



21st December 2020

Deputy Denis Naughten
Dáil Éireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

Re: PQ 32937/20

Question: “To ask the Minister for Health if the Covid-19 response team has been assembled; the make-up of the team by profession; if the team is active; if it has been called into use; and if he will make a statement on the matter”.

Dear Deputy Naughten,

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

I wish to apologise for the delay in issuing a response to your above question.

Due to the current demands of the Covid-19 pandemic and the numerous queries we have received to date it has taken longer than I would've liked to respond.

The HSE rapidly implemented a Testing and Tracing Programme following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic earlier this year. The future service model for testing and tracing has now been designed and implementation is well underway for priority areas such as workforce recruitment, the test centre estate and technology improvements. This service model will aim to deliver a patient-centred service, accessible, consistent and be flexible to demand. This plan includes the recruitment of a dedicated workforce in addition to leveraging the clinical and operational expertise embedded in our community services and this work has already commenced. The operating model will take into account the evolving needs and future potential service demands in the context of Covid19 surges in disease transmission.

In addition we are developing escalation plans. This means we have in place standing capacity and surge capacity and a set of triggers for when surge will be needed to be deployed. There are a number of different aspects to the response team within the Testing and Tracing Programme and I have outlined these below.

Swabbing

We have 33 static testing sites open— our intention is to have one in every county, we are working to open one in Leitrim to complete this objective. In addition, we have a number of pop ups and are developing our pop up infrastructure and staffing to expand this feature. We have hired and on-boarded c.616 new community swabbers so far. This is a brand new role and these staff are now working in our centres all around the country. We will continue to hire until we have c.1,000 new people on-board (c. 900 WTE's). We plan to have the capacity to swab up to 25,000 per day.

Laboratories

We are building PCR laboratory capacity, which now stands at 140,000 and we continue to grow this. Our taskforce are also piloting antigen testing and looking to advise us on specific tests and environments for its use.



Contact Tracing

In contact tracing we are introducing a number of new service initiatives in the coming weeks to include source identification and active calling of cases regarding self-isolation. In addition, we have developed new technology which we can deploy if cases rise. The HSE currently has access to 731 staff, with 694 persons who are the new dedicated workforce for routine contact tracing at present with the remainder (23) redeployed from the Revenue Commissioners and 14 HSE staff. We will continue to grow this until it gets to 800 WTE, this may be in excess of 1,000 people due to part time working. We plan to have capacity to do 9,000 calls per day in our standing capacity, anything in excess of this will involve deploying surge capacity.

The Public Health Pandemic Workforce Plan includes investment in Departments of Public Health across the country. Aligned to this plan, the HSE will recruit 173 WTE permanent resources to departments to support all aspects of regional health protection response including contact tracing with the details provided below.

Discipline	Permanent Posts for Recruitment – Departments of Public Health (WTE)
Specialist in Public Health Medicine	1.0
Nursing	58.0
Senior Medical Officers	4.5
Surveillance	40.0
Admin	69.5
Total	173.0

Recent campaigns include Administrative grades (V, VI, VII) and Surveillance Assistants. Campaigns due to launch over the coming weeks include health protection nursing (various grades) and surveillance (various grades).

We continue to build agility in our system to meet the increasing community demand and making process improvements to our end to end test and trace system.

I trust this addresses your question.

Yours sincerely,



Niamh O'Beirne
National Lead Testing and Tracing