

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Exercise Winter Willow was delivered in two stages. Stage 1 was held on 30 January 2007 and comprised a national-level tabletop exercise meeting of the Civil Contingencies Committee (CCC) that simulated UK alert level 2 (first UK cases) of World Health Organisation (WHO) Phase 6. Stage 2, between 16 and 21 February 2007, followed up the decisions taken during Stage 1 with a full national exercise held over several days. This was designed to test the UK response at local, regional and national levels during UK alert level 4 (widespread cases in the UK) of WHO Phase 6. As with any exercise there was inevitably a degree of artificiality in the scenario and response and in particular it was recognised that it was likely that there would have been some weeks notice of the developing global situation and the Civil Contingencies Committee would have met regularly prior to the confirmation of the first case in the UK. However, the exercise scenario successfully tested the planning presumptions outlined in the draft *UK National Framework for Responding to an Influenza Pandemic*.

Evaluation of the Exercise has been undertaken within a structured process at local regional and national levels in England and the devolved administrations. Feedback from all levels has indicated that the exercise was helpful in checking and validating plans and communication channels although there were clearly areas for improvement. Where possible, action is already underway to ensure that issues identified are used to review and revise plans and procedures. The analysis of the issues identified will serve to inform further work on the revision of the *UK National Framework for Responding to an Influenza Pandemic* which is due to be published later this year. The issues that were raised requiring action at a national level fell broadly in to the following areas

Crisis Management and Co-ordination

The Exercise was an excellent opportunity to explore working between the established crisis response structures at regional and local level with national government, the health community and, to a lesser extent, the voluntary sector and to get a better understanding of the challenges they would face during a UK pandemic. The exercise involved nine Regional Civil Contingencies Committees in England and their equivalents in the devolved administrations, fifty one local Strategic Co-ordination Groups covering the whole of the UK, all Strategic Health Authorities and a local Health Community Group for each Authority's area. In all, some 5000 participants were involved during the exercise.

Channels of communication during a pandemic are complex and there is a need to improve the linkages between established local and regional resilience structures and their equivalents in the National Health Service and to review the process of the collection and collation of daily reports in to the centre, together with clarity of the consistent use of data in describing the evolution of the pandemic.

Many aspects of the response to an influenza pandemic fall within the competence of the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and the Exercise highlighted several policy areas where there might necessarily be a difference in approach between administrations. The Exercise also demonstrated the need for continuing close liaison between the UK and the Republic of Ireland on pandemic influenza response planning.

At a national level, there is a need to strengthen and codify central government links with international bodies, e.g. the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

Public Advice and Communication

Communication was a key aspect of the Exercise and players were able to test the complex communications matrix that the UK-wide management of a pandemic presents. During a pandemic, a robust and co-ordinated communication approach will be necessary, particularly between the national and regional levels. Post –exercise feedback indicated that many people thought that public messages needed to be refined and that communications from central government departments and agencies needed to be better co-ordinated to ensure clarity and consistency.

For example, the central message of “business as usual” needed refining in the context of possible school closures and other measures that government might provide advice on. The message needed to be more sophisticated and would need to change as the pandemic developed.

The Exercise also highlighted the need for better engagement with the public and communities and particularly community responsibility for vulnerable people. There was a need for clearer advice to the public on the use of antiviral drugs, facemasks and other measures and on the stocking of home supplies.

Further Policy Development

In testing the practical aspects of implementation of plans, there were a number of areas where policy issues need clarification or further development. Work on these areas is already underway under the management of the National Pandemic Influenza Working Group and progress will be reflected in the revised UK National Framework for Responding to an Influenza Pandemic. Key areas included:

- Travel advice (International) – the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advice will relate to affected countries and their neighbours whilst WHO advice will focus on affected areas.
- Science advice – a review of the scientific evidence base for pandemic preparedness planning and clarifying the role of the Department of Health Science Advisory Group during a pandemic.

- There were several requests by RCCCs for central government to consider the use of the military in support of the local crisis response. However, existing guidance¹ on the UK Resilience website sets out the principles for the use of defence assets in a crisis and makes it clear that contingency planning should not assume the involvement of the military.
- Many aspects of responding to an influenza pandemic fall within the competence of the Devolved Administrations. The Exercise highlighted some policy areas where there might necessarily be a difference in approach between different administrations. Ministers in the Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government and Northern Ireland Executive will wish to ensure that the response made is appropriate to local needs. It was also felt that national contingency plans should be clearer on what policy and response areas fall within the responsibilities of the DAs in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- Northern Ireland shares a land border with the Republic of Ireland and many services and supply chains have cross-border links. The Exercise showed the importance of maintaining close UK-Irish liaison on pandemic influenza response planning.
- The Exercise showed the need for links between central and local government to be further reinforced, especially in the development of policies and sharing of information on the emerging local and national situation.
- The Exercise also showed the need to improve linkages between the established regional and local resilience structures and their equivalents in the National Health Service (NHS). In particular, a better separation needed to be created between crisis response and recovery roles at the local level. It was recognised that the management of a 'rising tide' event was significantly different to a sudden incident and some regions identified the need for greater clarity in individual roles and the trigger for establishing Regional Nominated Co-ordinators, and their equivalents in the devolved administrations, under the Civil Contingencies Act 2004.

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http://www.ukresilience.info/upload/assets/www.ukresilience.info/060710_revised_pandemic.pdf notes that *"Military assistance might be available in exceptional circumstances, at the time of an emergency, if life and property are in immediate danger. But planning for an influenza pandemic should take into account that military support may not be available if local units are deployed on operations; nor should it be assumed that local units have personnel available with either the skill or equipment to undertake specialist tasks. And military personnel themselves will be vulnerable to the illness."*

- A final learning point in this area was that established communication links between central government and international bodies such as the WHO and the ECDC needed to be strengthened and codified.

Next Steps

- National, regional and local resilience teams will wish to review their existing plans in order to codify linkages between responders and ensure that plans reflect existing guidance.
- Local responders should ensure that their multi-agency emergency response arrangements are fully integrated with specific health emergency arrangements to be activated in a pandemic.

Data and Reporting

- The Exercise highlighted the need for the process for the collection of regular data and information at the local level, and its collation into reports to the centre, to be reviewed. There were several possible communication routes between local responders and the centre with the potential to lead to confusion. The templates for reporting data also needed some revision to ensure a consistent picture of the emerging situation.
- Because of the complexity of available data, there needed to be clarity on the consistent use of data on the number of cases (i.e. would the data used by UK, Great Britain or England-only? Would the devolved administrations make their own announcements?)

Next Steps

- The Cabinet Office and the Department of Health are reviewing reporting templates. Existing arrangements for information-sharing will be promulgated more widely to ensure that local responders understand how the national picture will be developed.

Public Information and Communications

Communication was a key aspect of exercise play and the scenario offered an important opportunity to test the very complex communications matrix that the UK-wide management of a pandemic presents, in particular communications between the various levels and teams involved in the response. However, the role of the National News Co-ordination Centre in co-ordinating messages across departments was not tested during *Winter Willow 2*. Participants would have found it helpful to have a better co-ordinated communication approach particularly between national and regional levels and to have fixed times for media updates.