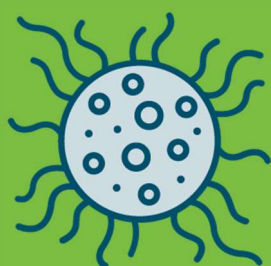


healthwatch

# What are people telling us about COVID-19 testing?

Key messages from our evidence – 5 October 2020



## About

This regular internal briefing aims to provide an update for national health and social care stakeholders about the COVID-19 related:

- information and advice the public are asking us about,
- experiences people have shared about care with us.

This briefing focusses on people's views and experiences of getting tested for COVID-19. The analysis draws on data from 42 local Healthwatch services across England, collected between August and September 2020. In particular, Healthwatch Knowsley and Healthwatch Richmond reported a large number of contacts from the public who were struggling to book a test.

## Key messages

### Information about tests

- The public messaging on how to access COVID-19 tests hasn't met everyone's needs. People have told us that they didn't know how to book a test for COVID-19. They have requested from local Healthwatch information about the opening times of testing centres or how long it would take for the results to arrive. People felt that there wasn't enough information online and asked local Healthwatch to help them book a test.
- People were unsure about when they should get tested. While some with symptoms contacted us to check if they needed testing, we also heard from asymptomatic people seeking tests for other reasons. This confusion suggests that there is some misunderstanding of what the NHS tests are for.
- While many people wanted access to tests for travelling to countries that required a "fitness to travel" certificate, others wanted a test before visiting vulnerable relatives in care and nursing homes or when people believed they lived or worked with someone who was symptomatic. However, people were usually content to seek tests privately once they understood the requirements but felt that there was a lack of information on how to get a private test.
- People felt confused and frustrated when they got conflicting information from GPs, hospitals and NHS 119 about where they can get tested.

### Accessing COVID-19 tests

- We heard from an increasing number of people that they were struggling to book a test. They found it equally difficult to book an appointment by phone or via the website and were unable to access home testing kits or walk-in/drive through tests. In some cases, people could not access a test even a week after the onset of symptoms.

- People reported being offered tests at centres a long distance away from their home. While some were unable to travel that far, others had felt they had no choice but to make the long journey. This issue was particularly challenging for those without adequate transport facilities and parents with young children.

**"Yes, I have tried to arrange a test and have been told to travel from Bolton to Inverness – 278 miles for the nearest available test via the government website."** Healthwatch Bolton

**"Caller said she is unable to get a test online for her daughter- the only test available was in Deeside, and she would be unable to travel that far."** Healthwatch Knowsley

- With some local testing centres only taking bookings online, some people who don't have or can't afford an internet connection told us they struggled to book a test. This issue highlights the importance of considering the needs of people who are digitally excluded. We have also heard that it can be difficult for children with Autism to get a home test and people with mental health conditions find the booking process particularly stressful.

**"XX's 4-year-old son has Autism and has returned from school with a cough. School have advised that she needs to access a test. Driving to a test centre and being tested in that environment would not be ok for her son- the only way she feels she would be able to complete a test would be when he was asleep. She has tried for 4 days without being able to access a slot or home test kit. 119 could not help."** Healthwatch Knowsley

- Even when people had a test booked, people told us that they faced problems. Some didn't receive an NHS QR code and were turned away by the test centre staff. Some who had asked for a home testing kit didn't get one. People also found it difficult to find the test centre because they were given the wrong or out of date address, or sites had stopped 'walk-in' services without informing the local council.

**"I applied for a test at a local site. I got a time the next day (so far so good). Our time slot was half 10 so we set off in plenty of time. The Sat Nav took us to the immediate vicinity, BUT – the test centre had NO signs at all? The Sat Nav recalibrated, and we did another two 6-mile circles with the same result. Eventually we saw a car leaving a blank lane and in desperation tried that! And there was the test centre!!! If we had missed our half hour slot, we would not have been granted another test!"** Healthwatch North Yorkshire

- On some occasions, people were refused a test by 119 or hospitals, although their GP or their school had told them to get tested. It seems this may have been because the symptoms they described didn't fit the criteria for an NHS test. This left people unsure about what they should do next.

## Impact of delays

- Delays in getting tested or receiving test results had a knock-on effect on people's lives. For example, when children with symptoms couldn't access a test, they had to miss school. Consequently, their parents struggled with childcare, sometimes for over a week. Some parents even had to take unpaid leave and lost income as a result.
- We have heard some cases of people who had their elective care cancelled because they could not get a test. It seems people were not given a priority for testing even though they were awaiting a major procedure, such as a lung transplant. When people did get tested, delays in receiving results left them anxious and stressed. On occasions, centres have also lost the test results of people.

"Spoke initially to woman whose daughter has been told she needs a COVID-19 test prior to a lung transplant assessment in hospital next Monday. Then spoke to the patient herself who has been trying since yesterday morning (the Monday before the appointment) to book a test for Thursday but keeps hitting brick walls online and on the phone. Currently, the advice is that no home tests are available, and people should try 'later' when more 'may become available'. Website also advises no drive-through tests are available despite being listed for the local area in the coming days. She needs the test to be able to have her transplant assessment but has not been able to book one for a day and a half. There is no indication on any platform as to when more tests, either drive-through or home, will be available." Healthwatch North Yorkshire

- When keyworkers, including paid carers, could not access a timely test, they were unable to go to work. This directly affected those who depend on their care and also impacted their workplace who were left short-staffed. Lack of timely testing even made some providers concerned about their ability to continue to provide care.

"Dental staff at local NHS dentist provider are concerned that they have not been able to get regular COVID-19 testing as they were (apparently) promised by NHS England. Staff are being told that there is no local testing capacity. They are becoming increasingly concerned that they won't have access to timely testing and will have to isolate unnecessarily and close the dental practice." Healthwatch Milton Keynes

- We have also heard from some concerned relatives about inconsistencies in care homes when it comes to testing residents and staff. There have been delays in testing for staff and residents, which meant they were potentially exposed and at risk.
- Although the government guidelines state that anyone who is discharged from a hospital to a care home should be tested for COVID-19, we have continued to hear about cases where this guidance has not been followed, potentially putting care home residents at risk. We've also heard that people who were going into a care home for respite care were refused a test.

"The hospital tried to discharge me without testing if I no longer had COVID-19. They kept saying I have got to go as I was medically fit. The government had changed the rules which insisted NHS hospitals test people before they were sent back to care homes. They did not do this. My daughter stated the law to them on several occasions. My care home refused to take me back until they had carried out a test." Healthwatch England

## Reasons for not having a test

- As the infection spread more in the northwest regions of the country, Healthwatch Bolton in partnership with Bolton Public Health, surveyed people about COVID-19 testing. They found that some people would not get tested even if they developed symptoms of coronavirus. Reasons for this included lack of confidence in the system to protect personal data, lack of trust in the accuracy of results or finding the information about testing confusing. People were also put off when they couldn't access a test easily, for example, when they didn't drive and didn't want to use public transport to travel to the testing site, or when they thought the testing procedure would make them uncomfortable. Some did not want to test positive and then have no choice but to self-isolate.

## What went well

- People had a positive experience when testing centre staff were friendly, provided a fast service and people received timely results. They valued the help they got to book a test and felt safe when hospitals tested patients before admitting them.

Child, 9 years old, was unwell with fever, sore throat and red rash on face and body for 5 days. Was seen by paediatric consultant who advised a COVID-19 test, this was performed and returned with a negative result within 24 hrs. This is how testing should be done, fast and efficiently if we are to control this virus. Great job NHS! Healthwatch Milton Keynes

## Talk to us

If you have a question about the contents of this update, please either contact a member of our [Policy or Research and Insight teams](#) or email [CV19Enquiries@Healthwatch.co.uk](mailto:CV19Enquiries@Healthwatch.co.uk)