

Responding to Variants of Concern (VOCs)

Mutations and variants of the Covid-19 virus can present a significant risk. As well as potentially being more transmissible and leading to more severe clinical consequences for individuals, mutations also present the possibility for Covid-19 variants to more effectively bypass naturally acquired immunity and/or reduce the effectiveness of current vaccines and therapeutics

Local Authorities, alongside and with the support of PHE and NHS Test and Trace at regional and national levels, have a key role to play in the investigation, management and control of COVID-19 variants designated as 'Variants of Concern' or VOCs. The overarching purpose is to restrict the widespread growth of VOCs in the population by:

1. **detecting, tracing and isolating cases to drive down overall community transmission, and**
2. **case finding additional VOC cases through whole genome sequencing to help assess the risk of community transmission and determine what further interventions and actions are necessary to contain the variant.**

All local authorities need to be prepared to quickly mobilise a suite of appropriate measures if a VOC is identified in their Borough, including local "surge" testing, and complemented by action to trace contacts and isolate cases as part of a wider strategy to control overall transmission.

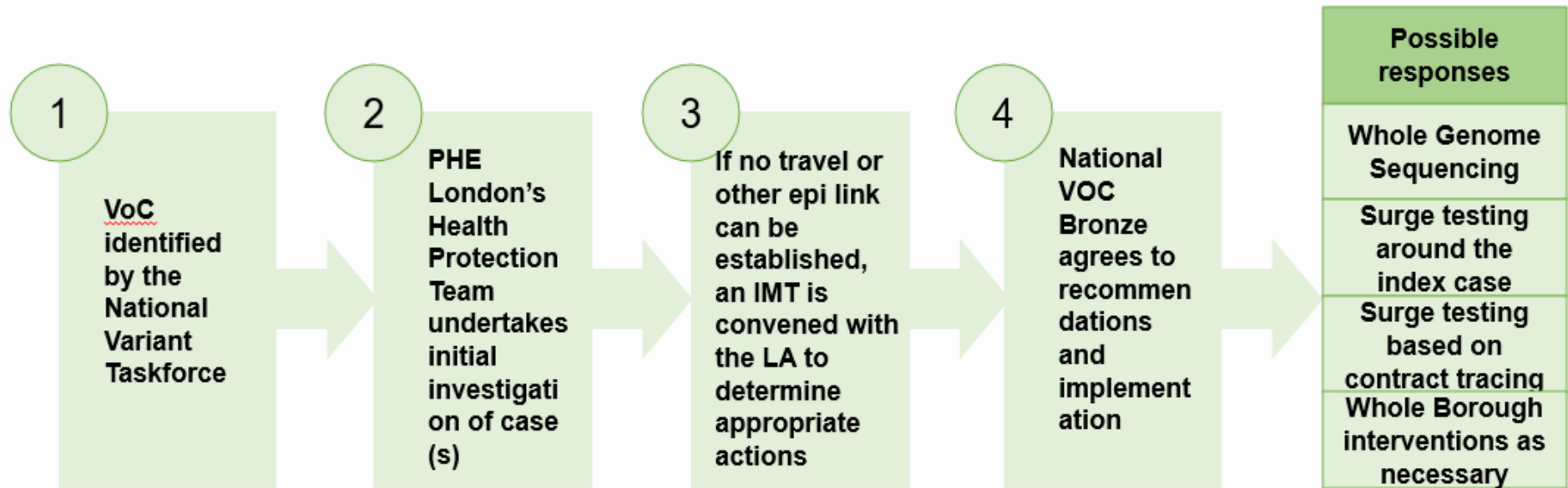
Following the identification of a VOC, PHE London's Coronavirus Response Cell (LCRC) will conduct the initial investigation to gather additional information, complete a minimum data set and establish whether there are epidemiological links to countries of concern. Those VOCs without an epidemiological link will require wider investigation and response, and this will be determined jointly between the Local Authority, on the advice of the DPH, and PHE London's Health Protection Team.

The combination, scale and focus of the tools deployed to investigate and control VOCs will be locally led, informed by the data and risk assessment, current epidemiology, knowledge of the local community and grounded in health protection principles and specialist health protection advice. Plans will need to be flexible and adaptable to different circumstances, such as the geography, communities or settings in scope.

The planned local response to a VOC(s) will need to be reviewed and supported by PHE National VOC Bronze to ensure the response is appropriate to the assessed risk and, critically, that the national support required for implementation of the plan (e.g. whole genome sequencing, surge PCR testing) can be mobilised within available national capacity.

The figure overleaf gives a high level representation of this process, and slide 3 describes the measures and interventions that boroughs should consider deploying as part of their local VOC response.

Variants of Concern (VoC) Investigation and Management



Guide to determining Public Health Action- range of approaches

Whole Genome Sequencing	Increase symptomatic PCR testing	Targeted surge asymptomatic PCR testing	Rapid and enhanced contact tracing	Support for isolation	NPIs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define and agree coverage/scope of PCR positives for WGS (over & above routine 5% surveillance) including pillar 1, and time period 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider increasing symptomatic testing capacity via additional MTU deployment, increased or changed opening hours Enhanced or increased local 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine target population, geography or setting Determine best operational method(s) for targeted surge testing eg: 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Immediate tracing response to positive cases from the defined area/population ie tracing begins on entry of positive case to CTAS/the trace process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Package of self-isolation support to meet practical and emotional/well-being support needs of cases and contacts Self isolation payments and discretionary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post national restrictions/lockdown, consider need for targeted, local NPIs/restrictions as part of VOC control approach Reinforce covid-secure and IPC measures in key settings
					<p>Monitoring and evaluation</p>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data led eg small area/geography around VOC case; setting specific; whole borough • Contingent on national capacity • Explore leveraging local hospital and academic sequencing capabilities 	<p>communications to encourage and ensure people get tested.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start or potentially increase the local booking arrangements for LTS sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Door drop model (Council, VCS or other trusted delivery partner, commercial partner) • Collect and drop model, roving model • ATS (swapping in PCR for LFDs or including supplementary PCR tests for positives) • Surge of up to 5000 asymptomatic tests • MTUs deployed for asymptomatic testing, not on the 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A dedicated team within NHS Trace contacts all positive cases from the defined area, using tailored scripting • LA's Local CT Partnership service works alongside national VOC Trace cell • Re-enforcement of isolation and public health advice to all cases and contacts • Consider using enhanced contact tracing to identify and investigate 	<p>support for those in financial need</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider enhanced welfare support/follow up calls and other enhancements 	<p>Evaluation framework in place to assess impact of local measures, inform future VOC response and outbreak control more generally. Requires data on sequencing results to be made available to the LA and IMT in a timely way, to assist with any real-time amendments to the approach, or to inform programme extension and support overall evaluation</p>
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		national portal, for walk up and booked via local system	potential transmission events/clusters as part of wider OB control		
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Communications and engagement

- Locally led plan for culturally competent communications and community engagement
- Coordination of announcements and clear messages about purpose and restrictions in place during implementation of local variant control measures/surge activities
- Ensure alignment of national comms with local comms
- Managing the need to inform the public about VOCs without driving negative behavioural or psycho-social outcomes
- Harness existing community assets, networks and trusted messengers eg community champions
- Specific considerations include: an inbound helpline; a postcode checker on Council website

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