



3 June 2020

Gabe,

Thank you for your recent letter on behalf of the Scottish Directors of Public Health and the National Joint COVID-19 Diagnostics Strategy Group about COVID-19 testing. I am heartened by the significant contribution you are making to the response to COVID-19, recognising the considerable responsibilities that sit with Directors of Public Health as part of the Scottish response, and the extraordinary work that has been undertaken to deliver and expand COVID-19 testing services.

I am also grateful for your engagement with the Scottish Government as we shape a national approach to identifying and responding to challenges arising from COVID-19. The particular challenges around responding to issues of transmission in care homes do not have straightforward answers, and our approach will continue to develop as our scientific understanding of the disease, transmission and effective interventions improves.

I agree it is fundamental that staff who are symptomatic, have a positive test result, or who have been identified as a close contact needing to self-isolate, are able to follow the guidance to do so. This not only supports safe working in care homes and other social care settings, but also staff members and their families. On the 24 May, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport announced additional funding to support enhanced sick pay arrangements to reduce the financial impact on staff who are excluded from the workplace. Arrangements to ensure this funding gets to staff are being put in place as a matter of urgency. This is also an area that will be considered in commissioning contracts going forward.

Reducing the risk of staff being an inadvertent source of transmission into care home settings is not a new priority, and the decision to introduce regular testing for asymptomatic staff should be seen in the wider context of the developing and strengthening of interventions, reflecting our improving understanding of SARS-CoV-2.

The introduction of PCR testing for asymptomatic staff in care homes not experiencing an outbreak is intended to provide an additional layer of protection



against staff importing the disease into care homes at a time when we remain very concerned about the continued outbreaks in this context. It is in addition to all of the other safeguards already in place. I recognise that there are limitations in the use of PCR testing among people who are asymptomatic, including that it will not identify people who are incubating the disease. There is also the risk that this approach will result in some false positive results. SAGE has considered this issue and opined in favour of asymptomatic testing in this environment; I note too that there is some emerging evidence to suggest that this approach merits at least a trial. In the light of the ongoing challenges in this sector, we feel this is an appropriate tool to use at the current time. Of course it will be subject to ongoing review with a view to stepping down this intervention when that is appropriate and if information comes to light that suggests limited ongoing value.

I welcome your interest in working closely with the Scottish Government in the ongoing development of our testing strategy and I have spoken to the policy team who would be happy to discuss this further with you. You can get in touch with them through mary.stewart2@gov.scot.

I do not underestimate the practical challenges that delivering testing of this sort places on the Directors of Public Health. If you need additional resources, and in particular if you do not have the staff you think you need to deliver this service, I would urge you to ensure this is identified as a rate limiting factor and appropriately escalated so that additional staff can be identified to support you.

Thank you for taking the time to write to me about this issue. I share your perspective that we should seek to work together in partnership, drawing on the best available scientific evidence to support Ministers as they make decisions about the Scottish Government policy response to COVID-19.

Yours sincerely

PD

DR GREGOR SMITH
INTERIM CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER FOR SCOTLAND