

COVID-19 Strategic Intelligence Group

13 September 2021 at 12:00 – Zoom Video Conference

Present:

Professor Ian Young (Chair)	Chief Scientific Advisor, DoH
Professor Sir Michael McBride	Chief Medical Officer, DoH
Dr Naresh Chada	DCMO, DoH
Dr Declan Bradley	Deputy Chief Scientific Advisor, DoH
Professor Stuart Elborn	Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor, School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences, QUB
Professor Frank McKee	Centre for Public Health, QUB
Professor Duncan Morrow	Director of Civic Engagement & Student Affairs, Ulster University
Professor Diarmuid O'Donovan	Professor of Global Health, Centre for Public Health, QUB
Dr Bríd Farrell	Acting Director for Public Health, PHA
Jonathan Norwood	DoH (Secretariat)

Apologies:

Dr Lourda Geoghegan	DCMO, DoH
Dr Joanne McClean	Associate DCMO, DoH
Professor Fiona Alderdice	Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford
Dr Nicola Armstrong	Programme Manager, PHA
Dr Eugene Mooney	Director of Information and Analysis, DoH
Dr Liz Mitchell	Chair of Contact Tracing Service Steering Group, DoH
Kieran McAteer	Director Covid Responses Directorate, DoH

Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

1. Prof Young welcomed all participants back to the meeting.
 - Apologies were as noted above.
 - Minutes from the previous meeting (**Paper 1**) were agreed.

Update on Disease Status

2. Dr Bradley provided an update on the current position:

Current estimate of R_t (new positive tests): 0.95-1.10 (7 days previous 0.90-1.10)

Current estimate of R_t (hospital admissions): 0.90-1.05 (7 days previous 0.95-1.15)

Average number of new positive tests per day last 7 days: 1458 (7 days previous 1586)

7 day incidence based on new positive tests: 537 / 100k (7 days previous 585)

14 day incidence based on new positive tests: 1132 / 100k (7 days previous 1214)

7 day average of total positive individuals (pillar 1 & 2): 8.2% (7 days previous 10.1%)

7 day daily average tests completed: 19,512 (7 days previous 17,835)

Number of new positive tests in over 60s in last 7 days: 1230 (8 days previous 1342)

Proportion of total positive tests occurring in over 60s: 12.3% (9 days previous 12.6%)

First COVID +ve hospital admission in last week: 228 (7 days previous 239)

Number of community acquired COVID inpatients: 402 (7 days previous 362)

COVID +ve ICU patients: 46 (7 days previous 42)

- Test positivity has decreased.
- Testing remains at a very high level.
- All age groups were declining until schools returned; now there is an uptick in 0-11 and 11-15 age groups.
- Cases in Derry and Strabane and Fermanagh and Omagh remain the highest LGDs in NI.
- Northern Ireland has the second highest infection rate of the five nations (UK and RoI) and is declining whereas Wales and England are rising.
- The ONS Infection Survey report that 1 in 65 people in NI have COVID-19, which is the highest in the UK.
- Hospital admissions, ICU numbers and deaths have all plateaued.
- Dr Bradley gave an overview of scenario projections and highlighted some key dates for peaks.
- Northern Ireland's baseline inpatients number is currently at 50% of last winter's highest occupancy, which is extremely worrying and much higher than the rest of the

UK.

- RoI have started publishing testing data again; NI is testing 2-3 times as much as RoI. Prof Young gave an overview of the future of testing. Prof McBride reflected on asymptomatic testing versus diagnosing those requiring medical care as we approach winter.
- The current testing in NI is unprecedented and we are detecting the highest proportion of cases since the epidemic began.
- RoI admissions are much less than NI; they have 59 in ICU compared to 45-50 in NI. RoI has less severe illness than NI, their vaccine programme is more recent and is ahead of NI. The group discussed vaccination waning. RoI hospital testing policy was also discussed.

SAGE 95: Final Minutes (Paper 2)

SPI-M-O: Consensus Statement for SAGE (Paper 3)

3. Professor Young provided a brief overview of the papers:

- The paper highlights uncertainties of where this epidemic is heading. Case numbers will rise as we move through autumn and this aligns with NI modelling. The paper describes hospital indicators versus case number indicators and the challenges with focussing on one or the other.
- NPIs were discussed.
- RoI have a target date of 22/10/2021 to remove all restrictions whereas the NI Executive have not announced a date.
- Prof Elborn raised wastewater testing and modelling. RoI have indicated that they will retain their wastewater testing programme. The UK intends to expand its wastewater programme. There is limited data to analyse to date. The group discussed wastewater signals and what actions might be taken following a signal from wastewater testing.

SAGE: PHE Waning VE (Paper 4)

4. Professor Young provided a brief overview of the paper:

- There is waning vaccine efficacy beginning at around 10 weeks and greater with the AZ vaccine and greater in the elderly.
- 70% of critical care inpatients in NI are unvaccinated, however, this means that 30% are double vaccinated.

- Booster vaccinations were also discussed and a decision from JCVI is imminent.

Hospital Admission for COVID-19 and Impact of Vaccination (Paper 5)

5. Professor Young provided a brief overview of the paper:

- The number of vaccinated hospital inpatients is rising.
- In NI, 70% of inpatients are from the 13% of the unvaccinated population.
- Approximately 20% of the unvaccinated have been infected and there is uncertainty about how long that immunity will persist.

Direct and Indirect Health Impacts of C19 (Paper 6)

6. Professor Young provided a brief overview of the paper:

- This paper details some of the direct and indirect impacts and contains a lot of useful information.
- The number of people attending food banks was discussed. Poverty was also discussed.

Transmission in Hotels and Managed Quarantine Facilities (MQFs) (Paper 7)

7. Professor Young provided a brief overview of the paper:

ACTION: Secretariat to forward paper to DoH team responsible for MQFs.

- Dr Bradley highlighted the implications to hospitality; there are likely more people in hotels than in MQFs.
- Dr Bradley agreed to take this paper to the Adherence Group.

AOB

8. Professor Young asked the group to raise any further items for discussion and there being no further business, the meeting closed.

Date of Next Meeting

9. The next meeting will be on Monday 18th October 2021 at Noon via Zoom.