

Ms Aileen Fallon
Clerk to the Committee (Work Programme)
Special Committee on Covid-19 Response
House of the Oireachtas
Leinster House
Dublin 2
D02 XR20

29th June 2020

INVITATION TO MAKE WRITTEN SUBMISSION

Dear Aileen,

With reference to your letter dated 17th June 2020 requesting a written submission on the topic of people with disabilities and the disability sector.

Please find attached the written submission as requested on behalf of the CEO, Ms. Teresa Griffin.

If any questions arise, I can be contacted by email or by phone, as detailed below.

Yours Sincerely,



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JUNE 29, 2020

WRITTEN SUBMISSION ON PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND THE DISABILITY SECTOR

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON COVID-19 RESPONSE

TERESA GRIFFIN, CEO (NCSE)

1. Introduction

1.1 The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is committed to promoting a society where children and adults with special educational needs receive an education that enables them to achieve their potential. The NCSE welcomes the decision of the COVID-19 Committee to consider the impact of Covid-19 on people with disabilities and the disability sector.

1.2 The NCSE has a number of roles including:

- Supporting schools to enable students with special educational needs achieve better outcomes and ensure a range of educational placement options are available. We do this through providing advice and supports to schools, as well as providing advice and professional learning for teachers e.g. 16,511 teachers were engaged in professional development and learning at NCSE seminars and Whole Staff seminars during 2019. In addition, our Visiting Teachers provided additional support to almost 1,300 blind or visually impaired children and 5,584 Deaf or hard of hearing children – in their homes or schools last year.
- Providing a research programme that identifies key issues, emerging trends and an evidence base to support the work of the NCSE and achievement of better outcomes for students with special educational needs – some 27 independent research reports are on our website covering a range of issues.
- Providing independent, expert and evidence-informed policy and practice advice to the Minister for Education and Skills.

1.3 The NCSE does not have any role in advising the DES in respect of matters to do with public health considerations as they may arise in schools.

2. The importance of education for students with disabilities

2.1 Access to education is of great importance for all children's development. The developmental and academic needs of any student may be considered as comprising those needs that are:

- a) Common to all students
- b) Common to students who share a disability or condition
- c) Unique to each student.

- 2.2 NCSE has examined the literature on ways or measures to help adults with disabilities to access, participate in and progress or move on from different types of education and training (2013)¹. The types of education and training options available include - higher education; further education; adult and continuing education; vocational education; and vocational rehabilitation. Findings were identified that apply to specific stages of the journey for students with disabilities including accessing the course, participating in it and progressing or moving on from the course. Training and using specialised staff to support adults with disabilities in all stages along with consulting with people with disabilities were key findings in this report.
- 2.3 Over 7,900 students attend special schools and over 8,400 students attend special classes. Over 167,000 students with learning needs are supported in mainstream schools by 13,400 special education teachers. Approximately 36,500 students with additional care needs are supported by SNAs in mainstream schools, special classes and special schools.
- 2.4 Students with special educational needs present with a wide variety of needs. Some students have complex medical needs, others have physical or sensory disabilities, others have emotional and/or behavioural needs, others have a specific learning disability, and many have general learning disabilities. Many require intimate care; need assistance with eating, drinking, mobility, and so on. Often medication is required. For many with behaviours of concern, very specific interventions may be required – often on a one-to-one basis.
- 2.5 Education – whether in mainstream classes, special classes or in a special school – with access to qualified teachers, individualised education and support plans including transition plans, differentiated education, appropriate supports from SNAs and/or technology plays a vital role in enabling students with disabilities to develop social skills, life skills, academic skills and independence. The NCSE supports as full a re-opening of all schools as is safe, in order to ensure that these needs are met.
- 2.6 NCSE is currently supporting SOLAS in its conduction of an evaluation of specialist training provision for persons with a disability. The purpose of the evaluation is to generate evidence-based conclusions and propose recommendations about the quality, effectiveness, on-going relevance and overall value of vocational training that is currently delivered by specialist training providers for persons with a disability and the integration of this training with the wider Further Education and Training (FET) provision by Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

¹ https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Report_15_Adult_Ed_09_04_14.pdf

An advisory group met for first time in Nov 2019. Since then engagement has taken place with ETBs and key members of the advisory group, including NCSE, in order to gather data. Further progress has been delayed due to current crisis, and the need to ensure robust processes are in place, e.g. capturing voice of learners, moving forward is essential.

- 2.7 NCSE is also supporting the Department of Health, the HSE and the Department of Education in finalising plans to re-establish vital non-Covid community and social care services including the resumption of adult day services in the current environment, and in line with public health guidance.

3. Impact of extended breaks on learning

- 3.1 Research has indicated that students learn best when instruction is continuous. Long absences break the rhythm of instruction, lead to forgetting, and require giving significant time to review material when students return to school (Cooper et al. (1996)². The NCSE (2015)³ also observed the potential for regression in students' learning. Research showed students with significant intellectual disabilities can experience regression in learning and also a slower rate of recoupment with long absences. These students may be unable to store concepts in their long-term memory in a way that can be easily recalled. The amount of instruction they need to recover or "recoup" their abilities may be longer than other students need, and they may need additional instruction to catch up.
- 3.2 The impact of lockdown and social distancing/public health advice on socialisation and social-emotional well-being is significant, particularly for students with disabilities. These students benefit greatly from the structured and supportive environment that schools provide. The human interaction that is encouraging and affirming becomes remote when school is closed.
- 3.3 To the extent that the home environment impacts learning, students who experience greater declines in educational measures over a summer can be expected to show similar declines over a long pandemic-related closure. The effectiveness of measures to continue the educational process, such as home schooling or distance-learning, depends on the extent to which the child is able to study in a home environment. We know that many students with

² Cooper, Harris Allen, Ashley Batts. Extending the School Day or School Year: A Systematic Review of Research (1985-2009) Review of Educational Research; 2010, Vol. 80 Issue 3

³ National Council Special Education (NCSE) (2015), Policy Advice Paper 5: Autism Spectrum Disorder

disabilities are not independent learners, parents generally are not qualified teachers and homes may not have access to the assistive technology or expertise required to support students with complex learning needs. It must be assumed that many students will have experienced significant regression during this time.

- 3.4 The NCSE strongly supports the DES decision to have a Summer Education Programme this year. We especially welcome the Minister's decision to expand eligibility to include students with disabilities other than a severe/profound general learning disability, or autism.
- 3.5 This provision will be an essential tool in assisting students' transition back into formal learning and enable them to start recouping lost skills and knowledge. As the provision is available to all students in special schools and special classes, it may also assist those students with the greatest level of need in transitioning to higher, further and continuing education, training and rehabilitation. Significant anxiety is a feature for many students with a disability. Supporting their emotional needs will be essential to assist the process of adjustment and re-engagement with learning.

4. Impact on Family

- 4.1 A return to school or a transition to another setting is essential to enable students with disabilities return to learning. It is also essential for families and carers. Many students with a disability are completely dependent on adult assistance – to eat, drink, take medication, and be mobile. Some have very severe behaviours of concern. Many need therapeutic and clinical interventions such as physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and nursing support.
- 4.2 School and access to disability services were an essential part of the normal family rhythm. Schools educate children, but for families of children with very significant complex needs, school time also provides an essential space for families and carers to do the normal activities taken for granted by the rest of society.
- 4.3 These past few months have been difficult for many families but for some families of children with complex needs, this time has been very challenging. The summer provision will provide students with an early opportunity to recoup some lost skills and re-engage with learning, but it will also help families.

5. Transition back to school / disability services

- 5.1 Going back to school / disability service after the usual holidays can be difficult for some students and especially for some students with a disability. Others really look forward to the routine and structure. This year, given the extensive break, students may need more time to re-adjust to school / disability service.
- 5.2 School management and all staff will need to engage in a transition process supporting students to re-engage with learning and social activities and help them adapt to any new routines and changes in the school environment. Schools management and staff are very familiar with the School Improvement Process which is embedded in the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) Process⁴. These tools can greatly assist in planning the return to school.
- 5.3 NCSE is aware of the need for teachers and SNAs to be supported in this process and we are working with colleagues in the DES to develop resources and supports to meet this need including developing a suite of resources and supports for young people with complex needs under the title of 'Getting Back to What We Know' to support the 'Summer Programme'.

6. Transition Planning

- 6.1 The need for structure to be brought to the transition process has been highlighted across all of the NCSE Policy Advice papers. NCSE recommends that a transition plan should be drawn up in a timely manner for students. At post-primary, NCSE noted that school professionals should begin the process of transition planning for students in junior cycle and parents should be facilitated to become active participants in the process. The transition plan should clearly outline the arrangements to be put in place to facilitate a smooth and efficient transition for the student concerned, including arrangements for a review of the new placement. Roles of relevant personnel should be clearly agreed and stipulated as part of this plan. There was recognition that the transition process was often a critical time for a student. These transition plans will need to be reviewed and updated in the context of recent school closure.

⁴ <http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/>

- 6.2 It was also acknowledged that where a student is transitioning to a new setting, the transition process is more complicated, as the student has no prior relationship with this new setting. Students leaving the school system and transitioning to higher education or adult day services often visit their new services providers, practice travelling to the new locations etc in the last months of the school term. These opportunities have been curtailed because of COVID 19 related restrictions. Students will need to have some opportunities to build a relationship with their new setting.
- 6.3 In 2016, NCSE conducted a study of the experiences of post primary students with special educational needs⁵. The most important key lesson from the literature review and from the students who participated in the study was that the students want to be involved in key decisions about their education and support arrangements suggesting that planning needs to be more student-centred. Those involved in transition planning for students need to consider that the person with a disability should be empowered to engage in their own plans and to advocate on their own behalf.
- 6.4 In May 2009, NCSE conducted a study to explore the access and progression experiences of students with special educational needs moving from compulsory education to further and higher education with a view to identifying practices and policies to ensure improved access and smooth progression. School support in accessing further and higher education was highly valued by students and they were generally positive about their experiences of the pathway to, and experiences of, further and higher education. The impact of school closure on young adults and the anxieties of young adults leaving a school setting without the normal transition process in place to help them transition to further and higher education will need to be considered. The closing date for Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) was March 1st prior to the school closure on March 12th. However, students may still need support in understanding the implications of their DARE application.
- 6.5 In June 2017, The National Disability Authority and the NCSE⁶ conducted a qualitative study of how well young people with disabilities are prepared for life after school. Employers believed that young people with disabilities received too much support in the latter stages of school. This lessened their capacity to work independently and to socially interact with their work

⁵ <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/NCSE-A-Study-of-the-Experiences-of-Post-Primary-Students-with-Special-Ed-Needs.pdf>

⁶ <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/NDA-NCSE-Young-People-with-Disabilities-Preparedness-Report-v-final-publication-20180528.pdf>

colleagues. Employers did acknowledge, however, that some of the issues encountered by young people with disabilities could be applicable to any new employee, such as, job fit/correct skill for the role. Peer and social support among students should be enabled and resumed to support valuable social contact for students taking account of the public health advice.

7. Vulnerable students

- 7.1 Transition to a new setting (higher, further and continuing education, training and rehabilitation in the Covid-19 context may be extremely difficult for medically vulnerable students. For some students and young people, the risk is higher especially for those who have a general learning disability along with an underlying medical condition. If it is not possible for these students to physically attend, they will need to be provided with the means to continue to receive an appropriate education, personalised and well linked to therapeutic interventions. This also applies to those vulnerable students in the school sector.
- 7.2 Many special schools and disability services are already expert in matters of public health as they have tremendous experience in educating medically fragile students. The NCSE is concerned that higher and further education institutions and other schools will need guidance and support in this area as a greater number of students, many of whom do not have additional educational needs, are now vulnerable as a result of underlying medical conditions. Supporting the needs of these young people while maintaining social distancing will be challenging.

8. Social distancing

- 8.1 Social distancing and students with disabilities
 - 8.1.1 Social distancing is not a usual feature of life and some students, particularly those with learning disabilities, will need a lot of support to understand and engage in social distancing in whatever setting they are in. They will need to be explicitly taught the steps of social distancing.
 - 8.2.2 There are some students who rely on close physical contact and/or the physical or verbal support of others to navigate the physical environment and for whom social distancing cannot

therefore be practiced all the time (e.g. some students using wheelchairs, students with visual impairment, students who need assistance with eating or intimate care.). Such arrangements will need to form part of each student's support plan and transition plans will need to be updated accordingly.

8.2 Social Distancing and FET, Third Level and Adult Services

8.2.1 Third level and FET have 'access' departments that support students with disabilities. These departments will need to develop guidelines and policies to ensure the continuing provision of their services while maintaining social distancing in line with public health advice.

8.2.2 While the move to on-line teaching, assessment and feedback in such a short timeframe has been well managed, it is essential that third level institutions and FET continue to cater for all needs of all students including students with disabilities including appropriate access to assistive technology.

8.2.3 NCSE welcomes the HSE 'Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services' and will be supporting the HSE, DOH and DES in its implementation.

8.3 Social Distancing and Special Education Teachers (SET)

8.3.1 Over 13,400 teachers are employed specifically to provide additional and targeted teaching support for students with special educational needs. These SETs are a wonderful resource and will significantly assist schools to support some 167,000 students with additional needs in their well-being and re-engagement with learning.

8.3.2 Some SETs support a cluster of schools i.e. they may work in a number of schools. This may need careful consideration from a public health perspective in a pandemic situation.

8.3.3 Some schools have dedicated SET rooms. Other schools use any available space, including corridors, to facilitate small group and individual SET teaching. Guidelines will be required to facilitate schools continuing to safely provide small group and individual SET teaching while adhering to any required hygiene/cleaning and social distancing regulations.

8.4 Social Distancing and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs)

8.4.1 SNAs support students with additional care needs. Many students require support with complex medical needs, complex behavioural needs and intimate care needs. Some students require movement/sensory breaks from their classes and SNAs accompany these students to play areas/sensory areas/quiet spaces, as required. Other students require support with social/ emotional and behavioural needs. Some SNAs can support a number of different students within different class groupings in a school.

8.4.2 Some of this work can be done in a socially distanced situation. However, much of it cannot. Schools will need practical advice and support in the context of managing these situations safely for both the student and SNA.

8.5 Social Distancing and Transport

8.5.1 Students often live considerable distances from special school or schools with special classes. Special school transport arrangements – collecting the student from their home and bringing them to and from school – are an essential support for students and their families.

8.5.2 The NCSE considers that students travelling to special schools and special classes must continue to be provided with this essential service as well as for students who attend their local school but cannot avail of the usual school bus. The non-availability of school transport would have a significant impact on families where parents need to drop other children to different schools/ commute to their own work places etc.

9. Access to In School Therapy Services

9.1 NCSE is managing an early years and in school therapy project in Kildare, South Dublin and Wicklow. This project was established in 2018 and was developed by the Departments of Education and Skills, Children and Youth Affairs, and Health with 19 Speech and Language and 12 Occupational therapists assigned to the project by the HSE. The project provided for the delivery of speech and language and occupational therapy in 75 early years and 75 school settings. The aims of the project are to provide early intervention in a school setting, develop greater links between educators and therapists, and provide professional training and guidance for school and pre-school staff and parents in supporting students' therapy and developmental needs.

- 9.2 As a result of the COVID 19 pandemic the majority of these therapists were re-assigned in mid-March 2020 back to HSE services, mainly to assist in swabbing and contact tracing. Currently, there is not clarity as to whether these services will continue in school and early year settings when they reopen. Students and teachers previously supported by these therapists may need additional supports to reconnect with learning if therapeutic supports are no longer available in schools.
- 9.3 The NCSE is concerned that the continued need for therapists within the HSE may prevent this project continuing in the next school year. This would be a very retrograde development.

10. Impact on NCSE services

10.1 Teacher Professional Learning

- 10.1.1 Delivery of continuing Professional Development (CPD) is a significant challenge as a result of COVID-19 public health restrictions. Teacher professional learning seminars and support visits for teachers during March – May 2020 were cancelled.
- 10.1.2 Once it became clear that schools were going to remain closed but that education had to continue to be provided, NCSE immediately began to develop a suite of supports for parents and teachers. These resources, developed by our Advisors, Visiting Teachers and School Inclusion Model staff, proved very popular with both parents and teachers. They are available on the NCSE website www.ncse.ie
- 10.1.3 Although these were well-received resources, they were not available to homes which did not have the appropriate technology. Even where homes had access to laptops, these devices may not have been adapted to the needs of their students with disabilities. In the event that schools do not fully open, it will be necessary to ensure that the appropriate technological supports and equipment are made available to families – along with training in their use – to allow for an appropriate education.
- 10.1.4 Our In-School support services and Visiting Teacher services were delivered by telephone, Skype and other online platforms. Two seminars were delivered online in late May / early June 2020.

10.1.5 We are currently developing a programme of CPD that will be capable of being delivered in-school or online, or a mixture of both – depending on public health advice. However, a very significant 5 day TEACCH programme will not be delivered in 2020 due to travel restrictions on staff in North Carolina University.

10.1.6 In finalising our programme of support for schools for next year, NCSE is considering:

- Learning approaches:
 - An e-Learning strategy is being developed for CPD including seminars, workshops, communities of practice, and in-school support
 - An e-Learning platform to support virtual delivery of seminars has been identified and trialled
- School capacity and priority needs for continuing CPD:
 - Prioritisation of CPD to be delivered virtually from Sept-Dec 2020 to support at both primary and post-primary level:
 - CPD to support teachers in newly established autism classes, including a modified version of the traditional four day intensive training course
 - Understanding students with different additional needs e.g. introduction to deafness, introduction to down syndrome
 - Supporting school leaders and teachers in relation to implementing the teacher allocation model
 - Supporting inclusion
 - CPD seminars to support student behaviours of concern and social-emotional well-being

10.1.7 The NCSE is also working with other departments and agencies such as HSE, DOH, DCYA and NEPS to support students with special educational needs and their teachers.