

Emergency Advisory Group

Advice note

1st September 2021

Schools, Facemasks, Vaccines, Variants of Concern

Schools

The EAG welcomed the paper and briefing from the CEO of the Department for Education, Sport and Culture (DESC). The EAG notes the DESC's plans to ensure pupils, teachers and school staff are kept safe and the priority protection measures put in place for vulnerable pupils and staff members. The EAG's view is that that this advice is also very relevant, as noted previously, to the wider community:

The EAG wishes to offer advice on two areas in relation to the plan for keeping schools safe in the current environment:

1. Set clear CO2 thresholds.

The EAG welcomes the use of CO2 monitors as a tool to determine the level of ventilation in an occupied room and so the potential risk of Covid transmissibility within that space. The EAG urges the Council of Ministers to consider the publication of guidance on CO2 threshold levels for certain spaces to assist teachers in determining when a space has good ventilation. The EAG notes the helpful advice published by the UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) at <https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/equipment-and-machinery/air-conditioning-and-ventilation/identifying-poorly-ventilated-areas.htm>

The EAG is of the opinion that the thresholds as described by the UK HSE would offer a useful starting point for consideration by CoMIN as guidance in this area for schools and other public and private sector settings:

CO2 measurements should be used as a broad guide to ventilation within a space rather than treating them as 'safe thresholds'.

Outdoor levels are around 400ppm and indoors a consistent CO2 value less than 800ppm is likely to indicate that a space is well ventilated.

An average of 1500ppm CO2 concentration over the occupied period in a space is an indicator of poor ventilation. You should take action to improve ventilation where CO2 readings are consistently higher than 1500ppm

CoMIN response

The Council of Ministers is supportive of greater use of CO2 monitoring, particularly over the winter period where more people are indoors and good ventilation can be more difficult to achieve. CoMIN notes that the Isle of Man Health and Safety team has advised the Department for Education and its contractors to ensure it is aware of, and operating to the parameters as set out by the UK HSE. The DESC has

confirmed it has installed CO2 monitors across its estate which are programmed to respond to the specified thresholds.

2. **Mandatory use of Facemasks in heavily occupied indoor spaces**

The EAG would reiterate its previous advice on this matter and would urge the Department for Education Sport and Culture to consider mandating facemasks for school pupils and staff (including those at UCM) where groups are likely to gather in indoor spaces with poor ventilation. These measures are seen as particularly important by the EAG in light of the current policy to not vaccinate the majority of children between the ages of 12 – 16.

CoMIN response

The Department for Education, Sport and Culture does not intend to make facemasks mandatory at this time as it is following the broader Government advice to support individual choice in this matter and all schools are committed to maintaining this approach. The Council of Ministers has agreed to offer vaccination to all 12-15 year olds in line with recommendations from the relevant Royal Colleges and Chief Medical Officers in the UK.

This further mitigation is aimed to reduce the small risk of serious illness in this age group but also to enable more young people to remain in school with the subsequent educational, mental health and general wellbeing benefits this brings.

Revised Covid strategy

The EAG is supportive of the revised strategy document, based on assurance that the vaccination booster campaign and the ability to control borders should a Variant of Concern emerge is maintained. Based on the information provided, the EAG advises as follows:

Vaccine Booster programme

The EAG noted the high level planning document from Manx Care, but would seek sight of a more detailed document which is needed urgently. This is a key protection in the Isle of Man response to a likely 4th wave of Covid 19 around quarter 4 2021.

In the context of the potential for increased cases over the winter period, the EAG urges the Council of Ministers to ensure that a booster programme now forms part of a series of mitigations to reduce the risk of the spread of Covid and the harm caused to those infected by Covid.

The EAG offers the following specific observations in respect of the booster programme plan:

1. The EAG urges further consideration of the impact of not undertaking the booster programme on the Government's plan for lifting of border restrictions and notes that JCVI recommendations should not necessarily be followed in the context of the Island's very different circumstances. In particular, the Island's border arrangements and population are not comparable to the UK and this difference should be taken into account.
2. The EAG understands the relationship with the UK and UK NHS is important but advises looking into the feasibility of sourcing alternative vaccine supplies (including the current research on the possibility of future use of tablets rather than injections).

- This option would offer resilience and flexibility to the Island and could ensure its vaccine rollout programme best suits the needs of the Isle of Man and its people.
3. Any variations or cost impacts of the booster programme should consider a broad range of factors as part of the business case for its delivery. This would include the economic effects of a further partial or full lockdown or widespread staff absence due to Covid illness.
 4. The EAG notes the comments in relation to scarcity of resource in delivering a vaccine booster programme and advises CoMIN to ensure that where resources are diverted from other healthcare areas, that the negative impacts of stopping, delaying or ceasing business as usual healthcare to resource the booster rollout are considered as part of the rollout plan.

CoMIN response

1. The Council of Ministers does not intend to diverge from following JCVI guidance at the current time, as per the existing policy. Any potential benefits of this approach are outweighed by the risks due to lack of on-Island resource or expertise for carrying out the significant research and analysis relevant specifically to the Isle of Man that would be needed
2. Any new vaccine products are required to go through the appropriate approval process by the MHRA. They then require assessment by the JCVI for use in general population. This work takes time and currently no new products, particularly those with innovative delivery methods, appear to be ready for consideration. In addition, the Island does not have the same ability to secure preferential supply lines for such products as the UK NHS which, combined with the significant demand across the globe for vaccines, means it is unlikely the Island would receive any form of commercial or supply line advantage by sourcing its own products. The UK government also provide an indemnity on the back of their supply to the Isle of Man, which is subject to stringent conditions on how the vaccine is handled and administered.
3. CoMIN would be interested in further information from the EAG on a proposed methodology or approach for undertaking such work in a robust and meaningful way for a small population. It should be noted that the delivery of the programme is led by JCVI and manufacturer guidance in how vaccines are handled and administered.
4. The Council of Ministers confirms that the Vaccination Board already takes scarcity of resource into account in relation to the delivery of the programme and particularly limiting any impact on the redeployment of resources.

Variants of Concern

The EAG discussed the risk posed by Variants of Concern (VoC) and urges the Government to prepare a sufficiently detailed strategy in the event of an emergence of a VoC. It would be helpful, for example, to clarify whether additional border control measures would be put in place in the event of a new VoC becoming prevalent. The EAG also advises Council (if it is not already doing so) to develop a strategy to ensure there is a sufficiently robust detection and mitigation plan in place in the event of an emerging VoC which may pose a risk to public health.

CoMIN response

The current approach to VoCs is that regular review of the UK Health Security Agency's detailed technical briefings and risk assessments are undertaken by the DHSC and Manx Care's Silver response groups. This includes potential local impact on health and care services. Where a response is deemed necessary, any major risks would be escalated to the Gold group and on to CoMIN for a strategic/policy decision on any response. Noble's Pathology laboratory has the ability to undertake genotyping on positive samples taken here and this capacity will be extended to include new VOCs as they are identified. Full sequencing continues to be available through the HSA laboratory at Colindale for samples sufficient for sequencing.

Masks

The EAG welcomes the recent, improved messaging on masks as a mitigation measure against Covid infection. The EAG's view, following consideration of this matter, is that the public require greater clarity on the circumstances and settings in which they should consider the use of masks. Given the current policy where masks are not mandated on public transport – either by the operator or by Public Health Regulation – clear communication of the public benefits of the use of masks is critically important. This is particularly relevant as we enter the winter period where it is likely the instances of Covid will increase, people will spend more time indoors and the ability to ventilate enclosed spaces reduces.

CoMIN response

The Public Health Directorate has already flagged the likelihood of a further surge in cases over winter related to changing patterns of mixing, indoors, in less well-ventilated spaces. As the seasons change, messages in respect of face coverings and ventilation will be refreshed and reframed to reflect this.