

Background to the establishment of the PPE Mailbox

1. During a time of national crisis, as at all times, ensuring the safety of our frontline Health and Social Care staff remains of the utmost importance to the Minister and leaders of the HSC.
2. Every effort was made to ensure that adequate supply of PPE and valid clear instructions for its safe use were available for all staff caring for patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department established a PPE Supply Cell specifically to address PPE issues along with an additional Infection Prevention and Control Cell located at the Public Health Agency (PHA). It soon became evident through initial reports and concerns being raised by staff that PPE was either not available to all staff in a timely fashion, or that there were concerns around how this was being managed and shared around those who needed it.

Minister's Response

3. Reacting to this widespread concern, on Friday 17 April, Minister Swann announced that the Department had established a new dedicated mailbox to allow concerned members of staff across the Health & Social Care workforce to raise issues of concern over the supply, quality and usage of Personal Protective Equipment. He added ***"This is the latest demonstration of just how seriously we are treating staff concerns on PPE. We continue to work very hard to build up our supplies and to make sure distribution right across Northern Ireland is the very best it can be. PPE is a major priority for the Department and across the Health and Social Care system"***.
4. To encourage optimum use of this facility, there was a commitment to protect the identity of each individual in the case where any corrective action was required; all communications were anonymised accordingly.

b. Qualitative review

9. The team has undertaken a thematic review of the emails received and the actions taken from a qualitative perspective.

10. As indicated above, to date the mail box has received 95 queries which, aside from the ones requiring no Departmental response, could be broadly segregated into four main themes.

- Offers to supply PPE,
- Concerns regarding access to PPE supplies
- Concerns regarding the correct use of PPE supplies
- Concerns regarding the quality and decontamination of some items of PPE in particular fluid resistant surgical masks and eye protection.

11. Taking each in turn, the team has analysed the queries as follows:

Offers to supply PPE

- There were 27 offers to supply PPE. The offers were mainly of a commercial nature and ranged from local and national, to international manufacturers.
- All offers to supply PPE were forwarded to the Supply Cell at the Department for onward communication to the Business Services Organisation.

Learning: it would perhaps have been of some benefit to clarify that the purpose of the mailbox was for the addressing of supply and usage issues, not an opportunity for businesses to offer their services. However based on the queries received via the email, a dynamic purchasing system (DPS) has now been established, and communication was issued via this route to all those who made offers. Once registered on the DPS, suppliers are then notified as competitions are run, removing the need to continually contact BSO/Dept. There are in the region of 97 companies on the DPS and we have found that resource to have reduced this type of correspondence.

Concerns regarding access to PPE supplies / PPE Supply Chain

- There were 15 queries regarding access to supplies of PPE. These issues were raised by range of concerned individuals in Trusts, Nursing and Care Homes, General Practice surgeries and some who did not declare their background.
- In all cases these queries were followed up by the team with the relevant Trust single point of contact, the Executive Directors of Nursing, and colleagues in the Department's supply cell.
- In all cases supplies were either found to be available or made available via the relevant Trust contact.

Examples:

- In one case where the complaint was raised in respect of a shortage of PPE supplies in a Nursing Home, evidence that adequate supplies were available was provided by the RQIA team and this was conveyed to the enquirer.
- One query highlighted the issue around lack of advice and access to PPE for volunteers: arrangements were subsequently established for the Public Health Agency to distribute PPE to volunteers.

No further concerns regarding the availability of PPE have been received since 29 June 2020.

Learning: in a new and unplanned set of circumstances such as we faced as the COVID crisis emerged, the urgent need for a uniform approach across all sectors and all Agencies is essential. With the potential need to address issues arising in any second surge there needs to be an explicit and accessible route for individual staff to raise concerns within the relevant organisations. This should be standardised where possible with clear lines of accountability and responsibility to ensure timely and robust response, enable partnership working and shared learning across the statutory and independent sector organisations. Mixed or differing messages sow confusion and can lead to very negative public and press perceptions

Concerns regarding the correct use of PPE

- The mailbox received a total of 27 queries seeking information on the correct type of PPE which should be worn. In each case advice was provided in line with current PPE Public Health England (PHE) guidance.

Example:

- One mailbox submission highlighted that there were variations in the wearing of appropriate PPE across the various COVID-19 Testing Centres. Information obtained from each Trust on their local practice confirmed this as being the case. As this situation had the potential to cause confusion amongst Healthcare Workers, information regarding the correct PPE and a request to standardise the process was issued to each Trust Single points of contact and Directors of Nursing.

Learning: the urgent need for a single source and process for dissemination of information is key. The sheer volume of guidance issuing from a multiplicity of sources threatened to overwhelm the user and leave them confused as to how to proceed. This should be standardised where possible with clear lines of accountability and responsibility to ensure timely and robust response, enable partnership working and shared learning across the statutory and independent sector organisations.

Concerns regarding the correct use of PPE, the quality and decontamination of some items of PPE

- Quality issues and fitness for purpose were identified in 15 separate queries received in the mailbox

Examples:

- Whilst investigating a query regarding the appropriate decontamination process for eye protectors it was identified that in the case where split packs or batches of PPE were distributed that manufacturers written instructions for use and where applicable decontamination were not always being provided. To rectify this issue an advice note from CNO was sent to all Trust single points of