

Paymaster General Speech on National Resilience Strategy delivered on 13 July 2021

Thank you to RUSI for inviting me here today, to those joining online and to the physical audience – who may have had to swim to get here this morning.

I am anticipating questions about what we have got wrong... why we weren't better prepared, how could we not have seen something so obvious, got our methodology so wrong, failed to invest in something so critical.

You think I'm talking about the pandemic, but I could be talking about any one of many events that collectively we didn't see coming and took us by storm.

We have been through so much over the last few years and in particular the last 18 months.

As we move to management and recovery in the pandemic we are at a pivotal moment for the UK. A moment that is a real opportunity for reflection, for growth; and, for change.

This has been immensely challenging for everyone. COVID-19 has forced us to adapt our lives, make sacrifices, and work rapidly around complex challenges both at home and at work.

We have seen our resilience tested: as a country, as businesses, as communities, and as individuals. It has challenged us to build resilience into the everyday, not just to leave it to an afterthought. It has stamped on the fault lines of disparity. We have seen the way in which emergencies can impact the most vulnerable in society to a disproportionate degree.

Our resilience agenda must consider everyone and we must see resilience as part of our wider levelling up ambition. And so, as we reflect, we ask:

Is there more that we can do?

Is there more we can do to collaborate?

Is there more we can do to communicate?

Is there more we can do to create contingencies?

How can we be better at situational awareness and fluency?

Can we be better prepared?

How do we become the most resilient nation?

What is resilience?

Let us be clear at the outset what we mean by resilience.

At the simplest level, it means our ability to prevent, deal with and recover from crisis. But in the modern world, that means much more than being strong, decisive and organised when things go wrong. It means understanding and communicating a complex and interconnected risk landscape. It means proper preparedness, from government plans, to business continuity, to individuals and communities taking responsibility. It means being in control during moments of crisis, which allows us to seize opportunities, learn lessons and come back stronger. And doing all of that in a world where risks are growing in impact, and the networks of networks which shape our lives are increasing our vulnerability.

Bolstering UK resilience is a key priority for the Prime Minister and this Government, to protect the people of the UK and our democracy. Resilience, at all levels of society, is more important than ever.

The Prime Minister envisions that by 2030, “we will have built back better from COVID-19, with a strong economic recovery and greater national resilience to threats and hazards in the physical and digital worlds”.

So now is our opportunity to reform our approach, to harness our strengths and address our weaknesses, to look internationally to identify and adopt the very best practice, and, at home, to bring the national and local levels together in one, united mission: building resilience, energising and empowering everyone who can make a contribution, with the local tier at the heart of this.

Resilience cannot be a niche activity, only considered in times of crisis. Resilience must instead be built into investment decisions, into management choices, and into the way our society is organised.

Resilience doctrine: lessons and achievements

Our approach to Resilience has come a long way in the past two decades.

We have developed world-class capabilities and we are recognised leaders in many aspects.

In the early 2000s, a series of emergencies, in the UK and overseas, led us to recognise a need for greater coordination in times of emergency.

In truth, the dismantling of Cold War civil defence structures in the early 1990s had left a gap and meant a moment of change was required.

But it took the lessons learned from severe floods, fuel price protests, and the outbreak of foot and mouth disease, to force us to review our approach to the management of risk and emergencies, and so the concept of Resilience was born.

We recognised at that time the importance of changes that still stand us in

good stead today: emergency response requires leadership and better coordination between the centre of government and the front line; it needs evidenced and coordinated national risk assessments and situational awareness; and we need clearly defined responsibilities and collaboration structures for our responders.

The Civil Contingencies Secretariat was established exactly 20 years ago this month to address this and a huge increase in effort and sophistication of approach was delivered across government departments, devolved administrations and local responders.

Since that time, our work has gone from strength to strength. From establishing the Civil Contingencies Act in 2004, laying out the duties and responsibilities of our emergency responders and creating local resilience forums to protect communities.

To producing our UK-wide risk tools: the National Security Risk Assessment, and its public facing National Risk Register. Throughout this period, resilience has always been a collaboration between the four nations, local government, civil society, the private sector, the public, and international partners.

And based on our shared success, the UK now has the firm foundations of an internationally-renowned approach. All the same, the arrangements that we have in place today are far from perfect.

Each emergency is a learning experience, offering us an opportunity to analyse what we do well, and where we can make improvements. And although this system has on the whole served us well, the pandemic has been the single greatest challenge to our country in peacetime, and the lessons we must learn from it are all the more important, given the grievous number of fellow citizens who have lost their lives.

Just as we faced a moment of reflection and change two decades ago, we now face another such moment, and one we must seize without delay.

The challenge ahead

Although Covid is the worst pandemic this century, the 1918 Flu infected a third of the world's population and MERS has a death rate of around 30%. We develop better medicine, better research, better response systems and better understanding to face this type of challenge.

But as our lives become more interconnected, and the way we eat, travel, live and work changes, we need to recognise that threats and hazards will continue to be a feature of our lives, and we need to be prepared to take them on at any time.

So it would clearly be a mistake to think now that we only need to prepare to face another pandemic, but to face it better.

Pandemics are just one of the potentially catastrophic risks we face: major terrorist attacks, widespread electricity failure, wide-area flooding, severe

space weather could all be incredibly disruptive, we track and prepare for over a hundred major national risks. We must not simply prepare to fight the last battle again. We don't know exactly what risk will challenge us next. What we do know is that the UK faces a broad set of malicious and non-malicious risks. Some of these are well understood, discrete and we have well-established risk management plans in place, whether that be flooding, public disorder or a commercial failure.

But as we look out to a world facing climate change and an era of compound economic, environmental, geopolitical and technological risks, we can no longer take comfort that the systems and approaches that have served us reasonably well in the past, will keep us safe in the future.

The risks we face are changing, and the way we live our lives makes us more vulnerable to their potentially large-scale impacts.

In the past 18 months, we have become more reliant on technology than ever before – whether that be for e-commerce, our education, our work or our social lives.

These changes in the way we interact with technology will outlive the pandemic.

Rapid technological developments can be hugely beneficial in the modern, digital world.

But we must also recognise how our increased reliance leaves us more vulnerable to attacks or failures in those global systems.

Technology is expanding and changing the risk landscape.

As an example, as our dependence on space capabilities grows, we need to consider the disruptive potential of solar storms or space weather upon digital systems.

Changes to our population must also be considered as we assess our vulnerability to risks.

Whether that is understanding the impacts of us living longer, or making certain that our commitments to tackling inequality ensure the most disruptive impacts of risks are not shouldered by the most dislocated and vulnerable groups in our society.

We need to face the far-reaching consequences of climate change, better mitigating its direct effects and how it exacerbates many existing risks. This is a truly existential risk for all of us.

And we must face the fact that in many cases our understanding of risk is still limited and continues to develop. For example, the international work on existential risk is relatively new.

We need to follow and understand the work of organisations like the Oxford Institute on the Future of Humanity, to develop our understanding of

questions about the prospects of humanity against AI, hostile acts and natural disasters at a scale not seen before.

Without a fundamental step change we simply won't be as safe in future as we have been in the past.

A resilience reset: starting now

As the risk landscape evolves, and our understanding grows, our approach must also change. This is not an overnight fix. It will be a long-term effort.

But we are taking action now to reset our approach, taking vital steps towards becoming the most resilient nation. This summer will see the launch of a new national Situation Centre, and extension of our COBR crisis management facilities.

Data, intelligence and expertise should underpin and inform decision making before, during and after emergencies. The Situation Centre will be a central hub, drawing together this information from across Government and those external partners, it will allow for the sharing of a common evidence base upon which timely and informed decisions can be made.

We cannot make decisions or build resilience in silos. We must work together and incorporate a wide range of perspectives.

We will increase our partnerships to enable us to do this well- especially before an event. After all it was not a lack of data that led to us being surprised by Coronavirus, Brexit or the financial crash. It was the inability to join the dots.

The establishment of the UK National Resilience Forum will be central to this, which will meet for the first time this week. Bringing together members of the UK Governments and the wider resilience community, including industry and the voluntary sector, to strengthen UK resilience.

This will be a visible symbol of the importance of partnership, and a means to engage on risk and whole-society preparedness.

We are also delivering a new national Emergency Alerting system, to quickly warn people of any danger-to-life emergencies in their local area, such as fires, flooding and terrorist attacks. The system will send a warning alert directly to personal mobile devices, providing clear guidance about how people can protect themselves.

As seen in other countries, such alerting systems have the potential to save lives. And the system should roll out across the UK this summer.

We will strengthen our resilience to evolving criminal threats, such as ransomware.

This will be supported by our new National Cyber Strategy.

We will work to strengthen relationships which may be challenging, for

example, continue to pursue a positive trade and investment relationship with China.

And we know that whatever the risks, we need to ensure the resilience of the infrastructure that is critical to the functioning of the UK, developing and progressing standards to ensure consistency and reduced disruption across our Critical National Infrastructure sectors.

As well as through the Telecommunications (Security) Bill, supported by the 5G supply chain diversification strategy. We are already locking in the learning from the pandemic, creating new and capable organisations such as the UK Health Security Agency and building agreements with global partners to deliver global health resilience.

Ambitions for the future

But these measures only mark the start of our ambition for resilience. This is a process of meaningful reform, and it must be backed by strategic vision.

That is why we made a commitment in the Integrated Review to publish a new National Resilience Strategy. And so, today we are publishing a Call for Evidence for that Strategy.

We need a proper national debate about what effective resilience should mean for us all, and that debate starts here.

We have to think big.

The new Strategy will centre around three key areas that will transform our approach and help us to achieve this vision.

And only one of these themes directly relates to the role of Government.

This is because resilience is a debate we all need to have and it is about the role we all play, not simply a question of which Government Minister takes responsibility when the proverbial hits the fan.

The first of the three themes is to better understanding the risks we face.

We must strengthen our analytical, policy, and operational tools and ensure that they are more proactive in their approach to risk.

We need to understand the risks that we are up against, how they might evolve and how they may affect us – this is the foundation of our resilience.

The UK is already a world-leader in national-level risk assessments, through the Strategic Risk assessment and the Risk register, but we must keep pace as the world around us evolves to maintain our position.

We are reviewing the methodology underpinning the National Security Risk Assessment, again – external partners are helping us ensure this reflects lessons from the pandemic and other recent events, and driving collaboration across government, academia, industry and the local level to ensure we stay

ahead.

Second, we must invest in preparation.

After a crisis we pay attention – but before the crisis is when we can make the biggest difference. We cannot put all our efforts into fighting fires, but need to balance preventing the fire starting in the first place and early detection, and practicing our fire drills, with ensuring we know how we will rebuild should the flames manage to break out and get a hold.

In other words, we must increase our efforts across the whole risk life cycle, investing in preparation, prevention, mitigation and recovery from risks, and ensuring our capabilities are able to adapt to every situation and circumstance.

To build resilience, we will also keep pace with changing threats, by putting more resources into the right parts of the system, to maximise our overall resilience.

Recently, the Government has provided some 'exceptional' funding to LRFs for crises, and has launched an LRF funding pilot for this financial year. They are the frontline.

Meanwhile, some businesses invest significantly in the resilience of their organisation, but others do not yet. Greater commitment upfront in preparing for risks would help us in the longer term, not only to make financial savings, but also to reduce the impacts on people's lives.

We need to build adaptable capabilities that allow us to manage the widest possible range of risks.

Third, we need to energise and empower everyone who can make a contribution. This final principle is fundamental. You will already know of our ambition to stand up a civil defence force.

And that we already work with a large number of civil and voluntary society organisations to deliver in the wake of emergencies at home and overseas, indeed SIMEX takes place in my constituency each year.

But we want to go further.

And we have an opportunity to do so with so many people stepping up to help over the last 18 months. What motivated people to do what they did during the pandemic was their sense of community, their feelings of service and duty towards their neighbours.

They wanted to help.

They wanted to protect others.

They wanted to support the vaccine effort and assist the most vulnerable. They asked what they could do for their country.

Many had real skills, talent and ideas, which made a massive difference.

They are a huge asset when we are resetting our resilience strategy.

If we place them at the heart of it, we will emerge from the pandemic a stronger nation.

There is a massive opportunity to ensure we harness those new strengths in our communities – energised volunteers, streets that take care of their most vulnerable, and new civil society networks.

That is why I am making this appeal today.

We have an ambition for a whole-of-society approach to resilience, reviving our effort to inform and empower all of society, and support greater community responsibility and resilience; We all have a role in building a safer, and more prosperous UK.

Governments, individuals, communities and businesses across all four nations, along with international partners, can and must work together.

Together, and only together, will we increase the UK's resilience and become the most resilient country.

So what will our new strategy cover?

These principles support six thematic areas.

We need action on risk.

If we are to better account for how widespread, cross-cutting risks can impact each other, and be in a position to cope with the impacts of multiple risks happening concurrently we must make fundamental and radical improvements to our approach.

We need to think about enhancing our whole system to identify and manage risk, developing our overall capabilities to anticipate, prevent, respond and recover, and giving this work importance in our culture and through our investments.

To face our future we need to fundamentally broaden our approach, drawing on external expertise. We must achieve honesty and openness about risk, and a broad national understanding which we have not yet achieved.

That means better visibility of planning in government, and clear accountability right down to the local level. It means effective cooperation with the devolved administrations.

People rightly expect the best of government in the worst of times.

Public sector organisations must know their role, and be open to account for it.

We need action on partnership across society.

We must decide how we will shape and agree on the role of many businesses which are vital in delivering essential services to the public.

We have to make the most of our world-leading academic institutions.

Partnership with the voluntary sector is an incredible and under-utilised resource.

Public value is not the sole preserve of government.

All who benefit from stewarding public services must also bear an appropriate share of the resilience burden.

We need action on community resilience.

The pandemic has shown the importance of mobilising communities and individuals; when we come together we are stronger.

Every person has a role to play but that must be supported and encouraged.

And that means practical advice and effective communication on risk.

It means making it work so people can lead their lives with confidence.

If this doesn't work for our citizens, then it has no purpose.

And if we cannot mobilise the support of our citizens, we will fail.

We need action on investment.

As we have seen, the costs of emergencies can be immense.

The pandemic has cost the UK hundreds of billions of pounds, but all emergencies can create financial consequences which are often devastating.

We must make hard-nosed choices about what we can afford when it comes to resilience against so many competing public spending priorities but those choices must also reflect value and not all the costs should necessarily be carried by the taxpayer.

Failure to invest in preparedness in a way which reflects costs and benefits is a false economy.

We need action to build resilience in our global networks.

The resilience of the UK is not determined only by action within our national borders.

For example, viruses – whether computer-based or biological – do not respect geographic boundaries. In an increasingly interconnected world, we are part of a network of societies and economies with both shared and differing values.

In pursuit of resilience, we must continue to strengthen our international

relationships, bilaterally and multilaterally to tackle shared global challenges such as climate change.

Reference to security of the 'homeland' is an import which doesn't always make sense in the UK context, we are a group of globally interconnected islands reliant on our maritime and trading networks rather than a large continental hinterland.

Conclusion

So we are clear on the challenge.

This is the chance for people, organisations, experts and businesses to share their views on how we can increase our national resilience, and identify and address the barriers that stand in our way.

Collaboration and communication will be key features of a UK-wide effort to resilience building.

The National Resilience Strategy will be fundamental in bringing these efforts together, and ensuring we are all working to achieve our shared vision.

The journey has already begun.

And we need everyone to join us.

The Call for Evidence is a crucial step in shaping our future work.

And you can make a valuable contribution with your perspective.

So please do share your views and insights.

Only together can we make the UK the most resilient nation.

As we start we know, we will never prevent or foresee all risks, we will never reach a state where we can say we are completely safe.

We know this job will never end.

The risk we face won't sit still.

We will hand the baton over, for generations to come.

But that will not be the measure of our success.

That will be counted in secure growth and lives saved.

That is our mission: harnessing the collective strength of the UK population, to be the most resilient nation on earth.