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Care Infrastructures in Disadvantaged Neighbourhoods at Times of Welfare State Change: Finland and UK Compared

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Abstract

In this article, we approach urban cultures of care from the perspective that analyses care and caring as taking place between bottom-up, everyday practices and welfare state structures. We begin with a broad understanding of care as a fundamental activity that sustains and nurtures our shared environments. This perspective highlights the often overlooked and marginalised nature of care. To capture the complexity of care, we identify care as an everyday activity with significant political and ethical implications for urban life. Drawing on qualitative and ethnographic research conducted in Finland and the UK, two distinct welfare state contexts, we investigate how urban cultures of care unfold in marginalised communities at times of welfare state change. Through case studies focused on community-led initiatives such as the sharing and gifting of food, clothing, and household items in the UK, and neighbourhood responses to urban development in Finland, we illustrate how caring practices are shaped by shifting state infrastructures. These practices as “infrastructures of care” are shown to arise through everyday interactions and affective engagements within urban spaces. We conclude by considering the broader potential of local care infrastructures to contribute to alternative economic models rooted in solidarity, particularly as welfare systems undergo significant change.

Keywords

care; care infrastructure; community; neighbourhood; urban development; urban space; welfare state

1. Introduction

As urban environments are today becoming more diverse and polarised, the concept of care has increasingly emerged in urban studies as part of discussions on urban (social) justice (Till, 2012; M. J. Williams, 2017).

Urban environments are seen not only as objects of care but as initiators or mediators of care (M. J. Williams, 2020) that contribute to urban quality of life.

In this article, we discuss urban cultures of care by analysing care and caring as taking place in cities between everyday bottom-up practices and welfare state structures. We take as a starting point particularly Fisher and Tronto's (1990, p. 40) famous definition of care as "everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible." This view places care at the centre of how society, politics and ethics are conceptualised and recognises the often excluded and marginalised nature of care (Jupp, 2022). To address the multifaceted nature of urban care, we identify care as an everyday activity having political and ethical impacts and consequences for urban life (see also Power et al., 2022).

In this article, we study local urban practices of care in Finland and the UK, two different welfare state contexts, to explore how urban cultures of care are unfolding at a time of rapid welfare and economic change. Through case studies, around community-led gifting and sharing involving food, clothing, and household goods in the UK, and neighbourhood initiatives responding to segregation and urban development in Finland, we examine how caring practices are shaped by shifting (state) infrastructures, and emerge via everyday and affective interactions in urban space.

The article proceeds as follows: We firstly discuss the concept of care especially in urban contexts. Second, we illustrate how economic restructuring and welfare reforms influence care provisioning and, specifically, in national contexts of our studies, Finland and the UK. We introduce our research data, cases, and methods. In empirical sections, we focus particularly on how "infrastructures of care" are produced via shifting state infrastructures and everyday encounters in the spaces of community and neighbourhood initiatives. To conclude, we assess the potentials and limitations of care practices in these contexts. This view on urban care, we believe, contributes to identifying the dynamics of urban everyday welfare and care in changing welfare states, contributing to the development of just and caring cities.

2. The Concept of Care and the Urban Context

Care can be defined as "an everyday and ongoing set of practices and relationships" (Jupp, 2022, p. 11). The concept is often defined to include diverse forms of care and caring, such as, caring for children, care for elderly or those with disabilities, caring for neighbours, care provided by communities, or notions of "self-care" and nurturing. The forms of care are not only individual relational matters but interact with wider structures and institutions that may be caring or uncaring (Jupp, 2022). Feminist research has also made the case for a far wider view of care than one might immediately imagine, including all the webs of relationships and support that enable us to sustain and nurture our shared environments (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Noddings, 2013). For Fisher and Tronto (1990), care is an activity that takes into account humans and non-humans in a way that is respectful and considerate towards them and our living environment. According to this definition of care, everyday living environments include social, bodily, and spatial contexts and activities, where care does not only refer to relationships between humans but also includes material and spatial aspects as well as non-human actors (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 2).

In recent contributions in urban studies, the concept of care has begun to be intertwined with discussions about just and fair cities, where cities are considered not only as objects of care but also as initiators or

mediators of care (Kymäläinen & Kuoppa, 2025, p. 8; Till, 2012; M. J. Williams, 2017, pp. 827, 836–837, 2020, p. 6). This discourse emphasises the need for urban environments that support the well-being of all residents, particularly the most vulnerable. Using the concept of “care-full justice,” M. J. Williams (2017, p. 822) emphasises collective responsibility for caring for the city for both its human and non-human inhabitants. In this context, the idea of *infrastructures of care* is essential for creating inclusive urban spaces that prioritise the needs of all residents. By infrastructures of care we refer to the systems and structures, both formal and informal, that provide essential support and services to individuals and communities (Bowlby & Jupp, 2021). These infrastructures are identified as crucial in addressing the inequalities that exist within urban settings, ensuring that care is accessible and equitable. Drawing on wider research developments on “infrastructure” within human geography (Alam & Houston, 2020; Latham & Layton, 2022), for instance, Power et al. (2022, pp. 1165–1166) highlight how economic restructuring and welfare reforms have led to new forms of urban poverty, necessitating a rethinking of care infrastructures to support marginalised populations. This rethinking involves recognising and integrating the diverse, often invisible, care practices that sustain life in urban environments.

The discussion on care infrastructures advocates for urban planning and policies that are sensitive to the needs of marginalised groups, ensuring that care is not only a private responsibility but a collective one. By embedding care into the fabric of urban planning, cities can become more just and equitable, addressing systemic inequalities and fostering environments where all individuals can thrive (A. Williams & May, 2022). This intersection of care infrastructures and urban justice underscores the importance of reimagining urban spaces to prioritise relationships, safety, and agency, ultimately advocating for systemic change (A. Williams & May, 2022).

3. Care and Economic Restructuring

Lately, welfare state restructuring along with austerity cuts has resulted in transformations of the provision of urban welfare and care in Global North contexts. As a result, people are experiencing a fractured landscape of care support and care services as established forms of welfare and care services are being replaced or supplemented by new emerging forms of provision and care (Power et al., 2022). These new forms of provision and care have emerged outside state-provided services, initiated often by community groups, social enterprises, and NGOs that adopt new roles as providers of care and care infrastructures (Jupp, 2022). Alongside community-based services, we witness the rise of diverse forms and networks of voluntary and informal care support that include, e.g., neighbourhood networks initiated by residents and communities (see Klinenberg, 2018). These kinds of services and networks as forms of informal care and care infrastructures operate outside or alongside formal welfare systems and contribute to sustaining life in urban neighbourhoods where official support may be lacking.

Power et al. (2022, p. 1166) analyse this transformation of care with their notion of “shadow care infrastructures” to explore how marginalised individuals navigate survival in the context of economic restructuring and welfare reform. This concept describes the mix of formal and informal practices that can support these individuals and communities. This framework highlights the often-invisible care practices and infrastructures that sustain life amidst growing urban poverty and alongside or in the absence of formal welfare systems. These infrastructures are sustained unequally by women, racially minoritised, and working-class groups and individuals (Lawson, 2007).

One manifestation of this collective responsibility can be seen in communities and spaces in cities that provide places for support for various marginalised groups (e.g., Jupp, 2022; M. J. Williams, 2020), or aim to preserve the habitats of non-human species alongside urban environments primarily built for human use (e.g., Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Low and Iveson (2016, p. 20) consider how access of marginalised groups or individuals, such as children or the elderly, to urban space may be facilitated by “caring others,” highlighting the collective responsibility for providing safe and sensitive spaces to receive care (see also Kymäläinen & Kuoppa, 2025, pp. 3, 5).

Nonetheless, as Bassel and Emejulu (2017) and Jupp (2022) have argued, there is an ambivalence to care practices arising in contexts of neglect and economic restructuring, as they place further burdens on those already operating at the margins and disadvantaged by society. As Traill et al. (2024, p. 190) point out, “these infrastructures often require more care to address care deficits and repair the social fabric of society.” In this article, we seek to trace how emergent infrastructures of care are forming in marginalised communities in Finland and the UK, and explore the politics and ethics of these forms of care.

4. National Welfare Contexts in Finland and the UK

In Finland, as part of the Nordic welfare model, local authorities, such as cities and municipalities, have traditionally carried responsibility for care provision for residents (Rose & Ståhlberg, 2005). What is typical for the Nordic welfare model is the universal nature of public services. Principles of equality, accessibility, and social solidarity are fundamental values, emphasising collective responsibility of caring about people and providing them with care. However, in the 2010s in Finland, the weakened economic situation, aging population, and high unemployment have increased regional welfare disparities. Local government reforms have aimed at bigger scales, stronger structures, digitalisation of services, and increasing efficiency. As public spending has been more strictly regulated, boundaries of public responsibility have narrowed (see Greve, 2022). These changes have influenced spatially, particularly, the living conditions of residents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, where gaps regarding living standards, life chances, social services, and health conditions have become prevalent (Sjöberg & Kings, 2022, p. 284). As Sjöberg and Kings (2022) point out, capital and resources are seen to accumulate in affluent urban areas where people have more economic and social resources.

In the Finnish context, the transformation of welfare state structures has increased responsibilities of communities as providers of welfare services, not only as “an extension” of the public sector but as independent partners of the public sector (Burau & Kröger, 2004; van Gerven, 2022). At the same time, a growing emphasis on the need for increasing citizens’ functional capacity and self-reliance is identified (see van Gerven, 2022). These changing settings of welfare services and care provision may result in increased polarisation and inequalities between urban neighbourhoods, hence emphasising the need to critically scrutinise the development this may have for the urban infrastructures of care in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Indeed, to respond to the rise of inequalities, national-level urban regeneration programmes were initiated in Finland to target disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. Particularly, the Neighbourhood Development Programme by the Ministry of Environment (2020) linked research and practice to respond to social needs of neighbourhoods. The most recent programme, undertaken in 2020–2022, aimed to strengthen the vitality of less-affluent neighbourhoods and reduce the risks of urban segregation.

The UK has long been classified as a “liberal” rather than “social-democratic” welfare state under Esping-Andersen’s typology (1990). As such, it has always involved a welfare mix of private as well as public sector provision, and involved conditionality, and means testing to access state benefits, as part of a “residual” approach to state support when the family and market fail. However, the broadly centrist/Third Way Labour government (1997–2010), which was in power before the financial crash of 2008, had expanded elements of state provision, with a particular emphasis on supporting “disadvantaged” communities. New forms of community centres, workers, and partnerships were targeted at places where households were most in need (Hills & Stewart, 2005).

2010 onwards brought a programme of austerity measures overseen by a right-wing Conservative government. Rapid cuts were made to state benefits, and increased conditionality, as well as the closure of many spaces and services in poor areas (O’Hara, 2015). This period also saw the rapid rise of non-state organisations moving into communities to provide services, especially with regard to material need. These included church and religious organisations as well as charities and social enterprises at various scales. One prominent example of organisations in this new landscape is the food bank (A. Williams & May, 2022), many of which are coordinated by a Christian organisation, the Trussell Trust. These spaces collect food from supermarkets and via public donations, and make up parcels for collection by food bank users who must prove themselves to be in need, via a process of “referral” from a professional such as a GP or another charity. Users are not normally allowed to access more than a certain amount of parcels in an allotted timeframe. Research has shown these spaces to be very ambivalent in terms of the interactions and support that people might get from visiting them, and it is hard to view them as spaces of sustained care, even if volunteers within them are caring (Cloeke et al., 2017). A newer phenomenon within the UK welfare landscape, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic, has been practices and structures of “mutual aid,” involving grassroots approaches to providing food, medication, and mutual support in communities, springing at least partly from anarchist traditions (Spade, 2020).

5. Cases, Data, and Methods

Our data is based on empirical research in Finland and the UK, from two cases that involve independent research projects. In the studies, we have utilised qualitative methods, such as interviews and ethnographic and participatory observation to distinguish the local practices and care infrastructures. Methodologically, we draw on a practice-theoretical approach (Schatzki, 1996, 2002), particularly to investigate how urban cultures and infrastructures of care emerge in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. According to Schatzki (1996, 2002), practice theory considers social life as constituted through practices, which, in our study, form the primary units of our analysis. For Schatzki, practices are not merely individual actions but consist of activities that involve, e.g., shared understandings, rules, goals, and emotions associated with the particular activities. Following this view, social practices are interactions between people, but they always occur within specific material contexts, hence addressing the importance of both dimensions as crucial for the formation of practices. Furthermore, in the context of this study focusing on urban neighbourhoods, the practice theory enables investigating the interplay between social activities and urban context for the formation of urban infrastructures of care. Following this approach, we recognise that the cases have their own particularities. They represent different welfare state traditions, but they share similar questions on emergent infrastructures of care. Studying Finland and the UK, we wish to distinguish the politics and ethics of the emerging forms of urban care within the transformation of welfare state in two distinct contexts.

We qualitatively analysed the data, aiming to identify various practices and forms of urban care that have emerged as a result of changes in the welfare state. We looked for sections in the data where interviewees describe changes or issues they have encountered in their daily lives, which have led to the development of new forms of care and support in their areas. We particularly focused on parts where people talked about the changes their locations have experienced and the impacts of these changes on residents' daily lives and experiences of inclusion. In this analysis, we categorised the data in two sections: the shifting state infrastructures that shape practices of care from top-down, and everyday encounters emphasising the affective interactions as initiating emerging, bottom-up forms of care.

In the analysis, we include data excerpts, such as interview citations and snapshots from fieldwork to illustrate the findings. It should be noted that as they spring from different wider projects, the data available in the different case study locations is somewhat different: in particular, in Tampere, the emphasis was on interviewing residents, whereas in Stoke-on-Trent, interviews were with community workers and volunteers running community spaces.

5.1. Tampere, Finland

The empirical research in the city of Tampere, Finland, is based on a qualitative study conducted as part of a research in two southern council estate neighbourhoods in Tampere. The research "Ecosocial Well-being and Inclusion: The New Dynamics of Residential Differentiation" (2020–2023), funded by the Ministry of the Environment's national Neighbourhood Development Programme, investigated the intertwining of ecological and social sustainability in the formation of residents' inclusion and well-being. The neighbourhoods under analysis represent Finnish so-called "forest neighbourhoods," or satellite-neighbourhoods, that can be seen as a product of former state-sponsored housing policy. This policy sought to provide a solution for the increasing population growth and need for less expensive housing in the age of urbanisation in the 1960s and 1970s in Finnish society. These segregated neighbourhoods have presented policy challenges, such as low levels of well-being explained to be associated from residents' lower socio-economic status and social problems (Junnilainen, 2020).

In Tampere, the case study neighbourhoods were primarily developed in the 1960s and 1970s and are characterised by their proximity to nature, spacious housing, and good transport connections. However, the neighbourhoods have several markers of disadvantage that include, for example, a low socioeconomic background, a relatively high number of unemployed people, resident turnover, a high proportion of non-native speakers, and a large number of low-income families with children (Tampere City Region, 2020). Urban investment in these areas was scarce in the 2000s, causing a desperate need for renewal of housing infrastructure and increasing unemployment rates. The neighbourhoods generally attract negative public connotations as peripheral, low-quality areas with social problems. However, the negative public image of the neighbourhoods is typically not identified by residents of these areas (Lehtonen, 2023).

In residents' views, both neighbourhoods are known for their closeness to nature. Residents appreciate local tranquility and the spaciousness of the housing. However, there is a desire for more diverse commercial services and improvements to the areas' reputation and overall welfare. Both neighbourhoods face socio-economic challenges typical of suburban areas, such as the need for improved services and renewal of buildings as well as the need for community facilities. Together with the Neighbourhood Development

Programme that was undertaken in the neighbourhoods in 2020–2023, the City of Tampere has stated an interest in developing local services and enhancing quality of life in the areas, including the construction of a new well-being centre that would provide public social and health care services. Efforts are being made to ensure the vitality and equality of these residential areas through long-term development plans.

Research data was collected by interviewing residents, discussing with local actors (e.g., housing committees, residents' association, the City's suburban project), observing local events and the neighbourhood, and using participatory methods. For example, residents were asked to photograph meaningful places in their area and a workshop for residents to discuss urban development of the areas was organised. The data utilised in this article consists of resident interviews ($N = 39$) collected in 2021. Of the interviewees, most of the individuals are 20–60 years of age. Women represent a majority (26) of the interviews to men (14). Most of the interviewees live in apartment buildings typical of the suburbs built in the 1960s and 1970s, but the data also includes individuals living in row houses, detached houses, or semi-detached houses. The interviews covered four main themes: residents' housing history and experiences of the area, the construction of everyday life and social networks, participation in the development of the residential area, and sustainable development, discussed in relation to residents' daily lives and the residential area. For this article, data is explored to identify the emerging forms of care contributing to the well-being of people living in these areas.

5.2. Stoke-on-Trent, UK

Stoke-on-Trent is a post-industrial city (like Tampere) in the British Midlands, previously the centre of the UK ceramics industry, and still known as “The Potteries.” It has long had high levels of poverty and associated social problems, and was hit particularly hard by austerity cuts in the wake of the financial crisis (Etherington et al., 2022). It is a dispersed urban area with a number of 19th-century urban centres (called the Five Towns), alongside large areas of housing, much of it social housing built from the 1960s onwards. These communities often developed around particular workplaces, including ceramics factories and associated mining and other industries. They are typically low-density housing areas with green space and countryside interspersed, and often feel somewhat isolated, with poor public transport links to urban centres. Whilst always experiencing significant deprivation, such communities benefited from urban regeneration programmes and some public sector investment and resourcing during the late 1990s and 2000s, including community facilities, community practitioners, and new forms of “partnership” initiatives which sought to involve residents in positive change. By 2012, however (see Jupp, 2021), much of this infrastructure had been dismantled, with very few paid community workers in neighbourhoods, and communities increasingly having to support the rising poverty and needs in their areas themselves.

The data is taken from a wider project, *Gifting and Sharing in Times of Crisis* (2021–2023), that examined community-led experiments in sharing food and other household goods at a time of rising poverty and inequality in communities, exploring the extent to which they constitute new sites of urban care and solidarity. Three contrasting UK locations were chosen, of which one was Stoke-on-Trent (the other locations were part of London and part of South East England). Following mapping exercises to find these initiatives, in each location 10–12 in-depth qualitative interviews were undertaken with those involved in gifting and sharing organisations. Visits and ethnographic engagements were also undertaken to different degrees and depending what was practical, including participating in community events and meetings, volunteering for two organisations and following the online activities of the case study community

organisations. These organisations and experiments included food sharing initiatives at various scales, online spaces where residents exchanged household goods, and other multi-faceted community spaces.

The data represents two community spaces that revolved around sharing and gifting food in different ways, and can be seen as “spaces of care” (Conradson, 2003) in their communities. The “Community Food Project” was located in a low-density area of social housing, occupying several shop spaces. It aimed to support residents of the immediate neighbourhood, as well as within a wider geographic area. The project involved different approaches to providing low cost or free food, including a “social” supermarket offering low cost food (which functioned as a membership scheme that residents had to join), a “free food space” which involved excess food from commercial supermarkets as well as some donations from residents (see below), “emergency food parcels” providing basic food packages for those in need, and a community café providing a social space and low cost hot meals. Other activities and initiatives also took place in the space.

The “Community Bakery” functioned in a variety of ways to provide food and connection to those using the space. It is in itself one initiative led by an arts organisation that aims to involve diverse residents with creativity and self-expression across the city. The Bakery, housed in a large former garage and warehouse space, is in one of the urban centres of Stoke. As well as baking and delivering fresh bread, different community activities take place from the site, including “pay as you feel” hot meals, where guests choose what to pay for a vegetarian meal, made largely with waste food, “chatty café” to encourage social interaction between visitors, and groups for women with young children. The bakery is also offering emergency food parcels to households and families that they have become aware of as being in need, mainly through a weekly delivery service. Both projects are enabled by several schemes, both local and national, which redistribute excess food from supermarkets to community groups and spaces (Caplan, 2017). To note that because of ethical consent agreements, for this data, the specific locations of the projects are not named, and both the projects themselves and the interviewees are given pseudonyms.

In the following empirical analysis, we discuss our data in two sections: in the context of shifting state infrastructures and everyday encounters. With these sections, we illustrate the transformations of care practices in the urban context.

6. Tampere: Shifting State Infrastructures

Among Finnish local governments, Tampere, the third largest city in Finland, has been recognised for its aims for growth and innovation and for maintaining the quality and efficiency of public services while securing citizen involvement in municipal decision-making (Radzik-Maruszak & Bátorová, 2015, p. 92). During the past two decades, the city has gone through a rapid growth in its population that has grown by 25 percent to 250,000. Also, major investments in city development are driven to encourage city growth and vitality. However, the narrowing public finance of municipalities that has been a driver for reforms in the public sector in Finland is also evident in Tampere.

As a result of the periods of recession, starting from 2008, the recession hit particularly the export sector (Wallin, 2025, p. 8). The city faced a significant budget deficit which led to the city being subjected to austerity measures. These measures targeted especially healthcare, childcare, and homecare of the elderly. At the same time, population growth and high unemployment increased service needs. Furthermore, as the

central government's funding to Tampere was reduced, the costs of unemployment and social services rose, but the population of the city has been growing and the city continued boosting massive urban development projects, such as a tramway system and urban densification (Wallin, 2025, p. 8). The strong emphasis on urban development in the city centre has, in our case study areas residents' views, been exclusive and resulted in neglecting the neighbourhoods and their service provision:

Maybe one would hope that in all these matters, attention would be paid to these small residential areas around here, and that they would be taken care of more because I somehow feel that the city center is already well taken care of and boosted enough. (Resident, no. 11)

The exclusion of many neighbourhoods from urban development and care provision has led to an increased backlog of repairs for the renovation of suburban buildings or has increased inequality between areas in local services (also Gabauer et al., 2021, p. 6). The need for urban care, particularly the maintenance of urban space, is recognised by residents. However, when promoting these needs to the City administration, they are confronted with the power of the City administration as a public authority who sets urban priorities (Lehtonen, 2023). The interviewees depicted the City controlling the variety and level of care that is distributed between different areas. Despite the activity of residents in identifying deficits, they experience their voices are not being listened to or even replied to:

There were some logs that were just left there [by the walking paths in the local recreation area]. Someone had just left them so I reminded them [the city administration] that they could be picked up. They have been lying there for five years already. If it was Kaleva [a more centered area of Tampere that is now under major urban development] this would not happen. But here I can see it can happen. (Resident, no. 26)

Amidst the austerity cuts, the City closed a community centre called Peipontupa that was located in the case study neighbourhood (Heiskanen & Häikiö, 2024). The centre was maintained by the City and it aimed to support social interaction of people over 65 years old. During 1991–2020, the centre organised diverse, guided recreational activities for residents every weekday. The case is one example of how the reduction of local services affects the well-being of elderly people: In our discussions, residents emphasise the value of the place as enabling social activities for the elderly, many of them living alone. After closing down the place, people felt they had no place to meet their fellow residents anymore.

On the contrary to the experience of neighbourhood neglect that people mention in relation to urban development of the area, residents appreciated local services provided by a community organisation, "Me-talo" (Me-house, Finnish word "me" meaning "we" in English). In the interviews, people described its welcoming atmosphere and its staff in listening to people's needs in providing services:

Yes, that's the great thing, that they want to include everyone, and if someone has an idea, they're immediately like, hey, we could start working on this, and would you be interested in doing it this way, and we try to see if we can arrange some spaces or something. It's always felt very open. (Resident, no. 3)

Me-house was a community centre organisation that started its work in the area in 2017 in collaboration with the "Me Foundation" ("Me-säätiö" in Finnish) and the City of Tampere, together with various local actors,

such as the church, residents, and associations. Its key aim was to promote well-being of children, youth, and families. This aim was addressed by tailoring local services to these groups, such as supporting children's schooling, increasing youth employment, developing diverse recreational activities, and strengthening mental health services in the area. Me-house organised its activities in various locations in the area, such as at the school, or at the facilities of the church. The activities consisted of, for example, open family cafés and toddler and parent meetings. Also, summer camps for children and leisure activities, such as language classes, were organised. The coordinator at Me-house provided support and help in practical matters of daily life and was available for a talk. For families, the place provided crucial support for well-being particularly during and after Covid-19. Parents appreciated the place providing possibilities to meet other families and have peer support. Together with other community organisations and the City of Tampere, Me-house organised delivery of free warm meals for children and youth in the local park during summer holidays:

This is really great and has received a lot of feedback about how much it helps families during the summer to have one warm meal, especially when you can actually be making that food in families with children....It makes everyday life easier, and here outside, you can safely meet people since we've been living quite a restricted life due to Covid. (Resident, no. 8)

However, one of the concerns that the residents shared was the temporary nature of Me-house as a care infrastructure in the area. They knew that it did not have any stable funding, which caused uncertainty:

It would be nice to have some continuity, and also, well, of course, you can't always control if it's the same people, but it does bring a lot more security if there are similar or the same people and familiar faces, so you don't always have to start getting to know people from scratch. (Resident, no. 3)

Unfortunately, under financial pressure, Me-house was closed in 2022. This was a loss for the area, as this kind of community support was no longer available. The City of Tampere was not eager to take responsibility for providing similar full-scale services. After the closure, some services were taken over by associations or charities, who provide free warm meals for residents of the area, give guidance and advice in questions about parenthood, as well as deliver information about services for families with children in Tampere. However, these services are now more irregular and scattered compared to those provided by Me-house.

7. Tampere: Everyday Encounters

In the case study neighbourhoods, residents already had various forms of social activities that served as platforms for the formation of social support. Local public and semi-public spaces, such as library, school, parks, yards of apartment buildings and council estates, or the Me-house were key places for connecting people to the area. At the same time, however, there was a constant shortage of meeting spaces where locals would have liked to gather spontaneously. Particularly, apartment buildings and their housing committees formed communal spaces that support social interaction between residents in activities that range from taking care of the building maintenance, to neighbourhood help in childcare or grocery shopping: "It is a very close community, this community in our house. These people have become so familiar to me that we do many things together, things related to the maintenance of our house" (Resident, no. 13). The courtyards formed social spaces where people could gather, socialise, and take care of the neighbourhood together:

Often, let's say once or twice in the summertime I will take my guitar and then we play and sing in our yard. And people gather there. Last year we had a massive event where we built new lawn to our yard. We did not hire any outsider to do that but we did it by ourselves. There were around 20 people there. It was really fun and went well and we managed to build a big lawn there. (Resident, no. 13)

Based on the interviews, mundane tasks resulted in bringing people together and building social bonds within the neighbourhood. Also, new people moving in were invited to these social gatherings, and local habits that supported interaction between residents were introduced to newcomers in apartment buildings: "Every time when new people move here and they do not yet know the habits of our house, we tell them that we greet each other in this community in our house" (Resident, no. 13). Interviewees told how they share their local knowledge and practices with new people moving in, hoping this would support the newcomers to feel the area as their home.

In the interview data, it was also distinguishable that as a generator of everyday interaction between residents, unintentional, spontaneous encounters, for example outside at the courtyards of council estates, in corridors or stairwells, at the local super-market, or when picking children from daycare encouraged people to get to know each other. These encounters had the potential to initiate grassroots support between residents by developing new routines of neighbourhood help. People had started, for example, to have joint walks with their neighbour, which was experienced as contributing positively to their wellbeing. Furthermore, other forms of assistance, such as child-care had emerged as a result of the everyday encounters in the neighbourhood. Collective spaces enabled people to meet and interact, which led to them taking responsibility for everyday care provision for their peers:

I first visited [Me-house] when we moved here and received a flyer from the children's health centre about MLL's [The Mannerheim League, an NGO that promotes the wellbeing of children and families] family café. Through that, we got to know it, and I ended up volunteering as a family café leader. We then started collaborating with Me-house through MLL, which has been a great support. Through this, I also got to know their activities, and we have attended events and activities organised by Me-house, such as Perhevoimala and others. (Resident, no. 3)

The neighbourhood's collective spaces such as the Me-house, that unfortunately no longer exists, appeared essential in enabling formal and informal kinds of care to become intertwined. Furthermore, the essential role of collective spaces in fostering community within neighbourhoods was clearly evident. As one resident (no. 39) described, people no longer gathered in the courtyard of their council estate to spend time together after the removal of the barbecue area, which had previously served as a key site for social interaction.

8. Stoke-on-Trent: Shifting State Infrastructures

Whilst in Tampere there was evidence of the precarity of state-supported services, in Stoke-on-Trent there was a feeling that the welfare state was now largely completely absent from many everyday spaces within communities. This was exacerbated by the experiences of the pandemic in the neighbourhoods. The interviews in Stoke were undertaken during the winter of 2022, when communities were still recovering from its impacts. During the pandemic, many community spaces had closed, but also there was clearly increased precarity around work, food, health, and wellbeing for communities (Ho & Maddrell, 2021). Much

of this requirement for additional support and care was met by community organisations and “mutual aid” groups, with state and official systems often failing to ensure access to food and essential medication for “vulnerable” groups. As others (Cross et al., 2022) have argued, these failures can be seen as connected to the longer-term precarities of state support due to over a decade of austerity measures.

Across the research, community organisations had re-modelled their offerings during the pandemic, as well as becoming more aware of, and responding to, material household needs. Such material needs were not always directly caused by Covid-19, but may have become more visible at that time, often due to community groups delivering to, or supporting households rather than encountering people in collective spaces. As well as this post-pandemic context, the UK has been experiencing high inflation for several years, driven by high costs of food and basic utilities, known as “the cost of living crisis” (Lapavitsas et al., 2023). During the fieldwork, the question of fuel bills in particular was discussed, as the weather was getting colder and there was a lot of concern about the ability of residents to heat their homes. Both spaces, Community Bakery and Community Food Project, were functioning as “warm spaces,” a network of community spaces where people could spend time if their houses were too cold during the day. The “warm spaces” networks can be seen as indicative of the infrastructures of crisis which have coalesced in recent years in the UK: largely resourced by community organisations, local government has a role in coordinating and “signposting” residents towards them. They are also clearly not an adequate response to the issue of the cost of fuel, and are very much a “sticking plaster” solution (Teodorowski & Trevor, 2024).

Such emergency and short-term measures were also in evidence in both spaces with regard to the provision of free food. Neither organisation had intended to provide emergency food parcels in the way they were doing at the time of the interviews. In the case of the Community Food Project, the original model had involved the members’ supermarket only (see above for details). However: “We started with a very small free food section. It quickly became apparent that people needed more help....Now we have a queue every morning around the corner” (Claire, project coordinator).

In the case of the Community Bakery, supermarket excess food had been initially distributed under a sustainability/environmental rationale:

It started off as an initiative about waste, but we were getting an increasing amount of people in need of food, not worried about wasting food....So we were having to say to hold off to those worried about waste. (Laura, Community Bakery project board member and volunteer)

This sense of immediate crisis within communities shaped both spaces, and meant that a wider politics of provisioning and care was always present in conversations. Across the interviews, many community organisations stated that “we shouldn’t be here,” meaning that they should not be responsible for tackling poverty, and indeed that the poverty should not be there in the first place. There was considerable criticism of the loss of local and national government infrastructures to provide the basic welfare now being put onto communities. A stark example of the reversal of welfare responsibilities was apparent during a visit to the Community Food Project—a council official arrived, from a homelessness team, with a young man who had been homeless, asking whether a food parcel could be provided for him by the community group.

Beyond the material demands being placed on the groups, a more emotional or affective mood pervaded of having been abandoned and neglected by the government as well as others in power in society. Claire, the project coordinator from the Community Food Project, spoke about the issues of the affordability of fuel in particular: “The oil giants have made millions, it’s disgusting.” She also said that she wasn’t “political” but that politicians had no empathy or understanding of the situation in communities like hers: “Those people in power, they haven’t lived the lives of ordinary people.” This sense of crumbling wider infrastructures and neglect or abandonment of communities therefore shaped the imperatives for care or “shadow care infrastructures” enacted within the community spaces. These were evident in the everyday encounters in the spaces that produced particular forms of care.

9. Stoke-on-Trent: Everyday Encounters

As well as providing material goods, the activities and ethos of both organisations were focused on providing particular kinds of spaces of care (Conradson, 2003), meeting needs, but also providing for conviviality, reciprocity, and inclusion. Both organisations sought to encourage residents to spend time in the spaces to benefit from, and contribute to, these forms of reciprocal emotional and social support. The value of food, especially eating together, was seen as important in co-creating such a space of mutual care. The Community Bakery had tables in its light, airy space, and interviewees said that this sharing of space and time represented the overall ethos of the organisation: “Helen [arts organisation director] loves nothing more than having everyone sat round one table, you know eating together....It’s that way that food connects everyone” (Kat, Community Bakery manager).

The pay-as-you-feel lunches in the Bakery were beautifully prepared and presented, as might be expected in a restaurant rather than a community space cooking with waste food. The meals involved three courses and table service, and a sophisticated mainly vegetarian set menu. The affects around this form of food sharing were therefore diametrically opposed to the emergency food parcels distribution (also being coordinated in the same space), within which food was shared on the basis of need and in an instrumental way for emergency nutrition. However, it was noticeable that the community lunches at the Bakery were not always very busy and this suggested that some community members did not feel able to participate in food sharing in this more leisurely and pleasurable manner. The “pay-as-you-feel” model may have also felt unclear and a little awkward to navigate, although the staff were always extremely friendly and did not pressurise anyone to pay anything.

At the Community Food Project, the community café was run on a more conventional basis, serving a simple and cheap menu of sandwiches, cakes, etc., from a serving hatch at the back of the shop space, described by Claire as “a treat, but not at treat prices.” During the data collection, the café was busy. A lot of emphasis was put on the café being a friendly and welcoming space, open to everyone, alongside a “community lounge” that was open several times a week, serving free tea and coffee and biscuits, described as “a safe warm space to just come and hang out.”

In both spaces, other activities were hosted on a weekly or regular basis, including the chatty café and a “climate café” (exchanging ideas on sustainability) at the Bakery, and wellbeing and craft classes at the Food Project. This meant that connections could be developed across different kinds of activities and spaces. Both organisations operated within an ethos of reciprocity, encouraging visitors and community members to contribute in different ways, for example skill sharing on clothes mending or reducing food waste at the

climate café at the Bakery, and a board for giving and receiving household items at the Food Project. In terms of actually donating food to the project, Claire said that, in general, most residents did not have food to spare themselves. However, allotments for growing fruit and vegetables were a feature of the area, and during fieldwork in the autumn residents were harvesting and had additional produce. During the data collection, a man brought in some carrier bags with large marrows in. Claire was very grateful to him, and mentioned how important it was that the community were able to contribute to the project (although she said that the marrows weren't always very popular in reality): "The community we are in does not have the means to donate more....But this time of year people have been bringing things from their allotments—beetroot, beans, tomatoes, chard, it's been great."

As the wider social science literature has explored (e.g., Barnett et al., 2005), the exchange of material goods is always tied up with matters of social relationships. For both organisations, developing caring and ongoing relationships with community members was seen as key to the kind of infrastructure of care they wanted to produce. In particular, these sustained relationships with and between individuals and households were identified as a key difference between these community projects and a more conventional "food bank" where people would visit on a one-off and purely transactional basis. Claire spoke about the positive atmosphere they sought to enable within their space:

For us there's no shame in using a food parcel....It's not like a foodbank, we're always very friendly, very approachable, you're always going to walk out of here with a smile on your face....Everyone knows everyone here, and they all know me.

Similarly, Laura, who did the food deliveries from the Bakery, spoke about "her mums" that she visited every week:

It's different to a food bank because I ring all the mums every week to see how they are. I ring them each week, I see what they need, what they might be short of, and then often they tell me other things as well.

Kat at the Bakery also spoke about the relationships as a key outcome of sharing food: "Such an important part of it is building relationships, I mean handing them a bag of food helps, but it's having those relationships, those connections." However, for both spaces, there was a sense that "handing over a bag of food" could in fact actively undermine the caring and convivial relationships aspired to by the organisations. This was because, unlike the wider community spaces which sought to be open access, and open to everyone, the food parcels from both organisations were meant to be targeted specifically at those "in most need." Although what that meant was not necessarily very clear cut, it positioned the workers as needing to take part in surveillance of how genuine needs might be:

We couldn't have affluent people using it because they don't need it. So we do ask awkward questions, and it is awkward....We need to know—Why? Why do you need this food parcel? Have you accessed others?....So we do ask the awkward questions and I guess...anyone could answer a question so it fits the bill....But then again we kind of know everyone. One or two have sneaked through. (Claire, Community Food Project)

Whilst Claire was not working to any specific guidelines, she clearly felt an imperative to ensure that people accessing the emergency food were not “cheating” or “sneaking through.” As she says, this creates atmospheres and interactions which are “awkward” and “uncomfortable.” Laura at the Bakery seemed less concerned by this: “Sometimes we find people are being supplied by multiple organisations. If people are desperate, sometimes people will exploit a situation, it’s human nature.”

Nonetheless, by becoming involved with emergency food provisioning, the Bakery was working with households experiencing acute poverty, and this created divides between those “on the food scheme” and other groups who might come into the café or order bread from the bakery (which they also delivered): “Most people who order bread aren’t the same ones as the food scheme, it’s a different clientele—the bigger houses—I mean it’s not the cheapest bread, although it’s good bread” (Kat, Bakery manager).

A pattern whereby providing emergency food sets up new kinds of divisions within the communities being worked with was distinguishable across the fieldwork. Accessing a community space to obtain basic sustenance was quite a different starting point to coming in for friendship and wider forms of collective care, and several interviewees mentioned that it was hard to engage those accessing this food in other activities. Despite seeking to distance themselves from food banks, it was hard for the community projects to not become transactional spaces for those who were dependent on them. It became evident that the more open-ended, convivial spaces that organisations aspired to could become hard to sustain. The Bakery part of the Community Bakery shut because of the costs of baking bread, although the pay-as-you-feel lunches and emergency food provision have stayed.

10. Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed how care and caring take place between everyday bottom-up practices and welfare state structures. We have analysed this with case studies from Finland and the UK, by identifying the shifting state infrastructures and affective everyday encounters as key initiators bringing individuals and communities together to develop collective, alternate practices of care. These practices may operate outside institutional welfare state structures, seeking to meet needs left unmet due to austerity policies and shifts in welfare arrangements.

Alam and Houston (2020, p. 7) state that “by forming different collectives, care can be provisioned, assembled, extended or made available through numerous other forms according to the demands of the situation.” As our cases demonstrate, collective forms of care, or shadow-care, are not static but constantly evolving and situational, dependent on resources, capabilities, and conditions of individuals and communities acting as care-givers in these disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and involving diverse communities, materialities, and practices. The cases show the persistence and creativity of care within communities, even when circumstances are becoming more constrained.

Differing contexts around care are visible in our cases, especially in relation to care needs. In Stoke-on-Trent we see the result of fifteen years of persistent austerity, and then the additional crises of the Covid-19 pandemic and the increase in the costs of living (e.g., energy and food). The focus of care provisioning is increasingly on meeting individual material needs in the short term, which in itself undermines aspirations for more collective, care-full spaces and practices, with longer-term aims. In Tampere, the care needs emerged instead more due

to the austerity cuts in social services as well as the neglect or lack of care of urban infrastructure, which was explained by local people to derive from the strategic prioritisation within urban development policies in the city. Nonetheless, collective spaces and practices of care seemed to persist in the neighbourhoods in Tampere.

In both sets though, communities had to find new ways to care for each other in the context of degrees of abandonment by state infrastructures. This illustrates some of the ambivalence which comes along with care. As shadow-care infrastructures (Power et al., 2022) or care collectives (Alam & Houston, 2020) arise at everyday levels, we need to pay attention to the demands these new forms of care provision place on individuals and communities involved in collective care on a voluntary basis. As the responsibilities of providing care increasingly fall on individuals or local communities, the burden of care-giving will also fall unevenly on certain actors, especially women and those marginalised by race and class. In Stoke-on-Trent, such community organisations are overwhelmingly run by women, usually working on a voluntary basis to sustain a community. On the other hand, these informal spaces, often based on friendship and community connection, will exclude some residents from participating, for example in the lunches in the Bakery. In Tampere, social connections are more easily found by those who share a similar life situation. They easily encounter their peers in the neighbourhood, such as when picking up children from daycare or taking dogs out every morning, potentially enabling easier access to collective care provided by fellow residents. Therefore, those people and their needs for care who are not part of these same phases of life, or who do not share similar cultural backgrounds or histories, may become excluded from the practices of everyday urban care.

Whilst creative and persistent, and undoubtedly providing support in marginalised neighbourhoods, it is unclear how sustainable and equitable these emerging care infrastructures are. On the one hand, it therefore remains imperative to continue to make demands from state infrastructures to meet caring needs (Jupp, 2022), and to consider more carefully the intersections of state care and community activity. On the other hand, there is also scope to consider emergent care infrastructures within wider economic and political frameworks, for example the “solidarity economy” (Hudson, 2021). This term designates a more structured approach to moving from localised care efforts to contributions to wider economic and political alternatives. Solidarity economy initiatives often involve particular organisational structures, such as co-operatives, credit unions, and community land trusts, which can embody values of justice, care, and democracy, as well as meeting particular needs. Such organisations may provide more resilient alternatives as traditional state infrastructures of care decline.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

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