



House of Commons  
Committee of Public Accounts

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# Government resilience: extreme weather

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2023–24

*Report, together with formal minutes relating  
to the report*

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## Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to strengthen resilience to the national risks that the UK faces. In December 2022, the *UK Government Resilience Framework* was published, setting out the government's strategic approach to strengthening resilience that will be taken forward by the Cabinet Office. Strengthening UK resilience to society-wide risks will require action to be taken across government, but we are concerned that the government's approach lacks the robust leadership, oversight and urgency required.

As global temperatures rise, extreme weather events are likely to become more frequent and severe, and recent events have shown that the government can do more to prepare for these kinds of risks. Extreme weather risks are some of the most serious facing the UK, for example, estimated insurance losses were £250 million to £300 million for Storm Arwen and more than 4,500 heat-related deaths were recorded during the summer of 2022 in England. By focusing on extreme weather events, we can learn wider lessons on developing UK resilience.

To strengthen resilience to national risks, including extreme weather, the government needs to focus more on medium- and long-term prevention and preparation, including, appointing a Chief Risk Officer to consider cross-cutting and system-wide risks. Government needs to set out clear roles and responsibilities for citizens, the voluntary sector, the public and private sector; be explicit about the level of resilience it wants to achieve and how it will get there; and speed up the development and implementation of its approach to resilience investment.

## Introduction

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Government assesses the most serious risks facing the UK or its interests overseas over the next few years via the National Security Risk Assessment, a classified document, and its public-facing version, the National Risk Register. Out of the 89 risks on the National Risk Register, eight are extreme weather events. Extreme weather events are those weather events that are significantly different from the average or usual weather pattern and include droughts, high temperatures and heatwaves, floods and storms.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to strengthen resilience to the national risks that the UK faces. In December 2022, the *UK Government Resilience Framework* was published, setting out the government's strategic approach to strengthening resilience and the key actions that it intends to undertake by 2025 or 2030. This work will be taken forward by the Cabinet Office's new Resilience Directorate, its Head of Resilience and the Resilience Steering Board. Government defines resilience as "an ability to withstand or quickly recover from a difficult situation, but also to get ahead of those risks and tackle challenges before they manifest".

## Conclusions and recommendations

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1. **Government is too focussed on short-term reactive responses at the expense of developing the UK's medium- and long-term resilience to extreme weather events.** Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has strengthened arrangements to manage national risks. For example, it established the National Situation Centre in 2021 to bring data, analysis and insight together to improve its ability to identify, monitor and manage risks. However, the areas strengthened often focus on response and recovery rather than on the ability to withstand these events and therefore minimise damage. The Climate Change Committee has found little evidence that government is taking action at the pace and scale needed to fully prepare for worsening climate risks facing the UK. It, along with the National Infrastructure Commission, has highlighted that infrastructure, such as roads, rail, power and data centres, is not designed to withstand extreme weather events. Recent events have shown the impact these events can have. In 2022, for example, more than 4,500 heat-related deaths were recorded during the summer in England and Storm Eunice left 1.4 million homes without power. Improving the UK's resilience requires medium- and long-term planning and investment to secure good value for money.

**Recommendation 1:** *The Cabinet Office, working with HM Treasury and relevant departments, should ensure sufficient focus is given to building the UK's medium- and long-term resilience to extreme weather events and other national risks, so that it is better able to withstand these risks and minimise damage. The recommendations set out in this report aim to support this.*

2. **The Cabinet Office is taking too long to develop its approach to investment in resilience, including private sector investment.** Public and private sector investment is critical in developing national resilience to extreme weather events and to the impacts of climate change. The Cabinet Office and HM Treasury do not know how much money is spent on resilience to extreme weather events or other national risks. The Cabinet Office has committed to having a coordinated and prioritised approach to investment in resilience within government, informed by a shared understanding of risk, by 2030. By 2030, the Cabinet Office has also committed to reviewing existing regulatory regimes on resilience to ensure they are fit for purpose. Currently, some regulators do not have a statutory climate resilience remit and we are concerned that slow implementation of these measures is holding back UK resilience. The 2023 Green Finance Strategy sets out government's proposed action to prepare the UK for the physical impacts of the changing climate, to align financial flows with a climate-resilient economy, and to increase investment in adaptation, but its commitments on adaptation are substantially weaker than those on net zero and on nature.

**Recommendation 2:** *By 2028, the Cabinet Office should:*

- a) *implement the government's coordinated and prioritised approach to investment in resilience;*
- b) *give infrastructure regulators consistent climate resilience roles; and*

- c) *work with HM Treasury and other government departments to encourage greater private investment in climate adaptation.*
3. **For most extreme weather risks government has not set out what level of resilience it wants to achieve or how it will attain this, including targets and standards for the desired level of national, local or sectoral resilience.** For three of the four extreme weather risks examined by the National Audit Office (high temperatures and heatwaves, storms and surface water flooding), government has not specified what outcome it is looking to achieve, such as target levels of preparedness or resilience, or the amount of risk that it is willing to accept in the pursuit of those outcomes (risk appetite). For droughts, water companies are currently required to plan to ensure resilience to a 1-in-200 year ‘severe’ drought and from 2024, to a 1-in-500 year ‘extreme’ drought. Without defining the level of risk government is willing to accept and aiming to attain, it cannot make informed decisions about trade-offs between long- and short-term priorities, investment or funding allocation in priority areas. It also makes it difficult for government or other stakeholders to track progress and evaluate how effectively and efficiently government is using public funds to improve national resilience.

**Recommendation 3:** *Using extreme weather risks as a pilot with a view to then applying more widely to other sets of national risks, the Cabinet Office should set out what a resilient UK looks like for these risks and a strategy to deliver this. This could include identifying the gap between the tolerable and acceptable level of risk and the current position, producing costed plans to drive down the risk to this level, bringing this information together to develop a coordinated and prioritised approach to investment, and monitoring and tracking progress in driving down the risk to this level.*

4. **In building resilience to extreme weather events, it will be vital to better understand how different communities and groups will be disproportionately affected.** People experience different levels of exposure to extreme weather. Factors such as location, income and health affect people’s ability to cope with and respond to these events. Better understanding of vulnerability to the impacts of extreme weather could be used to target adaptation measures and emergency response. Government has committed to conducting an annual survey of public perceptions of risk, resilience and preparedness and develop a measurement of socio-economic resilience by 2025. This will include how risks impact across communities and vulnerable groups, to guide and inform decision making on risk and resilience. Other countries such as Australia and New Zealand have programmes of public education and communication on how to prepare for crises.

**Recommendation 4:** *The Cabinet Office should set out how it will better engage different communities and vulnerable groups to understand the risks and impacts that affect them, for example, by using the results of its 2025 survey to better protect vulnerable groups.*

5. **If the government does not learn lessons on leadership and oversight for system-wide risks, this may come at a high cost to individuals, the economy and society in the future.** Managing and building resilience to national risks requires coordinated action to be taken across government and beyond. But there are



gaps in improving UK resilience as accountability is too fragmented and diffuse. In 2022, we recommended the establishment of a Chief Risk Officer to consider cross-cutting risks in government and proactively manage the identification and resolution of system-wide concerns. This post has not been created. Instead, the Cabinet Office appointed a Head of Resilience to lead the efforts to strengthen UK resilience and HM Treasury appointed a Head of the Government Risk Profession to build capabilities and skills in the risk management profession. These roles do not adequately address the objective of the Committee's previous recommendation. There is still a lack of independent challenge on the extent to which risk is properly identified and considered at the most senior levels when decisions are made, and a lack of cohesive leadership and objective oversight of how government as a whole manages national risks. A Chief Risk Officer should address these shortcomings, ensure that there are no gaps in risk oversight, and address systemic challenges across government and any consequential risks.

**Recommendation 5:** *By 2025, the government should establish a Government Chief Risk Officer role to oversee the identification and proactive management of cross-cutting consequential risks in government and the resolution of system-wide concerns in a cohesive and coherent manner. This role should be independent and have sufficient seniority to not only provide professional leadership and expert advice across the risk profession but also advise and constructively challenge senior leaders in government.*

6. **The Cabinet Office has yet to set out the respective roles of central government, local government, the devolved administrations, the private and voluntary sectors, and the public for developing and maintaining national resilience.** Government has identified that developing resilience requires a 'whole of society' approach, but it has yet to clarify the roles the different parts of government and society ought to play, leading to uncertainty on what actions to take. This uncertainty on roles, responsibilities and actions is particularly challenging for communities dealing with a novel risk that is impacting them for the first time where who does what has not been well rehearsed. Considering individual extreme weather risks, the public does not always know who is responsible for mitigating the risk. For example, public awareness of the risk of surface water flooding is low and it is not always clear who the public should contact to report incidents to when they happen. There are also opportunities to learn from other countries. For example, the Australian government has issued statements of responsibility for government, business, the third sector and individuals.

**Recommendation 6:** *The Cabinet Office should set out clear roles, responsibilities, and guidance for citizens, the third sector, the public sector and the private sector on prevention and preparedness for national risks, and how this links with the roles and responsibilities of central and local government.*

7. **Local organisations have a critical role to play in developing UK resilience, but the Cabinet Office does not know if they have the capacity or capability to fulfil their role effectively.** Local organisations, such as the local responders represented in local resilience forums and other voluntary and community organisations have a critical role in making the UK resilient. For example, each forum produces a community risk register setting out the greatest risks to their local area, what is

being done to manage them and where the public can get help or advice. They also prepare supporting emergency plans, that may either be generic plans that describe a response to a wide range of possible scenarios, such as a major incident plan, or specific plans that deal with a particular kind of emergency, such as a flood. However, central government does not check local plans to see if they are fit for purpose and does not know if local organisations have the capacity and capability to fulfil their functions effectively. The Cabinet Office, in its 2021 integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, recognised that the roles and responsibilities of these forums needs to be strengthened. The Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities plans to pilot ways to strengthen their leadership and accountability by 2025.

***Recommendation 7: The Cabinet Office, working with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, should put measures in place to gain assurance on local organisations' capacities and capabilities and to gain assurance on local risk registers and plans so support and resources can be targeted where improvement is most needed.***

# 1 Building resilience

1. On the basis of a Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, we took evidence from the Cabinet Office, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), HM Treasury, and the Met Office on government’s arrangements to build resilience to national risks, including extreme weather events.<sup>1</sup>

2. Government assesses the most serious risks facing the UK or its interests overseas over the next few years via the National Security Risk Assessment (the Assessment), a classified document, and its public-facing version, the National Risk Register (the Register). Out of the 89 risks on the Register, eight are extreme weather events that are significantly different from the average or usual weather pattern. These events are likely to become more frequent and more extreme as global temperatures rise and can have significant impacts. For example, more than 4,500 heat-related deaths were recorded during the summer of 2022 in England, Storm Eunice left 1.4 million homes without power and estimated insurance losses were £250 million to £300 million for Storm Arwen.<sup>2</sup>

3. Government defines resilience as “an ability to withstand or quickly recover from a difficult situation, but also to get ahead of those risks and tackle challenges before they manifest”. In December 2022, it published *The UK Government Resilience Framework*, setting out its strategic approach to strengthening resilience. It sets out the key actions that the UK government intends to undertake by 2025 or 2030, and identifies three principles: the need for a shared understanding of the risks faced by the UK; prevention rather than cure wherever possible; and that developing resilience requires a ‘whole of society’ approach.<sup>3</sup> The third National Adaptation Programme, published in July 2023, also sets out a five-year programme of work across government to build resilience to climate change.<sup>4</sup>

4. The Cabinet Office assigns ownership of acute national risks to lead government departments. The UK adopts a bottom-up approach to managing emergencies as most emergencies only affect local areas. The response to large-scale emergencies is led by a lead government department and, in the most serious cases, is coordinated through the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (known as ‘COBR’). COBR’s role is to ensure that ministers and senior officials are provided with timely, coordinated and quality advice to enable quick and efficient decision-making during national crises. The COBR Unit, which leads horizon-scanning (up to 6 months in the future) for and response to acute emergencies and drives professionalisation of emergency management in government.<sup>5</sup>

## Developing medium- and long-term resilience

5. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to strengthen the resilience of the UK to deal with future emergencies. The Cabinet Office told us that over the last 18 months it has been strengthening arrangements to anticipate, assess, prevent, mitigate, respond and recover from national risks. Actions include splitting the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat into the Resilience Directorate to focus on developing resilience and the COBR

1 C&AG’s Report, [Government resilience: extreme weather](#), Session 2023–24, HC 314, 6 December 2023

2 Qq 1–3; C&AG’s Report, paras 1–2, Figure 1

3 Qq 1; C&AG’s Report, para 5

4 Qq 29–31; C&AG’s Report, para 5

5 Qq 14, 27, 61; C&AG’s Report, para 3

Unit to focus on response, and publishing the resilience framework, which the Resilience Directorate will take forward.<sup>6</sup> It has put in place new cross-government governance for resilience overseen by the Deputy Prime Minister and updated the Assessment and the Register. In 2021, it also established the National Situation Centre to bring data, analysis and insight together to improve its ability to identify, monitor and manage risks, and is undertaking work looking across the UK's critical national infrastructure, to better understand risk interdependencies and where vulnerabilities may be.<sup>7</sup>

6. The Cabinet Office highlighted that it had carried out a new capabilities assessment that tests departments' generic capabilities to stand up and respond to an emergency. The assessment looked at plans and procedures, personnel across government, infrastructure and logistics, equipment and supplies, legislation, and doctrine. The Cabinet Office assured us that the UK is generally a resilient country.<sup>8</sup> When pressed on the fact that the generic capabilities approach is reactive and asked how government is getting ahead of significant risks, the Cabinet Office told us that it "is really testing that the system is fit to go for whatever might be thrown at it in terms of challenges".<sup>9</sup>

7. The Climate Change Committee has found little evidence that government is taking action at the pace and scale needed to fully prepare for worsening climate risks facing the UK. It, along with the National Infrastructure Commission, has highlighted that infrastructure, such as roads, rail, power and data centres, is not designed to withstand extreme weather events.<sup>10</sup> We also received written evidence from several organisations and academics highlighting the lack of progress on developing long-term resilience to extreme weather.<sup>11</sup> It seemed to us that our witnesses were indeed more able to speak to short-term response plans for how to react to and recover from events, as opposed to how to plan for resilience to withstand and minimise impact. We therefore challenged them on what they were doing to consider and plan for long-term resilience to extreme weather. The Cabinet Office drew attention to the National Adaptation Programme and that it was working with departments to better understand the impact of extreme heat events. It told us that it co-chairs the Climate Resilience Steering Board with Defra to ensure that senior officials are considering climate impacts and building adaptation into resilience plans.<sup>12</sup> Defra is the lead government department for the third National Adaptation Programme, published in July 2023, that sets out a five-year programme of work across government to build resilience to climate change. Defra noted that there is more to do but that government has taken a step forward in identifying the scale of the task.<sup>13</sup>

## Investment plans

8. Both public and private sector investment is critical in developing national resilience to extreme weather events and climate change. For example, many flood defence projects require funding from public and private sector sources in addition to government

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6 Qq 1, 45

7 Qq 1, 2, 39, 43, 90, 124; C&AG's Report, para 9

8 Qq 1, 2, 6, 9, 10, 43

9 Q 10

10 Q 34; C&AG's Report, para 21

11 Prof Rowena Hill and Rich Pickford ([GEX0008](#)); Newcastle University ([GEX0012](#)); UK Corporate Leaders Group ([GEX0013](#)); National Fire Chiefs Council ([GEX0016](#)); Wildlife and Countryside Link ([GEX0019](#))

12 Qq 29, 30, 31, 34; [Correspondence from the Cabinet Office](#) to the Public Accounts Committee, 28 February 2024

13 Q 35; C&AG's Report, paras 1.18, 3.27

funding before they can go ahead.<sup>14</sup> The Cabinet Office highlighted that there is plenty of evidence that it is often cheaper to invest in building resilience than it is to deal with the consequences of not investing. The Chancellor's Autumn Statement announced a £10 million fund for analysis to underpin where money is best spent for resilience.<sup>15</sup>

9. The Cabinet Office and HM Treasury cannot identify how much is spent on resilience activity as there is no common definition of what constitutes this type of activity.<sup>16</sup> Government has committed to developing a coordinated approach to investment in resilience by 2030, noting that to make strategic investment decisions, it needs to understand how current capabilities match up with risks and concentrate investment where gaps are identified. As a first step, it aims to agree on a working definition of resilience activities and capabilities, and using that, will map current government resilience capabilities. It also plans to start measuring and tracking departmental investment in resilience across national risks, meaning risk-owning departments will be able to track investments. The Cabinet Office told us that 2030 is an end point, not a target date, and if it can meet this sooner, it will.<sup>17</sup>

10. Regulation has an important role to play in developing resilience. Written submissions to us highlighted that resilience to climate change, including extreme weather, requires a strategic and coordinated approach to regulatory frameworks.<sup>18</sup> Most infrastructure regulators do not have specific duties regarding climate resilience. Ofwat is the exception and has had a more positive impact on infrastructure climate change adaptation than other regulators due to its explicit adaptation requirement. The Cabinet Office has committed to reviewing existing regulatory regimes on resilience to ensure they are fit for purpose and putting resilience standards in place by 2030.<sup>19</sup> It told us that it has met the Institute of Regulation, the UK Regulators Network and critical national infrastructure sectors to understand the approach that should be taken on standards and goals. It highlighted that it wanted to build up an evidence base to work out if current standards are good enough and then, due to the complexity of regulating critical national infrastructure sectors, including interactions between different regulations, put in place something coherent and consistent by 2030.<sup>20</sup>

11. On private sector investment in climate resilience, the Cabinet Office highlighted the 2023 green finance strategy that promotes working with private sector partners to improve the approach to climate resilience assessment and disclosure, and collaboration to make sure the things that need to be funded are funded included through the UK Infrastructure Bank. However, government action to create the right environment for adaptation lags behind that for net zero.<sup>21</sup> The Cabinet Office also told us that government is considering the inclusion of an adaptation objective in the upcoming UK green taxonomy.<sup>22</sup>

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14 C&AG's Report, para 23

15 Qq 26, 48, 52; [Correspondence from the Cabinet Office](#) to the Public Accounts Committee, 28 February 2024

16 C&AG's Report, para 3.12.

17 Qq 13, 26, 48, 49, 50, 67; C&AG's Report, para 3.13

18 Q 21; C&AG's Report, para 25; Association of British Insurers ([GEX0018](#)); Wildlife and Countryside Link ([GEX0019](#))

19 Qq 20, 22, 124, 128; C&AG's Report, Figure 3, para 3.10

20 Qq 22, 111, 124, 125, 126, 127, 128; [Correspondence from the Cabinet Office](#) to the Public Accounts Committee, 28 February 2024

21 West Midlands Combined Authority ([GEX0017](#)); C&AG's Report, para 23

22 Q 110

## Acceptable levels of resilience

12. The government's resilience framework does not set out a well-defined vision for what a resilient UK looks like, including targets and standards for the desired level of national, local, or sectoral resilience. Without specifying what outcome it is looking to achieve, such as target levels of preparedness or resilience, or the amount of risk that it is willing to accept in the pursuit of those outcomes (risk appetite), government cannot make informed decisions about trade-offs between long- and short-term priorities, investment or funding allocation of priority areas. It also makes it difficult for government or other stakeholders to track progress and evaluate how effectively and efficiently government is using public funds to improve national resilience.<sup>23</sup>

13. The Cabinet Office explained that it is difficult to have a single risk appetite across government because risks themselves vary and each risk will have different appetites. For example, society has a higher tolerance for deaths in road traffic accidents in a year than for deaths in a single terrorist event.<sup>24</sup> Instead, the Cabinet Office focuses on common consequences of risks and the ability to respond via generic capabilities, informed by a number of sources, including the Assessment, capabilities assessments, assessments of the resilience and interdependencies of critical national infrastructure sectors and lessons from the National Exercising Programme. It told us that it can provide information on how well prepared the UK is for a risk, what actions could be taken to mitigate it, the costs and the trade-offs and then it is a case-by-case decision to be taken by Ministers.<sup>25</sup>

14. For three of the four extreme weather risks that the NAO examined (high temperatures and heatwaves, storms and surface water flooding), there was a lack of clarity on what outcome government is looking to achieve, such as target levels of preparedness, resilience, and an agreement on the level of tolerable risk, based on a well-informed risk appetite. In the case of drought, water companies are required to plan to ensure resilience to a 1-in-200 year 'severe' drought and in their new plans in 2024, to a 1-in-500 year 'extreme' drought.<sup>26</sup> Defra, the lead government department for droughts and floods, noted that even where risk appetite or the level of resilience you are looking to achieve is defined, funding to achieve this is still competing with other areas of spending. The Cabinet Office highlighted other challenges in assessing risk appetite, including the evidence base on the returns on investment being a lot weaker for some risks compared to others such as floods, and having to make hard choices about where the money comes from to fund resilience.<sup>27</sup> Written evidence from the UK Corporate Leaders Group stated that an important starting point for reducing climate risk is to understand the risk appetite of different stakeholders. It suggested that a national conversation around the level of climate risk that is acceptable and the balance of costs and benefits from investment in adaptation would help determine where the priorities are for action and investment.<sup>28</sup>

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23 Q 12; C&AG's Report, para 10

24 Qq 1, 2, 5, 6, 12

25 Q 2; C&AG's Report, para 11

26 Qq 13, 70; C&AG's Report, para 3.2

27 Qq 13, 54; C&AG's Report, Figure 6

28 UK Corporate Leaders Group ([GEX0013](#))



## Planning for people exposed to different levels of risk

15. People experience different levels of exposure to extreme weather. Factors such as location, income and health affect people's ability to cope with and respond to these events. For example, lower income households may be more likely to live in properties at flood risk, which are less expensive to buy or rent, and be less likely to be able to afford the cost of replacing possessions lost to flooding. Our written evidence also highlighted the need to improve the understanding of what kind of vulnerabilities are exacerbated during an emergency with providers of essential services needing to identify and support vulnerable customers in an emergency. We know that those who are vulnerable are disproportionately affected by the risks and impacts of extreme weather, yet there is a gap in knowledge as to how investments in resilience and adaptation could mitigate these impacts.<sup>29</sup>

16. The Cabinet Office has committed to implementing several measures by 2025 to better support vulnerable groups. One of these is developing a measurement of socio-economic resilience, including how risks impact across communities and vulnerable groups to guide and inform decision making on risk and resilience. Another measure is offering better guidance to local resilience forums and local partners in England, created with local responders, the voluntary sector and communities to support them working with vulnerable groups. In addition, by 2025, the Cabinet Office will conduct an annual survey of public perceptions of risk, resilience and preparedness.<sup>30</sup> It noted there is guidance for identifying people who are vulnerable in a crisis, so that local action plans can identify those groups of people in an emergency. It assured us that careful consideration was being given to all the different dimensions of society, how it engages with them effectively, directly or through organisations that can represent them, and how it can have conversations about risk and people's roles. However, it noted that although conversations had started there is a long way to go.<sup>31</sup>

17. The Met Office noted that the media has an important role to play in getting important messages across and helping people adapt. It highlighted recent extreme heat events where the whole UK media helped to get the message across that "This is not weather you have seen before and it will require a different response at an individual level. This is heat that can harm healthy people as well as vulnerable people. You want to keep your windows and curtains closed, which is not what you normally do on a hot day, and you might want to consider going to a cool place".<sup>32</sup>

18. New Zealand's National Emergencies Management Agency runs a national communications campaign on how to prepare for emergencies. The 'Get Ready' campaign encourages households, workplaces, schools and communities to be ready. It provides information on what to do before, during and after natural hazard events, including floods and storms. The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience acts on behalf of government to share disaster resilience education, knowledge and information with the public. This

29 Chartered Institute of Housing ([GEX0001](#)); Prof Rowena Hill and Rich Pickford ([GEX0008](#)); Keep Britain Tidy ([GEX0009](#)); National Flood Forum ([GEX0010](#)); British Red Cross ([GEX0011](#)); West Midlands Combined Authority ([GEX0017](#))

30 Qq 25, 43, 78; C&AG's Report, Figure 3; [Correspondence from the Cabinet Office](#) to the Public Accounts Committee, 28 February 2024

31 Q 78

32 Q 78

includes the 2021 handbook Disaster Resilience Education for Young People. The Cabinet Office plans to develop a website to help the public know how to be prepared and respond to emergencies.<sup>33</sup>



## 2 Oversight arrangements

### Leadership

19. Although the Cabinet Office assigns ownership for each national risk to either a single department or to multiple departments, managing these risks and building resilience to them often requires coordinated action across government and beyond. This can be challenging for individual or small groups of departments to coordinate and oversee.<sup>34</sup> When asked how confident it was that the right action is being taken across government to manage system-wide risks, the Cabinet Office noted that it has a good programme of work in place, such as its capabilities assessment and critical national infrastructure assessment, to support the resilience framework.<sup>35</sup> When asked who is overseeing the balance between the 89 risks on the Register, HM Treasury told us that risk management decisions follow government governance arrangements and can be escalated from departments through permanent secretaries and ministers to the Cabinet. It noted that to support cross-government work, the Civil Service Board considers cross-cutting risks, and that there is a desire to do more cross-government collaboration on areas of resilience or risk management more broadly. The Cabinet Office highlighted that where a decision must be made about how resources are allocated it can present Ministers with a range of choices between risks or between risks and day-to-day business.<sup>36</sup>

20. We asked HM Treasury what more could be done to oversee national risks. It told us that the Head of the Government Risk profession is focused on improving the risk management capability of government, improving the professionalism and credibility of staff, increasing cross-boundary working, and all these actions will help. It has produced a suite of toolkits to help departments think about what they might need to do now to avoid or deal with long-term impacts and noted that everybody across government has responsibility for management of risk.<sup>37</sup>

21. In 2022, we recommended the establishment of a Chief Risk Officer to consider cross-cutting risks in government and proactively manage the identification and resolution of system-wide concerns. We stated that the role should provide independent challenge on the extent to which risk is properly identified and considered at the most senior levels when decisions are made, provide cohesive leadership and objective oversight of how government manages national risks.<sup>38</sup>

22. We asked the witnesses why there is still no Chief Risk Officer or Advisor, like the National Security Adviser, to provide a more cohesive system-wide view and leadership. The Cabinet Office told us that the Head of Resilience fulfils that role, by looking at all the resilience risks across Government and ensuring that there is a robust system in place to be prepared for them. It explained that the role reports into the Deputy National Security Advisor and has the support of the Deputy Prime Minister who chairs the National Security Council on Resilience.<sup>39</sup> HM Treasury told us that arguments for an overall Chief Risk

34 C&AG's Report, para 12

35 Q 43

36 Qq 3, 4, 24

37 Qq 38, 139

38 Committee of Public Accounts, [Government preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic: lessons for government on risk](#); 46th report of Session 2021–22, HC 952, March 2022, conclusions and recommendations 1

39 Qq 38, 44, 46, 47

Advisor reflect a desire for more challenge of government and the arguments against the role reflect the scale of the subject matter and the concern that others with responsibilities for risks may feel less responsible for those risks. HM Treasury noted that it is working to understand what that role could consist of and what contributions different parts of government are currently making to the management of risk.<sup>40</sup>

## Roles and responsibilities

23. Although the government's resilience framework highlighted that developing resilience requires a 'whole of society' approach, it has not set out what the respective roles of central government, local government, the devolved administrations, the private and voluntary sectors, and the public are.<sup>41</sup> We also received written evidence from several organisations and academics highlighting that roles and responsibilities for infrastructure providers, local government, the private sector, the voluntary sector and the public lack clarity.<sup>42</sup> Considering other countries' approaches, the Australian government, for example, has issued statements of responsibility for government, business, the third sector and individuals.<sup>43</sup> With so many parties involved the lack of clarity means there is a risk of it not being clear who is responsible for what and a risk of actions not being taken.<sup>44</sup>

24. The Cabinet Office assigns ownership of acute national risks to lead government departments. It updated the relevant guidance in 2023 with specific responsibilities for building resilience and preventing risks from occurring. It assured us that the lead government department list is also clear on the roles of the devolved nations.<sup>45</sup>

25. The Civil Contingencies Act sets out the roles and responsibilities for those involved in emergency preparation and response at the local level. The Cabinet Office explained that there are no defined responsibilities for businesses and the voluntary sector but highlighted that it engages with the response community, voluntary organisations and community representatives through its UK Resilience Forum.<sup>46</sup>

26. Considering individual extreme weather risks, the public does not always know who is responsible for mitigating the risk, particularly if it is a novel risk impacting them for the first time. For example, public awareness of the risk of surface water flooding is low and it is not always clear who the public should contact to report incidents to when they happen. The Cabinet Office told us that it plans to develop a website to help the public understand how they can be prepared for these events and the actions that they can take, not just in response to events but to be prepared ahead of time as well.<sup>47</sup>

27. During Storm Babet in 2022–23, there were 5.7 million properties in England at risk of flooding from rivers, the sea, surface water or groundwater. Over 150 rivers had record water levels and 2,200 homes were flooded. The storm hit local areas that were less used

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40 Q 46

41 C&AG's Report, paras 5 and 13

42 Dr Laiz Souto ([GEX0002](#)); St John Ambulance ([GEX0004](#)); Dr Tom Wood, Dr Saba Sadati, Dr Giuliano Punzo, Dr Martin Mayfield and Dr Hadi Arbabi ([GEX0006](#)); National Flood Forum ([GEX0010](#)); Newcastle University ([GEX0012](#)); West Midlands Combined Authority ([GEX0017](#)); Wildlife and Countryside Link ([GEX0019](#)); Local Government Association ([GEX0021](#))

43 Qq 14, 16; C&AG's Report, para 1.7

44 Q 39

45 Qq 14, 27; C&AG's Report, Figures 2 and 5 and para 1.9

46 Qq 14, 15, 16, 25, 94

47 Qq 16, 18, 25; C&AG's Report, para 3.19

to dealing with floods and were less clear about what was expected of them. Defra told us that one of the lessons from this storm was providing greater clarity about what the Environment Agency does and what local resilience forums (LRFs) are expected to do.<sup>48</sup> In addition, written evidence we received highlighted that while categorised responders have clear roles and responsibilities to respond and prepare for current and short-term weather patterns, there is no clear role for them to support longer term climate adaptation which considers the actions needed to reduce the negative impacts of climate change and build resilience to climate-related shocks and stresses across all systems.<sup>49</sup>

## Capacity and capability of local organisations

28. Local organisations have a critical role in responding to emergencies and building resilience.<sup>50</sup> Emergency responders in a local area convene in local resilience forums (LRFs) and the Cabinet Office published a set of national resilience standards for LRFs in 2020. These standards provide a consistent way for LRFs and their constituent local responder organisations to self-assess their capabilities and level of readiness, and to guide continuous improvement against mandatory requirements, good and leading practice. However, the standards have no formal status, and their use is voluntary. LRFs produce community risk registers that set out the greatest risks to each local area, what is being done to manage them and where the public can get help or advice. The NAO found that of 42 community risk registers in England and Wales, 43% may give the public partly outdated information as they have not been updated since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>51</sup> Local responders also have statutory obligations to maintain emergency plans and their own business continuity arrangements.<sup>52</sup>

29. We asked the witnesses whether central government reviews local emergency plans and monitors community risk registers. The Cabinet Office told us that LRF plans are not examined and assured by central government, noting that the powers exist to do this but not the funding for implementation. It also highlighted that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities monitors LRFs' performance against aspects of legislation to provide assistance rather than to perform an inspection or enforcement role.<sup>53</sup> We also received written evidence from the National Flood Forum indicating that the lack of local assurance has limited the ability of communities to understand how effectively their LRF is managing flood resilience.<sup>54</sup>

30. When asked if LRFs and other local organisations have the capacity and capability to carry out their resilience roles effectively, the Cabinet Office told us that resilience is often a function of the capacity and capability of the broader system more generally, such as the strength of their social services, children's services and LRFs' ability to muster effective executive decision making and draw on other local partners. It also told us that money spent on resilience by local authorities has fallen.<sup>55</sup> We also received written evidence from voluntary groups suggesting that there should be increased mapping of the local voluntary

48 Q 81; Committee of Public Accounts, [Resilience to flooding](#), 7th report of Session 2023–24, HC 71, January 2024, para 2

49 West Midlands Combined Authority ([GEX0017](#))

50 Q 97

51 Q 94; C&AG's Report, paras 1.14, 3.11 and 3.20

52 Q 109

53 Qq 94, 95, 96, 97, 99

54 National Flood Forum ([GEX0010](#))

55 Qq 52, 109

sector, its capabilities and skillsets in each area so that emergency responders know what support the voluntary sector can provide in a local area and to match volunteer skillsets with need. The evidence highlighted the importance of capacity, including surge capacity to meet the additional demand for responders during emergencies, via community links and the voluntary sector to enhance local resilience.<sup>56</sup>

31. The Cabinet Office, in its 2021 integrated review of security, defence, development and foreign policy, recognised that the roles and responsibilities of LRFs need to be strengthened. The Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities plans to pilot ways to strengthen their leadership and accountability by 2025. The Cabinet Office told us that these eight pilots will look at strengthening the role of LRFs in the local area to ensure that resilience is built into all local policies.<sup>57</sup>

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56 St John Ambulance ([GEX0004](#)); Southwell Flood Forum ([GEX0022](#))

57 Qq 28, 51, 109; C&AG's Report, para 1.15

# Formal minutes

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**Monday 25 March 2024**

## **Members present**

Dame Meg Hillier, in the Chair

Olivia Blake

Mr Mark Francois

Peter Grant

Anne Marie Morris

Sarah Olney

Sarah Owen

Matt Warman

## **Government resilience: extreme weather**

Draft Report (*Government resilience: extreme weather*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 31 read and agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Introduction agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Twenty-seventh Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available (Standing Order No. 134).

## **Adjournment**

Adjourned till Monday 15 April at 3.00 p.m.

## Witnesses

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The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Wednesday 21 February 2024

**Matthew Clarke**, Resilience Director, Cabinet Office; **Professor Penelope Endersby**, Chief Executive, Met Office; **Tamara Finkelstein CB**, Permanent Secretary, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; **Roger Hargreaves**, Director, COBR Unit, Cabinet Office; **Clive Martin**, Head of the Government Risk Profession, Government Finance Function

[Q1-139](#)

## Published written evidence

The following written evidence was received and can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

GEX numbers are generated by the evidence processing system and so may not be complete.

- 1 Arbabi, Dr Hadi (University of Sheffield); Wood, Dr Tom (University of Sheffield); Sadati, Dr Saba (University of Sheffield); Punzo, Dr Giuliano (University of Sheffield) ([GEX0006](#))
- 2 Association of British Insurers ([GEX0018](#))
- 3 British Red Cross ([GEX0011](#))
- 4 Chartered Institute of Housing ([GEX0001](#))
- 5 Hill, Professor Rowena (Nottingham Trent University); and Pickford, Rich (Nottingham Trent University) ([GEX0008](#))
- 6 Institution of Civil Engineers ([GEX0005](#))
- 7 Keep Britain Tidy ([GEX0009](#))
- 8 Local Government Association ([GEX0021](#))
- 9 Mineral Products Association ([GEX0014](#))
- 10 NCG ([GEX0024](#))
- 11 National Fire Chiefs Council (NFCC) ([GEX0016](#))
- 12 National Oceanography Centre ([GEX0020](#))
- 13 National Trust ([GEX0015](#))
- 14 Newcastle University ([GEX0012](#))
- 15 Power, Dr Nicola University of Liverpool); Betts, Charlotte (University of Liverpool); Philpot, Dr Richard (Lancaster University); and Levine, Professor Mark (Lancaster University) ([GEX0025](#))
- 16 River Action UK ([GEX0007](#))
- 17 Shimwell, Ms Elizabeth (University of Sheffield) ([GEX0003](#))
- 18 Smith, Dr Alan (University of Plymouth) ([GEX0023](#))
- 19 Southwell Flood Forum ([GEX0022](#))
- 20 Souto, Dr Laiz (University of Bristol) ([GEX0002](#))
- 21 St John Ambulance ([GEX0004](#))
- 22 The National Flood Forum ([GEX0010](#))
- 23 UK Corporate Leaders Group (CLG UK) ([GEX0013](#))
- 24 West Midlands Combined Authority ([GEX0017](#))
- 25 Wildlife and Countryside Link ([GEX0019](#))

## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Session 2023–24

Number	Title	Reference
1st	The New Hospital Programme	HC 77
2nd	The condition of school buildings	HC 78
3rd	Revising health assessments for disability benefits	HC 79
4th	The Department for Work & Pensions Annual Report and Accounts 2022–23	HC 290
5th	Government's programme of waste reforms	HC 333
6th	Competition in public procurement	HC 385
7th	Resilience to flooding	HC 71
8th	Improving Defence Inventory Management	HC 66
9th	Whole of Government Accounts 2020–21	HC 65
10th	HS2 and Euston	HC 67
11th	Reducing the harm from illegal drugs	HC 72
12th	Cross-government working	HC 75
13th	Preparedness for online safety regulation	HC 73
14th	Homes for Ukraine	HC 69
15th	Managing government borrowing	HC 74
16th	HMRC performance in 2022–23	HC 76
17th	Cabinet Office functional savings	HC 423
18th	Excess Votes 2022–23	HC 589
19th	MoD Equipment Plan 2023–2033	HC 451
20th	Monitoring and responding to companies in distress	HC 425
21st	Levelling up funding to local government	HC 424
22nd	Reforming adult social care in England	HC 427
23rd	Civil service workforce: Recruitment, pay and performance management	HC 452
24th	NHS Supply Chain and efficiencies in procurement	HC 453
25th	Scrutiny of sound financial practice across Government	HC 673
26th	The BBC's implementation of Across the UK	HC 426
1st Special Report	Eighth Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts	HC 628



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Number	Title	Reference
1st	Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy Annual Report and Accounts 2020–21	HC 59
2nd	Lessons from implementing IR35 reforms	HC 60
3rd	The future of the Advanced Gas-cooled Reactors	HC 118
4th	Use of evaluation and modelling in government	HC 254
5th	Local economic growth	HC 252
6th	Department of Health and Social Care 2020–21 Annual Report and Accounts	HC 253
7th	Armoured Vehicles: the Ajax programme	HC 259
8th	Financial sustainability of the higher education sector in England	HC 257
9th	Child Maintenance	HC 255
10th	Restoration and Renewal of Parliament	HC 49
11th	The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine programme in England	HC 258
12th	Management of PPE contracts	HC 260
13th	Secure training centres and secure schools	HC 30
14th	Investigation into the British Steel Pension Scheme	HC 251
15th	The Police Uplift Programme	HC 261
16th	Managing cross-border travel during the COVID-19 pandemic	HC 29
17th	Government's contracts with Radox Laboratories Ltd	HC 28
18th	Government actions to combat waste crime	HC 33
19th	Regulating after EU Exit	HC 32
20th	Whole of Government Accounts 2019–20	HC 31
21st	Transforming electronic monitoring services	HC 34
22nd	Tackling local air quality breaches	HC 37
23rd	Measuring and reporting public sector greenhouse gas emissions	HC 39
24th	Redevelopment of Defra's animal health infrastructure	HC 42
25th	Regulation of energy suppliers	HC 41
26th	The Department for Work and Pensions' Accounts 2021–22 – Fraud and error in the benefits system	HC 44
27th	Evaluating innovation projects in children's social care	HC 38
28th	Improving the Accounting Officer Assessment process	HC 43
29th	The Affordable Homes Programme since 2015	HC 684
30th	Developing workforce skills for a strong economy	HC 685
31st	Managing central government property	HC 48
32nd	Grassroots participation in sport and physical activity	HC 46

<b>Number</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Reference</b>
33rd	HMRC performance in 2021–22	HC 686
34th	The Creation of the UK Infrastructure Bank	HC 45
35th	Introducing Integrated Care Systems	HC 47
36th	The Defence digital strategy	HC 727
37th	Support for vulnerable adolescents	HC 730
38th	Managing NHS backlogs and waiting times in England	HC 729
39th	Excess Votes 2021–22	HC 1132
40th	COVID employment support schemes	HC 810
41st	Driving licence backlogs at the DVLA	HC 735
42nd	The Restart Scheme for long-term unemployed people	HC 733
43rd	Progress combatting fraud	HC 40
44th	The Digital Services Tax	HC 732
45th	Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy Annual Report and Accounts 2021–22	HC 1254
46th	BBC Digital	HC 736
47th	Investigation into the UK Passport Office	HC 738
48th	MoD Equipment Plan 2022–2032	HC 731
49th	Managing tax compliance following the pandemic	HC 739
50th	Government Shared Services	HC 734
51st	Tackling Defra’s ageing digital services	HC 737
52nd	Restoration & Renewal of the Palace of Westminster – 2023 Recall	HC 1021
53rd	The performance of UK Security Vetting	HC 994
54th	Alcohol treatment services	HC 1001
55th	Education recovery in schools in England	HC 998
56th	Supporting investment into the UK	HC 996
57th	AEA Technology Pension Case	HC 1005
58th	Energy bills support	HC 1074
59th	Decarbonising the power sector	HC 1003
60th	Timeliness of local auditor reporting	HC 995
61st	Progress on the courts and tribunals reform programme	HC 1002
62nd	Department of Health and Social Care 2021–22 Annual Report and Accounts	HC 997
63rd	HS2 Euston	HC 1004
64th	The Emergency Services Network	HC 1006
65th	Progress in improving NHS mental health services	HC 1000
66th	PPE Medpro: awarding of contracts during the pandemic	HC 1590

<b>Number</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Reference</b>
67th	Child Trust Funds	HC 1231
68th	Local authority administered COVID support schemes in England	HC 1234
69th	Tackling fraud and corruption against government	HC 1230
70th	Digital transformation in government: addressing the barriers to efficiency	HC 1229
71st	Resetting government programmes	HC 1231
72nd	Update on the rollout of smart meters	HC 1332
73rd	Access to urgent and emergency care	HC 1336
74th	Bulb Energy	HC 1232
75th	Active travel in England	HC 1335
76th	The Asylum Transformation Programme	HC 1334
77th	Supported housing	HC 1330
78th	Resettlement support for prison leavers	HC 1329
79th	Support for innovation to deliver net zero	HC 1331
80th	Progress with Making Tax Digital	HC 1333
1st Special Report	Sixth Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts	HC 50
2nd Special Report	Seventh Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts	HC 1055

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4th	COVID-19: Local government finance	HC 239
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6th	Public Sector Pensions	HC 289
7th	Adult Social Care Markets	HC 252
8th	COVID 19: Culture Recovery Fund	HC 340
9th	Fraud and Error	HC 253
10th	Overview of the English rail system	HC 170
11th	Local auditor reporting on local government in England	HC 171
12th	COVID 19: Cost Tracker Update	HC 173
13th	Initial lessons from the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic	HC 175

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15th	DWP Employment support	HC 177
16th	Principles of effective regulation	HC 176
17th	High Speed 2: Progress at Summer 2021	HC 329
18th	Government's delivery through arm's-length bodies	HC 181
19th	Protecting consumers from unsafe products	HC 180
20th	Optimising the defence estate	HC 179
21st	School Funding	HC 183
22nd	Improving the performance of major defence equipment contracts	HC 185
23rd	Test and Trace update	HC 182
24th	Crossrail: A progress update	HC 184
25th	The Department for Work and Pensions' Accounts 2020–21 – Fraud and error in the benefits system	HC 633
26th	Lessons from Greensill Capital: accreditation to business support schemes	HC 169
27th	Green Homes Grant Voucher Scheme	HC 635
28th	Efficiency in government	HC 636
29th	The National Law Enforcement Data Programme	HC 638
30th	Challenges in implementing digital change	HC 637
31st	Environmental Land Management Scheme	HC 639
32nd	Delivering gigabitcapable broadband	HC 743
33rd	Underpayments of the State Pension	HC 654
34th	Local Government Finance System: Overview and Challenges	HC 646
35th	The pharmacy early payment and salary advance schemes in the NHS	HC 745
36th	EU Exit: UK Border post transition	HC 746
37th	HMRC Performance in 2020–21	HC 641
38th	COVID-19 cost tracker update	HC 640
39th	DWP Employment Support: Kickstart Scheme	HC 655
40th	Excess votes 2020–21: Serious Fraud Office	HC 1099
41st	Achieving Net Zero: Follow up	HC 642
42nd	Financial sustainability of schools in England	HC 650
43rd	Reducing the backlog in criminal courts	HC 643
44th	NHS backlogs and waiting times in England	HC 747
45th	Progress with trade negotiations	HC 993
46th	Government preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic: lessons for government on risk	HC 952

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47th	Academies Sector Annual Report and Accounts 2019/20	HC 994
48th	HMRC's management of tax debt	HC 953
49th	Regulation of private renting	HC 996
50th	Bounce Back Loans Scheme: Follow-up	HC 951
51st	Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system	HC 997
52nd	Ministry of Defence Equipment Plan 2021–31	HC 1164
1st Special Report	Fifth Annual Report of the Chair of the Committee of Public Accounts	HC 222

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3rd	High Speed 2: Spring 2020 Update	HC 84
4th	EU Exit: Get ready for Brexit Campaign	HC 131
5th	University technical colleges	HC 87
6th	Excess votes 2018–19	HC 243
7th	Gambling regulation: problem gambling and protecting vulnerable people	HC 134
8th	NHS capital expenditure and financial management	HC 344
9th	Water supply and demand management	HC 378
10th	Defence capability and the Equipment Plan	HC 247
11th	Local authority investment in commercial property	HC 312
12th	Management of tax reliefs	HC 379
13th	Whole of Government Response to COVID-19	HC 404
14th	Readying the NHS and social care for the COVID-19 peak	HC 405
15th	Improving the prison estate	HC 244
16th	Progress in remediating dangerous cladding	HC 406
17th	Immigration enforcement	HC 407
18th	NHS nursing workforce	HC 408
19th	Restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster	HC 549
20th	Tackling the tax gap	HC 650
21st	Government support for UK exporters	HC 679
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23rd	Delivering carrier strike	HC 684

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25th	Asylum accommodation and support transformation programme	HC 683
26th	Department of Work and Pensions Accounts 2019–20	HC 681
27th	Covid-19: Supply of ventilators	HC 685
28th	The Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's management of the Magnox contract	HC 653
29th	Whitehall preparations for EU Exit	HC 682
30th	The production and distribution of cash	HC 654
31st	Starter Homes	HC 88
32nd	Specialist Skills in the civil service	HC 686
33rd	Covid-19: Bounce Back Loan Scheme	HC 687
34th	Covid-19: Support for jobs	HC 920
35th	Improving Broadband	HC 688
36th	HMRC performance 2019–20	HC 690
37th	Whole of Government Accounts 2018–19	HC 655
38th	Managing colleges' financial sustainability	HC 692
39th	Lessons from major projects and programmes	HC 694
40th	Achieving government's long-term environmental goals	HC 927
41st	COVID 19: the free school meals voucher scheme	HC 689
42nd	COVID-19: Government procurement and supply of Personal Protective Equipment	HC 928
43rd	COVID-19: Planning for a vaccine Part 1	HC 930
44th	Excess Votes 2019–20	HC 1205
45th	Managing flood risk	HC 931
46th	Achieving Net Zero	HC 935
47th	COVID-19: Test, track and trace (part 1)	HC 932
48th	Digital Services at the Border	HC 936
49th	COVID-19: housing people sleeping rough	HC 934
50th	Defence Equipment Plan 2020–2030	HC 693
51st	Managing the expiry of PFI contracts	HC 1114
52nd	Key challenges facing the Ministry of Justice	HC 1190
53rd	Covid 19: supporting the vulnerable during lockdown	HC 938
54th	Improving single living accommodation for service personnel	HC 940
55th	Environmental tax measures	HC 937
56th	Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund	HC 941