

Multi-billion-pound UK track and trace system failed to reduce COVID-19 spread

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A report by the parliamentary Public Accounts Committee (PAC) on the National Health Service Test and Trace Service (NHST&T) reveals the criminal plundering of taxpayers' by the Conservative government to enrich private pandemic profiteers.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government hailed the shambling Test and Trace system as "world beating" after setting it up last May. Johnson justified the tens of billions handed over from the public purse to the Test and Trace system as it enabled the pandemic to be comprehended in a "very granular way".

PAC chair, Labour MP Meg Hillier, said that "despite the unimaginable resources thrown at this project, NHST&T cannot point to a measurable difference to the progress of the pandemic," adding, "British taxpayers cannot be treated by government like an ATM machine."

The critical remarks of Hillier are self-serving. Everything that Johnson has been able to get away with since the beginning of the pandemic is thanks to the de facto government of national unity with the Labour Party, first under former leader Jeremy Corbyn and then under Sir Keir Starmer. As a result of their collusion, the death toll from COVID-19 now stands at more than 150,000.

If anything was "world beating" it was the corruption and theft of public money involved, the corollary of the callous indifference in ruling circles to the lives of the elderly, infirm and vulnerable.

Last week, Johnson told Tory MPs in private, "The reason we have the vaccine success is because of capitalism, because of greed my friends... It was giant corporations that wanted to give good returns to shareholders".

Through the operation of the NHST&T, the greed of capitalist parasites, many among his own party and their friends, was never clearer.

The amount doled out to the private sector under the NHST&T is massive, equating to around a quarter of the

entire NHS annual budget. At least £37 billion was allocated to NHST&T, which is principally run by 22 private companies, including Serco, Deloitte, Boots, DHL and Amazon. In all, £17 billion worth of contracts to purchase Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) were awarded to private companies, including those run by Tory party cronies.

Everything was done to make sure the private sector could make a killing. The High Court recently ruled that the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) acted unlawfully by not publishing the Contract Award Notices within the legal time frame.

The government has recommended to the NHS pay review body that health-workers receive only a 1 percent rise, yet a fraction of the funding allocated for the test and trace private sector profiteers—£6.8 billion—would be enough to give one million health workers in England a 20 percent pay rise.

Even ardent defenders of the capitalist class within the PAC expressed alarm at the scale of government largesse to the corporations. Sir Nicholas Macpherson, permanent secretary at the Treasury until 2016, tweeted that the NHST&T system "wins the prize for the most wasteful and inept public spending programme of all time."

Reliable test, trace and quarantining systems are vital in preventing COVID-19 transmission. But the UK government rejected putting such systems in place, as they embraced a criminal herd immunity policy in March of last year. The government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Valence, openly stated that the government's strategy was not to "suppress" the virus entirely and "it's also not desirable because you want some immunity in the population..."

It was only after a growing opposition from the working class at the prospect of up to half a million deaths that the government was forced to impose a national lockdown last spring. The Tories primary concern was then how to

reopen schools and the economy to restart the flow of profits.

But before it could send millions back to workplaces, it had to roll out a test and trace system. In May 2020, Conservative Party peer, Baroness Dido Harding, was appointed to run the test and trace system and given a massive wad of money, knowing that this would soon line the pockets of the corporate elite, including Tory Party cronies.

The PAC report notes that by the end of October 2020, “NHST&T had signed 407 contracts worth £7 billion with 217 public and private organisations, of which 121 (or 70% of the contract value) were assigned as direct awards without competition under emergency measures.”

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) told PAC that “in November and December, it had awarded a further 207 contracts worth £1.3 billion, of which around 30 were direct awards under emergency regulations.” By the end of the year, DHSC had signed “over 600 contracts for NHST&T-related services”.

Five months after launching NHST&T, there were 2,300 highly paid consultants and contractors working on it. Up to the beginning of November 2020 alone, they belonged to 73 different suppliers in NHST&T “with a total consultancy cost of approximately £375 million”.

The PAC noted, “When we took evidence in mid-January the Department estimated that from Deloitte alone there were still around 900 contractors on the books. In early February, NHST&T said it was still employing around 2,500 consultants, at an estimated average daily rate of around £1,100, with the highest daily rate paid of £6,624. It is concerning that the DHSC is still paying such amounts—which it considers to be ‘very competitive rates’—to so many consultants.”

This huge team of consultants failed to grasp the impending disaster of the second wave of COVID-19. The PAC states, “In September 2020, NHST&T significantly underestimated the increase in demand for testing, when schools and universities returned. Laboratories processing community swab tests were unable to keep up with demand, leading to large backlogs, limits on the number of tests available, longer turnaround times and some people having to travel hundreds of miles to get a test.”

It was reported last October that Serco and Sitel, involved in non-complex contact tracing, had managed to reach only 60 percent of contacts despite winning lucrative contracts. Serco alone was expected to rake £165 million profit out of these contracts.

Regardless of the evidence that the Lateral Flow Device

(LFD) test was not effective in detecting positive cases of COVID-19, DHSC announced last December that it would roll out mass testing in early 2021. The guinea pigs were to be school children and college and university students, to keep them in classes and their parents in work. Tens of thousands of LFD kits were eventually distributed among NHS workers—after many contracted the virus in the second wave—having no effect whatsoever on its spread.

“To support the roll-out of mass testing, as well as the continued increase in testing capacity, the government allocated a further £7 billion to NHST&T in November in addition to the £3 billion already made available for mass testing for 2020–21”, PAC wrote.

Professional bodies including the British Medical Association had already raised concerns over mass LFD testing as they result in a significant amount of false negatives compared to laboratory PCR tests. Only about three quarters of COVID-19 positive patients will get positive results from LFD tests according to published evidence. When LFD tests are self-administered accuracy falls to 40 percent.

Given growing public anger at the handing over of vast sums to the private sector while deaths reached the highest level of any European country, the PAC felt obliged to offer a few criticisms. “There is still no clear evidence to judge NHST&T’s overall effectiveness,” it wrote. “It is unclear whether its specific contribution to reducing infection levels, as opposed to the other measures introduced to tackle the pandemic has justified its costs.”

This is no more than a slap on the wrist for the government. The summary notes politely, “We appreciate that NHST&T had to be set up and staffed at incredible speed, but in particular it now needs to wean itself off its persistent reliance on consultants and temporary staff.”



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