

27th April 2021

Deputy Sean Haughey
Dáil Éireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

PQ 20694/21 “To ask the Minister for Health if he is satisfied with the capacity of the Covid-19 contact tracing system; the number of positive cases the system can cater for including close contacts of confirmed cases; if all cases are being traced back seven days; the number of persons who are working at contract tracing; if the numbers working in contract tracing need to be increased; if additional public servants need to be drafted in to conduct contact tracing; and if he will make a statement on the matter.”

Dear Deputy Haughey,

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's Contact Management Programme (CMP) was established in March 2020 to rapidly scale and support its Public Health and Health Protection capacity in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Contact tracing and infectious disease surveillance are core health protection activities undertaken by the eight Departments of Public Health in the HSE under the Health Acts 1947 and 1953; Infectious Disease Regulations 1981.

The CMP was initially resourced by HSE staff redeployed from across its services, along with staff from a range of external partners e.g. such as Higher Education Institutes, Defence Forces, Revenue Commissioners, other public bodies and volunteers. This approach was put in place as part of a crisis short-medium term response. However, given the global pandemic's ongoing nature, a longer-term and more sustainable approach to staffing was required so that redeployed staff could return to their substantive posts which were often patient facing, and thereby enable resumption of business as usual health services that were paused during the early stages of the pandemic.

In autumn 2020, the HSE's Test & Trace Programme committed that the CMP would work to build a sustainable contact tracing service with a dedicated workforce to meet a demand of 1,500 daily cases and 6,000 close contacts (i.e. standing capacity). The estimated size of the workforce required to create this capacity was 800 WTE.

The CMP has established six Contact Tracing Centres in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick with a total of over 800 staff. Staff are rostered across the operating hours of 8am to 8pm, seven days a week. The service has developed capacity to offer contact tracing calls to 1,800 cases and 9,000 close contacts per day which is sufficient capacity for all current contact tracing requirements. The workforce is now highly skilled and agile, and the ongoing programme of IT developments has supported and delivered efficiencies across the contact tracing system.

In addition, the CMP has maintained and formalised arrangements with the Defence Forces and our Environmental Health Service to release (trained) staff to augment our capacity in times of surge i.e. if cases were to go beyond 1,800 per day.

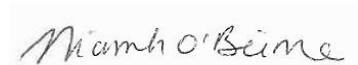
As of 31st March, the CMP is supporting Departments of Public Health with Case Source Investigations. Approx. 20% of cases are currently categorised as 'community transmission' which means the source of the transmission does not appear to be linked to a known case of Covid-19. Source investigation involves looking back seven days before the onset of symptoms to seek to identify the source of the infection and identify other contacts who might have been exposed simultaneously to disrupt the chain of transmission of Covid-19 to the greatest extent possible.

I wish to advise that Departments of Public Health have been undertaking Source Investigations throughout the pandemic as capacity allowed, as this is a core element of Health Protection services. While this recent collaboration between Contact Tracing Centres and Departments of Public Health allows for increased number of Source Investigations to be undertaken, it is important to state that this particular work requires clinical assessment and oversight of each case by a Consultant in Public Health Medicine within the local department of Public Health.

The effectiveness of Case Source Investigation is dependent on the incidence rate and burden of disease at any point in time. Low levels of infection in a country represents an opportunity to chase down the remaining cases.

I trust this addresses your question.

Yours sincerely,



Niamh O'Beirne
National Lead Testing and Tracing