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Coronavirus variant a reminder we can't let down our guard

"This is not a cause to panic, but it is a cause for caution."

That's the message from Simon Bryant, director of public health at the Isle of Wight Council, following the first recorded case of the variant of coronavirus first identified in India on the Island.

The Isle of Wight is one of 127 local authority areas where the 'variant of concern' (VOC) has now been detected, and it is likely that it will be present in all local authority areas in the future.

Today (Wednesday), Mr Bryant sought to reassure residents that the situation on the Island was managed appropriately and robustly.

Where a VOC occurs, Public Health England's Local Health Protection Team ensures there is swift follow up, with any close contacts asked to self-isolate and further, precautionary testing offered.

Mr Bryant said he would not reveal the specific location or comment further on the circumstances due to the risk of identification.

"While we wouldn't usually comment on an isolated case such as this, given the level of concern expressed locally, we felt it was important to reassure residents that the situation was managed appropriately," he said.

"I understand people will be concerned about this new variant. We know that the numbers of cases of this variant are increasing across the country, but it is important to emphasise that there is currently no evidence that this variant causes more serious illness, or that the vaccine provides less protection against it.

"What we do know is that this variant spreads easily — which is why we need everyone to continue with the behaviours that we know stop the transmission of the virus.

"Get vaccinated when it's your turn. Continue to test regularly when you don't have symptoms; this can stop you unknowingly passing on the virus to others. Self-isolate and get a test at Newclose if you get symptoms.

"It's vitally important that we continue to wear face masks where required unless you are exempt, to keep on washing your hands regularly and keep two metres away from anyone not in your household.

"We're all enjoying more freedom following the relaxation of some rules this week, but I would advise meeting outdoors where possible. If meeting indoors then open the windows and the doors — this simple action will make a big difference.

"Just doing one thing isn't going to work. We all need to play our part, work together and continue to follow the guidelines. Our behaviour can help stop the spread."

Earlier this week, health secretary Matt Hancock said the variant first detected in India last October — known as B.1.617.2 — was set to be the dominant strain in the UK. There are 86 local authorities where there are five or more confirmed cases. The key symptoms associated with an infection of B.1.617.2 are the same as the Kent variant:

- A new, persistent cough.
- A high temperature.
- The loss of taste or smell.

Mr Bryant added: "This is not a cause for panic, but it is a cause for caution and a reminder we can't let down our guard.

"The best way to protect against the virus – and all its variants - is to continue following the public health advice – which remains the same for us all, whether we have been vaccinated or not: 'Hands, face, space and fresh air', get vaccinated and make 'test-record-repeat' part of your weekly routine.

"Thanks to everyone continuing to follow the guidance. The infection rate on the Island remains among the lowest in the country. I'd urge everyone to keep going and use your judgement to keep everyone safe."