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The Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
By email to: george.howarth.mp@parliament.uk

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Dear George,

Thank you for your correspondence of 30 September to Matt Hancock about testing for COVID-19 and the NHS Test and Trace service. I apologise for the delay in replying, which has been caused by an unprecedented volume of correspondence in recent months.

The situation has moved on and I hope that your concerns are now resolved. I hope the following information is helpful, nonetheless.

The NHS Test and Trace service was launched on 28 May across England. It is central to our COVID-19 strategy, which is designed to enable life to return to as close to normal as possible, for as many people as possible, in a way that is safe and protects NHS and social care services.

NHS Test and Trace contacts those who have tested positive for COVID-19, and the close recent contacts they provide, by text, email and/or telephone. The number of call attempts is being increased from ten to 15, over 96 hours, concentrating calling in the times that best suit the public. The service is reaching the vast majority of people testing positive and their contacts. Between 28 January and 3 February, 87 per cent of people who tested positive and were transferred to the contact tracing system were reached. Of those whose details were given, 96.5 per cent were reached and told to self-isolate. As of 11 February, over 77 million tests have been processed in the UK so far, and there is capacity to undertake over 800,000 polymerase chain reaction tests a day.

NHS Test and Trace has worked closely with Directors of Public Health and local authorities (LAs) from the outset. It has now launched local tracing partnerships with 148 'lower tier' LAs, with a further 150 in the process of being implemented. We will continue to improve and refine how we support and empower LAs to maximise our efforts against COVID-19, and these local partnerships will boost the number of people reached by the service.

The statistics on the number of contacts traced, published each week, include the contribution by local teams. The same system is used locally and nationally and works to strengthen our data on the virus. The Deputy Chief Medical Officer has stated that this is a significant improvement on the start of the pandemic. This approach enables us to grow our national capacity quickly and provide surge capacity as required, while also maximising the use of local teams to follow up with tailored support for those individuals who need it most. We have tripled the size of local health protection teams, and these continue to grow.

With the expansion of testing to anyone with symptoms, the service was placed under extreme pressure and, at times, was running at maximum capacity. We understand that this unfortunately affected test availability. However, our efforts to increase testing capacity have now resolved this, and anyone who needs a test can get one.

As of 11 February 2021, we have over 850 testing sites, including 489 walk-through local sites, 87 drive-through sites, 19 satellite sites, and six Lighthouse Laboratories, along with home testing and mobile testing units. When booking a test, people are offered testing at the nearest site with availability that day. As of 11 February, the median distance people are travelling to booked, in-person tests is two miles.

Since the start of the pandemic, we have increased the capacity of the NHS and PHE labs more than tenfold. We also set up an entirely new nationwide network of Lighthouse Laboratories and partner laboratories to process COVID-19 swab samples. Our labs are processing over two and a half million tests a week.

Lighthouse Laboratories and partner labs continue to maximise capacity. This includes recruiting staff, mobilising additional equipment and optimising workflow. Since April, over 3,000 people have been recruited into lab roles. We also use 'surge' lab capacity to process more tests in the short term.

We have also announced that a new very high throughput lab based in Leamington Spa will open this year, cementing the UK as a world leader in diagnostics and creating up to 2,000 jobs. When at full capacity, the lab will be able to process up to 300,000 polymerase chain reaction tests per day, which will help us to maximise testing capacity as demand rises.

We are working with our partners around the clock to fight COVID-19 and safely bring the UK back to normal as soon as possible. As part of our strategy, we are exploring use of new technologies and options to further expand our rapidly increasing lab capacity.

I hope this reply is helpful.



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