



Oifig an Stiúrthóir Cúnta Náisiúnta,
Foireann Míchumais Náisiúnta,
An Chéad Urlár - Oifigí 13, 14, 15,
Áras Phlásóg na Rós, Coimpléasc Gnó na hOllscoile,
Páirc Náisiúnta Teicneolaíochta,
Caladh an Treoigh,
Luimneach.

Office of the Assistant National Director,
National Disability Team,
First Floor- Offices 13, 14, 15,
Roselawn House, University Business Complex,
National Technology Park,
Castletroy,
Limerick.

16th July 2024

Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett,
Dail Eireann,
Leinster House,
Kildare Street,
Dublin 2.
E-mail: richard.boyd.barrett@oireachtas.ie

Dear Deputy Boyd Barrett,

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: 28813/24

To ask the Minister for Children; Equality; Disability; Integration and Youth the estimated cost to clear assessment of needs waiting lists for children with autism.

PQ: 28837/24

To ask the Minister for Children; Equality; Disability; Integration and Youth the estimated full-year cost of ensuring that the timelines for assessment of needs outlined in the Disability Act 2005 are adhered to for every child in need of such an assessment; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

HSE Response

An Assessment of Need (AON) is a legal entitlement under the Disability Act 2005. Part 2 of the Disability Act (2005) requires the HSE to provide Assessments of Need for persons born on or after 1st June 2005 who may have a disability. The Disability Act outlines the statutory timelines under which AON must be completed. In summary, the assessment report must be completed within 6 months of the date the application was received.

The demand for assessments of need (AONs) under the Disability Act, 2005 has increased significantly in recent years, with a 25% increase in the number of applications for AON received in 2023 – from 6,775 in 2022 to 8,472 in 2023. This growth has continued into 2024, with a further 2,603 received in Quarter 1 (569 up on same period last year). The total number of applications ‘overdue for completion’ at end of Quarter 1, 2024, now stands at 9,924 (including 369 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) – which represents an increase of 115% on the end 2022 figure of 4,613.



Waiting lists are growing as demand outstrips system capacity. We are receiving circa 8,500 applications annually, with around 3,200 – 3,400 AONs completed each year. In this regard, we anticipate that, by the end of 2024, there will be over 20,000 AONs due for completion, comprising: AONs overdue at end 2023; AONs expected during the course of 2024; as well as Preliminary Team Assessments carried out under the previous Standard Operating Procedure (SOP), an approach found by the High Court not to have met the requirements of the Disability Act.

Additional funding

Approximately €10.5m was spent in 2023 to address waiting lists for clinical assessments identified through the Assessment of Need process and in 2024, an additional €5m in one off funding has been allocated. This funding is being utilised to procure diagnostic ASD assessments from the private sector. The HSE at local level is also using time related savings to source AON assessments privately for children in the order as registered on the AOS (AON information management system) in line with the date of receipt of a completed AON application.

Targeted Initiative focussed on long waiting families

A new targeted waiting list initiative is in place and the Government has allocated funding of €6.89 million to facilitate the HSE to procure up to 2,500 additional AONs, with delivery targeted over the next 6 months. This funding is in addition to existing HSE core funding of the €5m mentioned above, allocated for procurement of private assessments.

This waiting list initiative will target those families waiting longest for AONs, with the HSE reimbursing clinicians directly through the procurement of capacity from approved private providers. This provides a more equitable and fair approach rather than reimbursement of parents directly.

Funding has been allocated to each CHO area for the provision of Assessment of Need. The CHO Areas will be in a position to identify the longest waiters

It is envisaged that this initiative will be progressed through the existing framework of providers procured by each CHO Area, while also seeking to expand the list with any new private provision.

Costs

With regard to the questions asked regarding the estimated cost to clear assessment of needs waiting lists for children with autism and the estimated full-year cost of ensuring that the timelines for assessment of needs outlined in the Disability Act 2005 are adhered to for every child in need of such an assessment, it is difficult to give precise information, however we can provide indicative information.

As referenced above, in 2023, we experienced a 25% increase in the number of applications for AON – from 6,775 to 8,472. This growth has continued into 2024, with a further 2,603 received in Quarter 1 (569 up on same period last year). This would indicate that the current year's rate of applications for AON will be around 10,000.

We estimate, based on 36 hours to complete each AON that this would require 375 clinicians dedicated full time to complete 10,000 AONs in a given year, within the 6 months deadline outlined in the Disability Act.

The average cost of a staff grade OT/Physio/SLT = €80,000 (pay & non-pay); the average cost of staff grade psychologist = €120,000 (pay & non-pay).

Therefore 375 clinicians at staff grade (comprising 94 OTs; 94 Physios; 94 SLTs and 93 Psychologists) would cost €33.72 million.

In relation to the backlog of 9,924 AONs overdue at the end of 2023 and approximately 2,500 Preliminary Team Assessments requiring a new assessment, it would cost €33,544,800 to outsource these to private agencies/assessors. This is based on an average cost of €2,700 per AON outsourced to the private sector.

However, with regard to the above information, important caveats must be considered, as follows:

- Calculation of the increasing demand for Assessment of Need under the Disability Act 2005



- Difficulty recruiting staff; Health Services in general are operating in a very competitive global market for healthcare talent and there are significant shortages of qualified healthcare professionals across the globe. Clinical staff recruitment and retention challenges are impacting on target adherence.
- Additional activity generated from AONs, which redirects resources, such as complaints and legal cases.
- The requirement for diagnostic assessment for autism through the AON process is the most significant factor in waiting lists for AON and for children's disability services. Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) will generally require detailed information to support a diagnosis of ASD.
- Cost variation. Duration of the average assessment will depend on the type of assessment required. However, assessments that require diagnostic assessment for ASD may take in excess of 36 hours to complete. It should also be noted that due to the child's needs and requirements, it may not be possible or feasible for the child (and family/carer) to travel distances for the purpose of accessing an assessment.
- Limited private provider capacity.

Yours sincerely,

Bernard O'Regan

Bernard O'Regan
Assistant National Director
National Disability Team

