Manifesto for Mutual Aid

Drawing on research and lived engagement, this document aims to narrate, celebrate and elevate the mutual aid practices that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also identifies recommendations for policy, grounded in the lives and experiences of those on the front line.

May 2022

All photos taken by the research team unless otherwise stated.

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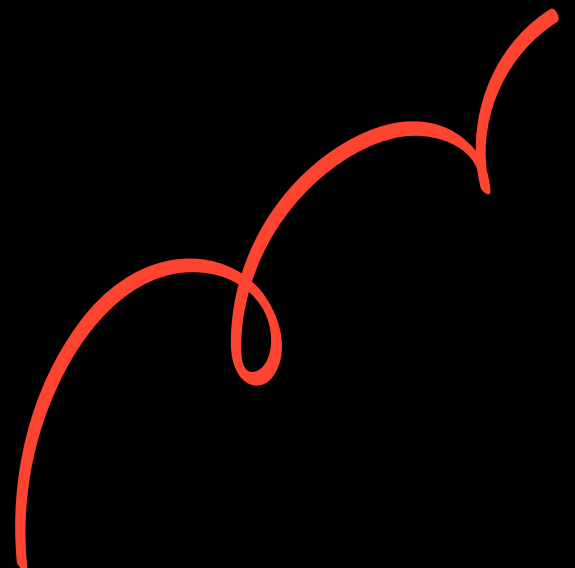
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1.0 Introduction

'Mutual aid' is a phrase that as a volunteer, organiser, public servant or indeed as a recipient of aid, you may have heard a great deal during and since the COVID-19 pandemic, but are you fully aware of what it refers to?

You may have heard it used by people in your community, neighbours, your local politicians, schoolteachers, on the news and even in national governmental reports. In most of these cases, the likelihood is you've heard it used to describe a group of people, usually volunteers and friendly neighbours, who are coming together to help out those who have struggled in various ways during the pandemic.

Maybe these volunteers delivered food parcels to people who couldn't afford to eat because they couldn't work; maybe they phoned up lonely people who had to isolate; perhaps they reconditioned spare laptops to give to children to home learn from; or they could have been busy making masks for people out of old pillow cases.

These groups of volunteers may have already been together before as a faith group (e.g. a mosque or church), attached to a school, volunteers with official charities, NGOs (such as Oxfam or the Red Cross), a neighbourhood watch scheme, local council or even a sports club. They may have already had a place where they operated out from; with large freezers and fridges to store food, health and safety officers and food hygiene certifications, and DBS checks. Or they may simply have been a group of people who didn't know each other before the pandemic coordinating deliveries from their own homes over WhatsApp.

All of these (and more) have recently come under the banner of 'mutual aid'. They have demonstrated that during a time of crisis, ordinary people come together to help each other in extraordinary ways. But what they have also highlighted painfully is that there are too many people out there in desperate need of help. The pandemic has made visible their struggles with meeting their basic daily needs and in many cases exacerbated the challenges they already faced. Those needs were there long before the pandemic, following a decade of austerity that has decimated local government funds, closed community centres and hollowed out social support.

There are too many people who require more help and support than is being given by 'official' means – hence why the community has needed to step up to fill the gaps.

The work done by the countless volunteers and community groups has been wonderful. It has saved lives and should be celebrated. As COVID-19 subsides and new crises are likely to present themselves (for example climate change-induced extreme weather events, strikes, resource shortages, future pandemics and unknown social challenges brought about by the increased cost of living), there will be more times when community support needs to 'step up' and perhaps it will need to become a permanent feature. We believe that this **shouldn't** have to be the case.

To reiterate the metaphor so eloquently articulated by the late great Bishop Desmond Tutu, these groups have been pulling people out of the river, time and time again. Mutual aid can be more than simply pulling people out of the river. It shouldn't be a crutch for society. It shouldn't let institutions, whose job it is to look after these people, off the hook. Practising mutual aid requires us to also go upstream and see who is pushing people in the river and, crucially, force them to stop.

As this manifesto will detail, mutual aid is an important concept – ideologically and practically – for helping people in need and, at the same time, for questioning why that need is there in the first place.

Newcastle Food & Solidarity delivery prep
19th February, 2022

1.1 So what does this Manifesto aim to do?

This manifesto makes the case for the wider changes needed to foster mutual aid as part of a longer process of community care and organisation. The resurgence of mutual aid should not be seen as an excuse for structures of power to overlook their responsibility to their citizens, nor is it a call to have more 'charitable' institutions inserted into the landscape of social supply. This manifesto celebrates mutual aid on its own terms and shows how the landscapes of provision can mould around it to give it more potency to change the world. It is a call to arms and alms for people to not only help each other, but to use the energy of the last two years to help change the social politics of community care, support and organisation across the entire UK.

With that in mind, the manifesto discusses six 'priorities' for the social, political and economic landscape of communities and how these can instigate change that will foster the spread of mutual aid practices and ideologies beyond individuals and communities (who are liable to burn out and become exhausted if they are not supported). These practices and ideologies need to be embedded into walks of life that can sustain them, learn from them and lead to better provision across society. These priorities emanate from our extensive research on, and experience of, activism and community action in the face of major emergencies and disasters. Our research focused mainly on the provision of food, highlighting the links food has to other critical concerns such as mental health support, children's education, internet access and so on.

The notion of 'resilience from below' (as a direct critical opposition to more institutional forms of 'resilience from above') is an important cornerstone in the development of our priorities, and while not completely aligned with mutual aid, offered ways to ground the framing of the six priorities.

Specifically, geographers Kate Driscoll Derrickson and Danny Mackinnon suggested that 'resilience from below' comprises four practices.[2] The four are:

- Organising capacity (inc. available time, social capital, and external investments)
- Skill sets and technical knowledge
- Indigenous or folk knowledge (the 'lived experience')
- Recognition (confers group status on the community in question on the basis of common attributes and a shared understanding)

Using these four as a base, we have expanded, analysed and critically applied them to suggest six 'priorities' for mutual aid in the UK:

TRUST

EMBEDEDNESS

PLANNING

SPACE

SKILLS

BUREAUCRACY

Each priority has emanated from our research and speaks to practical ways in which mutual aid has flourished but also to the barriers and obstacles it has faced.

This manifesto is certainly not designed to be a 'how to' guide for the practicalities of mutual aid as there are plenty of these already.[3] Instead, it is designed as a plea to communities – and the institutions that are created and elected to serve them – to understand the 'how' **AND** the 'why' of mutual aid.

This is done with the aim of showing that in the future, mutual aid can act as a benefit to people by (to echo the late great Desmond Tutu in the quote that opens this manifesto) not only pulling them out of the river but also by stopping them from getting pushed in.
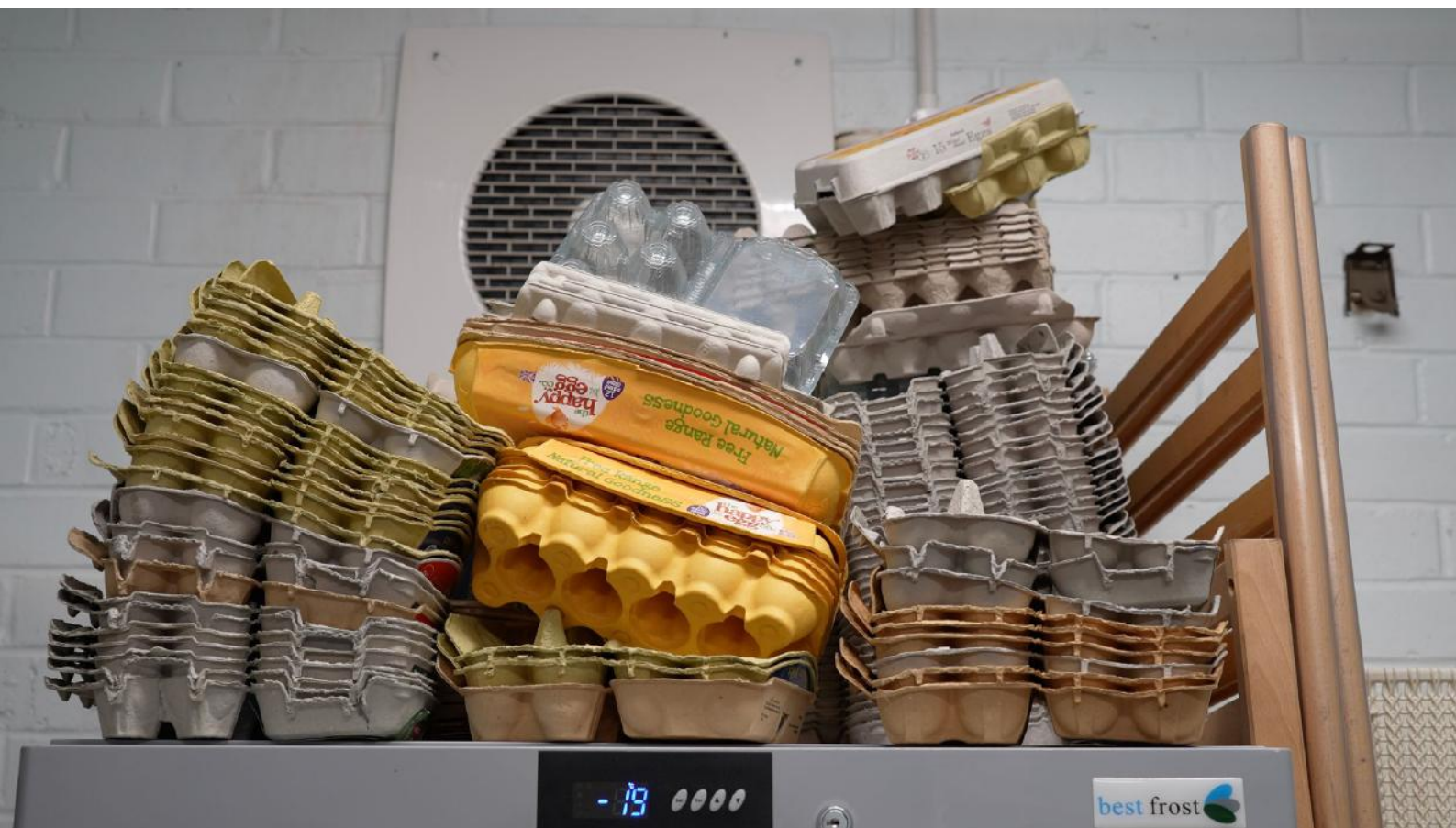
Slaithwaite, food hub at the Fire & Rescue Service, 21st November, 2021

Newcastle

Pendle

Burnley

Kirklees

Barnsley

Enfield

Guildford

Lambeth

Brighton & Lewes

There are nine case study locations in our research, shown in the map above. See section 5.0 (page 36) for further details about the research methodology and how these case studies were selected.

2.0 What is Mutual Aid?

"The species in which peace and mutual support are the rule prosper, while the unsociable species decay."[4]

Peter Kropotkin: Mutual Aid, a Factor of Evolution (1902)
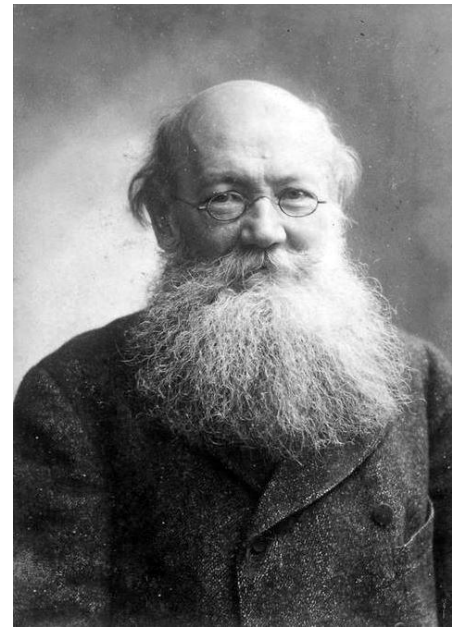
'Mutual aid' was first popularised by Russian evolutionary biologist-cum-anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin in his 1902 essay collection 'Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution'. In this work (which is free to read online), Kropotkin argues that cooperation and reciprocity – or mutual aid – is a fundamental organising principle of human society, rather than competition. Researching examples from the animal kingdom, pre-capitalist societies in Europe and indigenous communities from around the world, Kropotkin was adamant that the 'survival of the fittest' paradigm was not the only 'perpetuation of life'. Mutual aid and the cooperation between species was just as, if not more, important for evolutionary paradigms.

Mutual aid is therefore about people organising among themselves to provide for need without the help of a 'higher' power (be that a charity, government or company); it is one of the most radically democratic forms of organising there is. Indeed, it actively works to shun institutional and state structures in favour of horizontal networks that operate locally but expand beyond that, potentially globally.

Fast forward 120 years (through some extremely turbulent and politically contested years) and the COVID-19 pandemic has shown mutual aid to be just as powerful an organisational mode of society (at the level of the local community) as Kropotkin said.

Indeed, as the author Rebecca Solnit wrote back in 2009, what happens in response to a disaster is often the 'triumph'[5] of collective civil action in the wake of real and perceived failures of institutional authority. The 'collective action' of communities has been no more evident than in the rapid appearance of mutual aid groups during the most acute times of the pandemic. In May 2020, shortly after the first UK national lockdown, 64% of UK adults felt that other local community members would help them if they needed it, and 55% had checked in with their neighbours.[6]
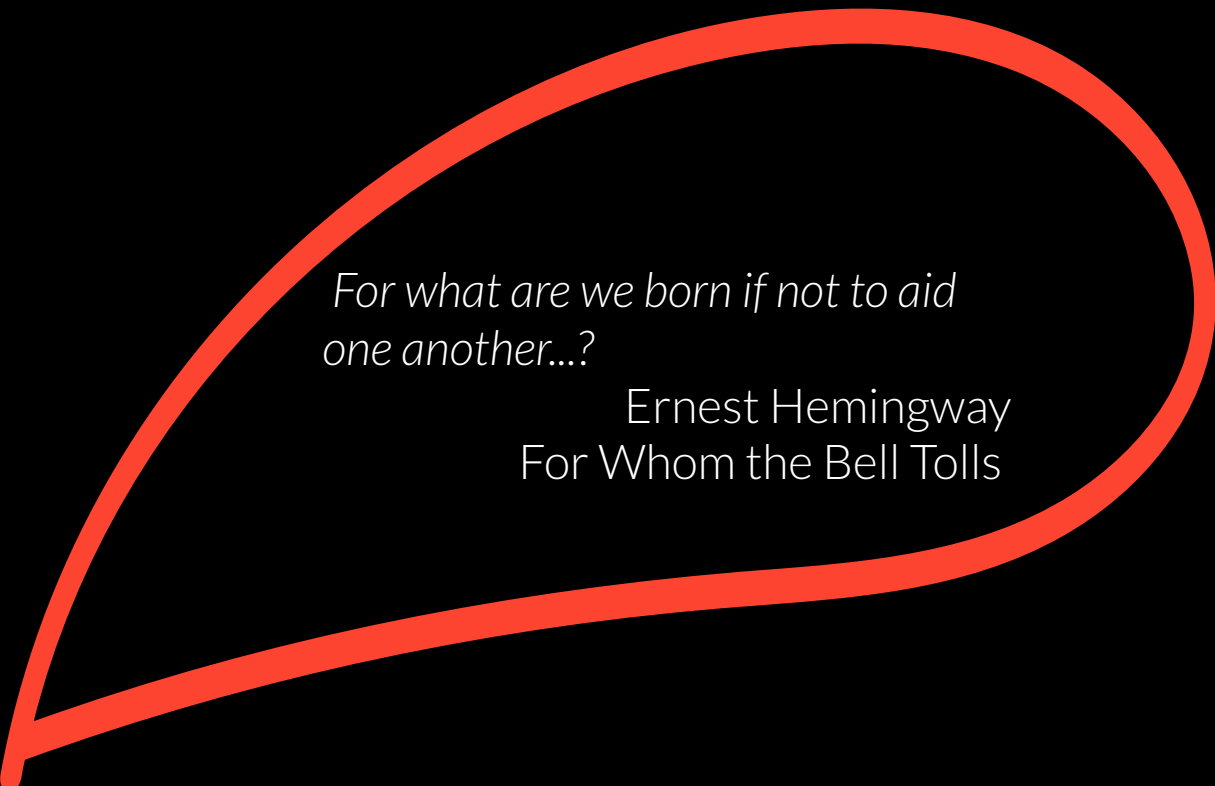
There is no doubt, then, that mutual aid in communities was vital in helping people cope and arguably saved many lives. It is the contention of this manifesto that it will continue to do so in the future. The trans activist and mutual aid organiser Dean Spade argued at the very beginning of the pandemic: that "mutual aid strategies will be the most effective way to support vulnerable populations to survive, mobilize significant resistance, and build the infrastructure we need for the coming disasters."[7]

Newcastle World
Cafe leaflets
19th February, 2022

The mutual aid groups across the country expanded to help people in their hour of need but so too did the way this term was defined. As the pandemic progressed, more of these community-led mutual aid networks developed into, along with, despite of and in opposition to more institutional forms of charitable giving or governmental programmes of welfare. The term 'mutual aid' therefore has been loosely placed along a spectrum of different forms of organising; some of these align with Kropotkin's original principles but others very much do not. For instance in the United Kingdom, the Conservative MP Danny Kruger penned a government report in 2020 that focused on 'Levelling Up' communities, entitled 'The New Social Covenant'.[8] In it, the term 'mutual aid' appears ten times, but in the context of volunteers, charities and those who gave up their time to help those in need. Nowhere in it does the distinctly radical tendency of mutual aid, and its distinct rejection of deeply structural notions of charity, appear. Whilst this is to be expected in a report written by a Conservative politician, it does evidence a creeping appropriation of the term 'mutual aid' to account for activities that are not actually mutual at all.

This manifesto aims to push against the creeping appropriation of the term mutual aid in order to celebrate, advocate and designate mutual aid practices now and in the future.

For what are we born if not to aid one another...?

Ernest Hemingway
For Whom the Bell Tolls

3.0 The Six Priorities

3.1 <u>Trust</u> between the volunteers and the community creates authenticity

One of the fundamental virtues that is needed is trust: both between people and between people and institutions. Trust is often elusive, tacit and transient but that just means it's all the more important to have. Fostering a trusting relationship between the provider and the receiver of aid means that the two roles are likely to be interchangeable in the future.

So, whilst trust was built between individuals via action taken throughout the pandemic, building trust between people in communities is something that can – indeed must – be done 'outside' of times of crisis to help people understand that aid can come from many different places and people. This fosters community cohesion and gets people talking to their neighbours, which means they understand one another better, can anticipate when others may need help and decide how that help can be best delivered.

For the successful delivery of mutual aid, trusting relationships are essential. At times, as difficult as this may be for those who have experienced oppression at the hands of the state, this may also require long-term trusting relationships to be established between mutual aid groups and public authorities. After all, it is the responsibility of public authorities to create safe spaces for marginalised and oppressed groups to interact with them.

CASE STUDY: CHURCHES IN BURNLEY

Churches and other faith-based organisations are often key anchor institutions. When tough times hit, such as a global pandemic, they are often where people turn whether they are part of the immediate faith community or not.

In Burnley, the pastors of two churches – Father Alex of St. Matthew's and Pastor Mick of Church on the Street – gained viral fame when they were featured in a BBC News website video (a still from which is shown below). The short video became a lightning rod, opening people's eyes to how the most vulnerable people in the UK were unable to cope without the help of local institutions, in this case, churches. As Father Alex told us:

"[The church] is part of the fabric of the community... for people around here, if we went for a walk, just through one of the estates, a lot of people would know me...they would probably say 'I were baptised at your church, were married there, or my dad were buried', you know, everybody knows it... In many circumstances, I think people feel let down by social services, or institutions or the National Health for whatever it is, and here, they feel – if nothing else – a place of security and safety, where we try not to judge them and we try to help them."

Still of Father Alex, from BBC News piece 'Children ripping bags open for food'
1 Dec 2020, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-55133081

Likewise, Pastor Mick told us: *"we don't use food parcels just to feed people, we use them to find out what's the real need. Because the whole ethos of what we're doing is about asking 'what's the real problem? Why do you need this food parcel every week?' Is it a mental health issue? Is it a drug issue? Is it a poverty issue? Are you on the right benefits? Is it a housing issue? "*

CASE STUDY: KIRKLEES MUTUAL AID NETWORKS

In Kirklees, Yorkshire, doorstep discussions were crucial in building trust between mutual aid groups and recipients of food parcels. Furthermore, they provided a window into people's needs beyond food. As one organiser said: *"We found that we needed to allow twenty minutes, half an hour for a food parcel delivery because people wanted to talk and make connections. As they started to talk to us and make connections, we would find out more about what they needed and would be able to signpost them toward what they needed".*

However, in this organiser's experience of building trust with the local authority, this presented a direct challenge: *"When you try to access this through Council officers – and I'm going to be rude – you just get gobbledygook. You get people who speak gobbledygook, just councilese… our direct experience of the council was, quite frankly, awful."* But this was, no doubt, because of the council's own specific challenges, as one local council officer reflected: *"There probably was, particularly in the early days, some work that had to be done around building good relationships between these voluntary groups and the members of staff within Kirklees [council] who were dealing with the cases that came in but that's because trust takes time to be built."*

One mutual aid group in Kirklees described their reaction to the meetings they were asked to attend with council staff: *"I also had moments where I really felt like we were doing the job that local council should have been doing… then there've been moments where they expect you to go to a two hour Zoom. That's two hours of my life I'm not going to get back, for the council's paid workers that were doing their best remotely from their lounges... It felt like they were wanting us to do the leg work and it kind of got a bit frustrating towards the end."* Another volunteer explained: *"the council made a decision to trust our communities and that was very well received. I think it acted like a bit of an olive branch to the community groups to [recognise that] the council does want to work with us. They clearly value us, value our views, our opinions. They are going to listen to us and they are going to work with us."*

Building and nurturing trust within and between neighbourhoods enables groups to respond to crises more quickly. When one person feels an injustice is occurring, the community is more likely to rally behind them and help them in their cause.

3.2 Embeddedness creates understanding

Responding swiftly to local need requires a level of community awareness and local geographic knowledge that needs to have been built up over time, before the crisis hit.

A well-informed community can mobilise with agility and responsiveness and can force external agencies to take a step back in order to work on acquiring that knowledge.

Christmas hamper packing at St Anne's Catholic High School for Girls 17th December, 2021

Embedded organisations and individuals within them, such as schools, care centres, local charities or faith groups, are deeply rooted within their community and provide a vector through which mutual aid groups can form: the institution acts as a rallying point for vulnerable people needing support and those able to support them. Furthermore, embeddedness within local communities creates understanding of what is best in context for that community (or members of it).

Charter House is a day centre in Burnley for adults with special needs or disabilities, the elderly and people living with dementia. Their clientele were particularly vulnerable to the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, as Director Mark Kelly told us: *"90% of the people we support were clinically vulnerable and so had to isolate and stay indoors. As a service, we knew we had to do something about it, so we had a directors' meeting and were like 'right'... A lot of people that come to us, come to us and have a lunch here. So if they don't have that care support on the days that they're here, will they have it now at home? If it's families that are doing it, is that stress and strain on them? And then Jason, our manager said, 'how about we just do a meal delivery?' I think that was the end of March and the first week in April, we started our project."*

Because the institution was already operating with staff that knew the community and clients well, in addition to specifically knowing how their complex needs would be impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Charter House was able to move quickly and effectively to ensure that vulnerable people were fed and cared for. The scheme was not limited to Charter House clients but was rolled out across Burnley and Padiham. Charter House also worked with other institutions, taking referrals from local GP services of patients the GPs considered to be vulnerable and with local schools to identify families and children in need. Over the first 18 months of the pandemic, Charter House provided in excess of 36,000 meals to vulnerable people in Burnley. Their role within a broader network of institutions – organised through the Burnley Together initiative – meant they were ideally placed to support people directly, or to refer them on to a group that could if they were unable to. As Mark told us: *"Anyone that comes to us, if we can't support them, we know someone in Burnley who can. People might come and ask us and if we can't help them because we've not got a project going on, we can give them the contact number of Burnley Together and the actual project they need to access. So because we've got the information there, and we're always working together, we know what [Burnley Together is] doing and they know what we're doing. It's a really good partnership."*

Deploying local knowledge quickly and efficiently is key to helping those in need. This knowledge needs to be developed over time.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

A food parcel delivery service, run by Exodus Youth Worx UK, operated out of St Anne's Catholic High School for Girls in Enfield, North London, primarily to support children usually dependent on free school meals. During lockdown, the service was able to ensure that Asian and Black Caribbean families were provided with culturally appropriate food that was tailored to their tastes, cooking facilities and desires, rather than all families simply being provided with homogenous packages that may have been less well received or utilised. Tara Hanna, who initiated the food parcel programme, explained: *"Tinned food was unfamiliar to many of the families, they didn't know how to cook it or how to use it. Many didn't have a can opener, or much space to store it. So we started adding recipe cards [into the bags] and small pots of spices to encourage new menu ideas. We also added fresh food from the local supermarket, fruit, vegetables and rice, and snacks for the children – biscuits and juice. At Easter, we made sure there was an Easter egg for every child in the family, not just the daughter(s) who attended St Anne's."*

Where this doesn't happen, it can be disastrous. For example Sobia Malik, who set up a mutual aid group around Burnley during the first lockdown, subsequently found that the government's food voucher scheme was failing. Those who had been let down by the system had no one they could turn to. She told us that: *"[The lack of vouchers] became clear because families had simply gone a month without the vouchers for their children. And I relayed that to the county council and no doubt other councillors had heard similar stories but for families to go without food for their children for a month and not know who to ask, I still, now, and I think back on it, it takes my breath away. It was frightening for them."* The lack of connection between the county council and the community was stark and it took a community leader to make this disconnect visible.

Regular contact between the providers of aid and those receiving it can provide a real panacea for this disconnect. In Guildford, Stoke Community Support (SCS) – two churches that got together to provide food parcels for those in the town who were most vulnerable – found that the consistent contact by the same individuals provided more than just the food. As their lead organiser Peter Curran said: *"There was a bit of a light-touch pastoral support as well in a sense that people are knocking on the door and during lockdown, for some families, that was really important because they were isolated; we had elderly people who weren't seeing anybody else and someone coming round with a friendly face dropping some meals off made a real difference to them. Because we've seen a lot of these families over two years now, we've got to know quite a lot of them."*

3.3 Planning community action

It was no good relying on existing infrastructures of emergency response during the pandemic. Geared towards sudden events such as floods or terrorist attacks, they lacked nuance and the ability to be reflexive to local sensitivities. Nor are they geared up to provide the long-term support required during lockdown and beyond. Instead, institutional (be they government or charity) planners need to listen to the grassroots, to those involved in mutual aid on a day-to-day basis. An institution's embeddedness at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic meant it could respond appropriately in a moment of crisis. When it comes to making mutual aid sustainable, plans of community action need to be developed in order to transition from pandemic response to everyday mutual aid for improvements to be meaningful in the long term.

Stoke Community Support, Guildford, 17th February, 2022

CASE STUDY: EXODUS YOUTH WORX UK, ENFIELD

Before the pandemic, Tara Hanna planned to set up a youth hub in Enfield, North London, under the banner of Exodus Youth Worx UK. When the pandemic hit and this became impossible, she swiftly reoriented to providing food parcels to families whose children were left without free lunches as a result of school closures. The plan to offer support to disadvantaged children from the local St Anne's Catholic High School for Girls provided a starting point and springboard for the more acute support needed by these children and their families throughout lockdown. This enabled Tara to draw on her existing contacts with the school's Head Teacher and the Board of Governors, and to reach into the local school and faith networks. Exodus was thus able to expand out to help a wider portion of the local community – across the borough and beyond – than had been planned originally. Tara did this by extending and evolving the initial plan but not fundamentally changing it.

Exodus Youth Worx UK
Christmas Hampers
December 17th, 2022

Her long-term plan is now to provide a *"much needed walk-in facility where young people can access vital services including a safe space to study, a listening ear and signposting, mental health counselling, educational/vocational advice, mentoring and coaching, and social activities"*. This plan finally came to fruition in April 2022 with evening sessions at the Croyland Youth Centre in London N9, offering arts and crafts, cooking, games, life skills and more to vulnerable youngsters. The plan has been expanded greatly as a result of the pandemic but this has been possible because there was a plan in place to begin with – a plan whose success has been dependent on Tara having the time and space to carry it through, while drawing on embedded community assets such as the school and its buildings in the early stages of the plan and the Croyland Community Centre later on.

CASE STUDY: NEWCASTLE FOOD & SOLIDARITY

At Newcastle Food & Solidarity, restrictions upon their food distribution activities during a second lockdown, and uncertainty over operating space and income, presented distinct challenges to the group's ability to evolve their mutual aid project from a COVID-19 response into a long-standing community-based mutual aid group that may be replicable in other localities: *"We've been inspected for food standards recently by the council and that has been good because we feel like we can't just be shut down arbitrarily now. What we want is to be able to create something that's sustainable – if not replicable exactly – that can grow and go to other places. We've been running for a year and a half on donations, which has been fantastic, but it would be easier to manage, more sustainable and less likely to fall apart at any second if we knew what we were doing week on week. At the moment we're having to limit the number of parcels, so people don't know if they're going to get a parcel on Saturday until the Friday, which isn't ideal. Ideally we would have a system where we can support people so they were able to plan for it. The only real way of doing that is having a membership model and so that's what we've decided to do."* By becoming more sustainable and being able to plan operations through a transition to a membership model, recipients of Newcastle Food & Solidarity's parcels will also be empowered to plan ahead with reliable knowledge of the food they will receive. In this respect, planning properly allows people to budget. Ibrahim of the Newcastle Central Mosque (which operates in the same inner-city area of Newcastle as the Food & Solidarity Network) said: *"During the pandemic, people applied for the food, so they come and get it and we keep their email and details. So every time, every month, we send them an email saying 'on this date, on this day, on this time your food parcel will be ready'."* As the pandemic subsides, the cost-of-living crisis will continue to make it difficult for people to prioritise spending limited income on food over other essentials such as rent and energy bills. Because of this, Ibrahim makes sure that the neighbours he serves know when they can pick up their parcel. Knowing that there is going to be free food for even one week of the month can make a huge difference to people's budgeting. Planning can reduce stress and anxiety as well the financial burden.

Plans can be practical: about who does what, what resources are needed or planning how long a food delivery process might take (e.g. a day, a week or a month). But having a plan – codified or not – about how things will happen is critical.

3.4 Having a space to operate from

Having a place to operate from is critical. Throughout the pandemic, it was clear that having a secure space to store the overwhelming amount of donated food – with refrigeration if possible – was fundamental to operating beyond the short term. Beyond that, simply having somewhere to go provides a familiar space for vulnerable people to come for support; it can be a place of refuge, restoration and healing as well as a base of operations. Providing for the vulnerable was not just about food parcels: a community café, even a makeshift one in a church hall or an empty high street unit, could provide hot food as well as companionship and shelter. This could be just as important to people's mental health as to their nutritional status.

Cook to Care, Lambeth, South London, 18th November, 2021

For Jojo, founder of South London-based Cook to Care (a kitchen providing meals for the vulnerable and training opportunities for prison leavers and gang-affiliated youth) affordable and accessible kitchen space was an ongoing issue: *"I started in my own kitchen and quickly needed somewhere bigger as it grew, so I've gone through a few places now. We're finally in a good spot that seem to like us being here but I'm always worried about what happens if they tell us to move out."*

Finding somewhere the landlords 'seem to like' the groups is critical. Too often landlords will be distant and not engaged. For Newcastle Food & Solidarity, space again was really important. One of the organisers told us: *"So we started putting [the food] out in public phone boxes every day… a year and a half ago we were in our front room, then we've been in several other locations since, we've been to the university for a bit, at Dance City, at a café and we've basically just moved around wherever we can do it."*

Pandemic closures meant that many spaces became available that were previously occupied, such as theatres, sports clubs and even car parks. This opened up critical spaces for mutual aid efforts to take place. But as restrictions have lifted, mutual aid groups have been pushed out as the regular occupants moved back in. The mutual aid groups have lost access to space and have had to find alternatives to remain viable. This presents an existential threat to the survival of these groups. Where groups have been able to make space, this has provided the basis for positive, affirmative action that has been crucial in providing community support.

Newcastle Food & Solidarity packing hub at Newcastle University, 7th August, 2021

Newcastle Food & Solidarity packing hub at World Cafe, 19th February, 2022

CASE STUDY: CURRY ON THE STREET, NELSON

A lack of suitable space was a significant barrier to growth and sustainability for Curry on the Street, a group that provides weekly hot meals to the homeless in Nelson, Lancashire. Despite this, the street itself can be a key space for action. As they told us: *"It's always the same place. We set stalls up, with chairs and tables like a café. We're there every Thursday at 6 o'clock. We have a really good group of people coming and it's changing their lives. People can sit and have their meal there, have a natter, tell us what's wrong. We can help with housing, different things, pinpointing which doctors to go to, the mental health side of things, we take homeless people to hotels to try and get them bed and breakfast through the council…"*

Curry on the Street, Nelson, 23rd April, 2022. Photos courtesy of James Foy

However, Curry on the Street founder James Foy says that to become sustainable and provide the support the community desperately needs: *"I need a building!"* Given the high rate of vacancy in commercial lets across the country, not being able to make use of such space is particularly frustrating for community groups who need space. Operating on high streets lined with boarded-up shops and vacant units is hugely frustrating. And for some of those that do have some access to space, existential threats are posed by short-term lets and uncertain futures that makes long-term planning difficult.

Having a space predicated on equality, dignity and care for all, is a vital part of creating positive outcomes for mutual aid members (recipients, volunteers and staff).

3.5 Having a range of skills really helps

Having the right blend of skills means that groups can respond more quickly. Packer, deliverer, organiser, administrator, communicator: one person cannot be all these things at once and so being able to come together and recognise the range of skills needed and on offer was essential for effective mutual aid. As an organiser in Newcastle said: *"those kind of skills, cooperative principles and cooperative skills, a lot of us don't actually have them and we all have to really learn, but it's kind of the only way, at least for me, the only way I'm seeing how things are going to get changed".*

Whilst mutual aid organisation on the one hand requires skillful people to undertake the work, on the other, mutual aid groups also provide fantastic experience and unofficial training for vulnerable people to develop important skills through community action and engagement. This was highlighted by Curry on the Street in Nelson, whose founder said: *"Our main vision is to have people in recovery who want to get back into the community and have them volunteering and get them to do the work as well, and it works. We have 15-20 volunteers, a lot of them are recovering alcoholics and drug addicts, and we haven't lost one volunteer yet, and they've all stayed clean... They've got the experience now to come back into the community and help people that are in the same position they were and they can say 'look at me, I can do it, you can do the same'."*

CASE STUDY: STOKE COMMUNITY SUPPORT, GUILDFORD

The production line at Guildford: freezers, packers, deliverers 11th March, 2021

In SCS in Guildford, space was available straight away in the form of St Peter's Church in Bellfields and generous crowdfunding was able to quickly secure freezers, delivery boxes, administrative tools (such as computers, stickers, printers etc.) as well as the food itself, some of which was bought but was also provided by local supermarkets and restaurants. As such, much of the effort was put into organising people and securing the skills needed. The directors deployed their skills to create an efficient 'production line' quickly, with communicators, packers and deliverers, as well as specific practices and instructions.

The process went something like this during most weeks at the height of lockdown: during the week, food was bought and stored in the freezers, the list of families and their dietary needs were updated by referrers, the correct packages were assembled on the day and were sorted via postcode. Deliverers would work for a few hours, doing about two or three 'drops', and then a sweep deliverer at the end of the day would drop off any undelivered packages. Without the organisational skills of a few key individuals, and the space and financial capital provided nearly instantaneously, it is clear that such an efficient and productive process could not have been developed and sustained.

Publicly funded organisations are a means for people to develop skills essential to mutual aid and community support. Greater public funding of local organisations will provide a greater basic level of skills within local areas that could become critical sites for mutual aid.

CASE STUDY: LEWES OPEN DOOR

The skills needed in an emergency or crisis situation need to be in place beforehand. Many of these skills involve understanding how to communicate and show empathy with people on the margins of society, who are likely to be hit the hardest. The skills needed are not just around cooking food, organising deliveries or helping people to access services but also include an awareness of and ability to address the deeper, more complex issues many of those who require food aid have experienced. This in turn requires people skilled in working with vulnerable people.

Lewes Open Door is a drop-in centre that had been running for approximately three years before the pandemic, where rough sleepers can get a drink or a hot meal. Belinda, a LOD volunteer, explained that most of the people who drop in: *"have some kind of issue, with drugs and alcohol, so [they're] often complex characters"*. During the pandemic, many were offered temporary accommodation in nearby Eastbourne but: *"hotels didn't have the experience to deal with them ... they didn't realise they needed food or had nowhere to go during the day ... mental health and adult social services care fell down"*. The Lewes Open Door volunteers, who knew their clients, understood their challenges and could treat them as individuals, found themselves providing: *"wraparound services. We cooked food at home and delivered it to people on the street, arranged radar keys for them so that they could access disabled toilets when everything was closed. We helped to connect people to social services and housing services."* These might seem like fairly straightforward organisational skills but it worked because the volunteers already had the skills to work with the clients. *"Our clients are very nervous and suspicious of authority; they really need a dedicated care worker they can trust"*.

As a result of the experience, and of seeing how little support was available for their clients, Belinda feels that: *"we've become a bit more campaigning. We started to become a bit more activist when we saw that people were being moved out of Lewes. This is their community and they were being treated unfairly. We're now feeding into Lewes' new homelessness strategy. We fought for them to be included in the Census. COVID really highlighted that the wraparound care isn't there and the council isn't doing enough."* She does feel, however, that because of the pandemic, the council has had to take more notice of the homeless. *"It's made it easier for [LOD] to pick up the phone to the council now, for example for emergency housing, and they do listen more"*.

3.6 Getting *bureaucracy* right – agility in response

In a moment of crisis, when support is needed immediately, bureaucratic functions are simply too slow. Mutual aid groups were forced to operate in a formal 'grey area' during the immediate onset of the COVID-19 pandemic because without taking action, people would have been left hungry, without heat and without community, mental or physical health support.

Having official structures to adhere to doesn't always mean efficiency. In a crisis, these frameworks can hinder more than they help. They take time to develop and the right people need to come on board. Hence, maintaining a loose, flexible or no relationship with 'top-down' bureaucratic frameworks can work just as well, as it can be helpful to understand when rules, regulations and processes must be rigorously followed and when they can be more flexible.

For example, it is essential to be sure that someone who goes into the home of a vulnerable adult to deliver food must be known to be a responsible person who will not abuse them. In a similar vein, where children are involved, the providers of aid must be trustworthy. Given the importance of food to mutual aid practice, food hygiene certification was a often a requirement in order to 'scale up' or maintain activities but during the process of trying to obtain it, the timeliness and effectiveness of mutual aid practice often suffered.

OFFICIAL BURDENS

Leyla Brooke, who set up the Darton East Community Fridge, remarked on how much training, work and official documentation went into doing so: *"It's been a very big learning curve. The risk assessments that have had to take place, the insurance that's had to be put into place, how much insurance you need, what you need to insure; the training that goes on for all the volunteers [they all have a Level 2 hygiene certificate], all the hazard perceptions, everything that goes on in the background, there's been a lot of work go into it."*

Darton East Community Fridge
30th November, 2021

Likewise, there is an undoubtedly a need to institutionally protect vulnerable people in the community and bureaucracy is often deployed as a means to put the checks and balances in place. However, in communities where institutions are embedded and there are high levels of trust, decisions about vulnerability, suitability and the appropriateness of care can be taken collectively by groups engaged in mutual aid without the need for clunky and costly 'top-down' frameworks. Father Alex of St Matthew's Church in Burnley recalls: *"I put a message out for volunteers. I could have had a dozen, you know. People want to help. They want to help and they couldn't help in the pandemic. They weren't able to... but we have to be very careful about that one, the DBS stuff you know, you've got to follow the protocols because if something happens, it's your fault, your responsibility."* Similarly, a mutual aid group member in Golcar in the Kirklees area reported that the council: *"were insisting that every single volunteer had a DBS check... I said, 'No, I am making a record of people that do have DBS checks in their jobs'. The teachers, policemen, etc., I keep a record of those. And only use those people for prescription runs and other things. I wasn't running DBS checks because we didn't have the time, people were needing help there."*

The need for individuals to shoulder the responsibility for ensuring vulnerable people are not abused in these contexts is severely limiting as well as worrying for those who take the risk. This needs to be reconsidered in preparation for future challenges that will also require a mutual aid response.

REFERRALS

Where bureaucratic systems do find their function in relation to mutual aid is most often through their ability to refer. Referrals from existing public bodies such as schools, GP surgeries and local authorities were a very common way in which vulnerable people were identified. A Guildford school link worker, who worked closely with SCS, said: *"The process for referrals was quite straightforward. I just sent emails to our Pupil Premium families to see who would be interested, or we had a COVID crisis fund in school, we offered them meals too [through SCS]. It was generally families we are aware of who usually struggle financially."*

This referrals process was critical, but can mean that certain undocumented groups and individuals who aren't on the radar of existing public bodies (such as asylum seekers) can be missed as well as people who don't fit into an already established community. The food parcel service run from St Anne's, for example, found that some families they delivered to were sharing their parcels with neighbours who had no such similar instant support network; once identified, these people could also receive parcels of their own. As the food was officially provided through Exodus Youth Worx UK rather than the school itself, anyone was eligible to ask for support.

Hence, some mutual aid groups, such as the Food & Solidarity group in Newcastle, flyered the local community (with flyers in multiple languages) as a means to alert people to the available food. This is in direct contrast to official and online referrals. The upside being, of course, that it gives people whose very survival depends upon not being on official registers a chance to reach out for essential food.

ORGANISATIONAL FORM

It has become clear that, because of their ideological roots, there is no readily suitable organisational form for mutual aid groups to take. Some organisations such as Charter House in Burnley reflected on the advantages of their position as: *"a Community Interest Company [CIC - a form of social business] with five directors that could get together, make a plan and decide that day that we were going to do it."*

This lends a crucial agility and indeed institutional credibility to response efforts but can simultaneously restrict a group's ability to apply to some funding streams (such as to the Charity Commission) and its ability to be completely 'off the radar' of institutional frameworks. Whilst CICs are perfectly suited encourage mutualism within their structures, they must be formed with codes of conduct – and these can take a long time to produce. Effective mutual aid in the future will require a tailored legal form for organisations to take.

3.7 In conclusion...

...mutual aid has been a lifeline for many during the pandemic. Echoing Bishop Desmond Tutu's words that opened this manifesto, Father Alex recalled to us about his church in Burnley:

*"There's a guy comes here a few weeks ago and told me 'I'm f*****g drowning. I'm f*****g drowning'. You try and hoof them out of the water if they're drowning and keep them afloat; keep them somewhere safe. But you know that the minute they leave the church, they're entering those treacherous waters again."*

Those waters are indeed treacherous because official structures often don't, or can't, help. But the mutual aid that shone through in the pandemic existed in spite of, not because of, any institutional support and frameworks. As Sobia Malik, a mutual aid organiser also in Burnley, said:

"We all turned to each other, and we all connected with each other. Wherever we were in the town, we knew what we had to do and we just got on with it. Nobody can take that away from us. We've had to suffer together and support each other together through this process. I always knew as a town we had this level of beautiful connection and mutual respect but what a time to show it."

4.0 Policy Recommendations

Making 'policy' recommendations out of mutual aid in some respects is an oxymoron. Mutual aid *requires* the absence of the State (with a capital S) to flourish and hence any interventions from institutions is potentially antithetical. But institutions do have a role to play.

This is because local institutions *can* work far more sympathetically with mutual aid groups (as people in those institutions will often be givers and receivers of aid themselves). At the same time, larger regional, corporate or even national governments –despite often being a barrier to mutual aid through their attempts at direct intervention – can create more structural and broader policy landscapes that can help mutual aid networks to flourish. The ability of Pastor Mick and Father Alex to reach into the institution of the Church; of St Anne's Catholic Girls High School and Marsden Heights Community College to reach into educational networks; Stoke Community Support calling on school link workers and council referrals: all these links amplified and enhanced the ability of the respective groups to support their immediate community.

That there were higher death rates in more deprived areas of the country (as a report by the Office of National Statistics[9] starkly outlines) speaks volumes to the uneven and patchy pandemic responses in different parts of the United Kingdom. So, in attempting to 'level up' the country after the pandemic, it is vital to focus on supporting local governments in their subsequent ability to support mutual aid groups.

This section resonates with other research[10] and suggests a number of recommendations for policy at the local level, but also we suggest some larger, perhaps national-level policy interventions that would provide a broader landscape for mutual aid to do what it does best.

4.1 Recommendations for local government

1 / Foster trust and embeddedness between local authorities and mutual aid groups through the provision of 'facilities time' (paid at living wage or above for the area) and financial remuneration for mutual aid members when liaising with the council. This will develop long-standing trust between mutual aid groups and local authorities that will be crucial in making mutual aid efforts sustainable and able to respond quickly in the face of another crisis.

2 / Make spaces available to mutual aid groups on a long-term, low-cost basis. In addition, it would help to collate lists of vacant premises and circulate these to mutual aid groups in the community as widely as possible. Groups need to know they have access to a space that will last long enough for them to make real and sustainable change in the community. This could be through the issuing of vacant local authority space or through the acquisition and distribution of vacant high-street units, which would give the added benefit of revitalising our high streets.

3 / Create easy-to-read, accessible information on food hygiene for mutual aid groups (in multiple languages) so that they can self-educate quickly in times of crisis. Outside of these times, provide food hygiene training to community groups free of charge – as many local councils provide free DBS checks – to build awareness and embed qualifications as a community resource. A well-qualified community is one that can mobilise quickly.

4 / Simplify grant application processes and introduce emergency funding for mutual aid groups during times of crisis. Finances were a primary obstacle to mutual aid groups becoming sustainable: a simplification of the grant application process, tied to rapid decision making and the provision of funds, can provide the platform for a transition to more sustainable financial models.

5 / Make DBS accreditations free/quicker to obtain and consider them part of a broader array of existing community assets. Similarly, provide GDPR training free of charge. This can work in conjunction with developing a skeleton/rapid turn-around DBS system that prioritises community workers and those providing front-line support in times of crisis. This will add to the ability of the community to mobilise quickly during future events.

6/ Recognise the autonomy of 'mutual aid' organisations, which is different to and separate from that of charities, community interest companies or cooperatives. The unique nature of a mutual aid structure and its value, particularly during crises, needs to be acknowledged.

4.2 National policy recommendations

1 / Provide longer-term, low-cost rents and the release of unused high street units to mutual aid groups to help people plan; this also creates community centres and places. A decade of austerity has left our urban and rural centres decimated. The high street is being hollowed out by rising rates and increasing online retail market share, without the stimulus it needs. Sure Start and youth centres have been closed down, whilst more and more Job Centres and food banks have sprung up. During the pandemic, mutual aid groups have been surrounded by vacant units yet have been unable to access these spaces to carry out their work. Spaces where people come together, get to know one another and where vulnerable people can interface with those who can provide formal and informal support are vital community resources. Where groups have managed to lease a space during the pandemic, their work has flourished and the community has seen the benefit. Giving mutual aid groups and community projects long-term access to such spaces will enable long-term planning and enable them to run sustainable activities that can provide meaningful and integrated community support.

2 / Support community spaces (youth clubs, breakfast clubs in churches and schools, community kitchens for cheap, nutritious food, etc.) via better funding to local authorities. Of the few community spaces that have survived successive waves of austerity, many are now facing existential threats to their ability to continue. Whilst many of the community spaces explored in this manifesto were deployed to good use in the pandemic, the pandemic has been the final nail in the coffin for others that closed their doors at the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions. The disruption caused by the pandemic has left community spaces in need of support to survive. Funds must be made available for the preservation and reintroduction of these spaces.

3 / Introduce a Universal Basic Income (UBI) scheme across the country. The majority of groups interviewed noted a decline in the numbers of people able to volunteer their time as the furlough system came to a close and those people returned to full-time work. Conversely, what this shows is that when people are given the time and the means to participate in the community, without having to worry about meeting their own financial needs, they do so readily. A UBI system would – similar to the Job Retention Scheme, or 'furlough' – facilitate time for non-work activities in the community. UBI enjoys political support from the across the political spectrum and has been successfully implemented in other parts of the world.

4 / Institute of a four-day working week without loss in pay. This will provide people with more time to work in their communities and engage in mutual aid activity. Research study after research study[11] is showing that productivity does not decrease when workers drop to four days per week, meaning there is no impact on business productivity.

In public sectors, where there is a need for staff to be working at all times, decreasing to a four day working week, combined with a recruitment drive, will encourage greater levels of employment, upskilling and economic participation – representing not only a benefit to our already overworked NHS, social care, teaching, police and fire staff but also giving rise to the opportunity for the system to improve and bringing more people into skilled work in the process.

5.0 The Research

All information/data in this manifesto is from the AHRC study 'COVID-19: The effectiveness of mutual-aid groups and their lessons post-crisis community care' (reference AH/V013297/1) conducted from Nov 2020 to May 2022. The team is (alphabetically) Dr Adam Badger (PDRA), Prof Phil Brown (Co-I), Dr Jennifer Cole (Co-I), Dr Matthias Kipert (Creative Director) and Dr Oli Mould (PI). We took a case-study approach and utilised a range of in-depth qualitative methods including interviews, participant observation and action research.

In selecting case studies to research, quota sampling was used. The baseline 'population' of mutual aid groups was gleaned from a variety of sources, namely the Mutual Aid UK website, but also personal contacts and social media. The conceptual framing of mutual aid as praxis was then applied, which consists of the triumvirate of charity, contributory and radical.[12] This framing is applied as a hypothesis, with case studies analysed as to whether they (con)test the framework's validity. From there, two other imposed 'limits' were applied; the lockdown restrictions on the movement of the research team necessitating local participants, and only those mutual aid networks that had food as a primary part of their provision were selected.

With these limits, quota sampling from five cross-cutting, overlapping and inter-relational structural variations or 'themes' was conducted: **employment status** (the level of JRS claiming in a particular location); **digital/non-digital divide** (many mutual aid groups remain undetected because of not having an online presence or of their online channels being invisible to the public); **urban/rural divide** (to capture the difference in geographical context; and a north-south and regional sampling was strived for); **institutional history**, as COVID-focused mutual aid networks have often grown out of longer-term (perhaps latent) activist groups or existing institutions such as schools, churches and even football clubs; and finally **local deprivation**, which was used to identify those places in the UK that are in most need of support.

In each of the places selected for case study, as many groups and mutual aid networks as possible were contacted for interviews and ethnographic study, largely by snowball sampling. We were limited by COVID-19 restrictions on movement, contact and occasional ill-health, and so some mutual aid groups that the researchers were helping out in as individuals also became part of the study. In reality, each place contained all, some or none of the sampling 'themes' within them and provided a useful platform to discuss the details of how the mutual aid networks cut across themes. Overall, these sampling themes acted as 'gateways' into the very real messiness of networks of mutual aid in these places. This allowed us to gain a far richer picture of mutual aid practice 'on the ground'.

To maintain consistency with institutional settings, languages and jurisdictions, not least the NHS (which has slightly different governance structures in the different countries of the United Kingdom), and given that research was conducted during the biggest health crisis in a century, all the case studies were based in England.

5.1 Featured organisations' websites

St Matthew's Church, Burnley, https://www.achurchnearyou.com/church/11467/

Church on the Street, Burnley, https://www.cots-ministries.co.uk/

Northern Community Network, https://www.northerncommunitynetwork.org.uk/

Charter House Centre, Burnley, https://charterhouseburnley.co.uk/

Burnley Together, https://burnleytogether.org.uk/

Curry on the Street, Nelson,
https://www.facebook.com/Curry-on-The-Street-103817378487494/

Stoke Community Support, Guildford https://stokecommunitysupport.com/

Darton East Community Fridge, Barnsley,
https://www.neighbourly.com/project/619760a553092b6bb1749b87

Community Response Kirklees, https://communityresponsekirklees.com/

Exodus Youth Worx UK, Enfield, https://www.facebook.com/exodusyouthworxuk/

Newcastle Food & Solidarity, https://twitter.com/nclmutualaid

Newcastle Central Mosque, http://www.newcastlecentralmosque.com/

Cook to Care, South London, https://connectlambeth.org/cook-to-care/

Lewes Open Door, https://www.lewesopendoor.org/

Notes

1. See Local Government Association (2021) <u>A perfect storm - health inequalities and the impact of COVID-19</u>. Available online: https://www.local.gov.uk/perfect-storm-health-inequalities-and-impact-covid-19 *and* Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2020) <u>Destitution in the UK 2020.</u> Available online https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2020

2. MacKinnon, D. and Derickson, K.D. (2013). <u>From resilience to resourcefulness: A critique of resilience policy and activism</u>. *Progress in Human Geography, 37*(2): 253-270.

3. For instance, see Spade, D (2020) <u>Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)</u>. Verso, London.

4. Kropotkin, P. (1902) <u>Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution</u>. Available online https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-mutual-aid-a-factor-of-evolution

5. Solnit, R. (2009) <u>A Paradise Built in Hell</u>. Penguin Books, London.

6. South, J., Stansfield, J., Amlôt, R. and Weston, D., 2020. *Sustaining and strengthening community resilience throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond*. *Perspectives in Public Health, 140*(6): 305-308.

7. Spade, D. (2020) <u>Solidarity Not Charity Mutual Aid for Mobilization and Survival</u>. *Social Text* 38(1): 131 – 151.

8. Kruger, D. (2020) <u>Levelling up our communities: proposals for a new social covenant</u>. Available online http://www.dannykruger.org.uk

9. ONS (2021) <u>Leaving no one behind – a review of who has been most affected by the coronavirus pandemic in the UK: December 2021</u>. Available online https://tinyurl.com/bdfvs4n6

10. Tiratelli, L and Kaye, S. (2020) <u>Communities vs. Coronavirus: The Rise of Mutual Aid</u>, New Local, available online https://www.newlocal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Communities-vs-Coronavirus_New-Local.pdf

11. For example, see Coote, A, Harper, A, and Stirling, A. (2021) <u>The case for a four-day week.</u> Polity Press, Cambridge.

12. Mould, O, Badger, A, Cole, J and Brown, P. (forthcoming) <u>Reclaiming the mutualism of mutual aid: Learning the lessons of the Covid-19 pandemic to reconceptualise the radicality of mutual aid</u>. *Transactions.*

Manifesto for Mutual Aid

Drawing on research and lived engagement, this document aims to narrate, celebrate and elevate the mutual aid practices that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also identifies recommendations for policy, grounded in the lives and experiences of those on the front line.

Written by Dr Adam Badger, Prof Phil Brown, Dr Jennifer Cole, Dr Mattias Kispert and Dr Oli Mould, and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

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