

# New measures to boost response to the B1.617.2 variant

- The government is closely monitoring the variant first identified in India (B1.617.2) and taking action along with NHS Test and Trace and local authorities
- A new Surge Rapid Response Team is being deployed in Bolton, additional surge testing will shortly launch in areas such as Formby, and enhanced contact tracing is in place across England
- Ministers are also considering a range of options which could include bringing forward second doses for eligible groups

The B1.617.2 variant of concern is beginning to spread increasingly rapidly in certain areas across the country and decisive action is being taken to further control its spread including additional surge testing, increased genomic sequencing and enhanced contact tracing.

While there is no firm evidence yet to show this variant has any greater impact on severity of disease or evades the vaccine, the speed of growth is concerning and the government is considering additional action if deemed necessary, including how to best utilise the vaccine roll-out to best protect the most vulnerable in the context of the current epidemiology.

The latest data on the B1.617.2 variant, published by PHE this evening, shows the number of cases across the UK has risen from 520 last week, to 1313 cases this week. Most cases are in the North West of England, with some in London.

Working in partnership with local authorities, additional measures are being put in place to help control the spread of COVID-19 variants and rapidly break chains of transmission.

To help identify variant cases, surge testing is already being deployed in 15 areas across England to suppress transmission, with more than 800,000 additional PCR test kits distributed. Over 4,400 cases and over 14,000 close contacts have been traced and instructed to self-isolate. Over 200 existing test sites and 130 schools have distributed test kits, with Mobile Testing Units deployed to provide PCR testing for people without symptoms.

Health and Social Care Secretary, Matt Hancock, said:

This data demonstrates why our swift and decisive measures are in place. Everyone has a part to play in controlling this variant, from participating in surge testing, to following the rules, to getting the jab. We are committed to working with local areas and deploying our world-leading genomic sequencing to get this variant under control. We are supporting areas where the cases of this variant are rising.

We are monitoring the situation very carefully and will not

hesitate to take further action if necessary.

It is imperative we all continue to be vigilant, and if you live in one of the 15 areas where we've introduced surge testing, make sure you get a free PCR test. And everyone who's eligible needs to come forward and get a jab.

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
- Increased genome 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
- Ensuring access to vaccination in the age and risk groups currently prioritised for vaccination and encouraging uptake

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.

The Surge Rapid Response Team in Bolton will include 100 nurses, public health advisers and environmental health officers, and will provide support to the local authority through door to door testing and encouraging residents to take a PCR test.

These teams were used recently in the London borough of Lambeth, where support was deployed hours after being requested. Over 5,000 households were visited in Lambeth over three days, helping many more residents to access testing.

In London, all positive tests with a high enough viral load are also being prioritised for genomic sequencing to check for variants, and surge testing can begin immediately if it is needed.

The public is being urged to continue to take up the offer of two free rapid tests a week, to help identify asymptomatic cases. Anyone who does test positive should take a follow up PCR test, which can be sent for genome sequencing to help catch new variant cases.

The best way for people to protect against the virus is to continue following the public health advice in their area – taking a test, getting their vaccine when asked, and following the rules on hands, face, space and fresh air.

As set out in the roadmap, we cannot rule out re-imposing economic and social restrictions at a local or regional level if evidence suggests they are necessary to contain or suppress a variant which escapes the vaccine.