

21st Dec. 2021

Deputy Paul Murphy,
Dáil Éireann,
Kildare Street,
Dublin 2

Issued via email to: paul.murphy@oireachtas.ie

PQ Number: 59265/21

Question: To ask the Minister for Health the number of PCR test appointments available to book for the past month given the current delays for people accessing PCR test appointments.

Dear Deputy Murphy,

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

We have been implementing plans to further increase the volume of COVID-19 testing we can provide to communities. We have increased the capacity from 100,000 tests per week to 230,000 tests per week over the last few months with plans to further increase capacity by the end of the year.

Testing capacity has increased significantly since September:

| PCR Capacity per week | | End of October | End of November | End of December |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| | 105,000 | 147,000 | 230,000 | 245,000 |
| ✓ The community testing service was established initially to support the delivery of 105,000 per week | ✓ Additional measures to increase capacity - with support from our community testing teams, the National Ambulance service, the Defence Forces - to 147,000 per week | ✓ Private providers - 6 new testing sites ✓ Recruitment is ongoing for swabbers ✓ Home & Mobile testing increased to 2,400 | ✓ Home & Mobile testing increasing ✓ 06/12 Commence Residential Care Facility Serial Testing | |

Our priority is to make sure Hospitals and GPs can refer patients for COVID-19 PCR testing where they feel it is warranted, and that close contacts of confirmed cases who are identified as requiring a COVID-19 PCR test get their test appointment as quickly as possible. Ensuring these two groups are prioritised does mean that those outside these categories may not be able to book a test until the following day or in times of increased pressure slightly longer.

The month of November saw the highest level of activity in the Community Testing Centres since the start of the pandemic. During this period over 645,000 people attended an appointment for a Covid-19 PCR test at a Community Testing Centre with over 120,000 confirmed cases reported.

It has been particularly busy in test centres across the country, however, we monitor test appointment slots continually throughout the day and slots often do become available later in the day or the following day. In addition to the further capacity provided by the Defence Forces and also that agreed with third parties, we are continuing to recruit additional staff to our Community Test Centres. We are also working to put further additional external resources in place to increase our testing capacity including potentially other private service providers.

It has been demonstrated that in these situations where demand is so high that offering appointment only slots is significantly more efficient and is enabling our testing centres to deliver the higher than capacity volumes of swabbing that we are currently observing.

Covid-19 testing is one part of the strategy in relation to managing the pandemic and ultimately there will always be a ceiling on testing levels in times of excessive surge. It is key that the public continue to follow Public Health guidance about restricting movements for at least 48 hours post symptoms, irrespective of a test result.

I trust this information is of assistance.

Yours sincerely,



Damien McCallion
National Director
National Lead Test & Trace and Vaccination Programme