

A JOINT OFFICE FOR PANDEMIC SECURITY AND INTERNATIONAL BIODEFENCE

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"As we have learned from the Covid epidemic, new diseases - whether naturally-occurring or deliberately released - represent a big threat to both our economy and national security. This timely report argues that we need to invest in new structures to anticipate and deal with them in order to safeguard our citizens."

- **Hilary Benn, Shadow Foreign Secretary 2015-16**

Executive Summary

- Within foreign policy, Conservative governments have primarily treated biological threats as an international aid issue.
- **Building on David Lammy's goal of improving resilience to 21st century threats, and in line with the view of the public, experts and senior Labour Party figures, the incoming Labour government should give biological threats their due importance as a security and defence issue.**
- Far from a “once-in-a-100-years” event, many natural biological threats have emerged in recent years, including SARS, avian flu, MERS, Ebola and monkeypox.
- Climate change and globalisation mean natural biological threats are becoming more common.
- Recent advances in gene editing allow adversaries to more easily modify viruses to be deadlier and spread more quickly, increasing the security risk posed by bioweapons and bioterrorism. Russia is believed to have an active biological weapons program.
- COVID-19, a natural threat, led to £410 billion in additional government borrowing and £250 billion of lost gross value added, before indirect economic impacts are considered. By contrast, Britain's annual funding to the Biological Weapons Convention reached a maximum of only £82 000 from 2010 to 2016.
- Future biological threats, whether natural, accidentally released or intentionally deployed, could be far deadlier than COVID-19, causing more economic damage.
- Polling shows that Labour are eight points behind the Conservatives on defence and security. Focusing on the national security dimension to biological threats could improve Labour's credibility in this area.
- The Joint Committee on National Security concluded that leadership failures on biosecurity made Britain more vulnerable to COVID-19.
- **Labour should make a manifesto commitment to establish a Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence between the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office**, modelled on the Office for International Health and Biodefence in the USA's Department of Defense, within the first 100 days of government.
- **This office should adopt a leadership role on foreign policy aspects of biodefence and biosecurity**, including but not limited to:
 - Strengthening the Biological Weapons Convention
 - Working towards a legally binding WHO pandemic accord
 - Improving laboratory biosecurity and biosafety globally

1.0 Biological Threats and National Security

In 1993, Aum Shinrikyo, an omnicidal cult terrorist group, unsuccessfully attempted to cause an anthrax outbreak in Tokyo. Their biological weapons program was led by Seiichi Endo, a member trained in virology and genetic engineering¹.

New gene editing techniques, such as CRISPR (invented in 2012), have enabled virologists to more easily modify viruses to be deadlier and spread more quickly. Researchers use this ability to understand how we should respond to future biological threats. However, there is a risk that adversaries will use this ability to create biological threats far deadlier than natural threats like COVID-19².

COVID-19 caused 212 000 deaths in the UK³, led to an increase in the UK's debt-to-GDP ratio from 80% to 100%⁴ and caused NHS waiting lists to rise to a record 7 million⁵.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, 88 per cent of the British public now view disease prevention as a national security issue⁶, with this view being more popular amongst older voters whom Labour needs to win over at the next general election. Additionally, 1 in 4 members of the public consider a new global pandemic to be **one of the three main risks to Britain's national security**⁷.

¹ CNAS, 2011. *Aum Shinrikyo: Insights Into How Terrorists Develop Biological and Chemical Weapons*.

<https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/aum-shinrikyo-insights-into-how-terrorists-develop-biological-and-chemical-weapons>

² John Hopkins Center for Health Security. *CRISPR Cautions: Biosecurity Implications of Gene Editing*.

https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/our-work/pubs_archive/pubs-pdfs/2020/200218-CRISPR-Cautions.pdf

³ UK Gov, 2023. *Deaths in the UK | Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the UK*.

<https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/details/deaths>

⁴ Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2021. *How did COVID affect government revenues, spending, borrowing and debt?*

<https://ifs.org.uk/taxlab/taxlab-key-questions/how-did-covid-affect-government-revenues-spending-borrowing-and-debt>

⁵ BMA, 2022. *NHS Backlog data analysis*.

<https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/pressures/nhs-backlog-data-analysis>

⁶ The Telegraph, 2022. *Covid-19 strengthens Britons' desire to fight global diseases, poll finds*.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/covid-19-strengthens-britons-desire-fight-global-diseases-poll/>

⁷ British Foreign Policy Group. *2022 Annual Survey of UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Britain*. <https://bfpg.co.uk/2022/06/2022-annual-survey/>

Far from a “once in a 100 years” event, multiple natural biological threats have emerged in the last few decades - HIV, SARS, avian flu, swine flu, MERS, Ebola, COVID-19 and monkeypox. Experts expect the frequency of natural epidemics and pandemics to increase due to climate change and globalisation⁸.

Future biological threats, whether naturally arising, accidentally released or intentionally deployed, could be deadlier and spread more quickly than COVID-19, posing a larger security risk. During the first wave of COVID-19, 1% of infected individuals died⁹, compared to 80% during the 2013-16 West African Ebola epidemic¹⁰.

1.1 Bioweapons and Bioterrorism

"The weaknesses and lack of preparedness exposed by this pandemic provide a window onto how a bioterrorist attack might unfold - and may increase its risks. Non-state groups could gain access to virulent strains that could pose similar devastation to societies around the globe."

Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General

The Biological Weapons Convention remains weak, with little funding and only 4 full time staff, compared to the 500 staff of the Chemical Weapons Convention¹¹.

Unlike the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and the Chemical Weapons Convention, the Biological Weapons Convention presently has no verification protocol¹². The Kremlin is currently exploiting this weakness to run a disinformation campaign, repeatedly accusing the USA of funding bioweapon labs in Ukraine without supporting evidence, in an attempt to justify Russia's invasion¹³.

⁸ PNAS, 2021. *Intensity and frequency of extreme novel pandemics*.
<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2105482118>

⁹ Imperial College London, 2020. *COVID-19 Infection Fatality Ratio: Estimates from Seroprevalence*.
<https://www.imperial.ac.uk/mrc-global-infectious-disease-analysis/covid-19/report-34-ifr/>

¹⁰ Clinical Infectious Diseases, 2020. *Case Fatality Ratio Estimates for the 2013-2016 West African Ebola Epidemic*. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31328221/>

¹¹ NTI. *Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW)*.
<http://www.nti.org/treaties-and-regimes/organization-for-the-prohibition-of-chemical-weapons/>

¹² NTI. *Biological Weapons Convention*.
<https://www.nti.org/education-center/treaties-and-regimes/convention-prohibition-development-production-and-stockpiling-bacteriological-biological-and-toxin-weapons-btwc/>

¹³ The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. *Russia's alleged bioweapons claims have few supporters*.
<https://thebulletin.org/2022/10/russias-alleged-bioweapons-claims-have-few-supporters/>

In the USA, in light of recent biotechnology advances, the Department of Defense is expanding the range of biological threats that it prepares for, citing the new ability of adversaries to genetically modify any virus or bacterium for use as a bioweapon¹⁴. Currently, the USA believes that Russia and North Korea have active biological weapons programs, with concerns around Biological Weapons Convention compliance by China and Iran¹⁵.

In addition to state actors, four key types of non-state actors may aim to use bioweapons to start epidemics and pandemics - religious extremists (such as Aum Shinrikyo), ecoterrorists, idiosyncratic actors¹⁶ and accelerationists¹⁷. Although bioterrorists have never previously succeeded at starting epidemics and pandemics, recent advances in biotechnology increase the risk of their success.

1.2 Laboratory Biosecurity and Biosafety

In addition to natural and deliberate threats, biological threats may be released accidentally.

Under the last Labour government, in 2007, a biological threat was accidentally released from a maximum containment lab at Pirbright, causing a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak amongst cattle¹⁸. A similar accidental release of a biological threat from a lab anywhere in the world poses a security risk to Britain.

There are now 59 maximum containment labs globally across 23 countries¹⁹. In many of these countries, laboratory biosecurity and biosafety remains poor²⁰.

¹⁴ US Department of Defense, 2023. *DOD Aims to Shield Warfighters From Novel Biological Agents*. <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3261095/dod-aims-to-shield-warfighters-from-novel-biological-agents/>

¹⁵ US Department of Defense, 2022. *Adherence to and Compliance with Arms Control, Nonproliferation, and Disarmament Agreements and Commitments*. <https://www.state.gov/adherence-to-and-compliance-with-arms-control-nonproliferation-and-disarmament-agreements-and-commitments/>

¹⁶ Aggression and Violent Behaviour, 2018. *Who would destroy the world? Omnicidal agents and related phenomena*. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1359178917302859>

¹⁷ Policy Commons, 2020. *The Growing Threat Posed by Accelerationism and Accelerationist Groups Worldwide*. <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1341638/the-growing-threat-posed-by-accelerationism-and-accelerationist-groups-worldwide/1953759/>

¹⁸ Science.org. *Labs Suspected in Foot-and-Mouth Crisis*. <https://www.science.org/content/article/labs-suspected-foot-and-mouth-crisis>

¹⁹ Global Biolabs Project. *Mapping Maximum Containment Biological Labs Globally*. 2021. <https://www.globalbiolabs.org/policy-brief>

²⁰ Global Health Security Index. *2021 Full Report*. <https://www.ghsindex.org/report-model/>

2.0 Value for Money

COVID-19, a natural biological threat, led to £310 to £410 billion in additional government borrowing²¹ and a direct loss of £250 billion to the economy via lost gross value added²², before long-term, indirect economic impacts are considered²³. By contrast, UK annual funding to the Biological Weapons Convention ranged from a minimum of £21 000 to a maximum of only £82 000 from 2010 to 2016²⁴.

Improving Britain's security against future biological threats, whether natural, accidental or deliberate, which could be far deadlier and far more economically damaging than COVID-19, would provide excellent value for money. This would help deliver on Labour's promises of economic stability and security.

3.0 Policy Recommendation

At time of writing, polling shows that the Conservatives lead Labour by eight points on defence and security²⁵. As the primary responsibility of any government and with a deteriorating geopolitical landscape, Labour must demonstrate to voters its ability to keep Britain secure.

Data from preventepidemics.org logs the most recent potential biological threats to Britain. These emerged in West Africa, India, Burkina Faso, Tanzania, Brazil and Indonesia, but were fortunately contained by national governments²⁶. It is clear that keeping Britain safe from biological threats requires global cooperation.

²¹ Commons Library. *Public Spending during the Covid-19 pandemic*.

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9309/>

²² Centre for Economics and Business Research. *One year since lockdown: The £251 billion cost to the UK economy*.

<https://cebr.com/reports/one-year-since-lockdown-the-251-billion-cost-to-the-uk-economy/>

²³ The British Academy. *The COVID Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19*.

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/covid-decade-understanding-the-long-term-societal-impacts-of-covid-19/>

²⁴ House of Commons. *Written Parliamentary Questions*.

<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2016-04-29/36136>

²⁵ YouGov, 2023. *Which political party would be the best at handling defence and security?*

<https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/defence-and-security>

²⁶ Preventepidemics.org, 2022. *Epidemics that didn't happen*. <https://preventepidemics.org/>

Within foreign policy, Conservative governments have primarily treated biological threats as an international aid issue. In line with David Lammy's stated foreign policy goal of building resilience to 21st century threats, and in line with the view of the public²⁷, experts²⁸, and leading party figures Jonathan Ashworth²⁹ and Tony Blair³⁰, the incoming Labour government should instead give biological threats their due importance as a security and defence issue.

The Joint Committee on National Security concluded that leadership failures on biosecurity made Britain more vulnerable to COVID-19.³¹

Therefore, **Labour should make a manifesto commitment to establish a Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence between the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office**, modelled on the existing Office for International Health and Biodefence³² in the USA's Department of Defense, within the first 100 days of government.

This new office should carry out similar functions to its American counterpart and adopt a leadership role on foreign policy aspects of biodefence and biosecurity.

At the multilateral level, this should include:

- Strengthening the Biological Weapons Convention in line with Labour's winning 1997 manifesto³³, particularly via increased funding, more staff and the establishment of a verification protocol

²⁷ British Foreign Policy Group. *2022 Annual Survey of UK Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and Global Britain*. <https://bfpg.co.uk/2022/06/2022-annual-survey/>

²⁸ CNA, 2021. *Why pandemics are national security threats*. <https://www.cna.org/our-media/indepth/2021/05/why-pandemics-are-national-security-threats/>

²⁹ Jonathan Ashworth, 2021. *Pandemic Planning is a national security issue*. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/pandemic-planning-is-a-national-security-issue-dq39j9ls2>

³⁰ Global Government Forum, 2021. *Treat pandemic preparedness as a national security issue, says former UK PM Tony Blair*. <https://www.globalgovernmentforum.com/pandemic-preparedness-national-security-issue-former-uk-pm-tony-blair/>

³¹ Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, 2020. *Government failed to act on its security plans for a pandemic*. <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/111/national-security-strategy-joint-committee/news/137998/government-failed-to-act-on-its-security-plans-for-a-pandemic/>

³² U.S. Department of State. *Office of International Health and Biodefense*. <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-economic-growth-energy-and-the-environment/bureau-of-oceans-and-international-environmental-and-scientific-affairs/office-of-international-health-and-biodefense/>

³³ The Labour Party, 1997. <http://labourmanifesto.com/1997/1997-labour-manifesto.shtml>

- Advocating for a permanent UN Office focused on biological threats, building on the existing UN Biorisk Working Group
- Supporting the establishment of a Joint Assessment Mechanism³⁴ once available, based in the office of the UN Secretary-General, to investigate the origin of epidemics and pandemics
- Driving forward the development and implementation of a new legally binding pandemic prevention, preparedness and response accord under the WHO³⁵
- Expanding the International Experts Group of Biosafety and Biosecurity Regulators to additional countries for more widespread collaboration on improving biosafety and biosecurity³⁶
- Strengthening the Global Partnership Biological Security Working Group³⁷, including the new Signature Initiative to Mitigate Biological Threats in Africa³⁸
- Strengthening the Biosafety Level 4 Zoonotic Laboratory Network³⁹
- Working towards legally-binding international regulations governing forms of biological research which pose security risks, building on existing WHO guidelines⁴⁰
- Establishing an annual, international conference focused on pandemic prevention, preparedness and response, similar to COP for climate change⁴¹
- Encouraging increased investment by governments in the Biological Weapons Convention, the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Interventions⁴², the Pandemic Fund at the World Bank⁴³, and the World Health Organisation

³⁴ NTI, 2022. *Joint Assessment Mechanism to Determine Pandemic Origins*.

<https://www.nti.org/about/programs-projects/project/joint-assessment-mechanism-to-determine-pandemic-origins/>

³⁵ WHO, 2022. *Pandemic prevention, preparedness and response accord*.

<https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/pandemic-prevention--preparedness-and-response-accord>

³⁶ Globalbiolabs.org, 2022. *Mapping Maximum Biological Containment Labs Globally*.

<https://www.globalbiolabs.org/policy-brief>

³⁷ The Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction. *The Global Partnership Biological Security Working Group*. <https://www.gpwmd.com/bswg>

³⁸ The Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction. *Signature Initiative to Mitigate Biological Threats in Africa*.

<https://www.gpwmd.com/africa-signature-initiative>

³⁹ Biosafety Level 4 Zoonotic Laboratory Network.

<https://inspection.canada.ca/science-and-research/science-collaborations/biosafety-level-4-zoonotic-laboratory-network/eng/1597148065020/1597148065380>

⁴⁰ WHO. *Global guidance framework for the responsible use of the life sciences: mitigating biorisks and governing dual-use research*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240056107>

⁴¹ World Economic Forum, 2023. *The world needs a COP-like process for pandemic preparedness*.

<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/world-needs-cop-level-process-pandemic-preparedness-davos/>

⁴² CEPI. <https://cepi.net/>

⁴³ The World Bank. *The Pandemic Fund*.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/financial-intermediary-fund-for-pandemic-prevention-preparedness-and-response-pfr-fif>

At the bilateral level, this should include:

- Encouraging states to undergo Joint External Evaluations⁴⁴ of their pandemic preparedness followed by National Action Planning for Health Security⁴⁵ and effective implementation under the International Health Regulations 2005 framework⁴⁶
- Encouraging states to plug gaps in laboratory biosafety and biosecurity, as identified by the Global Health Security Index⁴⁷
- Encouraging states to mandate that maximum containment labs adopt the international standard ISO 35001 (Biorisk management for laboratories and other related organisations)⁴⁸
- Encouraging states to pass legislation requiring screening of all orders of synthetic genetic material to ensure safety, particularly via tools such as those developed by the International Biosecurity and Biosafety Initiative for Science⁴⁹ once available

The establishment of this office should be in addition to increased long-term investment in biosecurity R&D under the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology in partnership with the private sector, to strengthen Britain's capacity to detect and respond to biological threats.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ WHO. *Joint External Evaluations*.

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/operations/international-health-regulations-monitoring-evaluation-framework/joint-external-evaluations>

⁴⁵ WHO. *National Action Planning for Health Security*.

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/operations/international-health-regulations-monitoring-evaluation-framework/national-action-plan-for-health-security>

⁴⁶ WHO. *International Health Regulations*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241580410>

⁴⁷ Global Health Security Index, 2021. <https://www.ghsindex.org/>

⁴⁸ Globalbiolabs.org, 2022. *Mapping Maximum Biological Containment Labs Globally*.

<https://www.globalbiolabs.org/policy-brief>

⁴⁹ International Biosecurity and Biosafety Initiative for Science. <https://ibbis.bio/>

⁵⁰ Scientists for Labour, 2022. *R&D for Economic Security from Future Pandemics*.

https://a1d139c7-34af-400b-88eb-0b256c91ae1e.filesusr.com/ugd/9ff546_d07a892b45144a5a963baa2e8efef2d.pdf

4.0 Connections to Existing Labour Messaging

“To achieve our goal of **building resilience against 21st century threats like pandemic infections**, we will establish a Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence.”

“Under Labour, **Britain will Reconnect** with our partners to work together on pandemic prevention and **defend the UK’s biological security**, via a new Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence.”

“In line with Labour’s **dedication to the treaties that uphold international law**, we will establish a Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention and work towards a legally binding WHO pandemic accord.”

“Labour will reverse the Conservatives’ **sticking-plaster** approach to biological security, by establishing a Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence to **defend Britain’s Security** against future pandemic infections.”

“As **the party of national security**, Labour will establish a Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence to strengthen our **biological security** and **defend** our communities against future **pandemic infections**.”

“Pandemic infections do not recognise borders, meaning that biological **security is not regional but global**. This is why we will establish a Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence, which will work with global institutions to keep Britain secure.”

“Labour will create a Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence to establish Britain as **a diplomatic entrepreneur** on biosecurity, building global resilience to pandemic infections.”

“Labour will create a Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence to protect Britain from pandemic infections and **make our prosperity more resilient**.”

“Our new Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence will **build dynamic partnerships with African nations**, working together to strengthen our defences against pandemic infections.”

“Under Labour, a new Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence will help our partners improve their ability to contain new infectious diseases before they reach the UK, including by **strengthening local manufacturing capacity for vaccines**.”

“Labour will establish a Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence, which will lead on **WHO reforms to protect us from future pandemics**.”

5.0 Media Window to Announce This Policy

Module 1 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry focuses on pandemic preparedness and resilience. Public evidence hearings begin on 13 June 2023 and will take place for 6 weeks until 21 July 2023.⁵¹ Senior Conservative figures are likely to be questioned on failures surrounding Britain’s biosecurity and pandemic preparedness, which will draw media attention and make the issue more salient to the public. Announcing plans to establish a Joint Office for Pandemic Security and International Biodefence just before, during or after Phase 1 of the inquiry may draw the most public attention and have the greatest impact on Labour’s image on defence and security.

Contact Us

If you have further questions about the contents of this report, would like to discuss how the Labour Party should approach biosecurity or would like to get in touch with the author, please email [sanjushdalmia\[.\]gmail.com](mailto:sanjushdalmia@gmail.com).

⁵¹ UK Covid-19 Inquiry. *Update: UK Covid–19 Inquiry to begin hearing evidence in June for its first investigation.*
<https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/2023/02/update-uk-covid-19-inquiry-to-begin-hearing-evidence-in-june-for-its-first-investigation/>