Thank you. Mr Chairman, the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention was a UK proposal in 1968 and, since its entry into force 41 years ago, the UK as a depositary state has played a keen and consistently supportive role in all efforts to make the Convention effective. Last year, we reaffirmed the high priority we attach to the Convention in both our National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review. Now, we see this year’s Review Conference as an opportunity to set in motion changes that will increase the effectiveness of the Convention and ensure its continued relevance in a fast changing world.

If we are to take full advantage of the opportunity the Review Conference presents, we will need to work hard during the coming months. The extended Preparatory Committee process that we agreed at last year’s Meeting of the States Parties provides us all with a much better chance to identify common ground ahead of the Review Conference and to build an early consensus on emerging points of agreement. We look forward to working closely with you, President-elect, and your team.

This Preparatory Committee has a number of important tasks to conduct. Some of those tasks are of an organisational nature. We hope that we can deal with them all as promptly as we have begun to today. Other tasks are of a substantive nature. We would highlight two in particular. We will need to prepare for reviewing the operation of the Convention over the last five years. And we will need to prepare for a consideration of issues identified in that review and any possible consensus follow-up action.

Those two tasks are closely related. The seventh review conference tasked the intersessional process to discuss, and promote common understanding.
and effective action on a range of issues. We believe that there were important and valuable discussions during the intersessional process, particularly on Article VII issues, some discrete S&T topics, the role and future of CBMs and on aspects of how we best go about demonstrating and ensuring compliance. And the intersessional process benefitted from the active engagement of specialists, industry, academia and civil society more generally. But, disappointingly, we have been unable to develop those discussions into substantive common understandings, or agree effective action during the course of the intersessional process. Our opportunity to do so may have passed, though in conducting the review of the operation of the Convention there may yet be a chance to come to some agreement on effective action stemming from our discussions over the last few years.

If, Mr Chairman, after five years, we should have nothing to show from pursuing the intersessional process agreed in 2011 surely we have little choice but to question the nature of that process with a view to identifying ways of improving upon it as part of the consensus follow-up actions from the Eighth Review Conference.

Without wanting to prejudge the review process, we would like to take this opportunity today to offer some ideas for an improved intersessional programme for 2017-2020. These build on the work of the last intersessional programme while addressing certain shortcomings which have become apparent to us. Our aim is to create a framework that enables us to make substantive progress on issues that can lead to agreed effective action.

For the UK this suggests that we take a different approach to how we organise our work. Effectiveness and efficiency should be uppermost in our minds: if we have to pay a little more for a more effective process that better addresses needs, we are willing to do so. We suggest splitting and sequencing our work to maximise its effectiveness as follows.
We start with Science and technology. Science and technology underpin the Convention and help us ensure it remains relevant. Developments may have actual and potential implications for both peaceful use and for misuse in the short, medium and long term – and so be relevant for Articles I, IV, VI, VII and X in particular.

Assessments of the relevant S&T should inform all other considerations that we make. For this reason, logic dictates that a meeting of State Party experts on S&T ought to come first in the calendar of meetings and be allocated appropriate time: we suggest a week long meeting. This working group of experts would report to an annual meeting of States Parties and inform other meetings during the intersessional process. We set out the detail in our working paper which has been on the Website since 8 April. In that paper we have also proposed specific text on the group for the Review Conference to consider adopting.

We believe that there is much common ground amongst us on the need for a better S&T review process and what it should look like in order to meet that requirement. This can be seen from the many points of convergence in our paper and in those submitted by the Russian Federation, Switzerland, the Nordic Countries and the United States. True, there are some points of difference, but it should be possible to find a solution acceptable to all. The UK is ready to work with other interested States Parties to that end.

Next, we think we need to move beyond the tendency to look at each Article of the Convention in isolation. This tendency means we risk overlooking important relationships between the Articles.

In its statement just now, India drew attention to linkages between Art III and Art X. We note, in particular, that there are important and undeniable relationships between capacity building and capabilities for effective surveillance, detection, diagnosis and mitigation of infectious disease;
emergency and rapid responses to major infectious disease outbreaks, regardless of cause, are part of a broad spectrum of capacities that are needed. It would be sensible therefore to consider Articles VII and X in the same space, providing an opportunity to consider synergies without losing sight of the issues specific to each Article. We believe such discussions would best be taken forward in a dedicated working group meeting for a week in the middle of the year. As with the S&T Group that is the subject of our first working paper, such a group would report its work, including any recommendations, to an annual Meeting of States Parties.

The other essential component of an effective intersessional process is a more action-oriented annual meeting of States Parties.

The annual meeting of States Parties should allow sufficient time to consider important issues such as national implementation, CBMs, universality and how we can better address the global risk of BW terrorism. All were issues that we discussed in the last intersessional programme.

But an annual meeting of states parties needs to do more than just discuss. In order to ensure that the new programme produces a substantive and action orientated outcome, the meeting of States Parties needs to consider and decide, by consensus and under carefully defined delegated responsibilities, the way forward for any recommendations that may emerge from these discussions and from the other groups that comprise the intersessional process. If we are serious about developing a new substantive and action orientated programme, we should not exclude beforehand the opportunity to take any decisions other than once every five years at a Review Conference. There should be scope to act upon some recommendations immediately, if agreed. Others may need more work and would be put to the next Review Conference for decision. Any decisions that might be taken under the new process would be by consensus, which
provides the strongest possible protection for any State Parties concerned that decisions would be taken that they do not support.

In summary, we have an opportunity to use the forthcoming Review Conference to put in place a new intersessional programme that is forward looking and can help ensure the BTWC remains relevant and effective. We need a work programme that will address the challenges of today and the future in areas such as outbreaks of infectious disease whether their cause is natural or deliberate. We also need to work with experts to understand better the implications for the BTWC of the ever quickening pace of change in science and technology. And, fundamentally, we need there to be scope for decision making on an annual basis.

We aim to reflect our ideas in good time before our August meeting in a further working paper that will contain specific language for the Decision and Recommendations section in the Final Document. We are ready to continue discussions with all interested States Parties. We will happily address any questions on our ideas today and in the weeks and months to come. We encourage others to submit proposals that help us to develop an effective and forward looking work programme. It is our hope that we all will engage proactively and make the most of this preparatory process.

Thank you.