



The staff at the Office of Emergency Planning, based in the Department of Defence on Parkgate Street. The office's role is to prepare and coordinate the nation's responses to major emergencies and incidents. It is also unique in that it integrates civilian and military personnel in the same working environment.

# Making Plans

**Within the grounds of the Department of Defence/Defence Forces Headquarters in Parkgate, a unique and integrated military/civil office has been operating successfully for almost three years. SIGNAL reports on the workings of the Office of Emergency Planning (OEP).**

**C**olonel Diarmuid Ó Mórdha and Commandant John Guinane are two Defence Forces' officers working in this unique and challenging environment. The Office itself was set up in a direct response to the large-scale destruction wrought on an unsuspecting New York on September 11th 2001. In the aftermath of these events the Government moved quickly and decisively to respond to the evolving international situation. Whilst there was an extensive framework of emergency plans in place, it was clear that the assumptions on which emergency planning was based needed to be revisited. The Office of Emergency Planning is staffed by four civil servants and two military officers. The range of expertise available within the Office is varied and includes technical, administrative, logistical and planning skills, both in an operational and strategic environment. This Office is the first wholly integrated civil/military office established within the Department of Defence. The

combination of skills available to the Office, the varied experience and expertise of all the staff and the support of the Department and the Defence Forces has permitted the development of a unique working environment.

## Background

Col Ó Mórdha explains; "Emergency planning changed dramatically following the incidents of 9/11, the Minister for Defence was tasked with chairing a Government Task Force on Emergency Planning which deals with policy and comprises those Ministers and/or senior officials of Government Departments and public authorities which make a key contribution to the emergency planning process. This Task Force continues to be chaired by the Minister for Defence and has met on some thirty-three occasions".

To support the work of the Task Force, an Inter-Departmental Working Group on Emergency Planning (IDWG), chaired by the OEP, was also established. This Working Group comprises officials representing



Colonel O'Mordha &amp; Comdt Guinane

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Government Departments and public authorities with lead or principal support roles in Government emergency plans. The Working Group is the vehicle through which expertise is shared between Government Departments and public authorities on emergency planning. Col Ó Mórdha stresses that there were emergency plans in place prior to this re-evaluation of the nation's emergency planning preparedness. "It became apparent, at an early stage, that there was a necessity to put structures in place to support existing services and to improve co-ordination across the various existing national emergency plans. It was felt that the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces should assist with this co-ordinating role in emergency planning. Perhaps the most important lesson learned was that emergency planning is not just for Government Departments that have responsibility for the "Blue Light Services", but that it is part of general planning and is an essential management activity for all Departments and public authorities to pursue".

According to Mr. Eamonn Farrell, the Chief Technical Officer with the Department of Defence, and Head of the Office of Emergency Planning, there were several new factors in emergency planning which that led to the setting up of the OEP. "There were

many changes in emergency planning perspectives principally as a result of the September 11th attacks; the type of weapon, using commercial aircraft to perpetrate the attacks, the number of casualties and the suicidal motives of those responsible - all highly unusual in the developed world. Nationally, there were a number of plans in place and there were sound arrangements within the relevant Government Departments for dealing with emergency issues but these might not necessarily be robust enough to deal with extraordinary situations that may not have been envisaged in the original preparatory studies and analyses. There was also the question of coordination of these plans. The OEP was set up to support the Minister for Defence in this role as chairman of the Task Force on Emergency Planning. The OEP and now provides a key support to the Task Force and co-ordinates the work of the Interdepartmental Working Group (IDWG) on Emergency Planning. The OEP's role is not to take over the responsibilities of other Government Departments with responsibilities in relation to emergency planning. They still carry those responsibilities; our job is to coordinate and oversee, and Our role is to help facilitate those responsibilities and we work proactively to bring key issues to the fore."

## Government Task Force

The Government Task Force on Emergency Planning includes all Government Departments and public authorities with policy responsibilities in the emergency planning process. Col Ó Mórdha explained that the Task Force was established in October 2001 to provide active political leadership of the process of reviewing emergency planning in this country. "The focus of this work continues to be on making the necessary arrangements to, at best, prevent or, at least, minimise the risks from terrorist activities, ensuring that the protection available to the Irish people is maximised, putting mechanisms in place to support the response agencies and providing co-ordination for maximum efficiency and effectiveness. It is vital that there is a high level of public confidence within these structures."

## Inter-Departmental Working Group (IDWG)

"The IDWG meets regularly under the guidance of the Task Force," explains Comdt Guinane. "It is chaired by the OEP and its membership includes senior representatives from those Government Departments with roles in emergency planning. The IDWG provides a forum for examining issues raised at the Task Force." Comdt Guinane says that the IDWG serves also to develop strategic guidance for emergency planning and provides guidance for co-ordinating responses and reviewing and continuously updating emergency plans. "I think the OEP have achieved definitive results. There is a heightened awareness and knowledge of public information issues within Government Departments. We have also worked hard to reinforce the links from Ministers with responsibilities for emergency planning right down to the service delivery level. To this end we have also carried out a lot of work on mechanisms to identify large-scale emergencies and to activate an appropriate response.

One of the most commonly held misconceptions in relation to emergency planning is that there is a single, all-purpose 'National Plan' to deal with every emergency. "National Emergency Planning for different scenarios and eventualities is developed under the auspices of specific Government Departments," explained Mr. Ciarán Desmond, Assistant Principal Officer at the OEP. "Different emergencies fall within the remit of different Departments. For example the National Emergency Plan for Nuclear Accidents is the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and

Local Government, assisted by the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland, while Public Health Emergencies come under the remit of the Department of Health and Children. There is no one generic plan. Each Department, with a lead role, is responsible for bringing its level of expertise to the process of emergency planning. They are supported in this role by all other Government Departments and public authorities."

There are also international dimensions to emergency planning. "There are a number of different warning, information and assistance mechanisms available to assist the State. The primary one is the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government as the National Correspondent. There are other internationally recognised mechanisms for different types of emergencies." These mechanisms facilitate the rapid communication of warnings and information in the event of an emergency within any of the affiliated countries. The OEP also liaises regularly with its Northern Ireland counterparts in the Central Emergency Planning Unit in the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

Col Ó Mórdha explained "There is always a requirement for review and revision. The scale of the events of September 11th served to concentrate the mind and brought a degree of urgency to the emergency planning process." Comdt Guinane says that while the plans pre-September 11th were quite thorough, the analysis and reviews that have taken place since that atrocity have identified areas where threats might exist which previously would not have been of concern. "The range of possibilities is large, we have made progress, but there is still much work to be done." Comdt Guinane adds, "We have quickly come to realise that it's a never ending cycle. To implement a plan you have to make sure it's as current as it can be, which means that it has to be updated on a cyclical basis. Those updates then have to be incorporated into the responses throughout the plan. It's an ongoing process of review, testing and revalidation. Emergency planning is an organic process, we constantly need to assess where we are and assess where we are going. It's vital that the OEP and the emergency planners are constantly moving forward. There are many issues to be addressed but this requires a methodical approach, we need to make sure all the plans are completely thought through and that there is a level of robustness to them. There is an old military saying that 'no plan survives first contact with the enemy' - but we are looking to develop something more than that." Mr. Eamonn Farrell reinforces this point; "Almost

three years on from September 11th the threat is still there, and it looks like it will be for the foreseeable future. We don't see ourselves being in a position where we can slow down our rate of preparation."

### Threat Assessment

So where does the OEP obtain the information to formulate its planning? "Potential threats to the State arising from international terrorism are continuously monitored by those involved, principally An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces. Both of these are represented at the Task Force and the Inter Departmental Working Group", says Comdt Guinane.

### Military/Civilian Integration

"Prior to joining the Department of Defence, I had worked with the Revenue Commissioners and was not fully aware of the role of the Defence Forces," says Mr. Ciarán Desmond. "However, I have been in the Department of Defence for three and a half years, and a member of the OEP since its inception. I have found the team atmosphere within the OEP to be a very progressive one. We have worked very well together and I find working with military personnel to be a highly

beneficial experience." Col Ó Mórdha concurs with his counterpart. "I've been in the OEP for more than a year now, and found the process of settling into the office relatively seamless, though the work has been challenging. The military system emphasises the need for working as a team and that is very much the case here in the OEP. It is a very rewarding role and the OEP is working effectively." Margaret Myron, the Office Manager in the OEP, added, "I had previously worked in the Department of Social and Family Affairs and transferring into the Department of Defence involved adapting both to a new Department and a new, recently established office. However, the civilian/military aspect to the Office was not an issue which posed any difficulties, to the contrary, I found the experience to be a positive one." Eamonn Farrell says that the environment in the OEP has helped. "Everybody working here represents the Office, there is no distinction between civilian and military personnel in that respect."

Further information on the Office of Emergency Planning can be acquired by contacting Ms Anne Marie Murphy at Tel: 01 804 2439, or email at [annemarie.murphy@defence.irlgov.ie](mailto:annemarie.murphy@defence.irlgov.ie)

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September 11th instigated widespread change in Emergency Planning internationally.