

Tips for Employers to Plan for the Pandemic

Pandemic planning is not solely a public health issue, and involves a co-ordinated response from all Government departments and all sectors of society, including the business community. Many organisations and businesses have been involved in pandemic preparedness planning over the past several years, with the assistance and guidance of the Dept. of Enterprise Trade and Employment, Forfás and other agencies. All businesses now need to make sure they have considered the implications of the present influenza pandemic for their business and make, or update, appropriate business continuity plans.

The current swine flu outbreak is causing mild to moderate illness, but even mild flu among large numbers of staff can have a serious impact on business continuity. During this pandemic, it is likely that staff will be absent from work if they are ill with influenza or if they need to care for others who are ill with influenza. At the core of business continuity planning should be an estimated absenteeism rate of around 15%. Even if the rate of flu is 25% with 1 in 4 of the population becoming ill, the absenteeism rate is estimated to run at 15% as not everyone will be off sick or caring for relatives at the same time during the pandemic.

In a simple example of a business of 100 people; about 25 staff members could get sick but they will be spread out over the pandemic period and the average number sick at the peak is estimated at around 12 -15 including those who might take leave or be left off to care for a sick relative.

This estimated rate of absenteeism (due to staff illness or if caring for a relative) could have a significant impact on economic activity. While some companies already have business continuity plans in place many do not. The pandemic is currently gaining a foothold in this country, so the time is now right to plan for this challenge, in order to protect your staff and your business.

Among the challenges businesses may face, in addition to high rates of absenteeism, are: disruption to supply chains and business travel, infection control amongst employees, a drop in demand for goods and services, as well as strain on human resources, insurance and cash flow.

Acknowledging that a significant problem could be coming down the track for businesses is the first critical step. Planning for the pandemic is key and adopting a common sense approach is recommended to minimise the impact on the business community.

Businesses are advised to prepare by appointing a Pandemic Coordinator and deputy who will understand the critical requirements, plan accordingly and communicate with staff, in order to help protect staff and reduce the impact on productivity levels.

What can employers do to keep their staff healthy?

Preventing the introduction of flu is the first and most important step. Respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette are key measures that everyone should use at all times to prevent the transmission of respiratory infections. These measures include, when coughing and sneezing:

- Turn your head away from other people
- Use a tissue to cover your mouth and nose
- Place the used tissue in a waste bin
- Wash hands after disposing of a tissue with soap and water, or alcohol based hand cleaners (with at least 60% alcohol)

You may wish to display posters on respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette in your premises and to consider having a supply of tissues and, where no hand wash sink is available, alcohol hand cleaners (with at least 60% alcohol) in common areas (e.g. canteen, lobby/waiting areas). Please see www.swineflu.ie to download posters for public places on stopping flu from spreading.

What should I do if I have employees returning from a country affected by swine flu?

Swine flu is spreading through many countries of the world, including Ireland; therefore the advice for travellers is the same as that for non-travellers. As long as an employee remains well, there is no need for them to stay away from work or to be tested.

What happens if an employee becomes unwell?

If an employee begins to develop influenza-like symptoms they should be advised:

- To stay at home, to avoid spreading infection to others
- To phone the HSE 24 hr Flu Information Line to check their symptoms, or visit www.swineflu.ie. The Flu Line is on Freephone 1800 94 11 00.
- That most people will be able to recover at home within a few days without needing medical care.
- That anyone in a high risk group should contact their GP surgery by phone. (This includes people with chronic illness, aged over 65 or under 5, women who are pregnant, and severely obese people with a BMI over 40)

Flu Symptoms Include:

Sudden onset of symptoms
High Fever - Temperature over 38°C/100.4°F
Severe weakness and fatigue
Dry cough
Aching muscles and joints
Sore throat
Headache
Runny nose
Vomiting / diarrhoea

What happens if an employee has swine flu?

The sick employee will be advised to remain off work for at least 7 days.

If someone is sick, who else may be affected?

If an employee becomes ill and turns out to have swine flu, other staff members should remain vigilant and keep an eye out for any flu-like symptoms. If they feel unwell, they should remain at home, call the Flu line and, if necessary, contact their local GP surgery as indicated above.

What should I do if an employee is travelling to an area affected by swine flu?

Travel advice is available on the Department of Health website www.dohc.ie
Information on this site is regularly updated.

Have you Flu-proofed your business?**Below are some tips for employers to prepare for a possible Swine Flu pandemic:****Prevention**

- Alert employees as to the symptoms and risks associated with Swine Flu, as well as prevention measures.
- Encourage employees to wash their hands prior to commencing work, after sneezing and coughing and after they touch objects that may have been in contact with people exhibiting flu symptoms.
- Encourage employees not to touch surfaces that may be contaminated with the flu virus and to avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Provide hand sanitisers where appropriate.
- Review cleaning procedures in place to regularly disinfect equipment, work stations and the workplace generally.
- Require sick employees to stay at home until they fully recover. This is a minimum of 7 days.
- Consider accommodating recovering employees, or employees who are caring for family members, by use of alternative work arrangements, such as working from home

Establish a pandemic preparation and response team

Identify a team responsible to plan for a pandemic, including representatives with expertise in human resources, operations, health and safety and communications.

Prepare a plan

- If the employer is part of a global group, with a Corporate Pandemic Plan, consider how that plan can be implemented locally and how it may need to be adjusted at the local level.
- Establish a process to get information from the HSE and other relevant agencies
- Determine to what extent the business can operate in the event of a pandemic. Workplaces should as a guide be prepared for at least 15% absenteeism related to flu.
- Assess staffing needs, including alternative work locations, overtime agreements, and alternative means of getting work done without direct contact (e.g., via teleconferencing and video-conferencing).
- Assess the effect of a pandemic on suppliers, service providers and customers.
- Consider how much time is needed for an orderly shutdown, if necessary.
- Review insurance coverage and relevant agreements to determine how the employer can meet contract terms if he/she decides not to operate for a short time.
- Consider whether the employer's facility is secure, in anticipation of possible service (e.g., power, water) reductions, reduced staffing levels and the possible need to shut down, without much, if any, warning
- Determine sickness/disability coverage, including for employees who are unable to come to work, but who are not sick.
- Review applicable legislation and obligations to determine if employees are entitled to emergency, family and/or other legislated leaves, to care for sick family members.

Communications

- Determine who will be responsible for issuing communications.
- Provide information to employees about Swine Flu and associated symptoms and risks.
- Carefully and clearly communicate information, policies and procedures to all employees.
- Ensure employees get regular, updated training and information on hazards and hazard identification.
- Establish a system for employees to report their status during a pandemic, including what information they are required to communicate (and how) to the employer and when they are expected to NOT report to work.
- Ensure employee and employee emergency contact information is up to date.
- Inform employees of how the employer will communicate with them in the event of an emergency.

Visitors

- Where applicable, consider asking visitors in advance of attending the workplace to identify if they may have Flu symptoms or if they have had contact with a person infected with Flu.
- Ask visitors to provide information as to where and how they may be contacted after their visit, in the event that Flu develops in the workplace and they need to be notified.

Contact your business association to find out more information in relation to applying policies and procedures and how they relate to human resources and employment law. ISME is currently working on such policies and procedures as are other organisations including the SFA and IBEC and Chambers Ireland.

Visit the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment website at www.entemp.ie to view and download the **Business Continuity Planning – Responding to an Influenza Pandemic** document which gives advice and a checklist to businesses on planning for the pandemic.

Influenza A(H1N1) information is available on the 24 Hour HSE Flu Information Line Freephone 1800 94 11 00 and at the dedicated influenza pages at www.hse.ie

The HSE website has introduced a new HEALTH ATLAS service, where you can find your nearest GP on a map, along with contact details. Check out the HEALTH ATLAS at <http://www.hse.ie/eng/HealthAtlas/>

More information for the business community is also available at:

www.forfas.ie

www.enterprise-ireland.com

www.idaireland.com

The National Pandemic Influenza Plan is available from www.hse.ie