

COVID-19 Strategic Intelligence Group

10 May 2021 at 12:00 – Zoom Video Conference

Present:

Professor Ian Young (Chair)	Chief Scientific Advisor, DoH
Dr Michael McBride	Chief Medical Officer, DoH
Dr Lourda Geoghegan	DCMO, DoH
Dr Naresh Chada	DCMO, DoH
Dr Declan Bradley	Deputy Chief Scientific Advisor, DoH
Dr Liz Mitchell	Chair of Contact Tracing Service Steering Group, DoH
Professor Frank Kee	Centre for Public Health, QUB
Professor Fiona Alderdice	Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford
Professor Duncan Morrow	Director of Civic Engagement & Student Affairs, Ulster University
Dr Stephen Bergin	Director Public Health (Interim), PHA
Professor Diarmuid O'Donovan	Professor of Global Health, Centre for Public Health, QUB
Dr Michael Quinn	Head of Clinical Information, HSCB
Professor Sir Stephen Holgate	Clinical Professor of Immunopharmacology, University of Southampton
Dr Claire Cope	Head of Policy, Academy of Medical Sciences
Jonathan Norwood	DoH (Secretariat)

Apologies:

Professor Stuart Elborn	Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor, School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences, QUB
Dr Gerry Waldron	Assistant Director of Public Health – Health Protection, PHA
Dr Eugene Mooney	Director of Information and Analysis, DoH
Dr Nicola Armstrong	Programme Manager, PHA
Kieran McAteer	COVID-19 Response, DoH

Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

1. Prof Young welcomed all participants back to the meeting.
 - Apologies were as noted.
 - The previous minutes were accepted.
 - All actions are complete.

Preparing for a Challenging Winter 2020/21

2. Prof Holgate presented slides giving an overview of:
 - How a challenging winter 2020/21 might look.
 - What this would mean for deaths and health and social care capacity.
 - What challenges this would present for surveillance, Test-Trace-Isolate (TTI) and NPIs.
 - Plans being developed to manage this.
 - Prof Holgate summarised the report's findings and gave an overview of the four mitigation strategies. He explained the modelling and associated scenarios. The emerging variants were not built in to previous models but will be going forward as well as the vaccination programme.
 - Pandemic to endemic was also discussed and the following key issues highlighted:
 - i. Vaccination;
 - ii. Variants;
 - iii. 'Long COVID';
 - iv. TTI;
 - v. Vulnerable populations;
 - vi. Health and social care structures;
 - vii. Prophylaxis and treatments; and
 - viii. Concomitant winter diseases.
 - The terms of reference, next steps, timelines and feedback were presented.
 - Are there issues specific to Northern Ireland?

ACTION: Select a Northern Ireland nominee to join the Expert Advisory Group.

- Dr McBride thanked colleagues for the clear and concise presentation. He reflected on wider adaptations required to society in general and the positives associated to public health. Further work in this space is required. He was very welcoming of the opportunity for Northern Ireland to contribute.
- Prof Holgate raised that the new chronic syndromes emerging and mental health issues will impact the winter and beyond. He reflected on immunity and possible vaccine boosters.
- Prof Kee asked about the inclusion of elective care and a return to 'business as usual'. Prof Holgate confirmed that the report will address this and more. He reflected on the fatigue within healthcare staff.
- Professor O'Donovan asked about inequality and the scope to address inequalities. Prof Holgate reflected on how COVID-19 has highlighted the complexities within communities. It is a huge issue and expertise within the panel aim to address inequality and provide recommendations.
- Prof Young raised modelling; assumptions vary in general and vary across different nations. A limitation of the modelling is that it deals with COVID-19 only. A total 'winter experience' will be a more important picture. Other respiratory illnesses might be more prevalent as many did not circulate due to restrictions and isolating in the previous winter. Prof Young thanked colleagues for their presentation and discussions. Prof Holgate and Dr Cope left the meeting.

Status Update

2. Prof Young provided an update on the current position:

Current estimate of R_t (new positive tests): 0.70-1.05 (7 days previous 0.70-1.05)

Current estimate of R_t (hospital admissions): too low for reliable estimate

Average number of new positive tests per day last 7 days: 93 (7 days previous 99)

7 day incidence based on new positive tests: 34 / 100k (7 days previous 37)

14 day incidence based on new positive tests: 72 / 100k (7 days previous 78)

7 day average of total positive individuals (pillar 1 & 2): 1.1% (7 days previous 1.1%)

7 day daily average tests completed: 10,096 (7 days previous 10,292)

Number of new positive tests in over 60s in last 7 days: 58 (7 days previous 73)

Proportion of total positive tests occurring in over 60s: 9.2% (7 day previous 10.5%)

First COVID +ve hospital admission in last week: 23 (7 days previous 24)

Number of community acquired COVID inpatients: 44 (7 days previous 38)

COVID +ve ICU patients: 7 (7 days previous 5)

- Hospital pressures continue to decline.
- Derry City and Strabane remains an outlier but has been declining in the previous four days and its current rate is 82/100k; all other LGDs are below 50/100k for 7-day total cases.
- The impacts of retail and close contact services opening are expected to be clearer at the end of this week.
- Newry, Mourne and Down has a number of clusters but not showing any concerning numbers yet; PHA will monitor.

Setting Up Medium and Long Term Vaccine Strain Selection and Immunity Management for SARS-CoV-2 (Paper 2)

3. Prof Young asked for comments on the paper:

- There is ongoing sequencing in Northern Ireland; a number of B.1.617.2 VOC have been sequenced including five clusters. These are under active investigation and PHA colleagues are monitoring. SAGE has indicated particular concern about this VOC (upgraded at the end of last week). Further data is required in terms of transmissibility and vaccine resistance.
- Serology pre vaccination and post vaccination was discussed; there are practical and ethical challenges associated. Northern Ireland is linked into ongoing studies such as SIREN.
- There being no further comments, the group noted the paper.

SPI-M-O: Summary of Modelling of Easing Roadmap Step 3 Restrictions (Paper 3a)

LSHTM: Roadmap Steps 3 and 4 (Paper 3b)

4. Prof Young asked for comments on the two papers:

- Northern Ireland modelling will be updated tomorrow taking into account live data and recent Executive decisions.

- In summary, all models show that after step three, under an optimistic and central scenario, there may be some increase in numbers but at a relatively low level. The pessimistic scenario looks somewhat worse albeit more unlikely to occur. The range of uncertainty is vast. Further modelling in relation to stage four will begin nearer the time and SAGE are discussing stage four at its next meeting.
- There being no further comments, the group noted the papers.

Social Distancing Review Analysis (Paper 4)

5. Prof Young asked for comments on the paper:

- England has an appetite to remove social distancing at policy level as trailed in some newspapers. The science has not greatly changed and SAGE's view is that to remove social distancing would be high risk. There will be further versions of this paper and allow further discussion.
- Planning with the higher education sector was discussed.
- Close monitoring of the epidemiology will be crucial going forward.
- There being no further comments, the group noted the paper.

The COVID Decade: Understanding Long Term Societal Impacts COVID-19 (Paper 5)

6. Prof Young asked the group to note this paper. NB: separating communicable and non-communicable diseases into silos is unhelpful; overall public health should not separate diseases into silos.

AOB

7. Prof Young asked the group to raise any further items for discussion:

- Prof Kee shared two papers for information:
- Wastewater surveillance in Newry was discussed. Queen's staff have been sampling in Newry and further collection and analysis is required.

ACTION: Dr Bergin to organise a presentation from Queen's University Belfast regarding wastewater surveillance.

- Wastewater sampling at the Irish Cup Football Final, on 21st May in Lurgan, was discussed as there might be 1000 spectators attending. Given that everyone will have

to provide a negative LFD, this will be an opportunity to gather important data.

- There being no further business, the meeting closed.

Date of Next Meeting

8. The next meeting will be on Monday 24 May 2021 at Noon via Zoom.