

WRF(10)4 – RESPONSE TO SWINE FLU – LESSONS LEARNT

Issue

1. A Pandemic Flu workshop was held at the Welsh Assembly Government on 18th November involving representatives from Local Resilience Forums and individual agencies.
2. The purpose of the workshop was to de-brief both Exercise Taliesin held on 23rd April to test pandemic flu response plans and the actual response up until that date to swine flu in Wales.
3. A full report of workshop has been produced in draft and is currently out for consultation with attendees and the wider resilience community. The report includes lessons learnt from the de-brief reports produced by the exercise facilitators, Gold Standard, for the individual Strategic Co-ordinating Groups as well as the outcome of the workshop held on 18th November.
4. The conclusions and recommendations contained within the draft report are provided below to inform discussion at the WRF on the lessons to consider in the response to swine flu and the areas of strategic importance which need to be addressed as a priority in Wales.

Draft Report Conclusions

5. It was ironic that a worldwide pandemic started to emerge for the first time in over 40 years the day after one of Wales' largest emergency exercises to test pandemic flu response plans. However, the reality of the pandemic fell significantly below the expectations set out not only in the exercise itself but in the national planning assumptions to which planning at all levels had been geared for a number of years previously. The reaction experienced at all levels was a direct consequence of this inherent anticipation of a flu pandemic having wide-ranging socio-economic impact. The fact that Exercise Taliesin had been held the previous day and had tested all those involved on a worst case scenario served only to heighten such expectation in Wales.
6. The response to the pandemic at the UK level also anticipated a worst case scenario and this drove the pace of the initial response at the centre and the resultant requirements for regular and detailed information from the local level of its impact on the ground. In reality, whilst the pandemic resulted in some cases in fatalities, it generally proved to be far less severe than anticipated across both waves which resulted in the planning assumptions published periodically by Government reducing on each occasion.
7. Against this background, the workshop held on 18th November aimed to de-brief the performance of plans and arrangements against both the pandemic envisaged in the national planning assumption and the swine flu pandemic

which emerged in reality. It was inevitable that attendees brought their experience of the swine flu response into the feedback for Exercise Taliesin but this proved to help rather than hinder the process.

8. The following conclusions are based on the issues raised at the workshop for swine flu and Exercise Taliesin as well as those provided in the Gold Standard reports:

- In spite of pandemic flu being known as the highest risk and with considerable investment being made in recent years to ensure that the UK is prepared to cope with such an event, a number of gaps were exposed in plans which need to be addressed ahead of a more serious pandemic. These issues in particular are:

- Excess Deaths

- While funeral directors do not have any formal obligations under the Act, their professional services will nevertheless be critical in maintaining smooth and effective arrangements for dealing with the dead. Information on funeral directors' capacity for body holding is necessary so that local responders can understand the totality of local capacity and capabilities, as well as the need for support in difficult conditions.
- The legal responsibilities of a local authority for the collection and transport of the deceased during a pandemic has emerged as something of a grey area. Whilst there are clear duties on local authorities in respect of emergency mortuaries, burials and cremations, the legislation does not put explicit duties on local authorities to collect and transport bodies from the place of death through to burial or cremation.
- Further work is required on the policy of collective burials to enable local plans to be made accordingly against the national planning assumptions.
- Further policy work is required on the death certification process to inform local planning and the timeframe required from death to burial.
- Further work is required to develop resilience of coffin supplies during a pandemic.

- Social Care

- Although considerable progress was made in developing resilience within the social care sector during the response to swine flu further work is required to enhance the engagement with, and preparedness in, the independent care sector.

- Schools and Early Years Settings

- The policy of school closure which existed at the time of Exercise Taliesin for closing schools when a pandemic is confirmed in schools in an LRF area proved to be unrealistic. The practice adopted during swine flu of schools/local authorities seeking the advice of the National Public Health Service (now Public Health Wales) on closing and re-opening proved to be pragmatic and effective.
- Concerns over the resilience of school transport highlighted the need for local authorities and schools to maintain engagement with transport providers on the ability to maintain services and for alternatives options to be built into plans.
- Attention needs to be given in local planning to the impact of the closure of Early Years Settings.

9. It was evident from both Exercise Taliesin and the response to swine flu that the requirements from Government for information to be provided from organisations are excessive and unrealistic. This was exacerbated by the regular changing of requirements. At the same time, Government produced and cascaded far too much information than was required.

10. The culture developed over a number of years in planning for a flu pandemic as the highest national risk was based on a worst case scenario and plans have been produced against this assumption. The plans have not taken into account the various types of less severe pandemics which may arise and this resulted in a high-level response to a low-level event with swine flu.

11. Overall, the response to swine flu in Wales did not fully test the plans in place to respond to pandemic flu. In the same way, the artificiality of exercise play in Exercise Taliesin, with the various stages of a pandemic wave being played out in a single day, left little opportunity to drill down into the more detailed aspects of the plans. However, the work undertaken during swine flu, especially within the health sector, to develop plans for using primary care as the foundation of the response with plans developed for the use of anti-viral distribution centres, the National Flu Service and the implementation of a vaccination programme have established structures and processes which can be built into future planning.

Draft Report Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Pandemic Flu plans in Wales should be revised to develop greater flexibility for local action to be taken based on circumstances which exist

on the ground and which are not solely reliant on UK Alert Levels being formally announced.

Action: WAG and LRF Infectious Disease Groups to produce a Wales Infectious Disease Alert Levels framework and associated actions and for these to be adopted in all plans

Recommendation 2 – Legacy issues on excess deaths need to be taken forward as LRF and pan-Wales priorities especially on temporary mortuaries, funeral director engagement, business continuity management, deferral of payments and loans and the transport of bodies.

Action: Wales Mass Fatalities Group in conjunction with Home Office Mass Fatalities Group and LRF Fatalities Group to address outstanding issues in relation to excess death planning

Recommendation 3 – All organisations should review their business continuity arrangements in the light of the experience of swine flu and should not allow the impetus gained in this work to slip.

Action: All organisations to review their business continuity arrangements against the national planning assumptions for pandemic flu and progress should be monitored in a multi-agency environment

Recommendation 4 – The existing Strategic Co-ordination Centres arrangements in Wales need to be developed to provide facilities which are fit for purpose for multi-agency operations.

Action: This recommendation from Exercise Taliesin is already in hand with the £10m grant from the Welsh Assembly Government's Strategic Capital Investment Fund to establish or modernise 3 SCCs in Wales at Colwyn Bay, Carmarthen and Cardiff.

Recommendation 5 - A more efficient means of schools data gathering needs to be developed which minimises the administrative burden on local authorities and other links involved in the data gathering process.

Action: The Welsh Assembly Government should commission the development of an on-line tool to capture the relevant school closure data more easily.

Recommendation 6 – The schools closure policy adopted in Wales during swine flu of local decisions to close and re-open schools being based on advice from the National Public Health Service should be built into all plans.

Action: Welsh Assembly Government, Local Resilience Forums and relevant responder organisations should adopt this policy in their plans

Recommendation 8 – Robust business continuity arrangements need to be developed in early years childcare and youth services - especially those in the independent sector – and a process adopted for monitoring impact on this sector during a pandemic.

Action: Local authorities to engage with the early years childcare and youth services sectors in their areas to encourage and provide assistance in developing business continuity and to work with the sector in establishing a monitoring process during a pandemic

Recommendation 9 – The work undertaken in social care for both adults and children during swine flu to enhance the resilience of the sector needs to be continued; particularly in respect of the independent care sector.

Action: Social Services Wales to work with local authority social services departments to continue to develop the resilience of the sector against swine flu and for the arrangements to be embedded in the relevant organisational and LRF plans.

Action: Arrangements for the Social Care Condition (SocCon) reporting process which was adopted for swine flu to be integrated into emergency plans and procedures.

Recommendation 10 – The work undertaken during swine flu on developing arrangements for anti-virals distribution centres, primary care, secondary care and vaccination programmes need to help inform future health emergency planning.

Action: The Welsh Assembly Government Health Emergency Preparedness Unit, working with the health sector in Wales, needs to ensure that the lessons learnt from developing these arrangements are embedded in health and LRF plans in preparation for future pandemics

Recommendation 11 – Further training and exercising is required to ensure that Strategic Co-ordinating Group members are familiar with the response structures, their specific roles and the relevant LRF plans.

Action: The Wales Training and Exercising Group, in conjunction with the LRF groups, should develop appropriate training programmes for SCG level training.

Action: Regular SCG training and familiarisation programmes need to be embedded into the routines of the new Strategic Co-ordination Centres

Recommendation 12 – The model developed of regular Civil Contingencies Group/Strategic Co-ordinating Group Chairs meetings during flu pandemics needs to feature in planning at LRF/WAG levels.

Action: CCG/SCG Chairs to review their working relationship during swine flu, the strategic communication between national and local level and the co-ordination of the response in Wales by the CCG and its relationship with Whitehall.

Recommendation 13 – The operational relationship between the ECC(W) and SCCs needs to be reviewed in the light of Exercise Taliesin and especially the experience of swine flu.

Action: WAG to organise a de-briefing of operations involving ECC(W) and SCC staff and for the outcome to be adopted in operational plans at both levels. The de-brief should include a review of how information from WAG Departments to the various sectors is undertaken during a pandemic flu event