

Witness Name: Sir Oliver Letwin

Statement No.: First

Exhibits: 4

Dated: 24th April 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF RT HON SIR OLIVER LETWIN

1. I, Sir Oliver Letwin, will say as follows.

Introduction

2. I make this statement in response to the Inquiry's request for evidence dated 8 February 2023. I have, as requested, attempted to focus on my experience as Minister for Government Policy between 2010 and 2016 and as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster between 2014 and 2016, and to expand upon the views I have publicly expressed about how the United Kingdom's ("UK") resilience-planning and resilience-response machinery might be improved.
3. I was the Member of Parliament for West Dorset from May 1997 until November 2019. Between 2000 and 2005 I held various posts in the shadow cabinet. I was Minister for Government Policy between May 2010 and July 2016. From July 2014 until July 2016 I also served as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. In these roles, I served as a member of the National Security Council from 2010 to 2016, and was involved in a range of discussions relating to the national risk register. From 2011 to 2016, I took on ministerial responsibility for national resilience within the Cabinet Office. In this role, I was involved both in resilience-planning for civil risks and in dealing with actual civil emergencies as they arose.
4. In relation to resilience-planning, I conducted a series of reviews, assisted by a team of Cabinet Office officials and working with relevant ministerial colleagues and officials across Whitehall. The purpose of these reviews was to examine (and, where necessary, to formulate measures to improve) our resilience in the face of a range of civil risks identified in the national risk register. These included the risks arising from: flooding; cyber-attack;

malfunction of critical machinery at sensitive sites; failure of the National Grid; dock-closure or other causes of import restriction; insufficient gas supply; and space weather.

5. In relation to the handling of civil emergencies as they occurred, I was involved in managing the government's response to a succession of events between 2011 and 2016. These included: threatened tanker-driver strikes, winter-pressures in the National Health Service ("NHS"), winter-floods, and the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

Preparations for handling pandemic influenza and other pandemics

6. During this period, 2011-2016, I was not directly involved in planning for the government's response to pandemic influenza in the UK. In retrospect, it may seem surprising that my resilience-reviews did not cover this issue, given the fact that pandemic influenza was ranked high (both in terms of impact and in terms of likelihood in the national risk register). The reason was that I was informed by Cabinet Office officials (when I initiated the resilience-review process in 2012) that an unusually large amount of attention had already been focussed on this particular threat because of its position in the national risk register, that (as a result) the UK was particularly well prepared to deal with pandemic influenza, that the Department of Health was preparing to carry out a major exercise to test our national capabilities in the face of pandemic influenza, and that my time would therefore be better spent examining other whole-system risks for which line departments might be much less well prepared. As the documents exhibited to this statement demonstrate, my junior ministerial colleague, Chloe Smith, did meet colleagues and officials from the Department of Health to look at preparedness for pandemic influenza (**OL/1 - INQ000013404, OL/2 - INQ000013415, OL/3 - INQ000136766, OL/4 - INQ000136765**). Also, initially, and from time to time thereafter, I checked with the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer, who confirmed that we were — in their view — as well prepared to deal with a pandemic 'flu as any country; and I therefore continued to review our preparedness for other whole-system risks. In the event, the exercise led by the Department of Health to test our preparedness for a 'flu pandemic took place after I had left office; so I was not involved in it.
7. I now believe, however, that it might have been helpful if I had delved into the pandemic influenza risk for myself, notwithstanding the amount of attention being focussed on this issue by the line department and the consequently high level of preparations for responding to it. This is *not* because I believe such a review would have been likely to lead to any significant improvements in our preparedness for a pandemic 'flu itself, but rather

because it might have led me to question whether we were adequately prepared to deal with the risks of forms of respiratory disease *other* than pandemic influenza.

8. As we all now know, in the event we were much better prepared to deal with the pandemic influenza that we did not face, than we were to deal with the Covid-19 that we did face. This was at least partly because of what the then Chief Medical Officer, Dame Sally Davies, has subsequently and rightly called the 'groupthink' that led Whitehall to focus on the response to pandemic 'flu rather than on the response to other forms of pandemic respiratory disease.
9. I believe that the first lesson we should learn from this institutional focus on what turned out to be the 'wrong' disease is that, somewhere within the UK government system, there needs to be a 'red team' whose sole job is to challenge the accepted orthodoxies about what the serious risks are. The work of this 'red team' should clearly range far beyond just health risks — but, equally clearly, it should include challenging the orthodoxies about which health risks (and, in particular, which pandemics) we should be most worried about. In order to create an appropriate distance from Whitehall, the 'red team' role could best be performed by a new, statutory Resilience Institute wholly independent of government. However, in the absence of such an independent statutory body, the role could be performed by a dedicated team within the new Resilience Directorate that the present Government is intending to establish, provided that the members of the 'red team' are rigorously separated from the rest of the Directorate and report to a senior official outside the Directorate, so that their careers are enhanced rather than blighted if they issue 'annoying' challenges to the prevailing orthodoxy. (I shall have more to say about both of these aspects of the institutional architecture later in my statement.)

Horizon scanning

10. The second lesson I believe we should learn is that it is necessary to establish a permanent function of 'horizon-scanning', to ensure that all relevant UK authorities and services are alerted in a timely way to any viruses that may be heading our way from other parts of the world. It is more likely that the UK will be properly prepared to deal with a particular virus if those at the centre of government have early warning that the virus is or may be heading our way — and the international systems for providing such warnings are often cumbrous and slow; so we need our own, permanent early warning system.

11. I had already formed this view before leaving office, as a result of my intensive involvement in the UK's response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014.
12. Following that episode, the then Cabinet Secretary (Sir Jeremy Heywood) and I established within the Civil Contingencies Secretariat a small team of officials with a specific remit to scan the horizon for viruses that might be heading our way. This team began immediately to provide regular reports on the risk of various viruses coming to the UK. These reports alerted us to the risk that the Zika epidemic in the Americas in 2015 might reach the UK — and this in turn led to intensive discussion within the government about the scale and likelihood of this risk, and about the proper response to it. In the event, it was judged disproportionate to take early preventative action, given the disruption that this might have caused and the assessed low risk of the virus reaching us; and in the event that judgement was vindicated by the facts as they emerged; the virus did not generate an epidemic in the UK. But systems of resilience should, in my view, be judged at least as much by reference to what does not happen as by reference to what does happen.
13. I gather that — at some point following my departure — the team with a specific horizon-scanning remit which we had established may have been absorbed back into the general body of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, and that no such specific and regular global horizon-scanning for viruses was being carried out in the period leading up to the Covid-19 outbreak. (I should emphasise that this is second-hand information, and I do not have any access to documents that would prove or disprove whether this did in fact occur. I hope that the Inquiry will bring to light what the sequence of events was.)
14. However, regardless of whether any systematic global horizon-scanning for viruses was taking place in the Cabinet Office in the lead-up to Covid-19, my view is that the only way in which we can *guarantee* in future that such horizon-scanning takes place is to make it explicitly and institutionally a *permanent* feature of the scene. (I shall have more to say later in my statement about the institutional framework within which this could be guaranteed.)

Degree of preparedness to handle whole-system emergencies

15. It is, however, clear that no amount of resilience-planning or horizon-scanning will be sufficient to ensure that government always responds in an effective way to emergencies as they occur. Fore-knowledge is never complete: surprises occur. And even if the government has fore-knowledge of the emergency in question, and has well developed

plans to deal with it, implementing those plans smoothly in the face of the emergency is no easy feat.

16. My experience of dealing with actual emergencies was that much depended on three things: (1) the availability of timely and accurate information about what was happening on the ground; (2) good systems of communication across government, devolved administrations, public agencies and public services; and (3) good working relationships between ministers and senior officials across government.

17. In relation to the availability of information about what was happening on the ground, I would say that the Cabinet Office — at the end of my time in government — had fairly well-established structures, systems and processes in place, centred on the Civil Contingencies Secretariat and the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms. These arrangements produced reasonably well organised, accurate and timely information about events on the ground when we were dealing with ‘normal’ civil emergencies such as floods. But different types of information were, of course, required to deal with different types of civil emergency — and the machinery was much better at producing the necessary data for types of emergency (like floods) that were repeated year after year than it was at producing the necessary data for unusual types of emergency. Hence, for example, I had to work with a specially formed, ad hoc team of Cabinet Office officials to design and implement a sufficiently timely and accurate central information system for dealing with the Ebola outbreak in 2014. Consequently, I cannot be confident that in a whole-system civil emergency such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the machinery would have been adequate to provide the necessary information in a timely fashion. This should have been one of the issues examined in the exercise carried out to test our national response to pandemic influenza — but, as I have said, that exercise took place after I left office, and I therefore do not know what it revealed about the information-gathering and data-presentation capacities of the Cabinet Office and of the government as a whole in the face of such a systemic emergency.

18. For the same reason, I cannot offer a view about whether the established systems of communication amongst ministries and agencies in Whitehall, and between those ministries and agencies and operations on the ground (such as local authorities, police services, hospitals and other emergency services), would have been capable of handling a whole-system emergency such as a pandemic. I can say only that they proved capable of enabling necessary communication to occur during ‘normal’ civil emergencies. During repeated winter crises in the NHS, for example, there was continuous and effective

communication between the Cabinet Office, the Department of Health, the NHS and local services such as hospitals. It was difficult to handle these crises — but we were at least all talking to one another about how to do so; in contrast to much of government outside the field of emergencies, there was no sense of having to bang down doors to get at the relevant people. Again, I imagine (but I do not know) that this question of communication in the face of a system-wide emergency will have been one of the issues tested in the course of the pandemic influenza exercise that took place after I left office.

19. On this question of communication, I should perhaps add that my own focus (in the resilience reviews that I conducted) was on whether we were adequately equipped to communicate during a different type of potential whole-system civil emergency — namely, failure of the National Grid (whether caused by space weather or by cyber attack or by some other phenomenon). I spent a considerable amount of time in my last two years as a minister pursuing this question, which I believed to be of the utmost importance; and I have, since leaving office, written a book (*Apocalypse How? Technology and the Threat of Disaster*) attempting to draw attention to this issue. I am by no means confident that the structures are yet in place to ensure adequate communication during such a failure of the National Grid. (Nor was this the only serious gap in planning for whole-system emergencies that concerned me in my resilience reviews; I was also very concerned in the last years of my time in office to ensure that the UK should maintain sufficient gas reserves to protect the energy system. I believed at the time that we were, if anything, under-equipped with gas reserves. And I have subsequently been distressed to find, as an observer from outside government, that the gas reserves were significantly diminished following my departure.)

20. In short: (1) I cannot comment on the adequacy or inadequacy of structures, systems and processes for dealing with pandemics (either in relation to information-gathering or in relation to inter-agency communication), because I did not review them and assumed that they would be tested in the pandemic 'flu simulation exercise carried out (as it happened) after I left office; (2) I can, however, say that both information-gathering and inter-agency communications were adequate to deal with repeated 'normal' civil emergencies such as flooding, though less well attuned to dealing with unusual types of emergency such as the Ebola crisis; and (3) I was concerned at the time when I left office (and have become more concerned since then) that the policies in place are not sufficient to make the UK properly resilient in the face of other types of whole-system civil emergency — in particular, those that relate to the resilience of the national energy system and hence, indirectly, to the national digital communications systems.

21. I turn now to the question of working relationships. Such relationships are, in my experience, at least as important as any structures, systems, processes, plans and policies when it comes to dealing with civil emergencies as they arise. The unpredictable course of emergencies inevitably means that, no matter how many plans have been developed and no matter how good the structures are, a considerable amount of improvisation will be required 'on the day'. Such improvisation demands good working relationships, in which all those involved adopt a 'can do' approach, concentrating on dealing with the emergency collaboratively rather than on blaming one another for its occurrence, protecting themselves, or protecting their 'territory'.
22. I am obviously not in a position to provide any first-hand account of the quality of working relationships within government before May 2010 or after July 2016. However, I can say that, between these dates, the quality of such relationships was high. Of course, there were frictions from time to time. But, as crises of one sort or another arose, both during the Cameron/Clegg coalition government of 2010 to 2015 and during the short-lived Cameron administration of 2015-2016, working relationships across Whitehall proved in general to be robust, enabling us to tackle 'normal' civil emergencies in a highly cooperative and pro-active manner. It is a matter of speculation whether these relationships would have remained robust in the face of a whole-system civil emergency such as Covid-19; but my guess is that they would have been sustained. In that one respect, at least, I believe that the governments of 2010-2016 would have been well equipped to deal with such a whole-system emergency,

The importance of simulations and of military assistance

23. As I have said, my experience was that the government machine found it much easier to deal with types of emergency with which it was familiar than with types of emergency with which it was unfamiliar. To put this point another way, preparedness was markedly improved by practice. There is, of course, nothing surprising about this: performance generally tends to be improved by practice.
24. Equally obviously, it is a feature of whole-system emergencies that one does not wish to create them in order to provide government and the rest of society with the opportunity to practice responding to them. Nor is it likely that the UK will face a sufficiently large number of whole-system civil emergencies in any given run of years to provide natural, as opposed to artificial, opportunities to practice our responses.

25. From these observations, it seems to me to follow clearly that the UK should put more effort than we have yet done into repeatedly performing large-scale exercises to test our resilience to various forms of whole-system civil emergency. Although one such exercise was of course planned during my time as a minister, and subsequently carried out after my time, in relation to pandemic 'flu, I believe in retrospect that we should have carried out more such exercises in relation to a wider range of potential whole-system civil emergencies.
26. I recognise that the considerations that deterred us from doing so will also tend to deter future governments: such exercises are difficult to construct and costly to carry out; they distract ministers and officials from tackling the urgent issues of the day; and they inevitably involve selecting particular risks for simulation, which (as in the case of pandemic 'flu and Covid-19) may not be the exact risks that materialise. But I believe that these considerations are outweighed by the potential advantages of conducting repeated simulations. Our (and other nations') armed forces repeatedly carry out large-scale simulations in different domains, in order to discern patterns and to develop doctrines as well as flexibilities.
27. My view, with the benefit of hindsight, is that the UK government should regularise the practice of simulating responses to a variety of whole-system emergencies by carrying out at least two such large-scale simulations in each Parliament — in other words, once every two years. I believe that such simulations should involve not only the central government departments, regulators and agencies relevant to the particular type of emergency being simulated, but also the relevant public services, devolved administrations and local authorities as well as the relevant utilities and infrastructure providers.
28. In addition, such regular simulations could and should highlight the extent to which our responses to whole-system emergencies will be improved by action at community-level. Parishes, neighbourhoods, estates, and voluntary and community groups all have a role to play in providing information, support and practical action in the face of emergency. We saw this during the Covid-19 episode, of course; but we have seen it also, repeatedly, in the face of severe flooding in Yorkshire, the Lake District and Somerset, and in the face of major fires such as the Grenfell Tower disaster. We have seen also that proper preparation — often through simple measures such as the provision of salt or grit for farmers to spread on winter roads that local authorities cannot clear — can make a huge difference to the effectiveness of national, regional and local responses. Although it is not to be expected that community action alone can handle whole-system emergencies, it is in my view more than likely that proper simulations will bring to light particular parts of the required

responses to given whole-system emergencies that can and should be carried out at community-level. And where this does come to light in the course of a simulation (or even in the course of planning for a simulation exercise) then central government and the devolved administrations (and, where appropriate, the local authorities) can take steps to establish whatever structures, systems and processes will maximise the chances of communities of different types in different parts of the country being able to contribute effectively and in the relevant ways to the national response. To take just one example, if every first-tier local authority in England had an up-to-date database of all the community groups in their area (for example, those providing help and support of various kinds to the frail elderly), with a full set of accurate contact details and a concise but informative indexing system, indicating the range of potentially useful capacities of each group under whole-system emergency conditions, that would be a major step forward. Time spent preparing such a database in the lead-up to a simulation exercise, and then testing its usefulness during the simulation exercise itself, would be time well spent. With repeated simulations of different types of whole-system civil emergencies, the design of these local databases could be refined to the point where they could become an invaluable national resource in time of actual emergency.

29. As I have mentioned, our armed forces are particularly experienced in carrying out simulations of responses to a wide range of military threats. I believe that the armed forces can therefore also bring invaluable expertise to bear on the construction of regular, large-scale civilian simulations — and they should accordingly be fully involved in the planning of such civil-emergency simulations and in the evaluation of the results of each exercise.

30. This is not, however, by any means the limit of the use to which the armed forces should be put in helping the civil authorities respond to whole-system emergencies.

31. My experience was that the armed forces were often needed to help the government respond effectively to civil emergencies. The capacity of the armed forces to construct detailed logistical plans and to provide logistical support was invaluable when we were dealing with the threat of tanker-driver strikes, with Ebola in Sierra Leone, and with major floods. The armed forces knew how to think through exactly what would be needed, where, and when in order to achieve given goals such as moving oil from ports to garages, organising the safe disposal of infected corpses to prevent the spread of disease, or ensuring that households trapped by floods were afforded the necessary assistance and relief. And the armed forces could put disciplined, flexible and effective teams in place at high speed to carry out those parts of the plans that the civilian authorities were not able to carry out.

32. I recognise, of course, that getting the right people to the right place at the right time in order to provide a specific form of logistical support to the civilian authorities is highly unlikely to be the whole solution to the problems facing the country in any whole-system civil emergency — whether that emergency takes the form of a pandemic or otherwise. Nevertheless, I believe that such logistical support will frequently be needed — as it was when the government decided to build the Nightingale hospitals during the Covid-19 response; and the armed forces are the natural people to provide that support. I do not believe that any serious risk to civil liberties or to the continued exercise of proper authority by the elected government is likely to arise from the use of the armed forces by the civil authorities to provide such logistical support. Accordingly, I believe that our resilience-planning should assume a significant degree of logistical support from the armed services in response to any major civil emergency; and the armed forces should therefore be involved from the start both in resilience-planning and in the response to all major civil emergencies. This would, of course, be materially easier to achieve in relation to whole-system civil emergencies if there were repeated, biennial simulation exercises in which the armed forces regularly took part to plan and practice the forms of logistical support likely to be required in relation to any specific form of whole-system emergency. If this became a regular feature of the scene, I believe it would remove many of the inhibitions about military involvement that I witnessed, both in line departments and in the Ministry of Defence (“MoD”) itself.

33. In my experience, however, there was a further obstacle that would need to be removed in order to ensure optimal cooperation between the civilian and military authorities. This was the question of who paid for what. I do not, of course, know whether this question reared its ugly head during the Covid-19 response, since I was not then in office. But it frequently balked or delayed efforts to involve the armed forces from an early stage of responses to ‘normal’ emergencies; and, unless the issue was definitively resolved during the Covid-19 response, I would suggest that it should now be resolved. The most obvious way of doing so, would be for the Treasury to establish a rule that where the Prime Minister signals the need for military involvement in resilience-planning or resilience-response, the costs charged by MoD for such involvement should automatically be treated by the Treasury as part of Annually Managed Expenditure rather than as part of the Departmental Expenditure Limit either for the MoD or for any line department. The fiscal costs arising from such a mechanism would pale into insignificance compared to the costs (both fiscal and economic) arising from delayed or sub-optimal involvement of the armed forces in the planning and logistics of responses to civil emergencies. (There is, incidentally, a direct

parallel here with the so-called Bellwin scheme, under which central government has, for many years, provided ring-fenced financial assistance to local authorities facing costs arising from civil emergencies. So there is a precedent.)

Balancing present problems against future risks: the need for a new architecture of resilience

34. The reluctance of successive governments to engage in, and to involve the full range of players including the armed services in regular simulations of whole-system civil emergencies arises from a deep-seated problem about the nature of our democracy.
35. The problem is that we find it difficult to establish a rational balance between the proportion of our national resources that we invest in insurance policies against uncertain risk and the proportion that we spend on doing things that are known to be necessary right now.
36. I do *not* believe that this problem can be resolved by relying on the ordinary electoral processes of our democracy. In the heat of the competition for votes, commitments to make Britain more resilient in the face of uncertain risks that may not materialise in the lifetime of the electors, let alone in the lifetime of the following Parliament, count for far less than commitments to tackle current problems that are certain and real. *Ex post* (as the establishment of this Inquiry illustrates), the electorate and the media take a considerable interest in the impact of, and the degree of preparation for responding to major risks. But *ex ante*, there is no similar level of media or public interest in uncertain risks. The wasp in the room attracts more attention than the Lion outside.
37. To address this imbalance within our democracy, I believe that we need a new architecture of resilience in the UK: a set of enduring institutions that cause successive governments to take resilience to uncertain risks more seriously than democratic pressures alone would cause them to do.
38. Until recently, this view might have been regarded (and was indeed in some quarters regarded) as eccentric. But I am glad to say that, very recently, it has become mainstream. The present Government issued, on 19 December 2022, a new *Resilience Framework*. This admirable document proposes a new set of institutions which will, if implemented, go a long way towards redressing the imbalance between concern with present problems and concern with future risks. The clear intent of the new *Framework* is to ensure that the imperative of managing big, long-term risks doesn't continually get overtaken by the need for ministers and officials to deal with smaller, more immediate problems. We are told that

there is to be a new Head of Resilience — a senior official in the Cabinet Office, equal in rank to the National Security Adviser. A new Resilience Directorate will support them, presumably kept separate from teams managing immediate crises, and equipped to do proper horizon-scanning for future risks. A new Resilience Sub-Committee of the National Security Council is also planned, which will force senior ministers to spend some of their time focussing on long-term resilience. An annual Parliamentary statement on resilience will ensure that Ministers are accountable to Parliament for what they have done to make us safer. A new National Resilience Academy is intended to train up a new generation of risk management professionals across government, public services, businesses and the voluntary sector. Finally, a reinvigorated National Exercising Programme will undertake both military-style and virtual reality exercises that test our resilience to a range of risks.

39. All of these seem to me to be sensible and practical propositions. If they are put into practice, and if they are maintained by successive governments of differing political colours over time, so that they become institutionalised in the way that, say, the Office of Budget Responsibility or the Monetary Policy Committee have become institutionalised, then I believe that they will go a long way towards making it likely that governments will invest a rational proportion of their time and resources in planning and preparation for responses to civil emergencies — and, in particular, whole-system civil emergencies.
40. There are, however, two additions to the present Government's *Framework* which I have proposed, about which the Inquiry has specifically asked me.
41. The first is the nomination of a Cabinet-level minister with full-time responsibility for resilience, who can work with the Prime Minister and the new Head of Resilience to ensure that frontline Secretaries of State actually take the actions mandated by the new Resilience Sub-Committee of the NSC. I am convinced that the need for the holder of such a dedicated Cabinet-level post to demonstrate his or her effectiveness, would give that office-holder an incentive to win whatever battles need to be won in Whitehall in order to make a living reality of what might otherwise stand in danger of becoming merely a set of good intentions. I was heartened, recently, to hear the Shadow Paymaster General indicate that the Opposition was taking a proposition of this sort seriously. I hope that the present Government might, likewise, consider it.
42. The second enhancement of the new *Framework* that I would urge is the additional establishment, through a new National Resilience Act, of a statutory and independent National Resilience Institute (broadly based on the model of the Climate Change Committee and the Climate Change Act 2008). As the Inquiry has asked me specifically

to elaborate on this proposal, I shall occupy the final paragraphs of my statement by doing so.

43. I should, first of all, stress (as there appears to have been some confusion on this point) that, as I have said previously, these are all one and the same proposal.
44. My suggestion is that, alongside the changes *within* government that are mandated by HMG's new *Framework*, Parliament should legislate to establish a National Resilience Institute. This Institute would, like the Climate Change Committee, be wholly independent of government — and would provide an alternative source of expertise about resilience-planning and resilience-response. It would report to Parliament rather than to ministers. Its governance would closely mirror that of the Climate Change Committee — with 5-year appointments of a Chair and a Board of around a dozen directors by a group of relevant Secretaries of State through a standard public appointments process; with statutory funding of around £4 million per year from a range of government departments and devolved administrations; with around 35 staff appointed by the Board of the Institute to assist it in its work; and with all the transparency requirements of a public body. Its members and staff should be people with a wide range of expertise in relevant areas of our national life — both in relevant technical disciplines (medical, digital, hydrographic, energy technologies etc) and in relevant practical fields (central government, devolved administrations, local authorities, logistics, utilities etc), so that they are not daunted by or afraid of confronting the difficult technical and practical questions that arise in relation to resilience-planning and resilience-response.
45. The principal difference between this National Resilience Institute and the Climate Change Committee would lie in the risks on which its governing statute required it to focus. Instead of statutorily advising Parliament and the government on the measures needed to achieve reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, the National Resilience Institute would have a statutory obligation to advise Parliament and the government of the day on the measures needed to achieve greater national resilience in the face of civil emergencies (and, in particular, whole-system civil emergencies). It would engage systematically in horizon-scanning for risks, in assessing the current state of preparedness to deal with those risks, and in recommending means of filling gaps in cases where it judged our preparedness to be inadequate.
46. I should emphasise that, like the Climate Change Committee, the National Resilience Institute would have no executive functions whatsoever. Unlike the current Government's proposed Resilience Directorate within Whitehall, the Institute would not be responsible in

any way for organising or supervising actual responses to civil emergencies. It would have no executive relationship to the civilian or military authorities. And it would not have any power to determine what measures those authorities took either in planning for emergency responses or in making responses on the day. It would operate without any line of accountability to the Resilience Directorate or the Head of Resilience, and would indeed have a specific remit to evaluate and second-guess the work of the Directorate as well as of line departments, devolved administrations, public agencies and services and local authorities. It would, in short, be an independent adviser, *not* an actor.

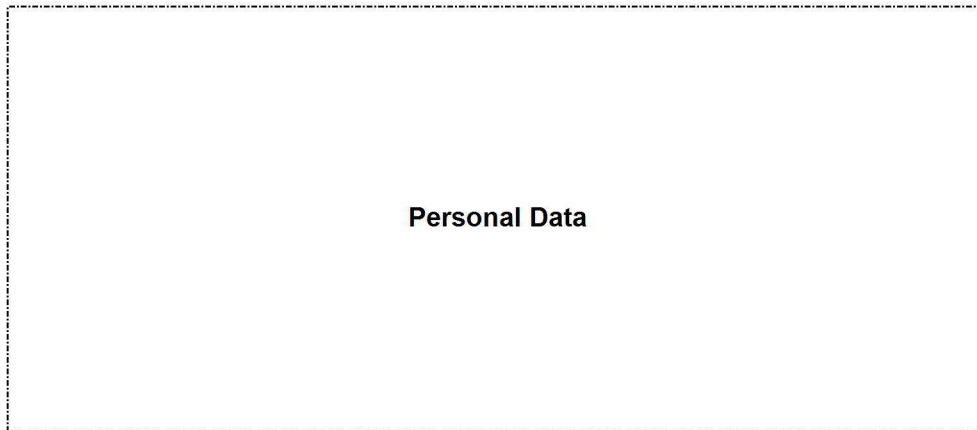
47. This point about the non-executive character of the Institute is of great importance — because it would permit the Institute to think about resilience without being constrained by whatever real or apparent constraints might limit officials and ministers within the bodies which have executive responsibilities. And this, in turn, would make the Institute the ideal locus for a ‘red team’ of the sort that I have recommended earlier in my statement. Freed from whatever ‘groupthink’ arises inside the executive bodies, the Institute could establish a group of staff whose sole purpose was to question assumptions at every stage in the resilience process within government: this could and should involve questioning the assumptions implicit in the construction of the national risk register, assumptions made in resilience planning, and assumptions made about the lessons to be learned from previous civil emergencies and simulation exercises.
48. Finally, in order to be effective, the National Resilience Act establishing the Resilience Institute should give the Institute open access to all officials and all official papers belonging to any public body or public service — and should accordingly require both the members of the Board of the Institute and relevant Institute staff to be security-cleared at the highest level, so that real or purported concerns about compromising national security cannot impede the Institute’s ability to interrogate government and other key actors about resilience-planning and resilience-responses. In this respect, the access of the directors and staff of the Institute should resemble that of the Judicial Commissioners of the Investigatory Powers Commission under Section 235 of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. I emphasise this point, because I believe that the official machine would otherwise be tempted to stifle irritating challenges to what Dame Sally described as ‘groupthink’ by restricting the Institute’s access to secret official information, citing national security concerns.

Conclusion

49. I hope that the preceding paragraphs have addressed all of the specific issues of interest to the Inquiry as identified by the Inquiry in the Request for Evidence sent to me on 8 February 2023.

Statement of Truth

50. I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.



Signed.....

Name: Oliver Letwin

Dated: 24th April 2023