

From COVID-19 Directorate



Stephen Ciaran McCann
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Your Ref:
Our Ref: FOI DOH/2021-0146
Date: 29 June 2021

Dear Mr McCann

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT 2000

I firstly must apologise for the delay in answering your request for information. The Department acknowledges public interest in the transparency and accountability of government, and the immeasurable public interest associated with the current pandemic and how that affects us all. We fully recognise that disclosure of information will give citizens, like yourself, confidence that decisions are taken on the basis of the best available information.

The Department is aware that we are outside the legislative time to respond. However, as I hope you will understand, resources within the Department and wider health organisations throughout Northern Ireland, have been stretched over the last number of months due to ongoing and ever changing COVID-19 challenges. A considerable number of staff have been redeployed from their normal “day jobs” to work solely on the response to the current pandemic.

Unfortunately, the staff who are in the best position to answer your request, are often the very staff engaged in regular discussions and consultations with senior officials and the Minister in considering the most appropriate course of action to steer us through the current crisis. Nevertheless, I am now in a position to respond to your request from the 26 April 2021.

Please find the Department’s response at Annex A.

I would advise that a significant amount of information underpinning decisions taken by the Department and the Health Minister is derived from work undertaken by other organisations such as the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) and the Public Health Agency (PHA). As well as this information, the Department publishes a range of relevant information on its website, including the daily dashboard. This information is accessible via the following link: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/coronavirus>

Additionally, the Health Minister provides regular updates to MLAs during plenary sessions and the Health Minister and Departmental officials regularly attend Northern Ireland Assembly Committee evidence sessions. Recordings and transcripts of these can be viewed on the NI Assembly website.

If you feel that the information we have provided does not fully meet your request please contact us at covid19directorate@health-ni.gov.uk in the first instance. You have the right to request that the Department formally review this decision within two calendar months of the date of this letter. If you wish to do so, please write to Mr Brendan O'Neill (foi@health-ni.gov.uk), Annexe 3, Castle Buildings, Stormont, Belfast BT4 3SQ.

If after such an internal review you are still unhappy with the response, you have the right to appeal to the Information Commissioner at Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, CHESHIRE SK9 5AF, who will undertake an independent review. If you have any queries about this letter, please contact me. Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications.

Yours sincerely

COVID-19 Directorate

- 1. I am lead to believe that you are responsible for the national initiative for asymptomatic testing using the Lateral Flow Test/Device in Northern Ireland. Can you confirm this is the case?**

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) is leading on a National Testing Programme to enable asymptomatic testing using Lateral Flow Devices across the UK. Working closely with DHSC, the Department of Health in Northern Ireland (NI) is enabling delivery of asymptomatic testing in Northern Ireland.

Under the direction of the Department of Health NI's Expert Advisory Group on Testing, a wide ranging programme of asymptomatic testing using Lateral Flow Devices continues to expand across a range of sectors and settings in Northern Ireland. Lateral Flow Devices are used to test people who are 'asymptomatic', that is people who do not have any symptoms. This includes the use of Lateral Flow Device tests in primary and secondary care settings; testing of staff and pupils in schools, universities, and regular asymptomatic testing across a wide and expanding range of workplaces in both the private and public sectors.

- 2. If so, when did this start in NI?**

Lateral Flow Devices were first used under this programme in Northern Ireland in November 2020.

- 3. And who is helping you with the data collection generated through the testing?**

Management information related to results from Lateral Flow Device tests is reported using the Department of Health and Social Care London's reporting portal. Management information from the portal is available to both the Department of Health NI and to the Public Health Agency.

- 4. Also before the LFT was used and it was PCR testing used for the national initiative testing outside of Northern Irelands trusts and hospitals. What date did you stop using the PCR test as the mains means of testing?**

PCR testing continues to be used in Northern Ireland to test people **who have symptoms** of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Further information can be found at:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>

PCR testing via the National Testing Programme is also in place for the regular programmes of asymptomatic testing deployed across the care home and supported living sectors in Northern Ireland.

5. **On the 27-29th December 2020 were you responsible for organising the testing outside of hospitals on those days in Northern Ireland? If so what type of test was used and if it was the PCR what CT cycles were used on those days?**

For those people with **symptoms** of the SARS-Cov-2 virus tested outside of the hospital environment, PCR testing was undertaken across the National Testing Programme network in Northern Ireland. Further information can be found at:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>

Information in relation to CT cycles for these tests on the days stated is not held by the Department of Health NI.

6. **What guidance or advice are giving to the ones testing about CT cycles and how they should be adjusted or used?**

Please see attached link to previously published information on Ct values.

[Microsoft Word - DOH 2021 0027 McCloskey response for publication \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#)

Finally, I would advise that the Department receives and answers a range of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests each year. Below is a link to the appropriate section of the Department's website where you will find FOI disclosures from 2016 onwards and classified by year:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/doh-significant-foi-disclosures>