

Urban Heat: Developing the role of community groups in local climate resilience

Executive Summary

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The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent organisation working to inspire social change through research, policy and practice.

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Please see the Urban Heat website for links to: the full report, the full bibliography, the executive summary, the independent evaluation (King, 2017), project papers and other materials. psi.org.uk/urban_heat

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

It is estimated that the 2003 UK heatwave caused 2,000 excess deaths, and it is predicted that such events will be more frequent in the future due to climate change. Certain groups are particularly vulnerable to heatwaves, including: older people, infants, those with health or mental health issues, disabilities or alcohol/drug dependencies, as well as people on certain medications and isolated people. London is particularly vulnerable to heatwaves, due to its size, location and concentrations of vulnerable people. In response to the 2003 heatwave, Public Health England (PHE) has published an annual Heatwave Plan since 2004, and work is now underway on a broader – and very much emergent – ‘overheating’ agenda by a cross-government working group. Although the Heatwave Plan guides national and local responses to heatwaves, there are very few statutory responsibilities in this domain and attention to the issue varies around the country. Community resilience – the idea of a range of individuals, voluntary and community sector (VCS) groups and institutions working together at a local scale to increase the community’s ability to prepare for, cope with and recover from adverse events or conditions – has been a policy objective within the Cabinet Office for more than five years. At the local level, work on community resilience tends to be led by local authority emergency planners within the context of a Local Resilience Forum, while work on heatwaves is led by public health managers. Although there are some statutory responsibilities in this area, local practice also varies around the country.

2. The Urban Heat project

The Urban Heat project took its inspiration from the simple observation that the heatwave planning and community resilience agendas are somewhat disconnected at the national policy level: the potential of community resilience is relatively unexplored in the Heatwave Plan for England and heatwaves are not mentioned in the Cabinet Office’s community resilience materials. The aim of Urban Heat was, therefore, to explore the potential for greater ‘community’ – and, more specifically, voluntary and community sector (VCS) – involvement in local heatwave planning and community resilience. The project focused on VCS groups because many of them: work with the social groups that are more ‘vulnerable’ to heatwaves, are able to reach many people that local institutions might consider ‘hard to reach’, and possess a distinctive form of ‘grass roots’ local knowledge that is derived from their own and their clients’ experience.

The project had three key objectives in the context of heatwaves and community resilience:

- To implement and evaluate a participatory action research (PAR) process designed to have a direct local impact;
- To learn more about the scope, processes, institutional arrangements and practices that relate to heatwave and community resilience planning and implementation, especially as they relate to the VCS, and to consider the role the VCS can play;
- To draw out and – through policy engagement – disseminate learning that will have broader strategic impact at London-wide and national levels, and thus in other locales.

The project addressed these objectives through a project design that combined: PAR in three London case studies (in Hackney, Hounslow and Wandsworth), policy engagement at local, London-wide and national levels, and independent evaluation (see Figure 1).

3. Key impacts

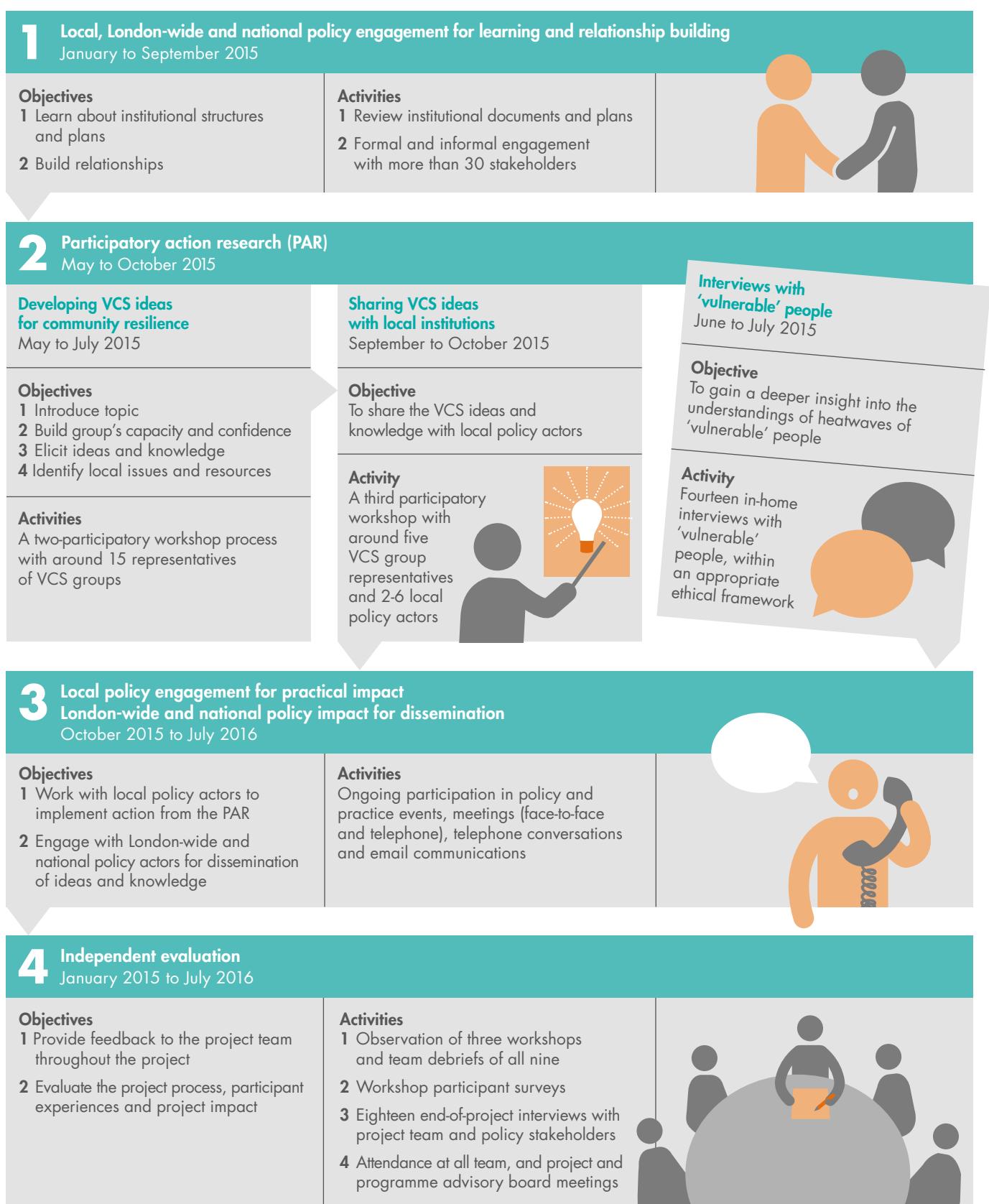
Within the project period, the main impacts of the project were: raising awareness and informing agendas across sectors and levels; brokering new relationships between policy and practice stakeholders; supporting the development of communications materials and systems at local and national levels; and changes in local governance structures. The project was also described as an example of best practice in community engagement by Public Health England (London) and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat. Significantly, the project drew attention to some of the more social aspects of heatwave response in a domain that often focuses on technical issues of health, buildings and mapping.

The key impacts of the project – within the project period – were:

Raising awareness and shaping future agendas

- In the local case studies, the project helped to increase awareness among VCS groups, emergency planners, public health specialists and others in local authorities, Local Resilience Forums, ‘excess deaths’ groups and a Health and Wellbeing Board;
- The project also prompted shifts in local governance, for example changing the remit of an ‘excess winter deaths’ group to ‘excess seasonal deaths’, and the inclusion of heatwaves in responses to a consultation on a major local development;

Figure 1. The Urban Heat design



- Regionally/nationally the project informed teams, working groups and strategies in the Greater London Authority, the London Climate Change Partnership, the London Resilience Forum, Public Health England (London), the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, Public Health England and Defra.

'Brokering' new relationships

- In the local case studies, the project 'brokered' new relationships and has had a positive impact on perceptions of the VCS within local authorities;
- Nationally, the project encouraged and supported the development of new relationships between the community resilience team in the Cabinet Office and the extreme events team in Public Health England;
- In London, the project facilitated new working relationships between the Greater London Authority and Public Health England, and officers in the London Borough of Hounslow in support of a local heat pilot project.

Communications

- In the local case studies, local VSC co-ordinating organisations agreed to act as communications hubs between local authorities and the VCS, the emergency planners in one of the case studies are working with a group of students to develop community-based communications strategies, and local authority Town Centre Managers have agreed to act as a communications hub between the local authority and local businesses and retailers;
- Nationally, the project supported Public Health England's development of new public communications materials for heatwaves through: direct feedback, by offering a 'community' perspective, and by facilitating links between Public Health England, and local policy stakeholders and a group of chartered environmental health officers to test the salience of communications materials.

An example of 'best practice' in community engagement

- The project was described in this way by Public Health England (London) and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat.

Advice services

- Locally, the VCS groups that we worked with, a local authority advice service for 'vulnerable' people, and a local pharmacy group agreed to incorporate heatwave advice into their work.

4. Key findings and recommendations

Community resilience

We recommend the following issues for consideration by the Cabinet Office and its advisory Community Resilience Working Group, for inclusion in future community resilience strategies and materials, and implementation at the local level:

- At the national level, it is important to more fully integrate community resilience and heatwave planning, through liaison between the appropriate teams in Public Health England and the Cabinet Office;
- There is widespread enthusiasm – across domains, sectors and levels – for the general idea of greater community involvement in resilience issues. However, community resilience is currently understood and practiced – both nationally and locally – in ways that limit its potential;
- For instance, the project shows that VCS groups have much to offer in terms of local knowledge and novel ideas, and these are appreciated by local institutions. However, local engagement on community resilience typically focuses on parish councils and voluntary emergency responders, and neglects the broader VCS. It is important that future community resilience materials should encourage local institutions to liaise with local VCS co-ordinating organisations – such as local Councils for Voluntary Services (CVSs) – to discuss two key issues:
 - i. Broad-based VCS representation (not just voluntary emergency responders) on Local Resilience Forums (and other relevant bodies, such as 'excess seasonal deaths' groups in the case of heatwaves);
 - ii. Use of the VCS co-ordinating organisations' mass communications channels to convey information and alerts to the local VCS. Given the relatively low uptake of digital technologies among some 'vulnerable' groups, the importance of the direct communications that the VCS undertakes with its 'client' groups – for instance face-to-face and on the telephone – should be emphasised and supported wherever possible;
- The Cabinet Office should liaise on community resilience with national bodies that represent the VCS, such as the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO);
- The project also suggests that there is potential in more fully including local retailers in community resilience efforts as they may be able to support 'vulnerable' customers, and provide 'cool spaces' and water during heatwaves;

- The project highlights the significant impact of the government's 'austerity' measures on both the public sector and the VCS in terms of reduced capacity, knowledge and skills. At all levels of government, it is important to appreciate that the VCS requires funding to carry out projects, and that the VCS is affected by 'austerity' measures just as much as the public sector. This means that it cannot be relied upon to plug emerging gaps in public services.

Drawing on these findings as well as the broader literature, we are also keen to offer a description of community resilience that we hope will be of value in policy and will maximise its potential in practice:

- Community resilience should focus on the most 'vulnerable' and should be mindful of the ways in which the dimensions and spatial distribution of 'vulnerability' vary across different events and issues;
- Community resilience is best understood as *both* an array of capacities or capabilities and a way of doing things that maximises these;
 - i.** Community resilience is the broad-based local capability to plan and prepare for, respond to and recover from adverse events and adverse background conditions. Community resilience is also the capability to learn, plan and adapt (and even transform) in ways that mitigate the impacts of adverse events in the longer term future;
 - ii.** As a way of doing things, community resilience has the potential to bring to bear a wide and, therefore, powerful variety of forms of both local knowledge, insight and ideas *and* capabilities and capacities (particularly with respect to 'vulnerable' people);
- While community resilience might often be led by local statutory bodies, its potential is maximised by approaches to planning and practice that are inclusive of the entire VCS (not only 'voluntary emergency responders'), as well as local retailers and individual residents;
- Community resilience is reliant on each of these sectors thriving, and on the good personal relationships and stable cross-sector institutional structures that facilitate effective collaboration;
- While it is implemented at the local level, building effective community resilience relies upon appropriate signals and support from regional and national government;
- Finally community resilience can also be driven from the outside of local statutory bodies, and may be in active resistance to them.

Heatwaves and heatwave planning

We recommend the following issues for consideration by PHE, other lead government bodies and the Cross-Government Group on Overheating, for inclusion in future Heatwave Plans, overheating strategies and implementation at the local level:

- The project suggests that awareness of the risks of heat and heatwaves is relatively low among ‘vulnerable’ people and VCS groups. There is a clear need for national public communications (the NHS FAST stroke awareness campaign might provide a model for this), and for national and local communication with VCS groups;
- Heatwaves have to compete for attention at both national and local levels. Now that heatwaves feature strongly in the UK Climate Change Risk Assessment (evidence review), it is important that this is carried through to the National Adaptation Programme;
- Although national benchmarks can be effective in prompting local action, previous efforts in this area by PHE have proved challenging. One option here might be to design the Heatwave Plan in ways that facilitates and supports greater self-assessment at the local level;
- In addition, at the local level, emergency planners and public health professionals need to think creatively about the ways in which new action on heatwaves can be ‘bundled in’ with existing activities (for example on fuel poverty);
- Long term urban and spatial planning to mitigate the impacts of heatwaves does not feature in either local planning guidance or the building regulations. At the national level, lead organisations – such as PHE, the Cabinet Office and the Greater London Authority – need to further emphasise this, and to work collaboratively, across sectors and disciplines, with other bodies – in particular, the Department for Communities and Local Government and Greater London Authority;
- It is important to more fully emphasise – both nationally and locally – the ways in which the characteristics of heatwaves imply different ways of thinking and responding when compared to flooding (in terms of climate change responses) and ‘excess winter deaths’ (as a public health agenda).

The Urban Heat process

The Urban Heat process was novel because it combined workshop-based PAR, ongoing policy engagement and independent evaluation.

- Urban Heat demonstrates that, although challenging, this process represents a compelling model for producing both local impact and learning for broader application;
- In particular, this approach is highly effective in terms of raising awareness, shaping policy agendas, introducing new ways of thinking and ‘brokering’ new relationships in local, regional and national policy. Implementing practical change is more challenging within the limited timescales of a project;
- The VCS workshops were highly effective in sharing knowledge about heatwaves and heatwave planning, generating enthusiasm, and eliciting participants’ local knowledge and novel ideas. It is recommended that workshop-based community engagement processes should be supported as important elements in the development of local policy and practice, and that ‘best practice’ in community workshop development and implementation should be more broadly shared within policy institutions;
- In the VCS-local policy workshops in two case studies, the participants built on the ideas of the VCS groups and collaborated in productive discussions of practical actions. The less successful third case study demonstrated the importance of getting the right policy people in the room and the potential for past challenges in VCS-local authority relationships to constrain collaboration;
- The implementation of local change was challenging within the project period, and due to the impacts of ‘austerity’;
- Our ongoing regional and national policy engagement has already had some positive impacts, and there is considerable scope for policy stakeholders to respond to the findings of the project in ways that can feed into local practice over time.
- Urban Heat was valuable to policy stakeholders because it focused on: research and evaluation (for example, giving voice to the VCS and ‘vulnerable’ people), practical action (in the three case studies) and policy engagement from the outset (in particular, the researchers acted as ‘brokers’, facilitating new relationships across policy domains and scales).
- The project suggests that there is widespread enthusiasm for community engagement projects among policy stakeholders, but that it remains challenging to ‘sell’ the distinctive value of this approach within their institutions. It is recommended that researchers and policy stakeholders work together to explain and demonstrate the distinctive value of community engagement within policy institutions.