11th November 2020

Deputy Robert Troy
Dáil Éireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

Re: PQ 32745/20
Question: "To ask the Minister for Health if the Covid-19 Test Centre can be reopened in Athlone in view of the rise in cases and the increase in testing persons that cannot drive and will have to resort to travel on public transport to their nearest test centre".

Dear Deputy Troy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question which has been referred by the Minister for Health to the Health Service Executive for direct response.

The HSE provides Covid-19 testing in the community as part of its pandemic response. There are currently 37 Testing Centres in operation nationally, a combination of permanent Community Testing Centres and temporary "pop-up" Testing Centres. Currently all counties in Ireland have at least one Testing Centre with the exception of County Leitrim where a centre will open in November 2020.

As part of the HSE Test and Trace Operational Model a comprehensive assessment of locations for the establishment of Community Testing Centres was undertaken with the goal to establish at least one Testing Centre in each county and to ensure that well in excess of 90% of the population have access to a Testing Centre within a 45 minute drive from their residence. This assessment evaluated criteria, including suitability and sustainability of the location as a long term Testing Centre as well as the location of this centre relative to observed travel times to Test Centres. This concluded that the facility at St Loman's Hospital in Mullingar best met these criteria for a testing centre in Westmeath while the facility at Castlerea Fire Station best met the criteria for a testing centre in Roscommon. A Testing Centre has operated in Mullingar since mid-March 2020 and in recent weeks offered in excess of 450 appointments for testing on individual days. In Roscommon, while a Testing Centre has operated in Roscommon since mid-March 2020, the facility in Castlerea has operated since mid-May 2020 and has accommodated up to 200 appointments for testing on individual days.

At this time, there are no plans to open an additional Testing Centre in Athlone. However, the HSE continually monitors the demand for testing and attendance rates on both a regional and local level in order to ensure that Covid-19 testing is available to all persons quickly. As needed, increased capacity for testing is added. This is accomplished through the extension of Testing Centre opening hours and, as needed, the set-up of additional temporary Testing Centres. In addition, recently in response to challenges with attendance to testing, the CHO8 Community Testing Team deployed a

small team of testing staff on occasion to conduct testing for a cohort of persons at Athlone Institute of Technology.

Further, the HSE provides information on its website for members of the public in relation to attending for a Covid-19 test in the community. The content of the website provides detailed guidance on travelling to a test centre. A GP can request a home test if the person's medical condition makes them unable to attend a test centre, which is provided by the National Ambulance Service.

The HSE Covid-19 Community Testing Service is committed to the timely provision of safe, accessible, quality swabbing services within the community setting.

I trust this addresses your question.

Yours sincerely,

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Niamh O'Beirne
National Lead for Testing and Tracing