



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.

15th April 2025

Deputy Rory Hearne,
Dail Eireann,
Leinster House,
Kildare Street,
Dublin 2.
E-mail: rory.hearne@oireachtas.ie

Dear Deputy Hearne,

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.

15012/25

To ask the Minister for Children; Equality; Disability; Integration and Youth the average length of time of assessments of needs nationally, in 2022, 2023 and 2024; and the number of assessments that took 80 hours or longer.

15698/25

To ask the Minister for Children; Equality; Disability; Integration and Youth with respect to the 14,221 children who are now overdue an assessment of need, the engagement she has made with therapists and professional stakeholders to clarify how long an average assessment takes; the plans in place to engage therapists and professional stakeholders in future reforms, including defining what is necessary in terms of assessment hours and addressing the backlog; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

HSE Response

The Assessment of Need process is set out in the Disability Act, 2005. The aim of an Assessment of Need under the Disability Act is to identify whether a person has a disability, the nature and extent of the disability, any health and education needs arising from that disability, as well as what services are required to meet those needs.

The Disability Act outlines the statutory timelines under which Assessments of Need under the Act must be completed. In summary, the assessment report must be completed within 6 months of the date the application was received. While the HSE endeavours to meet its legislative obligations under the Act, it has struggled to achieve compliance with these timeframes. In 2024, 10.4% of assessments were completed within the timeframes set out in the Disability Act 2005 and accompanying Regulations.



The total number of applications 'overdue for completion' at end of 2024, now stands at 14,221 (including 618 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 60% on the end 2023 figure of 8,893. This is largely due to the following:

- A 26% increase in the number of applications for AON received in 2024 – from 8,472 to 10,690.
- A total of 4,162 AONs were completed in 2024. The percentage of these AONs that show 'No Disability' has increased from 15.8% in 2010 to 22% in 2023.
- The judgement in the case of CTM & JA v the HSE March 2022 found that the Preliminary Team Assessment (PTA) approach described in the HSE's SOP for Assessment of Need did not meet the requirements of the Disability Act. The HSE is now required to deliver diagnostic assessments where necessary and appropriate as part of the AON.
- The number of applications for AON under the Act has risen steadily since its implementation in June 2007, largely driven by the High Court ruling in 2009 which confirmed that eligibility for AON applies to persons born on or after 1st June 2002.
- The non-commencement of the Education for Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004). 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 2024, this figure averaged 67%.**
- The education system drives a significant proportion of AON demand. It is noted that children may be recommended for an AON for reasons other than educational supports, as concerns about need for therapeutic interventions may be identified by school staff. The only statutory right to an AON process is under the Disability Act 2005. A disability diagnosis may be required to access certain educational supports and there is a need for a better understanding for families around the nature of an assessment required for educational purposes, specifically where the assessment is not required to be a statutory AON under the Disability Act 2005.

Please see the table below which gives the average duration of the assessment process per report completed in 2022, 2023 and 2024.

Table 1

Year	The average duration of the assessment process per report completed.
2022	16.51 months.
2023	20.42 months
2024	23.68 months

This timeframe extends from the date the completed application is received by the HSE to the date when the Assessment of Need report has been completed.

It is important to note that there are two aspects to Assessment of Need. The administrative process (Assessment of Need Officer) and the clinical aspect (assessment undertaken by Clinicians).

Data regarding the number of assessments, undertaken by clinicians, that took 80 hours or longer is not reported on or collated. Duration of each assessment will depend on the type of assessment required. However, assessments that require diagnostic assessment for ASD may take up to 36 hours and as reported in the most recent (2023) Section 13 AON report, the requirement for an ASD service was identified in 347 or 14% of the Service Requirements identified in completed reports.

This figure was 351 or 21% of the Service Requirements identified in completed reports.



Actions to address AON waiting lists

The HSE's National Clinical Programme for People with Disability (NCPDP) led the process of developing a revised AON Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) incorporating guidance on completion of clinical assessment to replace the element of the SOP which was found to be non-compliant with the Disability Act (2005) – the Preliminary Team Assessment. In developing this, the HSE included a wide range of stakeholders, including families, providers, staff and representative bodies. The revised AON Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) was launched in July 2023.

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

This waiting list initiative has targeted 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. This initiative was progressed through the existing framework of providers procured by each CHO Area and also sought to expand the list with any new private provision.

Information received from the CHO Areas indicates that under this targeted initiative, 2,479 AONs have been commissioned from private providers/assessors from June to December, 2024 at a cost of €8,229,919. This suggests that the average cost per AON is €3,320.

	Number of AONs	Cost	Average Cost per AON
June	379	€1,245,455	€3,300
July	342	€1,155,703	€3,379
August	371	€1,173,031	€3,162
September	318	€1,080,993	€3,399
October	344	€1,174,933	€3,416
November	365	€1,155,168	€3,165
December	360	€1,244,636	€3,457
Total to date	2,479	€8,229,919	€3,320

However, despite this increased activity in relation to AON, the number of people overdue an Assessment of Need is growing as demand outstrips system capacity. Current activity for AON indicates that the number of applications 'overdue for completion' stands at 14,221; in addition we estimate that we have a further 2,500 Preliminary Team Assessments requiring a reviewed assessment. This places the backlog at 16,721 AONs.

The increased numbers of applications for Assessment of Need, which is a legal entitlement under the Disability Act 2005, is a reflection of the increase in population and of families exploring all options for accessing services for their child.

However, an AON is not required to access Primary Care, Children's Disability Services or Mental Health Services providing services including assessment, goals setting, intervention and follow up services. This direct access ensures more efficient and timely access for many families.

The situation in relation to AON is not the same in every area. The numbers of applications in some areas have historically been significantly lower than other areas. This reflects a service model used in those areas to engage with families as soon as practicable and support them to access services without them having to resort to the Assessment of Need legal route.



This will be explored by the HSE in the context of the Roadmap for Service Improvement actions relating to Services Access and Improvement, with the objective to spread this good practice across all teams nationally, and rebalancing the demand for AON with CDNT Service Provision, including workshops with families and with staff on how this can be achieved.

In addition, as per the Service Plan 2025, €500k has been allocated for the recruitment of Assessment Officers and Liaison Officers to bolster assessment teams to enable the completion of Assessment of Needs.

Assessment of Need (AON) €4.5m

Funding of €4.5m (in addition to €5m in non-core funding) has been allocated in Budget 2025 to assist with sustainably addressing the Assessment of Need (AON) backlog. This will facilitate the continuation of the AON Waiting List Initiative, announced by Government in May 2024 to enable the procurement of private assessments for long waiting families, with €9.5m funding available in 2025 to deliver circa 2,850 AONs.

With regard to the plans in place to engage therapists and professional stakeholders in future reforms, including defining what is necessary in terms of assessment hours and addressing the backlog:

- Current ASD Assessment and Intervention Pilot is now nearing conclusion:
- Following National Disabilities/NCPPD's launch of the Revised AON SOP in July 2023, NCPPD have completed a review of outstanding clinical issues arising regarding assessment and proposed changes to the AON SOP to strengthen roles within and streamline the process.
- DCEDIY led prioritised work in train in partnership with the HSE, including clinicians experienced in completing AONs, Assessment Officers and senior management, on a multifactorial level to improve compliance with the Disability Act.

Since taking office, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Norma Foley, and Minister of State for Disability, Hildegard Naughton, have held meetings with both disability stakeholders and therapists from the HSE and Lead Agencies in order to better understand the challenges that face children's disability services across the country, including the current situation regarding Assessments of Need.

Yours Sincerely,

Bernard O'Regan
Assistant National Director
Access and Integration,
Disability Services

