Stepping up: coordinating local voluntary sector responses to the COVID-19 crisis

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VCS Emergencies Partnership

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About this report

Through 2020-21 the VCS Emergencies Partnership has supported a range of Local Infrastructure Organisations (LIOs) and others as Liaison Leads to reinforce COVID-19 emergency responses at local level. In June 2021 LIOs reported on the work they had been undertaking through engagement with VCS Emergencies Partnership. This report discusses the main findings and messages from an analysis of 170 'end of grant' monitoring forms completed by LIOs.

About the authors

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Acknowledgements

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Foreword

The VCS Emergencies Partnership has grown and developed through the COVID pandemic, learning much about the importance of connections and relationships, using those to enhance the response at all levels. This report sets out one aspect of the response and its impact – and the importance of local VCS infrastructure organisations to lead, coordinate, and support communities.

Most importantly it reflects the scale and breadth of the response, and we particularly want to thank the volunteers and the voluntary and community organisations who have stepped up time and again, to offer support where it has been needed most.

As a partnership, we believe that a more joined up voluntary and community sector, with local and national organisations better connected to work collaboratively will provide a more effective, locally relevant, and focused emergency response. By working together and fostering better connections local and national partners have brought together their respective skills and insight, created solutions and learned a lot, together. We have worked together to build bridges and develop reliable routes to engage with each other and government locally and nationally.

Now is the time to use what we've been through during the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that we are in the best possible position to keep people at the heart of our focus when the next shock hits, and that we have the relationships and connections to call on when they are needed. Understanding more about the risks and resilience of communities, knowing the right people to connect to, and continuing to build trust and insight are all key as the economic and social impacts of COVID-19 continue.

They are challenges we will overcome if we do it together.

Maddy Desforges
VCS Emergencies Partnership Co-Chair
& NAVCA CEO

Robyn Knox
VCS Emergencies Partnership Interim Director

Executive Summary

COVID-19 has dramatically altered the assumptions around emergency planning and responses. The Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership expanded its work considerably through 2020 and 2021, bringing national and local voluntary sector organisations together to construct a multi-tier framework of communication, intelligence and support. Drawing from accounts of VCS Emergencies Partnership supported work by 170 local infrastructure organisations, this report identifies five main findings.

1. ***Mobilising and supporting the sector***. LIOs have been intensively involved in supporting the emergency frontline response to COVID-19. On the one hand this occurs through recruiting, training, organising and managing the flow of large bodies of volunteers locally to address the need for 'people on the ground'. On the other it involves providing advice, guidance and support to help local VCS organisations navigate the uncertainties of the pandemic.

2. ***Coordination and joining up***. LIOs have played a vital and often leading role in coordinating responses to COVID-19 and in joining up services and support. VCS Emergencies Partnership has played a part in this process, by providing capacity at local level for engagement, but also as part of a channel of communication from national to local levels and vice versa. The intensified work of LIOs in cross-sector partnerships has been a notable feature of the pandemic, but in addition, LIOs have established, facilitated and supported thematic networks of community groups, voluntary organisations or individual practitioners, for example on mental health, or equalities, or digital inclusion.

3. ***The role of the VCS Emergencies Partnership***. VCS Emergencies Partnership was seen as an opportunity to better understand and act upon local intelligence, receive and provide invaluable peer support and to discuss the 'best practices' of other regions. It has brought together a diverse range of organisations working in different areas of the country to be able to learn from each other. By focussing upon a more integrated way of working between different levels of the VCS (hyper-local, local, regional, national) the VCS Emergencies Partnership, as reported by LIOs, has shown how local problems are intimately connected to national agendas.

4. ***The role and value of local infrastructure***. There are four main ways in which LIOs suggest they have been impacted through COVID-19: moving their operations online and increased demand for services, funding challenges and opportunities, extending their reach by the development of new and stronger relationships with local communities, other organisations and statutory partners, and some sense of recognition of the value of local infrastructure and the sector as a whole, demonstrated by invitations to take on leadership roles in local strategic forums. The strength of local infrastructure appears to be seen, from the reports, in the resources it can mobilise and build, including facilitating networks within and across sectors, but also its coordinating potential and role.

5. ***Learning, challenges and implications***. There are two main forms of learning throughout the reports: around the most pressing or surprising issues and needs facing communities as the pandemic has developed (on mental health in particular and also food insecurity); and around new understandings of how relationships, processes and systems can work for a more effective and joined up response. Some reports note frustration with existing resilience structures and duplication and confusion with some national response efforts.

Overall, the aims of the VCS Emergencies Partnership were realised in the activities of LIOs and their local partners described throughout the report, but it is important to note that activities tended to cut across a series of themes simultaneously. The range of VCS Emergencies Partnership processes discussed in the report should be thought of as working in and through each other as an integrated whole.

Introduction

The Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership was formed in 2017 to bring together local and national organisations to deliver a more coordinated response to emergencies. It emerged out of multiple crises where the voluntary and community sector was called upon in emergency relief effort, including the fire at Grenfell Tower. In mid-July 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic the government announced that a grant of £4.8m would be given to VCS Emergencies Partnership:

> *'to improve coordination across the voluntary and community sector through:*
>
> - *a network of regional hubs to provide additional capacity to the VCS when demand outstrips supply at a local level*
> - *a national cell to match and coordinate demand for volunteers across the country, and*
> - *a new data platform that pools sector-wide understanding of unmet need across the UK and informs a more effective response to emergencies'* (DCMS, 2020).

The funding has enabled the VCS Emergencies Partnership to expand its work during the pandemic to provide additional capacity to local response efforts. A structure involving regional 'multi-agency cells' and 'local liaison leads' was established to channel intelligence about new and unmet needs upwards and downwards. In each local area a local infrastructure organisation (LIO), such as a Council for Voluntary Service or Voluntary Action, a Rural Community Council or a Community Foundation, was supported to engage with the local VCS and statutory partners and to liaise with the VCS Emergencies Partnership structure.

The VCS Emergencies Partnership's work has shifted and expanded considerably during the COVID-19 pandemic, enabled by the government grant. As the initial funding came to an end in June 2021, local infrastructure organisations/liaison leads were asked to complete a short 'end of grant' monitoring form, to provide an account of their VCS Emergencies Partnership work and how they have engaged with others locally. The form invited LIOs to give a brief description of their VCS Emergencies Partnership activities over the period September 2020 to June 2021, and optionally to provide any case studies or impact stories enabled through the support. The breadth and richness of activity across some 170 local areas suggested the need to bring the reflections together in a single place.

Accordingly, this report discusses the findings of an analysis of 170 end of grant monitoring forms. The appendix provides a brief account of the methodological approach, and in the following pages we discuss, in turn,

- Mobilising and supporting the sector (section 2)
- Coordination and joining up (section 3)
- The role of the VCS Emergencies Partnership (section 4)
- The role and value of local infrastructure (section 5), and finally
- Learning, challenges and implications (section 6).

Mobilising and supporting the sector

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Over the duration of the VCS Emergencies Partnership local infrastructure organisations have been actively involved in supporting the frontline response to the COVID-19 pandemic. They and other VCS organisations have taken the initiative or been asked specifically to lead certain aspects of local activity, such as recruiting, training and assigning volunteers, or coordinating volunteers for vaccination centres and testing sites, distributing PPE and working with community health champions on public health messaging. LIOs have consistently mobilised and coordinated a range of different forms of support for local partners and organisations to meet a variety of emerging needs, both at the individual level and those of a more organisational or strategic nature, such as providing management advice, guidance and support to help local organisations navigate the uncertainties of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised important questions about the role of voluntary and community sector (VCS) within a period of national emergency. Two key considerations remain how the VCS could i) function as part of the response to the pandemic and the range of insecurities which have emerged from or worsened because of it, and ii) continue to provide much needed support for some of the most vulnerable groups in the country. A central aim of the VCS Emergencies Partnership is that of providing support to ensure that in times of national emergency or crisis, individuals' standards of living, health and security can be maintained. The extent to which LIOs were engaged in the coordination of volunteers and/or provided operational support to other local organisations depended upon the type of organisation the LIO was.

For example, some LIOs had a history prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of brokering volunteers through a Volunteer Centre and were more readily disposed to then adapt their services to new and emerging needs. In the first twelve months of the pandemic, the role and aims of the VCS Emergencies Partnership were somewhat different to that subsequently. Where the first phase of the response was *"focused on supporting our local partners and fulfilling their requests for help; the majority asking for volunteers"* (VCS Emergencies Partnership, 2021). As the pandemic evolved… *"a more comprehensive and strategic approach, which has included developing a range of insight tools to give our partners and stakeholders the information they need to make evidence-informed decisions"* (ibid) was assumed.
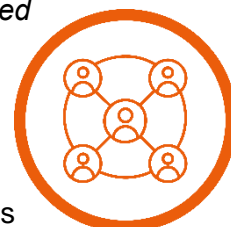
2.1. Mobilising and coordinating a voluntary response

The VCS Emergencies Partnership voluntary response is not simply about the numbers of volunteers recruited or mobilised during the pandemic, however impressive they may be, or of individuals helped and support tasks completed. A broader conception of mutual aid suggests there is value in any number of provisions and services provided by volunteers and local organisations to those in need. As LIO reports demonstrate, the physical practice of providing volunteers to meet local needs is the end product of a long line of overlapping processes. These involve the development of networks between different organisations, the joining up of services, recruitment drives, information sharing, training and coordination.

> **Mobilising volunteers**
>
> *"The local volunteering drive was a true example of local joint working by multiple agencies and people being mobilised to make a difference in response to the pandemic…"*
>
> LIO in the South of England

As a consequence of the furlough scheme and, unfortunately, the loss of employment through closure and redundancy, interest within volunteering opportunities increased precipitously over the first phase of the pandemic. Many different LIOs commented upon increases to volunteering numbers and shared some concern over a seemingly inevitable decline in figures which coincided with the easing of workplace restrictions. Where interest in volunteering opportunities was of particularly high demand, some LIOs and their partners used the opportunity of VCS Emergencies Partnership funding to redesign their digital volunteering practice. One LIO in the South of England centralised a range of different voluntary services into a single community action portal. This allowed the LIO to be able to receive and respond to requests for support in a more effective way and allowed resources to be better coordinated across the regions organisations. In a small number of cases, where LIOs did not previously operate a Volunteer Centre or run a volunteer management or recruitment service, the VCS Emergencies Partnership support had allowed them to begin doing so.

The primary form of volunteering activity discussed across the accounts of LIOs was that relating to the staffing of vaccination centres and mass testing sites. This was a local and regional response to a national political strategy and was largely coordinated alongside the leaders of local authorities, the NHS and Primary Care Networks (PCN). The role of the VCS was, for the most part, to recruit, coordinate and deploy volunteers to act as stewards and marshals at different regional sites. Individual tasks involved organising and directing large numbers of the public in a safe and effective manner. Volunteers were also regularly involved with lateral flow testing in local schools. Other roles were related to information sharing and involved distributing flyers in different locales, which intended to breakdown some commonly held misconceptions surrounding the vaccine and its potential side effects. In a similar way, a small number of LIOs reported that they had worked alongside local partners to encourage Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and other groups to be vaccinated.

Voluntary activities were not always directly related to the pandemic through testing and vaccination. Many LIOs reported that different phases of restrictions had created and worsened social and economic inequalities and made the lives of already vulnerable populations increasingly precarious. Volunteers were used to support services working to alleviate a range of different inequalities that were affected by the pandemic. With school closures across the nation, some LIOs distributed educational packs to the most disadvantaged children in their regions, often those subject to inequalities of class and ethnicity. As part of local Good Neighbour schemes, many

LIOs commented upon the value of matching volunteers with vulnerable residents to address issues of loneliness and isolation.

Relatedly, as part of a broadly defined strategy to prevent social isolation, a range of 'befriending' services were adopted, which included a phone call service, digital chat rooms and online events. Not only were the activities of LIOs addressing social isolation intended for older people, one LIO in the Midlands created a digital forum for children. This was particularly important given that many children continued to be required to participate in home learning without the opportunity to meet their friends. In a similar vein, for residents who were unable to access transport or delivery services in the same way as before the pandemic, LIOs had organised different forms of voluntary driver services to provide medicinal and food supplies.

LIOs often encouraged types of 'micro-volunteering' premised upon smaller, but still significant local needs: online training for local leaders to better understand the needs of the sector, boosted appeals for foodbank donations, encouraging people to continue to give blood, and efforts to celebrate the work of volunteers themselves. Whilst LIOs' response to the pandemic via volunteer services remain significant, it is important to discuss how LIOs have also supported the sector generally through the 'bread and butter' work of information sharing, advice and organisational support.

2.2. Supporting the sector

In their local areas LIOs are often leading the VCS COVID-19 response and have access to a range of organisational structures, networks, expertise, resources and facilities which individual VCS organisations alone do not have. The majority of LIOs acted as a central support hub for other local organisations. The type of supported provided by LIOs to local organisations, charities, community groups and village halls can be broadly thought of as relating to the distribution of assets, securing resources and employing expertise.

The distribution of assets and securing resources primarily concerns the ways in which LIOs were able to aid local organisations to secure funding, reorganise their services and infrastructures or provide a supporting role in the distribution of goods. In some cases, LIOs would simply guide local organisations to funding opportunities, but in others, LIOs played an active supporting role throughout the funding process, helping to identify potential streams, write bids and then develop an effective delivery plan.

To better understand the scale of issues facing grassroots organisations, LIOs frequently carried out snapshot or 'state of the sector' surveys to be able to identify support needs and provide more tailored support. It is the level of expertise and experience held by LIOs that was drawn upon by local organisations so that they would be better placed to ensure sustainability across a period of economic and social uncertainty. In one case, a LIO located in the North West had a presided over a successful bid for a substantial amount of funding from the local authority. This funding was then allocated to a number of local VCS organisations who were most vulnerable to financial difficulties across the area, helping them to avoid closure and continue to provide essential services such as food distribution throughout the pandemic.

Funding channelled through LIOs was consistently used to support local organisations tackle a range of different inequalities, from social isolation to mental health, which were worsened by COVID-19. An LIO working in the North East stated:

"We have advised our village halls at all stages of the pandemic regarding closing, re-opening and the rules in place. We have supported a number of halls to access capital grant and undertake refurbishment/improvement projects during lockdown, enabling them to improve their offers when allowed to re-open and re-establish themselves as the physical heart of their communities".

The way in which resources were mobilised by LIOs not only relates to funding and funding advice. LIOs also played a supporting role in the way of organisational development and expertise relating to internal organisational infrastructure. In the Midlands, a local group was supported by the LIO to achieve charitable status; the same LIO also acted as an accountable body for organisations who were unable to set up bank accounts on their own. The connections and networks held by LIOs were particularly important for linking together different local groups. They helped to create local partnerships where individual expertise can be joined up to create a more holistic mode of practice and to enter discussions with partners which may have been previously out of reach.

The pandemic also prompted many different organisations to move some or all of their practices online. In some instances, where local VCS groups did not possess the skills or knowledge of digital application, LIOs provided technical support and advice to aid service transfer. Similarly, LIOs provided operational support to local voluntary and community groups to adapt their service provisions to meet new and emerging needs. By focussing upon the values and expertise that local groups already possessed, LIOs could use their knowledge of the sector to broker conversations and relationships between different organisations. For example, one LIO working in the North supported a BAME organisation focussing upon racial and ethnic inequalities to become a contributor to a regional inequalities report. This is about making more visible and valuing the skills and work of hyper-local groups who are often locked out of more strategic conversations and outputs. How this was achieved, in large part, owes to the value of coordinating relationships between different local organisations.

Coordination and joining up

<div style="text-align: right;">**3**</div>

LIOs have played a vital role in helping to coordinate responses to COVID-19 and in joining up services and support. VCS Emergencies Partnership has played a part in this process, by providing some capacity at local level for engagement, but also as part of a channel of communication from national to local levels and vice versa.

The VCS Emergencies Partnership local reports show how LIOs have been involved in working with statutory partners, Local Resilience Forums (LRFs), emergency hubs/groups, other strategic partnerships throughout the pandemic, and in some cases have taken a lead on part of the local response and plans for 'recovery'. The intensified work of LIOs in cross-sector partnerships has been a notable feature of the pandemic, but in addition, LIOs have established, facilitated and supported thematic networks of community groups, voluntary organisations or individual practitioners, for example on mental health, or equalities, or digital inclusion.

3.1. Strategic engagement and leadership

Ordinarily local infrastructure organisations aim to have influence in local strategic forums and partnerships, bringing a voluntary and community sector perspective into discussions on strategies, plans and initiatives with local authorities, health bodies and others. They are often expected by their members to represent their interests and views, campaign on specific issues and to engage strategically, and are sometimes funded to do so. Yet their experience, involvement and influence can vary considerably, in terms of different arrangements and expectations locally, whether and where they have a seat at the table, how seriously their role is taken and how important they and the sector they seek to represent are regarded.

During COVID-19 that variation is evident, but there are signs from the VCS Emergencies Partnership reports that the sector's role, and that of LIOs, has been taken more seriously overall. Local statutory partners have been keen to use the whole range of resources in communities in support of the COVID-19 emergency response, from voluntary and community groups providing services, to mutual aid networks and individual volunteers. Local infrastructure organisations have frequently been central to the strategic and operational response. In many cases they have stepped up to take on specific coordinating roles, for example in LRFs, or have led new initiatives, working closely with local councils and health authorities.

Local infrastructure organisations have, for example, joined LRFs where they had not been involved before. Or they have taken responsibility for and chaired particular thematic sub-groups, working groups or cells, for example on mobilising and coordinating volunteers. Through these mechanisms the LIO shares information, experience and insight from the local voluntary sector, both about emerging and pressing household needs, and what organisations need on the ground to respond. In the West Midlands, for example, one LIO reported rather limited involvement in the LRF before COVID-19, but is now involved in various strategic, tactical and training and learning groups.

Engaging with Local Resilience Forums

"*A positive connection has been made…it was clear that there is now a strong desire for meaningful connection with VCS which is built into the LRF strategic plan".*

West Midlands LIO

LIOs are involved in sharing intelligence, facilitating discussion, and coordinating responses. One LIO in the East of England spoke of gaining increased recognition for the sector through this work, such that the voice of the sector had been heard in emergency planning. Some LIOs have been able to make the case for local 'resilience' grant funding for voluntary and community organisations, and have been involved as grant distributors.

More than this, though, local infrastructure organisations have been brought in to work directly on the emergency COVID-19 response. In many areas LIOs have been directly involved in establishing and running online Coronavirus information and advice hubs and portals, providing details of services and support and registration schemes for volunteers. Often LIOs were the first point of contact for community response enquiries. In the North West one LIO set up a 'Humanitarian Cell' comprised of local voluntary and community organisations, council leaders, and NHS staff to coordinate various waves of response to pandemic, from food distribution to vaccination.

As we have seen in section 2, volunteer brokerage expanded rapidly in the early months of the pandemic, particularly where Volunteer Centres had previously been cut back or closed down. In one South East town, a dedicated partnership brought the local authority together with more than 30 voluntary and community organisations to ensure support is provided to residents across the area. In the South West, a community response taskforce was set up and specifically funded in one authority to bring local infrastructure organisations together in a collaboration with the council and key service providing charities to manage the community response to COVID-19. Alongside information hubs and portals, LIOs have taken a lead on hosting online forums to bring interested parties together, information sharing events and training sessions.

Over time, the coordinating role appears to have shifted from day-to-day emergency response, for example in Tactical Cells or Coordination Groups, meeting weekly and even daily at the beginning of the crisis, to understanding and developing responses to emerging needs and planning for longer term recovery. For example, one South West LIO co-chairs a task and finish group for a county-wide COVID-19 recovery co-ordination plan. In one London borough a Coronavirus Community Hub has developed into a wider cross-sector Community Support Alliance "*focused on providing social support that delivers long-term reductions in inequality, combining resources, building on the successes of the Community Hub"*, and tasked with planning how best to support the post-pandemic recovery, and thus *"ensuring that there is a legacy of joint working from the pandemic".*

Elsewhere LIOs have taken the lead on setting up and chairing new food-related partnerships and developing food-for-all strategies, digital inclusion projects, and work to prioritise well-being, mental health and social isolation, including through social prescribing schemes.

The role of information and intelligence sharing comes across frequently and markedly in the VCS Emergencies Partnership reports. LIOs have been involved in a swathe of informal discussions, forums and networks, and in more formal alliances and partnerships, at which insight and understanding of pressing needs and practical ground-level challenges are shared, along with best practice and peer support. Provision has been mapped, and strengths, weaknesses and gaps in services have been identified against new needs. This has informed and led specifically to projects tackling emerging issues and new funding for the sector: in one London borough the vulnerabilities highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic have been discussed in a range of 'conversation cafes' to explore and develop a response. Information is generated and travels upwards: from voluntary organisations, community groups, staff and volunteers working at community level through to resilience forums and strategic partnerships and via LIOs to the VCS Emergencies Partnership nationally. It also travels downwards, from VCS Emergencies Partnership and through strategic partners and subsequently disseminated through bulletins and workshops. In these information flows LIOs act as conduits and mediators.

3.2. Networks, collaboration and joining up

A core function of LIOs involves establishing and facilitating networks between voluntary and community organisations, as a way of sharing expertise and insight, pooling resources and joining up initiatives. In combination this can build peer support, increase awareness of services, encourage collaboration and overcome duplication and unnecessary competition.

In emergencies, these aims become more important in the effort to respond quickly to immediate need. Many of the VCS Emergencies Partnership reports identify some of the existing work of LIOs of creating and taking part in a variety of networks of groups and organisations with common interests. Perhaps more significant has been the role of networking, collaboration and joining up through the pandemic response itself. LIOs report that they have been involved in bringing groups together, with varying degrees of formality, in order to create a more coherent and mutually reinforcing array of support in the sector during COVID-19. This approach operates at different levels, but also through different issues and thematic groups.
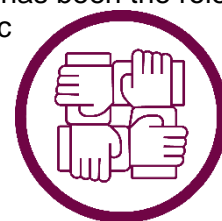
At its broadest level, LIOs hosted and facilitated regular VCS forums across the sector, or worked to share information through existing mechanisms such as VCS Assemblies. There are examples of LIOs convening regular peer support groups of leaders or CEOs, particularly of organisations deeply involved in the pandemic response. One East Midlands LIO acted as an anchor organisation for a partnership approach to the pandemic, working with the local council and local area groups to tackle multiple disadvantages relating to the pandemic. This involved working with others in the LRF to gain better awareness of very localised effects of COVID-19. In one area of the North West mutual aid and community responses were mapped to gain a much closer ground-level understanding of resources available at a hyper-local level. Network facilitation has involved working to support groups supporting particular communities or addressing specific issues. An LIO in the East Midlands has been working directly with BAME communities and groups to address health inequalities, access to services and provide trusted vaccine information.

It seems that experience at local level suggests that many community response efforts to COVID-19 occur in isolation or are at least relatively unaware of complementary work being undertaken by other organisations nearby. In response, many LIOs refer to their efforts to bring groups together. One South East LIO reported on how they helped local Councils for Voluntary Service and Volunteer Centres link up with highly localised Good Neighbour schemes operating across a primarily rural area. The former were often asked to support vulnerable individuals during the early months of the crisis, while the latter were often in need of more volunteers. Bringing them together pooled resources for a more effective and joined up response - an initial information sharing session has continued as a monthly meeting.

Another area in the Yorkshire and the Humber region reports adding a new Befriending Providers Group to its existing range of specialist networks, encouraging organisations to work together and share information and good practice. Much of this has by necessity been digitally enabled. One East Midlands LIO facilitated an 'Emergency Aid Network' to enable very local groups to come together, usually via WhatsApp, to share ideas and information about supporting residents.

Other LIOs have worked intensively to bring food banks and other initiatives involved in food distribution together. At first this aimed to secure food donations and to redirect food supplies and volunteers to where they were most needed. As the pandemic progressed, however, strategic networks of food providers have been established to provide mutual support, to generate ideas for new projects and to develop long term responses to food insecurity. One network started as an informal group of people and organisations interested in tackling food poverty but has since been recognised for its work as a broader Community Support Network.

A variety of mental health forums and collaborations have been established or enhanced, primarily to understand emerging needs and how best to formulate a joined up response. For example, an LIO in one West Midlands authority brokered a joined up referrals process between three established mental health providers. Some LIOs report a willingness to continue networking informally beyond the pandemic, through the structures and mechanisms developed in the VCS Emergencies Partnership, in order to keep sharing experiences and exploring possible joint projects.

Although most of the local reports refer to networking and other joining up efforts within their respective local authority boundaries, the extent of collaborative work with neighbouring authorities and LIOs, and within two-tier structures and across city-regions, is also noticeable. In part this has been enabled and encouraged by the multi-level liaison framework developed by VCS Emergencies Partnership, which has had the effect of creating regular space for dialogue between LIOs, but it also builds on prior relationships. It appears that the pandemic has brought some LIOs closer together to share information and to work on joint interests and agendas, for example on food strategies.

The role of the VCS Emergencies Partnership

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The VCS Emergencies Partnership is about *"bringing together local and national organisations to deliver a more coordinated response to emergencies"* (VCS Emergencies Partnership, 2021). How this was achieved in practice, and as reported by LIOs across the country, was largely dependent upon the development of information chains and information sharing networks between different spatial scales of the VCS. This is a key form of support negotiated by LIOs as it ensures that the voices and needs of local organisations are heard and recognised at the strategic level. Whilst simultaneously informing the lower sections of the VCS structure about national strategies, policy and practices and helping them to navigate different processes and make organisational decisions.

The primary way in which information was cascaded to local organisations took the form of newsletters, emails, and local meetings. One particularly interesting example was provided by a LIO operating in the Midlands, who summarised and simplified complex COVID-19 guidelines for village halls and community groups which allowed them to reopen in a COVID-safe way. Across LIO accounts, the role of the VCS Emergencies Partnership was frequently spoken about as an opportunity to better understand and act upon local intelligence, receive and provide invaluable peer support and to discuss the 'best practices' of other regions. In a sentence, the VCS Emergencies Partnership brought together a diverse range of organisations working in different areas of the country to be able to learn from each other.

A series of mechanisms were drawn upon by LIOs to gather information surrounding the experiences of their local partners. Primarily this was achieved using the pulse check survey – a frequent cross-sector method of understanding local needs. Pulse check surveys and the information provided within them by LIOs was fed into VCS Emergencies Partnership structures, and feature as part of discussions within regional strategic meetings such as the 'multi-agency cells' (MAC), and regional meetings of LIOs through NAVCA. Many LIOs thought that the VCS Emergencies Partnership provided the opportunity to share challenges and stories which helped to deliver better practice in the future. By focussing upon a more integrated way of working between different levels of the VCS (hyper-local, local, regional, national) the VCS Emergencies Partnership, as reported by LIOs, has shown how local problems are intimately connected to national agendas.

It was frequently reported that VCS Emergencies Partnership funding and networking has opened pathways from which local organisations were previously cut off. LIOs suggest that the VCS Emergencies Partnership has ensured that local expertise is taken seriously. A reflection from an organisation working in the East Midlands is particularly illuminating:

"With fellow Liaison Leads (some of whom I did not know or did not know well before joining VCSEP) – invaluable peer support and intelligence sharing which helped me deal with the many challenges of the last year. It was also helpful to know that support requests could be submitted via the MAC although in [region] we did not call upon this other than a much-appreciated delivery of PPE, which I was able to disseminate to VCSE colleagues all over the county".

The VCS Emergencies Partnership was particularly useful for identifying trends within the local area, understanding how this may relate to other regions and then being able to escalate the needs of grassroots organisations and their clients if needed. LIOs frequently reported that being a member of the VCS Emergencies Partnership enabled them to respond more efficiently and effectively to local needs, whilst having the assurances of the partnerships' structures to act as a 'safety net' for larger and more complex problems. Not only was this to the benefit of those individuals who accessed VCS support. The VCS Emergencies Partnership reduced the psycho-social impacts of the pandemic upon organisational staff themselves, by alleviating some of the stresses and worries that are part of any frontline response to an emergency.

The impact of the VCS Emergencies Partnership

"Receiving funding through the VCS-EP enabled us to prioritise engagement with this important network, giving us essential resources to fund dialogue and strategic networking at a time when there were so many other pressures on our capacity. It enabled us to meet as a group which rarely met before, to share intelligence, share ideas, coordinate communications, commiserate and offer mutual support to each other as charity leaders at a time of great stress".

LIO in the South of England

Here we find the VCS Emergencies Partnership acting not only as a form of infrastructure providing advice and strategic thinking, but a network which is premised upon making the lives of organisations on the ground easier and less demanding at a time of great uncertainty.

However, this view was not shared by all LIOs. In a small number of cases, there was a sense of frustration reported by LIOs as to the relevance and effectiveness of VCS Emergencies Partnership processes relative to their organisation. Smaller LIOs who had far less to report through pulse check surveys and regional MAC meetings questioned how relevant their role in the VCS Emergencies Partnership was. For them, many of the issues identified in the hyper-local and local could be resolved through smaller scale methods and services. One LIO working in the South commented upon the unintended consequences of the VCS Emergencies Partnership.

Creating better networks and relationships between local organisations meant there was less need for local problems to be escalated to external sources. Nonetheless, across the vast majority of LIO reports, the value of the VCS Emergencies Partnership and the impacts it has had, and will continue to have, upon the voluntary and community sector are clearly evident.

The role and value of local infrastructure

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How has the pandemic made an impact on LIOs themselves, and in particular how have they been affected by their involvement in local response efforts and in VCS Emergencies Partnership structures? VCS Emergencies Partnership local reports highlight four main ways in which LIOs suggest they have been impacted: their operations and services, funding, relationships and recognition.

First, LIOs note how, like so many VCS organisations, they had to quickly move services online and accommodate home working – in effect to develop a new operating model. The intensity of the early pandemic response, involving high-level coordination of humanitarian and volunteer support, coupled with increasing numbers of enquiries from frontline voluntary organisations and community groups, meant that service demand increased rapidly. In the East Midlands, one LIO reported that *"the need for our support rose, we went from an average of 15 calls per day to 30-40 plus per day...some of our staff were also self-isolating and/or shielding and we had to commit funding to buying in additional capacity in order to continue to support our work"*. COVID-19, the LIO reports *"has catastrophically impacted on our business plan and income generation plans for this year. Stripping back our resource at a time when the communities we serve need our support and adaptability more than ever"*.

A neighbouring LIO suggests that emergency planning as a whole before the pandemic had been largely based on the risk of flooding in the area. The response would thus be to mobilise resources to bring communities together in places of safety, minimising the risk to life and property and managing 'spontaneous' volunteers to help with flood relief work. The injunction to 'stay home' and avoid contact as COVID-19 escalated turned this assumption on its head and required a rapid 're-wiring' of the emergency planning response. Another LIO considered that the development of a more joined up approach as a result of VCS Emergencies Partnership to be valuable and necessary for all future practice.

For some LIOs, in the absence of other provision, COVID-19 meant, as we have seen, reopening a volunteer centre or establishing a new volunteer brokerage service. For others, new services and projects were developed, around isolation, befriending and mental health. In Yorkshire and the Humber one LIO notes how they were able to access funds to respond to identified issues locally, such as food poverty, funds to counter financial hardship and PPE.

While VCS Emergencies Partnership support and funding is not the cause of these developments, there is some evidence that involvement in the programme brought a little bit of flexibility and breathing space for LIOs to continue their work, or at least to relieve some of the pressure facing staff, who, as discussed, were now participating in an extensive range of networks, forums, working groups and partnerships. VCS Emergencies Partnership work also enabled organisations to identify pressing needs and make the case to secure additional funding, for example accessing emergency grant schemes from the National Lottery Community Fund, central government, local authorities and local community foundations.

> **Making enduring connections and relationships**
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> *"the most significant impact to date has been the wealth of shared knowledge that partners bring as well as the connections made with and between organisations... We have learnt more than we have contributed and expect that many relationships forged through the project will continue beyond the end of the programme".*
>
> North West LIO

Second, and more significantly, many LIOs highlight the development of new and enhanced relationships and stronger connections within the sector, and between themselves and statutory partners. This is partly the result of an all-hands-on-deck 'partnership of necessity' as the scale of the crisis became apparent (Macmillan and Ellis Paine, 2020), but has also been cemented and reinforced by subsequent involvement in VCS Emergencies Partnership structures and processes. The key features emphasised in the VCS Emergencies Partnership reports are around communications and information sharing, peer support and willingness to learn from each other, coordinating practical action and overcoming barriers, and joining up services. There is some hope that better relationships and new ways of working can be a lasting legacy of the crisis, and can extend into planning for recovery.

Several LIOs report that COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on their finances, financial outlook and opportunities ahead, but not necessarily in the same direction. One LIO in the South West reports dramatic early income losses through rent, room hire, training, car parking and trading income. Another in the East Midlands describes how *"The biggest challenge to the organisation was to reduce our costs so that forecast budget deficit didn't deplete our reserves to damaging levels, at the same time as responding to the many and varied calls for help and the overwhelming amount of information coming from central government and public health...To protect our reserves we furloughed those staff whose posts were reliant on earned income and absorbed the work around the team."* By the year end the LIO's turnover had doubled through its COVID-19 work, funded by grants and an increase in unsolicited donations. A neighbouring LIO reports how a precarious pre-pandemic financial situation had been transformed through its work during COVID-19: "*Across the pandemic we literally reinvented the organisation, as we went into the pandemic with a black cloud of reduced funding hanging over us".* A third notes how the pandemic has led the LIO to become more structured to help maintain long term stability and generate income, creating what they regard as a more robust funding strategy as a result, in part, of involvement in VCS Emergencies Partnership.

Finally, there is some evidence across the VCS Emergencies Partnership reports that the value of local infrastructure has to some degree been recognised in the pandemic by other local stakeholders, particularly local authorities and health partners. The strength of local infrastructure appears to be seen, from the VCS Emergencies Partnership reports, in the resources it can mobilise and build, including facilitating networks within and across sectors, but also its coordinating potential and role. Through this it has enabled the local voluntary and community sector to showcase its

assets and strengths. Other than through positive feedback, commendations and community awards, evidence for the valued role of local infrastructure is mainly demonstrated through new positions and responsibilities in strategic forums and partnerships.

In one London borough, for example, the LIO observes impressive partnership working, "*especially the way that the VCS has been given a seat at the table as an equal partner".* After promoting the role of the VCS Emergencies Partnership in one area of the South East, a liaison lead was asked to join several Local Resilience Forum sub-groups, focusing on vulnerable persons, the food and logistics group, and the voluntary sector more broadly. Coupled with regular catch-up meetings with local statutory bodies, the lead suggests that greater engagement provides statutory partners with a better understanding of the strengths and limitations of the voluntary and

> **Valuing the VCS**
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> *"Overall the value of the VCS has increased and the ability to work quickly/be flexible, among other things are now more valued".*
>
> London LIO

community sector: *"These links are now influencing discussions about "recovery" and the role that VCSEs could and should be playing in the future"*. Funding from VCS Emergencies Partnership supported the time of a CEO of one LIO in the North East to contribute to the local strategic COVID-19 response, sharing insights from across the sector with statutory partners. This has continued by advocating for the interests of the local sector in shaping of local recovery plans, for example by chairing Public Health COVID-19 Recovery meetings.

Recognising the value of local infrastructure through the pandemic, and with it the local sector, appears to be part of a journey for some areas. In another South East authority, a VCSE task group of key organisations formed in the immediate pressure of the first lockdown supported the local response by providing insight and feedback and coordinating the deployment of resources. A new VCSE Partnership Board was formed to maintain the positive momentum of shared purpose and working together, and consequently, in partnership with the local authority, a new three year VCSE strategic framework and action plan has been developed. The process appears to have cemented stronger strategic relationships to represent the sector, and aims to *"plan for more joined-up thinking for future emergency responses and continue to drive recovery forward in a more coordinated manner"*.

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Learning, challenges and implications

There are two main forms of learning throughout the reports: around the most pressing or surprising issues and needs facing communities as the pandemic has developed, and around new understandings of how relationships, processes and systems can work for a more effective and joined up response. First, involvement in VCS Emergencies Partnership processes, such as pulse check surveys, and also the general LIO work of gathering intelligence of community needs, through 'State of the Sector' questionnaires, workshops and forums, appears to have provided an alert system for identifying vulnerabilities and pressing needs. Concerns around mental health and wellbeing in communities are the most frequently noted area of growing and unmet needs, in many cases leading to specific action or projects in response. But mental health is quickly accompanied by a broader concern with poverty, rendered more visible during the crisis and manifest, for example, in growing hunger and increasing demand on food banks. Other new issues specifically mentioned include digital exclusion and access to online services, isolation and housing. The reports indicate learning and growing concern about the impact of the pandemic on specific groups, including BAME communities, asylum seekers and older people.

The VCS Emergencies Partnership local reports also highlight learning about the emergency response system in action as the pandemic unfolded. The role of pulse check surveys and liaison structures are seen, for the most part, to have provided a valuable framework for reporting, understanding and responding to needs locally and nationally. One LIO in the South West places this in a wider context: *"From an intelligence perspective this grant has enabled us to see a bigger picture and compare and contrast our demands with those elsewhere in the UK. [It has] enabled us to demonstrate both the similarities and often the stark differences between us and other parts of the UK."*

Some understanding of the strengths and difficulties of voluntary and community organisations are revealed through the reports. A sense of organisational fragility is noted, with some organisations closing down or contracting, although this is not universal. The main concern appears to be how sustainable organisations may be in what looks likely to be the constrained financial context of pandemic recovery – they may be under pressure to provide more services, but maybe challenged financially in doing so, and where the intense redirection of funding towards emergency support dries up in a recovery phase. They may also be under strain operationally: a further frequently mentioned learning point is about the mental health and wellbeing of staff and volunteers, facing or experiencing burn out after months of intense activity and pressure on services.

The reports highlight how important the ongoing development of relationships within and between sectors has been during the pandemic. One LIO noted how emergency planning scenarios revealed just how unaware organisations were of each other. There was a call to understand the specific challenges and conditions facing each sector, and communities themselves, and to work together to build upon what they each can do best. There was hope that new systems and ways of working would continue beyond the immediate crisis of the pandemic. This was laced with a worry, however, that these new approaches may quickly dissolve, as expressed by one LIO in the East Midlands: *"Overall we have been pleased to be part of the VCSEP network and hope that we can continue this involvement in the future. We have gained much from meeting with colleagues across the region, from sharing good practice to just having someone to listen who understands what you are going through. I know there are things in place to ensure the next phases are co-designed. I hope we can continue to develop the relationship between local and national and that it doesn't revert back to type"*.

A number of challenges and frustrations are also raised through the reports. The main immediate practical concern was that the surge in volunteer numbers seen in the pandemic to date may quickly fall away as restrictions are eased and flexible working and furlough schemes are withdrawn. This is in a context of difficulties for some organisations in continuing to meet higher demand for services and support. LIOs were involved in targeted call outs for more volunteers for vaccination centres over the summer months of 2021.

Some reports exhibit frustration with existing resilience structures and new response efforts, referring to blurry boundaries of responsibility between LRFs and other local authority structures combined with duplication and confusion between national and local responses. There was some concern over the apparent 'parachuting' in of national initiatives, which complicated the local response. Close monitoring, communication and action has been required to ensure complementarity between different structures. In one example, an LIO worked with colleagues through the VCS Emergencies Partnership to circumvent an LRF call for volunteers for surge testing, which was regarded locally as unnecessary – the lack of information and general contact from the LRF was a source of great frustration.

In another area VCS Emergencies Partnership liaison mechanisms helped manage the conflict between supporting volunteers locally and national initiatives to recruit and deploy volunteers. In the South West an LIO observed that *"our engagement with the Local Resilience Forum has been non-existent. Our most productive linkage came through directly reaching out to the local authority civil protection officers who we developed a good relationship with particularly in relation to the mass vaccination programmes. The main LRF boards or 'volunteer' structures have not been visible in this process and this is in direct comparison to other areas..."*.

Throughout this report a series of different processes have been discussed in relative isolation from one another – for example, mobilising the sector, coordinating responses, and joining up initiatives. What should be borne in mind, however, is that the way in which the aims of the VCS Emergencies Partnership were realised in the activities of LIOs and their local partners tended to cut across a series of themes simultaneously. The range of processes discussed in the report should be thought of as working in and through each other as an integrated whole.

This reflection illuminates how the VCS Emergencies Partnership has allowed for better relationships to be established across the voluntary and community sector at different scales – locally, regionally and nationally - and how a more joined up emergency response affords more effective and efficient practice. Not only this, the value of the VCS Emergencies Partnership framework and how relationships established over the duration of the funding period are hoped to continue into future are brought into dialogue with the identification of a range of localised issues.

> **An integrated approach**
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> *"There has been great value in connecting with other Local Infrastructure Organisation Partners across the region with other CVS partners. Our regular meetings have had a focus on COVID and the emergency response, however it is probable that these links and relationships will last beyond the pandemic. We have been able to identify a number of priorities which have emerged across the region: mental health support for volunteers and voluntary sector staff, food distribution, fuel poverty, vaccination rollout and digital exclusion".*
>
> LIO in the South of England

The ways in which local organisations were able to contribute to the local pandemic response relied heavily upon the information chains and expertise established between networks of larger partners who themselves constituted part of the VCS Emergencies Partnership strategic infrastructure.

References

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Appendix 1: Methodology

<div style="text-align:right">**A1**</div>

This report is based on the analysis of 170 'end of grant' monitoring forms completed in June 2021 by local VCS infrastructure organisations (LIOs) in England, as part of the VCS Emergencies Partnership's work supporting COVID-19 emergency responses at local level. The analysis was undertaken in three stages as follows:

I.   *Analysis framework.* The researchers jointly read and analysed an initial sample of 10 monitoring forms from the total of 170, comparing notes to identify eight analytical themes against which to record subsequent material.

   1.   *Volunteering and mutual aid.* References to registering, recruiting and supporting volunteers, matching them to tasks and organisations.

   2.   *Role of and support for local organisations.* References to the work of and issues encountered by local VCS groups, and the support to them provided by the LIO.

   3.   *Strategic engagement and leadership.* Where the LIO or liaison lead had been involved in working with statutory partners, Local Resilience Forums, emergency hubs/groups, other strategic partnerships; or has evidently taken a lead on part of the local response. This also includes any involvement in future planning and 'recovery'.

   4.   *Networks, collaboration and joining up.* Where the LIO has established, facilitated or supported thematic networks of groups, organisations or individual practitioners, for example on mental health, or equalities, or digital inclusion.

   5.   *VCS Emergencies Partnership comments.* Any specific comments about the role of the VCS Emergencies Partnership structures (nationally, regionally etc), and what involvement in VCS Emergencies Partnership enabled; information flows from national to local, and local to national.

   6.   *Impact on the LIO itself.* Where LIOs report something about how the LIO itself has changed or been affected through COVID-19 and/or the VCS Emergencies Partnership involvement.

   7.   *Value of infrastructure.* Comments on the value of infrastructure/LIO, whether it has gained increased/decreased visibility and recognition amongst local stakeholders.

   8.   *Learning and challenges.* Indications of new learning arising in the reports – things discovered that were not appreciated before, or new issues and experiences of specific groups; reports of difficulties, frustrations, challenges in any of the work.

II.   *Individual forms.* Using a simple excel spreadsheet, the researchers read all individual forms and identified key points, material and illustrative examples and quotes according to the analytical themes.

III.   *Analysis across each themes.* Each theme was reviewed to draw out the main messages and overall findings which come through the end of grant reports.