

This is not a drill: police preparedness for climate emergency

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As the consequences of climate change in the UK transcend extreme weather events, the police and public sector partners and agencies are recognising the importance of prioritisation, planning and preparation. On the 1st of May 2019, the UK parliament declared a climate emergency in response to growing evidence of the dangers facing countries and communities across the globe. Potential consequences pose not only threats to life and human prosperity but can overwhelm the capacity and capability of public authorities and their partners to plan and respond accordingly. Policing and the criminal justice sector are not exempt.

Researchers at Canterbury Christ Church University conducted a scoping [study](#) involving police leaders and partners from private and public sector agencies and organisations, about police preparedness for the consequences of climate emergency. The study engaged a cohort representing strategic, tactical, and operational levels of risk assessment, planning, management, and delivery. The key findings can be grouped under four main headings: climate change impacts; why should the police care; prioritization and preparation, and enabling and impeding factors. (See Figure 1).

The relationship between crime, [harm and climate change is reciprocal](#). The causal and contributing factors of climate change include some individual, but largely corporate and state activity related to fossil fuel emissions and other actions damaging the environment. Whilst not necessarily illegal currently, public pressure toward stricter regulation, including potential criminalisation of such activities places them within the interest and influence of criminal justice. On the flipside, the criminogenic consequences of climate change include behavioural changes linked to air pollution and increased ambient temperature, and those arising from the known stressors of resource scarcity and social disorganization: all likely to be exacerbated by climate change.

Consideration for policing impacts has started to take place at a strategic level including: international and national policy responses involving legal frameworks requiring rigorous enforcement, such as carbon trading regulations; anti-corruption and fraud action; new crimes of environmental harm and ecocide; security maintenance; increased emergency responses and disaster management and preparation for a range of protest activities from non-violent direct action to violent mass mobilisation due to resource competition. At national level, some of the threats and risks are [documented](#) in the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA), made appropriate for public consumption by the National Risk Register (NRR) on a two-yearly cycle. The NSRA provides a detailed government assessment of the likelihood and potential impact of 'natural' hazards, major accidents and incidents, societal risks, and malicious attacks that may directly affect the UK and its interests. These impacts are more locally contained in Community Risk Registers, individual organisational strategic risk registers, resilience, and business continuity plans.

However, the NSRA is not without contention over, inter alia, the short-termism of the planning cycle and its narrow focus. Consequently, this raises concerns about the state of longer-term planning and preparedness for prolonged singular, multiple and cascading threats and consequences of climate change beyond flooding, drought, and extreme weather events.

Climate Change Impacts

The impacts of the climate emergency cover environmental, health, security, and social and behavioural changes. The consequences of climate change transcend those immediately felt in the UK, such as flooding/drought and extreme weather events – in time to come, these are likely to be expressions of consequences originating from elsewhere in the world and the synergy of cascading threats triggering other events.

Other threats and their consequences include public health crises, fuel, famine, and food security, increasingly vulnerable populations, and climate ‘refugees’ fleeing environmental and societal decay in search of safety and stability: all with [impacts on community tensions and social cohesion](#). Many of these feature in the NSRA and NRR – yet receive limited holistic attention at local level planning. Notably, many climate change issues are seen as ‘tick-box’ exercises which are acted upon only if legislated due to limited resources. This is not synonymous with a lack of understanding of the issues or desire to act, but simply a combined result of poor central leadership and direction from government beyond the requirements metered out by the NSRA and legislation, a lack of strategic vision and insufficient resources and funding.

From the police perspective, protest and public order feature significantly. However, the challenge arises where rather than being limited to specific interest groups, it becomes more socially widespread, prolonged and widely supported by the public: a recognition that the police will have to deal with protest and civil unrest on an expansive scale.

Why should the police care?

The future operating environment for policing is forecast to change dramatically over the next 20 years according to the UK [College of Policing](#). Yet, there is minimal awareness and understanding of national and global trend analyses, understandable in the non-police sector, but surprising within the police service. This may have consequences for all concerned, in the way that challenges are conceptualised, planned for and approached from a multi-agency perspective. There is a sense that the police service is ill prepared in this area and lacking innovation, namely in its policing model that may be unfit for the current threats from the climate emergency. Among other roles and responsibilities, as Category 1 responders, the police play a pivotal role in planning for and responding to civil emergencies in partnership with other legally categorised organisations and agencies. Yet, such planning usually involves and is limited strategically to those listed by the NSRA.

Climate change and responses to it directly impact upon perceptions of police legitimacy and accountability. For example, issues arise around future performance indicators of how ‘green’ the police are, and the impact such measures would have on reputation and the ability to attract staff. And yet climate emergency is not just about

the practical considerations, but also about the ethical dilemmas it poses. When those who are the least responsible suffer the most harm and vice versa, both globally and at a local level, what does it mean to deliver justice, protect the vulnerable and serve communities? Whether the neutral position of leaders and practitioners on what is right and wrong, and what is ethical, remains a feasible one should harmful impacts reach a critical level, remains to be seen.

Prioritisation and Preparation

Beyond producing and issuing the NSRA and legislative requirements, more could be done to support and drive activity on the array of threats faced in local areas by the agencies and organisations studied. The main complaint highlights disingenuity in governmental response. For instance, while the UK government called for a collective response to climate emergency in the [COP 26](#), it did not take the appropriate measures to reduce disaster risks compared to other countries. Instead, the focus is on acute shocks rather than the chronic risks developing over time.

Significantly, the planning cycle is questionable and appears ineffective as a vehicle to address the compound effects of cascading threats. Principally, this is because it operates on a two-yearly cycle at a national level. While longer-term forecasts and planning do exist, and this is acknowledged; the reality is that police forces, local authorities and their partners operate between two to four-yearly planning cycles. Nowhere near the long termism required to mitigate and respond to the consequences of climate change.

Beyond well publicised and known threats from flooding, drought, and extreme weather, others are yet to penetrate the planning process. While climate change has attracted the attention of local resilience forums and has been picked up in their horizon scanning, it is generally not part of the strategic risk register. Moving into this space is considered as requiring greater 'grip', as climate change is not seen as a burning platform. The areas of prioritisation and preparation, if they are to move beyond the short-term and the traditional planning processes highlighted here, require culture change and greater strategic vision.

Enabling and Impeding Factors

There is a perceived issue with government leadership on matters of risk assessment, direction, priorities, and resourcing for planning for the consequences of climate change at a local level. Central government lacks thought leadership. There is merit in developing and accessing thought leadership for dealing with the climate emergency. Being in a position to respond appropriately requires leadership and vision, and notably, recognition of the factors that affect policing in the long run instead of the short-term, that can often be dealt with relatively quickly as business as usual.

In achieving this, thought leadership sessions are suggested with partners from diverse backgrounds and experiences, that would bring fresh ideas to see things from different perspectives. The net for such a resource might be cast broadly because there may be those in academia, industry, local authorities and charities who have expertise to bring, while the police should only be used here as part of the thought leadership space. In addition, a collaboration of agencies and partners would provide

better responses to climate change through the sharing of information. The need for more detailed and supported national planning templates that will provide consistency in response and improved collaboration between agencies is also suggested. In achieving this, it might be necessary to bring thought leadership to defined areas of operation on a trial basis, piloting around defined risks.

Multi-agency scenario testing and exercises contribute to collaboration and relationship building between agencies. However, current exercises do not focus on the longer-term management of climate change and cascading threats, directed instead at its symptoms, namely severe weather events and related incidents. Changes in exercising may occur only when the government identifies and treats climate change as a higher, chronic risk.

Resourcing significantly impacts planning and responses due to limited budgets, staffing, and capacity, especially for future planning and training. There is a need for adequate resources for the effective management of risks. The limited levels of resource lead to less time availability and capacity, forcing agencies to focus on immediate threats, while longer term planning becomes something of a luxury.

Conclusion

Whether the UK government meets its net zero target or not, the reality is that the consequences of climate emergency will occur and impact the police and partners in manifold ways, bringing challenges to society and those managing them. A collective, longer-term response to climate emergency is necessary now more than ever. Significant attention will need to be focused on planning cycle timescales, central leadership, dissemination of information and briefing material about the future operating environment for policing, ethical dilemmas of policing climate emergency and developing thought leadership.

Opportunities for future research and activity include increasing the size and diversity of the sample used in the original scoping study, to include more local resilience forums and police strategic decision-makers; detailed examination of Community Risk Registers, resilience and business continuity plans; creating impact by influencing conversations and policies with organisations and practitioners, and developing research collaborations. **If you are interested in participating or collaborating with us, please get in touch!**