**Oxfordshire County Council
New Road
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**Ansaf Azhar
Director of Public Health**

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For the attention of Chief Executives,
Managing Directors and business owners in
Oxfordshire

Dear colleague,

I am writing to let you know about the availability of free rapid COVID-19 testing for workers who do not have any symptoms of the virus.

Around one in three people with coronavirus have no symptoms and so regular testing is an important tool to help us stop the spread of the virus in Oxfordshire. It helps identify and self-isolate those who are unaware they are carrying the virus, which protects colleagues, customers and communities alike. The rapid spread of the highly infectious new variants of COVID-19 makes the testing of those who work outside the home an even greater priority.

There are two ways in which your staff can access symptom-free testing: workplace testing and community testing.

Workplace testing
Businesses of any size can sign up to the government's free coronavirus workplace testing programme, which provides free lateral flow tests for employees who cannot work from home. Previously this scheme was only open to businesses with 50 or more employees, but as of 6 March this scheme is available to all businesses.

Please register your interest by 31 March to benefit from free tests until the end of June. You can find out more and register at www.gov.uk/get-workplace-coronavirus-tests.

Community testing
If you do not have workplace testing in place, your staff who need to leave home to work can take advantage of Oxfordshire's symptom-free testing. Anyone who works outside the home and who does not have access to workplace testing can get a free rapid test as part of Oxfordshire County Council's symptom-free testing programme.

The county council is working in partnership with the city and district councils to provide rapid testing in locations across the county. We currently have three testing centres:
- Spiceball Leisure Centre in Banbury (OX16 2BW)
- The Beacon in Wantage (OX12 9BX)
- King's Centre in Oxford (OX2 0ES)

Slots for symptom-free tests can be booked online. The test takes just 15 minutes using a lateral flow device and it involves taking a swab of the back of the throat and inside the nose. The swab is then given to trained staff at the test centre, who process the test on-site. Results are given within an hour by text message or email. Anyone who tests positive is told to self-isolate and follow the national guidance.

We recommend that people get tested every week. This will help pick up a COVID-19 infection early and reduce the risk to others.

Symptom-free testing is aimed at those who cannot work from home. Those who can work from home do not need to be tested. The exception to this is childminders, whom we are encouraging to get tested regularly.

You can find further information at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/symptomfreetesting. I have also attached a message for you to tailor if you would like to inform your employees about this new service.

Self-isolation

It is a legal requirement for people in England to self-isolate if they test positive or are contacted by NHS Test and Trace. Workers have a legal duty to inform their employer about a positive test for themselves or somebody they share a home with. If an employee reports to you that they have tested positive, you will need to advise them of the self-isolation rules.

Employers who knowingly require or encourage staff to come to work when they should be self-isolating will also be liable for fines, starting at £1,000 and rising to £10,000 for repeated breaches.

Smaller businesses may be able to claim back Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) using the Government's rebate scheme: www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-back-statutory-sick-pay-paid-to-employees-due-to-coronavirus-covid-19. The SSP Rebate Scheme covers all types of employment contracts, including part-time employees as well as those on agency contracts, flexible or zero-hour contracts and fixed-term contracts. We would encourage all employers to offer full pay during sick leave where possible so that no one is disadvantaged by complying with the self-isolation rules.

Those on lower incomes who cannot work from home and have lost income as a result will be eligible for a £500 Test and Trace Support Payment, which is administered by the district councils. Further information about the payments, together with advice and resources to help individuals who need to self-isolate, can be found at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/selfisolate.

Clinically Extremely Vulnerable Individuals

The government has recently announced a national expansion of the number of individuals being asked to shield because they are considered Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) to COVID-19. In addition, all CEV individuals – both new and existing – are advised to shield until 31 March.

As an employer, this means that employees who are currently shielding will need to protect themselves for longer, while other members of staff may have received new advice which recommends that they work from home. If CEV individuals cannot work from home, they are advised not to attend their workplace. CEV individuals are advised to discuss options with their employers and where possible should work from home. The Coronavirus Job Retention scheme may be open to you for individuals who are unable to work from home, and employees may be eligible for statutory sick pay.

People who have been recently added to the shielded list will now be prioritised for vaccination alongside those already considered CEV. However, all CEV individuals – whether they have received the vaccination or not – are advised to continue shielding.

You will find guidance for businesses on supporting CEV individuals at www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-safely/protect-people.htm#vulnerable_workers.

Thank you, once again, for your support and cooperation. The continued support of businesses across Oxfordshire in helping suppress the virus and reduce infection rates is of vital importance as we start to ease out of lockdown.

Yours faithfully,

Ansaf Azhar
Director of Public Health
(*Chair – Oxfordshire COVID-19 Health Protection Board*)