

Mutual Aid Groups & COVID-19 Newsletter

Issue 1, May 2021

As part of the project 'Facilitating the public response to COVID-19 by harnessing group processes', funded by the ESRC (Ref ES/V005383/1), we have been researching mutual aid and community support groups in the UK.

This research involves interviews with coordinators/organisers of mutual aid groups and a longitudinal survey with participants in these groups.



We interviewed 32 coordinators and/or organisers of COVID-19 mutual aid and community support groups in different areas of the UK:

- Interviews were conducted between September 2020 and January 2021.
- 24 Groups were from England, 4 from Wales, 3 from Scotland, and 1 from Northern Ireland.
- Participants were aged between 21 and 75 years.
- 17 participants were female and 15 male.

Based on the interviews as well as on a review of past studies on community solidarity after disasters, collective action and social movements, we identified several factors and strategies that work in sustaining participation over time.

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Tips for mutual aid groups



Clarify group's goals

People may arrive to the group with different expectations of the group's goals, approach and purpose. It is important that the goals and actions of the group are understood as consistent, achievable, successful and relevant.

I'm more involved in [group's name] because that was where I could be more involved in helping to set up and that was what interested me because I knew that there was more that I could get my teeth into and work with and I enjoyed working with the people that I was working with and we all seemed to have a similar goal, so that's what I did.

(Theresa, Greater London, England)



Enhance sense of belonging

Feeling part of the group is important for motivating participation over time. Groups should promote practices that facilitate feeling part of the group, such as regular meetings. This should however be promoted in a way that is non-exclusionary to other people and communities.

I think just letting people know how important it was and making people feel that they were part of something that was really useful, really productive, actually saving lives and really helping people out.

(Oscar, South East England)



Promote socialising and celebrating moments

Some groups have been able to create social and/or celebratory events during the pandemic, mostly online but also outdoor activities. See for example, [the Harnham Harvest Table](#). This type of event has been considered important for facilitating community engagement and simultaneously to keep the morale of the group high.

And it became a big social event and it ran for ten weeks. (...) And it wasn't just about people getting fresh fruit and vegetables, it became a really good social event. And people bring the kids along and the kids, "oh we like this", and it became an event which glued the community together.

(Arthur, South West England)



Engage with the community

Informing the community about the group's activities is crucial for facilitating community engagement. Make sure that the local community knows how to join the group, participate in its activities and where to ask for help.

Well just keeping them in the knowledge of what's going on in the group, we're doing stuff on Saturday, we post it on Facebook we let a few people know in the community. We put newsletters out with the local councils and stuff. Just keeping people involved and knowing what's going on in the local area was key through the whole thing, and just keeping them up to date with we're here, we're here to help if you need us just let us know, and not being pushing about it as well.

(Joshua, North East England)



Encourage care and support

Care strategies are important to avoid burnout in activist and group settings, and they should be considered at an organisational level.

I think support, support and teamwork [explains] a lot of it. I think doing this kind of thing, and especially doing it now and working from home, now you're back in and stuff like that, you need a good team around you and you need that support and that motivation and that encouragement and that communication as well. So, I think, because we've had that, it supported us, it supported the volunteers and gave them reassurance as well.

(Emma, North West England)



Ask people to contribute

It can be tough to ask for help. People may feel anxious, ashamed and uncomfortable. It is easier to accept help when people feel that they are also contributing with something. This will also increase the spirit of solidarity and mutual support.

Well I've learned that you don't always have to take things at face value. When someone says they don't need help, it doesn't always mean they don't need help. It means you have to ask them in a different way. (...) So, we, we figured a way then, around that, so we've said, "could you help us then?" (...) It gave them something to do as a diversion, that they were doing something else. But at the same time, they were in the belief that they were helping someone else, but basically, we were helping them to have something to do, to stimulate them.

(Annabelle, Northern Ireland)



Promote collaborative relationships

Building alliances and collaborative relationships with other people, groups and organisations is key for ensuring an effective community response in which everyone receives the help they need. This facilitates access to resources and a more effective provision of help.

Even now our website's going to become a hub for those two groups in the local area. So, I think we've got, that's happening later on next week even. So, people can see what all of us are doing together, rather than thinking we're working against each other, we're all working together in this area.

(Joshua, North East England)



Be flexible in terms of roles and procedures

While coordination and leadership roles are considered important for keeping the group going, informal and flexible leadership roles are particularly valued. Groups should facilitate an organisation structure that is not too hierarchical and rigid in its roles and procedures.

As I say a lot of them are retired, they don't want to be within anything too formal, too structured, you know, if we turned around and said, "right, we're now a formal organisation you will attend training every month". I suspect a lot of people would disappear.

(Bob, South East England)

Interested in knowing more about our findings?

Check out [our outputs](#).

Useful resources

Activists, academics, and social movements have been active in producing knowledge that can help sustain solidarity over time. We have been compiling a list of articles, books and online tools.

[Have a look at our webpage](#) for these materials.

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Public adherence
Community support and mutual aid
Stories of community solidarity
Lessons from activists
Mutual aid toolbox
Other resources
Advisory group
Civil contingency response
News and events
People, outputs, and impact

Lessons from activists

Activists, academics, and social movements have been active in producing knowledge that can help sustain solidarity over time.

What can we learn from them?

Online Resources

A Guide for Effective Activism Produced by Long-term Activists	+
Toolkits & Guides by CIVICUS	+
Ulex Project	+
Community Tool Box	+

Stories of community solidarity

Examples of successful COVID-19 mutual aid and community support groups.

We are collecting experiences from groups and communities across the UK. Would you like to share yours? Please contact us at m.fernandes-jesus@sussex.ac.uk

Harnham Harvest Table	+
Wixams and Wilestead Community Shopping Club	+
NR2 Covid Community Response	+
Barlow Moor Community Association	+
Overton Community Emergency Plan	+

Next steps

From May to July 2021, we will be conducting a survey of people participating in COVID-19 mutual aid and community support groups.

This study will involve a two-wave questionnaire aiming at examining the psychological, organizational, practical factors that explain how to sustain involvement in community support and mutual aid groups over time.

Results of this study will be shared in our second newsletter on October 2021.



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Website: <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/research/projects/groups-and-covid/>

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