

Urgent need for a step change in homeless sector response due to new variant SARS-CoV-2 (VOC 202012/01) - Dr Al Story and Prof Andrew Hayward (UCL) – 24 December 2020

This Position Statement follows the detection in early December 2020 of a highly transmissible new variant of SARS-CoV-2 (Variant of Concern (VOC) 202012/01) that has now been identified in all regions of the UK. This variant emerged in southeast England in Sep/Nov 2020 and spread rapidly despite a national lockdown (5th Nov – 2nd Dec 2020). The new variant is >50% more transmissible and has rapidly become the dominant circulating strain in all worst affected areas. The increase in virus transmissibility is projected to cause a large and rapid increase in incidence with levels of hospitalisations and deaths in 2021 expected to be higher than in 2020.

The rapid increase in incidence seen, despite highly restricted population movement and household mixing, led the UK Government to place most of southeast England under “Tier 4” restrictions on 20th December. Equivalent control measures are now likely to be enacted across the rest of the UK and, to limit excess deaths, these measures will need to remain in place until both a significant and sustained reduction in incidence has been achieved AND a substantial proportion of the population has been vaccinated.

In March 2020, the Government’s ‘Everyone In’ strategy provided emergency single room accommodation to almost 15,000 highly vulnerable homeless people nationally. These unprecedented measures, coupled with enhanced disease surveillance, infection prevention and control (IPC) measures, outreach COVID-19 testing, clinical triage and support for people needing to self-isolate, saved hundreds of lives and prevented thousands of hospitalisations. Unfortunately, these effective measures were not sustained across all areas. Due to the closure of some emergency accommodation, combined with a dramatic increase in people becoming newly homeless, at least 2,000 people are now sleeping on the streets across the UK.

The exponential emergence of a highly transmissible new SARS-CoV-2 variant requires the following public health measures to be implemented with immediate effect: -

- 1. Government must provide resources to Local Authorities for additional safe self-contained emergency accommodation to protect lives and enable people who are homeless to follow national Tier 4 guidance**
- 2. Current projections indicate that safe self-contained emergency accommodation will be required for at least the first quarter of 2021 and probably beyond**
- 3. Local health and social care teams must ensure that enhanced infection, prevention and control measures are strictly implemented and adhered to across every facility accommodating homeless people**
- 4. Where not already in place, measures to ensure prompt identification, reporting, testing and strict isolation of all symptomatic residents and staff, and their close contacts, should be urgently implemented**
- 5. Testing should be provided through an outreach model and prioritised to symptomatic people, their close contacts and all residents and staff in facilities where outbreaks are identified**
- 6. Local health teams must ensure that all clinically vulnerable residents are identified, registered with primary care providers and, where possible, cohorted in medically supported COVID-PROTECT facilities**
- 7. Due to higher risk of outbreaks in communal facilities caused by increased transmissibility, local teams must ensure that plans and resources are in place to rapidly provide safe isolation and clinical and social support to potentially large numbers of infected homeless people**
- 8. Homeless people in emergency accommodation and frontline social care staff should be prioritised for vaccination due to increased risk of outbreaks**

9. **Government should reinstate a senior cross-department leader to support implementation of MHCLG and DHSC policy**

Supporting documents

1. Investigation of novel SARS-COV-2 variant. Variant of Concern 202012/01 (PHE December 2020)
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/947048/Technical_Briefing_VOC_SH_NJL2_SH2.pdf
2. Estimated transmissibility and severity of novel SARS-CoV-2 Variant of Concern 202012/01 in England (LSHTM Pre-Print December 2020) https://cmmid.github.io/topics/covid19/reports/uk-novel-variant/2020_12_23_Transmissibility_and_severity_of_VOC_202012_01_in_England.pdf
3. NERVTAG/SPI-M Extraordinary meeting on SARS-CoV-2 variant of concern 202012/01 (variant B.1.1.7) Note of meeting. 21 December 2020
https://m.box.com/shared_item/https%3A%2F%2Fapp.box.com%2F%2F3lkcbxepqixkg4mv640dpvvg978ixjtf/view/756964987830