

Witness Name:

Statement No:

Exhibits:

Dated:

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ANDY COLE

I, **ANDY COLE**, will say as follows: -

1. From September 2018 I was Grade 5 in the Executive Office (TEO) in the role of Director of Good Relations. My key responsibility in that role was to lead implementation of the NI Executive's Good Relations Strategy, Together: Building a United Community.
2. During the period 11 January 2020 to 15 February 2022, I undertook two roles, namely as a volunteer in the NI Hub (March 2020 – July 2020) and thereafter, Director of Civil Contingencies in TEO (August 2020 – October 2021). Prior to 20 March 2020 I had no involvement in any civil contingency arrangements.

NI HUB VOLUNTEER (MARCH 2020 TO JULY 2020)

3. On 20 March 2020, I was deployed within TEO to the NI Hub, to assist as a volunteer in the initial response and to work for Anthony Harbinson who took up the role as Chief of Staff. I was part of the multi-disciplinary team that coordinated the Northern Ireland response to the pandemic under the emergency response arrangements, from March 2020 through to July 2020, at which point these arrangements had been scaled down.
4. Almost all NI Hub volunteers returned to their departments through June and July 2020. In July 2020, I returned to my substantive post in TEO as Director of Good Relations. The operation of the NI Hub between March 2020 to July 2020 is discussed later in this statement.

DIRECTOR OF CIVIL CONTINGENCIES (AUGUST 2020 TO OCTOBER 2021)

5. Further to discussion between the Chief of Staff, HOCS and my Line Manager (Dr Mark Browne) in TEO, I was notified by my Line Manager on 3 July 2020, that I would transition during July to take up the post of Director of Civil Contingencies from August 2020. At that time the NI Hub had been stood down and the Chief of Staff had left post.
6. My role as Director of Civil Contingencies carried different responsibilities to those from March 2020 to July 2020 and of the vacated Chief of Staff role. Specifically, I was tasked to consider lessons learned from the initial wave, to ensure readiness for any future stand up of the NI Hub during autumn or winter, and in the medium term to restructure and reset the civil contingencies arrangements across Northern Ireland, all of which are detailed later in this statement. I remained in post as Director of Civil Contingencies until October 2021, leaving TEO on secondment to take up a position at the Food Standards Agency.
7. I cannot comment on any issues that occurred either before 19 March 2020 as my role did not involve Civil Contingencies or Covid 19, or after leaving TEO on 8 October 2021, when I left TEO to begin my new role in the Food Standards Agency. I remain in this position. A handover note to my Line Manager (TEO-M2C-AC-13 – **Exhibit AC/1 - INQ000417310**) set out a status position of workstreams at the time that I left post. There was I understand, a gap of 2 months prior to the new Director for Civil Contingencies, Doreen McClintock, taking up post.

GROUPS / UKG INTERACTION

8. In carrying out my two distinct roles, there were various groups and structures at an operational level that I attended during the specified period.
9. Firstly, I will address the groups facing into UKG. In the response phases from March 2020 to July 2020, and the subsequent response phase from October 2020 to February 2021, (both of which are detailed later in this statement), at an operational level I attended various stand-up calls set up by Cabinet Office. These were calls led by Cabinet Office with a wide attendance across all UKG departments and representation from each of the devolved nations, the purpose being to share situational awareness on the evolving response.
10. During March 2020 response, there were additional UKG structures that I was not involved in and those were fulfilled by the Chief of Staff who primarily led on the external structures. Those included, along with other Grade 3s, attendance at Ministerial Impact Meetings,

COBR, Quad meetings and similar. I have no observation on the effectiveness of that external machinery, although the information flow back from such meetings inevitably set the direction and agenda for the Civil Contingencies Group (CCG) and Ministers, and by definition the NI Hub.

11. Later in 2020 but still facing into UKG, I participated in the DA Liaison Group meetings (**Exhibit AC/2 - INQ000205944**). The purpose of these meetings was to discuss the D20 (December 20) arrangements, the name given by Cabinet Office to deal with the concurrency of COVID, winter pressures including health and weather, and the end of the transition period for EU Exit. Such meetings were a welcome development from the initial response in March 2020, although I acknowledge that such meetings would not have been feasible in March given the unprecedented pace and scale of the response.
12. On occasions I also found it necessary during those discussions to note our concern in Northern Ireland around aligning to their proposed footing which was a very different resourcing position in UKG and Cabinet Office. This was in respect of not being able to “resource match” the staffing resource or proposed structures in England. Given Northern Ireland’s much more agile footing much due to our structures, scale, and geography. Whilst collaboration increased through the second wave and towards D20, it often felt quite top down with on occasions UKG and the Cabinet Office not always understanding the devolved context, both in respect of resourcing and dynamics. I also had a sense that there was not always the distinction between Northern Ireland as a devolved administration and the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) as a territorial office of UKG.
13. One further UKG facing group was the Cabinet Office led Ad Hoc DG (Director General) Resilience group. The purpose of this group was for the UKG to build a more resilient United Kingdom. I did not routinely attend this meeting but did so on one occasion where I deputised for the Grade 3 who must have not been available. This was the meeting in May 2021 (**Exhibit AC/3 - INQ000207595**) where the publication of the Integrated Review was discussed. I had welcomed the document and approach whilst raising caution around engagement with the devolved administrations. I also touch upon this above where on occasions the Cabinet Office system, being so well resourced and moving at pace, could on occasions be blind to the practical outworking and detail across the nations.
14. This manifested itself in practical terms where Northern Ireland just did not have the people resource that seemed to be available to Cabinet Office and as such it was often necessary to tailor any proposed approach appropriate to our circumstances. It should be noted that

the scale of England does of course require different structures and approach, with for example multiple police forces and a large geographic spread – whereas Northern Ireland has the ability to be much more agile with by comparison, one police force, one ambulance service and eleven local authorities.

15. There was therefore not always a direct read across to the approach from England and I believe the need for a tailored in-country approach would have been a similar position in the other devolved nations. I did not see the examples cited as significant or having caused any difficulties, but it was always an important perspective to bring to such discussions when engaging directly into UKG. Whilst appreciating that everyone was working at pace, at times the flow and timeliness of information from UKG could have been more effective.
16. One further example of the capacity of Cabinet Office to resource change, was the establishment of the SitCen which was the Cabinet Office “Situation Centre” where I understand the aspiration was to run a live Ops Room and provide live data analytics to support COBR and Ministers in any emerging response. I commented in May 2021 (TEO-1622-M1 - **Exhibit AC/4 - INQ000207590**) my concern as to what it would mean for Northern Ireland, for example, I queried would an information feed from Northern Ireland be necessary to feed the 24/7 structures being developed in Cabinet Office. I was acutely aware of our constraints around the provision of data in the first wave. SitCen became operational at the end of September 2021 and with me leaving my post in October 2021 I cannot comment on its effectiveness or interaction with Northern Ireland.
17. Secondly, I will now address the groups facing into Northern Ireland. C3 is the Command, Control and Coordination arrangements which consists of a network across all Northern Ireland departments, PSNI, local government and the Food Standards Agency, C3 Leads are the nominated leads across those departments and partners, responsible for the coordination arrangements within their own department. Civil Contingencies can be split into three phases, PREPARE which is the readiness phase, RESPONSE which is dealing with an emergency situation, and RECOVER which is the recovery to a business as usual position.
18. In the PREPARE phase C3 Leads are a point of contact between each department and Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB) and in RESPONSE with the NI Hub. My recollection in the early phase of the standup was insufficient communication or information flow with the C3 leads. During my time in post, I sought to address this and provide leadership through the C3 structures, sharing information from the Civil

Contingencies Group (CCG), sharing all submissions and decisions, and ensuring there was a clear understanding of the evolving escalation or de-escalation of the NI Hub. In my later role, post June 2020 and in implementing lessons learned and working toward readiness for a future stand up, I chaired meetings of the C3 Leads.

19. Civil Contingency Group (CCG) is the principal strategic civil contingencies preparedness body for the public sector. CCG comprises of senior level membership from all NICS departments and key civil contingencies stakeholders. As a volunteer in the March 2020 response, I attended CCG as an observer. Then in my role as Director of Civil Contingencies I attended CCG in an official capacity.
20. The Northern Ireland Emergency Preparedness Group (NIEPG) sits in the PREPARE phase and is jointly chaired by PSNI and local government. It is a sub-group of CCG and its purpose is to ensure that work at a local level is in line with the strategic direction provided by CCG. In the RESPOND phase, the Chair of NIEPG sits on CCG. I do not recall attending any NIEPG meetings although members of CCPB will have done so in the PREPARE phase.
21. During the winter 2020 response phase I did however use the NIEPG structures and concept to hold a weekly Friday meeting where TEO briefed into local government and police resources, any updates from CCG, SitRep and key NI Executive decisions. This was well received and strengthened communication and information flow between strategic and operational.
22. In both my roles over the specified period I also attended on occasions Executive Committee Meetings, in the capacity of observer only.

ROI ENGAGEMENT

23. During the response and when in NI Hub I do not recall having any engagement with the ROI nor to my knowledge did staff in the NI Hub. Issues at a policy level, to include consideration of Ireland as a Single Epidemiological Unit (SEU) were not within my remit, and as such I did not have consideration of comparative structures for Animal Health and Welfare and my role was purely at an operational level.
24. At an operational level there were occasions where data from ROI would feature in a SitRep, but this information usually flowed through departments and their Departmental

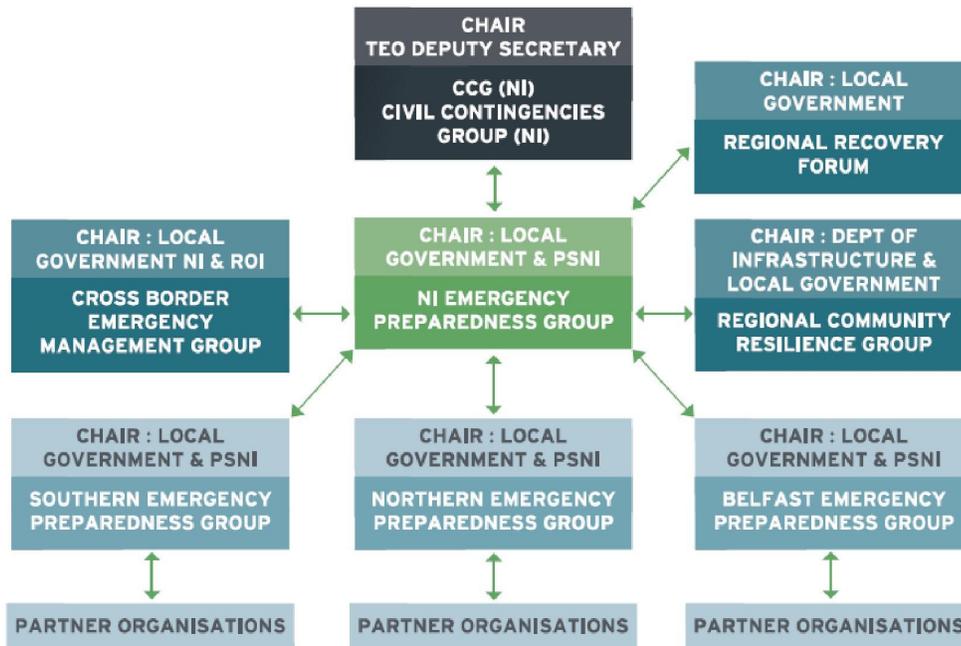
Operation Centres (DOCS). Those relationships and their departmental counterparts would have been well established and operated at that level rather than through NI Hub. I was not aware of a counterpart or structure to engage with into ROI. Given my limited involvement, I cannot comment on whether there was scope for further engagement or whether further cooperation with ROI would have been of value, however, it is my opinion that engagement with ROI would always be beneficial from a civil contingency stand point.

25. I was aware of a number of Ministerial engagements north/south and whilst I cannot comment on the detail of those meetings, those discussions and thinking may have shaped Ministers' handling of similar issues in Northern Ireland, for example around school closures.

26. The new Civil Contingencies Framework developed during my role as Director of Civil Contingencies, and is described later in this statement, reflects a Cross Border Emergency Group being part of the Local Resilience Structures. This group acts as a multi-agency group for emergency management on a cross border basis and its objectives are to aid planning, development joint protocols, share training opportunities and share information.

5.2 Local Resilience Structures

Figure 10: Resilience Structure Interactions at the Local Level



MARCH 2020 TO JUNE 2020 RESPONSE - RESOURCING

27. On 19 March 2020 whilst in TEO, Castle Buildings, I was approached by Anthony Harbinson, Chief of Staff, who verbally outlined the emerging situation. He explained how the NI Hub had been activated the previous day and he was seeking to build a team of volunteers around him to assist in the response. Through my line management I agreed to assist Anthony in any way I could, and I started in the NI Hub as a volunteer on 20 March 2020. Having only commenced on 20 March 2020, I had no knowledge of and was not involved in any discussions around the timing of the stand up or why this had not taken place in January or February.
28. I had previously never worked in the civil contingencies arena or within the emergency response arrangements and everything was new territory to me and an extremely steep learning curve, at pace. The context, original design and the exercising of NI Hub was in preparation for a non-negotiated exit from the European Union and NICS had participated in Operation Yellowhammer as part of UK wide exercising arrangements. As such, my expectation was that in place would be the structures, processes, and procedures, along with a cadre of suitably trained volunteers to staff the emerging response.
29. My experience in the early days of operation was different to what I had anticipated, with acute resourcing constraints on two fronts, firstly within the Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB) and secondly the volunteers to staff a scaled NI Hub.
30. CCPB is the team, located in TEO, who oversee the policy and coordination of civil contingency arrangements across Northern Ireland. My understanding when starting in the NI Hub was that CCPB was the team who led and managed the underlying structures, processes, and emergency response arrangements, and as such they would be there from day one and, under the leadership of the Chief of Staff, assist in scaling up the wider response across government and external partners. From the six to seven staff posted in CCPB, I believe I only met one, possibly two, face-to-face, with others either shielding or previously absent for a period of time.
31. I understand that the NI Hub had been built under Operation Yellowhammer, by a joint team from Northern Ireland Civil Service and Northern Ireland Office, largely distinct from the CCPB team. The PwC Futures Report in November 2019 reflected that CCPB provided a coordination function for civil contingencies across Northern Ireland and was not currently structured or staffed to deliver that business as usual role or to support EU Exit planning and operations.

32. Against that complex backdrop it also became clear to me when I started in the NI Hub that the team also had a different understanding to mine, of their role in such a response, that being a policy role or supporting role rather than a proactive and hands-on response role. In addition to the CCPB team there was also a temporary Grade 5 in post, Bernie Rooney, who had been previously appointed to carry out a strategic review of CCPB, but circumstances had overtaken this assignment.
33. This resourcing position concurs with the risks set out in Bernie Rooney's email in November 2019 (**Exhibit AC/5 - INQ000183597**). I also understand that the staffing complement within CCPB had been reduced over the last decade.
34. It is my view that the CCPB complement in place in March 2020 did not provide sufficient resilience and this contributed to an extremely difficult start to establishing the NI Hub. It must however be noted that the scale and pace of the March stand up could never have been resourced by CCPB alone and the response would always have required a large number of volunteers, which was the second constraint outlined below.
35. As part of Operation Yellowhammer there were, I understand, several hundred volunteers across the NICS exercised to run the C3 structures, including the NI Hub and Departmental Operation Centres (DOCS). Those staff had been trained, understood the processes, were matched according to skills and experience to the various NI Hub roles and were exercised in its operation. I had no role and was not a volunteer under Operation Yellowhammer. It is also important to highlight that Operation Yellowhammer was an exercising environment only, and was not activated to deal with a live issue. Activation of the NI Hub on 18 March 2020 (**Exhibit AC/6a - INQ000086883, Exhibit AC/6b - INQ000023225, Exhibit AC/6c - INQ000086935, Exhibit AC/6d - INQ000183592**) was the first test of how the full C3 structures would function in a live environment.
36. I understand the overall HR model of seeking volunteers was based on that adopted at Operation Yellowhammer, as roles in any NI Hub Activation would be temporary in nature and as such, a permanent staffing model was either not appropriate or feasible.
37. Within 48 hours of the NI Hub standing up, the Chief of Staff had personally reached out to a number of colleagues across NICS departments and the Strategic Investment Board (an arm's length body of TEO) and had an initial team of approximately 10 people. It was apparent however there was still not the necessary resources to staff the NI Hub, which

would be in the region of 30 staff per team and if the operating model was to be 7 extended days per week, then at least three teams and around 90-100 people would be necessary. The Chief of Staff's immediate focus was to address this resourcing challenge. HOCS (Head of NI Civil Service) wrote out on 23 March 2020 (**Exhibit AC/7 - INQ000389182**) across NICS requesting urgent assistance for staff to work in either the NI Hub or DOCS.

38. This did not see any influx of numbers and there are perhaps a mix of reasons for this. These were very uncertain times and civil servants like the rest of the population were subject to lockdown restrictions; there was very little known in the early days and weeks about infection spread and people were fearful of their safety and that of family and friends. I expect this was an early and genuine reason for sufficient numbers not coming forward. Other staff will have been shielding or indeed had decided to remain at home to either remain safe themselves or to care for dependents. Other staff will already have been deployed to work in other priority areas such as the Departmental Operation Centres or other public facing services. I also came to learn there had been tension between management and those staff who had been trained on Operation Yellowhammer, in respect of financial recompense. My assessment is this was a significant factor for the lack of willing volunteers coming forward, who had been previously trained.
39. There were therefore a complex mix of reasons why volunteers were not readily coming forward. However, the Chief of Staff's focus remained firmly on resourcing, and he subsequently reached out to the main consultancy firms in Northern Ireland, inviting them to a meeting on Monday 23 March 2020 (**Exhibit AC/8 - INQ000279354**). I attended that meeting where the request was put to the firms to provide leadership and partner in tackling the unprecedented crisis that faced us, and to identify suitably skilled and experienced staff who could assist.
40. Within a week these interventions saw a team of approximately 20 NICS alongside Strategic Investment Board and additional consultancy support, who each brought a range of skills, experience, and expertise to the task.
41. There followed further engagement with NICS HR over the coming weeks which saw a clearing system established to match those who were willing to work in the office, to priority areas across the whole of NICS. This did result in the numbers of volunteers to NI Hub increasing, although it was approximately three weeks before sufficient numbers were in

place to resource the required three teams (and one on standby) which operated on a shift basis across three sites, to mitigate infection spread.

42. In deploying staff, the reality in the circumstances was that whatever volunteers made themselves available, they were deployed. I was also a volunteer and as with all volunteers we each came with our own skills and experience. Given the pace, there was little luxury of an initial skills match and whilst roles and cells were populated, it did take time to refine the day-to-day footprint and teams in the early weeks. That on occasions required people to change roles, it required on-shift training, sometimes in groups and often 1-1. All staff came with skills, and this was maximised and complemented by the external expertise from Strategic Investment Board and the consultancy team who provided specialist support.

43. These issues surrounding resourcing were reflected in the lessons learned reports and these were also issues I was later required to consider when in post as Director for Civil Contingencies, addressed later in this statement. It was also a risk (risk 7) I had explicitly flagged and ragged as red in the CCPB Risk Register of 2020/21 (**Exhibit AC/9 - INQ000208647**), given my experience during the March 2020 stand up. I do note that the issue of resources had been referenced in the CCPB Risk Register of 2019/20 (risk 1) (**Exhibit AC/10 - INQ000201636**), although ragged amber.

MARCH 2020 TO JUNE 2020 - NI HUB RESPONSE

44. The role of NI Hub in an emergency response is to centrally coordinate information across NICS departments via their Departmental Operation Centres, and key partners such as emergency responders and local authorities. It provides an information flow in and out of Northern Ireland and it supports decision making in the Civil Contingencies Group (CCG) and NI Executive. NI Hub is generic in design and provides situational awareness, one single source of information and impact to CCG. Importantly, the NI Hub it is not a decision-making body.

45. Departmental Operation Centres (DOCS) are a key element of the emergency response structures and they operate in the response phase. They ensure a coordinated response across government. However, departments remain responsible for their own policy areas and delivery of their functions and accountable to their Ministers for delivery of their functions.

46. A DOC will stand up in each department to manage the response at a lead government department level and ensure their Minister and partners are apprised of the emerging situation and their actions taken to resolve. Once the NI Hub is stood up and multiple DOCS are operating, NI Hub becomes the focal point and coordination of the information flows across the full system. DOCS will be requested to coordinate information within their own department and organisation and feed requested information to the NI Hub by way of a departmental situation report, detailed further below.
47. DOCS are the main mechanism for contact between NI Hub and departments, including the Department of Health. The NI Hub has an equal relationship with each DOC. We also relied heavily on the relationship between departmental Liaison Officers and their departments, in building and nurturing these relationships. Specifically in respect of the Department of Health, they were understandably particularly pressured given the nature of the incident, and in the early weeks it was difficult to establish the necessary relationships and to ensure a smooth flow of robust information was coming to NI Hub.
48. It took time for DOCS to bed down and early weaknesses were identified in how the NI Hub and DOCS interacted and the flow of information, as reflected in the early “in-flight” review. Again, many people worked extremely hard to ensure the system “worked” and this continued to improve in time.
49. One of the key products from the NI Hub was the production of a situation report (SitRep). The first SitRep was produced for CCG on 20 March 2020 (**Exhibit AC/11 - INQ000232570**) and was produced daily initially, with 66 SitReps issued for the initial response through to mid-June 2020. These documents fused information and situational awareness across the C3 system - from DOCS and Liaison Officers, from wider partners and open-source data, for example economic data, policing data, schools’ data and any data which could helpfully inform decision making.
50. Early versions of the SitRep were basic and there were early teething problems across the system as structures and process both took time to embed. Each day NI Hub would issue a template for completion across DOCS and Liaison Officers for return to the NI Hub for collation of that evening’s SitRep. Each evening the NI Hub would analyse SitRep inputs from across the C3 system and produce a Northern Ireland SitRep which was issued each evening to CCG and Ministers – this formed the basis of the discussion at the following

morning's CCG meeting where HOCS briefed into CCG and subsequently the NI Executive.

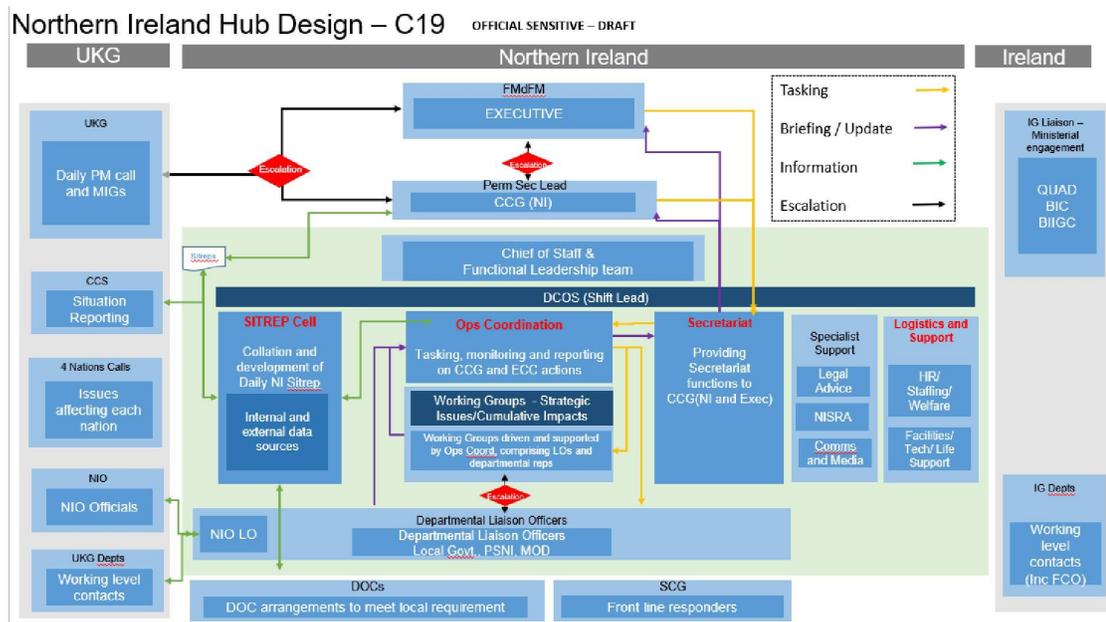
51. Any actions subsequently flowing from CCG would then be fed back through Liaison Officers in the NI Hub to Departmental Operation Centres, and those actions would return in the next iteration of the SitRep to the NI Hub and CCG. A practical example of how this would work in practice, would be discussion in CCG around infection rates of the prison population – the Liaison Officer would feed this back to the Department of Justice Operation Centre and data would then be collated and feed future SitReps to track infection rates of both those in our care and of prison staff.
52. The commission was initially structured around a planning framework where six headline planning clusters had been agreed by the NI Executive; however, those clusters did not always align to departmental remits and this initial approach together with the template issued by the NI Hub was overly complex and caused initial confusion by those trying to populate the necessary information.
53. This was addressed in a matter of days with a much more simplified template and daily request for information across the system. The revised SitRep was restructured to provide an overview of main developments (since the previous SitRep); main issues for escalation with an owner and rag rating; key data summary across departments and partners; and any key media and communications.
54. As a result of these and other improvements, for example the use of collaborative IT tools in the preparation of the SitRep, the whole process quickly became much more agile. There was richer information being provided to the NI Hub, the approach was more visual with graphs, infographics and trending and comparator data, all of which allowed for a lot of information to be distilled quickly for senior decision makers.
55. Whilst coordination and compilation of the wide range of information was mostly undertaken by NICS staff, the expertise to how that data was sourced, presented, and produced was primarily driven from the Ernst Young consultancy team which was invaluable. The Chief of Staff had also engaged Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) seeking support in the production of the SitRep and supply of data for UKG, but I understand their formal position as statisticians was professionally bound by dealing only in official statistics for publication of retrospective data, rather than live intel and management information to inform discussion and more agile decision making.

56. Whilst I was not aware of the 'Rapid Focused External Review of Public Health Agency' (**Exhibit AC/12 - INQ000001196**), one of main reporting issues I do recall in relation to data collection was the daily death data, particularly when reporting into UKG on a 4-nation basis. Data was collected in Northern Ireland on a different reporting cycle to that in GB and additionally, our weekend data was not fed into the system until Monday morning which created some misalignment on the public facing reporting of deaths across the nations. For the purposes of the NI Hub and informing CCG and the Executive, we used the daily death data as provided by the Department of Health. I do not believe this impacted decision making in any way for CCG or Ministers and I cannot comment in respect of modelling data which the Department of Health led on, with a weekly "R paper" coming to the NI Executive for discussion.
57. Whilst the early days of the response felt difficult and on occasions unstructured, CCG met at 0830 daily and continued to be serviced; nine DOCS were running and starting to embed and feed better information and data to the NI Hub; over 100 incoming staff were being trained live and assigned to roles, across 3 teams and sites; NI Hub design was being reviewed and refined; and communication across the C3 system was becoming more effective with each week that passed.
58. That is not to say everything was smooth, the pace and scale of what the NI Hub was dealing with was unprecedented and required strong and clear leadership together with willing volunteers on a daily basis to ensure the NI Hub and its teams functioned effectively. New structures, workflows, IT, and processes were developed at pace, to deal with the increasing demands from both within Northern Ireland and into Cabinet Office; the collection of data sets and formal reporting mechanisms; the sharing of information across the C3 system; and servicing the many stand up meetings that were necessary, both within NI Hub and UKG structures.
59. The Chief of Staff, in a submission to First Minister and deputy First Minister on 22 April 2020 (**Exhibit AC/13 - INQ000291438**), provided a status update on the establishment of the NI Hub and associated structures, which reflected the structures operating at full operating capability by that date. This was, I feel, a major achievement in the circumstances.
60. Whilst I did not have a specific job description, my role in the NI Hub (March 2020 to June 2020) was largely internal facing and a leadership role in support of the Chief of Staff. His

role was primarily the external machinery and relationships, and my role, along with others, was internal to the NI Hub and C3 system and ensuring it worked “on the floor”.

61. My role during that period was not specifically defined and by the very nature of the response, it was reactive and necessarily very broad. As a volunteer I used my skills and experience and quite simply contributed where I could add value. I directly supported the Chief of Staff on a daily basis, accompanying to meetings where necessary, attendance at CCG, briefing into the C3 system, drafting submissions for Ministers, leading the shift on the NI Hub floor, troubleshooting, and providing solutions in a dynamic and fast paced environment.

62. With the NI Hub now operating across 3 teams and on a rota basis (red team, yellow team and blue team) across 3 different sites it became necessary to build leadership capability around those structures. To address this a small leadership team of Functional Leads (FLs) was built who would have responsibility for different elements of the NI Hub machinery. This was not only important in providing leadership and responsibility, but it was also a key feature of ensuring consistency across the complexity of running three distinct teams on a rota basis, across different sites, a challenge in itself.



63. Each NI Hub shift on rota operated a number of distinct cells, which were teams of volunteers responsible for different aspects of the NI Hub. The main cells were the Secretariat Cell, a SitRep Cell and an Ops Coordination Cell.

64. Each cell had a Head of Cell to lead his/her team, for example Head of Ops Coord or Head of Secretariat Cell. The Functional Lead roles were distinct to the “Head of” roles and sat above the Heads, put in place to provide leadership to the teams in the rotating shifts for each Cell. I was the Functional Lead for Ops Coord, over 3 separate Ops Coord cells (operating on a rotation basis) who each had a Head of Ops Coord and a number of volunteers in each team.
65. The role of the Ops Coord cell was the glue that allowed the other cells and NI Hub to function correctly. The Ops Coord cell was charged on shift with a range of responsibilities including the welfare and feeding of staff, rostering, IT, and equipment, more laterally CONOPS and SOPs, CCG action and decision logs including follow up and engagement through Liaison Officers.
66. As with all roles across the NI Hub, it took teams time to settle into a rhythm of what was required including the interaction between the different cells and the rest of the C3 structure. It is a fair reflection that the workload in the Ops Coord Cell came in waves through the shift, and in time I deployed staff, depending on skills and experience, to other cells where at particular times of the day there was a pinch, for example the preparation of the SitRep each evening. Other lessons were learned each day and refinements implemented.
67. For example, a number of NI Hub staff, including the Head of Secretariat Cell, already dialled into CCG in an observer capacity. In the first number of weeks an early gap was identified where it would be useful for the Head of Ops Coord to also dial into CCG in observer capacity and allow that individual first-hand insight to the discussion at CCG and to better allow them to converse with Liaison Officers on the detail or nuance of any actions coming from CCG. This arrangement was not initially in place, nor would it be normal practice, for what should properly be a restricted list of attendees at CCG, where the issues and discussion focused on official-sensitive matters. These were however unique times that required us to be agile and pragmatic.
68. Relationships between the NI Hub and across Northern Ireland departments were on occasions strained, understandably, given the competing demands of departments and the central coordination function of the NI Hub. Early in-flight reviews of aspects of the systems as detailed below, went some way to addressing any tensions, with a clearer understanding of how the structures should operate both in design and function. As

indicated, we relied heavily on the relationship between Liaison Officers and their departments, in building and nurturing these relationships.

IN-FLIGHT EFFECTIVENESS REVIEWS

69. In testing the systems and a number of weeks into the stand up, the Chief of Staff had commissioned a number of “in-flight” reviews. These were intentionally targeted at specific areas of the C3 system and tested their effectiveness and made recommendations for improvement. Some of those recommendations could be implemented with immediate effect, others were to shape the future programme of work I would lead as Director of Civil Contingencies beyond June 2020.
70. In April 2020, a Capability Review of the NI Hub (**Exhibit AC/14 - INQ000279310**) was conducted to assess its readiness at Initial Operating Capability and its readiness to move to Full Operating Capability. This was key to ensuring the NI Hub was fit for purpose.
71. A Departmental Operations Centre Effectiveness Review (**Exhibit AC/15 - INQ000279311**) was also completed in April 2020 to assess the effectiveness of the nine DOCS within the C3 structure. This was a key review as the flow of information from departments to NI Hub was critical to the success of the SitRep and ensuring CCG and Ministers were apprised of detail and issues for escalation and decision.
72. Early weaknesses were identified and addressed and DOCS together with their Liaison Officers continued to be the cornerstone to the information flow and success of NI Hub. Communications were improved with increased two-way flow of information, training was implemented for DOCS and Liaison Officer staff, and more flexible remote arrangements were deployed to accommodate Liaison Officers who could not be physically present in the NI Hub.
73. In May 2020 there was a “point in time” review of the CCG arrangements (**Exhibit AC/16 - INQ000279312**), providing a rapid assessment of the working arrangements and effectiveness of the group over the seven-week period it had convened to oversee the initial response. That report stated CCG “delivered effective situational awareness, information sharing, progression of key issues, and critically it sustained senior level engagement across all key partners.”

74. I attended CCG in observer capacity at that time, and I do not concur with the observation from the later Ernst Young report that CCG was not an effective decision-making body. Rather there were few decisions necessary, given the principle of subsidiarity where operational decisions were taken within departments where possible, or policy issues subsequently escalated to the NI Executive. I feel the SitRep which featured at every meeting directly shaped the discussion and actions, and I feel CCG provided strong leadership throughout the response and was an effective forum for information sharing and collaboration.
75. Finally, in June 2020 there was a full lessons learned review (**Exhibit AC/17 - INQ000258535**) from the deployment of the C3 structures to manage the Northern Ireland response and how those lessons could shape the future roadmap for our civil contingency capability. The report was broken down into six key themes covering people and structure, governance and decision making, communications, collaboration, data sharing and outputs.
76. In commenting on what I regard as the most significant findings of the reviews and personal observations, I would point to the availability of volunteers and resourcing, to the preparedness of the stand up and to the application of the Yellowhammer structures to the live environment rather than a sterile exercise environment.
77. I have referenced resourcing in some detail and there were several factors in play, one of the key factors being the availability of returning trained volunteers. Additionally, I feel it is also important to recognise the acute impact of an immediate full switch on rather than a "scaled" stand up, something that I would later seek to address in the role of Director of Civil Contingencies beyond June 2020. My other observation and learning from the March 2020 stand up was the need to be more agile with the NI Hub footing and approach. The approach was largely driven by the Cabinet Office Yellowhammer exercise and my experience from March 2020 to June 2020 would reflect this was in places "heavy" and at times inflexible in its construct for this specific response.
78. Noting that the NI Hub structure and processes were designed for Yellowhammer and only exercised in a training environment, it became evident quite quickly, that didn't always translate well into the live environment. For example, the template for the SitRep was complex and needed reviewed and refined; information flows were unnecessarily complex; the working groups as envisaged in the NI Hub did not operate in practice, for example there were no legal, NISRA or comms cells "on site"; FM and dFM attendance at CCG was

not anticipated in the Yellowhammer structure; and conversely, the functional leads roles were a necessary new addition to the structure.

79. In summary, the prolonged nature of the response was not in the normal sphere of short-sharp emergency response and applying a rigid model with a large resource commitment from the outset, designed for another purpose, presented unique challenges when operating across multiple shifts and sites. It took a number of weeks to refine what was a Cabinet Office Yellowhammer solution, to be workable in the live environment applicable to a pandemic response.

80. It is my assessment however, that despite the full immediate switch on and any initial difficulties around resourcing, that the NI Hub in difficult circumstances was indeed effective, both in meeting its objectives and its role in supporting CCG and the NI Executive in the response. This is testament only to the commitment and public service of those volunteers who were involved, together with the external support and expertise from partners.

81. Despite my assessment of NI Hub being effective, it required ongoing agility and tweaking week to week and the reviews did provide many valuable lessons and recommendations which I was later to apply during my role as Director of Civil Contingencies after June 2020. The Northern Ireland response to the autumn wave and then D20, was as a result very different, and is detailed later in this statement.

MAY 2020 TO JUNE 2020 - NI HUB SCALE BACK

82. On 18 May 2020, the Chief of Staff wrote to HOCS (**Exhibit AC/18 - INQ000255317**) seeking approval to a phased scale back of the NI Hub from week commencing 18 May 2020 through to week commencing 22 June which would see a retained group of approximately 8 people to operate on a “readiness” footing. The proposals also sought approval for a Grade 5 role to manage the proper scale down and readiness for future response and any necessary future scale up of the C3 structures. Importantly, this was not “closing down” of the NI Hub, the C3 structures remained “warm” and in place for future scaling, and there was a defined programme of work flowing from the various reviews that needed to be completed by the remaining readiness team.

83. The timing and rationale for the scale down was falling infection levels at that time and a corresponding reduction in the R number, together with lockdown restrictions starting to

be relaxed. The SitRep and CCG rhythm had been adjusted and the time was right to scale down the current resourcing whilst taking the opportunity to start to ensure readiness for a possible second wave and any potential concurrency of the approaching end of transition period for EU Exit.

84. The proposals were approved by HOCS (TEO-M2C-AC-03 - **Exhibit AC/19 - INQ000417311**) and over the weeks that followed, the battle rhythm and shift patterns were adjusted and NICS volunteers and Strategic Investment Board volunteers were released back to their departments. This left the CCPB team and approximately 8 volunteers to focus on what would then become a structured programme of work on readiness. This small team also retained data analysis capacity from the Strategic Investment Board and specialist emergency planning resource which complemented the CCPB team.

85. During July 2020 I returned to my substantive post after the scale down whilst the Chief of Staff remained in the NI Hub until the end of July 2020. I subsequently returned in August 2020 to take up the role of Director of Civil Contingencies, my role being expanded upon later in this statement.

JUNE 2020 TO SEPTEMBER 2020 – APPLYING LESSONS & READINESS

86. On 24 August 2020 Chris Stewart wrote to FM and dFM (**Exhibit AC/20 - INQ000279313**) to provide an overview of the final Ernst Young Lessons Learned Report from June 2020, (**Exhibit AC/21 - INQ000287144**) in which he stated, “the key lesson is that success was a triumph of people over process: it stemmed from the efforts of all those involved in responding to the challenges, whilst overcoming the inherent weaknesses and lack of resilience in the C3 arrangements, which had been largely unchanged for some years.” An attached submission to Permanent Secretaries summarised the lessons learned as the need:

- to build a strategic civil contingency capability that is not reactive, and event focused but instead, is an agile professional function that can support the C3 network across NI government;
- to develop and refine in the short term, the tools that will help us deliver a professional service such as risk registers, contingency plans, horizon scanning, and situation reports; and

- to start preparing for the inevitability of needing to activate the structures again and build on the momentum that had been created from the current deployment.

87. In June 2020, with the NI Hub having now been scaled back in its response, a comprehensive programme of work commenced to address a series of short-term improvements, driven from the recommendations outlined in the various reviews. The series of “in-flight” reviews commissioned by the Chief of Staff also complemented a number of legacy pieces of work of which the recommendations remained outstanding, namely the Business Consultancy Service Review of Civil Contingencies in 2015 (**Exhibit AC/22 - INQ000201707**) and the PwC Futures Report in November 2019 (**Exhibit AC/23 - INQ000258531**).

88. In June 2020 I had remained in the NI Hub as a volunteer and one of the residual team. As previously indicated, I had subsequently returned to my substantive TEO post in July 2020, before then returning to a new role as Director of Civil Contingencies. My new role as Director of Civil Contingencies was:

- to consider lessons learned from the initial wave;
- to ensure readiness for a future stand up during autumn or winter, and
- in the medium term to restructure and reset the civil contingencies arrangements across Northern Ireland.

89. In this role I provided advice to CCG, to HOCS and to Ministers, through various submissions and recommendations, referenced below. In this role I also attended CCG as an observer and on occasion the NI Executive, again as an observer.

90. One of my early actions was to provide clear direction to the CCPB team, secure their support to a programme of change, and provide them leadership across what would be a refreshed footing of the team. I am pleased to be able to reflect their absolute support and willingness to embark on the journey of change, a change which they delivered in full.

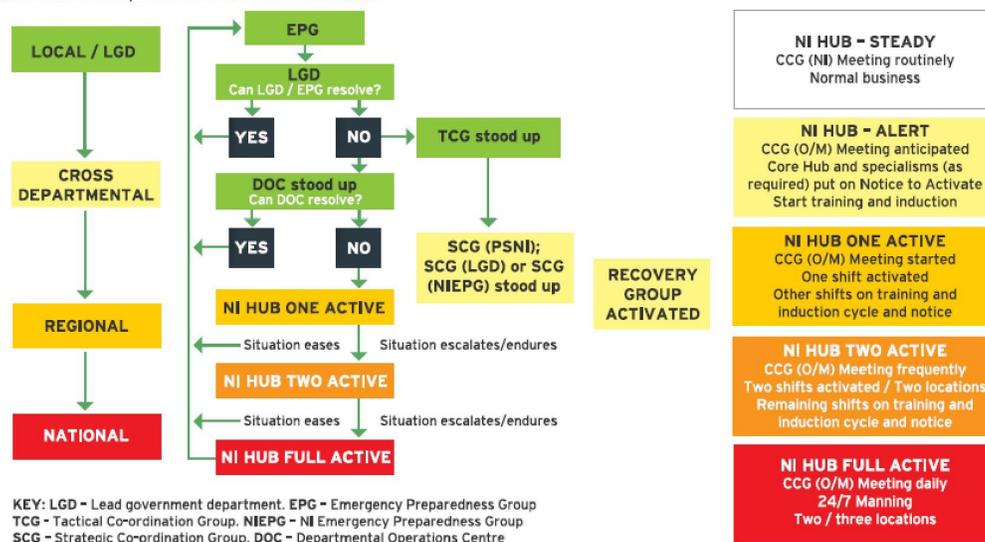
91. The initial programme of work was structured across 13 workstreams such as HR/staffing, NI Hub design, IT and estates and training and exercising (**Exhibit AC/24 - INQ000301607**). This was programme managed with assigned project leads, daily and weekly stand ups through a Programme Manager and SRO, with documented decision and action logs. The work was resourced by CCPB, and the number of specialist staff retained from the NI Hub stand up and it concluded around September 2020 when the

residual staff then returned to their departments. What then remained was the CCPB team of now 6 people.

92. The programme encompassed 86 high level actions and 343 tasks (TEO-M2C-223 – **Exhibit AC/25 - INQ000279630**) and addressed many of the practical issues identified in the initial stand up – how NI Hub should be resourced, training, CONOPS and SOPs, how the IT could be streamlined, the communication flow between NI Hub and departments and partners through C3 structures and DOCS.

93. By way of example, one key decision flowing from this programme of work that would place us well for future stand ups was in relation to how a future NI Hub would be stood up.

Figure 17: NI HUB|Escalation and De-Escalation



94. NICS Board on 28 August 2020 (TEO-M2C-AC-05 - **Exhibit AC/26 - INQ000417312**) agreed to revised principles for a graduated emergency response which consisted of a more proportionate and agile stand up across 5 stages: Hub Steady, Hub ALERT, Hub ONE Active, Hub TWO Active and Hub FULL Active (**Exhibit AC/27a - INQ000287251**, TEO-M2C-AC-15 – **Exhibit AC/27b - INQ000302740**, TEO-M2C-AC-17 – **Exhibit AC/27c - INQ000417315**).

95. In March 2020, the system in essence switched on at the highest NI Hub FULL ACTIVE, with no scaling. This revised approach would address the impacts experienced by a “full switch on” and ensure a graduated and proportionate scaling of resources in any future emergency response, both for escalation and as importantly, for de-escalation. The

stepped approach would set the rhythm for CCG, place staff on notice, enable training (induction or refresher), allocation of IT resources, and overall allow for a more orderly and controlled stand up.

96. I also wrote to Permanent Secretaries on 15 September 2020 (**Exhibit AC/28 - INQ000287252**) to confirm numbers of volunteers across NICS and how those would be deployed across the various phases of any future stand up. Again, this applied the lessons learned from March 2020 and we had identified a cadre of willing volunteers who could be on standby for any future graduated response and scaling of NI Hub. This would also importantly provide reassurance to Permanent Secretaries around their own resourcing requirements and establishment of Departmental Operation Centres.

OCTOBER 2020 TO DECEMBER 2020 - NI HUB ALERT RESPONSE

97. In September 2020, FM and dFM verbally requested advice on the activation of the NI Hub in the context of rising case numbers in GB. I wrote on 23 September 2020 (**Exhibit AC/29 - INQ000277781**) outlining the escalation model recently agreed by the NICS Board and confirming the status of NI Hub as ALERT at the time of writing. That footing had CCG meeting only periodically and had volunteers on notice to activate and commence refresher training in the event of further escalation.

98. My recommendation was to note the escalation model, the current NI Hub status of ALERT and to agree that a full stand up of the NI Hub was not necessary at that time. I reflected in that advice that without a significant escalation or stress around hospitalisation and ICU capacity, or a wider concurrency it was difficult to see the requirement for an increase in the frequency of CCG and by definition, for an escalation to Hub ONE or Hub TWO status. Additionally, the Department of Health was acting as Lead Government Department and had been managing the health response under its own emergency response procedures whilst providing TEO with situational awareness as required.

99. In the absence of a HOCS during this period I remained concerned around the risk of adequate resourcing as it became apparent that not all volunteers identified were likely to be available. Making every effort to mitigate the risk around resourcing I wrote on 28 September 2020 (TEO-M2C-AC-21 – **Exhibit AC/30 - INQ000287258**) to the NICS Board and on 29 September to the TEO Departmental Board (TEO-M2C-AC-20 – **Exhibit AC/31 - INQ000287244**), again raising the wider concerns around resourcing, should there be an

escalation in the stand up. There was limited impact from the correspondence with two responses which reflected departmental resource pressures within the context of wider machinery of government pressures (an example is exhibited at **Exhibit AC/32 - INQ000276142**).

100. On 2 October 2020 I also wrote across C3 structures to ensure consistency of message, a further lesson applied from the March 2020 response around the need for stronger communications (**Exhibit AC/33 - INQ000301975**). The purpose of that correspondence was to put the system “on notice” as NI Hub was on ALERT status and to signal the need for readiness across departments, including now identifying Liaison Officers and training requirements for Departmental Operation Centres, should they need to stand up.

NICCMA ACTIVATION – OCTOBER 2020

101. Given the lag of Northern Ireland behind GB in infection spread, in a short number of weeks from advising FM and dFM, the data did subsequently reflect a rapidly changing position and an increase in community transmission together with an increase in ICU COVID occupied beds. This together with NI Executive introducing further restrictions through regulation, meant the impacts moved beyond the health space with wider cross cutting impacts to be coordinated and monitored.

102. I wrote to FM and dFM on 18 October 2020 (**Exhibit AC/34 - INQ000289778**) to note the intention to activate the Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA) and to establish CCG as the focal point to provide strategic oversight for the emergency response. The NI Hub would remain in ALERT phase with the CCPB team providing support to CCG to ensure reach back into Departments and across partners to coordinate information, as necessary.

103. A further element of the submission was a proposal to establish a model which included CCG (Ministers) which would provide a dedicated forum and focused briefing to Ministers from the Chair of CCG (Officials) and act as a link to and inform considerations at NI Executive. The rhythm was proposed as CCG O to meet on a weekly rhythm with a weekly SitRep to monitor and track cross cutting impact and escalate issues for discussion and decision.

104. This overall approach again reflected the lessons learned from March 2020 with a graduated and proportionate stand up of the C3 structures. The pandemic was not in the usual space of “emergency response” which would normally be short and sharp in duration, and I was very aware of the prolonged response, the concurrency with winter and end of the transition period approaching, and the availability and resilience of staff. As such, it was key to manage this risk and ensure the structures were not scaled too quickly. This also mitigated the risk around the availability of volunteers, as reflected in my correspondence to NICS Board.

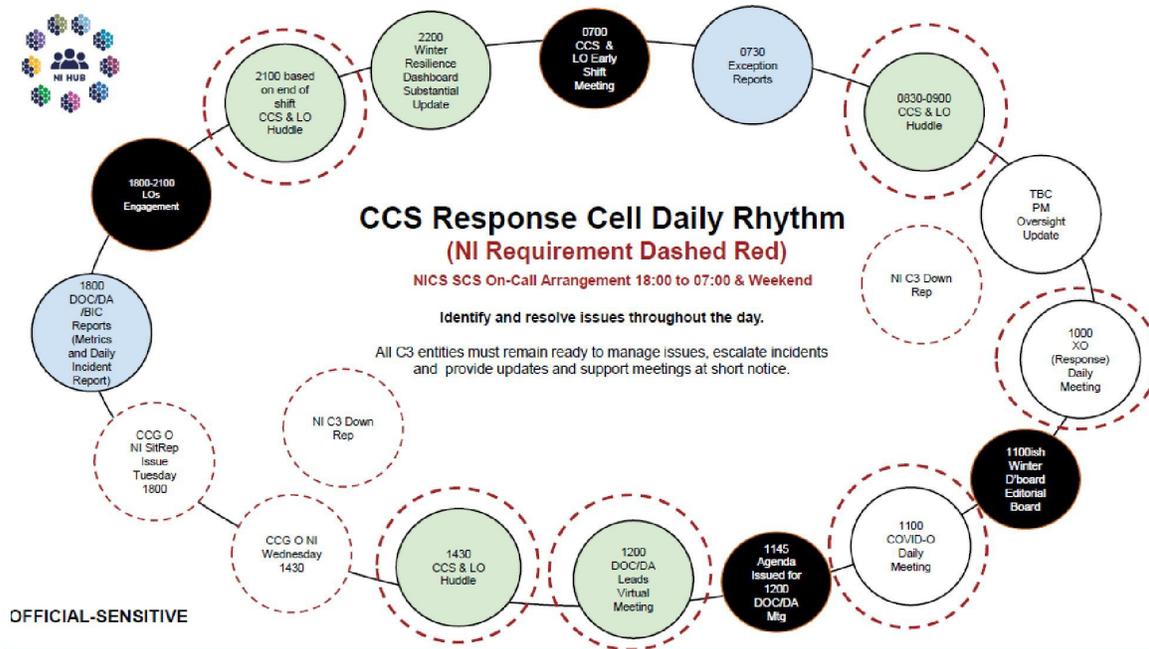
105. Ministers responded on 26 October 2020 to confirm they were content with the recommendations and suggested there should be twice weekly meetings between the Chair of CCG, FM and dFM (**Exhibit AC/35 - INQ000308887**).

DECEMBER 2020 TO FEBRUARY 2021 - D20 NI HUB ONE RESPONSE

106. In December 2020 NI Hub escalated from NI Hub ALERT status to NI Hub ONE status (TEO-M2C-AC-12 – **Exhibit AC/36 - INQ000417321**) to deal with D20, the Cabinet Office operation to respond to the concurrency of COVID, winter health and weather disruption, and the end of the transition period for EU Exit. D20 was Cabinet Office led with UK wide reporting and involvement across the devolved nations.

107. In preparation for D20 I had been attending DA Liaison Group meetings where the D20 arrangements were being discussed. I had concerns around the staffing resource footprint proposed by Cabinet Office and our ability in Northern Ireland to “resource-match,” and indeed whether duplicating this model in the devolved space was necessary.

108. I briefed CCG O on 9 December 2020 (TEO-M2C-AC-09 - **Exhibit AC/37 - INQ000417320**) outlining how the Cabinet Office intended to stand up and an alternative option of how I proposed Northern Ireland and NI Hub could respond. (TEO-M2C-AC-12 - **Exhibit AC/36 - INQ000417321**).



109. As shown in the visual, Cabinet Office were running a 7 day a week, long shift pattern with overnight on-call arrangements with full DOC and Liaison Officers in place across all UKG departments and Local Resilience Forums. Their clear expectation as briefed into the DA Liaison Group meetings was for a full devolved administration dock-in - with the structures to operate in shadow mode from 14 December 2020 and going live on 28 December 2020 (TEO-M2C-AC-10 - **Exhibit AC/38 - INQ000417319**).

110. Learning the lessons from March 2020, this was just not an approach that NI Hub could adopt. I proposed a different model to CCG O with the result that D20 was very different to that previously deployed in March 2020. The current ALERT footing of the CCPB team was supplemented by an additional 7 volunteers from NI Hub ONE, to ensure cover and resilience.

111. The differences from March 2020 were a step change – for example there was no live Ops room stood up and the only physical presence was the CCPB team during office hours - the remainder of the structures were deployed as virtual. There was no formal DOC stand-up although some were already in place, and we operated a model of C3/DOC reach back into departments and partners.

112. Senior Civil Service cover was put in place for out of hours and weekend and CCG O met on a weekly rhythm, with live incident reporting established across the C3 system and into Cabinet Office. The footing was by design flexible and in the event of disruption increasing, then escalation of the rhythm and SitRep could be deployed. Given the unique footing and more specifically the out of hours hand-off arrangements in place across Senior Civil Service, WhatsApp was used as a means for sharing information between shift handovers and during the period of the response.
113. The approach was approved by CCG O. HOCS also wrote to Permanent Secretaries on 11 December 2020 (TEO-M2C-13851 - **Exhibit AC/39 - INQ000304877**) acknowledging some of the inherent risks and seeking further assurance from departments should there be a requirement to escalate. The NI Hub ONE footing was adopted and successfully deployed from mid-December 2020 through D20 on a 24/7 on-call basis.
114. Our response I believe, was proportionate and effective. Whilst it valuably applied lessons learned and was fit for purpose for the winter and D20 response, it would not in my view have been the silver bullet to address all the identified weaknesses from the initial stand up in March 2020, which was of a different scale and pace. Every emergency response should adopt a tailored approach is my key observation.

FEBRUARY 2021 TO MARCH 2021 - NI HUB SCALE BACK

115. In February 2021 Cabinet Office had scaled their response and the level of disruption and decisions escalating to CCG O for action, had also been slowing in the weeks previous. I wrote on 12 February 2021 to FM and dFM (TEO-M2C-AC-11 - **Exhibit AC/40 - INQ000417322**) to inform them that CCG O would no longer be meeting, and NI Hub had returned to ALERT footing. CCG O had been meeting from 28 October 2020 (**Exhibit AC/41 - INQ000279279**) with a weekly SitRep to inform decision making. One of the key functions of CCG O was to take decisions and given the level of disruption was not requiring such, CCG O agreed on 10 February 2021 that the circumstances did not necessitate the structures remaining at the same rhythm.
116. Again, proportionate scaling down of the C3 structures was a learning point from March 2020. Despite the scaling, NI Hub remained warm and on an ALERT footing, providing situational awareness and a shorter weekly SitRep to CCG O and Ministers by way of exception.

117. March 2021 saw a further de-escalation of NI Hub, given CCG O were no longer meeting and there was no disruption requiring the NI Hub response structures to remain. I wrote to HOCS and CCG O on 8 March 2021 (**Exhibit AC/42 - INQ000289196**) advising of the intention to step down NI Hub from its current RESPONSE ALERT footing to the PREPARE posture. This also signalled the discontinuation of the weekly SitRep to CCG O with the last SitRep produced on 9 March 2021 (**Exhibit AC/43 - INQ000065892**). The revised footing was also advised to FM and dFM in a submission of 9 March 2021 (**Exhibit AC/44 - INQ000023227**).

118. Autumn and the D20 response demonstrated the successful implementation of many recommendations and feedback on the revised approach was overwhelmingly positive from departments and partner agencies. A Closure Report was prepared in March 2021 (TEO-M2C-221 - **Exhibit AC/45 - INQ000279624**).

RESET OF CIVIL CONTINGENCIES

119. With the readiness project completed and the NI Hub having stood down from the winter and D20 response to a PREPARE footing, focus switched in earnest to the next phase of modernisation. My next task as Director of Civil Contingencies was to restructure and reset the civil contingencies arrangements across Northern Ireland.

120. I wrote on 5 March 2021 to HOCS and NICS Board (**Exhibit AC/46 - INQ000289198**) to set out a focused programme of work to refresh and develop existing guidance into an overarching new framework for civil contingencies in Northern Ireland. The proposed new approach focused on providing a coordinated strategic risk managed framework for civil contingencies in Northern Ireland with the Executive Office bringing together all of the partners and providing strategic direction for the management of a portfolio of Northern Ireland risks. The ambition was for this framework to become, over time, the single reference point with all partners bought into the shared strategy and approach.

121. There followed extensive engagement across NI departments, Joint Emergency Services Interoperability Programme (JESIP) partners, local government and wider stakeholders with the approach structured across PREPARE, RESPOND and RECOVER. With CCG (NI) approval on 30 June 2021 (**Exhibit AC/47 - INQ000289753**), a submission to HOCS and NICS Board on 5 July 2021 (**Exhibit AC/48 - INQ000274304**) set out

progress of the full programme of work and sought approval to the new NI Civil Contingencies Framework.

122. The Framework was published and launched by HOCS in July 2021 (**Exhibit AC/49a - INQ000276196, Exhibit 49b - INQ000274296**) with Ministers approving publication on the department's website in August 2021 (TEO-M2C-AC-18 – **Exhibit 50a - INQ000427307, TEO-M2C-AC-19 – Exhibit 50b - INQ000427308, Exhibit AC/50c - INQ000258944**). The Framework has secured buy-in and it is for and used by all agencies and partners in Northern Ireland and remains a live document which continues to be updated.
123. The Framework was the culmination of lessons learned and has placed Northern Ireland in a wholly different operating environment in how civil contingencies are managed from NI Executive to local government and within communities themselves. I take personal pride in the programme of work delivered by the refreshed and now motivated CCPB team and the lessons learned and implemented in the form of the Framework.

COMMUNICATIONS

124. I can confirm I had an NICS issued laptop, Samsung mobile phone and iPad. I had brought these devices from my substantive post in the Executive Office and when I left the Executive Office on secondment in October 2021, I handed back the laptop but retained the mobile phone and iPad.
125. The only contact I made with Ministers and/or advisors, was through official emails or submissions on the NICS issued devices, and all such records were committed to the NICS records management system. I did not have contact with Ministers, advisors or party officials on any private or personal devices, by using email or other messaging platforms.
126. As many staff were working remotely and in the absence of an alternative NICS messaging platform, WhatsApp and SMS were used as communication tools. These provided a real time means of sharing information and situational awareness quickly and efficiently, across groups of people. This was particularly important given the absence of general office conversation and verbal sharing of information. I therefore, used WhatsApp and SMS to communicate with NICS colleagues, including Senior Civil Servants on my NICS issued mobile work devices. I did not routinely use my personal device to

communicate for work purposes. I confirm that I did not use the auto-delete function in WhatsApp. I did not use Slack or Signal.

127. In the absence of people working alongside each other those conversations were a means of ensuring strong situational awareness across senior colleagues of what was a fast-moving situation, often out of hours or during holidays, for example through D20 at Christmas 2020. I observed discussions via messaging platforms during formal meetings, but I did not observe any decision making having taken place by these means. My experience was one of sharing live and fast-moving information across senior officials.

128. My recollection is that I was a member of a number of WhatsApp groups, two of which were specific to the COVID response. The membership of these groups has been provided to the Inquiry by way of exhibits.

- **D20 C3 (Exhibit AC/51 - INQ000308422)** - our footing for the December 2020 (D20) response was very different to that in the initial wave and a key element of the stand up was dynamic handing off out of hours across a Senior Civil Service rota. This was a group I created to allow for sharing of information during meetings, between shifts and individuals and troubleshooting, as necessary.
- **TEO COVID Group (Exhibit AC/52 - INQ000325148)** - this was a similar and more generic group of mostly Grade 3 but internal to the Executive Office and again, with senior officials routinely working 15-16 hour days and working in a hybrid model, was used to share situational awareness in quick time or during meetings.
- **The Good Old Days (Exhibit AC/53 - INQ000370960)** - This was my legacy Senior Management Team in the Executive Office, with the Grade 3 and his Grade 5 cadre, engaging in general social conversation.
- **SMT (Exhibit AC/54 - INQ000370965)** - This was a similar group to above and the Executive Office Senior Management Team from my substantive post, engaging in general conversation not related to the response.
- **D20 C3** - this exhibit is a duplicate of the D20 C3 group above (**Exhibit AC/55 - INQ000380946**)

- **TEO COVID Group** – this exhibit is a duplicate of the TEA COVID group above (**Exhibit AC/56 - INQ000381035**)

129. There were also a number of groups that I was not a member of, specifically DfM PS Group (24) (**Exhibit AC/57 - INQ000381015**) and XO Meeting (26) (**Exhibit AC/58 - INQ000381069**), both of which appear to have included Ministers and advisors.

130. As indicated previously, I left the Executive Office in October 2021 to take up a post in the Food Standards Agency. At that time, I handed back the NICS laptop, whilst retaining the mobile phone and iPad in the event I would later return to the Executive Office after the period of my secondment. I kept the mobile phone in order to retain my mobile phone number; the iPad was retained to allow access to the HR system for access to payslip and P60 information for example.

131. Having concluded the response phase of D20 and no longer requiring the facility to engage with senior officials at such pace, I exited and deleted a number of WhatsApp groups in February and June 2021 and was not aware of any policy to the contrary. Prior to leaving the Executive Office on secondment in October 2021, I removed personal data and apps from my work issued NICS devices by way of protecting my personal data but I did not remove work data from the devices.

132. I am aware that any WhatsApp groups that I was a member of, and the conversations that I was party to, across officials at Senior Civil Service, have been made available to the Inquiry by other colleagues.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I 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]

Date:

6/3/24