

# UK: Mutual Aid After Lockdown

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**In the early weeks of Covid-19, mutual aid groups sprang up across Britain to support those abandoned by years of austerity. Now they are grappling with their roles in the months and years to come.**

In the face of government abandonment, mutual aid groups across the country have risen to the challenge of caring for our most vulnerable communities. After being quickly formed in local communities [across Britain](#), the groups have been made easily accessible by an increased [internet presence](#) and have gained widespread support even from those who would normally consider themselves apolitical.

But what might seem to some as a spontaneous form of welfare has a legacy in socialist and anarchist organising, and individuals and political groupings informed by such a tradition were quick on the mark to organise. Their efforts proved to be a major resource in lockdown for many marginalised people whose struggle would have been significantly harder if mutual aid groups never materialised.

When lockdown began in March, the transfeminist aid group Queercare circulated a number of resources, including [comprehensive medical protocols](#) and Google Docs for connecting people asking for help with local mutual aid groups and food distribution networks. At a time when official state advice over Covid-19 was sparse and contradictory, groups like Queercare proved their ability to respond quickly and without judgement.

But one of the earliest mutual aid groups to form in response to the crisis was [Lambeth Mutual Aid](#). Most people knew that there was little chance of local council intervention: according to a 2018 [report](#), Lambeth lost 56% (£250m) of government funding since 2010, making it one of the London boroughs worst hit by austerity.

Foreseeing the worst case scenario for lockdown in Lambeth – which was likely to be vulnerable people being trapped in their homes without the possibility of relief – community organisers Lou, Tom, and Pete quickly began coordinating flyers, zoom meetings, various WhatsApp groups and a free-phone number. Within days, Lambeth Mutual Aid was born.

By necessity, the work of the group is all conducted remotely, and tools such as Zoom and WhatsApp have become indispensable to the group's everyday activities. Members take on various roles from running the phones to shopping for food and other essential items and delivering to the homes of people who are self-isolating.

For many, including Sian and Reema, the decision to sign up to Lambeth Mutual Aid came once the economy had shut down and many workers were either furloughed or had been made unemployed, leaving many in precarious financial situations – and others with free time to fill with volunteer work. “We haven’t talked very much about people going back to work,” they told *Tribune*. “But as it’s non-hierarchical, it means that people can dip in and out as and when they need to.”

The group's work ranges from delivering shopping and other essential items to housebound community members, to financial support for people who have lost their jobs and risk running into [arrears with rent payments](#) or other housing costs.

However, Lambeth Mutual Aid often found that the latter form of aid, though still essential, was beginning to feel like an unsustainable, short-term fix for a structural problem. "We were having to put out donation requests," they told *Tribune*, "and while we got some amazing responses, it's not something that the group wants from mutual aid moving forward, as it does not feel like mutual aid."

Worried that people would begin to see Lambeth Mutual Aid as a local charity to keep people financially buoyant until their next job or DWP payment, group members are keen to stress that they are determined to fulfil "the mutual aspect of it," and aim to foster a broader sense of community by encouraging others to set up local groups in their communities.

Charity, according to Reema, "allows people to think that this can be a one-off, whereas if you tell them that this has been caused by years of neglect - and will take years to fix - that's a much more significant task to deal with."

However, as an attempt at business as usual begins, the conditions that have allowed mutual aid to surge - a mixture of urgent need and the freeing up of people's time by lockdown - is changing. Whether mutual aid will continue to thrive amongst the communities it has benefitted in a post-Covid Britain will depend largely on whether they can adapt their operations to the changes that the coming months will bring.

Part of the challenge, Sian says, is to make people "see community assistance as more than just a one-off." Part of the plan of building collectivism, they argue, is helping people realise that "there were people just down the road from them who were [struggling massively before this](#), and weren't being helped", and that support networks can make you "do your bit" for the people that you may have only met through the crisis.

While Lambeth Mutual Aid's founders share a background of community organising, there is the problem of politics. Many who have joined the group do not share the political ambitions or worldview that historically underpins groups such as these. It is here that a disconnect becomes apparent; even more significant given that mutual aid's resurgence has coincided with a period of mass public and political unrest.

However, that isn't to say that the groups are immune from world events. In Lambeth, Reema says, "there have been some interesting discussions of the Black Lives Matter movement," with group participants even sharing links to BLM protests happening in the London area. But this isn't the case in many other mutual aid groups, who have shut down all political debate.

"There's this tendency towards the idea of 'let's not make this political', because people equate politics to party politics, and there's a lot of negative feeling towards that," Reema says, "they just see it as helping their neighbours, whereas we see it as our neighbours needing help because they've been put in this situation by political means."

And while Lambeth Mutual Aid has developed into a significant body with a future-facing strategy, it's clear that a lot of work is still to be done. The rest of 2020 will prove crucial for efforts to politicise mutual aid and build a strong basis of community support.

Those involved do not deny the stress placed on them by the group's frantic work in such a short existence. But the work is necessary work, borne out of necessity in response to a crisis that still has the potential to ruin thousands of lives in the area.

With groups like Lambeth Mutual Aid emerging, the resurgence of mutual aid has been a source of cautious optimism for many on the Left. The potential remains for a large participatory movement, motivated by contact and solidarity between neighbours, on the streets, estates and tower blocks across Britain.

However, doing so requires a push from these groups to explicitly highlight the politics of the problems they're working to mitigate. A sustainable model of political mutual aid that's open to all needs to be established, with the tricky balancing act of keeping the community close to it.

"That is what is critical to mutual aid," says Reema, "you can have a really effective organising group with amazing structures and processes. But if you haven't got the community behind you, you won't get anything done."

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