

Written Briefing the AERA Committee for 26 March 2020 **on Covid-19.**

25.3.2020

Introduction

DAERA has established plans to apply to disruptions to business and emergencies from all causes.

Disruptions essentially dealt with 'in-house' are covered by the Corporate Business Continuity Plan (BCP). Where intervention by central government is required, this requires use of the Major Emergency Response Plan (MERP). These are outlined in Annex A.

The corporate BCP and MERP are how we organise ourselves to deal with disruptions and emergencies, setting out decision making and information flow to optimise what we do and how we work with others. Partly, these overarching plans tap into and coordinate business area specific plans.

The MERP has been activated to deal with the impact of Covid-19. In line with this, we have activated a range of Command, Control and Co-ordination (C3) structures in support of the Executive response to the Covid emergency. These are outlined in Annex B. The Department is working hard to play its part.

DAERA staff are working closely with TEO and all other Departments and public services to ensure that accurate information and situational awareness is available to decision makers to make timely, well informed decisions.

It is important to note that the Covid-19 situation is evolving rapidly and therefore we are reviewing and adapting our actions as information becomes available. Some of the information here will be out of date by the time you get it.

See <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/daera-and-covid-19> for updates. This page is under development, but includes the latest news and Q&As.

The Structure of this Written Evidence

Information is provided by each Departmental Business Group in separate sections below.

As it is not prudent to provide evidence face-to-face, we will provide regular written evidence and responses to questions from the Committee to ensure that it can fulfil its role as best as possible in the circumstances.

If the Committee can provide means to accept evidence more interactively whilst compiling with Public Health Agency (PHA) guidance we will revert to that.

Note that the DAERA input to the Corona Virus Bill is not detailed here, given that it was considered in the last Committee session. An update on that will be provided given that the Bill is expected to have progressed through Parliament this week.

Group Update - COVID 19

Rural Affairs, Forest Service and Estate Transformation Group

Following the meeting of the AERA Committee meeting on 19th March the Committee asked for further briefing on the Rural Affairs remit. The information below sets out activity across Rural Affairs to ensure safety of staff, continuity of activity across existing Rural Development Programmes; refocusing of rural community supported activity towards Covid response; and, actions to protect customers and staff across the DAERA Direct network of 12 Offices.

Information is also provided on actions taken by Estates Transformation and Forest Service.

Rural Response to Covid-19

Officials continue to monitor the COVID-19 Crisis situation closely. This is a very fluid situation and responses set out below are subject to change at short notice depending on the latest guidance from Government. Changes may also be required as our partners and external delivery agents take appropriate action to keep their staff and customers safe.

Rural Affairs is supporting our Government colleagues, and Council partners including our external delivery agents to enhance the Government messaging to protect staff and the wider public and support our rural communities during these difficult times.

Officials in Rural Affairs Division have been liaising on a daily basis with colleagues in DfC and the Public Health Agency to ensure a coordinated approach to assisting the Community and Voluntary sector in this time of crisis. The Community and Voluntary sector will require guidance, resources and flexible arrangements to deal with matters as they arise. Assurances of continued funding has been communicated and relaxations in respect of outputs and outcomes have also been advised.

An Executive Community Fund is being developed and this will focus on issues such as Financial Income, Access to Food and Connectivity in relation to accessing required services. DAERA officials will continue to liaise across Government on the development of this Fund and support its effective delivery and penetration to rural areas.

Officials are also in daily contact with Community Foundation Northern Ireland (CFNI) staff. CFNI opened a Coronavirus Community Fund call for applications on Monday 16th for organisations working with the elderly (aged 50 and over) to help them deliver support around emerging issues relating to the virus. DAERA will monitor this and may consider a subvention to the Fund to support rural applications.

DAERA DIRECT OFFICES

On Friday 20th March the Minister put measures in place to protect citizens and staff by reducing the public facing services offered by DAERA Direct Offices to appointment only. These will be reinforced on 24 March with the closure of the offices to all appointments.

To maintain the health of staff and our customers, and in collaboration with the Department's Estates Team at the DAERA Direct offices there will:

- Increase cleaning of public areas and offices
- Restricted opening to customers by appointment only
- Enforcement of Social distancing

The Premises Officers in the DAERA Direct offices are working closely with staff and line managers to continuously remind colleagues to adhere to guidance on hand hygiene and social distancing.

Although access to the DAERA Direct offices is now restricted to appointment only customers still have the option to conduct their business through DAERA Online services, which can be accessed from the DAERA Website home page or, via the Cattle Registration Telephony line.

81% of calf births are already notified electronically (73% online and 8% telephony) and 100% of SAF and EFS applications are now made online.

The Cattle Registration Telephony system, which currently facilitates the notification of bovine births and deaths and buyer confirmation for market to farm moves, will - on a temporary basis – be able to accommodate the notification and confirmation of farm-to-farm cattle moves.

Restricted access to the offices will have no impact on movements from farm-to-market or abattoir for either cattle or sheep as farmers complete their own movement documents. Most farm to farm sheep moves are seasonal (autumn) and impact will be minimal.

Although customers will still be able to avail of Digital Assistance to help with their BPS and EFS applications by pre-appointments DAERA Direct staff are working closely with their Orchard House colleagues to enhance and expand the telephony assistance currently available.

Documents can still be delivered to a DAREA Direct office where every effort will be made to have them processed within acceptable timescales.

TACKLING RURAL POVERTY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION (TRPSI)

Through the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation Programme, DAERA are working in partnership to deliver a range of initiatives that can help to tackle rural poverty and social isolation. Since the outbreak of the Coronavirus the emphasis for a number of these initiatives has changed to ensure best practices are implemented to ensure vulnerable rural people can be assisted in this time of need.

The TRPSI funded initiatives detailed below have over the past few days refocused their attention to proactively deliver support to rural dwellers in the following ways:

SPRING Social Prescribing

Following the latest government guidance, advising social distancing, all Social Prescribers have now suspended client visits. SPRING staff have this week developed a new delivery model called the “Connect Well Service” to ensure all clients, previously referred, continue to feel connected and supported at this time. The project has therefore moved to a service where Social Prescribers will contact all clients remotely, by telephone, text, social media platforms or through video link. Each Social Prescriber and organisation will identify the best means and method to stay in touch with their clients. This will benefit 530 vulnerable rural dwellers in the coming weeks.

Rural Community Development

Engagement is also ongoing with the Rural Support Networks to determine the level of service currently available to the public via their local office network and also to determine how, with their ability to circulate information quickly through their 1,500 member organisations, they might be utilised in this respect by the relevant statutory agencies. Going forward, it is anticipated that, with their outreach and local knowledge they will play an important role in delivering any measures being implemented under the Executive Community Fund. Appropriate guidance/assistance will issue as the situation develops.

Rural Support Charity

Rural Support staff are continuing to deal with calls to their helpline which have increased over the last few days. The majority of the calls are from people who have been paid off from their work and have concerns about their financial capabilities going forward. It is envisaged helpline calls will increase, therefore Rural Support are making provision for this by creating additional call lines.

Rural Support are also in the process of drawing up a comprehensive fact sheet for their team and which can be utilized when providing advice to clients.

Rural Support mentors continue their role in providing support to clients via phone and on-line and they are currently being trained on using counselling skills as part of an enhanced listening service.

Assisted Rural Travel Scheme in conjunction with DfI and Rural Community Transport Partnerships (RCTP's)

Rural Community Transport Partnerships are currently operational at present, however demand for Dial a Lift services has significantly decreased in recent days. DfI are exploring ways the RCTPs could deliver socially necessary functions arising as a result of reduced demand for travel by regular service users during the COVID-19 crisis. DAERA staff will be liaising with DfI on this initiative in the coming days.

Farm Family Health Checks Programme

After discussions with our partners in this initiative (the Public Health Agency and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust) the Farm Families Health Checks Service has been suspended for 2 weeks and in all likelihood a longer suspension will be required.

Going forward partners have agreed that the skills associated with the staff delivering this service (qualified nurses) will be best utilised in the medical environment. On that basis the NH&SCT will allocate duties to the staff in the coming weeks. Health are considering how best to utilise the Health checks van.

RCN AND NIRWN ARE FUNDED UNDER RISP

Rural Community Network (RCN) and NI Rural Women's Network (NIRWN). DAERA have supported DfC in agreeing grant funding flexibilities to be applied to RCN and NIRWN in view of Covid 19 challenges. NICVA are working closely with RCN in terms of delivering/activity relevant to the current situation. DfC have established a Community Contingency Fund that could provide the following initial categories of support and RAD officials are liaising with DfC.

- Financial – low income and at risk due to financial stress
- Food - access to food (whether due to cost or availability)
- Connectivity – those living alone or in in rural and border areas that are likely to experience greater challenges in accessing services.

Rural Business Development Grant Scheme 2019 and Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme 2019

To minimise the impact to the applicants to the above capital grant schemes, relaxations have been introduced this week where grant aid claims can be forwarded electronically to allow processing and payment as quickly as possible. In addition to this, where organisations are unable to receive their capital items due to the Covid-19 crisis, an extension to 30 June 2020 has been introduced.

EU LEADER PROGRAMME, TOURISM AND PROJECT STRATUM

DAERA has provided advice to all Councils responsible for administering the delivery on the EU 'LEADER' Programme 2014-2020 to protect and support Council staff and LAG Board members whilst continuing to provide a service to the public. The guidance advises on a number of easements to ensure that the LAG continues to assess project applications, take funding decisions and get Letters of Offer out to successful applicants. Also the guidance provides Council staff with easements in procedures and processes from application to LoO and in claim processing so that project promoters can continue to be reimbursed in a timely manner without the full checks being carried out in advance.

RAD staff are now receiving correspondence from Council staff advising that they are receiving queries from business owners regarding delays in receiving equipment from abroad and difficulties if the supply of the equipment also requires the supplier to provide on-site installation. Also a few businesses seeking extensions to their LoO due to contractors suspending building work. RAD will work closely with LAGs, Councils and other rural tourism project partners to maintain a flexible approach which will facilitate the utilisation of all budget allocations before the programme end

PROJECT STRATUM

Indications are that the bidders are continuing to prepare their responses to the Invitation to tender and Project Stratum/access to broadband continues to be viewed as a priority by DfE.

DAERA Estate

The Department's estate function has liaised with key premises teams contacts to ensure that appropriate steps have been taken to seek to prevent/reduce the risk from Coronavirus across the DAERA estate. This has included ensuring that Public Health Agency (PHA) posters are appropriately displayed on our premises; ensuring that premises have appropriate supplies of soap etc. in order that staff can apply good hand hygiene; that premises teams are aware of the PHA advice on how to deal with a situation where an individual may have suspected or confirmed coronavirus; and ensuring that premises teams had engaged with local cleaning staff regarding appropriate cleaning arrangements.

The Department and the Department of Finance (DoF) has also liaised with the relevant cleaning contractors to ensure that they have appropriate arrangements in place which are in line with PHA advice.

Hand sanitizers have been provided in some locations where supply has allowed. Where available these have mainly been allocated to visitor communal areas with staff advised to use available washroom facilities to ensure good hand hygiene in line with PHA guidance. In terms of public facing areas access to DAERA Direct Offices has now been restricted to by appointment only.

Additionally as announced by our Minister on 21 March some of our public facilities, including camping sites and visitors centres, have been closed with effect from 23 March. These measures at our forests, country parks, nature reserves and fisheries offices will be in place until the end of May 2020.

Daily parking charges have also been suspended in an effort to encourage people to use the wide-open spaces at our forests.

While public toilets are currently open at these facilities these may need to be closed should the situation arise that they cannot be serviced and cleaned as necessary.

CAFRE has ceased all face-to-face teaching with students and all Knowledge Transfer events delivered to the agri-food industry. However, it is delivering education programmes remotely and is also providing reactive support and advice to the agri-food industry. CAFRE will keep this situation under review.

Additionally the Department is working with DoF to help mitigate the impact of Covid19 on the ongoing maintenance and operation of the DAERA estate.

As DoF is responsible for management of the Government property maintenance framework, DAERA is assisting it in prioritising a list of buildings across the estate where essential maintenance will or may be required. It is also providing DoF with details of priority estate related projects which it wishes to progress including for essential business reasons.

We are also confirming details of any buildings where access restrictions may be imposed on contractors wishing to undertake maintenance. This is in addition to ensuring that DoF has key contact points for the DAERA estate in the event of any emergencies that arise over the coming period.

Forest Service

In preparedness for the Covid-19 outbreak, Forest Service in line with its business continuity planning is continuing to assess its priority business against the ever evolving and specific threat posed by the virus. As at 23 March priorities centre around:

Public safety – Measures have been taken to:

- a. Close the relevant Forest Service caravan and camping facilities and in addition the NIEA group campsite at Castle Archdale Country Park, all until the end of May at which time the situation will be reviewed.
- b. Closure where possible for public vehicular access to all DAERA (Forest Service and NIEA) Country Parks and Forest Parks until the end of May at which time the situation will be reviewed.
- c. Closure of associated Public Toilet Facilities.
- d. Close of all relevant DAERA (Forest Service and NIEA) Country Park Visitor Centres, Museums, Mobile Concessions and Cafes until the end of May at which time the situation will be reviewed.

- e. Closure of NIEA and Forest Service playparks.
- f. Cancel all facilitated events until the end of May, also then to be reviewed

*All of the above are under daily review.

Minimisation of effects on the economy – Contributing approximately £60M to the local economy, Forest Service are taking measures including the identification of key personnel in the supply chain to the wood processing industry to minimise any potential disruption.

Staff safety – Forest Service are complying with the latest guidance from the Public Health Agency in implementing measures to safeguard staff. While the situation changes on a daily basis with the rollout of necessary equipment including laptops, the position at 23 March is that approximately 85% of the workforce are working away from an office environment, either at home or remotely between home and direct worksites.

Group Update - COVID 19

FOOD AND FARMING GROUP

Minister Poots chaired an agri-food industry stakeholder meeting on Monday 16 March examining some of the issues impacting / likely to impact on the local industry. These included:

- Unprecedented demand on retailers due to significantly higher levels of consumer demand than normal, but supply chains are still working effectively. There is a need for clear messaging to provide consumer confidence.
- A lack of HGV drivers would cause significant issues throughout the supply chain, eg farm deliveries and collections / distribution of product to store. A relaxation in driver hours regulations and flexibility between companies to share resource is needed.
- Concern that a shortage of workers in key roles within the processing sector, both within the Companies and from Government / Agencies with statutory inspection roles to protect public health, could lead to a slow down or halt in processing capacity. This would limit the amount of product for retail markets and also have knock on effects at farm level, eg animal welfare issues due to build up of livestock or non-collection of milk.
- Industry keen to minimise the amount of Government non-essential consultation and inspections so that businesses can focus on dealing with the consequences of Covid 19 maintaining food supply, and to relax rules on labelling.
- Industry concerned at the lack of specific advice for the agri-food sector from Public Health Authority and a call for protocols aimed at farmers / drivers / plant workers / office staff and distribution centres.
- Industry to explore the possibility of redeploying underutilised personnel to areas where workers are needed most. This to be done in conjunction with DfE and DfC.
- Some evidence of orders being cancelled due to the significant downturn in the food service / hospitality and tourism sector. This is likely to get worse as events are postponed and more people stay at home and follow Government advice.
- Call for financial assistance to combat anticipated economic shocks / market price volatility / cash flow issues and higher costs incurred as a result of Covid 19.

The Minister gave a commitment at the meeting to support the industry in order to keep production lines going to maintain food supply, and indicated that everyone needed to work together.

DAERA have submitted a bid to the Department of Finance to fund a range of mitigation measures if required for the primary production sector.

DAERA have established a three times per week conference call with agri-food stakeholders, a dedicated email address for industry questions and regular one to one contact between stakeholder organisations and officials.

EU Area-based Schemes Division are currently assessing the impact of Covid-19 on the Single Application process. The online Single Application and Entitlement Service is operating as normal and farmers are encouraged to submit their applications as soon as possible. DAERA Direct Offices are closed to the public and we are seeking to provide enhanced telephone advice and guidance in the coming days. EFS Tranche 3 agreements have been issued and farmers are encouraged to accept their agreements by Friday 27 March.

Delivery of existing outstanding projects under the Farm Business Improvement Scheme – Tier 2, Tranche 1 is continuing as far as practicably possible.

The Chief Scientific Advisor's Office may be called upon at short notice to provide scientific advice to incidents that might arise due to indirect consequences of COVID-19 response. It is also liaising with other scientific advisors across the UKG and NICS.

CAFRE

- Face-to-face teaching on all CAFRE Education programmes ceased and delivery of learning materials continues remotely from Monday 23 March 2020.
- Face-to-face delivery of all Knowledge Advisory Service programmes has ceased from 18 March 2020, including, Business Development Groups (BDGs); Farm Family Key Skills (FFKS); Farm Innovation Visits (FIVs); Technology Demonstration Farms (TDFs); Industry Training short courses, conferences, seminars and other Knowledge Transfer events.
- Processing of applications for tranche 5 of the BDGs scheme and registration of farmers/growers are continuing remotely.

- CAFRE Open Days planned for end of March / early April have also been postponed and those interested in applying for CAFRE courses are being encouraged to continue to apply online as normal.
- Staff required to maintain essential services across the CAFRE campuses have been identified following the note issued by the Head of the Civil Service on 23 March 2020.

Group Update - COVID 19

ENVIRONMENT, MARINE AND FISHERIES GROUP

NIEA – Environmental Protection - Safe Drinking Water & Wastewater Treatment

Where we are - Issues:

The continued supply of safe wholesome drinking water and continued wastewater treatment is critical for Northern Ireland.

What are we doing – Actions and Engagement

- The Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) has been working closely with NI Water, local Councils and owners and users of private water supplies to ensure all necessary measures are in place to protect public health
- NIEA Water Regulation are also working closely with NI Water to ensure wastewater treatment is managed appropriately to protect public health and the environment.
- NI Water is operating under its Pandemic Flu Incident Plan and has activated its Major Emergency Group, with regular SitReps, however at present it is business as usual.
- NI Water has amended its random sampling programme and response to some types of consumer complaints to protect staff from entering private dwellings to collect samples from consumers' taps.
- Guidance in the risk based approach to be adopted in the delivery of sampling and risk assessment of private water supplies to ensure continued public health protection has been provided to all NI Councils.
- NIEA Water Regulation are working with other UK regulators to ensure a consistent approach is taken towards the regulation of Wastewater Treatment which will assist NI Water in its workforce planning. Mitigation measures currently under consideration is the reduction in compliance sampling to focus only on wastewater discharging upstream of drinking water abstraction points, SACs, Bathing Waters and Shellfish Waters.

What we Plan to do

- DWI is working with NI Water to ensure they can operate flexibly within the regulations to deliver their monitoring & continue to provide safe, wholesome drinking water.
- Water Management Unit is working to ensure surface water abstractions used by NIW are protected from pollution.

- Water Regulation will develop new regulatory position statements for wastewater compliance sampling and sludge handling. A review of the existing position statement for managing the impact of chemical supply interruption is also underway.

NIEA – Environmental Protection – Waste Management facilities and regulation

Where we are - issues:

The continued collection, storage and processing of waste are essential services that need to be maintained in order to protect public health and the environment. Concerns have been raised by local authorities and waste management companies concerning risks to waste operatives collecting/processing waste. There are also issues being raised around storage and processing capacity and the possibility that recycling will be reduced as more waste will need to go directly to landfill.

What are we doing – Actions and Engagement

- DAERA / NIEA have established a Covid-19 Waste Group with representation from Policy, Regulation and Enforcement – this group will provide as much information as quickly as possible;
- NIEA and Waste Policy are in discussions with the Council's Waste Working Group; a telecom is arranged for Wednesday 25 March at 10am. Meeting with the Waste Sector will be arranged for Wednesday 25 March pm;
- DAERA to develop a number of frequently asked questions (e.g. waste hierarchy, managing household waste, impacts for compliance targets etc.)
- NIEA has established a Burial Task & Finish Group to provide environmental advice to Councils on location of new sites – this links into the DoJ Pandemic Working Group.

What we plan to do:

- Further understand the contingency plans within the waste sector; discussions being arranged
- Currently working with other UK regulators to develop Regulatory Position Statements collaboratively.

NIEA – Environmental Protection – Water Quality

Where we are (issues)

Protection of surface water abstractions used by NIW for the supply of drinking is vital throughout NI. The Water Management Unit also undertakes analysis of water samples from the Faughan River to ensure the Mobuoy illegal landfill site is not impacting on water quality.

What we doing (actions and engagement)

- The 24/7 pollution hotline is operating as usual
- Pollution incidents which may impact on NIW abstractions are given top priority for investigation.
- Field staff are working from home.
- Lines to take on how to deal with uncollected milk from farms have been developed.
- Priority catchments used by NIW for abstraction have been identified. These will be subject to increased checks for pollution in order to protect drinking water.

What we plan to do

- Continue to respond to pollution incidents as normal with enhanced social distancing rules in place.

A review of Cross Compliance inspections is under development.

Fisheries – Sea fishing, Aquaculture and Inland fisheries

Where we are - Issues:

Whilst it is desirable to ensure that fish supplies are maintained, Covid 19 and the steps required to ensure the safety of workers in the supply chain mean that fishing activity is being severely curtailed.

Markets for high value fish and shellfish intended for the hospitality and catering sector have virtually disappeared over the last two weeks. There was still some demand for prawn tails and whitefish but the latest government guidance makes it impossible for vessels to fish and maintain social distancing whilst safeguarding their crews. Only a handful of vessels are still fishing.

For processors trade is similarly curtailed although some are reporting some sales resuming in far-east markets.

The market for most aquaculture products has been severely hit as these too would mainly have been intended for hospitality and catering. Stock can remain on the aquaculture sites but staff have to be paid and costs incurred to maintain stock and sites.

The lough Neagh eel fishery also reports no sales.

What are we doing – Actions and Engagement

- We met with all fishing sectors on 20 March to discuss the situation and possible solutions.
- The Chancellors announcement of the Job Retention Scheme will help fish processors, ancillary port businesses, and aquaculture and inland fishery businesses with paid employees.
- None of the measures so far (23/03/20) proposed by central government have a significant benefit for the sea fish catching sector because vessel owners and their crews are treated as self-employed.
- We are meeting again with fishing industry representatives on 24 March.
- At UK level our industry is involved in UK discussions with DEFRA on Covid 19 impacts and concerns are being voiced to UK Government.
- DAERA senior management and the Minister are being kept informed through daily situation reporting arrangements.

What we Plan to do

- Industry is being advised of the assistance currently available.
- Fisheries is urgently developing a potential case for industry support in the event that central government fails to introduce measures to support the self-employed or in the event that the measures are inadequate for the fishing industry.
- Normal inspection activity is declining in line with the fall in fishing activity and measures have been put in place to ensure that staff are social distancing.

Group Update - COVID 19

CENTRAL SERVICES AND CONTINGENCY PLANNING GROUP

CORPORATE SERVICES DIVISION

Communications

DAERA has established a central communications team and put supporting structures in place to facilitate timely, accurate and clear communication with DAERA staff, stakeholders and citizens at this challenging time. Actions taken to date to assist public, business and stakeholder readiness for COVID-19 include:

- Establishment of a forum led by the DAERA Permanent Secretary, supported by Senior Management, to engage directly with key agri-food and environmental stakeholder groups thrice weekly;
- Ongoing one to one contact and intelligence gathering with key companies and organisations to identify emerging issues and ways that they could be addressed by DAERA or as part of the wider Government response;
- Ongoing liaison with colleagues in other Departments across the NICS to share information and develop collaborative responses where it is appropriate/possible to do so;
- Provision of a dedicated email address and single point of contact for queries from key stakeholders in relation to their sector and the impact that the COVID-19 virus may have on it;
- Proactive engagement and communication of key messages through press and social media channels;
- Creation of dedicated pages on the DAERA website, including a Question and Answer brief and signposting to latest information across NICS and Government; and
- Ongoing internal communications with staff to keep them abreast of developments.

This programme of work will be kept under review and will be adjusted as necessary to meet additional information and communication needs as they arise.

Equality, Diversity & Public Appointments Branch (EDPAB)

All members of the EDPA Branch have laptops and are able to work from home. The equality and diversity units have stopped any planned engagement and training events until further notice. The public appointments unit have also had to cancel the Competition Initiation Meeting for the NIFHA competition due to one of the panel members having underlying health issues. Alternative arrangements were discussed,

such as using video conference calls and social media facilities, however, there are difficulties with the compatibility of the IT hardware/software solutions to conduct this meeting remotely. The LMC competition was recently launched and this will also have to be cancelled due to the technological incompatibility of the IT hardware/software solutions. The current difficulties will have an impact on the appointments to the Boards and it is likely that extensions will be required where necessary. The competitions will be planned for future dates. Due to the flexibility of the working arrangements within the Branch then other tasks and work is still being conducted by each unit.

Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC)

The LMC issued a PR on 20/03/20 to advise that following an emergency meeting of the Northern Ireland Beef and Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme (FQAS) Industry Board all face to face farm inspections have been deferred due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. This policy came into effect from Wednesday 18th March at 5pm.

LMC issued a PR on 20/03/20 to advise that following an emergency meeting of the Northern Ireland Beef and Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme (FQAS) Industry Board all face to face farm inspections have been deferred due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. This policy came into effect from Wednesday 18th March at 5pm.

Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA)

Harbour Masters Offices - the Harbour Masters offices are closed to all - other than staff. Arrangements are in place to allow for collection of cards and other essential business to be done.

Fish markets - in Kilkeel the market has been suspended. Criteria for operating a market will need to be established and agreed before the market can recommence.

In all three harbours the fish markets remain open for landing.

Slipways - the slipways are still open for now although the MCA has suspended inspections.

Ice plants - ice remains available. Week-end cover for the ice-plants at weekends have been suspended.

Dredging - for the time being dredging is suspended.

In terms of contingency planning, a member of the public sent a strongly worded email to the Minister related to the possibility of harbour closures being on the NIFHA contingency plan. All scenario's must be covered with such plans but as of this evening all 3 harbours are fully operational and there is no suggestion any closures are planned at this stage. This correspondence is being dealt with through Private Office.

Loughs Agency (LA)

Field staff are continuing to carry out mainly “reactive” duties. It is challenging to implement social distancing requirements regarding crews travelling in teams but LA have been working in single occupied vehicles with only 2 vehicles attending reactive situations were possible. HQ has closed to the public from last week.

DIGITAL SERVICES DIVISION

DSD invoked its business continuity plan on 19 March 2020. Priority work to date has focused on working with colleagues in IT Assist to source, configure, prioritise and distribute laptops to enable key resources to work from home. An additional 77 laptops have been provided to date. There are a further 400-600 on order for delivery in the next 4 weeks. These will take time to configure, update and distribute. There are risks to supply lines as other organisations across NI move to enable home working. DSD is also working with IT Assist to consider other options that will allow greater numbers of users to work from home but any option must be secure and not risk the NICS network.

DSD has a critical role to play in supporting DAERA’s priority IT systems. Work is ongoing to ensure that we can provide service continuity in the event that key IT resources are unavailable to work due to illness. DSD is also leading work across DAERA on video conferencing, audio conferencing and other collaboration tools to allow effective distributed working. Updated guidance on home working has been developed and will be issued shortly. New collaboration tools are being tested to extend the options available to staff to work remotely. These new tools and associated guidance will be issued once finalised.

The vast majority of DSD staff are currently working from home. A small team (5-10 people) remain at Dundonald House to ensure the laptop distribution process continues as this requires physical access to devices and networks. DSD is working closely with external IT delivery partners to ensure their resources will be available to help support DAERA IT systems. These resources will prove essential if significant numbers of internal resources are unavailable to work due to illness. Our delivery partners are also heavily involved in using their industry contacts to help secure laptops, as well as exploring ways to rapidly change to a distributed business delivery model.

DSD is developing an online application to log the status of staff to help with resource tracking. A first release of this application is due to be completed by 27 March 2020.

FINANCE DIVISION

(Please note the Committee have specifically requested an update on “increasing the rural support budget to allow further assistance to rural communities”.)

The Executive is currently considering proposals from the Finance Minister on the opening 2020-21 Resource and Capital Budget allocations for all departments. These will be finalised before the Finance Minister makes a statement in the Assembly setting out the Budget outcome. This is due to be in the week commencing 30 March 2020. Information on DAERA’s bids in relation to rural areas were set out in the briefing pack provided to the Committee on 13 February. These included the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme on Resource and a range of Rural Development Programme schemes on Capital. The Department is also liaising with DoF on additional funding that may be required in the coming months to support rural areas as a result of COVID-19.

GREEN GROWTH DIVISION

Implementing social distancing to slow the spread of the virus in line with UKG policy. Staff working from home where possible thus reducing the numbers in the office environment. Work areas within the Division have been reviewed and staff time is being shared with other business areas working directly on COVID 19 preparedness and response including e.g. stakeholder engagement and C3 arrangements.

NIFAIS

Staff are working from home and appropriate arrangements are being put in in place to allow work on the NIFAIS Programme to progress and to ensure DAERA can continue to engage constructively with the supplier, AMT-Sybex.

Group Update - COVID 19

Veterinary Services Animal Health Group

Introduction

1. Covid-19 presents an enormous challenge to human health at individual level and population level. As people are our most important resource, it has a huge impact on DAERA and VSAHG's capacity and capability to deliver our public services and programmes. Our response will require extraordinary measures to minimise damage to our vital services.

Key Issue – Prioritisation of Work

2. The impact of Covid-19 on numbers of staff available at any particular time is unknown with estimates of potentially 20% fewer staff at any one time but this figure will vary.
3. With the reduced availability of staff, VSAHG has identified our key priorities for service delivery. Focussing on these priorities and diverting resources to these priority areas will significantly disrupt other routine work and will require many staff to be re-assigned to duties aligned to the priority areas.
4. Our key priorities are in line with the Department's and the Government's priorities (where Food Supply is paramount):
 1. Veterinary Public Health – delivery of official controls for the FSA (and also DAERA) & Veterinary Certification – facilitating trade of animals and animal products and by-products, with policy support
 2. Epizootic Disease – prevention and detection, through surveillance and testing at ports, airports, on farm and in meat plants, with policy support
 3. Animal Welfare – investigating serious animal welfare incidents, with policy support
 4. Animal Health – maintaining or optimising the bovine TB programme of surveillance and testing on farm, in meat plants and in AfBI, with policy support

Additional Animal Health & Welfare Policy Priorities (complementary to Priorities 1-4)

5. NI Protocol - supporting implementation of those aspects of the NI Protocol within the remit of VSAHG including delivery of required legislative and operational changes and provision of input into EU negotiations
6. EU Animal Health Regulation – supporting implementation of the EU Regulation, which will apply from April 2021, by making the necessary legislative and operational changes. This is needed ensure compliance with NI Protocol and continued trade with the EU

5. In the first instance staff will be assigned to tasks to deliver these priorities, providing cover for staff unavailable due to Covid-19. With these priorities covered, other staff will continue where possible with the other broad range of veterinary services and policy support in line with programme and policy business plans.

Actions

6. We have stood up our emergency command structures as part of our well tested Contingency Planning. This ensures timely communications internally to central command as well as to staff, including Trade Union officials.

Engagement

7. We are engaging with key stakeholders on a daily basis as well as authorities in wider UK and ROI to ensure a joined up approach is adopted, where possible.
8. We are engaging with Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AfBI) to ensure key services are continued while they divert resource to the wider Covid-19 testing requirement.

Plans

9. We have identified a list of essential work, and key workers, to enable continued delivery of our Priorities outlined above. Work that is not considered essential is being temporarily paused, subject to review as we assess the continuing impact of Covid-19 on staff and society.
10. We have closed DAERA Direct Offices to public access to ensure safety of staff and customers. Measures are being put in place to increase our telephony availability to ensure key work areas continue where customers cannot access online services.

Areas of work currently affected by diversion of resources*:

- Brucellosis surveillance sampling (herd & abattoir) to be paused for 3 weeks. High risk testing will continue.
- Post-import testing paused for 3 weeks – animals will remain under restriction until testing completed.
- Scrapie Scheme work is paused.
- Residues risk sampling has stopped and National Control Plan sampling paused for 2 months.
- Animal By-Product Inspections paused
- Cattle & Sheep Identification Inspections paused.

*This list is subject to constant review and other items may be added as required

Risks

- Ensuring sufficient numbers of qualified and competent staff are available to deliver Official Controls and related activities necessary to maintain proper functioning of the agrifood supply chain.
- Engaging and collaborating with food business operators to develop protocols and procedures to ensure adherence with PHA social distancing guidance
- Disposal of Animal By-Products dependent on maintaining capacity and capability of Northern Ireland's two major renderers. Engaged with NIEA to develop contingency plans.

INTRODUCTION

1. For the purposes of this document a Business Continuity Plan (BCP) and a Major Emergency Response Plan (MERP) are defined as follows:

“**BCP** is operated when responses to emergencies can be delivered entirely by organisations operating locally/sub-regionally.”
(Example – flood at Dundonald House.)

“**MERP** is a strategic approach to emergencies where the extent or severity of their impact is such that strategic level intervention and co-ordination by central government is required.”
(Example – storms disrupting transport routes.)

BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLAN

2. Business Continuity deals with disruptions to the delivery of an organisation’s services.
3. A BCP is activated when there is a major disruption to DAERA business or to those external services upon which DAERA and/or its staff rely on a day-to-day basis and which cause, or may cause, an interruption to the business operations undertaken by DAERA.
4. Triggers to activate a BCP may include disruptions to premises, **people**, processes, providers of services and technology. Activating the DAERA BCP means pulling together the strategic ‘Gold’ team to direct the tactical planning ‘Silver’ team, who in turn direct the operational delivery the BCP “Bronze” team.
5. Our BCP response is structured in the same way as our MERP in that it involves similar procedures. Many of the same staff are involved in similar roles.
6. The NI Civil Contingencies Framework tasks public sector organisations to: -

“undertake Business Continuity Management processes which will enable them to... maintain essential services to the public through a business disruption”. The BCP is a tool to help staff **prepare** for, as well as **respond** to, a business disruption.
7. The DAERA Corporate BCP relies on local business area’s BCPs, linking to those and optimising their effectiveness.

MAJOR EMERGENCY RESPONSE PLAN

8 The term emergency within this Plan is defined as:

- An event or situation which threatens serious damage to human welfare, the environment or the security of Northern Ireland or the UK as a whole (Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Framework).

9 In Northern Ireland emergencies are classified as follows:

- Local level – emergencies where the outcomes are such that the response can be delivered entirely by organisations operating locally/sub-regionally; and
- Strategic level – emergencies where the extent or severity of their impact is such that strategic level intervention and co-ordination by central government is required. Strategic level emergencies are further categorised as Level 1 – Significant; Level 2 – Serious; Level 3 – Catastrophic.

10 The **purpose** of our Major Emergency Response Plan (MERP) is to set out the high level framework for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA)'s response to a major emergency.

11 The MERP concentrates on the response to an emergency and not its cause. It may be activated in tandem with DAERA Business Continuity Plans (BCPs) if a major emergency also disrupts the delivery of DAERA's normal services.

DAERA STRATEGY GROUP [DAERA GOLD COMMAND]

12 When the DAERA BCP is activated the Permanent Secretary will convene senior officials as a team referred to as the Strategy Group (or "Gold command").

13 The Strategy Group will be supported by Tactical and Operational Groups (or "Silver and Bronze commands").

14 The Strategy Group is in overall charge of control strategies. The Group is normally chaired by the DAERA Permanent Secretary.

15 Strategy Group functions include:

- Providing strategic direction;
- Appointing a tactical level / Silver (Grade 5) business continuity response commander in the event that no specific local business area continuity response plan exists;
- Ratifying developing policies (within which the tactical staff in Silver command will work);
- Prioritising departmental demands;

- Ensuring and authorising provision of adequate resources;
- Considering consequences; and
- Planning for recovery.

16 Typical membership of Strategy Group may comprise of:

- Permanent Secretary (Chair, if appropriate);
- Deputy Secretary, Central Services and Contingency Planning Group (CSCPG)
- Chief Veterinary Officer, Veterinary Service Animal Health Group (VSAHG);
- Deputy Secretary, Environment, Marine and Fisheries Group (EMFG);
- Deputy Secretary, Rural Affairs, Forest Service and Estate Transformation Group (RAFSETG);
- Deputy Secretary, Food and Farming Group (FFG);
- Director of CSD;
- Director of Finance Division;
- Chief Executive, Forest Service (FS) [in the event of a forestry or plant health incident];
- Departmental Principal Information Officer; and
- NICS Human Resource Business Partner (HRBP).

DAERA TACTICAL AND OPERATIONAL GROUPS [SILVER AND BRONZE]

Tactical response

17 When the BCP is activated, a Strategy Group (“Gold Command”) will be established by the Permanent Secretary. This Group will be supported by the Tactical and Operational Groups (or “Silver” and “Bronze” commands).

18 Tactical Response (Silver) will be split into two distinct groupings:

Tactical (Silver) Response Commander (Grade 5) - broadly responsible for the tactical and operational elements of the response to the incident or emergency. The individual will be as identified within local BCPs or, where no plans exist, appointed by the Strategy Group;

Tactical (Silver) Communications and Resources Commander (Grade 5) – broadly responsible for internal and external communications, resources and logistics. The individual will normally be the Head of CSD.

19 In the event of a major emergency, the **Tactical (Silver) Response Commander** will be responsible for:

- activating contingency plan(s) to provide a response at tactical (Silver Command) and operational (Bronze Command) levels;
- providing the Tactical Communications and Resources Commander with necessary information, reports etc. as directed;

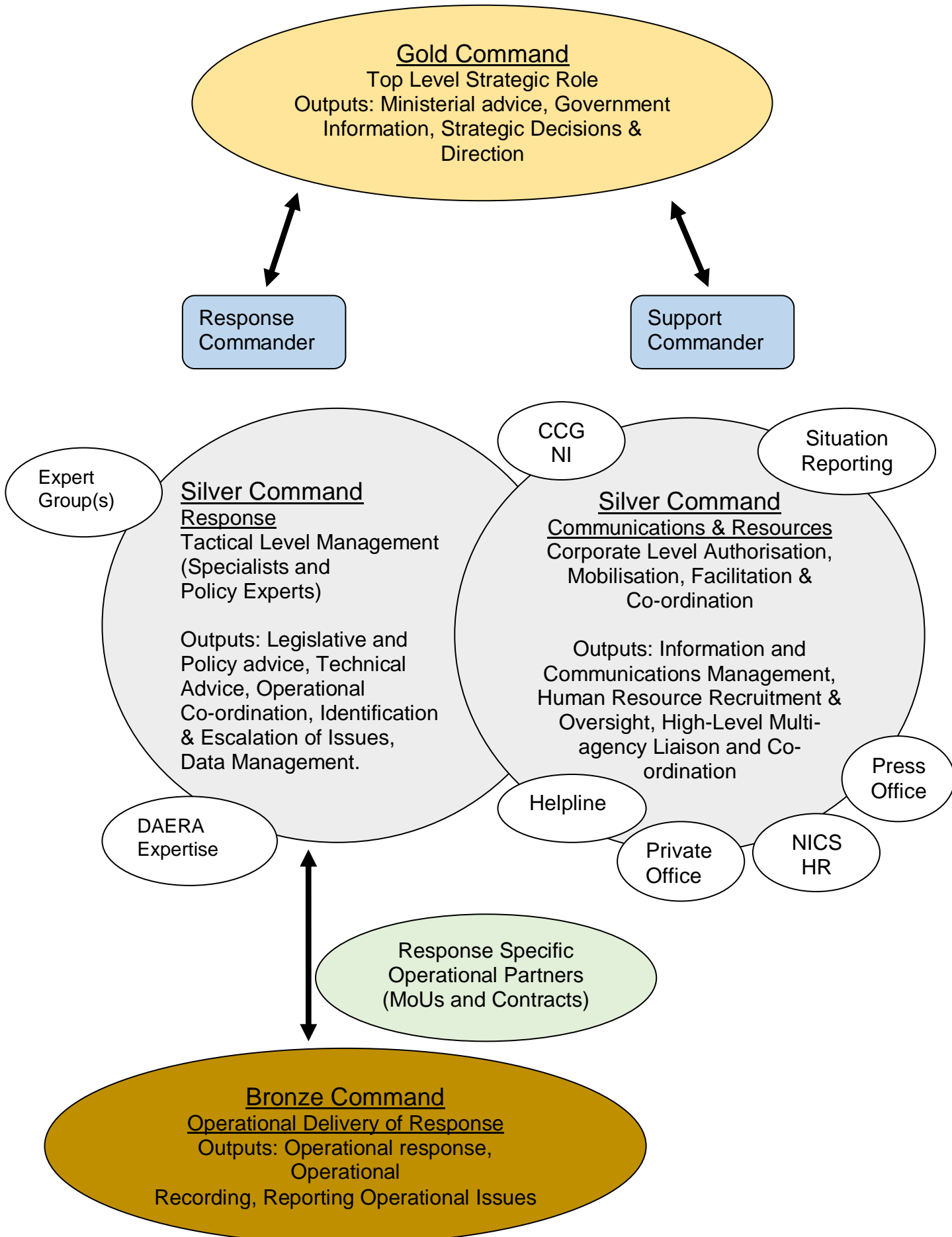
- considering any cross-cutting issues presented by the business area;
- liaison with the Tactical Communications and Resources Commander to ensure provision of facilities, equipment and human resources necessary to mount an effective response;
- allocating actions and follow-up of such actions to ensure an effective response;
- as necessary, seeking advice from, or providing advice to operational partners;
- deciding which strategic or high impact issues should be referred to the Strategy Group for further consideration or approval;
- making sure the Strategy Group are aware of sensitive issues i.e. those likely to result in harm to DAERA's reputation, political or socio-economic implications, significant financial pressures etc.;
- attempting to limit the issues escalated to the Strategy Group by filtering and resolution of non-strategic issues; and
- ensuring all documents are fully completed and filed in the appropriate HPRM container; ensuring all decisions and the rationale for making them are recorded.

20 In the event of a significant business disruption, the **Tactical (Silver) Communications and Resources Commander** will be responsible for:

- providing the Permanent Secretary with authoritative advice where a major disruption to business has occurred or is developing, and whether activation of the BCP is required;
- establishing a central Communications facility;
- convening meetings of Strategy Group and agreeing appropriate representation in view of the nature of the incident; and ensuring that the optimal corporate approach to strategic decisions in relation to the major emergency is being taken;
- liaising with the Tactical (Silver) Response Commander to authorise and ensure provision of facilities, equipment and human resources necessary to mount an effective response;
- putting the arrangements for the co-ordination of any multi-agency response in place when DAERA is Lead Government Department, including the chairing of meetings as requested by the Permanent Secretary;
- attending Strategy Group meetings, noting key decisions, issues and actions and ensuring that communication messages approved by the Strategy Group to staff and customers are disseminated effectively;
- ensuring proactive engagement with the press (via DAERA Media Services), MPs, MLAs and other elected representatives;
- oversight of the SITREPS and Commonly Recognised Information Reports (CRIPs) and adding inputs/issues arising in relation to the wider Departmental perspective;
- ensuring security of information within the CRIPs (which may contain sensitive information);
- GDPR requirements;
- presenting final draft CRIPs to the Strategy Group; and

- clearing status reports and briefing for Secretary or Minister as necessary.

Business Continuity Plan



RECOVERY

- 21 Recovery is the process of rebuilding, restoring and rehabilitating the business following an incident. It continues until the disruption has been rectified, the needs of those affected have been met and the demands on services returned to normal levels.

STAND DOWN & DEBRIEF

- 22 When the BCP response ends, the Permanent Secretary will advise Strategy Group members and other officials in DAERA as appropriate that reporting arrangements have been stood down.
- 23 The Tactical Communications and Resource Commander will instigate a debrief meeting with those who were involved at a strategic level, to discuss lessons learned and to document 'best practice'. He/she should ensure that the outcomes from this process are incorporated, by agreed deadlines, into a revision of the BCP, circulated to senior management and conveyed to other partners where appropriate.
- 24 Business areas will be responsible for the debriefing process in respect of local BCPs.

Command, Control and Co-ordination (C3)

1. DAERA is providing Liaison Officers to work in the NI Hub which will support the work of CCGNI and the Executive Covid Crisis Management Committee (ECCMC), ultimately informing UKG and COBR;
2. A Departmental Operations Centre (DOC) has been set up and activated and is now providing daily Situational Reports (Sitreps) to the NI Hub (all Executive Departments, Emergency Services, Local Government and Non Departmental Public Bodies), and will receive 'Down reps' from the NIHub and the wider UKG;
3. In accordance with the MERP, Gold, Silver and Bronze commands have been established within DAERA to provide strategic leadership and immediate implementation of decisions in line with Ministerial approval. DAERA Gold command is meeting daily and is supported by the DAERA DOC;
4. To support the work of the DAERA DOC, a network of business co-ordinators within the Department will gather and provide information to the DOC;
5. This information includes details about;
 - a. challenges relating to the wider agricultural, environmental industries and rural communities; and
 - b. internal Departmental issues including staffing cover for essential services, staff welfare, office and wider facilities information;
6. It is important to note that the DAERA DOC is not available to handle external customer calls or provide information to the public. It is, however, fully integrated with the Press Office through which appropriate information will be disseminated.
7. The DAERA DOC will be operated on a 'distance by default' basis whereby all operations will be set up so that they can delivered remotely and by people operating in isolation. This will also mean that the DAERA DOC can be operated if buildings are closed, enhancing resilience for the longer term during this emergency.
8. **A complement of staff has been identified to operate the DAERA DOC on a 24 hour basis and staffing will be prioritised for the DOC from across the Department.**