

Witness Name: Mark Sedwill

Statement No.: First

Exhibits: 30

Dated: 2 May 2023

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**THE UNITED KINGDOM COVID 19 INQUIRY**

**WITNESS STATEMENT OF LORD SEDWILL**

**In respect of Module 1**

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I, **Mark Philip Sedwill**, WILL SAY AS FOLLOWS:

**A. Introduction**

1. I make this statement in response to the request by letter dated 8 February 2023 for evidence under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 made on behalf of Baroness Heather Hallett, the Chair of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry ("the Inquiry"). Subject to the limitations outlined below, I intend to address the UK's pandemic planning, crisis preparedness and resilience for a pandemic.

**B. Basis of this Statement**

2. I am making this statement in relation to preparedness for a pandemic in respect of events and decision-making between 11 June 2009, when the World Health Organisation ("WHO") announced that the scientific criteria for an influenza pandemic had been met for what became known as the 2009-2010 Swine Flu Pandemic, and 21 January 2020, when the WHO published its "Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Report - 1" in respect of Covid-19 ("Covid").

3. I am also making a statement in respect of Module 2 of the Inquiry. I note that the requests for information sought by Module 1 are described as being less specific and more open-ended than some of the requests made by Module 2.
4. I make this statement on the basis of my personal knowledge, as refreshed by documents which have been made available to me and by documents which I have been able to source. That is not to say that I have had the opportunity to read all such documents but I have endeavoured to identify certain key and illustrative documents relevant to my Module 1 evidence. I have also had access to a draft of the corporate witness statement of Roger Hargreaves dated 1 February 2023.
5. In preparing this statement, because, as good security practice, I neither retained nor backed up messages, I have not had access to any text messages or WhatsApps which I sent or received during my tenure as Cabinet Secretary or National Security Adviser. Nor did I maintain a diary. My notes taken in Cabinet and Cabinet Committee meetings were not verbatim and are contained in Cabinet Office notebooks that I returned when I left office. I also did not use personal emails for official business other than for routine administrative functions, such as blocking out my personal calendar. I shall explain in my Module 2 statement my use of messaging apps during the pandemic, and the distinction between policy discussion and policy advice. Policy decisions were required to be recorded formally either in response to written submissions or in the minutes from ministerial or official meetings. To the best of my knowledge, that process was followed during my period in office.
6. I am ready to supplement this statement in the light of any documentation, including from messaging apps, presented to me which I may not have considered.
7. The Inquiry has invited me to reflect on the various issues which are the subject of Module 1. Wherever possible, I have provided evidence of judgements I made while I was in office. Those drew on the resources available to a Cabinet Secretary and National Security Adviser, including the ability to commission proper analysis and have detailed conversations with key stakeholders to inform my own conclusions. I have not had access to such resources since I stood down in September 2020 and therefore am not able to provide more authoritative assessments than I was able to make at the time. For the same reason, nor am I able to offer authoritative analysis of institutional or policy developments since I left office.

8. However, in preparing my statement, I have noted the published reports by the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy ("JCNSS") ("Biosecurity and national security" HL195 / HC 611 18 December 2020) [MS/1 - INQ000146687], the National Audit Office (NAO) ("The government's preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic: lessons for government on risk management" HC735 19 November 2021) [MS/2 - INQ000146685], and the House of Lords Select Committee on Risk Assessment and Risk Planning ("Preparing for Extreme Risks: Building a Resilient Society" HL110 3 December 2021) [MS/3 - INQ000146694] and the Government's response (CP641 17 March 2022) [MS/4 - INQ000146688]. In order to refresh my memory, I have also reviewed the published records of my oral evidence to the JCNSS on 8 July 2020, the House of Commons Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) on 17 November 2020, and to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, Health and Social Care Committee on 2 December 2020.

**C. Summary of Statement**

9. In the sections below, I have set out my background and experience, the overall machinery of Cabinet government as it relates to contingency planning and crisis response, including the roles of Cabinet, the Cabinet Secretary and Cabinet Secretariat, and the National Security Council ("NSC"), the National Security Adviser ("NSA") and deputies, the National Security Secretariat ("NSS") and Civil Contingencies Secretariat ("CCS"). I have also described the structures and systems established to implement the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 ("CCA"), which provides the legislative framework for crisis preparedness and response, including *inter alia*, the function of the National Security Risk Assessment ("NSRA") in identifying strategic risks and determining responsibility for addressing them. Although I oversaw these systems and structures for only the last few years of the Module 1 period, I shall endeavour to explain how they had evolved beforehand to inform the Inquiry's assessment of national, state, government, civil service and Cabinet Office preparedness.

**D. Background and Experience**

10. At the material time, I was the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service (2018-20). I was also National Security Adviser (NSA) (2017-20) and will therefore set out the relevant responsibilities and my experience in those roles.

11. I served in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office ("the FCO") 1989-2013, with overseas tours to Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Cyprus and Pakistan. I was HM Ambassador and then NATO Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan (2009-11), FCO Political Director (2012-13) and Home Office Permanent Secretary (2013-17), having earlier served as Director of UK visas and International Director of the Border Agency (2006-08). I was National Security Adviser (NSA) 2017-20.
12. In June 2018, the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Jeremy (later Lord) Heywood, took medical leave. The Prime Minister (the Rt Hon Theresa May MP) asked me to become acting Cabinet Secretary, retaining my role as NSA. Tragically, Lord Heywood did not recover from his illness and had to retire on 24 October 2018. The Prime Minister then confirmed me as Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service ("HoCS"), alongside my role as NSA. The combination of the roles was not intended to be permanent. Her successor as Prime Minister (the Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP) endorsed this arrangement. I was conscious that, while I had more operational and command experience than was typical for senior civil servants from my positions in Afghanistan, the Home Office and as NSA, I had little experience of social policy, so relied heavily on the expertise and insight of colleagues.
13. In June 2020, with Brexit concluded, after the first phase of Covid and as he planned to shift the Government's focus to the implementation of the December 2019 manifesto, the Prime Minister and I concluded that it was time to separate the roles again. We had discussed this before and other positions in national or international public service to which I might move thereafter. We agreed that I would retire from the Civil Service at the end of September 2020, allowing for smooth succession to both roles. This was announced in an exchange of letters on 28 June **[MS/5 - INQ000146681 and MS/6 - INQ000146682]** and the Prime Minister briefed Cabinet the following day **[MS/7 - INQ000088880]**. The Prime Minister announced that my successor as NSA would be his European Adviser, Lord Frost. There was a separate appointment process for Cabinet Secretary & HoCS, overseen by the First Civil Service Commissioner, Sir Ian Watmore, and Simon Case was appointed to take over on 9 September 2020. My last Cabinet was the previous day **[MS/8 - INQ000088964]**.

**E. Machinery of Government**

Cabinet & Cabinet Secretariat

14. The Cabinet is the ultimate decision-making body of HM Government. Cabinet meetings are chaired by the Prime Minister and attended by the whole of Cabinet and the Cabinet Secretary. The Cabinet system is based on the principle of collective responsibility, with all government ministers ordinarily being bound by the collective decisions of Cabinet and its Committees, whether involved in the decision or not, and carrying joint responsibility for the Government's policies, decisions and actions. Ministers contribute to Cabinet or Committee discussions on the basis of departmental briefs and their own political judgement.
15. The UK Civil Service supports HM Government and the Devolved Administrations in Scotland and Wales. The Northern Ireland Civil Service is a separate institution.
16. The Prime Minister determines departmental structures and appointments, Cabinet Committee structures, membership and remit. These systems and structures reflect the Prime Minister's priorities, working preferences and external events. For example, shortly after the 2016 Brexit Referendum, the new Prime Minister established the Department for International Trade, the Department for Exiting the European Union and new Cabinet Committees. The current Prime Minister has established a new Department for Science, Innovation & Technology. In my Module 2 evidence, I shall set out how governance structures and systems were reshaped through the first few months of the pandemic. Cabinet committees can either meet in person or agree policy positions through a written procedure. During the pandemic, they also met remotely or in hybrid format. These meetings operated and were minuted in the same way as traditional in-person meetings.
17. The Cabinet Secretary is the head of the Cabinet Secretariat which supports the Prime Minister and the various chairs of Cabinet committees in ensuring that Government business is conducted in an effective and timely way, that proper collective consideration takes place, that decisions are communicated to the relevant Government department(s) and/or other public bodies for implementation, and that standards of public life and constitutional conventions are followed. Much of this is set out in the Cabinet Manual **[MS/9 - INQ000182315]**.
18. The precise role of Cabinet Secretary is organic, varying according to the personalities of the serving Cabinet Secretary and Prime Minister. My predecessors as Cabinet Secretary were Lord O'Donnell (2005-12) and the late Lord Heywood (2012-18). Like

me, Lord O'Donnell was also Head of the Civil Service throughout his tenure. Lord Kerslake held that position (2012-14) after which the roles were re-combined.

#### National Security Council & National Security Secretariat

19. The National Security Council (NSC) was established at the beginning of the Coalition Government in May 2010. The NSC is a Cabinet Committee, which succeeded committees from the previous government responsible for national security, intelligence, defence, international affairs and international development **[MS/10 - INQ000146670** (which shows the structures of the NSC after the Capability Review referred to below)]. The NSC's secretary is the NSA. As well as relevant senior ministers, the heads of the security and intelligence agencies, the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Deputy NSAs attend, plus other ministers, officials or uniformed officers as required. The NSC is chaired by the Prime Minister. It has sub-committees which deal with highly classified national security matters. My predecessors as NSA were Lord Ricketts (2010-12), Lord Darroch (2012-15) and Sir Mark Lyall Grant (2015-17).
20. Prior to 2010, for a civil or non-terrorist domestic emergency, the Civil Contingencies Committee (a Cabinet committee) would convene ministers and officials from the key departments and agencies involved in the response, along with other organisations as appropriate. In 2010, the Civil Contingencies Committee was replaced by a sub-committee of the NSC, the National Security Council (Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingency) ("NSC(THRC)"). In practice, the NSC(THRC) evolved to focus on preparedness, with crisis response handled through the COBR mechanisms (see below). Like other Cabinet Committees, the NSC(THRC) can secure collective agreement through either a ministerial meeting or written procedure.
21. Like the NSC itself, the National Security Secretariat (NSS) and NSA role were an evolution from the previous government, combining secretariats and roles responsible for foreign policy, international development, defence, intelligence and security.
22. The NSA had two or three deputies throughout this period responsible for foreign policy, defence, economic security, domestic security, intelligence and resilience. While responsibilities and structures for the first three evolved over time, those for domestic security, intelligence & resilience remained the same and bridged the creation of the NSC, NSS and NSA.

23. In 2010, the post of the Prime Minister's Security Adviser became the Deputy National Security Adviser for Intelligence, Security & Resilience ("DNSA(ISR)"). Those responsibilities included the line management of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) and oversight of the Civil Contingencies Act (CCA) structures and systems, both of which are described in more detail below. Robert Hannigan was Director-General Security & Intelligence (2007-10). His successors, who became DNSA(ISR) thereafter, were Sir Oliver Robbins (2010-14), Paddy McGuinness (2014-18), Richard Moore (2018), Madeleine Alessandri (2018-20) and Beth Sizeland (2020-22).
24. Serving concurrently as Cabinet Secretary and National Security Adviser, I took the opportunity to reform the various secretariats in the Cabinet Office to create a single integrated Cabinet Secretariat **[MS/11 - INQ000146674 and MS/12 - INQ000146675]**. I sought to ensure that the various elements worked effectively as a combined team, drawing on the operational and contingency planning expertise of the national security community and the expertise in socio-economic issues of the domestic policy community **[MS/13 - INQ000146678]**. Below, I set out a description of how the National Security Risk Assessment, for which I had overall responsibility as NSA, impacted domestic policy departments, which I oversaw as Cabinet Secretary.
25. Like previous administrations, the Coalition Government committed to produce quinquennial reviews of national security. The 2010 and 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Reviews ("SDSRs"), respectively, "Securing Britain in an Age of Uncertainty: The Strategic Defence and Security Review" **[MS/14 - INQ000182181]** and the "National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015" **[MS/15 - INQ000146693]**, both contained sections and spending commitments on national resilience.
26. When I became NSA in 2018, the National Security Council commissioned me to lead a refresh of the 2015 SDSR following the 2016 Brexit referendum. In March 2018, the Government published the National Security Capability Review **[MS/16 - INQ000146692]**. In the section on national resilience, the Government committed to strengthen local resilience capabilities and to publish a (delayed) national bio-security strategy (see below). The Review also set out a structured approach to formulating and implementing national security policy, the "Fusion Doctrine", which incorporated the challenge "red team" function, scenario planning etc. into the standard policy formulation process.

27. While recognising that it would not have been appropriate simply to replicate national security mechanisms in domestic, social and economic policy, as Cabinet Secretary, I encouraged the Civil Service policy profession to explore a similar approach **[MS/17 - INQ000146676]**. This work was in its early stages as Brexit and the pandemic occurred.

## **F. Crisis Management Systems & Structures**

### The Civil Contingencies Act 2004

28. The CCA was introduced following the 9/11 attacks and several domestic crises, including severe flooding, fuel protests, foot and mouth disease, and several major public service strikes. Previous legislation included the Emergency Powers Act 1920, Emergency Powers Act (Northern Ireland) 1926, the Civil Defence Act 1948, and the Civil Protection in Peacetime Act 1986. The CCA has two key elements: local arrangements for civil protection (Part 1) and emergency powers (Part 2).
29. Part 1 established a statutory framework of roles and responsibilities for local responders. It requires Category 1 responders, including blue light services likely to be involved in most emergencies, to develop emergency plans and business continuity plans, and to cooperate and communicate with the public, businesses, Category 2 and other local responders etc. Category 2 responders, such as the Health & Safety Executive, utility companies and transport operators, are less likely to be involved in the heart of planning work but will be heavily involved in incidents that affect their own sectors. Category 1 and 2 organisations meet in Local Resilience Forums (“LRFs”) in England and Wales, with similar local resilience arrangements in Scotland and Northern Ireland, operating under the Devolved Administrations.
30. Part 2 updates the 1920 Emergency Powers Act and the 1926 Emergency Powers Act (NI). It allows for the making of temporary special legislation (emergency regulations) to deal with the most serious and urgent of emergencies. Their use is subject to safeguards and can be deployed only in exceptional circumstances **[MS/18 - INQ000056153]**.

### The Civil Contingencies Secretariat



31. The Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) was founded in 2001 and is responsible for preparing for, responding to and learning lessons from major crises. While it remained a separate body, it was brought within the remit of the National Security Secretariat (NSS) in 2010. Its primary functions during the Module 1 period were:
- (a) within the framework of the CCA, working with departments, devolved administrations and local responders on contingency planning and capabilities, including issuing advisory National Resilience Standards **[MS/19 - INQ000056231]**;
  - (b) identifying both immediate and long-term risks, including through managing the process to produce the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) and National Risk Register ("NRR") **[MS/20 - INQ000146680]**;
  - (c) coordination of the Government's crisis management mechanisms, including COBR;
  - (d) managing the Emergency Planning College, and providing training and support to resilience professionals across the UK and internationally.
32. As I shall explain in my Module 2 statement, CCS were responsible for running the governance mechanisms during the initial phase of the pandemic. As the pace and scale of the crisis increased, and due to the very wide societal impacts arising from the spread of Covid, the entire Cabinet Secretariat was to become involved and be reinforced, both to provide additional policy capacity and resilience for staff absences due to illness or isolation. It was also important to retain capacity in CCS should another crisis (e.g., a terrorist attack) arise in parallel.

#### COBR

33. The Government maintains the capability to respond to the range of hazards and threats facing the country through the COBR mechanism. This term comes from 'Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms' which is the location in Whitehall where such meetings usually take place. COBR is the primary forum for agreeing the central government response to major crises which have international, national or multi-regional impact, and for liaising with local responders. It includes senior ministers and/or officials supported by specialist input. It facilitates cross-government coordination and ensures

that ministers and senior officials are provided with timely, coordinated and quality advice to enable effective and efficient decisions during times of national crisis.

34. When COBR is activated, the key objectives are to protect human life, maintain public order and restore normalcy as soon as possible. The apparatus is designed to cope with concurrent crises.
35. COBR is supported by a range of standing capabilities, depending on the nature of the crisis, to provide authoritative information to decision-makers including legal and scientific advice, coordinate the operational response and logistic support, determine the allocation of responsibilities between national and local authorities, understand impact, plan recovery and communicate to Parliament and the public.
36. The UK adopts a “frontline first” or “bottom-up” approach to managing crises, based on the principle that operational decisions should be taken at the frontline with coordination only at the highest necessary level. Most crises, such as flooding, industrial incidents and major road crashes, only affect local areas. Local responders manage them without the direct involvement of central government. In some instances, the scale or complexity of a crisis means that some degree of central government support or coordination becomes necessary. A designated lead government department or, when appropriate, a devolved administration or another public body, is made responsible for the overall management of the central government response. In the most serious cases, the central government response is coordinated through COBR. COBR can operate at ministerial or official level. I chaired numerous COBRs as FCO Political Director, Home Office Permanent Secretary and NSA, including, for example, on the 2018 Salisbury attack.
37. COBR meets as required, from a 24/7 standing meeting, to every few hours, or every few days. Once the initial emergency phase of a crisis has been handled, responsibility is transferred as soon as practicable to the lead government department(s), releasing the COBR machinery and CCS personnel to be available for another emergency. For example, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) took over lead responsibility for the Government response to the 2017 Grenfell disaster. The pandemic, however, required a whole-system response, so (as I shall set out in my evidence for Module 2) the Cabinet Secretariat was reinforced, and new ministerial and official groups were established and adjusted as the pandemic and the Government's response progressed. It is standard practice for departments to be able

to redeploy policy and operational staff to meet emerging priorities or crises (e.g., policy staff to operational roles during strikes).

38. The 2015 SDSR allocated capital to CCS to upgrade the outdated COBR facilities in Whitehall and the secure communications network [MS/21 - INQ000146671]. This programme of work was still ongoing by 2020.

#### National Security Risk Assessment & National Risk Register

39. The National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) (previously the National Risk Assessment) is the government's main classified tool for identifying and assessing the most serious risks facing the UK or its interests overseas over a multi-year period. CCS coordinates biennial reviews and also produces a public National Risk Register (NRR) based on the NSRA (without the classified material). The NRR is useful to local emergency planners, resilience professionals and businesses who do not have access to classified systems and material. The House of Lords Select Committee report, "Preparing for Extreme Risks: Building a Resilient Society" [MS/3 - INQ000146694], suggested combining the NSRA and NRR to give primacy to the unclassified public document, with a classified annex for national security risks.
40. The NSRA and NRR support operational risk management, planning and responses in all tiers of the UK resilience system and also serve as a common framework for understanding risk. The Government Chief Scientific Adviser ("GCSA") chairs a sub-committee of National Security Council (Officials) (NSC(O)) to oversee the risk identification and assessment process. The NSRA/NRR does not anticipate every possible threat or hazard, but collates into groups risks of a similar nature in order to determine the planning required to respond. A risk is considered for inclusion if it meets the pre-defined criteria for an emergency under the CCA, could credibly occur within the subsequent two years and has the potential to cause significant harm. This is done by identifying the reasonable worst-case scenarios (RWCS), which are used to develop national resilience planning assumptions to be shared with local and national responders. These planning assumptions might be common to several of the NSRA/NRR risks.
41. For each risk identified, a government department or agency is designated as the risk owner. They produce the reasonable worst-case scenarios in consultation with experts, for example their Chief Scientific Adviser, other departments and agencies,

the intelligence community, industry and sector stakeholders, and external scientific, academic and policy subject experts. They also assess likelihood and impact: human welfare (such as fatalities, casualties, displacement), behavioural and societal issues, economic impact, public services, environmental damage, national security and public order, and international impact. For each new version of the NSRA/NRR, risk owners update existing risks and identify new ones that fall within their remit.

42. There are common consequences of the most significant risks. For example, a mass casualty event could be caused by a terrorist attack, an environmental disaster, a public health crisis or a major industrial accident. By preparing for these common consequences, rather than for every individual risk and scenario, the system is able to be more flexible in responding to emergencies. The National Resilience Planning Assumptions provide information across a range of common consequences from the number of fatalities and casualties that might arise in a civil emergency to the scale of disruption that such events could have on essential services such as transport and health. The planning assumptions in the 2019 NSRA, based on an influenza-type pandemic, included half the population being infected, over 800,000 excess deaths, mental health impact, disruption to the NHS and other public services, economic damage and potential public disorder. These assumptions reflected consequences which were common to a coronavirus or zoonotic pandemic.
43. All Government departments and agencies are also required to maintain business continuity plans (BCPs) to enable them to continue to provide essential services in a crisis, e.g. data loss, strikes, environmental disasters, epidemic disease or terrorist and cyber attacks. The typical planning assumption is 20% staff absence.

#### SAGE

44. The Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies ("SAGE") is also a standing capability. It is convened by the Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA) as required or requested by COBR, and consists of independent experts relevant to the situation faced. Because it is independent, its advice contributes to but does not represent Government policy.

#### Military Aid to the Civil Authorities ("MACA")

45. MACA is the collective term for the operational deployment of the armed forces in support of the civilian authorities. It is intended to be used as a last resort, once mutual aid between civil authorities and/or the private sector has been considered insufficient or inadequate, or if the civil authorities lack the capability at least in the immediate period to which government is responding.
46. The armed forces operate under the supervision of the relevant civil authorities, and all civil and military criminal and civil law apply. MACA can include armed assistance to maintain national security or public safety, but usually involves the provision of unarmed logistics, planning, expertise or personnel eg, to support the Covid vaccine programme, during major public sector strikes, to deal with elements of the Salisbury chemical weapons attack and to provide security during the 2012 Olympics. Inevitably, it requires the military to be diverted from their core tasks, with an impact on training and readiness. In my Module 2 statement, I shall set out how military planners were deployed to support the Department for Health and Social Care ("DHSC") in its response to the pandemic, and the public saw many military personnel staffing vaccination centres from late 2020.

#### Local Resilience

47. There are 42 LRFs in England and Wales based on each police area (with the exception of London, where one covers both the Metropolitan and City Police Area). The local arrangements in Scotland and Northern Ireland are similar, reflecting the variations in local governance under the devolution settlement. An LRF is not a legal entity, nor does it have powers to direct, but is a forum to encourage collaboration. In England, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and subsequently the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) acts as the main Government interface with LRFs through Resilience Advisers **[MS/22 - INQ000055993]**.
48. When I took over as Cabinet Secretary, I realised that it was necessary to strengthen our resilience systems and structures in case of a "No Deal" Brexit **[MS/23 - INQ000146672]**. I convened an official Cabinet sub-committee, EUXT(P)(O), which met frequently to review contingency programmes being developed as part of Operation Yellowhammer across central, devolved and local governments **[MS/24 - INQ000146673]**. Government departments were required to review their business continuity plans. The LRFs, some of which had atrophied in the previous few years,

were revived and CCS trained more officials and other responders in contingency planning and emergency response. I visited several LRFs during this period throughout the UK.

49. In July 2019, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (CDL), the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, further strengthened this programme of activity when he took responsibility for no deal preparedness [MS/25 - INQ000146677]. As I shall set out in my evidence for Module 2, these stronger mechanisms and additional resources were thus available in early 2020 as attention switched to the pandemic. Some departments, such as the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP), were able to switch to remote working swiftly, having invested in the necessary IT systems as part of their business continuity planning processes. Others had to adapt as the first lockdown was introduced.

#### International Cooperation

50. CCS is also required to maintain relationships with multilateral organisations that focus on resilience, in particular relevant teams within the EU, NATO and the UN, to exchange best practice and provide mutual aid.
51. While NATO's Civil Emergency Planning Committee initially focused on civilian support of the military effort wartime, its remit evolved to focus on civil preparedness more generally. The EU's Civil Protection Mechanism ("CPM") is the framework for participating European states to provide mutual assistance in the event of a disaster. CCS's equivalent is the European Commission's Emergency Response Coordination Centre. Its role evolved from liaison between member states to a shared competence with pooled resources. In the context of the Brexit process, the UK left the CPM and thus NATO became the key forum for engagement on resilience with European neighbours.
52. The UN's resilience activity is managed through the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. CCS worked primarily with the Department for International Development (DfID) on this.

#### **G. Public Health System**

53. The Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) is the lead department responsible for human pandemic contingency plans. It oversaw NHS England, Public Health England (“PHE”) and the social care sector.
54. PHE was established in 2013 and combined the health security functions of the Health Protection Agency (HPA) with a range of health improvement functions from various agencies and the Department of Health. Its purpose was “to protect and improve the nation’s health and to address inequalities”. Local authorities regained responsibility for a range of community and public health services, and each upper tier authority was required to appoint a director of public health, whose responsibilities included responding to emergencies. Duncan Selbie was Chief Executive (2013-20).
55. The 2013 decision to combine health security and health improvement responsibilities was reversed in 2020-21. Having operated in “shadow” form as the National Institute for Health Protection (NIHP) since the summer of 2020, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) was formally established in April 2021. It took over responsibility for health protection, while PHE’s health improvement functions were transferred to the DHSC and the NHS. It also subsumed NHS Track & Trace and the Joint Biosecurity Centre, which had been established in mid 2020. The Health Secretary explained the reform in a speech to Policy Exchange in August 2020, commenting that: “we need an institution whose only job is to prepare for and respond to external threats like pandemics” **[MS/26 - INQ000182384]**.

#### Pandemic Preparedness

56. A pandemic was one of the top risks on the NSRA/NRR. In July 2018, meeting a commitment made in the 2015 SDSR and the 2018 National Security Capability Review, the Government published the UK Biological Security Strategy **[MS/27 - INQ000146686]**. It set out a four-phase approach to biological hazards and threats: understand, prevent, detect and respond. The Home Office had the overall lead responsibility, alongside DHSC for human health and the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) for animal and plant health. The JCNSS examined this system in its report on biosecurity (HL195 / HC 611 18 December 2020 **[MS/1 - INQ000146687]** and made recommendations to improve state preparedness.

57. Updates of the NSRA/NRR during the 2009-20 period considered a range of pandemic risks as well as flu, including zoonotic diseases. A major contingency planning exercise, Exercise Cygnus, was carried out in 2016 on the basis of a flu pandemic. Flu was considered to be the most plausible pandemic scenario and the purpose was to test the UK's system and capabilities, e.g., the preparations should excess deaths overwhelm mortuary capacity and the legislation which might be required to impose social controls to impede its transmission.
58. Such an exercise is not intended to predict, or identify how to prevent, a specific pandemic threat, but to test the system's response to the likely consequences of any pandemic and identify actions by departments, devolved administrations and other public bodies necessary to improve resilience and response. Key outcomes from this exercise included: preparatory legislation, the requirement that business continuity plans for public bodies enabled them to operate with 20% staff absent, resilience standards for LRFs and the establishment of groups to consider the ethical and faith issues relating to excess deaths. Departments were required to incorporate actions arising into their business plans, with resources allocated accordingly through normal budgetary processes under Ministerial direction.
59. The reports by the National Audit Office (NAO) [MS/2 - INQ000146685] and House of Lords Select Committee [MS/3 - INQ000146694] in late 2021 made a range of recommendations to improve societal resilience and state preparedness. Both identified the need for robust risk assessment processes at the centre of government to be matched by more effective operational preparedness throughout the public service.

#### **H. Assessment & Reflections**

60. In my 11 May 2020 personal minute to the Prime Minister [MS/28 - INQ000146679], noting that demographic and societal factors would be significant in a final judgement, I set out my initial assessment of the state's effectiveness in preparing for and coping with the first phase of the pandemic.
61. My key judgement was that the UK had relied on ingenuity, teamwork, exceptional commitment from front-line public servants and volunteers, and the fortitude of our citizens to overcome significant capability gaps in the health and care sectors, which were not properly equipped for a pandemic. In making that judgement, I was also



conscious of the impact of an aging population plus co-morbidities such as respiratory illness and obesity, and of underlying societal issues affecting differential life expectancy and health outcomes. Stable communities with a strong sense of community spirit had both internal resilience and connections to state mechanisms. I recalled, from my time at the Home Office, that both resilience and connection were weaker in communities in deprived areas, particularly those where individual and/or community relations with authority were poor (in which, for example, vaccination rates were also significantly below the norm). It was my view that responsibility for addressing this should be shared between central, devolved and local government, communities and individuals.

62. Despite the experience of its political and professional leadership, dedicated and determined staff, and a surge of civilian and military personnel, DHSC was neither structured nor resourced for a public health crisis of this magnitude. It straddled the complex NHS, the under-powered public health system (public health grants to local authorities had been reduced in real terms over the previous decade) and the fragmented public/private provision of social care. Required to manage the ill-health of an ageing population, the NHS had inadequate critical care capacity for a public health crisis. Responsibility for protecting all citizens in need was scattered across central, devolved and local government, and the public, private and third sectors. I argued that the health and social care systems needed major reform. I also recommended that medical supply chains should be regarded as critical national infrastructure. While I did not address the question (which has been raised subsequently) of ring-fencing contingency investment in the health and care systems, my view was that, whatever the institutional mechanisms, choices between investment in immediate and contingent priorities, like choices about all other government expenditure, had to be made by ministers accountable to Parliament.
63. While substantive policy recommendations on such a fundamental question of social policy are beyond my capability as a private citizen, among the recommendations from the 2021 G7 Panel I chaired on economic resilience were proposals on global health and socio-economic inclusion **[MS/29 - INQ000146683]**. The parallel G7 report on international pandemic preparedness, "The 100 Days Mission" **[MS/30 - INQ000146690]** focused on how international cooperation should be improved. During a recent House of Lords debate for the Committee stage of the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill, issues of societal resilience in remote communities were raised by several speakers. The House of Lords Select Committee report **[MS/3 -**

INQ000146694], to which I have already referred, makes several significant recommendations in this area. These issues remain, rightly, at the heart of the national political debate.

## **I. Conclusion**

64. The Covid pandemic was unprecedented and strained the capabilities of every society and state, authoritarian or democratic, unitary or federal. Tragically, in the UK as elsewhere, many people died before their time and many more have been affected by the disease itself and its aftermath. Like everyone, this includes my own family and friends. I express my deepest condolences to all those bereaved or affected.
65. I hope that the Inquiry will yield important lessons for societal resilience, state preparedness and national response. In my foreword to the 2021 G7 Report on economic resilience [MS/29 - INQ000146683], I noted that:

*“Over the next few decades, the most significant risks are not other single-source crises like the pandemic, but some combination of adverse environmental, health, geo-political and socio-economic events. Future resilience is already under pressure because of ageing populations, the debt burden, the scale and scope of the green transition, cyber security threats, and adapting to the climate impacts already locked in”.*

The Inquiry’s conclusions are crucial to preparing for those crises to come.

## **Statement of Truth**

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.

**Signature**

**Personal Data**