

To: Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 5th October 2023

By: Dr Ellen Schwartz, Deputy Director of Public Health, KCC
Priscilla Kankam, Deputy Director of Nursing, Quality & Medicines
Optimisation, NHS Kent & Medway

Subject: Update on Covid-19

Summary:

This report provides a situational update on Covid-19 nationally and locally.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In February 2022 the Cabinet Office published its guidance “COVID-19 Response: Living with COVID-19” which was updated in May 2022. The objective of the government was to enable the country to manage COVID-19 like any other respiratory illnesses, while minimising deaths and retaining the ability to respond, if a new variant emerges with more dangerous properties than the Omicron variant, or during periods of reducing immunity, that could again threaten to place the NHS under unsustainable pressure.
- 1.2 Some of the principles set out by the government to achieve this are:
- a. Living with COVID-19: removing domestic restrictions while encouraging safer behaviours through public health advice, in common with longstanding ways of managing most other respiratory illnesses.
 - b. Protecting people most vulnerable to COVID-19: vaccination guided by Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) advice and deploying targeted testing.
 - c. Maintaining resilience: ongoing surveillance, contingency planning, and the ability to reintroduce key capabilities such as mass vaccination and testing in an emergency.
- 1.3 In the current era of “Living with COVID-19” all restrictions and control measures imposed during the pandemic have been removed and the monitoring mechanisms put in place have been scaled down. However, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) continues to monitor both the national and international COVID-19 situation and provide appropriate advice and guidance.
- 1.4 The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation advises the ministers on the group eligible for COVID-19 vaccination based on the current best evidence. COVID-19 vaccination for the current season began on the 11th of September in care home and is being rolled out to other eligible groups.

2. The new variant BA.2.86

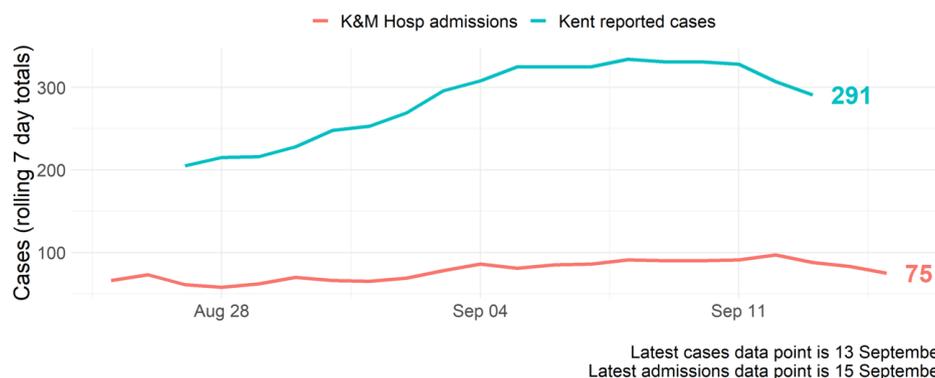
- 2.1 A new COVID-19 variant, BA.2.86, was detected in the UK on 18th August. It has been detected in several other countries although in low numbers. UKHSA has published an initial risk assessment of the new variant.
- 2.2 This newly identified variant has a high number of mutations and is genomically distant from both its likely ancestor, BA.2, and from currently circulating XBB-derived variants.
- 2.3 As of 4th September 2023, there were 34 BA.2.86 sequenced cases in England, with cases located in East of England, London, and Northwest England. There were five hospitalisations and no deaths related to COVID-19. Of the 34 cases 28 cases are part of an investigation of an outbreak in a care home in Norfolk which reported a high attack rate.
- 2.4 The world-wide situation is dynamic with countries reporting cases daily and, as of 11th September, there have been 97 BA.2.86 confirmed cases globally from 14 countries.
- 2.5 Wastewater detections have been reported in multiple countries. The numbers are likely to be an underestimate, as many countries do not routinely test or sequence the positive specimens.
- 2.6 There is currently insufficient data to assess the relative severity or how far the vaccines will be effective against this variant compared to other currently circulating variants. Testing and surveillance measures are likely to be increased in the UK as a result of the emergence of this new variant.

3. COVID-19 Situation in Kent and Medway

3.1 Kent hospital admissions and reported cases:

- 3.1.1 Over the last seven days there has been a downward trend both in reported cases and hospital admissions in Kent (Figure 1)
- 3.1.2 Trend in Kent and Medway hospital admissions (up to 15th September) and reported cases (up to 13th September)

Figure 1 Recent trends



3.2 Hospital admission rates

- 3.2.1 Nationally the number of hospital admissions where COVID-19 has been detected has decreased by 16.1% in the seven days up to 15th September, compared with the previous seven days.
- 3.2.2 In the seven days up to and including 15th September, the number of hospital admissions across Kent and Medway where the patient tested positive was 75. This has decreased by 17.6% compared with the previous seven days.

3.3 Clarification on plans for vaccination

- 3.3.1 As a precautionary measure to the emergence of BA.2.86, UKHSA has advised that the intervention with the greatest potential public health impact is to vaccinate eligible individuals. Following this advice, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has asked NHS England to bring the vaccination programme forward and to accelerate delivery of the programme to vaccinate eligible people quickly to enable as many people as possible to have been vaccinated by the end of October.
- 3.3.2 This accelerated vaccination campaign commenced on 11 September 2023, starting with care home resident and staff and those who are housebound. There is no change to the eligibility criteria for both Autumn 2023/24 COVID-19 cohorts, and flu cohorts. No decision has been made on expanded eligibility for vaccination and this continues to be kept under close review.
- 3.3.3 Kent and Medway will operate predominately a Primary Care led model with 38 Primary Care Networks, 90 Community Pharmacies and five Hospital Hubs offering vaccinations. This will ensure good geographical coverage within a 30-minute drive for general population to access the vaccination point. Roving and pop-up services have also been established to improve geographical accessibility and address inequalities.
- 3.3.4 As per previous campaigns, there's a robust communication plan to continue with co-promotion, and encourage co-administration, of both COVID-19 and Flu using a multi-provider approach to address inequalities based on the needs of the population.

3.4 Key public health messages

- 3.4.1 Currently there is no cause for concern as further studies are being undertaken to assess the various features of BA.2.86 including its severity and how well the vaccines will work and BA.2.86s has not been declared as a variant of concern (VOC).
- 3.4.2 There is no change to the guidance and advice on COVID-19 treatments, testing, outbreak control management and infection prevention control.
- 3.4.3 Adherence to the recommended measures remain the best way to protect the most vulnerable groups across healthcare and social care settings. This continues to be kept under assessment and close review. UKHSA has

reiterated the following guidance on what to do if an individual has respiratory symptoms; *“If you have symptoms of a respiratory infection, such as COVID-19 or flu, and you have a high temperature or do not feel well enough to go to work or carry out normal activities, try to stay at home and avoid contact with other people, until you no longer have a high temperature (if you had one) or until you no longer feel unwell. If you need to go out, then avoid close contact with anyone who you know is at higher risk of becoming seriously unwell”*.

- 3.4.4 It is essential that those who are eligible for COVID-19 and Flu vaccination and get the vaccine at the earliest opportunity as this is the best way of protecting them and others.

4 Recommendation

- 4.1 The Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the contents of this briefing, encourage Kent residents to follow current guidance and support the ongoing vaccination programmes for COVID-19 and flu this season.

Background resources/Documents

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-response-living-with-covid-19/covid-19-response-living-with-covid-19>

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/people-with-symptoms-of-a-respiratory-infection-including-covid-19>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/investigation-of-sars-cov-2-variants-of-concern-variant-risk-assessments/situational-assessment-for-sars-cov-2-variant-v-23aug-01-ba286>

Contact Details

Dr Ellen Schwartz, Deputy Director of Public Health ellen.schwartz@kent.gov.uk