

Surge testing to be deployed in parts of west London

Surge testing will start from today (Saturday 22 May) in some areas following the identification of confirmed cases of the B.1.617.2 variant, first identified in India. The cases have been instructed to self-isolate and their contacts are being identified.

Working in partnership with the local authorities, NHS Test and Trace is providing additional testing and genomic sequencing in education settings and targeted areas across the 4 boroughs. Testing will be deployed in different ways in each borough in order to meet local needs. Local authorities will shortly confirm the areas where additional testing will be offered in their boroughs, and reach out directly to residents to ensure people come forward for testing to stop the spread of the virus.

Everyone who lives, works or studies in the targeted areas and settings, including children, are being strongly encouraged to take a COVID-19 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test, whether they are showing symptoms or not. By using PCR testing, positive results can be sent for genomic sequencing at specialist laboratories, helping us to identify variant of concern (VOC) cases and their spread.

If you have symptoms you should book a free test online or by phone so you can be tested at a testing site or have a testing kit sent to your home. If you have no symptoms, you should visit your local council's website for more information.

In tandem with increased testing, enhanced contact tracing will be used for individuals testing positive with a VOC. This is where contact tracers look back over an extended period to determine the route of transmission.

People across the country are encouraged to take up the offer of twice-weekly free rapid testing, alongside the PCR test as part of surge testing.

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.

Appointments for a second COVID-19 vaccine dose will be brought forward from 12 to 8 weeks for the remaining people in the top 9 priority groups who have yet to receive their second dose. This is to ensure people across the UK have the strongest possible protection from the virus at an earlier opportunity.

The move follows updated advice from the independent experts at the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), which has considered the latest available evidence and has recommended reducing the dosing interval.

Carrier Strike Group sets sail on seven-month maiden deployment

Nine ships, 32 aircraft, and 3,700 personnel will set sail today on the UK Carrier Strike Group's maiden operational deployment.

The seven-month global deployment will extend through the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean and on to the Indo-Pacific, interacting with more than one fifth of the world's nations.

Britain's new flagship aircraft carrier, HMS Queen Elizabeth, will lead six Royal Navy ships, a Royal Navy submarine, a US Navy destroyer and a frigate from the Netherlands in the largest concentration of maritime and air power to leave the UK in a generation.

Her Majesty the Queen visited her namesake vessel – which she commissioned in 2017 – this morning before the aircraft carrier sets sail from Portsmouth, meeting crew members and wishing them luck in what will be an unforgettable life experience by being part of naval history.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson was also among those to visit HMS Queen Elizabeth ahead of her departure, joined on Friday by Defence Secretary Ben Wallace, First Sea Lord, Admiral Tony Radakin and Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Mike Wigston on the flight deck.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:

The UK's Carrier Strike Group sets sail to write Britain's name in the next chapter of history – a truly global Britain that steps forward to tackle the challenges of tomorrow, working hand-in-hand with our friends to defend our shared values and uphold the rules-based international order.

This deployment shows that we are strong on our own, but even stronger with our allies. I want to join the nation in wishing the crews across the Carrier Strike Group every success as they depart on this truly historic endeavour.

In a projection of the UK's global reach and influence, the Carrier Strike Group will interact with over 40 nations during its 26,000-nautical-mile global tour, undertaking over 70 engagements, exercises and operations with allies and partners.

As outlined in the recently-published Defence Command Paper, the Carrier Strike Group is a demonstration of the UK's commitment to be ready to confront future threats alongside international partners and help seize new

opportunities for Global Britain.

Underscoring the UK's leading role in NATO, in the coming days the Carrier Strike Group will take part in NATO's Exercise Steadfast Defender. The Strike Group will also provide support to the Alliance's Operation Sea Guardian and to maritime security operations in the Black Sea during the deployment.

Working alongside another key NATO ally, the Carrier Strike Group will be joined by French Aircraft Carrier Charles De Gaulle for a period of dual carrier operations in the Mediterranean.

In the Indo-Pacific, the Carrier Strike Group will visit India, Japan, the Republic of Korea and Singapore to strengthen Britain's security relationships, reinforce political ties and support our UK exports and international trade agenda.

Elements of the Carrier Strike Group will also participate in Exercise Bersama Lima to mark the 50th anniversary of the Five Powers Defence Arrangements between Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and the UK.

The next chapter in UK Carrier Strike capability

The deployment is primarily centred on regenerating the UK's Carrier Strike capability – a decade-long journey which is now entering its next chapter.

It comes after the Prime Minister announced in November an increase in Defence funding of over £24 billion across the next four years, enabling our Armed Forces to adapt to meet future threats. The Strike Group's cutting-edge platforms are expertly operated by 3,700 personnel from the UK, US and Netherlands armed forces including a company of Royal Marines Commandos.

HMS Queen Elizabeth is the largest and most powerful surface vessel in the Royal Navy's history. In a true success story for British industry she was built by a cast of more than 10,000, including more than 800 apprentices, in six dockyards from the banks of the Clyde to the River Torridge quaysides.

Joining her are a surface fleet of Type 45 destroyers, HMS Defender and HMS Diamond, Type 23 anti-submarine frigates HMS Kent and HMS Richmond, and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary's RFA Fort Victoria and RFA Tidespring.

US Navy destroyer USS The Sullivans and the Royal Netherlands Navy's frigate HNLMS Evertsen will be fully integrated for the duration of the deployment.

On the carrier's flight deck are eighteen state-of-the-art F-35B fast jets, operated by joint RAF and Royal Navy 617 squadron, and the US Marine Corps – the greatest quantity of fifth generation Lightning jets ever put to sea. Operating alongside the jets are four Wildcat maritime attack helicopters, seven Merlin Mk2 anti-submarine helicopters and three Merlin Mk4 commando helicopters – the largest number of helicopters assigned to a single UK Task Group in a decade.

Commodore Steve Moorhouse, Commander United Kingdom Carrier Strike Group, said:

As the Carrier Strike Group heads to sea, a new phase opens in Britain's maritime renaissance. A year's worth of exercises, and more than a decade of preparation, is over. HMS Queen Elizabeth, her escorts and her aircraft, will now begin the most important peacetime deployment in a generation.

It is the privilege of my career to lead 3,700 sailors, aviators and marines from the United Kingdom, United States and the Netherlands for the next seven-and-a-half-months. On their behalf, I would like to thank all those in government, the armed forces and industry who have worked so hard to get us to the start line, and will continue to support us when we are away. Most importantly, I would like to thank our families. I have every confidence that these young men and women will do you proud.

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Testing and sequencing of sewage ramped up to help tackle COVID-19 outbreaks

- The programme is currently providing insights to local health protection teams across England on the variants first identified in India and South Africa
- Previous support has involved working with Bristol local authority to investigate the presence of the variant first identified in Brazil and

launch surge testing to stop the spread

- Testing sewage for COVID-19 and variants now covers more than two thirds of the population of England

A government-led programme to test sewage for traces of COVID-19 has ramped up genomic sequencing to help rapidly detect outbreaks of variants of concern.

The Environmental Monitoring for Health Protection (EMHP) Programme, led by the Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC), a part of the newly-formed UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), has reached a new milestone of testing wastewater for COVID-19 and variants across more than two thirds of the population in England. A new laboratory in Exeter opened last month dedicated to analysing wastewater, making it one of the biggest wastewater processing labs in the world.

Analysts from the JBC are using this insight to help build a better picture of where the virus is circulating, particularly asymptomatic COVID-19 infections that may otherwise go undetected.

Increased genomic sequencing of these sewage samples will provide more clues to where variants of concern may be circulating undetected in communities. It can pick up evidence of variants from infected people and continue to monitor sewage after surge testing has ended in an area. This helps provide reassurance the variant is no longer circulating in that community.

The JBC shares this insight with local authorities, NHS Test and Trace and Public Health England who take action to prevent outbreaks. Insights from the programme have already been used in Bristol and Luton to provide timely understanding of the spread of variants in their communities and help to provide reassurance that local outbreak control measures are working.

Wastewater sequencing is another tool to shield communities against the threat of new variants, as the country follows the roadmap out of national restrictions.

Chief Executive of the UK Health Security Agency Dr Jenny Harries said:

This innovative programme supports the work of Public Health England and NHS Test and Trace to help us understand where the virus may be circulating undetected.

Sequencing wastewater samples provides an additional detection system for variants of concern, enabling us to respond more effectively to outbreaks and better protect citizens.

Programme lead at the Joint Biosecurity Centre Dr Andrew Engeli said:

Testing wastewater for traces of COVID-19 gives us an overall picture of national and local infection rates and is a great

complement to the work that happens in the wider NHS Test and Trace programme.

As infections fall and we head out of national restrictions, analysing wastewater to detect variants early on is important to help local authorities and NHS Test and Trace act quickly to stop variants from spreading in communities.

Wastewater samples are taken from around 500 locations in England and sent to the EMHP Laboratory at Exeter Science Park. Environment Agency scientists analyse the samples to quantify the amount of COVID-19 present. Some of these samples are then sent to other university labs, working with the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS), or to CEFAS laboratory partners who sequence the samples to identify variants.

The EMHP programme is a non-invasive way of providing insight for potential spikes in infection in an area. Testing takes place at sewage treatment works and the sewage network across England to understand infection levels at both national and local scales.

Without the need to rely on individuals coming forward for swab tests, monitoring in a catchment area is able to pinpoint outbreaks to smaller areas and neighbourhoods. There are also pilots analysing the wastewater from specific institutions such as within the food supply chain and prisons. It is not possible to trace back the samples of COVID-19 to specific individuals and no personal information is collected.

Environment Agency Chief Executive James Bevan said:

From the start of the pandemic, the Environment Agency has supported the nation's efforts to tackle COVID-19. The join-up between our scientists in the Environment Agency, water companies, government colleagues, public health officials and the academic community has delivered results that have had a real impact in the fight against the virus.

We can learn a huge amount about community health from wastewater monitoring, and the benefits of this programme will last for years to come.

Chief Scientific Adviser at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) Professor Gideon Henderson said:

Rapid ramping up of laboratory capacity has been fundamental to the success of the wastewater COVID-19 programme. This has only been possible through teamwork between government departments and agencies – the Environment Agency and CEFAS – and universities, and demonstrates the broad strength of UK science.

The resulting laboratory infrastructure allows early detection of outbreaks and powerful tracking of variants from genomic sequencing. It will continue to provide valuable information as social distancing restrictions ease and to monitor for future disease.

Scientists and academics from across the UK are collaborating on their findings, coordinated by the Joint Biosecurity Centre, and sharing data to build up a picture of cases across the UK. Wastewater testing carried out by Environment Agency scientists and their counterparts across the UK is one of a number of tools used to closely monitor the evolution of COVID-19, from symptomatic testing to surveillance studies and genomic sequencing of new variants. It will also play a crucial role in tracing other viruses in the future, including the flu, and understanding the impact viruses may have on local NHS systems.

The EMHP programme is led by the Joint Biosecurity Centre in the UK Health Security Agency, in collaboration with DEFRA, the Environment Agency, CEFAS, water companies, Water UK and academic partners. The programme is coordinated with similar programmes run by the Northern Ireland Executive, Scottish Government and Welsh Government.

Portfolio lead at CEFAS David Smith said:

Following the extraction and detection of COVID-19 RNA in wastewater, samples are transported a short distance to the University of Exeter Sequencing Facility where we have developed new methods to detect and quantify specific COVID-19 variants.

In the coming months, we will be scaling up the number of samples sequenced by CEFAS and the University of Exeter. This will further widen the surveillance for variants and help inform the nationwide response as they emerge.

Case study Bristol

Director for Communities and Public Health in Bristol, Christina Gray, said:

We are very pleased to be participating in the developing wastewater sampling technology. It proved particularly useful when we investigated variants of concern in the city and were undertaking surge testing. This technology helped us to be confident that the picture we were seeing through testing results was a true reflection of the spread of infection, and that there was not a pool of undetected infection that we were unaware of.

Going forward, it will be interesting to see how this technology can develop to support efforts to detect and contain infectious pathogens. For example, when we get to a stage where we wind down

routine testing, this method could potentially provide an effective means of identifying rising infection and assist us in taking prompt public health action.

Case study Luton

Director of Public Health at Luton Council, Lucy Hubber said:

The additional detail from targeted wastewater analysis acts as an extra layer of reassurance around the effectiveness of local outbreak control measures. Given the fast-changing position regarding variants of concern, the timely information we have received from genome sequencing has been critical in our understanding of transmission.

Luton Borough Council accessed insights from wastewater monitoring through a programme delivered by the JBC in partnership with a range of partners including Thames Water.

The Council was experiencing relatively low testing uptake for both rapid lateral flow testing and polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing, along with consistent positive case rates being reported across 5 areas.

Daily sampling of wastewater was carried out across these locations in the town, which was then processed and analysed with JBC support to outline levels of COVID-19 and to identify areas of concern.

The wastewater monitoring data helped Luton Borough Council in understanding that increases in cases were unlikely to be from general community transmission, but rather from limited person-to-person transmission. These insights informed their forward outbreak management response and helped the council with decisions to stand up targeted testing at ward level, and in applying targeted communications on the importance of twice-weekly testing.

Concerns regarding local impact of international travel identified via epidemiological data and outbreak management process, led to the Council requesting genome sequencing of the positive wastewater samples as a proactive approach in identifying variants of concern (VOC) or variants under investigation (VUI).

None of Luton's testing data – from symptomatic testing, key location testing or wastewater – has yet identified the presence of a VOC. However it is an area that the council remains focused on as surrounding authorities have reported VOCs within their localities. In this instance, wastewater monitoring has acted as an early warning system before cases are detected through individual testing.

Early data that the council has received has acted as an additional method of monitoring levels of the virus within the identified Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs). It has also provided reassurance that, based on the wastewater

data, VOCs have not been identified to date.

The data has provided an extra level of insight to inform the local COVID-19 response. It has also acted as a safety net for Public Health colleagues. Community leaders can be assured that the Public Health team is covering as many bases as possible to ensure the safety of the town, and that reactive interventions are timely, as and when required.

Please contact Amanda.Murrell@luton.gov.uk for interviews related to the Luton case study.

Please contact Caitlin Scott at newsdesk@bristol.gov.uk for interviews related to the Bristol case study.

[Government announces expert panel for fan-led review of football](#)

In the aftermath of the failed European Super League bid, the Government announced its manifesto commitment to conduct the review and published its [Terms of Reference](#) last month.

The panel features fan representation at its heart and also includes former players and managers, current administrators, representatives of non-league and the women's game as well as independent members. The Chair and panel will now begin a series of roundtable meetings that will reach out to fans and football organisations throughout the football pyramid, to hear their views on the future of the national game.

Representation will be from the whole football pyramid with Premier League, Championship, Women's, League One and Two and Non-league, Community and Diversity based fan networks asked to participate.

The full panel is as follows:

- Kevin Miles (Chief Executive, The Football Supporters' Association)
- Professor Denise Barrett-Baxendale (Chief Executive, Everton FC)
- Clarke Carlisle (former Burnley player and former Chair of Professional Footballers Association)
- Dan Jones (Partner, Football Finance)
- Dawn Airey (Chair, FA Women's Super League)
- David Mahoney (Chief Operating Officer, England and Wales Cricket Board)
- James Tedford (Former Secretary, Southport FC)
- Godric Smith (Director, Cambridge United)
- Danny Finkelstein, independent member

The Chair and panel will canvass fans' views on ownership, governance and financial flows within the game. It will add to the recommendations of the

English Football League's Governance Review and the Government's 2016 Expert Working Group on Football Supporter Ownership and Engagement.

In addition, they will assess if there is a need for an independent football regulator, charged with implementing regulation and compliance, and how that could work within the existing framework provided by the Football Association, Premier League and English Football League.

Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden said:

This expert panel brings together a wealth of knowledge and experience from across the football family to shape the future of our national game.

Their job will be to listen to fans and ensure their views are at the heart of reforms on governance, finance and improving day to day experience of supporters. Football is nothing without fans, and today we deliver on our promise to put them in the driving seat.

Sports Minister Nigel Huddleston said:

This is a groundbreaking moment in football. We have been clear that this is a wide ranging review and we have given the Chair and panel a broad scope to consider ownership models, financial flows and independent regulation.

The review could herald a step change in our approach to football governance and I look forward to seeing the recommendations."

Fan-led Review Chair, Tracey Crouch said:

I am thrilled to have such a strong team with a wealth of experience across the whole ecosystem of football to help support the fan-led review. The fans will be at the heart of the review panel's work and I look forward to kicking off the formal meetings with fan groups and others next week.

The focal point of the review panel will be to engage with fan groups, to hear views on what they believe needs changing in football governance. The Chair will meet regularly with the panel and fan groups in order to move forward with its engagement and reform agenda and will feed into the final report expected in the Autumn.

Further plans around the initial fan engagement sessions will be set out in

due course.

ENDS

Panel biographies

Kevin Miles

Kevin Miles is the Chief Executive of the Football Supporters' Association (FSA), having worked for the FSA and its predecessor organisations for over twenty years.

A match-going Newcastle United fan for more than half a century and a member of the Newcastle United Supporters' Trust, Kevin has also led the Fans' Embassy service at England away games since 1998.

A founder member and former chair of anti-racism education charity Show Racism the Red Card, Kevin is now an independent trustee of Kick It Out and the proud owner of two £1 shares in Blyth Spartans AFC.

Clarke Carlisle

Clarke Carlisle is an English former professional footballer who has played with many clubs including Queen's Park Rangers and Leeds United. He is an ambassador for Kick It Out – football's equality and inclusion organisation, and was chairman of the Professional Footballers' Association. He has provided football commentary and analysis for the BBC, ITV and Sky Sports amongst other broadcasters.

Dan Jones

Dan Jones leads Deloitte's work in sport around the world. He manages activities of the group across all services. Dan advises high profile clients including clubs, leagues, governing bodies, governments, agencies, investors and commercial partners on issues including strategic, commercial, financial, regulatory, organisational and structural matters. He is a regular speaker and expert commentator on sports business and edits Deloitte's Annual Review of Football Finance and the Football Money League.

Denise Barrett-Baxendale

Prof Denise Barrett-Baxendale, MBE, is a Director at Everton Football Club, Chief Executive Officer of Everton Football Club and Executive Chair of the Club's official charity, Everton in the Community. Denise has served as a Board member to Sport England; the only representative from the world of football appointed to the Board of the national body for grassroots sports.

Danny Finkelstein

Daniel Finkelstein writes a weekly political column for The Times. Before joining the paper in 2001, he was adviser to both the Prime Minister John Major and the Conservative leader William Hague. Daniel was appointed to the House of Lords in 2013. He has been a match attending football fan for 50

years and for almost two decades wrote a column on football for The Times.

David Mahoney

David is currently Chief Operating Officer at the England and Wales Cricket Board (ECB). Prior to this, he oversaw the strategy, insights, HR, integrity and public policy teams as ECB's Chief Strategy Officer.

Before joining ECB, David held a number of senior roles at Ofcom, the UK communications regulator, including director of policy and chief advisor to its CEO.

Godric Smith

Godric Smith is a board member at Cambridge United FC and a founding member of Cambridge Fans United, started his career in mental health campaigning in 1980s before spending 15 years in government communications, including 10 years in Downing Street.

James Tedford

James Tedford was the former Secretary at Southport FC. He has an extensive knowledge of the football landscape and held a senior management position at Scottish Women's Champions, Glasgow City FC where he led on match organisation for the UEFA Women's Champions League.

Dawn Airey

Dawn Airey is currently Chair of the FA Women's Super League and FA Women's championship and is non-executive member of the boards of Getty Images, Thomas Cook, Grosvenor Estates and Blackbird, having formerly led Channel 5.