



An Roinn Tithíochta,
Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta
Department of Housing,
Local Government and Heritage

Community Support Centres

A Guide to Assisting Volunteer Groups in Response to an Emergency

2025

Ullmhaithe ag
An Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta
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1 Introduction

The experience following Storm Eowyn (2025), the flooding in Middleton (2023), and other recent severe weather emergencies shows that there is a need to identify a location within each local community where people affected by severe weather or other potential emergencies can access basic welfare needs such as food, mobile phone charging, shower and hygiene facilities, and connect to Wi-Fi/internet. Such facilities could also be utilised as a means of communicating consistent important information on topics such as public updates, public health information and advice on accessing local Social Welfare offices and humanitarian schemes.

A **Community Support Centre (CSC)** is a premises situated within the local community that is activated rapidly to support the people based in that community or a neighbouring community in a time of need. The CSC offers services to impacted people in the community, and the services are facilitated by volunteers associated with the CSC. This type of support builds on the concept of community resilience, supported by local authorities and other agencies. The review of previous severe weather emergencies indicates that community organisations and local volunteers play a vital role in responding to emergencies; these organisations need to be facilitated and supported. The primary purpose of a Community Support Centre is to provide a safe place where basic welfare services can be provided by volunteers to any impacted people within their community.

After the 2025 Storm Éowyn severe weather event, many people were impacted by a lack of essential services such as electricity, water and communication systems. In response to this, communities across Ireland established response hubs with the assistance of the local authorities and other agencies. These hubs proved very successful and provided impacted people with a place to charge devices, obtain information, access Wi-Fi, avail of refreshments and other basic services. In addition, they provided people with the opportunity to engage with others, obtain key information and avail of important emotional support. This document aims to develop the concept of a response hub and provide structure and guidance on how such facilities should be activated and operated in future events. The guide will assist any agency,

organisation or volunteer group that may be involved in the provision or support of a Community Support Centre.

1.1 What is a Community Support Centre?

In general, a CSC can be any suitable building that is used by a community association or sports organisations for various activities in the community on a day-to-day basis and that in addition is designated as a place that can be used as a safe place for people to come together when an emergency or event that impacts on the local population occurs. When activated, the CSC can be a location where people can attend to avail of basic services, access information and meet with other impacted people.

The volunteer staffing of the CSC is managed by the organisation that has proposed the premises as a potential CSC, such as a sports organisation or volunteer group that already exists within the community.

The CSC may open for a designated period each day (set hours), or it may need to be open for a prolonged period (weeks) while the community is recovering, and the people impacted continue to require basic welfare services. The volunteer group managing the centre, in consultation with the Humanitarian Subgroup established to support the CSCs during the emergency or adverse event, will determine the operating hours. There will be no overnight rest facilities provided at a Community Support Centre.

The Framework for Major Emergency Management and supporting documents establish the principle of Evacuation and Rest Centres, which are managed by Local Authorities in coordination with other PRAs. The Community Support Centres do not replace the Evacuation and Rest Centres or the requirement to plan for their activation. CSCs are a separate element of the Framework; they are volunteer-led and fulfil a different function to other centres.

2 Designated Community Support Centres

The premises used as a Community Support Centre can be any premises suitably located near the community impacted and once predesignated by the local authority

as a safe place for the community to gather in times of crisis. Sports halls, Community Centres, Town Halls, Leisure Centres or other community facilities with appropriate resources can be considered for inclusion in a list of designated CSCs.

Each premise will be different, but the list below outlines the basic requirements that are considered necessary for a CSC:

- An established volunteer group that has control of the use of the proposed premises
- Large hall/room to allow people to gather
- Tables and chairs
- Premises should be able to accommodate people with mobility difficulties
- Premises should have an adequate heating system
- A serviced kitchen or kitchen area with facilities to provide basic refreshments such as tea/coffee, soup, sandwiches, Meal Ready to Eat (MRE), etc.
- Adequate toilets and washroom facilities (suitable for use by the public)
- First Aid kit (basic supplies)
- Wi-Fi services that are easily accessible to everyone using the premises
- Extension cables to enable people to charge devices
- A private space or additional room that can be utilised where necessary for nursing mothers, receiving medication or people needing privacy to talk to a member of An Garda Síochána, etc.

In addition, there are additional requirements that may influence whether a Community Support Centre is suitable to be established in response to an emergency. These are desirable features, but do not prohibit the use of any premises as a CSC.

- An uninterruptible power supply. In the event of a disruption to the electricity supply, the Community Support Centre may be required to assist people who have no power. Only premises that have access to power would be suitable in these instances; having premises that can utilise an independent power supply

(i.e. a generator connected to the building) to provide power would be very beneficial and is a desirable feature.

- Showering facilities (while this facility may be present, it may not be available where the emergency has impacted water supply or where generators are in use)
- Car parking adjacent to the building
- Identified external smoking/vaping area
- Electric Car charging point

The Community Support Centre must designate a coordinator who will act as the point of contact between the CSC and the local authority or subgroup of the Local Coordination Group.

3 Support Structures for Community Support Centres

The coordination of agencies responding to any emergency event in Ireland operates under the Framework for Major Emergency Management. CSCs are an element of response outlined within the framework document. When an emergency occurs, a multi-agency Local Coordination Group (LCG) or Regional Coordination Group (RCG) (RCG is where more than one Local Authority is included in the group) may be formed to coordinate the strategic response among the Principal Response Agencies (PRA), the Principal Emergency Services (PES) and any other appropriate agencies or entities that are required during the response or recovery phases.

As soon as it is identified that there is likely to be a need for humanitarian assistance as a result of an emergency. The established coordination group should consider the establishment of a humanitarian subgroup to oversee the humanitarian elements of the response and recovery phases. This subgroup would be chaired in line with the lead agency concept and will generally be chaired by the Director of Service with responsibility for the Community section (or alternate). The subgroup will report to the established coordination group (LCG or RCG).

When Community Support Centres are identified as a necessary element of the response or recovery, the coordination of support for any activated CSCs is delivered through the subgroup.

This subgroup should have representatives from any department, agency, utility or service that may be needed to provide support or advice to the impacted people availing of the services at any CSC. The established coordination group (LCG or RCG) should decide on the composition of the subgroup.

Membership of the subgroup may include some or all of the following:

- Local Authority Staff
- Health Service Executive Staff
- An Garda Síochána Staff
- Elected Representatives
- Representatives from the Department of Social Protection (DSP)
- Representatives from the Department of Rural and Community Development
- Civil Defence
- The Red Cross
- Utility providers involved in the emergency

Additional members may be added to the subgroup depending on specific circumstances of the emergency and the factors affecting the CSCs activated, or the community in which they are based.

Consideration may be given to including additional members representing any of the following: NGOs working with disadvantaged people, TUSLA, Family Resource Centres, Local representatives from national organisations such as the GAA, An Post, Utility providers, Public Participation Networks (PPN), and Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC). This is not an exhaustive list, and membership of the subgroup should be continually reviewed. Any group that can assist or aid in delivering humanitarian assistance at a local level may be asked to join the subgroup.

The humanitarian subgroup can be established to assist with the delivery of essential services, public information and to gather information from impacted communities that may inform key decision-makers. The humanitarian subgroup will liaise closely with any CSC that is activated within its designated area, this close relationship will enable the subgroup to gather key information from communities and reduce the possibility of any lag time, where local assistance or solutions can be identified the subgroup should assist and where issues arise that are beyond the LCG or RCG level these can be collated and presented to the relevant forum.

Reporting through the appropriate CCMA or LGMA representative, the Humanitarian Subgroup of the LCG/RCG can provide accurate information to contribute to the national decision-making structures, reflecting the issues faced by local communities dealing with the consequences of an emergency.

3.1 Functions of the Humanitarian Subgroup

One of the key functions of the subgroup is to ensure that any Community Support Centre activated is supported and assisted by the relevant agencies providing services to the impacted community. The role of the subgroup will vary depending on factors such as the nature of the emergency, the number of CSCs established in the County, the length of time the CSC is required, and the level of resources available.

Role of the subgroup may include any of the following

- Identify if humanitarian assistance is required and in what form
- Coordination of departments, agencies, NGOs or other groups to deliver assistance to people impacted by an emergency
- Identifying areas where Community Support Centres may be needed
- Contacting the Community Support Centre coordinator and requesting the activation of the CSC
- Providing updates and information to the Community Support Centre coordinators to inform impacted people
- Providing requested resources to the Community Support Centre, where available

- Publishing details of the location of each activated CSC and the relevant operating hours through available public messaging sources
- Providing access to funding where it has been made available
- Providing outreach services from departments or agencies to the impacted people, utilising the Community Support Centre as a suitable location to meet with people
- Providing representation on behalf of the Community Support Centres to the LCG or RCG so they can inform the relevant various Departments, Agencies, Volunteer Groups or Utility Providers
- Identifying and sharing good practices that have been identified at other activated Community Support Centres

The humanitarian subgroup may be established before an emergency has occurred. In anticipation of an impending emergency, the coordination group can decide to establish a subgroup to plan and prepare for some of the likely consequences and may decide to place volunteer groups on standby that the Community Support Centres may be required to operate after the emergency has occurred, and it is safe to do so.

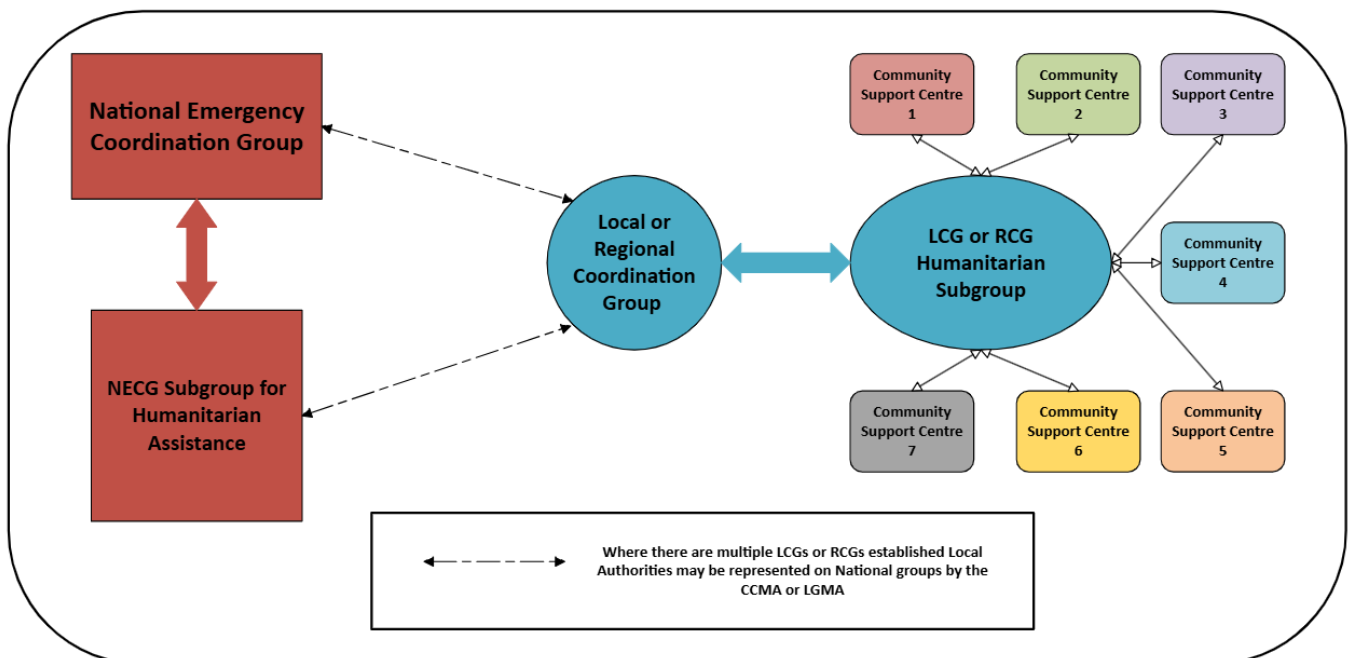


Figure 3.0 Potential structure for oversight of Community Support Centres

4 Procedure for Activating a Community Support Centre

Community Support Centres can be activated in response to an emergency, or as outlined, the CSC may be activated in preparation for an emergency. In terms of household resilience, the public is advised to consider the individual needs of their household and to plan and prepare for a period of up to 72 hours. Ensuring that they have contingency for such a period in terms of food, water, medical needs and energy. The potential activation of a CSC is not intended to replace the need for household resilience.

The activation can occur in either of two ways:

4.1 At the Request of a Coordination Group

Each Local Authority maintains a pre-established list of each designated Community Support Centre, which includes the details of the people to contact when the CSC needs to be activated. The Local Authority will confirm that the details are accurate on an annual basis. The volunteer group managing the CSC is required to inform the relevant Local Authority if there are any changes before the annual confirmation.

When an emergency, that may require a Community Support Centre to be activated, occurs or is anticipated, the LCG is established with the three PRAs and any other necessary agencies included. They can identify the locations where a CSC may need to be activated and contact the relevant coordinator(s), requesting activation. The volunteer group operating the Community Support Centre may outline the services that will be provided at the CSC and the proposed hours for operating. A Humanitarian Subgroup of the LCG (or RCG) is then established to support the volunteers operating the Community Support Centre(s).

4.2 Self-activated by the Community Group

When a sudden onset emergency occurs, the community volunteers connected to a designated Community Support Centre may decide to activate their CSC to support the impacted people in the community or nearby areas. In a fast-moving emergency where rapid activation is necessary, the Community Support Centre will inform the Local Authority that the CSC will be activated, the services that will be provided, and

the hours it will be open. The Local Authority will then determine if the formation of the LCG or subgroup is required.

4.3 Additional Communications with the Public

In the case of a high-impact emergency event, the local authority may establish a dedicated phone line which will provide information on the location of a Community Support Centre and supporting information on services available from different sources such as the DSP, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment the Department of Agriculture and active NGOs. Where communities are affected by severe disruption to telecommunications/ broadband services, the local authority may work with An Post to arrange leaflet drops and with local radio stations to broadcast any relevant information.

5 Becoming a Designated Community Support Centre

Each Local Authority will advertise an Expression of Interest (EoI) seeking submissions from community-based volunteer groups that have premises that may be suitable as a Community Support Centre. They will be asked to supply the following information:

- Location of the premises
- Details of the community organisation owning/operating the centre
- Details of the child protection policy of the organisation owning/staffing the centre
- Contact details of the coordinator proposing the venue
- Contact details of the people to request the activation of the CSC from
- Details of the premises and the associated resources
- Details of the potential capacity of the CSC
- Details of the services that may be provided at the CSC

The Local Authority will review the submissions from this process and determine which premises should be included in the list of Community Support Centres in the County. The operation and contact details of these CSCs will be held by the Local Authority and will be validated in advance of the winter season each year, notwithstanding the potential for these CSCs to be needed at any time.

Locations and contact details of predesignated centres should be included in the Local Authorities' Major Emergency Plan.

The list of Community Support Centres should be available to the other PRAs, Government Departments, and the availability of this resource should be considered in future emergency management training and exercises.

The volunteer group proposing the Community Support Centre will be provided with information on the preparations that they need to carry out to ensure that the CSC is maintained and ready for activation. The inclusion of any venue as a designated location will not affect the normal functioning of the CSC outside of when it is required as a Community Support Centre.

6 Funding for Community Support Centres

There are two potential streams of funding available for designated Community Support Centres, as follows:

6.1 Annual grant for Designated Community Support Centre

An annual grant will be provided to each Community Support Centre if they submit and update the requested information to the relevant Local Authority about their CSC.

Grant funding may include:

- Basic kitchen appliance upgrades (water burcos, kettles, fridges, etc)
- Tables and chairs
- Part funding generators/ integration of generators into the premises' power supply
- Solar/ battery power backup
- Supplies of MREs and non-perishable foodstuffs

6.2 Funding in Support of an Activated Community Support Centre

When a CSC activates in response to an emergency, funding may be available for centres that have been requested or approved by the Local Authority. This may be available during or after the emergency event.

Appendices

Appendix A - An Aide Memoir for Volunteer Groups establishing a Community Support Centre

To be completed.....

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