

Written evidence submitted by the Cabinet Office

1 How well does the National Security Council and/or Cabinet Office ensure that preparedness plans are resourced and exercised, and how are their lessons learned/implemented?

The Cabinet Office leads the coordination and delivery of the classified National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA), which assesses the most significant risks to the UK. The risk assessment process provides Government departments and agencies with the information required for them to take action to address these risks.

Responsibility for resourcing and overseeing levels of preparedness for the potential consequences of each risk is assigned to a Lead Government Department (LGD), whose Secretary of State is ultimately accountable. LGDs work with relevant sectors and partners to improve their resilience to these risks. The Cabinet Office supports the development of LGD plans and plays a coordinating role where risks have cross-departmental impacts.

Exercising is a key element of preparedness and the cycle of Integrated Emergency Management. Exercises enable plans to be validated against assessed risks, and for people and teams to rehearse in the context of foreseeable operating conditions. The Cabinet Office coordinates the central programme of cross-government exercises. The Home Office leads on Counter Terrorism exercises. LGDs conduct internal exercising, and also support and participate in exercises within their specific sectors.

There is an important distinction between *lessons identified* (observed weaknesses to address, and good practice to build on) and *lessons learned* (where negatives have been addressed and positives have been embedded and extended). Cabinet Office coordinates the response to lessons identified from operations and exercises through established governance structures, although LGD accountability for improvements within their areas of responsibility applies.

2 How does the NSC maintain its centrality in the policy-making process, and set ministerial direction and oversee implementation of national security decisions?

As a Prime Minister-chaired Cabinet Committee, the National Security Council sets direction and policy on a wide range of priority national security issues, both international and domestic. The NSC draws on the collective capabilities of all NSC departments and agencies. It coordinates a whole-of-Government approach to national security. It convenes to discuss a mix of: forward-looking strategies on priority issues; preparation for, and follow up from, significant events; and responses to urgent issues.

The Council is supported by the Permanent Secretaries of the relevant departments. They meet as a sub-committee of officials, known as NSC(O) to indicate 'officials' only. NSC(O) is chaired by the National Security Adviser (NSA).

Individual departmental plans draw on the strategies agreed by the NSC.

3 What is the appropriate role and remit of the National Security Adviser, including the NSA's required interaction with the NSC, COBR and ministers?

The role of the Prime Minister's National Security Adviser is to represent the Prime Minister and the National Security Council, both within Government and with other countries.

The NSA provides personal counsel to the Prime Minister as his chief adviser across the breadth of national security capabilities and concerns. Responsible for all matters of

international and domestic security, the NSA acts as Secretary to the NSC, coordinating its work across Government to provide collective strategic leadership on national security and crisis situations.

The NSA oversees implementation of NSC direction and policy across the national security community. As part of the Government's administrative 'centre', the NSA acts as a neutral broker between departments as needed.

The NSA is supported by a team in the Cabinet Secretariat, including the G7/G20 Sherpa and two Deputy NSAs. In response to a national security crisis, the NSA or one of their Deputies will attend COBR meetings.

The new National Security Adviser will undertake a rapid review of national security systems and processes to ensure the outcomes of the Integrated Review and future policy decisions receive swift and effective implementation, in line with ministerial direction.

4 What is the interaction between the NSC and COBR systems?

The NSC provides overall strategic leadership on national security and is a formal Cabinet Committee. The Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) provides a tried and tested mechanism for coordinating the Government's response to crises in the UK and overseas.

COBR is in effect an operational sub-committee of the National Security Council acting as a central mechanism to coordinate the UK's operational response to crises.

COBR meetings focus on the collective Government response to an actual or potential emergency, bringing together relevant departments, experts from within Government, external agencies and local responders as necessary.

In complex multi-dimensional crises, the NSC (or another Cabinet committee) will set strategy and take policy decisions, while COBR meetings will focus on the immediate operational response.

The governance structures for the Covid-19 response have evolved over the last year to reflect the changing nature of the decisions needed, and to coordinate a widening of the response across Government. At the appropriate time, the Government will review this approach, and incorporate any learning into future response planning.

5 What is the role of key Government departments and agencies in national security policy-making?

Government departments play a key role in national security decision-making, including: preparing for, and informing, cross-Government discussion; participating in policy-making meetings, including NSC and NSC(O); and then implementing the decisions taken.

The principal national security departments propose topics for NSC and NSC(O) discussion, where decisions are needed or risks shared with other NSC members. The relevant Department presents to NSC and proposes an outline approach to gain collective agreement. This can occur via the NSC meeting or via correspondence, if appropriate.

While the standing membership of the NSC is published, participation is flexible depending on the topic. Key Government departments and agencies are represented at the NSC by a Minister, usually a Secretary of State. Departments not normally represented at NSC may

attend NSC(O) when appropriate. Both committees allow for additional attendees depending on the agenda.

The development of policy is usually led by the department with the biggest stake in delivery of the policy, sometimes supported by National Strategy Implementation Groups (NSIGs) or other cross-Government mechanisms. In all cases, policies are developed following cross-Government consultation, and may also draw on external sources of expertise such as academics, think-tanks, public advisory bodies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

The NSA oversees national security policy development and implementation on behalf of the Prime Minister.

6 How does the NSC collect, use and analyse data across national security relevant departments, and what does the mechanism for the NSC collecting evidence to aid its decision-making look like?

The way policy options are presented to the NSC, whether by individual departments or via NSIGs, is informed by the findings of the Chilcot Inquiry and follows a standardised format. This includes specific requirements to draw evidence and data from a wide range of sources. The format ensures analysis follows six steps: UK interests and objectives; the situation; the outlook; objectives of allies and partners; the most impactful potential UK contribution; and the match between objectives and resources.

The JIC Chair attends the NSC to provide all-source assessment and ensure attendees have up to date intelligence reporting to inform their thinking.

7 How coherent are the NSC committee structures, as reshaped in this Parliament and further revised to address Covid?

As published, there is currently one sub-committee to the NSC and there have been no specific revisions to this structure to address Covid. Four Ministerial committees were created at the very early stages of the crisis, outside of the NSC, to manage different aspects of Covid response.

8 How well are funding/resources linked to national security decisions?

National security departments and agencies submit their respective, and sometimes joint, bids to Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT) to secure the funding they estimate is needed to deliver their programme of work. HMT review these proposals with the Cabinet Office to ensure they align with national security strategy. For Spending Review 2020, the policy baseline developed by the Integrated Review was used for this purpose.

9 How well is the 'Fusion Doctrine' embedded? How does this link to learning the lessons from Covid?

Fusion is reflected through the existing structures of the national security community. The Integrated Review has considered options for evolving our approach to development and delivery of policy on complex cross-cutting national security priorities. These include giving greater emphasis to effective implementation, including through enhancing Ministerial oversight, over and above that provided by the NSC itself. The conclusions of this work will be set out in due course, and led by the incoming National Security Adviser.

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