Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK), not generally exposed to serious natural disasters like major earthquakes and extreme weather events, but experiences flooding, landslides, terrorist incidents, major fires, accidents and flood risk which could increase fourfold by 2080 (Kapucu, 2009). The national ‘civil protection and emergency response’ strategy specifies who is responsible for: identifying and mitigating risks; responding to emergencies when they arise; and how responses are delivered. The Social Market Foundation suggests that disaster management will be one of the six key challenges for local government over the next 20 years, resulting mainly from climate change (Corfe and Keohane, 2017).

‘Social workers’ skills and experience are highly relevant for multidisciplinary disaster work. Of particular significance are their understanding of human behaviour, emphasis on ‘person-in-environment’, experience in community work and programme planning, and recognition of the value of advocacy and social justice’ (Cronin and Jones, 2015: 753). Senior local authority social work managers in the UK are invariably involved in developing local disaster strategies and social work practitioners have key roles in providing post-disaster support, advice, counselling and coordinating practical assistance. Social workers in less developed countries can be among the few professional people ‘on the ground’ with effective links to local communities; they have a key role in disaster response (Bragin, 2010). The personal experience of being caught up in an emergency or disaster has long-lasting impact on people; personal reflection can highlight issues of general significance.

This chapter provides a brief overview of the UK’s disaster response strategy and considers examples of responses to some recent disasters including a brief personal account of being caught up in a disaster. The Grenfell Tower fire happened while writing this chapter. Some of the challenges it poses to national and local government and questions to be answered by the public enquiry are identified. This is set within the context of the evolving understanding of the significance for social work of the ‘natural’ and built environment, and ‘green social work’ (Coates and Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012).
UK statutory framework for civil protection, emergencies and disaster responses

The UK has recognised the need for preparation for disasters and emergencies in order to mitigate the risks, prevent events from happening, respond quickly and appropriately to those which do occur, and ensure effective recovery. The nationwide framework for managing emergencies and disasters is the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (CCA) and related statutory guidance. There is a statutory duty to keep the Act under review (Cabinet Office, 2017b). A comparison of the disaster policies of six European nations, including the UK, is summarised by Christensen et al. (2014).

An emergency (or disruptive challenge) is defined as

a situation or series of events that threatens or causes serious damage to human welfare, the environment or security in the United Kingdom. This definition covers a wide range of scenarios including adverse weather, severe flooding, animal diseases, terrorist incidents and the impact of a disruption on essential services and critical infrastructure.

(Cabinet Office, 2013, para 1.1)

The guiding principles, developed to capture the core characteristics of effective emergency responses and which should be applied to the management of any emergency are preparedness, continuity, subsidiarity, direction, integration, communication, co-operation and anticipation (Cabinet Office, 2013, para 1.3).

The central government mechanism for handling major national and international emergencies is coordinated by the Civil Contingencies Committee, a Cabinet committee usually chaired by the home secretary or minister from the lead department, but sometimes by the prime minister. It deals with major crises such as terrorism or major natural disasters and is supported by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, which is part of the Cabinet Office. The Committee is generally referred to as COBRA, after the room in which it meets (Cabinet Office Briefing Room A). Relevant local officials attend. The UK Resilience website is a central source of public information on British civil defence and disaster preparedness (Cabinet Office, 2017a).

The arrangements place specific responsibilities on ‘category 1 responders’ – local authorities, fire and rescue services, police, health and environment agencies, with a local duty to involve all other relevant partners, such as transport and utility companies, businesses and community groups, in a ‘local resilience forum’ (England and Wales) (and equivalent provisions for Scotland).

The CCA sets out the local arrangements for civil protection, including:

• the definition of ‘Emergency’;
• the duties of the organisations covered by the CCA to assess risks, maintain plans in case of an emergency occurring, and maintain arrangements to advise and warn the public;
• requirements on organisations covered by the CCA to put in place business continuity management arrangements;
• ministerial powers to monitor and enforce the CCA’s provisions; and
• lists of the Category 1 (‘core’) and Category 2 (‘cooperating’) responders. The latter includes social workers.

The CCA Regulations describe the extent of the duties imposed on organisations under the CCA and how those duties are to be performed. The main provisions cover the following:

• the requirement to cooperate in a ‘local resilience forum’ (England and Wales) (and equivalent provisions for Scotland), including the ability to identify lead responsibilities among responders;
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- the duty of responders to assess risk and maintain a ‘community risk register’;
- the nature of response plans, including the requirement to have regard to the role of voluntary sector agencies and to include arrangements for exercising and training;
- the requirement to publish risk assessments and plans, and to have regard to the importance of not alarming the public unnecessarily;
- arrangements for discharging the duty to warn and inform the public;
- arrangements for the provision of advice and assistance to the public on business continuity (applies to local authorities);
- information sharing between responders, including the conditions in which information can be requested and shared;
- particular arrangements for London and Northern Ireland; and
- the requirement to conduct a review of the regulations.

The most recent systematic review of the arrangements by the Cabinet Office concluded:

There is no specific evidence, anecdotal or from the RCS [Resilience Capabilities Survey], to suggest that major legislative change is required. In practice – based on our regular conversations with interested parties, exercises and lessons learned from real incidents – the legislative framework appears fit for purpose.

(Cabinet Office, 2017b, para 19)

An independent review of the arrangements also claimed that the CCA arrangements ‘offer a more comprehensive approach to all-hazards management of disaster’ (Rogers, 2011: 91). Some elements of this conclusion may be called into question by the experience of the Grenfell Tower fire (see the ‘Grenfell Tower fire (2017)’ section later in this chapter) (Alexander, 2017).

Examples of responses to major incidents in the UK

Flooding

Widespread flooding in the winter of 2014–2015 affected many parts of the UK. The county of Somerset was badly hit, with some low-lying homes and villages under water for months (BBC News, 2014; Somerset County Council, 2014; BBC documentary, 2015). The disaster response required temporary accommodation for hundreds of households, intervention to limit flooding and action to prevent a repeat. Some argued that the flooding was made worse by failure to dredge sections of rivers and drainage ditches and environmental changes which resulted in greater water run-off. A government commissioned report argued that:

The increase in the risk of flooding as a result of extreme weather and climate change makes it essential for local authorities and communities to engage with this issue... The measures being developed include property-level protection, flood resilience groups, volunteer flood wardens and community champions, engagement with more vulnerable groups and efforts to increase financial resilience.

(Twigger-Ross et al., 2014: 1)

Media reports suggest that flooded communities recovered quite quickly (Norwood, 2015), thanks to insurance, community action and local government support.
Crowd disasters at sporting events

A top-level football match being played at Hillsborough in Sheffield in 1989 had to be abandoned when people standing in a fenced area were crushed by too many people trying to crowd into the space. The gates were not opened to enable people to escape the crush and 96 people died. The initial police account, headlined in *The Sun* newspaper, was that deaths were the result of drinking and hooligan behaviour.

The disaster response involved arrangements for receiving and identifying the dead, providing medical treatment for those with injuries, making arrangements for formal identification of bodies, providing immediate and longer-term support to families of the deceased, and reviewing the incident for lessons to be learnt and changes made. Some have since commented that the behaviour of the first responders was disrespectful and insensitive; for example, failing to express condolences and demanding to know whether the dead person had been drinking. They also suggested that initial approaches by social workers were not welcome. People assumed that they were being assessed for whether they were a risk to their own children. Some have argued that social worker visits to family homes were too soon or not done in the right way (Professional Social Work, 2016).

A ‘determined and dignified’ campaign by Hillsborough Family Support Group, supported by Members of Parliament (MPs) and others, refused to accept the ‘establishment’ narrative and eventually persuaded the government to set up an independent enquiry (Harrison, 1999; see also Scraton, 2004; Hillsborough Independent Panel, 2012: 1). The enquiry found that events had been misrepresented and was critical of the police and other officials. The Crown Prosecution Service subsequently announced formal trials of six officials. Steen (2016: 254) compares Hillsborough with other stadium tragedies.

Distant disasters

The 2004 Pacific Tsunami resulted in the death, injury or disruption of a significant number of tourists (Masters, 2005; Pittaway et al., 2007; Larson et al., 2015). A West Sussex Social Services Department team at Gatwick airport met returning tourists and provided support and assistance. Distant disasters can have local impacts which need to be anticipated.

Terrorism

A number of terrorist incidents, usually involving bombs, have occurred in the UK over the past 30 years. The chance of any individual being involved is very slight, but hundreds of people can be affected by any one incident and a speedy response is essential to contain the incident and provide support to those affected. Emergency services and hospitals have well-rehearsed procedures. The longer-term follow-up is more complex, especially when incidents involve people from scattered populations.

The Manchester lorry bomb (1996) was preceded by an Irish Republican Army (IRA) official warning. Attempts to defuse the bomb were unsuccessful and it created massive physical damage. Over 200 people were injured but there were no fatalities largely due to the fast response of emergency services and evacuation of thousands from the area (Scherrhout, 2016; Williams, 2016). The response was coordinated from the city council incident room. Social workers were involved. The bombing came to be seen as the springboard for the rebuilding and renaissance of the city (King, 2006). Manchester suffered an earlier bombing in 1992, when two
IRA bombs exploded, wounding 65 people and damaging many buildings (Foster and McK-ittrick, 1992).

On 22 May 2017, a suicide bomber detonated a homemade bomb at the Manchester Arena as crowds were leaving a concert by American singer Ariana Grande, killing 23 adults and children, including the bomber, and injuring 250 (Rawlinson and Ross, 2017). The tragedy happened during the General Election campaign, which was briefly suspended. Responding to survivors’ needs in the aftermath created challenges (e.g. getting them home, contacting families some distance away).

London also suffered several incidents during the IRA campaign and others recently linked to Middle East conflicts. The 7/7 bombings involved three explosions on underground trains and one bus explosion, killing 52 people and injuring nearly 800 (See ‘Reflections on a personal experience of a major incident’ below). The London Assembly report on the bombings and the aftermath is a comprehensive analysis of the management of disasters affecting millions of people in a major conurbation. It concluded:

What is clear is that all the relevant statutory organisations have their emergency plans in place, as indeed do many of the large non-statutory institutions. These plans have been tested, practised against and refined. However, the thread that links them all together is that in the event they proved service-specific, meeting the needs of the services, and lacked an outward focus that took into account the needs of their client groups.

(London Assembly, 2006)

The report investigated all aspects of the immediate response and support given to those affected. It found that there had been no plans for psychological support to large numbers of people following a terrorist attack and made several recommendations about how such services, including survivor self-help groups, should be organised (London Assembly, 2006: 109–115). A follow-up report commented positively on the response to most of the recommendations but raised concerns about support for survivors, an issue dramatically highlighted by the inadequate response to the Grenfell Tower fire (see the ‘Grenfell Tower fire (2017)’ section later in this chapter):

The responding organisations have acknowledged the need to establish survivor reception centres close to the scenes of major incidents, but further work may be required to ensure that this will be done in the event of a future major incident. This will enable survivors’ details to be collected, which will help to ensure that they receive the immediate and ongoing support they need.

(London Assembly, 2007: 7)

A more recent form of terrorism has used motor vehicles and/or knives to attack large, gathered populations. The 2017 Westminster Bridge (BBC News, 2017a) and London Bridge (BBC News, 2017b) attacks in London involved a car and van respectively, driven purposely at pedestrians at speed, followed by random knife attacks. In France, the attack in Nice involved a heavy lorry driven at crowds of people. In all cases, hundreds of people were affected – deaths, major injuries and large-scale psychological impacts.

The response to major incidents in other cities, such as the Boston Marathon (Gates et al., 2014), where the effective, pre-rehearsed emergency response minimised loss of life (Biddinger et al., 2013), and the Bataclan in Paris (Catto, 2016), highlight the need for preparation, co-ordination
and a focus on survivor needs. Jerusalem is well used to serious incidents. Yanay and Benjamin (2005: 263) report that:

> during city emergencies, Jerusalem municipality social workers are assigned to the disaster site, and with them hospitals, police services, the forensic institute and notification units form the Jerusalem Emergency Team (JET). Using formal and informal ties, social workers establish a professional, closely-knit helping network . . . [and they] should be trained to deal with relief work and its traumatic outcomes.

Disaster response always generates ethical and emotional responses and dilemmas (Sweifach et al., 2010). This includes who should receive assistance when numbers are overwhelming and to what extent should the political context influence who receives help.

**Grenfell Tower fire (2017)**

This is probably the worst fire disaster in Europe in the past 20 years. A small refrigerator fire on the fourth floor of a 24-storey block of flats spread to the external structure of the building and within minutes the flames had shot up the exterior insulation and cladding, engulfing the whole building. The standard advice to people caught in a tower block fire is to retreat to their flats, close all doors and windows and wait for rescue, on the assumption that modern building regulations inhibit the spread of fire and give time for evacuation. However, the Grenfell external cladding was not fire-proof and facilitated the very rapid spread of the blaze. Within minutes it was impossible for emergency services to reach areas of the building. At least 80 people died and hundreds were made homeless.

In contrast to some of the other disasters discussed, the perception of those affected was that local authority co-ordination of the response was inadequate or virtually non-existent. Long (2017) suggests that this perception is not supported by the facts. Whatever the reality, and this will be explored by a public enquiry, the widely accepted narrative is that there was no effective leadership of the humanitarian effort to support residents; the slowness in providing alternative accommodation; and an apparent lack of support and information for those affected. Yet, the official account was ‘that every family has a family liaison officer or social worker if they want one’ (Long, 2017). The leader of the council was forced to resign in the days following the disaster and new managers appointed.

The prime minister set up a public enquiry to consider not only the building structure and regulations but also the effectiveness of the disaster response (Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2017). There was great bravery by teams of firefighters but should the fire service have had better equipment, especially to fight fires in tower blocks from the outside? Why was there an apparent lack of co-ordination on the ground? Why was it apparently necessary for local religious groups to mediate between angry residents and the perceived distant and unresponsive authorities (Sherwood, 2017)? Why did the disaster plan prove ineffective, including the apparent breakdown in co-ordination between the council and voluntary organisations such as Red Cross? Was there sufficient planning for alternative emergency accommodation and for liaison with survivors as recommended in the 7/7 report? Did the government’s austerity policy, substantial reductions in local authority funding, poorly enforced building regulations and changes in social housing policy contribute to the disaster?

Recent disasters have also prompted reconsideration of the best strategy for post-disaster messaging (Easthope, 2017). Leaders are advised to stress resilience and determination to ‘carry on’. However, experience of media activity following individual child abuse tragedies has taught
me that acknowledging the legitimacy of strong emotions and pain has to come before, or at least at the same time, as a commitment to ‘carrying on’.

Reflections on a personal experience of a major incident

I was commuting to London by train as usual on 7 July 2005. It seemed a very ordinary day, but arriving at the London terminus, I found the Underground closed and people pouring up the escalators out of the tube station. I went to catch a bus and found large crowds outside and the main road being closed by police. I caught a bus, along with many others, and went onto the upper deck. Something major was obviously happening so I phoned my daughter who worked for BBC News to ask if there was a major incident. She found no reports, but as the bus left Russell Square, there was a loud bang behind us. I looked round to see the roof of the bus behind flying through the air. People on my bus screamed and rushed forward. I feared people would be pushed down the stairs so shouted ‘don’t panic’. The bus stopped suddenly and everybody got out. I then heard my daughter on the phone – it had been live throughout – shouting, ‘Dad, what’s happened?’ I said that there had been a bomb. She said she would phone me back from a studio, which is how I came to do the first BBC News interview about the Russell Square bus bomb (BBC News, 2005). Others were more closely involved and suffered serious injury and psychological damage (e.g. Tulloch, 2008).

People in the UK have become accustomed to the reality of terrorist incidents over several decades (see ‘Terrorism’ above). During my younger years, the main threat was from the IRA. They gave coded warnings of bombs, although that did not always enable areas to be cleared, and many people were murdered by these bombs. The more recent threat has come from attacks linked to Middle East conflicts, where there usually is an intention to kill. However, while unpredictable and scary, the risk of death from a terrorist incident is infinitesimally small; there are far greater risks from accidents in the home or on the roads (Drury and Cocking, 2007; Allouche and Lind, 2010).

Finding oneself in a major incident is a disruptive experience. There are now several studies of differential recall after major incidents (e.g. Drury and Cocking, 2007; Brown and Hoskins, 2010). The transcript of my radio interview shows I said very little, partly because the interview was cut short because the studio was needed almost immediately for a live broadcast, and partly because I was in shock. The public mobile phone system shut down soon after, so I was not able to reconnect with my daughter to continue. Mobile smart devices with news feeds did not exist then and, in any event, the decision to close the mobile phone network (because it was overloaded) cut off communication. Within minutes the whole area was alive with police and emergency vehicles; more roads were closed and taped off. There was suddenly a deathly quiet. The eerie silence was punctuated only by the blare of sirens – which still brings back immediate memories of that morning.

My next decision was whether to go back to see what had happened and whether I could help. I knew that I had no first aid skills but my main, somewhat selfish thought was to get away from the risk of another explosion. People around me then began to say that they had heard there were other bombs in London. Suddenly, the whole city seemed risky – was anywhere safe? The feeling of being unsafe lasted for some hours and effectively glued me to the spot. It later emerged that there had been three bombs on underground trains one hour earlier. It is thought the suicide bomber on the bus had originally intended to explode the bomb on a fourth tube train, but was thwarted and chose the bus as an alternative.

All public transport in the city had been withdrawn – there were no trains or buses and major rail termini had been closed. I walked to the next city square and consciously decided to wait in
the middle of the green space feeling it was a ‘safe’ place away from any new risk. Other people were standing round and began to share news and experiences; more news about other bombs began to filter through. Somebody was seen walking through the square with soot on his face. People gathered round. ‘What had happened?’ He had been on one of the bombed tube trains, had walked out of the tunnel and was walking home as he had not been injured. No official had offered him any help.

Journalists arrived, keen to talk with anybody who had experienced the explosion. After about an hour I decided to risk going into a café for a cup of tea. As I was waiting to pay, still anxious about risks, a policeman shouted to evacuate the square. Adrenalin rose again. I paid for the tea and walked quickly to the next square, where I noticed a rucksack left on a bench – was it another bomb? I asked if anybody claimed the bag and somebody immediately ran to it and apologised. I then became aware that heavy traffic was moving on the main road outside the cordon. Life was continuing as normal for most people. I got a phone signal and my daughter invited me to her offices for lunch. She arranged another live radio interview on the World Service programme covering the bombings. I said that I identified with people living in cities which experienced daily bombings and called on the G7 leaders then meeting in Scotland to work harder to stop conflicts.

Around five hours had passed since the explosions and I was still in limbo, insecure and uncertain what to do next. Was there transport home? Should I stay with family in London – but with no transport that also presented a challenge. News came through that the main railway lines were re-opening. I decided to go for a train and return home. The only option was a 20-minute walk to the station through silent streets, lots of people walking down the centre of normally jammed roads. I caught an almost empty train. An hour later, I arrived to find station staff offering bottles of water; I was grateful for the kindness. Suddenly, I was out of London and people were carrying on as though nothing had happened. I wrote a ‘blog’ about the experience which I shared with colleagues around the world as a form of therapy. I slowly returned to normal but am still sometimes ‘spooked’ by unexpected sirens.

Social work in action – emergencies and disasters

Social work has always been concerned about the person in their environment, ‘based on the notion that an individual and his or her behaviour cannot be understood adequately without consideration of . . . that individual’s environment (social, political, familial, temporal, spiritual, economic, and physical)’ (Kondrat, 2011). Concern for the relationship between people and their natural and physical environment has not received the attention it deserves (Marlow and Rooyen, 2001). This is being corrected with the emergence of green social work (Dominelli, 2012; Leung, 2015).

Social workers’ skills and experience are very relevant for disaster work (Dominelli, 2015). They are well placed to make a distinctive contribution at all stages of disaster work – preparation and prevention, initial response, long-term follow-up and recovery (Cronin and Ryan, 2010; Cronin and Jones, 2015). Concerns for human rights, protection of children and vulnerable people, and social inclusion are distinctive and valuable in a disaster context. The response to disasters is a priority in the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (International Federation of Social Workers, International Association of Schools of Social Work et al., 2012; Jones and Truell, 2012a; 2012b; 2017). One disaster specialist commented: ‘the ideal situation is one in which those whose decisions and actions caused the [tragic disaster] ‘own’ the problem, while those who survived it ‘own’ the solution’ (Alexander, 2017).
Social work is at its best when emphasising self-determination and working ‘with’ people, rather than doing things to them, as emphasised in green social work. This encourages the active involvement of those involved in planning and deciding actions or ‘social inclusion’. UN agencies recognise that this has frequently been absent in disaster response (Cronin and Jones, 2015). There is growing evidence that active involvement of disaster survivors in the recovery process and planning for the future facilitates quicker recovery (Christensen et al., 2014; Truell, 2014), always taking account of local culture and social systems (Dominelli, 2012).

The impact of disasters on workers is significant. Their needs are often similar to those they are supporting; they may be survivors themselves. These needs must be addressed through support and professional supervision (Chan et al., 2010; Ramon and Zavirsek, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Boulanger et al., 2013).

Conclusion

UK social work needs to rediscover the value of including the physical and ‘natural’ environment in the curriculum, assessments and practice. UK disaster legislation and planning appear to be effective, although support for survivors needs improvement. The response to the Grenfell fire tragedy has provoked concerns about disaster arrangements which will be examined in the public enquiry. There are good examples of social work involvement in disaster responses. Disaster preparedness should be a part of continuing development and practice, and the educational curriculum as advocated by green social workers.

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References


