

Testing in BCP and Dorset Councils: current issues and actions

Background

This briefing has been provided to give an update on the availability of COVID-19 testing in Dorset, covering both Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch (BCP) and Dorset (DC) Councils. Local residents have raised concerns that booking a test for themselves or a family member has been difficult often resulting in being given a slot in another part of the country or not being able to get one at all. This is understandably very frustrating and worrying for people who are showing symptoms and need to know whether they need to take action to help protect family, friends, those they care for and their local community.

We also know schools have concerns over the availability of testing slots.

As a local public health team we have raised our concerns at various levels, escalating it through the regional Director of Public Health, and Test, Trace and Contain Board, our contacts with MHCLG and other regional meetings we attend.

We are also taking the following actions to mitigate the local demand for tests as much as possible.

1. Communicating key messages that you only need a test if you have symptoms – local radio and social media coverage.
2. Providing clear guidance through the Local Resilience Forum on testing for essential workers, including a pathway to ensure rapid testing remains available locally.
3. Developing a local community swabbing service for people in high risk groups who may not be able to use pillar 2 community testing, and for people who require a test for planned care but are unable to access hospital pre-admission testing sites.

Testing

Testing for current COVID-19 infection takes place in hospitals (known as Pillar 1) and the community (known as Pillar 2). Pillar 1 testing is led by the NHS and Public Health England. Pillar 2 testing is led by the Department of Health and Social Care and is not run by local councils or local NHS services. On the ground, it is provided and run by independent contractors. A number of fixed sites and mobile units operate around the country taking swabs from people who have reported symptoms.

In Dorset the contractor is Mitie who run one fixed site in Creekmoor (known as a 'regional testing site') and 2 mobile units which operate from a range of locations around Dorset. Home tests can also be ordered which are sent in the post for people to use themselves and then post for processing. Once the swabs have been taken, either at home or at testing sites, they are then sent to laboratories specifically equipped to process them.

Capacity

There is currently a limit to the amount of tests these laboratories can process, around 245,000 per day for the whole of the UK. This includes both Pillar 1 and Pillar 2 tests and capacity can be flexible between the two types of test. A recent increase in the demand for testing has meant that these laboratories are running at full capacity and with a backlog. At

present, demand for tests is greater than the laboratories' capacity to process them. Because of this, laboratory capacity has been prioritised for processing of tests taken in hardest hit areas, such as the North West.

In practice, this means that areas with lower rates of COVID-19, such as Dorset, are only able to test as many people as they have been given laboratory capacity for, despite having the ability to do more. This has led to either the reported long distances some people are being offered for a test or the inability to book a test at all. Home tests have been similarly prioritised, i.e. they are only sent out to people where there is laboratory capacity to process them.

This is by no means an ideal situation and we are doing everything we can to represent the views of local residents to the Department of Health and Social Care.

The Government has committed to increasing capacity by opening further 'Lighthouse Laboratories' and is due to give an update on the situation this week (w/c 14th September 2020).

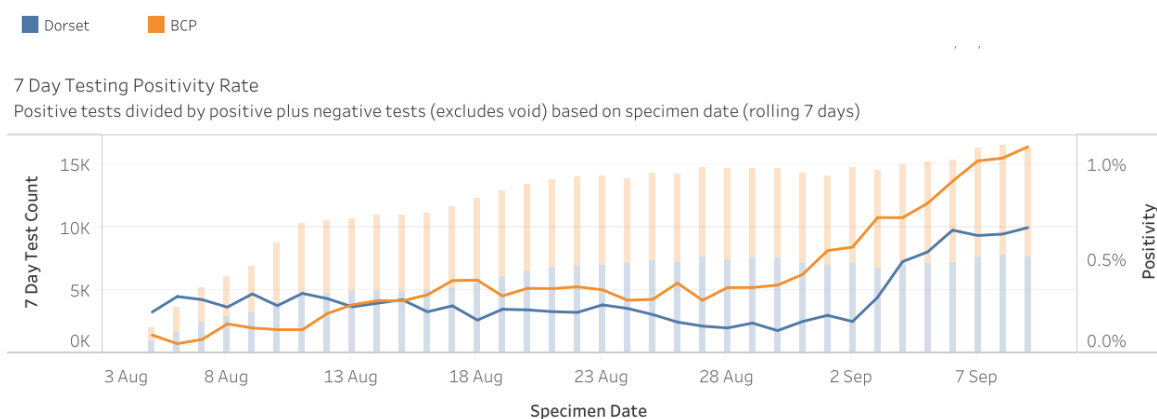
Local Testing Numbers

Latest available figures show that the amount of testing in Dorset has risen consistently since July, with more than 15,000 tests currently being carried out every week. Although testing numbers in Dorset are still gradually increasing, they are not increasing at the same rate as demand due to the reasons given above. Latest numbers of tests by council area are presented in the table below.

Weekly COVID-19 Tests

w/c	30/07/2020	06/08/2020	13/08/2020	20/08/2020	27/08/2020	03/09/2020
BCP	5,437	5,698	6,915	6,992	7,634	8,668
Dorset	4,691	4,834	6,008	7,275	7,139	7,653
Total	10,128	10,532	12,923	14,267	14,773	16,321

The proportion of positive tests was fairly steady for both councils at around 0.3-0.4% until the beginning of September when cases began to rise. The current rate is 0.7% for Dorset Council and 1.1% for BCP Council. The equivalent figure for the UK is 1.3% and for England is 1.5%.



What to do if you need a test

We know people have been experiencing delays in booking tests and we would urge you to continue trying to book a test, more slots are being added throughout the day. Please remember, you should only book a test if you have **COVID-19 symptoms** or if you have been specifically advised by NHS services to book one. If you have been asked to self-isolate for 14 days you do not need to book a test, you just need to self-isolate for the full amount of time and book a test if you develop any of the symptoms:

- a high temperature (37.6 degrees or higher)
- a new or continuous cough (coughing consistently for a long time)
- and/or a loss or change to your sense of smell or taste

You can also get a test for someone you live with if they have these symptoms.

A runny nose, sore throat or headache are not considered COVID-19 symptoms without any of the above.

Self Isolation

Self-isolating means you do not leave your house even to buy food or other essentials. You will need to get someone else to do that for you. Do not let anyone else into your house while you are self-isolating.

If you cannot get a test but have any of the symptoms (or you receive a positive test result) you should remain at home for at least 10 days.

Other members of your household, including those who do not have any symptoms, should then also stay at home and not leave the house for 14 days.

If you have been identified as a close contact of someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 you must self-isolate for 14 days. There is no need to book a test unless you experience COVID-19 symptoms.

Sam Crowe

Director of Public Health

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