



House of Commons  
Public Administration  
and Constitutional Affairs  
Committee

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**Lessons still to be  
learned from the  
Chilcot inquiry:  
Government Response  
to the Committee's  
Tenth Report of Session  
2016–17**

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**Third Special Report of Session  
2017–19**

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## Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith; to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service; and to consider constitutional affairs.

### Current membership

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### Powers

The committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 146. These are available on the internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk).

### Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at [www.parliament.uk/pacac](http://www.parliament.uk/pacac) and in print by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Dr Rebecca Davies (Clerk), Libby Kurien (Clerk), Ian Bradshaw (Second Clerk), Dr Patrick Thomas (Committee Specialist), Dr Philip Larkin (Committee Specialist), Makka Habre (Committee Specialist), Gabrielle Hill (Senior Committee Assistant), Iwona Hankin (Committee Assistant), and Mr Alex Paterson (Media Officer).

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## Third Special Report

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The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee published its Tenth Report of Session 2016–17, [Lessons still to be learned from the Chilcot Inquiry](#), as HC 656 on 16 March 2017. The Government's response was received on 19 December 2017 and is appended to this report. The Committee is disappointed with the Government's response given the clear evidence of the need for improvements to public inquiries and Government decision making that the Committee received. It is particularly concerned about the Government's failure to accept the case for stronger safeguards to ensure proper collective consideration by the Cabinet on decisions of national importance.

## Appendix: Government Response

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### Overview

The report of the Iraq Inquiry published on July 6th 2016 identified lessons to be learned from the UK's approach to and involvement in Iraq from 2001 to 2009. As the then Prime Minister noted during his statement to Parliament on the date of publication, the Government recognises that although many lessons from interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan had already been learned and embedded by government, the report identified "lessons that we do need to learn and...keep on learning".

At the most strategic level, the Government accepted that taking the country to war should always be a last resort and should only be done if all credible alternatives have been exhausted.

It also acknowledged Sir John Chilcot's finding that formal machinery of government structures to support collective decision-making are vital. The National Security Council was established in 2010 in part learning lessons from Iraq to ensure proper co-ordinated decision making across the whole of Government, including those responsible for domestic security. This Council has the right breadth of expertise in the room with Ministers from the relevant departments, the Attorney General, and advisors and officials including the Chief of the Defence Staff, the Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the heads of the intelligence services, and relevant senior officials.

The position of national security adviser was established in 2010 with a properly constituted team in the Cabinet Office to ensure that all the key parts of our national security apparatus are joined up. The national security machinery also taps the experience and knowledge of experts from outside Government. This helps us to constantly challenge conventional wisdom within the system and avoid, hopefully, group-think. It is inconceivable today that we could take a premeditated decision to commit combat troops without a full and challenging discussion in the National Security Council, on the basis of full papers, including written legal advice, prepared and stress-tested by all relevant departments, with decisions formally minuted.

The then Prime Minister accepted Sir John's finding that the culture established by Prime Ministers matters too. It is crucial to good decision making that a Prime Minister

establishes a climate in which it is safe for officials and other experts to challenge existing policy and question the views of Ministers, and the Prime Minister, without fear or favour. Everyone who sits around the NSC table is free to speak their mind and expected to do so.

The Government also recognised that in taking the difficult decisions to intervene in other countries, proper planning for what follows is vital. The task of rebuilding effective governance is enormous. That is why we created a conflict, stability and stabilisation fund, and beefed up the cross-Government stabilisation unit, so that experts are able to deploy in post-conflict situations anywhere in the world at short notice. The 2010 decision to commit 0.7% of our gross national income on overseas aid which the Government has reiterated has made this possible. Much of that money is spent on conflict-affected and fragile states, not only assisting with post-conflict planning but also trying to prevent conflicts in the first place.

The Government accepted that it must ensure that our armed forces are always properly equipped and resourced. That is why we now conduct a regular strategic defence and security review to ensure that the resources we have meet the ambitions of the national security strategy and why we meet our NATO commitment to spend 2% of our GDP on defence. The Government has also enshrined the armed forces covenant in law to ensure that our armed forces and their families receive the treatment and respect they deserve in ways consistent with the findings of the Iraq Inquiry.

The then Prime Minister committed the Government to learning additional lessons from Chilcot beyond those already embedded. The then National Security Adviser, Sir Mark Lyall Grant, conducted this process across the national security community, considering further improvements. A summary of the learning from this process is included as an Annex to this response. The Government fully recognises that ensuring lessons are embedded and properly learned will be a long term and ongoing process, which will also be considered in the ongoing work as part of the National Security Capability Review. To ensure that lessons are implemented, departments are sharing learning and knowledge across the community. Several NSC departments have also developed specific departmental Chilcot lessons learning processes and programmes.

The Iraq Inquiry Report provided a unique window on a decade of decision-making and implementation on a national endeavour. Sir John and his team were able to look at what happened in a way that was not possible for those working on Iraq within Government at the time. The report brings witness testimony and documentary evidence together, enabling the Inquiry team to review it objectively outside the daily practice of Government. The report is a forensic assessment not just of what happened and why, but of the cultures and behaviours that underpinned the process of national Government during this period. Some of these lessons are of wider relevance than the national security community and are being shared with the wider civil service community, through briefings to leadership teams across Government and in the form of an immersive case study through the new Civil Service Leadership Academy.

## Iraq Inquiry Process

1. ***The Cabinet Secretary indicated that the Government would consider further the question of how the Iraq Inquiry could have been carried out more quickly. We urge that this assessment is conducted as a matter of urgency and its findings reported to Parliament, so that both Government and Parliament can take the necessary steps to ensure that future Inquiries, particularly those with comparable scope and scale to the Iraq Inquiry, do not experience such unacceptable delays.***  
(Paragraph 31)

The Government notes the views of the Committee. It will be rare that an Inquiry will have the scope and scale of the Iraq Inquiry. The time it took to report was in large part due to the complexity and scope of the issues it was examining. Sir John Chilcot acknowledged this in his evidence to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee of 4 February 2015 when he identified the unprecedented scope of the inquiry as one of the key factors in the time it had taken the Inquiry Committee to complete its work.

More generally, the Cabinet Office is developing tools to provide guidance for those establishing, running and supporting future inquiries. A cross-Government expert group has been established to share best practice and offer advice to those establishing, running and supporting inquiries. This group will inform and develop a guidance paper for sponsor departments and Inquiry Chairs, Secretaries and their teams. Drawing on the expertise of a wide range of officials with experience of inquiries across Government, the guidance will build on the draft internal guidance already in use by departments, and provide a standard for best practice for all inquiries (both statutory and non-statutory) commissioned by the Government.

## Parliamentary Mechanisms and Involvement in Inquiries

2. **WeremainconcernedaboutthelackofmechanismsformeaningfulParliamentary oversight over the establishment of both statutory and non-statutory inquiries.**  
(Paragraph 36)
3. ***In future, there should be a full debate and vote on an amendable motion, setting out the precise terms of reference, an estimated timeframe and a proposed budget for the Inquiry. Before such a debate, Parliament should establish an ad-hoc Select Committee to take evidence on the proposed remit and to present formal conclusions and recommendations to the House. The Select Committee should also recommend whether the inquiry should be a Privy Council or inquiry Chair. Only then should the remit and the Chair of the inquiry be put before Parliament for final approval, along with a timetable and a budget for the inquiry, so that Parliament can act on the considered recommendations of the Select Committee.***  
(Paragraph 37)

The Government does not accept this recommendation.

The Government recognises the important role of parliament in the administration of public inquiries, and where possible will ensure a full debate takes place on the scope of an inquiry at the outset. For those inquiries set up under the Inquiries Act 2005, the Prime

Minister is required to inform Parliament about who will chair the inquiry and its terms of reference. At the conclusion of the inquiry, the Chair will provide his report to the Prime Minister, who will then lay it before Parliament immediately on receipt.

However public inquiries take many forms depending on the circumstances. They will often need to be established quickly to respond to issues of urgent public concern. The Government believes that the current approach to establishing inquiries provides the appropriate balance of responsiveness and flexibility. The creation and operation of select committees is a matter for the House, but the Government's view is that it will not always be possible or appropriate to follow the proposed format. Select Committees can of course call for evidence from Inquiry Chairs/Panel members/Secretariat which provides opportunity for scrutiny and ensures accountability.

### Lessons Learned Process

4. **The Government is conducting a lessons learned investigation across Whitehall coordinated by the National Security Adviser, into the substantive criticisms of the machinery of government made by the report of the Iraq Inquiry. *The Government must provide, in its formal response to this Report, a date when this exercise will be completed. The findings should be reported to Parliament so that PACAC and other relevant Select Committees can scrutinise and comment on the investigation and so that Parliament is able to hold the government to account for the implementation of its recommendations.*** (Paragraph 43)

The summary of the then National Security Adviser's Lessons Learned process is appended to this response. It covered not just machinery of Government lessons, but also knowledge management and behaviours and cultures. As the summary makes clear, the Government intends to update Parliament on its implementation of the lessons and recommendations identified in the Summary in its Annual Report on the implementation of the Strategic Defence and Security Review.

### Strategic Analysis and Assessment in the National Security Council

5. ***We reiterate the recommendations of our predecessor Committee, PASC, across its three reports on strategic thinking in government, that the NSC requires far greater capability in strategic thinking and analysis and would greatly benefit from having its own capacity to synthesise assessment and analysis from across Whitehall and elsewhere. We also fully support the recommendation of the Foreign Affairs Committee that the Government should commission an independent review of the National Security Council. The Government should consider how the NSC can promote more collective strategic analysis and assessment as part of its decision-making both within the NSC itself and across Government.*** (Paragraph 44)

The Government does not accept the Committee's finding that the NSC lacks the capability for strategic assessment and analysis. Firstly, the Joint Intelligence Committee process provides a formal all source strategic assessment process in support of National Security Council decisions. This process involves Whitehall departments and diplomatic posts but also draws on external sources of information and insight depending on the topic. Every NSC meeting begins with an assessment from the Joint Intelligence Committee Chair. In addition, the NSC draws on strategic analysis from professional bodies within

Government, including Foreign Office Research Analysts, the Government Economic profession and specialist analytical centres such as the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre and the Stabilisation Unit. Of course there is always more that government can do to make use of external expertise. The National Security Adviser is developing a more systematic approach to national security community engagement with experts outside Government designed to cover the full spectrum of issues.

While decisions on national security issues are taken at National Security Council meetings, the process of supporting that decision-making is a much more iterative policy process using the whole of the Whitehall system. Increasingly, cross-Whitehall country, region and thematic strategies help cohere different parts of Government to work to common purpose on an agreed set of priorities and outcomes. The role of the National Security Secretariat is to ensure that the whole government system supports that work, asking the right questions, developing a broad set of options underpinned by a wide set of evidence and recognising the risks involved. While the Government does not accept that the National Security Council, a Cabinet Committee, should be subject to independent review, it has recently reviewed the National Security Secretariat to ensure that it remains as agile, collaborative and responsive organisation providing the best strategic advice possible to support National Security Council decisions.

The Government notes that having the right machinery of government, proper processes, culture and planning comprehensive strategic advice on all the key issues and learning lessons from previous interventions does not guarantee success in military interventions. This is not a failure of strategic capability. The challenges of intervention are formidable. We are realistic that we can have the best prepared plans but in the real world things can go wrong. In volatile, dynamic and evolving situations, it is not always possible to work out in advance exactly how others will respond or events unfold. Intervention is hard. War fighting is not always the most difficult part. We are fully aware that the stabilisation and reconciliation processes that follow are a much more complex challenge. However, just because intervention is difficult, it does not mean that there are not times when it is right and necessary. The Government remains committed to taking difficult decisions to protect its people and meet its responsibilities to global peace and security as a Permanent Member of the United Nations Security Council.

## The Role of the Cabinet Secretary in Enforcing Procedures for Decision-making

6. **It is no longer acceptable that the present arrangements should continue without stronger means to prevent key ministers, or even the whole Cabinet from being sidelined. Beyond making representations to Ministers and to the Prime Minister, short of resignation, the Cabinet Secretary does not have any formal recourse to object to a Prime Minister's chosen course of action in the event that he or she wishes to disregard the procedures for decision-making set out in the Cabinet Manual. We are in no doubt that the absence of safeguards cannot persist. (Paragraph 53)**

The Government does not agree with the Committee's finding that there is an absence of safeguards on decision-making within Government. It is very clear in the Cabinet Manual that the Cabinet Secretary's role is to ensure that Cabinet Committees provide effective

collective Government and are not bypassed, and that sub-committees are set up to deal with issues that require a more intensive focus. As the Cabinet Secretary told the Committee in his evidence on 14 September 2016, the Cabinet Secretary has responsibility for making sure that Cabinet Government is working properly, that Cabinet Committees meet with the right people in them to take the key decisions, and that issues are dealt with in a proper way. Cabinet Secretaries and National Security Advisers take their responsibilities very seriously in enforcing this. This is backed up by practice. Neither the Cabinet nor the National Security Council has been bypassed in the decision-making process since the establishment of the NSC in 2010. In particular, when decisions on military intervention have been taken, the NSC and its sub-committees and officials groups have prepared decisions fully and there has been a full discussion of the issue in Cabinet before decisions were taken.

## Policy Making

7. ***PACAC recommends that the substance of the proposal of the Better Government Initiative should be adopted. There should be a mechanism of written Ministerial direction, similar to that used by Departmental Accounting Officers, reflecting the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary and other senior officials to ensure that proper procedure is followed as set out in the Cabinet Manual. If a senior official requests such a direction, it should be at his or her discretion whether this direction should be made immediately known to Parliament, through PACAC or the relevant Select Committee, or placed in the public archive for delayed release. As an alternative, the official should also be to notify Privy Counsellors. Such a mechanism would dispel any doubt about the Cabinet Secretary's direct responsibilities. Furthermore, it would make clear to Ministers the vital importance of following proper procedure and of taking proper advice on matters of procedure.*** (Paragraph 57)

As part of the then National Security Adviser's lessons learning process the Government considered the Better Government Initiative's idea for a formal Ministerial direction to be given, if Ministers decided to go ahead with a policy against the advice of officials. In the case of Ministerial direction for financial decisions, Permanent Secretaries (as Accounting Officers for their departments) have a clear personal responsibility for the propriety and value for money of the public finances for which they are responsible. In this role, they are directly accountable to the Public Accounts Committee. The Ministerial notification and direction process is activated if a Minister is considering a transaction which the Accounting Officer believes would breach the requirements of propriety, regularity or value for money, and if the Minister decides to proceed against the written objections of the Accounting Officer. This process enables the Public Accounts Committee to see that the Accounting Officer does not bear personal responsibility for this action. It is not an instrument which is engaged purely because a Minister decides to act against the advice of an official, but when a Minister decides to spend public money in a way that contravenes the role of the Accounting Officer.

In the case of policy, the role of officials is to provide advice and for the politicians to take decisions and be accountable to parliament for them. As the Cabinet Secretary explained to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) on 14 September 2016 and, as the Government has made clear in its response to the recent



Foreign Affairs Committee's Review of Libya policy, senior officials can best ensure that their views are expressed, and that their advice is fully reflected in policy formulation, through the NSC process. An additional process risks introducing a degree of unnecessary antagonism between officials and the Prime Minister on matters of collective decision-making. The NSC fosters a culture where alternative views are sought, and its membership, including senior officials, has been designed to ensure that Ministers benefit from the best advice and challenge as they take decisions. Different views are heard and recorded in the minutes. The senior officials present at both Ministerial and Officials NSCs are all confident in their own authorities. Under the Ministerial Code, Ministers have a duty to give fair consideration and due weight to informed and impartial advice from civil

servants, as well as to other considerations and advice in reaching policy decisions. As the then NSA's summary of lessons learned makes clear, we continue to make improvements to ensure that Ministers receive the widest range of policy advice and evidence possible and that officials at all levels are empowered or supported to challenge effectively in pursuit of the best policy outcomes. Disagreement between Ministers and officials over the best course to pursue in uncertain or volatile international circumstances is part of the policy-making process. It should not be confused with a contravention of processes and procedures.

The policy-making process is being strengthened at all levels. The FCO is embedding the Chilcot checklist by including it in the induction of all new entrants and new joiners, and embedding Chilcot lessons through the Diplomatic Academy, including in specific modules on Challenge and Strategy. The MoD continues to deliver a range of reforms including on diversity and challenge. The virtual National Security Academy Senior Faculty course on strategy at the RCDS also includes lessons from Chilcot. Participants on talent schemes have also received briefings on the lessons from Chilcot and, through the new Civil Service Leadership Academy, a 24-hour immersive Chilcot case study for senior leaders across Government will explore issues of accountability and help participants identify risks in the policy-making process.

## The role of Legal Advice in Cabinet Decisions

8. *In future, when the Cabinet is being asked to support significant decisions, such as whether the UK Government should commit to military action, which are based on legal considerations, the Cabinet Manual should be clear about proper procedure. The Cabinet Secretary should be under an obligation to ensure the Cabinet receives comprehensive legal advice, and he or she should have recourse to the proper mechanism of written Ministerial direction we recommend above to ensure this happens.* (Paragraph 67)

The Government accepts that it is important that Cabinet and its Committees including the NSC has access to proper legal advice as part of its decision-making process. The Ministerial code now includes a section making clear that the Law Officers must be consulted in good time before the Government is committed to critical decisions involving legal considerations. The Code also makes clear that when written advice from the Law Officers is included in correspondence between Ministers, or in papers for the Cabinet or Ministerial Committees, the conclusions may if necessary be summarised but, if this is done, the complete text of the advice should be attached.

As the then NSA's Lessons Learned Summary makes clear, we have also strengthened mechanisms to ensure that legal advice relating to NSC matters is prepared with the fullest understanding of the context.

A regular senior legal officials meeting has been established to reinforce and systematise legal work across Government in support of the National Security Council, particularly the Attorney-General's contribution as a full member of NSC, by providing strategic oversight of the legal advice being developed, informing NSS and NSC(O) about legal issues, commissioning work and receiving commissions as needed. Following the completion of a pilot period it is now a formal part of the NSC architecture providing assurance to NSS that relevant legal issues are being identified promptly and addressed coherently; improving the breadth and depth of the briefing available to the Attorney-General; and adding significant recognisable value to the work of its participants, particularly by providing a close, contextualising connection to the work of NSC.

### Effective NSC meetings

9. ***We recommend that the National Security Adviser conducts an analysis of meetings of, and around the National Security Council (NSC), to establish what makes meetings effective. This might include considering how to promote openness and candour within meetings, and an atmosphere of trust, as well as the use of briefs that synthesise cross departmental analysis and assessment, rather than the normal departmental briefs. The Government should report on the NSA's findings to PACAC, in confidence if necessary.*** (Paragraph 68)

As the then NSA's Lessons Learned Summary explains, the NSC (O) committed to exploring more diverse approaches and mitigating the cognitive biases and heuristics that all groups of experts possess as part of its lessons from Chilcot. It has set up a diversity and inclusion network which has been working with the NSC (O) to look at more effective meetings. This has resulted in changes to the ways that the NSC (O) runs meetings. As part of the commitment in the Strategic Defence and Security Review to improve diversity and inclusion across national security, the NSA has requested greater challenge of the papers that are presented to it, including using the Chilcot checklist for policy makers (see Annex A of the NSA's Lessons Learned Summary appended to this response) and establishing a Shadow Board, which is a group of junior officials that meet regularly to discuss subjects that are presented to NSC (O). The NSA is introducing additional reforms to the NSC process to ensure there is sufficient time to effectively debate the priority issues.

Synthesised briefing and analysis has always been an important component of NSC meetings and related mechanisms and the Government is committed to ensuring the best quality briefing and advice supports NSC decision-making.

## The Use and Oversight of Intelligence and the Role of the Joint Intelligence Committee

10. **We believe that the ongoing issue of Parliament's access to sensitive information underpins the need for an open conversation between Government and Parliament on this matter, so that Parliament can be confident of its full ability to scrutinise Government decisions. We agree with the Iraq Inquiry that the Intelligence and Security Committee should play a key role in strengthening the checks and assessments on intelligence information when it is used to make the case for Government policies. We also recommend that the Government considers how to bolster the independence of the Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee. It would be more independent if its place in the career structure were altered. It should be a matter of policy that those appointed to the role should not also be seeking promotion to a more senior role. We recognised that this may mean upgrading the post to the equivalent of Permanent Secretary in order to attract the necessary quality of individual.** (Paragraphs 71 and 77)

The Intelligence and Security Committee already has substantial powers to access and scrutinise sensitive information. The Justice and Security Act 2013 reformed the ISC, making it a committee of Parliament, providing greater powers and increasing its remit including oversight of operational activity and the wider intelligence and security activities of Government. In addition to oversight of the three intelligence and security agencies, the ISC examines the intelligence related work of the Cabinet Office. This includes intelligence related work produced by the Joint Intelligence Committee, the Assessments Staff working in the Joint Intelligence Organisation and the National Security Secretariat. The Committee also provides oversight of Defence intelligence in the Ministry of Defence and the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism in the Home Office. In addition, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy increasingly has access to closed briefings on sensitive national security issues to ensure that Parliament.

The Government recognised the need for the Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee to be above and beyond influence in response to the 2004 Butler Review into Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq. The Government response to the Butler Review, published in March 2005, noted that 'The Prime Minister made clear to the House on 20 July 2004 that the Cabinet Office would set about making a permanent appointment to the Chairmanship of the JIC...and that this would be done in accordance with Lord Butler's criteria. Every JIC Chair since the appointment of Sir Richard Mottram in November 2005 has been at Permanent Secretary level.

### Role of Parliament

11. **PACAC agrees with the assessment that alongside our criticism of the procedures of government in relation to the decision to go to war in Iraq, and together with our consideration of how the machinery of government can be improved to safeguard against such failings in the future, there is a further task. We, as Parliamentarians, must also reflect upon how Parliament could have been more critical and challenging of the Government at the time. This, we believe, is a vital consideration, not just for the Intelligence and Security Committee, the Foreign**

*Affairs Committee and the Defence Committee but for every Committee of this House. It is a lesson of which we must be consistently mindful, throughout all aspects of our work and scrutiny of Government.* (Paragraph 79)

The Government notes the Committee's conclusion.

12. *Dr Glen Rangwala's report makes a case, drawing from evidence presented in the Chilcot report, that the former Prime Minister, Rt Hon Tony Blair deliberately misled the House of Commons in advance of the decision to go to war in Iraq. We acknowledge the seriousness of Dr Rangwala's conclusions and recognise that his report supports the view held by many members of the House. We note, however, that Sir John Chilcot believes that there was no personal and demonstrable decision by the then Prime Minister to deceive Parliament or the public. This Committee is not in a position to take up and investigate further Dr Rangwala's conclusions. Should further evidence, beyond the Chilcot report, come to light that supports Dr Rangwala's arguments, the House may wish to refer this matter to the Privileges Committee to take further.* (Paragraph 81).

The Government notes the Committee's conclusion.

### Cross Departmental Coordination

13. *We note with approval the Government's efforts to improve cross- departmental coordination through the National Security Council and through the growth of permanent cross-departmental 'joint units'. However, these alone are insufficient for improving cross-departmental coordination for the delivery of complex policies. We agree with the recommendation of the Iraq Inquiry that a senior Minister with lead responsibility should be appointed to manage cross-departmental issues when they are of a scale and importance comparable to UK post-conflict engagement in Iraq. The present Government can be seen to have done exactly this by appointing a lead Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. The Government must also set out how it is going to encourage a positive attitude amongst officials towards joint departmental working, to promote the right behaviours that support cross-departmental coordination.* (Paragraph 90)

The Government welcomes the Committee's endorsement of the approach it has taken on joint units. As the Government set out in the 2016 Annual Report on the SDSR 2015, it continues to embed a whole-of Government approach to dealing with national security policies. Bringing expertise together from across Government in new issue-focussed teams drawing from multiple Departments has allowed us to consolidate the relevant knowledge and experience, coordinating policy more efficiently, and giving scope for removal of duplication. To date the government has established the following policy- making and delivery Joint Units identified in SDSR 2015 to promote the right behaviours to support cross-departmental coordination:

- The Gulf Strategy Unit, hosted by the Cabinet Office, was established in 2015 and is leading coordination and cross-government consideration of UK policy and programmes in the Gulf, in line with strategies set by the NSC;

- The Joint International Counter-Terrorism Unit (JICTU), hosted by the Home Office, was launched in April 2016, bringing together expertise from the FCO, Home Office and other departments. The new unit is leading our counter-terrorism agenda internationally, and oversees expanded funds for support and capacity building work abroad.
- The Counter-Proliferation and Arms Control Centre (CPACC), hosted by the MOD, started work in July 2016 with teams from contributing departments. Greater emphasis on cross-government working has already paid dividends, for example in the UK's central role in the international effort to arrange safe disposal of Libyan chemical weapons materials;
- The Export Control Joint Unit (ECJU), hosted in the Department for International Trade, went live in July 2016, coordinating the cross- government operation of UK export controls;
- The Joint Unit on Euro-Atlantic Security Policy (EASP), hosted by the FCO, was launched in October 2016. The team is leading the Government's work on NATO policy, the EU's CSDP, and conventional arms control in Europe;
- The UN Peacekeeping Unit (UNPK), hosted by the FCO, started work in November 2016, building on the cooperation between MOD, FCO and DFID on peacekeeping policy and operations, which contributed to the success of the September 2016 London Peacekeeping Ministerial meeting; and
- In 2016, we also established a North Africa Joint Unit, hosted in FCO, bringing together expertise principally from DFID and FCO.

We remain committed to exploring the establishment of further joint units where there is a good case to do so.

The Government also welcomes the Committee's endorsement of the approach it has taken on Exiting the European Union.

# Annex: Learning Lessons from the Iraq Inquiry: The National Security Adviser's Report, 1 January 2017

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## Introduction

Sir John Chilcot's Iraq Inquiry, published on 6 July 2016, analyses, in an unprecedented way, how the political, civil, diplomatic, military and Intelligence Services worked together for nearly a decade to tackle a major international intervention. It brought together documentary and oral evidence, including from sources not normally accessible for national security reasons. The Government is committed to learn the lessons from his comprehensive report.

This report from the National Security Adviser summarises the lesson learning process undertaken across the National Security Community in response to the Iraq Inquiry. That process focussed on ensuring that we have the right systems, capabilities and cultures to support cross-Government decision-making on national security issues. It is not designed to be an exhaustive list of lessons learnt – beneath the NSA-led process, Departments and Agencies have undertaken their own exercises, reflecting specific lessons for them highlighted in the Iraq Inquiry. But it does demonstrate the seriousness with which the National Security Community as a whole has responded to the Inquiry.

For the purpose of this report, the National Security Community includes the Home Office, the Treasury, the Ministry of Defence and Armed Services, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Department for International Development, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Attorney General's Office, the Cabinet Office, the Secret Intelligence Agencies, the National Crime Agency and the Joint Intelligence Committee.

As the then Prime Minister said to Parliament following the publication of the Iraq Inquiry report in July 2016, major changes have been made since the period covered by the Inquiry to the way Government works, including oversight of the intelligence agencies, how intelligence is assessed and used, how departments, agencies and the military work together, how we approach conflict and stabilisation, and how we deploy civilians and equip our forces.

The Iraq Inquiry Report underlined much we already knew about the challenges of working in international coalitions, particularly where decision-making and responsibility/accountability are not aligned; and about the need for realism about the capacity of partners, such as the UN, to deliver complex stabilisation operations in difficult security environments. Many lessons that Sir John Chilcot identified had already been incorporated into the way we work, as the Government is continually adapting in response to its experiences. But the Iraq Inquiry and its lessons have offered another opportunity to step back and test whether the changes we have made have been systematically embedded, whether they are working and assess what more we need to do.

The Iraq Inquiry has enabled us to look at patterns and trends in the way we work that are difficult to see day-to-day or in the heat of crisis. As well as the machinery of Government, we have looked at knowledge management in complex situations and the impact of culture and behaviour in the national security community. In particular, we have worked to ensure that there is constructive challenge, diversity of thought and innovation, as well as creativity in our policy making and our advice to Ministers. The Civil Service and national security community uses professional policy skills to present systematic, coherent advice to ministers, showing them where the risks lie, and the consequences and impacts of alternative options. There is always room for improvement. Even with the best decision-making structures, scrutiny and skills, it is not always possible to secure the outcomes we want. The consequences of doing nothing can be as great as, or greater than, the risks of trying to tackle a problem before it reaches the UK. This lessons learning process recognises these challenges and acknowledges that we have not always got things right. It commits us to being as well prepared as possible, whatever the next challenge.

## Chapter 1: What has changed since 2009?

Sir John Chilcot's committee reviewed successive UK governments' decision-making and policy design and delivery in Iraq 2001-9. This included the 2003-4 military occupation and post-conflict reconstruction and stabilisation efforts. During and after that period, the Government changed and improved the way we approach international crises and how government (both the civilian and military services) works together.

### *The National Security Council*

At the heart of Government, the most significant change has been the establishment of the National Security Council (NSC) and supporting structures to bring focus and rigour to foreign, security and defence policy. The NSC is a Cabinet sub-Committee chaired by the Prime Minister. It was set up in 2010, and brings Whitehall Departments together to take collective decisions. It fosters debate, with ministers and senior officials discussing and challenging policy options. It brings experts together with Ministers. The Chair of the Joint Intelligence Committee, the Chief of the Defence Staff (representing the collective views of the Chiefs of the Armed Services) and the Heads of the Intelligence Agencies attend NSC. Meetings end with minuted operational conclusions, with responsibility for implementation assigned to specific departments. The NSC addresses a broad range of national security topics and regular meetings allow Ministers to build up knowledge of complex issues over successive discussions. NSC sub-Committees cover complex technical issues.

The NSC normally meets once a week when Parliament is sitting and usually considers two issues at each session. If necessary, the NSC also meets during the Parliamentary recess, as it did when President Obama asked the UK to join airstrikes against the Syrian Regime's chemical weapons facilities in August 2013. It can also meet more frequently, as during the Libya crisis, when the NSC (Libya) met 62 times. Business can also be taken through the formal correspondence process common to all Cabinet sub-Committees.

Under the NSC itself, an NSC Officials group of Departmental Permanent Secretaries and Agency Heads (NSC(O)), chaired by the National Security Adviser (NSA), prepares papers and provides advice to the NSC, tracks implementation, and provides early warning if policy is going off track. As Permanent Secretaries are the Accounting Officers for their departments, this group can ensure that departments follow through on NSC decisions and that resources are allocated to secure the best possible outcomes

The government's crisis coordination mechanism, 'COBR', also supports the NSC. We are improving COBR's infrastructure and IT to ensure that the government has the ability to access the best information available on rapidly developing national security crises.

### *Conflict and Stabilisation Approaches*

The UK has a strong reputation in the field of conflict and stabilisation. Coherence has been improved by the National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (2015), our Aid strategy (2015), and by expert- frameworks, such as the Building Stability Overseas framework (2012) and Stabilisation Approach (2014). The Stabilisation Unit has been brought into the national security community and now serves all departments and agencies which support the NSC.



### ***Strategic Defence and Security Reviews (SDSR)***

The 2010 and 2015 Reviews reassessed the capabilities, including military equipment, needed to meet the security threats we face. The NSC (SDSR) sub-Committee, chaired by the Home Secretary, monitors progress against SDSR commitments.

### ***Overseas Development Assistance (ODA)***

The 2015 aid strategy included the creation of a new £500 million ODA reserve to enable the Government to respond rapidly to emerging crises, supporting civilian responses in the same way that the Treasury supports unforeseen military operations. This aims to address the concern of the Iraq Inquiry that civilian departments should have access to the Treasury Reserve in the same way that the MOD can access funding for military operations. This is important to ensure that there are not 'perverse incentives' to pursue military options before civilian activities [Executive Summary 890-95].

The UK continues to be at the forefront of innovative approaches to ODA through its 0.7% commitment, and work with partners to modernise the OECD Development Assistance Committee's definitions of ODA. This has increased the resources available to the international community to tackle security and justice challenges.

### ***Collaborative Teams across Government***

We have incentivised integrated working across government, including with our Armed Services, through single cross-Whitehall country, regional and thematic national security strategies, delivered in-country by integrated 'one Government' diplomatic missions. We have increased pooled funding such as the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), and set up Joint Units to provide an integrated approach to tackle international security issues, such as terrorism and counter-proliferation. We are making progress on our 2015 SDSR commitment to develop a virtual National Security Academy to support more collaborative and integrated working.

### ***Departmental Reforms***

At the departmental level, changes resulting from the Levene Reforms in the Ministry of Defence, the Diplomatic Excellence initiative and its successor Diplomacy 20:20 programmes in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as well as further reforms arising from the Butler Review in the intelligence and assessment community, are improving capabilities and ensuring that challenge is incorporated into our systems. The additional scrutiny of DfID and wider governmental work on overseas development assistance, including through the Independent Commission on Aid Impact, has also brought improvements to the way that departments build and sustain their capabilities. But Departments recognise that there is more to do in this area.

### ***Civil Service Reform***

The national security community sits within the wider Whitehall policy community. The establishment of the Civil Service policy and operational delivery professions has provided staff with new ways of approaching complex policy and operations. Improvements in the range of formal training open to civil servants through the Civil Service Learning portal

help staff to develop the skills required to tackle complex and evolving challenges. The national security community benefits from these improvements and contributes to them, including through the national security development, training and education institutions, which collectively make up the virtual National Security Academy.

## Chapter 2: Looking beyond the headlines

The Iraq Inquiry highlights that officials need:

- Expertise and skills to design innovative policy options, and to make sound judgements;
- To use evidence effectively;
- Access to a wide range of sources of information, including intelligence assessments;
- Confidence to present challenge to Ministers;
- A culture of leadership ( political and official) and government machinery which enables in-depth discussion, acceptance of challenge and integration of options before decisions are taken (even when this is done at speed);
- To pursue systematic implementation focused on tangible outcomes in line with strategic direction;
- To review policy dynamically at regular intervals, to check assumptions, context and whether objectives are still realistic and achievable given resource and political capital;
- To match resources to the task – and to be able to move them around with agility if things change;
- To manage the risks (with the implications for resources);
- To work together across departmental boundaries in an integrated way to serve a common purpose both in London and on the ground;
- Continuity and transfer of knowledge (of which formal record keeping, including of critical decisions and the reasons for them, is a vital part);
- Understanding of behaviours and biases that can undermine policy making – and tools to overcome them (e.g. red-teaming; diversity – both visible and of thought/background).

Additionally, in international situations, civil servants need to:

- Consider how the UK can add value, and the benefits and risks of intervening in a particular situation (and the risks of inaction);
- Be clear what others are doing and where they are better placed to lead;
- Understand local conditions and whether UK expertise can be applied or adapted to improve a situation;
- Be kept safe through appropriate security, preparation and trauma management;
- Be able to operate effectively with the UK military, as well as with local and international actors.

Against this background, the NSA's Lessons Process has focused on:

1. Testing whether the structures, mechanisms and processes of the National Security Council are consistently understood and used to support decision-making: "machinery of government" (chapter 3);
2. The quality of knowledge management in complex policy making (chapter 4);
3. How human factors (behaviours and cultures) impact on the way we take decisions and make and implement policy in ambiguous, contested international situations (chapter 5).

These issues are inter-dependent. Action in one area alone will not be enough, but can have a positive impact on other areas. We have tried to balance our effort across all three.

## Chapter 3: Machinery of government and decision making: ongoing work and next steps

The Iraq Inquiry is clear that undertaking a risky international endeavour involving commitment of British troops for a sustained period requires planning, preparation and effective decision-making. And that this will need to be adjusted in the light of developments on the ground. Preparation needs to involve real challenge from inside and outside government, testing of assumptions, and a broad range of evidence-based options which highlight the risks, and ways to mitigate them. The strategy needs to be implemented through a fully integrated government effort, with senior ministerial oversight and coordination.

### *The NSC and NSC(O)*

At senior levels in government, there is now a good understanding of the collective purpose and function of the National Security Council, helped by weekly meetings of NSC officials at the level of Permanent Secretaries and Agency Heads to prepare papers for the NSC, to challenge policy design, and to assure policy and operational delivery of NSC decisions. NSC(O) crystallises the key issues and decisions, often in slide pack form, underpinned by detailed papers drafted by the lead departments.

There are still shortcomings. NSC can sometimes be driven by short term deadlines. Within departments, understanding and visibility of the NSC can be mixed. This can impact on the quality and urgency given to policy-making in support of the NSC. There is a risk that policy choices put to Ministers can become incremental, without stepping back to check how choices align with wider strategic objectives.

**To mitigate these risks, work is ongoing to:**

- 1. Refresh the NSC Officials' mandate, clarifying the remit of the group to help staff understand how their departmental participation contributes to decision-making at the national level; and encourage NSC Officials to challenge their staff and themselves to be more robust in preparing policy for decisions at the NSC;**
- 2. Refresh guidance across Whitehall on how to work with the NSC and the wider apparatus, to enhance the understanding among staff of the importance of the NSC as the fulcrum of decision-making on national security issues.**

### *Decision Making*

In his evidence to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, Sir John Chilcot said that the single, most important lesson to draw from Iraq is the 'failure to exert and exercise sufficient collective responsibility for a very big decision, and then to scrutinise and supervise its conduct and implementation.' [House of Commons Liaison Committee, Oral Evidence, Sir John Chilcot, 2 November 2016]

While the Iraq Inquiry Report recognises that it is the responsibility of Ministers to take decisions, Sir John is clear that: 'It was the responsibility of officials to identify, analyse and

advise on risk; and Ministers' responsibility to ensure that measures to mitigate identifiable risks, including a range of policy options, had been considered before significant decisions were taken on the direction of UK policy'. [Executive Summary para 619]

The Iraq Inquiry Report also notes that: 'At no stage did Ministers or senior officials commission the systematic evaluation of different options, incorporating detailed analysis of risk and UK capabilities, military and civilian, which should have been required before the UK committed to any course of action in Iraq...' [Executive Summary para 617]

We have looked at the way we plan and evaluate options and the advice that supports decision-making. While the national security community has a good understanding about the process and rationale of decisions taken during a 'hot' crisis, especially when COBR is used, this knowledge can dissipate, when crises endure.

3. **The NSC is developing an annual review process to remind departments what decisions were taken and why, and to test whether they are still fit for purpose in current circumstances.**

### **Legal Advice**

As the Iraq Inquiry Report has made clear, sound legal advice is vital, particularly when military interventions are involved. The Iraq Inquiry considered that the then Attorney General (AG) 'should have been asked to provide written advice which ....explained the legal basis on which the UK could take military action and set out the risks of legal challenge'. Since 2010, the AG has regularly attended NSCs to ensure that any legal advice he is required to provide is based on a good understanding of national security interests and the situation on the ground. To strengthen further this legal link, the Attorney General was made a full member of the NSC in April 2016 and is privy to wider discussions of UK's National Security interests.

4. **To further strengthen and systematise legal work in support of NSC decision-making, the Attorney General's Office is establishing a regular senior legal officials meeting in support of NSC(O). This will provide strategic oversight of the legal advice being developed, inform NSC and NSC(O) about legal positions, commission work and receive commissions when needed.**

### **Intelligence Assessments**

As the Iraq Inquiry notes, the independence and impartiality of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) remains of the utmost importance [Executive Summary, paragraph 844]. JIC Assessments, based on all sources, are made available to all NSC ministers ahead of decision-making, and the key judgements are summarised by the JIC Chair at the outset of any relevant NSC meeting. JIC assessments include a confidence rating, so that readers are clear about the level of confidence that the JIC is able to place on its judgements. In the 2015 SDSR, the Government committed to reviewing the structure of strategic assessment in central government, including how we equip and train our analysts, promote challenge within government, and share threat information. That review is scheduled to be completed in March 2017.

## *NSC Strategies*

The Iraq Inquiry Report notes that, although the UK's most consistent strategic objective in relations to Iraq between 2003 and 2009 was to reduce the level of its deployed forces, the UK spent time and energy rewriting strategies which described a desired end state, without setting out how it would be reached [Executive Summary Para 617 and 816]. The Iraq Inquiry recognises that the government's strategic framework for stabilisation and machinery for inter- departmental coordination continue to evolve. It suggests that "if these changes are to increase the effectiveness of UK operations, they must address the lessons for planning, preparation and implementation derived from the Iraq experience" [Executive Summary, paragraph 869]. It describes the need for analysis drawing on multiple perspectives, reflecting dissenting views, identifying risks, including gaps in knowledge, and considering a wide range of options. It suggests that plans should, among other things, "integrate civilian and military objectives and capabilities in support of a single UK strategy; be exposed to scrutiny and challenge at Ministerial, senior official and expert level and be reviewed regularly and, if the strategic context, risk profile or projected cost changes significantly, be revised." [Executive Summary, paragraph 874]

A new process of designing and delivering single NSC country, regional and thematic strategies has been in operation for more than two years. These strategies create a shared understanding and common purpose across government particularly where supported by pooled funding. The strategies cover over 65 countries and regions and are underpinned by rigorous analysis of the factors affecting stability and resilience. NSC(O) undertakes a rigorous process to ensure that objectives are realistic and achievable, resources and level of ambition are aligned and under-pinned by evidence, appropriate methodologies are used (e.g. theories of change) and expertise has been consulted. Members of NSC(O) ensure that appropriate resource and effort is applied to the strategies. The highest priority strategies are regularly tested in NSC discussions. Boards of senior officials across Whitehall, chaired by Foreign Office Directors responsible for geographical regions, manage the strategies. Cross-government teams, led by the Heads of our diplomatic Missions overseas, are responsible for cross-government delivery in-country.

These strategies help to ensure clear cross-government objectives. This has improved integrated delivery across Whitehall departments, particularly at posts overseas. Regional Boards still sometimes find balancing priorities difficult to achieve. Participating departments could do more to consult more widely in the design of departmental programmes.

5. **The National Security Secretariat is undertaking a review of obstacles to implementation and will make recommendations to NSC(O) on any improvements in the first quarter of 2017.**

## *The Chilcot Checklist*

When things go wrong or risks increase, we have mechanisms for reviewing and adjusting our strategies. This includes convening a Regional Board to check the impact of changes; re-testing assumptions using fresh JIC assessments; a senior Officials meeting or a COBR.

The rigour of realism needs to be maintained. This remains a challenge, especially when a situation is fast moving. We have used the findings of the Iraq Inquiry to help policy-makers to think systematically about the factors they need to consider to support good policy-making. This “Chilcot checklist” is attached at Annex A.

### ***Risk Management***

Common national risk assessment frameworks have been established to facilitate a coordinated approach to risk management, including through the National Risk Assessment. This supports informed decisions about risk management on the basis of firm evidence. The government is working to improve risk assessment processes, including by engaging experts and ensuring that clear and concise information about potential risk is made available to policy and decision-makers.

### ***Flagging worst, not just best-case, scenarios***

The Iraq Inquiry has reinforced the value of methodologies and planning tools to ensure that the fullest range of options has been considered in setting objectives. We could do so in a more structured and systematic way flagging risks to Ministers.

In the 2015 SDSR, the Government committed to a Full Spectrum Approach. It has set up a Full Spectrum Effects Coordination Cell (FSECC) with representation across NSC departments. This is overseen by a senior Tasking and Oversight Board, chaired by the Deputy National Security Advisor (Conflict, Stability and Defence). The team is still fairly new. But it is already challenging Departments to think more comprehensively about how we can bring together the tools of national power to tackle threats. FSECC is also tasked to encourage different perspectives and interrogate current policy. It can ‘red team’ existing activity on NSC priorities, generate innovative options and plan how to coordinate and sequence activity. As well as reporting on whether Government activity will achieve its objectives, it can set out alternatives, drawing on lessons learned elsewhere.

6. **Guidance on NSC strategy templates is being updated to encourage teams to undertake scenario planning and other methodologies to underpin their policy development.**
7. **We are making increasing use of the Full Spectrum Effects Coordination Cell and ‘red-teaming’ to reality-check NSC strategies. This involves a set of experienced practitioners, coming up with their own policy options, or trying to envisage how another country/organisation might respond to the same situation.**
8. **The virtual National Security Academy has piloted a course to help staff across the national security community to use full spectrum approaches.**
9. **Worst case scenarios will be planned in parallel to current policy/best case scenarios.**



## Reviews

The findings of the Iraq Inquiry confirms that we need regular points where we can reassess policy. We currently do this through quarterly health-checks of the strategies by the Deputy National Security Adviser. Ensuring that this happens on a systematic basis will be important to counter optimism and confirmation biases.

10. **We are reviewing our processes for reassessing policy and the formal points we build into our planning and delivery to enable us to pause, gather evidence, external input and challenge, and examine alternative courses of action.**
11. **We are including a section in NSC country strategies on specific country/regional triggers likely to require a policy review.**
12. **We are considering how we can improve and broaden our relationships with academic experts and make use of their expertise in testing trajectories of risk for specific countries/regions.**

## Stabilisation Unit

The Stabilisation Unit was brought under the NSC umbrella in 2014, to ensure that stabilisation approaches were integrated into policy-making (a point which the Iraq Inquiry emphasised). Its Head now attends relevant NSC(O) meetings and reports through the National Security Adviser to the NSC.

As a cross-government civil-military centre of expertise, the Unit is mandated by the NSC to support delivery of HMG's conflict, stabilisation and security objectives. It is funded from the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF). Its remit includes:

- providing technical expertise, promoting integrated cross-HMG analysis and supporting policy formulation, programme design, delivery and evaluation;
- providing a dedicated cross-HMG conflict lesson-learning function, sharing best practice and delivering training on conflict, stabilisation and security issues;
- recruiting, preparing and deploying experts overseas in support of HMG objectives, including government-sponsored participants in multilateral missions; and
- providing a platform for the National School of Government International (NSGI), which supports civil service and centre of government reform overseas, and the Joint International Policing Hub, which is the gateway for UK international policing assistance.

Understanding of this remit varies in NSC departments. Some teams still see stabilisation as only required for a post-conflict phase, rather than as an approach which should also be applied before and during a conflict. Others consider some of the tools cumbersome or too slow to support decision-making in fast-moving situations. The Unit's extensive range of experts and methodologies, such as the Joint Analysis of Conflict and Security, are not yet fully used to support strategy design and delivery.

13. **Fresh guidance on the role of the Stabilisation Unit in supporting strategy design and delivery will be included in wider guidance on the tools to support NSC decision-making.**
14. **Departments have committed to give the Stabilisation Unit more visibility through training, and use of their research products.**
15. **The Stabilisation Unit is undertaking a full review of Joint Analysis of Conflict and Security (JACS) due to be completed by the end of March 2017. This aims to make it a more nimble process by refreshing the methodology and making it easier for departments to follow guidance. This will be widely promoted once complete.**
16. **In an effort to help to better measure the impact of stabilisation approaches, and to identify any lessons on a 'what works' basis, Stabilisation Unit will pilot live action research. This will monitor interventions in real time – initially individual outputs and, over time, their effect on overall stabilisation outcomes. The work will assess the process i.e. the quality and nature of planning, the availability of analysis and assessments, and how interventions affect overall NSC strategies.**

### ***Preparing in fast-moving situations***

Strategies support and implement decisions taken at the NSC and our medium/longer term approach to complex challenges. But some decisions need to be faster. It is a challenge to prepare senior officials and ministers effectively in fast-moving situations. The short timeframes involved in the NSC process sometimes give departments only a few days to absorb papers, consider options and brief Ministers. Departments do not always take full account of the collective nature of Cabinet Committee decision-making when preparing ministers, with briefs focused on departmental positions.

17. **We are testing a variety of approaches to improve collective briefing for ministers to ensure that they have the necessary depth of knowledge beyond the immediate issues covered in NSC papers, to help them to make informed decisions in line with their collective responsibilities in the NSC.**

## Chapter 4: Knowledge management: ongoing work and next steps

Knowledge management continues to be a challenge for cross-government working, made more complex in the national security space by the need to secure information and protect intelligence assets and different IT platforms. The way that information is archived digitally can lead to the dissipation of knowledge; and disjointed circulation can mean that information does not always reach the people who need to see it. The work to include prompts for policy-makers will help to some extent.

### *Cabinet Committee Minutes*

The NSC, as a Cabinet sub-Committee, adheres to the Cabinet Secretary's guidance on Cabinet minutes. The National Security Advisor is Secretary to the NSC and oversees the process of recording the minutes. NSC decisions and conclusions are recorded and circulated within 24 hours of the NSC meeting. Over the last year, improvements have been made in identifying specific actions set out in a clear list and tasked to department(s). The NSA oversees an implementation process through the National Security Secretariat (NSS) to ensure that actions are completed, the results recorded and the Prime Minister updated quarterly on progress. This process checks both output (whether an action has been completed) and impact (how an action has contributed to the outcome the NSC sought to achieve).

Recording formal minutes of meetings is rigorous and systematic. It remains harder for officials to access records when they have been stored digitally, and this can lead to 'institutional memory-loss' on long-term national security challenges. NSC departments are involved in wider work in the Civil Service aimed at increasing the understanding of officials that knowledge and information is an asset that needs to be valued. This work follows up Sir Alex Allen's Review of Government Digital Records (2015).

### *Accessing Expertise*

A challenge for policy-makers is to find the time to access expertise. A bewildering amount of information is available, which can be hard to sift under pressure of a real time crisis. Research Analysts in the Foreign Office and the Intelligence Analyst and Assessment Community help to identify and collate external analysis, and the JIC's 'all source' assessments are objective and independent sources of information for policy-makers. We are making more use of in-country knowledge by involving Ambassadors in Joint Intelligence Committee and NSC meetings. Where we do not have a diplomatic presence, we seek 'ground-truth' from a range of other sources. The JIC has worked to make its material more accessible. It has sharpened up reports, so they are as clear and unambiguous as the material allows and clear about the community's confidence in source material. The JIC presents its reports directly to the decision makers when they are making key decisions. The Diplomatic Academy now runs courses to help policy-makers use JIC assessments to support policy-making.

We use external expertise. The JIO consults academics, international counterparts and industry specialists before developing their assessments. Individual departments have relationships with academic institutions and think tanks. Occasionally, the NSC has heard from experts before it has taken decisions, for example at key points in our Afghanistan strategy, in the early phases of designing our approach to the Arab Spring, and as it

considered how best to improve the prospects for women and girls. We are working to further improve relationships with a broader range of experts as we develop the virtual National Security Academy.

Other ways we plan to improve our knowledge management include:

18. **Trialling virtual 'knowledge handbooks' on specific policy issues. These can capture lessons, highlight key documents and relevant decisions. These will help hand-overs from crisis surge teams to a longer term team, and from one individual to another.**
19. **Holding regular 'informal' NSC(O) meetings, which are more reflective in nature, and aim to share knowledge or assess a lessons learned process. These can include observers to widen access and to provide additional information to senior decision-makers.**
20. **Expanding the JIO (Assessment Staff) and ensuring that technology is able to support its remit.**
21. **Examining the role that the virtual National Security Academy might play in sustaining lessons learned through case studies and 'what works' sessions; and how we can incorporate and better use the Stabilisation Unit's 'lessons learned' role.**

## Chapter 5: Cultures and behaviours: ongoing work and next steps

As part of this review, we reflected on the systemic behaviours and cultures that were highlighted in the Iraq Inquiry. Two teams, one in the MOD and one in the Cabinet Office, separately analysed the trends and patterns they found in the Iraq Inquiry, and compared notes on which features remain familiar in our system today. The findings were broadly similar and are summarised in Annex B.

The Iraq Inquiry explicitly referenced the ‘ingrained belief’ of the UK policy and intelligence community that Iraq had retained some chemical and biological weapons capabilities, was determined to retain and enhance them if possible, including adding nuclear capabilities in the future, and was able to conceal them from the UN inspectors [Chapter 4.1 Key Findings. Page 8]. It referenced other forms of ‘groupthink’, with a desire to conform results in unchallenged analysis or decisions. It also noted that a downside of the determination of the UK Armed Forces to get on with the job, however difficult the circumstances, was a reluctance to report problems up the chain of command. This can prevent ground truth reaching senior ears. The Iraq Inquiry also highlighted optimism bias, where teams wanted to believe that things were better than they were, or reported them more positively than was justified. [Executive Summary, paragraph 863].

In our lessons learned process, we observed other behaviours. Some are heuristics or cognitive short-cuts or biases that expert communities use. They sometimes help experts keep on top of rapidly evolving developments. But there are downsides too. We cannot eradicate cognitive biases, but we can help staff understand the positive and negative aspects of them, and provide prompts to offset them. Changes to working cultures and behaviours can help. Work to address this is being led from the centre.

The structural and knowledge management improvements described in Chapters 3 and 4 will help to provide greater diversity of thought and views, counteracting group think and checking assumptions. Reviews have been implemented with the emphasis on changing behaviours and cultures in the workplace. We are beginning to incorporate learning from these. We will also:

22. **Use Annex B to begin a discussion within and across departments about how we best counteract cognitive biases;**
23. **Include the Annex in induction packs to help new policy staff understand the things to spot.**
24. **Use the new national security community diversity and inclusion network to generate ideas for how to foster more diversity of thought, including within the NSC(O).**

### *Challenge and Speaking Truth to Power*

The question of ‘speaking truth to power’ and fostering a culture where challenge is accepted lay at the heart of the Iraq Inquiry report and remains difficult even today. Officials can still find it uncomfortable to give difficult messages to ministers, or to challenge more senior officials, or international partners. The Iraq Inquiry Report provides a forensic case

study of the challenges for senior civil servants of negotiating the political/Civil Service interface: of speaking truth to power and managing their dual role as both policy advisers and policy implementers.

Experienced ministers already provide challenge within the NSC in the way that the Iraq Inquiry envisaged when it recognised ‘the important function which a Minister without departmental responsibilities for the issues under consideration can play. This can provide some external challenge from experienced members of the government and mitigate any tendency towards group-think’. [Executive Summary, paragraph 407]. To some extent, NSC(O) enables and role-models challenge. But there is no room for complacency. NSC Officials have therefore agreed to champion this aspect, including through:

25. **Greater honesty by departmental and service representatives about their degree of buy-in to particular courses of action ahead of decisions.**
26. **Better use of One-to-One Challenge: formal set piece meetings or formal shared advice when a decision is about to be made are not always the most effective way of providing challenge. Delivering difficult messages earlier in the process, including in one-to-one sessions with senior ministers, might yield better results.**

We considered the Better Government Initiative’s idea for a formal Ministerial direction to be given, if Ministers decided to go ahead with a policy against the advice of officials. In the case of Ministerial direction for financial decisions, Permanent Secretaries (as Accounting Officers for their departments) have a clear personal responsibility for the propriety and value for money of the public finances for which they are responsible. In this role, they are directly accountable to the Public Accounts Committee. The Ministerial notification and direction process is activated, if a Minister is considering a transaction which the Accounting Officer believes would breach the requirements of propriety, regularity or value for money, and if the Minister decides to proceed against the written objections of the Accounting Officer. This process enables the Public Accounts Committee to see that the Accounting Officer does not bear personal responsibility for this action. It is not an instrument which is engaged purely because a Minister decides to act against the advice of an official, but when a Minister decides to spend public money in a way that contravenes the role of the Accounting Officer.

In the case of policy, the role of officials is to provide advice and for the politicians to take decisions and be accountable to parliament for them. Officials must either accept and implement the decision, or resign. As the Cabinet Secretary explained to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC) on 14 September 2016 and, as the Government has made clear in its response to the recent Foreign Affairs Committee’s Review of Libya policy, senior officials can best ensure that their views are expressed, and that their advice is fully reflected in policy formulation, through the NSC process. An additional process risks introducing a degree of unnecessary antagonism between officials and the Prime Minister on matters of collective decision-making. The NSC fosters a culture where alternative views are sought, and its membership, including senior officials, has been designed to ensure that Ministers benefit from the best advice and challenge as they take decisions. Different views are heard and recorded in the minutes. The senior officials present at both Ministerial and Officials NSCs are all confident in their own authorities and responsibilities.

However, below this level, we looked at the way that officials sometimes 'self-censor' in their assumptions of what Ministers want in policy advice. This is done with good intentions, but it limits creative policy making and challenge. We recognise the need to support officials to be more confident to come forward with different ideas. The establishment of ethics counsellors within the SIA and the Intelligence Assessment community has been very successful and has been expanded to cover staff working in the National Security Secretariat of the Cabinet Office.

A further issue is the difficulty of being able to challenge technical or other specialists, such as security or scientific experts, when a policy-maker does not have technical expertise. While there have been significant improvements in the confidence of civilians to work with, and challenge, the military on conflict issues, civilian/military cooperation requires continued attention, including in international coalitions, particularly where the US military is in the lead.

- 27. NSC Officials have committed to role model challenge as a desirable behaviour in departments.**
- 28. The Cabinet Office is facilitating a workshop on making use of 'ethics' and workplace counsellors, as a way of encouraging departments to consider this option.**
- 29. The virtual National Security Academy is undertaking a range of activities to help build the capability of staff to lead and work together in interagency and civil/military teams, including setting up a further civilian/military training course.**

## Conclusion

A common feature of earlier processes is that lessons learned have been lost or not followed through. The improvements we have identified are consistent with the wider approach in the 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review. The NSA will continue to champion work to embed lessons from the Iraq Inquiry.

**30. NSC Officials will review progress and obstacles internally on a regular basis throughout the year, supported by a network of 'Chilcot champions', which we have set up across the national security community.**

**31. We will summarise improvements made and current challenges in the annual NSS/SDSR Implementation report.**

This report highlights what has changed since 2009, what still needs to be improved and how we will set about doing so. It represents part of the change that departments are delivering in light of the Iraq Inquiry. We have been reflective and frank about the challenges we face through our own behaviours and cultures, and external factors sometimes beyond our control. Whitehall is a dynamic system working on complex challenges. Sustaining change and improvements will continue to be hard. But, by continuing to hold ourselves to account, we strive to deliver a lasting legacy to the work of Sir John Chilcot and his team, and a substantive benefit to our national decision-making process and the interests it seeks to secure.



## Annex A: The Chilcot Checklist

This checklist builds on the findings of the Iraq Inquiry to help policy-makers in the national security community when they prepare work for NSC decisions on complex, evolving policy issues. The checklist is flexible and should be used as a guide-rail, not a template: not every situation will require detailed work on each point, but the checklist is a good place to start.

Taking a few minutes to go through the checklist before you start on a major piece of work may help you think more broadly about your issue, and who you might need to involve in it in order to ensure that the widest range of options is available to support NSC decision-making. If a British military intervention is one of the options under consideration, you are likely to need to use more of the points below.

### **VISION: Why do we care?**

What does this mean for British interests? What are the risks of acting or doing nothing, including in the longer term? What is different now?

### **ANALYSIS: What is happening now?**

What are your sources of ground truth/evidence? Have assumptions been exposed to analytical tools or external challenge?

### **SCENARIOS: What might happen next?**

Have you looked at a range of options, and scenarios and consequences that could flow from these?

### **OPTIONS: What should we do?**

Have you designed your options collaboratively, built in challenge and presented Ministers with clear information on risks, opportunities and costs?

### **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS: How do we ensure action is lawful?**

What is the wider legal context? Are Ministers aware of any legal risks? What are the policy implications? How will you ensure that any international legal basis remains sound if circumstances change?

### **POLICY AND STRATEGY: What does success look like?**

Does a clear strategy, and a feasible course of action that will meet policy objectives, exist? Is the approach supported by analysis?

### **RESOURCE: What do we need to deliver?**

What are the resource implications of your options?

### **PLANNING AND DOING: How should we do it?**

Have you planned for a range of possible contingencies? Who is accountable and responsible for what?

**POLICY PERFORMANCE: How will you monitor performance?**

How will you measure and evaluate success/failure?

**EVALUATION: Is the policy working?**

When and how will you review this policy? Has the context changed? Have UK objectives/ interests changed? Do you need to change direction?