

PHE statement on Variant of Concern and new Variant Under Investigation

The New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG) has named one additional SARS-CoV-2 Variant Under Investigation and one additional Variant of Concern.

Over 4,000 SARS-CoV-2 variants have been identified across the globe. Most of these are not of concern. The UK's world-leading genomic sequencing programme continues to closely monitor these variants as they arise and develop.

VUI202102/01 is characterised by the presence of the E484K spike protein mutation and a small number of other mutations. It is derived from lineage A.23, which is seen internationally, but the E484K additional mutation on this lineage has only been seen within the UK. It was first identified by Public Health England (PHE) on 10 January, while investigating a cluster of 5 cases linked to members of staff from a hospital in Liverpool. So far, 55 cases of this variant have been found.

VOC202102/02 is a specific cluster characterised by the presence of the E484K spike protein mutation on the VOC202012/01 SARS-CoV-2 B.1.1.7 variant that was first detected in the UK at the end of 2020. Through genomic sequencing and enhanced contact tracing, PHE have so far identified 21 cases of VOC202102/02 across the UK, predominantly centred upon an outbreak in the South West of England.

The E484K mutation is present on Variant of Concern first detected in South Africa (VOC-202012/02), as well as a number of other variants sequenced globally. Although there is currently no evidence this mutation alone causes more severe illness or greater transmissibility, it is reported to result in weaker neutralisation by antibodies in laboratory experiments.

Dr Susan Hopkins, COVID-19 Strategic Response Director at PHE, said:

While we expect that the vaccines will still prevent severe illness and deaths, we are taking public health action on clusters of variants with E484K to reduce the risk of spread in our population.

We will be implementing the necessary public health action to mitigate the spread of these variants and will continue to monitor them closely.

It remains absolutely vital that people continue to stay at home where possible, and follow the guidance on face coverings, social distancing and hand hygiene.

Background

The new Variant of Concern VOC202102/02 has been designated a variant of concern as it has arisen as a result of a mutation on the Variant of Concern VOC202012/01, and retains the characteristics that led to its parent variant being designated a VOC originally with an additional mutation E484K.

Wireless Communications, Networking and Information Theory Competition

News story

£500,000 available for innovation to boost UK wireless communications capability in Information Advantage challenge



The Defence and Security Accelerator (DASA) is looking for innovations to deliver information exchange capabilities that are resilient in a highly-dynamic operating environment where there are significant challenges from congestion and contention, such as jamming.

The [Wireless Communications, Networking and Information Theory Competition](#) is interested in ideas in the following areas:

- novel communication techniques
- novel coding and modulation
- novel networking techniques

On behalf of the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl) there is £500k available for this DASA competition, with the expectation that between 5 to 10 proposals will be funded.

[Click here for the full scope in the competition document.](#)

This competition links into the key component of the UK's future defence

capability; the concept of Information Advantage, meaning the ability to out-think and out-decide adversaries to achieve dominance of the narrative and of operations.

Fundamental to Information Advantage is the ability to exchange information in a timely manner, resilient to adversary action, which may come in the form of electronic, cyber or physical attack.

Whilst we are interested in innovations at [Technology Readiness Levels \(TRL\)](#) up to prototype demonstrators, the end of the project is hoping to deliver an array of technologies in the TRL 3 to 6 range.

The competition closes for submissions at midday BST on Wednesday 7 April 2021.

A series of 1-2-1 sessions will be available for those interested in discussing the challenge and their ideas with the project team.

[To register for a 1-2-1 slot on 18 February click here.](#)

[To register for a 1-2-1 slot on 23 February click here.](#)

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[Liz Truss deepens trade ties, announces investment wins in India](#)

International Trade Secretary Liz Truss has concluded a 5-day visit (February 5-9), mapping the path to a potential future free trade deal and deeper trading ties with the world's largest democracy.

The Secretary of State is today announcing that the Government has helped to secure a number of investment wins that will create jobs across the UK.

This includes a major investment by leading technology and digital firm Tata Consultancy Services that will bring 1,500 high-skilled jobs to sites all over the UK.

Indian pharmaceutical and biotechnology giant Wockhardt has also confirmed further investment in Wrexham, Wales, leading to more than 40 new jobs and the extension of their Covid-19 vaccination contract to ensure the UK has uninterrupted fill and finish capacity for vaccines in 2022.

India is the fastest growing major economy in the world, with longstanding ties to the UK and a potential market of 1.4 billion people. On Saturday Truss agreed an outline of a new [Enhanced Trade Partnership \(ETP\)](#) with

India's Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal, as part of the development of a roadmap that would lead to a potential comprehensive FTA, including considerations on an Interim Agreement on preferential basis.

It is an important part of the government's plan to deepen links with major economies of the present and future beyond Europe, creating more trade and investment in strategic industries like science, tech and services that will help the UK build back better, greener and stronger from coronavirus.

Throughout the global pandemic India and the UK have supported each other by keeping vital supply chains open, tackling protectionism and collaborating on vaccine research – whether that be the production of over a billion doses of our life-saving Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine at India's Serum institute or unlocking the export of nearly 3 million packets of paracetamol.

UK International Trade Secretary Liz Truss said:

India is the world's biggest democracy and a nation that shares our belief in free enterprise. Deeper trading ties will create opportunities for UK businesses that were simply not there as part of the EU, and set the stage for a much closer partnership with one of the economic powerhouses of the present and future, ensuring more investors like Tata Consultancy Services bring jobs and growth to the UK.

We will be collaborating much more closely in the industries of tomorrow like science, tech and green growth, so we can build back better and deliver an export-led, investment-led, jobs-led recovery from coronavirus.

The UK-India trade relationship, worth £23 billion in 2019, supports key industries such as technology and life sciences and around half a million jobs in each other's economies.

Life Sciences has been a priority sector for both nations, with UK pharmaceuticals exports to India growing by 21.4% to £96.75m in 2019. During her visit, the Secretary of State met with UK respiratory digital health company, Smart Respiratory Products, which is helping doctors in India manage their patients remotely via a smartphone app and telemedicine platform.

The firm recently secured a £5m partnership with Indian company, Care Ability Healthcare, to supply their Smart Asthma respiratory solutions.

Demonstrating the strength of the UK tech and life sciences sector, AI healthcare start-up Behold.AI announced during the visit that it has partnered with India's Apollo Group to provide a diagnostic tool which can quickly analyse chest x-rays to aid in screening COVID-19 positive patients.

And UK firm Micropore, which specialises in equipment and support services to enable pharma companies to improve the performance and economies of their formulated products is setting up in Hyderabad, India to supply its award-

winning membrane emulsification technology to its customers in the region and neighbouring markets.

9 in 10 local authorities in England now enrolled into community testing

- 9 in 10 local authorities in England have signed up to the community testing programme to offer regular targeted testing for people without symptoms
- More than 70% of local authorities are already offering rapid testing to those who are unable to work from home
- New postcode checker will launch to help those who need to leave home for work access rapid testing quickly

232 local authorities are now rolling out community testing, covering a population of around 42 million people and identifying thousands of positive COVID-19 cases in people not showing symptoms, who could be unknowingly spreading the virus.

Designed and implemented by local authorities, community testing programmes are designed based on local authorities' in-depth knowledge of the local area.

With around 1 in 3 people who have COVID-19 not showing symptoms, targeted asymptomatic testing and subsequent isolation is highly effective in breaking chains of transmission. Local authorities are currently being encouraged to target testing at people who are unable to work from home during the national lockdown.

Altogether, 9 out of 10 local authorities in England have developed plans for a community testing programme, and those not already offering rapid testing will be rolling it out soon. To date, over 2.2 million lateral flow tests have been carried out by local authorities for community testing programmes, with over 44,000 positive cases found so far.

To make accessing rapid testing even easier, a new postcode checker will be launching on GOV.UK, to help people who need to leave home for work find out if rapid testing is offered by their local authority or near their place of work. Further information about local authority testing services can be found, via the postcode checker, on their websites.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said:

It is brilliant more than 7 in 10 local authorities in the country are now offering rapid testing to find positive cases and break

chains of transmission and even more are due to start soon.

Since the community testing programme was launched in December, local authorities have undertaken incredibly innovative work to rapidly get programmes up and running in local areas, using their local expertise.

I want to take this opportunity to say a huge thank you to the incredible staff and volunteers across the country who are working so hard, alongside local authorities, to help protect people who are unable to work from home, and those at a higher risk of COVID-19, with rapid testing.

Lateral flow tests deliver results in 30 minutes, helping to quickly identify and isolate positive cases and break chains of transmission. Community testing programmes are encouraged to test participants at least twice a week using lateral flow tests, following clinical guidelines.

The community testing programme operates alongside the rapid workplace testing programme, keeping workers who cannot work from home from unknowingly passing on the virus – and protecting vital public services.

Case studies

Salford City Council

Salford City Council started offering community testing in January with 5 test sites now open, and plans to open additional sites over the coming weeks to ensure they are easily accessible across the city. It was at the Beesley Green Community Centre test site that mental health professional Louise Carey found out she had the virus but no symptoms:

I was getting tested as a precaution for work. I had no symptoms so wouldn't have got tested otherwise. If I hadn't had the positive lateral flow test that day, I wouldn't have known I had COVID-19 and would have been on a hospital ward later that day as part of my job, in contact with people who were mentally unwell as well as 2 doctors, ward staff and, potentially, police and paramedics. I went on to develop symptoms 2 days later and, with that in mind, I am hugely grateful that the service was so quick and it genuinely protected the vulnerable and my colleagues.

Waltham Forest Council

In London, Waltham Forest Council has 9 sites open 7 days a week where residents can turn up without having to book, making testing as easy as possible for residents. Using targeted translated communications and face-to-face, Waltham Forest Council drove a 13% increase in residents from its South Asian community getting a rapid test.

In Walthamstow, taxi driver Asif said:

I've started to get tested every week as I'm a taxi driver and want to make sure I can be sure I don't have COVID-19 before taking passengers. I've been going to Chingford Assembly Hall and have never had to queue and always get my test back within half an hour or so.

Lincolnshire

Across Lincolnshire over 110 local volunteers are involved in the community support programme providing vital help to those who are isolating. In Boston, 61-year old John Plant is one of such volunteers:

For me, getting involved was absolutely the right thing to do. It means I'm giving something important back to my community at this critical time of need. Like so many others, I want to do all I can to help. At the community testing sites there are a team of individuals who help vulnerable older people and younger people with complex needs through the testing programme – from registration, using the IT device and providing the calm reassurance they need. It's just wonderful to see their smiles and receive their thanks after we've helped them through the test. It makes it all so worthwhile.

City of Wolverhampton Council

Elsewhere in the West Midlands, the City of Wolverhampton Council's approach to community testing has engaged local communities, providing training and site lead support to empower local communities' volunteers to run their own sites. Testing sites have been established at the Jamia Masjid Bilal mosque, St Joseph's Church and The Hub at Ashmore Park, following a successful pilot at the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara, Sedgley Street, late last year.

James Clarke, Chairman of Ashmore Park Community Association, said:

Being a local organisation, made up of local people, we have seen the disruption and devastation the pandemic has caused on our doorstep and we were keen to do anything we could to help.

Ashmore Park has seen one of the highest infection rates in the country and rapid testing is one way of breaking the chain of transmission and protecting our loved ones, so I'd urge anyone without symptoms to visit The Hub for a lateral flow test – you'll get your result within an hour.

Background information

On 10 January, the [government announced that community testing would be offered to all local authorities in England](#).

[New £10 million fund to drive private sector investment in nature](#)

Nature projects which tackle climate change, create and restore habitats, or improve water quality could soon benefit from a new £10 million fund to help them both benefit the environment and attract private sector investment, the Government has announced today (10 February).

The [Natural Environment Investment Readiness Fund](#) will provide grants of up to £100,000 to environmental groups, local authorities, businesses and other organisations to help them develop nature projects in England to a point where they can attract private investment.

This will create a pipeline of projects for the private sector to invest in, and develop new funding models that can be replicated elsewhere, demonstrating the UK's leadership in nature finance in the run-up to COP26 in November.

Examples of projects that could be eligible for the fund:

- the creation of new woodlands and the restoration of peatlands, providing habitats for wildlife, green spaces for the public and carbon sequestration to help the government achieve its net zero target. This will generate carbon units which can be sold to businesses that want to offset emissions.
- the creation of new coastal wetlands, which benefit wildlife and reduce tidal flooding, while also attracting investment from developers needing to deliver biodiversity net gain and even delivering revenue through eco-tourism.
- the restoration of river catchments, helping to both improve water quality and reduce flood risk. As well as benefitting nature and people, these environmental benefits will deliver financial incentives to water companies (with reduced costs for water treatment) and encouraging them to invest.

Environment Minister Rebecca Pow said:

Our 25 Year Environment Plan made clear that while the public sector will continue to be a central source of funding, it is critical that this is alongside more private sector investment to

protect and enhance our natural environment.

Investors are rightly recognising environmental factors as key drivers of value. As we look to build back greener from the pandemic, I would encourage any interested businesses, local authorities, eNGOs or other organisations to bid for a portion of this fund.

Emma Howard Boyd, Chair of the Environment Agency, said:

The Government are calling for a green industrial revolution at the same time that investors, including people saving for their pensions, are looking for economic returns that reverse natural decline and manage climate shocks.

There are already examples of this happening, but the global economy needs more evidence if it is going to reach a tipping point that mobilises trillions of dollars towards nature. This fund will help, demonstrating funding models that can be replicated, providing long-term benefits for the economy and the environment, and showing UK leadership ahead of COP26.

The pioneering fund, which is being delivered by the Environment Agency on behalf of Defra, will help organisations get specialist advice, engage investors and build capacity to develop their project to the stage when it is ready to receive and repay investment.

Projects need to be replicable and scalable, with key learnings made public to encourage similar approaches to access private sector finance for nature projects in future.

Dr Rhian-Mari Thomas OBE, Chief Executive, Green Finance Institute, said:

There are many important nature-based projects that, with technical assistance and catalytic funding, could meet investor requirements and demand, and secure the private capital to help them achieve their missions. The NEIRF will serve as an essential bridge, as well as providing an example of how to build an investment pipeline for nature.

We are delighted to have been able to support the Environment Agency and Defra in the Fund's development and to continue our involvement in ensuring its success.

The fund – which will be open for applications until 26 March – will help deliver on commitments in the government's [25 Year Environment Plan](#) and [Green Finance Strategy](#), as well as supporting the Prime Minister's 10 Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution.

With the [Dasgupta Review](#) having recently made clear the value of nature to our economy and society, green finance will be essential to addressing the defining environmental challenges of our time, including climate change, moving to net zero, protecting biodiversity and improving the water environment.