



Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI)

Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Autism

Meeting to discuss services and supports provided by the State for autistic people

Chairperson and members of the Joint Committee,

On behalf of the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), I would like to thank you for the opportunity today to address the Joint Committee on Autism. I am Dr Louise Higgins, Senior Clinical Psychologist, and member of the PSI. The PSI is the learned and professional body for psychology in the Republic of Ireland.

In 2022, the PSI published updated '[Professional Practice Guidelines for the Assessment, Formulation, and Diagnosis of Autism in Children and Adolescents](#)'. These guidelines were developed to help facilitate a high level of professional practice for psychologists. One of the biggest challenges however faced by families is accessing a timely assessment for their child, with many often waiting years. Those accessing an assessment through the Assessment of Need (AON) as set out under the Disability Act (2005) have significant and lengthy delays despite a legal requirement to begin the AON within three months of receiving an application. The high court ruling last March, which found the HSE's Preliminary Team Assessment (PTA) method of dealing with AON applications as unlawful, has resulted in a situation where many of the approximately 10,000 PTAs completed need to be redone, specifically those requiring an autism assessment. The PTAs were introduced by the HSE in 2020, despite the PSI and other Health and Social Care Professions (HSCP) representative bodies clearly [stating](#) that it was not in the best interests of children.

The PSI has welcomed the recent [Report on Assessments of Need for Children](#) by the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. The PSI agrees with their recommendation that "*There needs to be an acknowledgment of the levels of resourcing required at all levels politically and within the HSE, in order to address the crisis in the disability sector.*"

While the PSI welcomes the development of autism diagnostic pathways by the HSE, the PSI and other HSCP representative bodies have not yet been consulted and are eager that the mistakes of the implementation of the AON PTA are not replicated.

Accessing intervention and supports is a further challenge for families. Research in recent years continually highlight this level of unmet service need for autistic children with many families waiting years for supports ('Every Child Counts', 2021; Inclusion Ireland 2022; Roddy & O'Neill, 2020). As of March 2022, none of the 91 Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) were fully staffed, with an average vacancy rate of about 25% across teams; and some teams only staffed to around 50%. The consequences for autistic children and their families of unmet service needs are significant. We know that not providing timely services and services at an early stage increases the costs at a later stage and has a negative impact for the individual, families, and society.

Furthermore, autistic people experience significantly higher rates of co-occurring mental health difficulties; however, the reality is that many autistic children and adolescents have difficulties accessing mental health services. In addition, there is often regional variation in the implementation of any shared care for autistic children and young people who require services from more than one service provider (e.g., CAMHS & CDNT). The recent Mental Health Commission's interim report of the independent review of the provision of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) highlighted major failings. This undoubtedly impacts on those autistic young people accessing CAMHS.

It is now recognised that autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition; however, currently autistic adults in Ireland can only access an autism diagnosis privately. Furthermore, services for autistic adults are minimal. A clear pathway is, therefore, required for the diagnostic assessment and post-diagnostic support for adults presenting with autism. At present PSI has established a working group to develop guidelines for the assessment of autism in adults.

In conclusion, as stated in the Oireachtas report on Assessments of Need for Children "*failures within disability services over the last number of years have caused immeasurable harm to children, parents and therapists*". Given the years of under resourcing of disability services, it is now imperative that the autistic community get the support they need in a timely way.

To this effect the PSI is recommending the following:

- Increase the number of training places on all professional psychology training courses to ensure the recruitment and retention of adequate professional psychologists to address the high level of service need and current vacancies.
- To improve recruitment and retention, there should be immediate funding for all trainee psychologists.
- There should be a clear timeline for the implementation of the Governments Disability Capacity Review to 2032 to future proof and resource disability services and AON adequately.

- Changes to the current recruitment practices for psychologists including the HSE national panel system for recruiting, to tackle the recruitment crisis and staff retention issues.
- Efforts to retain existing staff in post by creating the possibility to promote those eligible to senior positions following a competency-based review. At present this is not possible within services and is managed through the current national panel system. This results in a loss of experienced clinicians from the disability sector to other sectors.
- Create an agreed lifespan pathway within the public system for assessment and post diagnostic supports.

Thank you for your time. I am happy to take any questions in relation to this opening statement.

Representing the Psychological Society of Ireland at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Autism meeting to discuss services and supports provided by the State for autistic people is Dr Louise Higgins, Senior Clinical Psychologist.

Meeting details: Tuesday 28 February 2023, at 11am in Committee Room 4, LH2000, Leinster House.