



Northern  
Ireland  
Office

**To:** Secretary of State

**Cc:** Minister Walker

**Date:** 15 January 2020

**Deadline:** Urgent

### MACA for Healthcare Capacity in Northern Ireland

**ISSUE:** The Department of Health has submitted a request for Military Aid to a Civilian Authority (MACA) to assist the response to the current COVID crisis.

**SUMMARY:** The Department has requested 110 Combat Medical Technicians (CMTs) / Health Care Assistants (HCAs) to support wards and relieve pressure on the healthcare system in 3 HSCT sites. The request has been made on advice of the Chief Nursing Officer. The MACA request (at **Annex D**) has been received by the NIO, for SOSNI clearance prior to SOS Defence final approval. MoD have highlighted that they would appreciate a brief note on political handling which could be put in place to mitigate the risk to military personnel deployed in Northern Ireland. This is set out below at **Annex A**.

**RECOMMENDATION:** It is recommended that:

- You approve the MACA request (Annex D) which will then be considered by MoD ministers.
- You note the sensitivity of military involvement in Northern Ireland, and the risk for military personnel, which the Defence Secretary will need to weigh against the benefit to public health from intervening.
- You agree to the engagement in this submission, including:
  - A note to MoD setting out how NIO will work with DoH and MoD to mitigate the risk to military personnel through political and media handling. [**Annex B**]
  - Included within this - a commitment that you will contact FM and Robin Swann to ensure that comms around any intervention hit the right note to safeguard military personnel and avoid politicisation.
  - Top Lines and a rough draft of the engagement plan at **Annex C**.

**SPECIAL ADVISER COMMENTS:**

OL is content with the MACA request.

Given the threat assessment and political sensitivities, we will need to consider stronger engagement plans including a wider list of stakeholders across both elected and SpAd levels - including the DUP, UUP and considering SF, SDLP and Alliance. Political Affairs should work at pace to develop these plans for engagement.

IB has concerns about the communications handling plans and would like to see more information on the delivery of comms activity. As indicated in the sub, more work will need to be done between DoH, NIO and MOD to develop these plans.

**NEXT STEPS:** If approved, we will send the MACA request on to MoD, where we understand the Defence Secretary will make a final decision. We will also continue to work with MoD and DoH on comms, and share the Annexes of this submission to clarify how we will mitigate risk to military personnel through comms and political handling.

REQUEST FOR MILITARY AID TO THE CIVIL AUTHORITY

Request for Military Aid to the Civil Authorities (MACA)					
Consult guidance notes whilst completing this form					
TIMING <sup>1</sup> : URGENT					
Requesting Agency	Belfast, North and South Eastern Health & Social Care Trusts		Operation Name	Op RESCRIPT	
Department of State	NI Department of Health		JMC/RPoC	HQ 38 (Irish) Bde & NI Garrison	
Requesting Point of Contact	Name	Charlotte McArdle	MOD LO	Name	Name Redacted
	Role	Chief Nursing Officer (CNO)		Role	JRLO NI
	Tel	Irrelevant & Sensitive		Tel	Irrelevant & Sensitive
	Email	Charlotte.McArdle@health-ni.gov.uk		Email	Name Redacted @mod.gov.uk
DTG of request	15 Jan 21		JRLO Aware	Yes	
PART 1 – REQUESTING AGENCY TO COMPLETE SUPPORTED BY MOD LO					
1) <b>Headline summary of situation</b>					
Absenteeism in within the NI nursing staff is increasing; on 05 Jan, 316 nurses were absent due to Covid-19 or self-isolation. This more than doubled by 14 Jan to 629 nurses absent compounded by a further 826 HSCT staff recorded as absent due to self-isolation. The absentee figures for non Covid-19, but crucially including stress and mental health issues, rose from 800 nurses to 1339 over this same period. This stark figure is compounded further by the fact that in Dec 19, the nursing staff cohort across NI HSCTs had 2,800 vacant nursing posts – prompting the first industrial action ever enacted by nurses in NI. If we do not ease the pressure on our nursing staff over the coming weeks, in human terms, there is a risk that much of this vital resource will be become broken beyond recovery.					
2) <b>What is happening? – NOT initially required for URGENT MACA</b>					
Northern Ireland is now experiencing the highest recorded number of Covid-19 patients in hospitals across all 5 x Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs). The number of hospitalisations is set to rise again until early February, further exposing an already acute shortfall in ICU beds. Since mid-December, emergency measures have been implemented to centrally manage and surge nursing resources to points of greatest need, however this model is now compromised as there is no more resource to surge.					
3) <b>Why must action be taken? – NOT initially required for URGENT MACA</b>					
Covid-19 Inpatients - It is extremely likely that inpatient numbers will continue to rise for the next 10-14 days, taking NI over the 1100 inpatient mark, contrasting with a peak of 354 in Apr 20 which challenged our staff. ICU - It is also highly likely that inpatients needing critical care will also continue to rise for the next 14-21 days, making it highly likely that ICU usage will reach 80-90 Covid-19 patients. This is in contrast with a current Belfast Nightingale capacity for 34 staffed ICU beds. Deaths - Given the correlation between Covid-19 inpatients and deaths, it is highly likely that if inpatients reach over 1000, set against the current shortfall of nursing staff, daily deaths will reach between 25-30 against the current figure of 16 (as at 14 Jan).					

<sup>1</sup> As defined in 2018DIN03-028: **Urgent**: There is time to consult but a rapid decision is required. Abbreviation of this form is acceptable for initial submission. **Routine**: All other requests. Include the timing for the requested effect if appropriate. Annotate if a major incident has been declared.