



**Oifig an Cheannaire Oibríochtaí,**  
Na Seirbhísí Míchumais/An Rannán Cúram Sóisialta,  
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24<sup>th</sup> November 2022

Deputy Pat Buckley,  
Dail Eireann,  
Leinster House,  
Kildare Street,  
Dublin 2.  
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Dear Deputy Buckley,

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: 56299/22**

*To ask the Minister for Health if his Department will recognise that autism assistance dogs should have the same recognition as dogs for the blind; if his Department will consider providing Government funding in line with the way that guide dogs in Ireland are funded; and if he will make a statement on the matter.*

**HSE Response**

Pet animals can enhance the quality of life for many people. A companion dog may be suitable for a child with autism who doesn't need a dog for safety when out in public places, but may benefit from the companionship of a dog at home.

It is important to note that the Disability sector makes a distinction between Therapy and Assistance Dogs. Assistance Dogs are essentially working dogs and have to be accredited with Assistance Dogs International. There are Standards and Guidelines in place, which form the basis for ADI Accreditation.

Therapy/Companion dogs don't require the same level of training and are only placed for companionship. A Companion Dog acts as a constant companion to the child with autism in their home environment helping to give them a sense of responsibility, reassurance and support.

Assistance Dogs are highly trained and help to control and improve the child's behaviour in public places. Assistance Dogs also help children with autism to develop coping mechanisms, improve communication skills and their ability to learn and participate in social activities. All these benefits improve the long term quality of the life of the child and reduce the need for other costly supports and interventions.

In Ireland there are four organisations that have accreditation with Assistance Dogs International, Inc. (ADI). These are:

- Autism Assistance Dogs Ireland;
- Irish Dogs for the Disabled;
- Irish Guide Dogs for the Blind
- My Canine Companion - Autism Service Dogs



Assistance Dogs International, Inc. (ADI) is a worldwide coalition of non-profit programs that train and place Assistance Dogs. Founded in 1986 from a group of seven small programs, ADI has become the leading authority in the Assistance Dog industry.

Assistance Dogs organisations that pass ADI's accreditation process become ADI Accredited Member programs and are regularly assessed to ensure they meet the highest standards in the industry.

A vital part of the HSE's strategic goals is to provide and promote supports that enable each individual with a disability, including children with Autism, to achieve their full potential, living ordinary lives in ordinary places, as independently as possible.

With regard to children on the ASD spectrum, organisations such as some of those listed above, can provide Assistance and Companion Dogs. Assistance Dogs can help to control and improve the behaviour of a child with autism by promoting calmness and acting as a safety aid to the parents.

With the help of these dogs, family outings can become less stressful as the dogs allow families to enjoy greater freedom and mobility. Dogs are first trained as a safety aid to prevent a child bolting.

### **Funding**

The HSE must manage service levels within existing resources and funding can only be allocated within the parameters of funding available to the HSE.

As outlined above, there are a number of organisations that provide Assistance Dogs, some of which receive direct funding from the HSE and some of which rely on voluntary contributions and fund-raising activities for their funding.

In addition to funding that the HSE provides to organisations, the HSE has been allocated National Lottery Funding for distribution to community based groups and voluntary organisations under the Respite Care Grant Scheme and the National Lottery Grant Scheme. Groups and organisations involved in the provision of Health and Personal Social Services can apply for once off funding of between €500 and €10,000 for suitable projects. Completed applications can be obtained on the HSE Website [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie) and can be returned to the local HSE Community Healthcare Organisation.

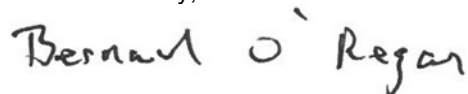
The Head of Operations Disability Services met with some organisations providing an Assistance Dog in 2019 and agreed once off funding of €10,000 at that time, which was administered through a Grant Aid agreement.

While the HSE considers the provision of Assistance Dogs for clients on the Autistic Spectrum as a very positive development, we are not currently in a position to consider further budgetary allocations outside of the National Service Plan 2022.

However, the HSE values Assistance Dogs' services to children with autism and has fully supported organisations' applications to other funding bodies such as the Scheme to Support National Organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector (SSNO).

The financial support afforded by an SSNO Grant would enable such organisations to grow and expand operations and significantly increase the number of dogs placed each year with children on the autistic spectrum.

Yours sincerely,



**Mr Bernard O'Regan,  
Head of Operations - Disability Services,  
Community Operations**

