Chair,

I would like to thank the Joint Committee for the invitation to address today’s meeting in relation to the provision of educational services for students with Down syndrome.

Government policy on supporting children with special educational needs aims to ensure that all children with special needs, including children with Down syndrome, can have access to an education appropriate to their needs.

Policy is to provide for inclusive education and to ensure the maximum possible integration of children with special needs into ordinary mainstream schools.

Where pupils require more targeted interventions, special class or special school placements are also provided.
Very significant levels of financial provision are made to ensure that all children with special educational needs can access education.

The Department of Education and Skills currently spends approximately €1.75 Billion, or almost 19% of its total educational budget annually, on making additional provision for children with special educational needs.

The main supports this funding provides for are:

Over 13,400 special education teachers in mainstream schools providing additional teaching support for pupils with special needs.

15,000 Special Needs Assistants supporting care needs.

125 special schools and over 1,450 special classes in mainstream schools.

An assistive technology scheme to provide assistive technology supports and equipment.

Special school transport arrangements.

Teacher training and continuing professional development in the area of special education, including support for schools in relation to the learning and teaching of pupils with Down syndrome.
A comprehensive system of continuing professional development for teachers in the area of special educational needs is provided for.

Through applications to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Support Service, schools and individual teachers can access support in all areas of special education, including support in relation to the learning and teaching of pupils with Down syndrome.

The NCSE provides a specific course - An Introduction to Teaching Children with Down syndrome.

This seminar provides an overview of Down syndrome. The content covers a wide range of topics relevant to teaching and learning and to the development of the child with Down syndrome in a mainstream classroom.

This course was available in 12 locations in 2017/18 and was attended by 243 teachers.

The NCSE has also worked in collaboration with Down Syndrome Ireland. In 2016-2017, the Special Education Support Service contributed to a number of differentiated lessons that are supported and published on the Down Syndrome Ireland website.

These lessons are particularly aimed at supporting the teaching and learning of students at post-primary level.

Schools also receive support from the NCSE team for in-school seminars/individual teacher visits, supporting learning and teaching of students with Down Syndrome / General Learning Disability.
The National Council for Special Education also has a role to advise the Minister for Education and Skills on matters concerning the education of children with special educational needs.

The NCSE has provided a number of policy advice papers in recent years.

In developing their policy advice reports, the NCSE consults with representative bodies, including with Down Syndrome Ireland.

In recent years, Down Syndrome Ireland has had a representative on the NCSE Consultative Forum, who assisted with the development of the NCSE policy advice on the Provision of Education for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Down Syndrome Ireland were also consulted as part of the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant scheme, and most recently, in relation to the NCSE’s consultation on special schools and classes, in October 2018.

In conclusion, given the extent of additional supports provided in the education system in recent years, this should mean that all students with Down syndrome can now be provided with educational services.

As changes are made to seek improvements to educational services in future, my Department, and the National Council for Special Education, will continue to consult with Down Syndrome Ireland in relation to these matters.