



Mari O'Donovan,
Interim Head of Service,
Cúram Príomhúil
FSS an Iardheiscirt

Áras na Ceachan,
Páirc Ghnó agus Teicneolaíochta,
Bóthar na Modh Feirme,
Corcaigh. T12 XHT4

Mari O'Donovan,
Interim Head of Service,
Primary Care
HSE South West

Caha House,
Business and Technology Park,
Model Farm Road,
Cork. T12 XHT4

[southwest.hse.ie](mailto:Southwest.hse.ie)
E: Mari.ODonovan@hse.ie

14th March, 2025

Mr. Pádraig O'Sullivan., T.D.,
Dáil Éireann,
Dublin 2

PQ ref 9674/25

"To ask the Minister for Health if the HSE is outsourcing routine orthodontic care in Cork to reduce waiting times; and if she will make a statement on the matter."

Dear Deputy O'Sullivan,

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to you in the context of the above Parliamentary Question, which you submitted to the Minister for Health for response.

The primary goal of the Health Service Executive (HSE) Orthodontic Service is to improve the appearance and function of misaligned or crooked teeth, with free orthodontic treatment being provided to children with the most severe orthodontic problems. Qualification for treatment is determined by nationally agreed eligibility guidelines based on an international grading system (IOTN). All referrals for the service are triaged and given a priority rating by the clinical team.

The HSE Orthodontic Service at St. Finbarr's Hospital covers Cork North Lee, Cork South Lee, West Cork and Kerry, therefore, the volume of children waiting to be assessed and treated on the waiting lists are extremely high. Unfortunately the service is operating under challenging circumstances in terms of available resources and this is having an impact on waiting times.

Waiting times can also be impacted by clinical priorities. Therefore, when cases present that are more clinically urgent than those already on waiting lists, those cases may be prioritised.

There are approximately 160 new referrals to the Orthodontic Service each month. Each referral is triaged by a consultant orthodontist and prioritised into "For Attention"; "For Attention ++" or "Routine", and waitlisted for assessment accordingly. Some referrals are discharged at this time, are not wait listed for assessment and are not called for assessment for treatment. If a patient is deemed eligible for an orthodontic assessment, when they attend their first appointment they are assessed for eligibility for treatment under the HSE guidelines.

Please see below the number of patients awaiting orthodontic assessment and treatment. The current waiting time for orthodontic assessment is running at between 18 to 24 months, with the waiting times for orthodontic treatment running at 12 months to 5.5 years.

Current Cork and Kerry Orthodontic Assessment Waiting List Data (excluding North Cork):

| Triaged assessment classifications | Numbers patients waiting | Average Waiting Time |
|--|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| CKCH Orthodontic Assessments for Attention WL: | 643 | 18 months |
| CKCH Orthodontic Assessments for Attention ++ Urgent WL: | 0 | Next available appointment |
| CKCH Orthodontic Assessments Routine WL: | 1701 | 24 month plus |
| Total | 2344 | |

The 3 consultant orthodontist's carryout patient assessments. Please note that we were making good progress shortening the waiting times for assessment almost to 12 months. However, as 2 clinicians have

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left the service, 2 of the consultants have taken on their transfers so this has reduced the number of assessments being carried out, lengthening the waiting time.

Current Cork and Kerry Orthodontic Treatment Waiting List Data (excluding North Cork):

| Cork Kerry Orthodontic Treatment WL: | Number of Patients | Average Waiting Time |
|---|---------------------------|---|
| Priority Fixed | 562 | 5 years from date of assessment |
| Routine Fixed | 1056 | 5.5 years from date of assessment |
| Functional | 297 | Waitlisted by DOB, 12 months to 5 years from date of assessment |
| Total | 1915 | |

National orthodontic waiting list initiatives are managed through the National Oral Health Office (NOHO) under the national procurement process. Unfortunately, uptake from private providers in Cork is minimal which has had an impact on the overall number of patients waiting orthodontic treatment in Cork and Kerry. Other regions of the country have no waiting lists for functional appliances and for routine fixed treatment due to procurement of private orthodontic capacity. Private orthodontic capacity is currently purchased centrally in conjunction with procurement of the National Oral Health Office. Previously in this region a waiting list initiative was carried out locally where the procurement process was handled locally and providers were available within the Cork City and surrounding areas.

The National Oral Health Office launched the Orthodontic Treatment Waiting List Initiative for eligible IOTN Grade 4 patients in 2023 and has been approved to continue until June 2025. The situation as it relates to the Cork and Kerry region is there is very limited capacity in the private sector to outsource patients. Currently there is one contracted orthodontist in the Bandon, West Cork area who we understand has no further capacity, one provider in the East Cork region has recently engaged the waiting list initiative and has capacity to treat 10 HSE orthodontic patients, one provider in Limerick has capacity to treat 20 HSE orthodontic patients and there are two contracted orthodontists in Kerry (Tralee and Killarney) who are currently at capacity, however, NOHO will continue to engage with these providers over the coming months to determine if they can provide any additional capacity.

Since the NOHO Treatment Waiting List Initiative (TWLI) commenced in 2023 the Cork Kerry Orthodontic Service (excl. North Cork) has put forward a total of 377 eligible patients from the Routine Fixed (Grade 4) waiting list of which 187 patients have accepted treatment through approved providers. Unfortunately, some patients are not in a position to accept transfer to the NOHO TWLI due to the geographical locations of available providers, and continue to wait on the local HSE orthodontic waiting list, with some patients advising that they have accessed treatment privately due to the long waiting times locally.

Unfortunately, despite inclusion in the National Oral Health Office (NOHO) waiting list initiative, Cork and Kerry have very few private providers that are available to participate in this initiative which is an on-going challenge for our service.

Orthodontic services for named schools in North Cork are provided by Cork University Dental School and Hospital (CUDSH) on behalf of the HSE under the SLA process, through their post-graduate orthodontic programme, whereby post-graduate students treat a defined number of patients as part of this programme which commences every 3 years. At the commencement time a defined number of patients are assigned for orthodontic treatment and are subsequently removed from the orthodontic treatment waiting list. The last CUDSH intake of post-graduate students commenced in October 2024. Unfortunately, the CUDSH did not have capacity within the service to appoint all those waiting orthodontic treatment in October 2024. Depending on a patients place on the orthodontic treatment waiting list some patients did not commence



treatment in October 2024 and therefore, will remain on the waiting list until the next intake of post-graduate students which will be scheduled for October 2027.

Please see below the number of North Cork patients awaiting orthodontic assessment and treatment.

Current North Cork waiting list data:

| CUDSH North Cork WL Data: | |
|--|-----|
| North Cork Orthodontic Assessments WL: | 78 |
| North Cork Orthodontic Treatment WL: | 501 |

The HSE Orthodontic Service continues to engage effectively with the National Oral Health Office to maximise access to national waiting list initiatives.

If I can be of any further assistance please do not hesitate to contact me.

Mari O'Donovan
Interim Head of Service - Primary Care,
HSE South West