



**Mutual Money**  
**How innovation enabled community-led**  
**COVID-19 responses**

September 2020

# Foreword



In the past five months, as we all experienced the detrimental effects of COVID-19, over 1 million people mobilised themselves to support

their local communities in the UK.

Thousands of groups organically formed across the country to help the most vulnerable people find shelter, feed their families, access essential supplies and medicine, and emotional support.

As an organisation that has supported community and grassroots movements for years, seeing direct citizen mobilisation at this scale was truly inspiring. It happened all over the country, under the radar of the press and local and national government. Organised through WhatsApp, Facebook and other platforms, literally thousands of people joined a completely distributed and decentralised network and did what they do best – just got on with it.

Many of our staff became involved with their local Mutual Aid groups. And between volunteering, work, and living through the pandemic, we still had an innate desire to do more, as The Social Change Agency, to support those on the front line.

The problem is though, when our infrastructure is not being destroyed by

robots and/or saved by Bruce Willis, we tend to find it a bit boring. Yet, with the help of some fantastic funders and supporters, we were able to implement a solution to help Mutual Aid groups manage their finances and stay accountable to their members and neighbours. Setting this up as a long-term service involved transforming our internal operations and these have been some of the most hardworking times our team has seen. It's been tough, but undoubtedly one of the most rewarding projects we've delivered.

As I write this, our response has reached over 350 Mutual Aid organisers across the 120 groups. This has enabled groups like Willesden Green Mutual Aid in London to provide food to 300 vulnerable families and Carlisle Mutual Aid to raise over £23,500 to fund life-saving goods for those who were shielding.

We want to say a massive thank you from all of us at The Social Change Agency to those who supported us in setting up this emergency operation. We're proudly sharing this update in the hope that others can also reflect on the learnings we've had and together with us, prepare as best we can for what's coming next.

Esther Foreman  
CEO, The Social Change Agency

## Money management: the headache for organisers

Most unconstituted or fast-forming groups have no bank account, legal status, decision-making structures or back-office systems. This allows them to act quickly but also poses significant challenges when it comes to accessing and managing money.

Mutual Aid groups are no exception. From the way they formed, to how they communicated, these groups resembled the community-led crisis responses we saw after the London Riots, Grenfell Tower and the Help Refugees movement. Enabled by technology and social media, neighbours acted at speed and scale, mobilising volunteers and getting help to the areas it was needed most as we entered lockdown. Inevitably, as their operations grew, the hurdles of money management began to surface.

“ The people we were shopping for had no system to reimburse volunteers and neither did we. ”

**Ruth, Send Community Aid**

### No legal entity, no bank account

With no legal infrastructure or bank account, Mutual Aid groups were essentially excluded from accessing the formal pandemic response system. They were unable to receive donations from bodies that rightfully require a level of accountability.



The difficulty in accessing funding as a grassroots group means there are three likely scenarios groups would be pushed to consider: take on a legal status, get absorbed into third sector organisations or the local government, or rely on someone's personal bank account.

## The struggle to process reimbursements

Volunteers, local businesses, and neighbours rallied at such speed to support their community that they were purchasing goods for distribution before the Mutual Aid group had a chance to sort out how they'd process money.

Examples of purchases included buying groceries, meals, medicine, and SIM cards. Volunteers would pay for goods out of pocket and be reimbursed by the individual receiving it or by the Mutual Aid fundraising pot. It's straightforward, in theory. But without a back-office system, bank account, online payments and even dedicated policy and structures on expenses, this turns into an administrative nightmare.

“ Our clients couldn't reimburse volunteers for shopping in any way. We're not incorporated, so we don't have a bank account. And every day, [we were getting] emails from what I call "tech bros" offering some new thing they've built, to do what we're already doing, but that wasn't actually helpful, isn't transparent, doesn't have the right structure

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Ruth,  
Send Community Aid

## Money management: one person's burden

Donations were paid into personal bank accounts as groups had no bank account of their own. The burden of handling transactions would then fall on the account holder(s). If the account holder fell sick, had to take time off or disappeared, funds could become inaccessible.

And while there are alternatives to personal bank accounts, such as fundraising and crowdfunding platforms, these aren't set to meet the needs that are unique to community-led movements who require both transparency and collective decision making alongside simple tasks such as reimbursing individuals or providing hardship funds at speed.

## Lack of financial transparency brings accountability into question

All of these hurdles not only end up wearing organisers down, but they also erode financial transparency. Transparency is crucial to building strong foundations of trust with donors, members and communities. Emma from Mutual Aid Ferry Ward described this as the need to “provide psychological security for donors”. Lack of accountability in the best case can lead to ineffective use of money, and at worst leaves open the possibility of fraud.

“ Although we are a young group, we are already working with lots of external partners. When it came to our finances, we needed a solution that would engender trust and be as transparent as possible. ”

Felix, Oxford Mutual Aid

## Spotting a solution

*We rallied our funders, network and staff to find a way to support the best parts of networked aid while helping groups prepare for the risks ahead.*

The Social Change Agency (SCA) has been supporting people-powered movements and community-led groups to create positive social impact for nearly a decade.



We know that the struggle to manage finances is not new or unique to Mutual Aid groups. Other grassroots groups and movements we support face the same challenges. This was brought to our attention from the research we undertook, commissioned by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, on [what makes an effective volunteer-led response in the time of crisis](#). We had been looking for a solution to this for a while and had come across an innovative piece of technology called [Open Collective](#).

The Open Collective platform evolved out of the Extinction Rebellion movement and now helps networks, campaigns and grassroots groups across the globe. It offers the opportunity for legal entities to act as “[fiscal sponsors](#)”, or as we call it, “[fiscal hosts](#)”, which involves taking on the risks of financial management on behalf of groups who are not legally constituted.

Open Collective addresses the unique needs of unconstituted groups without asking them to change structurally.

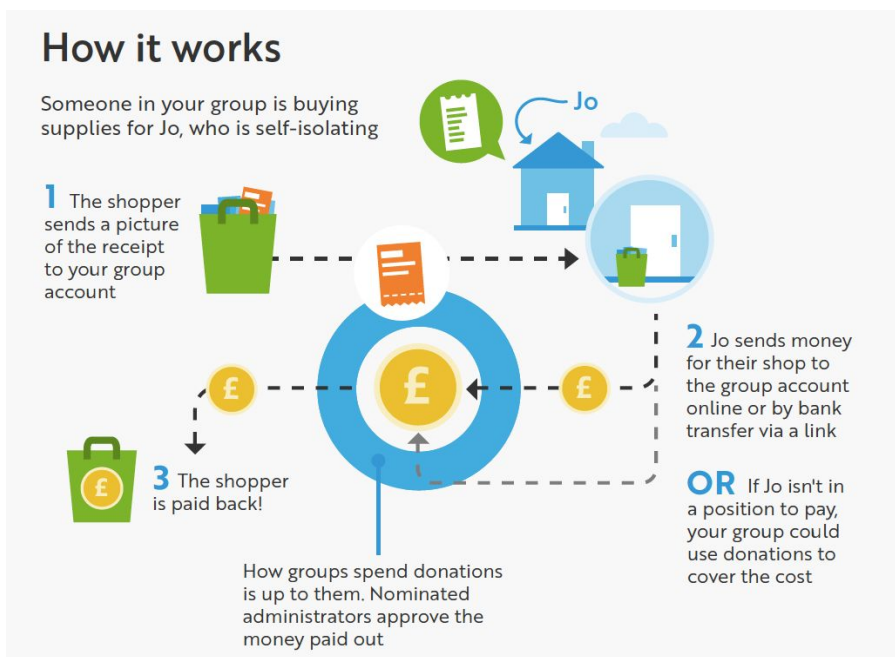
As we heard from Mutual Aid groups about their infrastructure and money management challenges, we knew that Open Collective would be a game-changer during the crisis. Using this tool, we could support the best parts of networked aid while helping groups prepare for the risks ahead.

## A fiscal host for Mutual Aid groups

*We set up our operations within three weeks of the crisis hitting the UK to help neighbours help each other during this crisis.*

A fiscal host acts as the legally constituted organisation that enables community-led groups to transact financially without needing to incorporate themselves. As such, we take on the responsibilities of financial due diligence, processing payments, ensuring transparency and risk management.

Because of the nature of the crisis, we knew we had to provide a seamless service for groups from onboarding onto the tech, to support with group decisions, so they could get on with supporting neighbours. The Open Collective fiscal hosting service became part of our Accountable work, which provides wrap-around support on money management and accountability for groups and networks wherever they are on their journey.



“ What we like about it is that it's really hands-off. They just provide us with the tools, then we do what we want with it. One of the things I was nervous about, getting involved in the mutual aid community, is the amount of red tape, and the amount of legislation compliance that we have to overcome – but to be honest, this system has allowed us to get over that. I've found it such a positive experience – it feels a bit like how things used to be done, and people are a lot more trusting

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Nettleham Volunteers  
COVID-19 Support

## Beyond fiscal hosting

### Building long term resilience

Leaning on our experience, we provide a robust and flexible offer of ongoing support that respects and values the culture of self-organisation and community leadership. We have run webinars, created user-friendly guides, shared free resources, and connected groups to each other and our network. We have also given out small grants (up to £300) to existing groups looking to establish charitable support or something similar, to kickstart their fund.

As we have done from the beginning, we will continue to be driven by groups, responding to their needs to enable action, not creating a centralised coordinating body.

### The Social Change Nest CIC

Created in May 2020, The Social Change Nest CIC is the charitable arm of the SCA. It gives us an adequate structure to support community groups and movements.

The objects of the Company are to carry on activities which benefit the

community and in particular (without limitation) to promote community capacity building, reduce poverty,

promote equality, equitability and diversity and to support a range of social justice and environmental causes.

## What Accountable has enabled

*"Financially speaking, the Social Change Agency's service has enabled everything we have done. It's access to a transparent and open budget, which has allowed us our whole process of doing emergency food shops in the community. It means that we can step in and help while the council is busy sorting out individual cases."* – Amy Daniels, Canonbury Mutual Aid

### Accountable in numbers

Groups quickly adapted to using Accountable as their main source of managing money.

In the first weeks of going live, we onboarded 96 community organisers from 32 groups across the UK. This number tripled in the following months, and today we're hosting more than 350 volunteer community organisers from 120 groups.



Accountable is an enabler, taking care of the complicated back-office management so groups can continue to grow and deliver life-saving goods and services. And we're stunned by what they've achieved. They've made sure people don't starve, run out of medicine and can pay their bills.

From March to August, groups raised a combined amount of nearly £357,000 in donations across 9,400 transactions all over the countries and over 662 people in London have donated to their group through the platform. With a system to approve and reimburse volunteer expenses, groups can continue to accept new volunteers without straining their resources.

### From goods to solidarity

Through the data available to us we can observe the changing nature of support being provided by groups. Some bigger groups are shifting from spending predominantly on shopping to more micro-grants or solidarity payments. For example, in the first few months, most expenses were for food, medicine and essential goods, but in June and July, we saw an increase of expenses for bills (gas, electricity), phone and fuel top-ups.



Charlie Watkinson from Nunhead Knocks Mutual tells us:

“We’re now seeing people who are running out of money because either they’re out of jobs, or their income has changed and their savings are running out, and they need help getting funds. We’re getting a lot more requests where people are just out of food, particularly in the half-term week where the kids of the key workers are at home. People are running out of money and don’t know where to go to.”

Another of these groups has been Arthur's Hill Mutual Aid. They’ve set up a separate Solidarity Fund page, and have already provided 44 grants to people in Newcastle. Grants have reached people without bank accounts, for example, people with no recourse to public funds, through making cash payments and processing expenses and reimbursements on Open Collective.

### Getting funding to communities through Accountable

In May we were commissioned by Guys and St Thomas Hospital Charity (GSTC) to use Accountable to help channel support into specific postcodes in Lambeth and Southwark. These communities cover the childhood obesity corridor and areas of high density for people with long term health conditions. The concern being that these communities may fall through the cracks of the health support system and statutory services. GSTC wanted to ensure that Accountable enabled community capacity building and not just an injection of immediate aid to keep the pressure off the local healthcare system.

Using our community-building approach, we have supported 19 groups to work more effectively for their communities and supported two teams of volunteers to set up mutual aid groups in their areas. This has enabled over £20,000 to go directly into communities not covered by pre-existing Mutual Aid groups. We have also co-produced feedback mechanisms with local residents to gather qualitative data on the impact of COVID 19, together with financial data of how aid money is being spent through the Accountable platform we have a firm methodology to understand the impact of our work that can be scaled across all projects.



# What's next?

We have passed the six-month mark and Mutual Aid groups are still going strong, adapting to new needs in their community and preparing for an uncertain future. We've just conducted research and spoken to 40 groups from across the country and will continue to work alongside them to set our priorities in a way that's responsive and supportive to their needs. Our key development areas for the next months are:

## 1. Access to funding

Mutual Aid groups are moving at a much faster pace than funding bodies. For one, groups are shifting from providing goods to hardship and solidarity funds. But will funders allow for this flexibility so that Mutual Aid can continue to be responsive to the immediate needs of their community?

Finances are critical to a group's ability to operate. Potential sources of funding include council grants, charity grants, donations from the public or local businesses. Groups are looking for new funds, and the challenge of accessing traditional funding is resulting in some considering incorporating as CICs, charities, or being absorbed into local government. We know from working with Mutual Aid groups and other unconstituted groups that their structure is key in their ability to respond quickly, take risks and have a positive impact.

We ask that funders review their funding structures, embrace community action and empower communities to be part of building a post-pandemic future. We will bring this conversation to the forefront of our work, ensuring that the concerns over funding are understood and the voices of the Mutual Aid groups taken into account.

## 2. Building strong roots

With lockdown lifting, many Mutual Aid groups have lost a significant number of volunteers to work and other commitments. Some have had to either significantly slow down activities as a result, switch directions, or stop operations. We can support them in navigating this space, providing the tools to work on capacity building, governance and long term purpose.

Through our preexisting services, we take groups through our [Movement Building Canvas exercise](#) to identify and prioritise key enablers that need some extra support. We diagnose the areas which need strengthening so groups can build strong roots and evolve into their next stage.

### 3. A peer-network

We're also facilitating the creation of a peer-support network for groups to connect and grow together. Mutual Aid groups are working almost completely in siloes from one another, yet they are facing similar challenges and delivering almost the same support. We want to facilitate the creation of a peer network of community-led group administrators, where they can connect, share learnings and support each other. This will support our common goal of making sure that the community ties strengthened during the pandemic last well beyond it.

### 4. Beyond Mutual Aid

There is a lot of pressure on groups to develop infrastructure and create long term resilience. Some are exploring different legal structures and others considering merging with local councils and charities.

Although we set up to support Mutual Aid groups as the crisis hit, Accountable is a service available to any group, movement or network that has no bank account or needs support with money management.

We have recently acquired Open Collective UK CIC and the 40 groups they fiscally host will be coming under our services as of October. Only a few of these groups are Mutual Aid, with the majority working at a grassroots level on environmental, health and housing issues.

As an agency, we help networks to grow from a temporary phenomenon into fully-fledged movements with long-term social impact. As Mutual Aid adapts, we hope they will continue to benefit from our support in their next steps.

This crisis has no end date and every day we have people across the country who are in serious need of help and are falling through the cracks of the system, not able to access support from the government or the third sector. We will continue to support the fantastic work of local people, communities and groups in any way possible.

Thank you again to everyone who made our work possible.

If you would like to talk to us about our work, please contact Fernanda Munhoz: Email: [fernanda@thesocialchangeagency.org](mailto:fernanda@thesocialchangeagency.org) Tel: 07495015278

# A view from the front line

Charlie Watkinson shares her experience of providing and receiving support during the Covid-19 pandemic as a member of the Nunhead Knocks Mutual Aid group (June 2020).

## **On the changing nature of the support...**

Initially, the majority of support that was needed was going to collect things for people that were self-isolating. That still continues now, but what we're seeing more and more is people who need financial support.

That's people who are running out of money because either they're out of jobs, or their income has changed and their savings are running out and they need help getting funds. We're doing more things around mental health and befriending more people needing that kind of support.

We're seeing more people who are out of food, particularly in the halftime week where the kids of the key workers are at home. People who need help with money, who are running out of money and don't know where to go to.

## **The stories are getting more serious...**

One gentleman was homeless until February, borrowed the money to get into a house and now has no food, no clothes, nothing. We've been able to fundraise to get these items donated to him.

Another family has just moved from temporary housing into permanent social housing. They only have a single bed between a parent and a child. So through the donations that our neighbours have provided we've got them a couple of double beds, a TV, a laptop for the child to their homework on, bookcases, books, activities for the kids. It's amazing, but it's definitely getting more serious and more complex in its needs.

## **On the mutual nature of Mutual Aid...**

One of the things that I think has been the biggest impact of Nunhead Knocks, and all of the Mutual Aid groups, isn't just who we're supporting. It isn't just the people who need help, the people that are self-isolating who've run out of money, who are vulnerable or at high risk. It's also the people that are volunteering.

I know that for me personally when we first set this up, if I didn't have this to focus on and I didn't have this outlet to feel I was contributing to the crisis and helping my neighbours, I would have struggled a lot more than I have done. It's helped my mental health and wellbeing tenfold.

Don't get me wrong. It's very stressful and it's very emotional work, but I think that's one of the really big impacts of having these Mutual Aid and community groups is that it's helping people to feel like they have a sense of control in this current situation and that they can give to their neighbours. Even if it's just sharing a tweet so that more people hear about us, every little bit amounts to a massive, massive impact.

### **On making the community spirit last...**

The problems that we've seen with people not having money, not having resources, being higher risk, not being able to leave their homes anyway... Those problems all existed before Covid-19, so what's really great is that hopefully these community groups and people that have come together in response to the crisis see the value of working as a community. It's one of the most amazing things I've ever seen.

It has been absolutely wonderful seeing some of the positive things that have happened in our local area because of this. It's just a shame that it took Covid-19 for something like this to happen.