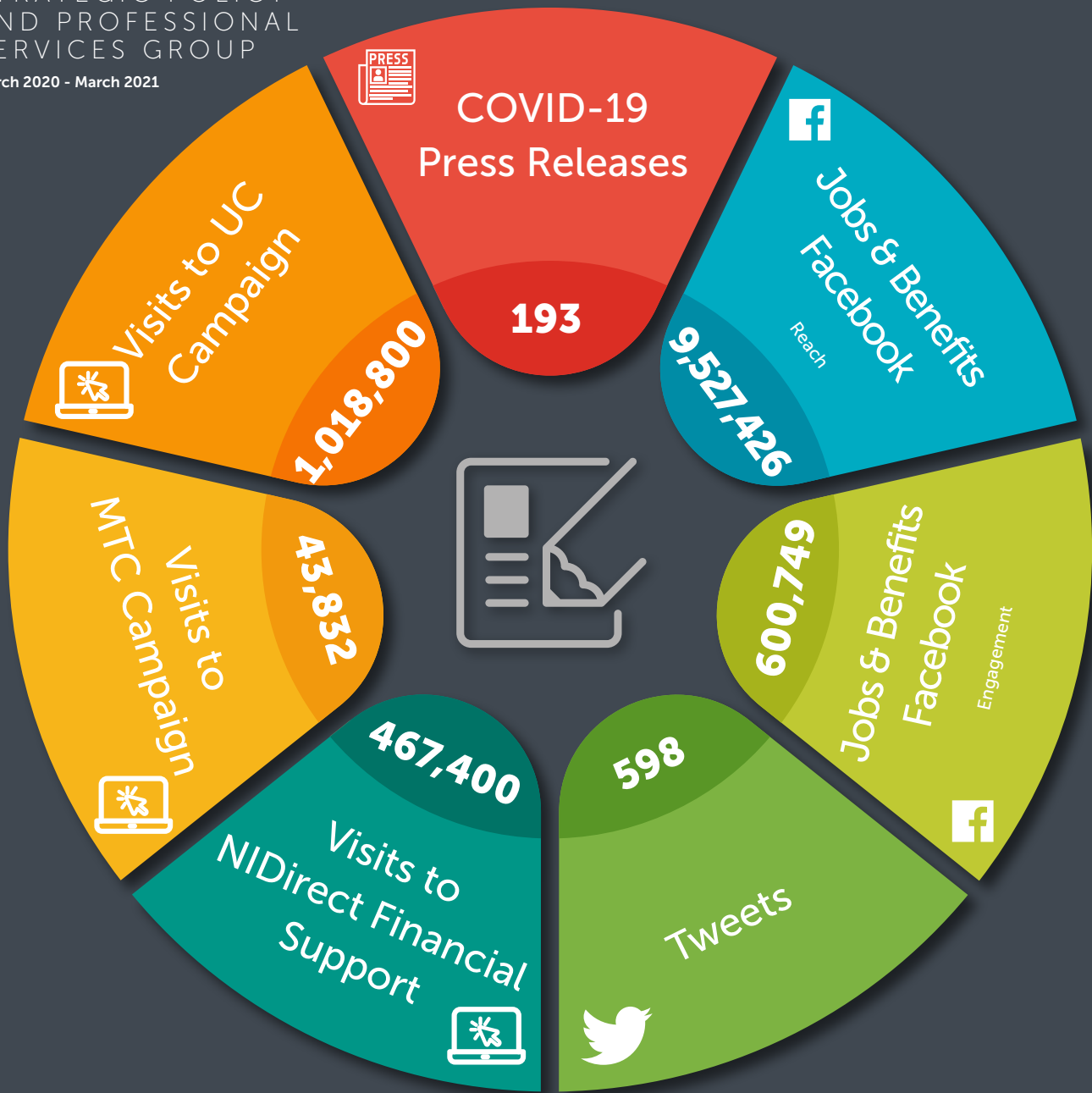


In order to ensure continued delivery of health assessment services and protect claimants' safety, the Contract Management Team worked collaboratively with operational colleagues, the Department's Health Assessment Adviser and Assessment Providers to implement an online telephone assessment service.

SPPSG also took swift action to safeguard the health and wellbeing of staff. We worked closely with Trade Union Side to address staff

STRATEGIC POLICY
AND PROFESSIONAL
SERVICES GROUP

March 2020 - March 2021



concerns and our Commercial Services team put in place measures including additional cleaning, provision of PPE and hand sanitisers to provide the safest possible working environment. This has been complemented by a range of measures to support physical and mental wellbeing delivered through the Operational Delivery teams, including a leadership toolkit for line managers to support them to lead during these challenging times.

The Corporate Communications and Press Office teams played a central role in cascading information to our customers, Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs), media and stakeholders, signposting them to funding and support schemes and services such as the COVID-19 helpline. Internally, they have also ensured that key messages from Minister, Permanent Secretary and senior management have been shared with all staff.

As we continue to address the impacts of the pandemic, SPPSG colleagues will lead the Department's recovery, through our 5 Year Strategy "Building Inclusive Communities".

The Strategy will be delivered through a new business planning model and underpinned by sound research and evidence delivered by our Professional Services Unit. Central to this is a three year sponsorship arrangement which was agreed with Ulster University Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC) in October 2020. This will complement and support the development of



internal research capacity for future policies and programmes. The arrangement provides for the completion of discrete and collaborative research as well as advisory support to senior managers. A study on employment vulnerabilities in the Arts, Creative, Culture and Heritage sector was the first project delivered through the



arrangement. This research will help to improve our understanding of the nature and scale of employment challenges faced by the sector and inform the development of a proportionate policy response. Together with extensive sectoral engagement undertaken by the sponsor team, the study provided an important part of the evidence base underpinning the development of the COVID-19 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Support Programme.

SPPSG enabled other business areas across the Department to deliver a range of interventions, initiatives and programmes.

SPPSG also delivered:

- a wide range of communications to highlight the range of supports available for citizens

- work also progressed on the development of the Social Inclusion Strategies including the Anti-Poverty, Disability, Gender Equality and Sexual Orientation strategies which aim to address barriers and inequalities in

society. The Department also published the reports of four Expert Advisory Panels to help inform the development of the new social inclusion strategies





Supporting People Group

SUPPORTING PEOPLE GROUP

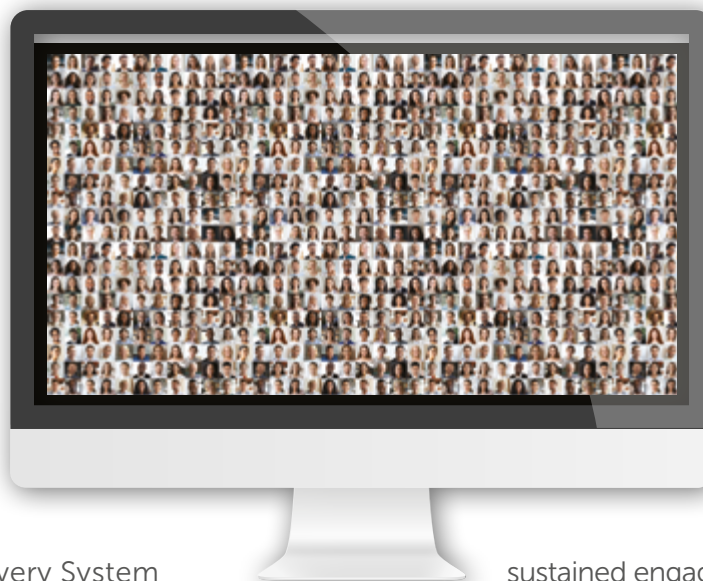
Supporting People Group (SPG) has played a key role during the COVID-19 pandemic supporting the delivery of the Department's critical services and emergency response to those in need and to the most vulnerable.

At the start of the first lockdown in March 2020, SPG immediately redeployed 419 staff to support the front-line delivery of Discretionary Support and Universal Credit as caseloads surged. The Group supported the Executive's emergency response at community level as well, redeploying staff to support the Community Helpline and providing data sharing advice and expertise to enable the Priority Home Delivery System for Vulnerable People, Access to Food Packages, and the Department of Education's Early Admissions,

Free School Meals, and Free School Uniforms programmes. SPG quickly assessed customer touch points and reviewed and edited telephone messages and

online content to accommodate changes to benefits and pensions provision. All face-to-face assessments for disability benefits were temporarily suspended, debt repayments were suspended for three months, and easements were applied to six different benefits. Early and

sustained engagement ensured that the Advice Sector and key stakeholders were kept fully informed of all changes impacting the people who rely on the services we deliver.





Benefit Caseload
750,000 claimants



£4.5b
Benefit
expenditure



15,000
Child Maintenance
caseload



540,000
Child Maintenance
Department for Work &
Pensions (DWP) caseload



£22.6m of child maintenance for **18,540** children



£44.1m COVID-19 Heating Payment to over **220,510** individuals



Make the Call received over **43,000** calls & connected with **31,000** individuals

SPG identified the continuity of maintenance payments to parents with care as a key priority during the pandemic. In response, the Child Maintenance Service proactively engaged with separated parents whose financial circumstances had been impacted by COVID-19 to keep money flowing to children.

The deployment of over 8,000 laptops, Mini PCs, and Surface Pros, and over 3,000 telephony licences to staff has enabled critical services across the Department to be maintained and Departmental capacity and resilience to be increased. To date over 95% of Departmental staff have been enabled to work remotely and this figure continues to rise.

Working with Trade Union colleagues, SPG conducted risk assessments and carried out adaptations to the Department's premises across 51 sites in line with Public Health Agency (PHA) and Health & Safety Executive (HSE) guidance to accommodate and safeguard staff who continued to work from an office location. Additional screening was installed, measures were introduced to reinforce social distancing, the wearing of face masks when moving around buildings was made mandatory, restrictions on the number of staff in buildings were introduced, and sanitising stations were installed to make sure all Departmental buildings were as COVID-19 safe as possible.



Benefits Security Division put in place a new Universal Credit (UC) telephony evidence verification team. The work of this team helped ensure that UC is paid to customers in greatest need. A new postal process and on line solution has been developed and implemented to support the allocation of National Insurance Numbers.

Throughout the pandemic, Supporting People Group has continued to support the people who use our services, to support our colleagues across the Department, to build our recovery, and has continued to innovate and improve the services we deliver.

In the past year, we have:

- managed a benefit caseload of 750,000 claimants
- delivered £4.5billion of benefit expenditure
- managed a local Child Maintenance caseload of 15,000 cases and a Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) caseload of 540,000
- collected and arranged £22.6million of child maintenance for 18,540 children

Range of interventions, initiatives and projects

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued into the winter months, Supporting People Group collaborated on a project to deliver a one-off COVID-19 Heating Payment which resulted in a total of £44.1million being paid to over 218,000 individuals. The £200 payment was made to older people in receipt of State Pension Credit and to those in receipt of certain disability benefits at the highest rates. The COVID-19 Heating Payment supported people who may have been more susceptible to the negative health impacts from colder temperatures and at greater risk from contracting COVID-19 to stay warm and stay indoors at home.

“

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was proud to have helped so many people who have contacted the Department via the Make the Call service. With the various lockdowns in place and restrictions on movement, the telephone service was a life-line to people whose circumstances changed. It demonstrated to me how pivotal Make the Call was in providing vital advice and support and as a vehicle to signpost people to all the help available during the crisis.”

Janet Baxter, Outreach Officer, Make the Call Team

A range of digital enhancements has increased the accessibility of the services we deliver. The new Pension Credit online service supplements the existing telephone and postal claim service, offering citizens an alternative way to make their claim to Pension Credit. The Get your State Pension (GySP) moved to an online service to enable new claims to be processed straight through from application to award without agent intervention.

The PIP2 Application can now be downloaded and returned electronically by the customer. The Video Relay Service (VRS) has been deployed across all Benefit Inbound telephony areas enabling customers who are deaf, hard of hearing or who are speech impaired to communicate in real time with DfC staff via British Sign Language or Irish Sign Language.

Child Maintenance Service (CMS) has developed an online self-service portal which includes the launch of a new Apply Online service. This means that parents wishing to make a child maintenance application can do so more efficiently at a time and in a way that works for them and their family commitments. As a reflection of its sustained levels of strong performance, one hundred new jobs were launched for the local economy in March 2021 as CMS expands the services it provides on behalf of DWP.

Supporting People Group has continued to deliver its vital advice and support service, Make the Call (MtC), which received over 43,000 calls and connected with over 31,000 individuals from April to March 2021 to ensure people do not miss out on the benefits or supports and services to which they may be entitled. MtC's reach is wider than benefit uptake and, in the same period to December 2020, it connected 252 individuals to partner organisations for further access to local supports and services.

A Pension Credit Uptake Campaign was delivered via tweets, a review of information on nidirect, signposting customers to the Pension Credit Calculator as part of the Pension Credit Online Toolkit, and engagement with Age NI.





Work & Health Group

WORK & HEALTH GROUP

Work and Health Group delivers £2.4 billion in benefits and financial support to around 350,000 working age people each year, and also delivers services to over 0.5 million people on behalf of the Department for Work & Pensions. This includes vital financial support to those who are in financial hardship, supporting people into and towards employment, protecting the vulnerable and ensuring that those with health conditions and disabilities are supported.

Many of the process and procedures required to pay benefit can only be completed in the office and so the outset of this pandemic presented a huge challenge to the Work & Health Group—overnight our available staff was reduced to around 40%. How could we get payments out on time, deal with ever increasing caseloads, adapt

access to benefits with the loss of our front offices and amend complex legislation with only 40% of our people?

In a matter of weeks we maximised remote working, reallocated resources, trained and retrained staff. We introduced specific financial





350,000
social security payments



Adult claims to Universal Credit rose from **42k** to **170K**



Payments issued doubled from **11k** per week to **22k**



In the period from 25 March 2020 to 31 December 2020 the Department made **15,659** Discretionary Support Self-Isolation grant payments totalling **£2.4m**

“ Discretionary Support is a service set up to help people who are struggling financially as a result of having to self-isolate due to COVID-19. I am really pleased to have been able to help play my part by providing this essential service. ”



**Andrew Leacock,
Discretionary Support**

support, with online applications, for those self-isolating – well ahead of the support rolled out in GB. We introduced a digital application form in weeks – progress which would normally take years. Almost 16000 grants totalling £2.4 million has been paid since last March.

At significant pace we implemented easements to processes, changed how we engage with people and refined operational procedures making sure that all of those coming onto Universal Credit (UC) would get paid on time – this was an incredible achievement with the UC caseload doubling in a matter of weeks and with so few staff able to work remotely.

Right away we got to work developing provision to help people who became unemployed through the pandemic – vital support targeted to young people, work ready people and those who would regrettably face long-term unemployment.

We collaborated with Supporting People Group to ensure that essential kit and telephony were secured for key roles across the Group maximising remote working capability. We now have remote capability across all non-operational areas of 100%, with UC Operations and Working Age Services at 90% and 60% respectively and this continues to improve.

In the midst of this pandemic, and as time goes on, it is evident that we have achieved something quite astounding - in the face of doubling caseloads, thousands of people needing our services and with reduced capacity, we have, and continue to, meet the needs of people who claim benefit here. Payment timeliness for UC has been consistently around 96%, despite the number of households claiming Universal Credit growing from just under 58,000 at February 2020 to 118,510 at November, and still growing.



Minister Hargey meets staff at Strabane Jobs & Benefits office

The systems, processes and policies that we deliver work – there is no fanfare or media attention but quietly in the background we provide critical support to people who need our help during difficult times and we are proud of that.

Summary of interventions, initiatives and programmes

- Digital innovation to rollout on-line forms to allow for applications to be received quickly and demand to be managed more efficiently
- Increasing our capacity for remote working from minimal numbers at the outset to now at around 80% for the Group
- Introduction of a specific COVID-19 Self-Isolation Grant, six months ahead of other jurisdictions, to give access to financial support to people impacted by COVID-19 or advised to self-isolate in line with Public Health Agency guidance
- Development of new, unique and targeted labour market provision to help and support people closer to and / or back to employment

- **Benefit Delivery Response - £5million -**
The Department incurred additional costs in meeting the unprecedented demand for Universal Credit and Discretionary Support as a result of COVID-19. This funding ensured that the Department met its statutory benefit delivery obligations which have significant impact on some of the most vulnerable in our society including households and families in crisis, who have no access to money for essential basics such as food
- **Social Security Legislative Changes:**
In response to the pandemic, a number of urgent measures were taken to further protect the health, welfare and wellbeing of people. These measures ensure that the social security system is more flexible to relieve hardship and to ensure people most in need get the help and support they require and reassure vulnerable people about the continuity of their benefits

These changes include:

- **Employment and Support Allowance (ESA):**
Removing the seven waiting days for people who make a new claim for ESA and the Department will treat those affected by COVID-19 as having limited capability for work from the outset without a fit note, an assessment or some form of statutory public health notice
- **Universal Credit:** Increasing the standard allowance of Universal Credit (and working tax credit) for this financial year (2020/21) by £1,040 per year (£20 a week). This is in addition to the annual uprating of 1.7%. This means that for a single Universal Credit claimant aged 25 or over, the standard allowance will increase from £317.82 to £409.89 per month. Regulations have also been introduced to ensure that grants to self-employed people are appropriately treated in their Universal Credit award

“ I was able to provide financial support to those who are most in need and help hundreds of people who have lost their job as a result of the pandemic. ”



Casey Shiels,
UC Case Manager



SUMMARY OF **THE**
DEPARTMENT FOR
COMMUNITIES COVID-19
SUPPORT ACHIEVEMENTS



Department for
Communities

An Roinn
Pobal

Deapartment fur
Commonities

www.communities-ni.gov.uk