

On 2 April the Government announced its goal to carry out 100,000 COVID-19 tests a day by the end of April and on 6 May announced its ambition for 200,000 tests a day (<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-05-06/debates/4D4A836F-EBB7-4255-B84C-1537BDE1DCC4/Engagements>) by the end of May. There has been widespread media coverage of the Government's progress.

I know you are a strong supporter of the proper use of statistics and data and that you will understand that for the sake of clarity and confidence it is important that the target and its context should be set out.

It should be clear whether the target is intended to reflect:

- testing capacity;
- tests that have been administered;
- test results received; or
- the number of people tested.

Each of these is of interest of course, whether or not they are targets.

In reporting against this target, sole focus on the total national number of tests could mask helpful operational detail. The way the daily tests data (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>) have been broken down by the different 'pillars' to illustrate the changing purposes of the programme is useful. Further breakdowns would provide more context, for example through showing the levels of testing by geographical area.

The daily data for the UK are currently reported on the gov.uk coronavirus page (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public>) and a time series is available through the slides and datasets to accompany the daily coronavirus press conferences (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/slides-and-datasets-to-accompany-coronavirus-press-conferences>). However, there is limited detail about the nature and types of testing and it is hard to navigate to the best source of information. It would support trustworthiness for the testing data to be more straightforward to find, with detailed breakdowns and richer commentary.

The data around COVID-19 are inevitably complex, which makes it the more important that publications should meet the standards set by the Code of Practice for Statistics. We urge Government to update the COVID-19 national testing strategy to show more clearly how targets are being defined, measured and reported. Measurements will no doubt need to change and develop as we move into new phases for tackling the pandemic.

Yours sincerely,
Sir David Norgrove

Related Links

Response from Matt Hancock

(<https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/response-from-matt-hancock-to-sir-david-norgrove-covid-19-testing/>) (received 27 May 2020)