

Exercise Cygnus - Recommendations

Background

As a result of the ongoing high risk of an influenza pandemic, it was agreed that a Tier 1 UK exercise should be held in October 2014 – Exercise Cygnus – to assess preparedness at both a national and local level.

The exercise was scheduled to be held in 3 phases:

Phase 1 – A workshop on health planning and response on 14th May 2014

Phase 2 – The main exercise held 13-16th October

Phase 3 – A recovery exercise on a date to be agreed.

There were initially 11 Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) scheduled to participate at the local level in England whilst Wales, all 4 LRFs agreed to take part.

Strategic Objectives

The Wales strategic objectives for the exercise were:

1. 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.
2. 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
3. To test the four LRF pandemic influenza plans to ensure that they are fit for purpose.

Exercise Play

The workshop in May focused on health arrangements during the assessment and detection phase and Welsh Government health colleagues and Public Health Wales were involved. A multi-agency workshop was held in Wales in early June to explore issues and raise awareness of what would be happening in these phases.

The main cross-government element of Exercise Cygnus scheduled for week commencing 13th November was postponed as the Prime Minister had asked that the Department of Health urgently run a live exercise to ensure robust processes were in place to manage any case of Ebola virus disease in the UK.

This exercise took place on Saturday 11 October. In view of the priority to the Ebola response it was agreed that it would be best to postpone Exercise Cygnus until a date when Ministers and officials could give it their full attention.

Despite the UK level exercise no longer being run, the local level play in Wales proceeded and with the 4 Strategic Co-ordinating Groups meeting as well as the Wales Civil Contingencies Committee meeting. We also took the opportunity at the end of the pandemic flu exercise to consider the response in Wales to Ebola and Public Health Wales attended the meetings to provide the required briefing.

Exercise Outcomes

The following are the issues and recommendations to emerge from the Strategic Co-ordinating Groups and the Wales Civil Contingencies Committee:

Issues Raised

- *Dealing with excess deaths* - There needs to be more guidance produced centrally on body storage and the collection and transportation of bodies. In particular, the lack of suitable vehicles presents a problem. There also needs to be a clear understanding on when mass burials would be an option and the permissibility of undertaking adapted burial methods. In the same way, there needed to be clarity on how the funeral industry could be supported.
- *Communication* - Information demands and situation reporting needs to be centralised to reduce duplication and sent to and from a single point of contact within each organisation. There needs to be consistency of messaging across the board centralised through Welsh Government; including the use of social media.
- *Regulation* – Further guidance is required on regulation and inspection issues during pandemic influenza. For example, the reduction the need for 2 signatures for the death certificate and the relaxation of CRB checks.
- *Resources* – There needs to be a national stockpile of resources made available.
- *School closures* – Advice is needed across all organisations in relation to the need to keep schools open wherever possible.
- *Demands for data collection* – There is a need for one central repository and the use of a single point of contact in each organisation
- *National Pandemic Flu Service* - Concern was expressed in one SCG with the commitment to the launch of the NPFS when arrangements are not finalised

- *Vulnerable People* - Concerns were expressed over the capacity and readiness of privately owned care homes to have robust contingency plans. It is now a requirement of Care homes to have contingency plans but a concern over whether these are exercised or effective. In the past local authorities have had additional domiciliary care capacity which could have assisted. However, with budget reductions this is no longer the case.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Wales Pandemic Flu Group and LRF Pandemic Flu Groups to address the requirement to identify Anti-Viral Collection Points for us under the National Pandemic Flu Service.

Recommendation 2: Wales Pandemic Flu Group and LRF Pandemic Flu Groups to provide clarity on the legal position on staff movement between Health Boards needs.

Recommendation 3: Wales Pandemic Flu Group and Health Department to agree the point at which decisions on a national level will be made by the Welsh Government in respect of the NHS rather than at the local level. Once agreed, this needs to be included in all pandemic flu plans.

Recommendation 4: Wales Pandemic Flu Group and LRF Pandemic Flu Groups to agree the criteria for declaring a flu pandemic a major incident in Wales. Once agreed, this needs to be included in all pandemic flu plans.

Recommendation 5: Welsh Government Department for Education and Skills to update the guidelines from 2012 on school closures; particularly in relation to the timing of the decisions taken by Welsh Government on school closures in the light of changes under the Education (Wales) Act 2014.

Recommendation 6: The LRF Co-ordinators Group to discuss the development of community resilience groups at the LRF level.

Recommendation 7: The Wales Pandemic Flu Group and Wales Warning and Informing Group to work together to develop arrangements for a core script to be produced for Wales during flu pandemics. These arrangements should be included in all pandemic flu plans.

Recommendation 8: Welsh Government Social Services to establish sub group to look in to the issue of vulnerable people and the actions required to identify those at risk.

Recommendation 9: The Wales Mass Fatalities Group to consider the issues raised on excess deaths in conjunction with Cabinet Office and Home Office.

Next Steps

The Wales Pandemic Flu Group will assume overall responsibility for taking forward the recommendations and issues from the exercise and for liaison with the appropriate groups charged with specific tasks.