

FROM: CMO

DATE: 13/05/2020

TO: 1. Minister Swann

COVID-19 TEST, TRACK, ISOLATE, SUPPORT STRATEGY

ISSUE:	Request for ministerial approval of the 'Test, Track, Isolate, Support' strategy and for key policy decisions to be made on contact tracing and testing for Covid-19.
TIMING:	Urgent – NI Contact Tracing Service must be initiated before lockdown measures can be relaxed.
PRESENTATIONAL ISSUES	This issue continues to attract media interest. Press Office will liaise with officials over lines if approached for comment. Cleared with Press Office 13/5/20 (TS).
FOI IMPLICATIONS	Fully disclosable.
FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS	None set out in this sub. The costs are likely to be substantial. Additional Covid-19 funding will be required from DoF. It is expected that funding is agreed/secured from DoF before announcements with significant financial implications are made. Cleared by Finance. 13/05/20 DM
EXECUTIVE REFERRAL	N/A

LEGISLATION IMPLICATIONS Nil.

EQUALITY/HUMAN

Equality Screening Exercise to be undertaken.

RIGHTS/RURAL NEEDS

IMPLICATIONS

RECOMMENDATION:

That you note this submission, approve the 'Test, Trace, Isolate, Support' strategy and agree to recommendations on the expansion of contact tracing and testing for all those who have symptoms consistent with Covid-19 in Northern Ireland.

Introduction

1. The Covid-19 'Test, Trace, Isolate, Support' strategy sets out the public health approach to minimising Covid-19 transmission in the community in Northern Ireland. This approach is designed to break the chain of transmission of the virus by identifying people with Covid-19, tracing people who may have become infected by being in close contact with them and supporting those people to self-isolate so that if they have the disease they are less likely to transmit it to others.
2. Rapid identification of cases and contacts, with testing and isolation is an approach that has been used effectively in a number of countries, for example, South Korea, Singapore and China. It is an approach recommended by the WHO.
3. A 'test, trace, isolate, support strategy' has been identified as one of the key measures to have in place prior to significant easing of lockdown measures in the UK.

4. PHA commenced a contact tracing pilot on 27th April 2020, and work is underway to rapidly scale this up during May 2020.

The Test, Treat, Isolate, Support Strategy

5. The strategy seeks to bring the key components together into a coordinated approach, including the work of the Expert Advisory Testing Group, the Contact Tracing Steering Group, and the Digital Cell.
6. The four key components of the 'Test, Trace, Isolate, Support' strategy are as follows;
 - Early identification and isolation of possible cases.
 - Early and rapid testing of possible cases;
 - Early and effective tracing of close contacts of cases;
 - Early, effective and supported isolation of close contacts.
7. 'Test, Trace, Isolate, Support' will not replace the measures we have already used effectively to reduce transmission, but rather, will be an additional measure alongside tried and tested methods of good hand and respiratory hygiene and physical distancing. Robust communications including consistent messaging and public engagement will be a vital determinant of its success.
8. The 'Track and Trace' approach set out in England is similar, with a large-scale integrated contact tracing and testing programme supplemented by the NHSX app and wider technological solutions currently in development. The date for launch in England is the 18th May 2020. Similar programmes are planned in Wales and Scotland, and will come on line later this month.
9. The Republic of Ireland has continued contact tracing throughout the pandemic, and are developing their own app which has not yet launched.

SAGE advice

10. At least 80% of contacts of an index case would need to be contacted and isolated within 48h for a contact tracing system to be effective.
11. An approach to contact tracing that rapidly identifies and quarantines the vast majority of cases and their contacts in theory could reduce R by the order of 30-60%.
12. Tracing of contacts should begin as soon as a new suspected case is identified, in parallel to testing. All individuals declaring symptoms should be tested as quickly as practicable. The aim should be to develop the capability to test index cases in less than 24 hours and therefore avoid unnecessary requests to isolate significant numbers of individuals repeatedly.
13. A high level of adherence to requests to isolate is required for the system to be effective. Risks include individuals becoming less willing to comply if they are repeatedly asked to isolate and if they are impacted financially from being asked to isolate. An accessible offer of financial support to those in need could reduce the risk of non-adherence.
14. There is currently insufficient evidence as to how testing of contacts could be done effectively. Urgent research is underway to determine the optimal time to test, and how many tests might be needed to confirm that a contact is not infected. Systematic testing of contacts is therefore not recommended at present but should be reviewed when evidence is available.

Policy options

15. There are two options to start the contact tracing pathway: (i) a confirmed positive SARS-CoV2 test result; or (ii) based on symptoms meeting the case definition.
16. Re (i) the benefits of contact tracing only those with confirmed results are that COVID-19 has a non-specific presentation, and waiting to commence contact

tracing at the point of a positive test result would mean that no-one would be isolated unnecessarily. It would be logistically much easier, as the numbers would be substantially smaller. The disadvantages are that a large proportion of people with COVID-19 are not currently tested, and for those who are tested, the length of time waited to receive a test result introduces a significant delay into the process. Currently, tests completed within NI HSC Trusts have a result reported within 24 hours, samples tested through the National Testing Programme are available within 48-72h of the sample being received at the laboratory. Awaiting confirmation of test results over a protracted period would make contact tracing much less effective at interrupting chains of transmission.

17. SAGE advice is that ideally, testing should be so rapid that contacts of an index case are only asked to isolate when a positive test result is confirmed for an index case. If the index case could be tested with a result advised within 24 hours, contacts could be requested to isolate only when the index case has a confirmed positive test. This is not currently the case in any of the UK countries at present, we are advised that significant work is in progress and planned to reduce the turn around times for reporting of test results by the National Testing Programme, we expect this reduction will take some time to achieve. It is considered essential that this timescale for turn-around of test results is reached before the autumn/winter influenza season, when a large number of those reporting symptoms may not have Covid-19.

18. Re (ii) contact tracing could start for anyone with symptoms of Covid-19 who meet the case definition. The UK CMOs are in the process of agreeing a case definition based on a symptom complex, including respiratory, gastrointestinal, and general symptoms. This case definition is based on advice from NERVTAG. The benefits of contact tracing based on symptoms is that the process can begin much earlier, with contacts being advised to isolate sooner, affording a greater degree of benefit in interrupting chains of transmission. However, there will be many more suspected than confirmed cases, hence more people will be required to self-isolate as contacts of potential cases, and some people may be asked to self-isolate on several

occasions. This approach will also mean that the scale of the service will need to be significantly greater.

19. Given the limitations on testing and current turnaround times for receipt of results, it is recommended that the NI contact tracing service commences contact tracing for those with symptoms consistent with COVID-19, until such a time as testing can be undertaken within 24 hours of symptom onset, and with test results available within the following 24 hours. We understand that this is consistent with the approach being considered in Scotland and Wales and possibly England. The Republic of Ireland we understand is currently contacting tracing at the point of receipt of a positive test result (i.e. contact tracing for confirmed cases of Covid-19).
20. It is also recommended that testing for SARS-CoV2 should be made available to members of the general population who have symptoms consistent with Covid-19, and that citizens are encouraged to get tested if they have symptoms. Access to testing should preferably be available within 24 hours of symptom onset. Efforts should be made to reach the optimal testing capability before we move into the autumn/winter season, and at that point consideration will need to be given to switching our approach to contact tracing only those with confirmed positive results, when the positive predictive value of symptoms may be less useful given other circulating concomitant viral illnesses at that time.
21. Evidence is awaited regarding the optimal timing and frequency of testing of asymptomatic contacts (that is contacts with no symptoms). This will be kept under review, and you will be updated.

Recommendations

22. That you note this submission, approve the 'Test, Trace, Isolate, Support' strategy and agree to recommendations on the expansion of contact tracing and testing for all those who have symptoms consistent with Covid-19 in Northern Ireland.

Copied to:

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