



04 June 2020

Deputy Louise O'Reilly  
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Our Ref: HM/Communications

**PQ8171/20: To ask the Minister for Health the details of the proposed catch-up programme for screening services such as BreastCheck, CervicalCheck and bowel screen for the thousands of scheduled screening tests which have been postponed or missed due to Covid-19; the details of additional capacity confirmed to ensure that this catch-up can take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter**

Dear Deputy O'Reilly,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

The National Screening Service's (NSS) four population-based, call-recall, national screening programmes: BreastCheck, CervicalCheck, BowelScreen and Diabetic RetinaScreen, have been paused until further notice. This move was taken on public health advice due to the situation with COVID-19.

The pause in community testing was put in place to protect patients and staff by complying with social distancing guidelines. In addition, the HSE temporarily redeployed staff and resources, where available, to the response to COVID-19. However, clinical staff continued to work within the programme.

Please be reassured that the safe restart of screening is a priority for the NSS. The four screening programmes are close to finalising their recommencement plans and determining the critical path to re-start screening. This is notwithstanding certain dependencies that remain outside the programmes' control.

These plans include:

- An analysis of the operation of treatment pathways
- Ensuring providers have full teams in place for delivery of the service in a timely way
- The provision of changed work practices in all our teams and a schedule for their implementation
- Use of PPE and clear infection control guidelines
- Close adherence to Public Health principles and guidance in order to keep patients and staff safe from COVID-19.

When restart dates are finalised, invitations for screening will be issued according to clinical prioritisation, taking the screening and treatment pathways into account.

The NSS has established a cross-functional working group to support the managed restart of its programmes. It is chaired by Dr Caroline Mason Mohan, NSS Director of Public Health, and Interim Clinical Director of CervicalCheck. The group will work with the HSE steering group chaired by Dr Colm Henry and Anne O'Connor, on the continuity of system-wide non-COVID healthcare.

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The Group is reviewing the individual programme plans for recommencement and providing a framework to support the safe restart of screening. The work of the group includes:

- Establishing protocols to comply with all HSE & Public Health social distancing and infection control guidelines, use of PPE gear, and reducing contact to protect patients and staff
- Evaluating the effect of safety protocols - such as cleaning of equipment and waiting room throughput in clinics - on capacity and activity within screening
- Assessing the operation of diagnostic and management pathways and the willingness of people to attend appointments
- Establishing a communications plan
- Reporting on the challenges and dependencies of screening within the wider hospital system.

The NSS is assessing the impact of new procedures on capacity. These procedures include cleaning, distancing, administration and other necessary arrangements. When we have a clear understanding of testing, assessment and treatment capacity along the entire screening pathway we will be in a position to report further on the resumption of screening services.

The recommencement of screening is underpinned by the assumption that there will be no worsening of the COVID situation & restrictions will continue to ease.

It is important to emphasise that screening is not the correct pathway for people who have symptoms. People who are in-between screening appointments, or waiting rescheduled appointments, are being asked to be aware of, and act on, any symptoms associated with the conditions being screened for.

If anyone has concerns about symptoms we urge people to contact their GP immediately. For other queries, she can call the Freephone information line on 1800 45 45 55, email [info@breastcheck.ie](mailto:info@breastcheck.ie) or [info@cervicalcheck.ie](mailto:info@cervicalcheck.ie) or [info@bowelscreen.ie](mailto:info@bowelscreen.ie) or contact their clinic directly.

I trust this information is of assistance to you, but should you have any further queries please contact me.

Celine Fitzgerald  
Interim CEO  
National Screening Service

