

To:

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

From:

**Joint Biosecurity Centre,
Policy and Legislation Team,
PMO**

Date: 22 March 2021

THE JBC: FOUR NATION COORDINATION UPDATE

Issue

To provide an update on the joint progress JBC and DA counterparts are making through the implementation of the Agency Agreement to support a fully operational UK-wide JBC.

Recommendation

That you:

- **Note** the progress towards building a UK-wide JBC following the Ministerial Board on 30 November 2020 (**para 3**);
- **Note** the progress of the priority projects through the Implementation Group for the Agency Agreement (TIGAA) and the project delivery teams (**paras 4 – 7**);
- **Note** the challenges to delivery and the proposed next steps (**paras 8 – 11**); and
- **Consider** success criteria for DA involvement in the JBC system. What would you like to see by the time of the next Ministerial Board in June?

Background

1. Following the completion of the 'Participation of the Devolved Administration in the Joint Biosecurity Centre' (the Political Agreement) in August, officials across the JBC and the Devolved Administrations have been working collaboratively to bring this joint commitment into effect. In the first instance, an Agency Agreement has been entered into between the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care and the Devolved Administrations.

2. Given the trajectory of the pandemic, it has been critical that the JBC and Devolved Administrations have sought to harness collective expertise and insight to support decision-makers across the whole of the UK in the months since the Agency Agreement was signed, principally through the work of the Technical Board and the sharing of insight reports and key findings. As we move forward with the roll out of the vaccination programmes and the phased release of interventions across the UK it is important that we continue working collaboratively in the coming months.

Progress following the Ministerial Board

3. Following the Ministerial Board on 30 November, officials across all four nations have been progressing the implementation of the Agency Agreement through The Implementation Group for the Agency Agreement (TIGAA).
Notable developments include:
 - a. The ongoing delivery of two priority projects to increase analytical collaboration and formally embed staff (detail below);
 - b. Further integration of the Devolved Administrations into JBC systems, notably attendance at the Senior Stakeholder Prioritisation Panel, which directs analytical work;
 - c. The further integration of Devolved Administrations into the governance structure of the JBC, including the JBC Steering Board, which met for the first time on 28 January;
 - d. Ongoing alignment at a UK-wide level through the JBC Technical Board, where the four CMOs have provided recommendations on the UK Alert Level and international risk assessment methodologies; and

- e. Collaboration across a number of analytical, modelling, and policy fora, with informal information sharing, including through fortnightly JBC analytical 'Show and Tell' presentations, alongside recent circulation of Insight Reports. These have covered topics including transmission across age groups, new variant spread, and the impact of Tier 4 restrictions in England.

Priority Projects

4. At the Ministerial Board in November, you gave clearance to proceed with two Priority Projects: the Analytical Pipeline Project and the Embeds Project.
5. The Analytical Pipeline project has started to develop a more integrated delivery model, with greater visibility of JBC outputs and analysis. This includes a proposed mechanism for Devolved Administrations to commission analysis from the JBC having been established; albeit, this has yet to be tested. Deeper analytical collaboration is being facilitated through the opening up of JBC's multidisciplinary ('stripy') teams – focused on key thematic priorities – to colleagues from all nations. Examples of current thematic priorities include:
 - a. **NPI Effectiveness:** understanding the effect of various non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) on a range of outcomes, from direct behaviour, including household mixing, to COVID-19 cases and non-COVID health outcomes.
 - b. **Cluster Detection:** understanding and building on existing work into cluster detection, contact tracing and the transmission dynamics of COVID-19, enabling the early identification of clusters and potential super-spreader events to break chains of transmission, as well as highlighting potential high-risk transmission settings.
6. Whilst this early engagement on key thematic areas is starting to happen, with Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish colleagues observing a number of the stripy teams for the most recent project sprints, several practical and technical issues have emerged through this first cycle – most notably the lack of access

to JBC IT systems and platforms, limiting Devolved Administration colleagues' real-time view of JBC work – that are impeding full Devolved Administration collaboration in these analytical priorities. We are working collectively to urgently mitigate and address these issues, exploring greater accessibility of platforms to support more meaningful, practical ways for Devolved Administrations to collaborate and influence priorities, and start to generate joint outputs. It will also be important to resolve issues in respect of the scope for wider circulation of the Insight Reports within the Devolved Administrations to better inform operational decision making.

7. One key deliverable that will help to support this is Devolved Administration staff being formally embedded in the JBC. The Embeds project has seen a business case submitted for embeds from Scotland, with work continuing at pace to finalise arrangements for Wales, and it is anticipated that the JBC will be in a position to bring in liaison embeds in the coming weeks. Northern Ireland colleagues will be reviewing the progress of the embeds from Wales and Scotland to inform whether they would also wish to embed staff in JBC at a later date. Recognising the significant resource constraints around analytical expertise, the Embeds project is also actively exploring scope for a less formal approach to analytical collaboration. These embedded staff embody the spirit of joint endeavour to build a UK-wide JBC and will bring benefits to the Centre and the “home” Administrations by facilitating even greater sharing of knowledge and experience. Options for embedding JBC staff within Devolved Administration Covid-response directorates are also being explored.

Challenges and next steps

8. There is still some way to go to fully engender the four nations approach and to turn the current level of collaboration and practical participation into more meaningful joint outputs. TIGAA is focused on progressing the priority projects by making arrangements for formal/informal embedding opportunities between the JBC and DAs, and in parallel maturing our processes to ensure DAs have the requisite opportunity to input and help shape direction.

9. Forums such as the Senior Stakeholder Prioritisation Panel offer a space for sharing of knowledge and collaboration. To increase the scope for collaboration, TIGAA officials continue to build on the progress made in the inclusion of Devolved Administrations at these forums, to greater, more meaningful participation. At the same time, it is recognised that each Devolved Administration will have its own priorities which will impact on the nature and scale of collaboration.
10. The practical issues outlined above are being addressed urgently, and the work is being prioritised. The arrival of formal embeds will support with this, but it will also require organisational and cultural changes. TIGAA are developing a business change strategy, with communications and engagement tailored to colleagues across the JBC and Devolved Administrations to maximise the benefits of the relationship.
11. In addition, TIGAA is considering the next steps we take to deliver against the aims of the Agency Agreement and provide the mechanisms to enable four nations collaboration, and will undertake a review of the Agreement itself, in accordance with the terms of set out in the document, to ensure all parties are content with the arrangements. **Do Ministers have any recommendations for improving four nation engagement? Is there anything Ministers would like to see reflected as part of the review of the Agency Agreement?**