Communities are doing it for themselves: Lessons from the mutual aid experience

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Executive Summary

Mutual aid groups are self-organising groups of people who come together to address challenges, through mutual support. The organisers and volunteers that took part in our research came from a wide range of backgrounds, with a mixture of professional, volunteering and political/activist experience. The groups were rich in skills and experience and tended to be embedded within their communities, connected to existing local groups, events and organisations. We found shared values across the groups in our sample:

- **solidarity (not charity):** mutual aid is distinct from traditional charitable models, focusing on building bottom-up structures of co-operation.
- **support with humanity and without judgement:** mutual aid offered friendly and non-judgemental support to anybody who needed it.
- **social justice/political collective action:** many saw mutual aid as a political movement to build community power and neighbourhood democracy and challenge social injustices.

Motivations for getting involved in mutual aid were diverse and varied, but primarily narratives centred around the gaps in statutory provision, with incomplete shielding lists and many people who needed support slipping through the cracks. Mutual aid groups demonstrated incredible knowledge of their communities. Their reach was deep and they developed inclusive offers that were specific to their own local contexts. Broadly, activities focused on:

- **Collection and delivery of essential items** – the delivery of food and prescriptions to the shielding cohort occupied the focus during the early weeks of the pandemic.
- **Food poverty** – most groups responded to the wider issues of poverty and socio-economic inequality. Their stories reflect on key policy failures, both before and during the pandemic, that led mutual aid to plug gaps in welfare provision.
- **Social and emotional support** – groups responded to social isolation by building connections, relationships and community.

What made mutual aid groups so effective?

By most accounts, mutual aid groups were the first responders in communities across the country, mobilising in advance of local government, voluntary and community sector (VCS) and national policy responses. A number of common organising structures and principles enabled such effective action:

- **Hyperlocal footprint** – all mutual aid groups worked within a defined geographic area, working a much smaller patch than that of local authorities or VCS organisations.
- **Relationally driven** – groups focused upon fostering sustainable relationships between neighbours that would continue after mutual aid stepped back.
- **Informal and flexible** – the informality of mutual coordination enabled groups to meet local needs quickly. The ease and flexibility of getting involved compared to more traditional volunteering opportunities was a key benefit for volunteers.
- **Horizontal decision-making** – shared leadership was an important feature, with core organising members taking on duties and making decisions in an informal and non-hierarchical way. Working together was enabled by a sense of group identity, based upon respect, listening and shared purpose.
- **Mutualism** – in line with the ‘solidarity, not charity’ ethos, groups found ways to include anyone, regardless of their own shielding status or support needs. Distinctive to traditional VCS organisations, they emphasised reciprocal, lasting relationships as an alternative to more transactional and paternalistic cultures of working.

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Relationships with other organisations

Relationships between mutual aid and their local authority, elected members, and VCS organisations varied across groups. Broadly, three types of relationships are identifiable: collaborative; arm’s length; and antagonistic. The common enabling factors behind strong collaboration were:

- Trust and recognition – recognising the value and importance of the work of mutual aid groups was key to collaborating, as well as being able to ‘let go’ and trust the groups, respecting their autonomy.
- Support and resources – such as community space, funding, guidance and training (always an offer, never an imposition), was also a key feature of collaborative relationships.
- Good communication, two-way collaboration and knowledge sharing – transparent council information processes, and open and reciprocal communication supported strong partnership-working. In examples of good practice, groups felt that they were working together with the council on equal footing, learning from and supporting each other.
- Local Councillors – elected members have been in a unique position to shape mutual aid-local authority relationships; in some areas, they were important conduits to resources and support, but elsewhere they created additional blockers and hurdles for the groups.

Where next? Impact, legacy and recommendations for policy and practice

Mutual aid activity has resulted in significant outcomes, for organisers and volunteers, communities and organisations. Being involved gave people a sense of purpose and an opportunity to connect with others, thus overcoming isolation and loneliness. A key outcome for mutual aiders has been the development of close interpersonal bonds with people in their communities and a sense of feeling more grounded and rooted in place.

At the time that the research was undertaken, some groups had already moved towards formalising their activities, and others had begun winding down. Groups that had developed a poverty-related focus hoped to continue their support, subject to the ongoing availability of funding, space and volunteers. However, a reticence towards the long-term role of mutual aid groups in plugging welfare gaps left by the state was shared by many groups. Several groups were focusing their attention on changes they felt could be achieved at the local level, utilising the tools of community development and community organising. Ultimately, the future direction of the groups will be decided by the groups themselves, based upon the specific needs of their communities, and the capacity, support and resources that they are able to harness locally.

Recommendations for local authorities

- Recognise and respect the autonomy of mutual aid groups
  Central to respecting the values of groups is developing an organisational culture that is trusting, flexible and able to engage with the diverse voices that exist within communities. Mutual aid groups should be seen as a valuable complementary resource and not a potential appendage to existing services.
- Understand what support is needed and how it can be facilitated/enabled
  Local authorities looking to play a facilitative or enabling role for mutual aid should reach out to informal groups to ask whether and what support they might need. Several groups identified the importance of practical support (with finance and grant applications, bank accounts, accessing space, etc.) but this varies across contexts. Micro-grants have been a lifeline for community groups during the crisis and could be used to continue to grow community action going forward.
- Extend community engagement
  There is an opportunity for local authorities to engage with mutual aid groups as an effective channel to connect with previously unheard or marginalised voices. This must translate into genuine community influence and co-production, rather than traditional tick-box consultation.
- Striking the right balance
  Whilst there is much potential in these relationships, there is a tricky balance that must be achieved between collaboration and the autonomy of informal approaches.

Recommendations for the voluntary and community sector

- Supporting mutual aid
  The lessons outlined above for local authorities regarding recognition, respect and support, are equally applicable to VCS organisations that may wish to work with or support informal community groups. The mutual aid experience highlights the importance of infrastructure organisations in supporting grassroots, community-led groups and organisations.
- Offer more flexible volunteering opportunities
  A key lesson for volunteering organisations wishing to encourage volunteering and attract a more diverse group of volunteers – as mutual aid groups did – might be to embrace a more flexible approach by dismantling bureaucratic barriers to voluntary action.

Recommendations for national policymakers

- Invest in place
  The experience of the pandemic has created a renewed focus upon communities, with the UK government announcing a policy agenda to give more power to communities (Kruger, 2020). However, community action does not exist in a vacuum. This research has demonstrated the way that groups have drawn upon existing local resources and infrastructure. Any serious commitment to devolving power and decision-making to communities and ensuring that the collaborations that have been built can be sustained will necessitate the funding of community infrastructure and the channelling of resources to grassroots groups.
- Address socio-economic inequalities
  Mutual aid groups have plugged large gaps in welfare provision, but informal community groups must not become a sticking plaster for wider societal problems. National policymakers should focus upon addressing socio-economic inequalities, to create the space for mutual aid groups to focus upon building relationships and harnessing the skills and assets of their communities to contribute to a more connected and cohesive society.
- Find ways to support informal volunteering
  The mutual aid response was facilitated outside of traditional, established volunteering infrastructure. The mutuality, flexibility and informality at the heart of these groups cannot be ‘harnessed’ through national volunteer platforms or volunteer passports, which seek to create a reserve ‘army’ of volunteers. Rather, support should focus on localised capacity building and build upon the flexibility and informality that encapsulates this type of volunteering. Central government could support this by ensuring that volunteering policy and funding facilitates, embeds and enables these diverse, informal and flexible forms of engagement rather than restricting volunteering into a homogenous framework.
The Covid-19 pandemic created an extraordinary wave of social solidarity and ‘good neighbourliness’ throughout communities in the UK. Even before the announcement of national lockdown, proactive neighbours began to organise themselves in preparation for potential social restrictions. The speed with which mutual aid groups formed, outside of the established frameworks of the VCS and local government, prompted some concerns about the movement. These concerns focused on issues of safeguarding and the perceived skills and experience of mutual aid members, while others assumed mutual aid to be a white, middle-class phenomenon. There have also been claims that groups have duplicated existing community offers. For example, the Mayor of London declared that he was ‘a bit nervous about the chaotic build-up of local groups and mutual aid that is not coordinated, because we saw in other disasters what can happen if it is not properly coordinated with duplication and things that are not needed being provided’ (Greater London Authority, March 2020, p. 18).

However, public perceptions of mutual aid have been largely positive, with politicians, journalists and researchers acknowledging their critical role and the importance of learning from their success. Yet with some notable exceptions (Benton and Power, 2021; Curtin et al., 2021; Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020), few studies have conducted detailed analysis with mutual aid groups themselves.

The Mobilising Volunteers Effectively (MoVE) project worked with mutual aid groups in England and Wales to examine:

- what drove this response;
- what motivated people to get involved and to stay involved;
- how groups organised and responded to community needs;
- whether and how they worked in collaboration with other partners;
- what support might be needed for future mutual aid activity.

This report discusses these findings in the following sections: the gap that mutual aid filled (what it is, who was involved and what they did); the organising structures and cultures of the groups; the relationships that they developed; and their legacy. Throughout, it extracts important lessons for systems and for post-pandemic recovery, and challenges some of the common misconceptions about mutual aid groups.

The report is based on findings from extensive research with 59 mutual aid participants across the UK between January and September 2021, including:

- 31 one-to-one interviews
- 8 focus groups
- representing 29 different mutual aid groups
- covering 12 local authorities (7 within one large regional authority) in England (10) and Wales (2)

Participants included 41 organisers and 18 volunteers to understand both organisation and lived experiences, although not all groups made this distinction.

All interviews utilised a common set of questions/themes to enable comparison. The approach was participative and open so mutual aid participants could tell their stories. In this report, we include participant quotes to evidence common experiences or perspectives shared by multiple participants. If a quote is used to demonstrate an exception, it is stated. The findings are also informed by the wider MoVE research with local authorities and voluntary sector organisations across the UK.

The team deployed a range of strategies to connect with mutual aid groups. In many cases, groups were contacted directly through their public email addresses and social media accounts. We also utilised existing VCS and local authority contacts, who connected us with willing participants. Participants received a £15 voucher to recognise their time. All participants gave informed consent, sessions were conducted utilising digital conferencing platforms, and transcribed in verbatim.
A broad range of localised community support groups emerged across the UK at the start of the pandemic. An independent group of volunteers set up a website – Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK – to assist the growing network. Over 4,000 groups self-registered on the site, where they could access support, resources, and a local map to increase their visibility. The site defines mutual aid as ‘self-organising groups where people come together to address a shared health or social issue through mutual support’ (Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK, 2020). Many groups offering this type of support did not call themselves mutual aid, preferring to describe themselves as community support groups or ‘good neighbours’, emphasising neighbourliness, kindness and community spirit:

“...I mean, we just call it, being neighbourly, I suppose, and community spirited” (S6LA1, admin 2).

Not all of these groups were new, and the research identified a number who had emerged from VCS organisations or from existing informal community groupings. Thus, this report utilises mutual aid as a broad term covering the rich diversity of groups offering community-based support. Equally, not everyone distinguished between organisers and volunteers within their groups, and some actively avoided the language of volunteers as they saw their work as very different from traditional volunteering. For want of an alternative, we use the term ‘volunteer’ to refer to those who participated in mutual aid without playing an active role in the organisation or coordination of the group.

This chapter examines the values that underpinned mutual aid, their motivations and the support they provided during the pandemic.

1. Backgrounds and Values

Individuals who engaged with mutual aid (both volunteers and organisers) came from a wide range of backgrounds, with a mix of skills, professional, volunteering and activist experience. While participants came from a range of employment backgrounds, there was a predominance of people with present or past careers in the public and voluntary sectors. In particular, participants spoke about their experience in social work, social care, health, community development and community engagement, as having shaped the way that they engaged with mutual aid, as the below quote demonstrates:

“Because I’ve worked for government, I’ve worked for local council, but I’m also grassroots... I can see things from all perspectives, and I can see how it can work in a small rural town compared to the difficulties we have in a city.” (S5LA1, admin 1)

A significant minority of participants were actively involved in party politics or local community organising. Five of the organisers were Labour Party councillors, and many others identified themselves as being actively involved in their local Labour or Green party. These political connections were central to the establishment of a number of groups, as councillors took a lead role. Others were not party political but were involved in community activism, having participated in or led in local campaigns and initiatives or, for a handful, their activism was linked to their paid work.

Mutual aid groups were rich in skills and experience, and organisers were commonly well embedded within the community, connected to existing local groups, events and organisations. People’s experiences of work, community and politics had both shaped, and been shaped by, their personal values, which in turn influenced the development of the values of their mutual aid groups. We found a number of common values shared by most of the groups in our sample: solidarity (not charity); support with humanity and without judgement; and social justice.

Mutual aid is not a new phenomenon. It was popularised as a theory of organisation by anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin in the early 20th century.
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i) Solidarity

Many participants were keen to distance the mutual aid approach from more traditional charitable models, perceived as stigmatising and bthering: Rather than relying on a service, mutual aid emphasises building bottom-up structures of cooperation:

“They’re not obligations, it’s not charity, it’s solidarity. I think fundamentally…there’s a narrative that in a crisis that it becomes dog eat dog and we eat each other and we burn our houses down and we run naked through the streets...The human instinct is to look after your neighbours in a crisis, always has been.”

(S2LA1, councillor)

ii) Support without judgement

Participants reflected on the differences between their approach and that of services. Mutual aid’s ability to offer friendly and non-judgmental support that is open to anybody who needs it, it was argued, contrasted starkly with existing means-tested services.

“If they need something they need something. Not falling apart. And not ask any questions, you seem weird to us and is absolutely critical to them to whatever weird thing people need, which might seem weird to us and is absolutely critical to them not falling apart. And not ask any questions, you know, we don’t ask people to justify anything...if they need something they need something.”

(S2LA1, admin 8)

If groups could not solve the issue directly themselves, they would engage into their networks and find a solution.

iii) Social justice/political collective action

Some participants saw mutual aid as a political movement for collective action in communities, and held building community power and neighbourhood democracy as key ambitions of their group. Several participants connected the rise of mutual aid to the existing political context:

“Some of the conversations we’ve had is about depoliticising mutual aid, and I thought, how can you depoliticise something that was created out of a crisis and the resulting impact of 10 years of people being destroyed by the systems that we have in place, that have put a lot of people in this position...thinking about my community...and all the inequalities that really showcased itself so blatantly during this pandemic...about who gets furloughed and who actually just loses their job...who have basically got no means of supporting themselves...it is all very political...a lot of the decisions we are making are political decisions about how we support our communities...”

(S3LA1, admin 2)

For some groups mutual aid represented not just a different way, but a ‘dissident’ way of organising that presents a direct challenge to the status quo. Groups that were based around political/activist connections presents a direct challenge to the status quo. Groups that were based around political/activist connections embraced these more political notions of mutual aid approach from more traditional charitable models, and were more engaged in campaigns and direct action.

“We initially started because perhaps we couldn’t quite see where the cavalry were coming from, you’ve got Parliament and the Prime Minister saying we’re just about to lock down, but nothing came through the door from the local councils on what was going to happen next.”

(S6LA2, admin 1)

The lockdown measures and subsequent furlough scheme afforded many people the necessary time to get involved. On a human level, the desire to help people who needed support and a sense of collective responsibility were common in mutual aid narratives. For some, this sense of social responsibility was heightened by a feeling of guilt associated with their own privileged circumstances. Others found getting involved was a way of channelling their anxieties and fear of the unknown into something productive and regaining control in a crisis situation:

“And I think that feeling of not knowing what was going to happen and the isolation, it did feel good to be able to do something, to get involved in something that was practical. Like, you can’t solve the world’s problems at the moment, but you could do something locally and you could connect with people.”

(S2LA1, admin 10)

“I think to be honest there was a bit of excitement because things were also different...certainly from where I was sitting there – was this awareness of different groups popping up around the country.”

(S3LA1, admin 1)

2. Motivations for involvement

Individuals’ motivations for getting involved or setting up groups were diverse and overlapping. Groups formed largely in anticipation of the impending social restrictions and a concern for people in communities who were isolated from friends and family and disconnected from services. Organisers described during the early days of the pandemic, how they realised that many people were slipping through the cracks of statutory support. The government focused upon establishing support for the ‘extremely clinically vulnerable’ – who were advised to ‘shield’ but these lists were often incomplete. Also, very little was put in place for those who needed support but did not reach the ‘extremely vulnerable’ threshold. These delays led to a loss of faith in local and/or national governments for some participants, were key motivations for taking action:

“We had...we been in...we didn’t know...we were kind of living in a pandemic and the resulting impact of 10 years...and they were fairly easy to find...the human instinct is to look after your neighbours in a crisis, always has been.”

(S3LA1, admin 2)

The motivations for getting involved point to the uniqueness of the pandemic situation as the catalyst for mutual aid, and demonstrate how communities pull together in times of crisis. Yet, the way that groups have sustained and evolved their collective support over the course of the pandemic is evidence of something special in the mutual aid approach which offers important lessons post-pandemic.

3. What did groups do?

Support revolved around the following areas: essentials and emergencies, poverty-related and emotional and social. While mutual aid groups quickly became associated with the delivery of essentials to the clinically vulnerable, they soon realised that more complex needs were coming to the fore and these became the primary focus for many groups.

i) Food Poverty

Almost all groups adapted to respond to the wider issues of poverty and socio-economic inequality in their communities - understanding quickly that the challenge of food was not simply one of access, but one of affordability. Most of the groups we spoke with responded to these needs by working with and supporting existing food offers; often becoming the bridge between communities and the local food offer. Groups would refer people onto food banks, and support food banks with mutual aid members. Some developed their own new food offers, working with local authorities, councillors, the VCS, supermarkets and community businesses to turn local playgrounds, council buildings, churches, mosques and other community spaces into sites for food provision. Groups also developed food offers specifically in response to the culturally diverse food needs of their communities, having found that existing food offers - both local and national - were often inadequate and inappropriate for some families’ needs.

Overwhelmingly, mutual aid groups relied upon their local socially and culturally sensitive knowledge in order to understand what their communities needed. Choice and dignity were central to their food provision:

“There has to be some dignity with the support that you’re offering, it can’t just be about just giving anyone anything and telling them to shut up and put up with whatever mess that they’re given.”

(S3LA1, admin 2)
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Groups regularly discussed how they organised to meet the needs of their culturally and ethnically diverse communities (e.g. around food, access to services and language barriers) and 15% of our participants were from minority ethnic backgrounds. Contrary to claims about mutual aid being a white, middle-class movement, the research found groups to be inclusive in their approach and highly skilled at meeting diverse needs.

Mutual aid narratives draw sharp attention to the wider problem of poverty, of which food insecurity is a symptom. In addition to food provision, groups signposted people to support services and some even offered assistance with universal credit, housing benefits, council tax, debt management and budgeting. Mutual aid participants across all sites stressed that in many cases, Covid-19 had exacerbated people’s existing struggles rather than simply created them:

“...it was basically starting from a position of we’ve got some really vulnerable people in our ward, who we knew were struggling anyway, and we knew that this was going to have an impact.”

(S3LA2, admin 1)

The stories in the data reflected on key policy failures, and the research found nuanced perspectives on the role that mutual aid groups played in plugging gaps in welfare provision. Many participants felt they were offering a sticking plaster solution to much wider societal challenges:

“...i feel like we’ve papered over a lot of cracks, and at some point we started to think, hang on, this is no longer an emergency, we’re just the provider now, and is that something we can realistically do?”

(S2LA1, admin 7)

ii) Social and Emotional Support

Mutual aid narratives suggest that uncertainty and social distancing have changed people’s behaviours, increasing anxiety and loneliness. Consequently, over time practical support began overlapping with emotional support, as the below quote demonstrates:

“At the start of lockdown, I used to phone people for their shopping list or they used to phone me, I used to be able to get that shopping list done, out, within five minutes. But as we went deeper and deeper into lockdown those conversations got longer and longer, and by the end I can honestly say I think I was on the phone to people for a minimum of half an hour, and it was just that they needed somebody to get everything off their chest.”

(S3LA7, admin 1)

Groups responded to social isolation in a variety of ways. Initiatives included buddying (matching neighbours for regular, informal, check-in calls), chatting on the doorsteps when delivering supplies and facilitating shared community activities, through newsletters, wellbeing packs, community exchanges and the use digital platforms. Groups sought to build connections, relationships and community, rather than relying on a transactional service model, focusing on what people had to offer, rather than the help they needed:

“To build connections with neighbours, that focus on what’s strong rather than what’s wrong. To create social spaces for people to share and exchange gifts, building and deepening friendships.”

(S3LA3, admin 1)

Some of the needs that groups came across were far more complex than they felt qualified to handle, and were referred onto other services. However, there was a concern that without mutual aid to act as a liaison, people would have slipped through the cracks in public service provision and not received the help they needed.
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MoVE: Mobilising Volunteers Effectively

The speed of mutual aid in responding to local needs has been widely acknowledged. This section explores what enabled such effective action and identifies a number of common organising structures and principles (whilst recognising the diversity of approaches): hyperlocal footprint; a relationally driven approach; informal and flexible support; horizontal decision-making; and mutuality.

1. Hyperlocal Footprint:
   Three Different Approaches

All groups in the sample worked within a defined geographic area, ranging from one row of houses on a street, to an entire electoral ward in a large city. Three different approaches to the coordination of mutual aid activity were identified: centralised; street-level connectors; and a hybrid model of centralised and localised activity.

Approach 1:
Centralised helpline and volunteers

Centralised systems involved a central phone line, call handlers, a database of volunteers, and often a rota. Groups using this approach described quite large-scale activity, with as many as 18 call handlers and 500 volunteers. Large numbers required more coordination; groups utilised digital software tools like Slack and Microsoft Excel to keep track of activity. Calls would come into the central helpline, call handlers would send the request out to Slack or WhatsApp, and volunteers would come forward to pick up the request. This approach was the most common in the sample, used primarily by ward-level groups.

Approach 2:
Street-level connectors

The street connector model was used by groups covering a very small area (e.g. a few houses on one street). Groups kept coordination light-touch, encouraging neighbours to join their street-level WhatsApp groups where activity was organised ad hoc. For example, if somebody shielding needed something from the supermarket, and a neighbour was planning a trip, they could pick it up for them. Participants reflected that this was both simple and a natural way to safeguard:

"Like, making the local super-super-super local, making it about your neighbours. So there are 100 people in this area that need to help 100 people, or there are 200 people that want to mutually connect... Authorities are moving two million, one million, three million, they just need the generality. We were really, really local." (S2LA1, admin 2)

This is a key lesson from the mutual aid experience; groups were able to respond so quickly principally because they were embedded in a compact neighbourhood.

Approach 3:
A hybrid approach of centralised and localised activity

Hybrid groups developed centralised systems, like a helpline and a database of volunteers, but with more localised structures underneath. For example, call handlers would receive requests for help which they would redirect to one of 10 local street coordinators, who would contact their local volunteers via a smaller WhatsApp group. This worked well for groups operating in densely populated urban areas because it enabled them to create an accessible ward-wide structure, whilst coordinating activity at the granular level.

An emphasis on localised activity characterised all three approaches. Although larger, ward-level groups were coordinating significant numbers of people across a bigger patch, the scale was still small compared to that of local authorities, or VCS organisations, that could be working across an entire borough.

"None of us had the time to start to kind of grow something massive, so what we said was, 'let's develop a structure of street coordinators... we felt that a street level was really important, because that was manageable, because you would generally be a familiar face." (S3LA4, admin 2)
2. Relationally-Driven Approach

All participants emphasised the importance of building relationships between neighbours. Where groups opted for a more coordinated, volunteer-activity matching model, they still often focused upon fostering sustainable relationships that would continue after the mutual aid group had stepped back. In this way, the mutual aid co-ordination work acted as a catalyst for longer term community relationships that could continue independently of the group itself. The street connector groups made those relationships their primary focus, so that neighbours would support each other organically both during the pandemic and beyond:

“We’ve got our own private connections now with two or three elderly people around my way who I go help… will keep supporting personally, and I think that’s what happened to a lot of the volunteers, they end up having their own mini network they’re supporting in probably their local area. They don’t need mutual aid for that, they just do it now as a regular thing.”
(S2LA1, admin 14)

“What we decided to do was see it as an opportunity to start looking at reconnecting neighbours. Instead of doing those flyers where people put a letter through somebody’s door saying, if you need help ring here, we did our own streets with an invitation to connect as a street, because who knows, we might need each other.”
(S3LA3, admin 1)

3. Informal and Flexible Support

Informality was a key feature of the mutual aid movement and was reflected in the wide range of support being offered and an ‘open-door’ philosophy.

“We had a list of bullet point things as examples of what we can help with… and if they had other needs we also said, even if it’s not on the list, get in touch with us if you’re struggling for something or whatever, and if we can’t find a way to help we probably can find a way to get that help.”
(S5LA1, admin 2)

Groups also organised relatively informally, with limited use of formal organising systems and a greater reliance on social media/digital platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Facebook groups were created to reach out and connect neighbours, growing rapidly to thousands of members in some places and representing a useful public space for sharing information. Coordination of activities took place on smaller WhatsApp groups, allowing messages to be posted and responded to quickly:

“It wasn’t a case of having to wait for a phone call for somebody to volunteer, the fact it was done… normally within five milliseconds of a post going out, somebody had responded, you know, there’s somebody with their phone in their hand, five milliseconds, ‘oh, missed again’, but that was the nature of it at the very beginning.”
(S3LA4, volunteer 1)

This agility meant groups met local needs quickly, but also provided important benefits for volunteers. Participants favoured the ease with which they engaged with mutual aid, compared to previous experiences of ‘traditional’ volunteering organisations.

“They highlighted the less rigorous recruitment process as well as the flexibility to do as much or as little as they liked, depending on their availability, etc.

“There’s lots of red tape when you’re going down a formal volunteering process, whereas when it’s been homegrown, if you like, and people just came forward… you can sort of… not bend some of those rules, but it’s not quite so onerous, and people will come forward because they haven’t got that pressure on completing their DBS, jumping through 72 hoops, and then finally saying, ‘OK, you’re fit to do some shopping for somebody.’”
(S6LA2, admin 2)

There are important lessons for VCS organisations in this: finding ways in which they might incorporate some of the informality and flexibility of the mutual aid approach could attract a more diverse group of volunteers.

4. Horizontal Decision-making

“We don’t have a boss or anything, we are all on the same level, there’s no hierarchy, and it has worked really well.”
(S3LA5, admin 2)

Mutual aid in essence, represents a horizontal mode of organising in which all individuals share power equally. This was reflected strongly in the data where participants felt leadership was shared and flexible. Most groups had a core group of organisers who met regularly (virtually) and were responsible for coordinating local activity, recruiting volunteers, liaising with local organisations and groups, etc. Members did not assume formal roles, but people took on duties spontaneously and informally. Non-hierarchical and informal decision-making was central to their ability to work together and to make quick decisions:

“What underpins mutual aid… is that we just do. So we weren’t asking permission, we didn’t have to wait for anybody to come back to us, we just did it.”
(S3LA5, admin 2)

Their ability to work together was enabled by a sense of group identity, based upon respect, listening to one another and a shared sense of purpose (keeping people safe). Participants spoke of how ‘ego’s were left out of the process as everyone worked together in pursuit of a common goal.

“I imagine in some sort of organisation where there was, like, some goal, like if you want to make money or, like, do you want to get famous, there would be more egos, but you know, there’s no real reason why anyone would want to take, like, push, someone else out, or something. So it’s super easy, everyone just kind of listens to each other.”
(S2LA2, admin 1)

5. Mutualism

An obvious central tenet of mutual aid, setting it apart from other charitable models, is mutualism. Participants stressed that mutual aid is not about ‘saving’ anyone, but about people coming together in a spirit of solidarity, to look out for one another. This is reflected in how groups found ways for everybody to get involved – regardless of someone’s ‘shielding’ status or support needs. For other groups it was embodied in a decision to avoid the language of ‘volunteers’.

“I was living by myself, I was… and then, you know, I was meeting people… there was definitely a two-way benefit for me, when I had to go into isolation people brought me my shopping, and that’s the kind of… that’s the whole point of it, isn’t it. Like, it’s not this person is vulnerable so we help them, they’re service users. It’s like, oh, well, this person is isolating but they can also be a phone buddy and help other people, or at another time in their life they can help in different ways.”
(S2LA1, admin 13)

“We’ve not separated volunteers and people who need support… I remember somebody who lives in the next street to me who was one of the first people who asked for support, and then the following week was doing other people’s shopping, and that was really good, people kind of talking about, you know, receiving support and also giving things back at different levels.”
(S2LA1, admin 3)

Groups embedded the concept of mutualism in their activities, distinguishing themselves from established volunteering organisations and public service providers, and identifying the emphasis on reciprocal lasting relationships as a radical alternative to more transactional, paternalistic cultures of working.
Communities are doing it for themselves: Lessons from the mutual aid experience

The research examined the relationships between mutual aid and existing VCS organisations, local authorities and their local councillors. It focused on two key themes: firstly, classifying the types of relationships that emerged; and secondly, examining the factors enabling effective relationships to be established.

1. Categorising Relationships
Essentially three broad types of relationship are identifiable: collaborative, co-existent and antagonistic. These align with the types of relationships identified during the first stages of the project (Burchell et al., 2020). These relationships varied according to local context and the approach of the local authority or VCS. Some variation was also evident within single authorities regarding relationships facilitated at neighbourhood and ward levels. Nevertheless, they encompass most variations.

i) Collaborative Relationships
Collaborative relationships with local authorities took a variety of forms. In one location, mutual aid was integrated into the council’s emergency response system, with place-based community development workers becoming lead coordinators of informal community support. In others, collaboration took place but groups were more autonomous. For example, one local authority established a two-way relationship whereby the council’s helpline could signpost residents to mutual aid, and mutual aid groups could signpost residents with complex needs to the council. Liaison officers appointed by the local authority were the connection between the council and the groups, relaying information both ways. Importantly, the groups were part of the coordinated community response, but retained their autonomy:

“Some volunteers kind of don’t want us to become a mouthpiece of the council, and I think we’re quite sensitive to that, … we don’t just receive information and put it straight out, it’s a case of we read it and make sure … we think it’s valuable, and then we’ll share.”

(S2LA1, admin 5)

Collaboration with the VCS was also a key theme in the data. Infrastructure organisations in particular offered a range of support to mutual aid groups. As the conduit for local authorities to release funding to communities, some infrastructure organisations channelled funding to mutual aid groups. They also offered advice and training, particularly around safeguarding and could carry out DBS checks for groups. In addition, they helped with basic back-office support, such as printing and photocopying, and assistance with finance and bank accounts. The below quote captures how valuable this support was:

“From the signposting and the grants and the practicalities, you know, advice as well, and the kind of safety checklists and all those sorts of things, all the things that you need to think through and about the making payments, that’s all been very, very useful.”

(S3LA7, admin 2).

In one location, the VCS infrastructure organisation set up a network space for mutual aid groups across the unitary authority, which groups found really valuable as a space for peer support and shared learning.

Mutual aid narratives were full of examples of collaboration with local community groups, particularly faith groups, food banks and community centres. This ranged from more formal collaboration (e.g. joint funding bids, and the sharing of volunteers and community spaces) to more informal relationships, where groups simply stayed in touch and drew upon each other’s knowledge and skills.

“There are lots of groups here anyway and we kind of get in contact with them little by little, particularly the religious groups… One could make better use of them, they could be on a list somewhere or someone could have, you know, a kind of dedicated person in each of those groups that would be contactable. So build into the flexibility of the neighbourhood but make the most use of the existing local groups, rather than trying to set something up centrally or permanently or even at local government level, because I don’t think that works too well…”

(S5LA2, admin 1)
Communities are doing it for themselves: Lessons from the mutual aid experience

This appears to challenge claims that mutual aid groups were often duplicating and failing to coordinate with what was already present. Many mutual aid groups found innovative ways to link in with existing local initiatives and contribute to the broader community infrastructure.

“...There's so much other stuff happening here that you can almost easily displace by going 'we’re doing everything so you know we've tried to support the food bank, because there didn’t need to be more than one here.’” (S3LA4, admin 1)

Groups also found support from local businesses, who were keen to contribute to the community effort by sharing resources and working together with mutual aid.

ii) Co-Existent, Arm’s-Length Relationships

Co-existent ‘arm’s-length’ relationships were identified in the first phase of the MoVE research, whereby local authorities recognised the existence and value of mutual aid, but did not consider it a feasible or appropriate way to work directly with groups (Burchel et al., 2020). Among respondents with experience of these relationships, some talked positively about their local authorities (some accessed funding via the council) despite little actual collaboration having taken place.

Equally, the research data collected from mutual aid groups regarding arm’s-length relationships with established VCS organisations, arising from cultural differences. These mutual aid groups had not had negative experiences with the sector, but perceived that VCS organisations were not flexible enough to support or signpost to mutual aid groups. This became a source of frustration for groups, whose attempts to work with their council were rebuffed. Participants commented how this was a lost opportunity and that local authorities, while keen to ‘talk to the talk’ of co-production and citizen-led action, were in reality risk-averse cultures that prevented collaboration.

“The council... didn’t promote us at all. I think there was a lot of fear around who we were, because we weren’t part of any mechanisms, and they decided it was a very top-down...They’re just so risk-averse. I think they’re frightened...there’s just no real trust...it’s a shame, really...that’s why citizen-led stuff doesn’t happen, because it’s blinkingly exhausting.” (S3LA3, admin 1).

“[name] Council are very much of the tick-box variety, I’m afraid... they’re not actually following through with what they’re saying, they’re talking about talking with the community and getting them involved but they’re not.” (S3LA5, admin 2)

Antagonistic relationships were not solely shaped by the local authority, with mutual aid groups also displaying agency in this process. Some groups made a conscious choice to keep a distance from their council, due to the perceived difference in values as well as a desire to remain separate or autonomous.

“...What I saw is a lot of mutual aid weren’t really mutual aid, if you look at what mutual aid actually is...They’d created the system and they took on, like, system roles and then took referrals, and now you see them being included within the system.” (S3LA3, admin 1)

We also found a handful of antagonistic relationships with the VCS, where the infrastructure organisation was untrusting and unwilling to work with or support mutual aid. Some told potential volunteers to get involved via formal organisations and advised residents not to trust the support on offer.

iii) Antagonistic Relationships

In contrast to the categories above, groups also spoke of experiencing resistant, fractured and antagonistic relationships with local authorities and VCS organisations. In many cases, organisations were unwilling to support or signpost to mutual aid groups. This became a source of frustration for groups, whose attempts to work with their council were rebuffed. Participants commented how this was a lost opportunity and that local authorities, while keen to ‘talk to the talk’ of co-production and citizen-led action, were in reality risk-averse cultures that prevented collaboration.

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“We [organisations name], and they were extremely against us, because they were very suspicious of what we were doing, and they actually went as far as to say, and I’m not making it up, not to trust us, because we were crooks. That’s what one of the members of [name] actually said...And we really really had a hard time.” (S3LA5, admin 2)

This was a small minority; on the most part, groups described supportive relationships with infrastructure organisations and the VCS more broadly. Interestingly, the research found that relationships did not necessarily remain static; some participants shared how their councils began to trust groups over time:

“You know, we’d reached out to the council to have private conversations to say what we are about... neighbours helping neighbours and wanting to support and work with them... I felt we acted more professionally than some of the council members at that point, and it took nearly three months for them to actually treat us with some sort of respect and listen to us.” (S3LA1, admin 2)

2. What Enabled Collaboration?

A number of common aspects were identifiable within collaborative examples, which help explain how local authorities and VCS organisations might engage and support grassroots community action in a post-pandemic world. Fundamentally, the ability of organisations to collaborate with mutual aid, depended upon a capacity to work flexibly, to understand and respect the informal nature of the groups, and the freedom of staff (i.e. permission from senior leadership) to work with and not control. This was often shaped by the wider approach of the organisation towards communities. Reflecting other aspects of the MoVE research data, it is evident that local authorities that had begun journeys towards more collaborative and place-based working pre-Covid, were often in a stronger position to work successfully with mutual aid groups.

i) Trust, recognition and support

Strong relationships were built upon trust, recognition and support. Where organisations recognised the value and importance of the mutual aid response, mutual aid groups felt validated in their work, which enabled the development of a reciprocal relationship. Equally critical was the ability to ‘let go’ and trust groups, respecting their autonomy and their values. Sometimes, what was needed was for established organisations to ‘move out of the way’, enabling communities to define their own support systems.

The job for us was to get out of the way and help people to help others, so we had an absolute policy line on it that we would support mutual aid organisations with any emergency grant investment, with any advice, support, but we would absolutely do that in a way that enabled them to just crack on and do what they wanted to do (VCS Infrastructure organisation, Site 1)

“I think we’ve really stuck gold with [LA Officer name] because she’s completely at one with what mutual aid is about and really...just really responsive, but not interfering at all.” (S2LA1, admin 8).

the authorities have been relying on us...Not in a proud sense, but in a practical sense, like, we are respecting what you’re doing, because what you’re doing is needed, because we need you and then we give you... So I think [participant name] used the perfect sentence, like, they were not saying what are you doing here? But saying, hey you are useful, you’re part of the positive things that [organisation name] has, let’s work together...I think that was amazing.” (S2LA1, admin 2)

Feeling valued was key to developing a strong relationship. Where this wasn’t evident, groups often spoke of ‘doing the council’s job for them’, with little recognition. Fear of the unknown, unfamiliar informal structures, and misunderstandings and assumptions about mutual aid, underpinned formal organisations’ failures to engage. Where local authorities and VCS organisations were rigid, inflexible and distrustful, they found it difficult to work with mutual aid groups:
Communities are doing it for themselves: Lessons from the mutual aid experience

The council have never said na… every time we put in for money, because they supported us all the way… so there we were, ticking over, helping people out in all sorts of ways, working in the food bank alongside the adventure playground, eventually the council said alright then, if we can make it safe for you we could let you use the ground floor only… and you’d have to sort of clean it up, and you can use it for nothing …, no electricity …, no rents, no rates, we didn’t have to pay a penny. So we said, ‘wow, yes.’

Importantly, in areas where partnership was strong, this support – particularly around training and guidance – was an offer rather than an imposition, and working together was not conditional upon the groups adapting their ways of working in a way that might undermine their values.

ii) Good communication, two-way collaboration and knowledge sharing

The council were extremely helpful, and if ever I did have a problem on absolutely anything, I could just phone either the person who had referred them or someone else would always take it off me and help me. But they were always very ready.

This contrasts with areas where groups found themselves excluded from essential information-sharing processes.

We asked several times for… rather than reinventing the wheel and rather than having to duplicate energy of volunteers …, lists of referral pathways for different organisations that we could refer and signpost people to… We never got a comprehensive list, and when we did finally get some sort of a list, which took several weeks, … it wasn’t even up to date.

In other areas, participants spoke of how councillors played an important intermediary role between the council and the mutual aid groups. Two councillors – who were not mutual aiders themselves but worked with the groups – explained their role in liaising between the groups and the council. These councillors were aware that their role should be supportive, but not directive. They were conscious of their own power and tried to carefully navigate the in-between space that they were occupying:

I think what we need here is an interpreter. There’s, like, two different organisations here who speak completely different languages, and there is a need to do some of that interpreting work between them.

I was very acutely aware that my presence as a local councillor… first of all I didn’t want to be, it was clearly a kind of distributed, flat structure of mutual solidarity, and me giving it the big I. Am, I’m your councillor; kind of thing, could kill that immediately.

As these quotes suggest, much of the mistrust was based upon a perception that mutual aid groups were not paying sufficient attention to safeguarding. In contrast, the research found that mutual aid groups were acutely aware of these concerns and stressed the safety of communities and volunteers as central to their response. The rich experience of groups meant that many had the necessary skills and experience to build safeguarding into their activities (particularly around data, the transmission of the virus and handling money) and others gladly accepted the guidance and advice offered by experienced organisations. While the research cannot claim that all mutual aid groups always took appropriate safeguarding measures, the study data identifies that the groups in our sample took their responsibility to keep their communities safe extremely seriously.

Also important for partnership working, were the resources that councils made available, in the form of space, funding, guidance and training. This support was invaluable, and signalled to the groups the notion that they were supported by their local authority.

"You could just tell that there was just this distrust, because we weren’t constituted. If we’d been constituted it would have been alright, but they just couldn’t understand why we didn’t want to be constituted, and we were saying, ‘because we just want to be able to do what we do, you know’. But how can people trust you?"

The only group we linked into was (VCS infrastructure organisation name), and at the beginning they were just a little bit… made things difficult, because they were just a bit formal, they wanted to know about safeguarding, they wanted to know about passwords to personal detail and data protection and all of that sort of stuff.

"If you’re a person working for free, you know, in the community, you’re quite sensitive to being taken for granted or, … and I can see how that happens, particularly when you’re holding a lot of responsibility and, yeah, it feels like you’re getting asked to take on more."

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Communities are doing it for themselves: Lessons from the mutual aid experience

As the UK looks to build a recovery from the pandemic, it is clear that significant focus will be placed on the role of local communities in the coming years. Building on the experiences of the past 18 months, policymakers are already looking at how they can build on the collaborations that emerged during the Covid crisis and the energy of community action such as that exhibited by mutual aid groups, to sustain community and voluntary action in the future. This chapter focuses on participants’ reflections on ‘what next?,’ examining the perceived impacts of the groups and their potential legacy and future. Lastly, it sets out the key lessons and recommendations for policy and practice.

1. Impacts: people, place and systems

Participants shared the myriad ways in which being involved in their group had impacted on them personally. Organisers, who described working up to 14 hours a day, talked of being overwhelmed and exhausted. The responsibility of supporting people who needed help, without making the situation worse by spreading the virus, was a heavy one. Many juggled mutual aid with their paid work, childcare, and other caring responsibilities, and several participants described a feeling of burnout. Equally, supporting neighbours who were dealing with very challenging circumstances also took an emotional toll:

“It does take something out of you. It’s all very good, you know, right at the beginning you’ve got all this adrenaline rushing through you and you’re saying, yeah, let’s start something up, and then over time you need that resilience to just keep it going.”

(S6LA2, admin 1)

“I didn’t deal, to be honest, very well with hearing so much pain…constant talking to people about terrible things that had happened to them…”

(S2LA1, admin 13)

Whilst the exceptionality of the pandemic circumstances sustained groups during the early stages of the health crisis, as it became clear that the pandemic was here to stay, personal burnout became more of a problem. Mutual aid groups developed ways to support the wellbeing of those involved, by finding opportunities to celebrate and recognise mutual aid activity (e.g. community events) and by offering tokens of thanks to volunteers. In making such large efforts to support communities and volunteers, some organisers described how they had neglected their own personal wellbeing. However, the power of reflection was an important strategy for managing burnout; sharing stories and feelings about the experiences that they had had together helped organisers to carry on despite the emotional and physical exhaustion.

These experiences highlight the incredible resilience of people who took part in mutual aid, for maintaining and evolving community support in light of the accompanying physical and emotional burden. They also demonstrate the value of group care strategies in sustaining activity. However, as we look to the future, the incredible goodwill of mutual aiders must not be taken for granted. Some groups have experienced a drop-off in volunteers and organisers as a result of burnout, and greater support will therefore need to be in place for those who are giving up their time and energy for free, if mutual aid activity is to be sustained. Local authorities and the VCS could play a role in sustaining community solidarity by recognising and celebrating groups’ achievements.

In addition to these troubling narratives, many stories of personal impacts were positive: participants reflected that being involved in mutual aid gave them an important sense of purpose and improved their physical and/or mental health and wellbeing. The opportunity to get out of the house and meet people during a period of social restrictions helped people to overcome isolation, loneliness and restlessness. Most participants expressed gratitude at the opportunity to provide practical and emotional support, and felt that they were making a positive difference to others:

“It was really a positive thing to do, and it did feel like my week was structured. You know, a lot of people were sort of at a loss, you know, but it felt as though I had a bit of a busy-ness in my life, and we were doing things that were really important, and you know, we were finding people who needed help and, you know, the public are always great with responding correctly and it felt good.”

(S3LA6, admin 1)

Some participants described feeling ‘empowered’ by their mutual aid experience. Importantly, this was expressed in the sense of residents empowering one another to get out into the community and support one another, rather than that power being bestowed upon them by organisations or institutions. Indeed,
many groups took the lead and moved quickly, without seeking permission from their local councils before setting up activities. Mutual aid groups fostered close interpersonal connections and bonds with people in their community. Participants shared how they'd developed enduring friendships creating 'life bonds' with people they would not otherwise have met. Groups reflected that it was the very human and personal nature of mutual aid that enabled these connections, breaking down the traditional barriers that exist in a more transactional relationship between service-user and service.

I still do this gentleman’s food shopping but it’s more like he’s become my adopted grandfather. I actually have a better relationship with him than my own grandfather.

(S5LA1, volunteer 3)

These relationships helped people to feel more connected to their community. Participants described feeling more grounded and rooted in place as the experience of being involved in mutual aid changed the way they perceived the area that they lived in. They felt that their communities had become more connected and cohesive.

Even though I’ve lived here…20 years now, I didn’t realise what a community we had until now. Even though it’s considered a poor area and we have a lot of immigrants, refugees and stuff... But actually, the community spirit’s amazing, and it’s really surprised me.

(S5LA5, admin 2)

People have said that I’ve lived in the area for years yet I didn’t know my neighbours. They’ve all now got to know each other, people are now saying hello, they’re now actively looking out for each other. So in a good way, people volunteering for their local area specifically has meant that they now know who lives on their street, they now know who’s a door they can knock on in case they need support and help, and people are more willing to go out of their way to help each other.

(S5LA1, admin 2)

WhatsApp groups were an important tool in this process; neighbourhood chat groups, initially there to coordinate support, had become important platforms for sharing information about what was going on locally. These community relationships are an important legacy of mutual aid, and participants felt people would continue to help each other in times of need, with or without mutual aid.

I know somebody who’s within one minute walk away from here, a lady who lives on her own, and she will only ring me now. Forget the mutual aid, she’ll just ring me.

(S2LA1, admin 14)

2. Legacy and the future of mutual aid

A key theme in the data focused on group’s plans for the future, and the types of support necessary to sustain informal, community action. Many groups had already reduced the scale of their activities when participating in the research (between February and August 2021). Demand for the delivery of essential supplies declined, but support for people living in poverty has become increasingly important. Most groups that developed food projects planned to continue as long as they could resource it, but expressed concerns about the sustainability of funding, space and volunteers.

Some groups were reticent about the long-term role of mutual aid in supporting people’s poverty-related needs, cautioning that the state should not become reliant on informal community groups to plug the gaps left by insufficient statutory support. Participants noted that it was the responsibility of the state, not communities, to ensure that people have access to a decent income and social services. However, mistrust of government systems and a fear that people will continue to slip through the gaps of statutory support, have driven groups to sustain their support despite these concerns.

Many groups were focusing their attention on changes they felt could be achieved at the local level, utilising the tools of community development and community organising. In some locations, the connections that mutual aid groups had fostered provided the momentum for people to come together and improve their neighbourhoods, unrelated to the challenges of the pandemic.

We started doing community treasure mapping, just bringing people together and saying, like, what are you passionate about that you’d get involved with, with two or three other people? You know, what do you really care about? Rather than what’s wrong with the area... What we’re trying to do is create all these associations, new associations, in the community, who then come together to make decisions about the community, with the idea that we will possibly create and enable them to plan.

(S5LA3, admin 1)

Groups organised community events, like litter picks and ‘street weeding’, and set up community projects, centred around food, gardening and art. Community spaces were a key theme in conversations about the future; some groups had acquired buildings or spaces from their council, and others were looking to secure ownership of space through a community asset transfer process. Ambitions for these spaces ranged from community centres or community hubs, community cafes, food co-operatives, parks and even housing associations. Participants emphasised that the decision about how to use the community space would be decided by the community, through dialogue and citizen participation.

Because this is also about democracy, really, so being able to grow it from the grassroots up, creating spaces for associations, which really is the plural of citizen, to come together, flourish and grow power, so that they can act for the benefit of the community.

(S5LA3, admin 1)

Critically these activities require resourcing. Several groups had moved towards formalising their activities, by becoming community interest companies (CIC), or constituted associations, in order to access funding. Groups understood that formalising would open access to funding and collaborations with other established organisations, but were aware of the constraints that might impose. Participants described a range of ambitions and visions for mutual aid, reflecting the diversity of the groups, their approaches and the communities in which they are based, while others had not yet decided on the future direction for their group.

We want to become the kind of charity where you’re not forbidden from campaigning around issues, because we don’t want to have our hands tied...we want to be able to campaign politically with a small p, you know, and fight for people to have things.

(S5LA1, admin 5)

[Mutual aid] sits in a non-official civic space, so a space which is not confessional, is not party political, and which, as I say, is not run by the council. And I think that... that has quite a lot of potential and it might go in different directions in different areas, depending on the flavour of that area and depending on whether people in the mutual aid are particularly involved with; you know, the allotment scheme or the food bank scheme or the play area scheme or whatever.

(S5LA1, admin 3)
Communities are doing it for themselves: Lessons from the mutual aid experience

Postscript (March 2022)

In February 2022, we brought mutual aid groups back together online to discuss the findings of the report and revisit our lessons and recommendations considering more recent events. Despite assumptions that mutual aid would fade out as the health crisis subsided and social restrictions eased, over half of the groups we spoke with were still active. Groups shared how they had been evolving and sustaining their activities over the last year and discussed the challenges that they have faced in trying to keep up the momentum.

A key theme of the discussion was a mistrust of the government and of statutory support, and the need to continue provision of poverty-related support. This is in spite of groups’ concerns with the problematic dependency that has been created whereby an underfunded public sector relies on the goodwill of unpaid volunteers. The latest cost-of-living crisis has made the work of many mutual aid groups more critical than ever. Groups shared their fears that if they begin to scale back their activities, people will slip through the cracks of statutory support. Burnout is still a huge challenge, with some groups struggling to keep members engaged, particularly those in admin/coordinator type roles. Although groups are exhausted and many committed organisers need a break, they feel compelled to continue. Interestingly, the mistrust of central government that propelled the emergence of many groups at the start of the lockdown continues to be a key driver of the movement.

These more recent experiences highlight the somewhat conflicting narratives and conceptualisations of mutual aid. On the one hand, it can be understood as a positive phenomenon that brought communities together in solidarity during a time of crisis, building relationships and support networks. On the other hand, it is also a difficult political project in which groups have assumed roles and responsibilities that ought to be delivered by the state. We found that groups are thinking more actively about their political and disident role in challenging power and campaigning for a fairer economy and welfare state. The experience of the pandemic has highlighted for many the profound need for political change to address socio-economic inequalities. Looking to the future, several groups plan to harness their power to challenge the status quo and draw attention to perceived flaws in the political and economic systems.

Some groups were continuing to keep their focus at the hyperlocal level, by bringing residents together to talk about shared priorities for the future and changes that they would like to see in their community. A key priority has been to organise fun events, where neighbours can get to know each other and celebrate the strengths of their community: building our community power, by building our relationships. This experience demonstrates how mutual aid is a powerful template for how citizens can step outside of the spaces that have been prescribed for community engagement; coming together without permission or invitation, to discuss what is important and to take collective action. There are important lessons for local government in this. Rather than inviting residents into council-owned spaces where agendas are pre-determined and power is not shared, forward-thinking local authorities could instead reach out to organised communities with established priorities, engaging with communities on their own terms and deepening local democracy. Mutual Aid has in many cases successfully engaged individuals and communities who have traditionally been marginalised from established political channels of representation and engagement. It is vital for local democracy, that such approaches should be utilised more broadly and key lessons learned.

As we are transitioning out of this health crisis, communities have also shown a desire to recognise and celebrate the community activity that took place. Residents have come together through creative projects, such as quilts and murals, in order to capture and document the memories of the pandemic and of how communities coped collectively.

3. Learning and recommendations

Mutual aid groups were essential to the Covid-19 response; they kept people safe, fed and connected during the crisis and make an important contribution to community resources. It is therefore in the interest of wider policy to endorse and bolster their work. Here we extract the key learning from the mutual experience about informal community groups and set out some recommendations for local authorities, the VCS and national policymakers.

Lessons for understanding the nature of informal community groups

The urgency of the crisis propelled people to get involved in mutual aid, but sustained and evolving activity was enabled by the connections and relationships that mutual aid groups created in their communities.

Mutual aid groups share some values which underlie their approach: solidarity, support without judgement, and social justice. These values underpinned the way they reached communities, organised activity, and collaborated with partners.

Groups were diverse in their organisational structures but shared some common strengths, including their local knowledge, a focus on relationship-building, and informal and flexible ways of working – all enabled by a hyperlocal geographical footprint.

These characteristics are fundamental to understanding how to work with and support informal groups like mutual aid.

Recommendations for local authorities

Recognise and respect the autonomy of mutual aid groups

Central to working with and supporting mutual aid is understanding and respecting the values of groups. Key to this is developing an organisational culture that is trusting and able to engage with the diverse voices that exist within communities. Staff will need the permission to work flexibly in order to embrace the informal nature of mutual aid and build relationships. Journeys towards culture change in approaches and systems should continue, with a focus on more flattened decision-making, genuine listening to communities and trusting the insights and knowledge of local people. Mutual aid groups should be seen as a valuable complementary resource and not a potential appendage to existing services; expectations must be managed about what mutual aid can and cannot be expected to deliver.

Understand what support is needed and how it can be facilitated/enabled

Local authorities looking to play a facilitative or enabling role for mutual aid should reach out to informal groups to ask whether and what support they might need. Several groups identified the importance of practical support (with finance and grant applications, bank accounts, accessing space, etc.) but this varies across contexts. Micro-grants have been a lifeline for community groups during the crisis and could be used to continue to grow community action going forward. This will demand a permanent relaxing of excess bureaucracy that prevents flexible and collaborative approaches, e.g. around grants, funding and data sharing.

Extend community engagement

Forward-thinking councils are often seeking to find ways to connect with those who are often (problematically) labelled ‘hard-to-reach’. There is a real opportunity for local authorities to engage with and draw upon the community networks that have been built during the pandemic. Engagement with mutual aid groups could provide an effective channel to connect with previously unheard or marginalised voices. This process has already begun in some areas at the hyperlocal level, as the following quote from a ward councillor highlights:

“Because I’ve seen how a lot of these groups that connected during the Covid period were completely invisible when I first became a councillor; like, I would attend lots of meetings and meet lots of groups and lots of groups get in touch, they were all white groups, all white staff, or whatever. You know, there was no diversity in terms of who was actually coming forward, who was accessing support, who was in those power positions.”  

It is critical that this translates into genuine community influence and co-production, rather than ‘tick-box’ consultation. This will require a levelling of the power balance, where communities host the conversation, and local authorities are the invited guests.
Communities are doing it for themselves: Lessons from the mutual aid experience

Services should be wrapped around us, like… you know, not as thick as icing, but, like, a light dusting, like icing sugar, where we can draw them in as we need them. And not what seems to be happening, is that they’re moving into local authorities as hubs and they’re displacing stuff. You know, they’ve got to come in as guests, into communities, and not, like, be at the front, and I think that would be really helpful, just a shift. [S3LA3, admin 1]

This is about engaging with communities on their own terms, leaving behind council-determined agendas and instead working with communities on an equal footing to co-produce strengths-based and place-based strategies.

Striking the right balance
Whilst there is much potential in these relationships, there is a tricky balance that must be achieved between collaboration and the autonomy of informal approaches. While some sought active participation, collaboration and engagement, other participants emphasised the importance of being independent from the local authority and formal services. Local authorities should also be mindful that the dissident nature of mutual aid may mean that collaboration is not always appropriate. Understanding the levels of engagement that groups require is key to building strong relationships.

Recommendations for the voluntary and community sector
Supporting mutual aid
The lessons outlined above for local authorities regarding recognition, respect and support, are equally applicable to VCS organisations that may wish to work with or support informal community groups. Equally important is permanently embedding the flexible ways of working that emerged during the pandemic, enabling VCS organisations to work with and support informal community groups. The mutual aid experience highlights the importance of infrastructure organisations in supporting grassroots, community-led groups and organisations. Some of the most important collaborations that groups developed were with small-scale VCS groups and organisations, who also rely on the support of VCS infrastructure.

Offer more flexible volunteering opportunities
Much of narrative in VCS circles during the pandemic has centred upon the need to maintain the sense of community spirit and neighbourliness that mutual aid has embodied during the pandemic. A key lesson for volunteering organisations wishing to encourage volunteering and attract a more diverse group of volunteers – as mutual aid groups did – might be to embrace a more flexible approach by dismantling bureaucratic barriers to voluntary action.

Recommendations for national policymakers
Invest in place
The way that mutual aid groups have responded to community needs – quickly, flexibly and with kindness – has demonstrated the potential of community-led movements. The experience of the pandemic has created a renewed focus upon communities, with the UK government announcing a policy agenda to give more power to communities (Kruger, 2020). However, community action does not exist in a vacuum. This research has demonstrated the way that groups have drawn upon existing local resources and infrastructure. After decades of disinvestment, the pandemic has brought about a renewed recognition of the value of VCS infrastructure (Macmillan, 2021). Any serious commitment to devolving power and decision-making to communities and ensuring that the collaborations that have been built can be sustained will necessitate the funding of community infrastructure and the channelling of resources to grassroots groups. A wider policy environment that supports social and community infrastructure will help create the conditions for these groups to thrive.

Address socio-economic inequalities
The pandemic has exacerbated poverty, with the worst effects of the pandemic measures falling disproportionately on already disadvantaged communities. Mutual aid groups have plugged large gaps in welfare provision, but informal community groups must not become a sticking plaster for wider societal problems. There is considerable work to be done in tackling the problematic new dependency culture that has been created, whereby an underfunded public sector is becoming dependent upon the resources of unpaid volunteers. Policymakers should focus upon addressing socio-economic inequalities, to create the space for mutual aid groups to focus upon building relationships and harnessing the skills and assets of their communities to contribute to a more connected and cohesive society.

Find ways to support informal volunteering
The mutual aid response was facilitated outside of traditional, established volunteering infrastructure. The mutuality, flexibility and informal nature at the heart of these groups cannot be harnessed through national volunteer platforms or volunteer passports, which seek to create a reserve ‘army’ of volunteers.

Rather, support should focus on localised capacity building and build upon the flexibility and informality that encapsulates this type of volunteering. Central government could support this by ensuring that volunteering policy and funding facilitates, embeds and enables these diverse, informal and flexible forms of engagement rather than restricting volunteering into a homogenous framework.
Communities are doing it for themselves: Lessons from the mutual aid experience


The MoVE project is a collaboration between the Universities of Sheffield, Hull and Leeds. Over the course of 18 months, the research examined how to understand, scale and maximise the effectiveness of volunteer responses to COVID-19. This research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as part of the UK Research and Innovation’s rapid response to COVID-19. If you would like to know more about these and other findings from the MoVE research, please contact Dr Harriet Thiery at h.r.thiery@hull.ac.uk

All our findings and reports can be found on our online ecosystem. You can also follow us on twitter @Enabling_SA to keep up to date with the research.