

UKHSA Advisory Board

Title of paper COVID-19 Lessons Identified
Date Wednesday 19 July 2023
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1. Purpose of the paper

1.1 The purpose of the paper is to update the Advisory Board on UKHSA work to date on identifying lessons from COVID-19 and other recent incidents. It also asks the Board to consider UKHSA's organisational learning and how assurance processes might be developed to demonstrate learning from these lessons and that actions are being monitored and implemented.

2. Recommendation

2.1 The Advisory Board is asked to:

- a) **NOTE** the existing work being carried out by different teams on identifying and implementing lessons from COVID-19 and other incidents.
- b) **COMMENT** on developing proposals for an organisation-wide learning and an assurance model for collating, analysing and implementing lessons identified from COVID-19 and other incidents.

3. Background

3.1 UKHSA is a new organisation and as such, identifying and implementing lessons has formed a central part of UKHSA's creation and remains key to UKHSA's ongoing evolution as we continue to build our capabilities to tackle current and future health threats. This will include reflecting learnings identified through the UK COVID-19 Public Inquiry.

3.2 From the outset of the COVID-19 response in early 2020, Public Health England (PHE), NHS Test & Trace (T&T) and subsequently UKHSA initiated a multi-modality programme of lessons identification activity. PHE incident response cells conducted rolling improvement/lessons identification discussions which were recorded and tracked to support response interventions.

3.3 Debriefs, surveys and internal audits during the main phases of the response identified further tactical and strategic successes and challenges. A comprehensive repository of lessons identified has been collated during the period and now forms the basis of formal lessons identified activity in UKHSA.

3.4 UKHSA is committed to being a learning organisation, focused on continuous improvement. An internal assurance process for lessons identified within UKHSA is currently being developed to monitor and report on implementation of technical,

structural, operational and cultural lessons that have been identified both prior to and during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

3.5 Lessons activity undertaken as part of exercises and wash ups from all routine incidents, including investigation of Serious Untoward Incidents and potential Serious Untoward Incidents also forms the basis of UKHSA's learning processes, but is not within the scope of this paper which focuses on COVID-19 related lessons.

4. Roles and Responsibilities

4.1 The whole organisation has responsibility for continuous improvement and setting a learning culture. There are teams with specific roles and activities to ensure lessons are identified and learned from incidents.

4.2 **Incident management and response lessons** are led by Health Protection Operations including UKHSA's National Response Centre and Emergency Preparedness and Response functions. Recommendations from internal reviews such as Project Ready to Respond are helping inform UKHSA's capability and capacity planning for future health threats.

4.3 **High-level strategic and organisational learnings** identified as part of the COVID-19 Public Inquiry response are being taken forward by Strategy division. These lessons strengthen UKHSA as an organisation, how it fits into the domestic and global health system and how it best delivers its mission across local, regional and national Government

4.4 **Pandemic preparedness lessons** are coordinated by the Centre for Pandemic Preparedness (CPP). A repository of over 1,900 lessons identified collated from 190+ evidence sources, collected from across UKHSA and its predecessor organisations (PHE, T&T and Joint Biosecurity Centre), NHS England, the department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), devolved administrations, local councils and testing sites, as well as other government departments. Informs the Pandemic Preparedness Portfolio workstreams (delivered jointly with DHSC).

4.5 **Scientific, clinical and technical lessons** are being led by UKHSA's Science, Clinical and Public Health and Data Analytics and Surveillance groups. Examples include COVID-19 focused assessments on settings, outbreaks, enduring transmission and variants, alongside threat assessments, data access, knowledge management and lessons from UKHSA's overall continuation to the public health response.

5. Identified themes

5.1 Based on the lessons identified work of UKHSA and its predecessor organisations outlined above, supplemented by reflections from past and current senior leaders involved in the pandemic, we have outlined several preliminary lessons outlined below, that are also summarised as part of the Module 2 response.

- **Planning for future health threats** needs to ensure the recognised all-hazards approach in practice gives proportionate consideration and capacity to cover all transmission routes, including new and emerging disease, radiological, chemical, nuclear and environmental.
- There is a need to **ensure adequate resourcing of public health capacity** and infrastructure so that the UK has the capabilities required to secure health

and to rapidly scale sufficient capacity to mount the required initial response while mobilising broader resources to scale up further as needed.

- Having **established or pre-agreed cross-government coordination and decision-making mechanisms** capable of handling an incident of the scale of COVID-19
- Appropriate **mechanisms and agreements on data sharing** combined with the necessary skills and culture of collaboratively sharing data should be a priority for government to enable better outcomes and will be important in both peacetime and in the face of a future pandemic.
- The **critical importance of consideration of health inequalities** across all of its work, and in planning for future health threats and pandemics, including how services can be designed to reach the most vulnerable first.
- The **scientific capabilities of UKHSA need to be better understood and supported as part of national critical infrastructure**, maintaining in-country capability to surge sufficient laboratory and genomics capacity through maintenance of partnerships developed during the pandemic

5.2

The Centre for Pandemic Preparedness is working with partners in Government to understand evaluations of COVID-19 policies and lessons exercises. These lessons are being used to inform the key topics of interest that make up our Pandemic Preparedness Portfolio and in supporting the public inquiry team. Examples of some of the lessons emerging in different capability workstreams include:

- **Surveillance** – the need for multidisciplinary, collaborative working and a range of data sets needed upfront within surveillance to ensure high resolution analysis and risk assessment
- **Diagnostics** – the importance of defining strategy and planning to surge diagnostic capacity, including prioritisation as we scale and securing the resilience of our supply chain
- **R&D and advice** – ensuring research and evidence underpins policy and practice through rapid processes, early dissemination of initial results, pre-prints and observational studies
- **Medicines** – establishing the right investment, infrastructure and relationships with the market for development of broad- spectrum antivirals which would allow us to mount an immediate response to a future novel pathogen. Noting this an area that UKHSA will be leading jointly with DHSC.
- **Communications & guidance** – setting up the communication structures for regular, consistent engagement with a range of partners and networks

6. Current work/next steps

6.1 UKHSA's development of our 3-year Strategic Plan, supported by our Science Strategy, along with the development of Data, People, Health Equity and Global Health strategies all underpin our commitment to continuous improvement based on learnings to date. UKHSA has also recently conducted an internal review of our readiness to respond across the health system to several scenarios, including challenges related to lessons from the COVID-19 response, along with enhancing the resilience and scalability of national and local health protection systems in partnership with NHSE and local and regional partners.

6.2 The ability to recruit, develop, and retain high-calibre people across our fields of expertise is key to implementing lessons. We are strengthening our capabilities by investing in our people, developing exciting career paths that are complimented

by an attractive employee value proposition. Additionally, UKHSA is making demonstrable progress in maturing our accountability processes, governance structures and controls resulting from lessons identified from COVID-19 and predecessor organisations.

- 6.3 Plans are being developed to set up a tracking and assurance process to ensure lessons are being actioned. Lessons need to be iterative and UKHSA will continue to ensure new sources are reflected, especially as the COVID-19 Inquiry and the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee progress.
- 6.4 The UK COVID-19 Inquiry has organised its work into modules, enabling it to issue reports and make recommendations as the Inquiry progresses. The Inquiry has indicated that the reports on Module 1, which examines pandemic preparedness and resilience, and Module 2, which examines government decision-making during the pandemic, will be published during 2024.
- 6.5 Both reports are likely to make recommendations directed to UKHSA and it is likely that the Inquiry will ask us to state publicly what action we intend to take in response to their recommendations. This process will continue as the Inquiry publishes the reports for modules 3-6, as well as for any other modules added to the Inquiry programme. We will consider the reports findings and make a recommendation to the Executive Committee on how we will do this in the autumn.
- 6.6 The House of Commons Science, Innovation and Technology Committee (chaired by Greg Clarke MP) is currently leading an inquiry into emerging diseases, examining what could be the next pandemic and learnings from COVID-19. On 21 June, Dr Meera Chand represented UKHSA providing evidence on Avian Influenza. She was questioned on lessons learned from COVID-19 surveillance and technology, to which she directed the inquiry to the CPP's work to enhance design of surveillance which will be informed by lessons from the pandemic. Jenny Harries is also expected to be asked to provide oral evidence to the final session of the inquiry after parliamentary recess which will explore the 'One Health approach'.

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Strategy, Policy and Programmes

July 2023