

# Understanding the Experience of Mutual Aid groups in London

July 2020

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## Foreword

Volunteers have provided crucial support to people in need throughout the COVID-19 crisis. From checking in on neighbours or strangers, to sorting and delivering food and collecting prescriptions. Alongside those on the front line, London's volunteer centres, council hubs, local charities, the NHS and Mutual Aid Groups have played an essential role in keeping this city going.



The work of Mutual Aid Groups has been entirely community led. They have responded urgently to the needs of local communities, working effectively without the formal structure of traditional organisations.

For Londoners, it is vital that these groups continue their support in the weeks and months ahead. It is, therefore, imperative that we acknowledge the role the organised sector can play in sustaining them.

The Greater London Authority (GLA) has been working with partners through the Funding, Community and Volunteering sub group (FCVS)<sup>1</sup> of the Strategic Coordination Group (SCG)<sup>2</sup> for London throughout the crisis, to strategically meet the needs of the capital. We at the GLA, alongside our partners, must understand what support is needed to allow Mutual Aid Groups to continue operating in London communities.

We have much to learn from the insight provided in this report. The findings are central to helping us meet the needs of Mutual Aid Groups and facilitate future discussions with them, the volunteering sector and strategic partners.

It has never been more important to support those in need. By working with those on the ground, we can help build a better, stronger London.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'D Weekes-Bernard'.

**Dr Debbie Weekes-Bernard**

Deputy Mayor for Social Integration, Social Mobility and Community Engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> A cross sector working group made up of civil society, public sector and funders.

<sup>2</sup> The Resilience governance structure that is set up at times of need to coordinate across London.

# 1. Mutual Aid and the Context in London

*“Negotiating the multiple voices and perspectives within the groups has been important and challenging. For some, Mutual Aid is about helping your neighbours and removed from politics. For others, Mutual Aid is about helping your neighbours, and intrinsically entwined with politics. Language around Mutual Aid has been challenging: how do we make sure that the process feels more 'mutual', and isn't patronising or divisive in any way; And, now, the challenge feels as if it must be harnessing this energy before capacity disappears completely as lockdown is eased”*

The term ‘mutual aid’ stems from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century anarchist writings of Peter Kropotkin<sup>3</sup> and is a system of voluntary reciprocal support and exchange that has been used in community organising for centuries. Mutual aid is distinct to Charity as it is situated outside of power structures and uses the assets already existing in communities.

As a model of collaborative support mutual aid strives to be non-hierarchical and non-bureaucratic. Even before official lockdown in the UK Mutual Aid groups were beginning to form at a neighbourhood level and as lockdown continued new groups emerged at a fast pace. The Covid-19 Mutual Aid

*“It's not a helper-recipient model, but a flow of cooperative and collective resource, with a view to building cooperation and community solidarity, rather than handouts or charity in the way that people would normally interpret it.” Anna Vickerstaff, Covid-19 Mutual Aid<sup>4b</sup>*

Website<sup>4</sup>, a resource for Mutual Aid Groups and a directory, lists over 700 groups in London. Groups may be organised at street, ward or borough level, and have stemmed from existing community groups, faith groups, councillors, or simply neighbours connecting. The scale of mutual aid varies across London as does the extent to which groups are connected to local charities and authorities.

There is some debate about the extent to which volunteering in London has increased through this period. Rapid development of mutual aid groups has been impressive and has encompassed those involved in community work prior to volunteering, those who have a political interest in models of mutual aid and those who are new to volunteering. However significant numbers of people who were volunteering prior to the crisis have had to stop due to shielding, health concerns and social distancing, leading charities to report a decrease in numbers of volunteers early in the lockdown. It may be that on balance it is not volunteering that has increased, but rather the visibility of more informal volunteering has increased.

The model of mutual aid groups, working at a hyperlocal level and utilising the immediacy of digital communication, has been a perfect fit for the unique circumstances of this crisis where social contact has been restricted and local approaches necessary.

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<sup>3</sup> Kropotkin, P, (1902) *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*.

<sup>4</sup> <https://covidmutualaid.org/>

<sup>4b</sup> <https://www.common-wealth.co.uk/reports/covid-19-interview-series-anna-vickerstaff>

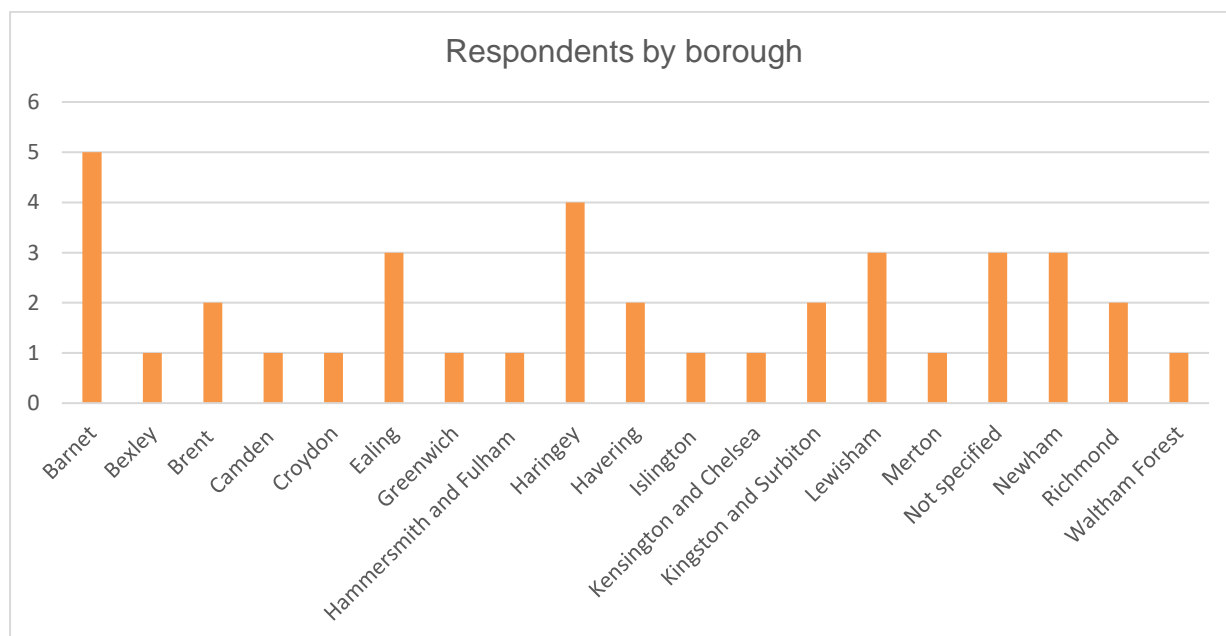
## 2. Methodology, Response and Geographical Coverage

We developed a survey for mutual aid groups which asked questions about the number of participants, activities they were carrying out, challenges they faced, what worked well, resources they found useful and relationships with other organisations (Appendix 1).

We disseminated the survey through the following means:

- London Plus shared the survey with volunteer centres to pass on to their local groups.
- A team at the GLA contacted the Covid Hub leads of each borough in London to reach out to local groups.
- The GLA team contacted groups through Facebook.
- The GLA team had phonecalls with groups in the boroughs they were covering.
- Team London promoted the survey on Twitter and the Team London Facebook page.

The Survey was open for responses for four weeks from 12<sup>th</sup> May - 9<sup>th</sup> June 2020. We received 38 responses in total from across 18 different boroughs. We also held an online conversation with 20 individuals from 13 groups on the 26<sup>th</sup> May 2020.



Of the 38 groups that responded, 32 provided details about the numbers of people signed up to their mutual aid group. The sizes of mutual aid groups ranged from those that had ten people signed up to those that had over 5,000 signed up.

The combined total of people signed up to the 32 groups who provided data was, 39,313. We also asked groups to state, of those signed up, how many people were

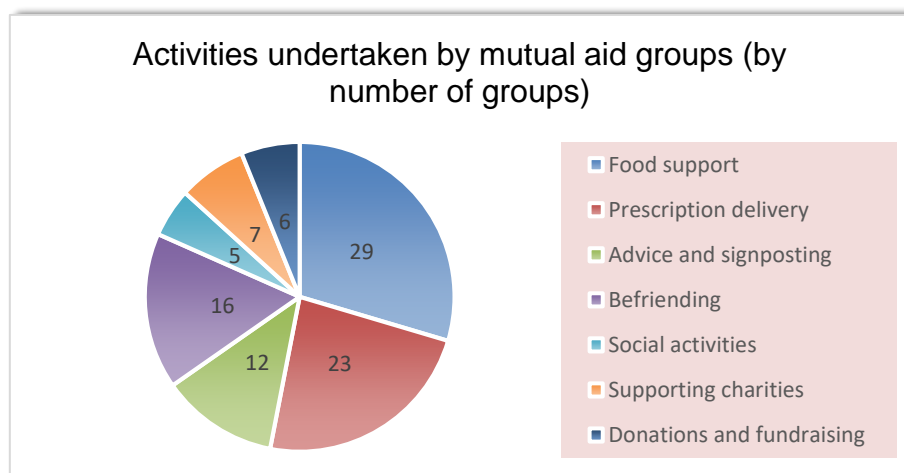
active in the group. Around 22% of the people signed up to these groups were actively volunteering, 8,623 people.

The great range in size of groups makes it challenging to extrapolate the numbers of individuals involved in mutual aid in London. The [Covid-19 mutual aid](#) website records as many as 740 groups having formed within the M25 alone. Our survey suggests groups' memberships average around 400-450. With these indicative figures there could be around 280,000 people signed up to Mutual Aid Groups with around 70,000 active, but the number could be far higher.

How does this sit in the context of other data we have on levels of volunteering in London? As of May 2020, there were over 95,000 people from London who had signed up to volunteer through the NHS Responders GoodSam App. The Survey of Londoners from June 2019<sup>5</sup> showed that pre-covid levels of volunteering amongst adults in London stood at 28% of Londoners volunteering formally in a year and 52% of Londoners participating in informal volunteering. According to these figures, pre-Covid there would have been around 2.5million Londoners formally volunteering in a year and many more informally volunteering. While it is very difficult to have a realistic figure for the number of people volunteering at any one time outside of a crisis situation, and it is equally difficult to say how many people have volunteered through Covid, the numbers would suggest that levels of volunteering over this time have been in line with usual levels of volunteering in London, or event slightly below. This is understandable given the context of social distancing.

### 3. Activities

36 groups shared information about the activities they undertaken to support their communities. The most commonly undertaken activity was **food support** with 29 respondents highlighting this as an area they had been engaged in. This ranged from volunteers shopping for people who were isolating, to large scale organisation of local foodbanks.



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<sup>5</sup> <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/survey-of-londoners-headline-findings>

The next most common activity was **prescription** pick-up and delivery. Respondents spoke about developing relationships with Pharmacies in their areas and in one case receiving referrals to the mutual aid group from the local pharmacy.

32% of respondents highlighted the role they play in **signposting** to appropriate help. One group mentioned signposting to “the Local Council, CAB, Domestic violence services etc.” This is an important indication of the role that groups can play in the local support ecosystem and connecting people to specialist services.

*“The major benefit was the sharing of information to support people in need. Delivering regular prescriptions for chemists who don’t have a delivery service and emergency prescriptions needed within 24hrs of being ordered which most chemists don’t have the capacity for.”*

Many groups highlighted the importance of **social support** with 43% of respondents specifying that their volunteers were providing a befriending service and a further 13% specifying organising social activities and giving ad hoc support: “Getting a bed for someone being rehoused”; “Repaired bikes for NHS workers”; “Sourcing white goods for people in need”; “Offer yoga and other classes to volunteers.”; “Virtual town hall meetings”; “Dog walking”; “Taking a carer to someone in need”.

*“What our volunteers offer their buddied PINs (Persons In Need) has blossomed, with some doing gardening, baking and delivering cakes, providing a VE Day celebration afternoon tea or as happened last week an impromptu mini street party to celebrate a 60th Wedding Anniversary.”*

16% of groups highlighted that they had undertaken fundraising activities to either raise funds for food provision or to support local charities.

## 4. What worked well

### What has worked well in your Mutual Aid Group?

35 groups responded to this question in the survey and eight individuals shared their insights on this subjects through the online discussion. There were a number of common themes that emerged.

#### Supportive networks

One of the key elements that groups highlighted as working well was being a part of a supportive network. This was raised by 12 different respondents.

This ranged from having good team members, to a strong wider support network, great local community spirit and working towards a joint purpose.

Groups also referred to addressing pressing needs and handling emotional complexity. Scenarios were mentioned where community members were upset by

*“He was so upset by the panic buying that he felt we needed people to look out for each other.”*

*“Passionate people who want to help their community. Easy to get donations, community want to help their neighbours”*

*“The main benefit was psychological rather than practical. It gave people reassurance during a time of uncertainty”*

panic buying, were dealing with mental health issues, agoraphobia, and housing needs. A strong sense of community and common purpose was important in this context.

#### Practical coordination structures:

Ten groups referred to the importance of quickly organising effective coordination structures. Some of the key points highlighted were:

- It helped to establish systems early so they were prepared for the increase in interest from volunteers.
- Having a core group responsible for coordination was important.
- Maintaining non-hierarchical structures within the core group and wider community was a challenge but key value.
- Having connections between a central coordination group across wards and more hyper local area or street-based groups was vital to ensure that help that supply of volunteers and demand for support could be well matched across the borough.
- Having clear relationships between street, wards and boroughs helped.

*“We have organised our volunteers by ward in Kingston. Each ward has an admin who filters the task down and shares the information on a private message to the volunteer who has registered and read the induction guidelines. We have 5 main co-ordinators (including me) who have been given clear responsibilities to own.”*

*“We have multiple teams and admins which spreads the workload and brings multiple skills/opinions to the group”*

*“We have a hybrid way of working, so we have a borough group, local ward group and then street level groups and at each level we have different guidelines and safeguarding measures.”*

*“We were lucky enough to have a diverse skill set among our founder members who recognised a need for a robust infrastructure and positive vision from the outset. Arguably, that model was not necessary when there were only 10 volunteers, but as the numbers swelled, we already had our systems in place. Though a Mutual Aid Group, the 6 'Founder' members form a coordination group that is responsible for all of the key decisions, but that group is flat, with no single 1 of us having overall control. We do run a Duty Administrator scheme and 1 of us will have overall responsibility each day.”*



### Effective systems

Alongside having a good coordination structure, groups outlined that effective systems were key to managing engagement quickly and meeting need. Seven groups referenced the systems that helped them in their Mutual Aid Group, highlighting not only tech (such as SpareHand, Google docs and Facebook) but also establishing good systems for safeguarding, protocols to minimise spread of the virus and methods of supporting volunteers. Often the mention of effective systems was linked to the ability of the group to be agile and respond quickly to need.

*“We use the SpareHand app to securely and effectively task volunteers. Expectations are clear and there are no security risks.”*

*“Small WhatsApp Groups for each street segment for quick information flow.”*

*“Organised structure - set up a call centre software so no personnel numbers and shared load, set up a website so people could request help for themselves or their relatives”*

### Agility

Seven groups highlighted the importance of being able to respond quickly at a local level where other institutions couldn't. This was enabled by the enthusiasm of people to help, the ability of hyper local communication networks to identify need and establishing good systems quickly.

*“We work well because we can pick up the different phases and waves of need as lockdown has changed what people need from us. The minor ailments scheme ended in March which has meant that more people have been coming to the group for help in getting simple over the counter medications. We've been thinking about this and discussing it with local pharmacies to see how they can help. But councils have different mechanisms as to how they deal with this kind of stuff, different methods. Getting referrals from council, doctors surgeries, pharmacies. Lots of referrals. We've built great trust in the borough.”*

*“The group was agile and could change to meet different demands”*

*“Red tape is totally disregarded.”*

### Connecting with other Groups

Eight groups mentioned that there was benefit in connecting with other organisations. This ranged from connections with other mutual aid groups, to charities and local authorities. This theme is explored further in the section on relationships (Section 8).

*“We have also developed a reliable process for referring requests to other agencies where they can provide more appropriate support than us.”*

*“There are lots of good groups who are already working in this borough e.g. mental health groups, refugee groups. They have been helping people who have fallen through the cracks but also been working hard not to duplicate the work of the existing orgs.”*

### Comms and Reach

Three groups highlighted the importance of distributing flyers to let community members know they were there to help and others emphasised the use of social media. One group spoke about having multi-lingual leaflets developed which was an important resource for their diverse community. Groups also highlighted the principle of being open to all and that they had no means-testing for recipients of support which was an important value for their group.

#### **Key points**

Social connections and relationships provided the driving force and energy for these groups and the systems and coordination structures enabled them to meet need effectively and in an agile way.

Mutual Aid groups worked well where they have been able to fill an important niche in local communities of bringing support to the doorstep of people who need it and also connecting people to wider services.

#### Questions:

- What conditions need to exist locally for supportive networks and what role can policy makers and communities play in enabling this? For example people have been able to dedicate energy to local volunteering because normal work structures have been disrupted. How can space continue to be made for local connections as normality resumes?
- How can we better understand systems that work well so that they can be replicated and supported? Can knowledge sharing networks be enabled with funding and support?
- People have been able to lend a hand because it has been easy to do so. Barriers to volunteering have been removed to meet need. What can we take from this to make volunteering easier in the future?

## 5. Challenges

### What Challenges have you encountered?

Mutual aid groups operate at different layers of geographical reach. We were aware from conversations with volunteer centres and councils prior to the research that the extent to which mutual aid groups were active and connected to the local community varied greatly across London and even within different areas of boroughs. Some

were established to encompass a whole borough, and some remained at street level, some had strong relationships with the CVS and volunteer centres, others were very much self-sufficient without connecting to local charities. 36 groups responded to this question in the survey and a further two discussed their experience of challenges in the online discussion.

### Relationships with statutory organisations

Ten groups referenced challenges in establishing relationships with statutory organisations, primarily the local authority, in the early phases of lockdown. Groups were keen to act quickly to meet need but found that the council took longer to establish their response and, in some instances, did not want to engage with local groups until then. Four groups mentioned the slowness of the council.

Groups also spoke about the barrier of bureaucracy and systems in trying to work with the council and the requirement for paperwork or DBS that were unnecessary and slowed down the response.

Others highlighted that it took time to build trust and when a relationship was built, and a councillor included details of the mutual aid group in their newsletter, the group could reach a lot more people.

*“Accessing support from the Council has been difficult to impossible throughout. After a few weeks, we found ourselves struggling to find sources of food for people in need.”*

*“Met with council at start and tried to coordinate groups but didn't really get the support from council and too slow and worked separately from them, advised to do DBS through council but other volunteer orgs said we didn't need DBS for the tasks”*

### Safeguarding

Ten groups highlighted challenges with safeguarding. In particular:

- not knowing early on what was needed in terms of safeguarding and DBS;
- managing privacy and personal information of volunteers and vulnerable people; and
- managing potential exposure to infection and anxieties around this.

These concerns were exacerbated by the fact that groups were responding quickly, in a time of pressure and uncertainty and working with strangers.

Connected with these issues is a theme of **building trust** that five groups mentioned. There were challenges in trusting the volunteers who were offering help, in building trust with vulnerable people and in becoming a trusted group with statutory authorities and other established organisations.

One group spoke about having challenges with disruptive individuals. Another mentioned people abusing the system in asking for help but not needing it and one other group mentioned having to moderate the Facebook page to remove negative comments.

*“There is always the problem of people, and we have had 2 instances of disruptive individuals, but from over 700 that isn't bad. Hopefully those issues were dealt with sensibly and as a result were defused with little in the way of long term damage. (Fingers crossed)”*

*“Given the red tape which local authorities must abide by, we found that we had to build trust in our service very quickly as we were dealing with a vulnerable group of people who had to trust us with their money and security because they were providing us with their home address. The only way to establish that trust was to get recognition from either the council or those in public positions. We wrote to our local MP and the council leader informing them of our service, the local MP published our groups details in her weekly newsletter and online platform.”*

### Soliciting requests for help

The third biggest challenge for groups setting up was reaching people in need. Ten groups mentioned this as a challenge. The issues here ranged from reaching people who were digitally excluded, lacking capacity to flyer large geographical areas and encouraging people to ask for help who might be reluctant to.

*“Isolated residents who are not vulnerable so not on council list and are too self-conscious to ask for help.”*

*“They got in touch and agreed to work with us, our groups information is now included in the councils' online directory for Mutual Aids that are providing support with food.”*

### Losing volunteers

Five groups highlighted the issue of losing volunteers as lockdown continued, the challenge of finding new volunteers and an uneven spread of volunteers across the borough. This brings to the fore some of the challenges of keeping people engaged in mutual aid groups and developing systems where all parts of the community feel like they can contribute and fit 'helping out' into their lives.

### Creating structures

In the section on 'what worked well' we highlighted the success of establishing good systems quickly. For some groups this was a challenge. Particular issues that were highlighted were: matching volunteers to need, having volunteers report back when they had completed a task, trying to ensure that there wasn't duplication of effort between different groups and dealing with the imperfect medium of Facebook and other social media platforms.

### Other issues

In addition to the points above there were a number of other pertinent issues that were only raised by individual groups but are significant nonetheless.

- **Unequal burden for coordinators:** One group mentioned that some coordinators took on more work than others, leading to an unequal burden of labour in the group. Another spoke about the challenge of running the group whilst also managing family life.
- **Negotiating with local groups with different interests:** Two groups highlighted that they encountered the challenge of negotiating with other groups in the borough with competing interests. Mutual aid groups, although responding to a clear and immediate need have still had to define a space for themselves within the local context.
- **Four groups highlighted the challenge of meeting complex needs:** In some instances they encountered people who were clearly vulnerable but not on the council's shielded list and had to find the right way help them. Mental health problems and physical health problems were highlighted as issues beyond the group's ability to support.

*"Learning to recognise more complicated cases that required help from the council."*

*"As time went on we uncovered more people with food and poverty problems - which was hard for us to support."*

*"We have encountered a number of people getting in touch who require foodbanks or mental health support, however a lot of the individuals needs are not specific to COVID-19 - they just struggle to make ends meet/get the support they require."*

*"As our organising group is only 5 person, all of us working from home full time, myself a mother trying to navigate home schooling meant we all had an increased workload in managing the Mutual Aid group so we found it a slight challenge at the start as were working all the time, everyday."*

### Key points

Mutual Aid groups established quickly to meet pressing needs and in some areas it took time to build trust with existing organisations (statutory and voluntary), and prove their purpose. The informal, non-hierarchical and spontaneous nature of mutual aid groups is culturally very different to other organisational structures and trust had to be built before real cooperation could take place. The relationships between Local councils and Mutual Aid groups has been explored further in a recent report by the New Local Government Network: [Communities vs. Coronavirus: the Rise of Mutual Aid](#)

The energy that drove the rapid establishment of Mutual Aid groups was susceptible to burnout and waning as volunteers grappled with their own personal challenges through this crisis and dropped away from groups and coordinators took on more responsibility.

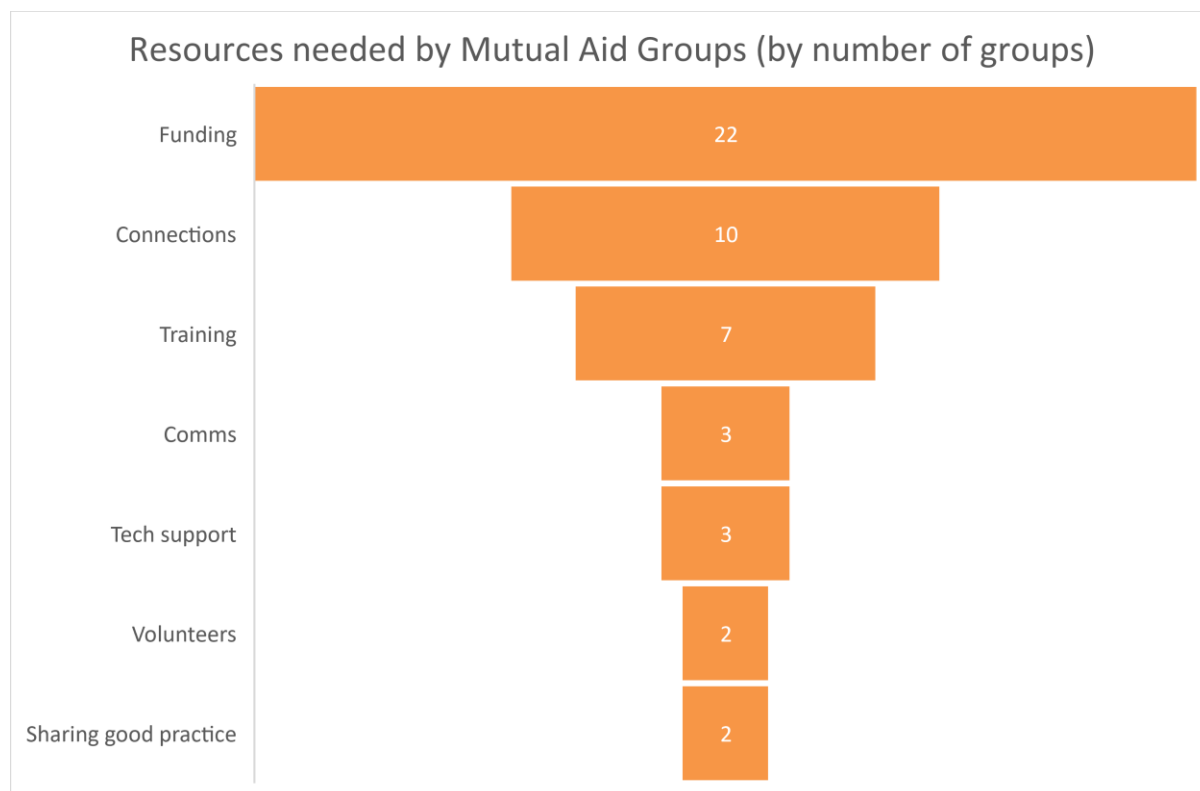
### Questions

- How do you protect and support the emotional wellbeing of mutual aid volunteers?
- How do we help prevent burnout of coordinators?
- How can trust be built between Mutual Aid groups and other organisations quickly?
- Greater clarity is needed on what mutual aid groups can and cannot do in crisis situations and in local support systems so that their agility can be maintained and opportunities to volunteer not hampered.

## 6. Resource needs

### What resources would help your group to continue supporting your community?

33 groups responded to this question and there were three overriding themes in the requests for support: funding, local connections and access to training.



#### Funding

67% of the respondents highlighted that funding would be helpful for their group to enable them to continue neighbourhood level support. Funding needs were:

- to pay for software licenses, online packages and tech;
- to fund someone in the group to provide core support so that they could afford to continue;
- for flyers, posters and comms
- to fund supplies for isolated individuals who can't afford to pay;
- to pay for PPE for the volunteers
- to pay for volunteer expenses; and
- funding for celebration events post Covid.

#### Local connections

The second most frequently mentioned need was connections with other organisations. Specific connections that were mentioned were:

- connections to businesses or partners who could support transport and storage needs for food banks;

- connections with other charities, locally and London wide;
- improved connections with the council; and
- links with other volunteer run groups.

### Training

7 groups identified training needs. These included:

- food handling courses
- safeguarding children and vulnerable adults
- fundraising
- financial management.

### Other

Other key resources that were highlighted were:

- better technology to speed up matching of volunteers to need
- advertising support
- help on how to help people who have become reliant on support
- mentor at local council to catch up with regularly
- help to set up as a charity.

### Key points

The needs identified through the survey draw attention not only to what would benefit group's activities now, but also the key resources necessary for ongoing sustainability.

Funding and training are tangible benefits that could make a quick difference to Mutual Aid groups. However local connections take more time and are more dependent on the local environment. A collaborative response is needed from the public sector, voluntary sector and businesses to strengthen local connections. Some of this might begin with a better collective understanding of the role and niche of mutual aid in the local social landscape.

A recent report by the Relationships Project observed: *"the most comprehensive and successful social responses have been highly collaborative and the best collaborations have emerged in areas where there were pre-existing structures and relationships. Growing the connective tissue takes time and is difficult to do well mid-crisis."* ([The Relationships Project](#), 2020)

Questions:

- What is the role of local infrastructure in supporting mutual aid and could more be offered locally in terms of training and local connections?
- How can funding be targeted in an easily accessible and flexible way to meet needs while maintaining the agency of mutual aid groups?



## 7. Anticipated impact of lifting lockdown

### What impact do you think coming out of lockdown might have on your group?

At the time the survey was open it was not clear when lockdown would be lifted or how. However, we anticipated a time when people would be returning to work immanently with others still isolating. We asked groups what impact they felt this change in situation would have on their activities. 33 groups responded to this question identifying immediate needs around volunteer support and changing demands, and also concerns about looking ahead to the future sustainability of the group.

#### Change in volunteer support

This was the key concern of 60% of groups responding (20 out of 33 groups). Many were already seeing a shift in the levels of interest from volunteers and their availability to support local activities. There were three key observations.

- **Volunteers less available:** most groups highlighted that volunteers were already less available as people began to return to work and they anticipated that this would continue to impact on volunteer numbers over the coming months.
- **Reduced interest in volunteering:** others highlighted that they were having fewer volunteering enquiries come through and that people who were enthusiastic at first were now less responsive.
- **Volunteer fatigue:** two groups mentioned that volunteers were emotionally fatigued and unable to commit.

One group also highlighted that they were keen to see connections across generations maintained as this has been valuable through the crisis.

*“People may forget about solidarity, changing social attitudes”*

*“We are already being impacted on existing volunteer corp going back to work and thus not being available. However others have joined.”*

*“People may be less available but still keen to be involved in something meaningful.”*

#### Change in demand for support

A number of groups mentioned that requests for support were dropping as people were more able to go to the shops themselves.

However other groups noted that while the need for shopping was decreasing the need for food parcels was increasing as families and people in precarious work situations struggled to make ends meet. Groups highlighted that they were encountering complex needs around mental health support and food poverty for



which they needed extra support. One group highlighted emerging needs for rough sleepers, children and young people and survivors of domestic violence.

*“As the lockdown has started to be eased, we've noticed a drop in the number of people requesting assistance with food shopping, however we are now receiving requests from those needing assistance with food parcels. We believe financial constraints on families and individuals who may have lost their employment due the lockdown will lead to more people requiring support with food.”*

*“All members of our community will need support in processing the traumas inherent in the pandemic, and in particular we expect children and young people to need support that is not currently available.”*

*“Coming out of lockdown will mean that the nature of the threat we face will change. At the start, people were panicking, the shops were empty and lots of people had to quickly self-isolate without any adequate planning. This immediate threat to an individuals health and safety is now nearly over. However, we are aware of the economic devastation that will occur and are concerned that the existing local government / charity sector will not have the resources or will to deal with this need.”*

### **Key points**

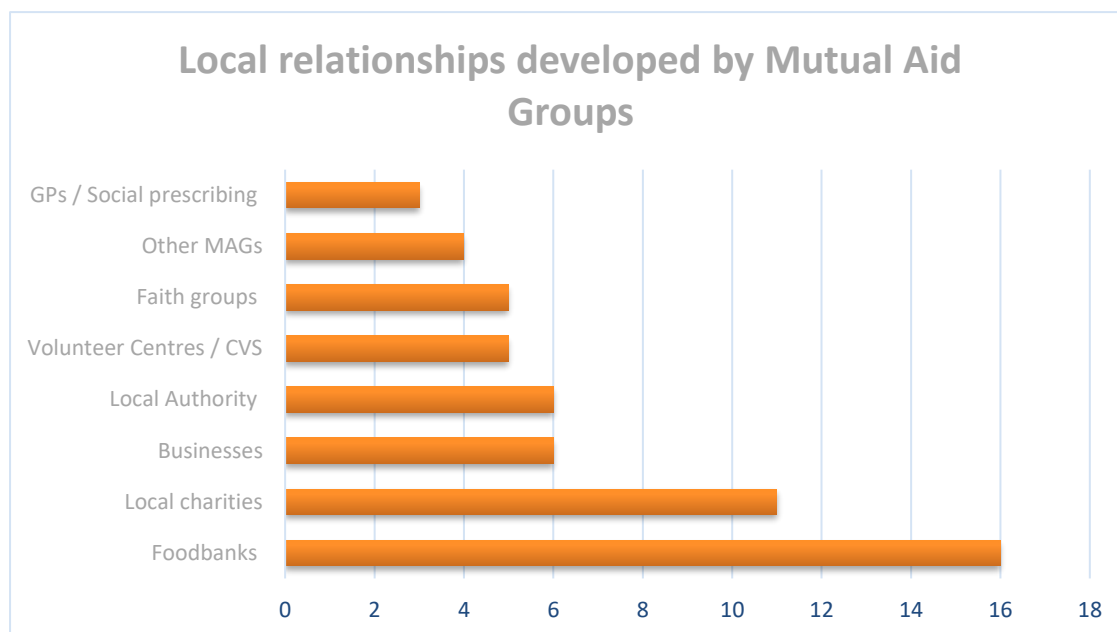
Direct links can be made between the anticipated changes identified and the challenges and successes that groups have experienced. Community Spirit has been a driving force in galvanising local volunteers, and as the pandemic takes more of a toll on peoples lives energy can wane. The implications of this have been well described in a recent report by [Neighbourly Lab](#).

By strengthening local networks of mutual aid groups, voluntary sector organisations and statutory services Mutual aid volunteers will have better support systems to help meet changing needs in their communities.

## 8. Relationships

**Are there any relationships with other organisations locally that you have found particularly useful?**

32 groups responded to this question in the survey and nine groups also spoke about it in more detail in the online meeting. There were a great variety of organisations referenced by respondents. The most frequently mentioned groups are highlighted in the graph below.



Foodbanks and Community Kitchen organisations were by far the most frequently referenced with 50% of respondents highlighting these as key relationships.

The next most frequently referenced type of organisation were local charities. This included Young People's Foundations, Community Trusts, Age Uk, MIND and Refugee support organisations. Five respondents mentioned faith groups as being important connections. This was particularly in relation to providing food support for people in need.

Groups mentioned GPs and Local Authorities as key public sector organisations they had worked with. One group also mentioned housing associations as a way of reaching people. Businesses that were mentioned included supermarkets, pharmacies, restaurants and estate agents.

*"Food organisations, caterers, food kitchens across London. Without them, we'll be on our knees"*

*"Early engagement with the local authority and BVSC was also crucial although initially a little tricky. Understandably, there may have been a little reluctance to accept our presence from nowhere, however, our relationship has grown in strength and we now engage on a regular basis, hold Zoom meetings, receive valuable guidance and advice and are very much treated as equals, which is remarkable considering our infancy."*

## 9. Recognition

**Do you have any ideas for how the role of volunteers in supporting people through the coronavirus crisis could be recognised and celebrated?**

32 of the survey participants responded to this question. Broadly, the responses fell under the following three categories: Thank You parties or events; recognition of volunteers through certificates, official badges and local media coverage, and living monuments or memorials.

Of the 32 respondents, three of them did not indicate how they would like to be recognised but they did note that they felt that recognition was important. Four of the respondents stated that active volunteers have not been involved in order to gain recognition or praise, highlighting that community spirit and a genuine interest in giving back is a key element of the success of these groups.

### Thank You parties or events:

Eight respondents noted they thought a Thank You event or party would be an appropriate way of recognising volunteer efforts. Possibly given the pandemic and the requirements for social distancing, four respondents stated that they would like to have a street party or an outdoor event to thank volunteers and celebrate their work. Notably, an outdoor event like this would make it accessible and open for all members of the community and one respondent noted that they would like to see an outdoor “family festival” as part of their recognition. Three respondents also indicated that they would like to receive funding to organise and run their own Thank You event for their group.

In addition to this, two respondents mentioned that they would like to see a larger scale, more official Thank You event, hosted by a senior figure such as the Mayor of London or a member of the Royal Family. Another respondent noted that they were planning a virtual thank you event for their volunteers during Volunteers Week, consisting of a virtual reception and sending virtual certificates to their volunteers. They hoped to have recorded messages of Thanks to play for the volunteers, either from the MP or local councillors.

### Certificates, badges and media coverage:

Five respondents stated that they would like to see a formal recognition of volunteers' efforts. Their suggestions included things such as badges, certificates, awards, t-shirts and Thank You letters. Some of these suggestions can clearly be linked to Mutual Aid Groups' desire to carry on their work and create a space where their volunteers are recognised for what they do and supported to continue their work. Six respondents noted the importance of **sharing**

*“Maybe a register number, T-shirt, we have badges but still, some people don't understand that you are putting your time in service of other people. . . Maybe companies could give free hours to employees to do the volunteering and maybe would be nice to have supermarket slots preferences for the very active members.”*

**stories** about volunteers and their work to raise awareness. The suggestions of how to bring volunteer stories to the community ranged from short videos shared online, to coverage in local newspapers and features in council publications or communications such as newsletters.

#### Living Monuments and Memorials:

Three groups stated that they would like to see a monument or memorial for those in their community who lost their lives to COVID-19. For example, one organisation noted that they are based in the London Borough which experienced the highest number of deaths from the disease. They suggested that a memorial for those who were lost, alongside a living monument (such as a community garden) for those who helped during the pandemic would be appropriate.

Another group suggested that a memorial for those who have passed away might consist of a plaque or a statue. There was also a suggestion from one group that we should have a national day of reflection on the impact of the pandemic, given that it represents such a formative time in world history.

#### Acknowledging the role of Mutual Aid Groups in the community:

The final theme that emerged from the 32 responses to this question were a group of activities which not only recognise volunteers' efforts but look ahead to the future of mutual aid groups and help to lay a path for how they might move forward with their work. These responses highlighted the importance of acknowledging the impact of mutual aid Groups on their community and their volunteers and building on that impact.

*“Systemic change; a recognition of the importance of communities and the work that goes into community-building; structures need to open up, and the voices present in these and other mutual aid groups need to be heard”*

- One organisation focussed on how volunteers might be supported to have value added to their volunteering through things such as a **certification, or a qualification** gained through volunteering. They noted that they are working to set up a service which encourages people to “hire a local skill”. This service is designed for volunteers who are seeking employment and would support them to develop transferable skills which would lead them to their next paid role.
- Four of the respondents referenced **recognition from their local council**, indicating that they felt that local authorities should be one of the key figures in leading the recognition of volunteer's efforts. For example, one respondent stated that they want to see local councils “fund and celebrate” the work of their active citizens. In a similar vein, a respondent noted that they would like the council to recognise them by offering the volunteers visibility through “council newsletters” and sharing volunteer's stories.

- Another group mentioned activities to raise the profile of the contribution of mutual aid groups such as newsletters, sharing stories of impact and small films.

*“Rather than individuals, mutual aid as a movement should be celebrated. Of all the groups in London that were quickly set up I've heard of hardly any abuse of this network of trust. It's been an extraordinary movement that quickly swung into action when established bodies floundered.”*

### **Key points**

Although individuals volunteering through Mutual Aid are not seeking recognition per se, there is a need to acknowledge what groups have achieved together and been through in this very challenging period.

Recognition can also have positive impacts in:

- strengthening local relationships, (which has been highlighted above as an action that can improve the sustainability of Mutual aid groups);
- supporting the positive wellbeing of volunteers by recognising their contribution; and
- maintaining community spirit and energy which could possibly impact on continued participation in groups

## **10. Participation**

### **What are the demographics of volunteers / are they new to volunteering?**

The question of participation was not featured on the survey but was raised at the roundtable meeting. During the discussion, 13 attendees described their experience of the types of people who were volunteering with them. Themes around the diversity of the volunteer force (both socio-economic diversity and ethnic diversity) were the most mentioned, alongside consideration of the mix of volunteers in terms of whether they had volunteered before or were new to volunteering.

Interestingly, there was no clear consensus on the demographics of the volunteers; each group had an almost unique experience with the types of volunteers they were working with.

#### **50:50 split between old and new volunteers**

Six of the 13 groups who responded in the meeting said that they had a good mix of people who regularly volunteered and those who were completely new to volunteering. 5 of the respondents noted that the split between old and new volunteers was almost 50:50 and only one organisation stated that their volunteers were “mostly new” to volunteering.

In terms of people who were new to volunteering,

- One group reported having an influx of **young people** joining their volunteer group. These were mostly **university students** or school students who had come back to stay with their parents during lockdown.
- The same group also noted that they had people volunteering with them who had lost their jobs, were furloughed or retired and that these people were also new to volunteering.
- Another group noted that they had people who had asked for help in the first wave of lockdown signing up to volunteer after they were no longer self-isolating.

Other instances contrasted with this and were about connecting with people who were regular volunteers:

- One group noted that they had built relationships with **resident's associations and community centres** who wanted to use their already existing infrastructure to contribute to the volunteer effort.
- Another group stated that they had received help from volunteers who were engaged with the climate emergency and therefore were used to giving their time.

One respondent noted that a lot of volunteers didn't see what they were doing as volunteering at all. Given that the activities in the Mutual Aid Group were so localised and often meant that people were supporting their neighbours, people felt it was more of an informal activity than volunteering.

### Volunteers from more affluent areas and diversity

While a range of participation was described, there were some notable observations on the socio-economic and ethnic demographics of volunteers taking part.

- Four of the organisations reported that they found that their volunteers tended to come from more affluent areas, which translated to a poor representation of the demographics of their whole area in their volunteering group.
- However in contrast to the above, three organisations spoke at the meeting and said that their group of volunteers is diverse and is representative of the community within which they are working.
- One group noted a quite distinct divide between the more affluent part and the less affluent part of their borough, and that the difference in volunteer numbers on the What'sApp groups in each of these parts of the borough was marked. The more affluent area had 250 people signed up to the group but the less affluent area had 25 participants on their What'sApp group.
- One group (based in the affluent part of a borough and operating on street level) as opposed to on a ward level, noted that they didn't receive as many requests for help as they thought they would, perhaps because of their location. Instead, they focussed their efforts on fundraising.

*"The very active [volunteers] tend to be experienced volunteers but over 50% are totally new to volunteering. Everyone has been keen to help and jump in. The make-up is sadly not reflective of the demography, but I believe this is a socio-economic issue. Most of our members and providers are Asians and White Europeans yet this is a huge BAME community. Also, we have hardly any undergrads or teens."*



### Volunteer spirit and enthusiasm

A clear theme that emerged during this part of the discussion was the spirit of generosity and enthusiasm that is being shown by volunteers across the Mutual Aid Groups, regardless of their socio-economic background, where they lived in the borough or whether they had volunteered before.

4 of the respondents specifically noted how pleased they were to see the commitment of people to helping others in their community reflected in the numbers of people who signed up to volunteer and how rapidly requests for help were being responded to.

*“I was impressed with how people have responded. We have had had 800 people involved on regular basis and others who have been less involved. [We have] very quick responses to all requests, I’m really happy with how brilliant the volunteers are”*

Two groups noted that when they started up, they had a huge amount of interest from volunteers, to the point where they didn’t have enough tasks available. One of the groups said that this became less of a problem as they built partnerships with local food banks and set up a “phone buddying system”, which created more opportunities for volunteers. Telephone befriending roles were established by a number of mutual aid groups as well as local Covid support hubs. A type of ‘phone buddying’ volunteer role was also established by the NHS volunteer responders scheme as ‘Check-in and chat’ indicating the great extent to which volunteers were needed to help address isolation during lockdown.

### Key points

We know that the form and operation of Mutual Aid groups varies greatly across different geographical areas of London and our conversations showed that there is no consistent rule about who is taking part in volunteering, but that it is dependent on the conditions in each geographical area.

Recent studies by the [Relationship Observatory](#) and [Neighbourly Lab](#), have found that volunteering through the crisis tends to be within existing social groups. This is reflected to some extent by the experiences shared in our conversations with Mutual Aid groups, and is also understandable given the geographical bounds of volunteering during this period.

If Mutual Aid groups are to continue to be a local non-hierarchical alternative to charity, then more research is needed to understand if there are barriers to social mixing within mutual aid groups and how these can be overcome.

## 11. Advice

**If you were to help set up a Mutual Aid group next week is there anything you would do differently?**

Respondents provided a range of thoughts on what they would do differently with the benefit of hindsight if they were starting mutual aid groups now.

34 respondents shared thoughts on this question. 7 people said they wouldn't have done anything differently.

The three more commonly stated pieces of advice reflect the observations of successes and challenges that groups shared.

- Establish your central infrastructure first: systems, processes, coordinators

*"Keep the structure simpler, the management team smaller. Setup outbound comms ie social media and website right off the bat for visibility and community access."*

- Connect with local charities, community groups and the council

*"Ask existing religious, civic, or political or organisations and networks to play a more prominent role in organising from the start."*

- Make sure you have enough volunteer support to share the coordination around

*"Yes get a few others around me to help, the last 2 months as the only active admin and person answering call, emails and text has been challenging."*

A full table of statements provided by groups under this theme can be found in Appendix 2.



## 12. Findings and Recommendations

The experiences shared by groups were rich and varied. Individuals were generous with their time and appreciated the opportunity to hear from others in the online conversation.

Further research is needed to better understand what barriers there might be to participation and how to remove them; how to build relationships quickly in times of crisis; how to maintain safe agile volunteering at a local level without overburdening volunteers with systems and how to ensure coordination of mutual aid groups is dispersed to avoid coordinator and volunteer burn out.

However there are some key themes of learning from this research that point to actions that local authorities, charities, the GLA and other regional bodies can take to enable the conditions for mutual aid to sustain.

### **There are no rules except...**

There is no single size, structure of group, or type of person who participates in mutual aid. It is important that groups have the flexibility to be able to mould themselves to meet the needs of their local community.

However in all examples there was a clear niche that mutual aid groups were filling which set them apart from other local services. This was essentially the **hyperlocal nature of support and trust built on neighbourliness**. Volunteers were matched to help people in a very close geographical area. This meant that they could be responsive and quick in offering support. Their existing relationships enabled them to help people quickly and effectively bypassing the bureaucracy of more structured systems.

But when groups ran into the limitations of that niche, i.e people needing specialist support, collaboration with other structures was vital. In connecting with wider charities and local authorities groups were enabled to:

- Widen volunteering opportunities for individuals
- Signpost people to more specialist support
- Widen the referrals coming into the group

### **Relationships matter**

One of the key challenges for mutual aid groups was building trust with statutory authorities. Where this relationship didn't work well the group's ability to reach people in need was hampered, their validity as a source of support in the local area was undermined and their effectiveness in being able to connect people to other help was diminished. Where relationships worked well, groups felt valued, were able to reach more people to offer support to in their community and were able to help people access the support most appropriate to their needs. The same goes for relationships with the voluntary and business sector.

### **Systems help**

Because of the COVID crisis, mutual aid groups now have models of systems for coordinating volunteers, at a street, ward and borough level, for promoting their offers of help and for effectively contributing to the efforts of other local charities such as food banks. Technology is important and some groups have developed their own systems to help them coordinate in the best way, but there are risks too with managing social media accounts in terms of privacy and appropriate use.

### **People are the heart**

Social relationships and community energy has driven the mutual aid response. Relationships have been forged quickly between teams of people working on mutual aid and between neighbours, fuelled by the urgency of the situation. As the crisis settles into a more stable situation and individuals who might have been volunteering are confronted more with their own challenges brought on by the situation there are questions as to whether there will be enough energy in the community to continue driving the response. Valuing and recognising the work of mutual aid groups could help to energise volunteers and prompt participation, but as with all forms of volunteering, people need to have the space and conditions in their lives to be able to take part.

“One of the key reasons we took this approach and why so many people come to us is also is that we operate on a principle of believing people need help - we don't ask them to 'prove' they need a food parcel for example, which I think is a really key reason we are very well regarded in our community and have these positive relationships. Asking for help is hard for anyone, and we don't want to shame anyone.”

### **Recommendations:**

The essence of mutual aid is that it is community owned and organised. It has developed rapidly through the pandemic because communities have identified needs that could not be met quickly enough by local authorities and Charities. It is important to maintain the independence of mutual aid groups and enable groups to develop in a way that works for the volunteers, neighbourhoods and local relationships.

However, there are some core ways in which funders, regional bodies and local authorities can support the conditions for Mutual Aid groups to continue and thrive.

### **Funding:**

Funders in London should have conversations about how accessible and flexible funding can meet some of the needs of mutual aid groups around tech, food support, and core resource.

### **Relationships:**

The GLA and London Councils should work together to gather examples of where the relationship between local authorities and mutual aid groups has worked well and develop toolkits to enable stronger relationships.

The GLA, funders and London Plus should work together to explore how local infrastructure can best support mutual aid groups through training, fostering local connections and support for coordinators. Case study examples of where this has

worked well can foster good practice and funding for pilot projects could help to develop new models of support.

As mutual aid has a strong relational basis, groups benefit from learning from each other and peer support. Covid-19 Mutual Aid, which maps groups in London, has become a welcome focal point for mutual aid. The GLA and other funders should offer to work with Covid-19, UK Mutual Aid and other regional coordination groups to understand what would enable them to continue to provide information and opportunities for networking and peer support across London.

**Recognition:**

The suggestions around recognition of mutual aid groups should be further explored with the Mayor of London, the GLA and local authorities in particular. Volunteering as a whole, not just in mutual aid groups has been vital in bringing communities through the Covid Crisis, and public recognition of this will be important in valuing and sustaining a culture of volunteering in London.

*“Mutual aid groups work in a more modern way which fill the gaps which other organisations can’t e.g. the use of whatsapp. A network which works outside of what local authorities are doing, just a bunch of people who want to be involved and modern tech has helped them to come together and work. We exist in a slightly different world to standard third sector orgs.”*

# MAYOR OF LONDON

## Appendix 1: Survey Questions

Name of Mutual Aid group
Main contact details Name / e-mail
Borough
How many members are there in your group?
What activities have your group been undertaking to support communities through the Lockdown?
What has worked well in your Mutual Aid Group?
What challenges have you encountered? ( <i>Think about the different phases from setting up your group to delivering support</i> )
If you were to help set up a Mutual Aid group next week is there anything you would do differently?
What resources would help your group to continue supporting your community? ( <i>e.g training / funding / people / connections / nothing</i> )
Do you have any ideas for how the role of volunteers in supporting people through the Covid crisis could be recognised and celebrated?
Are there any relationships with other organisations locally that you have found particularly useful? If so please provide details.
Would you be happy for the GLA to contact you to speak about your experience in a Mutual Aid Group?
If yes please provide a contact number and let us know the best time to call you.
Are there any other observations you would like to share?

## Appendix 2: Advice Shared

Advice Shared
We tried to reach out to each new signed up volunteer but the rate of growth was too fast!
Change our message and target less affluent areas of the borough first.
We now have our own provisions centre as well as continuing to collaborate with a local food bank. Potentially, we could have had ours up running quicker but in all honesty, the first three weeks were pretty manic. It really was a balancing act. Bite off more than you can chew and you run the risk of wholesale failure.
I would establish the administrative infrastructure first as an immediate priority and I would set up a central phone-line as early as possible.
Have the admin set up before and share the overall burden. Ward coordinators should be clear on their roles. There is a varying amount of commitment and you can't get rid of volunteers who aren't doing it.
Set up better links with the Council from the start and make more demands of them to ensure better communication. More clarity and understanding of the different roles of LA and community led groups.
If we were larger scale we would move from using spreadsheets to manage everything to a software based solution.
We started a blog series about building a Mutual Aid as a startup: <a href="https://medium.com/mutual-aid-as-a-startup">https://medium.com/mutual-aid-as-a-startup</a> I probably would've set it up as a CIC since day one so that it would be easier to manage some funding paths.
Ask existing religious, civic, or political or organisations and networks to play a more prominent role in organising from the start.
Get more motivated volunteers.
Have a key or key members for different days to spread the load.
Secure relationships with local government and groups quickly and try to promote the group more e.g. local media as flyers/door drops have been our only way of reaching the elderly who are most in need.
I would not publish QR codes to enable joining of WhatsApp groups.
We always had a few concerns about security - if they said they'd do the shopping for someone and then we didn't know who they were, we asked other neighbours for insight or called them up. The admin was really stressful. Maybe we should have done DBS but it was quite hard to do and lengthy. We only worked with local people.
Engage with more community groups.

Yes get a few others around me to help, the last 2 months as the only active admin and person answering call, emails and text has been challenging.

Think about using other formats ie posters and more leaflets.

Keep the structure simpler, the management team smaller. Setup outbound comms ie social media and website right off the bat for visibility and community access.

Yes, we would have reached out to schools, hostels, local TRA's, mother and parents groups much sooner. As our initial aim was to assist those who had to self-isolate on the grounds of age or health reasons, we didn't factor other vulnerable groups who possibly couldn't go out due to childcare reasons and financial hardship.

I would not organise the mutual aid groups per ward. I would go for one central organisation with one admin/safeguarding/communications/finance team for the entire borough.

We would raise funding or ask for grants from day one so we can finance everything from the beginning. What we did is that we financed from our own pocket. It is only now that we are asking for a grant.

## Appendix 3: Further thoughts from groups

At the end of the survey, the organisations were given the opportunity to contribute any other thoughts they had about their experience of running a Mutual Aid Group. 18 organisations gave their thoughts in this section.

The statements in the below table are the responses exactly as they were submitted in the survey. Given that this is purely qualitative data, the responses vary in their subject matter but broadly, the items that occurred most frequently were: the swift action of Mutual Aid Groups when local authorities were delayed: people's needs post-COVID and the commitment and generosity of volunteers.

In the <b>absence of local authorities and government response people stepped up and filled the void</b> . This needs to be recognised and not forgotten.
Only that this whole experience has been and continues to be ever more incredible. Bexley is blessed with some truly amazing people whose <b>commitment and generosity knows no bounds</b> . It has been fantastic to have been involved in the response.
Looking at how the group develops [going forward]. We expected isolation to be a bigger problem – it wasn't. Phone hotline for loneliness not as busy as expected - pride, and not as much need.
Food is obviously first focus but there is a need for a whole range of different support - electric (not solved by the energy companies offering top up - as there are many barriers and too little money); decreased access to CAB and other benefits advice has put more people at risk; <b>lack of advice to those without Recourse - we have a large number of people from Eastern Europe stranded with no work and no access to funds</b> .
As we are local we were able to be up & running within a day of lockdown whereas the <b>council took many weeks</b> and then confused people by having multiple contact points for getting help
Early response and then <b>be agile to develop and adapt</b> response as you learn things change. The local council took 2 weeks to get their resources going.
<p>The local Lib Dems offered to help us print our flyers but refused to do so unless we said we were affiliated with them - we found this incredibly disappointing</p> <p>The Supermarkets were a little bureaucratic about who they would continue delivering to and we had several calls from individuals in their 90s who had been taken off the deliveries list as weren't categorised as extremely vulnerable despite their ages</p> <p><b>Universal credit was slow to kick in</b> and those without money have an incredible amount of integrity - we bought shopping for an isolating gentlemen waiting for his universal credit without any money, we did not want to be refunded the £40 as he was clearly struggling but he insisted as soon as he received the Universal credit.</p> <p>The elderly who were asked to self-isolate felt they did not have an option to access their usual shopping other than us. There is a difference between receiving a box of generic food to survive on and <b>having your usual shopping picked up from your usual shop</b></p>

**for you which gives a much greater sense of connection to their usual lives and closer to feeling independent.** Also a lot of them refuse to not pay for their shopping.

There will also be people in need regardless of the crisis. This has just brought people together to support the community.

The communities in Newham organised themselves and fed the NHS and the community before the councils or government were up and running. **Not one of our organisations could have operated successfully without the multitudes of volunteers and donors.** I have organised a scheme to help the elderly and the vulnerable receive face coverings via food parcels through the council. We are also trying to get the letters, notes and pictures to let them know they have not been forgotten.

The community spirit is amazing! I've never seen anything like it. Always look for and to the helpers. **I'm stunned at the giving nature of people** - especially those with very little.

Most people appreciated the idea of a group when times were very uncertain. It was invaluable. **We need to retain the blueprint for the set-up of this type of communications group in case we deal with this again.**

Supermarket delivery slots were difficult. **Would like to keep the community going** - a regular neighbours drinks one evening a week in our street how do we not lose some of the good attitude/ stuff that happened and be a bit kinder to each other.

I think there **needs to be greater coordination with local charities.**

Enthusiasm seemed to wane. People didn't ask for help as much as I'd expected. I think people are proud and don't like to ask for help from strangers

**Structure needs to be opened up to 'new' or multiple voices, if we are going to 'build back better'.**



## References and Resources

**Covid-19 Mutual Aid:** <https://covidmutualaid.org/>

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**The Relationship Project** (June 2020), *The Moment We Noticed. The Relationships Observatory and our learning from 100 days of Lockdown*: <http://relationshipsproject.org/reports/>

## Thanks to...

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UK Mutual Aid

Mapesbury Mutual Aid

Covid-19 Mutual Aid

Croydon Mutual Aid

Isolation Help Bexley (IHB)

Muswell Hill, Haringey Mutual Aid

Ealing Community Aid CIC

Merton Mutual Aid

Bounds Green Mutual Aid

Sunray & Egmont Community Residents Association

Surbiton C19 Response group

Tottenham Hale MAG

Kingston and Surbiton Mutual Aid

Greenwich Mutual Aid

Barnet Mutual Aid

Havering Covid-19 Mutual Aid

Food4all

Royal Docks Covid-19 Support

Hither Green + Lee Mutual Aid Group

Redbridge Mutual Aid

MoVE (Mobilising Volunteers Effectively)

BRaG Residents Association

Newham Covid-19 Mutual Aid

Richmond Hill Mutual Aid support group

Waltham Forest Mutual Aid

Ealing Covid-19 Mutual Aid (Area H4)

SpareHand South London Hub

West Brompton Mutual Aid Group

Junction Ward, Islington

Harold wood and Harold park covid 19 support group

St Ann's Mutual Aid

Brent Covid-19 Mutual Aid

Hampstead and Kilburn Covid Community Relief

Dudden Hill Mutual Aid

Lewisham Mutual Aid

Forest Hill Mutual Aid

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