



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council for Special Education

Statement of Strategy

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National Council for Special Education

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NCSE Statement of Strategy

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Foreword

This ambitious plan is based on the key functions of the National Council for Special Education as set out in Section 20 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004. It focuses on five priority areas for the NCSE which, when delivered, will expand our knowledge of special education; provide the Minister for Education and Skills with policy advice on a range of issues in the area; ensure the equitable allocation of available teaching and care supports to schools which have enrolled pupils with special educational needs; meet our legislative and corporate governance responsibilities; and address further and higher education requirements for adults in this cohort.

Our strategic plan is being published at a time of great uncertainty for the Irish economy. Our last statement of strategy was published when the progressive implementation of EPSEN was expected to have been completed by October 2010. We now know that this has been paused until the economy improves.

In the interim, the NCSE strongly welcomes the continued priority the Government gives to children with special educational needs at a time of scarce resources and many competing demands. The NCSE will continue to work with parents/guardians, schools and the Department of Education and Skills to ensure that these resources are allocated effectively and equitably in line with Government policy.

Sydney Blain
Chairperson

Introduction and Environmental Analysis

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was established in 2003. Our functions are set out in Section 20 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004. They include:

- planning for, and co-ordinating, the provision of education for children with special educational needs and ensuring that a continuum of provision is available
- conducting and commissioning research
- advising the Minister for Education and Skills on policy in relation to special education
- disseminating information, including best practice, on special education to parents, schools and other interested persons
- consulting voluntary bodies to ensure their knowledge and expertise can inform development of policy by the NCSE
- reviewing generally the provision made for adults with disabilities to avail of further, higher and/or continuing education and advising educational institutions concerning best practice in the education of adults with a disability.

Analysis of Organisational Operating Environment

Cross-sectoral linkages

Our work requires close cross-agency and cross-departmental linkages with the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive (HSE). These connections occur at local level with special educational needs organisers (SENOs) and local HSE and Department staff working together as well as at senior management level with the NCSE represented on the national education/health cross-sectoral team.

One example of cross-agency co-operation is the assessment of need process for younger children under the Disability Act 2005. The HSE currently refers to NCSE assessments conducted under the Disability Act which have identified the need for an educational service for a pre-school child. This enables the NCSE to start the planning process for children who may need supports once they start school. It also enables a link with the National Education Psychological Service (NEPS) to be established. NEPS may identify from the assessment of need documentation that the child requires a specialist setting. It also provides clarification, if needed, to SENOs on assessment documentation.

Developments under way in the health sector include the establishment of early intervention and school intervention teams to provide assessment and intervention for children. These developments are very welcome and the NCSE looks forward to working in close co-operation with these teams at local level.

Policy and legal environments

The NCSE welcomes the Government's commitment under its new programme to publish "a plan for the implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004 to prioritise access for children with special needs to an individual education plan. The priority will be to move to a system where necessary supports follow a child from primary to second level and to achieve greater integration of special needs-related services."

The EPSEN Act 2004 and the Disability Act 2005 provided a new framework within which specialist support services for children and adults with disabilities would be planned and delivered. Both Acts identify the NCSE and HSE as the key delivery organisations.

Part 2 of the Disability Act provides for an entitlement to an independent assessment of health and education needs and a statement of services. Part 2 commenced for children under five years with effect from June 1st, 2007.

The NCSE will continue to work with the Department of Health, Department of Education and Skills and the HSE on cross-agency/department issues as they may apply to our role in providing supports for children with special educational needs. We will continue to resource schools, in line with Government policy, so that they can support these pupils.

Economic environment

In December 2010, given the need to control public sector employee numbers, the Government decided to cap the number of teachers, including resource teachers, and special needs assistant posts. This meant that, for the first time since 1998, the allocation of SNA and resource teaching posts was no longer "demand driven" and would have to be managed within a definite number.

Public commentary and media focus has been extensive since the decision. Parents in particular are most concerned to ensure that the NCSE can continue to sanction teaching and/or care supports in response to child needs. The NCSE will continue to ensure that all available resources are allocated in response to need in a fair, equitable and consistent manner to all qualifying schools.

Social environment

It can be assumed that the number of children with special educational needs will increase in line with the projected growth in general population. Even though the level of available resource teaching and SNA posts is very significant and higher than the numbers allocated in more recent years, the increasing pupil population will create demand for increased levels of supports in schools. This demand will have to be managed within the fixed number of support posts available.

Special education has always been the focus of much public and media scrutiny. Given this position, the NCSE will need to ensure – through the development of a communications and public information strategy – that parents and schools have access to the factual position concerning the policy parameters underpinning the allocation of special educational posts, our allocation processes and the level and extent of resources available for allocation.

The NCSE has a number of functions including to provide for a continuum of support for children with special educational needs. These include working with schools to provide them with the appropriate teaching and/or care resources so that they can enrol pupils with special educational needs as well as working with schools – both mainstream and special – to establish special classes to meet demand for such placements.

The ability of the NCSE to continue to provide for a “continuum of support” is dependent on the continued willingness of schools to respond to the needs of their community and agree to open/expand specialist placement options.

The NCSE has become concerned that a small number of schools have become reluctant to enrol pupils with special educational needs, or to establish special classes, unless supports e.g. speech and language therapy or occupational therapy, funded through the Health Service Executive are provided or unless they receive a guarantee of a pre-determined number of SNA posts.

The NCSE has brought this situation to the attention of the Department of Education and Skills. In addition, the NCSE has made a submission to the Department’s request for papers on issues which arise to do with pupil enrolment. In the meantime, continued reluctance by schools, if it were to become widespread, would affect our ability to provide for a continuum of support as required. More importantly, it could significantly impact on a child’s ability to access an education appropriate to their needs.

Internal Analysis

Operations

The NCSE currently processes applications for SNA and resource teacher supports from schools. In 2011, schools had additional resource teaching hours to provide additional tuition to over 38,000 pupils with specific special educational needs. SNA posts supported the care needs of over 19,000 pupils in mainstream and special schools.

Our information technology framework was developed to support the historic way in which supports to schools were sanctioned. During 2011, the policy parameters for support allocation changed: a cap was placed on numbers of resource teaching and SNA posts. In addition, all such posts are allocated to the school and it is a matter for each school to use its professional judgment on management and deployment of the additional resources so that pupils are effectively supported. The IT framework now needs further refinement to ensure it can support our future requirements and take advantage of further developments in technology.

Research

Our research programme is well developed and we publish our research on our website – www.ncse.ie.

Research under way includes subject areas such as *Transitions: Primary to Post-Primary*; *Project Iris*, a three-year longitudinal research project which aims to carry out the most in-depth study of special and inclusive education ever conducted in Ireland; and *Access/progression to further and higher education*.

Our research programme informs parents, educational professionals and academia interested in knowing the trends and latest thinking in special education. It also informs our policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills. Our research programme will continue to focus on developing knowledge and provide a basis for evidence-informed policy making.

Policy advice

Within the timeframe of this statement of strategy, the NCSE intends to provide substantive policy advice on key special education areas, including:

- a code of practice to guide educational placements for children with special educational needs
- resourcing of schools to support this cohort
- the education of children with certain specific special educational needs.

Staffing

Our head office is in Trim, Co Meath. We also have 39 offices throughout the country staffed by our special educational needs organisers (SENOs) who provide a locally-based service to parents and schools.

As at December 2010, the NCSE had an authorised staffing level of 109 posts which included 12 senior SENOs (SSENO) and 75 SENO posts. This level is to reduce in line with the Government's employment control framework. This reduction will need careful management to minimise the impact on delivery of our core functions.

Critical Success Factors

The achievement of the strategic objectives set out in this statement of strategy will depend on several critical success factors including:

Organisational capacity: Our capacity to carry out our functions is contingent on staffing and funding resources as well as a developed management information system.

Resourcing: Our capacity to respond appropriately to school applications for supports is contingent on the continued availability of teaching and SNA posts.

Partnerships: Ultimately, the education system's ability to provide an appropriate education for all children, including those with special educational needs, succeeds only as a result of all the partners in education working together. These include patrons, management authorities, school staff, parents and the various State organisations, including the NCSE, DES and the HSE, working together. The economic climate may require all of us to become even more innovative and flexible to ensure that a continuum of support is in place for all children.

Strategic Objectives

The core elements of our strategic plan include our mission statement and our strategic objectives. We have also identified the tasks required to deliver on our strategic objectives and have developed performance indicators so we can measure our success in achieving these.

NCSE Vision Statement

A society where children and adults with special educational needs receive an education that enables them achieve their potential.

NCSE Mission Statement

The NCSE will promote a continuum of educational provision which is inclusive and responsive, and provides an appropriate education for children and adults with special educational needs. We will do this by providing supports to schools; advice to educators, parents and guardians; undertaking and disseminating research into special education; and by providing policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills on special education issues.

NCSE Strategic Objectives

We have developed five strategic objectives which are linked to our functions.

Strategic Objective 1: Plan and co-ordinate the provision of education and support services to children with special educational needs.

Strategic Objective 2: Provide evidence-informed policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills concerning the education of children with special educational needs.

Strategic Objective 3: Conduct and deliver a research programme to underpin the dissemination of information relating to best practice in special education to schools, parents and the education sector.

Strategic Objective 4: Review further and higher educational provision for adults with special educational needs and develop best practice guidelines.

Strategic Objective 5: Ensure that the NCSE continues to develop as an effective organisation which is compliant with all statutory, regulatory and corporate governance requirements as well as having effective information dissemination, communication and media strategies in place.

For each of these strategic objectives, we have developed the associated outputs and expected outcomes.

Strategic Objectives	Strategies	Output	Outcome
<p>1. Plan and co-ordinate the provision of education and support services to children with special educational needs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan for the range of educational placements required in mainstream and special schools and advise the DES on school building requirements. • Ensure available resource teaching and SNA supports are sanctioned in accordance with prevailing DES policy parameters. • Provide information to the DES on support services such as school transport, assistive technology and specialist equipment which may be required to support individual children with special educational needs. • Create, maintain and publish data on support services provided to children with SEN. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Range of specialist classes in place in both mainstream and special schools. • SNA posts sanctioned to schools, as needed, in line with policy. • Resource teacher posts are sanctioned to schools, as needed, in line with policy. • Periodic reviews of allocated SNA posts and resource teaching posts as necessary. • School transport applications processed. • Assistive technology/ specialist equipment applications processed. • Home tuition applications processed. • Data published on NCSE website annually on SNA and resource teaching allocations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools will have resources in place in line with DES policy to support pupils with special educational needs. • Information is available on the annual allocation of resource teaching and SNA posts in schools.
<p>2. Provide evidence-informed policy advice to the Minister for Education and Skills concerning the education of children with special educational needs.</p>	<p>Conduct and deliver a programme for evidence-informed policy advice which will address key priorities in special education.</p>	<p>Policy advice provided on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A code of practice to guide educational placements for children with special educational needs. • Resourcing of schools to support pupils with special educational needs. • The education of children with certain specific special educational needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCSE is recognised as a source of expertise and knowledge on special educational provision in Ireland. • Minister for Education and Skills will be able to plan for changes in policy in relation to each of the areas.

Strategic Objectives	Strategies	Output	Outcome
<p>3. Conduct and deliver a research programme to underpin the dissemination of information relating to best practice in special education to schools, parents and the education sector.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue the management of a multi-annual programme of commissioned research and research-based projects on special education. • Establish a plan to enable the dissemination to schools, parents and other interested parties of information on best practice concerning the education of children with special educational needs. • Develop a communications and public information strategy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research reports published together with summary documents published on key research findings in each report. • Research conferences to have taken place in 2012; 2013; 2014 and 2015. • A programme in place, and in operation, to ensure parents are fully informed of, and understand, special educational provision in schools, placement options, and the wider public is aware of the factual position of special education issues generally. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCSE is recognised as a source of up-to-date information on best practice and trends in special education – nationally and internationally. • Evidence basis available for policy advice. • Parents will have access to information to enable them to make informed choices about their children’s education as they, and the wider public, will have access to both information on special education provision and on special education issues generally.

Strategic Objectives	Strategies	Output	Outcome
<p>4. Review further and higher educational provision for adults with special educational needs and develop best practice guidelines.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage with further and higher education providers to review current provision. • Research and develop best practice guidelines on the education of adults with disabilities and advise accordingly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information available for parents and young adults with special educational needs regarding further and higher education and continuing training options mapped with a full understanding of the various courses, enrolment criteria and certification. • Published research on best practice on the education of adults with disabilities. • Policy advice provided to Minister on the education of adults with disabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NCSE is recognised as having a key role in informing young people with disabilities and their parents/guardians on adult educational options. • Parents and young adults will be able to plan and make informed decisions regarding possible further and/or higher education options and/or continuing training options post-school. • The providers and users of further/higher education placement options and continuing education will have access to information on best practice on the education of adults with disabilities. • The Minister for Education and Skills will be able to plan appropriate changes to current policy on the education of adults with disabilities.

Strategic Objectives	Strategies	Output	Outcome
<p>5. Ensure that the NCSE continues to develop as an effective organisation which is compliant with all statutory, regulatory and corporate governance requirements as well as having effective information dissemination, communication and media strategies in place.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to review and improve, as appropriate, the necessary internal governance and control processes which cover the NCSE use of State funding and resources – both directly and indirectly allocated to the NCSE. • Continue to review and improve, as appropriate, our processes and linkages with parents, schools and other organisations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual accounts audited and published. • Annual report published. • Statement of strategy in place. • Employee numbers in line with employment control framework. • SNA and resource teaching posts sanctioned in line with DES policy. • Communications and public information strategy in place. 	<p>NCSE is recognised as an organisation which achieves its functions, meets all its statutory, regulatory and corporate governance obligations and can effectively communicate on issues concerning special education.</p>

