

PREPARING FOR THE UNEXPECTED

HELPING THE ADVICE SECTOR
RESPOND TO A LOCAL EMERGENCY

advice
services
alliance

CONTENTS

Introduction: Learning the Lessons	3
The Ten Lessons Learned	4
The Stages of Advice Needs in Emergencies	7
Take Action from the Lessons Learned: Prevent, Prepare, Respond	9
Advice services emergency plan	11
Working with others beyond advice	12

In the early hours of June 14, 2017 a fire broke out in a fourth floor flat at a 23-storey tower block in North Kensington, West London. The blaze quickly took. Seventy-two people died in the ensuing disaster.

At the time of writing, a judge-led inquiry is examining the circumstances that led to the devastating blaze which will ultimately make recommendations on how to prevent a similar tragedy. It is vital that all possible lessons are learned from the Grenfell Tower fire.

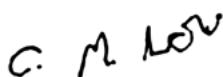
A story not often told is the advice sector's response to an unprecedented tragedy that unfolded on its doorstep. North Kensington Law Centre is located in the basement of the Lancaster West housing estate in west London. Its offices are so close to the tower that, for the first couple of days after the fire, they were behind the police cordon. Other advice services in the area including Kensington and Chelsea Citizens Advice, Shelter, Nucleus, AgeUK Kensington and Chelsea and Worlds End Advice Centre all had clients who either were affected directly by the tragedy or knew people who were. The shock waves felt across the entire country to the unfolding event were experienced most intensely at the epicentre in the Borough.

The events at Grenfell were unprecedented and the response between the local advice agencies required a new level of collaboration with each other and with the wider pro bono community. The government response was slow although resources for advice support were eventually received through a partnership led by Citizens Advice whilst the small Law Centre found itself handling many offers of help as the pro bono response was directed to its doors.

Tragically, acts of terrorism that year – attacks at the Manchester Arena, Westminster and London Bridge, the Finsbury Park mosque and Parsons Green – led to serious injury and loss of life for people going about their ordinary business. All incidents were unexpected, shocking and brought devastation to the communities in which they took place. Again, local advice agencies played an important part in a united response to such tragic events.

The advice sector is on the frontline. Our network of agencies and support groups who have been there for people through difficult times before, are often the first place they turn to for help. They are well-placed to help people back on their feet.

But these are challenging times. During the normal course of events, demands placed upon an overstretched and underfunded advice sector often outstrip capacity. Responding to an unforeseen and shocking event is always going to be challenging. Advisers will have to deal with vulnerable people in shock, even traumatised, in situations which are uncertain and unique. The Grenfell fire and the response of the advice sector illustrated just how complex, sensitive and vital this work was. We hope these guidelines help inform the response of any advice organisation that has to deal with an unexpected crisis situation in their region.



Lord Low



Steve Anderson

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INTRODUCTION: LEARNING THE LESSONS

In September 2017 the Board of the Advice Services Alliance (ASA), the sector-wide body for advice, reflected on the challenges over the year faced by local services at the centre of such emergencies. The Alliance with its membership of the principal national advice networks, is well placed to understand the response to local based emergencies and share the learning more widely. The concept of a set of guidelines to help local advice services prepare for and then cope with emergencies started to emerge.

The ASA approached Ashurst whose pro bono coordinator had supported the team at North Kensington Law Centre during the crisis. We asked Julia Kauffman, Chair of the Small Charities Commission, to help facilitate a meeting on 8th March 2018. We brought together representatives from the advice sector from across Kensington and Chelsea and staff from the advice sector network bodies who make up the ASA membership. Our aim was to create an opportunity to share the first hand experiences from Kensington and Chelsea and to develop from the tragedy an approach that could be applied in other crisis situations.

The response was overwhelming and we are grateful to all the frontline staff and network members who attended the meeting. It was a sad day for many as it inevitably included reliving harrowing experiences and remembering people who are no longer with us. Despite such challenges, the first thought of everyone was how to best help their clients and future clients. We salute you.

Drawing on the collective experience of the advice sector from that meeting (outlined in Lessons Learned) we offer straight forward guidance for all advice services and advice partnerships across the country. They have been created to help any advice service, whether your organisation operates independently or as part of a partnership. We acknowledge that the circumstances of any unexpected emergency will demand its own response, but the principles are universal. We hope you will use this guide to open discussions within your advice service, with other advice services locally and with your local resilience teams. In doing so, you will not only be better prepared for emergencies, you will be building stronger advice provision for all people within your community.

We welcome feedback on this document and please share with us your experience of working with these materials. We look forward to hearing from you (info@asauk.org.uk).

THE TEN LESSONS LEARNED

1. OUR GOALS STAY THE SAME

Within a crisis situation, the aim of the advice sector remains the same; we provide social welfare legal advice to those with the most acute problems and limited means to resolve them. It is what we do well and it is what we are known for. These goals remain the same regardless of the context in which we work and keeping focussed on providing this service when there are many demands on your time and resources is really important.

2. ADVICE NEEDS OF THOSE INVOLVED IN CRISIS CHANGE RAPIDLY

An unexpected emergency event will inevitably lead to a dramatic surge in your community's advice needs. These will be different from the usual requests for help and will change in urgency, volume and type over time. You need to be flexible enough to respond to these changing needs. Be ready to provide the right type of help at the right time. The section on Stages of Legal Need explains more.

3. ADVICE NEEDS OF OTHER CLIENTS WON'T GO AWAY

The emergency will not affect the issues your existing clients have brought to you previously, nor stop new clients encountering the 'usual' problems. With so much attention focused on the emergency, it will be hard but so important not to lose sight of these clients. A dedicated resource to help such clients is a crucial role and will prevent advice errors or oversights and will keep all your community on board. You need to think where this resource could come from; outside help, existing team members or referral to a partner service.

4. WORK TOGETHER

A joined up and collaborative response in your area is likely to deliver the most effective help for those caught up in an emergency incident. The response should be built on strong partnerships within the local advice sector, with the local authority and in the wider pro bono community.

The best partnerships do not spring into life overnight but are established through the experience of working together over years. Such relationships are built on good communication with your partner organisation, direct knowledge of each other's work and a mutual trust that you are willing to work together for the greater good of your clients. In emergency situations, decisions may need to be made quickly and by one organisation on behalf of many. Trust in your fellow partner advice agencies will ensure a speedy response for the benefit of your community's emergency and long term needs.

The strongest response will draw on the skills and resources of your partners. No one group can meet the legal needs of your community in an emergency situation. Their needs will be complex and evolving and the best response draws upon the skills of different partners. By building those relationships with your fellow advice agencies in your community, you will be well-placed to draw on their experience in an emergency.

5. SHARE RESOURCES

Our hard-pressed advice sector is constantly fighting for resources and often overwhelmed by vulnerable clients. The prospect of an emergency incident on your doorstep will be daunting. Our experience is that financial support and much needed resources including volunteers will flow into an area in the aftermath of such an event. That might take time. It might not arrive when you need it most. When the funding and support do come, carefully think through what your client's legal needs are and how best they can be met.

6. SHARE CLIENTS

When the worst happens, you – as a member of the local advice sector – are likely to be one of the first places where members of your community will turn to for help. As an established and trusted source of help in your community, you will be expected to fight their corner. You may not have all the expertise needed to help the clients and they may be already receiving other help elsewhere. Working generously with other organisations will ensure clients get all their needs met.

7. TAKE LESSONS FROM THE EMERGENCY SERVICES

Resist the urge to send everyone to the site of the emergency. As well as onsite support, maintain an offsite strategic response team to gather information in a less pressured decision-making environment.

8. PREPARE YOURSELF FOR TOO MUCH HELP

Human empathy is a wonderful thing and, when a crisis happens, people want to help out. Our experience is that finding enough volunteers is unlikely to be an issue. In fact, the problem might be the reverse: you quickly become overwhelmed with too many offers of help. Those offers are likely to come through the same channels (phone, email and through your reception) through which people who really do need your help will be trying to make contact. Such an outpouring of support soon becomes unmanageable for an understaffed advice agency.

Be prepared to spend a lot of time on the phone or dealing with emails. There are simple systems to help: for example, an auto-response email directing those needing help to a priority number and directing potential volunteers to a second number.

Be clear about exactly what support you need, both in the short and the long term; and be prepared to say “no” or “not now” if an offer of help is not needed. Volunteers need to know what they can do to help and who is best placed to direct them.

9. BE PREPARED FOR MEDIA INTEREST

These kind of emergencies attract huge media interest. Journalists can be helpful in getting messages out to the public but they need to be handled with care. Media requests can take up valuable time and energy at a time when you are unlikely to have much of either, and they can deliver little or, worse still, result in adverse or unsympathetic coverage. Journalists invariably want ‘case studies’ and expect advice centres to produce clients, who might well be vulnerable, to add a human interest angle to their stories. The media require careful handling. Do not let your guard down. The normal rules of engagement apply.

10. LOOK AFTER YOUR PEOPLE

Everyone on the frontline is likely to be deeply affected by an event of the kind we are anticipating – both clients and staff. The work is stressful and often traumatic. People will respond to extreme experiences in different ways and you need to make allowances for expressions of emotions. Some people may experience post-traumatic stress disorder.

Those at the heart of the response will focus their energy on trying to help those in greatest need. In exceptional and stressful situations, committed staff are likely to work long hours and there might be instances of colleagues not taking care of themselves. You should have at least one member of staff taking on the role of ‘pastoral care’ to identify and protect fellow members of staff suffering from stress and ensuring that they take regular breaks and eat and drink properly. They should be there to provide support for staff members who are struggling and to ensure that they are referred to specialist support if needed.



THE STAGES OF ADVICE NEEDS IN EMERGENCIES

STAGE 1: CRISIS – THE FIRST 24 HOURS

At the point the emergency occurs, the priority for everyone will be protecting people physically and accessing help including from the emergency services. Local resilience plans will be implemented with the local authority taking the lead. In severe situations, the Red Cross may be involved whilst the Police will lead the response, coordinating all the other emergency services including the Army. The situation on the ground is likely to be confused and chaotic as everyone tries to establish what exactly has happened.

Legal advice is not the top priority at this stage but this is the point at which advice services should consult their plans and those of their partners and get ready to take the actions that will be required later. This will also trigger offers of help and managing potential volunteers may be a useful way to spend this time. Many residents of Grenfell Tower lost all means of establishing their identity and these sorts of problems are likely to occur early. Advice Services can help with this type of problem as well as routing people to any emergency shelters or help points.

STAGE 2: STABILISATION – AFTER 24 HOURS

Once people have received initial assistance, such as access to medical care, food and accommodation, they will require help to secure other basic needs and to begin the transition back to everyday life. This is likely to be the point at which the demand for advice is highest whilst the shock and stress of the emergency is still evident.

Legal needs will vary considerably in terms of urgency and need, depending on the nature of the emergency and how it has affected individuals. The advice sector should be ready to respond but also ready to be flexible in terms of what role you take and how the advice is given. It is essential that the sector is working together in order to provide the best possible response. There are also likely to be differences in approach as well as uncertainty as to people's rights, entitlements to benefits and wider support.

STAGE 3: RECOVERY

During this stage, the legal advice needs are principally directed towards helping people to enforce any rights or access the long term help available. This may include applying for financial help, recovering and reinstating any benefits and establishing entitlements. This stage can be difficult for people who have experienced trauma as the focus moves away from the event. Many people will need support as they adjust to what may be a significantly different 'everyday' life.

STAGE 4: REDRESS

The final stage of legal needs relates to the legal consequences of the event, which can take many years to complete. The families of the Hillsborough Victims for example are still engaged with the courts as new prosecutions in relation to the tragedy have been brought. The advice sector may need to remain involved by helping people directly affected, their families and wider community with legal issues: any litigation flowing from the event; supporting them in other legal actions such as inquests and prosecutions; and helping them pursue compensation if appropriate.



TAKE ACTION FROM THE LESSONS LEARNED: PREVENT, PREPARE, RESPOND

PREVENT

- Use the evidence you collect in numbers or in stories as an early warning system for emerging problems
- Work together with your community to identify and challenge local areas of risk
- Work with local government, the voluntary sector and pro bono sector to mitigate any risks
- Listen to local voices and join forces with local campaigns
- Join forces with local lawyers and advice agencies to create cross sector partnerships

PREPARE

- Focus on developing strong advice sector partnerships that will support each other in emergencies
- Develop a good knowledge of the services provided by all advice organisations in your area
- Understand what type and area of advice is provided and know how to make effective referrals
- Include dealing with local emergencies as a key line in your services risk strategy
- Develop joint local area advice plans which feature responding to emergencies and update it annually
- Agree protocols for deciding who will take the coordinating role in emergencies
- Discuss with your network body what assistance they will provide in emergencies
- Present your local government resilience planning group with a clear plan of your role and response in an emergency
- Include dealing with emergencies in your staff handbook and ensure all staff know what this is
- Name one person in a position of responsibility in your service to lead on the pastoral care of staff and volunteers

RESPOND

- Set up clear communication paths with other advice and non-advice services
- Respect the role of the response coordinator
- Assess where the legal needs are most acute
- Direct effort at those most in need of advice
- Complement the work of others
- Refuse offers which don't help
- Remember that legal needs change over time
- Ensure all other clients are managed
- Be kind to yourselves and others
- Be ready to support clients for a very long time



ADVICE SERVICES EMERGENCY PLAN

Every advice service should have an emergency plan as part of its risk management. Here we present a possible structure for you to follow in drafting your plan. You may want to adapt this to suit your needs and local situation. We strongly recommend that you work with other advice organisations in your area when developing this plan. Working together now will save you time and energy when you need it most, in the centre of a crisis.

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

- Version Control – date and author plus any changes
- What geographical area do the Protocols cover? Brief description of area including local authority area/s covered
- What advice organisations are included in the Protocols? Brief description of the services offered and clients served.
- Who are the other relevant organisations in your locality? Include other parts of the voluntary sector, local authority civil contingency planning groups, Red Cross (responsibility for coordinating civil society in an emergency, police responsibility for emergency services and the armed forces).
- What are the partner's particular strengths in relation to providing advice? How and when will you deploy this? Include the pro bono sector here.

2. INVOKING THE PROTOCOLS

- When an emergency occurs, how will you invoke these protocols and who will be involved in the decision making? How will the decision be communicated and to whom?
- Establish a 'command' level equivalent to the Gold, Silver and Bronze command used by the emergency services: which organisation is best placed to provide the strategic oversight, which to provide the local coordination and which to provide the front line services?
- Establish which organisation will manage the 'usual' demand from clients and how referrals to these services will work.

3. COMMUNICATIONS

Communicating within the partnership: Do you have a central contact telephone and do you have arrangements for answering this? Do you need to establish a telephone tree? Keep lines for the public free.

Communicating with the public and clients: What information needs to go onto your website and who will do this? How will you keep it up to date? What message needs to go onto the answerphone / voicemail and who will do this? Who will look after on-going clients and how will they access this help?

Communicating with the media: How will you handle questions from the media? Do you have organisations within the partnership with media skills or with existing media relationships? How will you ensure that you protect your clients from unwanted media attention?

Communicating with the pro bono sector: How will you link with the pro bono sector?

4. LOOKING AFTER THE TEAM

Board of Trustees: Each organisation should have a member of the Board of Trustees or senior manager whose responsibility is to simply look after the advice staff. Who is this? How are they contacted and what is their role?

External Support/Counselling: Do you have external arrangements in place for staff emotionally affected by the work? Who is this and how is this accessed?

5. LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

After an incident: You will review your response and the use of the protocols: when will you do this, how will you do this and who will take the lead? How will you ensure that your findings are fed back into your practice? Who else will need to be included in the review?

WORKING WITH OTHERS BEYOND ADVICE

Across the country there are 42 local resilience forums, created under the Civil Contingencies Act and based on police force areas, to enable everyone involved in preparing for an emergency to collaborate at local level. It allows for people to be clear as to their roles and responsibilities. Forum members include local authorities, emergency services, the NHS, transport companies as well as representatives from the charity sector such as the Red Cross.

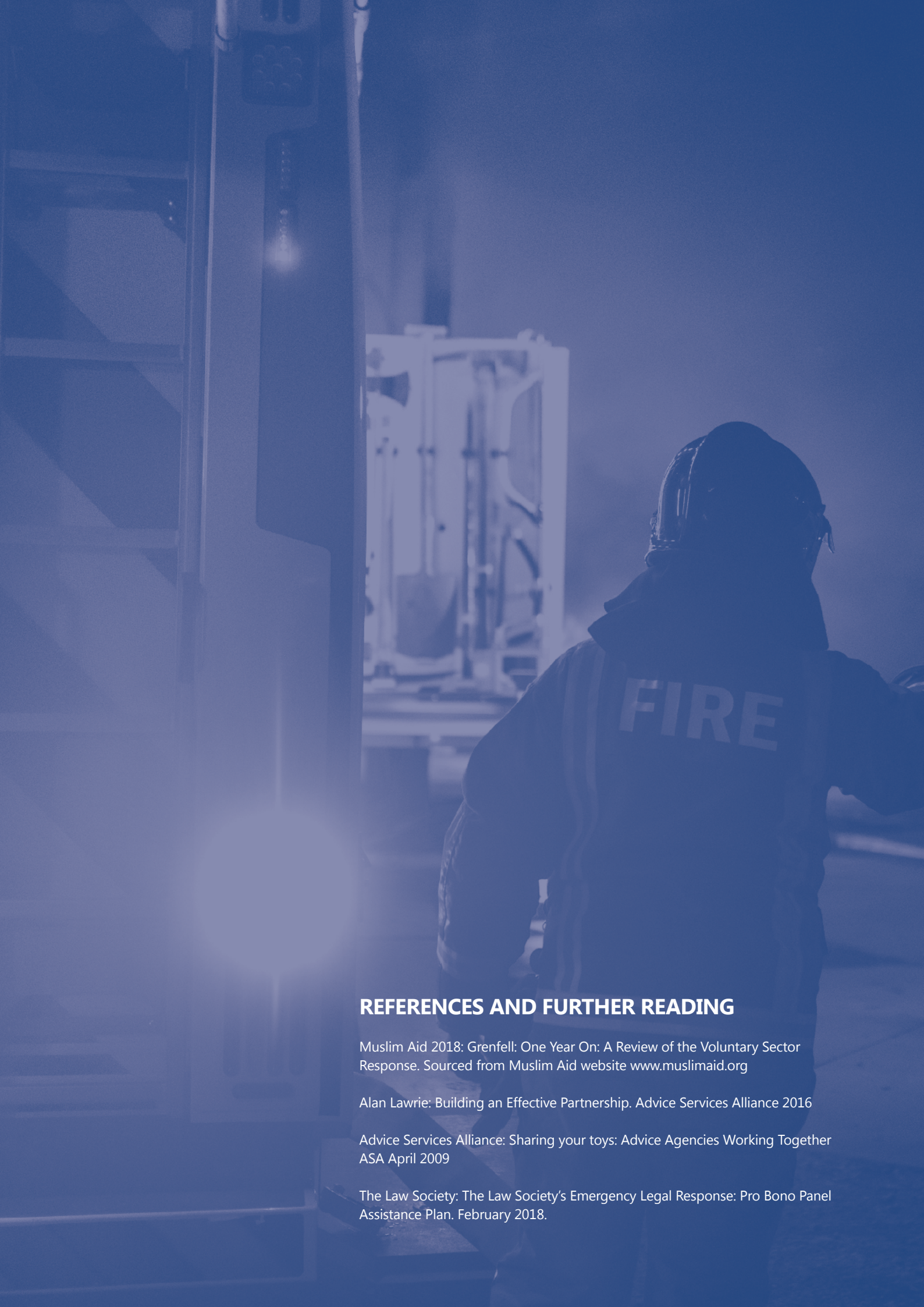
The forums provide a framework for emergency services and other groups in the community to plan ahead through the creation of what is known as a community risk register which flags potential hazards in each area.

Find out more about your local forum and its risk register. This will help you better understand the approach to an incident and enable you to identify who to contact.

One aspect of emergency planning to be aware of is the Gold, Silver and Bronze command structure used by emergency services. As well as helping to understand who is in control during emergencies, it also provides a structure for coordinating emergency responses devised by experienced practitioners. In short, Gold Command are based well away from the emergency, making the strategic decisions based on the information gathered by Silver Command on site. Bronze command are those organisations actually dealing with the emergency.

Find your local Resilience Forum at:
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-resilience-forums-contact-details>





REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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Advice Services Alliance

Tavis House, 1-6 Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9NA

info@asauk.org.uk | 07904 377460 | www.asauk.org.uk

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