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Lewis Macdonald MSP
Convener
Health & Sport Committee

By Email.

3 February 2021

Dear Lewis

CARE HOME TESTING: TRANSITION FROM UK GOVERNMENT TO NHS SCOTLAND

I am writing to update you on the ongoing work to transition routine testing of staff in Care Homes from the UK Government testing programme to the NHS Laboratories.

We have significantly expanded lab capacity in Scotland including the design and build of three new NHS Regional Hub Laboratories. I'm pleased to say that all three regional hubs are now open as the East Hub in Lothian went live on 21 January. As you know, the East Hub met with some unforeseen construction issues and the team have done a remarkable job to complete the project in such a short space of time. As was done with the other labs, the East Hub is in the process of scaling up its capacity and all three hubs will provide a total of 22,000 tests per day when fully operational.

It is my intention to transfer all routine testing of staff in care homes through the regional hubs and I can advise that we have now transferred 886 care homes, which is 84% of the total homes in Scotland. While we had planned for all homes to have been transferred by the end of January 2021, there has been a delay in transferring the remaining 16%.

Firstly, we agreed with the Care Home Programme Board that we would not transfer any care home which is currently dealing with a Covid-19 outbreak. 40 homes in this category have now come out of the outbreak status and will transition by 14 February. The remaining homes in this category will transfer at a later date, but only once they can safely move out of the outbreak status. With that in mind, we cannot put a firm date on the final transfer date but it is not likely to be later than the 31 March 2021.

As you will appreciate, there are also a number of regional concerns that must be considered. Some concerns were raised that the new courier might not be able to meet the needs of the Highlands in relation to travel distance and the winter weather. A plan has now been developed with the courier and the remaining care homes in NHS Highland will be transferred in the week commencing 15 February. Once these homes, and the 40 homes

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leaving outbreak status, have complete the transition, we will have transferred 94% of Scotland's care homes by 21 February.

Since my last update on care home testing, I have also supplemented the weekly PCR testing for the care home workforce with an additional requirement for twice weekly lateral flow device testing. This followed Sage advice that enhanced staff testing could provide additional protection for care home residents. Roll out started on the 4 January and we hope to be in a position over the coming weeks to start publishing associated data but the early indications are that care homes have responded positively to this additional testing requirement. This response is a huge credit to care home leadership and the workforce and demonstrates their ongoing commitment to maximum protection and mitigating risk of transmission.

My officials and I will continue to work with local partners to complete this transition which will give us greater control over turnaround times and reduce our reliance on the UK Government Lighthouse Lab Network.

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