

NI COVID 19 Modelling Group Conference Call – 8 September 2020

Attendees

Ian Young DoH (Chairperson)
Paul McWilliams SIB
Janice Bailie PHA
Declan Bradley PHA
Magda Bucholc UU
Adele Marshall QUB
Rob Brisk CAH
Paul Montgomery DoH

Key issues discussed

Update

- Following a temporary plateau, the 7 day average for new Covid-19 cases has started to rise again and is currently above 90 per day. The number of cases per 100,000 population is currently in the mid 30's for NI- significantly higher than the rate (20) required for international travel restrictions. Although this is in part due to an increase in the number of tests there has been a steady increase in the % of tests with a positive result for Covid-19 since July with a spike in recent days (7 day average just under 2%).
- However, while the number of Covid-19 hospital admissions had also been on an upward trend since July, it has fallen since the end of August which was now being reflected in the 7 day average for the number of Covid-19 hospital in-patients.
- There was a discussion about the potential reasons for the number of cases and hospital admissions to be moving in opposite directions. Although there are a number of possible explanations, such as cases being predominantly amongst younger people and an increased resistance to virus, the most likely reason is that NI is currently in a lag period before the increase in cases feeds through into a significant rise in hospital admissions.
- The divergence in trends is reflected in the significant difference in the ranges of the latest estimates of R for cases (1.1-1.4) and hospital admissions (0.3-0.9). Ian advised the group that he had previously used a composite of the ranges of the estimates of R for cases and in-patients which would result in an overall range of 0.3-1.4. Although there was concern that this did not reflect the spread of the virus currently, Ian indicated that it was important to adopt a consistent approach, along with appropriate explanation, when advising Ministers.
- In terms of the number of cases per 100,000 population by Local Government District (LGD) over the past 7 days, Ian indicated that there remained significant variation. Belfast has the highest rate at 60 per 100,000 which compares with

55 for Caerphilly which recently announced major restrictions on household contacts. At postcode level the variations were even more stark with BT29 having over 300 cases per 100,000 population in part due to an outbreak in Crumlin.

- However, Ian highlighted that it had not been possible to link the large majority of new cases to existing clusters. While recognising the complexities involved in tracking cases, there was a discussion about the need for the capacity and approach adopted by the tracking and tracing service to be improved as a matter of urgency. At the current time, it was felt that the service was not able to identify the source of cases in order to inform decisions on the appropriate targeted interventions. It was also noted that testing was almost at full capacity with the need to focus resources.
- There were a number of options that Ministers could adopt in response to the rise in cases. These include waiting for an increase in hospital admissions, as well as targeted restrictions on particular areas, activities and/or at risk groups. It was recognised that any decision would also need to take account of the wider social/economic costs. However, the scope to reflect other factors would reduce as the number of Covid-19 cases increases.

AOB

- Adele Marshall provided an update in respect of the Joint Biosecurity Centre 4 Nations meeting she attended with the role of the group being to make sure that the modelling analysis represents the position in NI, Wales, Scotland and England. The focus of the initial meeting was on the available data, including the need for local intelligence.