

This document was created by Bob Hatcher WE001, one of the founding members Wessex 4x4 Response. Thank you Bob

## **From four men in a pub to national charity in “One easy step” or seven hard years.**

This article was originally written for an internal work magazine so please excuse the work references.

By now most of the team will have seen me at one time or another in 4x4 Response clothing or seen me in my Discovery with its distinctive signage. I imagine that a fair percentage have realised by now that 4x4 Response is rather more than a one man band and takes up a fair amount of my spare time.

### **You may wonder how that happened.**

In my previous incarnations I have been both a Special Constabulary Section Officer (equivalent to a sergeant) and a Town Councillor; in both those roles I had the task of compiling a list of ‘friendly’ 4x4 owners, who would let us use their vehicles in an emergency, as it was obviously not cost effective to maintain a fleet of 4x4 vehicles, that might only need to be used a few times per year. I suppose that the reason that I had the job in both roles, was my long time love affair with off-road capable vehicles, which came from being raised on a farm and being the third generation of my family to own some woodland.

### ***Year one.***

In September 2002, I happened to be at the Land Rover show in Peterborough when I came across an organization, which at that time was called “4x4 Response”, now called for reasons which will become clear “Norfolk & Suffolk 4x4 response”. After a short chat, during which they explained how closely they worked with the local Emergency Planning team I thought, “Yes, this could work in Somerset”, so upon my return, I e-mailed the Emergency Planning Officer in Taunton, to ask his views on the creation of a team. After roughly 48 hours, during which he obviously spoke to his Norfolk counterpart, I received an invite to a meeting the next week AND more importantly an offer of help in setting up a Somerset team, which I proposed to call Somerset 4x4 Response. This was something of a shock to the system, as at the time the team consisted of one member, ME.

Some rapid posting on 4x4 forums, resulted in four of us meeting at the Lord Nelson in Ilminster in October 2002 to set up a committee. Within the year we had 16 members in Somerset and had attended several meetings with the Council.

It was soon clear that we were in a bit of a ‘Catch 22’ situation, in as much as although the various professional bodies were keen to use us, they were also wary of using an untried organization, it was also clear to us that we needed to be used to demonstrate our abilities.

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## ***Year two.***

By our first birthday we had reached a membership of 16, with membership cards, identifiable vehicles and were accepted as members of SVAG (Somerset Voluntary Agencies Group), the umbrella body for organisations such as ourselves, the Red Cross, WRVS etc. who can provide assistance in Emergencies. As a result of these meetings, we were developing a Command and Control structure, based partly on the Police, partly on the Fire Service, and to a great extent on the Red Cross and Cave Rescue Group, thus it is that we now have a Bronze - Silver - Gold structure although we seldom use “Gold” and can call-out all our members in roughly 30 seconds by the use of bulk SMS messaging.

## **Bronze, Silver, Gold?**

**Bronze**, is the controller on the scene making minute by minute decisions, - think Team Manager.

**Silver**, ensures that enough members are available for the incident and keeps everyone informed.

**Gold**, looks several days ahead and thinks of long-term strategy – think Head of Department.

Late 2003 saw our first attendance at a Multi-agency Exercise and an opportunity to practice our systems.

By 2004 it was clear that we were on people’s radar, to the extent that I was receiving phone calls not only from Somerset Civil Contingencies Unit, as the old Emergency Planning Office was now called, but also from the Government Office of the South West (GOS west) and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat of the Cabinet Office, which during an emergency meets in Cabinet Office Briefing Room A (COBRA). Also we had groups from around the country, e-mailing us to ask how they could go about setting up similar teams.

## ***Year Three.***

By the end of the year several teams, in particular those in Norfolk, Powys and Moray, plus to a lesser extent several others, were in constant touch, discussing common standards and working practices. During the year the original 4x4 Response rebranded itself to Norfolk and Suffolk 4x4 Response, thus not only following what was becoming the standard name format of County / Area 4x4 Response, but also enabling 4x4 Response to be the national name of the proposed umbrella group.

Late May 2005 brought heavy rain to the Pilton area of Somerset, resulting in a standby, but no callout, in case Glastonbury Festival needed evacuation. The thought of evacuating 100,000 individuals was to say the least somewhat daunting. It was clear that our role would be minimal but important, as we would be involved in transportation within the showground, if the need arose. Luckily we did not proceed from standby to callout, as I happened to be attending my Aunt's funeral with my colleague Tony acting as Silver Controller for a few hours.

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Only six weeks or so after, as I'm sure everyone will remember, the 7th of July saw the London transport system brought to a standstill by suicide bombers. This of course caused some anxiety, not only on the day but for some time afterwards.

### **Why do bombs in London affect us?**

Putting it simply places like Bath & Castle Cary are less than two hours by train and of course Yeovil is a similar time by coach from London. So without wishing to frighten anyone you can see how an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) can be a hazard to more or less anyone, a terrorist steps on a train or bus in London and two to three hours later he could be anywhere in the country. Not only that of course, but over and above the physical damage to people and property, there is also the shock of hearing that friends and family have been injured and the possible need to evacuate an area of the town. Also of course we need to be aware that they don't always travel from London. Recent years have seen terrorists arrested in Plymouth, Bristol and Exeter.

So you can imagine the position when my 'call-out phone' rang at 16:50 on the 18th of July only 11 days later. I answered to be told by Mendip District Council's Duty Officer that there was a major chemical incident possibly terrorist related being declared at Wells Job Centre, where several had developed a rash after handling an envelope. I was asked to put a Response team to standby ready to assist with transporting equipment to a Rest Centre in Wells, should evacuation be necessary. Within some 30 minutes we had seven units on standby waiting for the shout to go, at that time it was unclear what exactly had caused the people to develop a rash, but it was possible that it was some sort of Neuro-Toxin. By now the Council had decided that we would be better placed at their headquarters in Shepton Mallet, in case things developed into something much more serious, and it should become necessary to evacuate part of the city.

As I was the nearest Controller to Shepton Mallet, it was decided that Silver control would be passed to my colleague Matt at Weston-Super-Mare, whilst I and others made our way to the Council Offices, so by 18:00 we had seven vehicles either at or en-route to Shepton Mallet, where we spent a pleasant two hours drinking coffee, before being stood down once the suspect package had been examined and declared to be only impregnated with garlic paste and salt.

By the time that our third birthday came around, we had some 30 members not only from Somerset but also from Avon, Devon, Dorset and Wiltshire. We were now a Registered Charity with a declared aim: -

"To preserve and protect human life, by supplementing and supporting Emergency Services in Somerset and the adjacent counties, in particular but not exclusively by providing equipment and vehicles".

### ***Year Four***

Early in 2006 I was given the opportunity, by Somerset Civil Contingencies Unit to attend the National Emergency Planning College at Easingwold in Yorkshire and obtain a basic qualification in Emergency Planning. That was an experience in itself, touches of James Bond, getting in definitely isn't easy and getting out isn't a lot easier, with passes checked both in and out before the gate is opened. This lovely old country vicarage with outbuildings, accommodation blocks etc. excellent learning facilities

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during the day and an excellent bar at night is maintained by central government, which may explain why there are two guards on the gate one of whom stays inside the hut when his colleague checks your passes etc..

During the year Somerset 4x4 Response was renamed Wessex 4x4 Response, with the teams all being named after their counties except those in the Avon area who preferred to remain as Somerset. Although it appeared that there were several County teams we all operated as one with a common membership list and common control team (just as the various T.M.s and their teams constitute the Trade Team). This was a strangely quiet year with no major incidents, we did however find ourselves on standby to assist with the potential evacuation of Frenchay hospital, due to an unexploded World War 2 bomb found on the new Haymarket building site, luckily this turned out on excavation, to actually be an unexploded lump of concrete, so the drive to Bristol was cancelled.

We also found ourselves on standby for Coastal Flooding as winds blew the October tides up the Bristol Channel; again although we were on standby there was no need for us to actually deploy.

## ***Year Five***

As 2006 turned into 2007, we were finding ourselves receiving calls asking if we could provide support to various organisations, including the Police and Ambulance Service should we get adverse weather. It was time for us to ensure that we had a written Memorandum of Understanding in place with various organisations. As it happened I was at a meeting with the Civil Contingencies Unit in Taunton, when they received a call from Great Western Ambulance Service asking for us to go to standby, due to anticipated heavy snow. As mentioned earlier, our Call-out and Control System is flexible enough that any controller can log on more or less anywhere, so I sent the alert from the office there. This received a somewhat surprising response as my phone went off with the text in less than 10 seconds. "How did you do that so fast?" So I demonstrated it again but by putting in the phone number of the head of the CCU. To be told that our system which only cost us for messages sent was faster than that used by the Fire Brigade.

As it happened the National Network had moved on slightly over the previous eighteen months, so I asked permission to log on to the National Forum, to show us on standby. Once I had logged in, I commented that Powys, Cambridge and Norfolk had also gone to standby at the request of the respective Ambulance Services, which got the response "Do you know what all the teams are doing?" my reply was "But of course don't you?". A slight exaggeration but not far from the truth as we only know IF a team posts to say that they are on standby / called out - most do. This means that we know if anything major is happening anywhere in the country.

Most readers will remember that July 2007 saw the Gloucestershire floods with the loss of water pumping and the potential loss of electricity to the majority of Gloucestershire, which eventually resulted in the Pitt report.

To start with there was a certain reluctance to use voluntary agencies, but eventually at 08:52 Thursday 27/07/07 a call was received by Wessex 4x4 Response from The Red Cross at Warmley requesting four vehicles to attend the Red Cross distribution centre at Quedgley.

This was the start of our biggest operation to date, involving not only Wessex 4x4 Response, but also the fledgling Gloucestershire 4x4 Response and members from

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Humber, Yorks, Peak and Powys 4x4 Response teams controlled by myself in a Gold role, planning some 5 days ahead and liaising not only with the various teams but also the Red Cross, to ensure prompt payment of expenses, I have to say that the most impressive bit was that I could receive the claims from members by phone or e-mail, collate them into one bill submit it to the Red Cross by e-mail late in the evening and be told by 07:00 next morning that it had been approved and a cheque was on its way – usually through my door by the time I got home that evening. Luckily a senior officer of the Red Cross lived in Sherborne and so could drop a cheque over. During the operation our members carried over 150, 000 litres (150 tonnes) of water a large number of food parcels.

The following was received on July 31st 2007

"Bob, finally got 2 minutes to take some time out to let you know by e- mail the great work 4x4 Response are doing for us. We will follow up with something more formal obviously. For now it must be said that these guys have been an exceptional support. We would never have shifted the litreage we have in this operation, helping THE MOST vulnerable Victims of the floods in Gloucester, if it were not for the increased capacity your vehicles offer us, but more importantly the hard work, flexibility and sheer enthusiasm all your crews without exception have shown. Nothing has been too much trouble, and the hours worked have been significantly in excess of normal expectations. Please pass on this e-mail to all concerned with my heartfelt thanks- more to follow. I look forward to our continued working relationship together over coming days.

Keep in touch,

Gareth Morgan Transport coordinator British Red Cross floods appeal"

This operation was such a milestone that we gave it an Operational name of Aquarius, We even managed to persuade our clothing suppliers to provide commemorative shirts to everyone who took part emblazoned with the National badge on the left and the operation badge on the right.

The thanks of the Gloucestershire people was almost overwhelming when 10 of us from Wessex Gloucestershire 4x4 Response, attended a Service of Remembrance at Tewkesbury, with old ladies greeting us like lost sons as we walked into the Abbey. Afterwards when we went for a coffee I received an apology, "I have to charge you something, and is two pounds OK?" In my innocence I thought "bloody hell that's expensive" but worked out 10 coffees multiplied by £2 and handed over a £20.00 note only to be given £18 change. £2 for 10 coffees, seemed OK to me.

## **Year Six**

2008 was a year of changes, by now we were fully integrated into various levels of Emergency Planning, early in the year, two of us plus two colleagues from Gloucestershire were invited along with other Emergency Agencies, both Statutory and Voluntary were invited down to Exeter to meet members of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, to discuss the way that various organisations could work together, especially in the context of Major Disasters, such as Buncefield, Major Flooding, Weather related events and of course Pandemic Flu, which we seemed to have been discussing for many years, but always thinking in terms of the expected

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AVIAN flu pandemic which seemed to be always just beyond the horizon in South East Asia.

June saw the first national meeting of the informal organisation that had developed over the previous five years or so, although it was not an AGM, we were well on our way to formalising a National Organisation, with common standards and common aims.

August saw the creation of a more formal National Organisation as we registered the National Organisation as a Charity. I was invited to become National Chairman, pending formal elections of Trustees at a date to be confirmed. (At the meeting in June this year the members nationally were “kind” enough to elect me as National Chairman). This meant that I was running not only the local organisation, but also had a major part to play nationally.

## **Year Seven**

Late in the autumn I received an invitation to attend a conference in Bristol under the auspices of the Civil Contingencies secretariat, at which I not only represented Wessex 4x4 Response but also the National Network. This gave me the opportunity to meet my opposite numbers from organisations such as British Red Cross, Severn Area Rescue Association etc. and also of course senior officers from various Emergency Organisations such as Police. Fire etc. At much the same time Dorset Police requested that we formalise our agreement with them. The result was a formal signing of a Service Level Agreement by myself representing Wessex 4x4 Response, and Adrian Whiting the Assistant Chief Constable on behalf of the Police Force with an effective date of 01-12-08.

This may have been incredible foresight or just good luck as the winter seemed destined to be busy from the start. On 13th of December we were alerted to extensive flooding throughout Somerset, however we were also advised that it was not to a depth that gave cause for concern, “but please go to standby” before being stood down later in the day. On the same day we received similar messages from Great Western Ambulance Service.

Some six weeks later both ourselves and our Gloucestershire neighbours were put on standby again by the Ambulance Service, as heavy snow was forecast (an accurate forecast as it transpired). Within thirty minutes 23 Wessex 4x4 Response volunteers had indicated that they were available if needed. Within the next hour that had reached nearly 30 and of course the Ambulance Service was advised accordingly. By this point the Duty Controller was in close touch with me, to ensure that we able to provide assistance, not only to the Ambulance Service, but also any other user bodies who might call us. In my Role as Chief Exec, I was in close touch with my colleague Darren in Gloucestershire, to ensure that prearranged mutual aid protocols were being implemented. Mutual aid? Basically we send the nearest available unit regardless of the location. The weekend came and went with no particular issues then our world changed.

At 22:09 on Monday 02/02/09 we received a call from Dorset Police, our duty controller immediately realised that if St John's 4x4 vehicle couldn't help then this could be interesting, I was asked if I could take the “Control Desk”. So phoned Dorset Police Control with my usual “This is Wessex 4x4 Response, how can we help” and got the reply “We're going to test you tonight” there was some humour but also some concern in the voice.

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Three hours after getting to bed, I was called again by the duty controller, as Great Western Ambulance Service was requesting that we deploy to various Ambulance stations to assist them, including Glastonbury, Radstock, Salisbury and Weston Super Mare. Between then and Friday the control team and myself were dealing with many different user bodies, including the Ambulance Service, three Police forces, the Prison Service, Meals on Wheels, various Primary Care Trusts (Doctors & Nurses), over five different Counties: - Avon, Devon, Dorset, Somerset, and Wiltshire during which the members drove over 6,000 miles on over 100 different taskings, without any accidents.

The conditions in the West of the County were such that the first vehicles sent to assist with getting Carers to the elderly on Exmoor had to give up. The next day, a two man crew went deep into Devon to come back to Dulverton from the other side. As Somerset Care at home said "it was an amazing effort by your members" the guys drove over 100 miles each day, for three days to ensure the welfare of the elderly and housebound.

The busiest time was about mid-afternoon on Friday 6th February, when we had 39 vehicles operational on various missions, in all five counties. Due to the size of the operation over some ten days, we again felt entitled to give this a memorable and appropriate name. 'Operation Alabaster SW England 2009'

Since then we have been called out to several incidents. In March we were again called out several times due to snow, one of which was coincidentally on the day when we were supposed to be taking part in a major exercise at the Bath & West showground. The Duty controller for that week Paul, had been on duty all night over the 4th-5th March, when we sent several vehicles to Devon. So I was therefore going to control at the exercise on the 5th. I had just reached Sparkford when I received a call from Dorset Police, asking how soon we could get a minimum of eight vehicles into Dorset. In the words of Stacey "SIMPLES" I had 12 sitting at Shepton Mallet, so leaving four behind to assist at the exercise, the rest of us headed into Dorset, and deployed in teams of two, to standby at four stations. Another Dorset member became available meaning that I would be free to act as controller from Police HQ at Winfrith. We arrived at our various locations around 10 – 10.30 and carried out several checks of the highways etc. before being stood down at about 14:30.

These call outs during the snow, resulted in several letters of thanks from local authorities, the Prison Service and others, plus a Chief Officer's commendation from the Ambulance Service.

Bob Hatcher  
WE001

Bob continued to be a key member of 4x4 Response, both as a Committee Member and Responder, until personal circumstances saw a move to Africa, where he now lives with his beloved wife Rose.

Today Wessex 4x4 Response, with over 200 members, is part of 4X4 Response UK, a National Organisation that covers England, Scotland and Wales.

We are working with numerous Cat 1 Organisations, responding with Local and National Resilient Forums and other Charitable Organisations.

Wessex 4x4 is a Charity Number 1159765