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# Matt Hancock

## When do we deploy the new variant



## 'Project Fear' authors discussed when to 'deploy' new Covid variant

Matt Hancock's plan to 'frighten the pants off' the public to ensure compliance with lockdown measures exposed in leaked WhatsApp messages

By The Lockdown Files Team

4 March 2023 • 9:00pm



**THE LOCKDOWN FILES**  
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Matt Hancock wanted to “deploy” a new Covid variant [to “frighten the pants off” the public](#) and ensure they complied with lockdown, leaked messages seen by The Telegraph have revealed.

The Lockdown Files – more than 100,000 WhatsApp messages sent between ministers, officials and others – show how the Government used scare tactics to force compliance and push through lockdowns.

In another message Simon Case, the Cabinet Secretary, said that “the fear/ guilt factor” was “vital” in “ramping up the messaging” during [the third national lockdown in Jan 2021](#).

The previous month, Matt Hancock, the then health secretary, appeared to suggest in one message that a new strain of Covid that had recently emerged would be helpful in preparing the ground for the looming lockdown, by [scaring people into compliance](#).

In a WhatsApp conversation on Dec 13, obtained by The Telegraph, Damon Poole - one of Mr Hancock’s media advisers - informed his boss that Tory MPs were “furious already about the prospect” of stricter Covid measures and suggested “we can roll pitch with the new strain”.

The comment suggested that they believed the strain could be helpful in preparing the ground for a future lockdown and tougher restrictions in the run-up to Christmas 2020.

Mr Hancock then replied: “We frighten the pants off everyone with the new strain.”

Mr Poole agreed, saying: “Yep that’s what will get proper bahviour [sic] change.”

The discussion came two days after Mr Hancock was informed of [the emergence of a new variant](#) – known as alpha or the Kent variant, in Dec 2020. A surge in cases later led to the effective [cancellation of Christmas on Dec 19](#).

Mr Hancock expressed his worry that talks over Brexit would dominate headlines and reduce the impact, and probed Mr Poole for his media advice. “When do we deploy the new variant,” asked Mr Hancock.

During the pandemic, the Government [was accused of scaremongering](#) but it was denied, with Mr Hancock’s department saying such accusations were “misleading”.

Among the latest Lockdown Files’ disclosures, The Telegraph can reveal messages that suggest [Boris Johnson veering between lockdown sceptic and zealot](#), with the then prime minister wondering out loud two days after the introduction of the second national lockdown in Nov 2020: “What’s the data like today? Tory narrative that we panicked too soon etc.”

The messages also show the behind-the-scenes [animosity shown towards Lord Stevens of Birmingham](#), the then chief executive of NHS England. Mr Hancock declared in one message to an adviser: “He needs to know he is massively f---g up.”

21 April, 2020



Allan Nixon

Simon needs a kick but don't make yourself look bad in the process 10:14



Matt Hancock



It's ok - he needs to know he is massively f-----g up. And I'll tell the room what happened once the video is off

10:20



In another, he said “Removing SS [Simon Stevens] will be a massive improvement.”

16 August, 2020

Matt Hancock

PHE announcement has gone down well. Two further questions:



- Any progress on SS?



- The Times yesterday has an apparently leaked email from you saying the Bill this summer was scrapped because it's not needed. True for PHE - but not for NHSE. Removing SS will be a massive improvement - but we still need a Bill to do it properly.

18:15

Mr Hancock also tried to “persuade” Lord Stevens to quit in Jan 2020, just a few days after the first cases of Covid-19 had been detected in the UK, the Lockdown Files show.

In further developments, it was revealed that Rishi Sunak, when he was chancellor, described Dominic Cummings's reign as Mr Johnson's chief adviser as [“a nightmare” that he hoped “we never repeat”](#).

The latest from The Lockdown Files also revealed:

How Mr Hancock [accused Michael Gove of making a “play” for his job](#) after promising to reduce NHS waiting times

Ministers tried to have Sir Jeremy Farrar, now the World Health Organisation's chief scientist, sacked from its main Covid advisory group for voicing criticism of the Government. Mr Hancock [branded him a “complete loudmouth”](#)



[Mr Hancock took his mistress](#) to private dinners with his US counterpart – and then later had a ministerial response altered to remove the suggestion he had invited her

The Lockdown Files have cast a light on the Government's decision-making during the pandemic.

Mr Sunak, now the Prime Minister, has come under pressure over his flagship Eat Out to Help Out scheme, after [The Telegraph revealed that Mr Hancock "kept it out of the news"](#) that the restaurant discounts had been driving up Covid cases

The then health secretary and his advisers discussed how Sadiq Khan, the Labour Mayor of London, had been critical of an impending local lockdown before discussing the new variant.

The WhatsApp messages showed they were worried that Mr Khan was “lining up to being Burnham” - a reference to Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, who [had been a thorn in the Government's side](#) in the autumn over a local lockdown for the North West.

Mr Poole then pointed out that Tory MPs were “furious already about the prospect” over another lockdown, putting Mr Johnson's administration under considerable pressure.



13 December, 2020

**Matt Hancock** | Health Secretary

Sounds like Sadiq is lining up to being Burnham 10:51

**Damon Poole** | Department of Health Media Special Adviser

Yep 10:51

Tory MPs also furious already about the prospect 10:52

MOS leader trying to warn us off it too 10:52



Rather than doing too much forward signalling, we can roll pitch with the new strain 11:15

**Matt Hancock**

We frighten the pants of everyone with the new strain 11:17



but the complication with that Brexit is taking the top line 11:17

**Damon Poole**

Yep that's what will get proper behaviour change 11:17

**Matt Hancock**

When do we deploy the new variant 11:35

**Damon Poole**

Been thinking more about this and think we need to be more cautious 12:49

The strain that is 12:50

Think you made the point earlier but we need to keep schools off paperwork / agenda 13:45

**Matt Hancock**

Yes 14:24

**Damon Poole**

Worth doing a bit about no leaking at the top I think 16:34

Big risk with the variant, right wing papers go for a renewed push for let it rip on the basis the vaccines strategy is undermined. 19:16

**Matt Hancock**

That's why we reassure on the vaccine 19:47



By the beginning of December, the country had come out of the second national lockdown - a one-month circuit breaker - and [entered a tiered system of restrictions](#) that meant different areas of the country were subject to varying measures.

Psychologists have already warned that some Government messaging during Covid, including using alleged “fear tactics” in poster and health campaigns, [were “grossly unethical” and that inflated fear levels](#) contributed to excess non-Covid deaths and increased anxiety disorders.

The exchange was not the only time the former health secretary and other senior officials discussed tactics [to frighten the public into compliance](#).

Six months earlier, in June 2020 – when the UK was coming out of its first Covid lockdown – Mr Hancock and Sir Patrick Vallance, the Government’s Chief Scientific Adviser, appeared pleased that a study on the virus’s spread showing it going in a “positive direction” had not received publicity, while a “gloomy” survey had been picked up by the media.

“If we want people to behave themselves maybe that’s no bad thing,” said Mr Hancock in a WhatsApp message. Sir Patrick appeared to agree, responding: “Suck up their miserable interpretation and over deliver.”

5 June, 2020

**Matt Hancock** | Health Secretary

👍 Have you seen the v interesting Ara Darzi survey? 15:31



**Patrick Vallance** | Government Chief Scientific Adviser

Haven't seen it yet but heard a verbal output a couple of days ago. Will try to find it now 16:49

Ok seen it now. Very good and consistent with the ONS study. All pointing in the same positive direction 17:09



**Matt Hancock**

Yep. Just done presser where the media interest is only in the gloomy Cambridge survey 🧑 17:57



But, if we want people to behave themselves maybe that's no bad thing 17:57



**Patrick Vallance**

Agree, suck up their miserable interpretation and over deliver 17:58

One survey – the Real-time Assessment of Community Transmission (React) study from Imperial College London – showed R – the reproduction rate for the virus – had declined to 0.57. Meanwhile, a Cambridge University study in conjunction with Public Health England showed a high transmission rate in some parts of the country, prompting fears of local lockdowns.

Four months later, in Oct 2020, Mr Poole suggested in a group chat that a decision to stop publishing a so-called watchlist of the areas with the highest prevalence of the virus would be helpful to the Government, because it would make every area of the country concerned about the spread of Covid in a second wave.

“It helps the narrative that things are really bad if we don’t publish,” messaged Mr Poole.

7 October, 2020



**Civil Servant**

Matt, are you content that we hold publishing the Watchlist tomorrow. I think would be slightly confusing to publish without following up with the interventions but it will create a bit of noise if we dont. Assume we use a line about data going in the wrong direction so urgently considering interventions.



19:12

She's sent to you. 19:13



**Damon Poole** | Department of Health Media Special Adviser

It helps the narrative that things are really bad if we don’t publish 19:14

**Matt Hancock** | Health Secretary

Yes. No publication tmrw

19:17

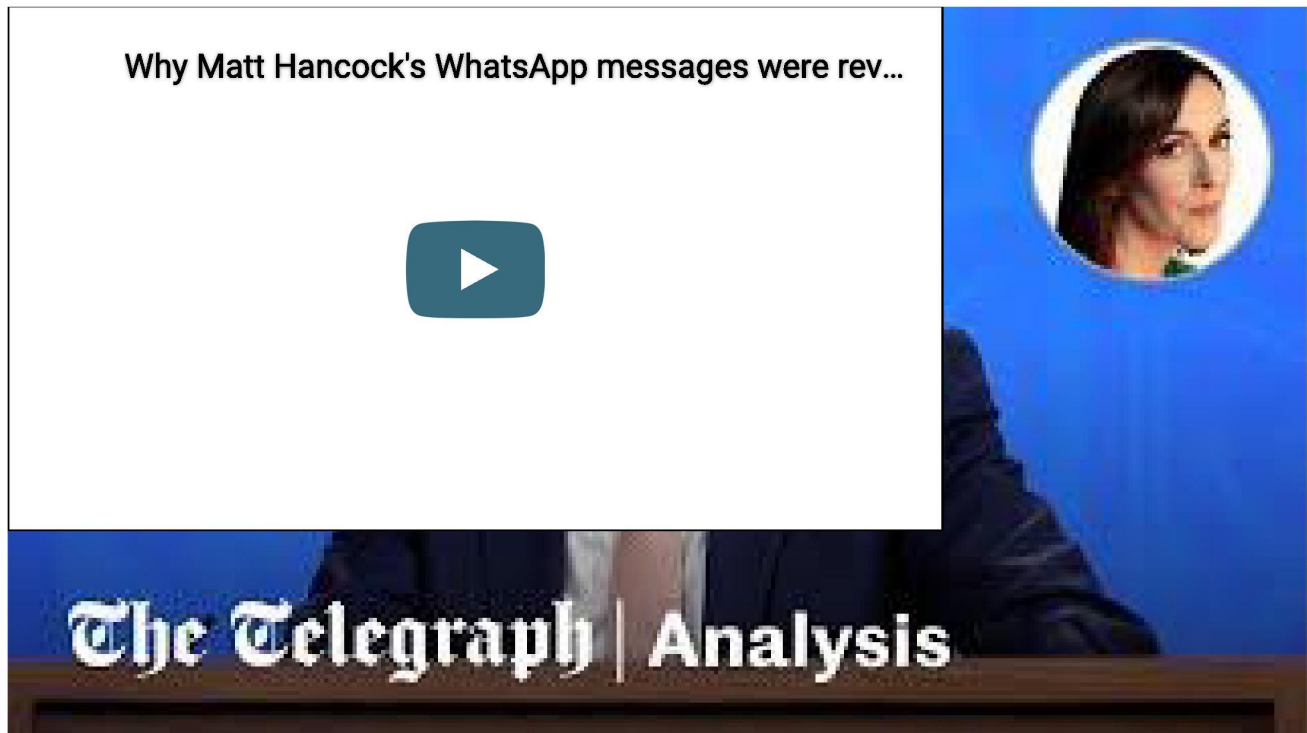


In Jan 2021, Mr Case suggested that the “fear factor” would be “vital” in combatting the latest Covid wave during the third lockdown.

[Mr Case and Mr Hancock discussed](#) what further measures would be effective, including “more mask wearing” to be mandatory, including “in all settings outside home”.

Mr Case then said: “Basically, we need to get compliance up,” but said some measures – like a ban on angling – “will be parodied galore if it looks like we have suddenly decided fishing is the first step towards tier 5!”





Mr Hancock replied: "I honestly wouldn't move on any small things unless we move on a lot. The only big reamaining [sic] things are nurseries and workplaces."

Mr Case responded: "I agree - I think that is exactly right. Small stuff looks ridiculous. Ramping up messaging - the fear/guilt factor vital."

The Cabinet Secretary then suggested the reopening of [a Nightingale hospital in London](#) – used as an overflow facility for non-Covid patients – would be a "big public moment". In reality, only a handful of patients were ever admitted.

10 January, 2021



**Simon Case** | Permanent Secretary at No 10

More mask-wearing might be the only thing to consider. Effectively free and has a very visible impact? Wear masks in all settings outside home and in more workplaces?

12:17

Am not sure that got us much further, did it? Basically, we need to get compliance up

14:20

We actually ought to be careful with stuff like angling - we should sort them, but quietly. We will be parodied galore if it looks like we have suddenly decided fishing is the first step towards tier 5!

14:21



**Matt Hancock** | Health Secretary

yep. I think the problem is that the levers not in the hands of No10 & DHSC are harder to pull

14:21

I honestly wouldn't move on any small things unless we move on a lot.

14:22

The only big remaining things are nurseries and workplaces

14:23



**Simon Case**

I agree - I think that is exactly right. Small stuff looks ridiculous. Ramping up messaging - the fear/guilt factor vital

14:23

I suspect London Nightingale coming into use will feel like a big public moment. Especially as I guess it will be full with a couple of days (based on current data)

19:14

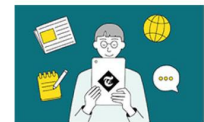
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