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Deputy Patricia Ryan

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Dear Deputy Ryan

Question:- To ask the Minister for Health if he will utilise local media to ensure the Covid-19 message is disseminated; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

I am answering on behalf of the HSE National Communications Division only.

Communicating with the public, listening to their needs and giving accurate and easy-to-follow health advice is considered a central part of any country's pandemic response plan. The HSE has led the operational health response to COVID-19, and the extensive public health information, advertising and education programme that is a central part of that response. The COVID-19 public and staff information campaigns have been active nationwide since the end of February 2020.

Our campaigns use a range of communications channels, including media relations with trusted health leaders and experts, websites, social media, search advertising, digital display, posted materials, press advertising, out of home (posters, billboards, projections, transport), TV, video on demand, radio and digital audio advertising, to provide clear public health advice that is easy for people to understand and act on. We also connect with a group of over 500 supportive partner organisations and stakeholders within health and across society.

The HSE and Department of Health conduct regular research to check people's understanding of and their reaction to the information and ongoing situation, allowing any new messages or content to be developed in line with feedback. Consistently high satisfaction levels with the HSE's and the Dept of Health's information and communications have been reported in our research.

In the unique and fast-moving circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic, we approached our information communications work under great time pressure, but also with a great sense of responsibility to be as inclusive as practicable, in terms of both languages and accessible formats for people with various needs.

We have developed an extended suite of flexible content, suitable for various audiences and people with different needs and in varied circumstances; this includes information in a range of languages, Irish Sign Language, braille, audio, easy-read and large print. We have ensured that we are meeting our duties under the Official Languages and Disability Acts.

We have worked hard to communicate clearly with our staff, using existing channels, and enhancing through both technology and personal networks.

The objective of the HSE's paid media campaign during the COVID-19 pandemic is to reach as many of the population as possible with vital and rapidly evolving public health messages. Our duty is also to ensure good value for money in the use of public funds to protect health through communications. In choosing channels to help us achieve this, we take the advice of our media agency on the channels used by various groups within our population, and the costs involved. Our decisions are also based on our wide experience in conducting social marketing campaigns and public information campaigns for people living in Ireland.

We have used local media throughout the pandemic to communicate messages to our communities. This has been done by our regional teams, with daily and weekly coverage and updates from the HSE provided through news releases, interviews and responses to media queries.

All of our radio campaigns, which have been on air consistently throughout the pandemic, use regional radio stations to share our messages. We have also used local and regional newspapers, not as frequently as radio, but where we have needed to reach specific communities or age groups. We have also used local radio and local newspapers to share our ongoing campaign about COVID-19 vaccines, and indeed, are placing ads in a wide range of local papers next week, inviting people aged 60-69 to register for their vaccine with the HSE.

I trust this helps to answer your questions, and I can help with anything else, please let me know

Yours truly,

Mary Brodie

Communications Directorate