

SAGE: Reflection and Recognition Discussion Summary (15/09/21)

On Wednesday September 15 2021, the SAGE secretariat, with the support of Professor Dame Angela McLean, organised a discussion with over 30 SAGE and subgroup participants to:

- reflect on major successes and challenges during the SAGE COVID activation
- reflect on which data streams were needed to underpin SAGE/subgroup advice, how these were sourced and what blockers had to be overcome to access them
- consider how to prepare for/ensure access to data streams during emergencies.

Below is a summary of this discussion. It is hoped that this summary will help those involved in current and future SAGE activations reflect on what the key enablers are for the ability of SAGE/subgroups to give rapid, data-informed, consensus-based science advice.

Reflection on successes and challenges during the SAGE COVID activation

Chair: Patrick Vallance

Summary

Some of the major successes during the SAGE COVID activation include:

- Implementing clear commissioning processes and the crafting of specific, answerable questions for SAGE and its subgroups. Developing quicker and more efficient commissioning processes allowed more time to be spent on the research itself, providing better quality outputs compared to the period where these processes were not in place.
- Being upfront about areas of uncertainty and communicating uncertainties to decision makers.
- Use of teach-ins to disseminate advice, improve understanding and connect with interested individuals across HMG.
- Use of the CSA network and the role of CSAs on subgroups to create a bridge between these groups and departments/ministers.
- Creation of the National Core Studies.
- Increased transparency through publication of papers, leading to greater trust and understanding from the public and policymakers.
- Working collaboratively across different research areas and organisational structures.
- Use of the Science Coordination Group and other structures to share updates on work across Whitehall and the devolved administrations.
- Having 'intelligent secretariats' who coordinated and organised meetings/papers while also providing more specialist skills (including in research and science communication).
- Having decisive and coordinated leadership from the GCSA, CMO and subgroup chairs that set a clear direction from the start.

Some of the areas to consider further include:

- Being strategic, carving out time/space to think, and looking ahead at likely future issues through small group meetings and other structures.

- Increasing join-up between subgroups and delivering more cross-cutting work that brings in a variety of disciplines.
- Using generalists in SAGE/subgroups and building in other kinds of challenge function (e.g. red teaming) to promote further diversity of opinion.
- Improving access to information and data required by SAGE/subgroups and increasing knowledge about what information is available and where.
- Improving feedback from central government to SAGE/subgroups on how and where advice has been used – where this does not happen, it can affect the trust and morale of independent academics, and makes it harder for them to improve delivery of advice.
- Having roadmap-like policymaking processes that can be used to understand the general direction of travel and frame questions clearly – it is very difficult to identify the relevant scientific questions and provide advice when the overall objectives and risk appetite are not clear.
- Bringing local knowledge, expertise and data into SAGE.
- Accessing and using industry expertise and data.
- Ensuring that, when data are not available, studies can be set up quickly to fill data gaps.
- Considering whether more junior researchers are included in the process to upskill the next generation of policy-aware researchers for future potential activations.
- Building the measurement of impacts on disadvantaged groups into the system fully from the start.
- Defining and improving the relationship between SAGE/subgroups, their participants and the media. Reflecting on the remit of different subgroups and on whether those with an operational duty should have a different relationship with SAGE.

Reflection on data streams during emergencies

Chair: Angela McLean

Summary

Data collection, access and sharing are essential to an effective response from the very beginning; much progress has been made over the course of the response, but there remain several barriers and challenges. There is a need to continue and expand the work undertaken during this SAGE activation on data – this could be taken on through existing programmes of work including those around the NSRA and National Situation Centre, and the development of UKHSA. The major risk is that the situation around data use will return to the previous baseline once SAGE COVID is no longer active and once some of the arrangements in place for COVID-19 end. When looking at data streams needed for risks on the NSRA, it is important to consider:

- The risk itself, including how data requirements may develop during a risk’s lifecycle, who owns the risk and where there is likely to be the need to bring together a number of different groups for input.
- Risk owners, including what data they may require to make decisions and how they can best be supported (and also challenged) when needed. Risk owners need to be able to answer: What are we afraid of? Who is vulnerable? What is the likely impact? What decisions do I need to make?

- Availability of data, including knowing what data are available, recognising the gaps and ensuring these gaps are filled (such as through quickly funding new studies or setting up new data collection exercises where needed).
- Access to data, including how to ensure data are available quickly when required and can be shared with all necessary stakeholders. Health data are relevant for many NSRA risks so improving access is a priority
- Variety of data required, including ensuring different data types and timescales are fully exploited.
- Quality of data, including improving granularity.
- Structures around data, including building capacity, developing infrastructure, improving data linkage, creating better systems and supporting data collectors and librarians.

Attendees

Professor Wendy Barclay, Professor of Virology (SPI-M, NERVTAG)

NR, Technical Advisory Cell Co-Chair (Wales)

Professor Ian Boyd, Professor of Biology (SAGE)

Dr Meera Chand, National Incident Director COVID-19 (PHE)

Professor Andrew Curran, CSA (HSE)

Dr Jeanelle de Gruchy, President (ADPH)

Professor Charlotte Deane, COVID-19 Response Director (UKRI)

Sir Ian Diamond, National Statistician (ONS)

Sir Jeremy Farrar, CEO (Wellcome Trust)

Professor Neil Ferguson, Professor of Mathematical Biology (SPI-M)

Professor Julie Fitzpatrick, CSA (Scottish Government CSA)

Professor Julia Gog, Professor of Mathematical Biology (SPI-M)

Mrs Natasha Grant, Deputy Director, Readiness and Response (CCS)

Dr Jenny Harries, Chief Executive (UK Health Security Agency)

Mr Rob Harrison, Director General, Analysis (Cabinet Office)

Professor Peter Horby, Professor of Emerging Infectious Diseases and Global Health (NERVTAG)

Professor Ann John, Professor of Public Health and Psychiatry (SPI-B)

Professor Angela McLean, CSA (MOD, SPI-M)

Professor Graham Medley, Professor of Infectious Disease Modelling (SPI-M)

Professor Andrew Morris, Director (HDR-UK)

Professor Michael Parker, Professor of Bioethics (SPI-B)

Mr Osama Rahman, CSA (DfE)

Professor Brooke Rogers, Professor of Behavioural Science and Security (SPI-B)

Professor Harry Rutter, Professor of Global Public Health (EMG)

Professor Calum Semple, Professor of Child Health and Outbreak Medicine (CO-CIN, NERVTAG)

Sir Patrick Vallance, GCSA (GO-Science)

Dr Stuart Wainwright, Director (GO-Science)

Professor Charlotte Watts, CSA (FCDO)

Professor Chris Whitty, CMO (DHSC)

Observers:

Name Redacted COVID-19 Science Coordination Team Leader (GO-Science)

Dr Zoe Bond, Deputy Director, COVID-19 Strategy and Delivery (GO-Science)

Name Redacted Head of COVID-19 Science Advice Team (GO-Science)

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Name Redacted COVID-19 SAGE Coordination (GO-Science)

Name Redacted Head of National Security and Resilience (GO-Science)

Name Redacted Senior Private Secretary to GCSA (GO-Science)

Dr Simon Whitfield, Deputy Director, COVID-19 Advice and Evidence (GO-Science)