

Pandemic Flu Readiness Board – Action and Activity in Wales

Background

Following the postponement of the original Exercise Cygnus in October 2014 as a consequence of the UK Government response to EBOLA, Wales decided to proceed to run the Exercise at the local level with table-top exercises being held in all 4 Local Resilience Forum areas. The learning from that exercise was taken forward by a Wales Pandemic Flu Task and Finish Group chaired by Welsh Government and comprising the Chairs of the LRF Pandemic Flu Groups.

Subsequent to the UK wide Exercise Cygnus held in October 2016, the Welsh Government has continued to work with the LRFs to implement the Cygnus report recommendations and address local and all-Wales planning. The Welsh Government's own senior level Civil Contingencies Group has also co-ordinated work across Departments to further enhance pandemic flu planning. This work was ongoing at the time the Pandemic Flu Readiness Board was established.

Activity

All 4 LRFs in Wales have multi-agency pandemic flu plans that comply with current Cabinet Office Pandemic Flu Guidance. These plans are validated against a checklist prepared by Welsh Government which has been circulated to LRFs to inform their planning, which was also shared with DHCLG to inform their review of the LRF Guidance.

Elements of the Wales LRF multi-agency plans were again tested in the re-instated Exercise Cygnus in 2016. This time, Wales also examined arrangements for distribution of Wales's health countermeasures and the National Pandemic Flu Service.

Welsh Government (Health & Social Service Group) maintain a range of medical countermeasures and consumables to meet the current pandemic influenza planning assumptions and deliver a defence-in-depth pandemic preparedness and response capability. These arrangements meet requirements of the 2011 UK Pandemic Influenza Strategy, which was agreed and signed off by the 4 UK Health Ministers. Welsh Government Officials continue to be part of a UK Stockpile and Deployment Structure aimed at maintaining these countermeasures in a state of readiness.

To assist in delivering outcomes of the UK Review, the Welsh Government has established a Wales Pandemic Flu Preparedness Group involving representation from Welsh Government Health, Social Services, Communications, Resilience officials, Public Health Wales and the Chairs of the four Wales LRF Pandemic Flu Groups. The Group's focus is primarily on areas subject to the review including healthcare demand, adult social care demand, sector resilience and excess deaths as well as communications and legislation. The Group last met in November 2018 but further meetings were paused due to Brexit priorities. There is a commitment to reconvene this Group and also strengthen the Wales structure for oversight of our health countermeasures.

Welsh Government has sought to engage Health, Social Services and Local Government Departments in the work of the UK Review Board and its sub-groups. Central co-ordination of input into this review across Welsh Government Departments is being conducted by both the Welsh Government Civil Contingencies Group and the supporting Wales Resilience Steering Group.

Sub-Groups

Welsh Government is represented on the Review Board and has previously been appropriately engaged in the 5 Sub Groups. The following describes the current position and progress has been affected by Brexit commitments.

Health Care Demand

Policy Leads: Name Redacted

Welsh Government previously issued pandemic influenza operational guidance to health and social care organisations consistent with the UK Pandemic Preparedness Strategy 2011. The focus of that Guidance is to identify actions that are required of each agency individually and collectively at each phase of the pandemic alerts.

A key issue during Exercise Cygnus was the surge in demand for critical care and the options available to CMOs who met during the Exercise to agree the way forward. Subsequent to the Exercise, DH and NHSE were tasked with providing information to assist potential decisions during an extreme pandemic influenza scenario in response to sustained pressure on the NHS. The draft Extreme Surge Guidance for the NHS in Wales (as an appendix to the Pandemic Preparedness & Response Guidance) has been developed in order to support local pandemic preparedness and response planning in Health and Social Care organisations in Wales at times of extreme surge and has been circulated to Wales Pandemic Flu Group for comment.

Next steps: The draft Guidance will be reviewed against any further developments at the UK level, particularly any agreement to escalating to a population triage policy position in the event of a severe surge.

Social Care Demand

Policy Leads: Alistair Davey / Name Redacted

We had a Wales representative on the Sub Group that is addressing this issue. We will be fully considering the outcomes of the work in Wales and the changes needed to the Pandemic Influenza “Framework for Local Authorities and Social Services Providers” previously issued in Wales. The Wales Health and Social Care Pandemic Flu Planning and Response Guidance, agreed by Wales Directors of Social Services, requires an integrated approach between these sectors in a pandemic situation. The Wales LRF Structure also provides the basis for considering potential impacts on social care and examining the support available from other agencies.

Welsh Government pandemic health countermeasures arrangements include making these countermeasures available to front line social care staff through the local government structures.

Next steps: The associated social care Guidance will be reviewed against any further developments at the UK level so as to take account of the approach being taken in England.

Moral and Ethical

Policy Lead: Heather Payne

The Welsh Government has nominated a Senior Medical Officer to be a member of the Moral and Ethics Group that has been established as part of the Brexit work. This Group is also expected to provide generic guidance to inform pandemic flu planning and also any Clinical Advisory Group (CAG) that may be established, involving the 4 CMOs. The expectation is that we will be fully involved and able to participate in discussions regarding moral and ethical issues to be considered in a pandemic, when making decisions on treatments and managing severe surge in health and social care. This Group has had a first meeting and we were represented.

Sector Resilience

Policy Lead: Name Redacted

Welsh Government was engaged in the Sector Resilience Sub-Group and work has been undertaken to look at the resilience of devolved sectors to a flu pandemic. Consideration was given to the impact on staffing resources and the delivery of services that a pandemic outbreak could entail so as to provide Ministerial assurance

Welsh Government Departments were asked to provide information on the work being undertaken specifically in the Education, Transport, Water, fire, health, and central and local government sectors and responses have been considered

In terms of health engagement, all 10 NHS Wales organisations were consulted on their business continuity arrangements. These arrangements build on a range of UK wide health measures that support NHS resilience, including NHS clinical networks and mutual aid, health counter measures that help protect NHS staff and the National Pandemic Flu Service, which is a contingency that would protect front line primary care services.

In terms of local government engagement, Welsh Government attended a Welsh Local Authorities Civil Contingencies Manager's Group meeting to discuss pandemic flu preparedness in all 22 local authority areas.

Wales has introduced a Sector Security and Resilience Planning process in order to provide Welsh Ministers with assurance and a submission was submitted to the First Minister on the general resilience of devolved sectors. Further work is planned to seek assurance through the Sector Security and Resilience Plans (SSRPs) process for a more intrusive system of scrutiny

Cross-Cutting Enablers (Legislative Vehicle)

During Exercise Cygnus, Welsh Government worked with the Cabinet Office in identifying devolved and reserved areas of legislative asks. As part of this review, officials are fully involved in the work to establish a Pandemic Flu Bill that would be readily available to pass into legislation in the event of a pandemic. Welsh Government legal officials are engaged in this work. Further engagement is being conducted with other Welsh Government Departments in relation to legislative asks in their sectors.

Wales Legislation

Welsh clauses have been drafted for indemnity, mental health, schools and childcare providers. However, there are still some points of clarification to be worked through for childcare providers. Policy colleagues in childcare have discussed the relevant clause and a follow up letter from the Office of the Parliamentary Council (OPC) is with Welsh Government lawyers. Initial thoughts are that there are no major issues, other than a few points for clarification/ agreement. These will need further discussion with Welsh Government and UK Government policy colleagues who are due to meet shortly. Points of discussion will include the role of Care Inspectorate Wales with the draft legislation being potentially amended to reflect the Welsh legislative position.

The aim is to complete the discussions as soon as practically possible. Unfortunately, Welsh Government lawyers will not be in a position to provide policy colleagues with a draft response to issue to OPC until week beginning 27th January (subject to their availability), or mid-February at the latest.

Consideration of other devolved provisions which include hospital discharge and further education institutions have been considered by policy officials and lawyers and it has been determined that there are existing powers are sufficient and therefore no additional clauses are required for Wales.

Next steps: Legislation is being taken forward as part of the four nation draft Pandemic Influenza (Emergency) Bill

Excess Deaths

Policy Lead: Name Redacted

The lowering of the target capacity on excess deaths following Swine Flu to a range between 0.35% and 0.525% of the population allowed local planners to calculate the likely impact in their areas and they have generally concluded that the funeral industry will be flexible enough to cope. They see the funeral industry as able to extend its capacity to cope with increased demand.

To supplement this, there are arrangements in place to increase crematoria capacity to deal with excess numbers and other plans in place to make the process more effective. Using Exercise Cygnus as a trigger, the aim is to work with the LRF

Groups to reinvigorate the work on dealing with excess deaths at the local level. This includes identifying and using good practice.

The Welsh Government is currently working with LRFs on reviewing existing local plans to ensure they remain fit for purpose until the publication of new UK guidance is formally issued.

Next steps: A full review will be undertaken of all LRF excess deaths plans to take account of the new UK guidance.

Communications

Policy Lead **Name Redacted**

The Welsh Government Communications Division is engaged in the work being undertaken at the UK level to revise the UK Communications Plan in the light of the findings of Exercise Cygnus. Information relating to Wales in this plan has been updated rather than developing a separate plan.

Public Health Wales has been engaged in this work in relation to confirming the point of contact for communications is still the same, the various responsibilities relating to communications and designated spokespeople. Further consultation will take place with the Health Board Heads of Communications, Welsh Government Press Office, CMO and the Chief Executive of NHS Wales.

The plan addresses the need to establish a Welsh digital health emergencies group, with representatives from Welsh Government, Public Health Wales, NHS Wales and local authorities, for the fast-moving areas of social media and web copy. Further consideration will be given to the membership of this group following the publication of the UK plan in February.

One challenge to be considered in Wales is the need to translate the public information and key messages which have to be available bilingually. Material agreed at the UK level will be translated by Welsh Government.

Next steps: The Welsh Government will continue to engage at the UK level and consider any implications for Wales Communication Plans.