

Committee for Scrutiny of the First Minister

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Evidence Paper on Contingency Planning

Introduction

1. This paper is intended as written evidence to inform the Committee for Scrutiny of the First Minister on the issue of contingency planning with specific reference to swine flu, possible energy shortages and adverse weather planning.

Swine Flu

2. The World Health Organisation had warned countries to prepare for a new pandemic and that is why Wales and the rest of the UK had been planning for some time. We were, therefore, expecting a pandemic, but it was perhaps a little ironic that it should start to emerge the day after one of Wales' largest emergency exercises to test pandemic flu response plans (Exercise Taliesin).

3. The UK planning assumptions advise of the need for plans to be capable of dealing with a reasonably foreseeable worst case scenario of a new pandemic virus infecting up to 50% of the population with severe consequences for some. However, the H1N1 swine flu virus was less severe. At the outset though, and for a considerable time afterwards, nobody could predict for certain the course this pandemic would take and Wales responded fully and effectively to ensure that all necessary measures were taken.

4. The response at the UK level also reflected the need to be fully prepared for a worst case situation and the central government civil contingency machinery was activated. In reality, the virus did not reach the levels of infection that are possible when any new virus emerges and the response was scaled down as more information became available. Nevertheless, 28 people in Wales with the virus have died and many more have been hospitalised.

Response in Wales

5. The Welsh Assembly Government's response to swine flu was led at ministerial level by the Minister for Health and Social Services. The Minister was supported at official level by the cross-departmental Civil Contingencies Group (CCG) which was established in the Emergency Coordination Centre (Wales) (ECC(W)) and supported by the Resilience Team comprising Emergencies Branch and trained volunteers from across the Assembly Government departments. The CCG was augmented by the inclusion of partner agencies such as Public Health Wales (then National Public Health Service), Police and Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA). The CCG also liaised closely with partner agencies through the multi-agency Strategic Co-ordinating Groups (SCGs) established in each police force area. The operation was supported by the ECC(W) which remained operational from 24th April 2009 to 29th January 2010. The response continues primarily through the Health and Social Services Director General who is progressing with the vaccination programme.

6. Close liaison with Whitehall and the other devolved administrations was a critical feature of the response. This was facilitated by the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) using the Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBR) response machinery and also introducing a '4 Nations' health committee at both ministerial and official levels to consider and agree health policy. The UK Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) also had regular contact linking to UK scientific advisory committees, as did Public Health Wales with the Health Protection Agency.

7. This was a Health led emergency and, from the outset, a Health Emergency Response Team was established within the ECC(W) to provide an immediate link to the NHS, other UK Health Departments and the Assembly's corporate response. Representatives of Public Health Wales (PHW) and the Welsh Ambulance Service responded immediately as part of the Team and as the response developed they were joined by other NHS representatives.

8. Health and social care responded to the swine flu challenge adapting plans to take account of information that was gathered on the nature of the virus, its likely impact on the population and services, and the availability of health countermeasures and H1N1 vaccine. In Wales, NHS and social care organisations examined and developed their contingency plans and arrangements were put in place to coordinate these services at a Wales level.

9. Regular meetings were also established between Assembly health officials and lead representatives from Health Boards, the Ambulance Service and PHW to help manage and coordinate the response across the NHS. Daily and weekly health updates were published and a weekly Bulletin introduced for Health and Social Care Professionals. Direct ministerial engagement with primary care leaders and health professionals became an important feature of the health response.

10. The CMO kept AMs briefed on the emerging situation and health communications staff worked with PHW to ensure that the media were kept informed. A "Pandemic Flu Dashboard" and information page on Health of Wales Information Service (HOWIS) was developed which pulled together information, guidance and daily situation reporting. Regular meetings with NHS leads helped manage and co-ordinate the response across the NHS.

11. Key decisions taken early in the response were to order vaccine which can take 6 months to get to the market and to increase and fast track stockpiling of anti-virals and other essential drugs and products such as facemasks. In October, Phase 1 of the H1N1/ Swine Flu Vaccination Programme was launched, targeting patients in identified priority groups such as pregnant women as well as front-line

health and social care staff. Since then, the vaccination programme has been extended to include children aged from 6 months to under 5 years old.

12. Wales arrangements include a targeted approach to treatment through GP services with patients in high risk groups with a clinical diagnosis of flu-like illness having access to anti-virals through community pharmacies, establishing and managing storage and distribution of health countermeasures, increasing secondary care capacity, especially critical care and implementing the swine flu vaccination programme. All these measures worked and provide a sound planning foundation for the future.

13. We also could not be sure for some time as to whether this specific swine flu virus would reach anything like the worst case scenario envisaged in the UK pandemic planning assumption of infecting up to 50% of the population. As a result, we continued to develop contingency plans for using the National Pandemic Flu Service and introducing antiviral collection points but these contingency measures were not needed.

14. Key policy decisions and initiatives taken during the response included the adoption of a policy to close and re-open schools on local advice from PHW, and the development of networks to promote community resilience to supplement and support the response of the public services.

Review Process

15. Throughout this pandemic, we kept our response under continual review to ensure it was appropriate to the situation we faced. Regular meetings were held of the CCG and between Assembly officials and the SCGs. In November, a workshop was held involving representatives from Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) and individual agencies to de-brief both Exercise Taliesin and the actual response up until that date to swine flu in Wales. In January, a similar exercise was undertaken by the health sector.

16. It has been agreed that the Welsh Assembly Government will co-ordinate a lessons learnt exercise on swine flu on an all-Wales basis. The purpose of this exercise will be to establish the strategic lessons identified from the various de-briefing processes taking place. A report of these findings will be submitted to the Wales Resilience Forum for consideration and shared with the LRFs.

Adverse Weather

Winter Maintenance/Salt

17. This winter, Wales has been in the grip of the most sustained period of cold weather it has experienced for 30 years. This culminated in January when we had significant snow falls across South and Mid Wales with all areas of the country being affected in one way or another.

18. The impact of the cold weather was felt largely by the transport infrastructure and the prolonged wintry conditions diminishing salt reserves. This meant that the demand for salt was greater than the salt producing companies could supply. These exceptional circumstances were experienced in spite of the action taken last year by local government to increase salt reserves.

19. Whilst trunk roads were kept clear, local authorities faced increased pressures on existing salt stocks to maintain local roads. It is the responsibility of each local authority to determine the amount of salt to stockpile going into each winter period and to arrange supplies as required. It is also their responsibility to determine priorities for gritting within their area. However, when the demand for salt nationally is greater than the supply available - as was the case this winter - it becomes a strategic issue. The Welsh Assembly Government, in conjunction with the WLGA, worked to provide deliveries of salt to the authorities that were most in need in Wales. Local authorities were asked to reduce salt usage by 50% and to make existing stocks last as long as possible. Mutual aid between local authorities was maximised to ensure that stocks were shared across areas and the WLGA urged authorities to share as much as they could. Additionally, the Welsh Assembly Government assisted local authorities with its own supplies of salt.

20. Although local authorities had built up their stocks of salt the duration of the cold snap posed a major problem. As a consequence, the Welsh Assembly Government will be working with the WLGA to consider various options to strengthen the resilience of salt supplies ahead of next winter.

21. During the worst of the weather "Salt Cell" was convened by the Department for Transport to co-ordinate salt deliveries at a UK level to local authorities on a priority basis. The Deputy First Minister was involved in high-level discussions with the Prime Minister and Lord Adonis that ensured Wales got its fair share of a limited supply of salt through the "Salt Cell". Also, the good working relationship that Assembly Government officials have with the salt suppliers played a major part in securing additional supplies and close collaboration with the WLGA ensured that deliveries got to the areas of greatest need.

22. Throughout the severe weather NHS Wales continued to maintain essential services. There was significant pressure on both Accident and Emergency Departments, and on medical bed capacity as the impact of a prolonged phase of very cold weather increased admissions of people with trauma, heart and respiratory conditions and strokes. There was also a significant increase in Diarrhoea and Vomiting cases across Wales. Elective (planned) surgery was affected to accommodate additional trauma cases and to provide flexible capacity for medical patients.

23. Health services are dependent on main routes being kept clear for access to services and to maintain crucial supplies, such as pharmaceuticals and blood. Roads to hospitals, doctors' surgeries and residential care settings were considered as a priority for gritting purposes.

24. The Police and Fire and Rescue Services supported other agencies as required. Ambulance movement was restricted in places but the emergency and voluntary services provided assistance with the use of 4x4 vehicles.

25. The weather caused some problems for water companies, making access difficult to sites for normal operations, deliveries of chemicals to treatment works and attending frozen equipment and burst water mains. However, no significant problems emerged.

26. This was a particularly difficult time for older people and there was pressure on social services to ensure that care was provided for those who were vulnerable. The conditions created transport difficulties for meals on wheels and domiciliary care services but these services but they continued to be maintained.

27. Headteachers and governors of schools were urged to keep schools open as far as possible, but they will make prudent decisions based on local circumstances. Local authorities put in place arrangements to ensure that examinations took place as planned.

Flooding

28. The Welsh Assembly Government uses the Wales Flood Group as the focal point for contingency planning in respect of flooding. The Wales Flood Group is a sub group of the Wales Resilience Forum and contains representatives from the key agencies engaged in flood warning, planning response and recovery activities across Wales. A key role of the group is to support, monitor and communicate emergency planning activities and best practice to the resilience community across Wales.

29. The Pitt Review made wide ranging recommendations to improve the way we plan our response to flooding. The Wales Flood Group is taking this work forward in a programme of work aimed at ensuring appropriate plans are in place at all levels of government to ensure there is a coherent and consistent response to flooding across Wales.

30. This includes the development of a Wales Flood Response Framework which will set out the existing local, regional and national structures and arrangements to deal with flooding incidents. Ensuring an effective predetermined response was a key message of the Pitt Review and the Framework will ensure that our response to flooding events is joined up. The Framework is scheduled to be tested in Exercise Watermark in March 2011.

Heatwave planning

31. The Heatwave Plan for Wales provides guidance to steer multi-agency preparedness and response in the event of a heatwave. In summary the plan aims to alert health, social care, other care agencies and members of the public to the dangers of excessive heat, and provides a framework to guide and support co-ordinated collaborative action at local, regional and national levels in response to extreme heat and heatwave conditions in Wales. The Plan will be revised, as necessary, and reissued on an annual basis to coincide with the Met Office's "Heat Health Watch" alert system that operates from 1 June to 15 September each year.

32. Ensuring that effective plans are in place to respond in the event of a heatwave is a vital component of overall emergency planning, and will become increasingly relevant as a response to the impact of climate change. A robust system for dealing with potential heatwave situations in Wales is important given predictions that summers in future will become hotter. The Health Minister has written to Chairs of NHS Trusts and Local Health Boards setting out her expectation that NHS Bodies, Local Health Boards, Local Authorities and all other stakeholder agencies in Wales incorporate the guidance into their own plans, setting out clearly the specific preparations and actions they should take in the event of a heatwave or conditions of extreme heat. Those plans should identify appropriate persons to be contacted in the event of an emergency."

Energy Shortages

Background

Energy supplies and Infrastructure in Wales

33. The Welsh Assembly Government consider that that we must actively safeguard our security of energy supply by ensuring a range of sources of gas - such as the new LNG terminals at Milford Haven and a mix of fuels by driving the move into renewable energy generation and clean coal technology.

34. Wales is a net exporter of both electricity and energy. The majority of the electricity generation capacity is in North Wales whilst South Wales is a net importer of electricity. In 2009, the total electricity generation in Wales was almost 36 Tera watt hours (TWh) with total consumption of electricity around 24TWh.

Strategic energy contingency response

35. In the UK, major electricity failures are very rare, failures generally affect smaller numbers of consumers as a result of specific, often isolated mechanical breakdowns and are restored as quickly as possible by the Distribution Network Operators and their agents.

36. In extreme situations, the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change may invoke powers within the Energy Act 1976 which have the effect of restricting, prohibiting or maximising the production and supply of energy. The secretary of State also has powers under the Electricity Act 1989, to direct power stations to undertake certain actions such as the use and stocking of fuels.

37. The National Emergency Plan - Gas & Electricity (NEP) describes the arrangements established between the gas & electricity

industries and the lead government department, the Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC) for the safe and effective management of gas and electricity supply emergencies.

38. The NEP applies to the electricity supply network from generator to consumers' meter or supply terminal in Great Britain; and the downstream gas supply network from reception terminal and storage site to consumer isolation valve in Great Britain. The emergency arrangements for the upstream gas supply industry from production platform to reception terminal are covered in the Upstream Crisis Management Plan for oil and gas industries.

39. The Civil Contingencies Committee (CCC) is responsible for managing the cross-government response to an energy emergency and is normally based in the Cabinet Office Briefing Room (COBR). The interface between the gas and electricity industries and central government is managed through the Joint Response Team (JRT) chaired and facilitated by DECC. National Grid and the Gas Distribution Networks (GDNs)/electricity Distribution Network Operators (DNOs) will also interface directly with the Local or Regional Resilience 'Gold Command' teams normally through a utilities sub-group, for consequence management.

Energy continuity response in Wales

40. Welsh gas and electricity supplies were resilient during the recent period of severe weather to levels comparable with a normal winter. Gas balancing alerts were announced for business' on "interruptible contracts" as a precautionary measure to provide a high degree of resilience should a further emergency occurrence compound the effect on demand of the severe weather.

41. In the event of a major gas or electricity supply emergency, gas and electricity companies are responsible for the practical and operational management of the incident in order to ensure that the situation is contained, managed safely and effectively recovered.

42. Energy distributors with interests in Wales, such as Wales and West Utilities and Western Power Distribution have well established continuity plans and procedures in place to achieve this, which can range from the management of a moderate supply deficit to restoration from an electricity black start or management of a major loss of gas supplies impacting on domestic consumers.

43. Energy distribution companies in Wales also monitor weather patterns daily, and have contracts with the Met Office for the provision of detailed daily forecasting advice.

44. The detailed continuity plans include arrangements for responding to severe weather conditions where access to affected sites and available human resource may be compromised. The plans contain arrangements for the importation of staff and contractors from other areas, the use of all terrain vehicles and other transport methods such as helicopters, in the event of severe conditions.

45. Distribution companies also maintain significant levels of investment in infrastructure to reduce the possibility of system breakdown in extreme conditions. Maintaining supplies is of paramount importance and there is a rolling programme of circuit refurbishment, asset replacement, tree cutting, new connections and reinforcement.

46. Assembly Government energy officials meet regularly with Wales-based energy companies as well as their counterparts in DECC, National Grid and Centrica to discuss emergency arrangements.