

ADVICE

Context

1. In May 2020 you agreed that the scope and scale of contact tracing should include the rapid testing of all suspected cases of Covid-19 (MA-VG-1688-20). Contacts of positive Covid-19 cases have only been advised - to date - to take tests when they become *symptomatic*, unless they are part of a separate scheme under our testing strategy.
2. Since February 2021 so-called backward contacts have also been offered tests, whether symptomatic or not. Backward Contact Tracing, (BCT) looks back prior to the 48 hour period undertaken for forward contact tracing. The look back period is 14 days prior to onset and the purpose is to attempt to identify the potential source of infection and follow up any other transmission linked to that original source.
3. In August 2020, the Test, Trace, Protect programme board considered the testing of ***all asymptomatic*** as well as all symptomatic close contacts but recommended asymptomatic testing was not implemented due to concerns at the time over PCR testing capacity. There were also concerns about the possible behavioural effects notably the risk that close contacts who test negative, might 'break' their self isolation before the end of the 14 day period. Now that PCR testing capacity is no longer a constraint, there is an opportunity to revisit testing of asymptomatic contacts in order to further "seek & stop" chains of transmission.
4. Our new testing strategy sets out the role of asymptomatic testing and the purpose of test to find, which is focussed on active case finding. The strategy outlines that on average around 10% close contacts go on to develop Covid-19, increasing to closer to 15% with the new variant¹. We also know that around a third of cases are asymptomatic. Any move to offer tests to close contacts – whether symptomatic or not – would therefore be in line with the test to find element of our overall testing strategy.
5. Scientific studies support this approach. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) recommends considering testing of asymptomatic persons, such as close contacts of a confirmed case, depending on epidemiological situation and resources, as part of maximising testing efforts². They note that this enables the measurement of secondary attack rates in close contact, and will aid an effective testing strategy to

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/950823/Variant_of_Concern_VOC_202012_01_Technical_Briefing_3_-_England.pdf

² European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. *Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the EU/EEA and the UK-eleventh update: resurgence of cases*. 2020. Jaspers V, Cornelis J, Delaet C, et al. *International comparison OF COVID-19 testing and contact tracing strategies*. 2020.