

Adults and wellbeing scrutiny committee - 21 September 2020

Questions from councillors

Initial question

From: Councillor Kevin Tillett

Is the Covid-19 testing facility at Merton Meadow in Hereford working to full capacity?

Response

From: Sarah Smith, consultant in public health

The Mobile Testing Unit (MTU) has been deployed every day at Merton Meadow since 14 August, which is an improvement over the previous rota which amounted to four days on and then one day off. Recent reports via the DHSC, suggest that the MTU is operating at 100% capacity daily which means that once this reached, bookings for the site will temporarily closed (although slots for bookings may reopen throughout the day). There is some evidence to suggest that on a daily basis, the testing capacity allocated to the Hereford MTU is not the maximum it is capable of delivering, and this would be in line with the current strategy of diverting testing capacity to the areas that are experiencing significant increases in community transmission. This strategy also includes prioritising care home testing (which uses the same type of laboratory capacity as the MTU) and we are starting to see some improvement in the timeliness of reporting for the care home testing regime.

Supplementary question

From: Councillor Kevin Tillett

My initial question arose from the concerns that have been raised by local residents and I am sure that this has happened to most councillors. There was a particularly distressing account of a toddler who was very ill having to be driven to Merthyr Tydfil as the nearest test centre, and other residents who are concerned about relatives in care homes. So my question is that, given that the council does have responsibility in some key areas of concern, what plans are there to improve testing capacity within Herefordshire?

Response

From: Karen Wright, director of public health

The mobile testing unit is available every day and the information that we have is that it is running to 100% capacity. The reason for this is that nationally the laboratory capacity is being deployed to those areas where there are greater pressures. The number of swabs that are allocated to mobile testing units outside of those priority areas has been reduced. So even though we are running to 100% capacity, 100% is not as many swabs as could be done. So what are we doing about this? We write on a regular basis to raise concerns about the issue, as my director of public health colleagues do and other people in the system do, to say that actually 'something needs to be done about this'.

We are planning on increasing the offer across the county through the establishment of local testing sites, which will be walk-in offers in the market towns but, at the moment, until we get a greater allocation of the laboratory capacity for the national system that puts us in a difficult place to be able to roll that system out.

The other thing that we have done is that we have commissioned a swabbing service from Wye Valley Trust; there is the swab that is taken and then there is the testing that is done in the laboratory. So they have increased their laboratory capacity through access to laboratories in Birmingham and they will help us, in individual circumstances, to be able to resolve some of those situations. In the case of the one example that you have identified with a toddler, had we been aware of that through the outbreak control hub, we may well have been able to help to say to Wye Valley Trust 'can you help us here, we have got a particular situation'. We cannot do it in every case but we have responded to a number of situations to help those individuals.

If you have got people in schools, schools do have a handful of swabs and they are designed for those people where they have got concerns that parents may not actually get the child swapped, so they can use those to help with that offer and they done, I believe, in some situations.

So we can use our own local Wye Valley Trust Service and we can keep pushing nationally to say 'we have got to have more testing offer in place'. We had somebody, for example, who works in Herefordshire but lives in Worcestershire and they helped us to get somebody tested who was quite urgent.

In terms of the care homes, there is regular testing that does take place in care homes and that system is in place. If we do have a situation where there are any outbreaks, then we do have capacity for testing and swabs through Public Health England who will step in and provide that support, and that has worked well.

So I absolutely share your frustration, it isn't good enough nationally, and we are putting all the pressure that we can with our partners and with our regional colleagues to say 'we do need more capacity locally'. I think we have heard nationally that it is coming on board and in the interim we do what we can locally to support that.

If there are any other circumstances, please do get in touch with the outbreak control hub and let us know because what we are doing is gathering all the evidence and then we are using that evidence to push nationally to say 'we need capacity here locally'.

[Note: At the time of publication of this document, details of the Covid-19 outbreak control plan and contact information for outbreak control hub were available at:
www.herefordshire.gov.uk/community-1/emergency-planning-herefordshire/6]