

Resilience First Summer Debate

‘This house believes that our resilience standards are not up to standard.’

Chair:

Claire Ward, Chief Executive, The Institute for Collaborative Working.

Speakers:

For the motion – Dr Chris Needham-Bennett, Chief Executive, Needhams1834.

Against the motion – Dr Rob MacFarlane OBE, Deputy Director, Civil Contingencies Secretariat, Cabinet Office.

Key Points:

Dr Chris Needham-Bennett:

- Standards can be made better; it is not that their existence is bad but they can be improved.
- Issue 1 - Too complex:
 - Standards have moved away from their purpose of simplifying management practices.
 - Searching for standards can unveil an overwhelming number of results on a single topic; there is too much out there, with too much complexity.
 - By becoming overly complex they are not up to standard as applicable resilience standards.
- Issue 2 - Not scalable:
 - We are a nation of micro-employers yet the business continuity and resilience standards on offer are given as one size fits all, from large corporations to SMEs, without due consideration of the varying levels of resources available within these organisations.
 - For resilience and business continuity standards to be up to standard they need to be scalable through the various sizes of businesses that exist.
- Issue 3 - Questionable utility:
 - A lot of the claims as to utility made by BSI seem to not have been corroborated by academic research.
 - A seemingly small number of standards available are actually evidence driven and supported by scientific research.
- Issue 4 - Several adverse consequences:
 - There are too many options to take short cuts in order to claim accreditation.
 - Often avoidance of standards occurs due to their bureaucratic nature.
- Resilience standards need simplifying in order to improve their applicability and utility for organisations of all sizes.

Dr Rob MacFarlane:

Note: Dr Rob MacFarlane was speaking in a personal capacity and no comment should be taken as government policy.

- A slight swerve at the outset:
 - We should acknowledge that there are a number of different kinds of standards, not purely ISO, BSI and European counterparts.
 - It is clear that we need some basic level of standardisation for interoperability and collaboration.
- Safe systems and different sorts of standards:

- In safety critical systems we need a standardisation of communication and methods of practice; confusion can arise without standardisation of, for example, signalling. Without standardisation it leaves room for error with very real and very serious consequences.
- Coherence matters everywhere and across systems and standards should support this.
- Guidance standards are there to convey principles and best practice.
- **Solidity, Rigidity and TABS:**
 - We could perhaps all agree that a solid and common foundation for what we do together is a good thing. Standards are aimed at achieving this.
 - Rigid systems at some point break; to use a RAF saying known as TABS (There's Always Bloody Something...that goes wrong) and this is true of standards. Simply relying on standards will not lead to ultimate success in crisis situations and this is not their intended utility. However, to undermine standards because of this detracts from their purpose as guidance rather than answers.
- **A concession but only a little one:**
 - Standards can be and should be a framework from which to improve, providing a ladder through which goals can be achieved.
- **Back on track:**
 - You need standards as yard sticks for improvement and what good looks like.
 - Standards do need to improve but without them we might be left rudderless.

Discussion Points:

- There is a huge difference between an auditable standard and a good practice guide. The increasing additions to standards can make them impossible to implement fully.
- There is no-one-size-fits-all approach to resilience and crisis management. Individual standards should be adopted and adaptable where appropriate.
- Assuring input and output can be fairly straightforward. However, assuring outcomes is difficult. There is a challenge for standards to develop guidance on how to create the conditions in which more positive outcomes may be achieved rather than ensuring the outcome itself.
- Standards organisations should seek evidence from those that use them as to the how they have or have not improved their specific outcomes.
- Standards should standardise what you should be able to do rather than standardise against a specific set of risks; in essence, maintaining a risk-agnostic approach.

Rebuttals:

Dr Chris Needham-Bennett:

- We are both dedicated to making things better, not denigrating what people have achieved.
- Scalability is a fundamental weakness for resilience standards. The essential ingredients of resilience that are cross-cutting and able to be scaled should be standardised.
- What we should be looking to do is create economically viable standards that can be applied across all sizes of organisation.
- Standards in of themselves are not bad things to have. However, in their current form they are not up to standard.

Dr Rob MacFarlane OBE:

- Not all standards need to be complex; there is room for standards that are brief but backed by supporting detail and evidence.
- We all have a better job to do in linking standards and their shared utility to one another.

- The principles in standards are there to improve and preserve life. Perhaps we need to articulate their universal utility better but at the same time acknowledge that capacities and contexts do differ.

Polling:

At the start of proceedings, 75% of the live audience voted for the motion and 25% against. At the end of proceedings, 72% voted for and 28% against. The motion was carried.

A video recording of the debate can be found [here](#).

Dr Chris Needham-Bennett's slides are shown [here](#). Dr Rob MacFarlane's slides are shown [here](#).

Speaker Biographies:

Claire Ward qualified as a solicitor before entering Parliament as the Labour MP for Watford in 1997. During 13 years in Parliament, she served for five years in Government roles, as a Whip and Justice Minister. After her parliamentary career, Claire was Chief Executive of the Independent Pharmacy Federation, a trade association for community pharmacy before becoming the Chair of Pharmacy Voice, the trade body for community pharmacy organisations. She continues to advise pharmacy organisations on a regular basis. She has been a non-executive director at Sherwood Forest NHS FT since 2013 and is currently serving as Chair. In 2018, Claire became a Governor of University of Hertfordshire. Claire joined the Institute for Collaborative Working as CEO in 2019.

Dr Chris Needham-Bennett is the Managing Director of Needhams1834 Ltd. Chris established Needhams1834 Ltd in 1996. His work experience includes commercial security work with the Home Office private finance initiatives, commission service in the Parachute Regiment and Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Since establishing the company in 1996, Chris has developed a keen interest in the strategic level responses to crises and he undertakes many of the board or ExCo level training presentations. Chris is also interested in development of an academic foundation for the resilience profession and has written and spoken extensively on the topic. He has a doctorate from the University of Portsmouth and wrote his thesis on the efficacy of risk/resilience literature to professional practice. He also has an MSc from the University of Leicester and wrote his dissertation on the psychology of risk-taking behaviour. Finally, Dr Chris Needham-Bennett was awarded with the BCI Global Consultant of the Year.

Dr Rob MacFarlane OBE is Deputy Director in the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat, where he has oversight of Resilience Doctrine, Standards, Training, Exercising and Assurance. Before joining the Civil Service in 2006 Rob established and led a geo-spatial analysis consultancy for ten years, running projects from post-conflict reconstruction in Mozambique to renewable energy planning in the Western Isles of Scotland. Rob is one of the authors of the Joint Emergency Services Doctrine and has led the development and subsequent revision of British Standards on Crisis Management and Organizational Resilience. Rob was awarded an OBE for public service in the 2021 New Years Honours List, has a PhD in geo-spatial analysis from the University of Aberdeen and a Doctorate in Business Administration on crisis decision making from the University of Durham.

