

COVID-19 TESTING PROGRAMME IN CARE HOMES – CMO MEETING

Date: Friday 12 June 2020 15:00 to 16:00

Venue: Teleconference

Present:

Department of Health

Dr Lourda Geoghegan Chair

Dr Michael McBride

Dr Naresh Chada

NR

NR

Kieran McAteer

Mark Lee

Public Health Agency

Olive Macleod

Dr Brid Farrell

Dr Joanne McClean

Dr Muhammad Sartaj

Kathy Fodey

NR

Regulation Quality Improvement Authority

NR

Key Points Discussed

Context

1. CMO welcomed everyone to the meeting. He recapped the context for the care home testing programme and reminded colleagues of Minister's clear commitment for staff and residents in all care homes to be tested for COVID-19 by the end of June 2020. A deadline for completing the testing programme has been set for the 25 June 2020; this will provide a further week to address any outstanding matters.
2. To successfully deliver the programme, CMO asked that colleagues continue to adopt a proactive approach with independent care providers to encourage uptake in testing and, if necessary, Trusts should secure additional resources

to meet the testing deadline. CMO reiterated that any pressing issues or concerns should be escalated to him as a priority for resolution.

3. Work is underway to identify a future programme of testing in care homes; this will be informed by our present understanding of COVID-19, emerging scientific evidence, the evaluation of the current testing programme in care homes, and findings of other national programmes underway. This detailed work will determine groups for testing (i.e. staff and/or residents), the frequency and type of testing to be undertaken (PCR, Antibody or a combination of both) and appropriate deployment arrangements to be implemented, taking into account logistical challenges.

Outbreaks to Date

4. Muhammad provided an update on the COVID-19 outbreak across care homes since it was first reported in mid-March:
 - As of 12 June 2020, a total of 172 outbreaks have been notified.
 - In 88 care homes, the outbreak has now concluded; this leaves 84 care homes with an active outbreak (not concluded).
 - Of the 84 care homes, 56 care homes have confirmed COVID-19 and the remaining 28 care homes are being treated as a suspected COVID-19 infection. In total, 27 care homes are in terminal clean.
 - An outbreak is considered concluded once the following criteria are met:
 - No new cases for 14 days (one full incubation period for COVID-19) after the symptom onset of the most recent case;
 - A terminal clean of the care home has been completed; and
 - The care home has submitted a completed outbreak closure form.
5. Muhammad informed the group that he had delivered a presentation to a sub-group of SAGE on specific elements of the care home testing programme in Northern Ireland. Not all nations are publishing information on their care home testing position, some are only reporting figures on care home deaths. He

explained that Scotland and England are presently unable to differentiate the status of their outbreak situations.

6. CMO congratulated Muhammad on the editorial piece published in the British Medical Journal which recognised the Northern Ireland approach to care home testing as an example of good practice.
7. Muhammad advised that the outbreak position across care homes continues to improve; in part this is due to a focus on ensuring the provision of robust preventative measures in care homes. He acknowledged that since March, there had been 12 recurrences of outbreaks in care homes (Northern HSC Trust: 6; Belfast HSC Trust: 3; South Eastern HSC Trust: 1; Southern HSC Trust: 1; and Western HSC Trust: 1). CMO commented that the dates of the recurrent outbreaks (notified early in the COVID-19 pandemic) most likely align with the timing of higher community transmission rates, particularly in the Belfast Trust and Northern Trust areas.
8. CMO reminded colleagues that if 'R' increased, there would be a greater risk of outbreaks in care homes and hospital settings. Lourda explained that once a vaccination was available, the vaccination programme would need to be prioritised for the elderly and most vulnerable in our society, alongside health and care workers.

Testing Programme – homes without cases/outbreaks

9. **NR** advised that good progress had been made with a further 50 'green' care homes tested this week. Results for the 50 care homes still need to be ratified but early findings reveal a low number of positive COVID-19 cases – in 5 care homes, 3 staff and 4 residents have been identified as positive.
10. The Northern HSC Trust and Western HSC Trust are working in collaboration with the National Testing Programme (NTP) to support staff in residential homes who do not feel equipped to swab residents. If an issue is identified, the NTP is repeating the testing programme in some care homes.

11. **NR** advised that a zoom training session for care home staff on the NTP, including the swabbing of residents had been hosted. The event was well attended with over 108 participants.
12. **NR** confirmed that as of 12 June, there are 119 residential care homes and 64 nursing homes still to be tested. There are some logistical issues to be worked through, including the provision of swabbing support. The position on swabbing across the remaining three HSC Trusts is as follows: the South Eastern HSC Trust has confirmed it can provide support to care homes in its area; the Southern HSC Trust requires further support; and the Belfast HSC Trust needs to verify its data to better understand the requirements.
13. CMO strongly emphasised that the care home testing programme must be completed by the end of June 2020. He committed to calling an extraordinary meeting of HSC Trust Chief Executives if required. Brid and **NR** agreed to discuss the continuing issues outside of the meeting and update CMO by Monday 15 June if further intervention by CMO (and the Department) is considered necessary.

Testing Programme – homes with cases/outbreaks

14. **NR** advised the testing programme in all care homes with outbreaks should be completed by next week. One care home in the Southern HSC Trust area has not yet been tested; this care home previously experienced an outbreak and there is a reluctance by management for further testing to be undertaken. Engagement with this particular care home will continue.
15. The current data now being submitted by the Belfast HSC Trust is more comprehensive and in line with Joanne's specified data requirements. A number of 'green' care homes have been tested by the HSC Trusts; **NR** will send **NR** details of those 'green' care homes tested to date.
16. **NR** advised that the consensus across HSC Trusts is for the process to test care homes notifying new or potential COVID-19 outbreaks to be managed through HSC Trust arrangements. A robust outbreak control plan will be

required to effectively manage future incidents. It may also be appropriate to consider the need for further surveillance testing programmes in care homes.

17. **NR** informed the group that she has established an operational task and finish sub-group of the joint multi-disciplinary surge management group. This sub-group, chaired by Joanne, includes representation from all HSC Trusts and the Department.
18. The issue of some staff refusing to be tested was discussed. It was noted that the Minister's announcement of an £11.5m funding package for the care home sector may help address staff concerns about being tested. Where required, the funding can be used to support staff who are required to furlough if they are symptomatic or because they test positive for COVID-19.
19. Correspondence is due to issue imminently from CMO and CNO to HSC Trusts, PHA and RQIA on the importance of the care home testing programme. This will include a leaflet for HSC Trusts to use to inform and support conversations with staff when undertaking testing.

National Testing Programme - Developments

20. Brid advised there are no updates on the NTP to provide at this stage.

Forward Plan

21. Lourda advised the group that we would be examining relevant studies from the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and other UK nations. Learning from these studies will be beneficial, when considered alongside a thorough understanding of the epidemiology and transmission rates in each country.

Any Other Business

22. The group were advised that a submission will be issued to Minister on progress to date of the care home testing programme. This will be the first of a series of updates to Minister. To inform the submission, it is essential that the

PHA submits comprehensive and timely data on each element of the care home testing programme.

23. Lourda referred colleagues to the paper published by the ROI Department of Health in May 2020 'Overview of the Health System Response to date. Long-term residential healthcare settings'. This is the first of a two paper study, with the second part of the study due to run until the end of June 2020. The findings from this study will be shared with Northern Ireland.

Summary Actions Agreed

24. A series of actions were agreed:
- a. NR to send NR details of 'green' care homes which have been tested by HSC Trusts.
 - b. Brid and NR to discuss continuing issues with the NTP element of the care home testing programme and revert to CMO by 15 June 2020 if they consider further assistance is required to urgently address these issues.
 - c. PHA to submit comprehensive data to the Department outlining progress on each element of the care home testing programme; this is to enable the Department to effectively update Minister on a routine basis.

Date of Next Meeting – Friday 19th June 2020