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To: Peter May
COVID RECOVERY Task Force – Adherence

Please note that content pertaining to recent research by the Scottish Government's Strategy and Insight Team is to be dealt with in strictest confidence and confined to this group.

RAPID INSIGHT – TACKLING COVID TRANSMISSION BEHAVIOURS IN YOUNG PEOPLE

1. Commissioned by the Adherence Group the Innovation Lab worked, with input from colleagues in UU (Mark Tully), BIT (Clare Delargy) and HSC R&D Division and BCG (Behaviour Change Group) (Nicola Armstrong) to consider existing COVID transmitting behaviours in young people, in order to identify intervention points most likely to reduce transmission. For the purposes of this paper it was agreed that work would focus on those aged 18-30.

SUMMARY

2. Rapid insight analysis and research conclusions

This is a complex subject and the paper highlights a comprehensive range of matters for consideration in addressing compliance/adherence amongst this cohort. Taking account of this, and the general messaging from UKG, the Adherence Group is invited to review the paper and advise on next steps –

- + Do Nothing – in light of the prevailing messaging from UKG**
- + Develop cohort specific messaging (as in para 7)**
- + Develop cohort specific messaging (as in para 7) and engage with PHA regarding complementary messaging (para 8)**

CONTEXT

3. It is accepted that there are limits to the weight and impact of messaging that seeks to maintain behavioural restrictions in the current, wider context of continued loosening of restriction - one such example being the imminent 'freedom day'. This raises the question that messaging /interventions to promote adherence at this point in time may prove nugatory, and simply get lost in the prevailing atmosphere.
4. Any approach to COVID transmission behaviour change is unlikely to be confined to the target group. Insights from research into this cohort do, however, present opportunities for better targeting, with increased potential for effectiveness.
5. Preventing COVID transmission includes, inter alia: social distancing; handwashing; mask wearing; reducing time in indoor spaces; and increasing use of ventilation in indoor spaces. It further incorporates increased vaccine uptake; self-isolation when COVID positive; and self-isolation following exposure to others with COVID. This paper identifies opportunities to inform messaging aimed at the first group of direct behaviours, while it recognises the complementing importance of vaccine uptake, self-isolation behaviours, alongside testing.

OVERVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH FINDINGS

6. Research regarding COVID related behaviours is ongoing, however findings from seven recent studies (including polling) inform this paper, with participants ranging from 12-44 years old.

- Findings show most people report adhering to guidelines most of the time.
- Key challenges voiced by young people regarding transmission-preventative behaviour include:
 - the frustrating impact of others not following the guidelines on social distancing/mask-wearing. Findings from qualitative research with young people aged 12-17 (Fisher et al. 2021) reflect high levels of reported adherence to COVID prevention behaviour, alongside frustration with ongoing restrictions and a perceived lack of adherence visible in others;
 - environmental and social inhibitors of social distancing (environments not being supportive of social distancing/mask-wearing, and closer relationships making distancing more challenging);
 - the physical and psychological impact of long-term social distancing and mask wearing;
 - parents' balancing concerns regarding the psychological impact of distancing versus the physical impact of not distancing, with this now including the physical and social impact of reduced team sport.
 - adherence behaviours are lower in 18-29 year olds than in older groups. Research suggests that motivation to practise social distancing is high, but knowledge of requirements and trust in government are low.
- Findings appeared to show gender differences in nature of social contacts between males and females. Females reported meeting family and friends indoors in small numbers, whereas males met larger groups of friends outdoors.
- **Vaccine Uptake And Vaccine Hesitancy**
 - Research by the Scottish Government concludes that young people felt they had sufficient knowledge about the vaccine and did not appear to have reservations about uptake. This is reflected in findings by Fisher et al. (2021) that indicate a high level of willingness to take up the vaccine, if it were made available. Notably, getting life back to 'normal' (no masks, no disruption to schooling, no restrictions) is a key motivator, along with protecting others.
 - A consistent theme was resistance to pressure to give in and holding on to the right to personal choice.
 - Stated levers for uptake:
 - Seeing fewer cases and side effects after a year
 - Participant's health status becoming compromised
 - More open debate would help them as they currently feel they are being given just one side of the story.
- Findings asserted the importance of communication that does not dictate and instead invites choice.
- **Self-isolating** - research from BIT suggests that throughout the pandemic, young people have been less likely to fully self-isolate than other groups. Because young people are more likely to work in service jobs requiring high levels of social contact, they are also at higher risk of transmitting it to others, and they are the least likely adult age group to be fully vaccinated.

POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS

7. Focus on addressing existing challenges to transmission-preventative behaviour through:

- Messaging that acknowledges desired behaviour and normalises it;
- Messaging that is short, accessible and relatable, from messengers outside of government;
- Making the desired behaviour easier by alleviating financial, practical and social barriers, such as concerns regarding loss of income, knowledge gaps re behavioural alternatives etc.
- Making the desired behaviour more attractive by considering soft incentives tailored to young people, such as Netflix subscriptions, food deliveries or gaming services.
- Simplifying guidance as much as possible, and testing out new forms of communication which require very little attention (e.g. 30 second videos, 1 page 'do's and don'ts').

8. While recognising this takes us into the wider health arena, our research suggests that adherence to transmission-preventative behaviour in this cohort would be strengthened by

- highlighting the significance of the initial few days of self-isolation in countering COVID transmission
- ensuring vaccine invitations reflect autonomy of choice, while asserting GP's endorsement, and incorporating learning regarding levers for countering vaccine hesitancy in messaging (the iLab has already provided behavioural insights input to GP letters promoting vaccine uptake generally).

NEXT STEPS

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Additional references

Adherence to the test, trace, and isolate system in the UK: results from 37 nationally representative surveys | The BMJ

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<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34254057/>

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