



British Red Cross:

The auxiliary role of the Red Cross and Red Crescent at municipal level

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

In 2010, the IFRC's 'World Disaster Report' was focused on urban risk, as National Societies (NS) increasingly shifted attention to urban areas – a trend accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2022, the Red Cross Red Crescent (RCRC) Movement Council of Delegates adopted Resolution CD22-R11 on 'Strengthening the Resilience of Urban Communities: Our Way Forward'ⁱ supporting broader localisation goals in Resolutions 34IC/24/R3 and 34IC/24/R4.ⁱⁱ In order to mitigate worst case disaster scenarios from unfolding, Resolution CD22-R11 calls for more investment into building the resilience of urban communities in addition to scaling up the service delivery and preparedness of NSs in urban areas. To execute this well, effective engagement with municipal authorities is vital.

To advance the commitment on the Resolution, the Movement Urban Resilience Working Group (MURWG) on 'Public Advocacy and Strengthening the Auxiliary Role at the Municipal Level' was established. A representative from the British Red Cross (BRC) chairs this group.

This case study examines BRC's auxiliary role at the municipal level, focusing on its legal and policy foundations and operational arrangements. It identifies examples of good practice, factors for effective engagement, challenges, and key enablers which strengthen impact at a local level. These findings will inform MURWG's drafting of 'Principles of Action' – actionable strategies for National Societies' urban resilience efforts – to be presented for adoption at the 2026 Council of Delegates.

MUNICIPAL LEVELS IN THE UK

Areas are defined as 'urban' if they have: a population more than 10,000 or a high density of residential addresses; or if they intersect with a major town or city (areas of a resident population of 75,000 or more people).ⁱⁱⁱ

There is a mixture of municipal governance structures in the UK. The predominant way the BRC approaches discussions regarding local decision-making is to refer to 'local authorities'. There are different types of local authorities, with different footprints, covering both urban and rural settings. For the purposes of this project, interviewees were asked about 'urban local authorities' and this case study will refer shorthand to 'local authorities'. This case study focuses on England, Scotland and Wales due to availability of interviewees from Northern Ireland.



METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured interviews with nine people within the BRC. The author used a snowballing approach to interviewing. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were supplemented with materials provided often by interviewees.



INTRODUCTION

The BRC has an official auxiliary role, laid down in law. BRC's Royal Charter is the legal document that recognises the organisation as a humanitarian auxiliary to the national UK Government i.e. the auxiliary status.^{iv} This status exists whether the BRC uses it or not. This case study will refer to both the auxiliary status as well as the auxiliary role, which is the enacting of the auxiliary status. The Royal Charter also contains specific powers related to our auxiliary role: "to act as an autonomous auxiliary to the public authorities in the humanitarian field, with a special role in enhancing respect for humanitarian values and human dignity."^v

BRC's domestic strategic focus covers three core areas: disasters and emergencies, health and care, and displacement and migration. At the municipal level, utilisation and recognition of the auxiliary role are most explicitly articulated within the sphere of disasters and emergencies. In contrast, provisions reflecting the auxiliary role in health and displacement and migration exist but remain comparatively limited. Consequently, much of this case study will be from within this thematic. However, it shall briefly outline key information regarding the other two cause-based areas' use and implementation of the auxiliary role.

Explicit recognition and operational implementation at municipal level in the UK varies significantly. Key challenges include limited awareness among stakeholders; strategic sensitivities related to exceptionalism amongst partnership spaces with sector peers and a focus on localisation; and internal capacity constraints to develop the formal arrangements and relationship building that would support utilisation of the auxiliary role at municipal level.

Nevertheless, there are several notable examples illustrating effective municipal-level engagement, which demonstrate key themes in enhancing influence and impact at municipal level. These span from clear translation of national legal and policy frameworks into local operational settings, strategic integration

within local decision-making structures – both formally and informally- and proactive frontline operational delivery. Interviews revealed a distinction between the operationalisation of the auxiliary role – where it is embedded in practice – and the explicit reference to the auxiliary role as a means of strengthening partnerships or increasing activity. There were divergent views on the effectiveness of the latter, with some interviewees seeing value in emphasising the auxiliary status to enhance engagement, while others questioned its necessity or strategic advantage in certain contexts. This was particularly regarding areas where there were strategic sensitivities regarding peer collaboration.

Auxiliary role: Health

The Royal Charter reflects the key role that the BRC plays in health, highlighting that in addition to providing assistance to victims of armed conflict, the BRC was established to "work for the improvement of health, for the prevention of disease and for the prevention and alleviation of human suffering in the British Islands and all throughout the world."^{vi}

In practice, the BRC significantly contributes to healthcare service provision across the UK. These services are usually formalised through contractual agreements with local health and social care authorities. This positions the BRC as an integral partner within the statutory health system, but often as a service provider rather than as a strategic humanitarian auxiliary.

Recent legislative developments, notably the Health and Care Act 2022, have accelerated the decentralisation of healthcare governance. National guidance sets out that the boards of newly set up local health and care boards are "expected to have developed a formal agreement for engaging and embedding the [voluntary and community] sector in system-level governance and decision-making arrangements."^{vii}

While statutory guidance does not explicitly reference the BRC or its auxiliary status, in practice the organisation has successfully secured representation on a number of these governance bodies. However, this has often been achieved on the basis of operational reputation rather than formal recognition of its auxiliary mandate.

Awareness and explicit recognition of the auxiliary role among stakeholders remains limited. Interviewees reported few instances where the auxiliary role has been explicitly leveraged or acknowledged in strategic or operational health engagements, indicating potential areas for future clarification and advocacy. Deliberate reference to the auxiliary role can help position BRC as a humanitarian partner with a distinct mandate.

Auxiliary role: Displacement and Migration

BRC holds a prominent position as the largest provider of support services for refugees and people seeking asylum within the UK. Its critical role is formally recognised in various national statutory and policy frameworks. For instance, government guidance explicitly identifies the BRC as a primary provider of independent family tracing services.^{xi}

In practice, the BRC strategically invokes its auxiliary status to emphasise its unique humanitarian mandate – particularly the principles of neutrality and independence – in operational settings that are closely associated with government policy. This has proven especially important in maintaining humanitarian space in contexts where access is restricted or politically sensitive, such as reception and short-term holding facilities and immigration detention. Explicit reference to the auxiliary role can be critical in safeguarding humanitarian independence and ensuring access in sensitive contexts.

Recent prominent examples include the BRC's humanitarian support activities at Manston and Wethersfield (processing and housing centres for people seeking asylum), where the

auxiliary role was explicitly referenced to delineate the BRC's distinct humanitarian contribution in settings commissioned by the government.

Explicit invocation of the auxiliary role in these sensitive contexts helps establish clear boundaries, reinforcing the humanitarian independence of the BRC while ensuring its role complements rather than substitutes governmental responsibilities.

Interviews highlighted that, at the municipal level, explicit recognition or strategic use of the BRC's auxiliary role within displacement and migration activities remains limited. Notwithstanding, operational engagement in these areas has been substantial and impactful, underscoring potential opportunities for further strategic clarity and advocacy around the auxiliary function.

WHAT DRIVES EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES?

Harnessing national legislation and guidance for involvement

The Civil Contingencies Act (CCA) 2004 is the primary framework for responding to emergencies within the UK. It governs the statutory responsibilities that responders have in planning for and responding to a crisis, along with accompanying non-statutory guidance. The CAA allows a government minister to permit or require local authorities to “have regard to” the activities of voluntary organisations specifically, carrying out their emergency and business continuity planning duties.^x The non-statutory guidance accompanying the CCA outlines some of the roles the voluntary and community sector (VCS) can play. As a significant voluntary organisation with a strong presence in the UK, BRC is therefore in a good position to harness the legislation and accompanying guidance for utilising its auxiliary role at a municipal level. For example, in the local emergency and resilience statutory groups that were set out in

the Act,^{xi} the BRC are written in as the lead agency in many local areas due to their strong reputation.

Collaboration and coordination mechanisms

The BRC takes a leading role in convening voluntary sector contributions to civil protection arrangements in the UK. As requested by the government's Civil Contingencies Secretariat,^{xii} the BRC was instrumental in setting up the Voluntary Sector Civil Protection Forum,^{xiii} and later the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP) (partially funded by government)^{xiv}, to provide a framework for engagement between the government, emergency services, local authorities and voluntary organisations.^{xv} The BRC co-chairs this, and provides support including IT, HR, and systems support. The BRC also strategically leverages its auxiliary role within other high-level strategic forums, for example chairing other devolved convening spaces such as the Voluntary and Community Sector Advisory Group in Scotland. Interviewees said that this partially as a result of ensuring visibility of the auxiliary role and a careful framing of it as a providing a distinctive support partnership. This involvement provides strategic opportunities to articulate the unique contributions the organisation can make to local resilience planning and response, enhancing its operational effectiveness at municipal level.

This approach has trickled down to the municipal level. First, having a strengthened voluntary sector voice overall means increased awareness amongst decision-makers at a local level; second, increased ability to jointly design the offer and identify strengths and potential gaps has led to improved responses. The collaborative approach means a united front to engage with decision-makers.

Interviewees highlighted, however, that the auxiliary role is not explicitly discussed in peer collaboration spaces such as these. This is a strategic decision. First, the non-hierarchical approach is viewed as key to the relationships internally, which interviewees felt would be threatened by pushing BRC exceptionalism as an auxiliary. Second, there are other organisations in the VCSEP who are auxiliaries, meaning that it is not a unique selling point. Third, interviewees highlighted that, unlike many other country contexts, there is a huge number of voluntary organisations in the UK operating in the crisis and resilience space. Therefore, the role of the BRC is often as a convenor between the numerous smaller voluntary sector organisations, helping to provide a conduit with national government and local authority spaces. The auxiliary role has been exercised through a model of 'humble leadership' – using the BRC's size, scale, and technical expertise to convene and strengthen collective action, rather than asserting exceptionalism.



The mechanisms that have been helping aren't formal things – it's been friendship through adversity including the experience of Covid and multiple and overlapping crises, and a fostered sense of unity through collaboration with the sector"

Disaster and Emergency Professional, BRC

The London Grenfell fire response of 2019 highlights part of the auxiliary role of the BRC being to connect together smaller community-led groups such as faith groups – which were central to the response in Grenfell – and plugging them in to local authority partners and the wider national voluntary sector with a London presence. This is because the BRC was the voluntary sector chair of the London Resilience Partnership. This is a network that ensures London's preparedness in the event of emergencies and coordinates the activities of a wide range of organisations.

Formal local partnerships

Establishing formal partnerships with municipal authorities strengthens clarity of roles, fosters trust, and provides a platform to operationalise the auxiliary role. Agreements such as Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) or cooperation agreements set out responsibilities, parameters, and expectations, ensuring both parties have a shared understanding of the BRC's scope of contribution.

The Disasters and Emergencies team in Wales have a cooperation agreement near completion with the City of Swansea, with discussions underway with other local authorities. This formalisation emerged from consistent engagement and regular check-ins, which built the trust necessary to move towards a written agreement. The signed agreement critically also defined the limits of BRC's response, specifying activities the organisation would not undertake. Although the agreement does not explicitly reference the auxiliary role, it reflects the functions the BRC undertakes as an auxiliary.

In parallel, the Disasters and Emergencies team in England observed that MoUs also provide a mechanism for regular reviews, helping relationships remain active despite staff turnover or shifting priorities. They also noted that once some councils had signed MoUs, others were more willing to do so, suggesting a 'demonstration effect' that helped overcome initial reluctance.

Importantly, interviewees emphasised that explicit reference to the auxiliary role is most effective once a relationship has been established and local operational quality has been demonstrated. Using the auxiliary role as an entry point was seen as less effective. At the same time, interviewees felt that if local authorities were more widely aware of the auxiliary role – without it needing to be promoted directly by local BRC teams to gain traction – they would be more likely to initiate engagement themselves.

Overall, formal agreements provide dual value. They clarify roles and responsibilities, reducing the risk of misunderstandings in emergencies; and they institutionalise engagement, ensuring continuity beyond individual relationships. However, they are most effective when built on a foundation of demonstrated operational capacity, with auxiliary status referenced strategically rather than used as an entry point.

Proactive and strategic stakeholder engagement

Interviews demonstrated that sustained, proactive engagement with municipal stakeholders is crucial for building trust and enabling autonomous operational impact. Regular interaction, structured visits, and participation in local strategic forums establish the BRC as a reliable and visible partner, which strengthens both awareness of its auxiliary role and the organisation's influence in decision-making processes.

The Disasters and Emergencies team in Wales have a strong engagement with several local authorities. They have a rolling calendar of engagement activities, meeting with two local authorities a month to build relationships informally and maintain BRC awareness amongst stakeholders. This requires resourcing to have a lead for external engagement to spend time building relationships.

The Disasters and Emergencies team in England highlighted the critical contribution of a BRC coordinator whose proactive and sustained strategic engagement significantly strengthened professional relationships with key municipal partners. For example, through consistent participation in command meetings, strategic briefings, and structured visits to local fire stations, the coordinator fostered trust and mutual understanding. Consequently, the team was able to independently deploy assistance in certain situations rather than waiting for permission.

Flexibility in responding to local needs

Demonstrating strategic flexibility in responding to local initiatives allows BRC to expand partnerships, address emerging humanitarian needs, and reinforce its auxiliary role in practice. By adjusting operational delivery without compromising core functions, BRC can cultivate stronger municipal relationships and seize opportunities for collaborative innovation.

For example, a partner within the local Fire and Rescue Service approached the BRC with an initiative aimed at enhancing support to individuals experiencing rough sleeping. While the proposal prompted internal considerations regarding organisational capacity and resource implications, the BRC demonstrated strategic flexibility in responding positively, provided this initiative did not adversely affect core organisational functions or resources. This service was hugely successful and increased longer-term engagement with the Fire and Rescue Service who had originally approached, but also with the local council who were part of the partnership.

Assertive outreach

Assertive outreach is critical for translating the auxiliary role into tangible operational influence at municipal level. By proactively advocating for BRC's presence and clearly defining operational boundaries, the organisation can secure access to emerging humanitarian situations even when local authorities may not immediately recognise the need. This approach reinforces both the credibility of the BRC and the practical impact of its auxiliary role, ensuring that principled humanitarian needs are addressed effectively.

For example, a Disasters and Emergencies team in England highlighted an example with increased decision-making in one local authority that emerged from an initial need to be assertive about the BRC's role in addressing urgent humanitarian needs. During the initial arrival of people seeking asylum from Afghanistan at UK airports, a local authority

emergency response officer approached the BRC to request urgent provision of blankets and beds. BRC agreed but requested that BRC volunteers were included in the response. They were told that this was not a humanitarian emergency and that BRC presence was not required. After continuing to assert the need for a BRC presence, after a few days the local authority requested volunteers on site. Once deployed, the BRC team continued to assertively champion humanitarian needs, clearly defining their operational scope and responsibilities, for example stipulating that they could not work with border enforcement.

As a result of this assertive engagement, in subsequent similar emergencies, the local authority proactively approached BRC first, enabling the organisation to significantly influence the humanitarian response from its onset. The BRC lead for this response stipulated that the key for building engagement was the clear mandate and pushing for inclusion on this basis. Once they had demonstrated operational capability, this cemented inclusion in later decision-making, showing that assertive but principled outreach can shift municipal authorities from reactive acceptance to proactive inclusion in future crises.

CHALLENGES IN ENGAGEMENT WITH MUNICIPAL AUTHORITIES

Despite examples of good practice, BRC's engagement with municipal authorities also highlights structural and contextual barriers to fully realising the auxiliary role. These challenges underscore the need for both organisational strategies and broader awareness-raising to ensure the role is understood and leveraged effectively at the local level.

Broad national legislation and guidance

National legislation and guidance is generally broad in how it frames the involvement of the voluntary sector in local decision-making forums for disasters and emergencies.

Interviewees noted that this could be strengthened to more clearly compel collaboration, which would in turn make it easier for the BRC to utilise when engaging municipalities.

National legislation and guidance also does not refer directly to the BRC and its auxiliary role. Views on this are mixed. Some argued that naming the BRC directly would undermine localisation, as the BRC is not always the organisation best placed to deliver on local needs, which should remain for municipalities to determine. Others argued that, given its auxiliary role, the BRC should be identified in legislation such as the CCA as a key delivery partner. They suggested this would raise awareness of the auxiliary role and support more consistent municipal engagement.

Strong local presence

In some areas, the BRC may not have a strong enough local presence to justify initiating discussions around the auxiliary role if they have not first demonstrated operational activity. Without prior engagement, municipal authorities may not fully understand BRC's capacity or reliability, limiting trust and willingness to engage.

“*You have to build the relationship and respect, not just go straight in with the auxiliary role. First, have the presence, have the internal structure.*
BRC staff

Awareness of the auxiliary role

Awareness of the auxiliary role varies from national to local levels. Whilst changes in government and local leadership, such as recent mayoral elections hinder awareness, this issue goes beyond leadership changes. As a result, the BRC often cannot rely on the auxiliary role alone to initiate engagement. Even where awareness exists, it tends to be focused on disaster response rather than early-stage planning or decision-making.

Capacity constraints among BRC staff further limit the ability to develop the strong relation-

ships necessary to increase awareness and engage strategically. Without dedicated time and personnel for relationship-building, opportunities to leverage the auxiliary role in influencing local decision-making may be missed.

Navigating exceptionalism in partnership spaces

Close collaboration with other VCSs benefits both the BRC and the wider sector, as well as the people being supported. Using the auxiliary role in these contexts can, however, be complicated due to potential tensions around exceptionalism if it is felt like it is being used to assert operational primacy.

Commitment to subsidiarity means the BRC may not always be the most appropriate responder; smaller VCSs may be better placed for certain interventions. Overemphasising BRC's auxiliary role in these contexts could generate tension or be perceived as overstepping. Furthermore, the BRC is one of multiple organisations with auxiliary status. Others, such as St John Ambulance, also play critical roles in UK resilience and disaster activity.

Interviewees highlighted the importance of collaborating with other auxiliaries to present a coherent, complementary offer. In strategic forums, explicitly referencing the auxiliary role can strengthen legitimacy and influence. In operational forums, however, demonstrating capacity, operational presence, and ability to facilitate partnerships is often more effective than emphasising the auxiliary role itself. In contexts with strong voluntary sectors such as the UK, leveraging convening power and positioning the BRC as a facilitator can enhance legitimacy, build trust, and sustain collaborative partnerships.



ENABLERS



Proactive relationship-building beyond emergencies

Municipal relationships are most effective when they have been nurtured over time through consistent engagement. This presence builds credibility and trust and enables local authorities to see the BRC as a standing partner. This requires dedicated staff capacity for relationship-building, understanding local governance systems, and ensuring consistent participation in local coordination and planning spaces.



Clearly articulating the local offer

A concise, concrete offer – outlining both what the BRC can and cannot deliver – reduces misunderstandings, particularly in politically sensitive contexts, and positions the BRC as a specialist partner in defined areas such as cash and voucher assistance. It also addresses the challenge of mismatched expectations that can strain relationships and hinder coordination.



Formalising cooperation through tailored agreements

Formal arrangements – whether detailed MoUs or more flexible Letters of Cooperation – help embed collaboration into institutional practice. These agreements should reflect local needs and contexts, with some setting out clear operational triggers and others defining parameters for the BRC's response.



Strategic collaboration with the local voluntary and community sector

Partnerships with the local VCS can extend reach, enhance legitimacy, and improve coordination with municipal authorities. Harnessing the auxiliary role to provide a convening role can be a very effective way to use it for best engagement at municipal level, as well as contributing technical expertise and local networks. In areas with minimal BRC presence, good practice suggests a supportive role can still add value, helping maintain visibility and relationships until a stronger footprint can be established.



Strengthening understanding and strategic use of the auxiliary role

Proactive internal engagement and guidance can equip staff to confidently articulate and apply the auxiliary role in their work where appropriate. Externally, targeted communication with elected officials, local authorities, and community representatives can reinforce the BRC's distinct but complementary role, helping to prevent misunderstandings, manage reputational risks, and foster mutual respect.

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Please note: This document was authored by Emma Cookson (policy and advocacy consultant) on behalf of the International Federation of the Red Cross Red Crescent (IFRC). The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official positions or policies of the IFRC or its member National Societies.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

Humanity

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield, endeavours, in its international and national capacity, to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being. It promotes mutual understanding, friendship, cooperation and lasting peace amongst all peoples.

Impartiality

It makes no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours to relieve the suffering of individuals, being guided solely by their needs, and to give priority to the most urgent cases of distress.

Neutrality

In order to enjoy the confidence of all, the Movement may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.

Independence

The Movement is independent. The National Societies, while auxiliaries in the humanitarian services of their governments and subject to the laws of their respective countries, must always maintain their autonomy so that they may be able at all times to act in accordance with the principles of the Movement.

Voluntary service

It is a voluntary relief movement not prompted in any manner by desire for gain.

Unity

There can be only one Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in any one country. It must be open to all. It must carry on its humanitarian work throughout its territory.

Universality

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, in which all societies have equal status and share equal responsibilities and duties in helping each other, is worldwide.



The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world's largest humanitarian network, with 191 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and around 17 million volunteers. Our volunteers are present in communities before, during and after a crisis or disaster. We work in the most hard to reach and complex settings in the world, saving lives and promoting human dignity. We support communities to become stronger and more resilient places where people can live safe and healthy lives, and have opportunities to thrive.