Research Space
Other
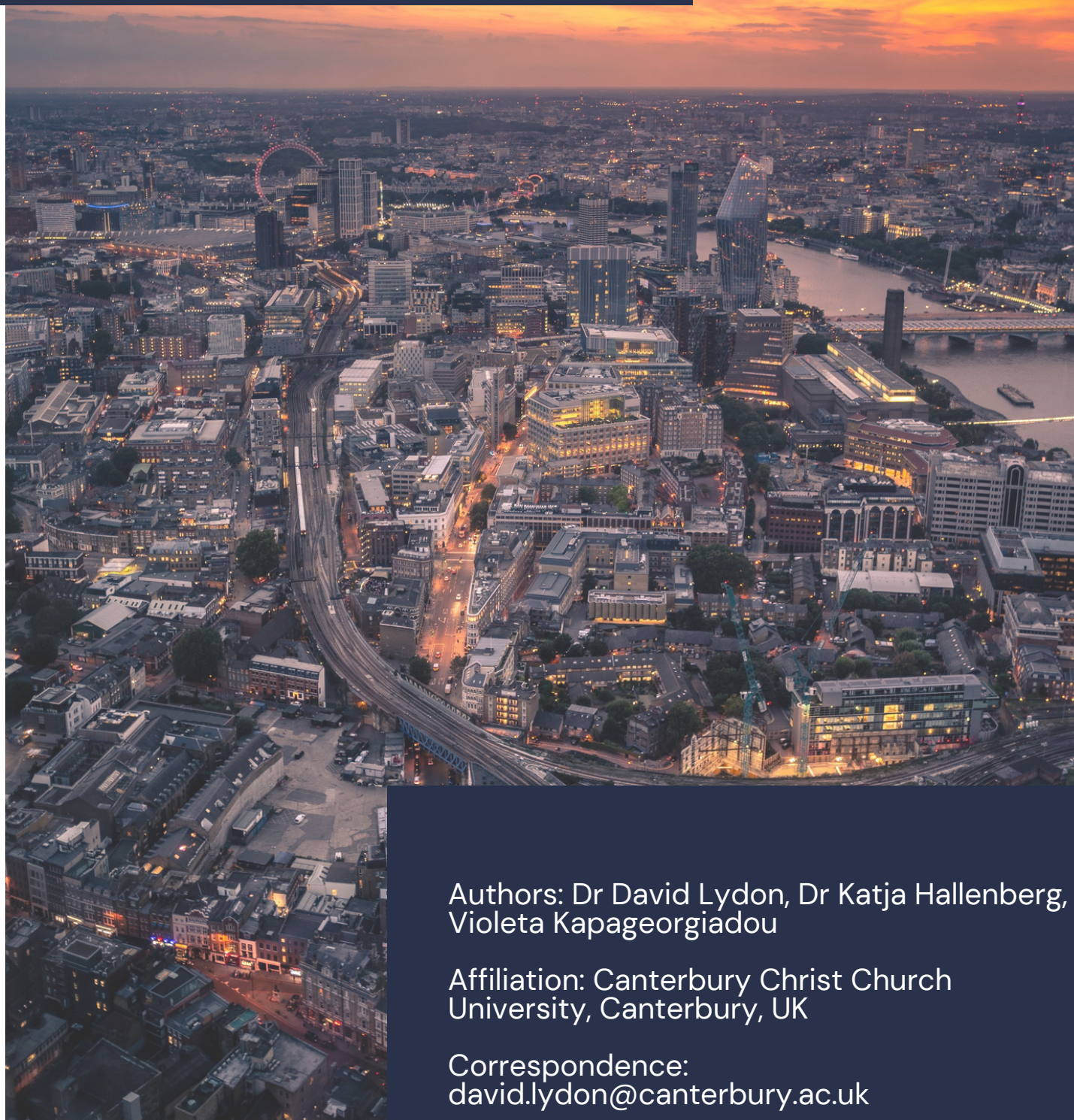
This is not a drill: police preparedness for climate emergency: summary report of a scoping study

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This is Not a Drill: Police Preparedness for Climate Emergency

Summary Report of a Scoping Study

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Introduction

On the 1st of May 2019, the UK parliament declared a 'climate emergency' in response to growing evidence of the dangers from climate change facing countries and communities across the globe. Potential consequences pose not only threats to life and human prosperity but can overwhelm the capacity and capability of public authorities and their partners to plan and respond accordingly. Policing and the criminal justice sector are not exempt.

The relationship between crime, harm and climate change is reciprocal (1). The causal and contributing factors of climate change include some individual, but largely corporate and state activity related to fossil fuel emissions and other actions damaging the environment. Whilst not necessarily illegal currently, the public pressure toward stricter regulation, including potential criminalisation, of such activities places them within the interest and influence of criminal justice. On the flipside, the criminogenic consequences of climate change include behavioural changes linked to air pollution and increased ambient temperature and those arising from the known stressors of resource scarcity and social disorganisation, all likely to be exacerbated by climate change.

Consideration for policing impacts has started to take place at a strategic level (2) and include, for example, international and national policy responses involving legal frameworks requiring rigorous enforcement such as carbon trading regulations, anti-corruption, fraud action, and new crimes of environmental harm and ecocide; security maintenance issues; increased emergency responses and disaster management and an increase in a range of protest activities from non-violent direct action to violent mass mobilisation due to resource competition.

At national level, some of these threats and risks are documented in the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA), made appropriate for public consumption by the National Risk Register (NRR) on a two-year cycle (3). The NSRA provides a detailed government assessment of the likelihood and potential impact of 'natural' hazards, major accidents and incidents, societal risks, and malicious attacks that may directly affect the UK and its interests. These impacts are more locally contained in Community Risk Registers, individual organisational strategic risk registers, resilience, and business continuity plans.

However, the NSRA is not without contention over, inter alia, the short-termism of the planning cycle and its narrow focus. Consequently, this raises concerns about the state of longer-term planning and preparedness for prolonged singular, multiple and cascading threats and consequences of climate change beyond flooding, drought, and extreme weather events.

This report summarises the results of a small-scale scoping study on the state of preparedness of the police, and public sector partners and agencies, for the consequences of the climate emergency and highlights recommendations and future research opportunities.

1) Hallenberg K.M. (2021) Crime, Harm, and Climate Change Nexus. In: Leal Filho W., Azul A.M., Brandli L., Lange Salvia A., Özuyar P.G., Wall T. (eds) Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. Encyclopedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71066-2_138-1

2) College of Policing (2020) Future Operating Environment 2040. Available at: Policing2040 | What Works Centre for Crime Reduction (college.police.uk). Accessed on 22/02/22.
UK Ministry of Defence (2018) Global Strategic Trends: The Future Starts Today. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/771309/Global_Strategic_Trends_-_The_Future_Starts_Today.pdf. Accessed on 22/02/22.

3) Cabinet Office (2020). National Risk Register (2020). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-risk-register-2020. (Accessed 02/08/2022)

Research Methodology

The research received appropriate ethical approval (ETH2122-0201).

The scoping study engaged thirteen participants drawn from a self-selected cohort representing strategic, tactical, and operational levels of risk assessment, planning, management, and delivery within:
- Police
- Local authorities
- Utility providers
- Specialist government contractors
- Environment Agency
- Ministry of Defence
- National Preparedness Commission.

Most participants were involved in Local Resilience Forums (4) (LRFs) in their areas, working in multi-agency partnership to plan and prepare for potential local emergencies and incidents as per the Community Risk Registers. Each participant took part in an online, semi-structured interview with a member of the research team, which was recorded, transcribed, and subjected to a thematic analysis.

Key Themes

A number of themes were identified from the data collected, evidence for which draws on the diverse range of participants' roles and expertise. They can be aggregated under four higher order headings of climate change impacts, why should the police care, prioritisation and preparation, and enabling and impeding factors. These are graphically represented in Appendix A and briefly discussed below. In addition, the interviews revealed some key recommendations, which are summarised at the end of the report.

Climate Change Impacts

Why Should The Police Care

Prioritisation and Preparation

Enabling and Impending Factors

4) Cabinet Office (2013). The role of Local Resilience Forums: A Reference Document. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62277/The_role_of_Local_Resilience_Forums-_A_reference_document_v2_July_2013.pdf (Accessed 04/08/2022)

Climate Change Impacts

The impacts of the climate emergency as identified by the participants cover environmental, health, security, and social and behavioural changes. The consequences of climate change were perceived as transcending those immediately felt in the UK, such as flooding/drought and extreme weather events – in time to come, these are likely to be *'violent expressions of consequences of consequences'* (Participant 4), originating from elsewhere in the world and the synergy of cascading threats triggering other events.

Other threats and their consequences included: public health crises; fuel, famine, and food security; increasingly vulnerable populations, and climate 'refugees' fleeing environmental and societal decay in search of safety and stability, all with impacts on *'community cohesion and community tensions'* (Participant 9).

Many of these feature in the NSRA and NRR – yet received limited holistic attention at local level planning. Notably, many climate change issues were seen as *'the nice-to-do and the should-do, but it's not in the have-to-do box [...] anything that's not statutory is pie in the sky, with the resources that we've got available, we focus on the bits that we absolutely have-to-do, that are legislated.'* (Participant 5). This is not synonymous with a lack of understanding of the issues or the desire to act, but simply a combined result of poor central leadership and direction from government beyond the requirements metered out by the NSRA and legislation, a lack of strategic vision and insufficient resources and funding as the fourth theme elaborates below.

From the police perspective, protest and public order feature significantly. However, the challenge arises where rather than being limited to specific interest groups or the 'usual suspects', it becomes more socially widespread, prolonged and supported by *'generally law-abiding citizens'* (Participant 9), a recognition that *'if communities are not happy because their environment is unpleasant, it's going to be the police go[ing] in and deal[ing] with the issues'* (Participant 7), and *'people are going to get desperate [...] because they feel that they aren't getting heard'* (Participant 2).

> "Flooding, severe weather, you know, heat wave. Those ones, they aren't named climate change, but they are a result of climate change" (Participant 13)

> "It's also more of an infra and a working environment issue. Because we all know that infrastructure, particularly for emergency services, is quite old. Old police stations, that sort of thing. So, you've got people working in unpleasant conditions." (Participant 7)

Why Should the Police Care?

The future operating environment (FOE) for policing is forecast to change dramatically over the next 20 years according to the UK College of Policing (5). There was minimal awareness and understanding of this national and global trend analysis, understandable in the non-police sector, but surprising within the police service. This may have consequences for all concerned, in the way that challenges are conceptualised, planned for and approached from a multi-agency perspective. There is a sense that the police service is ill-prepared in this area because *'policing is a 200-year-old model dragging itself through the 21st century […] and not fit for the future'* (Participant 8). The changes climate emergency brings impact everyone equally, the public as the police, the police as the public. The inadequacy of the current infrastructure, from buildings to transport, both generally and within the police in terms of operational capacity, was also highlighted by the participants. *'How are you coming to work to deal with something if you are food insecure? If you can't fuel your car or you are displaced because the environment that you called home, even in the UK, is now somewhere that you cannot be stable and live in?'* (Participant 12).

Among other roles and responsibilities, as Category 1 responders, (6) the police play a pivotal role in the planning for and response to civil emergencies, in partnership with other legally categorised organisations and agencies. Yet, such planning usually involves and is limited strategically to those listed by the NSRA.

Climate change and responses to it directly impact upon police legitimacy and accountability. For example, Participant 9 raised issues around future performance indicators of how 'green' the police were, and the impact such measures would have on the organisation's reputation and ability to attract staff. And yet climate emergency is not just about the practical considerations, but also about the ethical dilemmas it poses. When those who are the least responsible suffer the most harm and vice versa, both globally and at a local level, what does it mean to deliver justice, protect the vulnerable and serve communities? Whether the neutral position that practitioners *'shouldn't be arbiters of what's right and wrong'* and *'what the ethical test is, isn't for us [the police]'* (Participant 8) remains feasible should harmful impacts reach a critical level, remains to be seen.

5) College of Policing (2020). Future Operating Environment 2040. Available at: https://assets.college.police.uk/s3fs-public/2020-08/future-operating-environment-2040.pdf (Accessed 02/08/2022)

6) Local responders with established roles and responsibilities listed in Part 1 of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004

Prioritisation and Preparation

Beyond producing and issuing the NSRA and legislative requirements, more could be done to support and drive activity on the array of threats faced by local areas and the agencies and organisations involved. The main complaint highlights disingenuity, such as *'being the leading partner standing up globally and saying ''we must all do this'', like at COP 26* (7). *And yet, at home not doing it. So, where you've got other countries with really good Disaster Risk Reduction strategies at national level, increasing at their local level. Here we just haven't really got that.'* (Participant 3). Instead, the focus is on acute shocks rather than the chronic risks developing over time.

Significantly, the planning cycle was called into question and appears ineffective as a vehicle to address the compound effects of cascading threats. Principally, this is because it operates on a two-year cycle at a national level. While longer-term forecasts and planning do exist, and this is acknowledged; the reality is that most local areas and their partners operate between two to four-year planning cycles. Nowhere near the long-termism required to mitigate and respond to the consequences of climate change.

Beyond well publicised and known threats from flooding, drought, and extreme weather, others had yet to penetrate the planning process, for example, *'it's not on the strategic risk register and that's not to say it shouldn't be. For sure, climate change is something that is picked up in our horizon scanning work [...] the potential impact of climate change. So, we're definitely talking about it.'* (Participant 1). Moving into this space was considered as needing *'somebody to grip it'* and a recognition that *'people don't see it as a burning platform [...] and they should. They should definitely be responding and doing things right now.'* (Participant 1).

The areas of prioritisation and preparation, if they are to move beyond the short-term and the traditional planning processes highlighted here, require culture change and strategic vision.

Enabling and Impeding Factors

There is a perceived issue with government leadership on matters of risk assessment, direction, planning priorities, and resourcing for the consequences of climate change at a local level. Central government lacks thought leadership (8). It was recognised that there is merit in developing and accessing thought leadership in dealing with the climate emergency: *'[there's] a lack of thought leadership, that strategic level longer-term thinking, it's not there. It's not anywhere frankly. Certainly not there in government.'* (Participant 4). Being in a position to respond requires leadership and vision, and notably, it *'takes someone bold to stand and say this is the biggest factor for policing, it's not just about short-term crime trends or public confidence or things that we can do in a week of action.'* (Participant 12).

In achieving this, *'there is merit in bringing in wider partners'* such as *'academia, you bring in some global players, people with different viewpoints.'* (Participant 4). Thought leadership sessions were suggested *'with more people with different backgrounds and experiences around the table […] who's not a closely involved expert and can just see things from a different perspective, brings a whole different lens to the problem.'* (Participant 3). It was recognised that the net for such a resource might be cast broadly because there may be those *'in local authorities, who've got expertise to bring or local charities who've got expertise'* and the police should only be used here *'if they were in that thought leadership space.'* (Participant 4).

In addition, the collaboration of agencies and partners would provide better responses to climate change through the sharing of information. *'You inevitably start talking about other agencies, and I do think climate change spans multiple organisations and we need a joined-up approach.'* (Participant 1). The need for more detailed and supported national planning templates that will allow consistency in response and better collaboration between agencies was also suggested. *'A national or regional template that everyone can do the same, use the same risk assessment and look at what others are doing, that uniformity and approach.'* (Participant 13). In achieving this, it might be necessary to bring thought leadership to defined areas on a trial basis, for example: *'Pick one or two risks and pilot some work around those. Which is a good way of just testing out does the concept work? Do people buy into the ways of doing it, which are better or worse than others? And it's also easier for people to say, 'well I'll sign up for a pilot,' because it's smaller in scale and nature and it's not such an intensive commitment in terms of time or money'* (Participant 4).

8) Thought leadership is a term used to describe those who provide highly informed opinion and expertise in a given field, inspiring and innovating change and revolutionary thinking in problem solving. For more visit: https://thoughtleadershiplab.com

Similarly, the significance of multi-agency scenario exercises was mentioned as contributing to collaboration and relationships built between agencies. *'I try and do MAGIC (Multi-Agency Gold Incident Command) courses every so often to sort of test skills. I think to engage with people around the table, I think the relationships, particularly locally that training together brings.'* (Participant 6) However, the exercises were not identified as focusing on the management of climate change, but its symptoms, *'multi-agency exercises normally in the Local Resilience Forum will be environmentally based, so, a severe weather or prolonged period of severe weather incidents […] it's not necessarily exercises that are for managing the climate emergency. Then again, I think going back to symptoms versus cause, we access and prepare for what we see as the main symptoms. You know a landslip or a huge flood, a large fire, as opposed to that, conceptually saying that we exercise for impacts of climate emergency.'* (Participant 12). Multi-agency exercises require the government to *'take it a lot more seriously than they currently are.'* (Participant 5). Changes in exercising may occur only when the government identifies and treats climate change as a higher, chronic risk. *'If I'm being honest, until it becomes a defined risk at a higher, a very high level, no. Just because we only exercise the musts.'* (Participant 5).

Finally, resources significantly impact climate change responses due to limited budgets, staffing, and capacity, especially for future planning and training. The need to *'adequately resource and set direction'* was suggested *'for people to make sure risk is managed'* (Participant 2). The limited levels of resource lead to *'less time and less capacity when you start adding new things in like horizon scanning for 10, 15, 20 years' time, that starts to become a luxury, because, actually, what we need to be thinking about is what's happening this year, what's happening next year.'* (Participant 5).

"With the climate stuff, central government need to drive it because it will creep up upon the police and it will happen and we won't be ready for it." (Participant 10)

"What is missing is certainly the appetite to go deeper and go back into a process and say 'right, we can treat symptoms, but how about let's treat the root causes, and let's engage with what groups we would need, to make sure that our response […] is not going to be perceived as lacking or as making something worse." (Participant 12)

"Everywhere that's publicly funded at the moment is saying, 'Is it a statutory responsibility?' And if the answer is no, it goes on page 2, doesn't it? And sometimes never comes off page two of the To-Do list….Unless it is in the rulebook, unless it is a specific mandatory requirement, it wouldn't get addressed, and not get done." (Participant 6)

"I think my problem with climate change strategy at the moment is, it's very big picture at the moment, it's very difficult to translate that down to a more granular level as to how services contribute towards that. I'm not seeing at the moment a link or a correlation between the Council's climate change strategy and fire and rescues and police, and that and the NHS. All of those kinds of things. Again, it's all very individual. There's not a lot multi-agency." (Participant 5)

Recommendations

1

Planning Cycle

The timescales of planning cycles at local and national levels (currently 2–4 year) should be reviewed by the police and partner agencies, together with the type and scope of threats presently acknowledged. This is because the planning cycle tends to focus on the acute and mandated areas of concern (albeit for understandable reasons such as staffing, resources and funding). However, the type of planning and preparation required to deal with the chronicity of climate change calls for greater prescience. A detailed review (9) of requirements under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 has taken place, but a specific climate emergency focused review should be considered as a priority.

2

Central Leadership

Direction and clarity should be more explicit from central government, beyond the NSRA requirements and specific to the gamut of impacts of climate change beyond flooding/drought/heat incidents. This requires a level of leadership and committed engagement on a scale not provided currently. This will entail greater strategic vision and a commitment to resourcing and funding for the 'front-end' of planning and response. While there were clear examples of excellent and sustained collaboration and multi-agency working locally, more detailed planning guidance and uniformity at LRF level will be necessary.

9) Mann, B. et al (2022). An Independent Review of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and its Supporting Arrangements. National Preparedness Commission. Available at: Independent Review of the 2004 Civil Contingencies Act | National Preparedness Commission (Accessed 02/08/2022)

Recommendations

3

Future Operating Environment 2040 Report

The College of Policing should review the internal and external marketing and dissemination of its 'Future Operating Environment 2040' review report. While some awareness of its existence was present, knowledge of the detail is lacking. The National Police Chiefs' Council may have a role here in championing 'policing futures' beyond issues confined to protest, electrification of vehicle fleets and 'greener' estates. This will be required not only for policing moving forward, but also for partners where they are engaged in multi-agency planning and response.

4

Ethical Dilemmas of Policing Climate Change

Police leaders should consider and articulate the specific ethical dimensions of policing the climate emergency. There was a sense that policing of the consequences could remain ethically 'neutral' and be reduced to merely enforcing the law. While this may seem appropriate and appeal to such notions as the rule of law and policing by consent, once public concern and experiences reach a critical tipping point, the police may be obliged to wrestle the ethics of enforcement and police actions at a time when peoples' existence and way of life are under real threat. These scenarios need to be organisationally contemplated before they occur.

5

Thought Leadership

Thought leadership should be actively developed in all organisations involved. This will entail diversity in expertise and problem solving, thereby broadening the 'cognitive' space available to accommodate the scale of thinking and planning required to meet the challenges of the consequences of climate emergency.

Next Steps

The findings of the current scoping study demonstrate both the need for further research on the topic and how tapping into knowledge and experience of practitioners carries the potential to understand not just the problems but also the viable solutions. We are seeking to expand the project in the following ways:

2

Documentary Analysis

Documentary analysis of Community Risk Registers, relevant organisational strategic risk registers, resilience, and business continuity plans.

1

Sample

Increase of size and diversity of the sample, by expanding the current interview study to include more participants across the police and LRFs, with specific focus on strategic decision–makers

3

Impact

Creating impact by actively engaging with the relevant organisations and practitioners to influence conversations and policies

4

Collaboration

Seeking research collaborators from both academia and the public sector to enable the above

INTERESTED IN PARTICIPATING OR COLLABORATING IN FUTURE RESEARCH?

Please contact us:
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Appendix A

Climate Change Impacts

Environmental
- Floods/Droughts
- Heatwaves
- Extreme weather, storms

Food/water security

Health Impacts

Social/ Behavioural
- Increased vulnerability
- Refugees
- Protests
- Environmental crime

Why Should the Police Care?

Changing Operational Environment
- Infrastructure
- Staff capacity and capabilty

Civil Emergencies
- Scale
- Frequency

Legitimacy/ Accountability
- Reputation
- Recruitment
- Consent
- Ethics of neutrality

Prioritisation
- Urgency
- NRSA/NRR
- Taking the long view
- Beyond tick-box

Preparation
- Police unprepared
- Mitigation
- Changing demands
- Cultural change
- Vision

Enabling and Impeding Factors

- Central/ political
- Thought leadership
- Treating root causes not symptoms

(Lack of) Leadership

- Partnership working
- Consistency
- Siloing
- Scenario exercises

Collaboration

- Financial
- Staffing (capacity & capability)

Resources

- Review cycle
- Ownership

Systems, processes, planning