

JBC Ministerial Board – Minutes
22 March 2021
6.15 – 7.15pm

Introductions – Robin Swann MLA (Minister of Health, NI)

Robin Swann MLA (Minister of Health) welcomed attendees thanking everyone for the work undertaken to date towards delivering a four-nations JBC.

Transparency Approach – JBC

The Board endorsed the proposed approach to transparency and sanctioned publication of the Political Agreement, Agency Agreement and the Terms of Reference for the Ministerial, Steering and Technical Boards.

JBC as a UK-wide entity – All Ministers

Dr Clare Gardiner (Director General, JBC) provided an overview of progress following the signing of the Agency Agreement in December 2020, noting that JBC had continued to deepen analytical collaboration, with the Technical Board providing valuable advice through the four UK Chief Medical Officers on both the national alert level and international border methodology.

Officials are working to address concerns raised by Jeanne Freeman MSP (Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport). Dr Gardiner outlined that collaborative work is continuing in key areas, including wastewater surveillance and modelling of variants of concern, with senior officials from all nations now attending the Senior Stakeholder Prioritisation Panel. Embedding Devolved Administrations' staff within the JBC, in both analytical and liaison roles, will enhance collaboration.

Dr Clare Gardiner referred to her departure from JBC in the coming months, confirming that Devolved Administrations will be involved in the appointment of her successor.

Robin Swann MLA commented that progress had been encouraging, noting the differences between nations in their capacity to resource engagement and highlighting the importance to facilitate full engagement between the four-nations partners to work as equals, including addressing technical issues.

It was expressed that the JBC would be judged as a success as a UK-wide body when concrete examples of its positive impact can be demonstrated.

Jeanne Freeman MSP highlighted that progress had been made and that the next step must be to move from a position of Devolved Administrations being consulted to one of them being involved from the outset. She also noted that further clarity is needed on governance arrangements as we move towards UKHSA.

Vaughan Gething MS (Minister for Health and Social Services) agreed that it was important to emphasise the difference between consultation and involvement. It was also highlighted that following the movement of the modelling for the R number from SPI-M to JBC, it would be important to see a UK perspective alongside nation-specific modelling.

Dr Gardiner explained that the four Chief Medical Officers, through the Technical Board, will provide assurance on the data and methodology to support the transition of oversight of the R number from SPI-M to JBC. It was also noted that embedded Devolved Administration staff would support with the shift from a consultative to more involved partnership.

The Secretary of State agreed that feedback from Scottish Government had been helpful and had inspired further thought into big picture questions on how further four-nation alignment can be attained.

Jeanne Freeman MSP suggested that the international travel watch list could also evaluate the green corridor lists, which would define safer international travel connections.

The Secretary of State agreed it may be useful to look into this approach and aim for an agreed methodological alignment if possible, subject to four-nation decision making.

Transition to UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) – The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP

The Secretary of State explained that the new organisation would be called the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and would formally be established on 1 April 2021 (but with the transition of core functions within the new organisation to transition in slower time). The name change from the National Institute for Health Protection (NIHP) is to avoid confusion over the term “National”. UKHSA’s mission will be to focus on our response to and preparedness for pandemics, communicable diseases and threats to public health. JBC will remain an entity within UKHSA.

Health Ministers agreed that this would be an opportunity to build in four-nation involvement from the outset and transfer learning from the setting up of JBC.

Show and Tell: Past, present and future analytical collaboration

The Advanced Analytics team, JBC gave reflections through a data and analysis lens of the value of JBC as a four-nation body.

Three potential future areas of interest were outlined:

- Vaccine Toy Model
- Transmission Intensity
- Schools and community mass testing

Action: Provide any additional access required to Toy Model and share code with a view to adaptation for nation specific modelling

AOB

The Board thanked Dr Gardiner for her contribution to JBC and wished her well in the future.

Robin Swann MLA (Minister of Health) thanked all attendees and stated that the next Ministerial Board would take place on 19 July 2021.

Attendees:

The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP (Secretary of State for Health and Social Care)

Robin Swann MLA (Minister of Health)

Jeanne Freeman MSP (Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport)

Vaughan Gething MS (Minister for Health and Social Services)

Dr Michael McBride (Chief Medical Officer, NIE)

Richard Pengelly (Permanent Secretary, DoH NIE)

Clare Gardiner (DG, JBC)

10 government officials and observers from the JBC and Devolved Administrations