

Campaigners call for local, trusted, publicly provided test and trace scheme to replace the failed centralised, top-down, privatised 'NHS' Test and Trace

Speaking this morning to Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Janet Phillips said:

Professor Gabriel Scally, a former Regional Director for Public Health, said recently Covid was:

... an eminently preventable disease and [the death toll of tens of thousands of people] could so easily have been avoided.

The Government has put 22 billion pounds into the centralised organisation misleadingly named 'NHS' Test and Trace.

Councillors can calculate how much they could have done if Oxfordshire had had their proportion of this money to carry out their own work, and how many lives would then have been saved. The work of 'NHS' Test and Trace is carried out by a string of private companies with no prior experience of testing and tracing – Serco and Sitel, to name just two. It has been a scandalous failure.

Councils have done their best – Oxfordshire included – to provide the present scheme with an 'add-on' for the hard to reach. But it is not possible to fix 'NHS' Test and Trace because its model is fundamentally flawed. The only way to fix testing and tracing is to hand the money and the work over to the experts in our local public health bodies. 'NHS' Test and Trace should be scrapped without delay.

Time is of the essence in infection control. If we want to improve testing and tracing, we need to set up local and public testing and tracing now.

Pressure is building on the Government. Some Conservative MPs, including Jeremy Hunt, are now urging the Government that testing and tracing, to be effective, needs to be managed and carried out locally.

We cannot wait, though, for the Government to change its mind and provide the necessary funding: we need to make a loud and forceful demand for the resources to be provided now, while at the same time map out what the local operation would look like.

It could:

- Decide who should be tested, where and how.
- Choose which groups should have access to repeat testing, whether they have symptoms or not; for example, health and care workers, teachers and students
- Use local public laboratories for a faster turnaround of results
- Provide financial and moral support to people who need to self-isolate
- Address issues of inequality, and how it contributes to transmission and self-isolation problems
- Deploy fast tests in specified situations
- Involve GPs
- Develop a strategy for reducing infection throughout Oxfordshire to zero.

To this end, two activists (Liz Peretz and Isabel Tucker) and I – campaigning for We Own It and Keep Our NHS Public – have been in discussion with Craig Simmons and Louise Upton of the Oxford City Council; and they, together with the leader of the Lib Dem group, Andrew Gant, have proposed a cross-party motion that will be put to the vote on 30th November. It challenges the current, failed system by asking the Leader of the Council to:

- call on our Director of Public Health and the Leader of the County Council to support more local authority engagement in testing and tracing;
- and to write to our MPs asking them for their support.

I call on those from the Oxford City Council to support this motion on 30th November, and I urge those of you who are from other parts of Oxfordshire to put similar motions to your own councils.

Thank you.

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