

# UK to support rest of the world to find COVID-19 virus variants

- UK genomics expertise and capacity to be offered worldwide to find new variants of SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19
- The 'New Variant Assessment Platform' will help countries to identify changes in the virus, while providing an early warning of new mutations that could endanger the UK
- New commitment to improve Global Health Security comes as the UK holds G7 presidency this year

The UK will offer its world-leading genomics expertise to identify new variants of the virus that causes COVID-19 to countries who do not have the resources to do so.

The announcement comes as part of a speech the Health Secretary will deliver at Chatham House. As part of the UK's presidency of the G7 this year, the Health Secretary will outline his vision for a stronger, more collaborative and effective global health system, not just in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, but to ensure the international community is better prepared for future threats.

Countries will be offered UK capacity to analyse new strains of the virus through the launch of the New Variant Assessment Platform which will be led by Public Health England (PHE) working with NHS Test and Trace and academic partners as well as the World Health Organization's SARS-CoV-2 Global Laboratory Working Group. This supports the Prime Minister's 5-point plan, as outlined at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) last year, to protect humanity from another pandemic through a shared approach to global health security.

In due course, it will be led by the National Institute for Health Protection (NIHP) and will involve PHE laboratories and staff as well as academic partner capabilities.

They will be working directly on samples provided from abroad or will provide expert advice and support remotely where the partner country already has some capabilities in this area but requests further assistance. The offer could include training and resources as well as personnel and equipment.

Countries will be able to apply for assistance by contacting the World Health Organization where an existing channel does not already exist with the UK.

This vital work will combat the spread of coronavirus by identifying more COVID-19 variants around the world to keep the global community one step ahead of any mutations.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock will say:

This pandemic has shown that the foundations of so many of the

exciting experiences that make life worth living are contingent not just on our health, or the health of our neighbours, but the health of people across the world.

The new variants of coronavirus have demonstrated this once again so we must work to promote health security right across the world.

Our New Variant Assessment Platform will help us better understand this virus and how it spreads and will also boost global capacity to understand coronavirus so we're all better prepared for whatever lies ahead.

The UK has carried out nearly half of all SARS-CoV-2 genome sequences submitted to the global database, and this capability helped PHE's scientists identify the variant in Kent, informing new measures to tackle the spread of the virus.

Dr Isabel Oliver, Director of Public Health England's National Infection Service, said:

We know that the virus will evolve over time and certain mutations could potentially cause the virus to spread faster, make people sicker, or possibly affect how well vaccines work. Genomic testing is crucial to our efforts to control the virus – it allows us to keep an eye on how the virus is changing and to respond before it's too late.

This new initiative will bring Public Health England's cutting-edge science to countries that have little or no ability to sequence and analyse COVID-19 virus strains themselves. It will also give us crucial early warning of new variants emerging around the world that might endanger the UK.

As the UK holds the presidency of the G7, improving global health security will be a key theme as we encourage countries to work collaboratively both to tackle this pandemic and ensure stronger preparedness for further health threats.

New variants of coronavirus can be threats to the progress made so far with treatments and vaccines, so it is vital that the global community is able to react to them quickly and decisively.

The UK's genomic expertise will guide the global response to controlling their spread and saving lives.

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# New legislation to help ensure fair treatment for armed forces

- the Armed Forces Bill will enshrine the Armed Forces Covenant in law and help prevent service personnel and veterans being disadvantaged when accessing services like healthcare, education and housing
- the Bill will improve the Service Justice System for our personnel wherever they are operating.

New legislation to help ensure armed forces personnel, veterans and their families are not disadvantaged by their service when accessing key public services will be introduced in the House of Commons on the today (26 January 2021).

The Armed Forces Bill will embed the Armed Forces Covenant into law by introducing a legal duty for relevant UK public bodies to have due regard to the principles of the Covenant, a pledge to ensure the UK Armed Forces community is treated fairly.

Focusing on healthcare, housing and education, it will increase awareness among public bodies of the unique nature of military service, improving the level of service for members of the armed forces community, no matter where in the UK they live.

## **Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:**

For the first time ever we are putting into law the Armed Forces Covenant. This will break new ground, ensuring we live up to the principles of the Covenant and treating all UK Armed Forces personnel, veterans and their families with fairness.

It builds on progress we have already made, helping veterans into work through our guaranteed interview scheme, supporting service families with childcare, and providing personnel with more choice of accommodation.

## **Minister for Defence People and Veterans Johnny Mercer said:**

More than 6,000 businesses, charities and public organisations have already pledged to support veterans, service personnel and their families by signing the Armed Forces Covenant. This a fantastic feat and has changed lives up and down the country.

Today, we are going further still to help ensure all personnel across the UK have equal access to vital services like healthcare, education and housing. This is no less than those who have risked their lives defending this country deserve.

Since the launch of the Armed Forces Covenant in 2011, many businesses have committed to offering part-time or flexible working patterns to reservists, military spouses and partners. Many have also pledged to offer free training and to actively recruit veterans.

Enshrining the Covenant in law also builds on a number of initiatives implemented over the last year to support service leavers and veterans. These include the Defence Transition Services organisation which was established to assist those facing the greatest difficulties successfully transition to civilian life after leaving service. 800 GP practices in England are also now accredited as veteran friendly. This helps doctors provide extra support to ex-military personnel who may face additional challenges when returning to civilian life.

## **Maintaining the effectiveness of the Service Justice System**

The Bill will also help deliver a series of improvements to the Service Justice System, ensuring personnel have a clear, fair and effective route to justice wherever they are operating. These include:

- providing clearer guidance for prosecutors on how serious crimes committed by service personnel in the UK should be handled, placing a Duty on the Director of Service Prosecutions and the Director of Public Prosecutions to agree a protocol where there is concurrent jurisdiction to provide clearer guidance to assist those independent decisions
- creating an independent body to oversee complaints, overseen by a Service Police Complaints Commissioner who will ensure there is an independent line of redress if someone is dissatisfied with the outcome of a complaint
- making the complaints system more efficient by bringing the time given to personnel to lodge an appeal in line with timings offered in the private sector.

## **Other measures in the Bill**

- the Bill will also renew the Armed Forces Act 2006, following the Armed Forces Acts of 2011 and 2016
- as well as strengthening the Service Justice System and Armed Forces Covenant, the Armed Forces Bill will provide flexible working for Reserves and extend posthumous pardons for those convicted of abolished service offences.

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## **[UN and UK sign agreement to promote space sustainability](#)**

The agreement will help nations ensure that outer space remains safe and

sustainable for future generations.

The increasing complexity of space missions, the emergence of large constellations of satellites and the increased risks of collision all affect the long-term sustainability of space activities. And there are currently approximately 170 million objects in orbit – mainly debris – which could collide with satellites vital to services we use every day.

In 2019, the United Nations Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS), of which the UN Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA) is Secretariat, adopted the Guidelines for the Long-Term Sustainability of Outer Space Activities (LTS guidelines), which provide a framework to ensure the safe and sustainable use of space. The Guidelines were subsequently welcomed by the United Nations General Assembly.

Following today's announcement, UK funding of £85,000 will support international efforts to promote space sustainability by identifying examples of the sustainable use of outer space through a series of events and outreach efforts. This project will also inform future UNOOSA capacity-building efforts to promote the future sustainability of outer space, and it will encourage all actors to implement the LTS guidelines to the fullest extent possible.

Science Minister Amanda Solloway said:

As the Earth's orbit becomes congested with potentially hazardous debris, it's critical that we work with our international partners to secure the continued safety and sustainability of space.

I am therefore delighted the UK is partnering with the UN to implement and promote these vital standards to all emerging and established space-faring nations, helping to ensure that outer space remains open for our next generation of astronauts.

This partnership with the UK Space Agency is the first time the UK has funded a project with UNOOSA. It will enable the UN to raise global awareness on this important issue and foster the global governance of outer space based on international law.

It is also the first project to be funded from the international element of the UK Space Agency's National Space Innovation Programme, launched in October 2020 to support collaborative projects between UK organisations and international partners.

UNOOSA Director Simonetta Di Pippo said:

Global investment, and dependency, on space activities are increasing rapidly. It is essential the international community comes together to make the long-term sustainability of space activities a reality. The LTS Guidelines are a landmark expression

of global consensus and effective multilateralism on this crucial subject.

UNOOSA is working to put sustainability at the heart of global space operations. This project, generously funded by our UK partners, will help us 'connect the dots'; converting the successes of multilateral policy-making into practice, and help deliver the predictability the global space economy needs to ensure its sustained growth in the years to come.

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## [37th Universal Periodic Review: UK statement on Georgia](#)



The United Kingdom welcomes significant progress made by Georgia on human rights since its last review, and its ongoing co-operation with the OHCHR.

The UK welcomes the creation of an independent agency to investigate human rights violations by law enforcement officers and the creation of a domestic violence unit. However we remain concerned that the judicial reform programme has not been completed. Further reforms are also needed to ensure protection of minorities, including LGBT, women and children; and safeguard media

independence.

We recommend that Georgia:

1. Ratify and implement the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention.
2. Adopt an open, merit-based process when selecting national candidates for UN Treaty Body elections.
3. Implement all the recommendations of the recent OSCE/ODIHR election report as soon as possible to restore public confidence in democratic institutions and processes.

Thank you.

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## **52 illegal nets and traps seized during a pandemic**

In just nine months, from March 2020 to December 2020, 52 illegal fishing traps and nets were retrieved.

26 were found in Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire, 14 in Suffolk and Essex, and 12 in Norfolk.

These figures show an increase compared to 2019 where a total of 30 traps were seized across East Anglia over the course of the whole year.

The illegal instruments trap eels, crayfish, water voles, otters and coarse fish. They are a significant risk to wildlife and fish stocks.

Ian Hirst, Fisheries Team Leader for Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire said:

Despite Covid-19 our work to protect wildlife and the environment has remained, while observing social distancing rules.

We would like to thank the members of the public who reported these devices to our incident hotline number 0800 80 70 60.

Also, a special thank you to the agencies and river groups who have helped us recover some of the illegal nets and traps.

We urge the public to report all sightings of these instruments to our incident hotline number so we can investigate.

Lesley Robertson, Enforcement Team Leader for Essex, Norfolk & Suffolk said:

Traps and nets can often be seen from the river bank, and identified by a rope tied to the bankside.

We are very grateful to those who report these illegal traps. Without that information, illegal traps and nets might still be there causing damage to wildlife.

We encourage the public to keep their eyes peeled for any suspicious fishing activities and to call us on our incident hotline 0800 807060.

Our officers are regularly out patrolling the river banks and will not hesitate to take enforcement action.

There are strict rules when it comes to trapping or fishing for crayfish, eels, salmon, sea trout, lamprey and smelt.

You would need an Environment Agency licence to do so – more details here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/permission-to-trap-crayfish-eels-elvers-salmon-and-sea-trout>

All sightings of illegal nets or traps need to be reported to 0800 807060 so we can investigate.