

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM UATHACHAS

JOINT COMMITTEE ON AUTISM

Dé Máirt, 28 Meitheamh 2022

Tuesday, 28 June 2022

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Jennifer Carroll MacNeill,	Catherine Ardagh,
Joan Collins,	Eileen Flynn.
Marian Harkin,	
Joe McHugh,	
Pádraig O'Sullivan,	
Marc Ó Cathasaigh,	
Pauline Tully.	

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Aisling Dolan.

Seanadóir / Senator Micheál Carrigy sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Autism Policy and Education: Discussion

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Deputy Flaherty and Senators Wall and Garvey.

Before we hear from our witnesses, I would like to read some formal notices. The Ceann Comhairle, Deputy Seán Ó Feargháil, and the Cathaoirleach, Senator Mark Daly, published a Covid-19 code of conduct for the parliamentary community in May. Members, staff and visitors are requested to continue to be vigilant and follow public health advice on preventing the spread of Covid-19 infection so that we can manage the risk for ourselves and for others who are more vulnerable, including colleagues and their family members who may be elderly and-or have underlying health conditions. All members of the parliamentary community and visitors are strongly encouraged to wear face masks – not visors – in busy or crowded locations in the Leinster House complex. Medical grade FFP2 masks should be worn whenever recommended by the public health advice and should be worn for ten days after diagnosis of Covid-19. This will help to reduce the risk of Covid-19 spreading among the parliamentary community. I ask for everyone’s full co-operation in this.

I remind members of the constitutional requirement that they must be physically present within the confines of the place where Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House, in order to participate in public meetings. I will not permit a member to participate where he or she is not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the parliamentary precincts will be asked to leave.

For the information of the witnesses, I wish to explain some limitations to parliamentary privilege and the practice of the Houses as regards references they may make to other persons in their evidence. The evidence of witnesses physically present or who give evidence from within the parliamentary precincts is protected, pursuant to the Constitution and statute, by absolute privilege. They are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not criticise or make charges against any person or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable or otherwise engage in speech that might be regarded as damaging to the good name of that person or entity. Therefore, if witnesses’ statements are potentially defamatory of an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

I welcome everyone to the first public meeting of the Joint Committee on Autism. Before we hear from our witnesses, I wish to make a few introductory remarks. Following debates in the Dáil and Seanad, this committee was established earlier this year with support from across both Houses to consider matters relating to services and supports provided by the State for autistic people. As legislators, we must ensure that all Departments and agencies shape their policies and strategies with the aim of creating a more autism-inclusive and neurodiverse-friendly society. For the past two months, we have been meeting in private session to identify the key policy areas where we can make valuable recommendations in our final report and to prepare our work programme. Over the next nine months, the committee will sit in public and hear from the key stakeholders as we examine policy, the implementation of policy and the legislation relevant to autistic people. We look forward to hearing from autistic people, their friends, their families and their representative bodies as well as Ministers, Departments, Government agencies, trade unions and other stakeholders to assess the current state of services for autistic people, the barriers that they can face when dealing with the State and how we can make improvements in those areas. The committee is also interested in international good practice in

national autism strategies.

Our first meeting is with the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, to discuss autism policy and education. We look forward to a wide-ranging discussion with Mr. John Kearney, its CEO, and his colleagues.

In the coming weeks, we are planning to hold meetings on autism policy with the Minister of State at the Department of Education with responsibility for special education and inclusion, Deputy Madigan, and the Minister of State at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Health with responsibility for disability, Deputy Rabbitte. Before the summer recess, we also plan to meet the Teaching Council of Ireland, trade unions like the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, INTO, and the Teachers' Union of Ireland, TUI, and Mr. Adam Harris, CEO of the advocacy group, AsIAM. We will meet many more stakeholders after the summer recess. Later in the year, we will examine other issues - assessments of need; access to assessments and interventions; education, including the limited effectiveness of special classes in promoting full inclusion; the lack of employment, or the high percentage of underemployment, of people with autism; adults' access to diagnoses and the implications of same; public buildings and the need for autism-friendly buildings; and the relevant legislation. The committee hopes that Leinster House can be made an autism-friendly building just like the parliamentary buildings at Stormont. In that context, we have written to the Ceann Comhairle and the Cathaoirleach to request that this be done.

There is a body of work to do on generating more awareness of hidden disabilities like autism and on fostering a culture of acceptance, understanding and inclusion in society. The committee plans to report to the Houses by the end of March 2023, in time for World Autism Day on 2 April, with recommendations for policy changes for children and their families. These recommendations will be fed into the new autism innovation strategy, which is in line with a commitment in the programme for Government and is being developed by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

As no members wish to comment before we start, we will move on to the first business on our agenda, namely, the minutes of our previous meetings. Are the minutes of the private meetings held on 7 April, 5 May, 17 May, 19 May and 2 June agreed? Agreed. On behalf of the committee, I extend a warm welcome to representatives from the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, namely, Mr. John Kearney, chief executive officer, Ms Paula

Prendeville, policy and practice principal officer and Ms Mary McGrath, operations principal officer.

Before we hear from our witnesses, I propose that we publish their opening statements on the Oireachtas website. Is that agreed? Agreed. I suggest that Mr. Kearney make his opening statement in the region of ten minutes. We will then have questions and comments from members. Each member will have ten minutes and I will be strict on that time to keep the meeting within the specified two hours. Hopefully, members will get an opportunity to come back in again afterwards. I invite Mr. Kearney to make his opening statement.

Mr. John Kearney: I wish the Chairman and all Oireachtas Members a good morning. On behalf of the NCSE, it is a delight to meet with the committee this morning. I commend all members on their deliberations, which will make a difference to so many young people's lives.

Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh, as an gcuireadh a thabhairt don NCSE teacht chun

labhairt leis an gcomhchoiste inniu. John Kearney is ainm dom agus táim anseo ar son an NCSE. We warmly welcome the opportunity to assist the committee on matters relating to the services and supports that the National Council for Special Education provides to support autistic students in our schools. I am here in my role as chief executive officer in the NCSE. I am also joined today by my colleagues Mary McGrath, head of operations, and Paula Prendeville, head of inclusion, policy and practice. Ms McGrath has overall responsibility for the delivery of front-line services to children, families, teachers and schools. Ms Prendeville leads on policy and practice with responsibility for inclusion and special educational needs in the NCSE.

The National Council for Special Education was established in 2004 to improve the delivery of educational services to persons with special educational needs arising from disabilities, with particular emphasis on children. The NCSE's vision is for an inclusive society in which children and adults with special educational needs are supported to achieve better outcomes in their education. We provide advice to the Minister for Education in matters of special education, including autism. We support schools to enable students with additional needs, including autistic students, to develop skills for life so that they can participate meaningfully and to their fullest potential in society.

The focus of our supports for autistic learners is always to enable inclusive practice in schools that centres on a strength-based approach and embeds the autistic voice. The NCSE provides a range of supports in the area of autism that are focused on building the capacity of schools to meet the holistic needs of neurodiverse students. Our programme of supports for autism includes teacher professional learning programmes, establishing special classes and special schools and providing assistance to schools that have opened special classes for autistic students. We regularly engage with stakeholders who support autistic people and work in partnership with other educational providers.

In our role of building capacity in our schools to support autistic students, the NCSE facilitates a range of professional learning opportunities for teachers that include seminars, in-school supports and communities of practice. Our seminars range from courses that are two hours in duration, facilitated after school by our advisers, to supporting cluster meetings that assist teachers to embed practice-based evidence to support autistic students in schools. In partnership with St. Angela's College in Sligo as a linked provider of the Atlantic Technological University, our multi-day seminars lead to an accredited course that awards a graduate certificate or diploma in special educational needs. Some graduates of this course also progress to a master's level degree in autism.

The NCSE has a central role in establishing special classes and special schools to meet the needs of students with very complex learning needs. For the forthcoming school year, there will be 2,184 autism special classes providing places for more than 13,000 autistic students in our schools. This is an increase of 561% over the past decade. Some 306 new autism classes have been established for this coming September.

We have an essential role in supporting schools who open a special class for autistic students. We provide a range of supports to schools when they open their first class for autistic students. These supports include a principals' seminar that provides practical information on establishing a special class. This seminar facilitates a learning space for principals to meet each other and learn from other principals who have previous experience of opening classes. We have designed and developed a four-day introduction to autism seminar which all teachers who are opening their first special class are invited to attend. Teachers universally comment on the invaluable information they gain by attending these courses. These schools also receive

follow-up support from one of our advisers. All staff in schools who establish new classes have the opportunity to attend a facilitated exceptional closure day to increase the school's awareness and understanding of autism. This approach embeds the creation of a whole-school culture to support the inclusion of autistic learners in the school community.

In the past school year, the NCSE has sanctioned and supported the establishment of two new special schools to cater for students with autism and complex needs, located in counties Dublin and Cork. Both schools have received bespoke training programmes developed in consultation with school principals and their management bodies.

Requested by the Minister for Education, the NCSE facilitated the first national special needs assistants', SNA, training programme, which has been developed in collaboration with the school of education in University College Dublin. This course will train up to 3,500 SNAs in our schools and, in collaboration with neurodiverse people, this course has a dedicated module designed to support SNAs to have a greater understanding of their autistic students' strengths and needs.

We also published a range of resources that assist autistic learners in our schools. These include supports to assist with the summer provision programme, a publication to develop sensory spaces in schools and a resource that assists teachers to facilitate movement breaks that support the regulation needs of students. Upcoming publications to assist schools to build their capacity to support autistic students will include Establishing Communication, and Planning for Teaching and Learning in the Special Class.

In its advisory role, the NCSE's published policy advice paper No. 5 provided advice to the Minister for Education on the provision of supports for autistic learners in our schools. One of its recommendations was to publish good practice guidance to assist schools to meet the diverse needs of autistic students. We worked in collaboration with educational partners to support the development of this guidance. In March of this year, we welcomed the Department of Education's publication of this guidance to facilitate an environment where autistic students can participate meaningfully in school life.

The NCSE has a long-established partnership with Middletown Centre for Autism. Middletown centre is a North-South body that provides excellence in autism education provision. We work collaboratively with the Middletown centre around the provision of teacher professional learning. We support teachers of students with autism to access specific courses by providing travel and subsistence costs. In addition, substitute cover is available for teachers with primary responsibility for autistic students where it is deemed essential by their school principal to attend a specific training course. We also have representation on the steering committee for the pilot learning support and assessment project that Middletown centre implements and which supports the needs of autistic students, their families and their schools.

Déanfaidh muid gach iarracht na ceisteanna a fhreagairt inniu agus is féidir linn scríobh chuig an chomhchoiste tar éis an chruinnithe le heolas breise más mian le comhaltaí. Táim sásta, agus ag súil freisin,

le haon mholtaí atá ag an gcomhchoiste maidir lenár seirbhísí a fheabhsú do dhaoine le riachtanais speisialta a chloisteáil.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Kearney very much. I will now turn to the members. The first member to indicate was Deputy Carroll MacNeill, who has ten minutes for both questions and

answers.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the witnesses for coming in today and beginning our work. I thank Mr. Kearney for his statement. It does not reflect the experience I have with parents in my community and, indeed, other communities who have come in here to speak with members. Parents identify a significant continual uphill struggle as they seek to access early intervention and school places for their children, retain school places, get appropriate education programmes developed in a consistent way across schools and get SNA access consistently as the roles and responsibilities of SNAs change. The list goes on and on from a parent's perspective. The services are not being delivered well at present.

I have a number of specific questions for the witnesses with regard to, for example, early intervention in my own community. There is an early intervention class in Ballyowen Meadows Special School in Loughlinstown. Representatives from the school told me they were in touch with the NCSE to offer a second early intervention class to the students of my area and beyond and the NCSE has not been back in touch with them. This early intervention class is badly needed, according to the parents in my area. That is a question for the NCSE.

I note that in his statement, when describing the teacher training programme, Mr. Kearney said, "Teachers universally comment on the invaluable information they gain by attending these courses." That is too self-congratulatory. Teachers are telling me is that there is not enough access to picture exchange communication system, PECS, and treatment and education of autistic and related communications handicapped children, TEACCH, courses, and that they have insufficient access to ongoing training. It is not enough. I am trying to be brief because I want to give Mr. Kearney an opportunity to respond.

The response from the special schools is that the equipment needed for occupational therapy, OT, such as compression vests, and furniture grant forms are hard to find and the system is not clear. The HSE asks them to request it from the NCSE and it is not clear how and where to apply, and whether the HSE or the NCSE is supposed to provide it. It is unclear to the schools. If it is unclear to the schools and we have to ask about it here today, it is an important issue that needs to be followed up.

School places are the subject of much discussion. I have had two parents contact me in the past couple of days about a sense that they are being managed out of the school place that they currently have and that the school cannot be sure it has the resources for their child next year. This is the sort of language they are hearing. At a stage where a child is in fifth class and going into sixth class, they cannot be sure. Can Mr. Kearney imagine how disruptive that is for that family, and how stressful it is for the parents of that child who has been settled well and who has in many respects been settled better than other children without neurodiverse needs? It is a concern. It is all very well having a place for a while, but I refer to this sense of being managed out and not exactly knowing why, perhaps not having had the communication over time.

There is a range of different issues here. I suppose I am reflecting the considerable frustration that parents of children with autism have in the service delivery that is being provided to them. Quite apart from the OT and the speech and language therapy that they are not getting, this is the experience in schools, even at present. It is about all of these nuanced issues. It is about being managed out. It is about the NCSE giving a list of schools to parents and sending them off to call all the full schools and beg them to take their child with autism. In some cases, I have had parents telling me that they are pretending the child is not as autistic as he or she is or that the child does not have the difficulties that he or she has - I am using their language now,

not mine - to try to access and secure a place. What is the response of the NCSE when a place breaks down and when there is that sense of being managed out? I will let Mr. Kearney respond to that. I appreciate I have given him a lot of information there.

Mr. John Kearney: I thank the Deputy. To recap in terms of where we have come from in the past decade, it has been quite spectacular in terms of the level of investment in the sense that the special classes just over a decade ago numbered slightly over 500. As we currently speak, over 2,466 special classes have been delivered. That has been complemented by an ambitious capital investment programme that has seen permanent accommodation in over 292 special classes and additional capacity for 112 classrooms in 22 special schools delivered through the national development programme capital investment period over the past three years.

A further 700 projects are currently progressing under the national development plan. They will deliver over 1,300 new special education needs classrooms and 200 replacement special education needs classrooms, catering for over 7,800 special education pupils across primary and post-primary. Almost 100 of these projects are currently on site and will ultimately deliver classroom spaces for over 1,000 additional children.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I am sorry. This is my time and I have asked Mr. Kearney a series of questions. That information could have been included in Mr. Kearney's opening statement. I am trying to get to the questions that I asked Mr. Kearney.

Mr. John Kearney: I was principal in a secondary school ten years ago. I have been appointed chief executive of the NCSE in the past three months. In regard to many of the fears and reservations the Deputy is expressing on behalf of the parents, I have been out there meeting parents. I completely empathise with some of the concerns and frustrations that they are voicing in terms of securing placements. Demand here is challenging supply. In terms of 315 classes being delivered this year, there has been a very significant range of delivery by the NCSE. I am not saying it is perfect for one second.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I certainly acknowledge that. I can see that in my own community. I can see the additional classes there. I can see the efforts that schools and parents have gone to in collaboration with the NCSE to be creative. One school in Booterstown proactively identified a parish hall next to it, and the school, the parents and the Department have worked to secure that and find the additional space. When I go down the road, however, there is a school of 600 children which needs a lot of work. That school needs a lot of work anyway but the NCSE did not come to it with the same creativity and ambition to find the extra space, which I can see adjacent to the school. My point is that Mr. Kearney is correct that the NCSE is to be congratulated on that additional work, particularly over the past two years. I can see a pipeline over the next two years but more needs to be done to try to be creative and secure those premises. So many parents, and also schools, are trying to drive this.

Mr. John Kearney: I completely acknowledge that. I completely acknowledge the collaborative challenge that is ahead of us all, both at parental level and school staff level, and working in collaboration with the Department and the NCSE, in terms of delivering the comprehensive range of supports that are required for special education provision. I completely agree with the Deputy's comments and observations in relation to that.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Could I ask about the early intervention class in Ballyowen? Could I ask Mr. Kearney for clarity about how to get OT equipment, such as compression vests and other materials? Should the school apply to the HSE or to the NCSE?

Mr. John Kearney: I ask Ms McGrath to answer.

Ms Mary McGrath: I am afraid I do not have an answer on the Ballyowen Meadows early intervention class with me today but I will follow up. I will come back, either through the committee or directly to the Deputy's office.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank Ms McGrath.

Ms Mary McGrath: I am sorry. I do not have that information with me today.

In relation to the OT equipment that the Deputy mentioned, the NCSE does not have a role in providing that type of equipment to schools. It is through the HSE services that schools should apply. It is unfortunate that there continues to be that confusion. Certainly, it is something that we can take away. We can reflect on how we can support schools in clarifying what our role is. That is something we have been doing with various partners over the past while but we can take that away.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: If Ms McGrath does not mind, I might suggest that we need to do something more than take it away. If Ms McGrath is saying the school should apply to the HSE, there needs to be a resolution between the NCSE and the HSE. It is not a question of taking it away. It is a question of when my special school applies for OT equipment for the students there. They actually have a room. The committee visited it. They have a room there and they cannot use the equipment because they do not have the therapist to support it. I appreciate that is not directly for the NCSE. This is equipment that is in part there - they need more of it - but the students cannot use it because they do not have support. Even when they are applying, if the HSE is telling them that they are to apply to the NCSE, this is a real problem. This is something that needs to get resolved this week. There needs to be a resolution between the NCSE and the HSE this week so that those schools, when they apply on the next occasion, have total clarity.

Ms Mary McGrath: I accept that. It is something we can take up for that school, particularly in relation to that. As I said, we do not have a role in providing equipment and we can make that clear to both the local HSE team and the school.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Can Ms McGrath make sure that the HSE comes back in a way that is helpful to the schools?

Ms Mary McGrath: Absolutely.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I appreciate I am running out of time here. We may come back to it. Can Mr. Kearney talk to me about the recent changes to SNA roles and responsibilities and a communication that was issued from the NCSE to schools in relation to that?

Mr. John Kearney: Can Ms McGrath take that one?

Ms Mary McGrath: Certainly. I thank the Deputy. There has been no change to the role of SNAs. I am unclear what communication the Deputy is referring to. There have been some changes over the past couple of years in how SNAs are allocated to mainstream settings. Since 2020, SNAs have rolled over each year in a mainstream setting and schools can apply to the NCSE for additional mainstream SNAs if they are required to support the needs of the children within that school. Schools can do that through an exceptional review process which opened earlier this month for the forthcoming academic year. NCSE has made a clear statement and, in

collaboration with education partners, is prioritising developing schools that may not currently have an SNA resource within them to ensure there are no children within the school environment who may be prevented from attending school in September due to a lack of access to SNAs.

Chairman: I call Deputy Tully.

Deputy Pauline Tully: Can I just say at the first meeting of the Joint Committee on Autism that I welcome its establishment and look forward to working constructively with all my colleagues here to see positive change for people with autism?

I particularly welcome the three representatives from the NCSE here this morning. I have met them all previously: Ms McGrath, Ms Prendeville, and particularly the CEO, Mr. Kearney. Mr. Kearney and I worked together a long time ago. We know each other going back to when we held different roles in life and neither of us dreamed that we would meet here.

The first question I have to ask is a fairly obvious one. Much of the talk in the past few weeks has been about the lack of school places coming this September for children with additional needs, in particular children with autism. I wonder what kind of data the NCSE holds on exactly what school places are needed. Does it have a mapping system to identify where school places are needed, particularly as pupils go from primary to secondary school? Many people do not understand why if a child is already in a special class, an autism class or a special school, it is not recognised that the child may need the same service at second level but it is not provided. There is a major deficit in particular areas in the country, including Dublin, Cork and other areas.

What kind of data does the NCSE possess and how far in advance does it plan? How far in advance would it advise of the Minister of exactly what is needed? It was mentioned that there are 106 children without school places for September and it is now almost too late to be dealing with such matters. It is almost a rush job when the process should be planned perhaps two years in advance. What sort of data and planning go into ensuring children have places because this comes up every year at this time?

Mr. John Kearney: I am delighted to meet the Deputy in her current position and engage with her at this level. I commend her on the various inputs she made to teaching and learning in schools in County Cavan.

I assure the Deputy and other committee members that the NCSE has quite a comprehensive database. It is a five-year forecasting model, as such, which projects ahead in terms of placements required. At any given time we have a county-by-county analysis of placements required built on weekly meetings with the Department to project future placement requirements. Enrolment is an ongoing process, particularly in and out of special class placements, and those six students in a class could keep changing.

Based on our weekly meetings with the Department and the geographic information system that it shares with us, we have managed the demand on a county-by-county basis and we are confident we have the capacity to address emerging needs arising between now and September. We have narrowed this to the Dublin region with respect to 50 special school placements and 56 special class placements. We are quite confident in the data we manage, notwithstanding the fluidity of the enrolment processes. That enables us to accommodate and deliver on the projected need.

It is not perfect for a minute in that there are anomalies. Our first focus is very much on delivering against need so each and every student with special educational needs is provided with a special class placement in this country. We achieve this, by and large, and we have identified hotspots in Dublin that were well publicised recently. We are also focusing on moving in time so students would travel to local schools in local catchment areas. At this time, we are confident in the data and the management of that around places.

Deputy Pauline Tully: Okay. We can see how people, especially parents of these children, can be frustrated. Most of us enrol our children in secondary schools in November for the following September but we are now at the end of June and coming to July and these children still do not have a place. We can see how worrying it is for such parents.

Mr. John Kearney: I empathise with them completely. I have walked these byways and was a principal dealing with parents. In my role I can completely empathise with parents. In the past three months I have met many such parents. Unfortunately, it is in another context and having another conversation that I would like to have with those parents. I would prefer to be speaking about the teaching and learning experience in schools but, unfortunately, it is a more depressing conversation about trying to secure special class placements. Not only am I meeting them but I am fortunate to be joined by the committed staff within the NCSE, and our special education needs organisers, SENOs, are out and about.

To correct an implication that was made, our SENOs cannot engage with the enrolment process, which is the individual preserve of schools. We can only advise on placements and support parents in trying to progress an enrolment request with an individual school. We get the confusion and upset, however, and we know the hurt and trauma inflicted by on parents by each letter of rejection to families.

Deputy Pauline Tully: The Minister is kept advised at all stages so there should not really be any need for emergency legislation. Action should have been taken before this. Mr. Kearney has said the NCSE has regular meetings with the Department. Really, it should never come to a position where we seek the passing of emergency legislation.

Mr. John Kearney: I am very pragmatic in the sense I am always trying to find solutions. There is an urgent crisis and the vast majority of schools are proactive in engaging with the NCSE. Sometimes, some schools are less forthright in doing so. There is a need for emergency legislation to address the crisis we are currently facing. There is also a very significant pathway to be followed over the next couple of years in terms of getting uniform special class placements right across the country. Processes need to be streamlined, quickened and sharpened with a view to approaching that work. The legislation is the avenue to provide the degree of sharpness that is required.

Deputy Pauline Tully: Mr. Kearney might comment on whether a post on social media is true if he has the figures to hand. The post stated that in 2003 there were 72 SENOs and 15 other staff employed by the NCSE and in 2019 there were 65.6 SENOs and 150 other staff. That indicates there are fewer SENOs now than there were almost 20 years ago, although we know the number of children diagnosed as having additional needs has increased. Are those figures correct?

Mr. John Kearney: The figures are correct. That was the first thing I looked at when I was appointed chief executive in the context of an expectation for service delivery. I ruthlessly followed up complaints and issues around service delivery. I was confident that by and large, we

were delivering, but our services were stretched in terms of what we were expected to deliver. I have earmarked this for the Department, which is very much working with me to identify funding arrangements for additional staff with a view to providing that degree of service. What the Deputy is saying is quite correct in that staffing levels are more or less exactly the same as they were 20 years ago and the degree of service has changed.

Deputy Pauline Tully: Basically, the NCSE is under-resourced to deal with the level of need out there.

Mr. John Kearney: We are very much working with the Department to get funding for the additional staffing that is required to deliver on the range of expectation. That is right.

Deputy Pauline Tully: There is a request for additional classrooms and space in schools. Many parents would make the point that accommodation is not the only issue and it is about the resourcing of that accommodation. I know a school but I will not mention its name or location. If a school or class opens but there is not properly trained staff or proper resources, the process will not work. We have ended up seeing many children in special classes or schools being suspended, expelled or withdrawn by parents because it was not an appropriate placement. Does Mr. Kearney have any figures on the number of students in inappropriate placements or being homeschooled because there is no appropriate placement for them?

Mr. John Kearney: I do not have the exact figures sought by the Deputy and further work is required. The chief inspector's report on the placement of students in classes gives an indication that we need closer observation of special class placements, and that is further work for the NCSE to develop and take on board. What is very much required is an annual review of each and every special class placement in a school. That is required for any assessment of a student in a school and how the placement is working. That consultation must take place between a variety of stakeholders, including teachers, school management, parents and, in many cases, the student.

There is a collective responsibility in taking on special classes in a school. It is a formidable challenge for any school to take that on. It is a change in culture and leadership, with a dynamic approach required by all sections of staff to fully embrace each and every learner coming into a school community. They should be given the same sense of opportunity and progression as any other learner coming in. It is a journey that must be travelled by a school and it takes a significant effort to do that. The NCSE is eager and enthusiastic to assist schools on that significant journey they must travel. It is ultimately a journey that the vast majority of schools will have to travel in time. A number of schools are making that journey but more will have to do so in order to make a cultural change and provide strong leadership, openness and engagement with parents so as to deliver the quality of education that students with special educational needs deserve.

Chairman: Senator Flynn has advised she must leave at 1 o'clock and has asked that she be allowed to speak ahead of other members. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Senator Eileen Flynn: I thank the witnesses for attending. Last week, I tabled a Commencement matter on special schools that was answered by the Minister of State at the Department of Education, Deputy Josepha Madigan. Today, I have heard Mr. Kearney speak about special schools in the cities of Cork and Dublin. What does he mean by the term "special school"? I will ask him what I asked the Minister of State last week. Is the proposal to open five special schools in Dublin still being considered? I ask because students, parents and or-

ganisations need to hear the answer.

Personally, I believe it should be against the law to provide special schools for children with disabilities or additional needs because that puts them into boxes, which is what was done to Travellers years ago. As I said last Wednesday, there used to be special schools for Travellers. That was why many members of the Traveller community could not read or write. Instead of being educated, they were being washed and cleaned in school settings. This is not the conversation for it, but I probably know more than anybody else around this table what special schools can do to communities. I know from my work with some of the disability organisations that they do not want special schools. People with disabilities also do not want special schools. I am interested to know who the NCSE is working with to create special schools and who has requested them?

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission does not agree with special schools because they form a breach of human rights and equality legislation. There has been talk about the provision of special classes and supports in the cities of Cork and Dublin. There are children with special educational needs in rural Ireland and they also need services.

The SNAs are looking to be valued by the education system and that is nowhere in sight. A few weeks ago SNAs attended a committee here to explain why their work should be valued and why they should be recognised as a profession.

AsIAm published a snap survey, and according to that, 267 children do not have a school place for September and 112 children can be between one to six years on a waiting list.

I welcome the establishment of this committee and look forward to working with my colleagues to bring about equality for people with autism.

Mr. John Kearney: I am delighted to meet the Senator. To clarify, there are a range of special educational needs, SEN, supports that we support the State in providing through our network of education facilities. First, there is the mainstream school, and the vast majority of students with special educational needs are accommodated within the context of a whole school. Then there is the special class, on which some of this discussion would have centred, and 315 of those will be opened this year. There is another degree of provision then called special schools, and there are in excess of 122 of them in the country, providing the much-needed targeted support to students and their families who avail of those schooling services.

I think what the Senator was referring to was the proposal that was mooted about four or five weeks to have special education centres.

Senator Eileen Flynn: Yes.

Mr. John Kearney: From the NCSE and the Department perspective, we were looking at a variety of options and trying to narrow the bridge in terms of the supports that are needed. I have gone out there and I know the SENOs and the staff have spoken to and listened to the parents. We were looking at a number of avenues in trying to bridge that gap and ensure as many students as possible were offered special class placements come September. That looked at a number of measures. We invoked section 37A, which was an operational process that would eventually lead to schools being compelled to provide placements. We also worked in close collaboration with two education and training boards - the City of Dublin ETB, and the Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB. Very much embedded within that was an integration model, particularly from having listened to parents who had experienced extreme frustration when it

came to their children and the supports that were required for them. We were looking at that as a transition pathway to ultimate integration into special classes, whether they in primary or post-primary schools, within the city of Dublin.

Senator Flynn's points about integration are very well made. Our vision within the NCSE is that of an inclusive education where all students are completely cherished, respected and admired within their whole school community setting. Ultimately, we are working towards where each and every child can attend, as close as possible, the school that is nearest to him or her.

On the AsIAM survey, it mentions 267 students awaiting a placement. That does not quite tally with our figures for what is required. Notwithstanding that, we have interrogated the survey and know there is more work to be done in enabling students to travel closer to their local school in their local community, and that is the determinant of appropriateness. We are doing this in stages. Our first stage is to deliver those special class placements. The next is to get them closer to the individual parent's household.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: Mr. Kearney has not been in his role for long so it is great to hear his language. It is very refreshing, especially when he discusses local schools and says it is very important for children to attend their local school. I counted and believe he said it three or four times. It is new language the NCSE is using, and it is noted, so I thank Mr. Kearney for that.

SEN education has come in leaps and bounds. In Dublin 12, a huge number of classes have opened. Not every school has a class and I believe there may be six without a SEN class. It would be great to see every school in Dublin South-Central having a SEN class. It would be great to show the rest of the schools in the country that this can be done, that this is one constituency that managed to do it.

As Mr. Kearney rightly said, schools need the support to open classes. They need to ensure they have enough teachers, SNAs and the additional supports my colleague mentioned, such as occupational therapy equipment, speech and language therapy equipment and sensory rooms. Mr. Kearney has clarified that the HSE is involved in providing the equipment for sensory rooms. That is a discussion that might need to go back into the remit of the NCSE because they very much go hand in hand. It is not possible to open a SEN class without providing a really good sensory room with sensory facilities. It just will not work correctly in terms of getting a child regulated properly because a child will not learn unless he or she is regulated properly. I say well done but we still have a lot to do. There are complete blackspots in Dublin 4, 6 and 6W and children are still travelling from these areas to Dublin 12. We are delighted to have them in Dublin 12, but children should be able to go to the same school their siblings are attending. It puts extra pressure on schools in Dublin 12, which want to do the best for local children. A body of work needs to be done there.

It is very difficult to get a child into an early intervention class. First, there are very few of them available. Second, an autism diagnosis is needed to get into an early intervention class. We know that children are not being diagnosed because of the huge waiting lists. The only way a child can get into an early intervention class is by way of a private diagnosis. That is unfair on the child that only if his or her parents can afford it he or she might get into an early intervention class. There are none in Dublin 6W, there is one in Dublin 12 and one in Dublin 8. It is scandalous because we preach about early intervention but there are no early intervention classes. I have raised it previously but I would like to see the National Council for Special Education taking this on board and in particular, taking on board how to make them available

and then how to get over the fact that children are not being diagnosed with autism because of another Department's shortcomings. That is a big stumbling block.

At what stage does a special educational needs organiser, SENO, get allocated to a child? Is it just at early intervention or when he or she starts primary school? Many parents will know their child has autism when the child is about two and a half years old. They may not have a diagnosis yet but are working with therapists. It is likely they have a diagnosis of autism but not a formal one because the HSE has not been able to give them space for a diagnosis or they cannot afford a private diagnosis. Even the waiting lists for private diagnosis are crazy. When does the SENO get involved? How do parents get their child in front of a SENO to map out the child's educational needs? Many parents approach us and tell us their child may or may not have autism but they really do not know where they are going, whether they can go to an early intervention class, opt for mainstream with an SNA or to an autism class. Parents need a good deal of guidance.

My specific questions are, when does the SENO get involved? What is the ambition in regard to early intervention classes?

Mr. John Kearney: I thank Senator Ardagh for those observations. I concur and share her views in terms of parents' concerns in Dublin 12 and Dublin 15 in particular. I have met many of those parents and share their frustrations about special class places at the moment.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: Dublin 12 has a great many. Dublin 6, Dublin 6W, Dublin 2 and Dublin 4 have very few.

Mr. John Kearney: I am conscious there is more to be done within the metropolitan area. My colleagues will give specific answers to the queries Senator Ardagh raised. Ms McGrath will handle the SENO query and the placement and my colleague, Ms Prendeville, will handle the early intervention.

Ms Mary McGrath: Each SENO is assigned a caseload of schools. As mentioned earlier there are 73 SENO posts and 67 are currently filled throughout the country. Each SENO has a caseload of schools and engages with parents who live in the locality around that caseload of schools. The caseloads are geographical. Quite often the first time a parent engages with a SENO is when their child is at that pre-diagnosis stage where they contact the local SENO. They may become aware of the SENO through one of our parental engagement sessions. We work with HSE teams to reach out to families on waiting lists in order that we can set out what that education journey will look like, the different options and the different services and how to access those services within that education system from preschool, be that the early intervention classes or the access and inclusion model, AIMS, in the ECCE scheme to which no doubt Ms Prendeville will refer.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: I do not want to discuss AIMS here today because that is another day's work. It is really the early intervention classes I am trying to figure out because you need a formal diagnosis. Without that, you cannot get into an early intervention class. Your crèche can get AIMS support. It is important to highlight that AIMS support does not attach to an individual person. It attaches to a class so it is not a case that your child is getting a special need. It is rather that the class is getting a little more support. I am not a massive supporter of the AIMS programme but I want to know how do you capture children into early intervention if the HSE has not been able to give them diagnoses?

Ms Mary McGrath: Senator Ardagh is right, you cannot access an early intervention autism class without a diagnosis. That is the current pathway into one of those classes. When parents contact our local SENO looking for that support and guidance as to where their child will go in the education system, that is something we will track. We track that engagement from the family, where that child is going, whether he or she gets a diagnosis and track what that report suggests in terms of forward planning for additional special classes in the area. In answering the question on how a child gets attached to a SENO, it is through that geographical caseload of schools that each SENO manages.

Senator Catherine Ardagh: Dr. Niall Muldoon's report came out last week. It was quite scathing of the Department. We should not take the negative from it. It should not be an attack. Dr. Niall Muldoon is an unbelievable man. Some of the words he used were quite positive, such as "reconfiguration", "being reimaginative". There is no point in being negative. We must be positive in terms of what we can do in the future. The council needs to reimagine and reconfigure how to work, maybe rip up everything it has done so far and start again. We know it is not really working but as we have a new team, a new leader, it should really try to figure out a new plan, a new way of working, and put parents' needs at the forefront. I say "parents' needs" because parents have their children as their number one priority so when looking after parents you are really looking after the children. The council needs to figure out providing more early intervention classes in the city because it is really upsetting for parents not to be able to put their children in a proper placement. Moreover, AIMS is letting parents down and by that, letting children down.

Mr. John Kearney: I thank the Senator for the observations in regard to the ombudsman's report. We certainly welcome that from a number of perspectives. In synchronising with the Senator's observations in terms of positivity we did glean and extract the positivity of it as well. We certainly welcome the insight from the ombudsman in terms of reviewing various aspects of the legislation and the impetus for the entire system to build local capacity and to build greater collaboration with individual schools, the education partners in building that capacity and professional development, to assist schools to change that individual school culture. We were particularly interested in the ombudsman's report in respect of proactively engaging with schools, parents and students on the development and pathway of special education delivery in this country. In many ways, the first hurdle, namely, the creation of the special classes, is the first journey to be encountered in terms of delivery of special education. Far more enriching conversations on that will be happening in due course both with individual schools and parents in terms of the quality of the learning experience and then we need to look at progression pathways for children with special education needs in terms of progression from schools and the enhancement of quality of life and community engagement for students with special education needs.

Chairman: The time is up. I call Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I welcome the witnesses. I have met some of them over the past number of years and I welcome the interactions I have had. In the past couple of days, a number of colleagues touched on this earlier, this proposed emergency legislation has emerged. I know that nobody in this room has had sight of it but my question is, does Mr. Kearney welcome it? Albeit we are in the dark, the timelines being spoken of in the media seem to centre around six to eight weeks, or eight to ten weeks, to prepare for those classes. Does he think, if true, that timeline is sufficient?

Mr. John Kearney: We from the NCSE have always enjoyed engagement with the Deputy

and his interest. His practitioner experience as a teacher is certainly telling in terms of development of special education in this country. The legislation obviously centres on the section 37A process. It is a process that none of us would like to invoke with a view to delivering special education places for children. However when weighing up the needs of parents and the requirement of special class places, ultimately if the legislation has to be invoked, it is invoked. It has been invoked three times. This is our third time actually to invoke it. On one occasion it was four months in terms of delivery. On another occasion, it was much longer than that. It has to be streamlined. Sharp, decisive action is required on occasion. None of us is party to the exact detail of the special education legislation being considered this morning, but sharp, decisive action is required in terms of giving assurances to the parents. Many members have articulated well the fears, anxieties and apprehensions of the parents in terms of lack of clarity and special class placements. If it takes legislation to progress that with individual schools and to provide that degree of certainty to parents, then so be it.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I am sorry to cut across Mr. Kearney but an ASD class in theory could be delivered in those-----

Mr. John Kearney: At the moment, there are 22 or 23 steps in the legislation.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: Yes.

Mr. John Kearney: I think a lot of that has to be streamlined. I also think section 67 has to be looked at in terms of the ability of the NCSE to ensure the schools provide an individual placement. That would be radical and transformative but would address the kernel of the issue in terms of securing special class placements for children.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: To follow on from that, to be fair to both Ministers, Deputies Madigan and Foley, they have often spoken on these questions and about the collaborative approach with schools. As was said, that is in theory or ideally how you would like to approach these things. Obviously, we are where we are and the fact the Ministers have signalled their intention to bring forward emergency legislation is in itself an acknowledgement of the situation we are in. Based on that, would it yield what Ministers are aiming to set out? Earlier somebody asked Mr. Kearney how many children were getting a diagnoses every year. He said there is a model, a five year forecast, but at the rate we were going with the collaborative approach, how long would we have been waiting to catch up given the shortage of places with that forecasting model before this emergency legislation was mooted?

Mr. John Kearney: It is like asking how long a piece of string is because I was a principal 15 years ago and I would have heard too often that the school next door or down the road was the best school in terms of dealing with special education. Unfortunately, there were scenarios where a poll was done with staff on whether they should embrace and take on special class delivery as such. We have travelled a transformative journey since then and it is reflected in terms of that 500% increase in special classes delivery in that decade. We have much further to travel as a society. I certainly welcome the educational partners. We would have engaged with them through the section 37A consultative process. There was a very strong indication of how working collaboratively and progressively with a view to delivering it. It has delivered so much but there is so much more to deliver and quicker.

I believe the legislation will provide a sharper delivery but there are going to be twists and turns in terms of effective delivery as well-----

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Yes.

Mr. John Kearney: -----and we will embrace and encounter those as they come.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: I thank Mr. Kearney. Senator Flynn asked a question, which I would like to follow up on. I refer to special schools and their place in the overall education sector. We have spoken about the New Brunswick model in the past and obviously we are operating an inclusion model here. I am coming from a perspective where I believe there is a role for special schools and I put that on the table because there are people with profound intellectual and physical needs that need a space. In terms of the disparity between the provision of ASD classes at primary level and second level - I think it is a ratio of approximately 3:1 in primary, or it is definitely 2.5:1 - is it a case that in the future we are going to see further mainstreaming of children with ASD provision who heretofore might have had a space in an ASD class? Is that ultimately the model the NCSE envisages where we will be shifting to a model where students might rotate or do a set amount of time per week or per month in an ASD class and then transition back to mainstream and keep it on that kind of a loop? Ultimately the question is around how many buildings we can build. Is there going to be a critical point where it becomes the norm that kids are in and out of an ASD class?

Mr. John Kearney: We are into a pathway there in terms of the development of the quality of special education delivery in this country. I have been out and about to schools and have been managing and leading schools for the vast majority of my professional career. I already know there is a lot of quality engagement and enhancement in terms of integration between the special class and mainstream schooling and more of that needs to be enhanced and developed going forward. The international perspective, and as a nation we have subscribed to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, will put tremendous obligations on us in time but we have a very significant journey to travel in terms of resource development and cultural development of schools and specific supports being provided. It is well down the road in terms of delivering on that requirement and vision. For now, in regard to the special schools that have been developed and created, there is a very specific target need for those schools in terms of offering support. A progressive pathway needs to be developed towards inclusive education but we are talking about decades rather than years with a view to achieving and delivering on that.

Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan: Deputy MacNeill touched on therapies and so on earlier but can I ask about therapies specifically in special schools? We have 11 or 12 special schools in Cork and I would often talk to management in those schools. Many of them say they prefer dealing with the Department of Education, for example, than with the Department of Health. There are significant blockages when it comes to dealing with that Department. In regard to the therapies about which Deputy MacNeill spoke and which people are crying out for at this stage, could they be placed under the remit of the Department of Education rather than the Department of Health because it is clear the current process is not working? Is that something the NCSE would welcome?

Mr. John Kearney: At the moment we are involved in the school inclusion model. We are developing expertise in terms of the benefits that speech and language therapy can bring to a whole school as well as supports like occupational therapy. It works best when it is with a view to building teacher capacity. A whole string of our policy advice is very much indicated in terms of therapeutic supports and empowerments that are required for schools. We will certainly be supportive of whatever pathway that can be developed in time with a view to enabling those contributions.

Does Ms McGrath want to come in on therapeutic supports?

Ms Mary McGrath: The school inclusion model has been running in the CHO 7 in 75 schools and it was in 75 early years settings for the last three years. NCSE has a number of occupational therapists and speech and language therapists who are working on the ground with 75 schools, including, I believe, four special schools, although I might have that number slightly wrong. The early results we are seeing from that project are really quite transformative. The focus of the work of the speech and language therapists and the occupational therapists is building teacher capacity to have the right supports for the children in the school as and when they need them. Early evaluation, which was done by a team in University College Cork, has been very positive in terms of the outcomes.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: Can I ask Ms McGrath a question specific to that point? Are they having any difficulties in those vacancies like we are experiencing in the HSE.

Ms Mary McGrath: Yes, we are, to answer the question directly. We have sanction for 31 therapists, OTs and senior occupational therapists, and we currently have 12 in post. There are challenges in terms of recruiting in the education space, which is similar to what is being experienced in health.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: I thank the Chair.

Chairman: I call Deputy Harkin.

Deputy Marian Harkin: It is great to have our first public meeting. Many people are very interested in this subject and we have a huge responsibility on our shoulders. I look forward to working with everybody so that we can produce a comprehensive and, hopefully, action-oriented report. I welcome our colleagues from the NCSE. Mr. Kearney said he was fairly new to this job, so I wish him well.

My first question refers to the emergency legislation to be debated on Friday. A number of people have referred to it and Deputy O’Sullivan’s intervention has changed my question a little bit. I was going to ask why we needed emergency legislation because it was said that the Minister had been advised and that there is a database and five year projections, etc. If all of that is in place, then in theory at least, we should not need emergency legislation. In that context, I have two questions. First of all, does Mr. Kearney feel there might be a need to update the database and the information he has?

The collaborative model was mentioned. I am not here to apportion blame, but if it is not working in some way, or if it is not working well, what changes need to be made? It is absolutely crucial that it works. There is no point in complaining that it does not work. These children need our support.

Mr. John Kearney: In terms of what we have achieved so far quite significant progress has been made. This could only have been achieved with the engagement and collaboration we have had with so many schools. As I mentioned to Deputy Tully earlier, to open a school community to developing and supporting students with special educational needs is a very transformative journey for schools. The NCSE is greatly appreciative of the collaborative efforts of so many schooling communities in subscribing to it.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Are there enough supports for schools? Change is always very difficult. Mr. Kearney is a school principal and he knows this.

Mr. John Kearney: Many speakers have contributed on this. More and more supports are required. The NCSE has developed various policy advice over the years. Education partners continually make submissions seeking further support. Tremendous support is required in terms of the development of leadership capacity and the enhancement and enrichment of teaching and learning methodologies. More and more support is-----

Deputy Marian Harkin: Is it being given? Is it available? Is it there? Do schools feel it is there for them and that they can use it?

Mr. John Kearney: I believe they feel it is there, but they are also asking for more in terms of a progressive approach and reviewing the quality of teaching and learning for students with special educational needs. In ongoing engagement, particularly that in the past week, the education partners are continually seeking more support and encouragement in terms of what they are endeavouring to do and rightly so.

To get back to the Deputy's specific query on the legislation, by and large the collaborative approach has worked. Some hotspots arise in terms of special classes being opened as quickly as we would like. We are always weighing it up in terms of the pace and the capacity of an individual school allied to the need for special class placement. When I speak to parents, I see the hurt and frustration in their eyes. I know what has to be done and whatever action is taken it is done with a view to delivering on the placement. Whether from the perspective of the NCSE or that of the Department or the Minister, it is a step we would rather avoid but if it is a step that has to be taken with a view to securing places-----

Deputy Marian Harkin: I hear what Mr. Kearney is saying but I am looking at it from the other perspective. I hear what he has said about certain hotspots. Change is always difficult. It is difficult in any institution and educational institutions are the same as all others. For change to happen significant supports are needed. The carrot is much more important than the stick. I am not saying the legislation is a stick but it is to some extent.

I want to follow on with another question that relates to this. Courses for teachers, St. Angela's in Sligo and courses for special needs assistants have been mentioned. Does the NCSE feel that sufficient courses, seminars and educational opportunities are in place for teachers so that we have sufficient numbers? Is there a timeframe for the 3,500 special needs assistants? How many will be there this year, next year and the year after?

Last week I spoke to some childcare providers. Many childcare providers have level 6 or 7 qualifications. Their services close during the summer. They made the point that perhaps there is a real opportunity, with a little bit of further education, for them to help with July provision and summer provision. I know this is not directly the responsibility of the NCSE but do the witnesses think it would be worth their while considering liaising with childcare providers or schools on extra places for July provision? I do not need to tell the witnesses it is very important.

Mr. John Kearney: I thank the Deputy. I will begin on some of the queries on the professional development of teaching staff. It is the starting point to bringing in the necessary change, the development of leadership and the teaching and learning development capacity in a school. For many years, it is decades at this stage, the Department has been supporting staff in participating in up-to-date professional development courses at graduate level, particularly at St. Angela's College in Sligo. There is also the progression to the masters programme that is envisaged. We have been reflecting and developing our own portfolio in a range of programmes

on sensory, communication, interaction, assessment planning and curriculum access aspects of autistic programme development. An area we have particularly targeted is supporting the continuing professional development of special needs assistants. I will invite my colleague, Ms Prendeville, to elaborate more on this. Before that, I want to tell the Deputy I concur with her on the importance of the summer programme. The Department has very much been leading to it, with regard to its development, enhancement and roll-out.

Deputy Marian Harkin: So much more is needed but Mr. Kearney knows that.

Mr. John Kearney: There is so much more that we have supported through various materials. Yesterday I met parents who are very concerned about access to the summer programme. Every avenue has to be explored with a view to enhancing participation. This was articulated to me very strongly yesterday. I saw the anxiety and concern of the parents about the coming weeks.

Ms Paula Prendeville: I will respond to a query raised earlier by Deputy Carroll MacNeill on continuing professional development of teachers. We provide a lot of training for teachers to support students with autism. We have an ongoing policy recommendation that continuing professional development for teachers on special educational needs should be mandatory. This is in accord with the Teaching Council. It has been recommended in several policy documents. At present, it is not mandatory.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Does the NCSE believe it should be?

Ms Paula Prendeville: We recommend that it is. With regard to building the capacity of schools to meet the needs of students with special educational needs-----

Deputy Marian Harkin: Our time is running down. Does Ms Prendeville have numbers for me?

Ms Paula Prendeville: Not at present. With regard to the question on the special needs assistants course, we are training 3,500 as the Deputy knows.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Right now?

Ms Paula Prendeville: A total of 500 have graduated and another 1,000 will graduate in September. Another 1,000 will enroll in September and again in the following September. Given there are 19,000 in this system this will have a very good multiplier effect to support students and meet their needs.

Deputy Marian Harkin: Many people have spoken about the need for wraparound therapies for students. Like everyone I have heard many parents, particularly in Sligo, speak about the lack of these. How much of the budget was spent last year?

Mr. John Kearney: In what area?

Deputy Marian Harkin: The overall budget.

Mr. John Kearney: We spent all of the allocation itself. What we did not spend was with regard to some of the staffing deficits. This was the only area-----

Deputy Marian Harkin: Will Mr. Kearney send me details on this please?

Mr. John Kearney: I certainly will.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank Mr. Kearney.

Mr. John Kearney: It would be very useful if I provided details on continuing professional development supports for staff. In this current academic year, we have engaged with more than 5,000 teachers on various continuing professional development initiatives. We have delivered more than 8,300 professional learning days. We have delivered more than 250 external programmes and we have conducted close to 200,000 in-school visits as our contribution to the change initiative required.

Deputy Marian Harkin: I thank the witnesses.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: I thank the witnesses for being here. This is an important and time-bound committee that has quite a lot of work to do within a nine-month timeframe. Even though we must take a much wider view of autism than just education, it would be widely acknowledged that children's access to appropriate education is a significant part of how they experience the world. It is not children with autism but all children.

I will be a bit all over the map on this. I have quite a number of questions to put to the witnesses. I looked fairly closely at the policy advice paper No. 5, which dates from 2014 and which is a bit outdated. My questions concern timelines around the provision of special education supports to children. Working off these 2014 figures, it was estimated that about 63% of children with autism were in a mainstream classroom whether that be supported or unsupported. Would that proportion broadly be the same or has it changed greatly?

Mr. John Kearney: It would roughly be consistent at this moment.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Let me start with a few specific questions. An average is very crude but at what age are children being diagnosed with autism because that affects access to services?

Mr. John Kearney: Ms Prendeville will take that question.

Ms Paula Prendeville: It depends on the gender of the student. We tend to see later diagnosis in young females whereas in the male population, they tend to be quite young when they are diagnosed. I am a trained psychologist and have worked as a teacher in early intervention and mainstream classes with children with autism. I have also worked in children's disability network teams so I have a really good sense of the issues of the ground and the holistic issues that crop up. Risk factors emerge early on but they tend to start flagging around eight or nine years of age depending on the developmental trajectories of the young person. You get to a certain stage where they are meeting their developmental goals and the developmental goals start to widen as social communications become more nuanced. Because autism is social communication difficulty, the gaps really start to widen at that stage whereas you tend to see that at a very young age in some young people born with developmental delays who present with autism and other co-occurring complex needs conditions so it really depends on the developmental trajectories of the children.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: If we are talking about children aged eight or nine, we have missed the boat in terms of early intervention. A secondary question - I wonder if it is a question at all - involves the complicating factor of disadvantage. I assume that wealthier parents have access to assessments more quickly because they can go private, which means that we have a complicating factor of disadvantage. Particularly in an early years setting, we know all of the benefits that are there in terms of language deficits and access to language within an

early years setting. I will leave it at that because it is not quite a question. What are the average waiting times for a diagnosis? How long are our waiting lists from the time a parent seeks a diagnosis and a principal takes one of those precious NEPS slots?

Ms Paula Prendeville: It depends. NEPS does not assess children with autism. It occurs in a multidisciplinary team, which is the remit of the Department of Health children's disability network teams. Even if a child is flagged as having a developmental difficulty with his or her NEPS psychologist within a school, the role of the NEPS psychologist is to sign post the parents in the direction of how to apply for an assessment. Waiting lists really depend on where students live, but that is a matter for the Department of Health regarding the waiting lists for children's disability network teams. We would not be privy to that information.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Is it weeks, months or years?

Ms Paula Prendeville: I would say probably the latter.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Yes. These are all going towards that idea of first presentation to when appropriate supports are put in place. Ms Prendeville said that possibly in or around 63% of children are still within mainstream classrooms. For the benefit of the committee, could she talk me through the continuing support process that will happen within schools? Again, there is a timeline issue. We should be talking about classroom support and move on to school support and school support plus. However, there is quite an amount of paperwork involved in getting from one end of that continuum to the other. Ms Prendeville might talk the committee through that process from the point of view of a principal, a classroom teacher or an SEN teacher, and how long it takes for a child to move through that process to get to the appropriate level of support.

Ms Paula Prendeville: The continuous support model is a response to intervention model that was developed with the Department of Education and rolled out initially by our NEPS colleagues in education. The NCSE uses that model and a multi-tiered system-of-support model. Regarding the response to intervention model, the Deputy is correct in saying that schools track how the child responds to intervention across those tiers. We have the universal tier where we have the expectation that the school environment would be adapted and supported to meet the needs of the young children and then over time, the school in collaboration with leadership - the set teacher and the SNA supporting the child - look to see how the child responds to that intervention over time. That is tracked over time. It is the business of schools to track that. I know the Deputy said there is work involved in it but a significant amount of supports have gone into schools to enable them to track that support to build capacity in schools. The NCSE has developed a lot of resources to help schools around that universal piece. We have the sensory document we produced, which really supports schools to understand the regulation needs of students. Our therapy colleagues within the NCSE have also developed communication supports around adapting the environment to meet those holistic communication needs. Any of us from teaching backgrounds who have taught children with autism know that really good interventions for students with autism are really good interventions for all children regardless of what their need is. There are a lot of universal supports. We can embed a universal design for learning approach, which meets the needs of all students.

Over time, some students will not respond to all those supports. They then move to the school support plus, which means there will be more intense supports for those students. The NCSE has many advisers who will go into schools and request additional supports. We have advisers in inclusion and behaviour who will help in respect of those needs. For the very in-

tense supports, students can access behavioural therapists because I know behaviour is a major issue in many schools, particularly in special schools.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: It was less a question about the work involved because I do not think any of the schools are averse to the work involved but there is quite an elongated timeline from when needs are first identified in a child to the child getting the appropriate supports. The universal design for learning piece needs digging into but we cannot do it in the one minute and 47 seconds available to me so I might pivot slightly.

The assessment of the July provision is less than sanguine in policy advice paper No. 5. Mr. Kearney emphasised how important the July provision is to him. I know he is new in the job, and perhaps a new brush sweeps clean. What has brought about the change in mindset towards the July provision? Have there been changes in the model of provision?

Mr. John Kearney: Yes. In the Department's close consultation with parents in particular regarding the necessity and importance of the July provision, especially for parents of children in special schools, Covid heightened the awareness of all stakeholders regarding this. The July provision is also important for Ukrainian students and other students with emerging needs. The importance of the stability and continuity of a regulated and consistent provision has highlighted it. Sometimes when you look at policy perspectives, they can look jaded or nuanced in retrospect. Many of those policy advices have stood the test of time in terms of 2015 when this document would have been issued and developed by the NCSE. Many of them have been implemented and progressed. Further enhancements can certainly be taken on board. The Deputy has astutely picked up on matters relating to the July summer provision programme. I know from engaging with the Department that it is progressing that initiative.

Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh: Have I any leeway to speak?

Chairman: We are tight on time. I will try to get the Deputy back in later.

Deputy Joe McHugh: Guím fáilte dár gcoiste roimh ár n-aíonna. Is deas bualadh agus caint le John Kearney arís mar gur chas mé air cúpla bliain ó shin i gCabán. Tá taithí mhór aige agus guím gach rath air ina phost úr. Guím fáilte roimh Mary McGrath fosta, is deas casadh léi arís fosta, agus roimh Paula Prendeville fosta, m'iarchomharsa i dTír Chonaill, go dtí an coiste. The Chair is strict on time so I will delve straight into this. Mr. Kearney's practical experience will be instrumental and pivotal in his new role. I wish him well. His knowledge of school settings and his relationship with principals and former staff will be critical, because he will know where the pressure points are. That is already evidenced in his contribution about the principals' seminar. Principals who do not have special classes need to hear from the principals who have special classes. It adds value to the school and changes its culture. Mr. Kearney knows all this. In Brownknowe National School in Donegal, one student became the new heartbeat of that school and it changed everything. That experience is important.

I was going to ask about St. Angela's College and the progression from a graduate certificate or diploma. Mr. Kearney answered it in his contribution. There is now a path to a masters degree. I was going to raise this in the context of a discussion I had with John Gorman, principal of Rosses Community School. He was talking about the value of that continuous professional development for teachers. St. Angela's College plays a significant role. It will be part of the Atlantic Technological University. The access officer in Letterkenny, Brian McGonagle, plays a key role too. Since that question has already been answered, I have an additional one. Are we mapping the progression of a student from secondary school into third level or the world

of work? There is a history and tradition of moving from primary special classes to secondary classes. These students are now entering the world of work. These are our new scientists and new leaders in the world of work or education. Are we mapping that progression as a way to inform other principals who do not necessarily understand the complete benefits of being part of this model? A good story might help.

My other question relates to special schools. I passed Little Angels Special School this morning. It was great to see the crane over the building site for the new school. I assume we have moved on from the New Brunswick idea of a few years ago. I want the NCSE to state its policy on special schools. In the last year, it announced the opening of two new special schools. During my time as Minister, we opened a new special school in Dublin. It is important that we have mainstream integration but there is still a need for special schools.

We have a positive story to tell in Donegal with regard to primary and secondary level interventions. We have been fortunate because, in the early days, some schools led from the front and created a new culture of inclusive education. A politician can get into bother by mentioning schools, but I will mention Scoil Íosagáin, Buncrana, Niall Mór National School, Killybegs and Woodland National School in Letterkenny. I have left others out but I just do not have time, so I apologise for that. Raphoe is not a big town or city, but Raphoe Royal and Prior Comprehensive School and Deelee College are both striving to provide this inclusive model. That is having a positive knock-on effect, so St. Eunan's National School, Raphoe, now wants to be part of that model. It is important to acknowledge the leadership of some schools, but then one becomes a victim of one's own success. We have great SENOs in Donegal. They mix with the schools and communities. They talk and listen to the parents. They do a great job and I publicly acknowledge the role they play. There is pressure on the system.

It is a demand-led system at one end but it can be a supply-led system when it comes to building. The building unit deals with new builds and extensions with special classes at the heart of their design. That is mandatory for new schools. In fairness, the building unit tries to reach out to provide as much as investment as possible to meet the demand. Not all schools want a prefab and a segregated setting for the special class. The real leaders that I have come across put a mainstream class into the new prefab and brought the special class into the heart of the school.

I may have to give a practical example of geography, because we learn by getting into the details of geography. Parents want their children to stay in their communities. There is no question of that. It has been reflected through the public domain in the last days. Not only are children not able to stay in their own communities, they are not able to get a class at all. That is a constraint of the system. I understand that frustration and we have to look at ways to try to facilitate that. Consider Dungloe and Loughanure. A principal in a primary school in Loughanure wants to open a special class. A parent has a child in that school. There is a class in Dungloe, but Dungloe is not in the Loughanure community as far as the parents are concerned. It is not local and brothers and sisters are involved. Should we not reward a school principal who steps up to the plate? It is the same in Milford National School. The principal and parents want a class in that area but they are not being accepted on the basis that classes are available in my alma mater, Scoil Eoin Baiste, Carrickart, and Kilmacrennan National School. They are quite close but they are completely different communities. If it did not matter what community children were in, parents would be sending their children to all sorts of different schools. In the main, that does not happen. Parents want their children to come to these new schools.

Will there be a review of that demand-led policy? If there are vacant classes in a school or

special class 20 miles away, does that prohibit a principal in a local school from opening a class if the demand exists? I have a fair idea of what the answer will be. It will be that there are constraints on the system and that special classes are being provided. I would like to emphasise that parents like to keep their children in their own communities if at all possible.

This may be a question for Ms McGrath. There is a pilot for 75 schools. She talked about benefits. Where are we with trying to make that model mainstream? It is an excellent model that works well. It will have occupational therapists, potentially physiotherapists, and speech and language therapists in one setting to work in a joined-up way. That has to be the way to go. Are we still banging the HSE's door down? I do not want to get into a turf war between the HSE and the Department of Education when addressing the NCSE's role, but we need leadership from the HSE on this matter, because the feedback on educational matters are positive. I thank the witnesses. They have a short time. If there are issues they cannot get across today, Mr. Kearney might correspond.

Mr. John Kearney: It is good to meet the Deputy again. I thank him for the contribution he made during my previous role in Cavan-Monaghan, the insights he gave, and the difference he made to the lives of many parents and young people in that region. He set the scope for future-proofing at post-primary level and the incorporation of special classes in all new builds. He started that off and, as we know, it has been extended and embellished by the Department in the delivery of the national development programme.

When making his point, the Deputy mentioned good examples of strong school leadership and putting inclusive agenda at the top of the agenda to progress it. As we know from parents and the political system, the NCSE's ambition is that children would attend their local school in their local community. Different needs dictate that at different times. At the moment our emphasis is on finding that special class placement. We may very well have to look at reconsidering our policy in terms of demand and need, how best to actually deliver that inclusive education, and what it means when we are dealing with the smaller primary schools in particular and the demands around them not necessarily getting the 6:1 student ratio. We will certainly be looking at that resource portfolio in time. I will ask my colleague Ms Prendeville to discuss the progression pathways that were mentioned. It is certainly an area of future development and evaluation. I will now invite Ms Prendeville to look at the continuing professional development, CPD, element of that. Ms McGrath may then take the Deputy's query about expansion.

Ms Paula Prendeville: I am conscious of the time so I will be brief. I will respond quickly to question on the trajectories beyond post-primary school for students who are completing their time in special schools. We are currently working very closely with the comprehensive employment strategy in the cross-departmental committee to really look at how we can do that joined-up thinking and provide wraparound support to meet the trajectories of young people who are transitioning from post-primary special schools into the world of work or into any apprenticeship. We welcome the announcement this morning on the increase in that. I will send the committee more details about that. It is probably the best way to progress it if I submit it to the committee at a later time, if that is okay. I will hand over to Ms McGrath now.

Ms Mary McGrath: Do I have time?

Chairman: Yes.

Deputy Joe McHugh: All you have to do is give me a date for the year.

Ms Mary McGrath: No problem. As I mentioned earlier, we have experienced challenges in recruiting the 31 therapists that have been sanctioned in the pilot area. I understand it is still a commitment of the Department to work to further expand that project. There have been fantastic results. It is something that we in the NCSE see as being transformative. We hope that this does proceed. There is a lot of work to do around workforce planning and there are challenges recruiting therapists. There is a lot of work going on in the background to drive that forward.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank Mr. Kearney, Ms McGrath and Ms Prendeville for coming to the committee today. The main objective of us all is that at the end of this process parents and children would be clear in the role they can play and the role the NCSE plays around the issue we must overcome.

Many of the questions have already been asked and answered but I would like to get a bit more detail from Mr. Kearney about the database and the five-year forecasting. We are aware from the NCSE's information that 14,000 students have been diagnosed with autism. The majority of that cohort is, I presume, in primary school currently and will be moving to secondary school in the future. Has the NCSE got this mapped out for the next five years? I would have thought that once a child enrolls in a primary school, the NCSE would know about it immediately and would be conscious of the progression of that child. The NCSE would know that if a four-year-old starts school next September, he or she will need a secondary school placement in nine years' time. Has its forecasting gone into that detail? For example, are there enough secondary school places for those children coming out of primary schools at the end of the coming school year, 2022-23? I presume the changes to section 37A are being brought into place because there would not be enough primary schools with autism classes or the means to bring a child into the school.

On the issue of having to get another assessment of need when going into secondary school, parents have said to me that they have had to get this assessment done privately. Obviously, it is needed for the child to progress into secondary school to assess what his or her needs are. Perhaps we could get some clarification around that.

I also want to ask about July provision. I welcome Mr. Kearney's comment earlier about the role July provision can play. How many children have not have access to July provision this summer? I am aware that there are different reasons for some children not being able to get it. Some committee members, including the Chairman, were at a meeting last week where we discussed the small crèches whose staff are unemployed for the summer. They are let go when the school term ends and then brought back in September. They were saying that this cohort of workers could possibly be open to providing July provision. Has the NCSE looked at this area? I will leave it at that and if I need to come back in later I will ask another question then.

Mr. John Kearney: I thank Deputy Collins. I will take some of the queries the Deputy has raised, starting with the July provision programme. Our role within the NCSE is to support that programme rather than oversee the administration of it. As I shared with some of the Deputy's committee colleagues earlier, the programme is one we very much endorse. We see the value of it for parents and we see it from our engagement with parents and, especially, the SENOs' engagement with parents. The value and merit of that particular programme is well endorsed. We support every possible way in which we can support that programme, for example with resource materials. The Deputy is seeking the numbers participating in the programme. We can source those figures from the Department and revert to the committee afterwards.

On the requirement for assessment, it is entailed within the individual enrolment policies of

schools. An assessment report of less than two years is required with regard to the assessment criteria for the progression of students to post-primary level.

I will recap on the issue of our database. We have a forecasting model that looks ahead for five years. We very much take account on an ongoing basis. It is a five-year forecasting model but it is developing in consultation with the Department from the geographic information system that is provided to us and weekly engagements. The success of it has really been seen with the delivery of so many special class placements this year, notwithstanding the black spots we have alluded to.

There will be other challenges ahead. We have seen extraordinary growth at post-primary level which is beginning to peter out now. This will lead to spare capacity in primary schools. When one considers where the peak is now heading for provision, up to about 2026 the peak will be very strong at post-primary level. Unfortunately, there will be pinch points that we will have to navigate with all partners in delivering the degree and sufficiency of special class placements that are required. I am glad to say, however, that there is a bit of reprieve at primary level making the delivery of special class requirements that little bit easier. Notwithstanding this, there will be fundamental challenges at post-primary level. Obviously, the ongoing challenges will also continue with regard to Dublin. I am very confident that our five-year forecasting model is providing us with the necessary information and data that we will require in scoping out the future need and delivery requirements.

Deputy Joan Collins: On the speech and language therapists in the school inclusion model, will Mr. Kearney send the committee a breakdown of how many will be needed? I have found that some schools had been looking for the service, and to get a special education adviser into the schools, but they have been put on a waiting list. This negates the role of the service if there is a service but the school cannot access it. A child can be affected by being put on a shorter school day or sent home. This can have a big impact on the child. Will Mr. Kearney give us the breakdown of the vacancies in that area? Perhaps Mr. Kearney will also send over the programme for the five-year forecasting. It would be very interesting to have a look at that. I have covered the area in Dublin 12. We have four secondary schools that have no autism classes and four primary schools. It would be good to see them moving over the next two months.

Mr. John Kearney: I thank the Deputy. We will certainly provide that information she alluded to on the forecasting and the school inclusion model.

Deputy Joan Collins: I thank the officials.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. A couple of members from other committees indicated they wanted to come in. I will give them three minutes each but before that Deputy Carroll MacNeill wishes to come back in.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: I thank the Chairman. I just have a couple of quick questions on practical matters. How does the NCSE support dual enrolments between say, a national school and a special school and how does it track and monitor the effectiveness of that or is that something the NCSE does? How does it track the breakdown of placements or what I described earlier about this perceived managing-out of a student? What is the council's role in that and what communication does it have, say, in the example I gave earlier where the school is saying to the parent it does not think it has the resources or capacity to support their child next year? What is the council's role and when does it get notified? I ask the officials to describe that to me.

We have touched on the SNA and teacher training and what has been especially highlighted is psychological training and presence of psychologists to be able to support different behaviours so children have the opportunity to learn in a better way. Those three aspects are really important to me.

Mr. John Kearney: I ask Ms Prendeville to take the SNA training first.

Ms Paula Prendeville: Okay. Does the Deputy want more specific details about the SNA training?

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Yes, especially on the psychological side and supporting behaviours. That is the point that has been raised again and again to me. There is another issue that is also being raised with the special schools and the teacher training more generally, though I appreciate the latter is not the NCSE's direct remit. Teachers when they are being trained get a two-week placement in a special school but they do not prepare a lesson plan or do any of the things they might do in an equivalent way for any other school. Therefore, you have teachers being produced every year by the colleges of education who are not necessarily equipped to take over special classes within the schools. You do not see a career progression for teachers within mainstream schools to take over special classes and it is being left, one has a sense, to the designs of the individual principal about finding somebody who has either the experience or the desire to do that. However, if we do not have teachers coming out who are equipped to deal with children with additional needs in all forms then that is going to be much more difficult.

Ms Paula Prendeville: I can answer this really quickly if that is okay. I am getting a look from the Chairman. First, on behaviour, there has been a lot of work on behaviour for the training of teachers and SNAs. A lot of work has been done in the background with regard to those specific behaviours of concern that are in schools. There were plans to publish that prior to the Covid pandemic and that work is at a very advanced stage at the moment. Alongside the work the Department has done on that, the NCSE has developed a behaviour framework and we are really hoping both of those will support schools in the next academic year to meet that very intense need of building the capacity at universal level, the target level and the very specific level to build the whole capacity of the school system.

Specific to teachers and teacher training, the céim recommendations around the requirements that young trainee teachers coming out into the system have an understanding of the needs students with disabilities and inclusion are mandatory from January of next year with the Teaching Council. That means every initial teacher training course in the country has to have embedded those practices within its training programme. There are provisions there for supporting those teacher trainers who are out on their professional training placement, so that will progress in that space.

On the SNAs, as the Deputy knows, we have the course that has been running in UCD. An internal review was done on that and as the Deputy rightly said, there is that need for the SNAs to have greater understanding of the behaviours to address and meet the behaviours of concern for students - all student with needs. It has been looked at and, in response to that, to support it there is an extra module being developed currently that will be available to the SNAs who are attending that course. This extra module is specific to addressing behaviours of concern to build the capacity within SNAs to meet that need. There are three positive moves in that space I hope will make an impact in the next school year.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Okay. Ms Prendeville understands I am not criticising behaviours as such; it is really to get beyond that to allow children to learn.

Ms Paula Prendeville: Yes, exactly.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Of course.

Ms Paula Prendeville: I understand but it is just there are three initiatives moving there I think will really support the system.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Yes. I thank Ms Prendeville.

Mr. John Kearney: To come back to the other queries, a previous point referenced the chief inspector's report this year that set a good number of challenges with respect to the appropriateness of special class placements. The Deputy's question is really probing. There are a number of facets to that, in terms of the NCSE supporting transitions where you leave one schooling environment and go into another educational facility and track that along. Unfortunately-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Does Mr. Kearney mean dual enrolment? Is that what he is talking about?

Mr. John Kearney: Yes, I am just talking about if you are going from primary to post-primary; it is just one particular facet of that.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Okay.

Mr. John Kearney: The particular area the Deputy alluded to, dual enrolment of fostering greater engagement integration between a special class, the whole school itself and then by wider extension with special schools, that is an area of development that needs to be prioritised. Unfortunately from our perspective, there are capacity issues in delivering on that.

The breakdown in placements is a very astute observation as well because it is our thinking each individual placement would have to be reviewed on an annual basis because that alludes back to the chief inspector's report as well, so there is significant work and progression. We would very much like to have a role in that but unfortunately as we currently stand there are capacity issues with that. I have worked with the Deputy's colleague at ministerial level. Both Ministers are aware of it in terms of additional support and resources for the NCSE and likewise with the Department. We are progressing that with a view to delivering on those very incisive observations the Deputy has made there on supporting-----

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: If I could just say-----

Chairman: I want to bring in Senator Dolan.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: -----it is very helpful to have this committee used to highlight those capacity issues because where dual enrolment works well and you can move from a special school into mainstream, it is a huge advantage.

Mr. John Kearney: Yes.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: The only question I have about the breakdown of places is whether Mr. Kearney is saying if it is reviewed on an annual basis, it would not lead to uncertainty for parents that their child's place was up for review, as it were.

Mr. John Kearney: No, this would be part of an ongoing review. It is a consultative meeting that would take place with the parents, the involved school management and the special education teaching staff who are very much involved. It is a collaborative process that would have to take place so the placement is continually reviewed and the best interests of the child are continually being progressed and enhanced.

Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill: Okay.

Chairman: I thank the Deputy. I want to let in Senator Dolan. She has three minutes.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I thank the Cathaoirleach. It is great to be here. This is my first time at a meeting of the Joint Committee on Autism and it is wonderful to have it, thanks to the Cathaoirleach.

I have just gone through Mr. Kearney's opening statement and I thank him for the detail given there. It is very important. As he has mentioned, we have 13,000 school students with autism. That is a lot of families and households who are dealing with this. It is good to have this important focus. I am curious about some of what is in the opening statement, which references 3,500 SNAs. We had a group in with the education committee last week and I understood it was 1,000 at the moment and 500 that have previously been trained. Is that 3,500 over a number of years? That is the first question.

The census has just been done and the population is 5.1 million, which is excellent. Lots of people are wanting to come and live in Ireland. Of course, I want them all to come and live in the west and take the pressure off Dublin. However, we have challenges with capacity in areas like Ballinasloe where I am based. We have St. Teresa's as the special needs school there dealing with moderate to severe complex needs as well, which is so important. That graduation from primary to post-primary is going to be crucial. Then there is the role of the SNAs. To understand this a little better, if SNAs are a primary school-level support, what happens when you move into secondary school? The SNAs, from what I understand, are not going to be providing care in each subject when their students are at secondary school level. I apologise if the officials have commented on this before but will they highlight how that could be managed, especially with that increase we see coming down the tracks? It is something that is going to be very important, especially where we already have issues with capacity? In another few years it is going to be an even bigger pressure.

Mr. John Kearney: I thank the Senator. I ask Ms Prendeville to take the query on the SNA programme.

Ms Paula Prendeville: Yes. This was a recommendation we made some time ago on enhancing the role of the SNA and providing for that professional development support. The programme is being run over three and a half years.

Senator Aisling Dolan: The figure of 3,500 is over three and a half years.

Ms Paula Prendeville: Yes. It was 500 for the first year and 1,000 have just completed. Those people will be graduating in September and October.

Senator Aisling Dolan: Does Ms Prendeville see it as being possible to roll this programme out regionally? We have 19,000 SNAs. How do we roll out the level of education we wish to provide to all our SNAs if we are only catering for 1,000 people a year? Does Ms Prendeville think other colleges could provide this programme and that we could increase the

numbers involved each year in that way?

Ms Paula Prendeville: Other colleges have training courses currently. St. Angela's College in Sligo has a training programme that has run for a considerable time. This programme, however, was developed specifically through the school of education in UCD and it is all delivered online. It was developed during the time of-----

Senator Aisling Dolan: The lockdown.

Ms Paula Prendeville: Yes, it was.

Senator Aisling Dolan: Is there any value to having an in-person type of engagement for SNAs as well?

Ms Paula Prendeville: I can speak to that aspect because I was involved in the development of the autism training module before I took this role with the NCSE. In the results of internal evaluations done so far, SNAs have welcomed this course. They said it has empowered them a great deal in respect of the work they do. The programme is being evaluated by the NCSE. Once that evaluation is available, it will be possible to get a good sense of the positive outcomes. I know what the Senator is saying regarding-----

Senator Aisling Dolan: That is great, but how do we get more people trained up? It is a great course and I know many people who wish to do it. Another issue in this context is that many people are subbing in SNA roles. From what I understand, though, this programme is currently only available to those who are full-time SNAs, but many people are working in these roles part-time. We wish to get more people to come in to do this type of work. How do we support people who are subbing and doing this type of work to allow them to get access to some type of training? Regarding the 19,000 SNA full-time positions, do all those people have roles within schools or are these positions in which people can come in, sub in one school and then move to another school and sub there for another few days? Do the witnesses understand what I mean?

Mr. John Kearney: Yes, different arrangements apply in individual-----

Senator Aisling Dolan: Is it up to the schools to say that even people subbing are eligible to do this course?

Mr. John Kearney: Yes, it is up to the schools.

Mr. John Kearney: Yes, these are local school arrangements.

Senator Aisling Dolan: The schools decide.

Mr. John Kearney: Yes. As we know from our engagement with the school leadership groups-----

Senator Aisling Dolan: What about the part-time aspect?

Mr. John Kearney: -----school leaders, by and large, strongly support the CPD requirements of their staff. There is a general endorsement of the SNA group.

Senator Aisling Dolan: Can I ask one last quick question?

Chairman: Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan wishes to contribute.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I will get a written response, if that is okay. My final point is that SNAs who are subbing and going into schools sometimes do not receive information about the children with whom they are dealing. Do the witnesses wish to comment on this aspect? The teachers are managing this. People are subbing and coming into a school environment. Many schools are trying to manage bringing in people to sub as SNAs.

Mr. John Kearney: This is a query for individual schools. Our role is very much in respect of supporting best practice on how-----

Senator Aisling Dolan: To let the SNAs have the knowledge in advance to allow them to know how best to manage the children.

Mr. John Kearney: Yes. We have various teacher professional learning, TPL programmes, especially for deploying, supporting and enhancing the SNA role in schools. Part of the practice the Senator alluded to would certainly be encapsulated within our programme offering.

Senator Aisling Dolan: I thank Mr. Kearney.

Chairman: I call Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: Deputy Harkin touched on the issue of July provision earlier. I would like some clarification in this regard. A record budget of €40 million has been allocated again this year. In all likelihood, and hand on heart, we know we will be lucky if half this amount is drawn down. Let us be straight about this point. What is the role of the NCSE in this regard? Have policy documents been drawn up on this issue? I read the NCSE’s corporate governance guide last night. Under the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, the organisation has the ability “to advise the Minister on any matter relating to the education of children and others with disabilities”. That is quite a broad set of criteria.

On that basis, and concerning summer provision, we all want to see it being a success. Many people on this committee and on the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science come from educational backgrounds. Unfortunately, there are many different reasons this July provision scheme is probably not as successful as it could be. Even now, many parents tell me that because it has become so broad, the people it was designed for originally are not benefiting half as much as perhaps they should be. What is the NCSE’s role in this regard? If the organisation does not have a specific policy in this regard, is that something it could explore?

Mr. John Kearney: We do not have a formal role in the administration of the programme itself. We do, however, completely see the merits of the programme, including in the context of our continuous engagement with parents. I met with a group of parents yesterday and they highlighted the benefits of the programme in addressing their requirements in the next eight to ten weeks. We embrace and support the requirements of the programme itself. We support it in respect of the development of materials on which we can assist in the context of the delivery of the programme.

We certainly will take on board the policy comments made by Deputy O’Sullivan in respect of future contributions to the programme. We are also very much aware that the inspectorate recently commissioned a report on this scheme. Strong feedback was received on its merits and benefits. Therefore, regarding the continuation of the programme and its enhancement and improvement, that is well merited this year and in the years to come in respect of the benefits it brings to so many.

Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan: Everybody involved will appreciate those comments. From the NCSE’s point of view, however, I think we could get far more from this programme. In many respects, it is too late for this year, but for next year it would be worth looking at providing advice to the Minister concerning how we can improve this initiative.

Mr. John Kearney: We will certainly take on board that suggestion from the Deputy.

Chairman: I am the last speaker. We have gone slightly over time. We have tried to keep this meeting inside the two hours. I will make a few points. I speak as a parent with personal knowledge. I have also served on the board of management of Ardscoil Phádraig in Granard in north Longford, which has three special classes. Mr. Kearney will know it. It was one of the first schools in the midlands to have a special class. As Deputy McHugh said, these classes are at the heart of the school and that is where they need to be. They must be in the school and not, by any means, in an outside setting. Other students in schools derive great benefits from working with the students in the special classes.

Section 37 was mentioned. I am fully in favour of what has happened in recent days concerning the naming of the schools in the context of this section. We cannot have a situation where schools are not in favour of having special classes on their grounds. We cannot have a situation where children must leave their local communities and travel to special classes. I discussed this issue with parents in Athlone this morning, an area local to my own. Parents have had to book a place for their children in a school that is 55 km away. It means a round trip of 110 km daily, five days a week. We have a school system where it is necessary to go to the nearest school to avail of school transport. Yet children with special needs must instead go to the nearest school that is actually available to them. I fully support section 37 and its use and the Minister of State with special responsibility in this area, Deputy Madigan, mentioning section 67 of the Education Act 1998, as amended.

We must have a situation where children are educated with their siblings in their local communities. This means I am fully in favour of, and this is something I will be proposing to the NCSE and to the Department, doing an audit of every school at primary and post-primary levels to ask them if they are willing to have special classes. Those results need to be put up on the Department’s website. We need there to be a special class in every school in the country, if there is a need in local areas. We should not have to invoke legislation or be discussing bringing in emergency legislation. It is a disgrace that we must do this. We must do it, though, because some schools are not willing to have special classes. It is totally wrong. We need an inclusive education system so that all children, as I said before, can be educated with their siblings in their local community. We should ensure we do not again have a situation like the one we have today, where parents do not know what schools their children will be in next September. This situation is prevalent in numerous areas we have mentioned, including Dublin and Cork. As I said, in my local area, in Athlone, eight children must travel up to 55 km return daily. This is happening in 2022 and it is unacceptable.

I fully support the school inclusion model mentioned in the context of the CHO 7 area. This is the way forward. Speech and language therapy and occupational therapy must be available in the school setting, rather than children having to go out to clinical settings for these appointments. This is the way forward. The ability of SNAs to change courses daily must also be implemented. This move can only benefit kids. I have seen the benefits of early intervention for children. This is the stage at which it needs to be done, at that younger age. I have also seen the benefits of using music therapy. Music therapy should be rolled out more. I have seen the benefit it has for children’s speech. It is amazing the difference it can make. We referenced the

July provision and the summer provision a number of times. As Deputy O'Sullivan just mentioned, the reality is that the children it was set up for are not benefiting from it at all currently because a significant number of schools, including special schools, are not making the summer provision available. This year, we had to give financial incentives to schools to provide summer provision for children that are entitled to get it. Children will regress over the summer if they do not get support, but we are struggling to get staff and schools to come on board. Summer provision must be mandatory throughout the summer term.

We have it in our work programme that we will have discussions with other countries. Malta is a small island in the middle of the Mediterranean and it is miles ahead of us with regard to the provision for children with special needs throughout the summer. We must look to expand the summer provision. We met ECCE programme workers. We have a situation where people are qualified up to levels 6, 7 and 8, with master's in education degrees, who work in the ECCE system and they have to sign on for unemployment benefit during the summer months, yet we are struggling to get staff to work in the July provision. We hope to have the Teaching Council before the committee in the coming weeks. The fact that a person needs to have a Teaching Council number to work on the July provision scheme is an issue. That must be changed. We have qualified people working in the ECCE system going on unemployment benefit when they could work with and help children with special needs.

We also have third level students in the areas of speech and language and occupational therapy at a time when there is a shortage of qualified staff. We must look at where is the best place for them to do their work experience. They could do it as part of the July provision and give children speech and language and occupational therapy during the summer months. They are simple proposals and simple asks. I know it does not come not under the remit of the witnesses, but I ask them to highlight that it is something that can be done. When we review the summer provision this year, that is something that needs to be put in place for next year.

I ask the witnesses to continue their work. They have taken the right decision in the past 24 to 48 hours. There has been some criticism from certain organisations, but this is the right road to go. Children need to be educated in their own local school. We do not need a situation where people are travelling a return journey of 110 km five days a week for their children to get an education. It is 106 years since the 1916 Rising, when we talked about cherishing all the children of the country equally. The reality is that we are not doing it when we have a situation like that happening.

I support the work the witnesses are doing. We know that massive improvements need to be made within the system, but this is a very positive start. I ask the witnesses to look at the situation in Athlone. It is close to my home, and I work with parents in an advocacy group. It is 28 June and they do not know if they have a place for their children in September 2022. That is something that must be addressed immediately.

Mr. John Kearney: I commend the Chairman on how he conducted and led a very inspiring and thoughtful discussion this morning. In particular, I acknowledge the role he played in Granard, which is close to home for me. I remember the proactive leadership provided by the school. That was at whole-school level. I also acknowledge the Chairman's role at the board-of-management level. It is a whole-school approach, with the board of management taking stock and providing school leadership and ultimately the entire extended teaching staff of the school itself becoming involved.

We will certainly progress matters in Athlone. We are progressing a number of opportuni-

ties there in terms of addressing the issues to which you alluded. We very much concur with the expansion and roll-out of the summer programme. We have taken on board the contributions of various members on the summer programme in terms of further contributions to it.

There has been significant delivery of special class placements, this year and in previous years, in consultation and collaboration with many schools. As part of our deliberations last week, we met and consulted with all school management bodies. They very much want to deliver the same thing. They have logistical concerns in terms of adequate planning and resources being put in place to address the challenges they are taking on. Unfortunately, at times there will be situations where the degree of collaboration will not be at the level we would all like. In those situations, a sharp rebuttal process is needed. I hope we will be looking at that today in considerations in other channels, and the truncating of the section 37A process in terms of the enhancement of the section 67 avenue as well, with a view to delivering sharper inputs in terms of special class delivery.

On behalf of the NCSE, I thank all the Oireachtas Members present. It has been a very engaging conversation. Those involved in special education are passionate and enthusiastic. Special education brings out the best in us in terms of what we ultimately want to deliver for this country. We have made great strides in recent decades and years. We have much more to do, as has been highlighted and earmarked today. I wish the committee the very best of luck in its deliberations. This is a very active and vibrant committee, and it is timely in terms of the future development and delivery of special education in this country. I commend the committee on its work and how proceedings were conducted this morning.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Kearney. Just before we finish, I ask him to comment on an issue that has been in the media in the past 48 hours. It was requested that section 37A would not be invoked until September. There were comments from the INTO in that regard. Could Mr. Kearney comment on the matter? Letters were sent to schools, in particular to the 14 schools in Dublin. Ten schools engaged and four did not. Part of the section 37A process is that the schools are then listed on the Department's website.

Mr. John Kearney: We are in a complex area when we mention the section 37A process. We are balancing two needs at all stages. Schools the length and breadth of this country have worked to respond to Covid. As we all know, they were at the centre of communities in terms of offering support to them and reaching out in response to the Ukrainian challenge that presented. We are now going again with another ask in terms of the delivery of special class placements. We are always conscious of the situation regarding section 37A. I have met many parents whose special class placements were not delivered. I am an educationalist at heart. I know the frustration, anxiety, hurt and uncertainty in the voices of parents, and that is who I will be responding to in terms of issuing the necessary correspondence that has to be issued. There is a collective responsibility, and that was echoed in the Ombudsman's report last week. Ultimately, that is what we have to respond to at a systemic level throughout the country to ensure that parents get due regard in terms of special class placements.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Kearney very much. I thank him, Ms Prendeville and Ms McGrath for coming here to speak with us today and giving us their insights into special education. It has been very beneficial and informative for us.

Our next scheduled public meeting will be on Tuesday, 5 July 2022, when we will consider autism policy and education with the Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion at the Department of Education, Deputy Madigan, and a number of teachers'

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unions. As agreed at our last meeting, the committee is now adjourned until Thursday, 30 June, when we will meet in private session.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.19 p.m. until 12 noon on Thursday, 30 June 2022.