

Report on NCSE Review of SNA Allocation to Schools April 2009 – March 2010

1. *Context*

On 9 February 2009, the Secretary-General of the Department of Education & Science (DES) wrote to the Chairperson of the NCSE, Mr Sydney Blain, in relation to the allocation of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) to schools. In her letter, she stated that an initial review of a number of schools, as part of the Department's SNA Value for Money and Policy Analysis Review had indicated that there were instances where the work being carried out by the SNAs did not reflect the basis for the allocation of the post and where the level of SNA resources in some schools was greater than the proper application of the criteria would allow. In this context, the NCSE was requested to arrange for its Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) to further review the SNA allocation in all schools with a view to ensuring that the criteria set out in the relevant circulars are properly met. The key circular, which sets out the care needs, which can be supported in a school setting, is DES Circular 07/02.

Following a discussion at a meeting of the Council on 11 February 2009, the Council agreed to arrange for SENOs to conduct such reviews and requested that the Boards of Management of each school be informed of the review by the Department. Accordingly DES Circular SP ED 0009/2009 issued to all schools in March 2009, informing them of the review.

The commencement of the review process at this time meant that the NCSE was effectively conducting a review of SNA resources currently engaged in schools in the 2008/09 academic year in conjunction with the resource allocation process for new enrolments in the 2009/10 academic year, during which over 12,000 applications for teaching and SNA supports would be received. In effect the review encompassed a review of current SNA resources together with the processing of those applications for additional SNA resources.

2. *NCSE Process for the Review of Allocation of SNA Supports to Schools*

In general, the process attached to the review built on the established processes attached to the allocation of SNA supports to schools. In mainstream primary and post-primary schools, the allocations process was well embedded and schools were familiar with the overall approach. However, given the scale of the review, it was

agreed that there would be a greater capacity for parents to be involved in the review process with the SENO, either by phone or at meetings convened through the school.

In the case of special schools which cater for children aged between 4 and up to 18 years of age, the allocations process was less developed, primarily because these schools were established to provide exclusively for children with special educational needs (SEN). As the total number of children enrolled in these schools rarely changed to any great degree, the question of the need to apply to the SENO for additional resources did not always arise.

2.1 Mainstream Primary and Post-Primary Schools

Since January 2005, the responsibility for the allocation of SNAs to schools was transferred from the DES to the NCSE.

Each year the changes in the level of SNA support to schools is determined by

- The level of support required for children enrolling in the school or children currently enrolled who may now have identified significant care needs
- The level of support freed up as a result of children with sanctioned SNA support leaving the school
- The level of support freed up as a result of the diminishing care needs of some children with sanctioned SNA support still enrolled in the school.

In some cases access to SNA was adjusted from Full Time access to Part Time access or removed entirely because of the improvement in the development of independent living skills of the child. However this was viewed by some schools and parents as a *reduction* in the level of support provided to the child and not as a positive result in the recognition of diminishing care needs or the development of independent living skills.

In deciding the level of SNA support to be allocated to the school, the SENO would visit the school and examine the professional reports for each child with special educational needs, which have specified the care needs arising from the disability, together with the frequency and extent of the care needs as they arise in the school setting. This would enable the SENO to decide if the care needs described are eligible for SNA support under the provisions of DES Circular 07/02 and if the support required by the child can be met from within the existing school SNA resources or whether additional supports are required by the school. For example, a child whose care needs arise from behavioural issues, may be supported by an SNA who might also meet the care needs of a child who requires assistance with toileting.

The process would also permit the SENO to discuss with the Principal, teachers and SNA the manner in which the care needs of the child arise in the school and also the records the school has maintained e.g. incidence reports. Parents would also be in a position to contribute to this process, as appropriate.

Every school was requested to inform parents that the review was commencing and to invite them to contribute, should they wish, either by phone contact or by appointment during the review. In this regard, many parents participated in the review process.

Finally the SENO would observe the student in the classroom and schoolyard settings, as appropriate, in order to assist in the decision making process. In some schools, the view was taken that this stage of the process constituted the entirety of the SNA allocations process and statements such as “the SENO only observed the child for 20 minutes and made their decision” were articulated during the course of the review. In this context, it is important to note that this stage of the process is designed to underpin statements that are present in professional reports or statements made by school staff and does not in itself constitute the entire decision making process.

The outcome of the process enabled the SENO to determine to what extent a child with special educational needs, who also has identified care needs, may require access to SNA support on an individual basis or a shared basis, depending on the frequency and extent of the care needs. In this regard, it is important to note that the SNA is always working under the direction of the teacher in the class.

2.2 Special Schools

The review of special schools required the NCSE to take into account a number of factors, which did not apply in the mainstream sector, primarily the fact that *all* children enrolled would have special educational needs. Special schools are allocated SNA resources on a class ratio basis (e.g. two classes of 8 children with a Mod GLD would be allocated one SNA between them). In many of these schools, the number of pupils enrolled might remain static as the number of new entrants would match the number of pupils leaving the school therefore the baseline allocation of SNA support would remain unaltered. Consequently special schools may not have sought additional resources for new entrants through the NCSE unless particular circumstances applied in relation to an individual child.

However, given the policy of inclusion, which has applied in recent years, it was recognised by the NCSE that many of the children enrolled, would have significant care needs, as set out in professional reports and that an additional allocation of SNA support, over and above the baseline allocation, might be required to meet the care needs of individual or groups of children enrolled. Therefore in order to fully review the care needs of all children enrolled in special schools, the review of SNA supports was conducted by a team of 2-3 SENOs headed up by the SENO who is responsible for the allocation of resources to the school and was conducted over a number of weeks in stages, as set out below.

In August 2009, the NCSE wrote to all special schools informing them of the commencement of the review in the special schools sector and that the SENO for the school would be in contact with them shortly. The SENO then wrote to the school signalling the commencement of the review and that it would comprise of 3 discreet stages in special schools namely

- *Information gathering:* class lists for the 09/10 academic year and a profile of the current deployment of SNA supports throughout the school
- *Administration visit:* Documentation including the professional reports for each child enrolled, records relating to additional SNA posts sanctioned to the

school, the timetable of SNA deployment and any relevant teacher/school reports for each student that verify care needs

- *Student observation and discussion with staff:* each student was observed in a classroom or school yard setting, as appropriate and discussions took place with the Principal, teachers, SNAs, where appropriate other individuals who work with the student and parents/guardians. In this regard, the school was provided with a letter for issue to all parents informing them of the review and inviting them to make contact with the review team.

3. *Outcome of Review*

Overall outcome

Of the 4,000 schools, which are recognised under section 10 of the Education Act, 1998, in the region of 900 schools do not currently have an allocation of SNA.

To date 2,913 out of approx 3,150 schools with an allocation of SNA, have been reviewed with the decisions having issued to the school. The remaining schools will be reviewed in April, after the Easter break but the outcome of the review of these schools will not materially impact on the overall outcome of the review. A final breakdown of the outcome of the review will be made available at the end of April.

It should be noted that the tables set out below refer to Whole Time Equivalent posts (WTE) and not individual SNAs.

Table 1

**Overall Change in Number of SNAs in all Schools Reviewed
(n= 2,913 schools)**

	Number of SNAs
Prior to Review	8,821
Following Review	8,463
Overall Change	-358

Table 2

**Number of Schools with a Change in Level of SNAs in Schools Reviewed
(n= 2,913 schools)**

	Number of Schools
No Change in Level of SNA	1502
Decrease in Level of SNA	832
Increase in Level of SNA	579

Outcome for Primary Schools

Table 3

**Overall Change in Number of SNAs in Primary Schools Reviewed
(n= 2,283 primary schools)**

	Number of SNAs
Prior to Review	6096
Following Review	5801
Overall Change	-295

Table 4

**Reasons for Change in Number of SNAs in Primary Schools Reviewed
(n= 2,283 primary schools)**

	Number of SNAs
SNAs Freed Up Because of Students Leaving	723
SNAs Freed Up Because of Diminishing Care Needs	534
SNAs Allocated to New Students	962

Table 5

**Number of Primary Schools with a Change in Level of SNAs in Schools
Reviewed (n= 2,283 primary schools)**

	Number of Primary Schools
No Change in Level of SNA	1182
Decrease in Level of SNA	663
Increase in Level of SNA	438

Outcome for Post-Primary Schools

Table 6

**Overall Change in Number of SNAs in Post-Primary Schools Reviewed
(n= 573 post-primary schools)**

	Number of SNAs
Prior to Review	1707
Following Review	1656
Overall Change	-51

Table 7
Reasons for Change in Number of SNAs in Post-Primary Schools Reviewed
(n= 573 post-primary schools)

	Number of SNAs
SNAs Freed Up Because of Students Leaving	197
SNAs Freed Up Because of Diminishing Care Needs	199
SNAs Allocated to New Students	345

Table 8
Number of Post-Primary Schools with a Change in Level of SNAs in Schools
Reviewed (n= 573 post-primary schools)

	Number of Post-Primary Schools
No Change in Level of SNA	294
Decrease in Level of SNA	153
Increase in Level of SNA	126

Outcome for Special Schools

A key factor in the review of Special Schools was that in most instances, the NCSE was not involved in the original allocation of SNA resources, unlike mainstream schools. Consequently this was the first detailed profile of SNA resources in these schools, obtained by the NCSE.

Table 9
Overall Change in Number of SNAs in Special Schools Reviewed
(n= 57 special schools)

	Number of SNAs
Prior to Review	1018
Following Review	1006
Overall Change	-12

Table 10
Number of Special Schools with a Change in Level of SNAs in Schools Reviewed
(n= 57 special schools)

	Number of Special Schools
No Change in Level of SNA	26
Decrease in Level of SNA	16
Increase in Level of SNA	15