New Weather Institute

Unprepared

The Case for Community Control of Civil Contingency Plans

Why locally owned, properly resourced & genuinely civil disaster response will save lives

New Weather Pamphlet #6

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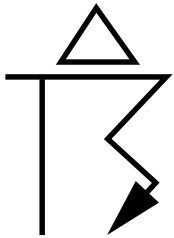
The front cover graphic is the international meteorological symbol for Heavy Thunderstorms (with hail at the time of observation).



Unprepared

The Case for Community Control of Civil Contingency Plans

Why locally owned, properly resourced & genuinely civil disaster response will save lives

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Section 1
Summary

This pamphlet looks at how the UK is unprepared for a new era of crises and disasters. To illuminate the national predicament we look at lessons from recent history, and what we can learn, often from countries in the Global South, about the kind of local planning required and resources needed to be ready for when storms and other disasters strike near where we live.

From pandemics to extreme weather, safety failures, energy and other system shocks, the government repeatedly reveals itself to be unprepared. Inadequate, poorly resourced, weakly connected and badly communicated national arrangements mean communities are typically the 'first responders' who are left to fend for themselves in disasters. This reality casts a long shadow over recent events ranging from the Grenfell tower block fire, to the floods and 'fire weather' of the worsening extreme weather events driven by global heating. Here, we call for a new vision of locally owned and properly resourced disaster response to save lives and build strong, resilient communities in the face of increasing upheaval.

Every neighbourhood should have a hub, underpinned by a resourced local network that helps each community in the twin tasks of facing a new era of disasters and working on the rapid transitions to prevent them, while making life better for all in the process.

Introduction

This story starts on the night of Saturday 31 January 1953, when the coastal communities of eastern England experienced a spring tidal surge of an unprecedented 18 feet above sea level. This was accompanied with hurricane force winds, which reached 126 mph as they hit Orkney on the journey south.

That was the background and the initial cause of the events known as the worst peacetime disaster to hit the British coast. It meant that sea defences were overwhelmed, killing 307 people in the English counties of Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. Another 19 were killed in Scotland, and as many as 1,800 people lost their lives in the Netherlands, on the other side of the North Sea.

But the scale of the disaster affected many more people than that:

- 32,000 people were evacuated.
- About 40,000 were made homeless.
- 160,000 acres of land were inundated with sea water and not usable for several years.
- Estimated damage cost £50 million at 1953 prices, approximately £1.2 billion today.
- Infrastructure including power stations, gasworks, roads, railways, sewage services and water services were put out of action.

The storm surge happened because water was forced southwards, causing it to pile up, unable to escape through the narrow Dover Strait and the English Channel, trapping it off the coast of East Anglia. Among those drowned were the passengers and crew of the British Rail ferry Princess Victoria, which foundered off the Scottish coast, on its way between Stranraer and Larne.

Strangely, for such an overwhelming event, the memories of six decades ago have faded. Very few people would remember the events if it had not been for a fascinating and moving article that the architectural critic Ken Worpole wrote to remember the sixtieth anniversary.[1]

These days, there would be warnings about spectacularly high tides. The Thames Barrier would be raised. The Environment Agency spokespeople would fan out to the TV studios; but not then. Back in 1953, the first that anyone knew of what was about to happen was when the 7.27pm train from Hunstanton to King's Lynn ran into a wall of water and was hit by "a bungalow floating on the crest of the wave".

The North Sea tide that night was the highest ever recorded and many of those who died simply awoke trapped in bed by water rising too fast to escape. Worpole paid tribute to the meticulous account published in 1959 by Essex County Council, and hails it as one of the great works of twentieth-century English social history: Hilda Grieve's narrative, The Great Tide.[2] He wrote:

1 The great tide of 31 January 1953 | openDemocracy

2 Hilda Grieve (1959) The Great Tide – The story of the 1953 flood disaster, Hilda Grieve, Essex County Council

> *"So vulnerable to disruption were communications at this time that many were already dead and their communities destroyed further up the coast, whilst along the Thames people slept soundly unaware of what was about to hit them."*

While things are different now, it is extraordinary that so few memories remain of a disaster that involved families and children dying of cold as they clutched onto their roofs. And for all the advances in early warning, the picture of inadequate national arrangements leaving communities to fend for themselves in disasters casts a long shadow over far more recent events – ranging from the Grenfell tower block to the floods and 'fire weather' of the worsening extreme weather events driven by global heating.

There are elements of these earlier events, however, which we can learn from now. Worpole emphasised an important point: the extraordinary way that so many individuals and local organisations swung into action in the middle of the night to rescue neighbours and near neighbours.

"From Grieve's account, almost every East Anglian appeared to belong to an organisation whose loyalties and resources could be called upon in an instant without demur," Worpole wrote.

This attitude must have been partly the result of the Second World War, which had finished only eight years before, and all these small organisations were still active and effective. Ten members of the South Benfleet Yacht Club alone saved over 60 people from Canvey Island.

In the humanitarian relief world there is a well-established general understanding that communities tend almost always to

be the 'first responders' when things go wrong.[3] The degree to which they are organised, resourced and prepared in advance of disasters determines both the severity of the impacts from them, and the speed and effectiveness of recovery after the event. Properly resourced and locally owned and controlled preparedness is key to effective response.

The difference now is that these small groups and associations tend to be overstretched, under-resourced and taken for granted by the authorities. They are the kind of organisations that have either been swallowed up by big charitable agencies or have failed to jump through the hoops required by funding operations such as the Big Lottery and its predecessors. Often, they have simply disappeared or exist, as they always did, on a voluntary basis and attached to a local church or school or football club.

The localism debate tends to be dominated by arguments about democracy, and occasionally – though rarely – by arguments about economics. Yet the critical spine of an effective localism is the continued existence of local institutions, largely autonomous, that are an insurance policy that paid off that night sixty years ago, and now, in the face of climatic upheaval, disasters and vulnerable infrastructure, not only still need to be nurtured, but properly resourced, empowered and the conditions created for them to flourish.

We were involved in 2009 in an event at the Imperial War Museum about lessons from the Second World War for a more sustainable economy.4 One of the attendees asked the speaker from the Women's Institute if they had received government

3 World Disasters Report: Focus on Reducing Risk (2002), IFRC

4 Andrew Simms (2010) The New Home Front, London: New Economics Foundation.

grants to produce the tons of jam which their local branches churned out throughout the war. The answer was they had not, though the government had given them can-making machines.

But then, what the WI had in the 1940s was an army of women at home due to cultural norms during the day, who nurtured and ran these local organisations. Given the shifts in cultural and economic norms since, the question is, what could liberate people from the contemporary long-hours working culture, to breathe life back into local associational life? Here, new calls for shortening the standard working week – whether to four or three days – backed by some form, or combination, of providing universal basic services and income, are offering hope.

The changing nature of the voluntary sector is little discussed in relation to the voluntary role in civil contingency planning, what used to be called civil defence. To the extent that parts of the community sector are more constrained by grants and key performance indicators, it means they will be that much less available to support people when disaster strikes. On the other hand, there are at least as many voluntary sporting institutions as were there in 1953. The difference, if there is one, is that they don't always regard themselves as having disaster contingency duties too – but then again, which of us do?

This pamphlet looks at what we can learn, often from developing countries, about the kind of local planning required to be ready for when storms and other disasters, natural or not,

claim lives near where we live – and what governments need to do in order to encourage it.

The rhetoric around terror attacks seems to be shifting in this direction, with simple mantras about what individuals should do if they find themselves involved (Run, Hide, Tell) – and in Manchester and Borough Market, passers-by played a key role in looking after victims, before and after the authorities arrived. There appears to be a shift away from the kind of passive advice that seems to have sealed the fate of some of the Grenfell Tower victims, that they should simply stay put and wait. And it was striking how the local community substituted for authorities who floundered to provide support in the aftermath.

This is not a new idea. Disasters can often be the spur for local innovation, like the volunteering infrastructure in Christchurch in New Zealand, and Kyoto in Japan, which were both born out of recent earthquakes. In Jacksonville, Florida, it was the smallpox epidemic of 1883 which kick-started their welfare programmes, forged by a group representing the local voluntary sector, local government, business and healthcare.[5]

They came together again for the yellow fever outbreak of 1888 and the great fire of Jacksonville in 1903. The same idea, and many of the same systems, were brought up to date in the 1970s and now the town has a unique institution called the Jacksonville Council on Citizen Involvement.

The Jacksonville Council has a track record of shaping a vision that can unite, notably in its JAX2025 project on a strategic vision for the next decade or so. But effects also seem to have filtered through into inclusive economic activity. The metro area saw significant economic development between 1980 and

5 Rebecca Solnit (2009) A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster.

2000 – twice as fast as the average metro region – but also reduced poverty, which bucked the general trend in metros towards greater inequality.

This is not beside the point. Active communities with a sense of themselves tend to be more successful than those which lack one. Yet when it comes to disaster planning or civil contingency, most of the information online – even about 9/11 – is about business recovery and IT recovery planning. Even here, there is a nod in the direction of other planning which needs to be done. For example:

> *"The most important part of this process is to ensure that everyone has access to information about the plan and that they know their role in it…"* [6]

There may be lessons to be learned from the literature of IT disaster recovery planning, which borrow from the anthropological literature about prehistoric tribes and their reciprocal relationships often many miles away – just in case. There is no point in having your IT response team in the same office after all, as they found after 9/11.

Partly because of 9/11, where local residents from Battery Park City were rescued by an ad hoc collection of ferries and police launches from the cloud which had engulfed them, community disaster planning has a more intense track record in the USA than in the UK. Battery Park City was also hit by the storm surge caused by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and remains one of the most vulnerable coastal communities in the world – so their volunteer disaster response network is clearly a necessary precaution.

6 What is contingency planning? A definition

Other US communities have volunteer-led support teams in place, often managed through the Red Cross. But it is developing countries like India which are currently leading the way, and they have a UNDP Disaster Risk Reduction Programme which covers 17 states of the country. This is how the Delhi disaster plan was introduced, now included in the state of Delhi's own disaster plan:

> *"In the context of Delhi, which is politically and economically, one of the most important states of our country, its ability to withstand disasters is of critical significance. Delhi is extremely vulnerable to disasters. The entire region of Delhi is in Seismic Zone IV, at high risk to earthquakes. Its densely populated areas with large amounts of non-engineered building stock, poor soil conditions, the sizeable number of unauthorised colonies and urban slums compound our vulnerabilities in Delhi. Further, on a day-to-day basis, Delhi is at risk to numerous hazards, such as bomb-blasts, other acts of terrorism, fires, industrial and chemical hazards, floods, building collapses, road accidents, waterlogging, etc."* [7]

As Delhi found, engaging a very low income and peripatetic community in disaster planning is not necessarily easy. It is easier to involve people who have a permanent stake in the area. That is one of the issues behind civil contingency which emerges. But the question is an urgent one: people on the spot are best able to plan for and mitigate disasters when they come – and climate change suggests that they may be more frequent – and we need to find ways in the UK of supporting this very local planning a good deal better.

That is what this pamphlet is about.

7 GoI-UNDP Disaster Risk Management Programme – A Seminar On Role Of Architects Towards Seismecally Safe Built Environment (2004)

Section 2:
Looming disasters

Every nation whispers about the moment that everything nearly fell apart but didn't. The founding myth of the modern British state, the Blitz from 1940-1, may be one of these moments where the nation celebrates the period when it 'carried on'. At least twice, once in the Cuban Missile Crisis and once twenty years later, the UK came close to being engulfed in nuclear war.

It is worth remembering how close society came to collapse in 2007/8, when a confluence of financial, energy and climate shocks came close to tearing the nation's economy apart – the threat is increasingly systemic, and government structures as they currently exist find it increasingly difficult to see the interconnectedness of the system. "I don't believe in panicking before it's absolutely necessary," wrote the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Alistair Darling, "but I came close to considering it on the morning of 7 October 2008."[8] Since then significant, continuing cuts in the resources made available to key government departments have worn thinner the ability of the public sector to be an ultimate guarantor of stability and social fabric.

But then we are not only concerned with a systemic collapse, when these volunteer efforts will make the difference between survival and complete horror. It is the local disasters and the

8 Alistair Darling (2011), Back from the Brink, London: Atlantic books.

unexpected regional events which need addressing, again which are likely to increase in the future, thanks to global heating. Even very specific events require civil contingency, like the 2017 Grenfell Tower Fire, which demonstrated three things that are important to our argument here:

- The astonishing vivacity and generosity of the community, both local and national.

- The incapacity of the local authority and central government to respond quickly and adequately.

- The unexpected nature of the disaster, born from unexamined political decisions.

Terror attacks are certainly included in this category and the UK seems to be pretty good at terror response, at least in terms of security services' response. But the UK is not so good at prevention or the subsequent recovery phase.

Then there is another, unpredictable category, which might fall under the heading of 'predictable surprises', which includes sudden food supply interruptions, floods in non-flood areas, epidemics, especially those not susceptible to antibiotics, further building failures, banking crises and extreme weather events, when the normal structural coping mechanisms are threatened. The European heatwave of July 2022 revealed the extreme vulnerability of infrastructure – from roads to railways and buildings – which was not built to endure 40°C plus temperatures.

In both these categories, communities and local people have to be the first responders, because they are on the spot. Since we have seen some withdrawal of state functions since the 1953 floods, that seems unlikely to change. That means that, in the

first stages, and in the recovery stages of a disaster, we will have to rely on communities, the local institutions and the voluntary and charitable groups which are there.

The difficulty is that very little thought has gone into how communities can best be prepared to meet this emergency role, except in so far as the mass of individuals can be given advice on how to react – and how they can be encouraged to behave in the event of a disaster or terrorist incident. But public, community level responses during the coronavirus pandemic have given a hint of the latent extraordinary public spirit and willingness to help latent in communities – the very opposite of the selfish, looting caricature seen in many disaster movies.[9]

This filtered through and was illustrated by, for example, an obvious shift in thinking from the former London's Metropolitan Police commissioner Cressida Dick. This became apparent after the Manchester bomb during the 2017 general election campaign, with an emphasis among journalists of the courage and fortitude of the general public in the face of terror – the Liverpool taxi drivers who had rushed to the scene, the off-duty nurses who had dashed inside.

Normally, politicians used to emphasise the evil men who had carried out the atrocity, their hearts being with the victims, the 'never be defeated' stuff, which tended to make everyone feel like victims too. But Cressida Dick's statement after the Borough Market attack was clearly deliberate. It wasn't that she whitewashed the perpetrators – quite the reverse – it was that she declined to waste airtime on them. Instead, she paid tribute to the courage of the bystanders, and people stood a little taller as a result.

9 Rapid Transition Alliance (2022) Pandemic Epiphanies.

But these are shifts that might eventually prefigure some more comprehensive attempt to gear up communities. Generally speaking, the lessons would need to be learned from developing countries.

Disaster responses around the world have identified that the best way to minimise damage from external shocks and to hasten recovery is to maximise the capacity and agency of communities beforehand to face them. In such strong communities, often found in geographically remote, less developed countries, long-established co-operative community values and economies prevail, and they have been developed deliberately to maximise resilience.

What policy-makers need to do is to ask what effective measures they might take under which the same community strengths could be made stronger in the UK and in other largely urban societies?

Section 3
How safe are we?

From lightning and tempest; from earthquake, fire, and flood; from plague, pestilence, and famine; from battle and murder, and from sudden death –

Good Lord, deliver us.

Book of Common Prayer, 1928

Different contingencies require different responses from us in relation to how safe we feel or should expect to feel. We're not safe if we drive a car while drunk, or go up a mountain in winter with no compass or supplies; it's nobody's fault but our own if disaster strikes, and we must take responsibility for the lives of others we might endanger.

Yet we still rely on laws against drunken driving, or the presence of a mountain rescue team. In other words, we still expect a social structure to protect us or admonish us if we do idiotic, anti-social things.

But this pamphlet is concerned with those events or contingencies which are not caused by individual fault – though they may be caused by people and human organisations – but which are generally believed to lie within the responsibility of

public bodies, like local authorities, government or regulatory bodies, to mitigate when things go wrong. The three examples chosen are the Grenfell tower disaster, the Manchester Arena bombing and the Covid pandemic. But the lessons will apply significantly to the predictable 'unnatural' disasters – the rise of flood and 'fire' weather, caused by human-driven climate breakdown.

In the first two examples, people expected to feel perfectly safe living in the tower, and going to the teenage concert. With the pandemic, we expected the government to have had foresight so that emergency provision was available, and to have systems in place so that medical and social decisions could be intelligently reached and acted upon.

It turned out that the residents of Grenfell were living in an extremely unsafe environment. Exterior cladding which had been chosen by the arms-length organisation which was responsible for the maintenance of the tower block turned out to highly flammable. It had been chosen because it was a cheaper option.

There were no sprinklers in the building. No fire drills were carried out. The residents themselves, who had contacted Kensington and Chelsea Council and the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation with worries about fire safety, were continually brushed aside. The systems of regulation and compliance were so weak as to be almost useless against a climate of cosy relationships between the TMO (Tenant Management Organisation) and builders and suppliers.

The Manchester Arena bombing, where the terrorist Mohammed Abedi went into the crowded arena and detonated a bomb which killed 22 people and injured many more, was similarly preventable. The elements which led to the

catastrophe are, as in the Grenfell Tower disaster, being slowly examined by a public inquiry. But we can see that in both cases the questions which should always be present in considering civil contingency were completely absent.

These questions are:

- What is the worst that can happen?
- Have we allowed for this?
- Who has responsibility for making sure that these preventive, protective and corrective measures are carried out to the best of our ability?

The overriding public events of our time are of course the Covid pandemic and global heating. Learnings from one for action on the other have been extensively explored by the Rapid Transition Alliance.[10] The pandemic overturned an 11-year governmental and financial march towards an economy and society based largely on the deregulated market.

And, it has revealed that many of the community values, mutual aid mechanisms and large-scale social and individual altruism that we may have thought had atrophied, have on the contrary, sprung into vigorous life across the country. In the United States, ad hoc mutual aid groups that arose during the pandemic went on to organise regionally.[11] While in the UK, four out of ten mutual aid groups set up to respond to the same crisis have carried on and broadened their local support work.[12] Reality

10 Lessons from Lockdown – the Reset Series (2020-3) Rapid Transition Alliance

11 Mutual Aid Groups That Arose During COVID Gather to Build Power Regionally (10 July 2022) TruthOut

12 Four in 10 pandemic-era mutual aid groups still active, UK data suggests (13 June 2022) *Guardian*

has been the opposite of the mainstream economics view of people as essentially selfish, competitive individualists.

Early on in the pandemic, in 2020, before the arrival of vaccines, the concentration of the government and public health authorities was on the test and trace structure. This was the weapon which would, it was hoped, restrain the advance of the virus. It is now recognised, widely, that the UK test and trace system was an expensive failure.[13]

One of the reasons for the failure was a huge mismatch between the use of existing community structures across the country and the corporate structure to which the government actually entrusted the whole enterprise. Public health organisations across England having been progressively run down by the years of small state politics, were now said by the government which had run them down to be inadequate for the task.

In fact, when the full inadequacy of the work done by the likes of private outsourcing companies Serco became evident, public health authorities proved themselves more than capable of reaching their populations through a variety of means – door-to-door visiting, mobile units, collaboration with local GP practices and so on.

Test and trace was (along with the purchase of some PPE equipment) an expensive disaster because the government decided to ignore the existence of the established altruistic and sociable networks which comprise British society and rely on profit-driven corporate organisations – a number of which are now the subject of police attention.

13 Covid-19: NHS Test and Trace failed despite "eye watering" budget, MPs conclude | *The BMJ*

The Grenfell Tower disaster showed some of the same deficiencies of infrastructure and belief system. The building regulation system was weak and poorly implemented, and hence useless. The desire to listen to the tenants, involve them in the safeguarding of their tower block, was non-existent. The primary relationships were instead those between builders, suppliers of the cladding, and council officials, with a concentration on substantial cost cutting. No one individual in an official position took responsibility for the safety of the block.

The Manchester Arena illustrated a different set of avoidable dangers for the public. The arena, one of the largest entertainment spaces in Britain, is owned by a new global company called ASM Global, based in Los Angeles. It was formed in 2019 by the merger of two venue and entertainment behemoths.

The ongoing and painstaking inquiry under Sir John Saunders has found huge gaps in the security arrangements for the concert, untrained stewards, no onsite medical personnel, lack of communication between venue owners and Showsec, the security firm hired to protect the children and teenagers who made up most of the audience at the Ariana Grande concert.

He finds the response of the police and ambulance services – who took hours to reach victims – to have been wholly inadequate, raising questions as to possibly needless deaths of children and young people.

The exhaustive reports produced by Sir John Saunders make horrifying reading. In answer to another question – would I trust my child in a large UK concert venue? It's clear that, according to evidence given to the inquiry, the answer is – definitely not.

Section 4
First steps

If any major, established group is wrestling with these issues now, it is the British Red Cross. At the time of the London bombings of 2005, they had 115 staff and around 2,000 trained volunteers of whom about 800 could be called on to respond in London within hours of an emergency. They have been launching similar volunteer schemes elsewhere.[14]

For example, try Somerset.[15] The Somerset Local Authorities Civil Contingencies Partnership is made up of Somerset County and the five district councils. The Civil Contingencies Unit (CCU) is the hub of the partnership based at County Hall. The Unit promotes community resilience within communities across Somerset and is the first point of contact for local authority services required during emergencies.

The voluntary agencies below are known as the Somerset Emergency Voluntary Agencies Group (SEVAG). It is a group of approximately 20 voluntary agencies who accept volunteers, give them resilience training, make checks for working with children and vulnerable people, and take part in exercises with responding agencies. SEVAG volunteers are available for callout to help the Civil Contingencies Unit with response and recovery in emergencies across Somerset.

14 How terror, fires and floods changed us (British Red Cross)

15 See: somersetprepared.org.uk

This group consists of the following voluntary agencies, plus the British Red Cross:

Royal Voluntary Service

Burnham Area Rescue Boat

St John Ambulance

Freewheelers Emergency Voluntary Service

Wessex 4x4 Response

Plymouth Brethren Rapid Response Team

Civil Air Patrol (Skywatch)

RAYNET

Victim Support

Salvation Army

Faith Communities Response Team

Samaritans

Exmoor Search and Rescue

South West England Rescue Association

Rotary Club

Lions Club

RSPCA

Street Pastors

Scouts

Each voluntary agency in the group has its own capabilities and services and can provide care and support, welfare, transport services, animal welfare, and so on.

There are also a number of locations where SEVAG provide volunteers to help run rest centres for those evacuated from home.

The Red Cross is learning from the kind of civil contingencies arrangements that developing countries have pioneered. Indeed, decades of learning are held by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), which publishes The World Disasters Report every year. They are also building on their own expertise developing the Voluntary Sector Civil Protection Forum, run by the Cabinet Office.

It is clear from the minutes of the last meeting, back in 2012 – at least the last minutes that are publicly available – that there was concern among the sixty or so people there about insurance for volunteers in emergency situations, and who will co-ordinate the various public sector resilience groups (there are new ones also emerging in health).[16]

There has been no update to the government website since 2013, which is not encouraging.[17]

Because disaster response around the world has identified that the best way to minimise damage from external shocks and to hasten recovery – is to maximise the capacity and agency of communities beforehand to face them

The big question is how communities would have coped if the 2008 banking crisis had been a little worse. Imagine for a moment that the ATM machines had stopped working, that fuel prices rocketed, that road hauliers blockaded fuel depots in response, as they did in 2000. Imagine then that the supermarkets ran out of food, and a breakdown in order follows. These are, after all, the likely effects of extreme weather events too.

16 Voluntary Sector Civil Protection Forum Annual Meeting – GOV.UK

17 Voluntary Sector Civil Protection Forum (VSCPF) – GOV.UK

Now, how would communities co-ordinate to protect the vulnerable and keep essential services and basic needs met? There are examples from Greece during that financial crisis, and from an earlier economic crisis in Argentina of how sophisticated collaborative community action helped, going as far as creating new local currencies and providing financial support to those who found themselves unemployed or without food or shelter.

We do not have all the answers to this for the UK, but we do know some of the questions:

- In such conditions, how would communities co-ordinate to protect the vulnerable and keep essential services and basic needs met?

- If we were choosing systems that were most resilient to a wide range of shocks and best able to cope under stress – systems which generally communities do not have much, if any, control over – how would our energy, food, housing, care and transport systems be different?

- How would they be owned and managed?

The answers to questions like this have profound implications for local democracy, services, infrastructure and the shape of local economies. It may mean building in a co-production element to the way these services are delivered (when the recipients of those services are also actively involved in their management and delivery) – not just planned – so that people become co-deliverers of services across a wide range of sectors, and are trusted to do so.

It is hard to imagine how this might be done without trusted local institutions, from surgeries to churches, from primary

schools to housing managers and sports clubs, which may be able to spread this encouragement.

In fact, this may be part of a much wider series of policy options designed to prevent ill-health and support struggling families, which will involve service users as critical elements in delivery. Given that we are also in a trend toward greater economic and environmental volatility, which seems likely to stress our systems further, this is an increasingly urgent priority.

Disasters, like the pandemic, reveal systemic faults in systems and create opportunities to default to new ways of doing things, and doing them better. Exactly this was witnessed during the pandemic in everything from the revealed vulnerability and vital contribution of key workers, to reclaiming urban environments from polluting traffic for people, and the crisis of homelessness. They may even open a window for rapid transition – a moment when people are prepared to change.

The question that follows is simple and rather urgent. How can we rebuild public services with these mechanisms? How can we justify the change for what is, in effect, a rapid transition, rather than in the heat of a multiple emergency?

It is worth explaining at this point how the Civil Contingencies system works today, more than eighty years since civil defence and air raid precaution first became a Home Office responsibility.

These were the three major events in 2000 and 2001 which spurred the then Labour Government- to overhaul the antiquated arrangements, dating from WW2, that dealt with potentially catastrophic events. Flooding, foot and mouth and the fuel protests led to the passing of the Civil Contingencies

Act (CCA) of 2004. There are three levels of emergency defined in this Act – 'Significant, Serious and Catastrophic'.

This is the limited good news about civil contingency, that we have a national structure (based on Local Resilience Forums), and a Whitehall infrastructure.

A legally required review of the act in 2022 found that across the UK in the role of Local Resilience Forums and related structures there were, "challenges in the level of engagement; the role of the chair and how resilience activities are coordinated; accountability; assurance; and the level of investment in local resilience."[18] Visiting the site of one Local Resilience Forum covering Devon and Cornwall, for example, apart from some standard information on coronavirus, no new material appeared to have been posted for four years.

The CCA led immediately to the Civil Contingencies Unit at the Cabinet Office, which co-ordinates the work of the government's emergency committee, technically known as COBR, but popularly as 'Cobra' and the work of the Local Resilience Forums in every police area.

It is obvious from even a short glance at the various official literature – and because this was also the main purpose of the Act – that the main work of the Forums is to co-ordinate emergency responses by the biggest agencies.[19]

Councils carry multiple responsibilities for emergency preparedness, response and recovery, with many Parish councils operating emergency committees in patchwork fashion.

18 Civil Contingencies Act – Post-Implementation Review 2022 (Cabinet Office)

19 See for example: Expectations and Indicators of Good Practice Set for Category 1 and 2 Responders (2013) Cabinet Office

Guidance tends to be hastily updated whenever the latest disaster reveals current inadequacies.[20]

The drawbacks of current arrangements include:

1. Despite the importance of prevention and mitigation of disasters mentioned in the Act and documentation, the emphasis is overwhelmingly on immediate response co-ordination.

2. Like so many of the institutions set up in that era of centralised government, there is far too much concern with official secrecy, with external messaging and with process minutiae.

3. It is not clear that police areas are the right size for the local civil contingencies that we have in mind. They are likely to be too remote, and much too big, to be effective.

4. The infrastructure is clearly lacking investment, or energy or both. When we were first drafting this section (in 2018), the latest message on the UK Resilience website, the official voice of the infrastructure, declared that they will soon announce the agenda for the 2016 national conference, at least 18 months before. Since then we have had the National Resilience Strategy consultation, and a tepid review of the CCA which while observing key weaknesses, concludes no urgent action is necessary.[21]

The degree to which communities succeed reflects how the quality of local relationships, the strength of local economies, the agency, resources and capacities of local people have been

20 A councillor's guide to civil emergencies (2018) LGA

21 Public Response to Resilience Strategy: Call for Evidence

enabled to thrive or have been undermined and suppressed. There is an ecology of disaster recovery shaped both by specific steps of preparedness, but also by the general circumstances of the community in question, whether the economic model, and social and cultural norms, support resilience or undermine it.

Here, the Government has abysmally failed. Its huge cuts to local authority funding since 2010 have meant the decimation of local groups which bring people together – youth services, pensioners services, mental health groups, sports activities. So we are less prepared to come together to fight a national emergency than we were even in 2013 when the new act was introduced. Although not uniform, the picture across the 42 Local Resilience Forums is of dust gathering. They are mostly invisible, and made up of underfunded groups who typically meet rarely. They are not pioneering responses to the new age of emergencies.

These are all reasons why a rethink is required.

Our testbed

What we need is a truly civil civil contingencies infrastructure. To get there, we propose a live real-time exercise. This will be an innovative experiment in which we take the various insights and see how they might be applied to achieve movement towards a rapid transition to help both reverse climate breakdown, and better adapt to it in a time of crisis. In other words, how can we make our response to disasters accelerate action to prevent and minimise them, whilst improving people's lives?

To do this, we need to get representatives of various sectors in a room and approach how to intervene in a moment of crisis to make things better. The purpose would be to have a good test event in its own right, but also to draw attention to the results and possibilities of a truly locally owned and properly resourced civil contingencies approach.

In itself, we believe that every one of these contingency conversations will leave the local area better off. Nor does such a Civil 'Cobra' (the UK name for the national committee, which could, of course, at local level be renamed with a more team-playing animal, a Mongoose perhaps?) need to be the initiative of central government.

The conversation would begin with worst-case scenarios – the worst that could happen, locally and nationally, with food, energy, finance and weather. It would include influential voices from the worlds of energy, food, climate, health and human rights. We would also need people to represent farming, business, local government, banking, community involvement and politics. We might also require experts on fire, flooding, snow, terror and policing – and probably also from faith organisations.

We envisage that our forum would be open to all civil society associations through an appropriate representative structure, with the objective to co-ordinate and focus deliberation on the future challenges to civil society during the rapid and just transition to a more sustainable society. The current local vacuum has led to an independent initiative to establish 'climate emergency centres' across the UK using empty buildings as community hubs to build resilience to climate and social crises.[22]

22 See: climateemergencycentre.co.uk

We believe such an exercise is urgent, as civil society can grasp the current economic, health and climate crises as they create uncertainty and a relative state of flux, which can be an opportunity for them to influence transformation toward a state of greater social justice and sustainability.

The alternatives are 'learning by shock' and relying on reactive responses to crises once they have already occurred. Experience with counter-terror legislation shows that it is difficult to manage social justice claims when in the midst or immediate aftermath of a crisis. Following the atrocities of 9/11, many Western democracies rushed through counter-terror legislation, which now have long-term implications for civil liberties.

Cobra's official remit is "to co-ordinate the preparation of plans for ensuring in an emergency the supplies and services essential to the life of the community; to keep these plans under regular review; to supervise their prompt and effective implementation in specific emergencies."

Our Civil Cobra, or Mongoose, will be to:

- Identify and resolve conflicts or barriers to action within civil society, and anticipate and prepare for future tensions by rehearsing them in discussions.

- Provide an environment to facilitate adaptive and anticipatory learning through deliberation. This would enable preparation of co-ordinated responses before more dramatic impacts are apparent. It would go above and beyond simply identifying risks, and contribute directly to adaptation decision-making.

- Allow civil society to then assume a more active role in shaping events and outcomes rather than merely responding to needs that arise from environmental change and resource scarcity.

- Good governance will be central to the aims of the forum. Experience at the international level has shown that by only increasing deliberative spaces, the inclusion of already well-resourced groups that are able to represent themselves tends to be furthered, merely amplifying the voices of those who are already relatively powerful.

Section 5
Conclusion

We began this short pamphlet with the disastrous and deadly floods that hit the UK east coast in 1953. Because they were local, the response was very local too, when, overwhelmingly voluntary, organisations turned out to be key to saving lives.

This is not to claim that central government is wrong about its own central role in preventing and responding to emergencies. It is to claim that, in co-ordinating their own role, they have been forgetting the vital role played by local institutions and the formal and informal involvement of people who would normally be regarded as service users – who are supposed to remain quiet, still and grateful to make them easier to process.

This means that immediate response is entirely dependent on agencies that may themselves be extremely centralised – and therefore absent. It also provides an explanation why the business of prevention is so rarely effective and why agencies find the follow-up response so difficult, as they clearly have in the aftermath of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017.

The central message of this pamphlet is that civil society should not wait for central government to realise their vital role, but should grow into the role themselves. It is time to stop disempowering themselves and to come of age – and to shoulder some of the responsibility.

Since we first decided to write this pamphlet, a couple of years ago now, that whole thesis seems to have been confirmed by

two major events – the Covid crisis and the invasion of Ukraine – and by a more acute understanding of the life-threatening climatic extremes.

While so many large-scale businesses and government agencies proved hopelessly inefficient and wasteful – test-and-trace, for example – it was those operating on the ground, at community level, that showed themselves most fleet of foot and adaptive – and, importantly, most effective. Also, the closer to the ground one got during the pandemic, the more that seemed to apply.

Again and again, in communities across the country, it was informal mutual aid by families, friends and neighbours which came first, closely followed by action from locally based community groups, charities, and faith organisations. From there, local councils and other statutory bodies stepped up too. As many as 750,000 signed up to volunteer on central government websites during the first week of the first lockdown – but even going via local authorities, they were difficult to allocate, Then, when the vaccines were first rolled out, it was clear that local organisation, managed by volunteers, was going far more effective than centralised or high-tech kickboxing.

There was also the great wave of social entrepreneurship, galvanised through social media, and organised place-by-place, while also being loosely connected across the country. For example, face masks and other PPE have been produced by a network of hundreds of local community groups across the country, enabling a great many people, including those classed as vulnerable, to play a positive part in the crisis.[23]

23 Steve Wyler and David Boyle (2021), Us and Them: A mindset that has undermined out communities, London: Local Trust. https://longreads.localtrust.org.uk/2021/12/10/us-and-them-a-mindset-that-has-failed-our-communities/

A similar phenomenon seems to have become clear, rather more quietly in the UK after the Ukraine war began. While Ukraine itself seemed to be co-producing its own defence, the UK government started with an overly-centralised and bureaucratic approach to Ukrainian refugees – only to find themselves overwhelmed by the generosity of people, with over 25,000 offering their homes within an hour of the first possibility becoming available.

We have lived for more than a quarter of a century without the looming presence of the four-minute warning of nuclear annihilation. While that has not gone away, it has reduced compared to the height of the cold war.

But now that there are new threats of catastrophe, how can we reassure people that there will be support if the worst happens. The answer is that we urgently need a locally owned and properly resourced disaster response infrastructure that can plan ahead, respond effectively and rebuild according to local needs. A genuinely civil, and local Cobra. Every neighbourhood needs a hub, underpinned by a local network that helps each community in the twin tasks of facing this new era of disasters, while working on rapid transitions to prevent them and, in the process, making life better for all.

About the authors

David Boyle is a writer and think-tanker, co-director of the New Weather Institute, and has been at the heart of the effort to develop co-production and introduce time banks to Britain as a critical element of public service reform. He was recently the government's independent reviewer on Barriers to Public Service Choice (2012–13). He is the author of *The Tyranny of Numbers* (2001). He also writes history books.

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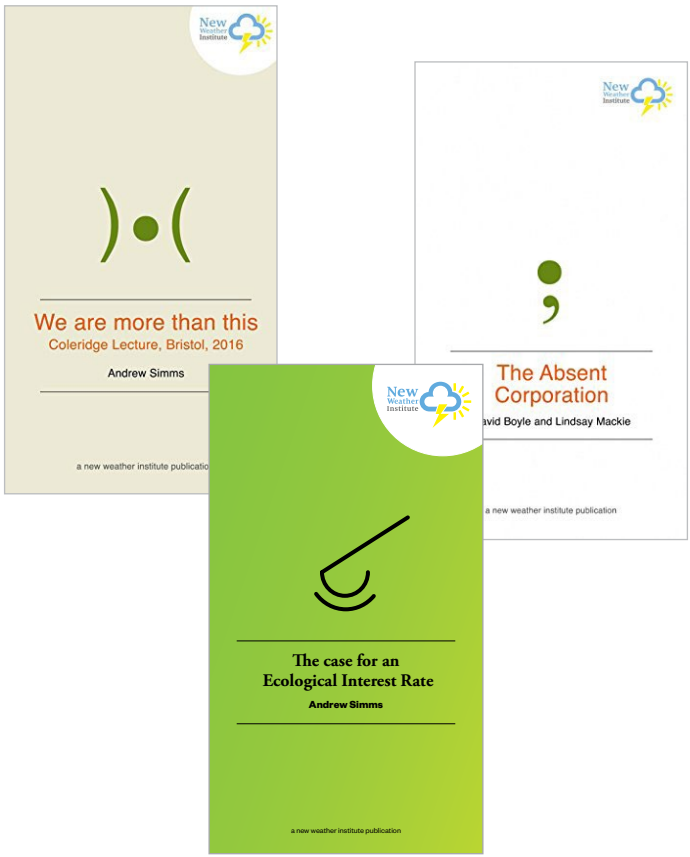

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