

25th November 2020

Deputy Bernard J. Durkan
Dáil Éireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

Re: PQ 33795/20

Question: “To ask the Minister for Health the extent to which the HSE remains capable of dealing with further surges in Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter”.

Dear Deputy Durkan,

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 future service model for testing and tracing has 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. While not yet concluded the expenditure for testing and tracing is expected to be in the region of €450m for the current year with a projected annual budget of €700m in 2021.

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.

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.500 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. 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 c.700 staff for routine contact tracing at present. This includes 550 newly hired people who make up our new dedicated contact tracing workforce – the remainder are redeployed from HR, Environmental Health and The Revenue Commissioners (23). By early December 2020 we will have in excess of 700 new dedicated contact tracing 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.

We continue to build agility in our system to meet the increasing community demand, examples of this include the outlined nationwide recruitment campaign for swabbers and contact tracers, standing up temporary swabbing sites and making process improvements to our end to end test and trace system.

I trust this addresses your question.

Yours sincerely,

Niamh O'Beirne

Niamh O'Beirne
National Lead for Testing and Tracing