



HM Government



COBR

Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms

The Amber Book:

Managing Crisis in Central Government

April 2025

Version 3

Revision history of The Amber Book: Managing Crisis in Central Government

The Central Government Concept of Operations for Emergency Response and Recovery was substantially refreshed and rebranded as ‘The Amber Book: Managing Crisis in Central Government’ (the Amber Book) in April 2025. Previous changes are summarised below.

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V.2	23 April 2013	Chapter 6 was revised	Civil Contingencies Secretariat
V.3	28 April 2025	Major changes to structure and content to reflect developments in UK government’s crisis management arrangements	COBR Unit



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Foreword

The Amber Book provides a national framework for crisis response, establishing clear roles and responsibilities and defining expectations across the lifecycle of a crisis. It acts as the foundational document for crisis management in UK government, informs risk-specific planning and is the basis for training staff.

Although the Amber Book represents a fundamental review and refresh of its predecessor – the government’s Concept of Operations for Emergency Response and Recovery – many key themes remain unchanged. The principle of subsidiarity continues to be the central tenet of the UK’s approach to crisis response, and local responders are the building block of response for an emergency of any scale. Increased central government involvement does not replace the local strategic perspective but seeks to consider issues and dimensions where value can be added by a broader or higher-level perspective.

The national response to a crisis will always prioritise the delivery of plans for the protection of life, continuity of activity, the restoration of disrupted services and, where required, the protection of UK interests overseas and support to British nationals. These objectives are invariant and are critical for keeping the people of the United Kingdom safe, secure and protected. Impacts are often disproportionately felt by vulnerable groups, and decision-making needs to give due consideration to the tailored support and communication required to support those most at need, drawing from the capabilities and expertise that the voluntary and community sector provides.

The document applies to UK government’s crisis management arrangements, and the devolved governments have their own respective structures to lead their response efforts for matters which are devolved. Nonetheless, the Amber Book provides a foundation for productive and collaborative working across the Four Nations. Crises do not respect borders or policy areas, and a partnership approach between all parts of the UK is essential to ensure we respond effectively to risks, wherever in the UK they occur.

This guidance represents the highest professional standards in crisis preparedness, management and response, and is reflective of the lessons of the past 10 years. The principles herein are vital to ensure interoperable and efficient collaboration and co-operation between departments, agencies, local responders and senior decision makers in demanding and dangerous times. The Amber Book sets out the guiding principles for roles, responsibilities and actions in crisis, but we recognise that such situations are inherently unpredictable and there may be moments where the guidance herein is not easily translatable to urgent action. In such moments one’s instinct should be towards the application of common sense.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Purpose and summary

- 1.1 The Amber Book is a framework for how UK central government collectively responds to crises that require co-ordinated action across government.¹ It sets out the principles, structures and arrangements that underpin and inform the response to crises from central government. It is issued and maintained by the Cabinet Office.
- 1.2 The Amber Book describes how the UK central government response will be organised, building on the role of the Lead Government Department (LGD), along with local arrangements which are the foundation of emergency response and which are underpinned by the statutory framework for civil protection set out in the Civil Contingencies Act (CCA) 2004.²
- 1.3 The Amber Book details key roles and responsibilities for response. This includes information on the relationship between the central, regional and local tiers within England, as well as covering the relationship between UK central government and the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- 1.4 It also defines the roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of ministers and senior officials, to provide clarity on their responsibilities and how they relate to the roles of other individuals and organisations within central government.
- 1.5 The Amber Book includes information on the activation and operation of the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR), the Cabinet Office-led mechanism for co-ordinating central government's acute response to crises.
- 1.6 Finally, the Amber Book articulates the process for standing down structures designed for the acute crisis response and transitioning to enduring response and/or recovery arrangements where required. This includes information on the Strategy and Operations Cabinet committee model used to respond to enduring crises.
- 1.7 Civil resilience in the UK is underpinned by the CCA 2004. The Amber Book complements the wider doctrinal framework underpinning the CCA 2004 and the use of the Amber Book should be informed by an understanding of other statutory and non-statutory guidance, including:
 - Civil Contingencies Act 2004: delivers a single legislative framework for civil protection in the UK ³
 - Emergency preparedness: statutory guidance on Part 1 of the Civil Contingencies Act, its associated regulations and non-statutory arrangements⁴

1 Central government includes government departments and their arm's length bodies: executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies, non-ministerial departments, and any other non-market bodies controlled and mainly financed by them.

2 Legislation.gov.uk, 'Civil Contingencies Act 2004', available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/36/contents

3 legislation.gov.uk 'Civil Contingencies Act 2004', available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/36/contents

4 Cabinet Office, 'Emergency Preparedness', 2013, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/emergency-preparedness

- **Emergency response and recovery:** guidance aimed at establishing good practice based on lessons identified from responding to and recovering from emergencies, both in the UK and internationally⁵
- **Orange Book: Management of risk – Principles and Concepts:** establishes the concept of risk management and provides a basic introduction to its concepts, development and implementation of risk management processes in government organisations – the Amber Book provides more detail on how civil contingencies and national security risks should be managed⁶
- **UK National Leadership for Risk Identification, Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recovery:** details the LGD model and which UK government department, devolved government(s) or other public body leads for different types of emergency, at different stages of the risk life cycle – it also includes guidance on how the LGD is expected to discharge its role⁷
- **Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Principles (JESIP) Joint Doctrine – The Interoperability Framework:** provides a framework of common models and principles, which will improve interoperability between responder organisations when responding to emergencies and major incidents⁸

Audience

- 1.8 The Amber Book is primarily aimed at UK government departments, public bodies and agencies. However, it will also be of use to other key stakeholders who interact with UK government's central crisis management arrangements (such as local responders and the devolved governments) to inform their own understanding of how their response structures interact with those of UK government.

Scope

- 1.9 The Amber Book focuses on the response stage of the Resilience Cycle (see **Figure 1**).⁹ The Resilience Cycle builds on the integrated emergency management cycle to include two additional phases: validation and assurance, and learning and improvement. The response stage encompasses near-term preparedness, crisis response, and the transition from acute response structures to enduring response and/or recovery arrangements.

5 Cabinet Office, 'Emergency Response and Recovery', 2013, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/emergency-response-and-recovery

6 HM Treasury, 'Orange Book', 2024, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/orange-book

7 Cabinet Office, 'UK National Leadership for Risk Identification, Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recovery', 2023, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/list-of-lead-government-departments-responsibilities-for-planning-response-and-recovery-from-emergencies

8 Joint Emergency Services Principles, 'Joint Doctrine: the interoperability framework', 2024, available at: www.jesip.org.uk/downloads/joint-doctrine-guide/

9 Appendix A includes more information on the Resilience Cycle.

1.10 The arrangements set out in the present document show how UK government responds to crises, and apply to all government departments, agencies and public bodies involved in the central government response. The arrangements only apply to local responders, devolved governments and other external stakeholders in relation to how they interact with UK government's crisis management structures and arrangements.

Figure 1: Resilience Cycle



- 1.11 The Amber Book is risk-agnostic, applying to all types of crises the UK faces, including those which occur in the UK or overseas, arise from malicious or non-malicious sources, or are rising-tide or rapid-onset events.
- 1.12 The arrangements and structures set out within the Amber Book are not prescriptive and will be adapted and scaled as necessary to manage the crisis at hand, recognising the inherent unpredictability of the situation.
- 1.13 The arrangements and structures in this framework do not alter local level arrangements or responsibilities of departments at a national level, but instead consider issues and dimensions where value can be added by a broader or higher-level strategic perspective and co-ordination.
- 1.14 Throughout the Amber Book there are links to external supplementary guidance. These provide further details on subjects that are relevant across government.

Structure

- 1.15 The Amber Book's chapters are as follows:
- **Chapter 2** defines the underpinning principles and models of response which govern crisis response in the UK.
 - **Chapter 3** sets out the primary governance structures within the Amber Book to co-ordinate the response to both acute and enduring crises, and support wider civil contingency activities.
 - **Chapter 4** sets out the core roles and responsibilities of an organisation's ministers and officials within the central government response.
 - **Chapter 5** details the phase prior to a crisis arising and central government's activities for maintaining oversight of its risk profile, and the steps taken to prepare for, prevent and mitigate crises.
 - **Chapter 6** outlines government's arrangements and structures when responding to an acute crisis.
 - **Chapter 7** outlines how UK government transitions from the response to an acute crisis to business-as-usual, enduring response, and/or recovery structures to oversee the next phase of crisis management.
 - **Chapter 8** details arrangements for maintaining the organisational resilience of COBR crisis management arrangements so that it is able to deliver as intended through uncertainty and disruption.

Management of the Amber Book

- 1.16 The COBR Unit in the Cabinet Office is responsible for the maintenance and dissemination of the document. A comprehensive review will occur every 5 years, as well as following novel crises or on receipt of new policy, guidance, or accepted inquiry recommendations which materially alter UK government's central crisis management arrangements. Administrative updates will be undertaken as needed to ensure the document remains up-to-date and reflects any machinery of government changes over this period.
- 1.17 This guidance is published online so that it can be easily updated to ensure good practice and lessons identified from crises and exercises are adequately reflected.

Chapter 2: **The UK's emergency management system**

Box 1: Chapter 2 summary

An emergency, as defined in the Civil Contingencies Act (2004), refers to an event or situation which causes or may cause serious damage to human welfare, the environment, or to the security of the UK. In the Amber Book, the terms emergency and crisis are used interchangeably.

Crises can emerge both over an extended period of time (rising tide) or with limited or no-notice (rapid onset), and government should have the flexible arrangements and capabilities required to respond to either.

Crises can also have acute and enduring phases which require different governance structures and types of responses to manage either the immediate or enduring impacts of the event.

Emergency response is founded on the principle of subsidiarity. However, the characteristics of an event – scale, complexity, external scrutiny, context – can determine the appropriate tier of the UK emergency management system which is needed to be activated to effectively manage the situation.

The 3 tiers of response include:

- Local response: emergencies which are handled by Category 1 and 2 responders, without the involvement of central government.
- LGD response: emergencies where national leadership, co-ordination or support is provided by the LGD through their own response structures and with the support of other departments and bodies.
- COBR response: where the collective UK central government response is co-ordinated or led from the centre by Cabinet Office through government's central crisis management arrangements.

Definitions

2.1 There are a range of events and situations which pose serious consequences and require special arrangements from the UK government's crisis management systems to deliver a response at any level. While many of these situations will share similar characteristics, it is important to define and distinguish between the different types of events which could require a crisis management response from central government.

2.2 An emergency in the UK is defined in the Civil Contingencies Act (CCA) 2004 as an event or situation which causes or may cause serious damage to:

- human welfare
- the environment
- the security of the UK as a result of war or terrorism¹⁰

¹⁰ More information on the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 is available at:
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/36/contents

- 2.3 This definition covers a wide range of scenarios including adverse weather, severe flooding, animal diseases, terrorist incidents, and the impact of a disruptive event on essential services and critical national infrastructure and systems. More information on the CCA 2004 can be found in Appendix B.
- 2.4 For the purposes of this guidance, the terms emergency and crisis are used interchangeably.
- 2.5 Not all situations which meet the legal definition of an emergency cause immediate harm. The definition of emergency includes events or situations with the potential to lead to serious damage, or those which have yet to occur. Even in that risk management phase a response from the UK central government crisis management system is still required.
- 2.6 Many crises have a phase of rising risk and imminence, with a lead time of days, weeks, or even months. We refer to these as rising tide crises. The pre-emergency phase presents a potential opportunity to reduce or mitigate risk, and refine preparedness through planning, exercising and capacity-building. Examples of a rising tide crisis would include:
- an outbreak of an emerging infectious disease in another country
 - increased signs of a risk of insolvency of supplier of critical services to the public sector
 - notification from the Met Office about severe weather expected to materialise in 7 days' time
- 2.7 While effective horizon scanning, risk monitoring and early warning systems allow for the prior identification of emerging risks and impending crises, even with the best risk management systems it is inevitable that some crises will occur with little or no notice. We refer to these as rapid onset crises. The existence of rapid onset crises puts a premium on general planning, capability building and flexible response systems. Possible examples of rapid onset crisis include:
- a cyber attack on the UK's health and social care system
 - accidents and systems failure, such as an accidental fire or explosion at an onshore fuel pipeline
- 2.8 The lifecycle of crises and the response can involve both acute and enduring phases and manifestations. The acute phase marks the onset of an event, characterised by accelerated demands on the system and inherent uncertainty. The acute phase necessitates urgent decision-making and action to regain control and respond to the immediate impacts. An example would be the immediate decision-making required to respond to a terrorist attack.
- 2.9 The enduring phase, on the other hand, occurs once the initial situation has stabilised and interim control has been established, but the issue continues to cause disruption and pose persistent negative impacts which erode the economy, community, way of life, and/or national security over a longer timeframe. While the response to the enduring phase of an event often requires robust government-led responses, the response tends to be developed through policy changes or business-as-usual mitigations rather than emergency civil contingency responses.
-

2.10 The COVID-19 pandemic exemplifies a crisis which had both acute and enduring phases. It persistently challenged the UK's welfare, functioning, and interests, while surges in infections and new variants demanded urgent collective decisions to regain control.

2.11 There are also crises characterised by recurring phases of emergence and stabilisation over an extended period of time. An event might have an initial acute manifestation, prior to stabilising once control has been restored through effective crisis management. However, a change in the situation, or the fact that root causes have not been addressed, can cause a destabilisation which requires moving back into an acute crisis response posture to respond to immediate impacts. Such an event is known as a rolling crisis.

Examples of rolling crises include instances of industrial action, where disruption in the sector will be determined by when strike action is taken in response to ongoing disputes.

2.12 Further information on the suitable response structures for the response to emergencies during their acute and enduring crises phases is detailed in [Chapter 3](#).

Box 2: Key definitions

- **Incident:** an event that can be, or could lead to, a disruption, loss, emergency or crisis.
- **Disruptive event:** occurrence or change that interrupts planned activities, operations or functions, whether anticipated or unanticipated.
- **Emergency/crisis:** an event or situation which causes or may cause serious damage to human welfare, the environment, or to the security of the UK.
- **Rising tide:** an event or situation with a lead time of days, weeks or even months.
- **Rapid onset:** an emergency which develops quickly and usually with immediate effects, thereby limiting the time available to consider response options.
- **Acute phase:** onset of an event, characterised by accelerated demands on the system and inherent uncertainty, necessitating urgent decision-making and action to regain control and respond to immediate impacts.
- **Enduring phase:** the stage where the situation has stabilised, but the issue continues to pose an enduring challenge that erodes the economy, community, way of life, and/or national security over a longer timeframe.
- **Rolling crisis:** a crisis characterised by recurring phases of emergence and stabilisation over an extended period of time.

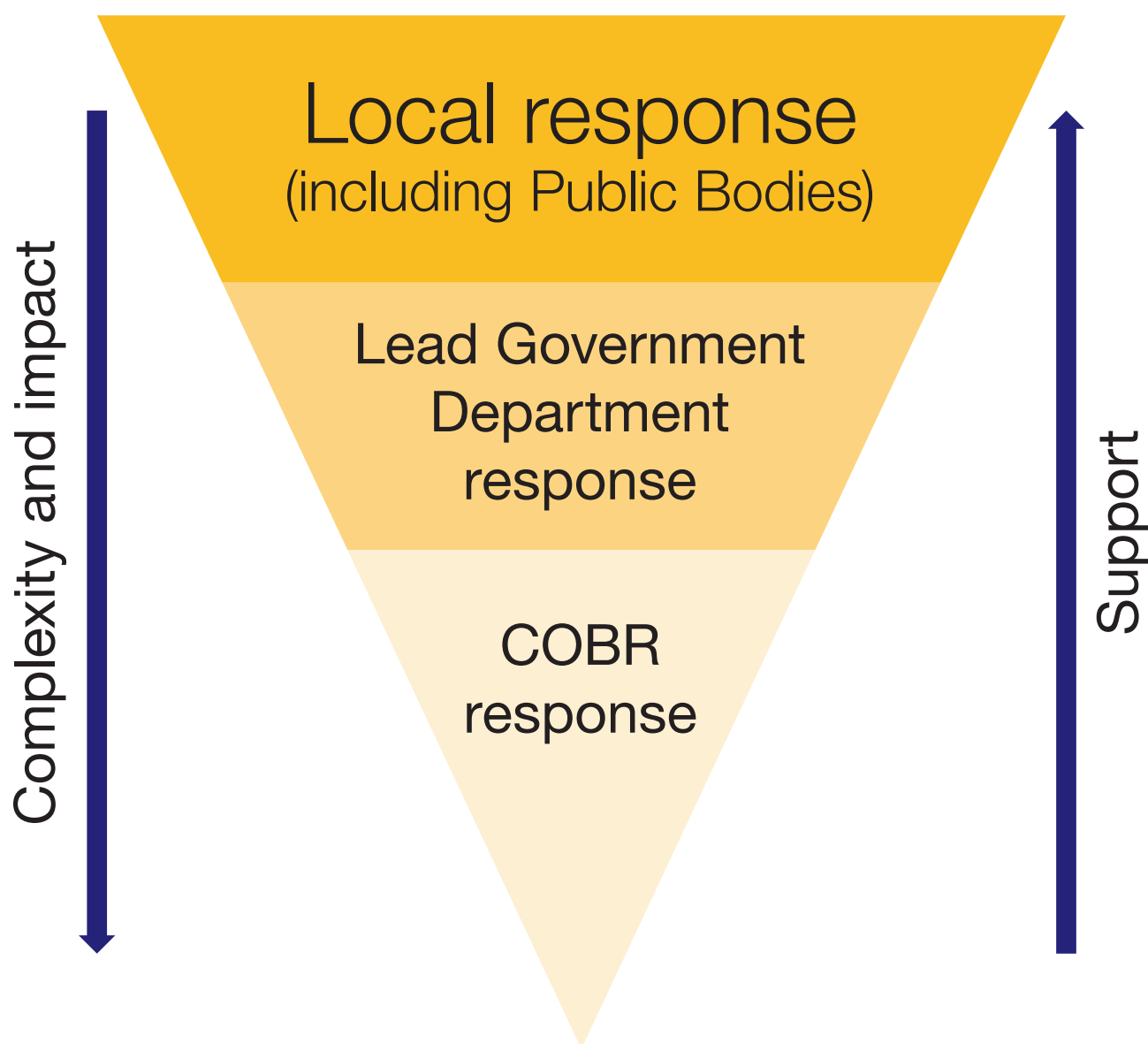
Emergency response principles

2.13 Emergency response arrangements should be flexible enough to be rapidly tailored to reflect the circumstances at the time, while still following a common set of recognised, justifiable and commonly understood underpinning principles. These principles guide the response effort at all levels – from local to national – to capture the core characteristics of effective emergency response. There are 9 guiding principles:

- **Anticipation:** in order to anticipate and manage the consequences of all kinds of emergencies, planners need to identify risks and develop an understanding of both the direct and indirect consequences in advance where possible.
- **Preparedness:** all individuals and organisations that might have to respond to emergencies should be properly prepared, including having clarity of roles and responsibilities, specific and generic plans, and rehearsing response arrangements periodically.
- **Continuity:** the response to emergencies should be grounded within organisations' existing functions and their familiar ways of working – although inevitably, actions will need to be carried out at greater speed, on a larger scale and in more testing circumstances during the response to an incident.
- **Subsidiarity:** decisions should be taken at the lowest appropriate level, with co-ordination at the highest necessary level. Local responders should be the building block of response for an emergency of any scale.
- **Direction:** clarity of purpose should be delivered through an awareness of the strategic aims and supporting objectives for the response. These should be agreed and understood by all involved in managing the response to an incident in order to effectively prioritise and focus the response.
- **Integration:** effective co-ordination should be exercised between and within organisations and local and national tiers of a response as well as timely access to appropriate guidance and appropriate support for the local or national level.
- **Communication:** good two-way communications are critical to an effective response. Reliable information must be passed correctly and without delay between those who need to know, including the public.
- **Co-operation:** positive engagement based on mutual trust and understanding will facilitate information-sharing and deliver effective solutions to arising issues.
- **Continuous improvement:** ensuring that the response is guided and informed by lessons identified to drive continual improvements in the response to crises.

Hierarchy of emergency response

Figure 2: Hierarchy of the UK Emergency Management System



- 2.14 The UK government adopts a bottom-up approach to managing emergencies based on the principle of subsidiarity. As the scale, complexity, context, and/or external scrutiny surrounding an event increases, there will be a requirement to activate the higher tiers of the UK emergency management system (See [Figure 2](#)). A tiered system of co-ordination ensures that the appropriate level of tactical and strategic direction is provided and the necessary resources and capabilities are being applied to manage the consequences of the event.

2.15 The characteristics of an event that will influence the appropriate level of response include:

- **Impacts:** the severity of the impact will be determined by a combination of the scope, scale and duration of harm of an event. As the severity of impacts increases, there might be a requirement for higher levels of strategic direction from central government and the deployment of national capabilities and government resources.

For example, severe and widespread flooding which causes significant damage to property, mass evacuation of individuals, and major damage to regional infrastructure would require additional capabilities from central government to support the response to the crisis.

- **Complexity:** the combination of an event's novelty, inherent uncertainty, scale, scope of its impacts, and duration of harm can affect the manageability of a situation through existing plans and capabilities. This may necessitate the activation of higher levels of the emergency response hierarchy to provide the required strategic direction, co-ordination and support for the response. Additionally, further complexity may arise from the cascading nature of impacts, leading to wider disruption across various sectors of society and necessitating a higher level of crisis response co-ordination.

For example, a novel virus outbreak with unknown transmission dynamics and health impacts. The novel and inherent uncertainty regarding the virus's behaviour, coupled with the scale (spread), scope (health, economic, societal) and duration of impacts, could require the activation of higher tiers of the emergency management system for the necessary strategic direction and support.

- **External scrutiny:** the handling of crises can generate significant interest and scrutiny from the public, media and parliamentarians in relation to how they are being handled. As the scale of an event increases, there may be increased expectation for national leadership of the response and, if the consequences are not being perceived to be handled appropriately, confidence in the government's ability to respond might be undermined. There may also be more of a need for central co-ordination of government's national communication strategy. The increased external scrutiny surrounding the handling of the event may require activation of the higher levels of the response hierarchy.
- **Context:** the context in which a crisis happens can influence the appropriate response level including whether it is the result of a malicious source, happens during a consequential time (such as a major event or general election), involves concurrent crises, or has international dimensions.

For example, evidence of a hostile state actor interfering with the democratic process (such as a general election) could escalate an issue immediately to the level which requires central government leadership of the issue.

Local response

2.16 Most major incidents and emergencies are handled at the local level by Category 1 and 2 responders – for example, many fires and industrial accidents. The structure for managing the local multi-agency response to emergencies is based on the CCA 2004. Part 1 of the CCA 2004 establishes a clear set of roles and responsibilities for those involved in emergency preparation and response at the local level. The Act divides local responders into two categories, imposing a different set of statutory duties on each:

- **Category 1 responders:** organisations at the core of emergency response. Category 1 responders are subject to the full set of legal civil protection duties. Examples include emergency services, local authorities and NHS bodies.
- **Category 2 responders:** co-operating bodies who, while less likely to be involved in the heart of planning work, will be heavily involved in incidents that affect their sector. Category 2 responders have a lesser set of duties – co-operating and sharing relevant information with other Category 1 and 2 responders. Examples include the Health & Safety Executive and utility and transport companies.

2.17 The act is supported by two sets of guidance: Emergency preparedness and Emergency response and recovery (ERR).^{11 12} Emergency preparedness deals with the pre-emergency (planning) phase. ERR describes the multi-agency framework for responding to, and recovering from, emergencies in the UK. A Government Liaison Officer (GLO), normally provided by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to the Strategic Co-ordinating Group, will be responsible for ensuring effective liaison between the UK central government and the local response. Through communications with MHCLG and their own risk monitoring, the LGD, Cabinet Office and MHCLG would assess what level of central government involvement was required and the need to activate higher levels of the emergency management hierarchy.

2.18 The ERR is complemented by the Joint Emergency Services Principles Interoperability Framework (JESIP), which provides a framework to support and enhance interoperability between emergency response organisations when responding to multi-agency incidents.¹³ While aimed at responder organisations, the common models and principles set out in the framework can also be interpreted and applied at a UK central government department level.

11 Cabinet Office, 'Emergency Preparedness', 2013, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/emergency-preparedness

12 Cabinet Office, 'Emergency Response and Recovery', 2013, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/emergency-response-and-recovery

13 Joint Emergency Services Principles, 'Joint Doctrine: the interoperability framework', 2024, available at: www.jesip.org.uk/downloads/joint-doctrine-guide/

Lead Government Department response

- 2.19 While most emergencies in the UK are managed at the local level (without central government involvement), because of scale or complexity, some emergencies need a degree of central government co-ordination or support, with the UK government, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive taking the lead where appropriate in accordance with devolution agreements.
- 2.20 The UK government uses a LGD model to cover all phases of emergency planning, response, recovery and risk assessment.¹⁴ Usually the LGD is the department with primary policy responsibility for the risk and expertise for the area impacted by the emergency scenario. For example, HM Treasury leads on financial services policy and is also the LGD for managing the risk of disruption to critical financial services.
- 2.21 The LGD may change between different phases of an emergency as the impacts change and different competencies are required. For example, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is the lead department for responding to significant flood events but MHCLG leads on flood recovery.
- 2.22 In response to an emergency, the LGD will be responsible for co-ordinating multiple departments, as well as other national and local bodies, to deal with the immediate consequences of an emergency. The LGD is responsible for identifying those other departments, ensuring that there are clear roles and responsibilities, and co-ordinating work across all phases of emergency management. LGDs are also likely to need to work closely with other responsible stakeholders, such as local responders or private sector operators. LGDs will usually do this through their agencies or the sectors they represent, or with support from MHCLG.
- 2.23 During an LGD-led response, their responsibilities will include:
- co-ordinating situational awareness, ensuring that situation reporting products are shared with Cabinet Office and other relevant departments and agencies
 - developing a situation-specific plan for handling the emergency, including defining strategic objectives and corresponding emergency response activities
 - co-ordinating consequence management and wider emergency response activities both within their department and across wider government departments, agencies and public bodies

14 Cabinet Office, The Roles of Lead Government Departments, Devolved governments and other Public Bodies, 2023,

- drawing upon and applying the relevant capabilities applicable to the emergency at hand and co-ordinating the support needed from other government departments and agencies
- co-ordinating and disseminating information for the public and the media at the national level
- acting as a focal point for communication between central government and the multi-agency, Regional and/or Strategic Co-ordinating Groups on the ground, involving the devolved governments as appropriate
- monitoring impacts on their sectors, as well as cascading effects or hidden interdependencies
- having plans and procedures that enable co-ordinated provision of timely and evidence-based scientific advice for decision-making, leveraging expertise from agencies, government departments, and external experts; ensuring quality assurance where feasible given timing constraints; and utilising diverse methodologies from a range of fields
- ensuring recovery issues are considered in planning and throughout the response, and that arrangements are in place to ensure a smooth transition to the recovery phase
- leading on briefing ministers, accounting to Parliament and leading in the submission of evidence to any subsequent public inquiry
- identifying lessons from the emergency, ensuring that these are disseminated across government

2.24 Where ownership sits in a department or an arm's length body (ALB) that has regulatory responsibilities for aspects of the risk cycle and for responders and other involved parties, the risk ownership role will not create conflict with other duties or impinge on regulatory independence. In instances where this means they are unable to fulfil all of the duties expected of an LGD when co-ordinating the response to an emergency, the Cabinet Office would work with other impacted departments to identify a more appropriate department to take on the role of LGD.

2.25 When an LGD is leading the response to an emergency, the Cabinet Office will monitor the situation through regular situation reports from the LGD and other sources. The Cabinet Office will also engage the LGD to ascertain whether there is any requirement for support to co-ordinate response activities. If either the LGD or the Cabinet Office assesses the need to escalate to a COBR response, the Cabinet Office will advise the Prime Minister's Office on whether to convene a COBR meeting. Should a decision be made to enter into central crisis management arrangements, the Cabinet Office will also facilitate the smooth transition into a COBR response (see below).

- 2.26 In rare cases, an emergency may occur where it is unclear which department should take the overall lead. This could happen in instances where the primary consequence of an emergency changes quickly, for example where initial fuel supply disruption led to public disorder. It is then the responsibility of the Cabinet Office to advise the Prime Minister's Office on which department is the most appropriate to take on the role of LGD. If this happens, the Cabinet Office will co-ordinate the central government response, leading where necessary, until an LGD is confirmed.
- 2.27 Further information on the role of LGDs and guidance on how they discharge their responsibilities can be found in other supporting guidance.¹⁵

COBR response

- 2.28 While most emergencies requiring central government involvement can be managed through the LGD's response structures, the most serious domestic and international crises may require a collective government response, where the UK central government response is co-ordinated from the centre by the Cabinet Office.
- 2.29 These events normally have significant multi-sector and/or national implications, generate external expectations for national leadership, and require sustained central co-ordination of the government's response. An example would be a significant overseas crisis which would require departments to focus on both the international element of the crisis – in terms of consular support to British nationals and processes for evacuating eligible persons – as well as the domestic implications of the reception and integration of those arriving from overseas.
- 2.30 Some events, due to the scale and complexity, can have catastrophic and cascading consequences which require leadership from the centre and a monumental response effort from the whole-of-government and wider society for an extended period of time to manage the situation effectively. These events are known as whole-of-system crises.
- 2.31 For whole-of-system crises, the Cabinet Office (in its role as the department which supports the Prime Minister and the effective running of government) will take on a leadership role for the response. For this category of risks, the Cabinet Office co-sponsors the planning phase with the LGD which owns the risk, with a particular focus on ensuring the right concept of operations is in place should a response be required.
- 2.32 The relevant governance structures that are established as part of the Amber Book are detailed in **Chapter 3**, with the corresponding roles and responsibilities of ministers and senior officials set out in **Chapter 4**.

15 Cabinet Office, 'UK National Leadership for Risk Identification, Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recovery', 2023, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/list-of-lead-government-departments-responsibilities-for-planning-response-and-recovery-from-emergencies

2.33 For the acute phase of a crisis, the government's central crisis management arrangements, Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR), would be activated. COBR would provide the primary organisational structure for agreeing the central government response, facilitating the rapid co-ordination of response activities and effective decision-making. A COBR response includes:¹⁶

- **COBR meetings:** Cabinet committee meetings that consider the response to crises, including plans for the protection of life, the continuity of everyday activity and the restoration of disrupted services. Also, where required, to consider the protection of UK interests overseas and support to British nationals (see [Chapter 3](#)).
- **COBR crisis management arrangements:** pre-defined, but flexible governance and response arrangements that lead, co-ordinate and control the collective government response to a crisis. It includes a regular rhythm of COBR meetings, the establishment of a COBR response structure to co-ordinate central government response activity and provide a secretariat function for COBR meetings, and a common set of supporting activities such as the development and maintenance of a Commonly Recognised Information Picture (see [Chapter 6](#)).
- **COBR Unit:** an organisational unit within the Cabinet Office which leads government preparedness and response to acute crises, including near-term horizon scanning, 24/7 watchkeeping and situational awareness.

2.34 For the enduring phase of whole-of-system crises, the Prime Minister would decide on new Cabinet committee structures to provide collective oversight of the policy and operational response, with the typical model to be used being a Strategy and Operations Cabinet committee supported by a central structure. Arrangements for responding to enduring crises are detailed in [Chapter 7](#).

¹⁶ See Appendix C for the default COBR response assumptions.

Response hierarchy thresholds

- 2.35** The level of central government involvement will be determined by the scale and nature of an emergency. The table below captures indicative thresholds for the characteristics of an emergency which would require triggering the different tiers of co-ordination.

Table 1: UK emergency management tier thresholds

Tier	Guiding thresholds	Functions of the response
Local response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consequences at a low level. • Local rather than national consequences. • Little or no disruption to everyday activities beyond the area directly affected. • Affecting few sectors or across sectors at a very low level. • Minimal reputational risk for the UK. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency response led by local responders. • Strategic Co-ordinating Groups provide the strategic direction for the multi-agency response. • MHCLG would deploy a GLO, with the LGD and Cabinet Office also monitoring the situation.
LGD response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consequences across a number of sectors, or a single sector severely impacted. • Impacts may be felt nationally. • Impacts cannot be managed at a local level without a degree of central government involvement and support. • Some disruption to everyday activities beyond the area directly affected. • Some reputational risk for the UK and media/public interest in government's handling of the response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency response led by the LGD. • Appropriate LGD command, control, and co-ordination (C3) structures established. • Cabinet Office would engage the LGD to monitor the situation and support the co-ordination of response activities if required.

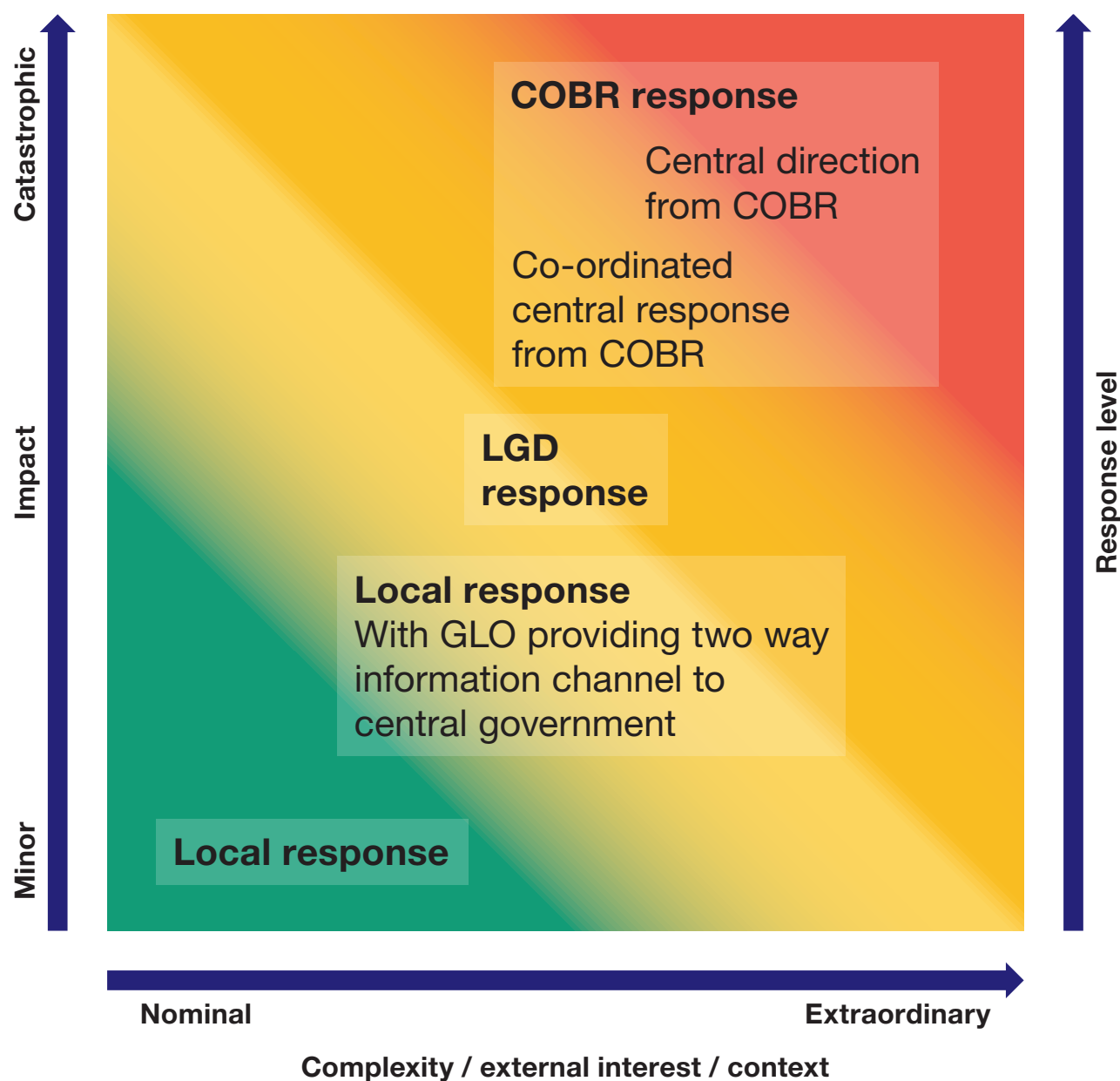
Tier	Guiding thresholds	Functions of the response
COBR response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consequences felt nationally. • Cascading consequences which have multi-sector and/or cross-border implications. • Significant disruption to a range of everyday activities beyond the area directly affected. • Surpasses the capacity or levers of the LGD to co-ordinate the central government response, requiring Cabinet Office crisis management expertise and collective decision-making from ministers and consideration by a Cabinet committee. • A rare and/or unique event, which differs substantially from existing planning assumptions. • Significant reputational risk for the UK, attracting high levels of parliamentary, media and public interest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cabinet Office co-ordinates the central government response. • COBR crisis management arrangements activated, with an appropriate C3 structure established (see Chapter 6).

Movement across tiers

2.36 The level of central government involvement may change over time (both up and down) as the demands and dynamics of the emergency changes. As the impact, complexity, context and external interest surrounding an event increases, higher levels of the emergency management hierarchy will be activated to provide the appropriate level of direction and co-ordination for the response (see [Figure 3](#)).

2.37 While certain emergencies will immediately meet the threshold for central government involvement – such as a terrorist attack – for others the situation may deteriorate over time meaning that the suitable response level also changes (for instance a growing instability and conflict in a foreign country which then necessitates a non-combatant evacuation to evacuate eligible persons).

Figure 3: Relationships between characteristics of an emergency and response level

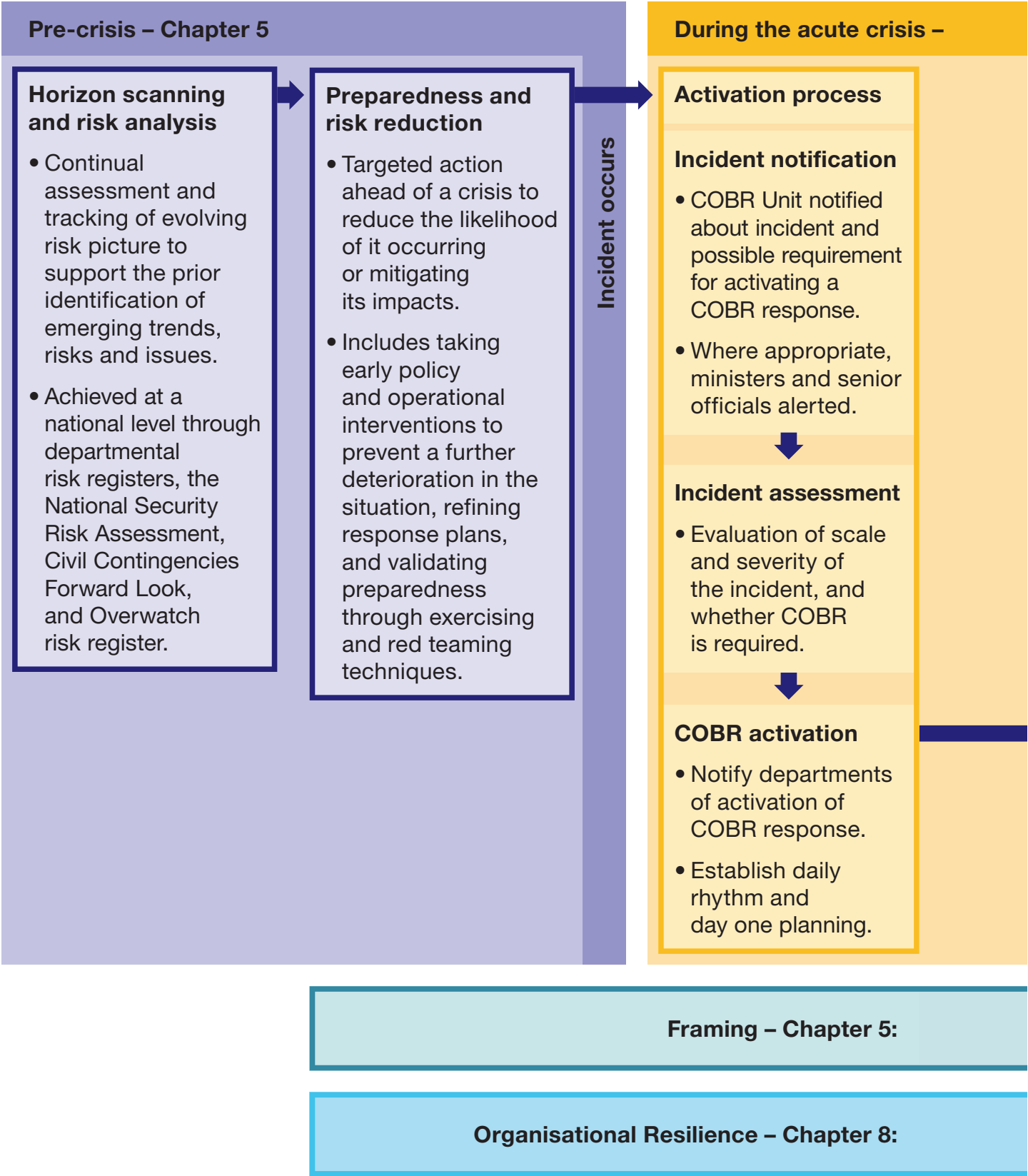


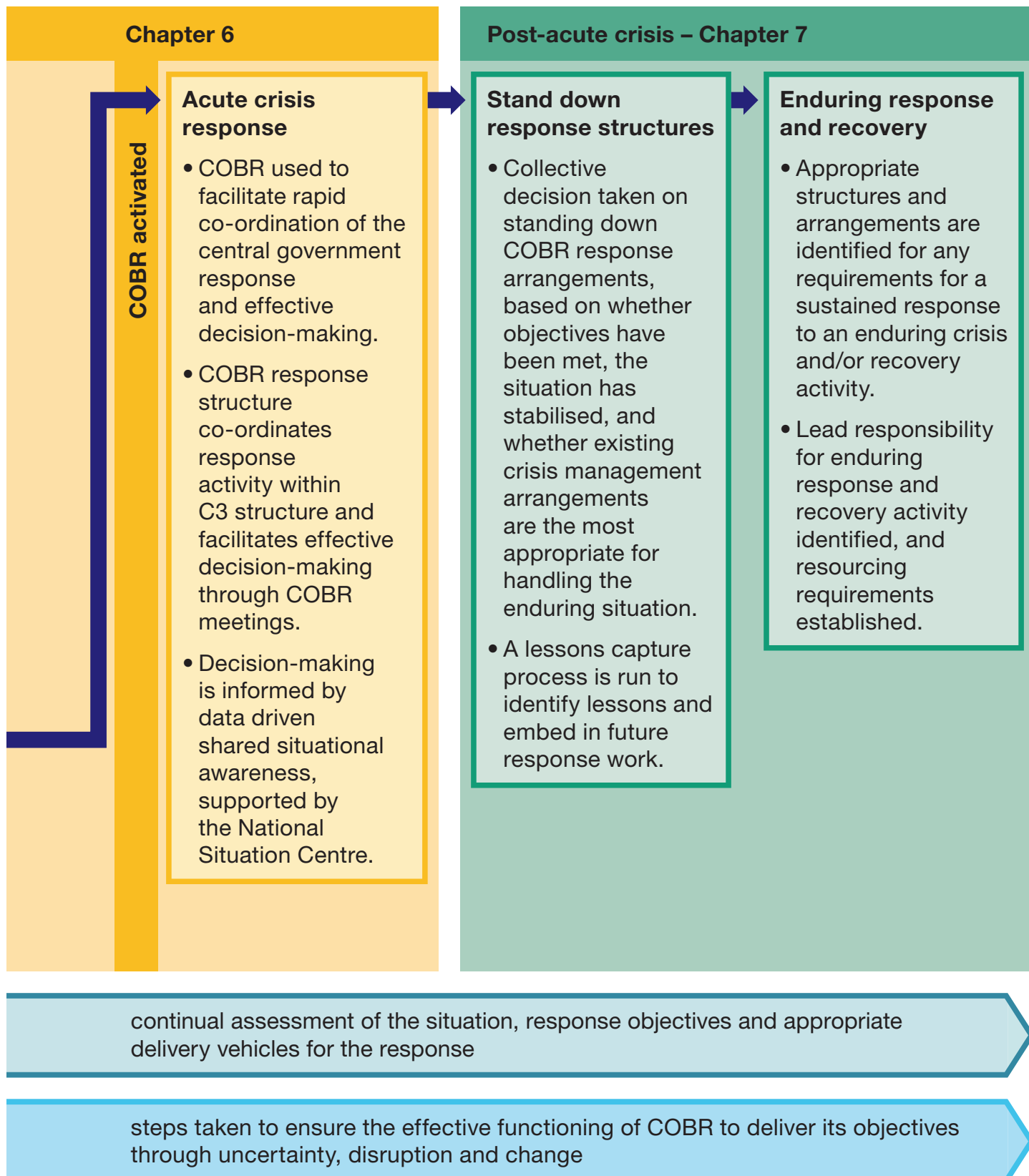
Crisis response sequence

- 2.38** The response to a crisis through the Amber Book includes a number of sequenced activities to ensure that the government is prepared for, able to respond to, and transition out from a crisis. The sequenced phases to a COBR co-ordinated crisis response are covered across Chapters 5 to 8 and are represented in [Figure 4](#).
- 2.39** Cabinet Office has also developed the TRAFFORD Model to act as an aide-memoire for a COBR-led crisis response.¹⁷

¹⁷ See Appendix D for more information on the TRAFFORD Model used by the Cabinet Office.

Figure 4: Crisis response stages flow diagram





Chapter 3: **Governance** playbook

Box 3: Chapter 3 summary

In the Amber Book, there are a number of governance structures which can be established to co-ordinate the central government response from the centre.

The structures are not mutually exclusive and can be used to reinforce one another or during different phases of the crisis.

The structures include:

- **COBR (ministerial/official):** Cabinet committee meetings used to collectively agree government's response to acute crises.
- **Strategy and Operations Cabinet committees:** Cabinet committees established to help co-ordinate the central government response to enduring crises over an extended period of time, by setting strategic direction and overseeing implementation.
- **Non-committee ministerial meetings:** which bring together ministers and officials to focus on the management of government's response to an issue and examine progress against expectations in detail, considering issues which do not require urgent collective agreement.
- **Senior officials:** official level meetings to co-ordinate departmental civil contingency activity.

- 3.1 This section details the selection of different governance structures that can be used to co-ordinate the collective UK central government response to crises.
- 3.2 Adaptable but predictable governance is essential for having the necessary agility to respond quickly to the inherent uncertainty associated with crises, while simultaneously enabling tested and well-understood structures to be employed.
- 3.3 The appropriate governance structures will be determined by the characteristics of a crisis – namely its scale, complexity and duration of impact – alongside the stage in the lifecycle of a crisis you are operating in. The Cabinet Office is responsible for establishing the appropriate Command, Control, and Co-ordination (C3) structure, obtaining the necessary and relevant ministerial and/or official approval. Governance arrangements will be kept under continuous review by the Cabinet Office to ensure their continued suitability for managing the situation at hand.
- 3.4 The governance structures below are not mutually exclusive and can be used concurrently to reinforce one another. Managing a crisis may require different governance structures at different points of the crisis. For example, Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) meetings may be used at the onset of a crisis to co-ordinate the government's acute response. Later, new Cabinet committee structures may be established to manage the longer-term policy response to the enduring phase. COBR meetings would remain available in the event of acute intensification during the enduring phase of a crisis.

Cabinet

- 3.5 Cabinet is the ultimate decision-making body of government. During the government's response to a crisis, Cabinet will normally have a role in considering the government's response to a national crisis at appropriate points, although decisions may have already been made at COBR or other appropriate forums.
- 3.6 During an acute or enduring crisis, Cabinet would usually be kept up to date at regular intervals with the Prime Minister, on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary, deciding when major decisions should be brought to Cabinet.

Cabinet committees

- 3.7 A whole-of-government response will likely require a framework for ministers to consider and reach cross-ministerial collective agreement in relation to the government's response to the event. The Prime Minister decides – with the advice of the Cabinet Secretary – the overall structure of the Cabinet committee system. The section below details two common Committee structures that can be used to provide collective oversight of central government's crisis management activities.

COBR (ministerial/official)

- 3.8 COBR meetings are the primary organisational structure for agreeing and co-ordinating the central government response to the acute phase of a crisis. When COBR convenes, its default strategic objectives are to:
- protect human life and, as far as possible, property and the environment
 - support the continuity of everyday activities and the restoration of disrupted services
 - uphold the rule of law and democratic process
 - protect UK interests overseas and provide support to British nationals
- 3.9 COBR facilitates urgent ministerial collective agreement, providing timely, co-ordinated advice to ministers and senior officials during crises. COBRs provide a focal point for the government's response and an authoritative source of advice for local responders.

- 3.10 Ministerial meetings of COBR are Cabinet committee meetings governed by the principle of collective responsibility, securing ministerial agreement binding on all members of the government in line with the principles as set out in the Cabinet Manual.¹⁸ This facilitates the quick and decisive decision-making required to manage the consequences of a crisis. COBR can meet at ministerial (M) and/or official (O) level depending on the issue under consideration. COBR (O) is normally convened before COBR (M) to identify issues that will need to be considered at COBR (M).
- 3.11 Typically, the chair for COBR (M) will be taken by the Prime Minister, a Cabinet Office minister, or the Secretary of State of the government department with lead responsibility for the particular issue being considered. The chair of COBR acts in a non-departmental capacity to co-ordinate the whole-of-government response independently of departmental priorities, ensuring the views of all attending ministers are considered. The chair, on the advice of the secretariat and, where relevant, in consultation with the Prime Minister's Office, will determine the agenda, attendance and actions arising from COBR. COBR (O) would typically be chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, National Security Adviser (or Deputy National Security Adviser), Crisis Senior Responsible Owner, or the COBR Response Director.
- 3.12 COBR has no fixed membership and attendance is based on the agenda and nature of the crisis at the time. Attendance would usually include ministers and senior officials/representatives from relevant government departments and agencies including the Government's Chief Scientific Advisor (GCSA) and the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) when science and/or health advice is required.
- 3.13 Depending on the nature of the crisis, it may be more effective for representation from operational areas to attend COBR. This approach ensures that ministers receive specialist advice and responses directly from those with first-hand expertise, alongside departmental attendees.
- 3.14 Departmental representation in COBR should be at an appropriate level – ministerial or official depending on the extent of the department's involvement and the issues under consideration. In all circumstances, meeting attendees should have a good understanding of the overall workings of the department and have the authority to take decisions and accept actions on behalf of the department or commit departmental resources at short notice.
- 3.15 Representatives from outside of the UK central government can also be invited, including from the devolved governments and/or local government. When a crisis has an impact on the responsibilities for the devolved government or other elected officials, either directly or indirectly, it would, in most instances, be appropriate to invite those representatives to all or part of a COBR meeting.

18 Cabinet Office, 'List of Cabinet Committees', 2024, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-cabinet-committees-system-and-list-of-cabinet-committees

3.16 By bringing together relevant ministers, senior officials, and other relevant stakeholders, COBR facilitates effective whole-of-government arrangements for managing the crisis. COBR's strategic decision-making responsibilities include:

- **Situational awareness**
 - establishing a data-driven, shared situational awareness among decision makers
- **Response planning**
 - defining the strategic aims of the response and co-ordinating departments' efforts
 - identifying key issues for consequence management and long-term recovery from the outset
 - minimising impacts on households in the short, medium and long-term, considering how those who are most vulnerable to the impacts of a given emergency may be disproportionately affected during crisis response
 - identifying UK central assets, national capabilities and legislative powers that can be used to manage the consequences of the crisis
 - maintaining oversight and evaluating the effectiveness of the response
 - establishing and maintaining contact with the local response and, where relevant, devolved government(s) and territorial offices
 - determining our approach to any international dimensions including engagement with other countries and international organisations
- **Communication and handling**
 - considering public information requirements as part of a wider national communications strategy carefully co-ordinated by the LGD supported where necessary by a core brief
 - considering the timing and content of any statement to Parliament
 - ensuring the territorial extent of communications and announcements coming out of COBR are clearly defined for the public

Strategy and Operations Cabinet committees

3.17 While COBR is the primary organisational structure for responding to the acute phase of a crisis, in certain instances it will be more suitable to establish new Cabinet committees to manage whole-of-government civil contingencies activities over an extended period of time. For example, when whole-of-government activity is required to co-ordinate contingency planning or respond to the enduring impacts of the enduring phase of a crisis.

3.18 While the Cabinet committee structure will be determined by the Prime Minister at the time, on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary, one Cabinet committee structure which has been used to provide collective oversight of the government's enduring response has been the establishment of Strategy and Operations Cabinet

committees. In this model, Strategy committees would set policy and strategy direction, while Operations committees would take a more detail-orientated approach to implementation of enduring response plans. This model is the basis of planning for whole-of-system crises.

- 3.19 It would be expected that the Strategy committee would be chaired by the Prime Minister, and the Operations committee likely chaired by a Cabinet Office minister due to the cascading impacts of the crisis.
- 3.20 Official committees can be established to support Cabinet committees. There is no fixed membership, but senior officials from each department with a minister sitting on the relevant Cabinet committee will be invited. Official committees may be convened for a variety of purposes, but would normally meet in advance of a Cabinet committee.
- 3.21 These Cabinet committees would be supported by a designated structure within the centre of government. The role of this central support structure would include the co-ordination of the ongoing whole-of-government response to the issue; providing strategic support, and the provision of policy advice to the Prime Minister and Cabinet to co-ordinate government's collective enduring response.

Box 4: Case study of COVID Cabinet committees 2020 to 2022

As the initial acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis passed, the Prime Minister of the day, Boris Johnson, established new structures for the prolonged challenge that followed, including the COVID Strategy Committee (COVID-S) and the COVID Operations Committee (COVID-O). COVID Strategy was chaired by the Prime Minister and its purpose was to drive the government's strategic response to COVID-19, considering the impact of both the virus and the response to it, and setting the direction for the recovery strategy. COVID Operations was chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and its purpose was to deliver the policy and operational response to COVID-19.

Non-Cabinet committee meetings

- 3.22 Alongside Cabinet committee meetings, other forms of ministerial and official governance may be used to complement these structures by co-ordinating departmental activities, implementing decisions and facilitating wider preparedness activity in support of COBR.

Non-committee ministerial meetings

- 3.23 Non-committee ministerial meetings can be convened to bring together ministers and officials to focus on a specific issue, examine progress against expectations in detail and/or scrutinise delivery. Such meetings would sometimes meet to consider issues ahead of final collective agreement to be taken at a later date. The Cabinet Secretariat would typically provide the secretariat function during a crisis for such meetings to co-ordinate departmental activities, though this would depend on the nature of the situation.

- 3.24 Such meetings may be convened to manage the government's response to an event which impacts the interests of multiple departments and requires ministerial attention but does not require collective decision-making to be managed effectively. Non-committee ministerial meetings may be convened in support of COBR meetings for protracted issues or to oversee the implementation of key workstreams.

Senior officials

- 3.25 Senior officials' meetings are used to co-ordinate departmental activity to respond to an event which either does not require or in advance of immediate ministerial decision-making. This is where there is a requirement for centrally co-ordinated activities to manage an emerging risk. These meetings may be used to co-ordinate contingency planning and wider mitigatory/preventive action to prevent further escalation of an issue. The COBR Unit would provide the secretariat function for senior officials' meetings.

Intergovernmental relations

- 3.26 Where an emergency in a devolved policy area spans across administrative borders, where the crisis related a reserved area takes place in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, or when responding a crisis requires both devolved and reserved levers, the UK government and the relevant devolved government will take a partnership to responding to the issue. This will involve sharing information, co-ordinating response activities, and ensuring alignment and coherence in response activities.
- 3.27 Ministers and senior officials from the relevant devolved governments can be invited to ministerial and officials governance structures detailed above or, where more appropriate, engaged through the engagement structures and ways of working detailed in the 'Review of intergovernmental relations'.¹⁹

19 Cabinet Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 'Review of intergovernmental relations', 2022, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-review-of-intergovernmental-relations

Chapter 4: **Roles and responsibilities**

Box 5: Chapter 4 summary

In a COBR response, Cabinet Office is responsible co-ordinating the central government response and has responsibility for the maintenance of the central crisis management facility.

A LGD remains in place to provide policy expertise and capabilities to lead the response to the primary impact of the crisis. Other government departments will also be responsible for responding to issues within their sphere of responsibility.

The UK government response to a crisis in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland depends on whether the matter is reserved or devolved. Devolved governments respond to devolved matters, while the UK government leads on reserved matters, working closely with the relevant devolved government.

The Lead Minister – who will either be the Prime Minister or another minister with delegated authority – will be the minister with overall responsibility for leading the response and will be accountable for co-ordinating ministerial decision-making.

The Lead Minister will be supported by the Crisis Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) who acts as their principal adviser on the response and is responsible for ensuring government decision-making is timely, accurate and co-ordinated. The Crisis SRO is supported by the COBR Response Director (who has responsibility for the COBR response structure) and department leads (who lead their department's strategic contribution to the response).

When it is not clear who the Crisis SRO is, the Cabinet Secretary will by default take on the role until they appoint another official.

4.1 This chapter focuses on roles and responsibilities in a COBR response to a crisis.

Cabinet Office

4.2 Cabinet Office's overall role is to support the Prime Minister and ensure the effective running of government.²⁰ As part of its responsibility, the Cabinet Office is responsible for delivering horizon scanning, preparedness and crisis response in times of domestic and international crisis.

4.3 The Cabinet Office has responsibility for co-ordinating the central government response to the acute crisis and for managing the central crisis facility Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR). This will include:

- monitoring national risks and co-ordinating cross-government contingency planning and wider preparedness activities
- managing the UK government's central crisis facilities, communications and delivery systems, and continuity arrangements; this includes ensuring 24/7 technical readiness of the COBR facility

²⁰ Cabinet Office corporate information is available at:
www.gov.uk/government/organisations/cabinet-office/about

- advising the Prime Minister's Office on whether, where and when the COBR meeting is needed, in consultation with the LGD (see [Chapter 6](#))
- ensuring a LGD is in place to support the centrally led response, taking on this role in cases where it is unclear and until a department has been designated as the lead by the Prime Minister's Office
- initiating the supporting structures for the COBR response – including the secretariat function for COBR meetings (see [Chapter 6](#))
- ensuring that there is broad cross-government input and robust challenge during both the development of options and the implementation of actions, brokering solutions and resolving disputes where necessary
- providing central co-ordination for the data elements of the response, including data sharing principles, through the National Situation Centre
- liaising with the LGD, Government Office for Science and the Chief Scientific Advisor to understand if science advice is required through the activation of the Science Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)
- requesting and co-ordinating international assistance and the Prime Minister's engagement with international counterparts where necessary working with FCDO

4.4 The Cabinet Office also has responsibility for supporting the transition out of acute crisis response structures, into enduring response and/or recovery arrangements as required. This includes providing advice at the earliest opportunity to the Cabinet Secretary, on whether there might be a requirement to establish new Cabinet committee structures to manage the enduring phase of a crisis (see more detail in [Chapter 7](#)).

4.5 Where a crisis is so serious as to have whole-of-system implications, the Cabinet Office (in its role as the department which supports the Prime Minister and the effective running of government) will take on a leadership role for the response.

Lead Government Department (LGD)

4.6 During a COBR response, the LGD will remain in place to inform the central government response to the crisis and is accountable, through their Secretary of State, to Parliament for the collective central government response. As the department with the responsibility for the primary risk and expertise for the area impacted by the emergency situation, the LGD will play a critical role in developing policy and wider advice to inform decision-making at COBR and in setting the strategic direction of the response. The LGD will also possess many of the necessary levers and capabilities required to respond to the primary consequence of the crisis.

4.7 The LGD will lead the central government's response to the cause of the crisis – to prevent a further escalation in the situation – and the primary impact. The response should be guided by the LGD's response plan, developed in line with their national level responsibilities for preparation, and lessons identified from previous crises.

- 4.8 While the Cabinet Office maintains a list of LGDs, in certain cases this will need to be reaffirmed at the onset of a crisis, in light of the precise nature of the event and the consequences arising.²¹ This could be in cases where the main impact of the crisis changes or is different to what is expected. In such instances, the Cabinet Office would take on this role until a department has been designated as the lead by the Prime Minister's Office.

Other government departments

- 4.9 Individual departments are responsible, and accountable to Parliament through their Secretary of State, for issues arising within their sectors. Supporting departments' responsibilities will include:

- providing situation reports for their sectors/policy areas and data to the National Situation Centre to support the develop of the Commonly Recognised Information Picture and other situational awareness products
- sharing information with Cabinet Office, the LGD and other departments, public bodies and agencies to ensure a joint understanding of risk
- consequence management for issues for which they have responsibility or sectoral oversight
- co-ordinating crisis response action within their department and public bodies, ensuring public bodies are informed and brought into the response as needed
- working with other departments to co-ordinate responses to impacts which require a joined-up approach
- identifying and communicating actual and potential risks/issues/impacts related to their sectors
- having sufficient trained staff to carry out their responsibilities
- delivering actions as assigned from COBR or other supporting meetings

- 4.10 Supporting departments will stand up a central co-ordination hub, often known as a Departmental Operations Centre (DOC), to co-ordinate the actions and information flows within their department and provide a singular point of contact for other departments. See [Chapter 6](#) for more information on DOCs.

21 Cabinet Office, 'UK National Leadership for Risk Identification, Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recovery', 2023, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/list-of-lead-government-departments-responsibilities-for-planning-response-and-recovery-from-emergencies

Public bodies

- 4.11 A public body is a formally established organisation that is publicly funded to deliver a public or government service, though not as a ministerial department. Arm's length bodies (ALBs) are a specific category of central government public bodies and there are three types of ALB: executive agencies, non-departmental public bodies and non-ministerial departments.²²
- 4.12 ALBs will respond to issues in line with their responsibilities delegated from their sponsor department. When responding to a crisis, the parent department and ALB will work together in line with the framework document (or equivalent) which sets out the relationship between the ALB and parent department. This could involve:
- being tasked by their parent department to deliver specific actions as part of the crisis response, in line with their responsibilities
 - escalating issues to the parent department which require their attention and consideration
 - sharing information and providing SitReps to their parent department, and other relevant departments, to support shared situational awareness
- 4.13 ALBs will need to ensure they are resourced to deliver in-line with their responsibilities.

Devolved governments

- 4.14 The handling of the UK government's response to an emergency occurring within Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will depend on whether or not the subject is reserved or devolved. Each government's competency depends on the terms of its devolution settlement, which is different for each of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- 4.15 In an emergency in a devolved policy space, the relevant devolved government will deliver the crisis response but when the crisis spans across administrative borders, or responding requires both reserved and devolved levers, the relevant devolved government(s) and the UK government will work together to respond and recover.
- 4.16 Where a risk is a reserved matter, the UK government will lead the response but will work closely with the devolved governments where appropriate. For example, managing the risk of disruption to the Great British energy network would be led by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, but responsibility for some cascading impacts of this risk (for example, the impact of energy failure on schools) is devolved. Further information on how UK government works with the devolved governments can be found in Chapter 6 and in Appendix F.

22 Cabinet Office, 'Public Bodies Guidance', 2025, available at: www.gov.uk/guidance/public-bodies-reform

- 4.17 Whatever the crisis and the nature of the crisis response, consequence management and recovery is generally devolved to the relevant devolved government.
- 4.18 In reality, crises and emergencies do not respect borders or policy areas and a partnership approach between all parts of the UK is essential to ensure we can effectively respond to risks, wherever in the UK they occur. Formal engagement between UK government and the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive should be based on the structures and ways of working set out in the **'Review of intergovernmental relations'**.²³
- 4.19 Officials working in civil contingencies roles in UK government should understand how devolution affects arrangements for responding to emergencies in the UK in their risk areas and the civil contingency structures used by the devolved governments.^{24,25} They should also understand and be clear on the application of measures and where they apply. For example, on whether an announced policy by UK government only applies in England or across the wider UK.

Territorial offices

- 4.20 The territorial offices consist of the Scotland Office, the Wales Office and the Northern Ireland Office, all of which are UK government departments. They represent the UK government's interests in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the interests of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the UK government.
- 4.21 Territorial offices play an important role in facilitating partnership between UK government and the devolved governments, given their close relationships and knowledge of both UK government and the relevant devolved government.
- 4.22 Territorial offices can support effective collaboration between the UK government and the relevant devolved government, and can support effective liaison and handling of particular issues. They can provide support and advice to UK government departments when working with the devolved governments, and should be included when UK government departments engage directly with the devolved governments.
- 4.23 Where devolved governments are looking to submit a request for Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA), this request must be channelled through the relevant territorial office to submit on their behalf.

23 Cabinet Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 'Review of intergovernmental relations', 2022, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-review-of-intergovernmental-relations

24 Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland, Office of the Secretary of State for Wales, Northern Ireland Office, Cabinet Office, 'Guidance on devolution', 2020, available at: www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-on-devolution

25 Appendix F includes further information on civil contingency arrangements in the devolved governments.

- 4.24 It is critical that the distinction between the roles of the devolved governments and the territorial offices are clearly understood across UK government departments. Care must be taken when requesting briefing, delivering briefing or seeking a view that either both the devolved government and the territorial office are consulted at the same time or, if appropriate, the consultation is strictly within the remit of the single organisation contacted. This is particularly critical in regard to public communication which should be clear on the application of measures and where they apply.

Overseas Territories

- 4.25 For emergencies affecting the UK's 14 Overseas Territories, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development (FCDO) Office is typically the LGD. Further information on arrangements in the Overseas Territories can be found in Appendix H.

Crown Dependencies

- 4.26 The management of an emergency in or affecting the Crown Dependencies is a matter for their governments and they have their own emergency planning and response arrangements in place. Where support is required from UK government, requests from the Crown Dependencies should be channelled to the appropriate UK government department/agency. The Ministry of Justice is responsible for managing the UK's overarching constitutional relationship with the Crown Dependencies but all UK government departments and agencies are responsible for their respective policy areas towards the Crown Dependencies and should engage directly with them. Further information on arrangements in the Crown Dependencies can be found in Appendix H.

Ministerial and senior official roles, responsibilities and accountabilities

- 4.27 A COBR response requires the involvement of a number of ministers and senior officials. An effective crisis management capability is dependent on clearly understood structures, roles, responsibilities and accountabilities.
- 4.28 In accordance with the principles of collective Cabinet government, ministers hold decision-making authority and are accountable to Parliament for the policies, decisions and actions of their departments and agencies. Civil servants are accountable to ministers and support the response by providing advice and developing options to drive forward the response, ensuring ministers have the information and options available to make informed decisions, and then implementing ministerial decisions. Civil servants may also exercise the powers of ministers in charge of a department under the Carltona principle.

- allocating an LGD, based on advice from the Cabinet Office, in cases where it is unclear which department should take the overall lead
- deciding on whether to take on the role of Lead Minister or assign this function to other ministers such as the Secretary of State for the LGD, the Deputy Prime Minister or a First Secretary of State, or another senior minister
- the Cabinet committee structure for the enduring phase of the crisis, based on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary

Lead Minister

4.32 The Lead Minister is the minister responsible for leading the UK government's collective response to a crisis. The Lead Minister is accountable to Parliament for the co-ordination of ministerial decision-making during the response and the collective central government response. The Prime Minister may take on this role for the highest impact or catastrophic events.

4.33 Their responsibilities include:

- typically chairing COBRs, acting in a non-departmental capacity to co-ordinate the whole-of-government response independently of departmental priorities, ensuring the views of all attending ministers are considered including ministers from their own department
- agreeing attendance for COBRs, in consultation with the Prime Minister's Office and Cabinet Office
- agreeing the strategic direction of the response, based on the advice of the Crisis Senior Responsible Owner
- identifying and summarising collective decisions made by ministers at COBR to ensure there is clarity on what was collectively agreed
- resolving disputes between departments, to ensure a whole-of-government approach is taken to responding to the issue

Secretary of State

4.34 Secretaries of State for departments impacted by an emergency will be accountable to Parliament for their department's actions and performance and for issues within their sectors of responsibility.

4.35 Their responsibilities include:

- receiving briefings and regular updates from their departments about impacts or actions, including any legislative responsibilities
- acting as the political manager of their department, providing political oversight of their department's contribution to the response
- representing their department's interests at COBR meetings, or delegating to a junior minister where appropriate

- acting as the ultimate decision makers on issues within their department which do not require collective decision-making
- ensuring that their departments take whatever action is necessary to implement decisions made by ministers at COBR, and for reporting back to colleagues on progress as needed

Officials' roles, responsibilities and accountabilities

Cabinet Secretary and National Security Adviser

- 4.36 The Cabinet Secretary is the most senior person in the Civil Service. The role of the Cabinet Secretary is usually combined with the role of Head of the Civil Service, responsible for providing professional leadership to the Civil Service. As Secretary to the UK Cabinet, they support all ministers in the running of government. The Cabinet Secretary is also usually the Prime Minister's principal official policy adviser across the entirety of UK government business.
- 4.37 The Cabinet Secretary provides advice to the Prime Minister on the structure, membership and terms of reference of Cabinet committees, including where there may be value in adapting or transitioning structures to handle enduring phases of crises.
- 4.38 Since 2010, Prime Ministers have chosen to appoint individuals to the post of National Security Adviser to act as his or her principal official adviser on national security matters. The Cabinet Secretary has in certain instances taken on this role. In relation to crisis response, their relevant responsibilities include providing advice to the Prime Minister and Cabinet on national security – this includes strategy, policy, capability and civil contingencies.
- 4.39 For crises where it is initially unclear where the leadership sits at the onset of the crisis, the Cabinet Secretary will take on the role or appoint a Crisis SRO to lead the response (see below).

Crisis Senior Responsible Owner (Crisis SRO)

- 4.40 Having clear leadership from the onset of a crisis is a prerequisite for an effective response. It provides a foundation for the clarity of direction and ensures that there is a consistent alignment in activity across stakeholders involved in the response.
- 4.41 The Crisis SRO is the senior official who acts as the principal adviser to the Lead Minister and COBR and has overall responsibility for the strategic co-ordination of the central government response. They are accountable to the Lead Minister for delivering the response in line with ministerial direction and decisions made by ministers at COBR.
- 4.42 The Crisis SRO's responsibilities may include:
- providing a focal point to the Lead Minister and the Prime Minister's Office for the UK government's response to the crisis
 - advising ministers on the strategic direction of the response, ensuring clear objectives are set at the onset

- overseeing the strategic co-ordination of central government response activities, setting clear roles and responsibilities from the onset
- ensuring whole-of-government decision-making is timely, accurate, and co-ordinated, identifying key decision-points and ensuring COBR (M/O) receives quality advice
- often taking on the role of chair for COBR (O), agreeing issues for ministerial decision-making, and, where applicable, make intermediary decisions until the next COBR (M) is held
- managing the relationships between the departments involved in the response, ensuring they are delivering their assigned roles and responsibilities and that the LGD is supported by and collaborating with other departments
- establishing the appropriate governance structure to deliver the response
- ensuring any specialist sources of advice that might be required are available to decision-makers at COBR
- evaluating the performance of the response against strategic aims, advising on different courses of action where appropriate
- identifying and resolving any blockers or strategic impasses to the crises, escalating to permanent secretaries where necessary

Crisis SRO profile

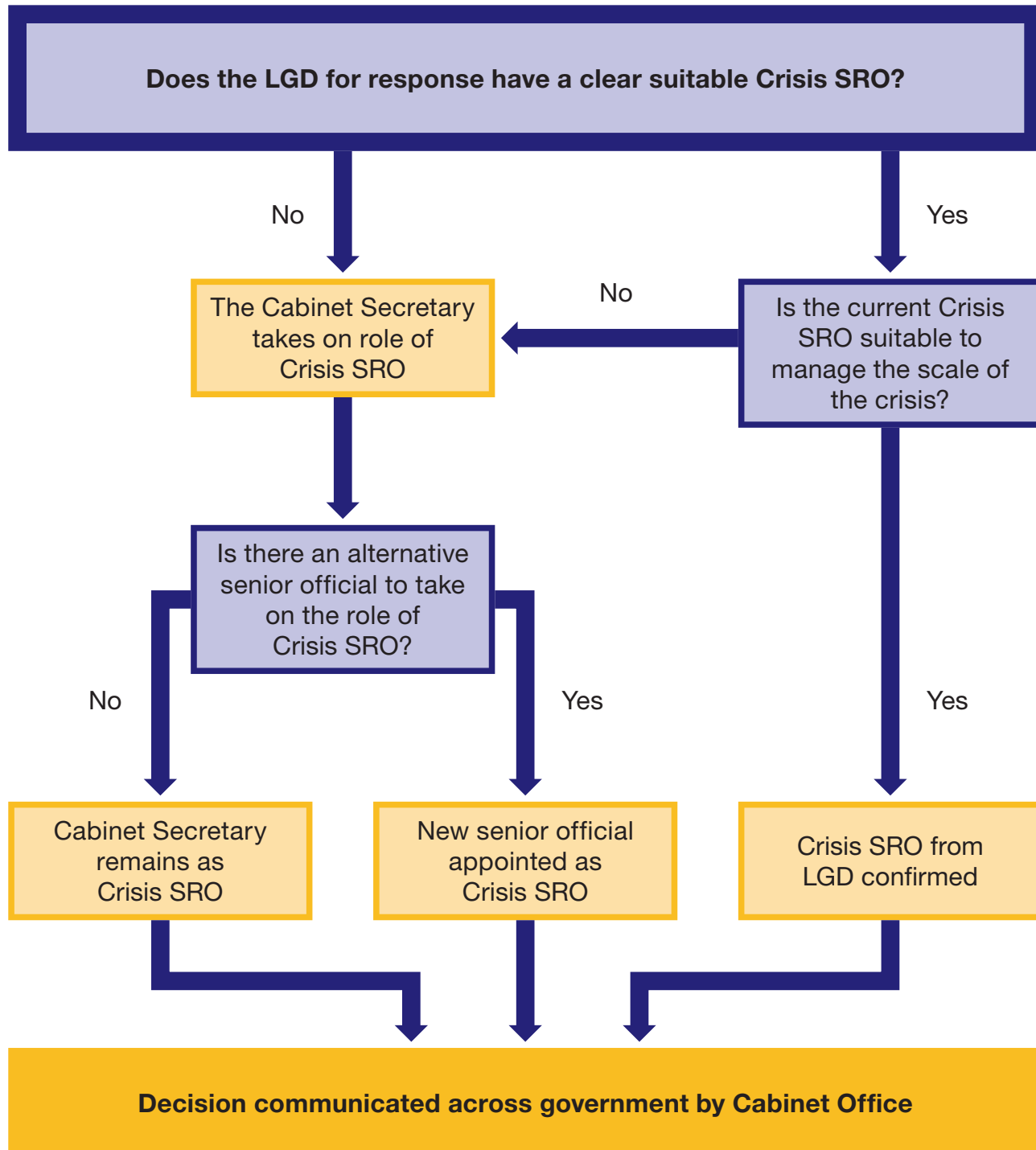
4.43 The typical profile of the Crisis SRO will be based on the following factors:

- **Position:** will be at least of director-level grade and will be either from Cabinet Office or the LGD depending on the nature of the crisis.
- **Knowledge, skills and experience:** should possess subject matter knowledge relevant to the event. They are expected to have prior crisis management experience and to have completed appropriate training, including the crisis leadership training provided by the Cabinet Office.
- **Personal attributes:** would also be expected to possess a number of personal characteristics necessary to be an effective crisis leader. Such attributes would include, but not be limited to:
 - seniority for the responsibilities and accountabilities the role involves
 - strong leadership and decision-making skills
 - credibility with ministers and other key stakeholders
 - resilience and the ability to operate under pressure
 - the ability to identify key issues and priorities

Crisis SRO appointment process

- 4.44 In many instances, the appropriate official to take on the role of Crisis SRO will be evident and will be agreed by the LGD in consultation with the Cabinet Office at the onset of the crisis. This will typically be the case for less complex crises, where policy ownership of the issue is clear and there are well established plans and procedures.
- 4.45 LGDs should ensure that as part of their responsibilities for preparing for crises, they have identified an appropriate official – based on the credentials set out above – to take on the role of Crisis SRO for risks falling under their areas of responsibility.
- 4.46 However, in certain instances the scale, complexity or novelty of a crisis may mean that it is either not immediately clear who the Crisis SRO should be, or that the previously identified Crisis SRO may not be suitable to provide leadership for a crisis of this scale. In such instances, the Cabinet Secretary will be responsible for taking on the role of the Crisis SRO until they have appointed a suitable official. This decision will be based on the advice of the Cabinet Office and LGD.
- 4.47 The appropriateness of the Crisis SRO will be kept under continuous review during the response to the crisis. If the scale or nature of the crisis changes to the extent that a different official is now more appropriate to take on the role, a decision will be taken by the Cabinet Secretary on appointing a new official, based on the advice of Cabinet Office and the LGD. If the existing Crisis SRO considers themselves not be able to deliver the role, it is their responsibility to escalate this to the Cabinet Secretary.
- 4.48 Once a Crisis SRO is appointed, it is the responsibility of the Cabinet Office to communicate this to relevant stakeholders involved in the response, to ensure there is clarity of the leadership of the response. **Figure 6** provides a flowchart which illustrates the process articulated above.

Figure 6: Appointment process for the Crisis SRO



COBR Response Director

- 4.49 The COBR Response Director has overall responsibility for the functioning of the COBR response structure – see [Chapter 6](#) for more information on this function – and is accountable to the Crisis SRO for the team's performance.

4.50 Prior to the activation of COBR crisis management arrangements, the COBR Response Director has overall responsibility for the COBR Unit's activities to prepare for acute crises. This includes overall responsibility for:

- managing and improving the UK government's central crisis facilities, communications and delivery systems
- the COBR Unit's near-term horizon scanning and risk monitoring activities, escalating to the Prime Minister's Office and Cabinet Office ministers issues which require their attention
- ensuring that departments are working in support of the LGD to prepare for and respond to the cascading impacts of risks
- convening and co-ordinating departments, public bodies, agencies and devolved governments (where relevant) to reduce risk and prevent the deterioration of a situation
- co-sponsoring the planning phase with the LGD which owns the risk with whole-of-system implications, ensuring the right concept of operations is in place should a response be required
- advising the Prime Minister's Office of whether a COBR meeting is required to manage the situation
- overall responsibility for ensuring their staff hold appropriate security clearances, are sufficiently trained, and have access to relevant ICT systems to effectively deliver their roles and responsibilities

4.51 When COBR crisis management arrangements are entered into, their responsibilities include:

- ensuring the necessary inputs and supporting materials for COBRs are produced on time and of sufficient quality
- the effective functioning of the command, control, co-ordination system and COBR facility
- capturing and progressing decisions agreed at COBR (M/O) and other supporting governance structures through overall leadership of the COBR Secretariat
- ensuring effective situational awareness is maintained for decision makers
- representing the COBR response structure at relevant governance fora
- overall responsibility for maintaining the welfare and wellbeing of their staff, ensuring appropriate arrangements are in place
- liaising with the GCSA in the Government Office for Science in order to activate SAGE if required
- inviting the right individuals to meetings, consulting the Crisis SRO, Lead Minister and Prime Minister's Office as necessary

First Permanent Secretary

4.52 Within government departments, the permanent secretary is the most senior civil servant. Each permanent secretary supports their relevant government minister, who heads the department and who is accountable to Parliament for the department's actions and performance.²⁷

4.53 Each First Permanent Secretary is appointed as the principal accounting officer for their department, with a personal responsibility to report directly to Parliament for the management and organisation of the department, specifically for the use of resources by their organisation. They are accountable to Parliament for propriety and regularity of spending and the use of resources within their organisation, including in a crisis situation.²⁸

4.54 Their responsibilities include:

- assuring their department has the sufficient capabilities to be able to deliver their role in a central government response
- ensuring they have a cadre of suitably prepared and qualified officials capable of taking on the role of Crisis SRO
- ensuring a department lead is in place to co-ordinate their department's strategic contribution to a response

Department lead

4.55 The department lead, often known as Gold Command, is the term used to refer to the lead official in a department who is responsible for co-ordinating their strategic contribution to the response. They are accountable to their First Permanent Secretary for their department's contribution to the emergency response.

4.56 Their responsibilities include:

- overseeing their department's strategic contribution to the response, ensuring it is coherent in a wider whole-of-government setting
- leading consequence management activities for areas falling within their department's area of responsibility, including working with other departments and agencies as needed
- attending COBRs (M/O) or strategic meetings as appropriate, representing their department and delivering actions as assigned
- escalating issues which require consideration across government or collective decision-making through COBR
- leading on briefing ministers and senior officials in their department

27 Cabinet Office, 'Cabinet Manual', 2010, available at:
www.gov.uk/government/publications/cabinet-manual

28 HM Treasury, 'Managing Public Money', 2023, available at:
www.gov.uk/government/publications/managing-public-money

- overall responsibility for maintaining the welfare and wellbeing of their staff, ensuring appropriate arrangements
- overall responsibility for ensuring their staff hold relevant security clearances, are sufficiently trained, and have access to relevant ICT systems to effectively deliver their roles and responsibilities

Central chief advisory roles

4.57 There are several roles within government who act as the government's principle expert adviser on specialist areas. They include:

- **Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA):** responsible for providing scientific advice to the Prime Minister and Cabinet when required. In an emergency GCSA attends COBR meetings – when SAGE is activated, GCSA chairs SAGE and communicates SAGE advice at COBR meetings.
- **Chief Medical Officer:** acts as the UK government's principal medical adviser and provides public health and clinical advice to ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care and across government.
- **Chief Veterinary Officer:** UK government's chief spokesperson on animal health and welfare issues. They lead the response to outbreaks of exotic animal diseases and advise on the programmes necessary to control and, where appropriate, eradicate disease.
- **Senior Analytical Leadership Team (SALT):** a group comprising the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, National Statistician, National Technology Adviser, Joint Intelligence Committee Chair, HM Treasury Chief Economic Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer. SALT helps to ensure that government policy and delivery decision-making is underpinned by the best possible evidence and insight, with the highest quality analysis where and when it is needed, and helping to ensure that it is acted on in a timely way.

Chapter 5: **Pre-crisis**

Box 6: Chapter 5 summary

Having effective risk identification and assessment processes is essential for informing proportionate planning and preparedness, and government's ability to mitigate and prevent crises. Processes should be in-place to identify and assess risks over the short, medium and long term to inform different risk management activities.

In line with their responsibilities for risk anticipation and assessment, LGDs have national-level responsibility for maintaining awareness of their risk profile and assessing the potential scenarios should the risk materialise.

Cabinet Office supports this process by producing the National Security Risk Assessment which is the government's principal tool for identifying, assessing and comparing risks. Alongside this, Cabinet Office produces a number of near-term risk products, including the Civil Contingencies Forward Look which is the cross-government near term assessment of civil contingency risks.

Informed by processes to identify emerging risks, LGDs have national level responsibility for acting to reduce the likelihood of risks from materialising or reducing their severity. For risks with inherent uncertainty or cross-departmental implications, Cabinet Office will take additional steps to co-ordinate government's near-term preparedness activities.

Near-term exercising and red teaming should be used to test plans and procedures to increase readiness. Cabinet Office has a designated near-term exercising and red teaming capability.

Crisis framing is the process through which Cabinet Office ensures that a structured approach is taken to entering into, or preparing to enter into, central crisis management arrangements. It does so by ensuring that a concerted effort is taken to understanding the situation, agreeing objectives, and defining the delivery vehicles for the response.

- 5.1 This chapter sets out government's activities prior to a crisis occurring. This includes the government's approach for maintaining oversight of its risk profile through its horizon scanning and wider risk management activities, and the steps taken to reduce the likelihood of risks materialising into crises or reducing their severity if they cannot be prevented.^{29,30}

29 Good practice guidance on horizon scanning can be found in Government Office for Science's 'Futures Toolkit', available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/futures-toolkit-for-policy-makers-and-analysts and the Institute of Risk Management's 'Horizon Scanning: A practitioners guide', available at: www.theirm.org/media/7423/horizon-scanning_final2-1.pdf

30 HM Treasury's 'Orange Book' provides guidance on the implementation of risk management processes in government organisations and is available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/orange-book

Risk anticipation and risk assessment

- 5.2 The UK faces a broad and diverse range of risks, including threats to lives, health, society, critical infrastructure, the environment and the economy. Risks may be non-malicious, such as accidents or natural hazards, or they may be malicious threats from malign actors who seek to do us harm.
- 5.3 Effective risk identification, assessment and management over the long, medium, and short term is important when developing proportionate crisis preparedness. LGDs are expected to consider the compounding nature of their risks to ensure the planning activities consider the different impacts which might manifest.
- 5.4 In accordance with the LGD model, LGDs are expected to have established risk identification, assessment and management processes within the areas of responsibility assigned to them.³¹ Their risk management processes should comply with Corporate Governance Code requirements and be informed by HM Treasury's guidance the Orange Book.^{32,33} Cabinet Office supports the government to have a joint understanding of the government's overall national risk profile through the production of several national risk products.
- 5.5 This section sets out the UK government's approach to risk anticipation and assessment over the medium and short term, while also detailing arrangements for chronic risk assessment. For the purpose of this document, medium-term risk assessment refers to a period of up to 5 years, while near-term refers to up to 6 months.

Medium-term risk anticipation and risk assessment

- 5.6 Medium-term risk anticipation and assessment enables organisations to have a comprehensive understanding of their overall risk profile. This provides the basis for planning activities and decisions to be made on the capabilities required to be able to effectively respond and manage the risk within their risk appetite.

31 Cabinet Office, 'UK National Leadership for Risk Identification, Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recovery', 2023, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/list-of-lead-government-departments-responsibilities-for-planning-response-and-recovery-from-emergencies

32 Cabinet Office and HM Treasury, 'Corporate governance in central government departments: code of good practice', 2017, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/corporate-governance-code-for-central-government-departments-2017

33 HM Treasury, 'Orange Book', 2024, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/orange-book

- 5.7 In line with their national level responsibilities, LGDs should have risk identification and assessment processes to maintain oversight of the risk landscape in their areas of responsibility. LGDs should assess the range of consequences of the risks and map interdependencies to understand where they interact. Risk management cannot be effective in isolation and LGDs should engage other government departments and public bodies who might be impacted by their risk to ensure a shared understanding. Alongside this, LGDs should engage key partners – such as the voluntary and community sector – to better understand the likely impacts of their risks on community vulnerability. LGDs should ensure their risks are considered and integrated into appropriate senior level governance structures and wider oversight arrangements.
- 5.8 Cabinet Office produces the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) which is the government’s principal tool for identifying, assessing and comparing civil contingency and national security risks. It is a classified, cross-government product which all departments collectively agree, with the National Risk Register acting as the publicly available counterpart.³⁴
- 5.9 The NSRA assesses the likelihood and impact of the most serious risks facing the UK, covering malicious and non-malicious risks over the next 2 to 5 years. They include threats to lives, health, critical infrastructure, economy, sovereignty and the environment. The NSRA is used to determine the common consequences of risks to help with planning and preparedness. To ensure that the assessment process is robust, risks are reviewed by a network of experts. These include professionals from industry, charities and academia, as well as subject matter experts within government.
- 5.10 The NSRA is a dynamic risk assessment process, meaning risk assessments are updated more frequently if required. These changes ensure that planners, practitioners and policymakers now have access to high-quality risk information, to fundamentally improve the ability to plan, prepare and mitigate risks in an effective way.
- 5.11 Risks in the NSRA are assessed using ‘reasonable worst-case scenarios’. These scenarios represent the worst plausible manifestation of that particular risk (once highly unlikely variations have been discounted) to enable relevant bodies to undertake proportionate planning. LGDs are expected to plan for, prevent and mitigate risks for which they have responsibility, considering the impact across society. Supporting departments whose sectors and areas of responsibility may be impacted by the risk, should also plan against the risk so that their response plans can be invoked in support of the LGD for issues falling under their area of responsibility.

34 Cabinet Office, ‘National Risk Register’, 2023, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-risk-register-2023#full-publication-update-history

- 5.12 The aim is not to capture every risk that the UK could face. Instead, the government aims to identify a range of risks that are representative of the risk landscape and can serve as a cause-agnostic basis for contingency planning for the common consequences of risks. Additional scenarios are provided for a given risk if they would result in substantially different impacts or require significantly different planning.
- 5.13 The NSRA identifies a diverse range of risks facing the UK. However, many of these risks have similar impacts. For example, they may result in casualties and fatalities, or a loss of essential services such as energy or telecoms. They may also require similar interventions, for example a need to evacuate people from their homes. The UK government has therefore developed cross-cutting emergency response capabilities, each with a clear lead department, which are designed to respond to these common impacts, regardless of cause. A response to any given NSRA risk is likely to require several of these response capabilities to be deployed, alongside any bespoke preparations for the risk.

Near-term horizon scanning and risk analysis

- 5.14 Near-term risk anticipation and assessment help identify emerging crises early. Early warning systems enable timely interventions to mitigate and prevent risks, along with contingency planning to prepare for potential escalation and different scenarios of how the risk might manifest.
- 5.15 As part of their risk anticipation responsibilities, LGDs are responsible for undertaking risk monitoring activities (working with other relevant LGDs, departments and agencies as necessary) to understand whether the risk profile is changing and whether there are signals that a risk is materialising, or a situation is deteriorating. This should include clear criteria for escalating risks that fall outside of their risk appetite or tolerance.
- 5.16 LGDs should have qualitative and quantitative systems and arrangements in place to monitor their risks for indications that risks are materialising, including tools which enable real-time and dynamic monitoring of risks. This will enable LGDs to act to avoid or reduce risks, and to prepare responses. If early warning indicators are identifying that a risk is materialising, LGDs are expected to notify other relevant departments (including Cabinet Office), agencies and bodies to ensure a joint understanding of the risk.
- 5.17 Cabinet Office produces a near-term risk assessment (Civil Contingencies Forward Look) of the most significant civil contingency risks facing UK government as a whole over a 6-month period, disseminating the assessment across government to maintain a shared situational awareness of government's risk profile. This is a classified resource used to support the department's near-term preparedness and mitigatory activities.

- 5.18 The Cabinet Office tracks live and emerging risks where there are signals of an increased likelihood of significant disruption being caused over a 6-week period. This informs a more deliberate effort to avert the crisis and be prepared for increased crisis planning, should the risk crystallise.
- 5.19 Cabinet Office regularly convenes central government departments and the devolved governments to improve the joint understanding of civil emergency risks and the preparations to mitigate them. This includes sharing:
- information and intelligence on risks, helping calibrate judgements and discuss solutions
 - lessons and experiences from exercises and responses
 - planning for current risks, detailing the capabilities being used or that may be used, and information to support and inform preparations for potential emerging challenges
- 5.20 Cabinet Office maintains a 24/7 capability, through its National Security Watchkeepers, responsible for monitoring open source materials to provide a real-time monitoring of risks and to provide an alert mechanism for emerging risks or incidents which may require co-ordinated central government action.

Chronic risk analysis

- 5.21 Chronic risks are distinct from acute risks in that they pose continuous challenges that over time could erode our economy, community, way of life and/or national security. The government has established a new process for identifying and assessing chronic risks led by the Cabinet Office and the Government Office for Science. Government policy teams should embed chronic risks mitigation into their wider policy areas where appropriate.
- 5.22 The chronic risk analysis does not assign a LGD to each chronic risk given the cross-cutting nature of these risks. Instead, these risks require a whole of government effort to bolster government's resilience to these longer-term, more persistent challenges. This new analysis of chronic risks supports departments to:
- have a shared understanding of chronic risks across government
 - test and strengthen plans against a range of future scenarios
 - think about the interconnected nature of chronic and acute risks and explore the cascading impacts that could affect their policy area
 - have strategic discussions within their departments and across government on the risk landscape, particularly where action may be required to mitigate risks or monitor data
- 5.23 LGDs for acute risks should understand and monitor how the chronic risks impact and influence the acute risks within their departmental area(s) of responsibility.

Preparedness

5.24 Based on the joint understanding of the risk profile developed through the monitoring and analysis of risk, this section sets out how this information is used to prevent, mitigate and prepare for emerging crises. Preparedness in this context refers to steps taken to reduce risk and prepare for risks which have shown an increased likelihood of materialising in the near-term. This section does not detail expectations on departments in terms of the planning and longer-term preparedness for their risks, which is covered in other guidance.³⁵

Risk reduction

5.25 In line with their national level responsibilities for prevention and mitigation, LGDs have responsibility for introducing measures and co-ordinating activities and interventions to reduce the likelihood of risks materialising or mitigating their consequences if they do occur. Prevention is better than cure, and LGDs should have well developed preventive and mitigation strategies to avoid and minimise escalation. Risk reduction should be treated as continual effort and be prioritised appropriately within departments, in line with their risk appetite.

5.26 LGD's prevention and mitigation activities should be informed by mature risk management functions, guided by the HM Treasury's **Orange Book** guidance.³⁶ LGDs are expected to:

- establish early warning systems to enable appropriate attention and assessment of potential consequences to be undertaken at an early stage
- have capacity within their response teams to respond to evolving conditions in a proportionate, meaningful and co-ordinated manner
- take appropriate action to respond to the escalating risk in line with their risk appetite and tolerance, seeking to reduce the likelihood of the risk materialising and reducing its impact if it does
- develop contingency plans on different scenarios for how the situation might evolve
- identify relevant emergency response capabilities applicable to managing their risks
- refine response and activation plans based on an increased understanding of the situation and its trajectory
- engage other departments and Cabinet Office to ensure a joint understanding of risk and to co-ordinate preventive actions and wider mitigations

³⁵ Cabinet Office, 'UK National Leadership for Risk Identification, Emergency Preparedness, Response and Recovery', 2023, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/list-of-lead-government-departments-responsibilities-for-planning-response-and-recovery-from-emergencies

³⁶ HM Treasury, 'Orange Book', 2024, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/orange-book

5.27 For live risks with significant uncertainty and cross-departmental implications – such as potential cascading impacts, threats to life or critical national infrastructure and systems, or high external interest – the Cabinet Office will engage the relevant LGD to ensure a shared understanding and co-ordinate appropriate actions. Examples of Cabinet Office actions include:

- commissioning and agreeing the rhythm of situation reports and/or risk updates from the LGD
- attending and supporting LGD meetings to understand and manage the situation
- providing regular briefings to ministers and senior officials in Cabinet Office and the Prime Minister's Office to keep them abreast of the situation
- convening cross-government officials and/or ministerial meetings to review the situation and co-ordinate mitigations and contingency planning
- undertaking near-term exercises to enhance the understanding of the compounding nature of the risk, identify decision points, and test command, control and co-ordination structures
- refining activation planning and response plans in line with new information
- through the National Situation Centre, producing a cross-government dashboard providing key situational awareness

5.28 The actions above will not be taken in isolation and the Cabinet Office will consider how these activities can support and reinforce one another to enhance preparedness.

Validation

5.29 Validation describes the measures to ensure that plans, procedures and other emergency response measures meet the purpose for which they were designed. In the context of near-term preparedness, the LGD or Cabinet Office may choose to use a range of validation approaches – such as exercising or red teaming – to better understand the compounding nature of the risk.^{37,38} These approaches can also be used to test whether response structures, plans and capabilities are equipped to respond to the risk, or identify decisions which may need to be taken if the risk does require a crisis response.

5.30 For medium- to long-term preparedness the Cabinet Office conducts the National Capabilities Assessment to ensure that government's ability to respond to risk-agnostic impacts is understood and maintained.

5.31 The COBR Unit holds a near-term exercising and red teaming capability which can be deployed to provide this function for emerging risks expected to require the activation of COBR crisis management arrangements.

37 UK Resilience Academy, 'Exercising Best Practice Guidance', 2024, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/exercising-best-practice-guidance

38 Ministry of Defence, 'Red Teaming Handbook', 2021, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-guide-to-red-teaming

Crisis framing

- 5.32 Contemporary crises are increasingly complex, characterised by interconnected, interdependent and cascading impacts and often compounded by other concurrent challenges. The problems they present are often multifaceted and require response activity from across government to be systematically managed.
- 5.33 The evolving nature of crises puts a premium on strategic planning, to ensure there is an agreed analysis of the nature of the crisis and how it impacts UK interests, as well as the direction of the crisis response.
- 5.34 Crisis framing is a process maintained by the Cabinet Office to support national-level strategic crisis response planning. Crisis framing is a structured, systematic methodology which is used to ensure there is:
- an agreed analysis and shared understanding of the nature of the crisis and how it impacts UK interests
 - clearly defined strategic objectives
 - an appropriate delivery model in place to co-ordinate and deliver the agreed strategic objectives of the response
- 5.35 Crisis framing achieves this by, at the earliest opportunity, ensuring that decision makers have considered and confirmed:
- the key UK interests affected and secondary impacts that need to be considered
 - the strategic direction and delivery model for the response, including appropriate governance structures, resourcing and information requirements
 - escalation and de-escalation pathways for entering into and exiting acute crisis response arrangements
 - roles and responsibilities, including identifying the LGD, Lead Minister and Crisis SRO when not already agreed (see [Chapter 4](#) for more information on these roles)
 - key workstreams to prepare for or respond to impacts
 - critical capabilities, support and resource requirements required to deliver and sustain the response objectives
- 5.36 The Cabinet Office is responsible for facilitating the crisis framing process for COBR responses, recording and disseminating the decisions taken during the process. For rising tide crises, crisis framing can be used to inform contingency planning and interventions to mitigate and prevent a crisis occurring. For rapid onset crises, the process should be undertaken at the earliest opportunity to inform the acute crisis response and decision-making at COBR.

- 5.37 Crisis framing is a process which can be iterated as the situation evolves and driving factors change, to provide a means of refreshing understanding and continually reviewing whether the response objectives and corresponding response models are appropriate.
- 5.38 Crisis framing will typically be undertaken in volatile, complex and uncertain circumstances, and how the methodology is applied will be determined by the characteristics of a crisis, as well as timing and resource constraints.
- 5.39 For less complex events which occur on a more regular basis, and which have well established plans and procedures in-place, there may not be a requirement to apply processes in the way you would for more novel and complex crises – although the framework might be a useful tool to test assumptions and inform response activity. Equally, timing and resource constraints, alongside competing demands for the time of senior officials, might influence how framework is applied and embedded into response activities.
- 5.40 A common sense approach is required when applying the crisis framing methodology, to ensure sufficient time is allocated to strategic planning activities, while also bearing in mind constraints and the need to deliver urgent action. However, the principles underpinning crisis framing are universal and should inform every response.

Chapter 6: **During the acute crisis**

Box 7: Chapter 6 summary

This chapter outlines the command, control, and co-ordination (C3) structure established to lead and manage the UK government's response to an acute crisis.

Activating central crisis management arrangements signals that an event requires resource re-prioritisation and significant government attention. This decision should be made with careful consideration, but in cases of doubt, it is generally better to activate even if subsequently stood down.

The decision to activate COBR will be taken by the Prime Minister's Office, based on the advice of the Cabinet Office and the LGD.

COBR is the primary organisational structure for agreeing the central government response and facilitating urgent collective decision-making. It is supported by the COBR response structure which co-ordinates the central government response and provide the secretariat function for COBR meetings.

Within the C3 structure, departments will establish Departmental Operations Centres to co-ordinate their contribution to the response. How the UK government works with the devolved governments will depend on whether the matter is resolved or devolved, but where there is a requirement to co-ordinate response activities a partnership approach should be taken.

The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government will act as the main point of liaison between central government and the local response, reducing duplicative requests.

The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies is the primary mechanism to provide timely and co-ordinated independent scientific advice to COBR.

When responding to a crisis, there are a number of national capabilities and policy options that could be deployed including emergency powers available under the Civil Contingencies Act, Military Aid to the Civil Authorities, emergency alerts and emergency spending.

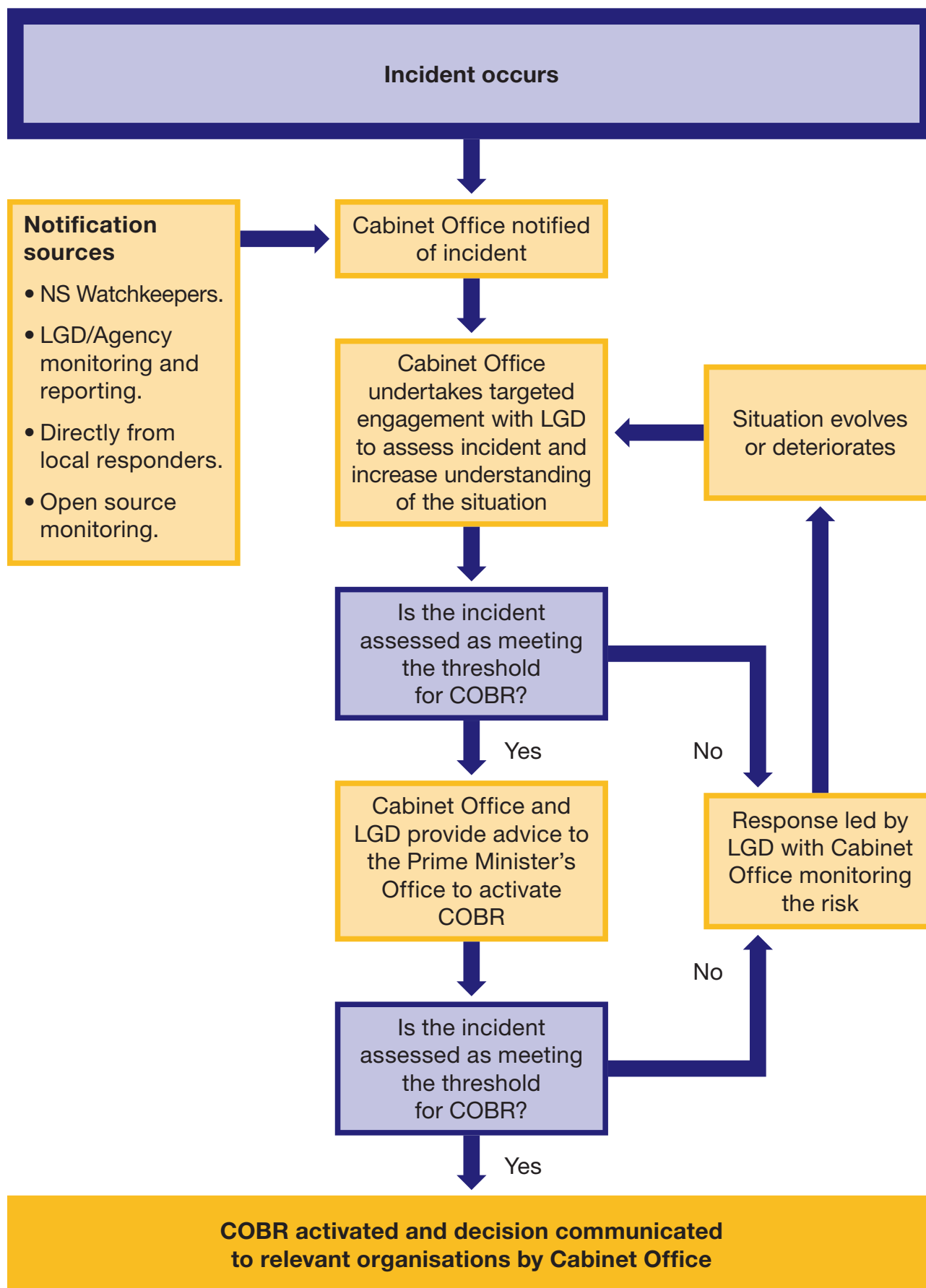
There are also a number of common key considerations including public communication, human aspects (including the disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups) and working with partners outside of government.

- 6.1** This chapter sets out the command, control, and co-ordination (C3) structure established to lead, direct and control the central government response to an acute crisis. It details the role and operation of different components within this structure.
- 6.2** The remainder of the chapter outlines the key elements of the collective central government response. This includes the:
- common activities underpinning the central government response
 - capabilities that can be deployed to respond to impacts
 - partnerships that are required to fulfil a whole-of-society response to the emergency

COBR response activation process

- 6.3 COBR crisis management arrangements include establishing the COBR response structure and a regular rhythm of COBR meetings to facilitate rapid co-ordination of the central government response and effective decision-making.
- 6.4 A structured approach is necessary for deciding whether to activate COBR crisis management arrangements, ensuring thorough consideration and a unified understanding across government. The activation of COBR crisis management arrangements sends a clear signal that a certain event or situation requires the re-prioritisation of resources to manage the situation and deliver response objectives.
- 6.5 The decision to activate COBR crisis management arrangements will be taken by the Prime Minister's Office, on the advice of the Cabinet Office and the LGD. Typically, this decision will be based on either the LGD escalating to Cabinet Office that there is a requirement to enter into these arrangements to support the co-ordination of the government response, or based on the Cabinet Office's own assessment that the event meets the thresholds for a COBR response.
- 6.6 For every situation there will need to be a consideration on whether the COBR crisis management arrangements are the most appropriate means of controlling and co-ordinating the response. However, while there is no presumption in favour of activating the central response, in cases of doubt it is generally better to do so even if it is subsequently stood down.
- 6.7 The chronological phased approach to activating COBR to respond to an acute crisis is detailed in the following section and illustrated in [Figure 7](#).

Figure 7: Indicative COBR activation process flow diagram



Notification of incident

- 6.8 Cabinet Office will be notified of an incident typically through several routes:
- reporting of an incident from the LGD or wider government departments, agencies and bodies
 - notification of contingency and national security developments requiring an urgent response from the National Security Watchkeepers, which provide a standing 24/7 horizon scanning capability
 - hitting pre-agreed thresholds defined in risk activation guides, response plans, or concepts of operation
 - direct reporting from local responders
 - open source monitoring of external sources of information such as media outlets
- 6.9 An incident may be considered as either rising tide that evolves to become a crisis over time, or rapid onset which occurs with a minimal amount of warning and immediately meets the threshold of a COBR response. This classification will determine the appropriate course of action and the speed at which the remaining steps are taken.
- 6.10 Depending on the nature of the incident, the Cabinet Office will undertake targeted engagement with the LGD and other necessary departments and agencies to increase situational awareness and increase understanding of the risk picture.
- 6.11 If the incident is deemed sufficiently serious, further information on the emerging incident will be shared with relevant ministers and senior officials in a timely manner.

Incident assessment

- 6.12 Once notified of an incident, Cabinet Office will undertake an initial assessment to determine the scale and nature of the incident, alongside the appropriate level of the strategic response required to co-ordinate and direct the response.
- 6.13 Based on the guiding thresholds for activating central crisis management arrangements set out in [Chapter 2](#), this assessment will consider:
- whether the event threatens or involves serious harm to human welfare, the environment, or infrastructure and wider critical services
 - the number of sectors and departmental interests impacted by the event
 - whether the characteristics of the situation surpasses the capacity of the LGD to co-ordinate the central government response through their own structures
 - the levels of parliamentary, media and public interest
 - the impact to British interests and British nationals overseas (where relevant)

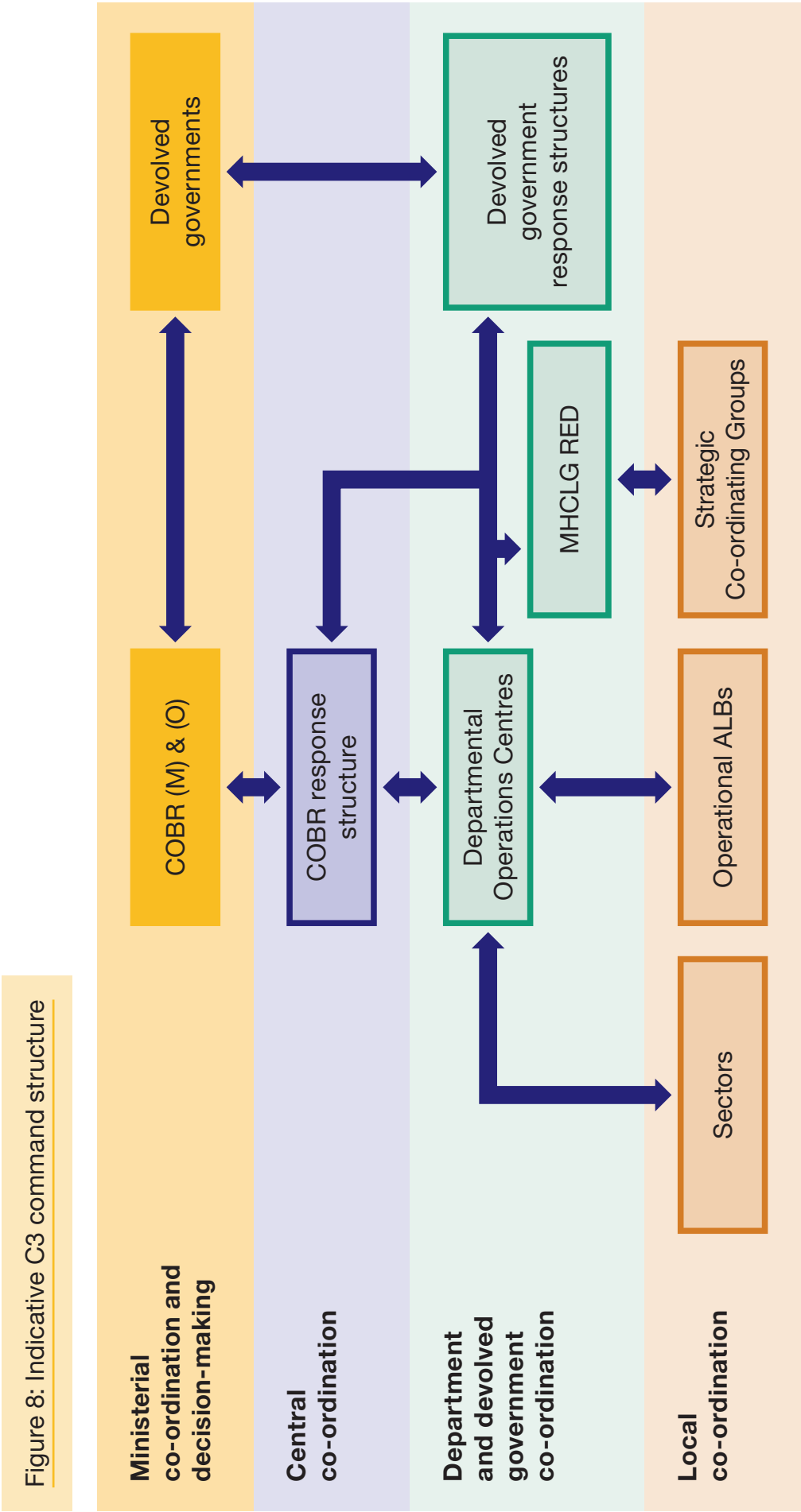
- 6.14 If either pre-defined triggers within response plans are met or the incident is assessed to meet the threshold for entering into COBR crisis management arrangements, the Cabinet Office will provide advice to the Prime Minister's Office to enter into COBR crisis management arrangements and hold a COBR meeting.
- 6.15 In contrast, if a decision is taken not to activate the COBR mechanism, the LGD will continue to provide the central co-ordination of the response to the emerging risk or emergency. Cabinet Office will consider how it could support the LGD to respond to the issue and will continue to monitor the situation in case of a future requirement to escalate co-ordination to COBR.

COBR activated

- 6.16 Should a decision be taken to hold a COBR meeting the Cabinet Office will have responsibility for agreeing with the chair, in consultation with the Prime Minister's Office, the time and date of the first COBR meeting, attendees and the agenda. A calling notice will be issued by the Cabinet Office to relevant departments, wider organisations and stakeholders as appropriate.
- 6.17 As soon as practical the Cabinet Office will formally notify relevant departments, agencies and, where appropriate, the devolved governments that COBR crisis management arrangements have been entered into. Supporting functions and teams that will provide specialist input – such as legal, communications, intelligence, commercial – will also be notified if there is a requirement for their support. The Cabinet Office at the earliest opportunity will seek to clarify clear roles and responsibilities, structures and the expected rhythm of meetings and data requirements going forward.
- 6.18 The Cabinet Office will stand up its response structure which will include a secretariat function, establishing the initial composition of the team as well as rotas for future shifts.
- 6.19 For a rapid-onset crisis, the Cabinet Office will undertake crisis framing at the earliest opportunity to inform the activation process.

Central government C3 structure for acute response

- 6.20 While the nature of the crisis will determine the exact C3 structure which will be established for the response, the overarching structure for the acute response is summarised in Figure 8. For international crises, these structures also include Embassies and/or High Commissions.



COBR

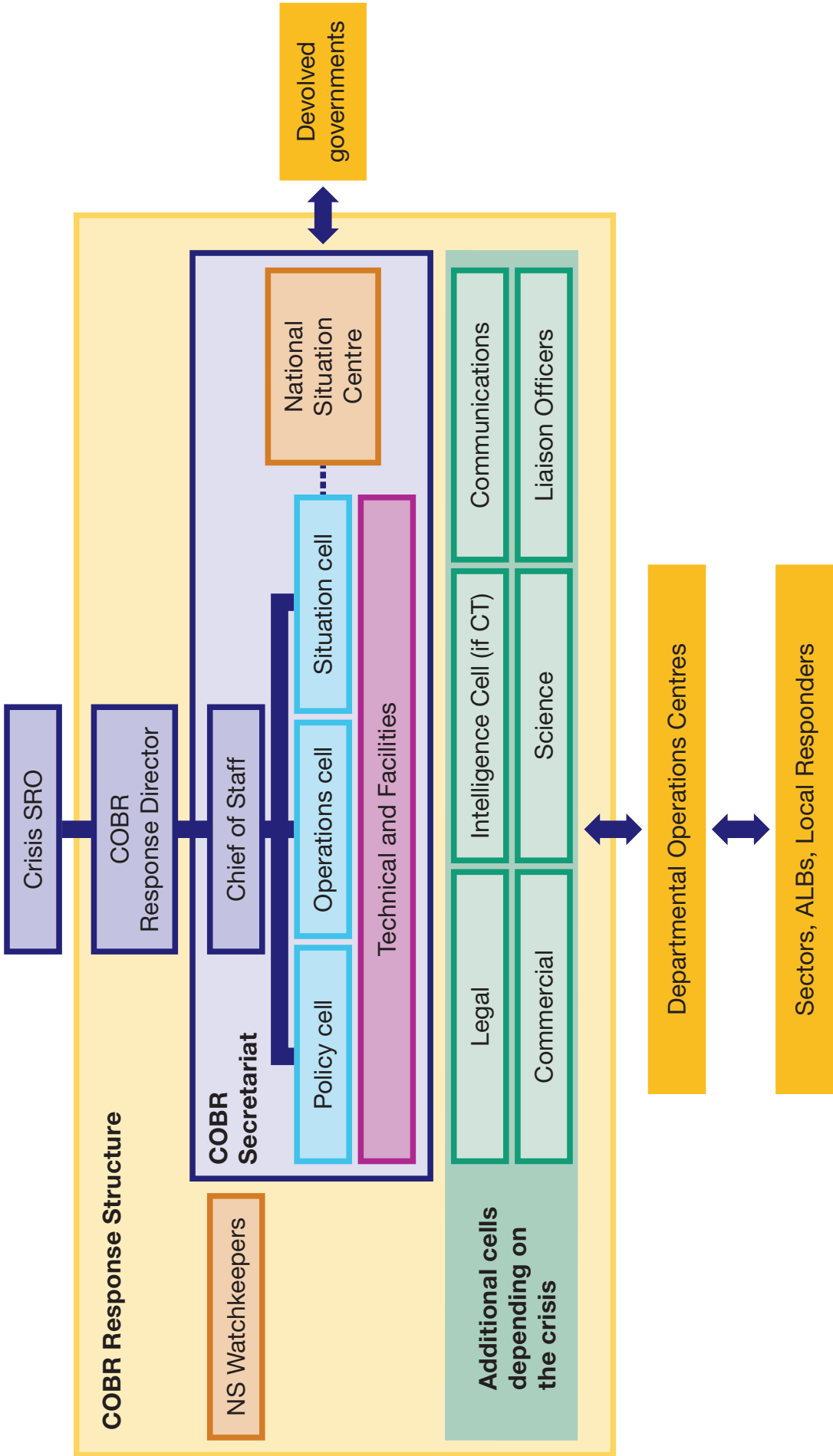
- 6.21 COBR is the primary organisational structure for agreeing and co-ordinating the central government's acute response to major emergencies. It is a Cabinet committee which facilitates urgent collective agreement to respond to the crisis.
- 6.22 During the acute response phase, COBR will meet regularly during the response with the rhythm of meetings being determined by the nature of the crisis and the requirement for collective ministerial decision-making. COBR acts as the principal structure for setting the direction of the response, taking strategic decisions, and co-ordinating the whole-of-government response to the emergency. Further information on the purpose and function of COBR can be found in [Chapter 3](#).

COBR meetings operations

- 6.23 To facilitate effective decision-making through COBR and ensure that the decisions taken are delivered in line with ministerial intent, the COBR response structure will be stood up. The COBR response structure will be stood up to provide the secretariat function for COBRs, centrally co-ordinate response activities across government, and respond to the consequences of the crisis for issues falling within the Cabinet Office's area of responsibility. The two sections below detail the role and responsibility of the COBR response structure and the conventions and procedures of COBRs. [Figure 9](#) illustrates the composition of the COBR response structure, which is detailed in the following section.

COBR response structure

Figure 9: Indicative COBR response structure



- 6.24 The COBR Response Director will have overall responsibility for the composition and activities of the COBR response structure. While the response structure's composition will need to be flexible, it will always contain the COBR Secretariat overseen by the COBR Chief of Staff. The COBR response structure will also provide the technical support for the effective functioning of the COBR facility and running of COBR meetings.
- 6.25 Depending on the nature of the crisis, additional plug-in functions may be established to co-ordinate specialist requirements for the response, such as communications, legal advice, intelligence and commercial activities.
- 6.26 The COBR Secretariat will always contain three cells – operations, policy and situation. This secretariat function will support the effective functioning of COBR meetings and co-ordinate cross-government activity within the C3 system. The COBR Secretariat will work closely with other parts of Cabinet Office, where relevant, to support decision-making through COBR.
- 6.27 The Chief of Staff will report to the COBR Response Director and ensure the effective functioning of the mechanics of the crisis response. Their specific responsibilities will include:
- overseeing the operation of the operations, policy and situation cells, ensuring they are effectively working together
 - clearing situation reports, agendas, chair's briefs, actions and other ad-hoc papers
 - chairing cross-government meetings and handover meetings for each shift
 - ensuring the welfare of all response staff on shift
 - overseeing continuous improvement of response processes with the Operations Lead
 - representing the response, briefing ministers and overseeing policy prioritisation
- 6.28 Within the COBR Secretariat, the responsibilities of the three cells will include:

Situation cell

- managing the information flows between COBR and departments/other stakeholders as required
- gathering information, data and maps (via the National Situation Centre) relating to the crisis to accurately assess whether the response is being delivered to plan, highlighting strategic risks to inform decisions on cross-government co-ordination
- developing and maintaining a Commonly Recognised Information Picture (CRIP) in support of COBR

Policy cell

- supporting COBR and other meetings as required with a secretariat function, taking minutes and capturing live actions
- identifying issues and providing policy advice for their resolution
- escalating issues coming up through the C3 system that need to be exposed to ministers and senior officials, and pushing back on issues that should be solved at a lower level
- co-ordinating working groups to inform COBR decisions, focusing on issues escalated through the C3 system and those which have cross-cutting impacts

Operations cell

- overseeing the daily rhythm, ensuring reports and meetings are delivered on time
- managing physical operations including staffing levels and shift rosters (24/7), facilities, security, IT
- capturing lessons, resolving issues, amending guidance and overseeing governance structures (with the policy cell)
- establishing effective information management processes for meetings to ensure effective record keeping for materials that will form part of the historic record of government

6.29 Co-location is a critical component of facilitating effective crisis response. In certain instances, it might be appropriate for departments and additional plug-in functions to deploy liaison officers to the COBR response structures to represent their department's interests and provide a dedicated escalation/dissemination point between their department's DOC and the COBR response structure. Equally, a member of the COBR response structure may be deployed to a DOC – most likely that of the LGD – or to the local response to provide support and spot the early identification of issues which might require central attention and escalation to COBR.

National Situation Centre (SitCen)

6.30 Access to situational awareness supported by data is crucial for senior decision makers during emergencies. It helps them understand the situation and its immediate, short-term and long-term impacts. Presenting data from various sources in a clear and effective manner speeds up interpretation and decision-making. This data provides a factual basis to support policy, open source information and intelligence reports.

6.31 The SitCen is embedded within the situation cell to provide the central co-ordination of the data, analytical and open source intelligence elements of situational awareness. Its responsibilities include:

- co-ordinating the collection and processing of data from departments, to provide integrated situational awareness for COBR meetings
- enhancing the availability of data-led insights by co-ordinating stakeholders across and beyond government to improve the identification, provision and reporting of data during a crisis
- responding to commissions for data-led insights during an emergency

6.32 To facilitate effective data sharing during crises, government operates to the data sharing principles enshrined in the Office for National Statistics' **'Data sharing for national crisis response' guidance**.³⁹ Several tools have been developed by SitCen to support this, including the Data, Analytics and Situational Awareness Hub (DASH) and the Risk and Insight Navigator (RaIN). Data liaison officers – assigned by departments – provide clear routes for discussing the sharing of data in a crisis.

Procedures of COBR

6.33 The COBR Secretariat is responsible for the operation and delivery of COBR meetings. The section below details key arrangements and conventions for running a COBR meeting.

Agenda

6.34 The COBR Secretariat, working with other parts of the Cabinet Office, will prepare an agenda for each COBR meeting, for agreement of the chair. Typically, the agenda will include an update on the situation, consideration of the government's response, and what the government's communication strategy is.

Papers

6.35 The COBR Secretariat is responsible for setting standards for the form and content of papers provided to COBR meetings. Papers will be circulated by the COBR Secretariat as soon as feasibly possible, to give attendees sufficient time for consideration ahead of the meeting.

6.36 Papers for COBR meetings should include any information that is needed for ministers to make an informed decision. They should be concise and should set out the benefits, disadvantages and risks associated with the proposed policy or operational advice. Any decisions that need to be made by ministers should be clear. Where a paper does not reach the appropriate standard, the COBR Secretariat may refuse the paper, substitute their own note, or produce a cover sheet to the paper, highlighting the key issues for ministerial consideration. Papers may be cleared by the chair of COBR, ahead of circulation to attendees.

³⁹ Office for National Statistics, 'Data sharing for national crisis response', 2023, available at: <https://analysisfunction.civilservice.gov.uk/policy-store/data-sharing-for-national-crisis-response/>

Minutes, actions and decisions

- 6.37 As with other Cabinet and Cabinet committee meetings, minutes are taken for COBR meetings and these form part of the historic record of government. They record the main points made in discussion and the conclusions as summed up by the chair. It is the responsibility of the COBR Secretariat to take minutes for COBR meetings, however, these are not circulated to attendees.
- 6.38 The COBR Secretariat is responsible for capturing and issuing actions agreed at COBR. This will be done very rapidly following the meeting. These actions will often be captured and displayed live in COBR meetings by the COBR Secretariat.

Implementation of decisions

- 6.39 Ministers are responsible for ensuring that their departments take whatever action is necessary to implement decisions made at COBR, and for reporting back to colleagues on progress if needed.

Attendance of ministers

- 6.40 The Ministerial Code states that Cabinet and Cabinet committee meetings take precedence over all other ministerial business apart from the Privy Council, although it is understood that ministers may sometimes have to be absent for reasons of parliamentary business or due to international commitments.⁴⁰
- 6.41 Where a minister is unable to attend a COBR meeting they may, with the consent of the chair, nominate a junior minister to attend instead. This will normally be another minister from the same department, who should be given the authority by the delegating minister to make decisions that are binding on their department.

Seating plan

- 6.42 The seating arrangement at COBR meetings will be approved by the Chief of Staff for the COBR Secretariat.

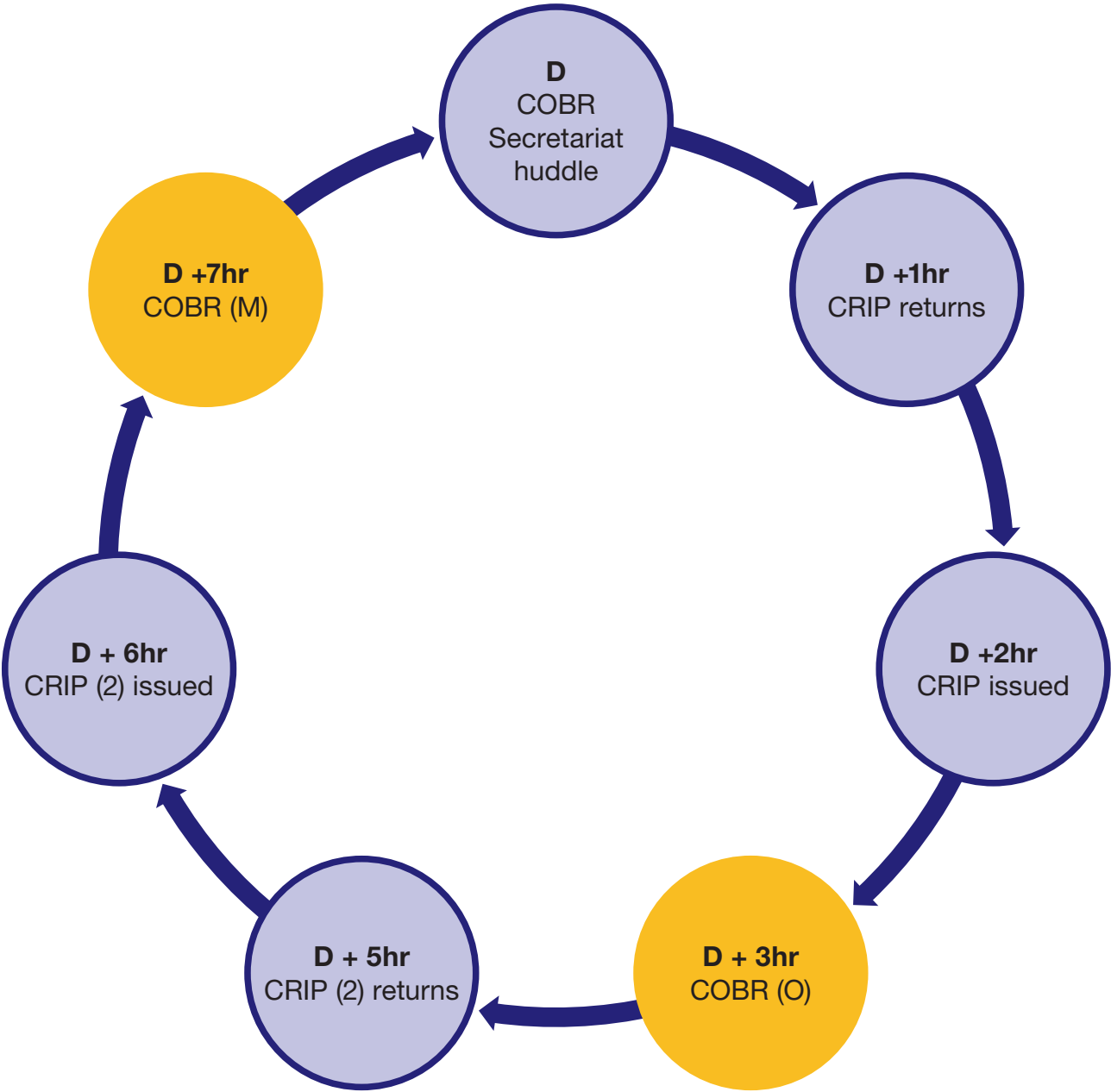
Daily rhythm

- 6.43 Upon a COBR activation, the Cabinet Office in consultation with the LGD and the Prime Minister's Office will determine:
- the synchronisation of activities between national, regional and local partners
 - which departments need to be represented in COBR
 - the frequency meetings will need to take place
- 6.44 This could be on a 24/7 basis for the initial period of the crisis.

⁴⁰ Cabinet Office, 'Ministerial Code', 2022, available at:
www.gov.uk/government/publications/ministerial-code

6.45 Departments, the local response and the devolved governments – where appropriate – should plan to and align their activity to the agreed daily rhythm. The daily rhythm may need adjustments as the situation evolves. The COBR Secretariat will promptly communicate changes to relevant departments and devolved governments. However, all parties are expected to be ready to provide updates and attend meetings at short notice as required.

Figure 10: Indicative daily rhythm from day 2



Provision of scientific and technical advice in emergencies through the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

- 6.46 The effective management of many crises will require access to specialist scientific and technical advice. This could be regarding the public health or environmental implications of a release of toxic material, the spread of a disease or the differential impact of an emergency based on the socio-economic status of individuals and communities.
- 6.47 Many departments and agencies have access to specialist scientific and technical advice to support the delivery of their core business and duties. All will have processes in place to ensure such advice is available to those who need it in the course of everyday business, including arrangements to liaise with other agencies as necessary. However, in an emergency, such arrangements are often strained by the pace and complexity of the issues arising coupled, particularly in the initial stages, with difficulty getting timely and accurate information on the situation.
- 6.48 SAGE provides scientific and technical advice to support government decision makers during COBR responses.⁴¹ SAGE is responsible for ensuring that timely and co-ordinated, independent scientific advice is made available to support cross-government decisions during crises, generally through provision of advice to COBR. SAGE does not cover the co-ordination, provision or use of other types of advice during emergencies, such as economic assessments and information from the intelligence agencies. For example, the Joint Intelligence Organisation will co-ordinate intelligence assessments.
- 6.49 SAGE would usually be chaired by the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA) or a departmental Chief Scientific Adviser, as appropriate. In emergencies featuring a significant public health dimension, it may be appropriate for the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) to co-chair SAGE.
- 6.50 The GCSA and the SAGE Secretariat sit within Government Office for Science. The SAGE Secretariat supports SAGE in providing independent scientific and technical advice to support government decision makers during crises.
- 6.51 Decisions on activating a SAGE would be taken by the Cabinet Office in consultation with the Government Office for Science and the LGD. Typically, SAGE meets in advance of COBR and the GCSA then represents SAGE at COBR.
- 6.52 A precautionary SAGE may be called by the GCSA if an early consideration of science questions is required for an escalating or imminent risk that has not yet required a COBR. Precautionary SAGE meetings can benefit the early phase of the response if the risk does lead to a crisis requiring COBR and SAGE.

41 Cabinet Office, 'Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) Guidance', 2024, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/scientific-advisory-group-for-emergencies-sage-guidance

- 6.53 SAGE provides advice but does not take decisions on policies or operational issues. The advice provided by SAGE does not represent government policy. Advice from SAGE should be considered by decision makers alongside other specialist and broader policy advice in order to make decisions based on the best available evidence.
- 6.54 While in most circumstances SAGE and scientific and technical cells (which co-ordinate scientific and technical advice at a local level) don't operate at the same time, if they are both operating due to need for co-ordinated advice at both a national and level local, interaction arrangements would be defined by the Government Office for Science and UK Health Security Agency.
- 6.55 Data analysis may also be important for the generation of science advice. LGDs and SitCen should make best endeavours to share data and analysis with SAGE to inform critical science advice in an emergency.

Box 8: Case study of a precautionary SAGE during the outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in domestic livestock in the United States, 2024

A precautionary SAGE (pre-SAGE) was called in 2024 as part of the government response to the outbreak of HPAI in domestic livestock in the United States. A pre-SAGE was activated by the GCSA to help co-ordinate scientific advice across both animal and human health to support government and enhance UK preparedness for this risk.

The pre-SAGE covered key areas of scientific and technological uncertainty surrounding the outbreak, as well as thresholds for further action. It was attended by key officials and experts from across government and external to government. The pre-SAGE helped form government's understanding of the status of the outbreak and risk to the UK.

Departmental Operations Centre (DOC)

- 6.56 DOCs act as the central co-ordination structure and single point of contact for each department during a collective response to a crisis. Departments involved in the response have responsibility for the activation and maintenance of their DOCs. Departments will also stand up their DOCs – or may operate them as a permanent function to also co-ordinate preparedness activities – to respond to incidents outside of the activation COBR crisis management arrangements.
- 6.57 DOCs will be expected to:
- provide timely situation reporting to the COBR Secretariat on impacts to their sectors for inclusion in the CRIP
 - ensure appropriate ministerial or senior official attendance at meetings, providing sufficient briefing for them to deliver their responsibilities
 - co-ordinate their department's response to commissions and deliver actions assigned to them from COBR

- co-ordinate their departmental response to impacts and wider issues falling under their area of responsibility
- escalate emerging risks or concerns to the centre as they emerge, while adhering to the principle of subsidiarity
- align their activities with the agreed daily rhythm set by the COBR Secretariat

6.58 DOCs are also responsible for ensuring appropriate records of actions and decisions are taken, as well as securing and storing all data and information that might underpin decision-making.

6.59 Departments are expected to have arrangements in place to be able to sustain their response, including arrangements to resource the response and protect the welfare of staff. Further information on expectations for resourcing and staff welfare can be found in [Chapter 8](#).

Devolved governments

6.60 In response to crises impacting their nations, the devolved governments will establish their own response structures in parallel to UK government response structures to handle impacts for which they have devolved responsibility. Even in crises relating to issues in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland which are devolved, there may be potential opportunities for UK government to provide support using reserved levers which interact or enable devolved lever actions.

6.61 The exact arrangements for how UK central government work with the devolved governments will be determined by the nature of the crisis, both in terms of where it occurs and whether its consequences are devolved or reserved.

6.62 The section below details arrangements for how the UK government ensures that it takes a partnership approach between all parts of the UK when responding to crises.

Working with the devolved governments

6.63 Where a crisis in a devolved policy area spans across administrative borders, UK government and relevant devolved government(s) will lead response within their own respective territories in accordance with their own response structures and devolution agreements, but will take steps to establish close partnerships and co-ordinate an effective response.

6.64 In this circumstance, Cabinet Office would typically enact the following arrangements:

- activate established links with the civil contingencies structure in the devolved government
- invite devolved government(s) ministers and officials to relevant meetings, including COBR where appropriate – this would typically be the case where the crisis impacts, or has the potential to impact, the devolved government

- where appropriate, request situation reports from the devolved government to feed into the development of the CRIP to ensure a UK-wide appreciation of the situation
- where appropriate, situational awareness products would be shared with devolved government(s) to ensure a shared situational awareness – this would typically be the case when there is a benefit in having a joint understanding of impacts being felt across the UK
- actively look to support the co-ordination of response activities where appropriate to ensure a joined-up approach is taken to managing consequences which impact multiple parts of the UK
- deploy a liaison officer, if required, to represent UK government ministers' views and facilitate the exchange of information and likewise host devolved government liaison officers
- if required, assist in the liaison with any other countries impacted by the crisis, e.g. the Irish Government
- engage on public communication strategies to, where possible, achieve consistency in public messaging – the devolved governments will co-ordinate, as appropriate, with the public communications strategies of local responders in their area

6.65 Where a crisis is reserved, COBR would co-ordinate the response being led by the UK government. The devolved government would still enact their own civil contingencies arrangements to co-ordinate their own response activities and management of consequences which are devolved.

6.66 In these circumstances, Cabinet Office would typically enact the following arrangements:

- activate established links with the civil contingencies structure in the devolved government
- inviting devolved government(s) ministers and officials to relevant meetings, including COBR where appropriate
- where appropriate, requesting situation reports from the devolved government(s) to feed into the development of the CRIP to ensure a UK-wide appreciation of the situation
- where possible, situational awareness products would be shared with devolved government(s) to ensure a shared situational awareness
- supporting close working between the LGD for the reserved matter and the impacted devolved government(s), to ensure coherent consequence management for both devolved and reserved matters
- engaging on public communication strategies to support the co-ordination of messaging whenever there are devolved aspects to the response
- representatives from the devolved governments may also where appropriate be deployed to the COBR response structure and vice versa

- 6.67 Further core information on how UK government works with the devolved governments can be found in Appendix G.

Strategic Co-ordinating Group (SCG)

- 6.68 The purpose of SCG is to take overall responsibility for the multi-agency management of an incident at a local level and establish a strategic framework, within which lower levels of command and co-ordinating groups will work.⁴²
- 6.69 The activation of COBR to provide strategic direction for the national response does not remove the local strategic perspective from the local level, rather they consider only those issues and dimensions where value can be added by a broader or higher-level perspective. For this reason, a local strategic perspective and role (i.e. the SCG) can be distinguished from the UK national perspective where national strategic issues may bear on the crisis response.

Working with the local response

- 6.70 The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has primary responsibility for providing the liaison function between central government and the local response. This will include sharing information between central government and the local tiers, escalating issues that require decisions from central government, and providing advice to COBR on the deployment of scarce resources and assets across affected areas. MHCLG ministers and officials will play an important role in facilitating the flow of information between central government and the local response at response meetings, including COBR.
- 6.71 When COBR is activated, or in other situations where there is a significant central government role, a Government Liaison Officer (GLO) will normally provide primary liaison channel between departments and local responders in the affected SCG. The GLO will normally be from the MHCLG. In some cases, such as a terrorist or nuclear crisis, a multi-disciplinary Government Liaison team will support the GLO. Nominated staff from departments should have sufficient training, expertise and seniority to command the respect of senior local responders and ministers.
- 6.72 The GLO will be responsible for facilitating the exchange of information between responders and central government, support local strategic decision-making and the escalation of any issues to Cabinet Office and/or other government departments for resolution. Using MHCLG as the main point of contact reduces the risk of duplicated requests from different central government departments, thereby minimising the burden on local responders. Where required by the scale or duration of the emergency, MHCLG will draw on staff and expertise from across MHCLG and other government departments.⁴³

42 Further information on roles and responsibilities of the different levels of command at a local level can be found at JESIP, 'Roles and Responsibilities', 2022, available at: www.jesip.org.uk/downloads/roles-responsibilities/

43 Further information on how central government works with the local response can be found in Appendix E.

- 6.73 Arm's length bodies will also, where appropriate, attend SCGs given their role within the operational response.

Key elements of an acute emergency response

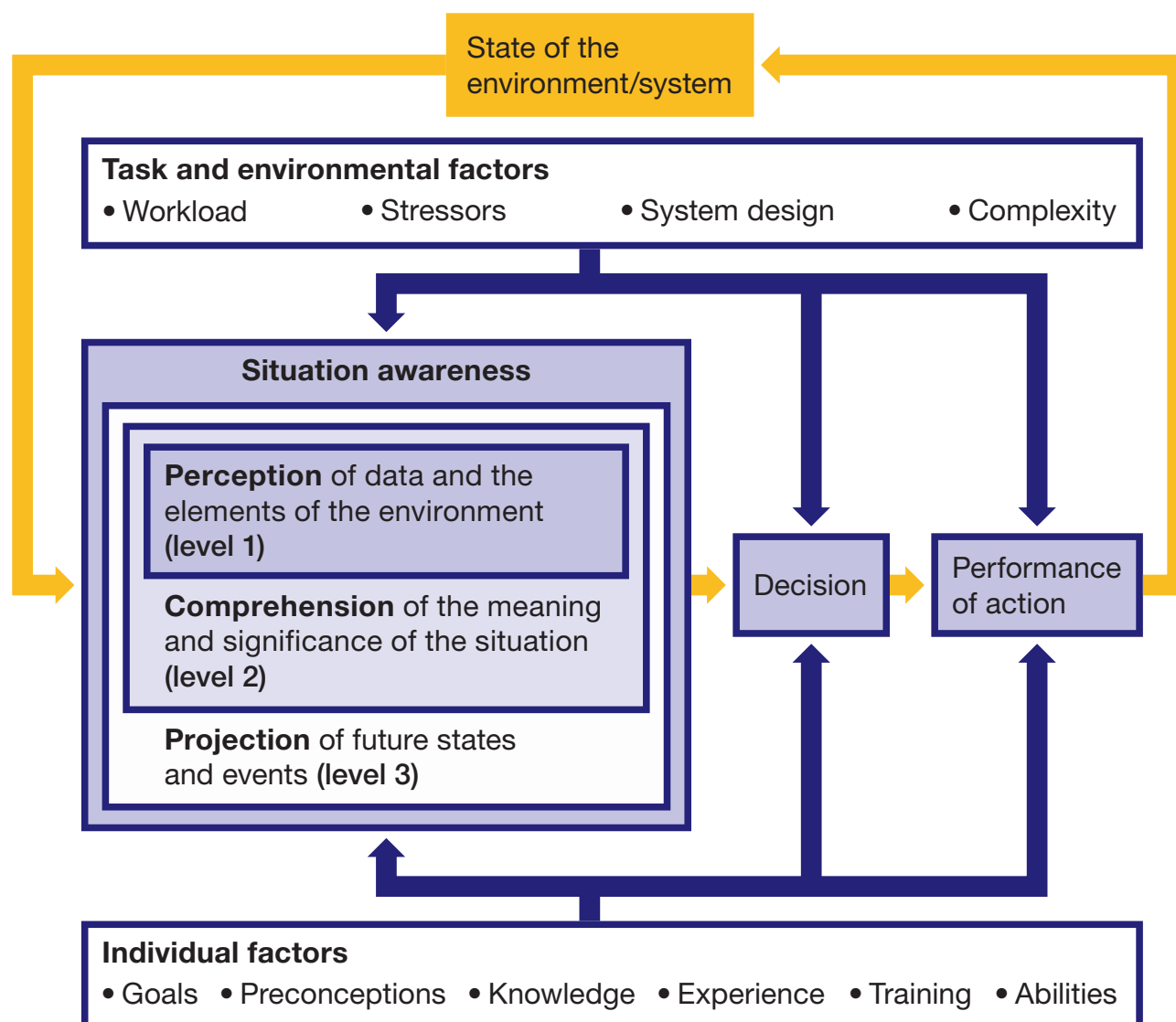
- 6.74 This section details key elements of delivering an acute emergency response through the COBR mechanism.

Data-driven shared situational awareness

- 6.75 A prerequisite for effective decision-making in a crisis is establishing a shared situational awareness, which has 3 main components:⁴⁴
- **Perception:** understanding what has occurred, what's happening now, and actions taken.
 - **Comprehension:** understanding the implications and broader impacts of an emergency.
 - **Projection:** anticipating future developments to enable decisions to be made on what is needed to be done now to prepare for future impacts.
- 6.76 This model is detailed in [Figure 11](#), which demonstrates how these three components influence decision-making and the performance of action; and are influenced by a combination of individual factors (such as preconceptions and knowledge/experience), and task and environmental factors (such as workload and stress).

44 Model is taken from Mica R Endsley, 'Toward a Theory of Situation Awareness in Dynamic Systems', 1995, Human Factors Journal 37(1), pages 32 to 64

Figure 11: Model of situation awareness in dynamic decision-making



- 6.77 The situation cell in the COBR Secretariat has responsibility for ensuring that there is a single, immediate, authoritative overview of the current situation available to decision makers, and will achieve this by providing decision makers with a Commonly Recognised Information Picture (CRIP) and the exploitation of data. The CRIP will consist of information relating both to the scene and significant wider impacts, including facts and figures, the main developments and decisions, trends, and upcoming decision points. This will be supported by data and analytics from the SitCen.
- 6.78 The CRIP will be on screens in COBR and briefed at the beginning of key meetings and shared as far as possible with those involved in the response.
- 6.79 To ensure accurate and timely information is available in the CRIP, the Cabinet Office will request situation reports from other government departments, devolved governments and agencies as appropriate, providing a national summary of nationally managed or co-ordinated services.

- 6.80 The situation cell should have clear reporting routes from departments and their sectors, local partners and the devolved governments. Alongside this, the situation cell would be expected to maintain an analysis and challenge function to ensure that information received is accurate and to challenge departments when reporting is not aligned with expected planning assumptions.
- 6.81 For crises which have cross-border impacts, the CRIP should provide information on the situation across impacted nations within the UK, even for matters which are devolved. This will enable a shared understanding of how impacts are being felt and managed across the UK, facilitating a more joined-up approach to managing the crisis.
- 6.82 A number of data products may be produced by the SitCen to support decision-making during a crisis. These include, but are not limited to:
- contributions to the CRIP, as part of the COBR response structure to provide shared situational awareness across those involved in a centrally-managed crisis
 - visual briefing aids, using data and other sources to provide wider contextual awareness of a centrally-managed emergency response
 - data snapshots, providing a concise overview of the situation at a given point
 - interactive products, either for a particular meeting or to support decision makers elsewhere
 - cross-government dashboards, providing a single-source of the truth across departments

Specialist advice

- 6.83 Effective decision-making is reliant on access to specialist advice and expertise, ensuring decisions are informed by expert insights, additional perspectives and diversity of thought. Expertise exists within government (government lawyers, intelligence agencies, communication professionals etc.) external to it (representatives from the third sector, private sector and trade bodies) and a combination of both (such as the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, which can include both Government Scientific Advisers and external academics).
- 6.84 In many cases, relevant specialisms which could support the crisis response sit within departments and/or their associated agencies or public bodies. Where a department assesses that they possess a relevant specialist function which could support the response, they should communicate this to the COBR Secretariat to ensure there is appropriate awareness.
- 6.85 The Crisis SRO, with the support of the COBR Secretariat, will be responsible for considering appropriate sources of expertise and the most appropriate vehicles for integrating specialist expertise into rounded advice that brings out decisions, trade-offs and uncertainties. Consideration should also be given to how to ensure diversity of thought is introduced to mitigate groupthink and other common biases.

Operational response

- 6.86 The requirement will depend on the nature of the emergency. In most cases, local responders will lead the operational response to an emergency with the government providing support. However, in some circumstances, the UK central government itself may be the lead responder.
- 6.87 Irrespective of where the lead lies, any central government contribution to the operational response will usually be led by the LGD, involving other organisations as necessary.
- 6.88 For crises emanating from a domestic terrorist attack or other significant national security incident, the immediate central government operational response will be led by the Home Office as the LGD working closely with operational partners, including the police, emergency responders and where applicable intelligence agencies.

Human aspects

- 6.89 During response, the exact nature of impacts will depend on the specific crisis and the local context. The changing nature of a crisis requires decision makers to keep their assessment of impacts under review and apply appropriate control measures. Primary and cascading impacts from crises will require consideration as part of dynamic risk assessment processes.
- 6.90 New information about vulnerable groups should be shared between organisations involved in the response – both across central government and between the local and national tier – to ensure continued and effective interoperability and for consideration of actions needed to mitigate further impacts to affected and at-risk groups.
- 6.91 Decision makers should consider the types of general and tailored support required by individuals and communities impacted by a crisis and how that support will be provided. For example, a consideration of how a crisis impacts children and their differing needs to adults. Depending on the circumstances of the crisis there may be a need to consider prioritisation of support to individuals and communities with specific needs.
- 6.92 The National Situation Centre in conjunction with the Office for National Statistics has developed a Risk Vulnerability Tool. This combines key demographic data with how vulnerable those demographics might be to a crisis in the UK – for example people with underlying health conditions that may be more vulnerable to the outbreak of an infectious disease or pandemic. It allows for rapid UK-wide analysis and understanding of the scale and location of disproportionately impacted populations ahead of, and during crises. The tool is accessible to officials in the UK government and the devolved governments through the SitCen's cross-government dashboard.
- 6.93 Decision makers should ensure they are receiving information from voluntary organisations operating within communities about the effects on specific groups and communities. These information flows should be co-ordinated by Departmental Operations Centres.

- 6.94 Consideration should be given to how the government communicates with and listens to vulnerable and at-risk groups in the response to an emergency. The involvement of external organisations who hold information on, or can act as a communications channel to, disproportionately impacted groups is important. Decision makers should actively seek out information from, and communicate with, external organisations who hold information on, or can facilitate communications with, disproportionately impacted groups. In particular, decision makers should engage with voluntary, community and faith organisations, who can often access harder-to-reach or underrepresented sections of local communities, and convey insights about the effects of emergencies on specific groups.
- 6.95 As part of establishing the communications strategy, consideration should be given to audience segmentation and the appropriate channels required to reach those who may be impacted during or after an emergency.
- 6.96 Decision makers must comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010.⁴⁵ This requires public bodies and those exercising public functions to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations when exercising their functions. Government departments must consider PSED as part of their assessment, planning and response for emergencies. As far as is reasonable and practical in an emergency situation, impact assessments should be undertaken to support understanding of the effects of response interventions.

Public communication

- 6.97 An accurate, timely and consistent flow of information to the public and other key stakeholders is essential to maintaining confidence in the response to a crisis and for promoting specific behaviours. Messaging should prioritise factual advice over reassurance, focusing on the efficacy of recommended actions and acknowledging uncertainty and ambiguity. Consideration should be given to the accessibility and cultural needs of specific audiences, with a particular focus on individuals and communities most likely to be disadvantaged by the crisis.
- 6.98 The lead department's press office will lead on public messaging in support of the Lead Minister. However, where a crisis has wide ranging impacts or gives rise to considerable public and media interest, the Cabinet Office will provide strategic support and additional resources.⁴⁶ This reflects the Crisis Communications Operating Model principle of where possible keeping crisis management responsibilities with the LGD, rather than taking them into Cabinet Office.
- 6.99 The Cabinet Office will provide strategic support and guidance at various levels depending on the nature and demands of the emergency. The duties can include:
- advising the lead department on media handling

45 Legislation.gov.uk, 'Equalities Act 2010', available at: www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents

46 Cabinet Office, 'Crisis Communications Operating Model', 2023, available at: <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/crisis-communications-operating-model/>

- compiling and maintaining a ‘top lines brief’ summarising the key facts and messages for distribution to ministers and others involved in the response at a national and local level
- briefing COBR meetings on media handling, narrative, key messages and public polling, analysis and sentiment tracking
- developing a coherent public information strategy for consideration by COBR in conjunction with local responders and government departments
- establishing a fully functioning cross-government communications hub in support of the policy direction from COBR and ministers

6.100 In a COBR response, the Cabinet Office will handle all requests to government for information on the crisis to ensure public messaging is clear, coherent and consistent across UK government. Messaging will be developed with local resilience forums and devolved governments as required, to ensure comms are co-ordinated across different tiers of government and across the UK and to ensure the territorial extent of the response is clearly communicated.

6.101 Decisions on the level of support required from the Government Communication Service (GCS) will be taken by GCS in consultation with the LGD and the Prime Minister’s Office.

6.102 The UK government also provides information to help the public prepare for emergencies, be informed about hazards, and get involved in activities to support community resilience before, during and after an emergency on its website **Prepare**.

Emergency alerts

6.103 The emergency alerts cell broadcast system is an important additional capability that the UK government can use to alert the public about emergencies and crises. Examples of when the system has been used include in February 2024 to warn residents in Plymouth of a cordon that would be deployed to facilitate the movement of an unexploded World War 2 bomb, and during Storms Darragh (December 2024) and Éowyn (January 2025).⁴⁷

6.104 To request an emergency alert, the following thresholds must be met:

- lives must be at risk
- the situation is urgent
- action is needed
- there is a defined location to be targeted

6.105 Strategic Co-ordinating Groups, Gold Commanders (at the local tier) and the devolved governments can request an emergency alert from the Cabinet Office.

47 Further information on past alerts is available at: www.gov.uk/alerts/past-alerts

Intelligence assessment

- 6.106** Intelligence is a key input into decision-making for UK government and is regularly fed into COBR meetings through the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO). The JIO provides authoritative, all-source assessment for the Prime Minister and senior policy makers to support their decision-making on national security and foreign policy priorities.
- 6.107** During COBR responses, the JIO will:
- produce high level intelligence assessment to inform decision-making
 - inform planning assumptions based on key judgements in the intelligence assessments, which can be used by those involved in the contingency and impact planning work at national, regional and potentially local level
 - set and co-ordinate COBR intelligence requirements
 - co-ordinate the effort of the intelligence agencies to meet this requirement
- 6.108** To aid planning for known events, a COBR intelligence cell can be established, working under the direction of the Director of the Assessments Staff, who will provide an intelligence cell manager responsible for the management of the cell. Input will be determined by the nature of the incident and expertise will be pulled from the relevant assessment bodies. In instances of terror-related responses, the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre will be responsible for informing COBR of threat levels and will also produce wider background briefs. The COBR intelligence cell assessment will be used to inform key documents such as the CRIP and scenario planning.

Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA)

- 6.109** MACA policy supports the government's intent to provide an effective response to all types of emergencies and crises at national, devolved, sub-national and local levels.⁴⁸ For emergencies or crises which necessitate it, central government departments or civil authorities may request military assistance as part of their co-ordinated multi-agency response to augment local responders, although this should always be considered a last resort.
- 6.110** The provision of Defence assistance is governed by four core principles:
- there is a definite need to act and the tasks the armed forces are being asked to perform are clear
 - other options, including mutual aid and commercial alternatives, have been discounted
 - the civil authority lacks the necessary capability to fulfil the task and it is unreasonable or prohibitively expensive to expect it to develop one

⁴⁸ Ministry of Defence, 'Joint Doctrine Publication 02, UK Operations: the Defence Contribution to Resilience (Fourth Edition)', 2022, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/operations-in-the-uk-a-joint-doctrine-publication

- the civil authority has all or some capability, but it may not be available immediately, or to the required scale, and the urgency of the task requires rapid external support from the Ministry of Defence (MOD)

6.111 If a request for Defence assistance is made through a COBR meeting, there is no requirement for a separate ministerial request by the government department needing Defence support, provided a Defence minister is present to accept the request. Agreement from the LGD to meet costs and indemnify MOD is still required. Moreover, a written request will still be required from the LGD so that all parties are clear on the nature of the assistance effect that has been requested.

6.112 The devolved governments are also able to make MACA requests. Requests from the devolved governments should be channelled through their respective territorial office.

Box 9: Example of Military Aid to the Civil Authorities

In November 2009, exceptionally prolonged and heavy rainfall led to severe flooding across Cumbria. The military response included search and rescue helicopters, which took part in a marathon rescue operation lasting over 11 hours. 67 people across 4 locations in Cockermouth and the surrounding area were rescued. Following the flooding many bridges were washed away or destroyed and the town of Workington was cut in two. 200 Army specialists from the Royal Engineers and other Regular and Territorial Army personnel, including from the local Regional Brigade, built a temporary replacement bridge – in poor weather conditions – to reconnect the two halves of the town.

Legal advice and legislating in a crisis

6.113 Managing a crisis is likely to raise legal issues. Departments and agencies are responsible for ensuring that the advice they provide has been developed, where necessary, with their legal advisors. The Cabinet Office legal team will advise the COBR Secretariat and chair on legal matters, and co-ordinate cross-government legal advice on complex issues. Where appropriate, the views of the Attorney General (as well as the other law officers) will be sought.

6.114 Most crises can be managed effectively within the existing legislative framework. However, inevitably, some crises may give rise to exceptional or novel challenges and may generate circumstances whereby new legislation is required, or existing provisions need to be suspended or amended in order to support the response.

6.115 Where a potential requirement is identified that can be addressed through existing legislation, including provisions available in crises (e.g. amending drivers' hours regulations or taking powers under the Energy Act 1976), the lead department will consider the implications and advise their ministers accordingly consulting with other departments as necessary, including the LGD where they are not also the sponsoring department.

- 6.116** Where requirements cannot be addressed through existing legislation, the LGD, where possible and where time allows, may seek to draft new primary legislation to provide the government with the required legislative powers to manage the consequences of the crisis. Decisions to legislate cannot be taken in isolation and departments should discuss any proposed legislation, as well as associated timescales, with the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Secretariat at the earliest opportunity who will in turn engage the parliamentary Business Managers. The LGD should communicate at the start of the process on whether this legislation is being made on behalf of the devolved governments.
- 6.117** It may be possible for a Bill to be introduced and fast-tracked through Parliament on an expedited timetable. Engagement with devolved governments would be required to expedite any devolved legislative processes.
- 6.118** In circumstances when existing legislation is insufficient and there is not time to make new primary legislation, it may be appropriate to draw on emergency powers which are available under Part 2 of the Civil Contingencies Act (CCA) 2004 to create new secondary legislation. Emergency powers under Part 2 are the last resort option in a range of tools that may be available as part of a response to an emergency, and there are a number of tests which must be met before these powers can be used, which are:
- there must be an emergency (as defined by the CCA 2004 – see Appendix B)
 - the proposed provisions must be necessary
 - the need to make provisions under Part 2 must be urgent
 - emergency provisions must be appropriate and proportionate
- 6.119** Emergency powers under the Act have never been used before and their use would be constitutionally significant. Cabinet Office legal advisers and COBR Unit can advise LGDs on whether the use of powers under Part 2 of the CCA 2004 is appropriate.
- 6.120** A decision to make emergency regulations under powers in Part 2 of the CCA 2004 is subject to the collective agreement of the UK government. The LGD will be responsible for advising the Prime Minister on their use, and lead on drafting and implementing emergency regulations. Where it is not clear which government department is mainly affected, or several departments have a strong interest in handling the emergency, the Cabinet Office will lead on drafting and implementing emergency regulations drawing on relevant expertise (or lead until the Prime Minister appoints a lead department).
- 6.121** Emergency powers under the Act are a reserved matter. Devolved governments must be consulted if the emergency regulations will apply to Scotland, Wales and/or Northern Ireland, unless urgency prevents this. Emergency regulations should be tailored to the devolution settlements, where relevant. While the LGD will be responsible for drafting and making the emergency regulations in consultation with the devolved governments, the territorial offices have overall responsibility for consultation with the devolved governments and ensuring they are kept informed and involved.

Use of public money in an emergency

- 6.122** In crisis response and recovery situations, funding and purchasing decisions often need to be made quickly, while still ensuring transparent and accountable decision-making, getting value for money, and acting lawfully. Strategic finance colleagues within departments must be engaged at the outset of an emergency to provide advice on urgent expenditure. The nature of a crisis means much expenditure will often be classified as ‘novel, contentious or repercussive’, and as such prior agreement from HM Treasury is required before it can be committed.
- 6.123** All spending commitments made during an emergency must be tracked, and departments may need to reprioritise in order to remain within existing budgets. Departments should maintain regular contact with their HM Treasury spending team throughout any crisis in order to keep them apprised of any emergency spending and seek any necessary approvals.
- 6.124** While there is flexibility in a crisis, the key principles surrounding spending controls remain:
- accounting officers remain responsible for their department’s expenditure, and the accounting officer standards of regularity, propriety, value for money and feasibility still apply⁴⁹
 - departments must still comply with Managing Public Money and other rules, including obtaining HM Treasury consent for expenditure as required⁵⁰
 - departments must still have sufficient budget cover to spend, and must still have parliamentary approval via the estimates process
 - departments must still have the necessary legal powers to spend money
- 6.125** Accounting officers are responsible for the management of risks related to their organisation’s expenditure in a crisis. This not only relates to the adherence to accounting officer standards but also exercising judgement around wider risks to public expenditure during an emergency, including fraud risk which is particularly heightened. In situations where it is not possible to meet the standards, it will be necessary for the accounting officer to seek a ministerial direction before expenditure is committed. Accounting officer assessments are an essential tool for evaluating spending choices in these situations.
- 6.126** HM Treasury, Government Risk Profession, and relevant government functions – including the Public Sector Fraud Authority, Government Grant Management Function, and Government Commercial Function – can all provide advice, support and guidance to departments spending public money in an emergency situation, balancing the need to operate at pace with maintaining compliance with legal, regulatory and functional standards, alongside minimising risk.

49 HM Treasury, ‘Accounting officer assessments: guidance’, 2023, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/accounting-officer-assessments

50 HM Treasury, ‘Managing Public Money’, 2023, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65c4a3773f634b001242c6b7/Managing_Public_Money_-_May_2023_2.pdf

- 6.127 Depending on the nature of the crisis, HM Treasury may implement an array of flexibilities to enable rapid expenditure related to the crisis. These will vary depending on the nature of the crisis and should not be pre-empted.
- 6.128 If expenditure is likely to generate budget pressures, departments should discuss this with their HM Treasury spending teams who will be able to advise them on the correct course of action. If a department's estimate does not provide sufficient cash, or a department needs to spend outside its scope, or in advance of legislation – they may seek a contingencies fund advance. This will need to be repaid at the next estimate.
- 6.129 Uncertainties regarding value for money, lack of budget cover or the necessity of departing from normal process may require accounting officers to seek ministerial directions. In such circumstance it is good practice to engage with the Treasury Officer of Accounts.
- 6.130 In a crisis, the UK government delivers and funds the response UK-wide in reserved policy areas. For areas which are devolved in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the relevant devolved government delivers and funds the response from within their budgets (which include block grant funding from the UK government and revenue from devolved taxes, fees and charges). Devolved government block grant funding is primarily calculated through the application of the Barnett formula. When there are changes to Departmental Expenditure Limit funding for UK government departments for areas which are devolved in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, the Barnett formula applies for the devolved governments.
- 6.131 In exceptional cases where existing budgets or funding provided through the Barnett formula is insufficient for a devolved government crisis response in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, HM Treasury can also agree to changes or flexibilities to devolved government funding arrangements. Devolved government crisis management and resilience teams should first discuss their funding needs with their devolved government finance teams at the earliest opportunity. Devolved government finance teams can then engage with their HM Treasury spending team to request changes to existing funding arrangements.

Ethics and decision-making

- 6.132 The **Seven Principles of Public Life** – selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership – outline the ethical standards those working the public sector are expected to adhere to and apply to anyone who works as a public office-holder.⁵¹ These standards apply at all times, including during the government response to a crisis.

51 Committee on Standards in Public Life, 'The Seven Principles of Public Life', 1995, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life. They were first set out by Lord Nolan in 1995 in the first report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life and they are included in a range of codes of conduct across public life.

- 6.133** The **Ministerial Code**, issued by the Prime Minister of the day, sets out the standards of conduct expected of ministers and provides guidance on how they discharge their duties.⁵² It provides guidance on how ministers should act and arrange their affairs in order to uphold these standards. Ministers of the Crown are expected to behave at all times in a way that upholds the highest standards of propriety, including ensuring that no conflict arises, or appears to arise, between their public duties and their private interests.
- 6.134** Civil servants support the government of the day in developing and implementing its policies. The core values of the **Civil Service Code** – integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality – support good government and ensure the highest standards in all that the Civil Service does.⁵³
- 6.135** Alongside the standards of conduct articulated above, where appropriate an ethical framework should be developed to support decision makers to articulate and resolve ethical issues that are identified during the decision-making process. Developing such a framework can introduce a step into the decision-making process which prompts decision makers to consider the ethical dimensions of their decisions and any issues which can cause ‘decision discomfort’.
- 6.136** Where the ethical framework supports the identification of possible concerns regarding the impact of the proposed decision, it allows further consideration of different courses of action and whether escalation is required.

Working with other partners

- 6.137** Crises will almost always require close working and partnerships with stakeholders beyond central government. External stakeholders can provide additional capability, expertise and insights that can inform a response and support the government to take a ‘whole-of-society’ approach to resilience. External stakeholders will be consulted and integrated into crisis response processes as necessary and appropriate.
- 6.138** Many domestic partners might operate across the UK as a whole. Where queries or requests are made to UK government on matters which are devolved, UK government should direct these to the relevant devolved government, and vice versa for matters which are reserved.

Working with international partners

- 6.139** The Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) is responsible for managing the UK’s relationship with other countries through its network of Embassies and High Commissions, as well as the UK’s overall relationship with international organisations such as the UN (and its agencies), Interpol, and NATO,

⁵² Cabinet Office, ‘Ministerial Code’, 2024, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/ministerial-code

⁵³ Cabinet Office, ‘Civil Service Code’, 2015, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-code

which all might have a part to play in the response to an emergency. The FCDO will do this on behalf of the UK given the fact that international relations are reserved matters.

6.140 Other government departments may have bilateral relationships with particular international or multilateral institutions. These existing relationships will be used where possible and where appropriate. For example, during a pandemic, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) would be best placed to engage with the World Health Organisation as part of the UK response.

6.141 For incidents in the UK, the FCDO representative in COBR will advise on the concerns and handling of other governments and will handle requests for support or assistance from the UK government. The FCDO will be responsible for ensuring that the UK meets bi-lateral and multilateral obligations, including to notify neighbours or partners of a crisis, though another department may be responsible for the notification. For example, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero in respect of a civil nuclear accident in the UK and DHSC, through the UK Health Security Agency, in the case of a public health emergency of international concern.

Working with the private sector

6.142 For many crises, public sector resources alone cannot provide all the solutions when responding to a crisis. The private sector has valuable skills and expertise about both specific parts of the economy and the operational management of complex systems which can support the delivery of central government's response to a crisis. They will also play a critical role in re-establishing commercial activities and the provision of disrupted services and operations, including in some cases critical national infrastructure and systems.

6.143 Lead departments will be responsible for engaging with the sectors they are responsible for. Engagement may include efforts to identify:

- issues sectors are facing and where government support is appropriate
- cross-sector interdependencies, including impacts to critical supply chains
- opportunities to identify where the government will work with businesses to ensure a co-ordinated response and drawing on experience from recent crises
- opportunities to share data and information effectively between departments and the private sector to inform crisis response activities – this can either be done on a voluntary basis or as required by legislation/ministerial direction

6.144 Existing departmental relationships with the private sector in an emergency should be leveraged to understand impacts on their relevant sectors and to identify opportunities to mobilise capability. Central government's engagement with the private sector will be most effective when there are pre-existing frameworks and established lines of communication. Departments should as part of their responsibilities for preparedness consider co-ordinating structures to strengthen their relationships with key private sector stakeholders, to enhance information sharing and the operational response.

- 6.145 The Government Commercial Function can also support central government's engagement with the private sector, by ensuring a consistent approach is taken to working with government's **strategic suppliers** and supporting wider centralised procurement activities required to support the response.⁵⁴

Working with the voluntary and community sector (VCS)

- 6.146 The VCS plays an important role in UK resilience and is regularly involved in preparedness activities and response operations. This is usually managed at local level, including through connections with local resilience forums. The VCS can help identify and communicate impacts being felt across different groups, especially vulnerable and at-risk groups which are often impacted disproportionately as well as groups that government struggles to reach through its regular communication channels. Where appropriate, the VCS can assist with the operational delivery of elements of a response.
- 6.147 The Crisis SRO should liaise with the department leading engagement with the VCS, who will engage with the sector and advise on capabilities and activities that may be relevant in an emergency. Capabilities that the VCS sector can offer include:
- volunteer mobilisation
 - specialist capabilities, such as search and rescue teams
 - expertise on specific communities
- 6.148 LGDs are responsible for engaging with the voluntary sector both prior to and during a crisis. LGDs should establish models and mechanisms for engagement with the VCS prior to a crisis and draw on these when a crisis occurs. An agreement on funding and reimbursement should be established with the sector.

Responding to crises overseas

- 6.149 There a number of overseas crises which impact British nationals and interests such as large-scale terrorist attacks, natural disasters and political unrest.
- 6.150 The standing advice to travellers is to take sensible precautions prior to travel, particularly in areas where a crisis is more likely to occur. This applies if people are travelling to or living somewhere where there is a high risk of terrorism, unrest or natural disasters. Travellers are responsible for their own personal safety and they should follow the travel advice provided by the UK government and local authorities as the UK government does not have a general duty of care to British nationals abroad.⁵⁵
- 6.151 For crises overseas, the FCDO will normally be the LGD, working closely with the Cabinet Office and other government departments as required. Other government department involvement will depend on the type of crisis.

⁵⁴ Information about Crown Representatives and the strategic suppliers they work with is available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-suppliers

⁵⁵ Further guidance for British people affected by crises abroad and the support FCDO provides is available at: www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-deal-with-a-crisis-overseas

- 6.152 Where an incident overseas leads to a request for assistance from the UK, then the FCDO will normally co-ordinate the response and advise on the handling of requests for assistance made by other countries. FCDO can also draw on support from the Ministry of Defence, applying the four principals of defence assistance considered above. Cabinet Office will support in engagement with domestic resilience expertise in support of a UK offer of assistance.
- 6.153 The LGD may change between different phases of an emergency as the impacts change and different competencies are required. For example, in an overseas emergency requiring evacuation, the FCDO would be the lead government department for the evacuation response, at least until all the evacuees are in the UK, and then it would shift to MHCLG. While the Foreign Secretary has discretion for those eligible for support during an evacuation, the Home Office is responsible for decisions regarding entry into the UK and policy decisions on entry documents and visas, with consideration for immigration rules, the border and national security. FCDO would remain LGD for the wider crisis that prompted the evacuation.
- 6.154 In terms of the domestic arrangements, MHCLG would be the lead for the reception, staging and onward integration of British nationals and their dependents arriving from overseas following an overseas crisis.
- 6.155 British passport holders who have not lived in the UK recently may not have access to benefits immediately on arrival, regardless of whether they are full British citizens. Unless arrivals are covered by existing exemptions to the residency requirements, Department for Work and Pensions ministers would need to decide whether they should get immediate access to benefits and, if so, legislation would be required to implement this. These decisions are normally taken in co-ordination with MHCLG, who apply similar residency requirements for social housing and other forms of local authority support.
- 6.156 Previous experience has demonstrated that overseas crises can last for a significant duration and require those involved to adopt a flexible approach to ensure that they have sufficient resilience and resources to cover the protracted nature of these crises.

Response to malicious crises

- 6.157 The UK faces a range of malicious risks generated by both state and non-state actors. This includes acts of terrorism, hostile state activity and cyber crime. The response to malicious risks requires a distinction to be made to the UK's response to the incident, which will focus on the attribution and response to the perpetrators (when it's a state or state-aligned threat), and the management of the consequences arising from the attack, such as fatalities, damage to property (including critical national infrastructure and systems), and other cascading impacts.

Chapter 7: **Post-acute crisis**

Box 10: Chapter 7 summary

This chapter focuses on the transition from the acute response phase of a crisis to business-as-usual, enduring, and/or recovery structures. It outlines the processes for standing down central crisis management arrangements and establishing appropriate governance for ongoing response and recovery.

COBR is not designed to be in effect for extended periods of times and should be stood down when response objectives have been met, the situation has stabilised and, in cases where new governance structures might be more suitable, to co-ordinate continued activity.

When there is a requirement for an enduring response, in most cases the response can be handed back to the LGD to manage the ongoing issue.

However, when there are continuing whole-of-system enduring impacts which surpass the capacity of existing structures, a Strategy and Operations Cabinet committee would be established to oversee and direct the enduring collective response. This structure would be supported by a taskforce responsible for facilitating collective decision-making and co-ordinating the enduring response.

If there is a requirement for central government support for recovery activity, a Ministerial Recovery Group will be established to provide continued ministerial oversight. Lead responsibility will be handed from the LGD for response to the LGD for recovery.

- 7.1 This section covers the UK government's arrangements for transitioning out of an acute crisis response. It details how to stand down acute crisis management arrangements and hand over to new structures to co-ordinate enduring response and/or recovery activities. Finally, it sets out expectations for the lessons identification process after the acute crisis response concludes.

Standing down COBR crisis management arrangements

- 7.2 Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) is designed to co-ordinate the UK government's acute crisis response and to deal with the immediate impacts of a crisis. It is not designed to be in effect for sustained periods of time or to manage the recovery from an emergency (although elements of the recovery and response should, and will, overlap).
- 7.3 Extended use of COBR structures can degrade the UK government's capabilities to horizon scan and undertake preparatory work to manage escalating risks. Importantly, protracted use can also severely limit the ability to respond to concurrent crises, restricting both COBR capacity and senior decision-making bandwidth. Failure to implement long-term, sustainable response structures also risks compromising the UK's ability to deliver against longer-term strategic objectives.
- 7.4 As such, while the management of the enduring phase of a crisis and wider recovery activities may still require robust government-led responses, they will require their own bespoke governance structures.

- 7.5 In the early stages of the acute crisis response, the Crisis SRO should seek to define thresholds for when it is suitable to stand down central crisis management arrangements and regularly review whether there may be need for longer-term structures and resourcing to deal with enduring impacts or recovery activities.
- 7.6 While exact thresholds for standing down central crisis management arrangements will be determined by the nature of a crisis response, considerations which should inform the decision to stand the central response should include whether:
- crisis response objectives have been met
 - the acute situation is contained and there is no significant risk of an imminent resurgence which may destabilise the situation
 - existing governance structures are assessed as the most suitable for managing the current and future situation
 - a new appropriate governance structure, if required, has been identified, resourced and established
- 7.7 Considerations surrounding the appropriate time to stand down central crisis management arrangements and suitable governance structures for longer-term policy challenges should be considered from the onset of a crisis and reviewed regularly by the Crisis SRO. Typically, central crisis management arrangements should not be in effect for a period of longer than three to four weeks.
- 7.8 Where possible, a decision to stand down central crisis management arrangements will be made by collective agreement in the final COBR meeting, recognising the end of the acute response, and this decision will be communicated to relevant departments and organisations by the COBR Unit. This will include information on what, if any, are the new arrangements, structures, and leadership of the continued management of the enduring response.

Enduring response requirements

- 7.9 When the acute phase of the crisis has been managed through COBR, typically either:
- the situation would have stabilised and pose no ongoing challenge, or
 - it continues to have enduring impacts which require continued central government involvement
- 7.10 The appropriate sustainable structures for co-ordinating central government's enduring response will be dependent on the continued scale and complexity posed by the enduring phase of the event and whether existing governance structures and arrangements are appropriate.

7.11 There are broadly three response transition models (as shown in [Figure 12](#) and detailed in the following section) for moving from acute crisis response to enduring response structures:

- **Business-as-usual:** where existing governance arrangements are sufficient and appropriate to oversee and co-ordinate the longer-term response to the event.
- **Enhanced posture:** where existing suitable structures exist, but they might need to be adapted or have increased resources assigned to them to effectively manage the enduring response.
- **New Cabinet committee structures:** enduring whole-of-system crises are expected to surpass the capacity of existing governance structures to oversee and direct the longer-term response and facilitate ongoing ministerial collective agreement.

7.12 Cabinet Office would be responsible for:

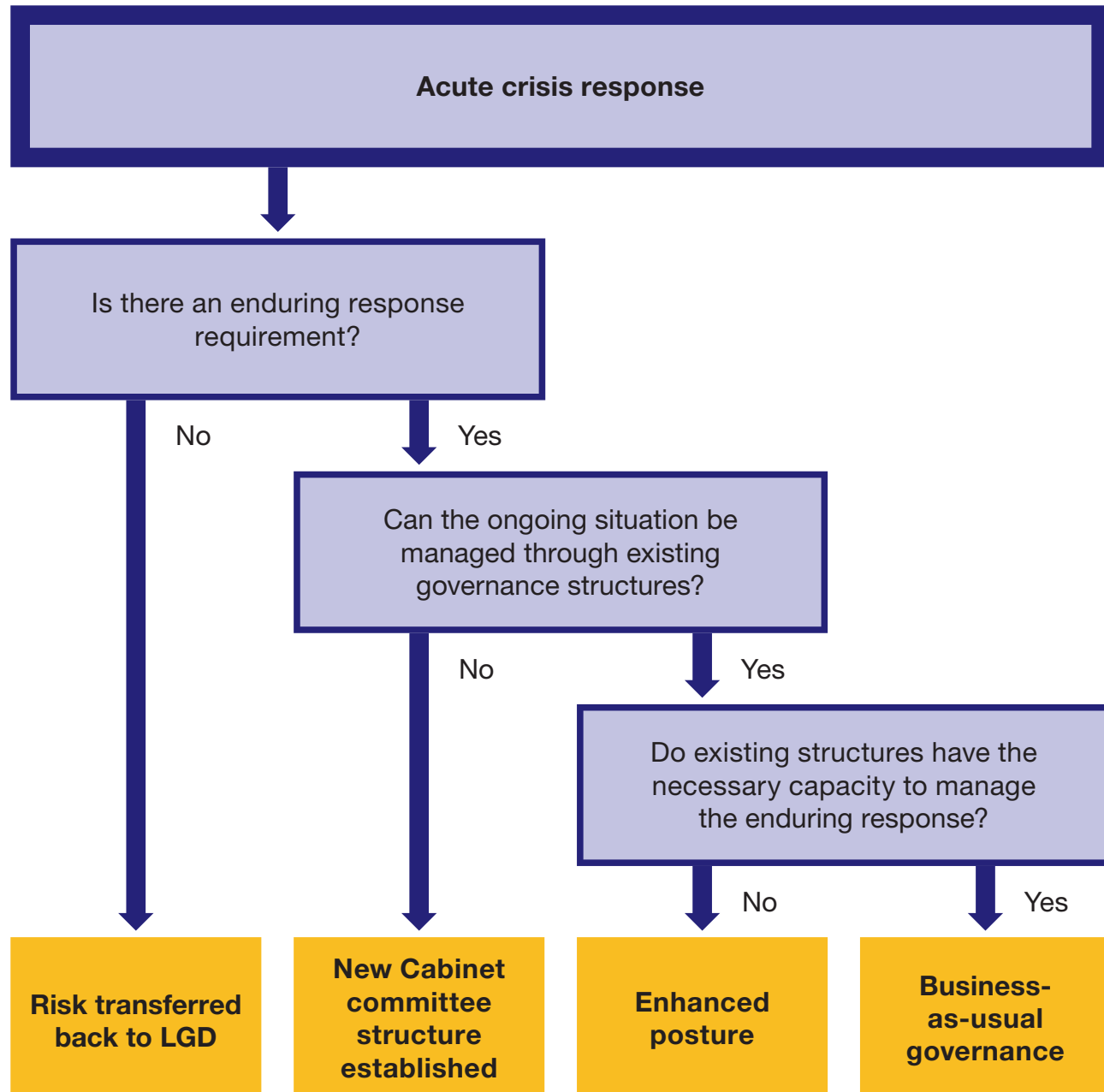
- identifying which model is appropriate, and who will be leading the ongoing response at both an organisational and official level
- ensuring that designated models for the enduring response are sustainable, with sufficient resource and capabilities allocated
- providing advice to the Cabinet Secretary on appropriate Cabinet committee structures where they are required
- clearly communicating new arrangements to relevant organisations to ensure clarity in approach
- ensuring that recovery and enduring response arrangements are aligned

7.13 Where central government support is required for the recovery phase of emergency management, consideration will need to be given on the appropriate structures to govern both activities and how they interact. This will be essential to ensure a coherence of effort and alignment of strategic activities. In certain instances, this will be establishing singular governance structures to govern both activities, while in other cases it may be more appropriate to establish separate but closely aligned structures. A decision on appropriate governance will be taken by the Cabinet Office in consultation with the LGD for Recovery – where this involves consideration of the Cabinet committee system this would be a decision for the Prime Minister.

7.14 Where there is a requirement for ongoing engagement and working with the devolved governments, consideration will be given on the most appropriate structures for engaging them during the non-acute phase – be it in enduring response and/or recovery. This includes inviting and integrating, where appropriate, the devolved government into UK government structures established to oversee these activities, and/or considering the appropriateness of existing mechanisms for intergovernmental relations (including the appropriateness of establishing time-limited Interministerial Committees by consensus).⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Cabinet Office and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 'Review of intergovernmental relations', 2022, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-review-of-intergovernmental-relations

Figure 12: Enduring response activation flowchart



Business-as-usual

- 7.15 While the response has dealt with the immediate effects of the crisis, the event has enduring impacts which require sustained policy interventions from central government. However, the severity of the impacts has decreased to the extent that the response can be led and co-ordinated through business-as-usual mitigations and structures.
- 7.16 The sustained management of this issue would typically be transferred back to the LGD, drawing on the support of other departments as necessary. The LGD is expected to develop sustainable structures to continue responding to disruptive challenges, including monitoring for potential changes in the risk landscape which may require escalation and the use of crisis response structures. For more complex situations, there may be a continued requirement for relevant Cabinet Office functions to continue to play a role in the central co-ordination of the longer-term policy response.
- 7.17 While there might be a requirement for Cabinet and Cabinet committee oversight, this would not extend beyond the requirements of typical business.

Enhanced posture

- 7.18 In this circumstance, while there are still clear existing governance structures for managing the enduring response, there is a requirement for additional capacity and/or amendments to the structures to support an enhanced response and prolonged tempo. The Crisis SRO would have responsibility for identifying appropriate governance structures for the response, including which department would have responsibility for leading the ongoing response, and ensuring that appropriate resources had been secured prior to transferring to new arrangements.
- 7.19 If there were any requirement for amendments to existing Cabinet committee structures to meet the needs of the enduring response, these would be confirmed by the Prime Minister on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary and in consultation with the Crisis SRO.

New Cabinet committee structures

- 7.20 For enduring crises with whole-of-system implications, their complexity, scope and scale might mean that there are no existing suitable structures to enable ministerial collective agreement and central oversight over a protracted period of time. An example would include the central government response to COVID-19.
- 7.21 In such instances, the Prime Minister, on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary, would decide on the Cabinet committee structure suitable for the enduring response to the crisis. A Cabinet committee structure which has previously been used for overseeing the UK government response to whole-of-system crises is the Strategy and Operations Cabinet committees structures (as detailed in [Chapter 3](#)). This governance model acts as a basis for planning for these types of events to support the orderly transition to a structure which has proved effective for co-ordinating the enduring whole-of-government response. However, there is

a requirement to be flexible and adaptable to the situation at hand, and the Prime Minister will make the decision, based on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary, if this is the most appropriate model.

7.22 In this model, Strategy committees would set policy and strategy direction, while Operations committees would take a more detail-orientated approach to implementation. Strategy and Operations Cabinet committees in most cases would also provide collective oversight of recovery activities, to prevent the duplication of effort and resource, alongside ensuring coherence between the strategic aims of the longer-term response and recovery.

7.23 These Cabinet committees would be supported by a designated structure within the Cabinet Office. The role of this supporting central structure would be supporting the new Cabinet committee structures and the centre would be responsible for:

- supporting ministerial collective agreement through Cabinet committees
- developing and delivering overarching strategy and bespoke policy interventions for the ongoing response
- co-ordinating data and analysis

7.24 To ensure there is clear leadership for the enduring response, the Cabinet Secretary would be expected to appoint an SRO to lead the enduring response.

7.25 Given the lead-time to design, resource and implement new structures, the requirement for new bespoke structures should be identified as early as possible. If there was a requirement to reprioritise resources across-government, it may be necessary to initiate a request to the Government People Group for central or cross-government resourcing support. This support can be tailored as needed, for example resource planning, standing up a central or cross-government team, and/or reprioritisation of resources at the cross-government level.

Recovery

7.26 Recovery from a crisis involves the process of rebuilding, restoring and rehabilitating individuals and the community impacted by an emergency. It is a complex and long-running process that will involve many more agencies and participants than the response phase. It will certainly be costlier in terms of resources, and it will undoubtedly be subject to close scrutiny from the community, the media and politicians alike. It is therefore essential for the process to be based on well thought out and tested structures and procedures for it to work in an efficient and orderly manner.

7.27 Recovery should commence at the earliest opportunity, and the LGD for Response at the earliest opportunity should engage the LGD for Recovery to ensure an alignment of activities. The LGD for Recovery, where possible, should start to co-ordinate recovery activities in parallel to the response, working with other departments and partners as required, and prior to the formal handover from response to recovery.

- 7.28 Recovery planning should consider the short, medium and longer-term impacts of emergencies on individuals, as well any risk-specific recovery considerations needed to better support individuals and/or communities. Crises are more likely to have a significant impact on those who are already vulnerable, and may also have wider impacts on the general public and/or those responding to the crisis. It will be important to identify and plan for the potential physical and psychological impacts of a crisis on individuals, recognising that these needs may change in the short, medium and long term through the recovery process.
- 7.29 Local resilience forums (LRFs) are responsible for planning for recovery. LRF partners have differing areas of expertise, and as such support local emergency planning in different ways. LRFs should ensure that they engage with and learn from the local voluntary sector on the impacts to their communities. Following an emergency, the local authority (or authorities) will usually lead and co-ordinate the recovery operation through a Recovery Co-ordinating Group (RCG).⁵⁷

Transition to central government recovery arrangements

- 7.30 During the response phase, the LGD for Response, Cabinet Office and other relevant departments will, with input from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, agree what support is likely to be required by local responders during the recovery phase. This will dictate what support structures, if any, are put in place.
- 7.31 When there is such a requirement for continued central government support for recovery activities, this will be co-ordinated by the relevant LGD for Recovery. The LGD for Response would need to work closely with the LGD for Recovery (where different) from the outset to ensure a smooth transition of responsibilities at the appropriate time and to ensure that response and recovery activities are undertaken in concert.
- 7.32 The point at which such a handover is made will depend on the circumstances. However, factors to be taken into consideration are:
- the crisis is contained and there is no significant risk of resurgence
 - public safety measures are in place and working effectively
 - appropriate governance has been identified for managing central government's recovery activities
- 7.33 The lead will formally be handed over from the LGD for Response to the LGD for Recovery, with the support of Cabinet Office in the cases of COBR responses. As part of this handover, the LGD for Response will be expected to communicate to the LGD for Recovery information on, but not limited to:
- the strategic objectives for the response
 - a summarisation of the response
 - envisioned next steps to support the smooth transition from response to recovery

⁵⁷ Cabinet Office, 'Emergency Response and Recovery', 2013, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/emergency-response-and-recovery

- 7.34 The LGD for Response will be expected to agree this handover with the LGD for Recovery, ensuring there is clarity on the new arrangements governing the recovery process. Where recovery activity is also required in Scotland, Wales and/or Northern Ireland, the relevant devolved government(s) should be consulted as part of these discussions to ensure they are aware of the change in engagement structures. The Cabinet Office will support this transition as required, mediating where there are disputes.
- 7.35 When this takes place, the LGD for Recovery will be responsible for notifying UK government departments and the devolved governments, if relevant, of this formal handover. The timing of the formal handover from response to recovery will be agreed between the LGD for Response and the LGD for Recovery, in consultation with the Cabinet Office. In some circumstances (e.g. wide-area flooding), it is possible (and in most cases, vital) for response and recovery activity to be undertaken in parallel initially and recovery should start as early as possible. The Cabinet Office would continue to provide support as required to lead departments during the recovery phase.
- 7.36 Recovery work in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will usually be led by the relevant devolved government.

Ministerial recovery groups

- 7.37 The LGD for Recovery, in consultation with the Cabinet Office and the LGD for Response, will consider the need for establishment of a ministerial-led (multi-department) recovery group to oversee recovery activity in England co-ordinating activity as appropriate with the devolved governments. A recovery group will typically be stood up for emergencies requiring national level co-ordination.
- 7.38 When stood up the group will:
- set the strategic direction for recovery at the onset
 - ensure that government departments and other national and regional bodies have a shared understanding of policies and priorities, and that they contribute fully and effectively to the recovery effort
 - monitor progress and, where necessary, tackle blockages
 - escalate, where necessary, significant policy issues for resolution
 - engender public and Parliamentary confidence in the recovery process at all levels
 - ensure that local authorities and other recovery agencies fulfil their role and that where necessary local issues are considered and resolved at the national level
 - discuss and agree funding options and arrangements for affected areas

7.39 In support of this role, key tasks are likely to be:

- to build up the best possible assessment of the nature and scale of the damage in each locality significantly affected by the event, including the impact on vulnerable groups, critical national infrastructure and systems, and the environment
- to identify issues which require resolution by government departments or other national and regional bodies
- to identify options, with clear recommendations, for addressing those issues quickly and effectively, drawing on the lessons of past incidents
- to ensure that a structured programme of visits to the affected area(s) is developed and maintained reflecting government's determination to support affected communities and stay the course
- to ensure that inter-departmental, including ministerial, agreement on the way forward is agreed in a timely fashion, and subsequently implemented

7.40 The exact role is likely to vary according to the nature of the emergency, as is the membership of the group. Membership is likely to comprise relevant government departments, with non-departmental organisations, such as the Local Government Association, invited as appropriate. Where the emergency has affected other parts of the UK, it may be appropriate to invite the relevant devolved government to join the group or participate in relevant meetings.

7.41 The recovery group will be supported by an Officials Recovery Group, normally chaired by the LGD for Recovery, with similar membership as above. The Cabinet Office will provide support to both groups as necessary.

7.42 Further information on recovery arrangements in the UK can be found in other guidance.⁵⁸

Lessons management

7.43 Lessons management refers to a strategic, organised approach to, and oversight of, planned processes and procedures to achieve evidenced learning from experience, in a continual, consistent manner.⁵⁹

7.44 Learning lessons both during and after a crisis response is a core means of driving improvement in the way that government prepares for, responds to, and recovers from future emergencies. The purpose of learning lessons and capturing positive practices is to drive continual improvements in the way that individuals, teams,

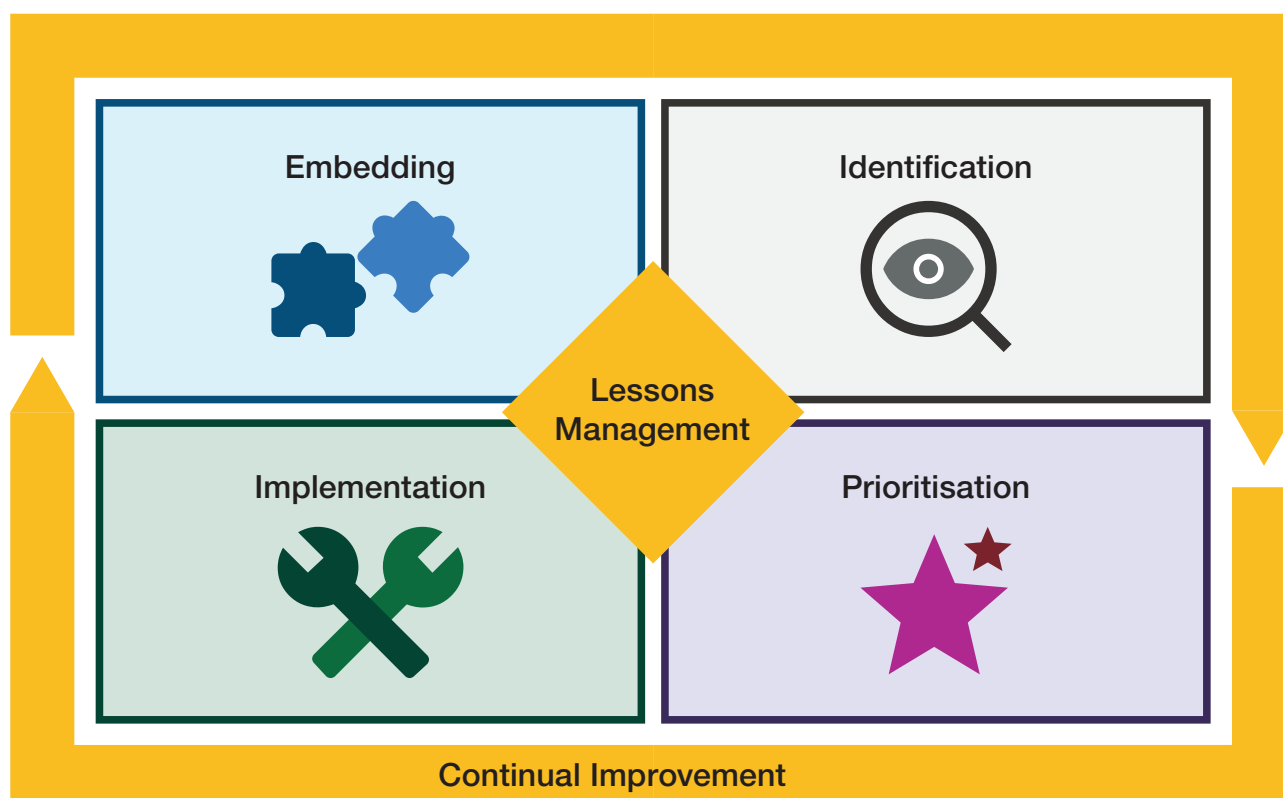
58 Cabinet Office, 'Emergency Response and Recovery', 2013, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/emergency-response-and-recovery

59 UK Resilience Academy, 'Lessons Management Best Practice Guidance', 2024, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/lessons-management-best-practice-guidance

departments, organisations, and multi-agency partners anticipate, assess, prevent, prepare, respond to, and recover from emergencies. Learning is therefore integral to managing risks.

- 7.45 After every crisis, a systematic process of lessons identification should be undertaken at the earliest opportunity to increase engagement and the quality of input and returns. Each department should follow the Lessons Management Framework (shown in [Figure 13](#)) which includes: identification, prioritisation, implementation and embedding change. This process forms the basis of continual improvement of each department's own crisis management capabilities. Cabinet Office will undertake a lessons identification process for the collective central government response, while departments involved in the response will be responsible for undertaking lessons identification exercises for their own contribution to the response.

Figure 13: Lessons Management Framework



Chapter 8: **Organisational resilience**

Box 11: Chapter 8 summary

Organisational resilience refers to the ability of an organisation to achieve intended outcomes through uncertainty, disruption and change.

The delivery of the arrangements set out in the Amber Book is dependent on having trained personnel who are able to deliver their roles effectively. It is the overall responsibility of the First Permanent Secretary for ensuring this for their department.

Departments are required to be able to staff their response functions in a crisis and should have a surge capacity as required to sustain a response. When there is a large-scale requirement to re-prioritise resource at a cross-government level, the Government People Group will support.

Crises can impose significant stresses on responders, and department leads have overall responsibility for putting in place processes to protect the welfare of their staff.

Concurrent crises can put additional stress on government, and decisions will be taken on the appropriate governance structures to oversee the concurrent responses and how government priorities activities.

Cabinet Office maintains continuity plans to ensure the continuing functioning of central crisis management arrangements (Continuity of Crisis Management) and government's decision-making authority (Continuity of Government).

- 8.1 Crises can place exceptional demands on organisations and those taking on crisis management roles and responsibilities, and can result in an unacceptable impact on the well-being of individuals. Crises can be persistent in nature and responders can be required to manage multiple crises concurrently.
- 8.2 Alongside this, crises can impact the ability of departments to maintain critical functions and crisis management capabilities, requiring mature and well-developed continuity arrangements. This section details the arrangements required to maintain organisational resilience in the context of COBR crisis management arrangements.⁶⁰ Supplementary guidance can be found in the UK Resilience Academy's 'Organisational Resilience Guidance for UK Government Departments, Agencies and Arm's Length Bodies'.

⁶⁰ Organisational resilience is defined as 'the ability of an organisation to achieve intended outcomes through uncertainty, disruption and change' taken from UK Resilience Academy's 'Organisational Resilience Guidance for UK Government Departments, Agencies and Arm's Length Bodies', available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/organisational-resilience-guidance-for-uk-government-departments-agencies-and-arms-length-bodies

Training

- 8.3 Every department should have the capacity to deploy trained personnel to support cross-government responses, providing or procuring training which improves their knowledge, skills and attitudes and to enhance the performance of the roles they will fulfil. The First Permanent Secretary has overall responsibility for ensuring their departments have the necessary trained personnel to deliver their department's role in an emergency.
- 8.4 Cabinet Office maintains a dedicated function – the Crisis Management Excellence Programme (CMEP) – responsible for professionalising crisis management across government, by developing individual competence, enhancing collective capabilities, and acting as a centre for excellence for other government departments. This includes providing training on the application and delivery of arrangements in the Amber Book, and dedicated leadership training for those expected to play significant roles in the response to emergencies.
- 8.5 The Cabinet Office has taken steps to continue to improve the quality and accessibility of training with the development and launch of the UK Resilience Academy (UKRA) in 2025, accompanied by revised Resilience and Emergencies National Occupational Standards. This aims to ensure that all those who work on resilience have the capability and knowledge they need to play their part. This includes LRFs and the voluntary and community sector, ministers, government departments and arm's length bodies, critical national infrastructure operators and businesses. In due course there will also be resources accessible to UK citizens and households, further to the practical advice available at the Prepare website.⁶¹
- 8.6 Alongside CMEP and training provided via the UKRA, individual departments should maintain developed training elements specific to their risks to upskill colleagues and uphold capabilities.

Resourcing

- 8.7 Alongside existing systems, crises may require the reprioritisation of personnel to manage the impacts and consequences of an emergency. Most crisis resourcing needs should be addressed through reprioritising and redeploying existing resources within a department and all departments should have the ability to scale up if required. Departments are expected to maintain a pool of suitably trained volunteers (known as a response reserve) who act as a surge capacity to support a department's effort to an emergency response, proportionate to the risks they face.

61 Prepare, available at: <https://prepare.campaign.gov.uk/>

- 8.8 However, for large-scale national emergencies which are unable to be resourced at a department level, there may be a requirement for the Crisis SRO to initiate a request to the Government People Group for central or cross-government support. This could be including targeted central support for resource planning or, in the most serious emergencies requiring significant resources, including stand up of a central/cross-government team and direction to reprioritise resources at a cross-government level.

Welfare

- 8.9 Crises can place significant physical and psychological stress on responding personnel. It is the responsibility of department leads to ensure a safe and supportive work environment for their staff. They should have plans and processes in place to manage intense periods which accompany a response. Such interventions should include:
- forward planning to ensure there is sufficient surge capacity to support the delivery of a rota system, while maintaining sufficient capability
 - appointing a welfare lead responsible for monitoring the wellbeing of their staff
 - ensuring shift times are adhered to and staff clock off on time and take breaks
 - supporting wellbeing and fatigue for those responding, by providing food and beverages, rest areas and, in some cases, accommodation
 - undertaking hot debriefs at the end of shifts to check in on welfare
 - signposting relevant employee support services and providing access to specialist resources and timely support to address wellbeing concerns that cannot be handled by the welfare lead

Concurrency

- 8.10 Given the national and international risk profile, it may be that the UK will face a separate, concurrent issue that would normally require the activation of COBR. Concurrent emergencies not only risk using the same personnel and resources, but also may result in compounding impacts.
- 8.11 If two emergencies were to take place simultaneously that required the co-ordination through COBR, there are two main options for the response structure:
- 1) **Manage both crises through the same response structure:** in this scenario, the responses to both emergencies would be managed through the same COBR meetings and response structures. This would be suitable in scenarios where the LGD is the same for both emergencies and/or there are sufficient links, similarities or relationships between the consequences of the emergencies.
 - 2) **Set-up two distinct response structures:** would be appropriate where there is no relationship between the causes and consequences of the two crises.

- 8.12 The decision on the appropriate response structures to manage the concurrent crises would be taken by the Cabinet Office in consultation with the relevant LGDs. This will likely involve difficult decisions about government's priorities and how to direct scarce resources to handle the concurrent challenges.

Continuity of crisis management / continuity of UK central government

- 8.13 If during the activation of COBR crisis management arrangements, the primary response site is disrupted or denied then the Continuity of Crisis Management (CoCM) plan may be activated by the Cabinet Office.
- 8.14 When the LGD is leading the response, the LGD can consider the appropriateness of activating their departmental CoCM plan if a resilient alternative location is required.
- 8.15 For all emergencies which may compromise the ability of government to continue with its decision-making authority the associated Continuity of Government plan may be activated by the Cabinet Office.

