

C3 COVID-19 Response *Lessons Learned Review*

June 2020

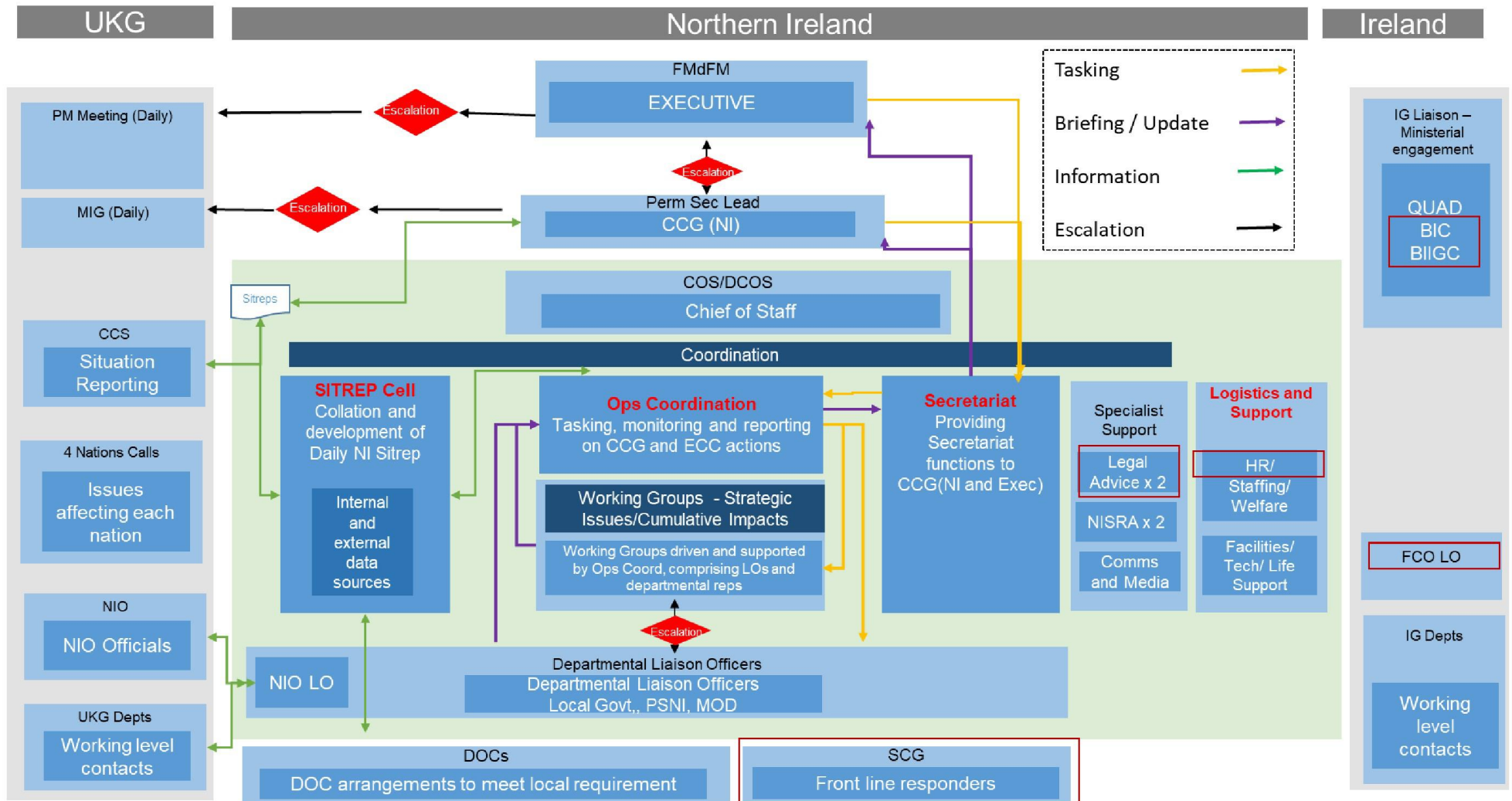
Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym	Meaning
C3	Command, Control and Coordination
CCG	Civil Contingencies Group
COS	Chief of Staff
CCPB	Civil Contingencies Policy Branch
DCOS	Deputy Chief of Staff
DOC	Departmental Operations Centre
FL	Functional Lead
MIG	Ministerial Implementation Group
NICS HR	Northern Ireland Civil Service Human Resources
NIO	Northern Ireland Office
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
TEO	The Executive Office

Abbreviation	Meaning
Sit Rep	Situation Report

Overview and Purpose of the C3 Structure

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, a fully operational Command, Control and Co-ordination (C3) structure was stood-up for immediate operation. A bespoke model, shown below, was designed to meet the response needs of the COVID-19 crisis. This report provides a review of how the C3 structure operated during the crisis.



Note: any item contained within a red box was not in place during the COVID-19 response

C3 Structure Response to COVID-19

Beginning in early March 2020 and accelerating at a rapid pace, the scale of disruption caused by COVID-19 was truly unprecedented and posed unique challenges in all aspects of work and life - the requirement for social distancing, strict government guidance for non-essential workers to stay at home, the rapid distribution of technology to enable remote working, the closing of all schools and nurseries and up to 95,000 people required to shield at home in Northern Ireland. This consequently placed significant constraints on the availability of staff with the necessary skills and experience to perform the required C3 roles. In spite of these challenges, C3 leadership worked quickly to mobilise the response and to identify and resolve the gaps, e.g. engaging external professional support to work alongside the C3 volunteers and assist in areas such as redesign, data analytics and training, ensuring the C3 response worked successfully:



The role of NI C3 in the response to COVID-19 was invaluable and all volunteers in the DOCs, the Hub and across the C3 network who were involved in the effort must be commended for their important work in a highly volatile and ambiguous context. The purpose of this review is to build upon what has already been achieved in the stand-up of the NI C3 structure, identifying the recommended areas for improvement, to ensure C3 is prepared to address the medium and longer-term impacts of COVID-19, as well as other concurrent issues going forward.

Key findings overview

There were a number of findings gathered which were processed and prioritised for the purpose of this report. Some overarching themes emerged:

- ▶ **People and Structure:** This addresses the skills, capabilities and civil contingencies experience of those involved with the C3 response, as well as the effectiveness of the established C3 structures.
- ▶ **Governance and Decision Making:** This addresses the governance structures and decision making approach in the C3 response.
- ▶ **Communications:** This addresses the effectiveness of in-Hub communications, as well as communications between other components of the C3 structure.
- ▶ **Data Sharing:** This addresses the important role of data analytics and reporting in production of the Hub Sit Rep and data sharing with the Cabinet Office.
- ▶ **Collaboration:** This addresses the extent and effectiveness of collaboration and information sharing between components of the C3 structure.
- ▶ **Outputs:** This addresses the key outputs associated with the C3 response, primarily the Hub and DOC Sit Reps, Action Log and Secretariat outputs.

The findings are grouped based on where they sit within the C3 network as follows:

Hub and Departmental Operations Centres (DOCs) <p>The DOCs were the operations centres from which the management and coordination of the response by each Department is carried out. The NI Hub existed to collate and disseminate information, coordinate multi-departmental/agency activities and planning, and filter/escalate decisions to the CCG as appropriate.</p>	Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB) <p>CCPB works across the public sector in Northern Ireland to promote and encourage the development of effective emergency preparedness to mitigate the effects of a civil emergency on the public and the environment.</p>
Civil Contingencies Group (CCG) <p>Civil Contingencies Group meets frequently during a crisis response to discuss key issues and carry out decision making. It is attended by Department Permanent Secretaries, PSNI, Head of Civil Service with voluntary attendance for First Minister and Deputy First Minister.</p>	NI Executive, U.K. and Ireland Governments <p>The NI C3 Structure interacts regularly with the four nations and Republic of Ireland to ensure alignment and escalation of any cross-nation decision making.</p>

People and Structure

Hub and Departmental Operations Centres (DOCs)

- A number of staff who had been previously trained in EU Exit civil contingencies preparedness returned to staff the Hub and the DOCs, however, many other volunteers did not have prior C3 experience. **It is recommended that a resourcing approach for the Hub and DOCs is maintained, exercised and ready to be utilised. A volunteer list should also be maintained.**
- As the C3 response was activated rapidly, NICS HR was not closely involved in the structure. **It is recommended that HR is embedded in future iterations of C3 to support on utilising the defined resourcing approach, including alignment of staff with capabilities and grade requirements, and to resolve HR queries which emerge.**
- Six DOCs were able to put remote working protocols in place quickly and work effectively, despite not being previously trained in this area. **It is recommended that remote working protocols are developed to prepare for potential future scenarios but that on-site working is prioritised where possible.**

Civil Contingencies Group (CCG)

- The audience at CCG meetings were often large with little visibility of attendees prior to the meeting. **It is recommended in future that the CCG meeting attendance is monitored closely to ensure the meeting remains fit-for-purpose.**
- The frequency of CCG meetings was reduced to reflect the changing requirements of the situation, **it is recommended that an agile and reactive approach to meeting frequency be maintained.**

Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB)

- To ensure all roles in the C3 structure remain fit-for-purpose for future scenarios, **it is recommended that all role profiles are updated so the skills, capabilities and grade required are clearly outlined and understood.**
- The skills, experience and background of staff were not always considered when assigning individuals to roles for the COVID-19 response. **It is recommended in future activations of the C3 response, staff should be assigned to roles by aligning the appropriate skills and grade requirements, in partnership with NICS HR and using refreshed role profiles.**
- The wide-ranging impact of COVID-19 across departmental areas has highlighted the importance of civil contingency experience. **It is recommended that civil contingency experience should be incorporated, or considered as a requirement, in professional development.**

NI Executive, U.K. and Ireland Governments

- The NI attendance at MIG, UKG and Ireland meetings was not centrally co-ordinated. **It is recommended that this is centrally co-ordinated by the Hub, and the Hub provides secretarial support where appropriate to ensure consistency. Future Secretariat staff should be trained and/or experienced in providing secretarial support to Executive meetings.**
- MIG meetings were UKG-led and last-minute changes could sometimes require a change in minister attendance for NI. **It is recommended that Secretariat are reactive in response to changes to MIGs to ensure the correct ministerial attendance where possible.**

Governance and Decision Making

Hub and Departmental Operations Centres (DOCs)

- The sign-off process for Sit Reps was not consistent across DOCs. **It is recommended that a consistent, clear and simplified sign off-process is established for DOCs to support timely input into daily Hub Sit Rep.**
- The Hub Chief of Staff had strong oversight and editorial authority over the Hub Sit Rep to ensure the consistent quality. **It is recommended that this input should be maintained in future activations of the C3 response.**
- The introduction of the Functional Leads partly diluted the autonomy and authority of the initial role of DCOS during the COVID-19 C3 response. **It is recommended that the DCOS role is repurposed as a Shift Leader position, with the Functional Leads supporting the COS role. The defined operating procedures for these roles should therefore be updated accordingly.**

Civil Contingencies Group (CCG)

- CCG meeting was seen as useful and informative, particularly for Ministers, however, it was not described as an effective forum for debate and decision making. **It is recommended that CCG is reconstituted into a two-strand process in future deployments – one to allow debate amongst Departments and the second a forum to ensure Ministers are regularly updated.**
- Working groups requested by CCG were not established or managed by the Hub, resulting in a lack of oversight of progress. **In future scenarios, it is recommended that Ops Coord is represented on working groups to provide update on progress back into CCG.**

Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB)

- The operating procedures defined for EU Exit civil contingencies training and exercising were valuable and provided a useful foundation for activating the C3 response at speed, but were not quickly adapted for the COVID-19 environment, which caused a lack of clarity. **It is recommended that ongoing maintenance and updates of the operating procedures are carried out as required to ensure they are ready for use in future scenarios.**
- Initially, there was no existing risk register or decision log, though a risk register was established, there was poor visibility of it, no decision log was established. **It is recommended that a risk register and decisions log be established and maintained.**

NI Executive, U.K. and Ireland Governments

- At times, there was duplication of effort between Hub Secretariat, TEO Secretariat and NIO, and inconsistency in the sharing of meetings with Ministers and their departments. **It is recommended that this co-ordination is centrally owned and controlled by the Hub Secretariat.**
- There was limited information sharing and shared decision making across the 4 Nations. Increased collaboration on NI-related/impacting UKG decisions would have been beneficial.
- There was no shared 4 Nations risk register or link with ROI. **It is recommended that the opportunity to develop a shared risk register be explored.**

Communications

Hub and Departmental Operations Centres (DOCs)

- The Liaison Officer role was crucial in establishing a line of communication between the Hub and DOCs however there was limited leadership communication around expectations and operational changes. **It is recommended that there is a weekly call with all DOC and Hub COSs and that the C3 Lead calls be better utilised to facilitate sharing of best practice across the network.**
- Hub morning stand-ups were useful in communicating outputs of CCG however the DOCs were not included in this and there was a delay in them receiving a down rep from CCG. **It is recommended that a down rep from CCG to the DOCs is implemented from the outset of the C3 activation in future scenarios.**
- Co-location was effective in facilitating communications amongst the team and collaborative tools such as Google Meets and Jabber softphone were beneficial in facilitating cross-site communication. **It is recommended that co-location is facilitated where possible and the use of collaborative tools continues in future scenarios.**

Civil Contingencies Group (CCG)

- Initially, there were insufficient down reps of information from CCG meetings to DOCs, creating a lack of shared situational awareness across the C3 network. **It is recommended that a down rep from CCG to the DOCs is implemented from the outset of the C3 activation in future scenarios.**

Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB)

- There was no maintained communications across NICS leadership on civil contingency preparedness or maintenance prior to the C3 activation.
- There was no formal communication to the C3 structure on activation plan or requirements.
- There was a lack of CCPB presence for provision of clarity and guidance on best practice across the C3 structure during the crisis response, due the government requirement for shielding.
- **It is recommended that CCPB develop a communications plan that outlines maintenance and live C3 operation communications requirements.**

NI Executive, U.K. and Ireland Governments

- There was a duplication of information shared by NIO and Secretariat with NIO going direct to the Departments at times. **It is recommended that all C3 structure information be communicated through the Hub.**
- Quad meetings were effective forums for communication with ROI, BIC and BIIGC meetings were not in place during this operation of the C3 structure.

Collaboration

Hub and Departmental Operations Centres (DOCs)

- Hub staff displayed strong teamwork and shared situational awareness, which was aided by their physical co-location in the Hub, however, the need to move to remote working may arise again in the future. **It is recommended that future operating models should have the ability to flex to reflect the emergency environment.**
- Cross-cutting issues across DOCs were not always jointly approached, e.g. use of shared language. However, improved cross-Liaison Officer collaboration improved this process. **It is recommended that cross-departmental collaboration and shared situational awareness is formally facilitated in future C3 responses with daily stand-ups between Liaison Officers. DOC Sit Reps should also be made available to the C3 network on a shared platform.**
- The introduction of the Google Suite of tools significantly improved real-time collaboration and communication in the Hub. **It is recommended that a collaborative tool like Google remains a part of the C3 response. To get full value from this platform, all relevant C3 stakeholders must have access, particularly DOCs.**

Civil Contingencies Group (CCG)

- There is an opportunity for improved cross-departmental collaboration, information sharing and input to the C3 structure. **It is recommended that strong collaboration and information-sharing is emphasised in the upcoming operational readiness preparation for EU Exit planning.**

Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB)

- The daily Hub Sit Rep was enriched by the inclusion of data analytics, including analysis of departmental data shared with the Hub. **It is recommended that data analytics continues to play a key role in the production of the daily Sit Rep in future C3 responses.**
- There is an opportunity for improved cross-departmental collaboration within the C3 structure. **It is recommended that cross-departmental C3 collaboration best practice be developed through continuous civil contingency exercising facilitated by CCPB.**

NI Executive, U.K. and Ireland Governments

- Escalation of issues sometimes bypassed CCG and went straight to the Executive. **It is recommended that where possible, the best practice approach for action escalation through CCG is followed**
- **It is recommended that there is a more consistent and formal approach to collaboration across the 4 Nations and ROI put in place drawing on the Inter-Governmental Review.**

Data Sharing

Hub and Departmental Operations Centres (DOCs)

- Resources were required to identify suitable data from departments, collect and share this data centrally through a dashboard 'portal', and visualise the relevant data in the Sit Rep to support decision making.
- An external team were engaged to provide the data reporting skills and resources. COS engaged with NISRA and some resources were offered to assist the Hub, but NISRA were unable to supply a full team capable of meeting the Hub's shift pattern requirements and daily demands for data reporting.
- Collecting and visualising health data was core to the Hub. The Hub data team were not permitted to have direct communications with the health data team which often limited the speed of resolving issues or answering data questions.
- **It is recommended that a data team becomes a permanent fixture in the Hub structure in future responses.**

Civil Contingencies Group (CCG)

- Obtaining data from departments was initially slow with some reluctance to share data with the Hub. This improved as the Hub and the Sit Rep developed. **It is recommended that strong collaboration and information-sharing is emphasised in the upcoming operational readiness preparation for EU Exit planning.**

Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB)

- The daily Sit Rep required content and structure that was not directly compatible with the template used in Yellowhammer. Furthermore, senior stakeholders agreed that decisions should be informed through data and analytics. **It is recommended that data analytics continues to play a key role in the production of the daily Sit Rep in future C3 responses and should therefore be maintained as a part of the standard Sit Rep template.**

NI Executive, U.K. and Ireland Governments

- The data reporting and analytics team initially focussed on Sit Rep content however the Cabinet Office data team (known as CCS) placed an increased demand on the supply of NI data to UK government for reporting purposes.
- An Information Sharing Agreement was agreed with COS that enabled CCS to share NI Hub data to other Government departments on behalf of the Hub.
- The No.10 Press Office became a key consumer of NI Hub data such that Downing Street briefings could display data from all DAs. Providing NI data that was consistent with the other DAs was frequently problematic (e.g. NI reporting times being out of sync with England).
- The central responsibility of the Hub's data team was well communicated however the Cabinet Office frequently went directly to DoH for some data else asked NIO for Justice data. This caused confusion and made it difficult for the Hub to stand over any data supplied from Northern Ireland.
- **It is recommended that data analytics and reporting play key roles in future C3 responses, in regards to supplying NI data to meet CCS requirements. It is recommended that these roles are fulfilled by specialists in this area for future scenarios.**

Outputs

Hub and Departmental Operations Centres (DOCs)

- The Hub Sit Rep evolved in the initial weeks and the action log later in the process in response to feedback. **It is recommended that this agile approach to the production of C3 outputs is maintained in future C3 responses.**
- Initially, there was a lack of clarity for the DOCs in what content was required within their Sit Rep, **it is recommended that DOCs receive early guidance and ongoing feedback on their Sit Rep content.**
- There was a blurring of responsibilities in relation to the production and sign-off authority of outputs e.g. FL and Secretariat/Ops Coord. **It is recommended that ongoing maintenance and updates of the operating procedures are carried out as required to ensure they are ready for use in future scenarios.**

Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB)

- The operating procedures defined for EU Exit civil contingencies training and exercising were hugely beneficial in establishing required outputs for the COVID-19 C3 response and putting a structure in place to support these however there was a delay in defining updated operational procedures to suit. **It is recommended that operational procedures are adjusted immediately when the decision is made to activate the C3 Structure.**
- There was no maintained risk register prior to activation of the C3 Structure and a lack of visibility of the risk register during the COVID-19 response. **It is recommended that a forward-looking C3 risk register be created and shared that will support localised risk and feed into national risks.**
- Contingency planning and exercising was carried out for Yellowhammer, **it is recommended that this be continued for various potential scenarios and potential concurrent issues.**

Civil Contingencies Group (CCG)

- Over time, the Sit Rep featured less prominently in the CCG meetings and was not used for decision-making, despite its purpose as a decision-making tool. **It is recommended that the frequency and content of the Sit Rep is reviewed regularly in response to feedback from CCG attendees and adjusted based on need to ensure it remains fit-for-purpose.**
- Information coming out of CCG was effectively communicated to Hub staff during the morning stand up however there was a delay establishing the down rep of this information to DOCs. **It is recommended that down reps from CCG are always in place.**

NI Executive, U.K. and Ireland Governments

- There were often actions and commissions for papers from UKG, Ireland and Executive meetings. During the COVID-19 response, these were actioned by TEO Secretariat team due to the fast-paced nature of changes to actions during the pandemic. Updates were then shared with Hub Liaison Officers, Ops Coord and Secretariat by TEO Secretariat for awareness. **It is recommended that future Hub Secretariat staff are trained and/or experienced in providing secretarial support to Executive meetings and owning the subsequent outputs.**

Strategic Recommendations

Whilst some of the findings identified and recommendations made relate to the operational procedures of the live C3 environment (which should be applied during the next C3 response), the findings also point to a wider strategic gap regarding the civil contingency capability within NICS. When examined more closely, many of the C3 operational issues which arose during the COVID-19 pandemic can be attributed to a lack of sufficient civil contingency preparedness and retention of corporate memory at the core.

There is a need to begin preparing for the inevitability of needing to activate these structures again and build on the momentum that has been created from the current deployment. As such, it is necessary to build a strategic civil contingency capability that is not reactive and event-focused (EU Exit, COVID-19, flooding, etc.) but instead, is an agile professional function that can support the C3 network across NI Government. To achieve this, the following recommendations should be considered for implementation:

- Develop and refine the tools that will help deliver a professional service such as risk registers, contingency plans, horizon scanning and Situation Reports;
- Build a robust civil contingency capability through a redesign and appropriately resourced CCPB - these staff will play key roles in all future C3 deployments;
- Create an agile and suitably resourced C3 structure that can quickly flex to meet differing emergency requirements;
- Reconstitute CCG to provide both a forum for discussion and decision making at NICS leadership level yet still ensures Ministerial awareness and understanding during an emergency response;
- Develop process for operational civil contingency to support the political machinery in a devolved Government;
- Run an NI-wide annual exercise which includes the Executive to test C3 preparedness;
- Build a blended resourcing model with a core team of experts (based in both CCPB and in the Departmental C3 structures), supplemented by volunteers and SMEs from HR, NISRA, etc.