



**1<sup>st</sup> October 2021**

Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor  
Dáil Éireann  
Kildare Street  
Dublin 2

**PQ 44647/21 “To ask the Minister for Health the current capacity of the Covid-19 test, trace and isolate system; the number of contact tracers currently in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter.”**

**PQ 44648/21 “To ask the Minister for Health if Covid-19 testers in mass test centres are being given adequate rest breaks in their work day given the huge surge in demand for testing currently; and if he will make a statement on the matter.”**

**PQ 44649/21 “To ask the Minister for Health if the practiced system of calling close contacts in school place settings has ceased; if contact tracers are currently instructed not to contact these cases if they arise in a school setting; if the job of contact tracing has been deferred to school administrators; if there have been changes to requirements for restriction of movement in these cases; and if he will make a statement on the matter.”**

**PQ 44650/21 “To ask the Minister for Health if there are plans to resume walk-in testing at centres nationwide; and if he will make a statement on the matter.”**

Dear Deputy O'Connor,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Questions which has been referred by the Minister for Health to the Health Service Executive for direct response. As a number of these questions overlap I have outlined our response in one correspondence.

In autumn 2020, the HSE's Test & Trace Programme committed that the Contact Management Programme (CMP) would work to build a sustainable contact tracing service with a dedicated workforce to meet demand flexing as cases rise to meet surge demand.

The CMP has established five Contact Tracing Centres in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick with a total of over 900 staff. The workforce is now highly skilled and agile, and the ongoing programme of IT developments has supported and delivered further efficiencies across the contact tracing system.

The service has developed capacity to offer sufficient capacity for all current contact tracing requirements. Currently, the national testing system has capacity to undertake 25,000 tests per day. During the month of September 2021:

- 90% of community referral received Covid-19 tests within 24hours
- 96% of those tested received their results within 48 hours of being swabbed
- 95% of cases had their end-to-end process (referral, swabbing, testing, result notification and any contact tracing) completed within 3 days

I wish to advise Community Testing have capacity for 20,000 appointments per day in test centres during surge. There is an integrated approach to monitoring Covid-19 testing demand and deploying supplementary resources to locations experiencing spikes in demand. Supplementary resources supporting Community Testing teams include deploying trained Defence Forces swabbers to Community Testing Centres and Pop-up Test Centres by the National Ambulance Service. Appointment times offered allow for adequate rest breaks for staff in the test centres.

The CMP was established by the HSE in March 2020 to notify results to people tested for Covid-19 (or a nominated person), and to identify and manage contacts of people known to have Covid-19. We continue to adhere to instructions received from the HSE and NPHE, which are regularly reviewed and updated in line with the Covid



pandemic now entering its next stage. With effect from 27<sup>th</sup> September, the process and Public Health advice involving close contacts aged <13 years has been updated as follows:

- Automatic contact tracing of close contacts in childcare facilities and primary education has been discontinued (not including special education facilities);
- Testing of asymptomatic close contacts in childcare facilities and primary education has been discontinued (not including special education facilities), with a focus instead on clinically relevant disease rather than infection and a transition to testing for Public Health surveillance and, where indicated, on Public Health or clinical grounds;
- Children <13yrs who are identified as close contacts in childcare, educational settings, and other non-household settings and who are asymptomatic are no longer be required to restrict movements, unless indicated on Public Health grounds;
- Children <13yrs who are identified as household close contacts in household settings are still be required to restrict movements and get tested, regardless of symptomatic status;
- Children <13yrs who are identified as close contacts in special education facilities and special classes in mainstream schools and are asymptomatic, are required to restrict their movements for 5 days and are encouraged to attend for testing.
- Public Health advice remains that any child <13yrs with symptoms consistent with Covid-19 should rapidly self-isolate and not attend school or socialise until 48 hours after resolution of symptoms.

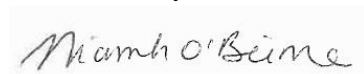
Regarding whether the job of contact tracing has been deferred to school administrators, this has never been the case. Local Public Health departments may engage with school principals or faculty staff in the initial stages of identifying close contacts of an index case in a school setting. Local Public Health then provide this information to the CMP for contact tracing follow-up.

Initially the primary route for referrals for Covid testing at a Community Testing Centre was through the patient's GP, the Contact Management Programme and as directed by Public Health. In March 2021, HSE National Test and Trace facilitated a self-referral option for people who were asymptomatic to attend at pilot sites, rolling out to all test centres by May 2021. In this model, people attended the test centre without a structured appointment time (walk – in). In the interim, the HSE developed a self-referral portal which allowed people to book an appointment slot online. This was made available in June 2021. It allows the person to select an appointment time, facilitating the smooth running of the test centre and minimising long waiting times at test centres which were experienced at times when people attended without a structured appointment time. There are no plans at present to resume walk in testing. Over 15,000 appointments were booked daily on the self-referral portal in mid-September when the service experienced very high demand, in addition to referrals received from GPs, the Contact Management Programme and Public Health.

As the Covid pandemic evolves to the next endemic stage in the coming weeks and months, Test and Trace services will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure capacity meets future demands, as required by the HSE, NPHE and Government guidelines.

I trust this addresses your questions.

Yours sincerely,



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**Niamh O'Beirne**  
**National Lead Testing and Tracing**