



Department
of Health &
Social Care

Minutes of SPI-M meeting: 8 February 2024

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Meeting details

The meeting was held on 8 February from 10.30am to 12.00pm 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
- Ellen Brooks Pollock
- Andre Charlett
- Louise Dyson
- John Edmunds
- Jessica Enright
- Neil Ferguson
- Thomas Finnie
- Christophe Fraser

- Ian Hall
- Thomas House
- Matt Keeling
- Adam Kucharski
- Chris Robertson
- Nick Watkins

Observers:

- John Bates (Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC))
- Meera Chand (UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA))
- Sarah Deeney (UKHSA)
- Lucinda Eggleton (UKHSA)
- Harry Mayhew (UKHSA)
- Caroline Trotter (University of Cambridge)

There were an additional 13 observers, 10 members of the secretariat, and an additional 1 presenter whose names have been redacted.

Participant apologies:

- Declan Bradley
- Michael Gravenor
- Julia Gog
- Rowland Kao
- Steven Riley
- Christopher Williams

Introduction

The chairs introduced the meeting and welcomed Professor Caroline Trotter, who is a member of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) – her attendance will hopefully foster greater connections between both groups. The chairs also extended the group's congratulations to Sir John Edmunds for his knighthood in the New Year's Honours.

The chairs noted that the minutes for the November SPI-M meeting have been circulated, and that new Terms of Reference have been drafted for this group as there were some time-bound elements in the previous version which needed updating.

The secretariat provided an update on the UKHSA's proposal to put in place data processing agreements between UKHSA and the academic institutions represented at SPI-M to improve data sharing ahead of future infectious disease emergencies. So far the responses from academic institutions have been limited, so the secretariat asked for suggestions and support with linking up data governance colleagues at their institutions with UKHSA.

Updates to the pandemic and emerging infectious diseases scenarios for the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) presented by colleagues from UKHSA

The chairs noted that slides and spreadsheets have been circulated related to this item.

UKHSA presented an update on their work reviewing the NSRA pandemic and emerging infectious diseases (EID) risks. Meera Chand from UKHSA attended to contribute as needed to this discussion.

In the November SPI-M meeting, DHSC and UKHSA gave an overview of the plans to review and update the planning scenarios for the pandemics and EID outbreak risks. A panel of experts have reviewed and updated the scenarios, supported by UKHSA's All Hazards Intelligence (AHI) team.

The planning assumptions discussed assume an unmitigated pandemic scenario. It does not assume that spontaneous behaviour change or government interventions are successful at reducing transmission. This approach allows for greater resilience and reflects the possibility that one or more mitigations may be ineffective.

The questions for discussion were:

- Are there any concerns with the review and update to the NSRA scenarios?
- Should vector borne diseases (VBD) be worked into a reasonable worst case scenario (RWCS) for a future update?
- Is there any ongoing work that SPI-M members would like to flag that may be useful for developing VBD scenarios for future planning and/or other scenarios?

The chairs noted that it would be beneficial for UKHSA to include a RWCS for VBDs (and indeed all 5 transmission routes) in the NSRA.

The committee observed that one feature that seemed to be missing from the list of assumptions was the age severity profile. The age demographics affected will determine how the disease is best tackled. The committee also noted that some diseases have sequelae which can be serious and last for months or years after the initial illness. This should be taken account of more in the RWCS.

The committee noted that the group should remind itself how these scenarios will be used, and how it would be decided which scenario the country was in. The committee also noted that it would be beneficial to split out into 'risks to a group' and 'risks from a group' (that is, whether groups are more likely to be affected by a disease or to spread it).

The chair queried at what point does an emerging disease cross over into being a pandemic. The important thing from a health response perspective is that the different components of the plan can be activated separately. The authors noted that it is important to consider an EID risk as the stage when we try to contain a pandemic.

The author added that additional written comments outside of this meeting would be appreciated, however future updates can be provided iteratively.

The committee noted that a clear plan for when to intervene in each scenario would be valuable.

COVID-19 modelling projections for 2025 and beyond

The chair explained that the JCVI are keen to get this group's thoughts on what the transmission of COVID-19 might look like in the UK in 2025 and beyond.

The committee noted that the scenarios produced by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) in February 2022 will likely work for a RWCS. However, for general planning, it is likely that we will continue to see omicron with less severity than the previous alpha/delta/wild type variants. The group also noted that vaccine uptake was very high during the pandemic, however it is likely that it will drop as COVID becomes more endemic, and this will be a significant issue in the future.

The committee noted that a reasonable scenario for planning was what has happened in the last year, which has seen the repeated emergence of similar variants. A more optimistic scenario would suggest the variants will continue to become slightly less severe.

The chair noted it is important to look at changes in immune protection either due to waning vaccine uptake or the emergence of a distant COVID strain.

The committee noted that something unpredictable could happen, up to and including the worst of the SAGE assumptions, and that it is important to be able to change vaccine policy if this becomes necessary.

The committee noted that having 3 scenarios (like last year, slightly better and slightly worse) would be a sensible approach.

The committee discussed seasonality, and that from looking at previous years, larger waves tended to happen around winter and there seemed to be lower incidence in the summer. However, the group noted that it is not currently a clearly seasonal epidemic.

Any other business

UKHSA brought an item about establishing a forecasting and/or modelling hub for the UK. This is not so much a plan as an opinion gathering exercise. Both the USA and the EU have modelling hubs which modelling teams contribute their forecasts to. The questions are:

- What are the group's views on this sort of architecture for the UK?
- How would this fit in with the 4 nations?
- What would be the impact on preparedness?
- What can be the UK's involvement in the wider international landscape?

The chair added that this would be brought as a substantive item to the next SPI-M meeting with a presentation, but this discussion was predominantly to gather initial views. The committee observed that as a model for setting up pipelines, this would be excellent. To do the project well, however, it would need substantial resources from UKHSA and academic modelling groups.

The chairs noted that the SPI-M secretariat would send out meeting invites for the meetings for the rest of the year shortly.

Actions

- For anyone with suggestions or who can offer support with linking up data governance colleagues at academic institutions with UKHSA to contact the SPI-M secretariat.
- For all to send further comments to the SPI-M secretariat on their position on COVID-19 modelling projections for 2025 and beyond.
- For the SPI-M secretariat and UKHSA to work together on an agenda item on establishing a UK modelling/forecasting hub for the next SPI-M meeting.
- For the SPI-M secretariat and DHSC policy to update on pandemic preparedness strategy at the next meeting.

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