

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

Ex-coVid 19 Meeting

Held on 18th February 2020
In Caerdydd 1, CP2

Note of the Meeting

Present:

Shan Morgan (Chair)	Reg Kilpatrick
Andrew Slade	Andrew Gwatkin
Tracey Burke	Toby Mason
David Richards	Helen Lentle
Natalie Pearson	Gary Haggaty
Frank Atherton	NR (note taker)

Apologies:

Peter Kennedy	Andrew Goodall
Des Clifford	

1. Introduction, Context and Purpose

1.1 The Permanent Secretary welcomed members to the inaugural meeting of the group which has been established to provide updates from those departments which are most likely to be impacted in terms of a Coronavirus outbreak; and provide her with assurance that the Welsh Government is doing everything it needs to in order to prepare for a pandemic. This will be a communications group for sharing information to maintain a consistent understanding across Welsh Government departments.

2. Health Update

2.1 Frank Atherton confirmed the outbreak in China is being closely monitored. There is uncertainty in terms of containment of the virus and how it may affect the UK but there should be a clearer picture in the next 6-8 weeks. In the meantime, planning continues to ensure we are prepared.

2.2 The Public Health Strategy aims to contain the virus and is working reasonably well. There are 9 confirmed cases in UK, none of which are in Wales. We are very much in the containment phase but the health system is gearing up. Public Health Wales (PHW) is doing initial contact tracing. Of those tested in Wales, 90% have been tested in the community and is proving to be very effective. The Cardiff and Vale Health Board have put testing facilities in place and any patients testing positive will be conveyed to a High Consequence Infectious Diseases (HCID) unit. This would be located in the University of Wales hospital, Cardiff.

2.3 Reasonable worst case scenario - we have well tested arrangements. All sectors could be impacted and so we need to consider what we collectively need to do should the coronavirus outbreak escalate further.

2.4 Legislation - The UK Government has introduced new legislation. There are some challenges with having a UK Bill and these were outlined. Devolved elements need to be taken into account. Various pieces of guidance are being issued from PHE but there is a need to ensure it includes the devolved element, and translated. Guidance on social care and employers also being issued. Reg Kilpatrick reiterated the challenges being faced and the tight deadlines being issued by Cabinet Office. Frank Atherton suggested we may need to start pushing back on those.

3. ECC(W)

3.1 The Resilience Team is working alongside Health colleagues in the ECC(W). There are regular dial-ins to Cabinet Office, and the ECC(W) is working closely with colleagues in MHCLG. The ECC(W) is also looking at how we prepare ourselves if we go into pandemic phase. Within Wales, the ECC(W) is engaged with local government, the Local Resilience Fora and, within Welsh Government, the Civil Contingencies Group (CCG) is bringing together senior officials within critical sectors.

3.2 In terms of planning across Wales, Reg Kilpatrick confirmed there is an Excess Deaths Working Group and each LRF area has a Mass Fatalities Plan. The statutory requirements for dealing with the dead rests with Coroners and local authorities. The Welsh Government role is to ensure effective planning is done and plans in place. He added that we must maintain a degree of calm but we can approach the LRFs to provide assurance. Frank Atherton confirmed England has issued a request for an assessment of plans and it was agreed this is the approach we should take.

Action: Reg Kilpatrick to write out to LRFs requesting an assessment of plans to ensure they are fit for purpose.

3.3 Andrew Slade asked about community tensions. Reg Kilpatrick was only aware of a small number of incidents but will check the figures and report back.

Action: Reg Kilpatrick to report back on figures relating to recent community tensions.

4. Resourcing.

4.1 Reg Kilpatrick confirmed we are fortunate some of the DWP staff remain with us in ECC(W) to enable us to have run ECC(W) at pace thus far. The Cabinet Office's Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) is operating on a 2 shift system but not on a busy rhythm so Reg Kilpatrick confirmed there is no need to change our working patterns currently. Volunteer lists are being reviewed as the team is pretty stretched. As well as dealing with the Coronavirus, they have also been, and continue to be involved in the recent flooding events. He stressed CoVid is a very serious corporate issue for Welsh Government.

4.2 Frank Atherton added it has been very busy over the last couple of weeks but the pressure has eased which gives a short window to gear up and start to understand the situation. The Health desk (ECC(H)) is only staffed by 3 or 4 and so needs additional resourcing. He is looking within his directorate to consider. There is not a requirement at present to run 2 shifts.

4.3 Reg Kilpatrick stressed there is a significant piece of legislative work which needs doing and it would be helpful to identify a Bill Manager (at Grade 7 level) adept in

managing UK and Wales relationships, and with the necessary experience to take this forward. It was suggested by some group members that the EU Exit team has this capability and perhaps could be approached to release some capacity to deal with the emergency. A DD will also be required to support the ECC(H), who is security cleared to a sufficient level. Andrew Slade asked that if the group has a brief of what is needed then between them they should find the appropriate people to front up and if needed, take this to Ministers to consider current priorities. Reg Kilpatrick confirmed legislation is a real risk to be able to present correct policy choices and a risk that we are subject to a piece of legislation or clause we do not agree with.

ACTION: Reg Kilpatrick and Frank Atherton to develop what is needed in terms of resourcing to include the skills and specification of roles required and send to the Permanent Secretary.

5. Communications

5.1 Toby Mason confirmed currently [NR] is working with Health colleagues and there are no impediments for sharing information from Whitehall. There are concerns if the situation escalates as there will be a need to ensure we are co-ordinating messages, and this was discussed at the earlier CCG meeting. There is no equivalent of CCS Comms in Welsh Government and currently the co-ordination of messages across departments is through Toby which is not sustainable.

5.2 The Permanent Secretary asked whether there is a need to convene a multi-agency group. Reg Kilpatrick confirmed the Wales Resilience Forum exists which is multi-agency and chaired by the First Minister. Frank Atherton confirmed that at an earlier meeting, the First Minister requested engagement with key portfolio Ministers currently.

6. Any Other Business

6.1 Andrew Slade alluded to departmental interests in particular schools, HE and FE establishments, and the economic impacts being experienced due to Chinese students not being able to come to this country. Frank Atherton added there are a very significant amount of pharmaceutical suppliers in China and in the future, we could experience an impact on supplies.

6.2 Andrew Slade referred to business continuity arrangements and what we need to put in place to address the potential for a reduction in workforce and what instructions we might give to staff.

6.3 Overseas – there is daily contact with our staff overseas. Staff based in China continue to work at home as it is difficult to move around.

6.4 The Permanent Secretary confirmed these will continue to be weekly meetings.