

HEA-MO-05862-2020
25th November 2020

Dear Mr. McDonnell,

Thank you for your correspondence to the Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, T.D., in relation to the Government's Covid-19 pandemic response. The Department has received unprecedented levels of correspondence over the past months and I wish to apologise for the delay in replying to you.

On behalf of the Minister I would like to say that the contents of your email have been noted. The Government's medium term Plan [Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19](#) sets out Ireland's approach to managing and living with Covid-19 in a range of areas over the next 6-9 months. This Plan sets out a framework of 5 Levels which outline the broad measures which will apply depending on the level of the virus at any given time. The Plan reflects a careful consideration of the impact of the introduction of restrictions on employment and livelihoods, keeping as many businesses open as possible at different stages, while acknowledging that some businesses and services are critical.

Any measures introduced at any level of the Plan are aimed at limiting the spread and damage of COVID-19, and are necessary to protect our key priorities of supporting and maintaining health and social care services, keeping education and childcare services open and protecting the most vulnerable members of our communities. The Government is committed to ensuring a balanced and proportionate response to COVID-19 by finding ways to implement public health measures in response to the pandemic in a way that is fair, reasonable and proportionate.

Regarding your comments on PCR testing, the HSE has adopted RNA PCR as the gold standard test for diagnosing Covid-19 cases, as part of the HSE test and trace strategy, consistent with international best practice, and approved by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). This platform is deployed in acute hospitals, the NVRL and HSE's commercial partners. Given the volumes required, these operate as batch tests and hence take a number of hours depending on the platform and the volume being processed. PCR testing remains the gold standard for community testing.

The HSE has worked intensively over the last number of months to put in place a comprehensive testing and tracing operation. We now have on-island capacity to test up to 126,000 people per week, which can be increased to 140,000 per week if the demand requires. On an ongoing basis, the NPHE considers and reviews, based on public health risk assessments, how best to target testing to hunt the virus in populations where it's most likely and where it will do most harm.

Many of the rapid Covid-19 tests reported in the public domain and in the media which purport to offer a test result in minutes (for example antigen tests) lack the sensitivity and specificity required for healthcare. The HSE is constantly monitoring the sensitivity of all types of tests that are available (e.g. antigen and saliva tests) to ensure that, if deployed, they would be of appropriate quality and sensitivity. This issue continues to be monitored by the WHO, ECDC, HIQA, and the HSE Laboratory taskforce.

It should also be noted that testing for Covid-19 only provides a point-in-time result. It confers no guarantee that an individual with a 'not detected' result is not incubating the infection or the level of virus is below detectable levels at the time of the test. It is for this reason, for example, that testing of close contacts of a confirmed case is carried out on two separate occasions, when they are first identified and again 7 days after their last contact with the person.

As I am sure you can appreciate, the evidence relating to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the decisions necessary to protect everybody living in Ireland from its effects is constantly evolving. The public health advice relating to Covid-19 is kept under continuing review by the NPHET, by the Department of Health and by the Government. The measures in place and the public health advice have been adapted to the changing circumstances and this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future.

It is intended that Departments and sectors will provide guidance for specific sectors and activities in line with the 5 level framework and any questions in relation to the retail sector should be directed towards the Minister for Enterprise Trade and Employment who has statutory responsibility for that sector.

I trust the above is of assistance.

Yours sincerely,

Miriam Rooney

Private Secretary to the Minister For Health