



Sir Bob Neill MP
Chair
Justice Select Committee

28 May 2020

Dear Sir Bob

COVID-19: TESTING FOR PRISON AND PROBATION STAFF

Thank you for your recent letter regarding our testing programme for prison and probation staff. Testing has played an important role in our Covid-19 response, and will continue to be a key part of our medium-term planning. We are working to consider the testing approach across the prison estate, balancing the risks presenting for HMPPS in the coming weeks and months.

As you will be aware, testing is now available for everyone, and this applies for both staff and prisoners. Since 24 April prison and probation staff and their families have been able to access testing and, to date, we have referred over 4,000 staff for testing. Staff can also self-refer via the employee portal.

In regard to reporting of staff testing results, the situation with data collection remains the same. We are unable to access the data direct from testing services due to confidentiality considerations, and so rely on staff self-reporting through usual line management chains. This data is then captured centrally in Situational Reports. As I noted in my letter of 26 May, we recently identified some discrepancies in our figures but have now moved towards a more robust way of reporting Covid-19 staff cases, and have provided renewed guidance on the process for reporting that must be followed by all establishments. We are also putting additional assurance checks in place, and continue to liaise with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) to explore options for obtaining more accurate testing data.

DHSC aim is to supply test results within 48 hours for those taken at a regional test site, and within 72 hours for home testing kits. In some cases, testing results are taking slightly longer, though DHSC is taking action nationally to resolve this. We have issued guidance to staff on the processes to follow depending on test results, which includes engaging with management as part of return to work processes. Staff are advised not to return to work until they have completed the necessary period of isolation and have recovered from their symptoms. Once returned to work, all staff will continue to follow guidance on social distancing, Health & Safety and use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) while at work.

DHSC are responsible for testing quality and reliability. There is, of course, a risk of human error in self-administered testing kits, however they have been designed so that those with no clinical background or training are able to take them effectively. Each kit comes with instructions to guide people through how to safely administer the swab themselves.

As we develop our medium-term plan, we are exploring further ways to expand our testing capability. We have also been approached by PHE in relation to a locally-driven initiative to conduct universal testing of all consenting prisoners and staff working in HMP Littlehey as part of the outbreak management at that site. This will start soon.

Finally, and as I am sure you will be aware, the Government has now announced the rollout of its Test and Trace strategy. From 28 May contact tracing will begin for all confirmed cases, in England. The new Service will contact, instruct and support those who have been in close contact with anyone in England with a confirmed case Covid-19. Where this is the case it will instruct people to self-isolate for 14 days. We have advised our prison and probation staff that if contacted by the NHS Test and Trace Service and told to self-isolate then they should do so and inform their line manager. In these cases, staff should work at home where possible and take paid special leave where this cannot happen. Staff who are unwell should of course take sick leave.

While this may lead to some increases in staff absences, we do not anticipate that it will have a major impact on our current operations. We have established safe operating processes in prisons, probation and in the YCS and robust systems are in place to manage the risk of infection, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) when needed. This means that in the normal course of our operations we do not routinely have staff and service users in 'close contact' with one another.

As already happens, in cases where service users in prisons or approved premises receive a positive test the local public health team should be informed so they can advise on any necessary steps. The implementation of our compartmentalisation strategy in prisons means that we are already isolating the sick, shielding the vulnerable and quarantining new arrivals.

We are also working closely with DHSC as we are keen to mirror processes in place for healthcare staff to support them in getting back to work as quickly as possible. This will in turn support our work to ensure our essential services can continue to be delivered and our staff and service users kept safe.

I hope you find the above helpful. As always, I appreciate your continued challenge and cooperation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Lucy Frazer'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

LUCY FRAZER QC MP