

**Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher  
Education, Research, Innovation and Science**

**Attendance by Department of Education officials on Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup>  
July at 12.30pm**

Cathaoirleach,

At the outset I wish to thank you and the Committee for the invitation to be here today representing the Department of Education and to talk to you about the supports available for deaf and hard of hearing children and young people in our school system.

My name is Martina Mannion and I am an Assistant Secretary General in the Department with responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion.

I am accompanied today by a number of colleagues from the Department who work across a range of policy and operational issues:

- Mr. Brendan Doody, Principal Officer, Mr. Frank Hanlon, Principal Officer and Mr Kieran Rogers, Assistant Principal Officer from the Special Education Section;
- Ms Evelyn O'Connor, Principal Officer from the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit and
- Mr Mark Kelly, Technical Manager from the Planning and Building Unit.

**General policy on special education and current provision**

The Department of Education's policy in respect of supporting children and young people with additional needs, including students who are deaf or hard of hearing is very clear. Based on a child-centred approach to the provision of

education, our role is to ensure that all children with additional needs are supported to access an education appropriate to their needs.

This means that children with additional needs should be supported to the greatest degree possible in mainstream settings with additional teaching and care supports to allow them to achieve their potential. In circumstances where children with additional needs require more specialised interventions, we ensure access to special class or special school places. We have a number of special classes and special school places dedicated to supporting deaf students and students who are hard of hearing.

The vast majority of children with additional or special educational needs are educated in mainstream settings in the Irish education system. It is estimated that almost 98% of all children in our schools attend mainstream settings.

### **Investment in special education**

This year, the Department of Education will spend in excess of €2.6 billion, or over 27% of the Department's budget supporting children with special educational needs. This is the highest ever provision of funding by the State for special education. By the end of this year there will be over 40,000 special education teachers (SET) and special needs assistants (SNAs) working in our schools who are specifically dedicated to supporting students with special educational needs.

It is important to note a particular major policy initiative undertaken by the Department in respect of the provision of support to students with special educational needs in schools. In 2017, the Department introduced the SET allocation model. This model of allocation provides additional teaching resources

to schools and enables them to provide for the identified educational needs of students without a requirement for diagnosis. The underpinning principle of this model is that the child with the greatest level of need should receive the greatest level of support in the school.

### **Specific supports for deaf and hard of hearing students**

In line with the agenda for today's meeting, I would like to take the opportunity to set out details on some of the specific supports that are available for deaf and hard of hearing students.

#### *Special classes and Special schools*

There is a longstanding existing provision in place, which provides a dedicated special needs assistant with Irish Sign Language (ISL) competency to support students in mainstream settings to access the curriculum and engage with school activities. There are currently 13 of these SNAs in place.

For deaf or hard of hearing children with greater levels of need, 24 dedicated special classes attached to primary and post-primary schools are available across the country and 2 special schools for deaf children are also provided. These special classes and special schools support just under 300 students at present.

#### *New Irish Sign Language Scheme*

As the Committee members will know, the Irish Sign Language Act 2017 was commenced in late 2020 and it placed a number of obligations on the Minister and Department of Education. In accordance with the legislation, late last year

both Minister Foley and Minister Madigan announced the commencement of the first phase of the implementation of an enhanced scheme of ISL provision.

A key element of the new enhanced scheme is to provide for two new roles in our education system. Firstly an ISL Specialist Classroom support will assist students and convey the spirit and content of the communication occurring in the classroom and enhance active engagement by the student with learning and participation in school life.

The second role, of ISL Advisor, has a broader remit and will work to try to build capacity in ISL across the school community including teachers, SNAs, other school staff and other students.

My colleagues and I are happy to provide further information on the rollout of the new scheme during the meeting.

#### *National Council for Special Education (NCSE) supports*

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) employs 29 Visiting Teachers (VT) who support children and young people who are deaf or hard of hearing. VTs who support deaf or hard of hearing students are qualified teachers with particular skills and knowledge of the development and education of children with varying degrees of hearing loss. They offer longitudinal support to students, their families and schools from the time of initial referral through to the end of the post-primary education. Following the introduction of the new-born screening programme, visiting teachers also provide valuable early intervention support in the home to babies and their families.

### *ISL within the curriculum*

In relation to supporting Irish Sign Language in the curriculum, at Primary level, ISL interpretation has been added by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to materials published as part of the Toolkit which supports the *Primary Language Curriculum*. At Junior Cycle, schools can choose to provide a short course on ISL, the emphasis being on developing communication skills in ISL. There are four modules on Sign Language available as part of the Leaving Certificate Applied Programme and there is also an opportunity for students to learn Sign Language during the course of Transition Year.

The NCCA redevelopment of the primary and senior cycle curriculum are obviously significant pieces of curricular reform underway at present. This provides an opportunity for the NCCA and the Department to further consider how we support ISL within these new curricula and build on some of the good work already in place.

### *Additional supports*

In addition to the main supports I have outlined in summary detail, supports are also available for deaf and hard of hearing students and their families through the ISL Home Tuition scheme. A total of 104 hours of tuition are available annually to students and their families under this initiative. Currently, 152 children and their families are being supported under the scheme by approximately 52 tutors. I can confirm that we are currently reviewing this scheme with the view to streamlining the application process.

The Department also has an assistive technology scheme, which provides technological support to children who need this for accessing the curriculum. This includes audiological supports for students with hearing impairment, such as soundfield systems, microphones and receivers. The Department increased its funding for this scheme by €2 million this year and we are fully committed to providing a range of technological supports to support students who are deaf and hard of hearing.

The concept of universal design now underpins all Department technical guidelines in relation to the design and build of new schools and school extensions. The acoustic performance of a building is a key determinant of a quality learning environment. Additional provisions are also made in the design and build of new classrooms which are specifically to support deaf or hard of hearing students.

Another significant development in this area, is the profession of the Bachelor of Education (ISL), initial teacher education programme which enables deaf and hard of hearing people who use ISL to become primary teachers. The first cohort of 4 students are graduating from this new programme this year and approval has been given for a second cohort to undertake the programme.

## **Conclusion**

We have worked hard to ensure we have providing a supportive inclusive education system for all children, particularly children with additional needs. While huge progress has been made we are always aware of the challenges faced by individual children and their families and we are continuing to work with the NCSE and all of the education stakeholders to address any issues as they come to light.

It is important for the Department and NCSE to keep abreast of the latest research and developments internationally on how best to support deaf and hard of hearing students. This is something that we are very aware of through the research function in the NCSE and through the Departments representation on various EU special education groups.

I thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to outline in summary detail some of the support available for deaf and hard of hearing students and my colleagues and I look forward to engaging with Committee members and providing more details in relation to any questions that you might have.

Thank you Chair.