

7th Dec. 2021

Deputy Neale Richmond,
Dáil Éireann,
Kildare Street,
Dublin 2

Issued via email to: neale.richmond@oireachtas.ie

PQ Number: 56898/21

Question: To ask the Minister for Health if he will consider adding capacity to walk in Covid-19 test centres given many are lacking in appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy Richmond,

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 seen an extremely high sustained demand for COVID-19 testing at our community testing centres in the last number of weeks in particular. This reflects the high prevalence of the disease and other illnesses at this time. The community testing service was established initially to support the delivery of 15,000 tests per day, the service has a number of additional measures which we have implemented to increase that daily testing figure for peak periods to 20,000 tests per day. Over the last week we have consistently carried out more than 25,000 tests per day.

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.

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.

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 224,000 tests per week over the last few months.

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.

As highlighted some of the actions taken as part of the HSE surge plan were;

- Increased recruitment of staff
- Utilisation of defence forces
- Contracting of private companies to increase testing sites
- Increasing mobile testing team resources and teams

These have helped to double the capacity well beyond the original public health target. 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