

## Ask the Experts Briefing on COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed all our lives dramatically over the past year. In this fast changing time, this briefing offered people the opportunity to hear from experts from a variety of fields about the current situation. There were four experts presenting and taking questions in this 15<sup>th</sup> March evening discussion, which was organised in partnership with the National Academies. Dr Shaun Fitzgerald from the Royal Academy of Engineering discussed how we can make spaces COVID-safe and what we have learnt about ventilation during this pandemic. Professor Melinda Mills was an author of the Royal Society's report on vaccine passports, and she discussed this reports conclusions and how these are important considerations for government policy. Professor Charles Bangham from Imperial College London discussed long-COVID and how we can best deal with this syndrome. Professor Judith Breuer from University College London discussed the emergence of new variants and what threats these pose to our current situation. There was a varied and extensive Q&A around these topics.

A lot of discussion was centred around the vaccine rollout. If the government wishes to follow the path of other countries and issue vaccine passports, there are many ethical questions to be considered. Some are concerned about the risk of creating a two-tiered society between those who are vaccinated and those who can't or won't access the vaccine. Although willingness to take the vaccine is high in the UK, the government must consider what role a vaccine passport will play in accessing many areas of life, from public spaces to social care jobs. As the vaccine rollout continues and restrictions decrease in the UK, we also heard

how it's vital that the vaccine passports meet an international standard, to allow for international travel.

We also heard about how new variants pose a potential threat to immunity. The new variants which have been identified are associated with a decreased level of immunity, although evidence suggests the current vaccines still prevent severe illness. The UK has seen an expansion of its genomics industry since the pandemic started and this will be a crucial monitoring tool as we go forward. New variants will have an impact on decisions about the need for an annual vaccination programme or an expiry date on vaccine passports, and so this knowledge will be vital.

As we see levels of COVID-19 decrease in the UK, many are still suffering the effects from having the disease. Long-COVID is associated with a variety of symptoms, most commonly fatigue. Professor Bangham explained that the mechanism of post-viral fatigue is poorly understood and so currently treatment is focused on relieving symptoms. As businesses start to operate again, it's key that employers recognise the syndrome and support their employees who are suffering from this condition.

Since the pandemic started, we have learnt a lot about how viruses spread throughout society. Aerosol transmission was under recognised at the beginning of the outbreak, but we now know that this is a key cause of infection. Looking forward, making sure that all building meets the requirements for ventilation will reduce this mode of transmission for future outbreaks.