

Group to measure for coronavirus prevalence in waste water

News story

New working group includes a range of water companies and experts across the UK



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Sewage monitoring is being established across the UK as part of an advance warning system to detect new outbreaks of coronavirus.

The new approach is based on recent research findings that fragments of genetic material (RNA) from the virus can be detected in waste water. This could be used to detect the presence of the virus in the population, including those who are asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic.

The World Health Organization is clear there is currently no evidence that coronavirus has been transmitted via sewerage systems.

Sampling from sewage treatment works around the country will begin shortly. Data gathered will be used to refine the approach and feed into the Covid-19 Alert System created by the Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC).

Techniques are still in their infancy, so the government and Devolved Administration partners are working closely with academics, UK Research and Innovation and the Natural Environment Research Council and water companies in developing and testing this cutting-edge approach.

This UK work is being coordinated by Defra, the Environment Agency and the JBC, working closely with water companies and the Universities of Bangor, Edinburgh, Bath and Newcastle.

In Scotland, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has begun analysis of the first samples of waste water provided by Scottish Water, coordinating the work with the Scottish Government's Centre of Expertise for Waters, the University of Edinburgh's Roslin Institute and Health Protection Scotland.

In Wales, a number of options to support specific wastewater monitoring

projects are being assessed, which would complement the UK programme to aid Covid-19 surveillance.

Further details will be released as the work develops.

Published 12 June 2020