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No 50: Finding the people who don't know they're missing



LonSAR volunteers on patrol in the City of London. Photo: London Search and Rescue.

How do you get lost in a city of nine million people, when you're never more than a few streets from a tube station? It is a question Isaac, part of the fundraising team at London Search and Rescue (LonSAR), hears all the time. The answer is where the whole story begins.

"It's a little bit confusing about why London needs a search and rescue," he says. "You think, how can you get lost in London? But the people we help are quite a different demographic to the people who get lost or injured in the mountains. Those people really want to be found. In London, these people don't necessarily know whether they're lost. Maybe they've got dementia. Or they don't want to be found, they're struggling with depression, mental health issues." The figures are sobering. Of the people LonSAR is called to search for, 27% are facing a mental health crisis and 36% have plans to take their own life.

Isaac knows better than most what a search and rescue team can mean. Working in Switzerland some years ago, he took up rock climbing, had an accident, and was flown off a mountain by helicopter. "I owe a lot to search and rescue," he says. He has since recovered well, and it drew him into volunteering for the cause.

LonSAR is not the search and rescue most people picture. “When people think of search and rescue, they think of someone injured on a mountain, or someone lost at sea. They don’t really think about the bit in between.” That in-between is lowland rescue, and LonSAR is one of around 36 lowland teams in the country, and the only urban one. Being both little-known and hard to explain was, Isaac says, their greatest challenge. “Not many people know about lowland rescue. And being urban, people are very confused about what we do and why we do it.”

The team of more than 100 volunteers pours its energy into the bread and butter of searching for missing people, not into design studios. “We didn’t have many people in the team who were professional designers or professional marketers. Lots of our marketing looked quite amateur.” A 100% volunteer-led organisation on tight budgets, LonSAR usually has to fundraise for equipment, vehicles and kit. Marketing was the gap.

Through the livery connections some of its volunteers hold, the team came across The Marketors’ Trust. “We put two and two together that you were there to support marketing and media, looked at our own, and found it lacking.” They applied at the end of 2024, and received a £10,000 Charity Grant.

What it bought was expertise the team simply did not have. “It gave us the support, guidance and money to employ people whose full-time job was marketing and media.” The website was rebuilt to tell their story properly. Emails, Instagram and YouTube now share consistent branding. They ran workshops to hear what was missing, right down to the colour schemes. For Isaac, the moment it landed was quiet but telling. “I’m signed up to the newsletter and the social channels, and seeing the quality and the branding improve, that was the moment. We’ve really smartened up as an organisation. The vision is much clearer.”



LonSAR out in public at the Lord Mayor’s Show, 2024. Being seen is part of being found.



Volunteers brief before deploying at the Lord Mayor's Show, 2024.

All of it serves a single purpose: helping more people find LonSAR before someone needs LonSAR to find them. One published call-out shows what that looks like. A 15-year-old girl with autism had been missing for several hours when the call came in around ten at night. More than 50 responders turned out, police officers, firefighters and LonSAR's own volunteers. They searched on foot, sent in a search dog and put up an infrared drone, invaluable across the surprising expanse of parks and common land the city holds. After hours of searching, they found her. She had not realised anyone was looking. Cold, but safe, she was driven home.



In the control unit: LonSAR coordinates a search alongside City of London Police.



A LonSAR search dog and handler. On night searches, dogs and infra-red drones cover ground the eye cannot. Photo: London Search and Rescue.

Being a scientist, Isaac is careful not to claim numbers he cannot yet prove. "Change like this takes time to show in the figures. But qualitatively, it's definitely improved, and it continues to improve." He is quick to share the credit too, noting how much the team learned from the Trust's earlier work with Surrey Search and Rescue. "A lot of the groundwork was already done."

Ask him what he would say to the Marketors who made it possible, and it is simple. "Thank you very much for your support. It makes a real difference to have people whose reason to exist is marketing, and who are really knowledgeable about it. Thank you."

Website: www.londonsar.com
Instagram: @lonsar_uk

Watch the film: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R22UIhZOTo4

(the video embeds and plays on the website)

How to give

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