



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;370:m3147

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3147>

Published: 06 August 2020

Covid-19: £150m worth of masks bought without tender by government are unusable

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Fifty million face masks bought by the UK government as part of a £252m (€280m; \$330m) contract at the height of the covid-19 crisis will not be used in the NHS because of safety concerns, the government has admitted.

The FFP2 masks, supplied under a contract awarded without advertisement or tender, have ear loops rather than head ties, and the fixings may not be adequate to protect NHS frontline staff from covid-19.

The government's admission comes in court papers for a judicial review case brought by the Good Law Project and EveryDoctor. The two non-profit organisations argue that the decision to award the £252m contract to Ayanda Capital, a private family fund that specialises in currency trading, offshore property, and private equity, was unlawful, disproportionate, and irrational.

Of the 50 million masks, estimated to cost at least £150m, 43.5 million have been delivered, and further production has been paused.

The contract also provided for the manufacture of 150 million cheaper Type IIR masks. The government said it was unaware of any problems with these but planned to subject them to further testing.

The court papers disclosed that the original approach to sell the masks came from Andrew Mills, an adviser to the UK Board of Trade and a senior board adviser at Ayanda. His company, Prospermill, which was set up in 2019 with share capital of £100 and two directors, had secured the full production capacity of a large factory in China. But he requested that the government sign the contract with Ayanda because it could arrange overseas payments more quickly. He told the BBC that his position played no part in the award of the contract, which was evaluated along with other offers in response to the government's call for help.

Ayanda said the masks met the government's technical specifications. The government said its safety standards process was "robust."