



RESEARCH ARTICLE

REVISED Human judgement forecasting of COVID-19 in the UK**[version 2; peer review: 2 approved]**Nikos I. Bosse ^{1,2}, Sam Abbott ¹, Johannes Bracher^{3,4}, Edwin van Leeuwen ^{2,5}, Anne Cori⁶, Sebastian Funk ^{1,2}¹Department of Infectious Disease Epidemiology, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, WC1E 7HT, UK²NIHR Health Protection Research Unit in Modelling & Health Economics, London, UK³Computational Statistics Group, Heidelberg Institute for Theoretical Studies, Heidelberg, Germany⁴Chair of Statistical Methods and Econometrics, Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Karlsruhe, Germany⁵Modelling Economics Unit, UK Health Security Agency, London, UK⁶MRC Centre for Outbreak Analysis and Modelling, Department of Infectious Disease Epidemiology, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, London, England, UK

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Abstract**Background**

In the past, two studies found ensembles of human judgement forecasts of COVID-19 to show predictive performance comparable to ensembles of computational models, at least when predicting case incidences. We present a follow-up to a study conducted in Germany and Poland and investigate a novel joint approach to combine human judgement and epidemiological modelling.

Methods

From May 24th to August 16th 2021, we elicited weekly one to four week ahead forecasts of cases and deaths from COVID-19 in the UK from a crowd of human forecasters. A median ensemble of all forecasts was submitted to the European Forecast Hub. Participants could use two distinct interfaces: in one, forecasters submitted a predictive distribution directly, in the other forecasters instead submitted a forecast of the effective reproduction number R_t . This was then used to forecast cases and deaths using simulation methods from the EpiNow2 R package. Forecasts were scored using the weighted interval score on the original forecasts, as well as after applying the natural logarithm to both forecasts and observations.

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version 1 19 Sep 2023	 view	 view

1. **Daniel J. McDonald** , The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

2. **Hongru Du** , Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

Results

The ensemble of human forecasters overall performed comparably to the official European Forecast Hub ensemble on both cases and deaths, although results were sensitive to changes in details of the evaluation. R_t forecasts performed comparably to direct forecasts on cases, but worse on deaths. Self-identified “experts” tended to be better calibrated than “non-experts” for cases, but not for deaths.

Conclusions

Human judgement forecasts and computational models can produce forecasts of similar quality for infectious disease such as COVID-19. The results of forecast evaluations can change depending on what metrics are chosen and judgement on what does or doesn't constitute a “good” forecast is dependent on the forecast consumer. Combinations of human and computational forecasts hold potential but present real-world challenges that need to be solved.

Keywords

forecasting, human judgement forecasting, COVID-19, UK, United Kingdom, Weighted Interval Score

Corresponding author: Nikos I. Bosse (Nikos.Bosse@lshtm.ac.uk)

Author roles: **Bosse NI:** Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing; **Abbott S:** Conceptualization, Data Curation, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing; **Bracher J:** Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing; **van Leeuwen E:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing; **Cori A:** Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing; **Funk S:** Conceptualization, Funding Acquisition, Project Administration, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: NIB is a part-time employee of Metaculus, an online prediction platform.

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In the past, two studies found ensembles of human judgement forecasts of COVID-19 to show predictive performance comparable to ensembles of computational models, at least when predicting case incidences. We present a follow-up to a study conducted in Germany and Poland and investigate a novel joint approach to combine human judgement and epidemiological modelling.

Methods

From May 24th to August 16th 2021, we elicited weekly one to four week ahead forecasts of cases and deaths from COVID-19 in the UK from a crowd of human forecasters. A median ensemble of all forecasts was submitted to the European Forecast Hub. Participants could use two distinct interfaces: in one, forecasters submitted a predictive distribution directly, in the other forecasters instead submitted a forecast of the effective reproduction number R_t . This was then used to forecast cases and deaths using simulation methods from the EpiNow2 R package. Forecasts were scored using the weighted interval score on the original forecasts, as well as after

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Corresponding author: Nikos I. Bosse (Nikos.Bosse@lshtm.ac.uk)

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REVISED Amendments from Version 1

We added a more detailed contextualisation of the study period (May to September 2021) and an explanation of the various factors that contributed to the pattern of observed cases and deaths from COVID-19 in the UK at that time. We also added a new Figure to illustrate the study period. We included details on the study authors who made forecasts as participants. We clarified parts of the discussion related to the evolution of the case fatality ratio (CFR) over the study period and provided references. We also clarified that our human forecasts were included in the overall Hub ensemble against which they are compared, likely leading us to underestimate the differences between the two. We added suggestions for further research, for example on priming effects from defaults shown in the user interface or on the effect that the availability of additional qualitative data might have on forecast accuracy.

Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article

Introduction

Infectious disease modelling and forecasting has attracted wide-spread attention during the COVID-19 pandemic and helped inform decision making in public health organisations and governments^{1,2}. Most forecasts used to inform decision making were based on computational models of COVID-19, but some authors also explored human judgement forecasting as an alternative or in combination³⁻⁶.

Past research found that in the context of infectious disease forecasting, human judgement forecasts could achieve predictive performance broadly comparable to forecasts generated based on mathematical modelling, in particular when forecasting incident cases, rather than lagged indicators indicators like deaths. Farrow *et al.*⁷ found that an aggregate of human predictions outperformed computational models when predicting the 2014/15 and 2015/16 flu season in the US. However, a comparable approach performed worse than computational models at predicting the 2014/15 outbreak of chikungunya in the Americas. Bosse *et al.*³ found an ensemble of human forecasters to outperform an ensemble of computational models when predicting cases of COVID-19 in Germany and Poland, but performing worse when predicting incident deaths. Similarly, McAndrew *et al.*⁵ reported an ensemble of human forecasters to perform comparably to an ensemble of computational models when predicting incident COVID-19 cases, and worse when predicting incident deaths. Farrow *et al.*⁷ and in particular Bosse *et al.*³ struggled to recruit many participants (numbers of active forecasters ranged from 22 to 61 in McAndrew *et al.*⁵, 7 to 24 in Farrow *et al.*⁷, and 4 to 10 in Bosse *et al.*³). It is important to note that in previous studies (and also this one) human forecasters were free to use any resources, including computational models, in the process of creating a forecast, making it difficult to completely separate human judgement and computational modelling.

In some situations, human judgement forecasting may have advantages relative to computational models. Human judgment

may be particularly useful to provide timely forecasts in situations where data is sparse and many parameters are hard to quantify. Humans are also generally able to answer a broad set of question (such as for example the likelihood that a given actor will take some specified action) and can take factors into account that are hard to encode in a computational model. On the other hand, human judgement forecasting is difficult to scale due to the time and effort required, and humans may be at a disadvantage at tasks that strongly benefit from the ability to perform complex computations. Also, the use of human judgement forecasts by decision makers may be complicated by the lack of clarity of the basis on which they were made.

Methods that aim to combine human judgement and mathematical modelling are therefore appealing, though we note that presenting this as a binary choice is misleading. Most computational models in use in epidemiology have at least some element of human judgement supporting their structure or usage. Also, human forecasters often make use of approaches such as calculating a base rate of incidences, or extrapolating current trends, which are in reality equivalent to simple models. One explicit method to combine separate human judgement and computational model forecasts with the goal of improving predictive performance is an ensemble. This has been shown to improve performance across model types⁵. Farrow *et al.*⁷, Bosse *et al.*³, Swallow *et al.*⁸ and others suggested additional possibilities in the context of infectious diseases that may also help reduce the amount of human effort required. One approach is to use human forecasts, for example of relevant disease parameters, as an input to computational modelling. Another approach is to use mathematical modelling in explicit combination with human judgement, for example by giving experts the option to make post-hoc adjustments to model outputs. Bosse *et al.*³ proposed asking human forecasters to forecast the effective reproduction number R_t (the average number of people an infected person would infect in turn) based on modelled estimates and to then use this forecast in a mathematical simulation model in order to obtain forecasts for observed case and death numbers.

This paper represents a follow-up study to Bosse *et al.*³ in the United Kingdom with one- to four-week ahead forecasts made over the course of thirteen weeks between May 24 and August 16, 2021. The study period is after the second wave of COVID-19 in the UK (which peaked in January 2021) and falls into a time when restrictions in the UK were gradually lifted as part of the roadmap out of lockdown (with final restrictions lifted on July 19, 2021). Forecasts were elicited from experts and laypeople as part of a public forecasting tournament, the “UK Crowd Forecasting Challenge”, using a web application. All forecasts were submitted to the European COVID-19 Forecast Hub, one of several Forecast Hubs that have been systematically collating forecasts of different COVID-19 forecast targets in the US¹, Germany and Poland^{9,10}, and Europe¹¹. This study aims to investigate whether the original findings in Bosse *et al.*³ with respect to forecaster performance replicate in a different country, in a different

time period, and with an increased number of participants. In addition, it explores the approach proposed in Bosse *et al.*³ to ask participants for a forecast of the estimated effective reproduction number R_t , which is then translated into a forecast of cases and deaths using a simulation model. We describe this approach as human in the loop computational modelling and consider it a formalisation of often practiced manual intervention in computational forecasts.

Methods

Interaction with the European Forecast Hub

The European COVID-19 Forecast Hub¹¹ was launched in March 2021 in order to elicit weekly predictions for various COVID-19 related forecast targets from different research groups. The forecasts evaluated in this study were submitted every Monday before 11.59pm GMT between May 24 2021 and August 16 2021. Forecasts were made for incident weekly reported numbers of cases and deaths from COVID-19 on a national level for various European countries over a one to four week forecast horizon. While forecasts were submitted on Mondays, weeks were defined as epidemiological weeks, ending on a Saturday, and starting on Sunday. Forecast horizons were therefore in fact 5, 12, 19 and 26 days. Submissions to the European Forecast Hub followed a quantile-based format with 23 quantiles of each output measure at levels 0.01, 0.025, 0.05, 0.10, 0.15, . . . , 0.95, 0.975, 0.99. Every week, forecasts submitted to the hub were automatically checked for conformity with the required format and all eligible forecasts combined into different ensembles. Until the 12th of July 2021 the default Hub ensemble (“EuroCOVIDhub-ensemble”) shown on all official Forecast Hub visualisations (<https://covid19forecasthub.eu/>) was a mean ensemble (i.e., the α -quantile of the ensemble is given by the mean of all submitted α -quantiles). From the 29th of July onwards, the default Forecast Hub ensemble became a median ensemble. The median number of models included in the Forecast Hub ensemble for the UK during the study period was 9 for cases and 10 for deaths (see Figure SI.1 in the SI).

Ground-truth data on daily reported test positive cases and deaths linked to COVID-19 were provided by the European Forecast Hub and sourced from the Johns Hopkins University (JHU). Data were subject to reporting artifacts and revisions. All data points were marked as anomalous retrospectively by the European Forecast Hub if in subsequent updates data was changed by more than 5 percent. In August 2022 JHU switched the data source for their UK death numbers from “deaths within 28 days of a positive COVID test” to “Deaths with COVID-19 on the death certificate” and revised all their past data to guarantee consistency. The 2021 UK ground truth death data as it was made available through the European Forecast Hub in 2021 is therefore substantially different and on average lower than the data available as of early 2023. Data revisions are displayed in Figure SI.2 in the Supplementary Information¹². All results presented here were derived based on the original data available in 2021, which were available through the European COVID-19 Forecast Hub GitHub repository (<https://github.com/covid19-forecast-hub-europe/covid19-forecast-hub-europe>).

Human judgement forecasts

Forecasts of incident cases and deaths linked to COVID-19 in the UK were elicited from individual participants every week through a web application (<https://cmmid-lshtm.shinyapps.io/crowd-forecast/>) described in 3. The application is based on R¹³ shiny¹⁴ and is available as an R package called `crowdforecaster`¹⁵. When signing up, participants could self-identify as “experts” if they worked in infectious disease modelling or had professional experience in any related field.

The web application offered participants two different ways of making a forecast, called ‘direct’ (or ‘classical’) and ‘ R_t forecast’. To make a ‘direct’ forecast (as described in more detail in 3), participants selected a predictive distribution (by default a log-normal distribution) and adjusted the median and width of the distribution to change the central estimate and uncertainty at each forecast horizon.

Just as in the previous study, the default forecast shown was a repetition of the last known observation with constant uncertainty around it. The shown distribution was the exponential of a normal distribution with mean $\log(\text{last value})$ and uncertainty set to the standard deviation of the last four changes in weekly log observed forecasts (i.e., as $\sigma(\log(\text{value}_4) - \log(\text{value}_3), \log(\text{value}_3) - \log(\text{value}_2), \dots)$). In addition to information about past observations, participants could see various metrics and data such as the test positivity rate and vaccination rate sourced from Our World in Data¹⁶. Figure SI.3 in the Supplementary Information¹² shows a screenshot of the forecast interface for direct forecasts.

In addition to the ‘direct’ forecasts, we implemented a second forecasting method (‘ R_t forecasts’), where we asked participants to make a forecast of the effective reproduction number R_t . This forecast was made based on a baseline estimate produced by the `EpiNow2`¹⁷ R¹³ package effective reproduction number model which we also used in 3 as a standalone computational model. The estimate produced by `EpiNow2` was shown as the default forecast and could be adjusted by the user. The resulting R_t forecast was then translated into a forecast of cases using the simulation model from the `EpiNow2` R package, which implements a renewal equation based¹⁸ generative process for latent infections. We chose a Gaussian Process prior with mean 0 for the first differences of the effective reproduction number in time, implying that in the absence of informative data the reproduction number would remain constant on average, with uncertainty increasing with the temporal distance to informative data points. Latent infections were convolved with delay distributions representing the incubation period and reporting delay, and assumed to follow a negative binomial observation model with a day of the week effect to produce an estimate of reported cases. This approach has been widely used for short-term forecasting^{3,11} and used to produce reproduction number estimates^{19–21}. Further details are given in the Supplementary Information¹².

To obtain forecasts for deaths, we similarly fit a model that convolved observed and predicted reported cases as implied by the R_t forecast over a delay distributions^{20,21} and scaled

them by a fixed ratio to model the time between a case report and a reported death and the case fatality ratio using the `EpiNow2` R package¹⁷. Further details are given in the Supplementary Information¹².

As R_t -estimates up to at least two weeks prior to the forecast data were uncertain due to their dependence on partially complete observations of underlying infections given the delays from infection to report, we also asked participants to submit an estimate of R_t for the two weeks prior to the current forecast date. Participants were therefore asked to estimate/predict six R_t values, four of them beyond the forecast horizon. In order to obtain sample trajectories needed as input for the simulation model, we drew 1000 samples from the six provided distributions. These samples were ordered and corresponding samples treated as one sample trajectory. Samples for daily values were obtained by linearly interpolating between weekly samples.

Upon pressing a button, participants could see a preview of the evolution of cases implied by their current R_t forecast. However, due to lack of development time, participants could not preview the death forecast implied by their current input for R_t , nor could they influence the estimated case fatality ratio or delay between reported cases and reported deaths. Figure SI.4 in the Supplementary Information¹² shows a screenshot of the forecast interface for R_t forecasts.

Every week, we submitted an ensemble of individual forecasts to the European Forecast Hub. In contrast to the ensemble of human forecasts described in Bosse *et al.*³, we used the quantile-wise median, rather than the quantile-wise mean to combine predictions, drawing upon insights gained from the COVID-19 Forecast Hubs²². We submitted three different ensembles to the Hub: The first one, “epiforecasts-EpiExpert_direct” (here called “direct crowd forecast” or “crowd-direct”) was a quantile-wise median ensemble of all the direct forecasts. “epiforecasts-EpiExpert_Rt” (here called “ R_t forecast” or “crowd-rt”) was a median ensemble of all forecasts made through the R_t interface. “epiforecasts-EpiExpert” (here called “combined crowd ensemble” or “crowd-ensemble”) was a median ensemble of all forecasts together. A participant could enter the combined crowd ensemble twice if they had submitted both a direct and an R_t forecast. Before creating the ensemble, we deleted forecasts that were clearly the result of a user or software error (such as forecasts that were zero everywhere). Our combined crowd ensemble, “epiforecasts-EpiExpert”, but not the other two, entered the official European COVID-19 Forecast Hub ensemble (“EuroCOVIDhub-ensemble”).

The UK Crowd Forecasting Challenge

To boost participation compared to our last crowd forecasting study in Germany and Poland⁷ which struggled in this regard, we announced an official tournament, the “UK Crowd Forecasting Challenge”. Participants were asked to submit weekly predictions for reported cases and deaths linked to COVID-19 in the United Kingdom one to four weeks into the future.

Everyone who had submitted a forecast for targets in the UK during the tournament period from the 24th of May 2021 to the 16th of August 2021 was deemed a participant and eligible for a prize. The first prize was 100 GBP, second prize 50 GBP and third prize 25 GBP. Participant performance was determined using the mean weighted interval score (WIS) on the log scale (see details in the next Section), averaged across forecast dates, horizons and forecast targets. For the tournament ranking, participants who did not submit a forecast in a given week were assigned the median score of all other participants who submitted a forecast that week. The UK crowd forecasting challenge was announced over Twitter and our networks. In addition, we created a project website, <https://crowdforecastr.org>, made weekly posts on Twitter and sent participants who had registered on the online application weekly emails with a reminder and a summary of their past performance. A public leaderboard was available on our website <https://epiforecasts.io>. Participants could choose to make a direct forecast as well as an R_t forecast and were counted as two separate forecasters and eligible for prizes twice. Weekly forecasts had to be submitted between Sunday 12pm and Monday 8pm UK time.

Analysis

We scored forecasts using the weighted interval score²³. For $(1-\alpha)$ -100% prediction interval, the interval score is computed as

$$IS_\alpha(F, y) = (u - l) + \frac{2}{\alpha} \cdot (l - y) \cdot 1(y \leq l) + \frac{2}{\alpha} \cdot (y - u) \cdot 1(y \geq u),$$

where $1(\cdot)$ is the indicator function, y is the true value, and l and u are the $\frac{\alpha}{2}$ and $1 - \frac{\alpha}{2}$ quantiles of the predictive distribution F , i.e., the lower and upper bound of a single prediction interval. For a set of K prediction intervals and the median m , the score is computed as a weighted sum,

$$WIS = \frac{1}{K + 0.5} \cdot \left(w_0 \cdot |y - m| + \sum_{k=1}^K w_k \cdot IS_\alpha(F, y) \right),$$

where w_k is a weight for every interval. Usually, $w_k = \frac{\alpha_k}{2}$ and $w_0 = 0.5$.

The WIS is a strictly proper scoring rule yielding non-negative values, with smaller values implying better performance. A forecaster, in expectation, optimises their score by providing a predictive distribution F that is equal to the data-generating distribution G , and is therefore incentivised to report their true belief. The WIS can be understood as an approximation of the continuous ranked probability score (CRPS, Gneiting *et al.*²⁴) for forecasts in a quantile-based format. The CRPS, in turn, represents a generalisation of the absolute error to predictive distributions. The WIS can be decomposed into three separate penalty components (corresponding to the three terms in the definition of the interval score): forecast dispersion (i.e., uncertainty of forecasts), overprediction and underprediction.

Bosse *et al.*²⁵ recently suggested to transform forecasts and observations using the natural logarithm prior to applying the WIS to better reflect the exponential nature of the underlying

disease process. We, therefore, also compute WIS values after transforming all forecasts and observations using the function $f: x \rightarrow \log(x + 1)$. In the following, we refer to WIS scores obtained without a transformation as “scores on the natural scale”, and WIS values obtained after log-transforming forecasts and observations as “scores on the log scale”. To make scores easier to interpret, we report relative WIS scores, where the average score for a given model was divided by the average score for the European Forecast Hub ensemble (“EuroCOVIDhub-ensemble”). In addition, we computed ranks based on WIS values.

In order to measure probabilistic calibration²⁴, we used the empirical coverage of all central 50% and 90% prediction intervals. Empirical coverage refers to the percentage of observations falling inside any given central prediction interval (e.g., the cumulative percentage of observed values that fall inside all central 50% prediction intervals).

If not otherwise stated, we present results for two-week-ahead forecasts, following the practice adopted by the COVID-19 Forecast Hubs, which found predictive performance to be poor and unreliable beyond this horizon^{1,9,11}. We analysed all forecasts stratified by forecast target (cases or deaths), forecast horizon, and forecast approach. We compared the performance of the direct vs. R_t forecasting approach using instances where we had both a direct forecasts and an R_t forecast from the same person.

For self-reported “experts” and “non-experts”, a simple comparison of scores would be confounded by individual differences in participation and the timing of individual forecasts. We therefore compared the performance of self-reported “experts” vs. “non-experts” by creating and evaluating two modified median ensembles, one including only “experts” and the other only “non-experts”.

Forecasts were evaluated using the `scoringutils`²⁶ package in R. All code and data used for this analysis, including individual-level forecasting data is available at <https://github.com/epiforecasts/uk-crowd-forecasting-challenge>. All code used to submit the forecasts to the European Forecast Hub is available at <https://github.com/epiforecasts/europe-covid-forecast>.

Ethics statement

This study has been approved by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine Research Ethics Committee (reference number 22290). Consent from participants was obtained in written form.

Results

Observed values

The study period (forecasts were made between May 24 and August 16, 2021, for targets between May 29 and September 11, 2021) was characterised by an increase in the number of cases and deaths in the United Kingdom. Reported cases in particular rose rapidly compared to pre-study levels, with a peak on July 17, 2021, followed by a trough and another subsequent increase in numbers. Death numbers remained

almost constant in the first four weeks of the study period, followed by a steady increase until the end of the study period in September 2021. This increase in the case and death numbers coincides with the rise of the Delta variant in the UK at the beginning of May^{27,28} as well as the European Football Championship²⁹. Reported cases were likely influenced by an increased uptake of the NHS COVID-19 app in spring and summer 2021³⁰. An overview of the reported case and death numbers is shown in [Figure 1](#).

Crowd forecast participation

A total number of 90 participants submitted forecasts (more precisely, forecasts were submitted from 90 different accounts, some of them anonymous). Out of 90 participants, 21 self-identified as “experts”, i.e., stated they had professional experience in infectious disease modelling or a related field.

The median number of unique participants in any given week was 17, the minimum was 6 and the maximum was 51. This was higher than the number of participants in [3](#) (which had a median number of 6, a minimum of 2, and a maximum 10). With respect to the number of submissions from an individual participant, we observed similar patterns as [3](#): An individual forecaster participated on average in 2.6 weeks out of 13. The median number of submissions from a single individual was one, meaning that similar to [3](#) most forecasters dropped out after their first submission. Only five participants submitted a forecast in ten or more weeks and only two submitted a forecast in all thirteen weeks, one of whom is an author on this study (S. Abbott). Three other authors participated in the study (S. Funk, N. Bosse, and E. van Leuwwen). A total of 535 forecasts were submitted by human forecasters, 118 (22%) of these were submitted by authors of this study. The number of direct forecasts (median: 13 for cases and 12 for deaths) was higher than the number of R_t forecasts (median: 6 for both cases and deaths) in all weeks (see [Figure 2A](#)). The median number of “non-experts” (11 for cases, 10 for deaths) was higher than the median number of “experts” (8 for cases and deaths) (see [Figure 2B](#)).

Case forecasts

At the beginning of the study period, human forecasters as well as the Forecast Hub ensemble, consistently underpredicted case numbers (see [Figure 5A](#)). All forecasting approaches overshot the peak in case numbers on July 17, 2021, overpredicting case numbers severely in the three weeks after, followed again by a small tendency to underpredict when case numbers rose once more in the 4th week after the peak.

All forecasting approaches exhibited underdispersion when predicting cases, meaning that forecasts on average were too narrow and not uncertain enough. Empirical coverage for case forecasts was below nominal coverage for all forecasting approaches for forecasts more than one week into the future (see [Figure 3E,F](#)). For 50% prediction intervals, empirical coverage was worst for the direct crowd forecasts (0.31), best for the R_t forecasts (0.46) and in between for the Hub ensemble and the crowd ensemble (both 0.38, see [Table 1](#)). For 90%

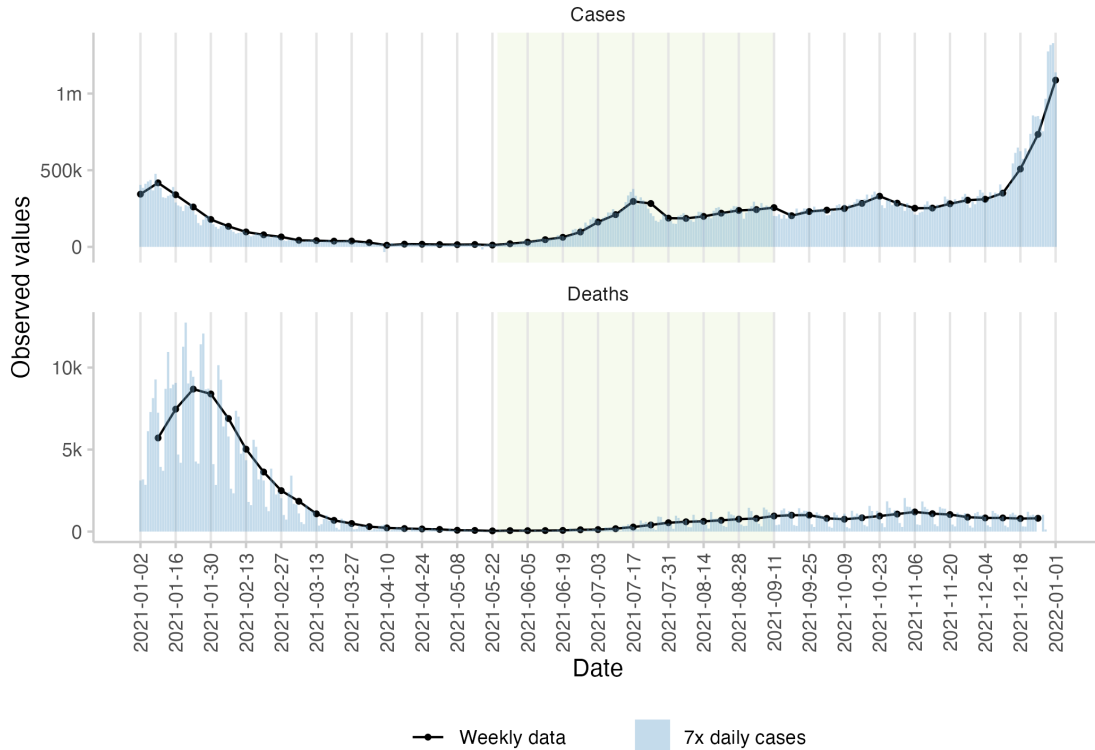


Figure 1. Observed cases and deaths of COVID-19 in the UK. Observed daily (bars) and weekly (black lines and points) numbers of cases and deaths as available through the European Forecast Hub when the study concluded in 2021. The green rectangle marks the study period from May 24 until September 11, 2021. Daily numbers were multiplied by seven in order to appear on the same scale as weekly numbers.

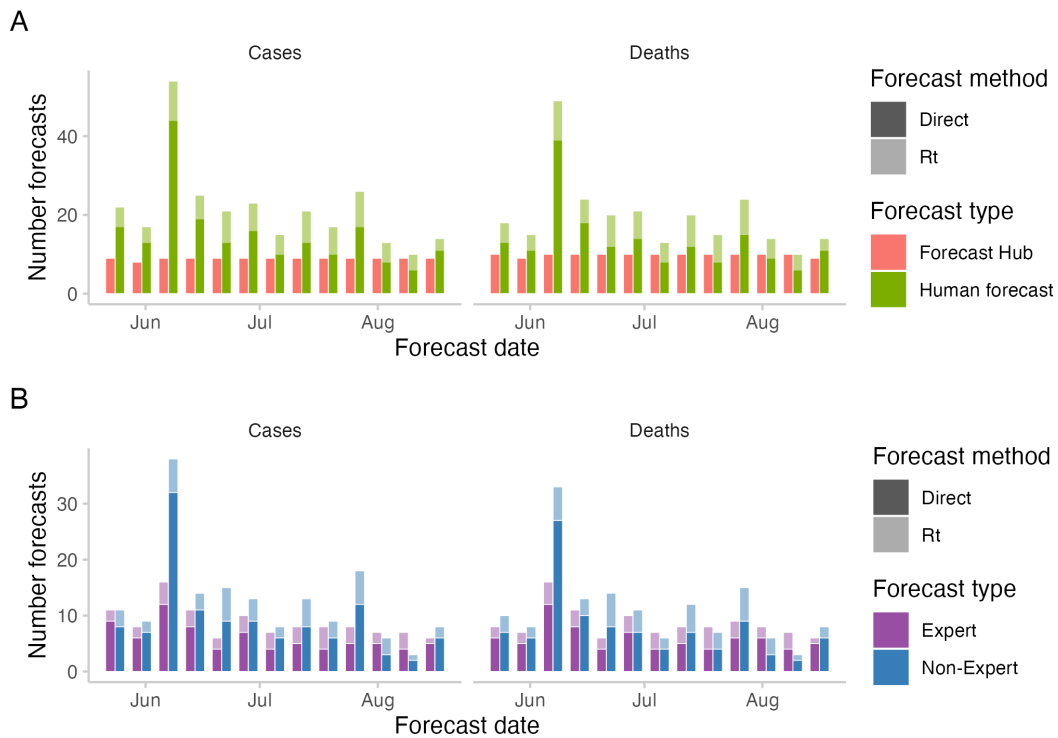


Figure 2. Number of forecasts across the study period. **A:** number of forecasts included in the Hub ensemble and the combined crowd ensemble. **B:** number of forecasts by “experts” and “non-experts”. Expert status was determined based on the participant’s answer to the question whether they “worked in infectious disease modelling or had professional experience in any related field”.

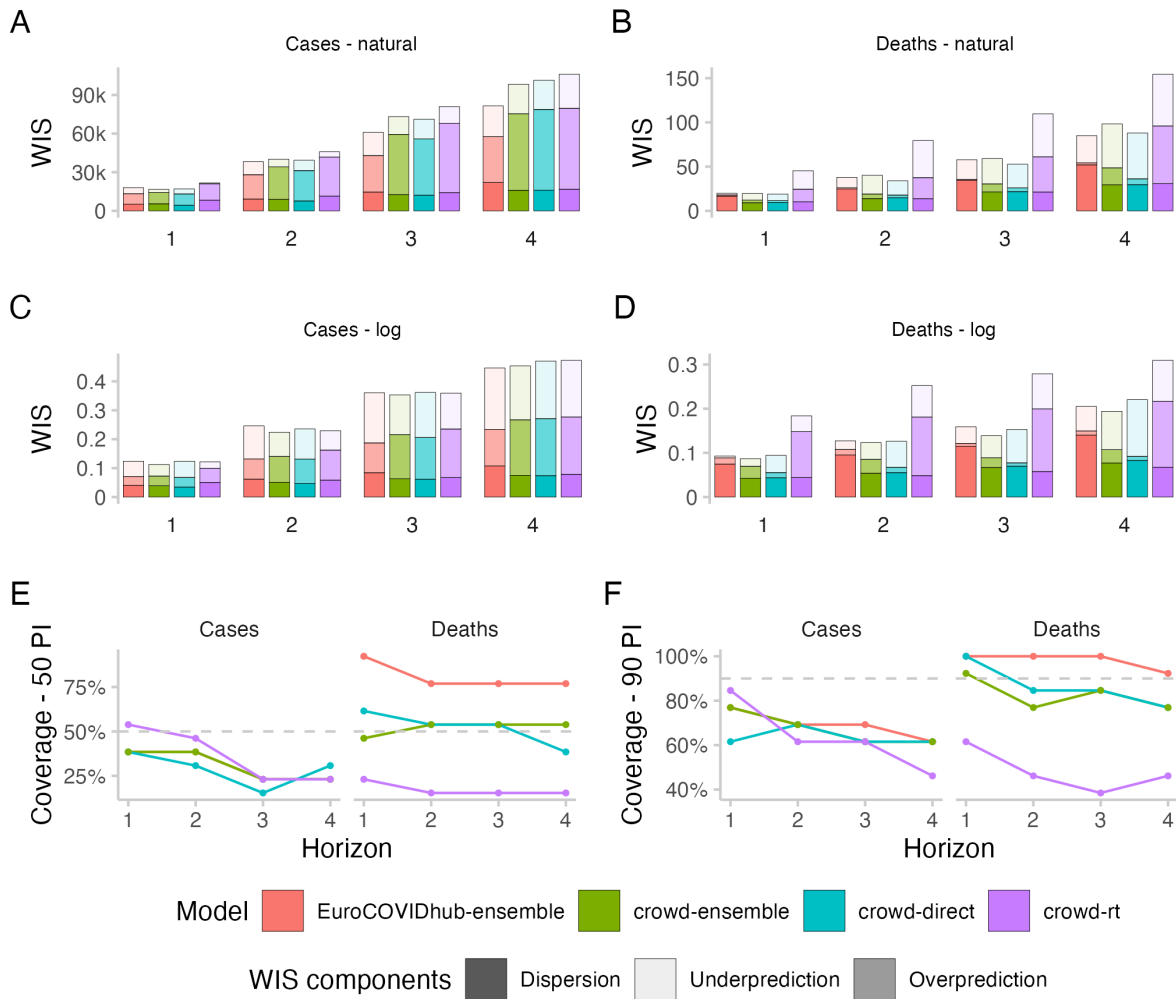


Figure 3. Predictive performance across forecast horizons. A–D: WIS stratified by forecast horizon for cases and deaths on the natural and log scale. E, F: Empirical coverage of the 50% and 90% prediction intervals stratified by forecast horizon and target type. Grey dashed lines denote the nominal coverage that a model should ideally achieve.

Table 1. Performance for two-week-ahead forecasts. Values have been cut to three significant digits and rounded.

Model	Target	WIS - natural			WIS - log scale			Coverage 50%	Coverage 90%
		abs.	rel.	sd	abs.	rel.	sd		
EuroCOVIDhub-ensemble	Cases	38.2k	1	55.6k	0.25	1	0.22	0.38	0.69
crowd-ensemble	Cases	40.1k	1.05	69.4k	0.22	0.91	0.25	0.38	0.69
crowd-direct	Cases	39.3k	1.03	67k	0.23	0.96	0.27	0.31	0.69
crowd-rt	Cases	45.9k	1.2	74.7k	0.23	0.93	0.24	0.46	0.62
EuroCOVIDhub-ensemble	Deaths	37.9	1	26.9	0.13	1	0.04	0.77	1
crowd-ensemble	Deaths	40.2	1.06	41.5	0.12	0.97	0.07	0.54	0.77
crowd-direct	Deaths	33.9	0.89	30.6	0.13	0.99	0.08	0.54	0.85
crowd-rt	Deaths	79.5	2.1	72.7	0.25	1.98	0.13	0.15	0.46

prediction intervals, coverage was worst for the R_t forecasts (0.62) and slightly better for the other approaches (all 0.69). Coverage for all forecasts deteriorated further with increasing forecast horizon (see [Figure 3E,F](#)).

In terms of WIS on the log scale, all human forecasting approaches outperformed the Forecast Hub ensemble for two week ahead forecasts of cases (see [Figure 3](#)). WIS values relative to the Hub ensemble ($=1$) were 0.91 for the combined crowd ensemble, 0.96 for the direct crowd forecasts and 0.93 for the R_t forecasts (see [Table 1](#)). In contrast, in terms of WIS on the natural scale, the Hub ensemble outperformed all human forecasting approaches. Relative WIS values on the natural scale for two week ahead forecasts were 1.05 for the combined crowd ensemble, 1.03 for the direct crowd forecasts and 1.2 for the R_t forecasts. The discrepancy between performance on the log and natural scale can be attributed to case forecasts from the Hub ensemble tending to be lower than forecasts from human judgement approaches (see [Figure 4](#)). On the natural scale, this resulted in smaller overprediction penalties, putting it ahead of human forecasts (see [Figure 3A,C](#)). On the log scale, however, it led to large penalties for underprediction.

Performance of the Hub ensemble relative to the human forecasting approaches improved with increasing forecast horizon (see [Figure 3](#)). For a four-week-ahead forecast horizon, the Hub ensemble outperformed all other approaches both on the log scale (rel. WIS values the human forecasts of 1.02, 1.05, 1.06) and on the natural scale (rel. WIS values of 1.21, 1.25, 1.3) (compare [Table SI.1](#) in the [Supplementary Information](#)¹²).

In terms of relative model ranks for two week ahead forecasts, the Hub ensemble and the R_t forecast showed a higher variance than the combined crowd ensemble and the direct forecasts (See [Figure 5](#)), despite forecasts being about the same or more dispersed (see [Figure 3](#)). Both the Hub ensemble and the R_t forecast were more often in first place than other approaches (4 times each, both on the log and on the natural scale). However, they were also most often in the last place (Hub ensemble: 6 on the log scale and 5 on the natural scale, R_t : 5 on the log scale and 6 on the natural scale). The direct forecasts placed relatively equally in places 1-4. The crowd ensemble never placed fourth, but also had the lowest number of first places (2, both on the log and the natural scale). Aggregated model ranks only changed marginally when switching between the log and the natural scale (see [Figure 5](#)).

When comparing WIS values on the log scale with those on the natural scale, scores were more equally distributed across the study period on the log scale and more weight was given to forecasts in June and July which underpredicted the extent to which case number would rise (see [Figure 4](#)). On the natural scale, the WIS as a measure of the absolute distance between forecast and observation increased or decreased with the magnitude of the forecast target^{23,25}. Average scores were therefore dominated by performance around the peak when

cases were highest, in particular by forecasts made on the 19th of July for the 31st of July (see [Figure 4](#)). For all forecasting approaches, overprediction was the largest contributor to overall scores (see [Figure 3A](#)). On the log scale, underprediction played a larger role (see [Figure 3C](#)). Switching between scores on the log and on the natural scale had the strongest effect on the R_t forecasts, which had a relative WIS value of 0.96 on the log scale and 1.2 on the natural scale. The R_t forecasts tended to be higher than both the direct forecasts and the Forecast Hub ensemble, especially around the peak, leading to high scores on the natural scale, but not on the log scale.

Death forecasts

In the first part of the study period, most forecasting approaches (albeit not the direct crowd forecasts), showed a tendency to overpredict the increase in death numbers (see [Figure 5B](#)). All forecasting approaches started to underpredict death numbers four weeks after the peak in case numbers on July 17, 2021, expecting a consequent drop in deaths that did not occur.

All forecasting approaches except the R_t forecasts showed higher empirical coverage for deaths than for cases (see [Figure 3](#)). Forecasts from the Hub ensemble generally tended to be wider than the human forecasts (see [Figure 4](#) and [Figure 3B,D](#)). For 50% prediction intervals, the Hub ensemble exceeded the nominal coverage noticeably (0.77) (see [Table 1](#)). R_t forecasts failed to get close to nominal coverage (0.15), while the combined crowd ensemble and the direct forecasts had empirical coverage close to nominal coverage (both 0.54). For 90% prediction intervals, the Hub ensemble again exceeded nominal coverage and covered all observations (1) while the R_t forecasts again failed to get close to nominal coverage (0.46). The crowd ensemble exhibited some underdispersion (0.77) while the direct forecasts almost reached nominal coverage for two week ahead forecasts of deaths (0.85).

In terms of WIS on the log scale for two week ahead predictions of deaths, the combined crowd ensemble (0.97) and the direct crowd forecasts (0.99) were marginally ahead of the Hub ensemble, while the R_t forecasts performed noticeably worse (1.98) (see [Figure 3D](#) and [Table 1](#)). For the Hub ensemble, the dispersion component played by far the largest role, while this was less the case for the human forecasts, which got higher penalties from both over- and underprediction. Combining the R_t forecasts and the direct forecasts led to an ensemble that performed better than either of them alone on the log scale despite the poor overall performance of the R_t forecasts. In terms of WIS on the natural scale, only the direct forecasts (0.89) performed better for two week ahead death predictions than the Hub ensemble, while the combined crowd ensemble performed slightly worse (1.06) and the R_t forecasts again noticeably worse (2.1).

In terms of relative model ranks for two week ahead death forecasts, the R_t forecasts took the fourth place most often (9

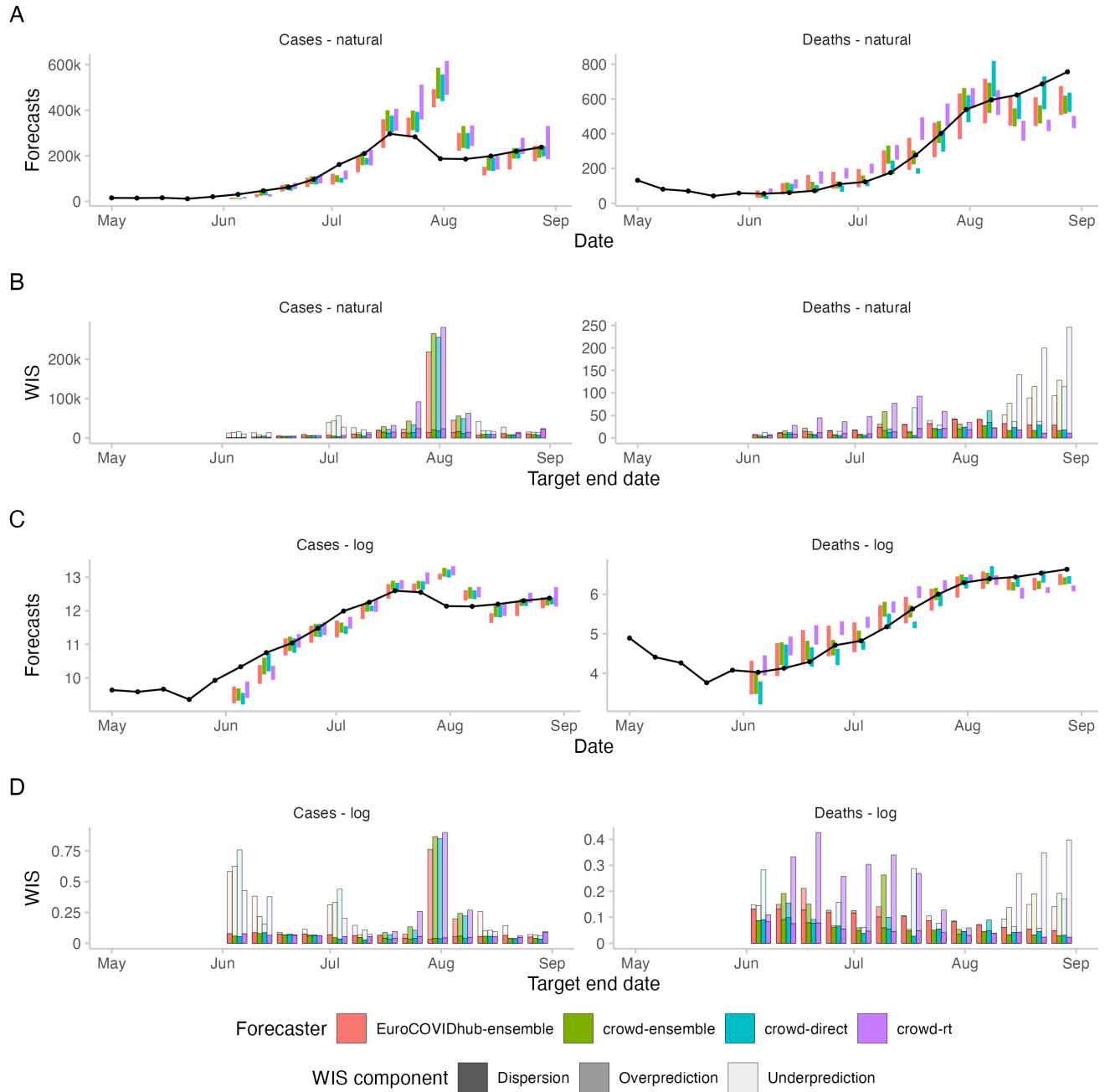


Figure 4. Forecasts and corresponding WIS for 2-week ahead forecasts of cases and deaths from COVID-19 in the UK. A: 50% prediction intervals (coloured bars) and observed values (black line and points) for cases and deaths on the natural scale. **B:** Corresponding WIS values, decomposed into dispersion, overprediction and underprediction. **C:** 50% prediction intervals on the log scale, i.e., after applying the natural logarithm to all forecasts and observations. **D:** Corresponding WIS on the log scale, i.e., the WIS applied to the log-transformed forecasts and observations.

on the log scale and 10 on the natural scale), while the direct forecasts placed first most often (5 on the log scale and 6 on the natural scale, see Figure 5). Again, the crowd ensemble never placed fourth.

When comparing scores on the log and on the natural scale, scores on the log scale were again more evenly distributed across the study period. On the natural scale, high scores were

concentrated around the end of the study period, when death incidences were highest (see Figure 4).

R_t forecasts

For cases, where participants could observe the case forecast implied by their R_t forecast, predictive performance was similar between corresponding direct and R_t forecasts for most forecasters who had submitted both (see Figure 6). For

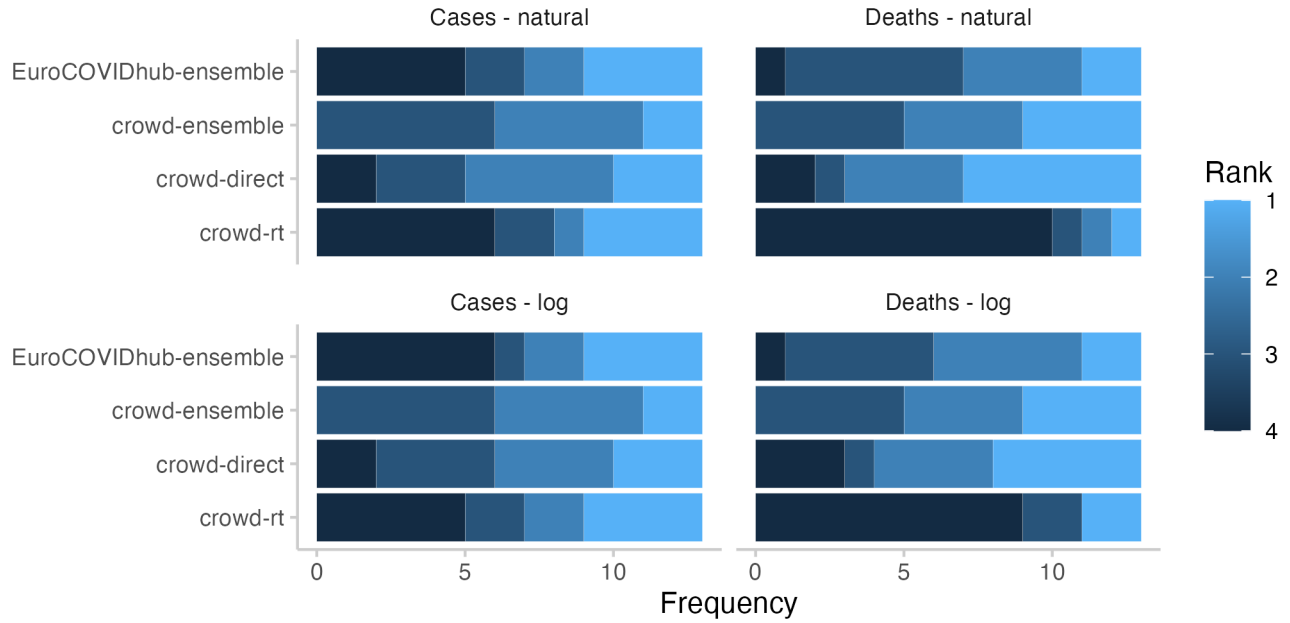


Figure 5. Ranks for all forecasting approaches for two week ahead forecasts. Colours indicate how often (out of 13 forecasts) a given approach got 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th rank.

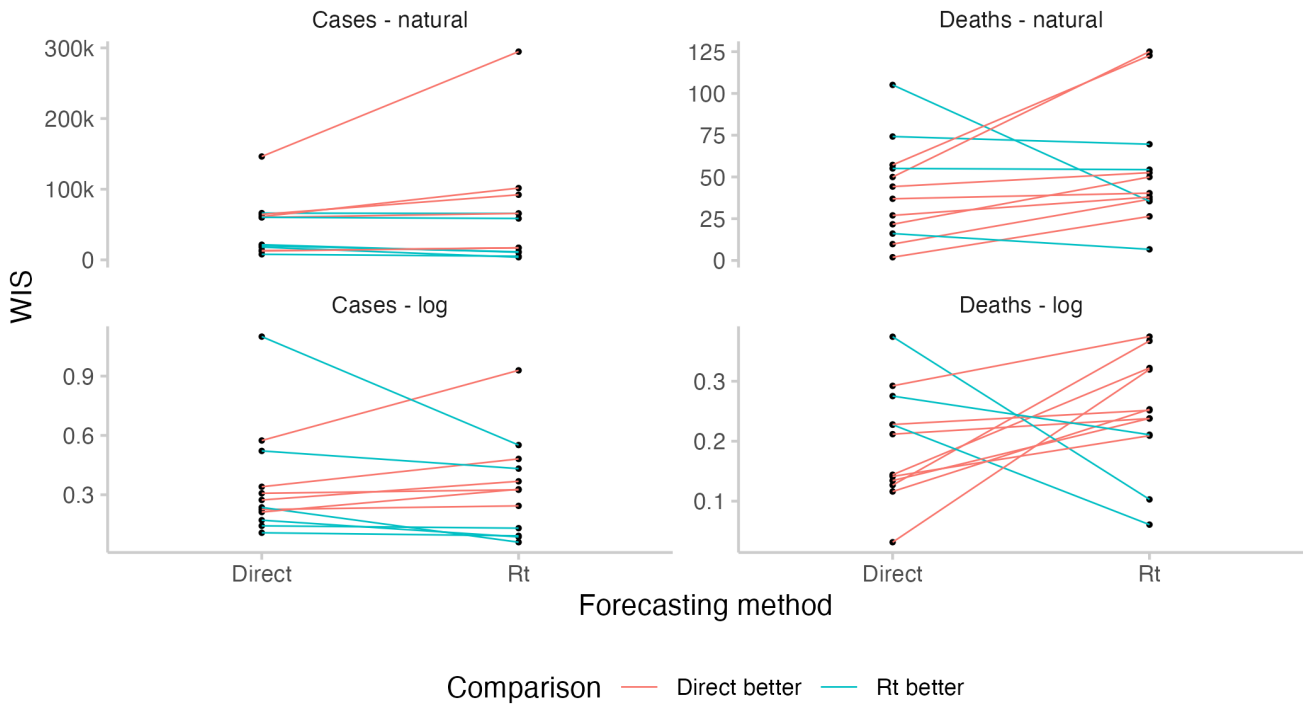


Figure 6. Comparison of predictive performance of individual forecasters using either the direct forecasting or R_t interface. Comparisons are based only on those instances where forecasters have submitted a prediction using both interfaces. The absolute level for a given forecaster relative to others is not meaningful as forecasters differ in the amounts of forecasts they have submitted and when.

deaths, where forecasters could not see the incidence forecast implied by their R_t forecast or manually adjust the case fatality rate, performance of the R_t forecasts was significantly worse. From June to the end of July, R_t forecasts overpredicted deaths

and were noticeable higher than other forecasts, whereas in August, R_t forecasts underpredicted deaths and were substantially lower than other forecasts (see Figure 4). In particular, R_t forecasts for deaths were worse than the corresponding

direct death forecasts for most forecasters (see Figure 6). Changing from the direct forecasting method to R_t forecasting for cases tended to improve scores for better forecasters and decrease scores for worse forecasters, although sample sizes and the size of the observed effect are both small.

Combining direct crowd forecasts and R_t forecasts improved performance on the log scale compared to both direct and R_t forecasts alone across all horizons and target types. This was not the case on the natural scale, where direct forecasts performed better than the R_t and the direct forecasts for both cases and deaths across most horizons. Only for case forecasts four weeks ahead on the natural scale was the combined ensemble better than the direct forecasts. However, even on

the natural scale, performance of the combined ensemble was better than the average of the WIS of direct and R_t forecasts.

Experts and non-experts

A median ensemble of two week ahead forecasts restricted to only those made by either “experts” or “non-experts” (determined based on self-reported experience in infectious disease modelling or a related field) performed worse than the combined crowd example, both for cases and deaths and both on the log scale and on the natural scale (see Figure 7 and Table 2 and Figure 2B for a visualisation of participation). The median number of “non-experts” was 11 for cases and 10 for deaths, which was higher than the median number of “experts”, which was 8 for cases and deaths.

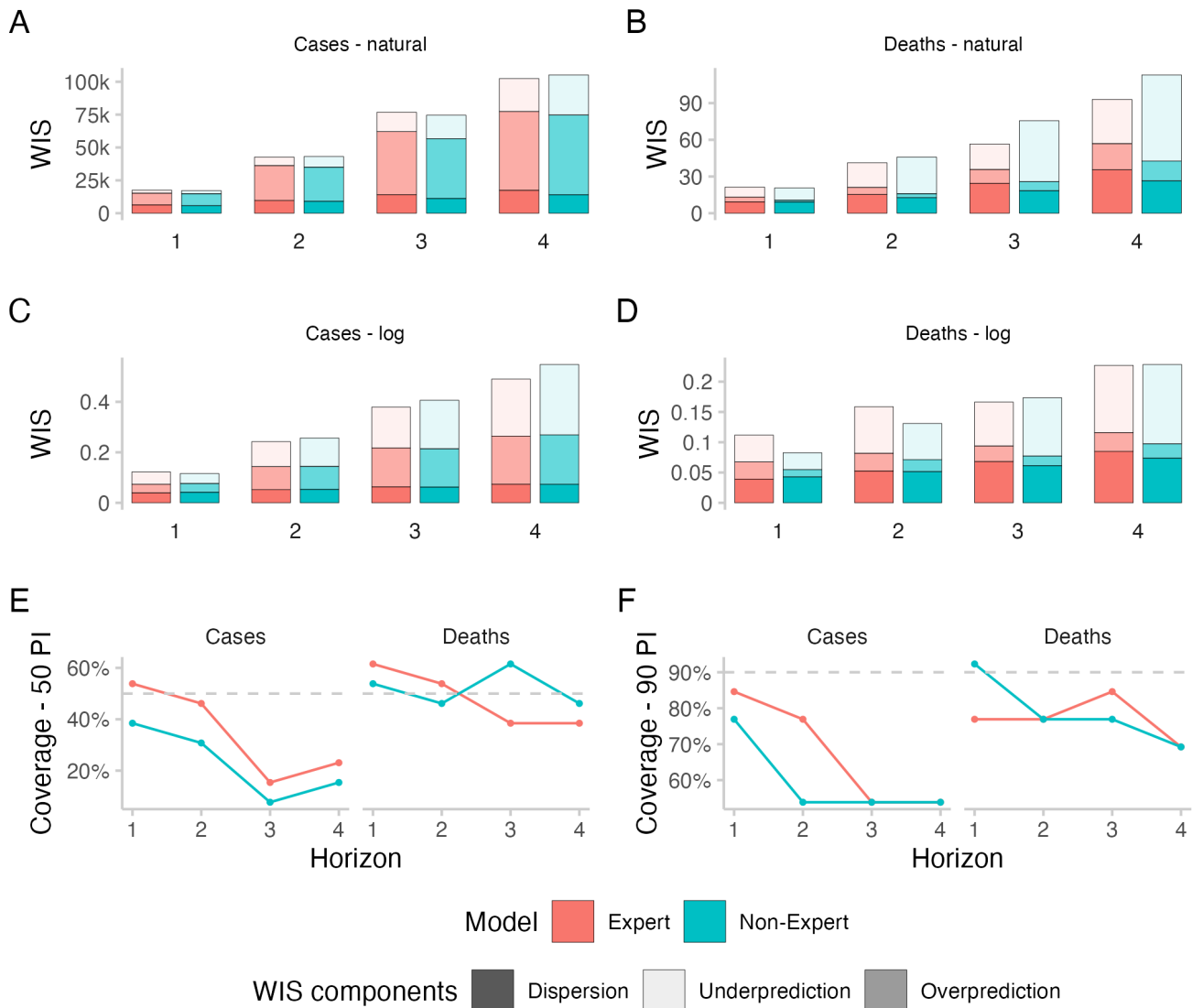


Table 2. Performance for two-week-ahead forecasts of experts and non-experts. Values have been cut to three significant digits and rounded.

Model	Target	WIS - natural			WIS - log scale			Coverage 50%	Coverage 90%
		abs.	rel.	sd	abs.	rel.	sd		
crowd-ensemble	Cases	40.1k	1	69.4k	0.22	1	0.25	0.38	0.69
Expert	Cases	42.7k	1.06	74.9k	0.24	1.08	0.28	0.46	0.77
Non-Expert	Cases	43.1k	1.07	67k	0.26	1.14	0.25	0.31	0.54
crowd-ensemble	Deaths	40.2	1	41.5	0.12	1	0.07	0.54	0.77
Expert	Deaths	41.2	1.03	41.8	0.16	1.29	0.15	0.54	0.77
Non-Expert	Deaths	45.9	1.14	56.8	0.13	1.06	0.08	0.46	0.77

When comparing two week ahead forecasts from “experts” and “non-experts”, the ensemble of “experts” was better calibrated (see Figure 7). For cases, “experts” achieved better scores than “non-experts” both on the log and on the natural scale. WIS values *relative to the combined crowd ensemble* were 1.08 for “experts” and 1.14 for “non-experts” on the log scale and 1.06 for “experts” and 1.07 for “non-experts” on the natural scale (see Table 2). For deaths, “experts” performed worse than “non-experts” in terms of WIS on the log scale (WIS relative to the combined crowd ensemble: 1.29 vs. 1.06), but better on the natural scale (1.03 vs. 1.14). Both the “expert”- and the “non-expert”-ensemble had similar proportions of R_t forecasts (mean of 32% for “experts” and 32.2% for “non-experts” across cases and deaths together).

For four weeks ahead forecasts of cases, the combined ensemble outperformed both “experts” and “non-experts” on the log scale as well as on the natural scale. “Experts” performed better than “non-experts” both on the log scale (WIS value relative to the combined crowd ensemble of 1.08 for “experts” vs. 1.21 for “non-experts”) and on the natural scale (1.04 vs. 1.07). For four week ahead forecasts of deaths, “Experts” performed better than “Non-experts” on the log scale (1.17 vs. 1.18) as well as on the natural scale (0.95 vs. 1.15).

Discussion

In this paper, we presented a follow-up study to Bosse *et al.*³, analysing human judgement forecasts of cases of and deaths from COVID-19 in the United Kingdom submitted to the European COVID-19 Forecast Hub between the 24th of May and the 16th of August 2021. Human judgement forecasts were generated using two different forecasting approaches, a) direct forecasts of cases and deaths and b) forecasts of the effective reproduction number R_t , which were based on estimates from an open source effective reproduction number estimation model and also relied on this model, along with a second model relating cases and deaths from the same source, to simulate reported cases and deaths.

Just like Bosse *et al.*³ and Farrow *et al.*⁷, this study struggled to retain a large number of participants. Focused public outreach efforts such as creating a dedicated website, announcing an official tournament, providing a public leaderboard, sending weekly emails with details on past performance and weekly announcements on Twitter, did noticeably increase participation compared to the previous study in Germany and Poland. Nevertheless, retaining participants beyond the initial recruitment proved challenging, and most forecasters only submitted a single forecast. McAndrew *et al.*⁵ had a higher number of participants, suggesting that making use of existing forecasting platforms that have access to a large existing user base and greater resources may be helpful in recruiting a larger number of participants, though these platforms lack the flexibility and software tooling to run a novel study of this kind in real-time as things stand.

The study period was marked by an increase in both case and death numbers. Case numbers rose quickly compared to the pre-study period, peaking on July 17, 2021, followed by a trough and a subsequent further increase. Forecasts displayed a pattern where forecasters tended to underpredict while case numbers were rising, and overpredict while case numbers were falling, particularly following a peak. Similar patterns have been observed previously in other short-term forecasts of COVID-19 (see e.g. 3,9,11).

Death numbers during the study period were increasing more slowly than during the previous peak in January 2021, coinciding with the beginning of vaccination efforts and a growing immunity in the population²⁸. The peak in case numbers in July 2021 was not followed by a subsequent peak in death numbers (but rather a steady incline over several months), suggesting some decoupling of case and death numbers such as would be expected from effects of immunity that are stronger in preventing severe disease than any symptoms. Forecasters tended to overpredict death numbers in the beginning, while underpredicting them in the end, expecting death numbers to fall after the peak in cases. The study period coincides with

the rise of the Delta variant in the UK^{27,28}, as well as the 2021 European Football Championship, which likely shifted the age distribution towards younger cases²⁹.

In line with results from previous work^{3,11}, we found almost all forecasts for cases to be underdispersed (i.e., too narrow/overconfident). Empirical coverage for death forecasts was higher than the corresponding coverage for cases for all forecasting approaches except the R_t forecasts.

For forecasts of cases two weeks ahead, performance of the human judgement forecasts was better than the European Forecast Hub ensemble in terms of WIS on the log scale, and worse in terms of WIS on the natural scale. This was linked to a tendency of the Hub ensemble to make lower case predictions, which led to lower overprediction penalties on the natural scale, but noticeably higher underprediction penalties on the log scale. For forecasts of deaths two weeks ahead, direct human forecasts and the combined crowd ensemble performed better than the Hub ensemble on the log scale. On the natural scale, the combined crowd ensemble performed worse than the Hub ensemble, while the direct crowd forecasts still performed better. R_t forecasts for deaths performed noticeably worse than all other approaches both on the log and on the natural scale.

In their original study, conducted in Germany and Poland, Bosse *et al.*³ found that humans outperformed an ensemble of computational models when predicting cases, but not when predicting deaths. They hypothesised that computational models might have an advantage over human forecasters when predicting deaths, benefiting from the ability to model the delays and epidemiological relationships between different leading and lagged indicators. McAndrew *et al.*⁵ similarly found in their study that humans performed comparably to an ensemble of computational models for cases, but not for predictions of deaths of COVID-19. Results in our study do not directly support this pattern, but given the low number of observations also do not provide strong evidence against it. In this study, the combined crowd ensemble performed better than the Hub ensemble on both cases and deaths on the log scale, and worse on the natural scale. Direct forecasts, which would be most comparable to the forecasts in Bosse *et al.*³, performed worse than the Hub ensemble on cases and better on deaths. During the study period, the case fatality ratio (CFR) likely changed quite quickly compared to the pre-study period. On the one hand, the rise of the Delta variant in the UK, which was first detected in the UK in March 2021 was estimated to have a higher CFR than previous variants^{27,31} (although Perez-Guzman *et al.*²⁸ estimated it to be lower than that of the Alpha variant). On the other hand, the ongoing COVID-19 vaccination and growing natural immunity in the population had decreasing effects on the CFR. In addition, the age distribution of cases changed (hence modifying the overall CFR) throughout study period in Summer 2021, in parts related to the European Football Championship²⁹. Overall, the CFR was lower than during previous peaks of COVID-19²⁸. One possible hypothesis for the relatively good performance of human forecasts for deaths compared to previous studies might be that some models submitted

to the Forecast Hub may have been more negatively affected by the changes in CFR during the study period than human forecasters or have been slower to update. The present study only saw a steady increase in death numbers, which one could argue is relatively easy to predict, making it difficult to compare forecast performance with performance in other settings. A confounding factor, when comparing results from this study and the one in Germany and Poland directly, is that we used a median ensemble to combine individual forecasts here, while the earlier study used a mean ensemble.

Importantly, in this study our combined crowd ensemble (“epiforecasts-EpiExpert”) contributed to the European Forecast Hub ensemble. This is in contrast to the study by Bosse *et al.*³, where they compared crowd forecasts against a hypothetical ensemble excluding the crowd forecasts. In the original study, including the crowd forecasts improved the Hub ensemble on average (however, the overall number of models included in the German and Polish Hub ensemble was smaller than the number of models in the European Forecast Hub ensemble). In our study, comparisons between our crowd ensembles and the Forecast Hub ensemble are therefore confounded by the fact the combined crowd ensemble was included in the Forecast Hub ensemble, possibly leading us to underestimate differences between the two.

This study explored a novel method of forecasting infectious diseases that combines a human forecast of the estimated effective reproduction number R_t with epidemiological modelling to map the R_t forecast to a forecast of cases and deaths. One appeal of this approach is that the forecaster can directly forecast the generative process and how they believe it is affected by interventions and changes in behaviour. Computational modelling then takes care of dealing with details such as reporting delays, generation intervals, day of the week periodicity, and the relationship between different indicators. This could help reduce cognitive load, and make it easier to synthesise various sources in information into a single forecast, at least for forecasters who have an intuitive understanding of R_t . Though we note all of these modelling steps and the construction of the model itself requires the human constructing the model to make assumptions. Anecdotally, forecasters familiar to the authors reported high satisfaction with the forecasting experience. One important limitation of the approach is that R_t values were estimated based on reported numbers of cases. This is susceptible to changes in testing and reporting and estimated R_t values may not accurately reflect the true underlying infectious disease dynamics. In our study, R_t forecasts of cases were comparable to direct forecasts, with a tendency for good forecasters to improve when using the R_t method and worse forecasters to deteriorate even more. Sample sizes, however, were very low. Given that forecasters could simulate cases in the app, it is also possible that forecasters were in fact directly forecasting cases. R_t forecasts of deaths (which forecasters could not see in the app) were noticeably worse than direct forecasts of deaths. The computational model underlying our R_t forecasts of deaths estimated a constant CFR and delay distribution using the last 4 weeks of data, therefore updating relatively slowly to

new circumstances and the CFR was assumed to be constant over the four week forecast horizon. However, as mentioned before, the CFR likely evolved during the study period. Forecasters had no way of inspecting the death forecast implied by their R_t forecast, likely impacting predictive performance. They also had no way to adjust the CFR manually, likely impacting forecast accuracy. Allowing human forecasters to see their implied death forecasts, as well as giving them the ability to adjust the CFR and other model parameters would have increased complexity of the interface, but would have solved issues with the assumptions of the underlying model. Alternatively, a more complex model could have been used which allowed for time-varying CFR estimates and forecast these changes over the forecast horizon though this approach may still have struggled to cope with the rapid changes observed during the study period. Another important limitation is that we didn't have full sample trajectories of the R_t -values predicted by forecasters. Rather, trajectories had to be constructed based on the distributions provided for the different forecast horizons, which likely negatively affected forecasts. One potential way to disentangle the effect of the convolution model from the R_t forecasts would have been to use the human forecasts for cases as an input to the second computational model, which could then have simulated deaths. Future work could expose forecasters to different combinations of these options with the aim of separating effects of the user interface from ones related to the structure of the underlying computational model.

Combining forecasts from “experts” and “non-experts” led to better performance for forecasts two weeks ahead for cases as well as deaths, and both on the log scale and on the natural scale. Combining direct forecasts and R_t forecasts led to better performance on the log scale, but not on the natural scale. This suggests that combining different forecasts can be beneficial in many instances, although there may be differences in terms of WIS on the log and the natural scale. In particular, WIS values on the natural scale may be more susceptible to models that would tend to overshoot and miss the peak, while WIS on the log scale may be more affected by models that underpredict and miss upswings²⁵.

Past studies of expert forecasts of COVID-19⁶ had found predictions from experts to outperform those of non-experts. In our study, an ensemble of self-reported “experts” outperformed an ensemble of “non-experts” when forecasting cases two weeks ahead, both on the log scale and on the natural scale. When forecasting deaths two weeks ahead, “experts” performed worse than “non-experts” on the log scale, but better on the natural scale. Forecasts for “experts” tended to be better calibrated than non-experts. However results should be taken with care considering relatively low sample sizes (median of 11 “non-experts” for cases and 10 for deaths, median of 8 “experts” for cases and deaths) and given that expert status was self-reported. Furthermore, we only asked for professional involvement in a field related to infectious disease

modelling, not specifically for familiarity with modelling of COVID-19 in the UK, and only offered participants a binary choice. However, as we used ad-hoc recruitment in our networks many of these self-identified experts are likely to be infectious disease modellers.

It is plausible to hypothesise that the default baseline shown to forecasters in the app may influence their predictions. One could also interpret the R_t -forecast as a way of showing a different baseline forecast to the forecaster compared to the direct forecast. In our study, the default was a naive forecast with the median equal to the last value and uncertainty equal to the standard deviation of the last four changes in weekly log values. Bosse *et al.*³ did not find conclusive evidence to that effect, but also did not analyse the question in detail. We suggest further research be done into potential priming effects that a default forecast can have on users.

Overall, results of our study should be taken with caution due to several important limitations. Firstly, our study was restricted to one location and to a relatively short period of thirteen weeks. Secondly, there were many confounding factors that likely influence results. These include the fact that different participants made forecasts at different points in time (with the median forecaster only submitting a single forecast) and that subgroups of interest (e.g. “experts”, or R_t forecasts) had different numbers of forecasters. In most instances, differences in scores between forecast approaches were small compared to the variance of scores within a single approach. In addition, there were many researcher degrees of freedom that could influence findings, for example how individual forecasts were combined to create an ensemble. Results were influenced by choices made during the evaluation with, for example, some conclusions depending on forecast horizon and the transformation used prior to scoring. Highlighting this, prizes to the human forecasters were paid out based on the combined WIS on the log scale across all horizons and forecast targets. Had we chosen to instead measure WIS on the natural scale, or to forecast only cases and continue to score on the log scale, rankings and payouts would have been different.

Conclusions

The results of our study are broadly consistent with previous studies on human judgement forecasting of COVID-19 and suggest that human crowd ensembles and an ensemble of computational models are able to produce forecasts of similar quality. One interpretation of these findings is that a mixed crowd of human forecaster can produce a viable alternative or complement to an ensemble of mathematical models created by experts. An alternative interpretation is that an ensemble of automated models can produce forecasts over the course of several years that are on par with that of an engaged crowd of human forecasters. This study, and all previous studies, comparing human judgement forecasts and computational models only ran over short periods of time and the majority of them struggled with recruitment and upkeep. Meanwhile,

COVID-19 Forecast Hubs have attracted continuous submissions for almost three years and were able to consistently provide forecasts of comparable quality.

Our findings do not suggest that humans are necessarily at a general disadvantage compared to computational models at predicting reported deaths, but evidence in both directions is limited and this is made particularly complex as our study took place during a period of time when CFR estimates were changing rapidly. Despite evaluations being public, it remains a challenge to properly incentivise contributors to Forecast Hubs to regularly update their forecasting methodology in order to maximise utility, predictive performance, or both. Combining human judgement and epidemiological modelling by mapping R_t forecasts to case and death numbers has not yielded competitive forecasts for deaths in this study. However, we only presented a prototype of a forecasting approach, which, while having appealing properties, proved challenging to implement. Subsequent iterations and improvements could likely achieve better results. More research is required to obtain a better understanding of the role of subject matter expertise in infectious disease forecasting. Similarly, it would be interesting to explore the effects on predictive accuracy of providing forecasters with additional qualitative real-time information such as detailed descriptive reports that enhance the forecasters' understanding of the overall context beyond the numerical data that was visible in our application. Our results underline that it is difficult to evaluate forecast performance devoid of context that helps inform what a good or a bad forecast is. Different ways to look at the data let different forecasts appear better or worse. Forecast evaluation therefore either needs to be clearly informed by the needs of forecast consumers to determine what a good forecast is, or it needs a broad array of perspectives to provide a wholistic picture as we have attempted to present in this work. Furthermore, evaluating forecasts post-hoc leaves the researchers with many degrees of freedom to make decisions that affect which models look good and there is a risk of allowing for motivated reasoning. More emphasis should be put on measures

that prevent this, e.g. by establishing common standards for evaluations, pre-registering studies, and making it a norm to display a variety of standard metrics.

Data availability

All data and code are available publicly under a MIT license under <https://github.com/epiforecasts/uk-crowd-forecasting-challenge> and <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7897257>. The data has been published separately here: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7897289>. Supplementary Information¹² to this manuscript is available at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7897513>.

Author contributions

NIB contributed to the conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, software development, validation, visualization, and original draft preparation of the manuscript, as well as its review and editing. SA contributed to the conceptualization, data curation, investigation, methodology, software development, supervision, and review and editing of the manuscript. JB contributed to the supervision, review, and editing of the manuscript. EvL contributed to the conceptualization, supervision, and review and editing of the manuscript. AC contributed to the conceptualization, supervision, and review and editing of the manuscript. SF contributed to the conceptualization, funding acquisition, project administration, supervision, and review and editing of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgements

We thank all forecasters for their participation and want to congratulate the three winners of the forecasting challenge: Russell Bradshaw, Sebastian Funk (an author of this study), and Akira Endo. All winners donated their prizes. We also thank Daniel J. McDonald and Hongru Du for their kind and thoughtful reviews which have helped improve the manuscript substantially.

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Version 1

Reviewer Report 20 February 2024

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Hongru Du 

¹ Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

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Yes

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Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

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Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: AI in public health, Infectious disease modeling

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 17 October 2023

<https://doi.org/10.21956/wellcomeopenres.21467.r67709>

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Daniel J. McDonald

¹ Department of Statistics, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

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Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Epidemic forecasting; Statistics

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.



Open Peer Review

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Version 2

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Daniel J. McDonald 

Department of Statistics, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

The authors responded carefully and effectively to the comments in my previous report. I have no further reservations.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Epidemic forecasting; Statistics

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Version 1

Reviewer Report 20 February 2024

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Reviewer Report 17 October 2023

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Comments on this article

Version 1

Author Response 12 Mar 2024

Nikos Bosse

Link to the [formatted version](#) of the response to reviewers.

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Author Response 12 Mar 2024

Nikos Bosse

Response to reviewers

Reviewer 1 - Daniel J. McDonald This manuscript describes the results of a crowd forecasting challenge conducted during the summer of 2021 in the United Kingdom. Participants were asked to predict Covid-19 cases and deaths in the UK during the period across a collection of forecast horizons and to provide uncertainty along with point predictions. The participants could (and were encouraged to) participate weekly, with a cash incentive. The results are somewhat mixed in terms of success of the study, with potentially the largest barrier being participant adherence (similar to related work). Nonetheless, participant submissions were (on average) of comparable accuracy to the EuroCOVIDhub-ensemble. The manuscript is well-written and provides a detailed and thorough discussion of the results, highlighting successes and drawbacks. It also serves as a strong template, illustrating current best-practices, for other work evaluating these sorts of forecasts. A few (minor) suggestions for improvement are listed below. We thank you for your kind and thoughtful comments and your contributions that have helped improve the paper substantially.

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We added a new [Figure 1](#) which displays an overview of the observed data.

We updated the introduction and added the following: This paper represents a follow-up study to Bosse et al. [3] in the United Kingdom with one- to four-week ahead forecasts made over the course of thirteen weeks between May 24 and August 16, 2021. The study period is after the second wave of COVID-19 in the UK (which peaked in January 2021) and falls into a time when restrictions in the UK were gradually lifted as part of the roadmap out of lockdown (with final restrictions lifted on July 19, 2021). In addition, we added a new subsection to the Results section, reading: The study period (forecasts were made between May 24 and August 16, 2021, for targets between May 29 and September 11, 2021) was characterised by an increase in the number of cases and deaths in the United Kingdom. Reported cases in particular rose rapidly compared to pre-study levels, with a peak on July 17, 2021, followed by a trough and another subsequent increase in numbers. Death numbers remained almost constant in the first four weeks of the study period, followed by a steady increase until the end of the study period in September 2021. This increase in the case and death numbers coincides with the rise of the Delta variant in the UK at the beginning of May [27, 29] as well as the European Football Championship [28]. Reported cases were likely influenced by an increased uptake of the NHS COVID-19 app in spring and summer 2021 [31]. An overview of the reported case and death numbers is shown in [Figure 1](#). We also added a paragraph to the results subsection on case forecasts as well as death forecasts: At the beginning of the study period, human forecasters as well as the Forecast Hub ensemble, consistently underpredicted case numbers (see [Figure 1A](#)). All forecasting approaches overshot the peak in case numbers on July 17, 2021, overpredicting case numbers severely in the three weeks after, followed again by a small tendency to underpredict when case numbers rose once more in the 4th week after the peak. And: In the first part of the study period, most forecasting approaches (albeit not the direct crowd forecasts), showed a tendency to overpredict the increase in death numbers (see [Figure 1B](#)). All forecasting approaches started to underpredict death numbers four weeks after the peak in case numbers on July 17, 2021, expecting a consequent drop in deaths that did not occur. In addition, we added the following to the Discussion: The study period was marked by an increase in both case and death numbers. Case numbers rose quickly compared to the pre-study period, peaking on July 17, 2021, followed by a trough and a subsequent further increase. Forecasts displayed a pattern where forecasters tended to underpredict while case numbers were rising, and overpredict while case numbers were falling, particularly following a peak. Similar patterns have been observed previously in other short-term forecasts of COVID-19 (see e.g. [11, 9, 3]). Death numbers were increasing more slowly than during the previous second wave peak in January 2021, coinciding with the beginning of vaccination efforts and a growing immunity in the population. The peak in case numbers in July 2021 was not followed by a subsequent peak in death numbers (but rather a steady incline over several months), suggesting some decoupling of case and death numbers such as would be expected from effects of immunity that are stronger in preventing severe disease than any symptoms. Forecasters tended to overpredict death numbers in the beginning, while underpredicting them in the end, expecting death numbers to fall after the peak in cases. The study period coincides with the rise of the Delta variant in the UK [27, 29], as well as the 2021 European Football Championship, which likely shifted

the age distribution towards younger cases [28]. We also added a sentence to the Discussion regarding the effect of the study period:

The present study only saw a steady increase in death numbers, which one could argue is relatively easy to predict, making it difficult to compare forecast performance with performance in other settings.

1. One author is mentioned in the body as having participated (presumably as an expert), while another won the challenge (according to the Acknowledgements). How many of the authors participated in the challenge (and how many of the total submissions are they responsible for)? It is worth being more forthcoming about this as well as perhaps analyzing how this participation impacts the results.

This is a great point. We added the following sentence to the Introduction: Three other authors participated in the study (S. Funk, N. Bosse, and E. van Leeuwen). A total of 535 forecasts were submitted by human forecasters, 118 (22%) of these were submitted by authors of this study.

1. The CFR discussion (in the Discussion) is relevant, but could be clarified. Some statements about "changes" should be supported more convincingly (is this from literature, some estimate not shown, etc). Additionally, it's assumption as constant for the R_t task (described in the Discussion) seems less important than the fact that the implied Death forecast wasn't shown (described in the Methods). I suspect that changing CFR is less important for the accuracy of the forecasts than the period of study, so these probably deserve at least equal treatment.

We updated the parts of the Discussion related to the CFR to try and make it a bit clearer: During the study period, the case fatality ratio (CFR) likely changed quite quickly compared to the pre-study period. On the one hand, the rise of the Delta variant in the UK, which was first detected in the UK in March 2021, was estimated to have a higher CFR than previous variants [27, 30] (although [29] estimated it to be lower than that of the Alpha variant). On the other hand, the ongoing COVID-19 vaccination and growing natural immunity in the population had decreasing effects on the CFR. In addition, the age distribution of cases changed (hence modifying the overall CFR) throughout the study period in Summer 2021, in parts related to the European Football Championship [28]. Overall, the CFR was lower than during previous peaks of COVID-19 [29]. We also updated the Discussion to make it a bit clearer that the fact that forecasters could not see their implied Death forecast likely was a relevant factor that impacted performance: Forecasters had no way of inspecting the death forecast implied by their R_t -forecast, likely impacting predictive performance.

1. The comparison to the EuroCOVIDhub-ensemble is illustrative, but it would help to compare with the individual forecasters as well. Figure 4, for example, is not particularly illuminating, but perhaps with a larger sample of (almost certainly worse) forecasts, it would serve to further emphasize the relative accuracy of the human judgement forecasts. Related, because these judgement forecasts were submitted to the Euro COVID hub, they are presumably included in the hub-ensemble? How might this impact your results about relative performance?

We agree that it would be very interesting to analyse the performance of individual forecasters as

well. Such an analysis could for example focus on the differences between human forecasters and compare that against the variability of forecasts from model-based predictions included in the COVIDhub-ensemble. However, we feel such an analysis is slightly beyond the scope of this paper since in our comparative analysis we're treating both the crowd forecasts and the hub forecasts as ensembles. You raise an important point about the fact that our forecasts were included in the COVIDhub-ensemble, affecting the comparison. Based on our previous work (<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1010405>) we expect the inclusion of our forecasts in the Hub ensemble to a) improve the performance of the Hub ensemble on average and b) lead us to underestimate differences between our forecasts and a hypothetical Hub ensemble without our forecasts. We added the following to the subsection "Human judgement forecasts" in the "Methods" section: Our combined crowd ensemble, "epiforecasts-EpiExpert", but not the other two, entered the official European COVID-19 Forecast Hub ensemble ("EuroCOVIDhub-ensemble"). In addition, we added the following to the discussion: Importantly, in this study our combined crowd ensemble ("epiforecasts-EpiExpert") contributed to the European Forecast Hub ensemble. This is in contrast to the study by Bosse et al. [3], where they compared crowd forecasts against a hypothetical ensemble excluding the crowd forecasts. In the original study, including the crowd forecasts improved the Hub ensemble on average (however, the overall number of models included in the German and Polish Hub ensemble was smaller than the number of models in the European Forecast Hub ensemble). In our study, comparisons between our crowd ensembles and the Forecast Hub ensemble are therefore confounded by the fact the combined crowd ensemble was included in the Forecast Hub ensemble, possibly leading us to underestimate differences between the two.

1. It is possibly described in Reference 3, but it would be interesting to examine the priming effects of the initially displayed "Baseline" forecast (reasonable to defer to future work). If the intervals were wider, would the judgement forecasts be better calibrated? If they sloped up would the forecasters be more likely to predict an increase? To some degree the Rt version is a different type of "priming" (as shown in SI.4).

We think this is an interesting point and added a paragraph to the Discussion: It is plausible to hypothesise that the default baseline shown to forecasters in the app may influence their predictions. One could also interpret the Rt-forecast as a way of showing a different baseline forecast to the forecaster compared to the direct forecast. In our study, the default was a naive forecast with the median equal to the last value and uncertainty equal to the standard deviation of the last four changes in weekly log values. Bosse et al. [3] did not find conclusive evidence to that effect but also did not analyse the question in detail. We suggest further research be done into potential priming effects that a default forecast can have on users. Reviewer 2 - Hongru Du This manuscript extends the investigation presented in reference 3, focusing on applying human judgment forecasts for COVID-19 cases and deaths within the United Kingdom. These human-generated forecasts were provided in two distinct styles: a) direct predictions and b) Rt-based forecasts. These forecasts' findings were then compared to those from the EuroCOVIDhub-ensemble. The overall quality of the paper is commendable, with its content being coherent and its main points effectively communicated. Below are further comments: Thank you very much for your kind remarks and your helpful comments. The assumptions for the Rt forecast need a more precise description. Given that the reported cases represent merely a subset of all infections, estimating Rt based on these reported cases may not accurately reflect the true Rt value. It's essential to clarify how this limitation is addressed in the forecast model. Thank you for raising

this important point. We added the following sentence to the Discussion to clarify this: One important limitation of the approach is that R_t values were estimated based on reported numbers of cases. This is susceptible to changes in testing and reporting and estimated R_t values may not accurately reflect the true underlying transmission dynamics. The benefits of human-based forecasting should be more prominently emphasized. I think the primary advantage of such forecasts lies in the human ability to understand a broader spectrum of information, particularly crucial insights that are difficult to quantify and input as numerical data. For instance, the period under review coincided with the spread of the Delta variant across Europe. Suppose experts were furnished with early official reports detailing the relative infectiousness or severity of the Delta variant. Could this have enhanced the ability of human forecasters to identify pivotal turning points, such as those occurring in early June? Exploring an alternative approach by providing human forecasters with more real-time, descriptive information, rather than solely relying on numerical data like test positivity and vaccination rates, can be an interesting extension of current work. This is a good point. We added the following to the discussion: Similarly, it would be interesting to explore the effects on predictive accuracy of providing forecasters with additional qualitative real-time information such as detailed descriptive reports that enhance the forecasters' understanding of the overall context beyond the numerical data that was visible in our application.

One minor comment about Figures 2 E and F is what the grey dash line means and why the Ensemble model is not showing in E for cases. E and F both have all four models/ensembles included. It may be a bit hard to see at first glance because some models share the same coverage values and lines therefore overlap. We updated the Figure caption to make explicit what the dashed lines represent: Predictive performance across forecast horizons. A-D: WIS stratified by forecast horizon for cases and deaths on the natural and log scale. E, F: Empirical coverage of the 50% and 90% prediction intervals stratified by forecast horizon and target type. Grey dashed lines denote the nominal coverage that a model should ideally achieve.

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