



Charity No. NIC101142

# Decorum NI

*Remembering the Past – Building the Future*

## **Chair's Report 2023-2024**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to our 9<sup>th</sup> AGM, and I want to thank you for taking the time to come along tonight. It is my duty as Chair of Decorum NI to report to you on the correct management and success, or otherwise, of the group for the year ending 31 March 2024.

The purpose of Decorum NI is to provide support to those who served, and their families, during the period of Operation Banner, in Northern Ireland. Our motto is 'Remembering the Past, Building the Future; but I like to think that we are also about supporting each other to live as positively as we can in the present. Decorum now has around 910 members.

This past year we have been able to carry out our activities as normal. Following on from the success of the previous year, the Personal Development Groups have continued with allocated times, days, and spaces to accommodate everyone wanting to use the facilities. I am glad to be able to report that Decorum has continued to fulfil its purpose and worked hard to provide an excellent service to all our members and thereby meeting – and, in most cases exceeding – all targets set by the funders.

### **FACILITIES**

The Senior Management Team continue to meet quarterly and the committee meet monthly.

As required by our funders, we have continued to prepare and submit anonymised records of attendance and this has had the added benefit of allowing us to see how many different people are using our services and to review the services we provide, enabling us to continue to respond to members requests.

Throughout the year the Senior Staff Officer has continued to consult with Group Leaders to assess how the current rota has been working out, and this has allowed us to slot in new interest groups as requested by members.

We have also carried out a comprehensive review of the policy documents and the committee are indebted to John McKillen and Carol Hutton for undertaking this task. Since these policies are 'working documents', going forward these will be reviewed and updated as required.

In August 2023, members of the committee met with Sir Declan Morgan, the then Chief Commissioner Designate for the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR) in order to put forward our members views and raise our concerns about the process. We felt that he had listened to us and he agreed with much that we said. We have continued to 'keep in touch' with the process.

We had a comprehensive Governance Review including a site visit, which went well, and any requested amendments were acted on promptly.

Your committee also seek to learn and expand their knowledge in order to provide a safe and holistic environment for all. Mandatory Training was undertaken in: -

Safeguarding - Keeping Adults Safe

Mental Health First Aid

Suicide Awareness

Basic First Aid

Health & Safety Awareness

Use of a Defibrillator

### **H&WBCW**

In order to maintain good emotional wellbeing, our Health and Wellbeing case worker incorporates the 5 Step Model in all her planning of activities and support of the members. The 5 Steps in the model are:

#### Connect

We encourage our members to 'Connect' with each other and with others, particularly, by providing a warm welcome at our Drop-In facility where people, can come in, relax, feel secure, seek help and find camaraderie.

#### Keep Learning

Decorum NI has aided our members in their learning through our Personal Development Groups: Crochet, Friendship & Support, Music, Craft, Flower Arranging, Horticulture, Fishing, Creative Minds and Voices and Darts. Leisure courses are also on offer through the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS).

#### Be Active

Decorum NI does provide many different ways for our members to 'be active'. Whether it's coming to the many weekly, fortnightly or monthly groups mentioned previously or participating in and with other community groups such as Mid and East Antrim Veterans Group.

#### Take Notice

It's important to be aware of what's going on around you with family, community, and the wider contexts of politics, government and change. Decorum NI have sought out speakers to talk to groups of members on wide-ranging subjects so that members are well-informed and can take notice of what is going on.

#### Give

Our members are encouraged to 'Give' of their time, perhaps money and certainly giving of themselves which is important in being a valued and valuable member of society. Having come from professions that were about helping others, our members naturally are selfless givers of their time, of their skills and of themselves, to help others both inside and outside our organisation.

### **FUTURE STRATEGY**

Our on-going strategy as a group has four aims:

To make and promote Decorum NI as a first-class provider of support and services.

To ensure services and support provided by Decorum NI are meeting the needs of our members.

To ensure there is sufficient funding for Decorum NI to provide the support and services needed by our members now and for the future.

To educate others in the mission of Decorum NI and ensure the legacy of sacrifice is acknowledged and remembered.

This strategy has continued to guide the Committee in deciding on how to prioritise the use of resources to meet member's needs in the best way. In addition to surveying our members about their needs, we also obtain feedback from them on the support and events provided. This is then used to make sure we are not only doing the right things for members about also doing them right. I am glad to report that 99% of the time, such feedback has been positive throughout the year. Negative feedback is viewed as an opportunity to learn and improve future service.

We have always been conscious of the growing agenda of some sections of society to re-write the history of our pasts. And although it isn't always easy, or comfortable, for us to do so, Decorum continues to engage with different groups, media outlets, and to participate in research and so on, to ensure that our stories, our perspective is not omitted in these articles and that we do not become a footnote in history. Our president appears regularly on Radio Ulster and he and Debra have been engaging for some time on the production of the Conflict and Legacy Interpretive Network website which is now up and running and on which Decorum NI has a space.

## **FUNDING**

As I think most people are by now aware, funding across all sectors of voluntary service has come under increasing pressure with budgets having been ruthlessly cut back. This has resulted in a significant reduction in what we are being given in grants and quite a bit of uncertainty about future provision.

Since 2023 we have relied on 'gap-funding', funding put in place to cover the period between Peace 4 and 21<sup>st</sup> May this year when Peace Plus has commenced. This funding covers all the work of the Health & Wellbeing Caseworker. Our good work has led to Decorum NI being seen as a 'trusted provider' of services and led to the organisation being accepted as a 'partner' with VSS in the Peace Plus funding stream.

We are very grateful to the Victims and VSS for its continued support in the Victims Support Programme (VSP) which covers the Drop In centre the SSO and some of the social events and activities although many of the events and activities organised are self-funded but all happen in a seamless fashion so members do not need to worry themselves with the bureaucracy involved. During the year we have also applied for other 'one-off' grants – rent, electric and mandatory training from the VSS, solar panels for the allotment from the Veterans Foundation and a new cooker and dishwasher wish was bought partly by the Veterans Foundation and the Crochet and Knitting class. A grant was also received from the Black Santa appeal.

All the money we receive through grants is earmarked for specific, named projects. This does not finance all our services and so, although not a fundraising organisation, we are especially grateful to those members who have personally donated funds on a regular and irregular basis for which we are extremely grateful. Thank you to all those who have given and, in anticipation, those who will give, after this appeal.

I know that money is tight for everyone, but I want to specifically appeal to each one to consider giving on a one-off or on a monthly basis and details of how to do this through 'GoodHub' are available on our private Facebook page.

## **STAFF**

Decorum NI have only two salaried full-time staff. They are our Senior Staff Officer, Mitch Bresland, and our Health and Well-being Caseworker, Linda Gillies.

The role of the Senior Staff Officer is to plan and manage the Drop-In Centre and all ongoing projects as well as directing and supporting volunteers and he is directed and supported in his role by the Committee. Whilst Mitch is very good at what he does, keeping all the plates spinning, and as well as the plaudits for a job well-done, his can be a frustrating and thankless job. It is he who must ensure that while the rest of us swan about enjoying ourselves, he ensures we comply with all the regulations, the record keeping and the guidelines. The Committee acknowledge the dedication and work of the SSO in making Decorum NI successful.

And, of course, alongside the SSO, is Linda Gillies bringing her warmth and enthusiasm to the role. The role of the Health and Well-being Caseworker is to support members and others referred to her by VSS in assessing their needs and sourcing the needed help. The committee were delighted when her work was again held up as an example of excellence to others earlier this year. She also sources appropriate resources for members such as gym memberships and complimentary therapies. She was instrumental in setting up a counsellor, on-site, one day a week from January 2024 and all referrals to this service are made through her.

Under a memorandum of understanding we also have an officer provided by SEFF to advise members on General Benefits advice and the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme.

In June 2023 we introduced a welfare service overseen by Linda. Members who are unwell or in hospital can request a phone call or visit.

It was especially gratifying when Linda was awarded the British Empire Medal in the Kings' first Birthday Honours, in recognition of her work with Decorum NI for Veterans in NI. This is the first individual award linked directly to Decorum NI. We congratulate her warmly.

The Committee thank both members of staff for their individual work but also their ability to work together to make such a success of what we do.

## **VOLUNTEERS**

Members of Decorum NI who want to help others are encouraged to become Volunteers within the group. The committee recognises that these volunteers are the backbone of the organisation. They include those in formal roles such as the Committee, the official volunteers who sign up for specific roles – Housekeeping, and Maintenance support. As well as the volunteers with expertise who run the many specific interest groups, right through to the less formal roles of members who volunteer as requested, helping to set up, or clear up after, events. These volunteers are managed and supported by our Senior Staff Officer, and their contribution was acknowledged at our Annual Awards night in September 2023.

The Committee thanks all these volunteers and acknowledge we would not be so successful if it was not for their efforts.

## **Personal Development Groups**

Our volunteers have used their interests, expertise and knowledge to form activity groups, previously mentioned, for other members to enjoy and gain new skills and interests. The groups meet weekly, bi-weekly or monthly and are all supported by good attendance of members. The groups vary in size but all are successful in what they do.

A Musical group for musicians of all levels of ability has been commenced in the past year and has been very successful and has entertained the rest of us on several occasions. The choir, while not coming together regularly, has remained in good voice and put on special performances, eg at Christmas.

Then we have provided Drop-in for coffee and a chat, lunches with a huge variety of cuisine; and Coffee Mornings. We provided Christmas Dinner and made-up Hampers for distribution to members.

I also want to give you a quick overview of the one-off events of the last year. 2023 marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the Greenfinches, this was marked with commemorative events across NI at which some of our members were able to participate. This included an Exhibition in our premises from 17<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> July.

We held a Remembrance Day Service and Breakfast on our premises as well as having representation at some of the local Cenotaphs. And, as we do every year, we participated in Holocaust Memorial Week.

We welcomed in the better weather with our 'Hello Summer' evening; tried our voices at the Karaoke night; and relived all our yesterdays at a 50's, 60's & 70's night. Some enjoyed a short break to Killough; and others showed our knowledge (or lack of it) at the Quiz Night.

There was the Allotment Open Day, a BBQ, Fishing Competitions, and special Lunches. Some of us went on a train trip to Castlerock. We had a Christmas Show (with lots of talent among our members) and a Christmas Coffee morning. We saw in the New Year at a party night and donned our tartan for Burns Night. For the more refined among us, there was a cultural trip to Kilkeel and Afternoon Tea with pianist accompaniment. There was a trip to the Cinema and a Food Demonstration.

Some members also participated in a Shared History event visiting sites in Derry/ Londonderry.

Then there are the courses. We have hosted both Creative Writing and Creative Arts projects and ran a very successful Citizenship Course with 10<sup>th</sup> Bangor Boys Brigade and 14<sup>th</sup> Bangor Girl Guides.

I am sure you will agree that we have fitted a lot into a year!

Members have also attended other, external events on Decorum's behalf such as; Bravo 22; courses on offer from Peninsula Veterans; and Mid and East Antrim Veterans Walking Group.

We have continued to encourage visits from other groups to our site including the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers and the Staff give a Decorum NI presentation at locations as requested, the most recent being Ballyholme Probus.

### **SPECIALIST SUPPORT**

Volunteers within the membership provide specialist support and advice to members who have specific needs. For instance, one volunteer provides support and guidance in IT matters. As our members have connections with service within the Security Forces, many have legacy issues from the times of the Troubles in NI. We are grateful of the advice, support and guidance provided by the Advocacy Support officer to offer support in filling in the applications for a pension.

### **THANK YOU**

Now, I must take time to give a big Thank You to all those who have been instrumental in the success of Decorum NI.

Externally, I must thank our Mayor, VSS, Stormont for GAP funding, Ards and North Down Borough Council, SEFF, Ulster Human Rights Watch (UHRW), WAVE, the Veterans Foundation and others who have supported us so well.

Internally, our Senior Staff Officer, who with his dedication, commitment and enthusiasm kept us on track and our Health and Well-being Caseworker for the excellent support to members in all its forms.

On behalf of members, I would also like to thank our President, the Senior Management Team and the members of the Committee for giving of their time, energy and commitment to keeping the ship afloat and heading in the right direction.

I thank our Treasurer and Secretary for their work in maintaining our accounts and maintaining our processes.

I offer a big Thank You to all our Volunteers who give selflessly of themselves so that services and events run so smoothly and efficiently. As we know volunteers are paid nothing but are priceless. Lastly, but certainly not least, thank you to our members who participate in what we do and who make things worthwhile.

## **FUTURE**

For the future, we wait for confirmation about our funding from VSS and Peace Plus, but our own Group Funds are reasonably healthy. We look forward to things continuing and our many and diverse groups being able to continue in strength.

I believe that through Decorum NI, we have touched peoples' lives for the better and pray that we all have the health and strength to continue for many years to come.

Fiona (Gray) Craig

Chair  
Decorum NI