

COVID-19 Strategic Intelligence Group

18 January 2021 at 12:30 – Zoom Video Conference

Present:

Dr Michael McBride (Chair)	Chief Medical Officer, DoH
Dr Lourda Geoghegan	DCMO, DoH
Dr Naresh Chada	DCMO, DoH
Dr Liz Mitchell	Chair of Contact Tracing Service Steering Group, DoH
Dr Gerry Waldron	Assistant Director of Public Health – Health Protection, PHA
Professor Stuart Elborn	Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor, School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences, QUB
Professor Frank Kee	Centre for Public Health, QUB
Professor Diarmuid O'Donovan	Professor of Global Health, 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	Assistant Director Public Health – Population Screening, PHA
Dr Declan Bradley	Consultant Public Health Medicine, PHA
Niall Donnelly	Health Protection Team, DoH
Jonathan Norwood	DoH (Secretariat)

Apologies:

Professor Ian Young	Chief Scientific Advisor, DoH
Dr Michael Quinn	Head of Clinical Information, HSCB
Kieran McAteer	COVID-19 Response, DoH
Dr Eugene Mooney	Director of Information and Analysis, DoH

Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

1. Dr McBride welcomed all participants back to the meeting.

- Apologies were as noted.
- Previous minutes were accepted.
- All actions are complete.

Current Restrictions Update

2. Dr McBride asked the group for comments on the current restrictions:

- The Executive will review on 21st January; it is unrealistic to end restrictions on 6th February.
- $R_t < 0.6$ (new cases).
- $R_t < 0.65$ (over 60s).
- Restrictions are having an impact but it is not the time to relax.
- ROI have a significant increase in the 'UK' variant; >52% now, which is concerning.
- Border areas are a concern and numbers in Armagh are increasing.
- The TTP programme was discussed and more detailed travel history is being captured.
- 'South American' variant and 'pre departure testing' was discussed.
- The longer $R_t < 1$, the longer it will take for R_t to exceed 1 post restrictions' easing.
- Dr Geoghegan gave an overview of ROI position and the risks these pose to border areas.
- ICU pressure are approaching maximum capacity.
- There are still 20+ deaths daily and predicted to continue to increase.
- Restrictions must continue for a significant period. The first type of relaxation to be considered should be permitting safe outdoor activity. SAGE have published papers detailing levels of risks within different types of settings. High risk settings include food manufacturing factories. This work requires revisiting to aid relaxation strategy.
- The impact of schools remaining closed and encouraging outdoor activity will require further work.

- Testing regimes to help schools was discussed. A strategic narrative will be required to support schools and other industries.
- Dr McBride apologised and left the meeting.

Reducing Within and Between Household Transmission in Light of New Variant (Paper 2)

3. Dr Chada took the chair and asked for comments on the paper:

- There is an inequality dimension to consider; many homes may only have one bathroom and no spare bedroom. Messaging and communication around this will need to resonant with those living in poverty. Families are complex and there is a risk that the solutions may be too complex. 'Quarantine Hotels' was raised as a consideration.
- Further discussions with communications teams to create a clear strategic narrative is required.
- Multigenerational households have many positives and any communications should be mindful of this.
- There being no further comments, the paper was noted.

Application of Physical Distancing and Fabric Face Coverings in Mitigating the B117 Variant SARS-CoV-2 Virus in Public, Workplace and Community (Paper 3)

4. Dr Chada asked for comments on the paper:

- There is opportunity to educate people on mitigations such as correct mask wearing and distancing.
- Distancing must be emphasised and face coverings are not a substitute for distancing. The group reflected on compliance and it appears higher than months ago with regard to number of people wearing face coverings. 'No Mask, No Entry' signs are more obvious now. Risk reduces significantly as distance increases between people.
- There being no further comments, the paper was noted.

COVID-19 SAGE #76 minutes (Paper 4)

5. Dr Chada summarised the paper and as there were no further comments, the paper was noted.

AOB

6. Dr Chada invited members to raise any further items for discussion:

- Care homes deaths and the vaccination programme was discussed.
- Residents in care homes will undoubtedly die following vaccination and their death will be associated with the vaccine rather than caused. Deaths following vaccination needs further discussion between the four nations and a clear approach will be required. Disease activity in care homes will reduce following vaccination.
- A care home testing strategy will need consideration following full vaccination of everyone in care homes.
- There being no further business, the meeting closed.

Date of Next Meeting

7. The next meeting will be on Monday 25 January 2021 at 12:00 via Zoom.