

Chapter Five: The risk assessment process

National Risk Assessment

5.1 Since 2005, the Government has carried out a classified assessment of the risks facing the United Kingdom: this is the National Risk Assessment (NRA), and it is the basis for the public National Risk Register.

5.2 The NRA process uses historical and scientific data, and the professional judgements of experts to analyse the risks to the UK. There are three stages to this analysis: identification of risks; assessment of the likelihood of the risks occurring and their impact if they do; and comparison of the risks.

Local Risk Assessment

5.3 The National Risk Assessment considers the whole of the UK and that means that the risks it assesses do not apply equally to all parts of the country. Each region and community has its own risk profile, different to that of other regions and communities, just as the United Kingdom itself is subject to different risks of emergencies than other countries.

5.4 As explained in Chapter One, in addition to the National Risk Assessment, Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) in England and Wales are required²⁸ to carry out and publish local assessments of the risk of non-malicious emergencies occurring in their area: these are known as Community Risk Registers. There are also equivalent processes in the Devolved Administrations.

Identifying risks

5.5 The first stage in the National Risk Assessment process is to identify the risks. This is done by consulting a wide range of experts across government, so as to ensure a comprehensive picture of the

potential accidents, natural events (hazards) and malicious attacks (threats) that could cause significant harm and disruption to the UK.

Assessing risks

5.6 The next stage is to assess the likelihood and impact of each risk. To assess the likelihood of hazards, historical, statistical and scientific data are used. Where possible, the assessment looks forward to take account of known or probable developments over the next five years that would affect the likelihood.

5.7 The likelihood of terrorist or other malicious attacks is assessed more subjectively. The willingness of individuals or groups to carry out attacks is balanced against an objective assessment of their capacity – now and, as far as possible, over the next five years – and the vulnerability of their intended targets.

5.8 In each case, the question being asked is: how likely is it that this type of emergency will happen, somewhere in the country, sometime over the next five years. The NRA does not calculate the chances of these events happening in one particular place, or to one particular community or individual.

5.9 In terms of impact, the National Risk Assessment takes account of the following effects:

- **The number of fatalities** that are directly attributable to the emergency
- **Human illness or injury**, over a period following the onset of an emergency
- **Social disruption** – the disruption to people's daily lives. Ten different types of disruption are taken into account, from an inability to gain

²⁸ Under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004

access to healthcare or schools, to interruptions in supplies of essential services like electricity or water, to the need for evacuation of individuals from an area.

- **Economic damage** – the effect on the economy overall, rather than the cost of repairs.

5.10 In addition, the National Risk Assessment (but not – at present at least – Community Risk Registers) also attempts to estimate the psychological impact that emergencies may have. This includes the anxiety, loss of confidence or outrage that may be felt by communities throughout the country as a result of an emergency, or widespread changes to patterns of behaviour.

Comparison of the risks

5.11 In planning for emergencies, local responders have to decide what types of risk, and what levels of consequence, to plan for. Putting a lot of effort into preparing for risks that are either very unlikely to happen, or are likely to cause relatively minor damage, is unlikely to be the best use of the time available to prepare. Priority is instead given to high risks: risks that are both relatively likely and could have a serious impact.

5.12 Apart from identifying the highest risks, the Government also provides guidance at national level and to LRFs called planning assumptions, on the range and type of damage and disruption that might result from a selection of the higher risks. This ensures that planning is mostly non-specific and can be adapted to different scenarios when necessary.

5.13 Different types of planning assumptions are needed by different groups.

- For emergency responders, and regional and local Government, to help them plan for and carry out their duties in an emergency. Planning assumptions are issued to provide information, for example on the numbers of casualties that might need treating, or how many people might need to be evacuated or found shelter. These are on a restricted distribution because some of the information they contain is classified for national security reasons.
- For government departments and agencies who lead on improving the resilience of the country to particular types of emergency. They receive classified planning assumptions designed to provide the basis for assessing whether existing plans, infrastructure, equipment, supplies and training are adequate; and, if not, for introducing capability enhancements in the areas for which they have national responsibility.
- Chapters Three and Four of this document now provide similar information for organisations, individuals, families and communities on an unclassified basis.

5.14 At the national level the planning assumptions are used to set the parameters for the UK Resilience Capabilities Programme which co-ordinates planning and capability building for resilience across the UK (more information on this programme can be found on the UK Resilience website²⁹).

What the National Risk Assessment does not cover

5.15 The National Risk Assessment and hence the National Risk Register do not cover:

- longer term or broader global risks – like climate change or competition for energy – that might affect the safety and security of citizens of the United Kingdom in the period beyond the five years of the National Risk Assessment. These are the subject of separate programmes of work.
- risks of major emergencies occurring overseas unless they have impacts that directly and seriously damage human welfare or the environment in the United Kingdom, in accordance with the definition of emergency in the Civil Contingencies Act.³⁰
- everyday occurrences – like street crime – that can cause extended misery and damage over a long period of time, but are not emergencies that require central government to be directly involved in the response.

Risk assessment in other countries

5.16 An increasing number of countries are undertaking national risk assessments of various types but as yet few, if any, are as well established and wide in scope as the UK approach.

5.17 The World Economic Forum (WEF) report on “Global Risks 2008”³¹ describes the United Kingdom as one of the pioneers in coordinated risk management for emergencies, and recognized the National Risk Assessment as the keystone for national risk management. Publication of this National Risk Register will mean that the UK will meet most of the principles of country risk management established by the WEF’s Global Risk Network.³²

5.18 The UK will continue to work with other countries and organisations to share expertise and learn from others’ experiences in developing risk assessments.

³⁰ www.ukresilience.gov.uk/preparedness/ccact.aspx

³¹ www.weforum.org/pdf/globalrisk/report2008.pdf

³² The five principles are:

- i **Accountability:** the need for accountability of risk assessment as a condition of the legitimacy of assessment as a basis for concerted government action both within and across departments of government.
- ii **Integrated Assessment:** establishing common procedures across government departments to assess risks reduces the chances of exaggeration of the risks and understatement of the more positive aspects of risks.
- iii **Devolved Implementation:** integrated assessment of the risks should not imply centralised implementation of risk management and mitigation.
- iv **Separation of analysis and policy:** analysis is best kept within a separate structure from policy implementation, to prevent pressures from policy makers from impinging upon the independence of the analysis.
- v **Disclosure and transparency (if possible):** the Global Risk Network recognizes that Governments are caught between pressure to disclose risk assessments and the need to keep some assessments confidential so as to avoid panic, protect sources, and maintain resilience. But it considers that disclosure is to be preferred to avoid a situation in which incomplete or inaccurate information causes a popular reaction that may be worse than the risk itself.