**Mandatory Testing and Testing Frequency in Prisons in England & Wales**

Testing continues to be our primary defence against COVID-19 incursions and is important in identifying and isolating infected cases at the earliest opportunity. All HMPPS staff should take part in testing in order to keep their colleagues, prisoners and all vulnerable persons safe from COVID-19. The effectiveness of testing has been particularly evidenced since the onset of Omicron, with the proportion of infections in staff and prisoners decreasing as testing has increased.

Since the temporary introduction of daily and mandatory testing in December, we have seen uptake of testing improve greatly and, whilst the number of outbreaks across prisons during this time has been high, control measures, such as testing has contained the scale and severity of outbreaks.

## On Mandatory Testing

It was agreed that daily and mandatory testing is subject to frequent review and that once the assessment indicates daily and mandatory testing is no longer a reasonable and proportionate measure it will come to an end. Given the reduction in prevalence and the reduced risk of Omicron it has been decided that mandatory testing is no longer proportionate and as of 3 March 2022, the mandatory element to testing is no longer required.

Testing, however, continues to be vital in containing the spread of covid-19 within prisons and so all staff are strongly encouraged to continue to test at the frequency outlined below. We thank you for your participation so far and are keen for testing to continue at the high levels it has been. Doing so will protect you, your colleagues, those in our care, regimes, and vulnerable people from outbreaks and severe outcomes.

There remains the potential for re-introducing mandatory testing either nationally or locally in future, if proportionate to a heightened risk.

## Testing Frequency

Additionally, it is now proportionate that the frequency of testing can be reduced. Staff will be strongly encouraged to undertake testing as follows: Staff testing is set at a minimum baseline of;

* **1 x PCR and 3 x LFD per week for higher risk sites, and**
* **1 x PCR and 2 x LFD per week for stage one sites.**

Only sites which are deemed to be at stage one would move to a minimum of 2 x LFD per week. All other (higher risk) sites would have a minimum level of 3 x LFD per week.

Additionally, Governors who think (for example, through indications from the surveillance hub or an increase in positive results) that their prison may require a higher level of testing than the minimum level should consult Health Protection Team leads and OCTs, as well as conducting a health and safety risk assessment to determine whether a higher level of testing (up to daily) is more proportionate to local risk.

**Visitor Testing**

Current pre-visit testing requirements will remain in place at least until the end of March. Social visitors will not be asked to pay for a pre-visit test, noting that we will provide further advice on longer-term visitor testing plans**.**

## Further review

We are considering the future testing strategy for April onwards and the balance between wastewater-based surveillance and targeted testing based on risk and vulnerability. We will need to agree advice, arrangements and responsibilities with health partners (UKHSA / DHSC / NHS / Wales Govt).  We will provide a further update in the coming weeks.

## Assurance, Reporting and Further Steps

* **Prisons should continue to strongly encourage staff to undertake routine testing, as we move away from government restrictions towards personal responsibility.** High levels of uptake across the system will limit the spread of infection, keep people safe, and support sites in understanding spread and assessing risk.
* Removing the mandatory testing requirement means that sites no longer need to undertake the visual assurance checks put in place to monitor daily testing compliance.
* All sites must continue to submit their weekly data on the smart survey
* Test kit capacity remains available to order
* Please continue to test, encourage all staff to test and ensure that all staff have signed a consent form as provided in the staff testing manual
* Staff will continue to follow guidance from their Health Resilience Lead and line manager and will be advised to not attend work if they have symptoms or have tested positive for COVID-19. Staff who are contacts of positive cases will continue to be offered the relevant HMPPS return to work testing program
* Governors should remove any material in their prisons which refers to mandatory testing. New material and additional comms for staff will be issued shortly.

## Support

If you have any questions, please contact HMPPSTesting@justice.gov.uk or COVID19Ops&Guidance1@justice.gov.uk