

Advisory Note re COVID-19: NI Civil Contingencies Preparedness and Response Arrangements – Strategic Coordination Group

For attention of Head of Civil Service (HOCS) via Chief of Staff, NI Hub re COVID-19

Strategic Coordination Group (SCG)

Observation:

Where there is a major, widespread and imminent threat to life or where the scale and complexity of the humanitarian issues require Command, Control and Coordination of operational resources SCG arrangements are activated by the PSNI as a Category 1 Responder under the Civil Contingencies Act. The decision to activate SCG rests with the PSNI Gold Commander alone. Its purpose is to ensure delivery of the direct operational response of the various services and to facilitate local coordination.

SCG arrangements are not yet in place. Consideration is currently being given to establishing SCG under the leadership of the DoH utilising the DoH Gold structure (at which PSNI are represented) as the basis for SCG meetings. Rationale for this is that DoH, with benefit of professional advice from the Chief Medical Officer, have led many aspects of the crisis to date. PSNI stand ready and available to support DoH regarding any requirements they may have of them.

Comment:

There is an understandable rationale behind the current consideration of a DoH-led SCG. However, consideration should be taken of the broader range of functions beyond Health and Policing that require coordination, for example, local government services, waste-management, enforcement, utilities, economic and infrastructure risks. Is the DoH best placed to coordinate the broader range of operational responses that will be required when there are so many health-specific challenges to manage?

There is also the specific responsibility carried by PSNI as the only NI Category 1 Responder under the Civil Contingencies Act and hence their role 'ordinarily' as Chair of SCG.

Advice:

- We are likely approaching a large number of COVID-19 fatalities and as such an SCG should be formed although that is technically a decision for PSNI.
- Deviation from policy and legislative intent regarding DoH chairing SCG would benefit from specific legal advice and as Chair of CCGNI it may be prudent to seek such before giving your concurrence to the PSNI decision to pass this responsibility to DoH.
- Any decision to deviate from policy in the midst of crisis should be well documented and ministers advised of the decision and rationale.

Name Redacted

29 March 2020