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Guidance

New Variant Assessment Programme

The New Variant Assessment Programme (NVAP) is an offer of UK capacity and expertise to detect and assess new variants of SARS-CoV-2 around the world.

From:
Public Health England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>) and UK Health Security Agency (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-health-security-agency>)

Published
20 May 2021

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Overview

The platform has been set up by Public Health England (PHE) and aims to deploy the UK's unique sequencing and virus assessment capabilities to help other countries respond to coronavirus (COVID-19) and strengthen global health security.

The detection and subsequent assessment of variants of SARS-CoV-2 for potential impact on viral characteristics (for example in virulence or transmission) and countermeasures (such as diagnostics, vaccines and therapeutics) is critical to implement timely public health measures.

The UK has large-scale sequencing capacity and extensive specialist expertise and is uniquely positioned to help address global sequencing capability gaps. Through the NVAP programme, PHE will work to support global partners to strengthen their genomic sequencing capability, either by building on existing infrastructure or by conducting sequencing and analysis of samples in the UK if there is no in-country capability.

The NVAP will also enable the biological assessment of emerging variants, strengthening horizon scanning and public health decision-making, both in this country and abroad. This includes a risk assessment from the point when a mutation is first identified, to ongoing assessment as more information becomes available.

The platform will also agree pathways for biological analysis, diagnostics, vaccines and therapeutics as appropriate.

Genomic sequencing has wider utility beyond COVID-19, for example to understand and control risks such as tuberculosis (TB), antimicrobial resistance (AMR), polio and HIV, as well as for future pandemic risks.

To maximise the benefits of the NVAP and to ensure it lays the foundations for a sustainable pandemic early warning system, capacity is being developed in consultation with the World Health Organization (<https://www.who.int/>) (WHO) and in partnership with other donor agencies.

Service offer

The NVAP can support countries in several ways, including genome sequencing, bioinformatic assessment, characterisation of variants, risk assessment and immunological testing of detected Variants of Concern (VOCs).

Countries can access support via a dedicated email address: nvap@phe.gov.uk

Countries can also liaise with British embassies and high commissions overseas to contact NVAP to request support.

The NVAP support will be tailored to each individual country needs and includes:

1. Genomic sequencing in the UK.
2. Genomic sequencing support internationally to countries and hubs.

With regards to genomic sequencing in the UK, countries can send samples to the UK for genome sequencing and analysis. This can also include remote support from the UK for training, bioinformatics, risk assessment and public health decision-making and further biological assessment if required for impact on vaccines or treatments on variants.

With regards to genomic sequencing support internationally to countries and hubs, the NVAP offers support to increase genomic sequencing capacity and capability in-country.

Where there is potential scope for a country or an organisation to operate as a sequencing hub for the region, the NVAP support will help them scale up and develop as a larger hub. This support can include provision of additional consumables, reagents or equipment to increase throughput. It can also include remote training and mentoring for analytics, bioinformatics or risk assessment to support public health decision-making.

These hubs could support neighbouring countries and the global surveillance system. Hubs are being selected through joint work between the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-development-office>) (FCDO), the Department of Health and Social Care (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-of-health-and-social-care>) (DHSC) and PHE, aligned with WHO assessment of global sequencing capacity.

Rapid support by a deployed team of experts may also be provided if needed.

NVAP is committed to making data available globally through GIS-AID (<https://www.gisaid.org/>). This will allow it to inform UK risk assessment and pandemic control strategies globally.

Published 20 May 2021

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