



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte  
Health Service Executive

# Joint Committee on Health

Meeting

Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Opening Statement

By

Mr. Paul Reid

Chief Executive Officer

Health Service Executive

Chairperson and Members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to update on you on the HSE's public health measures to respond to COVID-19.

Colleagues joining me today are:

- Dr Colm Henry, Chief Clinical Officer
- Niamh O'Beirne, National Lead for Test and Trace
- Dr Lorraine Doherty, National Clinical Lead for Health Protection
- Damien McCallion, National Lead for COVID-19 Vaccinations

I will make a brief opening statement on the current situation with COVID-19, current and future developments with test and trace and an overview of the rollout of the vaccination programme.

## **COVID-19**

Thankfully all major indicators of the disease are now trending downwards, although we remain alert to the impact of new variants of COVID-19.

Up to the 7<sup>th</sup> of March, a total of 223,219 cases and 4,422 deaths due to COVID-19 have been recorded in Ireland. Our 14-day incidence rate is now 172.3 per 100,000, down from almost 1,500 in mid-January.

We are still actively managing 358 outbreaks in acute hospitals and long-term residential care settings, although the number of new outbreaks is falling. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of March we have 419 people with COVID-19 in hospital and 103 receiving ICU care.

While falling, these numbers are still very high in the context of our experience with this disease and in comparison to other health conditions. This has an ongoing impact on our acute and community services which are simultaneously responding to usual seasonal pressures and maintaining as many services as possible accounting for social distancing measures and IPC requirements.

Thankfully our Winter Plan initiatives such as GP access to diagnostics and additional Home Care hours are successfully mitigating the demand on hospital services. We are restarting paused services on an incremental basis and hope to be in a position to restart all services shortly. However, it must be understood that our staff are still in the midst of responding to the unprecedented COVID-19 surge, from which the recovery will be much more gradual than the escalation.

### **Test and Trace**

The 3<sup>rd</sup> COVID-19 surge placed unprecedented pressure on our test and trace system with an increase in demand that has been well documented.

Referrals for testing peaked at 28,000 per day in late December. Extensive operational planning and demand modelling was undertaken in advance of this period which allowed the agile deployment of levers and service reconfigurations to cope with prolonged demand.

The decision to reduce close contact testing allowed all testing resources to be directed to finding new cases from symptomatic individuals. Close contact testing resumed on January 29<sup>th</sup>. Retrospective contact tracing is occurring and will increase as case numbers reduce to under 600 consistently.

While testing volumes remain high, current metrics across the Test and Trace system show that we are operating within target performance levels.

The HSE Antigen Working Group are validating a range of antigen assays including in acute hospitals, the meat processing sector, community testing sites and outbreak settings. Antigen testing is now available to (all) acute hospitals and is being used by 3 National Ambulance Service mobile teams on a pilot basis. These will be used as a tool alongside our extensive PCR rapid and batch testing systems.

## **COVID-19 Vaccinations**

Since the rollout of the vaccination programme began on 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2020 significant achievements have been made by the HSE. As of March 5th, 363,601 first dose vaccines and 149,721 second dose (total 513,322) vaccines have been administered and I am delighted to report that residents in Long Term Residential Care Facilities, front-line healthcare workers, and people over 85 years of age have largely received their first dose.

We are continually adjusting our integrated operational plans to align with the updated allocation sequencing and confirmation of supply schedules. Despite many challenges the HSE has adhered to the government's principle of ensuring all available vaccine supply is administered. We are currently amongst the top 5 countries in the EU for vaccine rollout.

Clinical oversight and guidance are at the centre of directing the rollout of the vaccination programme to ensure vaccines can be administered safely, efficiently and effectively. We continue to build the appropriate capacity to administer 250,000 vaccines per week, subject to supply.

Our ongoing planning and rollout includes operating models for GPs, pharmacies and vaccination centres, alongside the corresponding ICT, infrastructure and recruitment mobilisation.

37 HSE vaccination centres are agreed and the required infrastructure is being finalised, with self-referral processes planned. To date, over 2,000 recruitment applications had been received and an additional 9,702 healthcare professionals have completed COVID-19 vaccination training.

### **Closing Remarks**

We are coming out of a very challenging period, although we are not out of the woods yet. While we know it has been extremely difficult for everyone we are asking the public to stick with us over the coming weeks and continue to follow the public health guidance to help suppress the spread of the virus.

The virus and its impacts on society remain largely unpredictable, and as such the need for proactive monitoring and agile planning will always be a feature of our response.

Thank you.