

cc: Deputy Directors CPG – em

FROM: LINDA BROWN

DATE: 1 AUGUST 2003

TO: PAT CARVILL – EM

SARS

Following a presentation to PSG on SARS I became concerned that we in CPG (and the wider personnel family) may not have adequately addressed the implications of an outbreak of SARS or some other similar emergency in Northern Ireland.

Before going on leave I asked Wendy Johnston to take a look at the issues and in particular to consider whether there were any lessons to be learned from the handling of the foot and mouth outbreak.

Since then Nigel Hamilton asked Permanent Secretaries to provide Dr Mitchell with advice on the impact the a wide spread outbreak of SARS would have for their individual departments.

Wendy's report is now available (attached) and offers considerable food for thought.

Of some concern is Wendy's comment that the system for emergency planning (as it stands) does not seem to adequately address the people management and redeployment issues.

I think Wendy's blueprint for managing emergency planning from the personnel viewpoint looks reasonable, perhaps with the addition of some reference to a means of communications with staff on a corporate level although this would no doubt be informed by communications that a central emergency unit would put out to the wider public.

When you have had a chance to consider this report I should be grateful for your views as to how best we might take this issue forward. In the first instance it might be a good idea for me to write to Dr Mitchell copied to Etta Campbell and PSG colleagues and then perhaps to set up a

working party with PDG/EOM to refine Wendy's proposals and ensure that the outcome of discussions is embedded in the relevant emergency plans.

TO: MRS BROWN

Linda Brown

Before you went on leave you asked me to provide you with advice on the model that could be used to facilitate the redeployment of NICS staff should an outbreak of SARS in Northern Ireland.

LINDA BROWN

2. Since then I would advise that Nigel Hamilton wrote to his Permanent Secretary colleagues, enclosing the presentation that Elita Campbell and Elizabeth Mitchell had made on 27 June. He requested that they provide Dr Mitchell with advice on the impact that a wide spread outbreak SARS or a similar new disease would have on their individual departments. There is no reference to how a corporate approach might be taken on the personnel front but I hope that the information set out below assists with thinking on the corporate issue.

3. Having seen the presentation appended to Nigel Hamilton's PSG minute, I note that the reference is to contingency planning now for a level 3 outbreak. At present I would advise that we would be able to cope with outbreaks at level 1 or 2 (and obviously the current level 0 status). The management of the staff consequences for levels one and two, where there would probably be a need for the redeployment of a relatively small number of staff at administrative level or those with particular skills, i.e. for tasks such as assisting with monitoring of reports and collation of statistics or scientific or medical background, would be handled in much the same way as the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak. Clearly a lot would depend on the number, grade and location of the additional staff, but I would expect Departmental Personnel Divisions (and NICS staff in general) to respond in the same positive way in which they responded to the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD).

4. For the record the redeployment process while facilitated by EOM was very much tailored to the specific circumstances of the outbreak. The process that operated was -

- DARD Personnel used the EOM network (an initial e-mail) to alert other Personnel Divisions that there would be an urgent need to draw staff from other departments. A brief overview of the staffing requirement was provided at that point.
- CPG convened and chaired a meeting of EOM the next morning at which DARD gave a more informed and detailed presentation on their immediate staffing needs, i.e. numbers, grades, industrial or non-industrial, particular skills requirements, locations and for some specific

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FROM: WENDY JOHNSTON

DATE: 31 JULY 2003

TO: MRS BROWN

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posts the need for shift working, and an indication of future pressures if other hotspots were identified.

- Armed with more comprehensive information Establishment Officers returned to their Personnel Divisions to identify and approach appropriate staff.
- The lists of staff wishing to move on loan were forwarded to DARD Personnel for action.

5. Given that the outbreak of FMD was confined to specific geographical areas combined with the need to put in place mechanisms to ensure that people and vehicles were disinfected at the seaports/airports and borders, the number of civil servants who had to be redeployed was manageable by DARD personnel. The process operated very smoothly and successfully.

6. Clearly a level 3 outbreak of SARS or a similar disease would however be a completely different scenario. In addition to augmenting DHSSPS with administrators, there would be a need to ensure sufficient experienced staff are available to maintain key government functions on a NICS-wide basis, i.e. payment of state benefits and pensions, rates collection, treatment of water and sewerage etc. There would also be an interdependency between the wider public sector services such as the local council collection of rubbish and other key functions provided by HCS Departments, i.e., NIO, Inland Revenue, MOD and Customs and Excise.

Departmental Business Continuity Plans

7. As you are no doubt aware, each individual Department is meant to have its own Business Continuity Plan that would be put into operation to deal with an emergency affecting their own businesses. These plans are intended to include a staffing plan, which identifies key service delivery areas. However, having had a meeting with Emergency Planning Unit of OFMDFM these plans are departmental specific and it would appear that they are not in good repair (where they exist). Also having seen some examples that the OFMDFM representatives brought with them of the staffing sections, I fear that they are very bland and basic. I suspect this is because Personnel is very much a support function for the main public facing services of departments and unless the business areas of the department can determine which are key services and these afforded some form of categorisation in terms of strategic priorities, it will be extremely difficult for operational Personnel Divisions to scope what level of internal redeployment is required.

8. In terms of DFP's own Business Continuity Plan, Brian Martin in Corporate Services Group, has confirmed that the process is underway to revisit continuity planning both within individual business areas and across the department as a whole. I understand that Sandra Millar is the CPG contact. As I understand it work was carried out about 3 years ago in the context of Emergency Planning to identify key staff across all business areas within DFP when the threat of a petrol strike loomed large. Interestingly, although I was not in this post I understand that only a small number of CPG staff, with the exception of the operational areas, such as pensions (and I suspect HRMS which at that time was not part of CPG), were designated as a key personnel.

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While in pure operational output terms that is correct, the staff within ECPD (Belfast) could naturally be used to set up a corporate personnel function, drawing in staff from Personnel Divisions across the NICS. We must ensure that the corporate facet of CPG work is not under estimated.

NICS-wide Business Continuity Planning

9. From what I have been able to glean there is no top level plan for the strategic priority to be afforded to the various 'essential' services on a corporate NICS-wide basis (and how this would feed into the wider HCS and Public Service in Northern Ireland). The personnel framework that I am suggesting below is very much a 'first cut' blue print for a NICS-wide response. It would however have to be set in the wider strategic context and would clearly need buy-in from Departmental Personnel Divisions and PSG. I would also suggest that we involve TUS in its development (on a generic basis) at an early point, as we will need them on our side during any emergency.

10. Such a Corporate Personnel Emergency Plan will need formal corporate agreement to the framework, and strategic decision taking by PSG (agreed with local Ministers or the SofS, as appropriate) on the corporate priorities across the 11 Departments, i.e. if we cannot maintain all the various departmental essential services, which ones will take strategic priority – perhaps a form of categorisation needs to be developed e.g. Water and Sewerage Category 1 but perhaps Rates Collection Category 2 and others in Category 3. Such a categorisation system would ensure swift decisions at key points during an emergency from its initial onset.

A Corporate Operational Personnel Re-deployment Unit (COPRU)

11. While CPG does not in practice have an operational personnel capacity, we do have, within the wider Group, the management of the HRMS Team. This team will be invaluable in a service-wide emergency as it can interrogate the full HRMS system on a corporate basis - a capability not available to individual personnel divisions - although my understanding is that not all industrial staff are on HRMS.

12. Given the key role of HRMS the prime location for a COPRU would be Craigantlet Buildings. The back-up server, should Craigantlet Buildings not be available, is in Rathgael House (DE) and the COPRU could decant to there if Craigantlet buildings was not available. Alternatively the HRMS access level could be introduced at another Personnel location or indeed in Waterside House in Derry, although the latter would take a little more time to set up. HRMS have confirmed therefore that the technical side is well covered.

13. This COPRU would in effect need to be a form of 'virtual' COPRU. It would have, on site, key HRMS staff and ECPD (Belfast) staff, augmented by support staff from other areas, if possible some drawn from operational personnel divisions. However, it could only function with the co-operation of Departmental Personnel Divisions who would each need to nominate staff to act as dedicated liaison officers with COPRU for the purposes of gathering

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and disseminating information and co-ordinating the movement of staff to the essential services where interdepartmental redeployment is necessary. The close involvement of these staff with detailed knowledge of the both the staff and functions of their department would be essential.

14. The purpose of the unit would be two-fold, initially the core activity would be likely to be to act as a central information unit providing the strategic monitoring group with relevant data on the number of staff absent by Department, by Essential Service, by grade and if possible by geographical areas, etc and reporting on action being taken at departmental level to sustain their essential services in-house. Given the brigading of some departments e.g., DRD/DOE/DCAL the issue of priorities between and amongst them would need to be clear at an early stage lest DRD and DOE denude the DCAL resource for their internal benefit as opposed to the wider corporate priorities.

15. Once the level of absenteeism necessitated inter-departmental transfers the COPRU would begin to collate requests from departments for staff with particular skills and knowledge. COPRU would identify, on a service-wide basis, staff on the HRMS system who had worked in particular areas previously or who had comparable skills, and, if necessary, identify recently retired civil servants with appropriate skills and knowledge. The lists of available staff could be passed to the relevant employing Departments to check on individual availability of prospective redeployment candidates and could also be augmented by the first hand knowledge of staff in departmental personnel divisions of others with the relevant skills. In addition as the records all industrial civil servants are not held on HRMS it would be necessary for perhaps DRD to set up a redeployment section to be part of the 'virtual' corporate.

16. Regular meetings of EOM would also be run in parallel with the operations of COPRU to ensure continuing co-operation, sharing of problems and identification of forthcoming difficulties, hotspots etc to attempt to commence remedial action as soon as possible.

17. One final thing that we should not overlook is that Emergency Personnel Planning would also need to dovetail with any Emergency Accommodation Planning. This could be critical, as should a key building be put out of action or put into quarantine, the essential service within would have to be located elsewhere.

18. I hope this provides a good basis for further development and I am of course available to discuss further if that would be helpful.

Wendy Johnston

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