Written evidence submitted by The Executive Office, Northern Ireland Assembly

From the outset I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to comment and highlight that, as with all inter-departmental engagement, there are a range of experiences. In responding I could therefore record instances whereby we could say engagement has been limited and equally other instances where the engagement has been more intense. I think however it is more important to focus on the entirety of The Executive’s Office engagement with Civil Contingencies Secretariat rather than highlighting individual circumstances.

I thought it was important to set the context for Civil Contingencies in Northern Ireland. Civil Contingencies Division operates within The Executive Office and provides the overall strategic direction for Civil Contingencies Prepare, Respond and Recover arrangements for Northern Ireland Departments and partners. The Division also oversee The Civil Contingencies Group (Northern Ireland) which is Northern Ireland’s principal strategic emergency preparedness body for the public sector, chaired by me as Deputy Secretary and comprising SCS and senior level membership from key civil contingencies stakeholders. In staffing terms, the Division is staffed by a small team, currently nine staff, supplemented by some additional specialist external support.

As the primary Northern Ireland point of contact with Civil Contingencies Secretariat we have significant engagement across a wide range of areas. Historically this engagement with CCS had been sporadic but that has improved significantly in recent times. While the previous level of engagement pre-dates my involvement in the Civil Contingencies arena, I understand the weakness does not solely lie with colleagues in CCS and I believe there was equal weakness in the time afforded by the TEO team in seeking meaningful engagement.

As I have said things have improved significantly recently and I believe relationships developed during the planning and delivery for the D20 stand-up have allowed for real and meaningful dialogue between CCS and my team across a range on devolved and non-devolved matters.

During the D20 response we were in daily liaison with CCS and Whitehall Departments covering a wide range of issues and the direct access to Whitehall Departments was much appreciated and enabled issues to be directed to the correct Lead Government Department, with the assistance of CCS if required, ensuring faster resolution, essential in a response scenario.

The main issue in terms of contact relates to the quality of the engagement which must be meaningful and not just a tick-box exercise. Discussions with central Government has been increasing and we welcome this renewed engagement, however Northern Ireland often has a very different structural legislative landscape to the rest of the UK and this is on occasions overlooked. That said we accept that, on occasions, UKG polices and strategies can, by necessity, focus on GB and that our specific issues are not addressed.

More awareness of devolved differences at a central government level and subsequent reflection in policies and documents would also be welcomed. Language used in documents, especially those for UK wide release, need to ensure they are not politically sensitive or likely to cause sensitivities in a Northern Ireland context. There is increasingly positive engagement where Northern Ireland specific issues need to be considered and addressed and this is a very welcomed approach.

In closing I think it is important to highlight things are improving on both sides, but we can always do better. I do however caveat that with emphasising that we are a small team in Northern
Ireland and the demands of greater engagement can, on occasions, be overwhelming, but I would not wish that to be seen as a barrier to us endeavouring to participate fully.

Again I am grateful to the Committee for seeking our input.

Karen Pearson
Director
Covid Recovery, Civil Contingencies Group and Programme for Government

30 June 2021