



Department
of Health &
Social Care

Minutes of SPI-M meeting: 20 November 2023

Published 8 August 2024

Meeting details

The meeting was held on 20 November from 10.15am to 11.30am on Microsoft Teams.

The co-chairs were Déirdre Hollingsworth (academic chair) and Thomas Waite (executive chair)

Attendees

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

- Daniela De Angelis
- Marc Baguelin
- Paul Birrell
- Declan Bradley
- Ellen Brooks Pollock
- Andre Charlett
- Louise Dyson
- John Edmunds
- Jessica Enright
- Neil Ferguson
- Thomas Finnie
- Christophe Fraser

- Ian Hall
- Thomas House
- Adam Kucharski
- Steven Riley
- Chris Robertson
- Nicholas Watkins
- Christopher Williams

Observers:

- John Bates (Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC))
- Morwenna Carrington (DHSC)
- Meera Chand (United Kingdom Health Security Agency (UKHSA))
- Harry Mayhew (UKHSA)
- Matthew Sexton (UKHSA)

There were an additional 10 observers, 7 members of the secretariat, and an additional 4 presenters whose names have been redacted.

Participant apologies:

- Julia Gog
- Michael Gravenor
- Rowland Kao
- Matt Keeling

Introduction

The chairs asked participants to review the minutes from previous meetings which had been circulated by email to the committee and to send any comments to the secretariat.

The chairs notified participants that the SPI-M secretariat has reviewed and updated the Terms of Reference, and that these would be circulated by email.

National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) planning scenarios

DHSC and UKHSA gave a joint presentation on their work so far to update 2 risks in the NSRA:

- pandemic
- emerging infectious disease outbreaks

DHSC explained that a pathogen agnostic approach covering 5 routes of transmission would be taken. UKHSA presented the scenarios and variations for the current reasonable worst-case scenario (RWCS), finalised in 2022, for both pandemic and emerging infectious disease (EID) outbreak risks.

Participants noted that this had been a notable departure from previous risk assessments, which were not pathogen agnostic. Participants discussed whether a fully pathogen-agnostic approach was possible.

Participants noted that at the onset of an outbreak, it would be impossible to tell whether it was a pandemic or EID outbreak scenario, and therefore which response plan to use. However, the committee suggested that a pandemic scenario should be assumed initially because without sufficient intervention, there would be a risk of an EID outbreak scenario becoming a pandemic scenario.

The committee agreed with the importance of focusing on vectors as a route of transmission, as the risk profile of vector-borne diseases is very different to the risk profile of respiratory pathogens. The committee noted that much of the work on vector-borne disease is focused on low- and middle-income countries where the burden is highest; it was suggested that research be conducted on previous eradication efforts in high-income countries, and the ongoing Dengue Fever outbreak in Italy.

The committee noted the importance of continuing to review RWCS assumptions for respiratory pathogens, sexually transmitted infections, enteroviruses and water-borne diseases. The committee also noted the importance of considering low likelihood, high impact events in planning scenarios. Participants discussed the 2022 Mpox outbreak and expressed concern that some assumptions based on recent outbreaks risked being baked in without full consideration.

Participants also noted that current planning assumptions did not reflect the potential for the reproduction number to be above 1 in some groups and settings, even if it isn't elsewhere.

ACTION: UKHSA to review the planning scenarios and bring an update to the following SPI-M meeting.

Evidence base for non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs)

DHSC and UKHSA gave a joint presentation on evidence for the effectiveness of NPIs. DHSC provided context that there was limited evidence on NPI effectiveness to inform decision-making during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it was difficult to model the interaction effects between different NPIs. UKHSA highlighted work on NPI effectiveness and the agency's plans to continue to build the evidence base. UKHSA asked for the committee's advice on where efforts should be focused and whether they were aware of existing groups or teams working on this.

The committee expressed its support for the work, noting that one of the key unresolved outcomes from the COVID-19 pandemic is how to generate evidence on the effectiveness and harms of NPIs dynamically, and that it is important that proper randomised control trials (RCTs) are designed. Participants highlighted a National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) project after the 2009 H1N1 pandemic which allowed trial designs to be submitted and ethically accepted so they were ready to be deployed in the event of a pandemic.

Action: participants to contact the secretariat with details of any ongoing evaluation work or any views on where UKHSA's work should be focused.

Behaviour of COVID-19 in 2024

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has asked SPI-M whether participants are aware of work investigating what could happen with COVID-19 in 2024, to inform its approach to COVID-19 vaccination.

Participants noted that they were aware of some ongoing work, but the outputs are very uncertain and there are difficulties with data availability. Participants highlighted that the last year is likely to be the best guide to the future of COVID-19: multiple waves of epidemics seem to have been caused by the emergence of new subtypes of omicron. Over time, these epidemics have become slightly smaller and less severe, and it may be

reasonable to assume that this trend continues. Participants noted that it was not clear that there has been a strong seasonal driver to COVID-19 case volumes.

Any other business

The next meeting is scheduled to take place in February, but some smaller group meetings could take place in advance of that. Participants were asked to share any relevant work with the SPI-M secretariat in the meantime. The Chairs announced the intended publication on GOV.UK of a series of evidence papers that the committee had previously contributed to on social gatherings, data lessons learned and border measures. Publication would only take place once all papers are completed and signed off.



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