

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS COIMIRCE SHÓISIALACH

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Dé Céadaoin, 19 Nollaig 2012

Wednesday, 19 December 2012

The Joint Committee met at 1 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Ray Butler,

Deputy Charlie McConalogue,

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin,

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh,

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien,

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames,

Senator Marie Moloney,

Senator Averil Power.

In attendance: Deputies Eric Byrne and Michael McCarthy.

DEPUTY JOANNA TUFFY IN THE CHAIR.

The joint committee met in private session until 1.30 p.m.

Scrutiny of EU Legislative Proposals

Chairman: We will commence our scrutiny of COM (2012) 617, a proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and the Council on the fund for European aid for the most deprived. The joint committee has previously discussed this issue with its EU policy clerk. I welcome from the Department of Social Protection Ms Orlaigh Quinn, assistant secretary, and Mr. T. J. Fleming who will advise us on the proposal and the Minister's position in the negotiations. I also welcome Mr. Cormac Clancy, principal officer at Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government.

Before we commence, I advise that, by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the evidence they are to give to the committee. If they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to so do, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against a person or persons or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Members are reminded of the long-standing ruling of the Chair to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable. I also advise Dr. Quinn that her opening statement will be published on the committee's website following this meeting. I now invite her to make her presentation.

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: I thank the Chairman and committee members for giving me the opportunity to make this introductory statement on the matters it has requested to be addressed.

The Department of Social Protection is leading in the negotiations on this proposal at EU level, given its role in the specialised field of social policy at the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council, EPSCO. The Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government will have primary responsibility for implementation of the measures contained in the regulation if and when it is approved.

The European Commission's recently published proposal for a regulation on the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived was published on 24 October and presented to the European Council's social questions working group by the Commission on 23 November. The proposal is based on the previous EU experience of this type of programme. It has a tradition dating back to 1987 of releasing intervention stocks of food to the poorest people in member states. This was, for the most part, distributed by agriculture Departments using networks of NGOs and organisations involved in the relief of the poor. With changes in how the Common Agricultural Policy operates, the levels of intervention food stocks have become unpredictable or non-existent. However, the Commission is very keen to continue its support for people at the margins of society and thus, this proposal has emerged. The key objective of the regulation is to contribute to the Europe 2020 poverty target of having 20 million fewer people in poverty. The proposal calls for a fund of €2.5 billion over seven years for the 28 member states to help to address this difficult social problem. The proposal is being made under Article 175.3 of the treaty

on the functioning of the European Union relating to promoting social cohesion. The specific objective is to alleviate the worst forms of poverty by providing non-financial assistance in the form of food and other goods.

As the regulation is drafted, there is scope allowing member states to provide a number of forms of support and the Commission has indicated that it would like a flexible approach to be adopted to enable member states to implement their own arrangements to deliver the funding. It is leaving it up to member states to decide whether to target directly or indirectly and how to define the target group. The fund will be implemented by shared management and the regulation tries to keep implementation as simple and as flexible as possible. It is envisaged that most member states will rely on existing channels for such support and use a combination of public and voluntary bodies to distribute the aid.

In terms of financing, the overall budget is not significant in EU or national terms. However, depending on how the fund is eventually distributed and how narrowly focused the measures in an operational programme might be, the impact could be significant. Member states will also be required to co-finance the operational programme up to a possible 15%, with special criteria applying to programme countries. As for the likely sum of money Ireland may receive, I have no information on that matter yet. However, we believe the amount will be small, but it could make a significant contribution if used narrowly. The Commission proposes using allocation criteria based on two indicators, namely, the number of people in severe material deprivation and the number in households with low work intensity and how this has changed in past three years.

I again thank the committee for giving me this opportunity to outline the proposal which is at an early stage of development. I ask the committee to note that in our role as President we will not be in a position to take a national position; instead we will be taking a neutral stance on the merits of the proposal but with the objective of ensuring successful negotiations deliver an outcome at the earliest opportunity. While we are aware some member states do have reservations about certain aspects, this is not unusual at this point.

On the issue of subsidiarity, the Department has formed a view that such matters do not arise in that the proposed regulation will replace existing arrangements with similar objectives, albeit with different methods of implementation. The proposal is consistent with existing policies of the European Union, particularly cohesion policy and the aims of the European Social Fund. Member states are not under an obligation to implement the actions called for under the proposal. However, the funding cannot be used for other purposes if not drawn down. The amount of funding is small in terms of the overall funding available under the European Social Fund. We are only at the preliminary stage of discussion of this proposal, on which we are working closely with colleagues in the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government.

I thank members for their attention and will be pleased to answer whatever questions they may have.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I thank Ms Quinn for her presentation. Why has this proposal been placed before us at such short notice? For example, if we were to avail of the option of seeking a reasoned opinion, we would have to deal with the matter tomorrow in the Dáil and the Seanad, which would place a strain on us. Even though, in terms of the scale of the problem of poverty throughout Europe, only a small pot of money is involved, it is important that we fully consider what is being proposed.

I recall the intervention stocks and butter vouchers provided in the 1980s. I recall also the mantra of the European Union at the time that one should not interfere with the market. However, the reason there were intervention stocks was there had been interference in the market. In this case, the position is different. In some ways, the European Social Fund is laudable. As we all pay into it, we would only be getting back a little of what we put in. I do not know whether what Ireland would receive would equate to what it has contributed to the fund in recent years.

This proposal is from the European Commission, the same body which is part of the troika which is demanding that we do the devil and all to cut social welfare rates and ensure people do in fact live in poverty. The budgets for this year and last year were the consequence of some of its diktats. Also, the European Central Bank is charging us high interest rates. According to EUROSTAT figures, there are 120 million people in Europe at risk of poverty. If during the seven years of the programme the calculation was made *pro rata*, Ireland would only receive €2 million per annum, which is buttons in comparison to what we are paying in interest charges to the European Central Bank. It might be more, we do not know because we do not have the figures. It is a matter for negotiation but I cannot see the other European countries agreeing that Ireland would get a bigger share of a small pot, given that they have not been very supportive of our calls to the convention to date.

The most recent

figures from the Survey of Income and Living Conditions, SILC, is that approximately 16% are at risk of poverty in Ireland. That percentage figure nearly equates to the number on the live register but also people who are in low paid work, which is some 660,000. When one divides €2 million by the number of people, some 660,000, it amounts to the price of a packet of EasiSingles at €2.90 each. Even though it might seem attractive it is not attractive in view of these figures.

We are discussing whether there is an element of subsidiarity. I believe this is in conflict with subsidiarity. The EU through this decision would be determining how this money would be spent in Ireland but there is an element of compulsion in that whatever grant is given, Ireland would have to trump up at least 15%, as stated in the presentation. Again the final part will not be known. Not only will it not be known for a while, but Ireland will have no role because of hosting the EU Presidency and acting in a neutral position. We will not be able to influence whether that is 15%, 5% or another figure.

My concern is that we do not have a say once we have rubber stamped this. My inkling would be that we call a halt until we have a full discussion and can see the full implications of the grant. The intervention stock benefited people on and off over time and this money might benefit people who are at risk of poverty, homeless people and people in absolute distress, but it is so small that it will not make a major change in their life. We need to look at this in a different way. I hope Ms Quinn will be able to answer some of the questions.

If we go ahead with this, the likelihood is that this will form the basis of future EU interventions in national states in terms of the European Social Fund. I do not think the intention was for the European Social Fund to be set in this way. I think the original concept was that it would grant aid or give Government specific moneys for specific projects but the Government was not tied to deliver in the way that it has now been formatted.

Deputy Ray Butler: I see where Deputy Ó Snodaigh is coming from. I agree to disagree with him but I hope we will get rid of the troika in 2013. A great deal of pain has been put on the

public but in Spain, which is experiencing significant difficulties, one only gets social welfare for two years. After that a person is cut off completely, there is no social welfare. Some 1.5 million people in Spain have no welfare payment from the state. In Croatia one gets a social welfare payment for six months if one is lucky. I think this should be pushed on and implemented as soon as possible. Those in need in Spain are relying on-ex pats, British people who have opened soup kitchens to feed the people. It is a good incentive. The figure is €2.5 billion and I think we should look at the bigger picture. I know that Ireland is suffering but other countries are suffering as much. We are lucky in certain cases to have a social welfare system in place because many countries would like to have our system but cannot afford it. The situation in Spain is very serious. They thought they could fill the vacuum by stimulating growth and they put €22 billion into the economy which has gone into a black hole. Spain might need a bailout but they are introducing austerity measures in Spain because they have no option. They are starting to do what we have been doing for the past three years. They have seen what Ireland has done and are starting to do something similar but unfortunately they are three years behind us.

This was the subject of a recent BBC 2 documentary. I would like the Opposition to look at what is happening in the rest of Europe.

Chairman: I call Deputy McConalogue.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: With the permission of the Chair, I would like to hear the responses to the previous questions.

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: I apologise for the lateness of the proposal coming to this committee. I acknowledge that it leaves the members little time to consider it. The explanation is that this proposal was with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine as it was a CAP programme and there was various discussions at official level as to the most appropriate place to operate this type of funding. The ongoing work for the Irish Presidency has been top heavy in terms of the work programmes for Departments. I again apologise for the delay in bringing this to the attention of the joint committee.

It is not possible to say at this time how much will be available in overall funding. I think it will be less than the €2 million to which Deputy Ó Snodaigh referred. The total of €2.5 billion is part of the multifinancial framework that is currently being negotiated and will be paid over a seven-year period. In the overarching negotiations for the EU, this programme could be smaller, depending on what happens. It is a small amount of money, but given the way it could be used in a targeted way to focus on the homeless or people who are very detached from the labour market, it could be beneficial if it was targeted at a small number of people.

I take the point made by the Deputy on our ability to influence the proposals. Having said that, it is very important for Ireland that in our role as President we take a neutral stance. This covers every single item of EU business for the next six months, Ireland will not be taking a national position.

Chairman: Does Ms Quinn mean now or in six months time?

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: I mean now, absolutely now and going back at least one month. When we go to a meeting we are very much in Presidency mode because from Ireland's perspective if we are seen to take a very strong stance on something it will not help us from 1 January, as we will be seen as having a particular stance that will not help a member state that may be opposed to us.

Chairman: Has a member state ever taken a strong stance?

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: This would be typical of all Presidencies. The country hosting the Presidency tends to stop putting forward national positions somewhere between a month or two before the Presidency.

Let me assure the committee that it is not that our view would not be taken on board. Typically we would depend on countries with similar views to present them at ministerial and Council meetings. It is not that our views would not be known, but we would not be out there making them public because it would diminish our ability to get successful negotiations through if we are seen as having strong views. There is no element of compulsion. Member states can choose whether to access the fund. There is some suggestion that for programme countries the matching funding could be less than the requirement of 15%. A figure of 95% funding has been mentioned, but it is too early to say at this time. We just have the proposal tabled by the European Commission. It is only when we go into the negotiations that we will start to tease out the issues and see what is possible for member states to agree.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Under the previous arrangement with the CAP intervention stocks, how much would that have been worth per annum to the country? In respect of the overall value for the period of the previous funding, what was the total value within the European Union? As it has been stated that the value of the fund will be €2.5 billion for the next funding period 2014 to 2020, what was the value of the intervention stocks previously?

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: I can get some of that information for the Deputy. Our allocation at EU level was 0.1% of the CAP allocation. I understand we would have received in the region of €500,000 per annum.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Per annum.

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: Yes.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Is it expected that the amount will be more in respect of this allocation?

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: I think it will be less.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: Therefore, we could be talking about an amount which is worth about €0.5 million to the country.

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: It is small money.

Deputy Charlie McConalogue: We would have to apply if that is such to the Cohesion Fund.

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: We will have to draw up a programme for it.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: This is a very interesting proposal. I apologise for being late. I had a vote in the Seanad and, therefore, I did not hear what the witnesses had to say and I am not familiar with the questions members have asked. Out of a sum of €2.5 billion across all member states for seven years, what amount is Ireland likely to receive? The key goal of 20 million fewer people in poverty is laudable. I am conscious of the reference to food and other goods. I presume breakfast in schools would qualify. Breakfast is available in some schools in Ireland. There is significant evidence to support breakfast in schools on the basis that learn-

ing increases once nutrition is provided for brain development especially in the morning because it breaks the fast of the night before. Indeed, the World Bank has supported this in other countries. I am getting feedback to suggest that where breakfast is provided in schools many children are not eating the food. There is disadvantage in many settings that are not classified as disadvantaged. I would like to see this provided to all schools given the squeezed middle class, the squeezed coping classes and the fact that MABS could tell me the other day that more than one third of its clients are waged and self-employed and many are in pre-arrears. We need to look at a definition of “poverty” and a definition of who is disadvantaged. What other types of projects are likely to qualify? As this is a large amount of money, it is likely that this money would have been given to CAP previously.

Chairman: Will it come out of the European Social Fund?

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: The Cohesion Fund.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: The Cohesion Fund. There are many queries around the CAP. Families who would have benefited from CAP may lose out because they may not be in disadvantaged schools. I would like to hear the views of the witnesses on the issues I have raised. How can we influence it?

Chairman: I have a few questions. Do the witnesses and the Minister have concerns about what is proposed? What input has Ireland had into the proposal? If we were to seek a reasoned opinion, what is the problem? We were given powers under the Lisbon treaty. If there is a problem, why would countries not use that power? On the issue of subsidiarity, it is stated that the proposal replaces existing arrangements with similar objectives but with different methods of implementation. However, subsidiarity was not protected at that stage. The subsidiarity principles came late to the European Union dynamic and because something went through previously does not mean it should not be questioned now. I attended a European Union event. It is clear from the European Commission and the directors that they want to dictate how member states might use money but, on the other hand, Ireland’s record is quite good when money is flexible. In regard to the use of European Social Fund in education, it is clear that Ireland uses that funding well. Largely, it funded the regional technical colleges at the time and it funded courses but also much infrastructure. There is much to be said for more flexibility than what is provided for in this programme. Basically, it provides for non-financial assistance whereas it should be possible to use it as one wishes up to a point. In that way one could have ideas and be innovative. There is a question mark over how flexible it is.

Deputy Jonathan O’Brien: Deputy Ray Butler said he wished Opposition Deputies would look at what is happening across Europe. He mentioned that soup kitchens and food kitchens are popping up in Spain. Perhaps he should look at what is happening in his constituency and in the State because we have our own soup kitchens and food kitchens. Some of his rationale for wanting to proceed with it as soon as possible was that Spain needs it. That may be the case but we are here to consider the best interests of citizens in this State. Obviously, the upcoming Irish Presidency puts us at a disadvantage in the sense that we will have to adopt a neutral position during the negotiations. It is not clear to what extent Ireland will have to co-finance it, all of which will have to be worked out. I agree with Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh that we should not rush into the negotiations and we need to look at the consequences. If that means discussing it in more detail, I would favour that rather than rush into it today and make a decision.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: I am surprised the amount was less than the €2 million I mentioned, even though the €2.5 billion appears to be a substantial package. It would be a

great story if we had €2.5 billion to distribute to the poor in Ireland and it would have an effect. However, a sum of €2 million or less each year will not change substantially the lot of those in extreme crisis in Ireland. While the figures vary, there are 60,000 people at risk of poverty in Ireland and the number has probably increased since the budget. Those are the latest figures. If we were to take only those who are homeless and those who are totally dependent on social welfare, €2 million or less would not go a long way. It would only be the cost of a packet of EasiSingles, €2.90, based on that figure. The reason I concentrate on the negotiations is that if we want to get a greater share of the €2.5 billion pot, we need to be in the strongest possible position. A problem in our taking a decision on this now is that while Ireland, in having the Presidency of the EU, will have the goodwill of other countries, that role will hamper our direct negotiation on this. I am not blind enough to say we should pull out of this and disappear off the radar. While the officials will continue to argue Ireland's position it would be much better if the Irish Government was out there publicly demanding a greater proportion of this pot of money in competition with countries such as Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece, which are in extreme crisis like ourselves.

I am disappointed this is not a bigger pot of money. This is European Union citizens' money, which we paid into the European Union in the recent past, and this allocation is a pittance. That is not the fault of the Department. This proposal was only initiated in October and it seems it is progress is being rushed. It should have been initiated when the crisis came to light two or three years ago and it would have been in place at this stage. It will not come into effect next year but is intended to come into effect the following year. It will not deliver €2.5 billion in the morning to the poor in Spain, Portugal or those other countries of which Deputy Butler said we in the Opposition do not appear to be aware. I have many good friends living in Spain and Portugal who have regularly explained to me and others the extreme crisis they are in. Sometimes they hear what our Government is doing and they are also concerned about those in despair in Ireland.

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: I certainly acknowledge the disappointment about the level of funding. It has not been decided at this point and we are very early in discussing it at the committee because there are still many unknowns about the proposal as listed.

In terms of the programmes at which it could be directed, Senator Healy Eames asked school meals in this context. This will have to be decided and there is flexibility for each member state to decide how best it should be progressed.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: Where does the Department make that input?

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: We will make that input when the regulation is completed and decided. At the end of June if we get an agreed proposal, we will start to draw up what we intend to do with the funding allocated to us. It is currently very focused on homelessness but not exclusively on that. The proposal states that member states can be flexible in terms of school meals.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: Does Ms Quinn expect to come back to the committee on this when she knows more about it?

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: I expect that we will come back when we have more information. When the proposal is further advanced, we could certainly brief the committee then.

To put it in context, it is small money. For example, we spend €35 million on school meals and it is due to go up to €37 million this year. That funds meals for 189,000 children. This is a

very small, narrow, targeted fund and, as such, when it comes to developing our own proposals, it would have to be seen in that light. It will not do the broader-----

(Interruptions).

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: I think so, definitely, Senator.

The Chairman asked me about the reasoned opinion but I cannot comment on that. That is a matter for the Chairman and the committee to decide. This proposal builds on what was already there and there are not significant differences in it. As such, it will be on that basis that we would have given our opinion in terms of subsidiarity. We view it as something that has already existed and which member states do not have to take up if they do not wish to, although that would not be seen to be helpful.

On the point of Ireland not being represented, if there are particular proposals, which appear to be emerging, that programme countries would get a reduced matching funding, Ireland would benefit from that approach.

Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh: We will be out of the programme by then, as Deputy Butler told us.

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: We will be still in the programme next year, unfortunately.

(Interruptions).

Chairman: In terms of the other options, is there some way we could raise concerns about it but not necessarily do the reasoned opinion? What is Ms Quinn's view on that?

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: If the members have concerns, we are very happy to take those on board and reflect them.

Chairman: What about us as a committee?

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: I presume the committee will have its own routes into, say, the European Parliament which would also have a role in this, and Ministers would obviously have a view on it.

Chairman: Okay. Have members any other questions? I thank Ms Quinn and the other representatives from the Departments and we will take into account what Ms Quinn has told us. I thank her for presentation.

Ms Orlaigh Quinn: If we can provide any further information or the Chairman would like us to come in again, she can let us know.

Chairman: I propose that we now go into private session. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 2.05 p.m. and resumed in public session at 2.25 p.m.

Scrutiny of EU Legislative Proposals

Chairman: The committee has decided to make a political contribution on the EU legislative proposal, COM (2012) 617, to the European Commission and the European Parliament. We are also going to have further EU scrutiny on the issue. We will copy this information to the Minister for Social Protection and it will be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. Is that agreed? Agreed.

National Council for Special Education: Discussion with Chairman Designate

Chairman: We move on to our meeting with Mr. Eamonn Stack, who is chairman designate of the National Council for Special Education. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss with Mr. Stack the approach he will take in his new role, as well as his views on the challenges facing the council. Members will be aware of the Government decision of May 2011 which puts new arrangements in place for the appointment of persons to State boards and bodies. The committee welcomes the opportunity to meet the chairperson designate in public to hear his views. We trust that this provides greater transparency to the process of appointment to our State boards and bodies.

On behalf of the committee, I welcome Mr. Stack. Officials are accompanying him, although they are not formal witnesses. They are Mr. Jim Mulkerrins, principal officer, Department of Education and Skills, and Ms Teresa Griffin, CEO of the National Council for Special Education. I draw to the attention of Mr. Stack that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in relation to a particular matter and continue to do so, they are only covered by qualified privilege. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given. 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 by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

Members are asked to remember the long-standing practice that they should not criticise or make charges against any person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

After the meeting, Mr. Stack's opening statement will be published on the committee's website. I invite Mr. Stack to make his remarks.

Mr. Eamonn Stack: I thank the Chairman and other members of the joint committee for the invitation to attend the meeting. I am pleased with this opportunity to address the committee in my capacity as chairperson designate of the National Council for Special Education. As I only became aware of this appointment about a week ago, I have only begun to put together some initial thoughts on how I will give leadership and manage this role. Now that I am retired, I am very willing to put some of my time and expertise into some active role in Irish education at a national level. As members of the committee will be aware, this is a non-remunerated post.

I will briefly cover three main points, as follows: my experience in education, my vision for the NCSE in the years ahead, and my role as chairperson of the council. As regards my experience in education, I was the chief inspector in the Department of Education and Science - now known as the Department of Education and Skills - from 1997 to 2009, having joined the inspectorate there in 1992. Prior to my time in the Department of Education and Skills, I was

the founding principal of a large co-educational post-primary school in Limerick, from 1978 to 1992. Enrolment in that school increased from 90 students in its first year to more than 1,000 students within ten years. Between 1971 and 1978 I was a post-primary teacher of business studies subjects in a number of schools. I was also the author of many books and articles on business and economics. If some members are young enough, they might have studied some of them for the leaving certificate.

Some of my key achievements as chief inspector can be found on many pages of the History of Ireland's School Inspectorate, 1931-2008, written by Professor John Coolahan. I have a copy for anyone who wishes to read it over Christmas. Such initiatives included from 1978 the return of marked leaving certificate scripts to candidates; major structural change, reform and expansion of the inspectorate; the introduction of whole school evaluation, WSE, subject inspections and incidental inspections to all schools in Ireland; and the publication of inspection reports. I also played a lead role as chairman of the planning group in the establishment of the National Educational Psychological Service in 1998, the National Council for Special Education, NCSE, and the State Examinations Commission, SEC, in 2003. All of these happened in developing the inspectorate.

While I do not have a qualification and have not had direct involvement in any area of special education to date, I chaired the planning group within the then Department of Education and Science that in 2000 produced a report entitled, A National Support Service for Special Education for Students with Disabilities, which made ten recommendations. It is now known as the Stack report. Two of the recommendations were that the then Minister for Education and Science establish a national council for special education and that the proposed council have two key functions - a research and policy function and an operations function. That was the starting point for the establishment of the NCSE.

Since my retirement, I have done some work as a facilitator, mediator and adviser to schools and organisations. I also make presentations at conferences and mini-conferences and conduct half-day and full day sessions with educational leaders and entire teaching staffs in schools.

I refer to my vision for the NCSE. My initial thoughts are about ensuring the five strategic objectives spelled out in the recent council statement of strategy 2012-16 are delivered in the next few years. These objectives are based on the functions set out in section 20 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs, EPSEN, Act 2004. The first relates to operational issues. The strategic objective in this regard is to plan and co-ordinate the provision of education and support services for children with special educational needs. It might be described as core business. To achieve this, the NCSE has nine senior SENOs and 73 SENOs deployed nationally who allocate supports to approximately 4,000 schools to assist them in meeting the special educational needs of children arising from a disability.

The second strategic objective relates to policy advice and is to provide evidence-informed policy advice for the Minister for Education and Skills on the education of children with special educational needs. The development of NCSE policy advice is informed by evidence both from national and international research, consultation with the NCSE consultative forum and other educational stakeholders, the experience of NCSE council members and staff and visits to mainstream and special schools.

The third strategic objective, based on research, is to conduct and deliver a research programme to underpin the dissemination of information relating to best practice in special education to schools, parents and the education sector. I understand a number of consistent mes-

sages have arisen in the findings across the research to date such as the need for teachers to be upskilled in educating children with special needs, for example, differentiation-pedagogical approaches, disability specific information, etc.; the importance of early identification and early intervention; long waiting lists for assessments, particularly educational assessments, resulting in a delay in accessing resources and some parents seeking a private assessment; the role of SNAs in often working outside their care role but which is considered to be valuable support for schools; and closer inter-agency interdisciplinary working, particularly between health and education providers. I intend to read all of this research in the coming weeks.

Strategic objective No. 4 identifies the review of further and higher educational provision for adults with special educational needs and the development of best practice. Under section 20 of the EPSEN Act 2004, one of the functions of the NCSE is to review and provide advice on education-training services for adults with special educational needs. Under Part 2 of the Disability Act 2005, the NCSE, together with the HSE, will have certain functions regarding the assessment of needs and preparation of service statements for adults with disabilities. Up to 2011 the focus of the NCSE was on providing supports for pupils with special educational needs rather than considering adult educational issues. I need to examine this issue in greater detail with the new council in the next few months.

Strategic objective No. 5 is to ensure the NCSE continues to develop as an effective organisation which is compliant with all statutory, regulatory and corporate governance requirements, as well as having effective information dissemination, communication and media strategies in place.

These five strategic objectives have to be achieved in a way that ensures the NCSE mission statement and its vision statement are fulfilled in the context of the policy, legal, economic and social environments. As chairperson, I see my role as a person who provides the necessary leadership, in accordance with the code of good governance, to ensure the council is clear about its mandate and effectively functions to provide strategic guidance while also monitoring the activities and effectiveness of the work of the NCSE to ensure the highest standards of service provision are achieved. I will work closely with the chief executive officer, Ms Teresa Griffin, and her senior staff team. I also intend to cultivate and rely on the co-operation, expertise and good judgement of the council members to assist me in my role. I look forward to working with the new council after my appointment on 1 January 2013.

At the outset of the presentation I indicated that my thought processes had only begun to focus on this new role. I need to read further into the role in the next few weeks and listen to what people have to say on special education issues such as committee members, senior staff in the NCSE, personnel in the Department of Education and Skills, relevant parents' associations, school management bodies, school principals, teacher associations and children. I thank members for their attention and look forward to the challenge in the year ahead.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Stack. I would like to bring to the attention of members that the new chairman designate will not be remunerated for this role apart from receiving incidental travel expenses. The authority is new and we cannot expect him to comment on its operations to date. As a division has been called in the Seanad, I will allow Senator Fidelma Healy Eames to put the first question.

Senator Fidelma Healy Eames: Thank you, Chairman. I welcome the delegation and, in particular, Mr. Stack. I compliment him on taking up this role in a voluntary capacity. As a good and faithful public servant, it is good to see him continue and it is clear that he is eminent-

ly well qualified for the role. While he said very modestly that he had no specific background in special education, he was there from the beginning at the NCSE.

I wish to flag one or two concerns, which Ms Griffin and Mr. Mulkerrins and I may have discussed elsewhere. I would like to see other countries' models of special needs support for children considered. What models other than the SMA model are effective? I am thinking particularly of cost and the cap. We must ensure equality of provision for all children. I would appreciate Mr. Stack's comments. Adult education issues were also raised. What does Mr. Stack have in mind in that regard? Was he referring to parents of children with special education needs? I am further concerned about second level support for children with dyslexia and other special educational needs, in particular given peer issues and the stress they are under in the context of fitting in and withdrawal from classes, for example where they are exempted from Irish, to work on something else. It is a pointed matter.

Senator Averil Power: I congratulate Mr. Stack on his appointment. It is great to have someone of his calibre in an unpaid post. He is giving very generously of his time to take on what is not an easy task. I wish him well. He is a man of integrity and very smart and diplomatic and will be very good at bringing people together on the board to deal with sensitive issues. Hopefully, a great deal of progress will be made for children with special needs over the next few years. He has been able to drive change in the inspectorate and other areas, often in the face of considerable opposition. On another occasion, we can grill him on policy issues but for now I wish him luck.

Deputy Jonathan O'Brien: I welcome Mr. Stack, Mr. Mulkerrins and Ms. Griffin to the Joint Committee and wish them the best. It is very generous to undertake a role for nothing and it is obviously done from passion and love of public service. Nobody can underestimate the challenges which lie ahead, in particular at a time when resources are few and far between. It makes things even more difficult. There are a number of areas which must nevertheless be addressed. I note in Mr. Stack's contribution his reference to the need for closer inter-agency partnership, in particular in the areas of health and education. I agree. As he reads into the role over the next couple of weeks, Mr. Stack will come across some of the difficulties in health and education regarding special educational needs. The current HSE proposals on the reconfiguration of therapy services and their impact on children with special educational needs, particularly in specialist schools, have created fears among families that current services will be diminished by the move to more geographically based provision. It is happening already in Cork and there were issues with implementation in Limerick. Implementation in Meath seems to have been more successful than it was in Limerick. I do not know why. Consultation with the HSE will be very important to address the impact of the reconfiguration of services on special needs education.

Deputy Charlie McConologue: I commend Mr. Stack on taking on the role. His track record in education speaks for itself. He was involved in 2000 in the production of the report on a national support service for special education for students with disabilities. On retirement, it is apt that he is taking on the role of chairman of the National Council for Special Education. If his record as a civil servant is an indication, his contribution as chairman will be something to which to look forward. I commend Mr. Stack on his public service ethic in taking on the role and providing the benefit to the State and its education system of his experience and knowledge. I wish him the very best. It is a challenging time. There has been immense progress in special education in the last ten years, particularly since the establishment of the council. Ms Griffin and her team do a very valuable job. I welcome Mr. Mulkerrin also. I have no doubt Mr. Stack

will develop a good working relationship with all parties and provide strong leadership. The joint committee looks forward to engaging with him further when he is up and running in the role.

Chairman: I join members in wishing Mr. Stack well. He is very well qualified and experienced. He chaired the planning group within the Department which produced the report on a national support service for special education for students with disabilities in 2000 which led, *inter alia*, to the establishment of the council. While I do not expect Mr. Stack to have an answer right now, as a public representative a number of school boards of management, teachers and parents have raised with me the perception that there may not be a consistent allocation of resources among schools. Whether that is correct or not is another issue, but I flag it with Mr. Stack.

Mr. Eamonn Stack: The kind, sincere words of members have motivated me. The appreciation which was expressed is very encouraging and makes it worthwhile to remain at the wheel in the public service on a voluntary basis. I have done nothing in the job yet so the praise remains to be earned in the months ahead. I intend to do so. Members have made observations which have been very informative. The first job of a leader of any group is to use one's two ears before one uses one's mouth. One must listen to hear what people are saying to avoid making decisions before discovering information one should have had in advance. Deputy Tuffy's remarks on the perception regarding consistent allocation of resources are very useful. It means I know I must keep an eye out for that. As I speak to people I can learn about it and establish the position. Senator Healy Eames's question about other models is worthy of further reflection and research to establish if there are better, more efficient ways to do things. The focus of improvements must always be to further the educational interests of children. I do not mean cheaper or dearer but better in the educational sense.

Senator Averil Power put no specific question. Deputy Jonathan O'Brien was very useful in telling me about closer co-operation between agencies. I value his input about that and the reconfiguration of the therapy services. That is all useful for me in my steep learning curve in this matter. It has been wonderful. I appreciate Deputy Charlie McConalogue's kind words. I am taking on this new role with enthusiasm and commitment and with the interests of the young people it is intended to serve. That is what education is all about. I will end with a quotation: "Those who work in education shoulder an awesome responsibility. As Aristotle would have counselled, the course of history lies in their hands". I will play my part.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Stack for his presentation and for briefing the committee. Is it agreed that the committee inform the Minister for Education and Skills that we have concluded our discussion with Mr. Stack and that we will forward a copy of the transcript of the meeting to the Minister for his information? Agreed.

The select committee will meet on Thursday, 17 January 2013 to discuss the Education Training Boards Bill 2011 and we hope to make a site visit to the Grangegorman campus on 30 January 2013. I wish all the members, our guests and their families a very happy Christmas. I thank the clerk, the Secretariat and the Debates Office for their work this year and I wish them a very happy Christmas.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.50 p.m. until 1 p.m. on Wednesday, 23 January 2013.