Public Health England

Protecting and improving the nation's health

Public Accountability Unit
Wellington House
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London SE1 8UG

www.gov.uk/phe

By email

request-770036-53828024@whatdotheyknow.com
Our ref: 05/08/21/ld/969

3 September 2021

Dear P Newton,

Re: Internal review of Case ref: 654 – Detection and identification of Covid-19 variants

I refer to your email of 6 August 2021 requesting an internal review of the handling of case reference 654, in relation to your request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOI Act).

Your Request Case ref: 654

Public Health England (PHE) received your information request on the 1 July 2021.

Under the FOI Act, a public body such as PHE is required to 'respond to requests promptly' and no later than '20 working days … after the request is received within the organisation'.

Under the FOI Act, PHE had until the 29 July 2021 to respond to your request.

***Response Case ref: 654*:**

PHE sent you its response on the 2 August 2021 and, correctly, confirmed it holds some of the information you requested and applied the Section 21 – *information reasonably accessible to the applicant by other means* exemption to your request. PHE directed you to the following information on GOV.UK which is publicly available:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/investigation-of-novel-sars-cov-2-variant-variant-of-concern-20201201
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-variants-genomically-confirmed-case-numbers

PHE also provided you with advice and assistance under Section 16 of the FOI Act by including the following links:
https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m3862

UK evaluation_PHE Porton Down University of Oxford_final.pdf
Asymptomatic testing backed by new research studies - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
https://www.bmj.com/content/374/bmj.n1637

Internal review decision

PHE has now conducted the internal review and concludes that PHE sent you its response to your request for information outside of the statutory deadline. PHE can confirm it has provided all the information available that falls within the scope of the request, and correctly applied the Section 21 – *information reasonably accessible to the applicant by other means* exemption to your request.

PHE would like to apologise for the delay you experienced in receiving its response to your original request and for any inconvenience caused. Due to the pandemic PHE has been dealing with a high volume of requests.

Under Section 16 of the FOI Act, public authorities have a duty to provide advice and assistance. In addition to the above links, we have provided further information in response to some of your initial questions:

2) Please provide the information as recorded and held by Public Health England identifying the laboratory in which the variant isolates from patient samples are to be inspected and analysed for verification by independent scientists (chemists and biologists).

Isolates are available in all laboratories where diagnoses are made. However, please note that PHE does not hold information for non-PHE laboratories. Independent scientists would be able to inspect and analyse for verification data on isolation of variants from patient samples in the individual laboratories. Testing laboratories are required to be registered and regularly inspected by regulatory organisations in order to provide testing.

3) Please provide the information as recorded and held by Public Health England demonstrating that the SARS-CoV-2 "variant" isolates have been purified so as to remove genetic material which may be identical to the variant.

The Virus Reference Laboratory at PHE, Colindale, London has grown the virus, SARS-CoV-2. The method the virus has been cultured was published in the following peer-reviewed paper: https://www.eurosurveillance.org/content/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.32.2001483. PHE's culture work on other SARS-CoV-2 variants, like the Delta variant, is in progress but has not been published in any peer-reviewed papers at present.

5) Please provide the information as recorded and held by Public Health England proving or demonstrating that these PCR and Lateral Flow tests are absolutely confirmative of a SARS-CoV-2 case or infection and upon such confirmation does thereby diagnose a healthy male or female sick with COVID-19 despite presenting no symptoms of a disease?

The PCR test used to diagnose COVID-19 is designed specifically to recognise SARS-CoV-2, the causative virus of the disease. It is the gold-standard diagnostic test for COVID-19, with a sensitivity of 95% and a specificity of almost 100%. This means that in 95 times out of 100 cases the test will recognise the presence of the virus regardless of whether the patient has symptoms or not.

LFD tests recognise the virus in a different way, also with high sensitivity. Please see the below link for further information:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evidence-on-the-accuracy-of-lateral-flow-device-testing/evidence-summary-for-lateral-flow-devices-lfd-in-relation-to-care-homes

Please note that you have the right to an independent review by the Information Commissioner's Office if a complaint cannot be resolved through the PHE complaints procedure. The Information Commissioner's Office can be contacted by calling the ICO's helpline on 0303 123 1113, visiting the ICO's website at www.ico.org.uk or writing to the ICO at Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF.

Yours sincerely,

FOI Manager