



Science and Technology Committee

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From Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, Chair

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

5 February 2021

Dear Baroness Harding,

Members of my Committee were very grateful to you and your colleagues Steve McManus and Mark Hewlett for giving evidence on 3 February.

It was very useful to hear of the progress that NHS Test and Trace has made in terms of the test capacity, the turnaround of results and developments in the tracing system.

As Members commented at the hearing, the publication of the assessment of the impact of the test, trace and isolate system on the transmission of covid-19 (i.e. the reproduction ('R') number) is crucial. Not only is it important for public confidence in the system, but it is vital for Members across the House to be able to scrutinise the important and imminent decisions concerning if, when and how lockdown restrictions can be lifted.

As you made clear, test and trace is not the only determinant of the ability to lift restrictions safely, but it is a very important one. The combination of the effect of vaccination in blocking transmission, the impact of general social distancing and other non-pharmaceutical interventions and the impact of the test, trace and isolate system together determines the transmission of the coronavirus.

It was encouraging to hear from you that following the progress you have made since the early autumn—when SAGE considered the test and trace system to be having a “marginal impact on transmission”¹—you estimate that the impact on 'R' may be as high as 0.8 by March, an assessment that you also presented to the Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons on 18 January.²

As you will recall, it was not possible to examine the basis of this assessment at our hearing because you had not yet published a “technical annex”. It is somewhat unusual to give an important estimate to two successive Committees without the data and assumptions on which it was based. Although the Test and Trace Business Plan—published in December—included a commitment to publish this annex “shortly”,³ you said to my Committee on 3 February that it was still undergoing quality assurance and would be released “in the next couple of weeks”.

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925854/S0769_Summary_of_effectiveness_and_harms_of_NPIs.pdf

² <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1524/default/>

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/954963/nhs-test-and-trace-business-plan.pdf

Given the importance of operating transparently, I would be grateful if you would supply the technical annex, including the methodology and data sources used, to the Committee in time for its next public meeting on 17 February when we will be considering questions around lifting of lockdown restrictions. You further indicated in our evidence session on 3 February that you would confirm whether the September business case for the test and trace programme would be published. We also request that you be available for half an hour on 17 February—with or without the technical annex—to answer any questions the Committee have on the modelled impact of test and trace that you have made.

Yours sincerely,

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