

Third National Conference on Societal Resilience 2025: Summary of key discussions, reflections, insights and personal perspective

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Introduction

The Third National Conference on Societal Resilience (NCSR 2025), held on March 10-11 at The University of Manchester, convened resilience practitioners, policymakers, and experts from across the UK and beyond to explore the question: What worked? What didn't? Why? The event provided a platform for cross-sector dialogue, fostering collaborations and insights into strengthening societal resilience in the face of evolving risks.

With a strong international presence, the conference encouraged a global exchange of ideas. Sessions tackled a range of critical issues, from community resilience and cyber threats to the role of misinformation and trust in crisis response.

The event was rich with practical insights, drawing from real-world experiences, cutting-edge research, and collaborative initiatives. Through keynote addresses, panel discussions, and interactive sessions, attendees explored new community, organisational, and national strategies for building resilience.

Key Themes & Discussions

1. Community Resilience: Learning from Local Partnerships

One of the strongest themes emerging from the event was the power of local resilience networks. A standout session on day one featured speakers from Hunts Forum and Cheshire Local Resilience Forum, who discussed the importance of localising terminology and approaches to suit specific community contexts.

- **Standardisation vs Local Adaptation:** The debate around standardising resilience strategies versus allowing for flexibility highlighted the need for context-specific approaches. While common frameworks aid interoperability, local nuances must be considered to ensure meaningful engagement.
- **The Role of Volunteer Networks:** The success of grassroots organisations such as the Brockham Emergency Response Team (BERT) showcased how trusted leadership, effective communication, and structured coordination are crucial for sustaining long-term community resilience efforts.
- **Embedding Resilience in Education & Training:** Schools, care homes, and faith communities were highlighted as key partners in fostering a culture of preparedness at the local level.

2. Cyber Threats & Future Risks: The 2040 Cyber Attack Exercise

A major feature of the conference was the two-part cyber-attack crisis simulation, which immersed participants in a future scenario (2040) where the UK experienced a nationwide blackout due to a cyber-attack on the energy grid.

Day 1 Focus: Examining the immediate impacts—disrupted communication, resource shortages, and rising crime.

Day 2 Focus: Exploring the role of misinformation, the challenges of public trust, and strategies to maintain resilience in the digital age.

Key Takeaways:

- **Preparedness gaps remain a major challenge**, with many organisations lacking structured response plans for prolonged cyber disruptions.
- **Cross-sector collaboration is critical in managing cascading failures** in infrastructure and public services.
- **Misinformation can amplify crises, necessitating proactive trust-building** measures and reliable communication channels.

3. Misinformation & Trust: Challenges in Crisis Communication

In a compelling session by Emma Barratt (RBOC Network+), attendees explored how **misinformation can disrupt crisis response**. Insights included:

- **Lessons from COVID-19:** The pandemic demonstrated how misinformation spreads rapidly, leading to distrust in official responses.
- **The Power of Local Trusted Voices:** Research reinforced that community leaders, educators, and local organisations play a crucial role in dispelling myths and maintaining public confidence.
- **A Call for Crisis Communication Training:** Participants highlighted the need for pre-crisis planning to counteract misinformation before it takes hold.
- **The Psychological Dimension of Trust:** Attendees examined how fear, uncertainty, and emotional responses influence the spread of misinformation and discussed ways to counteract these challenges through transparent and empathetic communication strategies.

4. Strengthening Partnerships: Public, Private & Voluntary Sectors

The importance of cross-sector collaboration was emphasised throughout the conference. Key examples included:

- East Sussex Fire & Rescue's partnership with GP surgeries illustrates how **integrating health and emergency services can improve crisis response** for vulnerable populations.
- The Greater London Authority's **engagement with businesses** underscored the need for better communication between corporate entities and resilience forums.
- **Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Practice:** Attendees called for stronger coordination between local and national resilience strategies to avoid duplication of efforts.

Harnessing Private Sector Innovation: Discussions explored how technology, AI, and digital tools can enhance crisis response while acknowledging cyber dependency risks.

Personal Reflections & Key Insights

The conference sparked deep reflections on how resilience is built and sustained. Key takeaways include:

The importance of Communicating at the Right Level: Discussions around community grab bags and parish-level preparedness questioned whether resilience messaging should be more grassroots-driven rather than dictated top-down by government agencies.

The Need for Inclusive Approaches: A recurring concern was that resilience efforts often overlook marginalised groups, including faith communities, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and people with disabilities.

The Role of Values-Based Leadership: Many speakers emphasised that resilience is not just about policies and frameworks—it requires a commitment to shared values, trust, and ethical leadership.

The Challenge of Sustained Engagement: It remains difficult to keep communities engaged in resilience efforts beyond major crises. Calls for continuous education, regular drills, and long-term investment in community-based initiatives were prominent.

The Evolution of Risk Landscapes: Future risks—including climate change, cyber warfare, and complex socio-political crises—demand a more flexible, forward-thinking approach to resilience planning.

Localisation & Standardisation: A Necessary Balance

The first session featured a thought-provoking discussion by Rose Charlton-Peel and Malcolm Harrington from Hunts Forum in Cambridgeshire. One key observation was the deviation from standardised terminology—terms like *'liaison points'* and *'hazard management cycle'* were used in place of a *'community hub'* and *'integrated emergency management cycle'*. This raised important questions about the necessity of a unified approach versus the value of local adaptation in risk management.

I have advocated for standardisation for years, believing that standardised terms, toolkits, and templates enhance interoperability, streamline processes, and support training and evaluation. However, this discussion challenged my assumptions. As Emma Thompson noted, prioritising flexibility and adaptability over rigid guidelines can sometimes be more effective.

Standardisation offers clarity, consistency, and efficiency but can lead to rigidity, oversimplification, and resistance to local needs. To determine when and where it is appropriate, we must assess local requirements, balance uniformity with adaptation, and engage stakeholders in decision-making. A structured approach to regularly reviewing terms and templates will help maintain relevance and effectiveness in an evolving risk landscape.

Engagement & Impact: Rethinking Communication Strategies

This discussion led me to reflect on the concept of community grab bags. Have we been targeting our communication and messaging at the wrong level? Instead of relying solely on state-driven advocacy for household preparedness, should we shift towards enabling parish-level resilience, allowing household-level approaches to emerge through trusted, local delivery mechanisms?

The Cheshire Local Resilience Forum showcased a practical and replicable model of working through schools, care homes, and local partnerships to build resilience from the ground up. This suggests a need to reconsider our framework: Are we engaging the right people in the right places, at the right level, using the most effective communication methods?

Engagement & Impact: Rethinking Communication Strategies

One of the most pressing reflections from the conference was the question: *Are we communicating at the right level?* Traditional resilience messaging has often been designed as a top-down initiative, with governments and agencies advocating for household preparedness. However, discussions suggested that this approach may not be the most effective or sustainable.

1. Shifting from State-Led to Locally Driven Resilience

Rather than the state simply promoting emergency preparedness at the household level, should we be enabling more localised delivery mechanisms? The Cheshire Local Resilience Forum provided an excellent example of this shift, demonstrating how schools, care homes, and trusted local networks can act as community anchors, embedding resilience through existing structures rather than imposing external frameworks.

This decentralised approach allows messaging to be adapted to cultural, social, and geographic contexts, making it more relevant and accessible. For instance, preparedness campaigns in urban areas may need different approaches than those in rural communities, where social networks and local leadership structures operate differently.

2. The Role of Trusted Messengers

Engagement is not just about what is communicated but *who* delivers the message. The conference highlighted the importance of trusted messengers—community leaders, faith groups, voluntary organisations, and even local businesses—who can translate resilience strategies into everyday actions.

For example, faith leaders often play a critical role in reaching marginalised communities, particularly in times of crisis. Similarly, SMEs may be more receptive to resilience strategies when guidance comes from industry peers rather than government agencies. Identifying and equipping these trusted messengers can significantly enhance engagement and impact.

3. Moving Beyond One-Off Campaigns to Continuous Engagement

A recurring challenge in resilience-building is the tendency for engagement to spike after major crises but diminish over time. Discussions called for more sustained investment in education, drills, and long-term community-based initiatives rather than relying on reactive, event-driven approaches.

Some key strategies include:

- **Embedding resilience education in schools** – making preparedness part of the curriculum ensures long-term cultural change.
- **Regular community exercises and drills** – this helps normalise preparedness behaviours and improve response capabilities.
- **Using digital platforms and gamification** – leveraging technology to engage younger generations in resilience planning.
- **Investing in local resilience hubs** – permanent community spaces that serve as ongoing points of engagement.

By shifting from sporadic campaigns to continuous, embedded resilience efforts, communities are more likely to remain engaged and proactive rather than reactive.

Generalisations: Understanding the Complexity of Engagement

The discussions also underscored the danger of broad generalisations in resilience planning. Too often, resilience strategies assume a homogenous society rather than recognising different groups' unique needs and challenges. To engage effectively, we must move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and focus on *who* we are engaging, *where* they are, and *how* they need support.

1. Recognising Diversity in Community Needs

Resilience strategies must acknowledge that different communities experience and respond to crises differently. For example:

- **Faith communities** may have distinct cultural or religious practices that affect how they prepare for and respond to emergencies. Engaging faith leaders can ensure preparedness plans align with these practices.
- **Intersectionality**: people with disabilities may require alternative communication strategies, accessible evacuation plans, and specific support structures. This extends to gender, ethnicity, sexuality
- **SMEs and franchise businesses** operate under different financial and operational constraints than large corporations, necessitating tailored business continuity planning.
- **Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE)** groups play a significant role in resilience-building but are often undervalued or expected to provide services without adequate funding or recognition.

2. Overcoming the “One Size Fits All” Mentality

One of the key challenges highlighted was the assumption that a single resilience framework can apply universally across all communities. Instead, a more effective approach is to develop adaptable, modular strategies that allow different groups to integrate resilience practices that align with their existing structures and priorities.

For instance, while large-scale disaster preparedness campaigns may work well for mass communication, they may not be as effective for specific groups, such as migrants or non-English-speaking communities. In these cases, tailored, community-led engagement methods—such as multilingual resources or culturally relevant workshops—are essential.

3. Recognising the Unseen Contributions of Community Actors

Another vital reflection was the lack of recognition for the time, skills, and resources community groups contribute to resilience efforts. Many voluntary organisations, faith groups, and local leaders play critical roles in crisis response but often operate without formal support or funding. There is an urgent need to move away from the expectation that these groups will provide services for free and instead create mechanisms that support their long-term involvement.

Key considerations include:

- Establishing **sustainable funding streams** for voluntary organisations engaged in resilience work.
- Providing **training and capacity-building** for local community leaders to strengthen grassroots preparedness.

- Recognising and **integrating community expertise** into official resilience frameworks rather than treating it as secondary or informal.

Addressing these gaps can create a more inclusive and effective resilience system—one that genuinely represents and supports the communities it serves.

Values-Based Leadership

Values-based leadership emerged as a central theme throughout the conference, reinforcing that resilience is not simply about structures and policies but people, relationships, and shared purpose. A few key aspects stood out in the discussions:

1. Trust as the Foundation of Resilience

Resilience efforts thrive when communities trust the institutions and individuals leading them. This trust is built through transparency, ethical decision-making, and consistent engagement. When leadership is seen as distant, bureaucratic, or driven by external agendas, communities are less likely to engage or take ownership of resilience initiatives.

2. Ethical Decision-Making in Crisis Management

Values-based leadership demands difficult decisions, particularly in crisis scenarios where resources are limited and competing priorities must be balanced. Ethical leadership ensures that responses are fair and inclusive and prioritises the most vulnerable. This aligns with the call for resilience strategies that do not marginalise groups such as people with disabilities, faith communities, and SMEs.

3. Leading Through Influence, Not Authority

Traditional hierarchical leadership models often struggle in resilience-building, where collaborative, cross-sector approaches are needed. Values-based leaders act as facilitators rather than enforcers, empowering local communities, voluntary organisations, and businesses to participate actively in preparedness and recovery efforts. The example of parish-level preparedness versus top-down household readiness campaigns illustrates this shift from authority-driven resilience to community-driven action.

4. Cultivating a Shared Sense of Responsibility

Resilience is not the responsibility of any single agency or organisation—it requires collective action. Values-based leadership fosters a culture where preparedness, response, and recovery are shared responsibilities across government, businesses, community groups, and individuals. Initiatives such as the Cheshire Local Resilience Forum and London Resilience Unit highlight the power of networks and partnerships in building sustainable resilience.

5. Long-Term Commitment vs. Short-Term Reactions

Crisis response often focuses on immediate recovery, but true resilience demands sustained investment. Values-based leaders prioritise long-term engagement, education, and resource allocation, ensuring that communities remain prepared even when the urgency of past crises fades. This ties into the broader challenge of maintaining engagement beyond major events.

By embedding these principles into resilience planning, we move beyond policy frameworks and toward a people-centred, adaptive, and ethically grounded model. This shift can help build stronger, more connected communities capable of withstanding and recovering from future challenges.

Learning & Iteration: Embracing Change in Resilience Planning

One of the conference's most critical insights was the need for **continuous learning and iteration** in resilience strategies. Traditional approaches often assume that once a framework or plan is established, it will remain effective indefinitely. However, the evolving nature of risks—climate change, cyber threats, socio-political instability—demands a mindset of constant reassessment and adaptation.

1. Resilience as an Ongoing Process, Not a Fixed Outcome

Resilience is not a static achievement but a dynamic, evolving process. The most effective preparedness strategies are those that:

- Are **reviewed and tested** regularly through drills, simulations, and real-world events.
- Incorporate **feedback loops** where lessons learned from past crises inform future planning.
- Encourage **experimentation** with new tools, technologies, and community-led approaches.

For example, many resilience plans were heavily revised following the COVID-19 pandemic, as **existing emergency response frameworks proved inadequate for a prolonged, multi-faceted crisis**. This underscores the **importance of building adaptability into resilience frameworks** rather than treating them as fixed systems.

2. The Role of After-Action Reviews & Reflexivity

A key takeaway was the importance of structured after-action reviews (AARs) to **capture lessons learned** from crisis responses. However, beyond formal AARs, there is also a need for reflexivity—a **willingness to challenge our assumptions** and be **open to alternative approaches**.

This was particularly evident in discussions around **standardisation vs. localisation**. Many participants, including myself, had long championed standardised terminology and toolkits. However, the conference discussions clarified that flexibility and local adaptation could sometimes be more effective, but the context will determine the suitability of which approach to use. The key ingredient is the ability to question and refine our practices, which is an essential component for long-term improvement.

3. Creating a Culture of Adaptive Learning

To embed learning into resilience efforts, we must move beyond static training programs and foster an adaptive learning culture. This includes:

- **Encouraging innovation**—testing and piloting new approaches, being safe to fail even if they challenge existing norms.
- **Sharing failures and successes**—learning from mistakes without fear of reputational risk.
- **Investing in knowledge transfer**—ensuring that insights from past crises are passed down to new generations of resilience practitioners.

By treating resilience as a **continuous learning process**, we can develop more **agile, responsive**, and effective strategies that **evolve alongside emerging risks**.

Collaboration Over Competition: Building Stronger Networks for Resilience

One of the most potent themes from the conference was the **need for collaboration over competition**. The most successful initiatives in resilience-building **prioritise shared goals, knowledge**

exchange, and multi-agency cooperation. However, structural barriers, funding pressures, and organisational silos often create **unnecessary competition that undermines collective efforts.**

1. Breaking Down Silos Between Organisations

Resilience is inherently cross-sectoral, involving government agencies, businesses, community groups, faith organisations, and voluntary actors. Yet, too often, these groups work in isolation or competition for funding and recognition.

The conference discussions highlighted:

- The lack of interoperability between different agencies leads to duplication of efforts or gaps in service delivery.
- The tendency for organisations to “guard” information rather than openly share resources, lessons, and best practices.
- The challenges of multi-agency coordination, particularly when different actors have conflicting priorities or bureaucratic constraints.

2. Shifting the Mindset from Scarcity to Abundance

A major driver of competition in resilience work is the **scarcity of funding and resources.** Many voluntary organisations and local groups compete for limited grants, contracts, or public sector partnerships, creating an environment where organisations see each other as rivals rather than allies.

However, a **collaborative approach** can actually increase access to resources by:

- Pooling expertise and capabilities, reducing duplication.
- Strengthening collective bargaining power when seeking funding.
- Building stronger, more **integrated resilience networks** that respond more effectively to crises.

One example discussed was multi-agency emergency response hubs, where different organisations co-locate their services to improve coordination and efficiency. These models show how collaboration can amplify impact rather than dilute influence.

3. The Role of Trust & Relationship-Building

Collaboration is not just about strategy—it’s about relationships. Successful multi-agency cooperation depends on **trust, mutual respect, and ongoing engagement** rather than just agreements on paper.

Some key enablers of trust-building include:

- **Regular cross-sector dialogues**—creating spaces where different actors can share insights without competing agendas.
- **Joint training and simulation exercises**—ensuring that organisations can work together effectively during real crises.
- **Transparent communication and data-sharing**—breaking down barriers between agencies to enable better decision-making.

By fostering a **culture of openness, cooperation, and mutual support**, resilience efforts can become more efficient, inclusive, and sustainable—ultimately benefiting the communities they serve.

Insights and Conclusions

The conference discussions highlighted the importance of **building resilience through contextualised engagement rather than top-down directives or generic approaches**. They emphasised the need for diverse representation and a long-term commitment to fostering resilience. Key elements for achieving this include local leadership, ongoing education, and acknowledging the efforts of voluntary groups.

Moreover, the conference underscored that **resilience cannot thrive in isolation; it demands continuous learning, adaptation, and collaboration among all stakeholders**. By prioritising iteration, dismantling barriers between sectors, and shifting the focus from competition to cooperation, we can cultivate a more agile, inclusive, and community-oriented approach to building resilience in the future.

Acknowledging the Contributions

The success of NCSR 2025 was made possible by the dedication of its organisers, speakers, and sponsors. Special thanks were given to:

- **Conference Co-Chairs:** Chris Scott, Becky Heginbotham-Blount, and Duncan Shaw, whose leadership ensured an engaging and impactful event.
- **Key Speakers & Panellists:** Including Emma Barratt (RBOC Network+), Michelle Cliff (Support Staffordshire), Michael Crooymans (Netherlands), and Fiona Gaffney (UK Resilience Directorate, Cabinet Office), among many others.
- **Sponsors & Partners:** Including RBOC Network+, Noggin, VCS Emergencies Partnership, SALIENT, and SPRITE+, who played a vital role in supporting the event.

The conference also paid tribute to the late Craig Scott, whose contributions to community resilience were widely recognised and celebrated throughout the event.

Final Thoughts: Looking Ahead

As the conference drew to a close, the key message was clear: Resilience is an ongoing process requiring continuous adaptation and collaboration. Among the final reflections:

- The resilience sector must **integrate digital and cyber preparedness** alongside traditional disaster planning.
- **Engagement with communities** must evolve, ensuring that resilience-building efforts are genuinely inclusive and representative.
- **Multi-agency collaboration** remains challenging, but initiatives like NCSR are vital in bridging the gaps between policy, practice, and lived experience.
- A shift **from reactive to proactive** resilience planning is essential, with greater emphasis on risk anticipation, long-term investment, and strategic foresight.

I do not doubt that the insights gained from NCSR 2025 will continue to shape resilience strategies and programs across the UK and beyond. The conversations sparked here will continue to inform future initiatives, training programs, and policy developments to strengthen our collective ability to withstand and recover from crises.