



HM Government



COBR

Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms

The Little Amber Book: Executive Summary

April 2025

Version 3

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

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

Version	Date of issue	Change history	Authorisation
V.1	15 December 2010	First published	Civil Contingencies Secretariat
V.2	23 April 2013	Chapter 6 was revised	Civil Contingencies Secretariat
V.3	28 April 2025	Major changes to structure and content to reflect developments in UK government’s crisis management arrangements	COBR Unit



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Introduction and purpose

1. 'The Amber Book: Managing Crises in Central Government' (the Amber Book) is the UK government's primary crisis management doctrine, providing a framework for how UK central government collectively responds to crises which require co-ordinated action across government.¹ This updated framework reflects new crisis management capabilities that govern processes – such as the National Situation Centre and emergency alerts – as well as embedding lessons from recent crises.
2. The Little Amber Book acts as an executive summary for the Amber Book, providing an accessible overview of the UK government's approach to crisis management. Its purpose is to draw out and explain the key underpinning elements of the UK government's central crisis management arrangements. The Amber Book provides comprehensive detail when a more complete understanding of a topic is required.
3. Neither document is designed to be used only when a crisis occurs. They provide a framework which forms the basis for risk-specific planning and for training staff in the government's approach to crisis management.
4. In a more contested world, the nature of emergencies is evolving, with crises becoming more frequent, complex and interconnected, often occurring simultaneously. It is critical for the UK to have the structures, arrangements and capabilities which are able to respond to the increasingly volatile risk picture. The Amber Book provides a flexible and risk-agnostic structure designed to respond to the full spectrum of risks that the UK faces. While the structures can be adapted and scaled as necessary, the Amber Book clearly defines the UK government's crisis management arrangements to ensure roles and responsibilities are understood and to support the effective mobilisation of resources and associated processes.
5. The Amber Book codifies learnings from recent crises, including the COVID-19 Pandemic, and establishes the leadership role that Cabinet Office plays for crises with whole-of-system implications – recognising the scale and complexity of these events and its role as the department which supports the Prime Minister and the effective running of government.
6. It focuses on the response phase of the Resilience Cycle and sets out the activities across the lifecycle of a crisis, including near-term preparedness, response, and the transition from acute response structures to enduring response and/or recovery arrangements.

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

UK's emergency management system

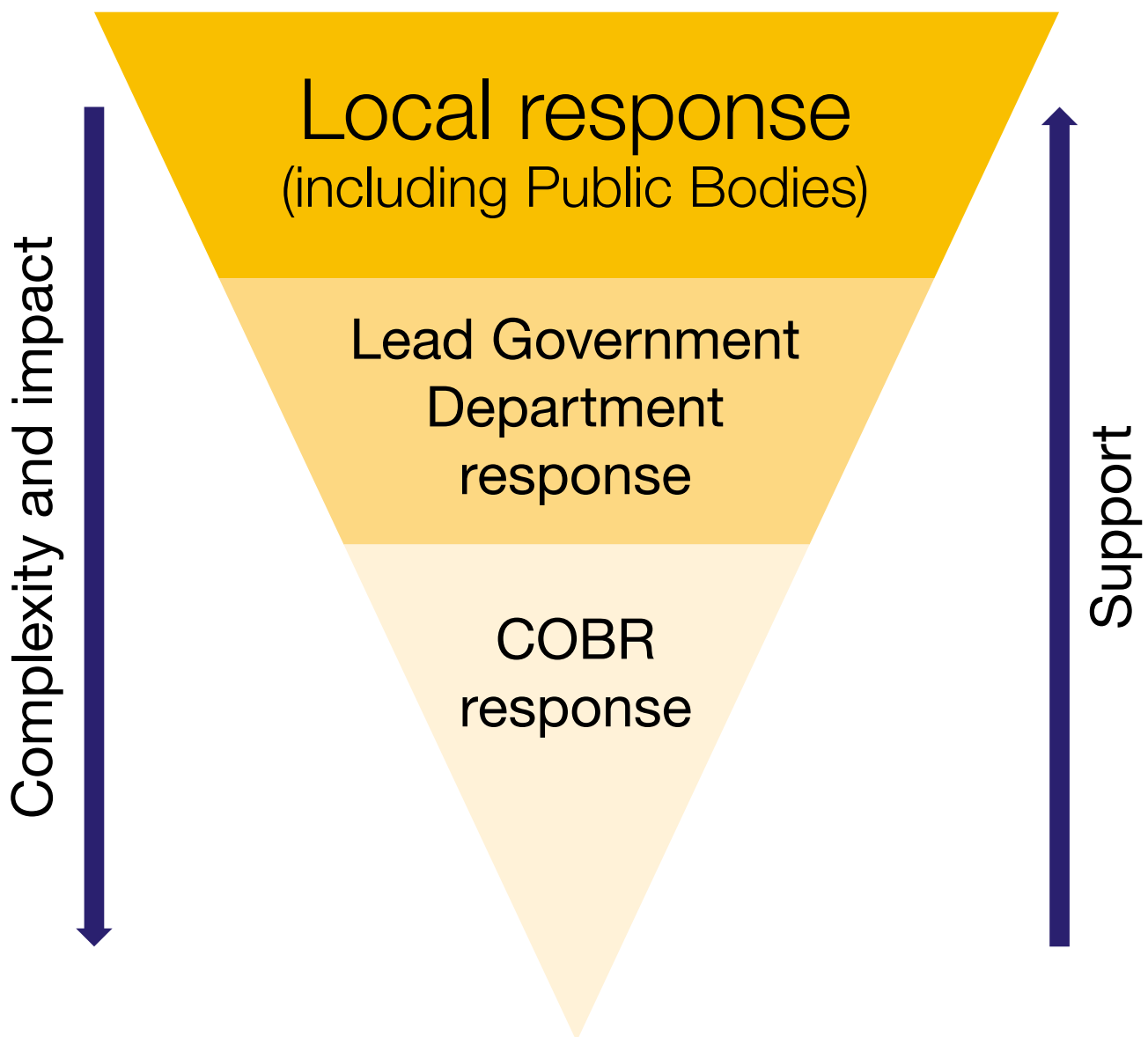
7. Civil resilience in the UK is underpinned by the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) (CCA) which provides a single legislative framework for civil protection.² Part 1 sets out the local arrangements for civil protection, and part 2 the emergency powers which allow for the making of temporary special legislation (emergency regulations) to help deal with the most serious of emergencies.
8. The CCA also provides a legal definition for an emergency as an event or situation which causes or may cause serious damage to human welfare, the environment, or the security of the UK.

Hierarchy of response

9. The UK's emergency management system is founded on the principle of subsidiarity, where decisions are taken at the lowest possible level and co-ordination at the highest necessary. As the scale, complexity, context and/or external scrutiny surrounding an event increases, there will be requirements to activate higher tiers of the UK emergency management system, with increased levels of central government involvement. A tiered system of co-ordination ensures that the appropriate level of tactical and strategic direction is provided, and the necessary resources and capabilities are being applied to manage the consequences of the event.
10. Activating higher levels of crisis co-ordination still maintains the local strategic perspective. Local responders continue to manage local issues, while higher-level co-ordination addresses areas where a broader or national viewpoint can provide additional value, ensuring both local and wider strategic needs are met effectively. The response to major emergencies requires both central government support and direction, as well as local responses supported by strong community involvement.

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

Figure 1: Hierarchy of the UK Emergency Management System



Local response

11. Most emergencies are handled at a local level by local responders through multi-agency structures based on the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 and in-line with the principles and ways of working set out in the Joint Emergency Services Principles Interoperability framework.³
12. Local responder organisations are divided into two groups, these are **Category 1 and Category 2 responders**. Category 1 responders include the emergency services, local authorities and NHS bodies, while Category 2 responders include

³ Joint Emergency Services Principles, 'Joint Doctrine: the interoperability framework', 2024, available at: www.jesip.org.uk/downloads/joint-doctrine-guide/

the Health and Safety Executive, utility and transport companies – these are examples and not an exhaustive list. Non-categorised responders include the military and voluntary organisations, and are not bound by the CCA.

13. Liaison between central government and the local response is primarily achieved through a Government Liaison Officer, normally provided by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to the Strategic Co-ordinating Group, which is the multi-agency body responsible for co-ordinating the joint response to an emergency at the local strategic level.

Lead Government Department response

14. Where an emergency necessitates a degree of central government involvement and support, this is typically provided by the **Lead Government Department (LGD)** which is the department with national level responsibility for responding to the emergency.⁴ In response to an emergency, the LGD will be responsible for co-ordinating multiple departments, as well as other national and local bodies, to deal with the immediate consequences of an emergency.

COBR response

15. While most crises requiring central government involvement can be managed through the LGD's response structures, the most serious domestic and international crises may require the activation of the government's central crisis management arrangements, **Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR)**.
16. In such instances, the Cabinet Office would co-ordinate the central government response to the crisis; establishing a regular rhythm of COBR meetings and corresponding response structures and arrangements. The COBR Unit in these instances would provide the secretariat function for COBR meetings and provide shared situational awareness for decision makers through the development and maintenance of a **Commonly Recognised Information Picture (CRIP)**.
17. The COBR Unit may also deploy a liaison function.
18. For whole-of-system crises, the Cabinet Office (in its role as the department that supports the Prime Minister and the effective running of government) will take on a leadership role for the response. For this category of risks, the Cabinet Office co-sponsors the planning phase with the LGD which owns the risk, with a particular focus on ensuring the right concept of operations is in place should a response be required.

4 Cabinet Office, 'The Roles of Lead Government Departments, Devolved Administrations and Other Public Bodies', 2023, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/list-of-lead-government-departments-responsibilities-for-planning-response-and-recovery-from-emergencies/the-roles-of-lead-government-departments-devolved-administrations-and-other-public-bodies-html

Devolved governments

19. The handling of the UK government's response to an emergency occurring within Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will depend on whether or not the subject is reserved or devolved. Each government's competency depends on the terms of its devolution settlement, which is different for each of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
20. In an emergency in a devolved policy space the relevant devolved government will deliver the crisis response, but when the crisis spans across administrative borders, or responding requires both reserved and devolved levers, the relevant devolved government(s) and the UK government will work together to respond and recover. Where a risk is a reserved matter, the UK government will lead the response but will work closely with the devolved governments where appropriate.
21. In reality, crises do not respect borders or policy areas and **a partnership approach between all parts of the UK is essential** to ensure we can effectively respond to risks, wherever in the UK they occur. Formal engagement between UK government and the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive should be based on the structures and ways of working set out in the 'Review of intergovernmental relations'.⁵

Amber Book governance

22. Adaptable but predictable governance is essential for having the necessary agility to respond quickly to the inherent uncertainty associated with crises, while simultaneously enabling tested and well-understood structures to be employed. The Amber Book clearly defines the governance structures which can be established to effectively manage a crisis across its lifecycle.
23. There are two primary Cabinet committees which are used to provide collective oversight of central government's crisis management activities:
 - **COBR:** for the acute phase of a crisis, COBR acts as the primary organisational structure for agreeing the central government response, facilitating the rapid co-ordination of response activities and effective decision-making. It has no fixed membership, with attendance being determined by nature of the crisis, and is typically chaired by one of the Prime Minister, a Cabinet Office minister, or Secretary of State for the LGD.
 - **Strategy/Operations Cabinet committees:** for whole-of-government activity required over a sustained period of time to co-ordinate civil contingency activity, a common model is to establish Strategy and Operations Cabinet committees. Strategy committees would set policy and strategy direction, while Operations committees would take a more detail-orientated approach to implementation of enduring response plans. These committees would be supported by a

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

structure in the centre of government. This model is the basis of planning for whole-of-system crises, although the Prime Minister would decide the Cabinet committee structure based on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary.

24. Cabinet committee meetings can also be supported by non-committee ministerial and/or senior officials meetings which can include crisis management activities that do not require collective agreement. Structures and ways of working with the devolved governments are founded on a partnership approach, with more detail on engagement structures and ways of working detailed in the 'Review of intergovernmental relations'.

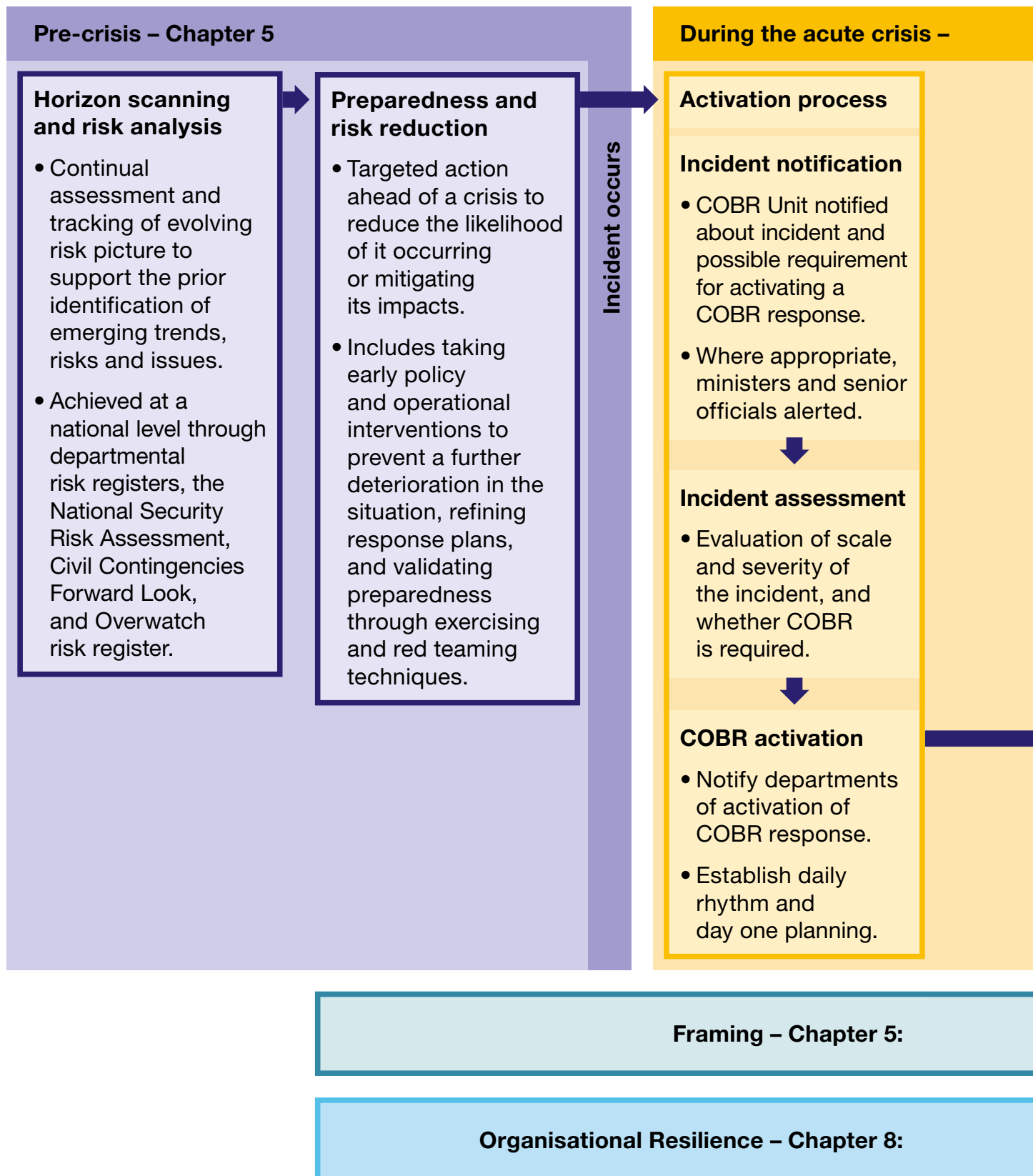
Amber Book roles and responsibilities

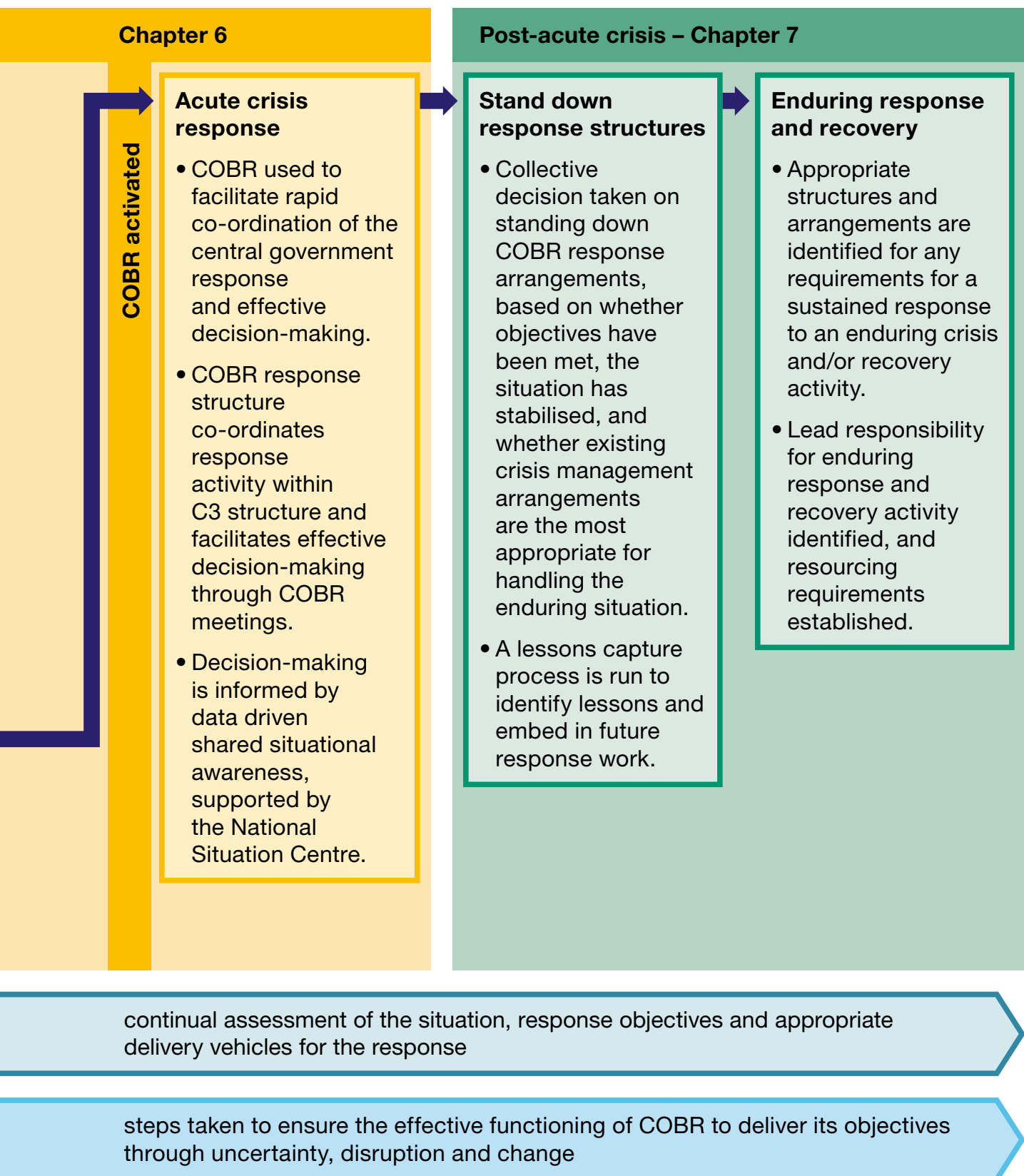
25. The uncertainty of a crisis situation demands that crisis roles and responsibilities are understood. A clear understanding of responsibilities is a pre-requisite for a coherent and unified response and is fundamental for effective decision-making and rapid action. Clarity of purpose is a core component of responders' wellbeing given the exceptional demands put on those assuming crisis management roles. The Amber Book designates clear roles and responsibilities for departments and wider organisations involved in a collective government response, as well as for the ministers and senior officials involved.
26. While further detail is included in the Amber Book on roles and responsibilities within UK government's central crisis management arrangements, key roles include:
- a **Lead Minister** who is the UK government minister responsible for leading the government response to the crisis
 - a **Crisis Senior Responsible owner** who is the designated senior official who acts as the principal adviser to the Lead Minister and is responsible for the strategic co-ordination of the central government response
 - the **Cabinet Office**, which is the department that co-ordinates the central government response to the crisis
 - the **LGD**, which remains in place to provide the policy expertise and capabilities to lead the response to the primary impact of the crisis
 - **supporting departments that** contribute to a whole-of-government response by managing consequences for sectors under their responsibilities and remain accountable, through their Secretary of State, to parliament for their contribution to the response

Lifecycle of a crisis

27. The lifecycle of a crisis can be broken down into 3 main phases, which focus on the required activities before, during and after a crisis event (as illustrated in Figure 2). Each stage requires a different set of crisis management activities to ensure government is best able to prepare for, respond to and recover from a crisis. The Amber Book details expectations on government across the lifecycle to ensure the UK is resilient to the threats and hazards we face.

Figure 2: Crisis response stages flow diagram





Pre-crisis

28. The pre-crisis phase encompasses the activities undertaken before a crisis event occurs. During this period, the government focuses on enhancing its capabilities and capacity to manage potential crises effectively. This is achieved by maintaining oversight of its risk profile through robust risk management techniques and engaging in proportionate planning and risk reduction activities. These efforts aim to mitigate, prevent and prepare for potential crises.
29. The pre-crisis stage is crucial for effective crisis management. The early identification of emerging risks can enable timely responses to prevent a crisis from materialising, or facilitate the necessary contingency planning to reduce impacts of a crisis if manifested. The pre-crisis phase should be defined by general planning, capability building and the development of flexible response systems.
30. The UK government's principal tool for identifying, assessing and comparing civil contingency and national security risks over the next 2 to 5 years is the **National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA)**. The NSRA is a dynamic risk assessment process run by the Cabinet Office, which ensures that planners and practitioners have access to high-quality risk information, to fundamentally improve the ability to plan, prepare and mitigate risks in an effective way. The process is robust and risks are reviewed by a network of experts including professionals from industry, academia, charities and subject matter experts in government.
31. This medium-term risk anticipation and assessment is accompanied by nearer term activities which are used to help identify signals of escalating risks. LGDs have responsibility for having the qualitative and quantitative systems in place to understand whether the risk profile is changing and if there are signals that a risk is materialising, to facilitate rapid activities to avoid or reduce risk, or to undertake planning for an imminent crisis.
32. The Cabinet Office supports near-term horizon scanning and risk assessment through the production of near-term risk assessment products which assess civil contingency and national security risks facing UK government over a 6-month **(Civil Contingencies Forward Look)** and 6-week period.
33. LGDs undertake risk mitigation and prevention activities for their risks to reduce the likelihood of risks materialising or mitigating their consequences if they do occur. Where there is significant uncertainty and cross-departmental implications such as potential cascading impacts, threats to life or critical national infrastructure and systems, or high external interest, the Cabinet Office will provide increased support to LGDs to support risk reduction activities.
34. Where a crisis cannot be prevented, a crisis framing process can be undertaken to support strategic planning for the crisis event by taking a systematic approach to ensuring there is a shared analysis of a crisis and government's plan for handling it.

During an acute crisis

35. The response phase focuses on the decisions and actions taken to manage the consequences of a crisis. During a COBR response, the default objectives of the response are to:

- protect human life and, as far as possible, property and the environment
- support the continuity of everyday activities and the restoration of disrupted services
- uphold the rule of law and democratic process
- protect UK interests overseas and provide support to British Nationals

36. This section details how COBR facilitates the necessary strategic direction, rapid decision-making, and co-ordination of central government response activity.

COBR activation

37. When an event occurs, it is crucial to swiftly co-ordinate and accelerate efforts to effectively manage the crisis. This involves prioritising central government activities to co-ordinate consequence management and regain control of the situation. A decision to activate COBR crisis management arrangements is taken by the Prime Minister's Office, in consultation with the Cabinet Office and the LGD. Typically, this decision will either be based on the LGD escalating to the Cabinet Office on the need to enter into central crisis management arrangements, or based on the Cabinet Office's assessment that the event requires a COBR response.

38. The activation of COBR crisis management arrangements sends a clear signal across government that the situation requires the re-prioritisation of resources and attention to manage the situation and deliver response objectives.

39. An activation will result in the establishment of a COBR response structure in support of a regular rhythm of COBR meetings which provide the primary means to facilitate the strategic co-ordination of the central government response and urgent collective agreement. The COBR response structure will be responsible for co-ordinating the central government response and providing the secretariat function for COBR meetings. Relevant departments will establish their own response structures – often known as Departmental Operations Centres – which will co-ordinate their departments contribution to the response and to lead consequence management for their sectors.

COBR response

40. When COBR is activated, its priorities will be to establish a shared understanding of the situation, to define the strategic objectives and corresponding priorities of the response, to identify and take urgent decisions to manage the consequences of a crisis, and to set the government's national communications strategy. A COBR response will facilitate rapid government action, by bringing together ministers and senior officials to assess the problem posed by the event, and to consider the necessary decisions and actions to respond to it.

41. Decision-making should be guided by government's ethical standards and values, while also taking into account the disproportionate impacts the crises can have on vulnerable groups and the requirement to provide tailored support and communications.⁶
42. Situational awareness is provided through the development and maintenance of a (CRIP) which includes information relating both to the scene and significant wider impacts, including facts and figures, the main developments and decisions, trends, and upcoming decision points. The National Situation Centre co-ordinates the data, analytical and open source intelligence elements of situational awareness, ensuring data-led insights are available to both decision makers at COBR and stakeholders across and beyond government.
43. Decision-making at COBR is reliant on access to specialist advice and expertise, ensuring decisions are informed by expert insights and additional perspectives. The **Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)** provides scientific and technical advice to support government decision makers during COBR responses with the Government Chief Scientific Adviser representing SAGE at COBR. Other forms of specialist advice are provided through other key agencies – such as the **Joint Intelligence Organisation** which co-ordinates intelligence assessments for malicious risks – or by inviting other relevant experts to attend COBR as needed.
44. An accurate, timely and consistent flow of information to the public and other key stakeholders is essential to maintaining confidence in the response to a crisis and for promoting specific behaviours from the public to reduce their exposure to harm. COBR will be used to agree the public information strategy with communications support being led in line with the ways of working set out in the Crisis Communications Operating Model, with the Cabinet Office providing strategic support and additional support to the lead department's press office where a crisis has wide ranging impacts or gives rise to considerable public and media interest.⁷
45. The UK government possesses a number of capabilities that can be deployed in support of a central government crisis response, including **military aid to the civil authorities** to provide military assistance to augment the response, and **emergency alerts** to alert the public about emergencies and crises that represent an imminent threat to life. In exceptional circumstances, **emergency powers** are available under Part 2 of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004, which enables the government to make emergency regulations when a number of stringent tests have been met.
46. Crisis and recovery situations often **require urgent expenditure, while still ensuring transparent and accountable decision-making, getting value for money and acting lawfully**. Close working with strategic finance colleagues, HM Treasury and the relevant government functions is vital for balancing the need to operate at pace with maintaining compliance with legal, regulatory and functional standards, alongside minimising risk.

6 Committee on Standards in Public Life, 'The Seven Principles of Public Life', 1995, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-7-principles-of-public-life

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

Liaison with other partners

47. An effective national response to a crisis requires close working and integration between the national, regional and local tiers.
48. When COBR is activated, or in other situations where there is a significant central government role, a GLO acts as the primary liaison channel between departments and local responders in the local Strategic Co-ordinating group. The GLO will normally be from MHCLG. In some cases, such as a terrorist or nuclear crisis, a multi-disciplinary Government Liaison team will support the GLO. The GLO will be responsible for facilitating the exchange of information between responders and central government, support local strategic decision-making and the escalation of any issues to Cabinet Office and/or other government departments for resolution.
49. Where there are cross-border implications to a crisis, the UK government and the relevant devolved government(s) will work in close partnership to respond to the crisis. This will involve ministers and officials from the devolved governments being invited to response meetings (including COBR, where appropriate), sharing information, and co-ordinating response activities to take a joined-up approach.

Whole-of-society response

50. Crises will almost always require close working and partnerships with stakeholders beyond central government. External stakeholders can provide additional capability, expertise and insights that can inform a response and support the government to take a 'whole-of-society' approach to resilience. Consideration should be given to the role that the private, voluntary and community sectors can play in a response, by providing skills, expertise and capabilities not available within government.

Post-acute crisis

51. COBR is designed to co-ordinate the UK government's acute crisis response and to deal with the immediate impacts of a crisis. It is not designed to be in effect for sustained periods of time or to manage the recovery from an emergency (although elements of the recovery and response should, and will, overlap).
52. As such, once the situation has stabilised and control has been established, central crisis management should be stood down and the ongoing management of the event should be transitioned to more appropriate structures. The Crisis Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) is tasked with ensuring that this process is initiated as early as possible during the acute response phase. This involves giving careful consideration to appropriate longer-term structures and clearly defining the thresholds for when it is suitable to implement these changes, making this an active decision point.
53. There may be a requirement to transition to longer-term structures when there is a need to respond to ongoing disruption and consequences of the event and/or to co-ordinate recovery management activities. Where an event requires central government activity to both respond to ongoing impacts and to support recovery, strategic consideration will need to be given to what is the appropriate governance structure for managing these concurrent activities. This will include assessing

whether it is more appropriate to combine enduring response and recovery activities under singular governance structures, or whether to establish separate but closely aligned structures.

Enduring response

54. The appropriate sustainable structures for co-ordinating the central government's enduring response will be dependent on the continued scale and complexity posed by the enduring phase of the event and whether existing governance structures and arrangements are appropriate. The appropriate governance for handling the situation should be kept under continuous review, with clear decision-points embedded into the process of deciding whether existing structures remain the most suitable.
55. There are broadly 3 response transition models for moving from acute crisis response to enduring response structures:
- **Business-as-usual:** where existing governance arrangements are sufficient and appropriate to oversee and co-ordinate the longer-term response to the event.
 - **Enhanced posture:** where existing suitable structures exist, but they might need to be adapted or have increased resources assigned to them to effectively manage the enduring response.
 - **New Cabinet committee structures:** enduring whole-of-system crises are expected to surpass the capacity of existing governance structures to oversee and direct the longer-term response and facilitate ongoing ministerial collective agreement.

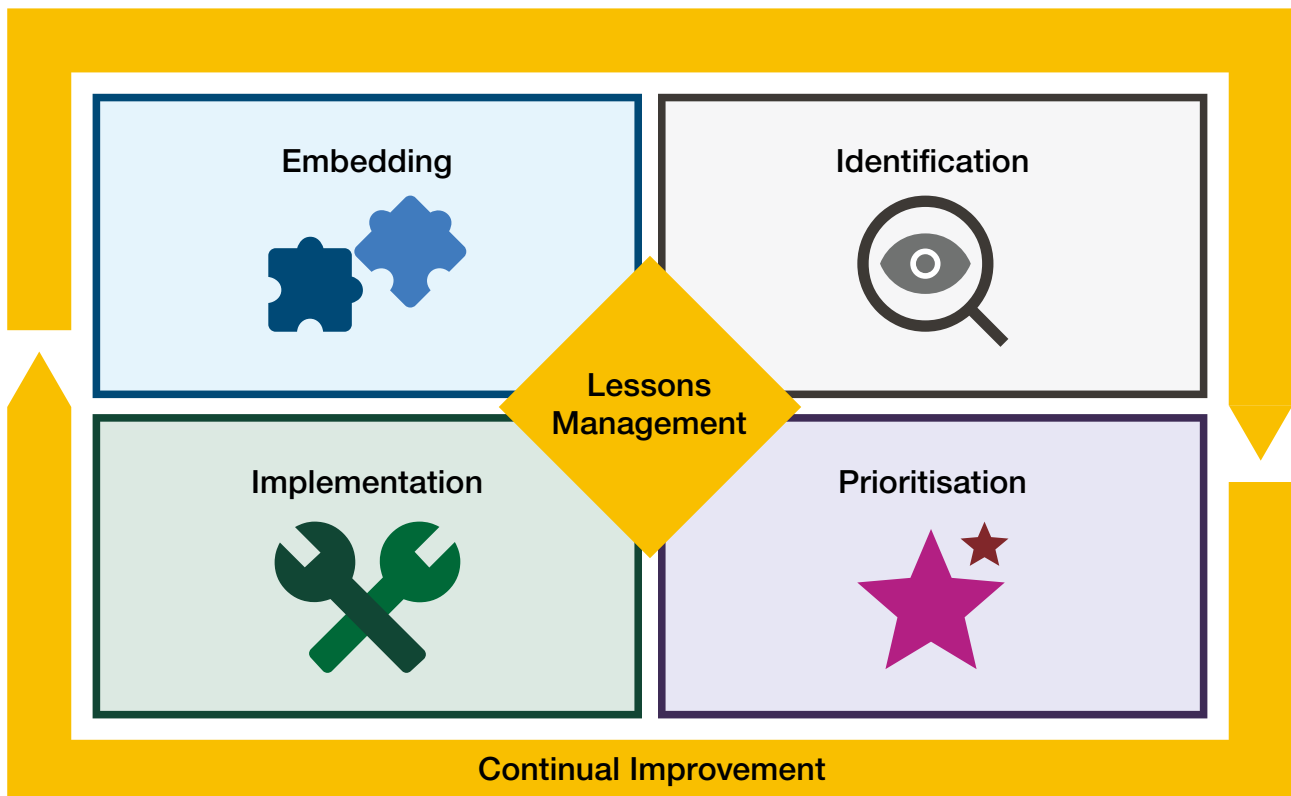
Recovery

56. Recovery from a crisis involves the process of rebuilding, restoring and rehabilitating individuals and the community impacted by an emergency. It is a complex and long-running process, requiring significant resources and being subject to close scrutiny from the community, the media and politicians alike.
57. Recovery should start at the earliest opportunity and typically in parallel to the response. It will require close collaboration and alignment between the LGD for Response and Recovery where they are different departments.
58. The LGD for Response will be expected to engage the LGD for Recovery as part of the formal handover, to ensure a smooth transition of responsibilities at the appropriate time and to ensure that response and recovery activities are undertaken in concert. Cabinet Office will support the formal handover, ensuring the appropriate governance arrangements are in-place to govern recovery. Where there is a need for continued ministerial involvement, this will typically be done through the establishment of ministerial recovery groups to oversee national level co-ordination.

Lessons management

59. Learning lessons both during and after a crisis is a fundamental means of driving improvements in the way that the government prepares for, responds to and recovers from future crises. It provides a mechanism for capturing and codifying positive practices to ensure they are replicated, as well as identifying opportunities for improvement and correction to enhance the capability to respond to future crises.
60. All organisations involved in the response are expected to undertake a lessons identification process for their own contribution to the response, while Cabinet Office will undertake this for the collective central government response. It is expected that organisations follow the Lessons Management Framework (shown in **Figure 3**) which includes: identification, prioritisation, implementation and embedding change.⁸

Figure 3: Lessons Management Framework



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

Organisational resilience

61. Crises can place exceptional demands on organisations and those taking on crisis management roles and responsibilities, and can result in an unacceptable impact on the wellbeing of individuals. There is a requirement for organisations to be resilient in a crisis, achieving intended outcomes even through uncertainty, disruption and change.⁹
62. To be able to respond to crises, organisations are reliant on being able to deploy trained personnel, equipped with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to deliver their roles, as well as have the necessary procedures in place to protect the welfare and wellbeing of their staff. Departments are expected to provide sufficient training to their staff on their own departmental crisis management arrangements, as well as enrolling them in training provided by the Crisis Management Excellence Programme which provides teaching on both general crisis management skills and behaviours, as well as the arrangements set out in the Amber Book. Training is provided to all of those who may play a role in a crisis response, from junior officials to ministers.
63. Crises can often require the re-prioritisation of resources to effectively manage the impacts and the pace of operation which is required. Departments are expected to have procedures in place for mobilising additional resources, including having access to a pool of suitable trained volunteers who can provide additional surge capacity. At a cross-government level, which can be required for crises with whole-of-system implications, the Government People Group can help support resourcing planning and the reprioritisation of resources across government.
64. Given the national and international risk profile, the UK government's crisis management arrangements also have to be equipped to manage the possibility of separate concurrent crises. Response planning should factor in the possible requirement to respond to simultaneous crises and the implications for resourcing and the prioritisation of government response activity. Consideration would have to be given to the governance for the concurrent response, and to be able to make difficult decisions surrounding the priorities for the UK government when handling multiple issues with scarce resources.
65. The resilience of the UK government's crisis management infrastructure is also underpinned by continuity arrangements, which have been developed in case of the compromise of UK government's crisis response capability at 70 Whitehall or the ability of the government to continue with its decision-making authority.

9 Guidance on organisational resilience can be found in the UK Resilience Academy's guidance 'Organisational Resilience Guidance for UK Government Departments, Agencies and Arm's Length Bodies', available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/organisational-resilience-guidance-for-uk-government-departments-agencies-and-arms-length-bodies

TRAFFORD Model

66. The Cabinet Office has developed the TRAFFORD Model to act as an aide-memoire to visualise how the Cabinet Office co-ordinates crisis management activities from the centre of government. It focuses on the response phase of the Resilience Cycle and covers the Cabinet Office's approach to near-term preparedness, crisis response and the transition from acute response structures to enduring response and/or recovery arrangements.

Figure 4: TRAFFORD Model

