

## Meeting of the EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19

### Meeting Report

**Monday 21/12/2020 at 15:00**

#### **1. Update on UK SARS –CoV-2 variant and possible implications**

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Commissioner Kyriakides thanked the participants for making themselves available at short notice in view of the latest developments on a SARS-CoV2 variant observed in the United Kingdom (and referred to in the UK as SARS-CoV-2 VUI 202012/01) and its possible implications. She emphasised the importance of coordination at European level for an effective response.

ECDC and a UK government scientific advisor provided an assessment of the current situation regarding this SARS-CoV2 variant. ECDC published a threat assessment brief on the topic on 20/12 (see [link](#)). The UK observed since mid-November a rapid increase in COVID-19 cases, particularly in Kent, London and South East England - while containment measures were still in place - which could not be fully explained by other factors. While the first sequenced case dates from September, currently, over 60% of new cases are suspected to be of this new variant, making it the dominant strain in London and South East England. The UK announced stricter “Tier 4” measures on 19 December, effective as of 21 December.

Different hypotheses exist regarding the origin of this variant, such as a prolonged infection in a single immunocompromised person leading to escape mutations. UK authorities are currently conducting laboratory investigation. Results are expected in a few weeks.

Implications for human health of this variant are a likely increase in transmissibility (with an increase in R-value by 0.4 or more) and possible false negatives results for some PCR tests (using assays targeting the S-gene). Current evidence does not suggest increased infection severity nor an impact on the effectiveness of vaccines. While it has been reported in some other countries, the extent to which this variant is prevalent throughout the EU is currently unknown.

Recommended response measures remain those already preconized in terms of non-pharmaceutical interventions (physical distancing, limiting social gatherings, hand hygiene, face masks, ventilation). These should continue to be implemented and stepped up if necessary. In addition, Public health authorities and laboratories could scale up their efforts to analyse and sequence virus isolates in a timely manner. It will also be important to monitor vaccinated individuals to detect possible vaccination failure and breakthrough infections.

Finally, experts stressed the fact that current conclusions are based on limited data. Another limitation is the fact that not all countries sequence specimens to the same extent as the UK (or base PCR tests on the S–gene drop out), inducing a possible detection bias.

In the discussion with scientific advisors, a variety of views were expressed as well as many questions raised. Several experts cautioned against a premature attribution of sharp increases in transmission to the variant, while other factors may also play a role. Some referred to the situation in their country where sharp increases were also observed, that could be explained by social and behavioural factors. They also stressed the importance of learning more about this variant and its prevalence in other countries, in order to design effective and proportionate control measures. Member States should further engage in genomic surveillance efforts to detect and notify cases of the new variant on their territory. The importance of clarifying the criteria to be fulfilled and the information needed to lift the temporary measures being put in place in many countries, such as travel bans, was also highlighted. Overall, experts agreed on the importance of adopting a pragmatic scientific approach accounting for the many uncertainties surrounding this variant.

The Commission informed about the outcome of the Health Security Committee meeting that took place the same day. A high level of consensus was observed on the importance of coordinating response measures across Europe. Such measures should cover i.a. the avoidance of non-essential travel to/from affected areas, the possible introduction of quarantine and testing requirements, the need to allow entry of EU nationals and residents and the importance of avoiding disruptions of freight transport. The Commission adopted a Recommendation in this respect on 22 December (see [link](#)).

## Participation

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### Platform participants:

1. Professor Markus MÜLLER (Austria)
2. Professor Steven VAN GUCHT (Belgium)
3. Dr. Angel KUNCHEV (Bulgaria)
4. Professor Alemka MARKOTIC (Croatia)
5. Dr Zoe PANA (Cyprus)
6. Dr Roman CHLIBEK, Marika MADAROVA (Czechia)
7. Professor Irja LUTSAR (Estonia)
8. Dr. Hans-Ulrich HOLTHERM (Germany)
9. Sotiris TSIODRAS (Greece)
10. Mr Miklós SZOCSKA (Hungary)
11. Ronan GLYNN (Ireland)
12. Professor Silvio BRUSAFERRO (Italy)
13. Dr Uga DUMPIS (Latvia)
14. Dr Jean- Claude SCHMIT (Luxembourg)
15. Dr Charles MALLIA AZZOPARDI (Malta)
16. Dr Aura TIMEN (The Netherlands)
17. Professor Andrzej HORBAN (Poland)
18. Professor Henrique DE BARROS (Portugal)
19. Professor Pavol JARCUSKA (Slovakia)
20. Fernando SIMÓN (Spain)
21. Dr Anders TEGNELL (Sweden)

### European Commission:

- Commissioner Stella KYRIAKIDES (Chair)
- Prof. Peter PIOT, Special Advisor to the President of the European Commission
- Director General Sandra GALLINA, DG SANTE
- Deputy Director General Pierre DELSAUX, DG SANTE
- Giorgos ROSSIDES, Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Kurt VANDENBERGHE, Member of Cabinet of the President
- Ralf KUHNE, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Chrystalla PAPANASTASIOU, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Peter WAGNER, Secretariat General
- Jeremy BRAY, Secretariat General
- Thomas VAN CANGH, Policy Assistant to Director General Gallina
- Cristina MODORAN, Policy Assistant to Director General Gallina

### ECDC:

- Erik ALM, Principal Expert Applied Molecular Epidemiology of European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control
- Ole HEUER, COVID-19 Public Health Event (PHE) Manager
- Pasi PETTINEN, COVID-19 PHE Technical Group Leader

Invited expert from the United Kingdom:

- Susan HOPKINS, Public Health England