TAG Wash up report 06/05/2022

TAG is the Technical Advisory Group, comprising scientific and technical experts who provide science advice and guidance to the Welsh Government (WG) in response to COVID-19.

The TAG subgroups were established during the COVID-19 pandemic to consider and discuss specific areas of scientific or technical advice relating to COVID-19 in greater detail. Each subgroup provides advice with regards to their individual areas and there is an expectation that subgroups will proactively draw on the expertise available within TAG and TAC in doing so. The Technical Advisory Group terms of reference can be found here.

On 6 May the TAG held a 'wash-up event' to discuss the subgroups' experience around the provision of science advice, their membership and expertise and lessons learnt over the course of the pandemic. The aim of this exercise was to inform the wider Welsh Government lessons learnt exercise and future emergency science planning. A summary of the outcomes of the exercise and key recommendations made by the subgroups is provided below.

Subgroups: what worked well and what could be improved.

Overall, the subgroups reported that participation in the TAG has been a positive and valuable experience. Many of the groups felt TAG and its subgroups evolved organically to meet pandemic response requirements and the diverse membership had worked well to allow both challenge and the opportunity to achieve consensus where possible.

The subgroups filled a gap in expertise and knowledge sharing that were not present at the start of the pandemic, bringing together experts from academia, health and social care, expert organisations and Government to provide knowledge and experience to support the pandemic response and facilitate the synthesis and interpretation of large volumes of evidence.

The subgroups reported that the structure of the TAG and its subgroups successfully facilitated the sharing of information and updates on the situation of the pandemic in Wales and the UK. Participating in the TAG has raised the profile of many members and their organisations amongst the group with many of the working relationships that have been established continuing outside of the formal structure of the subgroups.

Some members reported incidents of challenging encounters, where they faced difficult discussions within their groups as they felt it was appropriate to help answer a policy question through the provision of evidence and science but not to advise if a particular policy should be implemented. As a result, some reported that the scope of groups should be more clearly defined to ensure a stronger focus on science. On reflection, it was broadly agreed by participants that defining terms of reference for

each group right from the beginning would help to identify the type of representation needed and clarify the main purpose of each group which would set clear direction and boundaries in discussions.

Moving into the recovery period some subgroups will continue to meet but less frequently.

Recommendation 1: **Continue the TAG and subgroup meetings but less frequent to allow its members to continue to discuss and share information on Covid recovery (and response).**

Recommendation 2: **Keep a 'sleeping core' of some subgroups that can be readily reactivated if a COVID 'urgent' scenario arises.**

Membership and Expertise

The subgroups had good representation across many varied sectors with a diversity of institutional knowledge and expertise attending their meetings with some occasionally inviting guests when considering specific issues, meaning that over 200 contributors have been involved over the period. This enabled the subgroups harvest the evidence and considerations provided to help feed the information to the wider TAG in real-time.

Obtaining the right core membership has proven key with some subgroups initially experiencing fantastic commitment from the people who were invited to join but over time, gaps were identified, or memberships decreased, and some areas would have benefited from further stakeholder and specialist membership, such as academics, to support their group. Attendance rates also consolidated down over time with representatives being present less frequently due to other responsibilities or commitments.

It was felt the subgroups needed to set clear objectives from their conception, adapt as required throughout, to better identify their membership and ensure stronger levels of commitment.

Recommendation 3: **Create and review terms of reference (including membership) for both the TAG and all subgroups regularly, with timely update of the WG website; this will support in recruiting the right expertise and set clear direction for each group.**

Communication and Engagement

Engagement and communication with internal and external organisations were felt to be a positive experience. The availability of MS Teams and its functionality for the use of meetings, sharing information, documents and real time discussions deemed very useful. It also enabled the secretariat team to provide effective administrative support to each subgroup.

Some groups did face the challenge when attempting to 'get into the room' with UK led meetings which did have an impact of not having access to the same quality and levels of data and other resources as their UKG counterparts. To enable access to UK level meetings, Welsh Government officials should work closely with SAGE, Cabinet Office, UKG Office for Science CSAs (Chief Scientific Advisers) and chairs of subgroups such as SPI-M, SPI-B and NERVTAG to ensure experts and policy officials are able to agree equitable access to advice and representation from Wales is included on relevant groups. This would ensure representatives from Wales have access to the most up to date information and analysis shared in SAGE subgroups in the same way colleagues from England do; occasionally data presented at SAGE itself which WG did attend was out of date.

It was agreed data sharing agreements with the NHS and other organisations responding to the pandemic would have improved availability and timeliness of data, which was elusive in some cases at short notice, meaning that up-to-date data could be difficult to obtain.

The pandemic and the existence of the Wales Covid-19 Evidence Centre (WCEC) has played a big part in demonstrating both the importance of research evidence, and also that it is possible, with internal capacity to provide support and connections, to develop a feasible way of providing rapid evidence synthesis to inform decision-making. The WCEC could have been set up a lot earlier and the relationship between evidence synthesis, rapid primary research and policy making could be further developed, both in non-emergency and future emergency contexts.

On occasions there were issues amongst WG and non-WG colleagues accessing documents even when shared via Objective Connect and many have encountered issues with accessing documents when multiple individuals were required to review and provide input to a single document. This is something which needs further discussions with Welsh Government IT and Security colleagues to explore tools that provide better accessibility to and sharing of documents with partners external to WG.

The subgroups did highlight that more central coordination across the TAG subgroup chairs would have helped with more co-ordination of communication and information flows from subgroups to the TAG and vice versa. This would need to be picked up in future staffing models to ensure there are sufficient numbers of trained secretariat members.

Recommendation 4: Welsh Government officials should work closely with UKG counterparts and other UK level organisations to allow access to advice and visibility of other groups.

Recommendation 5: Improve sharing of evidence outside of Wales and ensure appropriate attendance at all UK level subgroups and meetings.

Recommendation 6: Consider the utility of an evidence synthesis and rapid primary review function, like the Wales Covid-19 Evidence Centre, beyond

Covid to support decision making both in non-emergency and future emergency contexts

Recommendation 7: Consider the digital access granted to trusted external partners and identify the best solution for use in future emergency scenarios, to expedite drafting of advice by multiple parties in real-time.

Recommendation 8: Review and improve the co-ordination of communication and information flows from subgroups to the main TAG and vice versa.

Recognition

Throughout the response phase the subgroups agreed that there has been recognition from peers and senior management of the important contributions from the TAG and its subgroups to the Welsh Government's pandemic response. However, formal recognition and acknowledgment of how the TAG's outputs have been used by policy and decision makers would have been welcomed, in particular ensuring that all contributions are formally recognised in the research excellence framework (REF) process.

Many felt that a formal arrangement is needed to ensure that letters of support and recognition from WG for the TAG contributors are provided. However, it is noted that any such approach would need to be undertaken in a fair and equitable manner therefore a transparent process would need to be agreed.

Furthermore, recognition could be enhanced by keeping the membership of the TAG on the Welsh Government website up to date - https://gov.wales/technical-advisory-cell/membership.

Doing this would ensure that there is public acknowledgment of membership by WG and clearly identify Welsh experts which in turn would help members with external communication and engagement with UK events, wider research collaborations and grant applications.

Recommendation 9: Provide research excellence framework (REF) letters to TAG and subgroup members.

Processes

At the beginning of the response phase there was no clear process for the subgroups to receive commissioned requests and it fell to the groups themselves to process and manage commissions. This proved challenging due to the pressures of demand, as the requests came with very short deadlines and involved many discussions. At times identifying the science question contained within a policy commission could be challenging and delay a timely response. A clear understanding of what each sub-group can and cannot do would improve this process. The commissioning process evolved over time, resulting in a more

streamlined and formal commissioning process managed by the TAC secretariat team.

Alongside commissioned requests, the process of review and sign-off of sub-group papers worked reasonably well. However, the need to finalise papers and circulate to the TAG in time for proper review and consideration before the meeting itself added additional pressures that needed to be planned for as attendees were forced to read papers at short notice.

A further issue experienced by some groups, in some instances, was the submission and presentation of issues and papers to the TAG, without prior consideration by the subgroup with the remit for the presentation in question. This came with some frustration and confusion about their respective roles of two groups. To improve this, it was suggested there was a need to clarify and improve relationships between subgroups would help with the crossover of work. More clearly defining the federated approach to sub-group sharing and working as well as more regular chairs meetings or sharing work programme updates would likely be beneficial.

Some subgroups reported the timely publication of papers and ensuring the data included remained current was also challenging. The formal process in place meant that once the paper had been signed off and published, the information was likely to be out of date. This was particularly frustrating with regards to papers on the latest data/pandemic forecasts as these could not be shared with local government and NHS partners before that process was complete, delaying their response which had the potential to cause harm to public health, although it was also noted that some critical-health information didn't require formal paper sign off. There is also a need to create an efficient process to ensure timely and up to date information is being presented to the public. However, it should be noted that scientific advice was used for active policy development and ministerial decisions and therefore could not always be published any sooner. Lessons learnt published by the Science Media Centre provide helpful advice on improving public science communication during the pandemic[1].

Recommendation 10: Clearer processes for commissions for new advice and finalising papers for publication to aid efficiency and manage demand.

Summary

At the Wash-up event on 6 May, the TAG subgroup chairs expressed the positive experience their groups had, and that the diverse make up of all the subgroup memberships worked really well. The demands initially were extremely high with short turnaround deadlines but all managed to deliver within the required timescales.

Some members reported incidents of challenging encounters, where they faced difficult discussions within their groups as they felt it was appropriate to help answer

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[1] Could science be communicated better during the next pandemic? – the lessons the SMC has learned during COVID-19 | Science Media Centre

a policy question through the provision of evidence and science but not to advise if a particular policy should be implemented and on reflection, groups should have maintained a stronger dedicated focus on science.

The subgroups felt there was a good breadth of expertise and membership attending their meetings. The connections made with external partners were very supportive, they shared intelligence, data and information in a timely way to help deliver workstreams during the pandemic. With this in mind, it was suggested that the subgroups needed to be set clear objectives in order to better identify their membership needs.

Engagement and communication were felt to be a positive experience, with MS Teams and Objective Connect and their available functions being useful tools in terms of connecting with external stakeholders. The barrier many of the subgroups faced was when multiple individuals were required to review and provide input to a single document. This is something which needs further discussions with Welsh Government IT and Security colleagues.

Some groups faced difficulty to get their foot in the door to UK led meetings. To help engagement and communication for Wales, Welsh Government officials should work closely with UKG counterparts to ensure experts and policy officials have access to advice with representation on relevant groups.

Recognition from WG of individual and group efforts could be improved and may help to sustain involvement and acknowledgement of how the evidence from TAG has been used to inform the response to Covid-19.

Process development and management is an area of focus for improvement, even though it has evolved over time, as there is a need to ensure a clear and effective way to deliver key workstreams.

Setting Terms of Reference which are clear to understand, set out the scope for each subgroup and that are regularly reviewed to ensure they remain fit for purpose was suggested.

The TAG Wash up event was very insightful with good open and honest feedback provided by all. The recommendations put forward for consideration on planning for a future national emergency and are summarised below.

Recommendation 11: Consider how science can be applied more broadly to future emergency planning and decision making.

Recommendations

1.   Continue the TAG and subgroup meetings but less frequency to allow its members to continue to discuss and share information on recovery.
2.   Keep a 'sleeping core' of some subgroups that can be readily reactivated if a COVID 'urgent' scenario arises.

3.   Create and review terms of reference (including membership) for both the TAG and all subgroups regularly, with timely update of the WG website; this will support in recruiting the right expertise and set clear direction for each group.

4.   Welsh Government officials should work closely with UKG counterparts and other UK level organisations to allow access to advice and visibility of other groups.

5.   Improve sharing of evidence outside of Wales and ensure appropriate attendance at all UK level subgroups and meetings.

6.   Consider the utility of an evidence synthesis and rapid primary review function, like the Wales Covid-19 Evidence Centre, beyond Covid to support decision making both in non-emergency and future emergency contexts

7.   Consider the digital access granted to trusted external partners and identify the best solution for use in future emergency scenarios, to expediate drafting of advice by multiple parties in real-time.

8.   Review and improve the co-ordination of communication and information flows from subgroups to the main TAG and vice versa.

9.   Provide research excellence framework (REF) letters to TAG and subgroup members.

10. Clearer processes for commissions for new advice and finalising papers for publication to aid efficiency and manage demand.

11. Consider how science can be applied more broadly to future emergency planning and decision making.