



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

Oifig an Cheannaire Oibríochtaí,
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16th November 2020

Deputy Bernard J Durkan,
Dail Eireann,
Leinster House, Kildare Street,
Dublin 2.
E-mail: bernard.durkan@oireachtas.ie

Dear Deputy Durkan,

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the following parliamentary question, which was submitted to this department for response.

PQ 33789/20

To ask the Minister for Health when he expects to be in a position to improve the quality and extent of support services for children with special needs including the provision of maternity leave cover for speech and language therapists in order to provide continuity of services for the children in respect of whom no such cover exists at present; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

HSE Response

Children's Disability Services were stepped down in March 2020 in line with government recommendations to minimise spread of COVID-19. Through the pandemic, services continued to be provided on the phone/online and also, face to face for some children and families with high prioritised needs, taking all of the required infection prevention and control (IPC) precautions and in line with HSE's Alternative Models of Support (Non-Residential)(March 31st). Some services continued, including therapists such as speech and language therapists working with service users and their families remotely and using technology in new and effective ways.

On July 31st, the HSE issued the Guidance to Support Resumption of Children's Disability Services:

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/partner-resources/guidance-to-support-resumption-of-children-disability-services.pdf>

This guidance applies to all Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNT) and those services planning reconfiguration into CDNTs. The Guidance clearly maps the pathway of access to services and supports, commencing with on phone/online supports, and where that does not meet the needs of the child and/or their family, moving to face to face interventions and what is required to do so safely.

The HSE's Chief Clinical Officer also issued Interim Guidance on Conducting Assessments in Disability Services. This document, which was circulated in July 2020 applies to both children's and adult services.

As an additional response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Special Needs Assistants were temporarily reassigned from the Department of Education & Skills to support HSE funded children's disability services. At June 30th, when this reassignment ceased, 263 SNAs were matched to children with complex needs, providing a range of centre and home based supports.

A further cross sectoral agreement facilitated the allocation of SNAs on a voluntary basis to support a range of HSE led summer programmes for children with complex needs.

The HSE, in partnership with Section 38 and Section 39 service providers, schools, preschools, community groups and sports partnership organisations provided a range of supports for children with complex needs during July / August 2020. Children's Disability Services worked with SNAs to deliver these supports in schools, community centres, homes and other locations across the country. Examples of the programmes provided included:

- In home supports to provide short respite breaks for families;
- SNAs working with Family Support Workers to provide in home supports for children with high support needs;
- SNAs implementing home programmes developed by Children's Disability Services;
- Centre based day respite;
- Centre based day respite with added therapeutic interventions;
- 3 day / week community run summer camp extended to 5 days / week with HSE and SNA support;
- Horse riding for 3 hours per day (weekly for 3 weeks);
- 1 week yoga camp for children with ASD;
- 1 week surf camp for children with ASD;

In addition, children's disability services provided support to a number of DES school based programmes.

The HSE acknowledges the challenges in meeting the demand for children's disability services and is acutely conscious of how this impacts on children and their families.

Maternity Leave

In relation to Maternity Leave, there is little capacity within current resources, caseloads and model of service provision to take over the caseload of a therapist who has left the employ of the HSE or who is on maternity leave, although, in this situation, local services will endeavour to put arrangements in place to provide, as far as possible, continuity of service provision. However, in a predominately female workforce, this situation can have a significant impact on the provision of multidisciplinary services to people with disabilities.

Reform of Children's Services

With regard to improvements in access for children with special needs to specialised therapies such as occupational therapy and speech and language therapy, a number of service improvements are being introduced that, when implemented, will help improve access to services for children with disabilities and developmental delays. The overall programme of improvement is the ongoing roll out of Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People (PDS). This requires the reorganisation of all current HSE and HSE funded children's disability services into geographically-based Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs).

PDS is doing this by forming partnerships between all the disability organisations in an area and pooling their staff with expertise in the different types of disabilities to form the CDNTs. These teams will provide for all children with significant disability, regardless of their disability, where they live or where they go to school.

It is important to note that access to therapy services under PDS for children, is based on their assessed needs not on diagnosis.

Under PDS, the HSE continues to establish Children's Disability Networks across each of the nine CHOs comprised of Specialist Multi-Disciplinary Teams to work with children with complex disability needs. Each Network will have a Children's Disability Network Manager with specialist expertise in providing children's disability clinical services.

Resilience & Recovery Framework

In the context of the Government's Resilience & Recovery Framework (2020 – 2021), the HSE regards the provision of all disability services including services for children with disabilities including autism, as essential to maintaining a response to people with a disability.

All disability services must follow public health guidance in this area, including the prevention and management of covid related infection. The HSE and its funded disability partners will continue to provide residential, including respite, and day services in line with public health guidance and direction and having regard to the availability of staffing resources.

This must be supported by way of assurance and oversight from the HSE's Chief Clinical Officer along with the NPHE, so that we can do so in a safe manner. This means that childrens services, whilst being delivered in new ways, will gradually be re-introduced to children with disabilities.

Reference is drawn to the following HSE weblink which provides updates and guidance for disability service providers, including 'service resumption planning guidance'.

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/partner-resources/>

Attention is also drawn to the following important web links which provides up to date information resources in respect of covid: www.hspc.ie

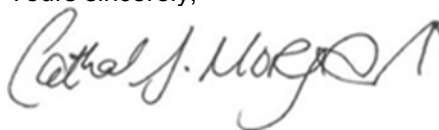
<https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/c36c85-covid-19-coronavirus/>

The HSE and disability service providers recognise the critical need and importance of disability supports for people and their families. The impact of COVID-19 on people's lives has and continues to be very significant. Our collective aim is to restore services and ensure continuity of services in a safe way and in line with the very significant investment made by the State and funded agencies.

In this context, we welcome the recent announcements from the Government of additional funding for Disability Services:

- An additional €100 million secured for Disability Services in the recent budget.
- €10 million is being made available to support the resumption of day services and enhanced home support services for disability service users. The €10 million funding is being drawn down from the National Action Plan on COVID-19 - €7.5 million will increase the level of day service provision and €2.5 million will provide intensive support packages for children and young people with complex/high support needs.
- €20 million in one-off grants will be provided to reform disability services, build the capacity of disability organisations and to improve the quality of life of those who rely on these services.
- €7.8 million has been allocated by Sláintecare to facilitate the HSE and its funded service providers to address the overdue Assessments of Need.

Yours sincerely,



**Dr. Cathal Morgan,
Head of Operations - Disability Services,
Community Operations**