



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From the Lord Bethell
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Innovation*

*39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU*

020 7210 4850

PO-1326980

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

30 May 2021

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your correspondence of 30 April on behalf of a number of your constituents, about COVID-19 and testing contracts.

I am very sorry that there has been a delay in responding to your correspondence. As I know you and your constituents will appreciate, my department has received unprecedented volumes of queries in recent months due to the pandemic and this, coupled with work to ensure frontline services are delivered, has unfortunately resulted in our taking longer than usual to respond to correspondence.

I trust that your constituents will find the information provided in the attached fact sheet useful.

For queries related to the Government's response to the coronavirus pandemic, guidance and information is updated regularly, in line with the latest scientific advice and the latest decisions that the Government has made in tackling the pandemic.

We have launched a COVID-19 'hub', which can be found at www.gov.uk/coronavirus and is regularly updated. The hub provides the latest advice and guidance from across Government and offers an email alert service so that the public can stay up to date with all the latest measures. If your constituents have online access, this service should provide them with information relating to the great majority of cases that we receive.

Thank you again for taking the time to write and I hope that this reply is helpful to your constituents.

LORD BETHELL



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Test and Trace

Testing and tracing are central to our COVID-19 recovery strategy. Anyone in the UK who has symptoms of COVID-19 can book or order a free test at www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test. We have put in place the largest network of diagnostic testing facilities in British history. 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 21 May, we have over 1,100 symptomatic testing sites, including 527 walk-through local sites, 90 drive-through sites, and seven lighthouse laboratories, along with home testing and mobile testing units. Evidence suggests that those with no clinical background or training should be completely able to secure an effective sample. Each kit comes with comprehensive instructions to guide the user through how to administer the swab. Guidance on home testing can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications/testing-for-coronavirus-at-home.

When booking a test, people are offered testing at the nearest site with availability that day. As of 14 May, the median distance people are travelling to booked, in-person tests is less than two miles. As of 21 May, over 169 million tests have been processed and there is capacity to carry out more than 650,000 polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests per day.



Contact Tracing

The NHS Test and Trace service was launched on 28 May 2020 across England. It contacts those who have tested positive for COVID-19, and the close recent contacts they provide, by text, email and/or telephone. Between 6 May and 12 May, 91.6 per cent of people who tested positive and were transferred to the contact tracing system were reached. Of those whose details were given, 89 per cent were reached and told to self-isolate. Further information and advice on COVID-19 and self-isolation requirements can be found at www.gov.uk/guidance/nhs-test-and-trace-how-it-works.

LAs and public health leaders have been at the forefront of efforts to tackle the virus in our communities. While we are now in a position to ease restrictions, it is vital we continue to support LAs to keep doing their most important public health work – responding to the virus – over the coming months.

We therefore announced a further £400million of funding for the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF) from 1 April, taking total COMF support for 2020/21 and 2021/22 to £2billion. This is to cover further public health activities in 2021/22, with more details to be announced in due course. In March, we published an updated COVID-19 Contain Outbreak Management Framework for local areas, which sets out how national and local partners will continue to work with the public at a local level to prevent, contain and manage outbreaks. It also includes details of the enhanced toolkit of measures to address variants of concern.

Further information can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for ‘containing and managing local coronavirus’.

Accuracy of Tests

We know that inaccurate information online about the reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) test and its use is prevalent. A typical RT-PCR assay (the investigative procedure) will have a maximum of 40 thermal cycles. The tests are very specific and the risk of false positives, where the tests are reacting to other viruses, is extremely low. Like any diagnostic test, there is a possibility of a false negative or false positive result, but this is very small. Independent, confirmatory testing of positive samples indicates a test specificity that exceeds 99.3 per cent, meaning the false positive rate is less than 1 per cent.

Lateral flow device (LFD) tests are effective at detecting infectious cases of COVID-19, thereby identifying people with a high viral load who are the most likely to spread the virus further. Extensive clinical evaluation shows lateral flow tests are accurate and sensitive enough, including for testing asymptomatic people. Recent analysis carried out by NHS Test and Trace shows LFD tests have a specificity of at least 99.9 per cent. This means that for every 1,000 lateral flow tests carried out, there is less than one false positive result.



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Additional guidance on PCR tests can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for 'assurance of SARS-CoV-2 RNA positive results during periods of low prevalence'. Further information on LFD tests can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for 'lateral flow device specificity in phase 4 (post-marketing) surveillance'.

Asymptomatic Testing

Alongside the symptomatic testing service, NHS Test and Trace is using rapid-testing technologies for asymptomatic individuals and to improve our detection of positive cases. Roughly one in three people have the virus without symptoms and could therefore be spreading the disease without knowing it.

Since 9 April everyone in England has been able to access free LFD tests twice a week, in line with clinical guidance. This latest expansion of testing builds on our NHS Winter Plan, which is already deploying hundreds of thousands of rapid tests to identify asymptomatic cases among those most at risk and people who need to leave home for work, including frontline NHS workers, care home staff and residents, and schoolchildren and their families. So far, over 160,000 cases have been detected using LFD tests.

Getting a rapid test is quick and convenient and is delivered through:

- online and telephone ordering services for home delivery;
- workplace testing programmes, on-site or at home;
- community testing, offered by all local authorities;
- collection at local PCR test sites during specific test collection times; and
- testing on-site at schools and colleges.

A new 'Pharmacy Collect' service has also launched which provides an additional route to regular rapid testing. Asymptomatic people aged over 18 can visit a participating local pharmacy and collect up to two boxes of seven rapid tests to use twice a week at home.

Further information on testing routes can be found at www.gov.uk/getting-tested-for-coronavirus. If testing at home, individuals will need to register their results online at www.gov.uk/report-covid19-result or by calling 119. They should self-isolate if positive and order a confirmatory PCR test.

NHS COVID-19 App

We launched the NHS COVID-19 App in England and Wales on 24 September. When a user first registers with the app, they will be asked for the first half of their postcode and they will be notified when their area's risk level changes.

The app is designed with user privacy in mind and it tracks the virus, not people. The app cannot track people's whereabouts, and it cannot tell anyone, including the Government, who or where people are. The app does not hold personal information about users, such as names, addresses or dates of birth. To ensure the anonymity of all app users, it is not



possible for the app to inform the user of when exactly close contact occurred or to review one specific case or notification; it is possible that the contact was unknown to them.

Using the app is entirely voluntary. Outside of national restrictions, the app gives people the option of checking into venues quickly and easily without needing to give their contact information to the venue or to the NHS Test and Trace service, and the hospitality sector will not be required to collect information from customers and/or visitors who have used the app to check-in.

The more people use the app, the better it works. As of 16 May, the NHS COVID-19 app has been downloaded 23.7 million times and over 1.9 million contact tracing alerts have been sent out via the app in England.

Test and Trace Support Payments

The NHS Test and Trace Support Payment (TTSP) is currently available in every local authority in England. The scheme exists to help people who are on low incomes to self-isolate. Eligible individuals will receive an up-front, one-off payment of £500 from their local authority. This is on top of any benefits and Statutory Sick Pay that they currently receive. Further information on the scheme can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for 'Test and Trace Support Payment scheme: claiming financial support'.

Following feedback from MPs and their constituents, changes were made on 10 December to allow app users to register for an account ID, which they can now use to apply for the TTSP. This means that anyone notified about self-isolation via the app after this date would be able to enquire about their eligibility for financial support.

We are now funding an increased package of LA support to help people who are self-isolating following a positive COVID-19 test result or close contact with a positive case. An additional £12.9million per month is being distributed amongst 'upper tier' LAs to support local delivery. Further information can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for 'COVID-19 response spring 2021'.

On 9 March, a framework document was shared with LAs, offering guidance on the contact and triage process for identifying support needs, and the types of support funding could be spent on. The additional funding aims to improve consistency across LAs and ensure that people self-isolating have what they need to stay at home. Further information can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for 'containing and managing local coronavirus'.



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Testing Contracts

Contracts are placed in line with the Department's terms and conditions. This includes clauses for contract management, to ensure that supplier performance and the delivery of value for money can be properly assessed throughout the duration of the contract. Due diligence is carried out for all Government contracts and we take these checks extremely seriously. As a result of our partnerships, we have been able to rapidly expand our testing capacity and expand COVID-19 testing eligibility to all symptomatic people across the UK.

The Department is unable to comment on individual contracts due to commercial sensitivity; however, public notices are published and can be found at www.gov.uk/contracts-finder.

Offers of Support

We have set up an online service for offers of support from businesses for COVID-19 tests or testing facilities. It can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for 'help the Government increase coronavirus (COVID-19) testing capacity'. Offers of help may be submitted by following the guidance and information given by the central team.

We are constantly exploring new ways to improve the NHS COVID-19 App. The current approach for those interested in reporting technical problems or providing feedback on the app, including on ways to improve it, can be found at www.faq.covid19.nhs.uk/create-case.

Complaints and Enquiries

The Coronavirus Testing Helpdesk number is 0300 303 2713. If someone has already called the helpline and was not satisfied with the response, they may wish to raise a formal complaint directly to the central complaints mailbox at scas.covid19testingcomplaints@nhs.net. The complaints team will then triage and respond.

For all MP derived enquiries from constituents that occur after a test is taken, including those that concern lost test results, the contact tracing process, self-isolation dates and financial support, please contact mp-cases@email.enquiries.test-and-trace.nhs.uk.

For constituents who have enquiries, feedback or complaints about the NHS Test and Trace service, we suggest that they contact the service online themselves at enquiries.test-and-trace.nhs.uk/s/, or call 119, and the appropriate team will be happy to help as soon as possible.

International Travel, including Hotel Quarantine

As of 15 January, people arriving in the UK by boat, plane or train require a COVID-19 test up to 72 hours before departing their country of origin. Prior to departure, passengers need to present proof of a negative test result, alongside their passenger locator form.



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People travelling to the UK from a green-list country are not required to quarantine, but must book and pay for a test to be taken on day two after arrival.

People travelling from an amber-list country will need one pre-departure test, and will need to quarantine at a designated address, which can be their home or the home of family or friends, for ten days upon arrival in the UK. In addition, PCR tests will be required on days two and eight of quarantine. More information on testing before travel can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for 'testing before you travel to England'.

In addition, anyone travelling to the UK from specific countries on the UK's travel-ban list, the 'red list', is required to isolate in a managed quarantine facility for ten days. People travelling from red-list countries need to book and pay for a quarantine package before completing their passenger locator form and embarking on their journey to the UK. Further information, including the full list of countries, can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for 'COVID-19 travel bans to the UK'.

Quarantine hotel guidance can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for 'booking and staying in a quarantine hotel when you arrive in England'.

Data

Data on COVID-19 testing, hospitalisations and deaths can be found on the Public Health England (PHE) dashboard at coronavirus.data.gov.uk. Information about how the data is collected can be also found by selecting 'About the data'.

As scientific studies have shown, COVID-19 is an incredibly dangerous virus, especially to the elderly and at-risk groups. The UK Government does not manipulate scientific data and we are committed to the open sharing of the scientific advice guiding our response to COVID-19 where possible. Cases, hospitalisations and deaths are all considered important metrics by the Government and are all factored into decision-making. All three are rapidly made available in the public domain via the PHE COVID-19 dashboard.

All the deaths data shown on the PHE COVID-19 dashboard are for people who have died within 28 days of a positive test result that has been confirmed by a PHE or NHS laboratory. They also include, for England, deaths of people who have had a positive test result confirmed through testing done by commercial partners. More information on the PHE definition can be found at www.gov.uk by searching for 'COVID-19 investigation and initial clinical management of possible cases'. It is true that people who have tested positive for COVID-19 could, in a few cases, have died from something else. However, this does not mean that the threat posed by COVID-19 has been exaggerated.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) publishes weekly figures listing deaths from all causes. These figures show that since March 2020 there have, tragically, been tens of thousands more deaths than we would expect on average. COVID-19 deaths reported by the ONS are based on the cause of death recorded on death certificates. These can



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include cases where the doctor thought it likely that the person had COVID-19, even when there was no positive test result.

The UK does not currently publish COVID-19 recovery data. This is because comparisons between countries are always challenging because different countries have different systems and different ways of counting cases. This is particularly true for recovery rates, where there is no internationally agreed way to count those who have recovered from the virus.

The fact that COVID-19 is a new virus has been a key feature of the Government's response from the start. It has inherently been a continuous and active process of learning, reviewing, adapting and responding as we discover more about how the virus works in light of the latest scientific research and available data.