Submission contents:

1. About Reform
2. Tackling cross-cutting issues with clear accountability
3. Linking the Strategic Framework to spending reviews

About Reform

Reform is established as the leading Westminster think tank for public service reform. We are dedicated to achieving better and smarter public services. Our mission is to set out ideas that will improve public services for all and deliver value for money. We are determinedly independent and strictly non-party in our approach.

Recently, Reform has launched a programme of work to consider how to improve the resilience of public services, and drive resilience through the machinery of central government.

In March, Reform published ‘A State of preparedness: How government can build resilience to civil emergencies’. This evidence submission is in large part based on that report, which can be read here.

How departments tackle cross-cutting challenges with clearer accountability for delivery

Summary: The pandemic has revealed gaps in government’s planning and capabilities to deal with cross cutting risks, which affect several departments and require a coordinated response. Gaps in preparedness for particular risks, including and beyond pandemics, will need remedying. However, a wider issue here is the lack of effective scrutiny of preparedness efforts. Our research has found this to be lacking for both specific departments and for wider cross-government efforts. This will need to be addressed with changes at several levels of government.

1. The risks facing the UK are increasingly complex and have the potential to create wide-ranging and cascading impacts. This underpins the need for a coordinated and cross-government approach to preparing for complex risks. In practice, this means that it cannot fall only to a Lead Government Department to prepare for a designated risk. The Department should play a coordinating role, but responsibility for preparedness should be shared by all relevant government departments.

2. Of course, government’s ability to prepare well for cross-cutting risks depends on risks being accurately identified and assessed. Government’s ability to do this is hindered in two ways: secrecy surrounding the National Security Risk Assessment
and the risk assessment process limits opportunities for external challenge; and scrutiny of the risk assessment process relies too heavily on people within government’s networks. Our research recommends government should have a presumption towards transparency – a shift from need-to-know to need-to-share – where this would not compromise national security. Further, to inject greater challenge into the risk assessment process, we have recommended that an Independent Civil Contingencies Advisory Group should be established, comprising academics and professionals working in the fields of risk management and resilience, and with expertise across sectors and risk categories. This could feed into the risk assessment process at several stages. For instance, it could convene independent challenge groups, to run parallel to government-run expert challenge groups, to scrutinise risk assessments. Findings from both groups could be compared to identify areas of divergent opinion to be explored further.

3. **COVID-19 illustrated the costs of the Government’s failure to plan and prepare for several of the wider impacts of COVID-19.** Several non-health impacts of a pandemic had been anticipated but were not mitigated, making the Government’s response to COVID-19 less agile and effective than it could have been. For example, neither HM Treasury or the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy had planned for the economic impacts of a pandemic, and the Department for Education had not made plans for the national cancellation of exams. This led to implementation delays and sometimes chaotic, last-minute policy making, which undermined public trust. These gaps in preparedness must be identified and then remedied.

4. **However, a broader problem that is driving the emergence of these gaps is a lack of effective scrutiny of government’s preparedness.** This is true both within specific government departments, and of the lack of mechanisms to oversee cross-government preparedness for cross-cutting risks. Better scrutiny would ensure that government is adequately preparing for cross-cutting risks, and support better accountability for delivery. **Reform** recommends that changes are made at four levels.

5. **First, the CCS should be more proactive in ensuring Departments’ preparedness for risks that could affect them.** The CCS should undertake regular scrutiny of Lead Departments’ planning and capabilities, and how effectively they are coordinating with other relevant departments. It should also scrutinise the preparedness efforts of non-lead departments which have a shared responsibility to prepare for a risk.

6. **Second, the attention given to resilience within departments should be strengthened.** There should be civil servants in every government department with a responsibility for civil contingencies. There should be a named minister within each government department below secretary-of-state level whose brief specifically includes resilience and civil contingencies, who would have the time to dedicate to these areas.
7. **Third**, the National Security Council should have greater oversight of resilience efforts, focussing the attention of ministers and holding them account for progress. The Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies Subcommittee (THRC-S) should be reinstated and used as a forum to coordinate cross-government action to improve preparedness for risks. Supported by the Deputy National Security Advisor, THRC-S should have responsibility for plans to enhance the Government’s resilience capabilities.

8. **Fourth**, Parliament must provide more proactive and consistent scrutiny of the Government’s resilience efforts. Parliamentary scrutiny of resilience in the run-up to COVID-19 was patchy and irregular. To address this, the Government should move a motion in Parliament to establish a Civil Contingencies Select Committee. This committee would ensure more continuous scrutiny and override the siloed focuses of existing departmental committees, in order to successfully scrutinise preparedness for cross-cutting risks.

9. The upcoming task of identifying and acting on lessons from the pandemic, and weaknesses in our resilience capabilities which have been exposed, will be a complex cross-government challenge. The scale, complexity and duration of the pandemic will make it difficult to identify and act on lessons at all levels of government, and to then drive actions that result in meaningful progress.

10. Our research argues that new structures should be introduced to drive this lesson learning process, which would better enable government to meet this cross-cutting challenge and support better accountability. We recommend two changes to support this agenda.

11. **First**, the Government should appoint a Minister for Resilience and Recovery, to serve for the remainder of this Government. This should be a Cabinet-level position, explicitly backed by the Prime Minister, to ensure they have the necessary authority and access to drive change across government. The Minister should be responsible for overseeing cross-government lesson learning from COVID-19 and ensuring action is taken within departments, as well as in the Cabinet Office, to boost resilience to future crises.

12. **Second**, the Minister for Resilience and Recovery should work through the reinstated THRC-S of the National Security Council to drive cross-government actions to address lessons identified from COVID-19. The CCS should report to the Subcommittee with lessons identified, and the Subcommittee should produce action plans to address these. The Minister should use the Subcommittee to hold the appropriate Ministers to account, convening it monthly to review progress.

**Linking the Strategic Framework to spending reviews**
Summary: Investment will be required across government to address lessons from COVID-19 and improve resilience capabilities. This will require appropriate mechanisms for assessing what spending priorities should be on a regular basis. As the risk landscape is constantly changing, this may in exceptional circumstances require discretionary spending outside of the normal spending review cycle.

1. **The Strategic Framework commits to building national resilience, which will require significant investment.** Health resilience is rightly a major focus of the Integrated Review, but so too is the need to pay more attention to low-probability, catastrophic impact events. Building capabilities on both of these fronts will require additional spending across government.

2. **‘Savings’ in resilience are a false economy.** The Government’s response to COVID-19 has cost at least £270 billion to the end of 2020.\(^1\) Investing to prevent or mitigate serious risks is both necessary and proportionate, even if there may be only a small chance that they will materialise.

3. **To link spending with building resilience, the Government first needs to identify where investment is required in capabilities – people, skills, and equipment – to respond to risks.** The Civil Contingencies Secretariat produces a regular National Security Risk Assessment which identifies and assesses risks, but there is no regular assessment of the Government’s capabilities to respond to those risks. *Reform* recommends that an assessment should be produced annually by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) for the National Security Council, and that the Threats, Hazards, Resilience and Contingencies Subcommittee (THRC-S) should be reinstated to consider the findings of this assessment. This assessment should identify gaps in the Government’s capabilities to respond to different risks. Following this assessment, the THRC-S should be responsible for producing an action plan for how to plug those gaps, which should include costings and necessary spending commitments.

4. **The risk landscape is constantly changing, so a need to invest in resilience may not align with the spending review cycle.** The National Security Risk Assessment is updated regularly and each iteration may include updated assessments or assessments of new or emerging risks. The most recent National Risk Register included ten risks that were not included in the previous 2017 Register.\(^2\) Where this is the case, for instance in response to a newly identified risk, discretionary spending may be required outside of the spending review process to ensure preparedness for those risks. The nature and amount of this spending should be decided through the assessment process run by the CCS and commissioned by the THRC-S.

30 April 2021

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