

25th September 2020

**Deputy Róisín Shortall
Dáil Éireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2**

Re: PQ22253/20

Question: “To ask the Minister for Health the number of staff needed per week for Covid-19 testing and for contact tracing, respectively in order to reach a full testing capacity of 100,000 per week; the permanent staffing level for Covid-19 testing and for contact tracing, respectively; the details of recruitment plans for staff in testing and tracing separately; and if he will make a statement on the matter”.

Dear Deputy Shortall,

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to your above referenced Parliamentary Question, which was submitted to the Minister for Health. The mobilisation to test and trace as part of our public health response has been an extraordinary challenge. The HSE has developed the existing testing infrastructure, taking unprecedented measures to build a robust end-to-end process with multiple pathways at great pace. However, today the HSE are in a position to conduct over 15,000 tests per day across our swabbing, laboratory and contact tracing infrastructure. The HSE have completed in excess of 1,100,000 samples tests to date and appointments for swabbing are now available on the same or next day.

There has been over 96,149 swabs taken between 15th – 21st of September in the community by Community Operations and the National Ambulance Service, in hospitals and as part of the serial testing programme. Approximately 59,836 of these were taken in community settings, c.19,043 of these were taken in acute settings, and 17,270 as part of serial testing. To deal with this significant increase, the HSE has put in place an escalation plan which mobilised teams very quickly over the last two weeks to augment staffing at testing and tracing centres. This plan includes the temporary re-deployment of staff from existing healthcare services to provide additional support to the testing and tracing services.

Current & Potential Staffing levels in Testing & Tracing

Resources have been redeployed throughout Covid-19 to meet testing demand at various points. Data as of mid-July indicates we have over 1700 staff redeployed to work across in testing, tracing and laboratories. Defense Forces also provided personnel to Testing and Contact Tracing – 525 WTE at the height of the pandemic in March/ April. Currently we are

recruiting so that staff who have been temporarily seconded to swabbing centres and contact tracing centres can return to their permanent roles. The balance of a return to service continuity in terms of ensuring core HSE services are delivered alongside the delivery and maintenance of our COVID specific services is a priority.

Multiple recruitment channels are being exhausted now and over the coming weeks and months. To-date job specifications have been developed for Contact Tracing and Swabbing. The Job Specification for the role of Community Swabber has been the subject of an extensive engagement process with both internal and external stakeholders including trade unions and recruitment options including an online bespoke National Recruitment Campaign which is live.

Contact Tracing: There are currently approximately 280 contact tracers in eight contact tracing centres around the country (HSE Galway, UCD, HSE Kells, Defence Forces – Cork, Defence Forces – Athlone, Defence Forces – Dublin, Revenue Commissioners Limerick and HSE Cork). The service runs from 8am to 8pm, seven days per week and contact tracers are rostered to provide a service during these times. The HSE is building standing capacity for 500 contact tracers. Recruitment is well underway, and we expect that the first group to commence training the week ending 2nd October. The contact tracers will be deployed in either 4 or 5 locations around the country.

Community Testing Centres: There has been approximately 96,149 swabs taken for COVID-19 testing between 15th – 21st of September. Over 59,836 of these were taken in the community, the majority were performed at fixed testing sites and a portion as home visits which have increased in recent weeks. The HSE has increased the number of staff working at community test centres; which now have longer opening times and additional testing bays to meet increased demand for community testing. Again, the HSE is building a standing community swabbing capacity and recruitment is ongoing. We expect to hire in excess of 700 new staff for this dedicated workforce. Redeployed staff will only continue until capacity is fully in place. Staffing is also being supported by staff from the defence forces and with voluntary partners.

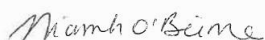
Future Recruitment Plans Testing & Tracing

The future 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 flexible service. 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.

Transition to the new model is underway and will continue through the Autumn. It is acknowledged that there will be ongoing challenges to attract and retain the required workforce numbers and as such it is anticipated that recruitment activity will be ongoing. Additionally, this recruitment activity will be operating in parallel to the broader workforce requirement signalled in the Winter Plan and as such it will be a competitive market for workforce, especially in the case of highly skilled and qualified staff. Finally, given the likely lead-times, additional external arrangements may be considered too, to quickly release redeployed staff and provide capacity for the HSE to recruit the volume of staff required to respond to needs.

I trust this clarifies the issues you raised.

Yours sincerely,



Niamh O'Beirne
National Lead for Testing and Tracing