

October 2020. BRIEFING 6

Rapid research COVID-19

Stepping up and helping out: grassroots volunteering in response to COVID-19

Angus McCabe, Mandy Wilson and Angela Ellis Paine

SYNOPSIS: Briefing 5, [Volunteering through crisis and beyond: starting, stopping and shifting](#), provided an overview of literature on volunteering. It ended with a question: would all those who have stepped up in their communities call themselves volunteers? And [our current research into community responses to COVID-19 across 26 areas of England](#) offers insights related to other questions raised in Briefing 5, concerning what volunteering is taking place, who is getting involved, how it is organised, whether new forms of volunteering are emerging as a result of the pandemic, and whether volunteers' energy can be sustained as it continues. We explore these issues in this briefing, using the term 'volunteering' as shorthand to encompass all the unpaid community activity observed over the last six months.

Key points

- People do not necessarily label themselves as volunteers; often they see themselves as 'just getting on with what needs to be done' in their neighbourhood and community.
- A new cohort of people have come forward to help out in their community in response to COVID-19. Volunteers have been involved in a range of these (mostly practical) responses, but there are also barriers to volunteering.
- Engaging people at the grassroots level has been more effective than national or regional command-and-control volunteer initiatives.
- COVID-19 has not necessarily created new forms of volunteering. It has, however, accelerated trends evident over the last decade, including online and 'micro' volunteering.
- There are some concerns about future expectations, and whether agencies understand the limits and boundaries of volunteering roles.

This briefing is the sixth in a new series seeking to understand how communities across England respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

Future briefings will be published throughout 2020 and 2021 to share early findings and learn from others exploring similar questions.

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What forms of volunteering are taking place in communities?

Volunteering is a very broad and contested concept that captures many different forms of activity and means different things to different people. Some literature suggests that there is a key difference between activism and volunteerism, between “working for social change and working to help individuals. [...] Working for collective good – neighbourhood good in particular – is associated with having a sense of control [over] one’s life and the social context in which one lives” (Glister, 2012, p. 769). This implies that there are key differences in motivations to engage; namely, that ‘volunteering’ relates to a wish to ameliorate or mitigate difficult circumstances for individuals, whereas ‘social action’ is driven by a desire to fundamentally change those circumstances through collective action.

Our research demonstrates that the concepts of volunteering and social action are not so clear-cut; that volunteering encompasses a spectrum of activities and that people get involved for a range of different reasons on an individual and collective basis. Mostly, people acted out of a sense of compassion and generosity towards others and concern for the community in which they live. It is also evident that local residents volunteered both through formal structures within their communities (for example, through established groups and organisations such as foodbanks and community hubs) and also undertook more informal voluntary action (such as helping their neighbours on a one-to-one basis).

What is notable, however, is that the majority of residents did not refer to themselves either as volunteers or social/campaigning activists. Instead, they said things like ‘we are just doing things’, and were motivated by strong associations with their neighbourhood in offering locally embedded, collective, responses. As one Twitter user put it: “We’ve made the decision that we don’t do volunteering anymore. We are just neighbours looking out for neighbours” (Wallace Dean, 2020). Social support also seemed to be particularly valued by residents when provided by known neighbours and local volunteers.

Who is volunteering?

As [Briefing 5](#) noted, the media has highlighted the apparent rapid expansion of volunteering throughout the early stages of the pandemic, with an estimated 10 million people in the UK – one in five adults – having volunteered during lockdown, with an economic value of over £350 million per week (Jones, 2020; Aldrick, 2020).

Whilst statistical data is not available on the numbers of volunteers involved in the 26 local areas involved in our research, it was apparent that there was no shortage of volunteers: indeed in some communities, organisations said they did not have the capacity to involve the large numbers of people offering their time. Interviewees frequently referred to the emergence of new volunteers and changes in their demography. This applied in particular to younger people, who appear to be more likely to volunteer in times of crisis (Barraket et al, 2013), in several cases replacing older activists who were shielding. These younger people were often reported to be furloughed workers who, without work commitments, were volunteering for the first time in their communities. Discussing her volunteering role, one research respondent commented:

“I think I would have been hitting the walls if I was stuck in the house for three months. Both me and my daughter have both really enjoyed it.”

The extent to which this new group of volunteers will remain active as furlough ends – and if or when they return to work – remains unclear, and will be followed up in our ongoing research.

In other areas there appears to have been a reliance on what has been referred to as a 'civic core' (Mohan and Bulloch 2012) – a relatively small percentage of the population that are active in multiple community and voluntary roles and groups. In several case-study areas this pool of established and committed activists facilitated rapid local responses to the immediate crisis (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020).

Just as Ellis Paine (2020) noted, "those with more resources (of different kinds) are more likely to volunteer" (Wilson and Musick, 1997). Similarly, Reyes (2020) has commented that well-intentioned interventions can "reinforce existing inequalities and hierarchies prevailing in the unbalanced relations of power between those who help, and the ones who are helped". Our research has found an awareness that volunteering can reinforce inequalities and attempts to mitigate against these. In one case-study area, a volunteer noted how the very act of volunteering potentially created an unequal relationship with the person they were supporting, and stressed the importance of being perceived as a neighbour rather than a 'helper'. Another respondent, a community member, lamented the fact that although they were willing to offer their time, they could not afford the petrol to deliver goods. They also commented:

"We need to make sure people have credit or free minutes to make these calls. Some people want to volunteer but don't have internet access."

There are examples of how some community groups have tried to address barriers to volunteering and the power imbalance that can arise between volunteers and the people they are helping. In many case-study areas volunteers have been reimbursed by community anchor organisations for expenses incurred, and in some they have been provided with the necessary equipment to carry out their support, such as tablets and internet access. In addition, more equitable relationships have been attempted through less individualised and more collective approaches, such as community fridges and outdoor food-sharing tables, which can reduce the perception of benefactor and beneficiary. In another case study, volunteers – seeing the conditions people were living in – brought together contacts they had made during food deliveries to develop a more collective-action approach through which everyone could contribute to addressing poor housing conditions.

What are volunteers doing at the community level?

As outlined in [*Stronger than anyone thought: Communities responding to crisis*](#) (McCabe, Wilson and Macmillan, 2020), there has been a wide range of responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Volunteers have been involved in many of these in many different ways. An example of this diversity of roles played by volunteers is summarised in Figure 1, which was created by the mutual aid group set up by the Stockport Organising Group (now called Woodley & Bredbury Community Neighbours).

Figure 1: the diversity of voluntary action at community level during COVID-19

Community organisers talk about creating a culture of possibility, but what does this actually mean?

These are a few things that members of our community have embarked upon since lockdown... it's quite remarkable and it's not everything. Does it take a pandemic to create this in a community? No, it takes people!



www.facebook.com/groups/woodleybredburycommunityneighbours

This research has found that grassroots volunteering within communities has primarily had a practical focus and fallen into two broad categories – the packing and distribution of emergency food aid and the provision of more social support – particularly for isolated and vulnerable residents. Beneath this apparently simple description, however, lies a rich diversity of activity. For example, in terms of food, different approaches have been taken beyond the provision of food parcels: volunteers have been engaged in 'shop and drop', community fridges, the preparation of hot meals, providing fresh ingredients in recipe boxes, setting up outdoor food-sharing tables and, as lockdown eased, developing pay-as-you-feel cafes.

In terms of social support, neighbour-to-neighbour contact has been critical, through conversations on doorsteps and streets, as well as wellbeing phone calls. In addition, a range of creative ways of providing support have evolved; street art to provide positive messages, creating and distributing activity packs for children and families, moving centre-based activities such as health and wellbeing groups, coffee mornings and 'knit and natter' sessions online and (also as lockdown eased) organising in-person play, creative and wellbeing activities compliant with social-distancing guidance.

These examples of volunteering initiatives are far from comprehensive. There have been many more, ranging from people making protective equipment for health workers and for the wider community through to the ongoing reliance of community organisations on volunteers to carry out their strategic governance and leadership roles. However, there is

little evidence so far that people new to community activity have moved into other, more sustained, forms of volunteering beyond the direct response to COVID-19. While a number of research interviewees expressed hope that these new volunteers would move across into management or governance roles within their community organisations, for now this remains aspirational and something that needs to be worked at. A community member commented:

“Volunteers have already come forward to do something, they won’t all want to sit around tables long term, so we need to see how we can keep them interested.”

What are the patterns of volunteering in terms of starting, stopping, shifting and sustaining?

In [Briefing 5](#) we explored the literature on volunteering during crises, and identified three questions to consider: how volunteering was starting, stopping and shifting. These arose because our case-study research uncovered such patterns within communities during the pandemic, alongside additional questions about the sustainability of this volunteering.

New people have started volunteering in new ways during the pandemic, particularly through the development of not only different approaches to food provision but also engaging in arts-based and creative responses to COVID-19.

Existing volunteers have shifted roles in order to meet immediate needs within communities, for example pausing their previous activities to become a delivery driver for food banks. In other cases the method of voluntary action has shifted – from groups meeting physically to online interaction. In some cases existing activity has shifted in terms of focus – such as community cafes and luncheon clubs converting to food distribution. At this stage in the evolution of the pandemic, some of these may return to their original purpose, whilst others see the need to continue their new, or shifted, activities.

Some volunteering has stopped – particularly amongst older volunteers having to shield. Some community-based volunteer-organised groups have ceased activity because it involved physical meetings, which were not possible while community hubs were closed and could not be moved online during lockdown. Moving into August, much of that stopped activity is in the process of restarting with the (at least partial) re-opening of venues – though it is unclear whether all previous activities in the near future will do so, and how many people can and will be involved while social distancing is in place. Volunteers who have been shielding are returning, but threats of future lockdowns might reverse this trend.

There is also a new question emerging about sustaining volunteering, particularly as the pandemic shows no signs of abating. As indicated in Briefing 5, it is unclear as yet whether the experience of those who put themselves forward to volunteer but never offered roles will deter them from volunteering in the future (Harris et al, 2017); whether the levels of interest in volunteering can be sustained. Furthermore, by August, some volunteers (particularly those that had been very active in the early stages of the pandemic and during lockdown) were reporting burnout and feelings of exhaustion. Will these people carry on in some way and at some level – or give up either on a temporary basis or permanently? The emotional cost of volunteering has been and remains under-explored, and will be one dimension of the next phase of our research into community responses to COVID-19 over the coming months.

How is volunteering being mobilised and organised?

Much of the grassroots volunteering that we identified in our case-study communities has been highly informal, on a neighbour-to-neighbour basis, and self-organised. Indeed, reflective of the theme of [Rapid Research Briefing 4](#) (Wilson et al, 2020), informality has been an important factor in the recruitment and placement of volunteers. Out of concern for those who might be put off by formal processes such as DBS checks and vetting, a number of community-based groups have adapted their ways of working to operate legally without such processes while still complying with safeguarding requirements. Some used references from other agencies rather than waiting for DBS checks; others felt they were not needed for the kind of tasks being carried out, such as doorstep deliveries; and others made sure that food deliveries to people's home took place in full public view, making DBS checks unnecessary.

At one level, volunteering during COVID-19 has been spontaneous rather than organised or overly planned. What has emerged, however, is the importance of individual network brokers: local people or groups who make **connections** between people and groups by drawing on their personal relationships and status (Barraket et al, 2013). This critical networking role at the hyper-local level has both facilitated the reaching of vulnerable groups and, through local knowledge, provided a level of coordination of volunteer efforts, which has avoided duplication of services. Here the role of community-led infrastructure groups has been invaluable and, in tapping into a groundswell of local action in some communities, has been more in evidence than the role of more formal organisational brokers such as councils for voluntary services or volunteer centres – those organisations tasked with the role of linking volunteers to organisations.

We heard echoes of criticisms made elsewhere (for example: Locality, 2020) of top-down approaches (either at national or local level) to volunteer mobilisation and deployment, which are largely seen to have been effective at getting people to put themselves forward to volunteer but far less so at getting them started. In one area, for example, lots of people signed up to the council's appeal for volunteers, but were then not engaged in any activity. Consequently, a lot of residents chose to volunteer informally on a hyper-local level. A local authority respondent in another of our case-study areas reflected on the importance of local approaches – through community-led infrastructure – to mobilising and organising volunteers:

“Managed volunteers in the local area at one liaison point ... that area got covered really well. Highlighted that rather than having one organisation coordinating across the piece, if they appoint people in each area they are able to maintain volunteers better.”

The ways in which community-led infrastructure groups have played a key role in both coordinating action and engaging volunteers through local knowledge is explored further in the full report on the first phase of research into community responses to the pandemic, [Stronger than anyone thought: Communities responding to COVID-19](#).

Other factors identified as being important in the successful mobilisation, coordination and retention of volunteers have included:

- **Clear boundaries:** Not asking people to take risks with their own health or engage in activities they feel are beyond their comfort zone.
- **Permissions:** To say no, to opt out at times and have the option of returning without being judged. A development worker commented: *"So they just receive an email and respond if they want to do it. There's no obligation, and I think that model is really good for volunteering."*
- **Social rewards:** Ensuring that volunteers can feel the benefits of volunteering and that the social connections they develop as a result of being active bring their own sense of rewards. One volunteer interviewed commented: *"I love the structure and purpose that this has brought into my life."* Others felt the new connections made with neighbours and within the wider community was crucial in keeping them motivated.
- **Nurturing of relationships with volunteers:** In some cases, those with responsibility for coordinating volunteers relied on those they knew most well – those they knew could do the job. There is a balance to be had in relying on those you already know, and spending a little extra time and effort in building relationships with new volunteers and thereby enabling more people to be involved.
- **Feeling valued:** Volunteers need to know that their contribution has been worthwhile and is recognised. As one community worker commented: *"Volunteers need to know that they are valued; although you don't pay volunteers it's nice for them to know their value and maybe will encourage them to do it again and not wait until a national emergency until they do."*

To this end, several of the community-led groups interviewed have put a lot of effort into acknowledging people's involvement through posts on social media, thank-you cards and planned thank-you events. It is hoped that these approaches will encourage people to stay involved beyond the pandemic



Yet the pandemic has raised some interesting questions

about the relationship between volunteers and the organisations coordinating them. In one case-study area the group's paid workers were resistant to recruiting lots of people in case they became unwell as a result of their volunteering activity, while in another area, a food distribution group which was mindful of its duty of care insisted volunteers take a week off every month to avoid burnout. This was resisted by the volunteers, who valued their autonomy. A community member commented:

"Their view was 'You can't tell us to do that – we are volunteers, you don't employ us, [we are] not workers'."

Implications for the future of volunteering?

Has COVID-19 fundamentally changed the nature, or forms, of volunteering? Probably not. What it has done, however, is both raise the profile of certain forms of volunteering (informal, community action and mutual aid) and accelerate trends that have been evident over at least the last decade, such as the growth of online voluntary action through street-level WhatsApp groups or the interest in and use of 'micro-volunteering' opportunities (Heley et al, 2019) requiring short-term small-scale actions (such as telephone support for a limited number of people over a defined timeframe).

What has shifted is the media and much of the policy rhetoric around informal volunteering. During COVID-19 such spontaneous, grassroots responses have been highlighted and revalued, often using militaristic language of 'heroes' working 'on the front line' within communities – language that volunteers interviewed for this research largely avoided.

This growing general interest in volunteering raises questions about its future. Previous research cited in [Briefing 5](#) indicates that crises do stimulate voluntary action, but often only in the short term. COVID-19 has now been with us for many months, with no real sign of abating – let alone disappearing. Concerns have already been raised by research participants about the kinds of roles that might be expected of them in the future as the scale of not only the health but also the impending economic and social crisis becomes apparent. Will volunteers be asked to 'step up' again as the pandemic goes on, with impending rises in unemployment as the furlough scheme comes to an end and a longer term fiscal crisis looms for the government? Will volunteers be asked to take on roles previously performed by paid workers? Are there limits to what volunteers could or should be asked to do? Can volunteers be mobilised and deployed at the scale that will be required to meet new and increasingly complex needs? Will volunteers remain energised in the long haul response to COVID-19?

We shall see. No doubt there will be national initiatives in the immediate and medium-term future to promote sustained volunteering, but important lessons need to be applied if this is the case. Where top-down, command-and-control approaches to grassroots action have been problematic, hyper-local, community-led infrastructure has played a vital role in mobilising, engaging, connecting and coordinating volunteering. Clearly, effective and sustained voluntary action does not simply happen – it requires an investment in community-led infrastructure to build and sustain local voluntary action. What exactly this might look like will be the focus of future research briefings.

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About this research

Local Trust commissioned in-depth research in communities across England into how they respond to COVID-19 and how they recover.

They are places where:

- residents have been supported over the long term to build civic capacity, and make decisions about resource allocation through the Big Local programme
- residents have received other funding and support through the Creative Civic Change programme
- areas categorised as “left behind” because communities have fewer places to meet, lack digital and physical connectivity and there is a less active and engaged community

The research, which also includes extensive desk research and interviews across England, is undertaken by a coalition of organisations led by the Third Sector Research Centre.

The findings will provide insight into the impact of unexpected demands or crisis on local communities, and the factors that shape their resilience, response and recovery.

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a place-based funder supporting communities to transform and improve their lives and the places where they live. We believe there is a need to put more power, resources and decision-making into the hands of local communities, to enable them to transform and improve their lives and the places in which they live.

We do this by trusting local people. Our aims are to demonstrate the value of long term, unconditional, resident-led funding through our work supporting local communities make their areas better places to live, and to draw on the learning from our work to promote a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and others engage with communities and place

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Local Trust

CAN Mezzanine | 7-14 Great Dover Street | London SE1 4YR
General enquiries 020 3588 0565 Registered in England and Wales
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