ESFA Update: 22 April 2020

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Britain's biggest network of diagnostic labs are completed in 5 weeks

The rapid creation of 3 new Lighthouse Labs in Milton Keynes, Glasgow and Alderley Park in Cheshire is increasing the country's capacity to test for coronavirus, with each site scaling up to test tens of thousands of patient samples each day.

Each individual site took just 3 weeks to complete and begin testing.

The new mega-labs are staffed by an army of highly qualified staff and volunteers from industry and academia, drawn from across the country.

These groups are working tirelessly to rapidly analyse coronavirus tests for NHS, social care and other frontline workers, allowing those testing negative to safely and quickly return to work.

The Lighthouse Labs will test samples from drive through testing sites, with new sites set up nearly each day across the UK. Work is ongoing to set up 50 of these drive-through sites, and there are now 27 in operation, including in Wembley, Manchester and Glasgow.

Thanks to increased testing capacity the government is extending testing to a wider group of frontline workers in addition to patients, NHS or social care workers who need one. Frontline workers who are eligible – have symptoms of coronavirus, a high temperature or new continuous cough – and would like to be tested should speak to their employer.

See the updated guidance on getting tested.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock said:

> We have set out our ambition to meet the challenge of achieving a 100,000 coronavirus tests a day by the end of the month.
>
> A stream of new testing and diagnostic facilities are being brought online, and the completion of the Lighthouse Lab network is an historic moment.
>
> This is truly a national effort, backed by Britain's world-class scientists and industry partners, including teams of expert volunteers supporting the new mega-labs to rapidly increase our testing capacity. Together their efforts will allow key frontline workers testing negative for the virus to return safely to work.

Scottish Secretary Alister Jack said:

> The UK government has committed to expanding our testing capacity across the UK. The completion of our network with the Lighthouse Lab in Glasgow is a tremendous achievement for all the partners in such challenging circumstances and only 5 weeks after this project was started.
>
> Scotland has world-class universities and I am pleased they have been involved in this UK-wide effort as we work together to protect the NHS and save lives.

National Testing Coordinator Professor John Newton said:

> Every day across the country we are increasing our coronavirus testing capacity. Just a few weeks ago we launched the first Lighthouse Lab in Milton Keynes, and now it is part of the biggest network of diagnostic labs in British history.
>
> I want to thank all the expert staff and volunteers who have helped make the construction of the Lighthouse Labs possible, and who continue to work so hard to ensure that NHS staff and frontline workers can be tested for the virus. Thanks to their efforts, thousands of people have been able to safely return to work after testing negative for the virus.

Earlier this month the Health Secretary Matt Hancock announced the UK government's 5-pillar plan to rapidly scale up coronavirus testing across the UK. The new 5-pillar plan outlines the ambitions to:

- Pillar 1: scale up swab testing in Public Health England (PHE) labs and NHS hospitals for those with a medical need and the most critical workers to 25,000 a day in England, with the aligned testing strategies of the NHS in the devolved administrations benefiting from PHE's partnership with Roche through a central UK allocation mechanism

- Pillar 2: deliver increased commercial swab testing for critical key workers in the NHS across the UK, before then expanding to key workers in other sectors
- Pillar 3: develop blood testing to help know if people across the UK have the right antibodies and so have high levels of immunity to coronavirus
- Pillar 4: conduct UK-wide surveillance testing to learn more about the spread of the disease and help develop new tests and treatments
- Pillar 5: create a new National Effort for testing, to build a mass-testing capacity for the UK at a completely new scale.

The new Lighthouse Labs have been created through a partnership with the Department of Health and Social Care, Medicines Discovery Catapult, UK Biocentre and the University of Glasgow. Their development is being closely supported by both NHS and Public Health England.

Dozens of universities, research institutes and companies across Britain are lending their testing equipment to the new hub laboratories for the duration of the immediate need for high capacity testing. No equipment already in use for coronavirus testing or research has been taken.

The sites are working in collaboration with devolved national health services and governments, industry and academia and will be supported by a national advisory network of scientific, clinical and operational experts.

- The Milton Keynes facility is hosted by the UK Biocentre, who are funded by the National Institute for Healthcare Research (NIHR) and the Medical Research Council (MRC).

- The Alderley Park facility is hosted by the Medicines Discovery Catapult, working closely with AstraZeneca.

- The Glasgow facility is hosted by the University of Glasgow in collaboration with the Scottish Government and expertise from BioAscent Discovery Ltd and the University of Dundee.

Funding supports community front line work

The 12 grants of £25,000 have each been offered to local authorities or charities where a Magnox site is located across the UK, and will be used to help support vulnerable groups.

To date applications have been received by Magnox from several communities, with funding now starting to be released.

Maldon Council, where Magnox's Bradwell Site is located, has already secured one of the grants and plans to work with Maldon and District Community Voluntary Service; The Salvation Army; The Essex Alliance; The Maldon Food Pantry and local businesses to distribute the grant to the places where it is most needed.

Activities include distributing critical provisions to vulnerable and isolated residents, assisting residents in accessing safe delivery of services and food to their homes, supporting individuals' mental health during social isolation and improving resilience in local charities and businesses.

Gwen Parry-Jones, Magnox Chief Executive, said: "Many community groups are carrying out positive work, supporting the most vulnerable in their areas. This work is vital, and a key part of Magnox's response to COVID-19 is to help other organisations deal with the pandemic wherever we can.

"In this time of national crisis, Magnox has agreed with the NDA that we should make available up to £25,000 at each site from the Magnox Socio-economic Scheme for use by local community groups on COVID-19 related activities. Magnox is committed to assisting the communities surrounding our sites, as our communities have supported us for over 50 years, and we hope this funding will go some way to supporting the essential work being delivered."

Our people

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About us

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