



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

**Office of the Assistant National Director,**  
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15<sup>th</sup> April 2025

Deputy Cian O'Callaghan,  
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Dear Deputy O'Callaghan,

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: 15555/25**

*To ask the Minister for Children; Equality; Disability; Integration and Youth if she will give consideration to issues raised in correspondence (details supplied) in relation to assessments of needs; and if she will make a statement on the matter.*

Details supplied: Excerpt from correspondence: As with every area (Kilbarrack, Dublin 5) especially those in socio-economically deprived areas, there is an unprecedented amount of children presenting with additional needs. Unfortunately, being in a low socio-economic area, private assessment isn't an option for many struggling families. The whole Assessment of Need process is flawed. I have a number of issues which I will outline. Furthermore, many of these issues actually are the reason that there is such a delay!- The form is very basic. Most of the information is about name/address etc. There is a really small box (approx. 5lines) to detail the issues the child is having. - Many people are applying, and the minister has stated that they do not need a complex assessment. Solution to this is having a checklist to ensure people applying meet the criteria. - Parents may commence a complaints process if it isn't carried out in three months. In all my time working with children, since 2009, the AON process has never been carried out in 3months! Therefore, the AON are now also dealing with complaints as well as the ever mounting amount of forms being submitted. Solution: remove this or change the timeline to a year. Another issue, like in all areas of the health service, is private practice. So many of the professionals needed are working in both sectors! A huge team needs to be employed to catch up and assess and review the children on their current list. The backlog needs to be dealt with. I see you have said there are 41,000 children awaiting.

## **HSE Response**

### **National Access Policy**

The National Policy on Access to Services for Children & Young People with Disability & Developmental Delay ensures that children are directed to the appropriate service based on the complexity of their presenting needs i.e. Primary Care for non-complex functional difficulties and Children's Disability Network Teams for complex functional difficulties.



Children may access supports from a Children's Disability Network Team or from Primary Care depending on the complexity of their needs.

An Assessment of Need under the disability Act 2005 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.

### Assessment of Need

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, the HSE acknowledges that 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.

### 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.

	<b>Number of AONs</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Average Cost per AON</b>
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
<b>Total to date</b>	<b>2,479</b>	<b>€8,229,919</b>	<b>€3,320</b>

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.

As per National Service Plan 2025, the HSE is working with the Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth to address the deficit in the delivery of assessments in line with legislative obligations and the *Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023-2026*, using all available mechanisms including procurement.

This will include updating the Standard Operating Procedure to incorporate updated clinical guidance, the further development of assessment hubs, and continued working with Government to improve access to assessment of need.

In addition, using funding that has been made available to facilitate the continuation of the AoN waitlist initiative, procure assessments for families who have been waiting for long periods of time

### **Childrens Disability Services**

In line with the Progressing Disability Services model, 93 CDNTs, aligned to 96 Community Healthcare Networks (CHNs) across the country, are providing services and supports for children aged from birth to 18 years of age.

Each CDNT covers a specific geographical area and holds a waiting list for children with complex needs residing in that area.

The CDNTs are currently providing services and supports for 43,000 children and strategies and supports for urgent cases on the waitlist where staffing resources allow. However, there are significant challenges for CDNTs including:

- Significant staffing vacancies
- Growth in numbers of children with complex needs as a result of their disability.
- Growth in demand for Assessment of Need, diverting further resources away from interventions

### **Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023 – 2026, Disability Services for Children and Young People**

The HSE's Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023 – 2026, Disability Services for Children and Young People is a targeted Service Improvement Programme to achieve a quality, accessible, equitable and timely service for all children with complex needs as a result of a disability and their families.

The Roadmap, has four Working Groups which report into a Service Improvement Programme Board every month which in turn reports to the Roadmap Oversight Group which was chaired by the Minister of State

Working Group 1 **Integrated Children's Services** – has responsibility for the implementation of National Access Policy (NAP) and the Primary Care, Disability, CAMHS Joint Working Protocol (JWP), Equity of Access to Aids and Appliances across all CHOs; and the Review of HSE Tusla Joint Protocol.

Working Group 2: **Service Access and Improvement** – has responsibility for Waitlist Management and Services; Optimising Teams Efficiencies, Effectiveness and Governance; AONs overdue for completion; and the development of a National Capital plan to enable all staff of a CDNT to be co-located.

Working Group 3: **Workforce** – has 21 actions dedicated to Retention of specialised CDNT staff, Recruitment of new graduates and experienced staff for all CDNTs Deployment of Students/Trainees/New Graduates; and Development of Existing Staff.

Yours Sincerely,

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

