

Statement from Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Matt Hancock on testing and vaccinations

We begin 2021 knowing that vaccines are our way out of this pandemic. Human ingenuity and phenomenal scientific advances make it a case of when, not if, we will return back to normal life.

The cavalry is here courtesy of our vaccination programme and we have already protected more people through vaccinations than any other European country.

Alongside this pivotal work, we must not lose focus on our system of testing, which we know is another important weapon in our fight against this virus, and can bring down the R number by between 0.3 and 0.6.

Over the past months, we have been regularly testing our colleagues in health and social care and those working in critical infrastructure, to give them peace of mind and to keep them and their colleagues safe.

We have also been doing community testing in the areas where prevalence is highest to help find more cases sooner and we currently have over 400 sites in community centres, village halls and places of worship across the country.

This targeted approach has yielded results, picking up a proportion of cases that's above the national average and allowing us to bear down hard on the virus in a local area.

Today I am thrilled to announce that testing for those who do not have symptoms will be available to every local authority in England, and working closely with devolved administrations, so every corner of the UK can benefit from this life-saving work.

This expansion comes at a critical time. We recently had to introduce difficult but vital restrictions to deal with a highly transmissible new variant of coronavirus.

As a result, millions of people are working from home, reducing their social contact to slow the spread of the virus.

But we know that millions of workers, who work in warehouses or construction sites or who keep vital services going, are not able to do this. So we will be asking local authorities to target this testing programme at those who cannot work from home and who have to leave home during lockdown, providing them with another layer of protection and helping us to drive down the spread of the virus.

Many large employers, like John Lewis and Royal Mail are already piloting regular workforce testing. As we expand our capacity, we want more rapid testing available to those who can't work from home, and NHS Test and Trace

will work closely with other government departments, employers and local authorities to make this happen.

This critical national infrastructure for testing will be so important as we ease restrictions, so we can use the confidence provided by accurate testing to find the virus and help us return to normal life.

One of the greatest breakthroughs in our testing programme was the use of lateral flow devices, which can pick up infectious cases and turn around rapid results.

So far, most of these tests have been shipped in from abroad, but we now have signed a contract with SureScreen Diagnostics, based in Derby, to deliver the first lateral flow tests here in Britain to be approved by Public Health England.

Two million of these rapid tests, which provide results within 30 minutes, have already been manufactured, with the first batch of one million due to be delivered by the end of this week.

This is great news for our country, not only because it allows us to test more people, but also allows us to boost British industry and further enhance our world leading life sciences sector.

While we deliver our vital programmes for testing and vaccines, using the best of human ingenuity to keep us safe for the long-term, we must all play our part and follow the rules that we know can bend the curve.

If we do this, then we know that 2021 will be a year of recovery, and a year when this nation gets back on its feet once more.