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**Ed Humpherson, Director General for Regulation**

Will Moy  
Chief Executive  
Full Fact  
(by email)

6 August 2020

Dear Will

**COVID-19: test times response at PMQs 3 June 2020**

Thank you very much for your letter of 14 July outlining your concerns with the availability of the data underpinning the Prime Minister's response during Prime Minister's Questions on 3 June. I am sorry it has taken so long to respond. This is because my team has investigated two distinct issues: what data were available to the public on 3 June; and what data were available internally with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and Government. On the second of these issues, we have liaised with officials at DHSC to understand the source of the data and have received excerpts from the NHS Test and Trace unpublished management information included in the Prime Minister's briefing material.

We have focused on Pillar 2, as this was the focus of the briefing material. We conclude that:

- At the time the statement was made (June 3) there were no statistics publicly available to support the statement. DHSC now publishes weekly [NHS Test and Trace](#) data, but this series of data only started to be published on 11 June and did not then include the times taken to return the test results. It was not until 2 July that the first data on the times taken to return test results were published. We support the publication of these turnaround times since they are of significant public interest.
- The data published on 2 July supports the first sentence of the Prime Minister's response, which was that 'We already turn around 90% of tests within 48 hours.' This statement is consistent with the published data<sup>1</sup> for Regional Testing Sites and Mobile Testing Units.
- The rest of the Prime Minister's response ('The tests conducted at the 199 testing centres, as well as the mobile test centres, are all done within 24 hours...') accords with the briefing he received, which was drawn from internal management information. That management

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Tables 3 and 4 of the NHS Test and Trace weekly bulletin

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/nhs-test-and-trace-statistics-england-16-july-to-22-july-2020>

information was not in the public domain at the time and is based on figures for the 'day of test' and receiving a result in the following 24 hours. A subsequent decision was made to publish statistics based on a strict definition of 24 hours and 48 hours, rather than directly publishing the management information, so the statement is not directly verifiable with reference to publicly available sources.

As my office has made clear in past statements<sup>2</sup>, when management information is used publicly and prominently to inform Parliament, the media and the public, it should be published in an accessible form, with appropriate explanations of context and sources. We have brought this to the attention of DHSC.

I am copying this letter to William Wragg MP, Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Select Committee and Stephen Balchin, Head of Profession for Statistics at DHSC.

Yours sincerely



Ed Humpherson  
Director General for Regulation

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<sup>2</sup> <https://osr.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/news/covid-19-production-and-use-of-management-information-by-government-and-other-official-bodies/>