

UK Government (Cabinet Office) Written Evidence to Defence Committee

Home Defence Programme

What are the main strands of the Home Defence Programme and how are responsibilities divided between the Cabinet Office and the MOD?

The Home Defence Programme, led by the Cabinet Office, ensures coordination across departments and agencies in the event of a major conflict impacting the UK. Home Defence is the additional layer of defence, security and resilience planning, focused on alignment between military and civilian effort in a period of international hostilities affecting the UK.

The Home Defence Programme is inextricably linked to defence planning and wider cross-government resilience efforts. The Cabinet Office coordinates cross-government civilian planning efforts and ensures military efforts with wider resilience planning. The Ministry of Defence is responsible for maintenance of the military defence planning, the means by which the UK would defend its territory. These plans are kept under regular review to ensure they remain fit-for-purpose in the face of constantly evolving threats. For example, the MOD's Homeland Defence plans are being updated this year.

What has the Home Defence Programme already achieved and what are the expected outcomes from it over the period of the Parliament?

The Home Defence Programme ensures coordination across departments and agencies in the event of a major conflict impacting the UK. A refreshed Government War Book will be complete by the end of this year, and elements of this will be rigorously tested through the largest UK home defence exercise in decades, in 2027. Ministers, as well as hundreds of officials from across government and the public sector, will take part in an exercise named Exercise ALBISTON SHADOW.

In July 2026, an acceleration of home defence planning was announced, including updating classified government crisis plans, commonly known as the "War Book". These documents, coordinated by the Cabinet Office Home Defence Programme, help departments plan to respond to threats against the UK. To support this, the Home Defence Programme has a clear work plan and governance framework for delivery.

While the precise scenario will remain classified, the multi-day exercise will test government preparedness for hybrid attacks against the UK. The exercise will complement NATO's forthcoming exercise known as CMX27. Both drills will help to ensure UK alignment with NATO allies and partners against a backdrop of rising threats.

This work will deliver a material change in the system, reviewing and updating our crisis plans to focus on strengthening the alignment between the military and civilian effort. The Government will provide further updates on the Home Defence Programme at the Committee's request.

The SDR said UK Defence should articulate its requirements of civilian authorities in a crisis, so that the Home Defence Programme could prepare accordingly. Has Defence done so and if so, what areas of responsibility has this covered?

Through the Home Defence Programme and MoD's Homeland Defence planning, Defence is working across government to fully understand its dependencies and requirements of civilian authorities from crisis through to conflict. The Home Defence Programme does not plan to publicly disclose areas of responsibility at this time.

What is the difference, in policy and practical terms, between preparing for discrete civil contingencies such as those identified in the NRR (i.e. civil contingencies of the type COBR Unit typically dealt with), planning for a transition to war, and preparing for a long-term war?

The Government plans for the most severe risks to the UK, and constantly reviews a broad range of scenarios. The Home Defence Programme supports these joint efforts, delivering the various related commitments from the Strategic Defence Review, National Security Strategy and Resilience Action Plan.

There are many risks outlined and assessed in the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA), of which a small number come under the Home Defence Programme. Many risks in the NSRA have a higher likelihood score than the Home Defence risks. Risk planning at all levels is the focus for government departments. Home defence planning is proportional to planning for other risks, and is incorporated into current risk planning and preparedness.

What measures were taken to retain institutional knowledge and memory within resilience work when the resilience directorate was absorbed into the COBR Directorate?

The COBR Unit and Resilience Directorate merged to form the COBR Directorate in 2025. Institutional knowledge and memory within resilience work was retained through the long-standing working relationship between the two teams.

The establishment of the Directorate ensures that all phases of the crisis management cycle report to a single Director and is in line with the Cabinet Office vision for a specialist, smaller and more strategic centre. The result has been a more joined up and responsive approach to crisis and national resilience.

What impact did the merger have on the timeline for the outcomes which needed to be achieved within the Home Defence Programme?

The merger joined together two teams in order to ensure strong practical delivery of improved resilience and crisis response. This has ensured the UK's long term planning and resilience aims are intrinsically linked to our short term horizon scanning apparatus. This integration provided a robust structural framework for practical delivery of the Home Defence Programme and has not impacted delivery timelines.

The Government already has plans to manage the most severe risks to the UK and risk planning at all levels is the focus. In July 2026, the Government announced that

Home Defence planning has been accelerated, in light of the deteriorating security environment and increasing geopolitical uncertainty – this means it will be delivered sooner. Delivery of the Home Defence Programme is grounded in a constant and proportional assessment of risk and planning is coordinated with other relevant activities across government.

What progress has the Cabinet Office made in developing the cross-government national defence plan, sometimes described as a modern War Book, and what is the timetable for completion and exercising?

As announced in July, the Cabinet Office is currently coordinating the update of classified government crisis plans, known as “War Book,” through the Home Defence Programme. These updated plans will be rigorously tested in March 2027 through Exercise ALBISTON SHADOW, the largest UK home Defence Exercise in decades.

While the precise scenario will remain classified, the multi-day exercise will test government preparedness for hybrid attacks against the UK and will complement NATO’s own forthcoming exercise known as CMX27. Both drills will help to ensure UK alignment with NATO allies and partners against a backdrop of rising threats. This is an iterative process with regular review, and the Cabinet Office will provide an update, following the exercise next year, on the subsequent programme of work.

In relation to the national exercises on home defence and resilience being held next year—are you anticipating any Parliamentary participation in that exercise? If not, will Select Committees or individual MPs be invited to observe the exercise?

The Cabinet Office is committed to conducting one major Tier 1 ministerial-led exercise annually under the National Exercising Programme (NEP). The Cabinet Office is responsible for the delivery of the NEP, which covers a range of whole-system risks, with priority areas for testing informed by cross-cutting capability priorities.

Exercise ALBISTON SHADOW will be the largest UK Home Defence exercise in decades, and will involve ministers and officials from across government. Preparations for this exercise are ongoing alongside the logistics for Ministerial involvement. The Cabinet Office is not currently anticipating any Parliamentary, Select Committee, or individual MP participation in this exercise, due to the classified nature.

What engagement has there been from other government departments in relation to the re-constitution of a 'War Book'?

The Home Defence Programme is the link between the civilian and military planning surrounding preparation to conflict. This is a cross government effort and all relevant departments are involved. The Home Defence programme is driving forward their work on identifying and progressing their equities in home defence resourcing, capabilities, and plans.

We previously recommended private briefings for Departmental Select Committees on the roles and responsibilities of the Departments they scrutinise will have in the 'War Book'—what is the Cabinet Office's view on this?

The Cabinet Office remains committed to supporting the work and scrutiny of Departmental Select Committees. The Cabinet Office can provide private briefings, subject to necessary security considerations, on the work of the Home Defence Programme.

There is some evidence to suggest that the War Book was not easily implemented at the start of WW2 by officials who had not been involved in drawing it up. How are you ensuring that wouldn't happen again in the event of a major conflict?

The 2027 warbook will be an evolution of 20th century predecessors and provide a compendium of departmental and central government plans. These plans will be rigorously tested through Exercise ALBISTON SHADOW. Regular exercises ensure that Ministers and Officials are familiar with crisis planning and responsibilities.

Modern resilience and defence planning is founded in a comprehensive wider preparedness system. The Government continues to assess the risk landscape and has well-developed contingency plans to respond to a wide range of risks. The plans and supporting arrangements have been developed, refined and tested over many years.

Which external partners — such as devolved administrations, local government, Local Resilience Forums, industry and the voluntary sector — have been engaged in developing the national defence plan, and what has that engagement changed?

External partners are absolutely critical to the UK's resilience and preparedness as they understand their local areas best and where the risks lie. The Government already works closely with external partners to manage the most severe risks to the UK, and have outlined how Home Defence planning should be proportional and incorporated into current risk planning and preparedness.

Working closely with MHCLG, the Cabinet Office has set out a structured engagement framework with external partners. This engagement will strengthen links between the national and local tier as we prepare for the Tier 1 Exercise in 2027.

What support are you giving to Local Resilience Forums and Voluntary and Community Sector groups, as well as Other Government Departments and agencies, that want to develop and test their local plans in the meantime?

The Cabinet Office encourages all Local Resilience Forums to conduct or participate in exercises on cross-cutting risks in line with the National Security Risk Assessment. Alongside structured engagement with MHCLG and involvement in Exercise ALBISTON SHADOW in March 2027, the Government will soon launch two major capabilities for national exercising: the National Exercising Tracker and a National Exercising Hub. The National Exercising Tracker will enable whole-of-system understanding, planning, deconfliction and collaboration on all significant exercises, and will be available to all Departments, Devolved Governments and LRFs. To raise society-wide exercising capability, we have designed a National Exercising Hub with products enabling any individual or organisation to conduct exercising and benefit from it.

What is the Cabinet Office's plan for leading the national conversation on defence and resilience, and how are other departments being held to account for their role in it?

The Cabinet Office has the overall lead within government on national resilience, setting the strategic direction for public-facing communications. This leadership role includes oversight of resilience planning and coordination of messaging during both routine and crisis scenarios. The Government is committed to driving forward a public conversation on risks and preparedness to strengthen national resilience and readiness.

As set out in the Strategic Defence Review (2025), the national conversation will be a multi-year, cross-departmental effort designed to deliver on the whole-of-society approach to national security and defence. The Cabinet Office is actively leading and coordinating this work with other departments through the Home Defence Programme. In July 2026, the Government announced a national resilience public engagement campaign later this year, working in partnership with devolved and local governments, Local Resilience Forums, utilities providers, businesses, civil society organisations and other partners to design and deliver this campaign.

Why is the Prepare website online only and not a physical document sent to every household as in so many other European countries?

Our approach is designed to fit the UK risk picture, prioritising channels that have the strongest and broadest reach, to ensure we reach audiences effectively.

We face a different risk picture to other nations who may provide a physical document to households. However, we have strong relationships with international partners and are using the insights they have shared on their public information campaigns to help inform our public engagement approach.

MOD are leading on the Defence Readiness Bill, but what is the role of the Home Defence Programme in identifying the measures required by Cabinet Office and other government departments to enable transition to war?

The Home Defence Programme is employing a pragmatic approach to coordinate x-Government work and map capabilities.