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HEALTH AND SAFETY COMMISSION

UK INFLUENZA PANDEMIC CONTINGENCY PLAN

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Issue

1. The Department of Health (DH) has submitted to its Minister a UK Pandemic Influenza Contingency Plan. The Plan has implications for the health and safety of workers during such a crisis.

Timing

2. The Plan was sent to the DH Minister on 6 December for approval to publish it as a working document on the DH website. In the near future, the DH Minister will write to all other Ministers (including Jane Kennedy) whose departments have been involved in the drawing up of the Plan. An informative submission was sent by HSE to Jane Kennedy on 8 December.

Recommendation

3. The Commission is asked to note the Plan and its relevance to worker health and safety. It is also asked to note HSE's watching brief and input where necessary into the Plan and its continuing interest in contingency arrangements for such a crisis.

Background

4. Pandemics of influenza are to be distinguished from 'seasonal' influenza which occurs most winters. A pandemic is the worldwide spread of a disease with outbreaks occurring in many countries and most regions of the world. Influenza pandemics have swept the world from time to time throughout history with devastating effect. Three occurred in the last century, the most severe of which was in 1918/19 and is reputed to have killed between 20 and 40 million people worldwide.

5. For some time now, DH has led on the systematic development of a UK contingency plan for an influenza pandemic to replace the one issued in 1997. The prime objectives are to reduce the impact of the disease on public health and to minimise

disruption to essential services. Maintaining business continuity and reducing disruption to society are subsidiary aims.

Argument

6. The Plan has been developed with the full knowledge, co-operation and input of other government bodies including HSE.

7. During such a crisis, the health and safety risk assessment approach will be vital in identifying risks to/provision of suitable control measures for workers in the emergency services, health workers, laboratory workers, funeral workers, workers at ports/airports, etc. In addition, consideration will also need to be given to the training of/control measures for those who are brought in to carry out unfamiliar work as a result of the emergency situation. The flexibility of the UK's health and safety legislation with risk assessment at its core should enable appropriate measures to be put in place even in extremis.

8. The Plan asks all employers to consider their preparedness for a pandemic. HSE is considering this as part of its own contingency plans and the matter will be brought to the attention of DWP.

9. This Plan is a 'living' document and so a continuing HSE watching brief, inputting where appropriate in the future will be necessary.

Consultation

10. DH has included HSE and the worker health and safety perspective in its consultation on the Plan.

Presentation

11. The primary concern of the Plan is public health and minimising the effect in the UK of an influenza pandemic.

12. The key consideration for HSE during the development of the Plan has been to ensure that the health and safety of workers during such a crisis is properly safeguarded.

Costs and Benefits

13. DH's cross-government consultation has enabled HSE to keep a watching brief and input where necessary and advise on the limitations of health and safety legislation.

Financial/Resource Implications for HSE

14. There are no specific financial or legal considerations connected with the publication of the Plan and its aftermath apart from the HSE staff resource in making an input into the Plan estimated at £10000 and the ongoing staff resource (keeping a watching brief) at £1500.

Environmental Implications

14. There are no environmental implications.

Other Implications

15. None. There are no devolution issues – it is a pan-UK plan.

Action

16. The Commission is asked to note for information the Plan, HSE's input into it and the Plan's relevance to worker health and safety.

10 December 2004