

# 10 Communication and public engagement

## 10.1 Current perceptions and understandings

Preparing for, responding to and recovering from an influenza pandemic will depend significantly on cooperation between the Government, public authorities, business, non-governmental organisations, the voluntary sector and individuals. An effective two-way communication strategy that positively engages each of these key groups prior to and during a pandemic is therefore a major strand of the Government's preparations. Any emergency on this scale also needs strong national direction of public information from the outset. Timely advice and information will help prepare the population for the potential impact of a pandemic and will be critical to its subsequent management.

Research commissioned by the Department of Health suggested that the general level of awareness and understanding of influenza amongst health professionals and the public is very limited. Influenza itself is not generally regarded as a serious illness except by those within traditional 'at-risk' groups and there is general confusion between antiviral medicines and vaccines, and their availability for treatment. 'Bird flu' is frequently confused with pandemic influenza, making pandemic communications prone to misinterpretation, and it is widely assumed that effective medical countermeasures will be available. Media information is perceived as sporadic, inconsistent and not associated with communications from the Government (even when Government spokespeople are quoted).

## 10.2 Aims and objectives

The main aims of the Government's communication and public engagement strategy are to:

- improve general awareness and understanding of influenza amongst the population and promote good hygiene and other general precautionary measures
- prepare the country for the probable emergence of a new or re-emerging influenza virus and explain what is being done to detect any such virus and prevent its spread
- achieve public support for national response and contingency measures
- explain the uncertainties and what can be done by the Government, the NHS, other organisations and individuals to reduce the impact of a pandemic and some of the constraints that entails
- encourage discussion of pandemic response options, limitations and constraints in an inclusive and transparent way
- mobilise the population as partners at the response phase

- convey accurate, timely, consistent and credible advice and information to the public (including all hard-to-reach groups), professions and businesses at the response and recovery stages
- provide advice and information for travellers and UK citizens overseas and for foreign residents and visitors in the UK
- provide specific advice on response strategies and tactics as the actual characteristics and impact of an emerging virus are identified
- provide multilingual information on how assessment, healthcare and other support services should be accessed by symptomatic patients
- encourage the continuity of normal and essential activities as far as possible
- uphold the rule of law and democratic process
- promote individual and social responsibility
- address the needs of all groups.

During the inter-pandemic period, the main objectives are to provide accurate advice and information, encourage the adoption of high standards of personal hygiene and prepare the population for the emergence of an influenza pandemic and its potential impacts. During any period of increased alert and throughout the response phase, the objectives are to promote and reinforce individual and collective actions that reduce the spread of influenza and minimise its health and wider impact on the UK.

### 10.3 Key elements

The key elements of the Government's communication and public engagement strategy are:

- encouraging prior public debate to explore the ethical, professional and practical implications of an influenza pandemic, condition public expectations and ensure that decisions are made in an inclusive and transparent way
- active media engagement to ensure that timely and accurate information and technical explanations are available to support informed reporting
- provision of open access to various direct sources of accurate and current information such as telephone helplines and websites
- research and pre-testing to identify communication priorities and ensure that messages are clear and effective and meet public needs

- multi-media and multilingual public information campaigns delivered directly and/or through healthcare and service providers
- specialist advice and information for particular settings and sectors
- clinical information to support healthcare professionals in primary and secondary care
- rapid information sharing within and between all sectors.

#### 10.4 Government News Co-ordination Centre

The Government's News Co-ordination Centre (NCC) is set up to manage the communications aspects of a crisis, major emergency or other disruptive challenge. In any period of increased alert and during a pandemic, the NCC will become operational in support of the Department of Health as the lead government department. It will work to the policy direction of the Cabinet Office Briefing Room to ensure that messages from central government departments are consistent and coordinated at national and regional levels, and explain national or international differences in response. A government media centre will also be established.

#### 10.5 Cascading information

The Department of Health will inform the Cabinet Office, the health departments of the devolved administrations (directorates in Scotland) and the Health Protection Agency (HPA) should the World Health Organization (WHO) declare a pandemic or update threat assessments. The Cabinet Office will alert other government departments and work with the Department of Health to develop, update and circulate top-line briefings via the NCC. The Department of Health will also alert health and social care organisations and professionals in England through strategic health authorities and via the Chief Medical Officer's established public health link mechanism. Similar arrangements are in place in the devolved administrations. Messages would include clinical information for health professionals. Other government departments will arrange sector-specific briefings.

Foreign nationals visiting or resident in the UK should maintain contact with their respective embassies, which should receive regular briefings, advice and information from relevant government departments.

#### 10.6 Health communications

The Department of Health will be the primary source of health-related messages and will work closely with the Cabinet Office, the devolved administrations,

other government departments and the HPA to deliver a nationally coordinated communication strategy. Effective internal two-way communication will also be vital to an effective response in a pandemic. Strategic health authorities/boards will play a key part in linking to health services and will support and coordinate the activities of primary care trusts and other local NHS organisations in delivering locally tailored press notices and key fact sheets, and in identifying suitable spokespeople.

All mainstream information and campaign materials need to be accessible to the widest possible audience, including hard-to-reach groups. Explanatory leaflets, a guide explaining pandemic influenza and other informative material are already available on the web. An information pack has been distributed to GP surgeries, pharmacies and NHS Direct call centres and walk-in centres. Plans for a print and broadcast advertising campaign and a public information film have also been developed and will be held on standby. A national leaflet door drop will be activated at WHO Phase 5.

Chief Medical Officers have an important professional leadership role in a pandemic. In conjunction with expert groups, professional bodies and health protection agencies, they will provide multidisciplinary advice and information and may need to adapt initial guidance as the characteristics of the emerging influenza virus become more apparent or if pressures on capacity, pharmaceuticals or other supplies make tactical changes necessary.

Further information on health communication in a pandemic is available at [www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu](http://www.dh.gov.uk/pandemicflu)

## **10.7 Public information and advice (National Flu Line service)**

From WHO Phase 5, the Government will make public information, advice, access to literature and updated situation reports available through the National Flu Line service (see also section 9.8.1).