

Full Fact
2 Carlton Gardens
London
SW1Y 5AA

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By email

Ed Humpherson
Director General for Regulation
Office for Statistics Regulation

Dear Ed,

We're aware, following the UKSA's recent correspondence with the Health Secretary, that the OSR is working with the Department for Health and Social Care on improving testing data. As you'll be aware, Full Fact has been checking claims on testing from all sides throughout the pandemic, and we wanted to raise a specific set of concerns around inaccurate and unpublished data with you.

On 3 June, during Prime Minister's Questions, [the Prime Minister said](#) in response to a question from the Chair of the DHSC Select Committee:

"We already turn around 90% of tests within 48 hours. The tests conducted at the 199 testing centres, as well as the mobile test centres, are all done within 24 hours, and I can undertake to him now to get all tests turned around in 24 hours by the end of June, except for difficulties with postal tests or insuperable problems like that."

In relation to the first part of the claim - that 90% of tests are done within 48 hours - [we've been unable to verify](#) the figure because not all of the data is published.

On the second claim - that all tests at testing centres and mobile testing sites were done within 24 hours at the time of the claim - we now know that is incorrect.

At the time the data hadn't been made available, but a DHSC spokesperson told us "we'd point you back to what the PM said yesterday...tests done at regional test centres and mobile teams are already done in 24 hours."

Full Fact
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020 3397 5140
team@fullfact.org

fullfact.org

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[Data then published](#) on 2 July showed that actually only a small proportion of tests were being done in this timeframe. In the week to 3 June 19% of tests at regional sites and 5% of tests at mobile testing units were turned around within 24 hours.

When we put this new data to DHSC, it did not respond directly, merely sending over a list of background points, stating the government's targets and current performance.

We are concerned about a lack of willingness from the government to engage on specific questions of accuracy. If the Prime Minister is not willing to correct the official record based on the government's own data that has now been published, then the public needs a clear justification for what he did mean at the time.

This is not the only example of inaccurate, misleading or unpublished data on testing we have seen. Full Fact [has written](#) about the government's unjustified claim to have hit its target of 100,000 tests a day by the end of April. New data published on 4 July shows that fewer than 100,000 tests were actually processed by a lab on 30 April, although many more were posted. We've also seen the Health Secretary [attempt to clarify claims](#) he made more recently about a 24 hour turnaround of certain testing to suggest '24 hours' can be interpreted to include more than 24 hours.

We recognise the unique challenges faced by the government in the production of statistics at this time of crisis and that data will inevitably need to be revised and updated. But we believe that much more can be done to improve the presentation and communication of data, and there must be a willingness to correct inaccurate claims once they are identified, no matter who said them.

The current crisis is ongoing and we don't know how long it will last. It has never been so important for the government to maintain its status as a trusted source of information: it will be critical to getting out of the crisis with as little harm to people's health and livelihoods as possible.

Yours sincerely,



Will Moy
Chief Executive, Full Fact


Full Fact
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