

Vaughan Gething AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Minister for Health and Social Services



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref VG/00289/20

Dr Dai Lloyd MS
Chair, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1SN

28 August 2020

Dear Dr Lloyd,

Thank you for your letter dated 31 July.

As I set out in my response to the committee's report on the *'Health Inquiry into the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak, and its management, on health and social care in Wales'* we know that test turnaround times are vital to the effectiveness of contact tracing in controlling the spread of the virus.

We are working at pace with Local Health Boards and Public Health Wales on a number of improvements and you will be aware that I have committed an additional £32 million in funding to improve in-lab processes to enhance efficiency and speed. This investment provides for extra staff and equipment for the Public Health Wales regional laboratories based at University Hospital Wales, Cardiff, Singleton Hospital, Swansea and Ysbyty Glan Clwyd, Rhyl, so they can operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It also enables the creation of six Hot Labs at acute hospitals across Wales, which will have rapid, under four hour, testing equipment and new testing equipment for other conditions to free up staff to work on Covid-19 testing.

I expect the three regional laboratories will be able to operate 24 hours a day from October. The six new Hot labs will be up and running in November. Work is underway to implement these changes with Public Health Wales undertaking a recruitment drive to recruit up to 160 staff into the new roles.

There are some testing routes which are not set up to achieve a turnaround within 24 hours. Home testing for example cannot operate within this timeframe. Similarly Care Homes have some flexibility in how the tests are administered to reflect staff shift patterns and working hours. We will always seek to deliver the fastest time possible in line with the aims and purposes of the tests being undertaken.

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:
0300 0604400

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd • Cardiff
CF99 1SN

Gohebiaeth.Vaughan.Gething@llyw.cymru
Correspondence.Vaughan.Gething@gov.wales

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

It may be helpful to explain, the timeliness of results authorised is presented in the Welsh Government's weekly summary of testing data in the location of tests table. It is shown as the proportion of tests which had an authorised result within 1 calendar day, 2 calendar days and 3 calendar days of the sample being collected from the patient. Results are presented in calendar days as many tests processed at NHS Welsh labs are missing information on the time the specimen was collected. Work is ongoing to improve the reliability of capturing this information.

Data on the time taken to receive a COVID-19 test result is split by testing route, as this will have an impact on the time taken to complete the test processing. These testing routes are:

NHS Wales lab processed tests

- Hospital
- Mass and community: in person
- Satellite asymptomatic screening of key workers and residents
- Other

Non-NHS Wales lab processed tests

- Organisation portal
- Community testing: in person
- Home tests

Key worker screening tests may take longer to complete as these individuals are asymptomatic in the main and there is an extended delivery process compared to samples collected at test centres. For example, care homes may complete batches of tests across different staff shifts before returning the tests by courier to the laboratory to be processed.

Tests on symptomatic individuals at test centres or individuals being tested as part of pre-operative, pre-partum and oncology-related asymptomatic testing (i.e. clinical need) will have a different testing pathway reflected by the clinical need to be tested. These varying methods and pathways can have an impact on the turnaround time of the test.

The latest statistics show in the week ending 23 August that 86% of tests requiring a rapid turnaround time were completed within one calendar day. These tests are through the following testing routes:

- Hospitals processed via NHS Wales labs
- Mass and community testing: in person via NHS Wales labs
- Community testing via non-NHS Wales labs

In answer to your specific questions:

What work has been undertaken to investigate the causes of the delays in turnaround times, and what are the findings of this work?

Since June, an NHS TTP operational team has been in place to oversee the operational performance of the system. A key deliverable of the team is to review and agree an action plan on turnaround times (TAT).

An initial deep dive into the end to end process was carried out which included the following:

- A review of access to tests
- Sampling process inclusive of consistency of process
- Courier times and routes from sampling centres to laboratories

- Laboratory process work cycles
- Detailed analysis of all time stamps of the end to end process in order to review delays at the different stages

The findings highlighted opportunities for improvements in all areas of the end to end process with actions at operational and strategic levels.

Linked to this, are there problems in particular regions, and if so which areas or regions are particularly affected and what are the causes of the problems?

There are areas of improvement in each region with some parts of the improvement plan addressing all areas but the courier improvements have addressed some of the issues affecting more rural areas.

Can you provide information on the measures that have been put in place to deal with the delays?

Measures that have been put in places to reduce turnaround times include the following:

- Consistent operational process on booking tests to accurately time stamp process start
- Operational processes at sampling sites to adhere to best practice. This relates specifically to taking of tests, labelling of samples and preparation for courier
- Reduction in long courier journeys
- Laboratory processes from arrival of samples, testing platforms (machines) and operating hours
- Data for each stage required on a consistent basis inclusive of tests occurring in lighthouse laboratories
- Clarification from clinicians on timeliness of tests, to include those tests requiring an optimum pathway of 1 day
- Presentation of data to reflect the purpose for testing

Weekly meetings are held with each region on sampling and testing performance along with weekly meetings with DHSC on lighthouse laboratory performance. There is also a regular review with NWSSP on courier performance

What timeframes or milestones for improvements are you working towards?

The timeframe for improving the turn-around-times in Wales is an ongoing process, but as I have said I expect 24 hour lab working to be in place in October and the new Hot Labs in place in November. These will provide for much improved turnaround times as well as providing enhanced resilience as we approach the winter.

The actions outlined above are in place to ensure that every opportunity to improve performance is taken at a local and national level.

If these milestones are not met, what alternative actions will you take?

Through the strategy we have diversified our sampling and testing. This utilises the totality of the resources made available to us from the UK Government as well as making our own budget choices including bolstering our own workforce and ability to test more rapidly and on a consistent basis.

I hope that his information is helpful in informing the committee of the work that is being undertaken to improve turnaround times.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vaughan Gething". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Vaughan Gething AS/MS

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