

12th October 2020

Deputy David Cullinane
Dáil Éireann
Kildare Street
Dublin 2

Re: PQ 24960/20

Question: “To ask the Minister for Health the status of the measures taken to date as a consequence of the HSE publication Covid-19 Testing and Tracing: Roadmap to enhance capacity and turnaround published 14 May 2020; the progress made on the measures identified within; and if he will make a statement on the matter”.

Dear Deputy Cullinane,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question which has been referred by the Minister for Health to the Health Service Executive for direct response.

I wish to apologise for the delay in issuing a response to your above question.

Due to the current demands of the Covid-19 pandemic and the numerous queries we have received to date it has taken longer than I would've liked to respond.

We are currently maximising our testing capacity as part of our winter preparedness. Over the past six months, we have rapidly built a robust testing capacity to meet the increasing demand. COVID-19 testing is currently conducted across our laboratory network, which is made up of a 46 public and private laboratories. Today, we have 18,000 per day laboratory capacity – which exceeds the initial 100,000 per week. We are currently also increasing laboratory capacity onshore for November and December. We have plans in place to increase this further by the procurement of new technology and new platforms in our community laboratory network over the coming months. While not yet concluded the expenditure for testing and tracing is expected to be in the region of €450m for the current year with a projected annual budget of €700m in 2021.

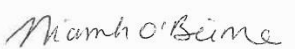
In contact tracing today we have over 300 staff. Many of the staff initially redeployed to tracing have returned to their substantive posts as we have been recruiting for the last few months. Some staff do remain in tracing who will return in the coming weeks. These staff come from Human Resources, Community Health Organisations, Environmental Health Officers, and some management admin staff. The largest group are Environmental Health Officers, with up to 80 people involved in contact tracing at present. There are approximately 25 Health and Social Care Professionals involved in contact tracing.

The HSE is creating standing capacity for contact tracing with over 500 contact tracers currently being recruited. The first new recruits have commenced training, and as soon as they are fully operational, staff redeployed from other parts of the HSE will return to their usual roles. Over 400 people are through the interview process and moving through to compliance stages with 135 commenced in the past couple weeks.

The future service model for testing and tracing is in the final stages of design with implementation underway for priority areas such as workforce recruitment and the test centre estate. This service model will aim to deliver a patient-centred service, accessible, consistent and be flexible to demand. This plan includes the recruitment of a permanent workforce in addition to leveraging the clinical and operational expertise embedded in our community services and this work has already commenced. The operating model will take into account the evolving needs and future potential service demands in the context of Covid19 surges in disease transmission.

I trust this addresses your question.

Yours sincerely,



Niamh O'Beirne
National Lead for Testing and Tracing