

IN THE MATTER OF THE INQUIRIES ACT 2005
AND IN THE MATTER OF THE INQUIRY RULES 2006

THE UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE CABINET OFFICE
MODULE 1 (RESILIENCE AND PREPAREDNESS)

Introduction

1. The Cabinet Office would like to start by expressing its deepest sympathy to all those who lost loved ones during the Covid-19 pandemic. It acknowledges the huge personal sacrifices which were made by families across the country and the dignity and bravery of all those who continue to live with the effects of Covid-19.
2. The Cabinet Office pays tribute to the efforts and courage of public servants and all those who played a role in the response to the pandemic, from those on the frontline of health and social care, to the scientists who worked on the vaccine, and all those across society who kept the country running.
3. The impacts of the pandemic went far beyond the many whose health suffered directly. The virus and the measures taken in response affected the economy and society profoundly. This Inquiry will rightly focus on Covid-19's profound effect on the United Kingdom. But it is right to remember that this was a global pandemic. It affected the lives of everyone. No country was left untouched and each government had to make extremely difficult choices in mitigating the suffering and hardship caused to its citizens.
4. The UK Government established this independent public inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005 to provide the United Kingdom with what may be the most ambitious Inquiry into Covid-19 undertaken worldwide. As the former Prime Minister stated when announcing the Inquiry, it is essential the Government's actions – its structures, processes and judgements – are examined rigorously, candidly and objectively, so every possible lesson from this terrible global event, as it affected the United Kingdom, is learned and remembered. To prepare properly for a future

pandemic of this kind, such reflection and learning is essential, and will build on the scrutiny that the Government has received through parliamentary inquiries and the National Audit Office.

5. The pandemic was the biggest peacetime crisis our country faced in decades. Its consequences will be felt for decades to come. It is important to recognise the many sacrifices that have been and will continue to be made across our country as a result of this virus. And although the pandemic had profound consequences for all, its enduring impact on individuals, families, communities and groups will vary significantly. The Cabinet Office welcomes the Inquiry's role in considering the different impacts on all parts of our society, including those with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.
6. Thanks largely to the vaccines, Covid-19 has now been brought under control, though the pandemic placed huge strain on our public services and we are still – as individuals and as a society – dealing with the longer-term consequences. The Government is seeking to address these consequences, for example, supporting those with long Covid, including funding research to better understand its causes, symptoms and treatment, and putting in place the Elective Care Recovery plan to tackle the Covid-19 backlog in the NHS. The Government is also taking actions to improve the UK's resilience as set out in the UK Government's Resilience Framework.
7. The Cabinet Office welcomes the role of the Inquiry in investigating the response of the Cabinet Office (as well as all other relevant Government Departments) to this crisis. The Inquiry should help us all understand what went well and what did not so as to improve the response should a pandemic threaten our country again. There will be much to learn from scrutinising, with the full benefit of hindsight, what happened – first in terms of preparation, and then by examining the response to the breadth and scale of the crisis created by Covid-19. Lessons can and must be learned. For a global event of this kind, it will certainly be the case that things could or should have been done differently. The Cabinet Office's overriding aim is to learn all the lessons it can from such scrutiny and make changes where appropriate to improve this country's resilience against such events in the future. Both history and science sadly tell us all of the need to prepare for future challenges to come. This Inquiry offers us the chance to face them with an open mind and the best information possible. The Cabinet Office therefore remains steadfast in its dedication to supporting the Inquiry in its vital work.
8. The Cabinet Office is committed to ensuring the Inquiry is provided with all relevant information to assist the Inquiry's ambitions to carry out its investigations quickly. The Cabinet Office has provided the Inquiry with over 55,000 documents in Modules 1 and 2, and has worked with the Inquiry Legal Team to identify those specific key documents and records that would best assist the Chair. The Cabinet Office, together with the many witnesses to whom it is providing support, will

continue to work hard to provide assistance to the Inquiry in discharging its terms of reference and providing practical, evidence-based recommendations in due course.

9. In response to the Inquiry's requests for information in relation to Module 1, which concern the period dating back to 2009, the Cabinet Office has provided 8 corporate statements, totalling approximately 340 pages, from senior officials currently working in key positions in the Cabinet Office. In addition, the Cabinet Office has supported 9 witnesses to provide Module 1 witness statements in their personal capacities, in which they set out their own views, reflections and suggestions for improvement in light of the requests from the Inquiry to do so; these include the former Prime Minister David Cameron, Cabinet Ministers and former Heads of the Civil Service. A number of these witnesses will assist the Inquiry by giving oral evidence during the forthcoming hearings.
10. The findings of this Inquiry will enable the country to be better prepared for any future pandemic. The Cabinet Office is keen to use its conclusions to build and improve upon the changes it has already implemented to enhance crisis management structures. The Cabinet Office recognises that continuous learning is vital to maintain effective resilience.
11. The remainder of this statement covers two main areas. First, the role of the Cabinet Office at the centre of government. Second, a high-level summary of the learning of lessons which the Cabinet Office has carried out so far and the actions it is already taking forward to enhance resilience for the future.

The role of the Cabinet Office

12. The Cabinet Office is a ministerial department of His Majesty's Government. Its ministers currently include, among others, the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, and the Minister for the Cabinet Office. The Cabinet Office is responsible for providing support to the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, and to ensure the Government works together to deliver for the people of the United Kingdom.
13. The Cabinet Office has a broad and fluid remit. Its key responsibilities include: supporting collective government decision making through Cabinet and the committee system; supporting national security; coordinating the government's response to crises; promoting efficiency and reform across government; and, monitoring and driving the delivery of priorities by other departments.
14. As such, the Cabinet Office has a unique role in government, which shifts in focus over time in response to priorities and challenges as they evolve. Within the Cabinet Secretariat, for example, the Cabinet Office houses teams that coordinate policy, manage decision-making and look at issues that affect the whole of government or do not neatly sit within any individual department.

15. A range of cross-government functions are based in the Cabinet Office. The cross-government functions - also comprising multiple agencies and public bodies - support departments and civil servants across government to be professional, capable and efficient, delivering strong value for money for taxpayers, mitigating and managing risks to operations, and ultimately helping departments deliver what ministers want. One such function is the Government Commercial Function, which includes the Crown Commercial Service.
16. The Equality Hub was created within the Cabinet Office in September 2020, when the Race Disparity Unit, Disability Unit and the Government Equalities Office were brought together. The Social Mobility Commission secretariat joined the Equality Hub in April 2021. The Cabinet Office has overall responsibility for the budget and resourcing of the Equality Hub. This is discharged in agreement with the Minister for Women and Equalities. All of the Ministers with equality responsibilities sit outside the Cabinet Office and each has policy responsibility and decision making authority on their specific equality issues.
17. While it has grown in recent years with changes in the machinery of government, at around 7,000 full-time equivalent staff the Cabinet Office is smaller than some of the departments with large-scale delivery responsibilities. Since its work is not oriented towards tackling one individual issue or risk, its structure and resourcing model adapt as needed.

Cabinet government

18. In general, the vast majority of decisions in Government are made within individual departments; but some decisions – such as where the subject matter affects multiple departments – need to be made collectively at Cabinet or a Cabinet Committee, either at a meeting or through write round to a Cabinet Committee. The Prime Minister of the day, with the advice of the Cabinet Secretary, decides the overall structure of the Cabinet committee system. There are broad principles and protocols set down in the Cabinet Manual, but no definitive list of decisions which must be taken by collective agreement.
19. The Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBR) committee is the mechanism for managing the central response to major emergencies which have international, national, or multi-regional impact and are of the scale and complexity to require central government coordination. Consistent with its need to provide an adaptive response depending on the emergency, there is no fixed membership of COBR. In general the chair will be the Secretary of State of the Government department with lead responsibility for the issue being considered. Invitees will generally include representatives from those departments or regions affected by the crisis under discussion, as appropriate.

The framework for emergency preparedness in the United Kingdom

20. Risks are managed by systems, in which departments and organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors work together at the local, regional and national level.
21. The principal role of the Cabinet Office with regards emergency preparedness is to set and operate the overarching framework for risk assessment, preparedness, response and recovery. The framework is founded in the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 which sets out, among other things, the role of Local Resilience Forums as the mechanism for coordinating local emergency preparedness. The framework has evolved through time with associated regulations and guidance, which is also shaped by other relevant legislation such as the Equality Act 2010.
22. The Cabinet Office carries out a wide range of activities aimed at understanding and enhancing preparedness for emergencies across the board. This is underpinned by an assessment framework encompassing the most serious national risks facing the UK. This framework includes the National Security Risk Assessment (“NSRA”), the published National Risk Register (“NRR”) and (prior to its amalgamation with the NSRA in 2019) the National Risk Assessment (“NRA”) processes. The NSRA is the government’s main tool for identifying and assessing the most serious risks facing the UK or its interests overseas over a multi-year period. The NSRA cannot anticipate every possible risk that might occur across the UK but, instead, brings together groups of risks of a similar nature in order to facilitate the planning required to respond to those risks. The NSRA underpins the development of ‘National Resilience Planning Assumptions’, which set out the common consequences of NSRA risks; these are then shared with local and national responders to assist them in their planning to deal with major national, and more localised, emergencies. The focus on these common consequences, rather than solely on specific risks, is to enable a flexible response to the widest range of scenarios. The NSRA is periodically renewed.
23. Specific risks and capabilities that are identified in the NSRA or NRA are managed by lead departments and are influenced by the broader strategic context for that department, such as related policy programmes, spending decisions and international factors. Lead departments carry out cross-government coordination, chairing meetings as appropriate, as needed to deliver their responsibilities.
24. The Cabinet Office does not audit other government departments in this sphere, but it did carry out work which was intended to inform other bodies of their capabilities and to enhance preparedness planning. This has included work such as: Resilience Capabilities Surveys, which were responded to by Local Resilience Forums; the Resilience Capabilities Programme, which sought to assess how certain workstreams were being prepared for; Sector Security and Resilience Plans, which allowed lead government departments to set out their approach to the resilience of their critical national infrastructure (“CNI”); and, the National Resilience Standards, which were

intended to allow LRFs and others to benchmark their work against a consensus view of good and leading practice.

25. Where potential impacts are sufficiently severe or wide-ranging across departmental responsibilities the Cabinet Office may convene and coordinate across government. This might include co-chairing official boards with the lead department to help ensure that wider system impacts are considered.
26. The pattern and intensity by which the Cabinet Office supports lead departments with their planning for specific risks varies by risk and through time. As is typical for the centre of government, Ministers and senior officials will have to decide what level of support they should provide to other government departments, based on what is known about the capabilities of that department, what needs other departments have, and the resources that central government can commit. The latter is informed by overall resourcing decisions and the landscape of emergencies and contingencies that the government is tackling at any one time. The Cabinet Office also has its own role in leading certain aspects of a response if one is required, for example, organising COBR.
27. While it can never be optimally positioned to respond to one individual risk, the Cabinet Office has channelled resources to meet specific emerging needs. Over the course of Module 1, the most pressing risk at any one time ranged from civil contingencies to national security threats and wide-ranging policy and operational challenges. In the period immediately preceding Covid-19 the dedicated team on the UK's exit from the EU was the biggest single formation in the Cabinet Office. In 2020, those resources were reassigned to Covid-19 as the pandemic emerged and by the end of that year the Covid-19 Taskforce had more than 300 people in it. This Taskforce was wound down in the spring of 2022 after emerging from the pandemic and the focus moved to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
28. The Government works closely with the devolved administrations to promote effective emergency planning and response that is, as far as possible, aligned across the UK, whilst respecting devolved choices.

The Cabinet Office's role in pandemic preparedness during the Module 1 timeframe

29. The work undertaken by the Cabinet Office in respect of pandemic preparedness is described in detail in other witness statements. As described above, the Cabinet Office coordinated the risk assessment process with input from lead government departments. Pandemic influenza was identified as the top risk throughout the relevant period. New and emerging infectious diseases were also included in the risk assessments and registers. Throughout the relevant period, health sector preparedness was managed by the Department of Health and Social Care.
30. Beyond the Module 1 period, but noted here for completeness, in July 2021, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Cabinet Office jointly established the Pandemic Disease

Capabilities Board, to enhance the cross-government and cross-UK approach to preparing for a broader range of pandemics, including but not limited to pandemic influenza.

Lessons learned and actions taken to improve preparedness

31. The Government set up this Inquiry to conduct a thorough and objective assessment of its handling of the Covid-19 pandemic with the ultimate aim of ensuring that all of the available lessons are brought to light, so that the country is better prepared when the next pandemic hits.
32. Covid-19 developed quickly from an acute, emerging threat to a pandemic requiring the whole of government to respond to a chronic challenge. The Cabinet Office will support the Inquiry to capture every lesson for our emergency frameworks and pandemic preparedness, including both where we need to build on existing strengths or address weaknesses in the UK's response.
33. The Government sought to learn and improve throughout the course of the pandemic, in real time. The Cabinet Office has also commissioned a number of reviews and made a range of changes to improve resilience and preparedness more broadly, with further improvements in train, as set out below. Continuous learning and improvement are an in-built and vital part of the UK's resilience mechanisms.

Formal reviews

34. Beyond the crisis, while respecting the Inquiry's process and without prejudice to its conclusions, the Cabinet Office has carried out formal reviews in respect of resilience and preparedness, including the following.
 - a. The Boardman Review of Cabinet Office Communications Procurement, which reported in December 2020, considered the preliminary results of a fact-finding exercise into the award of contracts for Covid-19 communications services made by the Cabinet Office in March 2020. It made three recommendations in relation to existing procurement policy and legislation, 13 recommendations in relation to Cabinet Office processes and governance, and 12 recommendations in relation to conflicts of interest and bias. The Cabinet Office accepted all of these recommendations.
 - b. In January 2021, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) commissioned the Royal Academy of Engineering (RAEng) to undertake an independent external review of the NSRA methodology. The RAEng was asked to address a number of priority questions, focused on scenarios, concurrent and compound risks, and interdependencies, assessment timescales, and cross-cutting issues such as data, expert input and diversity and inclusion. It was also asked to deliver evidence-based, practical, and implementable recommendations for improvement. Its report "Building Resilience" was published on

21 April 2023. The RAEng review was conducted alongside an internal review by the CCS. The RAEng Review made thirteen final recommendations. The Cabinet Office accepted and has or is implementing the majority of these.

- c. The Boardman Review of Government Covid-19 Procurement, which reported on 7 May 2021, covered five key parts of the government procurement in response to the pandemic and identified lessons to be learned for future procurement. It made 28 recommendations, which the Government has accepted. Implementation has mostly been completed and has been subject to review by the Government Internal Audit Agency.
 - d. In June 2021, the National Security Adviser commissioned a Review into Crisis Capabilities in government, which reported in February 2022. The review drew on lessons learned from recent crises, including Covid-19, and aimed to provide an examination of central government's approach to crises. This Review made 23 final recommendations, which the Cabinet Office has accepted in full, and has implemented them or is in the process of doing so.
35. The Cabinet Office has also contributed to other third-party reviews and publications in respect of lessons to be learned from the pandemic, and general resilience arrangements, including those conducted or submitted to Parliament, which sit outside the scope of this Inquiry. More widely, the Cabinet Office's role is shaped by other significant government reviews, such as the 2021 Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy.

Actions to improve preparedness

36. As a result of these reviews and publications, as well as internal lessons exercises, the Cabinet Office has already made significant changes to the way government deals with resilience and crisis management.
- a. The Crisis Capability Review recommended that a new permanent Cabinet Office crisis team should be established, with its responsibilities to include owning and implementing plans for scaling up central government's response in the face of major crises. Following this, the CCS was split in two: the COBR Unit now focuses on the Government's response to emergencies, and the Resilience Directorate has been established to lead on longer-term resilience issues.
 - b. The pandemic exposed the need for a material improvement in how government generates and interrogates data to support decision-making in a crisis. As a result, the National Situation Centre ("SitCen"), based in the Cabinet Office, was established and

became operational in October 2021. It now serves as a focal point for data and analysis in emergencies.

- c. COBR facilities have been modernised and upgraded, including new physical office space and improved ICT provision.
- d. The Cabinet Office established the UK Resilience Forum which met for the first time in July 2021 bringing together national, regional and local government; private and voluntary sectors and other interested parties to improve communication and collaboration on risk and help align emergency preparedness activity.
- e. In 2022, the Cabinet Office published the findings and recommendations from its review of the Civil Contingencies Act and also promulgated a new version of the NSRA.

37. The Government published its new Resilience Framework on 19 December 2022. The development and publication of the Resilience Framework was a key commitment made in the Integrated Review, and was prepared following a public consultation and with input from across central government, the Devolved Administrations, local government, the private and third sectors and the public. It sets out the UK Government's plans to strengthen resilience to 2030. The measures set out in the Resilience Framework include:

- a. Delivering a new UK Resilience Academy, built out from the Emergency Planning College, making world class professional training available to all that need it.
- b. The creation of a new Head of Resilience position, responsible for guiding best practice, encouraging adherence to best practice, and setting guidance.
- c. Introducing an annual Statement to Parliament on civil contingencies risks and the UK Government's performance on resilience.
- d. Clarifying UK Government roles and responsibilities for each NSRA risk.
- e. Growing the UK Government's pool of advisory groups of experts to inform risk planning and provide external challenge.
- f. Strengthening Local Resilience Forums ("LRFs") in England.
- g. Building private sector resilience by providing guidance on risk in order to help the businesses to meet new standards on resilience.
- h. Continuing to deepen and strengthen the Government's relationships with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in England to better understand and integrate their capabilities at the local and national levels.

- i. Developing a measure for social vulnerability as an indicator of socio-economic resilience and how risks impact across communities and vulnerable groups, to inform decision making.
 - j. Updating guidance with local responders, VCS and communities to support them working with vulnerable groups.
 - k. Conducting an annual survey of public perceptions of risk, resilience and preparedness.
 - l. Establishing a comprehensive National Exercising Programme, focused on priority NSRA risks, to test key capabilities and provide a stronger framework to capture and track lessons identified across government.
38. Alongside the publication of the Resilience Framework the Prime Minister formed a sub-committee of the National Security Council, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, to specifically consider matters relating to the UK's resilience.
39. The Government recognises there is always work to be done to ensure that the UK is well prepared for future crises. To this end, the Cabinet Office will listen carefully to the evidence and contributions of other Core Participants in Module 1, and looks forward to the Inquiry's report and recommendations in due course.