Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice, 2026, 20, paag040
https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paag040
Published: 30 July 2026
Original article

OXFORD

The policing role within local emergency governance in response to extreme weather: welfare, partnership work, and leadership

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Abstract

Climate-related extreme weather is reshaping the role of police organizations within local emergency governance, yet the ways in which policing is embedded within such multiagency frameworks remain under-examined. Drawing on a qualitative case study of a Local Resilience Forum (LRF) in England, based on twenty-four semi-structured interviews with police practitioners, senior emergency governance leads, and partner agencies, this article examines how police organizations contribute to local emergency governance during climate-related disasters. Three findings are identified. First, the police operate as 'generalist' responders, acting as a first point of contact and undertaking safeguarding, welfare checks, and evacuation support, often in challenging conditions. Second, specialist functions, including civil contingencies, neighbourhood, rural, and wildlife units, are key to local partnership work. Third, police leadership of the LRF is valued by partners, enabling other responders to focus on specialist tasks. The article argues that climate-related disruption is normalizing reliance on police as generalist responders and institutional anchors of local resilience systems, raising significant questions about responder welfare, organizational capacity and the sustainability of police-led emergency governance as extreme weather events become more frequent, severe and protracted.

Introduction

Policing has long been shaped by moments of crisis. Terrorist attacks, public disorder, and health emergencies have repeatedly prompted a recalibration of the role and function of the public police, alongside shifts in operational and organizational priorities, amid changing public and political expectations. These moments act as critical junctures through which the scope and nature of policing are reimagined (Roché and Fleming 2025). The climate crisis intensifies this dynamic. Unlike discrete emergencies, it represents a sustained condition of repeated and compounding disruption, characterized by the intersection of extreme weather events and cascading infrastructure failures with growing social vulnerability (Adger 2006; Arnell 2022). Consequently, the impacts of the climate crisis are no longer a distant or intangible concern for policing but an immediate and operationally significant challenge (Blaustein et al. 2023, 2024; Matczak and Bergh 2023; Matczak 2025). These impacts extend from public order policing associated with environmental protest through to increased demand arising from floods, storms, heatwaves, and prolonged power outages. At the same time, the climate crisis interacts with existing structural pressures on policing, including austerity and rising demand (Millie 2013; Topping 2022), alongside the continued expansion of police involvement in complex public health and social domains such as safeguarding and vulnerability (Crawford 2024).

Alongside these broader pressures, there is increasing recognition that climate-related emergencies pose significant risks to police officer welfare. Research on disaster policing highlights the emotional, moral, and psychological toll of sustained emergency deployments, particularly in contexts where officers perceive a duty to protect others at personal and familial cost (Pollock and Augusto 2023). These pressures are compounded by growing concerns about the inadequacy of police uniforms and specialist equipment under extreme weather conditions. Recent studies indicate that standard-issue police clothing and equipment are frequently ill-suited to prolonged exposure to heat, cold, and wet conditions, contributing to physical strain, thermal discomfort, and reduced operational

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effectiveness during weather-related emergencies (College of Policing 2025; De Camargo et al. 2025; Farrell et al. 2026).

Moreover, while there is a growing body of research on the role of the police in preparing for and adapting to the climate crisis in other jurisdictions, such as Australia (Blaustein et al. 2023) and the Netherlands (Matczak 2025; Matczak and Blaustein 2026), the role of the police in the UK context, both in relation to frontline response to extreme weather events and within local multiagency emergency governance frameworks, remains under-explored. Drawing on a case study of the police role within a Local Resilience Forum (LRF) in England, this article makes an original contribution to the emergent policing and emergency governance scholarship (Arnell 2022; Blaustein et al. 2023; Lydon et al. 2025; Matczak 2025) by highlighting how climate-related extreme weather is recalibrating the role of the police within local emergency governance arrangements. Rather than treating police involvement in climate-related disasters as a temporary extension of emergency response, the article demonstrates how police organizations are increasingly positioned as generalist responders and institutional anchors for multiagency coordination. The research is guided by questions about how police practitioners and LRF partners understand the role of policing in preparing for and responding to climate-related extreme weather, how this role manifests in practice within local emergency governance frameworks, and what implications this expansion of police work has for frontline staff, specialist units and police leadership in multiagency settings. The article argues that, while police organizations possess considerable experience and skills in coordinating local response efforts, organizational constraints and the continued demands of business as usual functions mean that further expansion of the police role in this domain is unlikely to be sustainable, particularly as extreme weather events become more frequent, severe, and protracted. The findings are significant because they raise structural questions for local emergency governance, rather than framing these issues as narrow operational concerns for policing. In agreement with Lydon et al. (2025), the article concludes that structural reform is needed to better align local partner roles and responsibilities, alongside greater national funding and support.

Literature review

Policing is frequently characterized by 'shocks' and 'crises', with 'exogenous shocks' in particular (for instance, health crises or pandemics) recalibrating normative understandings of police roles and responsibilities (Roché and Fleming 2025). The climate crisis represents a sustained condition of repeated and compounding shocks of this kind. Recent research and scholarship in this field converge on the point that the climate crisis poses an immediate challenge for policing, rather than a distant or speculative future risk (Blaustein et al. 2023, 2024; Matczak and Bergh 2023; Malik 2025; Matczak 2025). There is broad consensus on the wide-ranging implications for police welfare and frontline policing, from police–community relations associated with environmental protest and the policing of disorder through to organizational capacity and operational resilience under conditions of increased demand arising from extreme weather and climate-related disruption (Matczak and Bergh 2023; Lydon et al. 2025).

At an individual level, multiple factors shape the welfare of frontline police officers, including the continued expansion of the police role into non-crime domains such as safeguarding and responses to complex social vulnerabilities (Aliverti 2020; Crawford 2024), alongside a persistent decline in resources and organizational capacity associated with prolonged austerity and rising demand (Millie 2013; Topping 2022; James et al. 2026). Additionally, the cumulative toll of emergency response activity exacerbates responder fatigue, burnout and stress (Blaustein et al. 2023; Matczak and Bergh 2023). Disaster policing places significant emotional and moral demands on officers, with Pollock and Augusto (2023) documenting how extended deployments during disasters intensify stress, compassion fatigue and psychological strain, particularly where officers perceive a duty to protect others at personal and familial cost, while operating under conditions of uncertainty and sustained operational pressure. These concerns are well established in the broader police welfare literature, which consistently identifies cumulative occupational stress, organizational and operational stressors, fatigue, and repeated exposure to high-demand and potentially traumatic incidents as central determinants of frontline police wellbeing and resilience (Marmar et al. 2006; McCreary and Thompson 2006; Anderson et al. 2016; Violanti et al. 2017).

Alongside psychological and moral dimensions of police wellbeing, there is growing recognition that police capacity to respond effectively during disasters and extreme weather events is also shaped by the inadequacy of uniforms, specialist equipment, and training. Exposure to prolonged heat, cold, smoke, flooding, and physically hazardous environments places demands on officers that are exacerbated when standard-issue uniforms and equipment are not designed for extreme conditions (Alexander 2018; Pollock and Augusto 2023; De Camargo et al. 2025; Farrell et al. 2026). Empirical studies from the United States and Australia, particularly in the context of hurricanes, wildfires, and large-scale flooding, demonstrate how limitations in personal protective equipment, vehicle capability, and specialist training can constrain response effectiveness while simultaneously intensifying fatigue, injury risk, and wellbeing impacts among officers and emergency responders (Kapucu and Van Wart 2006; FEMA 2018; Blaustein et al. 2023).

At an organizational and operational level, the climate crisis has significant implications for the role of the police within multiagency emergency governance contexts, particularly in relation to partnership working and interoperability under conditions of uncertainty. The cascading impacts of climate-related disasters, including protracted power outages, damage to critical infrastructure such as transportation and communication networks, water and food scarcity, and associated forms of social disorder (Pescaroli et al. 2018; Mann et al. 2022), create conditions that intensify the routine 'boundary work' required of police within multiagency networked settings, similar to that observed in safeguarding and other complex welfare contexts (Crawford and L'Hoiry 2017). Empirical research on interoperability suggests that such crossing of institutional boundaries is central to sustaining shared

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situational awareness, coordination, and mutual trust and reciprocity, but remains highly contingent on informal negotiation, relational capacity, and a shared sense of social identity rather than formal structures alone (Charman 2014; Davidson et al. 2025). As climate-related emergencies become more prolonged and compounding, these conditions expose the limits of incident-centred and response-based models of 'disaster policing'. In response, a key conceptual move within the policing and governance literature has been to shift attention towards questions of adaptation and resilience, including whether policing institutions are able to align their organizational 'mentalities, practices, and capabilities' with wider adaptive governance agendas underpinned by whole-of-society approaches to preparing for and responding to the impacts of the climate crisis (Blaustein et al. 2024).

In England and Wales, a statutory basis for such joined-up approaches to emergency governance is provided by LRFs, established under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. LRFs bring together 'category 1' responders, including the police, fire and ambulance services, local authorities, and the Environment Agency, alongside 'category 2' partner organizations such as utility companies and transport bodies, with engagement from a broad network of voluntary and community sector organizations. Although LRFs are polycentric in design, with no formal leadership hierarchy or organizational command structure (Malik and Berg 2024; see also Lydon et al. 2025), their organization around police force boundaries structurally situates the police as a key institutional anchor within local emergency governance. Yet, while LRFs provide an essential statutory architecture for multiagency coordination, they are also shaped by short-term planning horizons, uneven partner capacity, and a tendency towards minimum statutory compliance rather than anticipatory governance, particularly in relation to climate-related risks (Lydon et al. 2025).

These structural conditions help to explain variability in local preparedness and place pressure on police organizations that, in comparison to other partner agencies, are better situated to provide continuity and coordination across strategic, tactical, and operational levels. Given the long history of the police role in disaster management (Fraser 2025), and their operational experience of managing incidents involving life-threatening situations, including the coordination of multiagency activity such as traffic management and public communication during emergencies (Charman 2014; Adams and Anderson 2019; Pollock and Augusto 2023; College of Policing 2024), police organizations are often well positioned to operate across multiple levels of emergency response under conditions of uncertainty. Crawford's seminal work on networked and plural forms of security governance demonstrates that police organizations frequently occupy a central role within multiagency arrangements, even where authority is formally distributed, by virtue of their capacity to coordinate partner agencies, determine shared priorities and provide operational continuity and consistency (Crawford 1997, 2006; Crawford and L'Hoiry 2017). Importantly, this centrality is often not by design, but emerges through practice and continued reliance on policing organizations to manage complex forms of risk and vulnerability within multiagency partnership settings (Crawford 2006, 2024). Consequently, this positioning has the potential to generate tensions, creating conditions in which the professional dominance of the police may marginalize other forms of knowledge and professional expertise held by partner agencies (Malik and Berg 2024). Nonetheless, and as demonstrated by this research, the police play a key role across multiple dimensions of emergency management, including frontline support activity and leadership of the strategic, tactical, and operational command structures to sustain multiagency response during periods of uncertainty.

Research design and data collection

This article draws on findings from an ESRC-funded[1] study conducted between May 2024 and June 2025. The research adopted a qualitative case study design, focusing on a region in the north of England encompassing two local authorities and one police force area. Given the limited empirical examination of the police role within LRFs (with notable exceptions including Lydon et al. 2025), a preliminary scoping exercise was undertaken. This comprised exploratory conversations with senior national police strategic leads and emergency planners, which helped to develop an initial understanding of key issues in this field and informed the selection of the case study site.

The case study site was selected because of a long history of climate-related disruption. The region has a mix of urban and rural geography, large farmlands and coastal communities, and has experience of large-scale flooding, frequent weather-related emergencies due to heavy snowfall and seasonal storms, and associated impacts on critical infrastructure, including access to remote and rural areas and isolated communities during prolonged adverse conditions. The LRF in the region is a small professional network of local practitioners working across police, local authority, emergency planning, voluntary sector, and partner agency roles.

Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of key actors involved in emergency planning and response activity. Access was negotiated through the local police, who appointed a single point of contact for interviews with policing participants. Non-policing practitioners were identified through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Participants included local police officers (from civil contingencies, response, wildlife, contact command, and rural units); senior representatives of the LRF Strategic Coordination Group from the police, fire and rescue service, and the Environment Agency; local authority representatives and emergency planners involved in the day-to-day functioning of the LRF; members of the voluntary and community sector; and practitioners involved in resilience and emergency planning at national and regional levels. Interviews took place between 1 August 2024 and 30 April 2025, with the majority conducted via Microsoft Teams. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by a University-approved transcription service. Interviews explored participants' understanding of climate vulnerability, experiences of climate-related

[1]'Policing and community resilience in the context of climate change', funded by the ESRC Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre.

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emergency planning and response, the role of police and partner agencies within the LRF, coordination between statutory, voluntary and community sector actors, welfare and operational pressures, preparedness, and perceptions of leadership within local emergency governance. Thematic analysis of the anonymized transcripts was undertaken using NVivo.

Full ethical approval was obtained from the host institution.[2] Interview transcripts were anonymized prior to coding and analysis to protect participant anonymity and confidentiality. Given the relatively small number of practitioners working in local civil contingencies and LRF contexts, and their close association with partner organizations, role titles and organizational identifiers have been removed from quoted material to minimize the risk of identification. Quotations are attributed using anonymized participant identifiers, such as P1, P2, and P3, with the numerical identifier representing the order in which the interviews were conducted.

Findings

Police as 'generalist' responders

Interviewees, particularly those from within the police (strategic command, control room, and response officers), described policing in the context of extreme weather as operating in a 'generalist' emergency response role. During such events, policing activity expands both in scope and intensity, involving overlapping forms of activity including leadership of strategic, tactical and operational command structures, frontline responses to safeguard life and property, welfare and safeguarding functions including evacuation and door-knocking, coordination with (and of) partner agencies and volunteer groups, and the continued delivery of routine policing functions.

Extreme weather events were described as generating an immediate surge in demand through police control rooms, with incidents reported to the *police* regardless of which agency ultimately held statutory responsibility. As one participant explained,

> People ring us for everything when the weather turns bad. Flooded roads, bridges gone, power off, trees down—they don't ring highways or the council, they ring the police. (P7)

Control-room staff described spending significant time attempting to distinguish between risks to life, infrastructure disruption, and non-urgent impacts, often on the basis of incomplete or rapidly changing information:

> We're trying to work out what's actually a risk to life and what can wait, and that's not always obvious with the information you've got coming in. (P1)

Frontline officers described being deployed into physically challenging and sometimes hazardous environments, including flooded residential areas, snow-covered rural roads, and locations affected by fallen power lines or debris. Activities included assisting stranded motorists, checking on residents who were cut-off or isolated, and maintaining a visible police presence in affected communities. Officers emphasized that reassurance work formed a core part of their role during and after extreme weather events, particularly where disruption persisted beyond the immediate danger:

> Even when the worst has passed, people are anxious. Roads are still closed, power's off, they don't know what's happening. Just seeing the police around helps calm things down. (P10)

A substantial proportion of police activity during extreme weather focused on safeguarding and welfare, rather than enforcement. Participants described conducting welfare checks on individuals identified as vulnerable, including older people, those with health conditions, and residents in flood-prone or rural locations. Police frequently acted as *the agency* that physically attended addresses, particularly outside normal working hours, even where other organizations held longer-term responsibility for care or support:

> We're checking people have food, medication, heating. That becomes the bulk of the work quite quickly. (P14)

In some cases, officers described acting as the only available responders during night-time or weekend periods:

> If there's concern about someone and it's out of hours, it'll be us who go and knock on the door. (P18)

Police participants did not imply that other first responders, such as fire and health services, were unavailable. Rather, in weather-related emergencies, police were often perceived by members of the public as able to deploy quickly and respond to a broader range of contingencies, including rerouting traffic or blocking access, conducting welfare checks, coordinating other agencies where needed, and providing safeguarding and reassurance.

Traffic management was described as a highly visible and labour-intensive aspect of policing during extreme weather. Officers were responsible for implementing and enforcing road closures caused by flooding, snow, fallen trees, or structural damage, and for responding when members of the public attempted to bypass safety barriers. Participants noted that such incidents could escalate rapidly into risks to life: '*People drive around the signs and get stuck, and then it becomes a rescue instead of a road closure*' (P24). This work was particularly demanding in rural areas, where alternative routes were limited and conditions could deteriorate quickly: '*A road that's fine in the morning can be completely impassable an hour later. You're constantly reassessing*' (P24).

Frontline response officers also played a central role in supporting evacuations and coordinating other first responders and volunteer groups with access to specialist equipment and vehicles. Officers described identifying households that needed to be evacuated, managing access points, and liaising with fire and rescue services, mountain rescue teams, and voluntary organizations: '*We're not water rescue specialists, but*

[2]University of Leeds, ethics reference number BESS+ FREC—2024 1703-2120.

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we're the ones coordinating where the fire service or mountain rescue need to go' (P11).

Locally, these partnerships were cultivated through routine work with multiagency partners and voluntary groups, with specialist units widely acknowledged as central to this relationship-building, as discussed below.

Role of specialist units

Interview data and subsequent analysis highlighted the key role played by specialist units, particularly civil contingencies units (CCU), rural policing, wildlife crime units, and neighbourhood policing, in developing relationships with non-policing partner agencies and in building a local knowledge base. This knowledge, often accumulated through routine partnership work, was widely perceived as being central to effective local multiagency emergency response. The research shows that CCU, in particular, played a key bridging role between the police and the LRF during emergency preparedness and planning. CCU staff often carry out the *mundane* preparatory tasks, including facilitating and attending large-scale public events (for safeguarding and reassurance), liaising with other members of the LRF including volunteer and third-sector organizations, ensuring policing emergency plans remain aligned with the LRF plans, updating action cards for frontline response officers, and contributing to table-top exercises:

> We don't fill sandbags. We don't rescue people. What we do is make sure the right plans and triggers are in place so it doesn't fall apart at three in the morning. (P11)

This work was described as continuous rather than episodic or reactive, and as largely invisible to those outside emergency planning. Participants noted that CCUs often bore responsibility for ensuring a joined-up response between agencies long before an emergency necessitated a response.

Similarly, neighbourhood, wildlife, and rural policing officers described how experience of climate-related disasters had expanded their portfolios beyond crime prevention into anticipatory work on environmental harm, vulnerability, and understandings of critical infrastructure and transportation networks including proactively gathering knowledge about access routes to remote areas or vulnerable residents in local communities. Officers situated in wildlife units described long-standing links with more specialized external bodies, such as the Environment Agency, which helped not only with investigating complex rural and wildlife crimes but also with identifying vulnerable rural locations, including wildlife habitats and farmlands, during extreme weather response efforts.

Participants emphasized that when emergencies occurred, response was faster and more effective because trust had already been built over time:

> When it happens, you're not thinking 'who do I ring?' You already know them. You're already on first-name terms. (P4)

Across all interviews, participants from within the police emphasized the importance of coordination and information sharing between agencies. Much of this coordination was described as informal and relationship-based, relying on established contacts rather than formal information sharing protocols: '*You're ringing people directly because you already know them from previous events*' (P24).

Police officer welfare

The research highlights that the expansion and intensification of generalist policing in the context of more severe and frequent extreme weather events has had profound implications for police welfare. This is driven primarily by increased demand and the need to balance business as usual functions with emergency response activity, alongside insufficient training, fatigue and stress linked to disrupted rest cycles, and the use of improper or inadequate equipment.

Officers noted that, while there is a common misconception that the police are involved only in emergency response, the role of local policing frequently extended into the recovery phase. This included the management of ongoing road closures, deployment in affected areas for reassurance and welfare checks, and continued support for partner agencies once the immediate response phase had ended. Officers also observed that such prolonged disruption was becoming increasingly common:

> It doesn't just end when the water goes down. Days later you're still out there dealing with access, reassurance, and the knock-on effects. (P6)

> This isn't once in a blue moon anymore. It feels like we're doing this most winters now. (P21)

Control-room supervisors emphasized the strain this layering of demand placed on staffing systems. Staffing levels designed for *normal* operations were rapidly overwhelmed by sustained surges:

> We cancel rest days, extend shifts, swap people around just to keep the desks running. (P1)

Participants also raised practical concerns about food, rest, and basic provision during prolonged emergency deployments, particularly where extreme weather disrupted usual arrangements. Officers described long periods on duty where access to hot food, hydration, or appropriate rest facilities was limited, especially during overnight response or in rural locations affected by flooding or snow. One officer described the reliance on improvisation during extended deployments:

> You're out there for hours and sometimes it's a case of grabbing whatever you can: energy bars, a cold sandwich if someone's thought ahead. It's not ideal when you're cold and wet. (P9)

In some cases, respondents noted that provision depended on *ad hoc* support from partner agencies or local businesses, rather than formal planning:

> Sometimes someone will turn up with food, sometimes they won't. It depends who's available and how stretched everyone is. (P14)

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Control-room staff and supervisors similarly emphasized the strain placed on welfare provision during sustained incidents, noting that systems designed for short deployments were ill-suited to protracted emergencies:

> These things go on much longer than planned for. Feeding people, getting them a break, somewhere warm, it becomes really difficult when you're running at that level for days. (P1)

For officers deployed in severe weather conditions, lack of appropriate sustenance was described as compounding physical fatigue, cold exposure, and decision-making strain:

> If you're cold, tired, and you've not eaten properly, it affects everything, your concentration, your patience, your judgement. (P24)

Specialist units experienced distinctive welfare pressures. CCU staff described extended on-call periods, constant readiness, and difficulty disengaging from emergency thinking even outside formal response windows:

> You're never really off it. You're always thinking, what's next, what's coming. (P23)

Rural and environmental officers similarly described personal preparation becoming part of the job. Officers spoke of monitoring weather forecasts, checking equipment, adjusting routines, and preparing psychologically for difficult conditions:

> You're preparing yourself as much as the organisation—food, kit, mindset—because you know it could get bad. (P24)

Beyond physical fatigue, participants emphasized a strong moral and emotional dimension to climate-related emergency work. Officers described a deep sense of obligation to continue responding even when exhausted:

> There's an unspoken thing in policing that you just keep going because people need help. (P18)

This moral labour was intensified when police activity compensated for limitations faced by partner agencies, particularly during out-of-hours periods or in remote areas. Several officers described this as creating a burden of responsibility that was difficult to articulate within formal welfare frameworks.

These concerns in relation to officer welfare were exacerbated by limited specialist training. Participants repeatedly described learning how to operate in extreme weather through experience rather than formal preparation. One officer explained:

> There's no special training for a lot of this. You're cold, wet, sometimes in water, and you're just doing what needs to be done at the time. (P9)

Another participant made a similar point in relation to snow response:

> When it comes to snow… there are no specific courses in emergency services about how to operate in what can be horrendous conditions. So, a lot of it is learned through experience. (P14)

Others similarly emphasized the absence of formal qualifications or structured preparation:

> I don't have any formal qualification… you just learn on the job. (P23)

These concerns extended beyond training to the suitability and availability of equipment during severe weather:

> We're probably woefully ill equipped for those circumstances when it really, really does come down… there's no real training for that type of thing… (P24)

> …there's pictures of cops in waders up to their waist, and I don't know where some of that equipment came from… your normal bog standard cop who is going to go to these incidents straight away may not have all of that kit… if people are getting tired, they're getting hungry, they're getting wet, they ain't going to perform as well. (P9)

Another participant similarly linked equipment access, training, and preparedness during spontaneous deployments:

> …actually being able to actively access that equipment, training, tools, kit, on the night, if it was to be spontaneous, I know these things often there's some element of warning, but, um, yeah, I think that would be probably the biggest thing is just knowing how to access all that … (P24)

These accounts show that police welfare during climate-related emergencies is shaped not only by fatigue, a lack of food provision and inadequate rest cycles, but also by the extent to which officers are trained, equipped and supported to operate in prolonged extreme weather conditions. These pressures are also relevant at the organizational level, particularly where police are expected to provide leadership and continuity across multiagency emergency governance arrangements.

Police leadership of LRFs

While LRFs are envisaged as polycentric networks (Malik and Berg 2024) with fluid leadership, practitioners from across all LRF partner agencies noted the value of police leadership of the Strategic Coordination Group (SCG), particularly during the initial phase of emergency response. Within the region, police leadership of the SCG involved a wide range of practical and organizational tasks that extended well beyond chairing meetings. Interviewees noted that police often convened the first SCG meeting at short notice, particularly where extreme weather events were escalating quickly, and that early meetings were focused on establishing an operational picture and identifying immediate risks to life. One senior police participant described how this involved pulling together fragmented information from control rooms, frontline officers and partner agencies to create a shared understanding of what was happening on the ground:

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> Early on it's about getting a picture, because information is coming in from all over the place and it's not always consistent. We're pulling that together and putting some structure around it. (P21)

At both strategic and tactical levels, police leaders described an ongoing role in maintaining situational awareness and ensuring that emerging risks were communicated across agencies. This included tasking internal police resources as well as developing an early sense of partner resources and capacity. Police leaders emphasized that experience of managing threat, risk, and harm under pressure informed this approach:

> We're used to making decisions with partial information. That's a big part of our training, and it comes into play a lot in these situations. (P2)

At the tactical and operational levels, police officers described coordinating deployments and prioritizing locations for welfare checks or evacuation, and ensuring that specialist responders and volunteer groups were directed to the areas of greatest need:

> We're not doing the specialist work, but we are coordinating who goes where and making sure the right people are in the right places. (P11)

Control room and civil contingencies staff highlighted that police command roles were closely supported by internal systems that allowed policing to sustain strategic oversight over extended periods. Being a 24/7 organization with established command structures enabled the police to retain continuity as other agencies rotated staff or operated within more limited hours. One participant noted:

> We don't shut down overnight. That means the picture doesn't get lost, and decisions can carry on being made even when other teams change over. (P1)

This continuity was described as particularly important during prolonged weather events, where command structures remained active across days. However, this also raised significant concerns about the welfare of police strategic leads. Police leaders frequently contrasted climate-related emergencies with traditional major incidents. Whereas major incidents were understood as acute and time-limited, climate-related emergencies were described as prolonged, uncertain, and open-ended:

> Gold was never meant to run for weeks. It's built for short, sharp incidents. (P6)

When command structures remained active for extended periods, fatigue accumulated at both operational and strategic levels. Supervisors described managing diminishing reserves of energy and attention:

> You can only run on adrenaline for so long before it starts to grind people down. (P4)

Senior leaders also described sustained cognitive strain. Responsibility for anticipating cascading failures, coordinating multiple agencies, and making high-stakes decisions under incomplete information was described as mentally exhausting:

> You're always thinking three steps ahead—what fails next, who's vulnerable, what happens if this goes wrong. (P21)

The positive role played by the police in all aspects of emergency response, including leadership of the SCG, was widely praised by partner agencies. Police leadership was associated with clarity, pace, and decisiveness, which were viewed as valuable attributes in situations characterized by uncertainty and rapidly changing conditions. A local authority representative explained:

> There's something reassuring about having the police chair at the start. Things move quickly, decisions get made, and everyone knows what they're supposed to be doing. (P20)

Several non-police participants contrasted police-led SCGs with other partnership settings, describing police chairs as more structured and focused on immediate action:

> Meetings can drift, but when the police are leading, it tends to stay very tight and very operational. (P10)

> It cuts through bureaucracy. When people are cold and vulnerable, you need action, not process. (P20)

At the same time, some partners acknowledged that police leadership also shaped the framing of emergencies, particularly through control of early information flows. While this was generally viewed as beneficial, participants recognized that it placed significant responsibility on police commanders to ensure that other forms of expertise were incorporated:

> Because the police have the initial picture, it's important they bring everyone else in properly, otherwise things can get missed. (P16)

Police leaders also justified leading emergency response within local emergency frameworks on the basis of their leadership experience, particularly under conditions of uncertainty:

> We're trained to deal with threat, risk and harm. That's why people look to us. (P2)

At the same time, they acknowledged a nuanced awareness of the risks of professional dominance. Police leaders and partners alike described the challenge of balancing urgency with inclusion. Effective leadership was framed as relational work rather than command:

> If you dominate the room, you lose people. You've got to bring them with you. (P5)

Across the participant responses, there was broad consensus that police were better equipped to lead the SCG, enabling other agencies to focus on their specialist functions:

> When the police are holding the SCG, it frees the rest of us up to actually get on with delivering what we're responsible for. (P7)

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Finally, a recurring concern, expressed by senior strategic leads across partner agencies, was the concentration of leadership capacity within a small number of experienced individuals. This was largely attributed to leadership experience accumulated over time and through involvement in multiple emergencies, including, for instance, the response to COVID-19. Such experience was described as having developed both operational knowledge and interpersonal trust:

> There are a handful of people who really get this. If they go, you feel it. (P13)

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that extreme weather events and associated disruption have resulted in a continued expansion of the police role, exacerbating existing organizational and operational pressures and raising significant concerns regarding police officer welfare. As the broader body of scholarship has recognized, the climate crisis presents an immediate and ongoing challenge for policing (Blaustein et al. 2023, 2024; Matczak and Bergh 2023; Lydon et al. 2025; Matczak 2025). This study lends further weight to recent critiques of response-based models of 'disaster policing', which assume short-term escalation followed by a return to business as usual (Blaustein et al. 2024).

While the expansion of the police role into non-crime domains is well documented (Crawford 2024), the findings demonstrate how climate-related disruption accelerates and intensifies this trajectory into other safeguarding and public protection contexts. During and in the aftermath of extreme weather events, the police are increasingly positioned as the organization that absorbs responsibility for leadership, coordination, and 24/7 resource provision, while simultaneously managing business as usual demands. The positioning of the police as generalist responders within local emergency governance resonates with Bittner's seminal account of policing as an institution defined less by specific tasks than by residual responsibility. As Bittner famously observed, what distinguishes the police is not the particular functions they perform, but the fact that they are the agency called upon 'when something must be done now', particularly in situations characterized by uncertainty, danger, or the absence of authority (Bittner 1970). This study reinforces this enduring feature of policing. During extreme weather events, the police were repeatedly described as the organization that intervenes when lives are at risk, when partner roles are ambiguous and resources are stretched, or when other agencies lack the capacity to respond, often outside normal operational hours.

Specialist functions within policing, including civil contingencies, wildlife, rural, and neighbourhood officers carry much of the weight of information gathering and relationship-building with partner agencies, which in turn supports strategic leadership and response during emergencies. However, officers in these units expressed that they were always at risk of being subsumed under business as usual functions due to ongoing resource constraints. As research on police boundary work and interoperability has shown, the slow accumulation of trust, mutual understanding, and reciprocal expectations is forged through routine, everyday inter-organizational interaction (Charman 2014; Crawford and L'Hoiry 2017; Davidson et al. 2025) and specialist functions remain a key mechanism for this type of partnership work.

The research also has important implications for understanding frontline roles and police officer welfare, particularly during protracted crises. While extensive research documents cumulative stress, fatigue, burnout, and trauma exposure in policing (Marmar et al. 2006; McCreary and Thompson 2006; Violanti et al. 2017), this study shows how climate-related emergencies intensify these pressures. Officers consistently framed their duty to safeguard life during extreme weather events, while simultaneously acknowledging limited expertise and training, along with a lack of specialist equipment. In line with emerging UK and international evidence, interviewees repeatedly highlighted limitations in training, uniforms, and equipment for prolonged exposure to extreme weather conditions (College of Policing 2025; De Camargo et al. 2025; Farrell et al. 2026).

The findings also deepen understanding of police leadership within polycentric emergency governance contexts. Consistent with existing scholarship (Crawford 2006; Crawford and L'Hoiry 2017), police leadership within LRFs emerged as default rather than formally prescribed. Police leadership was widely valued by partners for providing structure, decisiveness and reassurance, particularly during the early stages of an emergency. While the attributes police bring to multiagency settings were acknowledged and commended by partners, there was also an awareness that effective leadership depends on relationship-building and mutual trust sustained over time through experience of past events. As Crawford and L'Hoiry (2017) demonstrate, multiagency partnership work remains contingent on trust, goodwill, and informal routine work rather than mandated through formal hierarchical structures. However, reliance on a small number of key individuals does not fully mitigate the risks associated with professional dominance and knowledge hierarchies (Malik and Berg 2024), which have the potential to marginalize other forms of expertise. While practitioners recognized that police leadership of the SCG enabled them to focus on specialist responder roles, research in other LRF contexts has also identified reticence among some professional groups, including health services, regarding police leadership within emergency governance arrangements (Radburn et al. 2023).

Conclusion

This research has shown that policing plays a key 'anchor' role in local emergency governance during climate-related extreme weather events. Police organizations function as generalist responders and frequently provide 24/7 resource and organizational capacity, secretariat support, and leadership across the strategic, tactical and operational structures of LRFs. This role is underpinned by the routine coordination and relationship-building work of specialist units, and sustained over time through accumulated experience of past emergencies. However, this expansion of responsibility is accompanied by cumulative pressures on police officer welfare, alongside significant organizational and operational demands associated with balancing emergency response with business as usual functions.

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As this study is based on a single region in England, it is worth noting that local geography and shared experience of previous extreme weather events have shaped LRF practice and leadership arrangements over time. As with local subsidiarity more broadly, there is likely to be variation across regions. Nonetheless, the findings highlight dynamics that are likely to recur across LRFs in England and Wales and point to the value of future comparative research examining variation in preparedness, police officer welfare and LRF leadership across multiple local and international emergency governance contexts.

Conceptually, the study has three key implications. First, it demonstrates that emergency response in the context of extreme weather can no longer be understood as a series of discrete 'shocks', but should instead be conceptualized as a condition of chronic and protracted disruption that is already recalibrating the role and function of the police. Second, by examining policing within local multiagency frameworks such as LRFs, the study shows how police centrality is reproduced in practice through organizational continuity, the capacity to absorb shocks despite limited resources, and accumulated experience in coordinating multiagency partnerships under conditions of uncertainty. Third, it foregrounds police officer welfare as a structural issue arising from the expansion and normalization of policing roles within climate-related emergency governance.

As extreme weather events become more frequent, severe and protracted, continued expansion of the policing role within local emergency governance is unlikely to be sustainable. In the absence of clearer national and regional civil contingencies frameworks, police-led local coordination risks normalizing an emergency governance model in which leadership is assumed to fall to the police by default. While LRFs provide an essential foundation for local, multiagency approaches to emergency management, structural changes including enhanced national coordination, clearer allocation of responsibilities, and sustained funding are needed to support longer-term climate adaptation and to reduce continued reliance on policing as the default institutional anchor for local resilience systems.

Biography

Dr Malik is a lecturer in criminal justice at the School of Law, University of Leeds, and the Climate Crisis ARI lead for the Yorkshire Policing-Academic Centre of Excellence. He also co-convenes the Climate Change and Public Safety Special Interest Group of the Global Law Enforcement & Public Health Association. As a research affiliate of the ESRC Vulnerability and Policing Futures Research Centre, Dr Malik led a centre-funded project exploring the role of the police and Local Resilience Forums in understanding, preparing for, and responding to the climate crisis.

Conflicts of interest

The author declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Funding

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) is gratefully acknowledged. Grant reference number: ES/W002248/1.

Data availability

The data is not publicly available due to ethical restrictions protecting participant anonymity and organisational confidentiality.

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