



OPENING STATEMENT MR ADAM HARRIS, CEO, AsI Am

Good morning,

May I thank you Chair and the members of the committee for your invitation to appear today for this critically important and timely engagement on the Department of Education's revised approach to Special Education Teaching (SET allocations).

As members may be aware AsI Am is Ireland's Autism Charity. We are an autistic-led organisation whose vision is to bring about a society in which every Autistic person is accepted "as they are" - equal, valued, and respected. We provide a broad range of supports to Autistic children, adults and families and advocating for effective supports, which align with the UNCRPD, is at the very heart of our work.

Autism is a lifelong, developmental difference which relates to how a person communicates and interacts with others and how they experience the world around them. Our awareness of Autism has increased drastically in recent years, with the consequent result that 1 in 27 children of school-going age now have an Autism diagnosis, this is before we consider children on lengthy HSE waiting lists for assessment. A majority of our young people attend mainstream school, with significant numbers also enrolled in autism-specific classes within mainstream schools or in special schools. Whilst this may mean a shift in where our children learn, compared to the past, it does not necessarily indicate a fundamental shift in terms of inclusion. Indeed, in our most recent Same Chance Report, 23% of community members reported that their child did not have a suitable school place which met their needs and 61% did not believe, based on experience, that our education system was inclusive or accessible. For many the battle to secure a school place is followed by an endless battle for supports and reasonable accommodations in the face of exclusionary practices and the constant threat of reduced timetable, placement break down, suspension or expulsion.

Understanding this background and context is essential to understanding the sense of a breach of trust many families in our community feel by the Department of Education's announcement that the current SET allocation model would change - removing complex needs as a relevant factor in the front-loading model - without any forewarning, engagement or consultation with those most affected - Autistic children and children with additional educational needs. Our families have little reason to trust the system, least of all when it has attached zero weight in its model to the voices and experiences of our community.

The SET allocation model, as introduced in 2017, is based on NCSE policy advice. That policy advice was crystal clear that the number of children with what it describes as “complex needs” within a school should form a significant proportion of the allocation model. Yet this was deviated from, behind closed doors. This simply would happen to teacher representative or management body groups. It certainly shouldn’t happen to those who the Oireachtas voted these resources for.

It can never happen again, and we would ask this committee to secure assurances from the Secretary General of the Department of Education on how disability stakeholders are engaged with into the future. The UNCRPD is clear that disabled voices must be at the heart of decision making processes which affect our community - whether by commission or omission what has taken place is totally unacceptable and has led to a communications crisis which has caused significant stress to families and indeed appears to have contributed to a return to soft barriers as families report schools telling them that they can no longer be assured of a place in September or ongoing participation in mainstream as a result.

Indeed, this communication has not only caused confusion it has at times been a textbook case of contradiction with the Department’s new circular appearing to totally contradict brand new NCSE policy advice on inclusive education - suggesting that the growth in special classes and schools is a grounds or justification for removing complex needs from the modelling into the future. Additionally, we are told school level data cannot be used and yet just a few weeks ago the Department was arguing the same data was acceptable for school staff to conduct a statutory educational assessment as part of the AON process

It is for these serious reasons we have asked the Department to pause the SET allocation model for real consultation and to guarantee no child who needs support with lose out. It is why such a huge number of people have completed the short survey our three organisations commissioned.

We are told a pause is not possible. That the data the department has won’t allow for the use of the existing SET allocation framework. That there is no other way. That to us sounds like a case of asking children to conform to a broken system instead of creating an effective, child-centred approach into the future.

Finally, we would urge the Committee to closely examine the proposed “Exceptional Review Process” which the Department is relying on to assure families that no child will go without. We are not satisfied that this process will be inclusive or timely but even more significantly we are concerned it is an unbudgeted, uncosted appeals process. Nothing in our experience would lead us to believe that a child’s needs will be prioritised over budgetary constraints, in a system which lacks transparency for families by creating a blame game between schools and the department. Any allocation model which is to succeed must have a credible appeals process and must be accompanied by very strong safeguards to ensure the allocation reaches those who most need it

Thank you for your time and I look forward to your questions.

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY: This statement may be updated to reflect new information and our survey findings prior to Tuesday’s hearing.