Funding grassroots groups is mental health care

NSUN briefing

JANUARY 2024

About this briefing

We've been talking to grassroots and user-led groups across London, discussing the barriers faced by those who live with mental ill-health, distress, or trauma. This is the first of three briefings coming out of those conversations.

Here we focus on the experiences of grassroots and user-led groups since the start of austerity policy, the pandemic, and the current cost of living crisis. We explored how groups supported their community members through the pandemic and subsequent rise in the cost of daily living essentials like food, fuel, and housing.

In this briefing we see how the effects of the crisis extends not only to those living with distress but also impacts those who are doing vital work to support them. In the second and third briefings, we focus on the transport and welfare systems, respectively.

Collectively, the briefings highlight the **need to consider mental healthcare far beyond medical interventions; and instead call us to reimagine the material,** including the systems and structures that create and exacerbate distress. You can find all three briefings here.

Learnings

- Those living with mental ill-health face the sharp end of the cost of living crisis. Though, this "crisis" is not new; Disabled people have been dealing with the financial burden of disability for a long time.
- Grassroots and user-led groups are supporting people by providing mutual aid and care for those harmed by the cost of living crisis. Often, this work is undervalued and underfunded.
- Mutual aid is often taken advantage of, as grassroots and user-led groups are expected to rectify failings of the financial system.
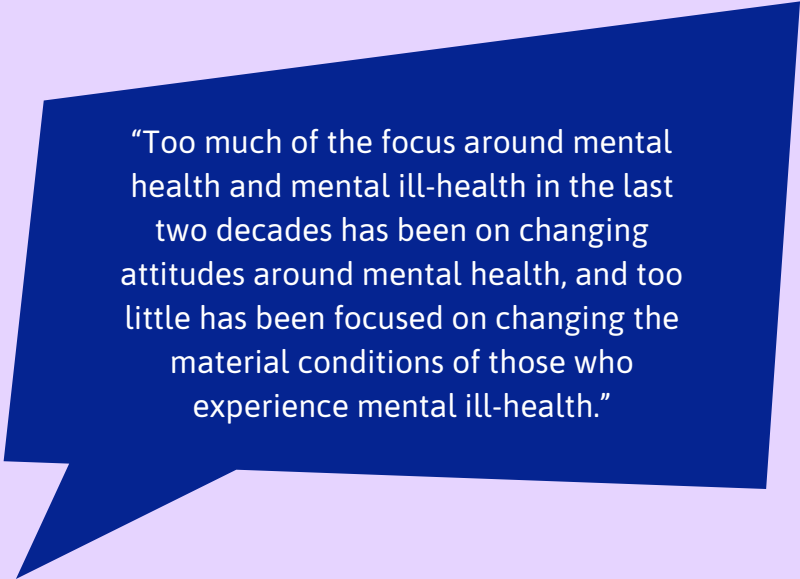
Background

For many living with long term mental distress and experiencing marginalisation, **the financial impact of mental ill-health began long before the pandemic and cost of living crisis.** Described as a 'mental health income gap' and predicted to be an average of £8400 per year: poverty is toxic to mental health, and yet, conversations around the cost of living and what support should look like continue to place blame and responsibility on individuals.

The nature of **the problem is deeply material, not simply psychological or medical.** As Mark Brown writes;

> "Too much of the focus around mental health and mental ill-health in the last two decades has been on changing attitudes around mental health, and too little has been focused on changing the material conditions of those who experience mental ill-health."

Austerity has been going on for over a decade. Whilst focus on the latest inflationary crisis is important, for some, **living standards have been unacceptable for too long.** Often people who live with mental ill-health, distress, or trauma are blamed for their experiences of poverty and deprivation.

Instead of blame, we need to see calls to reshape the systems that make people's lives marginal and we need to see responsibility being taken for the policies that contribute to avoidable deprivation and hardship.

For most people, the state is not the first responder in a financial crisis. Firstly, it is far too slow and even when support is available it can have significant omissions. For example, over the pandemic we saw IT issues cited as the reason behind not extending the £20 a week Universal Credit uplift to 2 million Disabled people on legacy benefits.

We spoke to grassroots groups who organise around a range of experiences: groups organising around shared ethnicities, sexualities and gender identities, and marginalised forms of work to understand their experiences of the cost of living, and how they have been able to respond.

What has been happening in the user-led groups we spoke to?

We've been talking to grassroots groups who supported their community members through the pandemic and subsequent rise in the cost of daily living essentials like food, fuel, and housing.

The groups we spoke to have been providing **wide-ranging support, often entirely volunteer-led.** During the pandemic, mutual aid became a widely used term, but the practices that form mutual aid run much deeper than the last few years. **Against a backdrop of diminishing state support for those who have no safety net, community support can be critical.**

In user-led groups, the line between supporter and supported is not neatly drawn. Some of those digging deeply to be there for their communities are facing hardship themselves. We heard examples of organisers struggling themselves: facing homelessness and insecure housing, struggling to afford legal fees and extortionate visa renewals, or finding themselves unable to pay for public transport to their place of work.

For groups working with communities that have roots in multiple countries, the need to send money back home to support dependents, including children, and the global nature of the cost of living crisis is another factor that places pressure on community members.

In this work, we want to hold that **the cost of living crisis is not an origin point of hardship for many.** As we heard from one community leader:

"If I think about my community, we've been living in a cost of living crisis for over a decade when austerity really kicked in. Benefits and the limit on benefits and without them providing people with means, ideas, or courses to do better and capacity-build, I think for the last ten years we've been living in crisis."

How are the groups around us supporting the people in their communities?

The groups we spoke to were taking approaches to supporting their community members that fit their specific context. For some, financial support was the main activity whilst for others it was part of a broader offer.

- Financial support including access to small to medium sized grants. For some this was means tested, for others it was not.
- Social spaces and activities including outdoor activities.
- Access to housing.
- Access to education and development opportunities.
- Access to peer support.
- A space to access multi-pronged support for those frozen out of other systems due to their immigration status.

What are the pinch points?

For grassroots groups, one point of tension is caused by **local authorities and other statutory bodies signposting people to grassroots groups and their grant, increasing demand without any kind of support for those doing the work on the ground.**

In reference to how statutory bodies direct people to their group, one interviewee stated: **"Mutual aid networks are taken advantage of".** We heard from two groups in different regions about receiving signposting from local authorities and police to their support offer and hardship funds, which placed additional strain on their volunteer-run community support initiatives.

There are tensions between mutual aid, community care and charity work. For example, one interviewee told us they would like to see **"more people being understanding that we're a group of people working towards community care and mutual aid and not a charity or a service".**

Getting funding to do this work isn't straightforward

Groups fund this work in a number of ways, some rely solely on individual donations whilst others have relationships with understanding charities to fund their grant giving. Whilst a common theme was local authorities and police directing residents in need to user-led organisations known to be running grant schemes, in none of these situations were statutory bodies or major grant making organisations a source of income for these grant schemes.

This reinforces a picture of something we are increasingly aware of: **<u>user-led groups often feel that funders don't understand their work, and this is reflected in their resourcing</u>**. Overall, this contributes to patterns of precarity.

Where funding comes from is also important. Some of the groups we spoke to raised all of their funds through individual donations. Alongside the difficulty for some types of groups to access funding from grant making trusts, another factor in income being made up of individual donors is maintaining integrity and trust with community members. **5**

"I actually feel like it's tougher in this climate, you have to work harder to obtain the same sort of funding levels prior to the pandemic and during. They don't recognise the additional needs and crises that exist. In some ways I think some of them are feeling like they've now done their part."

For some groups where individuals are heavily policed, for example, due to facing criminalisation for sex work, organisers felt accepting statutory funding could be compromising.

What do we want to see?

- Recognition that systemic racism, ableism and classism contributes to community experiences of precarity and marginalisation.

- **Resourcing and support for grassroots groups to provide financial help** to community members when they need it.

- Moving away from a culture of suspicion and mistrust from funding bodies: **groups need autonomy to decide the form their grants take**, and whether practices like means testing are appropriate.

- **Safe grant making practices:** ending data sharing as a condition of grant making to enable groups to maintain trust with their community members.

- Identifying where statutory bodies are signposting to grassroots or user-led groups, and what gaps in statutory services need to be addressed to ensure that there are a range of types of support available and that the statutory sector is **not displacing responsibility onto grassroots groups.**

National Survivor User Network