HOUSE OF LORDS

Risk Assessment and Risk Planning Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Risk assessment and risk planning

Wednesday 16 June 2021

10.15 am

Watch the meeting

Members present: Lord Arbuthnot of Edrom (The Chair); Lord Browne of Ladyton; Lord Clement-Jones; Baroness McGregor-Smith; Lord Mair; Lord O'Shaughnessy; Lord Rees of Ludlow; Lord Robertson of Port Ellen; Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean; Lord Thurso; Lord Triesman; Lord Willetts.

Evidence Session No. 27 Virtual Proceeding Questions 262 - 274

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP, Paymaster General; Roger Hargreaves, Director, Civil Contingencies Secretariat.

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Examination of witnesses

Penny Mordaunt and Roger Hargreaves.

Q262 **The Chair:** Good morning, and welcome to this evidence session of the House of Lords Risk Assessment and Risk Planning Committee.

This morning we will be taking evidence from the Paymaster General, Penny Mordaunt, and from the director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, Roger Hargreaves. Good morning to both of you and thank you for giving evidence to us.

You do not both have to answer all the questions that we ask. We have a lot to get through, and we will be finishing this evidence session at 11.45. I hope that meets your timings. You are most welcome here.

After the session, a transcript of the evidence will be available, which you will be able to correct in minor necessary ways.

I will begin, if I may, with our first question. The committee has heard that the national security risk assessment is used more for response and clean-up than for prevention, preparation or mitigation. How, would you say, is the NSRA used in the mitigation and prevention of risks? Can you point to any particular examples where it has led to mitigatory action being taken?

Penny Mordaunt: I take this chance, at the start, to record my thanks to the committee and to particular Members who were doing additional things to support our work and the next iteration of the NSRA.

I will leave some practical examples to Roger, but the prime purpose of this is as a planning tool. It is not there to predict what is going to happen, but it does provide a process and a document that everyone involved in the civil contingencies space can use to help inform what it should be prepared for and to find those areas of response that need to be designed and resourced that will help us to deal with the greatest range of potential events.

It looks at likelihood and impact, but it is not there to make specific recommendations on how we should respond to particular emergencies and events.

It is also there to help with some of the drier stuff and for being prepared—for example, how we go through a spending review to ensure that departments, LRFs and so on are properly resourced.

The Chair: Sorry: when you say "LRFs", do you perhaps mean local resilience forums?

Penny Mordaunt: Yes—sorry: local resilience forums.

The Chair: Just checking.

Penny Mordaunt: They are there to help to make judgments on what the priorities should be and to help us develop the relevant partnerships,

particularly international partnerships, that will help to build that resilience.

I do not know, Roger, whether you want to give some practical examples.

Roger Hargreaves: I can do. Simply put, the NSRA is the basis for all of the contingencies work in government: it is the starting point for all our preparedness activity. It is certainly not something that we turn to only once a crisis has happened. We can look across lots of departments and see the NSRA providing its prioritisation and the work that it does.

I will give some practical examples of that. For example, the prominence of CBRN events within the risk register meant that, when it came to the incident in Salisbury, we had capabilities built into government that could be used to respond.

Ministers at the Ministry of Justice receive weekly reports from a range of risks that relate to the operation of the prison probation system, which flow from the NSRA assessment of problems that might arise.

We feed information to the Treasury as part of the spending review process so that the CCS can help it to understand what the risk landscape is and how that can be used to prioritise preparedness spending through the spending review. We see it being used everywhere practically, by Ministers, by officials, to drive preparedness and prioritisation choices.

When emergencies happen, we see how that preparedness work helps us to ensure that we are further ahead of the problem than we might be if we were not using the NSRA to prioritise during the preparedness phase.

The Chair: Have you ever conducted an assessment of its impact?

Penny Mordaunt: That is part of the work that we do when we are looking at the methodology. As you can imagine, especially over the past 18 months, there has been a continual assessment not just of this tool but of all sorts of things that we do in civil contingencies, and of how we have got the balance right between information that we give to local authorities, what data we give to local resilience forums and so forth.

The changes you have seen in the approach that we are taking to this, but also to the risk register and other products and activities, show that we are developing this all the time. For example, we have added new areas into the risk matrix. We are looking at new topics as they become more relevant and more apparent. There is a continual process, and part of that is the two-way dialogue we have with our partners, particularly at a local level. Clearly, this is a tool that we share with them. They are largely, in most situations, in the front line of the response.

Yes, we do that routinely, as part of our informing the methodology that leads to the success of the product.

Q263 **Lord Clement-Jones:** This is a bit of a long question on the classification and communication of the NSRA. The NSRA is held at high classification.

It is impossible for the public to see it and extremely difficult for parliamentarians. It is even a challenge for the members of LRFs, the very people responsible for enacting many of the plans contained within it.

Beyond the NSRA, London Resilience told us that it had to rely on leaks to newspapers when producing its Brexit planning assumptions, as information from central government was so limited. In the light of that, does it seem right that emergency planners are unable to access such critical information?

Penny Mordaunt: There are several things to that. On some basic facts, the assessment is shared, at both official sensitive and secret level, with local resilience forums. As an aside, if there is a criticism of central government to local government and partners over the past 18 months in particular, it has been about the data. It has been about data audited to mount a response—for example, lists of vulnerable people who need shielding and those sorts of things. We are very aware that we need to do more to support people on the front line in that respect, but this document is shared with them.

With particular regard to Brexit preparations, I have said this before but one of the reasons we were able to be on the front foot in some of our Covid response was in part that the Brexit preparations had forced us to be more resilient, as we had to prepare for a whole raft of possibilities. Going through that process, with Yellowhammer and all the work that was done at the time, we were building information systems that previously did not exist in some cases, or that were not as robust.

The Brexit situation was a particularly difficult phase in civil contingencies planning. It has helped us in responses we have had to mount since. London probably had reason to be anxious at that time, understandably, but I do not think that is a generally fair criticism that could be levelled at how these products are shared and used. London, as with every LRF, should be sighted on this information, right up to secret level.

Lord Clement-Jones: So, Brexit is a one-off, basically, from which lessons were learned.

Penny Mordaunt: That is my assessment. I do not know whether Roger would agree.

Roger Hargreaves: We should not confuse the NSRA process, which is a big, systematic process, with a lot of engagement and products that are then cascaded across the system. The NSRA is shared. We run roadshows, we support network checks and practice around the understanding of risk at a local level, and we make advisers from a range of government organisations available to discuss specific risks. Across the NSRA process, it is a very consistent story.

Where risks emerge between NSRAs, some information gets shared at a local level, and other material does not, but generally the principle is that

we understand that the local level is a building block of resilience, and we share risk information in as timely a fashion as possible.

I would also observe that risks are often the subject of newspaper reporting, and newspaper reporting is not always accurate, or it is perhaps not as measured or detailed as some of the risk information we provide. You often get questions from local responders, saying, "I have read about this", or, "I am concerned about that", and we provide follow-up information in those circumstances.

Lord Clement-Jones: On the basis of what the Minister has said, I was going to ask the question: will you commit to making information more readily available, acting on the basis of publishing information as a default? Are you saying that you actually do that already? The Brexit aspect was exceptional, but you do, as a matter of course, disclose the contents of the NSRA to LRFs and so on?

Penny Mordaunt: For some of the scenarios that we were looking at potentially happening in the Brexit situation, we were starting from scratch in gathering information. Generally speaking, we would be sharing information with local partners.

Roger Hargreaves: We shared a vast amount of scenario information in relation to Brexit with local planners, and that is what allowed them to produce some very detailed local plans. We would see that as an intrinsic part of making the system work.

Brexit is a particular example. It was obviously very political and contentious, so there were a lot of discussions within government and a lot of political framing of those discussions. A particular example is discussions in government around risk, how they play out and how they are communicated. I do not think it necessarily holds true of the wider risk picture.

Q264 **Lord Mair:** The committee has heard that the risk assessment process is largely conducted behind closed doors and does not involve sufficient external challenge or expertise. It has been claimed that the process is "scientifically rigorous", but external and independent peer review is a crucial aspect of any scientific process. How can you ensure that the risk assessment process is rigorous and cutting-edge if you do not invite any external expertise or challenge? How can you claim to be doing this in a scientific manner without any independent challenge?

Penny Mordaunt: I would say that, historically, that is a slightly unfair criticism. We work with a whole range of partners. In this iteration, we have asked the Royal Academy of Engineering, and we are also working with a whole raft of other people across academia, industry and those at an amateur and local level to inform it. We clearly want to hear what your committee is suggesting to us, too. I think that the next iteration is going to be more open and consultative than previous iterations. That is not to say that previously it has not been open and that it has not been able to take advice and input from a large range of stakeholders.

Picking up on part of the previous question, this is just one part of the things that we can communicate to our partners and to Parliament. Even on very confidential matters such as cybersecurity, we will offer briefings to certain Members of Parliament, including Her Majesty's Opposition, on certain aspects that they would wish to be sighted on.

I think that we are open, and the learnings that we have had over the Covid pandemic, about how we can fuse different disciplines and information from different disciplines together to help inform our planning process, will also help make this even more relevant in its next iteration.

Roger Hargreaves: The trend here is towards more openness. We recognise that there is benefit in doing that. There are probably two aspects to it. One is the more formal independent peer review of what we are doing. We have tried to build that into our methodology this time round for our work with the Royal Academy of Engineering. I think that is the general direction of travel: find a way to put more structure in and create independent peer review and challenge within the process.

The other part of the story is how open we are about our conclusions and the extent to which we show some more of our working. When people get the end product, they can see the final matrix: the picture of risks. Some of the things that we do, looking at trends in risk over time, with strategic risk and policy challenges that unfold over decades, the work we do to compare and contrast different countries, what is on their risk registers and how we check whether we are missing anything other people have spotted: those things are part of the process, but they are not prominent. In my view, we can do more to tell a story about how we generate our products and about the wider risk context, to offer some visibility and assurance beyond government on what we are doing.

Lord Mair: Having heard what you have both been saying, I would like to know: will you commit to involving a wide range of experts in the process going forward, in particular including dissenting voices, rather than just the usual suspects, if you are really looking for constructive challenge?

Penny Mordaunt: Certainly. I would be very happy to look at any list of not the usual suspects you would wish to send. It has been very explicit, certainly in how we have taken advice and organised it in the Covid task force, fusing different disciplines, but not with a complete consensus of scientific opinion. We do value that, and it helps us to ensure that we are taking good decisions and are not missing a trick.

Yes, you have my undertaking that we welcome that. We would be very grateful for the committee's early input from your inquiry into this process, and we will certainly take it on board.

Roger Hargreaves: I would be concerned if we characterised this as a process that is very closed or narrow now. As things stand now, it is a process that draws on the aid of a wide range of external experts. They are channelled through departments. We have extensive involvement through chief scientific advisers in departments, who have their own

academic and private sector networks. We use expert groups to review elements of the NSRA in its present incarnation, and we are trying to expand that for the future.

This is not something drawn up only in the Cabinet Office; there are many, many people across and beyond government who take part in the process now. We feel that we can go even further and inject more formality around peer review and within the process.

Lord Mair: I presume that you both very much subscribe to avoiding groupthink—which is really what we are talking about—and to having diversity of thought and external challenge.

Penny Mordaunt: Yes, absolutely. Having people from different disciplines is highly valuable. Often in government, you tend to have different products that are produced, and there tends to be one type of person who holds the pen. Having people from different disciplines contribute is incredibly valuable; you end up with a much better product, and we are very aware of that.

Q265 **Lord Willetts:** Good morning, Minister. One of the themes that has come across very strongly in our evidence is that, however good and comprehensive the risk assessment, it is not worth much unless it is then followed up by individual departments, which have to plan and organise a response. What more can you do to get departments to prepare for the threats identified in the national risk assessment?

Penny Mordaunt: There are a number of things. First, as an aside, if we really want to live up to the ambitions of resilience, as stated in the RR and elsewhere, the profile of the civil contingencies and all the things we do as a nation to build that resilience need to be higher in government, and they need to be more explicit in the work plans and the concerns of the National Security Adviser and the National Security Council. That is my personal view.

Part of our job in the coming months is to raise the profile of these issues. That sounds a small thing, but it is an important thing. That stems through to Ministers understanding that this is their first priority—in my view—in their workload in government. I have said it at other committees before, but we need to invest more in induction, training, flexion and exercising with Ministers. Ministers are the most transient part of the team, but they are an incredibly important link and, ultimately, they are the ones at the table, so we need to ensure that they know what they should be doing and are equipped to do that job well.

The thresholds that exist in this document and in what is held at a departmental level generally work well, although we have asked the Royal Academy, as part of its help on producing this next product, and looking at the methodology, to look at those thresholds and see whether they are in the right place yet. Generally, I think they work well.

Certainly, as a Minister in this role, when I have seen something—for example, the situation that a colleague in Parliament reported to me that

happened in their constituency—I have been able, through the civil contingencies group in the Cabinet Office, to reach into the responsible departments, kick the tyres on what they are doing and make sure that it is in the right place.

We keep it under review, and we take feedback, but those thresholds tend to work. In practice, they work well. I am keen that my team has very well-understood authority to be able to go and kick the tyres when they need to in departments. For me, the weakest link is about what we invest in Ministers in preparing them in their understanding of what needs to be done.

Lord Willetts: Thank you very much for that. I think that, in one of those other evidence sessions that you are referring to, you called for "a more aggressive and interventionist approach". Of course, the new risk assessment process is under way. What might we expect to see different this time round as the Cabinet Office becomes more "aggressive and interventionist"?

Penny Mordaunt: The role of Paymaster General is quite a fluid role. Sometimes it sits in other departments. The portfolio that you have in this role changes from Minister to Minister—it is quite a flexible portfolio. Having very explicit deliverables, just as you would have for the Security Minister, is helpful.

As committee members will know, I have a great deal of interest in this sort of area. Any future postholder needs to know what to look for and what their deliverables need to be; that is an important part of this. It is really about there being a greater profile across Whitehall on the things that we need to do practically, whether it is on critical national infrastructure or some other issues that are slightly off this agenda. I know that the committee is very concerned about those. They are mentioned in the NSRA, but the bulk of the activities to ensure that we are in a good place, such as cyber—the work plan that needs to be done by various departments—are very clear and explicit. Just raising the profile of some of that work in the general drumbeat of day-to-day life in Whitehall is something that we want to do. That is one thing that we could see change.

It is also about the practical things: we have added new things into the risk register—areas that are getting much more focus than we would have seen previously, such as disinformation.

There is one other thing that we are very keen to encourage. We have mentioned spending reviews. Just as departments need to use these tools when they are putting bids into the Treasury, the Treasury also needs to use these tools in making good decisions.

Those are some of the things that I would say you will probably see differently if we have been successful.

Roger Hargreaves: To add a few other specifics that we are working on, the lead government department principle applies, so departments lead their own work and their own risks, for which they are responsible. However, we recognise some of the limitations of that, in part because of the Covid experience.

We are working on a potential insurance model, which takes some of the lessons from the Infrastructure and Projects Authority and the way in which it assesses major projects within government, and seeing whether we can apply the same model to emergency planning around particular risks within the system.

We are looking, in particular, at the way we handle catastrophic risks—essentially those, such as Covid, that create a whole-system emergency requiring a whole-system response, where the lead government department model might not work as effectively and, through the creation of a catastrophic emergencies programme, providing much more support from the centre, so there is more co-ownership with departments around the biggest risks.

We are taking some big steps forward on the use of data. One of the most important ways in which departments are held to account or, probably more accurately, in which Ministers are exposed to the decisions that they face, both before and during a crisis, is through the provision of data and situation awareness. The new national situation centre will really speed up that process and will give more central visibility and oversight of what departments are doing in the build-up to crisis and during crisis.

There are very practical steps that we are taking. It is not about second-guessing what departments do; it is about giving them more support and exposing, to a greater extent, the work that they have under way, and, in a sense, allowing us to ask them more questions that are more precise about the quality of what they are doing.

Penny Mordaunt: For completeness, we want to build capacity at the local level as well. We are providing, through MHCLG, some pilot funding to enable it to get the right people in at a local level to help them with planning. That is being billed as a pilot, but it is really just about getting the right consistency and levels, so that they can dock in with what is happening in order to build that capacity.

The Chair: This leads us straight on to Lord Thurso's questions.

Q266 **Viscount Thurso:** Good morning, Minister. My question very much goes on from there: it is about the national risk register as much as the NSRA. The committee has had a great deal of evidence to suggest that planning is often undertaken in silos, with departments failing to prepare for risks for which they are not the lead government department. For example, the committee heard that the Department for Education had done no contingency planning for a pandemic. Does that not highlight an issue with the lead government department principle?

Penny Mordaunt: Where we have major gaps on preparedness, we need to reflect on why that is the case. If you have good products and good oversight of what is going on, and if, critically, your exercising is also good, you should not have those situations.

The only way we can do this really well is to have that principle and to have the departments take the responsibility for ensuring that the work plan that needs to happen is actually happening. We do have a role, and I am keen to make this, as Lord Willetts said, "more aggressive", but I think that it is the right mechanism. I think that we can do it better than we have previously, but I think that the principles are right.

Roger Hargreaves: What Covid exposes, as I mentioned a moment ago, is the vulnerability where we have whole-system emergencies. On the face of it, you have a lead government department that pushes things forward, but in truth the emergency is so broad that it will engage the whole system. That is why we were initiating a catastrophic emergencies programme that looked at these whole-system emergencies.

We are considering whether to broaden the lead government department principle so that, for those kinds of emergencies, you have co-ownership between the lead government department and the Cabinet Office.

The lead government department principle works really well on lots of occasions. We might consider, for example, Storm Christoph in the spring, quite a severe named storm. That work was led out of Defra, with clear ownership by Defra Ministers. They drove the process with well-established structures within the department, engaging their arm's-length bodies. There was very active policing and very well-rehearsed plans—then, working with CCS, drawing in a wider departmental response. There was a really effective response to the flooding, particularly given the potential for significant problems in south Manchester, but then no interruption to testing programmes, no interruption to wider pandemic response activity and no interruption, on a material scale, to infrastructure, because, even if it was led out of one department, there were ways to engage the wider system. It does work and it does draw other people in; it is just that the category of risks, the category of emergencies that might need—

Viscount Thurso: Let us accept for a moment that lead government department works—and I think you have made a good case. You then have the question of what happens when you get a very big event that crosses several departments, when you are looking at mitigating that in advance or planning for that. Professor Watson said to us in his evidence, "We need fewer silos. We often try to get the cyber right, get the physical aspect right and then get the people right—and these are all linked". Professor Sir Mark Walport also stressed the need to get out of the silo.

The question that comes to mind is: if lead government department basically works, how do you link it together when you have these interlinking problems? Can you compel departments to work together on risks that span more than one area? How do you deal with that?

Penny Mordaunt: I fully note that your question is about planning and being prepared for events, but I shall start at the event. Regarding the way in which Whitehall responds to an event, the mechanisms that we have when we are faced with a situation, and how we work together and agree action points, we need to ensure that, up stream, that is as tight as it needs to be. I think that there is still more work to do to get that to be as good as we would like it to be.

The ways in which you create that are: clear plans, producing planning tools that are of high quality and that have involved people from the start—I do not just mean the lead departments; I mean the partners that will work with those lead departments. It is how you exercise, whether it is tabletop exercises or larger exercises, and that continuous learning, strengthening and testing. That is how you arrive at something that is really good quality.

Situations will inevitably arise—you cannot see into the future—where you have genuine blocks on breaking down those silos: for example, how you use data that might be held in different departments and how you get over obstacles to sharing that data, perhaps at a local level. Sometimes you are presented with situations that are pretty clunky and that do not run as smoothly as if you could just design something from scratch. That is part of the continuous learning process. For very sad reasons, we have learned a lot over the past 18 months or so that will help to inform us going forward.

We will always end up finding evidence of silos, but we have to have a continual process of learning and breaking that down.

Q267 **The Chair:** I have a very specific question about something that we heard in evidence last week—the strategy for the position, navigation and timing systems. It is a critical strategy: it is very important to our critical national infrastructure, but no ministry wants to be responsible for it or, more likely, for the funding of it. Have you become aware of that dispute, perhaps between BEIS and the Ministry of Defence—I do not know? Is it being resolved?

Roger Hargreaves: Certain risks emerge that do not have a natural departmental home. Particularly where there are large programmes of work potentially attached to them, it makes more sense for them to be run out of a department than out of central machinery. Nevertheless, a bit like how the Bank of England is the funder of last resort in the system, the Cabinet Office is the responder of last resort for these risks, so there are some programmes that we still temporarily fund before they find a departmental home.

We need to find a home for the work on the position and navigation systems, and those discussions are going on at the moment, but, in the absence of a departmental home, the Cabinet Office is moving forward with that. We do need to find a departmental home for that, and it is a risk area, but it is from within the NSRA, because it is so vital to our way of life now.

I would suggest that, at the moment, it is one of those machinery-of-government questions that we are working through, but we are carrying on with the work that underpins the plan.

The Chair: The sooner this could be resolved, the better, I think. That would be my suggestion.

Q268 **Lord Browne of Ladyton:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, and welcome back, Mr Hargreaves.

I wish to turn now to political involvement, by which I mean ministerial involvement, in the current risk assessment process, and to accountability for it. I will ask this question in two parts.

We have heard what I would call competing evidence about the level and value of political involvement. When you gave evidence to us, Mr Hargreaves, you said that the process of risk assessment was "pleasingly free of any sense of political interference". You may have been referring to something different from political involvement. However, we have heard from other witnesses that ministerial ownership at all levels of this process, not just the conclusion, is really important.

My question is to you, Minister. Are you comfortable with the level of political or ministerial involvement in the risk assessment process? Are Ministers sufficiently involved in that process as it is currently constructed?

Penny Mordaunt: This is critical work, so the Civil Service infrastructure that drives it and provides that continuity has to be really strong, and there has to be a very established process. You can say this about any area of work, but particularly this area of work.

I think that ministerial involvement—and I say this as a Minister and politician—is really valuable. It is an extra pair of eyes. Clearly, they are the people ultimately responsible for ensuring that we are quite prepared for any event that may transpire.

They bring some unique experience. We have seen it over the past couple of years with ensuring that things are going to work practically. Their day-to-day jobs involve health, local government and a whole raft of issues at a local level, and they can spot opportunities and test whether things are going to work. They can also give feedback about what happens on the ground.

I have long advocated that we need to be preparing Ministers as best we can to be able to contribute and do the job that we are asking them to do. I have always said that we need to do more to give people the tools and equip them to do this aspect of their job really well.

We give people the opportunity to do that, but we could do more to ensure that this is top of their priority list. That is on the ministerial side. This type of work should have the same status in Whitehall as other issues that will be going across the National Security Council table.

Those things are things that we need to do better, but if you look at the RR and at the intent that we have, that is where we are focused. The emphasis on resilience as a nation will help us to do those things.

Although structures have changed—clearly, the National Security Council signs off these documents—I am the Minister currently responsible for producing these products: the risk register as well as what we are discussing today. We have already touched on what sits with government departments and at a local level.

The other aspect to this is the devolved Administrations. They are part of our consultation plans. It is critical that we are not just producing these documents with them but are also exercising with them. We can give you some recent examples, not least things such as fisheries protection, where the protocols will be able to be followed only once we get down to that level of exercising and working out.

We generally do that well, and I am a real champion, I hope, for ensuring that Ministers do not just have these opportunities but are properly equipped to do the job well.

Lord Browne of Ladyton: If we can interpret that as meaning that you are enthusiastic or intent on involving Ministers in the whole process—assessment and implementation—I move on to a question about implementation.

In July 2019, when I think you were Secretary of State for Defence, the threats, hazards, resilience and contingencies sub-committee of the NSC was stood down, as indeed were all the other three specific commitments of the NSC. The reason in the public domain, whether or not it is true, is that the then Prime Minister wanted to focus that resource on planning for the possibility of a no-deal Brexit.

I should be very candid about this. I am particularly interested in the role that that sub-committee was given in the implementation of the UK biosecurity strategy of 2018. I tabled some written questions in Parliament about it, to which the answers were very interesting. What takes the place of the job that that sub-committee did in risk planning and particularly accountability? Is there any intention to reinstate this sub-committee, or an equivalent, at that level of government for these risks, particularly top-tier risks?

Penny Mordaunt: I do not have any skin in the game on this. I think that that committee was stood down when I was not in office. Where responsibilities sit is very clear. Ultimately, the NSC will sign off products and plans. That has always operated with a degree of flexibility—for example, with small groups on particular issues, or bespoke groups of Ministers, depending on what the issue looks like, and in some cases an expanded NSC. For example, DCMS is brought in on particular issues.

There has always been that degree of flexibility. What is important is that we have clarity about that accountability and which Ministers are responsible for taking the decision to sign off particular plans.

Of more importance is the contribution that is made by Ministers in the formulation of these documents. That is certainly what we have been focused on in the work that we are doing. It is really about Ministers' ability both to shape the agenda and have input into plans before they come to the NSC, or any group that sits on the NSC. I would say that that is the most important thing.

You are right: if we want to raise the profile of the importance of this work, having established committees is one way to do that. I do not know whether Roger wants to add anything from the Civil Service perspective.

Roger Hargreaves: You quoted me a moment ago and said I had observed that the NSRA was pleasingly free of political interference. In the same section, I observed that that did not fall short of ministerial oversight.

The hiatus in the threats, hazards, resilience and contingency committee reflects the huge amount of civil contingency business going through the Brexit and the Covid structures. The question that we are grappling with now is: what structures are appropriate beyond Covid? Obviously, we are moving into a multi-risk environment and I am looking forward to finding out what decisions are made on that front. There is no shortage of routes as things stand for us to reach ministerial collective agreement, but that will not persist once we have moved beyond the Covid structure.

Lord Browne of Ladyton: This sub-committee was stood down in July 2019, which predated Covid and the diversion of resource to deal with it. I do not wish to push this too hard, but it is quite well discussed publicly that the reason for it was resource for a no-deal Brexit at that level of government. It could not possibly have had anything to do with Covid and the pressure it was placing on the Government.

Penny Mordaunt: No, but we have had Brexit and then Covid, and you would have expected new structures, if we had not had the pandemic, to be stood up and formalised in a different way. That has not been appropriate because of the year that we have had.

The way we have organised things in the Cabinet Office means that the Covid-19 task force that looks after all aspects of the response is next to this office; it is in the same space, but that work has been separate from the area that I look after, which are the other civil contingencies aspects.

It is not the case that things such as critical national infrastructure and cyber—all those other areas—have received less attention. I would argue that they have received more attention and we can evidence that. For example, we have done a huge amount of work in pulling together all the strands of cyber activity across government to have a proper, one HMG

drive on improving all aspects of our cyber capacity and a great deal more focus on the aspects of critical national infrastructure.

The quality of what we are doing is continually improving. I referred to raising the profile of things being quite important, and I think that committees sometimes help do that, but for my money it is the input and work that goes into producing the products that the NSC signs off that is the most critical thing. That is where I think that we should be ensuring that Ministers are engaged, equipped and are doing their jobs and have proper oversight of the work that their departments are doing.

Lord Browne of Ladyton: That is very clear.

Q269 **Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean:** I want to turn to some of the machinery that is endemic in our system. MPs have short terms in office, and Ministers seem to have shorter and shorter terms in post at the moment.

The committee heard from Lord Ricketts and Lord Harris that there is little incentive to invest in long-term issues that stretch beyond the next election, or capabilities that might never be needed. This is compounded by a two-year timeline in the NSRA.

Do you think that this short-term thinking is endemic in our political system? As Minister, are you able to think longer term about the real risk, or is the term just too short to think about longer-term risks?

Penny Mordaunt: I shall not bang on about building capacity in Ministers, but I do think that if we invested in training for Ministers on the risk aspect of their job and said, "You do not become a Minister unless you have had some induction into the decisions you might be taking and the processes in which you might be involved", you would be strengthening the system. I think that is the weak area.

I think that we have the balance right in the planning tools and the timeframes that they look at. Although we are focused on a two-year timeframe, departments are still asked to look further than that. We have other exercises that complement the process that we are going through with this tool that look at horizon scanning further out and more immediate things as well.

The processes are focusing our attention on more immediate and short-term planning for things that we need to be aware of. One of the things that we have asked the Royal Academy of Engineering to do is give us some advice about testing whether we have got those timeframes right.

Leaving aside what I said about Ministers, I think we do have a sensible approach to this aspect.

Clearly, to make a final point—Roger might want to add some things—we need to ensure that decisions that might need to be taken by certain points are supported by other processes going on in government. If we need to take a decision about a capability that we need to stand up, being told that we have to wait for a budget cycle or spending review is

sometimes not helpful. This is why it is important that the Treasury looks at these tools and understands the business we are in. We are keen that we build on that relationship. It is no good saying that we need to do something if we are then delayed in doing it because we have to wait for a particular fiscal event before we can get cracking on it.

Roger Hargreaves: We have some good material within the NSRA already that relates to long trends in risk, and I think that there is scope for us to bring some of that out and present it more publicly so that people can recognise the direction of travel that we see in some of the work around climate change and defence. There are products that the Government generate that look at the timeframe, and I think that we could do something similar on resilience, not on the basis of something new but using what we already have. People will find that helpful both in framing political debate about different choices and how we communicate with the public, industry and so forth about risks that they might face in future.

Baroness Symons of Vernham Dean: The idea of an induction course for potential Ministers is certainly a novel one that I think needs a great deal of thought. What about the fact that permanent secretaries meet every week? We discussed departments working in silos. Surely, the permanent secretaries have quite a serious role in this, both on the question of silos and longer-term thinking. Are you convinced that the mechanism is there for permanent secretaries, who after all are the principal advisers to Ministers, to do that longer-term thinking?

Penny Mordaunt: I would say that they are, particularly because of not just Covid but Brexit preparations. Clearly, some major decisions needed to be taken in shifting priorities, not just within departments. Departments are working more closely together in sharing resource, in some cases giving quite substantial amounts of their workforce to other departments for those preparations. I think that that way of working has been very well established. Roger may wish to say a bit more about what might have preceded that, but that is established.

I think that the Civil Service does personal professional development quite well, but we are only as good as the information products and tools that are produced. One of the outcomes of the integrated review and how that has been formulated is that we will have and are having more sophisticated information products within Whitehall. I still think that we need better products. We are always capable of doing more, and it is important that Ministers are sighted on those things to help their situation, but largely because of the events that have driven the way in which we have had to work together in Whitehall we are in a much better place than we were five years ago. That is my assessment.

Roger Hargreaves: The weekly Permanent Secretaries' meeting considers resilience issues from time to time, particularly those that relate to co-ordination across the whole system. Of course, there are many, many other things that they are looking at, but it features from time to time.

A cross-Whitehall officials committee at director-general level considers a mixture of issues that include strategic and long-term resilience as well as short-term priorities. There was a commitment in the integrated review to develop a national resilience strategy to set out the long-term framing of our work around resilience, which hopefully then sifts through changes of officials, changes of Ministers and, if it is drawn up in the right way, changes of government.

Q270 **Lord Triesman:** Minister, I was very grateful to hear you say a short while ago that the Treasury needs to understand the business that we are in. In sessions with local resilience forum representatives, I heard them express the need at a basic level for what they describe as more funding, more trust and more information. Leaving trust and information to one side for a moment, given the level of cuts to local government, largely to the structure of governance of local authorities, how do you anticipate that the local response partnerships will fulfil the responsibilities placed on them when budgets are decreasing and the demands on them are increasing? Should there be emergency planned funding for local authorities? Should it be increased? Should it be ring-fenced?

Penny Mordaunt: This is really recognised. I referred to what has been billed as a pilot with some funding provided by MHCLG to local resilience forums and their partners to build the capacity that we know would strengthen them and enable them to do the job that they would want to do. That has largely been about getting the right personnel in post, particularly to help with the planning aspects of their work.

That is a year of funding and, from memory, is just under £8 million. There are ongoing discussions about what resource needs to be provided from the centre to local resilience forums going forward.

I have made some comments already about the amount of information and its timeliness going to LRFs, particularly during the Covid response. I think that there is a recognition that we ought to do better on that. There were some genuine obstacles, sometimes legal ones, about what data can be shared and when, but all those need to be worked through.

I think that we can do better on that front. I have always said that they are the front-line response and need as much information as we can give them to allow them, as much as we can, to tailor the response. They are the front line; they know their areas best; they know what works best and can follow it up and come up with creative solutions to problems that Whitehall will always be scratching its head about.

Sometimes there is an understandable reluctance to overburden either local authorities or LRFs. That is done sometimes with the best intentions, but it is wrong. Generally, local responders are incredibly robust and, quite often, as much as they can be involved in the design of a response the better.

We have learned a lot over the past couple of years, but it is recognised that we need to bolster that and enable civil society. I do not mean just

volunteers who step up to direct traffic or look after elderly people on the street; I mean finding professional charities that produce maps and do all sorts of things that are fundamental to domestic and international responses to tragedies and emergencies.

That is very well understood and is at the heart of our work. I think that it will be a major theme as we develop national resilience.

Roger Hargreaves: We recognise through funding that there is a really strong link between the resources that we provide at the local level and what we expect them to do. As well as the £7.5 million pilot this year to support and think about how we can enhance local response forums, we have provided them with £13 million to support their work over the past two to three years in relation to Covid and Brexit. We supplied local authorities with £80 million of additional funding to support Brexit operations. We provided them with £250 million to support a greater degree of work capacity in relation to Covid and to do operation response work.

We have been testing the principle of what more we can get, depending on what more we provide, and the question in the spending review is: how much more of that is it sensible to bake in so that we can have improved capacity across the local response system for the range of emergencies that we assess are likely to occur?

There is a degree of political choice here. We tend to be criticised for two things. One is not giving the local level freedom; the other is not having a tight enough central grip on what is happening and what people are doing. If we are to give the local level more freedom and support, that necessitates a degree of loosening of control. We either recognise that local balancing and give it space or we have a hard central grip. There is a balance between those two things, but they are at points competing questions.

Lord Triesman: There are so many questions, but I know that we are short of time.

The Chair: We are. I would ask everyone to have an eye on the time and keep questions and answers short and snappy.

Q271 **Lord Robertson of Port Ellen:** I want to move to the question of exercises, which is one of my favourite subjects. We have had quite a lot of written and oral evidence emphasising the importance of exercising, especially the involvement of decision-makers at the highest level and how crucial that is in establishing resilience across the whole field.

Minister, I know that you are a champion of that. You have already told the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy how much you believe in exercising. I want to probe you about how many exercises related to the NSRA you have been involved in during your time as Minister. How regularly are these exercises conducted? How are the scenarios chosen, and who is involved in them?

Penny Mordaunt: I could not tell you the number that I have been involved in as a Minister, but it is a lot. I am very conscious of the fact that in some real events, not exercises, I attended, it may have been the first day in the job for the Minister in the chair. I would probably wholeheartedly agree with the evidence that you have been given. We have to prepare people better if they play that critical role in decision-making on the day.

As Roger and his colleagues will testify, I have also been concerned—I have also been reassured—that, while we have dealt with so much during the Covid situation but also with Brexit preceding that, we have maintained our exercise regime for other areas, be that our response to a terrorist event, a natural emergency or extreme weather. We are maintaining that programme of activity. Although it has involved Ministers less in those exercises, that drumbeat has continued.

Other Ministers and I have also been flagging—the system allows for this—areas where there are concerns where we might want to do more, and the programme of exercising both at national and local level is pretty responsive to that. I have raised my own concerns, and the systems response, to that ministerial direction.

We can always improve the quality of those exercises. I am always very keen that the exercises look at concurrent events. For example, when we looked at the exercises for Brexit contingencies, I wanted to have an extreme weather event at the same time to test the system.

In terms of real-life events, we are good at recognising where we might have an area where there are a lot of things to do. Going into Covid, a couple of local authority areas had extreme weather situations and we wanted to bolster them.

Exercising is probably the most fundamental mechanism that we have to improve the quality of what we do. I would like to be doing much more of it, but we have probably got the balance right, especially during the Covid pandemic, in how much we are doing. Roger can take you through a bit more detail about when we are doing things and why.

Roger Hargreaves: Exercising is one of the most important services that the CCS provides to the system. Before we went into Brexit and the pandemic we ran a national exercise programme. There was a wide variety of different exercises: national electricity outage; foot-and-mouth outbreaks; pandemic planning itself; severe weather events; and flooding involving a medivac.

There was a long list of major exercises. The past two or three years has been a very busy period. We have done an awful lot of exercising in response to real or emerging events, particularly around Brexit and the pandemic, but also other emergencies that have run in parallel to that. The excellent team that I have been working with has been incredibly busy. It has provided a variety of different products across government:

major tier 1 exercises; manning for those exercises; war games; and red team sessions. We have quite a developed architecture around it.

We provide that service into government and it really shifts what people do in practice. For example, we ran three exercises of increasing scale and complexity in the run-up to the G7. The G7 in Carbis Bay passed off incredibly smoothly, in spite of the fact that it was quite a difficult location. We went through some significant problems that were dealt with incredibly smoothly because they had come up in exercises. We had adjusted plans and those plans kicked in.

I can see a huge amount of activity around exercising with demonstrable benefits within the system, but our challenge now as we move out of Covid is to restore a national exercise programme that moves away from how we deal with the present crisis into what is our systematic programme driven by the NSRA, working through exercises across all departments to test the system and improve it.

Lord Robertson of Port Ellen: That is quite reassuring. I would like to ask you about the exercises that you might be doing relating to COP 26 in Glasgow. As an outsider, that worries me considerably.

Minister, you were involved as a junior Minister in Exercise Cygnus in 2016, which involved a pandemic. Given that we had that exercise, why were we lamentably ill prepared for the pandemic that hit us last February?

Penny Mordaunt: If we had had a flu pandemic, that exercise would have been very helpful, but the scenario was substantially different from the pandemic that we have gone through because of the difference in transmission and a whole raft of things. It did not test us for some of the decisions that we faced during the Covid pandemic.

One final point that needs to be dialled up in our exercise programme is that a major part of learning and being prepared is having reflection on the exercise that you have just gone through. Generally, Ministers are not involved in that. There has been a lot of discussion around the dissemination of the recommendations of Cygnus. I have gone on record at another committee as saying that I requested very early on in the second COBRA meeting during the Covid crisis that the recommendations of Cygnus be circulated to all Ministers, because we had just had a reshuffle and as I looked around the table I saw a lot of junior Ministers, some of whom were new to ministerial office.

Those sorts of things need to be done better. We have learned the lessons of that. Part of learning from exercises is that reflection from those who have taken part in the exercises. I think that we should formally establish that, particularly Ministers' involvement. That would strengthen the whole exercise plan.

Q272 **Baroness McGregor-Smith:** I have a question about business. We had a session with business leaders, many of whom said that despite being

crucial players in many national responses they were really not engaged by central government. As an example, Logistics UK said, as did others, that it was not even aware of the national risk register.

Logistics have been so important in the past year. How better could we engage with industry groups in the risk assessment process? Why do you think that there was not more engagement with them?

Penny Mordaunt: First, in the products we produce we have good and improving engagement with business and industry, not just the critical national infrastructure players but wider industry. When I came into this post I got the COI to map whom we talk to across government. An enormous number of forums and initiatives sit within government departments, and I wanted to rationalise and understand what that landscape looked like, not just for civil contingency reasons but so that we are not overloading the same HR director with gazillions of requests on a whole raft of issues, for example. We need to understand to whom we are talking and why we are talking to them, given we have a plan, and how we better engage with business.

This is an improving situation. Other bits of work going on in government, particularly related to Brexit, will also help considerably. It is about taking information from business and using its information-gathering tools. You mentioned Logistics UK. Other membership organisations gather huge amounts of information. It would be very helpful to know about problems that the sector is facing. How do we utilise that information? How do we make best use of our own data-gathering and information-gathering services across government, right through to providing the level of support that departments need and working across government to provide that customer-facing support, for want of a better expression, that businesses might need or point of contact that they can dock into, ensuring that it is in the right place? I think that you will see us standing up those services in the coming months, particularly for situations such as Brexit.

We have also touched on how we are trying to make this process more open. I think that you will see us talking to a wider range of stakeholders. As a general point, our level of business engagement and communications with business need to improve, and we have put some things in train to do that.

Baroness McGregor-Smith: I have a very quick follow-up—I know we are running short of time. If you take a look at the impact on business after the delays in the reopening of the economy on Monday, do you think the Government took into account the impact on business? Did they have that information to hand readily so that they understood the impact sector by sector across the UK?

Penny Mordaunt: The answer to that is yes. I speak as a Minister who was given the task of articulating that on behalf of the wedding sector, for example, to business. I can tell you that I and other Ministers laid this on with a trowel in decision-making forums and utilised organisations—in

my case, the Government's task force—to produce data and quantify the impact of one course of action versus another, not just on business aspects and the economy but on the social implications of one course of action or another.

You can always improve. That case is very well made across all sectors, but there are competing priorities. The road map is designed to enable us to take decisions at particular points when we know that we will have the information and data on which to make those judgments.

Q273 **Lord Rees of Ludlow:** My question is about the newest national risk register launched in December last year. I quote your own words, Minister. You say that it "outlines the key malicious and non-malicious risks that could affect the UK in the next two years, and provides resilience guidance for the public". How can it be achieved? As you know, it was not really publicised. It is not widely known or read. Are there ways in which we could ensure that it gets a more public launch so that it does get through to the public?

Penny Mordaunt: Yes, you are absolutely right. Nobody here is expecting people to go and rummage through GOV.UK and apprise themselves of how they engage with and contribute to the resilience of the nation by reading the risk register.

First, we need a clear view about how people can contribute, whether it is those very professional civil society organisations or the incredible interest in volunteering and the large number of people who have stepped up, whether it is Covid or what follows, to help their communities and build up the nation's resilience.

We are developing a clear plan with other government departments for how people can contribute to that. I am looking to relaunch and reset this, including making a keynote speech in the coming weeks. We have an opportunity to engage people in building up a professional group of people who can help to step in and do much more of a planning role—those who may have retired from those roles—and utilise an army of volunteers.

Lord Rees of Ludlow: This is good news because when Mr Hargreaves spoke to us, he said that there was no clear plan.

Q274 **Lord O'Shaughnessy:** Following on from Lord Rees's questions and your responses on how to get the public involved, you mentioned that the integrated review proposed much greater involvement by what was described as a civilian reservist cadre for support in times of crisis. We have interviewed representatives from the voluntary sector. There is a degree of scepticism about what is intended—not the idea but how it would work and whether it would be additional to or would combine the existing strengths of organisations out there at the moment.

Will you tell us a bit more about your rationale behind the development of the force, and what engagement has taken place with existing voluntary forces in developing the concept?

Penny Mordaunt: Earlier in this evidence session my colleague pointed to the fact that one of the weak links between the centre and local responders is about our having that real-time information. What tends to happen is that we end up leaning on military planners or liaison officers that we drop into a local authority or LRF to give us that swift real-time information. We tend to lean a lot on defence to provide some of that liaison, but also that plan. I think that was one of the main drivers of how we can really strengthen this. It is a small force of 1,000 or so people who might have retired from particular professions and have these skills that we can call on to bolster that local response.

That is one aspect of this. It is that real practical experience that says, "Look, we have a gap here. How can we make this stronger?" Some of the scepticism that may be out there among charities and civil society organisations is about recognising how fundamental they are to that local response. We often think of blue-light services and our public services. I just give one example from my own local area. We solved the PPE last-mile problem by utilising underused Hampshire Search and Rescue, which had Covid protocols, transport and the ability to map and audit where stocks were. That was an organisation that said, "We are not being used as much as we could be. How can we help?" It got in touch with me and I said, "You're equipped to solve this problem". We did all our last-mile deliveries and got PPE to those who needed it in that crisis by using that body.

Lots of civil society organisations do incredible professional jobs. I think that raising the profile of that work, including them more in how we are generating our response and giving them some of those opportunities to be involved in exercises, but also potentially resourcing them for particular projects, would help and would go down very well with the sector.

The final piece is about utilising people in their streets who now talk to the little old lady down the road but who did not talk to her two years ago because they have to get her prescription and shopping for her. How do we build that local street-level resilience as well as new information systems such as the alert system to make us more resilient? It is at all these levels.

I think we are as clear as we can be about that whole plan. Even though different bits of government are leading on each of those levels, the more people understand it the more ideas will be generated at the local level.

Roger Hargreaves: I have regularly met representatives from the voluntary and community sector since taking up this post. I do not see this as an either/or with respect to the civilian reserve. The VCS is a critical sector in responding to emergencies and does a vital job, which we recognise both in the legislation and more generally. The civilian reserve is about augmenting some public sector organisations from alumni and potentially external experts, and building out from there.

The missing piece, or the open policy question, is whether we want to go down the road that many other countries do and have public sector-organised community engagement in civil protection with local volunteer civil protection units, which you find in quite a lot of continental countries. That is not part of our tradition here. We tend to use the military or voluntary sector. It is just an open policy question that forms part of the debate about how you engage with communities and whether you can do something with it more broadly, but I think that is for the wider resilience strategy.

Lord O'Shaughnessy: Those have been very illuminating and reassuring answers for the voluntary sector about harnessing their strengths as well.

The Chair: This has been a very constructive evidence session. You have both been very helpful in saying what you intend to do and where there are gaps and we can do better. We are extremely grateful. I thank the witnesses and the committee for being very disciplined, and the staff for helping us immeasurably, as always.