

Research on Mutual Aid Groups in Scotland - 20 April 2020



Objective

The objective of this paper is to provide some context on the mutual aid response in Scotland to the Covid-19 crisis. It is based on a short review of Facebook entries and data held by **Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK**.

Scale of mutual aid organisations – a review of Facebook has identified some very substantial groups as measured by ‘membership’. Summary statistics for 10 of the larger mutual aid groups are profiled in Table 1 below as at 14 April (see also further information in the Appendix):

Table 1 - Illustrative sample of the larger mutual aid groups in Scotland			
Mutual Aid Organisation	No. of members	No. of posts per day	No. of members per post per day
1. Edinburgh Coronavirus Support ¹	9,230	60	154
2. Fife Covid-19 Mutual Aid Group	4,300	16	269
3. Stirling Pulling Together	3,700	120	31
4. Glasgow Mutual Aid	2,800	50	56
5. Community Aid St. Andrews (CASA)	2,767	27	102
6. Aberdeen Mutual City Aid	1,900	20	95
7. Scottish Mutual Aid	1,300	4	325
8. Covid-19 Help and Support in Carnoustie	1,184	8	148
9. Dundee Covid-19 Mutual Aid	900	6	150
10. Mutual-Aid Perth	858	20	43
Total	28,939	-	-
Average per organisation	2,894	33	137

Sources: Internet search and Facebook

No. of mutual aid organisations in Scotland – the map of mutual aid organisations identifies c. 220 groups in Scotland: [Map of Mutual Aid Groups](#). Clearly the average number of members per group will be significantly less than the larger organisations listed above – see further discussion below. Although there is a fairly good coverage across much of rural and urban Scotland there are still significant geographic ‘gaps’.

¹ Previously called ‘Coronavirus Volunteering Edinburgh’. Name change 20 April 2020

However, one needs to be careful in the interpretation of this data. There are likely to be numerous mutual aid organisations which are not registered with Mutual Aid UK. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests there are many small groups operating on WhatsApp and other social media platforms at the street level in tightly defined geographic areas. This category of support is excluded from this analysis and the statistics therefore underestimate the true reach of the mutual aid movement in response to Covid-19.

Total number of people involved in mutual aid groups in Scotland – to estimate the number of people involved we have undertaken a sample of 16 mutual aid groups across the different geographies of Scotland to calculate an average number of members per group (this analysis excludes the larger groups listed in the table above): see Table 2.

Table 2 - Random sample of 16 mutual aid groups across Scotland			
Mutual Aid Group	No. of members	Mutual Aid Group	No. of members
Ballachulish Community Support Volunteers Group	66	Greenhill Coronavirus Self-Isolation Support (City of Edinburgh)	566
Tayvalley Timebank	17	Kirkliston – Local Help during Covid-19	993
Covid Mutual Aid Speyside	376	Govanhill Mutual Aid (Glasgow)	504
Assynt Covid-19 Mutual Aid	255	Elderslie Cares	575
Achiltibuie Covid-19 Mutual Aid Group	147	Millport Support Group (Great Cumbrae)	338
Portsoy Area Action Team	217	Auchinleck Covid-19 Mutual Aid	14
Mutual Aid Arbroath	84	Lend a Hand Lockerbie	1,221
Covid-19 Help and Support Carnoustie	1,184	Kindness Going Viral @Harleyburn (Melrose)	43
Total no. of members for all 16 groups listed		6,600	
Average no. of members per group		413	
Source: Map of Mutual Aid Groups			

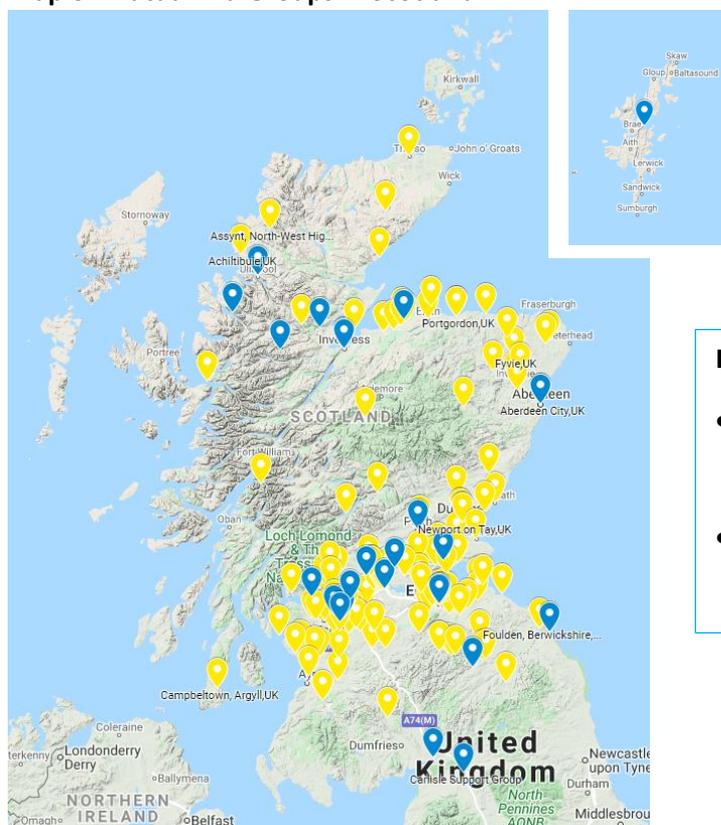
Based on the random sample data in Table 2 and the statistics from larger groups in Table 1 we have derived a very rough estimate of c. 116,000 members involved in mutual aid groups across Scotland as at 20th April – see Table 3. This estimation process will result in a relatively high margin of error. It is also important to recognise that there will be an element of double counting due to some individuals being members of more than one mutual aid group.

Table 3 – Estimated number of members of mutual aid groups in Scotland			
Classification	Average number of members per group	No. of mutual aid groups	Total no. of members
Table 1 data	2,894	10	28,940
Table 2 data	413	210	86,730
Total for Scotland	526	220	115,670
Sources: Internet search and Map of Mutual Aid Groups			

Initial observations on the data

- **Speed of response** – it quite remarkable that in the space of only four weeks or so over 200 mutual aid groups have been formed with an estimated c 116,000 members. This very rapid growth reflects several factors:
 - The scale and severity of the emergency being faced by the nation
 - The strong desire of individuals to provide assistance locally to help immediate neighbours and their wider community
 - The lack of barriers to entry – organisations can move very quickly in setting up their groups on social media platforms at zero or minimal cost
 - Local knowledge – local groups know their area best and can link up individuals in need with those who can provide assistance locally. This peer-to-peer support is ideally suited to mutual aid groups.
- **Geographic coverage of Scotland** – it is interesting that there are still significant geographic gaps across Scotland. If the mutual aid model is deemed to be effective, then there would appear to be considerable scope to expand the rollout of this model across many other villages and towns which don't have registered mutual aid groups, notwithstanding that there may already be complementary support through:
 - Smaller social media groups who are already active, but are not registered through Mutual Aid UK
 - Local Resilience Partnerships setting up Humanitarian Assistance Centres / Community Assistance Hubs
 - More formalized volunteering support facilitated through TSIs, local authorities, etc.

Map of Mutual Aid Groups in Scotland



Key:

- Map points in yellow affiliated to Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK
- Map points in blue are other mutual aid groups

Source: Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK

- **Variation in the geographic coverage of groups** – there is significant variation in the scale of the area covered by mutual aid groups and the size of the resident population, with some like Edinburgh Coronavirus Support covering a whole city, some covering whole towns like Lockerbie and others small villages like Achiltibuie. Many also target their support at specific neighbourhoods, particularly within larger towns and cities, for example Govanhill Mutual Aid in Glasgow. There are even some which cover huge areas such as the Far North Coronavirus Mutual Support Group. Its geography includes Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross.
- **Effectiveness of groups** – this short analysis does not provide any insights into the efficacy of the mutual aid model. For example, it is quite possible to have a high membership count, but also a low level of active engagement. Anecdotally we know that a number of people have signed up to such groups but are not active participants. What is important is actually providing the necessary local support where it is needed. It is difficult to ascertain this through the analysis of Facebook data alone. The only proxy indicator we can use is the level of posts relative to the number of members – see the ‘average number of members per post per day in Table 1. There is a wide variation between Scottish Mutual Aid (probably more of an umbrella organisation than one focused on grass roots delivery) at 325 and Stirling Pulling Together at 31. However, even the number of posts is questionable as an indicator as it may be counting social chat rather than serious communications to effect support where it is most needed. The other avenue one could pursue is the analysis of qualitative data for each group by examining the content of Facebook posts. However, this cannot be readily quantified and would be extremely time-consuming for c. 220 organisations.
- **Scale of groups** – why is there such a variation in the size of the mutual aid groups, which is often not correlated to the size of the geography they are serving? For example, the tiny hamlet of Achiltibuie in the remote area of Coigach has a mutual aid group with 147 members and a population of only 300. It is evident that the whole community is behind this venture. And what about the ‘Lend a Hand Lockerbie’ group with 1,221 members and a population of c. 4,000.

In contrast, Mutual Aid Arbroath has 84 members and a population of nearly 24,000. Interestingly, the mutual aid group in the neighbouring town of Carnoustie has 1,184 members and a population less than half that of Arbroath (11,400). Obviously, there could be a myriad of factors at play to explain these variances including, for example, the strength of local leadership, pre-existing community spirit, experience of collaborative working, the impact of deprivation and the clear identification of need within the community.

- **Impact on support infrastructure** – it is quite likely that the growth in mutual aid support will have had impacts on other elements of the local support infrastructure, including:
 - Local Resilience Partnerships setting up Humanitarian Assistance Centres / Community Assistance Hubs. It certainly appears that the mutual aid groups have mobilised faster than HACs.
 - The more formalised volunteering support facilitated through TSIs, local authorities and other partners. There may be an element of displacement whereby the demand for formal volunteering support through the charitable sector has reduced because of this new supply of local volunteering effort facilitated by mutual aid groups.

- **Risks associated with mutual aid groups** – the main perceived downside of mutual aid relates to potential risks associated with lack of safeguarding and organisational liability if groups become involved in deploying volunteers to particular roles. Facilitation of peer-to-peer contact is fine but moving into the management of the matching process is risky.
- **Sustainability of mutual aid groups** – the most important ‘known unknown’ is whether mutual aid groups will have a life after Covid-19. Are they single purpose vehicles which will wind down and then close post-recovery or will they mark the start of a new community engagement model?

Further research

What the above discussion highlights is that this paper is only scratching the surface of a complex new phenomenon. There are so many unanswered questions. However, what we do know is that the scale of the mutual aid movement in Scotland is very significant and, from the case study evidence, it has demonstrated its ability to provide very effective support, quickly and targeted to those most in need in the local community.

Based on the evidence outlined in this paper Volunteer Scotland believes there would be merit in undertaking a much more thorough investigation of the mutual aid movement. The objectives of the research would be to:

- Investigate the triggers for the formation of mutual aid groups in certain geographies and not others
- Learn about the different mutual aid models and their efficacy
- Understand the impact of mutual aid groups and any indirect impacts on other support providers
- Explore any variations in impact and the reasons for this
- Assess whether it is possible to influence the formation and survival of mutual aid groups
- Determine whether these ‘single purpose’ mutual aid groups are likely to continue post Covid-19
- Review the role of mutual aid groups in fostering stronger associational life, community spirit and engagement post Covid-19.

The scope of this research should include:

- **Population mapping** - an accurate mapping of the total population of mutual aid groups in Scotland by profiling their location, date of establishment, number of members, number of posts/day, classification of support provided, etc.
- **Correlation analysis** – investigating what relationship there is, if any, between the location and size of mutual aid groups and the socio-economic characteristics of the geography they are serving?
- **Qualitative analysis** – undertaking depth case studies for a sample of mutual aid groups across a range of different socio-economic geographies in Scotland.

Appendix

1. Coronavirus Volunteering Edinburgh

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/CoronaVolunteeringEdinburgh/>

This is a group for connecting and communicating efforts to help those dealing with the direct or indirect effects of the Covid-19 coronavirus. Connecting the people who can't, to those who can.

- 9,230 members (6,700+ in the last 30 days)
- 615 posts in the last 30 days (60 posts a day)
- Group Rules x 6 – informative post suggestions only; no individual contributions; verifiable resource links; etc.

2. Fife Covid-19 Mutual Aid Group

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/139925244059427/>

A venue for volunteers to co-ordinate and help people in Fife who have been effected by coronavirus self-isolation. Pick up shopping, posting mail, giving urgent supplies, dog-walking etc.

Things are, thankfully, quiet at the moment. We will assess how best to organize the group and make contact with relevant foodbanks, doctors' surgeries, leisure clubs, churches etc. An online database where you can add you name, note the times you are available to help, and type of service you can offer will be put on the group tomorrow.

- 4,700 members
- 487 posts in last 30 days

3. Stirling Pulling Together

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/2549927025254514/>

This group has been set up in the hope that we can come together as a community for those that are most vulnerable during the Covid-19 outbreak.

Hopefully those that are in the position to help will come together and maybe offer support with shopping, picking up prescriptions or just offer a friendly voice at the end of the phone.

If you know of someone who is not on Facebook and needs help, a friendly note from one of the members here could be posted through the door?

Let's all pull together, help each other whilst staying safe and making sure nobody is left to suffer alone.

- 3,700+ members
- 120 posts per day

4. Glasgow Mutual Aid

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/glasgowmutualaid/>

Glasgow Mutual Aid is a group for those in Glasgow wishing to help others by providing food and other services to those in need. We formed in response to the COVID-19 outbreak and are trying our best to safely support those who are self-isolating, quarantined, or otherwise vulnerable.

- 2,800 members
- 50 posts/day

5. Community Aid St. Andrews (CASA)

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/644757139646400/about/>

We are a community of people who care for each other, especially the most vulnerable among us, and want to do what we can to encourage and support each other during this difficult time. In this group, you can

- request support and connect with people who may be able help you
- offer support to other members of the community, and
- get information about other support that is available, other ways to volunteer and how to keep yourself and others safe.
 - 2,767 members
 - 805 posts in last 30 days

6. Aberdeen Mutual City Aid

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/Aberdeenmutualaid/about/>

This a mutual aid group to help with all those affected by the COVID-19 outbreak in Aberdeen City. It is run solely by volunteers who aim to provide support to those most vulnerable and/or in isolation.

- 1,900 members
- 20 posts/day

7. Scottish Mutual Aid

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/542029259769974/>

From now on, as per our updated description, this is a group for anyone in Scotland looking to help each other out during the COVID-19 outbreak.

It's a place for Scottish people to access information about their local mutual aid groups – and about the mutual aid effort across the world.

It will provide:

- Signposting to local Mutual Aid Groups
- Resources to help people in Scotland set up a local group where there isn't one already
- Opportunities to support Mutual Aid efforts at national level
- Organising capacity to engage with institutions and organisations across Scotland and make relevant connections with local mutual aid groups

- 1,300 members
- 4 posts/day

8. Covid-19 Help and Support in Carnoustie

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/665237324227738/about/>

A group dedicated to community support through these unnerving times. Please use this group to reach out if you need some support Hopefully this group can work as a means to help connect people who are feeling isolated and as a way of sharing information and resources We are stronger as a community.

- 1,184 members
- 8 posts/day

9. Dundee Covid-19 Mutual Aid Group

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/2259913884303722/>

This group is for people in the Dundee area to support each other, especially in doing things like food shopping for elderly and vulnerable people. Posts will be strictly restricted to requests for support and offers for support - no general virus chat will be allowed, especially rumours or misinformation.

- c. 900 members
- 6 posts/day

10. Mutual-aid Perth

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1230711410640080/>

Private

- 858 members
- 594 posts in last 30 days