



Minutes of SPI-M meeting: 5 May 2023

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Meeting details

The meeting was held on 5 May from 10.15am to 11.30am on Microsoft Teams.

The co-chairs were Graham Medley (academic chair) and Thomas Waite (executive chair).

Attendees

From the Scientific Pandemic Infections group on Modelling (SPI-M):

- Daniela De Angelis
- Declan Bradley
- Ellen Brooks Pollock
- Louise Dyson
- John Edmunds
- Jessica Enright
- Thomas Finnie
- Christophe Fraser
- Julia Gog

- Michael Gravenor
- Ian Hall
- Thomas House
- Rowland Kao
- Matt Keeling
- Adam Kucharski
- Steven Riley
- Chris Robertson
- Nicholas Watkins
- Christopher Williams

Additional participants for first substantive agenda item:

- Luca Ferretti
- Michelle Kendall

Observers:

- John Bates (Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC))
- Tom Beattie (UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA))
- Morwenna Carrington (DHSC)
- Fergus Cumming (UKHSA)
- Sarah Deeny (UKHSA)
- Johanna Hutchinson (UKHSA)
- Harry Mayhew (UKHSA)
- Max Nicholson (Cabinet Office)
- Charlie Sammut (UKHSA)

- Heather Stevens (Northern Irish Government)
- Richard Vipond (UKHSA)

There were an additional 6 observers whose names have been redacted as well as 8 members of the secretariat.

Participant apologies:

- Marc Baguelin
- Paul Birrell
- Andre Charlett
- Neil Ferguson

Introduction

The chairs welcomed John Bates, who has recently joined as the deputy director for the wider Health Protection Analysis team that the SPI-M Secretariat is part of.

The chairs reminded participants that the 2 sets of minutes from previous meetings have been circulated to the committee. They asked the committee to send any comments to the secretariat by email.

The chairs reminded participants to share the details for relevant contacts from their institutions for the purposes of data processing arrangements with UKHSA if they haven't yet done so.

Social gatherings paper

A draft of a paper on the impact of social gatherings on disease outbreaks during the pandemic was circulated prior to the meeting. The topic was identified in a previous committee meeting in part due to the attention large events attracted at the start of the pandemic in early 2020.

The committee was given an overview of the paper. Current evidence shows there is no one-size-fits-all approach to events; this paper summarises some of the factors that determine the degree of risk of a particular event.

The authors introduced a 4-type classification for events based on differing characteristics which may impact transmission. The authors noted most of the currently available evidence in academic literature is focused on global mass gatherings; the paper therefore does not cover these in detail. Hence, the main focus of this paper is national and local mass gatherings.

The committee suggested additional characteristics to consider, such as whether the event lasted multiple days and the impact of multiple staggered gatherings within the same event. The committee also considered potential limitations of the data used as evidence. The chairs noted that a policy steer on how the paper could be used would be helpful in informing its content.

The committee noted the uncertainty in behaviour changes and alternative outcomes should mass gatherings be restricted instead of being held under risk-mitigating measures.

The chairs thanked the authors for their work on this paper, including Dr Michelle Kendall and Dr Luca Ferretti, who are not regular participants in SPI-M. They noted it would be useful to circulate the paper within UKHSA and to relevant people in pandemic preparedness work areas.

ACTION: SPI-M Secretariat to collate comments made by SPI-M participants during the meeting and share with the authors of this paper.

UKHSA update - data, analytics and surveillance

UKHSA gave a presentation on the current updates within the Data, Analysis and Surveillance directorate which are relevant to the committee's work.

UKHSA acknowledged that SPI-M is an important part of the science community, and would like to continue the relationship between SPI-M, DHSC and UKHSA.

The committee suggested possible improvements to the ways of working between UKHSA and the academic community, including the scope of work academics are asked to provide, knowledge sharing both in the field of disease dynamics and data science, as well as further partnership and funding opportunities between both individuals and institutions.

The committee noted it would be important to consider the sustainability of the ways of working and lessons learned should an outbreak occur once current participants have moved on from the committee.

ACTION: UKHSA to lead on future sessions related to shaping the partnership between UKHSA and academics.

Avian flu - updates from DHSC policy

DHSC policy gave updates on the current work in pandemic preparedness and the lessons learned from COVID-19, specifically in relation to the risk posed by H5N1 avian flu.

DHSC has completed a baseline review of pandemic preparedness capabilities and assessed capability to withstand an H5N1 pandemic should this situation arise. Based on these, further development plans were established.

The committee was introduced to the department's priorities for development, particularly in the areas of PPE, medicines, vaccines, surveillance and diagnostics. The committee was given a brief update on on-going work related to the modelling scenarios presented by UKHSA in previous meetings.

The committee suggested it would also be helpful to have a presentation on the planning and preparedness specifically for early stages of an outbreak, such as first few initial clusters of cases, for scenarios of clusters both domestic and overseas.

ACTION: SPI-M Secretariat to liaise with pandemic preparedness policy teams in DHSC and UKHSA to arrange this presentation for a future meeting.

Avian flu - updates on diagnostics from UKHSA

UKHSA gave an update on their work in diagnostic capabilities as part of pandemic preparedness, specifically focusing on the risk posed by H5N1 avian flu. This included updates on development of lateral flow testing capabilities and PCR testing capabilities, as well as manufacturing capabilities.

For future consideration it will be important to think about how lateral flow devices impact behaviour. Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic suggests these impacts are significant and change people's perspective on risk taking, which needs to be considered when thinking about when these will be available to the public.

Any other business

The next SPI-M meeting is scheduled for 28 June; details will be announced shortly. Meeting frequency from that point onward will be reduced to once every 2 months but can be made more frequent if the need arises. Future dates in September and November are to be confirmed.

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