

Government launches new drive on coronavirus tests for frontline NHS staff

- Government working with industry, philanthropy and universities to significantly scale up testing.
- New partnership with Thermo Fisher Scientific, Amazon, Boots, Royal Mail and Randox, alongside the Wellcome Trust and top UK universities to boost testing capacity for frontline NHS staff.

Dozens of universities, research institutes and companies across Britain are lending their testing equipment to 3 new hub laboratories which will be set up for the duration of the crisis. No equipment already in use for coronavirus testing or other vital work will be taken.

All current coronavirus testing and research will continue, including at existing local NHS and Public Health England test laboratories, and this new programme will add significant new capacity.

Thermo Fisher Scientific and Randox, who make the equipment, are providing extensive logistical and technical support.

The first lab is now undergoing validation which is expected by tomorrow. Once approval is given, it is expected to enter operation over the weekend, initially on a fairly small scale, and processing around 800 samples.

It will be scaled up every week from then on, with 2 other hub laboratories being stocked with equipment and opening soon.

The first samples to be processed in the labs will be taken from frontline health workers. As the labs' capacity increases, other frontline workers will be tested. The samples will be taken at special sites set up around the country, initially in coronavirus hotspots such as London.

Work is also underway to source more of the kits needed to take samples from people – of which there is a worldwide shortage.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said:

We want to save lives, protect the most vulnerable, and relieve pressure on our NHS.

Healthcare staff are key in our fight against the virus and I want to ensure that any frontline NHS or care worker who has symptoms of coronavirus or who has a family member with symptoms can be tested

quickly and reliably.

I pay tribute to the generosity and public spirit of Britain's universities, research institutes and companies who have lent us their equipment without hesitation.

Dr Jenny Harries, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, said:

Laboratory-based testing on this scale is a little like building the medical equivalent of a car factory. We are assembling many different parts, some of them quite specialised and hard to find, then getting them to work accurately together in a highly co-ordinated process. There are bound to be teething problems, so we cannot switch on hundreds of thousands of lab tests overnight. But we hope that soon these hub laboratories will be operating round the clock, allowing us to significantly scale up our testing.

This new service, which will be free, will help end the uncertainty of whether NHS staff need to stay at home. Those who test negative for coronavirus will be able to return to work – enhancing the capacity of the NHS and social care to treat patients and care for those in community settings, with plans for a full roll-out for health, social care and other frontline workers.

Amazon and Royal Mail will help with logistics, while Boots has been supporting initial trials by supplying volunteer healthcare clinicians as testers. It will continue this support as the testing rolls out across the UK. Testing will not be done at Boots stores and these tests will not be available over the counter or for purchase online from any retailers.

Sebastian James, Managing Director, Boots UK and ROI said:

I am extremely proud that Boots is supporting COVID-19 testing for NHS workers. Boots has been at the heart of UK healthcare for 171 years and has always come forward to support the community in times of need. We will work with the NHS to recruit trained professionals – both Boots colleagues and from the wider community.

I am sure there will be many trained healthcare clinicians and students, who will step forward to support our dedicated NHS colleagues. Drive through test locations are being defined but will be spread across the UK; they will not however be in Boots stores, allowing our colleagues to focus on supporting our patients and customers.

Doug Gurr, UK Country Manager, Amazon, said:

We believe our role serving customers and the community during this time is a critical one, and we are committed to working closely with the Government to identify ways in which we can support efforts to respond to the crisis.

Mark Stevenson, executive vice president and chief operating officer, Thermo Fisher Scientific, said:

Our diagnostic test for COVID-19 will help to protect patients and enable medical staff to respond swiftly to treat those who are ill and prevent the spread of infection. This is closely aligned with Thermo Fisher's mission – to enable our customers to make the world healthier, cleaner and safer. In partnership with the UK government and our industry partners, we are committed to expanding the availability of diagnostic testing to prevent the spread of this virus.

Randox CEO Dr Peter FitzGerald said:

We are committed to this important initiative to support NHS frontline staff.

We have significant diagnostic capability and assets within the UK and, at this time of unparalleled national need, look forward to working with collaborative partners to meet the Government's objectives.

Sir Jeremy Farrar, Director of Wellcome, said:

Widespread diagnostic testing during a pandemic is enormously important to controlling the spread of infection. This initiative is a substantial step forward in our ability to fight this disease that will save many lives.

Alongside other difficult but necessary public health measures such as physical distancing, cancelling mass gatherings, and school closures, testing is a critically important part of the response. Wellcome is extremely grateful to the government, Thermo Fisher Scientific, Amazon and Randox for joining this important partnership, and has been supporting this critical initiative.

Rico Back, Royal Mail Group Chief Executive Officer, said:

Royal Mail fully understands the devastating impact of the coronavirus outbreak on families, businesses and communities across the UK. We have a responsibility to help people stay connected,

especially in this crisis when many are unable to leave their home.

The Universal Postal Service provides a lifeline for businesses and communities across the UK, and never more so than at this difficult time. We already deliver vital Government mail in relation to coronavirus. We are working closely with pharmacies and NHS trusts across the UK. And we are delivering many prescriptions and hospital appointments. This is of key importance for us. We will safely deliver these vital tests, a key step forward in the nation's battle against the virus.

Creating the new hub laboratories is one of 3 main strands to increase our testing programme. The other 2 are boosting the capacity of existing local NHS and Public Health England labs; and urgently analysing the reliability of home testing kits that do not need labs. These could be a game-changer – if they are reliable.