

COVID-19 Strategic Intelligence Group

12.00 pm – 14 September 2020 - Zoom Video Conference

Present:

Professor Ian Young (Chair)	Chief Scientific Advisor, DOH
Dr Michael McBride	Chief Medical Officer, DOH
Dr Naresh Chada	DCMO, DOH
Dr Lourda Geoghegan	DCMO, DOH
Kieran McAteer	COVID-19 Response, DoH
Dr. Liz Mitchell	Chair of Contact Tracing Service Steering Group, DoH
Professor Hugo Van Woerden	Director of Public Health, PHA
Dr Declan Bradley	Consultant Public Health Medicine, PHA
Professor Frank Kee	Centre for Public Health, QUB
Professor Diarmuid O'Donovan	Centre for Public Health, QUB
Professor Stuart Elborn	Faculty Pro-Vice-Chancellor, School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences. QUB
Dr. Michael Quinn	Head of Clinical Information, HSCB
Tricia Lavery	DOH (Secretariat)

Apologies

Dr Gerry Waldron	Asst. Director of Public Health (Health Protection) PHA
Professor Cathy Gormley-Heenan	Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Impact), Ulster University
Professor Fiona Alderdice	Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford

Welcome

1. Prof Young welcomed all participants to the meeting.

1.1. Prof. Young confirmed that all were content with the note of the last meeting

- 1.2. There were no outstanding actions to be reviewed.

Status Update

1. Prof Young provided an update to the group on the current state of the epidemic.
 - 1.1. The 7 day average of new cases has risen to around 90 cases per day. Whilst this figure has stabilised over the past few days, the current issues with testing capacity may have impacted on this.
 - 1.2. The volume of tests per thousand of the population has risen 5-fold whilst the number of positive cases has risen 20-fold. Hence we see the rise in test positivity rate, which has been rising progressively since early July and is now approaching 2%.
 - 1.3. The level of 14 day incidence per 100K of population last week continued to rise sharply and the levels in NI are significantly higher than the rest of the UK and also RoI.
 - 1.4. Both the numbers of hospital admissions and of hospital inpatients dipped last week but have begun to rise again in the last few days, and therefore the estimate of R when calculated tomorrow is likely to be close to 1 or slightly over. This may reflect the fact that the level of cases in the over 60s age group was running at around 8% but has risen over the weekend to around 15%. This rise may be due to the start of a slight uptick in hospital inpatients, however levels remain slow and still somewhat stable.
 - 1.5. The 7 day number of cases per 100K of the population by postcode shows, as of 10pm on Sunday 13 September, a total of 20 postcodes where level are over 40, and of those 20, 6 postcodes are over 80 cases per 100K population. The level are very high and certainly in the case of the BT43 postcode area can no longer be linked to the outbreak in the Meat Plant outbreak in that area.
 - 1.6. Other areas in the UK which have been subject to local restrictions have had levels of 50 and above per 100K of population. The Executive last week took the decision to introduce local restrictions in postcodes where cases per 100K population were at 80 or above, and in the cases of Belfast to apply these to the entire Greater Belfast LGD area.
 - 1.7. There is very little evidence that any more than a small number of these cases are associated with known clusters and in general they are attributable to either household transmission or community transmission. This means it is very difficult to identify where the transmission originated and so the focus, in the first instance, has been on limiting interactions between households. It is planned that these figures will be provided twice a week from the Modelling Group and the Department is giving consideration to publishing these figures in an attempt to improve public understanding. Published postcodes would be those areas over 80 and currently under local restriction, and also those over 40 to give the public a sense of whether or not they are in an area of risk.

- 1.8. No firm decision has been reached as yet on when restrictions should be reduced and removed and the views of this group would be welcomed on this issue. One possible option would be to wait to see the 7 day incidence level in a postcode fall below 40 and remain so for at least a week.

Paper 2: Higher Education Paper - FOR REVIEW - 01092020

2. Prof Young presented the paper which is the now final version of the previously-considered Higher Education paper.
 - 2.1. This is primarily for the universities and has also been shared with the Further Education Sector.
 - 2.2. There have been a lot of questions and political interest around the universities restarting and both QUB and UU have put a huge amount of effort into preparations for this.
 - 2.3. Prof. Elborn commented that it is a very useful paper and discussions continue with the Higher and Further Education colleges which will continue on a regular basis to bring coherence across the colleges and the universities. As there will potentially be 40,000 students living in Belfast, it is hoped to meet with Belfast City Council to discuss plans for a multi-agency approach to consider the off-campus activities of students which is currently a cause for concern. There also needs to be some consideration given to those students who do not live on campus and who return home each day.
 - 2.4. There being no further comments the paper was noted.

Paper 3: Adherence to the test, trace and isolate system

3. Prof Young presented the paper which is the CORSAIR study into the rates of adherence to the UK's test, trace and isolate system over
 - 3.1. In essence the message is that there is poor compliance with a range of elements of self-isolation in relation to Test, Trace Protect. This is not NI data and there is a limited confidence that it would not apply to NI.
 - 3.2. Observations around use of face-coverings tend to identify significant demographic differences and probably social deprivation in terms of adherence to their use.
 - 3.3. There are some suggestions around targeted messaging which PHA colleagues may wish to consider.
 - 3.4. There being no further comments the paper was noted.

Paper 4: ICJU European uptick - 09092020

4. Prof Young presented the paper which is from the International Comparisons Joint Unit and is mainly for noting.

- 4.1. Whilst it may be useful to carry out some quantitative analysis to explore further what is going on in the different countries, it is extremely difficult to determine any particular patterns and there are also significant cultural differences across the countries, even just across Europe, which are likely to impact on the success of different measures. This all needs to also take into account behaviours, the amount of testing and how data is collected and recorded etc. so there are no clear lessons to be learned at this stage.

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

Paper 5: SPI-M-O Statement on population case detection sent to SAGE - 09092020

5. Prof Young presented the paper which is helpful in terms of discussions around the “Moon-shot programme” around testing and the proposal to aim to move to 10 million tests per day across the UK at some point in early 2021, and to offer testing in a wide range of settings with very rapid turnaround times.

- 5.1. There are some very interesting technologies emerging including Mass Spectrometry which is promising results in a few seconds and is a potential topic for discussion at the Expert Testing Group.

- 5.2. It is understood that there is currently a project running between UU and QUB on the use of Mass Spectrometry in detecting COVID but as the technology is not very portable, this remains theoretical at this stage. There is also believed to be a pilot underway at a London railway station. Prof. Elborn agreed to ask colleagues to produce a short paper on this for consideration by members of this group.

ACTION: Prof. Elborn to ask colleagues to produce a short paper on this for consideration by members of this group.

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

Paper 6: NERVTAG immunity update - 02092020

6. Prof Young presented the paper which is a useful scientific update on immunity.

- 6.1. There is increasing awareness that immunity, at least for some people, is not likely to persist for more than a few months. There are still uncertainties around the likely severity of any second or subsequent episode of COVID and in addition uncertainty around how long average immunity persists, the role of T-cell factors vs antibodies

and the extent to which there may be T-cell immunity in the population.

6.2. There being no further comments the paper was noted.

Paper 7: MHCLG Housing Impacts Summary Paper

7. Prof Young presented the paper which aims to better understand the role of multiple-occupancy housing in transmission and how it might be mitigated.

7.1. There is general awareness of the dangers of multiple-occupancy housing, particularly in relation to some of the ethnic populations and also some of the student population.

7.2. There being no further comments the paper was noted.

Paper 8: Asymptomatic proportion - SAGE - 10092020

8. Prof Young presented the paper which looks at the proportion of cases currently asymptomatic.

8.1. The asymptomatic proportion is currently considered to be one-third of all cases, which is the number the Modelling Group have been using, albeit with significant variation.

8.2. The discussion of paucisymptomatic individuals who exhibit only mild clinical symptoms is helpful in understanding some of the discrepancies in the literature.

8.3. There being no further comments the paper was noted.

Paper 9: EMG-Re-use of PPE - Exec Summary 09092020

9. Prof Young presented the paper which has come up before when there were some shortages in PPE.

9.1. Dr. Geoghegan commented that, whilst NI did not always have large PPE stocks, at no time was NI in the position of having acute shortages of PPE as was the case in England at times and the guidance issued in April on the re-use of PPE was not guidance that was applied in NI.

Prof. Young agreed to pass this paper on to Rodney Morton, Director of Nursing in the PHA who previously chaired a group around the availability of PPE across NI.

ACTION: Prof. Young to pass the paper on re-use of PPE on to Rodney Morton, Director of Nursing in the PHA who previously chaired a group around the availability of PPE across NI.

9.2. There being no further comments the paper was noted.

Paper 10: SPI-M-O statement on gatherings FINAL - 19082020

10. Prof Young presented the paper which has been passed on to Karen Pearson, TEO for distribution to those sectors who may be considering or planning for the future commencement of large gatherings.

10.1. The messaging in the paper is helpful as are the considerations. At present there is nothing in the NI regulations to prevent large gatherings which are planned and indeed the Cookstown 100 event took place at the weekend with 2000 spectators, a report on which is anticipated soon.

10.2. There have not been any large indoor gatherings in NI as yet, but these considerations may be important if such events are planned for the future.

10.3. There being no further comments the paper was noted.

AOB

11. Prof. Young invited members to raise any further items for discussion.

11.1. There being no further business the meeting closed.

Date of next meeting

12. The next meeting will be on Monday 21 September at 12pm and will be via Zoom video conference.