VCS Emergencies
Partnership

Winter Preparedness:
Summary Notes

How did it go?

Across the week we welcomed over 80 partners to the Regional Winter Preparedness scenario exercise. Together, we worked through a winter emergency scenario, discussing our individual and collective considerations, questions and ideas at each stage.

Partners shared details of their activities and capacity, and steps they would and could take across each stage of this hypothetical emergency: sharing tools, links and organisational information. Across the five regional events, recurring themes developed.

The key themes that were discussed across the regional groups were:

1. Understanding capabilities
2. The importance of connection
3. Sharing and triaging of information
4. Funding, sustainability and recovery
5. Human resource – staff and volunteers

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1. Understanding capabilities

- Understanding who is best placed to respond and in what capacity for a given emergency, if done well, would improve impact and efficiency in emergency responses.
- **County or hyper-local exercising** that enable VCS organisations to consider the specifics of the capabilities needed and offered was a recommendation across these events.
- Continuing to develop the use of **Slack channels**, and adding county-level Slack channels, was also raised. These initiatives could help the sector understand capabilities and improve communications.
- Across sectors: further coordination in events like these, the inclusion of a Local Authority (LA) in potential local exercising, and adding statutory representatives to Slack channels could improve coordination and strengthen clarity of the VCS offer.
- **Capability mapping**: mapping of VCS offers and capabilities exist to differing degrees, within LRF and other fora. Developing these or creating streamlined or additional resources for capability mapping was recommended and will be a scope of work for the Emergencies Partnership in 2023.

2. The importance of connection

The power of connection: across the sector	The power of connection: connecting outside the sector
• Attendees agreed that relationship-building is paramount: "moving from the '**who are you?**' to the '**how are you?**'" when needing to collaborate quickly was a well-articulated aim during these sessions. • While rapid connections can still be beneficial, **making connections early**, prior to an emergency, is highly valuable for partners. This not only creates opportunity to develop plans and relationships but gives advance notice for people and resources on standby.	• Strengthening Local Authority (LA), Local Resilience Forum (LRF) and VCS connections was a key theme across the exercises. Where connections exist, they can be bilateral, resulting in each organisation working with the LA/LRF in different ways. Strengthening connections and using current connections to represent the sector as a collective, will lead to more impactful planning and response. • Connecting in advance with corporate organisations, with utility providers and other service providers was explored.

3. Sharing and triaging of information

- **Information sharing:**

- **Early intervention communications** are important for these scenarios, to build resilience in communities ahead of the needs materialising.

- Partners felt that the VCS has a vital role in **sharing fast and accurate information** with their networks and people they support, and in receiving information back from networks and communities. Strong information flow between VCS and Local Authority/LRF is needed to make this effective.

- Improved access to **situational intelligence**, through response coordinators or tools like Resilience Direct, is a key need. Partners who have access to alerts and other intelligence should consider opportunities to share across the sector. Similarly, opportunities for **briefing/debriefing and sharing of situational intelligence across VCS responders** could be strengthened.

- **Tailoring of communication** to different audiences: most community groups are stretched to the limits,but are vital communicators prior to and during a response. Clear, short and digestible communication, and mechanisms to feed in, would support joined up communication.

- Some impacted groups won't be reached through, or have low trust in, common communication channels or communicators. **Alternative communications** should be explored through Public Service Announcements and through trusted and recognised community groups/leaders.

- **Restrictions on data sharing** and information sensitivity prevent coordinated working across the VCS and between VCS and service providers/authorities. There are exceptional practices for data sharing in emergencies: however, hesitation to share and some data restrictions remain. Data and information restrictions and classifications should be understood and challenged where appropriate, balanced with improved practices for safe sharing and storage.

- Partners suggest that the promotion or creation of **shared space for the VCS to share good practice** and comms messaging could reduce duplication and increase efficiency. Similarly, **a uniform system for information sharing and operational intelligence** is also suggested.

Information triaging:

- Individual **Needs Assessments** or **community mapping** by VCS and others including Utility companies, Local Authority data, create multiple vulnerability registers and lead to duplication and gaps - if not shared or coordinated.

- VCS partners can deal with requests for assistance from many areas. How do we **coordinate and triage** these, considering our time and resources?

- Consider what systems/processes may support **needs and requests to be recorded**, escalated and triaged.

- Sectoral **culture change in data sharing** and **coordinated needs assessments** would improve efficiency.

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4. Funding, sustainability & recovery

- Partners agreed that they would like to be more engaged with their networks, however due to funding and a lack of resources, this was challenging.

- Developing and implementing plans for resilience-building and emergency response requires **funding**. Well-connected BAU work and programmes across the sector are not possible without sustainable and strategic funding, as well as project-based funding.

- It was agreed that the VCS could (and do) occupy an impactful space in preparedness/response activities - including initiatives to ease NHS pressure - and in information sharing and data management. However, it was highlighted that these will in many cases not be possible, and in some will have reduced impact, with the current funding available.

- Tangible and accessible sector-wide emergency response plans with (scenario-based) budgets attached may go some way to recording impact and quantifying value.

5. Staff & volunteers

- Key to this scenario is the need to consider and plan how staff and volunteers will operate in these conditions, and the logistics involved in deploying people safely.

- The **risk to wellbeing** for volunteers responding to and dealing with the protracted nature of winter challenges can be high: planning to mitigate for and reduce that risk is key to a winter action plan.

- As situation worsen, more volunteers may appear. Consideration is needed for how to coordinate and support, connect to or manage **spontaneous volunteering.**

- Partners discussed the benefits of coordinating and sharing human resource (community connectors; volunteers), as well as the sharing of tools to support, train and manage volunteers.

- Many partners are creating volunteer hubs and training, and expressed the need for greater collaboration in this.

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Points of interest

- The VCS must support themselves and others to tailor/target support for all hardest-hit, isolated and protected groups, and **include them in planning and preparedness** activities.

- The VCS can have a role to play role in ensuring key **needs assessments** and data such as the Priority Services Register, are accurate and reflect those most impacted and often missed. Work is needed to ensure that any assessment by statutory bodies and the VCS are up to date and reflect current crises including the Cost of Living Crisis.

- **Early intervention** is needed to share information and build trusted connections ahead of time at preparedness stage, particularly with isolated communities or groups.

- **Connecting with experts** (through work and lived experience) is important. Linking response and community organisations with organisations who focus on specific protected, isolated groups, or focus areas such as mental health, will support an appropriate response and greater access. Similarly, embedding **faith and belief networks** and other **key community actors** into preparedness and response activity will support reach and response quality.

- In response planning, the involvement of people with protected characteristics and groups frequently most impacted by shocks is essential. Not only that, prior to and during an emergency, recognising **capabilities in the community** as well as need will support a more effective response. Refugees, the deaf and hard of hearing community, and many other groups, hold expertise in a wide range of areas including translation, communication or guidance, and if willing to support, should be facilitated to do so.

Points of contact

- The [VCSEP Slack Channel](#) is a way to search and connect to partners across the network, with channels for different regions, responses, or areas of work
  Knowledge and Insights Lead [Nicola Horne](#) is your contact for Slack help or advice.

- The Emergencies Partnership Regional Engagement Manager is your point of connection across any region, leading the work to strengthen connections across sector and statutory partners: [Abubaker Adam](#): **London** and **South East** with [Becky Maynard](#) for **South West**, **Midlands and Central** or the **North**.

- We're continually programming events like this and more so if you aren't on our distribution list and would like to be, contact info@vcsep.org.uk

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Resources

- [VCSEP Slack Channel](#)

- [VCS Emergencies Partnership](#) Winter Preparedness 2022 resources

- [Information Commissioner's Office: Data Sharing in an Emergency](#)
  The Digital Economy Act 2017 contains provisions for public sector (and their contracted partners) to share data where there is a material benefit to the health & wellbeing of individuals without necessarily having explicit consent

- [Raynet UK Website](#) *"The UK's national voluntary communications service provided for the community by licensed radio amateurs"*

- [UKHSA Flooding and Public Mental Health Guidance](#)
  This guide provides insight into the adverse psychosocial impacts on flood-affected communities and how relevant agencies can develop plans to mitigate their effects

- [National Emergencies Trust Website](#) *NET responds to emergencies of 'national significance' by raising and distributing funds to charities, via Community Foundations, and to people affected. NET also signpost partners and can provide advice to Local Authorities launching their own cash appeals.*

- [Trauma Risk Management](#) - March On Stress.
  TRiM is a trauma-focused peer support system designed to help people who have experienced a traumatic, or potentially traumatic, event.
  marchonstress.uk

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Tips, suggestions or recommendations from partners across the exercises:

"Where early messaging to communities is vital, plan a process for 'warning and informing'"

"For non-English speaking groups, communications should be simple text or picture based"

"Have a clear plan for deployment (or not) of volunteers, risk assessments for the duty of care to staff and volunteers, their wellbeing comes first

"VCS support isn't free, the sector can't work for nothing."

"Whatsapp works well for connecting Emergency Response orgs, Local Authorities should replicate it with groups they could expect to need to contact"

"Not everyone will be on a Priority Service Register… or even know what one is"

"Make time to understand cascading risks and their potential impact – what happens if stores are prolongingly closed"

"If the VCS are preventing or reducing the need for Military Aid, they are saving the Government millions in costly interventions, how can we best recognise and quantify this saving?"

"Local schools know vulnerable families, who is on free school meals etc"

"Establish a pre-agreed rendezvous point in case of communications failure – if publicly known can be used for directing volunteers or as a response hub"

"How will you reach the geographically isolated, what might you need to support them?

"If a rural location, do you have a farmers network who might have tractors to get where you can't?"

"VCS and partners can work together to map what known resources are available – promoting where essentials can be reached"

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