



Case study – COVID-19 outbreak in a food distribution business

Summary

Following the identification of a Covid-19 outbreak at a food distribution business, the Director of Public Health (DPH) and the Consultant in Health Protection convened a multi-agency Outbreak Control Team (OCT) meeting. This included the company, Environmental Health Officer (EHO), DPH and Public Health England (PHE). The OCT sought to understand the cause of the outbreak, review the control measures put in place and coordinate outbreak management and control.

Background to the business

The company is a food distribution cold store business delivering its product to shops or depots/regional distribution centres. The business has 10 sites across the UK, with 2,000 employees.

The outbreak site

There were 120 employees at the site made up of: 5 x Shifts leads, 8 x Coordinators; 1 x Business support; 1 x Cleaner; 1 x Yardperson; 58 Drivers and 41 Chill employees.

Preparing for COVID-19

Before the Covid-19 pandemic occurred, the business had already considered a health pandemic risk assessment as part of its overall contingency planning system. This was prompted by historical experience of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), H₁N₁ (Swine Flu) and H₅N₁ (Bird Flu) viruses which threatened the world in the previous decade.

Although the specific characteristics of the new disease differed greatly from what had been anticipated, the business had the right approach for recognising the scale of the risk and a robust framework for responding quickly and decisively. It utilised experienced operational and technical managers and worked collaboratively with union representatives to modify business operations for the protection of all concerned.

Adapting the Plan for COVID-19 pandemic

Due to its pandemic preparations, the business was ready to act, and it pro-actively adopted several measures to ensure its working environment was COVID-19 secure, following the available government guidance for businesses. The first step involved agreeing a business continuity plan with personal health and safety at its heart. This was supported by daily high-level conference calls to review how the business was operating and was backed up by weekly review meetings with site managers to discuss best practice and share lessons learned.

A COVID-19 risk assessment was carried out and audit tools were also completed by the site manager and union representative. Alongside this, a 26-point action plan was created to ensure the safety of employees, contractors and visitors. This included information on best practice measures for depots focusing on hand hygiene, social distancing and communication to staff.

In addition, the following specific measures were introduced:

- identifying the highest risk operations in the business for transmission of respiratory infection, i.e. individuals who usually worked in close proximity;
- simplifying processes to reduce the head count to a maximum of 15 people on site. This included rapidly agreeing with customers to rationalise the range of goods available to enable effective social distancing. Fewer Stock Keeping Units (unique products to be supplied by the business) meant fewer transitions on production lines and fewer pick-faces, job roles where the density and movement of people was likely to be highest. By taking these actions, the business was able to reduce its reliance on temporary / agency workers, reducing the head-count;
- health checking employees/contractors on arrival and encouraging them to submit a pre-visit health questionnaire;
- an enhanced cleaning regime with more regular and intensive cleaning of all hand touched surfaces;
- regular and professional cleaning of vehicles and cabs;
- the placement of additional hand sanitation points in crucial locations;
- asking staff to maintain social distancing and staggering lunch breaks;
- encouraging staff to undertake an e-learning module on social distancing.

The factory also communicated to its employees through a dedicated intranet page and posted frequently asked questions on notice boards, as well as guidance for employees and managers, and briefing notes on specific topics of interest. These were all made available through personal computers and employee communication hubs.

In addition to the original risk assessment, an ongoing program of internal audits was put in place, to check on progress with implementation and identifying any barriers or additional risks. This had a beneficial effect on re-enforcing the necessary behaviours and physical controls, many of which were entirely new to the workforce.

Outbreak response – timeline, investigation and outcome

The first case developed symptoms on 4th June 2020 and was tested on the same day. Their positive result was notified to PHE via the Test and Trace service on 11th June and household contacts were identified and advised to self-isolate.

Once Public Health England's (PHE) local Health Protection Team (HPT) was informed of the case, they contacted the local Environmental Health Officer (EHO) who in turn contacted the workplace. The workplace manager confirmed that the employee had notified them of the positive test result. Telephone discussions undertaken by the EHO revealed that social distancing and hygiene precautions were in place.

The second case reported an onset of symptoms on 8th June 2020 but they did not receive a positive test result until 14th June as this was undertaken privately.

The company's management implemented an all staff testing policy on 11th June which was communicated through site managers and shift leaders. At that time, no other staff were reporting symptoms and all results had been negative.

The third confirmed case was tested on 16th June. The workplace was again flagged up to the local HPT on 18th June 2020 by the National Test and Trace service because another case had been confirmed. The HPT then informed the EHO who promptly contacted the business on 19th June.

On 19th June, a multi-agency outbreak control team (OCT) meeting was held to risk assess the outbreak and agree what communications and actions were needed to limit further spread.

During the OCT, the factory management outlined the processes they had put in place as part of planning for the pandemic and how they had triggered their COVID-19 action plan. This involved implementing testing of all 115 staff members and monitoring them using their own 'Track and Trace' process to prevent further spread of infection among the workforce.

As a result of testing, eight staff members who were asymptomatic tested positive, bringing the total to 11 members of staff. In line with national guidance, these asymptomatic cases were advised to self-isolate for 7-days from the date of the test and their household members were advised to self-isolate for 14-days.

The company's 'Track and Trace' process, was able to establish that there had been no evidence of transmission within the workplace as all those who tested positive worked on different shifts and were in different sections of the business. The tracker also enabled the business to account for the movement of their staff and enabled the HR team to check on the welfare of employees and ensure that they had access to sick pay.

A joint risk assessment of the outbreak was undertaken, and further control measures agreed. The Health Protection Consultant and the DPH continued to work closely with the factory, the Local Authority EHO and the Council's public health team to keep abreast of the outbreak until it was declared over on 22nd July.

The DPH requested a follow up report on the location of staff, follow up and completeness of contact tracing and an exploration of any possible community transmission. Public Health England's Field Epidemiology Service undertook a review of the COVID-19 confirmed cases in the postcodes associated with the outbreak during the period of interest and noted that there were no large peaks of cases associated with the postcodes.

Lessons learned

Adherence to national guidelines, strong leadership and preparatory planning work including an action plan, risk assessment, audits, social distancing and hygiene measures played a key role in limiting the spread of infection. This, alongside the identification of the workplace by the National Test and Trace system enabled prompt coordination of the outbreak response which was informed by the internal 'Track and Trace' system developed by the company.

This enabled the company to quickly identify staff members with Covid-19 infection and influenced the decision to arrange all staff testing. The prompt establishment of an OCT enabled a joint risk assessment and coordination of outbreak control measures, completeness of contact tracing, advice about further control measures required and exploration of the potential contribution of community transmission.

Success

As a result of the proactive preparation and swift action by the factory management supported by the Outbreak Control Team meetings, the Coronavirus outbreak was identified quickly and promptly contained without any further spread of cases and minimal disruption to the functioning of the company.