



COVID-19 national testing programme

Behind the scenes of care home testing delivery with the National Labs Programme

We spoke to John Murray, Project Manager with the National Laboratories Programme team, about the work involved in setting up care home testing. John's role was to help deliver a consistent COVID-19 testing service to the care home and care-at-home sectors across Scotland.

John explains some of the work that's gone into supporting care home testing, which has been essential to the COVID-19 response. Initially this included rapidly ensuring all care homes in Scotland had access to polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and lateral flow test devices (LFDs). More recently, it's meant supporting the creation of a helpline for care home PCR and LFD testing queries as part of a COVID-19 testing support service from NSS.

How did your role supporting the care home testing project evolve?

"Care homes were the first group to start using care pathways for care groups, enabled by the NHSScotland regional hub laboratories once they'd opened. To begin with, I looked at how we could support the care home sector before, during and after each care home had transitioned to using the regional hub laboratories. My focus then moved to supplying care homes with LFDs so they had capacity to test care home visitors.

"Recently, I've moved to transition planning. While the National Laboratories Programme's initial priority was to roll out the testing service to care homes, there was an ongoing need to support the care home and care at home sectors to establish a business-as-usual COVID-19 testing operation.

"The first part of this to launch was a helpline for care home PCR and LFD testing queries. Our colleagues in the National Contract Centre played a key role – the support and structures they already had in place were vital. Our April Customer Satisfaction survey found 96% of our customers were either very satisfied (89%) or satisfied (7%) with the service provided by the helpline.

"It's been a busy, dynamic programme – a remarkable job by an outstanding team of motivated people."

What other successes have there been so far?

"I'm particularly proud of are the work on lateral flow testing.

"We introduced LFDs to all care homes in Scotland, so that visitors could be tested before seeing residents. We shipped the initial batch to 1,074 care homes within about two weeks from getting the go ahead from Scottish Government (SG).

"This was an incredible achievement and so much work went into making this happen at pace. We worked with logistics colleagues to source devices, estimating demand across Scotland. We were able to ship the first batch of LFDs before Christmas.

"In addition, we arranged essential training and support with SG colleagues. Our LFD training programme ran from December to February, covering how to use LFDs as well as the clinical rules. The training sessions were well-attended and well-received – and they were backed up by live support, so we could respond to any issues and queries raised by users."

Beyond the National Contact Centre, who else has been involved?

"Working with a whole range of organisations across NHSScotland and the wider public sector has been essential to the success of this project – Scottish Government policymakers, clinicians, representatives from care homes, care-at-home, and from health and social care partnerships to name a few.

"Within NSS, colleagues from operations, marketing, finance, Programme Management Services, strategic sourcing, procurement, and Digital and Security all contributed. Collaboration brought the right mix of insight and expertise to make sure we achieved results."

What kind of challenges have you faced?

"Timescales were the biggest challenge. With COVID-19, the public sector has needed to act and react in a way that's beyond anything we've had to do previously. It was all about delivering well and delivering quickly. The performance by those involved has been amazing and demonstrates the art of the possible."

Are there areas where you've seen innovation help to move things forward?

"A good example is the national booking system. Scotland needed a system to book tests, and link an individual who gets a PCR test with the results from a test kit processed by the Regional Laboratories. The NSS Digital and Security team made this happen at a pace which has been quite mind-blowing, and it's made a huge difference – not only in the care home sector, but across Scotland.

"And thanks to feedback from users, bugs continue to be fixed, and new features added. This collaborative approach has greatly contributed to the success of this project. It's an innovation we should all be proud of."

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