



**TYNE AND WEAR FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY
EMERGENCY PLANNING UNIT**

Committee Report

Meeting: CIVIL CONTINGENCIES COMMITTEE: 15 MARCH 2010

Subject: NATIONAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS EXERCISE 'WHITE NOISE'

Report of the Chief Emergency Planning Officer

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise the local outcomes of a national telecommunications exercise that was held on the 11th and 12th November 2009.
- 1.2 Exercise White Noise was a Tier 1 national exercise and forms a part of the National Preparedness Programme and annual exercise series. It was a Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) led exercise but the scenario had impacts and consequences across all sectors and Departments of Government, including local government.
- 1.3 The north east region participated in the exercise, including representatives of the Northumbria Local Resilience Forum (LRF) Telecommunications Sub Group (TSG).
- 1.4 A loss of telecommunications is considered in the Government produced 'National Risk Register'.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The aim of Exercise White Noise 2009 were:
"To rehearse the BIS response in conjunction with other government departments and industry in the event of a major telecommunications disruption and associated consequences."
- 2.2 The objectives of Exercise White Noise are;
 - ◆ To rehearse the BIS telecoms response
 - ◆ To rehearse the Other Government Departments and regional response
 - ◆ To test the NEAT (the National Emergency Alert for Telecommunications) response
 - ◆ To test the information flows and interfaces between; industry, central and local government and the devolved administrations
- 2.3 The information and data used was generated by detailed research from the participating Telecoms Companies (Telcos) to determine how the

failure would occur and allow Government Departments to develop the potential impact themes that would result from the failure.

3. GENERAL OVERVIEW

- 3.1 The exercise was a strategic level simulation exercise stretching from the central strategic Civil Contingency Committee (CCC – ‘COBRA’) through government departments to industry sectors including the individual Telecoms Companies and their Network Management Centres (NMCs), and three regions, including the North East.
- 3.2 It did not involve any operational play “at the coal face” and all data was delivered via simulation and pre-written injects. In every other respect the exercise was played as realistically as was possible between the teams taking part.
- 3.3 The exercise play took place on Wednesday 11th and Thursday 12th November (but not through the night). Time on the exercise was played in “real time” without any time jumps within the exercise.

4. PARTICIPANTS

- 4.1 Participation in the exercise drew on crisis teams or response cells from most Government Departments, a large proportion of Telecoms Companies, and three Regional Resilience Forums. BIS was the Lead Government Department, and within the scenario exercised its full response organisation.
- 4.2 In a UK context, the exercise was also supported in full by both the Scottish Executive and the Welsh Assembly as an opportunity to look at the management of such an incident within the Devolved Administrations.
- 4.3 In the regions, the exercise stretched out to three of the Government Offices (South East, North East and East Midlands). All of the Local Resilience Forums in the North East participated, with Northumbria LRF providing the greatest number of players.

5. THE SCENARIO

- 5.1 Day 1 involved the impact of a serious disruption entering the main telecoms (PSTN) infrastructure at 08.01. This originated from a third party overseas operator acquiring a ‘virus’ in its main operating system, and infecting other networks.
- 5.2 This caused a major cascade disruption within the PSTN (public switched telephone network) switches across all the networks, and systems immediately began to try to control the ensuing failures.
- 5.3 After a short period it became apparent that a cascade could not be controlled, and it was decided that operators must isolate all other networks.

- 5.4 This affected a range of telecoms systems; landlines were 'not working', most mobile calls were lost, and the 999 calls was unavailable, although the internet remained in operation; as were private lines, Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) systems and the government 'GSI' secure network.
- 5.5 The second day did not involve LRFs as it was devoted instead to the Telecoms operators considering the implications of how to re-establish and restore all of the networks.

6. NORTHUMBRIA LRF INVOLVEMENT

- 6.1 Northumbria LRF involvement in the regional response was co-ordinated by the LRF Telecommunications Sub Group (TSG). It met on the first day of the exercise at the Government Offices for the North East (GONE) in Newcastle.
- 6.2 The LRF TSG is composed of officers with a responsibility for emergency communications from Category 1 and 2 Responders within our area, including the five Tyne and Wear Councils, the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service and the Emergency Planning Unit; with the TSG Group Chair being provided at that time by the City of Sunderland.
- 6.3 The TSG had to prepare situation reports for the information of COBRA throughout the day, on a number of evolving issues – an example of one of these is shown at Annex 1.

7. OUTCOMES

- 7.1 A senior official in Communities and Local Government conveyed thanks to the Northumbria LRF TSG for participating in the exercise and for providing central government a local slant on the implications of a loss of telecommunications systems.
- 7.2 At a post exercise de-brief meeting, the Northumbria TSG identified a number of action points that it could undertake to help to ensure resilient communications for our area in the event of a large scale telecommunications failure - see Annex 2. These are currently being actioned by the LRF TSG.

8. CONCLUSIONS

- 8.1 Exercise White Noise was an important national exercise designed to enable relevant organisations to consider the implications of a major loss of general communications systems, and to evaluate the impacts on local communities and services.
- 8.2 The actions identified will help to ensure the impacts of such a failure are mitigated should they arise.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 Members are requested to note this report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

'White Noise' exercise papers

Northumbria LRF Telecommunications Sub Group 'White Noise' de-brief notes

Copies of these documents are available in the Emergency Planning Unit offices.

ANNEX 1

(EXERCISE) EXAMPLE OF A 'ROLLING' SITREP FROM NORTHUMBRIA LRF TO COBRA

- Widespread regional disruption to telecoms
- Emergency services report loss of 999 communications
- Activation of LRF 999 loss plan – notified partner agencies via email/Airwave/private wires
- Health sector reporting problems with patient transfers, and community nurses cannot be reached
- Police establishing Rendezvous Points and extra patrols
- Consideration being given to calling Senior Co-ordination Group (SCG) / Regional Civil Contingencies Committee (RCCC)
- Retained firefighters being alerted – resource implications for Retained fire stations
- LAs reporting loss of telecare/warden services
- CE Electric cannot receive any customer calls about power outages or emergency situations therefore they cannot be addressed. Engineers cannot be contacted for urgent maintenance.
- Communications established with COMAH sites via Airwave
- All three SCGs in the region have now sat. RCCC will sit this afternoon.
- Major incident standby – partners alerted
- High profile/visibility patrols being prioritised
- Retained fire stations now available again. Local personnel contacted and local turnout arrangements in place.

ANNEX 2

EXERCISE 'WHITE NOISE' NORTHUMBRIA LRF DE-BRIEF POINTS

Topic	Responsible	Timescale
Update and circulate Inter-agency inter-operability Talk Groups protocol	TSG Chair, Northumbria Police, South Tyneside Council	End of March 2010
Train staff in updated Inter-agency inter-operability Talk Groups protocol	TSG Chair, Northumbria Police, South Tyneside Council, LRF Training and Exercising Group Chair	April 2010 onwards
LRF Communications Plan – finalise and circulate	TSG Chair	End of March 2010
Review of Airwave availability in Councils	Local Authority TSG representatives	End of March 2010
LRF Satellite telephone directory	TWEPU	End of March 2010
LRF Satellite telephone communications test	TSG satellite telephone holders	April 2010 onwards
Re-circulate BT Emergency arrangements	TSG Chair	Dec 2009
LRF Loss of 999 plan – review in light of exercise	LRF ESLG	March 2010
Review of representation on the TSG	TSG Chair	End of March 2010