

Learning from Covid Mutual Aid Groups in Central Manchester

This document has been developed to help us learn from and inspire each other to understand locally what has been happening during the pandemic in our communities, and to share good practice.

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What is a mutual aid group?

It's probably you, and your neighbours, even if you don't use the term!

A covid mutual aid group is a local community group organising to support people through the coronavirus pandemic and beyond.



It's made up of neighbours in a geographical area who come together in solidarity to voluntarily:

- a) support each other,
- b) figure out each others needs and develop strategies to meet them,
- c) meet vital community needs where this can be provided better by local people,
- d) look out where needed for those most in need, and those marginalised by the system, and
- e) build community in a bottom-up way that most services and organisations can't do by their nature.

Where does the term mutual aid come from?

Mutual aid is arguably as ancient as human culture - people in every society in every time period have worked together to ensure their communities can survive. The term was popularised by the philosopher [Kropotkin](#) over a hundred years ago; he argued that cooperation not competition was the driving mechanism behind survival and evolution.

Typically it is led by all participants and structured in a way to minimise hierarchy and bureaucracy, encouraging equity, democracy and participation, using shared leadership and cooperative decision-making.



Models and approaches

Whilst the fundamental principles of mutual aid groups (as above) remain the same, different models and approaches have been taken to respond to the situation and context locally.

Some groups have kept closer to a definition whereby people involved are neighbours first and foremost, helping each other out in a spirit of neighbourliness. Other groups are closer to having local volunteers, with something like a process of induction and with support offered to their role. Either way, those involved know the local area and have insights into communities (geographical, of identity or interest) who live there. Most people involved in the Central Manchester groups are local residents taking part in a voluntary capacity, though often there are paid workers from local organisations or services involved as well, who's managers have allowed their role to shape-shift to meet needs in a way that works for local people. The following is a selection reflective of different models and approaches.

In **Ardwick and Longsight** the independent community-led group ensures that they are responding to needs of the diverse communities that represent the two wards, and understand the importance of providing culturally and religiously appropriate food for families.



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It sparked from conversations between the Health Development Coordinator and councillors just before lockdown and is based across two main bases for food distribution. It is supported by a local councillor and 3 buzz workers along with about 75 volunteers and a network of local VCSE organisations. To avoid creating relationships of dependency, it signposts residents to the appropriate support services. It has weekly Zoom meetings to update and communicate with 'supporters' (volunteers, VCSE & services), and holds weekly volunteer meetings. During the 'setting up' phase additional Zoom meetings were held to develop the structure and clarify focus.

It is well organised and resourced (funding supplied from various sources including crowdfunding), and has [Facebook](#), [twitter](#) and [a website](#). It has developed leaflets which are being left in common areas; shops, pharmacies, takeaways, GP practices etc . The group have also been promoted on ALL FM and via the Manchester Evening News. This MAG uses a strength-based approach in delivering their aims across the neighbourhood, building on existing organisations to ensure their work is complementary.

The **Whalley Range** Covid-19 Mutual Support Group was established by a local resident around ten days prior to lockdown, and at the time of writing has 953 members. It was set up to encourage neighbours to support each other, and uses an autonomous model that encourages active local residents to set up and coordinate street groups.

Self-identified street coordinators link to the mutual aid group admin via a WhatsApp group (although not every street group is represented) and have, in turn, been encouraged to set up hyper-local WhatsApp groups that cover one or more streets. Street coordinators have been encouraged to leaflet all households on their street, informing people that support is available to them, and inviting them to join their local street WhatsApp Group. Uptake varies, for instance, one street has seen around 60 of 80 households join the WhatsApp group, whereas another smaller street has seen all its households join.

Two virtual street coordinator meetings have taken place, allowing issues, ideas and activities to be shared. At the most recent meeting, the majority of the street coordinators reported activities to be mostly non-covid related, focussing instead on acts of neighbourliness e.g. sharing plants, taking out the bins, an online community Iftar during Ramadan, and households getting to know each other better.

Some streets have started to plan for the future, recognising that there is a need to keep building on what has already been established during the covid-19 pandemic. One street has approached a local church and school about using a small patch of land to establish a community garden, as most households have only yards. The admin of the Mutual Support Group hopes to use the [Facebook group](#), in future, to encourage similar collective responses to problems across Whalley Range.



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In **Levenshulme**, Levy Corona Helpers was started two weeks before lockdown by a local resident, and the [Facebook group](#) soon grew to over 1000 members. From the very beginning it's role was clear - to support and facilitate neighbourliness and not to become an established group as such.

The week before lockdown, the Levy Corona Helpers admins held a meeting with representatives from Levenshulme Inspire, The Myriad Foundation, health services, Manchester City Council, local businesses and local community groups. Some working groups emerged which have formed the basis of support: older people, street coordinators, technology and food:

- Inspire took on the role of supporting older people, providing 600 hot meals a week.
- Local residents who had signed up to the Facebook group were encouraged to become street coordinators & deliver leaflets to their street with their contact details.
- Some local residents and businesses were keen to develop the idea of supporting people who did not have access to technology by repairing equipment donated by people in the community and delivering it to those who needed it. A group of volunteers able to assist people to use their devices was set up by Levenshulme Good Neighbours.
- The Myriad Foundation, based in Levenshulme, run a food bank twice weekly. They have adapted their service since lockdown to deliver food parcels and packages throughout the community and further afield. They work closely with MCC, health services & other local organisations to identify the people who need this help. Their biggest gift has been their ability to respond swiftly so that people in need have not been left waiting.



The Levy Corona helpers meet weekly via Zoom with Inspire, Myriad Foundation, Levenshulme Good Neighbours and people from health and MCC to keep channels of communication open. They have also facilitated a Zoom catch up with street coordinators. They stress that it's neighbours helping each other out, and that the core group only facilitate this process, rather than directing or leading it.

In **Rusholme** the Food Support Network came to being because of a partnership between the Unite the Union Manchester Local Government Branch and Rusholme and Burnage Labour Councillors. Together they identified that those who were suffering economic distress and had halal dietary needs were missing out on hot food. The Food Support Network is a powerful example of BAME communities in Manchester coming together, not only to support themselves, but also the wider community.



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Funding

Due to the groups developing very quickly (some from scratch) in an effort to respond to the growing crisis, they had no real idea of what was required or expected, but they dived in anyway. They soon realised that funding was going to be needed to provide a viable service. National & local funding providers adjusted their criteria to support local activities, but they all took the initiative, found creative solutions and were not held back by bureaucratic obstacles. Some started with no funding from outside sources and depended on donations from local residents, others set up crowdfunding links, some accessed formal funding sources (i.e. Forever Manchester, We Love Manchester) - with an agreement from a local community organisation with a bank account to act as fundholder. One existing organisation started providing a service with no funding, but this was recognised as beneficial by the council who provided additional funds to enable continuation.

Aims

In their own words....:

"The group is an independent community led response to support local people in Ardwick and Longsight during the Covid-19 pandemic. We don't have all the answers, but together we can ensure that we're supporting our community during this difficult time" (Ardwick and Longsight)

"The aim of the group is to help people in Chorlton to set up hyper local reciprocal networks to support each other and also identify anyone locally who might be more at risk / need additional support" (Chorlton Coronavirus Community Response)

"A place to share info and organise so that we can best support our neighbours and community through the Corona virus" (Levy Corona Helpers)

"Helping Gorton people through this difficult time" (Gorton Corona Helpers)



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Activities

Chorlton bike deliveries: volunteers picking up shopping for neighbours on bikes lent by a bike shop.

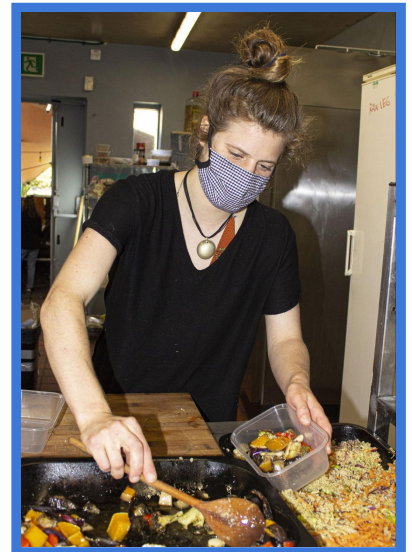
Lockdown bingo, karaoke and bunting: as part of the response to the pandemic on [The Redbricks housing estate](#) in Hulme alongside the mutual aid group, neighbours organised bingo from balconies, windows and gardens street by street. Following posters and social media posts, bingo books were delivered to all, the amplified caller was relayed by people at the end of each street and prizes were won! Lots of smiles and distanced socialising was had as people emerged from their flats and breathed again, after many anxious weeks. The karaoke came some weeks later, with people picking songs by writing them up on the posters in advance or via social media. Bunting is being made individually with bunt kits delivered when requested. These will then be sewn together to festoon the streets celebrating community action.

Activities and food around cultural festivals: AL Eid activities provided parcels for 25 families with children; distributed craft activities, toys and hand made eid cards made by local residents for local residents. In Rusholme, food was provided for Iftar to ensure all could eat, otherwise some may have gone hungry.

Craft activities: in Hulme, Levenshulme and Gorton art packs were sent out to residents to help with their mental wellbeing.

Cooked food provision, food parcels and cooking ingredient storage & distribution. The Ardwick & Longsight MAG also donated gifts with the food parcels each week based on a 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' theme.

Dedicated phone line for residents to request help; phone rotated between people, five days a week.



Street group-based **community gardens**, bringing people together to meet a local need.

Shopping for each other, neighbours helping each other out, especially for those most at risk, coordinated by street coordinators.

Befriending phone calls matched people up through a telephone tree, building up relationships; sometimes it has been older people chatting to each other and at other times younger volunteers joining in the fun.



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Culturally-appropriate food. During a pandemic it is important to understand the significance of continuing to get the food we like and are used to eating. Examples are, ingredients delivered by a collaboration between the Ardwick & Longsight Mutual Aid Group and local charities with expertise around understanding the needs of BAME communities, or hot food cooked twice a week by the Greater Manchester Somali Community Group in Moss Side, started in response to the pandemic-exacerbated food poverty.

Leaflets and posters to promote the mutual aid group or street-level support, and any collective action, with a phone number for those without internet access. They have also been used as a call-out for people who need support or can offer it, to ask about needs or ideas for promoting neighbourliness and future community-building. In Hulme and Gorton leaflets with additional information such as support with evictions, electricity and gas were hand delivered.

Communication: Most of the MAGs used social media as their primary form of external communication. In addition the area around the Old Abbey Taphouse in Hulme sent out a weekly newsletter, and in Ardwick and Longsight volunteers were recruited who spoke community languages, to help get information out to those who may have been missed by other forms of communication. Hulme set up an internet radio station and in Levenshulme the Inspired People’s Project had a weekly show on the local community radio station, ALL FM.

Mental health and wellbeing activities have been a focal point for Ardwick and Longsight with them delivering a project called 'Find Me A Home' which called for donations from local residents to support users to maintain the Five Ways of Wellbeing during lockdown. In the week titled 'Connect', the group generated donations of laptops, radios and televisions which were shared with people who were in need of devices, specifically benefiting older residents. Volunteers also did personalised poems and artwork to share in the food parcels, demonstrating connection to their community in this difficult time.

Roles

Overall project lead, an **administrator** and a **volunteer coordinator**. The volunteers cover the phone line, go shopping/pack/deliver food, and run the social media. (Fallowfield, Ardwick & Longsight)

A **core group of facilitators/admins**, keeping in touch with street coordinators through email. (Levy Corona Helpers)



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Street coordination is usually done through WhatsApp, with door knocking & phone calls for neighbours not on WhatsApp. It means geographical coverage can be easily mapped and gaps addressed. In Hulme, the Old Abbey Taphouse TV Diners project used AirTable to coordinate and link volunteers to people requesting food.

Learning from Central Manchester Stories

On Wednesday 17th June 2020, the centrally-based Health Development Coordinators facilitated a Zoom meeting for around 15 people from different mutual aid groups across central Manchester to discuss how their projects had developed as a result of Covid-19, and to share learning. The aim was to provide an opportunity for the mutual aid groups to network with one another, and share local information / resources to maximise their efforts, while supporting them to think about the longer term future of their groups. A number of learning points were discussed at this meeting, summarised below:

1. **Communities can organise themselves quickly, flexibly and put in place the appropriate structures and support to meet the different needs of local communities.**

It was confirmed at the meeting that most, if not all, of the mutual aid groups in Central Manchester were in place and operating at a very local level before Manchester City Council was able to fully set up their Community Response helpline, delivering food and collecting medicines. **Levy Corona Helpers** is a good example of mutual aid mobilised in this way, as described in the ‘models and approaches’ section of this document.

Local mutual aid groups were able to respond to requests for halal and culturally appropriate food which wasn’t generally available from the statutory sector, and were able to get food to people on the day they realised they needed it and in the right amounts.

However, as things progressed, a growing awareness of isolation and its impact on people’s health and wellbeing began to emerge. In response, a number of local initiatives were quickly established e.g. Levenshulme Inspire set up a befriending ‘phone tree’ which encouraged and supported older people to communicate with each other by phone, or receive a check-in phone call from a helper. The group also established weekly ‘coffee and chat’ Zoom calls. Other activities across central Manchester included a community craft project in Chorlton; Gorton Visual Arts sent out art packs, and lockdown bingo and karaoke in Hulme. Further information on the activities started by mutual aid groups in response to the pandemic can be found in the preceding ‘activities’ section of this document.



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2. The role of community leaders and local organisations is crucial.

Several mutual aid groups set up 'street coordinators', which involved people both familiar to their neighbours and familiar with hyper-local needs. They set up new community-led networks where needed. **Whalley Range Covid-19 Mutual Support Group** is one group that has used this approach - see 'models and approaches'.

Other groups mobilised local organisations, services and other resources that they knew about - adapting and innovating services to meet immediate needs, and getting leaflets through doors quickly both offering support and seeking people who could take things on. Local anchor organisations often have the infrastructure and volunteer processes already in place, and some city-wide services were useful such as Manchester Community Central. See the **Ardwick & Longsight** example in models and approaches.

Trust and relationships are key. Everyone was thrown into an unknown situation and had to pull together as a community to meet the needs of the people within it. People in trusted positions in communities were able to make change happen more effectively, and where people were already in positions of trust with the council or other key partners, significant support and resources could be 'unlocked'.

3. Mutual aid groups quickly recognised that not all people had access to relevant information. For some this was due to 'digital exclusion' (lack of electronic devices or wifi), or having English as an additional language.

Mutual aid groups were able to step in quickly to deliver leaflets with a central contact point (**Gorton and Abbey Hey**) or via street coordinators (**Levenshulme/Chorlton**); providing a channel through which accurate and up-to-date information about covid-19 and local and citywide support services could be cascaded to as many residents as possible. One group set up a dedicated phone line for residents to request help; the phone was rotated between helpers, five days a week. (**Ardwick and Longsight**). This group also had many volunteers who spoke multiple languages (15 in total), who were able to communicate with residents in a suitable format for them. Also, bike deliveries and hot meal deliveries door to door were cited as key responses for people with no access to the digital world.



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4. **The groups identified the shifting nature of support-giving in the wider context.** Some groups were overwhelmed by offers of support and could not take on any more helpers, whereas others needed very specific types of help e.g. people who could speak community languages, delivery drivers, and people who could help with packing food parcels. Due to the nature of the pandemic the helpers also changed over time. Some became ill or had to self-isolate, and others had to return to work. Many who had to self-isolate were still able to provide a functional role e.g admin, making phone calls etc.



Next steps/transition through lockdown easing

A general legacy is that there is now a much stronger network and infrastructure of local community groups and organisations, and willing 'helpers' to offer their time and support.

Before Covid there was activity to develop an **Ardwick & Longsight Good Neighbours scheme**. This is what the MAG will transition into, but how and when is to be decided (by the group) in the coming weeks.

A **Love Fallowfield Group** is being developed, but what this will look like is still being worked out. Activities will bring people together and encourage community cohesion.

The **Whalley Range** Facebook page and Street Coordinator's group will continue to be used to share good news stories & activities from the street groups; encouraging other groups to use the street groups as a foundation for people to think more generally about collective solutions to issues and needs..

Walk Ride Whalley Range is bringing people together to take action to make streets safer for walking and cycling, and enable physical distancing during this period.

A **Digital Inclusion** project in Levenshulme is refurbishing old and unused digital equipment, donating it to those without access to digital technology, and supporting set up of the equipment.

Chorlton Bike Deliveries are canvassing local people to see what they would like to see from the service in the future.

In **Hulme** bunting is being made, and they are looking forward to when they can all come together and meet for a community feast!



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Support



[Manchester Community Central \(Macc\)](#) is the organisation which supports the voluntary community and social enterprise sector in the city of Manchester. Any mutual aid group in Manchester can receive free ongoing advice and support from Macc.

Examples of support we offer include: offering funding advice and helping groups create policies, procedures and resources. If groups are considering developing into a more formal organisation we can offer support in partnership with the [Macc Capacity Building Team](#). Get in touch with [Tom Waring](#).

buzz [buzz Health and Wellbeing Service](#) have a team of Neighbourhood health workers (NHWs) who can support local people to help turn ideas, ambitions and conversations into new projects or help existing projects who need support to continue, adapt or grow. We can support Mutual Aid Groups to:

Manchester Health & Wellbeing Service

- connect with local or citywide organisations/networks;
- share local neighbourhood knowledge and contact information;
- offer small financial grants to support development of projects;
- help to promote groups through neighbourhood networks;
- provide health promotion information and research for funding bids;
- support engagement with residents in a community setting, or online, to listen to their ideas for new projects.

[Health Development Coordinators](#) (HDCs) support people to [improve their wellbeing](#), through breaking down the barriers together that get in the way of building stronger, healthier communities.



They do this by taking a [Community Development](#) approach and working in partnership with a range of organisations and services across the health, social care and the voluntary, community and social enterprise sectors. Central HDCs can support community groups and organisations to:

- network and learn from each other;
- take any concerns to strategic partners;
- promote a greater understanding of Community Development and its role in reducing [health inequalities](#).

[Further information](#) about how MACC, buzz and HDCs can support mutual aid groups.



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Further useful advice and find your nearest group

[Covid Mutual Aid Network UK](#) (includes safeguarding, safety & data protection advice)

[Manchester Community Central mutual aid page](#) (includes a Manchester map of groups)



With thanks to: [Ardwick and Longsight Mutual Aid Group](#); [Castlefield, Britannia Basin and Hulme Covid 19 support group](#); [Chorlton Coronavirus Community Response](#); [Fallowfield vs Coronavirus](#); [Food Response Network \(Rusholme, Moss Side and Burnage\)](#); [Gorton Corona Helpers](#); [Levy Corona Helpers](#); [Manchester Community Central](#); [Redbricks Covid 19 support](#); [The Old Abbey Taphouse TV Dinners](#); [Whalley Range Covid19 mutual support group](#).

This document was developed by the Central Locality MLCO [Health Development Coordinators](#) with the invaluable input of residents involved in mutual aid groups. We focus on [health inequalities](#), [social determinants of health](#) & a [Community Development approach](#). Version 2.3, July 2020. Latest version at <https://tinyurl.com/mutualaidlearningMCR>



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