

FOI request: records re "new variant of coronavirus" discussed by Secretary Hancock

coronavirus/FOI



Christine Massey <cmsync@gmail.com> Dec 14, 2020, 7:56 PM

to freedomofinformation

December 14, 2020

Freedom of Information Team
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H0EU

Submitted via email to: freedomofinformation@dhsc.gov.uk

Dear Freedom Information Officer,

This is a formal request for records.

Today, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock stated that:

"Over the last few days, thanks to our world class genomic capability in the UK, we have identified a new variant of coronavirus which may be associated with the faster spread in the southeast of England.

Initial analysis suggests that this variant is growing faster than the existing variants. We've currently identified over a thousand cases of this variant, predominantly in the south of England, although cases have been identified in nearly 60 different local authority areas and numbers are increasing rapidly.

Similar variants have been identified in other countries over the last few months.

We've notified the World Health Organization about this new variant, and Public Health England is working hard to continue its expert analysis ...

I must stress at this point that there is currently nothing at this point to suggest that this variant is more likely to cause serious disease and the latest clinical advice is that it's highly unlikely that this mutation would fail to respond to a vaccine but it shows we've got to be vigilant and follow the rules and everyone needs to take

personal responsibility not to spread this virus."

<https://twitter.com/talkRADIO/status/1338510584275460099>

Description of Requested Records:

1. All records in the possession, custody or control of the Department of Health and Social Care that:

- describe the identification of this particular "*new variant of coronavirus*" (including the methodology used, and/or the results of said methodology), and how this "*new variant of coronavirus*" relates to "SARS-COV-2";
- describe how the determination that this particular "*new variant of coronavirus*" "*may be associated with the faster spread in the southeast of England*" was arrived at (including the methodology used to arrive at said determination, and/or the results of said methodology);
- describe or summarize the initial analysis (methodology and/or results) suggesting that this "*variant is growing faster than the existing variants*";
- describe or summarize the investigation (methodology and/or results) that led to the identification of "*over a thousand cases of this variant, predominantly in the south of England*" with some cases "*identified in nearly 60 different local authority areas*";
- describe or summarize the investigation (methodology and/or results) that led to the statement that "*numbers are increasing rapidly*";
- describe or summarize the investigation (methodology and/or results) that led to the statement that "*Similar variants have been identified in other countries over the last few months*";
- include the notification provided to the World Health Organization about this "*new variant*";
- include any additional analysis/investigation relating to this "*new variant*";
- describe or summarize the investigation (methodology and/or results) into whether or not "*this variant is more likely to cause serious disease*";
- describe or summarize the investigation (methodology and/or results) that led to the clinical advice "*that it's highly unlikely that this mutation would fail to respond to a vaccine*", and explain who provided this clinical advice to Health Secretary Hancock.

Please note that all parts of my request include any sort of record, authored by anyone, any time, anywhere.

If any records match the above descriptions of requested records and are currently available to the public elsewhere, please provide enough information about each record so that I may identify and access it with certainty (i.e. author; title; date; publisher); please provide URLs where possible.

Format:

URLs and/or pdf documents sent to me via email; I do not wish for anything to be shipped to me.

Contact Information:

Last name: Massey

First name: Christine

Address: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

Email: cmssyc@gmail.com

Thank you in advance and best wishes,
Christine Massey, M.Sc.



Department of Health & Social Care

Freedom of Information Team
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0EU

www.gov.uk/dhsc

Ms Christine Massey
cmssyc@gmail.com

4 January 2021

Dear Ms Christine Massey,

Freedom of Information Request Reference FOI-1282095

Thank you for your request dated 14 December, in which you asked the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC):

“All records in the possession, custody or control of the Department of Health and Social Care that:

- 1. describe the identification of this particular new variant of coronavirus (including the methodology used, and/or the results of said methodology), and how this new variant of coronavirus relates to SARS-COV-2*
- 2. describe how the determination that this particular new variant of coronavirus may be associated with the faster spread in the southeast of England was arrived at (including the methodology used to arrive at said determination, and/or the results of said methodology);*
- 3. describe or summarize the initial analysis (methodology and/or results) suggesting that this variant is growing faster than the existing variants*
- 4. describe or summarize the investigation (methodology and/or results) that led to the identification of over a thousand cases of this variant, predominantly in the south of England with some cases identified in nearly 60 different local authority areas*
- 5. describe or summarize the investigation (methodology and/or results) that led to the statement that numbers are increasing rapidly*
- 6. describe or summarize the investigation (methodology and/or results) that led to the statement that Similar variants have been identified in other countries over the last few months*
- 7. include the notification provided to the World Health Organization about this new variant*
- 8. include any additional analysis/investigation relating to this new variant describe or summarize the investigation (methodology and/or results) into whether or not this variant is more likely to cause serious disease*
- 9. describe or summarize the investigation (methodology and/or results) that led to the clinical advice that it's highly unlikely that this mutation would fail to respond to a vaccine, and explain who provided this clinical advice to Health Secretary Hancock.”*

Your request has been handled under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). For ease of reference, we have numbered the individual elements in your request.

DHSC holds information relevant to your request. However, to comply with your request as it is currently framed would exceed the cost limit as set out in section 12(1) of the FOIA. Section 12(1) states that a public authority can refuse a request if complying with it would exceed the appropriate

limit of £600 (which represents 24 working hours). This represents the estimated cost of one person spending this time in determining where the information is held and locating, retrieving and extracting the information.

It may help if I explain that in order to comply with a single question in your request alone, we would be required to search through an extensive volume of files to establish whether they held information relevant to your request. In order to identify the full extent of the information relevant to your request, we would be required to search through the entirety of DHSC's inboxes and records both electronic and otherwise. We therefore consider that locating and extracting the full extent of the information within scope of your request would exceed the section 12 cost limit.

You may wish to refine your request for information by choosing a specific team within DHSC. The UK Health Security team are responsible for handling the new COVID-19 variant. Furthermore, you may also wish to specify a type of recorded information, such as documents or reports. However, we cannot guarantee that Section 12, or any other exemptions, will not apply to a reframed request.

If you are not satisfied with the handling of your request, you have the right to appeal by asking for an internal review. This should be submitted within two months of the date of this letter and sent to FreedomOfInformation@dhsc.gov.uk, or to the address at the top of this letter.

Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communication.

If you are not content with the outcome of your internal review, you may complain directly to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have already appealed our original response and received our internal review decision. You should raise your concerns with the ICO within three months of your last meaningful contact with us.

The ICO can be contacted at:

The Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

<https://ico.org.uk/concerns/>

Yours sincerely,

Piper Hewitt-Dudding
Freedom of Information Officer
FreedomOfInformation@dhsc.gov.uk

refining FOI-1282095

Christine Massey <[REDACTED]>
To: freedomofinformation@dhsc.gov.uk

Mon, Jan 4, 2021 at 11:31 AM

January 4, 2021

Freedom of Information Team
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H0EU

Submitted via email to: freedomofinformation@dhsc.gov.uk

Dear Freedom of Information Officer,

I wish to refine my access request submitted on December 14, 2021 (FOI-1282095) as suggested by Piper Hewitt-Dudding, Freedom of Information Officer, in the attached letter.

*You may wish to refine your request for information **by choosing a specific team within DHSC. The UK Health Security team** are responsible for handling the new COVID-19 variant. Furthermore, you may also wish to specify a type of recorded information, such as **documents or reports**.*

Please limit my request to **documents and reports** and **the UK Health Security team**.

Also the time frame should reflect the initial investigation into and/or (alleged) discovery of the alleged "*new variant*".

Thank you in advance, best wishes and Happy New Year,
Christine Massey, M.Sc.



Department of Health & Social Care

Freedom of Information Team
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0EU

www.gov.uk/dhsc

Ms Christine Massey
cmssyc@gmail.com

1 February 2021

Dear Ms Massey,

Freedom of Information Request Reference FOI-1286779

Thank you for your request dated 4 January, in which you asked the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC):

“Please limit my request to documents and reports and the UK Health Security team.

Also the time frame should reflect the initial investigation into and/or (alleged) discovery of the alleged new variant.”

Your request has been handled under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

DHSC holds information relevant to your request. However, to comply with your request as it is currently framed would exceed the cost limit as set out in section 12(1) of the FOIA. Section 12(1) states that a public authority can refuse a request if complying with it would exceed the appropriate limit of £600 (which represents 24 working hours). This represents the estimated cost of one person spending this time in determining where the information is held and locating, retrieving and extracting the information.

We recognise that you have refined your original request. However, it may help if I explain that in order to comply with your request, we would be required to search through an extensive volume of files to establish whether they held information relevant to your request. A search for these terms returned over 180 documents and reports dated between 11 December 2020 (when the UK variant was first flagged) to 4 January 2021 (the date this request was made) in one inbox alone. In order to identify the full extent of the information relevant to your request, we would be required to read through, establish the relevance of and extract information from each of these files, as well as files from other inboxes. We therefore consider that extracting the full extent of the information within scope of your request would exceed the section 12 cost limit.

You may wish to refine your request for information by giving a smaller and more specific timeframe. Due to the open-ended nature of your request, as more information is gathered on COVID-19 variants, more information will come in scope of your request. You may also specify which particular COVID-19 variant you are seeking information for, as there is now more than one

in circulation in the UK. However, we cannot guarantee that Section 12, or any other exemptions, will not apply to a reframed request.

Outside of the FOIA, and on a discretionary basis, you may find the following information on the COVID-19 variants useful. This information, the majority of which is held by DHSC, can be found on the following webpage: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/new-sars-cov-2-variant>

If you are not satisfied with the handling of your request, you have the right to appeal by asking for an internal review. This should be submitted within two months of the date of this letter and sent to FreedomOfInformation@dhsc.gov.uk, or to the address at the top of this letter.

Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communication.

If you are not content with the outcome of your internal review, you may complain directly to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). Generally, the ICO cannot make a decision unless you have already appealed our original response and received our internal review decision. You should raise your concerns with the ICO within three months of your last meaningful contact with us.

The ICO can be contacted at:

The Information Commissioner's Office
Wycliffe House
Water Lane
Wilmslow
Cheshire
SK9 5AF

<https://ico.org.uk/concerns/>

Yours sincerely,

Piper Hewitt-Dudding
Freedom of Information Officer
FreedomOfInformation@dhsc.gov.uk

Christine Massey <cmssyc@gmail.com>
To: freedomofinformation@dhsc.gov.uk

Fri, Feb 12, 2021 at 4:41 PM

February 12, 2021

Freedom of Information Team
Department of Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H0EU

Submitted via email to: freedomofinformation@dhsc.gov.uk

Dear Freedom of Information Officer,

On **December 14, 2020** I submitted to your department a request (your file # FOI-1282095, attached) in which I quoted televised statements made that very day by your Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock and requested the **records that support those claims**.

On January 4, 2021 your department advised that I "*refine*" my request by "*choosing*" the UK Health Security team that is responsible for handling the alleged "*new COVID-19 variant*" and by specifying "*documents or reports*". I have no way of knowing how your department's records are organized and it is not my job to decide how a reasonable search should be conducted; nevertheless that very same day I responded and requested that my request be "refined" as suggested.

On February 1, 2021 your department responded by assigning a new file number (FOI-1286779) and advising once again that I "refine" my request because:

A search for these terms returned over 180 documents and reports dated between 11 December 2020 (when the UK variant was first flagged) to 4 January 2021 (the date this request was made) in one inbox alone.... Due to the open-ended nature of your request, as more information is gathered on COVID-19 variants, more information will come in scope of your request. You may also specify which particular COVID-19 variant you are seeking information for, as there is now more than one in circulation in the UK.

According to the above, a mere 3 days had passed between the "flagging" of that alleged "new variant" and Matt Hancock's televised statements that prompted my **December 14, 2020** request.

My request was not "open-ended"; it was very specific in nature and focused only on records that would have been created after the "flagging" on December 11, 2020 and before Matt Hancock's televised claims on December 14, 2020.

Please note that all details of your department's handling of this request are being made public.

Christine Massey, M.Sc.