



**COVID-19 INQUIRY:
RESILIENCE AND
PREPAREDNESS (MODULE 1)
REPORT**

**EXECUTIVE RESPONSE
16 JANUARY 2025**

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Foreword

Baroness Hallett, the Chair to the United Kingdom-wide Covid-19 Public Inquiry, published her findings for Module 1 of the Inquiry on 18 July 2024. Module 1 of the Inquiry opened on 21 July 2022 to investigate the preparedness for the pandemic, to assess if the pandemic was properly planned for and whether the UK was adequately prepared. The module touched on the whole system of civil emergencies including resourcing, risk management and pandemic readiness and scrutinised government decision-making relating to planning to identify lessons that can be learnt.

Public hearings for Module 1 ran for six weeks from 13 June to 19 July 2023, during which time a wide range of witnesses provided evidence to the Inquiry. We recognise that the publication of the report represented a significant milestone for families of those who lost loved ones during the pandemic and for those who continue to be impacted by the pandemic. Our thoughts remain with those who lost loved ones during the pandemic. We welcome the report and would like to thank the Chair for the ongoing work of the Inquiry.

Throughout the pandemic, all of society faced a crisis unlike anything we have seen. We and our Executive colleagues remain committed to keeping all in our society safe. We have learned lessons from the Pandemic and have started work to implement changes to ensure we are better prepared for a future pandemic. The key is now to build on these improvements, adapt to evolving issues, and focus on long-term resilience.

As the Report points out, risks and emergencies do not recognise borders. The Covid-19 virus quickly spread across the globe. This underscored the need for cooperation and a unified approach. We will continue to engage with administrations and public health officials across these islands, exploring how we can share resources, information and efforts to ensure no one is left behind, regardless of geography. We recognise the need for effective collaboration in the event of future pandemics.

The Module 1 report contains ten recommendations that focus on cross-cutting systems and processes across the UK whilst also enabling us to consider issues specific to Northern Ireland (NI). It identifies improvements that could be made to the UK's civil contingencies arrangements and emphasises the need for better risk assessment and governance, streamlining emergency systems, and holding regular pandemic response exercises across all 4-Nations. Moreover, there are suggestions for improved data collection, coordination, and a more integrated strategy that accounts for inequalities and vulnerabilities as well as a need for independent scrutiny of our civil contingency arrangements.

It is important to acknowledge that there have been positive developments on resilience and preparedness arrangements in NI during the pandemic and since the Module 1 public hearings in summer 2023. There is also recognition that further improvements will be beneficial, and this document sets out how we plan to respond positively to and address the recommendations on resilience and preparedness for whole system civil contingencies events.

We and our Executive colleagues are familiar with our departmental-led civil contingencies risks; and the arrangements in our departments for preparing and responding to emergency

situations. Each department has a lead contact, known as the C3 lead (command, control and co-ordination); who meets regularly with officials in TEO, along with C3 Leads from other departments.

Future modules of the Inquiry will delve deeper into the decision-making and governance structures. Most importantly, the impact of the pandemic and our response will also be examined.

Michelle O'Neill MLA
FIRST MINISTER

Emma Little-Pengelly MLA
DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation 1: A simplified structure for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience

The governments of the UK, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should each simplify and reduce the number of structures with responsibility for preparing for and building resilience to whole-system civil emergencies. The core structures should be:

- a single Cabinet-level or equivalent ministerial committee (including the senior minister responsible for health and social care) responsible for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience for each government, which meets regularly and is chaired by the leader or deputy leader of the relevant government; and
- a single cross-departmental group of senior officials in each government (which reports regularly to the Cabinet-level or equivalent ministerial committee) to oversee and implement policy on civil emergency preparedness and resilience.

This should be put in place within 12 months of the publication of this Report.

Within 6 months of the creation of the group of senior officials, it should complete a review to simplify and reduce the number of structures responsible for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience.

Subsequently, within 24 months of the publication of this Report, the ministerial committee should rationalise and streamline subordinate or supporting groups and committees responsible for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience. Any groups and committees retained or created to support this core structure should have a clear purpose and should report regularly about progress with, and completion of, tasks assigned to them.

Response

The Northern Ireland Executive (the Executive) recognises the need for Ministerial and senior official oversight of civil contingencies as well as clear structures alongside clarity of roles and responsibilities. We also recognise that the civil contingencies landscape in NI looks complicated when presented in its totality and are grateful to the Inquiry for highlighting this. The Executive, therefore, accept this recommendation in full.

Progress in line with this recommendation has already been made. Following the restoration of the Executive last year, one of the first papers to be considered by the Executive on 29 February 2024 was on civil contingencies arrangements.

It is important to acknowledge that there are different types of emergencies, from those which require a local response to those that require a co-ordinated multi-agency, national or region-wide response. As a result, there are different structures in place to ensure they are responded to appropriately and in a timely manner. The *“NI Civil Contingencies Framework – Building Resilience Together”* (the Framework), originally published in July 2021, sets out the Northern Ireland arrangements for civil emergencies and identifies the processes involved in preparing

for, responding to and recovering from an emergency. The Framework brought together existing protocols and guidance (including the “*Guide to Emergency Planning Arrangements*”) into one document and is regularly reviewed.

The Framework shows the hierarchy in place to respond to civil emergencies that impact locally or regionally across NI and nationally across the UK. The Framework sets out the NI arrangements for effective civil emergencies management and identifies the processes involved in preparing for, responding to and recovering from an emergency.

There are some differences in process here compared to Great Britain due to the different administrative structures and reflecting the fact that the island of Ireland comprises a single epidemiological unit covered by two legislative jurisdictions. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was agreed between the Departments of Health here and in the Republic of Ireland in April 2020 to underpin and strengthen co-operation on the public health response to the pandemic. The MoU focuses on facilitating co-operation in areas such as public health messaging, research, and evidence base/modelling. The Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and the Department of Health (DoH), together with the Public Health Agency (PHA) regularly liaise on zoonotic risks and antimicrobial resistance in respect of the island of Ireland.

In terms of animal health, an all-island single epidemiological unit is respected, and this is factored into discussions at UK level. Arrangements are in place to ensure regular cross-border exercises are completed both at animal health and One Health levels. For example, in the event of an outbreak of epizootic disease in either Northern Ireland or Ireland, it is recognised by DAERA and the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine (DAFM - the relevant government department in Ireland) that sustained co-operation between both administrations will be essential to reduce the further spread of disease.

On a One Health basis, DAERA is a participant at the Ireland One Health Oversight Commission, a body which was established in 2023 and co-chaired by the Chief Medical and Chief Veterinary Officers from Ireland. It brings together participants from across environment, animal and human health agencies to consider ongoing and emerging risks. It reflects on the ongoing cross-border working group activities between government and academic parties.

In terms of whole-system civil contingencies preparedness and resilience in relation to emergencies that have wide impacts across society, there are many key players, all of whom must understand their roles and responsibilities.

The Inquiry has highlighted that due to the unique constitutional arrangements in place in Northern Ireland, the Executive is a mandatory coalition government, comprising the Ministers from the nine Executive departments, each of which is a separate legal entity. The Executive Office (TEO), therefore, has a role of coordination, not direction, across the departments of the Executive.

The Executive is co-chaired by the First Minister and deputy First Minister and attended by eight departmental Ministers. Subject to their statutory obligation to refer certain categories of matters to the Executive for agreement, individual Ministers have executive authority to determine policy and operational matters within their departments, without the general requirement to observe a collective ‘cabinet position’. The Executive exercises executive

authority on behalf of the Northern Ireland Assembly and takes decisions on significant and/or controversial matters and matters which cut across the responsibility of two or more Ministers, which are referred to it by individual Ministers.

Given the potential cross-cutting nature of civil contingencies that may touch upon all aspects of society and therefore on the responsibilities of all Northern Ireland Ministers, the Executive is ideally placed to provide Ministerial oversight of civil contingencies arrangements.

Similarly, the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Board, which consists of the Permanent Secretaries of all NI departments as well as three non-executive independent members and is chaired by the Head of the Civil Service, is well placed to provide leadership and direction at senior official level.

The Civil Contingencies Group Northern Ireland (CCG(NI)) is the principal strategic civil contingencies preparedness body for the public sector. CCG(NI) comprises senior level membership from all NI departments and key civil contingencies stakeholders.

This recommendation, which presents an opportunity to reset the governance arrangements for civil contingencies from a NICS perspective, has been actioned. Civil contingencies is now a standing agenda item on NICS Board meetings that immediately follow CCG(NI) meetings in March, June and November to facilitate reporting to the Executive. To strengthen Ministerial oversight of civil contingencies arrangements in NI, regular reporting will commence to the Executive for consideration following each CCG(NI) meeting. The Executive will consider this issue following the March 2025 CCG(NI) meeting.

Over the next 12 months, the Executive will strengthen and improve the oversight arrangements already in place and clarify roles and responsibilities within these improved arrangements.

Recommendation 2: Cabinet Office leadership for whole-system civil emergencies in the UK

The UK government should:

- abolish the lead government department model for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience; and require the Cabinet Office to lead on preparing for and building resilience to whole-system civil emergencies across UK government departments, including monitoring the preparedness and resilience of other departments, supporting departments to correct problems, and escalating issues to the UK Cabinet-level ministerial committee and group of senior officials in Recommendation 1.

Response

The Module 1 Inquiry report recognises that the constitutional arrangements in Northern Ireland would make mirroring this recommendation difficult. The Executive, whilst acknowledging that each department is its own legal entity, continues to work closely in a collaborative and collegiate manner to deliver for society here.

NI departments with legal and portfolio responsibilities relevant to civil contingencies are best placed to continue to drive forward the three key stages of the *“Building Resilience Together” Framework* – Prepare, Respond and Recover.

Our departments possess the necessary professional skills to lead planning during the ‘Prepare’ phase, mobilise resources during the initial ‘Response’ phase and advocate for citizens during the ‘Recovery’ phase.

That said, we recognise that the Inquiry’s recommendation highlights opportunities to improve whole-system civil emergency preparedness.

We are keen to align with the spirit of the recommendation, acknowledging that in the event of a ‘whole-system’ civil emergency, our departments must come together with a unified purpose to plan for and mitigate any potential crisis to be better prepared and able to protect society. This collaborative approach should be embedded from the outset.

Planning for local (Level 1) and regional (Level 2) preparedness and resilience should continue at the Lead Government Department level. For a Level 3 emergency with far-reaching consequences, a whole-system approach must be considered as recommended by the Chair of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry and much of this approach has already been integrated within the Framework. We will continue to work across departments and with our partners to further develop this approach and explore how this can be embedded, given the constitutional arrangements in NI.

For example, risks with a catastrophic potential as identified in the Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Risk Register, could be planned for on a cross-departmental basis, regardless of their likelihood. Currently, no formal structure exists for this type of planning, and cross-departmental collaboration will be required, facilitated through agreed mechanisms. This will

be further explored during the next 12 months with a view to bringing a proposal through the NICS Board to the Executive in line with the enhanced oversight arrangements.

Mirroring the approach of Cabinet Office, TEO will explore taking on an enhanced co-ordination role on the planning and mitigation of broader societal impacts, while other departments or the UK government address specific risks within their remit, which will also support the broader decision making around enhanced co-ordination.

This process is currently being piloted via the NI Cross Departmental Pandemic Resilience Programme Board which is co-chaired by the Department of Health (DoH) and TEO.

The DoH, as the lead government department for Pandemics and Infectious Diseases, continues to prepare for a future pandemic and provides advice to other Executive departments. This advice informs the development planning and mitigations for non-health related common or cross-cutting consequences on their respective areas of responsibility. TEO, in its position as co-chair, co-ordinates this secondary element, ensuring the planning for and implementation of wider non-health related mitigation measures.

It is important to note that lead departments or the UK government will continue to focus on their areas of expertise and lead on the broader whole-of-system planning and mitigations.

Recommendation 3: A better approach to risk assessment

The UK government and devolved administrations should work together on developing a new approach to risk assessment that moves away from a reliance on single reasonable worst-case scenarios towards an approach that:

- assesses a wider range of scenarios representative of the different risks and the range of each kind of risk;
- considers the prevention and mitigation of an emergency in addition to dealing with its consequences;
- provides a full analysis of the ways in which the combined impacts of different risks may complicate or worsen an emergency;
- assesses long-term risks in addition to short-term risks and considers how they may interact with each other;
- undertakes an assessment of the impact of each risk on vulnerable people; and
- takes into account the capacity and capabilities of the UK.

In doing so, the UK government and devolved administrations should perform risk assessments that reflect the circumstances and characteristics particular to England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole.

Response

We acknowledge the importance of robust risk management and accept the recommendation to enhance planning through the development of multiple risk scenarios. We, as an Executive, are engaged with the programme of work that is ongoing to improve catastrophic risk planning.

Following publication of the *“Building Resilience Together” Framework*, development of a comprehensive NI Civil Contingencies Risk Register commenced. This was led by TEO, and numerous workshops were conducted with key stakeholders to assess the risks. As a result, since the Covid-19 pandemic, the Executive has shifted from reliance on the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) to creating a bespoke risk register that addresses challenges unique to Northern Ireland, such as supply chain vulnerabilities and capability gaps. A NI Civil Contingencies Risk Register (NICCRR) was approved by CCG(NI) at its meeting in June 2022. The NICCRR is now in place and continues to evolve as further risks are identified or when there are changes to the current risks, mitigations or capabilities.

Furthermore, the 2023 NICCRR was developed through extensive engagement with Cabinet Office, emergency management groups and first responders, and aligns with UK-wide methodologies while focusing on NI-specific risks.

In February 2024, the Executive was briefed on the development of the NICCRR. The Risk Register follows a methodology which allocates an impact and likelihood assessment to 44 identified risks. Lead Government Departments have been identified for these risks.

Review of our approach to risk management in NI continues. In March 2025, we will launch Stage 4 of the review to map additional risk scenarios and explore the scale of impacts from worst- to least-case scenarios to enable better prioritisation. This will continue alongside

advice that will issue to the NICS Board and NI Executive on oversight arrangements and a review of the civil contingencies structure in NI in 2025.

Work is also underway to produce public facing material to assist individuals and communities understand risks and prepare and respond to crises.

This work reflects our commitment to continuous improvement in risk management and preparedness.

Recommendation 4: A UK-wide whole-system civil emergency strategy

The UK government and devolved administrations should together introduce a UK-wide whole-system civil emergency strategy (which includes pandemics) to prevent each emergency and also to reduce, control and mitigate its effects. As a minimum, the strategy should:

- be adaptable;
- include sections dedicated to each potential whole-system civil emergency – for example, one on pandemics with a clear explanation of the roles and responsibilities of the UK government, devolved administrations and their departments/directorates as well as local responders;
- consider a wide range of potential scenarios for each type of emergency;
- identify the key issues and set out a range of potential responses;
- identify how the strategy is to be applied to ensure that any potential responses are proportionate to the particular circumstances of the emergency;
- include an assessment in the short, medium and long term, based on published modelling, of the potential health, social and economic impacts of the emergency and of potential responses to the emergency on the population and, in particular, on vulnerable people; and
- include an assessment of the infrastructure, technology and skills the UK needs to respond effectively to the emergency and how those needs might change for different scenarios.

The strategy should be subject to a substantive reassessment at least every three years to ensure that it is up to date and effective, incorporating lessons learned between reassessments.

Response

We recognise the benefits of a UK-wide approach to civil contingencies and have worked with the UK government and other devolved governments to ensure an aligned approach. A single UK-wide strategy, however, would be complex and unwieldy and may not deliver the required benefits.

Officials are working with UK government and devolved governments' officials to develop Concepts of Operations (CONOPS) for each identified whole system scenario on the basis of assessment against the Reasonable Worst-Case Scenario (RWCS). There are 11 risks considered to require a whole-system approach, of which three fall within the devolved sphere. CONOPS for each scenario are being developed sequentially, the first being that required for a pandemic. The DoH in NI is engaged in this workstream.

Each devolved nation has a Memorandum of Understanding with Cabinet Office regarding the Civil Contingencies Act. It is recognised that the Memorandum of Understanding for NI is out of date and therefore needs reviewed and updated to ensure it is fit for purpose.

The *“Building Resilience Together” Framework* describes how the system would move from Prepare to Response and provides guidance on how this can be triggered by operational partners.

A revised governance arrangement was introduced in June 2021 to support the new Framework, building on long standing civil contingencies arrangements which were deployed during the Covid-19 pandemic. CCG(NI) remains the principal body for Prepare mode and meets three times per year in March, June and November (with a focus on Winter preparedness). It provides regular reports to the NICS Board.

The Pandemic Resilience planning work underway across the NICS will identify the core system requirements for responding to future health pandemics.

Recommendation 5: Data and research for future pandemics

The UK government, working with the devolved administrations, should establish mechanisms for the timely collection, analysis, secure sharing and use of reliable data for informing emergency responses, in advance of future pandemics. Data systems should be tested in pandemic exercises. The UK government should also commission a wider range of research projects ready to commence in the event of a future pandemic. These could be 'hibernated' studies or existing studies that are designed to be rapidly adapted to a new outbreak. Better working with international partners should be encouraged. This should include projects to:

- understand the prevalence of a new virus;
- measure the effectiveness of a range of different public health measures; and
- identify which groups of vulnerable people are hardest hit by the pandemic and why.

Response

We acknowledge there are benefits to be gained from better approaches to data management to help ensure timely data identification and sharing. We accept the Inquiry's recommendation for stronger UK-wide collaboration on data collection, analysis, secure sharing, and utilisation to inform emergency responses, including pandemics.

The NI Hub was responsible for the supply of the majority of NI data to UK government during the Covid-19 pandemic. Whitehall specified the data sets they wished to report upon, and the NI Hub liaised with the appropriate NI departments to provide the information, where possible. There were instances when the requested data was not available at all or not in the exact format requested by Whitehall. The DoH in NI also provided information to the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) through a range of routes to support planning and response.

We recognise that there were ongoing issues with information sharing in the early stages of the pandemic. For example, NI daily death and hospital data was out of sync with that of the UK as reporting times differed in NI (8am-8pm) and there was no provision of such NI data over the weekend. In addition, data on case numbers in health settings took time to filter through as NI was relying largely on paper-based records system.

TEO has expanded its Analytical Unit and embedded statisticians as civil contingencies business partners, integrating data analytics throughout emergency planning. A Data Liaison Network is now in place, chaired by TEO, linking departmental statisticians with emergency structures and aligning with the UK-wide Data Liaison Officer (DLO) network. Additional training and tools are also available through a data analysts' training course and an interactive risk register to support evidence-based decisions.

Work continues on the Health Protection Surveillance Framework, aligning with the World Health Organisation's (WHO's) MOSAIC framework, and enhancing surveillance systems and modelling in collaboration with the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and Ireland. A review is underway to ensure robust systems for early warnings of pandemic threats.

The appointment of a Chief Scientific and Technology Adviser (CSTA) in June 2024 strengthens leadership in science and technology in the NICS. The CSTA chairs the NI Science and Technology Advisory Network (NISTAN), coordinates research strategy, and represents NI in global scientific policymaking.

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) has made some progress towards meeting this recommendation, but there remains considerable work to be done to achieve the vision set out in this recommendation across the NICS.

Specific actions which we have taken include:

- Working with Office of National Statistics (ONS) and the wider statistical system, NISRA have developed and published a revised UK-wide methodology for calculating excess death statistics. These changes enable more accurate and timely analysis of short-run deviations in the number of deaths. NISRA has developed several linked data assets which combine information on individuals and businesses in NI, focussed on business performance and education records. These data assets will provide some building blocks for analysis in a future pandemic.
- NISRA has also developed a cross-departmental research strategy designed to provide a consistent approach to addressing important, cross-cutting research questions.
- NISRA has initiated discussions with NI and UK government departments to develop data sharing arrangements to enable our analytical work to be on a stronger footing.

However, there are a range of actions remaining which will need to be carried through to ensure a higher level of preparedness for a possible future pandemic. These include:

- Work to progress new legislation, which is required to create a new legal gateway for the sharing of health datasets. This was one of the central constraints in the Covid-19 pandemic and means that Northern Ireland is much less well placed than England, Wales and Scotland to produce the required analysis in the event of a future pandemic.
- Work to progress new data infrastructure and data sharing initiatives, which will provide a service able to respond to an emerging crisis with pace and agility. This will include the development of further linked data assets which enable day-to-day policy insights and provide a tool in response to an emergency.
- Further developments to our estimates of excess deaths are required in concert with other statistical bodies across the UK. Work is also needed to specify analytical outputs which could be 'hibernated' as described in the recommendation, in collaboration with the Cabinet Office.
- Dependent on resourcing, NISRA's Survey Transformation Strategy proposes to move more of our surveys online, to strengthen our existing data collections and to stand up a new, flexible survey which could be used in event of a future pandemic to understand developments in the society and economy of NI.

Recommendation 6: A regular UK-wide pandemic response exercise

The UK government and devolved administrations should together hold a UK-wide pandemic response exercise at least every three years. The exercise should:

- test the UK-wide, cross-government, national and local response to a pandemic at all stages, from the initial outbreak to multiple waves over a number of years;
- include a broad range of those involved in pandemic preparedness and response and;
- consider how a broad range of vulnerable people will be helped in the event of a pandemic.

Response

We accept this recommendation and recognise the need for exercising and learning. As such, work has commenced on preparation for a Tier 1 Exercise (Exercise PEGASUS) on a 4-Nation basis. Northern Ireland participation is led by the DoH, with input from TEO and other NI departments as required.

Exercise PEGASUS will be held in Autumn 2025 with the high-level aim to “assess significant elements of our preparedness, capabilities, and response arrangements in the context of a pandemic arising from a novel infectious disease.”

DoH, as the Lead Government Department, will provide oversight and TEO will lead on the cross-government input for NI. Planning for this exercise will include the identification and assessment of any sub-objectives that NI may seek to achieve as part of the overall exercise.

These exercises will require coordination across the 4-Nations and will include relevant devolved governments, voluntary and community organisations and Blue Light organisations.

Active consideration is being given to departments providing input to planning and participation in this exercise.

We recognise that these exercises must consider how a broad range of vulnerable people will be impacted in the event of a pandemic.

A learning and development strategic approach was endorsed by CCG(NI) at its November 2022 meeting. This builds on the long-standing concept of training and exercising of plans and operational responses but adds a new dynamic of individual and system-wide learning and development with the aim of enhancing competencies and moving eventually to accreditation.

The Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced the need for cross-government pandemic disease preparedness to be maintained, developed or initiated including but not limited to pandemic influenza. Therefore, a 4-Nations Pandemic Disease Capabilities Board (PDCB) was established in July 2021 and meets regularly.

While the DoH is at the forefront in planning for the management of the health effects of a pandemic in NI, building resilience and ensuring preparedness requires a coordinated approach across all NI departments and agencies, as amply demonstrated by the Covid-19 response which involved all departments.

A Cross-Departmental Pandemic Resilience Programme Board has been established to provide strategic direction and a coordination and governance function for the programme. The new Cross-Departmental Pandemic Resilience Programme Board led jointly by the DoH and TEO will deliver a programme of work to build resilience and better prepare NI for the challenges of the next pandemic.

This will mirror and feed into a similar 'UK Pandemic Disease Capabilities Board' chaired jointly by the DHSC and Cabinet Office, on which all UK government departments and devolved governments are represented (DoH and TEO attend for NI).

Recommendation 7: Publication of findings and lessons from civil emergency exercises

For all civil emergency exercises, the governments of the UK, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should each (unless there are reasons of national security for not doing so):

- publish an exercise report summarising the findings, lessons and recommendations, within three months of the conclusion of the exercise;
- publish an action plan setting out the specific steps that will be taken in response to the report's findings, and by which entity, within six months of the conclusion of the exercise; and
- keep exercise reports, action plans, and emergency plans and guidance from across the UK in a single, UK-wide online archive, accessible to all involved in emergency preparedness, resilience and response.

Response

We recognise the importance of learning and sharing lessons from civil emergency exercises and acknowledge that further work is required to embed the culture of publishing and learning from exercise reports. We therefore, accept this recommendation.

The Resilience Direct platform is accessible by civil contingencies practitioners and therefore provides an ideal forum for publishing exercise reports with those involved in emergency preparedness, resilience and response. Currently, Resilience Direct is utilised as a repository for post exercise reports with the emergency services also utilising the Joint Organisational Learning methodology for raising and accessing key post incident or exercise learning.

Northern Ireland is involved in discussions on exercising and lessons management through the Cross-government and Devolved Governments' Training and Exercising Advisory Board, which provides access to developments within the UK Government's National Exercising Programme, Crisis Management Excellence Programme and the development of the UK Resilience Academy and enables us to both benefit from and contribute to discussions.

We also recognise that there is more to do regarding the creation of a central, UK-wide online repository of information relating to civil emergency exercises. We understand that the Cabinet Office is currently considering solutions to address this and to facilitate openness and a shared process for the management of lessons.

"Lessons Management Best Practice Guidance", developed by the Cabinet Office and published in 2024, sets out the need for a report summarising the findings, lessons and recommendations within three months of the conclusion of an exercise or incident. We recognise the importance of identifying and implementing post exercise learning and have incorporated the recent Cabinet Office guidance on exercising and lessons management into the NI Civil Contingencies Learning and Development Strategy. The provision of a planning and exercising course reflects the importance of good fundamental planning skills which include training and exercising within the planning cycle.

Consideration will be given as to whether recommendations arising from certain exercises will be brought to CCG(NI) for broader consideration of cross-cutting lessons, themes or inter-dependencies.

Recommendation 8: Published reports on whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience

The governments of the UK, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should each produce and publish reports to their respective legislatures at least every three years on whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience. The reports should include as a minimum:

- the risks that each government has identified are likely to result in whole-system civil emergencies;
- the recommendations that have been made to each government to mitigate those risks, and whether these recommendations have been accepted or rejected;
- a cost–benefit analysis setting out the economic and social costs of accepting the risks as against taking action to mitigate the risks;
- who may be vulnerable to the risks and what steps are being taken to mitigate those risks;
- a plan setting out the timescales for implementing the recommendations that have been accepted; and
- an update on the progress that has been made on implementing previously accepted recommendations.

Response

We accept this recommendation and will take steps to establish a process for producing and publishing reports on whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience to the Northern Ireland Assembly at least every three years.

Working with departments and operational partners, TEO will submit a proposal to the Executive for consideration and agreement in summer 2025 that will set out how and when reports on whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience should be provided to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Recommendation 9: Regular Use of Red Teams

The governments of the UK, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should each introduce the use of red teams in the Civil Service to scrutinise and challenge the principles, evidence, policies and advice relating to preparedness for and resilience to whole-system civil emergencies. The red teams should be brought in from outside of government and the Civil Service.

Response

We recognise the importance of assured preparations that have been subject to robust scrutiny and assessment to deliver effective responses to and recovery from civil emergencies. We accept the principle of this recommendation both in terms of utilising red team methodology but also in the pursuit of complementary assurance activities such as challenge panels and peer reviews which we have used recently in the development of the NI Civil Contingencies Risk Register and a review of our winter preparedness arrangements.

In pursuit of this recommendation, we will engage with Cabinet Office and the Crisis Management Excellence Programme to enhance our proficiency in red team methodologies in conjunction with a CCG(NI) commissioned sub-group tasked to report on methods of delivering assurance opportunities.

We have introduced a new learning and development approach. This has various levels of activity and is available to our departments and operational colleagues. Implementation of our learning and development strategy includes the provision of seven introductory level courses open to all civil contingencies partners. These include planning and exercising, operations centres, decision logging and the three coordination levels – Operational, Tactical and Strategic.

Recommendation 10: A UK-wide independent statutory body for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience

The UK government should, in consultation with the devolved administrations, create a statutory independent body for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience.

The new body should be given responsibility for:

- providing independent, strategic advice to the UK government and devolved administrations on their planning for, preparedness for and building resilience to whole-system civil emergencies;
- consulting with the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector at a national and local level and directors of public health on the protection of vulnerable people in whole-system civil emergencies;
- assessing the state of planning for, preparedness for and resilience to whole-system civil emergencies across the UK; and
- making recommendations on the capacity and capabilities that will be required to prepare for and build resilience to whole-system civil emergencies.

As an interim measure, the new body should be established on a non-statutory basis within 12 months of this Report, so that it may begin its work in advance of legislation being passed.

Response

The Executive remains committed to learning lessons from the pandemic and applying them actively, particularly in the areas of emergency preparedness and resilience.

The Executive sees the potential value and benefits that an independent approach to discharging these functions could bring to the region.

As indicated throughout the response to the Module 1 recommendations, we are keen not only to learn the lessons of the pandemic, but to implement those lessons in real time particularly in terms of our work on civil emergency preparedness and resilience.

Embedding robust systems of assurance of our collective planning processes and systems is fundamental as we move forward over the coming months. Assurance in this sense though cannot be seen as a one-off activity and must instead be read as the aggregate of all that we do in this space. In practice, that speaks to the actions that we are already undertaking with regards to recommendations 3 (on risk assessments) and 5 (on data sharing), together with those planned on recommendations 7 (on publishing the findings of emergency exercises), 8 (with regards to our commitment to report to the Northern Ireland Assembly on a regular basis on our levels of preparedness and resilience) and 9 (with regards to red teams).

An independent approach to discharging those functions which have been described at recommendation 10 could supplement this work by providing further assurance through an independent perspective and challenge function.

We acknowledge that the UK government has been tasked with leading work on this recommendation, in consultation with the Executive and the other devolved governments. That work has commenced, and we are committed to working collaboratively with other nations to explore all available options on how the key tenets of this recommendation can most effectively be delivered.

We are, however, conscious of the constrained position we find ourselves in with regards to public finances here. Establishing a cross UK body, such as what has been described in this recommendation, is not without precedent – indeed, the Executive are co-sponsors to several such bodies. We are therefore mindful that it is a significant undertaking and commitment.

In that sense, achieving value for the public purse will necessarily be a key consideration. A significant investment of public resources will be required as we seek to take forward the other actions which have been articulated in this response, and at times we may need to consider which of these actions and activities are most impactful as we prepare for the future emergencies and crises which will inevitably come our way.

Over the coming weeks, we will therefore wish to critically assess with our counterparts in the other Nations whether the benefits which have so clearly been articulated in this recommendation can be delivered effectively and efficiently by any other means.

Finally, we are also conscious of the Inquiry's recommendation to simplify the structures for whole system civil emergency and preparedness, and we are keen to assure ourselves that establishing a new statutory body would not run counter to the ethos of a more streamlined system.

These are fundamental issues which we need to understand and address collectively, to ensure that we arrive at the right solution for all that we serve.

Closing

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been considerable work to transform the Civil Contingencies arrangements in NI resulting in the new “Building Resilience Together” Framework, a NI Civil Contingencies Risk Register and a dedicated Learning and Development Strategy. This work continues and we accept that more is required to ensure adequate planning for whole-system civil emergencies on behalf of our citizens.

The current Framework replaced and consolidated a number of former protocols and guidance documents that were in operation during the Module 1 period. The Framework has secured the confidence of and is owned across all agencies and partners in NI and remains a live document with further updates in development. NI's civil contingencies planning operates in a very different environment through the Executive to local government and ultimately, the communities themselves.

The proposed approaches outlined within this response set us on a path that will further strengthen and reinforce our Civil Contingencies structures and support our community of planners, responders and other key stakeholders.

We continue this transformation journey and must acknowledge that not only future crisis may influence our thinking or challenge our current plans, but also that reporting from the further modules of the Inquiry means we must remain adaptable and agile during this process.

Next Steps

Recommendation 1: A simplified structure for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience			
Action	By When	Progress	Status
Strengthen Ministerial oversight of Civil Contingencies policy.	Spring 2025	Reporting will commence to the NI Executive for consideration following each CCG(NI) meeting, which occur every March, June and November. The Executive will consider this issue following the March 2025 CCG(NI) meeting.	
Commission a review of the civil contingencies landscape in NI.	Post March 2025	The Executive will consider this issue following the March 2025 CCG(NI) meeting.	
Recommendation 2 - Cabinet Office leadership for whole-system civil emergencies in the UK			
Action	By When	Progress	Status
Planning for risks with a catastrophic potential as identified in the Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Risk Register on a cross-departmental basis.	Post March 2025	The exercise to explore planning for risks with a catastrophic potential as identified in the Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Risk Register on a cross-departmental basis will commence after consideration by CCG(NI) in March 2025.	
Enhanced coordination role for TEO on the planning and mitigation of broader societal impacts of while-system civil emergencies.	Within 6 months	TEO will explore taking on an enhanced coordination role on the planning and mitigation of broader societal impacts.	
Recommendation 3 - A better approach to risk assessment			
Action	By When	Progress	Status
Launch Stage 4 of the review to map additional risk scenarios and explore the scale of impacts from worst- to least-case scenarios to enable better prioritisation.	March 2025	Work is progressing to ensure Stage 4 of the review to map additional risk scenarios and explore the scale of impacts from worst- to least-case scenarios to enable better prioritisation will commence in March 2025.	

Produce public facing material to assist individuals and communities understand risks and prepare and respond to crises.	Within 12 months	Advice will issue to CCG(NI) for approval before being submitted to the Executive via the NICS Board.	
Recommendation 4 - A UK-wide whole-system civil emergency strategy			
Action	By When	Progress	Status
Work with Cabinet Office, Scotland and Wales to develop Concepts of Operations (CONOPS) for each identified whole system scenario on the basis of assessment against the Reasonable Worst-Case Scenario (RWCS).	Within 12 months	CONOPS are being developed in priority order, with the pandemic CONOPS already drafted.	
Review the NI Memorandum of Understanding with Cabinet Office regarding the Civil Contingencies Act.	Within 12 months	Timetable for starting this work is to be determined.	
Recommendation 5 - Data and research for future pandemics			
Action	By When	Progress	Status
Legislation to create a new legal gateway for the sharing of health datasets.	TBC	Work to progress new legislation, which is required to create a new legal gateway for the sharing of health datasets. This was one of the central constraints in the Covid-19 pandemic and means that Northern Ireland is much less well placed than England, Wales and Scotland to produce the required analysis in the event of a future pandemic.	
New data infrastructure and data sharing initiatives.	TBC	Work to progress new data infrastructure and data sharing initiatives, which will provide a service able to respond to an emerging crisis with pace and agility. This will include the development of further linked data assets which enable day-to-day policy insights and provide a tool in response to an emergency.	

Further developments to estimates of excess deaths.	TBC	Further developments to our estimates of excess deaths are required in concert with other statistical bodies across the UK. Work is also needed to specify analytical outputs which could be 'hibernated' as described in the recommendation, in collaboration with the Cabinet Office.	
More online surveys in line with NISRA's Survey Transformation Strategy.	TBC – resource dependent		
Recommendation 6 - A regular UK-wide pandemic response exercise			
Action	By When	Progress	Status
Exercise PEGASUS.	Autumn 2025	Exercise PEGASUS will be held in Autumn 2025 with the high-level aim to “assess significant elements of our preparedness, capabilities, and response arrangements in the context of a pandemic arising from a novel infectious disease.”	
Programme of work to build resilience and better prepare NI for the challenges of the next pandemic.	TBC	The new Cross-Departmental Pandemic Resilience Programme Board led jointly by the DoH and TEO will deliver a programme of work to build resilience and better prepare NI for the challenges of the next pandemic.	
Recommendation 7 - Publication of findings and lessons from civil emergency exercises			
Action	By When	Progress	Status
Potential review by CCG(NI) of recommendations arising from certain exercises for broader consideration of cross-cutting lessons, themes or inter-dependencies.	Post March 2025	Consideration will be given as to whether recommendations arising from certain exercises will be brought to CCG(NI) for broader consideration of cross-cutting lessons, themes or inter-dependencies.	
Use of Resilience Direct is utilised as a repository for post exercise reports.	Post March 2025	Currently Resilience Direct is utilised as a repository for post exercise reports with the emergency services also utilising the Joint Organisational Learning methodology for raising and accessing key post incident or exercise learning.	

Recommendation 8 - Published reports on whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience			
Action	By When	Progress	Status
Proposal to the Executive on regular reporting on civil contingencies to the Assembly.	Summer 2025	Working with departments and operational partners, TEO will submit a proposal to the Executive for consideration and agreement.	
Recommendation 9 - Regular Use of Red Teams			
Action	By When	Progress	Status
Enhance our proficiency in red team methodologies.	Ongoing	Engage with Cabinet Office and the Crisis Management Excellence Programme to enhance our proficiency in red team methodologies.	
Commission a report on methods of delivering assurance opportunities.	Post March 2025	CCG(NI) will commission a sub-group to report on methods of delivering assurance opportunities.	
Recommendation 10 - A UK-wide independent statutory body for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience			
Action	By When	Progress	Status
Work collaboratively with other nations to explore all available options on how the key tenets of this recommendation can most effectively be delivered.	Ongoing	Commenced.	