

A guide to support London Resilience Partners and statutory agencies to better understand, engage with, and integrate the potential of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in planning for, responding to, and recovering from emergencies. This guide is a partner document to the VCS Capabilities Document.

How to access voluntary and community sector support in emergencies

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How to access voluntary and community sector (VCS) support in emergencies

A guide to support London Resilience Partners and statutory agencies to better **understand, engage with, and integrate** the potential of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in **planning for, responding to, and recovering** from emergencies.

Purpose and contents

This document is intended as a reference tool for [London Resilience Partners](#) and other Statutory Agencies to better **understand, engage and integrate** the capabilities of the Voluntary and Community sector (VCS) in the response phase of large incidents and whole system civil emergencies.

This guide accompanies the London Resilience Partnership Voluntary Sector Response Capabilities Document (**VCS capabilities document**) located on Resilience Direct and the [LCEP activation document](#). Pending the review of the VCS capabilities document in 2027, it provides **additional context and practical guidance** to address identified gaps and support the effective mobilisation and coordination of VCS capacity and capability during emergencies in London.

Why has this guide been developed?

It has been developed to help decision-makers:

- Quickly understand how and where VCS support can be accessed in London
- Engage the right parts of the VCS system at the right scale
- Make effective use of VCS capability alongside statutory response arrangements

It is primarily focused on the **response phase of emergencies**, but it is relevant across **preparedness, response, and recovery**, and is most effective when used as part of ongoing engagement rather than only during crises.

This document is a **London adaptation** of national guidance produced by the VCS Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP), repurposed by the **London Communities Emergencies Partnership (LCEP)** to reflect London's governance, geography, and operating model.

Who is this guide for?

It is intended for:

- London Resilience Partners
- Statutory agencies who respond to emergencies in London
- Local Authorities – primarily Emergency Planning teams
- Borough Resilience Forums (BRFs)
- Strategic, tactical, and operational response leads

It has been written particularly for those who:

- are less familiar with the VCS and need a clear route in
- regularly work with the VCS but require a consistent London-wide approach

The guide does not replace the VCS capabilities document, local knowledge, existing relationships, contracts, or Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs). London Resilience Partners must continue to undertake their own due diligence, suitability and capacity checks when engaging VCS organisations.



Section 1: The Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in Emergency Response

The **Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)** in London includes approximately **43,877** charities, social enterprises, faith-based organisations, and community groups, employing over 400,000 people and supported by over 2 million volunteers every year.¹

- around **58% of VCS organisations in London are local or regional**
- the remaining **40% work across national and international regions** (2% is classified as unknown)

Directly and indirectly the activities of all VCS organisations (through both paid staff and unpaid volunteers) contribute to **improved community resilience** and therefore are engaged in the emergency preparedness, response and recovery of people and communities to different risks and incidents.

The above data does not include grassroots and community groups in the capital. Across London's communities, informal volunteers directly support other people who are not family members in preparedness, response, and recovery from incidents. Some VCS organisations (e.g. the British Red Cross' Community Reserve Volunteers) run programmes that aim to coordinate and harness some of the informal and spontaneous volunteering we often see in relation to emergencies (mostly in the response phase). At times of crisis the VCS will work with statutory partners or will self-mobilise to:

- **directly respond to the needs of their community** with their own capabilities
- **amplify needs that have not been adequately addressed** by responding agencies (particularly of those communities who are seldom heard and experience discrimination and inequalities), as well as highlight un-used community capabilities and assets to responding agencies and coordinating forums
- **connect-up different communities to parts of the system** so that deployed capabilities of responding agencies have most impact in meeting need

London's emergency system is **complex, layered, and diverse**. In practice, access to VCS support in London occurs across **three interacting levels**:

- **Borough-level engagement** through local infrastructure and community networks
- **Pan-London coordination** where impacts, risks or capacity gaps extend beyond a single borough
- **National engagement** for specialist emergency capabilities

The VCS respond and contribute both from within and outside of the multi-agency forums that Borough Resilience Forums (BRFs), the London Resilience Unit and Central Government lead. The VCS' level of involvement in emergencies varies greatly from place to place, as well as the type and scale of emergency, and the different agencies leading the response and recovery.

LCEP recognises a great number of effective networks, connections and relationships between government (nationally, regionally, and locally) and the VCS already exist. These are regularly drawn upon before, during and after emergencies and this document should be used with all of those in mind. The guide aims to strengthen any of those networks and relationships that already exist and create new opportunities for collaboration.

¹ Datawise London VCSE dashboard – datawise.london/London-vcse-dashboard/



Section 2: Six key considerations for engaging the VCS

In most emergency incidents (anything from local authority-led responses to whole system civil emergencies) the **six key considerations** below will aid London resilience partners and statutory agencies in quickly drawing on a more complete set of VCS capabilities across national, regional, and local levels.

1. Early, deliberate engagement with the VCS system.

Impacts can escalate rapidly; capacity varies across boroughs and community needs can differ significantly. Engaging early with VCS helps responders to:

- **avoid reliance on informal or ad-hoc engagement alone**
- **reduce duplication, unmanaged volunteering, and inequitable outcomes**
- **sustain VCS capacity during protracted or concurrent responses**

2. Actively convene and influence organisations to collaborate.

In an emergency, London Resilience partners and local authorities should:

- consider the **four types of VCS partners** (Annex B – D)
- **facilitate and promote spaces for VCS** to work together and alongside statutory partners
- Promote **open information-sharing, coordination of effort and mutual aid**

Where there are gaps in response, LCEP (Annex A) exists to support collaboration by:

- **convening** organisations across boroughs and sectors
- supporting **shared understanding of needs, risks, and opportunities**
- **connecting VCS partners** into strategic and tactical coordination structures

Find out more about our role in the [LCEP activation document](#) and the [LCEP webpage](#).

3. Speak with and commission VCS infrastructure nationally, regionally, and locally.

London Resilience partners and local authorities should draw on the capabilities of infrastructure organisations that have significant capability in:

- **communicating** at pace across vast networks and forums
- **access insight and capability beyond a single organisation or borough**
- **influencing and mobilising** the work of vast networks of VCS organisations locally

Two key types of infrastructure organisations are Councils for Voluntary Services (CVSs) and Volunteer Centres (Annex B).

- **Council for Voluntary Services (CVS) directory:** [London CVS Directory | London Plus](#)
- **Volunteer Centre directory:** [London CVS Directory | London Plus](#)

In London there is one organisation in every borough who are currently funded through the **Community Resilience Fund**, this is often a local borough-based infrastructure organisation. The Community Resilience Fund aims to embed the voices of Londoners in resilience through increased collaboration, partnership working, and preparedness. Projects on the programme are running a range of community resilience activities, including developing community emergency plans, producing 'What If' guides, training emergency volunteers, making community asset maps, and much more. Find out more about the fund and who your [local organisation is here](#).



4. Engage VCS organisations who specialise in specific communities.

London resilience partners and local authorities should directly engage with **VCS organisations who specialise in specific communities of interest, identity, culture, and belief (further info in Annex C)**. These organisations and networks can provide:

- Specialist insight into how best to **engage and collaborate with different communities**
- Specialist services that are **designed for and with specific communities**

They can help responding agencies and coordinating groups to **better understand and deliver support that is tailored to the needs and strengths of communities** and can **significantly increase the credibility and trust in statutory-led initiatives**.

Their involvement is particularly important where emergencies:

- Disproportionately impact certain communities
- Intersect with existing inequalities or barriers to access

Engagement may be initiated directly or through:

- LCEP
- Regional and national infrastructure organisations
- Borough-level infrastructure and partnerships

5. Continue to utilise VCS organisations with specialist skills relating to emergencies.

As they have in the past, London resilience partners and Local Authorities should continue to draw on **VCS organisations that hone specialist capabilities, experience and relationships that centre on emergencies (Annex D)**. Many of these organisations hold long-standing strategic relationships with local authorities and other agencies that place them at the forefront of the VCS capabilities in emergency response. They are often well-integrated into response plans locally, regionally, and nationally, some through contracts and Memorandums of Understanding (MOU), others (like the British Red Cross and St John Ambulance) are auxiliaries to government under Royal Charter.

These organisations' capabilities are vast, professional, and often regulated and accredited to the same standards as Category 1 and 2 partners. **Please refer to the VCS capabilities document for a list of these organisations in London, their capabilities and how to access them.**

Their capabilities are further enhanced by:

- **Skills and experience in command-and-control structures and processes**, and JESIP principles, that work in harmony with other VCS orgs like them and with Category 1 and 2 partners
- **Long-standing and trusted relationships with statutory agencies and other VCS organisations** built through joint preparedness, planning, and response activity. These established partnerships enable organisations to mobilise quickly during emergencies, coordinate effectively, and, where required, surge capacity and resources to meet increased community need.
- **Partnership arrangements and networks** such as through LCEP that can often draw on the mutual aid and capabilities from other local, regional, national, and international partners
- **Brands that are often respected and well-known** by the general public
- **Scope to flexibly deploy their capabilities** in other 'non-standard' (in comparison to their business-as-usual activities) scenarios and to scale operational capacity across a wider population of their organisations.



In addition, to the 'typical' emergency specialist VCS organisations listed in the VCS capabilities document hosted on Resilience Direct many VCS organisations hold specialist capabilities that can be (and have been) re-purposed and re-directed to provide **emergency surge support such as:**

- General welfare, hardship, housing, and legal advice
- Healthcare, both physical and mental
- Food and water distribution including logistics and infrastructure
- Surge volunteer projects to meet targeted and specific needs

6. Remunerate VCS organisations

London resilience partners and local authorities should ensure adherence to Charity Commission guidance on full-cost recovery and be open to **remunerating VCS organisations whose capabilities are requested in meeting the needs of impacted communities.**

Even VCS organisations that specialise in emergencies under their 'business as usual, like those in the VCS capabilities document, are unlikely to be able to fully cover costs through existing operating models. Particularly when emergencies are highly demanding, protracted, concurrent and impacting across whole systems. Financial support that enables the VCS to meet needs will represent significant cost savings compared to commercial alternatives or taking options like Military Aid to Civil Authorities (MACA).

It should be noted that in the event of a national emergency, the National Emergencies Trust or London Emergencies Trust may activate a fundraising appeal that could then distribute grants to local and national VCS organisations supporting people's immediate and longer-term needs.

Section 3 - VCS Capabilities Document

Compiling a fully comprehensive and detailed list of all VCS capabilities across London would be both highly resource-intensive and challenging for colleagues to navigate in practice. The VCS Capabilities document has therefore been intentionally designed to provide a clear, high-level overview that is *fit for purpose*, enabling London Resilience colleagues to quickly understand available capabilities and act at pace. LCEP considers this approach to be an effective and proportionate solution, however the document will be further reviewed and refreshed in 2027 to ensure it continues to meet evolving needs.

The document lists only those VCS organisations who specialise in emergencies, but we must re-iterate points made in Section 2 regarding other types of VCS organisation and how their capabilities support in emergencies, namely:

- **VCS Infrastructure organisations** can use their local, regional, and national networks to mobilise a wide variety of capabilities and insight that bolsters and informs all capabilities and can include the distribution of funds to the local level and wider reaching communications.
- **VCS Community Specialist Organisations** provide connection to and insight on vulnerable / disproportionately impacted groups that all deployed capabilities should consider and use
- **VCS Surge Capability Organisations** are embedded within communities and deliver highly valuable capabilities which in an emergency should be considered and drawn on

What we include in the seven types or groupings of capability.

1. **Generalist and Welfare Support** - Supporting emergency centres (rest centres, humanitarian assistance centres, survivor reception centres) including admin, practical assistance, information logging, food/refreshments, clothing, cash-based assistance, convergent volunteer management
2. **Mental Health Support** - Delivery of (or connecting to) specialist and longer-term welfare, psychosocial and mental health support, group therapy, counselling.
3. **Physical Health Support** - Support to ambulance services, First Aid and medical posts, hospitals/treatment centres, and assistance with vaccination



4. **Search & Rescue** - Urban, rural, coastal, remote, and water-specific search and rescue
5. **Logistics** - Transport/escort of people impacted and management of resources (acquisition, storage, transportation, clothing donations, surge food distribution)
6. **Communications** - General comms but also in widespread disruption, telephone and radio operators, interpreters and translators, tracing and message services, info cascade
7. **Fundraising and distribution** - Disaster fundraising and distribution, grant giving to individuals and organisations

Depending on the borough, there may also be borough-specific capabilities documents developed either through Community Resilience-funded projects or by local emergency planning teams.

Section 4 – Further information on VCS organisations

Organisations across the following appendices are listed in the same order as they appear in the considerations of section 2.

Annex A – London Communities Emergencies Partnership (LCEP)

The voluntary and community sectors' (VCS) involvement in emergencies is always incredibly varied with organisations from national emergency response specialists to local infrastructure, all playing a vital role throughout preparedness, response and recovery.

In the **response phase of an incident**, LCEP supports London's emergency system by helping to **coordinate, convene and support** VCS contribution where scale, complexity or fragmentation create gaps.

LCEP adds value by:

- Convene voluntary, community, and faith organisations for coordination
- Connect responding partners (multi-sector)
- Cascade learning, resource, and information
- Share and gather insights and need from responding partners to formal resilience structures e.g. via SCGs and TCGs
- Review, share finding and update processes accordingly.

LCEP works closely with the **London Boroughs Faith Network** (faith and belief sector panel), **Protection Approaches** (Equalities Sector Panel), and **VCSEP**. Together, LCEP, LBFN and Protection Approaches are streamlining and strengthening the offer to both colleagues and communities. During 2026–27, work is underway to reduce duplication, align activity, and deliver joint programming.



Figure 1: Diagram depicting the projects and organisations who are funded by and feed into the London Resilience Unit



LCEP does not replace borough-level engagement or existing relationships. It primarily provides **pan-London coordination and insight where there are gaps**, particularly in multi-borough, protracted or complex incidents.

Find out more in the [activation document](#).

Example LCEP emergency response

Golders Green Terrorist Incident, April 2026

Following the terrorist attack in Golders Green, LCEP coordinated with partners across London's voluntary, community, faith and resilience networks, working closely with London Boroughs Faith Network (LBFN) to monitor community impacts, share trusted information and support community reassurance.

LCEP disseminated messaging and resources for communities and provided community insight to the London Resilience Unit (LRU) and national government. LCEP and LBFN also co-led a meeting with 65 partners to identify emerging issues and support needs, with the learning later informing the development of LCEP's Community Cohesion Communications Guide.

The outcome meant that communities had access to timely and trusted information following the attack. LCEP identified and escalated concerns about misinformation, disinformation and community tensions, ensuring community insight informed the wider resilience response. Partnership working strengthened coordination, supported community cohesion, and contributed to a practical communications guide for community leaders responding to future incidents.

Annex B – VCS Infrastructure Organisations

VCS Infrastructure Organisations support the VCS and communities to take social action, thrive and be resilient by:

- developing local leadership and advocating for change
- enabling better partnership and collaborative working
- building local capacity and volunteering opportunities.

They include local and regional VCS infrastructure organisations such as Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS), Volunteer Centres (VC), and Community Foundations (CF). Most of these local organisations are supported by one (sometimes more) regional and national infrastructure networks/associations such as London Plus, NAVCA, Locality and UK Community Foundations.

These national organisations, their key contacts and their constituent members do not operate 24/7 but can still provide London Resilience Partners and Local Authorities with important emergency capabilities around engagement, communication, insight, surge volunteers and mechanisms to commission locally. It is recommended that your local infrastructure organisation is a member of your borough resilience forum.

Engaging these organisations early on in responses and establishing lines of communication from across their networks up and into strategic/tactical coordinating groups, will establish a means to gather rich insights and quickly support grassroots initiatives.



Example infrastructure organisation response

Flatblock fire 2026

A fire in Croydon required the activation of a local rest centre. British Red Cross identified the need for a small number of local volunteers and worked with Croydon Voluntary Action (CVA), the borough's local infrastructure organisation.

CVA, a Community Resilience Fund recipient with strong links to the local emergency planning team and experience responding to previous incidents, was able to deploy a volunteer within one hour (a second volunteer was stood down due to low demand). The volunteer provided light-touch practical support, including assisting a resident with loading belongings into a taxi.

This incident demonstrates the system working effectively: national voluntary sector partners advocating for local support, and a well-connected local VCS able to activate quickly. The volunteer fed back positively on their ability to contribute and support residents at a critical moment.

Annex C – VCS Community Specialist Organisations

London's VCS community specialist organisations are extensive, diverse and deeply embedded across communities, reflecting a wide range of characteristics, cultures, lived experiences, causes and areas of interest. Given this breadth, it is neither practical nor necessary to attempt a comprehensive list.

In emergencies, these organisations add significant value in multiple ways: many deliver tailored capabilities that are specifically designed for the communities they serve; others act as trusted gateways, enabling access to communities that may otherwise be harder to reach; and many use their insight and experience to shape how responses are designed and delivered, improving effectiveness and outcomes.

Their role is particularly vital given that emergencies often disproportionately affect certain communities due to existing inequalities. Involving community specialist organisations helps mitigate these impacts through more inclusive, culturally informed, and person-centred approaches.

There are currently a range of community resilience projects across London, funded through the London Resilience Unit's [London Resilient Communities](#) programme, which are helping to build the capability and capacity of VCS community specialist organisations. These initiatives help communities develop local emergency plans, train volunteers, and strengthen preparedness, providing valuable local knowledge and trusted community connections that can support emergency response and recovery.

Engagement with these organisations and the communities they serve can be most effectively initiated through established networked partners, such as London Plus, LCEP and local VCS infrastructure organisations.



Example VCS community specialist response

LGBTQA+ Community Safety 2025

During a period of increased tension and reported hate crime in summer 2025, **The Outside Project LGBTIQ+ Centre raised concerns with LCEP** about risks facing LGBTQIA+ communities. In response, LCEP worked with The Outside Project and Protection Approaches to convene a roundtable in July 2025.

This provided a safe and trusted space for organisations supporting LGBTQIA+ communities to share risks, challenges and lived experience. Discussion highlighted issues around community trust and safety, communications, and the ways in which marginalised groups may develop parallel response mechanisms when they do not feel included in formal systems.

Insights from the roundtable informed LCEP's preparedness and advocacy work, including insight briefings and wider resilience discussions on hate crime, solidarity messaging and shared responsibility.

Annex D – VCS Emergency Response Organisations

VCS Emergency response organisations dedicate the majority of their staff and volunteer resources towards developing and delivering emergency specific skills, assets and experience.

These organisations are listed in the VCS capabilities document and many hold MOUs and contracts with Category 1 and 2 partners (and national government) to provide support in emergencies.

They tend to provide prompt emergency response support with many operating 24/7 mobilisation numbers/support lines. Organisations hold some capacity to continue supporting into the recovery phase, but their focus is mostly on the response and preparedness phases of the emergency management cycle.

To support coordination and information-sharing, LCEP hosts a dedicated WhatsApp group for VCS emergency response organisations. This enables partners to quickly share situational updates, request or offer mutual aid, and improve collective awareness during live incidents.

Example VCS emergency response organisation

Southall Warehouse Fire – November 2025

In November 2025, a large warehouse and retail fire in Southall prompted a major response from the London Fire Brigade (LFB). With uncertainty surrounding the safety of approximately 1,000 evacuees due to explosives stored in the building, LFB called on The Salvation Army, to provide immediate welfare support.

On the first day of the incident, The Salvation Army deployed four volunteers and two vehicles offering food, refreshments, companionship and general assistance to those affected. On day two, they coordinated with mutual aid groups and the wider Salvation Army network to strengthen the response and provide food and supplies. The Salvation Army remained on scene until residents were able to safely return home.

The Salvation Army's presence helped foster a strong sense of reassurance and community during a period of uncertainty. Volunteers provided practical support while engaging people in conversation, sharing information and making themselves visible as a trusted source of help. Their involvement also encouraged wider community action, including offers of homemade food and support. The additional volunteers and resources were warmly received and served as a visible demonstration of solidarity at a critical time.



Annex E – VCS Surge Capability Organisations

VCS Emergency Surge Capability Organisations are organisations and networks who in significant, protracted or whole system civil emergencies hold various capabilities that might be drawn upon in a response. These organisations do not respond as those in Annex D do, often with immediate 24/7 capabilities.

These organisations often hold significant capabilities around building social capital including welfare advice, housing, hardship, employment and community connection that are likely to be secondary issues following the major impact of a crisis but which often require significant effort to address through recovery and resilience (re)building.

Example VCS Surge Capability organisation

Certitude – COVID-19 Community Support

Certitude is London's leading not-for-profit adult social care provider, supporting around 1,800 people with learning disabilities, mental health support needs and autistic people across 15 London boroughs.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Certitude identified early that the needs of people with learning disabilities, mental health support needs and autistic people living in the community were not well reflected in national guidance. In response, the organisation adapted its services to ensure individuals continued to receive person-centred support throughout lockdowns.

Certitude rapidly moved its peer-led *Connect & Do* programme online, enabling people to stay connected and access creative and wellbeing activities remotely. Staff also provided intensive, flexible support, including extended in-home care and daily online contact, helping people and families cope with isolation and uncertainty. The experience strengthened Certitude's confidence in its workforce, communities, and partners, reinforcing the importance of adaptable, community-based social care in times of crisis.