

NI COVID 19 Modelling Group Conference Call – 29 December 2020

Attendees

Ian Young DoH (Chairperson)
Paul McWilliams SIB
Adele Marshall QUB
Frank Kee QUB
Stephen Bergin PHA
Paul Montgomery DoH

Key issues discussed

Update (Note- full data not available over Christmas period)

- Ian indicated that the trajectory of the virus in NI over the Christmas period had been in line with expectations. In particular, there had been a large reduction in the number of tests requested for some days which were now rising again. This was seen in the number of positive cases which had been as low as around 200 but was expected to be around 1,500 today, representing the highest daily figure on record. The daily positivity rate had risen above 20% on certain days in the past week as only those with the severest symptoms came forward for a test.
- There is limited information on how prevalent the new variant is in NI with only 4 cases being confirmed to date. Although a recent ONS study, reported in the media, had suggested that around half of positive cases in NI related to the new variant Ian highlighted that this was based on a small sample size that was not reliable. There would be little further indication of the presence of the new variant in NI for the next few weeks until additional genomic sequencing takes place. Paul McWilliams noted that 50 of the new cases in NI have been in respect of individuals who had recently arrived from the rest of the UK.
- The highest number of cases per 100,000 population over the past week was in the Derry & Strabane Local Government District (LGD) which had almost doubled to around 400. The lowest rate of around 145 was in the Ards & North Down LGD, although this also represented a significant increase.
- Although the number of hospital inpatients with Covid-19 is currently at its highest level since late November this was mainly due to reduced discharges rather than increased admissions. However, the increase in case numbers in recent weeks would be expected to start having an impact on admissions next week.
- The number of positive cases for those aged 60 and over is growing at a slower rate than for the rest of the population. Going forward, the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine has been rolled out to all care homes (with up to 90% immunity after 10-14 days) whilst the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine is expected to be approved in the coming days to be offered to the over 80s in the community from the start of January.

- The group agreed that the latest estimate of the R number is above 1 and between 1.4-1.8 for cases (1.05-1.25 last week). The R number based on hospital admissions was agreed as 1.0-1.2 (1.0-1.2 last week).
- It was stressed that there was significant uncertainty in respect of the future trajectory of the virus. Ian indicated that daily case numbers could rise to 4,000 (with positivity of 20-30%), although he hoped that they might be kept to below 3,000. Stephen Bergin referred to the ongoing programme to train more contact tracing staff which would have the capacity to handle 2,000-3,000 cases per day.
- In response to a request from the Department of Health for updated modelling of inpatient numbers, it was agreed that a reasonable scenario would be for the R number to remain at 1.4-1.8 for 2 weeks before reducing to 0.8-1.0 as the latest restrictions took effect.
- This does not take account of the potential impact of the new variant first identified in the south-east of England. Ian advised that the increased transmissibility of this variant of the virus is due to biological rather than behavioural factors. In particular, it has a higher binding capacity which results in a higher dose of the virus, leading to more of the virus being excreted. The view continues to be that this variant does not have more severe symptoms or increased probability of reinfection. It was noted that there was more uncertainty in respect of the variant first identified in South Africa.