



Women's Centre in Derry keeps going despite lockdown difficulties

Since lockdown began in March the internet has been overrun with images of happy home schooling, Joe Wicks sessions, baking triumphs and DIY transformation projects.

But the reality for many is very different as many people struggle to cope with losing jobs, income and daily contact with a support network of family and friends.

Women in particular are finding it difficult to meet the new demands of the additional roles of teacher, home worker, home maker and mother and living up to the pictures of domestic harmony dominating social media.

The Women's Centre in Derry is normally a busy hub promoting and supporting local women providing training, education and childcare and helping people realise their ambitions in terms of achieving personal and professional fulfilment.

Need for the service and this additional support is now greater than ever and while the hustle and bustle at the centre has been put on hold due to lockdown restrictions, the team are still reaching out to the local community, despite the logistical challenges, continuing to connect and help where they can.

Margaret Logue manages the centre and she and her team want to reassure local women that they don't have to be superwomen during lockdown – and it's ok to ask for help if they need it.

SUPPORT

Face to face support at the centre has now been replaced by virtual assistance, but the team have worked hard to ensure the levels of service that so many women here have come to depend on.

"We have made changes to how we register and support women by making use of social media and communicating over the phone and online," said Margaret.

"Our qualifications are all now being delivered online so laptops are needed so that women can complete their assignments and we're trying to address the resourcing issue at the moment.

"One of our biggest difficulties has been trying to reach the women who have no computer access at home.

"It's been taken for granted that every family has equal access to resources to get through this crisis.

"Many families don't have them and are therefore completely excluded from learning – they worry that they and their children will fall even farther behind.

"We're delivering a range of qualifications online - for example Makeup, Hair-styling, Maths, English, Personal Success and Wellbeing, Counselling Skills and Supporting Children's learning.

"We have over 100 women logging on our Virtual Learning Environment facility to engage with their tutors and complete the work



One of the groups involved in the many programmes at the Women's Centre in Derry.

required.

"We're also providing informal wellbeing Zoom programmes to support women's wellbeing."

Margaret said the Women's Centre have two social media platforms where they share community information, jobs and information about online courses.

"We receive private mails from women and our team is supporting them online seven days a week.

"We also have a creche page to entertain young children and to support mums online and creative fun activities are delivered

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throughout each day.

"Our creche leaders help with stressful parenting topics like potty training, behaviour, child's development or coping with a child with disabilities at home.

"Staff are also sending out information and supporting the parents through calls daily."

According to Margaret, many local women are struggling with the day to day realities of keeping children at home all day when anxiety levels are already high.

"Women are stressed during these uncertain circumstances, worrying about job security and the health and wellbeing of their families," she explains.

HOME SCHOOL

"They're finding it hard working at home, trying to home school children and run a household as well.

"Social media paints a fairy-tale picture of how home schooling is fun for everyone and parents are completing arts and craft activities every day with their children.

"This is far from the experience of many of our families.

"These posts are just a snippet of their day and we all have good days and bad days.

"The lockdown situation is affecting many women's moods and wellbeing.

"Many worry that they're just not doing a good enough job with their children."

As well as providing their regular services, the centre has been

working with the Bogside and Brandywell Health Forum on a special project involving refugee families living here in the city.

Members of the Syrian community have been assisting the COVID-19 emergency community support effort by making face masks, as Margaret explained.

"This was a very positive project for the families who have made their home here, as they face the challenges of isolation and separation every day.

"As well as helping to emphasise the health message surrounding COVID-19, it generated conversation among the Syrian women about the issues of isolation and loneliness.

"There was a lot of talk within the group about self-isolation, social distancing and many other community related issues.

"The participants also picked up some practical skills by using the machines from the Women's Centre.

"Some of the women were able to teach others how to read a pattern and use a sewing machine, and now some of those who took part are continuing to make face masks from donated fabric from Fabric World.

"The Project really encouraged a sense of community integration and belonging.

"It gave a sense of purpose to families who are trying to become proactive community members and it has definitely sown the seeds

for future engagement."

While the new ways of working have presented challenges, Margaret and the team can also see the benefits of a better online presence for women trying to juggle work and home commitments.

"Following on from this experience we will definitely continue to provide online options to make learning more flexible for women.

"It will also benefit women who experience anxiety leaving their home - by building up a relationship with our staff online it may encourage them in time to start attending our Centre.

"There is still a need for face to face support though at the centre, especially if children can go into the creche. This benefits the children too.

"So, our 'Blended Learning' feminist model of delivery will be more developed after the COVID emergency, and if social distancing is to continue into the future this model of delivery will become a bigger part of our activities."

You can get in contact with the Women's Centre at 0287126 7672.

For more advice and information on a range of key issues affecting local communities and for a list of contacts for support organisations such as the Women's Centre offering help during the COVID-19 emergency go to Derry City and Strabane District Council's Community Support pages on the council website.