

Government boost to rapid workplace testing

- New government drive to increase workplace testing in sectors open during lockdown, to detect coronavirus (COVID-19) in people who are not showing symptoms
- Government departments tasked with ensuring targeted, rapid testing is set up in all key workplaces to ensure vital public and economic services can continue
- Criteria for joining the workplace testing programme is reduced to businesses with more than 50 employees, boosting the availability of rapid testing further

Cabinet ministers have been tasked to encourage their sectors to take up the offer of rapid workplace testing, marking efforts to normalise testing in the workplace across both public and private sectors.

The government is working closely with organisations across different sectors that are vital to the running of our country and where employees cannot work from home during lockdown, from transport networks to food manufacturers, to sign up to rapid testing programmes that identify cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) in employees who are not showing symptoms. This will help stop the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19) and ensure vital public and economic services can continue.

Many employers have already taken up the offer of rapid, regular workforce testing, with 112 UK organisations across almost 500 sites joining government backed rapid testing. Today, the government can confirm that it has widened the criteria for joining the workplace rapid testing programme from businesses with more than 250 employees, to businesses with more than 50 employees.

This hugely increases the number of different businesses that are able to sign up, so that small and medium size companies can benefit from rapid testing as we work to Build Back Better.

Testing is key to breaking the chains of transmission. More than 2.5 million tests have been distributed across the public and private sectors so far, and [an online portal has been launched to make it even easier for business in the private sector to get involved and find out more about offering rapid testing in the workplace](#). All those who can work from home should continue to do so.

Around one in three people who have coronavirus (COVID-19) have no symptoms and may be unknowingly spreading the virus. This expansion of testing will

find more positive cases, keeping workers who cannot work from home unknowingly passing on the virus and protecting vital public services. It's essential we still continue to use tests to safeguard the population and prevent the spread of the virus.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said:

"To save lives and protect the NHS, we have again asked for everyone to work from home. But we know that for some this is not possible, which is why the workplace rapid testing programme is so important.

"Employers should regularly test their staff, and this drive across government to raise awareness and encourage more businesses to introduce rapid testing for employees is incredibly important. When you consider that around one in three people have the virus without symptoms and could potentially infect people without even knowing it, it becomes clear why focusing testing on those without symptoms is so essential.

"We are already working with many employers to scale up workforce testing, spanning the food industry, retail sector, transport network, and across the public sector too. I strongly urge businesses and employees across the country to take up this offer of rapid testing to help stop this virus spreading further."

Case studies

The Department for Transport is working with organisations including Transport for London (TfL), the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and Network Rail on rapid testing to help keep the transport network safer. TfL opened 4 asymptomatic test sites across London, and have been offering testing to frontline operational employees in London Underground and surface transport, including station staff, train operators and revenue inspectors. The rapid testing programme has been protecting teams working on the frontline, operating the railway so that key workers can continue to travel to work. As of 29 January, NHS Test and Trace had provided TfL staff with 2,173 tests, identifying 28 positive cases that would have otherwise continued working alongside colleagues.

The Home Office has worked with police and fire services throughout the pandemic to ensure emergency workers have access to testing. This has included working with the National Police Coordination Centre to identify appropriate locations for asymptomatic testing sites. The Metropolitan Police is rolling out asymptomatic testing across 7 sites from 25 January. Other forces are due to get asymptomatic testing running in the coming weeks, including Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Hertfordshire, and Dorset. 60,000 tests have been given to fire and rescue services since November to ensure their staff can carry out coronavirus (COVID-19) support roles.

The Ministry of Justice is rolling out rapid workforce testing for prisons staff, as well as assessing how it could work in courts, to help ensure that the vital work of the justice system can continue.

The Business Department has been engaging with a wide range of businesses across the country, with companies in the energy, manufacturing, life sciences and retail sectors, already ordering mass testing kits for their workforces.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) continue to work closely with businesses in Defra sectors, including food, waste, water, and veterinary medicines, to support them in setting up testing for their workforces or hauliers and protecting supply chains. All major supermarkets are now planning to offer rapid testing to their workforce.

Border Force has also rolled out rapid testing to ensure that staff are able to carry out their critical role of protecting the UK border. The Border Force asymptomatic testing programme currently has 3 live sites with testing available for over 900 officers. These sites have seen over 2,100 people tested so far. Border Force officers at Heathrow Airport have access to the airport's extensive testing capacity, and more than 120 officers have already volunteered to be involved in the asymptomatic testing programme with further sites for asymptomatic testing being identified and brought online in the coming weeks.

The government has opened (Monday 1 February) an asymptomatic testing facility in the Queen Elizabeth II Centre to provide rapid testing for essential civil service staff working in key departments involved in the coronavirus (COVID-19) response. The testing centre is one of several measures implemented by the government, including remote working and Covid-secure workplace measures, to help prevent the spread of the disease, keep civil servants safe and ensure the ongoing smooth running of government operations during the pandemic.

Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng said:

"Businesses across the country have been working extremely hard to keep their workforces safe during the pandemic, with retail, manufacturing and energy companies among those already taking up the offer of workplace testing.

"I urge even more employers to do the same to help stop the spread of the virus and protect our NHS. We want to be able to reopen the economy and recover our way of life as soon as it is safe to do so, and large-scale workplace testing will complement our work in getting the British people vaccinated."

The Transport Secretary said:

"Our frontline transport workers have kept the country moving, allowing key workers to get to work, and ensuring vital services remain accessible throughout this incredibly difficult time.

"This is why it's so important the government ramps up the rolling out of mass testing, providing them with an extra level of protection and confidence. We've already set up a number of pilots to conduct mass testing for transport workers, and I'll continue to work with organisations to

rollout similar schemes right across the transport network.”

Dr Samantha Phillips, Head of Health and Wellbeing at Transport for London, said:

“We have been part of a Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) pilot whereby employees can volunteer to do twice weekly rapid antigen testing.

“We have had an enthusiastic response to the pilot and employees are finding it reassuring, particularly if they have vulnerable relatives at home or family members who are also key workers. Identifying asymptomatic employees has also helped us in our efforts to protect the welfare and safety of all our team members working on the frontline.”

Lord Chancellor and Justice Secretary Robert Buckland QC MP said:

“From the outset of the pandemic we have been clear that justice must continue to be delivered for the public, victims and defendants.

“So I am delighted we are ramping up the provision of rapid tests for prison staff across the country while exploring how it could work in courts.

“I want to thank all those working across our justice system who, in collaboration with health professionals, are making this possible.”

Alex Chisholm, Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary for the Cabinet Office, said:

“I am delighted we have opened an asymptomatic test centre in Whitehall for those civil servants and contractors who need to go into their workplace. This test centre contributes to ensuring the safety of our staff and smooth running of our operations, while helping to break the chain of transmission.”

Notes to editors

Lateral flow tests used by the UK government go through a rigorous evaluation by the country’s leading scientists. Tests detect cases with high levels of virus, making them effective in finding infectious individuals who are not showing any symptoms and are the most likely to transmit the disease.

[See further information on rapid workplace testing](#)

[See latest testing statistics](#)

NHS Test & Trace will support organisations to deliver scalable asymptomatic testing through provision of a digital solution, clinical protocol, supply of tests kits, guidance, training and framework for delivery.

Tests are currently being provided free to both public and private sector employers until at least 31 March. The government’s support will be kept under review and we will engage with employers before any changes to the support offer are made.

Extensive clinical evaluation from Public Health England and the University of Oxford research shows lateral flow tests are specific and sensitive enough to be deployed for mass testing, including for asymptomatic people. The [Oxford University and Public Health evaluation is available](#).

[More information on getting tested is available](#).