

# Surge testing to be deployed in areas around Lambeth in connection to new variant

Press release

Further targeted areas will have additional testing made available to control and suppress the spread of a COVID-19 variant.



Working in partnership with the local authority, additional surge testing and genomic sequencing is being deployed to targeted areas within Lambeth in areas within SE27 0, SE27 9 and SW16 2, where the COVID-19 variant first identified in South Africa has been found.

Surge testing is being introduced in addition to existing extensive testing. In combination with following the [lockdown rules](#) and remembering [Hands. Face. Space.](#), it will help to monitor and suppress the spread of the virus.

Positive cases will be sequenced for genomic data to help understand COVID-19 variants and their spread within these areas.

People living within these targeted areas are strongly encouraged to take a COVID-19 test this week, whether they are showing symptoms or not.

People with symptoms should [book a test](#) in the usual way.

People without symptoms should [visit their local authority website](#) for more information.

Surge testing in GU21 in the Surrey area, which began last week, is now complete and further data on surge testing will be provided in due course.

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## [New vacancies in the Office of Tax Simplification](#)

News story

The OTS is looking for tax professionals to join its team.



The OTS is currently looking to recruit 2 part-time tax professionals who have current or recent private sector experience to join its team.

You can find out more about these posts and apply [here](#).

The closing date for applications is 3 March 2021.

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## [Response to points raised in openDemocracy article, 08/02/21](#)

openDemocracy has accused the government of establishing a 'Secretive Cabinet Office "Clearing House" for Freedom of Information (FOI) requests'. There is also a letter from newspaper editors regarding the Clearing House expressing concerns about the way FOI legislation is interpreted and implemented.

In fact, as has been made clear, including in Parliamentary [reports](#), statements and questions, a Clearing House function has existed in different

forms since 2004, before the FOI Act came into effect in 2005. David Lammy, then Parliamentary Under Secretary for Constitutional Affairs referred to the function in April 2005, [explaining](#) that the Department for Constitutional Affairs 'has provided support to Freedom of Information (FOI) practitioners in government Departments...[and the] Access to Information Central Clearing House provides daily support to all Whitehall departments'. On 15 June 2005, the Minister of State in that department, Harriet Harman, [set](#) out that 'since the Freedom of Information Act came into force on 1 January [2005], 2,080 cases have been referred to the Clearing House, including Internal Reviews and appeals to the Information Commissioner's Office'. [Evidence](#) submitted by the Department of Constitutional Affairs to Parliament sets out details of the function's operation and an academic [book](#), *The Impact of the Freedom of Information Act on Central government in the UK* (2010, Palgrave Macmillan) by Professor Robert Hazell and others, includes an entire section on the Clearing House function.

Responsibility for FOI policy has moved between the Department of Constitutional Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, and now sits in the Cabinet Office, as part of the FOI and Transparency team and wider Cabinet Secretary Group. There is no stand alone Clearing House team. Coordination functions are carried out by a small number of staff members, all of whom have a range of other wider responsibilities.

The Clearing House function helps ensure there is a consistent approach across government to requests for information which impact or go to a number of different government departments (so-called round robins) or where requests are made for particularly sensitive information, including relating to national security or personal data. This is especially important for complex FOI requests where we are obliged to balance the need to make information available with our legal duties under the FOI Act to protect sensitive information. A coordination function ensures there is a consistent approach so all those submitting FOIs are treated in a similar and fair manner by departments.

The government remains fully committed to our transparency agenda. We routinely disclose information well beyond our FOI obligations, and release more proactive publications than ever before. For instance we publish details on spending over £25,000 by departments, KPIs for the government's most important contracts, as well as details of Ministerial meetings and salaries of senior officials. We have also been transparent about our approach to COVID-19, including through regularly publishing SAGE minutes on gov.uk, and sharing relevant findings at regular government press conferences.

With regard to our FOI obligations, government resources have inevitably been stretched by COVID-19, but in a three month period between July and September 2020 departments received more than 8,000 FOI requests and responded to almost 90% of them within 20 working days or with a permitted extension, in line with ICO targets. This reflects the government's commitment to fulfill its FOI obligations despite the pressures of responding to COVID-19.

We disagree with openDemocracy's claims about the Clearing House and have set out our position below.

**CLAIM: The British government has been accused of running an 'Orwellian' unit in Michael Gove's office that instructs Whitehall departments on how to respond to FOI requests and shares personal information about journalists. [openDemocracy article 08/02/21]**

RESPONSE: As set out above and detailed in Parliament, a Clearing House function has been in existence since 2004. It is now part of the FOI & Transparency team within the Cabinet Secretary Group. It is not in Michael Gove's office. It does not share personal information about journalists.

**CLAIM: 'It is also said to have blocked the release of sensitive FOI requests.' [openDemocracy article 08/02/21]**

RESPONSE: The Cabinet Office – including the Clearing House function – provides advice. It does not direct departments on what they should do with individual FOI cases, nor does it direct departments to block FOI requests.

**CLAIM: A shadow cabinet minister has accused the unit, known as the 'Clearing House', of 'blacklisting' journalists. [From openDemocracy article 08/02/21]**

RESPONSE: This is false – no such blacklist exists. The consideration of FOI requests is, and remains, applicant-blind. All FOI requests are treated exactly the same, regardless of who the request is from and their occupation. It would be unlawful for the Cabinet Office, or other departments, to blacklist enquiries from journalists and their requests are not treated differently to anyone else who sends FOI requests. It is appropriate for departments to prepare for possible media interest in information released under FOI, but this is separate from a decision on whether or not to release information.

**CLAIM: This government is set on making it more difficult to make FOI requests and is being untransparent in its handling of cases. [Paraphrased from openDemocracy article 08/02/21]**

RESPONSE: This is untrue. We are committed to our transparency agenda, to improving our FOI performance and to making the process for requesting information smoother. The Cabinet Office is streamlining many of the processes involved in FOI handling, to speed up how quickly we can process requests for information. We anticipate a marked improvement in Cabinet Office performance in the next quarter, despite an increase in the number of requests and the pressures of responding to COVID-19. Inevitably, given its position at the centre of government, the Cabinet Office handles many of the most sensitive and complex FOI requests. Other departments continue to work to improve their FOI performance to ensure government meets its FOI obligations despite the impact COVID-19 has had on the ability of public authorities to respond to requests, as the ICO has acknowledged in recently published guidance.

**CLAIM: David Davis MP described the Clearing House as ‘certainly against the spirit of the (FOI) Act – and probably the letter, too’. [Quoted in openDemocracy article 08/02/21]**

RESPONSE: The Clearing House function is not against the spirit or letter of the FOI Act. In fact, the Clearing House’s round robin process has been explicitly discussed with the Information Commissioner’s Office to ensure it is fully in line with data protection law. The Clearing House plays a role in ensuring compliance with the FOI Act across government, while also making sure sensitive information, including that related to national security, is handled appropriately.

**CLAIM: The letter calls on government to: ‘Open an inquiry into the operation of the Clearing House, which comprehensively investigates whether its operation is GDPR-compliant, whether journalists and other users of the Act are being monitored and/or blacklisted, and whether this is illegal and/or undermines the applicant-blind principle of the Act’. [Letter from openDemocracy to the DCMS Select Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee [08/02/21]**

RESPONSE: There is no blacklist and our approach to FOI requests is applicant-blind. We take our obligations under the Act, the General Data Protection Regulation, and the Data Protection Act 2018 seriously and our processes for handling requests made under the FOI Act, comply with relevant obligations concerning personal data. We are happy to set out further details to Parliament, as appropriate but do not accept that our approach undermines the FOI Act or the statutory rights of journalists to inquire into the action of government.

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## [Reservist at heart of the North’s mass vaccination effort](#)



Gerard is pictured at York’s newly operating mass Covid-19 vaccination on the

city's Tadcaster Road. Copyright YH RFCA 2021.

Pictured above at York's newly operating vaccination centre, Reservist, Major Gerard Hardy (Royal Logistics Corps) has been mobilised in support of the national Covid-19 effort.

Major Hardy is currently lead military liaison officer for the vaccine taskforce in the region. His team is delivering vital military support to underpin the roll-out of mass Covid-19 vaccinations by the NHS across the Yorkshire and the North East.

I head a team that includes 19 full-time regular British Army medics and our role is logistics planning and supporting the mobilisation of new sites as vaccination centres.

I'm the only Reservist on the team and one of my tasks is to deploy medics to plug any shortfalls the NHS may have in manpower. So, for example, we have a team doing Covid vaccinations in the North East and have been helping to prepare a site in York for the start of mass vaccinations.

In his civilian life, Gerard is a dad of two and the schools liaison manager for the RFCA for Yorkshire and the Humber.

The country is facing a historic health challenge and so it's been good that my role in the reserves has given me the opportunity to get involved and make a positive contribution.

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## [Aspiring pilot Mya among youngsters joining the cadets during lockdown](#)

The 12-year-old from Kirkburton, Huddersfield, is one of dozens young people from across Yorkshire who have become cadets during lockdown.

### **Air cadets is fun – even virtually**

Mya who is a pupil at Kirkburton Middle School is enjoying all that her local unit, 868 (Mirfield) Squadron, has to offer, albeit virtually.

We meet online once or twice a week and get to do things I would never get the chance of anywhere else.

We've had a tour of the Houses of Parliament, talks about in-flight safety and we've even learned about space which was really exciting.

It will be a while before I get to meet anyone face-to-face but I know when I do I will be nervous but happy too.

## **Being a cadet is a step on her way**

Maya's Mum Kirsti said:

She's dreamed of being a pilot since she was very small and being an Air Cadet is one step nearer for her.

She's so keen on flying that we bought her a flying experience where she went up on a flight for her 10th and 11th birthdays.

When she was ten, she even wrote to Richard Branson asking for tips on becoming a woman pilot.

## **Joining the cadets**

Mya's Squadron Commander, Flight Lieutenant Peter Doubell, said:

It's great that young people are continuing to join the cadets during this lockdown period and it's a tribute to the work of our adult volunteers and instructor cadets who put so much effort into providing engaging activities for our cadets to do online.

Obviously, it will be fantastic for everyone when things finally get back to normal. But in the meantime we're very much making the most of the opportunities online technologies offer our young people.