



contact@covid19.public-inquiry.uk

The Rt Hon Pat McFadden MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2AS

By email only

19 March 2025

Dear Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster,

UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry (“the Inquiry”) Module 1 Report on Resilience and Preparedness (Ref: 2500011688)

Thank you for your letter of 16 January and for publishing the UK government’s response to my Module 1 report on Resilience and Preparedness within six months of my findings, as requested.

In the Module 1 report, the Inquiry found that the civil contingency structures in the UK government, devolved governments and civil services failed to prepare the UK adequately for the Covid-19 pandemic. The recommendations that I have made are specifically designed to address these failures. They are vital to ensure that in the future the state is better able to discharge its primary duty of safeguarding its citizens. I set out ten recommendations which, taken together, seek to bring about fundamental reform of the way in which the UK government and devolved administrations prepare for whole-system civil emergencies.

I welcome the UK government’s statement to the effect that it broadly agrees with the Inquiry’s recommendations. I also acknowledge its acceptance that the Inquiry’s findings are an important part of learning lessons from the pandemic and that, as it says, it is committed to continue building the UK’s resilience and ensuring that it is well-prepared for future civil emergencies. I very much hope that the national resilience review, to which you refer, will help achieve that objective.

On the face of the response, it would seem that the UK government has accepted the majority of the recommendations, or at least the approach underpinning them, and believes that there has been significant reform of resilience arrangements and capabilities already.

Several improvements have been made, such as the establishment of a single ministerial Cabinet committee for resilience and preparedness, the publication of the National Risk Register and the 2023 UK Biological Security Strategy, the introduction of SITCEN and the launch of the [Gov.UK/prepare](https://www.gov.uk/prepare) website and the National Exercising Programme. However, they have not fundamentally altered the UK's central systems for preparing for, and responding to, whole-scale emergencies.

Far more work is necessary. Unfortunately, the phrase “we have already started work to improve how the system plans for and reacts to catastrophic/whole system risks” provides little reassurance of what action will be taken. As with the UK government's Resilience Framework, which was the subject of some scrutiny in the Module 1 hearing, I detect a tendency in the response towards the use of opaque language that conceals a lack of concrete action. There is too little detail in the response of the UK government's proposals with respect to a significant number of the recommendations.

I shall give two examples. Recommendation 2 proposes that the UK government abolish the lead government department model for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience, and require the Cabinet Office to lead on preparing for and building resilience to whole-system civil emergencies across UK government departments. In its response, the UK government has recognised the need for a greater Cabinet Office leadership role in this area. However this recommendation has not yet been fully accepted and I note that the current plan is for the Lead Government Department model to be retained. It is not clear what the greater role for the Cabinet Office will entail.

The evidence in Module 1 demonstrated overwhelmingly that major emergencies must be prepared for and responded to by a department residing at the heart of government, that is to say the Cabinet Office, as opposed to another government department acting as a Lead Government Department. I found significant flaws in the Lead Government Department Model in that government departments other than the Cabinet Office were constrained in their ability to oversee and coordinate the activities of the whole of government.

I look forward to seeing the results of the planned review of resilience and the update of the Central Government Concept of Operations for Emergency Response and Recovery (HMG CONOPs) in Spring 2025. I hope this review will set out in more detail the specific action that will be taken to ensure a strengthened Cabinet Office leadership role and active involvement in planning, monitoring preparedness and escalating risks, as per my recommendation.

Recommendation 10 proposes a UK-wide independent statutory body for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience. This recommendation is founded on my firm conclusion that the UK government and devolved administrations' systems of emergency preparedness, resilience and response failed in large part because there was no single, permanent and overarching body able to provide independent, strategic advice to the UK government and devolved administrations, assess the state of planning for, preparedness for and resilience to whole-system civil emergencies across the UK, and make recommendations

on the capacity and capabilities required to prepare for and build resilience to whole-system civil emergencies.

I note that the UK government accepts the importance of independent strategic advice and assessment to the civil emergency preparedness and resilience system. However, much remains to be done to set up an appropriate “mechanism” to provide the independent challenge, direction and advice required by recommendation 10. I trust the review of national resilience will set out a clear plan of action, with timelines for implementation.

Radical reform is required in the crucial area of planning and resilience. I very much hope and expect that the resilience review will identify specific and concrete action to be taken to ensure the UK is better prepared for the future.

Finally, I trust that all four nations of the UK will continue to work together to ensure the ‘joined up’ approach that will be necessary to deliver the radical reform required in the areas of planning and resilience.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'H. Hallett', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Rt Hon Baroness (Heather) Hallett DBE