

Blue Light Services

A RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

BY THE ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP ON HOMELAND SECURITY: IMPROVING EFFICIENCY, INTEROPERABILITY AND RESILIENCE OF OUR BLUE LIGHT SERVICES.¹

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Introduction

In June 2013, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Homeland Security issued a report on Improving Efficiency, Interoperability and Resilience of our Blue Light Services. Consisting of 18 members from both the House of Lords and the House of Commons, the Group is chaired by The Hon Bernard Jenkin, MP, and includes amongst its membership Lord Reid, former Home Secretary; Lord Carlisle, former independent reviewer of British anti-terrorist legislation; Lord Harris, first Chair of the Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA), currently the Home Secretary's representative on the MPA with responsibility for overseeing the work of the Metropolitan Police in countering terrorism and security and Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Policing; and Lord Dear, former Chief Constable of the West Midlands Police and a former member of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary. The Group currently has two advisers, former Chief Secretary to the Cabinet Office, Sir David Omand, who is credited with the setting up of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) a few months prior to the dreadful attack on the twin towers on 11 September 2001, and the Hon Michael Chertoff, who was the Secretary for Homeland Security in the United States (US) under President George Bush for four years.

It should be pointed out, firstly, that this APPG is not a Parliamentary Committee and the report is not an official publication of Parliament. Secondly, the report is authored by Tobias Ellwood, who is an MP and a member of the Group, and Mark Philips, who is not. Thirdly, it is made clear that the views in the report are those of the authors and may not reflect the views of individual APPG members,

nor do they reflect a consensus of the APPG membership. Nevertheless, it is published to further debate on the matters raised and it is in this context that the Institute responds.

Alleged shortcomings in existing arrangements

The report suggests that a number of incidents, such as the Kings Cross Fire, Buncefield, the 7/7 and 21/7 terrorist attacks in 2005, flooding in 2007 and shootings in Cumbria and Northumbria in 2010, have 'demonstrated persistent policy, cultural and technical shortcomings in the ability of different departments and agencies to work together despite the professionalism and dedication of individual staff'. Despite the success of the London Olympics, the report claims that gaps were exposed 'in overall response and recovery capability, resulting in bespoke, but temporary resilience procedures' and goes on to suggest that 'significant financial and operational efficiencies' would 'be gained with simpler and stronger ministerial leadership, streamlining of government policy formulation and unambiguous inter-agency operational command at both national and local levels.'²

Outline of the report

There are eight sections to the report. The first two provide an executive summary and a list of recommendations, of which ten refer to the national level and two to the local level; then follows two sections which outline successively the emergency services landscape and the role of central government in dealing with emergencies. The last four then suggest ways for increasing tri-service cooperation, improving local resilience, merging the fire and ambulance services and protecting critical sectors.

The recommendations put forward are massively ambitious and hugely contentious, particularly in these times of considerable economic difficulties, a point made by the Minister for the Cabinet Office, Francis Maude in his forward, which to say the least is lukewarm to the proposals. Pointing out that 'the police, fire and ambulance services are genuine life-savers, responding to an extraordinary range of incidents on an hourly basis' he states, 'they do a brilliant job in what are often extreme circumstances, and think little of responding well above the call of duty'. In relation to the report itself, he writes: 'In Britain we need to examine constantly how we can do things better. Money is very tight and technology is opening doors that have long been closed. So it makes sense for us to be open-minded to change. The paper is a thorough and imaginative study, exploring some ways to innovate and develop. I commend the authors for breaking ground that can no longer be treated as untouchable.'³

There is an element of truth in what he says about the need to explore 'ways to innovate and develop' but the report actually breaks very little new ground. Most of what it contains has already been discussed previously. Indeed, some members of the Institute were quick to point out that it was rather a muddled report, lacking clarity as to cost and how some of its proposals would be implemented.

It appears that the Group have concentrated, understandably, perhaps, given their focus, on the organisational structures needed to cope with emergencies, without making any attempt to evaluate the total time the blue light services spend dealing with the type of

events identified as requiring inter-service cooperation? Given the individual tasks required of each organisation, the figure is likely to be extremely low, so the Institute feels that there is a need for extreme caution in promoting major organisational change to address just one aspect of their role.⁴

Formation of a Department of Homeland Security

The main thrust of the paper is the formation of a Department of Homeland Security based on the tri-service model of the Ministry of Defence. Thus the suggestion is that all three of the emergency services – police, fire and ambulance – are brought together into a single department, preferably a new Department of Homeland Security, in much the same way as the Royal Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force are grouped together under the Ministry of Defence. In addition, the report suggests that there should be a new appointment, Chief of the Emergency Services (CES), which would equate with the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS).

Some of the recommendations can be easily challenged, while others could lead to improvements in efficiency and effectiveness but would require stronger arguments and deeper research before they are taken further. For instance, the arguments for a UK Department of Homeland Security are unconvincing. The creation of such a Department in the United States was a knee-jerk response by politicians to the 9/11 attacks. The initial aim was to improve cooperation between 22 separate Federal Government Departments, but many people in the US argue that it has led to reduced strategic and operational effectiveness and efficiency, and considerable duplication. In fact, David Omand explains in his book, *Securing the State*, why the UK did not go down the same route, and why the current security structure in the UK reflects our historical experiences (not least the Troubles in NI), the structure of UK central and local government, and our geographical size.⁵ In addition, the United

States did not have a department dealing with internal affairs similar to that of the Home Office; only the Department of Justice dealt with some aspects of internal affairs.

But returning to the comparison with the UK Ministry of Defence, members of the Institute were quick to point out, there are huge differences between the functions of the three military services and the three emergency services, not the least of which, is the fact that the military train together to undertake the defence of the country as and when required, whereas the three emergency services, for the most part, are operating 24/7 in roles, which do not require the interoperability that is required in a major emergency. Another factor mentioned by a member of the Institute, who served for a time as a military officer in the Ministry of Defence is that the CDS is supported by a massive Ministry and supporting agencies, and such an organisation would be too costly and, indeed, unnecessary for the blue light services.⁶

Interoperability

The report makes a number of demands for greater interoperability. This, of course, is a theme that the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) has concentrated on for a number of years now.⁷ Whilst it is agreed that there are areas in which interoperability could be improved, by no means all members of the Institute currently serving in the Blue Light Services, and thus intimately involved in operations on the ground, take the view that the formation of a Department for Homeland Security, similar to that which exists in the United States, would improve interoperability. Indeed, those who have knowledge of the current system in the United States go so far as to suggest that, even under the Department of Homeland Security, the interoperability platform that currently exists in the United States is inferior to that which operates in the United Kingdom.

As one former senior fire officer who, until recently, ran the Gold Command Courses at the Fire Service College said: 'Interoperability has been the holy grail for years, and in my view politicians think we aren't any good at it because they don't really understand what it is. We [that is the blue light services] work very well together at the times we need to. At most other times, each service is pursuing its own work and objectives based on its mission, skills and resources. As we all know, there can be hugely critical incidents underway being managed by the police that other agencies don't really need to be involved in. When other agencies need to be there, they are, and the ILO arrangements oil those wheels, but the wheels were already there and were turning fairly frequently in my view.'⁸

Cabinet Office Briefing Room

Another criticism of the report is the somewhat 'starry-eyed' impression that the authors appear to have about COBR (Cabinet Office Briefing Room). Insofar as the Institute is aware, COBR has never escalated to a Level 3 catastrophic incident, at least, not for a UK based incident, and does not believe that it has formally declared a Level 2 serious incident. Therefore, emergencies in the United Kingdom have, to-date, been Level 1 significant incidents or ones requiring a Local response.⁹ There are, however, a number of occasions when it would appear that COBR has attempted to interfere with the operational running of an incident and there is some concern amongst Institute members that, with a CES having been appointed by the Government, operational decisions being taken on the ground may be over-ridden by the CES because of a 'political whim'.

Training and the National College of Emergency Service Excellence

The report suggests that all training undertaken by the blue light services should be merged with the creation of a National College of Emergency Service Excellence.¹⁰ It will be recalled that at the turn of the century, the three individual military staff colleges, at

Blue Light Services

Dartmouth (Royal Navy), Camberley (Army), Bracknell (Royal Air Force) were disbanded with the formation of the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, which now runs the Combined Command and Staff Course. However, the role of the proposed National College of Emergency Services Excellence is not very clear. The misspelling of 'college' as 'collage' in the recommendations could prove to be true if it became a national college delivering a patchwork of training taken from existing training institutions!¹¹ Certainly, the Emergency Planning College has lost its way and now seems to be driven by Serco's business plan rather than improving the nation's ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from emergencies and disasters. Not only has the Emergency Planning College lost its way, but, so too, has the Civil Contingencies Secretariat.¹² It has no teeth and has generally been in decline as an influential body since the departure of Bruce Mann as its Head.

Presumably, the new National College of Emergency Service Excellence could run a combined Command and Staff Course, similar to that run by the military, which all future leaders in the police, fire and ambulance services would be required to attend in order to reach the top of their respective services. However, the proposal goes much further than that in suggesting that all three services should 'buy into a single location for basic, intermediary, advanced, specialist and all tri-service training' thus improving 'technical interoperability, protocols and best practice'.¹³

The idea that the proposed College would bring all training, from basic to command, for all three services under one roof would undermine the early development of the unique ethos and moral values of each service something which is difficult to measure in financial terms, but is something we tamper with at our peril. As one of our former military members points out: 'in 1968, the Canadians combined their three armed services into the 'Canadian Forces'; they introduced common basic training, a

common rank structure based on the Army, and attempted to adopt a standard green uniform. Much of the unification proved a disaster, and many of the common gestures were reversed!'¹⁴

And, of course, the military in the United Kingdom still undertake most of its training on an individual service basis. Even, officers are trained separately when entering the service - the Royal Navy at Dartmouth, the Army at Sandhurst, and the Royal Air force at Cranwell. This was an area in which a number of the Institute's members disagreed. Claiming difficulties had been experienced by "nationally" trained individuals when dealing with local incidents, it was pointed out by one operational member that, whilst a core set of role specific syllabuses are essential and should be agreed nationally, the degree of physical geographical and demographic variation suggests this should be delivered locally, at least partially.¹⁵ Another operational member agreed with the local delivery of training, pointing out that working in a predominantly rural area is very different to working in an urban area.¹⁶

The merging of fire and ambulance services

Some members of the Institute support the recommendation relating to the creation of a single fire and a single ambulance authority for England and Wales, which would be 'a stepping stone towards a full merger of the two services to create an Emergency Response Service'.¹⁷ This was, of course, suggested by Sir Ken Knight earlier this year.¹⁸ Perhaps, also the fire service should be returned to the Home Office, where it was prior to the formation of a monolithic government department in 2001 in order to give Labour Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott a job to do. Although there are different models, a combined fire and ambulance service works successfully in parts of Europe, the United States, the Middle-East and Asia. As one Fellow of the Institute pointed out:

'The least painful, and most successful, appears to be where the services merge in terms of responsible authority, premises, backroom functions, etc., but maintain separate skills cadres, i.e. firefighters and paramedics may be on the same station and turning out together, but their training and specialisations remain distinct (with the exception of first-aid level expertise, like "first-on-scene" and use of defibrillators). Places where they attempt to make the all-singing/all dancing firefighter/paramedic seem to stretch the technical competence abilities of their staff drastically, and it's usually a case of propping up an over-resourced and under-utilised fire department'.¹⁹

National Critical Infrastructure

Insofar as the National Critical Infrastructure (NCI) is concerned, the report suggests that Infrastructure UK and the Critical Infrastructure Resilience Programme should be merged into a single body and come under the authority of the CES and 'to ensure enhanced engagement (rather than just information sharing) with regulators and operators a new mechanism modelled on the US National Infrastructure Advisory Council should be set up'.²⁰ However, it does not properly address the growing role of the private sector, not only in the provision of the NCI, but in all aspects of security. A simpler and cheaper answer might be to give an existing body, such as the National Security Inspectorate (NSI) increased powers to oversee all aspects of security within the private sector, including the CNI. That having been said, the report does not adequately address the overlap between the role of, and services provided by, other related homeland security and resilience agencies, such as border control, food security, flood management and indeed the UK Armed Forces. How should they be folded into the governance of the nation's homeland security?

Where there is agreement with Institute Members

As one would expect from such an eminent body, there are some relevant and constructive ideas in the report which did find favour amongst some members of the Institute. For instance, those who had experience of coordination during the Olympic Games, felt that the establishment 'of a joint National Operations and Coordination Centre building on the infrastructure and experience of the National Olympic Coordination Centre' and which would have the 'ability to monitor locations, move blue light assets around the country and tie into Local Resilience Forums,' would be a step in the right direction.²¹

In addition, the report points out that 'resilience is a specialist area' and career structures within the Civil Service need to recognise this in order to 'develop experts in resilience in each Lead Government Department.'²² It also suggests that Local Resilience Forums should be given 'legal status', assuming 'the functions of Strategic Coordinating Groups,' which should 'be renamed Civil Contingencies Units and the quality of planning by these units should be independently assured by 'a beefed up CCS and peer review.'²³ Also, a relevant professional qualification in emergency planning should be made mandatory for Local Authority Chief Executives and other key representatives who sit on LRFs.²⁴

In conclusion

Members pointed out, that a number of elements of the report appeared to focus on areas that were already being addressed in the Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme (JESIP) and the Emergency Services Mobile Communications Programme (ESMCP), both of which appear to be led by the Home Office rather than the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, the Next Generation National Resilience Extranet (NG-NRE) and by the National Ambulance Resilience Unit (NARU).²⁵

With a merged Fire and Rescue Service and Ambulance Service moving back to the Home Office, this would, in effect, bring the three Blue Light Services back into a single department without the huge expense of forming a new Department for Homeland Security. Until the formation of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat in 2001, emergency management was the responsibility of the Emergency Planning Division, which was part of the Home Office Fire and Emergency Planning Directorate. The Civil Contingencies Secretariat could therefore be moved from the Cabinet Office, and given, as the report suggests, 'powers to challenge resilience planning by other government departments'.²⁶

There is, however, one area, from which the civil emergency structure could usefully copy from the military. Despite many statements to the contrary, doctrine and principles relating to resilience or civil emergencies do not exist.²⁷ This is, in part, because those who have been tasked have not fully understood what doctrine and principles are and how they differ from policy, strategy, guidelines, operating procedures and the like. The setting up of a Joint Emergency Services Doctrine Centre within a revamped Civil Contingencies Secretariat, staffed by representatives from police, fire and ambulance rather than civil servants, similar to the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre based within the Defence Academy at Shrivenham, which consists of members of all three military services, would make an extremely useful contribution in terms of ensuring that the United Kingdom is able to provide the type of response to emergencies that the public deserve. ▲

References

1. All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Homeland Security, *The* (2013). *Improving Efficiency, Interoperability and Resilience of our Blue Light Services*. London: Henry Jackson Society.
2. *Ibid*, p.5.
3. *Ibid*, p.4.
4. A point made to the author in correspondence from Institute Fellow, Alastair McAslan.
5. Omand, David (2010). *Securing the State*. London: Hurst.
6. McAslan, op. cit. 4.
7. See RUSI (Jan 2010). *Interoperability in a Crisis 2: Human Factors and Organisational Process*. London: www.rusi.org; RUSI (July 2010). *Emergency service interoperability in jeopardy due to lack of standardised operational procedures*. London: www.rusi.org.
8. A view expressed in correspondence from Kevin Arbuthnot, formerly Deputy Chief Officer of the West Yorkshire Fire and Rescue Service.
9. APPG, op. cit. 1, pp. 14/15.
10. *Ibid*, pp. 20/21.
11. See APPG, op. cit. 1, p. 8 (recommendation 6) for the misspelling; also McAslan, op. cit. 4, for the comment.
12. For example, see APPG, op. cit. 1, p.26, where it is suggested that the CCS is failing to manage 'cross-departmental resilience issues'.
13. APPG, op. cit. 1, p.21.
14. McAslan, op. cit. 4.
15. In correspondence from Matthew Booker; also referred to by McAslan, op. cit. 4.
16. In correspondence from Robert Flute.
17. APPG, op. cit. 1, p. 8, Recommendation 5.
18. Knight, Sir Ken (May 2013). *Facing the Future*. London: Department for Community and Local Government.
19. Arbuthnot, op. cit. 8.
20. APPG, op. cit. 1, p. 33.
21. *Ibid*, p. 8, Recommendation 4; also referred to by Flute, op. cit. 16.
22. *Ibid*, p. 9, Recommendation 10; see also p.17.
23. *Ibid*, p. 9, Recommendation 11.
24. *Ibid*, p. 9, Recommendation 12.
25. Pointed out by Matthew Booker, op. cit. 15.
26. *Ibid*, p.8, Recommendation 2.
27. This is a general view amongst many senior members of the Institute.

Acknowledgements

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Bio note

Tony Moore is Deputy President of the Institute. After a distinguished career in the Metropolitan Police, he pursued an academic career at Cranfield University and retired as the Associate Director of the Resilience Centre in 2009.