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Covid-19: Campaigners demand to see contracts for £10bn track and trace services

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More than 100 public figures, including public health experts, academics, journalists, and trade union leaders, have written to England's health and social care secretary demanding that he publish details of the contracts given to private companies to run the national test and trace system for covid-19.¹

The open letter to Matt Hancock, published on 29 July, said that £10bn of public money had been allocated for the test and trace system in England but that more than £9bn of funding was still unaccounted for, and "only £300m additional funding has been offered to local authorities across England to support the system."

Documents published by the Treasury show that the UK government has so far spent £10bn (€11.2bn; \$12.7bn) on its much derided covid-19 test and trace programme. Private companies such as Serco, Sitel, and Capita are among those awarded contracts to run the programme.²

At the time the Treasury report came out the former chief executive of the King's Fund, Chris Ham, said that the numbers were "astonishing." He tweeted, "Would be good to understand exactly what money was spent on, especially on test and trace where expertise in NHS and local authorities has been overlooked as private sector used."

In line with this, the letter's signatories argued that it was "essential" that the public saw the details of these contracts, including a full list of the companies awarded the contracts, the companies they in turn subcontracted, how many members of staff were hired, and how they were trained.

The letter, signed by Allyson Pollock, clinical professor of public health, David McCoy, director of the centre for global public health at Queen Mary University of London, and Anthony Costello, from the Institute for Global Health at University College London, was coordinated by the campaign group We Own It.

"A comprehensive test, track, and trace programme is vital to get out of lockdown safely and protect lives," the letter said. "The value for money and effectiveness of these contracts is not known . . . We believe that it is essential for the public and the wider health community in the NHS and local government public health teams to have a better understanding of these contracts, and write to request that the government publishes."

Commenting on the letter, the former director of public health for the north west of England, John Ashton, said, "The government's approach to test, track, and trace has been mired in secrecy. The public and the health profession have no idea of the scale and nature of the government's contracts with the private sector. This is frankly unacceptable. If we're to have proper scrutiny over government decision making on this pandemic these contracts must be published immediately."

1 We deserve to see the test and trace contracts with private companies. We Own It. 29 Jul 2020. <https://weownit.org.uk/blog/we-deserve-see-test-and-trace-contracts-private-companies>.

2 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: Government is criticised for "scandalous" £10bn spent on test and trace programme. *BMJ* 2020;370:m2805. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m2805 pmid: 32651172

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