



**Oifig an Cheannaire Oibríochtaí,**  
Na Seirbhísí Míchumais/An Rannán Cúram Sóisialta,  
31-33 Sráid Chaitríona, Luimneach.

**Office of the Head of Operations,**  
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4<sup>th</sup> October 2023

Deputy James O'Connor,  
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Leinster House,  
Kildare Street,  
Dublin 2.  
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Dear Deputy O'Connor,

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: 39797/23**

*To ask the Minister for Children; Equality; Disability; Integration and Youth if he will outline the support dog services currently available to children with autism; if he has any plans to review the current support systems in place, with a view to widening same to ensure more children can avail of autism support dog services; 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.

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, sense of responsibility, confidence, 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.

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.

Dogs must undergo extensive training and rigorous assessments to meet the standard required to be an assistance dog. The dogs that qualify as assistance dogs will have spent 18-24 months within a training programme undergoing regular assessments and evaluation.



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.

## **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.

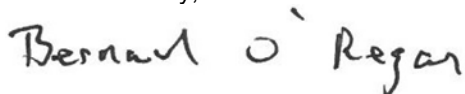
The HSE values Assistance Dogs' services to children with autism and has fully supported organisations' applications to other funding bodies such as the Scheme to Support National Organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector (SSNO).

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.

In addition, the HSE funds a range of organisations which provide services to people with autism, their carers and families. For example, Aslam provides an Information Helpline and will direct any queries to other relevant organisations and supports. Please see weblink below.

<https://asiam.ie/information-line>

Yours Sincerely,



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

