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Covid-19: England's test and trace system records worst weekly performance since launch

Gareth Iacobucci

England's test and trace system has recorded its worst weekly performance since it launched in May, official figures¹ show.

The system only reached 62.6% of close contacts of people who tested positive for covid-19 in the week ending 7 October, down from 69.5% the previous week. This is the lowest percentage since the service launched, and below the 80% that the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies estimates is required for the system to work.

The data show a stark contrast between cases handled by local public health protection teams—which reached 97.7% of contacts and asked them to self-isolate in the week to 7 October—and cases handled either online or by call centres, which reached only 57.6% of close contacts.

Healthcare leaders expressed alarm at the figures and said further restrictions for reducing the spread of covid-19 were likely without a drastic improvement in the service's performance.

Saffron Cordery, deputy chief executive of NHS Providers, said, "It's unfortunate that at this point with infections rising, admissions increasing, and winter looming, there's still a long way to go until our test and trace system is fit for purpose."

London is the latest area of England to have its risk level increased under the government's new three tier system, being upgraded from medium to high risk. Currently only Liverpool and neighbouring local authorities are on very high alert, but leaders are warning more areas could follow with rising numbers of cases and hospital admissions.²

Between 1 and 7 October, a total of 87 918 people were transferred into the test and trace service, compared with 34 494 the week before. And in the week ending 7 October, 18 212 (20.7%) of those referred to the test and trace service were not reached, compared with 7881 (22.8%) the week before.

Turnaround times for test results done at regional sites, local sites, or mobile testing units improved slightly last week, with 32.6% of people receiving their result within 24 hours, compared with 27.4% the previous week. But the turnaround times dropped for tests done in satellite centres, at hospitals, or care homes (from 22.9% within 24 hours to 20.9%) and tests done at home (from 30.2% to 16.0%).

Layla McCay, director at the NHS Confederation, said, "As cases continue to rise steeply, it is becoming increasingly likely we will see more—and more stringent—restrictions.

"We need to see improvements across the board. While our members in some of the worst affected areas tell us the system is coping for now, if the NHS is to continue to be able to cope, with the added challenges of winter, we will either need to see a swift and significant improvement in the test and trace system, or more draconian measures over larger parts of the country."

1 Transparency data: NHS Test and Trace (England) and coronavirus testing (UK) statistics: 1 October to 7 October 2020. www.gov.uk/government/publications/nhs-test-and-trace-england-and-coronavirus-testing-uk-statistics-1-october-to-7-october-2020.

2 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: Three tier alert system takes effect across England. *BMJ* 2020;371:m3961doi: 10.1136/bmj.m3961.