

Sheffield City Region Mayoral Combined Authority
11 Broad Street West
Sheffield, S1 2BQ

23 September 2020

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State Health and Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

Dear Secretary of State,

COVID-19 Testing Capacity in South Yorkshire

As the number of COVID cases and rate of infection rises across the country, particularly in towns and cities across the North and Midlands, there is a need for everyone to play their part in controlling the virus.

Despite the unstinting work of our NHS and local authorities, in South Yorkshire the situation is extremely precarious given the growing rate of infection. It is imperative that this trend is reversed, and we reduce substantively the number of new cases, an ambition I know we both share.

Getting what were stubborn infection rates of infection under control earlier in the summer was only possible with the support of your Department and through an extremely thorough programme of community testing. However, the current availability of tests means we are unable to deploy the same approach to tackling the virus. It is unacceptable that people are unable to get tests or face long waits for the results.

There is no bigger priority for the country than the immediate resolution of the current capacity and timeliness of the testing system. Without this it is impossible to understand and manage the scale of the problem we face. This is essential in retaining public trust and faith to follow the guidance that it is given.

Now is the moment to act decisively, before we see more lives, jobs and businesses across South Yorkshire put at risk. For this reason, I would strongly urge you to immediately utilise the excellent, strategic capabilities within our Armed Forces to help manage the current crisis regarding testing. Their logistical expertise exemplified by the rate at which they established the Nightingale Hospitals would be as of great a use now, as it was then. The country must

draw upon every resource at its disposal if we are to manage the risk posed by COVID in the days, weeks and months ahead.

Therefore, I also urge you to:

- Leave no stone unturned to immediately unlock **laboratory testing capacity** to increase the number of tests that can be processed, including the use of pillar 1 facilities to bridge the gap in the interim before national capacity increases in October. I am happy to explore this in South Yorkshire with local partners.
- Urgently introduce **priority access to testing for our key workers**, whilst I welcome the announcements you made in this regard yesterday, this needs to include an additional category of key workers such as our emergency services and others on the frontline to ensure our essential public services can continue to function.
- Provide **clearer public messaging** regarding the need to isolate for the full 14-day period if experiencing COVID symptoms and when unable to access a test.

I know that you are acutely conscious that winter, and all its existing pressures on health and social care, is coming. You may recall that long before Covid I raised with you the need for preparation to reduce Winter Excess Deaths. It is absolutely critical that we have a fully functioning testing system in place as soon as possible so that we can effectively monitor and manage the spread of the virus.

Without an effective testing system and having clear, accurate data about where and how the virus is spread, we will sleepwalk into a second COVID peak. It is the Government's duty to do everything they can to keep the public safe, and this will also require the continued collective efforts of all tiers of government working together to beat COVID.

I stand ready to do whatever I can to help in this regard.

With my best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dan', followed by a long horizontal line.

Dan Jarvis MBE MP
Mayor, Sheffield City Region Mayoral Combined Authority