

British Red Cross – Written evidence (RSK0077)

About the British Red Cross

The British Red Cross has more than 19,600 volunteers in the UK and nearly 3,900 staff. We are part of the world's largest humanitarian network, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, which has 17 million volunteers across 191 countries. We are the UK's largest voluntary and community sector emergency response organisation and largest independent provider of support to refugees and people seeking asylum.

- Before Covid-19, we responded to an emergency every four hours, from house fires to terrorist attacks. We provide practical and emotional support when it is needed most, and support individuals and communities to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies.
- During Covid-19, we have reached over 1.5 million people in the UK since March 2020, providing food, medicines, emotional and wellbeing support, transport to and from hospital as well as providing a range of education resources online as we continue to support the most vulnerable communities through the crisis.
- Since March 2020, we have distributed over £2m in cash assistance to almost 10,000 people.
- We collaborate with voluntary and community sector partners, such as through the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership which the British Red Cross co-chairs, and with statutory partners to provide holistic support to communities during and after a crisis strikes.
- The contents of this submission are based on our operational experience, insights from our partners as well as British Red Cross research exploring people's needs in UK emergencies.

The Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP)

The VCSEP is a coalition of over 250 organisations across England made up of local voluntary and community groups and larger regional and national charities. By working together, the partnership aims to make sure everyone, especially people worst impacted, get the support they need. It is co-chaired by the British Red Cross and NAVCA, and was formed in response to learnings from several 2017 national crises.

The VCSEP advocates for increased collaboration between government and the voluntary and community sector in an emergency, and for improved local to national coordination to better reach and support communities most impacted. By pooling resources and intelligence when capacity is stretched, we are collectively improving responses to major emergencies and the short, medium and long term impact they have on resilience. Local voluntary and community organisations are often best placed to understand the needs and concerns of the local community and by working together with larger organisations and the government we can develop a clearer picture of what support is required and

who is best placed to provide it.

1. Covid-19, emergency support, and our insights and recommendations

The British Red Cross has been exploring people's needs in the UK throughout Covid-19 to improve our own practice and advocate for policy and practice change. To summarise, people are:

- Struggling more financially¹ and, in some cases have not been able to access essentials, such as food².
- Struggling with their mental health and loneliness, which is reducing people's individual resilience and ability to cope³ [for more information on people's mental health and emotional needs during emergencies, see Annex A]
- The pandemic has both exacerbated inequalities and pushed new people into hardship. We explored this in our latest report *The Longest Year: the impact of local restrictions*.

These insights build on build on British Red Cross research exploring the needs of people and communities in emergencies pre-Covid-19, such as *Ready for Anything: putting people at the heart of emergency response*⁴, which identified four key themes of need people have in an emergency, including: immediate practical needs (such as food and shelter), mental health and psychosocial support, information and communication as well as advice, support and advocacy [see Annex B for more information].

We continue to call on governments across the UK to ensure everyone can access and afford basic essentials, such as food, toiletries, warm clothes, data and heating during Covid-19, in other emergencies, and in recovery. This could be achieved by:

- **Investing in and promoting discretionary emergency support, such as Local Welfare Assistance schemes in England, across the UK.** These schemes play a vital role in preventing households from being pulled under by the economic consequences of an emergency and falling into serious hardship. Where possible, they should use a cash-

¹ See British Red Cross, 'The Longest Year: the impact of local restrictions', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/the-longest-year>.

² See British Red Cross, 'Access to Food in Emergencies: learning from Covid-19', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/access-to-food-in-emergencies> and British Red Cross, 'The Longest Year: the impact of local restrictions', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/the-longest-year>.

³ See British Red Cross, 'Lonely and Left Behind: tackling loneliness at a time of crisis', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/lonely-and-left-behind> and See British Red Cross, 'The Longest Year: the impact of local restrictions', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/the-longest-year>.

⁴ British Red Cross, 'Ready for Anything: putting people at the heart of emergency response', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/ready-for-anything>.

first approach. The emergency response to Covid-19 has demonstrated how important it is for councils to have the capacity to deliver timely and discretionary emergency support to households facing financial crisis in their areas.⁵

- As part of its 2021 review of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, **the Cabinet Office should consider creating a statutory duty for national government and Category One responders to fully meet the humanitarian needs of their communities**, including access to information, emergency financial support, shelter, emergency food and psychosocial support.

2. Emergency response structures in the UK

Government

In recent years, British Red Cross policy reports have demonstrated the need for a clear and transparent role for central government in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from emergencies. *Harnessing the Power of Kindness*, which presented our learnings from the emergencies of 2017, emphasised that affected people should receive a coordinated and high-quality response during and after an emergency, and *Ready for Anything: Putting people at the heart of emergency response* explored what people expect and need before, during and after a crisis.⁶ This included the need to establish greater coordination, and improve leadership.

Previous research conducted by the British Red Cross suggests that the UK government's emergency structures do not always put the needs of those affected by a crisis first⁷, are not effective at facilitating a cross-governmental response, and lack clear accountability.⁸ The Government has no single point of contact in an emergency, preventing parliament, local government, NGOs and the public from engaging with the Government and holding it to account. This is due to various factors, including: different government departments holding

⁵ See further information on how to strengthen Local Welfare Assistance.

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-12/Utilising-the-COVID-Winter-Grant-Scheme-to-strengthen-Local-Welfare-Assistance.pdf>

⁶ British Red Cross, 'Harnessing the power of kindness for communities in crisis', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/emergency-response/harnessing-the-power-of-kindness-for-communities-in-crisis.pdf>

British Red Cross, 'Ready for Anything: putting people at the heart of emergency response', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/ready-for-anything>.

⁷ We call this a 'person-centred approach'. What is meant by this is similar to the concept of personalised care in health and social care services. At times of crisis, the people involved: - will have the best idea of the support they need most - have distinct psychological, emotional and social needs, as well as immediate practical needs (such as for shelter and food) - may need support in their longer-term recovery and not just in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. A person-centred approach to crisis response means that organisations and systems empower people to access personalised support at times of crisis, provide support that addresses both practical and psychosocial needs equally, and continue to offer longer-term support as people recover, and rebuild their lives.

⁸ British Red Cross, 'Harnessing the power of kindness for communities in crisis', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents/about-us/research-publications/emergency-response/harnessing-the-power-of-kindness-for-communities-in-crisis.pdf>

responsibility for various elements of emergency response and inconsistent working relationships and communication channels between actors at the local and national level.

Legislation

The current model is underpinned by the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA), and associated statutory and non-statutory regulation and guidance (such as the Cabinet Office's 'The Lead Government Department and its role – Guidance and Best Practice'⁹). While emergencies prior to the Covid-19 outbreak arguably highlighted the limitations of the CCA, the use of the Coronavirus Act and the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 instead of the emergency powers in the CCA in response to the pandemic has sparked new questions about the effectiveness of current emergencies systems.¹⁰

A whole society approach

The British Red Cross has argued that the UK's emergency structures and legislation must be able to meet people's humanitarian needs during a crisis, from immediate practical needs, to psychosocial support and longer-term emotional support. In our previous research, we identified three main issues in responses to emergencies¹¹:

- people's humanitarian needs not being fully met;
- ad hoc and insufficient involvement of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS);
- and a lack of accountability or a joined-up approach at a local and national level.

The current emergency response architecture does not consistently build other key sectors into preparedness and does not enable a truly human centred approach, particularly in recovery, which often starts very soon after the onset of an emergency. A whole society approach depends on understanding what support, stakeholders and assets are already in place – and being able to draw on those as necessary to respond to hazards and build resilience. Effective cross-sector collaboration requires investment in relationships by all parties *before* emergencies take place to build trust and a common language.

The British Red Cross is currently conducting further research into the

⁹ Cabinet Office, 'The Lead Government Department and its role – Guidance and Best Practice', https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/61355/lead-government-departments-role.pdf

¹⁰ Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, 'Parliamentary Scrutiny of the Government's handling of Covid-19',

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmpubadm/377/37705.htm#footnote-069>

¹¹ See previous emergency response reports:

British Red Cross, 'Ready for Anything: putting people at the heart of emergency response',

<https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/ready-for-anything>.

British Red Cross, 'People power in emergencies', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/people-power-in-emergencies>.

systems, structures and legislation around emergencies in the UK, and the findings from this research will be available from May 2021 in partnership with Demos. **We would welcome the opportunity to present the findings of this research to the committee.**

3. Local emergency planning and response

People power in emergencies, provided an assessment of voluntary and community sector engagement and human-centred approaches to emergency planning, and explored how local resilience forums and community groups can better work together.¹²

Our report shows that the amount and effectiveness of collaboration between the voluntary and community groups and local resilience forums can vary. Where collaboration is lacking, emergency response planning focuses mainly on statutory agencies, missing the opportunity to use the experience of voluntary and local organisations that are so important to community recovery.

We believe that closer collaboration across agencies and with people and communities themselves will enhance the response provided during and following incidents such as a fire or flood, wherever and wherever that emergency happens.

Key findings about Local Resilience Forums (LRFs)

The following findings, explored in a 2019 British Red Cross report, *People power in emergencies*¹³, are based on surveys with voluntary and community sector representatives in local resilience forums, and the National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) membership, as well as a review of local resilience forum plans:

- Voluntary and community sector organisations often tend to sit solely on local resilience forum voluntary sector subgroups, which focus on building coordination, skills and capacity within their own sector, rather than contributing to the local resilience forum's broader emergency response work.
- There are barriers to communication and engagement between local resilience forums and voluntary and community sector organisations [see further detail on page 9 of *People power in emergencies*].
- While most local resilience forum plans broadly covered the practical and psychosocial needs of individuals and communities at times of crisis, the plans did not offer detailed guidance on flexible approaches to support.

BRC Covid-19 Vulnerability Index

¹² For further information on how to improve local emergency planning, visit: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/people-power-in-emergencies>.

¹³ British Red Cross, 'People power in emergencies', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/people-power-in-emergencies>.

To meet need, we have developed a **Covid-19 Vulnerability Index**, which identifies vulnerable areas and groups within local authorities, wards and neighbourhoods across the UK, including those who fall outside the government's 'extremely vulnerable' group.¹⁴ This was developed in response to the need for a more holistic understanding of vulnerability. **We would welcome the opportunity to present our Index and work with national and local government bodies to support their endeavours to identify and support vulnerable groups during this pandemic and beyond.**

Key recommendations for government

- **The British Red Cross is calling for an urgent review of the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act.** The government should strengthen the role of the voluntary and community sector in emergencies under legislation and statutory guidance. This will give individuals and communities more say in how they are treated and the support they get in an emergency.
- The government should amend the Civil Contingencies Act, Regulations and Guidance to require local resilience forums, in partnership with the voluntary and community sector, to **ensure that the plans formulated by local resilience forums fully meet the humanitarian needs of their communities.**
- The government should deliver on its commitment to community engagement in emergencies. The British Red Cross recommends that the **government continues to play a greater role in supporting local resilience forums to share best practice and maintain national standards**, for example by regular national reviews of plans and implementing the Cabinet Office's Community Resilience Development Framework, which includes supporting communities of practice, developing guidance, tools, campaigns and projects, and scaling up best practice. This work should be taken forward in partnership with the voluntary and community sector.
- The **UK Government should consider establishing a National Resilience Planning Board**, that includes the key government departments together with non-statutory partners such as the Red Cross, an auxiliary, and the VCSEP, to oversee the development of preparedness and response plans against the risks highlighted in the national risk register.

¹⁴ British Red Cross, 'British Red Cross COVID-19 vulnerability index for the UK'. [Available at: <https://github.com/britishredcrosssociety/covid-19-vulnerability>].

Annex A: Mental health and wellbeing

The short and long term social and economic impacts of Covid-19 will continue to exacerbate mental health and loneliness. The winter period, coupled with further restrictions, present new and pressing challenges for people and services.¹⁵ Our most recent research, which has looked into the impact of local restrictions on people's lives, suggested that the biggest impact of living under continued restrictions is on people's mental health.¹⁶ To address this, there should be increased investment and access to services to meet demand, despite financial pressures, and targeted support for those identified at most risk.

- **Investment in NHS mental health services must continue to increase to meet demand** and to increase access during Covid-19, to ensure people receive the care they need.
- **The Government should commit to further financial packages of support for loneliness**, building on the best practice identified through its first round of investment.
- **People's mental health and emotional needs should be routinely checked and addressed on leaving hospital, and mental health and emotional support should be incorporated into the DHSC and NHSE/I's Covid-19 rehabilitation and recovery support.**
- **Mental health and emotional support offers should be attached to other public services** likely to encounter those most in need (such as mainstream benefits, bereavement services etc.)

Annex B: People's needs in an emergency

Themes of need

Understanding the needs of people and communities is critical to creating a more effective, human-centred approach to emergency response. Our report *Ready for Anything* identified four themes of need that are important:

- **Immediate practical needs:** this includes food, shelter and medication, plus the need for privacy and to feel safe.
- **Mental health and psychosocial support:** practical and emotional support is a hugely significant factor in the early stages of recovery. These psychological needs should be treated as equal to a person's physical health. This includes an empathetic need to be given time to reflect and to tell their story, to make sense of what happened and to feel in control of what happens next.
- **Information and communication:** this includes the need for leadership and organisation, for accurate, accessible and timely information, and the ability to contact and communicate with family and friends.
- **Advice, support and advocacy:** most people affected by an emergency will need some help with navigating systems, such as accessing legal aid or

¹⁵ British Red cross and VCSEP 'Mental Health: A VCS insights pack to help inform and shape collective responses to Covid-19'. [Available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5eb0bf25781e751869597b2e/t/5f7f05a89203741976323301/1602160042835/National+Insights+-+Mental+Health_final.pdf].

¹⁶ British Red Cross, 'The Longest Year: the impact of local restrictions', <https://www.redcross.org.uk/the-longest-year>.

dealing with insurance claims - it is important that this help is both co-ordinated and consistent. Critically, support must empower those affected to take control of their own recovery. It must also provide a platform or voice for victims' and affected communities' needs.

10 February 2021