COVID-19 and Data Centres

Notes and actions from call 24th April

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1 Update from DCMS

Testing regimes for key workers: The self-referral system for testing key workers (those who were symptomatic or living with those that were symptomatic) had been uploaded to the government website. The objective was to provide testing so that frontline staff who were quarantined but not infected could return to work. The site included useful guidance and a list of eligible sectors (including data centres). See: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-getting-tested#essential-workers

Other policy areas: In other policy areas there was little change: construction guidance had not shifted and there had been no changes to key worker classifications. The team was working with other parts of central government on issues relating to CNI but again no changes were proposed. The next stage of dialogue between DCMS and the sector looked likely to focus on longer term issues, for instance how government could best support the sector.

NB members asked whether there were testing kits available on the market: 4D had researched the market and found a potential supplier: https://www.surescreen.com/

2 Typical faults and outages: Ed Ansett, DCIRN

DCMS had asked the sector to provide an indicative list of typical faults that might occur in data centres. Ed Ansett kindly joined the call and provided an overview of typical incidents. To date he had not seen an escalation in incidents during COVID-19. However, there was evidence that routine maintenance was being deferred, either because personnel were not available or because social distancing requirements could not be satisfied so there was the obvious issue that as time went on, the likelihood of outages would increase.

It was also evident that stocks were depleting – typical delivery times of a month were now extended to at least six months, often with little certainty of actual delivery. Lead times for even the most basic components were dramatically extended.

The most common cause of failure in data centres was in engineered systems – those depending on batteries and those depending on generators. Battery related systems were a particular area of

weakness in data centres. As the sector matured into a mission critical industry these areas would need to be addressed. One problem with data centres was the relatively unpredictable result of an outage.

Members discussed outages: the most common cause of data centre outages was human error (see link). Not having the right people available could mean faults were harder to rectify and some could escalate rapidly, such as a cooling failure. Summer weather and resultant hot spots were another headache for operators.

There would be additional strain on supply chains because operators were likely to be demanding the same components and equipment from the same suppliers. It was worth investing effort to prevent a repeat of this kind of systemic problem in future.

Operators reported varying experiences: some had adequate stocks, others were experiencing delays from unexpected quarters such as from DHL couriers who were short staffed following layoffs. Equipment and plant, especially cooling and UPS, were generally shipped from outside the UK. One Italian supplier had asked for letters of importance with orders to enable them to restart manufacturing. There would be pressure on suppliers to work through their usual August shutdown in order to address the backlog.

DCMS thanked members for the information received from the sector include the comments on outages and supply chain. These would inform policy discussions.

3 Recovery and competitiveness

Brexit: If equipment were subject to border issues, this could place both ongoing operations and expansion at risk.

Transport: members would welcome more clarity and consistency in communications about transport: what was and was not required, and whether London was likely to ease restrictions earlier or remain in line with the rest of the UK.

Sales / international travel: Customers seeking data centre capacity did not usually make decisions without a physical visit to the data centre. Some form of guidance about international travel would be helpful in due course. However, members noted that when escalations had required international travel, there had been difficulties elsewhere in the world but not in and out of the UK.

Constraints on activity: if the UK were very slow to lift restrictions and other regulations were placed on domestic data centres there would be a risk of offshoring and subsequent loss of business to locations where restrictions did not apply. DCMS asked members to identify any specific countries or roles that they were particularly worried about in terms of travel to and from the UK. Operators noted that Northern Italy was a particular concern. Factory tests to look at new equipment in process in France, Germany and Italy were suspended but this activity would need to restart before too long.

Social distancing: members were keen to understand social distancing would be applied in practice as the country moved people back to work: how would it impact travel? Would desks in offices need to be spaced or dividers erected? How would a phased return be enacted?

4 Staff morale and wellbeing

Members noted that internal comms had been stepped up and rather than furloughing, some operators were recruiting.

Staff wellbeing and mental health was a cross sector issues and the priority at sector level was to demonstrate best practice, share it among the operator community and ensure that everyone had access to relevant guidance, information and other relevant resources.

5 Ongoing role of DCMS team

The Data Infrastructure Resilience Team was funded for 12 months, led by Emily Foley and comprising herself, Sam Roberts and Ashlea Scicluna. All three had transferred from other roles on data policy. Others might join that core team depending on necessity.

COVID-19 had made it clear that everyone's lives are extremely data dependent and that the data centre sector is critical to economic activity. While operators had been delivering resilience for years, government needed to understand more about the sector and how this was achieved. Having achieved the urgent changes needed to the Key Workers list, work would soon focus on longer term issues.

Policymakers needed to know whether government was working with operators in the right way, how they should view the sector and what support measures might be needed to ensure the future security and resilience of the UK's data infrastructure. This would be the team's focus once the immediate issues relating to COVID-19 had been resolved.

So over the next 12 months, they hoped to reach a point where they understood the sector well enough to make recommendations on:

- whether any transformative changes were needed to government support for the sector, both in terms of residence but also in terms of competitiveness.
- What should government be doing to support not just the economic viability of the sector but also enable the sector to continue to support the UK economy.

It would also be useful to hear which parts of government the sector was already engaged with and what kind of support operators were getting, especially those with sites designated as CNI.

6 Q&A with members

Members noted that they would be very happy to host data centre visits if needed.

Some members were anxious about the disadvantages of CNI listing, especially for smaller firms. DCMS clarified that, with respect to CNI, it was not a case of simply designating every company within a sector, but of identifying critical activities and conferring CNI classification, together with the associated obligations and protections, where appropriate. But first they had to understand the landscape.

techUK added that the sector, with a cohesive community of interest involving almost all commercial operators and a good proportion of large enterprise (some of whose facilities were already designated CNI) was well positioned to provide a collective voice. They could help DCMS understand

how resilience was achieved and provide comparisons with other countries on data centre designation. This would be an iterative piece of work as it was a very complex topic with significant implications for individual businesses and the sector at large.

Members asked whether there would be an opportunity to define something new to acknowledge criticality outside the formal CNI listing. DCMS responded that at present they were not yet thinking about solutions. The team had 12 months to do the work, so the first priority was to gather the evidence on resilience, security risks and economic risks and build up a picture that could be used to inform policy. The data centres industry had cropped up in different places in government and was seen through different lenses and in different contexts, but not to date as a sector in its own right.

7 Next call: Friday 1st May

Business recovery planning post COVID-19 would be discussed

8 ACTIONS

- Leverage techUK's Operator Supplier Forum to address supply level issues, both with large suppliers and SME sub-contractors.
- Identify and share best practice within the sector on mental health and wellbeing and provide links to relevant guidance.
- Link to test kit supplier to be provided to members – see https://www.surescreen.com/

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