

FROM:

NR

Civil Contingencies Policy Branch

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DATE: 3 March 2020

TO: The First Minister and the deputy First Minister

**COVID-19: CIVIL CONTINGENCIES PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE
ARRANGEMENTS**

Issue:	Co-ordination arrangements for both the health and wider non-health issues are required to deal with the escalating situation.
Timescale:	Immediate.
Press Office Advice:	Significant media interest on all Covid -19 matters. If these arrangements are activated this will generate media interest.
FOI Implications:	An exemption provided under Section 35(1) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 may be applicable.
Financial Implications:	Figures are being compiled to cover a range of scenarios and further advice can be provided in due course.

Equality Implications: None

Legislative Implications: None

Executive Referral Not required

Recommendation: That you:

- note the position in relation to Covid -19 and the need to make preparation for dealing with a potential outbreak of the disease;
- note the Lead Government Department role of the Department of Health (DoH) and the role of the Executive Office (TEO) to co-ordinate the wider non-health preparedness and response;
- note the role of Ministers within the strategic emergency response arrangements; the role of the Civil Contingencies Group (CCG) as the principal strategic co-ordination body and the function of the NI Hub which supports Ministers and CCG and is the central operations room for multi-agency co-ordination and shared situational awareness; and
- note the outline plans for activation of the NI Hub which are fully scalable and where the level of activation will depend on the circumstances presenting at any point in time.

Background

1. A new infection causing respiratory symptoms recently emerged in Wuhan, China; this disease caused by a novel coronavirus has been officially named as Covid -19. The virus can cause respiratory symptoms ranging from mild to very severe. Covid -19 has shown itself to be particularly harmful for the older population and those with underlying health conditions.
2. Currently the focus of the response to Covid -19 is on 'containment' of the virus within affected populations. However, given the evidence that the virus is rapidly spreading to many different countries the risk of sustained human to human transmission causing a global pandemic has increased. Were this to occur it would have significant and protracted impacts on NI.
3. The four nations are preparing for this using a Reasonable Worst Case Scenario (RWCS). The RWCS is not a prediction or a forecast of what will happen rather it is standard practice in civil contingencies to plan on the basis of what reasonably could be expected to be the worst outcome and scale the response accordingly. The RWCS in this case draws on the existing planning assumptions for Pandemic Influenza and emerging scientific evidence in relation to the virus causing Covid -19. The reasonable worst case scenario provides for an infection rate (the percentage of the population who will become infected although this may in some cases be mild) of up to 80%; a case fatality rate (the percentage of deaths amongst those severely affected by the virus) of 2-3%; and a workforce absentee rate of 17-20% in the peak weeks. In addition, it is estimated that should there be sustained transmission in the community that an epidemic in the UK would peak within 2 - 3 months.

Preparedness

4. Department of Health (DoH) acting as Lead Government Department has been managing the health preparedness and response to date. The Health Minister has attended each of the UK level Ministerial meetings (COBR (Ministerial)) chaired by the UK Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and DoH officials have been participating in four nations meetings and

COBR(Official) meetings.

5. As the preparations move beyond the health space there is an increasing need for co-ordination of the wider non-health work. Co-ordination of this wider preparedness falls to TEO albeit in close collaboration with and guided by DoH. Accordingly, TEO convened a meeting of CCG (Covid -19) Preparedness on 20 February and engaged daily in a variety of sectoral wide conference calls with Cabinet Office, Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) and other Devolved Administrations including COBR(Official), acting as a focal point for NI, sharing information with key partners and seeking input on preparedness to inform collective next steps and decision making.
6. Based on the scientific advice regarding increased risk the First Minister and the deputy First Minister along with Health Minister participated in the first COBR (Ministerial) chaired by the Prime Minister on Monday 2 March. The Ministers agreed with their counterparts in the other nations to the publication of a joint 'Coronavirus: Action Plan'.
7. As Covid-19 has become more widespread, more impacts are beginning to emerge and the potential cumulative impact is becoming more complex. In addition, the preparedness work is being undertaken at pace and a working group meeting weekly has been put in place to support CCG (Covid-19). Given the increasing demand the frequency of these preparedness meetings is likely to increase.

Strategic Response Arrangements

Role of Ministers

8. The Executive may wish to meet to consider the impacts of an outbreak of Covid-19 in NI and to offer their support to members of the public and to those dealing with the response.

Role of the Civil Contingencies Group

9. The Civil Contingencies Group is the principal strategic coordination group responsible for setting the overarching strategy for the non-health response to

a Covid -19 outbreak here. The Group assesses the impacts, directs the response, determines priorities and commits resources across the NICS. CCG can be chaired by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly, however in practice it is normally chaired by the Head of the Civil Service (HOCS). It is likely that the membership will comprise Permanent Secretaries and senior representation from local government and the emergency services.

Role of the NI Hub

10. The purpose of the NI Hub is to support strategic level multi-agency co-ordination and shared situational awareness in respect of the response to an anticipated, or actual reasonable worst case Covid -19 epidemic.

11. In line with this, the objectives of the NI Hub are:

- to support the Executive and the Civil Contingencies Group to make timely and informed decisions in response to the strategic management of any Covid -19 outbreak here;
- to provide a focal point linking to the UK and the Irish response arrangements;
- to receive issues escalated from NICS Departments, and other stakeholders, that require cross cutting strategic level intervention and co-ordination;
- in accordance with best practice to support co-location of key civil contingencies partners to deliver shared situational awareness, and so effectively co-ordinate the wider response to a reasonable worst case Covid -19 epidemic; and
- to facilitate co-ordination of media and public communications.

12. The level of activation of the NI Hub will be scaled according to need. It is anticipated that initially it will be staffed during normal business hours by core

TEO civil contingencies staff with out of hours call out arrangements. Then as the need increases with longer days and weekend working becoming necessary, the staffing would be supplemented by civil contingencies volunteers (drawn from the trained cadre of volunteers put in place for the EU Exit work). Determination of the level of activation will be based on scientific advice and assessment of need at any point.

Recommendations

13. It is recommended that you:

- note the escalating position in relation to Covid -19 and the need to make preparation for dealing with a potential outbreak of the disease in NI;
- note the Lead Government Department role of the Department of Health (DoH) and the role of the Executive Office (TEO) to co-ordinate the wider non-health preparedness and response;
- note the role of Ministers within the strategic emergency response arrangements; the role of the Civil Contingencies Group (CCG) as the principal strategic co-ordination body reporting to Ministers and the function of the NI Hub which supports Ministers and CCG and acts as the central operations room for multi-agency co-ordination and shared situational awareness; and
- note the outline plans for activation of the NI Hub which are fully scalable and where the level of activation will depend on the circumstances presenting at any point in time.

PD

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