

Track and Tracing: UK Government Accused of New ‘U-turn’ on Local COVID Contact Tracing

Exclusive: None of Serco or Sitel's contact tracing staff will be deployed locally, government admits – as councils face new lockdowns and funding shortages.

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The government has come under fresh criticism today over its controversial COVID-19 Track and Trace scheme, after admitting that, despite this week's promise to "[strengthen regional contact tracing](#)", the major firms involved in the controversial scheme will not actually be redeploying any of their staff to work regionally with local councils.

Outsourcing giants Serco and Sitel, tasked with running the scheme, have been under fire over reports of call handlers reaching [less than half of the contacts of people](#) who tested positive for COVID-19 in recent weeks, at a cost of [over £900 per person traced](#).

This week the government [announced](#) a “new way of working” in which “NHS Test and Trace will provide local authorities with a dedicated team of contact tracers for local areas” – a move welcomed by experts who had long advocated a more localised approach.

However, the government now stands accused by Shadow health minister Justin Madders of “U-turning on the U-turn” – after admitting to openDemocracy that no Serco or Sitel staff would be moved to work with local councils.

Oldham – the site of a major COVID outbreak – had to build its own contact tracing system and is, according to Council Deputy Leader Arooj Shah, “already looking at what vital services we may have to cut to cover our COVID costs because the government hasn’t given us what it said it would”.

openDemocracy also understands that other councils tackling major COVID outbreaks are asking existing staff to redeploy from other work, and local citizens to volunteer unpaid, in order to provide the contact tracing services needed.

Allyson Pollock, a member of independent SAGE, has described the situation as “outrageous” – warning that large-scale lockdowns are “catastrophic for the economy [and] an indicator that the current test and trace system is not working”.

Failures to reach enough contacts nationally means, she says, that “local authorities are mopping up clusters after 2 days and that’s too late”.

She characterised the current system as a “misallocation” of public funds amounting to “maladministration” by the central government.

Serco and Sitel have been awarded contracts that could see them receive up to £718 million of public money, although the government has refused to say whether this figure has now been reduced, given the one third cut in staffing levels announced this week.

A 'new way of working'

This week the government [announced](#) that the national Track and Trace service "will move from 18,000 to 12,000 contact tracers on 24 August with remaining teams to be deployed as part of dedicated local Test and Trace teams".

The media reported this as a major change to the current system. The Times [reported](#) that "A third of the call centre staff are to be laid off and the rest deployed regionally to work with councils... Call centre staff who work nationally will be split into regional teams after complaints they were too remote from the people they were asking to isolate." The [BBC](#) and rest of the press reported in a similar vein.

But under close questioning from openDemocracy, this version of events has fallen apart. In fact, the only people who will be "split into regional teams" and "deployed as part of dedicated local Test and Trace teams" are an entirely separate, much smaller group of clinically trained professionals working for Public Health England and the Department of Health, known as "Tier 2", none of whom are part of the multi-million pound Serco/Sitel contracts.

The Department told openDemocracy that Serco and Sitel's contracts had been extended beyond the initial review date of 23 August, and the outsourcing giants would continue to employ 12,000 generic national call handlers – known as "Tier 3" – but not, for the time being at least, in locally ringfenced teams. The Department confirmed that, "Our initial focus on ringfenced teams will involve Tier 2, and we will continue to review and develop our model."

No extra cash for councils for now

Shadow Health Minister Justin Madders told openDemocracy there needed to be a "more straightforward and honest approach" by government rather than "what sounds like smoke and mirrors", and urged the government to "swiftly reconsider their position", adding: "If the government are going to continue to spend millions of pounds on a falling model with the private sector that doesn't deliver the results we need then this has massive implications for the ability for the rest of the country to deliver the challenges that lie ahead."

The Serco and Sitel contact tracing contracts specified payments of £190 million in total for the first three months, but also allow for the firms to be paid up to an additional £528 million as they are extended. It is not currently clear how long the contracts have been extended for, though as openDemocracy reported [earlier this week](#), Sitel workers have been told it is for an initial period of a further 8 weeks from 24 August.

Asked about redirecting any of that money from the outsourcing firm to councils, the government said they had already allocated £300 million in June to be shared between local authorities "to support their local outbreak plans."

The government acknowledged that those local authorities who have developed their own

schemes “have used existing resources thus far”. They added they would “work with local authorities to refine that approach and make best use of all resources to achieve the best outcome.”

“Maladministration”

Oldham Council’s Labour Deputy Leader and COVID-lead told openDemocracy: “It’s impossible to do as good a job from a call centre hundreds of miles away... The government is insisting on spending public money with Sitel and Serco for reasons that can only be ideological.”

“The evidence is clear that we are better at this than private firms working nationally. It would be cheaper and deliver better results if the government trusted local authorities to take the lead.”

“Putting more responsibility on local authorities while funnelling resources to the private sector is even more unsustainable,” he said, adding that “we see people sat in call centres with nothing to do but watch Netflix because they’re not engaged in local teams.”

The extension of the private sector contracts to provide a broadly similar service as currently is “extraordinary”, Allyson Pollock, professor of public health and a member of independent SAGE, told openDemocracy.

“It’s actually maladministration because you’ve got misapplication and misallocation. There’s no transparency about the mechanics of the system and about how the money is flowing.”

Professor Pollock added: “The government needs to get this right so we can get on top of clusters. If local authorities are mopping up clusters after 2 days that’s too late, given that the national system is picking up less than 50% of cases. Councils should be doing the whole lot, not just the mopping up. Serco and Sitel are cherry picking and doing the easy bits and leaving the difficult stuff to local authorities.”

Campaign group WeOwnIt, which is calling for “not a penny more” to be paid to Serco and Sitel for these contracts, is organising a [day of action](#) on Tuesday 18 August.

The row comes amidst mounting disquiet about other major government COVID contracts which were similarly awarded [without competition](#), or [extended without consultation](#).

Serco earlier this week [said](#) that it had “played an important part in helping to reach hundreds of thousands of people who might otherwise have passed on the virus. Our team of call handlers has been 93% successful in persuading people to isolate where we are able to have conversations.”

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