

COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2): information about the new virus variant

Main points

Data from Whole Genome Sequencing, epidemiology and modelling suggest the new variant 'VUI – 202012/01' (the first Variant Under Investigation in December 2020) transmits more easily than other strains.

We currently have no evidence that the variant is more likely to cause severe disease or mortality – but we are continuing investigations to understand this better.

The way to control this virus is the same, whatever the variant. It will not spread if we avoid close contact with others. Wash your hands, wear a mask, keep your distance from others, and reduce your social contacts.

Is there any evidence that the variant is more serious?

We currently have no evidence that this variant causes more severe disease or higher mortality – but we continue to study cases to understand this better. We know that mortality is a lagging indicator and we will need to continually monitor this over the coming weeks.

Why is this more transmissible?

We know that mutations in the spike protein, the part of the virus that makes it infectious, can change how the virus interacts with human cells. However, we do not yet know the mechanism for this increase in transmission.

The evidence shows that infection rates in geographical areas where this particular strain has been circulating have increased faster than expected, and the modelling evidence has demonstrated that this variant has a higher transmission rate than other variants in current circulation.

How long has this variant been in circulation?

All viruses mutate over time and new variants emerge regularly.

Backwards tracing using the genetic evidence suggests this variant emerged in September 2020 and then circulated at very low levels in the population until mid-November.

The increase in cases linked to the new variant first came to light in late November when PHE was investigating why infection rates in Kent were not falling despite national restrictions. We then discovered a cluster linked to

this variant spreading rapidly into London and Essex.

Evidence of increased transmissibility was provided to [NERVTAG](#) and ministers on December 18.

Is this strain resistant to the Pfizer vaccine?

There is currently no evidence to suggest that the Pfizer vaccine would not protect people against the new strain.

Further laboratory work is currently being undertaken as a priority to understand this.

How widespread is the variant geographically?

144 Lower Tier Local Authorities have identified at least 1 case genomically, although the vast majority of cases identified are in London, the South East and the East of England.

Can tests detect this new variant?

Labs have been issued with guidance to adapt processes to ensure that PCR tests can detect this variant.

PCR tests can be adapted rapidly to respond to the new variant.

[British Embassy Bangkok hosted the screening of Sir David Attenborough's latest documentary 'A Life on Our Planet'](#)

“What will our world be like in the next 100 years?” To answer this question, we might need to look into our past.

66 years ago, ‘Zoo Quest’ was first aired on BBC on the 21st of December 1954. The documentary, presented by 28-year old David Attenborough, showed the world the wonders of the earth. The world saw, for the first time, marvellous creatures living in undiscovered landscapes and hidden oceans through the eyes and words of the 28-year old storyteller.

Today, now aged in his 90s and with a knighthood title, brimming with experience as earth’s adventurer and nature’s storyteller, Sir David Attenborough stands by his chosen path as a naturalist. Throughout the past

half-century of his career, he continues to speak for the planet, raising awareness of preserving wildlife, and over the past 20 years, has been an avid speaker for climate change.

His latest documentary, 'A Life on Our Planet' highlights the problem the world is facing at an alarming rate as a result of human-induced climate change. He posits that continuing on our current paths of consumption and fossil fuel use would lead to devastating outcomes for humanity. The documentary presents, through his 'witness statement', a crossroads between the 'destruction' that is dawning upon us in a period shorter than a lifetime, and a glimpse of 'hope' that we all can still save 'our planet', which is home to all of humanity and life on earth.

The United Kingdom (UK) will host the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in November 2021. As such, the British Embassy Bangkok, in conjunction with ICONSIAM and Major Group, proudly hosted the Screening of Sir David Attenborough's latest documentary 'A Life on Our Planet' at ICON Cineconic, ICONSIAM on 30th November 2020.

The event forwarded the goal of COP26 which is to unite the world on a path to a zero carbon economy as we build back greener from COVID-19. It featured activities consistent with COP26 campaigns, namely showcasing of British products that are at the heart of driving a transition to low-carbon energy and a panel discussion about nature-based solutions to climate change.

Nature-based solutions – saving nature with nature's solutions

Natural systems are on the front-line of the fight against climate change, both because they are impacted by climate change, and because they provide us with vital tools to help us adapt to rising temperatures, and to lock up and store carbon. Our land and Ocean are under threat from climate change but can also contribute to these solutions. That's why "nature-based solutions" is a core theme of COP26.

At the panel discussion – joined by Aban Marker Kabraji, Regional Director for IUCN Asia and Director of the IUCN Regional Hub for Asia-Oceania, Peter Galli the Global Director, Corporate Communications at Thai Union Group PCL, Weraya, a finalist in the "Changing Climate, Changing Lives Film Festival" – nature-based solutions were discussed from various perspective namely the private sector, NGOs and media.

Solutions mentioned include dealing with 'Ghost nets' in the ocean to save wild ocean life; exploring how communities and groups are using nature-based solutions to save the environment by cutting food waste and monitoring and reducing ocean carbon levels; and how local communities can help address climate change by maintaining natural mangrove forests.

Energy Transition

In the post-event online survey, the crowd was asked 'Which policy should governments focus on to solve Climate Change?' Interestingly, "Energy Efficiency" is the most mentioned key word followed by "Improving Public Transport".

The results reflect the fact that 'Energy' and 'Transport' are two things people experience in their daily lives and felt it would make a significant impact if technology was utilised to ensure these areas of urban living are environmentally friendly.

Through partnership with the UK's Department for International Trade, 5 British companies have showcased their technologies at the event including:

- Flexible and Lightweight Solar Panels from Verditek Solar. The panels are installed on the roof of the Electric Vehicle Association of Thailand's (EVAT) Electric Tuktuk. Its lightweight advantages allow for installation in places conventional solar panels cannot be fitted, for example, on public transport, low load bearing roofs, boats, cars, lorries and movable temporary solar power generation
- Ride-hailing Platform from evRiderz, world's first Triple Play ride hailing company, provides Electric Motorbikes to its drivers and aims to gradually transition drivers and users to Electric Vehicles (EVs). The platform was recently launched in Thailand, early in November. The App "evRiderz" can be downloaded from Apple & Google Play Store.
- Kinetic Tiles from Pavegen which converts kinetic energy into electricity, providing businesses equipped with the tiles with insights and incentives that rewards positive customer experience.
- Easson Energy provide Energy Efficiency Solutions which incorporate cutting edge technologies such as AI, SaaS and IoTs to give users granular, asset level, real time control of their energy usage helping users save as much as 40% of their electricity bills whilst simultaneously reducing energy usage and carbon footprint.
- Ricardo is a global, multi-industry, multi-discipline consultancy supporting the transport, energy and environment sectors. Examples of their multi-industry knowledge and deep technical expertise – developing electric vehicle technologies including batteries and motors, innovating emission reduction solutions for marine and off highway sectors and guiding government and industry on targets and obligations. They are uniquely positioned to handle their clients' toughest challenges regarding carbon emissions and climate change.

Make change a choice not a consequence

But there is still hope, among the alarming facts about climate change and the scientific data warning us that if we do not take an ambitious climate action before the turn of the decade, nature could be irreversibly ruined, and with it the human livelihood. There is still hope, even as the clock is ticking away. Opinions from the post-event online survey and Attenborough's message from the movie itself suggest that there is much more we can do. Besides the actions to be taken by governments, the private sector, and we as individuals, have a crucial role in making changes to save nature now. Because by taking climate actions we are saving not only mother earth but also the future of our own humankind.

One million laptops and tablets for disadvantaged children and young people

Over one million devices will now reach schools, colleges and councils, helping ensure students have access to high-quality remote education if they need it, the Government has announced today.

Almost 70,000 pupils are also now confirmed to have enrolled in the National Tutoring Programme, as the government continues to step up work to support young people.

The Government is also confirming today that, amidst unprecedented global demand, over 560,000 devices were delivered to schools and councils in 2020. The further purchase of more than 440,000 devices means that over one million will now be provided to help schools and colleges throughout the pandemic – making the programme one of the largest of its kind in the world.

The Government is now investing over £300 million to support remote education and social care, including providing devices and internet access to pupils who need it most. This is alongside work to help young people catch up through the National Tutoring Programme.

High-quality tutoring of the kind offered by the programme has been proven to help young people catch up by as much as 3-5 months lost learning, from just one term's worth of tutoring.

The Government has been clear that keeping education open for all is a national priority. Schools and colleges have already put extensive protective measures in place that are helping reduce the risk of the virus being transmitted.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

We know how important it is for children to be in school, but it's also vital that where public health advice means they can't be, we have all-encompassing measures in place to prevent them falling behind.

That's why scaling up our devices scheme, alongside our tutoring offer to reach as many children and young people as possible, is so important.

Providing one million devices is a hugely significant achievement, not only in the context of supporting children through the pandemic, but an investment in tech for our schools, colleges and children for years to come.

From January, schools will start being invited to order devices even if they have not had to send pupils home to self-isolate.

Devices are currently delivered within two working days of orders being placed and that will remain the case going into the first week of January. Schools will be kept up to date on delivery times should they be impacted by the level of demand.

The programme will also be extended to include 16 to 19-year-olds in schools and further education, many of whom will be preparing for exams.

The purchase of more than 440,000 devices comes from a further £100 million being committed, bringing the total to over £300 million to support remote education.

The vast majority of devices will be delivered to schools and colleges by Easter.

Matt Hood, Principal at Oak National Academy, said:

This is very welcome news. As we look forward to next term it is right we increase both laptops and data access for the children who most need support.

Every child must be able to access online teaching so they can keep learning, and this will help, no matter a child's circumstance. It's why we are so proud that pupils have taken part in nine million Oak National Academy lessons this term and we look forward to supporting more into 2021.

David Hughes, Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges, said:

This access to digital devices is a welcome step forward for college students. It means they will be able to engage fully in their learning as a result, receiving the high-quality education they deserve at all times. It is vital that our students are able to progress in their education as they should.

Victoria Gowan, Headteacher, Lord Derby Academy, said:

Receiving our allocation of devices has had a very positive impact on our school community – with access and engagement with our remote learning offer almost doubling amongst our pupils. A number of parents have also expressed their gratitude for their children now being able to access remote learning from home.

Our significant allocation of Chromebooks has boosted staff morale and motivation to be creative in delivering remote learning, alongside supporting us in removing one of the most significant barriers to our pupils' access to the curriculum.

Since schools began enrolling pupils into the National Tutoring Programme following its launch in November this year, over 62,000 pupils have enrolled in subsidised high-quality tutoring through the Education Endowment Foundation's Tuition Partners.

The National Tutoring Programme is expected to continue to ramp up over the spring term, reaching hundreds of thousands of pupils by the summer, ensuring those who have suffered the most from lost learning, including those in exam year groups, have the greatest opportunity to catch up.

188 Academic Mentors, recruited and trained by Teach First, have also started in schools serving disadvantaged communities across the country. This has benefited an estimated 7,000 pupils to date and over 500 additional mentors are set to join schools in January, with a further cohort starting in February.

Sir Peter Lampl, founder and chairman of the Sutton Trust and chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), said:

Our research has shown that high quality tutoring is a cost-effective way to accelerate pupils' learning. While only part of the solution in addressing the impact of school closures, it's clear that the NTP is able to make a real difference to pupils' outcomes.

So it's good to see the programme get-off to such a promising start, with over 60,000 pupils enrolled since its launch six weeks ago. Even more heartening has been the individual stories of the schools and pupils who have accessed the support.

By building on these strong foundations, the NTP will prove to be a powerful tool for tackling the attainment gap.

Sue Maguire, Headteacher, Hatch End High School said:

We've been absolutely thrilled with the invaluable support our Academic Mentor has provided to our pupils, teachers and whole school this term. A major reason why the programme has been so successful is the regular communication between the teacher and the mentor, resulting in high quality, intense and tailored tuition.

Students have already commented on how their mentor has supported them to gain in confidence, as well as improve their key skills in areas of the English curriculum.

The Department for Education has partnered with some of the UK's leading mobile operators to provide free data to disadvantaged families, further supporting remote learning where it's needed.

Where schools identify a child from a disadvantaged family without internet access at home, they can now request free, additional data through the DfE's Get Help with Technology programme. Families will benefit from this additional data until July.

The level of additional data will vary by provider, but for example EE customers will receive an extra 20 gigabytes per month. Other providers include Three, Tesco Mobile, Smarty, Sky Mobile and Virgin Mobile.

Lutz Schüler, Chief Executive Officer at Virgin Media, said:

We know how important it is for children to take part in online lessons and remote learning, and we're pleased to be working with the Department for Education by offering free mobile data to Virgin Mobile customers who need it. This is the latest in a series of measures we have taken this year to support our customers during this challenging time.

The National Tutoring Programme has been extended to run for two years to allow more tutoring to be rolled out across the country and be more beneficial to the children and young people who need the most support to

catch up.

The government is determined to ensure that tutoring is available to boost the progress of all students that need it, not just the most privileged.

Schools are offered blocks of 15 hours tutoring from Tuition Partners and schools are responsible for making decisions on which pupils receive tutoring support and how that tutoring is delivered to pupils. This can be small group or one-to-one tuition and either online or face-to-face.

[Two hundred independent cinemas supported through the Culture Recovery Fund this Christmas](#)

- Cinemas can apply for a further £14 million in grants from the second round of the Culture Recovery Fund
- More support for screen supply chain as Film and TV Production Restart Scheme extended until April 2021 and cover now available for cast and crew over 70 years old

More than 200 independent cinemas across England are being supported this Christmas with £16 million in grants from the Government's £1.57 billion Culture Recovery Fund.

201 cinemas have received funding so far from a £30 million pot allocated by the British Film Institute (BFI), on behalf of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, as part of the biggest ever single investment in this country's cultural sectors. More grant applications from independent cinemas are also currently being assessed. Cinemas will be able to apply for another £14 million in grants in the new year as part of the second round of the Culture Recovery Fund. The new round of funding is in addition to the £30 million already being allocated by the BFI.

The BFI has been accepting applications and awarding grants to independent cinemas throughout the autumn. Eligible cinemas were able to apply for Safety Grants, to help venues meet the immediate costs of implementing Covid-secure measures to protect staff and audiences, and larger Business Sustainability grants to help stabilise sites financially.

Recognising that cinemas need content, during this crisis, the Government's Film and TV Production Restart Scheme has helped keep the cameras rolling at the other end of the screen supply chain. The £500 million scheme, which

opened for applications in October, has assured nearly 100 productions that they will be supported if future losses are incurred due to Covid-19 and provided the confidence they need to restart filming.

From today, the scope of the Restart Scheme has been extended so that cast and crew over the age of 70 can be included in the cover provided by the scheme. The changes to the scheme will enable productions to receive compensation for Covid-related delays affecting up to two cast or crew members over 70 years old. This extension will give productions that involve cast and crew over 70 the confidence to start or restart production, increasing employment opportunities for this group.

The deadline for productions to register for the scheme has also been extended until April 2021, giving more film and high-end TV projects the security to start shooting in the spring.

Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden said:

The magic of film is such an important part of the festive period and this investment will help protect our independent cinemas so they're around for many Christmases to come. Alongside it, the extension of the Film and TV Production Restart Scheme means the UK will be producing even more great content as the cinema industry recovers, keeping us at the forefront of the creative industries.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, said:

As a Star Wars fan, I know there's no better place to experience great films than in your local cinema and these grants will provide vital support for independent venues through Christmas and beyond.

Our Restart Scheme has already helped to get nearly 100 film and TV productions back up and running as part of our Plan for Jobs, and it's right that we extend this to support even more jobs in the UK's creative industries, including for the over 70s.

The majority of the grant funding allocated by the BFI has been awarded to cinema sites in every corner of the country, from Penrith to Peckham and Penzance, with cinemas outside London benefitting from 78% of funding to date.

Actor Michael Caine, who starred in Christopher Nolan's Tenet which drew audiences back to cinemas in the autumn, has welcomed the help for the industry and encouraged audiences to support cinemas with safe visits where possible:

Sir Michael Caine said:

The moving image has the power to change the way we think. The power to inspire; to delight; and to move. It happens to me all the time. Film is one of the most powerful and accessible art forms on earth – and for so many a local cinema is a place we know, love and have grown up with. A cinema is very often a vital part of any community and we need to support them in order to keep the art of film and the sense of community alive. Let's go to the pictures!

The BFI worked closely with individual cinemas to provide detailed and bespoke support throughout the application process.

Ben Roberts, BFI Chief Executive, said:

Across the country, local independent cinemas are hubs and lifelines for communities and often the only form of culture and entertainment. From educational programmes and workshops for young people, to screenings for the elderly and audiences with specialised needs, these cinemas play such an important role in people's lives. The Culture Recovery Fund will mean that many of these cinemas survive the current crisis, and go on to play a vital role in the recovery of local economies and communities, bringing people together to offer joy, solace and the magic of the big screen.

The Regent Centre in Christchurch, Dorset, will benefit from £243,405 to help this community venue and local cinema weather the storm of Covid-19. The site, which also houses a museum display dedicated to the history of the 1930s art-deco venue, creates volunteering opportunities for more than 200 local people. This Christmas, the Regent Centre plans to show new family releases like *The Secret Garden* and *The Elfkings* alongside festive favourites like *Miracle on 34th Street*.

Combined grants of £121,488 will support the family-run Alhambra cinema in Penrith, Cumbria, to offer its programme of festive films, including the recently released screen event *A Christmas Carol* featuring Carey Mulligan, Martin Freeman, and Daniel Kaluuya, to socially-distanced audiences in a Covid-secure setting. The cinema continues to be an important cultural venue in the area which supports other regional events, local businesses and nearby schools.

Alan Towers, Partner, Alhambra Penrith, said:

The Culture Recovery Fund grant aids us in opening to our local community again, supporting our safe measures of work to provide a comfortable and enjoyable environment for staff and customers alike. The love of cinema is evident amongst ourselves and those in the surrounding area, with the grant we are able to welcome customers to the Alhambra to continue to provide the community with

great films and lasting experiences.

Recipients also include Suffolk's oldest cinema, the Film Theatre in Leiston, which has been trading for over a century and a grant of £57,509 will ensure it can continue to do so over the Christmas period this year and into 2021.

In Derbyshire, The Northern Light Cinema, Wirksworth, has been awarded grants totalling £27,749 to help the community venue continue to provide a diverse programme of screenings and events and work closely with young people as well as create a safe and Covid-secure environment for the local rural community when it can reopen.

The Wells Film Centre, a family run cinema in Somerset, will benefit from £78,980 so it can continue to offer its screening programme for young people, parents and babies, its popular Tea Matinees as well as its regular talks with invited art and history speakers.

Sally Cooper, Proprietor, Wells Film Centre, said:

After what has been an exceedingly difficult year due to Covid-19, the financial support from the Culture Recovery Fund has helped secure the continued survival of the Wells Film Centre so that we can continue entertaining and bringing together our local community.

London's Peckhamplex will benefit from £564,423 so that this well-known and well-loved community cinema can continue to serve its large and diverse local community safely in 2021. The programme includes a wide range of titles from Hollywood blockbusters to art house releases with accessible tickets for every performance priced at £4.99 alongside film festivals, screenings to promote local filmmakers, and events to support other community assets and charities.

John Reiss, Chairman, Peckhamplex, said:

Peckhamplex is immensely grateful for the whole range of Government support during the pandemic – the Job Retention Scheme, the taxation deferrals and the Safety and Sustainability grants from the DCMS Culture Recovery Fund, as well as for the support of the London Borough of Southwark. This help, together with very careful management by the Peckhamplex team, will enable us to remain viable, not losing a single employee, and when public health conditions permit and the flow of commercial films is renewed, we look forward to re-opening and continuing to entertain and inform our large and diverse audience from across London at affordable prices

Other cinemas in cities, towns and rural communities across the country

supported by the fund include the Hailsham Pavilion (£55,446), the Ilkley Cinema (£204,421), the Rex Berkhamsted (£350,332), the Merlin Cromer (£69,200), the Odyssey in Albans (£120,377), the Regal Melton Mowbray (£98,661), the Ultimate Picture Palace in Oxford (£44,269), the Rex Wilmslow (£138,141), and the Rio Dalson (£110,296).

Cinemas in England have also benefited from other aspects of the Culture Recovery Fund, including Nottingham Broadway which received a grant of £144,000 to kickstart its capital transformation project which was delayed due to the pandemic. Cinemas in multipurpose arts venues such as Home in Manchester and Watershed in Bristol were allocated grants by Arts Council England, ensuring that some of our best known screens have been supported during this crisis.

More than £1 billion has now been allocated from the Culture Recovery Fund to support culture in all four nations during the Covid-19 pandemic. Northern Ireland has allocated £29 million to a Covid-19 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Support Programme, and over £5 million to a Heritage Recovery Fund. Wales has established a £63.7 million Cultural Recovery Fund which includes £20 million to support music, dance, theatre, literature, and the arts allocated by Arts Council Wales. Scotland's £59 million funding package has also supported the arts, heritage, and grassroots music and established a £15 million Culture Organisations and Venues Recovery Fund.

£14 million in further support will be made available to cinemas through a second round of funding allocated by the BFI early next year from the remainder of the Culture Recovery Fund. Funding was held back to allow the Government to respond to the changing public health picture and will support cinemas at imminent risk of collapse before the end of this financial year. Cinemas which have not yet applied as well as those that have already received support will be able to apply for additional funding to help cover reopening costs from April to June next year. Guidance for applicants and eligibility criteria will be published by the BFI; Arts Council England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund have also published guidance for applications to the next round of grants. Cinemas are also able to apply to the repayable finance scheme for arts and cultural organisations.

ENDS

Additional quotes:

Mark Jenkin, BAFTA Award-winning director and producer, said:

Independent cinemas have always been a big part of my life. From regular Saturday matinees at the Regal in Wadebridge as a child, to recently watching my film BAIT play at so many unique venues across the UK, including the Newlyn Filmhouse, just down the hill from where it was made. For many people the local cinema provides a necessary communal cultural experience and it's a great relief that the Culture Recovery Fund can help to ensure they can survive and thrive.

Gemma Arterton, actor and producer (Made in Dagenham, How to Build a Girl), said:

As a child growing up in Gravesend, some of my fondest memories are the magic and wonder I felt going to my local cinema with my Dad. It felt like a special treat, an event. Sadly, that cinema has now closed. We have to support our local cinemas to make sure those special moments can be experienced by generations of children and adults alike, for years to come. Watching a film at home just isn't the same. Being in a darkened room with strangers, escaping into a world together is something very unique. It's a shared experience. Cinemas are amongst the last bastions of community hubs. We need to support them in any way we can and keep the magic of cinema and community alive.

David Harewood, actor (Tulip Fever, MI-5), said:

Independent cinemas are so very important to our local communities for the experience they give us all, whether it's as a cinema goer or as a member of the team. Be it a homegrown British film or an all time international classic, we've all known the magic of seeing a film on the big screen for that very first time and the inspiration it brings.

Hayley Squires, actor (I, Daniel Blake, Happy New Year Colin Burstead), said:

Seeing a film in a cinema is an unreplicable experience. There is something vital about the hold the big screen has on us. The cinema is a place for us all to gather and have a shared experience, while simultaneously also a very private and emotional one. Independent cinemas are starting to reopen – please support your local one.

David Nixon, Cinema Manager, Forum Hexham, said:

We are extremely grateful to receive support from the Cultural Recovery Fund during this difficult time. This support will enable us to continue our legacy of bringing the best films from around the world to Northumberland, in order to engage with every sector of the community.

John Potter, Chairman, Ritz Cinema Thirsk, said:

On behalf of the Ritz Cinema Thirsk I would like to thank you and

the Culture Recovery Fund for providing us with a grant to help us through these difficult times. The funding will ensure that we will be able to reopen the cinema in the confidence that we have everything in place to make it safe for our customers and volunteers.

Notes to Editors:

A regional breakdown of funding from this round of grant awards is as follows:

- East Midlands – £1,830,719
- East – £1,791,775
- London – £3,466,490
- North East – £169,669
- North West – £1,076,294
- South East – £1,862,028
- South West – £2,868,037
- West Midlands – £679,041
- Yorkshire and the Humber – £2,267,101

Cinemas can remain open over the Christmas period in areas under Tier 1 and 2 restrictions but must close in Tier 3 areas where the alert level is Very High.

As part of the second round of grant funding from the Culture Recovery Fund, Arts Council England will deliver £250 million; Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund will deliver £36 million; and the BFI will £14 million. In addition Arts Council England has received £100 million in the form of repayable finance. Further details on the second round of grant funding will be announced shortly.

[Prime Minister announces Tier 4: 'Stay At Home' Alert Level in response to new COVID variant](#)

The Prime Minister has announced tougher restrictions for large parts of South East England with a new Tier 4: 'Stay at Home' alert level.

The decision follows a rapid rise in infections attributed to the rapid spread of a new variant of COVID-19.

Based on preliminary modelling data, the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG) now consider that the new strain can spread

significantly more quickly and could increase R by 0.4 or more. New and existing data will continue to be analysed as we learn more about the variant.

As a result, the following areas will move from Tier 3 to Tier 4:

- Kent, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, Surrey (excluding Waverley), Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth, Rother and Hastings;
- London (all 32 boroughs and the City of London); and
- the East of England (Bedford, Central Bedford, Milton Keynes, Luton, Peterborough, Hertfordshire, Essex excluding Colchester, Uttlesford and Tendring).

In Tier 4 the 'Stay At Home' message will be put in law. As previously, there will be exemptions – including travelling for work or education, for childcare purposes, and for exercise.

People should not enter or leave Tier 4 areas, and Tier 4 residents must not stay overnight away from home. Where people cannot work from home, they should still travel to work, for example in the construction and manufacturing sectors.

Non-essential retail, indoor leisure [such as swimming pools and gyms], indoor entertainment [such as cinemas, bowling alleys and casinos], and personal care sectors [such as nail bars, barbers and hairdressers] must all close.

Tighter social contact restrictions will also be introduced, meaning one person can meet with one other person in an outside public space. Rules on support bubbles and childcare bubbles will remain as currently, and communal worship can continue to take place.

For the clinically extremely vulnerable, the same advice as in November applies in Tier 4 areas. This says that those who are clinically extremely vulnerable, which includes people with certain types of cancer, people on immunosuppression therapy, and people with severe respiratory conditions, shouldn't go to work and should limit time outside the home, and take exercise outside at less busy times.

The Prime Minister, Chief Medical Officer, Chief Scientific Advisor and Cabinet agreed that while no-one wants to impose these tougher measures, the new variant has significantly changed the current landscape and urgent action is needed to protect the NHS and save lives.

Throughout the pandemic, the evidence has shown that rising rates will lead to increased hospital admissions, risking intolerable pressure on the NHS in the toughest winter months.

There is no current evidence to suggest the new variant causes a higher mortality rate, that it affects vaccines and treatments, or that testing will not detect cases.

The Prime Minister also said that given the risk the new variant poses, the

Christmas bubble policy will no longer apply in Tier 4.

For Tiers 1, 2 and 3, Christmas bubbles can continue with up to three households able to meet, but for one day only on Christmas Day.

The government is also issuing new travel advice. Although the new variant is concentrated in Tier 4 areas, it is present at lower levels around the country.

People under Tier 1, 2, and 3 restrictions should stay local. People should not travel into or out of Tier 4 areas and those in Tier 4 areas will not be permitted to travel abroad, apart from limited exceptions including work and education.

Tier 4 rules will be reviewed on 30 December, as part of the wider review of all restrictions.