

Civil resilience and Operation Black Start¹

Purpose of report

For discussion.

Summary

Supporting councils to strengthen their emergency planning arrangements and local resilience is one of the draft work priorities for the Board for 2018-19. This paper sets out our planned activity in this area, and introduces a presentation by Lord Toby Harris on one of the risks which local resilience forums (including local authorities) are being encouraged to consider as part of their resilience planning: a 'black start' electricity blackout scenario.

Recommendation

The Board approve the civil resilience activities proposed in this paper.

Action

Officers to take forward as directed.

Contact officer:	Ellie Greenwood
Position:	Senior Policy Adviser
Phone no:	020 7664 3219
Email:	ellie.greenwood@local.gov.uk

¹ Both 'Operation Black Start' and 'Operation Black Sky' are used to refer to a national blackout scenario. This paper uses the term Operation Black Start.

Civil resilience and Operation Black Start

Background

1. The Safer and Stronger Communities Board portfolio includes within its scope the theme of civil resilience and emergency planning.
2. Following the series of emergencies which councils responded to in 2017 – including four terrorist attacks and the Grenfell fire tragedy – there is significant interest across both local and central government in strengthening local authorities' emergency preparedness and resilience.
3. Earlier this year, the team produced a short write up of a Chief Executive's session at the 2017 LGA annual conference which heard from chief executives involved in responding to the Westminster and Manchester Arena attacks. We also piloted a well-received councillor masterclass session on emergency planning and resilience.

Issues

4. Given the continuing interest among councils in learning the lessons of 2017 and the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat / Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) Resilience and Emergencies Division's interest in strengthening local capability on this issue, we have developed further plans for activity on this issue in 2018-19. The issue is also one of the areas of support identified in the LGA-MHCLG Memorandum of Understanding.
5. Our proposed activities include:
 - 5.1. Updating our councillor guide to civil resilience. Although this was only developed in 2016, it has a strong focus on flooding emergencies which although still valuable now seems slightly outdated in the context of the emergencies experienced in 2017. A draft of the document will be circulated to members in advance of the Board meeting, and we would welcome any general feedback.
 - 5.2. We are also working with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives to develop a case studies document to sit alongside the councillor guide which will look at the 'life cycle' of two different emergencies, and how councils responded to them.
 - 5.3. We expect to run a series of councillor (and potentially officer) training events on resilience issues, building on the pilot held in March. The first of these is scheduled for Leeds in November; a further event is being planned in London in early 2019. In

addition to that, we are looking to hold two or three regional events developed in collaboration with different local areas.

6. We are also working with the government to look at options for strengthening mutual aid arrangements between local areas, and local authorities in particular. In the first instance, this is likely to include the provision of tools including guidance and template mutual aid agreements. Government is also interested in the scope for providing more systemised national arrangements for mutual aid. We are exploring the potential mechanisms for achieving this within current funding arrangements, following a steer that there is no additional funding available to support this ambition. Clearly, part of our feedback to Government on this issue has been to highlight some of the challenges for councils in offering sustained periods of mutual aid given the significantly reduced capacity they have after years of austerity.
7. One other area we intend to explore is whether there are materials we could develop to assist councillors in building local community resilience. The emergencies of 2017 highlighted councils' crucial civic and community leadership role in the event of a major incident in their area; over the course of the year, we experienced both the positive impact of doing this well and the difficulties that can arise when there is gap in this space.
8. A core part of councillors' community leadership role, at the very local level, is in understanding their communities, their vulnerabilities, their assets and networks; information that can prove critical in an emergency response. We would be interested in members' views in how councillors already fulfil this role and whether there are tools that might help to strengthen community mapping and councils' ability to tap into local networks and capability.
9. We would welcome the Board's views on other forms of support that councillors would find useful in strengthening emergency planning and civil resilience.

Operation Black Start

10. Operation Black Start refers to scenario planning for a national blackout extending over a sustained period of time.
11. A total failure of the national electricity system is one of the highest rated risks in the National Risk Register (NRR) compiled by the Government, in terms of being a low probability but high impact risk. The NRR, which was updated in 2017, is intended to provide a steer for Local Resilience Forums (of which councils are part) to think about potential risks in their own areas.
12. A national blackout would be caused by a failure of the national electricity transmission system (as distinct to a failure in the electricity distribution system, which would lead to a

regional outage). This would be most likely to be caused by extreme weather, but terrorism, a cyber-attack and technical issues could also be possible causes.

13. The National Grid has a process called 'Black Start' to recover the electricity network from a total or partial shutdown; however, based on current plans, Black Start recovery could take up to five days with potential for additional disruption beyond that in the event of significant network damage.
14. Clearly, there are huge implications for local communities in the event of a prolonged Black Start scenario, with the consequences including:
 - 14.1. Disruption or loss of essential services, particularly transport, food, water and sewerage, fuel, gas, finance, communications (all types);
 - 14.2. Disruption to health care and emergency services;
 - 14.3. Disruption to businesses via lost working hours; and
 - 14.4. Potential public disorder and possible physical / psychological casualties.
15. The UK has never experienced a national blackout scenario, although other countries have. However, in 2015, around 50,000 households in Lancaster were without power for almost three days following flooding in the area.² In a summary of the experience, a local resident Professor Roger Kemp highlighted the following:
 - 15.1. Internet and broadband capability was lost; and mobile phones did not work after around twenty minutes of the blackout. Traditional fixed phone lines worked; wireless ones did not.
 - 15.2. Crucial services including care homes and health centres lost their connectivity; schools could not communicate with parents. Hospitals were able to remain open as back-up systems worked, but they were unable to contact staff or patients.
 - 15.3. Care homes were hard hit, with no TV to distract residents and cooking facilities not functioning; the delivery of care in community was particularly difficult.
 - 15.4. While some impacts on households could be predicted (such as loss of lighting and heating) others (such as the failure of cash machines and card payments) were not anticipated. Shops which operate on a 'just in time' basis found it hard to restock their shelves.

² The mains water supply remained reliable.

- 15.5. How individual households were affected was determined by housing and how people live. Houses with wood burners, gas hobs and camping equipment managed sufficiently; for those in flats it was much harder.
- 15.6. In an emergency, people naturally turn to the local authority but many services, particularly schools, are outside of council control.
16. The Lancaster experience was a locally contained blackout, but clearly illustrates the importance of council emergency planning teams and councillors considering key issues such as enabling communication when there is no electricity, the resilience of key services in the event of an emergency, and where there may be particular risks in their communities.
17. Lord Toby Harris, who has worked closely with the Board as Chair of National Trading Standards, has been working with the Electrical Infrastructure Security Council on work to strengthen the UK's critical infrastructure resilience.
18. Lord Harris will be attending the Board meeting to discuss work on Black Start, the implications for local authorities, and how councils can be thinking about the issue in their emergency planning work.
19. The Board may wish to consider the following questions in the context of Lord Harris's presentation:
- 19.1. How council councils and councillors fulfil their political, civic and community leadership roles in the event of a sustained blackout?
- 19.2. What planning is being undertaken with LRFs, and local authorities specifically, in relation to a blackout scenario?
- 19.3. How are councillors being engaged in this process?
- 19.4. What role could community resilience and mapping play in the response to a blackout scenario?
- 19.5. Would the Board find it useful to hear more about the Lancaster blackout from the perspective of the council / local councillors?

Implications for Wales

20. Welsh authorities are subject to the same requirements as English authorities under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004; however resilience and emergency planning is, broadly, a devolved issue. We will liaise with colleagues at the Welsh Local Government

Association to ensure they are aware of our work and able to adapt it and engage this as appropriate.

Financial Implications

21. The work identified in this paper will be undertaken out of existing budgets, including part of the sector led support grant provided by MHCLG.

Next steps

22. The Board are asked to provide any feedback on the revised councillor document and planned activities; insight into their own experience of resilience and emergency planning issues at their local councils, and suggestions for further support which the LGA could provide.