Covid-19 Recovery Committee

Informal fact-finding event

Thursday, 19 May 2022

Note of discussion

Invited guests

- Professor Niamh Nic Daéid FRSE
- Professor Maggie Gill OBE FRSE
- Professor Mark Woolhouse FRSE FMedSci OBE

Committee members

- Siobhian Brown MSP, Convener
- Jim Fairlie MSP
- Murdo Fraser MSP (apologies)
- John Mason MSP
- Alex Rowley MSP
- Brian Whittle MSP

Introduction to the session

The Committee discussed the work of the Royal Society of Edinburgh's Post-Covid Futures Commission's Data, Evidence and Science Working Group on data gathering. They heard of the need for—

- transparency when collecting data
- good communication of the science
- a collaborative and holistic approach to data collection
- trust and public confidence on science and data collection

As outlined by the working group, it was suggested that there should be a national conversation on the use and sharing of data and that an independent fact checking service should be established in Scotland

The Committee discussed the work of the Scottish Science Advisory Council and its report on Building on the Science Legacy of COVID-19 in Scotland. They heard of the need to—

- narrow the gap between science and policy decision making
- have more structured exchange between academics and government
- explain policy process alongside explaining the science

- appreciate the importance of variability
- learn from international experiences, such as Canada, in explaining science effectively

The Committee was also informed that many of these recommendations are not new and have been highlighted prior to the pandemic.

Scientific advice to inform decision-making

- A principle of good scientific advice is to provide decision-makers with options to choose from. This ensures that the provision of advice does not become directional.
- The pandemic highlighted different policy challenges and these weren't always well communicated or analysed, such as the direct versus indirect harms of COVID-19.
- There were examples from the pandemic where risk was communicated well and other examples where this was less effective. For example, there wasn't a good understanding of risk in different settings (e.g. care homes and schools). In contrast, risk was communicated effectively in the vaccination programme.
- A key public health message used by governments was that decision-making "followed the science". This was not well communicated because scientific analysis and advice is evolutionary and not static. This led to confusion about the rationale for decision-making, particularly where policy judgements changed over time.
- As a starting point, the "science" and process for analysing data needs to be contextualised. It is important to take time to explain key scientific issues and the scientific process with "communicators", such as the media, so that they can have an informed understanding of issues when sharing these with the wider public and scrutinising decision-making.

Public health data gathering and accessibility for decision-making

- Epidemiological modelling is an important tool that can help inform decision-making. For example, this helped to identify the likelihood of the second wave of infections in the UK.
- It is important that epidemiological modelling can be compared against public health data. Scotland has been developed this facility through the pandemic into a world-leading EAVE initiative led by Professor Aziz Sheik, University of Edinburgh. This has enabled Scotland to show the impact of vaccination.
- Health data is generally difficult to access in Scotland for research purposes. This is due to factors including the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation and a culture of data protection within the National Health Service and public bodies. The guardians of public health data can be risk averse and are not rewarded for collaborating with scientists to make data accessible to

drive public health research and understanding. The reluctance to share data may also be due to a “blame culture” should anything go wrong.

The role of expert advisory bodies

- The membership of advisory bodies is influenced by the NOLAN principles and also by other factors, such as the individuals who are responsible for making appointments, the accessibility of job adverts and a knowledge of how to write an effective application.
- There is sometimes a risk that advisory bodies can become institutionalised, as opposed to ‘disruptive’ in the advice they provide. It is important to ensure that decision-makers continue to access a diversity of perspectives and this can be achieved through a variety of means, including national societies.

Independent fact-checking service

- A challenge for government can be that they lose control of how information is used once it is made public, particularly if data is subsequently used to spread misinformation or disinformation.
- The Post-Covid Futures Commission developed a recommendation for an independent fact-checking service from a variety of discussions. It is important to be able to correct factual incorrect information quickly and from a trusted source.

How people access news and public health information

- A means to aid scientific communication and literacy is to help people understand the possible challenges society may face before they are realised, such as the risk of another pandemic.
- In order to help improve science literacy and public health communication, we need to understand where people access news and information. There needs to be more understanding of the variability in which people view the world and ways they communicate. Television programmes can be particularly effective, as evidenced by David Attenborough’s programmes. However, there are significant differences in how different generations access news and information. For example, younger people may rely on software programmes such as Tik Tok or Instagram, as opposed to traditional media sources.

Scientific posts in government and external networks

- The Chief Scientific Adviser played a smaller role in Scotland than in other parts of the UK in communicating directly with the public. The resources for this post and other scientific advisory posts are much less proportionally speaking in Scotland than they are at a UK-level.
- Scotland could benefit from a review of the structure and resourcing of scientific advice within government and its scientific networks outside government. The aim of this review should be to accelerate the access to and integration of scientific knowledge before it gets to government. This could be

achieved in a light-touch way and it would enable government to take an informed systematic approach to setting up advisory committees.