

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM ACHAINÍOCHA ÓN BPOBAL

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC PETITIONS

Dé Céadaoin, 19 Meitheamh 2019

Wednesday, 19 June 2019

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Pat Buckley,	Lynn Ruane.
Shane Cassells,	
Martin Heydon,	
Eugene Murphy.	

Teachta/Deputy Sean Sherlock sa Chathaoir/IN THE CHAIR

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: We have received apologies from Deputy Dara Murphy and Senator Buttimer. The usual provisos apply regarding the use of mobile phones. I propose we now go into private session to deal with some matters before resuming in public session.

The joint committee went into public session at 1.40 p.m. and resumed in public session at 1.50 p.m.

Senator Lynn Ruane took the Chair.

Mandatory Teacher Training on Spectrum Disorders: Discussion

Acting Chairman (Senator Lynn Ruane): I remind members, delegates and those in the Public Gallery to turn off their mobile phones as they interfere with the sound and broadcasting systems. I welcome everyone here today and thank them for appearing before the committee. The witnesses have been invited here to discuss Petition No. P00011/18 from Ms Josephine Boles. The petition concerns mandatory training for Irish mainstream schoolteachers on the needs of children with spectrum disorders.

Before inviting the witnesses to address the meeting, I draw their attention to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I also advise the witnesses that their opening statement and any other documents they have submitted to the committee may be published on its website after this meeting. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

The witnesses' presentation has already been circulated to members. I remind them that their presentation should not exceed ten minutes in duration. I invite Mr. Jim Mulkerrins, principal officer at the Department of Education and Skills, to make his opening statement. We are also joined by Mr. Eddie Ward, principal officer with the special education section of the Department of Education and Skills, and Mr. Adam Harris from AsIAm. I will call on members to ask questions when the presentations have concluded. I invite Mr. Mulkerrins to give his opening statement.

Mr. Jim Mulkerrins: I am a principal officer representing the teacher education policy section in the Department of Education and Skills. I am joined by Mr. Eddie Ward, principal officer with responsibility for special education section in the Department. Ms Madeline Hickey of the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, is in the Gallery.

We welcome this opportunity to appear before the committee today to discuss the issues raised in Petition No. P00011/18 regarding mandatory training on spectrum disorders for teachers. To assist the committee we have provided a briefing note for circulation to members for today's meeting. That note provides an overview of policy developments and provision in the area of inclusive education and forms the basis of our presentation. I note that the focus of the petition is primarily on the need to educate the educators. This aim is fully shared by the Department and I hope to demonstrate today that there have been substantial developments in recent years. This has occurred in both initial teacher education, ITE, and in continual professional development for serving teachers with the aim of supporting teachers' knowledge and understanding of the specific needs of children with special educational needs, including those with spectrum disorders including dyspraxia, sensory processing disorders and dyslexia as well as autism and other spectrum disorders.

I note also that the petition suggests that the desired objective could be achieved by making training mandatory. In his response to this committee on this issue in May, the Secretary General of the Department advised that inclusive education, including the education of children with special educational needs, is already a mandatory part of the standards for initial teacher education. The Teaching Council's accreditation process for initial teacher education programmes is the mechanism through which the council can satisfy itself that its standards are being met through a given ITE programme.

The Secretary General also noted that, at present, no mandatory professional learning is required of teachers after they have completed initial teacher education and induction. In this context, section 33 of the Teaching Council Act provides that the Teaching Council may make renewal of registration subject to having completed an accredited programme of continuing professional development, CPD. To inform and support the development of Cosán, the national framework for teachers' learning, the Teaching Council implemented a comprehensive, multi-layered consultation process in 2014 and 2015. Some 5,000 teachers contributed to the process, and the feedback was rich and helpful in informing the drafting of the framework, the purpose of which is to ensure there is a mechanism through which there could be further consideration of mandatory CPD. Findings from the process identified that teachers are very interested in opportunities to engage in high-quality professional learning activities that are relevant to their needs and those of their pupils and that enhance teaching and learning in their classrooms. Allied with this deep interest in professional learning is a strong interest in personal development and in the types of collaborative learning and professional conversations that take place in schools on formal and informal bases. The findings are confirmed by the strong demand for professional learning opportunities provided by the Department through its funded professional development services including the professional development service for teachers, the junior cycle team, the national induction programme and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, along with other professional learning opportunities, about which I will speak further.

In considering the question of mandatory CPD, it is important to consider any evidence to indicate that a mandatory approach to CPD would enhance teachers' practice and ensure that teachers are taking account of the diversity and complexity of learners' needs, especially in a special education context. The evidence gathered thus far by the Teaching Council has led it to the conclusion that ongoing learning by teachers should be encouraged and incentivised to ensure authentic engagement in a way that is sustainable and impactful. Through the Cosán development process, the council is exploring with the profession how this can be done. The Department will be guided by advice supported by appropriate evidence when considering the broader question of linking teacher registration to the completion of accredited courses. At this

time, the Department is of the view there is much more work to be done before such a move should be considered. In the material provided for the committee, we have included details of provision for professional development and, therefore, I do not propose to list the entire provision in my remarks. Nevertheless, I point members to the supports available to teachers through the NCSE. The council's remit is to develop schools' capacity to support students with special educational needs, including those with spectrum disorders, and to promote a continuum of educational provision that is inclusive and responsive. The NCSE is responsible for the allocation of additional teaching and care supports to schools to support children with special educational needs. In addition, the NCSE support services provide additional professional development supports for teachers of children with special educational needs. In this way, the NCSE fulfils a vital role in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in the area of special needs provision. CPD and other in-school supports provided by the NCSE are designed to enable teachers to adopt evidence based approaches to teaching students in special and mainstream classes and special schools. The focus of professional development is on enhancing teachers' understanding of the nature of the special educational need, including autism and other spectrum disorders, and the learning and teaching implications for each individual student and teacher; enhancing teachers' use of a variety of interventions and teaching approaches for students based on the assessed needs of the students and taking account of empirical research; and enabling teachers to assess, plan and implement effective and differentiated teaching strategies with a view to meeting the needs of students through individualised planning, which I will address further.

To support children with autism, the NCSE support service and the Middletown Centre for Autism operate co-operatively on the provision of CPD for teachers in the area of autism spectrum disorders. The Middletown centre, based in County Armagh, is a joint North-South initiative established in 2007 with funding provided by the then Department of Education and Science, along with the Department of Education in Northern Ireland. Its purpose is to support the promotion of excellence in the development and co-ordination of education services to children and young people with autism. There is also a range of other Department-funded CPD supports provided through other support services and delivered throughout the national network of 21 whole-time and nine part-time education centres, as well as in primary and post-primary schools throughout the country. When designing CPD for delivery to teachers, all support services must take account of the needs of all learners, including students with spectrum disorders and all students with special educational needs.

I thank members for their attention. We are happy to answer any questions they may have. We look forward to engagement with Mr. Harris. It will not be the first time and I am sure we will have a positive discussion.

Acting Chairman (Senator Lynn Ruane): I thank Mr. Mulkerrins. As Mr. Ward does not wish to comment, I call Mr. Harris.

Mr. Adam Harris: I thank the committee for the invitation to address it on the issue of mandatory autism training for teachers, which has featured in every submission that AsIAM has made to the Department of Education and Skills in the past five years. Whether we are discussing the need for additional autism classes, the special needs assistant, SNA, scheme, reduced timetables, better outcomes for autistic students or children out of school, the issue of teacher training cannot but be central. It is no surprise to us that it has been brought to the attention of this committee by concerned parents and we congratulate Ms Boles and others who took the initiative to get the matter on the committee's agenda.

By way of context, I am the founder and CEO of AsIAM, Ireland's national autism charity.

We will be five years old this year. We endeavour to bring about an autism-friendly Ireland, that is, a society where every autistic person is respected and accepted as they are and has the opportunity to participate in every aspect of Irish life. Central to this aim is an inclusive education system that universally respects and values autistic students and their unique way of communicating, understanding and interacting with the world. It is important that we treat it as an accessibility issue. In the context of the discussion about mandatory training for mainstream teachers, we must recognise that the right to access mainstream education is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

We are at something of a crossroads in respect of autism access to education in Ireland. A total of 86% of autistic students enrolled in school now attend a mainstream school, which is a sea change compared with the norm perhaps 20 years ago. As a young child, I spent the first three years of my education in a special school due to a complete lack of support or knowledge of autism in the mainstream school system at the time. It is clear to us, however, that while the quantity of children attending mainstream school has vastly increased, the quality of their experiences is greatly varied and significant change is required to ensure that every autistic student has a positive, empowering school experience. Sadly, that is not currently the case. Every week, my team deals with cases of autistic children being disciplined because of their autism and how they may interact with others or due to high levels of anxiety. We also deal with children who do not have a school place or are on reduced timetables, often because of a lack of suitable teacher training, and a sense of rejection when a child is not understood, respected and celebrated within a school environment.

To include autistic students meaningfully, there are numerous essential ingredients. Schools must be adequately resourced, that is, they must have access to the staff numbers, capitation and clinical expertise they require to include students universally, a point which is repeatedly raised. The environment of schools must be autism friendly. When we consider accessibility, we often think of wheelchair ramps and lifts but we often overlook the sensory needs of autistic students in busy, loud and often congested mainstream school environments. Even buildings currently being constructed lack autism proofing in their design. School policies must be autism proofed. Policies that, for example, deal with discipline, assessment and enrolment cannot remain the same as before the introduction of autism inclusion in school. They must reflect the specific support needs of a cohort of students who may need to do things in a substantially different way to get through stressful school days, which affects the culture of schools, including the language we use to describe autistic students. Everyone in a school community must be informed and respectful of autism. This includes peers, parents, non-teaching staff and members of the boards of management. Perhaps most critically, all teachers within a school must understand and accept their role in teaching students on the autism spectrum and must be able to access whatever training they need to provide a differentiated, accessible education for such students.

I have outlined these different issues because it is right that we understand meeting the needs of autistic students as something of an ecosystem as opposed to any one action. Although we are in attendance to speak specifically about teacher training, it is important we also acknowledge the need for the State to do more to support schools. For those who may not be very familiar with autism, it is perhaps useful to provide a short explanation of the condition and why, as a result, students may need teachers to be further equipped to support them. Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that relates to how a person communicates and interacts with others and how they experience the world around them. In practical terms, this means that autistic students may communicate in a different way from others. This might include using alternative communication systems as opposed to speech, understanding language very literally or

not using facial expression or body language in the same way as other people. A student might see detail as opposed to the bigger picture. A student might not be able to fill in the blanks in social situations as other people can. If a student perceives his or her environment very differently from others, this may lead to sensory overload and significant discomfort. When these issues are misunderstood, it is easy for breakdowns in communication to occur, frustration to develop and a lack of understanding to become evident. Unfortunately, we often take a deficit approach to autism. If we accept that autistic people sometimes need to do things differently, we can unlock the potential of students whose insight is different from others and who often excel in areas in which they are most interested.

Given that one in 65 students in our education system has a diagnosis of autism and that autism is a vast spectrum, with every autistic person having different levels of need and different challenges and strengths, it is easy to see that every teacher will encounter many autistic students in his or her career and will need to have the capacity to adjust his or her pedagogy and classroom environment accordingly. We can think about this from an accessibility point of view. If a teacher does not have these skills, the school is not accessible for students. Many teachers are already taking action in this regard. AsIAM has been inundated with requests from schools to access training and talks during Croke Park agreement hours. The Middletown Centre for Autism is playing a vital role in providing a range of high-quality free training to teachers across the island of Ireland. We are lucky to meet incredible teachers every week who have learnt about autism through their own initiative, and are now playing a vital role in ensuring their students can fully participate and succeed. However, *ad hoc* efforts like this are simply not enough. This cannot be optional because inclusion is not optional.

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 is 15 years old. If we consider this in the context of a student's journey through school, we will understand that a generation of students is now ageing out of the school system. It is regrettable that not enough has been done in that time to ensure every teacher knows and understands autism. Autism education does not constitute a compulsory element of initial teacher education. There is no mandatory training for existing teachers. Many teachers who are assigned to autism classes have little or no training on the condition prior to taking up their posts. This is a recipe for disaster because it places students and teachers in an entirely unacceptable position. Unfortunately, many students are being failed today as a result. I am sad to report that we hear each week from students who have fallen out of school or are attending school irregularly. A key factor in these cases is teachers who are not equipped to meet the needs of autistic students. This must stop.

I would like to make some practical recommendations to the joint committee. Autism training must form a compulsory requirement of initial teacher education, in line with recommendations already made to the Department and the Teaching Council by the National Council for Special Education. As I have explained, autism is counter-intuitive in many respects. As a result, it requires teachers to have a discrete knowledge of the condition. Autism training can improve their overall teaching skills. Mary Immaculate College in Thurles has taken the first steps in this direction. I encourage the committee to learn more about its rationale for making this decision and to encourage all other initial teacher education institutes to follow suit.

There is also a need for a national programme of training and continuous professional development for all teachers in autism and other disabilities. We need to get beyond the concept of autism being the purview of any one teacher. It must be the responsibility of every teacher in every school. We welcome the similar calls that have been made by teacher unions. We urge the Department to commence consultation with stakeholders on what such a training pro-

gramme should include and how it should be conducted. While I recognise that an evidence base is needed in this regard, it stands to reason that if a teacher does not have the knowledge to meet the needs of an autistic student, that student would be better served if the teacher were to acquire that knowledge. That is pretty intuitive.

Our next recommendation relates to the range of offering. It continues to be the case that a significant cohort of students who need autism classes or special school places cannot access them. Greater consideration must be given to the voices of parents when decisions are being made about school placements. Teachers in special classes must have advanced training and significant expertise. When we talk about training, we must remember that the people best placed to provide insight into their access needs and strengths are autistic students. In our work with young people, we have found that when students are not consulted on how they are supported, this reduces their self-esteem and their openness to accepting help. The voice of students must be built into the individualised planning process for autism because it is true that someone who has met one autistic student has met one autistic student.

I would like to highlight a positive example of partnership between educational stakeholders and our organisation. AsIAM, in partnership with the joint managerial body and the Irish Primary Principals Network, has developed a reflective online tool for teachers and schools to explore their own practice regarding autism. This will include three hours of free online training for every teacher in the country, aimed at a whole-school level of understanding. We will pilot this programme with 200 schools in September. Schools and teachers are often asked to be autism-friendly without a clear or fair picture of what this looks like. We hope this tool and training will help to make that relationship attainable. Teachers can massively improve the lives of autistic students. The teachers I had in school made such a difference in my life. The profession is already doing a lot, but we must put in place supports and standards to ensure inclusive practice is a universal reality in our education system.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I welcome our guests. I am delighted to participate in this discussion with the stakeholders. Parents approach Deputies and Senators on a weekly basis to look for supports for their children. It is commonplace and is becoming more commonplace. I welcome this discussion. I have two questions. What is Mr. Mulkerrins's assessment of what we have heard from Mr. Harris? Where can common ground be found? I ask Mr. Mulkerrins to share some of the Department's experiences of hearing from parents and boards of management about the supports that are needed. There is a conversational style of open and frank debate at this committee. I would appreciate it if Mr. Mulkerrins could address some of the points that have been made by Mr. Harris.

When Mr. Harris, who is very welcome, was speaking about autistic students at the beginning of his presentation, he mentioned that the quality of their experiences is very different across the board. Has his organisation assessed the demographics of that? Are these differences geographically based? Has an effort been made to drill down into the reasons for this different quality of experience? Mr. Harris mentioned teacher training as well. He also stated that teachers must understand and respect their roles. He mentioned that one in 65 students in our education system has a diagnosis of autism, which certainly stacks up from our perspective in light of the experiences we have on a weekly basis. He further stated that each student who presents with a diagnosis has different levels of need and different challenges and strengths. Therein lies the problem in terms of the requirements for teachers and the challenges they face. Mr. Harris spoke about the training required by teachers to acquire the different set of skills that is needed. Can common ground be reached with the Department as it seeks to face the chal-

lenges that have been outlined by Mr. Harris and with which his organisation is dealing? We can see from our work that this is a very complex area. We are not trained to deal with it. Mr. Harris's organisation, the Department and society in general want to see a far more welcoming attitude.

I disagree with the suggestion in the petition that our educational system has not changed much since it was introduced during the Industrial Revolution. I can see the education system that my children are enjoying in primary school. It is far more welcoming, inclusive and open than the system I was brought up in. It welcomes all children's strengths and weaknesses in the classroom setting. The petition is unfair in that respect. I would appreciate a response to the questions I have asked.

Mr. Jim Mulkerrins: The Deputy raised a number of issues and asked me to respond in general to the points made by Mr. Harris. I would be happy to do so. I will begin by making a couple of technical points. The petition relates to the experiences of children with spectrum disorders. It does not refer specifically to autism. I do not want to get into the personal details of the petitioner's child. Our comments have a broader focus than autism. I acknowledge that autism is the avenue we are likely to follow because it accounts for the overwhelming majority of children with spectrum disorders within schools. I am of the view that we can agree on this.

I acknowledge Mr. Harris's point about AsIAM being inundated with requests for training. I welcome that level of demand, to be frank, because it speaks to the willingness of the teaching profession to seek out and access opportunities for learning. The experience I would like to outline speaks enormously about the value of what has been traditionally been referred to as CPD. Mr. Harris pointed to the NCSE's recommendation on mandatory training for teachers teaching children with autism. In 2013 and 2015, the NCSE recommended that there should be mandatory CPD. In that context, work is under way at the moment both within the Teaching Council, the NCSE, and collaboratively between the two, to develop the framework for CPD. We would all agree that it would not be very effective for the Department to simply issue a circular from next Monday or 1 September saying it would be mandatory for teachers to undertake training on autism. One has to develop the training and ensure the training is appropriate, recognises the needs and contexts of children and also that it is capable of being translated into better practice within the school. One then needs a framework for the evaluation of that. Otherwise, it would be meaningless as well. We fully acknowledge that there is work to be done in that regard. The Department's concern is that before we get into the space of deciding that there should be a mandatory component on CPD that we would have the evidence base to underpin the decision and that is just not there yet, but work is under way.

I also acknowledge the point made by Mr. Harris that Dr. Finn Ó Murchú, head of education in Mary Immaculate College on the St. Patrick's Campus in Thurles has introduced autism in the initial teacher education training courses. That is one good example of practice. Dr. Ó Murchú has a background in working with the special education section of the Department and continues to inform it of best practice in this area. He also had a significant engagement with the Middletown Centre for Autism. There is a wealth of inter-agency activity, engagement and consultation happening in this space.

I wish to make a broader point, namely, that we have probably come from a difficult enough period perhaps 15 or 20 years ago when there was little in the way of additional provision and inclusion was not the language of the education system. In a very short period, the level of resources provided to support the inclusion of children in education has increased exponentially. During my time in the area of special education, the entire budget has increased from

approximately €880 million to €1.8 billion. Such was the commitment of the Government and the Department to support children's education, and specifically the education of children with special educational needs, that it was done over the ten years of the worst economic depression that the country has ever experienced. That has seen a significant increase in the number of additional teachers to support special education. We are now at in excess of 15,000 teachers and we just reached 16,000 SNAs from a very low base in the mid-1990s of approximately 300. Approximately one third of the adult population within schools is specifically related now to special education, particularly when one adds in the number of teachers teaching special classes and the number of teachers who teach in special schools. The investment is significant. That has encouraged a significant increase in the number of children who are being included. We are working at breakneck pace to try to ensure that those teachers are supported in order to ensure that there is best practice within schools.

We acknowledge that at a time of substantial change there will always be examples where one will find that the best things are not necessarily happening or where decisions within schools are not necessarily the best decisions in the context of, for example, the assignment of teachers to special classes or the assignment of teachers with special needs responsibilities. It is around those concerns that the NCSE has made most of its recommendations on training and qualification structures. The recommendations are now being actively interrogated in the context of the consultation and development work that the NCSE and the Teaching Council are doing. The Teaching Council's exercise, which I referred to in my opening remarks, on engagement with the teaching profession has satisfied it and we in the Department are convinced that there is a ready openness on the part of the teachers to engage. There is openness and willingness to engage in professional learning, including the formal and informal conversations in the schools and within the training opportunities that are provided, both by the NCSE and the Teaching Council through the education centres and all of the other training opportunities that are available, including Mr. Harris's organisation, AsIAM. The willingness to engage in training and the positivity towards it is what we are trying to identify better and to base the future on rather than simply engaging in a box-ticking exercise. I use the words somewhat advisedly because in preparing for the meeting we looked at where there is evidence of a mandatory CPD programme. Since the introduction of its mandatory programme in 2011, the Medical Council has published a report indicating that in many respects the mandatory CPD programme for doctors is regarded as a point of contention, a box-ticking exercise and does not speak to a quality of provision.

In terms of ensuring that it translates properly into schools, the Department is currently examining the Looking at our School document, which we use to ensure that schools are self-reflective in terms of their practice, that they are understanding of all of the different contexts within their schools - for example, that assignments are conducted appropriately - and that leadership and school management are conducted appropriately. That document speaks significantly about the inclusion of children with special educational needs and other diversity issues, including for example, disadvantage. We are currently reviewing that and we are conscious that there is an opportunity to bring all of our service providers, the PDST and the NIPT, which are responsible for induction training of teachers, and the JCT and the NCSE, together to ensure that there is coherence between development work and how that translates into best practice within schools. As members are aware, the inspectorate is a mechanism through which we look to see how schools are being effective in terms of practice. In the context of whole-school evaluations, inspectors will typically look at what the schools are doing in respect of the implementation of all that good stuff in the Looking at Our School document. There is a lot happening.

Mr. Adam Harris: I will respond to some of the questions from Deputy Cassells. He asked

where we have seen examples of a differentiation in quality. In the first instance, we have probably seen it at a very anecdotal level in that we do meet many young people and families who are having positive experiences in schools and who attribute that to the teacher in the class or the teachers in the school. Inversely, the organisation receives approximately 70 queries a month from families. Consistently, the top five issues are school issues concerning the support they receive within schools, the appropriate management of the resources Departments are giving them, engagement with parents by teachers and disciplinary processes. To give an example of the latter, if a student who is autistic experiences a meltdown during his or her school day, very often the policy that is being used to address that does not relate to support; it is a disciplinary policy and it deals with the person involved in the same way as it that deals with students who smoke behind the shed. That is a big issue. What we have been concerned about in particular is that while there is no doubt that a lot of students have very positive experiences, we are seeing an increasing number of students not attending school, not having access to a school place or illegally being placed on reduced timetables. That is consistently coming about fundamentally due to a lack of teacher knowledge. Schools are afraid to open autism classes because teachers do not feel that they have the training. Schools that have such classes or have students enrolled in mainstream classes perhaps are not in a position to support students as well as they could. That is central to it. We published a report in April that documented the cases of 313 children, whom we call “invisible children” who are currently out of school. That represents a very small example of the people in that position.

Another indicator that is important is when one looks at schools that have autism classes, there was a vision when such classes were established that students who enrolled in the classes in junior infants would increasingly spend more and more time in mainstream school as time went on. However, the evidence suggests that children who are enrolled in junior infants very often spend their whole education in such a class, which suggests that not enough is being done in reverse integration and slowly supporting students on the autism spectrum who enter schools. When we look at what happens to students when they finish school, while some progress to university, many find themselves in a position where they are very socially isolated because they have had negative experiences.

In terms of how teachers can manage the varied needs, fundamentally, what this comes down to is resources and then planning and differentiation. The courts have been clear through the years that people with disabilities have a right to an appropriate education and that an indicator for that, if one likes, is differentiation. I do not think that is particularly new in terms of what we are talking about because the established policy of the State is that in the vast majority of instances students with disabilities should attend mainstream school. The difficulty is that often while that is the established policy, schools then are not being sufficiently supported but also are not sufficiently regulated in terms of delivering the service. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities clearly states that it is never the case that a child needs to change or adapt in order to go to school, rather it is incumbent on member states and their agencies, in this case schools, to ensure that the service they offer is accessible.

This brings me back to mandatory CPD and the training relating to it. While I recognise that there might be a need for an evidence body for an overall mandatory CPD programme, if we do not have mandatory CPD, this is literally the equivalent of asking somebody who does not speak French to go in and teach a French class. Fundamentally, autism is a completely different way of doing and seeing things and placing a person without that knowledge and insight in a classroom is setting everybody up for failure. There is an evidence base for that. To return to language, there are current examples in the education system of non-verbal autistic children

whose SNAs and teachers do not have the training to use the alternative communication styles they might use, which highlights the importance of this issue.

Deputy Shane Cassells: In the context of what Mr. Harris said in terms of children being illegally placed on reduced hours and sent home, in the past two months I was made aware of two cases arising in two separate schools located close to each other in a rural area of County Meath. Where schools send children home on the basis that they cannot cope and where their parents are told to collect them, what is the process for the reporting of such incidents? What support is being offered to schools and is that followed up professionally in order to ensure that this practice is not allowed to continue?

Mr. Jim Mulkerrins: This issue raised at another Oireachtas committee meeting in the past couple of days. As Mr. Ward spoke on it, he might like to answer.

Mr. Eddie Ward: There is obviously an evidence base supporting the use of reduced hours timetables and there appears to be some confusion, at local and national level, regarding how the issue should be managed. It is very clear from the Department's point of view that every child is entitled to receive a full education. If there are examples or situations where children, because of a medical or some other pressing need that is supported by expert evidence, require to have that curtailed for any reason, it should be part of a plan about which parents are consulted. There should be timely engagement and there should be defined objectives as to what the outcome of the plan is. That should be reviewed and it should not happen as a surprise to the parent, with he or she just being called in to bring the child home on a recurring basis. This should, very clearly, be a response. There are support services available to help schools around individual children, such as the National Educational Psychological Service, for example, and there may be others.

On the legal side, it is clear that, under the Education (Welfare) Act, there is an obligation on schools to record attendance and to report on non-attendance. Where a child is sent home and there is no consultation and it is not part of an educational intervention, it is technically a suspension. It should be recorded and should be reported to Tusla, which has guidelines and a range of interventions in place through its education welfare service for that to be followed up.

On the broader issue, Mr. Harris made very valid points about school culture and teacher competence. The OECD carried out research a number of years ago which stated that the quality of teaching in a school cannot exceed the quality of the teachers. That has been central to Department policy-making and thinking in recent times, as well as to the emphasis on how we address that from a strategic and policy point of view. The establishment of the Teaching Council was a very strategic move in order to guarantee in terms of quality what we now call the continuum of teacher education, which governs the initial teacher education piece, then bridging the initial teacher education piece into teaching, and through to career-long professional development. The whole thrust of policy should be evidence-based throughout and, obviously, it is very much about bringing the profession with us.

While there is clearly a bit to go on that, much work has been done. All of the initial teacher education programmes, of which there are quite a few, have been reviewed and reconfigured since 2012. In the context of the NCSE review to which Mr. Mulkerrins referred, there was clear evidence in terms of these programmes having inclusive modules within them. There may be some work to be done on that and, clearly, the work of Mary Immaculate College will be useful in that regard. However, it is safe to say the council in its work is very much driven by what is the State's policy, what is international best practice and where are our needs currently.

In other words, if we want to meet the needs of children who are in school today, we need to respond to that and pick up on the work of our inspectors and the work of Mr. Harris and his organisation.

The other strategic move the Department made was to establish the NCSE. This was an intervention designed to address a lacuna in the Department's ability to respond to the needs of children in special education and to make sure the Department, in responding, was doing so on a very reliable evidence base. Mr. Mulkerrins outlined some of the statistics on the work that has been done. The commitment to supporting children with special educational needs and spectrum disorders cannot be second-guessed because the position regarding what has happened since 2011 is very clear, particularly in the context of the number of special needs teachers and SNAs, as well as the variety of supports going into schools, in place.

The emphasis on training cannot be understated and this is very clear in terms of the advice we have been getting from the NCSE, and we will see more on that. We know that, last year, something of the order of 15,000 teachers were trained on special education in general terms. There are further statistics, if the committee wishes to break that down, but that is a very clear statement in its own right of the commitment of the State to support the upskilling of teachers.

We have made a number of other innovative moves on the advice of the NCSE. There is currently a school inclusion model in development which will see a range of new therapies being brought into schools. It is happening in 75 schools currently and will be piloted for a further year. It is about bringing occupational therapy, speech and language and behavioural practitioners into schools so we support teachers in a way they have not been supported before. While special needs assistants are doing a magnificent job, it is clear they do not have the skills and competencies in some of the areas where children exhibiting needs in schools need to be supported. The outcome of this pilot will further inform policy as to how we might extend that model into the future.

The point I am making is that we recognise there is an increased need, our understanding and knowledge is building the whole time and we are trying busily to catch up, given that resources are not unlimited. Currently, almost 20% of the total education Vote is being spent on supporting special needs and that investment will grow. We need to be sure we are doing it based on good, sound evidence, which is our intention. Teacher education and general training have to be central to that.

Mr. Adam Harris: I want to speak on reduced timetables because this is something of which we are seeing a great deal. It is fair to state that there are instances where parents are comfortable with reduced timetables, feel that it actually helps their children, and are of the view that it is better for them to go school for part of the day rather than not at all. The aspect that really concerns us is where these reduced timetables are imposed unilaterally by a school. There has been a real culture of secrecy around that and, certainly in the surveys we have done, it appears reduced timetables have been put in place in a very coercive manner, with the approach to the effect that "If you do not accept this, we will be looking at suspension or expulsion."

What came out of last week's Oireachtas committee is very important, which is that Tusla has clarified that a reduced timetable is a suspension. The question has to be asked why schools are not being written to and informed of this.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank our guests for their honesty. I will address my questions first to Mr. Ward. I have encountered many cases of children with special needs who are having

problems,. Mr. Ward referred to schools having programmes and so on. Is he referring to a national programme for schools or is it based on the fact that, as we all know, some schools will perform better than others, and it depends on the co-operation between teachers and principals with regard to better supports for children in schools?

The Middletown Centre for Autism came up a number of times. I was lucky enough to visit the facility last year with a number of Sinn Féin colleagues. We had a frank discussion on this issue and the fact that it supports the industry, as we will call it. The reaction I received, however, suggested that the people in Middletown actually want to do more. They are chomping at the bit. The centre is co-funded by the British Department of Education and the Department of Education and Skills. The people there referred to how to “encourage” schools. That was a very cute word to use, but they were referring to encouraging schools through an accreditation system. It would be a case of inviting schools to state how many pupils they had and how many more were expected and then asking if there was a way to obtain assistance for those schools to upskill their teachers, without putting extra pressure on them.

As has been stated by previous speakers, this is an issue of resources and forward planning. What I understood from our visit to the Middletown centre, however, is that it has the system required to move this issue forward. We need the Government to buy into that system and to co-fund it. We will call it that. The positive aspect is that people want to do the right thing. It is a normal human reaction to want to help people in difficulty regardless of what is the problem. If a school is encouraged to help its teachers upskill, the obvious knock-on effect is that the quality of school life improves for everybody.

In addition, with accreditation comes acknowledgement. That is something that is missing from many systems in this country. We do not acknowledge the good work that people do. Would the Department be interested in this? Reference was made to cohesion and to tying everything up. Is there a way that everyone can tie in to this? I am referring to linking in with the Middletown centre. There is a coincidence in the name because I am from Middleton. It is strange because Middleton was also called Middletown long ago. The Middletown centre is totally non-judgmental. It has looked at the sphere of education in a 32-county context in a very honest fashion. Would this be a way of achieving joined-up thinking? I ask that because we have seen that many organisations want to do the right thing but they are all doing things differently. My question concerns whether our guests would regard this as a way to tie things together. If this is the only 32-county autism specialist centre, could we not link up and link in the work of the education Departments on both sides of the water? I understand that there may be an impact as a result of Brexit. The Departments are already working together, however. Surely they can come up with a plan and I think the accreditation model would benefit everybody. What is the opinion of our guests?

Mr. Eddie Ward: The Department is working closely with the Middletown centre as matters stand. We view Middletown as a centre for excellence on autism. We want to work with it and we have a programme of work with it at the moment. The centre works with the NCSE and delivers programmes for us. The centre will also be very closely involved as we move forward. For example, we are looking at a training programme for schools which are establishing special classes for the first time in September. The Middletown centre will be involved with our own National Education Psychological Service and the NCSE in developing that programme. I do not want to pre-empt how the delivery might work but clearly we are involving the centre more and more in our thinking, policy-making and planning. It is already involved in the delivery of programmes. The centre has expertise that we do not have in ready supply and we will be

drawing on that.

The Department spends approximately €50 million each year on teacher education. That covers everything from employing teachers, developing and delivering programmes, paying for substitute teachers in the base schools and all of the other expenditure involved in teacher education. The expenditure is significant and it is going to increase. Much of that increase is connected to new curriculum innovation and all of the things that will happen in a school such as the introduction of mandatory child protection guidelines, etc. There is much going on. The issue of special needs and spectrum disorders, however, is a priority. We are very aware of the increased needs, as we see it, and the issue of how we will respond to those needs. Deputy Buckley referred to resources and as a good official I should refer to resources as well every now and again. It is a question of balancing priorities. However, we take the point on board. Middletown has expertise and we will certainly be utilising that.

Mr. Adam Harris: I will pick up on a few of the points made. Not reinventing the wheel is particularly important because schools are getting so many new initiatives at the moment. In the resources we have developed, which I referenced, we have used the Middletown framework, the Autism Education Trust framework and all of the relevant departmental policies so there is not something new. It is just making everything a bit more cohesive. The point regarding accreditation is interesting. AsIAM accredits many organisations such as universities, shops and other businesses in respect of being autism friendly. We have been reluctant to do that for schools. There is a reason for our reluctance. We would very much like to do it. We must look, however, at a pattern that is occurring and which is worrying. Sometimes in a geographical area one school will step forward, state that it wants to be inclusive and that it will do the right thing by opening a special class. What tends to happen then is that every time one school steps forward all of the other schools take two steps backwards. We are hopeful that the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 will address this issue with the ability to designate areas for autism classes.

We are concerned that some ghettoisation is happening. In other words, one school ends up taking all of the children with special needs. That school is then mandated as the school that is good at that instead of there being a recognition that every school has a role to play. It is worth stating in this context that league tables and media reporting of league tables have a negative impact on outcomes for autistic students. Those league tables define that the only good school is one which does well in the league tables as opposed to one that works for everybody. I would love to do accreditation but the worry is that it would designate a school as the only school that does this.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank Mr. Harris.

Acting Chairman (Senator Lynn Ruane): I thank Mr. Harris. Is that okay?

Mr. Jim Mulkerrins: Can I comment on some of those points?

Acting Chairman (Senator Lynn Ruane): Yes.

Mr. Jim Mulkerrins: We agree entirely on the risk regarding school league tables. We are anxious, therefore, to avoid anything pointing to schools that are doing well and, conversely, to schools that are regarded as not doing very well. The Deputy mentioned issues regarding school programmes. It is important to point out that there are many programmes in place to support teachers working with children with autism spectrum disorders and a range of other special

educational needs. They are typically supported by means of provision from the NCSE. Work to develop those programmes is informed by the Middletown centre. It is a significant part of a much bigger joined-up process. Everything the centre does informs development work in this area. I refer to the development work that the NCSE is doing as well as the development work that Mary Immaculate College is doing with its particular programme. Dr. Finn Ó Murchú, while he was in the inspectorate, was involved in a major inspection of the Middletown model and he is very familiar with it. There is again much joined-up thinking in this regard. Turning to encouraging schools, from my own experience the difficult bit is to encourage schools to get to the starting point, to open the class and to enrol the child. There is a real willingness to continue once schools have opened classes. Engagement from that point on is wholehearted because it is possible to see the benefits-----

Deputy Pat Buckley: They see it working.

Mr. Jim Mulkerrins: The schools see the system working and that there are supports in place. It is not always perfect but it can be seen that it is working. The impact that has on the life of the child can also be seen, as can the improvement for all of the other children in the school who begin to understand that they do not live in an homogenous world. An inclusive school is much better for all of the children in that school and not just those children with special educational needs.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank Mr. Mulkerrins.

Acting Chairman (Senator Lynn Ruane): I thank Mr. Mulkerrins and Deputy Buckley. I will make some comments before we wrap up. I have spoken about this matter a few times, especially at the education committee. Having listened to the presentations, I have comments rather than questions. Our guests should feel free to comment as well. We are continuing to see what should be a normal way of teaching within a diverse system as something additional. We are taking it for granted that every child in a room must learn in the same way except for one child who might, possibly, be on the spectrum or is diagnosed as being on the spectrum.

That is instead of acknowledging that there should be a mandatory or general training scheme for teachers. That should be the case even if a teacher is not aware that a child in a room has a diagnosis or if there is child in a room that should have diagnosis. Teachers should be informed and trained in such a way that they teach on the assumption that they should teach in a particular way regardless of whether there is specific notification of a child or children needing special attention or special education. I am the mother of someone on the spectrum. Navigating the school system was really difficult for her. If some simple things had been done within the mainstream system, it could have made that experience much easier for her. Looking at some children who end up on reduced timetables particularly due to tiredness and the emotional toll it takes to navigate a school day - when one has that narrator in one's head about what one is supposed to do next and has to consider how to find one's way to a classroom when everybody moves into the corridors at the same time, or even where the teacher sitting at the top of room constantly clicks a pen and is not aware of the impact of that on someone in the room - there are very simple things that could be done to stop reduced timetables. It is the environment that creates the anxiety rather than the person's diagnosis. This involves the environment, the response to the person and the learning style that person is not receiving - the idea around verbal instruction and how we provide people with information on how to carry out their homework. The problem is that we keep seeing special education as additional. Every single piece of teacher training, regardless of what module it is or what teacher training year it is, should have a thread through it. It should naturally include the idea that different people learn in dif-

ferent ways. Perhaps what I will say next is not true but I will make the assumption that it is. If a teacher taught a class as if every member of it had autism and the assumption that everybody in the classroom is different, it would be a much nicer learning environment for most people because the teacher would take into account the fact that some people will have sensory issues or a different way of receiving information. That is where we are failing in terms of special education because we keep seeing it as an add-on. Unfortunately, accreditation would do that as well. Do the witnesses see a space where we need to transform teacher training in general to be more reflective of Irish society rather than having to keep finding these add-ons? What impact would that have?

Mr. Adam Harris: I certainly agree with that. While visiting a few teacher training colleges to give talks over the past while, I have had the pleasure of meeting student teachers who are on the autism spectrum. I think that will be so important in, ultimately, shifting the profession and moving it away from one type of person teaching other types of people and making the profession more inclusive overall. The point made by the Acting Chairman is really important because we talk about universal design and universal design for learning. The problem is when many of these frameworks were developed, autism was still addressed as a medical issue and was not seen as part of that. As I briefed the committee earlier, I even see that with regard to how school buildings are being built. They are incredibly accessible with wide corridors but are less accessible than they ever were for autistic students for a range of reasons. There is a need to embed autistic people into the universal design process recognising that it is not about charity or special education but about diversity and embedding that culture.

Mr. Jim Mulkerrins: Certainly it was true in the past that the classroom was such that teaching was teaching and teaching the child with autism was different but everything else was uniform within that almost as if the child with autism was inconvenient. A lot of work was done in this space around the introduction of the new resource teacher model in 2017 and it took many years to get us to a place where we could introduce that. The distribution of teachers was one small part of introducing the new model. The major part of it was changing the approach to teaching within schools, which now informs teacher training. Much of that was around the identification of pupils with additional needs and moving away from a model that relied entirely on a diagnosis because, frankly, a diagnosis of autism does not tell the teacher anything about the needs of the child. Every child with autism is different, as indeed is every child who is deaf, hard of hearing, blind or visually impaired or who has ADHD, dyslexia or dyspraxia. There are lots of different needs in there so it was very important that we would have a model that would encourage the school to have a better understanding of the learning needs of children and then develop planning.

We issued very substantial guidance to all schools and teachers around the introduction of that new model and also issued circulars around the distribution of teaching resources and what they would be used for. I will read one small part of it. Under the heading of additional teaching support in the 2017 circular for primary schools, it states that the classroom teacher in consultation with the special education teacher, as required, will consider ways in which the curriculum can be differentiated or adapted to suit the needs of individual pupils. It states that this may also involve identifying the most appropriate teaching strategies and programmes to meet the child's needs and deciding which additional teaching supports are required. It states that parents should normally be consulted as part of this process. That was a radical move from where we were where, essentially, the needs of the children were being negotiated between the parents and the NCSE and the response was "we'll provide a couple of hours teaching and some SNA support." This was now a discussion around the learning needs of the child in a

way that did not really happen until then but is happening now and is informing the differentiated teaching practices of teachers. A teacher should now understand the learning needs of all of the children in the classroom regardless of whether they have autism, Down's syndrome or moderate learning difficulties. Teachers should understand the needs of children. They have the supports to work with them and should plan to teach the child in respect of those needs and plan in consultation with the parents. That is what our teacher training and continuous professional development efforts try to support.

Mr. Eddie Ward: We recognise that the Department can come up with great policies and strategies but there can be a gap when it comes to implementation at local level. The point has been made - perhaps more than once - around what the school culture is like. Very often, it can take time to move school culture. It is a constant process and it is through training, information and leadership development that we get agents of change across the system at every level. I do not exclude the Department from that. It is a challenge. During my time in the Department, we have certainly moved in terms of the provision of special education, about which we have spoken. We have also moved in terms of curriculum development. There are strands of curriculum development that are focused around differentiated learning and teaching in the classroom. I know that in respect of the new primary language curriculum introduced in the past number of years, there would have been dedicated aspects of training to help teachers in the different environments they might be in.

The other issue concerns the quality of relationships within the school. Some of the points made by Mr. Harris refer to that. Clearly, we must value the voice of the student and child more and more because there is great learning from that. We have ways and means of beginning to capture that evidence with our inspectorate model and increasingly consulting with parents and families around their experience. We are beginning to focus on that more and more through the work of agencies such as the Teaching Council and the NCSE.

By its nature, change takes time. If we achieve one goal, obviously, there are four or five more on the horizon at any given time. There is a progression here. As human beings, this will be a lifelong challenge. A lot of work has been done but there is more to do.

Decisions on Public Petitions Received

Acting Chairman (Senator Lynn Ruane): I thank Mr. Ward. That concludes this matter. I thank the witnesses for appearing before us today. The petition will remain open so the committee will meet to deliberate on the evidence that has been heard and will follow up at a later stage.

We will move on to consideration of public petitions. The committee will now make formal decisions on six petitions. Petition P00015/19 from Ms Mmoley Taylor would like to see Irish citizenship offered to all British spouses of Irish nationals who are currently resident in Ireland and have been married for over five years. This petition cites the uncertainty of Brexit and potential hardships for British citizens as reasons for doing this. Does any member wish to contribute to this matter? I propose that we forward a copy of the response from the Department of Justice and Equality to the petitioner and close the petition. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Petition P00016/19 from Ms Molly O'Brien would like to see visa exemptions for non-EU spouses of Irish citizens in the case of short-stay visits only. The petition cites the excessive

documentation required for the application and lead-in in time required in the application process.

End of Take This is the first of two petitions by the same petitioner on a similar theme. Unless any member wishes to contribute on this matter, I propose that we forward a copy of the response from the Department of Justice and Equality to the petitioner and close the petition. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Petition No. P00024/19 is from Ms Laura Moore. This petitioner would like to see the immediate end to all badger culling and the implementation of a tuberculosis, TB, vaccination programme for badgers. The petition states that a vaccination programme was proposed by the Government in 2018 but has not been actioned. Does any member wish to contribute to this matter? No. I propose that we keep this petition open. Is that agreed? Agreed. We will correspond further with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to ask for further details on the roll-out of the vaccination programme, including a timeline. We will correspond with the petitioner and inform her that the petition remains open. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Petition No. P00015/19 is from Mr. Joseph Guerin. The petitioner objects to an official visit to the State by dignitaries and cites security fears. Does any member wish to contribute to this matter? No. I propose that we deem this petition inadmissible under Standing Order 111C(1) (a). Is that agreed? Agreed.

Petition No. P00030/19 is from Ms Molly O'Brien. This petition concerns the documentation required in the Irish visa application process. The petitioner specifically references the requirement for six months of bank statements from applicants. The petitioner considers this a breach of privacy. As an alternative, this petition suggests that a certificate of balance be used. That would show the balance of an applicant's account on a certain date. Does any member wish to contribute to this matter? No. I propose that we forward a copy of the response from the Department of Justice and Equality to the petitioner and close this petition. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Petition No. P00011/18 is from Ms Josephine Boles. This petition concerns mandatory training for Irish mainstream schoolteachers on spectrum disorders. This petitioner would like to see mandatory training given to all primary and post-primary mainstream teachers in the various elements of spectrum disorders. This would include autism, Asperger's syndrome, dyspraxia, developmental co-ordination disorder, DCD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, and sensory processing disorder. Does any member wish to contribute to this matter? No. I propose that we forward a copy of the Official Report of the meeting and the documents supplied by the Department of Education and Skills and AsIAM to the petitioner and also inform her that the petition remains open. Is that agreed? Agreed.

I thank everybody for their attendance at this meeting. I propose that the committee adjourn until 1.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 3 July 2019. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee adjourned at 3.03 p.m. until 1.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 3 July 2019.