**Gold Briefing – 25 May 2021**

**Variants of Concern**

Purpose

Over recent days you will have seen increased media attention on the number of areas where Variants of Concern (VoC) have been identified.

The presence of new variants of concern is a reminder that the risk of COVID-19 very much remains, and it has never been more important to take up the offer of frequent LFD and PCR testing in the workplace or at home. This remains extremely important regardless of whether you have been vaccinated.

Taking part in regular testing will continue to protect your friends, family and colleagues. You are also strongly encouraged to take part in any local surge testing.

This Gold Brief is to provide you with:

1. more information about VoC generally; and to
2. provide the current position on the implications for specific regime activities, namely ROTL and Social Visits.
3. General information on VoC

Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) have produced the attached communications pack to support workplaces with useful information which establishments may find useful in the event of VoC being detected in the local area. The pack provides:

* Detailed background on the approaches taken both nationally and locally to suppress the spread of variants of concern, including the use of surge testing;
* Examples of communications content for workplaces that you may wish to adapt in the event of a VoC being identified in your area;
* Key messages to include in any internal communications.



This is of course a dynamic situation, but we are aware at this time that the higher risk areas identified are:

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| --- | --- |
| * Bolton | * Burnley |
| * Blackburn with Darwen | * Leicester |
| * Kirklees | * Hounslow |
| * Bedford | * North Tyneside |

While these areas are all in England and the DHSC pack is similarly focussed, some of the information provided will be of interest to colleagues at Welsh prisons.

We will of course continue to monitor the situation centrally and provide further updates whenever necessary. Useful information can also be found at the following sites:

In England:

* (COVID-19) Coronavirus restrictions: what you can and cannot do - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
* Surge testing for new coronavirus (COVID-19) variants - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

In Wales:

* <https://gov.wales/alert-level-2>
* [COVID-19 Wales situational report: 20 May 2021 [HTML] | GOV.WALES](https://gov.wales/covid-19-wales-situational-report-20-may-2021-html)

1. Implications for regime activities

* **ROTL**

In undertaking risk assessments for ROTL the Governor must consider the COVID risk as part of the wider risk assessment.  We know that there is increased risk in several areas across the country and Government has issued guidance that encourages people to stay local and reduce contact.

We therefore ask that this guidance is considered in any risk assessment planned to take place in any of these areas of concern, notably Resettlement overnight Release [ROR/ Overnight CRL], as well as any domestic Resettlement Day Release [RDR/ day CRL] to any private address. The risk presented may prevent this form of ROTL at this time, notably if surge testing is underway in the area at present a release would run counter to the public health objectives in the area to control the spread of the VoC. Governors may therefore wish to-

* Permit the activity as per the original decision if the circumstances warrant this exception;
* Amend the ROTL to the local area RDR/CRL [subject to suitable notifications being completed] (it is worth noting guidance that outdoor contact is lower risk); or
* Suspend the proposed ROTL until the risk is reduced in that area.

Release to a domestic setting is considered higher risk than a Covid secure workplace or other controlled setting (hospital, college etc) therefore it may be appropriate that these types of ROTL continue, subject to risk assessment. Governors may wish to consider increased LFD testing and/or seek reassurance of Covid workplace practices were prisoners are known to be working within higher risk areas*.* The use of reverse cohorting is also an important consideration to reduce the transmission risk across all forms of ROTL.

* **Social Visits**

Social visits, where available, should continue to be run in a COVID secure manner.  Visitors from areas effected by a VOC are advised to stay local but this is not a stay-at-home directive.  We should encourage all social visitors from such areas to be mindful of both the necessity and the potential risk to health of their visit. We are however not specifically instructing visitors to stay away.

If any visitors from an area effected by a VoC do decide to cancel their visit, then establishments should ensure that the prisoner is given an opportunity to contact their family/friends by video call or telephone.

**Covid-19 Gold Command**

**25 May 2021**