

16th January 2021

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan
Dáil Éireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

Re: PQ 1513 /21 Question: “To ask the Minister for Health the actions his Department is taking to improve the track and trace operation in relation to Covid-19 in view of recent case numbers; and if he will make a statement on the matter.”

Dear Deputy O'Callaghan,

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 have liked to respond.

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 mobilisation to test and trace as part of our Public Health response to the Covid-19 pandemic 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 is in a position to conduct over 25,000 tests per day across our swabbing, laboratory and contact tracing infrastructure. The HSE has completed in excess of 3,000,000 tests to date and appointments for swabbing are now available within 24 hours.

The service model for Test and Trace is well progressed with performance indicators demonstrating a service that responded exceptionally well over the surge period across December and January. In Community Testing we have 35 static testing centres in operation with at least one test centre in every county which are within 45 minutes of 90% of the populations homes. These operate a 7 day service with extended opening hours being available in times of increased demand. In addition, we continue to deploy additional pop-up test centres in areas of most acute need. During the surge period these were implemented in Tallaght Stadium, St Joseph's Hospital Limerick, Donegal Town, Slane, New Ross, Ennis and Waterford City. In addition, there are NAS outbreak teams available to support the establishment of pop-up centers at short notice and as needed to support surge capacity. We also have an enhanced out of hours GP referrals capacity with an additional daily capacity of c. 5,000 – 6,000 referrals.

Contact tracing is an important part of the HSE's response to COVID-19. We are constantly improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the contact tracing service. The service was also improved so as to withstand surge levels beyond expected capacity and as demonstrated over this recent surge has managed to do this. This involved a number of automation processes being put in place to improve the service including the issuing of test messages to relay test results increasing turnaround times.

To deal with demand our Contact Tracing Centres are operating 12 hours a day, 7 days a week and are fully rostered every day. All of our turnaround times have been maintained, staff are working hard and are getting through all call queues in a timely way and in line with performance targets. During peak surge escalation, we maximise all processes to facilitate throughput and have used additional staff to work with us such as Environmental Health Officers, Defence Forces, volunteers when needed. Contact Tracing continued through the surge period with all close contacts receiving text message to notify them

of their close contact status. We did suspend the testing of asymptomatic close contacts on 1st January but this has since recommenced as of Friday 29th January 2021 when we re-instated the automatic testing of close contacts, five days from when they were last in contact with the confirmed case of Covid-19. In addition, the HSE also sends an SMS to close contacts of a person diagnosed with COVID-19 and to parents/guardians of children who have been identified as close contacts in educational facilities, including childcare facilities and schools. All close contacts also receive a daily active surveillance SMS for 14 days to remind them to continue restricting their movements (stay at home) and it sets out the end date of the restricted movement period.

We have developed an online referral system for close contacts to seek an online referral for Covid-19 testing. An enhanced version, "Request a Test" is going live as of 17th February. As part of our technology improvement initiative we are also developing a new online service that will allow people who test positive to share the phone numbers of their close contacts with us. This online service will support contact tracing if there is a large surge again to ensure that we can always make contact with cases as soon as possible. This allows us to follow up with their contacts and arrange a free COVID-19 test for each close contact. The identity of people using this service will be protected and will not be shared with those whose contact details they have provided. The information collected will only be used for the purpose of contact tracing and learning about the disease.

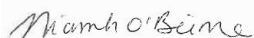
Recruitment of staff to support swabbing activity and contact tracing activity is ongoing. As of 15th February a total of 749 community swabbers have been hired and on-boarded. This is a brand-new role and these staff are now working in our centres nationwide. Recruitment will continue until there are at least 1,000 new people on-board and all those redeployed staff are back in their original community roles. Overall, c. 828 staff have been hired and retained for contact tracing. These are our new dedicated contact tracing workforce. In addition, we have a further 73 staff, from Revenue Commissioners and others redeployed from the HSE. This brings total contact tracing staff to 901 and this number will continue to grow until it gets to 1,000 persons.

Continuous improvement is paramount to the ongoing success of the test and trace process. These improvements aim to deliver faster results to the public, accelerate issue resolution, and enhance overall operational management and effectiveness. Immediate priority improvement initiatives include investigation to ensure facilities that are part of serial testing are receiving an overview of their results as quickly as possible. Ensuring accurate data is submitted when the test is being scheduled will generate faster and more accurate reports.

We continue to monitor all demand drivers and update our modelling work as appropriate so we can assess capacity requirements and communicate same as early as possible. Demand planning scenarios are refreshed on an ongoing basis and proactive demand and capacity planning activities are being used to support operational planning across the end-to-end pathway.

I trust this information is of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,



Niamh O'Beirne
National Lead Testing and Tracing