

Witness Name: Tamara Finkelstein

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**WITNESS EVIDENCE FOR THE COVID 19 INQUIRY MODULE 1 RESPONSE TO THE
RULE 9 REQUEST TO THE DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL
AFFAIRS (5 May 2023)**

DRAFT WITNESS STATEMENT OF TAMARA FINKELSTEIN

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I, Tamara Finkelstein, Permanent Secretary of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Seacole Building 2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 4DF will say as follows:

Introduction

1. I make this statement in my capacity as the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ("Defra").
2. I am making this witness statement to the Covid-19 Inquiry specifically in response to the second request for evidence, pursuant to rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 ("R9R"), addressed to me and dated 5 May 2023 (reference M1/DEFRA/02). I make this statement on behalf of Defra. Where the matters I refer to in this statement are within my personal knowledge, I say so explicitly in the statement. Otherwise, the matters I address in this statement should be understood to have been informed by information that has been gathered from across the department by its civil servants and provided to me.
3. This document should be read in conjunction with my previous witness statement dated 18 April 2023. I respond to each matter in sequence as per the R9R.

National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015

4. The 'National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015' (NSSR) is a five-year Strategy published by the UK Government setting out its vision for a secure and prosperous United Kingdom with global reach and global influence, and an approach for the implementation of this vision. The published scope of work covers the need to provide conventional defences against state-based threats, and the need to counter threats that do not recognise borders. This includes the deterrence of state-based threats, tackling terrorism, remaining a world leader in cyber security and ensuring the United Kingdom has the capability to respond rapidly to crises as they emerge.
5. In response to the questions that have been posed, Defra has sought to identify how it was engaged in the development of the NSSR. Defra's senior management team reached out to current policy colleagues who it considered may have knowledge of the subject areas covered in the R9R. This was supported by a targeted search of Defra's data repositories using specific terms covering the NSSR to help identify documents that could demonstrate Defra's input into the process. Within the time available to provide a

response, we could not identify colleagues who had an active role in the development of the NSSR. The automated search of the data repositories identified documents which indicated that a number of policy areas had been engaged in the development of the document and the team engaged colleagues in these areas to examine the material and understand how that engagement had unfolded.

6. In relation to the first question, whilst Defra was a participant in the development process of the NSSR, it was not responsible for leading the development of the content set out in the strategy. The review focussed on Tier One risks only and not Tier Two and Tier Three risks, therefore Defra was not recognised as a national security lead government department, only as a key stakeholder. The Tier One risks were led by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), Department of Health (DH), Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) and Home Office (HO), which were supported by key stakeholders, including Defra, Food Standards Agency (FSA), Centre for the Protection of National Infrastructure (CPNI) (now the National Protective Security Authority), Department for Transport (DfT), Department for International Development (DfID), Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC), Cabinet Office and the Defence, Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL)) [INQ000205187].
7. In relation to the third question asked, Defra is unable to assist in respect of the commitment to publishing a national bio-security strategy in 2016 and the subsequent publication of the UK Biological Security Strategy in 2018.

UK Biological Security Strategy 2018

Background, purpose and scope

8. In this section, I have sought to provide the information relevant to the role that Defra played in respect of the UK Biological Security Strategy (UKBSS). Where information could be obtained elsewhere, I have sought to identify this source.
9. The UKBSS was published in 2018 in light of the commitment outlined at paragraph 4.131 of the NSSR. It essentially provided an overview, for the first time, of all the government activity in the area of biological security and identified areas where government departments needed to integrate their actions in respect of biological security into a single

coherent thread. It was intended to identify where, in the future, government would co-ordinate a more comprehensive approach to meet the evolving risks (and opportunities) in respect of biological security. It sought to engender closer work between departments, so that prevention activity; the deployment of response capabilities; research programmes; and engagement with international partners, industry and academia are aligned, and their impact and investment maximised.

10. The strategy did not seek to duplicate or replace the work set out in other relevant national and international programmes, strategies and future work programmes such as the Global Health Security and UK Antimicrobial Resistance Strategy or the Vision and high-level Strategy for UK Animal and Plant Health Research to 2020 and Beyond. Instead, it set out an overarching narrative on how the cross-Government effort operates, and highlighted those areas such as horizon scanning that should be approached with an international as well as a domestic perspective.
11. It identified the importance of work overseas to reduce biological risks at source, recognising that events overseas can quickly escalate to become a direct threat to the UK or UK interests. This included international activities undertaken specifically to protect the UK and its interests and an acknowledgement of how our international development programme directly benefits UK biological security. While focused on delivering benefit for developing countries, the work of the UK's development programme is to help build health system capacity in countries overseas to reduce the risk of diseases and drug resistance spreading or reaching the UK by tackling these issues at source.
12. While pandemic preparedness is referenced throughout the UKBSS, it was intended as a report into our domestic capability to identify, assess, respond and recover from the threats to the UK, rather than an international pandemic response. The international work which could potentially enhance pandemic preparedness, was already being undertaken by other government departments, such as FCO, DfID, DH and MoD and was not a focus for Defra, beyond our routine horizon scanning and international reference lab activities.
13. The UKBSS was developed around seven cross-government workstreams, namely to:

- Assess the risks and threats we face and the opportunities we can exploit;
- Influence to reduce the factors that drive the development or emergence of biological risks;
- Safeguard hazardous biological materials and technologies;
- Detect the presence of harmful biological material and disease outbreaks;
- Mitigate the impact of a biological incident (to enable a swifter recovery);
- Analyse biological substances recovered from clinical and environmental samples; and
- Remove biological weapons capabilities.

14. Internally, our searches identified officials from Defra's then Strategy Directorate who were responsible for collating input from policy teams across the department and submitting Defra's response into the development of the UKBSS. However, at this point in time we have not been able to locate the input that Defra made in response to those commissions beyond participation in the ASSESS work strand meetings chaired by the Home Office. Defra and the Animal and Plant Health Agency were already responsible for the DETECT and MITIGATE actions relating to animal and plant disease outbreaks. Defra's activities across these work strands have been detailed in my first witness statement dated 18 April 2023.

15. These seven workstreams became the four pillars of our response to biological risks within the UKBSS ("four pillars"):

- **Understand** the biological risks we face today and could face in the future.
- **Prevent** biological risks from emerging (where possible) or from threatening the UK and UK interests.
- **Detect**, characterise and report biological risks when they do emerge as early and reliably as possible.
- **Respond** to biological risks that have reached the UK or UK interests to lessen their impact and to enable a rapid return to business as usual.

16. The strategy is structured around the following commitments which require government departments to work together and with other sectors to ensure their delivery:

- (i) We will ensure even more effective information sharing through a cross-government Biological Security Strategy Working Group. This will include:

- a. Better use of data sharing, including through exploring options for a cross-government data platform to allow sharing between sectors;
 - b. Long term trend mapping of emerging biological risks.
- (ii) We will improve our communication of risk information to the public, and our communication with the private, academic and third sectors, to improve biological risk awareness and to drive innovation in addressing that risk, including by learning from areas of good practice.
 - (iii) To achieve even more through our leading role in the international organisations that work to prevent biological risks, we will further enhance coordination across Government to deliver more coherent and effective engagement in international forums.
 - (iv) We will work with international partners to implement projects overseas as part of our International Biological Security Programme (IBSP) to improve the safety and security of dangerous pathogens which represent a potential threat to the UK and UK interests.
 - (v) We will work with industry and academia, including the UK Research Councils and other relevant organisations to review and refresh the Government's approach to dual use research of concern, ensuring this is proportionate.
 - (vi) We will approach biological detection in an integrated way across government to ensure that our experts are supported by the right technology and data systems.
 - (vii) We will do more to develop a common understanding within different Government departments and Government science capabilities of any science and technology challenges and gaps in relation to biological risks.
 - (viii) We will explore how to better coordinate our specialist biological science capabilities.
 - (ix) We will protect our science base for the future. Government-funded research via research councils and universities is ring-fenced. We will also protect the world-leading capabilities and scientific expertise within Government, so that our policy making, planning for response to biological risks continue to be underpinned by the highest quality evidence.
 - (x) We will work even more closely with industry and academia.
 - (xi) We will work closely with, and learn from, our international partners, ensuring the UK remains a valued source of expertise on the early warning of global biological risks – including through investment in joint research programmes.

Responsibility for overseeing the UKBSS

17. Governance for much of the activity described in the strategy falls within the existing portfolios and governance mechanisms of the relevant departments. However, to support delivery of the strategy, the Biological Security Strategy Governance Board, a cross-departmental director-led governance board, was created by the Cabinet Office. Progress in meeting the commitments outlined in the strategy (as well as any new work or identified gaps that emerge) is the responsibility of the Board, which is made up of representatives from key departments, including:

- Home Office
- Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) (including Public Health England representation)
- Defra (including the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA))
- Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
- Ministry of Defence (MoD) (including the Defence, Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl))
- Foreign and Commonwealth Office (including the Science and Innovation Network)
- Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS)
- Department for International Development
- GO-Science
- Cabinet Office
- Health and Safety Executive
- Office of Life Sciences
- Department for International Trade
- the Devolved Administrations.

18. At the time that the strategy was published, this governance board reported to the Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies Subcommittee (THRC) of the National Security Council, through the Minister for Security, to ensure that a forum at the highest level of Government held departments to account. The Government Chief Scientific Adviser also maintains an oversight of developments under the strategy. The strategy has recently undergone a major review by all government departments, including Defra, which is being led by Cabinet Office. The final version is now with departments and publication is expected imminently.

DEFRA's intended role in relation to the UKBSS

19. The UKBSS notes the need for an 'all-hazards approach' to human, animal and plant health, natural, accidental and deliberate threats, which corresponds to the international guidance in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction [INQ000116354]. The UKBSS highlights that Defra has responsibility for safeguarding the natural environment against animal and plant diseases, flooding and other hazards, supporting the world-leading food and farming industry in England, and sustaining its thriving rural economy. In respect of deliberate animal and plant disease threats, Defra is identified as being responsible for co-ordinating the national recovery effort.
20. The UKBSS therefore outlines Defra's role across all four pillars of the Government's response to biological risks. My first witness statement sets out the different systems at Defra for horizon scanning, risk assessing and responding to animal and plant health threats (**Witness Statement of Tamara Finkelstein, 18 April 2023, pages 27-59**). Defra's work on collecting and analysing data on animal and plant health, both nationally and internationally, is recognised as a key part of understanding both emerging and future risks. The strategy was intended to widen information gathering, improve information coordination and horizon scanning which relate directly to Defra's work. In relation to the commitment of preventing biological risks from emerging or spreading, Defra is noted to have a role in improving upon existing animal and plant health control arrangements, for example, through disease contingency plans which are updated annually. APHA's work in animal and plant health surveillance is recognised as contributing to the effective detection of biological risks to the UK. Finally, in respect of responding to significant disease outbreaks and biological incidents, Defra has a role in providing guidance on the reporting of pests and pathogens of concern (through the published disease contingency plans) as well as the decontamination of areas impacted by hazardous biological material.
21. As mentioned above, the strategy outlined 11 commitments. Defra was identified as one of the lead departments for commitments I, II, III, VII, IX and X (Defra was not sole lead as the commitments each had multiple Lead Government Departments). In contributing to their delivery, Defra has overseen more than 15 million new research projects over a four-year programme, on using genomic technology for terrestrial and aquatic animal and plant diseases, vector borne diseases, and has developed an online platform for the International Natural Hazards Forward Look and for zoonotic disease reporting.

22. In addition to its co-lead role in the commitments outlined above, Defra also contributes to the delivery of the other commitments of the strategy through business-as-usual work, protecting the UK from pest and pathogens and invasive non-native species through our border work. More detail is provided in the Corporate Witness Statement.

The UKBSS and pandemic planning and preparedness

23. The UKBSS is a report into the state of play of government actions and programmes to protect biosecurity at a domestic level. It was not a report into pandemic preparedness, although it does refer to the need to be aware of the threat from pandemics, which is recognised as increasing. Pandemic preparedness could be considered as both an international response and a domestic response. DHSC and the UKHSA, as Lead Government Departments, are responsible for developing and maintaining our capability in terms of horizon scanning, risk assessment, disease epidemiology, rapid and scalable vaccine production, laboratory diagnostics and genomic sequencing, understanding the effectiveness of non-pharmaceutical interventions, supporting the NHS and community health responses. These programmes would fall under the different pillars of the UKBSS but are equally applicable to a domestic epidemic as they are to a pandemic. While Defra's work improved our ability to horizon scan for new emerging threats, it did not specifically feed into pandemic preparedness which was focussed more on the threat from a strain of influenza spreading from human to human.

The UKBSS Entities

24. The Biological Security Strategy Working Groups were established in 2015 to support the Biological Security Strategy Governance Board. The working groups are composed of officials from government departments and are responsible for each of the seven workstreams that support the 11 commitments contained within the UKBSS. Each working group provides a forum for departments and agencies to discuss, share and evaluate progress, and coordinate work. The working groups are also responsible for informing and drafting an annual highlight report.

25. The working groups meet on a monthly basis. The following departments are standing members: CO, HO, GO-Science, FCO, FSA, DHSC, DfID, Defra, MoD, BEIS, HSE, Office of Life Sciences, The Devolved Administrations: Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland,

Department for International Trade, PHE, UK Border Force, DSTL and APHA. Each department is represented at meetings and can invite additional attendees to support detailed discussions as required.

26. While the Home Office, DHSC and Defra had co-lead roles in the delivery of the commitments identified in the strategy, the Cabinet Office has a more coordinating role within government through which it was considered better placed to assume responsibility for the refresh of the UKBSS.

27. The only working group in which Defra was involved was the ASSESS working group. Meetings of the working group involved discussion of upcoming issues, identifying threats and updating on a lot of the other commitments. ASSESS was chaired and supported by the Home Office until 2019. The chairing department provided secretariat support, which was responsible for circulating papers, developing the agenda and distributing any notes of the meetings in a timely fashion. Following this, consideration was to be given to rotating the chair between lead departments: the Home Office, Defra and DHSC. The effectiveness of the proposed approach was kept under review and as a result the Cabinet Office became the permanent chair department in November 2019. An annual report was submitted to the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, the Minister for Security, and the THRC in 2019 [INQ000205186], but the production of further reports was paused during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic when, in February 2020, monthly meetings stopped. The meetings subsequently restarted in November 2021, chaired by the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat.

28. The working group has continued to meet and develop the refreshed UKBSS which is about to be published. Defra was not involved in any separate sub-group meetings that were permitted to be called to focus upon specific delivery of the 11 commitments.

Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingency Sub-Committee Committee

29. Defra was not involved in pandemic preparedness. Although the UKBSS working group meetings have continued since the UKBSS was published in 2018, they did not discuss pandemic preparedness.

30. We have not been able to identify an individual in Defra or APHA, who was involved in the Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Programme ("PIPP") Board or the Pandemic Flu

Readiness Board (“PFRB”). I am therefore unable to address the structural and operational relationship between THRC and these boards, of their work programmes prior to the publication of the UKBSS.

31. The THRC was a subcommittee of the National Security Council and, as such, Defra has no information about the structure, governance or links to other programmes. THRC was chaired by the Prime Minister or the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and attended by certain ministers or senior officials with security clearance and the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs may be invited as appropriate. The THRC discussed a number of issues which could impact upon the biosecurity of the UK. The National Security Risk Assessment, which was first produced in 2015, and its further iterations, were provided to the THRC for discussion. This also included the Forward Look report, a three-monthly update on the risks which needed to be considered by the group such as industrial relations, key infrastructures, social unrest and protest, domestic disruption triggered by international events and animal and plant health. For the latter two, Defra provided information about likely seasonal events, such as winter avian influenza, summer vector borne diseases.
32. The abolition of the THRC did not have a direct impact on the work of Defra, and Defra continues to support preparedness in responding to animal and plant health threats, flooding response and CBRN recovery. Defra continues to provide a three-monthly Forward Look report to the Civil Contingencies Secretariat.

Reflections on cross-UK Government activity

33. To avoid inefficient duplication of work, there is a clear need for effective cross-UK Government co-operation given that a significant number of policies impact a number of Government departments as well as stakeholder groups. As set out in my earlier witness statement, each Government department has a defined set of policy responsibilities which it will lead on (**Witness Statement of Tamara Finkelstein, 18 April 2023, pages 11-13**). Within those defined policy responsibilities, there are also a smaller number of risk areas for which departments are named as Lead Government Departments in respect of planning, preparedness and response (**see Witness Statement of Tamara Finklestein, 18 April 2023, para 36 for Defra’s role as LGD**). Where the identification, control and recovery for such a threat lies in the scope of one department, they are the lead and will develop policies on behalf of Government. When the threat is shared across Government

Departments, a Lead Government Department will also be identified to coordinate the response and help ensure there is a consistent overall strategy.

34. Across both of those groupings, given the cross-cutting nature of many of the policies for which Defra is responsible, our approach to working with Other Government Departments needs to be collaborative. An example of this is laid out in the Exotic Disease Contingency Plan [INQ000101510]. In this plan, during an outbreak, a National Disease Control Centre (NDCC) would be set up so that Other Government Departments and agencies, who will likely be impacted by the policies that Defra is designing, implementing and/or managing, will be involved in the day-to-day management of the situation. The same approach also applies for Other Government Departments who design, implement and manage policies that have an impact upon Defra. My earlier statement also provides additional examples of how Defra operates with other Departments.
35. Communication is essential for working across departments, and with the wider stakeholder community so that all stakeholders have a full understanding of the overall strategy or approach. Our control strategies and contingency plans are published. Enabling 'policies' to be shared and tested ahead of their introduction is a key factor in reducing risks such as unintended consequences or inaccurately identifying the benefits that the policies are designed to deliver. There are also guidelines in place in respect of consultation with the wider stakeholder community [INQ000205188]. This is further underpinned, where appropriate, by robust scrutiny across Government firstly, and secondly, by debate when legislation is presented to the UK Parliament.
36. Many of these processes have been developed, following engagement with departments, and are managed by the Cabinet Office which has a clear overreaching role to ensure that Government operates effectively and efficiently to manage overlapping spheres of responsibility.
37. As set out in my earlier statement, CO therefore acts as the centralised Government department responsible for convening, co-ordinating and managing complex cross-cutting issues Defra related issues that need to be considered through these forums due to their cross-cutting nature include climate change adaptation, sustainability, major floods. Where there are potential differences, Cabinet Office-led processes helpfully bring government departments together to consider the appropriate direction through a process known as collective agreement. These processes are managed by a series of Cabinet Committees, each of which have defined scopes and mandates.

Does DEFRA consider that the Lead Government Department model is fit for purpose?

38. As described in the earlier paragraphs, the Lead Government Department (LGD) model clearly sets out the roles and responsibilities for each government department in respect of those defined issues. It also sets out how the roles and responsibilities will change depending upon the scale of the issue that is considered. In our view, the LGD model has proved to be effective, for example on floods where Defra is the LGD.

To what extent does DEFRA consider that there is a risk that the proliferation of overlapping intra-departmental and cross-departmental activity in core EPRR capabilities and pandemic planning?

39. As set out above, the complexity of the cross-cutting policy areas that require extensive co-operation across UK Government and collaborative engagement with key stakeholders means that the policies in question need to be considered holistically and benefit from the expertise of all relevant stakeholders. These discussions can be challenging given the diverse range of responsibilities that are being brought together but they are essential to design effective policies.

40. Defra has undertaken lessons learned exercises in order to enhance and improve its ability to respond to an event based on the learning from previous exercises or real-life events including the Covid-19 pandemic (**Witness Statement of Tamara Finkelstein, 18 April 2023, pages 111-115**). As stated above, we consider the LGD model to be effective in convening departments, based on our experience.

Involvement of the devolved administrations

41. In the Defra response of 18 April 2023, we have set out the principal approaches that Defra uses to guide its work with the Devolved Administrations (**see Witness Statement of Tamara Finkelstein, 18 April 2023, pages 19-21; 30-31**). Additionally, the UK Government has in place a governance system where there are Secretary of State led offices that have lead responsibilities for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

42. The responsibility for the cross-government initiatives, reviews, boards, committees and working groups referenced lies with Other Government Departments. Departments who

lead these structures are best placed to speak to the involvement of Devolved Administrations

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.

Signed:

Personal Data

Dated: 07/06/2023

Annex 1- Schedule of Documents

The following documents referenced in this witness statement have already been disclosed to the Inquiry:

- INQ000116354
- INQ000101510
- INQ000101474