

Executive Summary:

Understanding the Experience of Mutual Aid groups in London

Even before the impact of Covid on our daily lives was fully understood people began to connect with neighbours and reach out through social media to support those most affected. The local response of community organised mutual aid has been impressive in its scale and effective at directing help to where it is needed.

Within a short time, hundreds of new mutual aid groups had established. These have been recorded, mapped and informed by the Covid-19 Mutual Aid website¹, originating from a Lewisham based neighbourhood group. Community action is far from rare in the city, the survey of Londoners² showed that 52% of Londoners participated in informal volunteering³ over the preceding year; but the rapid response and organised nature of mutual aid groups has brought to the fore the power of people helping each other at a hyper local level.

We developed a survey for mutual aid groups which asked questions about the number of participants they had, activities they were carrying out, challenges they faced, what worked well, resources they found useful and relationships with other organisations. We received 38 responses to the survey from across 18 different boroughs. We also held an online discussion with 20 individuals from 13 groups.

The purpose of this research was to understand more about the experience of mutual aid groups in London through this time in order to inform strategic conversations between the Greater London Authority (GLA) and partners on how to support and sustain networks of local action. We applied qualitative data analysis, coding the responses in order to identify common themes. The responses from the survey provided rich data on the experience of individuals taking part in mutual aid groups, the challenges they have faced, learnings and needs.

Findings

- 32 of the responding groups reported over 39,000 volunteers in their networks.
- Respondents estimated that around 8500 of these were active volunteers.
- 94% of groups were providing support around food, from shopping to emergency food aid and partnering with foodbanks.
- 32% of respondents highlighted the part they played in signposting to others such as CAB, the local council, domestic violence support and local charities.
- 67% of groups highlighted the need for funding for software licences, flyers and supplies for people isolating amongst other things.
- 30% of groups highlighted the need for better connections to local charities and businesses and emphasised training needs such as food handling, safeguarding and financial management.
- Local relationships were important. 50% of respondents highlighted relationships with foodbanks and community kitchens as being key. 34% referenced other local charities. 19% mentioned local authorities.

¹ [Covid 19 mutual aid](#)

² [Survey of Londoners](#)

³ Informal volunteering was defined in the Survey of Londoners as 'giving unpaid help to a person who is not a family member in the last twelve months.'

What worked well:

- Social connections and relationships provided the driving force and energy for local groups. The strong sense of solidarity was key to enabling quick effective action and in supporting volunteers to face complex and emotional issues.
- Groups were able to establish necessary systems and good coordination structures quickly. Some highlighted that it was important to have a core group responsible for coordination and that it was challenging but important to maintain a non-hierarchical structure within the core group.
- 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 connecting people to wider services. Local relationships proved valuable in promoting the work of groups, providing more complex support where mutual aid groups couldn't and expanding a supportive network for volunteers.

Challenges:

- One of the biggest challenges groups faced was building relationships with local authorities. 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 energy that drove the rapid establishment of mutual aid groups was susceptible to burnout and waned as volunteers grappled with their own personal challenges through this crisis and dropped away leaving coordinators to take on more responsibility.
- As lockdown started to lift groups noticed a change in volunteering levels. Volunteers became less available as they went back to work and there was reduced interest in volunteering as fatigue set in. Groups also noticed a change in demand for help. They were called on less to help with shopping as people returned to the supermarket, but saw increased demand from families seeking food parcels as the economic impact of the crisis set in.

Advice from mutual aid groups:

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
- Connect with local charities, community groups and the council
- Make sure you have enough volunteer support to share the coordination around

Conclusions

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 by 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.

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

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 sectors.

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 have driven the mutual aid response. Relationships have been forged quickly between teams of people coordinating 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 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 why we have these positive relationships. Asking for help is hard for anyone, and we don't want to shame anyone"

Further questions were also raised through the research that merit further exploration and testing:

- *How do you protect and support the emotional wellbeing of mutual aid volunteers and prevent burnout of coordinators?*
- *How can trust be built quickly between mutual aid groups and other local structures such as charities and local authorities?*
- *Greater clarity is needed on what local networks can and cannot do in crisis situations so that their agility can be maintained.*

Recommendations:

The essence of mutual aid is that it is community owned and organised. It is important to maintain the independence of local groups and enable development 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 technology, 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. 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
- supporting the positive wellbeing of volunteers; and
- maintaining community spirit and energy which could possibly impact on continued participation in groups