

UK COVID cases rise due to ending containment and spread of Indian variant

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Coronavirus cases in England have begun to rise once more, after being in decline for weeks, due to the reopening of the economy and widespread circulation of the highly transmissible Indian variant (B.1.617.2).

On Friday, the health ministry announced that the *R* (reproduction) rate in England has risen to between 0.9 and 1.1, meaning the virus is no longer in retreat, with every 10 people carrying the virus transmitting it to between nine and 11 other people.

Public Health England (PHE) announced Thursday that 3,424 cases of B.1.617.2 had been confirmed in Britain—a 160 percent rise on the 1,313 cases confirmed a week earlier. The 3,424 cases marked an increase of 15 percent in just one day, with the figure standing at 2,967 Thursday.

The seven worst Covid hotspots in England are all large ethnically diverse urban areas with a substantial working class and Indian sub-continent population—Bolton, Blackburn, Bedford, Kirklees, Burnley, Hounslow and Leicester. The spread of the variant nationwide is clear in that Hounslow is in west London, Bedford in south England Leicester in the East Midlands, Kirklees in West Yorkshire, and other areas in the north west of England.

Bolton recorded 982 new B.1.617.2 cases in seven days, the equivalent of 341.5 cases per 100,000 people. The previous seven days saw a ratio of 189.2 per 100,000.

As the spread of the variant escalated, local authorities are being forced to defy Covid vaccine regulations, which so far have been aimed at immunising the most vulnerable first with older age groups prioritised. On Friday, Manchester—the largest city of the north west and centre of the Greater Manchester region that contains Bolton—announced it would rollout the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines to unvaccinated 16-year-olds in a “preventative vaccination plan” in target wards with a black, Asian and minority ethnic population above 50 percent. Bolton authorities already have a similar

vaccination programme underway.

The effectiveness of vaccination in combating the Indian variant is under review, with positive results indicated in India itself and elsewhere. But there is some evidence that the variant can infect those who have been vaccinated.

The data confirms the fears of scientists that the Indian variant is set to be the dominant strain in the UK in a matter of days. With the economy to be fully reopened by June 21, and travel not prohibited even to countries that have been placed on an “amber list”, such as France, Spain, Greece and the US, all the conditions are in place for the further spread of the variant globally.

Professor Andrew Hayward, an infectious diseases expert at University College London and member of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) advising the government was asked Wednesday if the UK was at the start of a third wave of the pandemic. He replied, “I think so” and that he was “very concerned.”

Hayward added, “I think that concern largely arises from the fact that it’s more transmissible than the previous variants which was already substantially more transmissible than the variant before that.

“I think what we can see is that this strain can circulate very effectively, although it was originally imported through travel to India, it’s spread fairly effectively first of all within households and now more broadly within communities, so I don’t really see why it wouldn’t continue to spread in other parts of the country.”

He called for more “generalised measures” to fight the spread of the variant. “Fortunately we’ve had a good proportion of the population vaccinated, but there’s still people who aren’t vaccinated in high-risk groups, the vaccine isn’t 100% effective, and also even in the younger groups if you get many, many thousands or hundreds of thousands of cases, then you will expect a lot of hospitalisations and deaths to result from that. So

that's the threat. And it's really over the next week or two we will see how much these outbreaks that at the moment are relatively localised, how much they become generalised across the population. And if that happens, that's when we're going to be much more worried."

The Conservative government is once again turning a blind eye to scientific evidence and warnings, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson insisting, on a visit in Portsmouth to the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* aircraft carrier Friday, "At the moment I can't see anything that makes me think we're going to have to deviate from the roadmap [for reopening]—though clearly we must remain cautious in our approach."

The Tories are responding to the demands of big business that no more lockdowns are imposed and to their support base in the more affluent suburban and rural areas of the country not living in the overcrowded urban centres being hit by the resurgence of the virus.

The media is busy amplifying this demand, with the *Times* insisting Friday, "Covid surge testing eases fears over spread of Indian variant". It cited the comments of government deputy chief medical officer Jonathan Van-Tam who said it was likely that fears that the Indian variant could be up to 50 percent more transmissible than the Kent strain could be assuaged as the mutation, according to estimates, may *only* be around 30 percent more transmissible!

According to modelling by Sage published this month, a more transmissible rate around 30 percent would see thousands of daily hospitalisation if the disease were allowed to spread.

At every stage of the pandemic, Johnson's government has reverted to its favoured herd immunity policy of mass infection. After abandoning its spring lockdown last summer, the government imposed a series of ineffectual local lockdowns on a regional basis, covering much of northern England, Scotland and south Wales. These were followed in October by a policy of "circuit breakers" that did nothing to stop the spread. The government finally put in place a four-week limited lockdown in England in November, covering over 50 million people, but by then, it was too late to stop the spread of the Kent variant only first detected in September.

By mid-December the mutated virus was responsible for nearly two-thirds of cases in the capital, London. The failure to impose the necessary public safety measures and restrictions created the conditions for the Kent variant to spread, claiming a greater loss of life than in the first horrific wave and bringing the death toll above 150,000.

Van Tam now compares the infection rate between the Kent variant and the Indian variant, while omitting to mention how much more infectious the Kent variant was compared with the original strain!

The *Financial Times* in a May 17 editorial declared, "Government is right to continue easing restrictions while stepping up jobs... to save Britain's reopening". It then admitted that Sage "says there is a 'realistic possibility' [the Indian variant] is 50 percent more transmissible than the so-called Kent variant, which was itself 40 to 80 percent more contagious than the original coronavirus. The rapid march of the new strain in places such as Bolton and Blackburn suggests it is set, as the Kent variant did, to become the dominant form of the disease. India, where the strain was first identified, has illustrated the tragic dangers of complacency."

The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the ruling class does not give a damn about the deadly consequences of reopening. As Johnson blurted out last October in frustration at having to authorise the November lockdown, "No more f***ing lockdowns, let the bodies pile high in their thousands!" Moreover, the Tories can depend on their de facto coalition partners in the Labour Party and the trade unions to ram through this assault on the working class. Labour has backed the Tories every move for well over a year in a policy of "constructive criticism". Backing the government and insisting "that this has be the last lockdown" (Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer), even its mealy mouthed appeals to "proceed with caution" and "follow the science" have been ditched.



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