

# **PANDEMIC FLU PLANNING IN THE FOOD RETAIL SECTOR**

## **Introduction**

This document is a summary of the anticipated response of food retail members of the British Retail Consortium (BRC) to a pandemic flu outbreak in the UK. It is intended to inform businesses and the public on the likely response of retailers and the impact it will have in terms of access to food stores during an outbreak.

The BRC represents the major food retailers in the UK and we estimate our members account for 80% of the grocery market. Our members operate throughout the UK in all formats of food store, from large supermarkets to convenience stores.

A guide for pandemic planning document has been produced by the Retail Business Continuity Association to help all retail businesses prepare for a pandemic and is attached with this paper.

## **Business Continuity Planning**

Retailers recognise the vital role they have in continuing to offer the maximum possible access to food stores during a pandemic. All major retailers have detailed continuity plans with dedicated managers to deal with major incidents. Their effectiveness has been demonstrated in events such as the recent floods.

These businesses have been revising and testing their plans to deal with a pandemic for a number of years. They have engaged in internal exercises, participated in the Winter Willow exercise and exchanged best practice in industry fora. This has allowed them to refine plans and identify challenges in offering access to food stores during a pandemic.

As well as working closely with each other, retailers are working closely with their suppliers to ensure the entire supply chain is preparing for the inevitable disruption a pandemic would cause. We have also used the findings of Winter Willow to identify areas where Government should assist retailers to maximise available resources.

## **Alert Level 1 (No cases in the UK)**

At this stage, where there is confirmation of a potential global pandemic but it has not reached the UK retailers will take the following steps.

They will prepare their stores for customers who will want to stock up in advance of a UK outbreak. This will mean refining their supply chains to ensure higher stocks of essential products such as bottled water, long life products and sanitary

items. We anticipate there will be some panic buying and we have spoken to the Government of the need to manage messages about threats and availability of essential goods. There may be some limited shortages in the early days of panic buying but retailers anticipate these and have factored this into their plans for future supplies.

Retailers will be working closely with suppliers to ensure increased supply where necessary and that they are prepared for the pandemic. They will monitor the outbreak itself as there will be consequences for their supply chains and personnel who may be abroad.

### **Alert Level 2 and 3 (First cases in the UK)**

Retailers will aim to continue to operate as full a service as possible, bearing in mind there may be limited local problems as the first cases emerge.

Retailers will maximise the use of their staff to ensure an optimum service. They have all assessed their supply chains to identify vulnerable personnel or specific sites, such as distribution centres and will use alternative staff or sites where appropriate. They are likely to close non essential services such as in-store delicatessens, freeing up staff and moving to packaged products. They will also be monitoring the impact on their supply chains, including key issues such as packaging suppliers and distribution.

Internet operations are likely to be suspended soon after a likely pandemic is confirmed and staff re-directed to keeping stores open.

Many supermarkets also have pharmacies within them and those retailers have been discussing with the Department of Health the supply of medicines as cases develop.

### **Alert Level 4 (Widespread activity across the UK)**

Retailers will be managing their stores to minimise the impact to keep access to food stores. They will use available staff to keep as many stores open for the maximum period but at this stage some store closures are likely and many stores will review their opening hours on a daily basis. They will have regard for the local community and the prevailing conditions. For example they may keep smaller local stores open if private transport is difficult, they will also have regards to the needs of smaller and remote communities.

Retailers as a group are conscious that the key issue is to ensure that enough stores, regardless of company, are available to the local community. In extreme cases where a number of stores are closing, retailers have agreed to liaise closely with each other to ensure the stores they keep open ensure adequate

coverage. When taking decisions on store closures, retailers with pharmacies will consider access to these as well as the food store.

Distribution will be prioritised to ensure the supply of essential goods. Although we do not anticipate major food shortages, choice will be much more limited and the main problem will be sufficient staff to safely operate the stores, especially given the likelihood of school closures. In an extreme situation there is a possibility that retailers may limit bulk purchases but that will depend on the prevailing situation. Distribution to stores will be more flexible and we have told the Government regulations on curfews, drivers hours and delivery times will need to be amended or suspended.

By this stage, due to the reduction in staff, the stores will concentrate on getting essential products on the shelves for sale.

Handling cash, due to the absence of key staff in stores as well as possible disruptions to cash collections may become a problem and retailers will encourage the use of cards for payments.