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INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON GROUP ON RISK ASSESSMENT

**Risk and Public Health: Addressing the concerns in the Phillips Report
A Paper by the Dept. of Health**

Summary

This paper summaries key initiatives being undertaken by the Department of Health on risk and public health in the light of Lord Phillips' report on BSE. It highlights action being undertaken, or under active consideration, to reinforce risk management structures within DH and in collaboration with other Government departments.

Background

1. The Phillips Report on BSE, published in October last year, highlighted failings in the Government's handling of risk and risk communication to the public. The Department of Health co-ordinated the Government's response on risk and uncertainty together with other Government departments such as MAFF, FSA and Cabinet Office.

2. The Government's interim response to Phillips, which provides a basis for consultation and discussion, was published in February this year. The chapter on "Risk and Uncertainty" seeks views on reinforcing risk management procedures, such as establishing proper lines of responsibility and accountability for risk management decisions, contingency planning and effective risk communication to public.

3. The proposals include procedures for consulting the public on risk issues, opening up the scientific advisory process and developing effective training programmes for departmental staff.

Issue

This paper is brought to the attention of ILGRA members to update them on current plans for improving the handling of risk and uncertainty both within the Department of Health and in conjunction with other Government departments.

Action

ILGRA members are asked to note what we have done so far to learn from the Phillips Report.

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RISK AND PUBLIC HEALTH: ADDRESSING THE CONCERNS IN THE PHILLIPS' REPORT

The Background

1. The Phillips Report on BSE was published in October last year. It highlighted several shortcomings in the Government's handling of risk and uncertainty in relation to the BSE crisis. However, the lessons from Phillips are applicable more widely in public health, and it is in this spirit that the Department of Health contributed to the Government's interim response to Lord Phillips' findings, which was published on 9th February. Since the publication of the Report, a series of steps have been taken to counter weaknesses in the way Government handles risk in the sphere of public health.

The Key Issues

Training

2. One of the central recommendations in Lord Phillips' report is the need to improve the way in which Government handles risk and uncertainty and its communication to the public. For example, Lord Phillips advocates that, where there is a risk issue, it should be handled openly and the public must be trusted to respond rationally to messages from Government.

3. To meet these recommendations, the Department of Health recognises that departmental staff must be properly equipped to deal with and communicate risk effectively. To this end, it has funded and organised, in conjunction with the Civil Service College, a programme of training courses for its staff. The training programme began in November last year with a course aimed at equipping senior members of staff with the key concepts in risk governance and risk communication. These include a better understanding of public perceptions and reactions to different risk issues, the role of scientific advisory committees, the application of the precautionary principle, and the influence of the media on how the public reacts to risk issues. The training course, which has now been extended to junior personnel, also includes practical examples of best practice for communicating risk and uncertainty in public health. It is anticipated that four additional training sessions this year will furnish both senior and junior staff with a sound grounding in the fundamentals of risk communication.

Research

4. The Department's training courses are being supported by a risk research programme. Currently, DH (in association with other Government Departments) is assessing the outcome of research on the social amplification of risk. The object of the research – conducted by four research teams from Birmingham, East Anglia, Belfast and Surrey Universities - is to assess why some issues become important matters of public concern (through social amplification), while others do not.

5. DH and the Health and Safety Executive have also funded the Institute of Food Research to research different methods of public participation such as focus groups, consensus conferences and peoples' panels, and to develop templates for evaluating

these public participation exercises. The final draft from the Institute of Food Research, is currently being assessed by both funding Departments. The outcome will be a toolkit for policymakers setting out the pros and cons of particular public participation methods, and guidance on how to evaluate the outcome of the participation.

6. In addressing Lord Phillips' concerns about transparency, DH has also funded means of opening up the work of scientific advisory committees, such as the Human Genetics Commission, through the use of open meetings and public consultation exercises. All meetings of the Commission are now open to the public. The feedback from the Commission has been positive. The Secretariat reports that the overwhelming majority of participants involved in the open meetings (98%) welcomed the exercise. This new approach towards greater openness also includes the publication of agendas, minutes and background material on the Internet by most DH advisory committees.

7. DH has also allocated new funding of £0.5m for risk research. Areas currently being considered for funding include research on how future BSE type risk issue might be handled, best practice on communicating scientific advice and uncertainty; an extension of a pilot project on risk literacy from Birmingham University as well as generic research on risk literacy and risk perception, and a feasibility study on decision support systems in risk management.

Precaution

8. Lord Phillips' report set considerable store by the consistent application of the precautionary principle in handling crises like BSE. Although guidance on the precautionary principle already exists, such as the EU Communication and Council resolution, Treasury guidance, and ILGRA's own paper on the subject, the Department of Health is looking at embedding a consistent approach to the application of the Principle within its own organisation. The Department intends that by summer 2001, it will have instituted a department-wide workshop that will:

- Investigate the use and application of the Precautionary Principle across DH -within Public Health Group, Social Care Group, Medicines Control Agency and Medical Devices Agency;
- Consider case studies in which DH might apply the Principle, such as mobile phones, vaccination, vCJD and re-use of surgical instruments.
- Take on board the current UK line and implications of the international dimension;
- Develop guidance identifying circumstances in which DH might apply the Precautionary Principle.

Inter-departmental co-ordination

9. The Phillips report also pointed to disjointed and ill co-ordinated action among Government departments when confronted with risks related to public health. To meet this shortcoming, the Department of Health is, with the collaboration of key players represented on the Phillips Steering Group, aiming to develop proposals for a cross Whitehall workshop in summer 2001, and to discuss the following:

- risk management and accountability;
- precaution and openness;

- scope for shared central guidance on risk and public health, and
- common principles for future training.

The International Dimension

10. In the wider context, the issues of risk and risk communication will be taking on an international dimension through the World Health Organisation - their World Health Report of 2002 will be on Risk. At a meeting earlier this year between the Chief Medical Officer and the Director General of WHO, the latter invited the Department of Health to make a contribution to that report on risk and public health. The precise details of the contribution have yet to be formalised, but it is expected that this will be developed at a WHO/DH consultation meeting in London in June.

Conclusion

11. The purpose of this paper has been to flag up work streams initiated within the Department of Health and in conjunction with other Government departments to meet the challenge of Lord Phillips' report. When taken together, the purpose of these measures is to establish a broad programme of re-evaluation, focusing on the key concerns of the BSE Inquiry: better training of staff on risk governance, transparency of purpose, trusting the public, and consistency in the application of the Precautionary Principle in public health.