



Maximising neighbourhood resilience after COVID-19

Local authorities' role in encouraging
and promoting mutual aid groups



Mutual Ventures

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that our country is built around strong communities and public services.

Whilst the rest of the UK is in lockdown, public services have been stepping up efforts to provide help and support to individuals that are vulnerable, as well as being there for everyone else when we need them.

Alongside public services provided by councils, NHS, charities and other providers, there has also been a blossoming of ordinary people wanting to volunteer and get involved in the support effort.

This paper looks at one aspect of this: the emergence of **mutual aid groups**. We argue that these voluntary groups provide an opportunity to harness social capital within local areas, and complement the work of public services on a long-term basis. With the right support and realistic expectations of what they can and can't do, they have the potential to make a valuable contribution to future community resilience.

We make the case that mutual aid groups' neighbourhood location and focus on helping individuals within their own homes means that local authorities should invest in supporting their sustainability. This opportunity must be grasped swiftly, before the crisis ends. We outline a number of strategies that local authorities could use to achieve this.

This paper is aimed at local authorities and is intended to contribute to a discussion around plans for recovery following the COVID-19 crisis. It is relevant to all tiers of local government, including county councils, district councils, unitary authorities, metropolitan districts and London boroughs.

Our recommendations

1. **Local authorities should promote the sustainability of mutual aid groups beyond the COVID-19 crisis.** They should adopt a strategy that encourages and promotes mutual aid groups as part of their wider recovery and resilience planning. This should acknowledge that mutual aid is based on voluntary participation and is not an extension of public services.
2. **Local authorities should work with community partners to support mutual aid groups' sustainability, for example local charities or community foundations.** These organisations have the existing knowledge and networks, and understand the local area. Where local authorities have community budgets, these could be invested for this purpose.
3. **Local councillors should encourage and promote mutual aid groups within their wards.** They understand their local neighbourhoods and have a democratic responsibility to be champions for the different communities within their wards.
4. **The opportunity to support mutual aid groups must be acted on swiftly** before the crisis ends and they lose momentum. This support must be 'light touch' and recognise mutual aid as a complement to public services, not a replacement for them.

The impact of COVID-19 on life in the UK

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered virus. It emerged in 2019 and has since turned into a global health emergency, infecting millions of people. There is no known treatment or vaccine.

In response to the spread of the virus and its risk to life, the UK entered a period of lockdown on 23rd March 2020. This meant significant restrictions to the lives of individuals, including closing schools and businesses, banning gatherings and restricting movement.¹

To contain the spread of the virus, those households with individuals displaying symptoms have been instructed to self-isolate and avoid any wider human contact. All individuals over the age of 70 or that have underlying health conditions have also been told to self-isolate for their own safety. So far, more than 30,000 people have lost their lives in England.²

Critical workers – including health and social care professionals, supermarket workers, cleaners, teachers, police officers and other front-line public servants – have been exempt from lockdown. These workers are putting themselves in harm's way in order to provide essential services and help and support others.

The closure of non-essential business and the general dampening effect of lockdown on economic activity has caused hardship across the population. Many businesses have cut wages, furloughed or laid off staff, and self-employed and casual workers have seen demand for their services ebb away. Figures from 1st April showed that there were 950,000 applications for universal credit over the previous two weeks, compared to the normal expectation of 100,000.³ Food banks report being 'overwhelmed'.⁴ Early indications also suggest an emerging mental health crisis as the effect of lockdown and financial worries impact on the population.⁵

Both directly and indirectly, COVID-19 has touched every part of life and continues to have a major human impact through its effect on health and economic well-being.

Increased community action

As people have witnessed the impact of COVID-19 on their local area, and the sacrifices made by those delivering frontline public services, there has been a desire among many of the population to do something to contribute. The consequence of this has been an upsurge in voluntary action within communities. This has included:

- at least 5,000 neighbourhood-based mutual aid groups, established to provide a network of support for residents⁶

- more than 750,000 NHS volunteers signing up through the RVS-administered GoodSAM app, to provide support to vulnerable people through Check In and Chat, Community Response, and NHS Patient Transport
- the weekly ‘clap for carers’ on the doorstep to show support for key workers, and to check on the well-being of neighbours

These responses provide a bright spot among the turmoil wreaked by the virus, and a note of optimism for a positive legacy from the crisis. For the rest of this paper, we focus on the first of these responses.

About mutual aid groups

Mutual aid groups are self-organised groups of people established to support and help people in their communities manage the impact of COVID-19.

They are neighbourhood networks of people working together and volunteering to help each other. They are deliberately narrow in their geographical outlook.

They focus on supporting individuals within their own homes and providing a level of practical support that does not require specialist skills or training.

Typical activities that are undertaken by mutual aid volunteers are:

- Raising awareness of the group, for example by leafleting or posting flyers
- Running errands/shopping for vulnerable or self-isolating people, such as picking up medicine or shopping for groceries
- Keeping an eye on vulnerable and older people
- Providing a friendly ear and emotional support to vulnerable people

Their activities are simple and practical but can be life-saving if they find something amiss and alert the emergency services.

Members of mutual aid groups are all volunteers. Groups have no formal legal structure, there are no formal contractual arrangements and no insurance. Help is provided on a voluntary basis at the giver and the receiver’s own risk.

Mutual aid groups are often organised online through Facebook or WhatsApp. COVID-19 Mutual Aid UK, a support network for people organising in their communities, advises that ‘there is no uniform way to develop a group and each group is advised to work in a way which best benefits their community’.⁷

The future of mutual aid groups

Mutual aid groups are an example of what is termed ‘spontaneous volunteering’, characterised by people coming together in response to a crisis event. They have been seen before in the UK following emergencies such as the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 and Whaley Bridge evacuation at the end of 2019.

Key differences between these examples and the COVID-19 crisis is the national scale of the event and the expectation that it could last for many months.

Mutual aid groups are part of a network of existing informal associations and friendships within neighbourhoods. This 'social capital' is widely understood as critical to strong and resilient communities. In a recent article for the Financial Times, the deputy governor of the Bank of England argued that social capital provides the 'foundations on which capitalism is built' and is an important part of the route to recovery from the current crisis.⁸

In addition to the immediate response to the crisis, the blossoming of mutual aid groups provides an opportunity for longer term benefit for communities. Working alongside formal public services, they have the potential to strengthen communities in the future. They could provide valuable informal help to vulnerable people and any additional 'surge capacity' for future emergencies.

Limitations of mutual aid

Mutual aid groups are not formally constituted organisations. They are loosely affiliated groups of individuals that support each other and volunteer their time to benefit their local community.

Crucially, volunteers act on their own free will and are not required to do anything if they don't want to. NCVO – the national membership body for voluntary sector organisations – define volunteering as 'any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives. This can include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation and social action.'⁹ People volunteer for a variety of reasons, including to make a difference to the lives of others, to feel valued and part of a team, to meet new people and make friends, and to get to know the local community.

One significant challenge is that the most commonly cited reason for people to stop volunteering is lack of time due to changing home or work circumstances.¹⁰ The second most common reason is that their volunteering involved a one-off event or activity. When the COVID-19 crisis subsides and people start going back to work/normal life, it seems certain to impact participation in mutual aid.

Studies on 'spontaneous volunteering', such as that characterised by mutual aid groups, highlight some of its limitations. A 2015 review of the literature cautioned that, although citizen participation is a key principle of disaster relief and recovery, it can be viewed by emergency professionals as a nuisance or liability, and volunteers' efforts undervalued.¹¹ It also warned that attempts to 'integrate' informal volunteers into formal systems can prove counterproductive by crushing the adaptability, innovation and responsiveness that informal volunteers bring. We consider how to manage these issues in the context of mutual aid below.

Local authorities and mutual aid

The key characteristics of mutual aid groups – they are place-based, neighbourhood-focused and support individuals within their own homes – means they have the potential to be valuable contributors to supporting the needs of local people in the future.

Among statutory agencies, local authorities are most closely allied to the purpose of mutual aid organisations. Councils are anchor institutions responsible for supporting neighbourhoods within their specific geographic boundaries. They are responsible for supporting local business and third sector organisations, as well running a wide range of local services, including supporting older people in their own homes, housing, leisure facilities and community activities. They have democratically elected politicians representing wards with an average of around 5,500 people.¹² These roles mean they offer the most natural alignment between mutual aid groups and public services.

All local authorities need a plan for recovery following the COVID-19 crisis. As part of this, they should consider the role mutual aid groups could play as part of stronger, more resilient neighbourhoods. We recommend the following:

1. **Local authorities should promote the sustainability of mutual aid groups beyond the COVID-19 crisis.** They should adopt a strategy that encourages and promotes mutual aid groups as part of their wider recovery and resilience planning. This should acknowledge that mutual aid is based on voluntary participation and is not an extension of public services. With the right support and realistic expectations of what they can and can't do, mutual aid groups have the potential to make a valuable contribution to plan for recovery and future community resilience.
2. **Local authorities should work with community partners to support mutual aid groups' sustainability, for example local charities or community foundations.** These organisations have the existing knowledge and networks, and understand the local area. Where local authorities have community budgets, these could be invested for this purpose.
3. **Local councillors should encourage and promote mutual aid groups within their wards.** They understand their local neighbourhoods, and have a democratic responsibility to be champions for the different communities within their wards.
4. **The opportunity to support mutual aid groups must be acted on swiftly** before the crisis ends and they lose momentum. This support must be 'light touch' and recognise mutual aid as a complement to public services, not a replacement for them.

Strategies for supporting mutual aid groups

In this section, we suggest a number of strategies that local authorities might wish to take for supporting the sustainability of mutual aid groups. These measures can be undertaken at a low cost.

We recommend that local authorities take a 'light touch' approach and focus on encouraging and promoting mutual aid groups as part of the social capital of a neighbourhood. Mutual aid groups are formed by voluntary association and should always retain the ability to decide what they do and create their own processes for matching volunteers with need.

Local authorities should not see mutual aid as an extension to public services. They cannot replace the job of trained professionals or replace targeted work required with individuals, but they can complement them in the context of a general community response.

Strategy 1: Keep it simple

Unless groups wish otherwise, local authorities should not seek to formalise mutual aid in any way. Mutual aid groups are an example of people working together to help each other on a voluntary basis. Local authorities should encourage and promote mutual aid groups for what they are and not do anything to create barriers to participation or prevent volunteers doing their job. This includes insisting on registration, creating paperwork or introducing compliance processes.

Research by the NCVO cautions against making volunteering too process-heavy. People giving their time to public services, such as hospital and library volunteers, police specials, and school governors, were found to be less satisfied with their experience than those giving their time to charities.¹³ 24% say it is 'too much like paid work' and 32% say that their experience is too bureaucratic.

Strategy 2: Work with partners

Mutual aid groups have appeared within neighbourhoods that already have an ecosystem of community groups. These organisations should be consulted and involved when promoting the sustainability of mutual aid.

Where appropriate, local authorities should explore the option of supporting mutual aid groups through existing charities, council for voluntary services (CVSs), neighbourhood forums, and community foundations. In particular, they should draw on the expertise of those organisations in supporting volunteering. They should also consider exploring links with other statutory services, such as GP surgeries or community hospitals as part of an integrated community response. Where local authorities have community budgets, these could be invested for this purpose.

Strategy 3: Reward and recognition

Local authorities should consider options to recognise the value of mutual aid organisations. Recognising good work both shows appreciation and could

encourage groups to continue, whilst also being low cost and easy to administer. Potential options include:

- A thank you letter from local politicians
- A small grant for a project that benefits the local community
- A gesture of thanks dedicated to the group, for example planting a tree in the street or local park
- A thank you event for network coordinators and local volunteers (when restrictions on gatherings are lifted)

Where they exist, neighbourhood forums, some of which may have their own budget, may be could be used to support activities.

Strategy 4: Learning lessons from elsewhere

As part of a strategy to encourage and promote mutual aid groups, local authorities could convene meetings between groups or invite external experts to run workshops for groups to learn from each other. This should take the form of a facilitative rather than a directive role. Where there are other successful neighbourhood-based groups, mutual aid groups should learn from them. For example, the scale and organisation of mutual aid have a similarities to Neighbourhood Watch, whose focus is the safety and security of residents. Mutual aid groups may be able to learn from their approaches to engaging with statutory services, volunteer management and use of digital tools to organise.

Conclusion

Social capital – the network of relationships that support and strengthen societies – provides an important part of the route to recovery from COVID-19. Local authorities should look at how they can support the sustainability of mutual aid groups as part of a plan to create stronger, more resilient communities following the COVID-19 crisis.

Public services will find themselves under huge pressure after the immediate crisis has passed. A backlog of cases, strains on the workforce and financial pressures are already mounting up. With the right support and realistic expectations of what they can and can't do, mutual aid groups have the potential to make a valuable contribution to recovery and future community resilience. However, this must recognise the constraints of voluntary action and ensure that mutual aid is understood as a complement to public services, not a replacement or extension of them.

The opportunity to support mutual aid groups must be acted on swiftly. It should not be allowed to slip away. For local areas that get it right, mutual aid can help to rebuild stronger, more resilient neighbourhoods for the future.

References

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- ⁶ Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK is keeping a record of mutual aid groups that can be viewed on its website
<https://covidmutualaid.org/>
- ⁷ Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK is a support network for people organising in their communities. Local support groups are not directly affiliated with Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK and we are not accountable for their activities. See <https://covidmutualaid.org/>
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