Stronger together:
What communities can do in the Covid-19 crisis

Image credit: Maree White

(This and all images are from Interior World, Paekākāriki photo-essay of life in isolation)

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for Paekākāriki and other communities**

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Contents

Image credit: Nik Bullard

From Italy's 'Listen to Your Grandmother' campaign and Bristol's Mothers Turned Drug Runners to RongoCare in the tiny village of Rongotea, Louise Thornley has been researching great NZ and international community responses to the Covid-19 pandemic.

A public health researcher, most recently with the University of Otago, Louise also researched community responses after the Canterbury earthquakes.

She has prepared this summary for communities as part of the Kāpiti Coast village [Paekākāriki's](#) Emergency Preparedness Group. **This version is the full report (25 pages). You can find the [shorter version here](#).**

Key points

Communities and neighbourhoods are vital: Communities and neighbourhoods are crucial places where the impacts of Covid-19 can be prevented and reduced. Local street-level connections are important, as well as other communities (whānau, hapu, iwi, LGBTIQ+, people with disability or chronic illness, playcentre, etc.)

Think and act collectively: Focus at the collective-level (not individual) on the groups and populations that make up our community. Act in the interests of our community as a whole

Mutual aid is spreading: Informal 'mutual aid' groups are springing up in New Zealand and around the world in response to Covid-19. Connect and exchange resources and services for mutual benefit

Focus support on people at most risk: Identify who is at higher risk of severe Covid-19 illness – and who are most affected by negative impacts like job losses, financial stress and social problems – and use local organising to support the most vulnerable

We're all in this together: Recognise that anyone can get this virus. We can spread it even when we have no symptoms. While some people are more affected, we are all in the same boat – all of us are at risk of feeling lonely and socially isolated

Image credit: Andy Hummel

Share information / be open: Being honest and transparent, and sharing information and data, about Covid-19 and its effects can help to reduce people's fears

Be creative in connecting with others: Identify what things your neighbourhood, town or culture relate to – and create ways to share health messages or tips about staying safe. One example is a video series in Italy, focusing on the respected Italian grandmother – bringing health information to life with messages like "[Listen to your grandmother!](#)"

Learn from social science: [Social and behavioural science](#) can inform community responses. For example, research-backed [ways to talk about Covid-19](#), learning how people perceive and respond to threats, and concepts like 'moral elevation' where great role models can motivate others to put their own values into action (the positive effects of virtuous action). Acting in ways that benefit all of us can be contagious!

Introduction

This summary aims to inform community and neighbourhood responses to Covid-19 by learning from others. Written for Paekākāriki, a village on New Zealand's Kāpiti Coast, it will also be shared with other communities. Guidance and examples are drawn from a rapid Internet scan carried out in April 2020.

When New Zealand is in level 4 (lockdown) or alert level 3 (restrict), face-to-face meetings in communities aren't possible. Some of the community examples given here won't be feasible to do until we are at alert level 2 or lower. Diverse examples are covered in any case to inspire ideas and action for now (adapted to suit the relevant alert level) – and for the future.

The Internet scan searched for learning, guidance and examples of local community responses to Covid-19 in New Zealand and overseas. The main sources of information were:

- community-based mutual aid networks and resource documents
- international databases on learning from crises
- websites of known public health and community organisations in various countries, and
- Internet searches for information on learning from mutual aid, including in Asian countries with earlier experience of responding to Covid-19.

The learning drawn from this scan comes from research reports, media and community directories.

Part 1 covers the mutual aid movement, with guidance and examples. Part 2 summarises learning from other health crises, from mutual aid experience, and from Asian countries with early success in reducing the impact of Covid-19.

Part 3 gives a fuller list of guidance resources and examples of community-level initiatives. Lastly, Part 4 briefly lists principles to keep in mind for community responses

to Covid-19. Links throughout the text show the sources for particular guidance and examples of community responses.

1. What is the mutual aid movement?

People power

Mutual aid = "reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit."

At a local level, informal mutual aid groups are springing up worldwide in response to Covid-19. A common aim is to help older people, those with health conditions, and those self-isolating or in lockdown. Assistance may include delivering groceries, making phone calls, or setting up emergency foodbanks. The model differs from a 'charity' approach – it's a mutual exchange where people on both sides benefit and assist each other.

Groups are independent with their own local priorities and focus, but they usually share rapid online ways to connect and organise (e.g. Facebook, Next Door) to meet the basic needs of the most affected people in communities.

Guidance for mutual aid

"Don't panic. Organise."

National mutual aid networks

National mutual aid networks exist around the world: three examples are in New Zealand, US and UK.

Aotearoa New Zealand: Two national networks are [Caremongering](#) and [Mutual Aid New Zealand](#). Both of these networks work to assist and support local mutual aid (or 'caremongering') groups during the Covid-19 crisis. The sites include advice and links to resources for organising in communities, learning about Covid-19 and keeping people safe.

"Caremongering – spreading acts of compassion"

The Caremongering website aims to make it easier for New Zealanders to help each other, from home during the lockdown, and to find essential care as needed. The site organisers have collated some [how-to reference docs,](#) crowdsourced with suggestions from the community (and partly inspired by [The Coronavirus Tech Handbook)](#). Topics include safety protocols, medical and healthcare, Te Ao Māori, technology, finance and funding, wellbeing and information for community organisers.

Originating from Canada, caremongering groups have spread around New Zealand, including in Christchurch, Queenstown, Wellington, Upper Hutt and Lower Hutt. Similar groups in New Zealand are the mutual aid groups affiliated with Mutual Aid NZ, a Facebook network called [The Aroha Collective](#), and a village-level group called [RongoCare](#) (see below).

United States: The US-based grassroots disaster relief network, [Mutual Aid Disaster Relief](#), works with, listens to and supports impacted communities, especially their most vulnerable members, to lead their own recovery in crises like Covid-19.

The network educates on collaborative neighbourhood crisis response, collects and shares lessons learned on the ground, and links other grassroots groups doing crisis response work. It advocates for a just response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

United Kingdom: [Covid Mutual Aid UK](#) supports thousands of local mutual aid groups in the UK. It focuses on providing resources and connecting people to their nearest local groups. Like in the US, this network stresses justice and equity issues – while all are at risk of Covid-19, some people are more vulnerable and need greater support from the community.

The UK also has a web platform called [Communities Together](#), which aims to temporarily help all UK communities respond to Covid-19. This is a free national timebanking platform, set up by Timebanking UK and Made Open.

Funding for community-led initiatives in New Zealand

Through the Ministry for Social Development, the [Community Awareness and Preparedness Grant fund](#) is available to community groups providing essential community-led solutions that support local resilience and community wellbeing during Covid-19 restrictions.

The Caremongering website has a section with how-to links on [finance and funding](#).

Links to lots more inspiring tips on community organising and support

This [Mutual Aid Disaster Relief webpage](#) is super useful – with tons of links to resources and open-sourced guidance, including 'how to' guides for [setting up our own mutual aid efforts](#).

[Collective Care is our Best Weapon](#) is a great short commentary, explaining why individual-level responses (e.g. stockpile, isolate, care for yourself) are inadequate. The piece argues that physical distancing must be grounded in the ethics and practice of social solidarity and collective care:

"COVID-19 clearly demonstrates that only by deeply looking out for each other—acting as if everyone's life has inherent worth and is at risk; as if the health of one is the health of all—will we actually be able to lessen the amount of sickness and death, not to mention the emotional weight on us all. Unless everyone cooperates, the virus exponentially spreads."

And: "Practicing mutual aid is the surest means for giving each other and to all the greatest safety, the best guarantee of existence" (Geographer Peter Kropotkin, who wrote a book on mutual aid)

[Coronavirus Resource Kit](#) – includes topics of community, healing and care; resources, data, tech, neighbourhoods, artists

[The Coronavirus Tech Handbook](#) is a crowdsourced library for technologists, civic sector organisations, public and private institutions, researchers, and specialists of all kinds working on responses to the pandemic. It is a rapidly evolving resource with thousands of expert contributors. And it's huge! Topics include tech responses, home, work, mutual aid, getting sick, medicine and care, medical equipment, information ecosystem, policy and public sector, private sector, third sector, academic etc.

[Resources for students (US)](#)

[Apart But United: open-source collection of best practices in community solutions - Top 100 actions you can take right now](#)

And here's an inspiring story of youth leadership in various countries, including Africa, Switzerland and Peru: [Meet 10 young people leading the COVID-19 response in their communities](#)

Action Station's Covid-19 Community Toolkit

New Zealand's Action Station has produced a "people-powered, crowdsourced community toolkit with tips and tools on how to organise your community in response to Covid-19".

It's for anyone who wants to look out for their neighbourhood, whānau, hapū or community in response to Covid-19. The toolkit stresses the reason for organising is because communities have a better chance of coping with this pandemic when we are connected, prepared and organised.

We can't rely on the usual services and agencies because they can get overwhelmed. The great thing is that communities are full of people with diverse skills and abilities who can work together to look after each other.

[This Covid-19 community toolkit](#) contains tips on:

- Supporting an existing effort or organisation
- Organising neighbourhoods or local communities online
- Online meetings and video conferences
- Guidance on how to run errands for people who are self-isolating
- Tips for organising help for older folk
- Considering different needs in your community
- How to campaign for immediate and long term needs in your community
- How to prepare your marae, hapū and whānau

Action Station divides organising into small-scale (neighbourhoods, local communities) and medium-scale (towns, cities, regions, nationally). Small-scale local organising includes three steps: mapping your community, reaching out, and organising a network.

1. **Mapping your community** – e.g. start small and write down everyone you know in your street, ideally in collaboration with others – and in lockdown we can do this using video call tools. Make a list of needs, e.g. note down people who are aged over 60, are immune-compromised, with disability, doing essential work, are homeless or in unstable housing, or who may need support for other reasons. Make a list of skills, e.g. medical knowledge, car owners who are able to run errands, DIY skills for urgent fixes, language speakers, separate on-site accommodation that could be used to isolate someone, tech skills, etc.

2. **Reaching out** – e.g. through existing relationships, phone, text or email the people in the group, drop flyers into letterboxes with contact info (using safety and hygiene practices like using hand sanitiser)

3. **Organise a network** – e.g. start a phone tree, or an online group to stay in touch, discuss important health information, share resources and help each other out. Use a mix of communications so that people don't miss out, e.g. online group for the main communications, but assigning people to pass on that information to people who don't use the Internet group. Check on people with specific needs, e.g. through regular phone calls. One person does not need to take care of everything. Welcome each other's skills and strengths and support each other to have rests.

Advice for organising communities online covers, among other things, how to start a new online community, bringing face-to-face groups online and online support groups.

Guidance for considering the diverse needs of affected populations includes tips for those with English as a second language, migrants and refugees, disabled people, whānau with new babies, people who are LGBTIQ+, foodbanks, pets and – importantly – taking care of the people doing the organising.

Image credit: Helena Faust

Steps to setting up a neighbourhood support group

A common local network is based on where people live – a street or neighbourhood block.

Similar to Action Station's guidance and based on information from Neighbourhood Support, Civil Defence and local councils, here are three simple steps to starting a new neighbourhood group:

1. Start a new group or join an existing group – contact the neighbours who live immediately around you. Groups tend to work well when they're not too large and are made up of households who can see each other

2. Register your group with Civil Defence and/or Neighbourhood Support so that you can be part of a coordinated response and have access to support and resources

3. Neighbourhood resources register - make a register of people's skills and needs, and the resources in your neighbourhood, so you can be ready to help each other out.

And here's a simple, practical guide from the Wellington founder of Reframe Aotearoa:

[A ready-to-go guide to getting your street connected for Covid-19 shutdown](#).

How big should a neighbourhood group be?

- Civil Defence in New Zealand has this advice: There are no rules on the size of your group. In a rural setting it might make sense to have a small group of **four farms**, where in a more urban area a group of **14 houses** on your street might be able to support each other well. You want to aim for enough resources to collectively take care of each other, but small enough to still know everyone and understand the risks and needs of the group.

- Wellington City Council suggests getting together with your **nine** nearest neighbours.

- A local group organiser in the US, who has studied Wuhan's community response, suggests using 'walking distance' as a guide for deciding how big a group should be. She says the size of the group really depends on your context – the group size could be as small as three people.

Example of a neighbourhood group

Just one example of a neighbourhood group ('hyperlocal' network) is the approach set up by the above-mentioned organiser, who is based in the US. Tricia Wang is a Chinese-American researcher, who [examined community responses in Wuhan](#) earlier this year:

"I borrowed what I'd learned from my researchers in Wuhan, and connected nearby friends and neighbors within walking distance on WhatsApp where we vetted information, shared updates on local store inventory, and checked in on those who felt ill. I've incorporated practices that work well in the online communities I use for work, including asking participants to agree to a code of conduct, maintaining a directory of all

participants, and organizing the most frequently asked questions into a shared Google Doc."

She gives detailed instructions on [creating your own hyperlocal group](#).

Neighbourhood-level groups can offer mutual aid in a crisis, and can also help communities to prepare in advance for future disasters – through getting to know immediate neighbours and having existing ways to connect.

Remember: Neighbourhood groups aren't the only kind of mutual aid model. Other communities may be more important for people – e.g. whānau or hapū-based networks, disability or chronic illness support, LGBTIQ+ support.

Community Action Response (UK)

Another example to guide action in communities is the [Community Action Response](#) framework, developed by the UK's Eden Project and a wide range of partner organisations.

COMMUNITY ACTION RESPONSE: COVID-19
5 things you can do to make a positive difference in your community

Think of others, consider your actions & be kind

People in every community will face the challenges of Covid-19 in some way – from needing basic provisions to help while they are unwell.

Connect and reach out to your neighbours

As self-isolation increases, we need to find new ways to stay connected and check in on one another for our physical and mental wellbeing. Share phone numbers and stay in touch.

Make the most of local online groups

Keep up to date, share information and be a positive part of your local community conversations.

Support vulnerable or isolated people

Different groups in our communities are at increased risk and social isolation and loneliness are key concerns for all ages. There are things you can do like volunteering for local support services or donating to food banks to help.

Share accurate information and advice

Support anyone who may be anxious about Covid-19. Sign post them to the correct advice from Public Health England and encourage people to follow the correct hygiene practices.

eden project COMMUNITIES · COMMUNITY FUND · NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH · Campaign to EndLoneliness CONNECTIONS IN OLDER AGE · Nextdoor

Learning and resource links are provided under each of these five headings below, drawing on this work and other community-focused Covid-19 information found in this Internet scan.

Five things you can do – in your community

1 Think of others / be kind

See here for more ideas and links

Remember we're in this together – this helps us work together and find ways to manage our challenges.

Do what you can to stay positive – seek out positive media and share great things that are happening.

Be kind to yourself – protect your mental wellbeing.

Reduce stigma and discrimination – use regular and proactive communication with the public and at-risk populations, build trust, and increase social support and access to basic needs for affected people and their families.

The World Health Organization has produced a guide to preventing and addressing social stigma associated with Covid-19.

2.   Connect and reach out to neighbours

See here for more ideas and links

Set up small local groups – a street, group of flats or small neighbourhood - to create trusted connections more quickly – especially important for older or vulnerable people who may not be able or willing to ask for help online in a big group.

Intergenerational interaction should be encouraged where possible.

Make the most of tech – e.g. join online classes with others, 'meet' for virtual drinks or online games.

Use creative ways to connect offline – artwork in windows, footpath chalk drawings, pick up the phone.

Start a buddy system or phone tree with your neighbours or family – template here.

3.   Make the most of local online groups

Local online groups are a great way to keep up-to-date, learn more, interact and share information – with kindness and respect for each other.

Also think about ways to get information to people who don't have Internet access or who aren't spending time online – e.g. leaflet drops, phoning or using a phone tree. Make a plan for how to share information if the Internet or power goes down.

Image credit: Deryn Groves

4.   Support vulnerable or isolated people

See here for more ideas and links

Various groups in our communities are at greater risk of Covid-19 severe illness, or experiencing social and economic problems at this time.

Remember a wide range of different groups may be more affected in the Covid-19 environment: e.g. people aged over-70, immune-compromised people, those with chronic health conditions, Māori and Pacific communities, people on low incomes, those who are homeless or in insecure housing, people experiencing family violence, people living alone with no family/social support, older people without children, etc.

Example: Māori researchers and health professionals have expressed concern about the potential impacts of this pandemic on whānau and communities. If the virus was to spread unchecked in NZ, academic modelling predicts Covid-19 could be twice as deadly for Māori communities – and the risk is even higher for older Māori and Pasifika and for rural areas. Māori are taking action to prevent and reduce the impacts of Covid-19 and protect whānau health and well-being: examples are the Māori Pandemic Group's website www.uruta.maori.nz and various checkpoints set up by local iwi to protect rural Māori.

Advice for action: Set up mutual aid groups to help people who are struggling or at higher risk of illness – find out who is at risk in your community (assess needs early on and in ongoing ways as the context changes).

Those with the right skills could offer personalised support, e.g. psychological 'first aid', mental health support and referrals to professional help. Remember also that in a lockdown context, any of us are at risk of social isolation and loneliness.

In mutual aid support, the safety of all people involved is crucial – don't share personal information without permission, let family or friends know what you're doing, keep safe (don't enter other peoples' homes during lockdown).

If you're helping others, look after yourself as well.

5. Share accurate information and advice

*The best information sources in Aotearoa New Zealand are [the official government Covid-19 website](#) and [Covid-19 Advice for Māori](#) by the National Māori Pandemic Group.

It's crucial we only share accurate information and advice about Covid-19. Be wary of misleading information circulating online – there are lots of inaccurate health tips and unhelpful speculations from people who aren't qualified experts.

Only pass on information from reliable sources and be aware of the potential negative impact sharing certain content might have. Be selective. With the situation rapidly evolving, make sure the information is up-to-date.

The New Zealand Māori Council has produced a [Guide for Māori and Covid-19.](#)

The Ministry for Pacific Peoples' has a webpage with information for Pacific communities: [Ministry for Pacific Peoples' Covid-19 Update](#)

Also in New Zealand, [The Workshop](#) has produced a useful guide on [How to Talk about Covid-19](#) in ways that are evidence-based, and to encourage us all to work together constructively on this journey.

Key points from this advice include:
- Lead communications with values like helpfulness, responsibility and caring. This supports a collective approach, promoting pro-social actions
- Other values for communication include connection, equity, creativity, minimising harm, neighbourliness/whānaungatanga, unity/kotahitanga
- Values-based messaging doesn't mean only being positive – it's important to tell the truth and impart urgency when required - open, honest, transparent approach. At the same time, make sure communications don't exacerbate fear (instead, encourage helpfulness and connectedness, talk about how we can help each other)

- Encourage collective responsibility, not a focus on individuals. Collective wellbeing depends on every person acting with a collective sense of responsibility
- Instead of an authoritarian response that highlights selfishness and 'bad' behaviour, take a caring, responsible, reciprocal response
- Avoid blame – instead "We're all in this together" and support people to do the right thing
- Avoid being an expert unless you are one. It's not always necessary to repost information which is readily available. Don't try to analyse the information.
- Useful metaphors include journey, navigating systems, teams (unhelpful metaphors are those related to war, battle, disasters, heroism)

A summary [Checklist for Covid-19 Communications](#) to help apply the guide is available.

Example: Some countries, like the US, UK and France, are using battle metaphors and nationalist rhetoric ("We are at war" with Covid-19). In contrast, [Germany is promoting democratic values](#) to benefit society as a whole in its response to the crisis. Chancellor Angela Merkel has said that as democratic citizens, "we live not by coercion but by shared knowledge and collaboration," sharing a belief that "every life and every person counts." She stressed that democratic government is a two-way street, and explained to citizens why the government needs them for the Covid-19 response effort, "what each and every person can contribute."

Other advice from this Internet scan includes:

- Communicate proactively in communities and neighbourhoods using a central communication channel, and also encourage two-way dialogue using diverse channels
- Work to understand the risk perceptions, barriers, needs and knowledge gaps in your community
- Find ways to make official data and information visible and translate communications so that all people in communities can understand it
- Acknowledge anxiety over Covid-19 and support people with this common experience

Trusted sources of Q and As

Official government website

- https://covid19.govt.nz/#faqs
- https://covid19.govt.nz/government-actions/covid-19-alert-level/
- [Section 70(1)(f) Health Act Order](#)
- [Covid-19 Advice for Māori](#)

One Health Aotearoa (a network of experts in human, animal or environmental health who work together on innovative management, prevention and control of infectious diseases)

- [OneHealth experts answer your virus questions, 30 Mar 2020](#)

Examples of mutual aid

Mutual aid groups in New Zealand (see Part 3 below for more)

RongoCare, Rongotea, Palmerston North, NZ: A small village on the edge of Palmy (population: 600 residents) set up a mutual aid group in mid-March – with a cellphone and an email address. The Rongotea 'hotline' uses a shared cell-phone with a roster of locals to take the calls. When a request for help comes in, they circulate the request to the wider group. Help so far has included grocery and prescription errands, and phone calls to check on people in their homes.

The organiser has made this kind offer to other communities: "If you want to chat about it, feel free to drop a note to RongoCare@gmail.com"

Other mutual aid projects in NZ include the Self-Isolation Support Kāpiti and Sikh Aware mutual aid initiatives in Auckland, Napier, Whangārei and Hamilton.

Mutual aid groups internationally

Mutual aid in Wuhan, China: Local people offered to drive medical workers from their homes to the hospitals

Feedfolks, Los Angeles, US: A mutual aid network that helps transfer food from farms to families in need in Los Angeles by assisting local communities to coordinate the delivery of farm produce boxes. This includes providing forms to identify vulnerable stakeholders, collecting orders and donations, and finding people to deliver (using software to find the fastest delivery routes).

Olympia Community Resilience, Washington State, US: Olympia Community Resilience is a mutual aid project coordinating support. This includes grocery delivery, food restrictions, translating or interpreting, pharmacy prescription pickups, running errands, food preparation, and accessibility needs, with priority on vulnerable and marginalised populations

Cooperation Humboldt, Northern California, US: A mutual aid programme to run errands and deliver food / supplies to those self-isolating, make DIY masks and hand sanitizer/cleaning solutions, and coordinate computer/tablet donations for those working/schooling from home. They have launched a mental health team and a policy/advocacy team. Also working with numerous other community organisations and one local government (the Wiyot Tribe), so far, in a coalition to coordinate local responses

Hospital Hero, US: Connects healthcare workers who don't have time to meet their own needs with people who can offer meals and accommodation

London LGBTIQ+ Mutual Aid, London, UK: The Outside Project is helping to coordinate a Mutual Aid Network for LGBTIQ+ people in London. The group has a focus on people who are homeless, sofa-surfing, squatting, living in overcrowded accommodation, or living in isolation as services begin to close down

Mothers turned drug runners, **Bristol, UK**: Mums in a running group changed their usual fitness plan to keep fit by running to pharmacies to deliver medications to people who can't leave their homes

MutualAid.world, **International:** This collaboration was set up by a group of Kiwis and is now an international team of designers and developers. They are focusing on making life easier for community organisers by building open-source software tools, including a tool for organisers called Resilience App, currently in development. They are looking for designers and coders, as well as local organisers and content writers (contact Miles at miles@paekakariki.nz for more info).

What's App groups, **International**: For example, in Italian retirement homes to enable calls between residents and their families after in-person visits were not allowed

Survival packs for people living in informal housing, **South Africa**: Johannesburg residents are urgently making survival packs (soap, hand sanitiser, bottled water, food) for vulnerable communities who live in informal settlements

Street Presidents, **Brazil:** are being recruited by residents' associations in Brazil's favelas (slum areas), who support residents to understand hygiene measures and the need to stay inside. Since the official health information doesn't make sense to many living on the periphery, they are training locals to translate the advice.

Wemunity Project, **Norway**: An open innovation project where people who have recovered from Covid-19 can be approved as immune and then offer to help out in their local communities – doing tasks that non-immune people can't do

WePals, **International**: WePals was founded by an 8-year-old girl to set up virtual play-dates for children. A global community of parents with school-aged children and interested in collaborating virtually with children (parent-led) around the world.

Other examples include Zoomers to Boomers and PhoneAFriend.care.

Looking for good news?

Bright Spots is a non-profit collaboration between internationally-renowned educators, futurists, designers and YOU. It's a call to action for anyone, to help us recognise new possibilities in this time of crisis (with a New Zealand-based cofounder).

One example of a 'bright spot' is a video game called Foldit, which involves solving puzzles that relate to real-life proteins. The proteins created as the game is played are being used by the University of Washington. Researchers hope to use contributions from the game in ongoing protein research to combat coronavirus.

Links from the Bright Spots website – to help find positive, inspiring stories related to Covid-19:
- Solution Journalists Network Covid-19 Story Tracker – collects Covid-19 stories on new solutions, initiatives and communities

- [Nieman Reports](#) – stories from journalism at Harvard University
- [Yes Magazine](#) – a non-profit independent publisher covering positive stories
- [The Good News Network](#) – publishes uplifting news internationally, including on Covid-19
- [Positive News Magazine](#) – a non-profit media organisation based in the UK
- [HuffPost UK #goodnews](#) – the good news section of the UK's edition of the HuffPost.

2. What can we learn from community responses?

Learning from mutual aid

Common steps:

1. A mutual aid Facebook (or similar) page is set up by a local person and within days there are hundreds of people using the site to offer or request help.

2. Locals put leaflets in letterboxes in the local area with a single phone number to call for assistance (e.g. in New Zealand this may be the regional Civil Defence 0800 number).

3. Calls are taken and people offering help are matched to the specific needs (e.g. picking up groceries or medication for people who can't leave their home). Accepting payment for groceries over the phone is important where possible, which requires trust.

4. Either linking people with existing community foodbanks where they exist – or setting up a foodbank or informal community food service to meet basic needs in communities (in New Zealand the Ministry of Social Development has [guidance on foodbanks and community food services](#) in Level 4).

5. Practical challenges can include finding a good payment system so that people can shop on behalf of others, and finding efficient ways to get medications from pharmacies out to people who can't leave home.

Build community even while physically apart in lockdown: talk on the phone, use technology to connect regularly, share ideas virtually, phone trees, buddy systems etc.

Act as safely as possible and as local as possible:

- **Safety is paramount:** be cautious about vetting unknown locals and use good protocols to protect people. The safety of all is paramount.

- Online safety is also important, this piece gives practical advice: [Keeping Each Other Safe When Virtually Organizing Mutual Aid](#)

Don't try to do everything ourselves – use existing community resources and services where possible

Don't duplicate work – find out what else is going on, so that people aren't doubling up

Dealing with difference

Mutual aid brings together people with differing expectations and values – acknowledge this and use open discussion, fair processes, ways to build community to help to work constructively despite differences of opinion

Reflect on what we do and share the learning

Share positive stories about mutual aid, e.g. NZ's Neighbourhood Support has launched a weekly Good Neighbour Award

Image credit: Steve Bright

Flexible and responsive: where reasonable, adapt the usual policies and procedures (of NGOs/councils/govt agencies etc.) to allow for innovation and fast responses

Learning from past health crises

An independent think-tank on humanitarian action and crisis management, Group URD, has published learning from their work on major health crises to share in the context of Covid-19.

Key points relevant to community-level Covid-19 response:

- Social mobilisation and community involvement – are part of the essential package of measures needed to manage epidemics and pandemics

- Clear communication on what the public needs to do – messages on preventive actions the public is advised to take needs to be disseminated locally using diverse communication channels (e.g. social media, posters, radio, TV, messages in languages used by the community)

- Avoid misinformation – work to reduce the impact of fake news and false rumours by sharing and emphasising the correct information

- Involve social scientists – social scientists (like social anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and behavioural economists) can offer important insights into how affected communities and population groups perceive the risks of Covid-19 – or into beliefs and rituals around illness, dying and death.

  These insights can help to shape the best responses for specific communities. They can advise how to communicate information and how to manage disinformation and rumours in affected communities. Social scientists can help draw attention to cognitive biases that constrain effective responses to Covid-19, such as confirmation bias — the tendency to seize upon information that confirms our preferred position or initial hypothesis.

  In the Ebola epidemic, social scientists were used too late in Guinea, but were used to good effect in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Social scientists contributed by analysing and explaining fear and apprehension in affected populations and explaining why communities behave as they do when faced with contagion, pain or death. They advised on strategies to facilitate the local population's acceptance of the humanitarian aid workers who arrived in response to the crisis.

Learning from other countries

China

A Chinese-American technology researcher (mentioned above), who previously had spent time researching in Wuhan's vulnerable communities, worked with her research colleagues in Wuhan in early 2020 to carry out [virtual ethnography fieldwork](). The aim was to understand how people on the ground were responding to the Covid-19 crisis.

Using WeChat interviews, she found that people in Wuhan had organised into highly sophisticated networks of local cooperation (mutual aid). She reports that alongside the government's top-down approach, bottom-up organising using hyper-local groups also helped to slow Covid-19 infections. Neighbours used social media to find food and medicine, to support those getting sick, and to help each other cope.

According to this researcher, people in Wuhan used "an existing social construct, the xiao qu (小区) group, which literally translates to "small district." A xiao qu is an official designation from the city grouping together all the homes in a given area.

Typically, a xiao qu captain (a volunteer or someone appointed by the property management) invites all residents into one WeChat group, which can range from 50 to 500 people in size. Wuhan has at least 7,106 xiao qu groups among its 11.08 million residents, many of which existed before the coronavirus took hold."

When the quarantines began in Wuhan city in 2020, people began to use the xiao qu to communicate with their physically-distanced neighbours – kicking off a hyperlocal network. Local residents vetted and shared trusted information, and warned each other about rumours of potential cures for Covid-19.

As a way to reduce exposure to the virus, neighbours would purchase groceries for others. In time, group purchases and bulk orders were made, where a group of neighbours would order a large delivery from one supermarket or pharmacy.

In an article published by the World Economic Forum, [public health experts in China share learning](#) from the response to Covid-19 in Hangzhou, a city of 10 million people that acted earlier than Wuhan did – before the city had any confirmed cases.

The city's proactive response, careful planning and clear communication (and use of IT) meant the impact of Covid-19 was greatly reduced compared to Wuhan.

Lessons include:

- Implementing preventive measures in communities and homes can influence the trajectory of Covid-19
- Mobilise all of society and get everyone involved in the process – since everyone is at risk. Covid-19 is highly contagious and can spread from people before they have symptoms
- Provide continuous, clear communication to the public, including clear guidance about the degree and scope of lockdowns
- Zhejiang University School of Public Health was fully engaged, producing easy-to-understand information for students and the public about Covid-19 and how to prevent its spread (they viewed all public health experts as responsible for providing factual and scientific information to people)
- Keys to success are to make everyone responsible, get every unit of the community involved and hold officials accountable. "We also need to change how we have been living and be responsive to new challenges."

Chinese community members share their learning from mutual aid in Wuhan, China, in [this practical guide](#). Tips include: create a psychological support kit, provide mental health support for people who are helping others, and protect pregnant women, new mums and infants from Covid-19.

South Korea

Frequent communication is a hallmark of the South Korea response. The [Korean Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) provides daily press briefings as well as detailed cell-phone alerts about infected people's movements.

South Korea's [Foreign Minister, Kang Kyung-wha](#), reports that the daily detailed information from Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has helped experts and citizens improve their understanding of how the virus functions – and the information has reduced the population's fears to some extent.

She stresses that being open with people and securing their trust is vitally important: "The key to our success has been absolute transparency with the public – sharing every detail of how this virus is evolving, how it is spreading and what the government is doing about it, warts and all."

The [Community Chest of Korea](#) is a disaster response charity that has provided help during Covid-19 in South Korea. Its website states the charity "plays a critical role in helping underprivileged citizens who are in need of community support. The CCK'S resources are allocated through transparent and fair procedures."

Taiwan

Taiwan's response is also characterised by [making relevant information easier and more convenient](#) for people to access, including maximising use of digital tools like social media. Taiwan's active civil society played a key role, and to control Covid-19 both government and citizens/communities needed sufficient information.

Singapore

[Singapore's success](#) in reducing the early impact of Covid-19 is attributed to various measures, including strong community engagement with regular communication on what people can do to minimise risk. Organised leadership was also a lesson, where roles are clearly defined with messaging able to be delivered by a range of people. The approach to messaging was strategic, with Covid-19 treated as a 'whole-of-government' issue, not a health matter. Cartoons were a feature of the public communications campaign, now being translated into other languages.

The AidHub website serves as a [hub for mutual aid groups](#) in Singapore. Two mutual aid organisations are also listed.

Hong Kong

The [Hong Kong SARS Mutual Help Association](#) spoke out in the media warning the government not to repeat mistakes made during the earlier SARS pandemic. In late January the group expressed concern about the government not taking the virus seriously enough. Many of the group's members still suffer from side effects of SARS treatment, including degenerative bone disorder, chronic joint pain and emotional problems. The Association urged the government to be proactive, including banning non-locals who visited Wuhan within the past month from entering the city and full border closure.

Locals in Hong Kong also report a [surge of support](#) for local farm produce – both for health reasons and as a form of resistance to reduce reliance on imports from mainland China.

This site lists a variety of organisations and the support being offered in Hong Kong: https://www.handsonhongkong.org/coronavirus-emergency-needs.

3. Resources and examples of Covid-19 community action

These tables list a fuller range of links to guidance and examples here and overseas, including those mentioned already in this report.

Aotearoa New Zealand examples

Guidance / resources	Examples
Action Station Covid-19 Community Toolkit	The Student Volunteer Army - national Covid-19 response
New Zealand COVID-19 Mutual Aid (MANZ) - website	National Iwi Chairs' Forum Pandemic Response Group
New Zealand COVID-19 Mutual Aid (MANZ) - FB group	Te Rōpu Whakakaupapa Uruta (Māori pandemic group)
Covid-19 Organising Toolkit - MANZ	Local iwi checkpoints around Aotearoa NZ
Find a mutual aid support group in NZ	RongoCare support network, Palm North
Register a mutual aid support group in NZ	Emergency Cargo Bikes of NZ
The Workshop's How to Talk about Covid-19 guide	Self-Isolation Support Kāpiti
Facebook Live panel on communicating Covid-19	Auckland Central City COVID-19 Community Response
Covid-19 Advice for Māori: Te Rōpu Whakakaupapa Uruta	Disabled Persons Assembly NZ Covid-19 Info for the Disabled Community
New Zealand Māori Council's Guide for Māori and Covid-19	Project Lyttelton Timebank
Ministry for Pacific Peoples' Covid-19 Update	Sikh Aware mutual aid initiatives in Auckland, Napier, Whangārei and Hamilton
NZ Family Violence Clearinghouse Resources for Whānau, Communities and Services	Student Volunteer Armies assisting people who need help in Wellington and Chch, for example
	Teddy bear hunt nationwide - bears in windows as a treat for kids
	Bright Spots – a website collating positive news and sharing the potential for great developments from Covid-19

Spontaneous creative initiatives

Here are a few examples from Aotearoa's lockdown:

- 'Stay' song recorded by 20 of New Zealand's favourite musicians – produced and recorded remotely in seven days

- Reverend Francis Ritchie hosted an online dance rave in his office

- Family Lockdown Boogie – Jack Buchanan's family music video, viewed more than 200,000 times on his Facebook page in less than 24 hours

- Kapa Haka 4 Kids – You Tube video classes in kapa haka, watched by tens of thousands around the world, led by Matua Whaitiri Poutawa

- More than 100 farming mums around rural NZ donned their wedding gowns and toasted each other

- Livestreamed Covid-19 parody pump classes – for all those missing their gym classes

- A Gisborne woman made an alternative to personal protective equipment - or PPE - a full-blown unicorn suit, covering her from head to toe

- Bella Mulheron, a school student sewing colourful scrub hats at home for Wellington Hospital staff

Overseas examples

Guidance / resources	Examples
Apart But United: open-source collection of best practices in community solutions - Top 100 actions you can take right now	AVAAZ Global Kindness Group
New England Complex Systems Institute: Community Action and Support for Covid-19	The Kindness Pandemic
Open Government Partnership: Collecting Open Government Approaches to COVID-19	Youth in India organise to support daily wage workers
350.org Coronavirus Community Organising Kit	Mothers turned drug runners (Bristol): Mums keep fit by delivering medicines from pharmacies to people who can't leave their homes
IFRC and World Health Organization: Risk Communication and Community Engagement Action Plan Guidance COVID-19 Preparedness and Response	Use of What's App groups, e.g. to enable WhatsApp video calling between retirement home residents and their families after suspending in person visits
World Health Organization Guide to preventing and addressing social stigma associated with COVID-19	Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra
World Health Organization Mental Health Considerations during COVID-19 Outbreak	Musical flash mobs from windows and balconies in Italy
Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK	Mutual aid in Wuhan, China - volunteer drivers take medical workers between their homes and hospitals
British Red Cross People Power in Emergencies: Evaluation Report (2019)	Johannesburg residents make survival packs for people living in informal settlements

Guidance / resources	Examples
Aging and Disability Services Seattle: COVID-19 Mitigation and Older Adults: Lessons from Seattle-King County	Hospital Hero (US) connects healthcare workers who don't have time to meet their own needs with people who can offer meals and accommodation
What other cities can learn from coronavirus US ground zero, Seattle	An 8-year-old created WePals, which sets up virtual play dates for children
UN commentary on community acts of kindness	schoolclosures.org finds teaching, meals and emergency childcare for overstretched parents
Media piece on applying learning from Hong Kong to New York	The Money During Corona network texts news of job opportunities to people looking for work
Key considerations: online information, mis- and disinformation in the context of COVID-19	People in Norway who have recovered from Covid-19 mobilise to help others in ways that non-immune people can't
IASC (Inter Agency Standing Committee) Addressing Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects of Covid-19 Outbreak	Balcony Bingo in Dublin housing estates
Care International 5 Min Inspiration: Responding to Epidemics With Courage and Hope	In Cape Town a group has used GIS mapping to map households, survey occupants and organise local people with medical skills, ready to step in if needed
Disability Inclusive Community Action – COVID-19 Matrix	Street Presidents (Brazil) are being recruited by residents' associations in Brazil's favelas (slum areas), who support residents to understand hygiene measures and the need to stay inside
Using social and behavioural science to support COVID-19 pandemic response	Hub for mutual aid groups in Singapore
Coronavirus: How Germany is showing solidarity amid the outbreak	Feedfolks - a mutual aid network that helps transfer food from farms to families in need in Los Angeles
Learning from the international mutual aid movement (The Conversation)	MutualAid.world – an international network of designers and developers making life easier for community organisers by building open-source software tools
Learning from the international mutual aid movement (Vox piece)	Zoomers to Boomers – a network in 17 US cities where Gen Zers deliver groceries to older people
Community Action Response, UK (Eden Project and partners)	PhoneAFriend.care is an open source project to connect people by phone

More resources for mutual aid

This link gives a [large directory of Mutual Aid Pandemic Disaster Relief resources](#)

Here's another [huge list of Covid-19 mutual aid efforts](#) from It's Going Down, a digital community centre for people-centred, revolutionary movements

[Spreadsheet List of Covid-19 mutual aid initiatives](#)

[List of Covid-19 resources (UK)](#)

[Coronavirus: dealing with bereavement and grief](#)

Online resource hubs: Other great, comprehensive and ever-evolving coronavirus resources include the [Covid-19 Community Care Guide,](#) [COVID-19 Mutual Aid and Advocacy Resources](#) and [Coronavirus Resource Kit.](#)

Podcasts: [Coronavirus: Wisdom from a Social Justice Lens](#) and [What to do When the World's on Fire](#).

4. Things to keep in mind (principles)

- Each community is unique – strategies will vary
- Consider all possible impacts on the community – population groups vulnerable to severe illness, and those impacted socially or economically
- Make the most of existing services where possible
- Scale Covid-19 mitigation strategies up or down depending on the local situation – be flexible and responsive
- Ask who is most affected by the mitigation efforts
- Consider ethnicity, gender, disability
- Use technology – but also consider the needs of people who don't have access or who don't use technology much
- Prosocial behaviour can be contagious!

If you have any questions feel free to contact louise.thornley@gmail.com