

Written evidence submitted by the Local Government Association's (LGA)

Meg Hillier MP
Chair
Public Accounts Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

5 July 2021

Dear Meg,

I am writing as Chairman of the Local Government Association's (LGA) Community Wellbeing Board to share our analysis of the current costs and performance of the national test and trace programme ahead of your Committee's inquiry into *Covid-19: Test, track and trace - Part 2*. Councils know their local areas best and local tracing generates much richer data and information. This expertise has proven invaluable during the pandemic. Councils have worked quickly, efficiently, and creatively to roll out their own local tracing systems and use targeted testing which have proven integral to tackling outbreaks of coronavirus alongside the roll out of the vaccine. At times of crisis, people rise to the challenge, and nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the local response to COVID-19.

As my predecessor Ian Hudspeth highlighted in [our submission to Part 1 of the Committee's inquiry](#), from the start of the pandemic there was criticism that local knowledge and capacity was being neglected by the Government. This grew when, for many months, the national test and trace system struggled to contact 80 per cent of people testing positive. In contrast, pioneering local test and trace teams set up in local authorities in partnership with regional PHE generally exceeded the 80 per cent minimum.

It was pleasing to see in August 2020 the national system being redesigned to include local contact tracing, initially in areas with high prevalence, with resources from the national system transferred to local authorities which were tasked with contacting people testing positive who could not be reached within 24 hours, and people in complex settings such as care homes. The combined effort meant that by December 2020, national test and trace reached 86 per cent of people testing positive. Furthermore, local contact tracing allows for tracing to be combined with signposting towards local advice and support for those being asked to isolate, increasing the likelihood people will comply. However, limitations remain, with local teams required to pass on information about close contacts of people testing positive for the national service to trace.

There is a widespread view in local government and public health that if local contact tracing had been resourced from the outset to take on an enhanced role, this would have resulted in a more effective and efficient system. The Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) has consistently advocated for a 'team of teams' approach with the responsibilities of each part of the system clearly articulated and properly resourced in its [Explainer test and trace service](#).

At the time of writing, we are experiencing a significant rise in cases of the Delta variant across the country. Although the rollout of vaccines means that risks posed by COVID-19 will gradually reduce, the virus, in different forms, may be with us for years to come. Continuing to tackle this, and reduce its impact on people experiencing health inequalities, will be a key task for public health long into the future. This includes the test and trace system, which as I have highlighted in this letter, works

extremely well when local councils are given the right powers and tools to carry out this important work.

The Local-0 scheme that launched in March 2021 has enabled many local authorities tracing teams to pilot contacting residents who have tested positive for COVID-19 on day 1 instead of NHS Test and Trace. Local-0 has proved successful and has since become a standard offering to local authorities. We have seen very positive examples of these local tracing teams progress since being given this opportunity for example local contact tracing in Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes has shown a 96 per cent completion rate since joining the Local-0 scheme in March. This clearly demonstrates how giving councils the tools to conduct their own test and trace schemes can be much more effective than the national system.

I hope the information outlined above is useful. Councils know their local areas best and this has been hugely beneficial throughout the pandemic. While it was pleasing to see the national test and trace system being redesigned to include local contact tracing in August 2020, it is important the Government continues to work with councils regarding sharing information of close contacts of those testing positive. If we can help with anything else, please do not hesitate to get in touch with my colleague laura.johnson@local.gov.uk.

July 2021