

Education Secretary sets out school contingency plans for England

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement regarding our plans for bringing children back to school this academic term.

Dealing with this pandemic has always been an exercise in managing risk. Throughout, we have been adamant that the education of children is an absolute priority, and that keeping schools open is uppermost in our plans.

The magnificent efforts of all the leaders, teachers and staff in all of our schools, colleges have ensured that settings are as safe and COVID-19 secure as possible but we must always act swiftly when circumstances change. The evidence about the new Covid variant and rising infection rates have required some immediate adjustment to our plans for the new term.

This is of course a rapidly shifting situation but some things remain constant: we continue to act to preserve lives and the NHS and we continue to protect education by putting children first. Above all our response is proportionate to the risk at hand and makes every use of the contingency framework that we put in place earlier this year.

The latest study we have from Public Health England is that Covid infections among children are triggered by changes in the community rate.

The study also says that the wider impact of school closures on children's development would be significant. I am quite clear that we must continue to do all we can to keep children in school.

Taking all these factors into account means we have had to make a number of changes for the new term in order to help with breaking chains of transmission and to assist with keeping our all of our children and all of our education settings as safe as we can.

The fact that we have managed to do this so successfully throughout the entire pandemic is due to the incredible dedication of all our teachers, leaders and support staff and I know that the House will join me once more in thanking them for everything they continue to do to keep children learning as safely as possible.

Accordingly, we will be opening the majority of primary schools, as planned, on Monday 4th January.

We know how vitally important it is for younger children to be in school for their education, well-being and wider development. In a small number of areas, where the infection rates are highest, we will implement our existing contingency framework such that only vulnerable children and children of critical workers will attend face to face. We will publish this list of areas today on the gov.uk website.

I would like to emphasise that this is being used only as a last resort – this is not all tier 4 areas – and that the overwhelming majority of primary schools will open as planned on Monday. The areas will also be reviewed regularly so that schools can reopen at the very earliest moment.

Ongoing testing for primary school staff will follow later in January, and we will be working to establish an ambitious testing programme helping to break chains of transmission and reducing the need for self-isolation where students and staff test negative for the virus.

We have already announced our intention for a staggered return to education this term for secondary-age pupils and those in colleges.

Because the Covid infection rate is particularly high among this age group, we are going to allow more time so that every school and college is able to fully roll out mass testing of all pupils and students. I would like to thank school leaders and staff for all their ongoing work in preparing for this.

This kind of mass testing will help protect not just children and young people, it will benefit everyone in the community because it will break the chains of transmission that are making infection rates shoot up. This in turn will make it safer for more children to physically return to school.

All pupils in exam years are to return during the week beginning the 11th January, with all secondary schools and college students returning full time on the 18th January.

During the first week of term – on or after the 4th of January – secondary schools and colleges will prepare to test as many staff and students as possible, and will only be open to vulnerable children or the children of key workers.

The 1,500 military personnel committed to supporting schools and colleges will remain on task, providing virtual training and advice on establishing the testing process, with teams on standby to provide in-person support if required by schools. Testing will then begin the following week in earnest, with those who are in exam years at the head of the queue. This is in preparation for the full return of all year groups on the 18th of January in most areas.

To allow this focus on establishing testing, throughout the first week of term, exam year groups will continue to have lessons remotely in line with what they would receive in class, and only vulnerable children and children of critical workers will have face-to-face teaching.

As with primary schools, we will be applying our existing contingency framework for education in areas of the country with very high rates of Covid infection or transmission of the virus. This will require secondary schools and colleges to offer face-to-face education to only exam years, vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, with remote education being given to all other students if they are in one of those contingency frame areas.

We are also asking universities to reduce the number of students who return to campus at the start of January, prioritising student who require practical learning to gain their professional qualifications. All university students should be offered two rapid tests when they return in order to reduce the chance of spreading Covid. To support remote education and online learning during this period, the government expects to deliver more than 50,000 devices to schools across the country on 4 January alone, and over 100,000 altogether during the first week of term. This is in addition to the 560,000 devices we have already delivered as we continue aiming for a target of a total of one million devices to be distributed for children who need them the most. This programme is now being extended to include students aged 16-19 in colleges and schools.

So often Mr Speaker we have had to close things down to try and beat this awful disease but with schools our best line of attack is to keep them open using the mass-testing tools that we now have available so that we can ensure all children benefit from a first class education. As we continue to hear more encouraging news about the vaccine roll out, I am more determined than ever that children will not have to pay the price for beating Covid.

Mr Speaker I have spoken many times of my determination that we cannot let Covid damage the life chances of an entire year of children and students. With these plans which allow for rapid testing and a controlled return to schools, I am confident that we can minimise the latest health risks posed by the virus and I commend this statement to the House.

[Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine gives hope as Tier 3 and 4 measures extend to wider areas](#)

Mr Speaker, today marks a great stride forward in our plan to get us out of this pandemic and return to normal life.

Our strategy throughout has been to suppress the virus until a vaccine can make us safe. Suppressing the virus has got a whole lot harder because of the new variant – and we must take more action today.

But the vaccine is the route out of this crisis – and the approval this morning of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine is another world first for Britain and it's the single biggest stride we've been able to take since the pandemic began.

It's almost exactly a year since we first heard about what we now know of as COVID-19 circulating in Wuhan in China.

Within weeks, scientists at Porton Down had sequenced the viral genome and scientists at Oxford University's Jenner Institute received the genetic code for the new virus.

Like the great British codebreakers before them, they set to work at lightning speed. We took the decision to back them from the start with funding and access to the NHS for clinical trials and partnered with AstraZeneca, who have done a brilliant job to develop and manufacture a safe and effective vaccine at speed.

And I'm sure the whole House will join me in congratulating everyone involved in this huge British success story, which is not just a triumph of science and ingenuity – cracking a modern-day enigma code – but a victory for all.

The Oxford vaccine is affordable, can be stored at normal fridge temperature and offers hope – not just for this country – but for the whole world.

Like so much else in the pandemic response, it's been a big team effort.

While this is a great British success, it's also the British way that we are best when we collaborate with people from around the whole world. This is another example.

The vaccines programme has shown that Britain is a life-sciences super-power and the Brexit deal that this House has just passed, with a very significant majority, will help us to strengthen this yet further.

I want to thank the National Institute for Health Research, the UK Vaccines Network, the Vaccines Taskforce, AstraZeneca, Oxford University, the volunteers who stepped up for science and took part in the trial and all those involved who have made this happen

From the beginning we have focused on a vaccine as the way out of this pandemic and now it is a reality.

We need to vaccinate as quickly as supply allows – following the necessary safety checks of course – and the NHS stands ready to accelerate deployment at scale from Monday 4 January.

We have a total of 100 million doses on order, which – combined with the Pfizer vaccine – is enough to vaccinate every adult in the UK with both doses.

We will of course vaccinate according the [Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation \(JCVI\) priority](#), but today's news means that everyone who wants one can get a vaccine.

We already have 530,000 doses available to the UK from Monday with millions due from AstraZeneca by the beginning of February.

Mr Speaker, the clinical advice is that the Oxford vaccine is best deployed as 2 doses, up to 12 weeks apart.

And the great news is, people get protection after the first dose. This means we can accelerate the speed at which we can vaccinate people for the first 12 weeks before we return to deliver second doses for that longer-term protection.

It brings forward the day on which we can lift the restrictions that no one in this house wants to see any longer than are absolutely necessary.

But, Mr Speaker, we must act to suppress this virus now and the new variant makes the time between now and then even more difficult.

And whilst we have the good news of the vaccine today, we also have to take some difficult decisions

The NHS is under very significant pressure – there are over 21,000 people in hospital with coronavirus right now and we can see the impact that this is having. The threat to life from this virus is real – and the pressures on the NHS are real too.

I want to put on the record my thanks to all those working right now in the NHS and in particular, those – including our Chief Medical Officer – who have been working selflessly on the wards over Christmas.

They deserve our thanks, gratitude and support. We owe it to them to fulfil our responsibility to keep the virus under control.

Sharply rising cases – and the hospitalisations that follow – demonstrate the need to act where the virus is spreading. Yesterday alone, 53,135 cases were registered – the majority of which are believed to be the new variant.

Unfortunately, this new variant is now spreading across most of England and cases are doubling fast.

It is, therefore, necessary to apply Tier 4 measures to a wider area, including the remaining parts of the South East as well as large parts of the Midlands, the North West, the North East and the South West. I have laid a comprehensive list in the library of the House – and published on GOV.UK.

Even in most areas not moving into Tier 4, cases are rising too. It is therefore necessary to apply Tier 3 measures more broadly too including in Liverpool and North Yorkshire. The rest of Yorkshire remains in Tier 3.

These changes will take effect from one minute past midnight tomorrow morning.

The new variant means that three quarters of the population are now in Tier 4 and almost all of the country in Tiers 3 and 4.

I know that the Tier 3 and 4 measures place a significant burden on people – and especially on businesses affected. But I'm afraid it's absolutely necessary – because of the number of cases we've seen.

But where we are still able to give places greater freedoms, we will continue

to do so.

Mr Speaker, today is a day of mixed emotions: the joy that we have in the vaccines giving us a route out of this pandemic. Of pride, that Britain is the first country in the world, once again, to approve this British vaccine. The sorrow, at the deaths and suffering this virus has caused. And of determination that we must all stick at it during the difficult winter weeks ahead.

We end 2020 still with great challenges, but also with great hope and confidence that in 2021 we have a brighter future ahead.

I commend this statement to the House.

[Formal tiering review update: 30 December 2020](#)

- The Midlands, North East, parts of the North West and parts of the South West among those escalated to Tier 4, with almost all remaining areas escalated to Tier 3
- Spread of the new strain of COVID-19 is increasing in the South West, Midlands and parts of the North West

After careful consideration of the latest data, the following local authority areas will move to [Tier 4: Stay at Home](#) from the beginning of Thursday 31 December 2020:

- Leicester City
- Leicestershire (Oadby and Wigston, Harborough, Hinckley and Bosworth, Blaby, Charnwood, North West Leicestershire, Melton)
- Lincolnshire (City of Lincoln, Boston, South Kesteven, West Lindsey, North Kesteven, South Holland, East Lindsey)
- Northamptonshire (Corby, Daventry, East Northamptonshire, Kettering, Northampton, South Northamptonshire, Wellingborough)
- Derby and Derbyshire (Derby, Amber Valley, South Derbyshire, Bolsover, North East Derbyshire, Chesterfield, Erewash, Derbyshire Dales, High Peak)
- Nottingham and Nottinghamshire (Gedling, Ashfield, Mansfield, Rushcliffe, Bassetlaw, Newark and Sherwood, Nottinghamshire, Broxtowe)
- Birmingham and Black Country (Dudley, Birmingham, Sandwell, Walsall, Wolverhampton)
- Coventry
- Solihull
- Warwickshire (Rugby, Nuneaton and Bedworth, Warwick, North Warwickshire, Stratford-upon-Avon)
- Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent (East Staffordshire, Stafford, South

- Staffordshire, Cannock Chase, Lichfield, Staffordshire Moorlands, Newcastle under Lyme, Tamworth, Stoke-on-Trent)
- Lancashire (Burnley, Pendle, Blackburn with Darwen, Ribble Valley, Blackpool, Preston, Hyndburn, Chorley, Fylde, Lancaster, Rossendale, South Ribble, West Lancashire, Wyre)
 - Cheshire and Warrington (Cheshire East, Cheshire West and Chester, Warrington)
 - Cumbria (Eden, Carlisle, South Lakeland, Barrow-in-Furness, Copeland, Allerdale)
 - Greater Manchester (Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Wigan)
 - Tees Valley (Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland, Stockton-on-Tees)
 - North East (County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside, Sunderland)
 - Gloucestershire (Gloucester, Forest of Dean, Cotswolds, Tewkesbury, Stroud, Cheltenham)
 - Somerset Council (Mendip, Sedgemoor, Somerset West and Taunton, South Somerset)
 - Swindon
 - Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole
 - Isle of Wight
 - New Forest

The following local authority areas will move to [Tier 3: Very High](#) from the beginning of Thursday 31 December 2020:

- Rutland
- Shropshire, and Telford and Wrekin
- Worcestershire (Bromsgrove, Malvern Hills, Redditch, Worcester, Wychavon, Wyre Forest)
- Herefordshire
- Liverpool City Region (Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, Wirral, St Helens)
- York and North Yorkshire (Scarborough, Hambleton, Richmondshire, Selby, Craven, Ryedale, Harrogate, City of York)
- Bath and North East Somerset
- Devon, Plymouth, Torbay (East Devon, Exeter, Mid Devon, North Devon, South Hams, Teignbridge, Torridge, West Devon, Plymouth, Torbay)
- Cornwall
- Dorset
- Wiltshire

Between 18 and 24 December the weekly case rate in England rose to 402.6 per 100,000, a 32% increase on the previous week. The NHS reports 14,915 patients have been admitted to hospital with COVID-19 in the past week, a 18% increase on the week before.

Evidence shows the new strain of COVID-19 is increasing in the South West, Midlands and parts of the North West. The majority of the cases identified in London, the South East and the East of England are of the new variant. Infection rates have increased faster than expected in these areas where the

new strain has been circulating and stronger measures are required to get the virus under control.

Rates in the East Midlands have increased to 256.1 per 100,000, a 17% increase on the previous week. Rates in the West Midlands have increased to 273.5 per 100,000, a 23% increase on the previous week. In the North West, rates have increased by 31% to 223.9 per 100,000. In the South West, there has been a 37% increase in cases to 175.1 cases per 100,000. While rates in the South West may be lower than other areas, the data shows a sharp upwards trajectory.

Winter is always the most difficult time of year for the NHS and an increase in COVID-19 infections is followed closely by a rise in hospitalisations and, after a lag, an increase in deaths. It is vital everyone plays their part by following the regional tiered restrictions in their area to bring down infections, save lives and reduce pressures on the NHS this winter.

All clinically extremely vulnerable individuals will be asked to shield if they live in Tier 4 areas. People will be sent a letter or email with advice and details of support. In the meantime they should follow the [shielding advice set out on GOV.UK](#).

Tier 3 and 4 areas will continue to be prioritised for community testing, with more than 100 local authorities now having signed up to the enhanced testing support programme.

All available data has been assessed by the government, including the Health and Social Care Secretary, NHS Test and Trace including the Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC), Public Health England (PHE), the Chief Medical Officer and the Cabinet Office. Data assessed includes how quickly case rates are going up or down, cases in the over-60s, pressure on the NHS and local circumstances.

See a [list of all areas in England and tiers](#)

Tier 1 restrictions mean:

- people must not socialise in groups larger than 6 people, indoors or outdoors, other than where a legal exemption applies. This is called the 'rule of 6'
- businesses and venues can remain open, in a [COVID-secure](#) manner, other than those which remain closed by law, such as nightclubs
- hospitality businesses selling food or drink for consumption on their premises are required to:
 - provide table service only, for premises that serve alcohol
 - close between 11pm and 5am (hospitality venues in airports, ports, on transport services and in motorway service areas are exempt)
 - stop taking orders after 10pm
- hospitality businesses and venues selling food and drink for consumption off the premises can continue to do so after 10pm as long as this is through delivery service, click-and-collect or drive-through
- early closure (11pm) applies to casinos, cinemas, theatres, concert halls, sports stadia, bowling alleys, amusement arcades, funfairs, theme

- parks, adventure parks and activities and bingo halls. Cinemas, theatres, concert halls and sports stadia can stay open beyond 11pm in order to conclude performances or events that start before 10pm
- public attendance at outdoor and indoor events (performances and shows) is permitted, limited to whichever is lower: 50% capacity, or either 4,000 people outdoors or 1,000 people indoors
 - public attendance at spectator sport and business events can resume inside and outside, [subject to social contact rules](#) and limited to whichever is lower: 50% capacity, or either 4,000 people outdoors or 1,000 people indoors
 - places of worship remain open, but you must not attend or socialise in groups of more than 6 people while there, unless a legal exemption applies
 - weddings and funerals can go ahead with restrictions on numbers of attendees – 15 people can attend wedding ceremonies and receptions, 30 people can attend funeral ceremonies, and 15 people can attend linked commemorative events
 - organised outdoor sport, physical activity and exercise classes can continue in any number
 - organised indoor sport, physical activity and exercise classes can continue to take place, if the rule of 6 is followed. There are exceptions for indoor disability sport, sport for educational purposes, and supervised sport and physical activity for under-18s, which can take place with larger groups mixing

See [further details on Tier 1](#).

Tier 2 restrictions mean:

- people must not socialise with anyone they do not live with or who is not in their support bubble in any indoor setting, whether at home or in a public place
- people must not socialise in a group of more than 6 people outside, including in a garden or a public space – this is called the ‘rule of 6’
- businesses and venues can continue to operate, in a [COVID-secure](#) manner, other than those which remain closed by law, such as nightclubs
- pubs and bars must close, unless operating as restaurants. Hospitality venues can only serve alcohol with substantial meals
- hospitality businesses selling food or drink for consumption on their premises are required to:
 - provide table service only, in premises which sell alcohol
 - close between 11pm and 5am (hospitality venues in airports, ports, transport services and motorway service areas are exempt)
 - stop taking orders after 10pm
- hospitality businesses and venues selling food and drink for consumption off the premises can continue to do so after 10pm as long as this is through delivery service, click-and-collect or drive-through
- early closure (11pm) applies to casinos, cinemas, theatres, sports stadia,, bowling alleys, amusement arcades, funfairs, theme parks, adventure parks and activities, and bingo halls. Cinemas, theatres, concert halls and sports stadia can stay open beyond 11pm in order to

- conclude performances or events that start before 10pm
- public attendance at outdoor and indoor events (performances and shows) is permitted, limited to whichever is lower: 50% capacity, or either 2,000 people outdoors or 1,000 people indoors
 - public attendance at spectator sport and business events can resume inside and outside, subject to [social contact rules](#) and limited to whichever is lower: 50% capacity, or either 2,000 people outdoors or 1,000 people indoors
 - weddings and funerals can go ahead with restrictions on numbers of attendees – 15 people can attend wedding ceremonies and receptions, 30 people can attend funeral ceremonies, and 15 people can attend linked commemorative events such as wakes or stonings
 - organised outdoor sport, and physical activity and exercise classes can continue in any number
 - organised indoor sport, physical activity and exercise classes will only be permitted if it is possible for people to avoid mixing with people they do not live with (or share a support bubble with). There are exceptions for indoor disability sport, sport for educational purposes and supervised sport and physical activity for under-18s, which can take place with larger groups mixing

See [further details on Tier 2](#).

Tier 3 restrictions mean:

- people must not meet socially indoors, in a private garden or most outdoor public venues with anybody they do not live with or have a support bubble with. Everyone who can work from home should do so
- people can see friends and family they do not live with (or do not have a support bubble with) in some public outdoor places – such as parks or public gardens in a group of up to 6
- weddings and funerals can go ahead with restrictions on the number of attendees – 15 people can attend wedding ceremonies, wedding receptions are not allowed, 30 people can attend funeral ceremonies, 15 people can attend linked commemorative events
- accommodation such as hotels, B&Bs, campsites, holiday lets and guest houses must close, other than where very limited exceptions apply
- hospitality settings, such as bars (including shisha bars), pubs, cafes, restaurants, and social clubs must close except for takeaway, delivery, drive-through and click and collect services. Takeaway must cease between 11pm and 5am, but delivery, drive-through and click-and-collect may continue during this period. This includes restaurants and bars within hotels or members' clubs
- indoor entertainment venues, such as casinos, bowling alleys, and bingo halls must close. Outdoor entertainment venues, such as botanical gardens and heritage sites, may stay open, although indoor elements at these attractions must also close. Cinemas, theatres, and concert venues must close; except for drive-in events
- leisure and sports facilities may continue to stay open, but indoor group exercise classes (including fitness and dance) should not go ahead

See [further details on Tier 3](#)

Tier 4 restrictions mean:

- people must not leave their home or garden unless they have a 'reasonable excuse' including where reasonably necessary for work, education, exercise or open air recreation and essential activities such as medical appointments and to buy food
- people must not meet socially indoors, in a private garden or most outdoor public venues with anybody they do not live with or have a support bubble with. Everyone who can work from home should do so
- people can see only one other person that they do not live with (or do not have a support bubble with) in certain public outdoor places – such as parks, public gardens, or outdoor sports facilities
- weddings and funerals can go ahead with restrictions on the number of attendees – 6 people can attend wedding ceremonies, wedding receptions are not allowed, 30 people can attend funeral ceremonies, 6 people can attend linked commemorative events
- accommodation such as hotels, B&Bs, campsites, holiday lets and guest houses must close, other than where very limited exceptions apply
- hospitality settings, such as bars (including shisha bars), pubs, cafes, restaurants, and social clubs must close except for takeaway, delivery, drive-through and click and collect services. Takeaway must cease between 11pm and 5am, but delivery, drive-through and click-and-collect may continue during this period. This includes restaurants and bars within hotels or members' clubs
- indoor entertainment venues, such as casinos, bowling alleys, and bingo halls must close. Cinemas, theatres, and concert venues must also close
- certain outdoor venues, such as botanical gardens, heritage sites, and zoos and other animal attractions may stay open, although indoor elements at these attractions must also close
- all indoor leisure and sports facilities must close except where a legal exemption exists, such as for the training of elite sportspersons

See [further details on Tier 4](#).

The government decides which tier applies in each area based on a range of indicators, including:

- analysis of cases across all age groups
- analysis of cases in the over-60s
- the rate by which cases are rising or falling
- the percentage of those tested in local populations with COVID-19
- pressures on the NHS

[UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement:](#)

UK statement on Overseas Territories

Press release

The UK government is providing extra support and reassurance to Overseas Territories excluded from the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement.



FCDO Minister for the European Neighbourhood Wendy Morton said:

With the signing of the historic UK-EU trade agreement completed the UK Government affirms its unwavering support for all of our Overseas Territories (OTs).

Under the Withdrawal Agreement, legislation will also come into effect at the end of the transition period to implement the Protocol and to safeguard the Sovereign Base Areas on Cyprus. Practical and technical discussions will continue to ensure the smooth operation of the Protocol.

The UK, in lockstep with the Government of Gibraltar, has held extensive discussions with Spain regarding Gibraltar's future relationship with the EU. All sides recognised the challenging nature of this process at the outset of talks. Although an agreement has not yet been reached, we are continuing our discussions with Spain in order to safeguard Gibraltar's interests, and those of the surrounding region. In addition, we are also working closely with the Government of Gibraltar, in discussion with Spain and the EU, to mitigate the effects of the end of the Transition Period on Gibraltar, including at the border.

Despite trying everything we could, the European Commission refused to negotiate a future relationship that included the OTs. We sought

to change the Commission's position, but it declined to engage.

We remain unwavering in our commitment to safeguarding their interests. As the UK exits the transition period, Tristan da Cunha will continue to have tariff-free access to the EU market for its main export, lobster.

We continue to work closely with the Falkland Islands to manage the effects of new EU tariffs on their fish exports (including a 6% tariff on squid) while also helping the islands – and all of our OTs – to maximise the benefits of our newly independent trade policy.

In addition, we will take into account any shortfalls that arose from the end of EU funding, as we plan future UK spending in the OTs. We will focus this funding on the greatest needs and to deliver the greatest impact.

The OTs are a much-valued part of the whole British family and we will continue to do all we can to protect their interests.

Published 30 December 2020

First phase of research paves the way for further studies on microplastics pollution

The Government company responsible for motorways and major A roads is committed to minimising the environmental impact of its network and in particular the vehicles using it.

It already has clear assessment and design standards for maintaining and improving drainage systems on its network.

Now it has kickstarted research to see if more can be done, and has just published initial research identifying what evidence exists and to determine what further research needs doing.

The academic desk top findings have also secured funding to investigate the issue further through 'on road' investigations.

Michael Whitehead, Principal Advisor for Water at Highways England, said:

Highways England takes environmental issues seriously and recognises the global concern around microplastic pollution. We have undertaken this research together with the Environment Agency and other industry experts to better understand the potential contribution that road transport has on microplastics.

The outcome of further research will be the evidence base to inform future decision making, enabling us to take positive action to manage identified risks, inform policy and identify further areas of research.

Helen Wakeham, Environment Agency Deputy Director Water Quality, Groundwater & Contaminated Land, said:

This research contributes to the work we do with partners to understand the sources and scale of microplastic pollution.

We supported this research by Highways England as it provided a valuable review into the current knowledge of the potential scale of microplastic and chemical pollution from highways. We look forward to continuing work with Highways England on this important topic as the work progresses. This will help us better understand the contribution from the road network as a source of microplastics and emerging chemicals of concern entering the environment.

Highways England decided to undertake research to identify whether there is a microplastic waste issue from water running off roads. The research will help the company better understand the scale of this issue, the nature of the problem and identify any further detailed research to inform changes to its current policy or design standards.

Alice Horton from the National Oceanography Centre, said:

This research is a key step in understanding the contribution of the strategic road network to microplastic pollution within the terrestrial and aquatic environment. This study has identified the critical knowledge gaps that should be addressed going forwards to enable us to understand the extent and implications of microplastic runoff from roads, and measures that should be put in place to limit this environmental contamination.

A crucial part of this first stage of research, which has just been

published, involved identifying suitable methods to collect and analyse samples of road runoff to establish the presence or absence of microplastics.

Judith Brammer, microplastics technical lead for the Atkins Jacobs Joint Venture, said:

This is cutting edge research that has the potential to transform our understanding of the contribution of road runoff to microplastics in the water environment. The Atkins and Jacob Joint Venture sat at the heart of it, gathering and assessing the evidence base to guide future research, informing Highways England's policy and decision making going forward.

This work will ensure that Highways England's understanding of the environmental effects associated with the Strategic Road Network (SRN) is up to date, and that the assessment and design guidance standards which is published and maintained in the Design Manual for Roads and Bridges (DMRB) are robust.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.