**Date: 11/12/2020**

**Duration:** 01:00:53

**Interviewer:** \*Project Introduction\* And my first question is if you can tell me the name of your group?

**Participant:** Yeah, so its [GROUP NAME], so [POSTCODE 1] is the local postcode area where we live.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and when did the group start?

**Participant:** Urr it started… at the beginning of the pandemic. So, we came together I think fairly quickly when the lockdown was announced at the end of March. And there was a kind of gradual process of turning a loose group of people into an actual organisation and-

**Interviewer:** How was the process? You were involved?

**Participant:** Yes, yeah, so I was one of the the founder members of the admin group. But urm because I know a lot of mutual aid groups sprang from pre-existing community groups or people that already knew each other, whereas ours was a little different in that it was a completely new and quite spontaneous thing, that came from, I think there were about ten originally people, none of who had met before. Who met through various social media channels and decided to do something specific in our local area. So, I say it began at the end of March but at the beginning was just a few messages between some people but then it grew gradually into –

**Interviewer:** And who was involved?

**Participant:** Sorry?

**Interviewer:** Who was involved, ten people?

**Participant:** Yeah, I think, I believe we started with ten… local residence that decided they wanted to try and organise something. That kind of core… group of admins was what we ended up calling ourselves, grew to… I think fourteen. But… the the mutual aid group itself grew to, we had a, we used WhatsApp as an organising medium and I think at the, at its highest point the number of people on the WhatsApp group was in the region of five hundred, I think.

**Interviewer:** Five hundred? Okay.

**Participant:** People either asking for help or offering help, or both. Urm-

**Interviewer:** You had both? People asking and offering at the same? Okay. Urm and what was the aim of the group when it started?

**Participant:** We didn’t really know, \*laughs\*. So, I guess urm… the initial aim was, the first thing we did and decided to work on was we’d seen the mutual aid postcards that became available at the beginning of the pandemic, where you could put a card through the door of a neighbour and offered to support them. And we thought that was a really good idea, so we decided to try and work on making sure that every household and ever address in our area had had one of those cards through their door from somebody with the name and the phone number of a neighbour that can help them if they needed help to get food and prescriptions was the main thing, kind of essential supplies for people who were shielding.

**Interviewer:** And has anything changed since it started?

**Participant:** Cripes, that’s a big question! Well, we set up a foodbank, that was a sort of, a later development, and that…remains. Urm, the mutual aid group remains though the format that we began with has not been a particularly active now that the first kind of part of the crisis was over. Because it was very much a, a crisis response and as soon as the crisis died down that initial response kind of sort of fizzled out, but we were aware that that would probably happen. So, there were two things really that have replaced that. One is a more organised group where we joined up with some local councillors and a couple, well a church and synagogue, in the area to set up a community food bank. So, a kind of… an add on to the more official kind of Trussell Trust foodbanks where you have to have a voucher and you have to go through an assessment and stuff, were as ours is more… just neighbours helping neighbours. If someone says, “hello I need food,” someone goes around with some food. So, there’s that.

And there’s also, we tried really hard to set up kind of, or to encourage other people to set up hyper local mutual aid groups, so people literally people on the same street that lived in, within in sight of each other, to have a WhatsApp group or a Facebook group or an e-mail based group but just someway of then communicating with each other as a small community. And one of the most interesting things about that process is that we don’t know whether that’s worked or not. I know it has on my street and it wasn’t me that did it, it was someone else on the street that set it up and that group is quite active. And we’ve had some kind of anecdotal evidence back from around the neighbourhood that that kind of thing is going on. But because we weren’t directly organising it because the idea was that it was kind of spontaneous interaction between their own neighbours, we’ve got no way really of kind of counting or checking how many of them there are or how active they are.

**Interviewer:** Urm, and what is the situation with the group now?

**Participant:** Its still exists, but it doesn’t do much.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Participant:** So, we still have the urm the group of kind of ten/twelve people that originally came together to set it up. We still communicate with each other quite regularly, but we don’t work together in the way that we did initially. Because initially it was quite, kind of, it was fairly sort of formalised, we were having a meeting once a week to decide what we needed to do, and we had various projects that we were working on and people were taking responsibilities for specific bits of work and getting on and doing them. Whereas now its kind of more of a social group really. We just, we all know each other, and we chat. And the larger WhatsApp group the one that at one point had five hundred people on it, that still exists but there’s very little happening on it. People aren’t using it in the way that they did during the lockdown.

**Interviewer:** So, what changed?

**Participant:** Huh?

**Interviewer:** Why it changed? Why, why, what’s the reason for this change in the group?

**Participant:** Urm, I think its because it was a response to a crisis and even though that crisis is not over,obviously we’re still in a pandemic, the particular crisis that we were trying to address was the sudden disruption to people’s lives, so it was that situation where people weren’t able to leave the house, but couldn’t get a delivery from the supermarket, didn’t have prescription delivery set up, didn’t know how to get food, that kind of thing. Whereas as time has gone on, people have got strategies and learnt ways for doing that so there isn’t the immediate need that there was back in March for people to kind of find a way. It felt very much like we were plugging the gap as the government and kind of statutory services struggled to adjust to be able to help people that were in a crisis. And to an extent that’s happened now. There are public phone numbers that you can ring if you end help with food or medication or whatever which there weren’t at that time.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Urm, and have you had any previous experiences of organising groups like this one?

**Participant:** No.

**Interviewer:** No.

**Participant:** Urm, I have a background in [OCCUPATION 1], so and various of us who came together to, to kind of run it, had useful… experience that we could bring to it, so there’s someone who’s the [OCCUPATION 2] and there’s someone who had a background in project management and I think there was one person who had a background in community work and community groups, but the rest of us it was the first time that we’d ever done anything of this type. So, no experience in community organising, but also no experience really in community involvement or volunteering either. And I think that was what was interesting about some of the stuff that happens this year, is that it was people who would not ordinarily get involved with that kind of thing. We, you know, all of us are quite open with the fact that we did it for, for kind of slightly selfish reasons in a way. Because we were all people who had either been furloughed or made redundant or had kind of, just didn’t have their, their usual things to do and wanted something to do. \*Laughs\*, so it was like right okay, we’ll, we’ll do something useful.

**Interviewer:** Was that your motivation?

**Participant:** My main motivation I think was wanting something to do. I was a [OCCUPATION 3] before, the last few years I’ve been [OCCUPATION 4], so it was very clear mid-March that there was going to be no work to do, all of my, sort of, scheduled work was cancelled. We didn’t really know at that point what the future was going to hold in terms of government support and money it was really quite a stressful time. So, I just wanted something to take my mind of it. And I think most of us feel a little but, you know, obviously we could have found other things and being motivated to help our neighbours and the community was a part of it. But I think if you ask anyone from the group, they would say their primary motivation was… to have something to do. To kind of take their mind of the pandemic.

**Interviewer:** That’s some motivation. What was, what was and what is your role within the group?

**Participant:** Urm, so…we have no… kind of formal role descriptions. So, the twelve of us that ended up being the core people, all just called ourselves group admins, and the main thing that we did was to kind of shepherd the people in that larger group to interact with each other in a useful way. So, we had a rota where everybody kept an eye on the big WhatsApp and Facebook groups, urm to just watch the conversations that were happening there and make sure that if someone had put a request up for help, someone had answered that and to encourage people not to use those groups for kind of debate or chat kind of thing that wasn’t urm, kind of related to someone communicating that they needed someone and someone helping with that need. Because I think having observed some of the other efforts that went on in the city… where we are, a lot of them kind of descended quite quickly in to just, you know those WhatsApp groups that’s just constantly like, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, ping, like millions of people chatting with each other about… their cats, \*laughs\*. And we weren’t having that so we were kind of, we saw ourselves as like the regulators of everyone else’s interactions to make sure it was a group where people could come and ask for help and get help quickly, [overlap, unclear 12:58].

**Interviewer:** Has your, has your role changed at all in the process?

**Participant:** Mine has, because urm… I… became involved in the foodbank side of things and that is kind of a distinct project. It doesn’t call itself a mutual aid group, but it’s a small informal community group that is running a food bank, so I used that resource that we had of those five-hundred odd volunteers to ask people to come and get involved in the foodbank and set up a kind of sub, subgroup of about, we’ve got about twenty volunteers in that group who urm… run the foodbank basically. So that’s my role in it and then one of the other admins, I think the other person that we suggested that you speak to in the end once you’d had e-mails from two-thirds of the group, the other member we suggested [unclear, overlap 14:01]-

**Interviewer:** Yeah, and I lost her e-mail, I lost her e-mail in the middle of the others actually, yeah but I got back to her today, yes.

**Participant:** Okay, so [GROUP MEMBER NAME]… it was [GROUP MEMBER NAME] and I that I think had the most time on our hands, so we did the most, and both of us have a background in project management so… we kind of did the most kind of distinct roles but actually took quite a lot of time. So, I did the foodbank, and [GROUP MEMBER NAME] did the kind of communications stuff, so I mentioned before that we wanted every resident in our postcode area had had a physical letter put through their door to tell them that this group exists and if you need help… this is who you get in touch. So, it was [GROUP MEMBER NAME] who coordinated that, she did the kind of… a huge map of every house in the area and then got a lot of volunteers on board to actually go out and then stomp around the streets and put letters through people’s doors.

**Interviewer:** Mmm, and how does, how does that activity that you do in the group relates to other parts of your life?

**Participant:** …Urm… I’m struggling to find a good answer to that question.

**Interviewer:** How do you fit everything? Do you relate it-

**Participant:** Say that again, sorry.

**Interviewer:** How do you fit the activity that you do in the rest of your life, in your profession, your family, this kind of thing, kinds?

**Participant:** Okay, well this is one of the the really interesting things at the moment and I think it’s the reason that the mutual aid group is much less active than it was, because as I said before, all of us had a lot of time on our hands, at the point where it was set up. So, we were kind of… all of us were quite sort of energetic, professional people who would usually be putting most of our time into a career. And that had suddenly stopped for a variety of reasons, so people were on furlough, people had lost their jobs people’s jobs had been paused, so it was quite easy to have the time to fit this in during those few months when that was the case. And then gradually as people have gone back to their professions or found new jobs, so I got a new job about a month ago and it’s a real struggle now to fit it in with work because I’m working full time. And yeah, I’m probably not going to be doing it that much longer.

**Interviewer:** Okay, but just to to go back to the food bank, because you mentioned the foodbank as a sub-project, but do you see the foodbank as a sub-project of this mutual aid group? Or a consequence?

**Participant:** Urm… the mutual aid group didn’t start the foodbank, so the foodbank sprang from something different. Which was a pre-existing project by… urr a local grassroots charity that already existed that used to run a urm a community meal once a week out of a local café. So, it was called the [CHARITY PROJECT NAME]… and it was a place where local residents could go if they needed company or if they needed food, to go and have a free meal and meet people and chat. And that was run by a couple of the local urm councillors, our local city councillor and our local city councillor. So that had already been a project before the mutual aid group, and they, when they were no longer able to run that, because of course you couldn’t have a café and you couldn’t have people coming in, to eat, they partnershiped with the local synagogue to open up a room and out some food in there so the people who used to come to their [CHARITY PROJECT NAME] could come to that instead if they were in need of some help. And just come and pick up some basic… urm food stuff.

So that was where the foodbank started, but the mutual aid group came into it, this is kind of where I came in as I saw that happening and they were kind of a drop in for people who lived in the very immediate area and I went to them and said, “could we help a wider range of people if I organised some delivery volunteers who could come and pick up food and if I set you up an e-mail account and a phone line and got volunteers to man them? Could you stock the foodbank l and could we… kind of make this into a bigger operation?” And they said, “yes,” and I got all the volunteers from the mutual aid groups to come and help with that and do the deliveries and kind of do some donations drives, got another volunteer to kind of be the administrator and answer e-mails and all of that kind of stuff. So, the two things kind of came together and now they’ve turned into the foodbank, which was sort of born from both. And I think that will be sustainable, that will continue.

**Interviewer:** Mmm, interesting. And the mutual aid, what geographical area have the group covered, urm your street, how was the, how many houses this kind of thing?

**Participant:** Yeah, urm, ooh, you’d have to ask [GROUP MEMBER NAME] how many houses because that was her, that was her thing, she’d be able to tell you right off the bat. It was a few thousand.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Participant:** So, urm, it was, we organised it by a postcode area, so we live in a, it’s quite a small city, [CITY NAME], and the city centre is surrounded by a ring-road so it’s quite, it’s not one of the cities that sort of sprawls out into the surrounds its quite a distinct area. And there are seven postcode districts within the city. And nobody really knows who made the decision or… how it ended up happening that way. But one mutual aid group was set up for each postcode within… within the [CITY NAME] area. And we took [POSTCODE 1] because that’s where we live.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and you don’t know how it happened?

**Participant:** No, we think there were two people who very early on set up a Facebook Mutual Aid group for the whole of [CITY NAME], and one of them, I think, heard of two other people that had decided to do something for their own postcode area and put a post up on there to say, “these people have done this,” and then other people went, “ooh we’ll do that!” And quite quickly there was a kind of list produced that was around on Facebook that was just organised by postcode areas with WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages you could join if you wanted to be part of your postcode group. But maybe it’s a fascinating research project to look at [CITY NAME] like that, if you could talk to one person from each postcode area-

**Interviewer:** Yeah, I’d love that actually.

**Participant:** -because its quite a uniform city. Well, I could get you one, actually.

**Interviewer:** Really? That would be great.

**Participant:** Yeah, we’ve got kind of the city-wide network.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and can you explain me a little bit more what kind of things the group did?

**Participant:** Yeah, so the very first thing we did was those postcards that we mentioned. So, it was just kind of little urm… A5 bits of papers with a space where you could right your own name your own number and they were quite widespread I think around the whole of the country – not sure where they came from either, but everyone started using them. So, it was just something that you could put through the letterboxes of your own immediate neighbours, to say, “I live next door to you, I can help if you need help.” So that was the first thing is we were encouraging people to print those out themselves and post them through the doors of their neighbours. As that happened, we realised quite quickly that urm, our particular postcode is separated quite starkly into two different areas. So, half of it is very, very affluent and its kind of the, the leafiest suburb of the city its kind of lots of high socio-economic, very well educated, we’re the university district, so, there are lots of kind of highly educated professionals living in one area. And they were the people who were doing that, they were printing out those leaflets they were putting them through their neighbour’s doors. Which is why we ended up with this huge group of like 500 people because everyone was like, “ah, I really want to get involved, I really want to help.” They all got together and became part of the group, but we realised that everyone on that group was somebody who wanted to help other people not someone who needed help.

And the other half of the postcode area is all social housing and it’s quite, urm, its all single occupancy social housing. So, some of the people who are the most socially isolated and who had the most kind of intractable problems, so people with drug and alcohol issues, people who are ex-offenders, that’s the accommodation that they end to get moved into. So, there were almost like kind of little ghettos, nobody was putting postcards through their doors. And when we started asking volunteers, like, “would you be prepared to go put postcards through those doors?” everyone was saying, “well yeah, I don’t mind doing the flyering, but I don’t want my phone number on it.” Which is fair enough. And we were not having anyone who actually lived in those areas coming forward to get involved. So, the second project was urm, we set up a phone line with kind of a standard number that volunteers would share between themselves and kind of pick up enquires from; set up an e-mail address and we put those details along with other kind of useful stuff about how to get hold of local food deliveries from local shops, how to contact the council, how to get emergency mental health support, that kind of thing. Put that together into a leaflet and made sure that that leaflet went through every door in the areas where people hadn’t chosen to put their own details through.

So that was thing two, and as those people joined the WhatsApp group, the main thing that we were getting was request for food. People saying that they didn’t have food and they didn’t have money, or they didn’t have the ability to do a bank transfer to a volunteer to go and get shopping for them. So, then it became about food bank.

**Interviewer:** Okay and how often urm… for example how often the group did this kind of things, urm… provided shopping, food bank for example?

**Participant:** Yeah, this is the difficult thing, we don’t know. Because the majority of those cards that went through doors were linking a neighbour with a neighbour. With no central organisation at all. We think that there are probably a lot of people who have this established relationship with other people, vulnerable people who live close by to them who are still helping with that stuff. I know that I am and all of the other admins in the group and a lot of the more active volunteers, we know that all of those people have one or two other people that they got in touch with during that time and they’re still providing assistance. But there’s no centralised record, people are doing that because they’ve swapped personal contact details, and they’re just calling and texting each other and so there’s absolutely no way of knowing how widespread that has become. which really, we really want to know but there’s no way we’ll ever find out.

**Interviewer:** How do you organise the help, how was the process, if someone wated to food…?

**Participant:** Hmm-hmm, so the main organising medium was the WhatsApp group, though we did quite quickly realise that that excluded some people who weren’t, who were kind of not very digitally able. So, people who didn’t have smart phone and don’t have access to computers, older people that kind of thing, which his why we set up the telephone line. But even when someone contacted us by telephone, that message would be put by the volunteer onto the WhatsApp group for someone else to answer. And we had quite a strict system of the only messages that you were allowed to put onto that shared WhatsApp group were requests for help or an answer to that request. And then once it got to the point of a recipient in need and a volunteer who was able kind of linking up, then we asked them to make the arrangements privately between themselves to avoid anyone having to share personal details of their situation or their address or anything on the public group. Which is why there is no way of keeping track, because you would just get someone, you’d get a message up saying, “somebody on [STREET NAME] needs some shopping,” and then you’ll get a reply saying, “I can do that,” and then those to people would leave the group contact each other privately and arrange for… for whatever it was that needed doing to get done.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and how did you get the volunteers it was through the Facebook as you mentioned and…?

**Participant:** Urm, the initial flush came through Facebook, but actually most of them, I think, came through putting then leaflets through the doors.

**Interviewer:** Okay

**Participant:** So, we found that when we put those leaflets out in the beginning… even though the intention as to offer help to people, there were a lot of people who received that leaflet, got in touch with the person who’d sent it not to say, “I need help,” but to say, “I want to help, what can I do?”

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Participant:** And that was how the community kind of group, was though people contacting the person who contacted them, to say, “can I get involved in this? how do I do some of those leaflets for somewhere else? What help do you need?”

**Interviewer:** Urm, what resources did you have?

**Participant:** None.

**Interviewer:** None, okay.

**Participant:** Yup, I mean, well, it depends what you mean by resources, if you mean funding and finance- no. But we we do have a lot of social capital in this area. So… there were a lot of kind of willing and capable people that wanted to help their community and people who were happy to use their own resources in terms of like printing out leaflets and delivering them around and that kind of stuff, donating food to the food bank, that kind of thing. So, I think if we’d have lived in a different area it wouldn’t have been possible without some external funding. But we didn’t end any because we’re lots of rich people around here.

**Interviewer:** Really?

**Participant:** Rich but not too rich, \*laughs\*.

**Interviewer:** And in terms of skills that people in the group have any particular skills that were, that was important?

**Participant:** Yeah, administration and project management were, I would say, the biggest ones. Project management and people management. So, we had a couple of really good people on the admin team that were very good at recognising how to get a group to collaborate and where the problems might occur, before they occurred. We had a really good mix of skill sets actually which I think is why, which it was good, yeah. So, we had one person who was an ex-police officer, a lecturer from the university, someone who worked with young people from the local college, a community organiser, a project manager, two project managers, someone with a background in [OCCUPATION 1] -which was me.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Participant:** Yeah, so there was a lot of kind of knowledge and skill of how to deal with those problems that weren’t appropriate for the neighbours to step in and help with. Which I think really helped, because you do when you set up something like that, you get a lot of people come and saying, “the person next door to me is beating up his wife, what do I do,” or, kind of, “my neighbour with a learning disability is not getting any support workers coming in and I think they’re going to have a crisis,” these sorts of issues. And that is not the kind of thing where a neighbour should or could offer appropriate help, so we were able to kind of direct those where they were needed to go and keep the group focused on the stuff that people can do.

**Interviewer:** And what kind of things did you do that might help urm, that probably help the group keep going? You mentioned a few already, yeah.

**Participant:** Yeah… yeah, I think there’s a really big question at the moment about whether the group has… or will keep going. It’s quite… kind of, I mean as I say, there are a lot of things that we have attempted to do to make sure that the community is more connected than it was.

**Interviewer:** Such as?

**Participant:** So, such as encouraging people to directly get I touch with the people who live in really close proximity to them… but as I said we don’t know how widespread or successful that’s been, we’ve got some anecdotal evidence that’s happened in some areas. But I think particularly the areas of higher need, the sort of big patches of social housing, that hasn’t happened at all, people aren’t more connected to their neighbours and their communities that they were before.

**Interviewer:** No. You don’t think so?

**Participant:** I’ve heard no, no stories about anything that reaches out to those areas, there are lots of stories, kind of, about groups of people who live in nice sort of leafy suburban streets, who had a street WhatsApp groups and they have kind of, Sunday afternoon socials and they all pop out and have a cup of tea in the street in a socially distanced way and they’ve set up a hedgehog run down their gardens, and all kinds of lovely stuff going on buts its very much the more affluent end of the area that has benefitted from that. But yeah, but like I said, we didn’t have any one really come forward from the less affluent side of the postcode that wanted or was able to be involved in any kind of organising, leafletting neighbours that kind of thing. People didn’t have the capacity, they were just trying to cope with having all their kids at home and living in a tiny flat on the third floor, trying to get through the day.

**Interviewer:** Okay and in terms of group stuff, you mentioned that you did meetings every, did you think that was helpful for the group?

**Participant:** Yeah, it really was. I don’t think we would have been able to do the same thing without the kind of technology we have now. So, we had a weekly Zoom meeting, urm, where the admins got together. And it, its just so much easier when you can see people, and it meant that we were able to build a relationship with each other, given that we were all people that didn’t, nobody knew each other before. So, it became a kind of semi-social meeting, but also… when there was a lot of stuff to do, it was quite business like. You know, we had an agenda, and we were all sort of on-point and deciding who was going to do what.

**Interviewer:** Okay, maybe more change the type of questions. But is the group part of any national network?

**Participant:** Not really. We did, we kind of tried… so, we realised that, in fact we never even got so far as trying national. We tried to get involved in a local network – well, there were two or three different ones. So, the local council tried to set up a network space for mutual aid groups, a couple do the more urm, kind of politically active mutual aid groups leaders tried to set up a network of… other leaders to set up a new society – I’m not sure really what they were trying to do. But, yeah, there were, there were lot of people trying to broaden it out and get everybody to try and connect with this wider network, locally and then nationally. And the, we had a couple of stabs of getting in involved, we just decided it wasn’t useful for us. Because I think from our point of view this was about helping neighbours and people in the immediate community, and these broader networks offered nothing useful.

**Interviewer:** No, was the, what kind of things they offered?

**Participant:** Five hour long Zoom meeting where everyone just complains a lot, \*laughs\*. Yeah, we kind of, there was nothing practical, we were very practical in terms of, this is a need that exists that we want to help with, and… you know, the Zoom meetings that we had we very useful but that’s because they were quite focused and they were quite short an d they were about, “this is what we need to do this week, I’ll do this, you do this, you do this, lovely, we’ve decided that, now we’re all have a glass of wine, then we’ll go away and get on with it.” And as soon as we started trying to get involved in the broader network groups and any of the… kind of… yeah, the bigger stuff it just seemed to be people spending five hours talking about what their group should be called. Or, yeah, what their aims and objectives were. It was like, we didn’t have aims and objectives, we didn’t have we didn’t have a name until October. We were just some people doing stuff.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Participant:** Yeah, and so it felt a lot like, and it may have just been our experience but, everyone else we came across seemed to be putting the cart before the horse, if that makes sense, it’s kind of a colloquialism, sorry.

**Interviewer:** No, no, I understand.

**Participant:** But yeah, they wanted, kind of, terms and conditions of the group… and a structure and to decide who was going to be the chairman and who was going to be the sub-chairman. It was a bit - I don’t know if you’ve ever seen Monty Python-

**Interviewer:** No.

**Participant:** -but there’s a really famous sketch in urm… in a kind of old British television show called Monty Python and its about urm two groups of community organisers having a fight about whether they should be called the Judean People’s Front, or the People’s Front of Judea, and it just goes on and on and on-

**Interviewer:** Oh, I’ll have to see that.

**Participant:** -it felt very much like that. It was, yeah, just lots of arguments about inconsequential things.

**Interviewer:** Okay. So how was the relationship with other groups?

**Participant:** Well, I mean actually it was okay, we had a, when it was just… wanting to get practical things done, it was fine. But we didn’t find that there was any other group that set up in our area that did as much practical stuff as we did. There were, urm… I think the thing that slightly different about our group was that we kept it very focused on a very small area of the city. And that’s quit a hard thing to do because you see people and you get enquiries from people who are outside of that area saying, “I need some help,” and we were trying really hard to direct those enquiries to whatever group that had set up in the relevant area. But then we were getting people coming back to us saying, “no one’s answered, we haven’t had a reply, we don’t know what to do.” And we basically said, “we can’t help,” which is quite… well its heart-breaking. But also, we realised that if we tried to do something too big, we would fail. And there were two or three other groups around the city that had done exactly that, they took the opposite approach which was, “oh well we originally set up to cover [POSTCODE 2], but the people in [POSTCODE 3] and [POSTCODE 4] which are the two areas that boarder us haven’t got anyone helping, because their groups haven’t really emerged in the same way that ours have. So, we’ll expand, and we’ll expand, and we’ll expand, and we’ll do more and more and more.” And because all of these groups rely on a really small number of people who are prepared to do the organising, it quickly becomes too much for those people. So, they, they kind of grew, and grew, and grew and then collapsed with a couple of them because they were more or less depending on one or two key people who did everything and then those people burn out and there isn’t anyone to replace them. And everything just kind of fizzles.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and how was the relationship with the local council?

**Participant:** Ours has been good. They haven’t been particularly useful, \*laughs\*. But they’ve been nice. Yeah, they… so the the the [CITY NAME] city council so the sort of district council for the area, set up… they already had a communities team, urm but they, I think diverted three posts within that team to support Mutual aid efforts within the city. So those people were there, and they got in contact with us quite quickly, urm and they did offer to help us find funding if we needed it. But as I said before, we didn’t really need it, money wasn’t something that we were particularly in need of. So therefore, they didn’t really have much, that that was pretty much what they were there for, was to help apply for funding.

Urm… yeah, it would have been good, I think what we were hoping was that they would take more of the… the role of coordinating the different groups around he city and helping us know where to refer people to if they weren’t covered by our group or they weren’t urm, part of our group that here is somewhere else, here is someone else that is doing that thing. But they just weren’t urm well connected enough with, so we would know before they did when the [FOODBANK NAME], [FOODBANK COORDINATOR NAME] gone sick so no one’s doing that anymore, but the one up, urm the Church in [VILLAGE NAME 1] has got some extra capacity, so we knew all that stuff and… they didn’t. So, a few times we were trying to kind of get in touch with them and say, “who’s covering [VILLAGE NAME 2] now?” And they were like, “oh, its so and so,” and we were like, “no its not!” \*Laughs\*, you know they stopped two months ago. Yeah, so that was our hope of what the council would do, but they didn’t.

**Interviewer:** Urm, has your group tried or thought about getting official recognition, for example becoming a company, charity or stuff? No?

**Participant:** No, we did consider it, briefly. But we couldn’t see the point,

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Participant:** Yeah, I think we saw ourselves as something distinct from… the charity, or an official group. Because there are so many of those things that exist already, like our our city is awash with small charities and registered community groups that are doing various projects and there didn’t seem to be any value in adding another one to that mix. So, when we did need money, like there was one occasion, because that seems to be the only reason to set yourself up as kind of registered organisation, is to be able to access funding, and when we did need funding, when we decided to do the leafletting for the urm areas of social housing, we wanted some printing done, and we needed to get credit for the phone line when we set that up. But we just went to another local organisation, a charity that already existed and said, “can you apply for some money for this thing to happen?” And they did, and then they gave it to us.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Participant:** Because that seemed a lot easier.

**Interviewer:** You make a clear difference between charity, charities and mutual aid, in your, what is the main difference?

**Participant:** …I think… not so much between charities, as between… organised community groups, so groups that are kind of registered that have a constitution that have people… in charge of them as it were, trustees and boards and members and what not. It… as I understood the concept of mutual aid… its more about grassroots community participation and help for neighbours. So… and actually this is a very personal view, it might be very different for the other members of the group, urm, but I think if we were to set ourselves up as a registered community group, that’s nothing new, they’ve been around since Charles Dickens. Like, kind of… yeah.

**Interviewer:** Okay, urm, perhaps you already mentioned, you already mentioned a few of this, but you talk a little bit about your own motivations for getting involved and also the other administrators. And how about the other active participants, the volunteers, why did they get involved?

**Participant:** Well…

**Interviewer:** In your vision?

**Participant:** Well, yeah, its hard to know. Urm…because I haven’t directly asked very many of them that question. The… I guess it’s easier to talk about the type of person who gets involved, because I would draw certain conclusions from that, that may or may not be true, but these are my assumptions. Is that the type of person that has got involved as a volunteer, particularly an active volunteer… they have been people who are relatively well off in terms of money, people who are older, so… not during the height of the crisis there was a huge range of demographics but mostly people who were off working age have disappeared now because they’ve gone back to work. So those people that we are left with are either semi-retired or retired. Urm… yeah, and in reasonable physical health. So, I think its people who are no longer focused on their career but still feel well enough and like they have enough time and capacity to do something there, they’re the people who volunteer to turn up for stuff.

**Interviewer:** Okay, now I want to ask some questions about problems and challenges that maybe the group faced. For example, has the group meant a lot of time and effort for you?

**Participant:** Yes. Yes, it was about fulltime for about six months.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Participant:** Yeah.

**Interviewer:** Have people drop out of the group?

**Participant:** Nobody has yet dropped out, but we’ve all stopped doing the amount of work that we did. And I think that’s why the group is no longer very active.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Why do you think that is?

**Participant:** So, urm to begin with we had those kind of ten twelve people who were active organisers of the group, who had a lot of time on their hand and they all put a lot of time in to doing stuff, that’s changed. People have gone back to work, no ones got as much time. So, it hasn’t been as dramatic as people saying, “I won’t do it anymore,” but… the amount of effort that the organisers are putting in has reduced greatly, the amount of hours that are available has reduced, so things have just gradually stopped happening.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and other problems? For examples organisation problems, coordination, these kind of thigs, did you faced any problems?

**Participant:** … not really!

**Interviewer:** No?

**Participant:** No, I think we were quite luck that we had some very organised people involved.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Organised people… in in what sense, what kind of thigs did you do in terms of organisation that was, that was helpful?

**Participant:** So, urm… I think it was mostly in there being a lot of people involved who… mmm, how can I give a pithy answer? My assumption is that because this group was made up of people who would usually be in the middle of putting their skills into a professional career and wanted to divert those skills to something else temporarily. But there were an awful lot of competencies involved that perhaps wouldn’t usually be there in groups of people in normal times, because you know, in my experience over the last few months, seeing the types of people who wanted to volunteer in March… when the kind of lockdown started and the pandemic really hit, they were very, very different types of people to the people we’re getting to come forward and volunteer now. Now that the world has kind of restarted and things are kind of semi back to normal. So, the people who come forward to volunteer now are generally people who’ve got a little bit of time on their hands, or they’re people who... kind of maybe having found a fulfilling career or who have had some difficulties in life and volunteering is a route that you can go down that is slightly less pressured than paid work. So, there are a lot of people who are coming forward who do fantastic job but need a lot of support with it. And who aren’t, don’t necessarily have the capacities to take on that, kind of leadership and organisational role that all of us who are involved when this particular group set up, kind of did have, everyone was very confident, everyone was very, kind of, urm… yeah, just quite happy to take on a job and run with it and go, go and do something. They didn’t need to have somebody to check back with or to kind of support them with stuff.

**Interviewer:** Okay, and did you discuss some strategics, strategies in the group, if you had a vision, something like that, what you wanted to do with the group?

**Participant:** No, we didn’t really. Yeah, it was, I think as I said before, it was very, very practical. Just like here’s a need and here’s what we’re going to do about it. And a couple of times we came close to kind of thinking, “oh, do we want this to be a, a movement?” But it wasn’t really our focus, it wasn’t particularly what we were interested in, it was just, there’s, our neighbours need some help so let’s help them.

**Interviewer:** Okay, urm, and have you learnt anything from coordinating this group?

**Participant:** Yes, probably all kinds of things. \*Laughs\*.

**Interviewer:** Good, can you tell me?

**Participant:** I’ve got to know some of my neighbours for the first time. I’ve lived in this street for about six years and I didn’t know any of my neighbours before. And now, now I know all of them, and I’m not sure whether that is a good thing or not.

**Interviewer:** \*Laughs\* Why not?

**Participant:** Oh, just because its impossible to walk up the streets now without having six conversations with different people, which, \*laughs\*, is kind of the ideal, isn’t it, of when you think of everyone should be more connected with their community. But actually, when you just want to go to the shop and buy a bottle of wine it can be a bit of a pain.

**Interviewer:** \*Laughs\* I understand. So, and more things for example. Have you learnt something about yourself about organising? This kind of thing.

**Participant:** Urm… I think I learnt that I’m very bad at having nothing to do, at a very personal level. It was like as soon as, as soon as… yeah as soon as they locked down and my business closed, I was like, there were a lot of the people that I knew who were like, “oh lovely I’ll plant some house plants and sit around in pyjama bottoms all day! And learn how to bake bread.” And I was like, “no, I need a job!” So, I invented one, I don’t know, yeah. So yeah, I think that was the thing I learnt about myself, is that I’m not good at sitting still.

**Interviewer:** Urm, and about how local governments work, for example?

**Participant:** Well, I’ve, I’ve, my [DESCRIPTION OF PREVIOUS CAREER], so I felt like I was fairly well, kind of, well versed in that already. Its… there’s been nothing unexpected about the failures of local government to plug the gaps that appeared when the country shut down, I think that was kind of – I guess that was another part of my motivation personally for getting involved. Is that I know that local government is not very responsive and not quick to adapt and I knew that they wouldn’t be able to cope with the level of need that arose when lockdown happened. So, yeah, it was no surprise.

**Interviewer:** And, okay, final questions, how do you see the future of this group?

**Participant:** I have no idea. I think… I think it’s probably going to disappear. That’s, yeah, that’s my predication. I think that some of the work that we did around trying to get very, very small local groups up and running will mean that there are more people that are better connected with a support network in their local area than they were before. But, certainly in this particular case, the people that set the group in in the first place… did it as a temporary thing and now have to go back to their lives that they had before. And I’m not seeing an army of people to step into those gaps. Like we have, we have asked, we’ve spoken to the wider network of volunteers to see if anybody’s interested in becoming part of the admin group or taking on more of an organising role, but people don’t want to. People want to volunteer but they want to be told what to do. They want somebody else in charge to say like, “this is how it works, and this is what you do, and would you go and pick a prescription for Mrs F and take it here?” people are really keen to do those kinds of things but there are not many people who are keen to actually… do the kind of boring administration, decision making, organising stuff.

**Interviewer:** And you? not in the group, if you think that the group will disappear, but how do you see yourself in the foodbank actually, for example?

**Participant:** Well, urm, I think I’m going to withdraw from my role with the foodbank actually. Yeah, in fact I was talking about that with them today because we’re doing the Christmas deliveries this week. And my role with the foodbank is logistics and organising the deliveries and I was hoping to be able to maintain that, but I recently, about a month ago I started a full-time job, and… its going to be more than a full-time job and I’m really struggling to keep on top of the work that I used to do for the food bank at the same time. So, I’m going to help them through Christmas… but after that I’m going to have to try and look for someone else to do that.

**Interviewer:** Okay, so I don’t think I have any more questions, is there anything that you want to add?

**Participant:** No, I don’t think so, I hope I gave you good answers, it’s always hard to know what you’re, what your kind of, what the answers are that you’re trying to find about. I guess I shouldn’t know that, because that’s the point.

**[Debriefing]**

**[End of Interview]**