

Government sets out new action to tackle B1.617.2 variant

- Vaccine roll-out drive bolstered in Bedford, Burnley, Hounslow, Kirklees, Leicester and North Tyneside to protect the most vulnerable
- In partnership with local authorities, additional testing and contact-tracing measures being deployed across these locations to isolate cases and break transmission chains

The government has outlined new decisive actions to halt the spread of the B1.617.2 variant of concern first identified in India.

Following extensive COVID-19 surveillance, which has rapidly detected cases of the B1.617.2 variant first identified in India, additional surge testing, tracing and isolation support measures are being deployed at pace across Bedford, Burnley, Hounslow, Kirklees, Leicester and North Tyneside.

The government continues to work in close partnership with local authorities to ensure the right action is taken at the right time, and to boost uptake of the approved vaccines for those eligible in these areas.

We are also providing support to the Scottish Government, who are adopting similar action to control the spread of variants in Glasgow and Moray.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock said:

We are determined to do all we can to ensure this new variant doesn't put our recovery at risk.

So we've acted fast, to guard the gains that we've made together. We are putting in place more testing – more testing sites – and on vaccinations, we are making more vaccinations available to everyone who's eligible.

To everyone in these areas, please exercise caution, get a test, and as soon as you're eligible, get the jab.

The latest data on the B1.617.2 variant shows the number of cases across the UK has risen to 2,967 cases. Most cases remain predominantly in the North West of England, with some in London.

While there is no evidence to show this variant has a greater impact on severity of disease or evades the vaccine, the speed of growth is of note and the government is working quickly to ensure the appropriate action is being taken.

Targeted activity will take place across Bedford, Burnley, Hounslow, Kirklees, Leicester and North Tyneside to continue to drive vaccine uptake

amongst eligible cohorts to protect the most vulnerable.

This includes, based on an assessment of local need, exploring opportunities to:

- expand existing assets – for example, extending opening hours and capacity of existing sites
- develop new capacity to support outreach directly to communities – for example, vaccine buses, additional pop-up sites
- utilise innovative methods of delivery where appropriate – for example, drive-through and roving delivery to workplaces via St John Ambulances
- co-locate vaccination sites with surge testing to support increased convenience for local residents
- increase local and targeted communications, working with community leaders to target underserved communities

Working in partnership with local authorities across Bedford, Burnley, Hounslow, Kirklees, Leicester and North Tyneside, strengthened testing operations are helping to control the spread of COVID-19 variants.

Testing will be ramped up to meet local needs, which will include additional mobile testing units, door-to-door testing and extra polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test kits for community testing sites.

In Bolton, a 100-strong Surge Rapid Response Team continues to support the local authority with door-to-door testing and encouraging residents to take a PCR test. The response team are now engaged with Bedford, providing some planning and coordination support to help them develop their testing strategy.

Additional measures will be implemented in areas where clusters of cases have been detected to stop further spread. These include:

- enhanced testing and contact tracing, including enhanced community and surge testing in areas defined by the local authorities and regional teams
- genomic sequencing of positive cases
- increased community engagement, including ensuring that messages are accessible in languages that are used by communities
- working closely with communities and community leaders to ensure that individuals are supported to test and self-isolate
- encouraging uptake for the age and risk groups currently prioritised for vaccination.

NHS Test and Trace works with each local authority to tailor the response to the local community to best meet local needs. Some of these areas are using genomic sequencing and enhanced contract tracing without more targeted testing, depending on the outcome of the public health assessment.

The government and its scientific experts are monitoring the evolving situation and rates of variants closely, and will not hesitate to take additional action as necessary.