

Message

From: Ben Warner [nobody@invalid.invalid]
Sent: 21/01/2021 08:32:02
To: Elizabeth.Perelman [elizabeth.perelman@hmtreasury.gov.uk]; [NR] HMT (OFF-SEN)
[NR]@hmtreasury.gov.uk
Subject: Re: Readout: COVID strategy meeting

Hi Folks,

I note in this readout

'CX was also keen that in future discussions, we run through the model in more detail, setting out the key assumptions, and running out beyond the Spring.'

This is the model that I was very concerned about having undue prominence to yesterday. There is no point in running through **this specific** model in detail, it is a very simple model which will not reflect reality. If we used this model to make decisions, we would end up with some very odd conclusions.

If we edit the sentence to this:

'CX was also keen that in future discussions, we run through our quantitative predictions in more detail, setting out the key assumptions plus uncertainties and running out beyond the Spring.'

Then I think CX is completely right.

If you could let me know what CX's major worries or questions are, then I will work on ensuring that we have the best possible answers.

As always, if I can be helpful let me know.

Regards,
Ben

From: Imran Shafi <Ishafi@no10.gov.uk>
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Cc: PM Private Office Support Team - Internal [redacted] I&S [redacted]@no10.gov.uk>

Subject: Readout: COVID strategy meeting

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Hi all,

Many thanks to the taskforce for preparing the covid strategy meeting this evening with the PM and CX, and for CMO/CSA for joining.

James Bowler opened, noting that we may be at the peak of cases, with admissions and then deaths falling in due course. We were however, at very high levels (15k more in hospital than the previous peak) – the question would be how far we needed prevalence, deaths and occupancy to fall before we begin to increase pressures on R. We currently did not know the gradient of the downslope of cases. It took two months for the first wave to fall from 19k admissions to 5k; vaccinations could speed this up, the new variant could apply upward pressure.

We needed to decide on schools by the 8th latest. If we can do this earlier, that would be better.

We discussed the efficacy of the vaccine. CMO's view was that it would have different efficacy on preventing deaths, significant disease, symptomatic cases and transmission (with decreasing levels of impact as you work through that list). Take-up would be critical – we needed to do everything we could to reach out to those in hard-to-reach groups who otherwise might not be able to take an informed decision. The moral question regarding those who have taken an informed choice not to take the vaccine would be different to those who have not been able to take an informed choice.

The PM was concerned that assumptions on the vaccine may be over-optimistic. It may be overtaken by a new variant, or have lower efficacy, and cases could surge. CMO's view was that he was very confident that with this particular virus we would not see a repeat of Spring 2020; the NHS was much better with treating this virus now, and we had medicines as well as vaccines (including starting the work to develop vaccines to tackle variants). CSA noted that the probability of new mutations are higher the higher prevalence is, which would point to pushing prevalence down as low as you can subject to other constraints. Whilst the virus may evolve in response to vaccine pressure, this was likely not as big an issue as it theoretically could be.

We discussed the latest figures on compliance. Current behaviours on mobility were pretty positive given what we were asking people to do. However, as individuals (and their relatives) were vaccinated, there was a significant risk of drop-off.

Henry noted that we need to press the NHS on a target for when we will vaccinate cohorts 5-9 – the PM agreed. Please can TF/Will M work out how to bring this to a forthcoming vaccine meeting.

We discussed the question on schools. The PM noted this was not a decision-making meeting, whilst noting the clear risks of opening too early. He wanted to look at options where we might have some children returning on 22 Feb, but wanted to understand what the impact on the path of the virus would be in this situation (including what testing support would be available). James Slack noted that we must avoid opening and then closing schools to any additional cohorts, to which the PM agreed.

The PM was keen to understand when we will get further information that guides his choices. Following the meeting, we agreed with CMO that we would get a list of dates setting out by when we will get further data points on the key metrics. CX was also keen that in future discussions, we run through the model in more detail, setting out the key assumptions, and running out beyond the Spring. CMO and CSA both stated that the model would not be able to provide a precise steer on numbers though it could show trends.

Taskforce – let’s discuss next steps tomorrow once we’ve had chance to reflect. We will need to ensure the Health Secretary/CDL are briefed on this work, and support potential conversations with them and, pertinent to schools, the Education Secretary next week for decisions.

Thanks,

Imran

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