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Health, Social Care and Sport Committee
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12th Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

Pandemic Preparedness

At this week's meeting, the Committee will take evidence on pandemic preparedness. The following witnesses will be in attendance:

- **Professor Sir Gregor Smith** – Chief Medical Officer, Scottish Government
- **Derek Grieve** - Director for Health and Social Care Performance, Scottish Government
- **Dr Jim McMenamin** – Strategic Consultant Lead for Health Protection, Public Health Scotland
- **Professor Devi Sridhar** – Chair of Global Public Health, University of Edinburgh (attending remotely)

This paper summarises the key findings of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry module on pandemic preparedness, outlines key actions taken by the Scottish Government, and highlights some themes the Committee may wish to explore with witnesses.

UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry

Module 1 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry investigated the UK's resilience and preparedness for the pandemic. It considered whether the pandemic was properly planned for and whether the UK was ready for that eventuality.

The module 1 report was published on 18 July 2024, and a central finding was that although the UK was widely regarded as a global leader in pandemic preparedness, it was underprepared for the type of pandemic that emerged in 2020.

> "In 2019, it was widely believed, in the UK and abroad, that the UK was not only properly prepared but was one of the best-prepared countries in the world to respond to a pandemic. This Report concludes that, in reality, the UK was ill-prepared for dealing with a catastrophic emergency, let alone the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic that actually struck."

A summary of the key findings of module 1 are shown below.

Summary of Module 1 Findings

- Recognition of the temptation for politicians to prioritise immediate concerns before hypothetical scenarios, but also recognising that the cost of preparing is vastly outweighed by the cost of not doing so.
- Better preparedness would have avoided some of the human and financial cost of the pandemic.
- The UK prepared for the wrong pandemic (i.e. influenza).
- The institutions and structures responsible for emergency planning were labyrinthine in their complexity.
- There were fatal strategic flaws underpinning the assessment of the risks faced by the UK, how those risks and their consequences could be managed and prevented from worsening, and how they could be responded to.
- The UK government's sole pandemic strategy, from 2011, was outdated and lacked adaptability. It was virtually abandoned on its first encounter with the pandemic. It focused on only one type of pandemic, failed adequately to consider prevention or proportionality of response, and paid insufficient attention to the economic and social consequences of pandemic response.
- Emergency planning generally failed to account sufficiently for the pre-existing health and societal inequalities and deprivation in society. There was also a failure to appreciate the full extent of the impact of government measures and long-term risks, from both the pandemic and the response, on ethnic minority communities and those with poor health or other vulnerabilities, as well as a failure to engage appropriately with those who know their communities best, such as local authorities, the voluntary sector and community groups.
- There was a failure to learn sufficiently from past civil emergency exercises and outbreaks of disease.
- There was a damaging absence of focus on the measures, interventions and infrastructure required in the event of a pandemic – in particular, a system that could be scaled up to test, trace and isolate in the event of a pandemic. Despite reams of documentation, planning guidance was insufficiently robust and flexible, and policy documentation was outdated, unnecessarily bureaucratic and infected by jargon.
- In the years leading up to the pandemic, there was a lack of adequate leadership, coordination and oversight. Ministers, who are frequently untrained in the specialist field of civil contingencies, were not presented with a broad enough range of scientific opinion and policy options and failed to challenge sufficiently the advice they did receive from officials and advisers.

Summary of Module 1 Findings
• The provision of advice itself could be improved. Advisers and advisory groups did not have sufficient freedom and autonomy to express dissenting views and suffered from a lack of significant external oversight and challenge. The advice was often undermined by 'groupthink'.

The inquiry also commented on the UK's general lack of resilience at the outset of the pandemic:

> "In 2020, the UK lacked resilience. Going into the pandemic, there had been a slowdown in health improvement, and health inequalities had widened. High pre-existing levels of heart disease, diabetes, respiratory illness and obesity, and general levels of ill-health and health inequalities, meant that the UK was more vulnerable. Public services, particularly health and social care, were running close to, if not beyond, capacity in normal times."

Standing Committee on Pandemic Preparedness

In addition to the module 1 report, the Scottish Government's Standing Committee on Pandemic Preparedness produced a final report in November 2024.[1]

It contained 5 recommendations:

1. Establish a Scottish Pandemic Sciences Partnership to provide a permanent link between government, Public Health Scotland and the scientific community, led by an independent Scientific Director and accountable to ministers.

2. Maintain and strengthen scientific and research networks by supporting pandemic-related research between emergencies and building enduring connections with Scottish, UK and international experts and institutions.

3. Improve Scotland's pandemic data capabilities through stronger data-sharing arrangements, a single national process for accessing health and care data, support for Research Data Scotland, and the development of a pandemic data and intelligence strategy.

4. Strengthen innovation and horizon-scanning, including mechanisms to support collaboration between academia, industry and government, and formal processes to identify and assess emerging infectious disease risks.

5. Embed behavioural science, public engagement and a focus on inequalities across all preparedness and response activity, including assessing impacts

[1] Standing Committee on Pandemic Preparedness (2024) Pandemic Ready: Safeguarding our Future Through Preparedness.

on disadvantaged groups, addressing misinformation, and supporting community-led resilience and mutual aid.

The report concluded that Scotland should strengthen its pandemic preparedness while continuing to work closely with UK and international partners. Its central proposal is the creation of a Scottish Pandemic Sciences Partnership, led by an independent Scientific Director and hosted by Public Health Scotland. The Partnership would bring together government, public health bodies and researchers to provide coordinated scientific advice, maintain research capability between pandemics and improve preparedness planning.

The Committee also found that Scotland's data and analytical infrastructure was not developing quickly enough to support an effective future pandemic response. It recommended stronger data-sharing arrangements, improved access to health and care data, greater support for innovation and horizon-scanning, and a stronger focus on behavioural science, public engagement and inequalities.

The Scottish Pandemic Sciences Partnership was established jointly by PHS, the Scottish Government and Scottish academic partners in response to the Committee's 2024 recommendations. The partnership is hosted by PHS and is intended to strengthen links between government, public health and the research community.

Implementation of Module 1 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry

The Scottish Government responded to the UK Inquiry on module 1 in July 2025 and has since produced 2 progress reports on implementation:

- 1st progress update - July 2025
- 2nd progress update – July 2026

There were 10 recommendations in module 1 and the following sections summarise the main findings behind each of these recommendations and provide an update on action to date.

The recommendations have been summarised in this paper but for the full detail of each then please see appendix 4 of the module 1 report.

Recommendation 1

Recommendation 1 - A simplified structure for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience
Each government should create a single Cabinet-level or equivalent ministerial committee (including the senior minister responsible for health and social care) responsible for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience, to be chaired by the leader or deputy leader of the relevant government. There should

also be a single cross-departmental group of senior officials in each government to oversee and implement policy on civil emergency preparedness and resilience.

The recommendation for a single Cabinet-level ministerial committee and a single cross-government officials' group arose from the Inquiry's conclusion that responsibility for pandemic preparedness was spread across too many bodies, with no clear leadership, accountability or sustained oversight.

The Inquiry described the pre-pandemic arrangements as "labyrinthine in their complexity" and found that this complexity contributed to weaknesses in preparedness and resilience.

The recommendation seeks to ensure that a future pandemic or other national emergency is overseen by a single senior ministerial body with authority across portfolios, supported by a single officials' structure responsible for implementation and monitoring.

Action on Recommendation 1

The Scottish Government accepted Recommendation 1 and has introduced new ministerial and official-level governance arrangements to strengthen oversight of civil emergency preparedness and resilience.

Key measures include:

- Regular Cabinet oversight, with Cabinet to consider two reports each year on resilience preparations and action relating to whole-system civil emergencies.
- Creation of a Future Pandemic Preparedness Ministerial Oversight Group (MOG), co-chaired by the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care and the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs, with membership drawn from across ministerial portfolios. The group provides strategic oversight of Scotland's future pandemic preparedness framework and meets every six months.
- The establishment of a single senior official structure to oversee preparedness and resilience work across government. This group first met in September 2024 and has been formalised as the Crisis Preparation Oversight Group (CPOG), chaired by the Director General for Strategy and External Affairs and meeting quarterly to coordinate preparedness for a wide range of civil emergencies.
- Establishment of a supporting Future Pandemic Preparedness Programme Board, co-chaired by the Director for Population Health and the Director for Strategy and Delivery. The Board oversees strategic planning and delivery of pandemic preparedness work, including data, research, modelling and arrangements for sharing analytical resources during future pandemics.

- Formation of a Cross Government Delivery Group to identify preparedness gaps, improve existing plans, develop new plans where required, and strengthen cross-government collaboration.
- Continued participation in UK-wide resilience structures, including the Resilience Steering Board (RSB), which brings together the UK Government and devolved administrations to oversee and implement policy on civil emergency preparedness and resilience.

Recommendation 2

Recommendation 2 - Cabinet Office leadership for whole-system civil emergencies in the UK
The lead government department model for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience is not appropriate and should be abolished.

The Inquiry concluded that the lead government department model encouraged preparedness to be organised within departmental silos and was ill-suited to whole-system emergencies such as pandemics.

Pandemic planning was led primarily through a health lens, with insufficient consideration of wider societal, economic and public-service impacts. Baroness Hallett therefore recommended abolishing the model for whole-system civil emergencies and replacing it with stronger cross-government leadership and oversight from the centre of government.

Action on Recommendation 2

The Scottish Government's progress reports detail that it considers recommendation 2 to be a matter for the UK Government as it concerns the role of the Cabinet Office and the organisation of UK Government departments.

However, it does also state that any reform of UK emergency preparedness structures should recognise devolved responsibilities and be developed in consultation with the devolved administrations.

Recommendation 3

Recommendation 3 – A better approach to risk assessment
The UK government and devolved administrations should develop a new approach to risk assessment that moves away from reliance on reasonable worst-case scenarios towards an approach that assesses a wider range of scenarios representative of the different risks and the range of each kind of risk. It should also better reflect the circumstances and characteristics particular to England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole.

The Inquiry found the UK's pandemic risk assessment process systematically underestimated the range, scale and nature of the risks that the country could face, leaving governments insufficiently prepared for Covid-19.

The report explained that UK pandemic preparedness was based too heavily on a 'reasonable worst-case scenario' and failed to consider a sufficiently wide range of possible threats and impacts. The UK's principal preparedness efforts were directed towards an influenza pandemic and risk assessments assumed characteristics associated with flu, such as different patterns of transmission, illness and intervention.

Risk assessments also underestimated uncertainty, focused narrowly on disease-specific risks rather than whole-system consequences, and did not adequately reflect the differing circumstances of Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England. Recommendation 3 therefore called for a broader, more flexible approach to risk assessment that examines a range of plausible scenarios and their impacts across society.

Action on Recommendation 3

The Scottish Government has been reviewing and developing its approach to risk assessment to ensure that a broader range of scenarios is considered and that assessments better reflect Scotland's specific circumstances. The Government has also sought to strengthen the links between risk assessment and resilience planning, while continuing to work with UK and devolved partners on shared preparedness arrangements.

Recommendation 4

Recommendation 4 - A UK-wide whole-system civil emergency strategy
A new UK-wide whole-system civil emergency strategy should be put in place, and it should be subject to a substantive reassessment at least every three years to ensure that it is up to date and effective, and incorporates lessons learned from civil emergency exercises.

The Inquiry found that pandemic preparedness relied too heavily on the outdated 2011 influenza strategy, which focused narrowly on health impacts and did not adequately address the wider societal consequences of a major emergency.

Lessons from exercises and previous outbreaks were not consistently translated into strategic change, and there was no robust process for regularly reviewing preparedness arrangements. Recommendation 4 therefore called for a new UK-wide whole-system civil emergency strategy, subject to regular reassessment, to ensure that preparedness remains current, comprehensive and informed by lessons learned.

Action on Recommendation 4

The UK and devolved governments concluded that producing a single UK-wide civil emergency strategy covering all the Inquiry's requirements would be impractical and incompatible with devolved responsibilities and accountability arrangements.

Instead, they considered that the combination of the UK's Resilience Action Plan, central operational plans for each catastrophic risk, and the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) collectively fulfils the intent of the recommendation.

In addition, the Scottish Government progress reports detailed that it had completed the first version of the core Concept of Operations (CONOPS) for the Scottish Government Resilience Room (SGORR). This establishes a framework for emergency response that is subject to ongoing review and adaptation, including the development of scenario-specific response plans.

The Scottish Government also contributed to the UK Government's 'Amber Book', published in April 2025. This aims to define roles and responsibilities for crisis response and strengthen arrangements for cooperation between the UK and devolved governments.

Alongside these measures, work is underway to develop a Scottish Resilience Strategy and in May 2026, the Scottish Government formally informed the Inquiry Chair that the recommendation had been fully implemented and could be considered closed.

Recommendation 5

Recommendation 5 - Data and research for future pandemics
The UK government and devolved administrations should establish new mechanisms for the timely collection, analysis, secure sharing and use of reliable data for informing emergency responses, such as data systems to be tested in pandemic exercises. In addition, a wider range of 'hibernated' and other studies should be commissioned that are designed to be rapidly adapted to a new outbreak.

The Inquiry found that the UK's response to Covid-19 was hindered by fragmented data systems, poor interoperability between organisations, delays in obtaining reliable information, and insufficient understanding of the impacts on vulnerable populations. It also found that, while the UK delivered important pandemic research, there was insufficient infrastructure that could be activated immediately during a new outbreak.

Data systems were not routinely stress-tested through preparedness exercises, and arrangements for research and information sharing needed strengthening. These weaknesses led Baroness Hallett to recommend the creation of robust, tested

mechanisms for collecting and sharing data, alongside a wider programme of "hibernated" research studies that can be rapidly deployed in future pandemics.

Action on Recommendation 5

The Scottish Government committed to establishing a framework by summer 2025 to enable the rapid redeployment of analytical resources during a future pandemic. This would aim to support the timely collection, analysis, sharing and use of data, research and modelling.

In the July 2026 progress report, the Scottish Government reports that an ‘Analytical Framework’ for the rapid deployment of analytical resources during a future pandemic has been developed, tested through Exercise Pegasus, and is now an operational working document.

It stated the framework will continue to be refined through lessons from Exercise Pegasus and ongoing oversight by the Data and Analysis for Crisis Delivery Group. In addition, a four-nation Memorandum of Understanding has been agreed between the Cabinet Office and the devolved governments to enable the rapid sharing of data and analysis during future crises.

The Scottish Government subsequently confirmed to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry in May 2026 that the recommendation had been fully implemented and closed.

Recommendation 6

Recommendation 6 - A regular UK-wide pandemic response exercise
The UK government and devolved administrations should hold a UK-wide pandemic response exercise at least every three years.

The Inquiry found that while the UK had undertaken several pandemic preparedness exercises before Covid-19, these did not occur regularly enough, were often too narrowly focused, and failed to ensure that lessons were implemented. Major exercises repeatedly identified weaknesses in healthcare capacity, coordination and resilience, but governments did not consistently address these shortcomings.

The Inquiry also found that preparedness arrangements for cooperation between the UK Government and devolved administrations had not been sufficiently tested and that exercises paid inadequate attention to the wider societal impacts of a pandemic. Baroness Hallett therefore recommended that the UK Government and devolved administrations undertake a comprehensive UK-wide pandemic response exercise at least every three years to test preparedness, identify weaknesses and ensure lessons lead to tangible improvements.

Action on Recommendation 6

In response to Recommendation 6, the UK Government and devolved administrations participated in Exercise Pegasus. This was reported to be the largest pandemic preparedness exercise conducted in UK history.

The exercise was held between September and October 2025 and involved all UK Government departments and devolved governments. Participants were presented with a fictional outbreak of a novel enterovirus originating from a fictional island. It was intended to test the UK's response to a simulated pandemic, from emergence through to mitigation.

The Scottish Government and the UK Government are both undertaking analysis and evaluation of Exercise Pegasus and the findings from both reports are expected to be published in late 2026.

Recommendation 7

Recommendation 7 - Publication of findings and lessons from civil emergency exercises
Each government should publish a report within three months of the completion of each civil emergency exercise summarising the findings, lessons and recommendations, and should publish within six months of the exercise an action plan setting out the specific steps to be taken in response to the report's findings. All exercise reports, action plans, emergency plans and guidance from across the UK should be kept in a single UK-wide online archive, accessible to all involved in emergency preparedness, resilience and response.

The Inquiry found that the UK repeatedly identified important weaknesses through pandemic and civil contingency exercises, but failed to ensure that lessons were transparently recorded, shared, monitored and acted upon.

Previous major exercises, such as Exercise Cygnus in 2016, identified serious preparedness gaps long before Covid-19, including in surge healthcare capacity, coordination across government, resilience of social care, and pandemic planning. However, many of the lessons were not fully implemented before the pandemic.

The Inquiry found that many exercise reports were not routinely published which reduced the visibility of what needed to improve and made it harder to challenge government preparedness.

The Inquiry also found that lessons from exercises were often held within individual departments, governments or responder organisations. There was no comprehensive UK-wide system for sharing findings, action plans, emergency plans and guidance. Baroness Hallett emphasised that conducting exercises was not

enough, and preparedness only improves when lessons are captured, published, tracked and implemented.

Action on Recommendation 7

The Scottish Government committed to 'reinvigorating' the Scottish exercise notification process and National Exercise Calendar by July 2025 as well as publishing lessons learned reports and findings, where possible, within six months of each exercise.

A new 'Scottish Training and Exercising Calendar' went live on 10 February 2026 through Resilience Direct. Awareness-raising work is ongoing, and the calendar is regularly reviewed through the multi-agency Scottish Civil Contingencies Development Forum.

The Scottish Government and UK Government are analysing and evaluating Exercise Pegasus, with reports expected to be published in late 2026. The Scottish Government has stated that it will continue to monitor and evaluate the implementation of recommendations arising from exercises.

Recommendation 8

Recommendation 8 - **Published reports on whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience**
Each government should produce and publish a report to their respective legislatures on whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience at least every three years.

Recommendation 8 was intended to address a lack of transparency, accountability and sustained oversight of emergency preparedness. The Inquiry concluded that governments should publish a comprehensive report on whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience at least every three years, enabling legislatures and the public to assess progress, scrutinise shortcomings and ensure lessons are acted upon.

Action on Recommendation 8

The first report[2] was laid before the Scottish Parliament in September 2025 and the Scottish Government has committed to providing a report to Parliament at least every three years.

The first report is largely descriptive in that it explains Scotland's resilience structures and recent developments but does not contain detailed performance metrics or a comprehensive assessment of preparedness gaps.

[2] Scottish Government (2025) The Scottish Government Report on Whole System Civil Emergency Preparedness 2025.

The Scottish Government wrote to the inquiry chair on 12 January 2026 to confirm that this recommendation has been delivered and closed.

Recommendation 9

Recommendation 9 – Regular use of red teams
External ‘red teams’ should be regularly used in the Civil Service of the UK government and devolved administrations to scrutinise and challenge the principles, evidence, policies and advice relating to preparedness for and resilience to whole-system civil emergencies.

Recommendation 9 arose from the Inquiry's finding that the UK's preparedness system suffered from ‘groupthink’, inadequate challenge and over-reliance on established assumptions, particularly the assumption that a future pandemic would resemble influenza.

The Inquiry concluded that governments should regularly use independent external ‘red teams’ to scrutinise policies, evidence, risk assessments and advice relating to whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience. This is intended to help identify weaknesses before they become critical during a crisis.

Action on Recommendation 9

In the July 2026 progress report, the Scottish Government stated it is working with NHS Highland to develop red team resources for use across the civil contingencies landscape. A delivery session for colleagues involved in the Crisis Preparation Oversight Programme was held during August 2026 to help disseminate learning.

Recommendation 10

Recommendation 10 - A UK-wide independent statutory body for whole-system civil emergency preparedness and resilience
The UK government, in consultation with the devolved administrations, should create a UK-wide independent statutory body for whole-system civil emergency preparedness, resilience and response. The body should provide independent, strategic advice to the UK government and devolved administrations, consult with the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector at a national and local level, as well as with directors of public health, and make recommendations.

The findings behind Recommendation 10 were rooted in the Inquiry's conclusion that governments across the UK suffered from a lack of independent challenge, oversight and scrutiny of civil emergency preparedness before the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Inquiry found that no organisation had responsibility for providing an independent assessment of the UK's preparedness for major civil emergencies, or for holding governments to account for implementing recommendations from exercises, plans and reviews. The Inquiry heard evidence that warning signs about pandemic preparedness had been identified repeatedly before Covid-19, but that action was often fragmented, inconsistent or delayed.

Recommendation 10 was intended to address these weaknesses by establishing a UK-wide independent statutory body that would:

- provide independent strategic advice to the UK and devolved governments,
- assess and report on the UK's preparedness and resilience,
- consult public health leaders and the voluntary and community sectors,
- identify gaps in capability and capacity; and
- make recommendations on the measures needed to improve preparedness for future whole-system civil emergencies.

The recommendation was that an interim body should be established on a non-statutory basis within 12 months of the module 1 report publication. This would allow it to begin its work before the legislation was passed.

Action on Recommendation 10

The UK Government accepted the need for greater independent scrutiny of civil emergency preparedness and agreed that external challenge is important to reduce the risk of groupthink. However, it rejected the creation of a new statutory body, arguing that this could be achieved through existing scrutiny mechanisms supplemented by new expert panels convened by the UK Resilience Academy.

These panels, chaired by independent experts, will review preparedness for major whole-system risks, make recommendations, and publish their findings alongside the government's response. A pilot was planned for late 2025, with the new arrangements due to become operational from April 2026.

Key Themes

Members may wish to explore the following themes with the witnesses:

- **Scotland’s overall preparedness and resilience**: The Committee may wish to explore whether Scotland is more resilient now than it was before COVID-19, particularly given ongoing pressures on the NHS, social care and population health.

- **Governance, leadership and accountability:** Significant changes have been made to governance arrangements, and the Committee may wish to assess whether these have improved leadership, accountability and cross-government coordination.

- **Feeback from Operation Pegasus**: the Committee may wish to ask for some initial feedback on the exercise and whether the reporting deadlines have been met.

- **Scientific challenge, scrutiny and groupthink:** The Inquiry highlighted concerns about groupthink and limited challenge, and the Committee may wish to examine whether current arrangements encourage independent scrutiny and diverse scientific perspectives.

- **Transparency, reporting and public accountability:** The Committee may wish to assess whether current reporting arrangements provide Parliament and the public with a clear picture of Scotland's preparedness and remaining vulnerabilities.

- **Reaction to the first report on Whole System Civil Emergency Preparedness:** The Committee may wish to consider whether the first report on whole-system civil emergency preparedness provides a sufficiently robust assessment of Scotland's resilience and preparedness.

- **Speed of implementation and perceptions of current readiness:** The Committee may wish to examine whether the pace of implementation has matched the urgency of the lessons identified by COVID-19 and how witnesses assess Scotland's current level of preparedness for a future pandemic or major civil emergency.

- **Independent scrutiny body**: With the UK Government choosing not to establish a new statutory preparedness body, the Committee may wish to consider whether alternative scrutiny arrangements provide sufficient independent challenge.

- **The role and impact of the Scottish Pandemic Sciences Partnership:** the Committee may wish to examine what it has achieved and how it is influencing preparedness planning.

HCS/S7/26/12/2

Kathleen Robson, Senior Researcher, SPICe

Date: 17/11/2026

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