

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM NITHE A BHAINNEANN LE MÍCHUMAS

JOINT COMMITTEE ON DISABILITY MATTERS

Déardaoin, 3 Márta 2022

Thursday, 3 March 2022

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Holly Cairns,	Erin McGreehan,
Pauline Tully.	Eugene Murphy,*
	Mary Seery Kearney.

* In éagmais / In the absence of Senator Fiona O'Loughlin.

I láthair / In attendance: Deputy Pat Buckley.

Teachta / Deputy Michael Moynihan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Aligning Education with the UNCRPD: Discussion (Resumed)

Chairman: As with the previous meeting, we have a number of apologies. They were received from Deputies Canning, Hourigan, Murnane O'Connor, Phelan and Wynne and Senator Flynn. The purpose of today's meeting is to discuss aligning education with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, UNCRPD. I welcome the Minister of State at the Department of Education, Deputy Madigan, as well as Ms Martina Mannion and Mr. Eddie Ward of the Department. All are extremely welcome to the committee. The Minister of State may call on her officials to speak briefly for clarification during the meeting where specific topics are raised. The officials can clarify issues to the committee and any follow-up questions should be put to the Minister of State as she is the accountable person before the committee. I am aware a wide range of issues will be subjects in today's discussion. If necessary, further and more detailed information on certain issues can be sent to the clerk to the committee by the Department.

I remind members they are only allowed to participate in the meeting if they are within the precincts of Leinster House. In this regard, if members are joining remotely, I ask them to confirm whether they are within the Leinster House precincts or not.

Before I commence the meeting, I will outline the position on privilege. The witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. I wish to advise witnesses giving evidence from a location outside the parliamentary precincts to note that the constitutional protection afforded to witnesses before the committee may not extend to them. No clear guidance can be given. If witnesses are asked to cease giving evidence in relation to a particular matter they must respect the decision of the committee.

I call on the Minister of State to make her opening statement.

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I thank the Cathaoirleach and the committee for the invitation to attend. I am accompanied, as he said, by Ms Mannion, assistant secretary general for special education and inclusion, and Mr. Ward, principal officer of the special education section.

The topic before the committee is aligning education with the UNCRPD and, in particular, a focus on the progress being made on aligning special education policy and provision with the convention. As the Minister of State with responsibility for special education and inclusion, I am committed to making a difference for students who have additional needs as part of an inclusive education system. It is important I outline to the committee the Government's ambition to develop an inclusive education system that meets the needs of all children regardless of disability or other disposition.

As Minister of State, it is my firm belief our education system should be adaptable and responsive to the needs of students. From my visits to schools across the country I have seen first-hand how this is the case in our schools. At the outset, I pay tribute to all our school staff, at every level, for the work they do. Through their work in the area of special education, they celebrate the individual talents of every young person in every classroom. That is as it should be. School staff know true equality is about much more than treating everyone the same. It also

involves an understanding that different people have different needs and that where these needs are met and supported, people are liberated to achieve their full potential. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, “education is the cornerstone of liberty”. By ensuring those with the greatest need receive the greatest level of support, our schools make this liberty possible for everyone.

Persons with disabilities in Ireland have equal rights of access to education under the law. The Education Act 1998 makes provision for the education of every person in the State, including any persons with disabilities. The primary piece of legislation dealing with education for persons with disabilities is the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004, known as EPSEN. EPSEN provides that a child with special educational needs should be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have special educational needs, unless it is not in the best interests of the child with special educational needs, or if it is inconsistent with the effective provision of education for the children with whom the child is to be educated. The Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 commenced in 2020. It brings more transparency to school enrolment and aims to prevent discrimination on a number of grounds, including disability. There is also provision in section 37 of the Education Act 1998 for the Minister to direct a school to open new special classes where required.

The Department’s policy is to ensure all children with special educational needs can be provided with an education appropriate to their needs. This means children with special educational needs should be included, where possible and appropriate, in mainstream settings with the necessary additional teaching and care supports in place. In circumstances where children with special educational needs require more specialised interventions, special school or special class places are provided for. We fully recognise that these more specialist supports and settings also have an important role to play. I am happy to say most children with special educational needs are educated in mainstream classes. The benefits of mainstream education are known and recognised. We must continue to build a society with inclusion at its heart, where everyone is welcome and where full participation is the right of every person, no matter their background or need. Our schools are where we nurture and develop the future of our society and there should be no barriers to inclusion, and no artificial segregation. In the past few years, we have made huge progress in providing the additional special class and special school places necessary to meet the emerging needs of children and young people. It is worth noting too that schools have bought into this vision of inclusivity, which is demonstrated by their willingness to enrol children with special needs in their mainstream classes and to open special classes where required.

The Department will this year spend more than €2 billion, or 25% of its total educational budget, on providing additional supports for children with special educational needs. This represents an increase of more than 60% in total expenditure since 2011. There are now 1,854 special classes for children with autism in place. Of those, 133 are early intervention, 1,205 are primary and 516 are post-primary autism special classes. This provision for 287 additional special classes in 2022-23 will bring the total number of classes to 2,405 in the 2022-23 school year and will represent an increase of 339% since 2011, when 548 were provided. Three new special schools have been opened in the past three years, with two being located in Dublin and one in Cork. Additional places continue to be provided to ensure children with the most complex educational needs receive an education in line with those needs.

We have worked hard to strengthen and streamline the planning systems between the Department and the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, to ensure that there are sufficient special education places available to meet needs throughout the country. Significant investment has been made to ensure schools have the necessary accommodation and facilities

to receive children and young people with disabilities.

Professional development for teachers and school leaders is key to building capacity and confidence among teachers and their leaders and a truly inclusive culture and school environment. I also refer to the extensive additional programmes provided to support students during the period of Covid-19 to ensure all students, including those with special educational needs, were supported and that their support continues through the Covid Learning and Supports Scheme, CLASS, in schools.

Complying with obligations of the convention is a priority for my Department and indeed the Government more broadly. In this regard, there are a number of other matters that are relevant to building an inclusive education system. This includes the policy advice from NCSE. It is currently working on policy advice on effective special education provision generally and this will also address the requirements of the convention. On the school inclusion model, we are aware, through policy advice from the NCSE, the current range of supports in schools, in other words, teaching and care on their own, do not fully meet the needs of some children with special educational needs, especially those with complex needs in the areas of speech and language, communication, sensory impairments, self-regulation and positive behaviour skills. Under the school inclusion model, which is currently at a pilot stage, we aim to broaden the range of supports that are provided to include speech and occupational behavioural supports. This is in order that schools will be better equipped to meet the needs of these children and in order that they can achieve better life outcomes. We are currently working on a proposal to develop and to expand the pilot in the coming year.

There is also a review of the EPSEN Act. As members will know, this legislation has been in place for almost 20 years and it is timely that we would review it now. There has been significant change in Department policy and educational provision has increased substantially in the intervening period. There also has been legislative change that impacts on education. This review will help to ensure that our laws reflect current policy and international norms on provision and inclusion. I plan to make a further announcement on this matter shortly.

The Irish Sign Language Act 2017 provides people whose main language is Irish Sign Language, ISL, with certain statutory entitlements. In recognition of this, yesterday I was pleased to launch a new scheme to provide ISL in-school supports for students who are deaf and whose primary means of communication is ISL. We are creating a new, specialised in-school support post for individual students so that they can fully access education and so that they can participate in school life. We will also be providing training and support for the school community, including teachers and special needs assistants, SNAs, to help with communication using Irish Sign Language. This is a positive development. It is the latest step in ensuring that we have an inclusive education system in which everyone is supported to reach his or her full potential. I am confident the implementation of this Act in education will create a more inclusive school environment for these young people.

It is a priority for me to support the transition of young people with a disability right through the education system, with a particular focus on enabling young people to make informed life choices. We are working with colleagues across a number of Departments to ensure that this remains a focus of the third action plan under the comprehensive employment strategy for persons with disabilities, which will cover the period 2022 to 2024.

In conclusion, my Department is fully committed to the full implementation of the convention. This will be achieved through increased investment, through implementation of evidence-

informed advice, as well as through consultation with teachers, parents, children, young people and general society.

Chairman: I thank the Minister of State. We will now go to members. Our first questions will be from Senator Murphy, who is substituting for Senator O'Loughlin.

Senator Eugene Murphy: I welcome the Minister of State to our meeting this morning. As the Chairman noted, I am substituting for Senator O'Loughlin, who is otherwise engaged.

First, I wish to pay tribute to the Minister of State, to the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, and to their officials. While this can be a difficult area and we always will have issues and questions, I acknowledge that much progress has been made in recent years. Although we all still have issues with schools, we acknowledge that much improvement has been made. In her opening statement, the Minister of State referred to 2011 and showed us how far things have come along since then. Nevertheless, we still have many issues to deal with.

I wish to raise one specific issue that is of great concern to me at present. Although it is not widespread, in some schools there is a slowness to accept special educational needs classes. I think that is regrettable. Is the Minister of State aware of this? I have come across it. She might find there is a need for it in a locality in which, despite the best efforts of the Department that even include allocating the funds to progress with a project, in some cases there is a reluctance to do so. That is highly regrettable. At this stage, I might ask the Minister of State to make a comment on that.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Senator for his comments, as well as for his acknowledgement of the progress that has been achieved to date.

On the special classes, I have been acutely aware of this since I came into this role as the very first Minister of State with responsibility for special education. This is really about a collaborative effort with schools via the Department. The Senator will be aware, and I mentioned this in my initial contribution, of the review of section 37 of the Education Act 1998 that is under way at the moment. The majority of special classes, however, are opened through engagement with the schools themselves. It is important to note that since 2011, and the Senator alluded to this, we have increased the number of special classes by 386%. We were at 548 classes, and this year we are now at 2,118. That is a substantial and a significant increase. We want to work with schools to entice them, for want of a better word, to open a special class, to show them that it is in their interests and to show that there are increased capitation supports. It is for the best overall, including for other children and not just for children who have additional needs. The NCSE is working proactively with schools on an ongoing basis in that regard. In addition, we have an increased number of SNAs, of whom we will have more than 19,000 by the end of this year, which is a support in terms of opening up special classes. As for schools with teaching principals that have two or more special classes, they are receiving additional administrative support.

Chairman: We will now move to questions from Deputy Tully.

Deputy Pauline Tully: I welcome the Minister of State and her officials and thank her for her presentation. I wish to raise a couple of issues in respect of the progressing disability model. While I acknowledge it is not under the remit of the Minister of State, it affects schools in that there has been a withdrawal of speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and physiotherapists from special schools. I am very concerned about that, as are the parents.

They are very distressed about it. The Minister of State referenced the social inclusion model. We had the NCSE before the committee recently, whose representatives also spoke about it. To me, that sounds like an excellent model. I acknowledge it is only a pilot programme at present but I would love to see it rolled out. However, is one not in contravention of the other, that is, withdrawing services from a school and then looking at a pilot programme to put services into schools? The right method would be to put the services into the school to support the students. If we want an inclusive education and if we want students with additional needs to attend mainstream classes, we have to put in the supports to do that.

I am concerned as well that we have seen the expulsion of a number of children from special schools. These are children with additional needs who are being expelled, disgracefully, from special schools. However, the bottom line is that schools are not given the supports to support those students or perhaps the children did not get the supports at an early enough age to ensure they could engage in education as they go along.

I would also like to comment on an issue that is connected to the progressing disability model. They seem to have moved away from the assessment of need under the Disability Act 2005, which provides for a multidisciplinary assessment that outlines the health and educational needs of the child. Instead, we have gone towards the child undergoing a standard operating procedure that I am told is an hour or an hour-and-a-half assessment, only for them to just be put on another waiting list. As a result, they are not getting a diagnosis. Then, when such children need to get into an autism unit, a special class or a special school, they are not admitted because the school states they must have a diagnosis. When I brought this up with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, I was told that they do not require a diagnosis to get into a special class or a special school but most schools have that in their admissions policy. I seek clarification on that because it is a quite serious matter.

I welcome the review of the EPSEN Act but I ask that it be fully implemented this time. There were several aspects of that Act that were never fully implemented and, in particular, the individual education plans for children.

My colleague, Deputy Andrews, may make the end of the meeting if time allows but he raised a concern about the lack of autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classes in the Dublin 6 area, as well as the fact that every day, over €72,000 is being spent on bussing children out of their localities and into special schools or autism units in different areas. In this regard, 14 students are being bussed into one area in Dublin 6 from another area, when there is need in that area. Deputy Andrews is pointing to a lack of planning.

My last question - I have a lot of them - is on Irish Sign Language. Irish Sign Language has been one of our official languages since 2017. There is a course in Trinity College Dublin in which students who are deaf or who are hard of hearing can take Irish Sign Language as a subject and they will become qualified. Yet, they are not recognised by the Teaching Council to teach that subject. The Teaching Council tells us that it is not part of the curriculum and the curriculum tells us that the Teaching Council does not recognise it. It has kind of been put from one to the other. Does the Minister of State have a comment on that as well?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: The Deputy has a number of different questions and I will try to deal with them as best as I can. First, around the progressing disability model, the Deputy is quite correct that it is under the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte's, remit. Obviously, I keep a close eye on it because it has a direct effect on my remit. It is being implemented by the HSE and existing therapy resources have been reconfigured into the geographically-based commu-

nity disability network teams. Following a specific request from the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, in April of last year, the HSE paused the removal of multidisciplinary supports from existing special schools. It is a separate matter from the school inclusion model, which as the Deputy knows, our 2019 pilot was paused because of Covid and has now recommenced in the community healthcare organisation, CHO, 7 area. The Department is consulting with relevant Departments, including the Department of Taoiseach, the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and a memo will be coming to Government soon on that. It has always been our view on the school inclusion model that it will be a complementary therapeutic resource. It is not in lieu of the HSE therapeutic services; it should be in addition to them and should, in fact, complement them.

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act is there since 2004. The Deputy is quite correct that parts of it were not commenced. The Department at the time looked at parts of the Act and it was going to cost around €225 million to try to roll some of it out. That is why it badly needs to be reviewed and will be reviewed. I set up a steering group and we are in the process of setting up an advisory group as well. Then it will go to short consultation so that we can make sure that we have an Act that can be fully implemented. There is no point in having an Act unless we can fully commence it. It is very timely that we are doing that right now.

In terms of transport, we have approximately 15,500 children at the moment with special education needs who are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools. That was at a cost of more than €289 million last year. There is a review of that scheme currently under way. The Deputy said that Deputy Andrews mentioned some pinch points that are happening. I hope that review will enhance efficiencies and provide better value and a better service for students. Obviously, we want to make sure that they have an efficient service when they return to school.

On ISL, I will look into that for the Deputy in terms of the Teaching Council. I am not aware of why it would not be recognising it. That seems to be an anomaly and it should be ironed out. It is a very good course and it is a new course. There six students, as far as I am aware, who are doing that at the moment and it will provide great specialist training for them. I can follow that up for the Deputy.

I thank that answers all of the Deputy's questions. On expulsion-----

Deputy Pauline Tully: I asked about the expulsion and diagnosis as well.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Around expulsion, the team of the NCSE, National Educational Psychological Service, NEPS, the inspector and the Department work with officials and schools that have expelled or suspended students. It happens, but rarely. It is regrettable when it happens at all. Obviously, one wants to keep a child in school if at all possible. However, sometimes that is just not possible. Again, it is about collaboration and engagement.

In terms of a diagnosis, a diagnosis is needed for a special class and a special school, but not for mainstream.

Deputy Pauline Tully: Unfortunately, children are not getting a diagnosis through this new progressing disability model-----

Deputy Josepha Madigan: That is something I will mention to my colleague.

Deputy Pauline Tully: The Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, asked the HSE to pause the withdrawal of services from special schools, but the information I am getting is that it was not paused and services were withdrawn. There may be some small interaction with school staff, but the interaction with students is finished. That is a concern. The therapists are linking in with the school but not on-site.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I can follow that up with the Minister of State, Deputy Rabbitte, and see what the position is. In June, she provided an additional 85 therapy posts to be employed within the closest proximity of special schools. I can discuss that further with her and see what the position is.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I welcome the Minister of State and thank her for her opening remarks. I want to begin by congratulating her and thanking her very sincerely for the recent opening and ongoing growth in the Our Lady of Hope School in my constituency of Dublin South Central. I know that a considerable amount of work was carried out by her good self and her officials and also with the Minister, Deputy Foley. I just want to thank her very much for that. It is good to see. There was a cry-out from the fantastic advocates on the ground and movement by those parents over the past number of years to constantly champion the use of a building that was there that could be used for special needs education. From the moment she started in that Ministry, she acted very quickly on it and I really appreciate that.

My home constituency in Dublin South Central is one of the greatest impacted from a lack of special education places in schools. There seem to be historically older schools that, for whatever reason, are very slow to sign up and come online with the additional places that are desperately needed. Children are looking across the road at schools that they have no way of accessing. The Minister of State, her Department and her officials did an extraordinary amount of work in marrying up a child moving from one school to a school that is a natural feeder that did not have the provision. This is a rolling, extraordinary work in progress on a school-by-school, child-by-child basis, when in actual fact, it could be moved to a greater global place where a macro plan is imposed on the schools where there is this level of hesitancy. I would really appreciate an update specific to Dublin 6 and Dublin 6W because that is where there is this chronic shortage.

Children with special education needs have been particularly impacted by Covid. If they were in mainstream, they perhaps lost supports when there was teacher shortage in the Delta round of Covid. In addition, they were out of school and impacted and, in some instances, there was evidence of regression in their education. Is the Department doing any research on that? What actions are in place? Will the summer education programme run? Is there a possibility of SNAs playing a role in that? I note that on the SNA education programme, they all graduated recently. I saw photographs and they are incredibly proud of just how professional the recognition is, how professionally they work and how well they are doing. They have learned even greater skills as well. We need a special Covid response in this area.

Lastly, I welcome the Minister of State's announcement on ISL. Does she have any idea of the timeline and when that will be up and running? That will be really appreciated.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: The Senator asked a number of different questions. Senator Murphy mentioned earlier the slowness or reluctance that the Senator mentioned about opening special classes. It can be a cultural issue, but it can also be a suitable accommodation issue. Training and professional development is required. The NCSE provides, as I said earlier, exclusive and extensive support and training programmes as well as on-site and in-school visits.

I mentioned earlier as well the increase in special classes, more generally, across the country. Specifically on Dublin 6 and Dublin 6W, the special education needs organiser, SENOs, as the Senator knows, work on the ground in terms of liaising with the schools regarding the availability of a space and have liaised in Dublin 6 and Dublin 6W on an extensive basis. As the Senator will be aware, most of those schools are on very tight sites and generally tend to be oversubscribed, but the work is continuing. It is likely there will be a new ASD primary special class and one new ASD post-primary special class opening in Dublin 6W for September 2022. However, the two new schools in question are finalising steps to open these classes, and although they have not announced this publicly yet, there is a lot of work going on behind the scenes in that regard. Separately, Bishop Shanahan National School and Bishop Galvin National School are taking steps to expand their existing special classes for two or three pupils to cater for the standard six each from September 2022. I imagine the Senator is already aware of that.

The question of regression that the Senator has raised is very important and is something I am acutely aware of since the pandemic started. It has been particularly difficult on children with additional needs, and I do not think any of us could say otherwise, particularly because of the loss of in-person learning. We have a number of programmes. We had the supplementary programme last Easter at a cost of €10 million and that helped some 14,000 children. We had the summer programme for which we doubled the funding to €40 million and there was an uptake of about 75% for that summer provision. We also had the Covid learning and support scheme, which, to be fair, does not just help children with additional needs but also other children who have perhaps been adversely impacted by Covid, and that was some €52.6 million. It is still ongoing and is of great assistance to these children.

The research is going to be important in terms of assessing what impact the school closures have had on children and their achievements. The inspectorate has commenced a series of research-focused inspections and it will be looking at overall trends to see how children have been impacted.

The Senator mentioned the role of SNAs in regard to ISL. Obviously, the new ISL scheme I mentioned earlier will be of great benefit to deaf children and children who are challenged in terms of hearing. We will have 40 different posts, 30 of which will be specialist in-class teachers and there will be ten who are advisers for schools in terms of ISL. It will be about translating what the teacher says, and not just the content but also the spirit of what they say. These are children whose primary means of communication is Irish Sign Language, so it should be of great assistance to those children.

I cannot recall what the Senator's question was on the role of the SNA.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: SNAs have come through the education programme that the Minister of State launched and it has been exceptionally well received. They have had an affirmation of their very good practice and an enhancing of their practice and, as I said, I saw graduation photographs from last week. I wonder whether there is a role for them in the expansion of the summer programme so they would have a competence that could support bringing children with special educational needs back up in terms of refreshing and supporting them where they may have been disadvantaged during Covid.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: Unfortunately, I missed the UCD conferring because I had Covid and I would have been there otherwise. They had five modules over ten months. There is going to be an intake of 3,500 over three years, which is incredible and it is at no cost, being funded by the Department. It is something the NCSE had given advice on in 2018 so that SNAs

would receive this training, which is vital.

On the Senator's point about working on different programmes, they will work and have worked on summer programmes and the Department also facilitated them on home-based programmes. Having this additional qualification would be of great assistance. I thank the Senator for her comments.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I thank the Minister of State for coming in today. We are a very dedicated committee and we are working to try to make a difference. We often hear of committees formed and reports published and all of these things in regard to disability. So often the rhetoric is about support, progress, numbers and funding but then there is the reality of disability services in Ireland and the reports that say things like "wasted lives". The rhetoric can be quite different from the reality. We hear a lot from all of the different communities on this committee and it is harrowing every week leaving this committee after hearing the reality of what people are going through. The Minister of State knows as well as all of the public representatives that one of the things we get the most from our own constituencies is families who are struggling to get an SNA in their school, space in a special class or even access to a special school. For example, in Cork South-West there is no special school, so people are travelling to the city and that could be two or two and a half hours depending on where people are. There are a great many examples of this. Ultimately, for us to be able to effect change, we need Ministers to come in and we do not always get such a positive response, so I thank the Minister of State for coming in to the committee.

I realise the issues around special education are a lot longer in the making than the length of time Deputy Madigan has been Minister of State. In her opening statement, the Minister of State mentioned that people with disabilities in Ireland have an equal right of access to education under the law and that the Department's policy is to ensure that all children with special educational needs can be provided with an education appropriate to their needs. The Minister of State and the Department have to realise that those statements are infuriating to hear for families who literally cannot get that education for their child to which, as the Minister of State said, they have a right and which they desperately need.

There are a few issues that I want to address but I want to start by addressing an issue which the Minister of State is probably aware of, which was in regard to the early intervention class in a primary school in Kilbrittain in Cork South-West. It came as a real surprise to the principal in Kilbrittain, the parents and the students that the NCSE informed them the class was to close. Fair play to the community, which rallied together and, thankfully, that decision has been reversed. At the outset, I want to say that is very good and welcome news and we were all delighted to hear that. What is still of huge concern is that the NCSE informed the SENO there that it was the national policy to wind down early intervention classes and to phase them out in favour of the access and inclusion model. We all know on this committee, and the Minister of State would also know, that this would be an absolute disaster. They are not the same thing. Early intervention classes are crucial for the many people who need them, and what we would like to see is more of them.

I was hoping there was a miscommunication or some kind of misunderstanding. When the NCSE representatives were in the committee last week, they were asked about this by our Chairman, Deputy Moynihan. Instead of saying what we all would have hoped they would say, which was "Absolutely not, no way, we would not dream of phasing out early intervention classes in favour of the access and inclusion model", their response was quite worrying and very evasive. They said they did not want to comment and that they are waiting on the find-

ings of the access and inclusion model report. Of course, that would lead us to believe that is something the Department is looking at or, in a worst-case scenario, has already sort of decided that it is doing, and that it is prejudging the findings of that report and has started the process of potentially closing down early intervention classes.

Since raising the issue around Kilbrittain, I have heard from other schools which have been in the situation where the NCSE is trying to close their class and, in many cases, they have not managed to keep them open. I know the response we constantly got from the NCSE throughout this was that it is based on need in an area and that it was already agreed with the school that it would be closed. None of that is accurate. In Kilbrittain, for example, they had the staff in place for the following year, they had the accommodation in place and they had students enrolled, so that is testament to the need in the area. It is beyond me how that class could have been told it was closing.

What I really want from the Minister of State is an assurance that there is no plan or that we are not even waiting on a report to see if there is a possibility of phasing out early intervention classes in favour of the access and inclusion model. If there is time, I might have more questions afterwards.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Deputy. Yes, I was surprised myself when this transpired and other Deputies contacted me in this regard as well. I want to be clear that the national policy is not to phase them out at all. I can say that from my perspective. Sometimes they are transformed into special classes for mainstream. I am, however, committed to early intervention. We have more special classes now. As stated earlier, we have 2,118. Generally, the NCSE sanctions the establishment of special classes, including ASD early intervention classes, where there is a need. There is no change in the Department's policy. I can reassure the Deputy of that, if that is of assistance to her.

Deputy Holly Cairns: Yes, it is very reassuring. As a follow-up question, are there plans to open more of those classes on the basis of the obvious need that exists in many areas? One of things I see a lot is that the transitions between the various educational stages being a major issue. In that context, I welcome the increase in number of special classes in primary schools and give credit to the Minister of State for it. However, that is not translating into secondary schools. When people finish primary school, they ring every secondary school within a radius of an hour-and-a-half's drive. There are waiting lists to get into special classes in secondary schools. I presume the Department can carry out modelling to establish how many places are needed in primary schools and how many that will translate to for secondary schools. What work is going on in respect of making sure there is provision for that?

On the specific issue of special classes, so many national schools are saying that they do not have enough SNAs and that they want to cater for all the children in their communities. I know of a school that is fundraising through its committee to pay for somebody to come in and help because, otherwise, it will have to tell the children that they can only come in for a certain number of hours. The school really does not want to do that. One of the problems we saw in west Cork, particularly during the pandemic, was that many people relocated to the area from the city because they were working remotely. There was a subsequent uptick in the number of school places but for some reason the SNAs remained in the schools in which they were working rather than following the students to their new schools. It could take another year to get the required number of SNAs in the schools to which those children have moved. I will leave it at that and see if I have more time afterwards.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: The piece about transition from primary to post-primary school is obviously critical. One of the challenges, as the Deputy mentioned, is when people move and we are not aware of that, particularly in the context of getting a special class specifically. If a family moves all of a sudden, it can be difficult. One of the things the Department has been doing in the past couple of years is making sure that we are more streamlined in our approach. It struck me and others involved in this area that there had not been a proper forward-planning forecasting model for a considerable period. Now, however, the building and planning unit shares its information with the NCSE. As a result, we can see where capacity is going to be needed in the future. Short-, medium- and long-term planning is going on at national and regional level. That is based primarily on population demographics but also on the average percentage of the schoolgoing population that will require special class places.

I have said publicly before that I do not want to be in a situation where, in a year or a number of years, I will be back before the committee talking about the lack of special class places, particularly during transition time. Unfortunately, there will always be cases where people fall through the cracks because of different factors, including moving from a special class to a special school, transferring from mainstream class to a special class or changing address. In the main, we should be able to anticipate in advance in the majority of cases. We have seen a growth in autism prevalence, for example. It has increased exponentially in Ireland and internationally. We have to cater for that. Most of our special classes are for students with autism. That is something we are very aware of. The main thing is that we have the structures in place in the way we have them for mainstream schools that are not for children with additional needs. If we can do it for schools of that type, we can certainly do it in the area of special education.

It is always open to a school to apply for an exceptional review if it requires an additional SNA. Obviously, there is the front-loaded allocation. In the coming weeks, schools will know exactly how many SNAs they will have for next term, which is important. It is important to say that in a mainstream school, a child does not need a diagnosis to access an SNA. However, we have an unprecedented number. Since 2011, we have increased the number of SNAs by 81%, which is quite considerable. There is always a demand for SNAs, and we have to ensure we have sufficient numbers coming on stream and adequate training for them, and that schools have the requisite number they need. As I said, they can apply for an exceptional review. Something like more than 50% of all exceptional review applications resulted in the allocation of an additional SNA or part of an SNA.

Deputy Holly Cairns: If 50% of those who seek a review subsequently get SNAs, it shows that an overly restrictive approach is being taken by the Department. When so much time is tied up with trying to get both SNAs and special classes, it takes away from the time spent with students. I hear from principals that this is the cause of major pressure. We need to look at the system because if 50% of appeals are resulting in SNAs being allocated, then something is not right. In addition, many of those who are appealing are not getting SNAs. This is despite the fact that it is clear to everybody involved that they are desperately needed.

While it does not come within the remit of the Department, I wish to raise the issue of progressing disability services and the children's disability network teams. Deputy Tully also touched on this matter. In the context of what families are dealing with already, they are not even getting the first interaction with the children's disability network teams. When we consider what families are dealing with already, we know that their first interaction with those teams is to be placed on a waiting list for months just to get an initial assessment in the context of getting early interventions such as speech and language therapy, physiotherapy or occupational

therapy. These are crucial services that should be there for people and that they should not be fighting for but, trust me, most people are. They are not even getting the first point of contact with them. Then they cannot get a place in a special class, an early intervention unit, in access and inclusion or in a special school.

Another matter I want to highlight is what people are experiencing and the real barrier they face in accessing education for their children. In the entire constituency of Cork South-West - a person could drive for two and a half hours and still be in the constituency - there is no special school. We know that not everybody can attend mainstream school. Obviously, that is the aim and what everybody would like, but there are situations where a special school is needed. For people to have to travel that far, when talking about education being a right for people, it is not even a possibility for many people. I wish to highlight that. I know it sounds very localised but I am sure it is the case in other areas as well. I am not sure what the story is with the provision of those specific special schools, but I ask that the Minister of State looks at that area and see if a special school can be put closer to people, because it is just not feasible, particularly when talking about disabilities. Some of the children of people and families I have engaged with cannot spend that long in a car. It is too enclosed a space. A two-and-a-half-hour journey is turned into something much longer because they have to stop regularly for their child to get out of the car and have some space out of that environment. A response from the Minister of State on the special school would be great.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: An additional 1,165 SNAs were allocated in the budget. They came on stream since January 2022 and will be allocated during the year. Sometimes what happens is that a school has an allocation of SNAs and then it may get new children with additional needs in and, therefore, it has a requirement that may not have been anticipated at the beginning. The NCSE has a criteria that it takes into account when allocating SNAs, including a baseline component, socioeconomic status, gender and the range of complex needs. It can be quite niche in terms of how the number of SNAs are allocated. In fairness, the NCSE always tries to endeavour that each school has sufficient capacity, but it is not always achieved and that is why the exceptional review is available.

On special schools, the Deputy will be aware that we opened a school in Carrigaline in Cork. Danu Community Special School was opened in Dublin before I came into this position. We have also opened Our Lady of Hope School. There is always a place for special schools and the Department and the National Council for Special Education are always amenable to opening a special school where it is needed. The Deputy is correct to say that education is a right. It is right but it does not specify that it is a right in one's particular locality. This is not to say that we do not endeavour to do that, because we do this for all children and not just children with additional needs. In general, the Department will try to do that and in particular, there is an argument for children with additional needs. As the Deputy noted, we do not want them having to travel extensively to the nearest education facility. Where there is a demand, the most important thing is that the SENOs are aware of that in the National Council for Special Education in order that they can plan accordingly in providing either more special classes, more special schools, or classes in mainstream schools. As I said earlier, most children with additional needs are in mainstream as opposed to special classes or special schools. There are some 8,000 children in special schools and about 8,000 in special classes. Where there is a need, I want to be aware of it. If the Deputy ever has information where she knows of children with additional needs who need spaces then please do let me know and make sure that I am aware of it.

Deputy Holly Cairns: I will get in touch with the Minister of State about specific areas,

that is for sure.

I have one final comment. The Minister of State referred to the right to education and that it is not necessarily based on locality. This is a really problematic approach from the Department because it should not be a postcode lottery. We have had people in before the committee who have said that when they came from Australia, the drop in services and access to education for their child was unbelievable. They made the decision to move back here because they wanted to be near family. Then, when they moved from Galway to Cork, there was the same drop and the service was completely depleted. It should not be a case of a postcode lottery around access to essential services that people have a right to.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I was simply reiterating what the law is and that is not to say we do not endeavour, because we do endeavour. It can prove really difficult and challenging. We can see that. I am not the Department myself but the Department is *ad idem* in what I say with regard to us trying to secure a special school place for a child in his or her own locality, neighbourhood and community. We try to do the same with special classes as well and mainstream classes but it does not always happen. It can be difficult, particularly if it is one child who might need a special school. The Department would look at it from a public purse perspective also. Can it build a school for just one child or will more children need that special school? There are a number of different factors that must be taken into account. As the Minister of State, I certainly will be doing all that I can to ensure that no child is not left, and that every child has the appropriate education.

Senator Erin McGreehan: I may have to scoot off for few minutes and I might miss the answers to my questions. I apologise to the Minister of State for this but I will listen back to them.

I congratulate the Minister of State, Deputy Madigan, for her work. It shows the importance the Government has placed on special education, given that we have a Minister of State dedicated to that.

My questions are both specific and general. The first question is on the early intervention classes. It was very good to hear the Minister of State's clarity on that in response to Deputy Cairns. I wish to highlight a situation the Minister of State may be aware of. The fantastic school, St. Colmcille National School in Togher, County Louth, has an incredible principal with an incredible commitment to early intervention classes. That school is almost a victim of its own success whereby children leave the early intervention classes and go into the mainstream classes but because of the matriculation in how the NCSE derives SNA places, those children who are in need of extra SNAs do not get them in the mainstream classes. If they had remained in the special classes, they would have got more SNAs. I am aware that the argument is to reduce SNAs when the need reduces but I believe that the SNAs are there to ensure that the child reaches his or her best potential and I believe they should have extra allocation for SNAs in a mainstream class. It should be child-specific rather than class-specific. This might be a way to review how we are allocating our SNAs to those mainstream classes for children who are really succeeding in the early intervention classes.

My second question relates to lessons that will have been learned through Covid. We all have lessons we need to learn. Will the Minister of State indicate if that work and research is ongoing? I suppose we will not see the consequences of Covid on our special needs children for another couple of years but has any thought been given to making special education an essential service in order that these classes would not shut down again? Will these disability services

be made essential services so that, if there was a fear that we would have another pandemic or another crisis, these children would not fall off the edge and that they would have a continuation of service?

On SNAs and the fantastic course and the work that they do, will that new UCD course be accredited? We have huge respect for SNAs and the committee knows the important work done by SNAs. They keep our inclusive education system going. Without SNAs, the children would not be there. Their multidisciplinary role within our schools is absolutely integral. What is being done about accrediting that course? Will there be acknowledgement of the levels of accreditation? Will the course be accredited and awarded to those people who are doing it?

The Minister of State referred to our special classes and the autism spectrum disorder, ASD, units that are dedicated to autism. How do we encourage or help a family that does not have an autism diagnosis for their child, who does not fit into these ASD units but who absolutely does need a special class place? I know of one particular family that is struggling to find a multidisciplinary special needs class. They are not getting the child into schools because they do not have an autism diagnosis. What would be the Minister of State's advice to me as a public representative and what is her advice for parents in this regard? How do we organise or help schools to establish these multidisciplinary classes? I am not sure of the proper title for these classes but how would we encourage and help that?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I thank the Senator. There are a number of different queries there.

On St. Colmcille National School, the Senator may be aware that I did meet with the school and with the principal outside Dáil Éireann. The school has four early intervention classes and they have made it clear privately and publicly that they want more SNAs. I met them on 16 February. They were also going to have a meeting with the National Council for Special Education this week, at my request. While the NCSE obviously has responsibility for allocations, not the Department, the council is aware of my interest in it and hopefully that meeting will be fruitful.

On Covid and the closure of special schools and special classes, the public health advice at the time, based on the numbers moving in the system, was to close the schools. There was priority reopening for special schools and special classes, which opened first in the summer of 2020. They reopened first again in February 2021. The Senator is right. It is something that I absolutely do not want to see happening again. Special schools and special classes, and children with special educational needs in mainstream, are an essential service. I did all I could to keep special schools and classes open. I want to assure the committee of that. It was not to be, much to my regret, although we did get them reopened first. I do not want that to happen again if, God forbid, there was another pandemic or for some other reason. That research will be critical in order to plan for that. Special education is still an essential service. We said that repeatedly. We need to make sure it can also stay open as an essential service next time. I take that point on board. It is something I am very aware of for the future.

SNAs have sought accreditation for some time. Their qualification does not detract from the calibre of SNAs. Many are more qualified than they need to be to become a SNA. There is a minimum qualification raised with the Workplace Relations Commission around this. The Department is open to reviewing the position. SNA accreditation will form part of the review of the outcomes of the training programme. It can also be looked at in the context of the SNA contract and the Building Momentum pay agreement.

Children with additional needs would not be able to function in any proper way without the help of their SNAs. They are critical for supporting these children who develop a special relationship with their SNAs. SNAs do an awful lot of work. Whether it is intimate care needs, yard work, homework, assistive technology or helping with breaks, they have many different roles. We take that very seriously and will look at it into the future.

Senator Erin McGreehan: Returning to advice for a parent of a child who has additional needs or is in need of a special class but has not received an autism diagnosis - forgive me, I do not know the name of the special class - how do we encourage that movement for schools? Is there a simple process to open up those multidisciplinary special classes?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: They are in existence. The majority of classes are for children with autism but many of them are not. The most important step to take in the case mentioned by the Senator is for the parents to speak directly to the special education needs organiser because the SENO will know where there are special classes available. That is probably the best thing to do.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I want to raise the transition from primary to secondary school. The Minister of State mentioned forward planning. We all have access to the constituency planning database. We can see data on age and health demographics. Do the Departments use that information for forward planning? We can look at it at the constituency level and find out how many children from a certain age group have autism or whatever it is. That would give an indication of what is coming down the road.

I listened to the Minister of State's comments and I welcome that she seems to be very driven and passionate about this issue. She also asked for information to be given to her. If the Chair bears with me, I will be as fast as I can. A mother, Karen, asked me to relate her story so that the Minister of State will get an idea of what parents are going through. Her story is not meant to be in any way aggressive but to show how disappointed and frustrated she is with the system. She told me she has no school for her daughter, Emma, to continue her education into a secondary school that is appropriate to her needs. Emma, who is 12 years old, was born with Down's syndrome. She has a mild learning disability diagnosis and is visually impaired. She is in sixth class in the local mainstream school. Emma's mother wrote that she was contacting me in pure frustration and hurt. She said she knew it would be a difficult road accessing a secondary school appropriate for Emma, but she was gobsmacked to learn that the admissions policy for a special school has placed Emma at the bottom of the list of enrolment requirements because she is coming from a mainstream primary school. She was referring to the Cope Foundation's Scoil Bernadette. She said she was open to correction but she could not see anything like this enrolment policy in any other special secondary schools in east Cork or the Cork city area, under which a child meeting the criteria of having a mild intellectual diagnosis was placed last on a list because she was coming from a mainstream school. There are 24 places in Scoil Bernadette. From the feeder schools, 19 have been accepted and one sibling has been accepted from another school. There are 15 applicants from the special school and ten applicants from mainstream schools. There are 24 places and 45 children waiting on that list.

The lady said she thought this was completely discriminatory and a poor reflection of the inclusion and inclusive living for children that we as a society strive for. A family such as hers, who chose to bring their child up in a local community in a local primary school with local children, was discriminated against when they tried to apply for a special secondary school because it accepted applications from special schools first. Fear has dictated to many families, she said, and this gave them no option but to place their child in a local primary school for fear of not

getting a place in a special school. This is, she said, appalling. She accepted that if a school was oversubscribed, a waiting list would kick in, but what stood out for her was that if a child attends a mainstream school, he or she does not have any hope of acceptance to the school.

The updated admissions policy was introduced in 2020 in Cork and Ross after the Schools Act of 2018 had been passed. Added to that, the woman contacted two other secondary schools with mild diagnosis criteria in Ballincollig and Rochestown in Cork city. Enrolments in Ballincollig are closed for the next two years and Rochestown has no enrolment for 2022 or 2023. The latter has accepted three children from the 2021-22 waiting list. It had over 24 applicants. The local secondary school in Middleton has been mentioned as an option but it is an ASD unit and Emma has Down's syndrome. The mother cannot see how that might be an appropriate alternative. A plan B was for Emma to repeat sixth class. That would ensure access to the secondary school next year. The mother applied for 2021-22 and she was second on the waiting list. She was then told verbally that Emma was disqualified because she had done eight years in primary school and could not repeat. She challenged this because she knew there had been provision made for this previously but it had been shut down. She asked me to bring this to the Minister's attention.

I know that is a lot to take in but can the Minister of State see the frustration? This child, who attended an integrated school in a town, has been cast aside because of a range of little loopholes. As Deputy Cairns said, she is going from west Cork to Cork city again. The frustration is exacting such a toll on the parents. The approach was not supposed to be nasty by any means but it is heartbreaking to see. I know the family in question.

I raise this case because Emma's mother asked me to raise it but I also want to give the Minister of State the picture. This is only one school area in east Cork which already has massive issues. If I look at my constituency database, I can see this problem will continue for another while. The Minister of State acknowledged that autism and autism-related conditions are on the rise. I cannot understand why we are not planning for them. I accept the Department is planning a large school campus in Carrigtwohill but we have to look at what this is doing to a mother and a 12-year-old girl who has no chance of leaving primary school and entering secondary education in 2022. I would love if the Minister of State could assist me or even take on the case on an individual basis. I heard her say she needs to have the information. We can accept them. It is not a case of raising it for favouritism. It is raising it because there are another 21 families in this situation this year that cannot get into a school.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: The Deputy is certainly not raising it for favouritism. It is about providing an appropriate education for Emma. I thank the Deputy for bringing it to my attention today. I presume those are Karen's words and I can hear the frustration and the hurt to a certain extent in those words. This is the first time I have heard about this case but I will certainly look into it. The Deputy can give me more details.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I will forward the information to the Minister of State.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: In general, each school has an admissions policy and it has to be in line with the Education Act. I will follow up with the National Council for Special Education on that.

On moving designation in special schools such as St. Mary's to go from mild to ASD, not all children in ASD primary can move. Some of them move to special schools. The Department is working strategically on transition with the NCSE, as I said, and the building and planning unit.

As the first Minister of State with responsibility for special education, I often say that previous Ministers - the former Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Richard Bruton, and the former Minister for Education and Skills, Deputy Joe McHugh - had the entire role of the Minister for Education, Deputy Foley, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Simon Harris, and me. Now we have a dedicated Minister of State for this area and while there are many pinch points and work that needs to be done, we will make progress.

The fact that the building and planning unit now shares its geographical information system with the NCSE so that it can see building projects which are planned in real time will make a big difference into the future. However, there are pinch points at present and I have to make sure that there is a more targeted approach and that cases such as this, for whatever reason, do not occur. There are over 300 building and planning areas throughout the country and there is a great deal of information there. Particularly in the instance of Emma and Karen, I will certainly look into that for the Deputy and see that we can make sure it is examined. Cork is historically like Dublin. Because of its dense population, it has been challenging, perhaps more than other areas.

Deputy Pat Buckley: I thank the Minister of State. As I said, I appreciate it. The Minister of State needs this information and we are giving it to her. We will work together. It is excellent.

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I appreciate it. I would rather know about instances than not because then I can bring them to the attention of the National Council for Special Education. I do not - the Department does not either nor does anybody in the National Council for Special Education - want to see any child in a situation where he or she is not receiving the education that he or she should be receiving.

Communication is important. We have a new CEO now of the National Council for Special Education, Mr. John Kearney, who has just been appointed. I have not met Mr. Kearney yet. I hope to meet him over the next couple of days. Mr. Kearney will be very much looking at the operational structure of the NCSE. That will assist as well in terms of the SENOs liaising with families and schools to make sure that we keep those lines of communication open and that there is no room left for error. That, with the targeted and integrated planning forecasting process, will make a big difference in the short, medium and long term.

Chairman: A number of issues keep cropping up. The transport section in the Department is under the Minister of State's remit. I refer to the special transport, either the grant for the family or the provision of transport through a taxi or through a company. Issues arise and are ongoing. Indeed, a number of parents I spoke to had to take the case to court to try to get the transport because they were moving from a special school to where there were better facilities and more avenues for their child to progress.

There are also technical issues such as the delay when the parent or guardian makes the application through the school for transport. In September, October and November, families are always in limbo. I, for one, have seen many families that have gone through an unsure period because they did not get a straight answer from the transport section for special education. Is it up to specification or is it something that has been flagged with the Minister of State? Should a greater emphasis be put on families that have made decisions to go to a particular school which is outside of their area and the transport grant, and the frustration that they experience? The schools will say that it will take time as well. Schools that are experienced in dealing with the

Department say that there is frustration or a lack of urgency within the transport section of the Department. Has that been flagged with the Minister of State?

This morning a number of members raised the exceptional reviews for special needs assistants. We have one school in north Cork, Freemount, which has gone into its fourth exceptional review because of the change in dynamics in the classroom. I spoke with the Minister of State earlier in the year about Newmarket. Even though it is clear the professionals, the teachers and the board of management accept that there is need for more SNAs to provide the best quality of education to the children who are coming through, they experience frustration. Then the Department comes back looking for another review, which is almost submitting the same language - changing it around slightly but resubmitting it for a review. It takes a long time for that review to take place. The schools are highly professional in how they deal with their business. When they present a case to the Department, they are always presenting a case in the best interest of their children who are coming in and for the school community. There is a slowness in dealing with the exceptional reviews. I wonder if that is the Minister of State's experience.

People are travelling long distances for special schools. Has the Department looked at any real audit of the country and seen that there are large geographical areas that do not have special schools? The Department should have a long-term plan to aim to put schools into particular locations.

As the Minister of State mentioned Cork city and Dublin, the issues in the large urban centres will be a noose around our necks in years to come because of the lack of services there, and when people have to move out. I had one family in contact with me yesterday who were living in the city centre of Dublin and they are going out to Kildare for services. That is not acceptable. It is a considerable challenge for the Department to make sure that they are getting it right. Has there been an audit from the Department's point of view to see the gaps in the services and the challenges that are there?

Deputy Josepha Madigan: I might work backwards from the Chairman's comments. The first thing that the National Council for Special Education will endeavour to do is find a special class place, a special school place or, indeed, a mainstream place for a child. Ideally, it would be, as I stated earlier, in the community or locality where that child lives, but that is not always possible. As I mentioned, we have this forecasting model now. The fact that the geographical information system is being shared from the Department's building and planning unit to the NCSE means that we should be able to anticipate that demand. That is based on the population demographic but also the percentage of children who will probably need, from a statistical perspective, certain places, whether in a special school or a special class.

The Chairman is quite right that in the cities it is considerably more difficult. Even when we look at it in the context of section 37 and trying to compel schools to open special classes, for example, some of them had legitimate reasons that they could not because they did not have the space. They were short for space because they are in a densely populated area and particularly where there is a growing demographic as well. It will be a challenge in the future. It is absolutely critical that we get that right now and we plan for the future and build these buildings.

One thing I did not get to mention is the fact that all new schools from last year will automatically provide SEN facilities going forward. That is a huge thing for generations to come because that was never there before. Rather than scrambling to add on infrastructure through the minor works grant or emergency accommodation or whatever it may be, we will not need to do that because the facilities will exist to begin with. That should help alleviate that pressure

going forward.

On the exceptional reviews, the Chairman can bring that particular school to my attention since, as he said, it has had four exceptional reviews. I presume the NCSE had an on-site inspection with the school. Perhaps a meeting could be set up with the NCSE to discuss it and to understand why it is not being given an additional SNA if it is the case that it requires one. Again, I mentioned earlier the various criteria where there is a baseline component and the socioeconomic reasons, gender and all of those different factors have to be taken into account. Obviously, the level of need that is required is also taken into account, whether it is complex needs or whatever else is required. Certainly, I can look at that for the Chairman.

On transport, it is broader than just special education. There are about 15,500 children with special education needs who use the transport system at a cost of €289 million. The transport scheme is under review. The Department outsources its transport to Bus Éireann and it, in turn, relies on both its own services and private contractors to deliver services. It is good that it is under review. There have been, as the Chairman said, various different complaints anecdotally in relation to children travelling. Again, we endeavour to not have children travel anywhere but, unfortunately, that is not always possible. However, it is something we want to try to alleviate into the future, to try to get children a special school place or special class place in their locality, which would alleviate that need. Certainly, the review will be welcome and there may be outcomes from that we have not thought of or anticipated that may dictate policy into the future.

Chairman: I thank members online and present, the Minister of State, her officials and our team as well for their efficiency. Our meeting stands adjourned until next Thursday at 9 a.m., for a private meeting which will be followed by the joint meeting at 9.30 a.m. We will also have the launch of the report in the afternoon. I thank one and all for their participation today.

The joint committee adjourned at 10.53 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 10 March 2022.