Come hell or high water - the partnership bringing large and small charities together in crises

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The Emergencies Partnership hopes to breakdown the silos that have previously affected the charity sector’s response to disasters in the UK. Rebecca Cooney reports
Early in the morning of 14 June 2017, as Grenfell Tower continued to blaze, community groups, small charities, mosques and churches were springing into action, offering supplies, support and shelter for those who had survived the fire.

Alongside them were volunteers from the British Red Cross, a humanitarian charity with almost 150 years of experience in dealing with the aftermath of disasters. The charity’s response to the fire was massive – overall, 1,000 volunteers were deployed – but just a few months later its chief executive, Mike Adamson, would admit it that it took “too long to reach out to the real grass-roots groups and that cost us in terms of trust through the process”.

In a blog for the think tank NPC in September 2017, Adamson said there was a lesson for the charity “about how we engage with a community that we do not know”.

Fundraising also became a major issue. Ordinary people, moved by the horrific images of the charred tower, set up online fundraising pages and suddenly found themselves responsible for hundreds of thousands of pounds in donations, with no idea of how to get it to those affected.

After the Grenfell fire and that year’s terrorist attacks in London and Manchester, calls began for something similar to a domestic Disasters Emergency Committee to be set up to coordinate a response to future events.

A better response
Jane Ide, chief executive of the local infrastructure body Navca, was at the meeting and said that, as well as the immense emotion and frustration she saw in the room, there was also a "palpable commitment" to try to work together.

Two key strands of work soon emerged from the discussions: one around fundraising and the other around the immediate and ongoing response on the ground.

The National Emergencies Trust was launched to deal with the fundraising challenge earlier this month. An independent entity with its own board, it plans to launch appeals and become a single point for donations and distributions after an emergency.

Meanwhile, the Emergencies Partnership, chaired by Adamson with Ide as vice-chair, is a group of 15 organisations that aims to improve coordination of the sector at national and local levels before, during and after emergencies, while empowering communities to help shape the process.

Members of the group include the Salvation Army, Muslim Aid, the St John Ambulance and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. It also includes UK Community Foundations and Navca, which can ensure that smaller groups that are closer to the community get their voices heard when disaster strikes.

And while the NET is still waiting for its first outing, the Emergencies Partnership has quietly already got to work: it had a key role in the response to the Whaley Bridge dam evacuations in August and during the recent flooding in Yorkshire.
Just last weekend, Ide was alerted via a partnership WhatsApp message to the outbreak of a fire in a student accommodation block in Bolton. In turn, she was able to contact a Navca member in the area to find out what assistance it needed.

The idea behind the partnership’s response, Adamson says, is to try to ensure “a human approach” to emergencies.

“Very quickly in most situations, whether fire or flood or terror attacks, communities and people start to think about what they need in order to recover,” he says. “For us, it’s about making sure they have some choice in what assistance they receive and how they receive it.

“We need to pay attention to the practical areas of putting out the fire, but also the emotional and social needs in the period after an emergency.”

This approach is easier to achieve, Ide says, where there is a genuine appreciation for the local voluntary sector.

The partnership will also be able to support charities in areas affected by disasters, Ide says. For example, when they might not be used to dealing with emergencies or find their resources stretched or when they are unable to access their premises because of flooding.

The partnership can use its networks to get an in-depth understanding of the need on the ground and provide feedback to the NET to help it decide whether or not to launch an appeal.

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about the impact it wants to have, the only way it can meet the challenge is to collaborate with government and with each other.

"What’s fantastic working with someone like Jane is she’s helping us bridge into a whole ecosystem and network that we couldn’t do on our own as a large national charity,” he says.

"We need to move beyond sharing information into sharing space, purpose and resources, and that requires all of us to change.”

Ide has been impressed by the humility with which the BRC has approached the project, saying that all the organisations involved have had to lay aside their egos in order to collaborate successfully.

"This is very much not about sitting here and pointing at the big guys and saying ‘do it differently’ or ‘you need to work with us’,” she says. “It’s absolutely about ensuring that all parts of that partnership are really thinking about what we can do better and how we can share.”

But Ide concedes that there will never be a perfect emergency response.

"We’re always going to feel we could have done better,” she says. "We’re never going to come to the end of this journey, but huge strides forwards are being made in terms of response, preparation and planning.

"This a fantastic example of large and small organisations coming together, and we hope that it will encourage other people to do the
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