

Witness Name: Matthew Collins

Statement No.: First

Exhibits: [To Follow]

Dated: 17 May 2023

**UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**  
**CORPORATE WITNESS STATEMENT OF**  
**MATTHEW COLLINS**

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I, Matthew Collins, Deputy National Security Adviser, National Security Secretariat, 70 Whitehall, London, SW1A 2AS, will state as follows:

1. I make this corporate statement in response to the Inquiry's request for evidence dated 3 April 2023, in order to address matters of relevance to the National Security Secretariat's role in preparedness in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. I can clarify or expand upon the evidence contained within this corporate statement if that would be of assistance to the Inquiry.
3. This corporate statement should be read alongside that of my colleague, Alex Chisholm, Permanent Secretary for the Cabinet Office, in which he provides a high-level overview of the Cabinet Office's structures, role, people and processes, insofar as these are relevant to the matters and period covered by the Inquiry's request. As well as Roger Hargreaves', Director of the COBR Unit, in which he provides a detailed account of the role of the former Civil Contingencies Secretariat, COBR Unit and Resilience Directorate, and provides descriptions of the relevant products and reviews produced by these teams since 2010.
4. As set out in the cover letter, this corporate witness statement was drafted in response to the questions set out in the UK COVID-19 Public Inquiry's letter dated 3 April 2023. The letter did, however, ask for details of documents and processes that fall outside of the remit and jurisdiction of the Cabinet Office. In such cases, I have outlined the respective departmental responsibilities should the Inquiry require further information.

## SECTION 1 - INTRODUCTION

### Introduction to the Author

5. I am a senior civil servant and serve as the Deputy National Security Adviser for Intelligence, Defence and Security within the Cabinet Office. I have held this position since January 2022.
6. Prior to occupying this role, I was Director for Intelligence, Technology and Security within the National Security Unit in the Cabinet Office. I previously worked in the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism where I was responsible for the Prevent pillar of the UK counter-terrorism strategy and for targeted communication campaigns to prevent terrorism and serious and organised crime. Prior to this, I was a Deputy Director in the Department for Education, responsible for coordinating the rollout of the academies programme.
7. This corporate statement is arranged in the following sections:
  - a. Section 1 – Introduction
  - b. Section 2 – Overview of key teams, roles and fora
  - c. Section 3 – The Cabinet Office's Role in overarching national security and international strategy
  - d. Section 4 - The Cabinet Office's role in the Biological Security Strategy
  - e. Section 5 - Specific responses
  - f. Annex A: Summary table of reviews

## SECTION 2 - OVERVIEW OF KEY TEAMS, ROLES AND FORA

### Key teams

8. A full description of the main business units, directorates, secretariats and other operational bodies within the Cabinet Office, and information on their respective roles and responsibilities, is set out in Alex Chisholm's corporate statement and detailed in Roger Hargreaves' statement, as referenced at paragraph 3 above. As such, what follows is a very brief explanation of the relevant teams for which I take partial or complete responsibility:
  - a. The National Security Secretariat ("NSS"), which has responsibility for the coordination and collective agreement of national security and foreign policy issues. One of NSS' main responsibilities is to improve the UK's resilience to respond to and recover from emergencies, and to maintain facilities for the effective coordination of government response to crises.
  - b. The Civil Contingencies Secretariat ("CCS") was founded in 2001 as a core part of NSS following a number of crises faced by the government, including fuel protests and widespread flooding. It was the unit within the Cabinet Office responsible for

preparing for, responding to and learning lessons from major emergencies during the Relevant Period. Between 2010 and 2022, the CCS sat as part of the NSS and is now split into two separate functions: the COBR Unit, which has remained in NSS and the Resilience Directorate, which has moved to the Economic and Domestic Secretariat (“EDS”).

- c. The Biological Security Strategy (“BSS”) team was established in January 2022 to deliver the refreshed BSS, drawn from existing resources within the Cabinet Office. This followed advice from the Government Chief Scientific Adviser (“GCSA”) that the Cabinet Office should lead the refresh process, noting the complexity of the cross-government risks and lack of central government oversight since the publication of the 2018 strategy led by DHSC, DEFRA and the Home Office.

#### Key Roles and Fora

9. The key roles within the National Security Secretariat are as follows:

- a. The National Security Adviser (“NSA”) is the head of NSS and senior adviser to the Prime Minister and Cabinet on security, intelligence, defence, and certain foreign policy matters;
- b. The Deputy National Security Advisers (“DNSAs”) support the work of the NSA. There are currently two DNSAs covering International Affairs, and Intelligence, Defence and Security respectively.

10. The key relevant ministerial fora within the Cabinet Office are as follows:

#### *Current*

- a. The National Security Council (“NSC”) is the main ministerial forum for considering matters relating to national security, foreign policy, defence, trade strategy, international relations, development, resilience and resource security. This is shadowed by an officials committee, the NSC(O), and is chaired by the National Security Adviser, who also acts as secretary to the NSC.
- b. NSC (Nuclear Deterrence and Security) is the main ministerial forum for considering matters relating to nuclear deterrence and security.
- c. NSC (Europe) is the main ministerial forum for considering matters of foreign policy and trade in relation to Europe.
- d. NSC (Resilience) is the main ministerial forum for considering issues relating to resilience.
- e. National Security Council (Economic Security) to consider issues relating to economic security.
- f. The National Science and Technology Council (“NSTC”) is the main ministerial forum for considering matters relating to strategic advantage through science and technology, and ensure R&D spend is managed effectively in accordance with plans and with impacts evaluated.

- g. The Domestic and Economic Affairs Committee is the main ministerial forum for matters relating to the economy and to home affairs. This is supported by the aforementioned EDS Secretariat.

*Previous*

- h. NSC Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies (THRC) was the NSC subcommittee, covering a wide portfolio of national security risks, including biological security. THRC stopped meeting in July 2019 as part of a wider consolidation of Cabinet committees. It was shadowed by an officials committee NSC (THRC)(O).
- i. NSC (THRC)(Resilience) coordinated all resilience activity across Government and reported to NSC (THRC). This was shadowed by an officials committee NSC (THRC)(R)(O). I am aware of a further Inquiry Rule 9 specifically about the role and responsibilities of the THRC and the THRC(R). Accordingly, I won't comment further in this submission.

### **SECTION 3 - THE CABINET OFFICE'S ROLE IN OVERARCHING NATIONAL SECURITY AND INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY**

- 11. It may help to explain how the Cabinet Office's role complements that of other departments. The Cabinet Office, in conjunction with No.10 and under the instruction of the Prime Minister, is responsible for overarching national security and international strategy and the identification of major risks to the UK and UK interests overseas - in line with the UK Government's responsibilities and respecting devolved competencies - and to coordinate activity where necessary due to the scale and complexity of a particular issue or until a lead department is identified. The Cabinet Office is also responsible for collective agreement of the policy response.
- 12. Under the principle of subsidiarity, Lead Government Departments are responsible for implementing strategy by means of sub-strategies as well as anticipating, preparing for, and responding to each risk identified by the Cabinet Office in the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA).
- 13. The 2010 NSS-SDSR, 2015 NSS-SDSR, Integrated Review 2021 ("IR2021") and Integrated Review 2023 ("IR2023") were all cross-Government processes led by joint Cabinet Office-No10 teams under the leadership of the NSA, reporting to the Prime Minister. The Government engaged with Parliament, Devolved Governments, external experts and wider stakeholders with an interest in the UK's security and prosperity during each process.
- 14. The 2010 and 2015 SDSR processes were relatively decentralised compared to subsequent reviews with small Cabinet Office teams, primarily constituted of departmental secondees, coordinating the process. Departments were largely responsible for the drafting of their respective sections of the strategy. This shifted to a more centralised model in 2018 and 2021 in which the drafting was largely done by a cross-governmental team established within the Cabinet Office. For the 2023 Integrated Review Refresh, a relatively small but agile Cabinet Office team was responsible for drafting and liaising directly with departmental review teams.

The 2015 NSS-Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR)

15. In 2010 the Government committed to a new SDSR in each Parliament and the 2015 refresh was committed to in the 2015 Queen's speech. The 2015 NSS-SDSR (INQ000196497) set out that since 2010 the threats faced by the UK and interests overseas had increased in scale, diversity and complexity due in large part to globalisation and technological advances.
16. Its predecessor, the 2010 NSS-SDSR (INQ000196506), marked the first time that the Government reviewed defence, security, intelligence, resilience, development and foreign affairs policy and capabilities in the round. It linked judgements on where to direct effort and focus the available resources, to choices on which risks and policies to prioritise. It set a clear target for the national security capabilities the UK will need by 2020, and charts a course for getting there.
17. The 2015 review was conducted in close coordination with the 2015 Spending Review which was published in the same week. The review shaped the contribution to the Spending Review of key departments involved in national security. For example, it was published within a fortnight of the 2015 Paris terror attacks, accordingly and in line with the threat assessment, the review emphasised the UK's commitment to strengthening domestic resilience to threats such as terrorist attacks. This was reinforced by increased Home Office resources devoted to counter-terrorism policing in the Spending Review.
18. In developing the 2015 NSS and SDSR, officials met with representatives from leading think tanks, NGOs, academic institutions and industry. This included a series of regional academic engagement events in Edinburgh, Belfast, Aberystwyth, Durham, Exeter and Cambridge, as well as London. Scotland Office Ministers were engaged throughout the process and Scottish Government Officials and Ministers met with UK Government counterparts at various stages from August until December 2015. The Cabinet Office team also engaged with international allies and partners visiting Paris, Brussels, Washington and Berlin.
19. As a quinquennial strategy, the 2015 NSS-SDSR set out how the UK would deliver a refreshed national security vision and strategy, through a set of national security objectives for the period 2015-2020. These objectives were high-level, enduring and mutually supporting, designed to collectively deliver the UK's National Security Strategy. They embodied an integrated, whole-of-government approach and were underpinned by new, targeted investment commitments.
20. The 2015 NSS-SDSR did not explicitly set out a plan for pandemic preparedness but included a number of related references and commitments:
  - a. In line with the 2015 NSRA, it retained public health-related risks as a tier-one risk over the 2015-2020 period and cited disease, particularly pandemic influenza, emerging infectious diseases and growing Antimicrobial Resistance as threats to lives, public services and the economy. It stated that the risks to health security would continue to grow as the world became more physically interconnected

through travel. This signalled a broadening of the Government's approach to preparedness work moving away from a focus on pandemic influenza in isolation.

- b. Citing the 2014 Ebola epidemic, it stated that the emergence and spread of microbes with the potential to cause pandemics and the rise of drug resistance, including Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR), were significant concerns. It stated that the UK had robust and comprehensive plans in place and the necessary capacity to deal with infectious diseases, including pandemic influenza and respiratory diseases.
  - c. It committed to establishing a new rapid response team of technical experts to deploy to help countries investigate and control disease outbreaks and expand the UK's Emergency Medical Team to provide medical assistance to help contain outbreaks when needed.
  - d. It committed to increased international action to strengthen global health security, such as our leading contribution to combating the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, and leading the global fight against Antimicrobial Resistance by implementing the UK AMR Strategy 2013–18 and delivering a new AMR Innovation Fund launched with China, bringing in a broad range of international partners.
  - e. It set out the work to establish a £20 million UK Vaccines Network to bring together the best expertise from academia, philanthropic organisations and industry for developing and trialling new vaccines for infectious diseases.
  - f. It signposted the publication of a national biosecurity strategy in 2016 which would address the threat of natural disease outbreaks, as well as the less likely threat of biological materials being used in a deliberate attack.
  - g. It recognised the importance of domestic resilience and effective national-local join-up. It signalled the launch of a review of NSC and COBR Crisis Support capabilities and announced the upgrading of the response infrastructure, including COBR and other departmental capabilities.
  - h. It signalled early progress on new early warning processes including establishing a domestic early warning process for hazards to cover international incidents.
  - i. It described the government's work to ensure horizon scanning across the government focused on strategic priorities, drawing on the best expertise available and feeding effectively into policy development.
21. The review restated that the NSC was responsible for overseeing its implementation and departments were responsible for implementing individual commitments, reporting these through their Single Departmental Plans. A new NSC Committee - the NSC (SDSR) sub-Committee, chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (CDL) - was established to review overall progress on a regular basis and to tackle the most challenging cross-cutting commitments.
22. The 2015 NSS-SDSR committed to providing public annual reports on progress to Parliament, of which there were three. A Written Ministerial Statement from the Prime

Minister and the Leader of the House of Lords confirmed the publication of each and copies were placed in the House of Commons library:

- a. The First Annual Report 2016 (published Dec 2016) (already disclosed) set out an evaluation of implementation progress which described strong progress on the 89 commitments laid out in the SDSR 2015. 38 of which were ongoing throughout that Parliament, 12 had been completed with a further 4 commitments forecast to be completed by early 2017. The report specifically referenced ongoing work to strengthen the UK's response to emergencies and work to review the UK's response to crises working alongside partners in government, the private sector, communities and the public. This included improving UK preparedness to deal with infectious diseases. It also signalled the commencement of a cross-government review of the UK's approach to the biological security landscape.
- b. The Second Annual Report was subsumed within the publication of the National Security Capability Review (NSCR) (published March 2018) (INQ000196498). The report set out how the UK was working closely with the EU, NATO and countries around the world in preparing for and responding to major emergencies, including earthquakes and major disease outbreaks. This is covered in detail below.
- c. Third Annual Report 2018 (published July 2019) (INQ000196499) updated on the key commitments of both the 2015 NSS-SDSR and the NSCR 2018. It set out:
  - i. Some of the key successes such as the implementation of a Fusion approach to national security, the fulfilment of the UK's NATO 2% commitment and events such as the coordinated response to attacks in Salisbury. Progress against SDSR and NSCR commitments was as expected. Although only 32 SDSR and 3 NSCR commitments were marked as completed, the complex and enduring nature of many commitments meant that on-track, enduring commitments were not annotated as completed.
  - ii. The work of the UK Public Health Rapid Support Team (UK-PHRST) - established as part of the 2015 SDSR - it consisted of a team of public health specialists rapidly deployed to outbreaks of infectious diseases to prevent them from becoming global threats. The UK-PHRST also conducted research and capacity-building to improve epidemic preparedness.
  - iii. Impact of Overseas Development Assistance programmes which were designed to build countries' capacity to prevent, detect and respond to disease outbreaks - each of which contributed to the UK's domestic pandemic preparedness.

*The 2018 National Security Capability Review (NSCR) [including the 2017 NSS-SDSR Rapid Refresh and the 2017 NSS-SDSR Annual Report]*

23. Recognising that the world had become more uncertain and volatile since 2015, the NSC commissioned a focused National Security Capability Review (NSCR) to ensure that the UK had the right capabilities to deliver the three 2015 NSS-SDSR national

security objectives to (1) "Protect our people", (2) "Project our global influence" and (3) "Promote our prosperity". Conducted within the existing national security fiscal envelope, departmental Spending Review 2015 settlements remained the basis of the government's spending plans. Funding for new NSCR recommendations was found through the reprioritisation of existing budgets.

24. In mid-2017 the Prime Minister and Ministers reviewed the high-level findings of the initial Rapid Refresh and agreed that work on the NSCR should continue as planned, concluding with a published report. The NSCR introduced a new national security doctrine, the Fusion Doctrine, which intended to improve the ability of the National Security Council (NSC) to make national security strategy and then implement its decisions across Government.
25. Throughout the process Cabinet Office officials engaged their counterparts in the Devolved Governments, concluding with wrap-up briefs to all the administrations. The central team also maintained regular communication with the Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland Offices in London to ensure that all their concerns and issues were encapsulated in the final product.
26. In terms of pandemic preparedness the NSCR explicitly highlighted diseases and natural hazards as a priority challenge likely to drive UK security priorities for the coming decade. It stated that one or more major hazards could be expected to materialise in the UK every five-year period. Diverged from previous reviews, it listed pandemic influenza among the five most serious major hazards threatening the UK. The NSCR reiterated the importance of UK collaboration with the EU and NATO on matters such as public health, to strengthen the alliances and to prepare for the challenges ahead.
27. Following the NSCR, a new set of cross-government structures and processes were established. A principal component was the National Security Strategy and Implementation Groups (NSSIGs) established for each of the NSC's key national security priorities. Each NSSIG was chaired by a 'Senior Responsible Official' (SRO) at Director-General level. These SROs were drawn from relevant departments and agencies across Government and made personally accountable to the NSC. Individual SROs, through their NSSIGs, were to determine the right partners in and outside of Government for their priority areas.

#### The Integrated Review 2021

28. The UK's departure from the EU provided a unique opportunity to reconsider many aspects of domestic and foreign policy, building on existing friendships but also looking further afield. The Integrated Review 2021 (IR2021) (INQ000196501) presented a comprehensive articulation of the UK's security, defence, development and foreign policy, and outlined the government's strategy on issues ranging from trade and climate change to countering state threats and terrorism, and meeting global health challenges.
29. The IR2021 marked a divergence from previous reviews since it addressed national security, foreign policy and the UK's approach to the global economy together, setting out the PM's vision for 2030 and how the government should use the full range of national levers to achieve it. It signalled a more holistic approach to resilience that



covered all types of risks, whether they were malicious or non-malicious, acute or chronic.

30. The IR2021 was the product of over a year of work across government, subsuming work started in 2019 in preparation for an anticipated SDSR-type exercise (including the NSCR 2020 set out in Question 6 of the Inquiry's Rule 9 dated 3 April 2023). This anticipatory work included a Joint Intelligence Organisation report on the Global Strategic Outlook and an NSS Capabilities Audit (INQ000196500 and INQ000196504). The Strategic Outlook set out the Joint Intelligence Committee's assessment of potential changes in the global context and their implications over the following ten years. The Capabilities Audit offered a summary snapshot of the nature and range of current UK security and defence capabilities, and their cost and quality, based on departments' own assessments. Departmental returns for the capability audit indicated that capabilities did not best equip the UK to deal with threats and opportunities highlighting, among others, the need to better mitigate risks including; climate change; antimicrobial resistance/ global health risks.
31. The initial SDSR work was paused during the first COVID-19 lockdown, to redirect resources to the COVID-19 response. A small core team remained in place, to support COVID-19 policy work, produce policy advice on the long-term international recovery, and plan and prepare for resumption of the IR21. NSC agreed to relaunch the IR21 on 24 June 2020. Initial activity focused on establishing a revised project plan for an autumn 2020 publication, alongside the rescheduled CSR; updating the evidence base for the review, including expert engagement, a revised Global Strategic Outlook incorporating COVID-19 scenarios, and analysis of international comparators; policy work organised around possible chapters for the final publication: national resilience, the UK in the world, science and technology, global issues, and defence.
32. The process included engagement with Parliament, the Devolved Governments, external experts and wider stakeholders, and a public Call for Evidence that received a diverse range of over 450 submissions. It also involved substantial engagement with allies and partners, much of which built on existing dialogue on COVID-19 response and recovery.
33. IR2021 Pillar 4 focussed on improving the UK's own ability to anticipate, prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from risks - and included building the ability of allies and partners given that in an interconnected world. It committed to accelerating vaccine distribution globally as the fastest route to recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and strengthening UK and global preparedness for future pandemics. Improving global health, including international pandemic preparedness, was committed by means of the Prime Minister's five-point plan.
34. The IR2021 placed greater emphasis on resilience, recognising that it is not possible to predict or prevent every risk to our security and prosperity - from natural hazards like extreme weather events to threats like cyber attacks. It emphasised the need to broaden resilience work beyond central government and stated that resilience should be a nationwide effort across individuals, businesses, local government, local resilience structures and responders. Although defence and national security are reserved matters, work to improve national resilience touched upon devolved policy areas – for

example, responding to non-malicious threats, such as pandemics. The review committed to maintaining engagement with the Devolved Governments and English regions as appropriate in areas of both devolved and reserved policy.

35. With respect to governance, the review noted that the NSC remained the key formal mechanism through which ministers would collectively set national security strategy and oversee its implementation and that virtually every department and minister, as well as Devolved Governments and local authorities, would be involved in its implementation.

#### The Integrated Review Refresh 2023

36. The 2021 Integrated Review foreshadowed the global turbulence of the early 2020s. Threats such as Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine and China's growing economic coercion exemplified an increasingly dangerous world with far-reaching consequences for the security and prosperity of the British people. The 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a More Contested and Volatile World' (IR2023) updated IR2021 to respond to the rapid deterioration in the strategic environment.
37. The objective of the IR2023 was not to set out a wholesale shift in strategy or policy. Instead, the refresh had two core aims: firstly, to update the strategic context of the UK's approach on the basis of major geopolitical events since IR2021; and secondly, to reframe and adjust some key policy areas in line with the new Prime Minister's specific priorities. It was run by a joint Cabinet Office-No10 team under the leadership of the Prime Minister's Special Adviser for Foreign Affairs and the NSA. The Government engaged with Parliament, the Devolved Governments, external experts and wider stakeholders with an interest in our nation's security and prosperity during the refresh process.
38. The IR2023 concluded that the UK's most pressing foreign policy priority was to address the threat posed by Russia to European security. It set out a new approach to manage the epoch-defining challenge presented by China, including the risks to the UK and its allies' prosperity and security. It reinforced the argument laid out in the IR2021 for further investment in the UK's science and technology ecosystem whilst also emphasising the need to manage the risks from rapid technological change.
39. IR2023 also reiterated IR2021's commitment to strengthening the UK's resilience, which had been subsequently developed through the UK Government Resilience Framework. In response to the lessons of both the pandemic and the wider consequences of the invasion of Ukraine, IR2023 introduced greater emphasis on addressing strategic vulnerabilities - the underlying economic, societal, technological, environmental and infrastructural factors that leave the UK exposed to crises or attacks. As part of this approach, IR2023 confirmed the importance of strengthening the UK's health resilience, through the One Health approach and the work of the Centre for Pandemic Preparedness (under UKHSA). It signalled the future publication of the 2023 Biological Security Strategy Refresh, which would set out a renewed vision to protect the UK from significant biological risks. In parallel, IR2023 committed that the UK would continue international efforts to prevent the next global health crisis, and committed to publishing further detail on the UK's contribution to global health in the refreshed Global Health Framework.

40. The IR2023 also set out the new national security governance structure, with the NSC overseeing a 'strategic cycle' to drive delivery of the IR2023 strategic framework. It emphasised greater integration of the IR2023 into the Government Planning and Performance Framework, greater use of horizon-scanning, improved monitoring and evaluation of delivery, and strengthened culture, diversity and inclusion. Coordinated by the NSS Strategy Unit the strategic cycle would be underpinned by products including the NSRA and ongoing monitoring and evaluation of delivery progress.

#### **SECTION 4 - THE CABINET OFFICE'S ROLE IN THE BIOLOGICAL SECURITY STRATEGY**

41. Prior to 2021, biological security policy coordination and implementation were owned by DHSC, DEFRA and the HO with a number of other government departments and agencies playing significant roles in delivery. The Cabinet Office played a minor role, primarily through the CCS's High Impact Threats programme. The Cabinet Office attended the UK Biological Security Strategy Governance Board and the BSS Working Group, established by the 2018 Biological Security Strategy and chaired by Home Office.
42. In January 2021, in accordance with the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy's 2020 Biosecurity and National Security Report recommendations as well as the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser's advice, a dedicated biological security team was established in NSS in the Cabinet Office. The team was tasked with refreshing the 2018 strategy including a review of the biological security coordination and implementation responsibilities. Ministers subsequently agreed that the Cabinet Office team should retain responsibility for coordinating the implementation of the forthcoming strategy.
43. The Cabinet Office continues to play a central role in facilitating Cabinet subcommittees on biological security-related topics. The NSC (Threats, Hazards, Risks and Contingencies) oversaw the work of CCS's High Impact Threat programme which included many malicious biological risks. Given the cross-government representation on this committee, importantly including DHSC and DEFRA who would lead on any response to a biological incident, it was considered the appropriate forum for agreeing and maintaining oversight of the 2015 and 2018 Biological Security Strategies. NSC (Threats, Hazards, Risks and Contingencies) stopped meeting in July 2019. The 2023 Biosecurity Refresh was developed through dedicated National Security Ministers meetings, including Ministerial meetings in June and December of 2022 and official meetings chaired by the DNSA. Once the 2023 Biological Security Strategy is published, NSC itself will consider matters related to biological security.

##### *The (Internal) 2015 Bio Security Strategy*

44. In 2015 the NSC (Threats, Hazards, Resilience And Contingencies) approved the internal-to-Government 2015 Bio Security Strategy (BSS2015) which followed over a year of strategy development following the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser's review into biological threats (INQ000196503). The review identified that there was no

single joined-up approach to preventing and mitigating biosecurity threats to the UK and its interests overseas.

45. Against the backdrop of a burgeoning Ebola epidemic, the Home Office on behalf of wider Government, developed the cross-departmental all-risk approach to dealing with biological disease. It was envisioned that the all-risk biosecurity strategy would allow Government to better coordinate current and future activity; more effectively commission and fund research; identify synergies between departments; more readily apply lessons identified from outbreaks; and develop a more effective national response to any future UK and/or global biological incident.
46. The 2015 NSS-SDSR and the 2015 National Risk Assessment (INQ000196497) identified a naturally-occurring outbreak of communicable disease (pandemic influenza) as the highest risk scenario facing the UK, with the potential to cause hundreds of thousands of fatalities and to cost the UK tens of billions of pounds. The 2015 NSS-SDSR also identified a non-state terrorist biological attack affecting the UK or its interests as a 'tier 1' risk, based on its potentially catastrophic impact. The BSS2015 recognised that the impacts of major animal and plant diseases were far-reaching and potentially more likely to occur. There were 18 outbreaks of exotic notifiable animal diseases in the UK between 2000 and the end of 2013 with the estimated direct cost of these to the Government ranging from £2 million to over £3 billion.
47. The strategy set out that the risk of high-impact infectious disease was changing. Evolutionary and societal pressures such as urbanisation and globalisation were driving the natural emergence of new diseases. The democratisation of scientific knowledge including advanced techniques for manipulating biological systems, meant that the threat of deliberate biological attack was also changing.
48. The BSS2015 set out the framework within which the UK Government and the Devolved Governments were to manage the threat posed by significant outbreaks of disease. It aimed to reduce the risk of high-impact outbreaks of disease and mitigate the impact should they occur. The strategy was organised around seven cross-government workstreams, each comprising a number of key objectives:
  - a. assess the risks and threats we face and the opportunities we can exploit;
  - b. influence to reduce the factors that drive the development or emergence of biological risks;
  - c. safeguard hazardous biological materials and technologies;
  - d. detect the presence of harmful biological material and disease outbreaks;
  - e. mitigate the impact of a biological incident (to enable a swifter recovery);
  - f. analyse biological substances recovered from clinical and environmental samples; and
  - g. remove biological weapons capabilities.

49. The Mitigate workstream aimed to ensure that if an incident occurred, the UK would have access to appropriate countermeasures and recovery options to reduce its impact (including its economic impact) as much as was practicable. Taken forward by DHSC, it explicitly aimed to make the UK a difficult target for, and resilient to, biological incidents or disease outbreaks, by ensuring that:
- a. there were appropriate plans in place to mitigate the health effects of emerging infections or outbreaks;
  - b. the population understood the risks posed by biological hazards and how they should respond to these;
  - c. the at-risk population was, or was able to be, vaccinated or had access to post-exposure prophylaxis, where appropriate;
  - d. operational responders were properly trained (and equipped) to manage biological incidents; and
  - e. the UK had proportionate decontamination, clean-up and waste management capabilities.
50. Given the Home Office leadership and substantial DHSC ownership of equities in this strategy, these departments are better equipped to address these points and I advise the Inquiry to consult those departmental returns for more detailed information.

*The 2018 Biological Security Strategy*

51. When Ministers approved the BSS2015 they asked for the strategy to be periodically reviewed and for a public version to be developed. The 2015 NSS-SDSR, therefore, included a commitment to publish a national Biological Security Strategy in 2016. However, following the resource pressures departments faced as a result of work to implement Brexit, the Cabinet Office agreed that the publication of the strategy could sensibly move to early 2017. Throughout 2016 the Home Office, DHSC and DEFRA, worked closely with other government departments and Devolved Governments to review the BSS2015 and develop a publishable version.
52. The 2018 UK Biological Security Strategy (BSS2018) (already disclosed) was championed by the Minister of State for Security and Economic Crime in the Home Office and co-sponsored by the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Public Health and Primary Care in DHSC and the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity in DEFRA. As such, respective departmental returns should be consulted for context, detailed reasons for the publication delay, its interaction with Exercise Cygnus, and judgements on the effectiveness of its implementation.
53. The BSS2018's main focus was on better coordination across and beyond Government, and more effective leveraging of joint, overlapping or interdependent capabilities. It also set out areas to go further and identified a number of cross-cutting commitments which the new governance structure would drive forward. The strategy divided biological security into four pillars of activity necessary to address all biological risks, under which cross-government activity would be better coordinated:

- a. understand the biological risks faced and could face in the future;
  - b. prevent biological risks from emerging (where possible) or from threatening the UK and the UK's interests;
  - c. detect, characterise and report biological risks when they do emerge as early and reliably as possible; and
  - d. respond to biological risks that have reached the UK or UK interests to lessen their impact and allow the rapid return to business as usual.
54. Two themes ran across all four pillars and are drawn out separately:
- a. All elements of HMG's response must be underpinned by the right scientific capabilities and capacity, both in the immediate and longer term.
  - b. HMG must be able to take advantage of the opportunities that the biological sector offers the UK, whilst balancing individual risk considerations.
55. A BSS Governance Board was established as part of the BSS2018 but met only twice (in 2018 and 2019). The chair and ownership of the Board were intended to rotate between Home Office, DHSC and DEFRA but due to Brexit, COVID-19 and other pressures this did not happen, and ownership of the governance remained with the Home Office.
56. The Board was supported and informed by the BSS Working Group which met twelve times between 2018 and 2020. The Working Group was also responsible for informing and drafting an annual light-touch highlight report to be signed off by the Governance Board before being submitted to the GCSA, Security Minister, and NSC THRC. The 2019 inaugural annual report (INQ000196502) provided an update on progress made under each of these four pillars, from publication to the end of 2019. The report provided examples of cross-cutting government initiatives that have strengthened collective efforts, exploited opportunities, helped to resolve issues and invested abroad to develop capacity and build capability. It set out progress on establishing a cross-government governance structure to improve departmental collaboration and ensure that prevention activities, deployment of response capabilities, research programmes and engagement with international partners, industry and academia are aligned to achieve maximum impact in addressing biological risks.
57. Outside of regularised meetings, there were frequent engagements between departments and a number of the BSS2018 workstreams progressed outside of the oversight mechanisms introduced under BSS2018. Indeed, much of the government's biological security work remained within individual departments' existing governance mechanisms such as the DHSC-led Pandemic Flu Preparedness Board and the Cabinet Office CCS-led work on the National Risk Assessment alongside the ministerial committees set out above.

*The 2023 Biological Security Strategy*

58. The IR2021 committed to reviewing and reinforcing the UK's approach to biological security and to becoming a science superpower. The IR2023 reaffirmed that

commitment as part of the UK's work on global health and confirmed that the UK remains committed to strengthening health resilience at home and overseas.

59. Once published the 2023 UK Biological Security Strategy (BSS2023) will set out the vision, mission and priorities to protect the UK and its interests from significant biological risks, no matter how they occur and no matter who or what they affect. The refresh seeks not to reinvent the 2018 strategic framework, but update it to reflect the changing context, establishing clear, actionable outcomes and instituting robust governance and implementation mechanisms to drive operationalisation of the strategy.
60. Since the publication of the BSS2018, the threat picture has evolved significantly. There has been a notable increase in the number of high-containment laboratories handling dangerous pathogens and considerable advancement in the biotechnology sector. This strengthens the case for a system-wide approach to preparedness and resilience. The team is currently working with Chief Scientific Advisers and external experts who are contributing to the updated threat assessment and assuring strategy development. The BSS Governance Board has been reestablished and is playing a key role in ensuring all commitments are both proportional and robust.
61. Many leading academics and commentators have contributed to the BSS2023 through a public call for evidence and continue to provide robust insight and challenge. The BSS team has engaged networks across the whole of the UK, including professional bodies, learned institutions, think tanks and trade associations. Over 60 organisations responded to the Call for Evidence comprising around a hundred individual respondents. Noting the mix of devolved and retained competencies, the Cabinet Office team regularised engagement with Gevolved Government Chief Science Advisers and policy officials to ensure a truly UK-wide approach to biological security.
62. The refresh has also utilised the experience of the G7 Pandemic Preparedness Partnership and 100 Days Mission established during the UK's 2021 G7 Presidency. The BSS2023 has been developed in close collaboration with US officials and the US National Biodefense Strategy was published last year reflecting the shared ambition of closer biosecurity collaboration to strengthen collective defences.
63. The BSS2023 will draw heavily on the 2022 National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) and is nested within the Government's broader Resilience Framework. Improvements made to the new NSRA methodology include better assessing chronic and acute risks and the relationship between them, assessing risks over five years where appropriate, using multiple scenarios of risks where necessary, and improving our use of data.
64. The refreshed strategy will cohere a substantial waterfront of existing government activity and will articulate a number of scalable priority proposals to bolster defences. It will include coverage of naturally occurring infectious diseases, deliberate biological threats from hostile state actors and terrorists and accidental exposure resulting from laboratory leaks or misuse of research.

## **SECTION 5 - SPECIFIC RESPONSES**

65. The Lead Government Department Model is described in detail in Roger Hargreaves' supplementary statement (2.12 - 2.18). As set out there, senior Officials and Ministers in

the Cabinet Office use a range of factors when considering where to support or push departments to act. These factors go beyond doctrine and include factors such as political direction and more intangible factors like confidence in the management of an issue. In the case of complex cross-cutting strategies such as the IR2023 and 2023 BSS, it is prudent for the Cabinet Office to review and set strategy, and establish implementation mechanisms that empower departments to collaborate on delivery.

66. As per the Cabinet Manual (already disclosed) Cabinet committees help to ensure that government business is processed more effectively by relieving pressure on Cabinet. The committee structure also supports the principle of collective responsibility, ensuring that policy proposals receive thorough consideration without an issue having to be referred to the whole Cabinet. Policies which have a cross-departmental nature are discussed and agreed at these Committees, through the written or oral process, avoiding overlapping approaches and allowing for all equities to be considered. All strategies set out above were approved by the appropriate committee and as such, all subsequent implementation work has a set committee for reporting and decision-making.
67. The Cabinet Secretariat (of which the National Security Secretariat is a constituent part) exists to support the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, and the chairs of Cabinet committees in ensuring that government business is conducted in an effective and timely way and that proper collective consideration takes place.
68. Alongside the IR2023, the Cabinet Office developed IR2023 Implementation Guidance which sets out the framework for cross-government implementation of the IR2023, based on the concept of a 'strategic cycle': a regular pattern of processes combined with an agreed set of behaviours that together support the ongoing development and delivery of UK national security strategy. The revised approach is designed to place a greater emphasis on departmental empowerment, accountability and flexibility, rather than focusing on bureaucratic structures.
69. As part of establishing the strategic cycle, the Cabinet Office is working with departments and HMT to incorporate the IR2023 objectives and sub-objectives into departmental Outcome Delivery Plans ensuring they support the delivery of IR2023. This process is designed to mitigate duplication and result in clear accountability for the IR objectives as well as provide regular reporting on progress against objectives and the projects which underpin the delivery of those objectives.



**Statement of Truth**

I believe that the facts stated in this corporate 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:**

**Personal Data**

**Dated:** 17 May 20

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE