

Deloitte Accountancy Firm Gets Another Huge COVID Contract - For 'Crazy' Plan to Test Millions Each Day

Operation Moonshot could be the biggest NHS privatisation in history, and civil servants are shaking their heads in disbelief.

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The British government had plans to test everyone in the country for coronavirus every week by October – and it's handed most of the work to the global accountancy firm Deloitte, openDemocracy can reveal. Labour MP Clive Lewis has dubbed the deal "potentially the biggest NHS privatisation in history".

Last week, civil servants were instructed to carry out the plan for all 68 million people in the UK to be tested weekly, according to a senior civil service source familiar with the conversations. The ambitious cross-departmental plan, dubbed Operation Moonshot, anticipated a second peak of COVID-19 in the winter.

Civil servants greeted the scheme with widespread incredulity, given the government's previous record on testing and tracing, which has lagged well behind most other leading economies.

Those tasked with implementing the plan expressed doubt that it was even possible. One senior source told openDemocracy: "We all double-checked the figures," and they described the plans as "crazy".

The source also informed openDemocracy that Deloitte was being given the contract to deliver more than half of the work.

Clive Lewis said:

"Why not give the contract to the NHS?" adding: "It's too easy to get the impression that this government will hand out contracts to whoever happens to be mates with the right minister."

In the week since civil servants were instructed to make plans for weekly testing, the government has already seriously scaled back Project Moonshot, from testing 10 million people a day to 4 million a day – a reduction of over 40 million a week. It has also pushed back the plan's target delivery date to February 2021, in recognition of the incredible scale of the challenge: "Timelines have already slipped," conceded one source.

Whilst there is widespread support for more aggressive action against the pandemic, openDemocracy understands there is considerable cynicism across government agencies at the resources being ploughed into ministers' ambitious, headline-grabbing targets, which are widely seen as unrealistic.

The original plan required UK testing capacity to rise from [326,000](#) tests a day at present to nearly 10 million. It would have involved the UK's already overstretched labs multiplying their capacity by 31 times, within six to ten weeks.

Even the revised target involves completing twelve times as many tests a day. Asked about this capacity problem, a senior government planner sarcastically replied to openDemocracy: "Capacity is somehow solved by reducing the accuracy of the test."

All this comes in the midst of a major reorganisation of health authorities, with [plans leaked in last week's Sunday Times](#) for Public Health England to be scrapped next month, and replaced with a new National Institute for Health. The new institute, [designed by McKinsey consultants on a £563,000 contract](#), is likely to play a leading role in delivering the testing plans.

The scheme also raises questions around compulsion. [Health secretary Matt Hancock has already said he does rule out compulsory testing](#), but the sheer scale of the new plan comes as a surprise, and there are serious concerns around forcing groups such as children to be tested.

There are also huge uncertainties around how enforcement would work, what any new legislation would say, what criminal penalties could be applied for non-compliance and whether police forces have the time or inclination to enforce the scheme.

In recent weeks, openDemocracy has revealed [a string of controversies](#) around companies linked to the Conservative Party leadership being handed major contracts.

There are currently fifteen workstreams within Project Moonshot. Eight have been handed to Deloitte. Other workstreams are in the hands of the Ministry of Defence, plus at least one other well-known private-sector consultancy.

Two days ago, [Matt Hancock likened population-wide testing to a "moonshot"](#) – an acknowledgement of the government's codeword for the plan.

Deloitte didn't provide a comment for this article, referring us to the Cabinet Office.

Update, 22 Aug: the Cabinet Office passed our inquiries to the Department for Health and Social Care, who have now said "we will continue to challenge capacity, and have routinely set and met ambitious targets", and that they have announced a series of testing pilots.

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