

# SPI-M-O: Consensus Statement on COVID-19

*Date: 28<sup>th</sup> July 2021*

All probability statements are in line with the framework given in the Annex.

## Examination of recent trends

1. The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in England rapidly increased for several weeks, with the growth rate increasing further in the week commencing 12<sup>th</sup> July. However, since hitting a peak on 16<sup>th</sup> July<sup>1</sup>, there has been a sharp downward trend in this metric. It is too early to have clearly seen the full effect of changes in social distancing measures on 19<sup>th</sup> July.
2. Cases peaked in Scotland on 30<sup>th</sup> June, and a drop in admissions has followed indicating that the drop in cases reflected a true drop in infections.
3. The epidemic in Wales has followed a similar trajectory to that of England, whereas the peak in cases in Northern Ireland appears to have happened later.
4. In England, it is too early to have seen any drop in hospital admissions that would be expected to follow a fall in infections implied by the trend in cases. Cases in England peaked on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021 but a clear drop in positivity in England in the Community Infection Survey was first visible in the data published on 22<sup>nd</sup> January. Similarly, a clear decline in ONS Community Infection Survey positivity in Scotland was not seen until the data that are due to be published on 30<sup>th</sup> July. We would therefore not expect to see a drop in ONS Community Infection Survey positivity for at least another week.
5. The change in trajectory has been both sudden and extremely homogeneous across England. The Gini coefficient<sup>2</sup> for cases across local authorities is at its lowest ever value since the start of the UK epidemic – this epidemic has never been so spatially homogenous. For that reason, it is highly unlikely that the change from sustained, rapid growth to a sharp decline in cases has been the result of increased immunity following an additional week of vaccines and infections.
6. Test positivity has dropped, as well as the total number of cases, suggesting that the rapid decrease in confirmed cases is not solely due to changes in test-seeking behaviour. Pillar 2 positivity has dropped most rapidly in men; in 20-39 year olds; and in local authorities

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<sup>1</sup> As measured by the seven-day average

<sup>2</sup> The Gini coefficient is a statistical measure of the degree of variation represented in a set of values

with a higher proportion of residents who identify as White British. There is no clear pattern in how the number of positive tests has changed in local authorities with different Index of Multiple Deprivation deciles.

7. SPI-M-O are confident that the current epidemic transition from growth to decline is not solely due to vaccination and infection reducing the number of susceptible people. If this were the case, we would expect:
  - The transition to be a gradual one; and
  - Local variations in vaccine uptake and natural immunity to cause the epidemic to peak at different times in different places.
8. SPI-M-O cannot rule out any of the following having caused the recent drop in cases:
  - Schools closing for summer holidays. In Scotland, where the summer holidays started towards the end of June, we saw an earlier, similar pattern of a rapid increase in cases followed by a rapid decrease.
  - Changes in behaviour during and following the Euro 2020 football matches.
  - The recent period of warm weather.
  - A large proportion of the active population isolating as a result of being identified as a contact of a case. This will have caused there to be fewer susceptible people (“susceptible thinning”), particularly focussed upon high risk settings.
9. It is of note that the first three of these have happened at a similar time, making it likely that a combination of each of them is responsible for the recent change.
10. Current behaviours (including widespread home working), summer conditions, isolation policies and school holidays are sufficient in combination with current levels of immunity to result in the number of cases dropping. As each of these behaviours relax, the reproduction number will increase. If this is not offset by additional vaccinations, the epidemic will start to increase again.

### Annex: PHIA framework of language for discussing probabilities

