



Understanding local patterns of volunteer activity during COVID-19

The Young Foundation

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About this paper

This research, commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and conducted by The Young Foundation, seeks to improve understanding of the ways in which volunteers were mobilised at local authority levels in England during the COVID-19 pandemic, with the overarching aim to support future policy development on volunteering. The report has been researched and written independently. The findings reflect the experiences of community organisations, local authorities and funding bodies, among others during the spring and summer of 2020.

About the authors

The Young Foundation's mission is to develop better connected and stronger communities across the UK. We research in and with communities to increase the understanding of community life today. We offer different methods and approaches to involve communities and grow their capacity to own and lead change. We provide tools and resources to support innovation to tackle the issues people and communities care about. We're an accredited research organisation, social investor and community practitioner.

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1. Introduction

Volunteers have played a pivotal role in the response to COVID-19¹. From providing food and medical provisions, to telephone befriending services, and offering to transport people to medical appointments, volunteers have been instrumental in supporting communities throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (NCVO, 2020). It is likely that a variety of different volunteering models, ways of working, and approaches likely developed over time and have continued to evolve as local partners adapt to the different phases of COVID-19 restrictions and resulting local needs.

This research, commissioned by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and conducted by The Young Foundation, explored volunteering during COVID-19. It provides an account of the voluntary response to COVID-19 at a local authority level and identifies some policy implications and areas for further research.

Completed between January and March 2021, this research took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic when volunteering efforts were evolving and where evidence gathering and publication on the volunteer response to COVID-19 were limited. It therefore considers what was a 'real time' topic as it continued to evolve, and the research team acknowledges the challenges and opportunities that this brings in designing and delivering research. It is hoped that this work can help to highlight areas for further research.

1.1 Defining volunteering

The term 'volunteering' is typically used in academia, education, government, communities and the VCSE sector to refer to activities that are thought to provide individual and communal benefits and involve some kind of donation of time to help others (Fox, 2019; NCVO, 2020). In this research, volunteering relates to particular activities that helped to support communities during attempts to suppress the spread of COVID-19 in a local context and include delivering food, medicine and essential supplies, fuel assistance, referrals, providing transport for essential appointments, supporting with accessing online services and combating loneliness, for example. In wider uses of the word, volunteering is broken down into two categories - 'formal' and 'informal' volunteering (Community Life Survey, 2013-2021). The terms adopted by DCMS, as well as other public sector and civil society organisations, define formal volunteering as giving unpaid help through clubs or organisations, while informal volunteering is taken to mean giving unpaid help and support outside these organised channels to someone who is not a family member (DCMS, 2017; 2020).

However, over the last two decades, the idea of volunteering and what it means or who participates has been contested (Lukka and Ellis, 2001). It has also been recognised that the existing definitions of volunteering can exclude the more informal activities of those involved in various local and community settings (Sixsmith and Boneham, 2003). For example, it could be argued that neighbours, family and friends helping each other out are equally part of an informal volunteering network (Lukka and Ellis, 2001). The Community Life Survey (2020/2021) captures some of this variety, including 'babysitting or caring for children, keeping in touch with someone who has difficulty getting out and about, or helping out with household tasks such as cleaning, laundry or shopping' as informal

¹ The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions were announced in England in March 2020. As a result, many limitations were placed on people's lives throughout the country, including the closure of businesses and schools, the order to stay at home wherever possible, and the allowance of exercise for just one hour per day. These restrictions remained in place until June 2020, when they were gradually eased.

volunteering activities, yet this still only applies to non-relatives and research is needed to understand if this is how individuals self-define their actions.

However, the pandemic has highlighted that categorising volunteering efforts, for example, into formal/informal or locally/centrally coordinated, is complex. Understanding the different types and ways in which people volunteered over the pandemic is important in planning for future local volunteering.

1.2 Scope of research and methods overview

Research objectives

This research looks at the ways in which volunteer responses have worked and developed in relation to the range of different challenges and contexts faced locally during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is intended to help inform future volunteering-led responses and to improve understanding of the contribution volunteering (and the infrastructure that enables it) makes to the resilience and civic life of a local area. We aimed to address the following research questions:

- How have volunteer groups worked and developed in response to local challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What infrastructure has enabled these volunteer responses?
- What were local areas' experiences of volunteer mobilisation in spring-summer 2020 in England?
- How far might the presence of mutual aid groups be correlated with different features and benefits for local areas?

This research focuses on experiences of volunteer mobilisation in local areas² in the spring and summer months of 2020 during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in England.³ It uses both qualitative and quantitative methods to understand patterns of local volunteer mobilisation during the COVID-19 pandemic. It draws on qualitative research with 34 stakeholders from local councils, combined authorities, community networks and organisations, charities, national funding bodies and digital volunteering platform providers that took place in either semi-structured interviews, workshops or through an advisory group discussion. A full outline of the methodology and interview guides can be found in Appendices A and B, however a summary is provided below.

Rapid scoping review

As the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, with volunteer mobilisation still taking place at the time of writing, there is a very limited evidence base on the theme of volunteering during COVID-19. As such, a scoping review methodology was chosen to rapidly map the literature on the topic and provide an opportunity to identify key concepts, gaps in the research, and types and sources of evidence to inform practice, policymaking, and research (Daudt et al., 2013). It is exploratory in nature and aimed to understand relevant themes and emerging research on the topic of volunteer mobilisation. This took a more inclusive view of the evidence to be included than more traditional forms of evidence review. It consisted of a review of relevant academic and grey literature as well as blogs, news articles and other forms of journalism and informed the research plan and sampling strategy as well as this final report. Existing and emerging insights were synthesised into several broad themes related to local volunteer experiences alongside more local perspectives⁴ of COVID-19 volunteering.

² In this research, 'local' refers to the geographic boundaries of local authority areas unless otherwise noted. 'Hyper-local' refers to much smaller geographies, such as a neighbourhood.

³ This research focuses on the period of initial mobilisation, around the end of March 2020, to the summer months of June and July when England began to emerge from a period of tight lockdown.

⁴ In this research, the term 'local' is used to demarcate a town or a city, typically defined by the geographic boundaries of a local authority. 'Hyper-local' is used to refer to neighbourhoods, or smaller geographic areas within the geographic boundaries of a local authority.

The findings from this review were also used to define thematic areas of enquiry which formed the basis for qualitative work of this research.

Advisory group

To inform the initial research plan, an advisory group of stakeholders was convened to provide knowledge and expertise regarding local volunteering responses to COVID-19. The role of the group was to identify key themes to explore, local areas of interest, additional strategic stakeholders and data sources. This advisory group was attended by 11 strategic stakeholders from the voluntary sector, research institutions and local councils with a range of hyper-local and national experiences. These individuals were chosen based on their knowledge and expertise of volunteering, as well as their involvement in strategic and operational processes relating to the COVID-19 volunteer response. They were engaged through DCMS and The Young Foundation's networks. The advisory group was convened through a roundtable format, allowing open discussion on four key themes: participant perspectives of local mobilisation in response to COVID-19; existing evidence that could be used as part of this research; suggestions for who we should engage in this research (specific individuals and participant types); and their hopes for this research and how this could be achieved. The insights gathered through the conversation helped inform the research plan and also presented the idea that actionable insights from the research could have wider value for national and local stakeholders coordinating volunteer responses, alongside DCMS's use of the research.

Qualitative research

Following the rapid scoping review and the convening of the advisory group, interviews and workshops were conducted with strategic and operational stakeholders who were connected closely to local volunteer responses.

The sampling strategy for both the interviews and workshops primarily used a purposive sampling method, commonly used in qualitative research (Ritchie et al, 2013). This meant selection was guided by a set of primary and secondary criteria to capture a diversity of views and experiences across different organisations that participated in efforts of local volunteer mobilisation. To ensure a diverse range of voices and experiences were heard, this research first ensured the sample contained a mix of local authorities, charity organisations, and volunteer networks. It then took into consideration the geographic distribution and composition (urban/rural) of these organisations, prior levels of volunteering, and council structures. The gender and ethnicity balance of the participants representing these groups was also monitored to ensure that different perspectives were being heard.

Semi-structured interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of volunteer mobilisation efforts across different local contexts. A set of interview guides were developed based on the findings of the scoping review and the areas that were determined as being relevant for additional enquiry. These guides covered such themes as organisation response, social capital and infrastructure needs and the potential future impact of volunteering on the area (see Appendix B). A total of 14 interviews were conducted by The Young Foundation with representatives from local councils, combined authorities, community networks and organisations, charities, national funding bodies and digital volunteering platform providers.

Building on the rich stories developing through the interviews, two workshops were hosted to extend and test the emerging themes on key factors and patterns that have determined how local areas have responded to COVID-19, what they found useful and what they would retain. The workshops aimed to: provide a space for organisations to reflect on their pandemic experience, learn from each other and network; develop and refine a list of key factors (and the tools/support systems) that influenced the local response; and draw connections between factors, mapping local patterns and relationships.

The interviews and workshops were conducted with a mix of strategic and operational stakeholders, however we interviewed more strategic stakeholders (such as directors of community organisations or senior staff in local authorities involved in decision-making on the local response) and the workshops

had more operational staff (such as those involved in more coordination and front-line delivery, including operation managers at community organisations and coordination of mutual aid groups). This was because we were interested in comparing and contrasting operational responses as part of this research, through facilitated conversations between local areas. We had two individuals from the interviews go on to attend the workshops, to draw out extra details of their local response and to stimulate conversation with other attendees. For further details, please see the sample tables in Appendix A.

The qualitative research was analysed using a general inductive approach. Interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed using an online qualitative data analysis software and the workshops were designed to generate insights from participants that could be coded and analysed during the workshop with participants and refined following by the research team.

The themes drawn out from the qualitative work were combined with key insights from the scoping review allowing a robust narrative to emerge that has formed the basis for this report.

It is important to note that the analysis in this report is not intended to be representative or measure the incidence of behaviours or circumstances. Rather, it aims to understand a range and diversity of experiences.

Quantitative research

The overarching objective of the quantitative part of this study was to explore what secondary data could tell us about the patterns and models of volunteering during COVID-19, with particular reference to mutual aid groups. We did this by carrying out an exploratory data analysis comparing the geographical distribution of known mutual aid groups with levels of personal wellbeing, levels of gross domestic product per capita, the total amount of COVID-19 grant awarded and the number of community owned assets in an area.

Initial hypotheses were made about the nature of the relationship between these variables and these hypotheses were then explored primarily through correlation analysis⁵ but also through the construction of a linear regression model.⁶ Full details about the provenance of the datasets, as well the analysis itself, is available in Appendix A. The analysis included data for Wales and Scotland wherever possible to maximise robustness. However, only results for England are included in the main body of the report.

Limitations of this research

This research has limitations that arise from the recent nature of this topic, the time constraints of this research and the availability of relevant data.

New and emerging subject

As far as the authors are aware this is one of the first research projects exploring volunteering during COVID-19, and new research and insights are now being published frequently. As a result, there may be new insights about volunteer mobilisation that emerge or long-term implications of volunteer response that are not yet clear and have not been captured in this report. With this in mind, we are aware that this report may be missing some key information that has not yet been published, or that has not been publicly shared. While we were able to summarise and synthesise available research for the scoping review, due to time constraints and the limited evidence base, we were not able to widely

⁵ Correlation analysis measures the strength of relationship between two variables. A correlation coefficient can vary from -1 to $+1$, where ± 1 indicates the strongest possible relationship and 0 the complete lack of a relationship.

⁶ Linear regression is an approach to modelling the relationship between a 'dependent' variable and one or more explanatory variables. In this case the dependent variable was the number of COVID-19 mutual aid groups in an area. (A linear regression model between a dependent variable and a single explanatory variable produces results that are equivalent to correlation analysis.)

compare or rate methodological approaches, risk of bias, or study design which could influence the quality of the scoping review and its comparability to other pieces of research.

Possible missing perspectives

A second limitation was the sample size of the qualitative interview and workshop cohort. This research was able to capture a range of different experiences around processes of volunteer mobilisation, however there may be other types of experiences that were not captured as part of this research, for example, the experience of the volunteers themselves who were involved in the volunteer response. Furthermore, the individuals who we engaged in this research were often from local areas that had a successful volunteer response, as compared to those areas with a less strong volunteer presence. This factor influenced the sample size and the perspectives that have been captured as part of this research as a result.

Limited quantitative data on mutual aid groups

The final limitation relates to the quantitative analysis where our analysis is dependent on the self-identification and reporting of mutual aid groups in the datasets used. As detailed in the research above, there are questions about the definitions of this form of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic, and data on the nature of mutual aid groups in different local areas is limited. For example, the data source used for this work (Covid-19 mutual aid) does not provide information about the relative size and scope of the mutual aid groups, just how many have registered. As such, the mutual aid group analysis should be treated with caution and considered as indicative.

1.3 Structure of this report

The following chapters bring together analysis from the scoping review as well as the primary qualitative and quantitative research. Following this introduction:

- **Chapter two** describes the ways in which local volunteering responses were initially established and how they evolved over time to adapt to the changing circumstances.
- **Chapter three** then describes the complexities of volunteering, highlighting the importance of recognising both 'informal' and 'formal' efforts, the role of volunteers and how the COVID-19 pandemic may have shifted the ways in which volunteering has or will be perceived.
- **Chapter four** is about the role of social capital and the various infrastructures which have enabled volunteer responses. It discusses how volunteering has strengthened different types of social capital and seeks to emphasise the role of the local context in understanding volunteer engagement.
- **Chapter five** concludes the report by discussing the key factors, principles and decision points which have emerged from this research that appear to determine how local areas have responded to the volunteer response, as well as what tools can enable local areas to reflect and learn from what's happened in a manner that is useful to their local context and future planning.

2. Establishing and adapting the volunteer response

On 23 March 2020, England entered into a national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Shops and workplaces closed, vulnerable people were told to shield and the majority of the population were told to remain at home when possible. As local communities and authorities adapted to these measures, volunteering was a crucial element in the COVID-19 response.

As this section will illustrate:

- The volunteer response that emerged in this research sample was organic and not initially consciously designed. It involved highly reactive and dynamic responses, with innovative thinking and collaboration between local organisations (e.g. councils, voluntary organisations).
- Participants recounted the ways in which they coordinated their volunteer responses, noting that their path to organisation was iterative and agile, requiring adjustments and changes along the way to meet the ever-changing needs of the community.
- A description of initial mobilisation emerged in which groups and organisations were simply trying to help those in need in any way that they could – not necessarily with formal systems in place.
- It was only as the pandemic evolved that changes in infrastructures and systems were fully considered among this research sample.

2.1 Initial methods of mobilisation

One of the main themes to emerge from this research is how the scale of the pandemic, its unpredictability and the abruptness of change (both in terms of the pandemic changing and government guidance), influenced volunteer mobilisation. It took time for organisations to understand the scale of what was taking place, learn what other responses there were at both local and national scales and find the resources that would aid in organising their volunteer responses. In February 2020, in the weeks prior to the Prime Minister announcing a national lockdown, in some local areas there were discussions about volunteer response, exploring what was available. However, as the situation quickly escalated, so too did the response: *“when lockdown did hit, it escalated very quickly over that week, it move[d] at a lot of pace and quite differently”* (Community Organisation, South West).

Participants in this research recounted that the processes of volunteer mobilisation during the initial weeks of the pandemic were highly responsive and reactive, rather than planned out and fully organised. Decisions on where to allocate resources and how to deploy volunteers were made swiftly and responded to the immediate needs of communities. For example, one community organisation explains, *“There was a very, very rapid process of thinking about what that [volunteer] scheme should cover... In the end, it focused on something quite straightforward about food parcels, and medications, and other key essential things that people needed and couldn't access.”* (Community Organisation, London).

The relevant literature suggests that initially, many volunteer services targeted those who were most vulnerable (NHS England, 2020; Royal Voluntary Service, 2021). This was a result of the highly reactive phase of the response to the pandemic.

Participants described how the capacity for longer-term forward planning was very limited in the early stages of volunteer responses, noting the inevitability of rapid changes and developments as they received more information about the pandemic. This resulted in organisations having difficulties strategising and planning ahead, not having the right systems and ways of operating in place to address the situation, and having to respond to an unprecedented circumstance by developing new solutions. For example, a representative from a local council in London explains how this rapidly unfolding situation made it difficult to strategise, expressing, “Of course, **there was a lot of stuff that was very last-minute and couldn't be planned ahead**”. That led to an immediate focus on the most vulnerable, on those most in need of rapid support. However, as the pandemic progressed and organisations were able to adapt, participants in this research noted that they were able to offer their services to more people. From this, structures of support began to develop and ways of operating were put in place. A representative from a housing association in London explained this process:

As an organisation, it was a very immediate response to: how are we going to deal with this? We've got vulnerable tenants and people are struggling ... There was an emergency response put in place, which was food deliveries ... That was an immediate thing. Then we got more structured...

Participants also noted that taking part in this research was the first time they had been able to reflect on their experiences of COVID-19 volunteer response and were keen to share stories of the challenges they encountered as well as of community strength and togetherness. They described instances of feeling overwhelmed and uncertain, yet proud of the collaborative working and the positive effects that this had on their area. For example, one local councillor from London described the “challenging circumstances” as “**a tsunami that engulfed us, that we'd never experienced anything [like] in our working lives**”. They continue “the fact that we responded to it in a way, and we managed to basically support 10,000 local residents who were asked to shield was, I think, **an incredible achievement**”. This sentiment is echoed by a community organisation in the North West who described that “**it was just absolutely overwhelming really to see that happen so quickly, it was fantastic.**”

Collaborative working, which will be further explored in chapter four, was cited as a particular triumph. Participants noted how working together across different organisations in their local communities helped guide the volunteer response, as well as set the foundations for stronger relationships within local areas. One community organisation praised collaborative working for reducing cross organisational rivalry, explaining:

*We've had to work quite competitively with fellow organisations just by nature of how services have been commissioned and stuff in the past ... **We're now working a lot closer with each other.** There are a couple of other infrastructure organisations in the local area, working together a lot more positively, openly, quite closely really, in ways that I don't think anybody ever would have seen coming (Community Organisation, North East).*

As the experiences outlined above illustrate, the initial volunteer responses to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic were reactive and not pre-planned. Immediate efforts were directed towards food and medical provisions, helping the most vulnerable in the first instance. While the circumstances proved challenging, those who were interviewed as part of this research expressed feelings of pride and joy in their abilities to address the needs of their communities. Over time, and as the pandemic and lockdown continued, the structures, systems and methods of communication associated with volunteer mobilisation began to change. The next section illustrates how organisations, networks, and councils adapted and considered what was needed not only in the moment, but for the future as well.

2.2 Adapting and changing approaches where needed

[Developing a local COVID-19 response model was] “like building the airplane while we were flying it. We took off with one wing and no tail when we’ve put bits together. We’ve got the airplane and now we need to sort out the seats inside to make the ride comfy.”

(Advisory Group Member, Community Organisation, North West)

In May and June of 2020, once the initial crisis mobilisation period of the pandemic was largely perceived as passed by participants, the needs of communities changed. As well as the national lockdown that much of England found itself under for the majority of March-July 2020, there were various local restrictions that also influenced the ways in which communities responded over time. There was a general shift away from emergency food and medical supply provision and towards other needs, including social isolation: “more emphasis was placed on social connections and combating social isolation – through doorstep conversations, telephone support or online activities” (Local Trust, 2020). As a result, participants noted that the approaches to volunteer mobilisation in their local areas changed. As time went on, and it became clear that COVID-19 restrictions would remain for some time going forward, participants recounted how volunteer responses transitioned from short-term crisis modes to longer-term maintenance modes.

Taking a step back to understand the needs of communities, as well as the demand for services, was reported as being a first step for those involved in local volunteer responses. Whereas the initial stages of the pandemic involved quickly adapting new systems to satisfy a large demand, the easing of COVID-19 restrictions meant that these systems could be re-evaluated and refocused. One participant explains:

When the restrictions lifted, [we were] assessing the people that were using the service. Did they need more support than just a shopping volunteer? Did they need actually to be signposted into more services? It was simplified, in that there were less people using the service, but the people that were still using it were more complex in what they needed from it. (Local Council, South West)

While organisations had to navigate the changing needs of the communities themselves, they also had to navigate the complexities of changing volunteer supply, ability and capacity. In particular, participants described how the furlough scheme, the challenge of balancing supply with demand, and volunteer fatigue influenced the ability to organise an effective volunteer response and could be the cause for needing to adapt approaches to volunteer mobilisation.

Shifts in volunteer capacity coinciding with furloughed staff returning to work was noted by participants as heavily influencing the number of volunteers involved in local response efforts. For the participants, the furlough scheme was perceived as having a positive impact on early volunteer numbers, effectively increasing the amount of people who signed up to volunteer. One interviewee explains:

One thing I was told when I visited [the local volunteering service] is that they literally had these incredible volunteers because a lot of them were on furlough in the first lockdown⁷, ...[F]or a few months in the first lockdown, you had this wealth of volunteers who actually...had the time to do it because they were on the government furlough scheme. (Local Council, Greater London)

⁷ The first lockdown refers to the period between 24 March and 4 July 2020 when the majority of England was under government restrictions.

With the lifting of the restrictions in June/July 2020 and the subsequent return to work, research participants reported a decrease in the numbers of volunteers. Reflecting on issues of volunteer capacity, one participant described:

*What's tricky is to think about how much of this is dependent on people being on furlough. We're seeing an interesting [pattern during] meetings recently where people were saying that...**because people are now coming off furlough, the volunteer levels are dropping** (Volunteer Network, Yorkshire).*

The pattern of furlough and its influence on the number of volunteers, however, was not linear. The government's strategy to curb the spread of COVID-19 has changed a number of times since the start of the pandemic and participants recounted how volunteer numbers reflected these changes. One organisation described how the furlough scheme influenced their volunteer numbers:

*We've had loads of volunteers who have been furloughed and then gone back to work when restrictions changed. Then it's like, 'Right, okay, no bother. Hopefully see you soon but if not have a nice life. Keep in touch.' Then [they] have come back to us and said, '**Actually, I've been furloughed again. Have you got anything for me?**' (Community Organisation, North East).*

The task of balancing volunteer supply and demand during the early stage (March-June 2020) of the pandemic was another challenge reported by those interviewed. With the number of people signing up to volunteer reaching the hundreds of thousands at the early stages of the pandemic in England - such as the response to become an NHS Volunteer Responder (BBC News, April 2020) - organisations received a large amount of support from people willing to donate their time to help others. However, participants, particularly those working in local authorities or within organisations responsible for organising the volunteer response, recounted the challenge of finding enough opportunities for individuals who were eager to volunteer. For example, one participant recalls a sense of frustration that was felt when their area had a large number of volunteers who wanted to help for whom they did not have enough opportunities, while another described how 1,200 people in their local area registered to volunteer, but there wasn't an immediate need for them. Further research is needed to understand why this happened and to provide evidence to support solutions to preventing this situation in the future.

Alongside fluctuations in volunteer numbers and the challenges around this relating to organising a volunteer response, a change in the energy levels of community members over the course of the three lockdowns was also noted as having a significant impact on volunteer capacity and mobilisation. As the pandemic became a more constant feature in our daily lives, community organisations noticed these shifts in energy, among their employed staff and volunteers. This has been reported not only in this research, but in emerging literature more widely (Ferguson, 2020; IFRC, 2020 Whitehead, 2020). For example, Cook (2020) describes the mental health impacts of working in a volunteering capacity during the pandemic: "There was a consensus that the sector is running on significantly limited resources and suffering from volunteer fatigue". These feelings of fatigue can potentially be attributed to volunteering during a pandemic, where not only communities as a whole need more support, but individuals supporting volunteering efforts were simultaneously experiencing stresses in their personal lives. As one participant describes:

*When lockdown two and three happened,⁸ **one of the reasons for the loss of energy was that people were just feeling emotionally exhausted...** it just became less about panic and crisis and more about just dealing with how difficult life had become, and it's harder to give*

⁸ 'Lockdown two' refers to the period between 31 October – 2 December 2020 and 'Lockdown three' roughly refers to the period between 6 January – 29 March 2021. During these time periods, England was under further restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While this research primarily concentrates on capturing the experiences of organisations during the initial months of the pandemic (March – June 2020), participants described additional experiences that took place beyond this initial time frame; this is due to the time period in which this research was conducted.

volunteering energy when your own life has certainly become so difficult (Community Organisation, South West).

While this work did not involve research with volunteers directly, this theme that emerged from those involved in the volunteer response suggests that additional research is needed to fully understand the impact that volunteer fatigue has on efforts of volunteer mobilisation.

2.3 Recognising volunteer mobilisation as an iterative process

When recounting the ways in which volunteer responses changed and adapted over time, participants highlighted the difficulties in coordinating and mobilising a volunteer response in a continually changing situation. Taking time to evaluate and potentially redirect volunteer responses, understanding the impacts of the furlough scheme, balancing the supply and demand of volunteers at different points throughout the pandemic and recognising the influence of volunteer fatigue were all themes that emerged through this research. These themes may also be areas for further research as understanding these challenges in greater depth may bridge research gaps and help provide information to implement strategies aimed at raising, managing and retaining volunteers in times of crisis and uncertainty.

The fact that local organisations went through a period of adjustment and change illustrates the complexities of trying to understand volunteer mobilisation as a static model or a uniform process. What has emerged from this research is that the process of mobilising volunteers throughout the pandemic was an iterative process that relied on flexibility and adaptation based on the needs of individual communities. Volunteer responses varied and changed over time, and with these changes came challenges. The following chapter builds on these dynamic processes of volunteer mobilisation described so far and highlights the complexities of volunteering, and the implications of these complexities for local areas when mobilising their volunteer responses.

3. Complexities of ‘volunteering’

As the previous chapter highlighted, the process of establishing and mobilising a volunteer response could be complex and shifted as time went on. As such, the experiences highlighted by the participants in this research raise questions around how volunteering is understood and the resources it requires. This has important implications for local areas as they will need to understand the different types of volunteering which they may have access to or influence and how less formal aspects of volunteering influence the more formal efforts they seek to direct.

As this section will illustrate:

- The distinction between centrally and locally coordinated volunteering is a complexity revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic revealed about the nature of volunteering. It is a key issue for local areas seeking to effectively mobilise voluntary efforts.
- ‘Informal’ groups played an important role during the COVID-19 pandemic response, suggesting that there is a need to look beyond traditional ‘formalised’ channels of volunteering when wanting to understand more about volunteering in a local area.
- There have been lessons learned during the pandemic that raise important questions around the future of volunteering, including issues of accessibility, balancing existing volunteering efforts with new initiatives and the need for longer term strategies following civic emergencies.

3.1 The role of different types of volunteer groups

Centrally and locally coordinated volunteering

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the expansion of grassroots support and mutual aid groups⁹ placed additional attention on neighbourhood organised forms of volunteering. To better understand areas where mutual aid groups were known to be active, exploratory quantitative data on the geographical distribution of registered mutual aid groups¹⁰ were compared with: levels of personal wellbeing, levels of gross domestic product per capita, total amount of COVID-19 grant awarded and the number of community owned assets in an area. This analysis found that:

- There appears to be **no relationship between the recorded number of mutual aid groups in an area and measures of personal wellbeing** (see Appendix A, Table 4).
- There also appears to be **no relationship between the recorded number of mutual aid groups in an area and levels of GDP per capita** when analysed at the national level, although a moderately strong relationship does appear to exist in the North West of England (see Appendix A, Table 5).
- There does appear to be **a relationship between the recorded number of mutual aid groups in an area and the total amount of COVID-19 grant awarded**. The correlation

⁹ This research understands mutual aid groups as including aspects of both formal and informal volunteering, however they are considered here as informal groups. This reflects their nature as emerging spontaneously, requiring fewer background checks and safeguarding measures for their members, and operating with a largely self-help ethos outside of more established volunteering efforts through a local council or community organisation, for example.

¹⁰ Our analysis uses a dataset of mutual aid groups that have registered on Covid-19 Mutual Aid. As detailed in our research, these data are limited. For example, it does not provide detail on the relative size and scope of the different mutual aid groups, and it just includes those groups that have registered with the site, we do not know how many unregistered mutual aid groups there might be.

coefficient is 0.51 at the national level.¹¹ The effect is particularly notable in London, the North East, South East and West Midlands, with correlation coefficients between 0.57 and 0.85 (see Appendix A, Table 6).

- There also appears to be **a relationship between the recorded number of mutual aid groups in an area and the number of community assets**. The correlation coefficient is 0.45 at the national level. The effect is particularly notable in the North East, South West and West Midlands, with correlation coefficients between 0.58 and 0.91 (see Appendix A, Table 7).

Given the correlations discovered for both the total amount of COVID-19 grant awarded and the number of community assets, a linear regression model was built that incorporated these two variables (and controlled for regional location).¹² This confirmed that each appears to have an independent and statistically significant relationship with the number of registered mutual aid groups (see Appendix A, Table 8).

Volunteering and levels of deprivation

Preliminary analysis of the demographic and political characteristics of registered mutual aid group members (O'Dwyer for LSE, June 2020)¹³ also suggests mutual aid groups functioned more effectively in communities already rich in social capital (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020).¹⁴ While the evidence base on mutual aid groups is emerging, it raises potential questions over whether the distribution of mutual aid groups may be privileging already advantaged communities in relation to their ability to respond to the pandemic and its economic impact. This is important in understanding the wider national volunteer picture during the pandemic. For instance, one participant highlighted how COVID-19 had exacerbated barriers to volunteering within their local area. They describe:

*Actually, **those barriers to volunteering have just been completely exacerbated by COVID...Basically, volunteering is now exclusive.** If you are not a middle-class professional, the door is closed... People only recruited people that they knew personally and trusted, or you had mutual aid groups who are people who can self-organise and self-motivate themselves (Volunteer Network, Yorkshire).*

Volunteer activities like mutual aid can, in some areas, appeal less to certain groups. For instance, there was an example of how people from an ethnic minority group might favour volunteering through faith groups rather than other channels. As a participant from a community organisation based in Greater London explained:

It's not because people aren't willing [that they don't volunteer through mutual aid groups], it's more about the challenges of everyday life...there's huge, huge levels of deprivation and challenges...there was a significant history of volunteering, mostly because a significant proportion of the population are black African, so [...] [they] volunteer with the church.

Although not necessarily representative of wider dynamics, the authors of this report believe that this raises an important point for further exploration: looking at how local perceptions, histories and

¹¹ Correlation analysis measures the strength of relationship between two variables. A correlation coefficient can vary from -1 to +1, where ±1 indicates the strongest possible relationship and 0 the complete lack of a relationship.

¹² Linear regression is an approach to modelling the relationship between a 'dependent' variable (the variable being measured and tested in an experiment) and one or more explanatory variables. In this case the dependent variable was the number of COVID-19 mutual aid groups in an area. (A linear regression model between a dependent variable and a single explanatory variable produces results that are equivalent to correlation analysis.)

¹³ At the time of writing, this research was published as a blog rather than a full report, so it is not possible to comment on the methodology or any limitations.

¹⁴ Social capital is defined as 'networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups' (Keeley, 2007: 103). Popularised by Putnam (1993), social capital theory identifies three forms of social connections; bonding capital, bridging capital and linking capital.

contexts can influence how people engage with different structures of volunteering. It could have implications for how and who local actors engage with, for instance faith leaders.

Other analyses have explored the tension and challenges surrounding these forms of volunteering. For example, a study conducted by Marco Felici of the Bennett Institute for Public Policy in April 2020 found a correlation between the socio-economic profile of an area and the self-reported mobilisation of mutual aid groups (Felici, April 2020). The work of Felici highlights that networks of support (registered mutual aid groups) are reported as being more present where communities are already relatively more affluent, illustrating how geographical inequalities could be reinforcing each other (ibid). However, given the limitations of available mutual aid group data we should be cautious in our interpretation. We do not know how many unregistered mutual aid groups there are and how this might change the overall picture. Other studies reflect these findings and have observed patterns between race and socio-economic levels and the COVID-19 mutual aid group participants in the first lockdown (O'Dwyer, July 2020).

Benefiting communities in other ways - formal and informal volunteering

This research illustrates that there may be other forms of support that people provide, which they do not identify as mutual aid or volunteering, but that have still benefited communities. This shift away from thinking of volunteers through traditional frameworks was recognised by a community organisation in the South West, which runs a local programme aimed at training people in the community to be 'connectors' which involves signposting to and informing friends, family, colleagues and neighbours about how to access support groups, services and information that might help improve their health and wellbeing. When describing their programme, they explain that they don't view the participants as volunteers. They state: "*[we've] always said that we use the word volunteer differently in that for us, our community connectors, our digital connectors, our warm homes connectors aren't volunteers, they're just empowered individuals*".

Another community organisation in London used their previous work in the community and the pandemic period to actively engage in conversations surrounding informal and organisation-led volunteering:

"We made sure that we were very relationship-based in how we interacted with the local community. We spent weeks on weeks, just going for coffees every day [when possible during lockdown] with the same residents, really listening to the issues and the challenges that they had coming up for themselves, and really thinking about what skills and tools they have, or they would like to develop... It really took having those continuous conversations with those same volunteers, making sure we're investing in those relationships to make it happen" (Community Organisation, Greater London).

Related to this, informal volunteering played a significant role in volunteering response. The Community Life COVID-19 Re-contact Survey conducted by DCMS in July 2020 to explore how behaviours changed since the pandemic, found that 21% of respondents took part in regular formal volunteering compared to 47% in regular informal volunteering (DCMS, 2020). The disparity in these figures illustrates that 'informal' volunteering formed a significant part of Covid-19 response volunteering activity, while recognising that a number of factors influence rates of volunteering.¹⁵

Implications

This research suggests that those involved in volunteer mobilisation should have an expansive view of how to define volunteering in order to have a more accurate image of how people might be 'volunteering' in different ways locally, and look beyond what they might be most familiar with. As one participant described:

¹⁵ These figures relate to all volunteering, not just that in support of COVID-19 and there are a number of factors that will affect the rates. For example, one of the reasons that formal rates of volunteering may be lower during the pandemic for example is that because many organisations such as charity shops, libraries, museums and sports clubs had to pause their activity.

We have always had volunteers working for the council. We have those formalised volunteer policies and application rules, and those are really important and will continue to happen. But I think the pandemic really brought to light...those more casual, local, self-managed volunteering things. Actually, it's really hard to measure how important those were because we don't hear from those people because they're being looked after...[Y]ou can't put a number on how many people are supported by their neighbours really, but I think it's a big one. (Local Authority, South West).

The conclusion we draw from this research is therefore in order to effectively mobilise volunteers locally, different partners and actors within local systems should have a good understanding of the kinds of volunteering to which they may have access and influence.

3.2 Beyond transactional volunteering

The role of volunteers and the support they have been able to provide have been key components in meeting the needs of local areas during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the initial months of the pandemic in particular, decisions about how to help local areas through voluntary response were made within a limited timeframe. Responding to the immediate needs of communities in a moment of crisis meant that a lot of the work that volunteers have been employed to do has been transactional in nature (i.e., food and medicine delivery, supporting testing/vaccine centres etc). In this research, participants noted that efforts of volunteers – both informal and formal – were often transactional, meaning that their time was given towards task-based work, where the reward is typically the knowledge that one is able to make a difference (Boas, 1982). Transactional approaches to volunteering focus mainly on tasks to be completed and programmes to be delivered, and often includes specific job descriptions for volunteers. This transactional model was widely deployed in the early stages of the pandemic when communities across the UK required immediate needs – such as food, medicine and access to reliable local information.

Organisations engaged in the primary research also highlighted a shift in the forms of support needed by their community. Throughout the first national lockdown some noted a reduction in food delivery needs as online shopping systems were consolidated amongst priority groups and people became more comfortable directly using digital services. Others, particularly following the reintroduction of further restrictions in Autumn 2020, instead noted an increase in the need for befriending services and longer-term mental health support. This marked a shift towards less transactional and more relational forms of volunteer activity, where personal relationships between the volunteer and the individual being supported became more significant, marking a shift towards a more transformational form of volunteering.

A Royal Voluntary Service report suggests that ‘transformational’ forms of volunteering can have significant benefits not only for the volunteer but can build deeper and more meaningful community connections, building local capacity in the long-term (Royal Voluntary Service, 2021). Transformational volunteering, if volunteers are well trained, their individual skills acknowledged and if communication to better integrate the volunteer into local infrastructures is improved (ibid), can help with volunteer retention, engagement and deepening the role of the volunteer within the organisation (Franz, 2008).

Based on the longevity of the COVID-19 pandemic, the research team believes that voluntary support has and will continue once the immediate and urgent needs of the community are met, raising a question about the role of volunteers beyond the immediate period of crisis as well as about the role of local organisations who work with and coordinate local volunteer responses. Is there a role for volunteers that goes beyond transactional approaches and instead builds their capacity and sustains involvement over the longer term? As an advisory group member from a UK-wide community organisation highlights:

...if we're thinking long term about that social fabric in communities, even the frame around volunteering can feel dated sometimes [and] quite paternalistic ... That might not be helpful in the long term for what we're trying to do around stronger communities where it's much more mutual, reciprocal, long term, active, collective, together ... Volunteering can still be quite transactional or professional.

The same report by the Royal Voluntary Service also argues for a more embedded approach. In discussing the relationship between volunteers and NHS services, they advocate for the volunteer resource that was available during COVID-19 to be permanently embedded into the NHS and social care to deliver on proposed government health care reforms and achieve better outcomes for communities (Royal Voluntary Service, 2021).

Thinking through the role of volunteers beyond the initial moments of mobilisation and direct crisis response highlights the importance of having a long-term strategy when mobilising volunteer responses. Given the uncertainties surrounding the process of volunteer mobilisation at the start of the pandemic, organisations in our research highlighted that those who were not immediately called to assist felt unsure of their role and place within the response and often became disengaged. A volunteer strategy, developed from the outset, that recognises potential goals, both short and long term, can be used to articulate a clear vision for volunteering and the reasons for involving volunteers in different types of capacities, hence solving issues such as volunteer retainment and engagement. Thinking about the longer-term impacts of a volunteer strategy has been perceived as a priority in efforts to support community mobilisation. As one local councillor from London describes:

Volunteering was either seen as you want to volunteer because you've got time on your hands and you're bored, or a route into employment. I think we are trying to marry those up a little bit, the employment and support around it. It's also very much about community mobilisation.

Despite challenges that may occur, thinking about the role and capacity of volunteers in the longer term will be critical in future forms of volunteer response.

3.3 Changing perceptions?

Drawing on the rapid scoping review, the scale and pace at which different routes into volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic have emerged has not gone unnoticed. From the initial 750,000 signups to the NHS Volunteer Responders (BBC News, April 2020) to the over 4,000 registered mutual aid groups across the UK (Cooney, 2020) there have been a significant number of opportunities and people involved in volunteer efforts.

However, while more emphasis has been placed on volunteering during the pandemic, it has also been noted that this is not a new phenomenon. As Paine writes: “what we are witnessing during COVID-19, is not a new form of volunteering, but arguably a recognition and valuing of what has always been there. The question is whether the increased interest that has been generated in it will nurture or stifle its ongoing development” (Paine, 2020).

Questions have emerged around perceptions of volunteering and how the efforts of volunteers during COVID-19 have changed potential ways of working in the future. For example, the community-centred response to the pandemic has created an opportunity for society to develop a new way of working that reflects a more community-centred system (South et al, 2020). There is also a potential opportunity to mobilise people around being a part of a bigger mission, highlighting the power and impact of neighbourly efforts (Clements, 2020). An experience among participants in this research was that there was a sense of something bigger than involvement with individual groups:

*My reflection...is that when we come out of COVID, the support that's out there and the way people have discovered to get involved, isn't necessarily [about] being involved in groups, **but being involved in a movement.*** (Community Organisation, South West)

3.4 Categorising forms of volunteering mobilisation

As this chapter has illustrated, not only is the nature of organising a volunteering response complex, but the COVID-19 pandemic has raised numerous questions around how volunteering is understood and the resources it requires. The research team believes that capturing and making sense of these approaches and factors is important in order to understand the various patterns of mobilisation in different local authorities and the different roles played by the key actors involved, so as to inform future volunteering responses.

The rapid scoping review conducted as part of this research found the Mobilising Volunteers Effectively (MoVE) Project (Burchell et al, 2020; Cook et al, 2020) to be the primary attempt in the existing literature to identify patterns for how local authorities and community partners worked together during the first lockdown to deliver local volunteer responses.¹⁶ This project, which is a collaboration between the Universities of Sheffield, Hull and Leeds, includes findings from 49 semi-structured stakeholder interviews conducted with local authorities, voluntary and community sector organisations and mutual aid groups from England, Scotland and Wales on their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In their second research paper, the MoVE project explores models and frameworks for coordinating community responses (Burchell et al., 2020).

They found four key themes which underpin how local areas have responded, and have been described by Burchell et al (2020) as follows:

1. Pre-existing relationships and partnership working
 - Rapid community responses to COVID-19 have been built upon growing relationships between local authorities and VCSEs (voluntary, community and social sector enterprise)
 - By building upon pre-existing levels of trust and collaboration, groups were able to coordinate a quick response and share roles and responsibilities.
2. Cross-sectoral response cells
 - In most cases coordination of the community response was based around cross-sectoral response cells.
 - These were often multi-agency collaborations with members coming from a broad range of organisations and departments, such as local authorities, VCSs and mutual aid groups for example, representing a transition from traditional silo working towards a place-based response.
3. Enhanced collaborative working and information sharing
 - A key aspect was the ability of groups to work collaboratively, to be flexible in requirements and to be prepared to share information and resources.
 - Local authorities often recognised that they were not always best placed to provide support and ceded control and devolved responsibilities to voluntary and community sector organisations.
4. Local responses versus national strategies
 - National response strategies were criticised for failing to understand local needs and resources, and for being too slow due to excessive checks and procedures

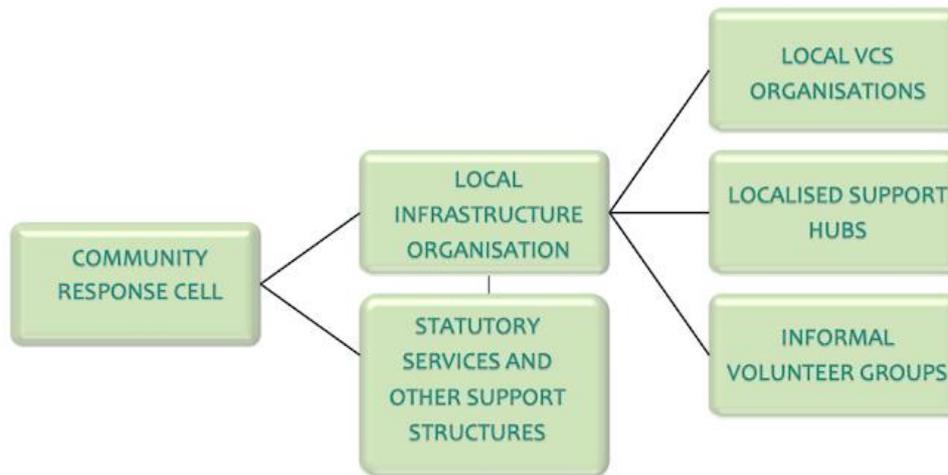
Based on these themes, the MoVE data has developed three main frameworks that are meant to illustrate how volunteer and community support models were coordinated. These models represent

¹⁶ The first UK-wide lockdown came into effect on 23 March 2020 and lasted until 4 July 2020, when the relaxing of restrictions allowed for the reopening of non-essential shops, pubs, restaurants, hairdressers.

generalised overviews in which core distinctive strands of activity, structure and relationships are apparent.

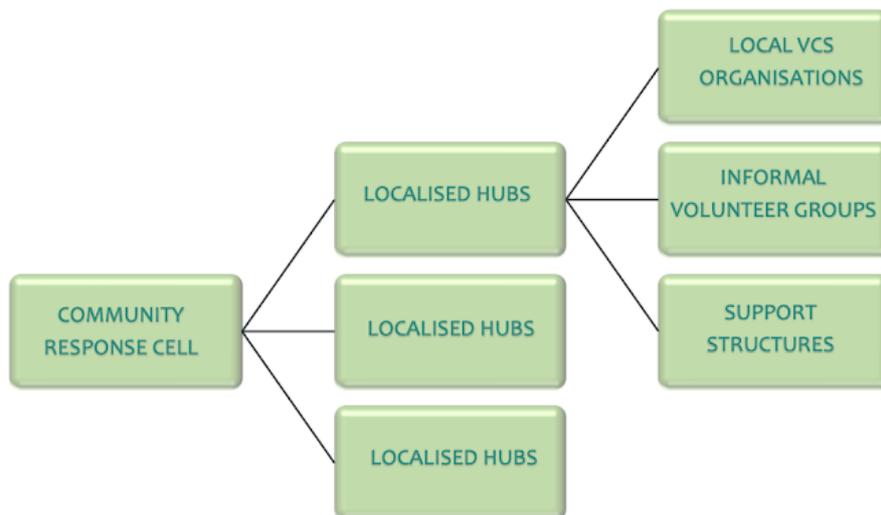
Burchell et. al (2020) describe the three models as follows:

Model 1: Response cells using a VCS local infrastructure organisation as the primary coordinator/broker



In this model, local authorities utilised pre-existing relationships with an established local infrastructure organisation to coordinate the volunteer response. The infrastructure organisation provided a centralised hub and coordinated and supported VCS groups to deliver with local authority support.

Model 2: Response cells channelling support through a series of hubs



Here, local authorities established a network of local hubs to coordinate delivery rather than utilising a single local infrastructure organisation as the primary coordinator and facilitator. In these cases, the central response cell utilised the network of hubs to facilitate support across different areas.

Model 3: Multi-agency response cells working directly with community networks and new informal networks



This model involved a more direct interaction between the LA and a network of community organisations. Multi-agency, cross-sectoral response teams were established in order to coordinate the response and provide support.

These place-based collaboration models varied in either being a distinctive shift in pre-existing local frameworks or accelerating collaborative frameworks that existed prior to the pandemic. The MoVE paper concludes by exploring how these emerging local models of mobilisation might shape post-lockdown models of social action and community partnership, as well as the need for further work to explore in detail what worked or didn't about these various responses. Across all three models there has been an emphasis on flat, decentralised organisational structures - the sharing of decision-making, greater collaboration and more subsidiarity, that devolves action to the most appropriate localised level.

Additionally, these fixed models are a snapshot in time, unable to capture changing circumstances whereby there has been a shift in an approach necessitated by the different phases of lockdown (e.g. changes in furlough affecting local volunteer numbers). Chapters four and five begin to look at key factors which this research has identified as being important to enabling a local volunteer response on an ongoing basis.

4. The role of social capital and supporting infrastructures

This research has highlighted how volunteering in a crisis requires networks of individuals and organisations, communication, collaboration and trust. Due to its emphasis on mutual cooperation, reciprocity, trust, and networking, volunteering is associated with social capital (Sixsmith and Boneham 2003).

The role and importance of social capital during the COVID-19 pandemic is emerging as a prevalent theme in the literature on community resilience during and after the initial moments of crisis (Pitas 2020; Makridis and Wu 2021; Wu 2020; Bartscher et al 2020; Lau 2020).

This research further explored the role of social capital in relation to experiences of volunteer mobilisation:

- While participants rarely explicitly referred to social capital as such, common themes emerged around the role of trust, relationships, networks and support in fostering the volunteer response.
- Examples of bonding social capital and linking social capital appeared to be most prominent. For example, the response to the pandemic bonded localised communities and enhanced existing intra-community trust. However, examples of bridging capital, or connections between local communities, were lacking within our sample.

4.1 Defining social capital

The concept of social capital has been widely interrogated (Bourdieu 1985; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Portes 1998; Fukuyama 1997; Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998). However, the most widely accepted definition of social capital has been put forth by Robert Putnam, who defines it as the “features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995). Lindström (2016) elaborates on this definition by highlighting the dynamism of social capital, describing how social capital can be understood as a resource that accumulates through formal and non-formal communication and interaction between people and changes over time. The discourse tends to make a distinction between three different types of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking (Putnam 2000).¹⁷ Bonding social capital resides within groups or communities characterised by similarity in demographic characteristics, attitudes and available information and resources; bridging social capital is between social groups, social classes, races, religions or other socio demographic or socioeconomic characteristics; and linking capital refers to relations between individuals and groups who are interacting across explicitly formal or institutionalised power or authority gradients in society (Claridge, 2018).

The role and importance of social capital during the COVID-19 pandemic is emerging as a prevalent theme in the literature discussing community resilience during and after the initial moments of crisis

¹⁷ Whilst the response to the pandemic bonded localised communities and enhanced existing intra-community trust, our research continually highlighted that bridging capital, or connections between local communities was not as prominent. This does not mean that bridging capital was not present in volunteering responses during the pandemic, however the limitations of our research meant that this theme was not as widely prevalent.

(Pitas 2020; Makridis and Wu 2021; Wu 2020; Bartscher et al 2020; Lau 2020). For example, Makridis and Wu (2021) explain that:

There is an increasing consensus that social capital—including trust, norms, and networks—may serve as one of the most important ingredients in accomplishing critical tasks in emergency situations. Even if physical capital is destroyed, social resilience and collaboration can help communities rebound, which is especially relevant during times of national emergencies.

Haldane (2021) also underscores the consistency of social capital, describing how “[t]he Covid-19 crisis has reinforced the values of community purpose and social solidarity on which social capital thrives, allowing it to grow as other capitals have crumbled.”

4.2 Bonding capital

In this research, participants shared examples which both highlighted the role of bonding capital in facilitating volunteering efforts, but also how volunteering contributed to the development of stronger bonding capital. Their experiences suggest that bonding capital is an important aspect of organising local volunteer responses.

Bonding social capital was described in relation to the networks that exist within local communities - both those that were place based as well as communities of interest. Participants described and considered strong local relationships defined by trust, familiarity, and the common goal of helping their community, as influential factors that helped volunteers and their networks provide support, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic. This suggests that having a strong sense of bonding capital allows for a quicker response because relationships and ways of working are already familiar and trusted, and can therefore be utilised to mobilise more effectively. For example, one participant described the importance of having established community connections and how these connections could aid the ability of local areas to quickly mobilise volunteers. They described:

There's something unique about the local organisations, and especially community responders. They press that button, SOS, and they have pretty handy volunteers lined-up. [There is a] level of trust, access, support, [that] we haven't seen...in any big infrastructure organisation. (Community Organisation, UK-wide).

Another participant who is part of a local GP federation, which also acts as a volunteer network and hub, highlighted the importance and influence of having close relationships with existing volunteer groups. They explained:

Our team have just tapped into all of those groups in the community, so that if we have somebody who's struggling...we've been able to tap into all those groups that we've had that those links with [to provide support]. (Community Hub, South West).

This sentiment around strong community connectedness was also raised when discussing the importance of faith groups in facilitating volunteer responses.¹⁸ For example, one participant explained:

There are established churches and then lots of smaller church groups that meet. My sense is that, within each church, the community looked after itself... I would say, if you belonged within a church community, you probably did have close of bonds, and possibly, at least from the church leaders, there was a sense of them keeping in contact with people within the church or members contacting each other. (Community Organisation, Greater London).

¹⁸ The research team suggest that further research should be undertaken with faith communities around the topic of volunteering.

Each of these examples illustrates how a strong level of bonding capital allows for local groups to mobilise more rapidly. By building on existing trusted relationships and tapping into known networks, organisations are able to respond to the needs of their communities in more effective ways.

This research highlighted how the practice of volunteering contributed to the development of bonding capital. Strong feelings of community connectedness that developed as a result of volunteer efforts in their local area were perceived by residents as being particularly helpful.

People are more open to knocking on doors or talking to neighbours, and I think feeling like they're part of something bigger than their household, feeling a bit more tapped into their immediate locality and realising also, how important-- actually, that we really needed it, (Local Authority, South West).

Another participant also highlighted how the practice of volunteering built strong bonding capital in their community. They described how having a diverse and active volunteer base meant that people got to know different aspects of their community which promoted what was described as a “*resident-led, community-led ethos.*” (Local Council, South West).

The notion of trust is another key factor commonly associated with the strength of social capital (Putnam 1995) and in the examples of bonding capital that were described by participants, levels of trust emerged as a key factor in being able to determine a local area's ability to respond to the pandemic. Participants who perceived their areas as having high levels of trust, whether this was between residents and local organisations, organisations and local businesses, or between community organisations themselves, reported being able to mobilise volunteers more quickly and draw on more extensive networks to provide support to local residents compared to those who did not. Participants emphasised the close relationships between volunteer coordination efforts and their local supermarkets. In describing how the process of food delivery was undertaken in their community, one participant highlighted the trusting relationship formed by the local supermarket and their organisation and how this facilitated volunteering activity. The manager of the supermarket allowed for delayed payments to be made for essential groceries, enabling the volunteers to first deliver the food, and then receive payment from the residents after.

Levels of trust also influenced which other local organisations participants chose to work with in their volunteer efforts. For example, while it was common practice for local areas to request new volunteer sign ups, levels of pre-existing trust, or the extent to which different groups knew and worked with each other before, could determine who would ultimately be a part of the volunteer response. As one employee at a volunteer hub explained:

People only recruited people that they knew personally and trusted ... they weren't recruiting new volunteers, they were working with their existing networks and they delivered (Volunteer Network, Yorkshire).

This example shows how levels of pre-existing trust also influenced how volunteer responses took place and who would be involved. As such, this research suggests that having an understanding of local networks and relationships, and being able to tap into those networks and relationships, is another important enabling factor of an effective volunteer response. While the participants of this research highlighted trust and relationships as supporting their volunteer response, there is an opportunity for further research to explore these themes more widely to understand how trust is formed and sustained, whether or not trust changed over time, and the impact of trust on building local relationships and strengthening bonding capital.

4.3 Linking capital: cross-sector collaboration and communication

The participants in this research also described experiences which can be understood as examples of linking capital. Linking capital can be understood as the networks of relationships between people who are interacting across explicitly formal or institutionalised power or authority levels in society (Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). It is the extent to which individuals build relationships with institutions and individuals who have relative power over them (e.g. to provide access to services, jobs or resources) (Woolcock, 2001; Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). Based on the experiences of those who were interviewed as part of this research, the most prominent ways in which this type of social capital appeared during the pandemic is the apparent strengthening of relationships between community-based organisations and government bodies or nationwide funding bodies.

This research has identified that linking capital is more likely to develop in areas where existing channels of cross-sector communication are in place and being utilised. Community groups highlighted the ways in which they previously had working relationships with the local council, but noted how this relationship became closer and more cooperative due to the changing working practices caused by the pandemic. One community organisation explained that more frequent and accessible communication helped to facilitate this. They described:

[We] definitely [have had] a closer relationship in day-to-day conversations over the past year as well, just been a lot more accessible and two-ways and easy across all levels [of the council]. I think that that has been the biggest thing for us in this area out of COVID (Community Organisation, South West).

This change in communication meant that the local council strengthened and created a stronger relationship between the two organisations. This is an example of linking capital because it involves interaction and relationships between institutions.

Participants noted an increase in the productivity of their working practices, explaining that the pandemic allowed them to gain a better understanding of the community level work and the dynamics of civil society organisations operating within their local areas. Facilitating cross-sector collaboration through regular and transparent communication revealed opportunities where support could be provided. For example, understanding the landscape of local volunteer responses at different scales allowed for a better understanding of where support or additional resources could be provided. One participant explained how they were able to facilitate the development of what could be described as linking capital in their local area:

You operate first at a mutual community level, street-level stuff, try and encourage people to mobilise locally. Then, you have an organisational level which is where you want to escalate things that are slightly more complex. Then, you have a city-wide level, and so we've been playing that role between supporting local organisations and escalating issues up to the city-wide level. That's been our core function. (Volunteer Network, Yorkshire)

This collaborative way of working was also noted by community organisations as being a positive factor which enhanced relationships between councils and local groups. For example, a participant from a community organisation explained:

The Councillor mapped out the different areas where these volunteer groups were popping up in... [the local area] and mapped up the streets where people were covering and helping and supporting. It did make the relationship a lot better and a lot closer, and we worked a lot closer with them (Community Organisation, South West).

The strengthening of linking capital in these examples appears to have positively influenced efforts of the volunteer response by enabling greater cross-sector collaboration, allowing for more support to be provided to the area at multiple levels.

Using the networks and relationships formed between organisations, particularly those working at different scales within the same geographic location, ensured that work across local areas was not duplicated. This form of linking capital was expressed as critical to the success of their COVID-19 operating systems, particularly given the speed of organisational adaptation and the rapid establishment of new services and systems duplication. Ensuring that work was not overlapping required an initial moment of pause to assess what initiatives were taking place. A local councillor explained:

We did a lot of very quick surveying work and said, "Right, where have we got things happening? Where have we got support? Where have we got gaps?" Then, as a council, what we were trying to say is, we will fill the gaps, but we don't want to step on people's toes and stop for all the good work that's already happening. We do want to ensure that that good work has been done safely, that you've got the guidance and advice and support you need.
(Local Council, South West)

Community organisations also noted the benefit of stepping back and looking at who else was providing volunteer services, or more significantly, who else was better placed to provide such services. While limited time restricted these moments of self-reflection, participants described how regular communication with a convener group or with a network of organisations operating at different scales allowed for rapid role assessment, allowing groups to work where they were best placed and fulfil their purpose. Communication prevented a 'stepping on toes' situation and also allowed organisations to understand where and in who community trust was placed.

The forming and strengthening of linking capital over the duration of the pandemic involved creating relationships with those in authority and positions of power, such as local authorities, who can access decision making powers or resources (Stone and Hughes, 2002), as well as used to link those in power to groups and organisations who have more local knowledge and skills that can aid in community development and support (Jordan, 2015). The establishment of linking capital in the form of multi-agency led collaborations also represents a transition from traditional silo working towards a place-based response (Burchell et. al 2020) that can involve a dynamic network of stakeholders at multiple levels. Collaborations at a local level between cross-sector partners - such as keeping each other informed through to joint initiatives - allow neighbourhoods and communities to become more than geographic entities, as new connections create active social webs (Tiratelli and Kaye, 2020). While there may be challenges to these processes, the research team believe that organisations should make a deliberate effort to link across power structures to ensure well connected local governance structures, which can be critical in aiding local volunteer responses.

4.4 The importance of social capital in supporting volunteer responses - research team reflections

This chapter illustrates the ways in which different forms of social capital - whether existing or newly developed - have played a key role in helping areas respond to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research team therefore acknowledges the potential for social capital to function "as the main engine of long-term recovery" (Aldrich 2010), and suggests there is thus a need to strengthen it in local places. Having strong social capital can enable areas to access resources more effectively, such as information and aid, as well as financial, emotional and psychological support. Additionally, it provides an opportunity to create stronger and better-connected communities. As one participant from a community organisation described:

One of the effects of [the COVID-19 response] has been to really strengthen the relationships between not just us and those organisations but all of the partners in that space. (Community Organisation, Greater London).

Therefore, investing in strengthening a local area's social capital could support efforts of volunteer mobilisation, as well as preparedness for future moments of crises.

5. Facing the future: factors and principles which enable an effective volunteer response

To effectively mobilise volunteers in the future the research team recommends that local areas are prepared, understand their structures and capabilities, and be ready to mobilise at unexpected times. In this research how areas were able to respond to an incident, and what tools they used to support their response, influenced the effectiveness of the volunteer response in communities.

This research has identified how the process of mobilising volunteers is impacted by different factors, for example, what forms of social capital and infrastructures existed before the pandemic, what tools were used during the pandemic, and what lessons and adaptations to volunteer responses emerged as the pandemic progressed.

This section brings together enabling factors in earlier chapters and further facilitators identified through this research, concluding:

- While there have been broad similar patterns across volunteering in different areas, the importance of individual local circumstances should be noted. A number of key enabling factors have emerged that influenced how local areas have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Based on this research and the experiences and themes cited by participants, a number of principles are put forth below as being important to consider when implementing a plan for volunteer mobilisation.
- The pandemic has raised new challenges and opportunities around local volunteer mobilisation, and this research suggests that learning can and should be taken from this period into planning for future crisis mobilisation. Given that many of the key themes of this research touch on frequently asked questions about volunteering (i.e. definitions of volunteering, how to mobilise new recruits, micro volunteering etc.), findings from this research should also be applicable to those considering typical or ongoing volunteer mobilisation more broadly.
- The research team believes that there is a need for further research on the key themes that this exploratory research has raised in order to deepen the understanding of the factors and principles cited below. There is also an opportunity to deepen local learning as areas process what they can take away from their local pandemic response and transition into recovery and beyond.

5.1 Factors enabling a successful local response

The nature of organising a volunteering response is complex and often involves multiple people, organisations and agencies coming together to coordinate efforts towards a shared goal. While there have been similar patterns across volunteering responses in different local areas (Local Trust, 2020; Supporting Communities 2020), the importance of individual circumstances should also be noted. Places are unique and relationships, networks and infrastructures vary in different local contexts. The ways in which different forms of social capital interact with one another in different circumstances significantly influences areas' abilities to respond, as well as their ways of responding.

Through this research, key enabling factors - that seem to have determined how local areas have responded - have emerged. In summary, these are:

- Level of existing volunteer structures in place
- Level of trust in the local community and across sectors

- Previous cross-sector collaborations including the engagement and previous working relationships with the local authority
- Access to digital tools and technologies (volunteer project management platforms, digital communication tools etc.) and the skills to use them
- Local council or organisation access to financial capital
- Physical assets like civic/public buildings
- The presence of strong faith-based communities

The research team's reflections that mapping local responses to the COVID-19 crisis into set categories is complex and becomes even more so if we try to apply assessment of what 'good' might look like for a local response. Success can be judged on whether the local need that necessitated a volunteering response is met, but there is nuance here on how effective and efficient that mobilisation was, what capacity and benefits it yielded for organisations and volunteers involved, both in the short, medium and long term.¹⁹

The factors identified above have emerged as important enablers of a local response. Through this research, the importance of understanding and working with what you have locally and how you build from this base has emerged as important. The opportunity now is to take stock on the principles that could help with future responses, based on this local learning.

5.2 Principles to aid the volunteer response

Based on this research and the experiences and themes cited by participants, the following principles are put forward as important to consider when implementing a plan for volunteer mobilisation. They cover both what needs to be in place at the point of crisis, but also the organisational and personal ways of working that need to exist as local areas transition through from initial response to ongoing mobilisation.

Crucially, the research team believes that along with these principles being useful touch points to reflect on during a crisis, they also can be considered when putting in place the structures, funding mechanisms, skills and mindsets prior to a crisis period.

Understand existing structures of social capital

As the previous chapter highlighted, community groups, local councils and volunteer networks alike embraced working collaboratively to enable efficient volunteer responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. These new ways of working have created, utilised and strengthened different forms of social capital. In understanding how these forms of social capital developed, this research also sought to explore which different types of social and volunteering infrastructures have most effectively supported local efforts of mobilising and deploying volunteers.

As noted in section 5.3 below, this is an area that merits further research given the exploratory nature of this work in identifying key themes rather than being able to explore every area in depth.

Effective use of digital platforms

Technology has also played a key role as both a supporter and an enabler of work that has taken place across the course of the pandemic. The ability to deliver services digitally was critical for many groups and organisations, though contingent on the nature of services provided, digital capacity, and organisational structure. Technology also helped enable partnership working through video conferencing and in the logistics of volunteer coordination.

¹⁹ The benefits of volunteering seem to go beyond addressing the challenges that have emerged out of the pandemic, with previous and emerging research suggesting that volunteering may benefit mental health and survival, fostering well-being and life satisfaction (Guanlan et al, 2020), as well as contributing to a sense of belonging (Bowe et al, 2020). As such, the ability for a local area to mobilise an effective volunteer response is important in not only combatting the challenges around unexpected circumstances but in building community wellbeing as well.

Participants in this research provided examples of digital tools being used to coordinate responses that spanned wide geographic areas, support the recruitment of volunteers, and assign tasks that needed completion. For example, one participant explained how digital working helped bring together people of diverse backgrounds:

Where we've got such a geographically diverse authority area, you would never normally be able to get people easily...into a meeting together and actually have those diverse groups and have people sharing ideas and talking and exchanging ideas together (Local Council, South West).

Digital platforms designed for mobilising and managing volunteers allowed for a centralisation and a streamlining of processes. These tools allowed for greater communication between the organisations and the volunteers themselves. For example, a participant explained:

[The app] is a really good volunteer management system where all our volunteers now have an app where we can post all the available missions, they call them and they can select from there what they want to do and let us know how it went (Community Organisation, North East).

Despite these positives, this shift to digital working has not always been seamless. Participants recounted that digital working could, at times, prove challenging, especially when grassroots organisations, for example, were accustomed to working face-to-face. As a participant explained:

It's been the biggest change really, and I know some grassroots organisations struggled the most to begin with, with everything moving over to a digital world when normally they relied on support in their members of the community face-to-face and through support groups and luncheon clubs and that type of thing. (Volunteer Network, Yorkshire).

This participant continues to describe how the heavy reliance on digital tools and technologies can make volunteering inaccessible for some, further contributing to the digital divide that has been highlighted during the pandemic (Watts, 2020). For example, volunteers may not have access to the internet or have a computer, may not know how to use a digital device, may have a disability preventing them from using digital tools, or may simply not want to use digital tools and technologies. As one participant described:

We've got loads of refugees. They don't have Wi-Fi or a laptop, so they can't engage. Yes, people have a phone, but no Wi-Fi. Even if you have a phone or no Wi-Fi, you can't engage in loads of stuff. (Volunteer Network, Yorkshire).

This suggests it could be useful for those involved in enabling the volunteer response to consider capital investment in digital infrastructure and training, facilitating knowledge sharing around best practices, and ways that these digital tools can be integrated into the whole system to enable more collaborative efforts particularly between organisations at different levels.

Flexible funding structures

The importance of needing flexible funding arrangements during times of crisis has been recognised elsewhere (Rohwerder, May 2017; July 2017), however the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted their relevance once again (Cooney, 2021; Hutchins, 2021; IASC, 2020). Community organisations interviewed as part of this research emphasised the importance of adaptability, noting the benefits of being able to redirect existing funding or tap into small amounts of additional funding to support their pandemic response. One participant described:

I think we were quite lucky quite early on, as the council who had obviously been given lots of money for their COVID response were able to allocate us some extra funds where we needed them for volunteer expenses. It wasn't a huge amount, but it definitely did the job (Community Organisation, North East).

Positive relationships with funders were deemed particularly important here with a trusting dynamic enabling quick decisions to be made, redirecting funding to newly needed services. Another community organisation highlighted the importance of this relationship with their local council, noting:

“I think the climate of funding at the moment is reflecting how flexible we need to be, but for how long will funding streams allow such flexibility, and how they commission programs. [...] I know for [us], it got completely flipped on its head for the past year, and the council was really supportive in how we all decided to manage our programmes” (Community Organisation, Greater London).

Having flexible funding structures within local councils, funding bodies or organisations can enable a more effective volunteer response as it allows for the reallocation or redistribution of funds when and where needed. Organising a volunteer response requires time and resources, and having access to immediate funding can both help with efforts of organisation, as well as alleviate the pressures that emerge from a lack of financial resources.

Cross-sector communication and collaboration between local councils and community organisations

Cross-sector communication and collaboration was perceived by the participants, especially those representing local authorities, community hubs and volunteer networks, as being an important factor for enabling local volunteer responses. As this research has shown, effective cross-sector communication not only enabled a more cohesive volunteer response, but it also contributed to the strengthening of linking capital in local communities, ensuring that work was not duplicated, that information was shared across different organisations, and that different actors within the system communicated with one another.

The importance of having a coordinator role to enable this rapid communication was cited as being a key factor in local areas' abilities to respond. Creating a position that was tasked with convening, organising and linking different groups to one another was said to be helpful, especially during a time when resources were particularly scarce. One participant explained:

I think with all of the organisations being so stretched, the value of a coordinator role has been really appreciated. Somebody to convene networks, somebody to take actions from those networks forward and to escalate them up to the City Council has really been important. (Volunteer Network, Yorkshire)

Participants representing local authorities who were interviewed as part of this research also noted the importance of enabling cross-sector communication and collaboration. They highlighted that the role of the local authority should be to enable local areas in their volunteer responses, whether that meant facilitating conversations, providing resources, or in some cases even stepping back.

*“Our role as a local authority was to **enable and facilitate**, not to dictate to or do on behalf of.”* (Local Council, South West).

*“It's the recognition actually sometimes it's best to **let go and enable local areas who know their communities better than anyone else just to crack on with it**, rather than just doing it top-down directly.”* (Local Council, Greater London).

There is also scope to further explore the role of local authorities as facilitators and enablers by conducting additional research with a wider number of councils and with those individuals within them who were directly linked into the local volunteer response.

Organisational adaptability

Given the continuously shifting circumstances throughout the pandemic and the limitations posed by lockdown restrictions, the ability to adapt or transform operating models was key to supporting an effective volunteer response. In the examples provided by those participating in this research,

adaptability involved the redeployment of staff, collaboration with partners, moving service provision into the community, and tailoring to the changing local context. Having a flexible approach to working, where organisations can quickly adapt and respond to challenges, embrace collaborative working and streamline decision making is central to the overall responsiveness and effectiveness of a volunteer response. In planning for the future, building in the capacity for this flexibility is likely to be important, both in terms of developing operational structures and to building the necessary skills and mindsets of individuals involved to navigate complexity.

5.3 Further research themes

These emerging principles from this research are not exhaustive. As highlighted in 5.2 there is a need for further research to deepen our collective understanding of what was critical to local responses and what might inform future volunteering mobilisation. In particular:

- Understanding existing levels and dynamics of social capital
- Exploring the role of councils as facilitators and enablers of volunteer mobilisation, by conducting additional research with a larger number of councils and with individuals within them who were directly linked into the local volunteer response
- Engaging with those local areas that did not have as strong a volunteer response in order to understand the factors underpinning this and how these principles relate
- Understanding the reasons for the less efficient volunteer responses will help to implement strategies to raise, manage and retain volunteers

In addition, throughout the report the research team have noted other emerging themes where further research would be beneficial, notably:

- Understanding patterns of supply and demand in volunteering (and how to best balance this)
- The impact of the furlough scheme on volunteering patterns throughout the pandemic
- The impact of volunteer fatigue on mobilisation efforts (and how to mitigate against this)
- The role of faith communities in COVID-19 responses
- The role of trust in local community responses, how it is formed and sustained, whether or not trust changed over time, and the impact of trust on building local relationships
- How local perceptions, histories and contexts can influence how people engage with different structures of volunteering

As noted above, understanding local responses to COVID-19 is a live research space, and while this work has aimed to bring together the latest research on the topic, the research team is mindful that there is further work underway. The research team believes there would be value to DCMS in actively keeping track of the latest research on this theme, and in convening those active in this research space to better understand the emerging synergies and evidence gaps. There have already been efforts within the third sector and academic community to do this – for example NCVO, Third Sector Research Centre, Institute for Volunteering Research and Voluntary Sector Studies Network have set up an evidence group on volunteering and COVID-19. It would also be useful to include within this evidence gathering and review, evaluations of major funding and support programmes for community activities in response to COVID-19 (for example, those by the National Lottery Community Fund) that utilised volunteers as these may yield further practical insights and data.

Finally, a notable theme across the interviews and workshops undertaken (March-April 2021) for this research was participants' assertion that the COVID-19 pandemic response was not over. It was also cited that the opportunity to explore what had happened, and the barriers and enablers to undertaking a local response, provided by participating in this research was often the first chance participants had to stop and reflect, particularly with others that had been in similar positions in other locations. There is an opportunity to consider what tools and spaces could be produced to support this self-reflection

(between different local areas; within local areas; and for individual organisations looking to better understand their role within their own local ecosystem) during a time of transition from immediate response measures to emerging out of the COVID-19 pandemic, from crisis response to more typical local volunteering. The research team believes consideration of how this might be facilitated in a timely and effective way that works for the needs of local communities could have significant value.

5.4 Future of volunteering - research team reflections

Related to this, informal volunteering played a significant role in volunteering response. The Community Life COVID-19 Re-contact Survey conducted by DCMS in July 2020 to explore how behaviours changed since the pandemic, found that 21% of respondents took part in regular formal volunteering compared to 47% in regular informal volunteering (DCMS, 2020). have played a pivotal role in the community response to COVID-19. This research has been undertaken with the aim of better understanding how this worked locally, with the aim of helping to inform future volunteering-led responses and to better understand the contribution volunteering (and the infrastructure enabling it) makes to the resilience and civic life of a local area.

The pandemic has raised new challenges and opportunities around local volunteer mobilisation, and the research team believes that learning can and should be taken from this period into planning for future crisis mobilisation. Given that many of the key themes of this research touch on frequently asked questions about volunteering (i.e. definitions of volunteering, how to mobilise new recruits, micro volunteering etc.), the research findings should also be applicable to those considering more typical or ongoing volunteer mobilisation more broadly.

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Appendix A: Methodology and limitations

This research employed a mixed method approach, involving a period of desk research followed by qualitative and quantitative research. This approach is detailed below.

Rapid scoping review

The pandemic has led to a significant shift in academic publishing, with many more outputs being published as pre-prints or in other formats pending peer review. Additionally, as the COVID-19 pandemic is ongoing, with volunteer mobilisation still taking place at the time of writing, there is a very limited evidence base on the theme of volunteering during COVID-19. As such, this rapid scoping review took a more inclusive view of the evidence to be included than traditional forms of evidence review. The rapid scoping review consisted of a review of relevant academic and grey literature as well as blogs, news articles and other forms of journalism and informed the research plan and sampling strategy as well as this final report. Findings were used to gather existing and emerging insights into several broad themes surrounding mapping COVID-19 volunteers alongside more hyper-local perspectives of COVID-19 and the local volunteer experiences.

This rapid summary of the evidence is based on a literature search undertaken in the week commencing 18 January 2021 and an associated Call for Evidence which was live between 8 March and 2 April 2021. The Call for Evidence was promoted online through The Young Foundation's website and social media accounts, and circulated through the networks of The Young Foundation and those who took part in the interviews and workshops.

To capture the current situation under COVID-19 and its continual development, the rapid review focused on recent publications from 2020-2021, however, publications pre-2019 were included for theoretical underpinnings. This project focused on the volunteer response in England and the rapid review reflected this limit in geographic location, however in some instances, literature with a wider UK scope was incorporated where there was no distinction between the four nations made.

Searches were conducted using electronic databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR and Wiley Online Library and Google with the primary search terms including: mapping covid-19 volunteers; community response covid; hyper-local volunteering during covid; volunteering + faith groups/rural/urban/private business; and more specific search terms such as 'the role of multi-faith volunteers in covid-response' or 'how did the village halls support communities during covid-19'. We also complemented this search with a cross reference of relevant literature cited in existing relevant research and produced by The Young Foundation on similar topics.

Paper recommendations provided by DCMS, colleagues at The Young Foundation and partner organisations were also engaged with. Additionally, bibliographies of existing literature were also used as a starting point for the identification of additional publications.

While our search was extensive, around 120 sources were either partially or fully engaged with as part of this work. These sources were chosen for further engagement as they were either the most relevant in terms of date published and topic matter, widely cited, or recommended by stakeholders. Due to the time parameters of this research, these pieces were summarised and synthesised which allowed the team to distil key themes and understand how the discourse fits together.

Limitations

While the scoping review did allow for an understanding of what evidence has been emerging on the topic, the method does come with limitations. Due to the time constraints of this research, the depth of the analysis of the literature engaged with has been limited. While we were able to summarise and synthesise the pieces of this research, we were not able to widely compare or rate methodological

approaches, risk of bias, or study design which could influence the quality of the work and its comparability to other pieces of research.

Furthermore, because scoping reviews provide an overview of the literature and a descriptive account of available information, this can lead to broad, less defined searches. As a result, scoping reviews are at risk for bias from different sources (Sucharew and Macaluso, 2019). While efforts have been made to reduce bias, such as having defined search criteria and ensuring that the literature has been reviewed by more than one member of the team, that does not mean that bias does not exist. For example, selection bias may occur if the scoping review does not identify all available data on a topic and the resulting descriptive account of available information is flawed (ibid).

Advisory group

To inform the initial research plan, a group of stakeholders was convened that could provide knowledge and expertise regarding the COVID-19 community response (identifying key areas, stakeholders and data sources). This advisory group was attended by 11 strategic stakeholders from the voluntary sector, research institutions and local councils with a range of hyper-local and national knowledge who were recognised as experts by those in their fields. Individuals were chosen based on their range of knowledge and expertise on the subject as well as their involvement in strategic and operational processes relating to the COVID-19 volunteer response.

The insights gathered through the conversation helped inform the research plan and provided a steer regarding how the insights could be used in a practical way.

Table 1: Advisory group composition

Organisation type/description	Role
Nationwide community organisation funding body	Development Manager
Local Authority	Head of Sustainable Resources
Nationwide funding body	Senior Head
Place-based charity supporting and developing the voluntary and community sector	Chief Executive
Nationwide volunteering charity	Chief Executive
Nationwide community organising charity	Chief Executive
Nationwide charity supporting small charities	Chief Executive
Nationwide volunteering charity	Chief Executive
Academic Institution	Professor and Research Fellow
Nationwide charity supporting community organisations	Director of Policy and Engagement
Academic institution	Research Assistant

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of volunteer mobilisation efforts across different local contexts. A total of 14 interviews were conducted with representatives from local councils, combined authorities, community networks and organisations, charities, national funding bodies and a mobile app designer. These interviews built on the findings from the rapid scoping review and aimed to enable a discussion around themes including organisation response, social capital, infrastructure needs and the potential impact of volunteering on the area.

Interview sampling

The sampling strategy for the interviews primarily used a purposive sampling method, commonly used in qualitative research (Ritchie et al, 2013). This meant selection was guided by a set of primary and secondary criteria to capture a diversity of views and experiences across different organisations who participated in efforts of local volunteer mobilisation. First, we set out to ensure a diverse sample of organisations including local authorities, charity organisations, and volunteer networks. We then took into consideration the geographic distribution and composition (urban/rural) of these organisations, prior levels of volunteering, and council structures. We also monitored the gender and ethnicity balance of the participants representing these groups to ensure that we were capturing a range of perspectives. Considering the project duration as well as the scope of this work, our initial aim was to interview 10 strategic stakeholders in different local authorities, ensuring a mix of urban/rural compositions and a range of different prior levels of funding and support for volunteer responses.

Due to the time constraints of this research, we also used convenience sampling where necessary, approaching individuals who are known to our individual networks (both DCMS and The Young Foundation) and available to participate in the study, ensuring that they were representative of the different groups and contexts we were aiming to engage.

Finally, because this research set out to explore effective models and frameworks of volunteer mobilisation, the individuals with whom we engaged were often a part of local areas who had a successful volunteer response. This factor therefore influenced our sample and the perspectives that form this research.

Table 2: Semi-structured interviews achieved sample

		Achieved sample
Sector grouping	Community organisation/volunteer network	7
	At least one of Local Council, Combined Authority, Housing Associations and Mobile Volunteering App Designer	7
Region	London	4
	South West	4
	North East	2
	UK-wide	2
	Yorkshire and the Humber	1
	West Midlands	1

The interview process

A semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the findings of the scoping review and the areas that were identified as being relevant for additional enquiry. The guide, which can be found in Appendix B, covered themes including organisation response, social capital and infrastructure needs and the potential future impact of volunteering on the area.

Fieldwork took place between March and April 2021. Each interview was conducted over Zoom by two members of The Young Foundation's research team and lasted approximately one hour in length. For ease of process and to ensure that no information was missed, the interviews were recorded and transcribed to aid in analysis. The participants and their organisations/affiliations remain anonymous and no personal information was recorded.

Interview analysis

Our analysis framework follows a general inductive approach – a systematic procedure for analysing qualitative data where the analysis is guided by specific objectives (Thomas, 2003). This strategy is evident in much qualitative data analysis (Bryman & Burgess, 1994; Dey, 1993), often without an explicit label being given to the analysis strategy.

According to Thomas (2003), there are three primary objectives of a general inductive approach to analysing qualitative data:

- To condense extensive and varied raw text data into a brief, summary format
- To establish clear links between the research objectives and the summary findings derived from the raw data and to ensure these links are both transparent (able to be demonstrated to others) and defensible (justifiable given the objectives of the research)
- To develop of model or theory about the underlying structure of experiences or processes which are evident in the text (raw data)

Therefore, based on the timescales for this project as well as the intention of inductive approaches to aid an understanding of meaning in complex data through the development of summary themes or categories from the raw data, we felt this was an appropriate approach to analyse our qualitative research findings.

In this research, the transcripts of the interviews were read several times to identify emerging themes and categories. a rough coding framework was developed based on the initial reading of the data as well as the research aims and objectives, and the transcripts were coded in an online qualitative data analysis software called Dedoose, according to this framework. The coding process enables the documentation of relationships between themes and the identification of themes important to participants. This process was then used to develop categories, which were conceptualised into broad themes. These themes were combined with the key insights from the other strands of work, allowing a robust narrative to emerge from the fieldwork process.

Workshops

The interviews and workshops were conducted with a mix of strategic and operational stakeholders, however we interviewed more strategic stakeholders (such as directors of community organisations or senior staff in local authorities involved in decision-making on the local response) and the workshops had more operational staff (such as those involved in more coordination and front-line delivery, including operation managers at community organisations and coordination of mutual aid groups). This was because we were interested in comparing and contrasting operational responses as part of this research, through facilitated conversations between local areas. We had two individuals from the

interviews go on to attend the workshops, to draw out extra details of their local response and to stimulate conversation with other attendees.

Building on the rich stories developing through the interviews, workshops were hosted to extend and test our thinking on key factors and patterns that have determined how local areas have responded to COVID-19, what they found useful and what they would retain. Through the workshops, we aimed to:

- Provide a space for organisations to reflect on their pandemic experience, learn from each other and network
- Develop and refine a list of key factors (and the tools / support systems) that influenced the local response
- Draw connections between factors, mapping local patterns and relationships

Two workshops were attended by a total of 11 participants and a purposive sampling methodology was used to recruit these individuals. Similarly to the interviews, participants were chosen based on their experience of and role within the volunteer response. Individuals were approached through the advisory board, the individual networks of DCMS and The Young Foundation, as well as those individuals who participated in the interviews. We aimed to ensure a geographic distribution of participants as well as a range of experiences including those individuals from local councils, charities and mutual aid groups. Gender, age and ethnicity were also monitored as secondary sampling criteria to capture potential diversity in views relating to volunteer mobilisation.

Table 3: Workshop achieved sample

		Achieved sample
Sector grouping	Community organisation/volunteer network	8
	Local Council	1
	Charity support	1
	Mutual aid Group	1
Region	London	4
	North East	2
	UK-wide	2
	North West	1
	South West	1
	South East	1

Quantitative analysis

This section presents the results of an exploratory data analysis comparing the geographical distribution of mutual aid groups with levels of personal wellbeing, levels of gross domestic product per capita, the total amount of COVID-19 grant awarded and the number of community owned assets in an area. Initial hypotheses were made about the nature of the relationship between these variables and these hypotheses were then explored primarily through correlation analysis.

Analysis included data for Wales and Scotland wherever possible to maximise robustness through larger sample sizes. However, only results for England are included in the main body of the report.

Data sources

Data on mutual aid groups were accessed from <https://github.com/Covid-Mutual-Aid/mutual-aid-wiki> as a JSON file, which was converted to CSV format. It contained details of over 5,500 groups worldwide, of which 4,158 were UK-based. All entries included longitude and latitude coordinates, and many included postcode details embedded in the location_name field. postcodes.io was used to classify these data into local authority districts, resulting in 3,791 matches.

Data on personal wellbeing (mean scores for life satisfaction, worthwhileness, happiness, anxiety) for 2019-20 were accessed from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/wellbeing-local-authority/editions/time-series/versions/1> as a CSV file. All entries were classified by local authority district. Estimates were not available for 18 districts where the sample size was too small.

Data on gross domestic product per capita for 2018 were accessed from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/datasets/regionalgrossdomesticproductlocalauthorities> as an XLSX file. All entries were classified by local authority district.

Data on COVID-19 grants were accessed from <https://grantnav.threesixtygiving.org> as a CSV file. Nearly all entries were classified by local authority district. In total, this included details of 29,488 organisations awarded £366,465,480 between March 2020 to February 2021 (excluding duplicate entries, those not geo-coded, those who were themselves grant makers and those whose awards were greater than or equal to £500,000).

Data on the distribution of community assets in England were accessed from previous work by the Young Foundation for its report [Flipping The Coin](#), which in turn came from primary research co-commissioned by Power to Change and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. All entries were classified by local authority district.

Hypothesised relationships between the number of mutual aid groups and other variables

Variable	Initial hypothesis	Result (see Tables 4-7 below)
Personal wellbeing	There might be more mutual aid groups in areas with higher average levels of wellbeing (and lower average levels of anxiety) because this could facilitate greater community connection and social cohesion.	Low to medium correlation in some regions. No correlation at the national level.
GDP per capita	More affluent areas might have a greater capacity to form mutual aid groups because residents could have more time and/or disposable capital to support group formation.	Medium correlation in some regions. No correlation at the national level.
COVID-19 grants	There might be more mutual aid groups in areas with more charities and social enterprises that are able to secure emergency grants.	Strong correlation in most regions. Medium correlation at the national level.
Community assets	Areas with more community assets might have a greater capacity to form mutual aid groups because of the physical space available to the community.	Medium to strong correlation in most regions. Medium correlation at the national level.

The results of these exploratory data analyses cannot be used to 'prove' or 'disprove' the corresponding hypotheses. Any correlations found would need to be explored and further research would be needed first.

Detailed analysis tables

Tables 4-7 examine the correlation between the number of mutual aid groups and levels of personal wellbeing, GDP per capita, COVID-19 grants awarded and the number of community assets. All analyses are presented at NUTS1 regional level.²⁰

There appears to be no strong relationship between the number of mutual aid groups and any of the four measures of personal wellbeing, with the possible exception of levels of anxiety in Yorkshire and The Humber, the North East and London. To the extent that any relationship exists, it is in the opposite direction to that hypothesised (i.e. implying there are fewer registered mutual aid groups in areas with higher average levels of wellbeing).

There appears to be no strong relationship between the number of mutual aid groups and levels of GDP per capita, with the possible exception of the North West, Scotland and Wales.

There does appear to be a reasonably large correlation (0.51) between the number of registered mutual aid groups in a region and the total amount of COVID-19 grant awarded. The effect is particularly notable in the North East, Scotland, West Midlands, London and the South East.

There appears to be a reasonably large correlation (0.45) between the number of registered mutual aid groups in a region and the number of community assets. The effect is particularly notable in the North East, South West and West Midlands. (Note, this analysis excludes Scotland and Wales, where no data are available about community asset ownership.)

Given the reasonably large correlations discovered for both the total amount of COVID-19 grant awarded and the number of community assets a linear regression was done to explore the relationship further. Table 8 presents the results of a linear regression model that incorporates these two variables (and controls for regional location). This confirms that each appears to have an independent and statistically significant relationship with the number of registered mutual aid groups.

²⁰ The Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) is a Eurostat geocode standard for referencing subdivisions of the United Kingdom for statistical purposes. Alongside, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, there are nine NUTS1 regions in England: North East, North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, East Midlands, West Midlands, East of England, London, South East and South West.

Table 4: Correlation between the number of registered mutual aid groups and personal wellbeing mean scores, all UK regions

Note: Rows marked in **bold** indicate the three regions with the highest correlation coefficients for anxiety. They do not indicate statistical significance.

NUTS1 region	Number of MAGs	Correlation with			
		Life satisfaction	Worthwhile	Happiness	Anxiety
East Midlands	240	0.05	0.00	0.11	0.08
East of England	337	0.14	-0.12	0.05	0.07
London	631	-0.18	-0.28	-0.21	0.33
North East	122	-0.16	-0.20	-0.25	0.35
North West	322	-0.10	-0.25	-0.13	0.20
Northern Ireland	14	-0.34	-0.40	-0.47	0.15
Scotland	210	-0.02	-0.01	-0.10	0.26
South East	568	0.10	0.04	-0.12	0.10
South West	387	-0.33	-0.07	-0.25	-0.17
Wales	172	0.18	0.08	0.13	0.02
West Midlands	269	-0.08	-0.07	0.08	-0.13
Yorkshire and the Humber	342	-0.04	-0.10	-0.01	0.36

Table 5: Correlation between the number of registered mutual aid groups and gross domestic product per capita, all UK regions

Note: Rows marked in **bold** indicate the three regions with the highest correlation coefficients. They do not indicate statistical significance.

NUTS1 region	Number of MAGs	GDP per capita (£)	Correlation
East Midlands	240	973,139	-0.03
East of England	371	1,298,280	0.08
London	632	9,377,660	-0.23
North East	122	270,239	-0.01
North West	322	963,189	0.41
Northern Ireland	14	230,195	0.29
Scotland	234	704,508	0.49
South East	572	2,060,940	0.03
South West	449	743,271	-0.01
Wales	172	482,912	0.47
West Midlands	269	798,547	0.06
Yorkshire and the Humber	348	494,927	0.02

Table 6: Correlation between the number of registered mutual aid groups and total COVID-19 grants awarded, all UK regions

Note: Rows marked in **bold** indicate the five regions with the highest correlation coefficients. They do not indicate statistical significance.

NUTS1 region	Number of MAGs	Total grants awarded (£)	Correlation
East Midlands	240	15,832,054	0.55
East of England	371	17,575,674	0.12
London	632	99,351,428	0.59
North East	122	14,558,732	0.85
North West	322	30,681,794	0.55
Northern Ireland	14	6,938,051	0.44
Scotland	234	46,322,958	0.79
South East	618	29,633,846	0.57
South West	449	24,047,881	0.60
Wales	172	25,643,140	0.56
West Midlands	269	22,089,369	0.67
Yorkshire and The Humber	348	17,805,808	0.56

Table 7: Correlation between the number of registered mutual aid groups and number of community assets, English regions only

Note: Rows marked in **bold** indicate the three regions with the highest correlation coefficients. They do not indicate statistical significance.

NUTS1 region	Number of MAGs	Number of community assets	Correlation
East Midlands	240	1,111	0.24
East of England	367	1,661	0.45
London	608	449	0.45
North East	122	484	0.91
North West	314	1,170	0.39
South East	572	1,713	0.45
South West	449	2,064	0.81
West Midlands	269	1,089	0.58
Yorkshire and the Humber	348	1,228	0.30

Table 8: Linear regression model, based on the number of community assets and the total amount of COVID-19 grant awarded (and controlling for regional location), English regions only.

Note 1: Each of the nine NUTS1 regions in England is represented by a binary variable (i.e. a variable that either takes the value 0 or 1). Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are excluded because the community asset dataset covers England only.

Note 2: East Midlands is the “default” region in the linear regression model. This means that, when all the other regions are coded 0, the model estimates the number of mutual aid groups in the East Midland. However if, for example, the London variable is coded 1, the model estimates there will be 6.279 additional mutual aid groups, all other things being equal.

Note 3: Rows marked in **bold** indicate variables whose coefficients are significant at the 1% level.

Regression term	Coefficient	Std Error	Statistic	p value
(Intercept)	1.669	1.324	1.260	0.209
Number of community assets	1.106	0.131	8.423	0.000
COVID-19 grants awarded	3.182	0.387	8.228	0.000
East of England (0,1)	1.311	1.774	0.739	0.461
London (0,1)	6.279	2.228	2.818	0.005
North East (0,1)	0.177	2.669	0.066	0.947
North West (0,1)	0.811	1.857	0.437	0.663
South East (0,1)	2.979	1.628	1.830	0.068
South West (0,1)	3.482	2.070	1.682	0.094
West Midlands (0,1)	0.940	1.950	0.482	0.630
Yorkshire and the Humber (0,1)	6.108	2.249	2.716	0.007
R²	Adjusted R²	Sigma	F statistic	Number of observations
0.473	0.455	8.050	26.228	303

Limitations

This research has limitations that arise from the recent nature of this topic, the time constraints of this research and the availability of relevant data.

New and emerging subject

First, the conversation and situation surrounding COVID-19 is constantly changing, and new research and insights are being published frequently. As a result, there may be new insights about volunteer mobilisation that emerge or long-term implications of volunteer response that are not yet clear and have not been captured in this report. With this in mind, we are aware that this report may be missing some key information that has not yet been published, or that has not been publicly shared. While we were able to summarise and synthesise available research for the scoping review, due to time constraints and the limited evidence base we were not able to widely compare or rate methodological approaches, risk of bias, or study design which could influence the quality of the scoping review and its comparability to other pieces of research.

Possible missing perspectives

A second limitation was the sample size of the qualitative interview and workshop cohort. This research was able to capture a range of different experiences around processes of volunteer mobilisation, however there may be other types of experiences that were not captured as part of this research, for example, the experience of the volunteers themselves who were involved in the volunteer response. Furthermore, the individuals who we engaged in this research were often part of local areas who had a successful volunteer response as compared to those areas with a less strong volunteer presence. This factor influenced the sample size and the perspectives that have been captured as part of this research as a result.

Limited quantitative data on mutual aid groups

The final limitation relates to the quantitative analysis where our analysis is dependent on the self-identification and reporting of mutual aid groups in the datasets used. As detailed in the research above, there are questions about the definitions of this form of volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic, and data on the nature of mutual aid groups in different local areas is limited. For example, the data source used for this work (Covid-19 Mutual Aid) does not provide information about the relative size and scope of the mutual aid groups, just how many have registered. As such, the mutual aid group analysis should be treated with caution, and considered as indicative.

Appendix B: Interview guides

Interview guide for community organisations/mutual aid groups/charities

Introduction and context gathering

1. Can you give a brief overview of [organisation] and your role within it?
2. How did [organisation] first get involved in responding to the pandemic?; What was your journey of engagement?
3. What role has your organisation played in the COVID-19 volunteering response?
 - What particular roles or services did you provide?
 - Who were these services aimed towards?
 - Who got involved in the volunteering?; any particular demographics?; were these new volunteers?; if so, why do you think this was the case?

Social capital and infrastructure

1. What existing relationships did [organisation] have within the community?
2. What existing relationship did [organisation] have with local government / the local council?
3. How have your relationships with other organisations / stakeholders changed as a result of your response to the pandemic?
 - What, if any, new relationships did you make?
 - Has the nature of any existing relationships changed?
 - Why do you think this was the case?
4. What types of tools, social networks, forms of support (financial or otherwise), or other factors have helped to support your experience of the volunteer response?
(Prompt: building/infrastructure, digital tools, financial capital, support networks, information sharing)
5. What, if any, additional resources do you feel you may have benefited from or that you have identified you might need to strengthen similar efforts in the future.?
(Prompt: funding, greater connections, time, capacity, expertise, training)

Future impact

1. What activities have you done during Covid that will continue post-lockdown? How has your role in the community changed, if at all?
2. In a post COVID-19 world, what do you foresee the role of [organisation] to be? Has this changed from your original purpose?
3. What, if any, lasting impacts do you think the COVID-19 volunteering response will have on community relationships in your area?
(Prompt: What has the impact been on your ability to engage volunteers locally? What has Covid done for the culture of volunteering or helping out in your area?)
 - More / different connections and collaborations?
 - How have conceptions of volunteering changed?
 - Have people become more aware of informal volunteering?

Interview guide: local authorities

Introduction and context gathering

1. How did the Council initially organise its community response?
 1. Did you have to create new structures or were you able to use/repurpose existing ones?
2. We know that local councils have taken on a variety of different roles during the pandemic – from establishing a central hub or hubs to deliver services directly to the community, to working closely with local partners to coordinating a response for example.

How would you describe the structure of your local council's volunteer and community response?

(Prompt: Did you repurpose staff into community outreach roles? What services did the council provide? What services did the council not provide? Who did you work closely with? How did you fill gaps in emergency provision?)

- Did you provide any new services?
- Who were these services aimed at? (Extremely vulnerable, 'non-shielded vulnerable', clinically vulnerable' etc.)

Social capital and infrastructure

1. How did you interact with community groups during the COVID-19 pandemic response? Can you tell me a little bit about the process of working with local people and other community groups operating in this space? Did you play a co-ordinating role or did you offer support of some kind?
2. To what extent have you engaged with local residents? Have you found particular demographics or parts of the community have been more involved in working with you during the COVID-19 response?
 - Which demographics have you most frequently engaged with?
 - Have you found the pandemic has led new groups / individuals to engage with your work?
3. Were there any particular challenges associated with your interactions and collaborations with local people and community groups?; Were there any points of conflict?
(Prompt: disagreements, miscommunication, differing motivation)
4. What types of collaboration, coordination or existing social networks have you found to be most effective in coordinating local people, community groups and volunteers?

Future impact

1. If you could go back and change one thing about [the council]'s COVID-19 volunteer response, what would it be?
2. Has the pandemic changed [the councils] relationship with community groups or other local stakeholders? If so, how?
3. Over the duration of the pandemic, has the role played by [the council] changed? If so, how?
4. What, if any, lasting impacts do you think the COVID-19 volunteering response has had on your relationship with the local people? How do you foresee this relationship evolving?

Interview Guide: Digital volunteering technology platform

1. Who was the intended audience? (People looking to volunteer? Charities? Councils?)
2. What was the process of creating the application? Who did you consult with to help design it?
3. Who currently uses it? (Organisations, local councils, volunteers themselves?)
4. How has the usage evolved over time? (Was there an initial uptake and then a decrease in volunteers? or has it remained consistent?)
5. Have any changes to the app been made over time? What were these and why did you end up making these changes?
6. Does the app focus on transactional activities or does it help build capacity of volunteers/organisations over the long term?
7. You have developed an algorithm for prioritising tasks. How does this work? How do you decide which volunteering tasks to prioritise?
8. What, if any, lasting impacts do you think the COVID-19 volunteering response will have on community relationships in your area?

Interview guide: Combined authority (CA)

1. We know that organisations and local councils have taken on a variety of different roles during the pandemic – from establishing a central hub to deliver services directly to the community, to working closely with local partners to coordinating a response for example.
2. How would you describe the structure of the CAs volunteer and community response?
3. *(Prompt: Did you repurpose staff into community outreach roles? What services did the CA provide? What services did the CA not provide? Who did you work closely with? How did you fill gaps in emergency provision?)*
4. Can you describe the ways in which you communicated and interacted with the different local councils? What was this relationship like and how has it changed over time?
5. Were there any particular challenges associated with your interactions and collaborations with local councils or partner organisations?
6. What types of collaboration, coordination or existing social networks have you found to be most effective in coordinating local people, community groups and volunteers?
7. What resources or structures would you have liked to have in place to help aid the CA's volunteer response?
8. If you could go back and change one thing about the CA's COVID-19 volunteer response, what would it be