

NHS Test and Trace meets new year surge in demand with faster turnaround times

- 13% of all PCR swab tests since start of pandemic carried out in first fortnight of January 2021
- Significant improvement in test turnaround times: 85.0% of in-person test results returned the next day after the test was taken, compared with 63.0% the week before

NHS Test and Trace has continued to reach a high volume of cases and contacts and, with improving turnaround times for tests, the service has seen a record-breaking start to the new year.

In the first 2 weeks of January, NHS Test and Trace has carried out more than 13% of the PCR tests conducted to date. Approximately 331,000 people received a positive result, with NHS Test and Trace identifying an estimated 47% of new infections.

Not only are record numbers of people being tested, but NHS Test and Trace has successfully reached 86.7% of the people who received a positive test result, and 92.9% of their contacts, making a real impact in breaking chains of transmission. In total during the week of 7 to 13 January, 874,552 people who had either tested positive or were a recent close contact of someone who had tested positive, were reached and told to self-isolate – people who might otherwise have gone on to unknowingly infect others.

People can also have confidence that if they have symptoms and need a test, they can get one quickly and conveniently. NHS Test and Trace's vastly expanded test site network now has more than 800 test sites in operation, including 448 local test sites. The median distance travelled for a test is just 2.2 miles, compared to 5.1 miles as recently as September.

Test results are also coming back more quickly. For this reporting period, 85.0% of in-person test results returned the next day after the test was taken, compared with 63.0% the week before.

The Lighthouse Laboratory at Charnwood, which began processing at the end of November, has met its target capacity of delivering 50,000 test samples a day by early 2021 following its ramp up phase. The Charnwood Lighthouse Laboratory, 1 of 2 operated by Perkin Elmer, sits alongside Alderley Park, Cambridge, Glasgow, Milton Keynes and Newport, and will be joined by the Newcastle, Brants Bridge and Plymouth laboratories in the coming months.

In addition to the growing Lighthouse Lab network, we have partnership agreements with Randox in Northern Ireland, the University of Birmingham and a range of public, private and academic sectors including NHS trusts, commercial suppliers and not-for-profit organisations.

Last week the government announced an additional £20 million to local authorities to cover the cost of the Test and Trace Support Payment Scheme, to ensure people continue to have access to the support they need to stay at home and reduce the transmission of COVID-19. This includes an additional £10 million to enable local authorities to continue making discretionary payments to people who fall outside the scope of the main scheme, but who will still face hardship if required to self-isolate.

Health Minister Lord Bethell said:

NHS Test and Trace has delivered impressive results so far this year, not least in demonstrating its ever-increasing testing capacity. More than 13% of PCR tests conducted to date were carried out in the first 13 days of January 2021 – a phenomenal achievement for a national service that has existed for just 9 months. Week by week, people are able to access tests faster and more conveniently than before, underlining the continuous improvement being made to the service.

While our testing capacity continues to grow as part of the government's winter plan, NHS Test and Trace is also deploying hundreds of thousands of rapid tests to identify asymptomatic cases. Almost one million LFD tests were conducted in this reporting week and we will continue to innovate and evolve our testing capability.

Around 1 in 3 people with COVID-19 don't display symptoms, meaning you can infect others unknowingly. It is therefore crucial that we continue to follow public health guidance, and all play our part by following the rules and reducing our social contact to slow the spread of the virus.

Interim Executive Chair of the National Institute for Health Protection, Baroness Dido Harding, said:

The pace of our response has been set by the virus and I would like to thank everyone who has worked so hard to ensure NHS Test and Trace is meeting this challenge. It has been a strong start to the year. More than 7 million people had been successfully contact-traced since the start of NHS Test and Trace, a testament to the service's performance levels.

There is no doubt that as we have built and scaled the service, we have learnt more and more about how to counter the spread of the virus. This is an overall national effort and no one organisation or team can do this on their own. With 290 local tracing partnerships now in operation, the combined local expertise of local authorities with the data and resources of NHS Test and Trace ensures that the service continues to grow from strength to strength.

Testing

As of 20 January, more than 62 million tests have been processed in the UK in total since testing began, more than any other comparable European country.

In the latest reporting week, 971,537 lateral flow device (LFD) tests have been carried out, with 2,599,617 conducted in total since first introduced in October.

Pillar 1 test results made available within 24 hours is the same as last week's total (94.7%) and this has remained broadly consistent since Test and Trace began. 92.9% of satellite tests were received within 3 days after the day they were taken, compared with 86.8% the previous week. For satellite test centres, 87.5% were received within 72 hours compared to 75.4% in the previous week.

Over the past months, the government has put in place the largest network of diagnostic testing facilities created in British history. NHS Test and Trace now has the capacity to carry out more than 790,000 tests per day, compared to 2,000 just 9 months ago.

Tracing

So far, more than 7 million cases and contacts have been reached and told to self-isolate by contact tracers.

Tracing performance has remained high with 86.7% of cases and 92.9% of contacts reached last week. The proportion of contacts reached within 24 hours once identified as a contact was 98%.

351,567 positive cases were transferred to contact tracers between 7 and 13 January, with 304,789 reached and told to self-isolate.

Between 7 and 13 January, 613,524 people were identified as recent close contacts, with 96.2% of those with communication details provided reached and told to self-isolate. Since Test and Trace launched 88.5% of close contacts for whom communication details were provided have been reached.

Background information

The [weekly statistics from the 33rd week of NHS Test and Trace](#) show in the most recent week of operations (7 to 13 January):

1. The proportion of contacts reached by tracing service remains consistent at 92.9%
2. 86.7% of people who tested positive and were transferred to the contact-tracing system were reached and asked to provide information about their contacts, compared with 87.7% the previous week
3. 96.2% of contacts where communication details were given were reached and told to self-isolate, compared with 95.9% the previous week
4. 85.0% of in-person test results were received the next day after the

test was taken, compared with 63.0% of tests the previous week (England only)

5. 94.7% of pillar 1 test results were made available within 24 hours, consistent with last week's total
6. 53.7% of in-person test results were received within 24 hours after the test was taken, compared with 31.6% the previous week
7. 92.9% of satellite tests were received within 3 days after the day they were taken, compared with 86.8% the previous week. For satellite test centres, 87.5% were received within 72 hours compared to 75.4% in the previous week. In the most recent week, approximately 82% of tests from satellite test centres were care home tests and removing the 18% of tests from other sites slightly decreases the percentage of tests received within 3 days after the test was taken to 92.6%
8. Launched on 28 September 2020, the Test and Trace Support Payment scheme is administered by lower tier and unitary authorities in England, with an initial £50 million of government funding for local authorities to cover the cost of administering the scheme
9. As of 13 January, the NHS Test and Trace app has been downloaded 21,416,429 times and 785,085 QR posters have been generated