

The terms of reference for this review seek to examine a number of questions. Our submission addresses the following points:

1. **Identify the role of the SNA**

In this regard, I attach an extract from our submission to the Public Service Benchmarking Body in July 2006 which sets out the background and current role of the SNA. While there may be some considerable variations in practice within schools, we believe that it is a reasonable statement of how SNAs should be operating under current arrangements and reflects the benefits to the pupils from having an SNA working with them.

2. **Relevance and continued validity of these objectives and role**

We believe that the established role of the SNA in relation to working directly with children with special educational needs is central across all sectors. This involves the SNA in the provision of care needs and support to educational and therapeutic programmes put in place by the various professionals involved. Put simply; the SNA is the person whose hands-on work with pupils enable the specific programmes designed to meet a particular child's needs to be delivered. This can range from providing for the child's comfort and care needs in a Special School setup to providing the one to one attention needed by a child with behavioural difficulties in a mainstream environment.

We believe that the objective of every child receiving the highest level of education appropriate to their needs may involve better access to specialist resource teachers, therapeutic and psychological professionals, but that the benefits of these inputs are maximised by the support of a properly trained and structured SNA service.

3. Outputs associated with the SNA Scheme

In our observations on the role of SNAs, the outputs or benefits to the child are outlined. The principle output is reflected in the huge growth of mainstreaming children who would previously have been dealt with through the Special School System. One reflection of this is the number of children now progressing to second level and achieving Junior Certificate qualifications which they may not otherwise have done. The impact of this achievement on these children and their families is very significant.

Our work with children with emotional or behavioural difficulties, in enabling them to function in a classroom setting without disrupting the class, has ensured that they remain in education when they might previously not have done so, and that teachers can give their time to the other pupils in the class.

The assistance of an SNA enables a child to socialise with their peers and has life long implications for them. It also means that children without special educational needs are exposed to fellow pupils who have disabilities and experience a level of integration which would not be possible without SNA support.

While it may be possible to gather statistics for the number of children in receipt of a service from SNAs, it is difficult to apply a direct value-based measurement of the benefits received. The intangible nature of many of the outputs does not diminish their value to the children affected, or to the broader society, of them reaching potentials that would not otherwise have been possible.

4/5 Efficiency of the scheme/Alternative policy or organisational approaches

In looking at the question of the efficiency of the scheme, as opposed to the efficiency of the individuals working within it, we believe that it is necessary to discuss policy and organisational approaches. Questions of efficiency can only be discussed in relation to the effectiveness of the scheme in fulfilling the policy aims, and the conversion of policy into practice relies on the organisational structure being designed to facilitate this.

This can be a complicated process, but should be kept as simple as possible. Each element of delivery should be tested to ensure it best meets the intention of the policy.

Policy and legislation have sought to place the needs of children to the fore. This is commendable, but the present structure could be more focused on the needs of the individual child throughout the scheme.

The National Council for Special Education should be given more control from interpretation of policy to delivery to children. The disconnect between referral, assessment and delivery would be best addressed by a single body (the NCSE) having charge of each stage. At present a granting of an SNA post to a school does not guarantee that an SNA will actually be assigned to do the job intended by the SENO.

In order for a more effective delivery of the intended service to a specific child, it would be necessary for a number of issues to be addressed.

- a) **There should be recognition of a standardised SNA qualification. This qualification should have a core element covering the generality of the competencies needed, and optional specialist areas to deal with particular disabilities/conditions (e.g. visual impairment, autism).**

- b) **SNAs should be employed by NCSE and assigned to specific schools as required.**

- c) **While day to day management of SNAs should remain with school principals, their function within the school should be set by NCSE. Accountability of SNAs and teachers with regard to dealing with children with Assessed Educational Needs should remain with NCSE, with goals set and performance monitored accordingly to the need and ability of each child.**

While this approach would have obvious concerns for the staff involved, and industrial relations implications for our members, our intention here is to open a discussion centred on the needs of children. This approach would better ensure a consistent delivery of service focused on individual need. It would recognise the responsibility of the educational system to these children and facilitate a more flexible, higher quality and accountable method of addressing the needs of children. Any problems regarding industrial relations could be resolved, once there is involvement of all interested parties, parents, teachers, SNAs etc. in a consultation process to redesign the operation of the scheme. Once all parties are committed to the welfare and needs of these children and the focus is maintained on that end, then the outcome will benefit all concerned.

The intention of this submission is to outline how Special Needs Assistants understand their current role and to offer a suggestion on how this valuable role could be enhanced through an overhaul of the structures of the scheme. We have not commented on the costs involved, as detailed breakdowns of sectoral costs are not available to us.

We would very much appreciate an opportunity to discuss or expand on the points raised in this submission.

THE SPECIAL NEEDS ASSISTANT'S JOB

The Role of the SNA

SNAs (SNA) are recruited specifically to assist in the care of pupils with disabilities in the education sector. They are appointed to schools to assist the school authorities in making suitable provision for a pupil or pupils with special care needs arising from disability. SNA support is provided either on a full- or part-time basis and can be shared by named pupils for whom such support has been agreed.

SNAs are recruited specifically to assist schools in providing the necessary non-teaching services to pupils with assessed educational needs. Their duties are assigned by the Principal acting on behalf of the

Board of Management. Their work is supervised either by the Principal or another teacher as determined by the Principal.

The generic role set out by the Department of Education is set out below:

1. Preparation and tidying up of classrooms.
2. Assisting school children to board and alight from school buses. Where necessary travel as escort during school hours on school buses may be required.
3. Special assistance as necessary for children with particular difficulties e.g. helping special needs pupils with typing or writing or computers or other use of equipment.
4. Assistance with clothing, feeding, toileting and general hygiene and being mindful of health and safety needs of the pupil.

- 7 -

5. Assisting on out-of-school visits, walks, examinations and similar activities.
6. Assisting the teachers in the supervision of pupils during assembly, recreation and dispersal from the classroom for one reason or another.
7. Accompanying individuals or small groups who may have to be withdrawn temporarily from the classroom for one reason or another.

8. General assistance to the class teachers, under the direction of the Principal, with duties of a non-teaching nature. (SNAs may not act as either substitute or temporary teachers. In no circumstances may they be left in sole charge of a class or group of children).
9. Participation with school development planning, where appropriate, and co-operation with any such changes with policies and practices arising from the school development process.
10. Engagement with parents of special needs pupils in both formal and informal structures as required and directed by school management.
11. Other duties appropriate to the grade as may be determined by the needs of the pupils and the school from time to time. SNAs may be re-assigned to other work appropriate to the grade when special needs pupils are absent or when particular urgent work demands arise.

The above does not comprehensively cover the full range of duties and responsibilities of the role and the following need also to be taken into account in order to more accurately describe the current position.

- Establish positive relationships with pupils and interact with them according to individual needs
- Set challenging and demanding expectations and promote self-esteem, confidence and independence
- Provide advice to pupils in relation to progress and achievement under guidance of the teacher

- Create and maintain a focused, orderly and supportive environment, in accordance with lesson plans and assist with the display of pupils' work
- Provide detailed and regular feedback to teachers on pupils achievement, progress, problems etc.
- Promote good pupil behaviour, dealing promptly with conflict and incidents in line with established policy and encourage pupils to take responsibility for their own behaviour
- To work under the guidance of teaching staff to undertake work, care, or support programmes, to enable access to learning for pupils with special needs and to assist the teacher in the management of pupils and the classroom. Work may be carried out in the classroom or outside the main teaching area.
- Supervise and provide particular support for pupils with special needs, ensuring their safety and access to learning activities
- Assist with the development and implementation of Individual Education and/or Behaviour Plans and Personal Care programmes
- Promote the inclusion and acceptance of all pupils
- Encourage pupils to interact with others and engage in activities led by the teacher

- Use agreed strategies, in liaison with the teacher, to support pupils to achieve learning goals
- Assist with the planning of learning activities
- Monitor pupils' responses to learning activities and accurately record achievement and progress as directed
- Establish positive relationships with parents and/or carers
- Administer routine tests and undertake routine marking of pupils' work
- Undertake structured and agreed learning activities/teaching programmes, adjusting activities according to pupil responses

- 9 -

- Undertake programmes linked to local and national learning strategies e.g. literacy, numeracy, recording achievement and progress and feeding back to the teacher
- Prepare, maintain and use specialist equipment and resources, required to meet the lesson plans/relevant learning activity and assist pupils in their use
- Be aware of and comply with policies and procedures relating to child protection, health, safety and security, confidentiality and data

protection, reporting all concerns to an appropriate person

- Be aware of and support diversity and ensure all pupils have equal access to opportunities to learn and develop
- Contribute to the overall ethos, work, and aspirations of the school
- Understand and support the role of other professionals
- Attend and participate in relevant meetings.
- Participate in training and other learning activities and performance development as required
- Assist with the supervision of pupils out of lesson times, including before and after school and at lunchtime
- Accompany teaching staff and pupils on visits, trips and out of school activities as required and take responsibility for a group under the supervision of the teacher.
- SNAs work can be physically demanding. They often work with pupils who are not fully aware of their physical strength. Training in manual handling is often required.
- SNAs need to be familiar with strategies of intervention in circumstances where bullying occurs.
- In some cases the official pupil/carers ratio is exceeded making the job more demanding and difficult.

- SNAs continually face the prospect of assault by their pupils.

- 10 -

- Many spend substantial time implementing the social, personal and health education (SPHE) programme of the Department of Health and Children. This is an initiative designed to enable students to develop skills for self fulfilment and living in communities. To promote self esteem and self confidence. Students are assisted in responsible decision making and the promotion of physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing.
- Be familiar with and apply the principles of Therapeutic Crisis Intervention (TCI).
therapy based early intervention technique to assist in preventing difficult situations from escalating into violence and assault.

Range and Diversity of the work

The range and diversity of the work of SNAs can be shown by the wide categories of special education needs required by the children with whom they work.

The various categories of special education need have been identified by the

Special

Education Support Service (SESS) whose role is to manage, co-ordinate and develop a

range of supports in response to the identified training needs of teachers. It provides a nationwide service to teachers and SNAs. The categories are:

Autism Spectrum Disorder

- Autism
- Asperger's Syndrome
- PDD-NOS or Atypical Autism

General Learning Disability

- Borderline Mild General Learning Disability
- Mild General Learning Disability
- Moderate General Learning Disability
- Severe & Profound General Learning Disability

- 11 -

Physical Disability

- Spina Bifida
- Cerebral Palsy
- Brittle bones

Sensory Disability

- Visual Impairment
- Hearing Impairment / Deaf
- Dual Sensory Impairment (Deafblindness)

Specific Learning Disability

- Dyslexia
- Dyscalculia
- Dysgraphia

Speech and/or Language Disorders

- Dyspraxia

▪Specific Speech & Language Disorders

Specific Syndromes

▪Down Syndrome

▪Tourette Syndrome

Emotional Disturbance and/or Behavioural Problems

▪Childhood psychosis

▪Attention Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD / ADHD)

▪Conduct Disorder (CD)

▪Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)

- 12 -

Giftedness

▪Exceptionally Able / Gifted & Talented children

▪‘Twice exceptional’ children

The Approval for the Creation/Termination of SNA Posts

This is the only grade in the public sector for whom it has been necessary to negotiate an ongoing redundancy package. The reason for this lies in the system by which SNAs are sanctioned for employment in any given school. Before a SNA can be recruited, a report must be done by the relevant Special Education Needs Organiser. These are employed by the Special Education Needs Council to assess the special needs of given pupils and to recommend or otherwise the employment of a SNA.

These needs are monitored and reassess on a continuous and ongoing basis, often resulting in the

reduction in the number of SNA posts sanctioned in a given school or in the working hours of a post. The consequence of this is that a SNA will be made redundant or have their working hours reduced. It has not proved possible to get agreement from the Department of Education and Science and the school management bodies to introduce a "panel" system such as that in operation for teachers. This system provides for this redeployment of teachers who become surplus to requirements in one school, to another school in the locality and to have their income preserved in the interim.

The situation for SNAs therefore is that there is a far greater likelihood of job losses than for teaching staff given their basis of employment but no guarantee of continuity of employment at all. SNAs have frequent recourse to the special redundancy scheme

- 13 -

Education / Qualifications

SNAs employed in primary and post primary schools are required to have Junior Certificate at a minimum. Although most are educated to Leaving Certificate standard. In addition most schools look for a child

care qualification as an additional desirable qualification. The majority of SNAs have undertaken various courses such as ABA (Applied Behaviour Analysis), Crisis Prevention Intervention (CPI), Anger Management, Signing, First Aid, New Technology and Specialist Technology specific to the needs of individual pupils. In addition to all of the above SNAs employed in special schools are mostly required to have an additional qualification and some are required to have written accurate records of work experience and certification for child care courses taken. Almost all of this group have taken specialised courses to assist them in their work

Certificate Course for SNAs

Three Colleges of Education, namely St. Angela's College in Sligo, Mary Immaculate College in Limerick, and Church of Ireland College, Rathmines, in conjunction with the Education Centre network, have formulated and delivered officially recognised training courses for SNAs. A person must be an existing SNA in order to apply for these courses. An SNA must complete a Level 1 Introductory Course prior to gaining a place on the Level 2 Certificate Course.

Level 1: Introductory Course for SNAs (20 hours)

This course has been in existence since November 2003. All 21 Education Centres offer this course to SNAs in their area. It is envisaged that this course will continue to be made available through the

Education Centres. The course itself is an introductory one, and covers such topics as:

The Enabling Role of the SNA,

- 14 -

**Understanding Special Educational Needs,
Building Positive Relationships, and
Understanding and Managing Behaviour.**

Level 2: Certificate for SNAs (60 hours)

This certificate course is a continuation from the introductory course. It is run in each of the three Colleges of Education mentioned above and in some outreach centres organised through the Colleges and assessed by them.

The course content for the Certificate course includes:

- **Concepts and theories of SEN, holistic care of students with SEN,**
- **Legislation and policies, health and safety, child protection,**
- **Record keeping and confidentiality,**
- **Development of collaborative skills,**
- **Students with specific needs, categories of learning disability,**
- **Language and communication,**
- **Promoting independence,**
- **Understanding and supporting the student with Special Educational Needs,**
- **Enabling access to the curriculum,**
- **The role of the SNA in relation to transition from primary to second level.**

Knowledge and Skills required

- **Use of specialist equipment and technology.**
- **Understanding of relevant policies/codes of practice and awareness of relevant**

legislation

- General understanding of national curriculum

- 15 -

- Basic understanding of child development and learning
- Ability to self-evaluate learning needs and actively seek learning opportunities
- Ability to relate well to children and adults
- Work constructively as part of a team, understanding classroom roles and responsibilities and your own position within these

Training and Career Development

There are no career development prospects for SNAs. Professional training and development in the public service is often prompted by the reasonable prospect of the improvement of the promotional chances of participants. The same cannot be said for SNAs. Their continued interest in expanding range of educational qualifications is primarily derived from an interest and commitment to developing the quality of the service to the children with whom they work.

Accountability

SNAs are directly accountable to the Principal. SNAs work in an enormously focussed, direct and personal relationship with a single child or a small number of children over a time period which could be six years

or longer. Such a relationship is capable of long term consequence on the child's development. The need for fair and consistent interaction with children with special needs is paramount to their subsequent long term personal and emotional development. The impact of the SNA's work has a profound effect on the successful long term development of the individual pupil.

- 16 -

Teamwork and Collaboration

SNAs work with a very wide variety of stakeholders in the world of special education. These include the children, their parents, teachers and principals and a mix of specialist professionals including, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists and others. The National Disability Authority hosted a major conference in December 2004 focussing on students with special educational needs. The conference was titled "Student Journeys Special Education Routes". At the conference Dr. Jean Ware, Director of Special Education, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra outlined the necessity for a collaborative process among workers and parents in the area of special educational needs. In a major

paper to that conference she stated "in mainstream schools in addition to the child's parents the resource and learning support teachers may be collaborating with a large number of different classroom teachers and SNAs each with their own style of working and with differing expertise as well as with each other and perhaps, visiting teachers, psychologists and therapists. In a special school each team may be a large and complex with a number of therapists and perhaps a psychologist or nurse being involved as well. Indeed on a recent visit to a special class for children with autistic spectrum disorders I was struck by the fact that the class teacher was responsible for managing more adults than she was children. Working in such diverse teams demands a high level of skill in collaboration and organisational expertise. It would be clear from this that, unless there is a degree of collaboration, it is unlikely that such a variety of individuals will be engaged as effectively as they might in meeting the needs of the individual child with special educational needs. It is clear that SNA's must have very good team work skills."