

PANDEMIC PLANS – TEN TIPS AND A FREE PLAN TO GET YOU STARTED

NIGEL TOMS – *Watercare Services Limited*

In 2019, if a selection of organisations had been asked about how many of them had pandemic plans, I doubt many would have said yes.

If asked again at the beginning of 2021, even if they did not have a specific pandemic plan yet, most would accept that significant revisions and wider thinking were required in order to maintain business operations when faced with Covid-19.

While Covid-19 challenges continue, it is interesting to note that conversations with counterparts in other utilities confirmed that:

- Significant innovations were identified and implemented to address the challenges that came with Covid-19
- New ways of working are now the “norm”
- The pace at which changes were made was impressive and far beyond expectations.

However, when asked if their pandemic plan (if they had one) has been updated to encapsulate these learnings and innovations, the answers varied from,

- Not yet – no timeframe set
- When normal operations resume
- As soon as resources are available – resources undefined
- It will be a separate project, timescale to be discussed

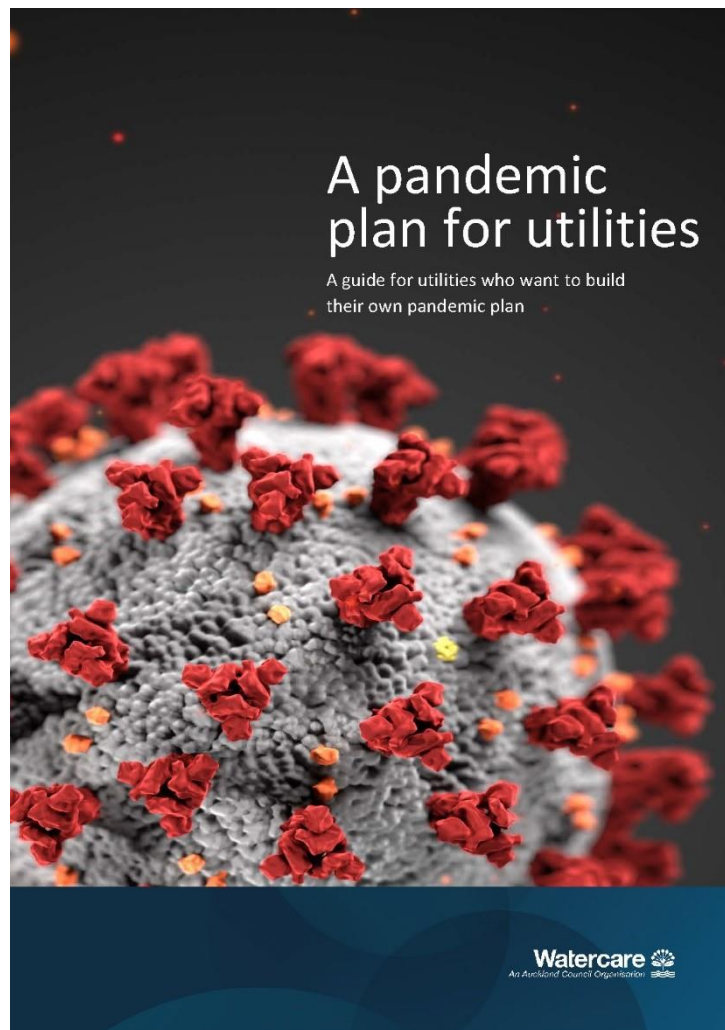
While I sympathise with the challenges faced, the dichotomy between the wide acceptance for the requirement for an update of the pandemic plan and the need to address other competing priorities, should not leave the pandemic plan in second place.

I am the Acting CFO at [Watercare Services](#), which is the primary water and wastewater services utility for the Auckland and Waikato regions in New Zealand. Maintaining 24/7 operations is critical with an expectation from all stakeholders that these services will continue uninterrupted, to the standard required with significant/regulatory consequences for any failures.

With this in mind, Watercare completed a full update of its pandemic plan late in 2020 and I am proud to say we have released a FREE generic version, which can be used by other large organisations and utilities to create or enhance their own plans. Our plan could also be used simply as a matrix for comparison to ensure that nothing critical is missing from other organisations' pandemic plans.

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We have designed this plan to be easy to roll out, easy to adapt to different contexts, and easy to use when responding to specific challenges from future outbreaks.



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Watercare's plan is FREE (yes, really, which is why I mention it twice!), interactive with guidance, videos, samples and templates, and is issued under a Creative Commons license, meaning others can adopt and use any components of, or even the whole plan, as long as they understand that it is at their liability.

Watercare's plan can be found and downloaded [here](#).

With the experience of having just completed an update to our pandemic plan, here are ten tips to get other large organisations and utilities started on creating or updating their own pandemic plans.

1. Identify your core – and protect it

Your pandemic plan, much like your business continuity and disaster recovery plans, has to be clearly focused on the critical or core areas of your business. Not all areas of a utility are critical to maintain services and your plan should ideally be designed to wrap organisational support around the core business. So the first action is to clearly identify the core and make sure everyone understands the areas with these core elements. A good check is that in most cases the critical/core parts of your business are covered in the mission or strategy statement of organisations.

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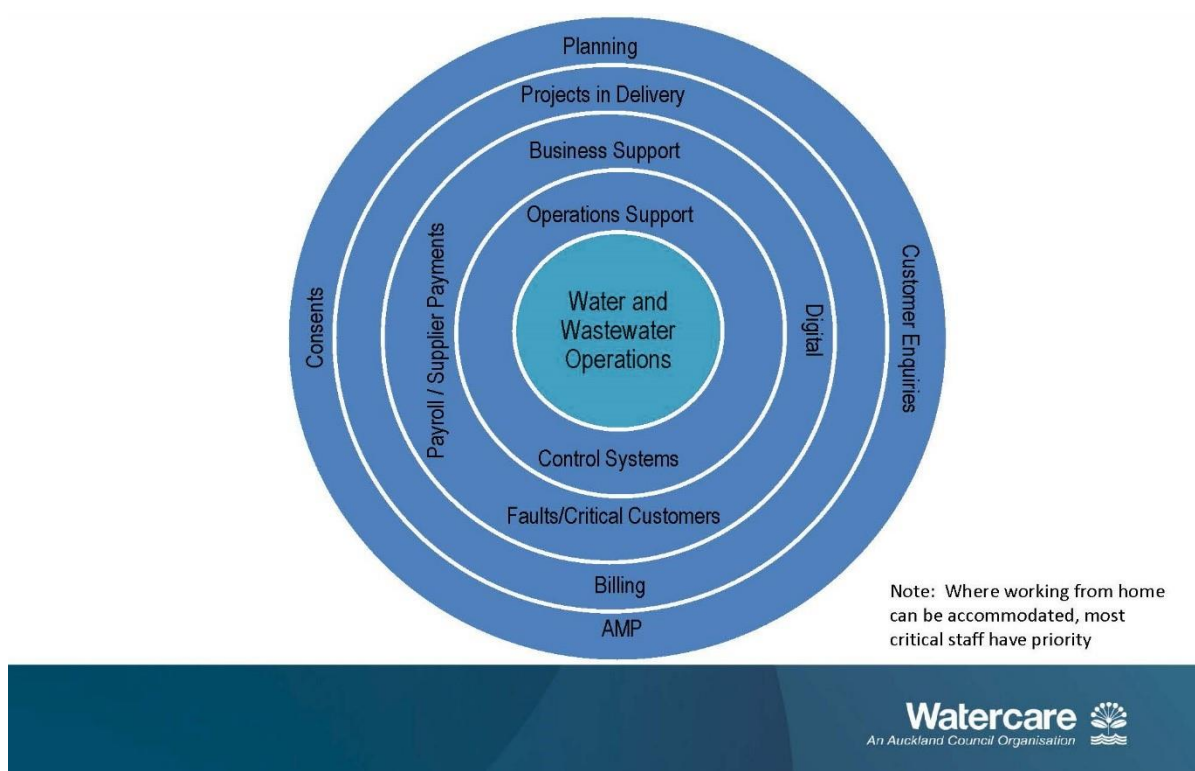


Figure 1: Clearly identify the core of your organisation and your plan should wrap organisational support around the core business.

2. Bring your departments together – it is a team effort

The intrinsic nature of a pandemic demands that all groups within the organisation will use the pandemic plan in some way. Make sure to integrate risk-and-resilience thinking in the plan and develop it to encourage collaboration among the different departments, units and functions to ensure efficient and effective implementation and operation.

3. Structure and process to support the plan

Watercare's plan is drawn from and aligned to the Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS) to aid organising our response. The CIMS structure provides clear delineation of responsibility across various functions, while demanding coordination from them. The structure also enables us to have as big or as small an incident team as necessary to maintain crucial functions and manage incident response.

Whether you decide to build your plans on CIMS or an alternate system, the important part is to have a clear structure with clear responsibilities that is well understood by your staff. This should be the case, not just for pandemics, but for all incidents.

4. Delineate stages and outline actions to each function

Break the pandemic response into stages that take into account global and national reactions. Customise these stages to closely reflect the realities within your national and local environments. While taking account of what might be happening around you, also use these stages to clearly define what you as an organisation will be doing to protect your core business at that time. For example, you might decide to put in place strict work-from-home and contact tracing measures, even before your country announces any kind of lockdown. Such pre-emptive measures can go a long way to protect from multiple staff infections within your organisation. All of this needs to be delineated in stages and actions, defined in detail for each function.

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5. Driven top down to build long term thinking

The pandemic plan needs to be driven top-down by the leadership. The executive and the board should be seen to support the plan and encourage the thinking embedded in the plan at every opportunity – not just during a pandemic but before and after. This should be part of a larger effort to build risk-and-resilience thinking within the company's culture.

6. Run incident practices/exercise with varied teams

A plan is only as good as the number of practice runs you put it through. Different teams should be put through practice sessions on a regular basis to ensure that they remain aware and up-to-date on the requirements of the plan, and to ensure that the plan itself is changed regularly to reflect any modifications in organisational functions and processes. A plan is only as strong as the people and process supporting it, so keep testing both regularly to find and address gaps. It is alright to have failings during tests. Failing safely allows improvements to be identified and implemented.

7. Pick inexperienced staff to act as deputies

Make sure that your incident management teams are diverse and include staff from different tiers as deputies during practice sessions. This is essential to making sure that knowledge related to incident management is well-understood across the organisation and is not restricted to a few higher tier staff. Once again, this goes to risk-and-resilience practices that can set the organisation up for the long-term. In addition, using experienced staff as mentors allows knowledge to be passed on.

8. All to participate in lessons learned debrief at incident completion

All team members should participate in a lessons learned debrief at the conclusion of practice sessions. Participation at these sessions leads to a shared understanding of the elements that worked well during an incident response and elements that could have been improved upon. Do it as soon as possible after the incident closes, as memories fade quickly.

9. Include support networks (contractors, suppliers, consultants) in exercises

One of the parts of any plan, which is most often forgotten, is the inclusion of the organisation's support networks in any exercises related to pandemic plans. You have to keep in mind that your support network will also need to continue to function in order for you to continue to provide critical services to your stakeholders. Include them in your exercises. That way they know what your plan and expectations are in case of pandemics (or any incidents) and they can modify their response structure to support your position.

10. Record experiences on staff systems and keep your plan updated

Use training systems to record staff who have gained experience from each incident and exercise. This is a powerful way to identify requirements for learning and training, especially with new staff and support networks. It is also a good way to identify and train future leaders.

Review and modify your plan regularly, and review after every training exercise. This will keep the plan fresh and ultimately easy to roll out when it is needed.

NIGEL TOMS

Nigel Toms is Acting CFO of [Watercare Services Limited](#), the sole provider of water and wastewater 1.7 million Aucklanders. Prior to his appointment as CFO, Nigel was Head of Risk and Resilience at Watercare.

Nigel is the technical author responsible for the drafting and development of [PAS 60518:2020 Developing and implementing enterprise risk and resilience management \(ERRM\) in utilities standard](#), published by the British Standards Institute (BSI) in July 2020. He was also a member of the Steering Committee.

In his time at Watercare, he has developed and grown the risk function to become a key part of the executive. Nigel championed and developed Watercare's own enterprise risk and resilience framework and the PAS 60518:2020 draws upon his expertise and reflects some of the ERRM work done there. Nigel can be contacted at nigel.toms@water.co.nz

