

WRS Board: 1 October 2020

## Information Report – Joint working with Public Health to control Covid-19 Outbreaks in work settings

**Recommendation** That the Board notes the Report and that members use the contents of the information provided in their own reporting back to fellow members of the partner authorities.

**Background**

As Members are aware COVID-19 poses a serious and imminent risk to public health and has been declared a global pandemic. On 5 March 2020 the first death from coronavirus in the UK was confirmed.

Local Authorities, with key NHS partners, work alongside Public Health England (PHE) on the reactive response to outbreaks, following the usual arrangements in place for any outbreak situation.

National contact tracers follow up most non-complex, routine positive cases and their contacts and will escalate any complex cases, clusters and outbreaks to the West Midlands Public Health England team, who work with the Local Authority to rapidly prevent and control transmission.

WRS Environmental Health expertise and resources have been focussed on outbreak investigation, proactive advice and enforcement to supplement the National contact tracing programme. This is a key role in effective disease control and prevention and your Officers have the essential experience, professional and legislative tools required to manage and control any outbreaks that do occur.

Worcestershire's Local Outbreak Response Team (LORT) was established on 1 July 2020, when Worcestershire's Outbreak Control Plan was published. It comprises of WRS Environmental Health Officers and Public Health Practitioners operating under the direction of the Director of Public Health.

The team's responsibilities are to ensure:

- Daily management of Covid-19 outbreaks;
- Availability Monday to Sunday 9am to 6pm with additional provision for out of hours working, as required;
- Standard Operating Procedures are developed and working effectively for different settings and situations;
- A single point of contact by email or telephone to respond to complex situations, provide additional capacity in outbreak management and to provide a local perspective to settings and communities.
- The LORT will also support settings in the prevention of outbreaks



## Report

Since July a team of WRS Environmental Health Officers has been working directly with the Worcestershire County Council Public Health Team and other partners to support Covid control in workplace settings. WRS has committed to having four officers and a team leader available to support the Director of Public Health on a daily basis. The WRS Environmental Health Officers are embedded with the Public Health Practitioners in the Local Outbreak Response Team (LORT).

The arrangement was immediately called into action when the team was asked to support Herefordshire Public Health in their investigation into a major farm outbreak on the county border, where over 100 Covid cases were identified in overseas workers. Two WRS officers in full personal protective equipment spent several days on site undertaking activities ranging from conducting interviews and information gathering to assisting those quarantined on the farm in obtaining food and essential provisions.

The epidemic continues to create major learning curves for all and the lessons learned from the Herefordshire incident were soon put to the test with two outbreaks in Worcestershire, the first at a food packaging firm which distributes vegetables and salad products and the second at a large food manufacturer.

At the packaging firm many overseas workers were living on site but it was established that infection had been brought into the business from workers travelling in daily by coach from the Sandwell area. WRS worked closely with Public Health consultants and Public Health England experts to control the outbreak whilst keeping both businesses operational. WRS maintained a constant presence at the packaging site from initial investigation into the source of the infection, assisting the Army with a Mobile Testing Unit and monitoring food safety when workforce restrictions were in place.

The outbreak at the food manufacturing premises was a smaller outbreak affecting one of the production lines rather than the whole site. Again the source of the virus was found to be workers from the West Midlands. For safety reasons the business asked that food checks were made at the factory by remote contact, the Food Standard Agency's new default position for recommencing food inspection work in the Covid era.

In September officers were involved in providing advice and guidance to a public house in Welland where two members of staff and a member of the public were found to be infected. This generated social media interest and this contrasting small business outbreak demonstrates that Covid can affect any workplace setting. Hence investigations are supplemented by an ongoing WRS programme of providing targeted business advice and support countywide.

Following the outbreaks the team has also undertaken a survey of over 100 food businesses from farmers to major producers across the county to identify their workforce makeup and provide Covid advice and reassurance.

The important learning for businesses has been a need to appreciate and understand where their workforce comes from, their external activities and method of travel to the workplace. Officers have also worked with the businesses to promote the wider use of working in site 'bubbles', so that if a part of the workforce is infected the rest can continue working and not have to self-isolate.

The management of Covid safety in businesses is a health and safety requirement. WRS has also had to take into account in giving advice, that many of the businesses at highest risk



of Covid are HSE enforced. This was identified as a potential barrier early on and consequently the WRS Team Lead for Covid contacted the area HSE Principal Officer and entered into a mutual work arrangement between the organisations. We believe this to be the first of its kind in the country, whereby the HSE allows qualified WRS officers to undertake an initial investigation and provide basic Covid advice, with the HSE issuing more formal advice or taking legal action where serious risk assessment gaps are identified. This has saved considerable resource for all involved and reduced potential time delays for our businesses.

The team is investigating an increasing number of daily Covid notifications in workplaces and also complaints from the public who have contacted the County Health Protection Team with concerns about Covid non compliance.

WRS is also delivering a training programme to temporary local contact tracers who will be employees of the County Council and potentially other partners on standby to assist should the county face an increase in reported cases and need more short-notice investigative capacity.

Going forward WRS will be working closely with the County Team to shape and improve the new local track and trace system to ensure it is effective locally whilst facing the prospect of further operational changes when Public Health England ceases to exist in early 2021 and becomes part of a new agency.

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