

Headlines for Housing Plus Academy Workshop Mutual Aid and Community Responses to COVID-19

Wednesday 20th January 2021

1. The growth in Mutual Aid Groups

The start of the coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdown in March meant the elderly and vulnerable had to self-isolate, schools closed, people were forced to work from home and 9.6 million people were furloughed. With this, there was a wave of community initiatives as people wanted to support others in the community who may be struggling. Mutual aid groups were set up by people wanting to support their local community and there are now an estimated 4300 groups across the UK. Mutual aid groups are generally informal and based on the idea of trust between the volunteers and the people being helped.

2. What the groups are doing

The groups are carrying out a wide variety of roles; food shopping, prescription pickups, telephone service for people who are lonely, dog walking and odd jobs. Some groups have teamed up with local food banks to collect food and deliver food parcels. Groups were also doing things to make the lockdowns more enjoyable, such as running socially distanced street music festivals and handmade gifts and cards for people's birthdays.

One group which had been given access to fairly large amounts of funding set up a holiday Forest School for local children to use in the holidays who would otherwise be stuck inside. They also provided grants for the local school to give to families who are struggling.

As well as more traditional mutual aid groups, people set up scrub hubs, teams of local people who sew scrubs for hospital staff and care workers.

On top of their day-to-day support, the groups were helping to tackle local problems and lobby for local issues. One group described how there was a lot of concern about people not wearing masks in their local supermarket. So, they teamed together and took the issue to the local council. The next week Sainsbury's released a statement about stricter enforcement on mask wearers. The group felt proud that they may have contributed to this shift in a small way.

3. The role of social media

Social media, mainly Facebook, played a big part in both recruiting volunteers and advertising the group's services to people who may need help. However, the groups pointed out that this had to be accompanied by physical leaflet drops as not everyone used social media. It also reassured people about the local nature of the groups.

4. Reaching people who need help

Unlike more formal services, the groups did not have any strict criteria for who they helped, they just helped anyone who needed it. The groups reached people in a variety of ways. People self-referred using the group's phone numbers and email provided online and on the leaflets. People also rang up and referred other people they knew needed support. Some groups reported people being embarrassed and unwilling to ask for help; they found turning up with food was a much better way

to help them as opposed to asking them what they needed. Groups reached many by using their volunteer capacity to help local food banks and other local organisations.

Groups also received referrals from local councils and social services. Group reported that they had seen a big increase in social service referrals since Christmas and they increasingly felt unqualified to deal with these problems directly.

5. Filling in for social services

The groups reported dealing with increasingly complex issues such as housing, mental health issues and long-term food provision. They feel as if they are becoming “unqualified caseworkers”. Groups were also receiving more referrals from statutory services, as services are increasingly stretched due to cuts in funding and an increase in people facing problems, who are having to rely on the groups for support. Groups need to be given support in how to identify people who may be struggling, where to refer them to for support and receive support themselves while dealing with complex issues.

There was a concern that if we become too reliant on the groups to provide services traditionally provided by statutory services, they will get used to not having to provide them. This may prove problematic when there is not a formalised structure. There is also a concern that the groups may not be sustainable in the long run.

6. Support of the Local Authority

Local Authorities have been very supportive and helpful to groups in some areas; however, some groups found the local authority had interfered and it had been very unhelpful. It is important for groups to feel supported by the local authority, without interfering and forcing the groups into a certain “official” mould.

Mutual aid groups can be very useful to local authorities as they have a better awareness of local issues. It was also pointed out that as local authorities face bigger cuts to funding the groups can help them ensure everyone who needs support is receiving it.

7. Benefits to the volunteers

The groups not only brought huge benefits to the communities they were working; they also benefitted the volunteers taking part. The involvement helped give people a sense of purpose at a time where many people felt lost. It also brought volunteers closer to their community and helped them build bonds with people they might otherwise not have known. One attendee commented that volunteering can teach people skills that can help them get a job later on.

Some groups commented that they had more volunteers signed up to help than was needed. However, some groups said they had seen a decline in people able to help as many people, who were furloughed in the first lockdown have now returned to work. They were also seeing some people become fatigued as the lockdowns have continued and lost some of the initial enthusiasm to help that people had at the start.

8. Which areas have mutual aid groups?

Some suggested that in some areas of the country the mutual aid groups were concentrated in the more affluent areas. However, others felt this was not the case in the areas where they worked and mutual aid groups existed in all areas. One participant argued that neighbours helping neighbours

has always happened in working-class communities but since the pandemic, the idea has gained popularity and been rebranded as “mutual-aid”.

9. Becoming more formalised

To help secure more stable sources of funding, put safeguarding policies in place to protect volunteers and the people being helped and work alongside bigger organisations the groups may need to formalise their operations. However, there is a concern that doing this will take away from the core value of “mutuality” and may put people off. Some groups reported that they were starting to carry out formal DBS checks and that this sometimes “rubbed volunteers up the wrong way” after helping for so long without the checks in place. Groups need to be supported to make these changes in a way that does not take away from the core ethos of the groups and there needs to be an acceptance that mutual aid groups work differently from more formal organisations.

10. Social landlords

Social Landlords are in a good position to provide expertise, resources, training, and support to mutual aid groups as they have a good knowledge of the communities where they work. One landlord had set up an umbrella organisation that the community groups could work underneath without having to formalise and have their own policies in place.

Some social landlords were working closely with the mutual aid groups to provide support for the community, one organisation used the local group to help their tenancy sustainment teams work with tenants.

11. Plans for the future

Most groups wanted to carry on working as a group helping local people; they and were thinking about what this would look like moving forward. Some groups were taking steps to formalise their organisation and become constituted, some groups were thinking about new areas of mutual aid. One group was setting up a solidarity fund, which local people would regularly pay into and be able to take money out of when they needed to. Some groups were using their collective power to tackle local political issues. One group was setting up a local forum where local groups would work together to tackle community problems. However, not all groups were going to continue running as an organised group, but they connected with others in the community which would continue.

12. The need for training

The groups need training to help them continue their work, this can help with the management of the groups and how to handle money. As groups are increasingly dealing with more challenging situations, they also need training on how to recognise issues and problems and where to signpost people for support. Volunteers are often the only people that those being helped see on a regular basis, and volunteers may be able to pick up signs and clues when extra support is needed. Larger, more established charities and organisations could help by providing training for free, to reduce any barriers for mutual aid groups.

Training can also help volunteers feel invested in and supported and give them the motivation to continue in their volunteer role. Proper training will help volunteers to identify problems and run successfully as a group. This training must not take away from the informal ethos the groups were founded on.

13. Concluding thoughts

Mutual aid groups have had a major impact in the communities where they have been working, they have a good knowledge of local need and can respond quickly to problems. Groups must be supported in the right way so they can continue their work.