

Improving the UK's Test and Trace System

I have received the below enclosed letter from the Health Secretary about improving our test and trace regime.

Dear Colleague,

Strengthening our testing regime

I am writing to provide an update on what we are doing to strengthen our testing regime in the light of unprecedented demand across the UK.

Testing has played a key role in our response to COVID-19 – we've used testing to find cases, protect those most vulnerable (such as in care homes or hospitals) and to help keep children in face-to-face education.

More recently our testing capability has enabled us to take further steps towards normal life, including by reducing self-isolation periods to re-unite individuals with their loved ones during the Christmas period, keeping venues that would otherwise pose a much greater risk open through use of the COVID Pass and allowed vaccinated people who have had contact with someone who is positive to take daily tests instead of having to self-isolate.

In contrast to many countries, the UK Government provides both symptomatic and asymptomatic testing free of charge, and provides isolation support payments to those who need them, demonstrating our focus on keeping the country running smoothly and avoiding unwanted restrictions (particularly during the festive period where many families come together). To enable this, we are doing more testing per head than any comparable country and we have focused recent communications on encouraging testing before seeing friends and relatives, particularly those who are vulnerable, over the festive period.

The arrival of the Omicron variant has caused record case numbers and unprecedented demand for both PCR and Lateral Flow Device (LFD) tests. This has inevitably placed strain on the testing system, despite the impressive scaling-up of supply, logistics and laboratory capacity. Other countries have faced similar challenges.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, over 350 million PCR and LFD tests have been registered in England (nearly 400 million in the UK), and we now see an average of around 1.5 million tests reported each day. In response to recent challenges, the UK Health Security Agency has more than doubled LFD deliveries from 120 million tests to nearly 300 million in December, more per head than any other country.

To respond to anticipated demand over the coming few weeks we are buying hundreds of millions more LFD tests, bringing new products on board and accelerating their deployment to the public. We are also doubling our total

delivery capacity with Royal Mail to 900,000 test packs and PCR tests a day. We are tripling the supply of LFDs in January and February from our pre-Omicron plan of 100 million to 300 million per month.

We are constantly reviewing system performance and ways to maximise its response to the demand for tests. However, in light of the huge demand for LFDs seen over the last three weeks, we expect to need to constrain the system at certain points over the next two weeks to manage supply over the course of each day, with new tranches of supply released regularly throughout each day.

Our daily PCR capacity has also been ramped-up, from around 530,000 per day in November to up to 700,000 per day now, excluding the tests for NHS patients and staff being processed in hospitals. Our world-leading Lighthouse Laboratory Network has and will continue to work 24/7 over Christmas and the New Year to process tests, despite like many sectors being impacted by staff sickness.

We will continue making tests available to everyone who needs them, particularly vulnerable groups such as care home residents and those who work in critical sectors such as the care workforce. Today, for example, there was particularly high demand from care homes with 190,000 PCR tests submitted to laboratories for processing, and these groups were rightly and will continue to be given priority. Everyone who may be eligible for anti-viral medication will be receiving a PCR kit in the post by mid-January, which they can store at home to use if they get symptoms. These will also be prioritised at laboratories.

I would encourage you and your constituents to continue testing when engaging in activities that carry the greatest risk, and before coming into contact with people at risk of serious illness. If people cannot get tests through GOV.UK they should try local pharmacies or see whether their local authority is distributing tests. Tests can also be collected from some community places such as libraries. If your constituent attends or works at a school, college or nursery they can get rapid tests through these too. I would like to thank your constituents for their continued understanding and patience during this unprecedented time.

Finally, I'd like to thank the men and women on whom our testing system relies. Whether working in the labs, on test sites or in our logistics network, they are rising to the challenge, volunteering to work extra shifts and extra hours to deliver the testing capacity our country needs at this challenging time. We owe every one of them our gratitude.

Yours ever,

RT HON SAJID JAVID MP