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THE UK is experiencing a surge of new coronavirus cases, following in the footsteps of several other western European countries including Spain and France.

On Sunday, 2988 new cases were reported, the highest number of positive cases in a single day in the UK since 22 May, according to government figures.

The seven-day rolling average of new cases has increased to 1812 cases per day across the country, up from 1244 the week before and 1040 a fortnight ago.

The rise in cases may partly be due to increases in testing across the UK. Throughout August, more than 170,000 tests were processed daily, compared with about 70,000 daily tests at the beginning of May.

But UK health secretary Matt Hancock has warned that while greater numbers of people are being tested, “the proportion that tests positive is going up as well”.

Public Health England has noted a broad increase across England rather than a spike in a single area, with most of the new cases coming from people being tested in the community, rather than in hospitals or care settings.

England’s deputy chief medical officer Jonathan Van-Tam told reporters that people had “relaxed too much”, over the summer.

Despite the increase in cases, the number of seriously ill people in hospital with covid-19 remains low, and only two deaths within 28 days of a positive test were recorded on Sunday. However, there may be a lag time of a few weeks before mortality figures catch up to new cases.

The majority of the new cases seem to be in younger people.

While the rate of infection among older people has fallen, the number of positive cases is rising sharply among those under the age of 40, who are less likely to have serious covid-19 resulting in hospitalisation or death.

The greatest rise has been in people aged between 17 and 21.

Van Tam has warned that the UK risks following in the footsteps of other European Union countries, such as France and Spain, which began to see big increases in case numbers in August. Spain has now become the first western European country to have reported more than half a million cases of covid-19, and cases there continue to surge.

“Where case numbers rise initially in the younger parts of the population, they do in turn filter through and start to give elevated rates of disease and hospital admissions in the older age groups,” he told the BBC.

“The fact that 17 to 21-year-olds are not becoming ill means they are lucky, but they also forget because the disease is not severe for them that they are potent spreaders,” said Van Tam.

Government sources have reported concerns that the UK is six weeks behind France.

John Edmunds at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, and a member of the government’s SAGE advisory group, has warned that the R number, the number of people that each infected person goes on to infect, is already greater than 1 in England, and could be worsened by the reopening of schools and universities throughout September. An R number greater than 1 means that an epidemic is growing.

In the week since many pupils returned to classrooms, coronavirus outbreaks have been reported at dozens of schools in England and Wales. Across Liverpool, an estimated 200 pupils are self-isolating after positive covid-19 cases at five schools, and five teachers at a school in Suffolk have tested positive.

UK labs appear to be struggling to keep up with an increase in testing demand as cases rise, and home testing kits have been temporarily unavailable in some areas.

The government has prioritised testing capacity in high-risk areas, and some people with covid-19 symptoms have been asked to travel hundreds of kilometres across the country to get a test.

The head of NHS Test and Trace in England, Dido Harding, has apologised for the situation.

Officials have said that people with symptoms shouldn’t have to travel more than 75 miles (120 kilometres) to get a test. Testing will be vital to keeping the spread of the virus under control in winter months (see page 8).