



Feidhmeannacht na Seirbhíse Sláinte
Health Service Executive

Oifig an Cheannaire Oibríochtaí,
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15th September 2020

Deputy Bernard 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 questions, which were submitted to this department for response.

PQ 22662/20

To ask the Minister for Health the extent to which he has identified disadvantages experienced by families with disabilities particularly impacted by Covid-19; the measures in place or being put in place to address these issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

PQ 22663/20

To ask the Minister for Health the extent to which he is engaged with addressing difficulties experienced by children with special needs and impacted by the Covid-19 crisis; if he anticipates specific new measures to correct imbalances likely to affect such children later; and if he will make a statement on the matter

PQ 22667/20

To ask the Minister for Health the measures put in place to improve the situation for children with disabilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

HSE Response

The presence and threat of COVID-19 in Ireland has resulted in significant challenges for service providers, families and most importantly, people with disabilities. During these challenging times disability services and supports such as residential services, day services, home supports, Personal Assistant supports, respite services and children's services were either suspended or delivered in alternative ways in line with Public Health guidance. The HSE is aware that the changes in service delivery have resulted in significant stressors being placed on families and individuals with disabilities across Ireland.

In the absence of regular, scheduled day services, respite supports and multidisciplinary supports, CHOs and service providers have tried to maintain services that can be delivered safely; providing outreach and telecare solutions, using technology where possible; and using creative and innovative models of care to support service users, both adults and children. The HSE was also mindful of the will and preference of

people in terms of receiving services and in certain instances where personal choice was made to put these services on hold.

Under the governance of the HSE's National Integrated Operations Hub chaired by the Chief Operations Officer and work relating to vulnerable people, Disability Operations put a team in place with the responsibility for providing supports and capacity building training for the sector. A range of guidance material was developed to support people with disabilities, families and staff including;

- Alternative Models of Support (Non-Residential);
- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) for People with Disabilities and Carers;
- Streamlined Health Passport for people with disabilities who are admitted to hospital;
- Guidance on Use of PPE in Disability Services;
- Guidance for supporting adults in a community residence/at home;
- Guidance of supporting children in a community residence/at home;
- Support coordination in a pandemic; practical checklist to avoid stressors for service users;
- Interim Guidance on Conducting Assessments in Disability Services;
- Guidance to Support the Resumption of Children's Disability Services.

The FAQ, in particular, explained the pathway for supports for family carers and included dedicated guidance and advice on a range of issues relating to COVID-19 together with a list of local and national helpline numbers.

Central to the above, there has been continued engagement and liaison with National Disability Representative Bodies on behalf of Service Providers and Family/Service Users & Care Representation Groups representing the interest of service users, their families as well as provider organisations.

These forums work as a team, with each having specific and identified work streams, working through regular tele and video-conference. Taking this approach ensured two-way communication as well as establishing working groups with assigned tasks in response to the COVID-19 emergency.

The Disability Operations Team Work Streams re COVID-19 undertook the following important measures;

- Engagement with Service Providers/Umbrella Organisations which involved co-ordination and communication between Community [Disability] Operations and the S38/39 Disability Representative Bodies;
- Guidance and Capacity Building for Vulnerable People which involved Design and Delivery of a National Sectoral 'Frontline Services' Support Programme aimed at Disability Services Supporting Vulnerable People;
- Re-assignment of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) which involved the temporary assignment of SNAs to provide supports in Children's Disability Services during the school term and a further voluntary assignment during July / August;
- Engagement with Service Users and Families to act as a channel of communication to family representative organisations;
- Adapting Models of Support which involved developing alternative and innovative models of support for Vulnerable Children/ Young People & Adults (and their families) with a disability, experiencing prolonged periods of isolation;
- The Built Environment/Resources which involved monitoring and providing guidance, in conjunction with CHOs, regarding the use of new and existing capacity in disability services.

Resumption of Children's Disability Services

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). 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 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.

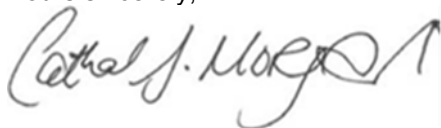
The HSE, in partnership with Section 38 and Section 39 service providers, schools, preschools, community groups and sports partnership organisations provided a range of supports for children with complex needs during July / August 2020. Children's Disability Services worked with SNAs to deliver these 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 and 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 in a safe way and in line with the very significant investment made by the State and funded agencies and we will continue to work with service users and their families/carers to ensure that we achieve this aim.

Yours sincerely,



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