

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health

EXPANSION OF THE ASYMPTOMATIC TESTING PROGRAMME — WORKPLACE TESTING

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Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Mr Speaker, as the numbers requiring hospital treatment for COVID-19 continue to fall, and as the vaccination programme continues to deliver at scale and pace, it is important that we do not lose sight of the need to continue to control this virus, even as the overall number of cases appears to decrease. As we emerge from lockdown, it is vital that we use every instrument at our disposal to ensure that we can effectively identify and target any outbreaks that may occur across different parts of our society.

The purpose of this statement is to inform the Assembly that my Department is today inviting public and private sector employers from key sectors within Northern Ireland to access the national testing programme as part of a targeted expansion of asymptomatic testing into a range of workplaces.

Lateral Flow Testing

New testing technologies make it possible to test at far greater scale, frequency, and pace than has previously been possible. In this context, the use of Lateral Flow Tests (LFTs) provides an opportunity to expand our approach to testing people who do not display symptoms across a range of settings in Northern Ireland, with the overall objective to ensure as safe a return to as normal a society as possible.

LFTs detect a protein produced by the virus at its most infectious stage. If present in an individual's sample, a coloured line appears on the device after 15-30 minutes. Lateral Flow Tests are simple, easy to use test devices which provide results quickly and which do not require any specialist equipment or a laboratory to deliver. LFTs are not as sensitive as polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests and negative results cannot absolutely rule out that an employee has the virus. It is therefore essential that employees at all times continue to adhere to COVID safe working practices, social distancing, and good hygiene measures. It should also be noted that anyone displaying symptoms of COVID-19 should immediately, self-isolate, and follow the national guidance for booking a PCR test.

Test to Find

The purpose of asymptomatic testing is to identify individuals within the population who are positive for COVID-19 but do not present symptoms. Up to a third of people with COVID-19 are asymptomatic. The aim of this testing is to identify these individuals so they and their close contacts can be advised to self-isolate - therefore breaking chains of transmission in the workplace and beyond. This approach is known as "test to find".

Individuals with positive LFTs will be asked to isolate immediately along with their households. In Northern Ireland it is our policy that all individuals with a positive LFT should book a PCR swab test at their closest test site as soon as possible to confirm the result. Community contact tracing will be initiated on PCR confirmation. If the result of the PCR test is negative the individual and the household can leave isolation and no further action is required.

It is important that employers and employees are aware of and can access any support if they are required to self-isolate. Further information on the support that is available to individuals and businesses can be found at NI Direct and NI Business Info.

Targeted expansion of the programme - workplace testing

As part of the UK wide procurement of LFTs, Northern Ireland has been allocated a proportion of these tests in accordance with the size of our population. The national programme is overseen by the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) in England. Access to the national programme will be managed through the asymptomatic testing programme team within my Department.

Members will be aware that our approach to asymptomatic testing currently includes testing of frontline healthcare workers, staff and pupils in schools and universities, staff residents and visitors in care homes, and one example of testing in private industry (at Moy Park). With these schemes operating successfully, it is now planned to enable expansion of the asymptomatic testing programme into workplaces across the public and private sectors, and into community settings where infection rates remain stubbornly high.

While there are currently no concerns around the supply of LFTs, it is important that demand is not allowed to outstrip supply. It has therefore been decided that expansion of the programme will be carried on the basis of public health advice and regional strategic priorities.

As a first step, my Department's support for regular asymptomatic testing in the private and public sectors will focus on those workplaces within these sectors which:

- Are performing critical functions or delivering key services;
- Have more than 50 employees who cannot work from home;
- Involve higher exposure to risk of infection for staff or customers.

Private Sector

On the basis of the available evidence on infections in the workplace, the following four sectors or private industry have been prioritised for the first phase of the programme:

- Agri-food;
- Manufacturing;
- Essential Retail;
- Construction.

While bringing as many organisations from these areas onto the national programme, officials will continue to develop proposals for the next phase of the programme.

Public sector

Our initial priorities for the public sector are focused on emergency services and national critical infrastructure. We have already brought Translink NI (working collaboratively with the Department for Infrastructure) and the NI Fire and Rescue Service on-board the national asymptomatic testing programme. We are currently working with the other emergency services to identify their requirements and will move quickly to bring them on board as this work progresses.

My officials are also working closely with other government departments in order to rapidly identify and prioritise other public sector organisations who may require access to the testing programme. Although not strictly public sector, under this strand the programme team will also consider food supply and distribution companies; logistics and distribution companies; transportation companies and NI Water.

High prevalence council areas

The programme team is also working with local government and public health advisers in order to develop proposals for community testing. In the first instance, this is expected to focus on initiatives to compliment or enhance existing public health testing arrangements, as well as ways of increasing access to testing for smaller businesses and organisations in a community setting. Based on evidence and learning from other jurisdictions it is not currently envisaged that this will involve mass testing sites.

The role of employers

The approach will include working jointly with the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) in England, which operates the scheme at a national level, and engaging with partners and local public

health teams to agree and support workplace testing with Northern Ireland businesses and organisations.

The support available for organisations in Northern Ireland to introduce workplace testing will include:

- Facilitation of access to relevant DHSC support materials, including a guidebook and clinical standard operating procedure (SOP);
- Provision, via DHSC, of Lateral Flow Tests from the Northern Ireland allocation for a defined period, subject to contractual arrangements;
- Access to the online workplace testing portal providing digital solutions covering user registration, results capture and delivery guidance;
- Training – online training and information from DHSC. Training opportunities may also be available from local partners and providers.

On being approved by my Department to access the national programme, organisations will work directly with DHSC to develop a plan according to the nationally agreed standard operating procedures.

Next steps

Employers have a vital role to play in this next phase, minimising the spread of infection among those who cannot work from home by introducing regular testing for asymptomatic staff. Workplace testing can help to protect staff, helping to give confidence to those who continue to come into work, as well as improving the overall resilience of business operations. It will also help to protect customers where staff are working in public facing roles.

In the early stages of the pandemic, the severity of outbreaks led to some sites being temporarily closed. The rollout of workplace testing will help to prevent this. Identifying asymptomatic positive cases and informing them to self-isolate will reduce the spread of the virus. This will benefit employers and society as a whole as it will help to keep infection rates down across Northern Ireland.

I would stress that, where organisations do not fall within categories set out in this statement, this does not mean that they will not be able to access the testing programme. It is expected that the programme will evolve rapidly as further information on capacity and uptake becomes available. Further information and contact details for the asymptomatic testing programme team are available on the Department's website.