

DRAFT: Department of Education and Skills Opening Statement to the Joint Committees on Education and Skills; Health and Employment Affairs and Social Protection – Supports for persons with disabilities accessing employment – June 12th, 2018.

We thank the Joint Committees for the invitation to today's meeting. We are aware of the Joint Committees' hearings of May 3rd and 29th and we will try address the matters highlighted during those hearings. Our statement today will primarily address:

- The provisions made for supporting children with special educational needs to support participation in further studies, training or employment subsequently;
- The supports available in the Further Education sector to facilitate access to further education and the transition from further education to employment; and,
- Career guidance for those with a special educational need.

Supporting Children with Special educational needs:

The Department's policy for supporting children with special educational needs aims to ensure that all children with Special Educational Needs can have access to an education appropriate to their needs, preferably in school settings through the primary and post primary school network as well as in special class or special school settings.

Such placements facilitate access to individualised education programmes which may draw from a range of appropriate educational interventions, delivered by fully qualified professional teachers, with the support of Special Needs Assistants and the appropriate school curriculum.

Funding for special education provision in 2018 will amount to some €1.75 billion, up 43% since 2011 and equivalent to 18.7% of the gross overall current allocation for education and training.

National Council for Special Education Guidelines

To support pupils and parents for transition from education, the NCSE has published guidelines for parents, students and schools covering the transitions between all stages of education, including the transition from primary to post-primary and on post-school education and training

options for people with disabilities. These guidelines provide students and their families with valuable information on the extensive range of post-school options and supports available and guidance to inform individual choice. The guidelines cover [Further Education and Training](#); [Higher Education](#) and [Rehabilitative Training and Adult Day Services](#).

These publications are available on the NCSE's website and all schools were informed when they were published.

Education Plans

The Department recognises the importance of planning for transitions throughout a child's education and, at present, all schools are required to develop Education Plans for all children identified with Special Educational Needs and Additional Care Support Needs. The Department's Inspectorate's advice is that the majority of schools are now using some form of individual education planning for children with special educational needs.

Educational plans should be differentiated in line with a pupils' needs. A student's support plan should include clear, measurable learning targets, and specify the resources and interventions that will be used to address student needs in line with the Continuum of Support process. Individualised support plans for students should be developed through a collaborative process involving relevant teachers, parents/guardians, the pupils themselves and outside professionals, as necessary. The individualised planning process should include regular reviews of learning targets as part of an ongoing cycle of assessment, target setting, intervention and review.

SNA Review

The Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme which was published by the NCSE on 30th May, has found that while the scheme is greatly valued by parents, students and schools and works well in meeting the care needs of Younger students it is less effective for some older primary and post primary students, as over reliance on SNA support can result in these students experiencing alienation and stigma.

It also found that there can be an over dependence on SNA support, leaving some young people inadequately prepared for life in post school settings and it is seen as a blunt instrument to deal with the very wide range and variety of needs, ages, developmental stages and school settings.

The Department is now developing proposals to implement the Review's recommendations in consultation with key Departments and Agencies.

Transitions from FET to Employment.

Turning to the further education area, a major focus of the Further Education and Training Strategy is to deliver skills for the economy and support active inclusion of all citizens. These twin goals are closely connected and both point to the importance of assisting people with disabilities to access employment.

Overall in 2017, over 17,000 people with a disability enrolled in a wide range of mainstream FET programmes. Details on all FET programmes are available on www.fetchcourses.ie. Learners on FET programmes have access to appropriate guidance services. Some programmes also provide income support by enabling learners to retain their DEASP entitlements and have provision for meal and travel allowances. The HEA Fund for Students with Disabilities also funds services and support for students with a disability in Post Leaving Certificate Colleges.

SOLAS and the Department meet regularly with the Department of Employment and Social Protection to discuss issues relating to the training and upskilling of unemployed people and those on other payments. Protocols are in place between INTREO Offices and ETBs to deal with issues relating to the planning of training and the management of referrals. This provides a good opportunity for the Department, SOLAS and the ETBs to assist DEASP as they look to extend their employment services and supports for people with disabilities.

SOLAS through the ETBs also provide specific funding of almost €47 million per annum for dedicated education and training for people with disabilities through Specialist Training Providers. Over 3,500 learners benefited from this provision in 2017. Generally this provision is accessed by people who need more intensive support. Features of the programme include longer duration, adapted equipment and transport arrangements.

SOLAS regularly commissions follow-up surveys in order to establish what happens to participants, primarily in terms of outcomes, after they leave the FET training delivered by ETBs. The most recent follow-up survey was conducted in 2017 and it surveyed those that exited ETB training in the period January to March 2016. Within this survey, a customised survey to gain feedback from participants with a disability who participated in Specialist Training Programmes (STP) was conducted. The findings included outcomes indicating that 26% were in employment, 4% were on government schemes and 15% were engaged in further study. There are plans to extend the approach to monitoring outcomes so that we can

also get a better picture of how people with disabilities on mainstream programmes do after completing their courses.

SOLAS engages with ETBs each year to discuss funding priorities, taking account of local need and labour market data. This year, SOLAS have required ETBs to set out how they are addressing barriers to accessing FET. This is done in the light of the 2017 SOLAS report on barriers for vulnerable groups accessing FET. A fuller picture of initiatives in place at ETB level will emerge from this process and provide a basis for determining future supports.

The Department recognises that there are still access difficulties in some FET settings. Scope to address these up to now has been limited as no specific capital budget was allocated for FET. Enhanced allocations of capital funds for the sector over the period of the National Development Plan will give greater capacity to address these issues.

Apprenticeships

The Department noted that many contributors to the previous Joint Committee hearings spoke about the potential of apprenticeship to provide access for people with disabilities to the labour market. 371 current apprentices, out of a total population of almost 13,500, report having a disability. As part of a review on 'Pathways to Participation in Apprenticeship', which is due to be completed at the end of June 2018, research is being undertaken on barriers to participation by people from diverse groups, including those with a disability. Alongside this research, SOLAS are conducting café dialogue sessions to further inform recommendations for the review. Attendees at the café dialogue sessions have included individuals from organisations representing people with disabilities. It is expected that the expansion of apprenticeship into new sectors, giving access to a much broader range of job opportunities and occupation types, will also assist in enabling people with disabilities access this valuable pathway to employment.

The Disability Act (2005) places an obligation on public bodies, including the Department of Education and Skills, to ensure that at least 3% of their workforce are people with disabilities.

Career Guidance for those with a special educational need:

Guidance in schools refers to a range of learning experiences provided in a developmental sequence that assist students to develop self-management skills which will lead to effective

choices and decisions about their lives. It encompasses the three separate, but interlinked, areas of personal and social development, educational guidance and career guidance.

For all children in **mainstream post primary schools**, including those with Special Educational Needs in the mainstream class or the special class, the support of the guidance counsellor is available where it has been provided. There is no other additional or separate guidance support for children with Special Educational Needs and there is currently no policy to support an alternative or separate guidance provision for children with Special Educational Needs in mainstream post primary.

In mainstream post-primary schools it is common practice for the school guidance counsellor and the special educational needs (SEN) coordinator to work very closely in liaising with parents and the feeder primary schools, analysing psychometric assessments, identifying and supporting the needs of students with SEN, advising students and their parents on the most suitable subject choices and programme options, and facilitating students to secure appropriate work experience as part of the Transition Year, Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programmes.

The SEN and Guidance team collaborate in facilitating students to apply for supports such as RACE (Reasonable Accommodation for Certificate Examinations), DARE (Disability Access Route to Education) and other access routes into further and higher education and employment.

A key role of the guidance counsellor is to develop close links with employers, with access officers in colleges, with SOLAS training and apprenticeship schemes and other organisations such as the National Learning Network with a view to maximising the opportunities for students with SEN and other disabilities to access further education, training and jobs.

The **National Learning Network** offers seventy different training programmes (including vocational and rehabilitative courses) to up to 5,000 students annually, many of whom have a disability and who wish to upskill, gain employment and live more independent lives. The programmes are funded through the Education and Training Boards or the Health Service

Executive. The courses are free and individualised, and offer a variety of awards including QQI (Level 1 – 6), ECDL and City and Guilds. Ninety per cent of students who completed a training programme last year went on to further education and training.

For students in **Special schools** the position is that special schools are substantially different to mainstream schools and these students typically have very different needs.

In all cases, the classroom teacher and other school staff are more intimately aware of the abilities of all students than would be the case in mainstream schools with the average pupil teacher ratio of less than 5:1 and special needs assistants of 3:1, in the majority of special schools.

Special school staff typically have extensive engagement with parents, HSE multi-disciplinary teams and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) which involves planning for the child's future, including options for further education, training, employment or other placement options subject to the child's abilities, including the young person's transition to adult services when the child reaches the age of 18 years.

Students who transfer to adult service settings can continue to participate in educational programmes through further adult educational programmes or in adult settings which are allocated resources towards educational provision.

The National Skills Strategy 2025 and the Action Plan for Education 2016-2019, provide for a Career Guidance Review that would include recommendations on changes to improve the existing career guidance tools and career information for post-primary/further education/higher education students and adults, currently in place across the education and training system in Ireland.

The purpose of the review is to ensure that we are providing high quality, relevant career guidance information to students from post-primary level up to further and higher education. The review will look at the quality of information available to students and adults in relation to career guidance, the sources of this information and how the system is organised to support students and adults in this area.

Opportunities have been provided for all relevant stakeholders to contribute to the review. Over 100 written submissions have been received including a significant number of submissions have been received from special schools.

Drawing on the results of the consultation process and further consideration by the Steering Group, the specific role and objectives of career guidance in supporting students in special schools will be assessed further.

Related to the area of career guidance, some stakeholders have spoken about work experience. The Action Plan for Education 2018 includes an action to commence a review of work experience at post-primary level with a view to increasing access to, and the quality of, work experience for students. This review is at the early planning stages with a Steering Group to be established which will then define a Terms of Reference and Project Plan for the review.

Higher Education

Whilst noting the broadly complimentary remarks made in previous hearing concerning access to higher education for persons with disabilities; it may be helpful to provide some information on the higher education sector.

Student Support Services in higher education institutions usually include an equity of access office, dedicated disability services and a career guidance support service.

The central role of disability officers is to provide supports and services to students with disabilities to assist them in accessing higher education and successfully completing, and to ensure compliance with the legal requirement to provide reasonable accommodations as appropriate.

A key ambition of the National Access Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019 is to achieve the implementation of more inclusive practices and integrated approaches that contribute to the realisation of a student body that reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population.

Perhaps the most important measure of how well access to higher education is facilitated is to note that the proportion of higher education entrants indicating they have a disability has

increased from 6% in 2012 to 10.3% in 2016. The challenge, of course, is to maintain and build on these numbers.

Interdepartmental/Interagency collaboration

The Department is represented on the Working Group of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities Strategic Priority Action 5.1, which is led by the National Disability Authority and which focusses on transition points for people with disabilities. The group has produced a report agreed by Government, to be published shortly outlining the policy approach and an implementation plan.

Conclusion

Very significant progress has been made in supporting learners with disabilities across the range of school levels and into further and higher education. The Comprehensive Employment Strategy framework will also help us advance the cross Departmental co-operation that may be necessary in some areas – it gives us visibility and access to colleagues in other Departments. Thank you for the invitation to appear today and the time to deliver this paper.

End

Department of Education and Skills

12 June, 2018