



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

Joint Committee on Health

Meeting

Wednesday 28th October 2020

Opening Statement

By

Ms. Niamh O'Beirne

National Lead for Testing & Tracing

Health Service Executive

Chairperson and Members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to attend today's meeting to discuss Testing and Tracing. Colleagues joining me today are:

- Dr. Kevin Kelleher, Assistant National Director Public Health/Child Health
- Damien McCallion, National Director Emergency Management & Director General CAWT

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the HSE has worked tirelessly to build a robust testing and tracing infrastructure.

It is important to acknowledge the extent of what has been achieved. To date, we have established a system that has enabled us to complete over 1.54 million tests, identified 58,067 detected cases and completed 258,230 contact tracing calls. Last week (Saturday 17th – Friday 23rd of October) we processed over 115,000 tests, exceeding the capacity set out by 15%.

We all know that caution is required when making international comparisons, but to provide a view of how our testing numbers compare against our European neighbours, as reported by ECDC, we are ranked second for countries with a population over 2 million of the 28 European countries ECDC report on. We are outranked only by Denmark. In addition, many countries do not test close contacts, such as the UK, Netherlands and most recently Belgium, and some countries like Germany (specifically in Berlin region), have requested people to trace their own close contacts.

We remain agile in our approach when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and have driven continuous improvement within our systems and processes. We focused on turnaround times and during the current peak in the pandemic we achieve 95% of swabbing appointment same day or next day and over 95% of results in less than 48 hours from swab. These metrics compare very well against our European colleagues. Italy, France, Spain, Netherlands, Denmark also work with 48 hours or less as a target from swabbing appointment to result. We meet all testing demand and are still working within our testing capacity.

Since the beginning of this pandemic, we have built up capacity for testing in our testing centres and acute hospitals. These services are stood up by healthcare professionals, community swabbers, the national ambulance service and defence forces personnel. In order to ensure we have the required staff we have engaged in a recruitment campaign for swabbers, contact tracers and public health doctors.

We continuously assess the needs in the community and identify areas where improved access to local testing is needed. In recent weeks, this included a large-scale testing centre which was opened in Croke Park, a testing centre opened in Galway City and an additional pop-up centre in Cork City. Capacity in our laboratories has been increased so that we can process over 120,000 tests a week, with our logistics team working to accurately forecast demand each week.

We have set up and are continuing to deliver numerous serial testing programmes. This has included over 291,000 tests for staff in residential care facilities, food production facilities and both residents and staff of direct provision centres. These programmes have been set up in response to these settings being noted as higher risk, and their residents among the most vulnerable in society. We are one of the few countries to conduct and maintain serial testing throughout peak demand.

As well as caring for these high risk groups, we have an enhanced pathway for school going children and staff in school settings, ensuring that any detected case which is associated with a school setting is managed by our public health departments and are turned around in the most optimal time, recognising the importance of keeping schools open. There is a constant need to balance the demands from individuals feeling unwell in the community, outbreaks in congregated settings and testing in higher-risk settings through our serial testing programmes.

We have worked and will continue to work to ensure that our test and contact tracing system is robust and performant. However, the significant increase in demand and the number of detected cases in our community in October has challenged our systems, particularly our contact tracing service.

The rapid rise in cases in early October exceeded the capacity of our tracing system as it was set up. For context, six weeks ago we were making 8,500 calls a week and this increased in the last week to over 38,000 calls and we struggled with capacity.

In response to this and in a continuing effort to maintain effective turnaround times for contact tracing for the population at large, we asked a limited number of people (1,971) who received a positive result from October 16th or October 18th to notify their own close contacts of their result and arrange a test through their GP. The decision was taken to ensure that each person receives information as quickly as possible, allowing them to be aware of their status and to take action to care for themselves, and protect others from infection. While this was clearly not ideal and we appreciate the impact on those affected, it was deemed to be the only viable option in order to deal with the most recent cases quickly and reset the system. We apologise to the 1971 people impacted and are this week going to call everyone we missed to check they were able to identify contacts and advise them to be tested.

Since Friday 23 October, our contact tracing system is back on track and achieving its metric of all close contacts being contacted within 24 hours of the notification of the positive case.

In order to ensure that we can address future demand, the HSE is continuing to recruit additional contact tracers; over 800 people are through the interview process, 274 new staff have been taken on board to date, with a further 90 staff expected to be on board by the end of this week. We will continue bringing in 60-70 new staff to the service every week over the coming period. The HSE plans to recruit up to 800 tracers, and then review the requirement for further recruitment.

As this pandemic develops, we continue to respond daily as effectively as possible while also designing and implementing a long-term sustainable test and trace operating model.

The COVID-19 disease doesn't follow any plan, it is unpredictable and continues to challenge us all individually and equally challenge our testing and tracing service. We continue to do the utmost in our response, ensuring sufficient testing capacity and optimal turnaround times, all in the best interests of public health.

This concludes my opening statement.

Thank you.