

The Rt Hon Matthew Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social
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Philip Glanville, Mayor of Hackney
Cllr Chris Kennedy, Cabinet Member for
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Dear Matthew,

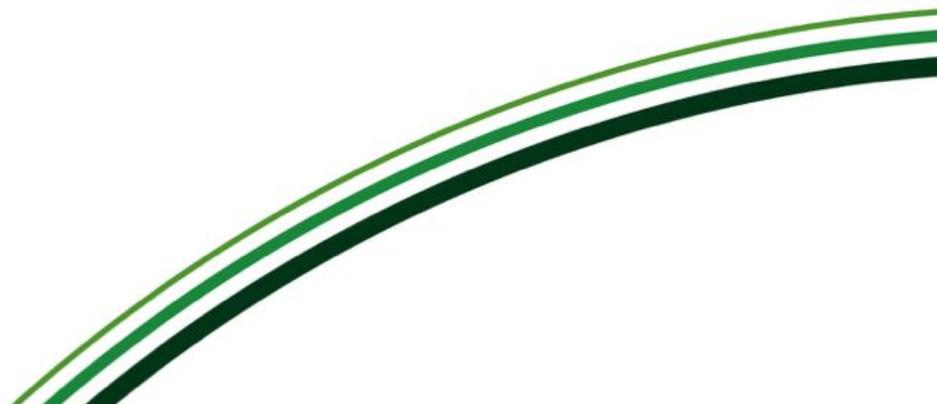
Testing provision in Hackney – Covid-19

We write on behalf of Hackney Council and the borough we represent to urge you to fulfil the commitment you made that all key workers, including all care home staff, reablement staff, home care staff, extra care and supported housing staff, adult social care assessors, social workers, occupational therapists, outreach workers, shared lives carers, foster carers and other frontline local authority staff will have immediate access to Covid-19 testing. This must also be through a pathway that works for them and Hackney, including home-testing, drive-through, pop-up or walk-in-centres.

We are also keen to lend our support, in light of our expertise in delivering testing, contact tracing and community public health programmes, as well as our unique local knowledge of our own communities, to the national emergency efforts to deliver the tracing, tracking and testing strategy as we move into the next phase of this crisis. It is our firm belief that local government, the local NHS, the voluntary sector and communities themselves need to be at the heart of testing in the weeks and months ahead.

Immediate testing issues

We welcomed your Department's 100,000-a-day Covid-19 testing pledge as we recognise that a workable tracing, tracking and testing strategy is essential to the protection of our workforce, as well as part of any wider lockdown exit strategy. However, the series of recent fiascos with home testing kits running out within just two minutes and the admission that no checks were conducted on whether recipients were essential workers, fills us with little confidence that this



commitment can be delivered by central government alone or through their attempts to involve the private sector.

The experience of our own frontline workers and residents in trying to access testing to date also highlights significant issues. For example, on a call this week with a local hospice we were informed that a worker there had been tested, but when they followed up two days later to discover the result they were told that their test had been lost.

We have also been advised that home testing has proved difficult to book with many reports that capacity has been reached. We would encourage your Department to rapidly expand not just eligibility, but the actual provision of home test kits, especially for key workers and their families.

While we welcome assurances that home testing will be extended significantly ahead of the weekend and that local testing centres are to be confirmed shortly, there have been ongoing issues with front line NHS and social care staff unable to access home testing as daily allocations of kits have gone within minutes of the website opening each day. This risks also becoming more difficult to achieve since the Government has opened up the criteria for testing more widely.

We fully recognise the wider need for testing, and indeed advocate for it, especially for other key workers in this national effort, but feel that health and social care staff should continue to be given priority access to testing while the system is so unstable and before fully widening the scope. We also need real options for testing on site in care homes where that is needed. While this was announced by Government earlier in the week, as yet there is little or no detail on how it will be delivered. It is also unclear which agency is the lead for coordinating this effort; Public Health England, the CQC or the NHS at an STP level.

On a local level, we have significant concerns about the location and capacity of testing centres. We have gone through weeks of confusion about when and if more local testing would be available, and while through the work of Hackney's Public Health team, this may now be close to resolution in Hackney, up until now the response nationally has been inadequate.

In a borough where two-thirds of residents do not own a car and where individuals understandably wish to avoid public transport, particularly if they are symptomatic, local test centres are extremely important. Communication on locations and pathways for testing must also be accurate and timely. When these centres do come, we have also been advised that individuals will only be able to access tests if they have booked a slot online on the Government website. We have been briefed locally that there are problems with the website and you can only book a slot if you have a vehicle registration. The whole point of these local centres was that they were in accessible places for pedestrians who do not have a vehicle and this needs to be corrected as well as access to the booking system for the digitally excluded.

There are also significant issues around the timeliness of test results and how these results are effectively communicated. Key workers and their families should be receiving test results within 48 hours to enable them to return to work, where the result is negative. Failing to do so removes greatly needed resources from vital frontline services at a time when they are needed most.

The critical next phase and contact tracing

While we welcome the Government's announcement that it will be pursuing a strategy of contact tracing, we are concerned that further details about how this will work in practice, including how the tracers are to be recruited and integrated with local services as well as how the potential new NHS CV19 app is to be rolled out, none of this has been made publicly available or communicated with key public authorities.

We would encourage the Government to work with local authorities on recruiting the 18,000 tracers, and make use of local government knowledge and skills. We know that there are significant issues in relation to digital exclusion within the borough and we would have concerns about any measures that would be overly reliant on an app or similar technology since it risks excluding a significant proportion of our community, including crucially the most at risk of the virus. The already disproportionate impact of the disease on black and minority ethnic communities, an issue that the Government is now urgently investigating, could if the approach has inbuilt exclusivity be compounded by a remote national scheme. We have communities with no or limited access to smartphones, and even more importantly we must retain and enhance the trust of the communities we serve that already feel excluded by the national response and may have entrenched socio-economic and health inequalities. There are also ample examples internationally both in response to Covid-19 and natural disasters that involving and training local volunteers delivers a better long term solution than more remote top-down responses.

Councils like Hackney are keen to - and are - playing our full part in the national emergency efforts to tackle this disease. We have experience working with local public health services to deliver testing, including sexual health services and we are eager to assist with any Covid-19 tracing and testing regime. As you may be aware, Hackney has offered to be a pilot borough as part of the next stage of tracing, testing and tracking measures and we are keen to use our local expertise and knowledge of our communities to ensure that this is as effective as possible. We also have an immediate track record of creating during this crisis new multi-partner and multi-disciplinary teams to support our care homes and Charedi community in Hackney.

We urge your Department to make urgent funding and resources available to local authorities to help deliver these vital testing, tracking and tracing efforts to isolate those affected, shield our most vulnerable residents and protect our frontline workforce, and involve us in the detailed planning for this next phase. Public health has again become a core function of local authorities like Hackney and it must be at the heart of the next phase of the crisis.

It simply won't be good enough to find out about the next phase of the emergency response, especially on contact tracing and testing, at a 5pm press conference when residents are looking to us to provide an integrated response.

We are ready to play an enhanced role, we would welcome the opportunity to speak with you, your officials or Public Health England about this matter; and we would be very grateful if you could ask your office to contact ours on the details above to make the necessary arrangements.

Yours sincerely,



Philip Glanville
Mayor of Hackney



Cllr Chris Kennedy
**Cabinet Member for Health, Adult Social
Care and Leisure**

CC: Professor Yvonne Doyle, Medical Director for Public Health England
Professor Kevin Fenton, Public Health Regional Director for London
Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Chair, LGA Wellbeing Board
David Maher, Managing Director, NHS City and Hackney Clinical Commissioning Group
Jane Milligan, Accountable Officer for North East London Commissioning Alliance and Executive Lead for East London Health and Care Partnership
Meg Hillier MP, Member of Parliament for Hackney South and Shoreditch
Rt Hon Diane Abbott MP, Member of Parliament for Hackney North and Stoke Newington
Rt Hon Jonathan Ashworth MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

