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BRIEFING

Covid-19: Surge testing for the South Africa variant begins in England

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What is being deployed?

The government announced this week that it was rolling out additional surge testing and sequencing capacity to a small number of UK locations where community based infections of the covid-19 variant first identified in South Africa (known as 501Y.V2) were found that could not be linked back to international travel. To date, 11 cases of this kind have been identified.

Where are the locations?

Surge testing is being targeted to eight postcode areas where the 11 cases were found. These are all in England—EN10 in Hertfordshire; W7, N17, and CR4 in London; PR9 in Lancashire; ME15 in Kent; GU21 in Surrey; and WS2 in the West Midlands.

How will it work?

From Monday 1 February, everyone over 16 living in the eight postcode areas was being strongly encouraged to take a covid-19 test, even if they do not have any symptoms. Mobile testing units will be deployed to offer polymerase chain reaction swab testing to people who have to leave their home for work or essential reasons, and additional home test kits will be supplied.

Who is running it?

Local authorities have been put in charge of overseeing the scheme. People with covid-19 symptoms are being told to book a test in the usual way, while those without symptoms are being advised to visit their local authority website for information.

How were the 11 cases identified?

Through large scale and rapid whole genome sequencing of virus samples, carried out by the Covid-19 Genomics UK consortium in partnership with Public Health England. PHE has identified 105 cases of the South Africa variant since 22 December. But only 11 to date could not be linked to international travel.

Are there likely to be more cases than this?

While the UK is conducting more genome sequencing (around 10% of positive test samples) than any other European country except for Denmark, this still leaves ample room for undetected cases. “There is a high probability that further local cases are in circulation,” said Rowland Kao, professor of veterinary epidemiology and data science at University of Edinburgh.

What is the purpose of the surge testing?

Any positive tests found in the eight areas will be sequenced to identify any further spread of the South Africa variant. The intention is to monitor and suppress the spread of the virus, and to gain a better understanding of the new variant.