



# Cabinet Office

## Guidance update (April 2025)

### Identifying and supporting vulnerable persons in an emergency

#### Overview

Anyone can be made vulnerable in an emergency but the impact often falls disproportionately. Some of those who may need additional support can be identified in advance.

This guidance supports Category 1 and 2 responders<sup>1</sup> by providing a common approach and set of principles to support the development of local, multi-agency, action plans for identifying and supporting individuals and groups who may be vulnerable in an emergency. It is intended for those involved in local emergency planning, particularly within a Local Resilience Forum (LRF), who have leadership roles and statutory responsibilities. It does not introduce new standards or regulations. The guidance has been written with English LRFs in mind. There may be elements relevant to emergency responders in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, however the nature of the devolution settlement for each nation means that there will be variations in the way this guidance could be applied.

#### Terminology and definitions: vulnerability

We understand that this is a contested and often disenfranchising term. Both the 2008 guidance and this updated version use as their basis the Emergency Preparedness guidance definition of vulnerability: *“people who are less able to help themselves in the circumstances of an emergency and therefore must be given special considerations in emergency plans.”*

Additionally, the updated guidance recognises that the exposure to risk that can affect the ability of individuals, households, groups or communities to respond and recover in an emergency, can be the product of a broad range of social, financial, physical and mental health, disability and environmental determinants. These should be recognised as factors that can increase the need for specific support before, during and after an emergency.

‘Vulnerable’ in the context of this guidance is used to describe individuals who may be at-risk of being disproportionately impacted by emergencies. The terminology should not detract from the overarching aim of the guidance: seeking to identify, understand impacts to, and develop approaches to enhance cooperation and engagement between partners to support individuals who may require additional assistance before, during and after emergencies.

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<sup>1</sup> The Civil Contingencies Act (2004) divides local responders into 2 categories, placing a different set of duties on each. Those in Category 1 are organisations at the core of the response to emergencies (including the emergency services, local authorities, NHS bodies). Category 1 responders are subject to the full set of civil protection duties under the CCA. Category 2 responders (including utility companies, transport providers, telecoms providers, some port and airport authorities) are co-operating bodies, required to co-operate and share information with other Category 1 and 2 responders to ensure that they are well integrated within wider emergency planning frameworks and risk management.

In respect of the definition, the updated guidance:

- offers a more comprehensive and nuanced view that reflects the complexities of vulnerability, its dynamic and situational nature, and the broader context within which emergency planners operate;
- contains more specific examples, tables, and structured guidance on identifying types of vulnerabilities and relational lists, providing updated and detailed scenarios for different groups of vulnerable persons during different stages of an emergency;
- articulates that vulnerability is not static and acknowledges the various factors, such as existing support networks, that can affect an individual's ability to prepare for and respond to emergencies;
- incorporates new learning and highlights that people who may not typically see themselves as vulnerable can still require support during an emergency; and
- extends the scope of the definition to include characteristics of communities that should be taken into consideration.

### Summary

The guidance outlines the responsibilities of Category 1 and 2 responders in planning for and addressing the needs of vulnerable individuals during emergencies. It sets out four stages of establishing a plan for identifying and supporting persons and groups who are vulnerable in an emergency. The stages provide a clear structure to help inform planning and approaches in LRFs:

- i. Building networks;
- ii. Identifying vulnerabilities and vulnerable persons;
- iii. Agreeing data sharing protocols;
- iv. Determining the scale and requirements.

To assist LRFs in fulfilling these responsibilities the guidance offers non-exhaustive examples and links to relevant resources and information, further enabling LRFs to develop and implement their plans. It sets out legal duties and other obligations, as well as communications, community resilience building, and recovery phase considerations. The document aims to enhance the overall preparedness and response capabilities of LRFs in addressing the needs of vulnerable individuals during emergencies.

### At a glance, what has changed?

The updated guidance is more comprehensive, structured, and aligned with current legislative and policy approaches. The newer version incorporates lessons identified from past emergencies and provides enhanced frameworks for collaboration and data management.

### Structure

- The 2008 document was shorter and more concise, summarising key stages of establishing an emergency plan in a straightforward format. Local Resilience Forum told us that the document was logical and sequential and so the overall approach has been kept, but restructured over three parts.

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- Each of the 'key stages' have been reviewed and significantly updated, working with UK Government Departments; Local Resilience Forums; Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector organisations, and technical experts (Informational Commissioner's Office; Ordnance Survey; Office for National Statistics) to ensure a comprehensive articulation of how local action plans for identifying vulnerable people can be developed.
- The updated guidance provides factual updates to legislation, organisation responsibilities, and the range of organisations involved in planning to identify and support vulnerable individuals.
- The updated guidance gives additional considerations to building community resilience, undertaking communication activities, and recovery. It contains a suite of annexes that provide detailed principles and guidance for identifying vulnerable persons.

### Legal references

- The 2008 document touched on legal obligations but did not sufficiently elaborate on how these laws interact with emergency preparedness and response.
- The updated version expands on interactions with other legislation - specifically the Equality Act 2010 and the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act (DPA) (2018) - making it clear that these considerations are integral to emergency planning.

### Focus on data sharing and protocols

- The 2008 guidance mentioned data sharing but did so in a less detailed manner, primarily focusing on the creation of lists of lists for emergency planning without as much emphasis on the collaborative aspect of ongoing updates and data-sharing agreements.
- LRFs told us about their barriers to data sharing. The updated version highlights the importance of data sharing, emphasising the need to consider information sharing in a multi-agency environment and establish agreements for data sharing in advance of emergencies. It expands greatly in respect of data sharing protocols, providing step-by-step support.

### Exercise in a box

- To further support LRFs, the Cabinet Office developed an exercise to support emergency responders and their partners when considering the challenges and demands of identifying and supporting vulnerable persons during significant disruptive events.
- The exercise is intended to allow responders to improve their preparedness to respond effectively to the needs of vulnerable persons, in a safe environment.
- The exercise materials provide a baseline "off the shelf", discussion-based, tabletop exercise. The materials can be tailored and developed by LRFs to reflect local requirements. The materials include everything needed to set up, plan, deliver and assess exercise activity.
- The materials were developed with national and local partners and are available for use on ResilienceDirect.