



**NATIONAL
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Operationalising societal resilience as a Local Resilience Capability

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INTRODUCTION

The National Preparedness Commission commissioned an 18-month research programme entitled ‘Towards a Resilient Democracy’, funded by the JRSST Charitable Trust. The research programme has delivered the following outputs:

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- **Societal Resilience Initiatives During Covid-19:** A report drawing on learnings from 15 **societal initiatives** during the Covid-19 pandemic to establish what worked and what did not work.
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- **Communicating effectively with the public during a crisis:** A literature review of evidence on crisis communications between communities and democratic institutions to explore what **communicating effectively** with the public means during a crisis.
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- **Case Studies:** **International examples** of resilience-building activities involving civil society.
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The research programme has given rise to a number of recommendations for the resilience sector that are summarised in this paper. The recommendations focus on how local resilience capability can be leveraged to ‘operationalise’ resilience at societal level, encouraging citizens and communities to get involved in a resilient democracy. They show the need to support local resilience partnerships in leveraging their knowledge of systems, networks, and what works locally, acknowledging that this is likely to need a mindset shift away from centrally-designed, universal solutions. The findings suggest the need to:

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- Take a strategic approach to societal resilience by aligning the contribution of resilience partnerships and local service providers.
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- Operationalise plans and agreements into existing systems, resulting in delivering a well-functioning local resilience strategy.
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- Ensure that key partnerships are supported to form the backbone of a local resilience capability that can pre-empt, prepare for, respond to, and recover from a crisis.
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- Focus on the needs of target groups of people and critical local organisations and infrastructure that will have needs when disruptions hit.
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- Focus on enhancing the baseline resilience of those target groups by supporting the local systems, services, and infrastructure that can meet their needs.
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- Recognise that most people and organisations in society are quite resilient most of the time – and that those who are normally resilient may need only some information and encouragement to help themselves and help others who are less resilient.
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- Evaluate the impact of the local resilience capability to understand its contribution to a resilient democracy.
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This report discusses each of these recommendations in more detail below, before drawing conclusions.

1

Take a strategic approach to societal resilience

Engaging society in building local resilience is increasingly acknowledged as a national ambition, recognised by the 2021 Integrated Review of Security and Defence (IR) which proposed a vision of a whole-of-society approach to resilience. However, the IR did not define what a whole-of-society approach to resilience meant, giving space to different sectors and stakeholders to consider and define the implications and opportunities for them in their context.

The UK Government Resilience Framework (2022) echoes the need for a whole-of-society approach to resilience and outlines initial activities to work towards this. More work at local levels will be needed to design and embed the strategic approach that is necessary to make a whole-of-society approach a reality. We are not starting from scratch - our research demonstrates that resilience partnerships are already working on aspects of societal resilience and other partners are also involved in wider supporting agendas (e.g., public health, social cohesion, levelling-up). Further, the work done by these partnerships provide the means to develop, deepen and operationalise a well-functioning local **resilience capability**. There are more opportunities, however, to think about whole-of-society resilience as a strategic endeavour in local resilience partnerships to ensure that its full benefits can be realised. This is a bigger, more strategic ambition than limiting activity to sharing information with communities through websites, leaflets, or activities that are disconnected from a strategic system.

A strategy for developing local resilience capability should focus on enabling society to support those groups that are most in need following a disruption (referred to as ‘target groups’) through:

- Helping individuals and communities to determine their own resilience – because self-determination is core to self-help.
- Enhancing the preparedness of target local groups – because better preparedness will reduce demand and variability of need and pre-position support for target groups.
- Reducing local risks that leave target groups vulnerable – because reducing overall risk and vulnerability will allow local resilience efforts to focus on those most in need.

2

Embed partner agreements to create well-functioning local resilience systems

Our research added weight to the view that societal resilience to disruption is essentially a local issue:

- It is built locally and supports local preparedness.
- It relies on local intelligence and relationships.
- It is deployed in local emergencies.
- It is lost when local attention is distracted.

‘Local’ in this context means the whole-of-society within locally-defined boundaries and is likely to require tailored support for groups for whom a ‘one size fits all’ approach will not work. This puts the focus for building societal resilience on local government, local services and partners that comprise the local resilience partnership, as well as local businesses and voluntary organisations. They continue to respond to local needs following a disruption, long after the emergency response has gone. They are best placed to coordinate effort to those most in need and ensure local essential services and their infrastructures are maintained.

Local resilience capability is best understood as the resource that operationalises societal resilience as a capability – turning plans and agreements into working systems. This cannot be a standalone ‘surge’ capability that is disconnected from business as usual. Instead, it should be integrated into operations so that it can be seamlessly activated or drawn upon when it is needed – whether in building baseline resilience before a crisis or responding quickly to an emergency event. Strong local resilience capability can be used to deliver a range of humanitarian functions to society and target groups to:

- **Prepare for a disruption:** by encouraging self-help and helping others and integrating that capability into a local resilience partnership as the coordinating and activating body.
- **Respond to a disruption:** by coordinating requests for help and offers of support from individuals/households, groups, organisations, and networks, and by monitoring changing local needs.
- **Recover from a disruption:** by supporting the community as it deals with the aftermath of a shock and local impacts of a disruption, for as long as is needed.

3

Focus on instrumental relationships

Local resilience partnerships comprise partners that contribute to the resilience activities of their local area. Some partners will be more interested and active than others in designing and implementing a local resilience capability. Rather than expecting all partners to contribute equally, these core partners should be recognised as being instrumental in forming a well-functioning backbone. Investment in their work will ensure that the capability remains active and fit for purpose, allowing other partners to contribute on a more fluid, needs-based arrangement, that may vary over time in strength, depth and continuity.

Our research suggests that when resources are stretched, local resilience partnerships should prioritise the development of instrumental relationships with a tightly-networked set of carefully chosen strategic partners. Every area is unique with regard to resources, networks and priorities, so resilience partnerships should identify who their instrumental relationships are with and focus on enhancing them to better support and deliver a sustainable local resilience capability.



4

Focus on the needs of target groups

Recognising that our society is diverse, we know that some groups and individuals are not as resilient to disruption as others. These are the groups that suffer disproportionately from impacts of disruption and are referred to as ‘target’ groups for additional support to enhance their resilience. They include those individuals/households, groups, organisations, and networks in society that are most at risk, as well as those who are vulnerable, unaware, unprepared, or unable to help themselves when disruptions happen. Vulnerability arises through multiple causes – for example, through limitations in capacity or through a lack of agency or perceived ‘permission’ to act – and target groups are likely to require tailored support that acknowledges those causes.

Given that some groups may be hardly-reached by the usual mechanisms of government, or may not trust state intervention, it is important to understand and engage whoever is in a position to reach these cohorts and ensure their needs are understood and met - be they local leaders, grassroots support organisations or local businesses.

Central to understanding the needs of target groups is understanding the risks facing society. At local level, these risks are articulated and prioritised in the community risk register which is a key tool in identifying groups at risk of disruption. Target groups may have networks that can support them but in times of crisis or disruption they may require extra help from local structures and services, such as a local resilience partnership. By working closely with target groups (as well as wider society), the local resilience partnership can enhance societal resilience towards enabling more people to help themselves and help others in a disruption. Continuous engagement will ensure a better understanding of the changing needs in target groups – for example, as situations evolve and new priorities emerge.



5

Focus on enhancing the baseline resilience of those target groups

Some disruptions are so significant that the scale of local need outstrips the local resilience partnership's capacity to support everyone. In such cases, it is vital to mobilise resilient local people to bolster this capacity and allow emergency responders to focus on target groups that are most in need.

Our research suggests that this informal local resilience response works best when supported by a strong volunteer infrastructure, that can provide facilities and guidance on how to help those who are in need. This is especially important where volunteers see local needs going unmet. Local resilience partnerships report that such a response can be provided informally as part of good neighbourhood relations, or through official channels that complement existing response efforts. The latter is particularly helpful to mitigate the risk of well-meaning individuals inadvertently intensifying disruption through unplanned or unhelpful activity. Practical examples in the research include arrangements for coordinating volunteers who are tasked by partner organisations to help with activities such as delivering supplies to those isolating at home. Volunteers and mutual aid groups may also be linked into communications structures, provided with training and insurance, and given appropriate ID and protective equipment where needed.



6

Recognise that most people and organisations in society have a base level of resilience

The societal response to recent emergencies, notably during the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrates that most people and organisations have the agency, motivation, and resources to be able to prepare for and deal with the impacts of an emergency, without requiring others to take over. Many individuals and communities, as well as businesses and networks, can support themselves and each other to continue throughout a disruption, constituting a level of resilience that already exists in society, and which can be mobilised when needed. Bolstering the self-help capacity of those individuals and organisations that already have a level of resilience (e.g., by providing information and encouraging self-help) means that local resilience partnerships can focus on those target groups that need more support.



7

Evaluate the impact of local resilience capability

Understanding how the resources and work of local resilience capability can impact local resilience is important to establish their strategic value and contribution towards a whole-of-society approach to resilience. Initial evaluations of local resilience capability should be based on a recognised framework and focus on the confidence of local resilience partnerships to deliver against that. This may include features of effective organisation - namely the strategy and leadership, intelligence, management systems, coordination and communication, and operations for delivering local resilience. As local resilience capability matures, there will be scope to assess its impact on different stakeholders, e.g., individuals/ households, groups, organisations, and networks that have needs. Evaluation would be designed to show how the work of the local resilience capability has effected a change in the volume, pattern and type of local resilience need.



CONCLUSIONS

Local resilience partnerships want to do more to build societal resilience and 48 of the 51 resilience partnerships in the UK and its Crown Dependencies are working together in a collaboration called the National Consortium for Societal Resilience [UK+] (NCSR+). The recommendations outlined in this paper were developed with local resilience partnerships in mind and represent a call to action. Through this activity we worked with resilience partnerships in all 4 nations to learn about what works at local level and how these recommendations could be implemented towards developing local resilience capability. Through discussions with NCSR+ and our own research we have identified the following points for how to operationalise societal resilience as a local resilience capability:

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- Local resilience capability needs to **grow organically** and build momentum and capacity from insight into what works best (or not) locally rather than imposing scale or pace too quickly.
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- Developing local resilience capability is an **ongoing process** that needs continual commitment - rather than being an episodic task- or time-bounded project. It will inevitably be ‘messy’ and challenging in some areas, so success needs to be evaluated over a realistic timescale.
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- Local resilience capability should be recognised as being **more than volunteering**, and as enhancing the resilience of individuals/households, groups, organisations, and networks to have the knowledge and resources to support themselves and others.
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- Local resilience partnerships can **integrate** informal local resilience capability effectively with their formal support and response structures. This can help to nurture and coordinate informal channels of support and resources e.g., handling donations and managing social media and local communications platforms.
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The achievement of these goals starts with the development of a strategic mindset about how to build societal resilience. A strategic approach is needed, blending structures and arrangements for emergency response (a clear strength in the UK) with a focus on building local capacity to raise the base level of societal resilience. This can provide opportunities and engagement points for society to play its part to create a resilience system that is ready to receive and guide informal support to where it is most needed in a crisis.



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