



Matt Wrack General Secretary
Bradley House, 68 Coombe Road,
Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey KT2 7AE
fbu.org.uk | @fbunational
020 8541 1765 | office@fbu.org.uk

Circular: 2020HOC0268MW

Date: 22 April 2020

To: All Members

Dear Brother/Sister

House of Commons briefing – Covid19 testing

I am writing to draw your attention to the attached House of Commons research briefing paper published 20 April. The Commons library produces these in-depth reports on topical issues periodically and this one pulls together a summary of the government's position on and action taken on COVID-19 testing thus far.

Types of test

After outlining the importance of testing for the tracing of the virus and for protecting individuals with or in close proximity of an individual with it, the paper explains the two tests. There is the RT-PCR swab test widely used by the NHS to determine if the virus is present in the individual at that time. The limitations of this 'antigen' test are that it will not detect if the virus has been and gone, or in the early, asymptomatic phase of the virus.

Antibody tests are in development which will determine if an individual has previously had the virus, even asymptotically. It will be a serological test which takes a blood sample. If defensive antibodies have developed in the individual they have presumed immunity and therefore could resume life without social distancing limitations, although this is a highly contentious point of debate. So far, millions of antibody tests of this nature have been purchased by the government but have failed to function.

Capacity

As the Fire Brigades Union has repeatedly highlighted, the UK is missing daily targets on the number of tests carried out. In early March, around 10,000 antigen tests were being carried out per day and by late April there is capacity for 20,000 per day. This remains significantly fewer than European and Asian countries rates of daily testing.

The paper explains that medical opinion is that the UK should have used January and February, when the virus was at its peak in other countries, to expand COVID-19 testing capacity, procure PPE, and establish a plan for when it reached the UK. However the government took no such action.

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This has also laid bare structural issues such as a lack of equipped laboratories and of chemicals needed for the tests. Since international travel restrictions began, the UK government has been unable to procure necessary materials from overseas.

The lack of emergency planning for a crisis of this type was laid out to all members in a circular 24 March (2020HOC0176MW).

The tripartite agreement reached by the FBU, the employers and the NFCC on 26 March and amended on 16 April makes it clear that firefighters are frontline workers in this crisis, facing a real and severe risk of infection in the course of their work. Additionally, following a negative test members would then be able to return to work if previously self-isolating. On 20 March, the FBU wrote to the government explaining the need for firefighters to be included in the high priority testing category. However, as explained in this research paper it was only on 27 March that the government even announced that testing would be extended to frontline NHS staff in England. The slow pace was further highlighted by reports on 1 April that only 2,000 of 500,000 NHS staff had actually been tested.

Please read the briefing paper in full and disseminate to members. It provides a detailed and evidence-based account of the testing saga so far, with the government's failure to prepare for the inevitable laid bare.

Best wishes.

Yours fraternally

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Wrack', written in a cursive style.

Matt Wrack
General Secretary

Att.

MW/sll