

**10<sup>th</sup> November 2020**

Deputy Sorca Clarke  
Dáil Éireann  
Kildare Street  
Dublin 2

**Re: PQ 24106/20**

**Question: “To ask the Minister for Health his plans to address the growing public concern regarding the competency of Covid-19 testing and contact tracing services here”.**

Dear Deputy Clarke,

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 enhanced service model for Testing and Tracing is in the final stages of design with implementation underway for priority areas such as workforce recruitment and the Test Centre estate. 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 permanent 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.

We are continuing to implementation the service model for Testing and Trace including recruitment to enable the staffing of the service model for community swabbing, labs and contact tracing and estate improvement in terms of a permanent and sustainable testing centre and contact centre footprint.

We have three key parts to the Testing and Tracing process. Referrals for Swabbing, Laboratories, Contact Tracing.

#### **On Referrals for swabbing**

In the community today we have over 1,000 people deployed to swabbing, 269 are newly hired staff. We estimate on-boarding an average of 80 new staff per week. This is a brand new role and these staff are now working in our centres all around the country. We received 3,451 applications and 1,347 have been interviewed. We will continue to hire until we have at least 1,000 new people on-board.

The HSE continually monitors the demand for testing on both a national and regional level in order to ensure that Covid-19 testing is available to all people 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. There are currently 37 testing centres in operation nationally, a combination of permanent Community Testing Centres and temporary “pop-up” testing centres. We are meeting all demand for swabbing with over 90% receiving a swabbing appointment in less than 24 hours.

### **Laboratory**

Our laboratories process the vast majority of results in 24 hours or less. We have built testing capacity to 100,000 in May and we increased this to 140,000 in October. We have been able to meet all demand and continue to result patients throughout the peak demand period. We will continue to release further laboratory capacity in the Winter months as needed. Nearly all countries have struggled to meet testing capacity, but our capacity has been met since April.

### **Contact Tracing**

The HSE currently has access to approximately 700 staff for contact tracing at present. This includes 414 persons who make up our new dedicated contact tracing workforce. These are our new dedicated workforce. This week an additional 50 dedicated staff will be hired and on-boarded with a further 70 planned for next week and the week after. By 1<sup>st</sup> December 2020 we will have in excess of 700 dedicated contact tracing staff. Contact tracing times are currently 0.8 days to call the positive case and contact all of their close contacts and arrange their testing. While tracing came under pressure in mid October, we did get it back on track by Friday 23 October. Since then we have recruited significantly and continued to meet our target metrics of all tracing completed in less than 1 day.

### **Turnaround Times**

Overall our end to end turnaround time for a “not detected” case in the community is 1.8 days and for a “detected case” it is 2 days. Over 90% of people receive their test result in less than 48 hours from swabbing appointment which is a metric that stands up well internationally – the last majority will receive it in 36 hours or less.

We are continuously striving to make process and system improvements to meet increasing capacity requirements, to improve data quality and optimise turnaround times.

I trust this addresses your question.

Yours sincerely,

*Niamh O'Beirne*

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**Niamh O'Beirne**  
**National Lead for Testing and Tracing**