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**An Comhchoiste um Oideachais agus Coimirce Shóisialach
Tuarascáil ar an ról atá ag an gCúntóir Riachtanas Speisialta
Eanáir 2016**

Houses of the Oireachtas

Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection

Report on the Role of the Special Needs Assistant

January 2016

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Chair's Foreword

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act is based on the principle that children with special educational needs should be educated, wherever possible, in an inclusive environment with children who do not have special educational needs. The requirement to have an inclusive environment means ensuring that the education system adjusts to meet the needs of children, rather than expecting children to 'fit' into the system.

Over the years, there has been a substantial increase in the provision of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) in mainstream primary and post-primary schools to meet the special care needs of pupils arising from a disability. The number of SNAs has been steadily increased in recent years, bringing the total number of posts nationally to 11,940, involving a cost in 2015 of approximately €400 million. Without doubt, SNAs are an important resource in schools around the country, and they make an enormous contribution in supporting students to meet their personal and educational goals. It is important that SNAs are employed in a manner that optimises their contribution to the children concerned and to the schools generally.

In its work programme, the Joint Committee has devoted considerable attention to the issue of catering for children with special educational needs, and has had a number of discussions with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE). The Joint Committee places considerable importance on the issue now being addressed in this Report, and in July 2015, it met with a number of stakeholders in the area of special needs education specifically to consider the issue.

I would like to warmly compliment Senator Mary Moran for the very considerable work that she has undertaken in completing this Report for the Joint Committee. Involving, as it does, considerable consultation, I believe that it brings much needed focus and valuable perspectives to the issue. I believe that the recommendations in the Report, which point the way forward for the role of Special Needs Assistants, will be of assistance to the Minister for Education and Skills and the NCSE.

I would like to thank the Members of the Joint Committee for their engagement on this issue, the Library & Research Service of the Houses of the Oireachtas for their helpful and efficient support, and the Committee Secretariat for its assistance. Finally, I would like to convey my appreciation to the stakeholders who assisted the Joint Committee in this work.

Joanna Tuffy, T.D.,

Chair

Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection



Rapporteur's Foreword

As rapporteur for this report I have thoroughly engaged with Special Needs Assistants, trade unions, teachers, principals, school boards of management, the Department of Education and Skills, academics, students and parents. I provided a series of platforms for engagement including a call for written submissions, public meetings, private meetings, Committee hearings and through the publication of a ten question online survey seeking responses from Special Needs Assistants. The responses to the open ended survey questions are reflected in the body of the report.

The Special Needs Assistant Scheme is broadly recognised by many stakeholders as crucial in supporting students with additional needs to attend mainstream and special schools. The dedication of Special Needs Assistants on a national basis was consistently apparent in my work as rapporteur even while the implementation of the scheme proved inconsistent.

Further review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme announced in July 2015 by Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan T.D. is very welcome. I would encourage that the review of the scheme include consultation with Special Needs Assistants in particular and be completed in advance of the 2016/2017 school year.

I would like to sincerely thank each group and individual who took the time to make a submission or contact me with their views. I would also like to pay special thanks to my assistant, Jordan Eis for her work on this report.

As is often the case, those on the ground are best placed to provide real-time perspective. I would like to specifically and sincerely thank the thousands of Special Needs Assistants who made contact with me through submissions, my survey, by email or phone. The information received from various stakeholders has had a significant impact on the findings of this report.

Senator Mary Moran,

Rapporteur

Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection

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Acronyms & Abbreviations

SNA – Special Needs Assistant

DES – Department of Education and Skills

NCSE – National Council for Special Education

VFM – Value for Money

IEP – Individualised Education Plan

CPD – Continuing Professional Development

SENO – Special Education Needs Organiser or Special Educational Needs Organiser

FETAC – Further Education and Training Awards Council

ETB – Education and Training Board

ICT – Information and Communication Technologies

Committee – Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection

Introduction

The Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection (hereinafter referred to as the 'Committee') sought written submissions on the role of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) in November-December 2013 and sought further and updated written submissions in April-May 2015.

A Committee meeting was held with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), IMPACT Trade Union, National Parents Council Primary and the National Parents Council Post-Primary on 9th October 2013.

A further meeting was held on 1st July 2015 to seek an updated account from the NCSE, IMPACT, National Parents Council Primary and the Department of Education and Skills (DES).

On 30th March 2015, as rapporteur, I held a public meeting for SNAs in the Crowne Plaza Hotel Dundalk, Co. Louth.

Separate from the specific interactions listed above, I engaged with a variety of other groups and stakeholders throughout the consultation period.

I had the pleasure of meeting and speaking with many SNAs around the country who displayed an obvious passion and dedication to their work and to the student's well-being. Across many of the groups who have weighed in on this topic there appears to be a broad recognition that the role of the SNA has expanded to include functions and duties not envisaged by past DES circulars and the most recent DES Circular 0030/2014.

In 2013, the Committee sought to examine the role of the SNA following reports of an expansion of duties on the ground. From my consultations, it would seem that the policy in relation to the SNA role as laid out by the DES Circular 0030/2014 does not match the reality of how the role functions in many cases. There is broad recognition from the feedback I have received that the role has expanded to include an administrative, therapeutic, teaching and behavioural function.

The Committee has made recommendations in this report with a view to addressing the inconsistencies that are present between the policy and the reality of how the role is administered in schools. The recommendations suggested in this report are in no way conclusive but merit consideration in order to strike the right balance going forward for all parties concerned. Most importantly, the recommendations aim to ensure that children with additional needs while attending school receive the appropriate supports so that they may best achieve their personal and educational goals.

Section 1: SNA Survey Results

The Special Needs Assistant Survey was published February 2015 and closed to participants on 30th April 2015. The anonymous ten question survey received 2,510 SNA responses out of a total 11,330 SNA posts nationwide. The questions and findings are outlined below and will assist in the reading of the recommendations and remaining chapters. Questions 2,7 and 8 were open ended and responses received assisted in informing the overall report.

- *Question 1: Do you feel respected in your work as a Special Needs Assistant by colleagues in your current school?*
 - Yes – 52.19%
 - No – 8.73%
 - Sometimes – 39.08%
- *Question 2: How do you feel the role of the Special Needs Assistant could be changed or improved?*
 - Open ended question with varying responses.
- *Question 3: How many years have you worked as a Special Needs Assistant? Participants were provided with a space for comment if the answers provided did not apply.*
 - Less than one year – 1.3%
 - 1-5 years – 11.28%
 - 6-10 years – 47.98%
 - Other (please specify) – 39.44%
- *Question 4: How many schools have you worked in over the last ten years? Participants were provided with a space if the answers provided did not apply.*
 - 1-2 schools – 80.28%
 - 3-5 schools – 14.05%
 - 6-8 schools – 1.31%
 - Other (please specify) – 4.37%
- *Question 5: Do you work in a primary, secondary or special school?*
 - Primary School – 59.13%
 - Secondary School – 24.45%
 - Special School – 16.24%
- *Question 6: Have you ever been injured as a result of your work as a Special Needs Assistant? Participants were provided with a space for comments.*
 - Yes – 37.85%
 - No – 62.15%
- *Question 7: 7.1 What qualifications, training, degrees, etc. do you hold? 7.2 Have you ever undertaken any training or degree qualifications specific to your work as a Special Needs Assistant? 7.3 Do you feel a mandatory and standard Special Needs Assistant training course would be helpful in your work? Participants were provided with a space to respond.*

- Open ended question with varying responses.
- *Question 8: What other school duties do you perform separate from your work with the student/students? Participants were provided with a space to respond.*
 - Open ended question with varying responses.
- *Question 9: Do you feel there is a clear structure in place for you to avail of if a problem arises in your work with a colleague? Participants were provided with a space for comments.*
 - Yes – 55%
 - No – 45%
- *Question 10: Do you administer medication to the student/students you have been assigned?*
 - Yes – 14.6%
 - No – 68.8%
 - Sometimes – 16.57%

Section 2: The Role of the SNA in Practice

The role of the Special Needs Assistant has expanded to varying degrees from what is outlined in DES Circular 0030/2014. Each SNA experience is individualised and based on the school in which they work. The Value for Money Review of the Expenditure on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (VFM) published in June 2011 by the DES states, 'The meaning of the term 'care needs' has been stretched beyond what was intended by the Scheme and this has meant that both parents and schools now expect that the role of the SNA is to carry out a much broader range of duties than originally envisaged.' (DES, VFM, pg. 10)

Mainly through survey responses received during Spring 2015, confirmation was received that a broader range of duties were being carried out but varied at individual school level. Some SNAs are expected to undertake a number of administrative duties such as assisting with newsletters, book rental schemes, lockers, managing school trips, cleaning, gardening, banking and office work amongst others. Other SNAs report they are responsible for teaching students in small groups, working with children on a one-to-one basis outside of the classroom, reading, being in charge of the classroom when the teacher is out and working with students who have behavioural, mental health and social issues.

The DES Circular 0030/2014 sought to clarify the role of the SNA outlining 'care needs' and secondary tasks that may be carried out. There is evidence to suggest that SNAs have, in some cases, become a whole-school resource. A serious issue has arisen in how the circular is interpreted individually within schools. Primary care needs and secondary care associated tasks are outlined in recent DES Circulars 0030/2014, 0071/2011 and 0008/2002 with the recognition that the primary care needs of the student/students are given priority over any other secondary care associated tasks. DES Circular 0030/2014 states, 'SNAs should be deployed by schools in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school or whom SNA support has been allocated.' (DES, Circular 0030/2014, pg. 15)

From the survey responses it is evident that the SNA experience differs greatly from school to school. While many SNAs report they feel valued and respected in the school community, some SNAs report a less positive work experience. In each of these cases, the survey responses show evidence to suggest that SNAs carry out tasks, whether it be teaching duties, administrative work or behavioural and therapeutic management, contrary to the purpose of the Scheme. There are further situations where SNAs, on some occasions, are being made to feel separate from the rest of the school staff by being given the responsibility of making tea for other members of staff, exclusion from staff meetings and exclusion from IEP meetings in relation to care needs. It must be also recognised that there are situations where the SNA Scheme functions appropriately and respectfully within schools.

The interpretation of the Scheme is an issue. The role is expected to be both broad and narrow at the same time. In DES Circular 0030/2014 under section 12 'Role of Schools to Manage SNA Support' it states, 'Once allocated to schools, SNAs are important and valued members of the school community. An SNA is an important whole school resource.' (DES, Circular 0030/2014, pg. 15) Many SNAs have no difficulty in assisting students who have not been allocated SNA support with care needs throughout the day. The recognition that SNAs are an important and valued member of the school is welcome but it may be unhelpful to label them as a whole school resource particularly considering how widely this may be misinterpreted.

Communication of the role is a contributing factor to its expansion and misinterpretation over the years. The NCSE published a pamphlet titled, 'Special Needs Assistant Scheme: Information for parents/guardians of children and young people with special educational needs' which provides clear and concise information on responsibilities, access, allocation and more. The literature published by the NCSE is welcome but needs targeted follow up. Teachers and principals should be provided with information and training on the management and appropriate function of the role in the classroom and wider school setting through CPD and training at third level.

Parents whose children have been allocated SNA support should be initially communicated with by the SENO and then the classroom teacher, resource teacher or principal in conjunction with the SNA regarding access to SNA support. Parents should receive clear information as to how SNA support is allocated for students with additional needs, what level of support their child requires and how the support will function for the student on a day to day basis. Parents whose children do not receive SNA support should also receive clear communication as to why the support was not allocated. It would be helpful, while recognising the NCSE's constraints, if yearly regional meetings were conducted by local SENOs for parents, teachers and principals to provide information on SNA support and special education resources.

Another contributing factor to the expansion of the SNA role is the difficulties concerning school resources in both rural and urban schools. Some SNAs have stepped into duties and roles within schools due to increasing student demand and limited staffing capacity predicated on difficult economic times in recent years. Significant strides have been made since 2011 with teaching and SNA posts announced as well as yearly investment in capital infrastructure nationwide by the current Minister for Education and Skills, Jan O'Sullivan T.D. and her predecessor Ruairí Quinn T.D. Further investment is needed in the area of special education for children with additional needs to receive the appropriate resources in primary, post-primary and special schools.

It would seem that in some cases SNAs have been assigned additional duties, particularly in the classroom, of helping students who have not been allocated resource hours or SNA support with their work, overall learning and behaviour. As mentioned previously, SNAs are

a dedicated and passionate section of our workforce who possesses an innate kindness and genuine concern for students. There are instances where SNAs have volunteered to take on additional duties in order to do what is best for the students and the school community. There will always be cases where additional responsibilities will be assigned which are outside of the job description but there are a significant number of SNAs participating in the teaching of students and the management of behavioural and social issues due to constrained school resources. The review of the scheme announced by Minister O’Sullivan should be carried out as a matter of urgency and in consultation with all educational stakeholders.

Section 2: Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The duties and function of the SNA need to be effectively, directly and regularly communicated to parents, teachers, principals and school staff. The role is subject to misinterpretation and as a result has expanded to include responsibilities which do not follow the Department of Education and Skills Circular 0030/2014. Through early communication with each of these groups the SNA is supported to carry out the role as defined and appropriate expectations are set. The NCSE should undertake regional meetings through local SENOs with parents, teachers, principals and school staff to discuss the SNA Scheme and special education resources. Continuous professional development and third level education for principals and teachers should provide training on the management and appropriate function of the role in the classroom and wider school setting.

Recommendation 2: Every attempt should be made to complete the review of the SNA Scheme undertaken by the Department of Education and Skills in time for the 2016/2017 academic year and in direct consultation with educational stakeholders.

Recommendation 3: The Department of Education and Skills should require SNAs to participate in the Individualised Education Plan of the student/students who they provide support to as it relates to ‘care needs’. The SNA has an important role to play in providing information for the care plan of the student/students.

Section 3: Training & Continuous Professional Development

The DES Circular 0021/2011 requires SNAs to have a minimum of three D's in their Junior Certificate or FETAC Level 3 major qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications. As evidenced in the over 2,500 survey responses SNAs undertake additional training, often at their own expense, throughout their careers in order to provide the best possible support to students.

Special Needs Assistant courses can be accessed through certain institutions, colleges and ETBs. The training and level of qualification held by SNAs vary but a strong majority of survey respondents possessed qualifications well beyond the minimum criteria outlined in DES Circular 0021/2011. Overwhelmingly, SNAs who responded to survey question 7 felt strongly that the introduction of a standard, recognised and mandatory training course prior to working in the field would be beneficial. The majority of respondents to survey question 2 would welcome the provision of CPD and training courses.

The strong level of commitment shown by SNAs to professional development was very impressive. Some of the SNAs who participated in the survey have Bachelor degrees and Higher Diploma's in Education, Social Work, Counselling and Early Childhood Care; specific training in the areas of Autism, Down syndrome, dyslexia, challenging behaviour, sensory integration, and deaf and hearing impaired; and specific training in ICT, childcare, Lámh sign language and child protection. The following is a very common response to survey question 7 which queried the level of qualification and skills:

'FETAC Level 5 and FETAC Level 6 in Childcare including module on Care of the Special Child. Child Protection, Occupational First Aid, Managing Challenging Behaviour, Autism Awareness, Critical Incident.'

'a) Diploma in Special Needs Assistant Training b) FETAC Level 5 SNA Training c) Lámh – Communication Augmentation Sign System d) Module Training – Challenging Behaviour and Modification Techniques e) Module Training – Sensory Integration, Processing and Modulation f) Module Training – Autism Spectrum Conditions, Communicating with Social Communication Difficulties g) Introduction of ABA based interventions for individuals with Down Syndrome.'

Many SNAs who responded to the survey and made contact during the consultation period were well in excess of the minimum criteria for employment established by DES. As stated in Section 2, some SNAs are involved in the provision of learning, behavioural and therapeutic support to certain students and at times the wider classroom. SNAs are seeking out additional training in order to better support and understand students in the classroom in their primary role as an SNA and in the expansion of their duties in dealing with other students they may be asked to work with in a behavioural or learning capacity. The introduction of a standard and mandatory course which addresses the work as it specifically

relates to primary, post-primary and special school settings should be introduced as a minimum requirement prior to commencing employment. This would provide certainty as to the level of qualification and place the profession on an equal footing with school colleagues who are required to have a specific education and training. The standard introductory course would provide SNAs with the skills necessary to effectively carry out their work at each level of education.

A point made by many stakeholders was the eagerness of SNAs to avail of further training in order to better support students. In certain situations SNAs have attempted to access teacher CPD courses where places were available and with the full support of the principal and were either refused outright or informed they would not receive certification following completion of the course. Where places are available and relate directly to the role of the SNA such places and certification should be available to them as the CPD will only enhance the school experience for the student/students receiving SNA support.

CPD which is specifically targeted at working with students who have additional needs, the area of special education and ICT technology as it relates to enhancing students learning, therapy or behaviour should be considered suitable courses for SNAs to take part in. Training and CPD is available in some locations nationwide.

SNA training and CPD should:

- a. Provide a standard and set curriculum for all participating; and
- b. Widen the availability of CPD that is currently provided for SNAs.

A common concern which emerged was the administration of medication. General knowledge regarding administration of medications and other common medical-related duties which may arise in the job should be included in SNA training and CPD.

Approximately one third of SNAs indicated they administer medications in survey question 10. SNAs indicated they were required to administer seizure medication, supervision of insulin pumps, catheterization and more. The level of training provided to SNAs who were required to catheterize students ranged from verbal instruction to parent instruction to attending a private course with a nurse who provided training on how to carry out the procedure. Worryingly, some SNAs reported very little instruction in the administration of medications and procedures to students.

In order to ensure the health and safety of students and appropriate work practices for the SNA training should be provided by a qualified health professional particularly in a situation where SNAs are being asked to carry out certain duties such as catheterization. The administration of medications and carrying out of certain medical procedures is a liability issue if the proper training is not provided. This is also a major issue of conscience as SNAs do not want to cause undue harm or injury to students due to inadequate training.

Over the course of any career, certain aspects of a job may change; new techniques and information may become available. The SNA job path is no different. The role has already evolved from its origins in the Child-Care Assistant Scheme introduced in special schools for the 1979/1980 school year.

Section 3: Recommendations

Recommendation 4: A mandatory, standardised training and course structure needs to be developed and implemented. A clear and defined structure would achieve further professionalization of the role, set a minimum standard of qualification for all SNAs and would provide the necessary skills needed at primary and post-primary to fulfil their roles most effectively.

Recommendation 5: A mandatory, standardised training and course structure needs to address the different levels of support as it relates to primary and post-primary. Students at different stages in their educational careers may require different levels of SNA support particularly in the transition from primary to post-primary. Any further training or courses which become available in future should address the differences at these levels.

Recommendation 6: A Continuous Professional Development programme which provides equal regional access needs to be introduced for SNAs as soon as practicable. Over the course of any new career, new methods and information become available which directly impacts on the work. SNAs should be provided with opportunities to avail of CPD relevant to their work and similar to that of teachers. SNAs should be allowed to participate in CPD for teachers where open places are available and receive certification on completion.

Recommendation 7: Appropriate training needs to be provided through CPD, initial training courses or by a medical health professional regarding the administration of medications and specifically for catheterization.

Section 4: Respect & Professionalization

Respect and the perceived or overt lack of respect was a recurring theme in the feedback received during the consultation period. In response to survey question 1 'Do you feel respected in your work as a Special Needs Assistant by colleagues in your current school?', 52.19% answered 'yes'; 8.73% answered 'no'; and 39.08% answered 'sometimes'.

As discussed in Section 3 of this report, the minimum criteria in DES Circular 0021/2011 of three grade D's in the Junior Certificate or FETAC Level 3 major qualification is no longer an appropriate minimum qualification for SNAs. The minimum level of qualification is a barrier to respect and stemming from that, also a barrier to professionalization. The preceding sections of this report have outlined the additional tasks and responsibilities SNAs carry out in schools, many exceeding the minimum educational criteria as set out by DES. The current minimum criteria could be replaced with the introduction of a standard training course as outlined in Section 3 which may carry a FETAC qualification level.

A further issue which contributes to a perceived lack of respect is the late SNA allocation announcements. The Committee hearing on 1st July 2015, highlighted the difficulties in allocations being made so late in the school year and particularly the lateness of allocations for 2015/2016. As of the meeting date, an announcement still had not been made and many SNAs had finished for the summer and were unaware of their placements for the following school year. There was recognition by the DES and the NCSE that this situation was unacceptable and they had hoped to have the matter resolved as soon as possible. At the meeting, the NCSE and the DES indicated the reason for the late allocation of posts was due to increased demand. SNA allocations were later announced on 7th July 2015. Irrespective of the late notice for 2015/2016, allocation announcements are often not made until June in years previous. As already mentioned, the SNA is crucial in supporting children and young people with additional needs in attending mainstream and special schools and without the support of an SNA some students and families would find attendance difficult and worrisome.

Many within the education sector, or any sector, would not be satisfied with the late notice of allocation and employment hours. The Committee has learned through consultations and hearings the difficulties this late allocation presents to SNAs and their families. It would not be appropriate to go so far as to call the work precarious but due to the flexibility of the post based on assessed need of students it is far from secure employment even with the introduction of panel rights for SNAs who have worked one year in a school and subsequently lose employment.

It is also necessary to highlight that SNA's hours may change year to year depending on the level of need for SNA support in the school. The decrease in hours which may occur, in some cases, from one year to the next is concerning. It is understandable as to why the hours may differ due in part to the number of students in the school who require access to

an SNA and the hours of SNA access which have been assessed. In some cases the SNA post in a school has become fragmented with hours allocated to student/students in the morning and a couple of hours allocated in the afternoon. It is possible for an SNA to work fifteen hours a week spread over 5 days with an hour and a half in the morning and an hour and a half in the afternoon. This situation and situations similar to this present a host of problems including difficulty accessing additional work as the SNA post is allocated at two different points in the day and difficulty accessing social welfare payments as the post is spread out over five days. The needs of the student in accessing an SNA must remain the priority but we need to provide a fair work practice for SNAs. The post should be used efficiently and fair and reasonable employment should be provided. DES Circular 0030/2014 highlights that the SNA post should be flexible but not at any cost.

The advertising of SNA posts through JobBridge should cease immediately and not be used in future. In the preceding chapters, a clear argument has been made that SNAs engage in a variety of training and courses to provide the best level of support possible for the student/students. JobBridge should not displace SNAs who possess valuable training and experience. It would be useful and welcome for individuals during their SNA training to gain experience in the classroom but not in replacement of experienced SNAs. JobBridge should not be utilised as a cost saving measure but as a pathway to gaining experience in a field of interest. It is vital that the recruitment of SNAs through JobBridge cease immediately in recognition that the post requires a level of training and experience to work with children who have additional needs. At the very least SNAs who have not been allocated hours for the next school year should be prioritised over JobBridge candidates.

A combination of raising the minimum criteria to gain employment as an SNA, ceasing the recruitment of SNAs through JobBridge, addressing the fragmentation of posts and earlier allocation of SNA places and hours would assist in generating the needed respect which may, in some cases, be lacking. These steps in combination with the recommendations throughout this report would assist in professionalizing and regularising the role. By introducing the measures outlined and professionalizing the role it would not displace the importance of the principal, teacher, resource teacher or other school staff but would carve out an additional place in the school for the SNA where a higher minimum qualification has been set and their work is respected.

Section 4: Recommendations

Recommendation 8: The minimum criteria of three grade D's in the Junior Certificate or FETAC Level 3 major qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications as set out in the Department of Education and Skills Circular 0021/2011 needs to be urgently reviewed. Consideration could be given to replacing the current minimum criteria in DES Circular 0021/2011 with a standard training course which may carry a FETAC level qualification.

Recommendation 9: SNA allocations need to be made at an earlier date in order to provide SNAs with the appropriate notice of their employment in advance of the upcoming school year. Earlier allocations would also be beneficial for parents and students as they will have clear knowledge of the SNA support they may or may not be receiving for the upcoming school year. A March or April allocation deadline would be preferable for the majority of allocations with additional time available in May and June if necessary.

Recommendation 10: The Department of Education and Skills need to ensure that SNA posts are not made available through Jobbridge.

Section 5: The Future of the SNA Scheme

Each of the recommendations included in this report would impact on the future of the SNA Scheme with varying degrees. There are three recommendations relevant to this section, one of which could be issued in the next DES Circular regarding SNAs and the other two would require careful consideration and longer term implementation if deemed workable.

A shorter term recommendation would require the drafting of a very clear statement of priority by DES that the care needs of the student are paramount and should be addressed before any other secondary task or duty is assigned to the SNA. This statement of priority would have two functions: it would provide a very clear and strong statement that the SNA's primary function at all times is to assist students who have 'additional and significant care needs.' (DES, Circular 0030/2014, pg. 1) DES Circular 0030/2014 does highlight that 'SNAs should be deployed by schools in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.' (DES, Circular 0030/2014, pg. 15) The circular also re-iterates that the focus of the SNA is in meeting the care needs of the student/students. (DES, Circular 0030/2014, pg. 15) A strong statement of priority should be drafted and made available at the beginning of the circular so as to provide a definitive message of the primary role of the SNA. The National Parents Council Primary also recommended in their submission of 2013 that a statement of priority regarding SNA duties should be present. There would be no issue in maintaining a level of flexibility in the role as outlined on pg. 15 of the circular.

A longer term recommendation which merits consideration by the DES and NCSE would be to consider the potential benefits in utilising the strong skill base which exists amongst SNAs. There are a number of ways this could be developed and should be considered as it could have positive effects for not only the student accessing the SNA support but the wider classroom.

A further longer term recommendation for consideration by the DES would be the introduction of a mandatory course on special education during teacher training at third level. The course would outline the role of the SNA and how to work collaboratively with SNAs in the classroom. It would also provide training in teaching students who have a special educational need and various techniques that may be employed to assist students. Over the course of any teaching career, a teacher will have a number of students in their classroom who require additional assistance. A mandatory course as part of the Masters in Education would provide an initial starting point for a teacher working with SNAs and students who have special educational needs.

Section 5: Recommendations

Recommendation 11: In future circulars, the Department of Education and Skills should include a strong and clear statement of priority that the care needs of the student are paramount before any other secondary duty or task which may be assigned to an SNA.

Recommendation 12: The Department of Education and Skills and the National Council for Special Education need to consider the potential benefits for students and the wider classroom of using the wide range of skills possessed by SNAs which may aid in the learning process and management of the classroom.

Recommendation 13: A mandatory course on special education should be introduced at Bachelor's degree level and Masters of Education level for teachers. This course would outline the role of the SNA and how to work collaboratively with the SNA in the classroom.

Section 6: Conclusion

The SNA role has developed in such a way over the years that it may not be possible to return to a role which provides only care and associated needs. The role has been allowed to function too flexibly particularly in circumstances where appropriate resources to support children with special educational needs cannot be accessed.

This report attempts to join the intentions of the scheme with how it operates in reality. The recommendations outlined throughout have been formulated with the needs of the students to the fore while also trying to provide an appropriate and fair employment situation for the SNA. The recommendations suggested appear to be the most workable.

The review of the SNA Scheme announced by Minister Jan O'Sullivan and the Department of Education and Skills is to be welcomed. This review presents a prime opportunity to introduce changes to the Scheme so that it may better function for students, SNAs and schools communities across the country.

Section 7: Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The duties and function of the SNA need to be effectively, directly and regularly communicated to parents, teachers, principals and school staff. The role is subject to misinterpretation and as a result has expanded to include responsibilities which do not follow the Department of Education and Skills Circular 0030/2014. Through early communication with each of these groups the SNA is supported to carry out the role as defined and appropriate expectations are set. The NCSE should undertake regional meetings through local SENOs with parents, teachers, principals and school staff to discuss the SNA Scheme and special education resources. Continuous professional development and third level education for principals and teachers should provide training on the management and appropriate function of the role in the classroom and wider school setting.

Recommendation 2: Every attempt should be made to complete the review of the SNA Scheme undertaken by the Department of Education and Skills in time for the 2016/2017 academic year and in direct consultation with educational stakeholders.

Recommendation 3: The Department of Education and Skills should require SNAs to participate in the Individualised Education Plan of the student/students who they provide support to as it relates to 'care needs'. The SNA has an important role to play in providing information for the care plan of the student/students.

Recommendation 4: A mandatory, standardised training and course structure needs to be developed and implemented. A clear and defined structure would achieve further professionalization of the role, set a minimum standard of qualification for all SNAs and would provide the necessary skills needed at primary and post-primary to fulfil their roles most effectively.

Recommendation 5: A mandatory, standardised training and course structure needs to address the different levels of support as it relates to primary and post-primary. Students at different stages in their educational careers may require different levels of SNA support particularly in the transition from primary to post-primary. Any further training or courses which become available in future should address the differences at these levels.

Recommendation 6: A Continuous Professional Development programme which provides equal regional access needs to be introduced for SNAs as soon as practicable. Over the course of any new career, new methods and information become available which directly impacts on the work. SNAs should be provided with opportunities to avail of CPD relevant to their work and similar to that of teachers. SNAs should be allowed to participate in CPD for teachers where open places are available and receive certification on completion.

Recommendation 7: Appropriate training needs to be provided through CPD, initial training courses or by a medical health professional regarding the administration of medications and specifically for catheterization.

Recommendation 8: The minimum criteria of three grade D's in the Junior Certificate or FETAC Level 3 major qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications as set out in the Department of Education and Skills Circular 0021/2011 needs to be urgently reviewed. Consideration could be given to replacing the current minimum criteria in DES Circular 0021/2011 with a standard training course which may carry a FETAC level qualification.

Recommendation 9: SNA allocations need to be made at an earlier date in order to provide SNAs with the appropriate notice of their employment in advance of the upcoming school year. Earlier allocations would also be beneficial for parents and students as they will have clear knowledge of the SNA support they may or may not be receiving for the upcoming school year. A March or April allocation deadline would be preferable for the majority of allocations with additional time available in May and June if necessary.

Recommendation 10: The Department of Education and Skills need to ensure that SNA posts are not made available through Jobbridge.

Recommendation 11: In future circulars, the Department of Education and Skills should include a strong and clear statement of priority that the care needs of the student are paramount before any other secondary duty or task which may be assigned to an SNA.

Recommendation 12: The Department of Education and Skills and the National Council for Special Education need to consider the potential benefits for students and the wider classroom of using the wide range of skills possessed by SNAs which may aid in the learning process and management of the classroom.

Recommendation 13: A mandatory course on special education should be introduced at Bachelor's degree level and Masters of Education level for teachers. This course would outline the role of the SNA and how to work collaboratively with the SNA in the classroom.

Section 8: Written Submissions

Table 8.1 Written Submissions – 2013*

Group/Individual/Organisation	Date of Submission
IMPACT Trade Union	22/11/2013
SNA – School Group Submission	27/11/2013
Sheena Byrne	2/11/2013
Holy Child Pre-School	22/11/2013
Early Childhood Ireland	19/11/2013
Enable Ireland	22/11/2013
Autism Ireland Patron Body	20/11/2013
St. Angela’s College, Sligo	22/11/2013
National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)	22/11/2013
Joint Managerial Body (JMB)	22/11/2013
National Association of Principals & Deputy Principals (NAPD)	21/11/2013
Our Lady of Mercy College	16/11/2013
Liz Byrne	16/11/2013
Valerie Brennan	21/11/2013
Catherine Fitzpatrick	10/11/2013
Gerard Comerford	25/11/2013
Catriona Galstar	16/11/2013
Barbara Hallinan	2/11/2013
Jane Johnstone	22/11/2013

* A call for submissions was issued by the Committee in 2013

Table 8.2 Written Submissions – 2015**

Group/Individual/Organisation	Date of Submission
National Council for Special Education (NCSE)	12/5/2015
Irish Autism Action	12/5/2015
Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)	6/5/2015
Joint Managerial Body (JMB)	12/5/2015
COPE Foundation	12/5/2015
Early Childhood Ireland	12/5/2015
National Disability Authority (NDA)	12/5/2015
National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE) (re-submitted 2013 submission)	12/5/2015
Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA)	13/5/2015
Catriona Galster (re-submitted 2013 submission)	16/4/2015
IMPACT	15/5/2015
St. Angela's College, Sligo	29/5/2015
Association of Secondary Schools Teachers of Ireland	19/5/2015

**A further call for submissions was made by the Committee and provided an opportunity for new stakeholders to submit and previous groups/individuals/organisations to update their previous submission from 2013

Section 9: Hyperlinks to Committee Meeting Transcripts

Meeting of the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection on 8th October 2013:

<http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/Debates%20Authoring/DebatesWebPack.nsf/committeetakes/EDJ2013100900005?opendocument#E00400>

Meeting of the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection on 1st July 2015:

<http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/committeetakes/EDJ2015070100002?opendocument#D00100>

Appendices

Appendix 1: Terms of Reference

a. Functions of the Committee – derived from Standing Orders [DSO 82A; SSO 70A]

- (1) The Select Committee shall consider and report to the Dáil on—
 - (a) such aspects of the expenditure, administration and policy of the relevant Government Department or Departments and associated public bodies as the Committee may select, and
 - (b) European Union matters within the remit of the relevant Department or Departments.
- (2) The Select Committee may be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann to form a Joint Committee for the purposes of the functions set out below, other than at paragraph (3), and to report thereon to both Houses of the Oireachtas.
- (3) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), the Select Committee shall consider, in respect of the relevant Department or Departments, such—
 - (a) Bills,
 - (b) proposals contained in any motion, including any motion within the meaning of Standing Order 164,
 - (c) Estimates for Public Services, and
 - (d) other mattersas shall be referred to the Select Committee by the Dáil, and
 - (e) Annual Output Statements, and
 - (f) such Value for Money and Policy Reviews as the Select Committee may select.
- (4) The Joint Committee may consider the following matters in respect of the relevant Department or Departments and associated public bodies, and report thereon to both Houses of the Oireachtas:
 - (a) matters of policy for which the Minister is officially responsible,
 - (b) public affairs administered by the Department,
 - (c) policy issues arising from Value for Money and Policy Reviews conducted or commissioned by the Department,
 - (d) Government policy in respect of bodies under the aegis of the Department,
 - (e) policy issues concerning bodies which are partly or wholly funded by the State or which are established or appointed by a member of the Government or the Oireachtas,
 - (f) the general scheme or draft heads of any Bill published by the Minister,

- (g) statutory instruments, including those laid or laid in draft before either House or both Houses and those made under the European Communities Acts 1972 to 2009,
 - (h) strategy statements laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas pursuant to the Public Service Management Act 1997,
 - (i) annual reports or annual reports and accounts, required by law, and laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas, of the Department or bodies referred to in paragraph (4)(d) and (e) and the overall operational results, statements of strategy and corporate plans of such bodies, and
 - (j) such other matters as may be referred to it by the Dáil and/or Seanad from time to time.
- (5) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), the Joint Committee shall consider, in respect of the relevant Department or Departments—
- (a) EU draft legislative acts standing referred to the Select Committee under Standing Order 105, including the compliance of such acts with the principle of subsidiarity,
 - (b) other proposals for EU legislation and related policy issues, including programmes and guidelines prepared by the European Commission as a basis of possible legislative action,
 - (c) non-legislative documents published by any EU institution in relation to EU policy matters, and
 - (d) matters listed for consideration on the agenda for meetings of the relevant EU Council of Ministers and the outcome of such meetings.
- (6) A sub-Committee stands established in respect of each Department within the remit of the Select Committee to consider the matters outlined in paragraph (3), and the following arrangements apply to such sub-Committees:
- (a) the matters outlined in paragraph (3) which require referral to the Select Committee by the Dáil may be referred directly to such sub-Committees, and
 - (b) each such sub-Committee has the powers defined in Standing Order 83(1) and (2) and may report directly to the Dáil, including by way of Message under Standing Order 87.
- (7) The Chairman of the Joint Committee, who shall be a member of Dáil Éireann, shall also be the Chairman of the Select Committee and of any sub-Committee or Committees standing established in respect of the Select Committee.
- (8) The following may attend meetings of the Select or Joint Committee, for the purposes of the functions set out in paragraph (5) and may take part in proceedings without having a right to vote or to move motions and amendments:
- (a) Members of the European Parliament elected from constituencies in Ireland, including Northern Ireland,

- (b) Members of the Irish delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and
- (c) at the invitation of the Committee, other Members of the European Parliament.

b. Scope and Context of Activities of Committees (as derived from Standing Orders [DSO 82; SSO 70])

- (1) The Joint Committee may only consider such matters, engage in such activities, exercise such powers and discharge such functions as are specifically authorised under its orders of reference and under Standing Orders.
- (2) Such matters, activities, powers and functions shall be relevant to, and shall arise only in the context of, the preparation of a report to the Dáil and/or Seanad.
- (3) It shall be an instruction to all Select Committees to which Bills are referred that they shall ensure that not more than two Select Committees shall meet to consider a Bill on any given day, unless the Dáil, after due notice given by the Chairman of the Select Committee, waives this instruction on motion made by the Taoiseach pursuant to Dáil Standing Order 26. The Chairmen of Select Committees shall have responsibility for compliance with this instruction.
- (4) The Joint Committee shall not consider any matter which is being considered, or of which notice has been given of a proposal to consider, by the Committee of Public Accounts pursuant to Dáil Standing Order 163 and/or the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993.
- (5) The Joint Committee shall refrain from inquiring into in public session or publishing confidential information regarding any matter if so requested, for stated reasons given in writing, by—
 - (a) a member of the Government or a Minister of State, or
 - (b) the principal office-holder of a body under the aegis of a Department or which is partly or wholly funded by the State or established or appointed by a member of the Government or by the Oireachtas:

Provided that the Chairman may appeal any such request made to the Ceann Comhairle / Cathaoirleach whose decision shall be final.

Appendix 2: Committee Membership

31st Dáil
Members of the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection
Deputies



Joanna Tuffy TD
Chairperson of the Committee



Aengus Ó Snodaigh TD



Brendan Ryan TD



Clare Daly TD



James Bannon TD



Charlie McConalogue TD



Catherine Bryne TD



Ciaran Cannon TD



Jim Daly TD



Ray Butler TD



Willie O'Dea TD



Jonathan O'Brien TD



Michael Conaghan TD



Joan Collins TD



Noel Harrington TD

24th Seanad
Members of the Joint Committee on Education and Social Protection
Senators



Senator Mary Moran
Rapporteur



Senator Marie Moloney



Senator Marie-Louise O'Donnell



Senator Averil Power



Senator Jim D'Arcy



Senator Gerard Craughwell