

Review of Welsh Government Covid-19 Technical Advisory Cell

Background

The Technical Advisory Cell (TAC) was set up in February 2020 to provide scientific advice in liaison with the Chief Medical Officer (CMO). TAC is responsible for attending the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and its sub groups and for providing advice across the Welsh Government (WG) and support to Welsh Government Ministers. It is supported by a wider Technical Advisory Group (TAG) which includes leading academics, other organisations and WG policy area specialists. TAC also publishes scientific advice on the WG website.

This is a review of its current operating structure and the capacity of TAC. It includes what has worked well, what needs to be improved and changes that may be required to address a potential second wave of Covid-19 in the autumn. An action plan is detailed at Annex A. The review was undertaken by interviewing all present and some past members of the team.

Findings

The main issues for TAC relate to the resilience of its team and the lack of a level of permanence of some team members within the cell and to gaps in the skills and expertise it requires.

A number of the team members current work status is tenuous and this instability needs to be urgently resolved to help assure their ongoing assignment to TAC and its viability until 31 March 2020. This is critical to the stability of the team and its capacity to continue to deliver its remit. The fall-back position resulting from key staff leaving the team is weak with a lack of depth to meet requirements as existing staff are already over-burdened with the volume of activity. This difficulty was particularly apparent at the start of the Covid-19 crisis.

Undertaking a review of the future structure of the team is essential to help reconfigure and stabilise the team to facilitate TACs continued

delivery remit. This will enable it in moving from a reactive to a more proactive role in addressing future priorities. These changes need to be aligned to the planned scope of its work and key objectives. The review needs to focus on the necessary technical expertise and skills required based on the detailed planning of resources necessary to address priorities for a medium term Covid-19 strategy and the structure and TAG sub-groups it manages. This prioritisation would include those activities required to support a potential second wave in the autumn/winter period and a consideration of how to deal more effectively with the implication of wider unconstrained expectations that may be placed on TAC. This is particularly the case given the impending impact of a return to a business as usual environment following recess and the additional demands policy divisions might wish to place on TAC.

Summarised below are both positive and negative reflections of people's time within the team and improvements that should be considered going forward.

Positives

- The team believes it has met its remit and made a significant contribution towards bringing the virus under control in Wales
- Morale and teamwork within TAC is very high with most members believing their work is of significant importance, they find it very interesting and rewarding and are demonstrating considerable enthusiasm and dedication to their role working long hours including weekends
- TAC provides an automotous though hectic environment with people describing it as 'the busiest team' I have ever worked in. However they do feel empowered, that they are making a real contribution and are able to define and manage their role to some degree which they enjoy (this does not suit everyone as it is described as requiring proactive self-starters)
- There is a very positive perception of TAC leadership and the way delivery is managed through its existing reporting structures (noted there is a critical reliance on key individuals)
- TACs approach to co-leadership significantly reduces risk and is also seen as operating very effectively by the team
- After initial teething difficulties the operating structure of the TAC and is now considered much more effective with good

organisation, communication and the delivery of timely advice through a more formalised operating structure

- The development of TAG subgroups has greatly aided the management of key areas of activity in a formalised way and is currently being extended (subject to resources)
- Advances in WG ICT to facilitate home working have been instrumental. The use of Teams including online messaging works very well and helps not only with delivery and communication in a rapidly changing work environment but with morale
- Most of the team have found the new working environment and working from home flexible and sustainable in the longer term subject to an adjustment in workload
- Communication and support both internal and externally has in the main been good
- The team has improved its ability to deal with excess requests and queries for instance redirecting back work that should sit with policy teams

Negatives

- Significant concerns about work life balance particularly during the crisis stage and the high level of workload which is in part a reflection of the teams dedication and the initial severity of the crisis but also the constraints of the 'new normal'
- Working from home can enhance the level of isolation which for some is having a negative impact on their mental health. It is far too easy to spend 10 hours in front of a screen, skip lunch, forget breaks and for other people to arrange numerous online meetings that would not be possible physically
- The level of meetings and interactions impacts on the time required to actually do the job though several have recently been reduced (e.g. TAG/bird table)
- The tenuous status of some staffs postings/position in the team is temporary and it urgently requires improvement for the resilience of the team and the stability of its postings until March 2021
- The transient nature of some postings and the difficulty HR has had in finding suitable and informed people for the team can be unhelpful to TAC and to those individuals. The appropriate expertise, skills and aptitude need to be much better sourced

- A lack of planning, induction and operating protocols for new individuals with most learning being on the job reduces resilience (though recently there have been some adhoc preparations of desktop instructions and checklists by individuals).
- Losing key people who have only been released to the team temporarily is a major risk and is of significant concern as it impacts on TACs delivery and upon other team members where existing cover is already inadequate. It takes time to develop detailed knowledge and build effectiveness which is being lost.
- Interactions at a UK level have not been overly helpful with junior staff citing more difficulties
- The team are experiencing information blockages and a reluctance to share or engage with what is specifically required in Wales, sometimes requiring escalation including SAGE, Public Health Wales (PHW) and at a UK government level.
- The TAC remit to provide scientific advice needs to be more focussed on key priorities and longer term objectives. Currently there is a feeling of getting dragged into policy areas and political decisions as well as endless lower priority queries and time sinks that can distract from the main priorities going forward.
- There is a view that there is sometimes a gap in external peoples knowledge of TACs remit and a wider lack of recognition of the complexity and number of variables involved by external/internal parties in TAC providing advice for which there may not be actual answers to questions but rather potential options and policy decisions to be made
- There is the risk that TACs current capacity acts as a constraint to increasing demands and its need to focus on critical priorities may create tension in external relationships
- TAC requires an urgent reconsideration of its current structure in preparing for the second wave encompassing any potential changes required to its staffing and the scope of its work

Improvements

- Resourcing issues need to be addressed with HR as a matter of necessity. It is essential that the team builds resilience and stability including retaining its key staff in the longer term and recruiting the required expertise to continue to deliver operationally. TAC needs to have the right people in place with the appropriate skills and

expertise who understand what is required of them in their role. There is currently a critical reliance on several key individuals without adequate backstop.

- A need for a mini induction and checklist with TAC operating protocols for new starters (e.g. A-team is subject to FOI and is kept 5 days, peoples work patterns/circumstances, who to contact if problems, standard WG operating requirements need to be in place)
- TAC is being asked to write and or check policy advice its TOR and future remit need to be more tightly focussed on key objectives and future priorities. This needs to be done though a wider explanation of its remit in a way that does not undermine existing relationships e.g. its policy and not for us, but rather more subtle this is the advice and you perhaps need to consider these options.
- There needs to be a consideration of TAC's future direction and scope. This should match the capacity of the team to deliver, including moving from a reactive to more proactive role in order to align work to key future strategy objectives. This would include ensuring the necessary mix of skills and expertise and a retention of key staff to undertake/maintain levels of delivery
- Realisation as to the extent of the pandemic resulted in a delay in the setup of internal structures to facilitate its management. There is now a window pf opportunity to ensure that improved measures can be put in place ahead of the potential second wave.
- The number of meetings and attendances where feasible needs to be mitigated and or refined to further to allow a better work life balance but more importantly to facilitate more time for developing longer term strategic advice rather than reactive advice.
- Given the complexities of some of the issues and variables involved there needs to be a move towards a more holistic approach for which there are not always scientific absolutes providing advice which should then be utilised to inform policy options and subsequent decisions that are informed by advice that is qualified and not absolute
- Wales as a smaller nation can struggle to influence output, get sufficient engagement or obtain all the information (data/research) it needs to manage Covid-19 in Wales. There is also limit to

- research expertise in Wales but encouraging further wider academic access to improve engagement would be beneficial.
- The difficulties of public communication and mixed messaging through a 4 nations approach needs to be improved. Drafting public information for circulation does require specialist skills

Planning for a potential second wave

The likelihood of a large second wave in the autumn together with delivering ongoing advice and a return to business as usual after recess could overwhelm the team. It is important to prepare now to ensure that the teams' stability and skill sets have the capability to match the future scope of its work. A more strategic approach to planning for future priorities and the timeline of objectives of TACs key priorities and the resources needed to achieve them is required.

TAC structure and resourcing requirements

The morale of the TAC is excellent with most of the team prepared to work excessive hours including weekends. This is only sustainable in the short term as it impacts upon/is detrimental to peoples work life balance. Furthermore working in isolation at home presents its own difficulties for some this is already creating mental health issues. A number of staff would welcome the opportunity to spend some time in an office environment.

The team has a number of expertise deficits which together with stability limitations create a significant level of risk and potential hiatus that could slow down other work streams. There is a high degree of reliance on several key staff meaning limited resilience and a lack of staff cover. TAC reliance on a number of short term secondments and staff goodwill and the transient nature of some recent recruitments is very unhelpful to such a critical area, which actually requires further longer term stabilisation.

The structure of the team needs to be examined closely with HR in order to achieve the correct mix of skills and to source the actual expertise TAC requires (on occasions TAC has had unsuitable matches into the team both in skills, aptitude and very short term). This requires a strategic look forward to planning for the autumn and future priorities. Existing gaps include administration, office management and the

technical skills and expertise necessary to ensure the delivery of TAC's future remit and planned objectives, together with sufficient cover for the work of its TAG sub-groups. The timeline of this potential hiatus overlaps a second wave which necessitates structures be in place before the autumn.

Working in this new environment and under pressure with long hours and in isolation creates difficulties and time needs to be taken to support work life balance and mitigate any mental health issues. Additionally protocols and mini inductions should be put in place for new staff which is particularly important given the new working environment and the level of isolation. This would include an induction pack with job descriptions, TAC/WG operating protocols, guidance on compliance with WG processes, TAG/TORs remits, desktop instructions, contact lists, who is who both for groups and individuals, flexi hours, where to do if you have any issues etc.

Scientific information requirements and providing advice

The adequacy of information and data to support the role of TAC is on occasion incomplete. Gaps have been identified that could be better addressed with access to both internal and wider external academic and research resources. Wales as a smaller nation can struggle to influence SAGE and UK government to obtain the output or information it needs, or to gain full engagement (data/research projects) that is fit for purpose to manage Covid-19 in Wales. TAC also publishes public information the drafting of which in an easily understandable form is a skill in itself.

Communications and relationships

The nature of the new normal and the changed way of working has also impacted upon relationships. In many instances these have had to be built rapidly without directly meeting people and outside of the normal protocols that would enable relationships and understanding to have been built up over a period. While day to day relationships and attendance at meetings have generally been fine, once information or assistance is required at speed this can become more problematic more especially so for junior staff.

Communication across the 4 nations has been mixed with problems cited in respect of UK government and SAGE access/advice/data which can be in part because of the political connotations and Wales 'being a

small fish in a larger pond' requesting additional output, there have also been issues with Public Health Wales.

Generally relationships within WG have been good though policy departments are not always as cooperative as would be hoped. Policy interactions tending to often fall into either they want TAC to do everything for them and sign off policy advice or they receive TAC advice which doesn't particularly suit what they would want to do which creates further work/difficulties with TAC. In the early days particularly TAC was getting overburdened with numerous queries which may have been important to that department but were not necessarily at the top of TACs priorities. This is now transposing into reviewing Covid-19 policy which is taking place across the whole of WG.

Future objectives planning and remit

The level of workload particularly during the initial critical period was very intense. Operationally the approach was a reactive one dealing at speed with issues and priorities as they arose. There is a window of opportunity now to set up improved planning for a potential second wave of Covid-19 in the autumn. Objectives and key priorities going forward need to be prepared in conjunction with a wider strategy for dealing with a second wave. Consideration is also needed as to the planned scope and role of TAC going forward. What research is missing, what data requirements may be needed, how are the TAG sub-groups structured to deliver their TOR and improvements to communication strategy - completed in conjunction with further development of the dash board.

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Annex A

Action Plan		
Technical Advisory Group Operational Review Recommended Actions		
Recommendation	Actions	Responsibility
Work life balance - concerns related to excessive workload and impacts on WLB and mental health exacerbated by isolation under the new normal	<p>Reduce the workload pressure on the wider TAC team by providing additional resources and the stabilisation of current temp posts.</p> <p>Provide opportunities to work from the office where appropriate</p> <p>WG/HR support mechanisms such as access to confidential advice</p>	<p>HR/TAC</p> <p>DD's</p> <p>HR</p>
TAC has a weakness in its resilience and a lack of cover for key staff with a reliance on short term secondments and transient placements	<p>Reparation of a workforce plan to provide greater resilience and cover for key staff in the TAC teams structure</p> <p>Essential to recruit long term postings to 31 March 2021 and to not accept placements of only 1 or 2 months which actually impact negatively on workload – support to be provided by HR</p>	<p>NS</p> <p>NS/HR/DD's</p>
Gaps identified in expertise and skills as the team has developed necessary to meet the teams ongoing remit and future priorities	Recruitment required both internal and where necessary external to meet identified gaps in research capability, data/modelling, corporate/government business, press/publicity and environmental services	DD's/HR
The nature of TACs inception during a critical period meant staff needed to hit the ground running without developing in advance induction processes and protocols	Development of an induction pack and operating protocols including recruitment materials including full job descriptions, desk top instructions, briefings on structure, roles/workgroups and contacts etc.	NS

Recommendation	Actions	Responsibility
As a smaller nation Wales can struggle to get engagement and access to data & information particularly at a UK level, which has provided difficulties particularly for more junior staff	Endeavour to create a better understanding and engagement with external organisations as necessary escalating where needed at a UK level to those government bodies such as with SAGE and Public Health Wales Develop improved exchanges with the other devolved administrations	DD's DD's
Staff cite the level of meetings and interactions is impacting on the time required to do the job	Mitigate the level of meetings through more coherent office management	DD's
The TAC remit to provide scientific advice needs to be more focussed on key priorities and longer term objectives	Strategic plan to be prepared with a focus on medium term priorities which provides an opportunity to prepare for a potential second wave using lessons learned Better explanation of TACS remit across WG clarifying its role in providing advice and not policy development	NS DD's
Move towards a more holistic approach for which there are not always scientific absolutes in providing advice	Given the complexities of some of the issues and variables involved there needs to be a move towards a more holistic approach providing advice which may be qualified in its use to inform policy options	TAC/DD's
There is a limit to research expertise in Wales but encouraging further wider academic access to improve engagement would be beneficial	Actively seek academic engagement both in Wales and wider on addressing Covid-19 issues pertinent to Wales	Research lead TBC
There is a need to plan for improved public communication and to mitigate mixed messaging during a possible second wave of Covid-19	Development of a communication plan for the autumn/winter period to address a potential second wave Drafting public information does require specialist skills not present within the team (to be recruited or P/T secondment)	Press publicity lead TBC DD's

