

# ALEX SUTCLIFFE

Interviewed by: **Helen Baxter**

Alex Sutcliffe and her team have built up a strong reputation with local authorities, emergency services and the third sector in emergency response management. They have been recognised with the York and District Community Award Medal for outstanding work during the floods of 2015 and continue to support victims of emergencies with practical and emotional support. Helen Baxter, Deputy Director of Risk, Resilience and Crisis Management, based at the Cabinet Office Emergency Planning College in York, caught up with Alex to find out more...

## **Alex, what first got you interested in working within the Major Incident Response Team?**

Ten years ago, a flyer came across my desk seeking volunteers to work on the Major Incident Response Team (MIRT). It caught my eye as it was asking for people who cared, and if they were interested in helping those affected in times of crisis. I think we have all experienced some kind of crisis in our lives, and it was an opportunity for me to give something back to others. It has been the most fulfilling work I have ever done, and now I am lucky to be able to lead this amazing team.

## **What kind of incidents do you and your team get involved with and what support do you provide?**

No two incidents are the same and we never know when our call will come, day or night. We can be found responding to floods or gas explosions by setting up rest centres for residents who may need to evacuate their properties. We work with our 'guests' in rest centres to ensure that they feel safe and cared for until we are able



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*North Yorkshire's MAJOR INCIDENT RESPONSE TEAM Manager of volunteers on EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE, welfare and her tips on staying HEALTHY when out on the ground*

to return them to their homes. Other times we can be supporting families or communities through the most harrowing life experiences, for example tragic road accidents or those bereaved by suicide.

We, as a team, offer emotional and practical support. We are professionally trained to take care of the emotional welfare of anyone affected by an incident which may take them out of their everyday

'normal'. We work with individuals or communities to assist them in readjusting to a different kind of 'normal', knowing that they will never forget the experience.

It is very humbling when people seek the help of the MIRT team and allow them into their lives when they are grieving and emotionally vulnerable.

**If you were stranded in the middle of a major incident, what top three items would you take with you?**

Without a doubt the MIRT volunteers' telephone numbers, I can't do this job alone. A box of Yorkshire Tea and a kettle. Never underestimate the power of a cuppa and a listening ear.

**What is the biggest challenge that you've faced when managing an Emergency Assistance Centre?**

It's always challenging settling people in following an evacuation. The first hour of a rest centre can be chaotic, and people evacuated often feel as though personal control has been taken away from them. They will crave information and this may initially be slow coming through to you. It is our job to reassure the public, make them comfortable, ensure their personal needs are met and allow them time to readjust to the situation. Other agencies may well need to be in your rest centre to offer advice; make sure that you can set aside areas where private conversations can be held if needs be. Noise may well be the biggest challenge of all; identify 'quiet' areas for the public to speak privately with other agencies if needs be.

**So, if you could be a Rest Centre hero, what superpower would you possess?**

Like the bionic woman (I'm a child of the '70s!), I would want amplified bionic hearing. Rest Centres can become hectic noisy places, and I would like the ability to tune in to the quiet conversations to make sure we are looking out for the quieter 'guests' in our rest centres. They are often the ones who need the most care. That elderly couple sat in a corner, who don't want to be a bother, may well turn into

your most vulnerable couple if left alone with their worries and concerns.

**At times your work must be stressful, what advice could you give others for staying safe and healthy? (Link to practical and emotional support)**

It is very difficult to take care of 'other peoples' emotions if you don't look after yourself first. Make sure you keep yourself healthy, take regular exercise and eat well. It is vital to have a network of trusted colleagues or friends with whom you can share your feelings. We are all human and sometimes it can be upsetting to listen to some of the stories or problems the public can bring with them into our rest centres. Ensure you do

have arrangements in place to support staff working in your rest centres.

Try not to work long hours in response to a rest centre call

out. Build up a trusted team around you who can take over. You will be of more use to the centre if you take regular breaks yourself and stay energised for the challenges you will face.

**In addition to your professional life, you're also known for your glamorous style and sense of adventure. When you're not responding to emergencies, what's the most unlikely hobby that we'd see you getting involved with?**

Spinning. It's so not glamorous when you're sweating away on static bikes with 12 other bodies! Exercise is vital for your physical and mental health. In my field of work, it is important to do something completely different and have some emotional 'downtime'.

**Finally, if someone was wanting to set up a support team in their own area, what key things should they consider?**

It is important to consider the key staff and the roles that you would want them to undertake in your rest centres. Make sure you attract the right team members



**“Never underestimate the power of a cuppa and a listening ear.”**

with the appropriate skill sets and be clear about the purpose of setting up the facilities as these might be different, depending upon the nature of the incident - A good support team should always understand the needs of their customers. Also, it is essential that background checks are carried out on the staff you appoint to your support team (employed staff or volunteers).

Regular training and exercising should take place to ensure your team are comfortable with completing the essential paperwork that is required in rest centres, and all staff are confident to face any situations that may arise at a very stressful time for the public.

Finally be prepared to constantly evolve as a team. Times change, situations change and peoples' expectations change... flexibility is key to a good support team. |

*If you would like to hear more from Alex on rest centre operations and the human aspects of emergency management, please visit [www.epcresilience.com](http://www.epcresilience.com)*

*The EPC is the UK's national authority on resilience and crisis management. To find out more, contact us on (01347) 825056 [enquiries@emergencyplanningcollege.com](mailto:enquiries@emergencyplanningcollege.com).*