

8 July 2024

Deputy Patricia Ryan  
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

**PQ27568.24 To ask the Minister for Health the plans, if any, in place to address the failure to increase the percentage of participants in the FIT test for the early detection of bowel cancer, which still stands at just 45%, as this failure is being directly linked to a lack of adequate funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter.**

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

### About BowelScreen

BowelScreen, the national bowel screening programme, invites men and women aged 59 to 69 for screening every two years. Bowel screening is a preventative health measure aimed at reducing people's risk of developing bowel cancer, by detecting and removing polyps (adenomas) in the bowel that could lead to cancer if left untreated. If bowel cancer is found early through screening, it's usually easier to treat and there's a better chance of recovery.

### BowelScreen register and participation

We maintain a register of people eligible for bowel screening using the following sources:

- the Department of Social Protection – which administers Ireland's social welfare system
- self-registration - when a person registers by phone or online

After being invited, if the person gives consent to take part they are issued with a free FIT kit (screening test) which they do at home and return by post.

### Working to improve uptake

For the most recent report on uptake and coverage by screening and invitation please see [BowelScreen Programme Report 2020 – 2021](#). As people need to consent to take part in screening, there is always a difference in the number of people invited and the number of people who consent and are sent home tests, and not all people who consent to take part return their test.

The Programme Report 2020 – 2021 shows that during 2020 and 2021, 299,898 people were invited by BowelScreen for screening. 154,472 people consented to take part in screening, and 139,618 satisfactory faecal immunochemical tests (FIT) were completed and returned. This reflects a screening uptake rate based on the eligible population of 46.6 per cent, which was the highest uptake achieved by the programme to date but below the programme target of 50 per cent.

We expect figures for 2022-23 to be published by the end of 2024.

BowelScreen can be most effective in reducing mortality from bowel cancer in the population if at least 50 per cent of eligible people attend for screening. Maintaining and improving the

accuracy of our register is key to measuring uptake.

We work to enhance the data we receive using various measures, including:

- use of PPSN and an Individual Health Identifier.
- simplifying the BowelScreen sign-up process by developing a new one-step online consent and sign-up process in 2024.

Ensuring equitable uptake of screening is a strategic priority for us. We run large-scale public awareness campaigns where we encourage people to check they are on our register, return their consent and their FIT kit.

During our most recent communications campaign in April to mark Bowel Cancer Awareness Month, we ran national and regional radio advertising, a social media campaign and a press campaign. Initial results show this led to a significant increase in enquiries to our information lines and saw registrations rise. Our social media and media activity continued during Men's Health Week from 10-16 June.

Additional measures to improve uptake include:

- We are doing extensive research both with the general population and with groups who experience disadvantage into the reasons why people don't or can't take the BowelScreen test. Research findings inform our public campaigns to help eligible people to choose screening.
- We provide BowelScreen materials in various formats to ensure that people have access to information on screening. We have information videos available in [25 languages](#) and EasyRead, plain English and photo story [resources](#).
- We have developed an [Equity Framework](#) in partnership with advocacy, patient and community groups, under which we are working to ensure more people can access and choose bowel screening. Our report [Working to reduce inequity in screening](#) outlines our work in 2022 to improve equity across our screening programmes. This includes the Traveller Health Project where we partner with Pavee Point and the National Cancer Control Programme to address the cancer prevention, early detection, and screening needs of the Traveller community in the Finglas and Blanchardstown area. We are continuing to drive uptake through our equity project work.

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

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Murphy,  
Chief Executive