



5 June 2024

Deputy Róisín Shortall
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Our Ref: LC/Communications

Dear Deputy,

PQ 22834/24: To ask the Minister for Health to provide a breakdown of the total number of BowelScreen invitations issued, by county, in each of the years from 2021 to 2024, in tabular form; the corresponding number of people, per county, who returned a completed FIT test in these same years; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ 22835/24: To ask the Minister for Health to confirm the total number of eligible men and women who are not on the existing BowelScreen register or list which is informed by information supplied by the Department of Social Protection; to outline efforts to target this group with a view to encouraging greater uptake in the screening programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ 22836/24: To ask the Minister for Health to provide details of the overall numbers of people aged 59 to 69 who are eligible for participation in the BowelScreen programme and who, as of the end of April 2024, have not been issued with a FIT test in the last two years; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

I refer to the above Parliamentary Questions.

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

It is not possible for us to identify people who are not on our register.

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. As people need to consent to take part in BowelScreen, there is a difference between the numbers invited and those who go on to consent and are sent a test.

Based on the 2022 census, we estimate that in 2023, there were 584,476 people in Ireland aged between 59 and 69 (the eligible age range from October 2023 onwards). During the years 2022 and 2023, we issued 617,443 invitations to take part in BowelScreen. In the same period, 274,874 tests were completed and returned. We invite people for screening within two years of them becoming known to the programme and re-invite them at two-year intervals thereafter. This means that we do not invite the entire eligible population in any given year.

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There will always be a difference between the number of people eligible across a given two-year period and the number of people invited. Differences occur due to operational changes, for example the 2023 expansion of the eligible age range to include 59-year-olds, population mobility over a two-year period and the time people take to both give consent and return the FIT kit.

For the most recent report on uptake and coverage by screening and invitation please see [BowelScreen Programme Report 2020 – 2021](#). Figures for 2022-23 will be published by the end of 2024.

Table 1: BowelScreen invitations issued, by county, in each of the years from 2021 to 2023, in tabular form; and the number of people, by county, who returned a completed FIT test in the same years. Verified data is not yet available for 2024.

County	Total Invited 2021*	Number who returned completed FIT kit 2021*	Total Invited 2022	Number who returned completed FIT kit 2022	Total Invited 2023^	Number who returned completed FIT kit 2023
Co Carlow	2,734	1,782	7,214	3,033	10,954	3,963
Co Cavan	2,106	1,414	4,908	1,693	4,196	2,326
Co Clare	1,063	575	10,759	4,333	7,425	3,644
Co Cork	9,336	5,550	38,096	15,339	31,480	16,922
Co Donegal	8,124	4,857	11,094	5,100	11,783	5,944
Co Dublin	48,908	25,740	74,766	27,204	74,445	35,207
Co Galway	12,321	6,734	10,977	5,275	22,832	9,837
Co Kerry	6,025	3,337	10,645	5,471	12,911	5,678
Co Kildare	7,867	4,294	8,460	3,798	14,007	6,666
Co Kilkenny	4,331	2,695	5,874	2,508	6,251	3,523
Co Laois	2,404	1,185	2,946	1,211	4,542	2,045
Co Leitrim	1,407	862	3,097	1,410	2,467	1,185
Co Limerick	1,574	916	16,381	6,447	12,548	5,871
Co Longford	1,173	575	3,980	1,696	2,048	750
Co Louth	7,774	4,126	6,986	3,206	10,068	4,539
Co Mayo***	6,929	3,542	9,862	5,244	11,174	4,647
Co Meath	7,036	3,914	11,024	4,536	10,434	5,587
Co Monaghan	3,995	2,033	3,460	1,525	5,074	2,248
Co Offaly	2,904	1,502	4,713	2,011	5,085	2,071
Co Roscommon	2,504	1,482	5,331	2,427	4,121	1,964
Co Sligo	4,457	1,919	4,912	2,859	5,165	2,104
Co Tipperary	3,921	1,811	12,488	4,131	11,448	5,837
Co Waterford**	3,530	1,937	7,760	2,898	8,919	4,536
Co Westmeath	2,613	1,577	6,893	2,909	5,736	2,450
Co Wexford	6,683	3,777	10,742	5,240	10,269	4,645
Co Wicklow	5,642	3,364	9,389	3,995	9,504	5,186
Totals	167,361	91,500	302,757	125,499	314,886	149,375

* The impact of COVID-19 restrictions meant endoscopy capacity remained at reduced levels in 2021. The cyber-attack on the HSE severely affected the capacity of our endoscopy services. ** In December 2020 we expanded to offer endoscopy services in Waterford University Hospital, bringing the total number of participating hospitals to 14. *** In April 2022 we further expanded to offer endoscopy services in Mayo University Hospital ^In October 2023 BowelScreen expanded the eligible age range to include people aged 59.

Table 1 shows the total number of BowelScreen invitations issued, by county, in each of the years from 2021 to 2023 and the number of people, by county, who returned a completed FIT test within the same year. We do not routinely report tests returned within the same year, as people choose when to return their test. Our programme reports capture tests completed in the reporting period in which it was issued, rather than when it was returned.

Working to improve uptake

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 the 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 will continue 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 happy to report we are back to screening at pre-COVID patterns and people are being invited when they are due.

An important pillar of screening is that there be an appropriate and available follow-up test for any screening test offered. We have increased endoscopy capacity since 2020, with the addition of two new endoscopy units in Waterford and Mayo delivering services for BowelScreen. Planning is ongoing to further increase endoscopy capacity with the addition of more hospitals delivering services for the programme. This is dependent on available funding and staffing.

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National Screening Service

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

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Murphy,
Chief Executive

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