

25th June 2021

Deputy Paul Murphy
Dáil Éireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

PQ 23518/21 “To ask the Minister for Health the number of additional staff the HSE has employed to carry out Covid-19 test and tracing activity; the number of additional staff the HSE has subcontracted through employment agencies to carry out Covid-19 test and tracing activity; the number from each agency; the number of staff the HSE has transferred from other HSE roles to carry out Covid-19 test and tracing activity; if he plans to request the HSE to carry out 14-day backward contact tracing as is done in Australia and Japan in order to protect against the spread of Covid-19 and new variants of the virus as the current restrictions are lifted; and if he will make a statement on the matter.”

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. In order to respond to your question as clearly as possible, I have provided separate responses to the staffing queries by service type, Contact Management Programme (CMP) for Contact Tracers, and Community Testing, for Community Swabbers. I have also outlined the response regarding Case Source Investigation (also known as backward tracing).

Contact Management Programme - Contact Tracing

The 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.

Initially, the CMP was resourced by HSE staff redeployed from across its services and staff from a range of external partners, e.g., 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 National Test & Trace Programme committed that the CMP would work to build a sustainable contact tracing service with a dedicated workforce. This recruitment process commenced in quarter three 2020. This longer-term approach is based on a blended use of external and internal staff, engaged through various external providers, which include organisations such as Abtran, CPL and Covalen. Arrangements are also in place with internal and external partners (HSE Environmental Health Service and Irish Defence Forces) to provide additional assistance if needed in times of surge.

The vast majority of contact tracers have been recruited via CPL Healthcare on behalf of the HSE. Contact Tracers are employed on specified purpose contracts and are contracted to work 37 hours per week. CPL have an ongoing campaign where they pipeline candidates on a weekly basis based on requirements for contact tracers per CTC. CPL draw down candidates based on their current availability with priority being given to those with a clinical background and their availability to work full time across 7 days.

As of 21st June 2021 the CMP has six Contact Tracing Centres (CTCs) in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick with 926 staff. The breakdown by employer as requested is as follows:

- 717 staff are employed in contact tracing with CPL
- 120 staff are recruited from Covalen
- 45 staff are recruited from Abtran
- 44 staff are recruited via HSE redeployment

HSE senior managers provide oversight and governance at each of our CTCs and report directly through the HSE operational reporting line in the CMP, to National Test and Trace. HSE management in each CTC is responsible for performance oversight and the service's operation that, as you are aware, spans an 84-hour working week. The HSE has full responsibility for every operational aspect of the service.

Community Swabbing

As of 21st June 2021, there are a total of 763 WTE (c. 837 individuals) working as Community Swabbers, recruited by CPL. We have an allocation of 800 WTE positions in Community Swabbing. This reflects 95% of our intended target. We are comfortable we can meet all metrics and standing capacity volumes with this workforce but we keep the number of staff required under constant review. I also wish to advise during Wave 1, over a third (1,031) of staff redeployed supported Community Testing, compared with 110 WTE redeployed to Community Testing as of April 2021. These staff are working in management/ administration and testing co-ordinator roles.

Case Source Investigation

Since 31st March 2021, CTCs are, in the case of individuals that have been identified as a detected case from community transmission, looking back seven days prior to the onset of symptoms (available data indicates that approximately 20% of detected cases are identified as relating to community transmission with no specific source identified on initial contact with the individuals concerned). The objective of case source investigation is to identify the source of infection and other contacts who might have been exposed at the same time in order to disrupt the chain of transmission of Covid-19 to the greatest extent possible.

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. Source investigation is something that Departments of Public Health have been doing throughout the pandemic. This recent initiative is designed to facilitate the work of the regional Departments of Public Health by carrying out Source Investigation on a greater scale via the work of our CTCs.

Prior to the implementation of 7 day retrospective contact tracing, we were measuring positivity rates amongst different groups of close contacts (e.g. social, household, schools etc.) to monitor patterns of transmission in the cohort of close contacts managed by the CMP. This work allows us to determine the likely source of infection for close contacts who become cases. The first report on this was produced for National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) in September 2020 and we currently produce analysis on this each week for NPHET.

In relation to your specific query re 14 day source investigation we can advise the following;

Data shows that the incubation period – time from exposure to Covid-19 to onset of symptoms is approximately 4 days since the UK variant has become the global variant, with more than 90% of cases getting symptoms within 7 days. The vast majority of exposures will therefore have occurred in the previous 7 days. Evidence also shows that people have difficulty recalling accurately their movements/activities the further in the past that you go. These factors have informed the current position that the 7 days for Source Investigation (SI) is the most valuable timeframe for SI.

I trust this information is of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Stephanie O'Keeffe

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Covering for Niamh O'Beirne, National Lead Testing and Tracing