



Briefing 09 -21

Swine flu: Issues for local authorities

Key Issues:

This briefing includes consideration of issues for those with responsibility for: -

- Emergency planning and business continuity
- Education and school meals services
- Community events
- Social or health care services
- School or park farms
- Staff health and safety and welfare

1. Introduction

This briefing replicates advice provided by the public health protection agency (HPA), the world health organisation (WHO) and the centre for disease control and prevention (CDC within the USA). Full guidance on a range of matters can be found at the Health Protection Agency website at <http://www.hpa.org.uk/> and the World Health Organisation at <http://www.who.int/en/>

This briefing also draws on the 2005 UK Pandemic Influenza Contingency plan produced in October 2005. This briefing is provided to encapsulate some of the key issues for local government, police and fire service providers as a ready reference point. However those responsible for strategic decision making are advised to refer to the appropriate Government agencies.

Recent news coverage of UK cases of Swine influenza have caused some concerns with APSE members and this briefing is intended to direct those with service area responsibility to the appropriate advisory bodies within the UK and provide some initial advice. **It is important to remember that at this stage there is not a pandemic and that UK authorities including the NHS and public health agencies are well prepared to deal with this issue, alongside local council, police and fire emergency planning teams.**

2. About Swine influenza

Swine influenza (flu) is a respiratory disease, normally found in pigs, but human cases can and do happen. The current human cases have now been confirmed in several countries including Mexico, US, Canada, Spain and the United Kingdom. This strain of Swine influenza contains a combination of genetic material typical to avian, swine and human flu viruses. Transmission of this new swine influenza virus is thought to occur in the same way as seasonal flu.

What is Swine Influenza?

Swine influenza (Swine flu) is a respiratory disease of pigs caused by type A influenza virus that regularly causes outbreaks of influenza in pigs. Swine flu viruses cause high levels of illness and low death rates in pigs. Swine influenza viruses may circulate among swine throughout the year, but most outbreaks occur during the late autumn and winter months similar to outbreaks in humans. The classical Swine flu virus (an influenza type A H1N1 virus) was first isolated from a pig in 1930.

How many swine flu viruses are there?

Like all influenza viruses, swine flu viruses change constantly. Pigs can be infected by avian influenza and human influenza viruses as well as Swine influenza viruses. When influenza viruses from different species infect pigs, the viruses can reassort (i.e. swap genes) and new viruses that are a mix of swine, human and/or avian influenza viruses can emerge. Over the years, different variations of swine flu viruses have emerged. However, most of the recently isolated influenza viruses from pigs have been H1N1 viruses.

3. Swine Flu in Humans

The following may provide a useful guide for managers, those with responsibility for community services such as social care, school meals, leisure centres and other areas where there is close contact between members of staff and the public. It may also act as a useful reference point to assure service users, parents, carers and trade union representatives.

Can humans catch swine flu?

Swine flu viruses do not normally infect humans. However, sporadic human infections with swine flu have occurred. Most commonly, these cases occur in persons with direct exposure to pigs (e.g. children near pigs at a fair or workers in the swine industry). In addition, there have been documented cases of one person spreading swine flu to others. For example, an outbreak of apparent swine flu infection in pigs in Wisconsin USA in 1988 resulted in multiple human infections, and, although no community outbreak resulted, there was antibody evidence of virus transmission from the patient to health care workers who had close contact with the patient. The emerging news about a new variant human flu virus in USA and Mexico suggests that the virus is most similar to swine influenza viruses. However, it is understood that human cases in the USA are not linked to pigs. There is insufficient information from Mexico at this time to know if any of the cases in that country are in people who have had contact with pigs.

What are the symptoms of swine flu in humans?

The symptoms of Swine flu in people are expected to be similar to the symptoms of regular human [seasonal influenza](#) and include fever, lethargy, lack of appetite and coughing. Some people with Swine flu also have reported runny nose, sore throat, nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea.

Can people catch swine flu from eating pork?

No. Swine influenza viruses are not transmitted by food. You cannot get swine influenza from eating pork or pork products. Eating properly handled and cooked pork and pork products is safe. Cooking pork to an internal temperature of 160°F kills the swine flu virus as it does other bacteria and viruses.

This [link](#) may provide useful information to local authority caterers if they are faced with concerns from worried parents or those in residential or home care settings who are receiving local authority school meals, meals-on-wheels, or other catering services.

How does swine flu spread?

Influenza viruses can be directly transmitted from pigs to people and from people to pigs. Human infection with flu viruses from pigs are most likely to occur when people are in close proximity to infected pigs, such as in pig barns and livestock exhibitions. Human-to-human transmission of swine flu can also occur. This is thought to occur in the same way as seasonal flu occurs in people, which is mainly person-to-person transmission through coughing or sneezing of people infected with the influenza virus. People may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth or nose.

What can people do to prevent the spread of Swine flu?

The single most effective way to stop or slow the spread of diseases such as Swine flu is to prevent the spread of germs. This includes washing hands regularly with soap and water and covering your mouth if you cough or sneeze and disposing carefully of used tissues. See this [Department of Health guide](#) for more detailed information. Local authorities, police and fire authorities may wish to encourage such practices amongst staff as a matter of good hygiene but to also reinforce the messages amongst those working in close proximity to the public such as those within health or social care or childcare settings.

In the event of a Swine flu breakout the World Health Organisation also recommends:

- Avoid close contact with people who appear unwell and who have fever and cough.
- Practice good health habits including adequate sleep, eating nutritious food, and keeping physically active.

If there is an ill person at home:

- Try to provide the ill person a separate section in the house. If this is not possible keep the patient at least 1 meter in distance from others.
- Cover mouth and nose when caring for the ill person. Masks can be bought commercially or made using the readily available materials as long as they are disposed of or cleaned properly.
- Wash your hands with soap and water thoroughly after each contact with the ill person.
- Try to improve the air flow in the area where the ill person stays. Use doors and windows to take advantage of breezes.
- Keep the environment clean with readily available household cleaning agents.

What is the government doing to prepare?

GPs and hospitals across the UK are preparing for a pandemic, and the UK government is working with the WHO to monitor the situation.

If pandemic flu does arrive in the UK, antiviral medicine will be used to treat people who become ill (see [Treatment](#)).

While the development of a vaccine can only start once the new virus has been identified, the UK has agreements with manufacturers, which will produce a vaccine when it becomes available.

Is the H1N1 swine flu virus the same as human H1N1 viruses?

No. The H1N1 swine flu viruses are antigenically very different from human H1N1 viruses and, therefore, vaccines for human seasonal flu would not provide protection from H1N1 swine flu viruses.

What medications are available to treat swine flu infections in humans?

One of the ways to lessen the symptoms of pandemic flu is to treat infected people with antiviral medicines, which have been used against Mexican swine flu. The UK has stocks of these medicines and there is enough to treat up to half the population should they become ill during a pandemic.

Antivirals will help to:

- reduce the length of time a person is ill by around one day,
- relieve some of the symptoms, and
- reduce the potential for serious complications such as pneumonia.

Antivirals will not cure but they lessen the symptoms and help recovery.

3. What can councils do in mitigation in response to human infections with swine influenza (H1N1) virus

The UK Influenza Pandemic Contingency Plan (October 2005) contains some measures that may be introduced to minimise societal disruption alongside measures that are designed to ensure essential services continue. The aim of the contingency plan is to reduce in the event of a pandemic virus the impact of public health i.e. to reduce illness and save lives. Therefore the plan concentrates on the continuation of health services, supply and distribution of antiviral drugs and vaccines (if they are developed). However on a regional and local basis local authorities are part of the critical response in both public health and service delivery terms. Included within the objectives of the plan are:-

- A flexible and responsive system to cope with unpredictable events
- Minimise the spread of the virus and if possible prevent a pandemic virus
- Access the epidemiology of a new pandemic such as age profile of likely affected groups
- Provide care for large numbers of ill people
- Cope with the eventuality of large numbers of people dying
- Reduce the impact on health and social care – for example by reprioritising services
- Provide timely information
- Ensure essential services are maintained
- Reduce the impact on daily life and business
- Anticipate the plan for other consequences
- Minimise economic loss

These measures include the need to ensure the maintenance of emergency services, transport, food distribution, pharmaceutical supplies, utilities and communications including:-

- Management of mass casualties
- Maintenance of public order
- The role of the police and armed forces.

All organisations need to consider the implications of staff absence because of staff sickness or the need for staff to care for sick dependants and to include within this:-

- The establishment of minimum staff numbers
- Identifying a 'front line' group of essential staff
- Considering the need to transfer or redeploy staff to do jobs they may not be trained to do or familiar with or recruit additional staff or volunteers
- Accommodation for staff to rest between shifts, for example, use of portocabins when transport home becomes difficult or disrupted
- Staff rosters to allow for adequate breaks and leave periods to ensure sustainable responses over several weeks.

There will also be a need for:-

- Appropriate staff training
- Training of volunteers
- Teaching staff how to handle and work with volunteers – e.g. St John ambulance volunteers
- Keeping a database of staff recently retired who may be called upon for help
- There will also be a need for councils to ensure that they involve the independent health or social care sector in their response and plans

Preparedness for a pandemic situation will be of particular importance to those providing services to vulnerable people including home care services or services to children. Those more susceptible to respiratory illnesses could be at higher risk of complications as a result of Swine flu, including developing pneumonia and therefore this should also be considered by local authorities in the context of care arrangements and for their own staff providing care.

Whilst closure of schools could create a severe disruption on working parents, particularly those who work within the health sector and might be unable to get into work, decisions will need to be made based on health risks amongst groups in close proximity, should a pandemic develop.

This may also be the case for other areas of local authority work that involves large social gatherings, such as festivals or concerts or leisure events.

Public sector employers may also consider new policies to allow remote working by non-essential staff or to facilitate a more flexible response to service continuity planning.

All managers will also need to be regularly updated on business continuity planning and run through local contingency plans as they affect their service areas.

3. Swine Flu in Pigs

The following may provide a useful reference point for those service directors and managers with responsibility for livestock in parks or school farms, markets and fairs

Unlike avian influenza, swine influenza is not a notifiable or statutory disease and it is not listed by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). Pig keepers and their veterinarians are therefore responsible for dealing with outbreaks of influenza in pigs to safeguard the welfare and productivity of their animals. Studies have shown that the previous swine flu H1N1 strain is common throughout pig populations worldwide, with around 25 percent of animals showing evidence of past exposure to infection.

Swine flu viruses are thought to be spread mostly through close contact among pigs and possibly from contaminated objects moving between infected and uninfected pigs. Herds with continuous swine flu infections and herds that are vaccinated against swine flu may have sporadic disease, or may show only mild or no symptoms of infection.

This [DEFRA link](#) on monitoring animal diseases may be useful to park or farm managers with responsibility for livestock

What are signs of swine flu in pigs?

Signs of swine flu in pigs can include sudden onset of fever, depression, coughing (barking), discharge from the nose or eyes, sneezing, breathing difficulties, eye redness or inflammation, and going off feed.

Is there a vaccine for swine flu?

Vaccines are available to be given to pigs to prevent swine influenza. There is no vaccine to protect humans from swine flu. The seasonal influenza vaccine will likely help provide partial protection against swine H3N2, but not swine H1N1 viruses.

APSE assistance

APSE will be monitoring this situation on behalf of member authorities and we would be obliged if member authorities brought to our attention any further areas where we are able to be of assistance. If you need to access APSE's network query service to find out what other service area managers are doing in response to this situation please contact one of APSE's Principal Advisors or email mbaines@apse.org.uk;

This matter can also be discussed on [APSE Connect](#).

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