

14th October 2019

Deputy Michael McGrath  
Dáil Éireann,  
Dublin 2.

**PQ 39299/19**

**“To ask the Minister for Health the number of children awaiting an ASD assessment as opposed to an assessment of needs in the CH04 area; the length of time they are waiting; and if he will make a statement on the matter.”**

Dear Deputy McGrath,

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply to you in the context of the above Parliamentary Question, which you submitted to the Minister for Health for response.

Children and young people born on or after 1st June 2002 who are suspected of having a disability can apply for an Assessment of Need (AON) under the Disability Act (2005). The Act allows for an assessment of the child's health needs. The assessment of need process consists of two stages, the first stage involves a review of the referral to the assessment of need process by an assessment officer which is an administrative exercise. The child is then referred to stage 2 if appropriate, which is for clinical assessment.

Disability Services has been significantly challenged in terms of the volume of applications for assessment of need and the resultant volume of referrals for ASD for a number of years now. Disability Services has undertaken initiatives since 2017 to address a non-compliance in respect of the requirement under the Disability Act to assess and determine a disability (or otherwise) within a pre-determined timeline

The numbers referred for ASD Assessment in Cork Kerry Community Healthcare are among the highest in the country, see below the numbers as they pertain to the Cork area:

- 100 Referrals received under the Disability Act per month
- 80 Referrals accepted under the Disability Act per month
- 56 Referrals accepted under the Disability Act for ASD assessments per month

In the past three years we have taken a number of steps to address the situation and provide assessments as quick as possible:

1. In 2016 we funded a number of additional autism teams in Cork to respond to the high number of referrals of ASD assessment.
2. In January 2017, we had approximately 808 applicants waiting to move from stage 1 (assessment officer component) to stage 2 (clinical assessment). A number of initiatives had been put in place around recruitment of additional administration staff and 2 additional assessment officers to screen applications. At the end of 2017, we had cleared the wait list at stage one. All Assessment of Need applications are now commenced within a month.

Currently, there are 874 children waiting at stage 2 of the Assessment of Need (AON) process in Cork. This is a reduction from 1,747 in March 2018. These cases have been processed through Assessment of Need and are now waiting for clinical assessments to be completed. Over 675 of these children have been referred for an ASD Assessment to the ASD assessment teams which are part of our voluntary funded services. On average 60% of the monthly AON applications received results in a referral for an ASD assessment, this is a significant challenge in terms of our capacity to respond to this need.

We recognise the long waiting times for clinical assessments within the current AON process. There has been both a national and local focus in 2018 and into 2019 in relation to addressing the numbers of children waiting at stage 2 of the assessment of need process including the following:

3. Introducing and implementing a nationally developed SOP in relation to the assessment process in the Cork Kerry Community Healthcare area. The SOP is still at consultation stage nationally.
4. Working collaboratively with the current service providers in an effort to standardise their approach to the process. Currently there are variations taken in the time to assess each child. Standardising the process should increase the numbers seen.
5. A waiting list initiative commenced in 2018 following a National Procurement process which identified a number of private providers of ASD Assessments.

These efforts, while not all are complete, have been successful and will have yielded a substantial increase in the number of assessments per month as we progress through 2019.

In addition to the above, we are working with our partner organisations to implement 'Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People Programme (PDS)'. The key objective of PDS is to provide equity of access to all children based on their individual need, regardless of their diagnosis, where they live or go to school. This means that a child will have the same access to services whether they live in Donegal, Dublin or Dingle.

Cork Kerry Community Healthcare area will re-configure Childrens' Services in 2019/20 in the Cork area with the roll out Progressing Disabilities (PDS) for Children. Services in Kerry and in West Cork have already re-configured and are now structured according to the PDS model. Cork County North and Cork City will re-configure in the months ahead. The aforementioned area will have 10 Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNT's) once the reconfiguration is complete.

Regrettably, all of the agencies in this area, who are providing assessments and interventions to children diagnosed with ASD, are experiencing very high volumes of referrals and as a consequence of same, they are holding wait lists both for assessments and for interventions. The level of need far exceeds the resources available.

Cork Kerry Community Healthcare acknowledges the lengthy waiting times that parents are experiencing under the Assessment of Need process. We sincerely regret that any child has to wait for an assessment and both management and staff fully appreciate the level of stress that families are experiencing due to the current waiting times. Cork Kerry Community Healthcare would like to assure parents that we will continue to work on a number of initiatives aimed at reducing the waiting times for assessment but must also point out that we can only do so within the current levels of resources and staffing available to our Disability Service.

I trust this clarifies the situation for you.

Yours sincerely,



Deborah Harrington

---

Ms. Deborah Harrington,  
General Manager Disability Services Cork North,  
Cork Kerry Community Healthcare.

