

Conversations

Hazard management and national resilience roundtable summary:

On 24 November 2011, the Met Office hosted the second in a series of conversations under Chatham House Rule to get key influencers talking about shared issues. The roundtable on hazard management and national resilience is summarised here, under topic headlines phrased as questions. Each section ends with an outcome.





What action is needed to ensure 'Keeping the Country Running: Natural Hazards and Infrastructure' published by the Cabinet Office is implemented?

The event opened with recognition of the valuable contribution made by many around the table to the Cabinet Office guide.

Outcome: Implementing the guide required organisations to work together more closely to improve national resilience without introducing new regulation.



Are we ready for the next significant natural hazard emergency?

Some organisations felt they were out of the loop when it came to recent developments in hazard management – keeping lines of communication open was important. There were also calls for better availability of data and integrated advice. The Natural Hazard Partnership could be of help, as it brought together 13 environmental science organisations to coordinate advice from a central point. A Cold Weather Plan was in place to mitigate the possibility of another harsh winter in the UK.

In other sectors, more clarity was needed on whether the impacts of last year's 'big freeze', and other recent natural hazards in the UK, indicated that investment in infrastructure had been targeted in the wrong place – it could simply be that unusually severe weather had occurred in the wrong place. Others felt important natural hazards may have been excluded from current thinking, notably space weather; while, for some, early results from the UK Climate Change Risk Assessment compiled by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ran counter to their sectors' findings in Sector Resilience Plans – perhaps because the science had moved on.

Outcome: Attendees welcomed the opportunity to share / communicate initiatives around hazard management and national resilience more often in future, to ensure work is joined-up and messages are consistent.



How do we ensure that we make continued progress in assessing resilience and identifying risks?

It was suggested that organisations were kept on their toes by regular hazard events. Because localised events could quickly escalate into national crises, impacts that cut across all types of hazard were covered in the Cabinet Office guide – but may usefully be identified as 'black swans' too (see opposite). It was recognised that a mix of generic and specific planning is required. When it came to the likelihood of specific hazards occurring, judgements should be based on the probability of the extreme events taking place – such as the eruption history of Iceland – and the possible knock-on effects explored. This was where it was felt generic planning was most useful.

Following the flooding in Cornwall last November, government agencies were criticised for issuing warnings only to Category 1 and 2 responders. The Government's openness and transparency agenda meant that the public owns this information, while advances in technology meant people could be warned of hazards very quickly. But clarity was first needed on the frequency of warnings (to avoid 'crying wolf') and the consistency of messages (who has precedence?), and it was recognised that warnings were only useful to the public if they were acted upon (only about 1 in 20 people currently did).

Outcome: The Met Office would work with other key stakeholders on how best to influence behaviours and actions through communication and warnings.





Are there any barriers to effective planning and risk assessment? What are they?

In thinking about, and preparing for, worst-case scenarios, it may be helpful to consider 'black swan' events — those natural hazards that seem unbelievable at first for their infrequency, severity or locality but are, nevertheless, possible. If the knock-on effects are severe enough, even the more likely natural hazards can turn into 'black swan' events, so it would be useful to include these in current thinking too, supported by the latest science.

It was also critically important not to look at the UK in isolation but to consider the impacts of international events, such as fall-out from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear-power plant following the earthquake and tsunami in Japan last year. Of particular importance were the impacts of climate change, not only on UK weather but on UK interests such as the global supply chain. There was also an opportunity to show the UK as global leader in resilience by providing consultancy to other countries on replicating our model and/or supplying services globally.

Public engagement was another big issue, particularly around changing people's perception of the risk of natural hazards compared to, say, crime in the UK. But, at the same time, it was important not to scaremonger. Communication was best done at local level around specific risks, such as homes being flooded, to ensure the right public response to warnings. However, it was recognised that some resilience forums were more organised and active than others. Talking in terms of probability was a wider, shared communication challenge and work was needed to combine the efforts of different organisations in this area. Generally, it was felt that messages to the public should be framed around the opportunities for national growth and security and avoid putting an economic value on improving resilience, particularly while austerity measures were in place.

Outcome: The Met Office would work with stakeholders to set up forums to take the wider (global) resilience and communication issues forward.



Looking at the longer term, what opportunities and threats are there to critical national infrastructure?

When it came to climate change, the risks and vulnerabilities of the move to low carbon energy/technology needed to be explored more fully.

Outcome: Overall, it was felt that the greatest threat lay, not in the next natural hazard, but in getting joined-up policy in the right place at the right time.



