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| HMPPS Prison Gold Command Learning Briefing  003/21: COVID-19 Testing  March 2021 | |
| Since testing was first introduced for HMPPS staff in November and for prisoners in October, we have expanded our testing provision significantly.  The purpose of this learning briefing is to streamline the available guidance on testing; provide suggestions and ideas of ‘good practice’ from across the estate to support establishments in increasing their uptake rates and help sites to explain the wider benefits to staff and their families, colleagues and those in our care, of agreeing to take part in testing. It is aimed at managers and staff who are involved in the organisation of local testing programmes, and staff who work in areas where prisoner testing is operating. You may have already seen some of the information shared within this briefing in other places, as we have a series of different work streams ongoing to help support establishments to increase their uptake rates.  We have previously issued a [learning briefing](https://intranet.noms.gsi.gov.uk/news-and-updates/notices/prison-gold-command-learning-briefing.) on the topic of co-operation with COVID-19 controls more generally, which establishments may also wish to refer to for guidance.  As establishments move towards Stage 3 and beyond of the National Framework, and restrictions in the community begin to be relaxed, it is now more important than ever that we can effectively detect cases.  There are no mandatory actions as a result of this briefing, the purpose is purely to share learning and ideas about increasing uptake. | Any Questions?  Please contact:  [**HMPPS Covid-19 Regime Management Team**](mailto:COVID19.Regimes&OpsGuidance@justice.gov.uk)  [**HMPPSTesting**](mailto:hmppstesting@justice.gov.uk)  [**Contact Tracing Team**](mailto:ContactTracingHMPPS@justice.gov.uk)  Email  Helpful Links:  [**Prison Testing Guidance**](https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/ersd-guidance/2020/04/28/staff-testing-in-england/)  [**The Prison Heatmap**](https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/ersd-guidance/2020/09/28/heat-map-for-reverse-cohorting-requirements-to-review-regime/) (including outbreak status of all sites)  [**Infographic**](https://intranet.noms.gsi.gov.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0013/1080220/COVID-19-fostering-compliance-and-cooperation-with-rules-and-decisions-Evidence-Based-Practice-Resource-Jan-2021.pdf): The evidence behind compliance. |

# Why is Testing so Important?

The primary purpose of testing is to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 within our sites. Identifying individuals with COVID-19 means we can more easily reduce the reproductive number (R number) and reduce the spread of the virus.

Engagement with testing by both staff and prisoners is therefore critical to safeguard the lives and health of our staff, their families and those in our care. Engagement with both LFD and PCR testing gives us the best chance of quickly identifying cases of COVID-19 and preventing the spread within sites.

**LFD**

* A Lateral Flow Device (LFD) test is a throat and nose swab which can provide results in 20 minutes.
* The swab sample is added to a fluid in the test kit. This fluid acts as an extraction buffer and is optimised to release viral antigens from the specimen if they are present. The antibodies are linked to coloured particles. The presence of a coloured band in the test region indicates a positive result for the SARS-CoV-2 viral antigens, while its absence indicates a negative result.

**PCR**

* A polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test is also a throat and nose swab which much be sent off for analysis.
* The results take longer to arrive that LFD tests, but they are generally regarded as more reliable and accurate.

# Home Testing

From 29 March, we will be rolling out LFD home testing for all staff. Establishments will be advised to continue offering in-establishment testing, but it is hoped that this change will help drive up rates by making testing easier and more convenient for people to take part in. Sites should continue to utilise the advice contained within this briefing to maintain testing rates once home testing is rolled out.

Self-Collect Testing allows staff to test, at their convenience, in the comfort of their own homes. By testing before leaving the house, we reduce unnecessary travel and the risk of transmitting the virus to friends and colleagues, keeping those who work and reside in prisons safe.

[Home Testing Guidance](https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/ersd-guidance/2020/04/28/staff-testing-in-england/) can be accessed via: <https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/ersd-guidance/2020/04/28/staff-testing-in-england/>

Staff Testing

Public Health England and Wales recommend that for testing regimes to be truly effective, we must secure at least **75% uptake** across the estate. Our ambition is therefore that all eligible prison and probation staff are tested for COVID-19 weekly or are accessing testing in the community. The data currently suggests that **staff uptake for PCR testing is 43% (**with considerable variation across the estate, and some data quality issues).

Staff testing remains voluntary, and we are not able to legally compel staff to take part in testing. We do however expect all staff to understand the importance of testing and play their part by participating in weekly testing and encourage managers to actively support their staff to engage. It is hoped that a positive culture where testing is perceived to be an accepted part of the daily routine will result in increased uptake, better protecting us all and our families against the virus.

**Why are staff not testing?**

Increasing Testing Uptake: Ideas from the frontline

* Establishments are encouraged to develop ways to **make testing part of an individual’s everyday routine of coming into work**. Picking up keys and a radio is part of the everyday routine and we wouldn’t enter a prison without doing both – we need to find ways of making testing equally as important and routine.
* Make access to testing as easy as possible. **Tests should be made available every day and at multiple times and locations** if possible so that shift patterns do not make it more difficult for staff to be tested. You can utilise outstanding bonus overtime hours from Wave 1 for volunteer administrative staff to support this process.
* Place a supply of PCR tests on each house block/wing/office space or in the Gate, to make collecting and returning tests as easy as possible for staff.
* Set up collection stations and drop-boxes so staff can collect their test at the start of their shift, do it when they have time to/in a place where they feel comfortable, and then drop it off on their way out.
* **Ensure test centre opening times are convenient and allow all staff to take a test.** We suggest that 7-9:30 and 12:00-13:45 are key times to have testing available.
* **Mobile test areas** like OMU, Reception and Kitchens on fixed days/times.

**Implications** of a positive result.

* Set up a small station at the prison entrance to ask staff if they want to take a test – this **‘face to face’ contact drives rates up.**
* **Signage in the gate** reminding staff that testing is available and directing them where to go.
* **Engage CTLs/testing staff to visit staff areas** to respond to concerns, dispel myths and remind staff of when and where they can be tested.
* **Use visual aids.** Consider offering stickers/badges to staff who have been tested to generate awareness, confidence and a buzz about the testing programme (whilst noting that those who have been tested still need to adhere to the other control measures). A range of helpful posters and signs on testing are available at [Staff Testing Resources](https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/ersd-guidance/2020/04/28/staff-testing-in-england/)

**Logistical issues** in accessing tests.

* Many staff have highlighted concerns about losing out on Payment Plus as a result of having to isolate, or the financial burden placed on their family if they were also required to isolate as a result of a positive test. Whilst this may be an unwelcome consequence of COVID-19, it is critically important that staff do continue to engage in testing to protect their colleagues and their families. **Staff should be encouraged to prioritise wellness of themselves and others over the potential temporary loss of income.**
* Having **more staff and prisoners engaged in testing should reduce the number of outbreaks across the estate**, and the number of required isolation periods should then reduce in the long run.
* Where staff have signed up to a bonus scheme and then test positive or have to self-isolate, **the bonus payment will still be received and staff are able to complete the pledged hours on return.**

**Forgetfulness** /testing is considered to be too inconvenient.

Accessing testing in the **community.**

* **Some staff are now also engaging with testing in the community via their children’s schools.** We encourage staff to do this but **it is important that this is recorded in our figures** so that we know that affected staff are still engaging in testing. We are currently looking into central mechanisms of reporting and recording this information.
* It is also government policy that staff access testing through their workplace wherever possible, allowing community home testing to be available to those who cannot access it through work.

**Discomfort** of taking the tests.

* Taking a COVID-19 test and doing a swab can be uncomfortable. To make the process as comfortable as possible for staff, sites are encouraged to **set up dedicated testing areas where staff can take their tests in a clean and private location.**
* **Operating a ‘drop box’ system** as suggested above allows staff to do these in their own time and in a place where they feel most comfortable doing the test.
* The imminent introduction of home testing will also allow you to test in the comfort and privacy of your own home, at a time that suits you.

The process is voluntary, therefore staff feeling it is their **personal choice** not to.

* **The decision about whether to engage with testing or not will ultimately be made by the individual.** Staff should be actively supported and positively encouraged to participate in testing unless they provide a reason not to. A move towards a cultural norm that staff and managers complete the test unless they opt out will be a positive move forward in preventing the further spread of the virus.
* Establishments **cannot force** staff to take part in testing if they do not wish to and should not place unreasonable pressure on those staff who genuinely do not wish to take part in testing.
* Make it clear to all staff and managers that they are urged to participate in regular testing in order to protect one another and their families. Line managers should engage with staff if they have opted not to take a test in order to understand the reason and support where possible. Continued positive focus on why testing is important is critical in encouraging staff to participate. We are also sending out comms from the centre highlighting that staff testing is crucial to protect staff and their families.
* Establishments may wish to set up challenges between different departments/groups of staff to compete for the highest uptake of testing and encourage healthy competition. These should not however be incentivised.
* Engage local union reps and other ‘**culture carriers’** in the establishment to get their support. Some establishments have reported that union reps and other influential staff have been instrumental in driving up testing rates. You should discuss suitable approaches with local trade unions to develop strategies which work for your prison. We are also engaging unions nationally to enlist their support in messaging. National trade unions are supportive of testing in order to protect colleagues and those in our care.
* Regularly check back with staff who have opted not to take part in testing to see if they have changed their mind. If establishments develop some momentum and a buzz around testing it is possible staff will change their minds if they see more and more of their colleagues agreeing to take part.
* There is some confusion regarding eligibility for PCR testing. **Staff cannot take a PCR or LFD test within 90 days of a positive result** due to increased likelihoods of false positives but it is important that they re-engage with testing following those 90 days. Staff who are on leave/absent from work should be removed from the eligibility figure. This will include staff on nights if they are unable to access testing, and staff on rest days following nights.
* It is important that establishment figures are adjusted to take those staff who are not eligible into account when completing returns.
* Our testing programme covers both **directly and non-directly employed staff (e.g contractors, partner organisations).** They should all be encouraged to take part.
* Establishments are encouraged to reinforce the narrative amongst the staffing group that engagement with **testing is crucial in allowing us to quickly detect COVID-19 cases and prevent the spread of the virus which is vital in keeping us, our families and those in our care safe.** The more people who engage in testing, the more likely we are to be able to detect cases and prevent an outbreak. The sooner we can reduce the number of outbreaks both in prisons and in the community, the sooner we will be able to get back to normal.
* Messaging should focus on educating individuals that **engagement with testing should continue even after vaccination, or if someone has already had the virus**. This is because people can still carry and transmit COVID-19 after having had it, and having had a vaccination. We are also testing to ensure protection against different variants. Sites may wish to utilise their CTLs, SMT and influential staff/prisoners in reinforcing this narrative. It is also important to communicate these messages through existing channels such as staff newsletters, meetings and through visual communications in staff areas.
* There is lots of misinformation and rumours around testing, it’s importance and potential impact circulating in the community**. Some of this is incorrect and is unhelpful in encouraging uptake of testing in both staff and prisoners.** The attached myth busting document pulls many of these common myths together into one place. This can be shared with staff and prisoners to help dispel these myths.

Misunderstandings about **eligibility.**

**Myths** about testing and concerns over safety.

People not **seeing the point** as they have already had COVID or have been vaccinated.

# Prisoner Testing

**What testing is available for prisoners?**

In addition to the PCR tests used as part of the prisoner reception process, our prisoner testing provision has now been expanded to include LFD testing on reception, prior to release, court appearances, transfers and ROTL. Specific guidance on LFD testing for prisoners is available at: [Prison Testing Resources](https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/ersd-guidance/2020/04/28/staff-testing-in-england/)

Currently the PCR testing take-up rate for prisoners is 78.3% and the LFD testing take up rate is 82.5%. These figures are positive, but it is important that we continue to keep these figures high through reinforcement of the purpose of testing.

**Why is it important we ask prisoners to engage in testing?**

The **Reception PCR Testing programme** remains a crucial defence for our establishments against the seeding of COVID-19 into our populations. Testing enables early identification of COVID-19 cases and can therefore help to prevent outbreaks amongst prisoners and staff by allowing us to quickly isolate cases and prevent the spread of the virus. This in turn helps to protect our staff and their families.

Engagement in testing is also important in reducing pressure on establishment Reverse Cohorting Units (RCUs) as it allows us to reduce the time that prisoners must spend reverse cohorting from 14 days to 7+ where two negative test results are received.

**LFD testing** on reception, prior to transfer, release or court appearance is important as it allows us to detect COVID-19 cases prior to movement in/out or around the estate, which means it is easier for us to prevent the spread of the virus and control any potential outbreak.

**How can we encourage them to engage?**

Every effort should be made to encourage prisoners to engage in testing even though participation is voluntary, and no prisoner should face any punitive action because of their decision not to take part. No financial reward, incentives or recommended changes to privileges can be offered to prisoners for taking part in this study. It is, important to inform prisoners of the benefits of engaging with testing (including both outbreak and business as usual testing).

It is also important to dispel any myths that prisoners might have heard about what happens if they do not engage with testing. The myth busting document can be shared with prisoners and includes some general myths around testing and its impact. On the next page are some common prisoner-focused myths about testing, which sites may wish to make available to both staff and prisoners.

**Myth Busting**



***Myth****:* Refusing an LFD test prior to transfer or a court appearance means that the prisoner will not be transferred/does not have to attend court.

***Fact***: If the prisoner does not give consent, they cannot be tested; however, testing is voluntary, and the transfer/release/court appearance should still go ahead. The only exception is moves to an IRC where the move is dependent on being tested Annex I. Specific advice for court appearances can be found in Annex G. (Annexes available at: <https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/ersd-guidance/2020/04/28/staff-testing-in-england/> )

***Myth:*** If a prisoner is tested on release and the test comes back positive, their release will be delayed.

***Fact:*** A positive test result will not delay release; it just means that extra support will be put in place to ensure that the risk to the community/the prisoner’s family is reduced as much as possible. In the case of discretionary release prisoners, release can be delayed following identification of COVID-19 where the release accommodation does not allow effective self-isolation. Further guidance on this is available at: <https://hmppsintranet.org.uk/ersd-guidance/2020/04/15/cohorting-and-population-management/>

***Myth:*** Taking part in testing means sharing all of my personal information with the Government.

***Fact:*** We do have to collect some information as part of testing, but this is stored very securely and is only shared with necessary people and organisations like the NHS. This does not involve the collection of any details which are not already on an individual’s healthcare record.

We will ask you to complete and sign a consent form which contains personal information about you:

• Full name

• Your signature to confirm consent

• Prison number

To get your result, we must register your details online and this includes the following information about you:

• First and Last Name

• Date of birth

• Gender

• Ethnic Group

• NHS Number (if known)

• Whether you have symptoms and the date they started

• The prison address where you currently reside

• The unique number for your test sample

The LFD swab is only used for COVID testing and is destroyed once the sample has been tested.

Positive results are shared with the national Test and Trace scheme.