

Written evidence submitted by the Joint Covid Mutual Aid groups (COV0119)

Summary

1. Covid-19 Mutual Aid is a network of local resident groups organising mutual (peer to peer) aid throughout the Covid-19 outbreak in the UK. There are over 4,000 local groups involving millions of residents. A central website with a local group map and support resources exists, alongside a Facebook groups bringing together local group administrators and representatives.¹

2. Mutual Aid groups vary in the types of food support they facilitate. While most offer peer to peer shopping and errand support for people who are self-isolating during the pandemic, many are now organising food parcels and cooked meal provision for vulnerable and financially struggling neighbours, as well as supporting local food projects with crowdfunding, volunteer and resources, and supporting local food businesses and supply chains to keep trading.

Key points in our submission

- 3. Mutual Aid Groups have sprung up across the UK as a first line of support for vulnerable people and are at the beating heart of local communities and the challenges they face during the Covid-19 pandemic. They are also facing an undue burden supporting people who should otherwise be receiving Government or local authority support.
- 4. For these reasons, Government and other institutions have a moral imperative to improve communication and support for these grassroots groups, and look to co-produce actions to alleviate food insecurity during this crisis.
- 5. Based on the clear evidence in our communities of suffering and lack of access to appropriate emergency food support, the Government must redouble efforts to fix problems in current assistance programmes, such as free school meal vouchers and shielded food parcels, and expand the remit of who is deemed worthy of receiving vital food assistance at this time
- 6. While Mutual Aid groups have a role to play in meeting the most urgent needs of vulnerable people, they must not be seen as a solution. Adequate statutory and social safety nets must be in place, now and for the future, so that our communities can flourish, rather than get tied up in fighting proverbial fires.

Submission written by: Vera Zakharov, local representative of the Lower Whitehawk, Bristol Estate and Manor Farm Mutual Aid group and member of the Mutual Aid Group Admins network.

Information was compiled through a survey promoted to Mutual Aid groups nationally and one to one discussions with group leads.

¹ <https://covidmutualaid.org/>

Have the measures announced by the Government to mitigate the disruptions to the food supply chain caused by the pandemic been proportionate, effective and timely?

7. While we acknowledge that the Government was faced with an unprecedented challenge to quickly ensure public safety in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is also important to highlight that the closure of food banks, community centres and community cafes that so many vulnerable people rely on hit our communities hard. Our Mutual Aid groups are faced with the challenge of supporting our neighbours who suddenly have no way of being able to feed themselves.

8. The very speed with which mutual aid groups popped up all over the country showed, aside from the immense goodwill and mutual care alive in our communities, that too many people were left without a safety net. There is a lot to learn from this crisis. Such a gap in provision should not happen again.

9. If the Government had taken a more cautious and phased in approach to closing vital community services, our communities would have had more time to prepare, food banks and pay as you feel cafes would have had more time to switch to delivery or doorside collection models.

I would like to share with the Committee the following feedback from our groups:

10. Maria Glover of the Covid-19 Community Support group for the villages of **Aston, Aughton and Swallownest (near Sheffield)** said, "These are unprecedented times, but the closure of premises for food banks hit us hard. Delays in getting Free School Meals and Universal Credit hit people very hard. We're still unable to get supermarket delivery or collection slots. I hope we have learned lessons for any future issues."

11. Ruth Greenfield of **Old and Cherry Hill village support in Northamptonshire** said, "Limiting items could have started sooner to stop the panic buying, but once introduced when the panic had stopped the relaxation was welcome to ease volunteer buying for others. Extra delivery slots have helped."

12. Rachel Rance from **Swindon Mutual Aid** said, "I think it's a good thing that this crisis has brought out the best in many people and brought communities together. I hope it has helped people feel that they're safe and not alone. However, I feel that the response from the Government could have been immeasurably better in terms of how slowly they seemed to organise proper support for vulnerable people."

Are the Government and food industry doing enough to support people to access sufficient healthy food; and are any groups not having their needs met? If not, what further steps should the Government and food industry take?

13. Government-led support for people facing food insecurity has had immense challenges, evidenced by our neighbours encountering problems with the free school meal voucher system, food parcels for clinically vulnerable groups, and signing up to Universal Credit. People stuck in sheltered accommodation, including care homes, and people with no recourse to public funds have also suffered.

14. Supermarkets were even slower to respond to the crisis, as priority online slots and limits to bulk buying were implemented late and caused a backlog in elderly and vulnerable people accessing vital food and other supplies.

15. Groups have picked up the pieces and have worked tirelessly to help the above gaps and delays in provision, but it is exhausting. We do not want to be seen as a solution in the long term, and we do not want to be plugging the gaps without adequate financial support in the short term. Government departments and major retailers must not get complacent, and must work to expand whom they are supporting, so that more people can access food, and so that our Mutual Aid and community groups do not face burnout.

I would like to share with the Committee the following feedback from local groups:

16. **Brighton Covid Cooking Club**², a peer to peer cooked meal scheme set up by Mutual Aid group members in Brighton & Hove, has expanded to support families struggling to access free school meal vouchers and residents of sheltered housing schemes who lack cooking facilities and money. Scheme coordinator Sapphire Prisdam said, "I know we're helping, I just wish we didn't have to. I feel pressure that if I mess up, people are going to go hungry, and that's not right. It wouldn't be an issue if I were only helping on top of government provision."

17. Louise Delmege of **National Food Service Bristol**³ food project feels that food support should be available to more people, not just those who fall into narrowly defined categories deemed most needy. "We don't means test. We believe that the risk of a few people receiving food who could've bought it is far, far lower than people falling through the gap because they can't prove they're needy enough. Plus, means testing takes training, cost and time - time that could be spent helping people."

18. Rachel Rance from **Swindon Mutual Aid** said some elements of Government support for clinically vulnerable people, including the NHS Responders scheme, have worked well, but some people meant to receive "shielded" food boxes are struggling. She shared, "Vulnerable people indicated that applying for parcels had been complicated. One resident had confirmation from the council that he would receive a food parcel as part of the shielded scheme, but after waiting with no further word, got in touch and was advised to resubmit a form on the Government website."

2 <https://www.brightoncookingclub.com/>

3 <https://www.goingforgoldbristol.co.uk/what-is-the-national-food-service/>

What further impacts could the current pandemic have on the food supply chain, or individual elements of it, in the short to medium-term and what steps do industry, consumers and the Government need to take to mitigate them?

19. Mutual Aid groups are sharing concerns about the current elevated need for food support is just the tip of the iceberg, and that further knock on effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, loss of jobs, and the lockdown will be felt soon. It is therefore important that the Government keep adapting, and in some cases expanding the food support response to address future waves of food insecurity.

20. As grassroots groups are well placed to communicate the needs and challenges faced by their neighbours, their inclusion in local support infrastructure is paramount. We are also sensitive to additional needs of vulnerable people, including those with disabilities and no recourse to public funds. Unfortunately, many councils have been unable or unwilling to connect with Mutual Aid groups, and we would like to see local authorities acknowledge the immense community service we are providing, and work with us to alleviate the current strain on our networks to plug gaps in statutory support.

21. Where Mutual Aid groups have to set up food projects themselves in the absence of other support, they need to be able to access funding quickly and easily. Many have shared struggles with setting up bank accounts in order to apply, or waiting precious weeks for funding decisions. Government can do its bit by influencing major funders such as the National Lottery Community Fund and local authorities to offer funding opportunities that are accessible to smaller and unregistered charitable projects.

I would like to share with the Committee the following feedback from local groups:

22. Rachel Rance from **Swindon Mutual Aid** said, "It will take some time for the supply problems to resolve. I imagine we will continue in the same vein but coordinate help for people who have lost their jobs, etc."

23. Cathy Wang of **Greenwich Mutual Aid** indicated that her Borough has had a well-coordinated and well-linked emergency food response, which includes the local Mutual Aid network, who are actively signposting needy neighbours to appropriate support, and coordinating a fleet of volunteer drivers to help in emergency food deliveries. "It's good that my local government has responded quickly to this and has set up the network. We are aiming to do more partnerships with local charities where we help with delivering food to people, or gather donations for them."

24. John lakey of **Bodmin Covid-19 Mutual Aid** says his projects has struggled to access existing funding streams. "We have not been able to access any funding from local council or Cornwall community foundation. We are a registered cic and have been trading as a community group for 5 years."

**How effectively has the Government worked with businesses and NGOs to share information on disruptions to the supply chain and other problems and to develop and implement solutions?
How effectively have these actions been communicated to the public?**

25. We understand that everyone, from Government to local authorities to local organisations and funders are learning and adapting along the way. But this is the time to learn from the mistakes of the past few weeks make improvements. We know that vital information is not making its way to many of our most vulnerable neighbours. We urge the Government to cascade up-to-date information on how people can access the help they need through local authorities into local communities, and resource local authority emergency response teams to establish communication with Mutual Aid and other grassroots groups, so they can better understand how to support local needs.

26. We also think much more support and credit is due to smaller local food businesses, who have been able to help our communities access food when supermarkets failed, whether through a lack of online delivery slots or effects of a rush on essential items ahead of the lockdown. It would be a shame for our communities to lose small businesses at this time. As one Mutual Aid group lead said, “The food industry does not have the capacity to ramp up in this time of need.”

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27. Pippa Caole of **Llandaff Covid-19 Assistance Group in Cardiff** highlighted that people with disabilities are especially struggling with accessing up-to-date and vital information from authorities and supermarkets. She says, “no one knows how to access food for those who are disabled and trapped at home.”

28. Ruth Greenfield of **Old and Cherry Hill village support group** said, “In this community food parcels to clinically vulnerable could have been wasted on those who could afford to buy food if they could. Delivery slots from supermarkets were certainly a problem initially even for the elderly and otherwise vulnerable - however alternatives were available through local farm shops, butchers and green grocers who delivered.”

29. The **Hangleton & Portslade Mutual Aid groups in Brighton & Hove** have partnered up with Premier Fruits, a hospitality and schools wholesale supplier whose business was severely impacted by Covid-19, to develop bespoke food box offers specifically to meet the needs of older residents in their community who could not access supermarkets but were able to pay, thus easing the strain on citywide emergency food efforts and helping a local supplier stay in business.⁴

⁴https://www.anymeeting.com/WebConference/RecordingDefault.aspx?c_psrId=EA50D88187473E&code=378-003-347 (relevant evidence starts at 56:30)

Recommendations

On measures announced by the Government:

30. The Government must ensure that any future government action on Covid-19 or other public health emergencies includes consideration, guidance and adequate financial support for community food projects to allow them continue to support vulnerable people within their networks.

31. The Government must exercise more pressure on retailers to put measures in place to ensure an even and equitable access to vital food supplies.

On Government and food industry supporting people to access sufficient healthy food:

32. Government must expand who is able to receive support and commit to fixing problems in existing support such as free school meal vouchers, and avoid forcing local services to means test people where possible.

33. Retailers must expand who can access priority online shopping slots and offer accessible options for people with disabilities, to reach more vulnerable people and struggling families.

On further impacts of the pandemic on the food supply chain and food access:

34. Government must put pressure on and support local authorities to adequately engage and communicate with mutual aid groups, including listening to local knowledge on how to best support the hardest to reach and most disadvantaged communities. This includes engaging with MPs to connect with the mutual aid groups in their constituencies and offer support. The Mutual Aid network is happy to consult on appropriate and mutually supportive ways to do so.

35. Funding must be made accessible to grassroots groups participating in emergency food responses, including shorter decision times and fewer financial structure requirements in a time of crisis. One option is to support councils or local charities to manage grassroots response funds and allow groups to invoice resource expenditures.

On Government work with businesses and NGOs to share information and implement solutions:

36. Government must do more to support smaller food businesses and supply chains to keep in business, including extra financial support, to diversify local community routes to market and safeguard local jobs.

37. Government must recognise and promote exemplary on the ground examples of grassroots communities and local businesses working together to support people in need. Our network has more examples to share.