

21.11.23

3 Senator S.Y. Mézec of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding Covid-19 PCR tests (OQ.239/2021):

What measures are being put in place to account for an increase in the number of Islanders requiring P.C.R. (polymerase chain reaction) tests as COVID case numbers increase and as more Islanders are identified as direct contacts as a result?

Deputy R.J. Renouf of St. Ouen (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

Two weeks ago we increased the number of available appointments at the harbour from around 500 per day to around 1,000 per day as we started to see demand increasing, particularly for direct contacts. Last week we tested just over 6,570 people at the harbour, including around 1,250 people with symptoms and just over 4,850 direct contacts. Recruitment is ongoing and 11 additional people started with us at the harbour last week with more new joiners earlier this week. The harbour team is continuing to increase the number of appointments available each day and we have just opened up to 300 appointments per day at the airport arrivals also, meaning we should have approximately 1,400 appointments available per day. I would like to thank all of the staff involved in so quickly expanding our capacity and assure Members we are working as quickly as possible to match supply with demand.

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Do I not get a supplementary?

The Bailiff:

You have a supplementary at the end. The way it works, the questioner will ask the question, there is an answer, other Members can ask with a supplementary and then you have a final supplementary at the end, Senator. I have just checked back in my notes and that is the way we have operated certainly as long as my notes go back.

Senator S.Y. Mézec:

Sir, normally the questioner asks the question, the answerer answers and then the questioner gets their first supplementary before it is opened up.

[10:15]

The Bailiff:

Hang on a moment. Well, this may actually not be a red-letter day for me because I think having taken advice and having reviewed my notes further, it turns out that I was not right about that, which is a lapse of memory. I should stay in the Assembly every session and not allow gaps. Yes, supplementary question, Senator.

4.3.1 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

We do get out of the swing of things when it is 3-weekly sittings rather than fortnightly. The supplementary question to the Minister: could I ask what impact on waiting times for direct contacts getting their tests is being had by the extra capacity that he has added into the testing system? Does he have an idea of, on average, how long people are having to wait not knowing, even if they are asymptomatic, whether they have contracted COVID from being a direct contact and therefore potentially still being out in the community potentially spreading COVID? What are the average waiting times for direct contacts getting a test and then getting the result afterwards?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Waiting times have been very variable. In part it has been because of the need to catch up with the recruitment of additional personnel but it is also the case that quite a lot of Islanders are not attending at their allocated appointment time. Some are arriving very early or very late, some even on the wrong date. We are in a position where we have sufficient staff to process the allocated appointments quickly but if people are not turning up on the time and date they are given then that will inevitably lead to queues. I would urge people to observe the times they are given.

4.3.2 Deputy R.J. Ward:

What is the current policy regards levels of infection across the Island because previously when we were told that if we start to test more we will see more cases, we have seen increasing cases again? Is there a point where mitigation measures will be taken?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The winter strategy has been released and makes clear that the critical issue here is the risk to our hospital and if we see larger numbers of cases coming into the hospital, particularly needing I.C.U. (Intensive Care Unit) treatment then that puts us in a much more difficult situation. We are not seeing those numbers at present and therefore we can say that we are not in the position the Deputy alludes to.

4.3.3 Deputy R.J. Ward:

May I ask the Minister then, the purpose of testing is to track numbers and to have people isolate, beyond that what are the indicators from that testing? It seems the only indicators being used is hospitalisation and I.C.U. treatment. How do those 2 things fit together given the huge investment in P.C.R. testing that we are making?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The intention is to slow the spread of the disease because with significant numbers of people in the community that will push through into hospital numbers. If we did not test, if we did not isolate, we would expect to see an escalation, a very rapid escalation of numbers in the community, and though the vast majority of those would not need hospitalisation because of the success of the vaccination programme, still there would be a number that would and a number that are likely to overwhelm our hospital services. Therefore, it is important to slow the spread of the virus so that our hospital and healthcare system can manage and also our education system can be maintained, and as normal a life as we can make in these difficult pandemic times.

4.3.4 Deputy I. Gardiner:

The Minister indicated that 11 people joined and they had undertaken a recruitment process, would the Minister confirm if these people also needed to go through the training programme as well to be able to join the team?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, there is a training process, which I understand is 2 or 3 days. It may be that they are staff members that we have used before; I do not know the precise details of those 11 people.

4.3.5 Deputy I. Gardiner:

It is the fourth time that we have recruited people for the test and tracing team. In the early days of the pandemic it was a state of emergency and an understandable situation, it was not stable, but

now it is predictable. What processes and procedures happened within the team to avoid this situation in the future? We had teams 3 times, we let people go 3 times and what has happened ...

The Bailiff:

I think that is simply asking the question a second time, Deputy Gardiner.

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Many members of the team are working on zero-hour contracts and it is not full-time work for them. There is a need to be very flexible because we need to respond to the needs that arise at any particular time. Because of the experience that the Deputy has referred to, those who are heading the team are aware of a pool of people who might well be available, students in university holidays are also part of the pool. Those are called upon when needed and are happy to step down in slacker times. I hope that helps the Deputy.

4.3.6 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

The question asks what measures are being put in place to account for an increase in the number of Islanders requiring tests. I wanted to just narrow it down to children and ask the Minister how he is planning to mitigate the effects on education, because I am certainly hearing that children's education is being significantly disrupted already at this stage in the season and I think that is only going to get worse. Are children being prioritised for tests and what other measures can be taken to mitigate the impact on children having to be out of school for these tests?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The difficulties in educational settings have been raised with Ministers. We do understand the pressures in that it appears that children are having to attend too regularly, it would be seen by some, for P.C.R. tests because they are regularly being identified as direct contacts of classmates. There is work going on within C.Y.P.E.S. (Children, Young People, Education and Skills) to try and mitigate that, sometimes, stress to children who may have to attend 2, 3 times a week for a P.C.R. test. It may not be most appropriate thing to do because lateral flow tests are very reliable with the Delta variant. That work is being considered with public health officials with a view to trying to help in the educational setting.

4.3.7 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

Could the Minister ensure that the information about these measures is provided to the relevant Scrutiny Panels, please?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, I will ensure that is going to be the case when plans are finalised.

4.3.8 Senator K.L. Moore:

Recently the Governor of the Bank of England has identified that the increase in public sector employment has led to increased pressure on private sector jobs and restrictions in supply of workers, I will not ask the Minister to consider whether he thinks that is a factor here but I would like the Minister to describe to Members what consideration he gives when going out to recruitment for these additional roles in terms of balancing the need for testing versus the need to maintain some supply of people for the private sector workforce?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Where there is recruitment by open advertising then it is for the job applicants to consider whether they wish to apply in the private sector or come and work in this temporary position in government. These are temporary positions. I would not have thought they are going to impact on the needs of the private sector greatly but, as Minister for Health and Social Services, I am not in a position to comment and I do not have any research that has been presented to me to cover the issues. Sorry, I cannot help the Senator any more than that.

4.3.9 Deputy G.P. Southern:

I do not believe I heard a direct answer to the Senator's supplementary question: how long do direct contacts have to wait, on average, not knowing whether they are infecting other people and not having access to the test?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I imagine the Deputy would like to know exactly how long but it varies day by day. It has been 3 days in recent days. I believe the figure is going to be lower now because of the recruitment that has taken place.

4.3.10 Senator S.Y. Mézec:

What guarantees can the Minister give us that this situation is under control and that they will adequately meet the demand there is out there for testing, the increasing demand as more people are contracting COVID as there are more direct contacts. I am aware of a constituent with symptoms who had been unable to get a test for 2 days and I am aware of lots of people who are direct contacts who were not able to get tests for 5 days and in the meantime were out and about in our community. What assurances can he give us that they are able to meet this demand and they are not simply being reactive but are increasing testing capacity down to a clear plan and projections knowing that this was inevitable as we headed towards winter?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I refer to the answer I gave to the Senator, the plans we have set out and the success we have had in recruiting. In his final supplementary the Senator asked me what guarantees I could give. He must know, as the whole Island I believe knows, that we can give no guarantees in a pandemic situation. The Islanders themselves are the key to this. If Islanders followed guidance, were careful about their movements, took tests before they mixed with large crowds of people - those are the lateral flow tests - wore masks in indoor public spaces and if they are asked to attend a P.C.R. test to attend at the date and time they are given to avoid delaying other people. We are in the hands of the Island, we are in the hands of this virus to a great extent, the Government is receiving good advice and putting all the measures in place that it can and thinks appropriate at this time. Thank you.