

Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy

Oral evidence: The National Security Strategy

Monday 13 October 2025

4.40 pm

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Members present: Matt Western (The Chair); Lord Boateng; Sarah Champion; Bill Esterson; Baroness Fall; Lord Hutton of Furness; Baroness Kidron; Edward Morello; Lord Robathan; Lord Sedwill; Emily Thornberry; Lord Tunncliffe; Baroness Tyler of Enfield; Lord Watts; Sir Gavin Williamson.

Evidence Session No. 3

Heard in Public

Questions 36 - 52

Witnesses

[I](#): Lord Harris of Haringey, Chair, National Preparedness Commission; Brigadier General Eero Rebo, Defence Attaché, Estonian Embassy; Captain (Navy) Juha Ravanti, Defence Attaché, Finnish Embassy.

[II](#): Steve Vincent, Strategic Manager, West Midlands Local Resilience Forum; Lisa Hollins, Co-Chair, Voluntary & Community Sector Emergencies Partnership.

Examination of witnesses

Lord Harris of Haringey, Brigadier General Eero Rebo and Captain Juha Ravanti.

Q36 **The Chair:** Welcome, everyone, to our third session on our evidence on the national security strategy. I welcome our witnesses today, but perhaps I can just start by saying that, unfortunately, we are still awaiting one of our witnesses who seems to have not quite made it yet. We are trying to track him down, but it is more important that we crack on with the session. As and when he joins us, there may be some questions that we can put specifically to him. Can I ask you, Lord Harris, to just introduce yourself?

Lord Harris of Haringey: I am a Member of the House of Lords and I chair the National Preparedness Commission. Do you want me to say anything about the commission or are you happy with that?

The Chair: That is fine, thank you. Captain Ravanti?

Captain Juha Ravanti: Hi, good afternoon. I am the defence attaché of Finland to both the United Kingdom and Ireland.

Q37 **The Chair:** Terrific. I will start with you, Lord Harris. The Government have obviously been speaking for some time—before the last election and since—about the need for a whole-of-society approach to developing resilience, and they are establishing new national resilience goals. What do you see as being the most critical factors to ensuring a resilient society? Where does the UK currently fall short?

Lord Harris of Haringey: The first thing to say is that the national security strategy is quite clear: it warns that, unless you have security and resilience within your home country, you simply cannot deliver economic growth. That is the basis on which everything else follows.

The strategy recognises the need to increase preparations for potential threats on the horizon—that includes pandemics, energy and supply chain disruptions, climate change, food security and so on. It also recognises the vital importance of long-term actions to build national resilience, reduce our reliance on others, and anticipate and prepare for new risks. Resilience and preparedness are, if you like, vital components of the strategic defence by denial, in terms of where we stand at the moment.

The Chair: Do you think we are late again to this? We have had so many cyberattacks and so on, and we have had the pandemic, as you just alluded to. We can look at Marks and Spencer and at Jaguar Land Rover in recent weeks. These are having a huge economic cost to us.

Lord Harris of Haringey: Absolutely.

The Chair: Why have we not done this before?

Lord Harris of Haringey: My view is that we should have started before. I am pleased that the previous Government did begin this journey, and I am pleased that the present Government are continuing that journey. But, in my view, we have a considerable way to go.

As was recognised in the strategic defence review, there needs to be a national conversation so that the general public, businesses and every organisation understand why this is such an important agenda. It is only if you have every level of government; every organisation, large and small; every business, private and public; every community; and indeed every individual household engaged with this process that you will be able to adequately have a sort of herd immunity against whatever the threats might be. I think that is where we are falling short and where we still have an awful long way to go.

The Chair: What do you think the public sector needs to do to make sure it is more resilient?

Lord Harris of Haringey: There are so many elements to that. You mentioned cyber specifically. We need to up our game on cyber, but the whole point about upping our game on cyber is that you have to prepare

for failure, as well as simply hope that it is not going to happen because you have put in mitigation effects. We need to think about what we do when a major public organisation or a major public dataset has been compromised. How do we recover from that? How do we make sure that the core functions of the nation are maintained under those circumstances?

That requires a different mindset. We need to go away from the philosophy, if you like, over the past 50, 60 or 70 years of the “just in time” mentality of increasing efficiency, removing duplication and so on and move towards one that looks much more at “just in case”. How do we manage in the event of one of our major strands of activity being compromised or disrupted?

Q38 The Chair: Thank you. Brigadier General Rebo, thank you for joining us. Sorry that you had trouble getting here today. I am keen to hear from you, and then from Captain Ravanti, about your experiences in your respective countries, when it comes to a whole-of-society approach. What can the UK learn from them?

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: For us, this is more of an existential threat because we are living in a neighbourhood where our neighbour is really aggressive. That means that we were looking for a long time to prepare not only the nation for war but the people, our citizens, and local communities. A lot of our work is actually done at the local community level, working together with local government in order to enhance its capability to withstand the crisis.

What we have found out is that, especially during peacetime, the good modus operandi is the use of volunteers. We have a significant volunteer organisation financed by the Government but run by the volunteers themselves. They have been supported by the defence forces and other national agencies. That means, for example, that rescue has its own volunteer force, but mainly defence-related assets are financed and supported by the defence ministry, which pretty much leads the running of the defence pool in Estonia.

Captain Juha Ravanti: On top of what Lord Harris and my Estonian colleague have said, I would highlight a couple of things. First, we all know that you cannot forge culture. It takes ages to write it down in a way that really makes it into society so that people—not just the elite, but ordinary citizens—understand their own role in national resilience.

We have approached this by extensive training. We train people at many separate levels. We have the mandatory military service for the male population, which brings not just resilience and military capability to many of our citizens but a connection between the military and the population. You see military everywhere all the time. Then we train our regional-level players: members of local parliaments or branch and division heads in the local governments. We train them and they know how the system works. The crown jewel is the national defence courses,

which are three and a half week courses for hand-picked people—the present and future leaders of our nation.

Everybody knows the role of the separate ministries. Everybody knows the role and capability of the National Emergency Supply Agency, and they know the civilian company's role in supporting the agencies.

The Chair: How long has that been in place?

Captain Juha Ravanti: We started doing the national military courses roughly in the 1950s, so we are talking about a good 75 or 80 years. So far, we have run more than 250 of those courses, plus some 60 or 70 special courses. For example, earlier this year, we arranged the first special course for foreign citizens who are permanently stationed in Finland and working, for example, in the leadership of some global companies that work in Finland.

The Chair: Thank you. It might be my hearing, but if you could speak just a little bit closer to the microphone, that would be helpful.

Captain Juha Ravanti: I will do my best.

Q39 **Lord Tunncliffe:** When it comes to scrutinising preparedness plans, the Government have rejected the Covid inquiry's recommendation for an independent statutory body in favour of a panel of experts convened by the UK Resilience Academy. Is this sufficiently robust? Indeed, will the structures that are emerging be capable of handling emergencies that, by definition, are unknown, not only in severity and form but in timescales? What do you think, Lord Harris, about the machinery of government when it comes to emergency preparedness? Do you think that it is fit for purpose?

Lord Harris of Haringey: The short answer is that there is a lot more that should be done in terms of the machinery of government. The problem is that the short-term political necessities—the immediate policies that any Government will have—are going to squeeze out and displace efforts to improve long-term national resilience against crises that are not currently happening. That is a real dilemma. So how do you institutionalise it? One mechanism, for example, was embodied by the Climate Change Act, which created an independent committee essentially to scrutinise what the Government were doing on climate change, with a remit to report and identify shortcomings or areas where more needed to be done. A model like that, I think, was essentially what Lady Hallett was recommending in her module 1 report.

The Government's response is that they do not think that is a good idea. I suppose no Government, whatever their political shade, ever like somebody else marking their homework. They are proposing instead that there should be a series of short-term, one-off expert groups convened under the UK Resilience Academy—it is a bit of a change in the role of the UK Resilience Academy—which will then look at specific topics over the space of three years, with perhaps 12 of them meeting over a three-year period. That is a useful thing to be doing, but I do not think that is

necessarily a substitute for a standing body with expertise to look at the full range of issues. Let us remember that we need to tackle these threats on a systemic basis. They will often interact and engage with each other. Simply picking one topic off at a time by convening an expert group is helpful but it does not solve the systemic problem.

Lord Tunncliffe: I wonder whether Brigadier General Rebo and Captain Ravanti could comment on how different their systems are from those apparently exposed in this conversation.

Captain Juha Ravanti: You hit the nail with your question. Even though we think of ourselves as a superpower of resilience, during the Covid time we were faced with the fact that our system was not built into having this kind of a single body which would have the authority to operate. Our constitution is very much sector-driven, so you have to have the Minister in place. We had all the time at least five Ministers in a row in front of the TV cameras explaining and making decisions, so it was somewhat painful. Even our President took it up at that time. Our Government were not ready to adopt that during Covid, but we are trying to make changes. We have a study going on in Finland: what if we could have a body under the Prime Minister's office, and change our constitution slightly to enable having this one single body that could be active and operate in dire circumstances?

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: In Estonia, we improved the law to fight the war, but that was really convenient for Covid as well, because we had our Prime Minister in charge and then very strong regional commands, basically. We have a law that says that we have support for agencies and aid. That means that the health agency was supported by everybody else. That is including volunteers. Where I was working, we were sending people in support, and additional agencies did the same. The huge part was that Estonia was making systemic plans. That means that if you are making a plan for different kinds of event, eventually you have, let us say, a playbook; you know each other's capabilities. At regional level or local level, you know what each agency can bring to the table. The same goes at the national level. That was a huge help in the case of Covid preparedness and acting-up in Estonia.

Q40 **Lord Watts:** Lord Harris, the explanation of government policy for resilience seems to me very strange in the sense that what we learned from Covid, defence changes that have taken place, and the threat from new viruses is that they can come at any time. To have a three-year strategy seems to me a very Civil Service way of looking at life—there is an immediate threat on all of these things, whether it be cyber, viruses or defence. I am just struggling to know whether anyone has set up anything yet to actually monitor these and come up with some recommendations now rather than wait for three years to do that.

Lord Harris of Haringey: The Government have now published a resilience action plan. You will notice that the strategy actually talks about a resilience strategy that would be imminent, and two or three weeks later what was produced was in fact a resilience action plan. Now,

my concept of a strategy—you may have different views—is that you start by agreeing what your baseline capability is, how resilient you already are, what you are able to withstand, where the shortfalls are. Whether you put all this in the public domain is a separate issue. Then you would work out all the things you needed to do to get to a reasonable standard over a foreseeable future. That is not what the action plan does. It lists a whole number of very valuable actions on their own basis, but it is not that comprehensive approach, looking at the full range of threats that might be faced. That is why you need to build in some nudge factors to make sure that the Government continue to do this and continue to keep that important—one of which, of course, is within Parliament. This Joint Committee, for example, could be that body, if that was what the parliamentary authorities were prepared to give it the resources to do.

- Q41 **Lord Boateng:** I wonder if you can help us, Brigadier General Rebo and Captain Ravanti, on the issue of reconnecting the British public and British society with defence. I was born at a time at which national service still existed. War comics were part of my childhood reading. I then grew up and went to school on a council estate in Hertfordshire during the Cold War when we still had cadets and at university, officer cadets. Britain has changed and all that seems so much more distant now. We do not have the advantage you have of being constantly reminded of danger. If you live next door to a bear, you are more likely to be conscious about the need to protect yourself from attack. So how do you suggest that we in Britain, where we are today, might better make our public aware of the role defence plays in keeping them safe from national security risks?

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: First of all, living next to Russia is not a very huge advantage, sir. The second thing is, like my Finnish colleague said, this is about education, and we are lucky to have it in defence. I am not talking only about the military; defence has many layers, and in Estonia we understand that defence is also cyber, as was mentioned, psychological defence and so on. We have defence lessons at high school where we talk openly about the threats, and we are talking about the different kinds of defence that we have: civilian defence, cyber defence, many layers of defence. We have 48 hours to talk with our high schoolers, and that is going to the trade school as well. We then have 48 hours to go to the field and do some things, to show the people the field graphs as well. That means that we have an educational part to this. But, as my Finnish colleague said, it is really important to teach every kind of leader who is taking care of their companies or their parts of local government. This education is much wider and needs to be systematic in the way that the different people and different agencies support it, including education on the part of the Government and local communities. I would rather invest to do the education.

Lord Harris of Haringey: First of all, other countries do a lot more public education and public engagement. In Sweden there is the *If Crisis or War Comes* booklet, which goes to every household—it has just been reissued following NATO entry. I think in Finland you have the home

preparedness manual and the 72-hour campaign: how would you run your household if this was not available for 72 hours—no water or electricity, or whatever else it might be? I think Poland has just done something similar. Norway has an annual emergency preparedness week, with specific content aimed at children and conversation guides for family members, and Denmark has a folder which has been emailed to all Danes. So there is a lot more going on. In this country we have, if you can find it on the GOV.UK website, the section on “How would you prepare for an emergency?” That contains helpful advice but it is actually rather low key. I rather suspect that, in a time of emergency, that is the last thing that people would find. So you have to keep reinforcing these messages over time, which is presumably why the strategic defence review called for this national conversation, to talk to the public—to the wider world outside Government—about the need to address these issues.

Captain Juha Ravanti: I have a couple of additions to the good words both these gentlemen said. I think you have most of the bits and pieces together already because you are talking openly. You are giving the public very good, accurate information on how the threat is developing, how the UK is willing to take leadership in support of Ukraine, and on European partnership with NATO and so on. So you are doing many things right, as I see it.

I would like to highlight one thing here, because I have to say that it has not always been this way in Finland—it has not always been this popular in Finland. I am really talking about the fact that we have more volunteers, for example, joining the military academy now than ever before, and it has only been getting better for us after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. But one key fact is that our population knows that that we treat our military extremely well. They are well trained and well equipped, and the morale in the armed forces is really good. So the kind of media profile of the armed forces is really high, and that plays a significant role in how the population is happy and really proud of our armed forces.

Lord Boateng: By way of a supplementary, maybe you can help us with this in terms of the UK and budgets. If you have the Department of Health having a role in resilience, and you have local government having a role in resilience, and the Department for Education in defence awareness, Lord Harris, how do you see the funding of these different strands incentivising joint work and effective spending in terms of outcomes for the money applied, and how do you best assess success in public readiness for crises, including armed conflict?

Lord Harris of Haringey: With deference to the former Cabinet Secretary at your table, for many years the UK Government have not been terribly good at cross-departmental working. There is a real issue that, if you look at any individual government department, such as the education department, for example, the priority that it will put on education, educating young people, and then right through life on

resilience and preparedness, will probably fall rather lower than, for example, sorting out the problems of people with special educational needs or whatever else it might be. If you go through every single government department, it will have its own departmental priorities which will be higher than that. Somehow you have to find a way of putting all that together and saying, "But as a nation we need each of you government departments to do these things even though it may fall below the threshold of your priorities". That is particularly important given the current turbulence and uncertainty that we face in the world, in terms not only of Russia and other international threats but of the increasingly frequent and extreme weather events that we are getting.

Baroness Kidron: I was struck by the fact that both the brigadier and the captain mentioned the importance of regional conversations. I wondered, Lord Harris, whether you have put much thought into the mayors and their relationship to their local population and whether that is a good place to have a conversation about this.

Lord Harris of Haringey: Our current structure is based on a network of local resilience forums, which are, for historic reasons, based around police force areas. So, in some cases, that coincides neatly with the remit of a strategic mayor, but in many cases it does not very well. You have to recognise that senior elected leaders such as the elected mayors should be part of this process of leading this national debate and making sure that things are happening in their locality. At the moment, I believe thought has started to go into whether you need to reconfigure this network of local resilience forums to bear in mind the Government's devolution agenda. But, again, I have not seen that much progress has been made on that.

Q42 **Baroness Fall:** Sticking with the resilience piece, obviously the spending on NATO recently went up to 5%; 1.5% of that was targeted at a wider resilience, or maybe it was too wide. So I was curious to know what you thought about that, what you thought about it in relation to Britain, and what sort of priorities you would place among the many different things that we could prioritise, from energy to food to infrastructure.

Lord Harris of Haringey: There is a danger that the 1.5%, which is for resilience, may be treated as a creative accountancy exercise by Governments, not just in this country but everywhere else, so that, for example, routine maintenance of critical infrastructure will end up being categorised: "Ah! We've met our 1.5%". The reality is we have an ageing infrastructure. Much of it was constructed in the 19th century and maybe the early 20th century. It has often been—in fact, more frequently than not—inadequately repaired and maintained. It is highly fragmented, it is vulnerable to systemic failure, maintenance backlogs have been allowed to grow, and, of course, it was all designed to cope with climate parameters far more favourable than the ones we currently have. So there is a huge amount which we should be doing in terms of resilience, and that is before you start talking about raising the general capacity of the country to respond to extreme shocks of one sort or another. That is

the difficulty that we face. So I would like the 1.5% to be additional, but I am sure that will cause problems with the Treasury.

Baroness Fall: Should we be accelerating that programme, given what you just said, particularly about climate?

Lord Harris of Haringey: That is essential. For example, the 1953 North Sea floods came perilously close to flooding the financial and political districts of London, and it took 30 years after that for the Thames Barrier to be constructed. That is the sort of timescale that we are looking at. But we are probably now in a situation where one ought to be asking whether the Thames Barrier itself is sufficient. Is there enough there, and do we have other mitigations that we need to put in place? Yet, if it is going to take 30 years to decide, what are the climate conditions and what are the risks that will be there in 30 years' time? I think the assumption was that the Thames Barrier would be raised once or twice a year, but I think it has been raised more than 200 times.

Baroness Fall: Do you have any thoughts, Brigadier General, on the 1.5%?

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: We are going to spend most of it on the military. In our spending structure—we were talking about the systematic planning—every agency is responsible for its spending planning. That was facilitated pretty much at the Prime Minister and parliament level. They and especially the parliamentary commission will look at how the money is spent and what kind of results were achieved. But for us, it is really important that we understand what kind of resource there is at the regional and local levels, but also what is nationally available, and a lot of resources you can use for different kind of operations or different kinds of rescue operations. That dual use is something that we are really looking at, even in terms of military tasks, what the police do and what rescue board is available. That is something which we are really working on. Are we good at it? We can improve. We are also looking at how to solve some of those problems in academic fields. Those problems, especially with budgets and preparedness, are so serious that we are seriously looking at and thinking about them through an academic lens.

Captain Juha Ravanti: We do not really have decisions on how to spend that 1.5%, but we will most likely be investing together with Norway and Sweden in military mobility and logistical support up in the High North. There is literally no way of using the current railways and roads up there to support troops manoeuvring from the Norwegian coast to the eastern border of Finland. The infrastructure just is not there. Of course, there will be additional funding into cybersecurity, and there will probably be new storage facilities and things like that for military purposes, as well as enabling local civilian life to some extent.

Q43 **Lord Robathan:** Carrying on along the same line, we have in Europe at the moment a war raging which crosses between the Western Front, with people living in trenches and covered in mud, and high-tech drones and other things being used against them. It is a really bloody war and much

closer to you two than it is to us at the moment. On the 10-year goal for the 1.5%, do you think that the spending is being given sufficiently urgent attention? After all, the Second World War went on for six years and we are talking here about a 10-year window, which seems to me a little bit long. What do you think?

Lord Harris of Haringey: I am quite struck by the fact that, whenever I talk to people in our military, they are expecting potentially widespread war in Europe within a very short timeframe—three or four years. If you talk to people who are experts on China, they will say that they expect some sort of action in terms of a blockade or otherwise of Taiwan within the next two years. Taiwan produces 98%, I think, of the most important semiconductors that we need as a nation, so that would have massive implications. So there is a degree of urgency with which we need to face some of this.

Chair, you have mentioned several times the cyber threats that we face, but we are getting sabotage attacks and we have had assassinations on British territory. There is a lot happening already, in addition to the cyber sabotage that we have seen. Of course, the advantage of those sorts of things is that they are eminently deniable. How do you prove that it was a state action? Well, it walks like a state action and it quacks like a state action and so on but, none the less, proving it is obviously more difficult.

Lord Robathan: Would our NATO allies think that the preparedness of NATO as a whole, looking at a 10-year window, is enough?

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: We are on different tracks because the sovereign states are taking their own actions and putting their money into different projects. My country is investing a lot in readiness and not only preparing for drone warfare but looking at air defence and other capabilities. We are investing heavily in that. We are taking some risks in working with different companies and procuring weapons from them. Logistically, that is probably not so convenient, but if delivery times will bring us closer, then it is something that we will do. We have some different artillery systems and different air defence systems that are already procured and will come to Estonia really soon. That means that we are speeding up and improving our preparedness and readiness.

Lord Robathan: Do you think that NATO allies should be doing more as well?

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: NATO is a collective organisation, and the collective have different issues and different problems. I hope that everybody is doing their best.

Lord Robathan: What about the Finns?

Captain Juha Ravanti: I would like to make two points. First, I would go with my colleague here, because in the war in Ukraine we can see technology is of course developing quite rapidly. That is what we see from that war, but it is not the only threat. We have to be very precise so that we get the right lessons of the war. The way that they are fighting

the war in Ukraine is kind of the only way that Russia can fight it. NATO would fight that war in a totally different way. That is one thing that we should remember.

The other thing is that, of course, there should be more urgency placed on funding and getting this 1.5% into use. One thing that you cannot build—or at least one thing that it would be very painful to build—when someone is shooting at you is your industrial base. We need to hurry that up.

Q44 Lord Hutton of Furness: Can we turn to the question of home defence and the role of the reserve forces? Perhaps this is a question for Brigadier General Rebo. The UK strategic defence review has called for new legislation here in Britain to mobilise reserves and industry if a crisis escalates into conflict. Based on your own experience, what are the key measures that can improve and speed up mobilisation processes?

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: The answer is the use of volunteers and the timely preparing of reserves. That means that you have a systemic reserve built up—a mobilisation plan, basically. In the old-school days when armies were preparing to mobilise, there was a plan for how to mobilise not only the army but industries and support behind them. In the modern world, we are seeing that a lot of services are outsourced to companies that work with other companies. Like my Finnish colleague said, we are working with the civilian companies, to use their help. If we are looking already at how significant the logistical effort will be in the conflict, that needs to involve not only the industries but everybody in the supply chain and so on.

Another part that is going on is our informational and command and control systems, including with the different kinds of companies, to understand what is going on. It means that we can provide very clear and fast information exchange and keep people in the loop about what needs to be done. We can build up not only the informational clear view, but also an understanding of what actually needs to be done. That is going through the planning.

Lord Hutton of Furness: I have a question for both you and Captain Ravanti: how do your countries assess the number of reserves that you need and their readiness should conflict break out?

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: The assessment is made through the war plans, using historical data on, for example, the number of losses. We are very carefully looking at Ukraine, not only assessing how many losses we are taking and what can be done to lessen them, but looking at our medical system and at how many people we can bring back and how fast. This is not only a one-way street with the losses; it is about how you bring back your troops and put them in the fight again. That is important for us. We are honestly learning a lot from Ukraine and from previous conflicts such as Iraq and Afghanistan where we were dealing with the wounded and people who were injured.

Captain Juha Ravanti: We have some 280,000 troops in our reserves; we would like to distribute them into operational troops and the original troops. Of course, like my colleague said, we planned this together with NATO so that they match the NATO original plans. Some of those operational troops will be chopped, with a change of command to NATO regional commands and so on. Of course, we also have to understand that the civilian companies and local government need a workforce during crisis times as well. We have to keep up production. So 280,000 is a good number, even though we could probably arm something like 950,000.

Lord Hutton of Furness: It is not an exact science, is it?

Captain Juha Ravanti: It is not an exact science. We have 280,000 listed as equipped at the moment. There is some pressure to increase the numbers. We are investigating perhaps 20,000 or 30,000 more.

Lord Hutton of Furness: That is a lot more than we have. I have a final question for both of you. The UK Government have said they want to learn war readiness best practice from NATO allies in the Nordic and Baltic regions. If you had one key learning from your own country's experience to share with us today, what would that be?

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: That is a really difficult question, because we do not have one significant silver bullet but actually a systematic approach. That systematic approach is connected with how we run not only the military force but the Government and the country. That is built up very systematically, and the dots are connected with different kinds of legislative support as well as resource allocation for the different parts. So, I would say that systematic approach to the problem and building that up significantly to have some reserve power in it.

Captain Juha Ravanti: Since the brigadier used my silver bullet example, I would say that trust is the key word; trust at all levels, between the population and the authorities. Nothing works without trust. But, again, trust is a culture. It takes a lot of time to build. It is not a silver bullet to that extent.

Lord Harris of Haringey: Lord Hutton talked about the defence readiness legislation proposed in the strategic defence review. The danger is that that is seen as only kicking in in times of war or conflict. You need to be preparing now. How would we galvanise, for example, British industry to produce thousands of drones? Where is our counter-drone defence?

On that final point about trust being critical, we have at the moment the continual undermining of trust, not only in the political process—in democracy itself—but in the authorities and everything else. That is being driven in part by social media and the manipulation of social media, and some of that is very actively being driven by hostile nations. It is a win-win for them; if they undermine the faith of our population in our national institutions and national structures, then we are more vulnerable.

The Chair: I am going to move on to Sir Gavin Williamson. I am conscious of time because we started late, so please speak briefly if you could.

- Q45 **Sir Gavin Williamson:** I remember having the privilege of visiting Estonia and being incredibly impressed by how you were looking at mobilising not just your own armed forces regulars but as a whole societal measure. Equally impressive, in both Finland and Estonia, is how your reserves reach far further than what would sometimes be seen as traditional military, especially in the area of cybersecurity. What lessons do you have in how you make people understand that reserve forces can be so much more than what people traditionally think of as the role of the armed forces? How have your countries gone about doing that?

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: In Estonia we use civil skills. The reserves bring in their educational background as well as their professional background. You get a really diverse background, especially from an education point of view. If you have an IT-skilled nation with information technology running the banks and different kinds of companies, those people will at some point join the military reserves as well. If you create a framework where they can work together for defence—and, as my Finnish colleague pointed out, defence and companies trust each other, and the system and others, not to steal their trade secrets—then cyber protection can be used in a wide range of services. This means that you are involving civilian companies and their knowledge to defend yourselves and that defence is not just a governmental task.

Captain Juha Ravanti: I would highlight the voluntary exercises that our reservists do together under the reservist training organisation. The armed forces give them support and personal information, and there is a lot of involvement of the armed forces but, in general, the reservists arrange the training and work as the trainers. The basic idea is to bring right-minded people together to teach and learn from each other. You can combine that with flexible capability.

In my previous job, I was the head of defensive cyber in the Finnish armed forces. I could task my people to call civilian specialists who were setting up primary reserves to ask them if they could come and take a look at something. They could jump off their civilian duty for a day or two, come in, and then just go back, with no papers or orders required. It is as flexible as you can get.

Sir Gavin Williamson: In the UK, about 0.3% of the population are involved in the reserves and the regular Armed Forces. Obviously, it is much higher in Finland and Estonia. If you were to make a recommendation to our Prime Minister, what sort of percentage would you recommend that a country like the UK should have involved in our regular Armed Forces and reserves?

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: We have different tasks in hand. It is not only about how to increase the numbers but also about the quality. In

some areas, such as cyber, it is better to have quality more than quantity.

Lord Harris of Haringey: There is a lack of clarity about our plans for home defence. The *National Security Strategy 2025* says that those plans “will focus on the protection of critical national infrastructure and countering sabotage during a crisis”. One can query whether that should say “before” the crisis. Does that mean the reserves will be armed? You would certainly expect armed forces to be protecting your nuclear installations or other key things.

It is deeply unhelpful—I do not know whether this was the imagination of a newspaper sub-editor or an overenthusiastic press officer—to talk about a modern Dad’s Army, when we are actually talking about precisely what has been said by our colleagues from Finland and Estonia; that this is about marshalling the skills you have in the community, knowing what you have available, and making the best use of them. We will need plumbers. We will need people who know about welding. We will need people who are able to do all sorts of things under emergency conditions or near emergency conditions, and I am not sure that we are anywhere near being able to mobilise them.

The Chair: Finally, I turn to Bill Esterson.

Q46 **Bill Esterson:** Thanks very much, Chair. Lord Harris, you were talking about the short timeframes involved in climate breakdown. I return to that briefly. Do you think we need to do more to raise awareness and to ensure that people are ready for the scale and immediacy of the threat when it comes to things such as food or population movements?

Lord Harris of Haringey: My refrain is that a lot more should be done. People who are in areas that are vulnerable to flooding are probably reasonably well prepared for that. But, increasingly, floods are occurring—for example, flash floods even in central London—and these are things that people have not experienced in the past.

We have extreme heat events. Three years ago, we had 40-degree temperatures in central London. We discovered, for example, that office IT systems do not function in that level of heat. There were all sorts of other problems, including extra deaths and so on. We need to be looking at how we respond under those circumstances. All of those are things that people need to be taking on board. I suspect that a lot more should be done to heighten people’s awareness and educate them about the sorts of sensible things they should be doing, both as individuals and within the organisations they work in.

Bill Esterson: Thank you for that. I turn to your two colleagues on the panel to ask what more you think the UK can do within NATO to contribute to areas such as Europe’s energy infrastructure and to prepare for disruption there, or indeed with other major infrastructure issues and challenges.

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: I am not an expert in energy but I noticed that there is quite a difficulty with the nuclear part of it. But I am not taking any stand here.

Captain Juha Ravanti: I would make two suggestions. One is the common understanding inside Europe. What is going on? Where is our adversary—I am talking about Russia—what is it doing and what is its fleet doing? We need to combine that situational understanding. The second, where the UK could be even a bigger player, is in cyber capability. You have a very strong capability in the cyber domain, and there are plenty of things you could share with the rest of Europe and NATO.

Lord Harris of Haringey: As a nation, we are very dependent on imported food and it is very easy to disrupt those supply chains. In energy, as we are moving towards more of a net-zero environment, we will require capacity to store energy. That means we will have to have access to critical minerals which are not indigenous to this country or which are very difficult to extract in this country. If you start to look through all the key manufacturing functions in this country, you will find that we are very dependent on what is coming in from overseas. If that is disrupted, that will present real difficulties.

Bill Esterson: Chair, I am aware of the time but I have just one final question about whether the Estonian or Finnish Governments are looking at how to work better or more closely with industry to incentivise the private sector to prioritise resilience, particularly where they are providing critical national infrastructure.

Brigadier General Eero Rebo: There are plans on how to work together with the industries and how to support industries, not only so that they have profits but also looking at the resilience of their organisation and ensuring that their services are provided. This is done in co-operation with several agencies, and in some cases the civilian companies are brought to the table to plan together with the governmental agencies or local government about, let us say, the water supply or energy supplies; all those vital services are part of our planning efforts.

Captain Juha Ravanti: We are not discussing currently bringing new tasks to the ministries, but we have divided our legislation into—if I remember correctly—roughly 46 strategic tasks which have been shared between the ministries. Each one goes down from international to national to regional to local level. We know who is supposed to be responsible in each case and who are the actors, so we have more or less built this capability. Of course, how much we utilise some civilian companies' expertise in supporting this depends on the company's size.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That concludes our first panel session. Many thanks to you, Captain Ravanti, to you, Brigadier General Rebo, and of course, to you, Lord Harris. Thank you for your evidence, which will be incredibly valuable as we go forward in our analysis and critique of the national security strategy.

Examination of witnesses

Steve Vincent and Lisa Hollins.

Q47 The Chair: We will now start with our second panel in this, our third session on the national security strategy. It is my pleasure to welcome Lisa Hollins, co-chair of the Voluntary & Community Sector Emergencies Partnership, and Steve Vincent, who joins us virtually. Steve has just confirmed that he is the strategic manager of the West Midlands Local Resilience Forum. Welcome to both of you. We have four main areas of investigation that we would like to put before you. I am sorry we are starting that bit later, which is due to some traffic issues. We will aim to complete by 6.10 pm, if that is okay with you. Baroness Tyler?

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: Thank you very much, Chair. Can I turn to you, Mr Vincent, first? We started in the previous session to explore a little the role of local resilience forums. I wondered whether you could say, in your opinion, how effectively Government are co-ordinating with these local resilience forums when it comes to emergency preparedness and planning. Specifically, what could the Government do if they wanted to improve the clarity of roles and responsibilities on the public sector resilience system? Do you think the accountability and the transparency are good enough at the moment?

Steve Vincent: Thank you for the question. In terms of the resilience forums, there is good communication through the MHCLG and the government liaison officers. However, up and down the country the local resilience forums mean different things to different people. Yes, we all come under the Civil Contingencies Act, but they are supported in different ways and have definite inferences. That has allowed subsidiarity in decision-making, but, thinking of your last session and being able to co-ordinate some of the main issues that we may need to co-ordinate for resilience, that has caused some considerations given the ongoing nature of this and the longevity of some of the plans. In essence, in some local resilience forums you probably have 40-plus organisations, both from the public sector and the utilities, which will be having to work together, with all of the differing priorities that their individual government departments will place upon them, and not always having the commonality that you would expect from one local resilience forum trying to deliver in an area.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: Can I just turn to the funding arrangements for local resilience forums? I think the resilience action plan talks about an intention to provide “sustainable funding”—I think that is the term—through launching this resilience forum capacity and capability funding to help with that. I am not sure what stage that is at, what involvement you have and whether you feel that that will indeed be sufficient to provide you with sustainable funding. Are you able just to expand on that?

Steve Vincent: For local resilience forums, some of the funding comes in kind or from local finance coming from the individual public sector organisations and utilities. Then there has also been funding from central government against certain priorities over the last few years. We have

just come to the end of a single year in terms of the finances. We were going to have a three-year settlement, but that is still to be finalised because of some of the changes within central government in portfolios and Ministers. But it is still on a rolling three-year settlement, and it could change at any time depending on the Treasury demands.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: I noted that the Centre for Long-Term Resilience described the funding landscape for resilience as marked by opacity and inconsistency. Do you agree with that, or do you think it is a bit too stark?

Steve Vincent: There is a lot of inconsistency up and down the country, with some partners contributing to some LRFs and other partners not, and they could be the same agency in different parts of the country. The amount that is put into that central pot for local resilience to work as a single entity is inconsistent, remembering that the LRF, in essence, is not an entity; it is a collaboration of partners and does not really have any powers over partners to make those contributions. It is a collective of the willing against a general action plan that is set there.

Q48 **Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** Thank you, that is very helpful. Ms Hollins, do you feel the Government are getting the most that they can out of the skills and resources within the wider voluntary faith community sector when it comes to resilience, or is there more it could be doing?

Lisa Hollins: There have been some positive moves over the last few years, which have benefited both sides. The resilience action plan is a real indication of acknowledging the role of the voluntary sector in strengthening local connections, which is absolutely critical to making sure that we have resilient communities.

Moving forward, there needs to be much more detail in how we do things in areas such as the national conversations on resilience, how we make sure people take the actions they need to and how we ensure that the voluntary sector and organisations can support people who cannot take those actions and need to be supported. So, there is a huge amount more that we could be doing.

One of the really critical things is co-ordination. You may know that one of the Voluntary & Community Sector Emergencies Partnership's big areas is communication. We were set up after Grenfell, when community communication and co-ordination between voluntary sector agencies was not what it should be. We have been doing a huge amount to make sure that that is in place, but more still needs to be done.

We want to see local resilience forums always including their voluntary community and faith-sector colleagues. It is a mixed picture across England and the UK and that needs to be better. We need to have minimum standards of engagement to make sure that people get what they need in local communities and that we all work towards the level of co-ordination we need in order to move forward.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: When it comes to the bigger, more

strategic, discussions going on in the whole area of resilience, resilience planning and preparedness, do you feel that you are properly engaged at the outset? Do you feel like you are an equal partner around the table? Or do you feel like you are someone who people come to when they finally remember the important role that the sector plays?

Lisa Hollins: It is mixed. We have had great discussions with the Cabinet Office, which has been really open about engaging with us, and we had quite an active role in the resilience action plan, which we welcomed. It is just about making sure there are standards that everybody adheres to around involving the voluntary and community sector at all levels—national level and local level—and that there is consistency and that consistency is measured. It is not a nice-to-have, but rather it is an integral part of the work.

We have learned from our last pandemic, from tragedies such as Grenfell, and from people who are disproportionately impacted that there is a real role for the voluntary sector in communicating and persuading people. We want to make sure that there are minimum standards of engagement, but we have seen that engagement has got much better.

Baroness Tyler of Enfield: That is good to hear. The Government have outlined funding commitments to the sector through both the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Do you understand this to be new funding or is it basically reiterating arrangements that have already been agreed, set out and announced?

Lisa Hollins: Funding from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport will be formalised. That was one-year funding and will now be formalised over a longer time period, which is very welcome because most organisations struggle to exist on annual funding. I think that the funding from MHCLG has been time-limited funding that has now come to an end.

Q49 **Lord Sedwill:** Mr Vincent, I will come back to the structure and systems around the LRFs in a moment, but if we just take a step back, you are responsible for one of the country's more mature—maybe most mature—LRFs. What are the decisive enablers of a resilient public sector?

Steve Vincent: In terms of the LRFs being decisive, it is working on the co-operation between the partners and ensuring that the communities understand the risks we are facing. One of the challenges we have in the West Midlands and in the wider LRFs is understanding what we mean by the community resilience that has been talked about in the new standards and guidance, and having a commonality in how we integrate the voluntary sector and communities in our response plans.

My colleague just mentioned that, post Grenfell, there was perhaps a missed opportunity in engaging the community in the overall response and, therefore, the recovery of that area. If we were to look at that in the widest aspects, that is something we would want to look to grow within

the LRF. This goes back to the fundamental understanding of what we mean by societal resilience and that each of us has a part to play in that.

Lord Sedwill: What do you mean by societal resilience?

Steve Vincent: For me, if you think about the communities and if you look at a national power outage as an example, we know that there are a number of factors where the communities would suffer, such as water and heating. How resilient is the community in being able to look after itself in an event that is happening straight away? Would it be in shock or would it know what to do? A key bit for us in moving forward—and unfortunately I am old enough to remember the West Midlands Fire and Civil Defence Authority—and working in education and in schools, is that, in making our whole society more resilient, we need to take a whole-society approach of looking at how we are working top-down from central government and up from the locality in bringing that together.

A key component that we need to bring back into the resilience world is education from early doors all the way through. As your previous panel talked about, when you are looking at culture change and building these societal changes, it takes years to do. We need to take an urgent approach.

Lord Sedwill: Thank you. I will come back to you in a moment on the LRFs themselves to pursue some of the points that Baroness Tyler touched on. Ms Hollins, let me come to you on societal resilience.

Lisa Hollins: To me, I suppose the strict definition is that it is about how a society can bounce back after a major shock or crisis. We know from the pandemic and other crises that some people bounce back really quickly and some do not. We can predetermine who will not bounce back quickly because we know the issues that impact on people, such as poverty and the social determinants of health, which are absolutely social determinants of crisis. We know which members of our society will have fewer choices and options and will struggle to bounce back in the same way.

When we are thinking about societal resilience, we need to make sure that people who can help themselves do help themselves, and hopefully they can help others and make sure that the people who are going to struggle, for all sorts of different reasons, have people to support them. It is how we construct that with the local resilience forums and other agencies to make sure that everybody has what they need.

Lord Sedwill: Can I ask about different communities, Ms Hollins? I live in an area which looked after people well during the pandemic because it is a stable community, not many people move around and there is a strong voluntary ethos in that community, so essentially it just rallied around. It did not need an awful lot of state help and support—people just got on with it. We know that in other communities, particularly in areas where populations are more transient, community relations are not as strong and it is more challenging. How do we deal with that variation?

Lisa Hollins: This is where the voluntary sector could really come in and help. In areas where populations are more transient, actually there is usually a huge array of voluntary and community organisations that can and will step in. We saw some great examples during vaccine hesitancy of all sorts of different groups stepping in to support, and this is really a key role that we could ask people to help in.

But when we think of the evidence around when people do not bounce back, poverty is a major critical factor. We know about how many people in our society face poverty; certainly they will have fewer choices, and we saw in the pandemic people living in multigenerational households. These are all the factors that we know people will struggle with, so it is about constructing a network of organisations around which can give support. To do that, we need really good co-ordination and communication at a local level, so we need the local resilience forums to be very strong at linking with local community and faith groups, because those are the people who will influence people who face the greatest challenges. That is the way we are going to make a difference in that area.

Q50 **Lord Sedwill:** Thank you. One of my colleagues is going to come back and pursue some of those points with you in a moment. Mr Vincent, back to you; just briefly on the LRFs themselves, are there any lessons from the trailblazer LRFs?

Steve Vincent: Unfortunately, to my knowledge, not many trailblazers have taken place, and therefore we are still waiting. That was supposed to end by 2030; one of the things that we think within the sector—I am saying “we” here but I also suggest this from my personal experience—is that that is too long. Going back to what your previous panel was talking about, in some respects we need to have the structures in place now ready to start building on all the good work that we are talking about and enabling our communities to build that resilience, ready for any shocks that may come to us, whether that is from natural causes or a foreign enemy in terms of the land. Therefore, I urge that some form of structure that will look at what we want LRFs to look like and at how they work needs to come way before 2030.

Lord Sedwill: Speaking as a former civil servant, the way the Government are approaching this feels quite civil servicey, if I can use that phrase—or rather, a caricature of a Civil Service, I should really say, because we are not all like that. Do the Government’s current priorities—leadership, local accountability, data sharing, peer review, et cetera—really capture the main constraints, or is there something more fundamental in your view? It sounds as if they are all about process rather than substance.

Steve Vincent: I would be looking for leadership and priorities as the key bit in terms of LRF and having the resource and the funding, and not disabling LRFs by maybe conflicting legislation that may stop partners from working more collaboratively together and joining up that work. We need to enable our communities. If you look at all the work that is done among all the different partners, they all have slightly different emphases

about what that is. The LRF at the moment does not have the legitimacy to say to a partner, "This is where we need to work and how we should be working", because it is not within the Civil Contingencies Act. We talk about "warn and inform", not about building that societal resilience. We need to work more collaboratively with the voluntary sector and build on all of its good experience, but we need to have a collective message about what that really means for all of us to work collaboratively together, because it means different things to different people currently.

Lord Sedwill: Just briefly, on the updated national resilience standards in the resilience action plan—although I note an absence of timelines—do those genuinely strengthen capability or is this just more process?

Steve Vincent: I think it is a good start. The difficulty would be: what does good look like? That is not really articulated. Peer review can work but, unfortunately, where is the capacity when everybody is working to full capacity? With the absence of what good looks like and moving forward, we did not have them before but have we really tested them out currently?

The Chair: It is striking in terms of not knowing what good looks like but then also that there is not a proper kind of audit process—we talk about peer review, but it is about auditing how things could work in certain eventualities and so on. I was struck by your use of "legitimacy". But let me pass on to Lord Boateng.

Q51 **Lord Boateng:** Thank you, Ms Hollins, for your work as co-chair of the Voluntary & Community Sector Emergencies Partnership. Both you and Mr Vincent mentioned Grenfell. I am co-chair of the Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission, and as a young man I worked as a community lawyer in that neighbourhood, in the voluntary sector.

In my experience, although the local and national government and services failed the community in Grenfell, the churches and the mosques—the religious organisations—delivered to that community. Could you outline for us what added value you think the voluntary, community and faith sector bring to national resilience and tell us candidly about the obstacles and your concerns about your future ability in that sector to deliver on this? I have to fess up to the fact that I was Home Office Minister responsible for the voluntary sector and I was Chief Secretary subsequently. In my experience, successive Governments of all political persuasions talk the talk about the voluntary sector but actually, when push comes to shove, they do not back it up with resource and with co-ordinated cross-departmental action. So tell us where we are today and where you think we have to go.

Lisa Hollins: That is a big question—I will do my very best. What I have seen over the last five years or so is a voluntary sector that is very keen to work together and to work with the public sector and with Government, and there is a realisation that we are all in this together. On the co-ordination that Steve was describing it is absolutely critical that, when a crisis happens, all the groups or organisations in a local area are

pulling in the same direction. I agree completely with Steve that people need to work in collaboration and, for that to happen, the co-ordination and communication and trust needs to be there. That needs to be there prior to crises happening, and there is a big role for Government and the public sector to reach out more and make sure that the systems and structures that are in place embrace the organisations needed within that local area to deliver what is needed to the local community.

I have found that there is a significant difference across local resilience forums, and that will stop the voluntary sector getting involved. There need to be minimum standards in collaboration to make sure that that co-ordination and communication, which are so important, happen at a satisfactory level. Of course, as you will know, local community groups really know the vulnerable people within their local area and look out for them, so they are critical information-givers as well as service providers in those local areas. So co-ordination, structure and communication are really important.

Other areas where the voluntary sector could and should help are around the difficult issues of polarisation and concerns around community cohesion. Voluntary groups play an enormous role in all emergencies. You will have seen with the tragic events a few weeks ago in Manchester that the faith communities of Manchester gathered together to show a united front at the vigil over the last week, were very present together and were united, and they collaborated very closely. That is really important; to show how we work closely together and that that makes a better local community.

I will just finish off on what good looks like. I repeat: structure, co-ordination and communication. But things will not change unless we are a bit more specific about what the measures of a good society and good resilience look like. We need to delve into that a bit more. Education, health and other areas have very clear evidence-based frameworks. There are fewer within resilience. We need to put our minds to developing that, to make sure we can produce those measures like other areas have.

Finally, the resilience action plan very neatly sidesteps the issue of funding. It says, "Please do not give the community groups any more work, because they do not have enough resources at the moment". If we are to take an active role, the issue of funding really needs to be addressed.

Lord Boateng: My sense is, listening to your answer to Baroness Tyler, that you do not know whether or not there will be new funding, let alone how much money will be made available. I do not see the evidence of new funding.

Lisa Hollins: Yes. Following the resilience action plan, the next steps are not clear. The funding is not clear. So we are not at the stage where we can say that that is explicit.

Q52 **The Chair:** Finally, I come back to you, Steve, on how your LRF works

with voluntary groups, faith groups and so on. Give us some ideas of what that looks like.

Steve Vincent: We have recognised that we have work to do in that area, and we have a project this year on starting to build those connections and enabling that, moving forward. We are currently working through that and the parts that we can play. At the moment, in the UK, when you look at the communities, it is unlike on the continent or in other countries where the community itself and the community groups are the first responders.

For 32 years, I was a firefighter and strategic commander in the fire service and was seen as a first responder. Actually, the first responders are the communities themselves. When something happens, whether it is a fire, flood or some other catastrophe, they are usually there supporting. We are looking at how we can enable that.

My colleague talked about health inequalities as disabling people from being able to make choices. The benefits of tackling those aspects starts to energise our communities.

The UK Resilience Academy is now looking at professionalising the service moving forward and at the need for us to see that the community should be at the forefront of the plans right at the beginning, understanding the risks in their area and how we work on those, and instead of causation, looking at the outcomes of flooding or a national power outage and how we get food, make sure people are warm, communicate with each other and understand where those key messages are.

At the moment, if you go into your communities, very few people understand what a local resilience forum is. They do not understand what resilience needs to be. We need to bring it to life. We can do that only by working with all the assets we have in our toolbox. The biggest asset is our community.

The Chair: Thank you very much for that. We have run slightly over time, but I thank you both, Lisa and Steve, for giving us your evidence today and sharing with us your experience and knowledge of the sector. It is quite telling, where we find ourselves and just how much more we could do. When we talk about where the risks are, there are some obvious risks out there, but then you think back to the Southport attack last summer and how a community suddenly had to galvanise itself out of nothing, and we maybe need to think about how we are set up as a society, to prepare us for the unexpected. There are, of course, potential floods and potential attacks from state actors or proxies, but then there are all sorts of other challenges to our communities and societies, which I think your evidence has alluded to.

Thank you very much for your time today. That completes our second panel and this evidence session.