HM Government

C-19 ANALYTICAL RETROSPECTIVE   **11 February 2021**

09:45-10.00 | MS TEAMS

CHAIR'S BRIEF

Our aim for this meeting:
- Bring key senior analysts together to try and encourage greater working together.
- Surface obstacles to the effective use of evidence in decision-making, and highlight areas that are a priority or particularly difficult.

Our suggestion is to concentrate this meeting on the obstacles, as it is easier to develop a plan on each of the vexing questions after the meeting.

We asked for a return on:
- What are the vexing questions that we still do not seem to be able to answer well enough?
- What are the principal obstacles to the effective use of evidence in decision-making?

We have added Ben Warner's comments for you to use them as talking points.

Lines that are in italics are taken directly from the org that person represents returns.

1. Introduction

You to set up the idea of a retrospective **"regardless of what we discover, we understand and truly believe that everyone did the best job they could, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand"** and to ask for an open and candid discussion.

Set out that the aim of the meeting is to look at that the challenges faced over the last 12 months and agree a small number of concrete actions that could make a meaningful difference to the use of evidence in Covid decision making.

Suggest that we concentrate on the obstacles at the start, and if timed out, other meetings can help us consider the vexing questions.

2. What are the principal obstacles to the effective use of evidence in decision-making?

The returns fit into three broad buckets. Of these, we would suggest the following prioritisation.

- i) Governance and decision-making structures.
- ii) Ways of working
- iii) People

i)   Governance and decision-making structures.

Obstacle: No forum to set the long term analytical plan, to prioritise resources, to drive operational action or evaluate programs.

Comment – I feel that this is where a lot of the other problems stem from. That this meeting is necessary and needs to be hosted by the Cab Sec, is itself evidence of the lack of this forum.

Patrick Valance - *There has been, at times, a lack of clear reporting lines for SAGE in the absence of COBR, a lack of a single point of accountability for key issues. ... no direct way to link decisions to operational levers*

Ian Diamond - *Co-ordination of the questions that government needs an answer to is critical; and clear leadership of the response. [..] It may be that someone understood everything that was going on but, to me it wasn't clear. In summary clear accountability is essential.*

Rob Harrison - *General lack of proactive, longer-term thinking. Lack of authority to centralise and collect the right data. [..] How much impact is the T&T system really having on bringing down infection levels?*

Clare Lombardelli - *Balance between short, medium and long term focus*

Obstacle: Where is room that forces the difficult messages to the forces, provides challenge or where disagreements occur.

Comment – The lack of challenge, critique and synthesis was often bought up when I talked to people across the space. This was especially seemed to be a problem when multiple data feeds from different org's.

Rob Harrison - *We may sometimes self-edit when delivering difficult messages upwards, which is then compounded by layers of gatekeeper*

Rob Harrison - We *rarely have time for proper challenge sessions* (including with external experts when possible)

Ian Diamond - *Co-ordination of the questions that government needs an answer to is critical; and clear leadership of the response.*

ii) **Ways of working**

Obstacle: Ensuring that analysts are active participants, and non-analysts are intelligent customers.

Comment – Non-analytical colleagues feel analysts are sometimes like lawyers, where work and responsibility is passed over. Analytical colleagues feel they are treated like lawyers, to support have no seat at the table. Both believe the end result is weaker than it should be. An example of this is analytical people want to know the objectives, and Non-analytical colleagues want to know what the right objectives are.

Patrick Valence – '*they were often unclear on the associated policy considerations or the aims of the questions they were answering*'

Clare Lombardi - *Clarity of objectives*

Rob Harrison – *We are still too reactive, distant from our policy colleagues.*

Rob Harrison - *What is our purpose: does analysis lead policy or support it?*

Obstacle: Is the balance on time scales right, and therefore are we asking the right questions?

Clare Lombardelli: *Does the system / centre (in which I'd certainly include HMT!) really understand some of the 'known risks' around Covid that should be used to inform how decisions area taken.*

Rob Harrison – Time horizon for decision making… This can lead to us being asked to address the wrong questions.

Obstacle: Data and analysis is silo'd or opaque due to various different reasons including the time scales on which we make decisions. .This means teams often lack context and the appropriate time to do the work.

Comment – This is a common complaint, I think concentrating the discussion toward openness and transparency between the representatives in the room would be the most effective use of time. Having the right context and time to do work is a problem but my conversations suggest that Rob has had a huge impact in this area and we simply need to empower this.

Ian Diamond - *Not yet a seamless culture of data sharing.*

Patrick Valance - *SAGE contributors repeatedly report difficulty getting public bodies and Government departments to share data or to publish data in the public domain.*

Rob Harrison - We let secrecy get in the way of properly engaging SPI-M on modelling. Then we complain that their work isn't relevant to the policies under consideration. This is improving.

[del] Patrick Valance - *timescales in which they are asked to answer questions are often unfeasible*

[del] Rob Harrison - *Many colleagues and decision makers don't appreciate the time it takes to do good quality work*

iii)   People

Obstacle: Do we have enough skilled people to be able to lead on the work?

Comment – In all my conversations there were worries about the capability of analytical teams, in some areas this was a lack of expertise, but in other areas this was that the teams were too small and were drowning under BAU. This area seems to be especially true of JBC and PHE. Beyond analytical teams, there is a concern that the quantitative ability is not in the room.

Patrick Valance - *A lack of internal capability in evidence generation and synthesis contributes to this overreliance.*

Rob Harrison - *Still a bit of a skills shortage (esp. epi, data science).*

Patrick Valance - *Government will require an enhanced and sustainable non-emergency science advice system and will need to build internal capability to generate evidence and answer science-based questions.*

Rob Harrison - *Are we bringing together the right multi-disciplinary team*

Rob Harrison - *We have often not had the right expertise in the room when the critical discussions have taken place. Integrating science, analysis and policy is difficult.*

Ian Diamond - *Lack of skills across government both at a high level; and awareness of data everywhere.*

3. What are the vexing questions that we still do not seem to be able to answer well enough?

You might want to ask whether we could improve our knowledge of:

How people are actually behaving?

Patrick Valance – *How are people behaving (as opposed to how they report they are behaving) and how can this best be monitored/measured?*

Rob Harrison – *What are the actual levels of compliance, and what is the true nature of public attitudes to restrictions?*

The effect of vaccination?
Patrick Valance - What are the short- and long-term outcomes of vaccination in the real world (for example, on hospitalisation, mortality, transmission and immunity) and how do these vary (for example, by age, ethnicity, sex and vaccine type)?

Where does infection occur?
Why are we still struggling with this? Where right now do we think the majority of infection is occurring, what is our evidence.

Patrick Valance – *Transmission: what is the dominant form of viral transmission (fomites, aerosols, droplets), through which transmission routes and in which circumstances?*

Rob Harrison – *Where does C-19 transmission occur?*

Impact of measures, both on the spread of disease and peoples behaviour?

Possible actions

Overall
- **COVID-A,** to act as a single point of escalation for scientific, analytical issues, that has a representative that also sits in COVID-S & O.

- That this group meet [weekly| fortnightly| monthly], chaired by James Bowler to continue the conversation, and break down barriers and escalate issues.

On a specific question
> Analytical weekly meeting to push forward on this with representation from appropriate analysis/scientific teams and teams that contain the operational levers.