



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  
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10<sup>th</sup> June 2025

Deputy David Cullinane  
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**PQ: 26111/25**

*To ask the Minister for Children, Disability and Equality whether there is a pause on the assessments of need process across any of the children's disability network teams in the State.*

Dear Deputy Cullinane,

Thank you for your Parliamentary Question referenced above, which have been forwarded to me for direct reply.

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. It is important that service users are aware that 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 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.

There is no pause in delivery of the HSE's legislative responsibility on completion of the AONs as outlined above with both CDNTs and Primary Care, and additional capacity maximised from private service providers. The HSE endeavours to meet the legislative obligations under the Act, however compliance with timeframes continues to prove difficult due to increased demand, case management complexity and access to resources. In Q1 2025, 7% 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 Q1 2025, now stands at 15,296 (including 1,055 applications for which an extended timeframe 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 an 8% on the end 2024 figure of 14,221. This is largely due to the following:

- A further 3,131 new applications were received in Q1 2025, a 20% increase on the figure for the same period last year of 2,603.
- 1,412 AONs were completed in Q1 2025, a 65% increase on the same period in 2024 of 849. The percentage of these AONs that show 'No Disability' has increased from 15.8% in 2010 to 26% in Q1 2025.
- 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 at end Q1 2025, this figure has increased to 70%.
- 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**

In Q1, 2025, 1,412 AONs were completed, which is a 65% increase on the same period in 2023 of 849. This increase is due in part to the funding of €4.5m (in addition to €5m in non-core funding) that has been allocated in Budget 2025 to assist with sustainably addressing the Assessment of Need (AON) backlog. This additional funding is building on the €6.89 million allocated by the Government in 2024 for a targeted waiting list initiative that commenced end of May 2024.

However, despite 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 2025, there could be as many as 24,796 AONs due for completion: AONs overdue at end of Q1 2025 (15,296); new AONs received in 2025 (8,000); and 1,500 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, a legal entitlement under the Disability Act 2005 reflects the increase in population and of families exploring all options for accessing services for their child.

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.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to review the Disability Act and we await further clarification on the timing and scope of this. In the meantime, we are also focusing on a communication campaign to ensure families know that an AON is not a requirement to access services. In addition, the following steps are being taken to improve access to timely AONs:



- We are reviewing the current Standard Operating Procedure to develop a more tiered approach to AON.
- We are engaging with Dept. of Education to remove school principals' requirement that an AON report is needed to determine educational need.
- Additional resource has been allocated in 2025 to increase the numbers of Assessment Officers and Liaison Officers. These will be prioritised to those areas, primarily in Dublin and Cork, with the longest waiting lists for AON.

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 disability stakeholders from the HSE and Lead Agencies to better understand the challenges that face children's disability services across the country, including the current situation regarding Assessments of Need.

Yours Sincerely,

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Dr. Aoife O'Donohue,  
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Assistant National Director, Disability Services, Transformation & Programme Coordination,  
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