

RESEARCH

Community Responses to the Coronavirus Pandemic: How Mutual Aid Can Help

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The beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic caused panic over job losses, food and toiletry shortages, and social isolation, over and above the health impacts of the virus. People wanted to help on a mass scale and there was a huge community response. The pandemic brought energy into neighbourhoods and communities, leading to the rapid formation of mutual aid groups in many different forms all over the country. At the same time, existing community groups and many service enterprises – particularly food outlets – redirected their activities to helping the NHS, families that were struggling, and vulnerable people.

Since March 2020, LSE Housing has been researching a sample of these mutual aid groups. In this paper, findings will be presented on the makeup of volunteer groups, the contributions of volunteers, the people they helped, and how; also, what potential longer-term benefits there may be. Exploring social problems that the groups address shows that more than mutual aid is needed to remedy the deep-set inequalities that the pandemic has highlighted. The need for community and a sense of belonging is a message that comes out most strongly from this research, reinforced by financial need and social isolation. Mutual aid can bind communities and neighbourhoods together and create a sense of belonging to a degree, but there is also a need for stronger and wider social infrastructure, of which the NHS is maybe the most shining example. Schools have a big role to play as part of this social infrastructure, but more housing, training, and jobs in new sustainable fields are needed in order to under-pin basic social infrastructure. Mutual aid on its own is not enough.

Keywords: mutual aid; COVID-19; community; volunteering

Introduction – The Impact of COVID-19 in Communities

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown that began in the UK on the 23rd of March created a unique set of circumstances: People over 70 and those with underlying health conditions were confined to their homes; people were cut off from their normal forms of support; family members were separated; schools and non-essential shops were closed; and day to day activities were stopped. The closure of many businesses created economic worries, resulting in pay cuts and job losses. Nine million employees were put on the furlough scheme, a government wage subsidy allowing people to be paid while no longer working. Working parents had to balance home schooling with working from home. Free school meals stopped, which for many children meant that they lost a main source of food. The virus and lockdown strained people's mental health, with older and single people often feeling isolated and cut off from support networks. The virus greatly increased pressure on NHS staff and carers as they had to balance their family duties with caring for those who developed the virus, all while trying to prevent the further spread of COVID-19.

It is important to highlight that some communities were hit harder than others by the pandemic. For example, Church Road in the London Borough of Brent had the highest level of COVID-19 related deaths in country as of 27th June 2020 [1]. This was linked to high levels of overcrowding in the area, as well as large numbers of residents working in frontline jobs. Church Road also had a high proportion of Somali residents; at the outbreak of the pandemic there was little information and health messaging available in Somali. For such communities, charities and volunteers were a crucial link between them and the state, with one of the groups from this research study, the Harlesden Mutual Aid group, being a vital form of support to Brent's Somali community.

From the start of the pandemic there has been a huge surge in the “helping spirit”. People have wanted to help and play an active role in responding to the crisis. This is evident from the impressive numbers signing up to volunteer:

750,000 people signed up to the NHS volunteer scheme, three times as many as expected and five times the numbers needed. There was also a surge in people signing up to local volunteer centres, with 250,000 people signing up in the first three weeks of lockdown [2]. Twenty-two percent of Britons now belong to a community support group, with a third of these joining since lockdown [3].

Existing community groups have played a crucial part in supporting people during the crisis, going above and beyond their everyday duties to provide for people in need. For example, The Felix Project, a food redistribution charity in London, quadrupled the amount of food it delivered to people in need, despite a 30-fold reduction in their volunteer members, as many were over 70 and were asked to shield as part of the Covid-19 restrictions [4]. From discussions with housing associations it is clear that they have also made a major effort to support tenants, with many staff volunteering beyond their normal working hours to provide support, as well as giving their free time to local efforts [5].

Businesses forced to stop normal activities have also helped people in need. All the traders at the Grainger Market in Newcastle joined forces to distribute 6000 meals a day to vulnerable people when the indoor market had to close [6].

Beyond a surge in volunteering for organised groups, there has been a striking surge in community spirit more generally, with neighbours across the country coming together in new ways. In Wavertree, Liverpool, a group of neighbours transformed the back alleys of their terraced houses into a community garden [7]. Previously the alleys were full of rubbish and uncared for. This combined effort has not only restored the unused space, but has brought neighbours together and formed new friendships.

The national spirit of solidarity was captured by army veteran Sir Tom Moore, who aimed to raise £1000 for NHS staff by walking 100 laps of his garden by his 100th birthday. His efforts captured the public imagination, and by the time he crossed the finish line he had raised £32,000,000, and he received 650,000 birthday cards from people across the country, with the rewards for his campaign culminating in an honorary army title and a knighthood from the Queen [8].

Much of this voluntary activity contributed to a remarkable surge in the foundation of mutual aid groups, as defined here:

A mutual aid group is a volunteer led initiative where groups of people in a particular area join together to support one another, meeting vital community needs without relying on official bodies. They do so in a way that prioritises those who are most vulnerable or otherwise unable to access help through regular channels [9].

There are now an estimated 4,300 mutual aid groups in the UK, with three million people offering their support to people in their local community. Most of these groups have been set up since the outbreak of the pandemic [2].

Research

LSE Housing and Communities has a long-standing interest in the role of small community projects in responding to community problems, with such groups, in general, aiming to tackle the problems in their communities that are not addressed by government policy. The previous research project, “Private Action for the Public Good”, outlined twenty local projects led by social housing tenants that tackled such problems in their own communities. However, since the start of the pandemic there has been significant increase in this type of work. This research aims to capture the community response to the COVID-19 virus and explore the function of the community groups in helping people.

The characteristics of mutual aid groups formed during the COVID-19 pandemic are that they:

- Appeal to people’s desire to help others in a crisis;
- Raise awareness of the people who are ill, short of basic necessities, elderly, and/or vulnerable;
- Run on an entirely voluntary basis.

Such groups are “mutual” in the sense of sharing a common need and ambition to help people in their community. They are “self-help” in that they are motivated to meet local needs, such as for food, medicine, or simply companionship, through local effort.

This research study aims to uncover what drove the rapid development of voluntary neighbourhood and street level ‘Mutual Aid’ groups to support vulnerable, sick, elderly and “socially isolated” people in the current health emergency. It also attempts to identify the forms of help that are most common in these groups and the impact of the work of mutual aid groups.

Research began by identifying mutual aid groups from across the country using social media, council websites, local and national newspapers, as well as the COVID Mutual Aid website which lists all known mutual aid groups in the UK [9]. In total, 70 groups were contacted between March and July 2020. This helped establish a picture of the scale and pace of development of the groups. As well as clearly identifiable mutual aid groups, organisations that had adapted their usual activities to support people in the community and organisations that had gone above and beyond their normal duties to help others were identified. From 70 organisations, 20 groups were selected, representing different types and geographical locations, to explore in more detail. Telephone interviews with the organisers and volunteers of these 20 groups were conducted to learn how they were organised, what they offer, and how they benefit their communities.

Forming a Picture of the Groups

Type of group

The 20 groups contacted supported people in different ways, with several groups falling into more than one category. The majority, 15 of the 20 groups, were local support groups responding to individual needs on a one-to-one basis. These groups carried out tasks such as shopping, prescription pick-ups, and friendly phone calls. Six of the groups provided food, two of which provided food specifically for NHS staff and carers. Two of the groups made protective clothing (scrubs) for frontline workers. Two of the groups interviewed were existing organisations who had adapted and expanded their services for supporting people.

Geographical distribution and size of groups

The 20 groups came from across the UK: From cities, towns, and villages. A quarter of the groups came from London (5), with the rest coming from the North of England (4); the Midlands (3); Scotland (2); South West England (2); East of England (3); and Wales (1).

The groups varied in size, from 2 to 800 volunteers. In total, the 20 groups had 3549 volunteers and organisers signed up to help; on average there were six organisers and 190 volunteers per group. The two biggest groups, with 800 and 700 volunteers, were both based in London.

What motivated the groups to form?

When asked what motivated the groups, the dominant motive (11) was the realisation that some local people would need support during lockdown. Four of the groups were motivated by wanting to play an active role in helping people through the crisis. Two of the groups wanted to show their solidarity with, and support for, NHS staff and care workers. Two of groups were motivated by religion in their commitment to helping their neighbours. One young volunteer who helped set up a group wanted to show that young people do care and were not “irresponsible and reckless” or breaking lockdown rules:

Furloughed Foodies set off on a mission to feed all those who are struggling the most in the pandemic and the people we concentrated on initially were NHS doctors fighting on the frontline. We wanted to help people who are furloughed struggling being at home unable to work.

–Group leader, Furloughed Foodies

Previous volunteer experience

The volunteers we spoke to had a range of previous volunteer experience: Some had been, or were involved in, several organisations while some had never volunteered before. Four of the interviewees had significant volunteer experience and two had been members of charity boards. Four had experience of brief, transient volunteering roles, such as organising charity cake sales. Seven people said they had done work linked to a religious organisation. Four interviewees had never been involved in anything similar before. All the volunteers said they would like to continue to be involved in some form of volunteering.

Volunteer time commitments

The time volunteers spent working with groups ranged from under five hours a week (9) to more than full time (6). Five people spent 5–9 hours, four people 10–19 hours and three people 20–30 hours. The time that volunteers reported spending demonstrates a major commitment of all the groups' members to helping their local community.

Safeguarding, health and safety policies

The groups had different systems in place to vet volunteers and ensure they were working safely. Four groups said they had safeguarding policies in place that were given to all volunteers. Two of these groups had taken these policies from established organisations such as the Salvation Army. Two groups said all volunteers had to be DBS checked; while two groups only required police checks for roles that came into direct contact with vulnerable people. Four groups felt there would not be enough time for all volunteers to get DBS checked, so they introduced an ID and self-declaration check that all volunteers had to complete.

Two groups that prepared meals ensured all volunteers had food hygiene, health, and safety guidance to follow, while another group required all volunteers to take part in food safety training.

The policies in place helped to create an ethos of responsibility, but due to the speed in which most of the groups were established, many did not have the formal structures in place that more established organisations would offer. They relied on trust, honesty, and good will.

What the volunteers gained from the experience

Through talking to group leaders and volunteers, it became clear that the groups not only helped their community, but that being part of the group brought benefits to the organisers and volunteers. It helped keep them busy during lockdown, when many usual routines were upturned, and gave them a sense of purpose. One volunteer said that being part

of the group had helped her cope with the loss of her dad, which had happened just before lockdown was announced. Being part of the group brought people closer to their community and helped them form new friendships:

I wanted to help because I suffer with poor mental health; and for me being involved in this and helping others actually helps me too by giving me a sense of purpose. –Volunteer, Dons Local Action Group

Roles Played by the Mutual Aid Groups

Who do the groups help?

The people the groups help fall into four main categories: Elderly people and people self-isolating due to health conditions (15); NHS and care workers (3); families (2); and homeless people (2). All the groups that offered one-to-one support adopted an open-ended approach to who they helped and did not have any strict criteria; they offered support to anyone they felt needed it. This is a very different approach from more formal forms of support which often have strict eligibility criteria:

In my mind one of the key things is that mutual aid groups don't have the eligibility criteria attached to some of the more normal forms of help. It helps ensure people don't fall through the gaps if they don't fit with the criteria. –Group Leader, Kensal Green Mutual Aid Group

How do the groups reach people who need help?

In most cases, people who needed help contacted the groups directly. They found out about the groups in several different ways: A leaflet posted on people's doors (8); word of mouth (5); social media (5); the group's website (3); and newspaper articles about the group (2). Despite the speed and level of informality with which many of the groups were established, eight of the groups reached people by linking their efforts with existing social infrastructure such as councils, food banks, hospitals, and care homes that faced huge pressures as a result of the pandemic. Four of the groups had received referrals from organisations, such as their local council, and two of the groups contacted hospitals and care homes directly and offered their services. A further two groups delivered food directly to foodbanks for them to distribute to people in need.

We reach people through the leaflets. It's important it is not digital because we have been surprised by how many people don't have the internet. –Group Leader, Kensal Green Mutual Aid Group

How many people have the groups helped?

The groups helped people in different ways and in different numbers; the Scrub Hub, for example, made 235 sets of scrubs. In some cases, however, this involved significant ongoing support, with volunteers building up relationships with the person needing help and supporting them on a weekly basis. In other cases, it involved one-off support with jobs such as gardening. Other groups delivered regular food packages and meals. From the middle of March to the time of interview, it is calculated that the 20 groups provided 102,620 meals and food packages. The groups were also providing on-going support for 975 people, on average offering support to 50 people per group.

The groups reported getting fewer requests for help as the lockdown progressed. Interviewees suggested one explanation for this could be that people needing help had been paired with volunteers, and these relationships were continuing on a more personal level.

The number of people helped by the support offered from some groups was harder to quantify, such as those who benefited from setting up a lockdown library in a telephone box. Similarly challenging to quantify are the two groups who provided support for other charities, one doing food collections and the second helping a homeless charity distribute food.

Below, **Table 1** summarises the numbers helped by different types of support.

Group Organisational Structures

Management structure

Despite 18 of the groups being volunteer-led and set up very quickly, they all had clear management structures in place. Seventeen of the groups had a small management team who coordinated the volunteers and the outstanding tasks. The bigger groups divided into street teams, with each area having a team leader responsible for distributing tasks.

The 15 groups offering direct ongoing services by pairing volunteers with those needing support all had a central phone number and email address people could contact to request help. These requests would then be passed to the volunteers. In most cases, this happened either over a WhatsApp group or shared Google document.

Funding

Twelve of the 20 groups received funding to support their work. Six of these groups received grants from the council or other local organisations, while four of the groups fundraised and collected money online. Two groups received sponsorship from local businesses and one group was completely funded by the temple it was run from.

Table 1: Type of support and number of people helped.

Name of group	Type of support	How many people helped (estimated)
High Town Mutual Aid	ongoing support	21 people
Prince Rupert Hotel-Shrewsbury	ongoing support	24 people
South Milford Isolation Group	ongoing support	30 people
Food Bank Collection (No formal group name)	food support	40 food bags since the group was set up in mid-March
Sway Village Volunteers	ongoing support	40 people
Grange Association	ongoing support	40 people
Chorley Buddies	ongoing support	55 People
Brockenhurst Parish Church	ongoing support	60 people
My Music Northamptonshire	ongoing support	60 carers on Facebook group, 50 on mailing list, 25 people engaging weekly
Harlsden Mutual Aid	food support	110 meals 3× a week
CRHG Mutual Aid Group	ongoing support	140 people
Ponteland Community Group	ongoing support	150 online shopping service
Kensal Green Mutual Aid Group	ongoing support	215 people
Scrub Hub- Country Durham	one off support-providing scrubs	235 sets of scrubs since the group was set up in mid-March
Mosley Together	ongoing support and food support	200 requests for help, 40 food parcels since the group was set up in mid-March
Shopping Club Wixham	ongoing support	In store shopping: 41, click and collect shopping: 37, prescription pickups: 1000, set up shopping to be self-sufficient: 12
Guru Maneyo Granth Gurdwara	food support	6000 meals a day
Caring for Carers	food support	6200 meals, 1000 snack project plus the support given to the homeless charity
Furloughed Foodies	food support	10,000 meals
Dons Local Action Group	ongoing support, food support and tech support	10,000 people since the group was set up in mid- March

Working with other organisations

A majority (14) of the groups worked with other organisations. This happened in a variety of ways and greatly enhanced their capacity. Five of the groups helped existing charities, four received referrals from other organisations, and one referred people to other organisations for more support. Five of the groups worked in partnership with other local mutual aid groups. This normally involved sharing advice on how the groups were run and referring people to mutual aid groups who were nearer to the person's residence. Three of the groups received support and guidance from larger, more established organisations, such as the Salvation Army.

How the Mutual Aid Groups Plan to Move Forward

Nineteen of the groups wanted to continue supporting people after lockdown was lifted, suggesting that the lockdown has created a wave of volunteering that will continue as normalcy is returned. However, all groups were planning to change how they were organised to adapt to new roles and challenges. At the time of interview, groups were still working out how to do this. Seven of the groups felt that the people they were supporting would need help in the longer-term and that there was a gap in support for many people even before the pandemic. Other groups wanted to move into new areas of support, with four groups wanting to focus on tackling food poverty. Two groups were setting up new community projects related to the support they offered over lockdown: A community garden and an outdoor exercise class.

Groups reported that friendships had formed between volunteers and people receiving help, and that volunteers would continue to support the people they helped on an informal basis, while three interviewees said the mutual aid group had given them and other volunteers an appetite for community work which they think will continue as the situation evolves.

They recognised the challenge of making the groups work when people were able to go back to work and had less time available. One group wanted to create a system that could mobilise quickly in case of a second lockdown. The hotel

that housed 20 homeless people was planning to take on five of those housed as full-time members of staff and continue to house them in the hotel. The music group planned to continue running some sessions online after lockdown eased, as it allows some carers who may struggle to find stand-in care to access the sessions.

I will 100% continue to be involved after lockdown ends. I have already had phone calls with the main leader about ways that we can remain a presence in the local community. –Volunteer, Dons Local Action Group

Policy Implications

The following policy recommendations were developed, building on the findings from our research and an accompanying 2-hour workshop held on January 20, 2021. This workshop was attended by members of 25 mutual aid groups and community support organisations, and discussed how they have supported people during the pandemic and what their plans are moving forward.

Practical significance: What are the policy implications?

The research done in this study illustrates that mutual aid groups have clear strengths that should be built on. Mutual aid brings communities together and helps meet the needs of the most vulnerable. The groups offer many different forms of support and are able to adapt quickly to meet local needs. In addition to routine jobs such as shopping and prescription pick-ups, groups are often able to identify other serious but solveable problems and respond to them quickly. For example, one group quickly rallied around a family that did not have a working oven and were able to find one; another group found one of their beneficiaries were unable to use their garden as it was overgrown, and they efficiently organised a team of volunteers to sort it out. Mutual aid groups can offer flexible support and respond directly to problems as they arise, rather than being limited to specific tasks. The work of the groups has been crucial in helping communities survive during the pandemic. Therefore, it makes sense for wider policies to endorse the work of mutual aid groups, with minimal checks operating to ensure safety and the provision of the right kind of support.

Due to their close community connections, the groups also worked with people who would have needed support even before the lockdown. For this reason, they want to go on supporting them as they know these needs will continue. Early research by the New Local Trust argues that the government's shielding programme – that required all those considered clinically vulnerable or over the age of 70 to stay at home – would not have been possible without the work of mutual aid groups delivering food to those shielding [10]. Many groups have proven, therefore, to be essential for the bare survival of some and for the meeting of some in society's most basic needs. It makes sense for policy to encourage this to continue.

The different roles that mutual aid groups play, including their ability to provide direct help, as well as their flexible, speedy responses to need, sits alongside the value of local involvement and strengthening community bonds. All of this makes mutual aid groups of great social value. To continue to fulfil these roles, they need both recognition and support.

Significance of volunteer contributions

The groups attracted significant numbers of volunteers – some of whom had never volunteered before – and they built on people's desire to play an active role in the crisis. People who may not have ordinarily considered volunteering may have been encouraged to do so at this time due to the informal nature of the mutual aid groups, the fact that people had more free time than normal, and that volunteering usually took place within very local boundaries. All of the volunteers we spoke to wanted to continue helping people in the community. Joining the group gave them an appetite for community work and allowed them to form bonds with people in the community which would continue. Encouraging volunteers through these newly formed channels will add value in unexpected ways; local policies can encourage this often untapped resource. It is important that volunteer momentum is sustained, and that volunteers have the correct skills to run the groups successfully.

The future of the groups

The mutual aid groups have said they want to continue providing support to people in the community, building on the strengths set out above. To do this they need to be self-sustaining both financially and in terms of membership. The groups so far have generally lacked robust processes to account for funds and how they are used. One challenge noticed is that the mutual aid groups contacted in this study have been reliant on one-off grants and fundraising to support their work. Groups need more stable sources of funding to become sustainable in the long-term, especially as donations may reduce over time.

Need for back-up and skills

As economic uncertainties continue and the winter lockdown takes its toll, mutual aid groups are also having to deal with more complex issues such as housing, debt, and mental health problems. These are traditionally problems that public services and established charities would have dealt with. However, the fact there is such a demand suggests that existing local support structures do not currently have the capacity to provide help to all those who need it. While mutual aid brings communities together and helps meet the direct needs of the most vulnerable residents, groups

need more stable, long term resources and skills to meet the continuing demands and needs of their local community. This places a responsibility on local authorities to find ways to support mutual aid groups which are fulfilling some key community support roles.

Need for further action

Mutual aid groups need links to professional organisations that can help them deal with these difficult issues and identify the best pathways and referrals for the people being supported. Volunteers need guidance and training on understanding issues and identifying problems, but also on directing people to the best help available. In particular, it is important that volunteers can refer people to more specialist organisations for advice when they do not feel qualified to deal with the issues being raised. In spite of their excellent work, mutual aid groups cannot become a replacement for public services and wider social infrastructure.

Consequently, training is an important tool to equip groups with essential know-how and to give volunteers the skills they need to manage both the demands and the groups successfully. Training must be tailored to the needs of mutual aid groups and at very low or nil cost to the participants due to the voluntary nature of the work. LSE Housing and Communities' report, "Private Action for the Public Good" [10], on the impact of tenant training on volunteering in social housing communities, highlighted the important role of training in providing social housing tenants with the skills, motivation, and support they need to organise and sustain community projects. The tenants spoken to for this report had received training in money management, which they found extremely useful in handling donations and fundraising, as well as training in how to reach isolated residents, how to manage volunteers, and how to run meetings. This training contributed to the group working effectively. Therefore, training in a) dealing with complex problems and b) running voluntary groups successfully is a major factor in mutual aid groups surviving and thriving.

Partnerships in Action

A successful approach is for mutual aid groups to develop partnerships with organisations that provide other services.

From our workshop, it is known that housing associations, local authorities, and voluntary support organisations can provide useful back up to mutual aid groups. During the course of the pandemic, some have provided practical advice on how mutual aid groups should manage themselves and handle money without taking over how the group is run. These groups found these relationships extremely beneficial. Building supportive relationships can enable very different organisations to complement one another as partners.

Research shows that statutory services are increasingly referring people to the groups and these mutual aid groups provide vital support to people during the lockdowns. Shielding and stay-at-home guidance would not have been possible without the work of mutual aid groups. As these groups seem likely to continue in these roles, clearer government guidance is needed on how best to support them. By reinforcing their main strengths, government could help them extend their reach to areas where there are no mutual aid groups in place.

Currently, mutual aid groups are informal, sometimes to the point where it is difficult for them to access funding. They are generally unprotected by formal safeguarding policies, which help to protect both the groups' members themselves and the people they are helping. Formalisation of these elements, safeguarding, and systems to manage funding, is often a key requirement for development. Local authorities and larger charities can help mutual aid groups with this formalisation process. However, this needs careful handling to avoid undermining the way mutual aid groups operate. Some members of mutual aid groups are resistant to becoming more formalised as it takes away from the "neighbour to neighbour" approach of mutuality which allows them to respond quickly and informally to local issues. Policymakers need to find a balance between helping the groups formalise sufficiently to access funding, alongside having proper safeguarding policies in place, but without taking away from the self-help ethos the groups were founded on. The groups must not be formalised to such an extent it deters people from joining as volunteers or adds barriers to helping local communities.

Community infrastructure

Mutual aid on its own is not enough to meet all the needs of a complex society. For a community to survive during the pandemic, it has to be able to rely on the support of wider social infrastructure, such as education, health, transport, housing and social services. The pandemic has shown us how important these statutory services are:

- The NHS is necessary to meet people's health needs, to provide schools for children and young people, and to offer social services to protect vulnerable people.
- The lockdown has shown the importance of a safe, secure home, with poor housing conditions linked to worse health outcomes.
- People need access to secure jobs and a benefits system that can support people unable to work.
- Employment needs to be supported by training opportunities to allow people to gain skills to help them progress in or change careers.
- Local communities need community assets such as community centres, parks, and leisure centres where people can come together.

Research by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Social Integration found that mutual aid groups were more successful in areas with a low population churn, more community assets, and a more skilled population with more graduates [11]. The success of mutual aid does not outweigh the need for functioning social infrastructure, particularly in areas of greater need, and policy must support this.

Overview and Conclusions

The 20 groups in this study offered, and continue to offer, many forms of support, and have had a significant impact in the communities where they work. They provide individual and personal support, organise projects such as community libraries, cook meals for NHS staff and carers, and house rough sleepers. They have an awareness of the isolated, sick, and impoverished households in their communities. Younger, more able-bodied people want to help more vulnerable neighbours. The groups respond quickly out of an instinct for self-help responding to local need. The groups offer many forms of help; in some cases, they use existing skills and businesses to support people in the local community, but in the majority of cases, they simply respond out of kindness and have limited experience of this kind of community action.

The groups underline a common desire for stronger, more involved communities. People want to feel part of their community and the groups allow them to achieve this. The mutual aid groups offer a sense of purpose and fulfilment in challenging times. These positive features require wider recognition and support if they are to last.

As we experience a third wave of the pandemic and with COVID-19 infection rates high again (although declining at the time of writing), the work of such groups is even more crucial. The NHS is still dealing with the backlog from the first two waves and the pressure of this third crisis is taking a physical and mental toll on staff. At the same time, the general population is weary of lockdown and needs support.

The community spirit which was unleashed in the first wave of the virus is still strong. This is evident in the response to footballer, Marcus Rashford's, campaign to end child food poverty. After the government voted against providing free school meals to children during October half term, thousands of cafes, charities, businesses, and voluntary groups, large and small, stepped in to provide food for families who were struggling [12], while the momentum has been maintained into the new year.

Mutual aid on its own is not enough to meet all the needs of a complex society. Wider policies and services to protect health and wellbeing are needed. These groups complement the need for more formal forms of support, but a wider policy environment that supports social infrastructure and the groups themselves will help mutual aid to thrive.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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