

Health, Social Care and Sport Committee  
Tuesday, 3 June 2025  
17th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

## Pandemic preparedness – Note by the Clerk

### Background

1. At a recent work programme discussion, Members of the Committee decided they wished to hold a one-off evidence session on the subject of pandemic preparedness.
2. This follows on from previous inquiry work undertaken in this area by this Committee, in particular its [scrutiny of a provisional common framework on Public Health Protection and Health Security](#) in late 2021 and early 2022, and by the [Covid-19 Recovery Committee](#), which was established at the start of Session 6 and subsequently dissolved on 14 July 2023.
3. In the UK, pandemic preparedness falls under the umbrella of ‘civil emergencies’ with an ‘emergency’ defined as:  
  
“[A]n event or situation which threatens serious damage to human welfare in a place in the UK, the environment of a place in the UK, or war or terrorism which threatens serious damage to the security of the UK.”
4. The legal framework is largely set out in the [Civil Contingencies Act 2004](#) although it is complemented by other topic-specific legislation such as the [Public Health \(Scotland\) Act 2008](#).
5. Emergency planning is a continuous cycle of risk assessment, planning, and revision, ensuring preparedness evolves with new lessons and changing circumstances.
6. Pandemic plans are a specific type of emergency plan and, as outlined above, are subject to a continuous process of planning, exercising and revision. A pandemic plan is therefore a living document which is reviewed at intervals and revised if there is a change in the global guidance, evidence-base or national/international legislation.
7. This cycle is depicted in the following diagram taken from the [Guide to revision of national pandemic influenza preparedness plans](#) produced by the European Centre for Disease Control.

**Figure 1. Key elements of the pandemic preparedness planning cycle**



8. The COVID-19 pandemic has offered a significant learning opportunity for pandemic preparedness going forward. Both the UK and Scottish public inquiries are now well underway and likely to have a large influence on pandemic preparedness planning.
9. The UK COVID-19 inquiry published its [report from module 1 of the inquiry in July 2024](#). This module was focused on the resilience and preparedness of the UK and set out a series of key findings and recommendations including the following:
  - Recommendation 1: A simplified structure for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience;
  - Recommendation 4: A UK-wide whole-system civil emergency strategy; and
  - Recommendation 5: Data and research for future pandemics.
10. The module 1 report found that pandemic influenza was identified as the most significant risk in the UK risk register between 2005 up until 2020. It also identified five major flaws in the risk assessment process:
  1. Too much reliance was placed on a single scenario – pandemic influenza.
  2. Planning was focused on the impact of disease rather than preventing its spread.
  3. Interconnected risks and a ‘domino effect’ were not properly taken into account.
  4. A failure to appreciate long-term risks and their effect on vulnerable people, and to appreciate the range of people who may be vulnerable to a pandemic.
  5. Insufficient connection between risk assessment and the strategy, including a failure to focus on the technology, skills, infrastructure and resources that would be needed, including testing, tracing and isolation.

11. At the time the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the only UK-wide pandemic strategy in place was the Influenza Preparedness Strategy 2011. Although it was open to the devolved administrations to take a different approach, each chose to adopt the 2011 strategy. However, the UK public inquiry identified a number of flaws with the 2011 strategy and also found that, when the pandemic struck, instead of adapting the 2011 strategy, it was 'effectively abandoned' and each administration took a new, untested approach.
12. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the UK government has conducted several reviews to assess its preparedness and resilience for civil emergencies. These include the [2022 UK Government Resilience Framework](#) which aimed to strengthen resilience systems and a [2023 update of the 2018 UK Biological Security Strategy](#).
13. In March 2021, a joint article from [a group of world leaders](#) proposed a new global treaty on pandemic preparedness and acknowledged existing provision for a coordinated international response under the [International Health Regulations](#), which would "underpin such a treaty".
14. A [Pandemic Agreement](#) was subsequently adopted at the 78<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly on 20 May 2025.

## Today's meeting

15. At today's meeting, Members will have the opportunity to put questions on the subject of pandemic preparedness to the following witnesses:
  - Professor Sir Gregor Smith, Chief Medical Officer for Scotland;
  - Daniel Kleinberg, Deputy Director, Population Health, Scottish Government;
  - Dr Jim McMenamin, Interim Director of Clinical and Protecting Health, Public Health Scotland.

**Clerks to Committee and SPICe  
May 2025**