Vulnerability & Policing Futures Research Centre

Policing, vulnerability and community resilience in response to the climate crisis

Key points

- While practitioners noted that vulnerability is often fluid and contextual, they have created a shared database to record vulnerability based on specific characteristics, enabling the rapid deployment of resources during emergencies.
- Police play a key role in emergency and disaster response, from leading Strategic and Tactical Coordination Groups to providing secretariat support, 24/7 call handling, and acting as first responders during severe weather. Police responders often operate in challenging circumstances with limited resources and equipment.
- Local practitioners follow the principle: 'make friends before you need them', recognising the vital role of community and voluntary sectors during weather-related emergencies.
- Despite local efforts, LRFs require national support and structural reform. This may include greater professional and administrative capacity, joined-up call handling and triage for weather-related emergencies, and mechanisms for regional and cross-boundary resource and capability sharing.

Summary

The increasing frequency and severity of extreme weather events in the UK, such as storms, flooding, heatwaves, and severe cold spells, recognised as consequences of the climate crisis, have placed significant operational and organisational pressures on police, emergency responders and local authorities.

This research adopts an in-depth qualitative case study design and a temporal analogues approach, which draws on past experiences and events to develop an understanding of the present and inform future learning. Doing this provides insights into the role of the police and Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) in preparing for and responding to extreme weather events.

The findings highlight that LRFs are essential for locally led emergency planning. However, due to resource constraints, these partnerships often rely on relational capital, negotiated agreement and goodwill. Decisive leadership, situational awareness, experience from past events and routine work were also described as key factors for effective emergency response.

LRFs cannot mitigate the impacts of the climate crisis without national support. Local preparedness depends on safe homes, green spaces, reliable transport networks and affordable clean energy. The research also points to the need for greater professional, analytical, and specialist support for LRFs, along with targeted funding to resource localised efforts for preparedness, recovery, and long-term climate adaptation.

Background

Across the UK, communities are experiencing the growing impacts of extreme weather, from prolonged heatwaves and flash flooding to severe cold spells and storms. Such extremes are no longer anomalies but part of a new climate reality.

While there is a strong national strategic emphasis on climate adaptation and resilience, under the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) the duty to prepare for and respond to complex disasters and emergencies, and to promote local resilience, rests with Local Resilience Forums (LRFs).

LRFs are not legal entities with a single organisational structure but function as multi-agency partnerships. They bring together key 'category 1' responders (organisations that are at the core of responding to most civil emergencies), such as the police, fire and ambulance services, local authorities, and the Environment Agency, alongside 'category 2' partners (organisations that share information and cooperate with Category 1 responders), including the Highways Agency, utility companies, and representatives from the voluntary and community sectors.

Despite their central role in emergency planning, preparedness and response, there is limited qualitative research on the role and function of LRFs in relation to extreme weather events and climate emergencies. In particular, there is a gap in understanding the lived experiences of police and LRF practitioners, including how they make sense of the climate crisis, what processes, structures, resources, capacities, and capabilities are in place to help them fulfil their statutory duties, and what is needed to ensure preparedness and adaptation to the new normal.

The project findings aim to inform a better understanding of what works and, crucially, what is needed to support LRFs for long-term adaptation.

What we did

The project used a case study approach, focusing on a region in northern England that has experienced several major emergencies, including large-scale flooding, wildfires, and severe storms.

Phase 1 involved a literature review and documentary analysis, including major inquiries such as Grenfell and COVID-19. A scoping exercise comprising conversations with senior police strategic leads and emergency planners helped develop an initial understanding of the key issues, and informed case selection.

Phase 2 comprised 24 interviews with local police (civil contingencies, response, communications, and rural units); senior representatives of the LRF's Strategic Coordination Group from the police, fire service, and the Environment Agency; as well as local authority representatives and emergency planners involved in the day-to-day functions of the LRF. Interviews were also conducted with key members of the voluntary and community sector and practitioners involved in resilience and emergency planning at both national and regional levels.

The interviews and subsequent thematic analysis employed the temporal analogues method. This method proved particularly useful by highlighting how the perspectives of experienced emergency managers, and lessons from past events, have directly shaped current emergency planning and preparedness.

Key findings

LRFs are essential for localised emergency planning and response, but they are not a 'solution for everything'. They require investment to build capacity, along with national drivers for resource and capability sharing to support long-term preparedness and climate adaptation.

Practitioner understanding of the climate crisis

Even though many practitioners are worried about the climate crisis, they prepare for emergencies by focusing on an all-hazards approach. This means they plan for the common consequences of a disaster such as power outages, a lack of food and water, or damaged infrastructure. The gradual escalation of 'yellow' and 'amber' weather warnings into extreme weather events and their subsequent impacts often makes it challenging for LRFs to measure the scale of the response needed. Response strategies must be proportional and balance public expectations with responder fatigue.

Climate vulnerability

The research shows that climate vulnerability is intersectional and contextual. Poverty, insecure housing, and limited mobility reduce coping capacity, while refugees and asylum seekers face additional barriers such as language, social hostility, and mistrust of authorities. Practitioners recognised that vulnerability is context-specific and cannot be reduced to a static list of at-risk groups. However, due to the immediacy and urgency of emergency response scenarios, a local information-sharing database has been developed by the LRF and partners with information on households that may be vulnerable. Some key indicators include age, disability, and specific health-related issues.

Community resilience

The findings reveal that community resilience is often borne out of necessity rather than empowerment. While community efforts are frequently lauded as examples of resilience, they obscure the structural neglect that necessitated them and risk normalising austerity. For minoritised communities, disadvantage, social exclusion and hostile social environments adversely affect their ability to cope and adapt. In contrast, those with deep-rooted ties to a region, higher social capital, stable familial and social networks, and prior experience of extreme weather events (such as floods) tend to cope better, often with minimal state intervention.

Police as 'generalist' responders

Police play a key role in emergency and disaster response. They act as a first point of contact for weather-related emergencies, lead command and coordination groups to provide tactical and operational support, and deploy resources for safeguarding purposes. They often negotiate extreme weather conditions and difficult terrain to check on vulnerable households, administer first aid, carry out rescue and recovery activities, and support evacuation. However, the findings draw attention to the vulnerabilities

police officers face, including exposure to heat and cold, fatigue, and welfare issues if not supported with basic needs, rest cycles, and appropriate training and equipment. Interviewees acknowledged the expertise, skills, 24/7 resources, and capacity that the police bring to the LRF, which often frees other responders (such as the Fire and Rescue Service) to focus on the more specialist tasks during emergency response activity.

Civil contingencies, rural, neighbourhood, and wildlife units are instrumental in building relationships and gathering information on vulnerable groups that may otherwise remain hidden. However, these roles are under-resourced and vulnerable to institutional memory loss, potentially hampering operational and institutional resilience.

Partnership and multiagency work

Due to experience with multiple extreme weather incidents over several years, as well as health-related emergencies such as COVID-19, local partnerships and multi-agency collaboration remain strong but often depend on individual goodwill and relational capital built over a sustained period. Formal plans and structures provide necessary frameworks, but participants reiterated that common purpose, decisive leadership, and established routines of joint working, including regular information sharing and knowledge exchange, largely determine how well multi-agency systems perform under stress.

Role of the voluntary sector

The findings highlight the vital importance of the community and voluntary sector in emergency planning and response. Volunteer groups - including those with specialist skills, such as the RNLI and mountain rescue - are well-equipped to assist emergency responders with rescue missions, welfare checks, evacuation, and help shore up operational capacity. Grassroots organisations can assist with household and community preparedness, as well as providing social and psychological support. LRF practitioners considered the early identification and inclusion of voluntary groups in emergency planning as a key priority.

Next steps

To inform preparedness for future climate emergencies and support long-term adaptation, the research highlights the following recommendations:

Take an equity-based approach to emergency planning and preparedness

Climate vulnerability is contextual and dynamic rather than a fixed set of characteristics. Emergency planning and preparedness must account for the differential needs of diverse social groups instead of adopting a one-size-fits-all approach.

Implement unified call-handling and triage

The police frequently supplement the capacity of other agencies by providing personnel and infrastructure. Consequently, they often absorb non-emergency responsibilities, which has the potential to strain local relationships and disrupt 'business as usual'. Localised unified call-handling and triage could help ensure the most appropriate agency responds to extreme weather calls.

Structural reform and capability sharing

Current mutual aid arrangements prioritise personnel deployment but do not always include capabilities such as specialist equipment, logistics, and operational support. A formal framework is needed to enable sharing of resources and capabilities across regions. While local subsidiarity is desirable, as the impacts of the climate crisis worsen, a unified national civil contingencies authority may be necessary to coordinate response and recovery efforts.

For further information

Scan the QR code to read more about the project.

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