

Open Government Status: Fully Open

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON GROUP ON RISK ASSESSMENT

IMPROVING COLLABORATION IN MANAGING 'INTERDEPARTMENTAL RISK'

A Paper by the Secretariat

Summary

The paper invites ILGRA to consider whether existing mechanisms are adequate to coordinate policy to address urgent issues where risks cut across departmental boundaries.

Issue

Should there be new/improved cross-Government mechanisms to address risk assessment, management and communication in situations where the risk spans more than one department, and where urgent action is needed?

Background – collaboration and contingency planning

1. The issue is not new, but it has come to the fore in the context of increasing interest in how the Government manages risk in general, and foot and mouth disease in particular.

2. The central message of the Cabinet Office Performance and Innovation Unit's report *Wiring it up - Whitehall's management of cross cutting policies and services* is that "simply removing barriers to cross-cutting working is not enough: more needs to be done if cross-cutting policy initiatives are to hold their own against purely departmental objectives." One of the six key areas in which action is recommended is:

- "Using the center (No 10, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury) to lead the drive to more effective cross-cutting approaches wherever they are needed."

3. The findings in the Phillips report on relations between Departments and contingency planning include:

- "We reiterate the importance of continuing to develop closer collaboration in the investigation and management of human and animal disease." (Vol 2 para 7.82)
- "The BSE story suggests to us that such collaboration may be facilitated by clear allocation of a lead responsibility ... to an organization and, within that,

- to an individual who will need to consider which other organizations need to be involved.” (Vol 2, para 7.83)
- “Establishing before a crisis arises where lead responsibility for advice lies is highly desirable.” (Vol 6, para 8.232).

4. Although made in the context of animal diseases and zoonoses, it seems reasonable to take up the same recommendations for other risks spanning more than one Department. The Government’s interim response to the Phillips report invites views on how the Government might best develop guidance on contingency planning in general¹.

The problem

5. Traditionally Departments have framed risk issues in the light of their interests, and then consulted with other Departments. However, this can lead to problems in circumstances where risks do not respect departmental boundaries – a risk management option that seems appropriate from one departmental viewpoint may not be so when viewed across Government as a whole. The foot and mouth outbreak, for example, was initially framed as an animal health issue, but risk management measures by MAFF to contain the risk included, for example, action to close footpaths, to dispose of carcasses, to maintain continuity and integrity of food supplies, and to seek to mitigate effects on the tourist industry, necessarily bringing in other Departments and regulators such as DETR, EA, DH, FSA, DCMS and local authorities. Realisation of the public’s expectation of an integrated, ‘joined up’ response was at best patchy.

6. There would appear to be a need for systems that enable Departments to share findings on emerging risks, and take an integrated view on the assessment and management of risk.

New systems?

7. Although ILGRA has “promoted new collaborative approaches, fostered research on topics of cross-government relevance and provided a network for improving communication between those engaged in risk policy in different departments”², ILGRA does not take up specific risk issues. ILGRA’s remit is coherence and consistency of risk policy across Departments. Its modus operandi is to work reflectively, meeting twice a year in an informal atmosphere to facilitate the development and exchange of good practice. It does not have executive or operational responsibility.

8. In situations where risk spans more than one Department and urgent action is needed, should there be new/improved mechanisms to, for example:

- gather intelligence about emerging risks and share the information with Departments;

¹ Para 6.24 in *The interim response to the report of the BSE inquiry*

² Para 6.16 in *The interim response to the report of the BSE inquiry*

- assess risk holistically, drawing as needed on the scientific and technical expertise available centrally and from Departments;
- identify options and their merits for addressing the emerging risks;
- establish clear responsibility and authority to take the lead in addressing the risk;
- act quickly and decisively;
- act as a repository of lessons learned from previous experience, and draw on them as appropriate.

Action

9. ILGRA members are invited to:

- consider whether new/improved mechanisms are needed;
- amend and develop the requirements in paragraph 8;
- suggest the form such mechanisms might take; and
- consider whether the issue should be raised in ILGRA's third report to Ministers.

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