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of Health &
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Rt Hon Greg Clark MP

Chair, Science and Technology Committee
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Dear Greg

Re: Rapid stand-up of Covid-19 testing

Many thanks for your letter of 21 April, requesting further information on the UK's future testing strategy. I appreciate your interest in the future national capability to respond to a potential COVID contingency scenario, including the UK Health Security Agency's (UKHSA) critical role in supporting testing interventions. UKHSA officials, whilst working to deliver cost-effective reductions in public expenditure at a time of limited testing are simultaneously monitoring changes in new variants and planning to ensure the most effective response to future COVID threats.

I have set out below answers to your three questions:

1. What reassurances I have received on the UK's capacity to rapidly stand-up testing provision should a future scenario require it
2. Where Government and public agency responsibility lies for ensuring the provision of future testing; and
3. On what timescale tests would be provided if required.

UK's capacity to rapidly stand-up testing provision

Whilst future requirements cannot be fully anticipated, we now have testing tools - notably lateral flow devices (LFDs) - which were not available for the first pandemic waves but which are likely to be effective for future COVID-19 surges. This means that the testing capacity that we would stand up in the face of a resurgence can and should be different to the testing capacity we have stood down. In addition, parallel enabling functions, such as the laboratory evaluation of LFDs against new variants and collaborative work with Directors of Public Health and Local Government representatives to support community testing has also been progressed. I know that preparing for a potential resurgence is a major priority for UKHSA and for its partners including the NHS. I am therefore reassured that work is underway to produce robust and detailed plans to stand up the necessary testing provision, should a future scenario require it.

UKHSA has been funded to retain some reactive contingency capability in the case of a severe new resurgence or variant of concern. In the event of a variant or resurgence, we would take into account risks to the NHS and other public services, and intelligence about the particular risks posed by the variant in deciding our response, including the extent to which it would be effective to deploy testing.

We will retain a supply of LFD test kits to allow us to offer tests to critical cohorts and for early epidemiological assessment; we also have contracts in place that allow us to order additional LFDs relatively quickly. With the home channel, we have a distribution channel that can scale up at pace. Together, these should give us capacity to distribute LFDs to a designated cohort of up to a million people within the first 10 days of mobilised response, with further distribution in the following weeks. Alongside this, we can rapidly procure additional tests and stand-up further distribution capacity if necessary.

We have also retained lab testing capacity of 150,000 per day to ensure we can scale up our polymerase chain reaction (PCR) capacity if needed. Like LFDs, PCR tests can be distributed via the home channel. We will also retain a limited in-person contingent testing capability which could be used to distribute tests to communities that struggle to access the home channel.

To support the aforementioned testing provision and its rapid reactive deployment capability, there are various digital systems, including contact tracing, that can be rescaled at pace to complement testing.

We are also continuing to provide testing for certain groups in high-risk settings such as the NHS and adult social care in periods of higher prevalence. We are considering evidence and options for scaling this back for certain periods of the year to reserve asymptomatic testing capacity for potential pressures later in the year and support any management of Variants of Concern.

Future testing provision responsibility

Responsibility for current and future COVID-19 testing largely sits with the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), formed last year from the merger of NHS Test and Trace and Public Health England. The Agency has been, and will continue to, work closely with the NHS, DHSC, the Devolved Administrations, and others across Government and beyond.

Future testing provision timescales

If needed, we would be able to ramp up testing quickly, with substantial increases in testing volumes within 10 days. Capacity would then increase further over subsequent weeks. Public health advice will guide the appropriate prioritisation and deployment of the available testing provision.

Yours ever,



RT HON SAJID JAVID MP