

LORAG Accounts Narrative 2023/24

In 2023/24 the Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group (LORAG) has continued to deliver and enhance a range of important services to meet its strategic goals of providing health, social, leisure and developmental activities while developing the socio-economic profile of the area. Our core projects in the areas of children, youth, health and cohesion have operated extremely successfully, achieving key targets in terms of numbers and diversity as well as the quality and effectiveness of the programmes on offer.

LORAG as a community development organisation has maintained a “cradle to the grave” approach in the organisation’s delivery of services with a key focus around children, young people and families to deliver holistic support to families with children aged from 2-18 years.

Core development funding again came through the Department for Communities Belfast Regeneration Neighbourhood Renewal programme, supporting LORAG deliver children, youth-based services and the wider development of services from Shaftesbury. This includes delivery of an afterschool programme for 5–11-year-olds, 350 sessions for 5–11-year-olds over the school year, 10 specific targeted programmes for 65 children. At key times of school closures, Summer, Christmas and Halloween. LORAG ran diversionary and themed programmes along with sports camps for children aged 2-11 year and their families.

The Department for Communities funding also allowed for delivery of core youth services including a youth drop in 5 nights per week, delivery of personal development programmes, art programmes and diversionary trip / residential breaks for youth aged 12-25 years. Youth staff sought to provide a safe space for young people to develop and build their skills, understand relationships and take part in a range of personal development programmes. Funding enabled LORAG to develop further programmes in partnership with the young people and other key agencies such as Common Youth, Wheelworks and other local organisations.

Additional funding was received from the Education Authority to support LORAG’s youth work in the areas of good relations, community safety, alternative diversionary activities, targeting key times when young people are vulnerable to engaging in risk taking behaviours. Programmes focused on both the children and youth during the 8 week of summer school closure.

Early Years under the Pathways fund have again funded a First Start programme delivered from Shaftesbury for children aged 2 -4 years and their families the programme includes crucial engagement with parents throughout the year. This project has been hugely successful and is in high demand within the area delivering 7 plus sessions per week. The project has worked with 62 children delivering structured sessions. The project also delivered 14 stay and play sessions with 40 parents attending, 8 family trips with 50 families attending at least one trip along with 45 parent and toddler sessions.

As a Healthy Living Centre, community health and well-being is at the core of all LORAG projects. LORAG continues to deliver bespoke needs led health programmes, providing innovative initiatives across South and wider Belfast designed to improve community health and wellbeing outcomes. A broad range of health improvement programmes have been devised to deliver these outcomes, programmes such as, Healthy Homes, Functional Fitness, Take 5, Strength and Balance, Fit to Breathe, Cook it, Couch-to-5k, Talking Therapies, Health-wise for example providing access to gym with specialist one to instruction for attendees. LORAG has been able to deliver these programmes by creating key partnerships within the Inner South Neighbourhood Renewal Area. This partnership has

linked closely with the Belfast Health Trust and Public Health Authority securing funding for the delivery of these vital health and wellbeing services.

Emotional Wellbeing is a key issue for the community LORAG has aimed many programmes towards developing this service over the years. In 2022/23 we launched our first self-referral Talking therapies service as well as a self-referral complimentary therapy offering services across the Inner South area supported by the Community Foundation Mental Health fund. Over 240 people benefited from these services delivered one-to-one. The project also delivered a range of group capacity building programmes designed to build community capacity and resilience. This programme was funded for 2-year funded programme from 2022/23 – 2023/24. The funds ended in March 2024 leaving a significant gap in Self-referral services for residents of the Inner South Belfast. The outcomes and impact of this programme were extremely positive in supporting people and their mental health. LORAG will continue to seek other avenues to bridge the gap created.

BHSCT continue to fund our GP referral based Talking therapies which has been a massive success with LORAG delivering 1421 one-to-one talking therapies sessions. The service is very flexible delivered morning, evenings, weekends from the Centre or via telephone directly to the clients at home. Maintaining delivery during significant holiday periods aimed to best accommodate the individual needs of the individual.

BHSCT also funded LORAG to act as lead in the delivery of the South One Family Support Hub as part of the overall Belfast Family Support network including a small fund to support families with issues that are identified as “gaps” in service. BHSCT through the Belfast City Council hardship funds also provided funding to the hub over the Winter period to deliver an essential voucher scheme to families in particular difficulty.

This included the delivery of partnership building, collating referrals, connecting services and evaluating Family Support services and the effectiveness of these services for families throughout South Belfast. The hub is in its ninth year and has gone from strength to strength with 316 referrals received from a broad range agencies and families with 314 parents and 135 engaging in a service. Families referred have reported positive outcomes from their experience with over 85% completing the full service. Over a third of referrals came from families as self-referrals which is a very encouraging statistic that clearly evidences a high level of confidence and support for the services delivered within the hub.

Funding was secured for the 9th year from BHSCT for the delivery of a needs led Family Support service across wider South Belfast. Support delivered included 38 family support home visits, 52 play therapy and mentoring programmes, supporting 52 children and their parent’s experiencing anxiety, stress, 92.5% of families completing the programmes reported improved outcomes in their family relationships with 89.5% of the children aged 5-11 years completing the mentoring programmes reporting improved levels of confidence and self-esteem.

LORAG continues to give and receive support from the Healthy Living Alliance (HLA) with LORAG acting as lead partners for the ongoing development of the Better Days Pain Support programme co-ordinating the delivery of 45 regional Pain Management programmes through a Health Social Care contract. This funding went out to tender in 2023/24 and in January 2024 LORAG secured a 5-year contract with HLA.

The Creating Cohesive Community / Good Relations project has been able to provide a diverse range of programmes supported by funding from The Executive Office (TEO) with additional funding from Belfast City Council (BCC), Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and the Clanmil Housing

Association (CHA). These funds have enabled LORAG to work with key partners delivering Good Relations work within the Lower Ormeau, Botanic, Market and Donegall Pass and wider South Belfast areas. The project has continued to provide opportunities to dispel myths, increase understanding and foster a sense of “belonging” within and between the community. Building good relations amongst neighbours through the Men’s and Women’s Good Neighbour programme and in the delivery of Intercultural festival events, such as Intercultural day in August, St Patricks festival in March and the Winter Fest in December. All the festivals have had in the region of 200-1000 people (with Féile na hAbhann / Festival of the River 10,000+ attendees) attending to engage in a wide variety of cultural activities. This project has been key in developing the Lockhouse programme delivered from the new Community Garden, Poly-tunnel and shed. Growing a core group of volunteers to give life to these important Good Relations initiatives.

LORAG has continued to work on the John Murray Lockhouse project, purchased in 2017, LORAG completed a business case in 2020/21 with a further Good Relations Business Case completed and approved by Urban Villages / TEO in 2022. A diverse range of partners and funders have supported the project which aims to develop a Healthy Living hub focusing on emotional wellbeing, a key issue identified during the community consultation.

The building will house a café opening on to the towpath, two large activity rooms for wellbeing activities and cookery and a conference room for groups to meet. This will open out onto a community garden and shed where horticulture and boat building will be the focus through key initial projects. We have also furthered our aim to develop onto the water and provide an access point for groups to use downstream. In 2023/24 the Community Garden element was completed by Summer, with soft opening around September time for localised volunteer programmes and development. Planning permission for the wider build of the Lockhouse was agreed in April 2023 and the contract for building was tendered and awarded. Funds are in place and the project build phase is to be managed by Belfast City Council for this and the larger house build which aims to be operational in 2024.

The Urban Villages / TEO programme funded a small but vital project titled “Up the Lagan in a Bubble” linked directly to the Lockhouse development supported over 30 young people to take part in taster sessions on the river with further training paddle sports lead by Sport NI Tollymore Outdoor Centre. Working in partnership with Sport NI’s this programme achieved much success in getting young people involved in paddle sports activities. However, the engagement also highlighted many challenges for the young people that took part, many had spent their early years living very much with their ‘backs’ to the river. For them the Lagan was an unsafe, unclean place, full of obstacles and danger. Many we found could not swim, a legacy of the Ormeau Bath’s and Maysfield Leisure Centre closures. Unfortunately, TEO ended funding for the programme in March 2024.

Féile na hAbhann was delivered for the fourth year as a waterway celebration festival and illuminated the river lagan and towpath with 10,000 people attending the family festival event with a further 2000 attending local events across the three core communities. This festival was a partnership with Féile an Phobail and a consortia of South and East Belfast partners. We aim to build on the festival and its delivery and to expand over the next few years to create a hive of activity in this area over key periods.

Belfast City Council revenue grant for the management of the Centre continued with additional funds for Capacity Building along with a range of small programme grants has meant that LORAG has been able to offer support for other smaller organisations and fledgling groups seeking support in the delivery of their programmes, governance and development. Shaftesbury the Centre remains a safe,

welcoming, warm, affordable space for many of the city's new and emerging groups particularly over the weekend periods.

Shaftesbury Community & Recreation Centre continues to open Monday to Sunday covering 96+ opening hours per week, 355 days per year with an average daily footfall of 800 peoples per day is the clearest and purest indication of LORAG's commitment to deliver quality needs lead services on behalf of the community.

LORAG has sought to grow the Social Economy income generating model with the aim of improving services and the growing demand to improve community health and wellbeing. This element is facing huge challenges with the current state of the economy and the pressures this has brought on the community. It is hard to sell gym and fitness class memberships while handing out food parcels and vouchers within a community.

Income from the hire of services has allowed LORAG to maintain some financial resources for the replacement of equipment repair and renewal, and increased salaries. However, pressures are rising with current fuel, gas and electricity costs up over 100% putting huge financial pressure on the organisation. Grant uplifts have been unable to keep in line with costs increases. LORAG is increasingly dependent on the income generated from within to meet additional costs.

The sudden closure of St John Vianney Youth Club which provided much needed Youth Services within area for the past 40 years clearly shows the impact that reduced funding coupled with pressure on the voluntary sector to deliver services has had on groups of long standing. Following a public meeting LORAG was tasked with protecting the youth facility and funding that had been available for the reinstatement of the service. LORAG have engaged independent consultants Sector 3 Solution to undertake an examination of the issues that lead to the closure of the setting and to agree a community response plan. LORAG have met with other community youth providers, the facility owners Down and Conon Diocese and Education Authority as the statutory agency responsible for the delivery of such service.

LORAGs plans have been adapted throughout the year to best meet the communities need for services while remaining aware of the inflationary fuel / energy, rising food prices and the impact this is having for many within the community. While LORAG continue to maintain our aim of delivering community services while keeping within our strategic aims of community growth and regeneration, day to day issues, such as those being experienced are placing huge pressures on the organisation staff and limited resources at this time.