

# A model for resilience built on tragedy

Resilience approaches continue to miss the bigger picture. **Stephen Arundell** and **David McClory** examine the case of London, UK

Over the past two decades, local authorities in London, UK, have employed fluctuating numbers of emergency planning officers (EPOs). Our research set out to test a widely held assumption among resilience professionals: that austerity and organisational change had eroded civil protection capacity at the local level. What we found was more complex and, arguably, more troubling.

Perhaps surprisingly, and despite sustained budgetary pressure, there are now more EPOs employed across London's local authorities than at any point since the *Civil Contingencies Act 2004*. Yet this headline figure conceals a deeper and less reassuring story. Capacity is unevenly distributed, provision remains inconsistent, and, most strikingly, the system appears to expand primarily in the aftermath of tragedy rather than through deliberate, strategic investment.

The authors of this article both returned to local authority emergency planning in 2022 after several years working separately across different sectors. We found ourselves working together on a remodelling and modernising project at an east London local authority. On re-engaging with fellow emergency planning officers across the capital, we were both struck by the noticeable reduction in cross-border engagement between practitioners that had been such a significant feature of our earlier professional experience.

During discussions with colleagues, a common theme emerged: the perception that there were now far fewer emergency planning officers than there had been previously and that

this reduction explained the decline in interaction. Mainly out of curiosity, we began reviewing shared contact directories of emergency planning teams to establish a count of emergency planning officers over time. That initial curiosity expanded into wider research, generating insights and revelations that, while long felt by emergency planning practitioners, had not previously been mapped or examined in detail.

From 2006 to 2024, the number of EPOs employed by London boroughs rose and fell in distinct waves. The 2006–2009 period saw growth following the *Civil Contingencies Act*, the July 7, 2005, London terrorist attacks, and new performance standards.

Between 2009 and 2017, EPO numbers declined by 33 per cent during the austerity years, with some boroughs reduced to a single resilience practitioner.

From 2017 to 2020, there was a sharp rebound following a series of major shocks, including the Grenfell Tower fire and multiple terror attacks in London during 2017, the Manchester Arena bombing, the introduction of new *Resilience Standards for London*, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

The years 2020–23 saw relative stability, with officer numbers holding between 94 and 96. In 2023–24, numbers surged to 110 officers, the highest level on record.

## The numbers speak

One of our key findings is that resilience growth is reactive, not preventative. Boroughs tend to invest in civil protection only after being jolted by crisis. This creates a perverse incentive model in which resilience capacity expands after tragedy strikes, but then declines in quieter years.

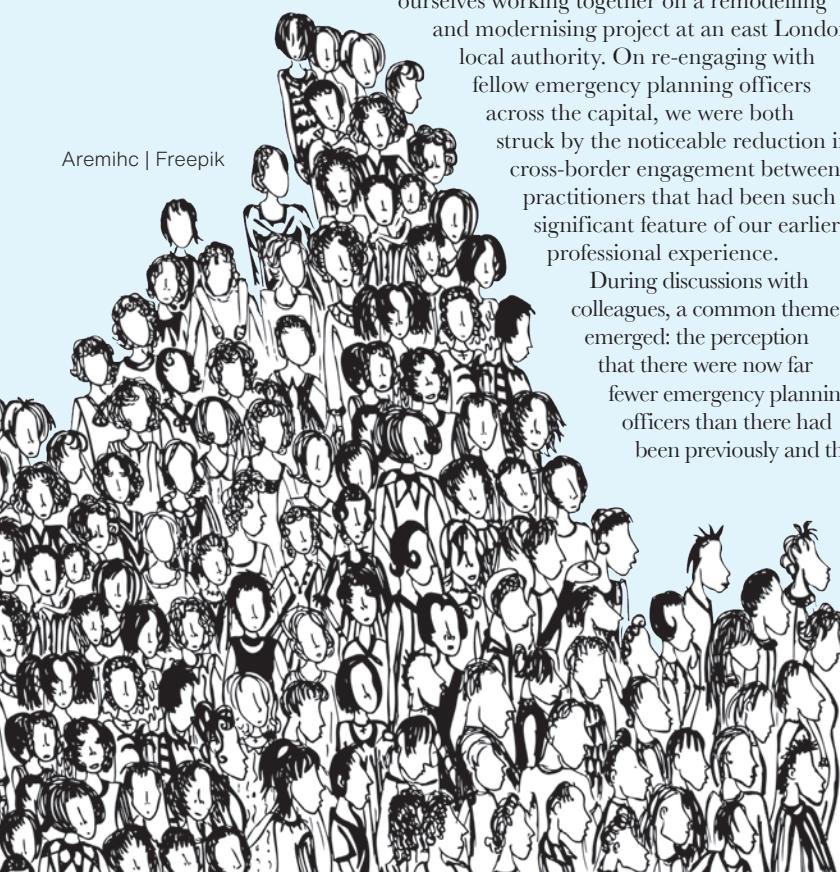
The pattern is unmistakable. Sharp and statistically significant increases in officer numbers almost always follow major London-centric major incidents in the previous year, from the July 7 attacks in 2005 to the events of 2017 and later the Covid-19 pandemic. By contrast, national and international shocks, such as the Paris Bataclan attack or Storm Eunice, show weaker links to local workforce growth.

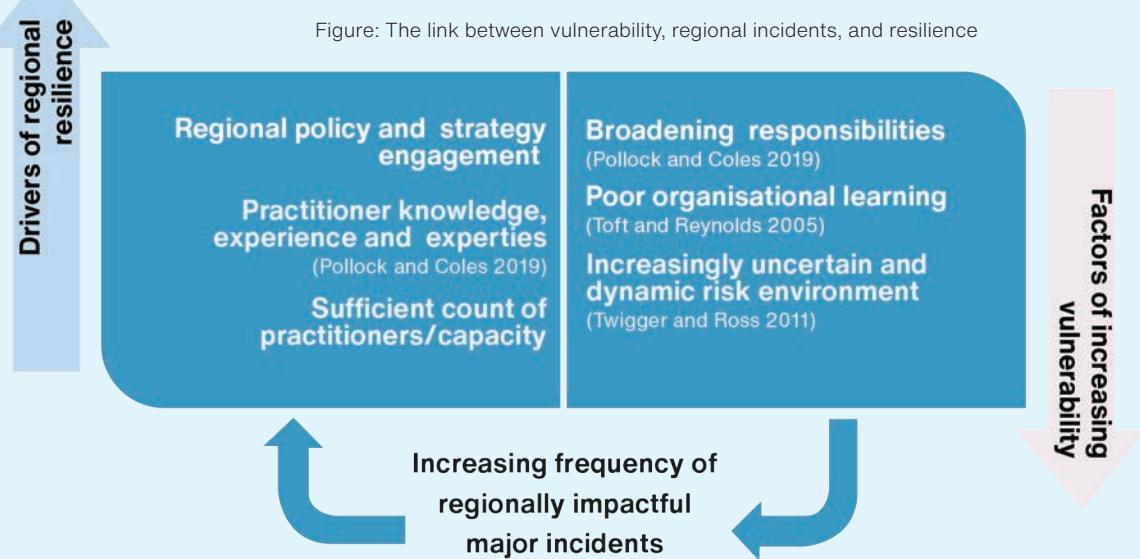
This helps explain why 2017 marked such a turning point. Not only did London experience multiple major incidents that year, but it also marked the lowest point for EPO employment, with just 81 officers across all boroughs. The following year, numbers rose sharply.

As the UK increasingly considers a defence-oriented posture, the limits of this approach are stark. In a civil defence or war-preparation scenario, reactive recruitment would be too little, too late.

Behind the numbers are the people who hold together London local authorities' resilience fabric. EPOs bring specialist knowledge across risk management, planning, communications, and consequence management. They act

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as organisational memory for rare but devastating events, ensuring lessons are not lost as staff rotate.

Yet their value is increasingly diluted. Over the past decade, job descriptions have expanded far beyond core emergency planning, absorbing responsibilities for business continuity, community engagement and resilience, health protection, event management, security, risk management, health and safety, tension monitoring, and even elements of public health. As organisations cut back and become increasingly lean, incidents that would previously have been managed through business as usual (BAU) activity or informal agreements are becoming more disruptive and increasingly require formal resilience intervention. With finite time and capacity, this widening remit stretches EPOs thin.

The result is a paradox in which, while headcounts rise, the capacity to focus on civil protection is eroded. In many cases, officers are forced to trade depth for breadth, covering a wider range of responsibilities but with less dedicated time to build preparedness for the next crisis.

The most significant rise in our dataset occurs between 2023 and 2024, when officer numbers increased from 96 to 110. Unlike previous spikes, there was no single major London incident to account for this change. The only notable policy development during this period was the release of the *UK Government Resilience Framework*, which is unlikely to have had a direct effect on local capacity, given its limited focus on local capabilities.

This raises intriguing questions. Could this be evidence of proactive strategic thinking beginning to break the reactive cycle? Or is it a response to less visible pressures, such as the volume of cyberattacks, the Grenfell and Covid-19 inquiries, or the war in Ukraine and growing international instability? We can only speculate at this stage, but this anomaly warrants closer examination.

Our research underscores several important lessons for resilience professionals:

- There are now more, not fewer, EPOs employed by London's local authorities than ever before. This raises important questions about why the system continues to feel under-resourced from a practitioner perspective;
- Resilience staffing increases in sharp bursts, most often following major incidents. This suggests that organisational memory is short and that decision-makers require visible catalysts before investing in civil protection capacity;

- Resilience professionals play a critical role as custodians of information and experience, helping organisations learn from events that occur infrequently but carry severe consequences. However, despite rising headcounts, their capacity to focus on resilience planning is increasingly eroded;
- Regional and London-centric incidents drive workforce change more strongly than national or international events. This likely reflects how local leaders frame risk, set budgets, and determine operational priorities; and
- Resilience development remains fundamentally reactive. The sector risks continuing to rely on tragedy as the trigger for investment, rather than adopting a sustained and preventative approach to capacity-building.

The title of our original study, *After the Horse Has Bolted*, captures this dilemma. London is not failing to employ resilience professionals; in fact, headcount is at record levels. However, the timing of those increases tells a more sobering story: investment tends to follow harm, rather than prevent it.

This reactive approach may just about hold for civil emergencies. In an era of heightened geopolitical risk, however, where war-fighting scenarios are openly discussed, such delays could prove catastrophic.

For resilience professionals, this research provides both reassurance and a warning: the reassurance is that crises do drive investment, while the warning is that unless there is a shift towards sustained, preventative investment in resilience, the next crisis may once again result in capacity being rebuilt only after damage has already occurred. **C·RJ**

## Sources

- McClory, David and Arundell, Stephen (2025): After the horse has bolted: A quantitative assessment of the count of civil protection officers in London local authorities between 2006 and 2024, In the *Journal of Business Continuity & Emergency Planning*, Volume 19, Issue 1, doi.org/10.69554/NVHV9374.

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