

PHE investigating a novel strain of COVID-19

The strain was identified due to Public Health England's (PHE) proactive and enhanced monitoring following the increase in cases seen in Kent and London. The variant has been named 'VUI – 202012/01' (the first Variant Under Investigation in December 2020).

As of 13 December, 1,108 cases with this variant have been identified, predominantly in the South and East of England.

PHE is working with partners to investigate and plans to share its findings over the next 2 weeks. There is currently no evidence to suggest that the strain has any impact on disease severity, antibody response or vaccine efficacy.

High numbers of cases of the variant virus have been observed in some areas where there is also a high incidence of COVID-19. It is not yet known whether the variant is responsible for these increased numbers of cases. PHE will monitor the impact of this in the coming days and weeks.

It is not uncommon for viruses to undergo mutations; seasonal influenza mutates every year. Variants of SARS-CoV-2 have been observed in other countries, such as Spain.

This variant includes a mutation in the 'spike' protein. Changes in this part of the spike protein may result in the virus becoming more infectious and spreading more easily between people.

Dr Susan Hopkins, Test and Trace and PHE Joint Medical Advisor, said:

We are investigating a new strain of SARS-CoV-2, predominantly in Kent and the surrounding areas. It is not unexpected that the virus should evolve and it's important that we spot any changes quickly to understand the potential risk any variant may pose. There is currently no evidence that this strain causes more severe illness, although it is being detected in a wide geography especially where there are increased cases being detected.

The best way to stop infection is to stick to the rules – wash our hands, wear a face covering and keep our distance from others.

The recommended control measures to limit the spread of the new variant continue to be testing, following the existing guidance and abiding by the restrictions, including 'Hands, Face, Space' and limiting your number of contacts.

Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 14 December 2020

Welcome back to Downing Street for today's coronavirus briefing.

Today I'm joined by Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty and Professor Kevin Fenton, Public Health England's Regional Director for London.

Sadly, the news on the spread of the virus is not good.

The latest number of cases of coronavirus is rising once more.

We've seen an increase of 14% in the last week and the number of patients admitted to hospital across the UK has risen again too.

The average number of new cases reported each day is 18,023 which is up on last week.

Today, there are 16,531 COVID patients in hospitals across the UK – which is also up.

And sadly, on average each day over the past week 420 deaths have been reported

Once again, the spread of this disease is not even across the country. There have been sharp rises in South Wales, London, Kent, Essex and parts of the East and South East of England.

In some areas, the doubling time is now 7 days, this rise is amongst people of all age groups – not just school-age children.

I'm particularly concerned by the rising rates amongst the over 60s, the number of people in hospital which is also rising. That's even before that we factor in the increases in last week's rates.

And we know, through painful experience: more cases lead to more hospitalisations and sadly, more deaths.

To think that this link and this chain is broken is wrong and dangerous.

We've seen it time and time again elsewhere this year when cases rise, the pressure on hospitals mount. And so to then sadly, do the number of people who die from coronavirus

To stop this, we need to act fast.

I can tell you that because of the testing and surveillance systems that we built, we've also identified a new variant of this virus which may be associated with the faster spread in some areas.

We deal with this variant just like we do with all the others and this underlines how important it is for us to be vigilant.

The vaccine is being rolled out – and it's wonderful to see that tens of thousands of people have had their jabs, their first jabs and it's also very good to see that the vaccine, as of today, is being rolled out by GPs in England and to care homes in Scotland.

Help is on its way. But we're not there yet.

To control this deadly disease while the vaccine is being rolled out, we all have a role to play.

Everyone should minimise their social contact, because that's how we can control the spread of this disease.

Turning to London and south and west Essex, and south Hertfordshire – in these areas we have seen sharp exponential rises in the past week we have taken swift and decisive action to protect the NHS and save lives even ahead of the formal review point on Wednesday.

We must act now.

So, from one minute from midnight on Wednesday morning these areas will move into Tier 3 – the very high alert level.

I know this is not the news people wanted – it's a blow to so many people who have made plans and to businesses that will be adversely affected too.

But we know from experience: the best thing to do in the face of this virus is to act fast and not wait to see the growth continue.

And we do not rule out further action.

This rise in transmission – as well as the new variant of COVID – should be a warning to us all that – even after such a difficult year – we must stay vigilant.

People of all ages can spread this disease and around 1 in 3 people don't display any symptoms at all. But can still spread it.

We should never lose sight of our own role in this – our personal responsibility.

Each and every one of us to respect the rules where you are don't ease up on those simple steps that keep us safe: like hands, face, and space. The social distancing that we need. And to come forward and get a test.

This moment is a salutary warning for the whole country – this isn't over

yet.

Please play your part and do all you can to stop the spread of this disease.

I'll now turn to Professor Whitty to turn to the data and the details.

London, South Essex, and South Hertfordshire to move to Tier 3 restrictions

- Tier 3 Restrictions will apply in all 32 London boroughs and the City of London, parts of Essex and parts of Hertfordshire from the beginning of Wednesday 16 December
- Latest data shows an exponential rise in cases as well as rising local hospital admissions which will soon put additional pressure on already overstretched NHS capacity

All 32 London boroughs and the City of London, and parts of both Essex and Hertfordshire will be moved to Tier 3 restrictions, coming into effect from the beginning of Wednesday 16 December, the government has announced today.

The areas that are being moved to Tier 3 are:

- all of London's 32 boroughs and the City of London
- in Essex: Basildon, Brentwood, Harlow, Epping Forest, Castle Point, Rochford, Maldon, Braintree, Chelmsford – and two unitary authorities Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea Borough Councils
- in Hertfordshire: Broxbourne, Hertsmere, Watford and Three Rivers

The latest epidemiological data shows an exponential rise in confirmed cases in these areas, necessitating emergency action ahead of the scheduled review point on 16 December.

Since the end of national restrictions, the situation in London, part of Essex and South Hertfordshire has deteriorated. New cases have continued to rise and hospital admissions have increased. Without urgent action this trend would continue at an increasingly rapid rate, leading to a rise in hospital admissions and deaths in the following two weeks, hitting the NHS at its busiest time of year. Latest figures from the ONS showed almost 1 in 3 people in England show no symptoms of having the virus but are still able to pass it on- requiring everyone to play their part to prevent the situation worsening.

The London weekly case rate at 225 per 100,000 people is already the highest regional rate in the country. Havering has the highest rates in London, at 471 per 100,000. These rates do not include the most recent days of

incomplete data which show the sharpest rises.

In South Essex, case rates are greater than 200 per 100,000 in 10 out of 14 local authorities and are increasing across the area, with cases in Basildon reaching 563 per 100,000. In South Hertfordshire case rates are greater than 150 per 100,000 in 4 out of the 5 local authorities bordering London and have increased by 10% or more over the last 7 days. Broxbourne's cases have reached 358 per 100,000.

As of 11 December there were 2,212 hospital beds occupied by COVID-19 patients and 261 mechanical ventilation beds occupied by COVID-19 patients in London, up from 1,766 occupied hospital beds and 242 occupied ventilation beds on 6 December. Daily hospital admissions in London for COVID-19 have increased from 179 on 6 December to 277 on 11 December.

All available data has been reviewed and assessed.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock said:

I know that this is difficult news. I know it will mean plans disrupted, and that for businesses affected, this will be a very significant blow.

So this action is absolutely essential, not just to keep people safe, but because as we've seen early action can help prevent more damaging and longer lasting problems later

Professor Kevin Fenton, London Regional Director for Public Health England, said:

The number of COVID-19 cases in London has increased significantly over the past two weeks and we continue to experience the highest case rates of anywhere in the country.

We are now in a situation of exponential growth which, if left unchecked, would lead to a rapid escalation in cases and hospitalisations that could overwhelm our NHS services over the festive period and into the New Year.

Whilst no-one wants to see London under tighter restrictions, the stark reality of the situation means we have no choice. Londoners have shown fantastic resilience in combating this virus to date and we all now have a key role to play in limiting its impact on ourselves and our loved ones over the coming weeks.

London boroughs, City of London and the named parts of Essex and Hertfordshire will be eligible for the ongoing rollout of community testing for those living under Tier 3 restrictions to further tackle the spread of the virus. Further details will be set out shortly.

The government has already confirmed on Friday that a targeted testing drive had begun for secondary school and college students in parts of North East London, Essex and Kent.

The government has made it a national priority that education and childcare settings should continue to operate as normal as possible during the coronavirus outbreak. This remains the default position for all areas irrespective of local restriction tiers.

The Chief Medical Officer has been clear that schools should remain open and has highlighted the damage caused by not being in education to children's learning, development and mental health, which greatly outweighs any other risks. Children are at very low risk from the virus, and staff are not at higher risk than those working in other sectors.

These restrictions, alongside the other parts of Essex and Hertfordshire and all other areas in England, will continue to be formally reviewed as planned on Wednesday 16 December.

Windrush compensation scheme overhauled

The Home Secretary has always been clear that she will listen to feedback to make the scheme as effective as possible so that everyone eligible for compensation receives the money they deserve.

Individuals affected by Windrush will now receive a minimum of £10,000 compensation through the Impact on Life category once their claim has been approved. This is 40 times the minimum award currently available. This will be paid as a new early preliminary payment as soon as someone applying on their own behalf or on behalf of a deceased relative can show any impact on their life under the terms of the scheme. They won't have to wait for their whole application to be assessed.

In addition, the Home Secretary has significantly increased payments at all levels within the Impact on Life category with the maximum available rising from £10,000 to £100,000 for eligible cases, with an option to go higher in exceptional circumstances. These higher level awards will be made once the whole application has been assessed.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

Today I am announcing significant changes to the Windrush Compensation Scheme so that those affected will now receive significantly more money, much more quickly.

I have always said that I will listen and act to help those who suffered terrible injustices and today's changes are an important step in rebuilding trust and moving forward together.

The Home Office will start to issue some offers of preliminary payments this week and will begin making payments under the new rules from 1 January 2021. We will ensure that:

- individuals directly affected themselves and their families and estates who have a pending applications will be considered for either a preliminary or final payment in the first 3 months of 2021
- we will begin to review all cases where an offer or payment has already been made and increase that in line with the new rules – applicants will be advised of the timeframes involved
- we are also removing the 12-month cap on compensation for lost earnings meaning that people will be compensated for the actual period that they were out of work in all circumstances
- full details on eligibility and guidance on the changes will be published following the announcement

Permanent Secretary Matthew Rycroft said:

The Windrush Compensation Scheme needed to be improved so victims receive the compensation they rightfully deserve as quickly as possible and at the right level.

We are making significant changes so individuals won't have to wait for their whole application to be assessed before they start receiving money.

We will continue to listen to anyone affected by Windrush to ensure the scheme works for them.

Bishop Derek Webley said:

The Windrush Working Group is glad to have collaborated with the Home Office and others to support these important and much needed changes to the existing compensation scheme, and are delighted that they will be implemented so swiftly.

Many will benefit from the relief that these new payments will provide, and begin to move forward with their lives with hope and determination.

The current compensation scheme was set up at pace and became operational in April 2019 so claims could be assessed immediately. It has paid out more than £2 million and a further £1 million has been offered.

From the outset of the scheme, caseworkers have been instructed to ensure everyone who makes a claim receives the maximum compensation possible under the scheme's rules. This is continuing with the revamped scheme.

Today, the Home Office has also opened the £500,000 [Windrush Community Fund](#) for bids.

Community and grassroot organisations can bid for up to £25,000, in 2 separate phases, to make sure all people affected by Windrush are aware of the support available through the Windrush Compensation Scheme and Windrush Scheme.

Voice4Change England will be administering the fund. They work with a large number of black, Asian and minority ethnic community groups and partners across the UK.

In addition, We Are Digital have been announced as the new claimant assistance provider for the Windrush Compensation Scheme. We Are Digital will deliver the assistance through their strong links with community organisations such as libraries, town halls and religious groups who will support individuals going through the compensation scheme application process.

New Law Passed Will Make Voting in UK General Election Fairer

NEW LAW PASSED WILL MAKE VOTING IN UK GENERAL ELECTIONS FAIRER

- Parliamentary Constituencies Act receives Royal Assent and becomes law
- Constituencies across the UK will be updated and have a near equal number of electors
- Every vote will count the same, delivering manifesto commitment for fairer elections

Every vote cast in a general election will carry equal weight, after new legislation passed today will make constituencies across the UK more equal in size.

The Government's Parliamentary Constituencies Act has received Royal Assent, which means the geographical boundaries of the UK's 650 constituencies will be redrawn to each contain a near equal number of eligible voters.

The updated constituencies will reflect significant changes in demographics, house building and migration – the current ones having been defined using outdated data from two decades ago.

Constitution Minister, Chloe Smith, said:

"Every voter deserves to have confidence that their vote counts the same, no matter where it is cast. This assurance is long overdue and today's Act delivers exactly that.

"Up-to-date, more equally sized constituencies is a sensible policy that will make our elections fairer, ensuring that people from all four nations of the UK have equal representation in Parliament."

Reviews of UK parliamentary constituencies are undertaken by four judge-led and independent bodies – the Boundary Commissions for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

The Government's new legislation will strengthen the independence of the process further, ensuring reviews take place every eight years and the subsequent proposals are implemented automatically. This will stop any potential for political interference or further delays to updating constituencies, protecting fair representation of the British people for the future.

Starting their review in January 2021, the Boundary Commissions will use the most up-to-date data on the current UK electorate available, to determine the average number of electors that will be in each constituency and their new boundaries. This will take into account five protected constituencies which must remain as they are out of geographical necessity.

The Commissions' proposed new electoral maps will be subject to extensive scrutiny, each undergoing three separate periods of consultation, where members of local communities can submit written suggestions for consideration and attend public hearings. The Commissions must present their final reports to the Speaker of the House of Commons by 1 July 2023.

Updated and equalised constituencies is one of a number of manifesto commitments this Government is already progressing in its first year, to strengthen the integrity of our elections and public trust in democracy.

We have recently published world-leading proposals to make political campaigning online more transparent for voters; a draft Bill to repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act; and will introduce voter ID at polling stations to protect our elections from potential fraud.