

COVID-19 Strategic Intelligence Group

04 January 2021 at Noon – Zoom Video Conference

Present:

Professor Ian Young (Chair)	Chief Scientific Advisor, DoH
Dr Lourda Geoghegan	DCMO, DoH
Dr Naresh Chada	DCMO, DoH
Dr Liz Mitchell	Chair of Contact Tracing Service Steering Group, DoH
Dr Gerry Waldron	Assistant Director of Public Health – Health Protection, PHA
Professor Stuart Elborn	Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor, School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences, QUB
Professor Frank Kee	Centre for Public Health, QUB
Professor Fiona Alderdice	Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford
Professor Duncan Morrow	Director of Civic Engagement & Student Affairs, Ulster University
Dr Stephen Bergin	Assistant Director Public Health – Population Screening, PHA
Dr Declan Bradley	Consultant Public Health Medicine, PHA
Dr Michael Quinn	Head of Clinical Information, HSCB
Jonathan Norwood	DoH (Secretariat)

Apologies:

Professor Diarmuid O'Donovan	Professor of Global Health, Centre for Public Health, QUB
Dr Michael McBride	Chief Medical Officer, DoH
Dr Eugene Mooney	Director of Information and Analysis, DoH
Kieran McAteer	COVID-19 Response, DoH

Welcome, Introductions and Apologies

1. Prof Young welcomed all participants back to the meeting.

- Apologies were as noted.

- Previous minutes were accepted.
- The following action was reviewed:

ACTION: Prof Young to send papers on to TEO to share with taskforce to help with messaging.

Action Complete.

ACTION: PHA to share epidemiological data with CMO regarding Mid and East Antrim and Causeway Coast and Glens to help intervene in these two areas.

Action Complete.

ACTION: Dr Geoghegan to share paper with PHA and Education Cell marked OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE.

Action Complete.

Status Update

2. Prof Young updated the Group on the current state of the epidemic:

- Numbers have risen in line with the upper end of modelling projections.
- $R_t = 1.8$
- Test demand has increased.
- Positivity > 20%.
- Expectation is to see the impact of post-Christmas restrictions this week and case numbers are expected to rise further.
- Hospital admissions are beginning to increase.
- Expectation is to see hospital admissions peaking in 10 days' time given the increasing case numbers in over 60s. Therefore, bed occupancy expected to peak at the end of January.
- A vaccination programme update from SAGE is expected in the next few weeks.
- Vaccination programme impact on pressures will not be felt until March at the earliest.
- The new variant was discussed: RoI have reported 10% new variant prevalence and Scotland reports 40%.
- Behaviour messages must be emphasised at vaccination clinics. This will become

more important as vaccination rolls out.

- Rol have had a dramatic rise in cases and exceeded testing capacity. The situation in other European countries was discussed.
- Potential additional restrictions were discussed including churches, schools, hotels, weddings and funerals. Contact tracing has reported clusters around hotels during weddings.
- Students' return was discussed and risk reduction is being considered at respective universities. Queen's are returning essential students only such as nurse, medical and dental students.
- The 'Working from Home' message requires strengthening; the TEO taskforce is leading on enforcement and announcements are expected imminently.
- Mobility data will be reviewed to better understand the situation this week.
- Impacts of the current restrictions will not be felt for a couple of weeks; the position we are in currently is from the mixing during the Christmas period.
- The SAGE view is to keep schools closed.

Optimising the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme for Maximum Short-term Impact (Paper 5)

- Prof Young wanted to discuss Paper 5 earlier in the agenda and asked for comments on the paper:
- The group had a discussion around delaying of the second vaccine dose to give more individuals a first dose. SAGE has advised that delaying the second dose is the optimum strategy.
- There were no contrary views to this from the group and there was recognition to how complex this is.; this is a massive operational and logistical challenge.
- There being no further comments, the paper was noted.

Impact of Children and Schools on Transmission (Paper 2)

3. Prof Young asked for comments on the paper:

- The new variant is equally transmissible to everyone and does not target children specifically.
- The paper summarises data around the impacts of schools and children on

transmission.

- There being no further comments, the paper was noted.

Possible Impact of the COVID-19 Vaccination Programme on Adherence to Rules and Guidance (Paper 3)

Factors Influencing COVID-19 Vaccine Uptake among Minority Ethnic Groups (Paper 4)

4. Prof Young apologised and left the meeting and Dr Chada chaired. He asked for comments on the two papers on vaccination:

- Prof Kee reflected on the high vaccine hesitancy in Black and Caribbean communities; what is Northern Ireland's proportions of minorities? There is a lot of work ongoing to better understand behaviours within ethnic minority groups. There is also low uptake in Romani and Eastern European pregnant women. How can we ensure maximum uptake?
- Data capture was discussed particularly around those refusing uptake and data should be collected to gain a better understanding.
- Prof Alderdice emphasised the importance of collecting information regarding anti-vaxxers and their associated behaviours.
- Dr Quinn discussed the complexities of ethnicity recording.
- A vaccine survey was discussed and PHA are monitoring local social media regarding anti-vaxxers.
- PHA are monitoring mass media campaigns and a recent survey included questions around vaccination.
- There being no further comments, the papers were noted.

AOB

5. Dr Chada invited members to raise any further items for discussion and as there was no further business, the meeting closed.

Date of Next Meeting

6. The next meeting will be on Monday 11 January 2021 at noon via Zoom.