



16 May 2024

Deputy Alan Kelly  
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Our Ref: GM/Communications

**PQ19600/24: To ask the Minister for Health the extent of the current backlog in the BreastCheck programme following the Covid-19 pandemic; when the programme will be back on schedule; and if he will make a statement on the matter.**

Dear Deputy,

I refer to the above Parliamentary Question.

### About BreastCheck

BreastCheck is Ireland's free breast screening programme. We screen women who have no symptoms of breast cancer so that we can find and treat breast cancer at the earliest possible stage. We aim to invite women aged 50 to 69 for screening every two years and provide access to appropriate care for those who need further tests and treatment. We work to make BreastCheck services accessible to all by, for example, providing longer or group appointments, and information in braille and international languages.

Around 3,500 cases of breast cancer are diagnosed in Ireland every year. About a third of these cancers are detected through screening, meaning that most cancers are detected when women present with symptoms to their GP or hospital consultant.

An important principle of BreastCheck is that we offer screening services locally to women in counties and locations convenient to where they live. To achieve this, each of our four static screening units operate in tandem with our 24 mobile units. Most women participating in BreastCheck have their mammogram in one of these mobile units. We update our breast screening locations regularly on our [website](#).

### Impact of COVID-19 on breast screening services

Along with many public services, BreastCheck was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Screening was paused in 2020 and 2021, meaning almost a year of screening time was lost. The impact of pauses and the resumption of screening in 2021 under ongoing COVID-19 restrictions meant that it took closer to three years rather than the normal two years to screen women due to attend breast screening during the period. Our published statistical reports for [2020](#) and [2021](#) further document the impact of COVID-19.

During this time, there was a temporary redeployment of BreastCheck staff to provide support to the symptomatic breast cancer service. They assessed and treated women of all ages who were at higher risk of breast cancer and whose hospital appointments had been delayed due to COVID-19. This meant that urgent patients who had symptoms were seen quicker, with the aim of improving the outcome of any diagnosis.

### Return to routine screening

When we restarted screening in 2021 we restarted women on their screening journey. The number of women attending BreastCheck each year is now close to pre-pandemic numbers. In addition, women being screened today are on track to receive their next screening invite in two years' time, in line with our programme aims.

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We continue to emphasise that women with symptoms or concerns about their breast health should not wait for or attend screening and should instead contact their GP who will give them the appropriate advice.

### Steps taken to support screening uptake

- We have hired seven consultant radiologists since September 2022. We have implemented an international recruitment advertising campaign for locum radiologists and we are piloting new, location-targeted recruitment campaigns. However, recruitment and retention of radiology and radiography staff is a challenge internationally.
- We have introduced three additional mobile units since 2021 and are researching introducing further units in line with our available clinical staffing.
- We have implemented a new text messaging system which provides attendance reminders to women, enabling us to work together to ensure every appointment slot is filled.
- As noted in the [National Cancer Strategy 2017 to 2026](#), cancer risk factor prevalence is disproportionately distributed in society. There is widespread variation in screening uptake rates and in access to diagnostics and treatment. Under our strategic plan, [Choose Screening](#), and our equity framework [Improving Equity in Screening](#), we are working to increase our screening uptake rates by ensuring all eligible people can access our services.

Women who have questions regarding breast screening can contact Freephone 1800 45 45 55 from 9am-6pm, Monday to Friday; or email [info@breastcheck.ie](mailto:info@breastcheck.ie).

I trust this information is of assistance to you.

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Murphy,  
Chief Executive.

