

Resilience in the UK

As the UK Government launches its call for evidence to contribute to the formation of a national resilience strategy, EPS Chair **Jacqui Semple** explores the most important aspects it will consider – and how resilience professionals can make sure their voices are heard in its formation

The UK's resilience has been challenged repeatedly in several different areas throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, but this crisis is not the first extreme challenge the country has faced, nor will it be the last.

The Call for Evidence seeks public views to inform the development of a new national resilience strategy that will outline: "An ambitious new vision for our national resilience." The Government says it: "Seeks to understand current perceptions of risk and resilience, gather evidence on where improvements could be made, and gauge the UK's appetite for change." It will be fascinating to see the responses and just what the 'appetite for change' is, along with the suggested improvements that may emerge from this consultation.

As the largest and longest-established members' group for professionals working in resilience in any capacity, the Emergency Planning Society (EPS) obviously welcomes the Government's commitment to developing a national resilience strategy and would attest that regardless of any 'appetite', change is needed, and so are improvements.

The strategy consultation will look at vitally important aspects of resilience. By far the most important of these aspects are partnerships, which are integral as none of the other aspects can be successful without them. A true partnership involves listening and learning – as well as action, of course – on all sides.

Vital importance of partnerships

Partnerships in this context need to be between government and resilience professionals; it is vitally important that they listen carefully to, and act upon, the shared knowledge and experience of professionals within the resilience sphere. In addition, partnerships must involve our communities, those at the heart of any impact and consequences of an emergency.

Our country's leaders need to use the expertise of emergency planners in their responses to disasters, emergencies and crises. This hasn't always happened to date – an issue that was magnified with great intensity during the Covid-19 crisis, where resilience professionals were not engaged with to their optimum potential.

Understanding the level of expertise and experience that already exists – and engaging with those who have it – gives a strong foundation on which to build resilience nationally and dovetails into the other themes set out in the Call for Evidence. The six themes, which are clearly all vitally important and inextricably linked, are as follows:

■ **Risk and Resilience:** Strengthening our ability to manage an evolving risk landscape depends on improving our capacity to predict and adapt to identified and unexpected challenges.

Prediction and adaptation are easier to achieve when everyone is involved, not just the 'experts' in one field, such as medicine or science, for example. Most resilience professionals are constantly planning for the 'what ifs',

predicting what will happen next and planning for adapting to a huge variety of different scenarios. Listening to them can certainly help the country be more resilient against both predicted and unknown threats to the country's resilience.

■ **Responsibilities and Accountability:** It is fundamentally important that all those involved in building resilience have a clear understanding of when, where and how to apply tools, processes and relationships effectively.

The EPS absolutely agrees, which is why it encourages and facilitates ongoing learning for all those who are working in the resilience field. Making sure we are all match fit for the challenges ahead is essential. This fits too with partnerships; knowing which tools and processes are available across multiple types of organisations and having good relationships with those organisations, can only benefit everyone when responding to an event – and that knowledge comes through building effective partnerships.

■ **Partnerships:** Resilience is not solely a government or public sector responsibility. Other parts of society play an essential role in building our collective resilience.

■ **Community:** A whole-of-society approach will be central to strengthening the UK's resilience, with a revived effort to inform and empower all parts of society that can make a contribution.

In essence, everything feeds out from partnerships, whether that is between organisations or between organisations and the community. Helping people understand risks at a community level and giving them the tools and agency to help themselves and respond positively are among the most powerful tools in our arsenal to improve national resilience. As we saw with Covid-19, that collective desire to help, to respond and play our part is baked into our DNA. The EPS believes that community engagement will be an essential part of any national resilience strategy.

The final two themes are 'investment' and 'resilience in an interconnected world'. UK resilience is closely entwined with the wider global context and, as witnessed during the pandemic, challenges and opportunities are frequently experienced on a global scale. Again, partnership is the key here; working globally requires partnerships, relationships, sharing, learning and developing cohesive and joined up plans.

The formation of a national resilience strategy is a process the EPS wants to be closely involved in. It has called on all of its members to help shape its response to this vitally important piece of work and ensure that the voices of resilience and of the resilience professional are heard and acted upon when the strategy is developed. This is a vital first step in the creation of this strategy: for the Government to listen to the people who work or study in this field every day.

During the pandemic, and long before, the EPS called for the Government to engage with, listen to and use the wide breadth of skills, experience and expertise at its disposal from the resilience professional community – both academics and practitioners.

What we saw during the Covid-19 crisis was a lack of emergency planners invited to be involved by Government at the very highest levels of planning in the same way as colleagues in medicine or epidemiology. Committees such as the scientific advisory group for emergencies (SAGE) did not appear to include any independent advisers on emergency planning and management. That cannot happen again.

While the strategy will look more broadly at the resilience of the UK in general and not at the pandemic, it's important that the lessons identified during Covid-19 are not lost or forgotten.

I will leave you with this. During the crisis, *The Guardian* published a piece by David Alexander, Professor of Risk and Disaster Reduction at University College London. In it, Professor Alexander noted that the coronavirus emergency was not just a medical and epidemiological problem and that: "Emergency planners will be needed to identify and meet the novel challenges that coronavirus presents, both now and in the future. Never have they been needed more on critical advisory committees."

This comes back to the theme of partnership – working together, using the best people and the best knowledge, which can bring the best outcome. I know that everyone across the UK, whether they are a resilience professional or not, wants the same thing: to keep our country and its people as secure as possible.

Author



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