**Joint Committee on education and Social Protection**

**1 July 2015**

**The Role of Special Needs Assistants**

I would like to thank the Chairperson and Members of the Joint Committee for the invitation to attend the meeting of the Committee and to brief Members on the Special Needs Assistant Scheme.

**The Role of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme.**

SNAs play an important role in assisting schools to support students with significant care needs and, since the scheme was first introduced, have substantially assisted the process of including students with special educational needs in schools.

The Department of Education and Skills recognises that all children require care and attention in school. This is particularly true in relation to younger children and infants. All schools therefore have a responsibility to provide for the care and wellbeing of all the pupils who attend their schools including children with special educational needs.

The Department also recognises that there will be a significant number of children who, by virtue of their disability, will require additional care and attention.

For these children, the SNA scheme is provided by the Department to assist recognised primary, post primary and special schools to cater for their care needs, in an educational context.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs.

This support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

The Special Needs Assistant scheme has been a key factor in ensuring the successful inclusion of children with special educational needs into mainstream education, and also with providing care support to pupils who are enrolled in special schools and special classes.

In recent years the SNA scheme has been reviewed on two occasions. In 2011 the Department published a comprehensive **Value for Money and Policy Review** of the scheme and in June 2013, the National Council for special Education published its report on **Supporting Students with special Educational Needs in Schools**

In the preparation of these reports the NCSE and the Review Group engaged in significant consultations with stakeholders including schools, parents, pupils, management bodies and other interested parties to ensure that the broadest possible range of views and opinions were considered in the preparation of the reports.

The Value for Money and Policy Review found that the SNA Scheme is supporting schools in meeting the needs of students with disabilities, who also have significant care needs, and that the SNA scheme has assisted in enabling as many students as possible to be included in mainstream schools.

However, the Review also found that the purpose of the scheme and the allocation process was generally not well understood within schools or by parents and that the deployment of SNAs in schools had in practice moved away from the objectives originally envisaged, which was to provide for children’s care needs, and had moved towards SNA involvement in behavioural, therapeutic, pedagogical or teaching and administrative duties.

The Review recommended that the criteria for the allocation of SNA support should be restated and clarified for both parents and schools.

These findings were essentially echoed by the NCSE in its later report. However, the NCSE also made a number of additional findings and recommendations which the Department considered and has now begun to implement.

**New Department Circular 30/2014**

In the light of the recommendations of these reports the Department published a comprehensive circular to give effect to a number of recommendations made in the review reports and to provide clarity to parents and schools on the role and purpose of SNAs. The circular was published in 2014 and a copy of the circular has been circulated to Members for information.

The Circular provides clarification and guidance on the following matters

* the role of the SNA,
* the description of care needs for which SNA supports are provided,
* the primary care tasks of SNAs,
* the secondary tasks which may be assigned to SNAs from time to time,
* the Role of the Classroom Teacher and Resource/Learning Support Teachers and the Role of an SNA to support those teachers.
* the Role of Medical and other Professional Reports/Recommendations by Medical and other Professionals.
* SNA Support for Pupils with Behaviour Related Care Needs.
* SNA Support for Children with Visual and Hearing Impairment.
* The NCSE allocations process.

In addition the circular clarifies that SNAs are allocated to schools to manage as appropriate. It identifies the role of the school in managing the resource and ensuring access of the SNA to the child as necessary.

The circular also provides that SNA allocations should be reviewed on an annual basis and that, in the case of some allocations, they should be timebound in the expectation that the care need should diminish particularly with the ongoing support provided by the SNA.

It also introduces a requirement that personal pupil plans should be in place which should include a care dimension. The pupil plan should indicate how the SNA will meet the needs of the child and the timeframe for which this support is expected to be required

Transition to post-primary is considered to be a critical time for a student with special educational needs. The Circular requires that the child’s Personal Plan should recognise this and the focus of the plan should be on ensuring that the child’s care needs are, in so far as possible, ameliorated before moving to post-primary.

Of course, some pupils, particularly those with physical disabilities or conditions with enduring needs, will continue to have a requirement for some level of access to SNA support and for some children there may also be short term care needs as they transition to post primary schools.

In a small number of cases for pupils at post primary age, emerging conditions or needs may only manifest as the child or young adult gets older.

However, for the most part it should be expected that only students with chronic and serious care needs arising from a disability should continue to require SNA support in Post-primary schools.

**Identification of children with Significant Needs**

Not all children who have special educational needs or who have been diagnosed as having a disability, require access to SNA support. The allocation of additional adult SNA support should not generally be regarded as a prerequisite for a student with special educational needs to attend school.

The purpose of the SNA scheme is to provide for the significant additional care needs which some pupils with special educational needs may have.

At present, for example, some 42,000 children receive additional resource and learning support teaching supports while over 24,000 children receive access to SNA support.

Accordingly, qualifying criteria for the allocation of SNA support include the following conditions:

* The Child must be enrolled in and attending a State Funded Primary, Post Primary or Special School.
* There must be a professional report including an assessment indicating that the child has a disability.
* The care needs outlined in the assessment must be of such significance that they are beyond that which would normally be expected to be provided to a child by the child’s class teacher, support teacher, or other school teachers.

In general the care needs of qualifying children will fall into one of four categories.

* Medical Needs
* Physical Impairment
* Sensory Impairment
* Danger to Self or Others

Of course the type of significant care needs that pupils may have can be varied, depending on the nature or level of the disability or sensory impairment that a child may have.

While the list is not exhaustive, the following are some examples of the primary care needs which would be considered significant and which might require SNA support because the extent of assistance required, if it was to be provided by the class teacher, would overly disrupt normal teaching time.

**Assistance with feeding or dressing themselves:** where a child with special needs requires adult assistance with feeding or changing clothes.

**Assistance with toileting and general hygiene: (including catheterisation)** where a child with special needs cannot independently self-toilet, and until such time as they are able to do so.

**Assistance with mobility and orientation:** on an ongoing basis including assisting a child or children to access the school, the classroom, with accessing school transport or helping a child to avoid hazards in or surrounding the school.

**Assisting teachers to provide supervision in the class, playground and school grounds**: at recreation, assembly, and dispersal times including assistance with arriving and departing from school for pupils with special needs.

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| Non-nursing **care needs associated with specific medical conditions**: such as frequent epileptic seizures or for pupils who have fragile health including, where necessary and appropriate, the administration of medicines.  **Care needs requiring frequent interventions including withdrawal of a pupil from a classroom when essential**: This may be for safety or personal care reasons, or where a child with a disability may be required to leave the class for medical reasons or due to distress on a frequent basis.  **Assistance with moving and lifting of children, operation of hoists and equipment.**  **Assistance with severe communication difficulties** including enabling curriculum access for pupils with physical disabilities or sensory needs and those with significant, and identified social and emotional difficulties. This might include assistance with assistive technology equipment, typing or handwriting, supporting transition, assisting with supervision at recreation, dispersal times etc. |

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