



Risk Assessment and Risk Planning Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Risk Assessment and Risk Planning

Wednesday 19 May 2021

11.15 am

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Members present: Lord Arbuthnot of Edrom (The Chair); Lord Browne of Ladyton; Lord Clement-Jones; Lord Mair; Baroness McGregor-Smith; Lord O'Shaughnessy; Lord Rees of Ludlow; Lord Robertson of Port Ellen; Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean; Viscount Thurso; Lord Triesman.

Evidence Session No. 23

Virtual Proceeding

Questions 228 - 234

Witnesses

I: Alistair Read, National Training Officer at Mountain Rescue England and Wales; Lynda Battarbee, Director of Operations at the Trussell Trust; Richard Lee MBE, Chief Operating Officer at St John Ambulance; Adrian Clee, Emergency Response Lead at Salvation Army.

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Examination of witnesses

Alistair Read, Lynda Battarbee, Richard Lee MBE and Adrian Clee.

The Chair: Welcome back to the Lords Select Committee on Risk Assessment and Risk Planning. The second panel covers volunteer groups. I welcome our witnesses. As before, please do not feel it necessary to answer every single question, particularly if somebody else has already given the answer you would have given yourself. We are always time constrained.

I will ask Lord Triesman to put the first question.

Q228 **Lord Triesman:** I add my welcome to the witnesses. What is your assessment of the UK's risk planning and disaster management? Do you have any conclusions as to whether you would categorise us as a resilient country? I will start with Lynda Battarbee.

Lynda Battarbee: Thank you very much for having me here today. We work primarily with a network of more than 400 food banks, so I can comment on this question only on the basis of what food banks have told us. We are really concerned that we lack resilience given that 2.5 million emergency food parcels were distributed through food banks in our network alone over the past year. That accounted for a 33% increase in provision over the past year and clearly was due to the pandemic.

Although, in theory, we have the structures in place to ensure that we are protected from poverty when our circumstances change suddenly, and to co-ordinate and provide immediate crisis support, we think they have been significantly weakened in the years preceding the pandemic. That food-bank provision is itself a symptom of, and reflects, the inadequacy of our social security system and local welfare support.

Over the past year we welcomed the increase in universal credit of £20 a week and would welcome it continuing. We see that as a key part of ensuring that the country is as resilient as possible. Although things happened over the past year that contributed to community resilience, that figure of emergency food parcels is a particular source of worry for us.

Adrian Clee: I believe that as a whole our emergency services plan and exercise very well to respond to significant incidents in a professional and disciplined manner, but there is a lot more scope, particularly at local authority level, to involve the voluntary sector directly in planning and exercising so that local areas and communities are better prepared. We are seeing a lot more natural disasters and other incidents, but very often how we deal with the humanitarian aspects of these incidents can end up being thrown together after an incident has occurred, even in areas where, for instance, flooding is a regular event, or in Kent where the road, sea and tunnel transport networks are going to be hit on a regular basis. Local authority planning teams have seen their resources

diminished a lot over recent years, just at a time when we are seeing an increase in these incidents happening, so it is counterintuitive.

I worked for a number of years in an area of the country where the county council emergency planning team genuinely valued, nurtured and harnessed the strength of the voluntary sector. It invested resources so that, for instance, we could sit alongside its teams when the Emergency Planning College provided training. The voluntary sector was there side by side learning and increasing its knowledge and the interworking that played well there. Moving on three or four years, personnel and resources have changed, and the response in that particular area has waned quite a lot in use and knowledge of the voluntary sector.

Genuine engagement with the voluntary sector at LRF level is still extremely sporadic across the country. Very often, when a major emergency occurs, the vital role that the voluntary sector can play in welfare and humanitarian support is still very much an afterthought rather than part of well laid-down exercise plans. For instance, these days very few LRFs have a voluntary sector subgroup, so those genuine partnerships, relationships and understanding of the breadth of what the voluntary sector can offer have waned in certain areas. There are some very good examples. I refer to the previous witnesses from London and places like that. There are good examples of voluntary sector panels and that side of it, but it is very piecemeal across the country.

The Civil Contingencies Act mentions that category 1 responders should have regard to the activities of voluntary organisations in carrying out their emergency planning. To be frank, that is pretty lame; it is a throwaway comment with no implied obligation. I have advocated for a very long time that the Civil Contingencies Act needs to be strengthened significantly so that there is an implicit duty on local authorities and LRFs to involve the voluntary sector in planning, exercising and responding to major incidents. The Act needs to have some teeth to ensure that the VCS is a genuine and valued partnership in LRFs across the country—not just a few best practice examples.

Lord Triesman: Before I turn to Mr Lee, when you say that the local authorities or those you are dealing with in these exercises change relatively rapidly—for example, people you saw a couple of years ago—would they say the same of you?

Adrian Clee: They probably could. People in the voluntary sector tend to stay with the same organisation for a fairly long time and are able to build those relationships. A lot of us are motivated because of the cause, as opposed to the pay cheque, if you like. It is like any organisation. People can move on, but it should not have to rely on one individual. One of the LRFs cited that it would phone the Red Cross; those would be its go-to people. That is the main thing the Red Cross does, quite rightly. It is a well-known organisation, but there is a breadth of support from the voluntary sector in local communities of which LRFs and others need to have an understanding.

Richard Lee: Good morning, my Lord, and everybody. I would echo a lot of what Adrian has just said.

This is my second year with St John Ambulance, having joined the organisation from a director of operations post in an NHS ambulance trust. It now appears to me that we are entirely resilient in the country in terms of a big-bang emergency—something like a major accident or terror attack and the response to that—but as to the rising tide of incidents, of which we see many more, and local emergencies that do not make the national news, we simply do not have a map of the capabilities of the third sector across the country. We do not know locally what is available everywhere. Certainly, from the point of view of St John Ambulance, we are very resilient at national level. We have good links into the right parts of government and the NHS in particular. However, locally, there is not a single map, and the role of LRFs in mapping and co-ordinating that response should be explored further.

Alistair Read: Good morning, my Lord, and everybody else. To answer the question directly, the UK is fairly resilient. I would reiterate Richard's comment that we are good for short-notice events. The challenge for longer-term, enduring-type events is not as well explored. We are also quite often challenged by the sharing of information and the ability of our local resilience forums to engage not only in the immediate impact period but, crucially, in the follow-on transition into recovery. A lot of my teams and their organisations are inside the inner cordon; we will stay while the incident is ongoing, but we will then depart and leave the community to recover afterwards.

I would share the view that our ability to understand what is available to local resilience forums is somewhat limited. Where we have good relationships I think it is well understood. The challenge is that engaging with the voluntary sector is not a widely endorsed viewpoint, certainly in terms of responders.

Q229 **Lord Robertson of Port Ellen:** I was going to ask what you thought your role was in establishing UK national resilience, but in a way your first series of answers has addressed that.

I would like to know from each of you whether your organisations played any part in Exercise Cygnus in 2016, which modelled a pandemic at that time. I would also like to ask whether you can tell us what your organisations have learned from the experience of Covid-19 over the past year. Are there any specific lessons that would lead you to make recommendations?

First, were you involved in the 2016 exercise? Secondly, what have you learned from the real-world exercise that has just taken place? I turn to Ms Battarbee from the Trussell Trust.

Lynda Battarbee: The first part is probably easy enough to answer. No, we were not involved, so for us the past year has been very much an exercise in responding to a pandemic for the first time. We have learned a few things.

One thing that is linked a bit to your first question, which you felt we had answered, is that we do not want to have a role in responding to emergencies; we would like not to exist. That is what I want to say at the outset.

We learned a few things. We learned that our voluntary sector is resilient and does a phenomenal job every day, as we know, in meeting local need. We saw that even more over the past year as our food banks coped with a 33% increase in people going to them at a time when we had to deal with reduced numbers of volunteers who were shielding and changing their delivery models. It completely turned the model on its head in terms of what was possible. People were no longer able to go to a food bank but had to have food delivered. Therefore, our food banks were incredible in responding very quickly to the guidance as it came out and adjusting in that way.

The other thing we learned is that a crisis such as this hits people very differently. Although it is the same storm, we are in very different boats. We saw that particularly profoundly this year. We know that people facing problems with the benefits system, particularly with delays and inadequate reductions, were really affected over the past year, as well as those with challenging life experiences and ill health, and those lacking informal or formal support. We saw that even more strongly than we have done over the past few years.

Practically speaking, we learned a lot about our country's ability to come together. We were pleased to be able to work with various companies and supermarkets to ensure that we could get food out very quickly to people who needed it. We tried to keep separate our role in providing food to people in poverty rather than people who were shielding. I think that provided quite a challenge in some areas where food banks were being asked to help give out government food parcels and that sort of thing, and we were trying to keep those two things separate. Our charities were set up for the purpose of providing food to people in crisis and poverty rather than specifically those who could not get to the shops. We saw some of those food parcels coming back into food banks because they were not necessarily going to the places where they were needed but rather to people who could not get out and about.

Our partnership working with the rest of the voluntary sector increased over the past year. In particular, we worked with Citizens Advice to develop a helpline so that people who would normally be able to get a referral to a food bank by another route could pick up the phone and receive a digital voucher that would give them access to a food parcel if needed. Projects around that which would normally take us a few months we were able to do in a few weeks because of that shared approach and the collective will to respond quickly to a changing circumstance.

We did see a real shift in our volunteers. As you can imagine, food banks have a lot of people volunteering who are of retirement age, and they immediately fell into the shielding category. So we welcomed a new group of people who were able to give time because they were perhaps

on furlough or had time to offer. We learned quite a lot operationally about how to respond to those different groups and help our food banks to adapt to those different communities that were coming in to provide support to us. I think the role of technology was particularly crucial and dealt with that really well.

I do not know whether that is helpful. I will leave it there and pass over to my other colleagues who are on the call.

Adrian Clee: What it has shown us is that we are quite resilient as an organisation. We are multifaceted; we are not just about emergency response. I am mindful that it is an organisation that contributes a massive amount to supporting communities and individuals on a day-to-day basis, and it is very often there before, during and after major incidents and disasters that occur in communities. In some ways we are a bit unusual in that regard. One of my colleagues commented on people coming in for a period of time and then going away.

We are not by nature at all extrovert in publicising what we do, but during the pandemic we have provided several million meals; we have maintained and expanded our services to the homeless—thousands of people are in beds each night provided by the Salvation Army; and there is other support.

The anti-trafficking programme that we do across the country has had greater demand placed on it during Covid. Elderly care homes have had some of the lowest mortality rates in the whole country due to sheer hard work and determination by the teams there to look after people.

As for the emergency response teams that I personally oversee, we continue to support the emergency response to major incidents, but we have utilised those vehicles to support the NHS, street homeless provision and any number of other tasks.

On top of that, there are 600 Salvation Army front-line centres supporting local communities in a variety of ways, many being used for testing and vaccination centres.

As we emerge from this stage of the pandemic and look forward to recovery, we are deliberately moving away from surge emergency food support and concentrating on expanding debt advice and employment support services, helping to give people who are struggling the support and tools they need to move forward now.

As the Salvation Army sees it, the past 16 months have shown that emergency response teams and the rest of the voluntary sector have played an invaluable role and have come together like never before. To be frank, without the extra capacity that the voluntary sector has given, government at local and national level would have really struggled.

The role of the national emergencies partnership and the National Emergencies Trust has been absolutely vital during the pandemic. The establishment of those groups following the experiences of Grenfell Tower

and the Manchester Arena attacks was an extremely significant move forward, which was instigated and supported by central government and the Charity Commission. That was put in place 18 months before this. Thank goodness it was in place because it has made a real difference to partnership working and co-ordination for the voluntary sector and across the country.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: That is an interesting point that we need to bear in mind. Did you play any part in Exercise Cygnus in 2016?

Adrian Clee: I am sorry; I did not cover that question. No, we did not.

Richard Lee: St John Ambulance did not play a part in the pandemic planning operation. That is probably because in 2016 St John Ambulance was 42 different county organisations under one umbrella. In the past three years, we have moved to being one national organisation with a national way of doing things, with local membership. That puts us in a much better place to participate in future exercises and to review our position within the Civil Contingencies Act as a named responder. When the Act was written, St John Ambulance opted not to pursue status as a category of responder because of that local delivery model. Now that we have a national delivery model, I think we could do much more as a categorised responder.

If we look at what we have been doing over the past 18 months, we have provided almost 700,000 hours of support for the NHS. We have done that by concentrating on the things that we do well. We have provided volunteer ambulance crews to answer 999 calls and supplement the NHS resources there; we have supplied volunteers to hospitals to do non-healthcare professional tasks to make sure that healthcare professionals can get on with the work that only they can do; and we have provided outreach services to homeless and other hard-to-reach communities to make sure that those people get the medical care they need while being housed in temporary accommodation provided as part of the pandemic response.

More recently, since November last year, we have trained 27,500 vaccinators to support the Covid vaccination programme. We are just about to deliver our 350,000th hour today of vaccination support since 11 January. This underlines the fact that the reason we have been so successful in recruiting 15,000 new volunteers to the organisation and delivering all this great service is that we have concentrated on the things we are geared up to do. In the early days of the pandemic, like other organisations, we were being inundated with requests to do all sorts of things. We took a very early decision to set up a strategic co-ordinating group, which I chaired, and we were ruthless in responding only to requests where we could add value. Those were clinical requests, because people who volunteer with St John Ambulance do so because they like providing clinical activity. We have been very successful at that. Our major lesson was to organise ourselves well—this was the first time we had used the strategic co-ordinating group approach—and

concentrate on the things that we could do because our volunteers like doing them and are trained and prepared to do them.

The vaccination programme included some upskilling for our volunteers. We worked hand in hand with NHS England to make sure we had the resources to provide training for those 27,500 people and get them deployed. We are now in the deployment phase and are providing about 30,000 hours a week of vaccinator support.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: Thank you very much for that. It is fascinating.

Mr Read, I am a bit flabbergasted at times about other organisations that did not play any part in Exercise Cygnus, but I do not think that Mountain Rescue was likely to be involved in it. I just wonder what you have learned about resilience from your experience over the past year.

Alistair Read: I can confirm that we were not part of Exercise Cygnus. I think we have taken away quite a few lessons over the past year from Covid-19. Where we have well-established links with local resilience forums, our mountain rescue teams and their members have been well engaged.

As a personal experience, I sat in the tactical co-ordination group meeting for the North Wales LRF and eventually became chair of the PPE cell supporting our tactical co-ordination group as a volunteer, bringing together people from local authorities, police, fire and ambulance. We were challenged where we did not have those relationships. It was very difficult to provide a suitable engagement for mountain rescue to support. We had volunteers who were extremely willing to provide time; we had equipment capability and skill sets that possibly could have been used, but there was not an easy mechanism to share those in the local resilience forum, the tactical co-ordination groups or even government.

That communication process was certainly challenged at times. Possibly we missed an opportunity to embrace the wider communities. We were quite lucky that during most of the lockdown we were not busy with mountain rescue. Post any lockdown period, we have turned that round and become extremely busy; 2020 was as busy as it was in 2019, albeit very much compacted within various timeframes.

Q230 **Lord Browne of Ladyton:** I know time is tight, but I want to take a few seconds to say thank you and express my admiration and appreciation for what your organisations and you personally do selflessly for our communities, particularly those in crisis.

If you had had the opportunity to listen to our previous session, you would be aware that we received evidence of complex and confusing lines of accountability and communication between local resilience forums and central government, and inadequacies and gaps in communication. In a similar fashion, I would like to explore with you your established communication channels and regular contacts, if you have them, with central and local government both during emergencies and otherwise.

I think we are interested to know whether that is two-way communication. Do you feel you are able to raise concerns about risks right up the chain to government through that communication method?

Alistair Read: It is probably fair to say that it is a challenging communication process in peacetime and does not seem to get any easier if we are fighting any of the battles. Mountain Rescue, along with other organisations as part of UKSAR—United Kingdom Search and Rescue—which is there predominantly to bring responders together to deal with this inside the inner cordon, finds that quite a difficult way to communicate with government. We get much better engagement and communication when we manage to engage at our local resilience forums. I would certainly support what was said in the previous session that the Civil Contingencies Act and the frameworks around that could probably do with refreshing, further embracing the voluntary sector to ensure that we have clearer lines of communication.

Richard Lee: We have excellent links with NHS England and NHS Improvement. I echo Alistair's comments about the need to build those relationships in peacetime so that they are in place when everything heats up. In the early stages of Covid we rapidly went through that process, but we now have excellent links into that. Locally, we are less well connected with LRFs. My view is that there is a role for LRFs in co-ordinating voluntary and third-sector capabilities in that area.

As for communication difficulties, during the pandemic it felt that there was sometimes a disconnect between central and local. We would agree something centrally and resource up for whatever it was and agree it, and then we would find that locally somebody had made a different decision in isolation; sometimes that meant that the local decision was undone so that the national solution could be applied and sometimes vice versa. That was quite frustrating. It is really important that, as part of the debrief of Covid so far, some of these things are further explored with the individual systems.

Our relations are stronger with the parts of the system with which we interact regularly. That goes back again to my earlier comment, echoed by some of the previous witnesses, about the need to establish the capability map locally ahead of time so that people know what is available when, and know it has been tested when needed.

Lord Browne of Ladyton: Lynda Battarbee, I know from my own experience what the Trussell Trust manages to get out into the public domain and that the Government hear what you have to say, but do you have a proper and adequate channel of communication with them, or could it be improved?

Lynda Battarbee: It is probably divided into a couple of sections. The food banks locally on the ground often have very established relationships with local authorities, although the past year has highlighted where there are weaknesses in those communications, particularly around understanding acute poverty. There are still limitations where

local authorities have seen food banks as the first port of call in a crisis, which is something we very much try to resist. That has been a challenge particularly over the past year in some communities.

For us, nationally, we have appreciated the opportunity to have a two-way ongoing dialogue, as you can imagine. Our communication particularly with Defra was already very well established and has increased significantly over the past year. We welcomed in particular cross-departmental action particularly through the Food and Other Essential Supplies to the Vulnerable Ministerial Task Force. That has been particularly instrumental in providing funding for local welfare assistance schemes so that people can have quicker access to cash rather than emergency food, which, as you will know, is really important to us.

For us, the past year was focused on funding for local authorities but also helping to make sure that our food banks were well supplied with food. We would want to move forward so that our relationships with Defra and, indeed, wider government are very much focused on a policy response around prevention, because for us that prevention message is much stronger than the need to be part of the fabric of society as an institutional response to a crisis such as this. So, yes, we have some relationships for which we are grateful.

Lord Browne of Ladyton: Perhaps I may ask a simple question that may require a complex answer. You have these good two-way communications in the middle of an ongoing crisis because the pandemic persists. Do you think this will survive peace?

Lynda Battarbee: Because it started before the pandemic we have confidence that those relationships will survive. For us, it is about being able to remain in touch with those people and groups. Because we are a crisis response, there was a lot more incentive for that relationship to be really strong this year. I think it will be about making sure we do all we can to keep those relationships strong, but it did help that we had a way into government earlier than the pandemic. In particular, we were glad that at the beginning we were able to advocate strongly for food banks to have key worker status and that we were able to achieve that. The challenge for us is making sure that that continues.

Adrian Clee: I mentioned earlier the national emergencies partnership, which involves government officials and the voluntary sector working together. Its creation and having it in place has been vital throughout the pandemic, because particularly for the voluntary sector we have been able to raise issues and needs that come up at a local level and bring them right up through the food chain, if you like, to ministerial level. That has been vital. We have been able to surge response with voluntary sector assets across the country and that side of things. Richard has cited St John Ambulance as one of the main partners doing a huge amount at the request of the Government in terms of vaccination programmes. That is a very clear example.

As for the emergency group, my fear is that as we move out of the pandemic it is vital for the Government to continue to engage actively with that partnership, provide funding to keep it going—that is certainly important; they have been very good during the pandemic, but that is a challenge going forward—and bring back the senior-level representatives from government who sat on the group before Covid-19 kicked in. Obviously, they have been inundated with other roles and other things, so we have had more junior partners, if you like, feeding messages through and the dialogue has not been as direct. It would be good to see a proper commitment that we keep this going during peacetime because plenty of things will be coming along.

From the Salvation Army perspective in emergency response, it would be helpful to have a named contact in the relevant central government departments so that we can very quickly raise issues that are relevant to us, or if we are advocating for people and that side of things.

One thing that really surprised me—I do not make this as a major point—is the “everybody in” side of things; that is, getting the homeless off the street and into hotels. The Salvation Army is by far the largest provider of front-line, hands-on homeless support in this country, but we are not in direct dialogue with government most of the time; we are not consulted too much around that; it is more for lobbying groups. That is an example where people with long-standing expertise who are rolling up their sleeves and doing things on the ground are not necessarily being consulted.

Q231 Lord Rees of Ludlow: The government integrated review noted that in developing resilience capabilities the Government should consider setting up a so-called civilian reservist cadre to provide support in times of crisis. Presumably, this would have generic expertise rather than anything as specific as your existing volunteers. Would you welcome the establishment of this, and how might you like or be able to work with such a force?

Adrian Clee: I have a fairly lengthy answer, but I will keep going. I feel that the creation of a national reserve for volunteers is not the right thing to do. The majority of incidents are within a specific community or region, and within those areas there is a wealth of support from the voluntary sector organisations that serve those communities day in day out. Use the strength of the voluntary sector in those areas where it is established, trusted and rooted in those communities, and encourage people to volunteer for them. The creation of such a reserve could be an extremely damaging thing to those local community groups. I know that some of the people in the first session mooted this.

It might be seen as a controversial statement, but the sudden creation of the NHS volunteers scheme at the beginning of the pandemic cut right across the valuable role that a lot of those local voluntary organisations and volunteers had to play. We have 600 locally based Salvation Army centres. A lot of them were virtually cut out of things because the sudden thought was, “Oh, we have the NHS volunteers and they will do

everything". It was almost like, "We will get these people's names. We will very quickly deploy them and they will do any number of tasks".

An awful lot of the people who needed support were vulnerable people in our communities. We have seen from Grenfell and other places that people can, for disreputable purposes, take advantage of these situations. If you are looking after vulnerable people, you need to be properly vetted and trusted by the organisations that we send out there. That is a great concern.

Our teams at Grenfell were there for three-and-a-half weeks. We used 150 volunteers. I would not as an organisation have even considered using people we did not know really well. We made sure that our safeguarding, training, ethos, et cetera, were followed through. If you just take people from a big list and throw them into a situation, I do not think that is the wisest thing to do.

If they insist on going forward with this, it ought to be more along the lines of the Olympic volunteers where there are things such as marshalling and peripheral activities and people are not being asked to interact with really vulnerable people. At the national voluntary sector group we were asked time and again whether we could have volunteers to signpost at train stations and this and that. I pushed back very much. As Richard said, we should concentrate on what we are good at. It was about having more manpower and not about the expertise of the voluntary sector.

Lord Rees of Ludlow: Mr Lee, I guess you might have rather similar views. Is that fair?

Richard Lee: Absolutely. St John Ambulance feels strongly that the answer here is a cadre of volunteers, not as a stand-alone, but as a knitted-together model of existing organisations with existing capabilities, each being given a role within that cadre so that it would be funded, prepared, exercised, tested and equipped to deliver across the country when required.

Our experience of generic volunteers and trying to train and vet 27,000 people to become vaccinators was that a whole-organisation effort was required to do that. To put some numbers to it, the NHS paid us about £6 million to get those vaccinators ready. With better planning and each organisation being given a role in a national volunteer reserve, we could develop and maintain those capabilities so that there is not that sudden rush and crisis mode to get people trained.

Lord Rees of Ludlow: Lynda Battarbee, is your view rather different? Maybe you do not need people with such specialised expertise.

Lynda Battarbee: I probably cannot offer too much comment on this one, not having given it enough consideration before the question arose. I agree with Adrian. Although a lot of our tasks are about sorting food and those sorts of things on which you can be trained relatively quickly,

dropping in lots of new people very suddenly is a real challenge, because we are always around people with vulnerabilities and checking needs to be done first.

Referring again to what Adrian said, we saw that with the NHS volunteer scheme people were not able to have roles because it was so oversubscribed. People came into food banks expecting to be able to volunteer and were disappointed. Our feedback is that a number felt quite overwhelmed, not by needing volunteers but having to respond to people who thought they had something they were able to give and wanted to be able to do something tomorrow. That connection to the local community and the ability of food banks to check, vet and train even on tasks that appear to be quite simple is really important to us. I do not think that at this stage I can comment any further.

Alistair Read: I discussed this in our executive group over the weekend. We provided limited support for this. We felt that the impact might be better if the development of a volunteer civilian reservist cadre was focused on already established volunteer organisations. They have established links; they have interoperability; they have communication systems. Everything else that may have been suggested within the integrated review adds an extra layer of newness to it. That would bring additional challenges. A huge amount of our resilience-type work relies on local knowledge and connections, which take a long time to establish.

Lord Rees of Ludlow: They need some first aid skills, do they not? Would you welcome more people with those skills on whom you could draw?

Alistair Read: We would certainly welcome more volunteers. If they come with good skills, obviously we can integrate them far more quickly.

One other thing that we felt would be a challenge would be how this new civilian reservist cadre would integrate with existing organisations and responders. In my experience, we work alongside category 1 responders; we are called out by the police. If I have another organisation to try to work alongside, that adds yet another challenge in developing and maintaining relationships so that the overall response is effective.

The Chair: Thank you. This is very interesting stuff.

Q232 **Lord O'Shaughnessy:** My question is in two parts. The second part was: if the Government established a volunteer force, what advice you would give them? I think we have had some pretty clear advice from you already, which is not, "Don't", but, if you do, construct it out of existing voluntary organisations such as yourselves and make sure they have the right levels of training, co-ordination and communication between them and the Government or local resilience forums. If I have got that wrong, correct me, but that appears to me to be the answers you have given.

I will focus instead on the first half of the question, which we are just getting on to, which is about how you go about recruiting talented volunteers. It sounds as if supply is not so much of a problem; it is about

training them to a high standard and indeed in extra skills, if they are part of some national scheme, on top of the other responsibilities they carry out for you, and then maintaining their interest for a long period so that they are active in their engagement with your organisations.

Lynda Battarbee: A few things are worth saying. For us, recruitment is always about purpose. Someone mentioned earlier that people start volunteering because they believe in a cause. That is something that we find really helpful. I think a shared sense of community also helps. We find it helpful that people can identify with the place where they live and can volunteer in that place and make a difference, but there are also opportunities for people to come together, build community and have shared friendships. People volunteer for more than just the reason they are volunteering; it is to build relationships and have a shared sense of community.

It helps for us to have a range of roles for different people. Often, lots of people from the same family with very different skills are able to go and volunteer together, doing something that is different. That has really helped in regard to the question you asked about maintenance. It keeps people doing something that is a shared experience, even if the skills that they bring are quite different. Also, for us, it is very helpful to have opportunities where you can volunteer for just a couple of hours a week. Particularly for those with busy lives and lots of different hectic schedules, being able to do something that is very meaningful but that they are not required to do for days on end is really helpful.

It is about being really bespoke and specific about the training that we give, making people feel of worth and value enough that we can invest in them specifically so that they leave with skills that are different from what they might have had to begin with.

For us, finally, diversity of recruitment is helpful. It is essential that our food banks reflect the communities that they serve, making sure that people are diverse, that they look like the communities they are serving and that the roles relate to people of all skills, communities and backgrounds. I am sure f people have stuff to add to that.

Alistair Read: Within Mountain Rescue in our recruitment process we draw from our local communities. On the mountain rescue side of it, we quite like to get people who are experienced in mountains and uplands.

We do search and rescue in our communities, so we have to train people up and beyond the ability just to walk in the mountains. A typical training period for a member of a mountain rescue team is 12 to 18 months. During that period they go through some casualty care training so that we can deal with people who are injured in remote locations. They learn how to work with helicopters; they get search training so that they can respond and search for missing people.

We provide flood and water rescue training. A lot of our mountain rescue teams are also registered with Defra as flood rescue assets on the

National Asset Register. We do things such as rope rescue skills because of steep ground, as well as provide incident management. That whole process takes about 12 to 18 months. They then usually go through a final selection to make sure they have met the required standard of the team.

As for maintaining and keeping up those skill sets, most mountain rescue teams are relatively busy. My mountain rescue team does about 140 call-outs a year. Team members attend typically about 60 or 70 of those. In addition to the training, which goes on on a monthly basis, we have operational experience. The outcome of that tends to be that, if we have recruited someone, trained them and they stay for five years, often we will have them for 10 years; if we have them for 10 years we will have them for 20; and if we have them for 20 we have them for life. We have a lot of team members who joined many years ago and they continue to provide support through their mountain rescue team to their local communities.

Lord O'Shaughnessy: What we are hearing from both of you so far is a lot of intensive training but also application of those skills. Briefly because of the time, Mr Clee or Mr Lee, do you have anything you would like to add to that?

Richard Lee: We have to make sure that the volunteering experience is good for people. That experience comes from learning skills in their volunteer role; it helps them advance in their outside volunteering role as well, so it is about making sure that we give people, especially the younger volunteers, skills that increase their opportunities through life. For most of our volunteers, it is all about getting out and doing what they are trained to do: making sure that our ambulance crews are out doing ambulance work, our first aiders are providing first aid, and so forth. This plays back to the agenda about doing what we are good at, but making sure we maintain volunteer experience is key.

Adrian Clee: Looking purely at our emergency response volunteers, we go to about 350 incidents a year. There are about 20 teams across the UK. Because the nature of these major emergencies is sporadic, the chance to exercise with the rest of the voluntary sector and other emergency services partners is absolutely key to keeping people's interest and motivation.

Lord O'Shaughnessy: It sounds like there are highly trained people out there, but the opportunity to exercise together and bring other multiple partners into those kinds of preparatory exercises is perhaps what a national civic force constructed out of your and other organisations could do. That is really helpful.

Q233 **Viscount Thurso:** I am interested in the pros and cons—and particularly the pros—of why a volunteer force might work better than a paid force. Why might you choose to staff a service with volunteers rather than paid employees?

I will go first to Mr Read, so I give fair warning. The second part of the question—this is particularly for mountain rescue, because it is a bit like RNLI and is almost a blue light service—is whether some of the provisions made for special constables, for example, who are not paid but get special leave for training and so on, might be helpful in your kinds of services. Mr Read, would you deal first with the general point and, secondly, with the specific one?

Alistair Read: Why would you recruit volunteers over paid personnel? I think we have already had one of the answers. Volunteers buy into the cause and are often engaged for the long term. One of the other things we also see is lack of turnover. With professional paid people, we see them every two or three years and they move on to another role within the organisation as a volunteer. I have team members who have been around for 30 or 40 years and have that long-standing, in-depth knowledge of how we have evolved what we are doing today.

There are challenges. That is often to do with where we are in life. Younger team members have families and, therefore, the demands on a volunteer may change, but that should be able to be managed. I think those long-term engagements, good training and being allowed to use their skill sets can develop a very good person. One challenge I often face when I work alongside, say, a police officer or fire officer is that maybe my knowledge and experience are greater than those of the person standing next to me purely because I have spent more time doing it. Those are some of the reasons why you might take it on but also the challenges associated with it.

On the second part of the question, on a couple of occasions I have raised with a former chief constable of North Wales Police the question whether the powers of a special constable could be passed on to us. That might be a little bit of a challenge for our team members. I think they value their volunteer process.

Viscount Thurso: If I may interrupt you, what I was after was not whether they become special constables, but whether the provisions should allow your team members to be let off work, which is what happens if you are in the reserve forces, you are a special constable or whatever. At the moment your team members can help you only if their employer allows it. Is there anything around that that would be helpful to getting more volunteers?

Alistair Read: Potentially. If we had greater employer engagement to allow our team members to go, it would make a call-out at, say, nine o'clock on a Monday morning much easier to handle because, instead of three people, we would end up with our usual 20.

Richard Lee: We would wholeheartedly support some sort of volunteer leave or release for the reasons Alistair has articulated. If we were ever in the position as a nation again of running a furlough scheme, maybe there could be some enhancement of that scheme for people who could

undertake their voluntary role full-time as an alternative to being at work.

As to why we might need a volunteer cadre, for me it is about surge capacity. It is about improving the link between local communities and statutory services. It is about attracting people into further training and gaining qualifications that allow them to pursue careers in those agencies, which may also allow those agencies to recruit more readily from local communities and more diverse communities where a career in public service may not be a first choice but local volunteering is very popular.

Adrian Clee: We touched on the furlough scheme. There is an important point to be made in that regard. There should be changes for the future if that ever happens again, because we had large numbers of staff on furlough from their normal duties who just could not do anything else completely separate from those normal duties to help the organisation in terms of volunteering. That was hugely frustrating for so many people. Perhaps some consideration could be given to that. I know why it is there: it is to stop people fulfilling their paid roles when they are on furlough, but more thought needs to be given to that.

Lynda Battarbee: The only thing I would add is that there is probably a concern about the voluntary sector as a whole as we go forward in that we rely very heavily on retired people. That will be an increasing challenge as people work longer. I think the second question you raised will become ever more pertinent as the years go by.

I should add that we rely on and work heavily with volunteers because we do not want to be an institutionalised part of the welfare state. Having volunteers enables us to exit a little more quickly and easily from the provision of service that we have.

Q234 **The Chair:** We come to the final question, which we enjoy as much, if anything, as the whole of the rest of the session. You get 30 seconds. You are allowed one suggestion and one recommendation that you want us to make to government. I will ask in this order: Lynda Battarbee, Adrian Clee, Richard Lee and Alistair Read. What is your one suggestion in 30 seconds?

Lynda Battarbee: We would just ask that, in the wider conversation about resilience and particularly individual resilience, you think about universal credit. We welcomed the £20 increase in universal credit each week that came in during the pandemic. That is due to finish in the autumn. We would ask that it be continued beyond that. It is a vital lifeline for people in crisis.

Adrian Clee: I just reiterate the point I made earlier about the Civil Contingencies Act and mandating that local authorities and LRFs have a duty to involve the VCS in planning, exercising and responding to major incidents. Give it some teeth. That would be excellent.

Richard Lee MBE: "Volunteer" does not mean "amateur". That is the closing statement from St John Ambulance. Our recommendation would be that the LRFs are given a volunteer or third-sector co-ordinator in each LRF to do the capability mapping and sort out the local position and what is available.

Our plea is that a national volunteer reserve is formed from pre-existing specialist volunteer capabilities pulled together, with each organisation understanding its role and being held to account for that role and capability within that model. Thank you very much for having us here this morning.

The Chair: I think you cheated there. I think that was three.

Alistair Read: From my perspective, it would be a clear supportive ownership of volunteer responders within government that is able to communicate, train, support and assure so that we can provide interoperability from the ground upwards.

The Chair: That is really good. In bringing this session to a close, I thank you all for your evidence. Perhaps more importantly, I want to echo something that Lord Browne said: thank you very much for being the face in front of us today for the huge volunteer effort throughout the country, which is really welcomed. Your work is much, much appreciated. Thank you very much indeed. I draw this evidence session to a close and formally end the meeting.