

RCC and Pandemic flu – reviewing preparedness for action

NCERCC has brought this matter to the attention of the sector previously. In the light of the recent announcements now is the time to review your preparedness for action.

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1. World Health Organisation (WHO) Alert Phases

There are six levels of alert – six being the most serious.

On 29th April 2009 WHO raised the alert to phase 5: Human-to-human transmission in at least two countries. Strong signal pandemic imminent.

Please note, it is still not a pandemic and there have been very few confirmed cases in the UK. However the change to phase 5 means that there is now increased urgency to review their existing plans or to start planning now, drawing on the DCSF guidance.

2. 29th April message from DCSF to LA Children's Services Departments on 'swine flu' (to Directors of Children's Services)

You will all have seen the media coverage of the current 'swine flu' outbreak, which has led to the World Health Organization changing its pandemic flu alert status from Phase 3 to Phase 4, but it has not declared that this is a pandemic. You may well already be taking action to ensure that services continue to operate however this situation develops.

We would expect schools and other children's services to be operating as usual at present.

It is however an appropriate time for us to remind partners of the guidance that we have published on planning for, and responding to, pandemic flu. This can be found at <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=9942> with further information at <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/humanflupandemic> We are writing to all schools to remind them of the guidance.

If you are not already doing so, we would recommend that you review your current plans - for pandemic flu or more general emergency plans – so that you are well prepared to deal with this situation, and provide assistance (where possible) to schools and early years and childcare providers.

As well as these providers and schools, you will also wish to review plans for the services you provide - directly or out-sourced - particularly to vulnerable children and families, especially looked after children, for whom services must continue. Among other issues, you will want to consider with other local authorities your arrangements for handling out-of-authority placements, whether you are the responsible or 'host' local authority.

We would ask you to contact all early years and childcare providers in your authority's area to bring the guidance to their attention, including confirming to them how you would communicate any future messages advising them to close, if the Government should decide at some stage that closure is necessary.

The Government is monitoring the situation closely, and we will keep you informed if there is any change.

3. Where can I get information?

DCSF guidance for all sectors of children's services is being continually updated and can be found here
<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/humanflupandemic>

Specific infection control guidance for residential settings, including children's homes, can be found at
http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/doc/11485/ifc_residentialsettings.doc

Guidance to schools and children's services can be found here
<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=9942>

4. Department of Health website

<http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/PandemicFlu/index.htm>

Here you can find the national framework for responding to an influenza outbreak published 22nd November 2007. It provides background information and guidance to public and private organisations developing response plans. It updates and expands upon health advice and information contained in previous plans issued by UK health departments and is intended to replace those documents.

Some providers will be interested in material relating to hospitals and primary care settings.

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_080771

All providers will want to ensure they are aware of the materials relating to personal hygiene education, and ensure staff are aware of general advice and general "guidance on infection control", including personal hygiene and seasonal influenza at:

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/PandemicFlu/DH_078752

For most general purposes the following will provide suitable information regarding pandemic flu

- Pandemic flu: important information for you and your family (October 2005 edition)

http://www.dh.gov.uk/PublicationsAndStatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidanceArticle/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4121631&chk=vR4A92

- Explaining Pandemic flu

<http://www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/12/17/49/04121749.pdf>

5. Some general comments

- The Government has stockpiled anti-viral drugs, mostly Tamiflu, to treat those who fall ill.
- It cannot be known in advance whether the virus would affect specific age groups to a greater or lesser extent. Seasonal flu is normally a greater risk for the very young, the very old and those with respiratory problems, however in the pandemic of 1918-1919 the most affected group was otherwise healthy young adults.
- Children secrete larger quantities of virus and for longer periods than adults, which is why 'flu often spreads rapidly in schools and within families.
- To reduce the spread of infection between children, the Government may in a pandemic advise schools to close to pupils, and advise group early years and childcare settings to close.

- Pandemic flu may occur in a series of waves, each lasting perhaps 15 weeks, coming weeks or months after one another; a single-wave pandemic is also possible.

6. Pandemic flu and RCC

Generally, wherever possible, settings should continue to function during a flu pandemic. The risk of infection spreading in these settings will not be much greater than in a large family, and is outweighed by the disruption of a transfer to other accommodation for children and young people who will often already have experienced much disruption in their lives.

Where a provider of RCC is responsible for more than one establishment, it may be possible to limit the spread of infection by moving children so that well children are not accommodated with sick ones. However, this will depend on appropriate infection control and medical advice and require the agreement of the local authority responsible for each individual child's care. In most cases, however, well children will need to stay with sick children and providers, with necessary support from primary care services, will need to take action, wherever possible, to prevent the spread of infection.

As well as planning for staff absences due to staff being ill or looking after sick relatives, managers of settings should take account of the potential impact of possible Government advice to close schools to pupils and close group early years and childcare settings. If such advice is issued and followed, working parents may wish to take time off work to look after healthy children who cannot be left at home alone. Settings will want to assess whether and how this would affect their staff.

7. Please note re NMS and CRB

No diminution of the staffing Regulations or National Minimum Standards should be expected during a flu pandemic. Providers will be expected to have arrangements in place to maintain sufficient levels of staff cover continuing to comply with section 25 of the Children's Homes Regulations 2001 and to meet Standard 30 of the Children's Homes National Minimum Standards

Where it is necessary to introduce temporary staff at short notice to cover for exceptional levels of staff absence, it will be important for them to be provided with sufficient guidance and supervision to be effective in their role as well as having a CRB check

8. What you should do now

There is generic guidance on Emergency Planning. This includes a draft Emergency Plan, which providers can adapt for their own use at:

www.teachernet.gov.uk/emergencies

Providers, in discussion with their registered managers, need now to begin to plan for continuity of care. Some key activities will include:

- Plans for when and how you might isolate a sick child.
- Preparing emergency plans; Ensuring that you have procedures for keeping up to date lists of contact names, phone numbers and addresses (including mobile numbers and e-mail addresses where possible) for all staff;
- Putting in place arrangements for the recruitment of temporary staff to cover for unusually high levels of staff absence - you will need to take into account the likelihood of demands from other service providers for the same 'pool' of potential cover staff;
- Ensuring that policies for applying for medical leave (or for special leave to take care of family members) are in place. Staff should be aware that government advice is that they should not come to work, if they think they are ill, during the pandemic;
- Ensuring that settings are fully equipped with materials needed to implement infection control measures in time to cope with any imminent pandemic;
- Familiarising yourself with the procedures to be followed if a child in your care dies;
- Making plans for supporting a home when a child has died;
- Making plans for supporting a child or staff member who has been bereaved.

9. Other issues you may need to consider in your plans so that arrangements are in place before a pandemic begins, such as:

- Heating of buildings;
- Maintaining health, safety and hygiene arrangements to a high standard, e.g. cleaning toilets, prompt disposal of waste;
- Continuity of meals provision;
- Rapid access to medical help if and when required;
- Willingness of staff to take on a different role for some or all of the duration of a pandemic, and arrangements for the provision of any necessary additional support and supervision;
- Desirability/practicality of sharing staff between homes;
- Options for unqualified volunteers assisting while staff are absent (bearing in mind the need to ensure that no unsuitable person has access to children)

10. What you should do during a pandemic

As far as possible providers, with their registered managers, should try to maintain normal routines for the children in their care. Your top priority will be to ensure that infection control is practiced consistently and rigorously. You will need to keep up to date with advice from the Chief Medical Officer that you would receive through your local authority.

You will need to take all reasonable steps to ensure that staff who are ill are positively encouraged not to come to work. You should, as far as possible, provide support to staff who are sick or bereaved, and deal sympathetically with requests for leave to care for sick dependants; and also provide support for children who are bereaved.

If as a result of the pandemic children have to be moved from their established placement, you must inform the local authority responsible for the child's care.

You should

- Advise staff to read any available NHS information;
- Ensure that all staff have read, and taken action in response to, infection control guidance, that cleaners are informed of measures that need to be taken, and that all necessary cleaning materials are readily available;
- Ensure that staff and children are aware of the general background information and guidance