

MEMORANDUM E (21) 037 (C)

From: Robin Swann
Health Minister

Date: 11 February 2021

To: Executive Colleagues

FINAL EXECUTIVE PAPER: ASYMPTOMATIC TESTING

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to provide you with an update on outline plans for a targeted expansion of asymptomatic testing into a range of areas including targeted community testing and testing in business, national critical infrastructure and emergency services.

Background

2. The Mass Population Testing Programme led by the Department for Health and Social Care, London (DHSC) aims to substantially increase testing for COVID-19 across the UK, using Lateral Flow Devices (LFDs), with the overall objective to accelerate a safe return to as normal a context as possible.
3. These new technologies make it possible to test at far greater scale, frequency and at speed. These developments supplement and build on our existing PCR laboratory-based testing system. Testing through our established testing programme (Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 testing) continues in the normal way and everyone who has **symptoms** must come forward for a PCR test.
4. Through my Department's Expert Advisory Group on Testing (EAGT), a number of New Testing Interventions (NTIs) to test people who do not have symptoms (are **asymptomatic**) are already underway using LFDs across a range of settings in Northern Ireland; this includes testing of frontline healthcare workers, staff and pupils in schools and universities, staff and visitors in care homes, and one programme in industry.

Targeted expansion of asymptomatic testing

5. Programme structures will be established to develop and operationalise plans for a strategic, targeted expansion of asymptomatic testing in Northern Ireland. This expansion will run in parallel and will strategically align with the programmes of asymptomatic testing already underway in the Health and Care and Education sectors.

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6. The main areas of planned expansion identified at this stage include:

Targeted testing in higher prevalence Local Government Districts

7. This strand will involve the development of plans to expand asymptomatic testing at community level, with a particular focus on those Local Government Districts with a stubbornly high prevalence and rate of community cases. The approach to testing will build on key lessons learnt from community testing approaches employed across the UK (including in Liverpool in England and Merthyr Tydfil in Wales) and internationally where relevant; and will be informed by exemplar plans from Local Authorities in England.
8. My officials will work closely with the PHA and EAGT to develop a targeted, risk based approach to testing in order help ensure maximum benefit. Building on learning from the community testing approaches adopted to date, this work will include plans to fully consider and appropriately target vulnerable and hard to reach groups, where engagement with testing and contact tracing can be low. These plans will utilise existing Public Health Agency infrastructure (health Improvement teams and expertise) where appropriate.
9. Operational expansion of testing will also involve close partnership working with a broad range of local partners including the Department of Communities and local government and other public sector agencies, with a view to determining how to best target and incentivise groups to come forward for testing; and will include support for communications, logistics and planning.

Public Sector - including National Critical Infrastructure and Emergency Services

10. My officials are already progressing necessary arrangements with DHSC London and other partners to bring Translink NI (working collaboratively with the Department for Infrastructure) and the NI Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) on-board the national asymptomatic testing programme. My officials will continue to work collaboratively to consider and bring further companies and sectors on board the national DHSC London-led testing programme in a planned way.
11. Organisations and sectors for consideration to be included in this strand include (this list is indicative only at this stage and is not exhaustive) emergency services; the energy sector; government bodies; food supply and distribution companies; other/general logistics and distribution companies; transportation companies and NI Water.

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Expansion into Private Industry

12. Building on momentum created in the food sector by the introduction of asymptomatic testing at Moy Park NI, and aligning with the strategic prioritisation of the food sector at national level, my officials are continuing to work together with counterparts in DAERA in a collaborative, joint working approach to begin to make testing available in a structured way across the agri-food and food and drink sectors in Northern Ireland.
13. DAERA officials have led on facilitating engagement with relevant association bodies in the sector and DoH officials have led on work with DHSC London to facilitate local organisations who have expressed an interest in the programme to understand more, and where relevant to come on-board the national testing programme in a coherent and timely way. It is important to note that organisational ability and readiness to take on a testing programme is an important criteria in the DHSC London on-barding process.
14. Further strategic consideration and detailed plans are required to support the planning and delivery of testing across other businesses and sectors outside of agri-food. This will involve linking with other NICS government departments including for example TEO and DfE, and with business leaders and other partners. There will be a need to ensure that the offer of asymptomatic testing to business and industry aligns with and complements other government initiatives and support currently in place.

Joined-up cross-government approach

15. The Executive COVID-19 Taskforce has the overall purpose of providing ongoing support to the pandemic response across Northern Ireland as we move through the next 6 months. The Executive's Taskforce is to co-ordinate a whole of Government strategy on recovery moving forward and its draft Terms of Reference advise:

'The Taskforce will do this by providing practical co-ordination, support, and management of the central strategic arrangements within Executive departments, local government and public sector agencies around the COVID-19 test, track and trace; vaccination strategy and implementation plan; mass community testing; adherence and compliance; and strategic communications'.
16. One of the four strands of initial focus for the COVID-19 Taskforce is Protecting the public (the PROTECT work strand). The PROTECT sub-group is led by my Department's Permanent Secretary, Richard Pengelly, and its remit includes 'planning and delivery of mass population interventions'. To ensure strategic alignment across government, Mr Pengelly has agreed to include updates to the PROTECT group on work in progress to expand the asymptomatic testing programme. Mr Pengelly will engage the group to

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ensure optimum support and input from across other government departments to planning and delivery of this expanded programme of testing.

17. The asymptomatic testing expansion programme will also closely align with existing structures and programmes of work underway across my own Department and agencies including for example the Department's Expert Advisory Group on Testing; PHA Contact Tracing Service and the NI Vaccination Programme.
18. In the interim, whilst plans are being developed and finalised, my officials will to continue to work with relevant partners, including other NICS government departments as necessary, to bring Northern Ireland organisations on board the DHSC London-led asymptomatic testing programme in a strategic and planned manner.
19. Ministers will wish to note that the Whitehall model for introduction of testing across Public and Private Sector industries is that the relevant Other Government Department (OGD) leads on engagement and support to their respective sectors. The role of DHSC London is to assist in practical arrangements to bring organisations onto the asymptomatic testing programme (eg contracting, supply of test kits, facilitating collection of data in relation to tests undertake etc).
20. I would greatly appreciate the support of Executives colleague and your Departments to work in a collaborative manner across our respective Departments in order to deliver this programme of expanded testing for business and industry, and for the people of Northern Ireland.

Recommendation

21. To note this update on emerging proposals to introduce an expanded programme of asymptomatic testing in Northern Ireland.

ROBIN SWANN

Minister for Health

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