

**ATSR/1**

Witness Names: Alan Todd and Stephen Reid

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: ATSR2-11

Dated: 18/4/2023

**UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

**JOINT RESPONSE RE REFERENCES:**

**M01/NIEPG/01**  
**M01/EPG Belfast/01**  
**M01/EPG North/01**  
**M01/EPG South/01**

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**WITNESS STATEMENT OF NORTHERN IRELAND EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS  
GROUP PRIOR JOINT CHAIRS:**

**ASSISTANT CHIEF CONSTABLE ALAN TODD, POLICE SERVICE OF NORTHERN  
IRELAND**

**STEPHEN REID, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF ARDS & NORTH DOWN BOROUGH COUNCIL**

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We, Alan Todd and Stephen Reid, will say as follows: -

**1. Background re Structures**

- 1.1. The structures in Northern Ireland have changed significantly since 11 June 2009. In 2009, there were 26 District Councils. In April 2015 Local Government Reform occurred reducing the number of councils in Northern Ireland to 11. Central Government also reformed in May 2016 leading to a complete revision of responsibilities between the new central government nine departments. The Police

Service of Northern Ireland also adjusted the boundaries of its districts in 2017 to align to the local government boundaries.

- 1.2. As at 2009 and until 2015, 25 of the councils in Northern Ireland were supported by Environmental Health Group Systems. The Group system also facilitated the Northern Ireland wide multi-agency multi-disciplinary working group Local Government Emergency Management Group (LGEMG) which included representation from local government, central government, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, environmental health, policing representatives and a number of other partners. It was set up to:
  - Provide expertise in emergency planning for District Councils;
  - Give guidance to District Council on emergency planning issues;
  - Liaise with government departments on emergency planning issues; and
  - Facilitate communication between central government departments and District Councils.
- 1.3. In 2005 Belfast Resilience Forum, which was a voluntary partnership unlike its counterparts in Great Britain, was formed to consider multi-agency emergency arrangements for the Belfast City Council area. Additional funding was also provided to appoint the Belfast Resilience Forum programme manager in 2009.

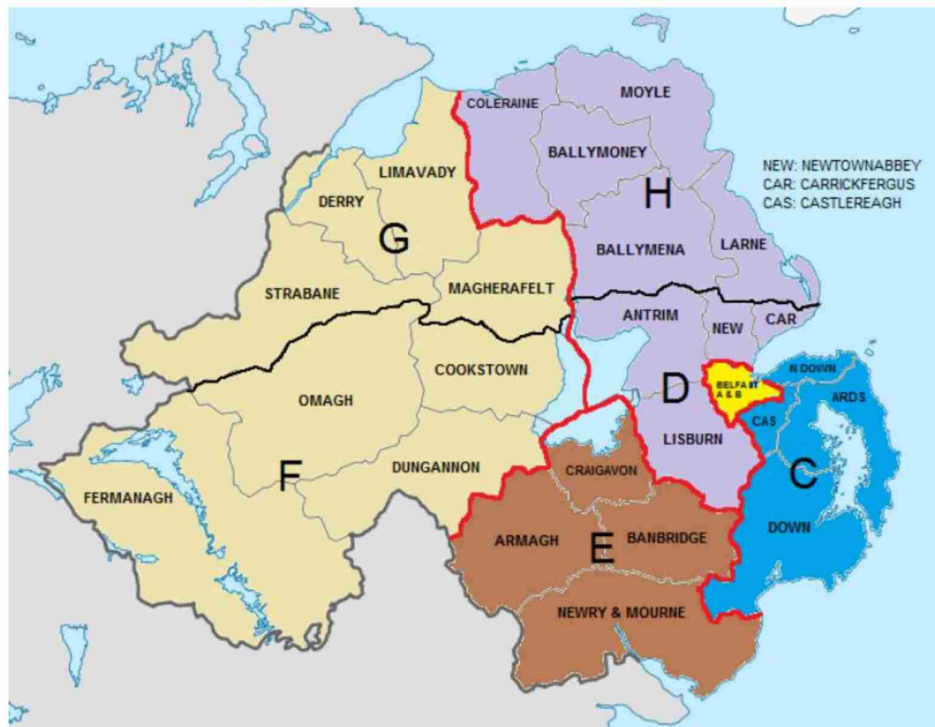
## **2. Measures made to enhance civil contingencies arrangements at local level in Northern Ireland**

- 2.1. In February 2014 the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMdfM) provided recommendations to the Northern Ireland Executive on measures to enhance civil contingencies arrangements at local level. This included the formation of a sub-group of the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) (CCG(NI), Northern Ireland's principal strategic group) entitled Sub-Regional Civil Emergency Preparedness (SCEP) to provide overarching governance to multi-agency Sub-Regional Civil Emergency Preparedness Groups (SCEPGs). A diagram of the structure is provided at ATSR/2 - INQ000174824.
- 2.2. The purpose of the CCG(NI) Sub-Group SCEP was to provide strategic direction to the work of the SCEPGs; to facilitate cohesion between the SCEPGs; and to ensure effective communication between the local and regional strategic tiers. The functions of the CCG(NI) Sub-Group SCEP were:
  - To agree a joint strategic approach to emergency preparedness and response across the SCEPGs;
  - To oversee the functions of the SCEPGs and allocate work themes;

- To receive reports from the SCEPGs on gaps in planning and progress with actions;
- To consider the implications of legislation, NI initiatives and decisions of the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) for local civil emergency preparedness; and
- To report to CCG(NI) on the operation of SCEPGs.

2.3. The CCG(NI) Sub-Group SCEPT was initially jointly chaired by the Assistant Chief Constable with policy responsibility for civil contingencies in the Police Service of Northern Ireland and by the Chair of the Local Government Emergency Management Group, representing the then 26 District Councils. Initial membership included the joint chairs of each SCEPG to facilitate cohesion between the SCEPGs, OFMdfM to facilitate integration with CCG(NI) and the Public Health Agency given the import of the health function to civil contingencies. Secretariat was provided by OFMdfM.

2.4. The proposed measures also included the establishment of five multi-agency SCEPGs, with Belfast Resilience Forum becoming the SCEPG for Belfast. The purpose of each SCEPG was to ensure that there is an appropriate level of preparedness to enable an effective multi-agency response to emergencies which have a significant impact on the local community. A map outlining the geographical boundaries of each SCEPG in 2014 is shown below.



2.5. The functions of each SCEPG in respect of their area were:

- to agree a joint approach to emergency preparedness and response for the local area in line with the strategic direction set by the CCG(NI) Sub-Regional Resilience Sub-Group;
- to liaise and co-ordinate with neighbouring SCEPGs, and where relevant with emergency planning arrangements and structures in the border counties in Ireland;
- to compile and agree a Local Risk Assessment to provide a robust basis for planning;
- to ensure that appropriate multi-agency plans, procedures, training and exercises necessary to address identified local and wider area hazards are in place and gaps identified;
- to direct and oversee the activities of working groups and allocate tasks;
- to receive reports from the working groups on gaps in planning and progress with actions;
- to ensure that appropriate resources are made available to working groups to fulfil their responsibilities;
- to co-ordinate the individual approaches and responsibilities of each organisation to ensure that they complement each other and dovetail with other stakeholders' arrangements;
- to consider the implications of legislation, NI initiatives and decisions of the Civil Contingencies Group (NI) for the local area; and
- to provide reports on gaps in planning and progress with actions to the CCG(NI) Sub-Regional Civil Contingencies Preparedness Sub-Group.

2.6. Each Sub-Regional Civil Emergency Preparedness Group was jointly chaired by a PSNI Chief Superintendent or Superintendent and a Council Chief Executive or Senior Director. Administrative arrangements/programme management was delivered by local government.

2.7. As part of the process of Local Government Reform and in consideration of the OFMdfM recommendations, the Local Government Chief Executives Group<sup>1</sup> which was leading the transition to the new eleven councils sought an independent review of the local government civil contingencies arrangements in Northern Ireland. The subsequent report issued in November 2015 provided a range of recommendations to improve local government and multi-agency emergency planning arrangements in Northern Ireland and included the recommendation that the programme

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<sup>1</sup> This group is now known as the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) Northern Ireland post the transition to the new eleven District Councils.

management of the multi-agency structures could not be funded by local government and recommended that this be funded via central government.

- 2.8. Between 2016 and 2019, multi-agency partners continued to liaise and implement the recommendations of the independent review as well as progressing the establishment of the proposed five SCEPGs. Following a change to the policing boundaries of the Police Service of Northern Ireland in 2017 to align with the new local government boundaries, the CCG(NI) Sub-Group SCEPT agreed to reduce the number of SCEPGs from five to three to align to the geography of the three new policing areas which were established at that time. Transition occurred in January 2018 and while there have been slight changes to the policing areas since this time, the Emergency Preparedness Groups have retained this geographical structure as outlined in Figure 11 of the Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Framework shown below:

Figure 11: Geographical representation of EPG areas



- 2.9. By 21 January 2020 a regional resourcing model to support local multi agency arrangements had been established which included a Local Government Regional Officer and three Resilience Managers to support the three Emergency Preparedness Groups. The team members were transferred from various councils to Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council in December 2019 to form a Regional Resilience Team with updated uniform job descriptions. Recruitment of three Resilience Officers and an administrative officer for the Regional Officer was underway, but they were not in post until May/June 2020.

- 2.10. Partners agreed to change the name of the CCG(NI) Sub Group: Sub-Regional Civil Emergency Preparedness to become the Northern Ireland Emergency Preparedness Group (NIEPG) with secretariat provided via the newly established Regional Resilience Team. The first meeting of this group took place in March 2020 and updated terms of reference were agreed as attached at ATSR/3 - INQ000174825.
- 2.11. The term SCEPG also became shortened to Emergency Preparedness Group (EPG) with secretariat provided via the newly established Regional Resilience Team.
- 2.12. The current terms of reference of the NIEPG and the three Emergency Preparedness Groups are attached at ATSR/4-7 - INQ000174826, INQ000174827, INQ000174828 and INQ000174829. The updated structure chart is shown at ATSR/8 - INQ000174830.
- 2.13. Membership of both the NIEPG and the three EPGs has continued to grow over the years. The current membership of the four groups is shown at ATSR/9 - INQ000174831.

### **3. Risk Assessment**

- 3.1. A Northern Ireland Risk Register was produced by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMdfM) in 2013 but as it was marked official sensitive it was not shared with all local partners; however some members will have contributed to its development due to their regional/topic specific roles. The Northern Ireland Risk Register was most recently updated in 2022 and the Regional Resilience Team, the emergency services and some regional NIEPG partners were asked to contribute to the review.
- 3.2. Belfast Resilience Forum partners created a local Community Risk Register which was updated a number of times, including in 2010 and 2014. Participating organisations completed a standardised template in relation to the risks within their remit and a multi-agency group reviewed the local assessment. During the 2014 update, members of the Risk Assessment Working Group were briefed orally by OFMdfM on risks which were deemed national/regional and a high-level assessment was agreed for inclusion in the Community Risk Register.
- 3.3. In 2014 the regionalisation of the Belfast Resilience Forum community risk register was discussed, but this was not adopted.

#### **4. Legislative Basis for Civil Contingencies**

- 4.1. The Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMdFM) produced the NI Civil Contingencies Framework (2005) (NICCF) in response to the introduction of the Civil Contingencies Act 2004. The Framework notes “In November 2004 Civil Contingencies legislation was enacted across the United Kingdom. Part 1 of the Act specifies Civil Contingencies duties for local response organisations listed in Schedule 1 of the Act. For a range of practical and constitutional reasons it was not appropriate to use the Act to place statutory duties on organisations delivering transferred functions in Northern Ireland.”
- 4.2. The Act does apply fully to a small number of NIEPG/EPG partners in Northern Ireland whose roles were not fully devolved or remain UK wide. This includes the Police Service of Northern Ireland and HM Coastguard as Category 1 responders and telecommunications providers as Category 2 responders.
- 4.3. The NI Civil Contingencies Framework (NICCF) notes that its aim was to ensure civil protection standards in Northern Ireland were in line with those provided by the Civil Contingencies Act. In terms of governance, it is complementary to the Act and provides guidance rather than a legislative basis. The NI Civil Contingencies Framework (NICCF) has been refreshed a number of times including significant revisions in 2011 and most recently in 2021. The statutory position remains unchanged as shown in the updated NI Civil Contingencies Framework Version 2021 (ATSR/10 - INQ000145913).
- 4.4. In relation to local government in Northern Ireland, the Local Government (NI) Order 2005 Part III Miscellaneous Provisions Article 29 provides individual councils with legislative vires to plan and respond to emergencies. This remains the current statutory position in 2022. Guidance in relation to civil contingencies was also provided by the Department of the Environment in April 2006 via LG Circular 07/06 Departmental Guidance to District Council in relation to Emergencies and outlined a range of discretionary provisions.

#### **5. Emergency Planning in Northern Ireland including Pandemic Planning**

- 5.1. Due to the structures in Northern Ireland, a range of NI strategic emergency plans are managed by central government departments or their arm’s length bodies and are not therefore devolved to the local level. There can however be an overlap in the individuals and organisations participating in regional and local groups and workstreams.

- 5.2. The Northern Ireland Emergency Preparedness Group/other Emergency Preparedness Groups have a range of plans in place, many of which were originally produced via Belfast Resilience Forum and then regionalised and adopted by the CCG(NI) Sub-Group SCEP for use across all the Emergency Preparedness Group areas. All Emergency Preparedness Group plans are subject to continuous review from learning following incidents or exercises, as well as having a review period. NIEPG and each Emergency Preparedness Group have their own work programmes which are influenced by the work programme of the overarching governance structures including CCG(NI) priorities if a local aspect of delivery is required. On a continuous basis, prioritisation is reconsidered collectively and by individual organisations. This includes refocussing emergency preparedness priorities on imminent issues of concern e.g. a local emergency response/recovery or wider preparation for issues which have been raised via horizon scanning which could pose a particular risk e.g. winter preparedness, EU Exit or a large-scale public event.
- 5.3. NIEPG had an EU Exit focused meeting in October 2019 and NIEPG and EPG partners were invited to participate in a range of familiarisation sessions, exercises and Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA) training in 2019/2020 which helped to codify the co-ordination arrangements between the local and regional levels in Northern Ireland.

## **6. Business Continuity Management**

- 6.1. Business continuity management is the responsibility of each organisation. Individual NIEPG/EPG partners may have considered pandemic planning as part of their normal business continuity planning, but this is an internal responsibility.

## **7. Maintaining public awareness and arrangements to warn, inform and advise the public**

- 7.1. NIEPG/EPG partners have arrangements in place to communicate with the public as part of their normal service provision. Belfast Resilience Forum established a Public Information and Media Working Group and following the regionalisation of structures, this group became the EPG Public Information & Media Working Group. Most of the organisations involved in the emergency planning structures have an officer on this group and an emergency distribution list exists to share public



messaging as quickly as possible in emergencies. This was in place at 21 January 2020.

## **8. Pandemic Planning**

8.1. In relation to pandemic planning, the Northern Ireland Civil Service Lead Government Departments are:

- The Department of Health for Health Service Demand Surge, Health Service Disruption and Infectious Diseases Response (with tactical delivery via the Joint Response Emergency Plan of the Public Health Agency, Health & Social Care Board and Business Service Organisation and local delivery via the six Local Health & Social Care Trusts which includes the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service).
- The Department of Justice for the Excess Deaths Response to a large acute and/or chronic increase in mortality resulting from civil emergencies (which led to the development of 'A Framework for Managing Excess (Pandemic) Deaths in Northern Ireland' with contributions from local partners).

8.2. There was also local situational awareness raising between 2009 and 2020 to some NIEPG/EPG partners individually rather than as a collective, such as:

- Engagement in relation to H1N1 Swine Flu preparations in 2009/10
- Situational awareness in relation to planning for Ebola in 2014.
- Exercise Cygnus facilitated by the Department of Health, Social Service and Public Safety NI (now Department of Health) for CCG(NI) members which was initially scheduled for 2014, then moved to 2016.
- Exercise Shamrock Responder in 2018 (an MoD Exercise which partners were invited to observe and some partners provided subject matter expertise to aid delivery).

8.3. At NIEPG/EPG level the focus has been on core competencies of individuals/organisations and addressing the consequences/impacts of emergencies regardless of the cause.

## **9. Vulnerable groups/individuals**

9.1. Vulnerability is always a consideration in preparedness, response and recovery. The Belfast Resilience Forum plans were all subject to a s75 consideration via the Belfast City Council Equality Screening in 2014 which included engagement with the local Equality Forum.

- 9.2. In 2016 the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister provided all partners with the CCG(NI) Vulnerable People Protocol which is to be considered in all emergencies and is a normal part of all activations. The Northern Ireland definition of vulnerable is within the protocol but an incident specific assessment is also required. The protocol has now been incorporated into the new Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Framework v2021 which has a chapter focused on vulnerability.
- 9.3. A range of partners in Northern Ireland have regular engagement with voluntary and community partners in their area in relation to normal service delivery and for some partners this includes emergency preparedness engagement.
- 9.4. Multi-agency engagement with voluntary and community partners in relation to emergencies has been undertaken via a number of groups, including:
- Emergency Preparedness Group (EPG) Voluntary and Faith Working Group (regular meeting with voluntary and faith representatives specifically in relation to emergency arrangements)
  - Regional Community Resilience Group, focussed on communities affected by severe weather. This group facilitates the development of community emergency plans and currently engages with approximately 30 community resilience groups.
  - Emergency Preparedness Group Humanitarian Assistance Working Groups (some core voluntary organisations attend these meetings e.g. Red Cross).

## **10. Cross Border Engagement**

- 10.1. The Cross Border Emergency Management Group meets a minimum of twice a year to enable civil contingencies counterparts along the border corridor to meet and deliver joint planning and exercising. The boundaries and the governance arrangements of the Cross Border Emergency Management Group are shown at ATSR/11 - INQ000174823.
- 10.2. Some individual NIEPG/EPG partners have routine cross border engagement with their counterparts and reciprocal arrangements are in place to support each other in emergencies e.g. a fire, medical emergency or search and rescue response in a border area could receive support from agencies on both sides of the border at the request of their counterpart.

## **11. Funding of Civil Contingencies in Northern Ireland**

- 11.1. As at 21 January 2020, individual councils in Northern Ireland do not receive specific funding to undertake emergency planning. It is for each council to determine the resource they will internally provide based on their local assessment.
- 11.2. The funding model was revised following the Independent Review in 2015 and now funds the Regional Resilience Team in addition to an allocation to fund multi-agency co-ordination, training/exercises, co-ordination facilities and business continuity/community resilience promotion. This funding, known as the Civil Contingencies Grant is currently £680k pa and covers the secretariat role of NIEPG/the EPGs (i.e. the Regional Resilience team members) and the multi-agency work the NIEPGs/EPGs wish to prioritise each year. Funding is allocated on a year-to-year basis and is provided via the Department for Communities Local Government & Housing Regulation Division (Department of Environment prior to central government reform). In the period from 2009-2017, local government received funding via a similar mechanism but at differing amounts per annum.
- 11.3. In relation to current year and future funding for the Civil Contingencies function, the Department for Communities has noted that the Executive did not agree a budget for 2022/23 but has allocated £680k per annum since 2018/19 and the function remains a priority service going forward.
- 11.4. In relation to funding response and recovery arrangements of local government, the Department for Communities can provide a Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance. While historically focused on flooding, there is the option to open a non-flooding scheme and this is what was put in place for COVID19.

## **12. Planning for future pandemics**

- 12.1. Since March 2020, NIEPG/EPG partners have contributed to a number of reviews and further planning in relation to COVID19. This has included:
  - Some organisations have undertaken their own internal debrief of their response to COVID19 at various times since 2020.
  - July 2020: The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives NI collated feedback via the cross council Regional Internal Recovery Group in relation to shared learning.
  - May 2022: The Executive Office led a collation of lessons learned.
  - Partners supporting the Executive Office led scenario planning for COVID19 for Autumn/Winter 2022/23.
- 12.2. A number of plans were written or updated since January 2020 due to COVID19. This included a range of regional plans and COVID related guidance was also

produced throughout 2020-2022 by various organisations and specialisms. Specific multi agency plans that we are aware of include:

- "An Operating Model for Council Co-ordination Hubs" in relation to the distribution of food parcels in April 2020.
- Interim Guidance to take cognisance of Covid19 mitigation measures was added to the existing Generic Protocol for the Establishment of Emergency Support Centres incorporating emergency rest centres (ERC), survivor reception centres (SRC) and friends and relatives' reception centres (FRRRC) in May 2020.
- An Interim Multi-Agency Plan re Variants under Investigation/Variants of Concern was developed in May 2021 to link existing Public Health Agency internal plans with external partner arrangements.
- Existing Pre-Designated Emergency Arrangements for Cruise Ships in Belfast Harbour was updated to reflect COVID guidance and regional work re the return of cruise ships was undertaken.
- The Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Framework was refreshed in 2021. A revision of all Emergency Preparedness Group plans is currently underway to align them to the updated Framework.

### 13. Statement of Truth

We believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. We understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Personal Data** \_\_\_\_\_ Local Government

**Dated:** \_\_\_\_\_ 18/4/2023 \_\_\_\_\_

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Personal Data** \_\_\_\_\_ Police Service of Northern Ireland

**Dated:** \_\_\_\_\_ 18/4/2023 \_\_\_\_\_