

Working paper 2: What the existing research tells us

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Introduction

The [Mobilising Voluntary Action](#) project is generating UK wide findings to inform recovery and future pandemic preparedness. This working paper explores some of the key themes from a thematic analysis of more than 70 research reports, representing a range of organisations across the UK including intermediaries and infrastructure organisations, volunteer involving organisations (VIO's) and local authorities. Many of these reports were written following the first lockdown, perhaps – with the benefit of hindsight - prematurely reflecting on what recovery would look like. The main trends are comparable across the four nations, yet the key differences relate to the structures, systems and approaches that have supported the mobilisation of voluntary action at different geographical scales. Subsequent working papers will reflect on the divergence in policy frameworks that have underpinned the mobilisation of voluntary action. This paper is structured in two distinct parts, firstly, taking stock of voluntary action trends during the pandemic and secondly by reflecting on recommendations put forth to inform national recovery.

1. Taking stock of what happened

Six key themes have been identified that capture the most consistently reported trends across the existing literature.

Mutual Aid and hyper-local activity:

One of the most remarkable features during the first lockdown was the speed at which communities and hyper local groups organised to provide emergency support to members of their community. During the first lockdown in March 2020 4000 mutual aid groups were registered on the COVID Mutual Aid UK website. [Tiratelli and Kaye \(2020: 28\)](#) argued that, “these groups are not a ‘nice-to-have’ they are of decisive importance to the health and welfare of thousands of people”.

Many of these early responses gravitated around food and medicine but in some cases evolved with the pandemic to support families home-schooling or with wellbeing initiatives like befriending. In many cases these more informal networks were able to respond quicker than formal organisations ([Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020](#); [Wilson et al.,](#)

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[2021](#)) who faced the challenges of digitising services, furloughing staff, and the mass transition to remote working ([Cretu, 2020](#)). This surge in support was also manifest in an increased sense of neighbourliness with immediate neighbours in the same street and [Jones et al., \(2020\)](#) found that 46.2% of neighbours wanted to get more involved in their neighbourhood in the future.

Local responses were responsive to local needs ([Curtin et al., 2021](#)). Mutual aid represented a form of place-making, and the spirit of mutualism fostered **trust** within communities. As [Alakeson and Brett \(2020:19\)](#) note, “it is their home too and they are trusted because they are not providing a service so much as supporting the place where they live”. [Tiratelli and Kaye \(2020\)](#) identified that **informality** was a key factor that allowed mutual aid groups to be agile and responsive, yet this informality was difficult to manage with many groups adopting undemocratic structures and facing challenges sustaining the enthusiasm of volunteers as the crisis continued.

Collaboration and Partnership:

Another widely reported theme in the existing research was the spirit of collaboration and partnership that was galvanised across sectors and within organisations after the onset of the crisis. [Cretu \(2020\)](#) remarked that the crisis was a catalyst for change in local government. Rather than working in silos, multi-disciplinary teams were created with staff redeployed to triage calls and respond to requests for help.

Bureaucratic processes were streamlined, and data sharing helped to quickly identify those in need. Collaboration allowed for flexible responses, recognising that local government actors were not always ‘best placed’ to respond. In the context of food banks, [Cretu \(2020: 34\)](#) noted that many people go directly to food banks, “because of the stigma of accessing councils’ services and fear of being referred for social care intervention”.

This spirit of collaboration and partnership between various actors was however geographically uneven within countries, with no standard approaching to mobilising organisations and volunteers to respond. [The MOVE project](#) (a collaboration between the Universities of Sheffield, Hull, and Leeds) has added to our understanding of the range of approaches to partnership working, introducing three models that describe the different ways voluntary action was coordinated at different geographical scales.

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The first model involved local infrastructure organisations taking a lead role in brokering relationships, in the second responses were coordinated through a network of local hubs, and in the third there was a collaborative multi-agency approach involving formal organisations alongside informal groups, representing “a ‘whole community’ response based upon place-based partnerships” ([Burchell et al., 2020: 18](#)). The response model adopted was dependent on a range of factors including the strength of existing relationships between statutory services, the voluntary sector and communities and the size of the area.

The degree of collaboration also varied amongst different actors, of particular interest is the relationship between mutual aid groups and local authorities. In many cases the local council had served as an, “invaluable partner and source of expertise” ([Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020: 22](#)), in other cases local government were deemed to be “getting in the way” (p.23) with the collaboration style likened to micromanagement. For Tiratelli and Kaye (2020:24), “supportive councils find ways to facilitate **without** crowding out the community” and the best approach is one that sees “community action as important and worthy of support rather than as a source of amateurism and needless challenge”.

Tensions also arose between national and local responses. In England, the NHS Responders scheme had to be closed within 6 days after 750,000 people stepped forward to volunteer ([Royal Voluntary Service, 2020](#)). While such enthusiasm to volunteer was celebrated by the media, [Thiery et al., \(2020: 28\)](#) commented on the “inherent challenge of creating centralised solutions to local challenges” with numerous reports mentioning the oversupply of volunteers the scheme produced.

Innovation:

The pandemic also accelerated modernisation, encouraging more agile ways of working and leading to the large-scale digitisation of services, particularly within local authorities ([Cretu, 2020](#)). Digital technologies were increasingly used to identify pockets of need and to mobilise volunteers in response. [Kay and Morgan \(2021\)](#) also identified new approaches to funding for community led initiatives with priorities determined by communities themselves.

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Inequality and need:

Despite these innovations the pandemic exacerbated and brought into sharper focus pre-existing inequalities, as well as leading to the emergence of new pockets of need. The impact on the voluntary sector was vastly unequal, while 'going digital' provided many community groups and VIO's the opportunity to engage with a wider geography, some projects were impossible to imagine in a virtual format. Remote or online volunteering may have enabled those shielding to volunteer from home, yet [Donahue et al., \(2020: 17\)](#) identified the negative impact for others, finding that some LGBTQI+ groups reported losing a "safe space to volunteer". Moreover, organisations dependent on trade, including social enterprises and charity shops have been adversely impacted with [Volunteer Scotland](#) revealing in October 2020 that 80% of social enterprises had seen or were expecting to see a negative impact on their income (Maltman, 2020).

[A December 2020](#) study by Glasgow University exposed the impacts of the pandemic on marginalised groups who were 'left out and locked down', including increasingly punitive measures for individuals in the criminal justice system and an intensified sense of 'life on hold' for refugees and asylum seekers. The study speculated about the potential emergence of a social form of 'long COVID' (Armstrong and Pickering, 2020).

[Grotz et al., \(2020\)](#) drew attention to the health and wellbeing impact on older adults who had been stepped down from their volunteering roles in accordance with government guidelines and the British Red Cross reported on widespread loneliness and social isolation especially amongst those who had continued to shield by choice ([British Red Cross and Britain Thinks, 2020](#)). It was also widely reported that the digital divide has never been more apparent with digital exclusion significantly impacting access to community activities, services and volunteering opportunities ([Young et al., 2020](#)).

2. Recovery: Hopes, Fears and Recommendations

The literature not only documents what happened during the pandemic, but many reports make recommendations to inform recovery. Across these reports there is an appreciation that while the pandemic has placed enormous pressure on organisations, there are some innovations and novel approaches that could be carried through into

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the future. This section provides a summary of some of the most widely reported hopes, fears and recommendations related to recovery.

Funding and Investment

There was widespread uncertainty about the future funding landscape with calls for more **flexible funding** supporting core costs *rather than* project costs to enable organisations to respond more flexibly to future crises and quite simply, to secure their future existence ([Wilson et al., 2020a](#); [Wilson et al., 2020b](#); [Coutts, 2020](#); [Welsh Senedd, 2021](#)).

Community-level and hyper-local activity have been significant, especially during the first lockdown, and there is a widespread sense that where public services had been investing in new ways of working with communities and the voluntary sector **pre-COVID**, there was a better response ([Deacon et al., 2020](#); [Wilson et al., 2021](#); [Wylar, 2020](#)). Similar trends were reported in areas prone to flooding. **Social and community-led infrastructure** have proven their worth and enabled joined-up responses built on existing relationships of **trust** ([Macmillan, 2020](#); [Wilson et al., 2020b](#)). The Welsh Senedd study emphasised the importance of acknowledging the infrastructure that has underpinned responses, so it is not taken for granted ([Welsh Senedd, 2021](#)). Consequently, research has called for investment in community-wealth and capacity building/ and to allocate budgets for communities to sustain local action ([Cretu, 2020](#); [Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020](#)). Investing in communities of place is seen as one way to sustain the involvement of those who've helped their community without necessarily identifying as a volunteer ([Ellis Paine, 2020](#)).

Engagement and Voice

Several reports advocated for a people-powered recovery promoting civic empowerment and participation to elevate the voices of citizens in policy making ([Deacon et al., 2020](#)). A report by the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee of the Welsh Senedd emphasised the importance of including the voluntary sector in emergency planning at national, regional, and local levels ([Welsh Senedd, 2021](#)).

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Volunteer engagement-was another key theme encompassing the difficulties of *not only* sustaining the involvement of new volunteers, but in re-engaging with those who had to shield ([Boelman, 2021](#); [Welsh Senedd, 2021](#); [Ellis Paine, 2020](#); [McCabe et al., 2020](#); [Bevan Foundation, 2020a](#)). The furlough scheme and increase in homeworking enabled many to volunteer for the first time and [Tiratelli and Kaye \(2020\)](#) found that more working age people were involved in mutual aid groups than other kinds of voluntary activities. As such, many reports called for renewed attention on employer supported volunteering to enable working age adults to engage in the future ([Coutts, 2020](#)); [Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020](#)). The [Relationships Project \(2020\)](#) moves beyond demographics by exploring the diverse range of motivations to volunteer during the pandemic. The Active Neighbours report identifies 5 personas, suggesting pathways to secure the continued engagement of that 'type' of volunteer (I. Robinson, 2021).

There's anecdotal evidence that the vaccine rollout is influencing some to return to volunteering yet there is still **much** more to learn about how organisations are striking a balance between making volunteers feel safe and supported without pressuring them to re-engage before they feel ready, especially with new variants circulating.

Relationships and Partnerships

Partnership working is continuing to shape the response to the pandemic, most notably through the collaboration between the voluntary sector and health service to support the vaccine rollout. Although we observed new and strengthened partnerships within communities, between organisations and across sectors during the pandemic many are concerned that in an uncertain funding landscape partnership will give way to competition and gatekeeping. As one council member remarked: "dealing with money scarcity is hardly a space for innovation" ([Cretu, 2020:40](#)).

Many reports called for measures to support future partnership working based on an honest assessment of who is best placed to respond dependent on the task at hand ([Welsh Senedd, 2021](#); [Deacon et al., 2020](#)). [Burchell et al \(2020: 8\)](#) encouraged local authorities to undertake an, "enabling role, acting as the 'safety net', providing back-up support to enable other organisations to provide the 'hands-on' support". Tiratelli and Kaye (2020) offer a comprehensive list of ways that formal organisations can

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support mutual aid in the future, most notably by providing expert advice on safeguarding, managing risk, and securing funding. The pandemic has also provided an opportunity to look beyond a binary of informal vs formal volunteering. Informal groups have forged links with formal organisations, and formal organisations have gained ‘community intelligence’ by collaborating with informal actors at the local level ([Wilson et al., 2020a](#)).

Meeting Societal Challenges

Lastly, all reports expressed concerns about the increasing severity and wide-ranging nature of societal need, most notably digital exclusion, mental health and loneliness and social isolation ([British Red Cross and Britain Thinks, 2020](#); [Welsh Senedd, 2021](#); [The Bevan Foundation, 2020b](#)). These issues will shape the future volunteering landscape and determine what kind of roles exist and how voluntary effort is likely to be mobilised in response. Engaging in volunteering could provide a way for individuals who are lonely or isolated to slowly re-engage with society and boost their overall wellbeing as a result.

The Road to Recovery

It remains to be seen how these recommendations will translate into action as we embark on the long road to recovery. While there is much to be hopeful about there is also widespread concern about the deep-seated societal issues and structural inequalities that the pandemic has exacerbated. Organisations are being encouraged to ‘build back better’ ([Ellis Paine et al., 2021](#)) with little recognition for the impact on staff, many of whom are experiencing burnt-out after more than 15 months in crisis response mode

Many organisations are pre-occupied with day-to-day activity and do not have the time or space to consider what recovery means, and plan strategically. As the Relationships Project argue, perhaps we first need time to recuperate and heal before embarking on a process of recovery, only then can we reflect on what innovations and changes we wish to take forward (D. [Robinson, 2021](#)).

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The MVA study

This analysis of existing research formed a key component of the Mobilising Voluntary Action project and shaped the design of our four-nation survey, enabling us to ensure our research complements and advances knowledge. Our survey is capturing the volunteering responses (plural) over the course of the crisis as pandemic restrictions have constrained and enabled voluntary action. We are investigating how the protracted nature of the crisis has impacted motivations to volunteer and will consider the significance of different stages of the crisis on the type of volunteers stepping forward, the nature of their roles and the needs they are responding to. Our surveys are identifying which parts of the voluntary sector may require further support to re-emerge and re-engage in a post COVID world. We are also capturing how organisations are planning to re-connect with their traditional volunteer cohort who may have been inactive during the pandemic, while sustaining the involvement of new volunteers. Moreover, our findings will gather the perspectives of organisations on what 'innovations' or 'learnings' may be here to stay. Subsequent reports will share the findings from our data collection activities and make further recommendations to contribute to strategic conversations around recovery.



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