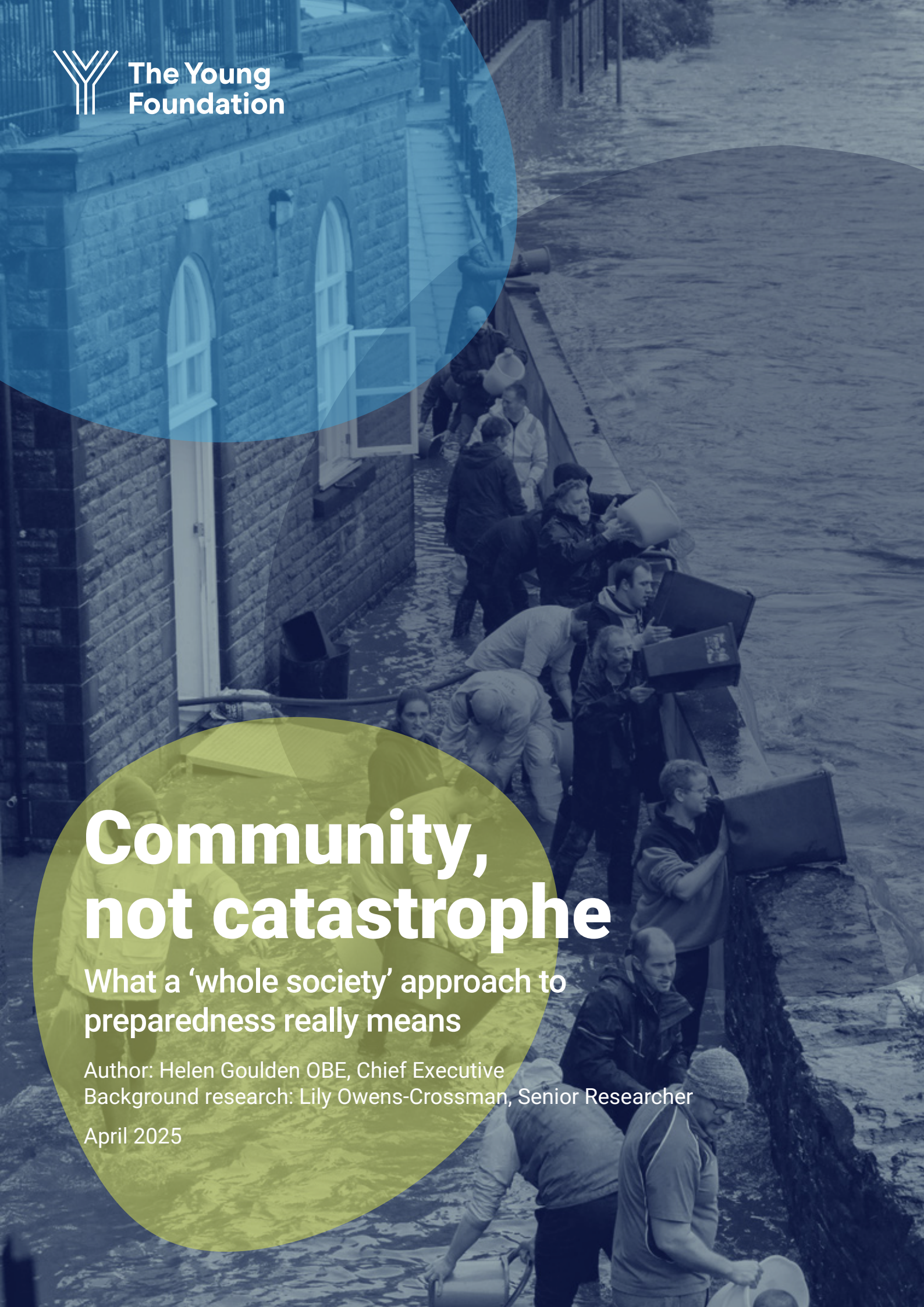

The Young Foundation

Community, not catastrophe

What a ‘whole society’ approach to preparedness really means

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Background research: Lily Owens-Crossman, Senior Researcher

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The Young Foundation

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Local Trust creating lasting change

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VCS Emergencies Partnership

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The scope of this report

For many authors and senior strategists of crisis response and disaster planning, a somewhat blurry boundary differentiates an acute crisis (such as fire or flood) from a crisis (arising from the long-term impacts of inequality, or a lack of investment in preventative health, for example). And while, in the white heat of a chronic crisis, the underlying fragility of society is hugely material, this report is not an analysis of our UK response per se.

Neither is it solely about long-term recovery from crisis. There is already a huge body of evidence (including from The Young Foundation and Local Trust) showing that good levels of social infrastructure, and the strength of relationships and social capital in the places we live, are the foundations for many, many good societal outcomes; including our ability to respond to and recover from crisis and disaster. Again, this is material to, but not the core focus of, this report.

The primary concern of this report is to make the case for why greater attention, respect and investment in people, communities and the voluntary sector are key to unlocking a 'whole society' approach, building preparedness for and responses to extreme events. And showing why that approach must be rooted in equity and inclusion, and grounded in the participation of every sector and every community.

Personal note

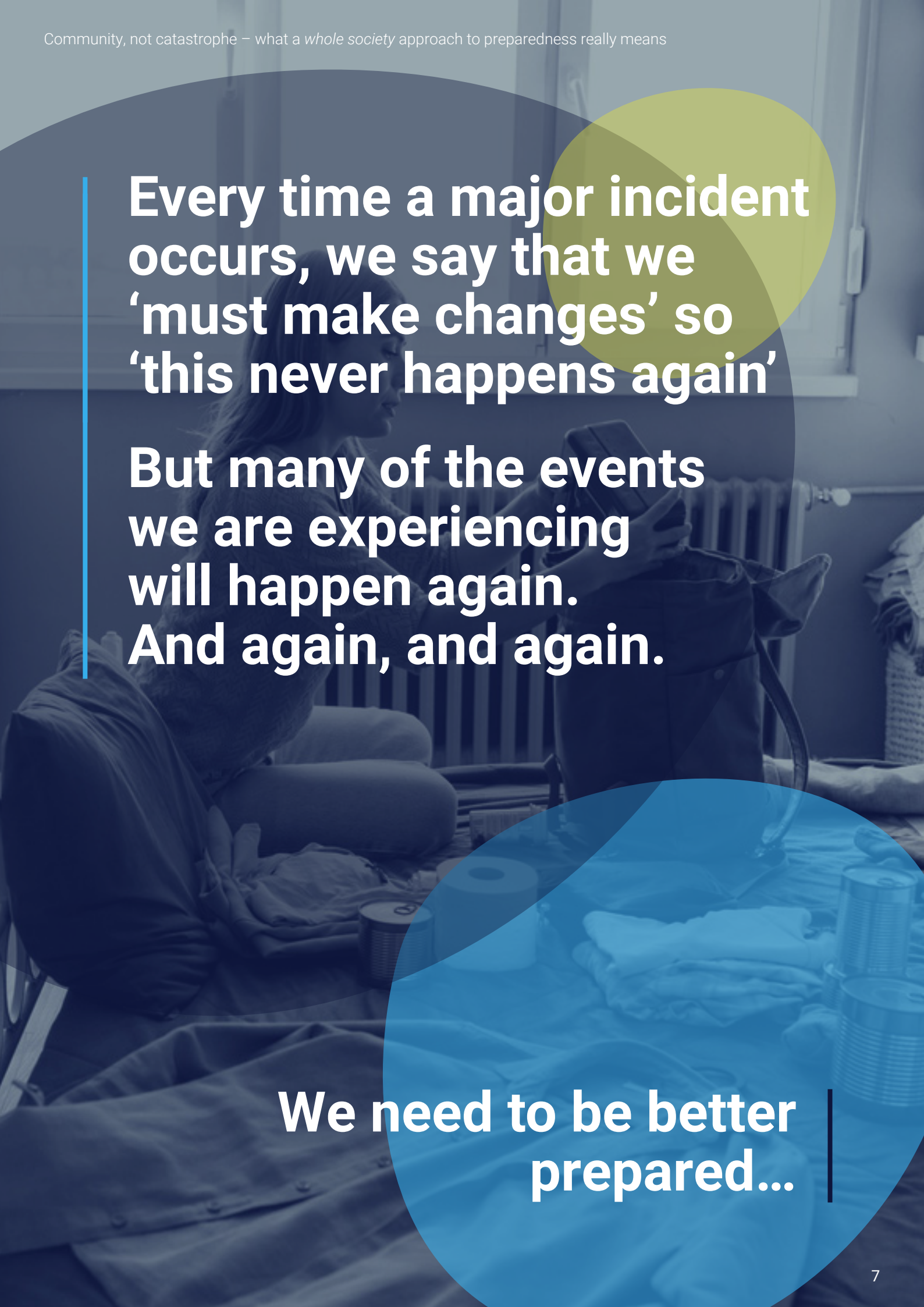
Growing up on a council estate in the 1970s and early 1980s, a number of things are seared into my memory. The presence of the National Front. Nights in a dark house during power cuts. But most memorable was impending nuclear war. Surrounded by five RAF bases, the whole area was deemed to be a prime location for the Russians to drop a bomb. It might seem very far-fetched, but this fear was reinforced at every turn. The F4 Phantoms and Harrier Jump Jets screaming over our school playground; the regular dropping of leaflets through the door warning us what to do if the four-minute warning sounded; the backdrop of films such as *When the Wind Blows* and *The Day After*. The latter terrifying to an adult, let alone a child. But it was the leaflets that scared me the most, because were sent to offer comfort but delivered the opposite. It did not seem plausible even to my tiny ten-year-old mind that unscrewing the living room door from its hinges, leaning it against a wall and hiding underneath it would provide any defence against an atomic bomb.

As I got older, that childhood fear and preoccupation with existential threat never went away. And many years later I became a city prepper, always ensuring I had a backpack stashed in the back of my wardrobe, ready to hike out of London with clothes, a roll of cash, emergency supplies and a shortwave radio. My closest friends humoured me and assumed I had a problem; with one memorably accusing me of being 'wistfully apocalyptic' – actually *wanting* the worst to happen. It was not until 2006, when I graduated through a radical, but now sadly disbanded MSc at Bath University that I came to some sort of reckoning with my fear. Any kind of long-term answer to preparedness or survival through deep crisis was never going to be a singular endeavour. I couldn't just walk alone from a city on fire. It would be morally and practically impossible to do so. I saw little worth in a climate-changed, war-changed society that did not seek its response and recovery in communion with others. Ultimately, in any least-worst-case scenario, I knew we would only get through crisis through mutual aid, community and solidarity.

Fast forward to 2025, and the commentary on the fracturing and polarisation in our society now consumes many books, many column inches, many lived realities. This report seeks to fill the 'community chasm' that exists in how we understand strategies for 'preparedness' in the face of multiple and varied threats. We can prepare as individuals (if we are able, and as best we can) and we have exceptional commitment to preparedness through statutory services responders; albeit with less investment than is needed. But unless we see ourselves, civil society, as genuinely part of what government calls our *civil contingency infrastructure*, our response to major threats will fail many of us; and specifically fail those who are already at the sharpest end of disadvantage and marginalisation.

The role of the public, communities, civil society and the voluntary sector is downgraded in many national policy debates about crisis preparedness. That needs to change.

Helen Goulden OBE, March 2025



Every time a major incident occurs, we say that we 'must make changes' so 'this never happens again'

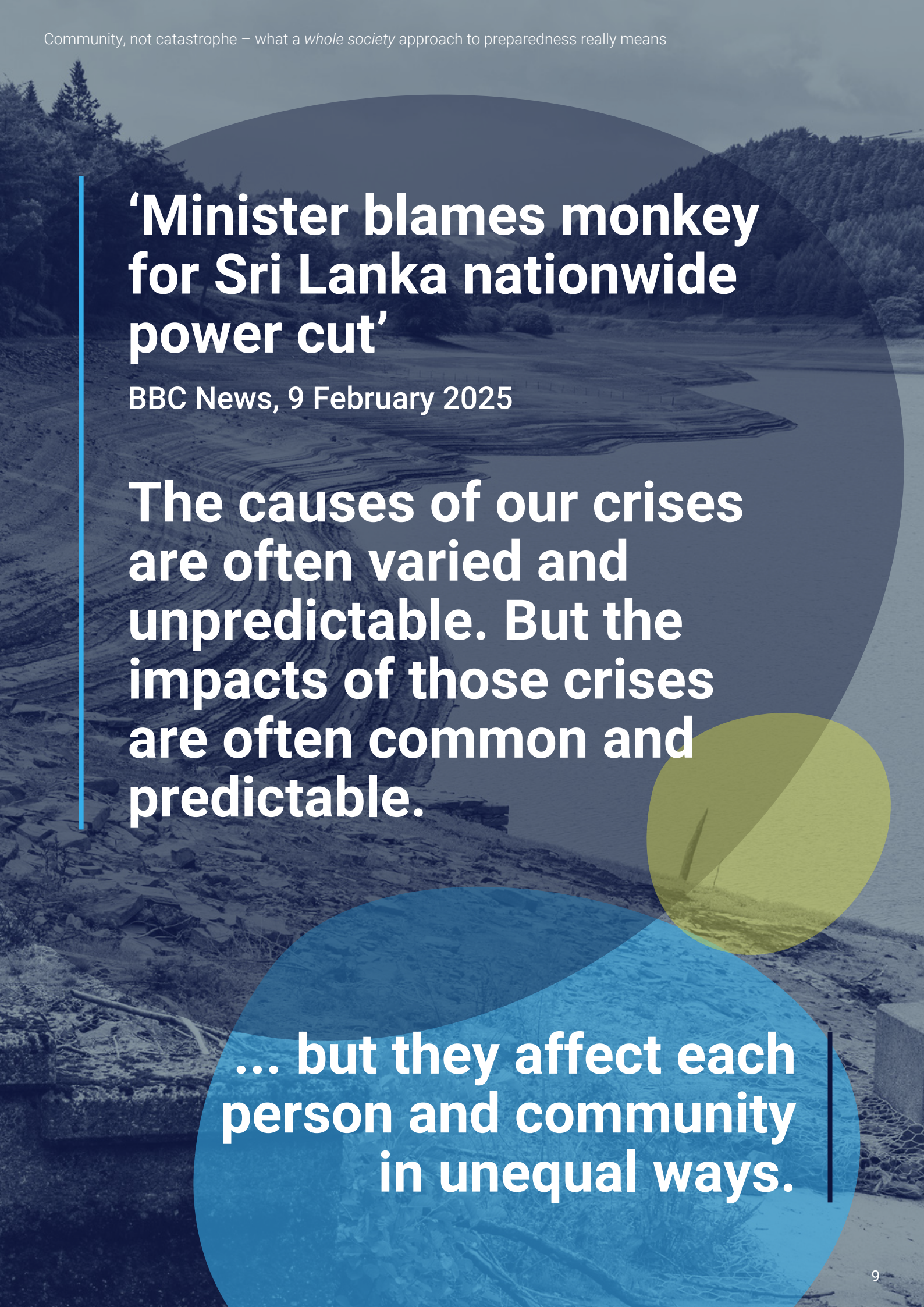
But many of the events we are experiencing will happen again. And again, and again.

We need to be better prepared...

‘We need to mobilise a more diverse set of groups and partners across the full risk landscape in order to prepare for and respond to emergencies on a “whole of society” scale.’

The UK Government
Resilience Framework 2023

What makes this a reality?



‘Minister blames monkey for Sri Lanka nationwide power cut’

BBC News, 9 February 2025

The causes of our crises are often varied and unpredictable. But the impacts of those crises are often common and predictable.

… but they affect each person and community in unequal ways.

1 Too long; didn't read? Here's the executive summary

The range of threats, risks and predictable crises facing the UK is growing, rapidly. It is highly likely that we will encounter more turbulence in the coming years and decades. Not all of these can be prevented or mitigated. The existence of social infrastructure, networks of support (social capital), voluntary capacity, and trusted information-sharing is vital to the functioning (and rebuilding) of an economy and society.

This report builds on and extends some of the many voices and recommendations being made to achieve this. It seeks to build a far greater level of awareness and understanding to those who are not necessarily steeped in the work of crisis response and recovery. Trusts, foundations, charities, investors, businesses, and state actors who play a critical role in a national or local crisis to support local people and communities, but who are not yet ready - or sometimes not able - to apply a 'preparedness' lens to their work and strategies.

The Government's *whole society* resilience approach requires a whole system approach to thinking, recognising there are intersecting systems that contribute to national preparedness and resilience building. Not everyone is a resilience guru, but we must all understand how our existing work and influence contributes to whole society resilience. Cross-sector system approaches are fundamental. They demand a level of competency in systems thinking, a mindset of collaboration, and a willingness to work across boundaries, sectors and silos.

The ability to organise, co-ordinate and support UK citizens in times of crisis and recovery relies heavily on the charity and voluntary sectors, and on high levels of mutual aid and support by neighbours and community leaders. This capacity is critical across the general population, but specifically crucial in supporting vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalised communities to address the disproportionate negative impacts faced during and after a crisis. Not everyone who becomes vulnerable in an emergency will be on a pre-existing list. So the 'live' reliance on communities who understand and know their community intimately are far better placed to identify and reach vulnerabilities that emerge during and after a crisis.

The reach and scale of that charitable and voluntary support, and distributed infrastructure into these communities demands recognition and investment, as part of any national resilience strategy.

Civil society should therefore be recognised as 'critical national infrastructure' in the UK.

It is not enough to engage the VCSE sector in unfunded activities relating to the work of Local Resilience Forums. The Government's Community Resilience Framework sets out a key objective to enable 'businesses, individuals, community networks and voluntary organisations [to be] empowered to prepare, respond and recover from emergencies and disasters'.[1] It has

a primary objective of enabling 'a participatory approach to emergency management'. This is entirely the right objective.

However, the operationalisation of that objective demands deeper investment, commitment and evaluation, if we are to transform the rhetoric of a 'participatory approach' into a reality. Drawing on extensive experience from The Young Foundation for enabling such participatory approaches to knowledge and capacity-building endeavours in communities across the UK, there is a collective need to understand how we shift from a 'do to' to a 'do with and alongside' approach to preparedness – particularly with disadvantaged communities where the risk of increased impacts from a crisis will be most severe.

The capacity, reach and expertise that exists in civil society to meet government resilience objectives takes many forms. Civil society is not a homogenous mass. To support each part, different kinds of enabling strategies are required. These include thinking systemically about household preparedness; neighbourhood-level mutual aid networks; local charities who bend their efforts towards tackling crises as they arise; those trained in providing crisis response; voluntary skills and expertise; the role of educational institutions; and the platforms and infrastructure that help direct voluntary support, resources and money to those communities who most need it. The willingness and capacity of local businesses to support preparedness and response efforts are also included as components of civil society action.

For the complex and often changing nature of this civic capacity to successfully provide support through crises, it requires a deep shift in attitude by government towards traditional, national 'command and control' approaches. The military, emergency services, local authorities, the NHS, utility and transport infrastructure bodies are, of course, fundamental to national preparedness and crisis response. Their *effective* collaboration with this critical voluntary capacity cannot be 'turned on' at will. And in places – often deprived and disadvantaged communities – where civic and social infrastructure are either weak or missing, and where levels of household preparedness are very low, a longer-term focus on building community resilience and meaningful relationships with a plurality of local voluntary actors is required.

2 Our ten recommendations

Key shifts and needs - and their rationale

The need for shared principles of preparedness

A 'whole society' approach to preparedness should be underpinned by a common set of principles to guide *all* actors in their different roles and responsibilities. These include principles of equity, experience and participation:

Equity

Crises disproportionately affect people who are more vulnerable, poorer or marginalised by their race, ethnicity, ability, gender, age and other protected characteristics. A whole society approach must be rooted in a principle of equity. Namely, that different resources, attention and efforts should be determined on the basis of different circumstances. This principle can be most authentically enacted through:

experience

The realities of daily lives, and different experiences of crisis (whether surviving a terrorist attack, a flood, or a pandemic) must inform every part of preparedness; from the development of strategies and policies to the design of response mechanisms on the ground. Action plans must include sustained, real-time, qualitative data on the specific experiences of those who are most likely to be disproportionately impacted by a national or local crisis.

participation

To adopt a whole society approach, the participation of a much broader, more distributed network of civil society actors and community leaders is essential. This means opening opportunities to participate in the co-design and delivery of awareness-raising activities, and taking actions to increase preparedness in households and communities. It requires the sustaining of structured spaces (both at national and hyperlocal levels) for many more members of civil society to build relationships and trust with state services and large national responders.

It is recommended that:

these principles, which should be uncontroversial to HM Government, are applied to all national and local preparedness strategies and planning activities. And all state actors held to account for their implementation.

ii Better, sustained national messaging and support

Too often, fears of creating panic can limit (or completely curtail) messaging from central government on the impacts of risks and likely crises. This is despite manifest evidence that communicating consistently and regularly does *not* induce panic in the population. In fact, it can prevent panic by empowering people with the knowledge and ability to take proactive steps to prepare for potential emergencies; reducing anxiety when a disaster occurs.[2] The attention and effort that most people can (or do) give to preparing for a crisis is very limited. This is particularly true of households and communities who are experiencing live and acute challenges relating to locality, poverty, health, housing and protected characteristics.

With trust in governments (both in the UK and other countries across the world) at an all-time low, **the communication of messaging will be most effective when channelled through trusted, local networks** and institutions such as faith-based organisations, local charities and anchor institutions – all part of our civil society infrastructure. However, this presents particular challenges as social media can bond people together in some negative ways perpetuating mis- and disinformation through 'echo chamber' networks who trust and connect with each other in localities.

More fundamentally, **any national messaging must be combined with context-specific and community-specific information and support to increase household preparedness**, in partnership with trusted, local actors in civil society. The centralised broadcasting of *risks* will not achieve the intended outcome of increasing preparedness in our population. Local messaging communicating the *impacts* of risks being realised is more important.

It is recommended that:

- a shared, coherent communications strategy is developed, in partnership with civil society organisations who are best placed to understand the realities and challenges of people's lives.
- Significant attention and investment should be given to building deeper, broader partnerships to test, evaluate and scale practical actions for households to prepare.

Expect and enable community participation and experimentation

The UK has a long history of innovation and experimentation, and interventions in public policy areas are most effective when developed and tested *with* people and communities. Charities who work with vulnerable groups and local communities often have a deep understanding of what is missing, what is needed, and have no shortage of ideas and innovations to better meet local need or address local challenges. **Structured, funded opportunities to test new ideas to motivate, incentivise and support community preparedness should be created**. A central body with a remit to share 'what works', and what does not, could draw in good and effective practice from other countries with more experience of disaster preparedness, response and recovery. This would introduce social innovation in cross-sector preparedness, with a specific focus on more vulnerable populations and deprived areas of the UK.

It is recommended that:

there is a significant, public-facing extension of the UK Resilience Academy including a 'what works' experimental component to invite, support and test innovative community-led approaches to building preparedness.

iv Community-designed Exercises for All

The UK Resilience Academy has been effective in developing and sharing guidance on 'exercises', which develop the necessary preparedness and confidence in state actors to respond well during a crisis.[3] Exercising and role-playing crisis scenarios, when executed well, are critical to building trust, 'muscle memory' and confidence in responding to a crisis. However, the prevalence of 'lived experience' and civil society in the design and delivery of those exercises seems highly limited. This serves to limit the preparedness of a wider set of civic actors and increases the 'blind spots' and flaws that generally occur when multiple and varied perspectives are absent from service and exercise design.

Types of preparedness 'exercises' vary, but many are labour intensive, expensive, and require very high levels of commitment, planning and resource from military, emergency and public sectors. These exercises are highly necessary, but they are insufficient in building a 'whole society' approach to preparedness.

It is recommended that:

the Government's approach is extended and adapted by creating new preparedness exercises, which are practical and deliverable in local communities, by civil society organisations; building trust, preparedness and empowerment in more parts of the UK population. These new exercises should be designed with the communities most likely to experience the impacts of any crises.

V Better creation and mobilising of evidence and data

At present, there is no data to assess the levels of household or community preparedness across the UK. We can probably intuit that it is very low, but there is currently no way of attaching a quantifiable or meaningful assessment by which to target attention, effort or investment.

Combining a small number of household and local indicators to effectively map this gap would **produce a National Preparedness Index to plot progress on the UK Government's commitment to a 'whole society' approach**, annually reinvigorating a national and local focus on the essential need to be more prepared. Risk registers from UK Government are only useful if we have a whole society view on whether and how they are being addressed, and whether progress is being made.

There is also insufficient attention to the knowledge and lived experience that enables us all to understand impact and how risk impacts different people disproportionately. This kind of knowledge is only created *with* those communities, and there are no shortcuts. Participatory research to understand marginalised and so-called 'hard to reach' communities is required; serving to build institutional understanding while simultaneously building awareness and agency in those groups.

There also needs to be accountability for Local Resilience Forums in their work to advance preparedness in the communities they serve, with clearer metrics for what success in this endeavour means.

It is recommended that:

there is a structured, sustained method by which to assess household and community preparedness levels to an LSOA level, and evaluation of Local Resilience Forums in achieving their stated outcomes.

vi Support actions to increase household preparedness

As set out above, the level of household preparedness in homes across the UK is likely to be very low – as is the recognition of need, motivation and ability to address this. At the end of 2023, 2.8m UK households were in arrears with their bills or behind on scheduled lending repayments; 4.2m were going without essentials; and 3.4m reported not having enough money for food.[4] Preparedness for a future crisis is not possible for these households without significant intervention. This means the prevalence of a strong civil society - which is equipped to support very low-income households before, during and after a national or local disaster - is both morally and materially essential.

For households who are more affluent, persistent challenges to preparedness also exist. Preparedness does not often feature on their radar either.

It is recommended that:

government recognises the need to shift from a primary focus on centrally publishing information, to enabling support for households to implement the actions necessary to increase preparedness. This can be achieved through collaboration and partnership with the private, and the voluntary and community sectors, to test new approaches.

vii Build local civil defence infrastructure

Civic and community buildings play a significant role during a crisis or disaster, often serving as vital hubs for emergency response operations, providing temporary shelter, healthcare facilities, and community support centres, facilitating relief efforts and supporting affected populations. Civil defence infrastructure is essential and should be taking advantage of existing havens of trust and safety. A designated gymnasium may be less appropriate than a mosque or community library. A locally informed balance of where people will be instructed to convene, and where people will want to be for safety, is key.

In European countries where there is more immediate risk of invasion or threat of war due to their proximity to Russia, there has been significant state investment in secure, safe buildings in which to take refuge in the event of threat to life. Notably, in Sweden, these buildings are clearly marked with a common logo. Awareness of their existence and location is high, and their purpose understood.

This level of need and investment is arguably less high in the UK at present.

It is recommended that:

- there is public official identification of spaces and places which are officially recognised as being *sufficiently prepared and primed to be mobilised and used during a local crisis* or disaster.
- Emergency Contact Hubs, which provide a focal point for co-ordinating activities in an emergency (such as those being extensively rolled out by Wiltshire and Swindon Prepared – **the public facing side of a Local Resilience Forum**), should be widespread, publicly known, and recognisable to all residents and visitors.
- Such hubs can also serve as public spaces to share information and training opportunities in times of relative calm.

viii Support efforts to grow trust and community connections (social capital)

The level of social capital in a community determines its ability to support itself during a crisis. The existence of social capital in reducing deaths and enabling recovery during a local disaster and building resilience is well documented. However, evidence suggests that communities develop more mutual aid networks where there are higher levels of economic advantage, thus deepening the inequalities of outcomes at times of crisis. Higher levels of social capital are also proven to impact many other social and economic policy areas.[5]

It is recommended that:

UK Government develops coherent and sustained strategies and infrastructure for deeper connections, trust and relationship-building across places and communities. The case for this is strengthened by the positive impact of social capital on community resilience (and better understanding potential negative outcomes from some forms of social capital[6])

xi Rethink and scale leadership, training and education

Community leadership and experienced voluntary capacity are crucial in a crisis, and we are some distance from this capacity being sufficient. For example, this author's best estimates put levels of formally trained volunteer leadership capacity relating to flooding at less than 0.1% of the population, despite one in six homes in the UK being at risk of flooding. Expanding existing and creating new opportunities to access citizen training to respond locally to a crisis is essential, as is rethinking the citizenship and PHSE curriculum to begin the journey of resilience and community action at an earlier age.

Leadership requirements for building preparedness are very broad. The wide variety of actors who would benefit from support and training is therefore also broad. Sources of training are not just the traditional resilience spaces. There are clear and tangible opportunities to build on the work of the national Community Leadership Academy to strengthen the infrastructure for all parts of society to build the distributed leadership capacity and competencies required, on the ground, in times of crisis.

It is recommended that:

- officially recognised community leadership preparedness training should be accessible to any member of the public;
- there is a focus on building understanding of - and adapting to - the complex, changing contexts which unfold during and after a crisis.
- Preparedness (both in terms of a duty of care for educational institutions and the wider resilience building support for pupils and students) is enshrined in regulation and curricula.

X Co-ordination and facilitation of national and local action

A 'whole society' approach to preparedness requires us to engage with the complexity of society and its different actors. It requires local empowerment and capacity to take action with a less top-down, centralised approach to directing efforts. Civil society actors play a proven and effective role in providing the infrastructure to enable the flow of resources, and the funding to reach the spaces and places where they are most needed, in ways that connect the vast array of community and voluntary capabilities and existing infrastructure. This includes but is not limited to the VCS Emergencies Partnership and the National Emergencies Trust. Local Resilience Forums that exemplify more inclusive, community-involving practice and infrastructure should be nationally evaluated and learned from.

The ongoing work of the National Preparedness Commission also plays a powerful role in building the national narrative, recommendations and vehicle for advancing a 'whole society' approach to preparedness.

It is recommended that:

- significant public investment is made into operationalising the National Preparedness Commission's work across civil society and industry.
- The UK Resilience Academy and Local Resilience Forums should also be extended and supported, and deeper investment made into the growing number of Emergency Contact Hubs. These require outward-facing strategies to build community leadership, training, and education to scale preparedness skills across our communities.
- accountability for Local Resilience Forums should be clear and evaluated to support continued development and measurement of progress towards community and household preparedness.

3 Why focus on communities and the voluntary sector?

Recent examples of community responses to crisis

History shows that the ability to organise, co-ordinate and support UK citizens in times of crisis and recovery relies heavily on the charity and voluntary sectors, and on mutual aid and support by neighbours and community leaders. This capacity is critical at a general population level, but specifically crucial in supporting vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalised communities to address the disproportionate negative impacts faced during and after a crisis. The reach and scale of that charitable and voluntary activity and distributed infrastructure demands recognition, support and investment as part of any national resilience strategy.

Civil society should therefore be recognised as 'critical national infrastructure' in the UK in times of crisis response.

While it is certainly true that the UK is not routinely battered by severe hurricanes, or experiencing famine, earthquakes, or war on its land, we are by no means immune from severe tragedies, crises and disasters. As referenced in the executive summary, the frequency of crises is growing rapidly, and it is far from easy to predict which kinds of crises will strike, and when.

In the last decade, the UK has experienced extreme heatwaves, cold waves, flooding, cyclones, a hurricane, wildfires and, of course, the Covid-19 pandemic. We have witnessed acts of terror at Manchester Arena and London Bridge, and tragedies such as the Grenfell Tower fire. Individual acts of extreme violence and murder persist, such as the murder of three young girls and the attempted murder of 10 others in Southport last summer.

Civil unrest and rioting by certain groups are also very clear kinds of crisis, with devastating immediate and long-term impacts on communities. Civil unrest can often be a predictable outcome of any disaster or crisis and as such, the crisis and unrest should be seen in tandem. Crises can expose existing fault lines in a community, or dramatically increase economic strain. A more participatory, community-involving approach to preparedness therefore may also be likely to build trust – and mitigate unrest to some degree.

Very different kinds of crises have different causes but can have common impacts. Civil society and communities continually and consistently respond to local need as they work through crisis, trauma response and, over time, recovery. Usually in the service of those who are most at risk. The following, very well-known examples, highlight ways in which communities have responded to different kinds of crisis in recent years, and what kinds of conditions can further increase their effectiveness.

Covid-19 (of course)

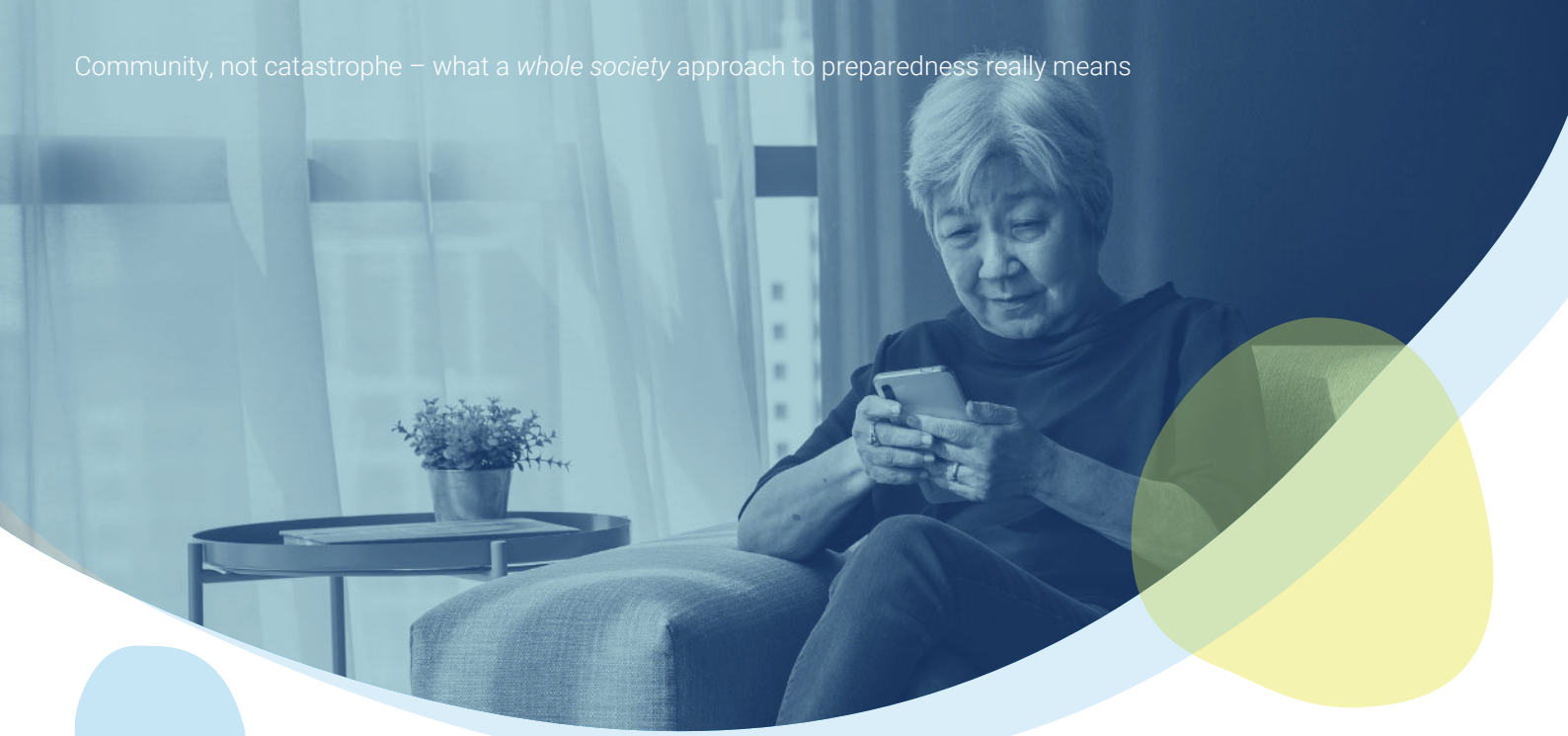
On 23 March 2020, then Prime Minister Boris Johnson addressed the nation,[7] instructing people that they would only be allowed to leave their home for limited reasons, such as shopping for basic necessities. All shops selling non-essential items were closed. Gatherings of more than two people in public were prohibited. All social events stopped. Like many of the 1.3m mutual aid groups set up at the beginning of the pandemic, members of my own community were printing leaflets and distributing them across our neighbourhood, letting people know that help was available if they had any particular needs (shopping, prescriptions, worries and so on). These groups largely formed *before* 23 March 2020. In other words, they mobilised faster than the state.

The Covid-19 pandemic served as a litmus test for the resilience and effectiveness of community responses in the UK. The Local Trust has consistently sought to underscore the necessity of community-led responses in times of crisis. *Stronger than anyone thought: Communities responding to Covid-19* examined how communities in the UK responded to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. It highlights the high levels of resilience and adaptability of local communities. Many were able to quickly mobilise resources, volunteers, and support mechanisms to meet the needs of their residents. The swift pivot to virtual platforms, for example, enabled community groups to maintain communication and support networks in a socially distanced world. This agility stands as a testament to the capacity of grassroots organisations to respond effectively under pressure, highlighting their vital role in crisis response and management.

> There is a terrible, terrible truth, and it's something that we all need to reflect on, which is that all pandemics feed off inequality and drive inequality[9]
>
> **Sir Patrick Vallance**

Many communities demonstrated exceptional support for each other by quickly adapting to the changing landscape. They developed innovative solutions to meet emergent needs, such as establishing and strengthening the work of food banks, creating mental health support lines, and organising prescription deliveries. Informal networks played a crucial role in coordinating responses and delivering essential services. These groups were often more agile and responsive than larger institutions, effectively addressing local needs. There was a significant surge in community-led action, with many community members stepping up to help vulnerable populations, such as the elderly and those in isolation, demonstrating a capacity and willingness of residents to support each other in times of crisis.

Stronger than anyone thought resounds with the same call as this report: communities are vital partners in resilience-planning, preparedness, response and recovery. But we risk valorising this 'blitz spirit' if we do not also shine a bright light



on the levels of burnout, difficulty in accessing funding, challenges of digital exclusion, bereavement, trauma and financial difficulty that swelled through Covid community action. Community leaders were not immune to any of these challenges.

Throughout the pandemic, community leaders emerged as a cornerstone of effective community response. These people - often unpaid volunteers or members of small local organisations - played pivotal roles in coordinating efforts and galvanising collective action. These local, community leaders were uniquely positioned, possessing an intimate understanding of their communities' specific needs, the best channels through which to meet those needs, and the location of existing resources. Crucially, the provided a sense of safety, reassurance and reliability. The use of trusted networks to address vaccine hesitancy - the realisation of the power of a child's voice in influencing parents and grandparents on getting the vaccine, the voice of religious leaders in encouraging and so on, was incredibly powerful. This was well evidenced in The Young Foundation's report examining the role of trusted networks in addressing vaccine hesitancy in more vulnerable communities.[8]

Support and solidarity in times of crisis is part of the human condition. We do it consistently and predictably; the better angels of our nature. But at what point does that community strength give out, overwhelmed by need and the chaotic mix of presenting problems?

In the first Covid Inquiry Report, we saw *zero* attention given to this first response community action. Its report sidelined the necessity of trusted people to reach those most vulnerable to both the disease, and the immediate impacts of a national lockdown. This implicit exclusion in mainstream HMG inquiries into the pandemic sent a clear and frustrating message that it can neither be relied on or trusted as a key actor in a crisis. It does not feel like Sir Patrick Vallance's words have taken hold. But they must.

Grenfell Tower fire

The years leading up to the Grenfell Tower fire provide perhaps the most devastating example of how a racialised, minoritised community was ignored and degraded by the very institutions that were responsible for their safety, homes and wellbeing. The raw stories of Grenfell Tower are not this author's to tell. However, the scale, intensity and trauma in the community did not diminish the significant and complex role that this same community played in the many stages of the response, recovery and justice-seeking processes. A range of community groups emerged through this tragedy: the Grenfell Community Response group; the Grenfell Foundation; Grenfell Tower Community Monitoring Project, and Grenfell United, the survivors and bereaved families from the fire.

Emergency relief and shelter was provided by community centres, churches, mosques and schools, who opened their doors to provide shelter and basic necessities to displaced residents. These spaces served as temporary refuges for survivors who had lost their home.

There was an overwhelming influx of donations from the local community and beyond, including clothes, food, toiletries, and other essentials. The scale of giving - both of resources and money - was not without its challenges, not least how to channel significant sums of money to the people for whom it was intended. This, also happening in the year of the Manchester Arena bombing and the terror attacks on Westminster and London Bridges, led to the development of the National Emergencies Trust.[10] This is a prime and successful example of how a national infrastructure can work in the service of hyperlocal strategies and action.

Members of Grenfell-affiliated and other local organisations also provided information and emotional support to survivors and relatives. This included helping people locate family members, offering immediate psychological first aid, and ensuring survivors knew where to find assistance. They played a key role in coordinating the distribution of resources and services, working alongside larger charities to ensure relief efforts were targeted and effective.

As the response to the tragedy continued, local community leaders became advocates for the survivors, trying to ensure their voices were heard, highlighting their immediate needs, and pressing for action in discussions with local authorities and media. Community meetings were organised to keep residents informed about ongoing relief efforts, housing arrangements, and health services. They also provided platforms for affected individuals to express their concerns and needs directly.

Community and voluntary groups assisted displaced residents in navigating the complex process of securing long-term housing. They provided support in dealing with bureaucratic challenges and liaised with local authorities on behalf of survivors. Recognising the long-term psychological impact of the disaster, volunteers facilitated access to trauma counselling and support groups. This was essential in helping survivors and community members cope with the emotional aftermath of the fire.

To foster solidarity and healing, commemorative events and activities were organised by community leaders. These aimed to honour the victims, provide collective spaces for mourning, and strengthen bonds. And finally, beyond immediate recovery, community groups have continued to advocate for justice, focusing on accountability for the fire and reforms to prevent similar tragedies in the future. This includes pushing relentlessly for policy changes around building safety and fire regulations.

In August 2024, another illegally cladded building was engulfed in flames in Dagenham.[11] The campaigning role of civil society and community campaigning in advancing social justice after a tragedy is no less a part of building preparedness and mitigating future tragedies than any other.

Time and time again, we see the community and voluntary sector step up in the face of disaster and crisis. We see sustained community action whatever the crisis. We saw it in the riots of 2011, which prompted community clean-up responses, support for business owners, community efforts to form solutions to crime, and safety groups. We saw it flow from the Somerset Levels flooding in 2014[12] and many, many other serious floods across the UK. We saw it in the aftermath of the Manchester Arena bombing in 2017, which prompted a social media campaign offering accommodation and transport to those who needed it after the attack, and the creation of Manchester Attack Support, which included a 'We Love Manchester Emergency Fund' for donations (both set up in partnership with local authorities).

Community preparedness and response in the wake of the riots of summer 2024 is a particularly sensitive area, which demands sustained attention in preparedness planning. There was well-evidenced racist - including, specifically, Islamophobic - intent behind much of the hardcore rioting, with some people motivated to participate because of 'personal grievances, vulnerabilities, social media influence, a search for identity'[13]. This unrest presented distinct challenges, especially when entwined with geopolitical and ideological shifts. And the results were disastrous for communities in parts of the UK.

Homes For Ukraine

In March 2022, The UK government launched the Homes for Ukraine scheme in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The scheme allowed Ukrainian refugees to come to the UK and be sponsored by UK residents. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the Home Office jointly ran the scheme, processing visas, checking sponsors and working with local authorities and devolved governments to support new arrivals. Government were ably supported by the huge wealth of knowledge, guidance and expertise of the VCS who specialise in refugee and migrant support.

By the summer of 2023, 248,388 people had expressed interest in becoming a sponsor and around 100,000 Ukrainians (predominantly women and children) have now been homed through the scheme, providing major savings and better outcomes than alternative refugee accommodation. It is regarded as a successful programme; a programme not afforded to refugees from other war-torn and unsafe countries.

Sensitive and safe matching of residential accommodation and refugees is a difficult task, but for households wanting to help, there was no clear way to connect with a local organisation looking for hosts, nor local resources to assess suitability through the scheme. We have no data, but my guess is that a very large proportion of those citizens who had the good heart to offer their homes through registering with the service - and who were publicly thanked through press headlines for doing so - had expected the service to broker suitable connections with Ukrainian families. This resulted in people finding each other through Facebook, with local government and other agencies co-ordinating hosting, inspections and safeguarding in patchworked ways.

Our systems are pitifully out of date for co-ordinating that kind of activity in ways that fully realise the 'latent capacity' to help and support others in times of crisis. Given the future likelihood of refugees from across Europe and beyond – and indeed, the 'domestic migration' away from UK homes under water (potentially inland, but more likely on the coast) there is a huge opportunity to develop the distributed system and infrastructure in advance to co-ordinate the short- and medium-term matching of hosts with those who have lost their homes.

In December 2023, then Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden MP announced the creation of an online 'Resilience Academy' which would:

"provide a range of learning and training opportunities for the 'whole of society'. For professionals there will be a curriculum to build skills, knowledge and networks and a centre of excellence for exercising. For businesses there will be greater guidance and particular assistance on threats to Critical National Infrastructure and cyber."

"And for citizens there will be a unified government resilience website which will provide practical advice on how households can prepare, as part of a campaign to raise awareness of simple steps individuals can take to improve their resilience".

As many crises fall on each other (and just as we have seen in the decline of volunteering and giving since the end of the pandemic)[14] we can't continue to expect people and community groups and the voluntary sector to keep rebuilding, keep going. It needs recognition and long-term, thoughtful investment as part of our 'critical national infrastructure'.

There is no real counter-factual to evaluating all this community effort. The best we might get would be to ask how many more deaths there might have been as a direct and indirect result of Covid-19 has it not been for community responses around the UK. Meanwhile, the fact that this gigantic act of mass local action to support one another was so sidelined and ignored in the first Covid-19 report[15] is an indication of the lack of value that is placed on this 'hotch potch', 'every day', 'messy' realm of human compassion and practical support.

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Oliver Dowden MP

It is difficult to imagine a world where this sustained expression of human compassion and practical support was absent. Again, there is no counter-factual. If this community mobilisation and response had not happened, what would have been the result? Where would UK society find itself? We must regard our local civil society organisations and community groups as critical to our functioning as a society and economy. They must not forever be the postscript in preparedness strategies; the last member on a Local Resilience Forum list. They should be the first.

4 What does a 'whole society' approach to preparedness mean in practice?

There has been a growing focus on the need for a 'whole society' approach to preparing for crisis and disaster in the UK, chiefly due to the range of threats, both 'natural' and 'man-made', which seem to be exponentially growing on a daily basis.

In February 2025, a monkey 'came into contact with a grid transformer, causing an imbalance in the system'[16] resulting in a nationwide power outage in Sri Lanka. But of course we have seen serious attacks on energy-providing infrastructure in recent years, including the still 'mysterious' explosions on Nord Stream gas pipes, which released about three months of Danish gas supply into the atmosphere. The Sri Lankan example of a monkey in a power station was significantly more random but serves to remind us that the causes of disruption and peril in our daily lives are not always predictable. Weird things can happen in a hyper-connected, complex world. Some are on our radar, others are not. And while we can review the 89 risks publicly available in the UK's National Risk Register, the list of *impacts* on the population from any of those risks materialising is far smaller and arguably far less visible to the public.

An approach to preparing ourselves for those *impacts* cannot be the sole job of any government. If the lights go out across the nation, even if temporarily, it is largely up to us, and our communities and the voluntary sector, to cope with the *impacts* of that loss while national agencies and bodies work to get our infrastructure back online.

Whether it's a national power outage, an act of war, or a global pandemic, viewing 'preparedness' as a 'whole society' endeavour is therefore essential. Because these events demand that we *all* have the know-how, resources and preparedness to meet our needs, when the world is turned upside down.

But of course, taking a 'whole society' approach means the *whole* of society - and it relies, inevitably and heavily, on communities to support each other, on charities and the voluntary sector, and on the pooling and sharing of resources to meet local and specific needs. Most fundamentally, these actors must ensure that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in our communities are supported with the kind of support that you, as a reader, would expect if you were in similar circumstances.

Too often, this voluntary and community capacity is viewed and treated by national government as one homogenous mass: civil society. One neat circle in a Venn diagram of other actors. The reality is far more complex; far more distributed. It is entwined and networked into the fabric of our daily lives and our neighbourhoods. And therefore, **civil society is the most important component of any whole society response.**

The following section of this report seeks to disentangle the diversity of capacity, which is so critical to preparedness in our communities, in relation to other actors across government and industry.

The diagram below gives a basic view of the 'ingredients' of a 'whole society' approach, each of which require different kinds of policies and investment to support.

The remainder of this report takes a number of the key dimensions of this 'whole society' approach to preparedness and how each might be better supported.

Household preparedness

Any whole society approach has to start with the level of preparedness in people's homes to withstand sudden, extreme events that significantly disrupt lives or place them in peril. And yet there are some profound barriers to building preparedness.

According to the ONS, of the c.25m households across England and Wales, more half meet at least one dimension or measure of household deprivation.[17] In May 2024, nearly two in five households (39%) were in 'serious financial difficulties' or 'struggling' financially.[18] And unless someone has previously been involved in an extreme event affecting their home and household, they are highly unlikely to proactively seek out information on preparedness without any kind of support, incentive, or belief that preparing for a future, as yet unknown crisis, has some benefit to the here and now.

Storing supplies of food and cash, preparing paperwork, and buying kit such as wind-up batteries and torches, is never likely to be in the top 100 things residents in any household are thinking about, let alone in households where there is financial distress, or more material pressing concerns and priorities. Raising awareness and encouraging preparedness for something that people believe is unlikely to materialise is a very difficult task. Compound this with challenges that may relate to language and digital skills in many households, and the task becomes even harder.

The UK Government was long overdue creating a trusted resource to support household preparedness. However, in 2024, then Deputy Prime Minister Oliver Dowden was unlucky enough to announce the UK Government Preparedness website (prepare.campaign.gov.uk) on the day Rushi Sunak announced the general election. Consequently, much of the fanfare of the launch and Dowden's speech on resilience was lost – as was a powerful opportunity to start a 'little and often' approach to increasing awareness of the need for preparedness across the UK population.

However, the UK government's Prepare website should be regarded as a primordial version of the service it needs to be, if it is to be useful. While the information is clear and straightforward, it is a *brochure* for preparedness. It is deficient in acknowledging context or circumstance and offers only convoluted pathways to engaging and volunteering for preparedness and crisis response. An altogether different, distributed approach is needed; chiefly shifting from communication of information to the provision of active support to mitigate likely impacts on households.

For example, it is not useful to publish words on a government website that say 'learn how to turn off your electricity, water and gas'. It *is* useful to promote videos on social media showing how we might do this. It *is* useful for any heating or other kind of engineer visiting a property to include basic preparedness 'training', showing people where their switches and levers for turning off utilities are.

Levels of trust in government are at an all-time low. A vast body of research shows that working with locally-trusted community groups and voluntary organisations can have a material impact on the adoption of advice and guidance.

This was further reinforced in research into effective ways of tackling vaccine hesitancy in US and UK black and minority ethnic communities during the Covid-19 pandemic.[19]

Taking inspiration from research undertaken to explore disaster preparedness of households in the Caribbean, preparing for and responding to disasters requires a 'strong understanding of households' perceived risks and ability to cope with risks'.[20] *This is different for different households.* Like our transition to a net zero society, if it is to be of benefit the *whole* of society, a person-centred approach is essential.

When thinking about low-income or vulnerable households, this kind of distributed approach - where support from civil society organisations and consumer-facing utility and service providers could dramatically increase levels of preparedness - is an important innovation opportunity. It is emblematic of a 'whole society' approach, rooted in collaboration and co-ordination of different strengths and capabilities.

Research need

Assessing the scale of need is a clear evidence gap. This author could not find any public available data which offers any view of the levels of preparedness in UK households. A direct response to this knowledge gap would be to take three well-established factors that determine household preparedness and map to the UK population. Those three factors are:

- the possession of emergency supplies
- the level of discussion of how to cope in a disaster situation within a household
- community resources which would mitigate the impact of any disaster.

And more specifically, what do we know about the context and circumstances of poorer households, those with disabilities, complex health needs and communities in relation to levels of preparedness, and how information and support can best be provided?

Social innovation opportunities

At The Young Foundation, we've been thinking extensively about the Finnish "äitiyspakkaus" or 'maternity box' that is given by the state to all expectant mothers in Finland. Containing things of universal use to every new mother and baby, the maternity box has been offered since the 1930's, initially prompted by a need to drive down Finland's exceptionally high infant mortality rates – which it did. Today, it is a culturally engrained practice of the government. Taking inspiration from this idea, working with marginalised groups and low-income households to determine the potential contents of a 'preparedness box', and prototype its usefulness to those households, is worthy of consideration.

Some 24 years ago, upmystreet.com was able to aggregate and present complex data from tens of different public data sources to present one, unified view of life 'up my street'. Everything from

my nearest plumber to what the local schools were like, to crime rates. It was one of the first consumer-facing, open-data platforms in the world and brought together information people needed, in one place, personalised to them. The idea was simple: what do people want and need to know about their neighbourhood and how can that be presented simply and usefully? Mindful of digital exclusion, upmystreet was also available in printed form; a personalised directory of local information, contacts and services, made available to new residents and homeowners in different parts of the UK.

There is a clear opportunity to *directly* lift this idea to place localised preparedness information, services and contacts into the hands of every resident across the UK, in any language, in online and analogue formats. The technology to do this has been around for more than two decades. The ability to provide locally relevant data, actions and signposting also exists.

National preparedness also requires national, networked, co-ordinating infrastructure and a steady, 'little and often' campaign to increase awareness and share immediate actions to take during an extreme event. Think *See it, Say it, Sorted*. The extended use of this phrase on public transport does not incite fear and irrational behaviour, as a 'one off' loud call for extreme vigilance might. The same is true of campaigns to increase preparedness.

While blanket campaigns will have an impact on awareness, there is a clear need to understand the demographics, values, beliefs, and media consumption patterns of those who are most likely to be impacted and disproportionately affected by a disaster or extreme event. Alongside this, there is a need to communicate different messages to different audiences, such as disaster victims, volunteers, donors, and other supporters.

This is not, possible without a more participatory approach to involving people and communities in the production of genuinely useful information and signposting. It is not possible without a very broad consortia of partners who are regular, or even sporadic visitors to people's homes.

Mutual aid, resilience builders and reactive responders

Mutual aid refers to support that community members in need provide to each other. It can involve sharing resources, services, or information. The prevalence of mutual aid (response capacity that exists outside formal civil society organisations and charities) was prolific during the pandemic with reports of as many as 3m participants.[21]

'Resilience builders and reactive responders' refers to existing civil society organisations and charities who bend their efforts towards crisis response in times of local and national emergency. Domestic abuse charities, mental health charities, food banks, charities serving very specific groups of people, and others have been shown, time and time again, to pivot their efforts and respond swiftly and in agile ways to address emerging need in a community during a crisis. Sometimes with additional funding, but often not, the people running and volunteering in these organisations barely think twice before redirecting (or, more often, doubling-down) on their efforts. There is possibly no charity in the UK that did not respond to the crisis that ensued during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The term 'social infrastructure' is used to describe the buildings, resources, community spaces and civic buildings that are open to all members of the public. It goes hand-in-hand with the presence of social capital, and there is no shortage of evidence that sets out the importance of places for people to go, learn, create, play, hang out, pray and exercise. Evidence of reducing crime, increasing social cohesion, health, wellbeing, and education attainment is manifest. Pretty much every social policy agenda is supported by neighbourhood-level social infrastructure. These spaces and places also assume a role of critical importance during a local or national emergency.

'Social infrastructure represents the crucial organisations, places and spaces that enable communities to create social connections – to form and sustain relationships that help them to thrive.'[22]

The efforts of reactive responders during crises are rarely possible without the existence of social infrastructure. It acts as a 'seedbed' for fostering social capital within a community.[23]

Civic buildings and social spaces during a crisis provide an essential anchor to collective, communal action and collaboration. They provide the foundation for the provision of mutual aid, if traditional provision becomes overwhelmed or disappears. It can provide not only secure space but is more likely to be trusted when it comes to advice and guidance during a crisis.

Post the Covid-19 pandemic, there is 'muscle memory' of how these civic spaces were used to offer vaccines, food, protective equipment and so on. But what is their role in building preparedness for future disasters? Of being primed, resourced and ready if the worst happens? And is there an opportunity to dramatically expand the range of buildings, spaces and social infrastructure that is available at a time of national need?

Civil Defence Shelters

When it comes to war and attack, Sweden is possibly the most prepared country in Europe. From a social infrastructure perspective, it has 64,000 Civil Defence Shelters; buildings that are prepared and capable of accommodating the population in times of need, making it one of the most civil defence shelter-dense countries not just in Europe but the world. These shelters are reinforced to be capable of withstanding blasts, shrapnel and nuclear radiation, can be mobilised with 48 hours, and provide secure, physical protection for people. Funded through the Swedish national budget, these shelters can be used for other activities during peacetime. All Civic Defence Shelters must be clearly marked with the *Skyddsrum* logo; identifiable by the population as a secure space to go in the event of a crisis.

Since 2024, Sweden has invested SEK100m (£73m) in the creation of Civic Defence Shelters with an additional SEK40m (£29m) to strengthen municipal rescue service capabilities during times of heightened threat and attack.

Despite an overwhelming amount of evidence on the critical importance of social infrastructure in delivering social and economic outcomes that benefit the whole of society, historically there has been limited noise from the UK government that it is worthy of serious investment. On the contrary, here, social infrastructure has been 'hollowed out'. This is primarily due to years of austerity measures, which led to significant cuts in local council funding, resulting in closures of community spaces such as libraries, community centres, and under-maintained parks, thereby weakening the fabric of local communities and reducing opportunities for social interaction and connection.[24]

With fewer accessible community spaces, people have fewer opportunities to build relationships, participate in local activities, and feel connected to their neighbourhood. And areas with already high levels of deprivation are often disproportionately affected by the decline in social infrastructure, further exacerbating existing inequalities.[25] The decline in social infrastructure is linked to a decrease in social capital; the levels of connection, trust and cooperation within a community.

This hardly prepares a whole society to respond to crisis and disaster and, **in the UK, there are no physical spaces that visibly show communities where to go for information or training in how to respond to a crisis,** let alone for refuge if neighbourhoods become unsafe. This needs to change if we are to seriously consider a 'whole society' approach to preparedness.

While a call to invest in our social infrastructure more broadly is only now gaining small political traction, there is a clear and distinct case for working across sectors to develop consistent, recognisable places (sites of existing or potential social infrastructure) for people to go to understand how they may respond in an emergency. Whether a post office, a community centre, library or leisure centre, some recognisable sign that they are a site of information and response is essential to community preparedness. Local context is key, however the provision of government investment and support to be more prepared (whether that is training, kit, advice, assurance, or support) from a trusted and recognised source is fundamental to a serious whole society response.

Specialist preparers

Around the UK there are some very well-organised and well-equipped organisations, which have the capacity and experience to provide emergency response to a crisis. These include organisations such as REACT, a charity that helps communities and people affected by sudden events both UK and internationally. REACT delivers training courses to repurpose the skills and experience of military veterans, 'blue light' responders, and skilled civilians - often deploying that capacity to the hardest to reach disaster zones, to deliver critical life support. REACT is a member of most UK-based Local Resilience Forums and has a strong track record in providing swift responses to events such as Storm Ciarán in 2023, carrying out 340 welfare checks to the most vulnerable people in the Hampshire area. Funded solely by donations from the public and corporate partners, REACT represents one of a number of charities mobilising specially trained volunteers.

A major source of capacity and support in the UK is the British Red Cross, who have thousands of trained emergency response volunteers across the country, ready to provide people, equipment, space and resources to support those affected by an emergency, helping them to recover. These volunteers are deployed during all kinds of disasters, from floods and fires to terrorist attacks.

These trained volunteers - co-ordinated by charities including St John Ambulance - are relied on by state actors such as local authorities and resilience forums. But they are by no means the only source of trained, specialist volunteer and resource capacity that is vital to a whole society response.

Here in the UK, 'dormant' volunteer capacity also exists, and can – when mobilised - deliver specific kinds of resource and critical infrastructure. There are clear innovation opportunities to do much more to leverage the potential benefits of this capacity.

RAYNET-UK

In 1953, the East Coast floods - particularly those affecting the Netherlands and parts of the UK - led to a significant crisis. During this disaster, radio amateurs stepped in to provide vital emergency communications when traditional communication systems were disrupted by the flooding. These amateur radio operators utilised their equipment. They played a key role in coordinating rescue operations and ensuring that information about the affected areas could be relayed to emergency services and the public; RAYNET was formed.

In the event of a national or widespread power outage, mobile and wifi communications are not possible, giving rise to significant challenges in co-ordinating emergency responses. In that scenario, amateur radio users can communicate across a wide range of radio bands, operating modes and equipment which allows them to offer emergency communication services. Many of the Local Resilience Forums include RAYNET as a response partner, and RAYNET has around 2,000 members across the country.

This voluntary response from radio 'hobbyists' is part of our civil society, connecting distinctive expertise and equipment that can be drawn on in case of emergencies. It prompts a question about whether there are other 'hobbyists' using

technologies that could be equally useful in times of crisis, including meshtastic,[26] the decentralised wireless off-grid mesh network designed to run on affordable, low-power devices.

Drones

The use of drones in natural disasters is becoming more common and is being promoted, for example, for search and rescue, to provide real-time data, to deliver supplies to remote areas, and to assess disease outbreak. Drones are increasingly used by emergency responders, such as in the 2023 floods in Libya, mapping images to assess the extent of damage in the city of Dern. In that same year, earthquake emergency responders in Morocco used drones to create heat maps for search and rescue operations. And in 2021, drones were used across multiple regions of Africa for aerial imagery, search and rescue, and aid distribution in the wake of Cyclone Eloise.

It has not been possible to determine whether this is a nascent drone version of RAYNET, which could provide larger, more distributed volunteer capacity of drone use in the case of emergencies. However, the Royal Life Saving Society runs an *Emergency Response Drone Pilot Award*[27] course teaching organisations or groups how to operate a drone to assist with rescues - especially in bodies of water.

Volunteer/Village Emergency Telephone Systems:

From the people who brought you access to defibrillators in public spaces, the Volunteer Emergency Telephone System (VETS) is community-run and enables groups of 10 to 15 'good neighbours' to assist in crises, pending the arrival of the emergency services. A local number is used as a single point of contact to ring all volunteers' phone numbers simultaneously.

The motivation and innate sense of compassion that prompts this kind of voluntary action also exists in other parts of our population, mobilising people who are not necessarily specialist responders, but do provide specialist resources in times of crisis and need.

Skills and education

The impact of crises on education - from Covid-19 closures to terrorist attacks, and the flooding of school buildings - has increased attention in providing preparedness training in schools in recent years. It's acknowledged that children and young people are disproportionately affected by extreme events, with substantial, long-term negative impacts on their health as well as impact on behaviour, cognition and school performance.[28] Children and young people from poorer, disadvantaged and minoritised backgrounds are even more deeply affected, both materially in terms of access to internet and a place to study at home, for example, and from increased psychological stress and anxiety over parental employment and income.[29]

It is worth reading the stories of nine young survivors of the Manchester Arena bombing, who led a research project to share insights for future preparedness, response and recovery. This Bee the Difference report notes the depth of psychological trauma on survivors of such extreme attacks, and the critical importance of specialised trauma support, which is accessible to all those affected. Yet 29% of surveyed young survivors of the Arena attack have never been offered or been able to access professional support.[30]

There is now a requirement on all English schools to plan for a variety of 'all hazards' preparedness, to cover a range of potential incidents affecting the school estate and community, including the recommendation of conducting an annual lockdown drill, alongside fire drills. Compulsory curriculum modules, such as in geography, include the discussion of extreme events including earthquakes and global weather - and from 2020, all children in English schools must teach life-saving first aid skills as part of their health education.

The importance of all these components of formal teaching should not be underestimated; but despite extreme events feeling like a remote risk for many, very little is actually known about the delivery of preparedness training in schools.[31] This is despite schools being a platform 'wherein classroom teachers provide a sense of security, developmentally appropriate pastoral care, as well as being cognisant of students' typical emotional and behavioural patterns to cultivate learning'.[32]

It is vital to understand the extent and efficacy of preparedness training for young people, and important to make a strong case for increasing our attention on informal learning for preparedness in a school environment. Young people are likely to experience many more extreme and existential threats than any other demographic, over the course of their lifetime. Multiple studies indicate that formal preparedness training can result in empowered decision-making during a crisis, and has 'multiplier effects, in transferring knowledge back into households and the local community'.[33] As such, young people hold the potential to be 'active participants' in crises in ways that foster personal as well as community safety.[34]

Given that young children from the global majority were disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, we need an increased focus on inclusivity when teaching preparedness, considering individuals' context, culture and circumstances.

The 2024/5 National Curriculum Review should include a wholesale rethinking of Citizenship education, to include the active building of trust, connection, and agency in local neighbourhoods and communities; to support a 'pipeline of preparedness' to increase resilience to disasters; and in support of other social outcomes.

Local schools should be members of Local Resilience Forums. Of the LRF's who responded to a request for a list of their members, none included schools, colleges or universities. This seems an oversight with regard to local critical response infrastructure, as well as evidence of a lack of attention on the role of education in building preparedness for future generations.

We must consider how to build preparedness into existing youth-involving infrastructure, with a focus on building young peoples' confidence, capacity and agency to support themselves and others in the event of a crisis (of any scale or size). For example, the Duke of Edinburgh Scheme or the incoming Young Futures Hubs.

Government should consider how to build on – or extend – existing major youth-led initiatives that are already focused on understanding and taking social action on serious violence (such as the Peer Action Collective), to build trust, agency and preparedness for larger crises or events.

Universities

As large anchor institutions delivering education to around 3m[35] students, the UK's higher and further education system have a pivotal role to play in preparedness, response and recovery from crisis and disaster. Like businesses, their primary response during the Covid-19 pandemic was one of 'business continuity'.

HE and FE also have a number of other powerful roles to play, including (perhaps obviously) the generation of solutions (such as vaccines), the education of students in key systemic risks (such as we see in Imperial University's partnership with the EIS Council), and other research activities with direct impact on disaster and crisis preparedness (such as The National Institute for Health Research Health Protection Research Unit; a partnership between King's College London, the UK Health Security Agency and the University of East Anglia).

But universities are, in the main, large estates in densely populated areas, no less immune to the impacts of any kind of disaster than anyone else in a locality. And it is unsurprising that countries most likely to be affected by earthquakes and tsunamis are those who have taken most action to safeguard and support for their students' education and safety. Even before the pandemic, there was work in the US to determine what a 'disaster resistant' university[36] should look like.

In addition to this variety of roles and responsibilities a university has in times of crisis, there is, the rising idea of the civic university[37] pioneered by the late Sir Bob Kerslake. A civic university is a higher education institution that actively works to benefit its local community and population. Civic universities are characterised by their local focus, long-term commitment, and clear strategy for supporting local priorities and need, most effectively executed when working in partnership with other local actors. There is arguably a strong rationale for aligning civic and preparedness agendas within universities that are publicly calling themselves 'civic' and ensuring that their commitment to student, faculty, staff and community safety is viewed as a whole society endeavour.

Online learning

A self-motivated person interested in building their preparedness skills may turn to the internet. Let's assume they are more likely to click on a video than read through a government website. What do they find? That the world of disaster preparedness is the world of the prepper movement…

> A prepper is a regular person who prepares for emergencies or disasters by stockpiling supplies and developing skills to be self-sufficient. They want to be ready for the worst-case scenario and protect themselves and their family
>
> **TruePrepper.com**

What can we learn from the 'prepper' movement?

A closet prepper in my 20s and 30s, I'm far less dismissive of the prepping movement as *'tin-hat wearing nut jobs'*[38] than most. I can follow the logic of seeing what's going on in the world and wanting to be personally prepared for the worst.

This report does not contain any in-depth analysis of the prepping movement, which started in the 1930s in response to the very real threat of war in Europe and has seen a strong resurgence in the 21st Century. But half a day trawling through YouTube shows a public-facing prepping movement that is almost exclusively male, very white, contains lots of khaki and *lots* of territorial army-style gadgets. There's also a good deal of list-making, impeccable Tetris-style storage rotation systems, and gas masks. For the outward-bound, organised man with a fondness for Die Hard, YouTube prepping channels clearly have a strong appeal. There's a very survivalist, individualist vibe across all these sites and channels: stockpile what you need and be prepared to defend yourself and your resources while chaos reigns around you. Aside from this YouTube clip for someone 'prepping for their elderly mum' there is little advice on how to prepare and train for supporting others.

Preparing yourself and your household for dealing with food, and energy and electricity outages is necessary across the whole population. Access to bite-size clips of people showing how to do this is a vital component of any public campaign to build preparedness. But there is clearly a dearth of content that speaks to 'everyday preparedness' by families and regular households. Official content or guidance via video is borderline non-existent. Content that speaks to community responses, the building of softer skills necessary in a crisis (such as conflict resolution, understanding complexity and adapting to fast-changing environments), communication and co-ordination practices is not to be found. Anything that speaks to the needs, concerns or circumstances of more vulnerable or marginalised groups ditto.

From searching the web then, you can find government information or you can find the prepping movement. There is a clear social innovation opportunity to incentivise and bring together video and training content to build awareness *and* preparedness skills and fill the vast chasm between the two.

General preparers

Educating and practicing preparedness and crisis response are not only the domain of formal education institutions or the 'wild west' of You Tube; there are specific initiatives already in the UK to train local people and volunteers in disaster preparedness. Groundwork Communities Prepared is a national community resilience programme that equips Community Emergency Volunteers (CEV) and Flood Warden groups with the knowledge and confidence to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a range of emergencies, from flooding and severe weather incidents to pandemics.

Communities Prepared emerged out of the Cornwall Community Flood Forum, which was formed in response to widespread flooding in mid Cornwall in 2010. Its focus shifted over time from providing flood preparedness to a multi-hazard approach. With funding from The National Lottery Community Fund now extended to August 2029, Communities Prepared provides community volunteers with free online or in-person training and support, with the in-person offer tailored to local needs and priorities. Training combines practical actions to take, alongside useful explanations of who is responsible for what and how volunteers co-ordinate and engage in times of crisis.

Communities Prepared has approximately 1,700 members (0.00002% of UK Population), including volunteers, wider community members and professionals. Over the past two years alone, it has trained and supported 500 people from 195 communities across England (0.000007% of UK population). Around 6.3m properties in England are at risk of flooding[39] (25% of all England's 25.3m properties). Statistically, your home is more likely to be flooded than burgled. This is not to minimise the efforts of initiatives such as Communities Prepared. It is to show how comical it is to suggest that this is an appropriate scale of response to tackle the present and future flooding landscape across the UK. Flooding is going to get worse in the UK. Not better.

> I started mopping but then just stood there, watching it come into the living room, around my sofa. One inch, two inches. It was a feeling of terror: I can still feel it now. I was watching in disbelief, thinking, when is it ever going to stop?"[40]
>
> **Suzanne Stankard, Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire**

Flooding wrecks homes, lives and businesses, communities. It is not hyperbole to state that whole communities will be lost[41]; with Happisburgh in Norfolk and Fairbourne in Wales perhaps the canaries in the cage. It also disproportionately affects poorer households and communities. Research from Manchester University and Friends of the Earth reveals that more than 700,000 individuals residing in the 10% most vulnerable neighbourhoods in the UK are at risk of flooding due to their location.

If we wanted to increase the reach of Communities Prepared from 0.00002% of the population to just 1% of the population, focusing on those 700,000 individuals might be a socially just and necessary start.

Speaking to the Communities Prepared team, their sense is that its training tends to attract white, retired, middle-class community members. This group often gets a rough time (for being just who they are) but does provide capacity, experience and skills that are fundamental to many activities in communities across the UK – often because they have more time on their hands. However, this is not the demographic most adversely affected by extreme events and disasters, and **it is vital that initiatives such as Communities Prepared are sufficiently funded, scaled, and tailored to attract and serve global majority communities, and those living in areas of high deprivation.**

Data - and the lack of it

The neighbourhood Flood Vulnerability Index undertaken by OCSI in 2017 was a one-off data analysis, which has not since been updated. It is recommended that an Index of this kind is an essential part of our national data stack to understand and act on the disproportionate impact of climate change on those who are least able to withstand them. Actions should also include the inclusive development and wider scaling of initiatives such as Flood Re and other financial products that protect the most marginalised from the impacts of flooding on their homes and belongings.

Platforms and infrastructure – co-ordinating across state and civic actors

With so many examples of volunteer and neighbourhood capacity that is primed and ready to respond to crisis in the UK, it would be easy, but lazy, to assume that we are 'prepared' across the whole of society. Two key challenges exist. The first, highlighted earlier in this report, is to ensure that all members of the population, particularly those who are at most disadvantage, receive the support needed. Michael Marmot's approach to 'universal proportionalism' in the health system is perhaps the most effective way of viewing this challenge. Namely, that all members of the population should be supported to prepare for a crisis, but disproportionate support should be given to those who are furthest from being prepared, and most likely to be disproportionately impacted in a crisis. In short, **we need a commitment to the principle of equity when planning any national or local preparedness strategy** and directing resources and funding.

A key challenge is one of navigating complexity. When faced with so many facets of existing and potential voluntary activity, we have historically fallen into two traps. Trap one is to both take for granted (and frankly downgrade) voluntary effort and assume there is no need for a serious strategy that supports and invests in communities and the voluntary sector.

Trap two is to attempt to co-ordinate and control crisis response primarily through very large organisations having 'a seat at the table' in planning, response and recovery efforts. But there is not enough capacity in those organisations to meet our population's needs, and this approach often serves to marginalise and ignore the hyperlocal, grassroots efforts which are so fundamental at such times. There is a need for both informal and formal influence in this space. There is a critically important role for government, military and other state-funded organisations in preparing for disaster. There is also a place for networked, enabled and distributed leadership that can and should be connected in in different ways, connected through Local Resilience Forums, Emergency Contact Hubs, and new approaches to national, regional and local coordination including the VCS Emergencies Partnership, National Emergencies Trust, National Centre for Societal Resilience and other existing local infrastructure.

The understandable and historic co-ordination of crisis response and recovery through the military and government brings with it a mindset of command and control, and has struggled to work in networked, distributed and enabling ways to support the hyperlocal effort. However, that need for co-ordination remains. Co-ordination across different actors has a strong national component when delivering key messaging and working with Category 1 and 2 responders, but primarily it is most effective for local people when happening at a local level.

There has been a rise in interest and activity in Local Resilience Forums since their introduction in the UK in 2004 by the Civil Contingencies Act. These forums create the vehicle by which emergency responders and supporting agencies can work together on local emergency preparedness. Most LRFs describe themselves

as multi-agency partnerships made up of Category 1 and Category 2 responders, which does not include community and voluntary sector. Community and voluntary organisations are often mentioned as additional, supporting organisations and capacity. *Some* recognise the importance of community preparedness much more than others, encouraging a community emergency plan and options for ways to be prepared 'at home' 'as a business' and 'as a community'. Warwickshire Resilience Forum is a good example of this.

Another interesting example is Bedfordshire, which has a more formalised volunteer arm of the LRF; the Bedfordshire Local Emergency Volunteers Executive Committee (BLEVEC). This group includes organisations and individuals who wish to volunteer.

Local Resilience Forums are possibly the best starting point for co-ordinating a whole society approach to preparedness. But if they are to genuinely and effectively meet the enormous tasks they face – and will continue to face – their evolution and growth, and greater accountability for their efforts, is vital.

Emergency Contact Hubs

Emergency Contact Hubs probably originated in New Zealand, playing a significant role in enhancing the nation's disaster response capabilities. Historically, the development of these hubs stemmed from the need for improved communication and coordination during emergencies, particularly following significant disasters such as the Christchurch earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. Emergency Contact Hubs were established as part of a broader strategy to enhance resilience and preparedness across the country.

In the UK today, Emergency Contact Hubs are becoming more common as part of LRF activities. The Wiltshire and Swindon Prepared LRF[42] has been steadily setting up more than 50 across their region, with a mission to set up 100. These hubs are located in venues that are run by and for the local community and staffed by volunteers. This enables communities to come together and help each other in a co-ordinated way in time of an emergency and enables services and community groups to also share information and offer support.

A further example of the innovative approach taken by Wiltshire and Swindon Prepared is the development of an app to locate vulnerable people in a time of crisis. I would encourage those who have been hard-bitten by ill-designed, poorly-used apps for the public and charity sector *not* to look away at this point. The approach taken by this LRF is potentially transformative in building a distributed, VCSE-involving infrastructure to co-ordinate disaster response. Their app combines data from utility companies and the NHS with social services' lists of known vulnerable people[i] who might be in need of additional, or even life-saving, support during a crisis - such as any interruption to power or water supplies. Personal data is anonymised, but addresses are made visible to official and volunteer responders within the app, enabling them to knock on the doors of those most in need. This not only enables more comprehensive targeting of response support, but (as is the case when disruption or crisis is widespread) it enables a far larger cohort of civil society actors and local organisations to participate in targeted support efforts.

[i] What constitutes a vulnerable person – and do people generally self-identify as such - has been a recurring theme in writing this report. However, definitions of vulnerability are codified by utility companies, social services etc – often in understandably different ways.

The case for basic social infrastructure to be in place as a foundation of community preparedness is, I hope, now well made[43]. And it is clear there is a decent scope for Emergency Contact Hubs to provide not just sites to co-ordinate responses of shared information, but also opportunities for drills, training and action-oriented advice.

Across the world, there are other national initiatives, which have built (or are building) local, distributed networks of trained volunteers to respond in times of crisis. When significantly large events happen, the British Red Cross and volunteer organisations such as REACT can be stretched very thinly. The more people who have sufficient skills and feel prepared for something going wrong, the more people will be helped. And countries who have more experience of – and continue to expect – natural disasters are sites of huge learning for the UK.

Neighbourhood Emergency Response Teams (NERT)

NERT is a San Fransisco-located, community-based training programme dedicated to a neighbour-helping-neighbour approach to preparedness. Its training programme is for individuals, neighbourhood groups and community-based organisations, offering the basics of personal preparedness, as well as hands-on disaster skills with a heavy (and understandable) focus on dealing with the impacts of earthquakes. It's not for the faint hearted; with the curriculum covering everything from extricating victims trapped by fallen timbers to identifying and dealing with hazardous materials[44]. Trained volunteers are then able to provide immediate assistance in their neighbourhoods during emergencies. Since 1990 the NERT program has trained over 24,000 San Francisco residents to be self-reliant in a major disaster.

Another example is the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) programme in the US, led by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). It trains members of the public as volunteers in basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organisation, and disaster medical operations.[45] Each CERT team in an area is recommended to have a minimum of 10 volunteers, who between them cover a number of roles. Training follows established curriculum nationally; everyone receives the same. It is unclear how and in what ways more disadvantaged groups and communities are supported to participate.

Ready2Help is an initiative of the Netherlands Red Cross – a civilian support network that started in 2014 to engage willing volunteers when capacity is needed in a crisis response. People who are signed up will receive a text message when extra capacity is needed in their area. It is co-ordinated by the Netherlands Red Cross with the Ministry of Security and Justice, and emergency services. Colleges have developed their own version of this - Campus Community Emergency Response Team (C-CERT) - to prepare students and staff to be prepared and respond in the event of a disaster on campus. Footnotes within this report signpost further reading on CERT and C-CERT roles and effectiveness in disaster response.[46]

A new approach to national co-ordination

There are many more global examples of this kind of initiative from governments to support their population to be prepared. And it is economically and socially critical for the UK government to understand it's role in enabling the training, co-ordination and preparedness of households and communities across the nation through civil society and the voluntary sector. There is no other way to build resilience to prepare, respond, recover and learn from crises and emergencies.

As highlighted in this report, there are many ways to enable local and hyperlocal co-ordination of state and voluntary actors, which need to be supported to enable a 'whole society' approach. Agile and sustained co-ordination is required at a national level too. The VCS Emergencies Partnership is perhaps the most important route to achieving this, providing a growing and diverse 'network of networks' – committed to working together to better understand the needs of communities and offering not only informed and personalised support to those affected by emergencies, but also a vehicle by which national government and agencies can engage, embrace, and work more effectively with volunteer and community organisations.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this report takes us back to the beginning: that communities and the infrastructure that supports them are fundamental to a 'whole society' approach to preparedness. As critical national infrastructure, we would be in steep, precipitous decline without civil society in the event of a serious, national interruption to our daily lives.

And so, it remains only to say four short things:

- We are going to face more dangers. It is difficult to imagine future years where there is less turbulence and difficulty than we face today.
- The social connections and trust we have in each other will be the strongest determining factor of whether we all survive those dangers.
- There is both a clear moral and material case to invest in the people of this country who support those in greatest need in times of crisis.
- Those people are to be found in civil society.

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