

Mapping Civic Leadership Platforms, Digital Civics and Volunteering in the UK during Covid-19

Report prepared by Neil Pye, with Katerina Alexiou and Theodore Zamenopoulos. The research was supported by funding from the Open University's Citizenship and Governance Strategic Research Area.

Contact: katerina.alexiou@open.ac.uk, theodore.zamenopoulos@open.ac.uk

Design Group, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA

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Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown immediately forced both Central and Local government, as well as citizens and communities, to adjust to new circumstances, which not only restricted movement and travel, but also any situations that involved face-to-face contact and social interaction. This led to the adoption of social distancing measures along with alternative ways of communicating and interaction. The Covid-19 crisis accelerated changes over the way in which civic engagement and political discourse has been conducted through the use of digital technology platforms. It also exposed shocking social inequalities within the UK and highlighted existing deficiencies in public services as a result of austerity and lack of joined up thinking across all levels of government. This prompted individuals and communities to mobilise to fill the gap, leading to a growth of social capital and volunteering on an unprecedented scale.

Over the course of two months (from June to July 2020) desk research was conducted in order to explore the kinds of digital platforms used by different actors (government, local authorities and community organisations) to support civic activity at different scales (national, local). The research aimed to understand current practice and to identify gaps and opportunities for supporting civic leadership in the future, through the use of digital tools.

Community responses to Covid-19

One of the key platforms supporting local civic action was the Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK website (<https://covidmutualaid.org/>). The website was set up by a group of volunteers and aimed to support local mutual aid groups by providing resources and helping them connect to other local groups, to individual volunteers and to those in need. During the height of the pandemic, the platform listed over 4,000 groups nationally. Many temporary groups were set up using platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, as well as various other forms of social media including Twitter.

During the pandemic, volunteers involved with food banks, community centres, local authorities, NHS Trusts and services, universities, peer support organisations, disability support groups, neighbourhood watch groups, churches and other faith organisations were vital in ensuring that people and communities did not go hungry, or without life-

saving medications. Much of this agency was carried out at a 'breakneck speed'. According to Julia Unwin, Chair of the Civil Society Futures independent inquiry during 2017-18, the Covid-19 pandemic flipped the narrative that residents are highly dependent on local authorities for both agency and leadership [1]. Benjamin Taylor, Chief Executive of the Public Service Transformation Academy noted that prior to the onset of the pandemic, at community level, whenever there had been a 'sudden uptick in connections, self-help, voluntarism, community capability', this activity has been either been 'stifled or enabled by councils with other public services getting involved' [2].

Local government responses to Covid-19

As community agency was being transformed by the pandemic, a digital transformation also took place in local government, which before the outbreak of Covid-19, had been 'painfully slow'. According Oliver Dowden MP, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport [3]:

'Coronavirus has fundamentally altered our lives and the role that tech plays within it. It's turbocharged the digital transformation of almost every part of our days – of our workplaces, our businesses, the way we shop and stay in touch with family, and the way we use public services'.

One of the main drivers of this process has been the growth of cloud-based 'Software as a Service' or SaaS, which helped councils rapidly accelerate digital transformation projects. A company at the forefront of this transformation has been TechnologyOne, which as a leading specialist in this field, helped more than 330 councils in the UK, Australia and New Zealand to adapt to change during the pandemic. When the company's technology was preconfigured and delivered remotely via SaaS, local authorities were able to 'reduce implementation times and costs, reduce risk, and migrate much faster to new digital services' [4].

Across England and Wales, TechnologyOne worked with a wide range of local authorities including Chelmsford City Council, Dover District Council, Redditch Borough Council and Bromsgrove District Council, whilst in Scotland, the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service managed to save £340,000 a year, and slash employee workloads by switching to TechnologyOne. In Northern Ireland, Mid-Ulster District Council also embraced next

generation, mobile-enabled technology from the provider to transform its organisation.

On the back of the Covid-19 pandemic, another local authority which implemented cloud-based SaaS services for its 140,000 residents was Horsham District Council. Since 2017, its previous switch to digital services away from analogue methods, not only enabled an upgrade of its financial and human resource systems via the use of cloud technology, but also future-proofed the local authority. This enabled it to cope during the Covid-19 crisis and according to Dominic Bradley, Head of Finance at Horsham District Council [4]:

'We made a strategic decision to move to SaaS for a number of reasons, none of which included managing through a pandemic. (...) Using TechnologyOne has helped lay the groundwork—it prepared us for Covid 19. Two or three years ago we couldn't have suddenly uprooted the team and worked from home as easily. (...) There's certainly been a cultural change. People are working in a different, more agile way.'

In order to do things differently during the pandemic and lockdown, the 2020 Coronavirus Act, which was given Royal Assent on 25 March 2020, provided a raft of temporary emergency powers which included a provision for council meetings to be held remotely. The regulations stated that a 'place' where a meeting is held can be 'electronic, digital or virtual locations such as internet locations, web addresses or conference call telephone numbers'. This enabled councils that were concerned about weak broadband connections to hold their meetings over the phone instead.

In some quarters, the use of digital platforms and technology as a mechanism for civic engagement has been highly problematic. During the lockdown, as tech companies and network providers stepped up their efforts to improve online capacity and the speed of networks and bandwidths, many tech-wary councillors refused to embrace new technology, as well as engage in remote council meetings. From a democratic participatory perspective, this was quite concerning insofar as social distancing has seen many participation processes at local and national level shift online [5].

Anthony Zacharzewski, founder of the Democratic Society, suggested that there is a belief that once public meetings have resumed, online and digital participation will grow as a complement to offline events. He cautioned that whilst it will 'broaden citizen engagement', there are dangers that it can exclude people. Zacharzewski cited that

moving away from an economic lockdown requires 'bold decisions, and involving citizens in them will be essential to ensure their consent and liberate their energy', which may reshape citizen/council relations, in order to change economies, buildings and lifestyles, as well as tackle salient issues such as climate change [6].

In terms of 'Virtual Democracy', the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown provided an opportunity to move away from traditional structural forms of democratic decision-making and oversight by mainly analogue means. Jacqui McKinlay [6], Chief Executive of the Centre for Public Scrutiny, asserted that 'embracing new ways of working that are more distributed and dynamic will enable councils to engage more closely with communities and support more inclusive participation, rather than be limited to those who can physically attend meetings'. McKinlay suggested that the acceptance of legitimacy and value of virtual democracy and its role in our future governance landscape will be vital, as one of the ways in which 'brilliant community activism' can be captured and built-on, in order to maximise the skills and expertise of councillors, as well as fully embrace transparent decision-making.

Covid-19 accelerated the role of digital technology by connecting people who might otherwise have been isolated and allowed citizens to remotely access help. Natalie Turner, Head of Localities at the Centre for Ageing Better, suggested that for the most vulnerable people in society, this is a real challenge [6]. Research showed that over-55s made up 90 per cent of the 5.3 million people in the UK who are not online. For others, the crisis provided an impetus to transcend the digital gap, and a number of organisations moved many of their services online. For example, in Leeds, the 100% Digital project emerged with one neighbourhood scheme moving its regular coffee mornings onto Zoom. For local authorities going forwards, building on this 'new normal' and supporting older residents in being digitally connected is crucial to the resilience of both individuals and communities [7].

The case of Manchester

Prior the Covid-19 pandemic and in response to financial constraints being imposed centrally on local authority budgets throughout the 2010s as a result of austerity, there had already been many innovative attempts made by local authorities to improve engagement with citizens.

Following the model of the Wigan Deal which established a new social contract between the State and community [8], the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) began a journey in 2017 to develop this theme on a much broader scale with a blueprint for Greater Manchester to become a top-five European digital city region. In 2018, the GMCA updated the Greater Manchester Digital Strategy by placing people at the heart of its plans with new priorities that involved empowering people; enabling innovative public services; digitally enabling all businesses; creating and scaling digital businesses and being a global digital influencer. The main intention behind this blueprint involved the delivery of public sector transformation by maximising opportunities and resources and enable a completely joined-up digital approach to service provision across all aspects of the GMCA's policy portfolios [9].

The Covid-19 pandemic both accelerated the role and impact of the Greater Manchester Digital Platform, which was initially designed to connect secondary care in the form of hospital data with GP data and care home data. The main purpose behind the platform was to establish a central health and care record for all Greater Manchester citizens, and to create the first bi-directional flow of health and care information ever seen in the UK. Seven suppliers were chosen by the GMCA to produce the platform. They included: Black Pear, which provided a two-way integration of GP systems with acute and community settings; Shaping Cloud, which is involved in delivering an innovative identity and access management service; Snowflake – a cloud data platform and an analytics and data science platform; Janeiro Digital, which is charged with providing software called XFORM Health that gives people more control of their own health and care data; Aire Logic which is responsible for building of e-forms and linking of the various components of the platform to support the storage of citizen data; Clinical Architecture, whose aims is to deliver terminology and 'semantic normalisation' solutions to harmonise disparate coded data to national standard codes; and Orion Health, which was tasked with the development of Greater Manchester Integration Engine to support the integration and message flow across the platform [10].

During the pandemic, the new GM Digital Platform was adapted to support Greater Manchester's response as a daily reporting system to monitor PPE stock levels, staffing availability, infection rates and outbreaks to identify early signs of instability so swift

action could be taken. Sir Richard Leese, Chair Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership, stated that ‘The digital response has been no exception - the speed at which this new situation reporting tool is being deployed across our city-region is ground-breaking and is helping us manage this pandemic in a much more coherent and proactive way’ [11].

In response to the humanitarian needs of the pandemic and the task of coordinating a huge growth in the number of people volunteering across Greater Manchester, the GM Digital Platform spawned innovations such as The Community Hub Volunteer application, which was developed by Bury Council in collaboration with ANS and Microsoft, with support from the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA). Community Hubs were established in all ten boroughs of the GMCA to provide support for the most vulnerable in each borough, as well as coordinate efforts for those who did not have any other way of sourcing food and medical supplies, and help vulnerable residents gain access to hardship grants [12]. The application itself, provided a platform that all parties involved in logging, assigning and volunteering could access. This helped coordinate contact between centres, Hub Managers and volunteers and also allowed for the collection of required information that matched appropriate support to a citizen needs [13]. Andy Barrow, Chief Technology Officer of ANS, said that they were now working on variations of the app for a number of other councils, along with different applications based on Power Apps for the NHS and higher education sectors [14].

The role of universities

The emergence of the Community Hub volunteer app in Greater Manchester, and many others like this across the UK, is part of a much wider theme that was already in motion prior to the Covid-19 pandemic through the growth of Digital Civics. This is a cross disciplinary area of research that explores ways in which technology can promote new forms of participation in the design and delivery of local services including education, public health, social care and town planning. From 2014, there was an emergence of university-led place-based studies which involved mass consultations with cities engaged in building digital technologies to support citizen engagement. What began at Newcastle University with the creation of Open Lab by Professor Patrick Olivier spread to other universities across the UK, as driven in response to the demands laid down by the Research Excellence Framework REF (<https://www.ref.ac.uk/>). Through the dissemination of knowledge via research and teaching, many universities have adopted

a civic function based upon the delivery of impact. [15]

The origins of Digital Civics can be traced back to when Greece was deeply affected by austerity during 2014-15. Mass demonstrations gave rise to a Solidarity movement comprised of neighbourhood-level civic groups coming together that were not formally constituted as charities, but operated on the basis of consensus and direct participation. Citizen-run health clinics, food centres, kitchens and legal aid hubs sprang up to fill gaps that had been left by austerity [15]. On the back of this, Professor Olivier set up an Open Lab in Athens with university researchers from both Newcastle and Greece collaborating, which both captured and unlocked much civic action that previously, would have largely gone unnoticed. The Open Lab initiative later extended this engagement to work with displaced Syrian nationals in Lebanon around issues such as access to healthcare and food resilience amongst refugee communities [16].

Since those early research initiatives, Open Lab, not only had an effect upon place management in Newcastle through the use of digital consultation platforms, but has also achieved much in enabling the university as an anchor institution to become a driver of civic engagement through various digital platforms. A good example of this is the Metro Futures: Co-designing the future of Tyne and Wear Metro's scheme, which informed a successful £362m bid to the Department for Transport for a fleet of new Metro trains. This project was innovative in that rather than rely on methods such as paper questionnaires and surveys, consultation was devised through the use of pop-up Labs in shopping centres and busy public spaces across the North East, along with co-design workshops with co-researchers (members of the public), as well as the use of tools such as the Open Lab built JigsAudio - a consultation method that involves talking and drawing. Metro Futures also sought the views of the youngest Metro passengers and through working with seven schools and colleges, the project invited students from across Tyne and Wear to put forward their designs for future Metro trains and welcomed over 60 schoolchildren to sit in the driver's cab of a real Metro train for an afternoon [17].

Digital Civics has been premised on the use of open technology and open source models and systems as a means of ensuring sustainability in creating participatory platforms. From this, emerged an App Movement Platform (<https://app-movement.com/>), which is a new kind of technology commissioning service that allows anyone to campaign for, design, and automatically generate location-based review

systems for topics of concern to them. This app has since been used in various participatory projects such as SOLE Connect (<https://app-movement.com/v53xwg>), which enabled refugees to 'self-organise to find, rate and review the location of essential services and safe havens'. It has also been used as an online hub for 'Community Action and events in Wingrove' (<https://app-movement.com/eykbp6to>) encourage debate about how best to manage the area and achieve that through co-operative working between the council, the freemen, local businesses, local residents and others.

State-wide platforms and programs

The use of digital platforms has proliferated across the globe, as many apps and websites now act as an interface between the State and communities. An example is Decide Madrid (<https://decide.madrid.es/debates>), which is a digital democracy platform where thousands of ideas can be collected and sorted by a randomly selected citizen assembly, who filter through online proposals and then decide which ones to turn into policies. Other such platforms include vTaiwan (<https://info.vtaiwan.tw/>), which was designed in 2014 as part of a civil-society movement called g0v. This neutral platform engages experts and relevant members of the public in large-scale deliberation, and facilitates constructive conversation and consensus building between diverse opinion groups. In terms of recent debates, vTaiwan helped resolve a disagreement between civil-society activists on internet alcohol sales and the ratification of several items on ridesharing regulations.

Another organisation, CitizenLab (<https://www.citizenlab.co/>), which is based in Brussels, Belgium has provided over 180 cities and governments globally with digital participation platforms that have been adopted to consult citizens on a wide-range of local topics and empowered them through decision-making apps [18]. The platform has used Artificial Intelligence (AI) to support citizen participation as part of a Youth4Climate case study on the back of youth protests about Climate Change, which had previously been initiated by the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, and the use of crowd-sourcing to generate innovative ideas to improve mobility in Brussels [19]. During the Covid-19 pandemic, CitizenLab worked with local councils across Europe to set up online Town Hall meetings as a platform for civic engagement [20].

As Covid-19 accelerated the rise of digital democracy and various interfaces for civic

engagement, one of the biggest challenges for parliaments and legislatures, as well as town halls is the replication of methods of scrutiny, debate and voting using online platforms [21]. An interesting innovation that emerged during the lockdown within the UK Parliament was the development of a digital voting app, which was first used on 12 May 2020. The app is secured using two-factor authentication and directly linked to MemberHub, a digital dashboard already used by parliamentarians to table questions. Having a system in place that politicians are already familiar with, has been beneficial in supporting a transformation from the traditional ‘division lobby’ procedure [22].

Alongside democratic innovations such voting apps, it was noted that whilst the UK government was said to have been following the science in making decisions about the easing of lockdown, it also ran a large-scale data-driven operation to help with strategy, as seen during the 2019 General Election and 2016 EU referendum. According to one UK government official [23]:

‘The internal polling is pretty extensive every day...We get an overnight breakdown of surveys of 2,000 adults. We get stats on how worried people are, people’s perceptions of risk, whether they feel they’re being served by government information, whether we’ve got the balance right between the economy and healthcare, polling on people’s finances, thoughts on the NHS, about social distancing, businesses, workplace, face masks’.

Over the past few years, Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Special Adviser, Dominic Cummings has called for major changes to way in which the Whitehall and Westminster models of governance work through the adoption of more data-driven policies [24]. Post-pandemic, as more of those platforms emerge, it can be speculated that this may at some stage, have an impact on voluntary activity in the UK, and how they can be both nurtured and harnessed amongst citizens and communities.

Reflections and recommendations

During the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, the UK experienced a significant growth in levels of volunteering to the extent that had not been seen since the Second World War. This was amid conditions, as described by Neil Howard, where ‘millions have lost their jobs, large numbers are unable to pay their rent, and some of the poorest and most marginalised are having to risk their health by continuing to work so as not to

starve', and in addition, 'domestic violence has increased, some of the sick are unable to be treated, and...many are dying' [25].

In terms of what can be learned from the new voluntarism amongst activists, campaign organisations and left-leaning politicians, the Covid-19 pandemic has been seen as 'an unparalleled opportunity', to both build a more caring society and usher in a much needed green transition to a post-carbon economy', as well as harness digital technology to build new civic platforms and interactions [26]. Neil Howard has also suggested that 'more and more people are aware that former status quo left too many vulnerable and uncared for and therefore wanting change' [25].

At the very beginning of the pandemic and lockdown, despite many UK citizens signing up to the government-backed NHS Volunteers Responders scheme on the back of concerns that NHS services would be overstretched, as Patrick Butler suggests, it was not 'an unalloyed success', even though huge publicity had surrounded this initiative [27]. The initial recruitment of 750,000 volunteers shrank to 600,000 once security checks had been undertaken and on the back of this, roughly 500,000 tasks were carried out by those volunteers. Butler suggested that although very commendable, the 'volunteer supply massively outweighed the demand for help'.

The other major civil society phenomenon during the pandemic was the rise of thousands of Mutual Aid groups and informal neighbourhood-level networks linked by social media. The Royal Voluntary Service (RVS) charity which operated the NHS Volunteer Responders scheme, admitted that the growth of mutual aid and 'lockdown volunteers', left many NHS Responders with nothing to do. A study by the New Local Government Network (NLGN), which is now called New Local [28] found that Mutual Aid groups were more heavily concentrated in areas where large numbers of working-age people could participate in them, especially in places with high levels of social capital that were wealthier and better-educated. Alternatively, in rural areas and less wealthy places, community activists, existing networks and institutions such as churches, banks and rotary clubs, played a much more prominent role.

One of the biggest challenges for the government in 'levelling up' civil society, is how to encourage mutualism in places where there is very 'little civic infrastructure, high population churn, low levels of trust', as well as 'stark income and ethnic divides' [26]. Mutual Aid groups emerged and thrived not because of Whitehall policy directives, but

because of the lockdown introduction of furloughing which created a mass cohort of working-age people with time on their hands, as well as motivation to help in a moment of national crisis with no immediate pressure to seek paid work [ibid].

Mutual Aid groups flourished in places which possessed 'abundant community assets where people of different backgrounds were able to 'meet and mix', such as community centres, libraries and parks. The growth of civil engagement in public spaces occurred, despite increased digital interaction generated during the pandemic through Zoom meetings and WhatsApp messaging. However, whilst informality made Mutual Aid groups more distinctive, as well as 'agile and responsive', a bigger challenge involved managing informality [28]. For instance, New Local has pointed out that some groups struggled because of a lack of leadership, and as a result, were unable to retain volunteers who simply drifted away. During the lockdown, there were also instances of some Mutual Aid groups being 'slightly hierarchical and undemocratic' in their working practices, whilst others experienced challenges about sustaining enthusiasm amongst volunteers [28].

A bigger issue relates to how Mutual Aid groups have interacted with councils. Some have seen local authorities as being an invaluable partner and source of expertise, whilst other councils have been criticised for being controlling because of their hyper-rigorous safeguarding processes and protective regulations on community-level activities. New Local has pointed out that when council teams tried to control the efforts of volunteers and spontaneous community groups, the outcomes had been negative [28]. Many Mutual Aid groups have viewed local government as an obstacle to their efforts, or as a parallel support system. One voluntary sector support facilitator noted that there was a lot of 'should' and 'must' which came from one council that put many people off from volunteering. Also, in some parts of the UK, the response of local authorities has been one of indifference or dismissal, which in turn, drove many Mutual Aid groups to engage more independently with other institutions and organisations and damaged some council's reputation with communities [28].

The Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown confirmed that the 'Big Society' approach, which had previously been advocated by former Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron during 2010-15, was unlikely to work, as it was 'a centralised, PR-driven and top down-approach' [27]. However, there is an argument that post-pandemic Covid-19 will lead to the emergence of a new social contract. This view has been put forward by Philip

Stevens of the *Financial Times*, who asserted that 'Coronavirus has shaken the kaleidoscope' [29]. Stevens argues that a major problem facing policymakers is that within the post-pandemic world, if they do very little and revert to type, there is a danger that inequality gaps in the UK will deepen even further.

Expanding on this theme, Dame Louise Casey, a former adviser to the government on homelessness and social welfare, has suggested that the UK faces a 'period of destitution' in which families 'can't put shoes on'. With the furlough scheme, introduced at the beginning of the first lockdown, ending on 31 October 2020, through which, government and firms jointly paid up to 80 per cent of people's wages, to a maximum of £2,500 a month, being replaced by a less-generous Job Support Scheme, which has promised to pay two-thirds of wages from 1 November 2020 for workers at firms forced to close under tougher Covid-19 restrictions, Dame Louise Casey has warned that this reduced level of support would not 'cut it'. She argued that many 'normal people, trying to get on in normal lives' risked falling into poverty. [30]

Under the Job Support Scheme, employees in 'viable jobs', who are able to work at least one-third of their hours will receive 77 per cent of their pay, with the government contribution capped at £697.92 per month. Further, employees at UK firms ordered to close completely will get 67 per cent of wages of their usual salary paid - up to a maximum of £2,100 a month. Dame Louise Casey has argued that the new measures put in place are 'not going to be good enough', and has suggested that 'It is like you're saying to people, you can only afford two-thirds of your rent, you can only afford two-thirds of the food that you need to put on the table'. She added that 'there is this sense from Downing Street and from Westminster, that people will make do. Well, they weren't coping before Covid'. [30]

Further, the Resolution Foundation think-tank has cited that the biggest losers during the first lockdown period were workers in low-paid, insecure jobs of the gig economy, as well as poorer households [31]. Since Brexit and the rise of populism, for which leaders in the UK and US such as Boris Johnson and Donald Trump were elected on platforms which criticised old political elites, bankers and minimum wage immigrants, the pandemic has changed the political argument. Competence and fairness have re-emerged as traits that citizens look for most in their leaders and according to Philip Stevens, the crisis has now reframed the role of the state and put a premium on trust [29].

A knock-on effect of the Covid-19 pandemic is that ‘racial, gender and socio-economic inequalities’ have been brought into much sharper focus, especially through the emergence of protest organisations such as Black Lives Matter. Along with disproportionately high-levels of deaths from Covid-19 amongst BAME citizens, since the global lockdown, the notion of responsible citizenship has become more associated with building communities and looking out for one another. According to statistics released by the UK Government in June 2020, 73 per cent of UK residents were confident that they could turn to others in their community for help during the pandemic, and 81 per cent were doing more to help others than before the outbreak [32]. Helen Coffey has suggested that instead of sliding back to ‘normality’ and adopting a ‘business as usual mindset’ that would allow voluntary activity to disappear one solution would be for councils to recognise the wealth of opportunity and embrace it [26].

Simon Kaye of the New Local [28] believes that more power should be given to communities. Kaye has asserted that already, the best councils are thinking about ways in which Mutual Aid groups and projects could be embedded, as well as how to build and develop them on a sustainable basis, once the pandemic has ended. New Local found that for Mutual Aid groups, the management of their relationships with local government has been challenging, insofar as some councils have been inclined to micro-manage groups, whilst at the other extreme, some local authorities have demonstrated a lack of support and interest that has not been conducive to their success.

Citizens UK explored how the weekly Clap for Carers during the first lockdown period, which caught the attention of the nation, could be translated into action through its own Living Wage movement, for which they highlighted [26]:

‘There is this public awareness and sympathy for our key workers, the invisible people who make society work. People are suddenly much more aware of low-paid essential workers – and we really want to see how many clappers we can turn into campaigners for a living wage for key workers. This will be a defining feature of whether this “crisis spirit” translates into meaningful difference’.

With regard to the future of Mutual Aid and voluntary activity which emerged in the UK during the pandemic and lockdown, New Local made a number of recommendations, and believes that councils should play a facilitating role in helping Mutual Aid groups

evolve. Second, it has argued that Central government should invest in Mutual Aid by investing in local government, and in doing so, provide spaces, resources, expertise and funding for voluntary activity to flourish. And thirdly, New Local believes that as the employee furlough schemes and small businesses packages which fed into the development of Mutual Aid groups during the pandemic ends, the growth of social capital and community resilience would be reinforced by the introduction of more flexible working-practices and guaranteed free time for working-age people [28].

In going a stage further to New Local's recommendations, a way forward for Mutual Aid and volunteer organisations to flourish post-Covid-19, is through the wider use of technology such as App Platform to coordinate activity and develop broader strategies around it that are geared towards place. In planning for the future, both during the lockdown and throughout its easing, Mutual Aid groups and charities are trying to cope with increasing demand during uncertain and difficult economic times. This has been caused by furloughed workers who have since been made redundant and other employees who have seen their working hours reduced in comparison to what they were prior to the pandemic and lockdown, as well as greater food poverty.

For instance, in Jersey and during the lockdown, the Salvation Army saw its number of volunteers increase from 99 to over 500. Also, to cite one of many examples, in poorer parts of Greater Manchester, the Mustard Tree charity which for twenty-five years has supported and created opportunities for people and communities across Manchester and Salford, has seen a ten-fold increase in the number of people who needed their help. Before the pandemic, the East Manchester charity helped 500 people a month. As of June 2020, that figure rose to over 1,000 persons per week, with an increasing number of those turning to the charity having never used a food bank previously [33].

The payment of staff wages, premises and providing food to residents across Salford and East Manchester costs the charity, roughly £8,000 per week, which led Manchester United Football Club through its charitable arm, the Manchester United Foundation to step in with a £100,000 donation [33]. With such vast overheads to maintain community resilience, Central government and local authorities have a role to play in ensuring that necessary funding is in place to assist charities and mutual aid groups in maintaining social cohesion, which digital platforms can facilitate.

In summary, the Covid-19 pandemic and first lockdown period in the UK exposed many

deficiencies with government at both central and local levels, which require more trust and collaboration. The resulting wave of voluntary activity in response to the crisis must be seen as an opportunity to build greater resilience amongst citizens, communities and neighbourhoods. This can be facilitated through the wider adoption of digital platforms that can foster engagement and empowerment in shaping places and their futures, post-pandemic.

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