

COVID-19 Strategic Intelligence Group

15 November 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 Lourda Geoghegan	DCMO, DoH
Dr Joanne McClean	Associate DCMO, DoH
Professor Stuart Elborn	Faculty Pro-Vice Chancellor, School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences, QUB
Dr Declan Bradley	Deputy Chief Scientific Advisor, DoH
Professor Duncan Morrow	Director of Civic Engagement & Student Affairs, Ulster University
Professor Fiona Alderdice	Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford
Dr Nicola Armstrong	Programme Manager, PHA
Dr Liz Mitchell	Chair of Contact Tracing Service Steering Group, DoH
Dr Gillian Armstrong	Consultant in Health Protection, PHA
Jonathan Norwood	Secretariat, DoH

Apologies:

Dr Naresh Chada	DCMO, DoH
Professor Frank McKee	Centre for Public Health, QUB
Professor Diarmuid O'Donovan	Professor of Global Health, Centre for Public Health, QUB
Dr Bríd Farrell	Acting Director for Public Health, PHA

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. Prof Young provided an update on the current position:

- Case numbers declined slightly, coinciding with the school half term break.
- The return of schools coincided with the opening of hospitality sector, which helps to explain the rapid increase in case numbers.
- Testing remains stable and at a very high level and is expected to increase further.
- There is an uptick in test positivity also.
- Daily case numbers are highest in school age children and are continuing to increase.
- There has been a substantial rise in case numbers in the 18-30 age group coinciding with hospitality opening. Cases in the 30-40 age group are also rising. All age groups are expected to rise this week.
- Total case numbers in Causeway Coast and Glens, Mid Ulster and Mid and East Antrim have increased significantly. Case numbers have increased in all LGDs.
- The conversion of case numbers into hospital admissions is approximately 2%. Therefore, hospital admissions are expected to increase significantly in the coming weeks.

Discussion: Current State of Epidemic

3. Prof Young asked for discussion around the current state of the epidemic:

- The group discussed a local event from the weekend where there were numerous complaints of overcrowding. There were reports of 1,700 people crammed into the building. Thus far, there have been 148 cases identified associated with this event.
- The Adherence Group have fed back that there is low compliance with The Executive's guidance to hospitality.
- Domestic COVID certification was discussed.
- Wales has the highest rate of infection across the Common Travel Area. RoI numbers are increasing rapidly despite relatively low testing numbers.
- Community acquired inpatient numbers have also been rising.
- Hospital acquired inpatient numbers have dramatically increased in the last two weeks.
- ICU inpatient numbers and deaths are stable for now but these are lagging indicators.
- A number of recommendations were discussed to be taken to The Executive.

- The £100 voucher scheme was discussed and is a known risk. Large quantities of people will be in shops and in hospitality in the next few weeks to spend their vouchers.
- $R_t = 1.2$
- 'Work from Home' and 'Face Coverings' messaging was discussed.
- Impacts of vaccination and boosters were discussed although significant booster effects will not be seen in the next 2-4 weeks.
- The nosocomial dashboard was discussed. Dr Geoghegan asked for an update of the current nosocomial position from PHA colleagues and this will be discussed in detail after the meeting.
- Prof McBride reflected on the current situation and the need for more leadership from the Adherence Group specifically around the hospitality sector. He reflected on the nosocomial impact in hospitals and the challenges faced by the HSC system.
- Messaging around 'Work from Home' for teachers will be led by the Department of Education.
- Dr Armstrong raised concern around the significant pressures on the system. Acting now is important to prevent the system becoming overwhelmed.
- Impacts on Universities were discussed.
- Face coverings were discussed in detail.
- The consensus is that domestic COVID certification within hospitality is required.
- Dr Geoghegan reflected on the importance of the University population limiting their hospitality and socialising endeavours over the coming weeks. In person exams present a further risk as students will be required to gather in person within Universities.
- Dr Armstrong reflected on the importance of the right people delivering messages and the positive way that they should be delivered. Talking about measures as 'enablers' rather than 'restrictions' can be received much better by the public.
- The consensus was that we should act now to avoid more severe interventions in the post-Christmas period.
- This is not a unique problem to Northern Ireland; many European countries are introducing more severe restrictions now. An announcement from RoI is expected today.

Predictors of SARS-CoV-2 Infection Following High-Risk Exposure (Paper 2)

4. Professor Young provided a brief overview of the paper:
 - The paper highlights that using face coverings correctly can reduce transmission by 40-50%. This adds to the Department's evidence base and strengthens the need to have maximum compliance.
 - The quality of face coverings was also discussed.

AOB

5. 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

6. The next meeting will be on Monday 6th December 2021 at Noon via Zoom.