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TO:

- 1. HOCS**
- 2. NICS BOARD**

NI CIVIL CONTINGENCIES PRINCIPLES FOR GRADUATED ESCALATION AND DE-ESCALATION OF NI CENTRAL GOVERNMENT EMERGENCY RESPONSE ARRANGEMENTS

Issue: Escalation and de-escalation principles required to manage future NIHUB arrangements.

Timescale: Routine.

FOI Implications: An exemption provided under Section 35(1) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 may be applicable.

Financial Implications: A business case is under consideration to support the resourcing model for Civil Contingencies Policy Branch within TEO.

Legislative Implications: None.

Press Office Implications: No media required. Principles should be welcomed by Departments and other emergency planning partners.

Recommendation: It is recommended that the NICS Board :

- note this paper and the medium term work underway to build the capacity of the NICS Civil Contingencies Arrangements;

- approve the short-term escalation and de-escalation strategy for the NIHUB, providing proportionate staff reinforcement as required; and
- agree to release a small number of nominated volunteers should the NIHUB need to stand up in the coming months to deal with a 2nd wave of COVID and/or concurrency.

Strategic Context

1. The 2004 Civil Contingencies Act placed an onus on the Devolved Administrations to provide secondary legislation to underpin their Civil Contingencies Arrangements (CCA). Northern Ireland remains some way behind the other DAs in completing this work, work which would bring better cohesion through a clearer framework and investment to facilitate a more measured response to developing crises.
2. The step-up of the NIHUB under YELLOWHAMMER (EU Exit) and latterly COVID have both provided valuable context to framing the 3 necessary strands of work to put NICS civil contingencies on a firmer footing and closer to parity with the rest of the UK, namely:
 - a. a strategic review of the NI Civil Contingencies framework, funding and legislation in order to provide a coherent structure from local level through to NI Executive;
 - b. medium to long term staff and training investment in Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB) to mould it into a professional centre of excellence around which any future NIHUB will form; and
 - c. short term operational fixes that will allow us to potentially step up again in the autumn or winter of 2020, with the ability to react to concurrent crises. This work is focused on the Ernst and Young (EY) 'Lessons Learned' review of the COVID 19 Hub.
3. The necessary foundation to any revised framework for Northern Ireland civil contingency arrangements is based upon investing in CCPB, whose staff would be appropriately recruited, trained and skilled for their posts.
4. The longer term aspiration would be for this CCPB team to be the professional and enduring NIHUB, able to step-up for the initial period of a crisis and be augmented by a small number of staff and specialist support, as and when required. During non-operational NIHUB, CCPB would be directly available to departments to support and add value in respect of crisis risk identification and mitigations and Departmental Operations Centre (DOC) capacity. The work to populate an appropriate staff structure in CCPB is underway and as staff resource in CCPB increases, the demand for NIHUB volunteers across departments will reduce in any early response phase.

5. Clearly there is a necessary lead in time and therefore the support from departments in the short-term manning of any NIHUB and likewise if an enduring long-term crisis unfolds, remains key. That said, how the NIHUB should step-up, is worth consideration and is addressed in the following paragraphs.

NIHUB Escalation and De-Escalation

6. Under COVID a graduated approach was advocated for the previous step-up although the demands to respond to the Cabinet Office information and data requirements on a daily basis required additional resource from departments to be committed very early in the process and at very short notice. Additionally, the operating model used for the initial stand-up largely reflected the Yellowhammer approach designed for EU Exit, not all of which was compatible with the nature of the COVID response.
7. The lessons learned reflect the importance of striking an appropriate balance in how the HUB should step-up, balancing the demands of staff resource on the NIHUB and DOCs, and also the importance of ensuring the design is proportionate and can flex to deal with a generic emergency and concurrency, rather than a template specific to one operational model – and be agile in step-up and equally in step-down.

Proposed Principles

8. The key takeaway, is to simplify and rationalize the original structures and design of the NIHUB, to be more proportionate and less resource intensive across the system.
9. The revised approach is based on an output driven scenario, recognising that CCG (NI), as the link to the Executive, will be the central point for the dissemination of crisis management information. Once the intensity of CCG (NI) meetings escalates, the need to provide information to and from the NIHUB will also intensify with the staffing model flexing to meet these demands.
10. The attached diagram at **Annex A** shows the proposed NI crisis response architecture and mirrors the national model, using a traffic light system from green through to red, from local crisis through to national.
11. As per the current CCG (NI) Protocol for the Escalation of Multi-Agency Response, Local level emergencies will be dealt with through existing emergency planning and response structures. Where a potential need for escalation has been identified by two or more relevant responding organisations because; the impact is likely to be severe and /or prolonged and affect a widespread geographical area; and/or there is potential for progression / expansion from a Local Level emergency to a Strategic Level (Government) emergency – the next escalation stages will be triggered.
12. **Annex B** provides a visual of that architecture, where most crises are dealt with at EPG / SCG and DOC level; and only in the most extreme circumstances should it be necessary to escalate to a full stand up of the NIHUB.
13. The proposed overarching principles of adopting a model like this allows for:

- responsive escalation and de-escalation as the situation evolves;
- targeted people requirement, allowing departments to hold onto their volunteers for as long as possible, whilst also ensuring that once the NIHUB escalates its people are engaged immediately;
- early notification to volunteers, staff and Line Managers to improve people welfare and management in recognition of the value of the staff and the departments who release them;
- timely and targeted induction training, only for those who need it, when they need it;
- maximum flexibility, as the stepping up phases are only activated as and when required;
- improves sustainability of our people, as the NIHUB will increase its tempo in a measured way, only arriving at full 24/7 capability if it is absolutely necessary to do so;
- improved value for money in minimising location and support service contracts until the point they are required; and
- a professionalised response that sets the tone for crisis management from the outset of the incident.

NIHUB Volunteers & Stand-Up

14. The cadre of current volunteers is comprised of a combination of previous YH volunteers and new volunteers who responded to the most recent call to assist with COVID. There was a significant attrition rate in volunteers following YH and while eventually there was enough volunteers for 4 teams during the COVID stand up, only 3 teams were used at the peak of the crisis.
15. A survey of COVID volunteers has resulted in a **confirmed 60 volunteers** willing to return, already having line manager approval. There are a further 20 volunteers who have indicated they would return but do not believe their line manager will release them from their current duties.
16. The average size of each team during COVID stand up was approximately 20 inclusive of logistics, plus up to 12 liaison officers supplied by departments. A review of the NIHUB roles and responsibilities under this escalation model proposes a reduction in the footprint to approximately 13 in total. In the longer term it is envisaged that an enhanced CCPB would take on the cell lead roles and all Ops-Coord roles, thereby reducing further the need for volunteers to 6-8.
17. For an imminent stand up therefore, there are sufficient volunteers now identified within the pool of 60, and it is planned to allocate volunteers to teams shortly and advise them in early September that they would form part of any upcoming stand up if necessary.

18. Overall, the model is functions based and aims to only augment a function if demand outweighs the staff available. The major advantage of a functions based approach is that it allows for concurrent issues to be dealt with simultaneously and provides a generic NIHUB structure that becomes familiar to those engaged with it. It also provides CCG (NI) with a coherent view across the Government Departments of operational impacts during concurrent crises.
19. The utility of such a framework is that it allows for both escalation and de-escalation, minimising the need to go for the maximum three shift option until it is absolutely necessary.

Departmental Escalation

20. This plan does not seek to change how departments step-up their own DOCs and acknowledges that a DOC could step-up without the need for the NIHUB to be manned. A DOC activation could trigger HUB alert only, though that alert state may heighten if more than one DOC voluntarily steps-up. Conversely the plan does assume that once the NIHUB is activated DOCs will need to be engaged to provide CCG (NI) with the operational information.

Recommendation

21. The proposed approach has been tested both internally within NICS and externally with key delivery partners of any civil contingencies response, and they have welcomed the clarity brought by understanding how a full system response should operate and the more proportionate approach to stand up. Key to success will be ensuring that the model remains flexible and can adapt quickly depending on the nature of the crisis in hand.
22. The continued commitment of departments to support the NIHUB in the coming months is key as it will enable crisis response whilst future-proofing CCPB to build resilience and develop as a centre of expertise for civil contingencies. You are asked to:
- **note this paper and the medium term work underway to build the capacity of the NICS Civil Contingencies Arrangements; and**
 - **approve the escalation and de-escalation strategy for the NIHUB, providing proportionate staff reinforcement as required.**
 - **agree to release a small number of nominated volunteers should the NIHUB need to stand up to in the next few months to deal with a 2nd wave of Covid.**
23. I would welcome the opportunity to provide a short verbal briefing on this paper if that would be helpful. If the proposal is accepted, I will brief through departmental C3 structures to ensure a mutual understanding of the scale up and scale down of the NIHUB, should it be necessary in the coming months.

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