Microbiology Society welcomes the findings of the UK Covid Inquiry on Test, Trace and Isolate, drawing from the Society's evidence

Thursday 19 November, 2026

The Microbiology Society response to UK Covid-19 Inquiry Test, Trace and Isolate (Module 7) Report findings that the Government's failure to recognise the significant testing capacity available, including in the university sector, contributed to a testing crisis which led to the loss of lives.

The report draws on the evidence provided by the Microbiology Society, that the capacity to process tests could have been increased – while the Lighthouse laboratories were being established – by using academic and local laboratories.

The Society welcomes the findings of the Covid Inquiry on Test, Trace and Isolate (Module 7) and its recommendations, which provide clarity on the extent to which the expertise of the microbiology community was sidelined in the development of the nation's systems for testing for the SARS-Cov-2 virus during the pandemic.

The Society was clear in its witness statement to the Inquiry that important advice in testing – based on members' deep expertise – was not listened to from the outset, despite its repeated offers of support.

The report recognises "the strength of the UK's scientific and research capability", emphasising that with political will, the UK could have had more testing capacity much faster if it had drawn on the huge network of labs around the country with the right equipment, skills and people and that would have saved lives.

In our statement to the Inquiry we said:

- The Microbiology Society believes that throughout the pandemic but particularly during its early stages as testing strategies were developed, the strong UK academic expertise, resource and infrastructure was not used effectively. Support to do so was offered by the Society and not accepted.
- It is the belief of the Society that not properly considering the testing capacity that was available in public laboratories led to a reduced ability to ramp up testing in the early stages of the pandemic.
- The Society encourages the Governments of future pandemics to better engage with the expert community. Throughout the pandemic, communication with the community was inconsistently managed: it was unclear how experts could feed into testing strategy and what expertise was being used.
- Due to a lack of understanding and two-way engagement with the academic community, delays were imposed on the staffing of Lighthouse Laboratories which could have been mitigated. The associated lack of trust and sense of alienation felt by the academic community could have been avoided by effective early engagement with this community.

Reflecting our concerns, the findings of the Inquiry into Module 7 state that:

- Despite showing world-class scientific capability by developing a test in January 2020, the UK lacked co-ordinated laboratory capacity to deliver testing.
- Existing private and academic laboratories represented a valuable but under-utilised resource in the early months of the pandemic. Many were effectively 'ready to go', with established equipment, laboratory space and trained staff. There was typically a delay of one to two months between the decision to establish a Lighthouse laboratory and it becoming operational. Making greater use of existing sites could therefore have provided a reasonable, and possibly more cost-effective, short-term means of increasing testing capacity while longer-term solutions were developed.
- Since the pandemic, most Lighthouse laboratories have been decommissioned, and the testing infrastructure created for Covid-19 no longer exists. Although it would not be appropriate to maintain full testing infrastructure outside of a pandemic, the UK government and devolved administrations must be prepared to scale up again.
- The UK government and devolved administrations should prioritise developing a clearer understanding of the existing life sciences and diagnostic expertise available across the UK, alongside stronger working relationships with those sectors. It is vital that, in a future outbreak of a highly infectious disease, decision-makers have immediate access to accurate and

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comprehensive information about the infrastructure available to support testing.

Looking forward

The current Government has responded to a number of the Inquiry's earlier findings and recommendations via the March 2026 publication of its *Pandemic Preparedness Strategy*. In which it states that: *"A future pandemic is a certainty….Most likely caused by a virus, though it could also be caused by bacteria or fungi."*

This is why the Microbiology Society remains uniquely placed to provide expertise to the Government on future pandemics.

In response to the findings of the Inquiry Module 7 report, the Society calls for:

- Direct collaboration with UKHSA to provide access to the Society's expert microbiology community as a core group in the development of pandemic preparedness plans and to advise on staff and laboratory capacity required during a future pandemic.
- The Government to consider a model where a network of laboratories are regulated and approved to act as a diagnostics hub when needed during a future pandemic, given that the centralised laboratories established during the Covid pandemic have not been maintained.
- This could involve following models established in Germany and South Korea to accredit labs as emergency, 'surge' testing centres. The Society supports, and can contribute to, a feasibility review on investment into a comparable laboratory funding model, to strengthen routine diagnostic capacity and provide a more resilient and flexible infrastructure for future pandemics.

The Society's principal lesson for the future is that the next time a microbial pandemic happens, we need vastly improved mechanisms for putting the UK's strong academic expertise, resources and infrastructure at the heart of the scientific response. We are ready to work with the Government and its agencies to achieve this. Should the next crisis not involve microbes, we make the same appeal that the Government take the advice of expertise that exists across our world-leading science community.

About the Microbiology Society

The Microbiology Society is a membership charity and a not-for-profit publisher for scientists interested in microbes, their effects and their practical uses. It has a worldwide membership based in universities, industry, hospitals, research institutes, schools, and other organisations.

Our members have a unique depth and breadth of knowledge about the discipline. The Society's role is to help unlock and harness the potential of that knowledge. We do this by bringing together and empowering communities that shape the future of microbiology. We generate public benefit by fostering communication both among communities of microbiologists and between microbiologists and other communities who can translate that knowledge in useful ways.

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