COMMUNITIES vs.
CORONAVIRUS

The rise of mutual aid

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New Local (formerly the New Local Government Network) is an independent think tank and network with a mission to transform public services and unlock community power.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

This report addresses a key aspect of the nation's response to COVID-19: the hyper-local, spontaneous efforts of communities. These efforts do not reflect the traditional 'helper and helped' relationship, which prevails in public services and the formal charity sector. They obey the deeper obligations of mutualism: free citizens combining to protect their communities, and the most vulnerable, against a threat to all.

The work of Mutual Aid groups during the lockdown may not look very different from traditional charity or public service – in both cases, people with more assets are generally helping people with fewer - but the spirit behind it is very different. 'Ordinary' people, not just those usually active in their town and village life, have stepped forward in astonishing numbers. Neighbourhoods have become more than geographies, but active social webs, linked by new connections and reciprocal dependencies.

The essential finding of the crisis, detailed in this report, is that there exists a great reservoir of latent goodwill and community spirit which can translate into actual capability in times of crisis.

The question is – is it only available in a crisis? Do we only get Mutual Aid when people have stopped going to work (is the Government's natural and proper focus, to get the economy moving and people taking up jobs, a threat to community spirit and social action)? And will people step forward for 'business as usual' social support – the complicated business of improving ordinary community life – once the emergency has passed?

While we cannot answer these questions yet, this report makes useful recommendations about how to sustain – or repeat if lockdown happens again - the Mutual Aid we have seen in recent months. Partly because the dynamic is more fully one of equals, Mutual Aid does not require the same degree of management and safeguarding that are thought necessary when there is more potential for abuse of power. Therefore we urgently need to dismantle bureaucratic barriers to voluntary action and trust people more.

That said, I am pleased that the authors highlight the necessary role of local government. The temptation to cut councils out is strong, especially where they have hampered the mutual effort. And indeed we must not insist that every voluntary initiative should be registered or somehow routed through the council. But if we want to make Mutual Aid more of the default position; a central part of the way society is organised, we need to integrate it more with local public services and democratic systems. But the onus of change is on councils, not communities, to accommodate the idiosyncratic and uneven patterns of Mutual Aid into its systems.

We need a new recognition by national and local government of the latent capability of communities; and an expectation - incentivised and even mandated by policy that practice must make use of this capability. This report provides vital evidence of the opportunity and helps point the way to a better model.

Danny Kruger
MP for Devizes

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to tens of thousands of people losing their lives in the UK, stretched the capacity of public services, altered everyday life for millions, and ground our economy down to a standstill. Yet the public response to the crisis also inspires hope.

Thousands of spontaneous Mutual Aid groups have emerged to support the most vulnerable people in our society. These groups have been supplying food and medicine, connecting with people who feel isolated, and organising community resources for the benefit of all. In many cases they have been able to reach people more quickly than traditional public services and help them with a wider variety of needs. In this way, the Mutual Aid phenomenon is a powerful demonstration of 'community power'.

Based on conversations with people working both in and alongside Mutual Aid groups, this report shines a light on the movement, revealing how it has worked in practice and uncovering lessons for the public sector.

Our research has found that while the Mutual Aid phenomenon has emerged across the country and in all kinds of varied communities, it has been significantly assisted by access to digital infrastructure and to social capital. On this latter point, the furlough scheme has been a major driver of participation.

In terms of the activities they are engaged with, groups are engaging in a much wider variety of activities than popular media has suggested. From their origins in picking up shopping and medicine for people, many of these groups are now expanding into work aimed at combatting things like loneliness or financial stress. They have been immensely successful in these endeavours, and that has been enabled chiefly by their ability to work flexibly, responsively and in a person-centred manner.

Yet Mutual Aid groups have faced various challenges in their work: particularly relating to how best to structure themselves, and in terms of managing the morale and conduct of their members. Another area that has proved challenging for some groups has been managing their relationships with local government. Some councils have been inclined to micromanage groups, while at the other extreme, others have demonstrated a lack of interest and support: neither stance has been conducive to their success.

Examples of positive relationships between groups and councils do exist, however. These tend to be characterised by a facilitative approach on the part of local government, aimed at creating the space, and offering the operational support needed, for groups to flourish.

Drawing on these findings, this report offers the following key lessons:

1. **Mutual Aid groups have been crucial to our society's COVID-19 response.** These groups were not 'nice to have' – they provided essential support to vulnerable people and prevented further negative outcomes emerging from the crisis.

2. **Mutual Aid groups illustrate the wider potential of community power.** These groups represent a case study in the potential of community-led movements. With the concept of reciprocity at their heart, they offer an alternative to traditional, more paternalistic public service relationships.

3. **Mutual Aid groups reveal the importance of the attitude of local government.** Local government has significant 'make-or-break' power over community initiatives, and the extent to which they succeed depends in large part on the attitude of councils.

4. **Where social capital is more developed and working age people have more time, Mutual Aid Groups function with more ease.** This has profound implications for what these groups might mean for inequality. In order to prevent the transformational power of community activism being concentrated in areas with higher existing social capital, we must proactively support community mobilisation and capacity building.

5. **Central government has struggled to connect with Mutual Aid groups – a small scale is key:** These groups operate on a hyper-local basis, and so they require local coordination and locally-specific support.

To maximise the impact of Mutual Aid groups in the fabric of communities in the future, the report makes the following recommendations:

6. **Councils should play a facilitating role as Mutual Aid groups evolve.** Councils will need to operate in the grey area between doing nothing and doing everything with creativity, trust, and above all a clear understanding of the value these groups add within their communities.

7. **The creation of a community support financial package for local government.** Government should invest in Mutual Aid by investing in local government, and this package should include provision to support community development teams and to train wider staff in community-centred approaches.

8. **Employment policy and practice that supports flexible working, giving working-aged people more time to volunteer.** The potential of more free time for community power and mutualism should form a core part of considerations as future policy responses for economic recovery and renewal are developed.

This report makes a contribution to understanding a movement in its infancy – one which responded to a very real and immediate crisis, but is already showing signs of evolving. Mutual Aid groups have already created and cemented social bonds in communities nationwide, and they will not simply be unmade as the pandemic eases. The future role they play in communities has potential to strengthen our social fabric for the benefit of everyone.

INTRODUCTION

What is mutual aid?

Amid the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic, a rare cause for optimism has been the emergence of the Mutual Aid groups which have sprung up around the country. With over two million[1] at-risk people 'shielding', and many others struggling with a range of issues brought on by the pandemic, these groups are ensuring that their communities have what they need to get through this crisis, whether that means supplying food and medical supplies or sharing information and making contact with isolated people.

The concept of Mutual Aid is nothing new – indeed some have argued that it represents a fundamental 'tendency' of human nature.[2] From enslaved African-Americans forming the Underground Railroad[3] network in the 19th Century, to modern addiction support groups, human beings have always had an extraordinary ability to create grassroots organisations which help and support their communities. There is also evidence to suggest that such unselfish interactions will tend to emerge and outperform other approaches if given the chance. The Nobel-winning political economist Elinor Ostrom documented dozens of global examples of communities entering spontaneous, long-lasting, and mutually beneficial associations with each other.[4]

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1 'Coronavirus: millions shielding in England can go outside from Monday, says Robert Jenrick'. The Guardian, (2020). https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/may/31/coronavirus-millions-shielding-in-england-can-go-outside-from-monday-says-robert-jenrick-video (accessed 23/06/20).

2 In Peter Kropotkin's words: "The mutual-aid tendency in man has so remote an origin, and is so deeply interwoven with all the past evolution of the human race, that it has been maintained by mankind up to the present time, notwithstanding all vicissitudes of history." Kropotkin, P. (1902). Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution. Extending Horizon Books.

3 Curl, J. (2009). For All The People. PM Press, Oakland.

4 Ostrom, E., Governing the Commons (Cambridge, 1990). NLGN's Ostrom Project will publish its final report in summer 2020 – more information can be found at https://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/2020/nlgns-ostrom-project/.

We should not, then, be surprised by what we are seeing today. We should, however, pay attention to these groups and their idiosyncrasies. Through this report, we will use Mutual Aid groups to shed light on the social fabric of Britain, and the capacity of public services to work with, rather than 'do to', communities. We will extract some lessons to build the case for community power - meaning communities' ability to deploy their own skills and assets to define and help address many of the challenges they face.

Mutual Aid groups can be defined as "self-organising groups where people come together to address a shared health or social issue through mutual support."[5] This sounds simple, but in the context of modern public service delivery and the norms by which much of the voluntary sector operates, an ethos of mutualism is in many ways radical.

Mutualism breaks down the divide between helper and helped, and instead emphasises equality in the social interactions between people.[6] Mutualism is not about one group lending their charity to another; it's about mobilising a community to meet the shared needs of all. As the key online resource 'COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK' advises, it "isn't about "saving" anyone, it's common sense human values of neighbours and community members looking out for each other."[7]

This is the ethos that is now guiding over 4,000 groups with reports of as many as three million participants in total.[8] Their flourishing has the potential to be a transformative experience for communities across the country, and to reset the relationship between people and public services. The movement demands our attention.

This report is an initial study capturing the most immediate lessons generated by the experiences of communities during the COVID-19 crisis.

5 Seebohm, P et al. (2013). 'The contribution of self-help/Mutual Aid groups to mental well-being.' Health & Social Care in the Community, 21(4), 391-404. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/hsc.12021 (accessed 23/06/20).
6 Cox, E & Bamber, C. (2020). 'Why Mutual Aid groups and the NHS volunteer 'army' must work together to save lives'. RSA. https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2020/04/mutual-aid-volunteer (accessed 23/06/20).
7 https://covidmutualaid.org/ (accessed 25/06/20)
8 https://covidmutualaid.org/local-groups/ (accessed 25/06/20)

We have organised the discussion into three main sections, dealing with:

- Group formation and the conditions for Mutual Aid groups,

- The activities and behaviours of those groups, their successes, and the challenges they encountered,

- The diverse relationships between Mutual Aid groups and local government and wider public services.

The report concludes with five key lessons that have emerged from our research and some recommendations for the future of Mutual Aid after the crisis.

HOW DO MUTUAL AID GROUPS FORM?

One of the principal strengths of spontaneous Mutual Aid groups is their capacity for rapid emergence and diverse structures. The underlying social needs that most of these groups are responding to during the pandemic are similar: they tend to be involved in the supply of food and medicine in the first instance and often move into wider social welfare roles later.

Some constraints are universal. Each group needs a minimum number of committed and trusted volunteers with some means of interaction. Each group must have some way of meeting their community's needs (e.g. arranging dedicated shopping time at a supermarket or agreeing to collect food that would otherwise be wasted and distributing it on to those who need it). However, the variation between groups is striking and, in many ways, foundational to the strength of the movement.

Some urban Mutual Aid groups can depend on near-universal internet access within the community, while in rural areas, leafleting and telephone calls remain crucial for keeping everyone in touch. Some groups emerge as outgrowths from existing networks and community projects, with good links to local institutions and public services. Others are wholly new entrants to the local social fabric and are surprised to discover a complexity of voluntary and charitable work already going on around them.

For these reasons, it is unsurprising that the central COVID-19 Mutual Aid site suggests that groups do not need to be set up in a uniform way, and that "each community is advised to do what is best for them."[9]

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9 https://covidmutualaid.org/resources

Digital infrastructure has been important to mutual aid groups – but offline communities have helped each other too.

While there is a great diversity of structures and approaches used by different Mutual Aid groups in the UK, some similarities and patterns do emerge from our survey. Digital infrastructure and wide usage of web-based social media have been a central component of many groups' ability to function during the lockdown. The majority of the groups whose activities have been 'visible' for the purposes of this study have been those with an online presence of one kind or another. The 'standard pattern' of such groups is of a dedicated group on Facebook, with or without supplementary instant messaging via WhatsApp. Some groups reserve a 'private' layer of social media interaction for core members and organisers, while using a 'public' group to advertise services and coordinate with less-involved participants. In this way, hierarchies of involvement and decision-making are often shaped by the options available within the digital platform being used.

This does not mean that activities are only taking place online. Similarly, there is evidence to suggest that in some places there are new voluntary groups responding to the pandemic which simply do not self-define as 'Mutual Aid' or think to formally register themselves like other groups. Such groups pose a particular research challenge, and have for the most part operated beyond our reach. In the words of one community organiser,

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In some places there is loads of stuff happening – but they're not calling it 'Mutual Aid', they're just calling it neighbourliness or solidarity, or calling it whatever they call the things that are already happening in those areas."

Existing social capital helped many groups emerge, but the furlough scheme was decisive.

Existing community networks have been significant for the development of some Mutual Aid groups: many are the product of activity or projects that are repurposed. Our research suggests that many of the 150 Lottery-funded 'Big Local' community projects that are organised by Local Trust all over the UK have pivoted into building or supporting local Mutual Aid efforts, for example.[10] Community businesses, charities, and Community Interest Companies – we spoke to examples in Cornwall and Cumbria – have also become natural starting points for Mutual Aid activities.

This suggests that high levels of local social capital are an important variable for the emergence of the groups. This finding is echoed by rapid research from the Bennett Institute, which mapped active Mutual Aid groups against standard measures of socio-economic advantage.[11] Wealthier and more advantaged areas generally enjoy higher levels of social capital, which in turn, as this study found, correlates with the emergence of more Mutual Aid groups.

More working-age people are involved in Mutual Aid groups than other kinds of voluntary activities. The specific circumstances created by the pandemic crisis – of a great many working-age people being furloughed or otherwise having much less to do if self-employed – has led to a very different age profile among participants.[12] Traditionally, voluntary activities and high levels of community engagement are demographically associated with older and retired people. The key metric of 'social trust' has a U-shaped relationship with age, with the young and the old both enjoying higher levels.

As a result, the emergence of entirely new Mutual Aid groups seems to have been more concentrated in areas where large numbers of working-age people can participate in them. In rural areas and

10 Macmillan, R. (2020). 'How will communities respond to and recover from the crisis?' Local Trust. https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Briefing-1-220420-V2.pdf (accessed 23/06/20).
11 Felici, M. (2020). 'Social capital and the response to Covid-19.' Bennet Institute for Public Policy. https://www.bennettinstitute.cam.ac.uk/blog/social-capital-and-response-covid-19 (accessed 23/06/20).
12 Tiratelli, L. (2020). 'The Key to a More Altruistic Society? Working Less.' NLGN. http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/2020/the-key-to-more-a-more-altruistic-society-less-work/ (accessed 23/06/20).

less wealthy places, community activists and existing networks and institutions – such as churches, food banks, and rotary clubs - have been more important.

One participant in a Mutual Aid group that had developed out of an existing community business in a relatively poor rural area told us that some of the other groups they were coordinating with "came out of nowhere and set up crowd-funding, started organising food parcels – but this wouldn't work in a more deprived area like ours." In other places, we have been told about a deliberate effort to avoid "the usual" networks in order to ensure that new people would start to become involved in community activities.

WHAT DO MUTUAL AID GROUPS DO IN PRACTICE?

Activities have often evolved from delivery of essentials to wider social support

During this crisis, Mutual Aid has come to be most associated with coordinating over social media to run errands, such as picking up shopping or prescriptions, for the most vulnerable in communities. And indeed, our conversations with those on the frontline of these groups reveal that this does form a substantial part of their operational activities. Some relatively small groups are performing these tasks on a daily basis for as many as 200 people.

In that same spirit of making sure people have the provisions they need to get through lockdown, many Mutual Aid groups have gone further than simply doing people's shopping. Some have formed partnerships with local food banks to put together and deliver parcels for those in financial stress. Some are engaging in mass meal preparation in efforts to ensure that those in quarantine can stay healthy. Other Mutual Aid groups are going beyond food and medicine, and are also bringing people sources of entertainment, by running things like 'book and jigsaw exchanges'.

Another major focus for Mutual Aid groups has been combating loneliness, and a wide variety of initiatives are now underway across the country in this space. These include innovations like community 'virtual coffee mornings' over Zoom, or simply arranging for people with time to call and chat with those who may be socially isolated. Some groups are running news pages or newsletters on top of their social media activity, to try to reach as many people as possible with information about what is happening in their communities and how they can get involved.

The most ambitious Mutual Aid groups are looking to harness not just the potential of people's free time, but also the power of pooled money.

One group we spoke to had raised £9,000, which it was using to help support individuals and households who had fallen on hard times with basic support for things like bills, nappies and formula milk. This shows that the potential of these groups goes far beyond running basic errands, and that already, they are diversifying into more impactful and difficult work.

Case study: A mutual aid group supported by the local council

This group got started at the earliest stages of the crisis, building on organisers' expertise as self-employed small business owners and their existing relationships with local institutions and networks. Within two weeks, nearly 100 households were using the group's services. By mid-May, it fulfilled more than 500 food and medicine deliveries for sheltering people, supported by some basic logistical support from the council and agreements with local businesses.

In addition to supplying food and medicine, this group runs a dedicated helpline and information page, a regular book and jigsaw exchange, a food bank, and a community library. It has set up a 'listening crew' to keep in touch with lonely or isolated people, and the group is now collaborating to produce a short film.

This group also developed its own systems to ensure very high record-keeping, safeguarding, and data protection standards. They use rotating call handlers and a system of anonymised forms to coordinate the contributions of more than 200 volunteers.

A participant with an organising role within the group reflected that the group's experience during the pandemic had revealed a strong sense of cohesion community – and some concern that this cohesion could fade after the crisis:

"there's so much appetite here for people to help each other - there's huge community spirit. It would be a terrible waste if it all went away when the virus was over."

Rapid reaction and strengthening community bonds: the successes of Mutual Aid groups

Those at the sharp end of the Mutual Aid movement are clear that they feel they have made an "absolutely essential" contribution to getting the most vulnerable through this crisis. In this sense, the key success of this movement has been to get things like food and prescriptions to people who would otherwise have risked their health by leaving their houses. It seems reasonable to assume that this will have helped to save a considerable number of lives.

Another key success of the movement has been their ability to mobilise and start reaching people in the earliest days of lockdown. This is something that has been acknowledged by people we've spoken to working in local government. Traditional public services, and even the traditional voluntary sector with their more professionalised and formulaic processes, simply cannot compete with the 'agility' of community groups, who have been able to uncover need and get working almost immediately. Mutual Aid groups' ability to pick up the slack as charities and traditional services reorganised themselves during those crucial early weeks of lockdown has been another major success.

In terms of longer-term successes, groups have excelled at creating networks. Many have created partnerships of various forms, and with various degrees of formality, with both local government, and with charities and businesses in their areas. With local government and charities, this has meant coordinating activities and trying to work together. In terms of businesses, this has meant a variety of things, from sponsorships, to negotiating for supermarkets to allow teams of volunteers to shop before opening times, so that they can get hold of food for those in need before the shelves empty.

There is also emerging evidence of direct positive effects on people's wellbeing from this community mobilisation. One coordinator of volunteers highlighted the example of a woman who had been unwell for years and getting by with minimal contact in her community. She has now become a participant in her local Mutual Aid group – she not only receives food packages and calls from her neighbours, but also calls and cooks meals for other shielding members of the network.

The ability to contribute on equal terms and play a role in turn has the potential to transform the wellbeing and self-esteem of people who are too often estranged from their communities.

This work, of creating bonds between key actors in communities, can be counted as a short-term success, but is also what offers Mutual Aid groups the chance to have a longer-term legacy of successfully improving their areas.

Case study: A mutual aid group not supported by the council

This Mutual Aid group developed from the existing voluntary networks around a pair of small community businesses. Its initial ambitions – to repurpose the business premises for community support and to produce PPE – were hampered by a lack of interest from the council. Initial attempts to collaborate were rebuffed, and the council later asked the group to restructure the governance of its core community business – a potentially weeks-long process – in order to be eligible for support.

Without help from the local authority, the group worked to partner with local supermarkets and national charities in order to feed up to 100 sheltering people every week. This group has now set up a dedicated distribution hub to facilitate its efforts and offers additional support for isolated and vulnerable people within its network. Many of its efforts are coordinated via social media, where volunteers also share information and updates with the wider community on a dedicated page.

This group's interactions with the council have left a lasting impression. One participant told us that the pandemic has revealed longer-term issues in the area, and these would ultimately need to be solved by the community itself:

"The lockdown has brought a lot of problems to the surface, and they won't just go away after it ends. The best support we've had during this crisis is from other Mutual Aid groups and people in community groups."

Managing informality, waning enthusiasm and internal tensions: challenges for mutual aid groups

Despite their successes, the Mutual Aid groups that we have spoken to for this research have encountered a range of challenges, from managing the conduct and morale of volunteers, to working out how best to structure themselves.

Informality is what makes Mutual Aid groups distinctive, and what allows them to be agile and responsive. Yet managing that informality can also be a challenge.

On the one hand, some groups have struggled from a lack of leadership. Groups report that people are keen to join and offer their services, but are not willing to take the initiative. They instead prefer to wait for instructions. When these are not forthcoming, the risk is that these people then drift away from the group.

On the other hand, some groups, in their eagerness to address the crises brewing in their communities, developed slightly hierarchical and undemocratic working practices. This is not necessarily an issue, particularly if it means that needs are being met, but such an approach may run counter to the spirit of mutualism that attracts people to join these groups in the first place.

Some groups also experienced a challenge around sustaining enthusiasm among initially willing volunteers. As one Mutual Aider put it - in the early days of lockdown, the need "is so immediate", that finding motivation "is easy". But as the crisis has dragged on, maintaining energy has proved difficult – a challenge that is only likely to intensify over time.

This problem of maintaining levels of engagement has been exacerbated for some groups by the emergence of internal tensions. Some groups reported issues over the perceived "politicisation" of their activities. For example, one group, which was organised largely over WhatsApp, saw many members leave in response to overtly left-wing content being posted to the group-chat. This is a difficult issue, as for some people, community activism as an activity and mutualism as an ethos are inherently political. For others, these groups were about stepping outside of politics and instead practising a certain do-it-yourself spirit. These kinds of tension are a challenge for any group wishing to maintain an engaged mass membership.

HOW DO MUTUAL AID GROUPS INTERACT WITH COUNCILS?

Our research has revealed a huge range of different approaches and outcomes in the ways that Mutual Aid groups have interacted with councils. This reflects the varying degrees to which different councils have historically worked with their communities. In many cases, the local council has served as an invaluable partner and source of expertise and support for volunteers. In other places, local government has attempted to directly manage all such activity within its jurisdiction.

As one study has found, "the placing of community development within council structures is enormously varied. It moves in response to the changing political and administrative agendas of the time".[13] These changes of approach – impacted by waves of budget cuts and shifting policies from the centre – have led to a patchwork of different environments across the UK, each of which can have an impact on the emergence and success of Mutual Aid groups. This section of the report draws out the conditions that are most – and least – conducive to meaningful and agile community action in times of crisis.

As discussed in the previous section, there are many areas where councils have been proactive in their engagement with these groups, and vice-versa. However, this willingness to engage does not always create a positive relationship. We have spoken to some Mutual Aid group participants who would rather that the local authority remained indifferent, instead of adopting a controlling approach. In particular, these groups were resistant to councils insisting on the formalisation of processes, centrally coordinating plans, and the introduction of hyper-rigorous safeguarding and protective regulations on community-level activities.

13 'Empowerment in action: case studies of local authority community development'. COGS. https://www.bl.uk/britishlibrary/~/media/bl/global/social-welfare/pdfs/non-secure/e/m/p/empowerment-in-action-case-studies-of-local-authority-community-development.pdf (accessed 23/06/20).

Micromanagement is widespread

When council teams have sought to exercise a controlling relationship over the efforts of volunteers and spontaneous community groups, the outcomes can be negative. Many Mutual Aid participants reported seeing local government as "getting in the way" of their efforts, or of setting up parallel support systems, usually a few weeks after the emergence of local Mutual Aid, whose slightly-different service offering can prove "confusing as hell" to participants.

In some areas, councils had important objectives in mind for their interactions with the new Mutual Aid groups, such as ensuring the safety of participants, but pursued these in a highly prescriptive way. One voluntary sector facilitator noted that "there is a lot of 'should' and 'must' language coming from the council, which can really put people off". Another interviewee from a different part of the country put this formalising instinct in starker terms:

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The council wants to professionalise everything. They want groups to fit into their corporate plans. It's really unhelpful."

Indifference holds MUTUAL AID GROUPS back and hurts public trust

In other parts of the country, the response of local authorities has been one of indifference or dismissal. While this does not necessarily mean the end of the efforts of Mutual Aid groups, the absence of support can make those groups' work far more difficult, driving them to engage independently with other institutions, and damaging the council's reputation with communities. Without at least the tacit blessing of the local authority, Mutual Aid groups can struggle to organise their efforts and arrange partnerships.

One of the Mutual Aid organisers interviewed for our research explained how his group has had to work without any support from

the local council. This group nevertheless proceeded to set up services supplying food to around 100 sheltering people, including mental health patients who were allocated to new accommodation when their care unit was repurposed to create extra capacity for the NHS virus response. Despite having a firm local foothold in the existing structure of a community business, this Mutual Aid group was "laughed at" by the council when it suggested working jointly on a local action plan. Weeks later, the council got back in touch, suggesting that some collaboration would be possible but only if the Mutual Aid group's structure was reformed to meet certain requirements, which could take weeks to finalise. "The council wasn't interested in starting up a relationship while those changes were going through, and we were already deep into the crisis by then, so we decided to get on with it by ourselves," one participant reported.

This left the group with a narrow range of possible sources of support and funding, which it managed to secure through deals with local supermarkets. But to continue operating this group is now spending time applying for funds from national funding bodies. Our interviewee reports that this experience, with the local authority functioning "basically as gatekeepers", will certainly "impact on public trust in the future". He adds:

"We are learning we can't trust the council. We can't see ourselves working with the council again. We are connected to this community, and we are in a position to help – to supply PPE, to feed people, set up food banks. Why didn't the council come to us?"

Supportive councils find ways to facilitate without crowding-out the community

The best examples of functioning community-council relationships found over the course of our research are underpinned by a different kind of mindset: one that sees community action as important and worthy of support, rather than as a source of amateurism and needless challenge. It is possible to find examples of good practice on both sides of these kinds of relationships.

The response to the pandemic has put all councils under significant strain and required that they learn lessons quickly. The relationship with communities is one area where local authorities are making these rapid adjustments - for example, by learning that a top-down approach may ultimately be less effective than collaboration. One interviewee leading a council's engagement with Mutual Aid groups explained that they were having to learn in this way as the crisis continued. She reflected: "In our initial meetings we took a very traditional approach – but after a few weeks of seeing these groups work, I think we would now take a very different approach to those initial meetings."

There is evidence that places where the council has made recent, concerted efforts in community engagement have done the best job of realising the potential of and supporting Mutual Aid groups. This experiential factor has two main components. First, councils in these areas have already helped to build up the local social fabric and networks in a way that encourages Mutual Aid groups to emerge and flourish. Secondly, to do this, they have also had to develop an internal organisational culture that recognises the importance of autonomous community action. Councils without this immediate experience have, in the words of one Mutual Aid participant, been like "rabbits in the headlights … they have no institutional memory of how to mobilise a community."

For councils already engaged with their communities, the essentials of taking a facilitative stance – offering in-kind support, helping to connect people and networks together, budget collaboratively, ensure some consistency in how to contact and coordinate and look for opportunities to build skills in the community – are already well-established. Several of the local authorities we spoke to had made an enormous effort to work with their local Mutual Aid groups while ensuring safeguarding and data protection was taking place. One officer described the need for "gently steering rather than ordering people around about things like safeguarding". A coordinator of another council's COVID-19 response made it clear that GDPR, safeguarding, and PPE were seen as "the council's responsibility", but that the council's approach was to "make it easier for the groups to establish these systems – make all the resources and information available, stand ready to answer questions and help".

A practical and light-touch approach produces the best results.

In our research we contacted several groups that had benefited from a facilitative approach on the council side. Interestingly, we also encountered several which had already implemented such sophisticated data protection and safety policies that the local council was comfortable simply allowing them to continue their work without any intervention or guidance. The significant measures from local government have differed from place to place, but examples of good practice include:

- Willingness to reorganise some council operations in a way that makes interaction with community organisations easier – for example, as in the case of several councils, by moving their coordination and networking efforts down to a more granular scale of operations.

- Explicitly helping Mutual Aid groups to keep track of any people with with longer-term service needs, so that those people do not 'slip through the cracks' of council service provision in future and the community groups can keep working without worrying about what will happen to all of the people they are supporting.

- Proactively connecting people with resources, existing networks, and other voluntary or charitable groups – but without insisting that everyone follows the council's own plan while doing so.

- Providing spaces and digital infrastructure to help groups organise, interact, and plan their activities. Investment in useful platforms for interaction with the local authority has been a powerful tool in a crisis which necessitates that most people spend much of their time at home.

- Supplying practical help that new groups will struggle to organise and resource by themselves. Examples include councils providing a float to cover the gap between expenditure and income as a Mutual Aid group buys medicines and food and is then paid back retrospectively (a simple but effective safeguarding measure

that would otherwise be impossible), or supplying mobile phones to allow groups to set up help lines and card readers to make payments simpler and safer.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE MUTUAL AID GROUPS?

This report has identified many new insights from the experience of Mutual Aid groups and those that have interacted with them during the pandemic. In this section we summarise five key lessons for policymakers, local authorities, and the mobilised communities at the heart of the Mutual Aid phenomenon.

1. Mutual Aid groups have been crucial to our society's COVID-19 response

These groups are not a 'nice-to-have'- they are of decisive importance to the health and welfare of thousands of people. There is evidence that councils recognise this - NLGN's Leadership Index survey found that 95 per cent of council leaders and chief executives saw community groups as being significant or very significant in their COVID-19 response.[14]

The reality is that many vulnerable people would simply not survive this crisis without the work that is being done – autonomously and voluntarily – by Mutual Aid groups.

The work has made the Government's shielding and social distancing policies possible to sustain in practice. In the small sample of groups studied for this piece, we have heard of food and medicine being supplied to thousands of vulnerable, impoverished, or shielding households. Beyond this, Mutual Aid groups are also responding to other needs, and are working to tackle loneliness, setting up helplines, and offering informal yet valuable social and emotional support.

We know from our interviews that in the early days of lockdown, neither councils nor the conventional voluntary sector was agile enough to get the right help to the right people straight away. Only the community

14 'NLGN Leadership Index, May 2020'. NLGN, (2020). http://www.nlgn.org.uk/public/wp-content/uploads/Leadership-Index_MAY-2020.pdf (accessed 23/06/20).

could respond with the flexibility and immediacy required, and this informal effort has proved to be vital.

2. Mutual Aid groups illustrate the wider potential of community power

The real, pivotal impact that Mutual Aid groups have had during this crisis demonstrates the potential of community power. More specifically, it demonstrates the potential of a less formal, community-led, and more human way of thinking about responding to people's needs, outside of the traditional public service framework that is the established and dominant model of deploying support. With extraordinary speed, the most successful of these groups identified the most critical needs in their communities and met them with a holistic approach that has strengthened the local social fabric and improved all participants' wellbeing in a time of crisis.

The concept of mutualism, with its emphasis on horizontal relationships and two-way commitments between people, represents a radical divergence from both traditional public services and traditional volunteerism.[15] In this sense, Mutual Aid groups have offered us a glimpse of something powerful and different.

3. Mutual Aid groups reveal the importance of the attitude of local government

The attitude of the local council has a clear impact on the success and sustainability of community groups. If determined to manage and control everything, a local authority will often suffocate the efforts of informal groups. Communities' efforts can also be made far more difficult if they are faced with indifference, disinterest, or micro-management. The work of truly facilitative councils – those that seek to partner with and support the will of the local community – should stand out as one of the central accomplishments of the COVID-19 response.

We have also learned from our conversations with people in these groups that many of them see themselves as working around the

15 Spade, D. (2020). 'Solidarity Not Charity: Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival.' Social Text, 38(1(142)), 131-151. https://read.dukeupress.edu/social-text/article/38/1 (142)/131/160175/Solidarity-Not-CharityMutual-Aid-for-Mobilization (accessed 23/06/20).

existing landscape of public services – often doing the work that service providers have proven unwilling or unable to do. In that sense, these groups, and the activities they are performing, serve as something of a map of insufficiency. The best councils are already learning from Mutual Aid groups in order to capture new evidence of need, and are thinking creatively about what the best ways of addressing it will be in the difficult times ahead.

4. Where social capital is more developed and working age people have more time, these groups function with more ease

It is not enough to say that communities are simply rushing to plug the gaps left by public services. Indeed, to do so could be misconstrued as a justification for regressive austerity policies. As previously discussed, there is some evidence to suggest that Mutual Aid groups have mapped the distribution of social capital across the UK, with richer, younger and better educated areas seeing more groups per capita (although community action in more deprived areas may not be conducted under the Mutual Aid banner). Their emergence has also clearly been driven by their role as a public-spirited outlet for people who find their working lives put on hold by the pandemic, for example through the furlough scheme.

This means that those seeking to build community-led models of public service delivery need to be mindful of proactively building social capital and community assets, and of mobilising communities as a first step in any process of redesign. Communities should be empowered as the authors of their own objectives rather than a desperate sticking-plaster over a failing system. And as our society moves towards recovery, we should remember what so many people chose to do when they suddenly had more 'free' time on their hands. This should have implications for many looming policy debates, particularly around the future of work, automation and universal basic income.

5. Central government has struggled to connect with mutual aid groups ⬚ small scale is key

Mutual Aid groups demonstrate the power of a highly localised approach to supporting communities. This is a scale where more people can be involved to a greater extent, and where they can respond more directly to the specific conditions in their area. These groups also show how voluntary and informal efforts often function most effectively when they are relatively focused.

By contrast, our research reveals a wide perception that central government has failed to capture the sheer potential generated by the community response to the crisis. One well-placed council officer told us that, in their large and population-dense area, more than 2,500 volunteers had signed up to the NHS 'GoodSAM' volunteer register – but over the course of six weeks fewer than 30 tasks had been assigned to them. Elsewhere, Mutual Aid participants described their attempts to engage with these large-scale efforts as "too slow" and "disappointing".

Successful Mutual Aid groups seem to have certain basic similarities in terms of design, suggesting the existence of a rough 'recipe for success'. One factor which many of the groups we spoke to felt was important to consider was scale. Some Mutual Aid groups have quite deliberately confined themselves to working only within a small geographic area, as that is where they feel the natural boundaries of community exist. Trying to bridge areas which have discrete communities can prove challenging organisationally and operationally, and trying to be too large too quickly can knock a group off track if it is still developing. Similarly, attempting to engage in too wide an array of activities too early can cause problems.

By limiting itself to a relatively discrete offer, a group has the chance to perfect what it does, and build momentum and competence in the process. This in turn will help them build up trust within the wider community, and with local stakeholders such as the council, voluntary sector and businesses.

THE FUTURE OF MUTUAL AID GROUPS IN THE UK

In order for Mutual Aid groups and local government to act on these lessons, and for the long-term potential of this movement to be harnessed, our research suggests that meaningful support will be needed. We outline here a few core recommendations which would serve to underpin the evolution of Mutual Aid beyond the crisis.

1. Councils should play a facilitating role as Mutual Aid groups evolve

Building on the lessons from this research, councils need to understand their role is pivotal to maximising the impact of Mutual Aid groups. As the groups evolve, councils should recognise their distinctive value and respond by seeking to support them in a trusting and creative way. By using their expertise of the local context, councils can avoid the pitfalls of being either too controlling or doing nothing at all. As we have seen, Mutual Aid is beneficial to the people involved because it shifts their role from passive recipients to active participants. This lesson can be applied to a wider set of council activity than crisis response.

As Mutual Aid groups evolve after the immediate crisis, councils should understand their unique facilitating role which seeks to only provide what the groups may not have the expertise for (such as safeguarding or referrals in to statutory services). In this way, they can free the groups to do what they do best – informal, flexible and adaptive peer support. In turn, central government needs to understand that councils are best placed to provide this facilitating role, because nationally-led initiatives are too remote and disconnected from this hyper-local neighbourhood activity.

2. The creation of a community support financial package for local government

Government should invest in Mutual Aid by investing in local government. As we have argued, councils can play a crucial role in the success of Mutual Aid groups by connecting groups and volunteers, and by providing spaces, resources, expertise and funding. Given the growing funding crisis brought on by years of budget cuts, in addition to the costs and lost revenue relate to Covid-19 and lockdown, most councils will not be able to afford this kind of support without additional funding from central government. To ensure councils can play a proactive role, this package should include provision to support community development teams and to train wider staff in community-centred approaches.

3. Employment policy and practice that supports flexible working, giving working-aged people more time to volunteer

After the pandemic, the employee furlough schemes and small businesses packages which fed into the voluntary backbone of many Mutual Aid groups will end, as we seek recovery and economic renewal. The growth of social capital and the resilience of communities would be reinforced by the emergence of more flexible working practices and more guaranteed free time for working-age people. There are ongoing debates about the potential for a reduced working week or the provision of a universal basic income.[16] The promise of more free time for community power and mutualism should form a core part of these considerations as future policy responses are developed.

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16 See, for example, Taylor, M. & Painter, A., 'A Year of Stabilisation to Build Bridges to the Future', RSA, 2020, https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2020/05/stabilisation-transition-bridges (accessed 29/06/20).

CONCLUSION

This report has presented a snapshot of a movement in its infancy. Nonetheless, in the short time they have existed, COVID-19 Mutual Aid groups have offered an invaluable insight into the dynamics and potential of community power, and into how it interacts with local and national government. In so doing, they offer a road map for those interested in transforming public service delivery through similar community power initiatives.

We are encouraged that so much research and scholarship is beginning to appear around the Mutual Aid phenomenon. The deepest lessons will surely emerge in the months ahead - as well as some sense of how much our centralised state and institutions will learn from the experience of a crisis that has shown, again and again, the importance of diverse, distributed, and informal efforts.

Future studies will be able to overcome some research limitations – for example, the enormous challenge of interviewing Mutual Aid participants operating away from digital infrastructure and under conditions of lockdown – in a way that this report could not.

Looking to the long term, it is impossible to know quite what will happen to Mutual Aid groups, or what the energy they represent will eventually lead to. While shielding persists – at the time of writing, UK policy is that the most vulnerable people should continue to self-isolate until August 2020 at the earliest – there will certainly be a sustained demand for the services that these groups continue to provide.[17] However, it seems plausible to suggest, even if life as 'normal' could return tomorrow, that this movement will produce an enduring legacy. It has created social bonds in communities that did not previously exist. These bonds will not simply be 'unmade', just because the crisis eases off. Where these groups have formed, they have changed the landscape of their communities, and this will be consequential.

17 As evidenced by, for example, analytics from UK Mutual Aid: http://report.mutualaid.co.uk/ (accessed 25/06/20).

APPENDIX: METHODS

This report has been informed by two principle methodological approaches. These are:

- **A review of the relevant literature,** including the emerging literature on the subject of COVID-19 Mutual Aid groups, as well as relevant work on community mobilisation, community power, and the interactions between communities and the state.

- **Observational research** of the interactions of Mutual Aid groups that use public social media platforms to organise and communicate.

- **Interviews** with people in Mutual Aid groups, as well as with people who have been interacting with these groups either in local government or the third sector.

These approaches were, to a minor extent, then supplemented by the observations and experiences of NLGN staff who have participated in Mutual Aid groups.

A future, retrospective study of the COVID-19 Mutual Aid phenomenon would be well placed to engage a larger and more representative sample of these groups - reaching, for example, those groups that do not necessarily self-define as 'Mutual Aid' or those that are not primarily organised online.

The public response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a source of much-needed hope. Thousands of spontaneous, voluntary Mutual Aid groups have emerged to support the most vulnerable people in our society. They are supplying food and medicine, connecting with those who are lonely, and organising community resources. In many cases these groups have been able to help people far more rapidly and flexibly than traditional public services.

This report argues that the Mutual Aid phenomenon is a powerful demonstration of the potential for community power in the UK. Yet for community collaboration to outlast this crisis and make our places more resilient in future, lessons must be learnt. National government must resolve to empower localities and give people the free time they need to be better neighbours. Councils, meanwhile, must recognise the crucial role they can play and the make-or-break power they often wield over community groups.