

Exercise Cygnus – Tier 1 Exercise in Pandemic Influenza – Ministerial COBR Telephone Conferences

Date: 19 October – 09:50 to 11:30
20 October – 15:20 to 17:00

Venue: ECC(W) Cathays Park

Accompanying officials: Frank Atherton, Irfon Rees and David Goulding

Background Briefing

The risk of pandemic influenza occurring in the UK remains at the top of the National Risk Register.

The UK Pandemic Framework Strategy was revised and agreed by the 4 Health Ministers in 2011, following lesson identified in the Swine flu pandemic that occurred in 2009. It details the UK strategic approach to planning for and responding to the demands of an influenza pandemic.

In May 2014 the first phase of 'Exercise Cygnus', a Tier 1 exercise designed to test the UK Strategy in readiness for an influenza pandemic, took place. The second phase, due to take place in October 2014, was postponed to enable Ebola preparedness measures to be put into place across the UK. Wales did, however, continue with the phase 2 exercise and tested both the Welsh Government and four Welsh Strategic Co-ordination Groups' response. The second phase of the exercise which has all four Nations participating is now taking place on 18-20 October.

Aim and objectives of Exercise Cygnus

Aim:

To assess preparedness and response to an influenza pandemic in the United Kingdom

Overarching Objectives:

- a. To exercise organisational pandemic influenza plans at local and national levels in the United Kingdom;
- b. To exercise coordination of messaging to the public;
- c. To exercise strategic decision-making processes around managing the wider consequences and cross-government issues at both local and national levels during an influenza pandemic (such as excess deaths);

- d. To exercise the provision of scientific advice, including Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), during an influenza pandemic;
- e. To explore the social care policy implications during a pandemic;
- f. To explore the use of the 3rd sector to support the response;
- g. Exercise the coordination of resources to cope with excess deaths in the community;
- h. Identify issues raised around the impact of flu in the prison population.

The Welsh Government was asked to submit our own objectives for the Exercise. These have been used by the Planning Team in Whitehall to develop injects and for us to evaluate ourselves against. Our objectives are:

- To exercise organisational pandemic influenza plans at local and national levels in the United Kingdom;
- To exercise coordination of messaging to the public;
- To exercise strategic decision-making processes around managing the wider consequences and cross-government issues at both local and national levels during an influenza pandemic (such as excess deaths);
- To explore the social care policy implications during a pandemic;
- To implement the Pan-Wales Response Plan against a pandemic influenza scenario in order to exercise the strategic decision-making processes at both the local and national levels in Wales;
- To activate the operation of the Emergency Co-ordination Centre (Wales) and exercise the linkages and interdependencies required with the local level in Wales and with the UK response protocols;
- To test the four LRF pandemic influenza plans to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

Scenario

The scenario for Exercise Cygnus is set in week 7 of the UK's response to a pandemic influenza:

- A new strain of influenza, 'Swan Flu', is identified in Thailand (June – July 2016) and quickly spreads to other South East Asian countries. WHO declare a pandemic;
- 2-3 months later, the first case is confirmed in the UK (29 August 2016). Clusters of infection appear over the next few weeks;

- Exercise play takes place seven weeks after the first UK case is identified (18-20 October 2016). Infection has now spread across the UK. Approximately 300,000 cases reported; 800 deaths;
- The peak phase of the pandemic in the UK is projected to occur around four weeks later (mid November 2016);
- Across the pandemic curve, 30-40% of the total population are expected to experience symptoms; the case fatality rate is expected to be 1.5% of these (lower than international CFR due to effective use of antivirals); 3% of symptomatic people will require hospitalisation;
- National antiviral stockpile has been activated; antivirals are being distributed widely via pharmacies;
- Vaccine contract (APA) was activated in week 4, but vaccines will not be available for 4-6 months;
- Policy for schools to remain open – although around 250 are closed across the UK;
- National Pandemic Flu Service is operational across the UK (live in week 6 in England, Scotland and Wales and in week 7 in Northern Ireland);
- Absentee levels are currently 3% above normal levels: there is some pressure on services, but currently no significant impact on delivery.

Wales Pandemic Influenza Preparedness

Specific guidance for health includes the Wales NHS Pan Flu Planning and Response Guidance. This details planning and response actions to be taken in the planning stage and the three phases of a pandemic - the detection and assessment phase, treatment and escalation phase and recovery phase.

As part of Welsh Government's responsibilities in the planning stages of a pandemic we participate in the UK Defence in Depth Strategy. This means Wales has a range of health countermeasures, sufficient for a 50% attack rate. These include antivirals, antibiotics, facemasks, respirators and hygiene products and stockpiles are based on just in case/just in time approach. Wales is also part of the UK Advanced Purchase Agreement for the development of a pandemic specific vaccine.