

BEYOND RECOVERY: REFRAMING UK RESILIENCE AROUND SURVIVABILITY, NOT SURVIVORS

by Ian Fox M.ISRM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This submission builds upon the recent Young Foundation publication *Community Not Catastrophe: Resilience Through Local Crisis Response* and the National Preparedness Commission's (NPC) foundational report on resilience 'Making it Happen.' Both deserve recognition for advancing a bold and necessary conversation about risk, coordination and the evolving role of communities. Rather than challenging these frameworks, our aim is to complement them with a practical, citizen-led layer that strengthens their intent, fills operational gaps and ensures no community is left behind when systems falter.

However, taken together, the reports point to a persistent and systemic flaw in the UK's national preparedness model: Policy continues to focus, whether by design or unintended outcome, on helping survivors recover from catastrophe, rather than equipping citizens to survive it.

While some may argue that survival is implicitly addressed within broader planning frameworks, we contend that this assumption leaves a dangerous gap in immediate, citizen-level survivability. By integrating a complementary survivability layer, rooted in civic empowerment, we can reinforce the integrity of the existing strategy.

Key message: Survivability must be embedded at citizen level to bridge the critical early gap. The integrity of the existing strategy, extending its reach into those fragile first hours when formal systems are disrupted and ordinary citizens are thrust into extraordinary roles.



THE MISSING LAYER:

DEFINING COMMUNITY-LED SURVIVABILITY

The NPC report focused heavily on foresight, coordination and systemic risk. It modelled failure of transport, power, digital infrastructure and geopolitical stability but largely presumed strategic command would survive and that formal coordination could be restored.

Similarly, 'Community Not Catastrophe' places significant emphasis on local structures, Local Resilience Forums, local authorities and voluntary partnerships, assuming they will remain intact or can be reactivated with support.

Importantly, the Young report does acknowledge challenges in communication and trust between councils, communities and specific demographics. While this demonstrates an awareness of fragility within current engagement models, it stops short of articulating a strategy for community-led survivability.

In many Tier1 risk scenarios, formal actors may be delayed, disrupted or incapacitated. Citizens will be left to make life-and-death decisions in real time, under stress, without institutional instruction. This is a vital insight and one we believe should be built upon more explicitly through the creation of pre-authorised, bottom-up survivability protocols.

While institutional planning frameworks do incorporate survivability, particularly through continuity of operations and multi-agency coordination, they are underpinned by an implicit assumption: that core command hierarchies will survive the shock, retain their communication pathways and be able to reassert control.

In reality, catastrophic events rarely respect organisational structure. Leadership nodes may be severed. Local actors may be missing, incapacitated or overwhelmed. Once public trust fractures and fear escalates, even orderly communities can descend into hoarding, panic or withdrawal, compounding the breakdown of law and order.

What can be anticipated with certainty is that civilians will survive in uneven, uncoordinated clusters. What cannot be guaranteed is their readiness, coherence or ability to self-regulate under extreme stress. That is the gap this doctrine seeks to address: by preparing citizens not only to survive, but to remain functional in the absence of authority.

It is within this context that wider national security planning must also be considered. The most recent Strategic Defence Review reflects a shift in government posture, acknowledging that future conflict may not remain geographically distant, but may instead play out on the streets of the UK. Whether through cyber-disruption, grey-zone activity, disinformation campaigns or direct hostile action, the evolving threat landscape includes a credible expectation that communities will be directly affected.

Key Message: National resilience is therefore no longer an abstract policy aspiration. It is an operational necessity. Without an embedded culture of moving from bystander to upstander, we are not enabling communities to protect themselves, we are asking them to wait.

COMMUNITY AS SYMBOL, NOT STRATEGY

It is important to acknowledge that recent developments, including strengthened Local Resilience Forums, the expansion of the National Voluntary Sector Resilience Partnership and improved local authority engagement, reflect real progress in community-level coordination. These efforts have brought valuable structure to previously ad hoc relationships between statutory and voluntary actors. However, these structures still function within a professional command hierarchy. They are delivery mechanisms, not survivability platforms.

Our proposal is not a criticism of these partnerships, but a recognition that they cannot substitute for embedded civic capability. What's missing is a public-facing doctrine that enables citizens themselves to act when institutional capacity is absent or disrupted. Without embedding the expectation that citizens must become upstanders in crisis, acting decisively and ethically before formal responders arrive, resilience efforts will falter in the critical early window.

Key Message: Communities are symbols. Rallying points. They are physical places / platforms / foundations; through which strategy can potentially be communicated / implemented / delivered.



THE COLLAPSING MIDDLE: WHERE PEOPLE DIE

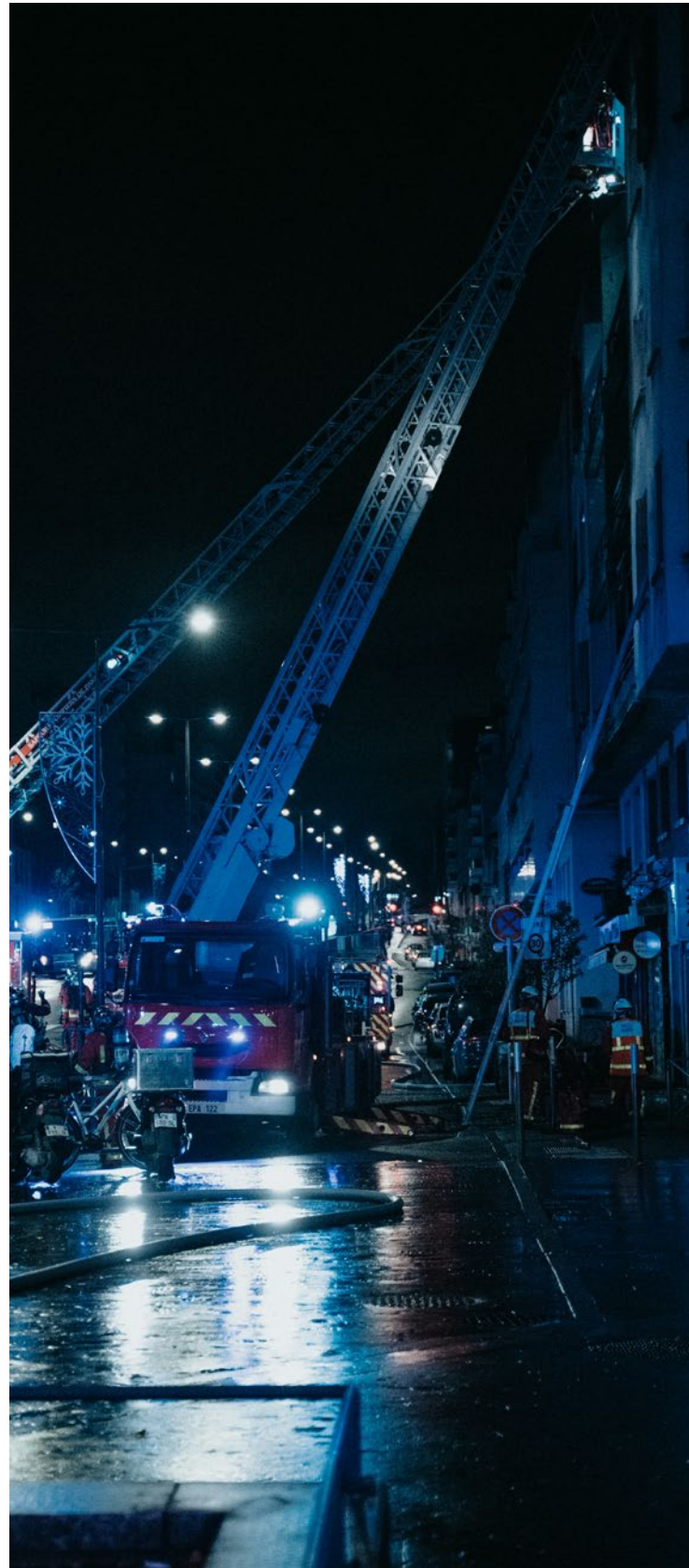
What both reports underplay is the space between system shock and system recovery, the collapsing middle:

- Where survivors must self-organise
- Where resources are scarce
- Where moral injury, improvisation and loss of life will occur.

This is the human terrain of disaster; the lived environment of suffering, improvisation and social interaction. Where survival hinges not on policy but on the instincts, ethics and preparedness of individuals and groups under pressure.

It cannot be met with strategic planning or community engagement models alone. It demands a civilian survivability strategy that empowers citizens to function as zero responders, not passive recipients of aid.

Key Message: Knowing how to deal with basic emergencies – should be as natural as breathing.



OUR PROPOSAL:

A COMPLEMENTARY LAYER, THE ZERO-RESPONDER DOCTRINE

We offer a practical, decentralised and ethically grounded framework designed to support and extend the ambitions already present in both documents. But we also recognise that proposals for decentralised civilian activation will provoke discomfort within professional and institutional circles.

That discomfort is not unfounded. Misinformation, improvised actions, legal uncertainty and interference with official responders are all credible risks. But at the heart of this discomfort lies a deeper, more persistent reflex: the assumption that control must be maintained and that the public, if activated independently, poses more risk than reward.

In everyday scenarios, this reflex serves a purpose. But in national-level emergencies, where networks fail, hierarchies collapse and formal actors are delayed or unreachable, that reflex becomes a liability. The system is already broken in those moments. Control is not maintained. The public will act.

The question is not whether citizens should be involved. The question is whether their actions will be coherent or chaotic, stabilising or destabilising. And that depends entirely on whether we have prepared them in advance or left them to improvise in the dark.

The Zero-Responder Doctrine does not advocate freelance intervention. It is not a do-it-yourself emergency service. It is a doctrine of stabilisation and survivability for precisely those moments when the official system is absent. It includes ethical boundaries, basic triage frameworks and role-limited training. Most importantly, it sets thresholds for activation, ensuring alignment with formal responders wherever possible, but not contingent on permission when delay would cost lives.

This is not about loss of control. It is about accepting that, in the most extreme circumstances, control has already been lost and resilience must come not from command, but from competence. The real risk is not public action. The real risk is public helplessness.

What we offer is a pathway between the two. It addresses precisely the gap both papers acknowledge but do not structurally fill: A strategy for survivability when systems fail and citizens are alone.

Critics may question whether such a decentralised model can scale safely. We believe that concern is valid, and solvable. This doctrine is not a call for uncontrolled civilian activation. On the contrary, it provides the only realistic pathway for coordinated coherence in the early hours of a system shock.

International models such as the Finnish sisu ethic, the United States' Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) and grassroots New Zealand preparedness schemes all demonstrate that scalable civic capability is both possible and effective, when properly supported.

The Zero-Responder Doctrine is not an alternative to formal systems, but a pre-bridged framework designed to function within the fog of collapse. It assumes temporary command latency, not permanent institutional failure.

We propose initial regional pilots with built-in feedback loops, cross-agency governance and legal safeguards. This is not about scaling chaos. It is about constraining it. In a moment of cascading failure, what causes most damage is not action, but vacuum.

Key Message: Untrained improvisation will happen either way. The only responsible choice is to shape that improvisation into something safer, sooner.



REINFORCING SHARED INTENTIONS

We stand alongside the authors of both reports in their commitment to smarter risk planning and stronger localism. But we also believe that:

- Community engagement is not the same as community preparedness.
- Systems must not assume their own survival.
- Resilience must be people-first, not policy-led.

Both documents seek to enable recovery. Our framework seeks to enable survival.

Key Message: Without mass survival, there is nothing left for leaders to recover.



ANTICIPATING MISINTERPRETATION AND MITIGATING RISK

We anticipate that certain elements of this doctrine may generate concern or be misunderstood. We welcome this scrutiny. Resilience demands rigour. But to be effective, that scrutiny must rest on what this proposal actually sets out to do.

LANGUAGE & TERMINOLOGY

Some may argue that the language of "zero responders," "the collapsing middle" or "the upstander ethic" leans too far into narrative and metaphor. But these are not rhetorical flourishes. They are operational principles distilled for memorability and uptake. They are rooted in behavioural science, emergency preparedness literature and hard-won lessons from prior failures.

Key Message: We remain open to further definition, refinement and professional alignment of these terms as implementation progresses.

SAFEGUARDING & LEGALITY

Others may raise legitimate questions around safeguarding, legality or the potential for misuse. We recognise the importance of boundaries, thresholds and ethical oversight. The Zero-Responder model is not an invitation to unqualified intervention, but a call for structured civic readiness. Where communities are prepared in advance, risk is reduced, not increased.

Key Message: We would support a cross-sector ethical review board to ensure doctrine development remains balanced, legally compliant and socially responsible.

We also recognise the risk of eroding trust in formal systems by focusing on their potential failure. However, our aim is precisely the opposite: to reinforce trust by offering the public a clear role when those systems are disrupted.

Key Message: A citizen empowered to act is a citizen less likely to panic, hoard or withdraw. Competence builds confidence, and with it, trust.

Legal and ethical concerns about unqualified civilian intervention are entirely valid, particularly in safeguarding-sensitive contexts. However, the Zero-Responder Doctrine is not a legal loophole. It is a call for proactive, formalised legal clarity. In fact, we argue that the current lack of legal scaffolding for civilian survivability may itself be negligent.

There is a growing body of evidence that fear of legal repercussions can deter individuals from intervening in life-saving situations. This concern is not unfounded. Although rare, there are documented cases in which citizens have been subject to legal action after attempting to help during emergencies. The reputational weight of these cases can discourage professionals and civilians alike from stepping forward.

Existing legislation such as the UK's Social Action, Responsibility and Heroism Act 2015 (SARAH) offers some protection for individuals acting in good faith during emergencies. SARAH affirms that courts must consider whether a person was acting for the benefit of society or in a responsible manner when determining liability. While this provides some legal reassurance, it remains underused, under-publicised and insufficiently embedded within wider preparedness training.

International comparisons offer valuable perspective. In the United States, Good Samaritan laws provide broad protection for bystanders rendering emergency assistance. Scandinavian countries, including Finland, often include a civic duty to assist as part of national culture and legal frameworks. The Israeli Home Front Command trains thousands of civilians in emergency preparedness each year with integrated legal protections.

Key Message: We are not calling for de-regulation. Rather, we propose a national legal review of survivability protocols to strengthen pre-authorised, threshold-based civic interventions. Survivability frameworks must be grounded in both ethical restraint and legal foresight. This is not about bypassing the law but making it fit for purpose in the context of modern resilience demands.

ADDRESSING UNEQUAL UPTAKE

A further concern, particularly from public service practitioners and third-sector organisations, is the potential for community resilience capacity to become a postcode lottery. Without equitable roll-out, more affluent or better-connected areas might benefit first, leaving underserved communities vulnerable to further disadvantage.

“THIS RISK IS REAL.
BUT IT IS ALSO
AVOIDABLE.”

A national survivability framework, embedded as a standardised training offer within existing civic infrastructure, can ensure consistent access. Schools, community centres and local employers can all serve as anchor points. By linking Zero-Responder readiness to existing platforms for public engagement, the doctrine becomes not a privilege, but a baseline.

To further prevent uneven uptake, we propose three safeguards:

1. National coordination and certification via a central resilience body
2. Ring-fenced funding for rollout in disadvantaged areas
3. Peer-to-peer mentoring models, where prepared communities support those at earlier stages of implementation.

This is not a hypothetical solution. It mirrors the approach of the NHS's Health Champions programme, community fire safety visits and volunteer police cadet & Combined Cadet Forces schemes. It builds on structures that already exist, delivering equity through design, not dependency.

Key Message: Resilience should not depend on where you live. This line represents a core principle of our approach and should serve as both a policy anchor and a public message: every citizen, regardless of geography, deserves equal access to survivability tools. It should be a shared national standard. The Zero-Responder Doctrine is the mechanism by which that standard can be delivered.

POLITICAL CONFIDENCE AND NARRATIVE RISK

A legitimate concern for any government is that by elevating community-led survivability, it may inadvertently signal a lack of confidence in the state's own emergency systems. In political terms, this could be seen as an admission that government structures might fail under stress, or worse, as a dereliction of central responsibility. Such perceptions carry political risk, particularly in an environment already marked by institutional distrust.

However, we believe this risk is best mitigated through reframing, not avoidance. Positioning survivability doctrine as a complement to state capacity, rather than a substitute, allows government to lead from a position of realism and strategic foresight. The ability to empower citizens to act responsibly and ethically in moments of system fracture does not imply a failure of leadership. It demonstrates maturity of leadership. It signals not abandonment, but preparation.

There is precedent for this reframing. National resilience campaigns in countries such as Finland and Singapore deliberately fuse state preparedness with civic education. In both cases, the government retains full authority while equipping the public with survival knowledge, mutual aid strategies and expectations of conduct in crisis. These nations report higher trust in institutions, not lower, because of their transparency and empowerment ethos.

In the UK context, this principle aligns with emerging security strategies acknowledging hybrid and grey-zone threats. It allows government to demonstrate that national defence is not confined to the military sphere or Westminster briefings, but is distributed across every town hall, community centre and kitchen table.

Key Message: By articulating that Zero-Responder capacity is a national asset rather than a vote of no confidence in the state, policymakers can pre-empt criticism and reshape the political narrative. This is not an act of political retreat. It is a public commitment to foresight, shared duty and the modern realities of risk.

CONCLUSION

A National Resilience Ethic.

True resilience begins not in the Cabinet Office, nor in the Local Resilience Forum, but in the community centre, the school hall and the kitchen table. It must be layered, lived and led from the ground up, not just engaged from the top down.

The NPC and Community Not Catastrophe provide strong scaffolding for long-term preparedness. But unless they are paired with a survivability doctrine rooted in public activation, the UK will remain underprepared for the first twelve hours of its next national emergency.



ABOUT

THE INSTITUTE OF STRATEGIC RISK MANAGEMENT

The Institute of Strategic Risk Management (ISRM) is a leading global centre for the promotion and sharing of best-practice strategic risk and crisis management capabilities and thought leadership amongst practitioners, academics and policy makers. Across the Institute's global chapter network, our Members and Fellows help progress and promote the underlying understanding and capabilities associated with strategic risk and crisis management, alongside developing their own personal and professional networks.

The ISRM provides best-practice training, hosts leading events across its global and local networks, and provides strategic advice to support organisations' management of complex risks.

 www.theisrm.org

 info@theisrm.org