

National Statistician's Data Ethics Advisory Committee Minute

Tuesday, 21 April 2020
Meeting held via video conference

Present

Members

Dame Moira Gibb (Chair)
Stephen Balchin
Rob Bumpstead
Vanessa Cuthill
Colin Godbold
Isabel Nisbet

UK Statistics Authority

Emily Mason-Apps
Simon Whitworth
Ross Young
Nicola Shearman

Office for National Statistics

Peter Benton

Apologies

Emma Uprichard
Marion Oswald

1. Chair's Welcome

1.1 The Chair welcomed members to this meeting and thanked them for convening at short notice to consider the project proposal NSDEC(20)11.

1.2 Stephen Balchin informed the Committee that he is currently an official at the Department for Health and Social Care.

2. Incidence of SARS-CoV-2 infection and prevalence of immunity to SARS-CoV-2 in the UK general population as assessed through repeated cross-sectional household surveys with additional serial sampling and longitudinal follow-up [NSDEC(20)11]

2.1 Peter Benton, Director of Population and Public Policy Operations, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), presented a proposal to undertake a pilot study (Phase I) that aims to measure the incidence of SARS-CoV-2 infection and prevalence of immunity to SARS-CoV-2 in England. Phase II of this work will seek to measure the infection and immunity rates in a UK-wide representative sample. This project will provide vital statistics that will help scientists and the government work out how to manage the COVID-19 pandemic moving forwards. This project is sponsored by the Department for Health and Social Care, and will involve collaboration with the University of Oxford (leading on

scientific design and analysis of de-identified blood samples), IQVIA (a human data science company who will collect survey data, blood and swab samples), and the National Biosample Centre (who will conduct the swab testing).

- 2.2 The Committee were informed that the medical ethics aspects of this project proposal had been approved by the National Research Ethics Service. The Committee would therefore consider the data ethics elements of the project.
- 2.3 The following points were raised in discussion:
 - i. The Committee were informed that at this stage Care Homes would be out of scope for this research;
 - ii. The Committee asked that Mr Benton amend the title of the proposal to reflect that this stage of the work will provide statistical estimates for England only;
 - iii. The Committee recommended that ONS should consider how best to extend the scope of the survey to include the rest of the UK;
 - iv. The Committee highlighted a number of factors that have the potential to influence the representativeness of the sample, and advised that these factors be carefully considered when interpreting findings, and when planning Phase II of this work. These factors included: sampling from respondents who have already taken part in multiple ONS surveys; the definition of a household; potential biases resulting from including houses with multi-occupancy; and the influence of the current situation in terms of where certain groups (such as students) are currently residing;
 - v. The Committee emphasised the importance of ensuring that respondents are made aware of the intention to link to other data sources, and were reassured that this is mentioned in the participant information sheets;
 - vi. The Committee suggested that ONS provide clear links to where respondents can seek support if they are experiencing distress as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic;
 - vii. The Committee were assured that ONS would ensure that all collaborators would comply with ONS policy and UK data protection law; and,
 - viii. The Committee recommended that ONS do all they can to ensure that GPs are encouraged to communicate swab results to respondents.
- 2.4 The Committee acknowledged the clear public benefit that would result from this work, and encouraged ONS to consider the Committee's recommendations as this work progresses.