



The role of the DASS and social workers in disaster recovery (refreshed 2024)

Background

Every Local Authority has a legal duty to have policies and procedures in place to respond to disaster including critical incidents, serious injuries, explosion, flood, poisoning, electrocution, fire, release of radioactivity and chemical spills. The impact of globalisation, terrorism, displacement of people and humanitarian disasters such as the pandemic has directly impacted on the delivery of planned emergency responses in England and in delivering long term support responses for individuals and communities. Both the Director of Adult Social Services (DASS) and social workers play an integral role in disaster responses.

The DASS response

In London the London Resilience Partnership Humanitarian Assistance Framework (v 7 November 2023) clearly sets out the 'Humanitarian Assistance Lead Officer' (HALO) role. This is not the case across other areas and the resilience procedures are also different in Manchester. In the event of a disaster the London Handbook for HALOs (April 2024) describes the responsibilities of the DASS and HALO:

"The Director of Adults Social Services (DASS) is responsible for ensuring that the local authority and its partners have the capacity to provide effective humanitarian assistance should a major incident or emergency happen".

"The HALO is appointed in a particular incident to provide strategic leadership to the multi-agency humanitarian response. The HALO is usually a Director of Adults Social Services but can also be a director in Children's Services or Public Health depending on the type of incident."

The HALO is responsible for:

- **Championing the needs of people affected by the incident**
 - Ensuring there is a comprehensive and ongoing humanitarian impact assessment and that hard-to-reach people affected by the incident are not missed by the response.
 - Ensuring that everyone affected by the incident has good access to:
 - existing statutory, voluntary and community services and support
 - humanitarian assistance support established in response to the incident for all people affected, such as a helpline or Humanitarian Assistance Centre.
 - Ensuring that people who are critically affected have good access to more intensive or dedicated support, such as a keyworker service.

- Ensuring that humanitarian assistance is given sufficient priority in the overall management of the incident.
- **Ensuring that all relevant partners are engaged effectively in the humanitarian response**
 - Convening a multi-agency Humanitarian Assistance Steering Group.
 - Ensuring that all relevant partners are represented on the HASG or its sub-groups.
 - Ensuring that the HASG functions effectively.
 - Ensuring that there is effective communication between the HASG and other groups, particularly the Strategic Coordination Group (SCG), the Recovery Coordination Group, and the Mass Fatalities Steering Group (MFSG).
 - Ensuring that suitably qualified people are appointed to key humanitarian assistance roles.
- **Adapting activities to the requirements to each stage of response and recovery.**
 - Reviewing structures in the transition from the Response to the Recovery stage
 - Supporting commemoration and memorial activities
- **Ensuring that responders, including volunteers, are well supported.**

However, the experience of the DASSs involved in post disaster management following the Manchester Arena bombing and the Grenfell Tower fire, suggests there should be greater clarity on the HALO role in all Local Authorities so that any DASS stepping into the space would know what their responsibilities would be. It was also felt that clarity is needed on the HALO role in these situations so that other key partners understood the role and how it links with the Emergency Planning Response in a wider disaster.

Given the size of the HALO responsibilities (and the number of Local Authorities who have one individual responsible for the DASS and Director of Children's Services (DCS) statutory roles) it is very important for the HALO to be appropriately supported and resourced.

The social worker role

Social workers play an integral role in disaster responses. Their skills, knowledge and expertise are essential requisites in an emergency. Their professional responsibilities and expertise include supporting survivors, the bereaved and those directly and indirectly affected by an emergency.

Social workers are central to the key stages of disaster management and support: prevention, immediate relief, and recovery, advocating for equality of access to services, and ensuring principles of equality, social justice and human rights are always adhered to. Further responsibilities include advice and support regarding reconstruction, access to financial, health, emotional and practical support, family reunification and prompting self-care. Social workers also play a crucial role as coordinators of services, especially when delivering a joined-up response to individual victim- survivors. Social workers are integral to facilitating and coordinating an integrated strategic and operational disaster delivery service including sharing and supporting families and individuals when receiving difficult news, assessing need,

coordination services, signposting and enabling and supporting individuals, families, and communities in coping with difficult traumatic circumstances – they can be the key workers in disaster responses.

A cohesive disaster response must consider the role of social workers as key workers, working in partnership with community groups, voluntary and independent sector, central and local government departments, health agencies and emergency response organisations at a local, regional, and national level. Identified strategic leads for social work emergency out of hours response teams should be included in all emergency planning procedures with clearly identified functions and responsibilities including pre, during and post disaster emergency recovery phases.

A key worker role in post disaster also supports community recovery and by ‘standing side by side with’ communities supports the development of a sustainable cohesive future. It is important to share and develop knowledge, skills, best practice and learning from disasters nationally and internationally and from social workers who have been directly involved in emergency responses as well as from the communities they have served. The impact of disasters not only affect those directly affected but also individuals, families, groups, and local communities locally, nationally, and internationally. The importance of evidence and community-led recovery and involving local communities is critical to effective social work in disaster responses and post recovery.

The ‘key worker’ role (a snapshot)

Learning from both an international and domestic context the role of the social worker as a key worker provides a critical key contact for individuals or families and is underpinned by a rights and strength-based approach to meeting people’s needs.

The key worker role incorporates many functions and skills, at any given time the key worker will be a facilitator, coordinator, community and resource mobiliser, negotiator, advocate and will:

- act as the primary contact for an individual or family ensuring they have all contact details of the key worker both in person and in writing.
- work with individuals/families to agree how they wish to engage and the level of contact they would like.
- work in partnership with the Family Liaison Officer (FLO) or equivalent role to ensure bereaved relatives are supported to access emotional and practical support (including finances, accommodation, flights, visas, immigration documentation) and to work closely with the coroner’s office with all aspects of recovery and investigation process.
- ensure that individuals/families are supported in the way that they wish to access health, housing, and educational support (which may include practical visits, arranging transport and financial support).
- work in partnership with the identified housing link worker to take a joint lead on housing and temporary accommodation.
- be the main contact for an individual and family 24/7 (on a rota basis) providing access to emotional and practical support as required and signpost to specialist support.

- ensure individuals and families are connected to community groups, reconnect to friendship and family contacts as they request.
- identify any safeguarding or areas of risk and ensure these matters are managed through agreed processes.
- identify any safeguarding needs from a protected characteristic perspective and ensure equal right of access to support services (including those with No Recourse to Public Funds).
- ensuring appropriate and effective communication needs are met, including for example access to translation services and sign language.

All the above will be dependent on each individual and/or family member – the pace of engagement and role responsibilities will need to be explored in a sensitive and professional manner.

Recommendations for considerations regarding the DASS role

1. There should be one nationally agreed resilience framework (which sets out the responsibilities of the HALO) but with flexibility for locally agreed resilience procedures.
2. Each local authority Civil Contingency/disaster recovery plan should include the HALO responsibilities and which statutory role/s will take these on in disaster recovery. It is important to note the different Local Authority structures which exist (e.g., County, Unitary, City), as well as health and social care partnerships, and therefore the different contexts some HALO workers must navigate. This role ought to be adequately funded to ensure that workers have enough time to fully dedicate to the role, without other departments suffering as a result.
3. Local Authority induction of a new DASS/DCS should include meeting with the emergency planning team, to develop an understanding of each of their roles and how they will work together in disaster recovery.
4. That Local Authorities develop a protocol with key partners for the HALO to call upon/delegate to internal or external resources.
5. Ongoing CPD and training for the disaster role in emergency response social work.

Recommendations for consideration regarding the social worker role:

1. Local Authority Emergency/Civil Contingency plans to incorporate the role of social workers as key workers in disaster response, including immediate relief, recovery, and reconstruction. (resources may need to be sought from government to support this).
2. The designated HALO to promote and implement the role of social workers as 'key workers' in disaster responses.
3. Local Authorities (including all types – for example County, Unity and those listed previously – as well as health and social care partnerships) to produce and

disseminate guidance on the expectations of staff, specific disaster roles, training and support that will be required to staff pre, during and post disaster event.

4. Integrated training is developed for communities and organizations involved in emergency planning, incorporating curricula about the role of the social worker as a key worker.
5. To ensure the voice of people with lived experience is incorporated into all staff training.
6. An annual conference on the role of disasters in emergencies to be hosted by BASW in collaboration with partners and people with lived experience. The aim will be developing national good practice guidance for statutory, voluntary, community and independent organisations.
7. Mandatory training for all social workers in disaster emergency response work, developed in collaboration between Higher Education Institutes and partner organisations. To help achieve this goal, a free-to-access online training course has been developed and successfully piloted in collaboration with BASW, the Open University and other partners. This training can be accessed [here](#), and BASW seeks further engagement from Local Authorities in rolling this out.
8. ADASS, ADCS, LGA, Principal Socials Workers and Chief Social Workers for England work in collaboration to promote and embed the social worker role as a key worker in all emergency/disaster response planning and implementation. Integrated Care Boards also have an integral role in the human aspects of emergencies and humanitarian assistance.

Further resources:

[The Association of Directors of Public Health Major Incidents Checklist for Directors of Public Health](#)

[Information regarding government plans to establish Independent Public Advocate for victims and bereaved in large scale disasters](#)

[Victims of Terrorism Unit Local Authority Toolkit](#)

London Resilience Partnership (LRP) Humanitarian Assistance Framework
(Version 7 Nov 23)

Handbook for Humanitarian Assistance Lead Officers (HALOs) and Humanitarian Assistance Steering (HASG) Group Members
(Version: 1.4: April 2024)

(Please note all documents will be subject to updates).