

Witness Name: Deborah Higgins

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: 5

Dated: 11.05.2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF DEBORAH HIGGINS

I, Deborah Higgins, will say as follows: -

1. I have been employed by Serco since March 2018. I am the Head of the Emergency Planning College ("EPC"), a role that fulfills the requirements of a Services Director as described in the Cabinet Office contract with Serco Limited for the period 2010 to 2025.
2. The Relevant Period (11 June 2009 and 21 January 2020) pre-dates when Serco began operating the EPC. The Cabinet Office are best placed to address the period prior to April 2010.

Overview of the EPC

3. The EPC is a government-owned facility, operated by Serco Ltd under a 15-year contract placed in 2010, *'for and on behalf of the Cabinet Office'*. It currently operates under the supervision of the Resilience Directorate of the Cabinet Office.
4. The contract in place between the Cabinet Office and Serco largely covers the management of the Cabinet Office owned property and estate known as the Hawkhills. The Hawkhills estate comprises of approximately 80 acres of buildings, garden, park and pasture, and a further 120 acres of woodland. This includes a historic house, Hawkhills, dating back to the 1700s. The estate also includes a purpose-built training block. It has 14 modern training rooms in a variety of room

sizes and a fully equipped 150-seater lecture theatre, fitted with AV equipment, air-conditioning, and Wi-Fi. There are communal breakout areas for refreshments as well as 102-bedrooms providing on-site accommodation, including a gymnasium, bar and games room.

5. All costs related to the running and the maintenance of the estate and service delivery have been borne and/or generated by Serco Limited with revenue generated from the sale of training courses, supported by a complementary environment which is managed by Serco as a 'retail' business. The provision of prospectus training courses are not centrally funded by the UK Government.
6. The EPC offers emergency planning training services to domestic and international customers. The core purpose of the EPC is to deliver training of the highest quality in resilience and emergency planning to the wider stakeholder community.
7. Upon commencement of the contract for operation of the EPC in April 2010, Serco inherited a prospectus detailing courses offered by the EPC. The current prospectus covers courses that aim to enable responder organisations to meet both their statutory duties under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, and improve the UK's resilience to the full spectrum of civil protection risks, using the Integrated Emergency Management doctrine approved by Cabinet Office, including courses that cover the following areas:
 - a. Risk Assessment
 - b. Building preparedness, for example through writing and exercising plans.
 - c. Crisis Communications
 - d. Emergency response at tactical and strategic levels
 - e. Business Continuity.
 - f. Recovery Management

The EPC also offers a standalone portfolio of crowd and event safety training.

8. All prospectus courses are mutually agreed and approved by the Cabinet Office. The EPC attend regular meetings with the Cabinet Office to ensure that the courses continue to be relevant and are aligned to the Civil Contingencies Act

2004. A copy of the EPC Prospectus is appended to this statement as [DH/1 – INQ000184647].

9. Training courses provided by the EPC are not mandatory to government departments. Each customer selects courses based upon their own requirements.
10. Serco operates under a Performance Management System (PMS) that addresses the provision of high-quality training, the management of the college environment and the effective business management of the college. This governance regime is in place to ensure the successful performance of the contract.
11. The close proximity of the offices of both the Cabinet Office and the EPC facilitate daily communication and a productive working relationship between the two organisations.
12. The EPC Performance is monitored by the Cabinet Office using the Governance Framework set out in the contract. Governance consists of various Boards including the Contract Progress Board (CPB), Curriculum Board (CB) and the Partnering Board (PB). These Boards ensure that Serco is upholding the EPC brand and delivering high quality UK resilience doctrine to the maximum possible delegates at value for money prices. A copy of the Governance Framework is appended as [DH/2 – INQ000184648].
13. The EPC produce a monthly report for the CPB that covers the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for the contract. Examples of the monthly CPB reports are appended as [DH/3 – INQ000184649].
14. The CB currently meets monthly and is chaired by the Cabinet Office. The CB is where Prospectus training courses can be commissioned and approved, and any doctrinal changes are shared with the EPC. The Terms of Reference for the CB are included within the Governance Framework at [DH/2 – INQ000184648].
15. The PB meets annually to review the financial position of the college and consider recommendations for any matters requiring financial investment. The Terms of

Reference for the PB are included within the Governance Framework at [DH/2 – INQ000184648].

16. All training course content is based on the UK Civil Protection Doctrine. The EPC staff and Associates consist of resilience practitioners who have experience in application of this doctrine in all four nations of the UK. It is the responsibility of the Cabinet Office to contribute doctrinal inputs to the EPC curriculum. Relevant doctrinal updates, changes or new policy under development that is shared by the CO may require the EPC curriculum to be updated. Examples include when the National Risk Register is updated, and when the Civil Contingencies Act had its Post implementation Review in 2022.
17. EPC customers are mostly Category 1 and 2 responders from organisations identified as Category 1 and 2 responders, a list can be found using the following link https://protect-eu.mimecast.com/s/_TV-C8A6fgyyBjT2h0da?domain=gov.uk However, there is no imperative for organisations to undertake the training offered through the EPC and indeed there are other providers nationally.

Between 11 June 2009 and 21 January 2020, what reviews did the EPC complete in respect of the UK's planning, preparedness and resilience for: (a) whole-system civil emergencies and (b) pandemics?

18. The EPC did not complete any reviews specific to the UK's planning, preparedness and resilience for either whole-system emergencies or pandemics within the Relevant Period.
19. Whilst the EPC offer bespoke services to customers on request, the underlying content for UK customers always complies with the IEM framework.
20. The EPC experience is in developing and delivering course content in line with IEM doctrine and not in advising on mitigation for specific risks. The definition of "emergency" in the Civil Contingencies Act is concerned with impact and consequences (an event which threatens human welfare, environment or security), rather than with specific cause or source. For example, therefore, the EPC deliver training on general emergency management but not in relation to any specific type

of risk such as management of a pandemic. Instead, the products and services provided by the EPC are designed to help individuals and teams in government departments and other end users to prepare themselves for any and all Civil Emergencies and they can adapt and apply their learnings and skills in a specific context.

21. In addition to training, the EPC can be commissioned to run exercises and provide advisory services, in order to help organisations to prepare for identified risks.
22. Agencies across the UK plan and prepare for risks identified through the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) process which is the responsibility of the UK Government.

What advice and training did the EPC provide to the UK Government in respect of pandemic readiness?

23. The EPC did not provide any advice or training to the UK Government specifically in respect of pandemic readiness. Outside the Relevant period, in May 2020, the EPC developed and delivered COVID specific online training modules, commissioned by The Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS).
24. The EPC are not an advisory body to the UK Government. The EPC is a training supplier to individual customers, as detailed above, to include Category 1 and Category 2 responders. The EPC does not provide training to the UK Government as a whole.
25. The UK plan and prepare for risks identified through the National Security Risk Assessment NSRA process which is the responsibility of the UK Government. The Covid-19 pandemic was a global crisis on a scale not previously anticipated. Planning and preparedness activities for all emergencies involve training and exercising to support capabilities for the individuals and teams that have a role in an emergency as required by the Civil Contingencies Act.
26. All emergencies, whatever the cause, impact on people, premises, processes or systems. The EPC training that has been taken up, can be applied to risks, known

and unknown to responder organisations. Through this approach, it is likely that the EPC training contributed to pandemic preparedness. Training prepares organisations for the impacts of an emergency such as impact on staffing levels, loss of premises, loss of data, impact on systems etc.

27. Training can prepare organisations to think about their critical activities and the impact of loss or curtailment of those activities, regardless of the specific reason. As above, all emergencies, whatever the cause, impact on people, premises, processes of systems. As set out in the CCA, it is however, the responsibility of responder organisations to develop and validate (through exercising) pandemic plans. For example: EPC civil protection courses provide the knowledge and skills to individuals who might have a role in responding to any emergency. The EPC run a course on how to be a decision loggist for example. A loggist trained by the EPC might well have applied their learning in a pandemic exercise or in a real human disease outbreak, thus enabling lessons to be identified and learned. An emergency planner in a local authority might also have been trained and certified in business continuity. It would also provide a level of readiness to respond to any emergency experienced in that organisation or department. In addition, the training the EPC provide in tactical emergency management, writing contingency plans, emergency plans and business continuity plans should also support preparedness and resilience and response.

28. Any organisation that has undergone effective training is better placed to respond to emergencies, including a pandemic, through application of the skills they have learned. Through undertaking effective training, individuals have an enhanced state of readiness for an event such as a pandemic and the skills acquired through that training should support that emergency planning and response. A full suite of training is available for any organisation to utilise as required.

29. The UK Government Policy, doctrine, guidance and standards exist that are designed to support the responder community to plan for all types of emergencies, and more recently there have been a series of risk-specific standards published. The National Standards for Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) are a series of standards designed to set out what LRFs need to do for a series of risks. There is for example an LRF standard for Pandemic Influenza preparedness, and the EPC

share this information as part of our courses. The National Resilience Standards are appended as exhibit [DH/4 – INQ000023122].

What general reflections does the EPC have in respect of the UK's readiness for the Covid-19 pandemic?

30. On reflection, it is clear that the nature, scale and complexity of the pandemic was unprecedented in the recent past and went well beyond anticipated impacts. However, as I have highlighted above, any organization or individual that has undertaken any training provided by the EPC would have had an increased level of readiness for the Covid-19 pandemic.
31. In my view, organisations could extrapolate learning from their training and apply it to this unprecedented global emergency. The risk management process can support organisations to assess the potential impact of an emergency, regardless of the type of risk, and as a key stage of the Integrated Emergency Management framework, is taught in all the civil protection training courses provided by the EPC.
32. Reflecting is such an important activity, and the EPC is invested in identifying and learning lessons in order to continually improve. The EPC publish the Lessons Digest in partnership with the Cabinet Office. An example of this is appended as [DH/5 – INQ000184651].

Additional information

33. I understand that this statement relates to preparedness and resilience of the UK before the direct effects of Covid-19 began. It is a relevant matter to note that the pandemic heavily impacted the EPC as a business. The college stopped offering residential training and commercial events and many hospitality staff were furloughed as a result with only a skeleton staff being retained. Some staff in the resilience training business were also furloughed as the majority of the EPC customers were busy responding to the continuing crisis and not doing any training. Due to the prolonged nature of COVID-19, and like many other retail businesses, Serco had to downsize and restructure the business as necessary due

to a significant lack of customers utilising the EPC services with the exception of some NHS staff (Yorkshire Ambulance), who used the Hawkhill facility to continue their paramedic training.

34. The following additional matters I believe may be relevant to this Module albeit they fall outside the Relevant Period, relating to resilience and preparedness to the pandemic. The Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) commissioned the EPC to develop and deliver a series of online training modules encompassing pertinent topic areas. The overall aim of the programme was to enable continuous improvement amongst the Local Tier partner organisations in their COVID-19 response and recovery operations. The training was rooted in Government policy and guidance, Resilience Standards and established good practice. The course material was developed by The EPC in collaboration with CCS, MHCLG (now DLUHC) and other UK Government Departments, Devolved Administrations, the College of Policing, the University of Manchester and professional institutions. The audience for this programme were members of LRFs, Local Resilience Partnerships (LRPs) and Emergency Planning Groups (EPGs) and their constituent organisations across the UK. Modules were:

- a. Learning lessons
- b. Concurrent events
- c. Recovery
- d. Human Aspects and Civil Society

35. These online sessions offered an excellent opportunity for LRFs and other resilience stakeholders to explore expectations around UK Government guidance and thinking, and to share current local experience and good practice in relation to the COVID response.

36. In February 2022 the EPC were asked to conduct a 'fundamental review' of the resilience arrangements by the London Authorities Panel (LAP) and supporting Local Authorities. LAP is a collective Local Authorities formed 'pan London' grouping for the purpose of resilience management. The LAP is formed, primarily, of six Chief Executive representatives of six 'sub regional groupings of Local

Authorities' and Chaired by two additional Co Chairs who are also Borough Chief Executives. An EPC Associate was assigned to this task. A review report was subsequently provided to the LAP in October 2022.

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
Deborah Higgins

Dated: 11.05.2023

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit Reference	Document Description
DH01	EPC Prospectus
DH02	Governance Framework
DH03	Example Monthly CPB reports
DH04	National Resilience Standards
DH05	Example Lessons Digest