

# How do we harness the power of local?

**Bruce Mann** starts the debate on building a ‘resilient society’ as part of the National Preparedness Commission’s Independent Review of the UK’s *Civil Contingencies Act* and its supporting civil protection arrangements

I hope that readers of the *CRJ* will have seen news on its website of the *Independent Review of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004* and its supporting arrangements commissioned by the National Preparedness Commission. I particularly hope that readers will have seen the open invitation to contribute. We want to encourage a wide range of inputs on what is working well and where improvements could be made, especially those that draw on hard-earned experience over the past 20 years.

We are looking to stimulate an open debate on some of the more complex issues. So we are grateful to the Editor, Emily Hough, for giving us this platform to get

one aspect of the debate going and to seek views – on how to give real, operational meaning to the phrase ‘resilient society’. Or, putting it another way, to ask the challenging question: “Have we, since 2004, focused on the easier bit of improving the resilience of the UK, and do we now need to go much further to build a truly resilient society?”

The resilient society is at the heart of our review. Put simply, our work divides into two parts: ■ **First:** How well have the *Act*, and the arrangements put in place for its effective implementation, worked? Are they a firm foundation for the future? And where, considering experience gained over the past

15 to 20 years, could improvements be made?

■ **Second:** Do we now need to go further, building on those foundations so that we are well placed as a country to deal with the challenges we face in the next 15 to 20 years, as set out in the *Integrated Review*, OECD and WEF publications?

It’s on that second point that we may need to be frank and ambitious. It is often said that true resilience needs a whole of society approach. That means ensuring that public sector bodies and essential services operators – the organisations that are the specific focus of the *Act* – have their own arrangements for risk and emergency management in place. But it means thinking more widely because, to use another cliché, resilience is about people – all people. It is about understanding the impact of the range of potential risk events on people and communities and putting in place the right prevention and preparedness programmes. But it is also about harnessing the knowledge, talent and enterprise of businesses, voluntary and charitable bodies and communities – right through to households and individuals. And, with the benefit of hindsight and experience since 2004, this looks like an area where the *Act* and its supporting arrangements need substantial development.

We’ve seen the power of local action in the larger-scale emergencies of the past 15 years at home and overseas, most recently in the flooding in Europe. And, of course, we’ve seen it in the response to Covid-19, with the inspiring contribution of voluntary and charitable bodies, local groups, businesses and within communities. In the more interconnected society we are building, with greater scope for compounding and cascading risks, impacts are increasingly going to be felt more widely, across the whole of society. The need to engage the whole of society in risk and consequence mitigation is growing.

This theme isn’t new; it has been around longer than the UK’s revised civil protection arrangements have been in place. The *2001 Anderson Report* on the foot-and-mouth outbreak noted that: “Whatever central government does and however well, it cannot defeat a major outbreak of animal disease on its own. It needs to co-ordinate the support and services of many others, including those most directly affected.”

A description in 2007 by the Government’s then Security and Intelligence Co-ordinator of the UK’s developing civil protection arrangements noted that: “A key challenge for civil protection planning in the UK is to enable the active involvement of all sections of society.”

Charlie Edwards and Demos published *Resilient Nation* back in 2009, with useful prescriptions. More recently, the Rt Hon Penny Mordaunt, MP, in her speech announcing the launch of a Call for Evidence for the National Resilience Strategy, said: “We have an ambition for a whole-of-society approach to resilience, reviving our effort to inform and empower all of society, and support greater community responsibility and resilience. We all have a role in building a safer, and more prosperous UK.”

So, there is plenty of good intent and there has been some useful progress over the years, especially in the field of community resilience. But I would suggest that both academic analysis and practical, operational experience – as evidenced by the early contributions now being made to the review – show there is much further to go.

John Holcroft |  
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I recognise that is easy to say and harder to do – and probably more difficult than what has been done under the *Act* across the public sector since 2004. What’s more, experience suggests that it could be uncomfortable territory for Whitehall. This is not something that can be driven from the top down. Here, above all, resilience needs to be built from the local level upwards. But harnessing ‘the power of local’ – encouraging creativity, drawing on flexibility and the power of different approaches, while respecting independence and the human and institutional idiosyncrasies that come with it – can look and feel untidy.

This can be challenging in a governance system that has historically tended towards centralisation, a preference in government for being directive and a yearning for bureaucratic tidiness. But it has been achieved in other social policy fields, and I believe it can be done for civil protection.

My hunch is that this may be less about the *Act* itself and more about its supporting arrangements in: Structures and partnership working across boundaries; what is put into statutory and non-statutory guidance; arrangements for enabling and supporting action; training and exercising; attitudes and approaches; and, of course, in resourcing.

## Views welcomed

So that’s where we would welcome views. There are several obvious questions. We are already looking at the best means of engaging and supporting business, voluntary and charitable sectors. But who are the other potential actors? How do we gain their interest and attract them into playing a part – without being seen to be alarmist or heavy-handed? And what kind of support might they need in terms of information on risks, impacts and how public sector bodies are planning and preparing; advice on good practice and solutions elsewhere; contacts and networks; and material and financial assistance?

Wrapped around this are what may be the bigger issues of culture, leadership, trust and respect. Of building a spirit of collaboration and shared endeavour, putting aside empires and egos, and acting for the greater public good. And this leads us to one crunch question: Who might be best placed to lead and guide this activity, at national level, but more particularly at a local level?

There’s plenty of academic literature and some good case studies in this area. But we’d like to focus specifically on what’s best for resilience. We would welcome any insights that *CRJ* readers want to offer. Please fire them to a member of the team (see below). And we hope to start other debates via blogs on the *CRJ* website. CRJ

## Sources

- *Anderson I (2001)*: Foot and Mouth Disease 2001: Lessons to be Learned Inquiry Report, London: Stationery Office, HC888, 2002;
- *Hennessy P (Ed) (2007)*: The New Protective State: Government, Intelligence and Terrorism pp 55, Continuum;
- *Edwards C (2009)*: Resilient Nation, Demos.

## Author



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