Huge boost to national testing study will offer new COVID-19 insights

- Office for National Statistics to significantly expand infection survey to 400,000 people in England, making it the country's largest study tracking COVID-19 in the general population
- New data will support rapid testing and diagnosis of COVID-19 on a national and local level, helping to narrow down the areas of concern
- Government to provide £2 million grant to ZOE COVID-19 Symptom Study app to support its ongoing data collection

The ONS COVID-19 Infection Survey tracking the virus in the general population will expand from regularly testing 28,000 people per fortnight in England to 150,000 by October, the Health Secretary announces today. The survey aims to increase to 400,000 people across the entire project in England.

ONS has also partnered with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to extend the survey across the 4 nations, making this the UK's largest COVID-19 surveillance survey.

The expanded study will play a crucial role in providing extensive, weekly data on the spread of infection, supporting rapid testing and diagnosis of COVID-19 both nationally and in areas of concern. The ONS will prioritise ramping up in the north west of England and London in light of recent upticks in infection rates in these areas.

Letters have already been sent out to tens of thousands of homes inviting new participants to take part in the survey. Anyone who receives a letter asking them to participate in the study is encouraged to do so.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said:

> This country now has the capacity to test for coronavirus on an unprecedented scale and this ONS survey will be a crucial part of this work – improving our understanding of the rate of infection in the population and how many people have antibodies.
>
> This will allow us to further narrow down the areas potentially affected by local outbreaks and continue our fight to curb the spread ahead of winter.
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> I urge anyone who is able to take part in this study to do so – you will be playing a vital role in the fight against the virus. The data and insight gathered will help inform our national, regional and local responses to the pandemic, allowing this nation to get back to the things we love doing.

Reporting on a weekly basis, the ONS study will provide both a national picture of how the virus is spreading as well as granular estimates of the number of COVID-19 cases down to local level. Crucially, this will allow government and local authorities to further narrow down the areas which may be undergoing outbreaks, potentially reducing the number of people affected by new restrictions and allowing for swift action to curb the spread of the virus.

Led by the ONS and The University of Oxford in partnership with the departments of health across the UK, the survey uses routine swabbing and antibody testing to provide insight into the rate of infection and antibody levels in the community.

Professor Sir Ian Diamond, UK National Statistician, said:

> Vigilance is key to containing this pandemic and the extra data on the spread of infections and antibodies at local level will be invaluable to the planning of effective local responses.
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> Following this expansion, the ONS-led COVID-19 Infection Survey will be the biggest of its kind in this country. If you've been approached to take part then please do so. You will be helping us all to contain this terrible virus and get on with our lives.

Alongside this significant expansion, the government is providing a £2 million grant to the ZOE COVID-19 Symptom Study app to support its data collection. Participants use the app to regularly report on their health and symptoms and whether they have tested positive for the virus or not, making it the largest public science project of its kind anywhere in the world.

Data from the app is analysed in collaboration with King's College London researchers and provides granular data on symptoms across the country, helping identify local outbreaks and support NHS decision-making. Researchers are able to predict who has the virus and track infections across the UK as well as identify who is most at risk and where high-risk areas are.

The government will not have access to the base data gathered by the app. The ZOE app is separate to the NHS Test and Trace app launched last week for a trial run, to support national and local contact tracing and help minimise the spread of COVID-19.

Together, these studies will help control the spread of the virus by providing vital new intelligence on the scale of local outbreaks, inform our understanding of the virus and how it affects different demographics.

Jonathan Wolf, CEO of ZOE, said:

> We are a start-up, so we are delighted that this funding guarantees the future of the study throughout the winter. When we started the study with Professor Tim Spector at King's in March, we never

> imagined it could become so important. We have been blown away by the commitment of the British public to help fight COVID, by sharing the state of their health daily.
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> The app is an amazing demonstration of the power of large-scale science and the use of machine learning. We have funded the app ourselves so far, and with this funding we can continue the essential work of hotspot detection and research on the long-term risks of COVID.
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> We are delighted that ZOE and this innovative study can play a part in keeping the UK safe.

The ONS Infection Survey looks at the prevalence of symptomatic and asymptomatic COVID-19 infection in the community, how this varies over time and how this varies by population broken down by age, ethnicity, geography. Results are published weekly on the ONS website.

The ONS COVID-19 Infection Survey is led by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and draws on the world-leading scientific expertise of the University of Oxford.

Participants provide samples taken from self-administered nose and throat swabs and answer a few short questions during a home visit by a trained health worker. The swab tests will show whether or not participants currently have the virus. They will be asked to take further tests every week for the first 5 weeks, then every month for 12 months.

20% of participants aged 16 and over also provide a blood sample taken by a trained nurse, phlebotomist or healthcare assistant. These tests help determine what proportion of the population has developed antibodies to COVID-19. Participants will be asked to give further samples monthly for the next 12 months.

The ONS Infection Survey study forms part of pillar 4 of the government's COVID-19 testing strategy, to conduct UK-wide surveillance testing to learn more about the spread of the disease and help inform the development of new tests and treatments. Under this pillar, the significant and successful Real-time Assessment of Community Transmission of Coronavirus (REACT) study led by Imperial will continue data collection until the end of October 2020.