



National Resilience Committee

Corrected oral evidence

Thursday 12 March 2026

10.30 am

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Members present: Baroness Coussins (The Chair); Baroness Curran; Lord Farmer; Baroness Helic; Baroness Hunter of Auchenreoch; Lord Marland; Baroness Mobarik; Baroness Northover; Lord Oates; Lord Peach; Baroness Winterton of Doncaster.

Evidence Session No. 1

Heard in Public

Questions 1 - 9

Witnesses

[I](#): Sian Jones, Director of Value for Money, National Audit Office; Mfon Akpan, Director of Financial and Risk Management Insights, National Audit Office; Dr Eleanor Parker, Head of Training and Curriculum, Resilience Academy; Councillor Matt Boughton, Chair, Safer and Stronger Communities Committee, Local Government Association.



Examination of witnesses

Sian Jones, Mfon Akpan, Dr Eleanor Parker and Councillor Matt Boughton.

Q1 The Chair: Good morning, and welcome to this first public evidence session of the Select Committee on National Resilience in the House of Lords. Thank you very much for your time and for coming today. This is a public meeting that is being recorded and broadcast live, so there will be a transcript, and all three of you will be sent a copy of the transcript in a couple of days or so, so you will be able to make any minor corrections if anything has come out wrong. Welcome, too, to Dr Eleanor Parker, who we have online there.

We have about an hour for this session and, as there are four of you, when we get to the questions we need to ask you, please do not feel that you have to answer every single one; answer the one that you feel equipped to deal with.

I will start by asking each of you to introduce yourselves very briefly for the record in one or two sentences and then we will move to questions from us.

Sian Jones: I am a director at the National Audit Office looking at the value for money of government programmes. In this context, I have worked with my colleague Mfon Akpan on a series of reports looking at risk and resilience, focusing on a whole-system and cross-government perspective.

Mfon Akpan: I am the director in charge of the financial and risk management insights team at the NAO. Essentially, we are one of seven subject matter expert areas that seek to influence government practices in our respective subject matter areas. For me, it is financial management and risk management and resilience in government.

Dr Eleanor Parker: I am head of training and curriculum at the UK Resilience Academy, which is run for and on behalf of the Cabinet Office by Serco. We were established as part of a previous government policy to deliver accessible learning and development opportunities for those who have the responsibility to deliver resilience in the UK.

Councillor Matt Boughton: I am chair of the Safer and Stronger Communities Committee at the Local Government Association, which covers, among other matters, resilience. I am also leader of Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council in Kent.

The Chair: Thank you all very much—I am sure we will hear a lot of expertise, experience and advice from you all. I will kick off with the first question. This is probably one for each of you to give a brief answer to. What major risks does the UK currently face, including those linked perhaps to the natural environment and to supply chains? What are the implications for preparedness and resilience?



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Sian Jones: If I may, I will kick off the response and then defer to my colleague, Mfon, to pick up where I leave off. We very much work together as a double act.

As I think we all know, we are facing quite a broad and interconnected series of risks. We have seen in our work that these risks span not just acute shocks such as extreme weather and flooding, cyber, pandemic and supply chains, but also chronic risks, which are things such as climate change and biodiversity, borders and systems. In our work we see that these system risks affect all aspects of our society, whether that be people, businesses, infrastructure, or the economy. That means that our focus is consistently on whole-system preparedness because if there is a break in one part of the system, there is a potential for the whole thing to come a cropper.

One of the issues that we see in our work is that the Government's preferred approach is about strengthening what they call generic capabilities, because they cannot prepare for every risk, so they have clusters of risks that are complemented by bespoke planning. However, because of this generic preparedness capability, it is important that the system that sits around the Cabinet Office, which leads on these risks, has its own very mature and robust risk systems: for instance, lead government departments for risks and, as I am sure my colleague will come to, local and regional level risks, as well as risks within communities. Mfon, would you like to come in on that?

Mfon Akpan: Yes. It is fair to say that we know that we are living in a fast-moving, complex world. We talk about Turbulent, Uncertain, Novel and Ambiguous environments. Some people say volatile, uncertain, complex, or ambiguous, or they talk about Nonlinear, Accelerated, Volatile and Interconnected [risks]. So we would say that yes, we have an interconnected set of risks that are quite far reaching.

The NRR, the national risk register, covers about 100-plus permutations of those risks. From our body of work, we know that the Government need to define the outcomes that they need to achieve and plan for compounding and cascading risk. We see cascading risk and interconnectivity on top of the current level of uncertainty.

We are saying from our body of work that we also feel that the Government need to not just plan for single events but to look at the possibility of the multiple scenarios that could happen and have a clear definition of risk appetite to be able to inform their trade-offs and investment decisions and place greater emphasis on anticipation, planning and prevention in response to that. It is fair to say that it is a wide array of risks. We could list an extensive list but the experts tend to talk about a state of permacrisis—a permanent sense of crisis and polycrisis.

Councillor Matt Boughton: The key major risks that we face cover a wide variety of issues, from terrorism to cyber to natural hazards,



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accidents, water outages—something that I have been very involved in in the last few months with South East Water—power outages, flooding, wildfire; the list goes on. I could be here for an hour telling you about the list of risks.

The key thing for us in local government is recognising that we have reduced likelihood of outages and risks but the impact, particularly on a local level, can be great. Water supply is a good example: it is a very localised problem but it is quite catastrophic if you have no running water.

Then there are risks that perhaps have a wider impact and last for longer but in terms of preparedness and resilience, there is a greater prospect of reducing the impact on individuals' day-to-day lives. It is important to understand where each potential risk falls within that matrix and to understand how the whole-system approach and your preparedness enable all the key organisations to be involved from the outset, having very clear plans and strategies going forward. Where some of the higher impact risks are very localised, it is important from our perspective that through local resilience forums there is an opportunity to bring together all the key partners in all sectors to deal with those issues.

Dr Eleanor Parker: Thank you for the opportunity. I agree with the previous witness that it is important to recognise that crises and emergencies are experienced locally very frequently.

Therefore, locally, there is a great deal of knowledge and experience of what we might call normal risks. We see a wide variety of those across various different locations and contexts. There is a lot of opportunity for sharing the experiences and understanding the limits of the capabilities that we have in our well-practised structures and systems.

We deliver a range of learning and development opportunities that address national risks so that our learners have an understanding of the catastrophic risks that we face that are laid out in the national security risk assessment and the detailed methodology that underpins that. Then we see a very important role in us facilitating how those things are translated locally and how they are translated into sectors—for example, the environment sector with the Environment Agency, or transport with the rail organisations—that are responsible for critical national infrastructure.

It is important to understand that there are national risks that tend to be defined in terms of hazard and threat—flooding being a hazard, threat being malicious attack—but the consequences happen locally. I think that some of the language that we use could be improved so that we are really thinking about consequences and common consequences and the impacts and needs that those translate into for the people who are affected and for the organisations that have a duty under the Civil Contingencies Act to support the response and recovery of those who are affected.



Q2 **Baroness Northover:** I want to ask in particular about how you approach, as it were, forward thinking. One of the lessons from the pandemic was that indeed, we had pandemic in the risk register, but that did not result in a proper plan because we did not anticipate what form it was going to take, hence the challenges that we encountered. I wondered how you deal with that and how you deal with the limitations of working within a democratic system where people are looking at very short-term horizons with the pressures of needing to put money into this or that. The NAO, for example, is looking for value for money, but for what you are talking about there you need to be looking at forward thinking and therefore potentially investing in areas that may not be required but which must be addressed if risk is properly going to be identified. To start with Dr Parker, how do you build that into the training that you are doing?

Dr Eleanor Parker: We begin with the risks to ensure that throughout all our learning and development opportunities we develop that risk knowledge in those with resilience responsibilities. Again, I come back to the importance of the consequence tree, developing the skills and abilities in our professionals to be able to follow the consequence tree all the way through to needs. Those needs then become the focus of developing the capabilities that you need to be able to meet those needs. Thinking that way rather than, for example, focusing on pandemic flu enables you to follow the thread much further. Then, under the Civil Contingencies Act and through the way we do training together—we try to bring together all the partners who have a stake in that particular risk or that particular capability in the place where they work—that means that we can help them to identify the shared knowledge and understanding of the different capabilities that need to be brought to bear and follow that golden thread and the cascading tree of consequences and needs to better ensure that we have an understanding of the systemic effects that will spread through the system if one of those risks should occur.

I add that my background is in climate change adaptation, so I am no stranger to having to think about motivating organisations, teams, individuals and communities to consider win-win opportunities, to think about what can be done now that will be of benefit for me for everyday life and will strengthen resilience to small-scale, everyday crises and issues and problems but which will also have that win-win effect if and when the worst should happen.

Baroness Northover: Can I ask Sian Jones to comment? Here is the NAO looking for value for money and you mentioned that you are government driven, so the Government set the parameters. Is that the right balance when perhaps you ought to be telling the Government that they have to look at the longer term and not be so constrained by the immediate term?

Sian Jones: Absolutely, yes. You are asking the million-dollar question there. Our work has basically shown that government is generally much



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better at response than it is at preparedness, for many obvious reasons. That is an issue that all Governments wrestle with.

The NAO is particularly interested in the relationship between short-term thinking versus longer-term thinking. First, do departments have data to understand where they should prioritise their spend to mitigate against any risk occurring? This is the idea of “invest a pound now to save many millions later”. For instance, we reported earlier last year on property maintenance backlogs. That is £49 billion and counting, soon possibly to get to a point where it is an almost existential risk, because investment has not been made consistently throughout the years and now it is hitting a difficult point comparable to the legacy IT systems problems that we talk about.

Secondly, as you rightly point out, are incentives to plan longer term? The Treasury obviously has a spending cycle that goes through five-year periods, and we have long talked about what incentives there are for departments to plan for longer than that. What the Treasury has been trying to do with that is to give certain departments that need longer-term thinking longer-term plans—10-year plans for departments such as the DHSC and MoD, for instance—so that they can plan in the longer term.

We would say that weak resilience drives poor value for money, because you pay more later than you would today to fix things. Resilience also means productivity, because resilient systems are not just better prepared to stand up to shocks but recover more quickly afterwards. The Covid example you gave there is a great example of where the Government adapted their flu plan and so responded in a very agile and quick way in many respects. However, because certain characteristics of Covid did not match that of flu, they were playing catch-up in their understanding of risk and what that meant, which may have led them to making decisions that they might have reconsidered with a more specific plan.

Councillor Matt Boughton: Local government has the preparation of the prevention and response to all these key risks. We have emergency planning teams set up within all councils to ensure that we are as prepared as we possibly can be and, of course, the reason for that is we are category 1 responders under the Civil Contingencies Act. Local resilience forums, as I mentioned earlier, are critical. They are generally staffed by local authority staff, they cover the same area as the local police force, which helps with joint working, and they create community risk registers and develop a joint emergency response plan. Certainly, using my own example of the one in Kent, we have had issues related to Brexit no-deal planning going back a few years ago and to water outages in more recent times. That helps with the co-ordination of the response.

The resilience and emergency division at the MHCLG provides a steer to local resilience forums and prepares them for the key issues coming from national government that resilience forums should be thinking about, but



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we would have a question that is beyond the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Cabinet Office. How many other government departments are feeding into the public sector resilience system? We know that, depending on the nature of the risk, different government departments take the lead on that. It would be good from the perspective of local governments to see a structure within Whitehall that we could feed into and engage with the various government departments on when they are making key decisions that will ultimately affect local resilience, whether that is through the national risk register or those very localised issues that may come. For example, some communities are more vulnerable to flooding than others. We also need greater engagement with Defra when it comes to that particular example.

I also labour the point that the resilience of local government needs to increase. You mentioned democratic oversight and the challenges that you faced as a democratically elected representative in prioritising resilience over the day-to-day needs, and that is critical, particularly in a sector that has had significant funding cuts for quite a long time now. Yes, there is a responsibility that I know all local authorities have, but quite simply put, the greater the resource available to us, the more we can put towards longer-term resilience planning while not neglecting the day-to-day spend that residents expect their councils to prioritise.

Baroness Northover: Ms Akpan, you come from the World Bank and a wider global approach. Do you draw into the NAO some of the lessons from where things have gone well or badly in other countries? In the pandemic, east Asia did very much better because of SARS and so on and so forth, and the eastern European countries are doing better, it seems, in trying to counter cyber instability from Russia. When you are looking at risk, do you draw upon those wider examples of what has worked well and what has not?

Mfon Akpan: The short answer is yes, we do look at international comparisons as part of the execution or conduct of the value for money studies. When it came to, for example, the pandemic, it was very clear to us that the two countries that were, in a sense, poster children for standards across the globe for handling the pandemic also happened to have a very high incidence of death rates and so on. Taking learnings from certain countries that seemed to be able to get a better handle of it—you mentioned the south-east Asian example with MERS, for example, and the SARS outbreak—that is what informed one or two of our recommendations, where we said “reasonable worst-case scenario” does not give you a full or robust set of scenarios that we should consider for what could go wrong under very extreme circumstances.

One of the things we found from our body of work is that when it comes to risks that are well known—take flooding, for example; I think the UK Government do a very good job of it—when there is variability of



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potentially more novelty, which is what I addressed at the beginning of the session, you find that we tend to struggle.

At the NAO we do look at international comparisons. Recently, we did cyber resilience and of course also looked at comparisons with the likes of other countries such as the United States. We factor that in from time to time, and I think that going forward we intend to bake that even further into our work as a matter of practice.

The Chair: I think that we had better pause there because a number of the other questions we have will circle back to some of the things that you have touched on, and we have several more questions to get through.

Q3 **Baroness Winterton of Doncaster:** We will come on to the private sector a bit later, but I am particularly interested in what your instinct is about how well organised the public sector resilience system is. You talked about the integration of national and local levels, but Councillor Boughton said that he felt that not enough information and feedback went into departments when they are, for example, drawing up their 10-year plans. I think what you are saying is that that needs to happen, and the National Audit Office people might like to comment on that, in the sense that money will be wasted if the exchange of information and sharing of best practice between local and national planning is not good.

I have a particular interest in cyber attacks at democratic level and interference in democracies at local and national level. Is that on the national risk register and where it features in the planning that is going on at the moment?

I wonder whether Councillor Boughton might like to expand a little bit on how he thinks local and national planning could be better integrated, and whether he feels that there are particular recommendations that we ought to be making.

Councillor Matt Boughton: I very much agree with the premise of the question. Integrating local and national is critical for the reasons that I mentioned earlier, in that some risks can be catastrophic but highly localised at the same time. With local government and local authorities being a category 1 responder under the Civil Contingencies Act, our duty that is required by that means that we continue to invest there. The challenge that we face, particularly with category 2 responders where the risk has essentially come about because of failures in their supply, is getting the information out of category 2 responders and feeding it into the category 1 responders' plans—

Baroness Winterton of Doncaster: What is category 2?

Councillor Matt Boughton: That would be utility companies, for example. We need to be ensuring that there is a joint awareness of that information sharing with appropriate government oversight, too. That is why the whole system has to work together, and we see that local



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government has to be at the centre of that web, given that local resilience forums essentially are a part of local government. That is why it is so important to us that this works together, that everyone has a joint sense of ownership on it and that we can tap into our knowledge of the community to ensure that we can deliver the response that is needed when the community is in need. To do that relies on information coming to local government, and that is where we require clear direction from government, but we also require utility companies, for example, to be very clear about how they feed into that system.

If I can touch on cyber very briefly, that is a key risk that is identified in the resilience action plan, and at the Local Government Association we have developed a cyber support offer for a number of member councils because we recognise that the risk is the same, effectively, across the country. There is no geographical bias to it; it is just about how the systems are set up from one council to another. That is where the Local Government Association thinks it is important to provide leadership to local authorities so that when there is any evidence of interference that is likely to increase the risk in a particular local authority we can go in and provide that support.

The Chair: Does anybody else have anything to add very briefly to that?

Sian Jones: On the structural question, as the councillor just said, risks do not respect boundaries, and one of the Government's challenges is that the whole-system leadership can often be quite patchy. Cyber, for example, is one of the risks on the national risk register, along with many others. The Cabinet Office owns the overall risk register at the centre of government, and each risk is allocated what we call an LGD—a lead government department. For instance, Defra would take flooding and DHSC would take zoonotic and other pandemic risks.

While there is real benefit in having specific accountability for those individual risks, you often find that a challenge in joining up planning and preparedness between the Cabinet Office, the departments—and they often have arm's-length bodies. For instance, Defra delegates flooding to the Environment Agency and then, as the councillor has said, underneath the Environment Agency you have all the local and regional-level people who are actually responding to risks, and I guess things can slip through the cracks.

Baroness Winterton of Doncaster: Does misinformation come under the heading of cyber attack—misinformation in elections?

Mfon Akpan: Misinformation is what they call hybrid. It is called a hybrid event, so cyber and hybrid attacks.

At the core of cyber are our legacy systems, and that is a big challenge. If we are to crack cyber, we have to deal with legacy. There is really no way around it.



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Dr Eleanor Parker: There is a duty on category 2 organisations to co-ordinate with category 1 organisations—the primary response organisations—and to share information. That duty exists in legislation under the Civil Contingencies Act.

Q4 **Baroness Mobarik:** We have spoken a lot about risk and response and so on. I want to ask a very practical, basic question. Do we currently have a clear national strategy for strategic stockpiles and, if so, who in government is responsible for determining what the UK should hold in reserve? I am talking about which critical goods or supply chains you believe the UK is currently most exposed on. Is it energy components, pharmaceuticals, food or something else?

The Chair: A quick-fire answer from each of you for that one.

Sian Jones: It is a very good question that I do not have a specific answer to. I would say, though, that in the first part of your question you asked, “Who is responsible?” Again, it would be the Cabinet Office owning and managing that risk; for example, if you are talking about energy, you would go to the key department that was responsible for that risk, then it would be that department’s responsibility for working with regulators, utility companies and so on to understand what the situation was and manage those risk levels. I am afraid, though, that I do not have an answer for you as to which of those supply chains are most at risk.

Mfon Akpan: I would say that when it comes to supply chain, we have a significant exposure across the space. Right now we have a work-in-progress study on the food supply chain in the UK and then we will do a broader one following on from that. If you look at some of the think tanks and the thought leadership and publications in this space, such as the National Preparedness Commission’s *Industrial Resilience* on manufacturing, CO2 for example, the UK has significant vulnerability in that space.

The supply chain is broad and there are challenges, but from an NAO perspective and in terms of our body of work, I guess we would be able to comment more authoritatively once we are done with our food supply chain assurance piece.

The Chair: Will that study be done in time to submit to us as written evidence?

Mfon Akpan: We can check the dates.

Dr Eleanor Parker: The Cabinet Office has a national capabilities programme as a result of recommendation 10 from Grenfell currently undergoing pilot scrutiny panels for the risks and the associated capabilities. That is an ongoing programme of work that I have had the privilege of being involved with. There is also a team within the Cabinet Office that focuses on criticalities and which is currently reviewing and updating its approaches and training in order to be able to deliver across



government to identify criticalities in national infrastructure and these systems and approaches.

Councillor Matt Boughton: To answer the question directly, what are the most important things you need in life? They are food and water. If I can use water as an example, from the water outages that we had in west Kent recently, we had a huge issue with the supply of bottled water. Simply, the bottled water was travelling from a long way away. When it could get into the area, the water companies did not have the staff to operate bottled water stations. People were travelling for 40 minutes to get bottled water and when they got there it had all run out after two hours because there simply was not enough of it. There is an urgent need—I say this very much in my capacity as leader of Tonbridge and Malling Council—to massively increase the resilience around water supplies when water outages happen.

The Chair: Thank you. We will move on and all be a bit brisker.

Q5 **Baroness Hunter of Auchenreoch:** Ms Jones, you mentioned the interconnectedness—is there such a word as interconnectedness?—of risk and I was just thinking about that this morning, listening to the radio about what is happening in the Middle East: the knock-on effects. I want to pick up a point of Baroness Winterton’s about the private sector. We have mentioned the National Audit Office and the Cabinet Office, and you have just talked, Councillor Boughton, about the public sector and your local resilience forum. However, what are you doing about incorporating the private sector? Is the private sector building in resilience plans? Is it thinking about risk and how does it all work together? It is that connectedness that I am interested in: the bigger thing. To your point about the water, that was a private company bringing it in. Why did that not work? Why was there not enough? How does it all connect up?

The Chair: Perhaps Councillor Boughton would like to speak on that.

Baroness Hunter of Auchenreoch: I would like everyone to comment on that, if that is okay.

Councillor Matt Boughton: Essentially, the resilience action plan sets out how the Government look to support the private sector in these instances and strengthen its resilience. The Prepare website has guidance from the Government, but I do not think it is that well known about in the private sector. It is certainly not something that the key organisations in the private sector come to us with great knowledge of when these incidents happen.

Ultimately, it is important that that is delivered in a two-way dialogue between the private sector and the public sector at the same time. The reason for that is that you cannot solve the issues that come without the private sector’s involvement, and water companies are an example of that. There is a question for the Government about how they ensure that



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the private sector is able to understand the risks as well as the public sector does. I think that goes without saying.

If we were to use food as an example, are supermarkets thinking about what happens if there is a national power outage, for example? I do not know the answer to that question, but I think that it is really important that that is the question the Government are preparing to be answered. That is where the involvement of the key national stakeholder bodies, such as the CBI, for example, and the FSB, for small businesses, are really plugged into that to help get that awareness out to the private sector, just as much as the public sector does through our own resilience teams at local councils.

Baroness Hunter of Auchenreoch: Are you saying that there is a gap there?

Councillor Matt Boughton: Yes, I think that there is, and that comes down to the fact that from our point of view we have a duty and an obligation, we all have emergency planning teams, and we have dedicated staff available to do it. That will not be realistic for every single private sector organisation, but we need to ensure that they—certainly, key utility providers—know what to do in terms of resilience should there be an urgent need for them to help resolve a problem that is causing an catastrophic impact on local communities.

Sian Jones: The NAO's responsibility is to audit public sector funding. We often use the phrase "follow the money", which obviously ends up going through the public sector into the private sector. A couple of things intersect here to make the system not as joined up as it could be. We have talked a lot about whole-system risks. That means that risks go across government departments, regulators, private operators and delivery partners, and these delivery chains are often incredibly complex and stretch across sectors. The longer the arm, if you like, the more difficult it is to manage that interconnectedness and those things that are going on at the end of the chain.

There are couple of areas where we have specifically commented on how government should be working more closely with the private sector. Flooding is a good example. The Government have had a partnership funding scheme where they will be looking for private operators to match funding that the Government put in for local flood schemes. That took quite a while to get off the ground. The Government struggled to incentivise investments so those local structures could be reinforced.

We just did some work on water regulation. We showed that there was a real need for more frameworks and standards to attract that long-term private investment to unlock that. We saw that where they were lacking asset condition—we talked about that earlier—investor confidence suffers. In terms of extreme weather, we also commented on how the Government work with the private sector in that case, and again about a



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lack of incentives and assurance given in order to bring that money in to support the Government in delivering their goals.

It is therefore safe to say that while we do the majority of our work on the public sector, we are increasingly recognising that we are bringing in delivery chains and private sector partners, and that the Government are often playing catch-up in order to both get the funding in to incentivise them and join the dots. Mfon, is there anything you want to add?

Mfon Akpan: No, just to reinforce the point about interdependencies, it is quite critical and that is what our body of work tends to identify: the need to identify risk across the whole system, and vulnerabilities. When it comes to private sector/public sector interaction, I know that we have not done as much in that space, but the principle about that whole-system interconnectivity and communication and engagement with the private sector is one of the things that has come out from our body of work.

Councillor Matt Boughton: If I may just briefly add some very quick points on the back of that flooding example, things such as the demise of local enterprise partnerships make that much harder, because local enterprise partnerships were a brilliant way of getting funding from the private and public sector for things such as big flood relief schemes. I have one with the Leigh flood storage area, which even required an amendment to the River Medway (Flood Relief) Act 1976 through Parliament to access private sector funding. However, since the demise of local enterprise partnerships, that funding is simply not available, and it means that the relationship between the private and public sector in this space is much wider than it was five years ago.

Dr Eleanor Parker: I think that my colleagues have articulated quite clearly some of the issues at that systems level—at the top level. One of the things that I think is very close to our mission in the UK Resilience Academy is providing the opportunities, where organisations have a duty under the Civil Contingencies Act—that would include private sector organisations that provide essential and critical services—for them to come together to plan, train and exercise together. It goes back to not just the incentives for all those individual partners and stakeholders to come together but also to investment, resources, time and leadership culture. We do not doubt for a minute that we have a large job ahead of us to enable that culture and that leadership through learning and development opportunities, as well as through some of the more functional courses and learning opportunities that we deliver.

I add that there are functional standards for, for example, local resilience partnerships and forums on what should be in place and what makes good and leading practice. I was privileged to be part of national occupational standards for resilience and emergency. When you ask why it does not work, what good looks like is defined in various different places, but it is not necessarily mandated or expected that we will work in a way that maximises our opportunities to come together, to plan, train



and exercise to demonstrate that we can meet that good practice and the competencies.

The Chair: We have three more questions we would still like to get through.

Q6 **Lord Peach:** Hello, everybody. My question is about narrative, and I am aiming first at Dr Parker. How can we train and provide information and exercise—you already raised it—to the public about the risks we face, and are we having the right conversations about preparedness and resilience?

Dr Eleanor Parker: Thank you for that question. Our primary audience at the UK Resilience Academy are resilience and emergencies practitioners. We are primarily building their capabilities, knowledge, skills and behaviours to be able to go out and engage with other services within their organisation, the voluntary community and faith sector organisations that they work with locally, in order to be able to have those conversations with their communities.

There is an important distinction to be made and it seems like semantics, but there is a difference between when we use the word “public” and when we use the word “community” in terms of the approach that we take. A lot of public awareness is obviously a core responsibility for Cabinet Office through things such as the Prepare.gov website, and its insightful public survey that was undertaken and published in July 2025, which has informed a lot of what we do and which provided data on public perceptions of risk, resilience and preparedness. We have that public insight that is enabling us to inform what we deliver to practitioners.

I understand that you are talking to the Cabinet Office and COBR Directorate later in the series; this is also a question for them. However, I think that in narrative and the story that we tell we have been perhaps a little too focused on risks and what the hazards and threats might look like. The recent survey shows that we need to shift to conversations about the utility of the preparedness actions that people can take to prepare. The public have a good understanding of the risks that they face—they can visualise those—but they cannot necessarily visualise or prioritise the utility of the actions that they can take to prepare and then respond, and that is something we are embedding.

Mfon Akpan: From our own body of work, I would say that the Government’s approach to communicating and training the public on national risk combines training for specific professional groups with public information and real-time comms. The statutory models such as those Dr Parker mentioned—Prepare—use mandatory role-based training and local delivery to build capability among front-line professionals. We also have the resilience action plan, which Councillor Boughton mentioned, that sets out an ambition to enable the whole of society to take action for improving public risk information. That is just some broader context.



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Although this is not necessarily an area that we have done a whole lot of work on, we note that the Government should be engaging with the public in a national conversation on risk and resilience. I think that is a key point that we would just like to make: to treat society and the public as mature adults and not to be scared about the underlying risk. The reality with risk is that things will go wrong, and the more prepared we are, the better—which was the point I made earlier about communication as well, even with the private sector.

Lord Peach: Are there any particular lessons from your recent experience?

Councillor Matt Boughton: There have been lots of lessons. The critical thing is twofold. First, when you have had an incident—I will use our water instance as an example—you have a golden opportunity in the immediate aftermath to communicate how to prevent the same thing happening again because it is very fresh in people's minds. They have lived and witnessed the challenge of living without water, for example. To do that, you need to have the knowledge of where has been affected, and that is where local government has a critical role to play because we are the ones that can know the different risks within the community and can also help communicate the right message to the right organisations. For example, there is no point talking about flood risk if you live at the top of a mountain. You need to ensure that you are talking about flood risk from rivers if you are living in a flood zone, for example, and knowing exactly what to do. That means that some communities are much better prepared because they are much more alert to the risk than others. Again, it is knowing the communication that is necessary to the different communities that is important.

The Chair: This links very nicely and neatly into the next question from Baroness Helic.

Q7 **Baroness Helic:** Thank you for your contributions. This question is for Councillor Matt Boughton. You have already touched on challenges, preparedness and what you would like to see in terms of upward connection. I have a concrete question on how the preparedness and the resilience of local communities could be strengthened, particularly within the context of the local resilience forums.

Councillor Matt Boughton: There is a question about the accountability of local resilience forums. Ensuring that they are accountable to local leaders is important. Thought also needs to be given to the voluntary sector and the third sector in all this. We saw that very clearly at the start of the pandemic, when lots of people were very eager to come forward and volunteer in their communities, go out and get prescriptions for people who had to shield and all that, but there was no vetting or training and sometimes volunteers are not covered by an umbrella organisation. As local government, we are very much on the front line of those requests. How you can manage that as best as possible is incredibly important. That is a challenge for the public sector, too.



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There is also a separate piece of work around the Fire and Rescue Service, its preparedness and how it can help in this space, which I will not go into detail about today because of time constraints.

Local resilience forums have trailblazer programmes that they are rolling out, looking at increasing their preparedness for responses: for example, creating chief resilience officers and strengthening the accountability that I referred to earlier. That in turn makes them much more visible to local leaders in terms of communicating the crisis message communications when that happens.

Critically, all these things happen at a very localised level. They need to be joined up and fed into the conversation with all the different government departments that manage the different risks. That is something that we believe the Local Government Association is very well placed to do and we are very keen to be part of that conversation because we recognise, as I mentioned in a previous answer, that there is a particular challenge around ensuring that we have the right communication to the right communities depending on the nature of the risk that they face.

The Chair: Baroness Curran, did you have a supplementary?

Q8 **Baroness Curran:** I know we are pressed for time, so I will be as brief as I can.

Practically, are the devolved Governments active partners in all this planning, so we are not just talking to local government but to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well? That is a question for everyone.

I would challenge a bit using terms such as permacrisis. I think that the public are very concerned and that there is a growing concern among them about this field. We need to be much more active and engaged with people. We talk about the public sector and the private sector but we need to talk about the people, too, and give some sense of help and direction for people so that they are not overwhelmed by it. I think that there is a sense of that growing in the country at the moment.

Very briefly—I have lots of questions, but I will just ask one—do you have any examples of leading practice, where there is very good practice and where the people, or if you like, the public, as distinct from the public sector, are engaged and get a sense of support, direction and guidance about what they can do to build their own resilience for their own families, their own communities, but also for the country as a whole?

Councillor Matt Boughton: I am happy to kick off. You asked for an example. Flood wardens are a very good example of that. Particularly where they are trained by the Environment Agency, they have a very clear role and mandate for what they do. It fits in nicely with the Environment Agency's response and the wider response to it, and it is a very good way of getting the public involved. I think that we have come



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on in leaps and bounds on flood risk and resilience over recent years, and flood wardens are critical to that.

The Chair: If any of you have other examples to answer this question with, it would also be helpful to have them in writing afterwards to complement your oral evidence.

Baroness Curran: It would also mean international examples if other countries do this better.

The Chair: Right. It sounds as if you probably all have several examples of good or leading practice that you could let us know about, so if we could have a paper on that, that would be great. Lord Farmer has a quick supplementary.

Lord Farmer: It is a very quick one. If there is a disaster that cuts all communications and so on, is the local community prepared to be physically able to go to a place where they can be advised as to what they should do if all other communications are incapacitated? I have been thinking of family hubs or something like that.

Councillor Matt Boughton: Yes, and it is something that we did in our local authority in Tonbridge and Malling about a decade or so ago. We had very bad flooding on Christmas Day 2013—so a bit longer than a decade ago now. We set up rest centres in village halls, things like that, and they were staffed effectively by the local council. Essentially, an operation was put in place to provide food, water and blankets and keep people warm at the time because they simply could not get to their houses.

I am speaking from a Tonbridge and Malling perspective here. We have that available to us because we know that flood risk is a very real issue for some of our communities. We can stand that up as and when needed, and we use our local connections with the voluntary sector in particular but also with organisations such as parish councils and organised community groups to provide the manpower for some of the support that is needed around that.

Again, the work that we have done on emergency planning more generally has enabled us to be able to rely on organisations—for example, UK Power Networks providing generators for heat and warmth—and bring them in as and when needed. That does happen, but I emphasise very much that it is highly localised.

Mfon Akpan: I have one final point. Based on our body of work, we see variability at the local level, even though we do not audit the local level, but that is what we get from the central Government. The Government have told us that there is some variability across capabilities at the local level. However, for risks that are well known, such as flooding—Sian can speak to that—an area such as surface water flooding continues to be a challenge, so we see this variability.



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Sian Jones: What we would like to see, very much in line with what Councillor Boughton has noted, is the various central government departments supporting the resilience forum panels to develop so everyone is at the same level of capability, and then we can have more assurance at each level that things are working as intended.

Q9 **The Chair:** That links very neatly with my winding-up question for you all. As you know, it is our job at the end of this inquiry to identify recommendations to government. The last question to each of you, very briefly, is: if you just had one recommendation to make to the Government about preparedness and resilience, what would you say? Help us out here.

Councillor Matt Boughton: If I may, I have two.

The Chair: One.

Councillor Matt Boughton: Okay. It has to be all about national plans that have a local context and working with local government to develop them and, linked to that, looking at utility providers and being category 1 responders.

Mfon Akpan: The NAO has consistently made recommendations seeking to address key issues of national resilience. As you can tell, we have this body of work that we have done over five years, and one of the recommendations, which is also supported by the PAC, has been about the need for cross-government leadership and system-wide oversight, coupled with independent challenge of cross-cutting risks.

The PAC itself had called for the government equivalent of a Chief Risk Officer, or a government chief Risk Officer/Adviser. The NAO recommended that government should consider the merits of the role. The point we would like to stress here is that we are not looking for someone to take over accounting officers' roles. The chief risk officer is the second line of defence and looks across system-wide, coherently and cohesively.

Baroness Winterton of Doncaster: Would you have that in the Cabinet Office?

Mfon Akpan: I am not sure whether situational arrangements come under the Cabinet Office or not, but that is a possibility.

Baroness Northover: What do you make of the current arrangements that have been improved and upgraded within COBRA?

Mfon Akpan: COBRA deals with emergency response, and it has also integrated the former resilience directorate into it, but those are not all the risks that it covers. We also have cyber risk with DSIT and the National Situation Centre. You have a distributed model, again, when it comes to covering risk.



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Baroness Northover: Do you not think that the reorganisation has particularly improved things?

Mfon Akpan: It has done something, but when we are looking at cohesive understanding of risks across the system and, as one individual, being able to convene the right people to discuss these risks to also be at that table—one person with a team behind them, which is the function.— The Chief risk Officer role has been successfully done in other sectors. It is similar to your CMA, Chief Medical Adviser, Chief Scientific Adviser, so it is cohesive.

The Chair: We will have to give further thought to this. Thank you for that suggestion.

Sian Jones: I completely endorse what Mfon has said. I would add to that that we would like to see much richer data, so it is a data-led system looking at risk.

The Chair: Dr Parker, have the last word here.

Dr Eleanor Parker: Unsurprisingly, I will go for something about learning and development. I would love to see incentives and drivers that encourage category 1 and category 2 organisations to train and exercise together, which might mean more focus on those who enable that to happen, so strategic leaders within organisations that have a resilience responsibility.

The Chair: Thank you very much, all four of you. That has been a really helpful session.