**Date: 09/12/2020**

**Duration:** 58:24

**Interviewer:** \*Project introduction\*

Urm, okay so, for can we just to start with some information about your group, what is the name of your group?

**Participant:** Urm, I’m kind of involved with two so we set up [NAME OF PREVIOUS MUTUAL AID GROUP] as a sort of private thing and then gave that over to a friend to coordinate, and then I run [GROUP NAME], which is for the [AREA NAME 1] neighbourhood, which is the adjacent neighbourhood to [AREA NAME 2], I live in [AREA NAME 2] and I work in [AREA NAME 1].

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Participant:** And then I sort of set these up very early in the pandemic thinking it will be a good idea, urr then I realised the [AREA NAME 2] group would be rather difficult for me to manage, you know, privately while doing absolutely tonnes of work in my own sort of paid role. So, what I’ll do is I’ll ping on the contact information for my friend [NAME OF FRIEND] who runs the [AREA NAME 2] groups and then she’ll be another person you’ll be able to pick up the study with.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So, but you, so you, you started the group, but you are not involved anymore?

**Participant:** Yeah, I mean, I started both groups, I sort of saw the mutual aid model somewhere else in the city and I thought, that’s what we need here, and I set it up in [AREA NAME 2] and then the next day went into work, I run a development trust, urm thought, yeah, we actually need to do this as our main, you know, way of working. So, we moved to mutual aid model, where we sort of facilitated mutual aid if you like. Urm and so I kind of was involved in both mutual aid groups and then, it got to the stage very quickly in the pandemic where I was working eighty hours a week and I just couldn’t, you know I couldn’t function as it was without, you know, having a private mutual aid project as well as what I was doing through work. So, it was getting a bit crazy.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so urr, when did this group start?

**Participant:** Urr, I can’t remember the exact date, but I think urm… in fact I do know the exact date, it was my Mum’s birthday, [DATE OF MUM’S BIRTHDAY]. So, I came back up from [CITY NAME 1], I’d been down in [CITY NAME 1] for a couple of days with my Mum and then came back up the road and spent most of the journey thinking about it and then… kind of set it up that night, when I got home.

**Interviewer:** Okay, urm, so and you said you were, you were involved and who else? How did it start, actually? So, the process.

**Participant:** Yeah, so I just set up a Facebook group in [AREA NAME 2] and posted about it, I set up the Facebook group and posted about it in the main community Facebook group and there was a lot of interest very quickly. So had a couple of hundred members within a short space of time. Urm and then my friend [NAME OF FRIEND] contact me and said she wanted to help me run it, you know, so I kind of was pleased to kind of get her involved. And then in [AREA NAME 1], where I’ve mainly been involved in this work, sort of went in on the 16th March and we had a team meeting that day and I said that we need to do this, let’s get this set up. Urm and that was alongside a number of things that we as a team had put in place, you know we got involved in coordinating food deliveries and helping the voluntary sector come together in our community. Urm so its kind of part of a wider sphere of work if you like.

**Interviewer:** Okay. And what was the aim, what was the aim of the group?

**Participant:** I think it was to tap into the… to provide a bit of a structure for people to help others. It struck me very quickly people were, you know, dead keen to help and lots of people early in the pandemic were furloughed and didn’t have anything to do, felt really frustrated that they didn’t have any mechanism by which to help people. And no framework, you know. So, it was just a way to connect need with people that could help. So, but that’s the primary thing, sort of tapping into hat voluntary and providing a wee bit of structure.

But also like the community where I work, [AREA NAME 1] and also [AREA NAME 2] to a lesser degree, is incredibly diverse in a [COUNTRY NAME 1] context you know. My Mum and Dad live in [AREA NAME 3] so, if you’ve been to [AREA NAME 3] or any of the sort of [CITY NAME 1] boroughs, they’re just hugely diverse, super diverse. So, you know, in a [COUNTRY NAME 2] context we’re nothing massively out of the ordinary, but in a [COUNTRY NAME 1] context we’re very very ethnically diverse community with a high Roma community from Slovakia and Romania, a very high south Asian so Pakistan, [\*audio dips out 05:03\*] community, and then other migrant groups that have come together as well. So, one of the challenges is how people who don’t speak English or were not literate, can get access to information as well. So, I kind of saw the capacity that I had in my team with lots of multi-lingual workers to be useful in facilitating support for people who otherwise couldn’t get help.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so you were actually involved in multiple towns at the same time, yeah?

**Participant:** Urr yeah, two different towns but very quickly moving away from the [AREA NAME 2] work because it was, you know, my job just took over my life completely for a couple of months, and you know, I was working… everyday just insane hours every day. Just because there was so much need and there was always something you could be doing. It’s kind of the same with our work generally. But given the depth of the crisis and the problems that people were experiencing, yeah, I felt that every hour I was working was really valuable. So, I was just trying to give as much of my time as possible. So, I really couldn’t carry on the [AREA NAME 2] work.

**Interviewer:** Okay, urm, has anything changed since that initial phase?

**Participant:** Yeah, I think we’re, its moved to a much mature model locally. And few of the voluntary sector really scrambled and did a really fantastic job in our communities - meeting need and every month thats past by, people have accessed you know private sector support or voluntary sector support. So there’s no doubt about the need that was there, most people that found ways to get food or get help with their animals or they’ve dealt with whatever issues that they had. Urm but we’ve found that the mutual aid group has kind of moved on beyond just another community page. Recently, you know, there’s been more people asking for help, more people volunteering their help as we’ve kind of entered another sort of phase of crisis, and there in [COUNTRY NAME 1], [CITY NAME 2] we’ve been in like tier four lockdown so the highest level of lockdown so suddenly folks find themselves a bit stuck again, you know. But the thing that happened too is folks have made the connections first time around, and so they didn’t need to put out that appeal to the whole community they could just go back to the people who had helped them before, or the organisations that had helped them before, the volunteer who had helped them before. So, there wasn’t, you know, there wasn’t so much of a need I don’t think for the mutual aid structure because its kind of run its course almost.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so the situation with the group is? At the moment, how would you describe it?

**Participant:** We’re probably a bit different to other groups but I think mutual aid groups generally are, kind of, left wing, very fluid, [unclear 07:51] led structures, you know. And we are a bit different in the sense urm… partially by necessity and also by resources, my organisation kind of took it by the scruff of the neck and said, “right, we could actually do a really good job with this.” Because we’ve got, we’ve got bodies we’ve got people that know, know the community that are already trusted, they’ve got language skills, they understand all of the voluntary sector and we can help using our expertise in the community to create a structure and facilitate volunteering, facilitate information being shared, you know so. I don’t think we’re typical you know we’re an organisation I guess that runs a mutual aid group, which probably doesn’t fit with the definition in the way that others do, so it’s a bit different in that regard. So, we’ve really just been able to carry on providing support through the group. We’ve publicised information about local services, lots of folks have started posting about things that they’re doing or help they’re providing urm, so the Facebook structure has been really useful as well and that’s probably a bit of a difference to mutual aid groups in previous decades if you like, where they wouldn’t have been so dependent on social media, they would have been local organisers. So, I think we’re going but we’ve kind of just continued doing what we always did and just kind of provided the support through the group, you know, facilitated volunteers helping others, things like that.

**Interviewer:** Okay, urm… and have you had previous experience of organising groups like this one?

**Participant:** Urm… I suppose I’m an actual organiser in some ways, I’ve always been involved in the voluntary sector organisations and you know volunteered, so I’m used to that sort of informal, urm kind of structure around things. But in terms of this kind of activity, no, I’d say, no, not at all.

**Interviewer:** Okay, urm, so why did you get involved, why did you thought that was…?

**Participant:** Urm, it probably chimes a lot with my ethos, you know, although I’m not really, I’ve not been involved as an activist before particularly, you know. You know the idea of, I suppose the potential, I could see there could be, there was, within the community there was going to be untapped without some sort of structure. And without some sort of support. That frustrated me, you know like I’d felt there was so many people that wanted to volunteer here but they don’t know how to do it, they don’t know how to do it safely. They want to help people get food, but they don’t know how to connect with people because they don’t know who these people are. So I just felt it was almost like a … a working, a working out of my values but also, a way to use the capacity of organisation first and foremost, because we were just so perfectly placed in terms of the staff that we had, you know, a recognised role already within the community.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Participant:** So, it was about, you know, just about seeing potential and being able to you know recognise that we could make a real difference.

**Interviewer:** So, you mentioned that you worked a lot, how did you fit the activities that you do in the group, in the organisation with other parts of your life?

**Participant:** Well, my life was work for a long period you know, I think there was about three months from mid-March where a bit of a blur, you know I was just working insane hours. And then I got quite exhausted, you know, and quite… urm, physically tired as well, so that kind of had to change. But I think urm… there was a lot of things that we did as an organisation which, you know, they sat outside of the mutual aid structure but supported it. So urr, for example the [ORGANISATION 1] that I run, we already coordinated the voluntary sector, we run a voluntary sector network and a big part of my job over the years has been to look at where there’s gaps and try and make things work better. So, for example, we set up a… a group of English and literacy providers so they could network better and share information and referrals. So that created better partnership and relationships for [unclear: 12:01] classes in relation to kind of support individual learners. So, they weren’t going to five or six different organisations to try and find a class.

Urm so, so when this kind of pandemic arose urm… myself and a particular colleague looked at the structure of the voluntary sector and said, “well there’s probably six or seven, urm, loose groups here.” So, there’s youth providers; there’s people who provided food; there’s people that, there’s a need for kind of communications; what else did we have? There’s a support works group. And we created these groups of organisations and groups of people. And I also was able to secure 200,000 from the [COUNTRY NAME 1] government urm to support basically emergency voluntary activity in [AREA NAME 1]. Urr it was quite incredible actually because for a number of years I’d been part of the [ORGANISATION 1] movement and also the [ORGANISATION 2] movement because my organisation is a subsidiary of the [ORGANISATION 2] as we as the [ORGANISATION 1] and [ORGANISATION 2] have been saying look, you know, we are perfectly paced as organisations to help communities resources better. And the [COUNTRY NAME 1] government basically looked at a situation where they had to give money to meet acute community need very, very quickly. And there is absolutely no way they could use a conventional grant application process. So they were, more or less literally on the phone in a couple of days saying, “look, we’re going to get a fund sorted out, we’re going to give you a guys a chunk of money and within four weeks we had I think about £200,000 transferred into our account to disperse.

So, we used this kind of working group structure, you know the youth providers, the food providers, the creative urm there’s a creative group as well, there’s a mental health group, and and we resourced each of those with their own budget. So, they got ten/twenty thousand pounds each to look at how they could meet the need of the local community. And then we also got a parallel small grants programme so that individual organisations could also apply for up to £2,000 to make amendments to their premises or develop a new resource or pay for additional staff, as a result of the pandemic. So, you know we kind of looked at the whole community and how best, you know, we could use our resources, but also how we could coordinate the capacity within the community better. You know, and we recently secured a post called the community connector… so probably my best worker he’d been previously been doing a [unclear: 14:35] role moved into that particular job and she helped set up all of these working groups and then, you know, we led one or two of them urr others led others and and and then, but you know we coordinated the kind of financial disbursement across the groups and the money side of the small grants as well.

**Interviewer:** Okay, urm… and what geographical area has the group covered?

**Participant:** A very tight one, a very very tight one. So [AREA NAME 1] is urm about a mile south of [CITY NAME 2] city centre. It would take you probably five minutes to walk from one side to the other in one direction and going the long way it would take you maybe fifteen minutes to walk across the longest distance, diagonally you know. So, its actually quite a small neighbourhood. Urm, its very densely populated, it’s got the highest population density in [COUNTRY NAME 1], of a neighbourhood. So again, compared to say [CITY NAME 1] or parts of some areas in [COUNTRY NAME 3] its maybe not that dramatic. But in a [COUNTRY NAME 1] context its quite densely packed. Its obviously the most ethnically diverse population in [COUNTRY NAME 1] so you have this very small area but packed full of people from different areas and different backgrounds. So, it’s really just about a quarter of a square mile, urm and and you know very a lot of people living within this space.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and what kind of things urr did the group do, or the group do?

**Participant:** Yeah so we we again we tried to plug some gaps, so using our volunteer coordinator, we tried to urm find people that could help others, we sort of maintained our Facebook page and we tracked requests for help to make sure they were followed up, urm we started a specific thing where we recognised there was quite a lot of people who were self-isolating, urm but who were also already in poverty, who were therefore stuck and they couldn’t get out to get food. So, we worked directly with the foodbanks to identify urm, well we we got volunteers together, we identified people who needed food and then we used volunteers to collect food for them from the foodbanks and take it to their homes. So that was one of the things we did. We also kind of helped people who, you know, were really low, who needed maybe a friend or support, we referred people onto all the different support organisations locally. We also developed a sort of support services directory for the area, which was-

**Interviewer:** What-?

**Participant:** It was kind of directory of local services because we have maybe forty active social enterprises and community organisations, so we did a directory and its broken down by food and youth work, and it’s kind of largely aligned with the urm, the working group structure. So, we did this and it had contact information, what kinds of support you could get form each organisation and we were able to find that through some of the money we got and that was posted out to every address in [AREA NAME 1]. So, everyone got a copy of this and it was a visual as possible as well so people who have lower literacy, or who didn’t speak English could still make sense of what what it was trying to tell them.

**Interviewer:** Mmm, and how often you did those things, or do you do, actually, its very-?

**Participant:** Yeah, we just carried on right through to be honest, we’ve just been doing them all along. I think, I like I say, the need has changed quite dramatically. There was very acute need at the start, and I think we and, although we were trying to coordinate activity, we couldn’t meet that need at the beginning it was just too much at the start. It probably actually took us a month to maybe be well positioned ourselves, we had money coming in we had IT set up and we were still, you know, its been a real struggle for people to work from home. And I think you know, people’s mental health really struggled, people with kids urr I’ve got a couple of kids, they’re fine but you know my wider kind of family situation separated, that was quite challenging, you know? So, that was quite difficult for probably very single member of my team for one reason or another to work in that way. You know so it took I would say, the first month was kind of the storming period and then after a couple of months it was very much about delivery, and then we entered kind of a very mature phase where things calmed right down, and people seemed to have access to the services that they needed. And then recently we’ve started to see the upswing of activity. So, we’ve just, I guess we’ve just gone with the flow and we’ve tried to just provide what’s needed at different times.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and how many people are in the group?

**Participant:** Urm we have Facebook group that has got nearly 700 members just now.

**Interviewer:** 700, okay.

**Participant:** We have probably thirty or forty volunteers who help with food deliveries or who volunteer particularly kinds of support, we also set-up a parallel, urm Romanian language Facebook group which was kind of mirror site for the main [AREA NAME 1] side, I think its got more members, its probably got about a thousand members.

**Interviewer:** Really? Okay.

**Participant:** Yeah, and it’s got lots of, yeah. I will check that but yeah, we’ve got a parallel group that’s run by three Romanian speaking workers and they’ve used that as a way to get safe information out to the community. Urr, actually I should say one of the important things that we did was urm, early on was provide video messaging. That was so powerful. So, for example within the Romanian community there was a real apathy about [\*audio dips out\* 20:18] –

**Interviewer:** About? About the virus?

**Participant:** In the Slovak community its quite different, people from Slovakia know that back home - about COVID yeah there was a lot of apathy initially. And the Slovaks urr were actually the first people to start wearing masks, because they knew that back in Slovakia there’s a very hard line, you know Eastern, central European governments basically just shut down society straight away and tried to contain it and did a very good job, and so in Slovakia people were really afraid and really followed the government line. And we noticed that Slovaks were wearing masks more than Scottish people, they’d really embraced all the safety messages. In the Romanian community there was kind of a real opposite view there was almost a very relaxed attitude to it. There was a lot of people who were urm, Charismatic Christians who thought like, you know we’d be protected by our faith.

And then what happened was within the first couple of weeks of the pandemic, four or five Romanian men died very quickly from COVID, the very first person to die was the main pastor for the area as well, and it cause complete panic. So, we had a lot of people they were just going to up and get themselves to Romania as quickly as possible, so jumping in cars, jumping in minibuses, taking whatever flights or anything that they could get. So, we had started to use videos to share information about how to access our services, and what, you know, a couple of like almost public safety videos in Romanian and urm, what to do and what not to do. And we stared to publish videos about urr, how to keep safe if you were travelling home, recommending that people didn’t travel, clarifying about the boarders being shut and the kind of fact you’d have to pass through other countries to get there and all the restrictions you would face as you tried to do that. So that was, that was really important and those videos, the Romanian video we created about staying at home, was shared, was watched 6,000 times and shared, you know, a couple of hundred times, so it because a really powerful tool. Another organisation with multi-lingual works started to produce videos about, you know, accessing welfare rights or, you know, what’s happening with schools and you know, so videos became a really key way of communicating that information, so that’s something we’re looking to do again, particularly in relation to Brexit now, in relations to urm, changes to people’s status in, from the end of June

**Interviewer:** Mmm, so you are providing that now? Or will be, okay.

**Participant:** Yeah, yeah.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Urm, and what kind of resources do you have, you mentioned some funds urm…?

**Participant:** Yeah, well we have staff on long term contracts who have worked in the community and I’ve been running the team for about nine years now and it was just eight at the start, we now have about fifteen of us and everyone’s on a sort of minimum of one-year contracts, most people are two or three year contracts, we’ve got lottery funding and long term [COUNTRY NAME 1] government grants for most of our work. So, we have people, we had skills with experience, you know, so that’s a really good bedrock. We have some funds via some of our grants, all of COVID specific funding had to be spent by the end of October, so its all gone now. Urm… so I guess the main things is just trust and relationship with the community. You know we have people here in desperate need and and I’ve got some fantastic workers who area are very much loved in the community and and deeply trusted, so that’s the main asset I think for us, is the relationship.

**Interviewer:** What do you do to get that kind of relationship?

**Participant:** \*Exhales\* yeah, treat people with respect, help people, you know constantly help people, offer a quality of service. We actually have to be very urr, very firm with people because the demands on our services are so high that we can’t actually, you know, meet, meet, you know, everyone’s requirements. So, you know for example urm, we tried to use videos as much as possible so people don’t even have to come to us, so they can watch the video and hopefully it answers their question. But we’ve also had to put in, on a … acceptable standard in terms of what we will offer people. So, we’ve made a commitment to do X, Y and Zed for people, but we’ve asked people not to phone us all the time, we’ve asked people to try and resolve their problems before they come to us, we’ve asked them not to badger us, because we will deal with their enquiry, we will get back to them and we tell them that we’ll do that. So, you know, we have to be very firm, but people respect that and they quite like that, that dynamic as well, I think it’s quite helpful in terms of knowing where everyone stands in the relationship.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and how did you get people involved, the volunteers?

**Participant:** Urm, I I think like a lot of it came naturally through the Facebook groups, you know a lot of people were urm… asking for help with food deliveries and I suppose there is an element of we also wanted to keep people safe, so we were pointing people in the direction of the [unclear 25:23] Care guidance which was the early health and safety guidance about doing food deliveries and, you know pick-ups and things like that. So, we were trying to sort of get involved in a as many of the transactions as possible to try and keep people safe. The the, what they were signing up for, if they were - some of them were saying you know, when they need food, how are they going to deal with payment, how are they going to do the handover, you know, how do they keep the good clean and keep them safe when they’re in their care, things like that. So, we were trying to help people with that. And then you know so we were seeing these exchanges happening, but we were also, we put calls out for volunteers so if people wanted to volunteer to help, we’d have adverts for that. The whole nature of the page was very much about saying, the Facebook page, was about saying, “if you need help with the following - we can help you, and if you can offer help with the following- please let us know.” So, we were trying to capture the names of people and connect people up and as when that was required.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Urm just to, you mention a lot of about coordination, can you explain me a little bit more about how you coordinate everything, how is the structure?

**Participant:** Urm, the few things I didn’t mention, actually, which I I’ll mention now, so we set up our referral form, which is an online form, so if people needed help, they could fill out the online referral form. And that comes to urm… an e-mail address that we can check if there’s been any referrals and we can then pass them on to someone in the team or a different agency. So, people recognised that we were taking referrals and they quite often would tell people to use our referral form to seek help, because they know that we would then pass folks on to a number of different supports. Urm… and we also produced the directory of support which I mentioned earlier. We also setup phone lines which I can’t believe I didn’t tell you this. But we set up four multi-lingual phone lines. So, there’s a a Slovak line, a Romanian line, an Urdu, Punjabi line, and an English-speaking line, and people can use these phone lines to phone and get information about local services or seek help. So that’s quite, been quite a key resource. It took us quite a while to get that one set up because on a technical level it was quite difficult. And also it was me who was doing that, while trying to do another fifty things everyday so it took a while to get the line up and running, and I think because it took so long, the moment had somewhat passed, you know we got the line up and running but in reality most folks had found, found help and also got the the services directory by that stage so people had a resource in their house where they knew they could get help.

So, we did that, and then in terms of coordination, I mentioned my colleague, she participated in all of the working groups to make sure they were kind of up and running properly. And then they largely took a bit of a life of their own, you know, so we didn’t really have to be involved beyond the first couple of sessions. Urm… but that was helpful initially just to kind of get them going.

But we also coordinated the funding, so we were able to use the financing team of the housing association to manage the funds, disperse the funds, keep track of everything, keep us right. Urm and so that meant we were kind of involved in coordinating the groups but also managing the fundings that’s going to and from the groups. And then we used our volunteer coordinator to work with volunteers and myself and the community connector who I mentioned, we were liaising with voluntary sector organisations to try and bring them in, raise awareness of what they were doing to help people, getting them to work more effectively with others so we were, you know, you didn’t have eighteen people providing food without any connection whatsoever, you know? So, we were trying to basically make sure there was minimal duplication and maximum communication.

**Interviewer:** And all the the help provided in urm, was connected with this structure?

**Participant:** Yeah, pretty much, I mean because the funding was attached to the funding it meant that there was kind of a lot of alignment with the structure. Urm that’s not to say that a wee bit of activity happened under those banners, not by any means and we didn’t want that. We just wanted to provide useful support for people, useful connection for people, resourcing for what people wanted to do… urm, you know, good communication between groups and structures as well. So yes, it’s very, very powerful actually, really, really good. But there was plenty of activity that happened out with the structure as well.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Urm, how many groups were involved, how many organisations?

**Participant:** Oh God, fifty I think in the end.

**Interviewer:** Fifty?

**Participant:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Participant:** Yeah, yeah, so we have probably about thirty active organisations in [AREA NAME 1]. And then for example with the food working group that was quite a strong, quite a strong group, there was a lot of people from [AREA NAME 1] that was going to [AREA NAME 2] which, you know, if if you live in – [AREA NAME 2] and [AREA NAME 1] are right next door to each other, so you can be five minutes’ walk from [AREA NAME 1] to [AREA NAME 2] or fifteen minutes’ walk within [AREA NAME 1], you know, so a lot of people were going to [AREA NAME 2] to different food providers there. And similarly, there were groups within [AREA NAME 2] who were maybe working with, maybe the Pakistani community, so a lot of their services were in [AREA NAME 1]. So eventually a lot of the food providers in [AREA NAME 2] were funded from the work they were doing in [AREA NAME 1]. So, I think there were twelve, thirteen organisations who were involved in sort of food delivery work, there were maybe a dozen who were involved in youth work, there’s maybe seven or eight who were involved in creative activities, urm another seven or eight involved in mental health support, urm and then there were others who weren’t funded through, through the grant structures that they were doing work in partnership with those organisation or continuing to do what they’ve always done, but they’ve never received separate funding to expand what they were doing. So, we had like grocery deliveries, we had a grocery delivery service for the elderly for example, who weren’t involved in the food working group so much because they didn’t need to be, they had tonnes of volunteers of their own, and so much work to do they could have been working twenty-four-seven you know?

**Interviewer:** Mmm, and how is the relationship with the local council?

**Participant:** Mmm, that’s a really interesting question, I think we would have a really different perspective because you know we’re, the [ORGANISATION 2] is often seen almost as being a part of the council, we’re very much seen as their establishment if you like, so that really does set us apart, because I know from the local voluntary sector – albeit we have a voluntary management committee, we secure grant funding, we have a charitable purpose, you know, we’re a multi-million pound turnover organisation with, you know, [ASSETS OF ORGANISATION TYPE 2] and a [STAFF OF ORGANISATION TYPE 2], so there’s commercial bits to the business as well. So, we are a bit of an unwieldy beast. So, we’ve a very close relationship with the funder and they also give us millions of pounds every year to [ACTIVITIES OF ORGANISATION TYPE 2], so our relationships kind of very intrinsic.

I would say though, kind of from an outsider’s perspective, the council were invisible the first couple of months of the pandemic. I think form an IT perspective they were already, you know, so bureaucratic and so, they were just hopeless, you could barely e-mail a file of like five meg to someone in the council because, you know, it wouldn’t get the through the server or, you know, people couldn’t use the technology to work out of hours and stuff like that, if you worked for the council. So, when the pandemic hit the council just ground to a halt, you know, they really – some of the basic services continued but my goodness, all of the community workers, community learning workers, social workers, didn’t have clue what they were doing. So, they’re all setting up g-mail accounts so they could continue doing their jobs and… you know working from their mobiles in their living rooms. It was just chaos, absolutely chaos. And the voluntary sector organisations which were smaller and agile were really quick to get their feet on the ground and get moving, whereas the council were just really poor.

So, I don’t know, I think the council, there was a lot urm of disappointment in the council initially. And I think people then saw the work that was happening in the voluntary sector with other partners and were like, “we’re doing a bloody good job here, you know, we’re working really well together, and you know, what do we need the council for?” The council weren’t giving us funding, they weren’t, you know, opening up their buildings, they weren’t really doing anything that could support the efforts. Urm, so it’s, they were a bit disappointing, a bit disappointing. And I think for us, didn’t have a great deal of live for [CITY NAME 2] city council to start so… urm… you know it’s time that they improved that.

**Interviewer:** Okay, any other urr type of organisations, urm, so you are a charity just to make sure?

**Participant:** Urm, we’ve got a slightly different perspective, so the [ORGANISATION 2] a charity, and its regulated by the charity’s regulator and also the [SECTOR REGULATOR]. The [ORGANISATION 1] is a wholly owned subsidiary of the [ORGANISATION 2], but we are company Ltd by shares. So, we don’t have charitable status and we’re not regulated in the same way. But because our parent company is, we sit in an awkward space in the middle where we have the independence to work and do different things to our parent company. But we still have to comply with the legislation and we, you know, we are effectively part of the [ORGANISATION 2].

**Interviewer:** Okay, just to understand, how COVID changed the kind of things that you used to do?

**Participant:** Wow, yeah, so the main focus I suppose of our work is supporting volunteers, urm, also teaching people to read and write, improving their literacy, urm… and all of that work has completely changed. So, we’ve gone from, you know, almost being like a volunteer training organisation with [unclear: 35:12] of volunteers, to working with a handful of volunteers to coordinate them doing food deliveries. We’ve not really taken on much kind of volunteer training, because it’s just been so difficult to do.

We also, we largely put our English language and literacy programme on hold. So, for the first, you know, three or four months, a lot of the folks we normally engaged with, it was very difficult to communicate with them, without the regular face-to-face contact. And then by the time we managed to get folks onto, you know, online classes or or you know, into some kind of online structure, the Summer holidays came, because we finished earlier in [COUNTRY NAME 1]. So, it was only a wee bit tail end of our summer holidays, mid-August that we were really able to start planning a new English programme. So, we’ve just recently done some recruitment and got some new workers in with money that was secured during the pandemic.

So, you know, it’s been, we’re not really delivering, even now we’re not delivering in the way that we were before. We’re not in our offices, I haven’t seen most of my team physically for nine months, you know. Urr, I was like ten stone before the pandemic and I’ve ballooned from sitting in the house doing very little. But not quite ten stone but. Urr I think you know most people have just been working form home, trying to make the technology work, getting really fed up with not seeing people, getting really fed up with not being able to do jobs in the same way, but we’ve really adapted.

I think in terms of our like family support work, we work with the Roma communities, I’ve got like four or five people that support families with kind of, whatever issues they’re experiencing. That’s actually become much more efficient because a lot of the time… you know, if my staff walk through reception, we usually have half a dozen people who wanted to speak to them, and it would take them an hour just to get through reception and get up the stairs. Urm… now though it’s all done on the phone, tis video conferencing, its, you know, WhatsApp or messenger calls and you’re able to quite quickly deal with the issue and move onto the next thing. So, there’s a really, efficiency in the way that we work now in some ways, its fantastic.

I think we weren’t having weekly team meetings before, we are now, they’re very focused, they’re very quick. You know, I think we’ve learnt to use tools much faster than they were expecting. So, cloud based systems, urm… online collaboration, video conferencing, it was all stuff that was kind of over there, you know, we were kind of getting towards it very slowly but we just had to quickly grab it and start using it. So, all of a sudden, we’re seeing the potential in it now, and you’re thinking, “well why did we not do classes this was before? Why can we not do classes in the evening if we’re doing it on Zoom? Why can’t we continue to support families, you know?” And certainly COVID – we’ll be under urm, even with the restrictions of the restrictions in offices and things, we will be the last organisation to re-open because we’re a really, urm health had safety conscious and a very by the rules kind of organising. So, we’ll absolutely minimise risks, so we’ll be the last people to come back and work. So, we will have to keep using these techniques for quite a while.

**Interviewer:** Okay, urm, and how about the volunteers, you talk a bit about your own motivations to do this kind of work and stuff, and how about people, the volunteers why do you think they engaged in mutual aid?

**Participant:** Urm, such an interesting question, you now, because it’s about your fundamental human values isn’t it, you know? I think for a lot of people, on a practical level there was lots of people who were furloughed and perhaps were just not able to do their job. And they were so frustrated. Other people I think their motivations was maybe born out of faith, we have, you know, some really brilliant projects, we’ve got Hindu’s, we’ve got Sikhs working together, the churches had really stepped up. The Mosques have been incredibly active in terms of supporting families, so for a lot of people it was an expression of their faith and their faith values. For others I think its almost a manifestation of their left-wing views as well, more sort of socialist principles, we’re generally a left-leaning country so I think that, you know, people in [CITY NAME 2] in particular have always had that sort of socialist root to the way their work, so mutual aid isn’t a massive jump, you know it’s just kind of almost like a structure within which you can live out your values.

So yeah, I don’t know, it’s a real mix, I don’t think any two people are the same. Urm kind of practical values, religion… and I guess, as well, there’s also that thing about, like with us, we saw the potential that we had within the team, the resources we already had. So did busines owners, they thought, “hang on, I can feed people here, I can, you know, I can offer my premises, or I can, you know, use my design skills.” So, in some ways it was just a sort of, “well, what, what can I do? And what are the resources have I got? I’ve got an opportunity here and actually maybe a responsibility because I’ve got this opportunity to do something.”

**Interviewer:** Okay, urm, you mentioned in the beginning that involvement meant a lot of time and effort for you, and for others? For example, of the volunteers and for other members of the team, how do you see that?

**Participant:** Oh, do you know, it was just exhausting. And I think a lot of it was about the practicalities of being taken away from, you know, a warm cosy office with an IT team and a finance team and a front desk and having well established communication channels and having to rip all of that up and just make something work. So, I would imagine you know the first couple of weeks I probably spent fifty-five hours week just dealing with practical crap. You know, trying to get things up and running. But then at the same time, you’re trying to apply for funding ad you’re trying to set you these working groups, you’re dealing with your team’s mental health falling apart, you know. So, its just, and then so much work, you know, just you know, thinking about the food stuff alone… I… did try and involve some of my team in the food distribution stuff, you now working with stuff who were self-isolating, and she made an absolute [hearse? 41:36] of it, and I had to just take that on myself and that was probably five/ten hours of work a week, you know, just to try and coordinate between the foodbanks, get peoples details, organise their volunteers, you know, deal with the problems that arise when things happen. You know, even though people were self-isolating, sometimes the volunteers would turn up with shopping and they’d be no one there, you know? So, you spend half a morning just dealing with some stupid problem around that. So... and it just felt that everything you tried to do took twice as long as will, you know I think, in terms of your own mental health, your own energy levels. Getting hold of people, you now things not working the way it should have done, so.

**Interviewer:** Urm… and have people drop out of the group?

**Participant:** Urm… not really, no, I mean I think with volunteers, you know… volunteers can be you know an absolute cog of your team. You know, we use volunteers, we have a community support centre and we use it as a training environment for volunteers. And they can be such key staff members almost, from one day to the next - and then they’re gone. You know it’s just their situations changed, their mental health fluctuates, their health fluctuates, they get a job, they get another opportunity, they move away. We’ve lost quite a few people in terms of the volunteer group, but I think in terms of the Facebook group there’s not been a massive drop off in numbers. I think right through the pandemic people have seen it as a really good source of information, and they’d like to see sort of the cuddly community stuff that happens there, you know the the people asking for help, getting help, responding to say how much its means to them. People love to see that kind of stuff. So yeah, I think maybe come back to it a couple of times, I think most folks now have found the support that they needed, you know, there’s still vulnerability, there’s still people with needs and problems, but…most people have found, you know, food deliveries or they’ve dealt with their situation or they’ve got someone who helps. So, I just think that we’ve moved to a different phase so I’m not sure mutual aid is necessarily, is necessary.

**Interviewer:** Okay and… urm, how about problems that affected the group?

**Participant:** Urm, yeah, I think like probably from an organisational perspective, some wee issues around data sharing, you know if you’re trying to, if you’ve got eighteen organisations here providing food, often to the same families, that can be done much more effectively with more coordination. But in reality, you know, the ability of organisations to share information is quite challenging. So, it would have been great if we could have just shared information about everything we were doing, it would have been a lot easier but then that would have kind of just moved away from the principles completely that we try to, you know, to work by. So that was a challenge.

Urm, mental health, that was a huge challenge, still is. You know I think that’s probably been five percent of my working week just dealing with the consequences of peoples’ mental health, you know the struggle – just having to check in with people more, you know people from one week to the next being happy as Larry to you know, being deeply upset. So, I think that’s been a real challenge. You know, my own mental health is very challenging, I manage a team and manage all these different bits of work and my own motivation has crashed in these last couple of months. You know, its been really difficult to, to get the energy up to the levels it was at before. And its just like this kind of long-drawn-out period we’ve been in now. Its what, nine months, such a long time.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and what kind of things have you done that have helped the group going?

**Participant:** Yeah, just to say one more thing actually, just on the last question, just about urm… vulnerability, that was a real concern for me. Is, I think a lot of… in the rush to help, urr a lot of people who urr were previously very vulnerable, you know who needed help, were quite exposed. So, I think that where having, you know, an organisational framework around some of the activities has been really helpful, because we’ve ben able to kind of safeguard people. Urm… whereas, you know, and I’m not sure that has been the case in every interaction, you know I think a lot of exploitations taking place during the pandemic and you’ve heard some bad stories about, you know, people stealing things or trying to enter people’s homes and what not. You know so, that was one of the problems I think and as organisations we were really wary of that. Really wary.

**Interviewer:** Mmm, thing that you did to help the group keep going?

**Participant:** Yeah… urr there was definitely, I suppose as a staff team, you know we we we started to use Microsoft Teams really heavily, so we would use it for all our team meetings and all our kind of sharing stuff, but we also set up… what we called the happy space which was a bit of time every week where people would come together, just to talk and to… you know have a bit of a laugh and urm one person led some activities, you know, like games and different things each week. So, that’s really good because it just keeps things informal, and everybody was working really hard, but this was a change to still connect as friends and colleague, that was really important. I think in terms of the volunteer work, a lot of that is just about being available, and listening to people, you know so I think that was something that was really important because we knew how much we were struggling, but you know I’m reasonably well paid, I’ve not just lost my job, you know I, I wasn’t looking for a job when the pandemic started and now no prospects of a jobs to. Excuse me, a lot of the time it’s just been giving people time and and a listening ear, so I think that’s been really important for folks.

**Interviewer:** Okay, were any of this strategic?

**Participant:** In terms of the [kind? 47:42] thing?

**Interviewer:** Yes, if you planned to do this or urr, it was just ad-hoc?

**Participant:** Urm, I think it was just a necessity more than anything else, you know we really trying to help urm people stay on the level and feel, you know, feel comfortable.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Urm… and have you learnt something from coordinating this group?

**Participant:** Urr I guess it’s just confirmed a lot of my beliefs more than anything else. I mean I think urm, its [coordinated? 48:17] my belief in the voluntary sector as being the most effective way to support people and communities, you know? I think-

**Interviewer:** Why?

**Participant:** -I mentioned local government, urm completely failed us at the start of the pandemic, national government didn’t fail us but couldn’t couldn’t find their way to support people, you know so we had to step in. Urm and I’ve always believed the voluntary sector, like I say we’ve been campaigning for years to promote to work of [ORGANISATION 1] and [ORGANISATION 2], and suddenly the [COUNTRY NAME 1] government just said, “week, we don’t have any choice, we’ve got to do this, this is the only way we can get support out.” Urm and what was amazing actually was when they gave us £200,000 and latterly gave us another forty, they specifically said they wanted a report of no more than one page of how we spent the money. Which was just like, for me, was mind blowing. So not only did they give us this money, they didn’t even care what we did with it. They just wanted, the trusted us enough to take account for this money and then tell them how we used it and they didn’t want to know, they just wanted to get this money out there. And it was it was actually me who was saying, “oh my God, we need to put in systems here, we need to account for every penny, we need a really fair assessment process for grant applications, we need all these account systems in place.” And so, you know we put all of that around and I just feel like, you know, the trust in us was rewarded. So, it really vindicated a lot of what I’ve been saying to government for years about, about – and also kind of, the sort of central organisations who coordinate [ORGANISATION 1], [ORGANISATION 2] and you know been saying we’re agile, we’re locally led, responsible trusted organisations. So, the working out of that was so encouraging, and you know and it’s so encouraging to get that support and recognition from central government.,

**Interviewer:** Okay, and how do you see the future of this group?

**Participant:** Urm... I guess it’s, I guess it’s kind of intrinsically tied with where we go in the next six months, you know? I think urm, I think the mutual aid, in terms of coordinating volunteers to provide local services, we’ll continue to support them, but its already reached a level where it’s no longer a big part of our work anymore. You know and we’re in the phase now of kind of looking to the new year and thinking of how we’re going to reboot lots of our programmes, you know, urm, people are getting vaccinated already. So- [\*audio cuts out\* 50:43]

**Interviewer:** Sorry-

**Participant:** -look like in six months’ time, what percent of the community-

**Interviewer:** I lost you, sorry my internet, you were saying that in January.

**Participant:** Oh, we did, did we? Yeah, I was just saying we were starting to think about what our programmes of work are going to be in January, and and looking ahead you know to a kind of post COVID period because I think maybe by the summer things maybe starting to get back to normal. I think we’ll probably start to see more people face-to-face by the summer, but only in limited circumstance. Maybe in a years’ time we’ll be back to what we were doing before, you know, fully. You know English classes, you know face-to-face support for families, volunteer training, community events things lie that, we’ll probably be doing in a year. But still a long way off, you know it’s urr…

**Interviewer:** Yeah, and the mutual aid urm related with COVID? So, all the volunteer that was directed to those activities, how do you see?

**Participant:** Yeah, I expect we’ll continue to engage folks because I do think, in terms of their values most of the volunteers really want to help people, they really wanted to, you know, make connections in their community, and this is a way for a lot of people to maybe not lived long to make new friends and maybe get involved in the life of the community, and I think that that will be a real legacy. You know the fact that, the kind of, it’s a really cheesy term but the kind of community-cohesion I think has really improved. Earlier it was an area where there was lots of tensions between different groups, mainly between the settled communities and Roma communities. But I think you know, that will still be there, but I did think on a sort of general level, its strengthened the kind of bonds of the community. You know and I think you will see that worked out in terms of voluntarism in terms of voluntary relations in terms of maybe taking more pride in the community, I don’t ever get a sense that we’re going to go back to the way exactly that things were, you know I think the volunteers and the people who have been involved in mutual aid led activities will be central to that and… we’re started to see that who have volunteered, you know, applying for jobs, maybe in things that they wouldn’t have done before. Or getting involved in projects and things like that as well, which is really interesting.

**Interviewer:** What kind of projects, can you say a little bit more about that?

**Participant:** Urr, well we’ve just set up our volunteer translator project, urm because [AREA NAME 1] we’ve got about eighty different languages spoken in [AREA NAME 1], so there’s people who can speak you know, most of the languages of the world, you know. And there’s organisations that can’t afford a big translations budget or, you know, maybe want to support someone to have a volunteer experience as well so, we’ve tried to connect the dots and create this volunteer translator project and folks have come forward for that. And people here are volunteers through mutual aid who who even, you know, we’ve put out a call a couple of times for little bits of translation folks came back really quickly with the translation. So, it’s almost been like they’ve followed through and decide to take on a more in-depth voluntary role.

**Interviewer:** Okay, okay and how do you see your role in the group in the future?

**Participant:** Urm… I think, you know the the sort of nine months so far have really stayed, will stay with me, I think urm… just the positivity around people volunteering around the way the community’s come together I suppose it’s maybe… you know like I was saying when people chose to have faith in us, really delivered. And I’m really encouraged by that. I think I maybe didn’t quite, we didn’t really believe that we could do it and then we did, you know? In some ways you still think, “yeah but we’ve got massive capacity and you know,” but actually you know, my team just preformed so well right though and you know other organisations have done such a great job in terms of food delivery and mental health and support for young people. I’m just really encouraged by it, so you know I think maybe be bit more positive about about urr my own team about the sector in general about my community in general.

**Interviewer:** Mmm, okay. Urm, I don’t think I have any more question, is there anything that you’d like to add?

**[Debriefing]**

**[End of Interview]**