

15 February 2022

Deputy Róisín Shorthall TD
roisin.shorthall@oireachtas.ie

Our Ref: GM/Communications

PQ4905/22: To ask the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to deal with the backlog in the BreastCheck national breast cancer screening programme; the reasons women under 50 years of age are not included in the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the query above.

Regrettably, BreastCheck, along with many public services has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic over the last two years. The COVID-19 related BreastCheck delays detailed in recent media reports have been the subject of NSS national public information and advertising campaigns, and NSS communications.

BreastCheck was paused for several months in 2020 and 2021 which means appointments in our current screening round (where we normally invite women for screening once every two years) are delayed by up to a year.

In keeping with other breast screening programmes internationally we don't keep waiting lists, but have restarted women on their screening journeys since screening restarted in October 2020.

If a woman was due to be screened in 2020, we aimed to invite her in 2021; if she was due to be screened in 2021, we will now aim to invite her in 2022. We are prioritising women who are due screening the longest, and women who are new to screening.

During this time, Ireland will be more in line with England, which screens women every three years. However, we aim to return to screening women every two years as soon as possible. This is dependent on the situation with COVID-19 and restrictions.

To alleviate pressure on the existing system and to increase capacity, our clinics and mobile screening units are working hard to screen as many people as possible while adhering to COVID-19 safety protocols. Measures include:

- Completed staff vaccination programme
- Mobile vans and static units upgraded to meet infection control and physical distancing requirements
- New text messaging system to manage appointments

Teach Óstaí an Rí, 200 Sráid Parnell, Baile Átha Cliath D01 A3Y8. King's Inn House, 200 Parnell Street, Dublin 1, D01 A3Y8.
☎ 353 1 865 9300 ✉ info@screeningservice.ie www.screeningservice.ie



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

In recent months we opened a new mobile unit in Roscommon, and will open two other mobile units in the first half of this year.

We are recruiting staff, while noting that staff recruitment remains a global challenge in certain areas, most notably radiography. For example, in breast screening, it takes up to 15 years to train a radiologist and 10 years to train a radiographer.

We are asking all participants, including new entrants, to check their telephone details on the BreastCheck register so we can better manage appointment uptake through our text messaging system. They will receive a reminder text message from 'Swiftqueue' a few days before their appointment.

To help us screen as many people as possible, we are asking women to come for screening when invited, and if they can't come, to let us know so we can offer this appointment to another woman in their community.

Age range

The current screening age group has been chosen because the evidence shows that the benefits that can be gained by that group from screening outweigh the harms; and that the use of resources for screening is a cost-effective way of improving population health with regard to the condition.

For younger age groups, with lower rates of breast cancer, the benefit to the population has been shown to be lower and the potential harms (of over-investigation, over-diagnosis and over-treatment, and of increased lifetime radiation dosage) have been shown to be higher. To date, this has tipped the balance against screening this group.

In addition, mammogram has been found to be a less reliable test in women aged under 50 years because of the different composition of breasts in pre-menopausal women.

All screening programmes are dynamic and part of our role is to monitor evidence and practice and respond when the evidence is sufficient to warrant change. We are keen to learn and evaluate research on age range.

In 2016, we began a project to extend the upper age range of women invited from 64 to 69. This implementation project was completed in 2021, and now all women between the ages of 50 and 69 are eligible to join the breast screening programme.

Any revisions to our screening programme are considered by the National Screening Advisory Committee (NSAC), the independent committee that advises the Minister and Department of Health on new proposals for population-based screening programmes, and revisions to existing ones.

We understand the requests being made by the public to reduce the breast screening age, and the good intent behind those requests. We are keen to see the evidence around screening younger women considered and have made a submission to NSAC for a review of the evidence in this area.

Teach Óstaí an Rí, 200 Sráid Parnell, Baile Átha Cliath D01 A3Y8. King's Inn House, 200 Parnell Street, Dublin 1, D01 A3Y8.
☎ 353 1 865 9300 ✉ info@screeningservice.ie www.screeningservice.ie



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service





An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

I trust this information is of assistance to you, should you have any further queries please contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Murphy
Chief Executive
National Screening Service

Teach Óstaí an Rí, 200 Sráid Parnell, Baile Átha Cliath D01 A3Y8. King's Inn House, 200 Parnell Street, Dublin 1, D01 A3Y8.
☎ 353 1 865 9300 ✉ info@screeningservice.ie www.screeningservice.ie



An tSeirbhís Náisiúnta Scagthástála
National Screening Service

