6.1 Contingency planning

Contingency planning is the process by which organisations plan for uncertain events. Effective contingency planning covers all aspects of preparation for such eventualities, including: recruitment and training of staff; deployment of systems for administration and information management; installation of structures for management and decision making; sourcing of goods and services; and procedures for communicating internally and externally. A cornerstone of good contingency preparation is open communication among key partners to address strategies for response, including escalation, according to circumstances. Some organisations, notably the emergency services, have well-honed systems to respond to emergencies, and they rehearse and update them regularly.

The Government’s Memorandum to our Inquiry stated that “comprehensive contingency plans were in place”. We did not find this to be so. Papers laying out FMD contingency plans had been prepared and accepted by the European Commission and approved by the Standing Veterinary Committee. But we found the contingency plan limited in scope, out of date in some respects and not integrated into a national programme of rehearsal and testing. Some local government representatives and other stakeholders claimed they were not aware of these plans. One stakeholder referred to them as the “best kept national secret”.

The contingency plans within MAFF consisted of three main parts: the plans submitted to the EU in accordance with Article 5 of Directive 90/423; the instructions issued to the State Veterinary Service for dealing with an FMD outbreak and contained in Chapter 3 of the State Veterinary Service’s Veterinary Instructions, Procedures, and Emergency Routines (referred to in this report as the Veterinary Instructions); and the local Divisional plans drawn up by each Animal Health Divisional Office.

In March 1991, the European Commission published ‘Recommendations or Guidelines for Contingency Plans against Foot and Mouth Disease DGVI/1324/9’. One of these recommendations was that each Member State should ensure that it had, immediately available, sufficient trained staff to deal with, at any one time, up to 10 cases and to maintain surveillance of premises in the 3km protection zone required around each. This was based on the scale of outbreaks previously experienced in Europe. A calculation made for the whole of the European Union during the preparation of Directive 90/423/EC estimated, in a worst-case scenario, 13 primary outbreaks, each with about 150 cases, throughout the Community over 10 years.
The contingency plan for Great Britain was approved by the Commission in 1993. This plan included the detailed veterinary instructions and guidance set out in Chapter 3 of the Veterinary Instructions. It described the legislative framework, financial provisions, national and local disease control centres, personnel resources, availability of diagnostic laboratories, epidemiologists and training exercises. Prior to the 2001 outbreak, the plan had last been updated in July 2000. It was not, at the time of the outbreak, available on the DEFRA website. It was placed there in August 2001.

The State Veterinary Service’s Veterinary Instructions provide, in over 100 chapters, guidance and procedures for dealing with diseases and all the other tasks that the Veterinary Field Service performs. Chapter 3 which deals with FMD, is based on the EU agreed slaughter policy and disposal arrangements. This chapter provided the basis for managing the outbreak. Over 200 Emergency Instructions were issued during the outbreak. These reflected changes as policy developed and experience was gained in the field.

Each of the 23 Animal Health Divisional Offices is required to have contingency plans for FMD and other diseases. These plans were last checked and updated during 2000. They focused on ensuring that all the local information that might be needed in the event of an outbreak was readily available and that Animal Health Divisional Office staff knew how to implement the Veterinary Instructions.

6.2 The Drummond Working Group Report

In July 1998 the State Veterinary Service had been considering the state of its contingency planning. It set up a working group to study how well prepared it was for dealing with outbreaks of notifiable disease and to make recommendations for any necessary improvements. Richard Drummond, Head of the Veterinary Service in Harrogate, the lead region with responsibility for notifiable disease, chaired the working group.

His report, published in the CD-ROM annexes, was submitted in February 1999. It concluded that there was considerable variability throughout the State Veterinary Service in its readiness to deal with outbreaks of exotic, notifiable diseases. In particular, it was concerned about resources and identified five broad areas requiring action: training; contingency planning; infected premises work; use of information technology in outbreak control; and staffing and direction.

On contingency planning, it recommended that objectives and targets relevant to planning be included as work objectives within annual staff reporting. It urged that a template contingency plan be available on the MAFF Internet, and that there should be increased awareness amongst the veterinary profession to the threat of notifiable disease. It also urged consideration to be given to the risks posed by the gathering of animals at markets, shows and large livestock units, and called for discussion of the ways in which contacts with local authorities could be established and best maintained.

In response to its own internal report, the State Veterinary Service agreed to target available resources to five priority areas. These were: making a generic emergency plan for FMD available for each Divisional Veterinary Manager to use if desired; formulating regional and Divisional training plans; preparing national guidance on overcoming the problems of supply of services and materials for dealing with outbreaks; ensuring up-to-date instructions were available for staff on-line; and discussing with the veterinary profession how to improve relations with Local Veterinary Inspectors.

In June 1999, the Chief Veterinary Officer emphasised the importance of emergency planning to deal with outbreaks of notifiable diseases. He acknowledged that resources had been concentrated on BSE, rather than on implementing the recommendations of the Drummond Report.

In July 2000 the Chief Veterinary Officer remained aware of the lack of progress on contingency planning. On 18 July 2000, the Assistant Chief Veterinary Officer in Wales wrote to the Chief Veterinary Officer expressing his concerns about lack of progress on implementing the Drummond Report recommendations, in particular those concerning the slaughter and disposal of carcasses and the training of staff.

The Chief Veterinary Officer was not only aware of the lack of contingency planning but had also visited the Pirbright Laboratory on 12 July 2000, where he was shown the deteriorating FMD situation in the Middle and Far East.

The Chief Veterinary Officer on 18 July 2000 wrote to colleagues within the State Veterinary Service expressing his concerns (in the CD-ROM annexes). However, his concerns were not exposed to Ministers or to the Department’s Permanent Secretary. No action outside the State Veterinary Service was taken to tackle the significant shortcomings. We believe this contributed to a false sense of security within MAFF on 20 February 2001, when FMD was confirmed.

6.3 Weaknesses in the plan

It has been suggested to us that the level of preparation by MAFF was adequate for the generally accepted level of risk and that the extraordinary nature of this epidemic could not have been anticipated or prepared for. There is some truth in this argument. As noted above, the plan was based on EU guidelines suggesting that Member States should have the resources to deal with up to 10 simultaneously infected premises.

In developing its contingency plans, the State Veterinary Service used two scenarios – moderate and severe – each comprising 10 simultaneous outbreaks. The severe case scenario envisaged there being more premises at risk in the 3km protection zone around each outbreak. This would lead to a need for more tracings, including livestock movements through a market, than in the moderate case scenario. The severe case scenario...
“May I pay tribute to the lay staff at MAFF Gloucester who played a large part in getting the right people to the right place at the right time. The veterinary team of three who planned action played their part magnificently, often working long hours. As a Temporary Veterinary Inspector I felt that I was most of the time being sensibly deployed. There seem to have been adequate staff for the jobs in hand. We were perhaps fortunate to have an influx of students at peak times and they worked hard and well.”

Temporary Veterinary Inspector employed in Gloucester

“The whole organisation was sound asleep, they were a sleep on their feet.”

Public Meeting, regional visit to the North West

demonstrated that the UK would need 235 veterinary officers. The Commission judged the UK’s readiness for disease outbreak as the best in the Community. MAFF estimated that, in a more extensive outbreak, the number of staff needed might rise to 300. In such circumstances, it was expected that resources would be drawn from elsewhere within the service, the private sector and certain foreign countries with which agreements had been reached. “…The State Veterinary Service did not often have to deal with crises on the scale of this FMD outbreak, and it had to come down to what was a reasonable insurance premium to pay in terms of maintaining high staff numbers…” (Senior MAFF Official).

In the event, when FMD broke out, at least 57 premises were infected before the initial diagnosis was made. All State Veterinary Service resources were fully utilised almost immediately. During the course of the outbreak, over 2,500 Temporary Veterinary Inspectors were appointed, with nearly 70 from abroad. A further 700 foreign government vets and other secondees assisted on a temporary basis. There had been no assessment of the effects that a large-scale outbreak might have, or of how plans might be escalated. Better scenario planning would have left the State Veterinary Service more able to cope with the severity of the outbreak that it eventually faced. Planning should be comprehensive enough to deal explicitly with the challenges of scale-up. “…The classical swine fever outbreak had stretched State Veterinary Service resources to their absolute limit so that when FMD struck it had, from the outset, rung alarm bells within the State Veterinary Service…” (Senior MAFF Official).

6. We recommend that contingency plans set out procedures to be followed in the event that an emergency expands beyond worst-case expectations.

7. We recommend that provision be made in contingency plans for rapid prioritisation of a department’s work in the face of a crisis, and for speedy reallocation of resources.

8. We recommend that DEFRA develop its human resources plans for use in emergency. In particular they should focus on how staff numbers and expertise can be rapidly increased at a time of crisis. This should be developed in England, in consultation with the Cabinet Office, the Regional Co-ordination Unit and the network of Government Offices. Similar arrangements should be developed in Scotland and Wales.

Contingency planning is not just producing a written document. Rather, it is about putting in place the systems, processes and culture to respond effectively to crises. Above all, it is about a shared sense of ownership and purpose across the relevant stakeholder community. We believe that the plans at national level would not have stood up to critical stakeholder scrutiny in advance of the outbreak. Deficiencies in critical resources could have been identified with prior communication and consultation.

6.3.1 Preparedness in Dumfries and Galloway

Dumfries and Galloway has a highly developed emergency planning approach – the Major Emergency Scheme – that has grown from its experience of the Lockerbie air disaster. This Scheme is based on a multi-agency partnership, co-ordinated by the Dumfries and Galloway Council.

Following activation of the Scheme on 28 February, the emergency planning group met daily throughout the outbreak and co-ordinated a wide range of support activities. These included: the establishment of the Emergency Room – known locally as “the bunker”; local work to prevent spread of disease; setting up a logistics and transport operations centre; providing fully equipped accommodation centres for vets and military personnel; and establishing catering and welfare services.

As one submission commented, “Contingency plans for the management of FMD are only as good as the working relationships between the organisations that are involved in the disease control campaign.”

Co-ordination between the centre and local operations ensured that the policies determined by the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department, based in Edinburgh, were implemented effectively. The Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department seconded staff to work with the Council and the Council was represented at relevant Scottish Executive committees. By contrast, MAFF did not fully exploit local authorities’ expertise for management of emergencies in England.

The Council’s Chief Executive and Emergency Planning Officer worked closely with the Regional Operations Director, the Divisional Veterinary Manager and Army Commander who jointly managed culling operations, once they were established in Dumfries. They met and updated each other at regular meetings, often two or three times a day.

Early and close involvement of the farming community contributed to the management effort. Unlike some areas in England, where the NFU felt marginalised, the NFU Scotland President was allocated space in the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs Department’s Edinburgh offices.

The arrangements worked well. FMD was eradicated from the region within three months.
6.5 Being better prepared

The contingency plans available in MAFF on 19 February 2001 to fight FMD met EU requirements but lacked scope. The plans that did exist were not widely exposed or rehearsed and, as a result, there was a limited shared sense of ownership by stakeholders. In addition, plans had failed to keep up with changing farming practices. Contingency planning was low down on the Department’s list of priorities. It was not seen as part of a wider process of disease prevention and risk management.

10. We recommend that Government departments ensure that their own internal departmental arrangements properly resource contingency planning work. This should be monitored by the National Audit Office.

The eventual scale of the FMD outbreak could not have been foreseen. Nevertheless, better preparation, including better contingency plans, which were understood and well rehearsed would have done much to limit the scale of the crisis.

11. We recommend that the Government publish a biennial report to the nation on the level of preparedness to tackle animal disease emergencies. The first report should be published in 2003 and include measures of achievement against goals.

9. We recommend that accepted best practice in risk analysis be used by DEFRA and others in developing livestock health and disease control strategies.