National Security Machinery Inquiry Submission from Nottingham Trent University

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This submission builds on research and partnerships developed by Associate Professor Rowena Hill from Nottingham Trent University supported by colleagues from the Department of Psychology and Nottingham Civic Exchange. Through the submission we make reference to the outputs of the C19 National Foresight Group which was active from March 2020 to January 2021 providing a cross-governmental and multi-agency support function for the UKs Covid-19 response. This group produced over 60 reports. 49 of these are available publicly via the Nottingham Civic Exchange webpages for the inquiry to and other groups to learn from.

1. Executive Summary:

1.1. To develop the National Security Machinery our research suggests it needs to 'dock' more effectively with the resilience and emergency management structures, as well as ensuring that the existing structures, such as COBR, operate to their terms of reference and design. Alongside this, the NSC should provide holistic policy leadership across department portfolios of government, and support and funding to the emergency management structures which implement their policy at functional local and community level. Covid-19 has shown that highly centralised decision-making can be easily overwhelmed during national incidents or in cascade events when multiple incidents stack, and that the infrastructure (physical, technological and legal/policy) is not in place to support authorities at any level to work well together. Building communication networks and infrastructure from the machinery of government to local authority level resilience structures is likely to increase efficiency and effectiveness.

1.2. This submission calls for a review of the frameworks between government departments and agencies and with those managing disasters and emergencies at a regional and local level.

2. Submission:

2.1. **How well the National Security Council and/or Cabinet Office ensures that preparedness plans are resourced and exercised, and how their lessons are learned/implemented;**

2.1.1. The Cabinet Office and MHCLG are seen as the main coordination point for sharing learning across relevant stakeholder groups and the implementation of those lessons learned. However, our research throughout the first six months of the Covid-19 pandemic has suggested that this absent and local strategic bodies across the UK were looking for that facilitation of shared learning (see the first, second and third Interim Operational Review (IORs) reports as well as our Managing the First 230 Days report, Local LRF Learning and Local Lockdown Learning reports available via https://bit.ly/C19NFGOutputs). As well

as shared learning, the ability for local areas to share horizontally with each other is also challenged due to the systems and processes used. Resilience Direct, although delivering a platform where otherwise a vacuum would exist, is limited in its structure to share learning. The structure of the software is very siloed and hard to navigate. In our paper "Local government information sharing structures" the role of central government in information sharing highlights that

1) policy and legal frameworks are determinants of successful information sharing,
2) lack of funding is identified as an impediment to information sharing and,
3) 3) providing IT infrastructure, funding and IT training were important for facilitating information sharing.

2.1.2. We suggest that central government's role should be to provide the environment in terms of infrastructure, funding and policy, from which resilience and preparedness can emerge which maximises local level, horizontal collaboration. This is in contrast to creating and imposing particular strategies from above and afar. The IORs provide details of the challenges and possible solutions and reflect the views of LRFs who felt they were having to operate outside of their mandate due to a lack of suitable policy frameworks. We conclude that central government should have a facilitative role, providing the environment (in terms of funding, infrastructure and policy) in which resilience and preparedness can emerge from local-level flexibility, collaboration and innovation, supporting subsidiarity.

2.1.3. As well as the facilitation of sharing learning, the Cabinet Office and MHCLG were looked to for thought leadership on the associated challenges across the country regarding process and concepts of operational and local strategic implementation of policy and guidance. However, our research indicates that centralised responses were not able to cope with the complexity and nuances of local situations, which can often interact in unanticipated ways. This view is taken from our experiences of Covid-19 and other more local and regional disasters in recent times across the UK.

2.1.4. Centralised emergency preparedness campaigns have often not had success, with research suggesting that bottom-up, community led methods and a shift in society norms are required to prepare adequately. This includes organisation and collaboration across locally meaningful boundaries, rather than traditional governmental or census boundaries which are often inappropriate and do not align with the situation 'on the ground'. This collaboration should involve the identification of potential threats, the formation of networks and carrying out simulation exercises. The role of central government is then again facilitative rather than organisational: creating a policy framework to encourage, resource, and reward local level collaboration across jurisdictional and administrative boundaries.

2.2. **How the NSC maintains its centrality in the policy-making process, sets ministerial direction and oversees implementation of national security decisions;**

2.2.1. Our research shows that during the Covid-19 pandemic the policy-making process and direction lacked a holistic approach and coordination. This announcement-led approach has not eased over the length of time of the pandemic despite government departments and the machinery of government having time to adjust to pace and stretch of the challenge. The IORs were one of many voices calling for a change in approach to better support the response and recovery effort.

2.2.2. Given the nature of the national emergency, the coordination which could be offered through the NSC has not docked with the resilience structures and the emergency management. This may be explained in the typical focus of the NSC being on human created or actor threats. The initial health response (quickly impacting and drawing across all portfolios of departments) lacked the central coordinating body such as the NSC. In IOR 1 we recommended a solution to this. A Concept of Operations (CONOPS) group at national gold level which could have eased some of the coordination and communication demand on central government in the early stages of the pandemic and increase the situational awareness. This would effectively connect COBR, departments and structures such as the NSC with the local response across the nation. This would also include the issues outlined above.

2.3. **The interaction of the NSC and COBR systems**;

2.3.1. Throughout the pandemic it appeared that COBR was operating in relative isolation to the other emergency structures outside of the government machinery. Whilst SAGE has become the focal point of the decision-making process in the public narrative, this is a scientific and technical advisory group. It should be, and has been, limited to providing an evidence base for COBR decision-making. COBR is where the strategy and advice should be integrated, then synthesised with the national common operating picture and situational awareness and applied to future strategy and planning. Very quickly COBR was perceived to be dislocated from the strategic and operational decision-making of the pandemic and this impacted on the local strategic capacity (as evidenced throughout all three IOR reports). With reduced strategy, coordination and communication coming from COBR to the other emergency management structures, this left a vacuum in the provision of information, planning and strategic national leadership. The Government Liaison Officers tried to address this gap, but they were under-resourced, rotated frequently and unable to take issues back to central government with enough seniority for resolution or clarity. The gap between COBR and the local emergency management structures across the UK could have been resolved with a single additional structure to address coordination and communication to local strategic emergency management leaders. Instead there are multiple taskforces relating to Covid-19, which may be demonstrating leadership across governmental and department portfolios, but they have no presence, recognised alignment to, or communication with, the emergency management structures across the country. This has effectively left the newly created taskforces leading the portfolios across government, but not providing leadership or strategic or operational management of the pandemic across the nation, their leadership is

limited to government as there is no recognised structure or network which they effect change of decisions outside of government. This highlights the issues and gap between central government and the local strategic decision-makers responsible for implementing policy, consequences of this include the coordination communication challenges.

2.4. **The role of key Government departments and agencies in national security policy-making**;

2.4.1. In our research captured in the Managing the First 230 Days report, one point of learning to take forward from the Covid-19 pandemic was for holistic and fully integrated policy making, which was needed across all portfolio areas in government departments. The whole of society impacts of Covid-19 required a whole systems approach which should have been coordinated and rounded. The C19 National Foresight Group shared this in its response to the Integrated Review. This has meant that a perception of uncoordinated policy has developed, which has been mirrored with the communication between government departments, the communication of policy decisions from government to local strategic decision-makers, and the communication of policy decisions from government to the public. They are all significantly challenged, uncoordinated, unaligned and completed in an announcement-led delivery. This directly led to confusion and a lack of preparation time between the policy announcement and the implementation at local level across the UK for local services and civic leaders. This is evidenced throughout out the first, second, third IOR reports, the communications paper and the Managing the First 230 Days report in a significant way affecting not only within an operational context but also on the health and wellbeing of frontline strategic responders who had to react to government announcements and citizen and stakeholder requests with no time to plan for or consider the best way forward.

2.4.2. The lack of a coherent communication strategy also impacted directly on public support and adherence to recommended behaviours. Our research shows that clear communication increases trust- which is vital for public adherence-decreases confusion and frustration and increases the likelihood of adopting recommended behaviours. Although our research was in the context of health behaviours during a pandemic, it is likely that this also applies to broader preparedness and resilience behaviours that would be needed for a whole of society approach (e.g. individual members of a community being prepared for floods/power outages etc). Effective government communication is therefore vital not only to inform the public about impending threats and good practices to minimise harm, but also to increase adherence to those recommended practices. Here there is a role for centralisation- centralising information management to filter out inaccurate information and 'noise', and to co-ordinate information diffusion strategies to ensure that there is a unified communication strategy providing clear and consistent information to the public. This should however be done in concert with a holistic risk communication system that connects the public, local government and central government to allow feedback and ensure that needs are met. In terms of future planning, evidence from the IORs shows that although there are plans in place for managing future

crises and concurrent events, the delegates were not confident that they had the capacity to enact those plans successfully given the current demands of Covid-19. Our research shows capacity was affected by 'capacity enablers' and 'capacity drains'. One such important capacity enabler (i.e. something that increased capacity to respond to crises) was early warning systems, such as those from environmental agencies. Early intelligence and foresight from key government departments of potential national security crises could act as an 'early warning system' increasing the capacity of partners to respond. This could be achieved through a national coordination and aggregation of intelligence. A clear theme that has emerged from our research is that such multi-agency working and collaboration are vital for effective and efficient working, especially for incidents that cross geographical or portfolio boundaries. Conversely, misalignment between partners in multi-agency working was reported as a capacity drain, decreasing the efficiency of the response. This suggests that government departments should consider reaching beyond themselves to make partnerships and develop policy in collaboration with both other departments and agencies, as well as local level governments and partners. This should be done before crises occur, as our evidence shows that local responders found a lack of infrastructure and frameworks, both physical, technological and legal, impaired their response to the C19 crisis, and developing ad hoc partnerships and structures without a framework to facilitate and guide them was difficult. Further to this, it may be useful to have dedicated roles for developing policy and co-ordinating collaboration for likely large-scale, long-term, and complex impacts of crises such as mental health consequences, which encompass multiple domains and jurisdictions.

2.5. **The collection, use and analysis of data across national security relevant departments, and the mechanism for the NSC collecting evidence to aid its decision-making;**

2.5.1. Our research shows an absence of this function across all portfolio areas across the UK. The absence of data, information, intelligence, strategy and analysis has significantly hindered the ability of evidence-based decision-making throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. At local level due to the lockdown measures and service disruption the data (surveillance of impacts at local level) was suspended leaving a paucity of data and information from the local context across large portions of portfolio and service provision. This hindered situational awareness as well as future planning and the real time understanding of impacts at local level.

2.5.2. The local data analysis solution written into the Civil Contingencies Act of 2004 is the Multi-Agency Information Cell (MAIC), which is an emergency response and recovery structure provisioned from seconded people from the Local Resilience Partnership (LRFs). This means the funding, energy, resource capability and skill redeployment is provided from, and impacts upon, local services for the length of the emergency. For Covid-19 this is a significant length of time. At national level a similar challenge generated the Joint Biosecurity Centre, but it has never been addressed at local level, and this is

limited to supporting local areas when there is a transmission increase, so when a response is required. This does not support local strategic decision-makers when in periods of stabilisation, adaptation or recovery.

2.5.3.   Our research also demonstrates that the data requirement from government was unidirectional and uncoordinated for some months, overwhelming the local provision with duplication of data with little or no return of that investment other than a reflection of the data back in a dashboard. Our roundtable reports on mental health and evacuation, and our reports on those with limited liberty, children and young people and the court processes demonstrated the lack of data being collated during the pandemic on the impacts on the public and particularly at risk groups and surveillance of impacts across communities. Given the nature of how important this is, our research advocates an intelligence ecology is built within the resilience framework of emergency management. This should inform local level strategic decision-makers and for aggregating to inform the situational awareness of central government. Effective intelligence sharing was also highlighted by LRFs as being essential to highlighting, sharing and learning from best practice, and learning for the future- information sharing facilitates policy improvement iteratively from flexibility and innovation at local level in response to the situation 'on the ground'.

2.6.   **The coherence of the NSC committee structures, as reshaped in this Parliament and further revised to address Covid**;

2.6.1.   The structure and sub-committee focus of NSC demonstrate that the current approach to risk and threat is unbalanced. Given the structures and changes in focus as a consequence of Covid-19, there are two groups focussing on this, there are a further two sub-committees with a focus on 'other' types of threat and risk (climate crisis and EU transition). These are threats and risk we are already experiencing. The other sub-committees are focussed on nuclear or other types of threat. However, there is no sub-committee focussing on resilience across the UK, arguably the mechanism through which all of the other sub-committees deliver their objectives. Given the learning in Covid-19, we see this as an omission which needs to be addressed to ease the portfolio split between the Cabinet Office and MHCLG who hold differing responsibilities regarding resilience.

2.7.   **How well funding/resources are linked to national security decisions;**

2.7.1.   Throughout all of the IOR reports funding of resilience structures and resourcing the resilience mechanisms has been a clear challenge for LRFs. This needs addressing as a matter of urgency given the ongoing nature of Covid-19, EU Transition and the Climate Crisis. We have addressed this in more detail in our response above and also in the three IOR reports.

3.   Recommendations:

3.1.   Enhanced information sharing systems are required between central government and local responders with structures required to support better

connectivity. Links between local responders should also be supported through frameworks that allow cross area learning and data sharing.

3.2.   A new framework and operating model are required to facilitate this which requires learning from practice developed mid-crisis. This framework should be rooted in the whole of society approach that recognises the importance of subsidiarity which has been reduced through the pandemic.

3.3.   This pandemic has highlighted the challenges our current geographical boundaries have created with multiple agencies operating at varying spatial scales which makes coordination and response challenging.

3.4.   An integrated model through a CONOPs Gold Group could be utilised to improve the linkages between different partners. NSC did not dock well with the resilience structures and emergency management model across the UK during the Pandemic and this should be reviewed. A more structured relationship between parties must be developed that builds on the whole society approach to disaster and emergency response. Future policy should include this model when moving forward.

3.5.   Policy communication has evidently been a challenge across the pandemic leaving local responders with very limited time to plan and develop responses. This must be addressed through a communication framework and system that supported an integrated approach to tackling emergencies.

3.6.   Our evidence highlighted a significant challenge around data and its effective sharing and use by a variety of partner agencies and organisations. When responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. The MAICs require additional support and capacity to ensure clearer bi-directional relationships that help the whole sector make more informed decisions at both a strategic and operational level. Our work through the MHCLG funded MAIC pilot makes further recommendations in this space. Alongside this we advocate for a stronger information and intelligence ecology to ensure the most up to date and robust information can be fed into the intelligence picture during disasters and emergencies.

4.   About the Authors:

4.1.   Dr Rowena Hill is an Associate Professor of Psychology from Nottingham Trent University. She was on secondment for ten months to the C19 National Foresight Group, a cross-governmental group to consider the longer-term impacts of Covid-19 and to provide academic insights and an evidence base to the considerations of the group. The C19 National Foresight Group is now decommissioned. The submission therefore draws on the work conducted by the academics on this group during it's time of operating but is not a submission on behalf of the C19 National Foresight Group. Dr Hill has led research projects funded by the ESRC.

4.2.   Dr Hill has been researching emergency management and resilience for the past five years. She has been researching alongside emergency responders specifically for over 15 years and has a strong publication record. Dr Hill has also been the lead author of reports which led on roundtable discussions with practitioners involved in the Covid-19 response and produced reports on these that have been disseminated to the resilience community across England.

4.3. Dr Hill will be happy to discuss the details of any of these projects at any future meeting of the committee.

4.4. Research collaborators relating to this inquiry include:

- Rich Pickford, Knowledge Exchange Officer, Nottingham Trent University was seconded part time to support NTU's work with the C19 National Foresight Group and co-wrote this submission
- Adam Potter, contract researcher engaged by NTU for their C19 Foresight work. Adam provides research assistance and co-wrote this submission.
- Dr Duncan Guest, Associate Professor, Nottingham Trent University
- Dr Stacey Stewart, contract researcher engaged by NTU for their C19 Foresight work. Dr Stewart provides research assistance.
- Stephanie Bianco, contract researcher engaged by NTU for their C19 Foresight work. Stephanie provided research assistance.
- Dr Sally Andrews, Lecturer in Psychology, Nottingham Trent University.
- Dr Lisa Sanderson, Lecturer in Psychology, Nottingham Trent University.
- Professor Thom Baguley, Professor in Psychology, Nottingham Trent University.
- Professor Nigel Wright, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Nottingham Trent University.

Additional colleagues provided research and insights to the material our group has produced. These can be shared with the inquiry if required.