

NHS London

London Strategic Health Authority implements collaboration technology to improve Emergency Planning

Emergency Planning within NHS London

The swine flu pandemic and the July 7th terrorist attacks are just some of the major crises that require Emergency Preparedness – the ability to prepare and effectively handle emergency situations within the NHS. It requires numerous departments and divisions of the organisation to be equipped and informed to coordinate and respond to emergency scenarios effectively.

To ensure the public is in safe hands, a team exists within NHS London, the capital's Strategic Health Authority (SHA), to plan and prepare for any unforeseen circumstances that may occur in the region. It also acts as a hub to coordinate and manage the responses of up to 73 other local health organisations.

There are two main categories of potential emergency events. The first deals with 'slow burn' health issues, such as management of the recent pandemic swine flu virus. Vast information needs to be collected to help make informed decisions about how best to cope with these longer-term situations. The data collected by the emergency planning team feeds into local and national policy, sometimes factoring into ministerial decision-making.

The other function of the team is to cope with 'big bang' type events. This is where an incident is sudden, unforeseen and requires a rapid, well-orchestrated response in order to minimise impact on the public and deal with any immediate victims or casualties, like the London bombings of July 7th.

“When researching our options, a key objective was to achieve balance between cost-efficiency and functionality, as the project budget did not allow for large development overheads.”

Andy Wapling, Head of Emergency Preparedness, NHS London.

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The Business Challenge

Prior to implementing the new IT system, most information relating to emergencies was gathered manually. Forms, faxes, emails and telephone calls to NHS London, from representatives at different organisations were the main source of data. This had to be collated, interpreted and then manually re-entered into different systems – a time consuming process.

The Emergency Preparedness team at NHS London identified this as a potential weakness. Effective planning, from their perspective, was about making good decisions, based on accurate, up-to-date information. Although Situation Reporting is an established process across the whole country, the actual deliverables vary greatly from place to place. With London's 73 healthcare organisations each responding differently, the margin for error and delay did not sit comfortably with the London team. Ultimately, the organisation needed to be better prepared to handle emergencies and have an effective reporting system that would assist various departments.

The Solution

The Emergency Preparedness Team identified alternative systems to improve the collection of essential information at NHS London, along with the way in which it was reported. After a review of their available options, the team settled on the development of a collaborative, web-browser based tool.

Andy Wapling, Head of Emergency Preparedness at NHS London said: "When researching our options, a key objective was to achieve balance between cost-efficiency and functionality, as the project budget did not allow for large development overheads."

NHS London awarded the contract for implementing the solution to a partnership of managed service provider UKN Group and Concentra, a specialist in collaborative tools.

The Functionality

The new Situation Reporting (Sit Rep) system is browser-based and can be used to gain a snapshot of relevant incident data at a specific time, or over pre-determined intervals. The Emergency Preparedness Team needed an overview of health services across the capital. The primary function is to issue a request for information, using templates designed for the specific situation and receive a response within a certain time frame. The tool also provides visibility of which operator has issued a report, making it quicker to track back or request further details.

Hosted on the NHS N3 network, the tool can be accessed via the web and activated remotely. The data is securely collected and automatically alerts other organisations when a situation report (Sit Rep) will be required. In this way, NHS London can target specific health departments to input information at any given time for a specific campaign.

Wapling commented: *“Emergency situations are difficult to predict, which is why we have a range of Sit Rep templates particular to different scenarios. These will be expanded and refined in due course, based on what we learn from using them in simulations and real-life incidents.”*

He went on to say: *“In the event of an emergency, we have a range of measures in place to ensure that NHS London can continue to operate, even in extreme circumstances.”*

The implementation

The swine flu outbreak hit at the exact time of implementation, so the tool went live immediately. As the pandemic was not anticipated during the planning stages of the project, it was an unforeseen event in itself, providing a challenge which would test various aspects of the new tool extensively.

Wapling explained the underlying procedures, “the Sit Reps the system collects are already part of an established process, so our staff have not been thrown into a system they don’t understand. The main challenge at the beginning was becoming familiar with the interface and workflow based on the on-screen instructions” he said.

The system itself can easily transfer information into Microsoft Excel to help with analysis and data management, therefore decisions and reports can be made more quickly and effectively. Data providers have logins, as do administrators, allowing access to different levels of information and management functionality.

Having already proved its usefulness during the swine flu emergency, NHS London has been pleased with the progress made on this project. The Emergency Planning Team is currently scheduling time to work on new scenarios and improve the tool based on recent experience. The organisation is also very keen to work on testing a number of the ‘big bang’ situations to make sure it is prepared for such an event.

Access to the Sit Rep tool has now been rolled out to London’s PCTs, the London Ambulance Service and Mental Health Trusts.

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