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22 December 2020

THE PRIME MINISTER

Dear Bernard,

Thank you for your letter of 29 September, following my appearance before the Liaison Committee on 16 September, in which you asked about scaling up test and trace operations and Parliamentary scrutiny of COVID-19 emergency measures. I am very sorry for the time it has taken to reply.

Test and trace operations

We can be very proud that we have built the largest Coronavirus testing capacity in Europe. To do this we have built a national coalition of people and organisations – from national and local government, the NHS, Public Health England, the military, academia, epidemiology, the private and not-for-profit and community sectors – to create a massive testing and tracing programme.

Our testing capability has increased to record high levels, which is a testament to the huge efforts of all involved. We have now processed more than 48 million tests since the programme was launched.

NHS Test and Trace remains focused on ensuring everyone who is eligible for a test can get one, with more than 700 test sites, including 400 local test sites, now in operation. It has also made significant improvements to its contact tracing service such as improving the contact tracing website, reducing duplicate calls to households, and increasing numbers of call handlers.

Of course, we are working to deliver an ever more effective testing system, increasing the availability of tests, ease of access and turnaround times. We have six Lighthouse Laboratories already operating across the UK with more coming online over the coming weeks and months. Two new mega labs will also open early in the New Year that are capable of processing an additional 600,000 tests each day by early next year, doubling the current daily capacity.

We have also run a number of pilots across schools, universities and workplaces to assess the use of rapid lateral flow antigen tests. We have built on these pilots to now offer regular testing to patient-facing NHS staff with lateral flow devices, as well as ongoing pilots in Southampton and Salford using the LAMP no-swab saliva test. Additionally, we have recently announced plans to offer all schools with secondary-age pupils access to additional COVID-19 testing from the first week of January.

Local planning and response form an essential part of NHS Test and Trace, and specialist teams from the local authority or PHE manage any local outbreaks. 278 Local Tracing Partnerships are already in operation, with more due to come online in the coming weeks. Our commitment to ensuring all councils are resourced to support their communities during this challenging time includes over £400 million to support them to develop their local outbreak plans. These plans look at community settings such as care homes, schools and hospitals to ensure contact tracing is working in their areas.

We set out in our Winter Plan how we would offer Local Authorities the opportunity to work together on whole community testing to improve our response to COVID-19 still further. Community testing programmes, with rapid, regular testing will help identify those who are asymptomatic and find positive cases at a much faster rate to help break chains of transmission. As part of the community testing programme, all Local Authorities in Tiers 4 and 3 and those in Tier 2 at significant risk have been offered the opportunity to participate.

I want to pay tribute to our Armed Forces which, since the start of the pandemic, have worked with colleagues across Government to increase our national testing capacity. Many talented Armed Forces personnel have been deployed to rise to the challenges posed by COVID-19.

I have also written separately to Tobias Ellwood about the essential support that the Ministry of Defence and our Armed Forces will be providing in the roll-out of the vaccine programme.

Parliamentary scrutiny

We have always said we will give Parliament every opportunity to scrutinise decisions. Responding to the virus means that the Government must act with speed when required. However, it is important to secure the right balance between responding to a fast-moving situation and proper scrutiny. The Government seeks to provide as much notice and opportunity for scrutiny as possible ahead of the introduction of legislation.

We have committed to Parliament being afforded the opportunity, where practicable, to debate the motion to approve regulations of national significance before they come into force. This was used successfully with the tiering regulations and the more recent national restriction regulations. However, we reserve the right to act without a vote in an emergency.

The Government has also engaged Parliamentarians continuously, offering a number of briefings to MPs and Peers at key points, including specific briefings for affected areas. Most recently, this included briefings to MPs for affected areas on 20 December, followed by an all MPs and Peers briefing led by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Chief Medical Officer, and the Government Chief Scientific Adviser on 21 December. We will continue to engage and hold debates where practicable.

Conclusion

Finally, there is hope on the horizon. The delivery of a safe, effective vaccine is the best way to protect the most vulnerable and save thousands of lives. The prospect of ultimately beating this virus is growing with every vaccine dose administered. It is great news that more than half a million people in the UK have now received their first dose.

Thank you, once again, for writing. I look forward to appearing before the Committee on 13 January.



Sir Bernard Jenkin MP