



## Policy Brief

# COVID-19: The Effectiveness of Mutual Aid Groups and Their Lessons for Post-crisis Community Care

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### KEY INFO

**Research question:** How did mutual aid groups emerge, organise and endure throughout the acute phase of the pandemic? What did they do, what enabled them and what barriers did they face? Can a better understanding of mutual aid improve policy formation and implementation, post-COVID-19, to respond more effectively to future events?

#### Policy area or themes

- Ethics, Procurement and Governance
- Guidance, Messaging and Behaviour Change
- Healthcare
- Places and Communities
- Skills and Training
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

**Methods:** Ethnographic research including participatory action and interviews with mutual aid groups and activists across the UK

**Geographical area:** England [Specifically: Burnley, Brighton and Lewes, Enfield, Guildford, Kirklees, Newcastle]

## Summary of the research

Our research sought to understand how mutual aid was enacted during the pandemic, including how mutual aid groups emerged, who organised them, and whether these individuals had links to existing organisations (e.g. faith groups, schools, voluntary groups, good neighbour groups); and what helped or hindered their enactment of mutual aid. We focussed on food provision and food (in)security due to the large number of groups offering food delivery (to isolating or shielding neighbours; children left without free school meals; overworked NHS staff with no time to shop or cook), newly emerging food banks, community fridges and community kitchens. The project team comprises academics from political geography, health studies and housing studies, one of whom (Cole) has a background in UK Government community resilience policy formation. The team engaged with mutual aid groups and activists across the UK to understand how they organised, who they helped and, crucially, why those people needed such help. This highlighted gaps in welfare provision and support that left some individuals and families in dire circumstances when the pandemic lockdown happened. Many of these vulnerabilities were, however, already present: the pandemic simply exacerbated them and made them more immediately visible.



## Policy recommendations

- Current welfare state provision is too low to prevent many people falling into food poverty and thus reliance on food banks. The introduction of a Universal Basic Income would help to alleviate this.
- Support to vulnerable community members is best provided by community-centric and community-embedded groups (e.g. churches, mosques, schools, community kitchens) who are better placed than impersonal council services to understand individual needs and provide a more holistic service to vulnerable community members whose circumstances they have time to fully understand.
- Communities contain many pro-active individuals who are willing to help their neighbours when they have the time and resources to do so. The introduction of a four-day working week as normal could help to create time for community members to organise local support for the more vulnerable.
- A reinvestment in community centres, including community social clubs and community kitchens, could create space for civil engagement and provide social space to support vulnerable individuals.
- Welfare provision reorganised on a more local level would help vulnerable members of a community to be easily identified, supported and included in a thriving, supportive and caring community.

## Key findings

- Lack of a living income for many families and individuals has left them unable to afford the basic necessities of life, most notably in our research, adequate food. Additionally, many families were living close to the edge pre-pandemic and even a short lockdown pushed them into poverty.
- There is, however, no shortage of food in the UK food system, much of which goes to waste. The problem is inequity of distribution, not availability. Food waste and poverty can be tackled together.
- New food banks, community kitchens and community delivery services have worked hard to redistribute this food during the pandemic and have been more agile than council services.
- This redistribution has been made easier where mutual aid actors have permanent premises to operate out of (e.g. churches, mosques, schools). Some groups have moved into temporary premises (e.g. empty high street shops; theatres and sports clubs closed during lockdown) but have faced barriers in securing long-term, affordable rents that would enable longer-term planning.
- Locally organised distribution ensures that people are treated as individuals, with culturally appropriate food needs and choices recognised and provided for with a more personalised service.
- People need more than just a food parcel. The ability to have nutritious cooked food, in a social environment such as a café or community kitchen, is just as important to their health and wellbeing.

## Further information

The Conversation: <https://theconversation.com/mutual-aid-can-community-fridges-bring-anarchist-politics-to-the-mainstream-174491>

Mould et al, 2022. 'Reclaiming the mutualism of mutual aid: Learning the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic to conceptualise the radicality of mutual aid' *Transactions* [In Press]

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14 March 2022