



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From the Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care*

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The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
Chair, Health and Social Care Committee
House of Commons
Westminster
London SW1A 0AA

19 October 2020

Dear Jeremy,

Exercise Cygnus

I am writing to you in your capacity as the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee and the former Secretary of State for Health and Social Care at the time of Exercise Cygnus, to notify you of the decision to publish the full report on 20 October 2020.

The decision to publish the report has been made following careful consideration of the public interest, and although the public interest factors are finely balanced, my opinion is that our collective desire to be open and transparent in the handling of the response to the current COVID pandemic outweighs the risk that publication may fetter future internal analysis. I am satisfied that any possible negative impact is outweighed by the necessity of demonstrating how this exercise contributed to our pandemic preparedness, and I am clear that the decision to publish the report is restricted to Exercise Cygnus. It does not set a precedent for the publication of past or future pandemic preparedness exercises.

As you are aware, Exercise Cygnus was a Tier 1 command post exercise delivered by Public Health England (PHE) on behalf of the then Department of Health and took place in October 2016. The exercise was designed to assess the United Kingdom's preparedness and response to a pandemic influenza outbreak.

The exercise scenario was close to the Reasonable Worst-Case Scenario (RWCS) for pandemic flu and specifically designed to highlight vulnerabilities and areas for improvement. It focussed on the later stages of an influenza pandemic and tested the country's response to the increased demand for healthcare and our ability to maintain essential services. Exercise Cygnus did not consider other potential pandemics, or what action could be taken to prevent widespread transmission.

Participation in the exercise included responders from the Department of Health, other Government departments, NHS England, PHE, Local Resilience Forums, several prisons and the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland governments. The published report identifies recommendations relevant to these participating organisations. The report was

commissioned by my Department and produced independently by PHE and was shared with participants shortly afterwards.

The exercise identified 22 recommendations in four areas of key learning:

- a) Concepts of operations, i.e. how Government works with responders;
- b) Legislative easements that might be employed during a pandemic;
- c) Public reactions; and
- d) Capability and capacity to surge services to meet demand.

Following Exercise Cygnus, the then-Prime Minister chaired a meeting of the National Security Council (Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies), which commissioned a cross-government programme of work to strengthen the UK's preparedness. Actions on all 22 recommendations have been taken forward.

The report is being published alongside an update on gov.uk that sets out actions taken to implement the recommendations from Exercise Cygnus to support the Government's pandemic planning, such as drafting the Pandemic Influenza Bill, on which large parts of the Coronavirus Act were based, and without which our preparedness would have been severely impaired.

I hope this letter is helpful for putting into context the decision to release the Exercise Cygnus report.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Matt', with a stylized flourish at the end.

MATT HANCOCK