



Oifig an Stiúrthóir Cúnta Náisiúnta,
Foireann Míchumais Náisiúnta,
An Chéad Urlár - Oifigí 13, 14, 15,
Àras 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,

26th February 2025

Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú,
Dail Eireann,
Leinster House,
Kildare Street,
Dublin 2.
E-mail: ruairi.omurchu@oireachtas.ie

Dear Deputy Ó Murchú,

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: 6976/25

To ask the Minister for Children; Equality; Disability; Integration and Youth to provide a breakdown, by county, of the numbers of children waiting on assessments of needs and therapies across the State; the plans in place to reduce the backlogs; 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 significance of this is that the AO and possibly Assessors would have spent time assessing these applications as they would have either gone through the AON process and deemed not to have a disability (as defined by the Disability Act), or they would have begun the process and been identified as not having a disability during the desk-top phase.
- 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 number of AON applications overdue at the end of Q4 2024 as extracted from the AOS. (Assessment Officer System)

With regard to overdue AON, of the 14,221 applications that are overdue, 11,693 (82%) are overdue for longer than 3 months.

Months overdue are calculated based on the statutory timelines of 3 months from start stage 2 and no more than 6 months from the application date. This overdue figure does not include applications that have been put on hold, are closed or are ineligible for Assessment.

Table 1: Applications overdue for completion end of Quarter 4, 2024

CHO	LHO	Overdue	<1 month	1 - 3 Months	>3 Months
AREA 1		594	35	58	501
	Cavan/Monaghan	278	24	30	224
	Donegal	293	9	23	261
	Sligo/Leitrim	23	2	5	16
AREA 2		370	45	83	242
	Galway	179	15	36	128
	Mayo	149	23	40	86
	Roscommon	42	7	7	28
AREA 3		442	40	26	376
	Clare	62	10	4	48
	Limerick	221	14	14	193
	Tipperary N.R	159	16	8	135
AREA 4		1163	150	267	746
	Kerry	57	10	19	28
	Cork North	306	37	72	197



	Cork North Lee	526	65	100	361
	Cork South Lee	226	36	61	129
	Cork West	48	2	15	31
AREA 5		573	35	63	475
	Carlow/Kilkenny	145	11	18	116
	Tipperary S.R	87	5	11	71
	Waterford	143	10	20	113
	Wexford	198	9	14	175
AREA 6		1513	124	280	1109
	Dublin South East	380	26	64	290
	Dublin South	348	39	98	211
	Wicklow	785	59	118	608
AREA 7		4635	210	256	4169
	Dublin South City	422	29	26	367
	Dublin South West	1395	55	55	1285
	Dublin West	1289	50	74	1165
	Kildare/West Wicklow	1529	76	101	1352
AREA 8		1738	150	304	1284
	Laois/Offaly	464	33	97	334
	Longford/Westmeath	54	16	27	11
	Louth	617	58	114	445
	Meath	603	43	66	494
AREA 9		3193	135	267	2791
	North Dublin	1937	73	157	1707
	Dublin North Centre	313	20	37	256
	North West Dublin	943	42	73	828
Total		14221	924	1604	11693

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. This 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. In this regard, we anticipate that by the end of 2024, 19,559 AONs will be due for completion: AONs overdue at end of Q4 2024 (14,221); new AONs received in Q4, 2024 (2,838); 2,500 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.

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.

Children waiting for Therapies

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 arising from their disability.

It is important to note that children do not require an Assessment of Need as defined by the Disability Act (2005) in order to access a CDNT or Primary Care service or Mental Health Service They can be referred by a healthcare professional or parent/carer to the or to Primary Care.

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 model of service for all CDNTs is family-centred and based on the needs of the child. This includes universal, targeted and specialised supports and interventions, as appropriate to the individual child and family. It is based on the objectives of empowering and supporting parents and others who are with the child on a daily basis to facilitate the child's developmental needs.

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.

Working Group 4: **Communication and Engagement** – has responsibility for developing and ensuring the delivery of a rolling Communication Plan for the Roadmap and CDNT service, which is a key priority; review and updating the HSE PDS Website to meet information needs of families, further Staff Engagement and Workshop days and ensuring sustainability of the Family Forums and Family Representative Groups.

In addition, the Cross Sectoral Group on issues for children with disabilities will be resumed in the coming weeks to drive integration and collaboration between education and health services, and supports for special schools for optimal benefit and outcomes for children with disabilities.

Waiting List for the Childrens Disability Services

Historically the number of children waitlisted for children's disability services provided by section 38 and section 39 providers has not been available nationally. The establishment of CDNTs in 2021 has facilitated the collection of this data. A National Management Information System for all 93 CDNTs is being rolled out and when implemented, will provide current data on waiting lists and other details for all CDNTs.

The CDNTIMS (information management system) has been rolled out across 50 CDNTs. There is an ongoing Legal issue for S38/S39 Lead Agencies however this is nearing resolution which will facilitate all remaining teams to migrate to the system in 2025.

Pending full roll-out, manual data collection is on-going. The table on the next page is the validated data for the end of December 2024 activity reports. This shows the number of children that are waiting for an initial contact with a CDNT in the 9 CHO Areas.



Status report	CHO 1	CHO 2	CHO 3	CHO 4	CHO 5	CHO 6	CHO 7	CHO 8	CHO 9
No of children waiting 0-3 months for an initial contact @month end	109	175	247	157	82	61	151	296	48
No of children waiting 4-6 months for an initial contact @month end	70	102	157	120	83	74	153	178	62
No of children waiting 7-12 month for an initial contact @month end	58	136	298	104	150	138	325	282	128
No of children waiting over 12 months for an initial contact @month end	405	242	605	305	1091	1228	1942	800	2358

In addition, 722 children (&/or their parents) who are on the CDNT waiting list participated in one or more individual and/or group intervention appointments during December 2024.

Please also note that this is an interim dataset as we await the roll out of the National Information Management System and some individual CDNTs indicate that they do not have a system in place to capture this level of activity, therefore there are gaps in data returns for some of the CHO Areas.

Recruitment

The HSE is operating in a very competitive global market for healthcare talent. There are significant shortages of qualified healthcare professionals across the globe. Seven of the disciplines working in Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) have been included on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's Critical Skills Occupations List.

To address resourcing challenges the HSE Resourcing Strategy 'Resourcing our Future' was launched in May 2023 to ensure a sufficient domestic supply of health care staff. The strategy is being implemented to maximise the resourcing and delivery of publicly funded health services for the future. Children's Disability Services benefit from resourcing actions in the HSE Resourcing Strategy including increasing training places in Health & Social Care Professionals, delivery of apprenticeship programme for Social Workers and development of further apprenticeship programmes.

Health & Social Care Professionals training places in Higher Education Institutes have increased with a growth in clinical placements in Children's Disability Network Teams- this serves to improve recruitment of Health & Social Care Professionals into Children's Disability Network Teams. Tertiary programmes are also being developed for Health & Social Care Professionals to increase the pathways into Disability services. Within recruitment, there is a particular focus on Irish trained overseas applicants and international recruitment with a relocation package marketed to Irish trained Health & Social Care Professionals who have travelled overseas.

The HSE and funded agencies are focused on identifying barriers to workforce growth and putting in place corrective retention and recruitment initiatives. These initiatives have led to a marked growth in CDNT staffing levels in 2024, particularly in Health & Social Care Professionals roles.

The HSE optimises multiple applicant engagement opportunities to encourage uptake of CDNT vacancies including recruitment fairs, outreach to third level colleges and secondary schools, presence at national events and virtual engagements.

To optimise recruitment into our funded agencies, the HSE have facilitated direct access for funded agencies to existing HSE HSCP panels which will shorten the recruitment process for them and will provide direct access to competent and eligible candidates. The HSE have also enabled our funded agencies to advertise their vacant posts through our advertisement channels which provides them with direct access to the substantial candidate pools registered on the HSE's CareerHub portal.

In 2025 the HSE and funded agencies will continue to focus on maximising recruitment potential and engagement within the current applicant market to achieve workforce growth.



These activities form part of an ongoing suite of initiatives to populate vacancies and increase retention on Children's Disability Network Teams.

Yours Sincerely,

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

