



Belfast City Council

| | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Report to: | Strategic Policy and Resources Committee |
| Subject: | Pandemic Flu Contingency Planning |
| Date: | 8 May 2009 |
| Reporting Officer: | William Francey, Director of Health and Environmental Services, Ext. 3260 |
| Contact Officer: | |

Relevant Background Information

Following the recent emergence of a new strain of Influenza A (H1N1) in Mexico the World Health Organisation (WHO) is co-ordinating the global response and monitoring the threat of an influenza pandemic. WHO has categorised the prevailing circumstances as being at alert level 5 on a 6 point scale. This does not indicate that progression to a full pandemic is inevitable although this appears increasingly likely.

At national level the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) has been activated and meetings are being held daily to co-ordinate the national response. These meetings are chaired by the Secretary of State for Health and attended by Minister McGimpsey and his counterparts from Wales and Scotland.

The purpose of this report is to inform Members of the steps already taken to prepare the Council to cope with the situation where there is a risk of major disruption in circumstances such as a pandemic and of the ongoing review of these arrangements.

Key Issues

Since 2007 the council has had in place a specific corporate contingency plan (Strategic Pandemic Plan) to cope with a pandemic situation. This overall plan provides a framework and addresses issues such as:

- The external groups necessary to ensure that infrastructure and resources were in place to provide services.
- Action to be taken by the council at each of the 6 alert levels.
- The critical services necessary in a pandemic.

This strategic plan is supported by individual pandemic contingency plans for critical public services such as refuse collection, cemeteries and some environmental health functions. All Services also have more general business continuity plans. All of these are subject to regular review and appropriate desk-top testing.

A meeting at which all Council departments were represented on 28 April initiated an immediate review of these plans to ensure that they can be implemented at short notice. This was to include revisiting the actions at each level, considering any current resource or training needs and also ensuring that stated actions within the plans are still relevant in line with the officially recommended best practice. In addition, the strategic plan itself was to be reviewed to ensure that it meets current best practice. Two further meetings have taken place to oversee the review of the Strategic Pandemic Plan and, in parallel with this, a communications group has been established to ensure that relevant advice issued by central Government is communicated effectively across the organisation. This group is also ensuring that arrangements are in place to meet the requirements of Members to be kept informed, especially in circumstances where there is potential service disruption.

The initial focus of internal staff communications has been on providing reassurance that the council has been preparing for such events for some time. General advice on personal, preventive measures has been issued by email with links to information on Interlink and has also been included in the current team brief. It is also being emphasised that all media enquires must be referred to Corporate Communications. The Council's building cleaning provision is also being adapted in line with official guidance and staff informed accordingly. Information was posted on the Council's website on 28 April with links to useful official sites such as DHSSPS, Health Protection Agency, NI Direct, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and WHO.

The Council has links to the Health Protection Agency and the Northern Ireland Civil Contingencies Group through which daily situation reports are received. To promote clarity and speed of transmission of all relevant information and preserve confidentiality where necessary, all incoming official advice is channelled through the Council's emergency co-ordination officer.

In terms of Council governance, the Director of Legal Services has indicated that, in the event of it not being possible for Committees or the Council to carry out business (through difficulty in achieving the quorum) there is sufficient scope within the existing delegated authority to Chief Officers for emergency decisions to be taken. There is a general requirement within the scheme that in certain circumstances Chief Officers should, where possible, consult with the Chair of the Committee and Members can be assured this would be done in the event of a pandemic situation.

As the situation has been developing rapidly the Committee will be provided with the most up-to-date information both nationally and regionally at the meeting.

Resource Implications

There are no specific resource implications arising from this report as work to manage the risks to business continuity are integral to the role of individual managers. However some costs may arise if additional materials need to be procured, for example for cleaning or other critical purposes or if specific protective equipment or measures are needed.

| |
|------------------------|
| |
| Recommendations |

The Committee is requested to note that contingency arrangements are in place and are being reviewed in light of the current threat level. As the situation is changing rapidly further and updated information will be provided at the meeting. The Committee is also requested to note the comments of the Director of Legal Services regarding the taking of decisions should Committees not be able to carry out business.