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Office of the
**First Minister and
Deputy First Minister**
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Welcome to the third edition of this update on what is happening in the Civil Contingencies field in Northern Ireland. We would welcome any contribution in relation to regional level or local level Civil Contingencies news for inclusion in future newsletters.

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Meet the Team

Introducing: Emergency Planning Branch, DHSSPS

In light of the current flu pandemic, now seems a good time to introduce you to the team working on the response to the pandemic influenza H1N1 virus, more commonly known as swine flu, in the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS). DHSSPS is the lead Department in Northern Ireland for managing the strategic health response to swine flu and for coordinating the wider Health and Social Care response.

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Dr Liz Reaney (Senior Medical Officer/Consultant Epidemiologist) has been appointed as the new senior medical lead involved in planning for the health aspects of pandemic flu within the Department, having succeeded **Dr Lorraine Doherty** in this role. Dr Doherty has since departed to take up a new post in the Public Health Agency – we wish Lorraine well in her new post and thank her for all her hard work and achievements in the Department over the years.

Andrew Elliott, is still the Director of Population Health Directorate. Emergency Planning Branch lies within this Directorate, headed by **Elaine Lawson**, who has recently taken over as the new Head of the Emergency Planning Branch (EPB) on the departure of **Joy Peden** to pastures new in the Department. We also wish Joy well in her new post and thank her for all her endeavors in her two years in post.

The Branch has two strands within it: a pandemic flu team and a civil contingencies team. The pandemic flu team, led by **Bernie Duffy**, includes **Sholto Carnew, Alan Weir, Kieran Blaney, Helen Reynor** and **Karen Pateman**. The civil contingencies team, led by **David Robinson**, includes **Robert Cranston** and **Darren McCaw**.

Emergency Planning Branch has lead responsibility for the development of policy, guidance and advice on planning for pandemic influenza and the provision of health countermeasures. In doing so, the Branch supports the Health Minister and the Chief Medical Officer and other senior officials in the Department.

DHSSPS has been involved in a UK wide Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Programme over the past four years, consequently the UK is recognised as being one of the most prepared for a pandemic and we were able to respond quickly and accelerate a number of plans to respond to the specific demands resulting from swine flu.

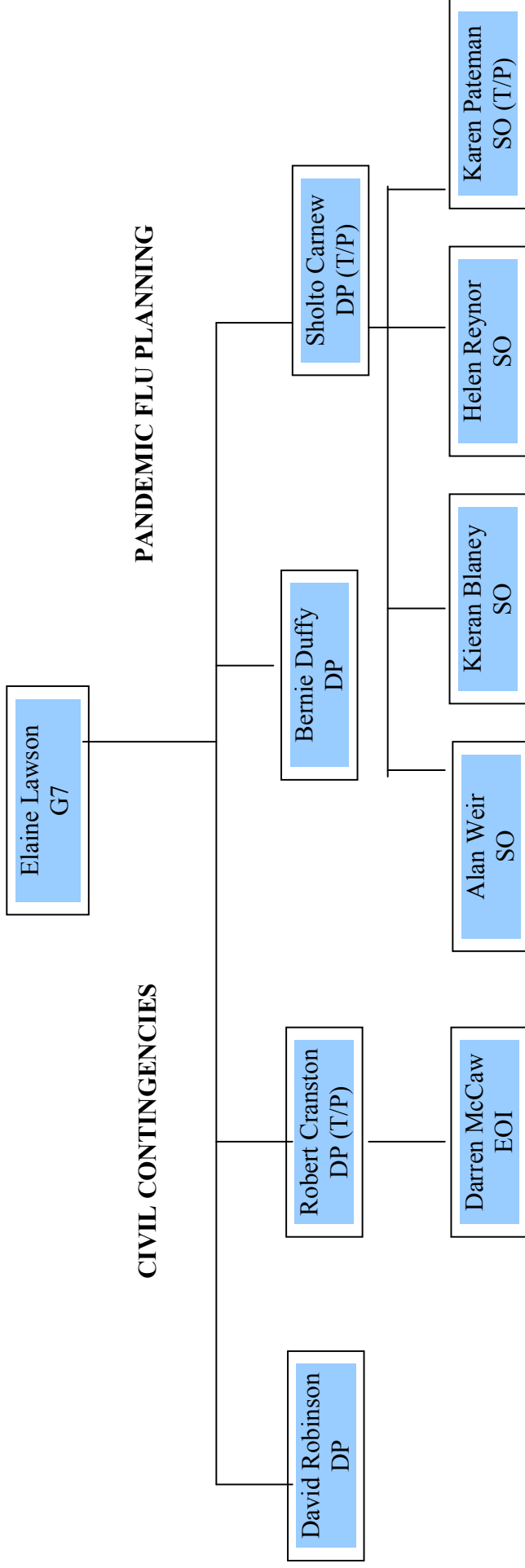
As health and social care organisations in Northern Ireland were fundamentally changed at the beginning of April 2009, staff right across the health service here faced urgent challenges to revise the fine detail of roles and responsibilities in order to effectively manage the health and social care response to swine flu. The Department works very closely with the Public Health Agency, the Health and Social Care Board and the Business Services Organisation in managing and coordinating this response.

Information about Swine Flu is available on the Departmental and NIDirect websites:

www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/health-and-well-being/swine-flu.htm

www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/phealth/php/infectious_diseases/pandemicflu.htm

EMERGENCY PLANNING BRANCH



- DHSSPS is lead Government Department for health consequences arising from the following emergencies:
 - CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear)
 - Human infectious diseases including pandemic / avian influenza and smallpox
 - Disruption to medical supply chains and stockpiling of medical and other countermeasures
 - Mass casualties
 - Management, activation and exercising of the Regional Health Command Centre.
 - To support strategic health decision making by Minister and/or Chief Medical Officer during an emergency.
 - Develop regional guidance aligned to OFMDFM / national guidance

- Policy development in stockpile management – procurement, delivery, storage and distribution and liaison with UK
- Provision of support and briefing to Minister and Chief Medical Officer on Pandemic Flu planning and preparedness
- Development of a range of guidance on the management of response to pandemic flu for health, social care and voluntary sectors, Primary Care, Human Resources, Dental, Acute Services, Mental Health Services, Maternity Health Services and Ambulance Services.

SWINE FLU AND THE NON-HEALTH PUBLIC SECTOR: - DIARY OF A PANDEMIC

Personal reflections from Judith Brown, CCPB, on the response outside the health sector to swine flu.

I returned from an Easter trip to Greece at 9.00pm on Friday 24 April, having travelled since early morning. When I eventually surfaced on Saturday morning I switched on the radio to catch up with what had been happening at home in my absence and heard the words 'swine flu' for the first time. Six months later my holiday photos are still unsorted and swine flu has dominated my working life.

By April 2009 I had already been heavily involved for two years in planning for the possible impacts of an influenza pandemic on government and the wider public sector. Working with a wide range of organisations from central and local government and the emergency services, Civil Contingencies Policy Branch (CCPB) had facilitated consideration of what the impact on public and essential services would be of an influenza pandemic as described in the national planning assumptions and what measures could be adopted by individual organisations and by the public sector corporately to mitigate the effects of those impacts on the public.

The key to the early days of the swine flu outbreak was uncertainty. We knew that this was a new virus to humans and that the initial information from Mexico suggested that both the attack rate (how many people developed the disease) and the fatality rate (how many of those who exhibited symptoms may die) appeared to be relatively high compared to seasonal influenza. How and when it might arrive in Northern Ireland was uncertain and we had little information on what its effects on individuals and society would be. During May the number of cases in the UK and Ireland edged upwards, with the first confirmed case in Northern Ireland being confirmed by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) on 14 May.

Throughout the month we in CCPB were involved in daily teleconference meetings organised by the Cabinet Office (including weekends and Public Holidays), regular communications with departments and others in Northern Ireland, and the preparation of regular situation reports on how the non-health sectors in Northern Ireland were preparing for the expected Pandemic. Hours were long and the demand for information and advice greatly exceeded what was available, despite the best efforts of the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Department of Health, DHSSPS and the newly formed Northern Ireland Public Health Agency (PHA) to establish the medical effects of the virus. In the absence of reliable information on the likely impact of the disease on wider society, all NI departments began to put arrangements in place to manage their business delivery and liaison with their sectors in line with the pre-planning for a worst case scenario. An impressive and co-ordinated media campaign was undertaken by the health departments to remind people of good practice when coughing and sneezing and how to clean hands effectively. Many employers used the materials provided online to extend this campaign to the workplace.

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On 11 June the WHO formally declared the swine flu outbreak to be a pandemic and plans were reviewed to ensure that all necessary measures were being taken. Numbers of cases rose slowly in Northern Ireland during June, with 33 confirmed cases by the end of the month. During this time employers and service providers were consolidating their contingency and business continuity planning and dealing with a range of personnel and workplace infection control issues. While information on the impact of the disease and predictions on how the pandemic would develop was still scarce, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the impact was not so great as the worst case scenario. We were still attending regular teleconferences with London, not just the 'round table' interdepartmental meetings but specific working groups on subjects identified as requiring additional work. In addition, meetings were held of the Civil Contingencies Group, Northern Ireland, and the Pandemic Fatalities Management Sub-group and with individual organisations in relation to specific topics.

In July, swine flu activity in Northern Ireland (as measured by GP consultation for flu), increased sharply, peaking in late July. This traditional holiday month was a busy one for CCPB as the increased swine flu activity placed pressure on organisations at local and national level to ensure that they could maintain essential business services with fewer staff should the increase in cases continue and falling again during August. Issues addressed included possible impacts on the running of public events, possible legislative changes to facilitate business continuity and planning for the re-opening of schools after the holidays. This early summer peak of swine flu activity constituted the first pandemic wave of cases in Northern Ireland.

Over August and into the first week in September the indicators for the spread of disease in Northern Ireland and elsewhere in the UK and Ireland decreased. This allowed some respite in CCPB but regular teleconferences continued with various UK-level groups, weekly situation reports were compiled and circulated and the flow of policy paper went on unabated. However, over the remainder of September the indicators of swine flu in Northern Ireland rose sharply and continue at a high level indicating that we are in the second wave of the pandemic. This has placed significant pressure on the health services and unfortunately a number of additional deaths have occurred.

While it is now apparent that the severity and duration of the illness are limited for most people, some businesses may continue to experience higher than usual levels of absence, requiring measures to be taken to ensure that essential services are delivered. Plans are in place to implement further administrative and legislative measures to secure the delivery of essential services in the health and non-health sectors should the need arise.

So even though swine flu continues to take up most of my time and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future, at last I have been able to deal with some of those other issues which were waiting for me on my return from leave all those months ago! It is too early yet to draw any firm conclusions about future pandemic influenza planning from the swine flu experience: the pandemic is by no means over and it may yet hold surprises for us. With that caveat, some initial personal thoughts about swine flu, many of which have a broad applicability in emergency planning, would be:

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- At the outset, demand for information will greatly exceed what is available. In such circumstances it is necessary to assume a worst case scenario and to take policy and operational decisions with a lower quantity and standard of information than would normally be acceptable. This will almost certainly result in decisions having to be revisited and revised at a later date and we should not be afraid of that.
- In a wide-ranging and prolonged event such as a pandemic a range of information sources are required for a range of different interest groups, with information and method of delivery targeted to the intended audience. The type and frequency of information provided to the business sector will be different from that directed at the schools sector. Developing and updating websites, information bulletins, Q and A briefings and briefings for senior staff and Ministers requires the application of significant personnel resources but pays high dividends in ensuring that everyone has appropriate information and reducing the resource required to deal with ad hoc information requests.
- No matter how well-developed emergency plans are (and planning for pandemic influenza had been extensive) there will always be unexpected issues and situations which do not develop as anticipated. One of the most important aspects of pandemic pre-planning was the degree to which pandemic influenza awareness and expertise had been extended beyond the health sector. This expertise could then be applied to the new and unexpected issues so that they were resolved quickly.
- While some issues were new, most had already been addressed in pandemic influenza planning. Even though swine flu to date has had a less severe impact than the worst case scenario for pandemic planning, the prior identification of issues and potential responses to a range of scenarios allowed appropriate responses to be chosen from the available menu.
- Transparency in decision making and good media relations has been a key feature of the response to swine flu. Extensive use has been made of both the traditional media such as television and newspapers and newer outlets such as the internet and online networks. As much information as possible has been made accessible to frontline responders and the public.
- A balance needs to be achieved between aligning with the nationally and internationally agreed responses and addressing local needs.
- Don't switch on your radio immediately after returning from holiday.

To be continued.....

Where to find out more:

For the present the latest information on swine flu activity in Northern Ireland is published weekly by DHSSPS on www.dhsspsni.gov.uk.

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If you would like to learn more about swine flu and planning to maintain business during the pandemic please see the following websites:

NI Direct on www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/health-and-well-being/swine-flu.htm

NI Business Info on www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/swineflu

Civil Contingencies Latest News

Belfast Resilience Forum

The Belfast Resilience Forum welcomed their new Programme Manager Claire Carleton in May 2009. Claire's role is to support and co-ordinate the various work flows of the Forum. She reports to the Chair of the Belfast Resilience Steering Group (ACC Alistair Finlay) and Belfast City Council act as her employing organisation.

The Belfast Resilience Forum currently involves more than 110 representatives from over 50 organisations. It has undergone a period of change in recent years and members of the Steering Group and Planning & Development Group met on 2 October 2009 to discuss the role and priorities of the Forum over the next few years.

In the interim:

- The Media/Public Information Working Group has recently been reformed to agree how organisations can work together to manage public information and media arrangements before, during and after an emergency
- The first meeting of a new Voluntary Organisations Working Group was held on 1 October 2009 to explore the contribution that voluntary organisations can make in emergency situations and how voluntary and community support can be co-ordinated more effectively
- The Recovery and Emergency Support Centre Working Groups are currently consulting with community representatives to obtain feedback on their respective plans
- The Mass Fatalities Working Group is progressing with the finalisation of its plan
- Following the completion of the Tall Ships Major Incident Plan, the Belfast Harbour Working Group is now working to produce a public version of its Port Emergency Plan.

If you have any questions or would like to know more about the work of the Belfast Resilience Forum, please contact Claire Carleton at carletonc@belfastcity.gov.uk.

Flooding Incident Line – 0300 2000 100 - update

Northern Ireland's new Flooding Incident Line has successfully handled more than 1450 calls between January and mid September 2009.

The Flooding Incident Line is all about making it easier for the public to report flooding. The benefits to the citizen of calling 0300 2000 100 are as follows:

- calls won't be redirected, nor will callers be given other numbers to ring
- no need to decide which agency to contact - Roads Service, Rivers Agency or Northern Ireland Water;
- calls are logged and passed to the relevant agency;
- the line is open 24 hours a day, every day; and
- calls are charged at local rates.

The new number was introduced under the banner of 'NI Direct' and is an important part of Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) reform. It reflects NICS commitment to improve citizen access to government services and information.

You can find out more about the Flooding Incident Line and issues around flooding on www.nidirect.gov.uk, the new government website designed for the citizen.

The Tall Ships come to Belfast: After the Event

In our last newsletter we reported on the planning which was underway for the Tall Ships visit to Belfast on 13-16 August. We thought that it would be interesting to look back on the experience and how things went.

On Thursday 13 August 2009 the Tall Ships Atlantic Challenge competitors arrived in Belfast, having sailed from Halifax Nova Scotia on 20 July and covered over 2,300 nautical miles in the last leg of the race. Over 40 Tall Ships came to Belfast for the final celebrations of the 2009 Challenge, which had lasted for four months and involved some 2,500 crew members and trainees on the Tall Ships. The four-day celebration attracted unprecedented crowds to the Belfast seafront to visit the ships and associated attractions, which spread over both sides of the River Lagan. To plan and run such a large and complex event safely required an exceptional level of co-operation and co-ordination between agencies on all sorts of fronts, from financial support to safety at sea. As part of this process a multi-agency Tall Ships Major Incident Plan was developed to supplement the Event Management and Traffic Management Plans.



The contingency planning process included:

- 7 Local Councils
- 4 Blue Light Services
- 3 HSC Trusts
- and 2 Voluntary organizations (but no partridges in pear trees)

in a direct or consultative role.

During the days of the event a multi-agency control room was established in one of the buildings adjacent to the quayside, enabling all those involved to work effectively together.



The Tall Ships Control Room in operation

The statistics for the four-day event are as impressive as the Tall Ships themselves and it is to the great credit of all involved that the event went off without any significant incidents or accidents. Here are some of the headline figures:

- Attendance over four days: 750,000 people made up of:
 - Thu 150,000
 - Fri 75,000
 - Sat 250,000
 - Sun 25,000
 - Parade of Sail – 250,000
- At peak periods between 300 - 400 people would have crossed each of the two main bridges at the festival per minute.
- The Portuguese Navy vessel 'Sagres' had 15,000 visitors aboard on Sat 15 Aug – the vessel's biggest ever visitor numbers on one day.
- Energy Saving Trust Gateway to the Tall Ships had over 36,000 visitors on one day alone!
- It is estimated that 9,000 car parking space were used per day with a total 36,000 vehicles using the facilities

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- Around 65 buses moved up to 100,000 people per day. The efficiency of the operation allowed the 'park n ride' space to clear within an hour and half of the daily closing time.
- When pressure on existing facilities became too great, an additional car park was created in six hours by Belfast Harbour.
- In addition to those who came to the event by car and public transport, around 750 recreational vessels visited the port during the event, requiring their own safety and stewarding arrangements. Pleasure craft also offered trips to see the Tall Ships from the river.
- Over 40 Tall Ships took part in the Parade of Sail with hundreds of local pleasure craft seeing the ships out of Belfast.
- 180 plus police officers were on site per day (with only two arrests) and nearly 300 stewards.
- NI Fire and Rescue Service committed over 45 staff to ensuring a safe event. They saved 1 French 24 year old female naval officer and also put out one minor litter bin fire.
- Emergency medical and first aid cover was provided by 5 ambulances with 10 ambulance personnel, supported by in excess 50 first aiders and with full onsite medical command. Only 0.02% of the visiting audience required attention, much lower than the national average of 0.5 to 1% of people at large scale public events.
- The cost of event was £2.5m. Funding and value in kind came from:
 - Belfast City Council,
 - The Northern Ireland Tourist Board,
 - The Department of Culture and Leisure,
 - The Department for Social Development,
 - Belfast Harbour Commissioners
 - Event sponsors and participating organisations / businesses.
- An estimated 100,000 holiday makers came to Belfast to visit the event.
- The city experienced an estimated economic return of over £10m supporting an estimated 550 jobs.
- The remaining legacy of the event includes a new £1m marina built for the Tall Ships Festival adjacent to the Odyssey Pavilion, the cost of which was funded from the £2.5m.

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To learn more about the Tall Ships and their visit to Belfast why not go to <http://www.tallshipsraces.org/>, <http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/tallships/index.asp>, and for 360-degree pictures of the event [http://www.virtualvisit-northernireland.com/gallery.aspx?dataid=381986&title=Houses and Heritage](http://www.virtualvisit-northernireland.com/gallery.aspx?dataid=381986&title=Houses_and_Heritage).

Congratulations to everyone whose hard work in planning and running the event made it such a success.

Many thanks to Ian Spratt, Safety and Environmental Officer for the Port of Belfast for the information for this article and the picture of the Control Room.

Website watch

Belfast Resilience

The new Belfast Resilience Forum website was launched in August 2009. The site provides a range of information on the work and structure of the Forum and also gives links to the websites of Member organisations and useful information such as advice in relation to pandemic flu and flooding. You can find the website at www.belfastresilience.co.uk.

CCPB Website

The CCPB website at www.ofmdfmni.gov.uk/emergencies is kept up-to-date with background information on the Branch and its activities, items of interest, and NI publications. If there are specific features which you would like to see in the future on this website, please contact us.

NI Direct and swine flu - handling emergency information for the public

NI Direct the new Northern Ireland government website has logged more than two million page impressions since its launch in March.

Its early success is down to several factors. Firstly, it is different from other government websites as it brings together information from government departments and agencies, organised under easily recognisable themes and written in language that people can understand. This means that citizens don't need to know how government works to find the information they need. The website can be updated 24/7 by remote access so it can publish the latest information. NI Direct has also developed its presence through social media sites, including Facebook and Twitter.

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One of the successes of NI Direct has been its involvement in getting information to the public about swine flu. NI Direct has been used as the main website for swine flu information and this has contributed to its increasing traffic. Most importantly, citizens can access comprehensive information covering a number of different aspects of the outbreak all on the one site. This has included:

- latest swine flu news in Northern Ireland;
- latest travel advice;
- questions and answers for parents / find your local GP online;
- advice on what parents should do if they have children attending school;
- details about the vaccination programme; and
- national television advert.

This strategy has proved a success and to date there has been 127,091 visits to the swine section on nidirect and 310,934 page impressions.

Feedback received from both members of the public and departments relating to the swine flu material has been positive, however, further research into the effectiveness of the information on the website is something the nidirect team intend to progress in the near future.

Online media in Northern Ireland are pointing people to the nidirect website on all swine flu related stories so there is an understanding that this is where the latest information can be accessed.

In terms of lessons learned for other emergencies, clear, concise and up to date information is crucial. In a period of uncertainty there is often a communications vacuum so the ability to deliver an accurate and timely piece of information to target audiences is vital.

NI Direct can be found at www.nidirect.gov.uk

Exercises

DARD Veterinary Service

Veterinary Service, Contingency Planning for Epizootic Disease (CPED) Unit is organising an epizootic disease training exercise in Loughry College on the 11th of November 2009 which will be known as Exercise Yellowhammer. The primary purpose of Exercise Yellowhammer is to test the capacity of structures within the Local Epizootic Disease Control Centre (LEDCC) which will be based in Loughry College, to deal with an outbreak of Avian Influenza (AI).

Exercise Truce

Around 175 delegates from the Emergency Services, statutory and voluntary bodies took part in a two-day Emergency Planning exercise which was held from 28 – 29 September at the Manor House Hotel, Enniskillen.

The overarching aim of Exercise TRUCE was to task and evaluate current multi-agency responses and recovery plans and protocols to a major incident occurring within each of the proposed Local Resilience Areas within Northern Ireland.

TRUCE was a Hydra Minerva table-top exercise involving Gold and Silver multi-agency discussion groups tackling a plane crash over a 14-day period in five different locations across Northern Ireland. It consisted of pre-incident planning, response to and investigation of the incident and recovery.

Delegates also heard from speakers from various agencies, including Airport management, Public Health, PSNI Media & PR, Disaster Victim Identification and local government. A senior figure in US emergency management, Professor Daniel Boatright from the University of Oklahoma, delivered a lecture on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and how emergency services coped with tens of thousands of survivors at the Astrodome in Houston, Texas.

The exercise was opened by ACC Rural Dave Jones and closed by ACC Alistair Finlay who both participated in the Gold group.

Civil Contingencies Training

Training for Northern Ireland Departments

The Centre for Applied Learning (CAL) provides training for the Northern Ireland Civil Service on a wide range of subjects. One course provided by CAL which is relevant to all involved in emergency planning is 'Business Continuity Management' which will run on 11 November in Bankmore House, Belfast. Further information can be obtained on the CAL website at <http://nical.nigov.net/>.

Emergency Planning College

The Cabinet Office Emergency Planning College continues to offer a wide range of Civil Contingencies courses in Northern Ireland. Further information can be obtained from the College website at http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/epcollege/training/ni_courses.aspx.

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