

THE 2026 UK EQUINE INFLUENZA OUTBREAK: WHAT SURVEILLANCE DATA TELL US



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BACKGROUND

Equine influenza (EI) is an acute, **highly contagious respiratory infection** of horses caused by equine influenza virus (EIV). Transmission occurs primarily via viral aerosolisation during coughing, with fomite transmission, via contaminated equipment, also possible

The brief incubation phase, coupled with high-titre viral shedding immediately following infection, facilitates **rapid spread, particularly during the movement, co-mingling, and transport of horses**

MARKED INCREASE OF OUTBREAKS

Following a relatively quiet first quarter of 2026, with only two outbreaks recorded nationwide, April and May 2026 saw a marked increase in lab confirmed outbreaks (**Figure 1**), highlighting the continued importance of **EI as an endemic yet episodically emergent respiratory pathogen of equids**

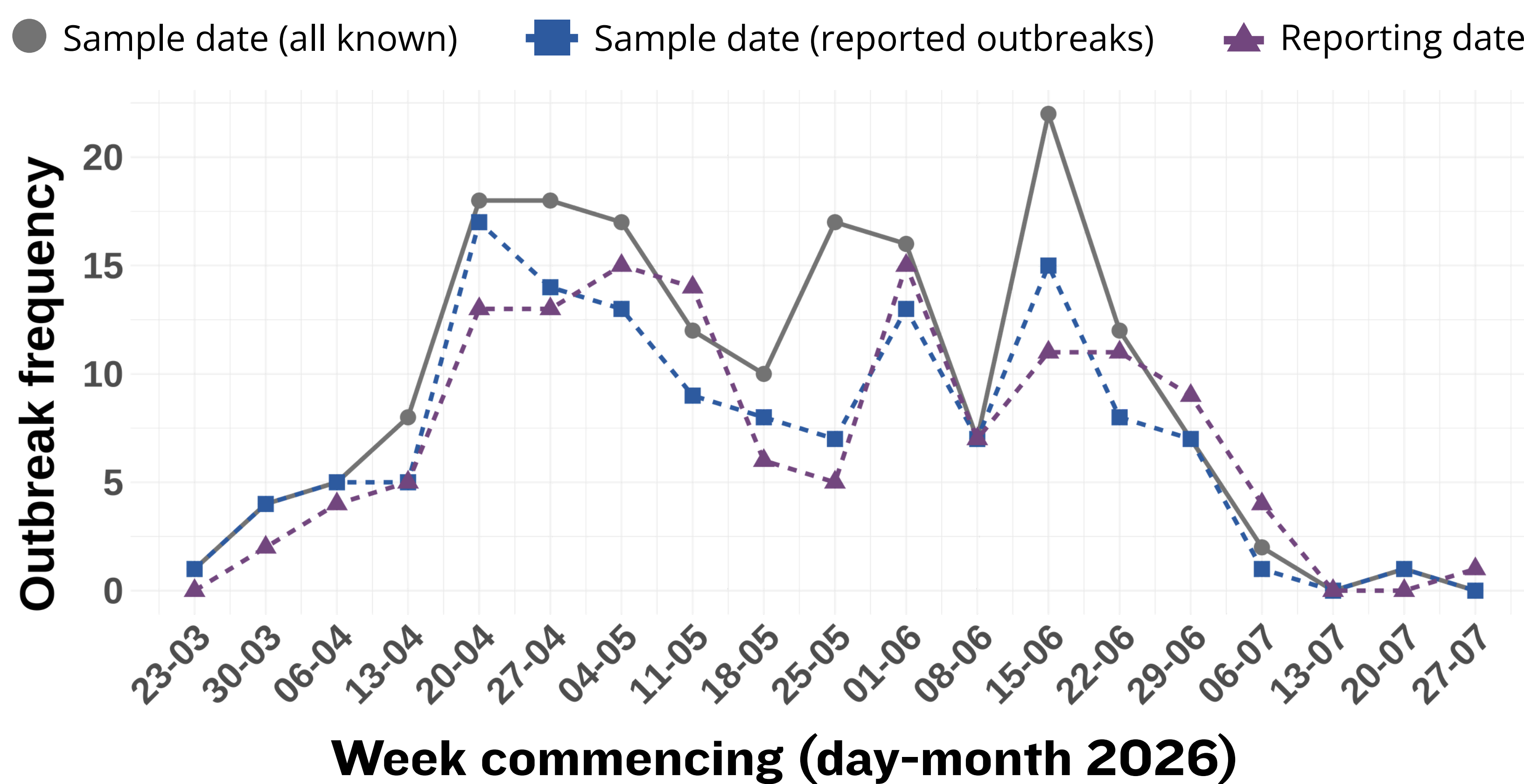


Figure 1: Progression of laboratory-confirmed EI outbreaks over time, showing total sampled outbreaks (including non-reported outbreaks - i.e. laboratory-confirmed outbreaks known to but not officially reported to EIDS), reported outbreaks by sampling date and, reported outbreaks by reporting date

KEY FINDINGS

Movement history

61% of outbreaks involved horses with a **recent history of travel** (83/136)

Vaccination status

64% of outbreaks involved **unvaccinated horses** (including mixed groups of vaccinated and unvaccinated horses) (87/136)

EI confirmed

120 by qPCR
39 by HBLB scheme
16 by point-of-care LAMP or iPCR

GENOMIC SURVEILLANCE

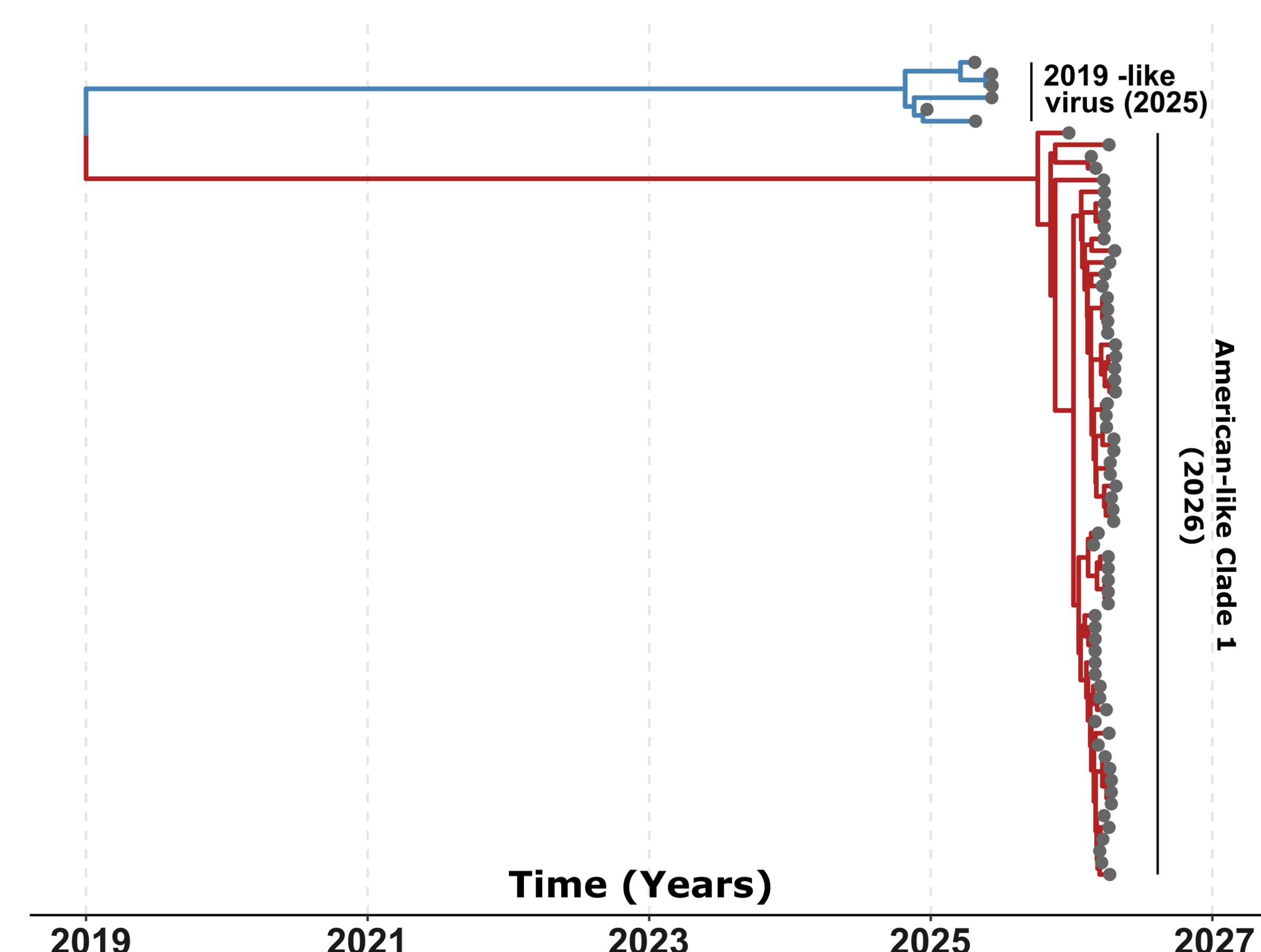


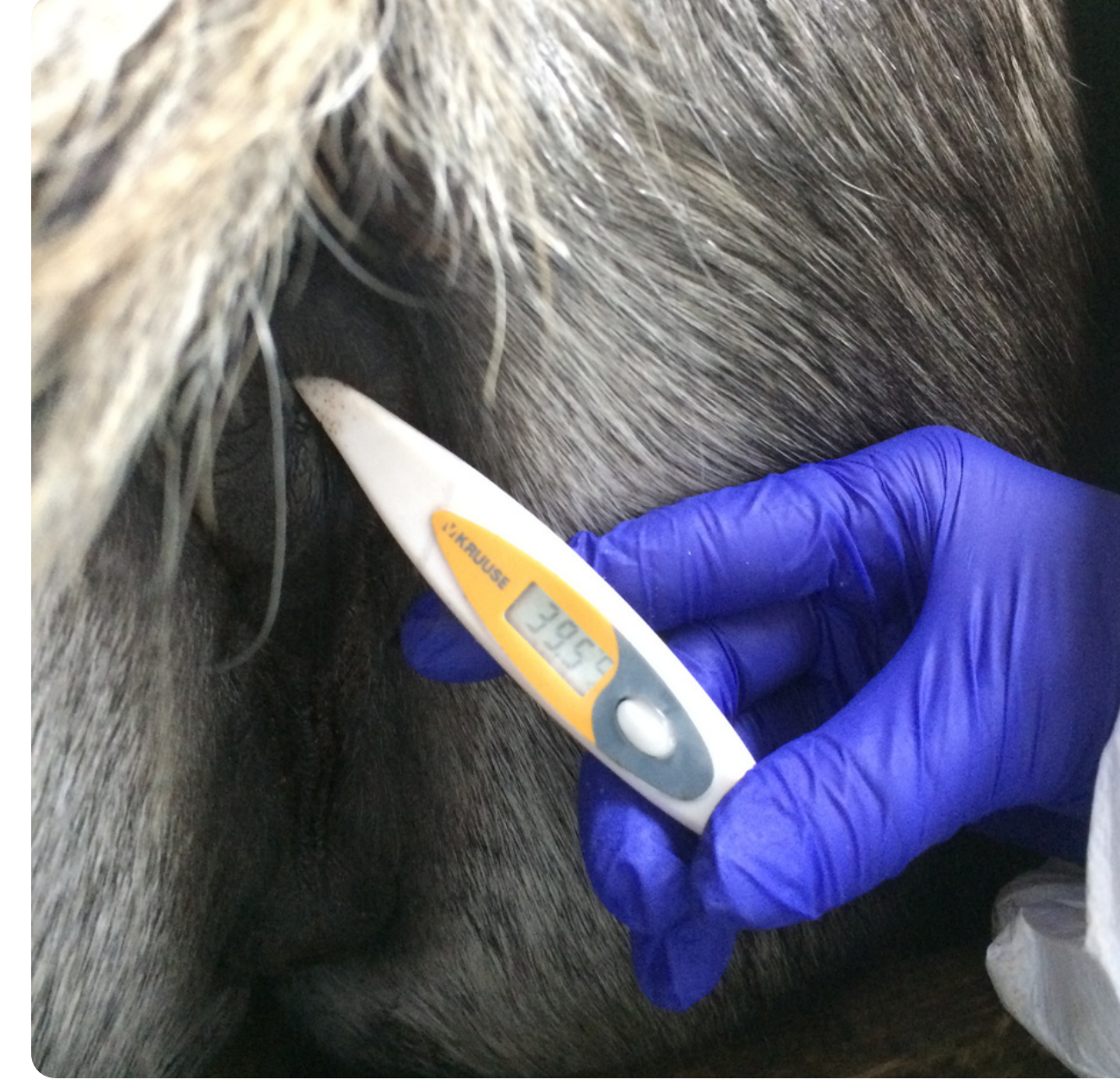
Figure 3: Genomic sequencing comparison of USA-like (2026, red branch) and UK-like (2019-2025, blue branch) FC1 variant EI viruses indicates a last common ancestor rooted around 2019, the time of the last large UK and European epidemic

- **New Variant Identified** of EI H3N8 Florida clade 1 (FC1) introduced to the UK, most likely in early 2026 (**Figure 3**)

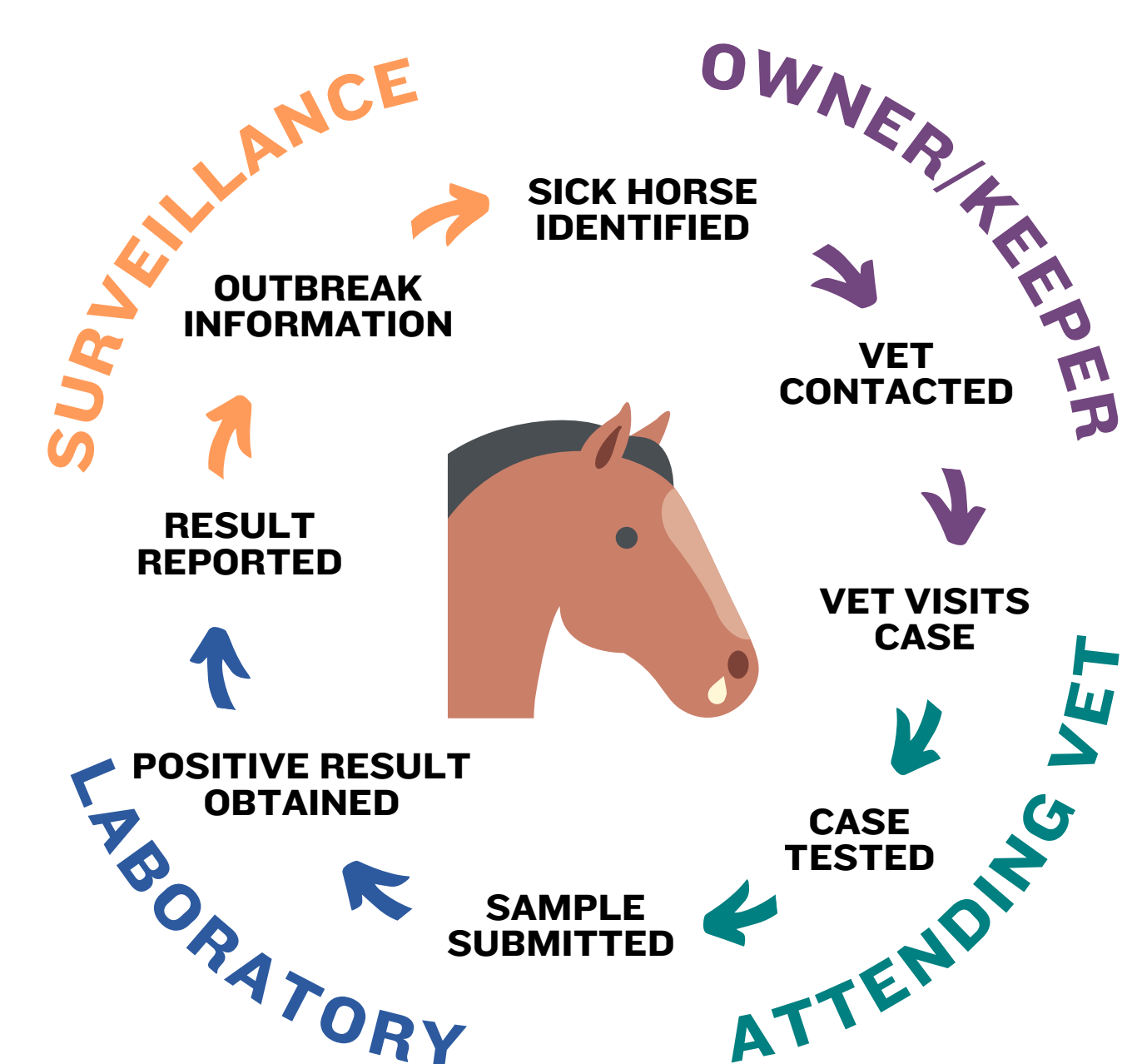
- **Lineage:** Divergent strains last reported in UK in September 2025; closely related to recent US isolates

- **Dominance:** All analysed samples since March 2026 match this FC1 lineage

With an **incubation period of one to three days**, clinical signs typically include transient lethargy, inappetence, pyrexia, a dry-harsh cough, and nasal discharge



SURVEILLANCE PROCESS



- A continuous, multi-stage framework (**left**)
- Horserace Betting Levy Board (HBLB) Equine Influenza Surveillance Scheme at Rossdale Laboratories
- Voluntary data sharing from other laboratories
- Direct notification from attending veterinary surgeons

WIDESPREAD COVERAGE

183 total outbreaks between 23 March - 8 September

- 136 laboratory-confirmed EI outbreaks **reported** across 57 UK counties (**Figure 2**)
- 47 **additional** laboratory-confirmed outbreaks not officially reported to EIDS

⚠ Reports of deaths in free-roaming New Forest ponies testing positive for EI serve as a stark reminder of the severe impact of EI virus on **unvaccinated or naïve populations**

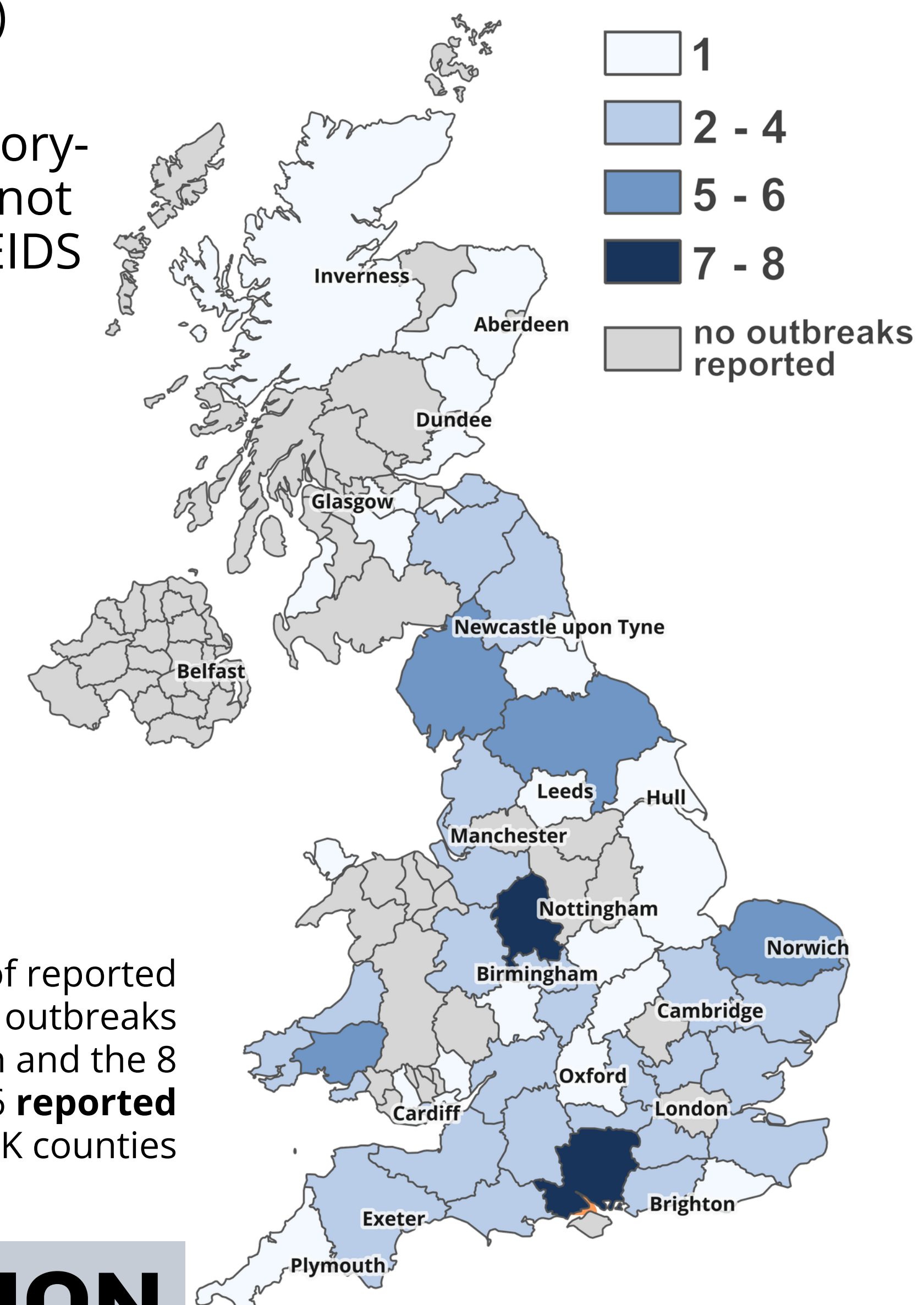


Figure 2: Frequency of reported laboratory confirmed EI outbreaks between the 23 March and the 8 September, totalling 136 **reported** outbreaks across 57 UK counties

CONCLUSION

Despite elevated summer transmission risks, **effective industry communication, rapid veterinary intervention**, and uptake of diagnostic testing may have helped **mitigate an outbreak surge**

Reporting limitations continue to obscure surveillance figures

Improved EI protection requires removing barriers to better biosecurity, such as applying quarantine protocols and increasing vaccine uptake