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Michelle O'Neill, First Minister of Northern Ireland
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By email only

19 March 2025

Dear First Minister and Deputy First Minister,

UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry (“the Inquiry”) Module 1 Report on Resilience and Preparedness (Ref: 2500011691)

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

In that report, I found that the civil contingency structures within the UK government and devolved administrations and civil services failed their citizens at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. I set out ten recommendations that, when implemented together, would significantly reform how the UK government and devolved administrations prepare for whole-system civil emergencies.

I note the progress made by the Northern Ireland Executive to date on improving resilience. I am pleased that the majority of my recommendations have been accepted either in totality or in principle, and work has begun in implementing some of these. I recognise that the unique constitutional arrangements and governmental structures in Northern Ireland affect the method of implementing some of my recommendations.

It is encouraging to see specific progress and concrete action in areas including simplifying civil contingency structures, a Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Risk Register and commitments to transparent reporting on preparedness. I also welcome the clarity of language used in the response, which is beneficial to ensure public understanding of the actions being taken.

However, as the response notes, further action is necessary across a range of my recommendations to embed the lessons learned and make the necessary improvements. It is vital that both current and future commitments made to the Inquiry translate into specific action that will better prepare Northern Ireland, and the UK as a whole, for the next pandemic.

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 independent body that was responsible for advising on and assessing preparedness for whole-system civil emergencies.

There remains significant work to be done in establishing an independent UK-wide function to provide the independent challenge, direction and advice envisaged by my report. I have therefore written to the UK Government outlining my expectation that the upcoming publication of the Resilience Review and updated Central Government Concept of Operations for Emergency Response and Recovery (HMG CONOPS) will set out firm progress towards meeting the aims of my recommendations, including recommendation 10.

Finally, I trust that all four nations of the UK will continue to work together to ensure the 'joined up' approach which 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 'Heather Hallett'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

The Rt Hon Baroness (Heather) Hallett DBE