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18<sup>th</sup> July 2023

Deputy Bernard Durkan,  
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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: 32702/23**

*To ask the Minister for Children; Equality; Disability; Integration and Youth when it is expected that all waiting lists for children with special needs/disabilities are likely to be satisfactorily dealt with; and if he will make a statement on the matter.*

**PQ: 32703/23**

*To ask the Minister for Children; Equality; Disability; Integration and Youth the extent to which he has identified particular areas of deficiencies in services for children with disabilities; the action being taken to address the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter.*

**HSE Response**

Everyone working in the HSE, and in our Children's Disability Network Teams, is very aware of the importance of children's disability services and early intervention in the lives of many families all over Ireland. It is not acceptable to have to wait an extended time for either an assessment of need or therapy that would help a child and their family.

The National Policy on Access to Services for Children & Young People with Disability and Developmental Delay ensures that children are directed to the appropriate service based on the complexity of their presenting needs rather than based on diagnosis. Many children and adults with a disability who have support needs can be effectively supported within mainstream child and adult health services. This policy provides a single point of entry, signposting parents and referrers to the most appropriate service (Primary Care for non-complex functional difficulties and Children's Disability Network Teams for complex functional difficulties).

91 Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) are aligned to 96 Community Healthcare Networks (CHNs) across the country and are providing services and supports for children with complex disabilities aged from birth to 18 years of age.



The CDNTs are currently providing care and therapy for over 46,000 children and strategies and supports for urgent cases on the waitlist where staffing resources allow.

Each team is supported by a Children's Disability Network Manager, and team members typically include Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Psychologists, Physiotherapists and Social Workers.

Since 2019, more than 610 development posts have been allocated to children's disability services across the country. These posts have been assigned to teams based on a number of factors, including the existing ratio of staff to the number of children with disabilities in each area. This figure includes 190 posts provided in 2022 as well as an additional 136.3 WTEs to restore pre-existing services in 104 special schools.

The HSE completed its second annual Children's Disability Network Team Staff Census and Workforce Review in October 2022. The resulting report was finalised in February 2023 and has been circulated to relevant stakeholders. An overall analysis of the data from 2021 and 2022 demonstrates an increase of 11% in the number of approved posts and a 2% increase in the CDNT workforce. This increase has been achieved in a context where there is an average turnover rate 9.6% in health and social care professionals each year.

The census indicates over 707 posts vacant out of 2103 at this time across all CDNTs. Disability services, similar to all other areas of the Irish health services are experiencing enormous challenges in recruiting Health and Social Care Professionals (HSCP) at this time.

### **Actions to address Staffing of the CDNTs**

#### **RETENTION of STAFF**

The HSE and Lead Agencies are operating in a very competitive global market for healthcare talent as there are significant shortages of qualified healthcare professionals across the globe. In partnership with our CDNT Lead Agencies, the HSE continues to explore a range of options to enhance the recruitment and retention of essential staff into CDNTs. These are as follows;

#### ***Learning & Development***

A comprehensive Team Development Programme 2020/2021 has been provided for CDNMs and cascaded to all team members. This programme, which was designed to support the establishment of the new CDNTs and the implementation of the new model of service, will also support staff retention. All resources from this Programme are available online for CDNMs.

Delivery of an extensive CDNT Training and Development Programme 2022/2023 will be completed by Q1 2024. This is supported with dedicated funding of €660m and based on the current competency gaps identified across the 91 CDNTs and prioritised by the National CDN Forum. This is in addition to local CHO and Lead Agency commissioned and funded training as CDNT competency gaps arise.

The HSE and Lead Agencies are committed to providing ongoing training and development supports for CDNT staff supporting their professional development and retention.

#### ***Establishment of the CDN Forum***

This community of practice, established in Jan 2022 for and led by CDNMs, is to drive consistent development and implementation of CDNT service models across all 91 CDNTs. .

#### ***Confined Recruitment Campaign - Senior Therapy Grades for CDNTs***

A confined recruitment campaign was negotiated and signed off with Fórsa on 14<sup>th</sup> March 2023. This initiative sought to retain staff within the 91 CDNTs. This recruitment process is ongoing and is being managed locally at CHO level.

#### ***Engagement with staff representative bodies regarding CDNTs***

There is ongoing dialog with the staff representative bodies to troubleshoot the issues that are challenging for staff working in our CDNTs. A partnership approach between HSE, Section 38 and Section 39 representatives



ensures clear management messaging and allows for the development and smooth implementation of initiatives. The confined recruitment campaign to support retention in the sector is a product of this forum.

### ***Culture and Engagement Session***

The HR Social Care Team in collaboration with HSE Communications have developed a Culture and Engagement workshop. The purpose of this engagement is to meet CDNT staff, articulate the actions of the Children's Disability Services mnRoadmap, review the current culture on the teams by CHO areas to allow a targeted response and finally to enhance the communication skills on the teams.

The stakeholder engagement session required to initiate this work will take place in Q3 led by Disability Operations. A subgroup will be developed to review and agree the content developed by HR and Communications.

### ***Marketing Disability Services - specifically CDNTs as an workplace of choice***

The HR Social Care Team have worked with colleagues in HSE communications and National Children's Disability Team to develop material for dissemination to candidates on all HSE recruitment panels. The information developed seeks to create a new narrative promoting children's disability services as an area where job satisfaction is linked to the positive impact of service delivery to children and their families.

In addition, an advertising campaign with a fresh creative concept has been developed. This will be used as part of all future recruitment campaigns.

Work is ongoing with colleagues in Corporate HR to establish a recruitment pathway for all vacancies in CDNTs regardless of employer i.e. HSE, Section 38 and Section 39 Service Providers.

### ***Engagement with Graduates by HR Social Care Team***

There has been significant face to face engagement with both potential employees at the Healthcare Job Fair in the RDS and graduates in colleges.

In Q1, 2023 HR Social Care Team partnered with colleagues in Recruitment Reform and Resourcing to visit / present at a number of Higher Education Authorities to promote Disability Services and specifically CDNTs as a workplace of choice. Connections were made with the following:

- National University Galway
- University of Limerick
- Cork University College.
- Technical University Dublin

These graduates were offered a full insight into the opportunities in the CDNTs together with support to help them to apply and prepare for interview. This was followed up with significant on line support material.

### ***Career Hub***

In Mid-April the HSE launched an on-line initiative to harness the details of potential and future candidates, i.e. the Career Hub. This hub creates a database of potential employees who will be notified of roles as they are advertised together with the ability to directly engage with individual cohorts. In the first 6 weeks since its inception, over 10,000 individuals have registered.

A significant enhancement has now been developed to particularly support the resourcing into the CDNTs. This service spotlight page, which went live the week commencing 26<sup>th</sup> June, will be aggressively promoted through social media, providing a fresh marketing approach to CDNTs. This will allow for candidates to register their interest for roles in the CDNT but will also signpost candidates to section 38 and section 39 Lead Agencies, demonstrating our commitment to partnering with our colleagues in the not for profit sector.

### ***Campaign to Target Irish candidates abroad***

Whilst not specific to the population of the CDNTs, the HSE, over the next 2 weeks will commence a direct targeting of Irish trained HSCPs who travelled abroad. This will be a social media campaign working with the Regulator, the Colleges and the Professional Bodies. These candidates will be directed to the Career Hub above with CDNTs spotlighted in the first instance.



### ***Student Sponsorship Programmes***

A proposal has been developed by the HR Social Care Team in collaboration with National Disability Operations. This proposal is with the Head of Disability Operations for sign off and dissemination to CHOs. If adopted this student sponsorship programme for 2023 costing circa. €2.7m will see 91 students supported for between one and three years (2023 – 2026). The CDNT is acutely aware of the importance of expanding the overall candidate pool and therefore this sponsorship initiative is considering the sponsorship of Irish students training abroad. This is already at an advance stage of implementation with our service colleagues in Donegal.

### **RECRUITMENT of STAFF**

Recruitment of staff is the responsibility of the employing agencies where vacancies exist. The HSE, Section 38, Section 39 continue to recruit and in 2022 managed to increase staffing in CDNTs by 2% while also managing a 9.6% turnover in Health and Social Care Professionals.

### ***Targeted Recruitment Campaign – Senior Therapy Grades for CDNTs***

A targeted recruitment campaign was launched the week commencing 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2023 for the remainder of vacant senior therapy grades on the 91 CDNTs.

### ***Staff Grade Recruitment***

The HSE is acutely aware of the importance of early engagement with the HSCP Graduates and to this end 2023 graduates of programmes for Occupational Therapy, Physiotherapy, Speech and Language Therapy, Dietetics and Social Work have been offered an opportunity to apply for employment through the National campaigns. All of these have now been interviewed and recruitment panels prepared. Permanent job offers will be issued prior to their professional registration. Some professions will also be offered an opportunity to take positions as Therapy Graduates in advance of their registration. Opportunities in the CDNTs have been given priority in job offers and these offers have been accompanied by significant marketing material to promote CDNTs as a workplace of choice.

There will also be an opportunity later in the year for those who, for whatever reason, chose not to apply or weren't successful to apply / reapply.

### ***Student / Clinical Placements***

HR Social Care Team have undertaken an analysis of the staff levels by discipline in each CDNT and have made recommendations using a 4:1 ratio of filled WTE: student, based on the CDNT Staff Census and Workforce Review 2022. This will require clinical oversight and is with National Disability Operations for implementation.

### ***Retirees***

To address identified gaps on our CDNTs, the HSE is writing to all HSCPs who have retired over the past three years inviting them to return to the workplace, giving due cognisance to pension abatement rules.

### ***International Recruitment***

Despite all of the above, CDNTs will require significant recruits from overseas in addition in order to fill current team vacancies. The lead in time for this will be 6 months plus and will require significant supports in relation to clinical supervision, and cultural competence.

### **WORKFORCE PLANNING**

#### ***Working Groups***

The HR Social Care Team are contributing to multiple workforce planning projects and working groups set out below in the context of Disability Services:

- Cross Sectoral Employers Working Group for Social Workers
- DCEDIY - Supply Issues for Disability Grades – Stakeholder Group
  - DCEDIY – Sub Group for Social Care Workers
- ESRI - Workforce projections in Disability services
- Recruitment & Retention Forum HSE and Disability Umbrella Bodies



In addition there a number of internal initiatives within HSE and / or Disability Operations that the HR Social Care Team are supporting, to address challenges in recruitment to specific roles, these include:

- Review of the Person in Charge (PIC) role
- Review of behaviour support requirements in the Disability Sector
- Healthcare Assistant (HCA) review of the role and function for disability services based on a social care model of delivery.

### **Projections**

As outlined earlier the CDNT Staff Census & Workforce Review 2022 demonstrated that the overall staffing on our teams nationally had increased by 2%. In addition the service managed a turnover rate of 9.6% for Health and Social Care Professionals.

The target for recruitment of graduates in 2023 and 2024 is set out in table 1 below. This is based on the approximate number of new graduates in 2023 / 2024. Disability Operations will target 10% of graduates in 2023 but expect that workforce planning initiatives and marketing will increase the profile of CDNTs and have adjusted the target in 2024 to 20%.

HSPC Graduates	Graduates	Targeted 2023	Targeted 2024	Total
Dietetics Total	69	7	14	21
Occupational Therapy Total	123	12	25	37
Physiotherapy Total	228	23	46	68
Psychology Total	75	8	15	23
Social Work Total	252	25	50	76
Speech and Language Therapy Total	119	12	24	36
	<b>866</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>260</b>

It is expected that international recruitment will yield 20 WTE by year-end 2023. A target of 91 will be explored in collaboration with HR and Service colleagues for year-end 2024.

In addition, our student sponsorship programme will target 91 individuals each year for four years increasing our WTE by 182 year-end 2024.

In summary, our target for recruitment is as follows:

- HSCP Graduates 260
- Sponsorship Programme 182
- International Recruitment 111
- **Total 553**

There are other initiatives ongoing that are dependent on an increase in the number of graduate places on recognised courses. The HSE as part of their workforce planning initiatives are working to influence in this space and if successful this could see an increase in the number of graduates available and an upward revision on 2024 figures.

The requirement for innovation in a regulated environment continues to be a challenge, however we are committed to working with all stakeholders, internal and external, to reimagine disability services and ensure that we close the gap between our allocated and filled WTE.

### **Assessment of Need under The Disability Act (2005)**

The Disability Act (2005) provides a legislated right to an Assessment of Need (AON) that outlines the health and education needs for people born on or after 1<sup>st</sup> June 2002 who are suspected of having a disability, but does not include a legislated right to service provision as an outcome of that AON.



6,755 applications for AON were received in 2022. This was the highest number of applications received in any year since Part 2 of the Act was commenced in June 2007.

The numbers of applications for Assessment of Need under the Act have risen steadily since its implementation in June 2007. The non-commencement of the Education for Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) is a significant contributory factor. When originally implemented it was envisaged that the Assessment of Need would apply to children aged less than five years. Following a High Court ruling in 2009 eligibility was expanded to include all persons born on or after June 1st 2002. This has also contributed to the rise in applications. The number of children aged five and over, and in addition of school-going age, has risen steadily as a percentage of all applications received. At the end of 2011, the figure stood at 26%, while throughout 2022, this figure averaged 55%.

5,899 applications for AON were received in 2021 and 8,353 AONs were completed. The number of assessments completed in 2022 was 3,071. This reduction in numbers of AONs in 2022 was as a direct result of the High Court judgement in March 2022 in the case of CTM and JA v HSE.

#### High Court – Challenge to the Standard Operating Procedure for AON

The judgement of Ms Justice S Phelan in the case of CTM & JA v the HSE was delivered in March 2022. This judgment found that the Preliminary Team Assessment approach described in the HSE's Standard Operating Procedure for Assessment of Need does not meet the requirements of the Disability Act. This judgement in effect requires the HSE to deliver diagnostic assessments where necessary and appropriate as part of the Assessment of Need process. This ruling has a significant impact operationally and has resulted in a growth in the numbers of overdue Assessments of Need. The requirement for services to prioritise the statutory Assessment of Need process will also impact significantly on their capacity to provide necessary intervention / treatment for children with disabilities.

As a result of the Judgement, activity for the first quarter of 2023 indicates that there has been an increase in the total number of applications 'overdue for completion', which now stands at 5,484 (including 180 applications for which an extended time-frame was negotiated with the parent on the grounds of there being exceptional circumstances as provided for in paragraph 10 of the regulations).

The HSE has reviewed the files of all children who received a preliminary team assessment and engaged directly with families to establish what additional assessments will be required to meet the requirements of the Act. Overall activity for the first quarter of 2023 indicates that there are approximately 5,171 Preliminary Team Assessments requiring a diagnostic assessment.

#### **Actions to address AON waiting lists**

A revised AON Standard Operating Procedure incorporating guidance on completion of clinical assessment was launched on July 14<sup>th</sup> to reflect the High Court ruling in CMT & JA vs HSE 2022.

**It is important to note that children do not require an Assessment of Need to access health services. Parents may refer their child directly to their local Children's Disability Network Team (CDNT).**

When the 5,171 Preliminary Team Assessments requiring an assessment are added to the 5,484 AONs overdue at the end of Q1 2023 (including 180 applications for which an extended time-frame was negotiated with the parent on the grounds of there being exceptional circumstances as provided for in paragraph 10 of the regulations), the total number of applications 'overdue for completion' at this time is 10,655.

In addition, an estimated 7005 new AONs are anticipated in 2023 based on the number of AONs received over the previous four quarters.

#### **Regional Assessment Hubs**

The development of Regional Hubs to undertake AON Assessments is currently under discussion within the HSE, including National Units and the local CHO Areas. The HSE is committed to the development of six Regional Hubs and is working across the CHO Areas to have these in place by 1<sup>st</sup> August this year. While the





CHOs are at various stages in the development process, there are a number that have established Hubs or are at an advanced stage in the development process: These would accelerate the process of dealing with the long waiting lists for assessment, and take this work away from the Children's Disability Network Teams so they can prioritise providing services to children with disabilities.

Approximately €11.5m has been allocated to address waiting lists for clinical assessments identified through the Assessment of Need process. It is intended that this funding will be utilised to procure diagnostic ASD assessments from the private sector. The CHO areas are at various stages of engagement with private providers for the provision of AON. There are some challenges with the outsourcing of these assessments due to a number of factors, including:

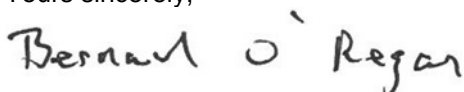
- The lack of availability of suitable Private Providers;
- The limited capacity of the Private Sector to deliver assessments due to recruitment issues;
- Variations in costs quoted by Private Providers - Some tenders received by the CHOs are price prohibitive and there are often additional costs, particularly if a cognitive assessment is required, such as school observations, travel costs etc;
- The location of the Private Provider - In some situations, it is not possible or advisable for a child to travel to private providers;
- The provision of ASD assessments through Private Providers can be challenging in terms of meeting deadlines, completing reports, responding to correspondence etc.

#### **Procurement**

To address the challenges in outsourcing AON, National Disability Services is working with HSE Procurement to develop a tender process and Service Specification for the delivery of Assessment of Need from private providers. A successful procurement process will facilitate the CDNTs to focus on the provision of intervention for children on their caseloads. This is at an advanced stage and will be concluded towards the end of July.

The HSE remains committed to the delivery of appropriate services for children with disabilities and will work with families and staff to develop services and improve retention, attraction, recruitment and workforce planning in Disability Services that meet their needs

Yours sincerely,



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

