



Science and Technology Committee

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From Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, Chair

Baroness Dido Harding
Executive Chair (Interim)
National Institute for Health Protection
(By e-mail)

8 October 2020

Dear Dido,

Following your appearance before the Committee, I wrote to you on 25 September asking for further details that you did not have immediately available to you. I asked that you reply by 6 October. We have now passed that generous deadline and I am disappointed to have not received a response.

As you will appreciate, there continue to be serious concerns relating to test and trace. These concerns are by no means a criticism of the individuals who continue to work tirelessly to deliver the system and rectify issues as they arise: we are very grateful to them for their efforts. My Committee has sought throughout the pandemic to offer constructive suggestions to Government and others to remedy problems that arise to ensure the UK learns lessons and makes changes as the pandemic progresses. I would therefore be grateful if you could respond urgently to my previous letter so that we have the information we need to offer constructive suggestions for improvement.

Since writing to you there have been further developments around the test and trace system. On 3 October there was an unexpected increase in the reported number of positive cases. This was accompanied by a message on the Government dashboard that there had been cases missed from previous dates which were now being added to the dataset.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care told the House on Monday 5 October that the issue was related to a Public Health England (PHE) legacy system, which included the use of Microsoft Excel. It is reported that PHE developers used an old format of the software, XLS, which had a set number of rows to log data that was incompatible with the volume of data being generated.

In light of this, I would be grateful if you could set out:

- How the missed test results have affected estimates of the R number for the UK as a whole and at the regional level;
- The proportion of potential contacts who were asked to self-isolate within 72 hours of a positive test result (which were delayed in being fed through to the contact tracing system¹), in line with SAGE's recommendations;
- What certification took place of the Microsoft Excel-based system, what consideration was given to the standards required for a safety critical piece of software, and what safeguards are in place to prevent this problem from happening again; and
- Whether the use of Microsoft Excel in this way breached any statutory or regulatory requirements for safety.

¹ The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies has [advised](#) that "any delay beyond 48–72 hours total before isolation of contacts results in a significant impact on R".

I will be placing a copy of this letter, and your response when received, on the Committee's website. I would be grateful if you could provide a response to this letter by Monday 12 October at the latest.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Greg Clark'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Greg' and the last name 'Clark' clearly distinguishable.

Rt Hon Greg Clark MP
Chair