Isle of Man Establishes First Joint Control Room in British Isles

Department of Home Affairs Communications Division
Isle of Man Government
British Isles

With traditional fire calls decreasing, ambulance calls on the rise, and policing directed more toward community engagement, the need for collaboration among emergency services is imperative. Collaboration presents an opportunity to make better, more efficient use of resources to improve service delivery.

The Isle of Man's Department of Home Affairs Communications Division has embraced collaboration and the benefits of shared IT systems and premises. It manages the island's Emergency Services Joint Control Room (ESJCR), a unique tri-service control room in Douglas, the capital of the Isle of Man. Managing call-handling and dispatching for ambulance, fire and rescue, and police services, the ESJCR is the first joint control room of its kind in the British Isles.

Three Services, One Vision

The vision for the ESJCR began in 2000, following the UK government's "Invest to Save Budget," an initiative that encouraged partnership and cross-boundary working between public sector agencies. Located in the Irish Sea between Great Britain and Ireland, the Isle of Man is an internally self-governing, dependent territory of the Crown that is only 31 miles long by 10 miles wide, with a population of approximately 85,000. Yet, the Isle of

Man's emergency services operated from three separate control rooms using different systems to manage incidents, so the time was ripe for change.

The chief officers from the Isle of Man's three emergency services agreed to collaborate and take a bold step to combine call-handling and dispatching operations into a single center managed by the Department of Home Affairs Communications Division. Keeping the division separate from emergency services, and thus impartial, was important as the project came to fruition.

"The fact that the three chiefs signed up straight away, and were all equally enthusiastic, was a big factor in the

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> **Jane Quayle**
> Head of the Communications Division
> Isle of Man's Department of Home Affairs

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success of the project," said Jane Quayle, head of the division. "This was a unique thing we were doing, not only sharing dispatch in a single control room, but also, crucially, using the same multi-skilled operators for every call, regardless of type."

New IT & Staff

The ESJCR project coincided with the introduction of Tetra digital radio for emergency services, so members of the project team had a lot on their hands. A purpose-built operations center was constructed in Douglas to include infrastructure for both radio and dispatch systems, as well as a modern working environment.

Procurement for the computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system – the heart of the operation – was a complex affair, involving requirements from all three emergency services, a team from all agencies, and the Isle of Man Treasury. Following an intensive evaluation process, officials selected Hexagon's industry-leading CAD system as the preferred solution.

Quayle said they chose Hexagon's Safety & Infrastructure division because it offered the best fit for the requirements of the island, as well as its extensive prior experience with multi-agency systems. Hexagon's CAD system, a scalable and flexible solution that coordinates multiple agencies, was configured to accommodate each agency's workflows.

The system's track record as an out-of-the-box, multi-agency solution is apparent in the Isle of Man's simple configuration. It features interfaces to fire

station hardware and alert systems, as well as to Priority Dispatch's ProQA triage software. Its resource recommendation module assists operators with finding the right resource to dispatch. If appropriate, incident types are shared between agencies, but for most calls, they are separate, allowing precise incident entry and business reporting. Since operators are multi-skilled, the same graphical user interface is available for all incident types.

Staffing the new center was a major undertaking. The three emergency services had operated their previous control rooms differently, with some using dedicated operators and others using uniformed officers, either taken directly out of the working roster or on temporary assignment. Those officers went back to their primary jobs, so the division needed to hire new staff to operate the center.

Operating the new center was a multi-skilled task due to the individual culture and systems of the three emergency services. The new operators required extensive training, and spent many weeks with each agency learning the processes, skills, and systems required before the new center went live in April 2004.

"Nowadays, we do our training in-house, and it doesn't take so long, but back then, we had nothing," said Quayle. "Now, operators are exposed to the CAD system much earlier, doubling up in the control room as soon as they start their training, and during any breaks in that training process."

More Than a Decade of Success

More than 10 years after implementation, the Isle of Man can claim success, despite the initial challenges resulting from consolidation. Since it went live, the system has been through two upgrades and enhanced in other areas.

"Initially, we were understaffed," said Bill McCann, former operations manager of the ESJCR. "You think there will be savings in manpower, and there are, but you need the staff to take the calls. The main savings come in other areas – buildings, overhead, energy, and so on."

The control room runs with 3 to 5 staff members per shift and answers up to 35,000 calls per month, resulting in more than 2,500 incidents managed through the system. The volume of calls jumps significantly during the Festival of Motorcycling and the famous Isle of Man TT Race, an annual motorcycle race that increases the island's population by up to 50%.

Quayle urges other agencies thinking about following the Isle of Man's example to focus on the accuracy and quality of the data.

"A system is only as good as the data contained in it, and that data must be up to date," she said. She also believes the system and IT staff are crucial for success.
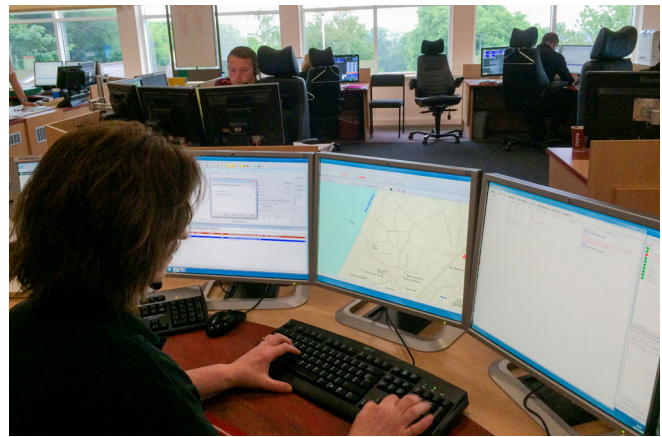
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"You need the backroom staff with the right skills to keep systems up to date and ticking over," she added.

Now that the center has been operational for more than a decade, the Isle of Man has built a reservoir of experience in multi-agency collaboration. The Communications Division testifies to its benefits.

"We wouldn't go back," said McCann of the separate systems and centers. "That would be a huge backward step."